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## WITH ARMS TO HOLD THE WIND

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# I

Illa Preneur stepped out of the opentopped transport, dust eddying around her in Tabit's light gravity. The train ride from Downer's Landing eight hundred kilometers to the south had been just long enough to give her a false sense of acclimation to the twothirds g. The thirty kilometer drive over compressed matter roads from Leaglenn Station had restored her caution.

*I won't be here long enough to get really used to it*, she thought, looking up at the farmhouse. Three people waited on the immense porch that wrapped around the entire openwalled first floor. The second and third floors squinted at the world through narrow windows, and the roof grew over it like a displaced hill, the shingles bright like hot coals in the noon sun. The other buildings looked plain and utilitarian, prefab modules probably dating from the earliest days of the colony. The main house reserved all the character of the stead to itself.

"It looks Cetian," she mused.

"Is." Skaner Vahi came around the front of the transport. His friend, Jos Kurlen, pulled Illa's bags from the storage. Skaner was taller than Jos—who lived with the Vahis and worked on the stead—but Jos was thick across the chest and appeared the stronger of the two.

"I knew the first colonists here were from Tau Ceti—"

"Vahis are first wave from Homestead," Skaner said, a hint of pride in his voice.

Which made Skaner and his brother Rafir fifth generation.

"I'll take these up?" Jos asked, holding Illa's two big packs.

"Guest room," Skaner said. Jos nodded, smiled quickly at Illa, and bounded up the steps and into the house. "Let's meet." Skaner gestured for her to precede him.

In the shade of the porch, Skaner said, “Pater, mater, this is Co Illa Preneur, from Sol. Co Preneur, this is Co Corum Vahi and Co Rilana Vahi-Strethem and Co Vida Strethem, my aunt.” He tucked his hands into his hip pockets, then stepped back, duty done.

Illa hooked her righthand thumb in the V of her shirt and tucked her other hand out of sight under her anklelength coat, an aesthete’s greeting, as familiar as a smile or a handshake in the circles she normally moved. Here it jarred. They would see was an intruder from the Inner Pan who probably saw them as unsophisticated and dull, found their speech amusingly rustic, and their values unnecessarily austere. Illa counted on that cultural wall to buffer all of them. They had enough pain to bear already; she wanted neither to add to it nor share in it.

Skaner’s father was a wiry man, his bald head seeming too large for his body. Skaner had the same deepset pale eyes, but where in him they gave an impression of thoughtful intelligence, in Corum Vahi they looked only mistrustful. Corum had a fine tracery of cracks in his dark skin, earned in a lifetime spent under Tabit’s glare.

Rilana and Vida differed strikingly for two people who looked so much alike. Dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin, and features more suggestive than revealing. Taller than Corum and broadshouldered, Rilana showed the same tight sinews as Corum, grown from the daily labor a stead demanded. Vida exhibited the physique of an athlete, muscles smooth and rounded. Skaner’s mother exuded a kind of negligent competence while the aunt was clearly aware and proud of herself.

Then Illa spotted the ring on Vida’s right hand middle finger. A black band with a single sapphire. Armada. When she looked up at Vida, the woman smiled slightly, reminding Illa of her own mother. For a few moments she felt vulnerable, exposed: everything she was doing could easily be undone by a simple inquiry to the right office, all her careful subterfuge destroyed by a close look.

“Thankyou for welcoming me,” Illa said. “I don’t wish to seem rude, but if I may I’d like to see your son before anything else.”

“I can take her,” Vida said, already starting to turn toward the interior.

“No,” Rilana snapped. “Skaner, show her.” She frowned for a few moments. “After, there’s tea. We—”

“That would be wonderful,” Illa said. I won’t be long.”

Rilana nodded and a heartbeat later so did Corum.

She followed Skaner through the screen, the field tugging at her lightly. Inside, the warmer air smelled of spice and bread. Low couches and pillows formed a kind of maze to the central stairs. Through the back she saw cultivated fields shifting gently.

Skaner took her up to the third floor, to the last door at one end of a long hallway. Illa entered a room brighter than she had expected—tiny refractors lined the window frame that directed any light that fell on them inside to bounce off the white walls and ceiling—a warm light with an amber quality. There was a walllength bureau and a few chairs around the large bed.

The young man there lay embraced by a shapeshifting cocoon that regulated all his biofunctions. From time to time his limbs trembled from the impulses that worked his muscles. No scars, no braces, no bruises, no deformities or disfigurements, the only sign of his injury a slight discoloration of the interface caps

on his fingertips. In fact, Illa noted, he was an attractive man. His features favored Rilana rather than Corum. Dark eyes and hair, thin lips. Tall. Before his damage—

Illa stopped the thought. She had seen ten others like Rafir Vahi. Fine body, beautiful almost, and a blank face. His dark eyes stared, halfslitted, occasionally blinking, at nothing. They did not track her when she crossed in front of him. She touched his cheek lightly.

“Hello, Rafir,” she said. “I’m here. I’m going to end your nightmare.”

She stepped away from the bed. Skaner leaned against the doorframe, watching. For the moment it was easy to see his father, latent in the doubt in his eyes. Illa studied the biomonitors attached to the bedstead, but she already knew what they showed—Rafir Vahi suffered link coma, caused by a shock to the interface branches that trailed throughout his nervous system and brain, creating a closed loop that fed back on itself, effectively, nullifying all sensory stimulation. His brain pattern showed as a long, sinuous sine wave, no spikes, no variation. He was trapped inside himself.

Hanging on the wall above the bureau stretched an enormous set of wings with a harness attached. Brown and tattered, they appeared to be made of a pair of big leaves. Holes opened in the complex web of veins, and reinforcing rods showed through along the top edge and in the center. The surface glistened faintly, like plastic coating.

Directly below, on the bureau, was a plaque that said “Rafir Vahi’ Piric Canyon and a datachit.

“Trestling,” Skaner said. “Rafir holds the record for Piric.” He straightened. “Tea, Co Preneur.”

“So,” Corum said, watching Skaner fill six tall glasses. Ice crackled. “You make sitchers, Co Preneur?”

“In situ sensorems,” Illa corrected. Skaner set a glass before her, then Co-rum, Rilana, and Vida. He placed another by his own chair and the last one on the far end of the low table.

“We didn’t expect you so soon,” Vida said.

Skaner sat down and Rilana raised her glass.

“Welcome to Vahi Stead,” she said. They all drank. The greenish tea was bitter, the aroma sharp. Rilana pointed to the sixth glass. “Eldest shares tea, always. After Rafir came back hurt, Skaner became eldest, but we set one for Rafir all the same.”

Corum nodded and took another swallow. “So, how do sitchers help Rafir?”

Illa hesitated. She hated explaining, especially when it was half a lie; no one so far had understood. It doesn’t matter, her mother told her, the illusion is everything. The illusion of understanding.

“Rafir’s injury” she said, “do you know what it is?”

“His ship’s sensory net backloaded,” Vida said. “He was hit. Instead of shutting down, a surge ran through the whole system and into him. The in-terface webbing has become his only source of stimulus. Nothing outside of it can get through and he can’t get past it.” She cocked her head at Illa. “Cor-rect?”

“I couldn’t have described it better myself. Technically, anyway.” Illa leaned

forward, ignoring Vida's frown. "You have to understand first that no one really knows why the link works."

"The technology is over two centuries old," Vida said.

"Some of it. True, we've had supplemental links since the early twentyfirst century, augments to compensate for certain inadequacies or to amplify in-tellectual resources, but you must understand that those amounted to little more than data transfer devices. The full sensory link is different. We know *how* it works. We don't know *why*." She waited for Vida to challenge her. When she did not, Illa continued. "So when something like this happens—Rafir's damage—we don't know what exactly is happening."

Corum nervously turned his glass by the rim, round and round in place. He licked his lips. "So...how do sitchers come into this?"

"What I do—my art—is to make full sensory experiences. Fictions. But I draw them from the extant. Real life." Illa felt herself stumbling. This was the part, the thing that never seemed to make sense when she described it. I construct a tableau..."

"Why you?" Vida asked. "Why not an Armada tech?"

"The programs are Preneur constructs. No one is better qualified to do this."

"Sitchers..." Rilana said, frowning.

"Yes, Rilana," Vida said, "that thing Corum got a few seasons ago and couldn't stop using?"

Rilana scowled. Illa looked at Corum and his expression became immediately familiar. She hated the word addict, it came burdened with so much history and judgment, but in some cases it described perfectly. Corum was a sensorem addict.

*All the way out here?* she wondered, and recognized the history and judgment permeating *that* question.

Vida wore the expression of one who has successfully counted coup, while Corum looked ashamed under Rilana's resentful stare. Skaner kept his face carefully neutral; Illa admired his skill.

"There was one pilot I worked with who exhibited a pronounced dissociative syndrome," Illa said quickly. "She had divided into two distinct people, one a warrior who remembered clearly every action she'd been in. But it was the other one who dominated most of the time and she was completely guilt-ridden. Unable to function outside the hospice ward, incapable of independent decisionmaking, a total psychological invalid. The trouble was, she didn't know why. She only knew she was an evil person. She did a lot of damage to herself—mutilation, forced starvation, things like that. I made a template of both of them and set it up as a dialogue. No matter which one exhibited at any given time, the other would kick in and complete her. Not a perfect fusion, but she was able eventually to leave hospice care and function."

"Why didn't they adjust her?" Skaner asked. I mean, that's not a new problem."

"But is new. Like your brother, it's a malfunction of the interface. Instead of being primarily psychological, it's physiological. Her separate personas existed as distinct entities separated by the neural implant network. In Rafir's case it seems he's living entirely within his net."

“You can reach him there?” Rilana asked.

Illa nodded. “I’ve done ten of these now. The profile I sent you detailed the success rate.”

“What’s yours?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“She wants to know,” Vida said, “what you get out of it?”

Illa hated lying to people, but after the first couple of times it had grown easier. Then she had found a better way, a simple truth that explained nothing. Better than lying, it still left her feeling oddly tenuous.

“That’s personal.”

Illa opened the pack and spread out her equipment. Small boxes, modules attached by cables, displays, an arsenal of specially built devices. She ran diagnostics on all of them, especially the recorders, trying to pretend Skaner was not watching her. The Vahis did not trust her, especially Rilana, and she could hardly blame them. Offworlder, arriving with the blessings of the Armada, with a claim to ease the suffering they imagined Rafir experienced, and then refusing to tell them why she even wanted to try. What would they think if they learned that she was the wrong Preneur, that it should be her mother here doing this instead of Illa?

Late afternoon light flooded the narrow window. Illa examined the biomonitors, more for Skaner’s benefit than her own. She knew these systems now. The Armada provided only the best for its fallen, state-of-the-art, self-correcting, largely self-maintaining. She plugged a decoder into an external feed, then linked a recorder into that land at the junction where signals crossed between Rafir and his machine. Ready lights winked on and she patched the new arrangement into a datadump.

“This will take some time,” she said. She gazed up at the wings on the wall. “You said this is for trestling. Tell me about it?” She leaned over the bureau. “It looks organic. A leaf?”

“Vinerleaf.” He seemed about to say more, but uncomfortably looked away.

“Is it a secret?”

“No. Just...” He nodded toward her equipment. “What’s that doing?”

Illa walked over to Rafir. “Do you understand how—do you know what’s wrong with him? I know I explained before, but did you really understand what I said?”

“No. Vida tried once. Said it’s like having a nova go off inside your skull all the time.”

“Partly. But it’s more complicated.”

“Always is.”

He did not seem so young now. She wondered what it meant for him to suddenly become eldest son. In other places, it would only have signaled a change in social status, little more than a title. But here, Illa sensed, it came mixed with responsibilities and regrets, new burdens and unexpected guilts.

“The link,” she said, “is basically a mesh of conductive fiber that blends with the nervous system, most of it in the brain. At key intervals small processors, like secondary neurons, act as interpreters between the brain and the external systems

being interfaced. Sorry that's so technical. I—"

"I follow."

"There are safeguards. Cutouts that shut down the link to prevent overload. Once in a while, though, this happens." She drew a deep breath and kept her gaze on Rafir. "A massive surge of input. Probably the external fail-safes went first. The surge pours through and the net doesn't shut down, it takes the full force of the surge. Burns out. Normally, it fails and switches off. In some cases that can even be repaired, but generally it means that, while the victim is organically functional, undamaged, linking is no longer possible. Ever. In even fewer cases the system fails switched on. It stays on then. All the time, It generates its own stimulus. Overwhelmed, the mind shuts down."

"Coma."

She gestured at her devices. "What I do is make a recording of the stimulus and try to interpret it, find out what's going on inside. If I can do that I can get through."

"You mean bring him back? Like that pilot with the two selves?"

"No. That was unusual. Most of them, nothing brings them back."

"Then—?"

"I can create a new sensorem for them. For whatever is left of their life, I can at least help it be pleasant. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, it can be genuinely good for them."

Skaneer's discomfort showed clearly in his eyes.

"So," she said, approaching the wings again, "are you going to tell me about these? Or is it a local secret after all?"

"No secret. Just a game. I'll go see about dinner."

Before she could protest, he left.

Annoyed, Illa checked her instruments once more. Another ten hours twelve at most, for the decoding. "What do you have for me, Rafir Vahi? What did you see?"

He was the last one scheduled. Three other families had refused outright and four more had not responded. She gave her recorder a pat, as if it were a living thing. In a way it was. Several living things.

Illa waited on the porch, a cup of hot tea in her hand, for Jos to come in from his morning chores. She gazed out at the sloping fields of newheat that glowed beneath Tabit's tooyellow glare. An aegis tree stood on the horizon, its medusan limbs coiled skyward; the roots, Illa knew, spread for acres, holding the soil and secreting microfauna to defend against native parasites and rework the local minerals into compatible nutrients.

From the train Illa had seen a sizable portion of Leaglenn Massif. A huge upthrust, broken into hundreds of individual sections separated by a network of canyons spanned by delicatelooking bridges. The cold top had been largely barren when the colony began, mostly local grasses and a few scrub trees. But the canyons were choked with dense foliage, warmed by a labyrinth of hot springs.

Jos grinned as he came running up to her from the line of sheds. A smudge darkened one side of his face; he smelled strong with sweat and loam.

"Come up," he said, "I'll set you in while I wash."

For a moment Illa was confused. “Jos—”

He hurried past her and led the way to the third floor of the house. He let them into a long room. A workbench against one wall was filled with a tan-gled assortment of equipment. The few pieces Illa recognized told her that it was a polyglot sensorem rig. Jos immediately began switching things on. He gestured for her to sit down.

Disappointed, she sighed and came forward. He offered her goggles and skin tabs with an expectant smile. Reluctantly, she let him fit her with them.

“Ready?”

She nodded. A moment later she was immersed in what should have been a fully realized experience.

The image cut from completely spherical to a flat surface, then back again. The junglefilled canyon below rose and fell suddenly. The smooth transitions were rare and only made Illa more aware of the amateurishness of the effort. She felt as if she were constantly falling, which, she assumed, was supposed to be the sensation of flying, except that instead of exhilaration it gave her nausea. Continuity was poor...

She backed out of the sensorem and removed the goggles. The contacts peeled away from her skin with faint rasps. She blinked, not moving, until her vision settled. A direct link would have helped, but Jos did not have an interface panel.

Jos perched on the edge of a stool, his fingers lacing and relacing anxiously.

“That was...interesting,” she said. Gliding, down the length of a canyon: trestling. “That was Piric?”

“No, that was Gannon. Made the first recordings last season. Been working them since.”

“I thought you’d just take me out and show me, real time.”

“Not safe with only one person. You’re not experienced and Skaner won’t do it.”

“Why not? Does he disapprove of trestling?”

“Oh, hell no! He’s as good as—” He stopped, his face reddening.

“As good as Rafir was?”

Jos nodded. “Skaner was set to beat Rafir on Piric. He wanted Rafir home, so he’d be there. Skaner would have done it, too, but then Rafir came home like he did.”

“And Skaner quit?”

Jos shrugged, then gestured to his equipment. “Can’t afford a good setup. Lot of this I got from Corum after Rilana made him give it up. Corum spent most his relax time sitting through, but when Rafir came home he about lived in it. Rilana had a fit. Corum couldn’t bear to throw it out, so I took it. Hard to do what I want when I have to fight the tools, but—what do you think?”

Illa could not remember the last time she had produced a sensorem that clumsy, but she recalled vividly the incessant doubt that clouded her early work, inadequacy meticulously refined by her mother. The trouble, always, was Eco Preneur’s superb talent and craft. Uneasily, Illa recognized that her relationship now to Jos contained the same potential. She could hurt him, deeply, with a misplaced word.

“Not like yours, I know,” Jos said suddenly. He slid off the stool and went to

another table. He opened the cabinet below it and knelt. “All of them,” he said, pointing.

Illa crouched beside him and saw the sensorem disks stacked neatly within. She pulled one out and examined it—“Croshemar by Preneur”—then took out another and another. She skipped to the bottom of the far righthand stack and looked at the cover. “Axolotl Pale by Illa Preneur.”

“A lot,” Jos said. I thought, you’d be older.”

Illa returned the disks and stood. “Most of those are my mother’s.”

Jos gaped at her as if she had struck him. She did not give him an explanation, but left his cramped room.

She studied the readings, carefully matching them to the baseline displayed on her slate. She caught herself chewing her lower lip and stopped. She fed numbers into another slate and watched the points on the projection match up.

“There you are” she murmured, jittery with pride.

Illa reset her recorders and tapped in instructions. She watched Rafir’s pattern and started the download. His metabolism sped up as the spikes came faster. In less than a minute “Completed” flashed on her equipment and she brought him back down.

She removed the disk and tucked it away with the others, then reset the interface. From another part of her kit she pulled out a new disk and slid it into place. The program started feeding fragments of sensorems to Rafir, allowing other systems to gauge his reactions. The disk held several thousand samples so it would take a few hours to derive a reliable set of numbers.

It was night, the window a column of blackness. Only one lamp burned in Rafir’s room. Illa sat against the wall and gazed up at the wings. No Armada memorabilia stood on the bureau. The ring even his retired aunt wore was missing.

She looked up at a light tap on the door. “Yes?”

Skaneer peered in. “Dinner, Co Preneur.”

“Illa, please. Thank you, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

After Skaneer’s steps had faded to silence, Illa went to the pack where she had put the disk she had just downloaded. There were ten others, each labeled with the name of a young trooper, his or her age, the name of their home systems. Four of them had been on the same world, in the same clinic, in fact. That had been the riskiest one to do since it had taken the longest time, but she had managed it before Eco had arrived. Illa had never sat through one, though.

She slipped Rafir’s into her player and opened the contact plate. When the ready light winked on, she pressed her fingertips to its milky white surface, the polyeramo caps sliding liquidly, and—

—stars filled the sphere of her perception. Everywhere, all around, all at once. Her skin felt the touch of radiation, the impulses of sensor readings, the cold of hard vacuum. She moved swiftly in the company of two others just like her, elegant spindles of spacehardened composite, blackhulled and dangerous. At a thought she could grasp the entire electromagnetic spectrum. She was the ship and it was natural, the constant fall, the windless rush, better than winged flight in atmosphere had ever been, absolute freedom of movement, not as a simple observer attached to a

machine, but as the machine, alive and aware in its body, all of existence open to her probe.

Part of her sensory grid drew her attention and she saw the enemy, a group of ships coming toward them. Six, she counted, and moved to intercept, relaying tactical instructions to her companions. She commanded, it was her unit, her decision. A simple divideandkill maneuver, plunge right through, It had worked dozens of times already with these amateurs. She especially knew they could not beat her, they did not love the fall as she did, they were not linked to their ships as she was. Their ranks opened up for her and she tracked them with her guns.

Three bolts of energy struck her, scorching, overloading the grid, the stench and itch of burning filling her senses. It hurt. She tried to withdraw and give the system a chance to reset itself, drop the damaged feeds. She would be partially blind, but undistracted by the pain of the ship. She spun out of control and briefly she went back in to correct the tumble. Three more bolts hit. The entire interface locked open, she could see the surge enveloping the sensor net, pouring through the lines even as she tried desperately to pull out, disconnect, damnit, break off, break off, break off, and the sudden pure blaze nova bright, infinitely present, filling the mind, the soul, the net melting, sealing her inside the glow of absolute sensation with no way to shut it off, pull out, or just fall and experience death and light and—

Illa jerked back from the player. She gulped air, lungs heaving, the edges of her vision still flickering with afterimage. It took her a few seconds to realize that the player's own automatic safety had kicked her out of the sensorem.

She looked at Rafir. He was trapped in that final image, the universe on fire.

Shaking, Illa went to her room to wash her face and calm down. She held her hands up and when they no longer trembled visibly, she went downstairs to dinner.

Illa woke from a dream of flying. She had hung from Rafir's vinerleaf wings and sailed toward a star through a blue, red, yellow, and white nebula. For minutes she lay there, staring up at the ceiling of her room, savoring the image.

She tended to her morning ablutions quickly and went to Rafir's room. The samples had run and her equipment offered it's conclusions. Six of the programs showed sufficient match points to be somewhat therapeutic for Rafir, but none of them gave the kind of numbers she wanted. Any of them would "distract" Rafir from the repetitive horror of his coma dream, give him relief, but Illa found herself dissatisfied with that. The signal from the biomonitor gave relief by damping down the level of the sense impression, but it lacked substance. He was in an essentially vegetative state and would remain so un-til death. Illa toyed with the various possibilities each sensorem routine offered, then gave up and went looking for Skaner.

"He and Jos are working platte seven," Rilana told her, keeping her eyes on her work; she sliced and cleaned a mass of vegetables Illa did not recognize. There was a grid displayed on a board next to the counter that marked the kitchen area. Ten plattes plus the residential compound comprised Vahi Stead. "How comes your work?"

"I'm near a solution," Illa said. "But I might need Skaner's help." She studied the grid. "How far is that?"

“Twenty kilometers,” Vida said, suddenly appearing from the main stair. “I’ll take you.”

Rilana looked up at her sister, frowning.

“Thank you,” Illa said quickly, “I’d appreciate that.”

“Corum—” Rilana started.

“Corum is in Leaglenn Station to pick up a shipment of bearings,” Vida said, gesturing for Illa to follow her. “This is no trouble for me.”

Illa felt Rilana’s disapproval all the way outside.

Vida strode across the bare earth to the shed. Beneath its metal roof farm machinery stood in ranks, waiting for instructions, complex agro motiles that looked to Illa like rearranged war engines. Several stalls were empty, the service modules on standby. Vida steered a transport out into the sun and gestured for Illa to get in.

Illa clutched the seat with one hand and braced herself against the dash with the other.

About twenty minutes out Vida turned off the main road onto a narrow spur. The transport bucked over the rougher grade until they came to an enormous aegis tree. Vida stopped beneath its tangles and shut the engine off.

“We can talk here,” she said, moving herself up to sit on the back of the driver’s seat. “What do you think of this place?”

Illa stepped out of the transport and leaned against the frame. Vida regarded her evenly, waiting, and everything about her, the easy way she rested her forearms on her thighs, the relaxed readiness, the alertness, reminded Illa of her own mother. The impression rattled her and she looked away, at the horizon defined by grain.

“I don’t know what you want,” she said. “It’s pretty. It smells odd. It’s big.”

“Don’t worry about my feelings, I don’t give a damn. Be truthful. It’s backward, uncomfortable, and dull.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Duty. I brought Rafir home.” Vida looked momentarily uneasy. I also am the reason he got hurt. I convinced him to join the Armada.” She shrugged. “That was enough for Rilana in itself. I didn’t care. Rafir was a natural pilot, it was as if he were born to it. Rilana had no right trying to keep him here. But it hurt her when Rafir signed up so fast. She blamed me, of course, but she treated Rafir badly. I wasn’t here at the time. Even if I had been I don’t think it would have been any better. I did promise to look out for him, though, so when he was injured...well, I resigned and brought him home. I still look out for him.” She narrowed her eyes at Illa. “Your turn. Why are you here?”

“The Armada—”

“Is sending your mother, not you. I still have friends in Command. Eco Preneur is supposed to be here now, not her daughter. In fact, Eco should be here day after tomorrow.”

“Did you tell anyone else?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I want to know first. I already failed once to protect Rafir. It won’t happen again.”

Illa filled her lungs and tried to control the faint trembling in her legs.

“You couldn’t have protected Rafir. What happened to him...there would have been nothing you could have done.”

“I’m listening.”

“The programs that allow the interface with a fighter were constructed by Eco.”

“Your mother.”

“Yes. The most recent version was modified. It gave a higher degree of access, quicker response time—a compression module, to accelerate time sense.”

“I’m familiar with them. Good program.”

“Everything Eco does is good. But she added something. A buffer with a record loop. It’s a trapdoor system, hidden from standard diagnostics. It’s accessible by a proprietary system.”

“I suppose only Eco has it.”

“No. I stole it. There’s a flaw. Maybe, I don’t know, maybe it’s not a flaw. But it interferes with the automatic cutoff. Under certain circumstances it won’t let the pilot out.”

Vida stared at her for a long time. “I see. So Rafir was caught in his system for...what?”

“The record buffer keeps working even after burnout. Eco could download from it and have a sensorem of the pilot’s death.”

“What have you been doing?”

“I’m getting to each one first. I don’t think it’s right, I’m keeping her from getting them.”

The silence stretched. Vida gazed out at the fields, lightly tapping a finger on the steering wheel. Finally, she shook her head.

“I think that that’s not the whole truth.”

“Anything else is personal.”

“This is personal. Rafir is my nephew, my responsibility. You’re here by virtue of a lie, Co Preneur. I want to know why or you will not finish what you want to do. Everything I know about you and your mother doesn’t suggest such altruism. I want to know it all or I bring in the garrison provost and wait for Eco.”

Illa walked away from the transport and tried to control her anger and fear.

“Time passes, Co Preneur.”

“Are you familiar with our work?”

“The sitchers? Yes, I know them.”

“You know that they’re constructed from real experience, that we edit actual emotional responses and sensory detail into the fictional frames?”

“Yes’ of course.”

“When I was three, my mother took me from Sol to Fornax. She had a commission and the work needed to be done at the site. It was my first interstellar trip. I was very excited. Eco decided to record me. There’s something particularly wonderful about a threeyearold’s joy—still an infant in most ways, but the conscious mind is engaging and memory is accessible in a reliable way. So she had me tapped. I didn’t care, it was even more fun to think I was helping my mother by being happy. But the ship was sabotaged. I don’t know what group, but the translight envelope generator went down, then the environmental systems. We were adrift, cooling off

and dying. The life pods didn't even work, nor did the TEGlink, so we couldn't communicate for help."

"Three days. It went on for three days before the rescue ships found us. Not too bad, really, we were lucky that it all happened pretty close to Pan Pollux. But in three days people turned so ugly. There was one riot. The shipmaster was killed and the crew responded by killing half a dozen of the rioters. People went around like robots, blank, lifeless—at least, when they weren't screaming and wailing like the damned. It was terrifying. I was terrified. I wanted Eco to hold me and protect me. She never touched me. She let me experience the full weight of threeyearold horror at what I couldn't understand. I was hysterical by the time we were rescued. After we were taken off, Eco became a perfectly nurturing parent again. But something had changed between us. Then later, when I understood that she had taken the recording and put it in a *sensore*..."

"So you're doing this to get back at her? You're grown now, haven't you gotten over that?"

"I thought so. For the most part, yes. I was terrified of shuttles and starships for years after that, but Eco got me therapy and I recovered. I've never really felt comfortable around her since, though, and when I found out about this I became outraged all over again."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"Always is." When Illa remained silent, Vida shrugged. She slid down into the seat. "I'll take you to Skaner, then leave you. I'm going to make some inquiries." Vida smiled. "Don't worry. I'm on your side."

Skaner shook his head. "No."

Illa blinked, startled. Even Jos, working on the other combine, looked at him with shock. She wished Vida had stayed instead of dropping her at the worksite and going back.

"No?"

Skaner closed the panel over the datafeed. "Promised I wouldn't. After Rafir came back, no more trestling. Mater has enough worry without making it worse by doing stupid."

"Skaner," Jos said, "It's *for* Rafir. Didn't you hear?"

"Heard. Still no. This mean you can't do anything for him?"

"No, not at all, I can." Illa's thoughts jumbled from the unexpected refusal. "But this would work better. Everything I have would only be sufficient. This would be—"

"You want it for a new sitcher. That's all."

"What?"

"Figure to record me trestling for Rafir so you can feed it to him. Maybe it'd be better than what you have, maybe not. But *then* what? You have new material to go make one of your shows for people. I don't like that."

Illa bristled. "That's absurd."

"Is it?"

"You can have the damn original if you want!"

“No. I promised.”

“Skaner—” Jos began.

“This is Vahi concerns, Jos,” Skaner snapped.

Jos stepped back from the machine as if he had been punched.

“Answer is no,” Skaner said. He walked away, toward another farm machine.

“Co Preneur,” Jos said. “I’ll do it.”

“What...?”

“You can record me. I’ll do it.”

Illa looked at Jos. He was watching Skaner, jaw set, angry.

“You’re upset, Jos—”

“You need a sitcher for Rafir, I’ll do it.”

“Can you do Piric Canyon?”

He blinked, his anger dissolving into uncertainty. “Sure...”

“No. You’re *not* sure. Thank you, Jos, but it needs to be Skaner.”

“You don’t think I’m good enough.”

When she looked around, Jos was walking away, hands balled into fists at his sides. For a moment, she considered going after him. Instead she ran after Skaner.

“If you don’t,” she said, catching up to him, “Jos will.”

“Got what you want, then,” Skaner said. He worked on the diagnostics of the big machine.

“No. Listen. Jos isn’t right for what I’m trying to do.”

“What is that? You never told me.”

“I’m trying to repair damage I caused.”

Skaner’s hand stopped. He licked his lips and stepped back from the machine. “Explain that?”

“It’s complicated—”

“Always is. You already said you can’t cure him. What can you do?”

“I can give him better dreams.”

“What good is that? Dreams are...like the wind. Can’t hold them, can’t share them. Not without...eyes...voice...legs and arms...”

“But that’s all Rafir has now. Dreams. The one he’s been having is terrible. You could give him a good one.”

Skaner shook his head. “I promised.”

“Skaner—”

“Leave me. Please.”

Illa walked away. She saw Jos, sitting beneath an aegis tree. Disappointed, she started toward him.

Piric Canyon looked like a vast waterless river. It cut Leaglenn Massif almost in half. Four trestles jumped it. This one, the narrowest gap, stretched half a kilometer from lip to lip. The supporting arches soared high overhead. Walkways lined the outer edges.

Illa carefully attached the feeds, to Jos—chest, back, arms, legs, the skull, alongside the temples, and just below his eyes—and ran through the links three times while he prepared his wings.

“Idea is,” he said, looking out at the canyon, “is to make that trestle, then

come back.”

“It looks like almost two, maybe three kilometers.”

“Three, about.”

His movements were quick, jerky, and he kept glancing up nervously.

“Have you ever done it with vinerleaf wings, Jos?”

“Once. Not here. Most people now use sythlex. Safer. But for records, you use vinerleaf.” He pointed toward the far trestle. “See, what Rafir did, he went all the way, but didn’t land. Turned around, looping over the trestle, and made it back here, single flight. Did it on vinerleaf.” He grinned, his face showing his astonishment. “Never before.”

“And Skaner could do it?”

Jos shrugged. “Skaner made the next trestle on vinerleaf, came back. But he touched down.”

“Mmm. What’s the point of doing it with vinerleaf?”

“Tradition. Leaf falls apart soon. Takes something to sail them any distance.”

*Anything falls apart if you sail it far enough*, Illa thought. The biofeed showed Jos’s anxiety. She did not know if she could filter out all that fear and worry. Maybe the thrill of the flight would overwhelm it and she would end up with a solid recording.

“Ready,” Jos said.

A transport rumbled onto the bridge. Skaner stopped near them and jumped out.

“Jos.”

He came onto the walkway.

“I’m doing this, Skaner.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Rafir’s my brother, not yours.”

Illa saw the words hurt Jos, saw his face change, shift from dismay to pain to anger. She glanced at her readouts. It was falling apart already, his anxiety levels even higher now.

“I’m doing this,” Jos repeated.

“Let me.”

Jos glared at Skaner. “You said no!” He looked at Illa. “Ready?”

Without waiting for her answer, Jos mounted the railing. The wind whipped at him and he teetered. Illa wanted to stop it, but she started the recorders instead.

He flexed his knees and launched.

Illa squatted before her monitors. Jos’s responses skewed into nearly singleminded fear. She made adjustments and found a substrate of other emotions, their presence faint. Jos was terrified.

Skaner banged the heel of his hand repeatedly against the railing, his gaze fixed on Jos.

His white wings made him easy to see against the green and wispy grey of the canyon jungle. He banked from side to side, dancing across the complex pockets of warm air boiling out of the growth below.

Suddenly he dipped, fast, as if the thread suspending him had broken. Illa

heard Skaner suck in his breath, saw the spike on Jos's readings, then looked out to see him recover, swerve up and catch a new thermal.

He reached the far trestle without another mishap. His pulse and respiration showed very high; all the other diagnostics said he was far from stable enough for a return flight.

"He's staying," Skaner said.

"Jos?" Illa spoke into her comm.

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

"Never better."

"Are you going to come back?"

"Don't think so."

Skaner knelt beside her. "Got what you need?"

"No. It's too much one sensation. He's—"

"Scared. Stay here."

He went to the transport and drove away.

Illa watched as one by one the feed from Jos's patches died. She could not see him, but she could imagine him tearing them off. She sat down and stared the length of Piric Canyon. Her mother would arrive tomorrow, finally catching up with her, and she still had not finished with Rafir.

She wiped at her face and her palms came away wet.

"Illa."

"Skaner?"

"Jos is connecting the feeds. Set your gear."

The comm died. She watched the readouts as they came back on, one by one. Different now, Skaner's readings. He was much calmer, though there was a definite spike of anger, but even as she made the adjustments for a new recording it faded.

"Ready?"

"Skaner—"

"Ready?"

Illa touched the contact. "Yes."

"Get it the first time," he said. "Won't be another."

On impulse, Illa opened the cover on the interface and pressed her fingers down—

—below, seeming both closer and farther at the same time, the thick jungle spread out, waiting to receive a drowning body. The harness tightened as the wind filled the wings. Balance took constant attention, minute flexings of the ankles and knees, leaning into the moving air just enough, falling back when it let up. The feed contacts felt strange, uncomfortable, but it was possible to ignore them. The far trestle looked small, toylike in the distance. One more gust, a flex, *push!*

Falling forward changed to falling downward. The green became detailed, leaves proliferated fractally, strands of fog rose. Temperature varied with depth, growing hotter, shoving around air masses in an attempt to equalize. The wings bucked, jerking side to side as they tried to snag a draft. The fall continued, each possible updraft avoided until just the right one, and then a tug on the control lines brought the wings down just enough, let them fill, and the harness became a giant

hand gripping around the torso, ribs pressed, and descent changed to ascent. The horizon line wavered, threatened to roll completely over, then stabilized and the wing held, buoyed on the breezes.

Now came the difficult part, the dance from pocket to pocket. Some lasted a quarter of a kilometer, but gave out eventually as the heat funneled up out of the center of the declivity and escaped. It was necessary to move from wall to wall, tracking the new thermals, riding them back the other direction as they fed into the low pressure column, faded, and then fell toward the opposite side, find another, in a long, slowmotion bounce; like a boat riding crests, tacking against the wind. The trestle grew larger, became real, became large, and there was Illa, crouched against her equipment on the walkway, her head back—

She pulled out as Skaner sailed beneath the bridge. She ran to the rail and looked down, but he was gone. She turned in time to see him rising, rising on the far side, a steep climb that emptied his wings, and he turned deftly, just missing the top of the arch and falling at a shallow angle, now truly gliding on less active air, down into the trough again and toward the far trestle. The soft glide carried him nearly a kilometer before he dropped low enough to start snagging on the fey hot currents again.

Illa's heart hammered. She leaned on the railing and watched Skaner complete the flight and set down on the far trestle. He had not fallen like Jos. It seemed to Illa that he had made it effortlessly.

“Get that?” he asked.

Illa checked her equipment. “Yyes. Good take.”

“Good. Jos will pick you up.”

And again the comm shut off and she was alone on the bridge. After a time she bent to secure her gear.

Jos drove back to the compound in rigid silence. There was a cut over his right eyebrow, but Illa did not ask about it. He parked the transport under the shed and stalked away. Illa draped her bags over her shoulders and trudged up to the house.

In the few seconds her eyes took to adjust, she saw Vida, Rilana, and Skaner sitting around the tea table, watching her. She felt ashamed for no specific reason, a reaction left over from all the times her mother had stood over her, watching while she worked, wordless. When Illa finished, then the criticism came, and there was always something wrong, some simple thing usually that a word at the right time might have corrected and allowed the learning to be less painful, less humiliating.

Illa filled her lungs to speak, then saw movement. A head turned to peer over the back of a couch. White hair, large eyes, faintly iridescent skin.

“Illa,” her mother said.

“Eco.”

“Been busy, haven't you?”

“I still am. Excuse me, I have work to do.”

“Stay away from my son!” Rilana came toward her. Vida jumped up and caught her sister's arm and held her. “Liar!” Rilana continued.

“I'm quite sure my daughter hasn't lied outright” Eco Preneur said, standing.

“At least, not to hurt. It’s not her tactic.”

“Leave Rafir alone!” Rilana hissed.

“Please, Co Vahi,” Illa said. I have to finish.”

“You’re quite finished, Illa,” Eco said. “It’s time to leave these people to themselves.”

“I don’t think so, Co Preneur,” Vida said. She tugged at Rilana, gently forced her back to her seat. “I think Illa should finish with Rafir.”

Eco’s expression was thinly tolerant, clearly disapproving.

“I checked. What you’re doing, Co Preneur, was not part of the commission you undertook for us. I doubt a general board of inquiry would pass on it.”

“I’m glad we both have friends,” Eco said. “If yours fought it out with mine, who do you think would win?”

Vida smiled. She looked at Illa. “Go up and do what you need to. Your mother and I have matters to discuss.”

“Vida—” Rilana snapped to her feet.

“Enough,” Vida said. “No more guilt. It’s not your fault, it’s not my fault. That ends. What has happened to Rafir can be laid completely at Co Preneur’s feet. Go on, Illa. Finish. We’ll be right here.”

Hesitantly Illa carried her gear upstairs, to Rafir’s room. Before she closed his door, she heard yelling.

The recording required very little editing, almost no enhancement. Illa damped the fear levels to a faint background presence, except right at the beginning, at the launch. The other responses fell into an elegant arrangement. She sat through it twice and both times emerged breathless and rushed.

She made a copy and stored it, then began preparing the sensorem for load into to Rafir’s interface. Halfway through came a knock at the door. Skaner entered the room.

“Done?” he asked.

“No, I’m setting it up now.”

He nodded. “Vida’s feeding your mater a bad time.”

“Good. Eco needs to hear sometimes that not everybody loves her.”

“Is she right? About what happened to Rafir?”

“Him and sixteen others that I know of.”

“Why? What use is it?”

“For Eco? New sensorems. Powerful material, death, especially heroic death.”

“But they didn’t die.”

“It’s a debatable point.”

He did not speak again until she finished. She slipped the disk into the player.

“He’ll experience my trestle?”

“Yes. Hell be flying.”

“Mater didn’t want him to leave. Vahis came with the first wave, been here since. Rafir didn’t want that. Didn’t hate it, not at first, but mater pushed. When Vida got him a commission he took it to get away. I don’t know if that’s what he wanted, but mater didn’t want it, so it was right to Rafir.”

“And she made you promise to stop trestling because of that?”

“No. She never asked. I just promised. I thought—Rafir is eldest, not me. It’s not the same. I thought giving that to mater would make up the difference.” He shook his head. “But it never does.”

Illa waited for him to say more. When he did not she touched the contact on the player. “It’s loading.”

“Your doing this is to hurt your mater?”

“I was. When I found out about it I decided that it was time Eco didn’t get what she wanted. She was always so fortunate in her choice of material. She didn’t care about how she got it. I didn’t either, but her work was always better than mine. But after I did several of these, it changed.”

“So why are you doing it now?”

“I don’t really know.”

“Maybe you’re doing something she can’t do.”

“I don’t know...”

The sensorem finished loading. Rafir’s monitors began to register a change. When she was certain it had loaded successfully, she unhooked her equipment. The readings said he was experiencing a vivid dream. The biomonitors compensated but did not completely, damp the physiological responses. Pulse quickened, adrenaline flowed, the neocortex showed global neuronal response.

Illa secured all her equipment and packed it away. Then, on an impulse she was afraid to question too closely, she handed all the discs, including the copy she had made, to Skaner. She tapped the last disc.

“Your flight.”

“And these others?”

“Give them to Vida when I’ve left. Whatever she feels best.”

He held them for a time without moving, then looked at Rafir. He caught his breath.

Tears ran from Rafir’s eyes.

Jos had joined the others. Illa saw him give Skaner a hard look. Eco sprawled against the back of a sofa, her eyes halfclosed. Illa shuddered—she knew the anger masked by that expression—and went directly to Rilana.

“I’m done. Everything is all right now. Rafir’s no longer suffering.”

For a terrible instant Rilana’s face flashed with betrayal and fear. “He’s—”

“Rafir’s alive,” Skaner said quickly. “He’s fine. New dreams, that’s what she meant.”

“An angel of mercy!” Eco said acidly. “A new role for you, Illa. You really shouldn’t promise what you can’t give, though.”

“Everything is all right,” Illa said slowly.

“You’re sure?”

Illa looked at her mother. “I didn’t use these people!”

Eco laughed. “No? What do you call *this*, then? You’ve been interfering with my work. You needed their cooperation to do that.” Eco slid off the sofa and came up to Illa. “You thought it would be better if I were barred from doing what I intended. You interfered. That has a cost.”

“But these people won’t have to pay it.”

“You think not? Are they more or less upset than if I’d simply come, retrieved my data, and left?” She glanced over her shoulder. “Jos, you have something to say?”

Jos looked startled to be suddenly the center of attention. He stepped forward shyly. “I, uh...I’m joining the Armada.”

The responses came all at once, forming a nearly meaningless jumble.

“Damn!”

“No!”

“Jos, don’t—”

“Why?”

Eco smiled triumphantly at her daughter. Jos looked from face to face and stopped at Skaner.

“Why, Jos?” Skaner asked.

“*You won’t,*” he said. Then he looked at Illa.

“He wants to be a hero for you,” Eco said. “You’ve made an impression.”

“What do you know about heroes?” Vida said.

“Quite a lot actually. My work has made enough of them.”

“Leave,” Rilana said. “You two. Leave.”

“Of course,” Eco said. “Illa, are you packed? We’ve overstayed our welcome.

“Jos,” Illa said, “don’t do this.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Whatever you want.”

Jos shook his head, anger and confusion tugging at his face.

“Talk to Skaner, Jos” she said. “Please. *Talk* to him.”

“Illa,” Eco said.

At the change of light, Illa looked out the window. The train had emerged from a cleft between two high ridges and shot out over a deeply green valley. The drop was vertiginous; she imagined what it might be like to fall from this height, strapped into broad wings. Fog smeared across the thick growth below.

Then the train entered another cleft and the window filled with dark blur.

“One puts up with this all the time,” Eco said. She sat across from Illa, eyes closed, head back. “People who don’t understand your work, draw all the wrong conclusions. I expect it. From them, not from you.” She sighed. “At least a few are left. It’s not all a loss. You changed nothing. Not between us, at least. Why did you do this?”

*Because you didn’t give me better dreams, mother,* she thought. She wondered why she could not say it.

Illa slipped a hand inside her jacket and touched the note Skaner had given her as he helped load her gear into the transport. She rubbed it gently, as though it were a talisman.

“I don’t blame you for anything,” it said.

It was strange to be so universally absolved. She looked at her mother and thought how very wrong she was. *Everything* was changed. It could not be otherwise.

Illa closed her own eyes and dreamed of flying.