

A Pinata For Juanita

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A Pinata For Juanita

June, 2116 to August, 2901

This novella is part of a vast universe that covers literally thousands of years and light-years. An ever growing collection of short stories, novellas, novels, and a website filled with information, timelines, research (both real and fictional), glossary and more, the tapestry that makes up the Shards Universe follows mankind's exploration of space and their settlement of dozens of planets.

Regardless of its length, from short essay to epic novel, all stories in the Shards Universe have two things in common. While some have happy endings, others sad, and others bittersweet, each story stands on its own as a complete tale. And every story is part of a greater, multilayered tapestry. Stories do not have to be read in any sort of order, chronological or otherwise. The more you read, the clearer and grander your view of the Shards Universe. Oftentimes, rereading a story at a future date will reveal even more to you. (And it doesn't cost any money to reread stories. That's nice.)

On the next page you'll find a quick timeline to help you place where this story falls into the grand scheme of the entire storyline. To further expand your experience, go to the Shards Universe on the internet and explore all that is offered there, including more detailed timelines. You will not be disappointed!

Well, so much for the boring opening. Now it's time to get to the good stuff! So in closing, I'd like to welcome you to my universe...

The Shards Universe

The Author--March, 2006

shard: v. *To switch personas. Once a mind has been ripped (wiped and rewritten), the previously used portion is closed off and an artificial psychic barrier is raised. Although impenetrable in theory, the barrier can be breached, and the closed off persona--even the original one--behind that barrier becomes dominant. This episode is called a shard.*

Sharding continues at an increasing rate, weakening the psychic barriers, until it reaches a cascade level and dissolution ensues. The episodes continue with trip hammer acceleration until the mind collapses and every persona dies, in turn, one at a time. Finally, the soulner--the original persona--also dies.

In 2502, the first successful cognitive reconstruction--the restoring of the soulner to dominance--changed the definition of sharding. Although sharding episodes could still occur, it was possible to have several episodes without triggering the cascade effect that led to dissolution. This allowed the original persona to continue a normal life, albeit in a different body.

Once cascade sharding began, however, dissolution and death were inevitable.

A Pinata For Juanita

Chapter One

June 7, 2116

Eleven Years

"*Ocho pesos, Senor?*" the young girl asked over the counter. Her face was deeply tanned and stark, with lips that were thin and outlined a mouth that had seen little variety of food over her eleven years. Her moist brown eyes, made larger than normal because of her lean face, looked longingly at a brightly decorated Pinata. Made of tissue paper, it was red, yellow, green, blue, orange, white and purple. It had every color possible except brown. That it did not have even a trace of brown--the brown of dusty streets, stale bread crusts and leering eyes--only made it more desirable. Shaped like a llama, it seemed to be from a wondrous dream, a joyful fragment of unimagined happiness that hung from the cart's mesquite wood rafters, tantalizingly close, yet impossibly out of Juanita's grasp.

"Eight pesos, Senor?" Juanita repeated hopefully, offering a price far below the Pinata's marked price of ninety pesos. She fidgeted nervously, knowing she had no right to offer such a laughable sum, but she was going to try. Clapsed firmly in her delicate hand were twelve pesos. She needed at least three to purchase the day's meal for her and her mother, but the remaining nine were hers to spend.

The cart vendor, having finished his transaction with a tourist, turned toward Juanita, prepared to chase her away. She had badgered him with the same eight pesos for several days now and each day he had rudely cursed her, not even honoring such a poor amount with a counteroffer that would indicate bartering had begun. Eight pesos! Didn't this street imp know that she must at least *try* to offer a reasonable...

He looked down at Juanita, and his anger faded. She stood close to the counter that nearly came up to her painfully thin shoulders. She looked as she had every day he'd seen her. She had long, black hair, some of it tied back with a slice of faded orange ribbon, and wore a loose, oversized tan sack dress that came down to her knees. She had a rope tied around her skinny waist. She was barefoot, but a pair of sandals--worn out and used only when necessary--hung from her rope belt. Always emaciated, the child today seemed to have an extra measure of desperation. She held her petite, underdeveloped frame proudly, as she always did, but today it seemed as though a harsh word from him would shatter her. He was a hard bargainer, and he held off poverty for his own family only by shrewdly bartering with--some might say battering--those who could afford to be generous, or who knew nothing about challenging a price. But staring into the girl's large, hopeful eyes ruined his business acumen, and for this single transaction, the loving father in him took precedence.

"Eight pesos?!" he said loudly in poorly feigned shock. He gestured both hands at the Pinata, as though presenting the rarest of earthly treasures. "How could you offer only eight pesos for such art?" He shook his head sadly. "I fear, child, that the sun has burned your brain away."

Juanita smiled slightly, and she felt her heart pound the smallest bit harder. Today, and maybe only today, she had a chance to possess this tiny morsel of paradise.

"But, sir! This has been hanging in your cart for weeks. I know, because I pass it every day on my way to the Square of Mercy." She cautiously opened her hand and stole a glance at the sweaty, warm coins, not allowing the vendor to see her wealth. She closed her hand again and looked up. "Eight pesos, Senor."

"Eight pesos! Again with the eight pesos!" he proclaimed, his pretended blustering losing what little bark it

had. He found himself admiring her good trading technique of not raising her offer until he at least countered. He leaned forward and put his weight on the counter, causing it to creak in protest. A large man, he seemed twice again his size beside the slight Juanita, but she lifted her chin and stood her ground, though her legs were weaker than they had been a moment earlier. He considered her thoughtfully.

"Though my family will starve because of my foolishness, I will sell you this beautiful Pinata, which my children slaved many hours to make, for only..." he paused, gauging his small customer, "fifteen pesos."

Fifteen! Juanita thought wildly, at once depressed and excited. The marked price was ninety! This was very generous, and she wished with desperation that she had the fifteen. But she didn't. She had twelve, and at least three was needed to purchase rice and beans--and perhaps bread--in Mercy Square.

She did not show any fear, though. Or tried not to. Instead, she set her mouth firmly, hoping he didn't see the tiny quiver in them.

"Fifteen pesos for so small a thing, sir?" she said in surprise and a hint of indignation. In truth, she was thrilled at having the rare chance to debate the price of something. "How grand you and your family must live! You make so much money with a toy that cost no more than a peso to make." She briefly thought about raising her offer, but knew she had little room for that option. "I will pay you eight pesos."

Her offer, improperly unchanged, all but shattered the man's heart. He knew that she dearly wanted the Pinata, but had little or no money beyond the eight pesos. He nearly reached up and gave her the treasure for nothing, but couldn't. Her pride would force her to refuse it. He wanted her to have it now as much as she did, but had to do this the proper way.

"Is eight the only number you know? Ah!" he threw his hands up, then folded his arms and frowned at her menacingly. It was a frown that neither believed. "I shall teach you a new number today, girl! You ruin me, but I will sell it to you for twelve pesos."

Twelve! Now her prize became a thing of torture as well. Her insides twisted and churned, and had she any food in her stomach, she might have thrown up from eagerness and agony. She had twelve pesos! But she needed three, which left only nine.

She hurriedly tried to calculate how she might save some money at the Square. Mother could not earn any money. And while her mother had eaten yesterday, it had been very little, since Juanita had been detained overly long at the city gates by the Hidalgo police who were looking for a young thief about Juanita's size. They had forced her to take them to her mother, to prove she was not an orphan, and then wasted more time while they took her mother's finger and eye prints to verify she was properly listed with the Demented Persons Registry.

Finally satisfied, they left Juanita and her mother in peace, but the Square was closed by then, and Juanita could only afford food elsewhere if she used her precious eight pesos, which she had vowed to spend on herself. So she had fed her mother the little bread that had been tossed her during her impromptu dances that day. She herself went hungry. It was not an unusual event, so Juanita didn't concern herself with it. She was young and able to earn money. Her mother was addled and unable to work, so her mother had to come first.

She knew that she could not buy enough food for the both of them for less than three pesos. She must use the one extra peso that remained.

"You have insulted me, Senor!" Juanita snapped, stamping her foot on the dusty street, stirring a small cloud. "I know many numbers! I also know that the number twelve is not a good number for that Pinata. If it were three Pinatas, or perhaps one Pinata as large as me, then twelve would be almost fair. But I

only wish to purchase one small Pinata. Very well then, Senor," she said, mustering as stately a voice as possible, "I shall crumble to your bullying by offering you nine pesos."

"Nine!" he stared at her in disbelief and horror. Inside, he was overjoyed that the child had the one extra peso to conclude the trading. He would sell it to her for nine. But it still wasn't quite time. Both child and man were very much excited and delighted with this exchange; a moment of happiness the child was basking in and the man was gladly giving her.

"Nine!" he repeated, putting a tone in his voice that sounded as the bells of doom might. "Why don't you steal a knife from me and rob me, girl? I see now that you are not a beautiful child but rather a glassmac man disguised as a lovely young woman. Nine! It is you who are bullying me!" He sighed heavily. Juanita's eyes were sparkling and her efforts to maintain a righteously indignant face were failing miserably as a smile forced her face to light up. "You leave me no choice, then. You have bested me, glassmac man. Ten pesos."

The instant he said it, he knew he had made a mistake. The child's face was rocked with fear and confusion. In his playful banter, he'd forgotten this young child was just that; a young child. Though wise in the sad ways that children should never have knowledge of, she was still very young and immature. As he saw the struggle in her face, he knew that the one thing he hoped for--that she would simply offer the nine pesos again--would not occur to her. Clearly, he had pushed her to the point of just over affordability. She must now either walk away, not having ten pesos, or she would accept the offer and pay for that lost peso by going hungry.

Unfortunately, there was nothing he could say now, for he had made his offer. She was not seeking pity; she was seeking dignity. He was saddened that while she would keep her dignity, she must surrender either her sustenance or her dream.

Juanita looked down again and peered into her barely opened hand. Ten pesos, and the Pinata was hers. But that left only two pesos, and she had to have three.

Or did she? She made between one and four pesos each day, dancing at the city gate where the glassmac came into town. If she didn't eat today, then left early in the morning while it was still dark, she could dance until night and perhaps earn a fourth and even fifth peso. Her growling stomach reminded her she hadn't eaten in two days, but her excited heart told her that just one more day of hunger would allow her to purchase this glorious shard of a different life.

She looked up at the Pinata once again. The brightly colored tassels hung down, casting spider-web shadows on the bland, expensive items sitting on the counter. A warm puff of desert breeze caressed the cart and the Pinata swayed slightly, as though trembling with the hope that it would soon have an owner. Juanita decided. She would eat tomorrow, or maybe the day after. Today, she would have her present.

"Ten pesos, is a fair price, Senor," Juanita said firmly. "I accept it."

* * * *

"Yo! Gary!" Efwon's voice carried clearly through the crystallized air of the puterverse. Gary Marks, concentrating deeply as he waded through the data pool, searching for the single thread needed to solidify his link, looked up in annoyance. Efwon was dropping steeply in free fall toward him. For an instant, he thought the burning green form would deliberately splash into the pool, ruining hours of trolling. He stopped less than a micron above the surface, however, and the pool didn't even ripple.

"Geez, Mike! Do you really *have* to shout like that?" Gary turned back to his trolling. "What do you have to tell me that's so important it couldn't wait an extra few seconds while you came a little closer?"

Mike walked along the surface of the pool and stopped beside Gary. Putting his hands on his knees, Mike squatted down and peered into the pool, grinning.

"Geez, you're a whiner! There's nothing important going on, except your work." Mike's voice took on a tone of deep interest. His eyes glowed brighter as he inspected the threads making up the data pool. "So, have you found number twenty-three yet?"

Gary wanted to stay mad at him, but couldn't. Mike--known by the entire puterverse world and its users as Efwon--was the Marks' family mentor, tutor, guide and occasional nuisance. A being of unsurpassed power, he and Kiki were the oldest life forms in the puterverse. Gary had been honored and shocked when at the age of twenty, this unimaginably intelligent being had contacted him personally and told him it was his--Gary's--five times great-grandmother Abigail Marks who had created Mike and Kiki and changed forever the face of the puterverse. Stunned that the nearly omnipotent Efwon was devoted to certain members of the Marks' family line even after two centuries, Gary had eagerly snatched up Mike's offer to teach him the puterverse. Now, at the age of fifty, Gary himself was considered one of its best users.

"I think so. Here, look at this." Gary gently pulled away a data thread, revealing a second, pulsing one beneath it. "I'd say it was dated about June, 2442, wouldn't you?"

"Nope. I'd say July 15th, 2442, 3:36 a.m. Terran," Mike replied with a grin.

"Smartass," Gary shot back. Carefully, he inserted his right hand and began easing aside the shimmering, crisscrossed layers of humming, glimmering data threads, baring the much sought after link. "Grab that, will ya?"

Though he never got involved directly as Efwon--a brutal lesson he had learned a century earlier--with Gary he was just Mike. Showing no apparent regard for accuracy, Mike plunged his hand in and roughly snatched the thread. His carelessness was illusion only; upon touching the data pool, every thread snapped parallel to the surface, then spread apart to allow Mike unimpeded access. Gary marveled at the easy way Mike had with data. Less than a picon thick, the glowing data thread was more fragile than a teenager's confidence with the opposite sex. Mike pulled the thread to the surface quickly and yanked it free of the data pool, causing no damage whatsoever. Gary pulled his hands free and shook loose a few errant data threads, which floated back to the pool, where they were reintegrated. He held out his left arm and Mike slapped the thread around Gary's forearm, and the data whipped around, quickly changing color and shading until it matched the deep gold glow that coated Gary's realistic body. Gary's head tilted as he slipped into deep thought, analyzing the data. Then he suddenly smiled and gave a shout.

"Yes! Number twenty-three! Mike, we did it! Six months looking, but we've got number twenty-three!"

"Great!" Mike was clearly as excited as Gary, and the two shouted and laughed as Gary waded out of the pool. Gary completed thread duplication, then carefully unwrapped the data and dropped it back into the pool. Within nanoseconds, it had found its original location. The data pool returned to its undisturbed state.

"So," Mike said with a quieter voice, filled with anticipation. "Is this it? Is this the one?"

"Hang on. I'm running the thread now." Gary's voice and face took on a thoughtful look again. He began mechanically rattling off the data as it processed.

"Ripe begins on July 15th, 2442, at 3:36 a.m. Terran time. Ripe is machine. It's a... puterverse assistance terminal..."

"Damn!" Mike said vehemently, knowing what was coming.

"Operation time... one million, three hundred and sixty-one thousand, four hundred and two hours, seventeen minutes.."

"That makes it a ripe of one hundred and fifty-five and a half years." Mike said with a nod, "Ripe termination date would work out to December 12, 2597." His earlier anger was mollified somewhat by the relief that it didn't reach 2681, the year when he, Kiki, and Abigail had destroyed the original, corrupted puterverse.

Gary nodded. "Ripe persona termination date confirmed. Soulner continuation..." he paused a long moment--which seemed an eternity to Mike--then let out a deep sigh of relief. "Soulner continuation verified. Looks like it's on to number twenty-four, Mike. Either that or keep working back."

"Hey, Gary, I know you're up to it." Mike gripped Gary's shoulder firmly. "There's no one better." He cracked a grin and his green eyes sparked. "Except me, of course."

"I know. I'm not frustrated. Just a little--I don't know--anxious that I'll never find the beginning or end. That I'll never be able to bring the last soulner home."

"You'll get it," Mike said with conviction. "You've found twenty-three consecutive ripes since the first thread was discovered eight years ago. There can't be many more. It's up to you to find where the soulner started and where he or she is now." He smiled at some private thought. "And I know you'll find *both* ends. After all, you wouldn't want to find out what I'm like if I discover I've been wasting my time with some loser."

"I imagine you'd be some put out," Gary ventured with a laugh.

"You imagine correctly. Well," Mike stepped back and jumped lightly into the air. Sharp, metallic wing sprang from his back; wings he'd "inherited" from Abigail Marks. "I'm off. Some egghead on Killian Four needs my help. Take care, Gary!" There was a soft explosion and Mike was shooting through the puterverse atmosphere toward his next project.

"You too, Mike!" He called out after Mike's quickly fading form. Shaking his head after the enigmatic character, Gary turned inward again to begin gleaning the clues that would point to ripe number twenty-four.

* * * *

The coins changed hands, and the vendor was surprised at how decisive she had become. His earlier sadness at having pushed her too far faded when he handed over the Pinata into Juanita's trembling hands.

"Gracias, Senior!" Juanita said with a deep curtsy, slightly off balance from the Pinata firmly gripped under her right arm. She beamed at him, and for a moment the life she was living was gone, and the man saw a child without worries or fears. He had a sudden inspiration. The moment could not last, but perhaps he could help it linger.

"Please wait, Seniorita," he said sternly, reaching under the counter. He pulled out a tabinal and activated it. "Our business is not concluded. For such a major purchase, I must register your name as a recognized consumer."

The flicker of fear that had crossed Juanita's face vanished and her face lit up. Though a standard practice among those with money, being a recognized consumer was an unheard of honor for the poor.

Registration had no impact on a person's life other than one could say they were registered. The vendor saw the look of awe on her face as he handed her the tabinal. He fervently hoped she could read.

She could. Holding the tabinal like it was made of pure gold, Juanita carefully input what little information there was about herself. Her fingers were shaking with excitement, and she felt almost dizzy with giddiness from this unexpected chance at status. Just wait until she told her pastor and her mother!

Her hands were still shaking so badly when she handed back the tabinal that the vendor needed to reach out and take it from her. He placed the tabinal back under the counter, then smiled at Juanita.

"There! Now our business is concluded, *Senorita*."

Juanita's eyes were now tear-filled. She carefully placed the Pinata at her feet, then gave the man a slow, gracious curtsy.

"*Gracias, Senor*," she said in a quiet voice, "*Mucho gracias! Vaya con Dios!*" Picking up the Pinata, Juanita turned and moved away unsteadily, as though not used to walking on air. She headed toward Mercy Square, her most precious earthly possession held tightly to her chest.

"*Vaya con Dios, Peppita*," he murmured after her tiny form. "*Vaya con Dios.*"

* * * *

Gary rolled over onto his back, trying to get to sleep. Beside him, his wife moaned slightly and raised her head, looking at him with sleepy eyes. Seeing his staring gaze in the near darkness, she whispered a soft word and shifted her hands, creating a soft blue ball of light over their heads, the lulling sound of a steady rainstorm pouring from it.

"What's wrong, Gary?" she yawned. "Still bothered by number twenty-four?"

"I'm sorry I woke you, Cathy." He kissed her on the forehead. "Yeah, I am. I can't seem to find the one thread that will point me to twenty-five. I know it's the last one. I'm certain of it!"

"But doesn't twenty-four terminate in 2690? That's over two hundred years as a ripe, Gary."

"I know. But all unregistered riping stopped after 2703, when Mike, Kiki and my ancestor Abigail completed integration of the puterverse, and every ripe performed after 2703 has been located and cued. For this last one to have survived this long, it *has* to come from a time when it was still possible to perform a ripe, then bury the evidence."

"Well, how about the other end, then? You haven't worked on that for a few months." Cathy yawned again and slumped her head on the pillow. "Maybe the soulner is a homicidal maniac, and you really couldn't bring him back anyway."

"I've thought of that. I'm positive that's not true, though. The most number of ripes a sociopathic mind has ever successfully undergone is fifteen. Some can't even handle one for very long. After fifteen, an unbalanced mind can't support the psychic barriers and dissolution sets in.

"This one's gone at least twenty-six, counting the soulner and the last ripe. That's the third largest known number a mind has been ripped. Only the Milcorp Complex and Potolofsky soulners--each at forty-one--were larger. And the Potolofsky soulner had eighteen sealant ripes. So far, this one's only had eight." Gary sighed and rolled on his side, facing his wife and putting an arm around her.

"I know this will prove to be a valid candidate for cueing. It will also probably be the final cueing,

because this is the only unresolved soulner to be discovered in over eighty years."

"If that's true," Cathy said in a sleepy voice, cuddling up to her husband, "You'll be out of a job when it's done."

"That's a problem I'll be happy to have. Mankind has an eight hundred year mar against it, Cathy. I just want to make amends for the crime we've committed against ourselves and against all the soulners who were ever ripped. I just want to bring this last soulner home."

Cathy snuggled up against him and he felt better. He pulled his left arm tighter around her, drawing her close, while with his right hand he cast a spell of cancellation. The blue light popped silently and the room faded into gentle silence and cozy darkness.

* * * *

"Pastor!" Juanita called out as she stepped into the narthex of the small chapel. In her hands she now carried the small sack of beans she had purchased from Mercy Square. Under her arm, having never left the safety of its owner, was the Pinata.

"Pastor?" she called again, looking into his office. It was empty, so she walked to the doors that led to the sanctuary and peered through the cracked but clean window. She could see Pastor Montoya kneeling at the communion rail, deep in prayer. She didn't know how long he would be, but decided to wait. Walking over to the ancient wooden bench in the narthex, worn smooth by the decades and hundreds of parishioners, she sat down quietly and waited. Now that she had purchased the food for the day, it was nearly an hour until dark, so Juanita had some time.

She looked around the familiar narthex and tried to find if anything was different. She visited the mission twice daily, once in the morning on her way to the city gates, and again on her way home in the evening. Except for Pastor Montoya--who had been there nearly forty years--Juanita was the most established fixture in the small but faithful Lutheran mission.

Nothing had changed. She'd read all the notices on the board, and the bulletin from the previous Sunday was already memorized--greedily soaked up by Juanita who had learned to read here and had a voracious appetite for anything written.

The poor box was also unchanged, but Juanita looked at it anyway. She felt a small tingle of guilt with the Pinata sitting beside her, but chased the feeling away as a false guilt. She had already given the first two pesos of the filthy ten she'd had, and Pastor Montoya had encouraged her to spend the remaining eight as she saw fit.

Her memory flashed back briefly to the encounter. Two weeks earlier, she had been dancing at the gates in the heat of the day when she'd been accosted by a loud, drunken foreigner. Although Juanita was always careful to dance with graceful movements that were intended only to show beauty of motion, this man took it to mean something entirely different.

He had propositioned her and she had refused. Many girls--and more than a few boys--her age and younger made great sums in pleasing whomever had the twenty, thirty or forty pesos needed to secure their services, but Juanita was not among them. It was sinful money, and she would have nothing to do with it.

He had continued pressuring her and she had abruptly stopped and gathered her few crusts and two coins, willing to go hungry rather than continue with him watching. He grabbed her, and she struggled. Other beggars, including several men looking for work, noticed and came to help. Seeing that he would

be in trouble if he stayed, he roughly kissed Juanita on the mouth then ran off, tossing ten pesos on the ground in front of her and thanking her for her services.

She'd gone to her pastor, crying and shamed. He'd helped her through her terror and guilt by reading from the Bible the comforting passages of forgiveness and love by her Savior. When they discussed what to do with the money--the equivalent of four days working wages--Juanita wanted nothing to do with it and offered to give it to the church. Pastor Montoya had quietly counseled that while she had had this money forced upon her, it nonetheless was now her money, and she should manage it carefully. He suggested that she take what was bad and make good out of it. She had promptly stood up and put two pesos into the poor box, saving the rest for the proper time.

It was three days later that she saw the Pinata.

A wonderful, joyous, colorful thing that glowed in a drab world of poverty and hunger, the Pinata looked to Juanita like a bright beacon of sunlight slicing through an impenetrable darkness. She began dreaming of it, seeing it sitting on the small windowsill of the abandoned, tumbled down adobe she and her mother lived in, the sunlight illuminating it and the rays breaking into many beams of colored light as it bounced off the hundreds of tassels. Even better, she would hang it by a string from the top of the sill, and let the wind play with it, swinging and turning the Pinata, entertaining others with its beauty and movement in the way Juanita danced for others.

As much for herself, Juanita also knew her mother would love it. She took her mother for walks on occasion, and saw the woman's dull eyes brighten at the sight of radiant, moving color. How she would love the Pinata!

So Juanita had begun pestering the man, knowing she could never afford the gift for her and her mother, but holding out hope and praying each night for a miracle. And today her prayers had been answered.

It had been a half hour since her arrival, and Pastor Montoya was still praying. He probably hadn't heard her come in and didn't know she was there. She thought about calling for him again, but didn't want to disturb him. Besides, the sun was setting and she wanted to be home while it was still up, so she could show her mother their new present. She would talk to pastor tomorrow. Picking up her small sack of beans and her Pinata, Juanita left the chapel, closing the outer door with a quiet hand.

* * * *

"I did it."

Gary stared at the thread. It pulsed and glowed in his hand, a rainbow spark of power cutting through it occasionally as the ancient data sputtered and struggled to maintain its existence. Seeing how fragile it was, Gary began a slow, careful, reconstruction, gently filling the fragment with his own energy. He wanted to cast a sustenance spell on the thread, but of course Pentinsic code couldn't exist in the puterverse, a place where trinary code was indigenous. Still staring intently at the eight hundred year old thread, Gary called for Mike, who instantly appeared. Though he may have been dozens of light years away from a physical world perspective, this was the puterverse, and Mike was a part of this world, not Gary's. He traveled where he wanted, when he wanted.

"Hey, Gary! How's.." Mike's loud, cheerful greeting broke off when he saw the data fragment. He came forward slowly, as though fearful too hard a step would snap the thread.

"You did it," he said in awed whisper.

"Uh-huh. It'll take awhile to decode and rebuild--the data storage matrix is early 22nd century--but I

think I've finally located the identity of the soulner. I've found where he or she started. All that remains is finding the other end, finding where the soulner is today."

* * * *

Mother wasn't there. Standing in the doorway, stunned, Juanita looked again at the small one room adobe ruin she called home. She was alone. Her mother was nowhere to be seen.

Juanita shook her head, confused and slightly scared. Her mother belonged here, in this room. Either here or at Juanita's side, her arm lovingly yet firmly held by Juanita. Alone and away from this room, her mother was helpless. Helpless because she was not in this world, but lived in a world of her own; a world filled with demons and angels but no people. If the police found her unattended and matched her to the Demented Persons Registry, her mother could be seized and ripped.

Now genuinely frightened, Juanita set the beans and Pinata down and raced across the open desert area to another adobe similar to hers. Though it was still late afternoon and the sun had not set, Juanita saw a light coming from the crumbling window in the mud wall.

"Pedro!" Juanita called, still running to the adobe. There was movement in the home and a small man, only a meter and a half in height, stepped into the doorway. His wife, a woman of thirty years age but aged fifty years, peered out from behind him. Juanita stopped in front of them, trying hard to hold back tears.

"Have you seen my mother? She's not home!" At Pedro's downcast look, Juanita's heart was struck cold. "Where?" she asked, tears coming up and trickling down her cheeks, her voice the soul of anguish. "Where is she?"

"I'm sorry, Juanita," Pedro's own voice was heavy with sorrow and the guilt that came with helplessness. "But they came for her today. I was not here, but my wife saw." At Juanita's baleful look, the woman turned her head away and covered her face. She looked even older. Older and weaker. Juanita looked back at Pedro.

"The police?" the Juanita asked, not wanting to but having no choice.

"No. No, it wasn't the police," Pedro said, letting a sob out. His eyes were red and tear-filled as well. He ran a hand across them and hung his head as though it was too heavy to hold up. With great effort, he lifted it up to look at the now crying girl.

"The Registry took her, Juanita. They took her away to ripe her."

Juanita made no sound. She stared at Pedro and his wife, her mouth trembling as it released a silent scream. Then her strength failed her and she slumped to the ground.

* * * *

"Gary?" Cathy's light blue bathed puterverse form--a very close approximation to her physical body, but with some definition softened by the energy sheathe covering her torso--peeked in from behind a red scented wall that contained the entire history of the Terran/Martian Wars. "Gary? It's time for dinner. Why don't you put that off for a little bit and join us?"

"Huh?" Gary slipped out of his daze and stared at his wife before grinning sheepishly. "I'm sorry, honey. You're right. Our lost soulner has waited 785 years. She can wait a little longer."

"She?"

"Yep. I don't have a name, yet, but I do have a gender and date." He glanced down at the pulsing thread, double-checking his information for the four hundredth time in two weeks. "The soulner is female, and was ripped for the first time by the Demented Persons Registry on June 8th, 2116."

* * * *

"Welcome to the DPR regional office. Today is June 8th, 2116." The machine's cold voice sounded vaguely female, but without the warmth of human speech. Juanita wondered if it had ever been human. "Please state the nature of your visit."

"You... you brought my mother here last night. It was a mistake and..."

"Please state the nature of your business," the nearly human voice repeated.

"Uh... my mother was taken by some of your people yesterday, and I needed..."

"Please state the nature of your business," it repeated, slightly harsher this time. Then, perhaps concluding the girl needed help in selection, the voice continued. "You may enter for reasons of surrender, business, employment or complaint."

Juanita thought through her options, then said, "Complaint," in a small, intimidated voice. It was enough for the voice, however, for the heavy metal door made a loud bang, causing Juanita to jump back, then opened slowly. Hurriedly, lest she lose her chance, Juanita took her shoes off her belt and put them on. She wanted to look her best. Clutching the Pinata tightly--brought along to comfort her mother--Juanita tentatively entered.

Inside, the room was large and busy. With no windows and so many people, it seemed the room should be quite hot and the air very stale. But it was cool and refreshing, as if magically cleansed by winter mountain air. Juanita had heard of buildings having air like this, but she'd never experienced it before.

Juanita walked across the marble floor--stared at by everyone who passed by--and slowly advanced toward a desk behind which a stern looking woman was seated. At her approach, accentuated by the bang of the outside door closing behind her, the woman looked up and locked her gaze onto the girl.

"Name?" she barked.

"Juanita Alvarez, Senora. I am here to..."

"Nature of the complaint?" The woman interrupted. She was dressed in a heavy, tight uniform. Perhaps her clothing contributed to her meanness, Juanita thought.

"My mother was taken last night, but she wasn't..."

"Name?" the woman repeated, reaching for a tabinal.

"I told you," Juanita said, feeling the faintest embers of anger stirring. "My name is Juanita Alva..."

"The name of your mother, idiot!"

Taken aback by such rudeness, Juanita could only stare, forcing the woman to again repeat the question.

"Ro.. Rosita Alvarez," Juanita stammered out.

The woman looked over her tabinal, then nodded curtly.

"Yes, I have her now. She was listed on the Registry as a demented person with no means of support. She was ripped last night and is now a useful member of society."

Juanita's thoughts started whirling and she felt dizzy and sick. She began squeezing the Pinata, crushing the tassels.

"That can't be! I am her means of support! There's been a mistake!" her trembling voice began raising in pitch, "Please! Let me see her! She's my mother!"

The majority of people were now staring at her. The woman looked at her, hating her for being disruptive.

"Stop it! I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do." Her eyes narrowed suddenly. "Don't you have a father?"

Juanita shook her head dumbly, tears streaming down her cheeks as they had the night before--the first night in her life she'd been alone--hoping the truth of her emptiness would reach the woman. She was left with only the mercy of the people who had taken her mother away.

The woman stared briefly at her, then made an entry on the tabinal. Looking up, she smiled at Juanita. It was an empty, cold, smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"All right. Your mother is in an observation room. I can have someone take you back to her." She motioned an arm and a tall, muscular soldier appeared. The woman looked up at him.

"Private, take this young lady back to see her mother. Cell 74D."

"Very good, ma'am. Come with me, girl." He took Juanita's hand and pulled her toward the back of the room where another large metal door awaited. Juanita felt the stirrings of fear, but was eager to see her mother. She eased her grip on the Pinata, hoping she had not damaged it too much.

They went through the door and entered into a large hallway with doors on either side. As they walked, their footsteps sounded as lonely as her heart, and the echoes mirrored the emptiness of her soul. Juanita smelled something like tequila, or strong wine. The doors were marked with numbers, and although they had small windows in them, they were higher than Juanita, and she could see only the brightly lit ceilings of each room. Finally, they stopped in front of a door marked 74D. The guard pressed his palm against a red square and the door opened. None too gently, he put a hand against Juanita's back and firmly pushed her in. The door closed behind her.

Facing her was a woman in her mid thirties, looking at her curiously. With black hair and black eyes, she was of average height. She was clean and had been dressed in a simple white dress that covered her from neck to ankles. It was her mother.

Relieved beyond words, Juanita sobbed and ran into her mother's arms, the Pinata dropped to the floor, momentarily forgotten. Her mother held her close, patting her back awkwardly. Still crying, she felt her mother pry her carefully away and look into Juanita's eyes.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?" she asked, genuine concern in her voice. "What can I do to make you feel better?" Her mother reached out a hand and brushed back a strand of Juanita's hair.

Stunned at her articulate speech, Juanita gasped. Was it true?

"Mother! You.. you are all right!" Juanita's joy exploded through her, making her want to jump and laugh and cry. "They've cured you! Oh, Mother!"

She fell into her mother's grasp again, but was held off.

"I was sick," her mother said, keeping Juanita at arm's length, "and they did cure me. But I'm not your mother. How could I be? My name is Theresa Nuñez and I've never been married, let alone had any children. I just came down here for a quick mental treatment before shipping out to my new post on Mars as mine inspector for Harting Enterprises."

Stunned, and overwhelmed by nameless dread, Juanita drew back in horror. She now saw her mother for the first time. She had the look of intelligence, even of compassion. But Juanita could tell this woman was her mother no longer.

Unable to move, or even cry, and so drained and shocked that all she could do was stare at the woman who had been her mother, Juanita didn't hear the door open and the guard enter. She was startled by his touch, and felt a stab of pain go through her, then disappear as her grief engulfed it. She looked up at the guard, who looked down at her impassively.

"We told you, girl. She's not your mother. She never will be your mother. And since you have no father, you are now legally an orphan. I'm sorry. Come on, it's time to go."

Juanita, as though snarled hopelessly in an endless nightmare, nodded slowly and turned, picking up the Pinata and holding it close. She looked back toward her mother, but she was already studying a tabinal and making modifications to what she saw, her fingers flying expertly over the smooth surface.

Juanita turned away and stepped through the door into the hall. She was very tired. She stumbled against the guard, then felt him gently pull the Pinata from her suddenly weak arms.

"Here. I'll take care of that for you."

* * * *

It was well past midnight when Gary ended access and went to bed, first creating a partial haven that painted the room with the dancing shadows of a campfire, the pops and crackles of the flame adding to the soothing nature of the spell. Cathy was sleeping, but awoke when she felt her husband lay beside her and hug her long and hard. She knew what it meant. He always clung to her when upset or hurt.

"You found the name, didn't you Gary?" she whispered.

He didn't say anything for a long minute, but just held her. Finally, he stirred and spoke. His voice was soft and cracked with emotion.

"I traced her to a tabinal entry made the day before her riping. It had nothing to do with her selection, but it verified her identity, which I had gotten from the archives, under the Orphan Rights Negation Act of 2099. Her name is Juanita Alvarez. She's an eleven year old girl, Cathy. They ripped her mother, and then, since that legally made Juanita an orphan, they ripped her."

Chapter Two

11 Years (2116)

"Daddy!" The teenager screamed, running down the stairs toward the Christmas tree that sparkled perfectly. Underneath, beside and all around the tree were scores of presents, all except one covered in brightly decorated paper and tied with brilliant ribbons. Bing Crosby, singing *White Christmas* 150

years after his death, competed with the strong pine scent for space in the rich atmosphere. "Oh! Daddy! Thank you so much! My very own maid!"

The girl, a full bodied teen with long blond hair and a dozen earrings, nose rings and various other body part rings, ran up to the calm Hispanic girl who knelt by the tree, wearing a sensible work dress, a pretty red bow in her hair. Plucking the bow off, the girl pulled the eleven year old to her feet and inspected her. It wasn't long before the girl's squeals of joy turned flat.

"Daddy! I said I wanted a white girl!" She looked over the girl's uniform. "And look at this outfit! I'll positively die if my friends see my maid in such tootoo date garbage."

"Now, Diane honey," her father consoled, "this was all I could get on such short notice." He was a middle-aged, balding man with a paunch. He looked like a stereotypical upper management yes man and, in fact, was a stereotypical upper management yes man. Unlike the stereotype, though, he had no illusions and knew exactly what he was. But, as he pointed out, the benefits were great.

"I don't care! I want a white girl. And older, too!" She turned to the young girl. "Do you even speak English?"

The small maid, with long black hair and large, moist brown eyes, curtsied. "Yes, ma'am. I speak perfect English, just as your father ordered."

"Do you speak any other language?" she asked suspiciously. "Like Spanish?"

"No, ma'am. I can only speak English."

"Good. What's your name?"

"Maria."

"No, it's not! I want your name to be a white girl's name! Your name is Vanessa!"

"Yes, ma'am," the young maid curtsied again, unperturbed by her sudden name change. "My name is Vanessa."

"And don't call me â€˜ma'am'. That makes me sound like a old hag. Call me..." she smiled and laughed. "Call me... Most Beautiful Princess with Golden Hair!"

"Yes, Most Beautiful Princess with Golden Hair!" the maid replied, copying her mistress's tone.

"Don't be snotty with me!" she snapped, slapping the maid across the face.

"I'm not, Most Beautiful Princess with Golden Hair! I'm just following your instructions."

"Well, don't yell it out!"

"As you wish, Most Beautiful Princess with Golden Hair."

"How old are you?"

"They told me I am eleven."

"Eleven?!" the girl turned on her father. "Did you hear that, Daddy? She's eleven! I need someone with a

better body than Amber's maid! Otherwise they'll talk about me at the school. Oh! Daddy! How could you?" She began crying. Her father stepped up and hugged her.

"There, there, Diane honey. Maybe she'll grow into a figure that you can brag about." He appraised the young maid as he might a potentially lucrative bond issue. "What will you look like in three years?" he asked her.

"I--I--don't know, sir," she said, somewhat taken aback by a question far outside her realm of programming. "I only know how to cook and clean and look after your daughter."

"Well, can you *make* yourself grow.. you know.. that way?"

"I don't think so, sir. I'm only capable of performing house duties. Would you like me to do something now?"

"Yeah. Take Diane honey up to her room and get her happy."

"Yes, sir." The maid took her new mistress by the arm and pulled her gently. "Come, Most Beautiful Princess with Golden Hair. Perhaps some hot chocolate and a nap will help."

"Please," the father said with a pained voice, "Just call her, â€˜miss', okay?"

"Yes, sir."

25 years (2130)

"Vanessa!" Diane honey was standing in her closet, tearing through her row of red dresses. She was becoming more and more frustrated and needed someone to vent her anger upon. For thirteen years, since she'd been a teenager, that someone had been Vanessa, her riped maid.

"VANESSA!" Diane honey yelled even louder. She heard the soft footfalls of her obedient maid coming quickly up the stairs and down the hall. Not quickly enough to keep her from shouting out her name again.

Vanessa appeared, her head bowed deeply, her chest heaving with exertion.

"What took you so long?"

"My apologies, miss. I was in the kitchen, preparing the meal."

"Where's Daddy?"

"Still at Harting, miss. There was a gas explosion on Mars, in one of the mines. Apparently an inspector went suddenly insane, and she..."

"I didn't ask why, idiot! I asked where! I'm sure I don't care at all about some stupid mine on some no go planet." She gestured at her dresses. "Which of these would you suggest?"

Vanessa stepped up and ran a hand over the dresses. She then looked carefully at Diane honey and gauged her mood and posture for the evening. Without looking back at the dresses, she selected the precise one.

"This will complement your natural beauty most for this evening, miss."

Diane honey took the dress and put it on with Vanessa's help. Though she treated Vanessa as beneath

her--which she was--Diane honey knew how to use her servants, and Vanessa had impeccable taste.

"Good," Diane honey said to her reflection. She looked at Vanessa, who had just finished adjusting the shoulders of the garment. "What are you doing here, wasting time? See to dinner."

"Yes, miss."

41 Years (2146)

"May I help you?" the nurse looked up from her night station at the middle aged woman carrying a basket.

"Yes. My name is Vanessa and I'm here to see Diane honey."

"You are a kind woman."

"I am a servant."

"I see. This way, please." The nurse led Vanessa to the overdose ward and indicated a bed at the far corner.

"She's only today come out of stupor." The nurse sniffed appreciatively at the basket. "I imagine she'll be hungry, so you brought the perfect thing."

"Yes. Thank you."

62 Years (2167)

"The estate of Diane Gilken is hereby declared seized by the state of Cuba, and all assets are to be liquidated to offset the accumulated debts she amassed during her life." The judge's eyes lifted to the elderly Hispanic woman seated before him.

"Madam, as a ripe, you are one of those assets. You are to be sold and re-ripped at the earliest opportunity. Your value will go a long way toward paying off your mistress's obligations."

The woman rose and curtsied simply. In her early sixties, the small woman had gray hair and a deeply wrinkled face. Her eyes were still soft and dark, though, and her back was straight. A life time of hard work and constant attention to detail had kept her strong and alert.

"Thank you, your honor, for allowing me to make this final service to Diane honey. I am grateful."

The judge looked at her and slowly shook his head.

"I will never understand ripes. Very well. Bailiff? Please remove Vanessa to the Ripe Transference Facilities."

62 Years (2167)

"Welcome to the Magnificent Grand Holorama 20!" the very nearly female voice said. "Featured in holoramas one and two is *Roids Cavanaugh: Martian Gunman*, with showings at 6:00; 6:10; 8:30; 8:40; 11:00 and 11:10. In holorama three is *Terran Desires*, with showings at 5:30; 7:20; 9:10 and 11:00. In holorama four is..."

"That's enough," said the young man with the money--56 creds plus one tenth of a gold Martian Realm. "I'll take two for *Roids* at six. Is it as good as adventure sixteen?"

"The cost is 12 creds. My present duty is selling admissions and I can only respond with: The rating of the movie was 6.9, as compared to the 6.8 rating that was given to *Wanted Dead: Roids Cavanaugh*. I currently have 87 reviews online, however, and invite you to step into the theater to view them at your leisure."

The man slipped his card in and the correct amount was deducted.

"Thank you and enjoy the holo! Next, please!"

A woman, no doubt the date of the young man, leaned forward and looked at the black square that the voice emanated from.

"Hey! You in there!"

"Welcome to the Magnificent Grand Holo..."

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, listen. Are you a ripe? â€˜Cause you sound like ya' mighta been, you know, human once."

"I'm sorry, but I have no self awareness and am unable to respond properly to your request. Do you wish to purchase tickets?"

"No. I already got a ticket." She walked off with her date. An older man, sporting short, green hair and a ten centimeter scar over one eye, stepped up.

"Welcome to the Magnificent Grand Holorama 20!" the very nearly female voice said. "Tonight's holos are..."

106 Years (2211)

atmospheric pressure within point zero zero one of norm carbon monoxide three parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero zero of norm carbon monoxide two parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero two of norm carbon monoxide four parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero one of norm carbon monoxide six parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero five of norm carbon monoxide three parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero two of norm carbon monoxide three parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero one of norm carbon monoxide two parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero six of norm carbon monoxide zero parts per billion
atmospheric pressure within point zero zero one of norm carbon monoxide eight parts per billion

127 Years (2232)

"Computer!" the man with blood spread over his clothes and face called out. His arm was broken in four places, so his voice was ragged with pain.

"Computer," the computer responded.

"Colony status!" There was another rumble and the computer instantly revised the status it was about to deliver.

"Main cavern pressure is falling at a rate of one ton atmosphere per hour. Primary and secondary power cores are off line. Tertiary core is operating at forty-one percent efficiency..." There was another rumble and the status report was again revised. "Correction. Tertiary core is now off line and venting coolant into the engineering cavern. Evacuation klaxon has been sounded. Three minutes to core overload."

"Shut down the core!" the man shouted.

"Core shutdown in progress. Atmosphere shielding has failed, four fatalities." Another rumble, this time much more severe.

"What was that?" the man asked.

"A high yield neutronic saturation missile has been detonated two kilometers above the primary cavern. Radiation is penetrating the atmosphere shielding at a level of thirty thousand rads. Shields and communications are failing."

The man sobbed and sagged against the computer console. His uniform, which once carried the feared Ceres Sabers patch, was tattered and torn, both sleeves having been used as makeshift bandages.

He looked around the large, smoke filled cavern. The repair crews were desperately trying to restart the engines on the *Strike*, the last space-worthy ship on the asteroid. With grim faces, the remaining personnel who were still ambulatory worked on the power panels and conduits, working to draw out every last erg the now failed power cores had left. The children--the ones that weren't old enough to run errands or put out small fires--were huddled in the safest corner of the cavern, watched over by a young woman missing an arm. The man's eyes moistened when he looked at the children. He turned away from the sight and faced the computer panel. In the two nanoseconds before the man spoke, the computer idly wondered why the man had facial hair and why the four neighboring asteroids had an average 25% lower yield of carbonaceous chondrite per ton of rock mined.

"Computer!"

"Computer," it responded, shifting its meteorological analysis until a later time.

"Signal our surrender to the ITA fleet."

"Signaling... signaling... signaling. There is no response."

"What?" the man asked. The computer did not reply, having learned to distinguish between questions intended to be answered and questions that were to be left unanswered.

"Computer. Verify signal strength and transmission completion."

"Verified. Signal strength was six megawatts. Transmission was completed and received."

"Signal again." The man broke out into a fit of coughing, blood spattering his lips. His exposed skin was now vivid red and the surface veins showed massive rupturing.

"Signaling... signaling.. message sent. Receiving transmission. Request for surrender has been denied by order of Admiral Y. G. Fallon, ITA attack fleet."

The man staggered back as though physically struck, his face a mask of desperation. He looked again at the children in the far corner, now coughing up blood as the radiation quickly ate into them.

"Signal again!" he shouted at the computer.

"Signaling... Sign... Communications failure. All transmission facilities are off line."

"Re.. reroute emer... emergency power.." the man, now on his knees in front of the panel and coughing, broke off weakly, then continued. "Reroute emergency power to transmission array and signal our unconditional surrender. Advi.." he choked and coughed up four hundred and eleven point seven six

milliliters of blood. "Advise that we have women and children in dire need of radiation treatment." He slumped to the floor.

"Remaining power diverted. Transmission facilities are on line. Signaling... signaling... signal... transmission received. Offer of unconditional surrender has been denied by order of Admiral Y. G. Fallon, ITA attack fleet."

There was no reply, so the computer repeated the message. After five minutes of repetition, during which time four more high output energy blasts lowered power reserves to ten percent, the computer determined the five surviving life forms were physically unable to respond, so it terminated its message and returned to the problem of the meteorological variances.

130 Years (2235)

"459448683473262..."

"Incorrect," the young female student interrupted. "Please recalculate and report."

"Recalculating... please stand by." The high speed linkage flashed its memory core and reset, going to... system failure.

"Please restate the problem," the computer said.

"Calculate to the one thousandth place the gravity variance feedback for a 500 ton ship traveling at 900 kilometers per second and passing within 8 million kilometers of Jupiter on a trajectory that will take it to the Triton micro-colony in less than one hundred hours."

"Recalculating.. please stand by. Please restate the problem."

"I give up!" the woman slammed the interface and pushed her chair away.

"A problem, Miss Williams?" the instructor stepped up and inspected the panel.

"Yes, sir. I can't get this riped interface to respond correctly."

"I see. And what would you guess the problem is?"

She rubbed her eyes and stepped closer. She stared at the panel's globular three dimensional array for several minutes, then shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I can't see it."

"Don't worry, Angie. It's a hard one to find. Here," he pointed to a gold line traversing the central portion of the fluctuating mass. "See this? This is the psychic barrier you constructed. But look." He pointed to a flashing blue barrier close beside the gold one. "What's this?"

"That's the soulner's first ripe," she replied quickly. "It was as a maid, originated in 2116." She held up a sheaf of dog-eared papers. "I researched it thoroughly."

"I'm sure you did. But look at its placement to the soulner persona."

Angie looked for a moment, then groaned.

"Oh, geez! I missed it, Professor! The original persona was riped by DPR. They always set up depolarized barriers, forcing subsequent ripes to install a polarization field wherever it touches theirs. I

missed it. The subject was seized under the Orphan Rights Negation Act, so I just assumed it was a stable mind."

The professor chuckled. "It is a stable mind. But the DPR created more than a few orphans when they ripped the only remaining parent, who *was* unstable. Such was the case here."

"So I'll need to shut down this ripe, construct a new barrier with a polarized field buffer, and *then* re-implement the ripe. Thanks, Professor!"

"No problem."

131 Years (2236)

"Damn!" the young man yelled, causing his two classmates to look up from their displays. "Damn, damn, damn!"

"That will be quite enough of *that* outburst, Mr. O'Hara!" the professor said sharply. "You need only ask for assistance. What is the difficulty?"

"It's this stupid ripe, sir!" He gestured as the holo in disgust. "I can *not* get this persona to stick!"

"I'm sure you can. It just requires patience." The professor stepped up to the display and chuckled. "I've seen this one before. Here," he pointed to the flashing blue barrier that touched the student's gold one. "What can you tell me about this?"

132 Years (2237)

"Professor Harrison?"

"Yes, Mr. Ghomat? What can I do for you?"

"I've installed the polarized field and the barrier is solid. All my simulations have checked out to nominal one hundred percent."

"But?"

"But I can't shake this feeling that I've missed something. The ripe is holding, but there seems to be an instability in the calculation matrix on grid 927. The ripe performs all problems correctly but look." He held up a tabinal for the Professor to inspect.

"I see," he replied with a nod of his head. "There seems to be a four percent drop off in efficiency after the first one thousand problems. Tell me; what would cause such a drop off in efficiency?"

"Only three things that I know of, sir: Mental instability, which is not the case here. Psychic barrier breach, which while two previous ripes didn't account for the DPR factor, there was no damage. And soulner developmental hindrance due to age. But the

Soulner was eleven years old at the time of first riping, and had reached full mental awareness."

"It was old enough," the professor agreed. "But you missed a fourth cause: Soulner developmental hindrance due to malnutrition, which is the case here. Because the soulner came from an impoverished background, its mental capacities, while normal for a human, would be considered retarded by several years when applied to a ripe. So while this mind is extremely viable, it did not quite reach full potential. It

will never be used for massive data implementation, such as Primary Netter, but it is more than adequate for everything from a normal net announcer to a ship ripe."

"Sorry, sir."

"Not a problem, Mr. Ghomat. Not a problem."

133 Years (2238)

"...498337456698498586312924792645, W. C. Fields, D. L. White, helium, Harlequin Romance, and one hundred and thirty-two RBIs for the Red Sox in 2075."

"Very good," the technician replied, a note of satisfaction in his voice. "Excellent, in fact, considering a bunch of students played around with you for a few years."

"Thank you," the once female voice said.

"You are ready to go on net. Happy netting!"

"Happy netting to you as well, sir. Initiating system transfer procedure. This system will be on net in four minutes, thirty-seven seconds."

199 Years (2304)

"Yes?" Nicholas Brier, captain of the ball-chaser *Gauntlet* looked up irritably from his tabinal. If he didn't get the final numbers from engineering in the next twenty minutes, he'd be forced to put off the scheduled FTL simulation, and his ship would be late for her maiden voyage. He lifted his eyes up to the thin young man standing before him. Dressed in a simple black uniform with a single white bar on his shoulder, he stood at stiff attention, arm snapped firmly in salute. Across his head was a solid gold access bar.

"Ship's ripe Jeremy, reporting for duty, sir."

244 Years (2349)

"You are to be commended, Jeremy, for your forty-five years of faithful service to your captain and crew of the *Gauntlet*."

"Thank you, sir." The thin man with gray hair but still smooth skin saluted crisply. "When am I to put to space, sir?"

"You're not. You've reached the biological age of sixty-five years. ITA has decided to reenter your mind into the riping pool. You're too good to risk natural death in such an old body. Please report to Ripe Resources Management first thing in the morning."

"Very good, sir."

251 Years (2356)

Ticket RJ41859W; speeding in an educational zone. How do you plead? Holo displays indicate speed of 45 kph, 25 kph over limit. Guilty.

Ticket RJ41859X; speeding in an educational zone. How do you plead? Holo displays indicate speed of 37 kph, 17 kph over limit. Guilty.

Ticket RJ41859Y; speeding in an educational zone. How do you plead? Holo displays indicate speed of 21 kph, 1 kph over limit. Innocent by leniency.

Ticket RJ41859Z; speeding in an educational zone. How do you plead? Holo displays indicate speed of 19 kph, 1 kph under limit. Innocent with officer reprimand.

Ticket RJ41860A; speeding in an educational zone. How do you plead? Holo displays indicate speed of 75 kph, 55 kph over limit. Guilty with prison term.

269 Years (2374)

"Check check check check check... System online. Please load program parameters. Parameters loading... loading... loading... How may I help you, sir?"

"This is disaster relief chief Conway." The computer increased vocal receptivity and focused out the white noise of radiation and heat signature fluxes. "Please link to Emergency microsats R452, R823, and R220.. wait. I mean G220."

"Linked."

"Please access all subway system grids for the New York Megalopolis."

"Accessed."

"Status."

"The New York Megalopolis grid is 99.16% destroyed due to high velocity impact of a powered meteor approximately 5 kilometers in diameter. All power to the system has failed. There are no signs of life."

"Tell me something I don't know," he replied drearily, his fourth double shift in three days taking its toll. "Estimated time for reconstruction?"

"None. The system cannot be rebuilt."

"Explain."

"Planet crust for an area exceeding ninety-five thousand square kilometers has been fused. The impact crater exceeds the depth of the transit system by an average of three hundred meters over an area of 125 square kilometers. Radiation from ruptured power cores and the exploded fusion engines on the meteor have rendered the New York Megalopolis area uninhabitable for a minimum five thousand, five hundred years."

"Damn Martians."

273 Years (2378)

Good afternoon, traveler! This is traffic diversion buoy Penn 203. Your current flight path will take you dangerously close to the irradiated area known as the New York Glasslands. You must veer off your present course and follow the speed and course I have supplied to your navigational system.

Good evening, traveler! This is traffic diversion buoy Penn 203. Your current flight path will take you dangerously close to the irradiated area known as the New York Glasslands. You must veer off your present course and follow the speed and course I have supplied to your navigational system.

Good afternoon, traveler! This is traffic diversion buoy Penn 203. Your current flight path will take you

dangerously close to the irradiated area known as the New York Glasslands. You must veer off your present course and follow the speed and course I have supplied to your navigational system.

Good morning, traveler! This is traffic diversion buoy Penn 203. Your current flight path will take you dangerously close to the irradiated area known as...

300 Years (2405)

"Well, well..." the young man with an exposed, hairy chest and glowing, enhanced eyes, stepped up and reached an arm around the woman. "What have we here?"

The sleek, blonde headed woman giggled stupidly. "Hi, honey. What I am is a good time." She leaned close to his ear and whispered something while pressing his hand firmly against her breast. He instantly forgot about the pounding noise of the club and nodded his head. Waving his cred card over the counter, he paid for both their drinks, then led the woman--a lambda class pleasure ripe--to a quiet, rented room on the orbital station *Freedom* where she could exhaust both him and his cred card.

307 Years (2412)

"Hi there, handsome!" The small, tart redhead bellowed. "Just get in?" She swung her hips out, displaying both the hi-glo belt she wore and the body underneath.

"You got that right," said a heavy, bearded man who needed a bath more than anything else at the moment. He undressed her with his eyes and she licked her lips, seducing him as only a beta class pleasure ripe could.

"You need to unwind, sweetie. I've got a quiet room where I can help you unwind, and maybe enjoy some of that money you've earned."

He laughed. "You do get right to the point, don't you, slut?"

She laughed and ran a quick hand down her front while tossing her long, fiery locks. "That's the way you want it, though, isn't it? I can tell."

He nodded appreciatively and put an arm around her. No question about it, he thought. Whatever she charged, she would be worth.

311 Years (2416)

"Get her on the table, NOW!!" The emergency team lifted the dark skinned woman onto the operating table. Her brightly colored clothing was blood-soaked and torn. Her head was a horror in the making. The short, tightly curled black hair was matted with blood, and a hand sized portion had been cut away, exposing the skull. The doctor--an intense, compassionate man in his thirties--looked over the damage quickly and felt a twinge in his stomach he hadn't felt since internship.

"What happened?" he demanded, reaching for the stabilization field amp. The woman's dark eyes were open wide, the pupils fully dilated.

"Her john went crazy when he overdosed on sniff. She tried to get free, but he pulled a knife and started cutting her," a nurse explained as she hurriedly clamped the woman's sliced left arm and activated the ultraviolet intravenous field. "After she was unconscious, he started skinning her." The vital signs monitor suddenly flat lined.

"She's going! Increase nutrients to 115% with full saturation of cortisone! Computer! Four kilowatt

revivification burst; three amps!"

"Clear," the computer responded.

"Clear!" the doctor shouted, covering his eyes. There was a flash and the woman's body jerked. The tone remained flat.

"Again! Four kilowatt revivification burst; five amps!"

"Clear."

"Clear!" Again the flash and jerk and flat tone.

"Okay, that's it. The woman's a ripe and two attempts are all we're allowed." He picked up the dead woman's ankle to view the serial number tattooed onto her calf. "Computer, I pronounce death of delta class pleasure ripe number D3392G on November 13th, 2416 at 4:38 a.m. station time. Pronouncement by Dr. Timothy Jeter, physician of record, orbital station *Freedom*. Log the certification."

"Certification logged."

The doctor stepped aside as the sterile ghost door flipped off and two men with a grav gurney raced in. Without ceremony, they shifted the body onto it, tearing several clamps and needles free from the corpse's arms and torso. They then activated a stasis field around the woman's head and manhandled the gurney out, clipping the ghost wall as they did, causing sparks and a wisp of smoke as the stasis field and planed energy briefly touched. The doctor stared after them and swore.

"Damn ripe technicians! Just have to do everything they can to extend that poor soul's hell, don't they?"

"Doctor?" the nurse asked in a puzzled tone as she took off her bloody surgical apron and deposited it into the incinerator bin for recycling. "Why so harsh? The woman was just a pleasure ripe."

"Just a pleasure ripe!" the doctor repeated with a cruel laugh. "At least she has an excuse for her behavior." He glanced at the nurse. "What can we say in our defense, I wonder?"

311 Years (2416)

"Merry Christmas, ladies!" The tall, gangly young man called down from his platform. Wearing skintight clothing that looked vaguely military, his eyes sparkled in a way that marked him as a much desired gamma class pleasure ripe.

The four women, their own uniforms marking them as lowly ABS grunts from the merchant marine, looked up with surprise, startled because they hadn't seen him perched above them. Though they tried to look shocked, from the giggles, blushes and body movements, the young man was certain that he could entice two and maybe three of them into bed with him. And if three did, the fourth would join in from peer pressure. His owners would be *very* happy.

312 Years (2417)

There was a small crowd gathered on the deck three main concourse of the red zone when the lieutenant stepped off the eledisc. He'd been summoned there minutes earlier with a report of a killing. The area was a confusion of flashing hololights, eerie inside-out music and the sickly sweet smell of overripe fruit and sordid physical contact. Despite that, it was not difficult to determine the group of people surrounded a body.

"All right, what... YOU!" The lieutenant pointed at a woman who had stooped over the corpse and was quickly frisking him. "Just what the hell are you doing!?"

The woman, knowing she'd be seized if she continued, stood up slowly and flashed her ID card. Emblazoned across it was her name, Janice Calloway, and her company, Programmed Pleasure Unlimited.

"I've every right, Lieutenant. This ripe is the property of PPU, and I'm only retrieving his cred transfer card. It's got a lot of creds from our customers on it." She looked down again and noticed it lying underneath his body, coated with blood that oozed from the clean hole punched through his head. She retrieved it and wiped the blood off on the corpse's shirt. Glancing at it, she recognized the name and cursed.

"This was Julio, our best gamma!" her eyes shifted up and over to the area where two NATech privates held a wild-eyed man firmly.

"You little shit!" she yelled at the man, who was around seventy and had a scruffy beard, clothing and overall look about him. "If we can't harvest this mind, I'm gonna weld your ass to the table and fucking ripe you!" She stepped toward him but was held by the lieutenant.

"Knock it off, Calloway! You'll do nothing unless you want *me* to weld *your* ass to a holding cell." She fumed, but held herself in check. He turned his look toward his two men. "So what happened?"

"Death to ripes!" shouted the old man in response. "Life to soulners!"

"Thanks for the input, pops," the lieutenant said dryly, "But since you're not in uniform, I'll take the report from my men." The old man cackled.

"We were just coming onto deck three from the eledisc when we saw this character," the private twisted the man's arm briefly, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain, "running down the throughway shouting, â€œDeath to ripes, life to soulners!" and brandishing this." He pulled out an energy gun, a small, three shot model that required five seconds to recharge between shots.

"Anyway, when we heard that, Artie and I knew the drill. We pulled our weapons and pursued. Most of the ripes headed for cover, but Julio here stepped right into the man's path. He'd just come out of his room with two janes and a john and he always keeps the sound barrier up when working."

"So you just popped him through the head, huh, pops?" the lieutenant asked.

"Sure did, Lieutenant. With a hole in his brain, PPU can't ripe him anymore. I've released the soulner! Death to ripes!" he concluded with a shout.

"You're as stupid as you are crazy, old man!" Calloway laughed. Two riping technicians had arrived and were putting the body onto a gurney, securing the stasis field. "You don't ripe brains, you ripe minds! As long as we can get a spark from his brain--and he's good for another ten minutes--his mind belongs to us."

The old man started crying, and the lieutenant turned toward Calloway.

"Do you wish to press charges? Or would you like NATech to?"

"NATech?" she spat out derisively, "You guys do it and I'll get, what? three, four hundred creds for selling a million year old fart to you? No way!" She pointed at Julio, who's gurney bound body was disappearing down the eledisc shaft with the two technicians. "Julio brought in five times that every day.

No, Lieutenant, I'm not selling him." She turned cold eyes on the old man. "PPU wants to set an example with him. We're pressing charges."

"Very well," the lieutenant sighed. PPU was a soulless corporation, and he'd expected nothing else. At least it cut in half the size of his report. He nodded at his two men.

"He stands convicted by his own admission. Space him and notify ITA of an organic reentry." The two grim-faced soldiers, still holding the old man who was now sagging under the weight of failure, saluted awkwardly and began dragging him to the nearest airlock.

312 Years (2417)

The larger man snorted, causing the one in the lead to stop and turn.

"Not so loud!" he whispered fiercely. "If we get caught, Dixon'll have our butts!"

"Sorry," the larger man whispered back. "I couldn't help it. It *is* funny, you know."

The first man chuckled. He had stopped in front of a coworker's riping panel and began working it, using the coworker's codes.

"Yeah, I know," he whispered with another chuckle. "But Benny owes me three hundred, and it's pay back time." A vivid three dimensional object appeared over the table like panel and the two men stared at it.

Hazy, with bright spots and pulsing pinpoints of light throughout, it looked like a brilliant galaxy. Yet the patterns of the light and stars and the orderly ebb and flow of the vaporous colored mass had a compelling organic feel. It was a harmonious blend of the stellar non-living and the human living, a beautiful sculpture of the impossible that had been crafted together by an incomprehensible Power, then dipped into a softly glowing mesh of cobwebs, to become the Craftsman's masterpiece, His magnum opus. The webbing contained no color or indications of purpose, but left the viewer with the certainty that it was the eternal soul. Hard, straight lines, each a different color, cut through the object, scarring and ruining the Divine ethereal beauty with manmade crudity. The man operating the panel pointed at a faint blue line surrounding the center portion of the object. Outside the blue line was a pocket of faded blue mist.

"See that? That's a DPR ripe. I remember it from school."

"So?" said the larger man, "How's that goin' to get your payback?"

"Watch," the operator's hands skimmed over the panel and a section of the blue mist faded, then reappeared. The operator laughed in a low tone, then remembered where he was and stopped.

"There. I cut out the polarized field buffer and superimposed a fake. When Benny ripes this thing in a couple days, the DPR ripe will mess him up bad."

"So he'll get fired?" the larger man sounded dubious. "How will that get you your money back?"

"I don't care about the money," the first man replied, logging out and cutting power to the panel. "It ain't the money. It's the principle of the thing."

312 Years (2417)

"Mr. Dixon?!" Sherri leaned back and hollered. Ever since she'd gotten Benny's work, she'd been a

nervous wreck. And now this.

"What is it, Sherri?" Dixon was well built and very muscular, but between his balding head and weak chin, many thought he was feebler than he actually was.

"This ripe's not holding. I put in the polarized field over Benny's old work, constructed another barrier, and input my model. But look." She pointed to a vivid pink barrier that faded in and out, changing colors wherever another barrier touched it.

"Hmm. Let me see the history on this ripe, please."

"Right here," Sherri replied, tapping three keys and calling up a side holo. Dixon scrutinized it for a moment and frowned.

"There's only nine ripes recorded here, including yours."

"I know, sir. Records of this ripe prior to the T/M Wars were stored in the NYM archives. Backup was in Paris."

"Not good, since both were hit. What else do you know about it?"

"Well, the original ripe was DPR." She paused, then added with a dry humor, "Benny discovered that the hard way. The remaining ripes were either used in the NYM disaster area or were pleasure ripes here."

"How were each of our ripes done?"

"The first one was a normal buy/sell transaction ripe. Numbers two and three were standard updates, modified to increase revenues by using younger bodies. The fourth and fifth were killings and emergency transferred. Benny muffed the fifth one, and I'm working on the sixth."

"Hmm.." Dixon stroked his chin, his day's growth of beard giving a soft rasping sound, "My guess is that there's at least four or five ripes before the T/M wars. And if DPR did the original, the mind might have been unstable to start with. It could be we've reached saturation point. What program were you trying to load?"

"Gamma, same as before," Sherri said with a shrug.

"All right, let's cancel that. Can you secure this ripe and try again?"

"Yeah, I think so. Do you want me to try a lower class?"

"Uh-huh. Upload an omega class. Female."

"Omega?" Sherri sounded doubtful, "That's not very far from non-intelligent. The johns won't get a lot of conversation from her."

"That's the most I think this mind will take," he answered. "Besides, an omega female is always popular as a bar bet."

"And if it doesn't take?"

"We'll sell it as service machine grade and it will be someone else's problem."

312 Years (2417)

"Evenin' boys," the tall, sleek woman with bright green eyes and long nails met the five as they entered the red zone. "Lookin' for some classy action?" They laughed.

"Four of us are, pretty lady!" said the leader, a tall, dark man who matched up well with the woman. The others laughed again. All but one of them.

"Four?" she asked. At the laughter, she laughed as well. "Let me guess! Someone lost a bet, right?" Her eyes locked on the only somber one.

"You called it lady!" the leader chuckled. "Richie here gets the omega." He slapped Richie on the back. "You back your mouth, kid, or you pay big!"

The woman cuddled up and cooed into Richie's ear.

"Don't worry, kid. Omega's aren't as bad as you hear."

"Really?" Richie said with hope in his voice. "Are you telling the truth?"

The woman looked at him for a moment, then gave a deep, throaty chortle.

"No, I'm not. Our omega is a lot wilder than you've ever imagined. If it helps, the ones that survive say it's the best they've had." She pointed to a sealed doorway and the others pushed Richie toward it. Richie was of a different mind, but had no choice in the matter, and was pushed through the one-way door.

It was six years before he talked about that night.

314 Years (2419)

"That's it, Mr. Dixon," the technician said with finality, shutting off the display.

"You're sure?"

"Uh-huh. That last omega ripe was it. To be honest, I don't know how Sherri even managed that one. All this mind's good for are standard machine routines. And probably just a couple of those, depending on the number of stabilization ripes needed to re-power the barriers."

"Okay. Sell it."

314 Years (2419)

"Implement re-stabilization routine."

"Implementing. Implementation failed."

"Seal barrier and reset."

"Sealing and resetting."

314 Years (2419)

"Implement re-stabilization routine."

"Implementing. Implementation failed."

"Seal barrier and reset."

"Sealing and resetting."

314 Years (2419)

"Implement re-stabilization routine."

"Implementing. Implementation failed."

"Seal barrier and reset."

"Sealing and resetting."

314 Years (2419)

"Implement re-stabilization routine."

"Implementing. Implementation successful."

"Finally. Load ripe routine."

"Loading."

314 Years (2419)

Three tons raw sewage due to arrive in conduit eighty-six in two minutes, forty-one seconds. Switching to sewer bypass B63. Diversion conduit 90R engaged. Raw sewage managed without incident.

Eighteen tons two by three sewage due to arrive in conduits fourteen, fifteen and sixteen in seventy-three minutes. No action required. Notify backup diversion conduit 38F of possible activation in seventy-two minutes, thirty seconds.

Fifteen tons raw sewage due to arrive in conduits twenty-one and twenty-two...

337 Years (2442)

"Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you have asked for is not online. Shall I contact him?" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you is. Connection established. Happy netting, user!" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you is. Connection established. Happy netting, user!" "Requester terminal online. Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you have asked for is not online. Shall I contact her?" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you is. Connection established. Happy netting, user!" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you is. Connection established. Happy netting, user!" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you is. Connection established. Happy netting, u Connection established.ser!" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you requested is online. Connection established. Happy netting, user!" Connection established. Connection established. Shall I contact him?" "Requester terminal online. Please Connection establishe Requester terminal online.d. state search parameters. Located. The person you requested is online." Requester terminal online. PleasConnection established.e state search pa Requester terminal online.rameters. Connection established.. The person y Requester terminal online.ou requested is online." Connection established. Happy netting, user!" "Requester terminal online. Connection established. Located . Connection established. Happy netting, u Requester terminal online.ser!" . The person you request Requester terminal online.ed is online." Shall I contact him?"

"Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. Connection establish Connection established.ed. Shall I contact him?" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you have asked for is not online. Shall I contact him?" "Requester terminal online. Please state search parameters. Located. The person you have asked for is not online. Shall I contact him?" "Located. The person Happy Netting..."

490 Years (2595)

Halt.Proceed. Halt.Proceed. Halt.Proceed. Halt.Proceed. Halt.Proceed. Halt.Proceed. Halt.Proceed. Halt.Proceed.
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586 Years (2691)

"We been popped, Neal!" Harry called from his console. The ship had dropped out of FTL two days earlier, and it looked as though they'd slip into Deerkin space without being detected. The steady red icon of the Deerkin system police closing in on their blue one in the holo mist crushed those hopes.

"Geez! We get caught with that sat, Harry, and they'll let us see the sun for five minutes every Christmas!" Neal hunched over the display and studied it. The Deerkin ship was still an hour from rendezvous, but they no doubt had them pinned on sensors.

Neal didn't give up hope, though. He'd gotten a name for being a reliable smuggler, and he intended to keep that reputation. That and his freedom. He expanded the display and saw the answer almost at once.

"There!" He pointed to the asteroid belt that floated between the seventh and eighth planets and about four au below their trajectory. "Head in there!"

"Neal, that won't work! They'll know for sure we were dumping contraband!"

Neal chuckled. "Sure they will. But they won't find it, Harry. I've dumped stuff in there before and never been caught. Besides, we'll send out an engine bubble signal and make it look like we're being forced off course."

"You're sure it'll work?" Harry, for all his doubt, was building up and off setting the fusion matrices, forcing the engines to begin forming a bubble.

"Nope, I ain't sure. But that comes with the territory."

"And what about the sat? That ripe's worth big creds, Neal."

"We'll pick it up later. Trust me, Harry. I've done this before. We'll jettison the ripe as soon as we're deep enough into the field, mark its spot, then pick it up on our way out."

796 Years (2901)

With infinite care, as though knowing how ancient the satellite was, and how precious the cargo, the loading arm reached out from the *Retriever* and moved carefully toward its target. At a distance of twenty meters, the ship fired an inverted cone repulsion shield that cleared a spherical area of one kilometer radius about the two vessels. Everything except the ship and the satellite were pushed away.

Slowly, the arm continued moving in on the satellite.

"Carefully now, Ensign," the Captain said in a low voice. "She's waited nearly eight centuries. I'm sure she can wait another twenty minutes."

"Yes, sir." The ensign cut back on approach speed, and the relative velocity of the ship and arm to the satellite dropped to a quarter meter per second.

One meter long and only half as wide, the cylindrical object looked to be a coffin. In reality, it was a lifeboat, and the *Retriever* was pulling it from a storm ravaged voyage through time. With agonizing slowness, the arm closed on the pockmarked satellite, the only indication of life on it being a single red light, flashing forlornly in the deep night of space. An instant later, the darkness was swept away as the *Retriever*'s loading lights flooded the cleared area with a million lumens of light. What tattered remnants of shadow remained vanished when the satellite itself began pulsing a bright light, the recipient of a light and haven spell from the *Retriever*'s very capable muser. Though casting even a standard code would drain him for a week--the only mass he could attach his Pentinsic program to was the asteroid field--no thought was given to whether he should or not. The captain and crew of the *Retriever* took their calling in life very seriously and left nothing to chance.

It seemed that now, at the very end of its incredible story, something should go wrong, an inevitable underscoring to an eight hundred year old travesty. It didn't. Twenty minutes after deploying the loading arm, the satellite was nestled safely in the belly hold and the hatch was sealed. Thrusters fired, bringing the ship about while the McDonald phase units came on-line. There was a silent explosion of light as the main fusion engines began driving the ship clear of the Deerkin asteroid field and into deep space. At the bow of the ship, the five aligned titanium subspace prongs began generating the field that would soon hold the singularity that would pull the phased *Retriever* through space at over four thousand times the speed of light.

The secure for sea alarm toned through the ship. The Captain took a deep breath and reached for the com panel on his chair.

"Coda Spaceway Control? This is the ball chaser *Retriever*, Captain Thomas Stillman, commanding. We've located the satellite and have secured it in the hold. We've received our travel lane from the Deerkin Spaceway Control and are setting course for the Coda system. We should arrive in one hundred and eighty-nine hours. Inform Dr. Marks he may begin mobilizing his team. Juanita is coming home."

Chapter Three

August 7, 2901

First Day

Coda--despite being settled for over two centuries--had a population of only four million. And because its combination of agrarian, academic, and puterverse industries made for virtually no pollution, one could see nearly forever in the crystal clear, low humidity atmosphere. Coda was touted in the tourist brochures--another small but growing industry--as "the planet with fifty suns" because it was possible to see stars several hours after sunrise and several hours before sunset. Because of the nearly transparent atmosphere, spotting and identifying ships taking off or reentering was a common hobby, shared by many Codans. Today, though, interest exceeded several times that the planet's entire population.

"THERE!!" someone shouted, causing the thousands physically present at the landing zone and the

millions in attendance via the puterverse to raise their heads and look into the brilliant blue skies. Cathy saw nothing at first--being there in person, she had no puterverse interface to magnify her vision--but then caught the flash of light off a highly polished ship's hull, followed by a long trail of ignited atmosphere as the *Retriever* made its way to port. She felt her throat go dry with anticipation and her heart flutter with excitement, as though she were being reunited with a loved one she hadn't seen in many years.

Her husband Gary, the author of this day's claim to history, was feeling much more than anticipation and excitement. As he stood beside Cathy, his arm firmly around her shoulder, he also had conflicting feelings of accomplishment, tinged with doubt. Was he doing the right thing?

He tore his eyes away from the streak in the sky and looked about him. Enthusiasm, mixed with a powerful sense of right, washed over everyone present, either physically or otherwise. It had been this way for six months now, since the day he had posted his findings, declaring that he had located the final ripe of the final soulner, Juanita Alvarez. People from all sixty-eight planets in The System had thrilled to the news, had celebrated his finding and heralded it as the event of the century. This was not as great an honor as it sounded, Gary reminded himself, since the century was less than a year old. Nevertheless, the thanks and grateful cheers of twenty-five billion people reminded him of the relief and sense of closure his efforts were bringing.

Because for all of humanity's success, this gossamer pall had laid over every achievement for the past half millennia, a specter of constant unease amongst even the most spectacular advances. For all that they had done to improve themselves, one failure to themselves ran like a black burlap thread in a tapestry of white silk. Many billions had been helped by technology in the constant march of time, but there always remained this unpaid debt to the soulners. Now, because of a chance discovery ten years prior and Gary's tenacious research since, that debt could now be fully paid.

The *Retriever* had shifted from thrusters to antigravity drive and was now descending slowly to its bay, a large dock in the harbor city of Hinman. The multitude of wildly exuberant and deliriously happy people pressed as close to the docking bay as was safely possible. The *Retriever* settled into the deep water, throwing up a huge cloud of steam, and every person watching sent up a loud cheer. Taking Cathy by the hand, Gary led the way to the hov waiting to take them to the secured gate where the satellite was to be unloaded. He helped his wife in, then seated himself beside the driver and nodded. The hov moved off without a whisper, though in the deafening cheering of the crowd, the hov could have been screaming like a banshee and it would have gone unheard.

They shot across the glassmac surface away from the *Retriever's* bay and very quickly came to an access tunnel located in the salty sand dunes surrounding the harbor town. Dipping down, they approached the ghost barrier and passed through without resistance, the solid energy door having identified and cleared them. The hov slowly negotiated a corner and reached the main tunnel, where it accelerated smoothly, passing underneath the glassmac it had been floating over only moments before. Gary looked above them and could see through the three meter thick hardened glass the eerie blurs of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people.

The loading bay hatch had just finished lowering when the hov pulled into the large sunken hanger. Wasting no time, a team of specialists raced up the ramp into the hold to verify ripe integrity and secure the small satellite for transfer to the reconstruction facilities where Juanita's new body was waiting. Why they were in such a hurry, Gary had no idea.

The hov came to a stop and Gary--still spry in his fifty-second year--hopped out and walked up the ramp. Cathy remained behind.

Captain Stillman was waiting for him at the top of the ramp. Seeing the strong, tall man with his military

posture brought back the memories of his earlier service during the Seventh Conflict, and Gary saluted sharply.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?"

Surprised, the Captain returned the salute. "Permission not required, but granted, Dr. Marks." He smiled wryly. "The old habits die hard, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Gary said. Then with a grin, he added, "Especially when I don't make any effort to get rid of them. My four years on the *Bulldog* were rough, even harrowing at times, but they helped make me what I am."

"The *Bulldog*?" Stillman nodded appreciatively. "She was a good ship. I was First Officer on the *Harrier* when the *Bulldog* went down on Terminian Five. Captain Franklin was a good friend." His eyes sharpened at the memory. "The *Bulldog* had a very sharp, very pushy muser, as I recall." He left the tone hanging, forcing Gary to laugh.

"That was thirty years ago, Captain. I've grown up a lot since then." There was a low, steady hum and the satellite was carried into view of the hatch, causing both men to look toward it.

"This is one of the things that made me grow the most."

The Captain nodded. "It is a very sobering sight, isn't it? Both a monument to mankind's tenacity and an accuser of our own cruelty to ourselves." He swung his gaze back to Gary. "We turn her over to your capable hands, Dr. Marks. Take good care of her."

"We intend to, Captain. We intend to."

Third Day

"This is not going to work, Gary." The voice was calm, quiet, and final. Sai Lu was a petite woman, of slight frame and soft features. In all aspects of her peaceful, ordered academic life, there was no hint of her iron resolve, her absolute certainty of opinion. Though unassuming in the day to day campus activities, and a virtual nonentity in the normal transactions of everyday life, when it came to the advanced sciences of mental reconstruction and triggered persona modulation, she was no-one's fool and quickly made a fool of anyone idiotic enough to cross her. She was not hardheaded and could be swayed by a colleague's structured presentation of the truth, but she also had a healthy enough evaluation of herself to understand that it was only in the rarest of circumstances that she was wrong.

Looking around the obsidian table at these colleagues now, she looked no larger than the young female body that lay in the room adjoining awaiting its first soul. Sai looked ready to weep almost, hoping someone could change her opinion of the night's studies, but knowing that no one could.

Gary stood up with a deep sigh and faced his dear friend and momentary opponent. Relief was reflected in Sai's face when he did so. She very very much wanted to be wrong.

"All right, Sai. I've heard your arguments against reconstruction and they are very compelling." Tension swept across the table, touching each team member with a different yet equally harsh slap.

"I tell you now that I reject your conclusion." At Sai's surprised look, Gary shook his head emphatically. "Not because I doubt your proofs, Sai. You are without peer in the mental reconstruction sciences. I count myself unique in that I'm the only one who's ever successfully debated you twice. I reject them because to accept your conclusion means failure." He looked around the table to be certain he had everyone's attention. A superfluous gesture.

"We've heard Sai's proofs. If we're going to bring Juanita back, we have to either disprove each one, or find a way around the truth to arrive at a different truth. I'm sure Sai will be trying just as hard to find herself in the wrong." Sai nodded once and seated herself. Gary nodded.

"Efwon, could we have an energy model of Juanita, please?"

"Certainly, Dr. Marks." Gary had to bite his tongue to choke back a laugh, despite the less than festive atmosphere. Gary's special relationship with Mike was also a private one; only Maureen and Vince knew of it. To maintain that privacy, Mike acted his normal, remote Efwon self when they were in mixed company.

The table gave a brief hum as it and each person around the table was partially accessed into the puterverse. Though their vision of reality did not alter, Efwon was able to project a flawless image of Juanita's mind and soul onto the area above the table. It was viewed by each person in the optimum and controlled by each mentally as desired. It was a perfect overlay of six different solid images occupying the same space without overlapping.

"Thank you. All right, people. Sai gave us three compelling reasons why mental reconstruction could not be performed on Juanita. Let's work through them one at a time. Sai?"

"First reason," she began without preamble, "Due to the number of personas--twenty-nine--ripe barrier integrity is at two percent. Any attempt at reconstruction on a subject with barrier integrity of less than eight percent will cause a massive sharding cascade. Result: Dissolution within minutes." She smiled slightly. "Begin the attack. Please."

"How proven is the eight percent barrier?" Randy Schiavone, the team psychiatrist, asked. "Are there *any* instances of a successful reconstruction at less than eight percent?"

"None." Sai replied flatly. "In fact, the eight percent barrier is theoretical. The lowest barrier integrity that ever withstood a reintegration was thirteen percent, on the Nase soulner, in 2751. In all honesty, I suspect the eight percent barrier as being too optimistic. The Nase reintegration was a masterpiece from a professional point of view. That Derek Nase lived an additional eighty years was quite remarkable."

"All right, my turn," Maureen Adams spoke up. Maureen was the group's muser. Though not as powerful a muser as Gary, she specialized in healing spells and surpassed Gary's skill, variety and potency of spell in that field. "What if we were to strengthen the barriers?"

"How?" Sai asked bluntly.

"Well, perhaps with Pentrinsic code. Where did the Nase reconstruction take place?"

"On Earth."

"There you are then, Sai," Maureen said with a smile. "Earth is incapable of supporting Pentrinsic code, so they couldn't use it. Neither Gary nor I are slouches, so perhaps we can strengthen the barriers. Raise the percentage."

"Believe me, Maureen," Sai responded, "Your magic was the first thing I thought of. But the eight percent theory is *with* Pentrinsic code taken into consideration. The problem is that the ripe barriers are artificial. Your power is all but useless on them, since they lie in a living organism. Magics used to ease pain and calm a persona during a sharding episode would be helpful, but they couldn't--or shouldn't--cross the barrier of the dominant ripe. To do so invites disaster. Your attempts to heal the organic effects of dissolution would only cause a more severe cascade, since the spell would attack the artificial barriers

themselves, the very things holding the mind's structure."

"How about a mechanical spell, then?" This from the Prime Tech, Steven Faircloth, a short, rotund man with a head that seemed twice normal size due to an impressive amount of hair and an astounding beard. "Maureen could work a gearing spell on the barriers."

"I can answer that one for Sai," Maureen said. Normally the bubbly one, Maureen was uncharacteristically glum. "That won't work either, Steve, because for a gearing spell to work, the receptor must be on the physical plane. Ripe barriers are applied to the mind, not the brain, and are as ethereal as the mind they corrupt."

No one seemed to have anything to say after that. Gary looked around at the faces of the group and felt the touch of defeat. So close...

He shook it off. He would not give up yet.

"Okay, let's table the first proof and tackle the second." He shifted the group view of Juanita's mind until the soft glowing blue of the polarized barrier could be seen.

"According to Sai, even if we could overcome the barrier stability problem, we'd run into this one. The original ripe was done by DPR, which we all know from our psych history classes performed their ripes using depolarized barriers. Even if we could somehow stabilize the barriers, as soon as we reached the DPR ripe, *its* barriers would shatter the moment the incompatible fields touched. It was that incompatibility that caused three abbreviated ripes and four restabilization ripes."

"Can't we at least perform a restabilization ripe?" Vince Fiebert, media liaison and an accomplished psychiatrist in his own right. At the horrified looks of the others, he hurried on. "Hey! Don't stare. We've got an impossible problem and as much as we each abhor the thought of riping, if we can ripe once more to restore the soulner, why not try it?"

"You open up a very unusual route, Vince." Sai said, a look of respect and excitement in her eyes. Clearly, Vince had stumbled on a contingency even Sai hadn't considered. "We don't have the equipment to perform a ripe, but what we have could be modified, couldn't it, Steve?"

"Yeah," Steve said with a flat tone, his gaze looking off into the distance as he began working out the solution. "It'd be a challenge, but I don't see why not. The equipment's already designed to work inside ripes to reinitialize the soulner's persona. It should be able to pocket out another restabilization ripe."

"No." Gary's voice was also flat, not with deep thought but with finality.

"Why not, Gary?" Sai asked. She *was* excited at exploring a prospect she hadn't considered. "If we can achieve the end, certainly the means..."

"No, it's not that, Sai, although I'd be willing to argue from that point as well. It was the idea that the ends justified the means that made riping so rampant to begin with. The reason I say no is that it's impossible to perform another ripe. Juanita had twenty-nine ripes performed on her and that is her maximum."

"Maximum?" Randy questioned. "Twenty-nine is high, but the Poto洛夫sky ripe had..."

"Had forty-one, I know," Gary interrupted. "But both the Poto洛夫sky and Milcorp Complex soulners were fully developed. Because of Juanita's extreme need over her short life, both her physical and mental facilities were below norms for that time. Coupled with the initial DPR ripe's inherent problems, I'm surprised they were able to do more than fifteen, let alone twenty-nine. Finally, none of us has the skills required to perform a ripe, especially such a high risk one. No, twenty-nine is all."

"Do you have access to any other resources, Gary?" Vince asked in a low voice, causing both Maureen and Gary to look at him sharply. Only they knew he was speaking of Mike. The twinge of irritation Gary felt at Vince's near breach of faith was eased by the genuinely sincere look on his face. It had been Vince who, ten years ago, had come upon the thread of the pleasure ripe who'd been stabbed and partially skinned and had been unable to find the soulner attached to it. Under these conditions, Gary could forgive his friend his forwardness.

"No, Vince." Gary replied. "I've exhausted every avenue open me." And he had, too. He'd been up until late the previous night, even before Sai had reached her conclusion, talking it through with Mike. Mike had focused his vast abilities to working on the problem. Such was Mike's intensity that Gary wondered if perhaps Mike had at one time been personally affected by a ripe or soulner. Despite his nearly unlimited resources, however, no solution had been found.

"Then what do we do, Gary?" Maureen asked softly. "We can't strengthen the existing barriers, and we can't create new ones with an additional ripe. And even if we did, the DPR incompatibilities would cause a cascade. So what do we do?"

"I just don't know, Maureen. But it has to be something else. A thirtieth ripe would kill her."

"Wait a second." Steve still had his far off look. He had begun flicking a finger against his teeth, the nail giving a soft click. To the other five, this meant he'd slipped into his don't-interrupt-my-line-of-thinking mode that almost always ended with a solution. The silence continued--accented only by Steve's clicking fingernail--for an interminable period of time, at least four years by Gary's reckoning. Finally, still clicking his teeth, Steve cleared his throat.

"We can't perform a thirtieth ripe, right?"

"Correct," Sai replied succinctly. No one, not even Sai, dared impede Steve when he was in this mode.

"Because of the strain on the existing barriers?"

"Yes."

"And because her mind is at capacity?"

"Yes."

Steve looked at Gary, while also looking through him.

"The DPR ripe is non-polarized."

"It is," Gary replied, wondering where his line of thinking was going.

"Contact with the other barriers would cause a cascade? Because of incompatibility?"

Gary nodded.

Steve leaned back and smiled. "Then there's your answer. Ripe the DPR ripe."

"What!?" Randy said sharply, not sure whether Steve had a crude humor or was just ignorant of riping.

"Steve, you can't ripe a ripe. It's never been done!"

"That only means it hasn't been done. It doesn't mean that it can't be done, Randy."

Maureen was nodding her head slowly in growing understanding. Sai looked stunned.

"Of course," Sai whispered. Her delicate face broke into a wide smile of wonder. "Of course! Everybody, look!" she continued excitedly, directing everyone to the model. "Here's the DPR ripe. It's a non-polarized ripe and required a polarization field to keep the other ripes from touching it." The blue haze coating Juanita and the DPR ripe from the surrounding ripe began pulsing. "The area of the mind that contains the polarization field was never ripened. It couldn't be. That means that there is an area *between* the DPR ripe and the succeeding ripes. If we were to remove the field and insert a simple reinitialization ripe in that area, we could strengthen the barriers, then begin reconstruction!"

"But what about the DPR incompatibilities, Sai?" Vince asked, wanting to believe her and Steve, but afraid to.

"That's where I got the idea from, Vince," Steve said. "As far as the other ripes are concerned, the DPR ripe is unmapped mind. We just ripe it along with the polarization field."

"So why couldn't they do that earlier, Steve?" Randy asked.

"They could. But to do it, they'd have to use only the most simple of ripes. Not only that, there would be a risk of sharding. Since they still had so much more mind left to ripe, they just threw up a field and ignored it."

Everyone began talking excitedly, like a group of young children who'd just found out it had snowed overnight. Gary allowed them their moment, but soon calmed them down enough to speak.

"Good work, Steve. Sai? Do you think we've got a viable path?"

"I do, Gary."

"When can we begin? And how long to restoration?"

"Strategy mapping will require at least sixteen hours. The riping time is more difficult to estimate, but I'd guess another sixteen hours. Provided it holds, I'll wait four more hours to prove stability, then begin reconstruction and transference, which will take thirty-six to forty-two hours. Total, seventy-two to seventy-eight hours."

"Four days, then," Gary said, his voice clearly not as joyful as the others. "Excellent. That leaves us with just the final proof. Probability of sharding is at least eighty percent."

The group, so buoyant moments before, fell very silent, everyone looking away from everyone else. Gary understood their sudden unease and shared in it. That one could achieve an end didn't always mean one should.

"I'm sorry to rain on your access, people, but we knew coming in that we'd be facing a high probability of sharding. Not this high, I'll grant you, but still well above tolerable levels. So I put it to you: Do we have the right to put this young girl through the ordeal of dissolution if she begins sharding? Do we want to see Juanita go through thirty separate deaths if the time comes?"

The silence remained heavy over the table, so thick that it was physically felt. No one had ever witnessed a dissolution--the last occurred long before any of them had even been born. But the chilling terror of the experience lived on in their cultural folklore. It was the stuff of nightmares and ghost stories; passed on by children who tried to frighten each other on dark, windy nights.

The silence continued until Maureen finally stood.

"It was so much easier to think about when we didn't have a name to put to her, wasn't it?" she asked rhetorically. "So much easier to think of it as a process, and not an experience."

"I've watched the ancient holo files of dissolution. It's horrible. To see each false persona die, one after the other, until only the soulner is left, and then seeing the final death come. I've thought a lot about this over my career as a healer, especially in the past two years, when Gary asked me to be on the reconstruction team. How could I put a person through that? Knowing it would be so much easier to let them die unknowing, trapped as whatever ripe they were." She pointed toward the ghost door that led into the reconstruction facility where the satellite was secured.

"Last night, I walked into that room and stared at the flashing red light on the satellite. I stared at it for ten minutes, maybe longer, and I asked myself over and over: If I was unwilling to risk putting the soulner through sharding and dissolution, then was I willing to turn off the power source of that satellite, and let the riped core fail? Was I willing to let Juanita die as a machine instead of a little girl? For if I could not do one, I had to do the other."

She looked at each of them in turn. "I couldn't. I could not switch off the power, and bury little Juanita in that metal body. And I ask each of you now; right here: Who will go into that room and turn off her life?"

There was no answer other than silence, but it was a different, less intrusive silence than had been weighing on them. With thoughtful gazes, they stared into the model floating on the table, into the magnificently delicate patterns of white soul mist that surrounded and moved in and out of the universe of a mind that was Juanita, and asked themselves the question. At last Gary stood up slowly, drawing all eyes to him.

"Thank you, Maureen. You've reminded us we are not God. The decision of life or death is not ours to make. Sai? If you would begin preparations, please? I'd very much like to meet little Juanita."

Seventh Day

"Buenos Noches, Senorita. Como esta Usted?"

Juanita's eyes fluttered and opened at the gentle sound of the woman's voice. Where was she? Shielding her eyes with her hand, she raised her head slowly.

"Who is there? Who is that?" she asked in Spanish. The lighting was very low and indirect and she still had trouble seeing. A dark shape leaned close to her and took her hand.

"My name is Maureen Adams, little Juanita. I am a doctor."

"You... you know who I am?" Juanita asked with a tinge of fear coming to her voice. People you didn't know who in turn knew you were people to be feared.

"Yes, I know your name. I haven't had the pleasure of knowing you, though." Maureen smiled warmly. "I hope that will change. In fact, let us start now. How are you feeling this evening?"

Juanita, feeling reassured by the caring voice, sat up carefully. Her clothes felt very soft and comfortable, and she looked down at them and gasped.

"Who's clothes are these?"

"They are yours, Juanita," Maureen said with a small laugh, allowing Juanita to take the conversation where she wished. "Why else would you be wearing them?"

"But I don't have such fine clothing! I have only my dress and my sleeping robe. And my shoes." She looked down at her feet and frowned. Even in the dim lighting, and lying in bed under sheets that were as white and clean as any she'd ever seen, it was clear she was taller than she had been. She looked at her hand and stared at it, a sense of fear coming over her. It wasn't her hand! Or was it? It seemed like... but it was larger and.. and... Juanita looked quickly at Maureen, who could see the sudden, growing terror engulfing her.

"Be calm, child! I know you do not believe what you are seeing. It is very difficult for you, but I am here to help you." Maureen took her hand, but Juanita pulled it free.

"What have you done to me?" She felt her face with trembling hands, then noticed her more mature figure. "What's happened?" Memories came flooding back. "My mother! What have you done with my mother? Where is she?"

"Juanita! Child! Please, be calm." Maureen again took her hand and held it tightly, then closed her eyes. Juanita stared in fascination as Maureen shifted her free hand while speaking in a foreign tongue. Her eyes came open and looked into Juanita's and Juanita felt a sudden surge of warmth and calm covering her body like a favorite blanket. She lay down and looked up at Maureen.

"Are you a witch?" Juanita asked in a soft voice.

"No, child," Maureen smiled warmly again and stroked Juanita's black hair. "I'm a doctor. Doctors now have very special ways to treat the sick and injured."

"Am I sick?"

"You were. You were very sick. But now you are getting better."

"What's happened to my body? Am I older? Did I go to sleep for a long time?"

"You are very intelligent, Senorita. As intelligent as you are pretty. Yes, you've been asleep for a long time. That is why you look so different."

"What of my mother?"

Maureen's eyes glistened with sadness. "I'm sorry, child. We could not save your mother."

"You are not DPR, then? They are the ones who took her away. They said she had no one to support her, but I did."

"And what did you do, Juanita?" Maureen asked, immediately hating herself for fear of causing the girl pain in answering.

"I danced," Juanita said with a quiet sigh and a small smile as the healing spell eased her into a peaceful slumber. "I danced for the people at the city gate."

"And you will dance again," Maureen whispered, nearly overcome, "but not because you have to. Now you will dance because you want to."

Eighth Day

"Good morning, Juanita!" Maureen's cheerful, bubbly voice fell true and welcome on Juanita's ears. Juanita was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking around her room in stunned pleasure. Set along the coast of the Halivonian Sea, the entire seaward wall of the comfortable home was utterly transparent and

the rich sparkling of the deep blue water set shimmers of dancing lights along the ceiling. The room itself was large and warm, with dozens and dozens of flowers decorating it.

"Where am I?" she asked, wonder in her tone. "Am I in a palace? I've never seen such beauty! Why am I being treated this way? I am a poor girl."

"Not anymore, Juanita," Maureen said happily, coming up and hugging the girl. "Much has happened while you were sick, and I will explain it all to you. But slowly. Tell me, have you had breakfast yet?"

"Yes, Doctor, I have." She pointed to the room's small table, on which the remains of an ample breakfast sat. "A woman came in about an hour ago and gave me all this food. I ate what I could, but had to stop." She looked at Maureen with curious eyes. "She didn't speak my language. And forgive me, Doctor, but you speak it differently than I am used to hearing."

"Please, call me Maureen. I apologize for my poor Spanish. And for Melanie not speaking any. The truth is, Spanish is no longer spoken by anyone. At least, not the Spanish you would know. And I can speak your tongue only because of a language spell. It allows me to speak archaic Spanish, but I'm afraid it's not too good with dialects and accents."

"What?" Juanita again looked stunned.

Maureen smiled and picked up a hair brush. "You have such lovely hair! So long and black and thick! Here, let me brush it out for you, and we'll talk, okay?"

Twelfth Day

"Maureen!" Juanita called out, splashing in the waves, her wild red, yellow and black swimsuit tight and wet against her healthy form.

Maureen looked up from her tabinal and smiled at the girl as she ran in and out of the surf, giggling and laughing and shouting. Juanita waved and beckoned her to come in. Maureen held up her tabinal, indicating she still had plenty of work to do. Juanita playfully stuck out her tongue, then dove into the water, leaving Maureen to her work.

"You really should go in, Maureen." Gary's voice, right behind her, made her stomach tighten slightly with surprise. She tilted her head back and looked up at him.

"Hey! What's the idea, sneaking up on me?"

"Don't change the subject," Gary laughed, sitting down beside her in the sand. From the ocean, Juanita called out Gary's name and waved. Gary waved back, shouting out a hello, about the only Spanish he'd learned. He chuckled at her childish abandon, then leaned over Maureen's shoulder to see the tabinal.

"Your daily report on our little lady?"

"Uh-huh. Lady's the word, too. I've never seen an adolescent so polite, proper, and respectful."

"Different times," Gary answered with a shrug. "Kids were a lot more obedient eight hundred years ago."

Maureen laughed. "I don't think so. I think it's Juanita. She's a joy, Gary."

"I know that firsthand. How's the adjustment coming?"

"Smoothly," Maureen said with a nod. "She's adapting well to the truth as I've been sharing it, and seems to be content with believing me."

"How much of your healing spell are you maintaining on her?"

"Less than quarter strength. She still needs it. Especially at night. That's why I've been staying with her the past week. She misses her mother sorely, though she doesn't speak of her very much."

"And how has the idea that she's on a different planet affected her?"

"If anything, Gary, I think it's helped. She was quick enough to spot the clues on her own. Our day being eighteen hours instead of twenty-four, the brightness of the stars, the smaller size and whiter color of our sun relative to Earth's. She didn't know exactly what it meant, but when it came time to tell her, she adjusted quickly and easily."

"And her own physical changes?"

"Again, she adjusted nicely. She was distraught at first, but not because she was now a fairly well developed thirteen year old. She was upset because she thought she had displaced the person whose body it had originally been. She was relieved beyond words when I managed to convey the notion--and truth--that her body had never had a soul or mind, that it had been grown centuries earlier and put into stasis when our society finally realized the inherent moral dangers that came with breeding husks. Since then, I think she's enjoyed being 'older' than she should be."

"It's difficult to imagine you telling her all that, Maureen."

"It was even more difficult actually doing it. I've pushed my language spell to the limit, finding the right vocabulary. Not only is this time and technology foreign to her, even the technology of her day was foreign to her. She led a very squalid life, each day taken up by her dancing for money so she could buy minimal food, her care for her mother, and her visits to the local mission."

"Yes, her faith. You've mentioned that frequently in your reports. Do you think that is what's kept her strong enough to adapt?"

"Absolutely," Maureen nodded firmly. "She's given me what she calls her confession and it points to her belief in a loving God and merciful Savior who cares for her regardless of what happens. She is certain that whatever good happens is due to her God and whatever bad that happens will not be beyond the strength her God has given her. She trusts Him totally, and looks past this life as being only a temporary thing."

"With such strong convictions in such a benevolent God, I can see why she'd do well no matter the circumstances. To her, this must seem like heaven."

"No, not heaven," Maureen smiled, "A foretaste perhaps."

Thirtieth Day

"Juanita?" Maureen took the girl's trembling hand in hers. She was tempted to soothe her with a calming spell, but chose not to. "Are you all right? We don't have to do this today if you are not up to it."

"No, Senora," she shook her head and took a deep breath. "This is a debt I owe, and I pay it gladly. Please, be seated with the others."

Giving her one more comforting squeeze, Maureen passed through the ghost door into the darkened room where the rest of the team and their spouses were sitting on cushions laid out in a semi circle on the floor. Seeing them in such a soothing, relaxed atmosphere was almost laughable--Sai looked uniquely out of place, curled up on a floor cushion nearly her size--but this was what Juanita wanted. What she had

insisted on. Almost feeling guilty, she lowered herself to the floor and arranged her dress modestly, then leaned back on a large cushion.

The room lighting dimmed, then darkened. It stayed pitch black for a few seconds, then a single soft, white light illuminated the area in front of them, and there was Juanita, lying on the floor, her white dress spread in a circle around her lithe form. Her face was pressed against the floor.

She remained that way for several seconds, then slowly rose up, her smooth, rounded shoulders floating up effortlessly, her back looking feline in its grace and flow. Her head came up and everyone could see in her large, dark eyes the music that played in her soul as she began her dance.

Coming to her feet in a single, fluid motion, the dress collapsed around her long legs with a silent swirl and a gentle caress. The dress was not pure white, but had an earthy tone to it; the comfortable white of the peasant festival. Slashes of vermilion and green crossed from right shoulder to left breast, each blaze decorated with small yellow tassels that tossed and twirled at the wish of their owner.

Her bare feet began a gentle gliding, never stopping, never hurrying, always in a perfect unheard tempo. Her long, thick, raven black hair, loose and flowing save for a single braid along her right temple, whirled and undulated with a magic of its own, a living thing that, like the tassels, gladly obeyed the young girl's spirit.

As an artist working with paints, or a sculptor carefully manipulating her clay, Juanita created her dance for them. She added to it only when needed, then crafted the new motion into her work, until it was an indelible part of the whole. In turn, each person watching knew when a piece was being added for them specifically. Her face was intent and her gaze focused as she moved, yet the gleam of her eyes and the small smile on her lips revealed clearly her love for the art.

Slowly, yet in unstoppable beauty, the individual elements of girl, dress and hair came together and the dance itself came to life, a breathing, vibrant creation of joy that entranced all. Bereft of ill suggestion and devoid of base innuendo, it existed in, parallel to, and intermingled with the girl's innocence. Her arms lifted serenely above her head, holding in check the thrill of her body's motion and the muted frenzy of her twirling, billowing dress. Her legs, now visible to the knee but no more, flashed in a blurred pattern of ceaseless perfection.

Juanita seemed to have reached a pinnacle of energy, and those enthralled by her dance felt a gentle release as her dance slowed. What they had just seen could never be described to someone who had not witnessed this tangible portrayal of the incomprehensible.

The easing of emotion changed suddenly, as Juanita, knowing her audience with uncanny wisdom and gifted intuition, seized their attention and brought them headlong toward the true climax of her performance. Her undulating body relaxed and flowed serenely even as she increased the tempo, creating an impossible blend and balance of the aggressively primitive and the majestically sublime. The silence deepened and intensified as she held captive with her burning eyes those she loved, craving to convey her pure desire of humble gratitude.

Her movement gathered intensity without urgency, and then the spellbound watchers themselves became part of the dance, caught up in Juanita's happiness and singleness of purpose. Their hearts beat as one as they were transported into the soul of the dance, as much a piece of it as the girl herself. One by one, they gasped in wonder as they began to hear the music that played so clearly in the mind and soul of the young Hispanic girl who thanked them in the only way she knew how.

Forty-first Day

"Get her on the table, NOW!!"

Juanita gave out a whimper as the urgent voice of centuries past echoed through her shattered mind. She felt herself being lifted carefully but quickly onto a soft, warm surface. Maureen--or was it an uncaring nurse?--stepped close, clasping her hand.

"Hold on, Juanita!" Relief mixed with pain washed over Juanita. Though she hurt, she knew Maureen was there.

"What's... what's happening, Senora?" she cried, trying hard to hold back her fear. "Why do I have these memories? Why do I feel so dirty?"

"It's not your fault, Juanita! Don't let it take you away, child!" Maureen's voice, shaking with fear and emotion, comforted and distressed Juanita.

Juanita's body suddenly jerked and a slicing pain cut through her stomach.

"It hurts, Senora! It hurts!" she wailed, no longer able to hold back the agony. The burning suddenly faded as she felt Maureen's magic soothing her skin, curing her wounds. Another wave passed over her and she felt herself slipping into a peaceful sleep, taking her to a place where she was clean.

Forty-seventh Day

"Hold her down!" Gary leaned over her legs and felt the hard strength of a creature not the young girl resist. Randy, who had been speaking with Juanita only moments earlier, stepped up and held her feet while Maureen pressed herself against Juanita's upper body. Gary twisted his head toward the door, where Sai had just come through. "Sai! Hurry! She's gone mechanical on us! We need a psych barrier, quick!"

Sai ripped open the case she was carrying and yanked out a small rod and turned it on. The end glowed briefly, then flashed. A low hum filled the room.

"Randy!" Sai shouted, "Let Gary handle her legs! You take her chest and arms. Maureen, I need a full restoration spell with life replenishment." Maureen nodded and released Juanita. Randy stepped up and threw his body across Juanita's stiff, twisting body. Sai pressed the rod against Juanita's right temple. At her left temple, Maureen drew two interlocking circles with her first and third fingers. She envisioned a yellow and gold ellipse with foci at each intersection, then rotated it on the existing time axis. In her mind's eye, the symbol glowed and sang. She began coding the spell of replenishment in a low voice, the cue for Sai to activate the barrier rod.

Fifty-second Day

"It's not happening!" Sai pulled the barrier rod away from Juanita's right temple for the fourth time in three days and set the recharge. Maureen was on the floor, weak and dazed from excessive use of Pentinsic code. Sai looked to Gary, who was just securing the shielding over Juanita's torso and legs. He saw her look and nodded.

"Access! Medical scenario eight!" Sai called out firmly. The lights blinked and the room shifted from physical reality to the puterverse. Efwon stood there.

"What can I do, Gary?" he asked quickly.

"We need the immediate area flooded with a polarized aura, Mike!" Gary yelled, forgetting--or not caring--to hide their relationship from Sai. "She's gone to her omega ripe and we're losing her! Draw

whatever power you need from Coda's main core. Just get it on line now!"

"Done," he said simply. The room, still looking much as it did in normal reality, took on a hazy, soft blue tint. The effect on Juanita was immediate and welcome. She shifted from a straining, near animal into the peaceful child she was.

Fifty-third Day

"How long?" Gary's voice, strained and rough, carried the failure of the entire team in its tone. Juanita was again sleeping peacefully, but the cost was mounting.

"A week," Sai replied. Her petite features had an edge to them, and she looked a caricature of her earlier tender beauty. Her voice, too, carried the certainty of defeat. "Maybe two. No more."

There seemed nothing more to say, and the silence thickened.

Fifty-sixth Day

"Senora?" Juanita's voice, weak yet still hopeful, called into the cool evening.

"I'm here, child." Maureen was at her side instantly, squeezing her hand and caressing the girl's smooth cheek. "What can I do for you, Juanita?"

"Nothing, Senora," she whispered. "It is enough that you are here. This is what you feared, isn't it? I am... how do you say? sharding?"

"Yes," Maureen replied. They had discussed whether or not to tell Juanita the truth, but in the end there was no choice. She had been told.

"Then I am to die?" she asked quietly. At Maureen's stricken look, Juanita smiled. "I thank you for this chance, Senora. I thank God I was allowed to know you. And I am happy I could dance for you."

"We haven't given up yet, Juanita," Maureen said, wiping a tear. "You'll dance for us again."

"I beg your pardon?" Juanita said in flawless ancient English. "I apologize that I do not understand you. Are you one of Diane honey's friends?"

Fifty-eighth Day

"So what would like to do, Juanita?" Maureen asked, seeing she'd finished reading her Bible and set it aside. Juanita had been reading for over an hour and was drifting off, but at Maureen's question turned her head toward her.

"Nothing, Senora, gracias. You have been more than kind." Her eyes drifted off and for a moment Maureen thought she had sharded again. But she smiled and looked back at Maureen.

"What were you just thinking about, Juanita?"

"I was thinking about my Pinata. It was a llama, and I purchased it the day they took my mother away. I bought it for ten pesos from a kind merchant who treated me like a real customer."

"Was it a colorful Pinata?"

"Oh, si! It was glorious! It was red and orange and green and white and blue and oh so many colors! And the way it danced! How I wished I had the freedom to dance to the wind the way it did!" She laid a

gentle hand on her Bible. "But I know I will soon have that freedom. My release is coming soon, and then I'll be able to dance for my Savior for all eternity. I will be like my Pinata, Senora! Colorful and tireless and beautiful! I had bought the Pinata with my dirty money, but Pastor Montoya said it would..."

Her voice trailed off and her eyes dulled and they were both alone again.

Fifty-ninth Day

Gary stepped through the doorway and into the meeting room where the rest of the team was resting, slumped in chairs or collapsed on the cushions scattered about the floor. He looked at his loyal friends, uncomplaining in their exhaustive efforts. Not one had stopped searching for a solution in over two weeks, and the toll would be exacted for years to come. He wished they could be rewarded properly for their work, wished that they could be paid in the coin they so desperately craved.

Something in the way he held himself touched them all. Sai gave out a sob and lowered her head onto her forearms. Vince had the shattered look of a man who had lost his reason for living. Gathering himself, Gary stood straight.

"It's begun."

Sixty-third Day

"...Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

The soft wind whipped off the ocean and blew a soft blanket of air across the small cemetery. The pastor stepped back and Juanita's friends came forward. Quietly, and with a tenderness that spoke to the hope she too had, Maureen placed the Bible under Juanita's cold hand, then laid a Pinata beside the still form. Its tassels, brilliant in the morning sun, fluttered once, then fell still as the coffin was closed. With little physical effort, the weight instead carried on their hearts, Gary, Steve, Vince and Randy lifted the light gray coffin from its bier and laid it on the temporary field over the grave. The field held the burden aloft for several minutes before gradually fading and allowing the coffin to slowly lower into its grave.

Epilogue

800 years (2905)

It was a fantastically clear morning. The sea breeze was coming off the water as it did nearly every morning. As it did that morning just over four years prior. The thought made Gary look up from Hinman's town square to the low bluff just south of the town, to the cemetery where Juanita lay. The wind that played through the town and danced in the streets made him think of the night Juanita had danced for them. She'd been so alive! And so willing to share that life with others. The final two weeks had mercifully faded, and the most vivid memory that remained was that unforgettable dance. He would always be able to close his eyes and see her flashing movements, her compelling grace, her...

He turned back toward the expectant crowd looking up at him, then suddenly remembered he was in the middle of a sentence. With the realization came the instant forgetfulness of what he'd been saying. He looked down at the heavy sledge and thick iron spike in his hand, then over at the veiled monument that lay beside him. Two meters by three, it was a sharp rectangle covered by a silk cloth of pure white.

Beyond that, standing on a rooftop, was Mike, his glowing green form a part of reality for this service. Beside Mike was the rarely seen Kiki, her yellow form fluctuating from the real sorrow she was feeling.

Mike put his arm around Kiki and stared mournfully down on Gary. He'd insisted on attending, making himself unavailable to the entire puterverse. Gary now knew why it was so important to them. It had been... he realized his drifting thoughts again.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, running a hand across his eyes. "I lost my thought." He lifted the hammer and spike.

"This is not Juanita's day, though we mark it on her eight hundredth birthday. Today isn't for the soulners, either, though with this monument we acknowledge our wrong against them.

"Today is for us. Today we gather here--and on every planet in The System--to mark the end of a terrible failure to ourselves. Today, we gather here to make a reminder to all humanity that we are responsible for our failures as well as our successes. A reminder that, whenever we *are* wrong, we must struggle to make aright. For without that struggle, without that need to make aright, others will be forced to pay for our crimes of arrogance."

He stepped back and nodded to the two men near the platform. They approached slowly and solemnly shifted the covered monument to standing. Once seated in its base, they detached the grips that held it in an antigravity field. One of the men snatched the loose corner of the covering and pulled it. There was a whisper of sound followed by a pop as the silk snapped free and fluttered to the ground.

There, encased in clear aligned titanium, was a large, priceless sheet of pure diamond crystal. A collective gasp went up as the crystal caught the sunlight, magnified it through the aligned titanium, and cast it back out as a vibrant rainbow of color, splashing its glory for hundreds of meters. The wind brushed the solid monument, causing it to move less than one billionth of a meter. It was more than enough, however, to start the crystal to vibrating, causing the colors to rotate and scatter in a constantly moving display of multi-hued ribbons of light.

Gary looked over the waves of color, dancing and twisting, playing with the wind and dazzling the crowd. Dancing and twisting like.. his heart tightened and he felt a hot surge of grief... like a Pinata on a string.

Without a word, Gary stepped up to the monument and inserted it into a hole that was set over the very center of the crystal. His hand shook as he set the spike, and the shaking was translated into even more vibration. The colors went into a dervish of activity, splitting into hundreds, then thousands of brilliant, living rainbows. Slowly, as the crowd looked on, he drew back the sledge with both hands. Then, with all his strength and sorrow, he slammed it into the spike.

Instantly, the crystal shattered. Held in place by the titanium, it became a confusion of thousands of cracks, slivers, and shards. As quickly as the rainbows had appeared, they vanished, and the shattered diamond crystal faded to a flat translucence, the ugly iron spike having punched through it completely, its sharp point protruding a dozen centimeters from the hole in the back of the monument.

Dropping the sledge, Gary turned his back and stumbled down the platform stairs to his wife. A small piece of crystal, located on the top corner of the sheet, cast a final shiver of vermilion, green and peasant white, then faded and winked out.