

ADRIAN J. MATTHEWS  
**The Ninth  
Wave**



## Praise for the writing of Adrian J. Matthews

### *The Ninth Wave*

Creative characters and evocative language make *The Ninth Wave* a "must read."

-- Denise Dietz, author of *Fifty Cents for your Soul* (Loose Id)

*The Ninth Wave* is a must read for lovers of futuristic/science fiction. Adrian Matthews is a master at creating a very believable high-tech world, filled with original, memorable characters. I really enjoyed this book!

-- Jill Noelle, author of *Mine* (Loose Id)

Exciting blend of science fantasy, erotica and paranormal phenomena.

-- Daria Karpova, author of *Loose Diamonds* (Loose Id)

An amazing tale set on a distant planet of ice and lightning storms. *The Ninth Wave* has everything: incredible characters, legends and myths, new worlds...and a tender love story. I loved the writing, and the story grabbed me from the very first line. The love scene in the storm absolutely blew me away -- it was so hot it sizzled! I'm looking forward to more stories by this very gifted writer!

-- Samantha Winston, author of *Ice Man* (Loose Id)

Deftly blending "Neo-Hinduism" with futuristic fun, A. J. Mathews' debut offering at Loose Id is tightly paced and suspenseful. The characters are well drawn and believable, the plot unique and entertaining. I found *The Ninth Wave* thoroughly enjoyable.

-- Cyndi Friberg, author of *Ontarian Chronicles 1: Taken by the Storm* (coming soon from Loose Id)

# THE NINTH WAVE

Adrian J. Matthews

LooseId

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

# The Ninth Wave

Adrian J. Matthews

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## Chapter One

“Stand on the shore,” Cassie O’Neill said, shading her eyes from the harsh sunlight. “Look out to sea. That’s when you *know* you’re on another world.”

She and her lover, Craig Lowell, stood on the edge of a frozen beach of mixed sand and gravel that trended down the inner length of a long, curved peninsula. Around them, the jumbled mass of pack ice glowed yellow beneath the lurid noon blaze of Solace, star of Orpheus. In the deeper water near the horizon, huge, fantastically carved icebergs loomed like fairytale castles. The rich scent of salt and seaweed hung heavy in the cold air.

Craig skimmed another stone onto the open stretch of water in the large hole they had found in the ice. The tiny pebble flew straight and true for hundreds of meters, smacking lightly off the slow ocean surge that rolled under the pack ice. Three long skips, then, when it was little more than a distant speck on the shimmering water, the lighter-than-Earth gravity of Orpheus finally claimed the stone.

“Your mom knew what she was talking about,” Craig said as he crunched over the snow-covered sand toward her. He took her in his arms and stared down at her, his big blue eyes sparkling with warmth. “I’m only sorry I never had a chance to meet her,” he said softly.

"I'm sorry, too. She would've liked you." She rubbed her hands over his chest as she smiled up at him. He bent his head, kissing her tenderly. Cassie's nipples hardened and a rush of warmth flooded through her pussy. She melted against him, her breasts aching, pressing her lips avidly on his, flicking her tongue lightly over his. He tightened his strong arms, pulling her closer as he nuzzled her neck, his breath gusting hot over her skin.

She pulled away slowly, closing her eyes for a moment, her heart racing. Damn, but the man could kiss! If they didn't have to unload the drones, she'd drag him into the ATV right now and rip off his clothes. She opened her eyes, ignoring his knowing grin, and turned away.

"Work first, you bad man," she said, injecting a note of mock disapproval into her tone. "But you better believe you're going to give me a rain-check!"

"If you insist." He laughed and moved alongside to help her unload the drones from the storage bay.

In spite of their bulky heavy-weather clothing, they worked quickly and methodically, unloading the survey drones and readying them for deployment. A stiff wind blew from the north, but the heating mesh built into Cassie's body sheath warmed her skin. She glanced at the readout on her wrist unit. Negative fifteen degrees Celsius.

"I'm damn glad the Council opted to buy this newer gear," she said.

"You and me both. It would be impossible here without it," Craig replied, grunting as he lowered the last section of the launch ramp to the ground. "There! That's it." He straightened up and made a show of rubbing his back. "Lighter gravity or not, this sure gets to be hard work after a while."

"You baby!" She grinned and punched him lightly on the arm. "Look, I'll set the drone test patterns running; you go in and fix us something hot. By the time we've eaten, they should be ready to launch."

"You got it."



Craig disappeared through the personnel hatch, leaving her to check the sleek, submersible drones for any obvious signs of transit damage. Their smooth, gunmetal-gray skins were untouched, the ceramic composite gleaming like oil under the sun. Flipping their input ports open, Cassie plugged in the interface cables from the ATV and left them to their own devices.

She made her way through the lock to the stuffy warmth of the ATV's accommodation area and peeled off her outer suit. Craig smiled and handed her a mug of hot soup. His gaze dallied on her breasts. When he looked up again, she winked at him.

"Later, lover!" she said, teasing a lock of his hair.

Craig took hold of her hand and laid a gentle kiss on her palm. "I know! I'm counting the minutes. Now drink your soup before it gets cold."

"Yes, dear. Gods, I need this!" She sighed, combing the tangles out of her long black hair with her fingers as she sipped from the mug.

"Everything okay outside?" he asked.

"Yep." She sat on the bench and peered out through the porthole, then frowned.

"Although it's looking cloudy to the west."

"Yeah? Odd. There aren't any weather fronts forecast in this area for another ten hours." He sat alongside her. Draping an arm around her shoulder, he lightly kneaded her tight muscles. She turned her head, kissing his fingers, and he grinned.

"I'll check the met data," he said, glancing at the chronometer. "We should have one of the satellites overhead now."

"Don't worry about it now." She clasped his hand. "We'll launch the drones and be snug in here within an hour." She smiled wickedly. "And I have a rain-check, remember ...?"

"How could I forget?" He growled and pulled her into his embrace.

Cassie giggled, and snuggled up to him. Safe within his strong, warm arms, she studied the tiny compartment, a functional space made cozy by little touches of domesticity. Small

scatter cushions in multicolored patchwork, a Hudson Bay Company blanket, a beaded plaque of abstract Celtic design, made by their friend Jan. Craig's liter-sized mug with 'Born to drink coffee!' emblazoned on the side, a kitsch relic of his pre-embarkation leave home in Wellington, New Zealand. On the wall nearby, a holopic glowed vibrantly in the subdued light. She reached and took it down, the glue-blob that held it relinquishing its grip with a soft pop.

Craig's chin pressed against her as he looked over her shoulder, his cheek lying lightly against hers as he peered at the picture. "Isn't that New Madurai?"

Cassie nodded, cradling the precious picture in her hands. Propelled by tiny movements, the image of the marble palace with its multitude of wings glimmered white against the ochre of the sweeping plains. Beyond, the hills rose, dark umber and green blurred by heat haze and distance.

"Yes; those are my uncle's lands." She flashed him a smile. "In the midst of all this damp and ice, it does me good to look at this and remember the dry heat. When I go there again, I'll take a picture from here, so I can remember how cold we felt!"

"Even after all these months, I still wonder at how someone from such a hot land can come to a frozen waste like this," he said reflectively.

"Are you complaining?" she asked, tilting the picture to make the colors flow again.

"Not in the least!" He hugged her close. "But you've never really told me why, of all the colony worlds, you chose Orpheus. Don't answer if it's too sensitive; just tell me to mind my own business."

He spoke with humor, but there was the suggestion of anxiety in his voice, as if he felt the prospect of a void opening, into which their relationship would plunge, irretrievably. Yet he'd tossed the question out there, and Cassie recognized its validity.

Not all colonists of the high frontier took up the life through choice. Some fled political or religious oppression; others fled the law. Still others fled their families because of some

deep and bitter feud. The governments and organizations of human space would say those who moved to the new worlds did so purely for the spirit of adventure, a desire to advance the Race. In reality, it was a cycle as old as humanity; a pattern repeated since there had been a horizon and a mind willing to cross it.

"It's not sensitive, *jaan*." The image of New Madurai in her hands evoked the Hindi endearment. "I know you well enough by now to tell you, and I don't want anything coming between us. It's no great secret, really." Cassie fixed the picture back on the wall, and then settled back into Craig's arms. She stared off into the middle distance, as if her gaze could penetrate the thick ceramic composite of the hull.

"I guess it was because my mother died," she said thoughtfully. "My uncle was very kind, as always, but I knew I had to get away from the court and do something positive with my life. New Madurai was wonderful, but I felt a need for a change of climate, perhaps even a change of planet. I was of an age to go into space. After what happened to Mom, the Navy didn't appeal, but the prospect of the high frontier did. I've always had a good head for sciences, so I gained my degree. As for surviving the cold..." Her lips twitched. "Thanks to my mad mother, I'm half-Irish, and they're born tough."

"Oh, absolutely!" He coughed and looked at her with embarrassment. "Jan actually beat me at arm wrestling the last time we were aboard *North Star*."

"Really? There you go, then!"

"I was drunk!"

"Right..."

"Honest!" He kissed the top of her head. "What about your dad? You've never told me about him."

The old pain rose inside her at the question, and she felt Craig stiffen against her.

"I shouldn't have asked," he said. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be.” She twisted ‘round in his embrace to look at him and touched a finger to his lips. “Darling, the answer is simple. I just don’t know who my father is, or was. Mom never did say.” She stroked his cheek and looked into his somber eyes.

“I guess I’m a bit of a mongrel,” she said mischievously, hoping to lighten the mood, but he looked hurt.

“Oh, Cass! Don’t say things like that.”

“I wasn’t being serious, you silly boy!” she said mildly. “The days when being half-blood counted against a person have long-gone, even on Earth.” She winked at him. “And you must admit, I’m a terrific example of how good mixed genes can be!”

Craig shook his head, his face flushed. “Gods! You irritating woman! You had me worried there for a moment.”

“I’m a woman; it’s my civic duty to throw men a curve ball now and then; it keeps you alert. Look, forget all that. We’re here, together, now. It was karma that we should meet.” She gestured to the picture. “We’ll go to New Madurai together one day. I’d like you to meet the rest of my family.”

“I’d like that, too,” he said, and kissed her gently on the cheek. “We will go, once everything is settled here.”

“It’ll take years to make Orpheus viable.” She nestled against him.

“It will. But we have plenty of time.”

Cassie wrapped her arms around his neck.

“We do,” she whispered, and kissed him deeply. Their lips parted, tongues meeting in moist intimacy, dancing a salamandrine dance over and around each other. Cassie nibbled Craig’s lips and flicked his teeth, lightning-quick, with her tongue as she drew back.

“Oh ho!” She chuckled as she squirmed onto his lap. “What’s this I feel? It’s nice to be appreciated!”

“A corpse would get a boner, the way you kiss!” he said with a groan. “I don’t know how I’m gonna last until those drones are launched.”

“I’m afraid we’re both going to need some self-control, lover,” she said with a grin, taking his hand and closing it about her breast. Her nipple was hard and aching against his palm. “The thought of that lovely meat of yours just a layer of clothing beneath my tight little Pindoo butt is making me wetter than that bloody sea out there. We’ve got work to do now, but I’ll go easy on you later,” she said with a purr. His eyebrows rose and she giggled. “You don’t believe me? I mean it; we’ll skip the Tantra tonight.”

Craig made a show of wiping his brow with relief and she laughed. Standing, she took his hand and pulled him to his feet.

“Come on,” she said. “The sooner we finish out there, the sooner we can begin in here ...”

\* \* \* \* \*

They left the comfort of the ATV and readied the drones, working with easy and professional camaraderie. Green lights winked across the display panels, showing all was well with the sophisticated robots.

“I’m glad they’re working okay!” Craig said, closing the hatches over the panels. He patted the machine. “These cost us plenty. I wouldn’t want to be the one to report a bad apple to the Council.”

“They wouldn’t shoot you if you did. Even they know there’s no such thing as perfection. You worry too much. Come on, let’s get the ramp down.” She glanced over her shoulder at the clouds rolling slowly over the horizon. “I want to be inside before that weather hits.”

The prefabricated launch ramp took mere minutes to assemble. Its latticework rail extended and slipped into the gelid water, the servomotors whining faintly under the load.

Cassie took advantage of her waterproof suit and walked into the sea a little way. She checked the ramp, ensuring no underwater rocks would impede the drones' progress. The pressure of the water pressed the suit against her legs in a strangely sensuous way. She suppressed a giggle and waded deeper, until the water rose up to her waist.

"Don't go too far in, babe," Craig said.

"I won't," she replied, savoring the living feel of the pressure against her crotch as the slow current surged around her. Resting her hand on the rail for balance against the slight undertow, she looked out over the sea.

"Funny how the swell has kept the water clear," she said thoughtfully. "In these temperatures, I'd have thought it would still freeze over."

"It's the kind of thing these babies are here to look at, remember?" he replied. "It might lead to something the colony can use."

"Yeah." She walked up onto dry land, glancing back at the dark water. "I hope so."

The sun was already beginning to dip toward the horizon, the short Orphean day of 18 hours another oddity for an Earth-born to get used to. The first drone hummed softly on the cradle.

"Fire one." Craig touched the button and the robot slipped down the ramp into the water with barely a ripple.

Cassie had already set the second drone up on the crane by the time the cradle retracted. Within two minutes, the second drone had left the scene. Cassie and Craig stared at the water, then up at the gathering storm looming black and ominous over the rocky hills of the peninsula.

"Wanna cash that rain-check?" she asked, nudging him in the ribs with her elbow.

"I thought you'd never ask!" He grinned.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Darkness came quickly, borne on the rising wind and the first slashing drops of rain.*

Snug inside the ATV, Cassie peeled the thin fabric of the body sheath off Craig's body like a gossamer cocoon. His exposed skin was hot and pliant beneath her hands as she caressed his firm, muscular torso, tracing a path with her fingertips around each rosy pink, hair-rimmed nipple. She ran her hands across his chest, and he trembled as he held her, his cock rising hard against her belly.

Craig's breath was loud in her ear as he held her close, his fingers searching for her body sheath closures, his usually deft touch clumsy in his eagerness. She held him tightly in her arms, feeling their hearts beating hard, united in rising lust. The top of her suit came loose, peeled away from her arms and breasts. Under his urging, she lay back on the bunk, her butt on the edge, arms flung wide as Craig tugged at the legs of her suit. He finally pulled the sheath from her feet and flung it aside.

Cold air ran electric fingers over her hot flesh. Craig's eyes burned with fervid desire as he parted her thighs and stepped closer. Reaching out, he ran a finger over her cheeks to her lips, her throat, and down to her breasts. She moaned softly as his hands cupped each orb. He squeezed them hard, pinching her nipples as he bowed his head and laid gentle kisses on her belly.

*Dark, sleet-laden clouds roiled over the hills to the west, the darkness seeping from the turbulent sky to merge with the basaltic hills until earth and heavens seemed one. Deep within the mass, lightning flickered, the huge energies remaining hidden behind lobes of tumultuous vapor...*

Craig ran his lips and tongue over her belly, laying a moist trail down, down to her pussy as his hands slid up and down her flanks with long, slow strokes. She felt his hot breath playing over her labia and sighed with contentment, her eyes hooded, unseeing.

*The storm front grew four great wings of dark cloud. Moving with preternatural speed, they reached around an area of sky directly above the ATV until they met and merged with a*

*shocking blast of lightning, enclosing the ATV in an amphitheater of relative calm. As the clouds merged, they thickened, until the small area of calm became swallowed by night...*

Her lover's hot, moist tongue began to play with her labia, and Cassie gasped as the touch sent a thrill through her belly. She spread her dangling legs wider as her instincts began to take over, and she felt his hair tickling her inner thighs. With his thumb, he eased back the hood of her clitoris and began to lick and nibble at the sensitive bud, his touch sending ripples of pleasure through her flexing body, a pleasure heightened when he slid two fingers inside her and began to move them slowly in and out.

*Outside, a solid wash of frigid air rolled down the slope of the hills and buffeted the ATV, making it sway on the heavy suspension.*

At that moment, Craig rose between her thighs and entered her. Her yoni stretched and spread before his steady advance with a delightful soft *squissshhh* of juices. Craig knew what she liked. He held himself in check, entering her a little way, then withdrawing, then in a little further, until at last his length filled her. Cassie gasped and mewed softly as he clasped her hips and began to ride her, hard, his balls swinging against her butt.

*Thunder rolled, the sound hard and heavy in the thick Orphean atmosphere. Sheet lightning streaked from cloud to cloud, illuminating the ice, which seemed to absorb then throw it back with a spectral glow. St. Elmo's Fire blazed silently over the peaks of the icebergs, the eerie light growing in intensity by the minute. As if in response to some hidden command, one then another flared at intervals until the whole mass of ice seemed to burn.*

Craig loomed above her, his face a tight mask of concentration as he worked to pleasure her to the utmost. His manly scent mingled in the air with her own subtle musk, and his wiry pubic hair scratched her shaved belly, the prickle mingling with the hard rubbing of his shaft against her clitoris to send electric quivers of delight through her body. Her pussy glowed hotter, grew much wetter. Then a stronger tremor blasted through her like a shock wave centered on her womb. A gasp escaped her lips; her fingers gripped the coverlet



convulsively, and her eyes closed behind fluttering lids as she gave herself up completely to her man and her rising desire.

*The wind raged and screamed around the vehicle, slapping it with harder gusts, unnoticed within. Lightning stabbed the hills, and the thunder was a continuous roll high overhead. Then, for a moment, the overwhelming noise dropped. The storm listened ...*

Cassie keened in the back of her throat. Teeth clenched, pussy clenched, eyes tight shut, she lay spread-eagled beneath Craig as he leaned into her, the perspiration dripping from his body to hers like rain. Rising on the balls of his feet, he increased the angle by which he entered her, his hips bucking, plunging deep with each rapid stroke until the fire exploded within her sex, rushing through her body like a wave-front of pure feeling, overloading her nerves and dragging a harsh scream from her lips.

Nirvana hit her between the eyes. Borne on orgasmic wings, her soul flew endlessly over a plane of silent light. She was only vaguely aware of Craig's climax. His terrible groan merged with a single, mighty thunderclap, as his seed flowed copiously into her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie woke in Craig's arms to hear a soft, insistent noise permeating the cabin. She lay for a long moment listening, trying to identify it, feeling Craig's slow, regular breathing against her breasts. Disengaging from her sleeping lover, she slipped off the bunk and stood a moment, feeling a sudden twinge of nausea. Still groggy with sleep, she shook her head and swallowed to clear the feeling as she padded into the science shack, the cool air raising goose bumps on her bare skin. A red light blinked in the computer's holographic display, and she cursed vehemently under her breath, the last dregs of sleep vanishing in the face of an emergency. She touched a few pads, and the display came up with more information. She took it all in at a glance, and then went to wake Craig.

"Wha...?" He mumbled and blinked as the light came up to full brightness. "What's up, babe?"

“One of the drones is acting up,” she replied tersely as she dressed. “As near as I can make out, it’s somewhere under the ice about three kilometers east of here.”

“Depth?” he asked, sitting up and massaging his scalp vigorously.

“Four meters. I think it’s trying to surface but the ice is in the way.”

“Aww, nuts!” He fished a pair of boxers from an overhead locker. “Why didn’t it sound the main alert?”

“How do I know?” she asked. “The drones are semi-autonomous, remember? It made the decision, not me.”

In the science shack, an update showed the situation was getting worse.

“Look at that!” Craig said, pointing at the flickering readout. “It’s drinking power! Yet it’s still not sounding the main alert.”

Cassie shook her head, baffled. “At that rate, it’ll be on battery backup within the hour. It shouldn’t happen! The piezo-fusion plant is good for years! Whatever caused the trouble must have been damned ugly.”

“We’ll have to go fetch it,” Craig said, spreading his hands. He glanced at the read-out. “We can burn a hole in the ice, and the drone should come up by itself when it detects it. If not, we’ll have to set the override.”

“Is that ice thick enough to hold the weight of the ATV?” she asked doubtfully.

“Should be,” he called over his shoulder as he headed for the cockpit. “Even if it isn’t, the auxilliary A-grav modules will take most of our weight.”

“I don’t like it,” she said nervously, moving to stand behind him as he climbed into the seat. “That way the tires won’t grip too well. We could slide into the water.”

“If we do, we can get out again. It’s either that or lose the drone, and the colony funds will be hurt bad if we do that.” He pointed to the passenger seat. “Better buckle up, my darling...”

\* \* \* \* \*

The ATV stirred into life as Craig set the course. Eight huge balloon tires bit into the gravel and propelled the ATV toward the ice floes, the sensor array in the bows searching the ice for the safest but quickest course. The high wind buffeted the big vehicle, making it rock in spite of the heavy-duty suspension. Beneath their feet, the A-grav modules lining the ventral surface hummed as they took the weight.

Cassie lurched in her seat as the wheels hit the ice, slipped, bit, and slipped again. “Gods!” she said. “This is awful!”

“These babies are built for hard pounding,” Craig said with a smile, patting the dash. “Enjoy the ride; I’ll keep an eye on our little lost drone.”

“I’m not looking forward to going out in that!” she said, pointing at the mixture of rain and hail streaking the windshield.

“With luck we won’t have to. The waldo should be able to handle a recovery in a pinch.”

The tracking indicator pulsed steadily, a soft beep sounding to show the drone was still active and trying to surface. Kilometers passed swiftly as the ATV steered its chosen course through heaved-up ice floes and mini-bergs. The seascape around them became a jumbled mass of strange wind- and sea-carved sculptures in white, yellow, and flickering violet as the storm raged overhead.

“The power drain’s still bad,” Craig said with a grimace as he checked the telemetry from the drone. “That drone will need a full overhaul when we get back to base.”

“Wonder what caused the problem?” Cassie peered through the windshield at the distant bergs as they flared. “This storm shouldn’t have affected it underwater.”

“We’ll find out in a few minutes. It’s only a hundred meters ahead now.”

Under Craig’s direction, the ATV slowed, the sensors narrowing their search pattern to a tighter focus to check the ice ahead.

"It's there," Craig said, lighting the laser range finder mounted alongside the plasma gun. A small red dot lit up fifty meters ahead on smooth, featureless ice shorn of snow by the wind. "Get ready to burn."

The windshield darkened to protect their sight. Above them, the small turret-mounted plasma cannon used for sampling swung 'round, locked on, and fired. A super-heated stream of incandescent gas blasted the dense air apart with a howl as the plasma stream struck the ice and flashed it into instant vapor, the beam itself a livid line of light across the darkness.

Cassie watched the cloud of steam surge up and tear into rags in the roaring wind. "How thick is the ice here?" she asked, raising her voice to be heard above the noise.

Craig glanced at the readout. "Three meters. I'm cutting an area five meters from the drone. It's protected from high temperatures, but I don't want to risk boiling the thing if it's damaged in any way."

"I'll send it a signal, tell it to hold until we give the word," she said.

Plasma burn super-heated the water until a wide, boiling hole appeared in the ice. Small floes tore loose and swam innocently into the line of fire to explode in a flash. Steam gushed up and flowed away downwind, soon to be torn to pieces by the storm's fury.

"That should do it," Craig said, shutting down the cannon. "Tell the drone to surface."

"It's responding!" Cassie said. "It's sensed the hole and is moving toward it."

They watched the patch of dark water anxiously through the flurries of rain and sleet. Soon, a faint violet glow appeared under the water, growing brighter as they watched.

"What the hell is that?" Cassie gasped.

The shark-like snub nose of the drone surged up out of the water, blazing with purple light -- then the world went crazy.

## Chapter Two

Fat blue sparks seared the control panel as the ATV gave a sickening lurch and skidded toward the open water.

“The steering’s out!” Craig fought to gain manual control.

“Cut the wheel motors or we’ll ditch!” Cassie said, searching the holographic display for anything that made sense.

Each pad, every holographic display, had gone mad. Alphanumeric characters blurred at impossible speeds in the air, and the speaker emitted garbled information mixed with harsh static. Desperately, she stabbed her finger on the emergency communications pad, hoping and praying the microwave up-link would work.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday!” she called. “ATV *Bushwacker* to Home Base. We have a problem here!”

A howl of static came in reply, then a snatch of something that may have been a human voice.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday!” she called again, her voice rising with increased urgency as the big vehicle gave another lurch.

They slid closer to the water. The hole had grown much larger as the fury of the storm broke the edges. Large blocks and slabs of ice floated there like pieces of broken mosaic from a giant's floor, lit by the strange glow emanating from drone and raging sky.

Suddenly the lights flickered and went out, to be replaced instantly by the red emergency lights. Momentum carried the ATV a few meters more until it came to a shuddering stop near the edge of the hole. The noise of the storm died away. Cassie froze in her seat, her finger pressed on the auto-transmit pad. She gazed out at the eerie, silent light filling the world.

"What happened?" she asked in the deadly quiet.

"We've lost all power," Craig replied tersely. He waved a hand at the dark holodisplay. "There's nothing there."

"Battery back-up is on-line," she said and looked at the drone, remembering the drastic power drain the thing had suffered. "But for how long?"

"Unknown."

She glanced at him. Craig's face was a mask of mingled frustration and anguish.

"I'll go check," she said, patting his arm.

She clambered out of her seat and made her way aft into the science shack. Even a cursory inspection in the ruby half-light of the back-up lighting showed nothing connected to the main electrical system was working. She unclipped a lamp from the storage rack and used it to complete her check.

"Anything?" Craig asked.

"Nothing," she said with a sigh, leaning back against the workbench. "Dead as a doorknob. Anything on comm?"

"The emergency beacon is operating -- barely. I think you got through, but it'll be a day, at least, before anyone reaches us."

Cassie ran the options through her mind.

"*North Star* is nearest. She should be surveying the northern end of the mid-ocean ridge by now. We'll have to sit tight." She shivered even as the words left her lips. The thought of the deep, dark water only a few meters beneath the vehicle kept intruding on her mind. Cold sweat broke out on her skin as she fought to contain her fear. A dreadful creaking made itself heard above the wind as the ATV settled on the ice, its weight no longer supported by the A-gray, and Cassie squirmed nervously.

"We can do something useful whilst we wait," Craig said, coming aft.

She was relieved to see he had regained his composure. "What?" she asked, glad of the distraction from her thoughts.

"That drone is still lying there. If we use the winch, we should be able to recover it." He gave her a smile. "We need to do something, Cass. The temperature in here will start to drop soon, so the work'll keep us warm."

"What about the storm?" she asked, peering out a nearby porthole. She pointed. "I can't see any lightning, but those 'bergs are still lit up with that weird glow."

"Weird, yes, but I think the storm's blown out. We'll be safe now."

"I dunno. I've never seen a storm like that anywhere, Craig," she said doubtfully. "It wasn't natural."

"Humanity has only been on this world for a few decades. Just because it's never been observed before, who's to say if it's unnatural to Orpheus?" He grinned. "We must be the first to see it, so they'll name the phenomenon after us. The 'Lowell-O'Neill class storm.' How does that sound?"

"I'm not quibbling over whose name goes first," she said sardonically. "Let's just make sure we survive to hear anyone use the term!"

"Okay, then. But we should work until help arrives. If nothing else, it'll be a distraction."

Cassie explored the alternatives. "Good idea. It's getting colder in here already. I'd rather be out and doing something than sitting here freezing my butt off."

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s suit-up.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“At least the survival suits still work,” Cassie said as she clambered down the retractable ladder at the stern hatch. “We can wear them inside if it gets too cold.”

“We should save the suit power packs until we have to use them,” Craig replied thoughtfully. “The way the electrical systems around here went screwy, I want to conserve as much energy as we can.”

“What could have caused the outage?” she asked, staring out into the semi-darkness of the ice floes. “It’s not as if an electrical storm is anything we haven’t encountered before without trouble. And that light just spooks me!”

“Gods know,” Craig replied. He stepped off the ladder, and then gingerly walked across the ice to the edge of the hole they had melted with the plasma cannon. “We’ll ask Doc Maguire when we get back. She has an answer -- or a theory -- for everything.”

Cassie followed slowly, her gaze drawn oft and anon to the eerie glow that surrounded them. As she neared the edge of the hole, she moved more cautiously, feeling with her feet for the first warning signs of cracking. Nothing moved; the partially melted ice seemed solid. Some way out in the black water, she saw the dark shape of the errant drone. No longer glowing, it wallowed slowly in time to the surge of the ocean, seemingly quite inert.

Craig stood with his fists on his hips and glared at it.

“Look at the bloody thing!” he said. “You’d think it had nothing to do with all this!”

“Never mind,” Cassie said irritably, suddenly sick of it all. “Let’s get a line on the blasted thing and tow it in.”

“We’ll need the boat,” Craig said. “You get the line from the winch; I’ll unpack the inflatable.”



They worked quickly. Cassie unreeled the heavy-duty mono-polymer line from the bow-mounted winch and dragged the hook to the water's edge. Craig unrolled the smaller of their two inflatable boats and triggered the gas canister. The boat inflated quickly, and she returned to help him slide it over the ice to a natural slope that led down to the water.

"Who goes out to the drone?" she asked. She sensed his grin behind the muffler covering his lower face, and he put his hand behind his back.

"Okay, best of three," she said, smiling reluctantly. *Bless you, Craig, for keeping things light. Do you know how nervous I am?*

They played scissors-paper-stone until Cassie won.

"I'll take the boat," she said, and climbed in.

"Are you sure?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes. You're the strongest, so you can guide the cable."

Before they launched, she checked the motor. A small green light glowed steadily.

"At least this is okay," she said with relief.

"You've got the paddle under the thwart, just in case," he said.

"I'd hate to be up any creek without a paddle," she said, smiling. "Okay, lover, launch when ready."

Craig braced himself against the stern of the boat. "Go steady. Watch those floes."

"Yes, dear."

The synthetic rubber slid easily down the ice and splashed into the water. Keeping her booted feet clear of the small amount that slopped over the blunt bows, Cassie took the cable hook from Craig and attached it to the stern cleat.

"Be careful!" he said, concern etched in his handsome features.

Cassie smiled and pulled his face down to hers. Tugging aside their mufflers, she gave him a deep kiss. His arms enfolded her, and for that one moment, the world and her troubles

faded. Cassie's breasts ached, and she longed for the whole cold, miserable experience to be over, so they could go to bed, make love for hours, and forget the dangers.

Eventually, she pulled away, holding Craig by the hands as she stared up into his eyes. "Looks like we'll need another rain-check." She laughed. "Damn, but you make me hot enough to melt this ice, boy!"

He kissed her quickly on the lips before pulling his mask back into place. "Once we fix this mess, I'm not letting you out of bed for days, lover! But right now, we'd better get working."

Cassie turned back to the task at hand. The motor soon propelled her out to the drone at a slow but steady rate. Small semi-submerged floes bounced and caromed off the tough hull of the little boat as it lifted and dropped in the gentle ocean surge. Cassie peered over the side. Even the water had taken on a soft, violet phosphorescence. A line from an ancient poem by the English poet Lord Tennyson slid into her mind, a poem taught her long ago by her uncle in the quieter days of her childhood in New Madurai.

*"Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,*

*'til last, a Ninth one,*

*Gathering half the deep,*

*And full of voices, slowly rose,*

*And plunged, roaring,*

*And all the wave was a flame..."*

A loud bump as the hull rebounded off a large floe brought her back to the present, and she resolved to concentrate on the steering. She didn't need Craig's shouted injunction to watch where she was going.

Soon she reached the drone. It lay quietly as she slowed the boat until it thumped gently alongside. The drone's hull radiated an odd warmth against the exposed part of her face as she reached out to attach the hook to the tow loop. She tugged the cable a couple of times to

make sure it was secure, then turned and waved to Craig, who waited on the distant shore. “Ready!”

His reply was lost in a sudden roar, a noise so loud it battered all her senses until her head reeled with pain. Through blurred eyes she saw him point urgently at something behind her. Spinning clumsily on the seat, she turned. A kilometer away, the pack ice was surging up and breaking apart, as if a gigantic plow was gouging a furrow -- straight toward her.

Desperately, she fired up the motor and set it to full speed, forgetting the drone, forgetting everything in the blind need to reach somewhere solid, someplace to take cover, even the illusory solidity of the ice.

She was halfway across the hole when she felt the boat lurch then shoot upwards like an elevator. The ice dropped away, and she saw Craig for a brief instant, staring up at her open-mouthed, and then the boat tipped and she fell into the water.

### Chapter Three

Ice-cold water slapped Cassie across the face as she plunged deep into the sea, and she fought the instinct to gasp. Keeping her mouth and eyes resolutely shut, she endured the swirling, roaring chaos of the arctic water until she felt the survival suit's automatic life-preserver function snap on.

She spun and twisted, lungs straining, caught in the grip of fierce currents until the cold and light suddenly intensified and she opened her eyes to find herself on the surface once more. All around her, huge waves broke the ice floe into hundreds then thousands of pieces, smashing them like china plates. A massive iceberg, trailing great reams of St. Elmo's Fire, surfed down a mile-high breaker to crash in white ruin onto the peninsula. The roar of its death filled the air until she thought her eardrums would burst.

Of Craig and the ATV, there was no sign.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eventually, the ocean calmed, the waves dropping to a moderate swell dotted with ice where once had been unending white. The horrible violet light had gone.

Cassie endured. She had little choice. Amidst her terror, she again gave heart-felt thanks to the wise folks on the colonial Council who had opted for the expensive all-terrain survival suits. The heating mesh kept her warm; the lining kept her dry. A transparent, flexible mask pulled from a pocket in the hood protected her eyes. A glance at the temperature read-out told her more eloquently than words that she would have died within moments of falling into the arctic water without the suit.

Over her left breast, a small white light shone hopefully, there to guide any rescuers to her location. High above her floated an orange metallic-foil balloon, tethered to a point near her waist. The foil acted as a radar reflector; the suit manufacturers claimed it was detectable out to fifty kilometers, even under storm conditions. Once it detected a search radar, a circuit would cut in to broadcast an automatic mayday and radio beacon. She sent up a silent prayer the manufacturers were right in their claims.

She floated on her back, limbs relaxed and outstretched, rocking gently in the swell as she stared up at the night sky. Constellations only moderately different from those of Earth hung far above the wisps of stratocumulus that drifted there. It was all so peaceful, it seemed unreal.

“Craig,” she whispered, her throat tightening at the thought of his death. Could he be dead? How she had survived the crushing, grinding ice she would never know. The ATV was armored like a tank. If Craig had got back inside in time, he would stand an excellent chance. If...

A coldness more bitter than that of the ocean gripped her heart as she thought of her lover’s death. The prospect of never seeing him again brought tears to her eyes, tears that mingled and froze with the ocean spray on her cheeks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig punched the dead holodisplay and swore vehemently. Outside, the ocean bed lay tranquil, the dark sand undisturbed seemingly for years until the abrupt arrival of the ATV.

Flopping back into the driver's seat, he glared at the quiet water for a long while before picking up the recorder he'd recovered from the upturned mess in the science shack.

"ATV *Bushwacker*, emergency log number one," he said, his voice husky with strain. "I'm now at the bottom of the sea. All power except emergency back up is out. It's been thirty minutes since I lost Cassie..." He paused and swallowed the lump in his throat. "Gods know how I managed to get into the vehicle in time, before it tipped off the floe and went under. I saw Cassie in the boat. I hope she...she held on, that she survived."

He paused, and then continued in a firmer voice. "The strange power outage shows no sign of coming to an end. I've just checked the power plant. Everything looks undamaged, but the whole thing is inert. Life support is down, and I can't activate the A-grav unit. Hell, I haven't even enough power to blow the emergency tanks and surface. Whatever that storm was, it's dangerous. If I don't...make it, I hope someone finds this and takes warning." He cracked a bitter smile. "I joked with Cassie that it would be called the 'Lowell-O'Neill class storm.' I'll leave it to others to decide if we get that honor.

"The weird purple phosphorescence seems to have left the water, at least at this depth. I'm glad. Maybe it means whatever caused the outage has gone and the power can be restored before the emergency reserve gives out. All the instruments are down, but I estimate I have only two hours before power failure becomes total."

A faint grating sound rang through the hull and he paused, and then switched off the machine. Peering through the windshield, he saw the cable from the winch rising vertically to a point somewhere above; the grating noise was caused by it rubbing on the hull. By twisting his head up and around, Craig could look directly upwards. A hundred meters or so above, he could see the shape of the drone, still attached to the cable and floating like a balloon in the current. A small orange navigation light on its hull winked on and off, piercing the ocean's gloom.

The sight gave him an idea.

Within minutes he had pulled a hard-suit from the store, suited up, and made his way to the airlock. The heating mesh activated as the cold water rushed in and rose swiftly over his head until the compartment was full. Popping the hatch, Craig floated out into the wine-dark ocean. The pressure squeezed him and his ears popped until he compensated by swallowing repeatedly. He checked the depth gauge on the wrist unit. Only two hundred and twenty meters down. The slow, tortuous plunge to the seabed had felt much further. If worst came to worst, he could surface, yet he was reluctant to abandon the ATV.

“Although the Council will be sure to recover it!” he muttered.

It took a few minutes to cross ‘round to the front of the vehicle, then a few minutes more to begin reeling in the floating drone using the manual crank on the winch. The small light blinked continuously, reassuring him as he worked. He needed that power.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie slept. It was easy, once the sea had settled further; the slow, even swell rocked her to sleep. She drifted slowly, further and further out onto the world-girdling ocean, drawn on small currents and eddies hither and yon until she had traveled several kilometers from her shipwreck.

Strange dreams flitted through her mind, of voices from the deep calling her name, her mother’s face from when she had seen her last. A battle above some far-flung planet had taken that dear life years before.

A small wave slopped across her face, waking her with a start. Wiping the salt water from the mask, she looked up to see Eurydice, blue evening star and companion world of Orpheus, riding high in the sky above her. Straggling clouds drifted across the firmament -- clouds tinged with an odd violet glow.

“Oh, no!” she whispered.

The sky filled with incredible speed, great rolling masses of darkly glowing cumulus that bore down upon her with the weight of doom. Pushed by the rising wind, the sea began to surge with greater power. Helpless, she struggled in the grip of the deep.

*“Wave after wave, each mightier than the last...”*

Violet light tinted the cresting foam as the unearthly storm closed upon her from all directions.

*“‘til last, a Ninth one...”*

The wind roared and howled as a huge breaker rose up and up, filling her limited world beyond all reason.

*“Gathering half the deep...”*

The cacophony terrified her as she stared up into the dull, glowing face of the ocean, the crest curling, spreading, lengthening like fingers as it reached for her.

*“And full of voices, slowly rose,*

*And plunged, roaring...”*

It fell upon her with the weight of worlds, crushing her deep, twisting her, robbing her of air and life. All around, the violet glow oozed and swelled.

*“And all the wave was a flame...”*



## Chapter Four

Power surged from the drone into the ATV's exhausted batteries. Craig sat back, breathing heavily, his body tingling from the frantic effort to connect the power couplings in time. He watched with deep relief as the holodisplay on the power plant flickered on and began the re-ignition process.

"ATV *Bushwacker*, emergency log entry number three," he said into the recorder. "As I hoped, the drone has recovered from the strange power loss that caused it to surface. Whatever the cause, it seems connected to the strange purple light we saw during the storm. I'm certain I can get this crate moving again; then I'm going looking for Cassie."

He clicked off the recorder and sat with it held loosely in his hands, staring at the bulkhead. Cassie was so strong in his mind, her face seemed to hover in the air before him.

"I guess I can allow myself a few moments to breathe, darling," he whispered to her image.

Twenty minutes later, the re-ignition sequence was complete and the ATV's small but potent piezo-fusion plant fired. From the science shack came multiple beeps and clicks as the computer came back on-line, recognized its existence, and ran several diagnostic checks on itself and then on the vehicle. The air-conditioning whirled into life; hot air blew from the

vents to counteract the chill, and the chemical scrubbers began to filter out the carbon dioxide build-up from the air. Craig noticed the effect on the stale air almost immediately; the lassitude which had affected him began to drop away, leaving him invigorated. Even so, he left the recovery sequence to the computer. It would manage the process much quicker than he could hope to do.

Having seen to the comfort of the crew, the computer began to check the surroundings and found things distinctly wet. A single pulse sounded as the sonar probed the surrounding water and the nature of the sea surface. Finding it clear of ice, the computer released an emergency beacon, unreeling it from a cell on the upper hull. It surged the two hundred and twenty meters and broke into the air. From the driving compartment, the communications suite squawked into life and the *Bushwacker* emitted a lusty yell for help.

The reply came almost immediately.

“ATV *Bushwacker*, ATV *Bushwacker*, this is *North Star*. Please respond!”

Craig ran into the driving compartment and activated the comm unit. “*North Star*, *North Star*, this is *Bushwacker* declaring an emergency...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Three hundred kilometers to the southeast, the survey vessel *North Star* surged through the ocean at her full speed of 35 knots. On the bridge, Doc Maguire elbowed the sensors orderly out of the way.

“Craig! This is the Doc,” she snapped. “What’s all this crud about a storm?”

From the corner of her eye, she saw the orderly look at the captain and roll his eyes, and she shot the man a warning glance. Captain Singh made a soothing motion to her with his hand as Craig’s reply came over the radio.

“Doc, I’ve lost Cassie!” Craig’s voice cracked with despair. “She’s out there somewhere in the ocean. I ... I think she may have drowned.”

Doc Maguire's hard expression softened instantly. "Dammit, boy, why didn't you say so in the first place?" She looked back at the captain, but he had already set a search in motion, so she turned to the comm unit once more. "Was she wearing her suit?"

"Yeah. We had to rescue a drone. She was in the boat when the ice suddenly broke apart. She...she went in."

Doc leaned closer to the microphone. "Craig, listen to me," she said softly. "Try not to worry; Cassie's got an excellent chance of surviving. Now, what about you? Can you get that very valuable piece of hardware back up to the surface, or do you need us to come and get you?"

"I can manage," he replied after a short pause. "We took some slight hull damage only. The A-grav is back on-line and the impellers seem okay, so *Bushwacker* should be seaworthy again. I'll surface and look 'round; if I can't find her in the vicinity, I'll head south. That seems to be the direction of the prevailing current. Cassie might be floating that way."

Doc found herself being gently eased aside by Captain Singh.

"Craig, this is Dalip," the captain said. "Okay, I hear you. We're southeast of you. We'll head west to the coast, then north. The satellites are now scanning the area, and I'm launching the aerodynes to widen our own search pattern. Somewhere between the two of us, we'll find Cassie alive and well."

"I hope so, Captain."

"Believe it!"

Beneath their feet, the ten-thousand-ton bulk of the *North Star* heeled and headed west at flank speed. Dalip smiled at Doc.

"Damn, but the big girl can crank it out when needed!" he said.

She smiled grimly. "Let's hope we're in time," she said, and turned back to the communications unit. "Craig, we're on our way."

\* \* \* \* \*

Katrina “Doc” Maguire remained on the bridge only a few minutes more before heading below to the laboratory. Sitting at her desk, she thought for a long moment before calling up a real-time global image of Orpheus on the holodisplay.

The world hung before her eyes, the point of view a composite of the Western Hemisphere taken from the small array of satellites swimming in space above her. A green-blue-gold striated orb, the atmosphere marbled with white clouds, Orpheus had earned the distinction of a Garden World the first time a ship had entered the star system forty years ago.

“Indicate location of ATV *Bushwacker*. Run display back in one-hour increments, five seconds between images,” she ordered the computer. “Stop at the reported time of the storm.”

The globe rolled to present a clearer image of the sub-arctic region, then turned counter-clockwise in small jerks as the computer called up the information from its archives. Cloud streams gathered together to form larger masses and swam upstream against the coriolis forces. The Arctic continent lay directly before her, a small, pulsing red dot off the coast of the hook-shaped eastern peninsula showing the location of the ATV.

The world turned as the hours went by, until the time of the accident. The skies around the site were clear. Doc turned her attention to the weather-front approaching the scene over the continent from the north. It was too far away to have played any part in the disaster that had befallen the small survey team.

“Then what the hell hit you, Craig?” she asked.

## Chapter Five

“Am I dead?”

“A valid question, Cassandra,” her mother replied in a lilting voice.

Cassie stood on nothing, surrounded by nothing. Nirvana; the Afterlife, if that was where she was, had no color or form at all.

“Things must be serious!” Cassie said in brittle tones, feeling as if she was hanging onto sanity by her fingertips. “You only called me Cassandra when you were cross, or if things were serious.”

“True!” Her mother’s soft chuckle came out of nowhere. “Wait a moment; I’ll just make things more comfortable...”

Cassie suddenly found herself standing on a beach from long ago, feeling the samskara fire warm the backs of her legs through the thin blue silk of her sari. Away to the south, the lights of Chennai were a faint glow in the sky beyond the headland; only a few kilometers distant, yet civilization and all its teeming multitudes seemed a world away from this quiet beach. Ahead of her, the full moon rose above the great sweep of the Bay of Bengal, its light casting a silver path over the little waves to her feet. Cassie felt she had but to step onto the light to be able to dance up the sky to that great orb.

Lucia Priyadarshini O'Neill looked at Cassie and grinned, her pretty Irish face pale in the light. Cassie stared back, realizing they were the same height, of the same slender but bosomy build. The lush green of her sari set off her mother's fine, titian blond hair, so different from Cassie's own crow-black locks. When they had last stood together on this beach, casting the ages-old ritual of samskara, Cassie had been only eight and her mother had been bound for the depths of space the next day. And now they were of an age.

"I brought you here because this was where we last had a serious talk," her mother explained with a half-smile. "It was one of the few times I got a word in without you exploding in my face, so it was!"

"What the hell happened over Fomor?" Cassie asked, the question leaping straight from her subconscious to her lips without checking with her mind.

"Oh! Like that, is it?" Her mother shrugged. "We were in high orbit, we got jumped, then hosed. It bears out what little I remember." She looked thoughtfully at Cassie. "The captain told me after we died that we never felt a thing, if that's what's worrying you."

"Of course it bloody well is!" Cassie fumed, gathering her skirts about her legs and sitting on the sand. Too late she realized it was damp and stood up again hurriedly. "It hurt like hell when I heard you were dead. Then when I came to terms with it, I hoped and prayed to the gods you didn't suffer."

"I didn't." Lucia shrugged and grinned. "And I'm not exactly dead, so." She gestured around the beach. "This isn't so bad, is it?"

She stooped and helped Cassie brush the damp sand from her sari, an action Cassie remembered with a pang. Her mother had done just this when she was a girl, home and dirty from playing with the neighborhood children.

"What do you mean you're not dead?" Cassie demanded, distracted by the firm touch of her mother's hand. "How could anyone survive being shot out of space?"

"The same way you've survived being attacked and swallowed by *that*," her mother retorted and pointed out to sea -- or at least, where the bay should have been.

Instead of the moon-dappled water of the bay, Cassie saw a starry void, in which lay her adopted world of Orpheus. A huge, amorphous shape formed from cloud moved with amoebic slowness across the face of the Arctic Sea. The creature was the size of a small continent and glowed with an unhealthy purple light. Deep creases in the clouds seemed to gather the light into sharply defined rivers and streams that pulsed vein-like with an evil vitality.

"What is that?" she asked quietly, a sick dread settling in her stomach.

"I call it Nataraja, the Dancer at the End of Time," Lucia said somberly.

"Nataraja's a god, an aspect of Siva." Cassie waved at the creature. "How can that be a god? Where did it come from?"

"It's immensely powerful; it can dance across the universe, shape worlds...and it finds humanity amusing. All the qualities needed for godhood, I'd say. As to where it came from..." Lucia wrinkled her nose. "I have an idea, but nothing concrete yet."

Cassie looked at the glowing thing. "It swallowed me?"

"Completely, *acushla*."

"So how did I survive? How did *you* survive?"

"It was down to our Lazarus Chips."

"Our what?"

Lucia shrugged and waved her hand. The scene of Orpheus and the beast faded and the bay returned to lap softly upon the shore. "I had a computer nanocyte implant."

Cassie gaped. *Nanocytes*? The technology involved in constructing microscopic robots had been a hot potato since the last years of the twentieth century. Religious leaders and politicians had railed against it; scientists had come to blows over the wisdom of using it. It would be of immense benefit to mankind! Disease and pollution would be eradicated forever!

The nanocytes would get loose and turn the world into gray goop! Nothing would be safe! The debate had raged long and furious, until eventually the old United Nations had passed an edict forbidding the use of nanocytes anywhere on Earth or the moon. That ban had held, although rumors of violations abounded. When she had thought about the issue at all, Cassie always decided she was undecided about the whole concept. And now her own mother had admitted to being infected with the micro-machines.

“Aren’t those illegal?” she asked at last.

“What’s ever illegal, in time of war?” Lucia smiled. “The point is, selected Fleet officers with commander rank and above had them, especially us loonies in the intelligence branch. The nanocytes exist in a microscopic armored shell created by the computer, hidden somewhere about the brain, safe from all harm. Once activated, the computer stores a few strands of DNA from the host and downloads the neuro-pattern of their mind every five seconds. When the ship blew, my body was destroyed, but the chip kept enough of me safe from the radiation and vacuum exposure.”

“But your spirit, ghost, whatever, is sitting here in this unreal place, talking to me as if you’re still alive.” Cassie shook her head. “Either I’m a ghost, too, or I must be hallucinating!”

“Oh, this was unexpected, I’ll grant you that,” Lucia said. “I’m not sure what the official line on post-death survival is regarding those of us who had to use our chips. That kind of thing is way up the food chain from my humble rank.” She laid a gentle hand on Cassie’s arm. “But there’s more to life and death than science can imagine. Somehow, through this technology, we’ve been given the means to access the Afterlife -- and return.” She grinned. “We get another ride ‘round on the wheel of life. I have to admit, apart from the dying, it’s been great fun!”

“No kidding? So how come I have a Lazarus Chip?” Cassie demanded, her thoughts swirling. “I’m damn sure I would have remembered it being implanted!”



“Would you?” Lucia squeezed her arm gently. “Nanocytes, remember? Military-spec stuff, so. They could have been brushed on your skin, or sprayed on, or even just left on an object you’d handle. The point is, you have one, it was dormant until needed, and now it’s keeping you alive -- or, at least, not dead.”

“Oh, this is too much!” Cassie sank onto the sand again, disregarding the dampness. “Who would do such a thing to me?”

“Me, darling.” Lucia sank onto the sand and gracefully folded her legs in the lotus position. “There are some advantages to being a Fleet officer, especially in intelligence. I...obtained a nanopacket from a friend and stuck it to the last holochip I sent you, programmed to activate only to your DNA.” She smiled. “I’m glad to see it worked!”

Cassie felt numb. Then a surge of cold welled up inside her until her spine and ears tingled. *What the hell have you done to me, Mother?* Shock, horror, and sheer anger began to rage inside her mind. Her skin crawled, as she imagined the nanocytes would crawl through her bloodstream, invading every single cell of her body, doing the gods-knew-what to her.

“I can guess you’re upset right now,” her mother said softly, “but look at it like this. You can be injured or even destroyed, but you’ll never die permanently. You’ll never grow sick, no matter what bugs and poisons you come across in all of space.” Lucia laid her hand lightly on Cassie’s shoulder for a moment. “Cassandra, it’s possible that you and me, all of us with the implant, could be virtually immortal.”

“So I’m still down there, neither alive nor dead?” Cassie said eventually. The idea of immortality was just too big a concept to get her mind around just yet.

“You are, so. From what I gather, Orpheus is currently lacking the kind of creatures that like to eat human flesh, and the nanocytes will spread out through your system to stop your body’s bacteria from getting nasty.” Lucia waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. “Ah, physically, you’ll be fine. Once the computer senses survivable conditions around it once

more, it'll revive you. Until then, your id, or ego, or whatever, is floating in a kind of tethered state. Look closely at your foot."

Cassie looked. Against the dark sand, a faint shimmering line trailed from her left foot and away into the sea.

"That's your Silver Cord, the line that connects your soul to your body. When the time comes, it'll lead you back."

Cassie glanced at Lucia's left foot and saw the same luminous trail. "So, it's true; you're not entirely dead, either?"

"No." Lucia grimaced. "Somewhere on or above Fomor, there's a small parcel of me, maybe attached to the remains of my body, maybe not. It might be in orbit; it may have re-entered and hit ground somewhere by now. The trouble is, the nanocytes will begin the rebuilding process if the computer senses Earth-normal conditions. Space is out, of course; Fomor's mostly a desert. If no one finds that little packet and gets it to safety, I could be there forever."

"What about the Navy? Won't they look for you?"

"Fomor's off-limits after the Treaty. The Navy wouldn't violate the DMZ for a bunch of stiffs."

"I would!" Cassie said. "Treaty or no!"

"You're a good girl, Cass." Lucia biffed her arm. "It's good to see you grown up. Hopefully, your boyfriend will find you soon, and then you can come looking for me."

"You know about Craig?" Cassie asked, suddenly feeling very shy.

Lucia winked. "Hey! You'd be surprised at what we can see from the Afterlife!"

Cassie's face grew hot. "You were spying on us?"

"Only once," Lucia replied with a grin, "and that was enough. I do have a sense of discretion, I'll have you know!" Her expression turned thoughtful, then animated. "In fact, it's one way of helping him to find you. Imagine yourself with him, and you'll find you are!"

She clasped Cassie's hands. "If you love Craig deeply enough, melter-of-hearts; if he cares for you the same way, then it'll happen, and you can reach his thoughts. Help him to help you, Cassie. Tell him he needs to head east. Head east!"

Cassie looked away over the ocean, to the great orb of the moon riding above the shimmering waves. "I'll try," she whispered. "I'll try..."

## Chapter Six

Night had fallen over the sea. The horizon merged with the darkening sky until the ATV seemed to exist within a bubble of motion out of time. The spotlights had come on automatically with the gathering dark, the intense halogen beams picking out and freezing the small whitecaps directly ahead. Craig switched the headlights off. The electronic sensors would cope perfectly well without them, and his growing misery felt more at home in the dark. Only when the call came in from *North Star* did he reluctantly turn on the main light in the driving compartment.

Doc Maguire's image appeared in the holodisplay.

"There was no storm yesterday," she told him flatly, without preamble. "Nothing showed up on the download from the meteorological satellites. All the automated shore stations say the nearest weather front is only now approaching the area you were in."

"Then you don't believe me?" he asked, fists clenched.

"I do believe you, Craig," she said emphatically. "I magnified the image of the site. The ice pattern there has completely changed within the space of time covered by the event you described. Some icebergs and large ice sheets have vanished altogether. I'm saying that no storm caused that break-up."

“Then what the hell hit us?”

Doc’s tiny holographic image shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “Unknown, but there is one thing I tried,” she said eventually. “When I fed the ATV’s sensor data covering that period into my computer, I found they were picking up an unusual sub-current of electrical activity. It approximates to the neural frequencies found in the brain, with some subtle differences. It was barely enough to register, and the *Bushwacker’s* computer wasn’t set to alert you to it, but my computer filters here on *North Star* picked it out. When I reset the satellites for the same wavelength, I found the whole area around that peninsula was rotten with it.”

“What does it mean?” Craig asked.

Doc shrugged. Her stern features showed more emotion than he’d ever seen.

“I’m...not sure,” she said at last. “I’ve been on seventeen worlds in my career, seen all kinds of wonders, met all kinds of phenomena. But this has me beat.”

A chill ran up Craig’s spine at her words. If the Doc had to admit she was baffled, then life had turned really serious.

A schematic popped up in his display, downloaded from the *North Star*. It showed a purple patch covering a wide area a hundred kilometers east of the peninsula.

“The phenomenon is still around,” Doc said, a note of worry tainting her voice. “This was taken a few minutes ago after I re-calibrated the met-sats to concentrate on that wavelength. As you can see from the side-bar, whatever it is appears to be gaining strength.”

“Is it a threat?”

“If it had anything to do with Cassie’s disappearance, I’d say a provisional ‘yes’ to that.”

“Is there any sign of Cassie on the satellite feed?”

“Nothing,” Doc replied somberly. “Their sensory definition is more than sharp enough to pick out a human being. That in itself gives me cause to wonder.”

She didn't expand on her thoughts, looking away to one side instead as she checked something. "Dalip has sent a couple of drones to scout the area. Given what happened to your drone, we're being careful. They've got strict instructions to scout the edges of the zone, and to back off if the energy shows signs of coming their way. Needless to say, we're not going to risk any living person on this mission."

"Do you think Cassie is in the middle of that?"

"Craig, seriously, I doubt it. Our data show the currents for that region set southward at this time of year. She's still more likely to be between you and us. We'll keep coming your way. Thomas and Jan are flying the aerodynes, sweeping ahead and to either side of our course. You know how good they are. We will find her, Craig. Believe that..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Many hours later, dawn broke over Orpheus, coloring the eastern sky in wild shades of lemon and crimson. *Bushwacker* ploughed manfully through the short, choppy seas, the ducted water jets pushing her along southward at a steady ten knots. Her blunt, boat-shaped bows thrust the water aside in bursts of spray that reached to the observation dome high above the control deck.

Craig sat beneath the dome, feeling the first warmth of the rising sun on his left cheek as he stared out over the sea in search for a sign, any clue as to Cassie's whereabouts. The sensors would be much more efficient in finding her; all bar the necessary navigation and steering controls were slaved to the task. A repeater module in the dome gave him steady updates. Yet as the hours passed, Craig still held vigil, sweeping the far horizon, his eyes and love and fervent hope the only human attributes he could bring to bear.

The first white-hot flush of anguish had subsided to a hot, heavy ache around his heart. He loved Cassie, wanted to be with her as often as possible in the active, arduous life of the young colony. They had such plans! They would travel among the human-occupied worlds when their contracts had expired. Then, when that palled, back to Orpheus and a farm of

their own in the hills far beyond the spreading development of Home. Some livestock, machinery when they could afford it. And children. Plenty of children.

“I’m both Indian and Irish,” Cassie had explained when he’d raised the question, one lazy night in their apartment many weeks before they had set out for the Arctic. “Both races were born to love kids, so my genes have got me coming and going!”

The Council tried to be helpful; once a relationship seemed well established, they did their best to ensure the couple was given the same assignment wherever possible. The only drawback was the need to use the limited skill pool to best advantage. Luckily, he and Cassie had specialties that coincided enough to make the enforced absences infrequent. But nothing, *nothing*, prepared him for her sudden loss.

Cassie’s holopic nestled in his breast pocket. It hurt too much to look at it, but he wanted it close, as if the picture could bridge the awful gap that lay between them. It was his favorite image of her, taken not long after they had become lovers. She had been standing under an Orphean-adapted cedar tree growing on the grounds of their apartment complex, shaded from the noon sun. One slender hand rested lightly on the trunk as she gazed into the camera, the tip of her tongue touching her even white teeth as she laughed at some silly joke he’d made. So alive, tender and loving; in the heady first flush of love. He touched the pocket in remembrance. To think a boy from downtown Wellington could meet someone so wonderful amongst the stars of the high frontier.

A larger-than-usual wave slapped the ATV, making the hull ring and bringing him back to the present with a jerk. He gazed mournfully at the ocean. Doc Maguire’s last update had him confused, and his troubled mind stirred the data she’d given him like a tongue returning to a sore tooth.

“Gods, Cass!” He moaned softly. “I hope Doc was right and we will find you!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Why don’t you believe that, Craig?” Cassie asked softly, coming up behind him. Although she couldn’t feel anything physically, she rested her hand on his shoulder, pressed her breasts against his back, willing him to sense her touch. He just stared straight ahead through the water-speckled glass, and she let her hand fall.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she said with a sigh. “How do I get into your head? I could always read your thoughts before now, my darling. You were like an open book to me.”

Craig yawned and stretched, one up-flung arm passing straight through her. Cassie flinched automatically, and then shook her head ruefully. “Guess you can’t touch me if I can’t touch you.”

*Bushwacker* rose and fell on another wave, and Cassie found herself swaying instinctively.

“Oh, this is stupid! I hope you’re heading in the right direction, at least.” She glanced through the dome at the rising sun, then at the compass reading. “No, it couldn’t be that easy. Why are you heading south, Craig? My body’s over to the east, darling.” She forced her mind to try to touch his. Craig merely rubbed his temples, as if feeling the onset of a headache.

Cassie slumped and shook her head. “There has to be a way!” she said, exasperated.

Craig pinched the bridge of his nose, and then looked up briefly through the dome. “Oh, Cassie!”

“You can hear me?” she exclaimed, rising eagerly.

“I’m sorry, girl, I can’t keep awake much longer. Haven’t had much sleep lately. I’m gonna get my head down, and let *Bushwacker* guide herself for an hour or two.”

Cassie watched as he rose and descended the short ladder and passed through into the sleeping cabin.



“Sleep, Craig,” she said softly. “Perchance to dream! I’ll find a way to your thoughts then, I know I will.”

He stroked the thin coverlet on the bed and stared down in reflection, remembering, she was sure, their last time together.

“I’ll find you, Cass,” he whispered. He drew back the cover and climbed heavily into the bunk. Burying his face in the pillow, he inhaled deeply. She flushed with pleasure at the thought of the scent of their last lovemaking still lingering there in the fabric.

Sleep came slowly to his troubled mind. Cassie hovered over him, watching intently for the moment he began to dream.

“Come on, come on!” she urged, clenching her fists.

His eyes began to flutter beneath the lids. *There!* She willed herself into his mind, and...

...found herself in the spaceport lounge at Willott’s Landing, waiting to board the shuttle up to the *Sundowner*. The proportions of the room were all wrong. It was recognizable as the lounge, but it was much bigger than she remembered. *Or maybe Craig remembers it this way*, she thought. *This is a dreamscape...*

Beyond the sealed windows, the twin rings of Lemberg glittered like arcs of gold dust trailing across the blue-black sky. Somewhere up there, the colonial transport waited to take them to their new world. Around her, a handful of other mission specialists bound for Orpheus chatted quietly amongst themselves. She recognized a few familiar faces, but one person was missing.

She remembered. He had been late, as usual. She turned and found Craig standing a little way behind her, staring at her with a mixture of longing and despair.

“This is where we first met!” she said softly. “What did I do back then? Ah, yes!”

She flashed him a smile and walked over, thrusting out her hand. “Hi! I’m Cassie O’Neill. You must be Craig Lowell?”

Craig loomed over her, his handsome, boyish features lit in a smile. *Did I really appear this short to him*, she wondered ruefully. She glanced down. *And a sari? I was wearing a jump suit, like everyone else!*

"Is this how you saw me from the first?" she asked him, picking up a fold of the gorgeous red silk and letting it drop. "Your little poppadom popsi?" Annoyance mingled with amusement in her mind.

"Oh, no! I fell in love with you at first sight!" He spread his hands and shook his head in wonder. "You looked so exotic; I could picture you in this."

"I haven't worn a sari since leaving Chennai, Craig."

"I'd love to see you wear one; they look so beautiful." He shook his head slowly. "Guess that's not going to happen, now you're dead."

She looked up at him, and laid her fingertips gently on his lips.

"Craig, I'm not dead," she said softly. "Something got me, yes, but it failed to kill me. I'm still out there, *jaan*, in the sea. All alone..."

She shivered, then steeled herself. "And you're heading the wrong way, you big lump! Go east, Craig. I'm east of where you are."

"Doc said the currents would take you south," he said. "We're combing the whole area for you."

"You won't find me there, Craig. Darling, the creature, the storm, whatever it was, took me *east*."

Around her, the world began to blur at the edges. The people began to fade and, desperately, she clasped him in her arms, shaking him. "Craig! You're waking up! I can't hold on in your mind whilst you're awake. Go east, Craig! Go east!"

\* \* \* \* \*

“East!” Craig sat up in the bunk, staring into the muted night-light of the accommodation section. Cassie’s touch had been so real, the look in her eyes more intense than any image of her he’d dreamed before. For a giddy moment, even her perfume seemed to linger in his nostrils.

Hurriedly, he scrambled out of the damp covers and into his pants, before dashing into the driving compartment. A glance at the chronometer showed the time to be early morning.

“Can’t call Doc,” he said softly, blanching at the thought of disturbing that formidable person. “But Dalip...”

The communications unit took his message and transmitted it. Even as the microwave up-link shook hands with the satellite, Craig had changed course. The *Bushwacker’s* blunt bows turned east...

## Chapter Seven

“You are mine, little human!”

Cassie found herself in a wood-paneled chamber, standing within the ‘U’ formed by three stalls of plain, dark oak. In the one to her left sat a row of twelve men, faces shadowed, all clad in somber black with starched white collars and tall, black, broad-brimmed hats. To her front sat a figure alone, lit by a shaft of weak light from a tall lancet window. A robe of rusty black, the right cuff heavy with snuff; a stiff, white ruffed collar, and above it a heavy, dusky, glabrous face, slick with perspiration, framed by a heavy, gray horsehair wig. Thick lips parted to sneer at her, and she knew he’d been the one who’d spoken.

Her nose tickled. The air was heavy with the smell of old wood, dust, and leather books and thick, brooding menace.

“What the...? Who the hell are you?” She demanded of the lone figure.

“Silence!” The figure rose in its seat, radiating anger, knuckles resting on the bench before it. “This court will ask the questions! You stand accused of witchcraft! How do you plead?”

“Witchcraft?” Cassie scoffed. “You must be joking!”

“Then what is this arcane ritual, but the work of sorcery?”

A wave of the creature's fat hand and a picture formed in the air. Cassie recognized her eight-year-old self on the beach with her mother, casting the samskara ritual of long ago.

"That's our religion! It's Neo-Hinduism!"

"A ritual spell cast to appease false gods, good people!" The figure growled in an aside to the twelve silent men.

She squinted at them. They were unmoving; they didn't even appear to be alive.

The gooseberry eyes turned on her again. "And do you deny that you are alive when you should be dead?" The tone was silky.

"I don't know what I am just now." Cassie took a deep breath to calm her nerves, then exhaled slowly. "Look..."

"You were tested! Set to drown as a witch, and you floated! You survived!" The judge growled. "A pure sign of guilt!"

The light through the window intensified and took on a purple taint. Cassie stared at the judge.

"Are you the creature which tried to kill me?" she demanded. "Why? What's your problem?"

"Damn you and your questions! I will not suffer your insolence!" it thundered. "Your sin is manifest! Confess! Confess!"

"Get lost, creep!" she replied with a curl of her lip as she turned about, seeking a door and escape from the madness. The wood panels were now plain stone walls, surrounding her. There were no visible exits.

"Let me out of here or there'll be trouble!" she said through clenched teeth.

"Confess!"

"Shove it where the sun don't shine!"

“Then your contempt for this court and your lack of a plea is taken as confession in itself.” The being growled. It turned to the shadowy figures of the jury. “How find you, good people?”

As one, the jurors leapt to their feet, fingers stabbing at Cassie. Their features were identical to the judge’s.

“Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!” They roared in unison.

“I haven’t time for this shit!” she screamed back at them.

“Guards, seize her!” the judge said with relish, rising in his seat and gesturing.

Two hulking figures, man-shaped but not human, emerged from the gloom of the corners. They advanced on her, clawed hands outstretched. Purple fire crackled over their leathery skin.

Furious and frightened, Cassie turned her eyes to the wall at the back of the courthouse, where a door would be had it been real. But none of this was real, so why shouldn’t there be a door if she willed it? She concentrated, and saw the Silver Cord. It led straight to a blank wall at the rear of the court.

The guards were almost upon her when a door flickered into being, right where her cord touched it. Tall, paneled, set in a wooden pointed arch, dark oak -- escape! Cassie ran for it and hurtled through, not caring what lay beyond.

The judge’s scream of anger was music to her ears.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Craig, where the hell are you going?”

Doc Maguire’s question was loaded with barely contained anger.

“Cassie was in my mind all last night, Doc,” Craig replied, spreading his hands. “Look, I’m convinced she’s somewhere east of here, and I’m going to find her.”

“Craig, your course is set straight into the middle of that anomaly,” Doc said. “I’m not sure what the hell that thing is, but you’re to stay clear of it, understand? You won’t find Cassie there, Craig, and we don’t want to lose you, too!”

“You won’t.”

“Why did you take it into your head to turn?” Doc asked, almost plaintively. “We’ll cover much more sea if you’d held your course.”

“It’s...difficult to explain,” he said softly. “I had a hunch she’s this way.”

“A hunch?” Doc’s face took on a perplexed expression mingled with exasperated fondness. “Craig, you scored low on your PSI tests. I’ve seen seaweed with higher PSI-cognitive functions than you!”

“Gee, thanks,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t be right now and then.”

“No, you’re right, it doesn’t. By the law of averages, I guess even a PSI-putz like you can be right sometimes. There’s nothing we can do to persuade you to change your mind?”

“No, Doc; I’m sorry.” Craig blushed.

“Well...” she said. “I think you’d better get this out of your system. Dalip’s holding to our present course, but he’ll head east when we reach the point where you began to deviate. I hope you’re right, Craig. For Cassie’s sake, I just hope you’re right!”

Her face flicked out of the holodisplay, and Craig swung his chair to look out over miles of empty ocean.

“So do I,” he said softly. “Oh, Cass! Where are you?”

## Chapter Eight

“I’m here!”

Cassie stepped into the ring of firelight in the meadow above Athenry, her summer skirt rising and floating with the breeze. The others greeted her with friendly smiles, and Thomas Ho rose to take her hand and guide her to a seat on a tussock of grass. Jan Hughes looked up long enough to nod. She was in close discussion with a fiddler, whom Cassie didn’t recognize, as his face was turned away from the firelight.

“Glad to see you, my dear girl!” Thomas (“never Tom!”) said in his rumbling bass voice, his handsome Polynesian face creasing into a broad, white-toothed smile. The loops and swirls of the bioluminescent tribal tattoo on his cheeks and throat pulsed with a warm orange and sparkling blue in response to his mood. “How was the journey?”

“Rough!” Cassie replied absently. A small nugget of pain had settled behind her eyes, and she pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Ah, you can relax now,” Jan said. She grinned, waving a chicken leg. “And is this not the best spot for it?”

Cassie looked around. The slopes of the hill loomed behind, the sweet smell of heather mingling with the intense green of the moss on the breeze; a cow lowed mournfully, and she



could just make out the dark bulk of a byre away to her left, beyond the narrow, overgrown lane. Below and far away, the waters of Galway Bay shimmered under the stars.

“Fire, again,” she said softly. “First Chennai, then here...”

“What’s that, Cassie?” Thomas asked.

“Hmm? Oh, I seem to be making a journey between fires tonight,” she said, feeling distinctly odd. “I saw my mother, then Craig, then all of you. My mom’s dead, but not dead, if you see what I mean; then I turn up here when I know we’re on Orpheus. It’s all very strange.” She peered at the fiddler. “Who’s that?”

“Why, Craig, of course!” Jan said with a grin. She touched the man on the shoulder. “Craig? C’mon, I’d like you to meet somebody.”

Craig stood up and came over, skirting around the fire. Cassie’s heart leapt when she saw his handsome face. He stopped and grinned down at her.

“Hi!” he said.

“But you can’t be here!” she whispered, standing to face him. “You were still in Washington when we had this party. We didn’t meet until Lemberg!”

“Well, I’m here now.” He reached up and gently touched her cheek. “Cassie, my darling, you talked of this last night you spent on old Earth so often, it was like I was here. Don’t you remember telling me?” He gestured around at the others, who were smiling but looking away politely. “How can you blame me if I dream of this?”

“But it’s all so real!” she said, looking around. “There’s no way you could get all the detail just from my description. I’m not that good a storyteller.”

“Yet we’re here.” His smile grew broader. “And even if you’re lost on the ocean, and even if I’m hurting because of losing you, just dreaming in such mad detail...why shouldn’t we enjoy this time?”

Cassie looked up at him in wonder, and then she lost all doubts. Her laugh split the sky.

“Yes!” she cried, grabbing his hands. “Why the hell not?”

They walked away from the others, their figures and the fire a tableau that faded into the blue of gathering night and distance. Their feet swept through long grass and heather and bracken, until they found a clearing, and then Craig's lips were on hers.

Falling to the ground, cushioned by soft Irish grass, her hands reaching up to clasp his head and draw it down to kiss him on the lips. Tongues sliding past teeth to meet and merge and twine in moist union, as fingers sought and found fastenings to slip buttons and rip Velcro with a giggle at the sudden noise, soon suppressed by rising ardor.

A warm hand sliding inside her blouse to cup and squeeze her breast, her nipple hardening to full ripeness in a matter of moments. Pressing her firm flesh into his hand, as she reached down along his body to his denims and inside his belt. A soft gasp against her cheek as her hand closed about Craig's shaft, then his kisses redoubling in eagerness, his chest rising and falling against her as he fumbled with the hem of her dress, pulling it up, and up.

A hot hardness against her thigh, then against her crotch, a hardness meeting the soft moistness of her yoni. Thighs spreading, opening, her back arching as he slid inside, gasping as he entered her unto the last hair, his balls smacking lightly against her butt.

Then slow, rhythmic lovemaking, hot belly to belly, his pubic hair lightly scratching her shaved smoothness, matching each thrust with one of her own, quickening, quickening. Craig's breath hot and gusty on her neck, his head buried in her shoulder as his hips and thick cock worked that old magic inside her.

Her legs coming up to clamp about his hips, drawing him harder against her, ankles locking, her own passions rising, rising, meeting his, her juices flowing, wetting her crotch, trickling down over her anus to the sweet meadow grass.

Breathing hard now, his shaft sliding deep, pushing her cervix, and withdrawing almost to the point of falling out, then plunging deep to much deeper.

“Oh! Oh! Ooohhhh!” She began to keen, her yoni clamping around his cock as his breath came in hoarse ragged gasps and grunts, until...

“AAAAaaaHHHHhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Ooohh godddsssss!”

Spurting, spending, deep inside her, flooding her with his cum, her body vibrating like a violin string on high C, resonating with love and affection and a deliciously decadent feeling.

Cassie held him close, their perspiration meeting and mingling in a sticky embrace, until their breathing settled and his cock gently softened inside her until it slipped free amidst a cocktail of their fluids. She stared up with deep contentment at the stars above Ireland.

“When did you ever learn to play the violin?” she asked him drowsily.

## Chapter Nine

“I’m getting damned worried about this!”

At Doc’s words, Dalip looked up from the holoscreen. “I can’t say it makes me feel better to hear that you’re beginning to worry, Doc,” he said with a thin-lipped smile.

Doc stood at the door to the starboard lookout platform, her gaze fixed on the horizon. She didn’t answer, simply stared straight ahead, the breeze ruffling her short-cropped hair. Dalip glanced at the readout again. The wind was rising out there. “Have you come up with a theory about this phenomenon?”

“I’d have told you if I had!” Doc passed her hand over her eyes in a weary gesture. She stepped inside, and the door closed automatically behind her. Coming up beside Dalip, Doc laid a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, Dalip. I haven’t slept properly since this whole thing began.”

“It’s okay, Doc. We all want to find Cassie and get away from here. At least, we’ll get away as far as a safe observation range. We’ll get plenty of readings for you.”

Doc smiled, then chuckled. “Oh, you know the way to a woman’s heart.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Above Cassie, the night sky was deepening. Thousands of stars shone down peacefully on Ireland, their glittering beauty occulted only by slowly drifting high cirrus. From the direction of the fire came the sound of Thomas strumming his guitar, a slow, reflective melody that became the introduction to “The Fields of Athenry.” Then Jan began to sing the age-old song of departure, her pleasant coloratura soprano lifting high in the still air and carrying over the meadow.

Craig lay peacefully by Cassie’s side, his head resting on her breast, fingers toying idly in her clasp.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Cassie whispered, not wanting to break the spell.

“I’m just happy, being with you,” he replied softly. “I miss you, Cass.”

“I miss you, *acushla*. You’ll find me, or I’ll find you. We’ll always come when the other’s in need.”

“Even beyond death?” he asked, rising on one elbow. His face was lost in the darkness, but she knew he was looking down at her.

“Yes, but I’m not dead, Craig,” she replied, reaching up to stroke his hair. “Hold on to that thought, that belief. You’ll find me soon. I feel it in my bones.”

“This is more than just a dream,” he said, sounding perplexed. He ran his hand through the grass. “I’ve never had a dream this intense.”

“I’m in your mind, Craig.” Her lips twitched and her voice carried the smile. “I hope I’ve been there since we met! But this is...some kind of reality, even though I’m also out there, floating in the ocean. I drifted quite a way from where the boat overturned. Then that storm reappeared. It’s some kind of being, some monster.” Her voice grew soft. “It killed me, Craig. I think it wanted my soul, but it can’t hold onto me.”

“That weird storm’s a monster?” His voice took on an urgency it had lacked in the sleepy aftermath of lovemaking. “Cassie, you need to tell me! I’ve got to pass a warning on to Doc; we’re all heading toward it.”

She cocked her head; her heart gave a sudden lurch of dread. "What?"

"Doc found an anomalous reading on the satellite readouts right after you vanished. It's far out to sea from where you fell from the boat."

Cassie listened with growing astonishment as he told her the news. "That has to be the creature!" She sat up. "Craig, it fits!"

She told him of the judge, the trial and escape. "I must be irritating it like a bone in its throat. And I can tell you about it! You're convinced now this isn't a dream?"

"I'm...becoming used to the idea," he said softly.

"Tell Doc and the others to be careful! It looks and feels incredibly powerful."

"I will, but I'm not sure they'll believe me."

"You've got to try. Keep heading east, Craig, and you'll find me. I'm technically dead, but I have something inside me that'll let me live again."

*"What?"*

She was about to explain when she looked up beyond the silhouette of his head and gasped. Far overhead, the soft streamers of cloud had become tinged with purple...

\* \* \* \* \*

With a dying whine of ducted fans, the aerodyne undercarriage settled on the fantail landing platform of the *North Star*. Jan Hughes settled back in her seat and rubbed her eyes as the alphanumeric display in her mind ran through the vehicle shutdown procedures.

"The Fields of Atherny?" Why am I thinking of that?" she asked herself aloud as the aerodyne rolled forward to engage the deck trolley. It locked on to the nose wheel and began drawing the aircraft into the hangar.

"What's that, Jan?" The sensor operator's voice came through her communications link.

She looked up at the *North Star's* towering superstructure and found the operator looking down at her from the flight control pod. "Nothing, Harvey. Just got a tune running

through my mind. An old song I sang before we left Ireland, prior to traveling here.” Her throat tightened with emotion. “Cassie was with us ...”

“We’ll find her, Jan. Be sure of that,” Harvey said, his tone sympathetic.

Jan pulled off her flight helmet as the aerodyne rolled into the hangar and the umbilical hoses swung out to tend to the aircraft, connecting it to the ship’s power and data-system and pumping fuel into the near-empty tanks.

“I’ll hold to that thought,” she said. “How’s Craig bearing up?”

There was a pause. “*Bushwacker’s* computer says he’s asleep.”

“Asleep?” Jan popped the seal on the cockpit. The clamshell canopy swung open and she climbed out. *How the hell can he sleep if Cassie’s lost out there? I love Cass like a sister, so Craig should be going through hell!* Biting down on the uncharitable thought, she asked, “Any word from Thomas?”

“Just the routine check-in message.”

She stretched and eased some of the knots out of her back. In her mind’s eye, the cyberlink announced the aerodyne was being fed and otherwise cared for, and she acknowledged before closing the link. “Harvey, I’m going to debrief, then get some sleep. Call me the minute anything happens, okay?”

Half an hour later, her head touched the pillow, and she was asleep in moments. In her dreams she could still hear the words she sang, drifting across that dark meadow by Athenry, not so long ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What *is* that?” Craig demanded. On his feet now, he stared upwards, hands on hips, unaware or uncaring of his nudity.

Cassie realized she could see him clearly; the odd purple light had grown so strong in the sky.

“That’s the creature,” she said in a whisper. “My mother calls it Nataraja, the Dancer at the End of Time.”

“Ugh! Very dramatic!” Craig grimaced. “That sounds just like your mom, from how you described her.”

“This isn’t the time for sarcasm, Craig!” Cassie said, rising to stand beside him. She grasped his elbow. “That thing is a killer! It nearly got us both in the storm it cooked up!”

“It controlled the weather?”

“Yes! No! Oh, I don’t know for sure.” She pressed her hand to her head. In the heightening of her emotions, the ache behind her eyes had returned and was growing stronger. “All I know is, it’s sentient, and it doesn’t like us very much. Me, especially.”

She looked up at the sky again and shivered. The purple light was growing more intense, and the meadows and fields glowed sickly under the baleful glare from above.

“It’s looking for me, Craig. I can feel it. It didn’t like the way I escaped, so it’ll keep searching until it can find me and finish me.”

“You escaped that courtroom by willing yourself to find a door?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t you do something similar here?”

“Like what? There’s no place to put a door. Unless...” She looked down and concentrated. The Silver Cord was there, trailing away into the vague distance.

“Unless what?”

Cassie glanced at the violin, lying where he had dropped it before they had made love. “Why do you have a violin?”

“What?”

“Craig, tell me! Why do you have a violin?”



He frowned and shook his head. "It's the thought of Ireland, I guess," he said at last. "Irish jigs and reels, and that. Maybe when our minds met in this weird place, you were thinking of Athenry and I picked up on the theme. But what are you thinking?"

"You can play it!"

"No! I never learned!"

"Maybe not in the real world, our world, but this..." She waved a hand. "This is in our minds. Our own form of reality. So here, if you believe you can play that fiddle, then you can play it!"

"But how, in the name of all that's holy, can it help us escape that thing?"

"I'm the only one who needs to get away, Craig. It's me the creature's interested in; I think you're safe for now. All you have to do is keep away from it."

"But how will *you* get away?"

Cassie grinned, as forked purple lightning stabbed the hills. "Haven't you heard of finding escape in music?"

## Chapter Ten

“Is this gonna work?” Craig asked, standing with the bow poised above the strings.

“Believe it!” Cassie stood poised. “The jig has power; all dances have power! Why do you think dance features in so many religions?”

“Maybe. Can you dance a jig?”

The scene around them changed. The fire died out; her fellow colonists faded into nothing. Only the two of them remained. A low growl of thunder rolled around the deserted hills, and the purple-shot clouds oozed lower until the peaks vanished from view. Cassie shivered as she heard the resonance of the judge’s voice, ringing with a note of anticipation, in the thunder.

“It’s getting closer,” she said, then nodded firmly. “Yes! I can dance a jig! My mother taught me after my uncle showed me the Vedic dances.” She pointed a commanding finger at him. “Play!”

Craig shrugged, straightened his back, and brought the bow down smartly on the strings.

A jig tune rolled out of the instrument, a catchy little song that made her toes tap of their own accord. Cassie closed her eyes and brought forth all the talent she’d ever held in the dance.

And she was good! She knew she was good, believed she was good.

She danced, her feet kissing the ground, her skirt flying, as all around the hills, violent lightning stabbed, and stabbed, and stabbed...

Craig began to chant in an Irish brogue as he played, his eyes wide, unseeing.

“Nataraja preys but he can’t find her,

Dancing on the meadow, she’s a laughing girl,

She’s wanting escape, her feet a blur,

A kiss on the wind makes the clouds unfurl...”

Light-headed and giddy, Cassie kept moving. Something in the air changed, and she recognized a great mind, questing, almost finding, then, baffled, losing. And then the clouds unfurled, rolling apart to show a stretch of shining water where only land had been.

“Think you’re the hotshot dancer, huh, Nataraja?” she asked under her breath, her legs flying as Craig sang another refrain.

“Orpheus now, he rued the day,

In Hades, fair Eurydice did dwell.

But Cassie’s my love, and so she’ll stay,

Dead or alive,

no matter if gods,

or Hell

itself stand between...”

His voice trailed off even as he played on, the notes of the fiddle glistening in the air like the tears that coursed down his cheeks.

“Oh, Craig!” she called back to him, dancing on the water toward the brightening horizon. “I shall return to you! I love you!”

“And I love you! Oh, gods! Cassie...!”

And then there was silence, broken only by the lapping of water.

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig woke with a start, staring into the gloom. The computer sensed his awakening and raised the brightness of the cabin lights, and Craig rubbed his face with both hands, trying to restore some feeling to his skin. His tears wetted his palms.

“Oh, damn! Cassie...” He buried his face in his hands and moaned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some kilometers ahead, a small aerodyne drone purred through the air, its sensors sweeping the very edge of the anomaly. To the human eye, there was nothing but the slow surge of ocean waves beneath a dark indigo sky. But thanks to Doc Maguire’s reprogramming, the drone had the means to see the massive cloud of electrical energy pulsing across the eastern horizon. A human would have become extremely nervous at the sight; even the drone, with its limited AI, felt some qualms. It moved closer, slowly, carefully.

Fine tendrils of energy whipped out of the cloud, coming dangerously close. The drone skittered back like a nervous horse; then, at a safe distance, it ran a quick self-diagnosis.

On the *North Star*, Doc watched the relay from the drone with intense concentration. The readout of the diagnostic showed a limited energy drain from the drone’s fusion plant, but no other damage. She turned in her chair and looked up at Dalip, who hovered expectantly behind her.

“I think Craig’s right. It’s sentient. That was a definite reaction to the drone.”

“How dangerous is it to us?” Dalip asked. “I have to think of the safety of this ship and her company.”

“Highly dangerous, I should imagine.” She glanced at the readout, then switched to another view. “Thomas? What are you getting over there?”

Thomas Ho's thoughtful face filled the holoscreen, his tattoo glowing the muted yellow of concern. "Nothing this side. The creature seems to be concentrating on the drones."

"Can you move closer, in safety?" Dalip asked.

"I think so."

Dalip raised a questioning eyebrow at Doc, who pursed her lips, then nodded. He gave the command.

"Okay, Thomas, approach closer at your discretion. The moment that thing shows signs of reacting to you, pull out."

"Roger that!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Thomas glanced around the VR display. All systems showed green. With an expert touch, he pulled the aerodyne into a gentle bank, moving from his circuit on the edge of the anomaly into a slow, oblique approach.

The VR relayed the computer-enhanced view from the sensors. Towers of purple cumulus reared up thousands of feet across the eastern horizon, filling the sky ahead. Slow, Brownian motion stirred the clouds, but Thomas sensed no hostility, or even awareness.

Keeping his attention on the cloud, he sent a brief report. "Looking good so far, *North Star*." A small, red diamond suddenly appeared right at the edge of sensor range and an urgent modular tone sounded. "*North Star!* I'm getting a reading from Cassie's suit! She's on the surface, dead ahead!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Doc and Dalip stiffened and looked at each other. Dalip felt a prickle through his body, every nerve ending suddenly keen.

"Can you get closer?" he asked, regretting Thomas's choice of words.

"I think so. It's not reacting to me so far."

Dalip nodded then glanced at Doc. "Is there any way we can distract that thing?"

"We could buzz it with the drones," Doc said thoughtfully, "but I'm not sure how long they'll survive. You saw how that energy surge hit the drone. I have a hunch that thing's reactions are fast!"

"Make it so," Dalip commanded the sensor operator, who set to work passing instructions to the two drones. "I'd sooner risk the drones than a human life. Thomas?" Dalip called over the relay. "We're setting up a diversion. Wait until we give the word, then go in fast and pick her up. But for the gods' sakes, take care!"

"Wilco!" Thomas replied tersely.

The drones began their erratic maneuvers, skimming close to the cloud and away, teasing it. The readout from their sensors showed the anomaly's color intensifying, deepening. Streaks of fierce energy appeared in the narrow gaps in the cloud.

"Do you think it's getting angry?" Dalip asked in a hushed voice.

"Maybe. I hope it is!" Doc replied. "I don't care if we lose the drones, so long as they can keep that thing's attention."

"Thomas, make your play," Dalip said firmly. "It looks plenty riled enough now."

## Chapter Eleven

“Oh! It’s you. *Namaste*.”

The voice had a Delhi accent filtered through a strange, otherworldly tone.

“Yes,” Cassie said, looking around in the glittering world. “*Namaste* to you, too. Now, who are you, where are you, and what is this place?”

Seemingly surrounded by nothing, Cassie floated in an indefinably huge space filled with streaks of colored light, which flared along fixed pathways in the open air. Countless silver double helices hung suspended from who-knows-where, seeming to stretch in serried ranks for miles above and below her. They turned with a slow, ponderous motion as if they weighed thousands of tons. Her Silver Cord linked her to them in a fine filigree mesh of light. The air smelled of fried tin.

“I do apologize; I didn’t know you were coming back so soon, or I’d have cleaned up.” There was a soft, deprecating cough. “In my defense, you of all people should know how busy I’ve been lately.”

“I’d be able to give you a better answer if I knew just who the hell you are!”

“Oh! Forgive me. I’m the computer that manages your Lazarus functions. You may call me Pandit. As to where I am, well, I’m all around you.”

Cassie floated gently amidst the flash and glitter. “O...kay,” she said slowly. “Then my next question is, where am I?”

“You, as in your consciousness, and I, are in a small pocket of nano-space, located behind your spinal cord in the first vertebrae.” Pandit’s disembodied voice held a happy note. “That Nataraja entity is prowling around outside. Don’t worry! We’re quite safe. It hasn’t a hope of getting inside here. It tried, and failed. We have it baffled! As per my instructions, I’m keeping everything going until someone can get your body out of the creature’s influence.”

“Then what was all that I went through just now?” she asked, looking for somewhere to sit. A white-painted, wrought-iron garden chair in the ancient French Belle Époque style flicked into being. Cassie stared at it for a moment, then sat down very gingerly. The bench felt cool and solid beneath her. “Was it some kind of dream, or an afterlife?”

“Both, but not exactly either. Your spirit seems to be able to travel around a kind of hinterland linked to this nano-space in some way I have yet to discover. I must say, it’s all very interesting! Especially the way you are able to communicate with another who has the Lazarus function. I’m already working up a dissertation on the subject.”

Cassie found her jaw hanging open. She shut it hurriedly. “Never mind that! How do we fix this situation?”

“Oh, it’s no trouble, I do assure you; I’m quite capable of a multitude of simultaneous processes. As for fixing things, well...” Pandit paused. “At the moment, my own scope is limited to damage control and protecting what’s here. You, on the other hand, seem to possess the capability of traveling almost at will in the hinterland existence.”

Cassie turned her attention to the slowly revolving helices and suddenly recognized them. “Those are strands of my DNA!”

“Yes. I have several thousand with which to initiate a complete restoration of your body, should it prove necessary. I must congratulate you; it is most splendid material! An excellent fusion of different genotypes.”



Cassie flushed, unsure how to take such a compliment. “Yes, well, I didn’t exactly have any say in the matter.”

“Indeed.” A polite cough echoed throughout the space. “As for your restoration, rescue may well be at hand. Your friend Craig is already heading in this direction, and I’m picking up indications that another person may be here soon, as well.”

“What?” She gasped, standing quickly. “We’ve got to contact them! Maybe we can guide them to me.”

“It would be most difficult without a cyberlink.”

“But my suit has a built-in emergency radio.”

“Cassandra, they have better sensory equipment than I. They won’t need to be guided.

“Oh, gods!” Cassie clenched her hands. “I hope they take care!”

“The other people know of the risks by now, and are prepared to face them to recover you.”

“Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“Perhaps there is. Nataraja is a powerful entity; it would seem to be able to project itself into the hinterworld whilst remaining physically in another locale, much as you can. Given what I can see in your mind, you are capable of holding it at bay.”

“You can read my mind?”

“Easily,” Pandit replied breezily. “I am, in fact, part of you. Don’t worry! I’m programmed not to tell anyone your secrets.”

“I should think not!” she said, her cheeks growing warm. “So, what can I do?”

The air around her began to hum with hidden energies. “I shall formulate a plan. We have an advantage. Nataraja doesn’t quite understand humans. Your minds are too diverse, too chaotic for it to grasp. But it seems to find sustenance in the neural activities of your brains.”

"It knew about those historical witch-trials from somewhere. My uncle made me study them so I could understand something of Western history and culture."

"Oh?" The barely audible hum in the air stilled briefly and Cassie's head tingled.

"Excuse me," Pandit said. "I am downloading recent data from your consciousness now. Yes, I see...That could be worrying. It implies a certain gain in knowledge of humanity, either due to feedback from your mind, or the reception of broadcast material from Earth over the course of time. I shall have to think about the implications."

"You say you can do that whilst we figure out a way to divert that thing?"

"Oh, easily."

"Then can we please get on with it?"

"Whenever you are ready."

Cassie balled her hands into fists.

"Now would be a very good time! Please!" she said through gritted teeth.

"Very well, here's what I suggest..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Thomas Ho flew low and fast over the sea. The short waves slipped beneath the aerodyne's hull in a blur of blue and violet. Data streamed through Thomas's mind, and he kept a wary eye on the readout marking the creature's position as he opened a communications link.

"*North Star*, I should reach Cassie in three minutes. I'm continuing to close."

A violent flash split the sky to port, lightning and more than lightning. Thomas flinched, causing the aerodyne to jerk in response, before swinging back on course.

"*North Star*, did you get that?"

The reply was terse. "Yes, Thomas. The thing just blew one of the drones out of the sky."

Thomas moved his lips in a silent prayer, his skin prickling at the thought of the titanic energy he'd just seen unleashed reaching out to swat *him*.

"C'mon, girl!" he whispered to his craft. His thoughts flickered through to the aerodyne, coaxing yet a little more speed from the straining engines.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie felt the discharge of energy as she emerged into the ghastly purple light of day.

"What the fuck was that?" she demanded, looking around the horizon.

"Nataraja seems to have struck at something." Pandit's ghostly voice sounded in her mind. "With my limited sensor suite, I cannot be sure, but I am no longer detecting one of the search radar patterns."

"Which?" Cassie's heart was in her mouth.

"I'm only picking up emanations from one drone now."

"Gods! I thought it was one of our people."

"It may well come to pass, Cassandra, if you don't get a move on!"

"Now you're sounding just like my mother!" she said, willing herself into motion.

It was like a dream of flying, but beyond any dream. Her incorporeal form, a form without mass or physical weight, took on wings of light in her desire to meet and defeat the creature. Cassie flew swiftly over the sparkling sea toward the nexus of purple cloud that lowered on the horizon. Unbidden, what her mother had always called "the Irish part of you" came to the fore.

"Hey! Nataraja! You big lump!" she yelled at the top of her voice. Something in the cloud told her she had been seen, or sensed; that the colossal entity had turned her way. "You want a piece of me, you gobshite? Come and try it!"

A flicker, then a streamer of cloud lashed whip-like across the sky straight at her. It moved across the intervening distance in a flash. Cassie rolled swiftly out of the way.

“Missed! Is that all you’re good for?”

“Oh, no!” The thing answered in a rumble of thunder, an evil smile in the tone. “Do you think I can be fooled with such tricks? Your fellows played right into my hands!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Thomas fought with controls suddenly gone berserk in the midst of a huge discharge of power. Alarms screamed in the cockpit, every alert sounding at once. The aerodyne ran into air thicker than water and the nose crumpled under the impact. Turbofans shattered, their blades spinning away to splash into the waves many meters distant.

“I’m going down!” Thomas yelled, as the vehicle’s power suddenly cut out. “Can you read me? I’m...”

The thickened, deep purple air found its way inside the cockpit through a microscopic fissure caused by the impact. It wrapped itself lovingly around Thomas’s head and flowed into his ears, nose, and mouth, choking off all speech. All conscious thought fled forever as Nataraja fed on the encephalitic power it found in his brain.

## Chapter Twelve

“Hmm...piquant!”

“You murdered him!” Cassie screamed.

“Irrelevant,” Nataraja said sneeringly. All around Cassie’s ethereal form, the cloud rolled and swirled in a curiously satisfied way. “Your kind is a most interesting study. Especially you. You, I cannot grasp. I killed you, yet you still live; you retain your mind.”

The cloud thickened perceptibly and Cassie banked sharply, coasting to a stop some kilometers away, wary, frightened, and angry beyond belief.

“That one called Thomas Ho lacked your defenses,” Nataraja said. “I have absorbed his thoughts, his memories, yet you, little human, little *witch*, are as slippery as -- yes, an appropriate simile comes from his memories -- as an eel.”

“I’ll get you, you bastard!”

“Will you? I rather think it will be I who will triumph...”

The entity’s voice held a sudden note of glee. And then it was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It’s gone!”

The sensor operator's voice cut across the bridge in a shout.

Dalip blinked in confusion as his cyberware sorted the data coming through the ship's sensor feed. He glanced at Doc. "What do you make of it?"

"Is there any sign of it anywhere, Harvey?" Doc asked. "Search all wavebands!"

"Complying..." Harvey's voice held a note of annoyance.

Dalip checked the new feedback the sensors presented to his mind.

"Nothing on any waveband," he said. "Neural negative, IR and UV negative, X-ray negative. It's gone!" He thought quickly, and made a decision. "Craig?"

"Yeah, I see it, too," Craig said. "What shall I do?"

"Need you ask, boy? Go get her!"

"Complying!"

Dalip looked at Doc. "Could it be a trap?" he asked.

Doc swung in her chair and stared at him for a long moment. Then she sighed and shrugged.

"We have to take that chance." She waved a hand to indicate the holodisplay. The red diamond marking the *Bushwacker* crept slowly nearer the red circle that marked Cassie's position. "Do you think Craig would hesitate, even if we knew it was?"

"Doc, we have to face up to the fact; Cassie was in the middle of that...that *thing*." Dalip shook his head. "There's a good chance she's dead. And if she is, she's not going to look too good, not after all this time in the water."

"True, Dalip. Equally, she may still be alive. Those suits are good. The budget was tight, but I made sure we bought the best we could afford."

"Colonial budgets!" He leaned heavily on the console. "I hate them, Doc. It's always the equipment we don't have, or the gear that isn't top-notch, that costs lives."

“You don’t need to tell me, Dalip,” Doc replied calmly. “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.”

Dalip wiped his hand over his face and made an effort to calm himself. “I know. I’m sorry, Doc, I’m just letting off steam. I know you did your best with those suits. I’m surprised the makers didn’t fit the transponder with a bio-signs function.”

“It was considered, or so I heard.” Doc looked at him with a pained expression. “The trouble with that is, it can show a death, too. Not every culture thinks recovering a dead body worth the effort...”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Pandit! It’s gone!”

“Apparently so, Cassandra.” Pandit sounded remarkably calm.

“Where?”

“Unknown.”

“That’s no help!”

“I’m sorry I can’t be specific.”

Cassie sat in the lotus position in mid-air. Around her hung the flickering lights and silver helices of the mini-universe hidden inside her spine.

“Pandit, can’t you make yourself visible? I really want to look at something, not just listen to a disembodied voice!”

“You had but to ask.”

The mild voice spoke from behind her. She turned. A few meters away stood a short Indian man, somewhere in his early hundreds, graying black hair cut short and neat, peering at her through two small lenses fixed to his head by wire frames. He wore a simple suit composed of a beige semi-tunic with a high collar and baggy trousers of a charcoal hue. Sandals shod his neat, well-kept feet. Pressing his palms together, he bowed.

*"Namaste, once more,"* he said.

*"Namaste, Pandit,"* she responded in kind. She pointed at the lenses. "What are those?"

Pandit touched them in a self-conscious gesture. "These are spectacles, devices used in ancient time to correct deficiencies in sight. They are something which the people of Earth have not required for over a hundred years, even in India." He gave a soft cough of embarrassment. "You must forgive me; they are something of an affectation."

"Not a problem," she said, fascinated with the way light reflected off the lenses, hiding the wearer's eyes. "What do we do now? What *can* we do now?"

Pandit produced a datapad from nowhere and consulted the screen. "From what my limited sensors tell me, your friend is approaching at the maximum speed possible for a *Shackleton*-class ATV."

"Craig! Oh, gods, Craig, my *jaan!*" Tears prickled Cassie's eyes. "C'mon, baby! Come and get me."

"Indeed," Pandit said quietly. He put the datapad away, then looked at her. "Given the fact the Nataraja creature is no longer visible to any sensor, might I suggest I initiate your self-repair mode?"

"Sure," Cassie replied, sniffing and wiping her eyes. She gave the construct a sweet smile. "Whatever it is, go do it."

"Perhaps you would care to watch the procedure? I think you will find it informative, not to say educational..."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Yuck!" Cassie looked with horror at the gooey mess that had formerly been cells on the surface of her brain. As far as her synthetic vision stretched, herds of amorphous bacteria the size of small elephants were busy degrading the cells, absorbing the nutrients. "Can't we stop them?"



“Oh, yes. Wait a second.” Pandit looked into the distance for a moment. “There, the cavalry’s on its way.”

A few moments passed, busy with the sound of contented burps and gurgles from the bacteria. Whether the sounds were real, enhanced thousands of times, or just a product of the construct, she didn’t want to think.

“I sure hope you’re right about my memories being preserved!” she said, resisting the urge to pull the nearest bacterium off her brain and give it a good kicking. “At this rate, I’ll have nothing left when I revive!”

“Panic not, Cassandra. Ah, here we are.”

A silvery tidal wave of microscopic machines surged into view over the artificial horizon of her prefrontal lobe, a wave of nanocytes clinging to and swarming over the blood- red walls of the membrane. Multi-clawed waldo arms swung as fast as thought, reconstructing damaged cell walls, restoring nerve connections. Behind them, they left the surface of her mind looking pristine, as good as new.

Then they reached the cluster of bacteria and swarmed all over their lumbering shapes. Cassie watched with growing horror as the bacteria twitched and shuddered helplessly under the onslaught. The process was appallingly swift and sanguinary as the nanocytes cut them into useful component chemicals, which they used to restore damaged areas. A wash of indefinable fluids burst out of the collapsing forms and swept about her legs, only to be inhaled by yet more of the eager nanocytes.

“Urghhh!” She groaned and turned away. Nausea rose in her stomach, and her mouth flooded with saliva.

“It was them or you, Cassandra,” Pandit said quietly.

“Yes, but really ..!” She shot a glance at the scene of carnage. “Thinking of having pieces of bacteria making up my body is so...ewwww! Can’t we go somewhere else?”

“Certainly. I was meaning to show you something; now is as good a time as any.”

Under the guidance of the construct, Cassie felt her identity sink into her brain, faster and faster, until she found herself in a place, surrounded by warm air. Warm, dry air, redolent with the scent of soil and dust and sand heated in the furnace of a warm summer's day, cooling now in the balm of night. As her mind's eyes became accustomed to the surroundings, she looked around.

She was in a tall, cool room, bathed in moonlight. The desert air blew softly through fine net curtains over the high windows, carrying the scent, the windows piercing thick stone walls of red sandstone painted a pale ivory. Beyond the mesh lay a courtyard surrounded by the marble-faced wings of a great house. Doorways led to other rooms, shadowy but without the lurking menace darkness usually held for those who dwell in daylight. A contradictory sense of great age and the freshness of youth emanated from the air.

"I know this place," she said in a whisper, reaching out a hand to brush a softly billowing curtain. "It's my uncle's palace in New Madurai."

"A place you knew and loved," Pandit said with a gentle smile. "I appropriated the image from your memories and used it to create this construct of your mind."

Cassie stared at a large statuette that stood in a nearby niche. "Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, Remover of Obstacles. I remember that. I used to like the stories Uncle told me about the gods." She turned to look at the construct thoughtfully. "Is this some kind of virtual reality?"

"There's nothing virtual about it," the construct replied with a shrug. "In effect, this *is* reality, as far as your mind is concerned. Each room, and there are countless rooms, holds memories. Think of them and you are there. Walk where you will."

"Why?"

"Because I could see you need soothing, so I brought you here. Think of it as a place of respite from your cares." He gestured toward an open doorway, leading to another room, and another doorway, beyond which lay another room. "Go ahead, Cassandra. Explore at will; it's

your mind. Don't worry about the reconstruction of your body; all is in hand. And your friend will be here soon."

Cassie looked at him, then turned and walked on bare feet toward the nearest doorway. A room opened before her and a plangent snatch of sitar music drifted to her ears.

## Chapter Thirteen

Craig took over the *Bushwacker's* controls as he neared the scene. Darkness had closed in. Picked out by the headlights, a bright orange balloon glittered on the end of a cable some meters away, the end tethered to a dark object that rolled and bobbed in tune with the ocean swell. A lump formed in his throat. He knew it was a body; Cassie's body. No hint of movement suggesting life showed through the spray-dashed windshield.

"Enhance," he said softly, and the optical readout magnified the view.

Cassandra wallowed in the water, limbs spread, her dark face illuminated by the tiny survival light on her suit.

A few moments later, Craig reached her. Foregoing the use of the ATV's waldo arm for such a purpose, even though it was capable of such delicate work, Craig suited up and climbed out the hatch onto *Bushwacker's* narrow fantail to recover Cassie's body. Murmuring instructions to the computer, he guided the vehicle closer and closer. As he came alongside Cassie's limp body, he reached out and took hold of her, hauling her upward.

Water poured out of her survival suit as he tried to drag her aboard. Sweating and swearing, Craig fought for a good grip on the slick material. He turned her, took hold of the

two purpose-made grab-strips on the shoulders of the suit, and heaved. The balloon bobbed with obscene cheerfulness on the tether until it slipped into the airlock.

The door closed, the automatic cycle rushing warmth and light into the small compartment. Craig knelt beside Cassie, cradling her in his arm, stroking her forehead. Tears ran down his cheeks and dripped onto her dead, bloated face, where they met and merged with the sea water.

“Cassie! Oh, gods, Cassie!”

His howl of frustration resounded through the vehicle.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Craig?”

He sat at the small table in the ATV’s accommodation unit, swaying slightly with the motion of the ATV as it moved through the water, staring without focus at the chronometer on the wall over the bulkhead.

“Craig?” Cassie whispered again, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

Mechanically, he raised his mug of coffee and drank.

“Watching you without me is so hard,” she said with a sigh, letting her hand fall to her side.

Her body lay below, in the cold unit used for storing samples taken from the arctic environment. Pandit assured her all was going well in the reconstruction of the damaged tissue, but it would take some hours yet before revival could take place. She had returned much calmer from her magical mystery tour through her mind, to discover just how torn-up Craig was after seeing the condition of her body. Her consciousness hovered in the air beside him, feeling the pain emanating off him like a visible aura.

"If only you would sleep, darling!" she said softly. "Then I could slip into your dreams, tell you all's going to be well again. I'll come back to life, tell everyone what I know about that entity, then we can be together once more."

Craig sighed heavily and buried his face in his folded arms. Cassie knelt beside him and slipped her arm around his shoulders. She knew he would not feel the touch, and she could only imagine the feel of his body, but it gave her some comfort.

"Sleep, darling, let me into your mind. I need you, Craig. I want you to be strong for me." A tear trickled down her cheek. "Damn it, boy, I want to feel you inside me again!"

"Oh, Cassie!" he said in a whisper. "I miss you so much!"

Startled, she leaned close and looked into his eyes. "Craig? You can hear me?" Her heart sank when he looked right through her. "No. I guess not. You couldn't last time. Pandit?"

"Yes, Cassandra?"

"Is there any way, other than dreams, to communicate with Craig?"

"I fear not. Judging from the readings I can see on the computer relay, *Bushwacker* is close to the rendezvous with the *North Star*, so it is doubtful Craig will be able to sleep soon, in any case."

"Damn." She watched Craig sip another mouthful of coffee and flung up her hands. "Oh! This is getting me nowhere! And it *hurts*, Pandit! It hurts me to watch him just...existing, going through the motions."

"I understand, Cassandra. Perhaps it would be best if you took some more time out, got away from here until we are in a position to revive you."

"Yes..."

Cassie concentrated, slipping ghost-like through the deck and down, into the freezer unit, into her body, until she found herself in the quiet halls of her mind. The curtains still billowed in the soft night air, moon shadows swayed and drifted over the marble floor. From one passageway came the gentle, reflective sound of uilleann pipes.

“What progress have you made with the...repairs, Pandit?” she asked.

“Slow but steady, Cassandra. Being part-frozen isn’t exactly helping matters, but that will change when your body is transferred to a proper morgue cabinet. The temperatures there are well within my tolerances.” Pandit came up beside her, and touched her arm. “I shall do my very best, Cassandra.”

“I believe you.” She turned and hugged the construct, surprised at some deep level at how solid he felt. Standing back, she held him at arm’s length and smiled at him fondly. “It was a helluva shock, finding you in my mind. But I’m really glad you’re here for me, Pandit.”

The construct blushed, his dusky skin taking on a much darker hue, and he pressed his palms together and bowed. “I exist only to serve,” he replied softly. “But it becomes a pleasure when I serve you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*North Star* loomed up ahead, her huge hull brushing aside the short choppy waves with ease. Craig took his seat at the ATV’s controls. He need not touch a thing; the computer guidance system had hooked up with the *North Star* and would handle everything required in the docking process.

In truth, he felt utterly drained, incapable of so much as pressing a button. A dreadful lethargy had settled on his shoulders in the hours since he had found Cassie’s body, a lethargy that felt loaded with the weight of worlds.

“Was it all a dream?” he asked himself, as the stern doors of the big survey vessel opened. “Was Cassie there or not?”

Engines surged, steering impellers whined, and the bulky ATV entered the calmer waters of the docking bay. Behind it, the huge doors swung shut, sealing off the world. Bright lights came on, and people began to emerge from the doors onto the side gantries, to stare silently at the ATV as the cradle lifted it effortlessly from the water and moved it into

the garage. Craig looked up and saw Doc waiting for him with two of the medical team. Tears blurred his eyes.

He went through the motions, ensuring the garage umbilical cables had connected with the ATV, taking over refueling and data-transfer duties from the autonomous systems. He looked at the empty seat in the driving bay, sighed, grabbed his tote bag, and headed for the airlock.

Doc was waiting quietly for him outside. She looked up into his face and, unexpectedly, took him in her arms and hugged him hard. “Dammit, boy, but I can see you’re hurting,” she said with compassion. “John and Fiona will take care of Cassie. Come with me to the wardroom; we’ll get you settled with a hot drink and anything you want to eat before we debrief you.”

She held his arm and made to lead him away as the two orderlies opened the cold-storage compartment. Craig held back.

“Doc, Cassie came to me in my dreams!” he said. “She told me she isn’t dead!”

The two medical orderlies stopped and glanced at each other, then at Doc. She paused, then nodded to them to go ahead, and took a firmer grip on Craig’s arm.

“Craig, I can understand how you feel. It was the same for me after I lost Andrea. When you’ve loved and lost someone, it hurts like hell, no matter how long or short the time you were together.” She took hold of his hands, gazed up into his eyes. “Craig, this is going to be hard, but you must understand! Cassie is dead.” She sighed. “She’s not coming back, Craig.”

He shook his head in flat denial. Deliberately pulling from her grasp, he stalked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“Hello, world!”*

Cassie soared above Orpheus on wings of light, her soul, her spirit barreling through the empty void like an angel from the Christian faith, tethered only by her Silver Cord. Her



childhood dream of flying come true. One of the rooms of her mind had held the image. A little dark-skinned girl, all arms and legs and runny nose. Racing about the courtyard of her uncle's palace, arms outstretched like wings, long black hair floating behind her. Gazing up at the slowly circling kites as they hunted for prey on the baking plains, ardently wishing she could fly up to be with them; free of the constraints of hard earth, of schooling and family fussing.

And here she was, flying above a much greener, much bluer world.

"Hello, world!" She called out again, twisting and rolling and then coming to a floating stop high above the sea.

The long-forecasted storm was sweeping down from the arctic ice cap. Great swirls of white cloud, the length of continents, unheeding of the lands and seas over which they traveled, gathered power in its most basic, primitive form. A chill ran down her mental spine as she saw in it the likeness of Nataraja.

"Murderer!" she said. "Why did you come to my world? Why do you seek to destroy us, who never harmed you?"

Her attention focused on the tiny streak of white that marked the wake of a ship. She focused in, her eyesight sharper than any bird of prey. The research cruiser *North Star*, heading toward Home, the seas through which she plowed already rising under the impulse of the wind from the north.

"All you cruisers, head for home. All you fishermen, come safe from the sea. All lifesavers, blessed be!

"Come home from the waves, come home from the water. Come home; come home! Come safe from the sea..."

## Chapter Fourteen

"I'm deeply worried about that boy," Doc said with a frown, cradling a mug of coffee between her hands.

She was alone with Dalip in the *North Star's* wardroom. Dalip looked at her across the table. His deep-blue silk turban shone under the overhead lights.

"Death can hit hard, Katrina," he said. "We both know that. Where is Craig now?"

"In a cabin, under sedation. I thought it best to put him under; he's wearing himself out through sheer anguish. He claims Cassie came to him in his dreams and told him she wasn't truly dead, that she would revive!" She shook her head. "That could only happen with nanocytes. None of us ever had those."

"Will Craig recover?"

Doc shrugged. "I don't know."

"And what of Cassie?"

"We'll get her back to the clinic at Home. Then I'll perform an autopsy. The facilities are better there. It may be we can get a clue from her remains as to the nature of that creature." She shook her head slowly, then drank more coffee. "Craig won't like the idea of an autopsy. He's convinced she'll spring back to life, somehow."

“Oh, dear,” Dalip said with a sigh, then held up his hand. “Excuse me one moment; I’m getting an update on the met situation.”

Doc topped up her coffee whilst Dalip accessed his cyberware.

“The storm’s getting worse,” Dalip said after a few moments, “but the eye is a long way astern, and we’re making good time. We’ll be safe in harbor before long. And then, we’ll see.”

“I hope it isn’t that creature, following us,” Doc said with a frown.

“The satellites are still watching for its signature. Nothing like that is showing up.”

Doc stared into space. “It went somewhere, Dalip,” she said eventually. “I want to know where, and if it’s likely to return.”

Dalip nodded slowly. “We all do, Doc. We all do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“How’s it coming, Pandit?”

Cassie walked into the great shining hall of light and motion that was the construct’s abode. The dapper figure sat in the lotus position on the invisible floor, contemplating a sutra open on his lap. He looked up with a smile.

“All is in hand, Cassandra. You are now in the *North Star’s* morgue unit. It’s a standard model; the low temperatures are not interfering with the restoration process. Just a little frost damage to repair in some cells and organs, then we’ll see about initiating start-up.”

“You make me sound like a clapped-out ATV!” she said. “Can’t you just say revival?”

“My apologies,” he replied, somewhat insincerely.

She looked at the twinkle in his eyes and shook her head. “For a computer program, even an AI, you’re too bloody human by half, Pandit.”

“Why, thank you, Cassandra!”

Pandit looked genuinely moved. Cassandra shook her head, blew him a kiss, and walked out, back into the halls of her mind.

Soft air enveloped her. A billowing wisp of lace curtain touched her skin and images of past times in the palace at New Madurai flashed through her thoughts.

She began to walk slowly, letting her consciousness drift where it willed through the halls of memory. Here was a room where a serious little girl sat on the knee of the Maharaja, listening to his stories of the gods of Old India. There, an excited young teenager at the Kalkotta spaceport before her first college trip to Luna. A vast courtyard, where a five-year-old girl clapped her hands with glee as noble Marwani horses curveted under her uncle's consummate horsemanship; her ayah's hand was firm on her shoulder to keep her away from the dangerous hooves. Another room, and Lieutenant-Commander Lucia Priyadarshini O'Neill stood to one side and looked on, pride and amusement in her face as a four-year-old Cassie met her uncle for the first time and burst into tears.

Then she came to a more recent memory. A memory of a rocky shore, with breakers surging over black Orphean granite, the waves smashing in white ruin. Spray was hitting her cheeks, stinging with salt and cold as she wrestled with the line to the sensor buoys further out on the raging sea.

"Craig! Give me a hand here; I can't hold this thing!" she called.

Strong hands closing on the cable next to hers; a tall, hard, muscled body moved alongside her as Marine Specialist Craig Lowell, late of New Zealand, came to assist Biology Specialist Cassandra "Cassie" O'Neill.

Between them, they straightened out the dangerous kink in the cable that threatened to ruin two solid days of work. Hot in spite of the cold wind, damp in spite of their survival suits, they stood back and grinned at each other in the happy knowledge of work well done.

"Urgh!" Craig shuddered. "These old suits aren't up to much. I'll be glad when we get the new models next month."

“Me, too. I don’t know about you, but I’m soaked!” she said, shaking droplets of water from her hair. “Let’s get back to the module and clean up.”

They returned to the small geodesic field module, set up a kilometer inshore in a sheltered hollow well back from the sand dunes. Craig went to his sleeping bay whilst Cassie went to hers next door. She peeled off the suit and then flung it into the hopper where the servo-systems would clean it of muck and sweat. The cotton combinations followed, and she stood, nude, staring thoughtfully at the partition wall.

Craig was just the other side of that wall. A tall, muscular Kiwi, with a ready smile and a deep voice that sent shivers up her spine. From their very first meeting she had felt attracted to him; nothing in his manner had suggested he was repelled by her. He would be nude as well, by now. Cassie had seen him working with his shirt off before, could see his muscular body in her mind’s eye as he had labored on some task in the warmer southern climes. Now she felt a strong desire to see what he looked like in the raw, but that was out of the question -- for now.

Pressing her ear to the partition, she sought to make out the sounds of his movements in spite of the efficient sound insulation.

“Want a coffee?”

She jumped back and stared at the wall. Maybe the insulation wasn’t that efficient; his voice had come through clear enough. Did he suspect she was listening to him getting changed?

“Sure!” she called, blushing at the thought. “But I need a shower first.”

“So do I.”

“Who’s going first?”

“Oh, I dunno! It ought to be me, my need’s pretty desperate!”

“And mine isn’t?” she said sweetly.

*It’s not all I’m desperate for!* she thought. Her pussy gave a sympathetic little twitch.

“Okay, we’ll settle this like adults. Scissors-paper-stones?”

Cassie wrapped a towel around her and emerged from her bay just as Craig came out of his, that ready smile broad on his handsome face. He was wearing a towel around his waist, showing off his tanned, supremely fit body to perfection, each pectoral, each abdominal muscle sharp and hard. Cassie felt a distinct twitch somewhere that didn’t show, and her cheeks grew hot as she realized she was staring. Her blush deepened when she realized he seemed equally taken by her.

“Ready?” he asked eventually, hiding his right hand behind his back.

“I’m not sure if I want to compete with you,” she said softly.

He looked at her, his head tipped to one side, eyes narrowed. “How shall we decide, then?”

Cassie chewed her lip. “Want someone to scrub your back?”

His eyebrows rose and a smile creased his face. “I would like that,” he said lightly, “but you might get wet.”

Cassie reached out and stroked the line of his jaw with her fingertips. “Oh, I don’t mind getting ... wet,” she said huskily.

Craig’s smile broadened into a grin and his eyes sparkled. He took her hand and softly kissed her palm.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

She nodded, feeling her heart beginning to beat faster.

“Damn it, Cass!” he said in a near-whisper. “All the time we’ve known each other, I was never sure if you’d be interested in me. Now I feel like all my birthdays have come at once!”

She clasped his hand and grinned up at him. “Then why don’t you come and open your present?” she said.

They went into the little bathroom. Cassie's heart beat strongly against her breast, and she couldn't quite believe how daring she'd been. The suggestion had just slipped out, without her conscious mind having any say in the matter. She almost regretted it.

Almost. Craig turned and looked at her, his gaze steady and serious. Then he tugged at the fold of his towel and let it fall, and any small doubts vanished from her mind.

"Holy Vishnu!" She gasped.

His penis hung from a thick knot of dark hair, a penis that was already stiffening and taking on proportions she'd never dreamed of, even in the privacy of her bunk. Fumbling, eyes fixed upon him, she tugged at her own towel and pulled it slowly open. Letting it fall from her shoulders, she allowed him to gaze at her nudity for the first time.

"Gods, Cassie!" He let out his breath in a long, soft whistle as he swept her with his gaze.

She glanced down at her body, pleased at the effect she seemed to have on him. Watching his reaction, she ran her fingertips slowly over her full breasts, describing ever-decreasing circles around them until she touched each dark-brown nipple. She paused to wet her fingertips with her tongue, then stroked her teats. The moist touch and the thought of his lips closing around the sensitive buds brought them erect within seconds. Craig's face was flushed as he watched her avidly, and she heard his breath quickening. Smiling broadly, she cupped her breasts, squeezing them, before sliding her palms lower, down over the smooth flatness of her belly to her tight mass of dark curls.

Craig sank to his knees and, reaching out, laid his hands upon her thighs and stroked them sensuously, up and down. Cassie teased his thick blond hair, as she slid her free hand between her thighs and over her swelling pussy lips. She rubbed herself, lightly at first, then deeper, pushing her fingers into the soft, hot flesh and spreading her labia for him.

Craig clasped her hand and drew it to his mouth. Looking up at her, he took each wet finger in turn and slipped it into his mouth. His tongue worked around them as he licked and sucked her juices.

“Oh, yes!” she murmured. “Do you like that?”

“I like! But I think we’ll both like this ...”

He grinned, then leaned forward.

“MmmMMmm!” She breathed deeply, her eyes closed, as his hot breath caressed her belly. His nose brushed against her pubic hair, and then she gasped. “OOooooo!”

Craig’s tongue flicked between her thighs, short, darting stabs that laid trails of fire over her swollen yoni. She caressed his hair, running her fingers through the short blond mop, then gasped as his tongue probed deeper inside her.

“Craig, the shower...”

“We wouldn’t both fit in there, darling.” He chuckled softly, the soft gusts of air sending a thrill of delight over her sex. “Besides, we’re gonna work up a sweat in a moment.”

“How romantic!” she said, then her knees buckled, bringing her down to his level.

They clasped hands as they kissed, thundercloud-dark body pressing urgently against Anglo-Saxon fairness. Cassie tasted herself on his lips and on his tongue, amidst the residue of salt from the sea spray. Craig’s penis pushed hard against her stomach, and she slipped one hand between them to hold and stroke him. His cock twitched in her grasp.

And then they were on the cold, plastic floor, the sweat on her skin lightly sticking to the tiles as Craig rose and settled between her spread thighs. His face took on a mildly distracted look as she guided his shaft quickly to her yoni.

“You don’t want to play a little first?” he asked.

“Sod that!” she said, using one of her favorite English expressions. “I want you inside me!”

And then he was. In a smooth motion, Craig entered her for the first time, his hardness pushing, spreading her, lubricated by her arousal, until he was deep, deep inside her.

“Oh, my gods!” She moaned, feeling her cervix being pushed up in an almost-painful way by his extraordinary length. “Gods! You’re so fucking big, boy!”



“Only got what Ma Nature issued.” He chuckled in her ear as he nibbled the lobe.

And then he began to thrust, long, leisurely deep strokes, in, deep, and out, to the point of falling from her, using his whole shaft. Cassie trembled, her arousal rising higher, and higher. Wrapping her legs around Craig’s hips, she locked her ankles behind his butt and pushed her belly hard against his, matching his rhythm, mashing her soft pussy against his groin. His chest hair brushed her breasts; her hard, taut nipples raked through the wiry curls in time to his thrusts.

Craig’s breathing turned fast and deep, and his thrusting harder, faster, the muscles on his glorious body knotting and bunching and relaxing as he strove to pleasure her. His wonderful hardness slid rapidly back and forth inside her as her pussy muscles clenched him. The bulbous head of his cock rubbed over each ripple to send a shiver through her body, and her breasts swayed violently.

Craig hovered above her, blocking the light from the bathroom ceiling. She felt rather than saw that he was taking most of his weight on his arms, the rest lying upon her body. She bore him with ease. Droplets of sweat fell from his face to meet and merge with her own as he began to gasp.

“Yesss! Oh, gods! Yessssss!” She moaned, then cried out and shuddered as he came, suddenly, exploding inside her in hot, sticky spurts. Her cries blended with Craig’s, echoing throughout the dome, bodies and voices united for the first time.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Wow!” Cassie leaned against a wall in her hall of memories, the images of that day still bright and sharp before her. An exquisite moment in time; her first true love, their bodies locked in post-coital embrace, soothing and soothed. Pandit ghosted up silently and smiled in understanding.

"I could never forget how that felt," Cassie told him in a shaky voice. "I've been with other men, and even a few girls before, but they were all froth and bubbles compared to Craig." She sighed. "I want to have his children, someday."

Pandit coughed, sounding very human-like. "Cassandra, I was going to mention it when all this was settled, but now is as good a time as any. You are having Craig's child. Congratulations, you're going to be a mother!"

Shock made her nerves stand on edge. Cassie gaped at him. "What?"

He nodded. "Oh, yes! My nanocyte teams working on your womb discovered a fetus there and reported back. It's at a very early stage, but it's viable."

Sudden recollection dawned. "Oh! Of course. I felt sick when I woke up just before the emergency. I thought it was something I'd eaten. Will the...will the child be okay?"

"Oh, there's no doubt of that. At such an early stage, it would have nothing resembling a mind. As for a soul...Who knows what the gods intend?" He touched her arm. "Don't worry, Cassandra. I shall make sure all is well."

She felt her stomach, then blushed. No child grew there in her consciousness, but in her physical body, the body that now lay in the morgue cabinet aboard the *North Star*, there nestled a precious scrap of potential life.

"I wonder how I should tell Craig?"

"You won't have long to form an idea." Pandit smiled. "*North Star* is coming into port as we speak."

At that moment, a muffled *thud* echoed down the hallways of her mind. Cassie and Pandit stared at each other, then, as one, turned to look in the direction from which the sound had come.

"What the hell was that?" Cassie asked.

## Chapter Fifteen

A subdued crowd had gathered at the dockside to watch the ship come in. Up on the bridge, Dalip looked at them and sighed. “So few of us, still. Any death hits us hard.”

Harvey nodded as he conned the ship up to her berth. “Journey’s end with lovers’ partings.”

“Harvey!” Dalip rounded on him. “That was less than appropriate!”

“Sorry, Captain.” Harvey flushed. “I didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

Dalip sighed again as the hull nudged the fenders and he rang “finished with engines” to the computer. The subliminal note of the MHD turbines faded to nothing, and the sounds of wind and rain on the bridge windows grew suddenly loud. “I know, Harvey. Sorry I snapped. Cassie and Thomas were popular with a lot of folks.” He closed his eyes briefly as a message popped into his cyberlink. “Okay, Doc’s ready down below. I’d better get along to the gangway and do what’s required. At least we could bring Cassie back.”

“Will we ever recover Thomas, sir?” Harvey asked.

Dalip paused on the threshold and looked back. “We’ll have a damn good try!”

A collective sigh rose from the crowd as the small bearer party emerged from the superstructure. As the gurney carrying the black body-bag trundled onto the lip of the brow,

Dalip came to attention and saluted, the assembled ship's company matching his action. Doc nodded almost imperceptibly to him as she led the way ashore to the waiting ambulance. Dalip looked up at the *North Star's* mast. The colony flag flew at the half. The bright banner seemed to blur momentarily.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come on!" Cassie raced off down the passageway.

The construct flowed effortlessly after her and soon matched her strides.

"I do not understand this!" he said. "I mapped this entire construct, and I know every feature, every function. That was not a noise we should hear!"

"Something made that sound," she said, racing onwards through passage after room after passage. "With all that's happened lately, I don't like surprises!"

The air grew indefinably stale and musty as they went, and the light grew dimmer. A cobweb stretched across the next passageway and she stopped in astonishment.

"What the hell's that?" she asked, pointing. "Is this thing breaking up?"

"No!" Pandit said. He waved a hand and the cobweb flickered and vanished. "Something has corrupted the surroundings."

Cassie's nose tickled. The air was heavy with the smell of old wood, dust, and leather books, and thick, brooding menace.

"Oh, fuck!" Cassie gasped. "Nataraja! It didn't vanish; it went to ground in my head!" She looked around fearfully. "It's in here with us!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The ambulance took off and soared over the heads of the crowd, bearing Cassie's body to the hospital morgue. Doc sat beside the gurney, trying not to look at the still form of the body bag. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a violet light flicker briefly around the head

of the black shroud. She shot the bag a hard look, but the light had gone, leaving her doubting it had ever been there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie and Pandit came at last to a pair of huge doors, gaping open at the end of a long and disused-looking passageway. They stared at the yawning portal, then at each other.

“Nataraja’s a tricky bastard,” Cassie said in a whisper. “Do you think it’s still in there?”

“I doubt it, but if it is, we can certainly deal with it!” Pandit replied. “I have been formulating various measures we can use against the creature, based on observations of its behavior.”

“I would settle for a gun right now!” Cassie said softly, moving a little closer.

“Weaponry won’t be necessary. I think it did vanish,” Pandit said. “It certainly could not get in here through me. But I believe the concept of it took refuge here. With a creature like that, a virtual god, a belief in its existence could be all it needs.”

Fetid air emanated from the darkness, rank with stagnant seaweed and other substances, about which she dared not hazard a guess. Amidst the silent, squirming terror, she felt a sense of outrage, indignant that such a creature could have squatted in her mind.

“But that was its whole aim, Cassandra,” Pandit said, reminding her of their close link by his response to her unspoken thought. “It wanted to lie low. I can only guess that it saw in you a means of getting at the colony. People out there saw it; they believe.” He walked up to the doors and peered in, oblivious of any danger. “It’s not there now. It must have sensed our arrival. The sound we heard was that of these doors being flung open.”

“We’ve got to warn people!” she said. “They can get out of the way so we can stop it! *If* we can stop it.”

“We will,” Pandit said. “We need to return to my operations center. Your body is at a sufficiently advanced stage of regeneration that we can attempt a crash-start.”

“What did I tell you about treating me like a broken-down ATV?” she said as they set off at a run.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the hospital morgue, Doc stared down at Cassie’s body where it lay upon the dissection table.

“I don’t understand this,” she said to her colleague.

“Nor do I.” Doctor Barratt nodded somberly. “You say Cassie was in the sea for the better part of forty-six hours, yet her body shows no signs of swelling, abrasion, contusions. No fluid has congealed in her torso or limbs that I can see. She looks...well, she looks as if she’s asleep! I admit, I’m at a loss, too.”

Cassie’s body lay between them on the cold, stainless-steel table, her dusky form naked and exposed under the harsh light of the shadowless lamp. Though both offended and intrigued by the mystery, Doc Maguire thought again what a superb body the young woman had. So much life, so much potential; such a waste.

“Will you perform the autopsy?” Doctor Barratt asked, gesturing to the trays of implements on the ready table beside her.

“I think I had better do so. After all that’s happened, I don’t like *anything* that poses a mystery,” she said grimly.

At that moment, a purple flash lit the room. The lights flickered, dimmed, and faded down to a mute yellow.

“What the hell was that?” Barratt asked, looking ‘round. Then he touched his head. “Ouch! My brain feels...”

He dropped silently in a heap on the floor. Doc staggered back, looking down at him. Violet light crept out of Barratt’s nose and ears. Appalled, she turned and ran.

Overhead, the illuminated strips of the emergency lighting came on and burned a fierce violet for a few seconds before dying completely.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the control center, Pandit gestured for Cassie to sit on the Belle Époque chair.

“Please wait but a few moments; I need to calibrate.”

“But we don’t have time for that!” she protested.

“Cassie, darling, sit down and shut up!” The familiar voice came from nowhere.

“Mother! Where have *you* been?”

Lucia Priyadarshini O’Neill emerged from thin air to stand in front of her daughter. “Oh, around. Don’t worry, Pandit knows what he’s doing, and so do I. As for time, don’t forget that time here isn’t exactly the same as time out there.”

“Your assistance in this matter would be appreciated, Commander,” Pandit said and bowed.

“Sure, as if you didn’t have a choice but to ask!” Lucia joined Pandit, slipping effortlessly into the lotus position beside him. “Here’s what I suggest...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Screams echoed down the corridors as Doc emerged from the morgue.

Home Hospital wasn’t so big that sounds came from a long way off. She pushed her way through the sterile screens and into the main passageway. The seven staff members on duty were frantically piling furniture up against the main exterior doors.

“What the hell is going on?” someone demanded, voice cracking through the chaos.

“It’s that creature!” Doc said. “It’s loose in the hospital! Get out and seal this place!”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to try and distract it if I can’t fight it!”

“We can’t go out!” A nurse pointed through the window, her voice shaking. “It’s already outside!”

Doc felt as if her bowels had turned to lead. “Oh, no!” She groaned. “Not here, not Home!”

She joined the nurse by the window, keeping low down by the sill, pulling her gawking colleague down beside her.

Thick, angry-looking purple clouds hung above the well-ordered streets. The old familiar blue skies of Orpheus were gone, filled instead with the horrible presence of the creature. A stinging hail lashed down out of the cloud, propelled at more than natural speed, scattering the crowds who had gaped up at the ghastly presence that had suddenly overtaken their world. As the colonists ran, tongues of vapor coalesced with astonishing speed in the air, wrapping almost lovingly about them.

Doc Maguire moaned in horror as each person touched by the vapor fell to the ground, seemingly lifeless.

\* \* \* \* \*

“From what I’ve seen, Nataraja feeds on life essence,” Pandit said.

Cassie translated his words in her mind. “You mean it’s a vampire?”

“In a way, although this feeds on the neural energy found in the human brain, and not blood.”

“But where did it come from?”

“I don’t believe it to be native to Orpheus, although it could be a relic from a long-gone era in the planet’s history. I think it more likely came here somehow.” Pandit shrugged. “It needs further investigation, but right now we need to deal with it.”

“We can start with the fact it killed me, but it didn’t kill me,” Cassie said in a sour voice.



“Correct!” Pandit replied. “My presence puzzled it and so it tried to manipulate me. It failed, of course, and I think it has discarded the thought of any further action in that direction as being irrelevant to its aims.”

“It still got into my mind.”

“Cassandra,” her mother said, “an *idea* of it did. Take no offense, *acushla*, but you’re the weakest link in the chain. Nataraja has learned quickly. Humanity’s now a form it can deal with. Although it actually made a really big mistake when it found itself a nice little hidey-hole in your mind construct.”

“Although it is human in scope, the construct was fashioned by me!” Pandit said proudly. “In essence, it is a very, very sophisticated computer program.”

“Then we can use that against it,” Cassie said eagerly. “If its nature is close enough that it can corrupt my construct to its own ends, we can do the same to the creature!”

“Precisely!” Pandit beamed. “And here’s how we can do it.”

He opened his hand to reveal a small packet of glittering light. When Cassie stepped closer to look, she found it was a whirling ball of silvery light, formless, yet with some kind of pattern on a Mandelbrot scale.

“Fractals?” she asked.

“Yep!” Lucia grinned. “A fractal virus! Let this little darlin’ loose inside the creature and we’ll see sparks fly for sure!”

\* \* \* \* \*

All across town, lights went out as the creature surged through the streets. Doc felt numb at the sight of her fellow people dropping like flies, caught and drained of life no matter how they tried to evade the tendrils of sentient cloud.

“Can’t we do anything?” The nurse yelled above the screams.

Doc was already moving toward the reception desk.

“Yes!” she said over her shoulder as she hooked into the communication circuits. “I’m calling the *North Star*. I just hope someone can get away from here and tell them what happened!”

The nursing staff went pale as the import of her words sank in.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aboard the *North Star*, Dalip Singh had problems of his own. A lurid purple light filled the bridge as he fought to resume control of his vessel.

“Harvey!” He roared over the screaming wind and the cries of the refugees crowding the decks below.

“Here, Captain!” Harvey banged onto the bridge from the port wing, and had to hurl himself against the door to help the straining motors shut it against the howling wind.

“Get onto the main controls! Use manual override if I can’t get into the system.”

Dalip turned and concentrated his thoughts once more, trying to shut out the sounds of the mayhem outside.

Graphic displays flickered into his mind’s eye, alphanumeric characters dancing and blurring at the edges as he fought to gain entry to the *North Star’s* system. After an agonizing moment, a menu coalesced at last into a coherent form. “Which-ich-ich functionsss?” the normally toneless voice asked in a drunken slur.

“Moorings! Engines! Steering!” Dalip said.

*Outside, a tendril of cloud drooped lazily toward the superstructure. For a few moments, it quested amongst the masthead array, searching, and then it twitched and lashed itself around an antenna. It found what it was looking for deep in the bowels of the ship.*

“Attempting requestsssstttt...” With a flicker, the voice and visual display vanished.

Dalip opened his eyes, staring blankly for a few seconds as his mind came back to the real world. “Harvey! Go to manual!”

Harvey needed no further bidding. His fingers danced over the main controls, bypassing the computer, resorting to the age-old mechanical systems they had only ever used in exercises. Dalip blessed the foresight shown by the *North Star's* builders when they had included them in the vessel's construction.

Beneath the decks, the MHD turbines began to spin up to speed. With a groan, the big vessel surged forward, her wayward advance checked only by Dalip, standing at the ship's wheel in the manner of sea captains of long ago. An intolerable strain came onto the moorings and the hull began to resonate with the tension.

"I can't hold her! Harvey, cast off! Cast off, dammit!" Dalip glared at the sensor operator.

"I'm trying, Cap'n!" Harvey punched desperately at his panel. "The controls are jammed!"

Along the dockside, the mooring and umbilical cables strained as thousands of tons of vessel tried to break free. The bow twisted and groaned, throwing to their knees those people still trying to scramble aboard. Casting a wild glance through the windows at the crowds still pouring onto the dock, Dalip snatched up the all-call mike. "Stand clear! Stand clear!"

His amplified voice bellowed from the ship's speakers and across the dockside, overcoming the howl of the storm for a brief moment, but it was too late. A second later, the first mooring parted, then, swiftly, the rest of the cables, one after another, scything lethally across the wharf. Those who had not managed to get aboard were cut down like wheat before the harvester's blade.

Dalip blanched and closed his eyes. Harvey cast one look at the carnage and vomited noisily onto the floor.

Gathering speed, the *North Star* turned and headed out to sea.

## Chapter Sixteen

Craig felt his thoughts slowly coalesce into order through the haze of the sedative. As his consciousness returned, he became aware of muted noise and motion all around him. He opened his eyes with an effort, and gazed up at the dimly lit ceiling. The familiar clutter of ducts and cables over its surface showed he was in a cabin aboard the *North Star*.

Recent memories suddenly kicked in, and he felt the sharp stab of loss in his heart. He groaned.

“Craig?” A woman’s voice spoke softly, and someone came up alongside the bunk.

“Jan?” he said, his voice hoarse. “Are we at sea again? What’s going on?”

Jan Hughes clasped his hand and stroked his brow. She looked pale. “It’s nothing, Craig,” she said. “Lie still.” He forced his eyes to focus on her. She looked away.

“There’s something going on,” he said insistently, struggling to sit up. “I feel...” His head swam. “Oh, shit! That fucking drug!” The spinning sensation gradually faded and he took a deep breath. “Jan, please, just tell me what’s going on.”

“Look, that creature’s back!” she said hurriedly. “Dalip’s taking us out to sea. It’s our only hope!”

“What?” Craig stared at her. “Where are we?”

“Home. We reached port whilst you were out cold. Everyone else went ashore. I’m only aboard to finish up my report. I thought I’d sit with you until you woke up.” She shivered. “Then word came over the comm circuit. That creature suddenly appeared in town. It’s killing people, Craig. Killing them like it killed Cassie and Thomas!”

“Cassie?” Her words penetrated the haze at last. “It’s killing people?”

Jan gripped his hands. “Yes, Craig. Dalip’s doing his best to get us out of here. Someone’s got to be left to warn others.”

Craig looked at the wan face of the aerodyne pilot, her dark brown eyes misty with unshed tears.

He shook his head. “No. No!” he said, rising unsteadily to his feet. “Cassie’s back there! Doc shouldn’t have taken her; she’s going to cut her up, and Cassie’s still alive...”

“She’s dead, Craig! Likely they’re all dead now!” Jan bit her lip. “We have to accept that!”

He grabbed her by the arms, glaring down into a pretty face suddenly filled with the immediate fear of a young woman being gripped by a strong man.

“Jan,” he said with a sigh, easing his grip. “Please, please believe me! Cassie came to me in my dreams. She told me that she’s still alive, that there’s something preventing her from dying. She promised to return to me.”

“Oh, gods, Craig!” Jan said with a moan. Angrily, she pushed his hands away and rubbed at the bruising on her arms. “You’re deluded!”

“Look into my eyes, Jan,” he said. “You’ve got some PSI-talent. Look into my eyes and see if I’m deluded or not!”

Jan looked up at him. A long moment passed. “I’m not sure,” she muttered eventually. “But my instinct says you’re not.”

“What if I can prove it to you?” he asked, looking around the cabin. Then he held up a hand. “Yes! That’s it!” He swung back to face her. “You and Thomas were there in the dream,

Jan. We were in Ireland, having a last night on Earth before catching the shuttle to orbit. You were singing a song.”

He snatched the datapad from the front pocket of her flight-suit, and then hurriedly pecked out a few words on the word-processor function. “I’ll not show you until you tell me, but this is what you sang. Remember, I wasn’t with you that night.”

“It was the ‘Fields of Athenry,’” Jan said softly, staring up at him. “I had that song running through my mind for hours after I returned from searching for Cassie.”

Craig handed her the datapad.

She looked at the screen. “‘The Fields of Athenry’!”

\* \* \* \* \*

A sizzling barrier of violet light closed off every outside door and window in the palace of the mind. Cassie, Lucia, and Pandit stood in the chamber, staring out at the sight, their faces lit by the baleful glare. The curtains no longer drifted in the soft breeze; the scent of a desert at night no longer filled the air.

“We’re shut in!” Cassie clenched her hands into fists. “Nataraja set up some kind of barrier around us!”

“Ah, that’s clever, Cassie, so it is,” her mother said. “I’d never have guessed if you hadn’t told me.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Mother!” She retorted.

“Ladies, I suggest we save our energies for dealing with this situation,” Pandit said firmly.

“Are you going to use the virus on it?” Cassie asked.

“I’m not sure if it’ll work,” the construct replied. “I’ll have to think of another method to counter this barrier.”

“Have we really got time for that?” Lucia asked. “Even in here?”

Pandit shrugged. “We have little choice, Commander. We must get out of this construct in order to deploy the virus.”

Cassie let her thoughts follow a thread of action that had suggested itself. “There’s one thing we can do,” she said, looking at the statue in the nearby niche.

Lucia and Pandit stopped arguing long enough to glance at her, then at the statue.

“Ganesh?” Lucia asked.

“The Remover of Obstacles!” Pandit grinned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jan settled into her seat in the aerodyne. “I don’t like this!” she said.

“One way or the other, it won’t matter for long!” Craig replied from the passenger seat as he fastened his helmet.

“I mean I *really* don’t like this!”

They were in the hangar on the afterdeck of the *North Star*. Jan began flicking through the initiation sequence in her mind-link, tuned in to the aerodyne’s systems. No problems presented themselves; the entity hadn’t interfered with the flying machine. It left her plenty of time to worry.

“Jan?” Harvey’s voice came over the communications link.

“Hello, Harvey,” she said with a sigh.

“What are you doing? My display shows you’re prepping for flight!”

“Then that’s what I’m doing, Harvey. Don’t worry; I’m just giving Craig a lift to shore.”

“Jan, this is Dalip!”

“Oh, fuck, here it comes ...”

“Close down and get out of there, at once!” The Captain thundered. “This is no time for playing games!”

"I'm not playing, Captain," she responded tersely. The hangar doors purred open, revealing a choppy, turbulent sea. "Craig is convinced Cassie is still alive. I'm prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. She's ashore in the middle of that thing. If we can, we'll get her and anyone else we can find out of there."

"You'll be killed, damn you!"

"We all die in the end, Captain." Jan looked out at the ugly sea and the purple-hued sky. "And this is as good a day for it as any."

\* \* \* \* \*

Up on the bridge, Harvey worked to seal the hangar, but the override was down. He and Dalip watched impotently as the sleek aerodyne rolled out onto the flight deck, the refugees huddling there scattering before its advance.

"Jan, please, in the name of sanity, don't do this!" Dalip said.

His plea went unanswered as the aerodyne's engines whined, lifting it up and over the deck and away. Before long, it had disappeared in the direction of the malevolent purple cloud that covered the shore.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lord Ganesh, Remover of Obstacles, hear our prayer!"

Cassie bowed before the statue, her palms pressed together, head lowered in supplication. Pandit had created sweet incense, and the fragrance filled the still air.

"I hope this works!" Lucia said.

"It will," Pandit replied. "I have every confidence in your daughter."

Cassie bowed before the god. "Ganesh, Great Helper! Aid us in our need!" she said loudly.



The idol stirred. Dust drifted to the floor. Strong limbs unfolded, stretched, as if working out the knots from muscles too long unused. Gold bangles clashed on his arms. The great trunk flexed between the shining gold-capped tusks, straightened, then sniffed the air. Lord Ganesh stepped down ponderously from his plinth. Two darkly intelligent eyes fixed themselves on the young woman.

“Yourrrr requessstt?” Ganesh growled in a deep bass voice.

“Lord Ganesh, we seek to aid our people, yet our way is closed by this barrier!” Cassie gestured to the flickering light beyond the windows. “We lack the power, and many will die if we do not succeed!”

“She’s good!” Lucia marveled *sotto voce* to Pandit. “Damn, but she’s good!”

Pandit was also bowing, his palms pressed together. “Commander, I suggest you show proper respect to the gods. It may well be a construct, fashioned by Cassie from memories of her childhood stories. But in case it isn’t...”

Lucia got the point and joined him in respectful prayer.

Ganesh, Remover of Obstacles, squinted at the glowing light. From the expression on his elephantine face, he was not impressed by what he saw. Striding across to the nearest tall window, he flung the curtain back and contemplated the barrier at closer quarters. With a derisive snort, he reached out with hands and trunk, took a firm hold of the crackling, spitting light, and heaved.

\* \* \* \* \*

Doc paced up and down the morgue. The frightened survivors watched her. One of the nurses began to cry, quietly.

“Stop that!” Doc snapped. “Mewling now won’t help us do a damn thing!”

The noise abruptly ceased.

Doc continued to pace, but she shot the nurse a glance. “Dear colleague, there’s a tide in the affairs of men. A time to sing, a time to dance, a time to laugh, a time to weep. And right now, it’s the time to say ‘Fuck it!’” She fumed, glaring up at the narrow slot of the window. An evil purple light glared back. “I’m not in the habit of giving in to anything. I don’t feel like starting now!”

“If you have any ideas, we’re open to them,” one of the nurses replied timidly.

Doc didn’t respond. She was deeply worried. Think as she might, not a single idea presented itself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Strong winds made the aerodyne buck savagely in the air. Jan fought the controls in the silence of her mind, striving to keep them on course and, preferably, upright.

Craig sat miserably beside her, having puked his stomach dry soon after they had entered the storm front. The air-conditioning just barely held the stench of vomit at bay. Craig tried not to look at the state of the small cabin. One sick-bag hadn’t sufficed. Jan, locked into the controls, didn’t appear to notice. He felt an incongruous guilt at putting more strain on her long-suffering good nature.

His conscious mind was sulking. *A bad idea. This was a bad idea!*

*So what?* His subconscious mind retorted. *Cassie’s in there, and we’ll be with her, come what may!*

“I’m going higher!” Jan called over the roar of wind and speed. “We’ll get over the hospital, then dive straight down!”

“What’ll that do?” He yelled back.

“If nothing else, it’ll reduce the time we’re in this muck!”

In the seat of his pants, Craig felt the aerodyne lift and climb. He sank back in the padding, the harness loosening for a moment before automatically tightening. His attention swung to the small visual display in the dash in front of him. It was filled with purple light.

“We’re coming, Cass,” he whispered. “Hold on, we’re coming!”

\* \* \* \* \*

The air in the halls of the mind sizzled as Lord Ganesh took up the strain. Muscles like coconuts moved under his skin as his powerful body fought to overcome the barrier. Cassie watched from a safe distance, her fists clenched, willing the god on. Finally, with an outraged shriek and a violent flash, the energy barrier parted and died, leaving her dazzled.

Gradually, her eyes recovered, and the soft moonlight returned.

Lord Ganesh wiped his hands and turned to regard Cassie and the others. “Alllll gonnne.” His voice rumbled with great satisfaction.

“Thank you, Lord Ganesh!” Cassie beamed and forgot decorum enough to hug the avatar of the god.

Ganesh did not seem displeased as he gently eased her away.

“Go nowww!” He pointed beyond the palace. “Save yourrr peopllle...”

An effort of will, a flash of power, and they found themselves in the cold, antiseptic surroundings of a morgue. The room was large, yet crowded with people. No one paid any attention to them; their arrival had apparently gone unnoticed. Cassie recognized a few faces, mostly people from the hospital. Doc Maguire was striding back and forth, her heels clicking on the cold tiled surface; a tigress in a cage. Cassie sensed her emotions roiling within her mind, the frustration, the anger. The fear.

She could also sense her own body, lying not far away. *My body!* she thought. *It’s just over there. All I’ve ever known in my life, and now I’m detached from it...* She glanced

down at her feet. The Silver Cord shone there, brighter than before, an argent thread leading through the eerie darkness of the morgue to the cabinet in which her body lay.

Cassie shuddered. “How do we do this?” she asked Pandit, concentrating on the task at hand.

“We will need to act directly on the creature. The *Tri-Vikrama* virus will work better that way.”

“Hold on!” Cassie grasped his arm as he headed for the door. “*Tri-Vikrama?*”

Even her mother looked thoughtful.

“It’s the only way, Cassandra,” Pandit said gently. “These people need help; *you* need help.”

“But that’s bloody powerful stuff!” Her voice quavered. “You’re calling on Vishnu himself!”

“Yes. I bound a ritual of supplication to him within the fractal matrices. Vishnu is the protector and preserver of the world. Only he can help us defeat the entity. Only he can restore *dharma*.”

*Dharma*: order...

“I just hope it works!” Cassie said softly.

The howl of an aerodyne in a steep dive abruptly split the air. She looked up, let her attention focus.

“It’s Craig!”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, shiiiiittt!” Jan gasped, fighting with the manual controls. Purple light infused everything, the surge of power sending the computerized controls into howling insanity. Jan felt her grip on reality being twisted like a cloth in a mangle and hurriedly disengaged the cyber-link.

*Outside the chassis of the vehicle, Nataraja swirled and focused on the impudent intruder. Savage winds battered at the little craft, trying to get at the sweet contents of the human minds it sensed within. All it needed was a tiny hole, just a small fissure.*

## Chapter Seventeen

Cassie snatched the ball of the *Tri-Vikrama* virus from Pandit's hand and ran through the door. The mere fact that it was closed, locked, and barricaded was irrelevant to her at that moment. Spurning the use of any more doors, she ran through the walls and found herself outside, in the middle of a maelstrom.

Home was deserted. Bodies lay scattered like chaff on sidewalks and streets, draped over fences and vehicles. All around, the strange wind howled, a mingled torrent of mortal pain and terror. Cassie, her hair flowing about her head in the ethereal wind, looked up into the turgid gloom. The shriek of the falling aerodyne grew louder, but she could see nothing.

"Nataraja! Down here, you gobshite!" she screamed to the air.

The wind dropped.

"*You?*" The voice came from all around, oh-so-familiar, powerful, masculine -- and hideous. "*Back again! What do you want, little toy?*"

"I want you to leave my people alone!"

The pitch of the aerodyne's engines changed. Somewhere in the murky cloud, the pilot was regaining control.

"*Go away, I have no use for you...*"

A violent gust threw her off her feet and through the wall behind her. Shaking her head, Cassie stood up and stormed back out. "I'm gonna kill you, you bastard!"

Nataraja's mocking laugh filled the air, shaking the heavens with his mirth.

*"Oh, I think not!"*

And suddenly he appeared in front of her.

A gaudy, gauzy costume. Shining white turban, a glittering red jewel *aigrette* on the peak. Waistcoat and puffy short trousers of black silk with swirls of reds and oranges and yellows and vibrant blues. That was her first impression. The second: the face of the judge had changed into something much younger, more refined -- but every bit as evil. His bare chest and four muscular arms shone with oil. The sneer was all too familiar.

Nataraja drew a sword, a tulwar of ancient design, and swirled it through the air experimentally. "If you insist on personal attention, then you shall have it, little toy." He smiled. "I thank you for serving as my...what is the phrase these Westerners use? Oh, yes: Trojan Horse!" The sharp black eyes glittered at her with contemptuous malice. "How dreadful you must feel, knowing you helped to kill all your friends!" He sighed, and fluttered his eyelashes at her.

Suddenly he pressed against her, his breath hot and fetid on her face. "And perhaps I can find another use for you!" He snarled. Cassie felt the creature's erection pressing against her belly. "I found much of interest amongst the memories of your kind. Amazing, how many thought about this...sex." His gaze flickered downward, then up. "Most interesting and instructive -- and enjoyable, it seems! Now I have the knowledge I can rape you to death!"

Huge, strong arms threw her to the ground, and the winds tore at her clothing, shredding it in the blast of his will. Then he was on top of her naked, writhing form, his huge phallus seeking entry.

With a scream, Cassie wrenched her hand free of the god's clasp and slammed the small ball of virus against his forehead.

\* \* \* \* \*

A pulse of white light exploded outwards from an epicenter on the ground below. As soft as thistledown, it washed over the aerodyne, and suddenly all the controls were restored.

Jan didn't ask questions; like most pilots, she was prosaic about life in the sky and took things as they came. Her instruments were telling her all was not well with the vehicle, and she should set down as soon as possible. There was also an acrid, organic smell in the cockpit, one which seemed familiar but out of place. Turning the scanners to the ground, she sought for a clear space to land.

Beside her, Craig had gone rigid in his seat. "Cassie! Oh, my gods! Cassie!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Nataraja gaped, staggered to his feet, and clutched his head. Eyes wide, he fell back a step.

An unseen presence seemed to fill the air. It spoke with a voice of total authority.

*I am Lord Vishnu! Hear me! Know that all creatures live within one of my three footsteps...*

"No!" Nataraja gasped. His gaze fixed on Cassie, incredulity and rising panic surging in the liquid depths of his eyes. "Not him! Not that ...!"

The purple leached from the sky as swiftly as water pouring down a drain.

Nataraja fell back a second step.

*...the three footsteps I take to make all things possible; to fight the evil that afflicts Mankind.* The tremendous voice of Vishnu rumbled across the sky.

A rising wail of agony tore out of Nataraja's throat. He shook violently. Cracks appeared all over his body, cracks that leaked a feral silver light. Above, the skies cleared, the blue returned.

Nataraja took a third and final step back.



*Until Satapatha Brahmana is reached; Nirvana, the Highest light of all...*

The god's body blew apart with a dying scream that shook the heavens.

*Which you shall never see, my brother!*

Then the unseen presence faded. Cessation. Negation. No wind, no noise. Nothing remained of the avatar. Nataraja, the Great Dancer at the End of Time, had gone.

Cassie got to her feet, feeling weak and shaky. She looked around, saw the bodies of her friends lying in the streets, and began to weep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Much, much later, she came 'round. She felt heavy; uncomfortable. Cold. It took an effort to raise her arm and wipe her face. For some reason, she was in the dark and lying in a tightly confined space.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked.

"I believe the conventional phrase for those regaining consciousness is 'Where am I?'"

"Pandit?"

"Yes, Cassandra?"

"Either shut up, or tell me where I am."

"You are in one of the cabinets in the morgue. I'm pleased to announce that your revival was successful. You are now alive!"

"Thank the gods for that! But I feel so heavy!"

"Well, you were flitting around in nothing but your spirit for a few days," the construct said reasonably. "You must expect to feel heavy for a while."

"Can I get out of here?" she asked, pushing at the unyielding surface in the dark.

"Oh, yes. Don't worry, the power supply is still down, so the cooler circuitry isn't operating. The drawer should yield easily when you push against the sides." Pandit coughed

delicately. "I'm afraid, after all that has happened, the colonists have higher priorities than looking after a dead body."

"Supposedly dead!"

With an effort, she drew her hands up above her head, and then paused.

"Nataraja was destroyed by the virus, wasn't he?" she asked, her suspicions raised. "When you said you invoked Vishnu, it was just a figure of speech, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps; and all you saw of Nataraja's demise was nothing more than the virus construct in action, hmm?"

"Pandit?"

"Yes, Cassandra?"

"You're being economical with the truth, aren't you?"

"Go and meet your lover, Cassandra; he's waited for you far too long already."

She grimaced, and pushed hard.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morgue, Craig looked up at the sound of the drawer sliding open.

He had been sitting at the cold, cold dissection slab for hours, not moving, his head sunk on his arms as he dozed. The smell of disinfectant clogged his nose, but he didn't heed it. No one had suggested he help with the massive clearing-up operation in progress all across the town. Some depressions are too deep for the harshest tragedy to move.

And now Cassie was clambering out of a drawer mid-way up the cabinet. Totally nude, her dark skin seemed to glow in the dark with an inner light of deep health. Numb with shock, almost disbelieving his own eyesight, he watched her lower herself to the floor, then twist and stretch as if working kinks out of her muscles.

He leapt to his feet. "Cassie!" His cry echoed around the tiled room.

She turned quickly and spotted him in the dim daylight shining through the high window, the only illumination in the room.

“Hello, Craig,” she whispered, shaking out her tumbling mass of black hair.

Joy overcame his bone-deep tiredness, and he ran to her. They met halfway, and melted into each other’s arms.

“I knew you would come back!” He held her tight against him, and his tears flowed down to fall upon her skin, as soft as rain.

### Aftermath

Two months later, the morning fog rose in the bay of Home and drifted across the town. Colonists on foot and in vehicles moved as silent as ghosts through the milky half-light; met, formed larger parties, gradually converged on the hill behind the town.

A monument stood there on the crest, a whiter shape against the white of the sky. Hundreds of names were inscribed on the surface, each picked out in gold leaf and coated with a monomolecular layer of diamond to preserve them for all time.

At the foot of the monolith stood Doc Maguire and Dalip Singh, the senior surviving personnel left in the colony and de facto rulers until an election could be held. As the crowd gathered around the crest of the hill, they regarded the two leaders with silent respect.

Cassie and Craig stood at the edge of the crowd, their arms around each other. Cassie was beginning to show, a new life forming amidst the memory of so much death and destruction. Behind her eyes, unknown to any but Craig and Doc, Pandit and Lucia Priyadarshini O’Neill looked on.

At last, all had gathered who could gather, and Doc stepped forward, clearing her throat.

“I’m not going to give a long speech,” she said in matter-of-fact tones. “We know what happened, and why.” She stole a glance at Dalip, who stared back with unreadable eyes, and

then looked at the faces of the crowd. “All of us lost, yet we’re still here. We met adversity in a shocking way. Yet we’re still here.”

Her gaze roved the faces until it settled on Cassie and Craig. “I was looking for the appropriate words for this occasion. Not being much of a wordsmith, I was at a loss. Then one of us who went through more than any other came to me with this.”

She held a datapad in her hand, yet those closest could see she was not reading from it. Her gaze now was fixed on some unseen point, far away in time and space.

“From ‘Vastness,’ by Alfred, Lord Tennyson...

“That which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield...”

❧ THE END ❧

~\*~

## Adrian J. Matthews

A native of the County of Norfolk, England, Adrian (43) attended school in a village right on the North Sea coast before moving on to further studies at college and university. After an early career in the leisure/tourism industry, he worked in the Inland Revenue and local government, before his present occupation of courier.

His hobbies include history, archaeology, science and technology, and he has travelled in Britain, the USA, Canada, Hungary and France. He lives within a stone's throw of the beach with his two adorable dogs, Ellie and Suzy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

*Dream Warriors 1: Gareth*

by Cyndi Friberg

Available Now at Loose Id

## Dream Warriors 1: Gareth

### *Elysian Fields*

Gareth pulled the supple body of the young woman into the bend of his own. Mortals responded to death in different ways. Some wept. Some screamed, bemoaning the injustice of all they had failed to accomplish; and some -- like this woman -- wanted one last taste of what they were leaving behind. He pushed her hair aside, fastening his mouth onto her neck, sucking firmly, while he caressed her soft skin. They lay on their sides in the fragrant grass, sunlight warming their naked bodies. Spooning, he'd heard this called. Such a silly name for something so erotic.

And eroticism was Gareth's life, his sustenance, his purpose for existence.

She squirmed restlessly, her nicely rounded bottom teasing his aching erection. He cupped her breast, enjoying the contour and firm resilience. Her nipple peaked as he rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. She arched into his caress, increasing the pressure against his palm and grinding her buttocks against him.

"Please, you're driving me crazy."

She panted out the words and Gareth smiled. Mission accomplished. Slipping his fingers beneath her knee, he raised her leg, pushing it up and toward her chest. His shaft had no trouble finding her entrance. Her hot, liquid response eased the way. He loved sinking into a woman slowly, allowing her to feel his thickness and length as he stretched the walls of her sheath. The woman in front of him trembled, moaning loudly once he impaled her completely.

He hooked her ankle over his thigh, keeping her open as he stroked the silken plane of her belly. Her feminine curls were damp, praise to his skill and caring. He explored her tender folds, amazed at how tightly she stretched to take him.

"I want to feel your pleasure. Don't move. Just let me touch you." He whispered the words into her ear and searched until his fingers found her swollen nub. Oh, yes. How he loved this incredible little gift from Aphrodite. His job would be so much more difficult without it. He circled her gently, knowing she didn't need much stimulation to lose control.

He rocked forward while increasing the pressure of his fingers. Her core rippled, squeezing him tightly and she shook in his arms.

"Very nice. Can you do it again?"

"I could do this forever." She laughed. "You're amazing."

He was still hard and throbbing within her, so he didn't remind her that this was a one-time only offer. As soon as Rhadamanthys officially admitted her to the Elysian Fields, her libido would dissipate. She'd be at peace, content, happy, but never...horny. Poor thing.

"Gareth."

Someone spoke his name from behind him, but he ignored it. He started moving in the woman, reveling in the sweet friction of her clinging sheath.

"Gareth. You have to come now."

"I'm working on it," he snapped, thrusting faster.

"We have an emergency. Morpheus sent me to find you."

"I'm a little busy right now!"

"Just hurry up. The team is assembling."

\* \* \* \* \*

*What people are saying about*

## Dream Warriors 1: Gareth

The story is sexy and sweet. The dream sequences were sensual and passionate. I could not put it down. I will be anxiously awaiting more from the *Dream Warrior* series.

-- Carla Vail, reviewer for *Karen Find Out About New Books* and *Coffee Time Romance*

Cyndi Friberg's eroticism starts in the slumbering mind, a great place for any fantasy to begin. Her dream warriors are quite skilled and their bedroom antics are fairly explicit... Gareth's handsome comrades are also built up to have interesting story lines, leading this reader to hope that Cyndi Friberg continues to take her readers back to this vision of an ancient time and place.

-- Naomi, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

The first book in the *Dream Warriors* series, *Gareth* deftly blends Greek mythology into a contemporary setting giving readers a delightful romance of originality and passion... While the romance in *Gareth* stands alone, there are plot threads woven through the entire series that will not be resolved until later. Fast paced, with a well-matched hero and heroine and a variety of interesting secondary characters both human and inhuman, *Gareth* will appeal to fans of paranormal and fantasy romance alike. I look forward to the next book in the series featuring Gareth's yummy fellow Dream Warrior, Ryder, and Meagan's friend and co-worker, Sheridan.

-- Sondrea Cash, *Romance Reviews Today*