

EARTHBOUND



D M Arnold

EARTHBOUND

Volume I of the *Earthbound Series*

a novel by

D M Arnold

For other volumes in this series, visit

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1 -- Nykkyo

Nykkyo Kyhana dreamed of a blue world. It was the same as he had dreamt for the past ten nights: The flash of a warp jump and he found himself looking down at a blue orb flecked with white and seemingly small enough to hold in the palm of his hand. He began to fall, accelerating toward the planet -- a lone, naked figure falling through the void. The sapphire sphere grew to overwhelming size as he fell, expanding to fill his field of vision...

He woke with a start, breathless and his heart racing. Beside him lay his wife Senta, her face turned from him and hidden by unruly locks of red hair. A shaft of golden morning sunlight streamed through the archway leading to the balcony.

Nyk arose, showered and dressed in a tunic and *xarpa*. He stepped onto the balcony of the apartment he shared with Senta, looked down 353 stories to the street and watched the orange sun bronze the city. It was 6636.031 APF, the 31st Floran day of the 6,636th Floran year after PlanetFall.

He turned from the balcony and stopped to regard a medallion hanging on the wall. It was a golden disk with a green stone set at its center and incised with three odd symbols. At the top was an upright with two crossbars. Next, clockwise, were two slashes tilted toward each other's tops. Clockwise again was another upright, bent to the lower left and crossed with a single stroke.

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Nyk lifted the pendant from its hanger and cradled it in his palm. He noted a flaw where it had been bent and straightened. The disk was an artifact from the founding days of his world. He felt pride to hold it; and melancholy as he recalled how he had acquired it. It had belonged to his father.

Senta stood nude in the doorway to their bedroom. “You didn't sleep well last night,” she said. “Your tossing and turning kept me up.”

“You're right, *korlyta*,” he replied. “I didn't. Thoughts of my transit tomorrow kept disturbing me.” His gaze returned to the golden pendant and he traced the mysterious figures with his fingertip.

“Nykkyo Kyhana -- the keeper of the crest.”

“Why do you mock me so? I'm proud of my Kyhana blood. For two hundred generations this pendant has been passed from grandfather to father upon the birth of the first grandchild. It won't be rightfully mine until you and I have a child. What are the odds of that, Senta?” Her eyes narrowed. “Stranger things have happened, I suppose. How do you think Dad would react to learn his son finally made something of himself?”

Senta folded her arms and sighed. “I don't understand how you can consider a one-year ExoAgency tour making something of yourself. You'll still need a career after you return.”

Nyk ignored Senta's remark. He huffed moisture onto the pendant and buffed it on his tunic. “I suppose this should be in a museum. It is an object we know was crafted on Earth. By right, it belongs to all the Floran people. Maybe I'll donate it along with my translation of Koichi's journal, once I finish it.”

He replaced the object on its hook, returned to the balcony and looked out. Floran City's urban landscape stretched before him to the horizon. He saw the streets filling with groundcars and foot traffic. Tubecars sped through the transparent, tubular roadways lacing together

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the city's mile-high skyscrapers, and skimmers flew from rooftop to rooftop. Senta stood beside him.

“The High Legislature is in session today,” he said. “No doubt debating the wisdom of relocating the polity's capital to a colony planet. I understand the Deltans are making a case for the honor. I wish they would. It might relieve some of the traffic.”

“Will you be stationed in a city?” she asked.

“In a small city. It's smaller than Sudal. The population's about fifty thousand.”

“Come, I'll heat some breakfast.” He followed her to the apartment's kitchen and began brewing a pot of green tea. She retrieved a pair of prefab meals, warmed them and plunked the trays onto the table.

Nyk sat across from his wife and regarded her as she ate. For an instant she seemed to him a stranger. He had married her eight Floran years ago -- shortly after the shuttle crash had claimed his parents. Like most Florans', his was an arranged marriage. Veska had insisted on it.

“I'll be home early today,” Senta said, “to prepare for your farewell party.”

Nyk was dreading the party. “I'm not looking forward to it,” he replied.

“I don't know what's wrong with you -- why you're so adverse to having a little fun.”

“Tomorrow I go offworld for a year. An Agency tour of duty seemed a good idea when I applied for it. Now the notion is beginning to daunt me.”

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“I wish you hadn't chosen that assignment. I rather you had signed onto a scout cruiser, instead. You might have served on the vessel that discovers our next colony planet.”

“Might-haves don't count.”

“You certainly wouldn't have gone through such arduous training and you wouldn't find yourself alone on a hostile world.”

“It's hardly that. It's different, but it's not hostile. I don't mind working alone. My Agency training is more than adequate. I'm sure I'll survive Earth.”

Nyk's gaze focused on the coin-sized tattoo on Senta's right deltoid -- the marriage crest binding her to the Kyhana line. The design was identical to the one on the pendant, and he wore her family emblem on his right upper arm. The same Kyhana insignia had adorned the shoulder of Nyk's mother.

He recalled his cultural training. On Earth -- or, at least in the corner of it where he was headed -- brides and grooms selected each other on the basis of love. He wondered if the Earth adage was correct -- if a man married a woman similar to his mother. If it were so, he mused, then what about Senta would remind him of his mother? They certainly didn't look alike. His mother had been a large-framed woman with the sandy hair and blue-grey eyes she passed on to her son -- round, soft -- attractive, in a matronly way.

Senta frequently was mistaken for a girl half her age.

He scooped a spoonful of his breakfast and wondered if it worked the other way around. Would an Earth woman choose a husband who reminded her of her father? What about himself was similar to Veska? One similarity he did recognize -- toward the end, his parents had been incapable of beginning a conversation without it degenerating into an argument.

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“You know,” Senta said without looking up, “ExoAgents have died there. Some were burned alive.”

“That was hundreds of years ago. We've had no problems with Floran Agents on Earth for generations. The Agency is a critical arm of the Service. I'll be making a valuable contribution to the health and welfare of our people.”

“Think what you like.”

“The Agency is how we obtain fresh genes to keep our food and fiber crops healthy. As a geneticist you must appreciate the importance of that.” Nyk scooped another spoonful. “I wish you hadn't planned this party. I'd prefer to have a quiet evening alone with my thoughts.” He sipped his tea. “And with you, *korlyta*.”

“I think you'd rather have a quiet evening alone in your study. You'd probably prefer a quiet lifetime in there. Why can't you see tonight as a last chance to have some fun before you start your assignment?”

“Senta, I know tonight's event is really for your enjoyment. You're well aware I don't like these occasions and I never feel comfortable at them.”

“You're inhibited, Nyk. It must be that provincial upbringing of yours. You're in the City, now. You should regard tonight as a chance to get it out of your system. You'll be on Earth a long time. Indulging at one of these parties in no way diminishes what you and I have. I've invited some very beautiful men and women. The Arodsu twins will be here. They were flirting with you at last year's lab party, I recall. Aren't you the least bit curious about them?”

“Curious, perhaps... a little,” he said.

“Then, use this as an opportunity to satisfy your curiosity. The party is in your honor. No one would refuse you.”

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“I don't like making intimate with strangers, and I hardly know them. I'll bet I'll hardly know anyone.”

“If you would've given me the names of some of your *amften*, I'd have invited them, too. Oh, I forgot -- you don't have any. How can you have friends to invite if you can't take the trouble to make a few?”

“Let me see the guest list, *korlyta*.” Senta handed him a datacel. Nyk inserted it into a vidisplay and scanned the list with a frown. “I was right. I hardly know anyone. How many of these number among your conquests?”

“Why does my social life bother you so?”

“It doesn't, Senta -- it amazes me.”

“It must, or you wouldn't keep bringing it up. We do have our understanding.”

“As you like to remind me.” He looked into her green eyes. “I'm sorry -- thoughts about the mission have put me into an odd mood.” He returned his gaze to the vidisplay. “Are any of the women on this list fertile?”

“No -- none have applied for birth licenses.”

“Good. Then we won't have to worry about any accidents. Did you invite Aahhn and his wife?”

“Yes, but they declined.”

“I'm not surprised. Aahhn's too busy now with his responsibilities at the clinic.” He continued to peruse the list. “Zander Baxa is coming?”

“So -- you will know someone. He's the only dear friend of yours I could think of.”

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“I haven't seen him in years. He and I were best friends as boys in Sudal, and he's the one who first interested me in the ExoAgency. He'll bring his trophy wife. You know she's an *ax'amfin*.”

“I hope you won't use that word in front of her, Nyk. She'll be our guest.”

“Would you rather I called her *ax'amfa*?” Senta glowered. “How about *ax'amorfa*?” She looked daggers at him. “You know how I feel about the *ax'amfinen*. You can sometimes see them on news broadcasts, consorts to colonial officials looking so ... so stuffy and snooty. That whole institution's an abomination. We should abolish the genetic counselors that create them and the finishing schools that train them. I can't believe our society permits it.”

“They're such beautiful women,” she replied, “so striking, with such light blond hair and white skin.”

“I suspect she's the reason you invited Zander.”

“I've wanted to meet one.” Senta sipped her tea. “I have some curiosity of my own. Promise me you'll make her feel welcome in our home.”

“I promise, *korlyta*. I can't understand what Zander did to deserve one of those women. I've never heard of a mere mortal like him being assigned an *ax'amfin*. He's no colonial chancellor. He's a mid-level functionary -- an ExoService career man.”

“Your father earned such a reward. He could've had a finishing school companion.”

“My father did something much more sensible. He had the house in Sudal built.”

“That's not my point,” Senta replied. “It is possible for an ordinary citizen to accomplish something and be granted a boon. Finishing school companions are frequently so awarded.”

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“It's not right to make a human being the reward for accomplishment.”

Senta placed her empty tray and cup into the waste reprocessor. Nyk dumped his utensils, walked to his study and sat at his desk. He picked up a metallic cylinder and turned it over in his fingers. A polymer tray held a number of similar objects. They were the data capsules containing the journal of Koichi Kyhana.

Nyk slipped a datacel into his vidisplay and contemplated the screen. Senta stood behind him. “I can't make any sense of this.”

“Those are the old Roman characters,” he replied and touched the screen. “This is the same text in Floran characters.”

“That hardly helps.”

Nyk flipped the screen to the Roman characters and read a paragraph in the original Esperanto. He translated the passage -- one in which Koichi lamented the loss of his wife Sarah the year before. “Koichi wrote that about twenty years after PlanetFall. Such pathos. Do you see what a sensitive journalist he was? And, Esperanto wasn't his first language -- English was.”

“You know, Nyk, if you had applied yourself toward your studies with half the diligence as learning Esperanto, you might have that Food Service position today.”

“That job was nothing but data pushing. Estimate this, plan for that, measure productivity, invent lame slogans for incentive programs. I have no interest in that sort of work, and you know it.”

“You'll need some sort of career.” She headed from the study. “I'm going to get dressed.”

Nyk laced his fingers behind his head and regarded the screen of Esperanto. He had read some of the other material dating from the founding of his world. The *Floran's* log was preserved and translated, as

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were shipboard diaries kept by Captain Ty Davis and other crewmates. Nyk knew of the mission, launched in the opening years of Earth's twenty-third century. It was that world's first attempt to form a colony on a planet orbiting Beta Centauri, a star so close as a stone's throw in interstellar terms.

Something went wrong when the *Floran's* warp coil was triggered. The vessel was thrown two hundred lightyears off course and five thousand Earth years into the past. It was Koichi Kyhana who discovered the colonists' only chance for survival -- the planet they named after their vessel. It was the world Nyk and a billion and a half others now called home. Nyk touched the vidisplay and brought up a photoimage.

"Is that Koichi?" he heard Senta ask from behind him as she laced her sandals.

"Yes."

"He looks nothing like anyone on this world."

"Our family originated in an Earth region called Japan. Koich's features are typically Japanese. Note his black hair, the shape of his eyes and his yellow-brown complexion. You can see a trace of his features in my eyes."

Senta looked at him and laughed, "Think what you want, Nykkyo, but your eyes look like everyone else's."

"Exactly. Interbreeding in the early years eliminated the racial diversity of the original settlers. Now, Florans come only in shades of blond. You're a bit of an oddity with your red hair. Floran eyes retain a hint of Asian influence and your eyes have it, too." He leaned back. "Oh, how I wish I could experience Earth as Koichi describes it. It's two hundred years yet before his time." Nyk returned his attention to the vidisplay. "I would give anything now for a bowl of my mother's *miso* soup," he translated. "I wonder what *miso* is."

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“Nyk, I'm headed to the lab,” Senta said from the living room. “My skimmer will be here any moment. Don't forget the drugs for tonight's party.”

He stepped from the study. “Of course not.”

“Here's the list.” She handed him a datacel. “I loaded your spending account with ample credits, so don't skimp. Make sure you get everything on the list.”

“Oh, I won't...” Senta shot him a stern look. “...skimp, that is.”

She regarded him, her arms folded. “Here I am, giving you spending credits. I STILL can't believe you spent two full years in Agency training without pay. They offered you no stipend at all.”

He rolled his eyes. “We've gone over this, Senta. I was enrolled on a provisional acceptance, and they don't pay stipends to provisional trainees.”

“That's right -- I imagine they were as astounded as I was that you actually completed the program.”

“That wasn't called for.”

“Oh, don't pout. I AM happy to see you succeed, Nykkyo ... at anything.”

“Why should you care? You're earning more than enough for both of us. The living allowance for this apartment alone must be several times an ordinary worker's stipend.”

“There's no shame in holding responsibility and being well compensated for it.”

“I'll have a good enough income once I start my assignment,” Nyk protested. “I'll receive a stipend in work credits ... and, I'll also receive a living allowance in Earth currency. It's as if I were being paid twice.”

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“What good is Earth currency, here?” she asked.

“About as good as Floran credits there,” he replied. Nyk saw the skimmer approach and hover adjacent to their balcony. He glanced at the Food Service emblem on its side -- a stylized agridome within a wreath of wheat stalks. A wide door swung upward and a stairway dropped to the balcony floor. The pilot stepped out and stood by the open door.

Senta headed toward the balcony. “Just make sure you get everything on that list,” she called to him over her shoulder.

Nyk followed his wife to the balcony. “Good morning, Dr Kyhana,” the pilot said. He nodded at Nyk. “Mr Kyhana.”

“Rez, I’ll be coming home early,” she said to the pilot, “It’ll make a short day for you.”

“Thank you ma’m,” he replied as he helped Senta into the skimmer. He gave Nyk the two-finger Floran salute, climbed aboard and shut the door. Nyk watched as the skimmer disappeared into the distance.

Nyk returned to his study and worked on the journal until he began to feel hungry. He selected a sweet bean paste and rice cake and opened a bottle of an effervescent blue liquid. The time on the vidisplay caught his eye -- if Senta returned and he hadn’t procured those drugs, there would be trouble. He washed down the last of the rice cake and deposited the empty packages into the waste reprocessor.

The lift took him to tubecar platform on the 100th level and he approached a kiosk. He pressed his right wrist to the scanpad. It chirped as it read his personal identification code from a microchip implanted in his metacarpal bone. “Good afternoon, Nykkyo Kyhana,” a synthesized voice came from the kiosk. “Where do you want to go today?” A list of destinations appeared on a vidisplay.

“Arcade, two-fifty-seventh street.” The vidisplay showed an image of the mall. “Confirmed.”

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The fare for the ride was computed and deducted from his Central Admin spending account. “We apologize for the delay in our service,” said the voice from the kiosk. “Have a good day.”

He paced around the platform. Overhead, the sky was a deep, lapis lazuli blue and constellations of brighter stars were visible in broad daylight. The bullet-shaped vehicle rolled onto the platform and its transparent cowl slid back.

Nyk climbed in and settled into his seat. “Car, go,” he commanded. The cowl slid forward and the car accelerated into a transparent tube suspended high above street level. It slid, propelled by its inertial sink, along the tube. The vehicle slowed and veered into a two-lane tube, then accelerated. The car joined others in a ballet choreographed by Central Admin transportation computers.

The tubecar arrived at the mall. Nyk climbed out and walked into the drug store. He reviewed Senta's list on a handheld vidisplay he carried tucked in his *xarpa*. He began selecting items from the array of intoxicants on sale in the government-run shop.

The shop attendant called to him, “Have you seen this? It's brand new. This will double a woman's endurance.” Nyk picked up a few of the new product. He gathered a collection of inhibition-relaxant and euphoriant inhalers, psychedelic tabs and some injectibles. He paid for his purchase with a press of his wrist to the scanpad.

Nyk proceeded down the mall concourse to the food store and began selecting refreshments. He reviewed the list and loaded a polymer shopping bag with packs of beverages. On his way toward the self-service checkout he picked up a package of snack wafers.

He decided to walk home. His mind wandered to his Agency training. He recalled the intensity of it. His trainers were given two years to instill flawless facility in the language and to teach Earth customs and practices. The instruction had been augmented with subliminal induction and mind-expanding drugs.

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Nyk remembered the language training. Actually, he remembered none of the training proper. He had lain in a coma for ten days as the subliminal inducer programmed the neurons in his brain. He remembered vividly awakening from the coma -- the crippling headaches and debilitating nausea. It was three days before he could keep food down. But, he emerged from subliminal sleep with a native-born American's fluency.

One lesson in particular had been drummed into his head. "Above all, we must avoid temporal interference," an instructor had lectured. "The act of placing Agents on Earth puts us at risk of creating a temporal paradox. Our civilization grew from the failed Centauri mission, five thousand Earth years in our past. However, the mission is yet two hundred years in that planet's future.

"If those on Earth were to learn of the upcoming fate of the *Floran*, the mission might not be launched. Without that mission the Floran hegemony -- twenty-four billion men, women and children -- would cease to exist. This is the risk of an Agency assignment. Tread carefully on Earth. Think of the lives, the cities, the colony planets and the civilization we've built over six thousand Floran years. Think of your own life. Tread carefully..."

Nyk headed down a side street. At about mid-block, he was approached by a gaunt man several years older than he, barefoot and wearing a stained and tattered tunic without a *xarpa*. His beard showed several days' worth of growth. An orange triangle tattooed onto the man's forehead marked him as an incorrigible. Nyk realized he had no way to escape an encounter.

"Excuse me, sir," the man said, "I see you've been to the food store. Could you spare a miserable felon a bite to eat? I've exhausted my food credits for the period and I haven't eaten in two days."

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Nyk reached into the shopping sack and retrieved the package of snack wafers. He handed it to the man, who ripped it open and began devouring them.

“You're looking at what becomes of a criminal,” he said between bites. “Economic incarceration, it's called.” He held up his right wrist. “My ID's been marked. I cannot purchase anything, save subsistence food. I must travel on foot. Even use of the vidphones is denied me. I must sleep in a shelter. I'm a prisoner on the streets of this city.” He muttered as he ate.

“I committed no crime. I was convicted of homicide, of murdering my *amfin* in a crime of passion. I did not do that, I could never do that. I loved her. I was convicted on circumstantial evidence ... They called me a societopath ... I volunteered for truth drug interrogation, but Internal Affairs convinced the magistrates even that testimony couldn't be trusted.” He looked into Nyk's eyes. “I ask you, does this look like the face of a societopath?”

Nyk thought it might.

“In fact, they've no proof she's dead. They never found the body! I've lost everything, my home, my livelihood and my family.” Nyk's gaze strayed to the man's right arm. It bore a solid black circle where the wedding crest would be. “I've served half a fifteen-year sentence. In two years, my sentence is up for review. I might be granted parole. I'll go down to Tinam and do some crop tending. Or maybe to one of the colonies. I'll enter a mining camp on T-Delta and start over, there...”

The man finished the pack of wafers. “Thank you, sir. Thank you for taking pity on this wretch.” He crumpled the empty package and began to toss it on the sidewalk.

“I'll take that.” Nyk took the wrapper. The felon gave him the two-finger Floran salute and walked away. Nyk hurried toward his apartment building. He tossed the empty package into the waste reprocessor at the entrance and rode the lift to the 353rd floor. A press of his wrist against

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the scanpad opened the door. Senta was at the lab, but he expected her shortly. He set the drugs and groceries on the kitchen counter and headed for his study.

Nyk heard the sound of the skimmer door. He walked into the kitchen. Senta was examining his purchases. "Is this new?" She held up an injector cartridge.

"Yes, it's a new female endurance enhancer."

"Well, I want to try that tonight."

"You hardly need it, Senta."

She examined the groceries. "You didn't get the snack wafers?"

"...No ... I can go out now and get some."

She scowled. "No, don't waste a trip. We'll manage without them. I put them on the list because I know you like them. I swear, Nyk, you're determined not to enjoy yourself tonight." She opened a cabinet door, withdrew a stack of polymer fiber baskets and began filling them with the inhalers and injector cartridges.

"I want to do some more work on Koichi's journal until it's closer to the time of the party. It may be a while before I can get back to it".

"Take these on your way to your little sanctuary. Please, Nykkyo, try to enjoy yourself tonight -- and try to think first of the needs of our guests. Is that too much to ask?"

He took the baskets, plopped them onto a table and headed to the study, pulling the door shut behind him. There, he picked up a datacel containing Koichi's journal. Nyk had not translated the journal in a systematic fashion. He had started with easier passages and worked his way to the more difficult ones as his grasp of the ancient Esperanto language improved. Now he was struggling with an entry from early in the journal. He translated:

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5.001 APF

Today begins our sixth orbit around the orange star we now know as our sun. We have agreed on some conventions for the recording of the passage of time. Our year has now been accurately measured to be 251.724 Floran days long. We have agreed the first day of each new year shall be marked by the conjunction of our sun and the star Deneb, which is bright enough to be seen in daylight.

When both Deneb and our sun are simultaneously at the zenith, it is a new year. Every fourth year will be shortened by one day to accommodate the nearly three fourths of an extra day in the revolutionary period -- analogous to the practice of Leap Year on Earth, except our Leap Year shall be shorter by one day, rather than longer. As for marking of time during the day, we have agreed to split each day into two meridians, the Zenith meridian, marked by the sun being at its zenith, and the Nadir meridian. Each meridian shall be divided into eight segments, and each segment into one hundred divisions. We have deliberately avoided the use of Earth terminology of hours, minutes, seconds, months and weeks. So far, there has been scant interest in carrying forward Earth holidays....

The study door slid open. "Nyk, our guests will be here any moment. Please get ready for the party." He saved the text of his translation and switched off the vidisplay.

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2 -- Green! Everywhere Green!

Nyk stood on the balcony watching the sky darken and dimmer stars appear. “I hope that's not what you're wearing,” he heard Senta say. “You look like you're ready for a day at the office instead of having some fun.”

“I'm comfortable in this.”

“Wouldn't you be more comfortable in the robe I gave you? You know which one I mean. It matches what I'm wearing. Now why don't you go change? Our guests will be here any moment.”

Nyk walked into their bedroom, kicked off his sandals, removed his *xarpa* and tunic, and slipped into the short, sleeveless robe. The doorchime sounded. He walked barefoot to the front door and opened it.

The first guests, a pair of young women with dark blond hair, walked in and slipped off their sandals. They were the Arodsu twins, dressed in revealing costumes to be mirror images of each other. “Hello, girls. It's Katha and Ratha, isn't it?”

“I'm Ratha,” the one on the left said. Her twin giggled.

Nyk eyed the colorful, abstract body art on their shoulders and thighs. “Those are ... impressive decorations. Do they rub off?”

Katha giggled. “Not until we want them to.”

“They go all the way up,” Ratha added, lifting her hem. “See?”

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Nyk averted his gaze and gestured toward the living room. "Senta is expecting you."

He greeted more guests, most of whom flocked around Senta. A young man approached Nyk and handed him an inhaler. Nyk smiled and thanked him, then circulated through the guests and slipped it back into the basket of euphoriants.

The doorchime sounded again. Nyk opened the door and recognized Senta's skimmer pilot. "Rez -- come on in. I'm surprised you didn't just drop in onto the balcony. I wasn't expecting you."

Rez looked at his feet. "Dr Kyhana invited me this afternoon. If there's a problem..."

Nyk shook his head. "If Senta invited you, you're more than welcome. She's in the living room." Rez nodded an acknowledgement, headed toward Senta and embraced and kissed her. Nyk rolled his eyes as he saw her take Rez's hand and lead him toward the guest room.

An auburn-haired young woman approached him. "Hi, I'm Kyra."

"Pleased to meet you, I'm Nykkyo."

She handed him an injector and lifted her hem. "Please inject me. I can't do it myself."

Nyk saw it was loaded with an orgasm enhancer. He removed the needle guard. She closed her eyes and turned her head as he drove the needle into her thigh and triggered the spring-loaded device. "Done," he said withdrawing the needle and replacing the guard. "That wasn't too bad was it?" He ejected the spent cartridge.

"No -- I hardly felt anything." She put her arms around him and rested her head against his shoulder. "It's funny, I can inject someone else, but not myself..." She pressed and rocked her hips against his. "I'm starting to feel it, already." He held her for a moment, and then heard the doorchime.

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“Excuse me,” he said and headed toward the door, flicking the spent cartridge into the waste reprocessor. He opened the door and saw Zander Baxa and his wife.

“Nykkyo, it's been years.” Nyk tapped his left wrist to Zander's. “This is Andra.” Nyk regarded Zander's wife. She was dressed in a tunic and *lifxarpa*. Andra had oat-straw white hair, alabaster skin and eyes of the palest light blue, almost white. Her sash matched her eyes. She was tall with long neck and legs and slender arms. Impeccable posture accentuated her height. Nyk noted the diamond-shaped Baxa marriage crest tattooed on her right arm -- the black ink contrasted against her creamy skin.

Andra extended her hand. “I'm pleased to meet you,” she said, making a hint of a curtsy.

“I'm pleased to meet you, too. Help yourself to the recreational chemicals.” Nyk gestured toward the baskets on the table.

She smiled. “I don't use them, but thank you so much for offering.”

Nyk saw his wife appear from the midst of the crowd. “Hello, I'm Senta.” She led Andra toward the crush of guests in their living room.

Nyk accompanied Zander toward the baskets. “It's quite a crowd,” Zander said.

“I don't even know the names of most of these people. They're all Senta's friends.”

Zander plucked a pair of inhalers from a basket, handed one to Nyk, put the other to his lips and inhaled. Nyk did the same, but he held his in such a way as to avoid inhaling most of its charge. Zander closed his eyes and held his breath for a few moments, then exhaled slowly through his nose. Nyk feigned a cough and Zander slapped him on the back.

“You haven't changed, Nykkyo. You never could handle drugs.”

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Nyk tossed the spent inhalers into the waste reprocessor. “What's happening in the Agency?”

“Oh, the same-old-same-old. You start a tour tomorrow, I understand. You will enjoy yourself, I can assure you. Agency assignments are the most rewarding in the entire ExoService. We're a close-knit group and we take care of each other. For everyone's safety, you might not know the names and locations of other Agents. But we're there, and we help each other out.” He put his arm around Andra and she smiled. “The Agency's been good to me.”

“Come on, Nyk -- have some fun!” Senta approached him, staggering.

“Senta, your robe is open,” Nyk said.

“So what? I'm enjoying myself. Why don't you open your robe and enjoy yourself? You're so stiff, Nyk ... except where it counts. Loosen up and have some fun! I invited the prettiest girls and boys I know. Come on -- use tonight to get it out of your system. You'll be Earthbound a long time.”

“Senta's right,” Zander said. “You'll have to keep your hands off the Earth girls. If Seymor knew you even looked twice at an Earth woman, he'd bounce you back here so fast your head would spin.”

“I don't enjoy intimacy with strangers, and I don't know the names of most of these people. Besides, I'm saving my desire for you, for when I'm home on leave.”

“Maybe you'd like to spend some of that desire right now...” She looked up. “... Andra, can I get you anything?”

“I'd like a cup of water, if it's not too much trouble.”

“Not at all. Come with me.” Senta looked at Nyk. “I'll be back for you, later.” She led Andra by the hand toward the kitchen.

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Zander held up his hand. "Go ahead and enjoy Andra. You know her name, at least. I'll call her over." He waited until she glanced his way. "It's the training, Nyk. They're taught to watch their companions for signals." He made a slight gesture with his thumb and Andra started walking toward them.

"Thanks, but I'm not in the right mood for any of this. Enjoy yourself, Zander. Don't let me spoil your fun."

"If you say so." Zander flicked his index finger. Andra nodded, turned and rejoined Senta. "She's too much woman for you, anyway." He headed for the baskets on the table.

Nykkyo eyed the festivities. Couples were on the floor kissing and groping each other. He glanced into his bedroom and saw a foursome on his bed -- a tangle of arms and legs. Undoubtedly they included the Arodsu twins; he rolled his eyes. A young man he observed earlier popping psychedelic tabs danced to music in his head. Senta stood with her arm around Andra's waist talking to a group of women.

Nyk saw Kyra sitting on Zander's lap. They were caressing each other and she had opened his robe and slipped it off his shoulders. One of the men swiped a basket of euphoriant inhalers from the table and took it to the balcony. The traditional men's caucus was forming there and a noisy discussion of sports and politics was underway.

He slinked along the wall of the apartment. A young woman who had overindulged in euphoriants tripped over him, fell to the floor and he helped her to her feet. He stepped over a young man who hit his limit and had passed out.

Nyk reached the door to his study. He slipped through, pulled it shut, switched on the vidisplay and began translating.

Nyk lay on his back, cracked his eyes open and closed them again. Senta lay beside him. He recollected the previous evening with a groan.

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“What time did you come to bed?” she asked.

“I didn't look. That party kept me up too late.”

“It wasn't the party. You were still in your study when I came to bed.” She rolled from him.

“I want to try to get some more sleep before it's time to get up,” he replied. A clock built into a panel by the bed chimed -- Nadir-four. Nyk groaned again.

He arose and found a cold breakfast package; he ate half and tossed the remainder into the waste reprocessor. Senta was showering as he dressed in a tunic and powder-blue *xarpa* and packed his travel gear.

She stood behind him. “Wasn't Andra gorgeous?”

“I didn't notice. I did notice how phony she was.”

“Phony? What do you mean?”

“I don't use them, but thank you so much for offering,” Nyk said imitating Andra and mocking her curtsy. “It was enough to make one gag. And how she dotes on Zander. They've been married more than three years and she sticks to him like glue, like a newlywed. It was the most nauseating display. You never gave me that kind of attention.”

“Perhaps he deserves it. Where do they live?”

“Zander has an apartment somewhere in the city. He also has a home on Earth, and he spends more time there than here.”

“Maybe I'll give Andra a call. She probably has some free time on her hands.”

“I hope you're not considering adding her to your list of conquests.”

“I thought Andra was sweet and I'd enjoy having her as a friend.”

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“Senta, sometimes ... I just can't believe it.”

“Are you saying you don't want me to have her as my friend?”

“Have anyone you want as your friend.”

“But you don't approve of her, do you?”

“You know how I feel about the *ax'amfinen* and the schools that produce them. I wouldn't have a thing to do with any of them.”

“Do you think Andra is somehow ... less than human? Do you think the blood flowing in her veins is some color other than red?” Senta shook her head. “This is so unlike you, Nyk.”

“The whole institution is an abomination and must be abolished.”

“Andra is not the institution. She's a pleasant young woman.”

“She enables it. Without the likes of her the institution would starve to death.”

“What do you know of how the finishing schools operate?”

“I know enough -- enough to form a low opinion of anyone who'd enroll there.”

“I had an opportunity to talk with Andra last night while you were holed up in your study. It wasn't her choice to enroll. Her parents sold her to the school. I'll bet you didn't know that, Nyk. She was only fifteen and she hasn't seen nor spoken with them since. If you had mingled with our guests, if you had engaged them in conversation rather than sequestering yourself in your study, you might have learned something about Andra. You even might have made a few friends.”

“I leave in a couple segments for a yearlong assignment on Earth. I'd rather we not spend our parting moments arguing. If you want to be friendly with Andra, it's fine with me.”

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“I don't need your approval, Nykkyo.”

“As you've demonstrated many times over the years.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Senta, can we drop it?”

“As you wish,” she said as she selected clothes from her wardrobe. She slipped into her tunic and donned a *lifxarpa*, securing it with a pin emblazoned with the Kyhana crest. “I'm sorry I won't be able to see you off, but we're having an appallingly busy time at the labs. You'll call once you're there, won't you?”

“Yes. We have a comm station moored above their sun's north pole. The station connects us with our communications systems, and also ties into the Earth computer network. Communicating with you will be as easy as if I were in Sudal and you were here.”

“What are your plans?”

“I'm taking the train to the fusion plant this morning. My packet leaves at zenith.”

“Why the power plant?”

“To collect diamonds from the ash pile. I must bring at least a half-kilogram of diamond crystals to the Agent-in-Chief. The Agency sells them on Earth and the proceeds fund our operations there.”

“I don't understand the value of those rocks on that world,” she said, glancing toward the balcony. “My skimmer's here.” Nyk gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Good luck on your assignment.”

“I'll be in touch.” He watched her climb into the skimmer.

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Nyk stepped off the shuttle and onto the transit platform, a large spaceport in synchronous orbit. He headed toward the departure lounge for the interstellar packets. His father-in-law spotted him and waved him into his office. "Hello, my friend and son."

"Veska. I'm on my way to Earth."

"Yes, I've diverted the Gamma-5 packet for your benefit. How does Senta feel about your assignment?"

"She's not happy about it. She'd rather I'd signed aboard a scout cruiser."

"Life on an ExoScout's hardly a stroll in the park. Many of those cruisers spend long stretches out of range of the comm net. At least on Earth, you have communications. I'm always more than happy to divert a packet to bring you home if you're needed."

"Tell that to your stepdaughter," Nyk replied, "unless she wants me out of reach for a year."

"Your packet boards at port three, middle level. Good luck on your mission."

Nykkyo picked up a case loaded with empty stasis canisters and capsules. He stepped into the lift, rode it to the middle level and proceeded to the departure lounge.

He could see the packet through the viewports. It was docked with the transit platform and being serviced by tender shuttles. Nyk entered through the docking tunnel, found his seat and belted himself in. He glanced out the viewport for a final look at his world -- an indigo sphere suspended in the black of space.

The packet's airlock shut. The starliner detached from the platform and sped away. The viewport shutters closed and the subjump jolted the ship. The vessel had left orbit and was now outside Floran's heliopause. Another indicator flashed to signal the interstellar jump. He felt the jolt

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as the warp coil fired, rupturing the timespace fabric and permitting the starliner to travel two hundred lightyears in an instant. The viewports opened.

Nyk could see the comm relay station as the packet approached in a docking maneuver. He walked through the docking tunnel into the station's main workroom. A short, older man with receding grey hair greeted him. He was Seymor, the Agent-in-Chief for North American Operations.

Zander had told Nyk of Seymor -- that he had grown fond of an Earth lifestyle. "Seymor's sponged a personal fortune from Agency coffers, a fortune worthless to him on the homeworld. It's no wonder he never sets foot off that planet."

Seymor addressed Nyk in English, "Greetings, Nykkyo Kyhana. From now on, you will answer only to the name Nick Kane. Your wife's name is Cindy. You were born on the 27th of April 1974 in Augusta, Georgia, and your parents are deceased. Your assigned locale is near Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The wardroom is over there. Select some appropriate Earth clothing and we'll head down. It's September, so you won't need anything too warm."

Nyk found a pair of jeans and a polo shirt and selected a pair of running shoes. "Very good, lad. You look every bit the university researcher. Here are your identity papers -- birth certificate, passport and Social Security card. This is a debit card you may use to access funds deposited in your draw account. I believe you have something for me." Nyk turned over the bag of diamonds. Seymor examined the contents and scowled. "Next time, bring bigger ones. These will do for now. I will be riding to the surface with you. You are qualified to operate a shuttlecar, yes?"

"Yes, I've had the required simulator training."

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“Simulators and the Real Thing are like Theory and Practice,” Seymor lectured. “In theory, they're the same. In practice, they almost never are. I want you to take the controls.”

Nyk initiated pre-launch diagnostics and tested doorseals. He started shuttlebay decompression and the bay door retracted. The shuttle rolled forward and leapt into space. He checked the subjump coordinates and pressed the actuator. The warp coil discharged with a bang. The windows and windscreen lightened and he saw a deep blue planet flecked with white, swimming in the void. As the craft descended the sphere grew until it filled his field of vision.

“Well done, lad,” Seymor said. “I'd think you've done this a dozen times.”

“I have -- in my dreams.” He computed an orbital insertion vector, executed it, and activated countermeasures to make the craft invisible to Earth radar.

Seymor pointed to a control on the panel. “You can use the timeline vernier to make slight temporal adjustments in your warp subjump. The goal is to arrive when North America is in the dead of night. We're a bit early and we'll have to sit in orbit awhile before we risk setting down. You can save some time by adjusting your vernier, remember that. It's a little tricky, but you'll get the hang of it.”

Seymor gave Nyk the go-ahead for landing. He nosed the car down using its inertial sink to absorb re-entry forces. The shuttlecar landed on target, a quiet country road. His final destination was programmed into the navigational computer. At Seymor's direction, Nyk piloted it into a small city near Milwaukee and parked in the driveway of a house.

“Don't power down the craft yet,” Seymor chided as Nyk began to switch off the life-support system. “We must pull it into the garage. This vessel resembles an Earth automobile at a glance, but we don't want curiosity-seekers taking too close a look.” Seymor stepped out. He unlocked and opened the garage door and motioned Nyk inside.

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Nyk pressed the unistick forward and the shuttlecar rolled into the garage. “Okay, secure it.” He initiated an orderly shutdown. The craft went dark and he sat in it for several moments. Then he opened the door and put his foot onto the hard-packed dirt floor. A quiver ran up and down his spine -- he was now on Earth! He inhaled the smells the place exuded.

“Come along, lad.” Nyk walked from the garage and glanced around. The dim glow of street lamps illuminated the undersides of leaves on the trees lining the street. He looked at the houses. All were similar but each differed in detail. Many had cars parked in their driveways. He heard the sounds of the slumbering city, of sparse late-night traffic on the distant main highway and buzzing from the trees.

Seymor climbed the steps leading to the front porch of the house and beckoned Nyk to follow him. He opened the door and Nyk stepped inside. “As you recall from your training, Earth days are shorter than Floran days. You'll need some time to become accustomed to them. This is your home-away-from-home.”

The house was an older, two-story dwelling on a small city lot. Seymor pointed out the kitchen, bath, and bedrooms. The furniture was old and battered, with wear showing on the upholstery. Seymor led him upstairs and into a bedroom converted to a study.

He handed Nyk a small, black device with a button. “Here is the most important feature. Press the button.” Nyk pressed it and a wall of bookshelves swung open to reveal a concealed room behind. Inside was a rack of equipment, some of it Floran and some of Earth origin.

“This is one of our communications uplinks. There is a GravNet transducer concealed beneath the roof. This equipment is a GravNet transceiver, and this is a protocol adapter.” Seymor pointed to another rack. “That is all Earth equipment, connected to a high-speed data circuit. This house is one of five such facilities in North America. Remember, under no circumstances should any Floran technology be

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left lying about the house. Keep it in this room, and keep this room shut and locked unless you have a specific need to use it. Now ... it's two in the morning, and I think we'd both benefit from a few hours' sleep. We'll conclude the briefing in daylight.” Seymor retired to the house's spare bedroom.

Nyk walked around the darkened house. The kitchen cabinets and refrigerator were empty. He sat on the sofa in the living room. Built-in bookshelves stood vacant except for an old television set. He climbed the stairs to the master bedroom, stretched out on the bed in his clothes and shut his eyes.

Dawn's first light roused Nyk. He descended the stairs from the master bedroom. Seymor hadn't arisen, so he decided to look at the planet's sights in daylight. He opened the front door, stood on the porch and felt the cool dampness of the morning air. Walking onto the lawn, he stooped to pick a blade of grass, put it in his mouth, and chewed it. A grin spread across his face.

He began looking around attempting to identify some of the plants he saw. An ash tree, he thought, a maple and an oak. Nyk walked to the oak and stroked its bark. The house caught his attention and he compared it with his mental image of the one Koichi described in his journal.

Seymor called to him and he and went inside. “What's your impression of the place in daylight?”

“Green! The vegetation's green. Everywhere, green. I'm trained in the appearance of Earth plants, but seeing it for real!

“This house must be similar to the one Koichi describes in his journal. It's in New York, in Queens, and it belonged to the family for two hundred years before him. You're stationed in New York, you might've gone past it.”

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“New York's a big place, lad, and I rarely get to Queens. Let's continue the briefing.” He handed Nyk a black device. “This is a laptop computer. It may be primitive by Floran standards, but these do work, most of the time. They get the job done, and we can eliminate the risk of assigning you Floran communications devices. These have revolutionized the way we do our jobs. Even five years ago, you wouldn't believe the worry I had when one of our agents needed contact with the homeworld. With these, we've eliminated the need to issue homeworld technology into the field, except under special circumstances.

“When connected to any data port in the world, you may use it to communicate with myself or other ExoAgents via Earth Internet email. You all have coded identifiers. If you or another agent is off-planet, messages are routed and sent via GravNet for delivery on Floran or any colony planet.

“This computer can also access the Floran TachNet. I'll show you how. Maybe you'd like to speak to your lovely wife. If you would like for her to see you on her end, you must attach this miniature camera, which clips to the top of the display panel.” Seymor manipulated the keyboard and a blue window appeared on the screen, then an image. It was Senta.

“Hi *korlyta*. I made it to Earth.” Nyk exchanged small talk with her.

Seymor interrupted him, “We must go to the lab. I'll introduce you to the college brass as FloranCo's new botanist. As long as they can keep cashing our checks they'll leave you alone. Are you hungry?” Nyk said he was. “Good. As part of the deal with the school they issue us a university staff card. It is useful as it allows you to take meals at the university union, which is a short distance from the lab, quite convenient. The food is not very good, but it is expensive.”

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Seymor escorted Nyk to the campus offices and obtained keys to the lab and Nyk's staff card. “You'll be fine, lad. If you need anything, you can call me or send me an email message. It's all in your training packet. Well, I'm off to New York. Enjoy!” He picked up the sack of raw diamonds and left.

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3 -- Sukiko

Nykkyo unlocked the door to the Chem Annex building, entered the lab and looked around. Old laboratory benches were covered in years' worth of dust and grime. Seymor had told him the structure's history. Built in the mid 1970s, the wood-frame building had provided a temporary home for the Chemistry Department's graduate school. When the Science Center opened in 1990, the university abandoned the annex as a research facility. He walked along the concrete floor, assessing the effort required to make the place usable. Seymor had hired a cleaning crew and Nyk awaited their arrival.

He was regarding some circa 1950 electrochemistry equipment when a knock at the door interrupted his survey. The cleaning crew arrived and Nyk began directing their efforts.

He had found some empty filing cabinets and discovered they would accommodate his stasis equipment. He asked one of the cleaning crew to help him move the cabinets into position underneath a lab bench.

“I clean, I don't move,” the worker replied.

Nyk recalled a lesson from his Agency training. He reached into his pocket and produced a twenty-dollar bill. The worker snatched it, winked at him, and the heavy steel cabinets were in place.

The crew left and Nyk began installing the first piece of Floran equipment, a power converter. He snaked the power cord through an

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opening in the rear of the filing cabinet. The plug wouldn't fit the power sockets. Perhaps, he thought, he'd done enough work for one day.

He walked toward the house, passing the university union. Students were coming and going, some talking boisterously and engaging in rowdy horseplay. Nyk shook his head and continued on his way. By now he was quite hungry and he knew the cabinets at the house were empty. He stopped at a small grocery along his route.

His ExoAgency training course on Earth food came into his mind. "Earth people are, by and large, flesh-eaters. This is a difficult concept for a Floran to comprehend ... while we will not discourage an ExoAgent on assignment from experiencing Earth meat products, we do advise caution..."

"...the approach we recommend toward Earth food is simply not to think about its origin. Many Earth natives employ this approach as well. Those who wish not to consume flesh products should seek items labeled 'vegetarian'..."

He passed the meat counter and lost his appetite. He saw a section labeled Health Foods, and there he found a can of vegetarian lentil soup. The picture on the label looked like a package meal from the homeworld. He bought it, trudged home and ate the soup cold, straight from the can.

"It sounds like we shipped you the wrong power converter -- probably one for Europe," Seymour said over the phone. "I'll send you a new one via overnight express tomorrow. You'll have it the day after that."

Nyk snapped open the laptop computer and clipped on the digital camera. The vidphone program activated and he selected Senta's locator code. She answered and he saw her image on the screen. "Hello again *korlyta*."

"How was the first day of your assignment?"

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“I'm cold, tired and discouraged. I hadn't realized adjusting to the time difference would be so difficult. The Earth population doesn't appear as Koichi described it. The students here are loud and rowdy, and most of what's in the food store is stuff I wouldn't dream of eating.”

“Now aren't you happy you refused to forget this ExoAgency nonsense and sign onto a scout cruiser? That would've been more like an extended vacation.”

“Zander told me Agency assignments are the most rewarding in the Service.”

“You're getting exactly what you deserve for believing one of your friends instead of me.”

“Veska says life aboard a scout's tougher than you might imagine.”

“Think what you want.”

Nyk terminated the call and flopped on his bed.

The replacement power converter arrived and the stasis canisters were working, concealed in the locked filing cabinets. Nyk tested the equipment by placing a strawberry from the grocery into a stasis capsule. He placed another in a petri dish sitting on the lab bench. Now, a week later, the berry in the dish was moldy and grotty while the one in the capsule was as fresh as the day he bought it.

He had produced cultures of some vegetables by isolating individual plant cells and putting them into a nutrient broth. After a few days he had little plantlets. He could create an entire living plant from the smallest cell sample.

It was now noon and he decided to dine at the union. He flashed his staff card at the door, stood in line and bought a bowl of vegetarian chili. His scan of the dining room found a single empty table near the

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rear door. He scooped a spoonful of chili and reacted with pleasure and pain to the mix of flavors.

A woman's voice startled him. "Do you mind if I join you? I think this is the only empty seat."

"Please do."

She sat across from him and began eating her lunch, fixing her eyes on her tray. Nyk compared her appearance to his memory of Koichi. She had the same black hair and yellow-brown complexion. Her face was an oval with prominent cheekbones and full lips. She was petite, with a well-proportioned figure. Her eyes were deep brown and had a pronounced epicanthic fold, more so than Koichi's. She was beautiful, and Nyk couldn't avoid staring at her.

"Excuse me -- are you a Japanese?" he asked.

"No. I'm an American." He made eye contact, and then she looked down. "My mother is Japanese. My father's family came from Japan at the turn of the century." She took a bite from a tuna salad sandwich.

Nyk scooped another spoonful and gazed at her. "You have the most beautiful eyes. I've never seen eyes so dark."

She glanced up, looked down, gulped her mouthful and grasped her tray. "If you'll excuse me, I have a class."

Nyk watched as she stood, dumped her tray and walked out. He followed her to the door and observed her proceed into a classroom building. He estimated she was about his age, maybe slightly older. Nyk was 31 Floran years old, about 25 Earth years. She's not likely a student, he figured, perhaps an assistant professor.

Nyk had tried to maneuver himself close enough to the Japanese-American woman to start a conversation, but she always seemed just out

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of reach or headed the wrong way. Now he sat in the union dining room and saw her enter carrying a tray. She walked toward his table, stopped, turned and stood waiting for another to empty.

He picked up his tray and carried it to her table. “May I please join you?” She made a hand gesture that said, do what you want. “I’ve been looking for you for the past two weeks. I suspect you’ve been avoiding me. I wanted to speak with you.”

She looked up at him. “Why do you want to speak with me?”

“I’ve so wanted to meet a Japanese. I was hoping you could answer some questions.”

She glanced at the clock. “I don’t have time. I teach two classes and I only have fifteen minutes for lunch.”

“I work in the Chem Annex building. Could you come over after class?”

Her eyes narrowed. “If I come and answer your questions, will you quit bothering me?”

“I promise.”

“My last class is over at 3:30. I’ll come after then.” She picked up her tray and left.

Nyk returned to the lab and tended his cultures. He watched the clock. At 3:45 he heard someone open the door to the lab.

She walked in. “I thought this building was abandoned. Okay, I’m here, but I’m warning you. I don’t take funny stuff. I’m from New York.” She held up her bag. “I have pepper spray and I’m not afraid to use it. So let’s have your questions.”

“What is *miso* soup?”

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The woman looked at him for several moments. She started to giggle, and then she put her hand over her mouth. “I'm not laughing at you. It's just ... I didn't expect ... well, I don't know what I expected. It certainly wasn't for some guy to practically stalk me for two weeks, lure me into a creepy deserted building and then ask about *miso* soup!” She began to regain her composure.

“I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea *miso* soup was funny stuff. I meant no offense.”

She giggled again. “There's nothing funny about *miso*. It's fermented soybean paste. It comes in a variety of flavors and colors and it's used to make a lot of Japanese foods.”

“What does it taste like?”

“Awful. But I don't like Japanese food. It's so fishy and smoky and salty. Do you have a lot more questions?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Okay, I'll answer them, but not here. This gloomy old barn gives me the creeps. I'll make a deal with you. We'll walk over to the union and you can buy me a coffee. For as long as that coffee lasts, I'll answer your questions. Is it a deal?”

Nyk walked with her toward the union. It was a cool, late October afternoon and dried leaves crunched underfoot. “If you don't like Japanese food, what do you like?”

“No fair. I won't answer any more questions until I have my coffee. We have a deal.”

“I'm sorry.” Nyk fixed his gaze on the sidewalk as he walked.

She giggled. “I'm passionate about Indian food. That's east Indian, not Native American. I don't have it too often. There isn't a good Indian

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restaurant in this town, so I have to make it myself. I rarely do that these days because it's no fun going through all that work just for me."

"It's getting cold," Nyk said.

"It'll get even colder. Is this your first winter here?"

"Yes, it is."

"Mine too, although it certainly gets cold in New York." He opened the door to the union, held it for her and gestured for her to precede him. "Thanks ... I'll find a table while you get the coffee." She pointed toward the coffee bar. "Mocha latte double-tall."

Nyk stepped to the counter. "Do you have ... makka-loty?"

"Do you mean mocha latte?" the attendant asked.

"Yes -- that's it."

"What size?"

"...Double-tall ... two of those, please." He turned and watched the woman work her way toward a vacant table and remove her coat. She was wearing a knit top and scarf, wrap skirt and black tights. She smiled and waved at him.

She took a brush from her bag, removed her headband and held it in her teeth as she brushed shiny black hair extending halfway down her back. Then, she examined herself in a mirror, returned her implements to her bag and snapped it shut.

"That'll be six thirty-six." Nyk whirled around, dug a crumpled ten-dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to the attendant. He picked up the coffees and headed toward the table. "Your change, sir." Nyk turned and retrieved three singles and some coins.

"I didn't know what to order so I'm having what you're having," he said as he handed her a cup.

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“Before we start, I want you to answer a question of mine,” she said.

“All right...”

“What is your name?”

“...Nick Kane...”

She extended her hand. “I'm Sukiko. I'm pleased to meet you, Nick. Please forgive my behavior toward you earlier. It was my defenses acting up.”

“I'm pleased to meet you, too, Sukiko. That's a pretty name.”

“My mother wanted me to have a Japanese name. I wanted an American one, something like ... Jessica.” She sipped her coffee. “Now, Nick, what did you want to ask me?”

He took a sip and his eyes popped. “What do they put into one of these?” he asked, looking at the cup.

“Coffee, milk, cocoa ... a little sugar, maybe a touch of cinnamon. Don't you like it?”

“It's different.” He took another sip. “A curious blend of sweet and bitter...”

“Okay, we've addressed the topic of mocha latte.” She sipped from hers. “You said you had Japanese questions.”

Nyk looked at her for a long moment. “I can't remember. I had a list but I can't recall a single one.” He gazed at her face and she returned the eye contact.

She glanced down. “I'd rather you not stare at me like that. It makes me uncomfortable.”

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He looked down at his cup. "I'm so sorry." He swirled his coffee. "You have such beautiful eyes, Sukiko. I didn't intend to upset you. Please forgive me."

"It's just ... I felt on display, as if..." She giggled. "... as if you've never seen an Asian before ... or something." She shook her head. "It's all right, Nick. It must be my defenses again."

Nyk stared at his cup until he noticed she was crouching toward the table and looking up to intercept his sightline. He glanced into her eyes and she smiled. "My friends call me Suki." He returned her smile and followed her eyes with his as she sat up again. She took another sip.

"Suki, you said you teach a class. Are you a professor? What do you teach?"

"I'm not a professor. I'm a lecturer, which means I'm below an assistant prof and above the guy that sweeps the floor. I teach undergraduate comparative religion and a senior-level course on Babylonian and Sumerian mythology. Do you teach?"

"No, I'm not even on the faculty. My company rents lab space from the university. I'm a botanist doing field work for FloranCo. I find plant specimens, make cultures and send them to the home ... lab. Our lease grants me use of the union. I'm new here and still feeling my way around. My assignment will run for at least nine months, maybe longer."

"So, that explains what you're doing in that awful old building. Are you alone, or do you have family with you?"

"I'm here by myself."

"Then you're like me. We're both strangers in a strange land."

Nyk sipped his coffee. He gazed at her eyes, glancing down whenever she looked up at him. "Why do you like Indian food?"

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“I stumbled onto it, almost by accident,” she replied. “I fell in love with it right away.”

“Is it really so different?”

“Oh, yes -- the complexity of the spices...” She closed her eyes. “Just thinking about it puts me into the mood for a hot *dahl*...” She sipped her coffee. “What sort of food do you like?”

“I subsist on beans and rice for the most part.”

“There are lots of ways to fix beans and rice. It is a big world, Nick.”

“I wish I could experience it all,” he replied. “... the diversity of life and people and culture on this world -- all the different forms of humanity. I have such little time here.”

“Don't we all. I wish everyone shared your view. I know from personal experience many don't.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever been judged by your physical appearance?”

“...No, I don't think so.”

“I have. There are many, right here in this town, who'll see my color and my eyes and conclude I'm something less than human. I've had to develop a thick skin...” She pinched the back of her hand. “... a thick yellow skin.”

“Do you wish you weren't Japanese?”

She took a sip of her coffee. “No, I don't wish that. It doesn't make sense to wish for what you can't change.”

“Might-haves don't count,” Nyk replied.

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“They certainly don't. I do wonder though... What's it like, Nick? What's it like being blond and blue-eyed and having an all-American name like Nick Kane?” Nyk shrugged. “I'd like to live just one day of my life as Nikki Kane ... oh well, the grass is always greener...”

“I'm sorry -- I'm not following. What grass is greener?”

“You know, on the other side of the fence.”

Nyk made a silent oh. “Where one can't reach it.” He smiled. “I understand the metaphor.”

“I guess I made the mistake of picking the wrong parents,” Suki said and took another sip. “My mom's okay, but there've been plenty of times I wish I could've picked a different father.”

“I cherish your Japanese heritage, Suki. When I took this assignment, I was hoping to meet someone just like you.”

She smiled. “I'm getting a bit light-headed from being up on the pedestal where you're putting me, Nick. Don't you have Asians where you come from?”

“Not very many.”

“I do feel your sincerity,” she said. “I was guilty of pre-judging you. I don't know why my shields went up. New Yorkers are a suspicious bunch and I guess I'm suspicious for a New Yorker.” She looked into his eyes. “I feel a bit foolish, now.” She picked up her empty cup and examined it. “You know -- that was one of your better coffees...”

“Would you like another?”

“Lord, no, I'll be floating home from this one as is. I have a huge pile of test papers to grade, so I'd better be going. Thank you, Nick, for the coffee.”

“You're welcome. It was my pleasure.”

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“Maybe I’ll see you around campus.” She stood and started to adjust her scarf. Unhappy with the struggle it gave her, she removed it and started to put it on. Nyk spied a pin that was concealed beneath it. He thought it looked like the family crest hanging on the wall of his apartment, though smaller and in silver.

He took a step back and nearly fell over his chair. She slipped into her coat and walked toward the door. Nyk followed her, but became caught in the traffic of a group of students entering the union. By the time he reached the door she was gone, and he hadn’t seen in which direction.

He sat at the table to think. The pin! He must ask her about the pin. Nyk walked to the lab where his laptop computer was jacked into the university network, another privilege granted by the lease. He brought up the school’s web site, accessed the faculty directory, entered “suki” and pressed search. The results were displayed.

Kyhana, Sukiko, PhD. Comparative Religion

-- *Corliss Hall 234. Extension 7133*

Myasuki, Tanaka, PhD. Chemical Engineering

-- *Drake Hall 101. Extension 7354*

Otsuki, Michael. Admissions Assistant

-- *Old Main 132. Extension 7278*

He looked at the first entry. Sukiko Kyhana! A quiver ran down his spine. He selected the map and located Corliss Hall. It was on the opposite side of the campus.

Nyk dashed from the lab and headed across the quadrangle. Corliss Hall was one of the older buildings on campus, dating from the 1930s. His footsteps on the terrazzo floor made empty echoes as he walked

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through the building and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Here, small classrooms had been converted into offices for junior faculty and graduate students. He found room 234. The door was shut and locked. A sign listed Sukiko Kyhana and three other faculty members and gave her office hours as Tuesday and Thursday, eight to eleven.

Nykkyo climbed to the second floor of Corliss Hall and approached Suki's office. The door was open and he saw her sitting at a battleship-grey steel desk consulting with a student. He paced outside the door. Once he thought she glimpsed him. She was taking her time with the student. The hands on the clock in the corridor crept: 8:30 ... 9:00. The student left.

Nyk knocked on the doorjamb and stuck his head in. She looked up. "Hi, stranger. You found me! It's my fault for giving out my name. I thought you promised not to bother me any more."

"I'm terribly sorry to interrupt your office hours. I looked for you Friday and Monday but I didn't see you."

"Did you remember your questions?" she asked.

"No. When you left the union the other day, I thought I spotted a pin on your ... blouse. I was hoping you'd show it to me."

"This?" she asked, lifting her chin. She was wearing a thick turtleneck and had the object pinned at her throat. She removed it and handed it to him.

Nyk studied it. The pin was the size of a large coin, with a pink stone set in the center.

"It's sterling silver," Suki said. "The stone is rose quartz." He was trying to keep his hands from shaking. The design was identical to the ancient Kyhana crest pendant he inherited from his father. He traced the

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three characters with his fingertip. “Those are *katakana* characters that spell my family name.”

“*Katakana*?”

“One of the three Japanese alphabets -- *kanji*, *katakana* and *hiragana*.” She pointed to the pin. “This is *katakana*.” She moved her finger clockwise around the disk. “Ky-Ha-Na. The name's been anglicized from the original Japanese.”

“What is the original name?”

“I can't even pronounce it. When my great-great-grandfather stepped off the boat, the immigration officer couldn't pronounce it either, so it became Kyhana. Why are you interested in that pin?”

“I ... I thought I saw one like it, once.”

“That's not likely -- it's the only one in the world. The only other thing at all like it is hanging on the wall at my parents' house.”

“Where did you get this?”

“My grandfather made it. He was a goldsmith, a jeweler. He became obsessed with the old country. He wore traditional clothing and called everyone so-and-so-*san*, even though he didn't speak the language.” She giggled. “*Ojiisan* -- that's what I had to call him -- *Ojiisan* had a crazy idea our family should have a crest, like the old Japanese nobility, so he invented this. My father has the original. It's gold, about this big.” She made a circle with the thumbs and forefingers of both hands. “It has a jade cabochon in the center.”

“Jade?”

“Yes. It hangs on a cord. *Ojiisan* said our family should have a tradition where the crest goes to the parents of the next generation's first-born. He made this pin for my mother.”

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Nyk turned the pin over and saw an inscription: *To YK From TK 5/6/67*. “YK is your mother?”

“Yes, and TK was my grandfather.” She pointed. “That's my parents' wedding date. *Ojiisan* gave this to Mom at the wedding.”

“How did you get this? Did you inherit it?”

“Oh, Lord no -- Mom's very much alive and kicking. She gave it to me when I was a kid -- after *Ojiisan* died, of course.”

“She doesn't care to wear your family emblem?”

“It's not an emblem -- just an old man's foolish notion. Mom thinks this whole crest business is rather silly.”

“I don't,” he replied and returned the pin to her.

“You would've gotten along with *Ojiisan*.” She began to fasten it to her blouse. “Well, I like it because it's pretty and different.”

“Thank you, Suki. I'm sorry I bothered you and I won't bother you again.” He started out the door.

“Oh, Nick -- wait. I'll be at the union at 11:45 for lunch, if you'd care to join me.”

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4 -- Sad, Sad Stories

Nyk entered the union and saw Suki waving to catch his attention. He brought his tray over. On hers was a tuna salad sandwich. She pointed to his. “Are you a vegetarian?”

He scooped a spoonful of tomato soup. “Yes, I am.”

“You should try some Indian food. The union has a token vegetarian dish, but it's awful. Once you've tried Indian vegetarian, you'll never go back to this stuff.”

“I remember some of what I wanted to ask you. What's *tatami*?”

“They're woven reed mats, a traditional floor covering in a Japanese home. My parents have them at the house in Queens.”

“What about *kimono*?”

“That's a garment, a sort of lightweight robe. My mother wears a *kimono* now and then. My parents gave me one to commemorate receiving my PhD.”

“I'd love to see you in it.”

“It's at the house in New York,” she replied.

“What's a *samurai*?”

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“A warrior from the feudal times. Why are you interested in Japanese things?”

“I was reading and came across these terms. I'm so happy to have met a Japanese, Suki.”

“I told you, I'm an American.” She smiled. “My mother's Japanese ... to the core. I'm not too fond of that culture.”

“I have another question, Suki.” She glanced up at him. “Would you agree to meet for lunch on a regular basis? It's convenient for me, the lab's only a short walk.”

She looked into his eyes. “Okay, Nick. I'd like that. We strangers must stick together.” He walked with her to drop off his tray and headed his separate way.

Nyk carried his laptop computer home, set it on the kitchen table and placed a vidphone call to Senta. The initiation indicator flashed ... and flashed.

He reached to cancel the call, and then Senta's image appeared. Her hair was wet and dripping and she had a towel wrapped around her.

“Oh, it's you.” She removed the towel and began using it to dry her hair.

“Hello *korlyta*. I'm sorry to call at a bad moment. The time conversion is very confusing. The most remarkable thing happened. I met a woman named Sukiko Kyhana. I think she might be a relative.”

“It sounds like a coincidence to me.”

“She's Japanese. I've shown you the photoimage of Koichi. She looks like him.”

“She must be a very homely woman.”

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“That's not what I meant. She has Koichi's features -- the black hair, the yellow-brown complexion and the eyes. She also has a pin with our family crest. She said her grandfather designed it.”

“You mean this?” Senta pointed to the crest tattooed onto her arm.

“Yes, that. She said the three symbols spell the name Kyhana. Ky-Ha-Na. I'm curious to know how closely we're related.”

Senta flipped her hair from the towel. “If you'd like to know for sure, try to get a DNA sample. You can send it in a stasis capsule along with your cultures. I'd be glad to sequence it for you and we can look for common genetic markers.”

“Senta, there must be over two hundred generations separating her from me. How good of a match can you expect, especially given the interbreeding in the early years?”

“We can go into the sequencing archives. They must go back at least fifty generations. Let me check.” Nyk's vidphone screen went blank as Senta suspended the session. He saw her image reappear. “Yes, we can easily lop off one hundred generations using these records, maybe more. The Kyhana records are remarkably well preserved. We have a sequence file on Gordo Kyhana, who lived about thirty-three hundred years ago. That'll get us closer.”

“How do you suggest I obtain a sample?”

“Maybe you can collect a hair or two. You shouldn't have too much trouble engineering such an encounter. One with the root intact would be all we need -- so, if you do get hold of a sample, send it along. Now I must go to work.” Senta slipped into her tunic.

“I'll see you later, *korlyta*. ” Nyk said as the screen went blank.

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Nyk placed his tray on a table in the union dining room. Suki slipped off her coat and sat across from him. "I look forward to lunch here with you," he said.

"So do I. The past three weeks have flown by. When we sit and talk together, I feel almost like a normal human being."

Nyk regarded her. "You don't appear to have any abnormalities."

"No, my abnormalities are inside."

"Do you suffer from some internal disorder?"

She giggled. "They're inside my head."

"Oh... If you have troubles you'd like to talk about, I'd be happy to listen. Sometimes talking about a problem is the easiest way to make it go away."

"That's sweet. Maybe, sometime. I'll warn you, Nick. You should be careful what you offer -- someone might take you up on it." She placed her hand on his forearm. He gazed into her eyes and she slowly retracted her hand and looked down at her tray.

Nyk ate his chili in silence. He glanced up. "Suki?"

"Nick?" she said simultaneously. She smiled. "You go first."

"Suki, would you agree prepare an Indian meal for me? You said it was no fun making it for yourself, and it sounds like something I'd like to try."

She looked past him for a moment. "Okay, how about Saturday night at six, my place. Do you know where the faculty apartments are?"

Nyk nodded. "Yes."

"Building 3, apartment 2A. You don't have to bring anything."

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Nyk picked up a sample vial and some forceps from the lab, slipped them into his pocket and headed toward the faculty-housing complex. His route took him past the grocery and he walked in.

The place was old and had an air of not being quite clean. A faint, sour smell of something rotten permeated the place and Nyk was repelled by it. He noticed a bucket with fresh flowers and bought a bouquet.

Sensing a mix of eagerness and apprehension, he approached her building. Outside the door was an array of buttons. He pressed the one beneath a label reading “S Kyhana.” A buzz and a click came from the door latch. He entered, walked up the stairs and saw Suki waiting at her apartment door. “Howdy stranger -- come on in.”

Her apartment was small and warm. Nyk looked around and saw a pair of watercolors of nude female torsos on the wall. The place was sparsely furnished with institutional furniture. The living room sofa and chairs were pushed to the walls and a cloth and some cushions lay in the middle of the living room floor. Eerie music came from somewhere.

A mixture of strong scents filled the air. Suki was barefoot and wearing a tank top and a pair of running shorts. Nyk regarded her from head to toe.

“Should I remove my shoes?” he asked.

“No need,” she replied. “I’m sorry about the heat. They can’t seem to do anything about it.”

“This feels fine to me. It reminds me of home.”

“Home?”

“I come from a warm climate.”

He presented the flowers to her and she regarded them. “I hope you don’t have any ideas about starting a relationship.”

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“The flowers are a gift. I cannot accept hospitality without bringing a gift.”

Suki blushed. “I’m so sorry, Nick. It’s my defenses again, please forgive me. Thank you, they’re lovely.” She found a jar to serve as a vase and set them on the counter. She nodded toward the living room. “I’ve prepared a northern Indian dinner. We’re going to enjoy this meal Indian-style. Indians take their meals on the floor and they eat with their hands. If you’d like to wash first, the bathroom’s over there.”

While using the sink he noticed a hairbrush on the vanity. With his forceps he extracted four jet-black hairs clinging to the bristles and put them into the vial. He replaced the brush and slipped the sample into his pocket. Nyk returned to her living room.

Suki brought out two battered looking dinner plates, on which were some glass custard cups containing the various entrees. “This is *thali*-style service,” she said, “... typical for north India. I don’t have a real *thali*, so I had to improvise, but you get the idea.”

She placed the plates on the cloth, brought out a bowl mounded with yellow rice and another plate with some flat bread. Then, she assumed the lotus position. Nyk sat and attempted to cross his legs.

“You don’t have to sit like this if it’s uncomfortable,” she said. “Use the cushions. This position is natural for me, because I meditate -- or I used to. Lately my head’s been so full of crap... I can’t empty myself of thoughts, so I find myself meditating on how miserable I am and end up feeling worse than when I began.” She pointed to the custard cups and identified the various entrees, the bread and saffron rice. “I forgot to provide drinks. Would you like some beer? It goes well with Indian food.”

“No alcohol, please.”

She brought a pair of glasses filled with a ruby-red fizzy liquid. “This is an Indian soft drink.” She resumed her lotus posture. “Now I’ll

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show you how Indians eat with their hands. The right hand is reserved for eating, the left is for hygiene.” She demonstrated the technique. “I believe part of the dining experience is eating the way the natives do. When I cook Chinese, we use chopsticks.”

Nyk started with a bit of *dahl makhni* mixed with rice. The flavors were such a far cry from the bland fare of his homeland, even though the ingredients were familiar ones. The blend of spices exploded in his mouth. “This is so different from what I am accustomed.” he said.

“Are the spices too much for you? It's easy to be overwhelmed if you're not accustomed.”

“I'm doing just fine. Where do you find the ingredients for this?”

“We're fortunate to have an Indian spice shop within walking distance, just down the street from the university. There are a lot of Indians on the school faculty. Maybe you'd like to walk over there with me sometime.”

“I certainly would.”

Nyk helped Suki return the sofa and chairs to their original places. “Thank you for dinner,” he said. “It was delicious and I truly enjoyed it.”

“Thank you for suggesting it. It was my pleasure, and it helped take my mind off my troubles. I've had a lot on my mind lately.”

“Would you like to tell me about your troubles? I'd be more than happy to listen.”

“You're not heeding my warning, Nick. Maybe... But not right now.”

“How did you become an expert in comparative religion and mythology?”

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“I'm not. I'm an archeologist -- a historian. My specialty is ancient Sumeria. For my PhD thesis I prepared a translation of newly discovered clay tablets containing a version of the Gilgamesh myth. I translated it from the cuneiform.” She stood and took a small, flat box from a shelf and handed it to him. He opened it and saw a shard of pottery with odd impressions. “Cuneiform. This is a piece I found on a dig in Syria during graduate school. They let me keep it. It's nothing too important, just a piece of household inventory from a merchant-class family. It dates to approximately 3500 BC, making it about 5,500 years old.”

“This is amazing, Suki.” The artifact was as old as Koichi's journal. He returned the box to her. She replaced it on the shelf and resumed sitting beside him.

He looked into her face. “How did you end up here, teaching those courses?” He held eye contact until she broke it.

“I ... I came here to get away from it all.”

“Get away from what?”

“I have a past, Nick, and not a happy one.”

“Are you running away from something?” he asked.

“...Yes.”

“Did you commit a crime -- steal something? Kill someone, perhaps?”

“No, nothing like that.”

He looked into her face. “I didn't think you capable of such. Maybe you had an affair with a politician that went wrong.”

“Of course not,” she giggled.

“Did you intentionally and unrepentantly injure another?”

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“No, Nick -- I'm the injured party.”

“Then tell me about it. It won't change my opinion of you.”

“I don't want to bother you with my problems.”

“It's not a bother. Let me share your troubles, to lighten your load.”

She buried her face in her hands, and then looked up. “All right. I'll make another deal with you. You tell me your sad, sad story, and I'll tell you mine.”

Nyk looked into her eyes again. “I don't have too much to tell.”

“Where's your home town?” she asked.

“... My birth certificate says Augusta, Georgia, but I don't have a home town. I grew up in the country, in a house on a bluff overlooking the sea. I was an only child.”

“Down south?”

“Yes, the southeast -- near a small city on the coast.”

“Your warm climate. I thought I detected a trace of a southern accent in your speech. It's quite charming.”

“I had few friends growing up, being isolated the way we were. I flunked out of my first college, then I went back to study botany. I work for FloranCo on a ten-month assignment manning their field lab. They provide me with a house and living expenses, as well as a salary.”

“Tell me about your family, Nick.”

“It's just my wife and I. We don't have any children.”

“Do you miss her? What's her name?”

“Her name's... Cindy. Yes, I miss her. I'm not sure she misses me, though. She's a geneticist, a microbiologist. She's a brilliant woman, the

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head of genetic sequencing in our organization. It's a very important position. She has plenty to keep her busy, and lots of friends." Nyk looked down. "I'll bet she hardly notices I'm gone. She's had a long string of lovers -- both men and women."

"How do you feel about that?"

"It shouldn't bother me, but it does."

"It must bother you, or you wouldn't have brought it up."

"We both believe what two consenting adults do while they're by themselves is no one else's business. I truly do believe that. She was like this before we married. She didn't think our marriage was any reason to alter her social life."

"Do you love her?"

"... I don't know... I thought I did, but lately I've had my doubts. It's funny, Suki. You and I have known each other for three weeks and I feel more comfortable talking with you than with her. There are times I'll look up at her and ask myself -- who is this person? I'll wonder if our marriage wasn't a big mistake." He brushed a tear from his face. "Her behavior does hurt me. I'm pained to know I can't satisfy her -- that I've never lived up to her expectations."

"How did you two meet?"

"I've known her a long time, since we were children. She's the stepdaughter of an old friend of my dad's. My earliest recollection of her was when I was three and she was five ... I think she married me out of pity. I was so lonely and miserable after my parents were killed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "How did your parents die?"

"They died in a ... plane crash. That was ... eight years ago. Aside from Cindy, I'm alone in the universe." Nyk looked down and saw Suki was holding his hand. He patted the back of hers. "That's all right with

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me. I do well by myself. Maybe it's the reason I applied for this assignment. I'm sorry, Suki. I've made it sound like I'm unhappy. I'm not."

"Not unhappy isn't the same as happy," she said. "Are you happy?"

"I'm happy enough. I don't think my sad, sad story's all that sad."

"Well, my story will make up for it." She closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. "I want to set the record straight between us. I'm not interested in relationships -- not right now. I'm not looking for a boyfriend. I'm a lesbian." She looked into his eyes. "I'm not saying that to blow you off, Nick. You're a nice guy, and I like you. I'm saying it because it's the truth, and I want to make sure we understand each other. I hope it doesn't bother you."

Nyk shook his head once. "Should it?" he asked. "We can be friends, can't we?"

"It bothers some people. It bothers my father. After I finished graduate school, my father insisted I get married, in an arranged marriage like the old days in Japan. He wanted an heir, someone to pass the crest to. We fought about it and I finally relented. I married the son of one of his business associates."

"He wished to bind your line to his associate's."

"I don't know why he insisted. I think he was trying to make a point, that I'm not really a lesbian. It didn't work. The marriage was a disaster. I was never attracted to the guy. I had to grit my teeth in bed. My husband started abusing me, hitting me. One day, we had a big fight and he beat me -- he beat the tar out of me. I ran home to my parents and my mother took photos of my injuries. I had two black eyes and bruises all over. She called the police and they arrested the guy. We got a restraining order and I filed for divorce, which, of course was granted."

Tears were starting to well up in her eyes. "My father blamed me! He blamed me for not trying hard enough, for not being attractive

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enough! He insisted I marry again. We had a huge argument. This time I refused and I told him I am absolutely resolute. I told him I am a lesbian, I will never marry another man, I will never even sleep with another man, and that the Kyhana family line will die with me!" She stroked tears from her face.

"Then, my father said, 'To me, you're dead already,' and he threw me out of my childhood home. I haven't been back nor spoken with my parents since."

"So, you came here."

"No! There's more! I had nowhere to go. I knew of a friend with whom I had a brief affair during grad school. Alice was her name. I called Alice and asked her if she could put me up for a while. She agreed. I moved in and it turned out she was just as abusive as my ex-husband. Only in her case, it wasn't physical -- it was emotional abuse. She called me names -- she did everything to break my spirit and to make me submit.

"After a year of this, I wanted out. I couldn't go home, I wasn't on speaking terms with my father. I started circulating my resume on the sly, looking for a position, anything away from the City. I hadn't used my degree in three years, and that didn't help. Finally, this college saw my Gilgamesh translation and offered me a two-year contract as a lecturer. I sneaked out of her apartment in the middle of the night. I spent the rest of the night at the airport and came here with what I could carry. Luckily, it's a furnished apartment.

"So, I'm here by myself. It's hard for me. I've never been alone before. I mean, really alone with no one to turn to. This community seems so closed. Everyone here has their own family and circle of friends. I do feel like a stranger in a strange land." She stood, turned from him and pressed her fist to her lips.

Nyk stood and placed his hand on her shoulder. "If you ever need a shoulder to cry upon, use mine. Consider it another gift."

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She turned to face him. “Oh, Nick...” He opened his arms to her and she fell against him. “I’m so afraid,” she sobbed. “I’m not strong ... I’m all alone ... I miss my mother ... I’m such a mess...”

He held her and felt the warmth of her body against his. “You’ve been mistreated, Suki -- you didn’t deserve it,” he said, putting his lips to the top of her head and inhaling the scent of her hair. “No one deserves mistreatment.” He smoothed his hand along the back of her head and down her hair. “It’s okay to let it out.” Nyk cried with her. “Let it all out.” Suki wept against him as he held her and caressed the back of her head. “Let me be your friend. You said we strangers must stick together. If you’re ever alone and afraid, call me.”

She looked into his eyes and stroked one of his tears off his face with her finger. “You’re sweet,” she said and kissed his cheek. “I’m so sorry. This evening didn’t end the way I expected. Nick, I will have you as my friend if you’ll have me as yours. I hope you know what you’re getting into.”

He thought, so do I.

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5 -- Christmas

Nyk set down his lunch tray and sat across from Suki. He reached into a pocket, withdrew a folded piece of paper and began to hand it to her. "What's that?" she asked.

"A thank-you note. Hospitality must be followed up with a thank-you note."

"Read it to me -- my fingers are all tuna."

"Dear Suki. Thank you for the wonderful dinner. It was delicious and an experience I shall never forget. It was a gift, one I accept it in the spirit in which you gave it, and I give you my thanks. Thanks also for your gift of companionship and friendship. Your friend, Nick Kane." He folded the note and tucked it into her bag.

"That's sweet, Nick. By the way, I have a couple of gifts to thank you for. First, thank you for the wonderful cry and the shoulder to cry upon. It was cathartic. I meditated last night and my meditations were better than in years. And thanks for holding me the way you did, it felt so good." She placed her hand on his. "Thank you, too, for being non-judgmental."

"For being non-judgmental about what?"

"You're too sweet." She touched the tip of his nose with her forefinger. "Are you doing anything for Thanksgiving?" Nyk recalled

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his Agency training course on Earth feast days. "Next week. I'd love to have your company. I don't do well alone on holidays."

"I'm sorry. I have to travel home next week."

"To be with your wife? I understand..."

"I probably will see her. I have to deliver my first set of cultures to the home office labs. I must also make a trip to headquarters in New York. I wish I didn't -- I'd rather be with you."

"I'll be all right, I guess. I don't suppose you'll be here for Christmas."

Nyk thought. "I'll be here for Christmas," he said.

Nyk loaded a stasis canister containing bean cultures and the vial with Suki's hairs into the shuttlecar. At midnight he drove into the countryside to a secluded spot, pulled onto the shoulder, ran pre-launch diagnostics and checked the doorseals.

He pressed the launch sequencer. The car nosed up and shot into the sky. He activated countermeasures and was soon in a high orbit around Earth. A pre-programmed subjump put him close to the comm relay station. The shuttlecar's guidance homed in on the station's transponder and he parked it in the shuttlebay. The bay doors closed and the pressurization sequence began.

Nyk connected cables to recharge the shuttle's power cells and picked up his canister. He went through decontamination, dressed in a Floran tunic and *xarpa* and slipped into a pair of sandals. A hail from the packet's captain blared through the comm station intercom. Nyk heard and felt the thud of the vessel docking. He boarded through the docking tunnel and took his seat.

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Shortly he was disembarking onto the transit platform in orbit over Floran. He walked down the concourse toward the shuttle to the planet's surface.

Veska beckoned him. "Hello, my friend and my son. How goes your tour as an ExoAgent?"

"It's too soon to tell for sure, but it's been interesting. Earth people are different, but I think I like them. It's a beautiful planet with much more interesting plant life. The land is full of life. I see flying creatures called birds as well as ground-dwellers. Floran's biology is simple and dull in comparison."

"Don't be late for your shuttle."

He pressed his wrist to the scanpad outside the apartment and the door popped open. It was mid-afternoon and he figured Senta was at the lab. Nyk examined the family crest hanging on the apartment wall. Ky-Ha-Na, he touched the *katakana* characters.

Senta's voice came from the balcony. "Thank you, Rez. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good day, ma'm."

Nyk heard the skimmer door slam shut. Senta approached him from the balcony.

"Hello, *korlyta*," he said. He opened his travel case, withdrew a cellophane bag and handed it to her. "I brought this for you -- Earth sweets."

Senta slipped a peppermint lozenge into her mouth. Her eyes popped and she reached into her mouth and removed it. "The flavor's so strong," she said as she tossed it into the waste reprocessor. "It almost made me sneeze. Don't tell me you like these."

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“Try a green one,” he said. “It's milder.”

“Maybe later.” She pointed to the stasis canister. “Are those your cultures?”

“Yes -- I have some of Sukiko's hairs.” He opened the canister, removed the vial and withdrew a hair with the forceps. “Look at the color... Did you ever see hair so dark? It's black!”

Senta examined the specimen. “It looks like the root is intact on this one, so we should have no trouble sequencing it. It should be done in ten days or so.”

“Ten days! Can't we get it done sooner?”

“I'm sorry, Nyk, but we're in the middle of sequencing the latest set of prototype seedstocks. I must have those analyses done before we decide which strains to put into the pilot beds. If I can work it in sooner, I will. By the way, how was she?”

“What do you mean?”

“You seduced her, didn't you? How else did you obtain those samples? You knew I'd want a full report. What kinds of lovers are Earth women?”

“I did not seduce her. I picked those out of her hairbrush.” Nyk stalked into his study, sat at the vidisplay and began scanning through Koichi's journal in the original Esperanto. His search for the word Sukiko yielded nothing. He began perusing the entire text from beginning to end, looking for family records. No references could he find to any Earth Kyhanas except Koichi's own parents.

“I'm sorry, Nyk,” Senta said from behind him. “I should've known better. You've been away. I've missed you, and I want our short time together to be pleasant.” She draped her arms across his shoulders.

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He jumped, turned and looked up at her. “I'm sorry, what were you saying?”

She glowered at him. “Fine, Nyk. Spend your leave with your dusty old journal.” She stormed out of the study and slammed the door behind her.

Nyk arose and looked at the closed door, then sat. Why hadn't Koichi left a family tree as the other *Floran* crew had? Perhaps the answer lies elsewhere in the journal. He began translating a passage.

6.011 APF

It was five Earth years ago today we departed on our ill-fated mission to Centauri. Or as close to five Earth years as we can determine, given the differences in the planets' rotational and revolutionary periods.

I still remember that last tea ceremony with my parents. How good my mother was at keeping the old traditions. She wanted me to see the land of my heritage, and I kept putting it off. There'll be time, I said. Now, I will never have the opportunity to see the Land of the Rising Sun with my own eyes, to see the sun rise over Mount Fuji, or to rub elbows with my people. How poorer I am for that lost opportunity, and how poorer will be Yasuko, Tetsui and other of my children that may come. My humblest apologies to the reader of these words, but today is a day that fills me with regrets. Carpe diem, before it is too late.

Nyk stepped to a public vidphone at the shuttleport and placed a call to Senta. “Why didn't you wake me?”

“You were so exhausted last night, I didn't want to disturb you.”

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“I overslept and I'm on standby for the shuttle. Veska won't be happy if I miss the packet he's taken the trouble to divert for me. I didn't have a chance to say goodbye.”

“What are your plans?”

“As soon as I arrive on Earth I must travel to New York...” He heard his name announced over the shuttleport's PA system. “...I have a seat, I must go.”

“Goodbye, Nykkyo,” Senta said. She kissed her fingers and placed them against the vidphone camera.

“Goodbye, *korlyta*.” He dashed to the gate and boarded the shuttle.

Nyk trod down the jetway at LaGuardia and hired a taxi to take him to the Tribeca section of Manhattan where Seymour's office was located. A truck passed on the street and he coughed and gasped from the cloud of diesel fumes it left in its wake. He entered the grimy office building, climbed to the second floor and entered a door marked “FloranCo.”

A middle-aged woman with dark brown skin greeted him. “May I help you?”

“Seymour is expecting me. I'm Nick Kane.”

“Just a minute.” She picked up the phone and punched a button. “A Mr Kane to see you, sir... Go right in, Mr Kane.”

Nyk entered a door marked “private” and saw Seymour sitting behind a large desk. He closed the door.

“That is an Earth woman,” he said to Seymour.

“That's Jaquie. Earth people can be handy for some roles. Jaquie is an excellent receptionist and secretary.”

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“How do you keep what we do secret when they're in the next office?”

“Experience, lad, experience. Now, do you have something for me?”

Nyk opened his case and presented a sack of raw diamonds. Seymor looked them over. “These are nice. Yes, very nice. I received a complimentary memo from the plant breeders, saying you've been diligent and prompt in sending the material they've requested. I've put a copy in your permanent record. I'm pleased with your performance so far, lad.”

“I appreciate it, Seymor,” Nyk replied.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Could you explain to me the significance of Christmas? I've been invited to a friend's home, and I'm not sure I appreciate the importance of this feast day.”

Seymor stood by the window and gazed at New York's skyline. “Christmas... It's a time to buy things you don't need with money you don't have. It's day to find yourself a year older but not an hour richer ... That description's from a century and a half ago. It's just as apt today -- more so.”

“Then why is it such an important event?”

“Pay no mind to me, lad -- these are just the ramblings of a cynical old codger.” He turned to Nyk. “I think one must be a native of this rock to fully appreciate the holiday. You'll need a gift. What sort of friend?”

“She's a woman. She's been through hardship and I'd like to cheer her.”

“You know the hazards of involvement with Earth women. I'd hate to have to send you up.”

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“We're only friends -- no romance. She says she's a lesbian.”

“Oh... that should be safe enough. How about this?” He took out a large, flat case and snapped it open. Inside was row after row of sparkling gemstones. “These are what your rocks get turned into ... Cut and polished diamonds. This case is worth an Earth fortune...” Seymor picked up the smallest stone. “This is about two carats -- why don't you take this? I can let you have it -- it's of second quality.” Seymor slipped the stone into a fabric pouch and put the pouch into a small cardboard box. “She'll love it.”

“Do you think so?” Nyk asked.

“Sure -- that'll put you in solid with her, lad. Just glad to help...”

Nyk pocketed the box.

He flipped open the laptop computer on the kitchen table and attempted a vidphone call to Senta. She answered on the second signal. “Hi, *korlyta*. I just arrived from New York.” He saw movement in the background. “Do you have company?”

“Only Andra Baxa. We had an opening in the lab schedule, so I performed the DNA analysis of your Earth friend. I compared her sequence to Gordo Kyhana's. Her genetic markers are consistent with a straight-line ancestry -- as consistent as we can get given the hodge-podge in the early times. I'd say the odds are between eighty-five and ninety percent she's a direct ancestor. I'm sorry it couldn't be more conclusive.”

“I'd say eighty-five to ninety percent is close,” Nyk replied.

“In my field, a close match is 99.9999-plus percent. This is as good a match as we can get, given the circumstances.” He saw Andra walk up behind her and whisper into her ear. “Now, if you'll excuse me...” The screen went blank.

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The clock on the lab wall read 3:30. Nyk slipped a tray full of capsules into the stasis canister and locked the filing cabinet. He heard the lab door and Suki walked in.

“Howdy, stranger,” she said and sat on a lab stool.

“How were your classes today?” he asked.

“I thought I wanted to spend my life digging in the dirt. But, I really enjoy teaching. I like those kids.”

“Just on a chance ... do you have any idea what *carpe diem* means?”

“It's Latin,” she replied. “It means 'seize the day.’” She made a grasping gesture to illustrate the word.

“Seize the day?”

“Yes, I'm surprised you've never seen it before.”

“I guess I've led a sheltered life, with my plants and culture dishes and all.”

“You're an odd mix of innocence and wisdom, Nick. It's one of your more endearing traits.”

He talked with her as he tended his cultures. At five o'clock, he switched off the lights, locked the lab door and escorted her to her apartment building. It diverted his route home by only a short distance.

Her hand touched his. He placed his palm against hers and spread his fingers. She laced her fingers with his and he walked, holding hands with her. He walked slowly, savoring her company and the conversation.

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“Nick, don't you think the lights are beautiful? I like seeing the lights this time of year. I'm so happy you accepted my invitation to come over for Christmas Eve dinner. I don't think I could bear being alone.”

“It's an important day -- one of the more important Christian holidays.”

“I think Christmas today is about twenty-five percent Christian, twenty- five percent pagan, and the rest commercial.”

“Pagan?” he asked.

“Yes. Many of the Christmas customs derive from pagan solstice festivals, like the Roman Saturnalia ... I'm sorry, Nick, I'm lecturing you as if you were one of my students.”

“Please continue -- I enjoy listening to you. You teach comparative religion. Are you religious?”

“No, I'm not. I don't believe in a specific, personal god, in heaven or an afterlife. I do believe in spirituality and I try to be a spiritual person -- it's the reason I meditate. I think it's possible to be spiritual without being religious, and the other way around. I do think all religions are valid as a metaphor for the fundamental mystery of the universe -- 'Where did I come from and where am I going?' What about you?”

“I'm not religious and I'm not sure I know what it means. I do believe in Destiny. The universe appears chaotic, but I think there's some underlying plan for how it unfolds. Destiny traces a path for each of us, one we have no choice but to follow.” He reached her apartment. “Lunch tomorrow?” he asked.

“Of course.” She gave his hand a squeeze, then unlocked the door and went into her apartment building. He stood and watched the door close, turned and headed home.

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Nyk locked up the lab and walked to Suki's apartment. "Thank you for coming," she said. "Christmas Eve makes me sad and your company will cheer me up."

"Why are you sad?"

"Because it reminds me of happier and simpler times. My mother is Buddhist, and my father is ... well, I don't know what he is, but he's not a practicing Christian. They used to celebrate Christmas for my sake, so I wouldn't feel too different from the rest of the kids at my school. They'd put up a Christmas tree, hang stockings, and have presents... As I grew older the tradition wasn't so special. The last Christmas I remember celebrating was when I was in the eighth grade, I think. The last three were nothing special, believe me."

She presented him a package, about half the dimensions of his laptop computer and wrapped in colorful paper. "Merry Christmas, Nick. Open it." He opened it and inside was an Indian cookbook. "This one is the best -- it's the one I use. It's also out of print, so I had a used bookstore hunt a copy down for me. There are some inspired vegetarian meals in here."

She looked into his eyes. "Please accept this gift, from one stranger to another."

Nyk replied, "Thank you -- this is special, and I shall cherish it. Now, I have a gift for you. Merry Christmas, Suki." He handed her the small box. She opened it, removed the pouch, and held the stone in the palm of her hand.

"I ... I can't accept this ... it's too much."

"Please accept this gift in the spirit in which I give it."

"It's too much. I'd feel obligated in a way that makes me uncomfortable. There's no way I could afford to reciprocate."

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“The stone is synthetic. It didn't cost me a thing. I brought this because I thought it would cheer you. Please accept it.”

“You mean it's an artificial stone? I know something about gems, Nick. Remember, my grandfather was a jeweler. This sure looks like a real diamond to me!”

“Oh, it's real, it's just synthetic. My company makes them. We've developed a technology to make diamonds synthetically. They're just as real as natural stones. Please accept it.”

Suki looked up at him. “It's beautiful. I've never seen a more beautiful diamond. It looks to be about two carats. Thank you very much.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Let's have dinner.”

Nyk sat with her on her sofa until nearly midnight. “It's getting late,” he said. “I'd better be leaving.”

“Please don't leave me alone tonight. I couldn't bear it. I get sad at Christmas now, because it reminds me of happy times that are gone -- gone forever and replaced with sad memories. We strangers must stick together. You said if I ever felt alone or afraid, I should call on you. Please stay with me tonight.”

“Are you afraid?” he asked.

“I don't want to be alone on Christmas.” Nyk put his arm around her and held her. She leaned against him. “Mmm, this feels so good, Nick.” Nyk dozed and his head fell against hers. He awoke with a start.

He held her hand and followed her into the bedroom. Nyk stretched out on the bed and Suki lay beside him. He put his arm around her and held her tightly, stroking her back. She let out a contented sigh. Nyk smoothed her hair. He felt her arms and legs twitch as she drowsed. Her lips parted and she began to breathe regularly through her nose and mouth. Her body relaxed.

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“I love you Suki,” he whispered, knowing she wouldn't hear. “I've loved you since the moment I saw you.”

Christmas morning's daylight awoke Nyk. He was alone on Suki's bed. She walked in wearing running shorts, tank top and a towel around her hair. “If you'd like to take a shower, there's a towel for you.”

Nyk showered and dressed in the same clothes he slept in. “I'd have brought a change of clothes if I had known.” He looked out the window. “Snow!” He had only seen snow from a distance, high on the slopes of the mons. Outside her apartment large, fluffy snowflakes were falling.

“Let's go out in it!” Suki grabbed her keys and he followed her outside. She stretched out her arms and turned her face to the sky. She held up one leg and then the other.

“Aren't you cold?” he asked.

“The air's not that cold. It feels good. I love feeling the flakes melt against my skin.” She ran around like a child with her arms outstretched. Then she said, “I'm starting to get a chill. Let's go inside.”

Nyk followed her into the apartment. He folded his arms and shivered. “I'd rather be in here than out there.”

“I'd like to tell you something about myself,” she said. “I hope it won't bother you.”

“I can't imagine you saying anything that would.”

“When I was a teenager, I had a friend who lived out in the country. Once, I was staying at her house. Her parents had left us alone.

“It started snowing and we both ran outside. I told her I liked feeling the flakes on my skin. I took off my blouse and she did the same. We both took off all our clothes. We ran around, naked, in the snow for

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several minutes.” She looked into his eyes. “Then, we went inside and made love. That's how I discovered I was a lesbian.”

“That event doesn't make you a lesbian, does it?”

“It wasn't just one event. I had several girl lovers in high school and in college. I've struggled with who I am ever since I remember. I knew I was ... different, and I never fit in. I've tried relationships with men. I've never felt the least bit of attraction toward a man. I find men repulsive.” She looked down. “Present company excepted, of course.”

Suki stood at the window. Nyk stood behind her and watched the falling snow. “When I was in graduate school, my thesis advisor kept trying to fix me up on dates. 'All work and no play makes Jane a dull girl,' he'd say. I always refused. He used to call me 'Sushi Kyhana, my little Japanese cold fish.' I never told him why.”

“Suki, your preferences make no difference to how I feel toward you. You must be true to yourself. It would be a terrible mistake to deny or to ignore what makes you ... you.”

She looked into his eyes. “Oh, Nick -- do you know how much it means to me to hear you say that?”

Nyk opened his arms and she fell into them. “I can feel it -- I feel your uncompromising acceptance of who I am. I wonder why my own father can't accept me and why a complete stranger can.”

“You have difficulties with your father.”

She nodded. “I was a big disappointment to him. He never accepted my gayness and he didn't approve when I became a history major. He said there wasn't a future in it.” She giggled. “I suppose he's right.”

Nyk shook his head. “He's wrong -- history and the future are one and the same.” He caressed the back of her head. “You and I have something in common. I was a disappointment to my father, too.”

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“Really?”

“Yes, really. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps. I had no interest. I do understand how you feel.”

She slipped her arms around his waist. “This feels so good, Nick. The pain goes away when you hold me.”

He put his lips to the top of her head and inhaled. “I’ll wager,” he said, “your father isn’t as disappointed as you believe.”

“You’re so sweet ... and, so ... different. I’ve never met anyone quite like you. You have a softness -- a femininity I find very appealing, and I mean that as a compliment.”

“I’ll accept it as a compliment,” he replied.

“You know, Nick ... I’m beginning to think ... I might want to try a physical relationship with you. That is ... if you’d want it.”

“We mustn’t, Suki. That is something we must not do.”

“Nick, your wife has hardly been faithful to you, from what you’ve told me, at least. You said what two people do by themselves is their business.”

“That’s not the reason.”

“Well ... okay...” She released him from her embrace. “It’s funny ... for years men have been hitting on me and I’d tell them to get lost. Now, I finally work up the nerve to ask the first guy I’ve ever responded to ... and he shoots me down.” She turned from him.

“Suki, I’m sorry ... oh, Suki, if things were different, I’d say yes in an eyeblink. I wish I could explain.”

“It’s okay, Nick -- really.” She faced him and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. “You’re right -- it’s probably better this way. We agreed to be friends, and friends we are.” She took his hand. “I’m going

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to finish making Christmas dinner. You can help me, if you'd like. I like help in the kitchen.”

“I'm afraid I'd be no help at all, but I'd be happy to watch and keep you company.”

“I'm making a southern Indian meal. It's not a traditional Christmas dinner, but I think you'll enjoy it. I'm sorry it's not a hundred percent authentic. A southern meal should be served on a banana leaf, and it's a bad time of year for banana leaves.”

Nyk watched as she cut up ingredients and finished putting together their meal. “It's hard for me to believe those light, lacy pancakes started out as beans and rice. I wouldn't have believed it at all if I hadn't seen you make them with my own eyes.”

“I told you Indian vegetarian foods are inspired. These are my absolute favorites, and they're not only delicious but healthy, too.”

“I'm impressed with the amount of planning that must go into this and the amount of effort. I had no idea food preparation was so involved. It seems to require so much... equipment.”

“I bought most of this at the thrift store shortly after moving here. I don't think I paid more than a hundred dollars for everything. A serious cook can spend a hundred dollars on a single pan. The thrift store has been my salvation. I've bought kitchen utensils, clothing and dinnerware there. When I was growing up, even when I was in college, I never wanted for anything. Being on my own has certainly taught me the value of a dollar.”

“I never gave much thought to how food is prepared. Since my parents' deaths, I've subsisted on prepared dinners. I cherish the meals you've made and we've shared, Suki. I can feel the love you put into them.”

She looked into his eyes. “Thank you, Nick. That was sweet. Does Cindy cook?”

EARTHBOUND

“Who?”

“Your wife, of course.”

“Oh... No, she's too busy with her work. We rarely even sit down to eat together. It's just easier to heat up a package.”

“I feel sorry for you, Nick. I think a nice meal, with good food and good conversation, shared with friends or with someone you care for is one of life's greatest pleasures. Even our little lunches together at the union have been the highlights of my days.”

“Of my days, too.”

“Everything's ready. Please bring those plates over.” Nyk carried the plates to her living room and they sat together on the floor. “Southern Indian food is hotter than northern, so I hope you've prepared yourself. Here's some cubed melon if you need to cool off your mouth.”

Nyk helped clean up after dinner. “Thank you for the wonderful Christmas,” he said. “and thanks for the book.”

She embraced him. “Thank you, Nick, for your friendship. It's dearer to me than the largest diamond your company can fabricate.”

He headed for the door. “Wait, Nick. The union will be closed for the Christmas break. I'd love it if you'd come here for lunch.”

“I'll see you Monday.” He walked home, shivering, through the accumulating snow.

Nykkyo walked from the lab to Suki's apartment. She buzzed him upstairs and let him in.

“Hi, stranger,” she said. “Lunch will be ready in a few minutes.”

EARTHBOUND

Nyk stood to look at the two paintings hanging on the wall -- the watercolors of nude female torsos. "What do you think?" Suki asked from behind him.

"I think I like the magenta one better," he said. He glanced at her and saw she was smiling. "They're both excellent representations." She broke out giggling. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"They're of me! When I was in college, I had a friend who was an art major. She was a little behind in her figure drawing assignments, so one weekend I agreed to pose for her. She gave them to me after the school year was over. I've had them ever since. If you look closely you can see the titles in pencil at the bottom -- Suki I and Suki II."

Nyk averted his gaze, and he could feel himself blushing. "I thought you said you left your personal belongings at home."

"Well, I wasn't about to leave these lying around where my parents could find them. But when I moved into this apartment, I thought the walls needed some color and figured why not? You're the only person other than myself who's been in here to see them. Come into the kitchen. Lunch is ready."

Nyk followed her and sat at the kitchen table.

"What plans do you have for New Years?" she asked.

"New Years?"

"Yes, you know, *Auld Lang Syne*, the ball dropping in Time Square. This is the first time in my life I won't be in New York for New Years. We used to go in to Time Square and make a lot of noise and watch the ball drop. I suppose we could watch it on TV, if I had one. Do you have a TV, Nick?"

"Yes. Let's celebrate New Years at my house. Tell me what we should do."

EARTHBOUND

“Maybe it would be all right to have some snacks and share a bottle of champagne. But you don't drink, do you?”

“I suppose it wouldn't hurt for one special occasion. I'll supply the champagne, and you can supply the snacks. I'll stop by after closing up the lab and we'll walk over to my house together.”

“Why don't we plan on having dinner here and then walk over to your place?”

“I'm afraid this is not as inviting a place as yours,” he said, holding her hand as they walked toward his house. “The house is owned by my company, and it's provided to me as a convenience while I'm on assignment here. My apartment is quite a bit more of a home.”

Nyk escorted her inside. The place looked nearly as it had when he first saw it, except for an additional three month's worth of dust having settled. The built-in bookcases stood empty save the Indian cookbook Suki gave him. Nyk showed her what he bought -- a Champagne-style sparkling wine from Spain.

“That will do fine. Why don't you put it on ice to chill?”

Nyk had no ice, so he opened the back door and poked the bottle into a snowdrift. “What do we do now?”

“We wait until it's closer to midnight. Since we're in the central time zone, the ball will drop at eleven. That's okay. To me when it's New Years in New York, it's New Years.”

Nyk invited her to sit on the sofa and talk. “You seem different,” he said. “Your eyes... sparkle.”

“I'm happy, Nick. I'm happier than I've been in years. I enjoy teaching, and I like having you as my friend. Yes, I think I finally have my life on track.” She started setting out snacks. “I think it would be

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okay to sample the Champagne before midnight, as long as we save enough for a proper toast when the ball drops.”

“What's a proper toast?” Nyk asked.

“Don't you know?”

“I've never paid much attention to it.”

“We count down as the ball drops. When it's New Years, we say, 'Happy New Year!' We clink glasses, take a sip, and then we kiss.”

“That sounds okay.”

“I should warn you about me and Champagne. It makes me giggly.”

“You're giggly now.”

She smiled and touched her forehead to his. “It makes me gigglier.”

Suki turned on the television and switched channels until she found coverage of the New Year's parties. Nyk sat with her and she pointed out various New York landmarks. When eleven PM arrived, they prepared for the toast.

“5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 ... 1... It's 1999! Happy New Year, Nick.”

“Happy New Year.” Nyk clinked his glass with hers and took a long sip of Champagne. His lips met hers and they kissed. He drained his glass and could feel the alcohol in his knees. Looking deeply into her eyes he embraced her and kissed her again.

EARTHBOUND

6 -- Not In Wisconsin Any More

Nyk looked at the clock on the lab wall. It read five, and Suki hadn't stopped by to chat. She hadn't met him for lunch, as he had expected. He locked the filing cabinets and the door to the lab, walked to her apartment building and pressed her button. Nothing happened. Again and again he pressed it and paced around the doorway.

A junior professor came from the building and acknowledged him. "Have you seen Sukiko?" Nyk asked.

"Not since this morning. She may be clearing out her office. She and four other lecturers were let go."

"Let go?"

"Fired. The new humanities head wants only full or associate profs teaching classes. He treated them rather shabbily -- their students were notified over break the classes were cancelled. He dropped the bombshell on them today. She took it pretty hard, I heard."

Nyk slipped through the front door before it latched and climbed the stairs. On the door to her apartment were taped two envelopes, one addressed, "Mom," the other "Nick." He took down the envelopes and opened the one bearing his name.

Inside he found a door key and a note, moist with tears.

Dear Nick,

EARTHBOUND

Thank you for all you've done to try to help me. Deep inside, I knew I was a lost cause. You gave me moments of hope, moments in which my worthless life actually seemed worth living. I've been beating my head against a wall for three years. It's time to stop and find some peace. Suki

He unlocked the door, walked in, slipped off his jacket and looked around the apartment. “Suki?” Her bedroom was empty. “Sukiko?” The bathroom door was closed.

He rapped on it. “Suki? Suki, it's Nick,” he called out and tested the knob to find it locked. Nyk sprinted to the kitchen, found a paring knife, and used it to jimmy the door.

Suki was slumped in the bathtub, naked, covered with blood and bleeding from both wrists. He shut his eyes and pinched his lips together.

She was still warm but pallid and he could find no pulse. He pocketed the door key, ran to his house and opened the garage door.

Shortly, he was pulling up to the apartment building in the shuttlecar. He hopped from the shuttle carrying a stasis canister. With her door key he let himself into her apartment, ripped the top sheet from her bed and spread it on the bathroom floor. Kneeling by the bathtub, he slipped his arm around her shoulder blades. She fell backwards as he attempted to put his other arm under her knees. Her body was limp. Blood made her skin slippery and the narrow tub restricted his leverage. He stood, averted his gaze and gagged.

Nyk slid her into a lying posture in the bottom of the tub, lifted her legs by the ankles, then bent over and grasped her forearms. He pulled her from the tub and rolled her onto the floor. After popping the cover off the canister, he dumped its stasis capsules onto the floor, slid the device over her head and switched it to its internal power cell. Then, he straightened her arms and legs and wrapped her in the sheet, folding it over her head to secure the canister.

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He slung her over his shoulder, carried her to the shuttlecar and placed her in the passenger seat. The shuttle responded to his touch on the unistick and he piloted it from the parking lot. He sped away from the university section and headed toward the outskirts of town.

A vehicle was following him. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted flashing red and blue lights. He increased his speed -- the police car kept pace. Nyk grasped the shuttle's unistick and jerked it left and right to make tight turns. The craft's inertial sink permitted it to corner briskly. By taking a zigzag route he put some distance between himself and the squad car.

He reached the main highway leading toward the country road he used as his launching pad. A push forward on the unistick increased his forward velocity. The police cruiser was still with him and closing in. He sped past his turnoff, increased his speed and hurtled down the highway.

The shuttlecar zigged and zagged around other vehicles as Nyk used the inertial sink to change directions instantly. The squad car began to fall behind. He crossed a small bridge. Then he pressed a control to increase the Z- component of his thrust vector and create some lift. The shuttle rose off its wheels. Pulling the stick full to the left, he executed a tight U-turn and headed back in the direction he had come.

As he approached the bridge from the other side he saw the squad car, stopped and pulled across both lanes of the highway. The officer had jumped out, pulled his service pistol and was crouching by the guardrail.

Nyk pushed the unistick forward again for more speed. He aimed the shuttle directly at the stopped police car. The officer jumped behind the guardrail and braced himself for impact. Nyk increased the Z and flew over the top of the stopped cruiser. The shuttlecar touched down, tires screeching and smoking on contact with the pavement.

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He sped down the highway, pulled onto the side road and stopped behind a deserted school. A touch on the control panel began pre-launch diagnostics. He was awaiting the orbital trajectory coordinates from the navigation computer when he saw flashing lights in the distance, coming his way from two directions. The door safety catches engaged with a snap.

The shuttlecar nosed up and shot skyward. Nyk manipulated the navigational computer as he ascended through the stratosphere. He fired the subwarp coil as soon as he was beyond the atmosphere. The craft's sensors detected the relay station's transponder and he headed toward it at maximum sublight velocity.

The spacedoor opened and he saw the flashing approach lights. He pulled back on the unistick and guided the car into the bay. The shuttle touched down on the deck and he initiated bay repressurization before he came to a halt in the parking stall.

Shuttlebay repressurization required only a couple of minutes but it seemed an eternity. He heard the door safety catches release and he jumped out, picked up Suki and headed into the station's workroom.

Nyk opened the hatch to the station's emergency stasis chamber. He switched off the portable stasis canister, removed it from her head and slid her in. The control panel indicated good stasis. He went through decontamination and placed a vidphone call to Veska, marked it urgent and paced back and forth before the vidisplay.

"Hello, my friend and son." He saw Veska's image on the vidisplay. "What is so important?"

"I need the first available inbound vessel for a medical emergency. Also, a portable stasis chamber for patient transport. We have a grave injury here."

"Who's injured?" Veska asked.

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“Someone on the comm station. It's very serious. I have them in the stasis chamber now.”

Veska shook his head. “Those comm techs shouldn't be permitted to work alone. They should have a buddy with them. It's a good thing you happened by. Let me consult the packet schedule ... Nothing I can divert ... There's an inbound colonial courier. I can't order them to divert, but I'll transmit a request. Please stand by.”

The vidphone session suspended. Nyk paced back and forth. Veska reappeared. “Nyk, it's a courier from the Lexal colony. They have a stasis chamber on board, and they've agreed to divert to transport the patient. Expect their hail in 1.2 segments.” The display went blank.

Nyk resumed his pacing. He looked into the stasis chamber and at its control panel. The hail came over the vidisplay, then the courier docked with a gentle thud. A pair of attendants came through the docking port, dragging a field stasis chamber on a levitating pallet.

“Over here,” Nyk said and directed them toward the comm station's chamber. He switched it off, opened its hatch and withdrew Suki. The attendants helped him maneuver her into the portable chamber's transparent tube.

“Man or woman?” the attendant asked.

“A woman.”

“She's certainly bleeding badly,” an attendant said noticing the red splotch on the sheet.

“We have good stasis,” the second attendant said upon activating the portable unit. “We'll take her directly to the Floran City shuttleport. A skimmer's standing by to transport her to the Central Clinic.”

“I'll accompany her,” Nyk said. “Call ahead, ask for Dr Kurso Aahhn.” He followed them into the courier. The attendant pressed a control and the pallet settled onto the deck.

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Nyk looked at the bulkhead separating the courier's cabins. The door to the forward cabin was closed. "The chancellor's in there," the attendant said. "It's good we're ahead of schedule. He's needed on the homeworld for an important meeting -- and he hates being late."

Nyk belted himself into a crewman's jump seat as the warp indicators signaled the impending jump. A subjump brought the courier into orbit around his indigo homeworld. The spacecraft maneuvered to head belly-first into Floran's upper atmosphere. Nyk could see the orange-red glow of their reentry through the viewports. Upon entering the stratosphere, the craft extended a pair of wings and flew toward Floran City.

The courier touched down onto the polymer concrete runway of the shuttleport and taxied to a stop near the diplomatic gate of the private terminal. The doorway popped open and a stairway unfolded and locked in place. A pair of skimmers approached the parked craft. Nyk watched as the forward hatch dropped and a compact-looking man was escorted into one of the skimmers. He glimpsed the back of a tall woman in a long gown as she was helped into the craft. She was wearing her oat-straw white hair up, in a twist. The skimmer lifted off and headed toward the center of the city.

"Who was that?" Nyk asked one of the attendants.

"Mykko Wygann, our chancellor. He's addressing the High Legislature on the topic of colonial security."

"Don't tell me your chancellor has an *ax'amfin* consort."

"Are you speaking of Mrs Wygann, our beloved princess?" the Lexalese attendant asked.

Nyk blushed. "Please accept my apologies," he replied, wondering if he were the only Floran citizen who despised the finishing schools.

EARTHBOUND

The attendant activated the pallet's antigrav field and pushed it out the door. Nyk helped guide it to the ground, and a pair of medical corpsmen loaded it into the other skimmer.

“We'll take her from here,” a corpsman said.

“I'm not leaving her side,” Nyk replied, and he climbed into the skimmer. The vehicle lifted off and sped toward the emergency department of the Central Clinic. The corpsmen offloaded the pallet and pushed it into emergency receiving.

A pair of orderlies slipped Suki from the stasis chamber and began unwrapping the sheet. An emergency medic folded the fabric back from her face. He looked at Suki's black hair, pallid, yellowish skin and the shape of her face. He turned to Nyk. “What is this? Who is this?”

“She's a patient who needs your help. She's an Earth woman. I brought her here for a special ExoAgency project. I have the appropriate Agency authorization.”

“I can't treat her.” the medic exclaimed.

“Why not?”

“It's highly irregular!”

“This is for an ExoAgency project.” Nyk replied. “Haven't you taken an oath to preserve life?”

“Of course.”

“Then, preserve her life!”

“But that oath applies to...”

“She's no less human than you or I.”

“I'll need to obtain authorization to begin treatment.”

EARTHBOUND

“How long will that take?” Nyk asked. “How long out of stasis before the damage is irreparable? Once someone goes into stasis, they must remain there or be reanimated. Otherwise they die.”

“You've no need to explain my job to me,” the medic replied. Nyk returned the medic's glare. “I'll return her to stasis and page Aahhn.” The orderlies slid her back into the stasis tube.

Nyk paced around the emergency room. He heard the orderlies speaking to each other and saw them pointing in his direction. His friend Aahhn approached. “What's the commotion? What's this I hear of an Earth woman?” He looked into the stasis chamber, then at Nyk.

“It's ExoAgency business, Aahhn. I'll take full responsibility.”

“I'm certain you will. What's the nature of her injuries?”

“Self-inflicted cuts to the wrists. She lost a lot of blood.”

Aahhn turned to the emergency medic. “Check and bind her wounds. Get a synthetic blood infusion going. Keep her in stasis until her blood volume's been restored. Then prepare the reanimation chamber.”

The medic nodded acknowledgement and glared at Nyk.

“I'll check her out once we have her reanimated,” Aahhn said. “What was her condition when she entered stasis? Was she breathing, did she have a pulse?”

“None I could detect.”

“How long before stasis?”

“Maybe a quarter-segment. No more than that.”

Aahhn shook his head. “I don't know, Nyk. She's apt to have brain damage.”

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“I put a portable stasis canister on her head while I transported her to the relay station. I don't know how good the stasis was, but it had to be better than nothing.”

“A stasis canister?” Aahhn said. “Interesting ... Right now, let's get her reanimated.”

Nyk sat in a waiting area. An attendant beckoned to him and he followed her into a treatment room. He saw Suki lying on a therapeutic pallet. She was unconscious, but breathing on her own. Her skin had a greyish cast and her lips were black. On her head was a helmet-like device and a light drape covered her from her armpits to her feet.

“How's she doing?” he asked.

“The reanimation was normal,” the attendant replied. “Her vitals look good. We gave her quite a bit of synthetic blood -- that's why her color is off.”

“What about her brain activity?”

“You'd best speak with the doctor about that.”

Nyk sat beside Suki and stroked her cheek. He pressed his hand against his eyes. “Oh, Suki,” he whispered. “I'm so sorry ... I wish I were there for you ... I did what I could ... please...”

“She can't hear you.” Nyk turned and saw Aahhn reviewing a portable vidisplay.

“Aahhn! Tell me she'll be all right.”

“I wish I could. Nykkyo, your friend did experience some brain injury.”

“Even with stasis?”

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“Your stasis canister probably saved her. When I saw the degree of tissue hypoxia, I was surprised we could reanimate her.”

“Are her injuries permanent?”

“We detected some other tissue damage, but we think it's reversible. We've repaired her wrists. She severed some tendons along with her blood vessels, but all that's been patched up. There may be some lingering numbness in her left thumb, though. We used a lot of synthetic blood -- she was down to ten percent of her own by the time we were done.” Aahhn poked the vidisplay. “I'm worried about her heart. It started right up, but we'll need to watch her cardiac rhythms carefully for a couple of days.”

Nyk picked up one of Suki's hands and examined and stroked her wrist. Barely noticeable scars betrayed the places where she had cut herself. “What can you do for her heart?”

“It may be weakened permanently.”

“What about the brain injury?”

“We're using neural induction. We have salvaged cases worse than hers, but not much worse.”

“Will she be all right?”

“It's too soon to tell.” Aahhn looked at her vital readings on the side of the pallet. “For the life of me, Nyk -- I don't know why you'd take the risk to bring her here.”

“It was her only hope. She'd have been declared dead at an Earth hospital.”

“The condition of a member of that planet's population is no concern of ours. You know that. You should've left well enough alone.”

“No, Aahhn. This was the right thing to do.”

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“Well, now she's here. I've instructed my staff to treat her as any other patient. Protocol dictates any attempted suicide must see a psychomedic. I suppose we'll need you to interpret for us, once she regains consciousness -- if she does. That won't be until we discontinue the neural induction, which won't be until mid-morning tomorrow.” Aahhn set down the vidisplay. “It's late and I'm calling it a day. Why don't you go home and get some rest?”

Nyk headed for the tubecar platform and rode to his apartment. He took the lift to his floor and approached the door. The scanpad chirped as he pressed his wrist to it and it read his ID chip. It indicated the door was locked with a privacy code. He pressed the privacy override and scanned his wrist again. The door popped open, and he walked in.

“Senta? Are you home?”

He heard a commotion from their bedroom. Senta poked her head out the door. “Nykkyo, what are you doing here? Don't you ever have the courtesy of calling first?”

“I live here, too. Why, do you have ... company?”

“Maybe I do.”

“I'll ride to the mall and pick up some snack wafers. I'll take my time. Sorry to disturb you, *korlyta*.”

Nyk pressed his wrist to the apartment's scanpad and the door popped open. Senta was arranging her *lifixarpa*. “I'll heat some dinners,” he said.

She joined him in the kitchen. “Thank you for spoiling my day. For future reference, if you see the privacy code on the doorscan, assume it's there for a good reason.”

“This is as much my place as yours,” he replied between bites.

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“This is my apartment, I'll remind you.”

“We are married, I'll remind you!”

“How long are you onworld?”

“A few days. I don't know for sure. I'm spending my days and maybe evenings out, working on ... a special project. I'll need a place to sleep, shower and change, and I'll use the guestroom if it's more convenient for you.”

“I'm sorry, Nyk. That's not necessary. It's just... I was on the verge of a breakthrough with Andra.”

Nyk rolled his eyes. “Senta, sometimes I can't believe it!”

“It's not what you think, Nykkyo. Andra deserves pity more than anything.”

“How much pity can one have for the likes of her?”

Senta's eyes narrowed. “How could you know until you've walked a few kilometres in her sandals?”

“She's an *ax'amfin*.”

“I won't let you goad me into an argument about Andra.” She eyed him. “Now -- what's the nature of your special project?”

“I'm not at liberty to discuss it.” He picked up his tray and dumped it into the waste reprocessor. “I'm sorry, too, Senta. I've had a stressful day. I'm going to try to get some rest.”

“You're not working on your translation?”

“No, I'm not in the mood. If this project doesn't work out... The journal might be moot.”

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Nyk returned to Suki's treatment room. The neural inducer had been removed but she was still unconscious. A feeding tube had been inserted into one of her nostrils. He placed his hand on her forehead, and then he sat near her.

Aahhn walked in. "She's causing quite a stir. Nearly the entire staff has paraded through here to get a glimpse of an Earth woman. I've stressed the importance of keeping knowledge of our ... patient ... confined to the walls of this clinic."

"How is she?" Nyk asked.

"We've done all the neural induction we can do. Now it's up to her. If she doesn't improve by mid-afternoon, she never will. We're taking periodic brainwave scans. Her coma has lightened significantly since we discontinued induction, and I'll admit, I'm cautiously optimistic."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"I'd like you here when she wakes up. I'm trying to put myself into her position, awakening to an alien environment."

Nyk nodded. "I'm prepared for that." He reached, took her hand and stroked her forearm. "Please, Suki, I need you. We all need you."

Aahhn picked up a handheld vidisplay. "I'll need to file a report on her." He poked the device's touchscreen. "What kind of report, I don't know. She obviously doesn't have a personal ID code. What's her name?"

"Sukiko," Nyk replied.

"Is that her given name or surname?"

"It's her given name."

"What's her surname?"

Nyk looked into Aahhn's eyes. "It's Kyhana."

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The color drained from Aahhn's face. "Now I understand... You're playing with fire, Nyk."

"I'm trying to extinguish the fire. This woman is destined to bear the child who's the root of my family tree."

"How do you know that?"

"Senta's done DNA sequencing, and the results are consistent with straight-line ancestry. There's the name, the racial characteristics and the crest. It all points to an inescapable conclusion. Her yet unconceived son is destined to give rise to Koichi Kyhana. If she dies... I don't even want to predict what happens! She must not die. She will not die." Nyk stroked her raven hair. "I'm guilty of temporal interference. My friendship with her caused this and I must put it right. I don't care what happens to me. She will recover and she will return to Earth and fulfill her destiny, or else we wouldn't be having this delightful conversation."

Aahhn eyed him. "Out of respect of our friendship, I'll hold off filing this report until she's safely home, assuming she makes it that far."

Nyk sat beside Suki, holding her hand and stroking her forearm. "She can't feel it," he heard an attendant say. "Her extremities are numb from the neural induction. Aahhn said you might want this," she said and handed him a meal package. "I have a nutrient slurry for the patient." She injected the slurry into the feeding tube. Suki's body jerked, she turned her head, and let out a soft moan. Nyk stood and looked into her face.

"She must've reacted to the sensation of having the slurry introduced into her stomach. I've seen that before." The attendant left and returned with a large syringe. "This is some cold water." She attached the syringe to the tube and pressed the plunger. Suki rolled her head to the other side.

EARTHBOUND

Nyk walked around the pallet and stroked her face. He thought he saw movement beneath her eyelids. “Suki? Suki, are you there?”

“Mmmmmph,” she said. The attendant stood behind Nyk and placed her hand on his shoulder. Suki lay still and the movement under her eyelids stopped.

“I’ll speak to Aahhn about a neural stimulant,” the attendant said and left the treatment room.

The attendant returned with a pair of injectors. “This may be a bit disturbing to watch. The drug must be injected directly into the carotid artery. We have an imaging tech on his way.”

Nyk sat near her, held her hand and stroked her forearm. He saw movement under her eyelids. A technician wheeled in a portable imager.

The attendant and technician shifted her on the pallet so her head extended past the pad, and gently eased her head back to raise her chin. The technician positioned the imaging transducer and turned the screen so the attendant could see.

“Image the right carotid artery,” the attendant said. She removed the guard, exposing the long needle on one of the injectors. She began inserting the needle into Suki’s neck.

“Now, the left side... Good.” The technician withdrew the imaging equipment. The attendant turned to Nyk. “Lift her head.”

Nyk put his hands under her head and lifted. The attendant discharged both injectors simultaneously. Suki’s eyes opened and rolled back. She gasped. Nyk leaned over her.

She closed her eyes. Nyk looked at the attendant. “What about another dose?”

The attendant shook her head. “Maybe later. Help me slide her down.”

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Nyk stroked Suki's hair and kissed her forehead. Her eyes slowly opened again.

“Suki?” he said. He stroked her cheek. Her lips parted and she made soft gasping sounds.

The attendant rushed to his side. “Quick, roll her over! She may be about to vomit!” Nyk assisted her turning Suki onto her side and directed her face downward. The attendant guided the end of the feeding tube.

Nyk walked to the side of the pallet and sat, looking directly into Suki's face. Her eyes closed. He stroked away some hair and looked up. The attendant shook her head.

He looked into Suki's face again. She was blinking. “Suki?” he said. “Suki? Are you there? Is anybody home?” He stroked her hair. “Hi, stranger,” he said.

“Stranger...” she mumbled.

“Suki, it's Nick.”

“...Nick...” Her eyes opened and looked past him. “Nick... Hi, stranger... sleep.” She closed her eyes.

He stroked her hair. “Is this good or bad?” he asked the attendant.

“I don't know.”

She stirred again. “Nick... hold me... hold me...”

Nyk put his arms around her, cradled her head and stroked her hair. She opened her eyes and looked his way. “Nick.”

“Yes, it's Nick,” he said, his eyes filling.

“You came... Can't move...”

“*Mi va xi medika ig,*” the attendant said and headed for the door.

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“Ji. Zi dev Aahhn tien liveni dir,” Nyk replied.

She blinked and squinted. “Nick... What's that language?” She began flexing her fingers. “Hand's asleep.”

Nyk helped her roll onto her back. She touched her face and fingered the feeding tube. “Don't disturb that, for now,” he said.

“...Feel awful ... can't feel legs.”

The attendant returned. *“Aahhn vavi liven.”*

“Lita lita litu gamben nesent midir't,” Nyk said.

“Litu gambenu senten va tuje xin reven,” the attendant replied.

“The feelings in your legs will return soon,” he told her and squeezed her hand. “Can you see?”

“Can't focus...”

“Can you remember anything?”

She nodded. “I remember it all...” She struggled to swallow. “I remember...”

“It's all right,” he said. “You don't have to tell me now.”

“I want to ... tell you ... I remember... being called to Dr Larson's office... told my services wouldn't be needed for... spring term...” She closed her eyes. “I went to the lab to look for you, but you were gone...”

“I was at the union, waiting for you.”

“Didn't think of that ... went home ... cried ... cried for ... long time ... hit rock bottom ... no money ... no place to go ... no place to live ... water...”

“Lita akwa ard,” Nyk said.

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The attendant returned with a tumbler of water and a drinking tube. Nyk slipped the tube between her lips. She took a long sip. "... wondered how many times ... slapped down before ... made up my mind ... wrote a note to you, and Mom ... found a razor blade ... got undressed and sat in the bathtub and cut ..." She felt her wrists. She leaned toward the tumbler and Nyk placed the tube between her lips again. She sipped more and looked up at him. He thought her eyes were beginning to focus.

"I'm beginning to feel my legs ... I felt the warmth of my blood ... flowing over my skin. I was at peace ... closed my eyes ... leaned back ... willed myself to death ... wasn't afraid." She touched his face. "Then, it happened..."

"What happened?"

"It was an out-of-body experience ... I was floating, at the ceiling ... saw myself in the bathtub ... covered with my own blood." Tears began to fill her eyes. "I knew it was wrong. I tried to stand, to call 911. I must've passed out. That's the last I remember." She pinched her cheek. "Am I alive?" She looked around. "Where am I? What's that outfit you're wearing?"

"Suki, you're not in Wisconsin any more. But you're with me and you're with friends. Yes, you're alive. I found you and you were dead or close to it. I brought you to my home, because I thought my people's doctors might help you."

"Your home? Your people?"

Aahhn walked in and looked at her. "*Lita veke es!*"

"*Ji, lita veke es,*" Nyk said.

"What did he say?" Suki asked.

"He said you're awake."

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“Mi niva lita ekzamin.” Aahhn slipped an instrument from a kit hanging from his xarpa. He pressed a transducer to her forehead and looked into her eyes.

“Lita vi trebone fet,” he said. *“Litu okulen tre malume es!”*

“Xin tre bele es,” Nyk replied.

Aahhn began manipulating a handheld vidisplay.

“Mi va xi psykomedika voka donat. Ky, mi va zi lidiri zipermes.” He smiled and placed his hand on her forehead. *“Bon'taka, Sukiko, ky al Floran bon'ven.”*

“What is he saying?” she asked. “Where am I? What language is that? I've been hearing it in the back of my mind.”

“He said he's giving the... psychiatrist a call, and he'll leave us alone to talk.”

“Psychiatrist! No, Nick, I don't want to see a psychiatrist.”

“It's routine with an attempted suicide. Please don't worry.” Nyk stroked her face. “That was Dr Kursu Aahhn, a good doctor and a good friend. He also said welcome to Floran.”

“To where?”

“You're on Floran. It's another planet.”

“Another ... planet?”

“That's right -- Floran is in a star system about two hundred lightyears from Earth.”

“Two ... hundred ... lightyears?” She smiled. “And, you're an alien... that explains a lot...”

“You're not dreaming, Suki. You're alive and you're awake. You're in a hospital on my homeworld.”

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She pulled away from Nyk, looked at him and at the treatment room. The walls were lined with shelves loaded with equipment, instruments, syringes, catheters and bottles of chemicals. On one side of the pallet stood a device with a reservoir containing a dark green fluid. Attached to it was a coiled-up length of tubing terminating in a heavy-gauge needle.

On the other side was a cart holding the helmet-like neural inducer, tethered to its control equipment by an umbilicus of wires. Vidisplays flashed readings in Floran characters. Announcements in *Lingwafloran* came over the P.A. system and attendants and staff chatted in the corridor. "Oh, my God!" she gasped. "What do you want of me?" She gasped again, clutched the hem of the drape and held it under her chin. "What are you going to do to me?"

"We're going to heal you. Then, I'll return you to Earth." An attendant entered and began to hold an instrument to Suki's forehead. She recoiled and shielded her face with her hands. "It's all right. No one's going to harm you. These people are trying to help."

"People? You all look so ... human."

"We are human -- we originated on Earth. You and I are the same species." Suki put her hands down. The attendant recorded the reading on a portable vidisplay, smiled and headed for the door. "That wasn't so bad, was it? These are doctors and nurses who want to make you well."

"You originated on Earth? How?"

"My past begins in your future. Two hundred years from now, a starship named the *Floran* will depart with the intent of forming Earth's first interstellar colony on a planet orbiting a neighbor star. Something went wrong - - something will go wrong -- and the explorers will be hurled backward in time. The colony was formed, but on a different world than intended.

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“Five thousand Earth years have elapsed since the *Floran* and her company of a thousand colonists emerged from the warp jump accident. The seed they planted has grown into a great, interstellar polity, a hegemony with a population exceeding twenty-four billion, inhabiting a dozen planets. I am a citizen of that hegemony.”

“Twenty-four ... billion?”

“Twenty-four billion men, women and children who work and play, love and hate and birth and die very much as on your world.”

“Then, why were you on Earth?”

“In order to survive, we need contact with our planet of origin. We need genetic samples to keep our food and fiber crops healthy. So, a few of us walk the surface of your world, covertly and benignly, to gather those samples. I am an exobotanist, a specialist in Earth plants.”

“The cultures in the lab!” She eyed him. “Do you collect ... other genetic samples?”

“Do you mean human genes? No, Suki -- that is something we will not do. I'm sorry I couldn't divulge this to you before now. I didn't want to deceive you -- but would you have believed me?”

She shook her head. “No way, Nick. I'd have thought you were delusional.”

“Do you believe me now? I never deceived you about this: I do care for you, and I do cherish you as a friend. Do you trust me?”

“I think I do.”

“Florans can't approach Earth overtly, because any knowledge of us could alter the outcome of that mission, two hundred years in your future but five thousand years in our past. Altering that mission could result in our civilization simply ceasing to exist. We are absolutely

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forbidden to reveal our true nature to the Earth population. Can you understand why?"

"Yes, I ... I think so."

"Trust me, Suki. We mean no harm to your world or people. I love Earth, and I love its marvelous diversity of life and people and cultures. We couldn't harm you if we wanted. We have no weapons. During the past five thousand years we have eliminated disease, poverty, war, and hunger. We have no racial differences, national jealousies, or religious strife. We're lovers, not fighters. We hope, one day, to make contact with your world -- to extend our hands in friendship, and to open our arms and embrace our cousins and progenitors. That can't happen in my lifetime." He extended his arm. "But I can offer my hand to you. Do you still accept me as your friend?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "Of course, Nick."

Nyk took her hand and sat beside her again. "I took an enormous risk bringing you here, but not doing so would've been disastrous. I had to save you -- and I knew of no other way. You must promise me you'll never reveal what you know of our world to another Earth person. Now, promise me -- it's a matter of life and death to me and countless others."

"I ... I promise. Why so important to save me?"

"It's because you're a crucial figure in the events leading up to the founding of our world. Remember, your future is my past."

"How could I be crucial? What possible role could I play?"

"I mustn't describe it further, so please don't press me. I was sure your only hope for survival was treatment by our doctors. You lost nearly ninety percent of your blood. They've replaced it with a synthetic. Look at your hands."

She held up the back of her hand. "My skin's grey."

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“Yes, and you'll have green urine until your body displaces the synthetic with your own blood. You must remain here while you convalesce, for a few days at least. Then, I'll take you home to Earth and face the consequences with my boss.”

“Oh, Nick, it's too much to process.”

“You might as well call me by my real name. Call me Nykkyo. Nick's the Earth name I use while I'm there. You can call me Nykkyo on Earth, when we're alone together.”

“Nykkyo Kane?”

“Close enough.”

EARTHBOUND

7 -- The Temporal Paradox

Suki stroked and examined her wrists. “Your medical technology is amazing. I can't believe these cuts are healed so quickly, and I can't believe how little scarring. If I'd been taken to an Earth hospital, my wrists would look like they belonged on Frankenstein's monster.”

An attendant walked into the treatment room carrying a portable vidisplay. “*Bon'noka, Sukiko,*” she said looking at the display. “*Mu noma Vilka es. Mi dev zu kor ekzamin.*”

Suki looked toward Nyk. “Her name's Vilka. She wants to check your heart.”

“Okay, Vilka,” Suki replied. Vilka glanced at Nyk and he nodded. She grasped the hem of Suki's drape to fold it down. Nyk stood and started to leave the room.

Suki touched his forearm. “It's okay,” she said, “please stay. You saw me naked while I was ... unconscious. I don't mind you seeing me uncovered, now.”

He resumed his seat, fixing his gaze on the floor. Vilka took an instrument from a shelf. Nyk could hear Suki's heartbeats. “*Zu kor bone sonen hav,*” Vilka said.

“Your heart sounds good,” Nyk said. “It's a beautiful sound.”

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“*Bone.*” Vilka covered Suki with the drape and pressed the instrument to the vidisplay's scanpad to record the readings. Then, she produced a pair of meal packages, handed one to Nyk and set the other on Suki's lap. “*Mi va x'eltir,*” she said pointing to the feeding tube and gestured she would remove it. With a tug she pulled out the tube. Suki swallowed. “*Bon'noka ... okay?*” Vilka smiled, gave Suki a little wave and left the room.

“She was sweet,” Suki said. She looked around the pallet. “Does this thing raise? I can't find a control.”

“Certainly. *Kaja, lev.*” The pallet began to assume a sitting position. “*Kaja, halt.* You just have to speak its language. Is that all right?”

“That's fine.” Suki removed the cover to the meal package and looked at it. “I guess hospital food's the same everywhere in the galaxy.”

“Except that's not hospital food. That's what we all eat every day.”

She examined it from several angles. “What is this?”

“It's a wheat-rice-lentil pilaf and a mixed fruit puree. Ninety-nine percent of our food comes from Earth plants.”

She scooped some. “This could benefit from some seasoning.”

“Now do you see why I reacted as I did to your Indian dinners?”

She ate about half the meal. “I'd have to be much hungrier to finish that, I'm afraid.”

Nyk picked up a package, removed an object and handed it to her. “Try this.”

“What is it?”

“It's a sweet snack wafer.”

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She took a bite. "That's much better."

"Only by comparison."

An older woman entered the room. She looked at Nyk. "*Nykkyo es-zi?*"

"*Ji, mi m'es,*" he replied as he stood to offer her his chair.

"*Bon'noka, Nykkyo. Kil bon'noka dir-zi vave?*"

"Good evening."

She looked at Suki. "Sukiko, good evening. *Mi doktor Krulla es.*" She pointed to herself. "*Mi psykomedika es.*" She smiled and took the seat near Suki's pallet.

"Hello," Suki replied.

Dr Krulla took Suki's hand and patted her forearm. She opened her palm and pressed it against Suki's.

"That gesture's a Floran sign of friendship and openness," Nyk explained. "If you accept her offer of friendship, lace fingers with her."

Suki looked into the psychomedic's eyes and smiled. She spread her fingers and the two women held hands.

Dr Krulla looked at Nyk. "*Zi niva per ni zitruduk.*"

"*Ji, mi va mitraduk.*" He pulled up another chair near the pallet.

"Please tell me how you're feeling, now," the doctor asked Suki via Nyk's interpretation.

"I'm feeling fine," she replied and Nyk translated.

"Do you wish to die?"

She shook her head. "No, I fear dying."

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“Do you recall how you felt as you cut your wrists?” the doctor asked, examining her scars. She turned Suki's hand over and stroked and patted the back of it.

“Yes, I remember vividly. I wasn't afraid. I was calm and at peace. Now, it's as if it never happened. Except I know it happened. I can see the scars and I'm here.”

“Have you tried to kill yourself before this?”

“Yes -- once,” Suki said, looking at the floor. She looked up. “But I didn't want to die. I did it to punish my father for an argument we had. I must've been about twelve. I swallowed a bottle of aspirin, and then told my mother what I had done. They took me to the hospital to have my stomach pumped.” She looked down again. “It didn't work. My father wasn't punished -- I was.”

“Have you desired death before?”

“No. Yes. I don't know. Isn't it normal to think of death from time to time?”

“Normal enough,” the doctor said, gazing into Suki's eyes.

“I do think of death and even suicide,” Suki continued. “I've always dismissed it. Maybe it's racial. My father has an antique *hara-kiri* dagger hanging on the wall. Maybe something about being Japanese draws us to suicide. But this time, I was so afraid. I felt so rejected when I learned I'd been let go. I knew I had no place to live -- nowhere to go. I felt hopeless, then a calm came over me and I...” She began to cry.

Dr Krulla stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. “You don't desire death, now?”

“No, not now. I'm afraid of dying, now.”

The doctor sat back and began poking the handheld vidisplay. “*Denke. Bon'noka...* good evening, Sukiko.” She stood and left the room.

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Nyk sat near Suki and held her hand. She spread her fingers for him. He stroked her forearm. "Suki, I want you to understand something." He looked into her eyes. "I love you. I tried not to, but I couldn't help myself."

"You tried not to do what?"

"I tried not to love you." He brushed away a tear. "Florans aren't supposed to fall in love with Earth people. Suki, I fell in love with you the moment I laid eyes on you. I love you more deeply than I've ever loved anyone -- more than I thought I could love anyone."

"Oh, Nick ... Nykkyo..." She opened her arms, embraced him and kissed and stroked his face. "... I love you, too."

"Believe me -- the fact Destiny has given you this ... role in my planet's founding does nothing to alter how I feel for you. I'd love you the same way even if Destiny were tracing a different path." He held her and smoothed her hair. "The thought you'd find yourself so alone and so hopeless to resort to... It breaks my heart, Suki." He brushed another tear from his face. "It especially breaks my heart because I was within walking distance, and I'd have come to you and held you and together we'd have solved this."

Suki looked away from him as he spoke. Tears ran down her face.

"I love you. I've always loved you, and I'll never stop loving you. Remember that. No matter what Destiny has in store for you, and no matter how difficult your path appears, remember there's someone in the galaxy who loves you and who'll never stop loving you. Someone who'd be crushed to learn you succumbed to hopelessness. You need never abandon hope. Promise me you'll remember that."

"For the past three years, everyone and everything told me I was worthless," she replied. "All I wanted was to make it on my own, and I couldn't do that. When I was told I was being fired ... I had just begun to believe I might make it on my own. That's why it hurt so much."

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“I'm sure it had nothing to do with your qualifications or your performance. It was simply college politics. No one is immune from politics now and then.”

“Do you think so?”

“Of course. I recognize politics when I see them. The new department head was probably making room for some crony.” He stroked her face. “Or, maybe a mistress.” She smiled. “Can you promise me you'll never try anything like that again?”

“I can't promise, Nykkyo. I promise I'll think of you.” She stroked away more tears. “You said to me what I wanted my father to say when I swallowed the aspirin.” She wept. “I just don't want to be alone!”

“If you ever need help, contact me and I'll do what I can for you. That's my promise.” He brushed away more tears. “We might be separated, but we'll never be alone. There will be a way for us to be in touch.” He embraced her again. “I wish this pallet was wider. I'd lie with you and hold you.”

“I'd like that,” she said.

He held her and stroked her back until he felt her begin to calm. “It's late and I'd better go and get some rest. Aahhn and his staff will take good care of you.”

She nodded. “I know they will. I'll be fine, I'm sure.”

He kissed her lips. “Sleep tight. I'll see you in the morning.”

“Nykkyo?” she said as he headed toward the door. He turned to face her. “Thank you.”

Nyk approached his apartment and pressed his wrist to the scanpad. The door popped open. Senta appeared from the bedroom

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wearing a short, sleeveless robe. She was adjusting a ribbon she wore to control her unruly hair.

“I'm sorry about last night,” she said. “You surprised me, that's all.”

“I'm sorry, too,” he replied.

She smiled at him. “You said you were saving your desire for when you're home on leave. Let's spend some tonight.” She walked to him, put her arms around his waist and looked into his eyes. “We have some drugs that might make tonight more... special.”

“Please, Senta -- I'm exhausted and not...”

“Aren't you happy to see me?” She stroked his bare arms and lay her face against his chest. Her eyes focused on his *xarpa*. “What's this?” she asked and plucked something from his sash. She looked at it carefully. “If I didn't know better, I'd say it's a hair. A long, black one, like the ones you brought for me to sequence.” She continued to examine it. “It is a hair. Here's the root.” She backed away from him. “That Earth woman's here. You brought an Earth person onworld. She's your special project! Nykkyo, how could you?”

“She was hurt -- dying. I knew our doctors could save her.”

“If she was dying you should've let her die.”

“She's important to the founding of our world. If she died, there'd be no Koichi.”

“How do you know that? How do you know Destiny wouldn't have found some other way? There's another reason. You love her, don't you?”

Nyk looked at the floor. “Yes... a bit.”

“More than a bit!” Senta's lower lip was trembling. “How did you convince Dad to permit this?”

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“Veska doesn't know. He thinks I brought an injured comm tech for treatment. We arrived via a diplomatic shuttle that didn't stop at the transit platform.”

“You lied to my dad!”

“I never lied to him. He asked me who was hurt, and I said someone on the relay station. Suki was on the station, so it wasn't a lie.”

“You misled him, tricked him into bringing your Earth lover here!”

“I saved a life. I'd have done it for a stranger.”

“No, you wouldn't. You know you wouldn't.” She glowered at him. “Get out. Get out of my apartment.”

“I have every right to be here.”

“Get out!” she screamed and advanced toward him. Nyk backed away from her. She lifted her hand to strike him. He turned and pressed the actuator. The door opened and he dashed into the corridor. It slid shut and latched.

He paced outside the apartment for a few moments then pressed his wrist to the scanpad. It read entry denied. He descended the lift to the tubecar platform, rode a tubecar back to the clinic and curled up for the night in a waiting room chair.

The clinic's morning bustle roused Nyk. His eyes were bleary from lack of decent sleep, his tongue felt fuzzy and he had a dull ringing in his ears. He went into the unisex restroom near the waiting area and purchased a single-use razor and some soap from a personal-care products vending machine, paying for it with a wristscan. He stood at a basin, lathered his face and began shaving his sparse beard.

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Aahhn walked in, stood at a urinal and hiked up the front of his tunic. “Good morning, Nykkyo. I saw you sleeping in the waiting room. Your friend's out of danger. You've no need to mount a vigil for her.”

“Senta threw me out of the apartment last night.”

“Why would she do that?”

“She found one of Suki's hairs on my *xarpa* and put two and two together.”

Aahhn stifled a chuckle. “I've known Senta a long time. She may be many things, but dim-witted isn't one of them.”

“Certainly not,” Nyk replied.

Aahhn stood beside Nyk to wash his hands. “We took Sukiko down for some scans, to make sure there isn't any other neurological damage we need to treat. It turns out one of our neural imaging techs served an Agency tour on Earth about ten years ago. He still knows the language and was quite helpful. Sukiko is a very pleasant woman. She's also quite a beautiful one, in a different way. How common is her ... configuration on Earth?”

“Quite common,” Nyk replied. “There's amazing diversity on Earth, people of all shapes and colors. People with light skin, dark skin and every shade in between. One doesn't need much time there to realize how dull our world is in comparison. I love that planet.”

“I can't believe her eyes,” Aahhn said.

Nyk looked up at the ceiling. “Her eyes... I melt every time I gaze into her beautiful, dark eyes.”

“Nykkyo, I think I'm seeing what Senta must've seen last night. How deeply are you involved with this girl?”

“I love her more dearly than I've ever loved anyone. I love her more than life itself.”

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“I'm going to give you some advice as an old friend, Nykkyo. Once she's recovered, take her back to Earth. Then you must disengage from her. A continued relationship with her can have only one outcome, and that's heartbreak for both of you.”

“My mind tells me I must do that, but my heart tells me something else.”

“Break it off now, Nyk. It'll only be more difficult with time. Some day, you'll return to Floran for good, and you'll have to leave her behind.”

“Maybe not. Maybe I'll go native. It's been done before.”

“I can't believe I'm hearing you say that.”

Nyk began washing the shaving detritus from his face. “Maybe I'll become an Agency career man.” He blotted his face on a fabric towel and tossed it into the laundry.

“That would effectively end your marriage with Senta.”

“That's if it's not effectively ended already.” Nyk tossed the spent razor into the waste reprocessor. “I do have options, Aahhn.”

“We're transferring Sukiko to a convalescence room on the 50th floor,” Aahhn said. “I'll ride the lift with you. She should be finished with her tests by now.” Nyk pressed his palm against Aahhn's and they laced fingers. He and Aahhn headed, holding hands, toward the lift.

Nyk followed Aahhn into Suki's room. He found her dozing on a pallet adjusted into a sitting position. She was dressed in a Floran tunic. Her room was spacious -- a sofa lined one wall and a low table sat before the sofa. A large window looked out on the city.

Aahhn picked up a handheld vidisplay and began poking its touchscreen. “Her scans were negative. She'll make a full recovery. We

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can discharge her as soon as her blood volume's at least seventy-five percent her own. That'll be a few days, yet."

"Her color looks better."

"Yes, she's doing well -- better than I expected when I first saw her."

"What about her heart?"

"Nothing's presented itself yet. She's a very lucky woman." Aahhn turned the vidisplay toward Nyk. "I have the psychomedic's report. I shouldn't be divulging this to you, but you're the closest to immediate family she has here. Dr Krulla believes she's not despondent and not imminently suicidal. Remember, though, this is her second suicide attempt. It says she's not completely stable and she's prone to depression and anxiety. Her profile is consistent with someone who was sexually molested as a child."

"Oh, Aahhn -- I had no inkling."

"She also has self-abusive tendencies."

"How could Dr Krulla determine that? She never asked about it."

"Sukiko suffers, or suffered, from bulimia nervosa."

"Bulimia? What makes you think that?"

"On the knuckle of her right middle finger are some marks -- some scars -- characteristic of a bulimic. They're made by the front teeth." Aahhn made a gesture to imitate cramming his hand down his throat. "The marks aren't fresh, so we're assuming she's a recovered bulimic."

Nyk looked down. "Suki never mentioned any of this to me..."

"She should be encouraged to seek whatever counseling is available on Earth. She's fragile emotionally, Nyk. There's little we can do to help her here. Since she doesn't appear to be an immediate hazard

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to herself, we have psychomedical clearance to discharge her. That leaves the blood as the only obstacle to sending her home. Please make sure she gets help once she's there.”

Nyk approached Suki and placed his hand on her forehead. “Good morning, stranger.”

She opened her eyes. “*Bon'matina.*” He hugged and kissed her. “Nykkyo, everyone's been so sweet and so considerate. I knew you were the sweetest, gentlest person I ever met. Now I see where it comes from.

“And look at this room. I've never seen a hospital room like this. It's more like a hotel.” She lifted the bedcover and swung her feet to the floor. He followed her to the window. “This city makes New York look like a small town. What's the population here?”

“Around seven hundred fifty million.”

“That's three times the population of the US! In one city!”

“About half our total population live in Floran City.”

“You tell me I'm a major figure leading up to the founding of all this. It's hard for me to believe, and it makes my petty concerns seem so self- absorbed.”

“Destiny traces for each of us a path we must follow. Your path leads, ultimately, here.”

“Then it was in your destiny to bring me here.”

“No, I'm afraid not. I believe it's possible for some outside event to interfere with your destiny. I believe my friendship has so interfered with yours. Who knows what might be if I wasn't your friend?”

“I'd still have been fired, and I still would've slit my wrists. Without you, I'd be dead.”

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“Are you sure? How do you know you wouldn't have ... sat with someone else instead of me at lunch -- a visiting professor who offered you a fine position at another university, and you'd welcome being fired because it freed you from an obligation you no longer wanted?”

“I suppose that might have happened,” she said. “No one knows.”

“Might-haves don't count,” he replied. “I shouldn't have made you my friend. I should've kept far from you, especially once I was sure you were... who you are. But it was too late -- I was already in love with you. I'm guilty of what we call temporal interference.

“When I found you in your bathtub, I knew immediately I had to bring you here. Suki, I love you. Nonetheless, if I knew it was in your destiny to die like that, I'd have allowed you to die. But that's not how Destiny planned it. Not saving you would've caused a temporal paradox.”

“Paradox?”

“Yes. I caused your interference. You are important to our world, but you have yet to play your role. If I allowed you to die, you'd never play your role, and our world might not be. I might not exist -- I might never have existed. If I never existed, I couldn't cause the interference, and you'd survive and play your role. Don't you see? I had no choice but to bring you here and to have our doctors save you. No Earth doctor could've. The reanimation technology doesn't exist there.”

An attendant inflated a cuff around Suki's bicep and drew a tube of tar- black fluid from a vein inside her elbow. “*Denke*,” the attendant said and headed for the door.

“I see the needle go in, but there's no wound,” Suki said, stroking the inside of her elbow.

“The needle's coated with healing salve. The wound closes instantly.” He stood and looked out the window. “I know what must

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happen. You've yet to fulfill your destiny. After you're discharged, I'll take you to Earth. Then, we must go our separate ways."

She joined him at the window. "No. I won't let you go."

"You must. I matter little in all this."

"You matter to me. I feel real, unconditional love with you, Nykkyo. You're the one I've been looking for my whole life. Now that I've found you, I'm not giving you up so easily."

"No, Suki. The stakes are far bigger than either of us. You're the one on the critical path, and I dare not interfere." He slipped his arm around her. "I don't see the harm in us staying in touch, though -- as friends."

Nyk sat with Suki on the sofa in her room. An attendant poked her head through the door. "Nykkyo?" She beckoned him.

"Excuse me," he said and stepped into the corridor.

"Someone to speak with you," the attendant said.

Nyk turned and saw Senta. "Nykkyo, I've re-enabled your ID code at the apartment."

"You came here to tell me that?"

"No. I also wanted to meet my rival. Would you be kind enough to make introductions?"

"Step this way." Nyk gestured Senta into Suki's room. "Suki, this is Senta -- my wife. *Senta, xe Sukiko es.*"

"*Saluti,*" Senta said as she walked toward Suki. Suki extended her hand. Senta kept hers at her side as she regarded Suki from head to foot to head. She looked into Suki's eyes and at her face from several angles.

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She walked around her and looked into her face again. Senta proffered a faint smile and said, “*Bon'taka*.” She turned to Nyk. “*Bon'taka, Nykkyo*.” She headed out the door.

“That was the most awkward moment I've had in many years,” Suki said. “I felt like a steer being judged at the state fair. I thought you said your wife's name was Cindy.”

“That's her Earth name.”

“I'd have believed Senta as a name.”

“I didn't make it up. Our Earth identities are carefully engineered for us.”

“Nykkyo, don't you think it'd be all right to tell me the truth about you? How much of the sad, sad story you told me was fact, and how much was fiction?”

“None of it was a lie, exactly. I never wanted to deceive you, Suki. I was born in a small city on the coast, down south. The city's Sudal, population about a hundred thousand. I did grow up in a house on a bluff overlooking the sea. I flunked out of my first college. It's all my real life.”

“What about your parents?”

“My father was Food Service Ag Director. He had plans for me to follow in his footsteps. I was to be fast-tracked through the organization. It was something that didn't interest me in the least. He and my mother were returning from a trip to one of the colonies. An inertial sink malfunctioned and their shuttle crashed into one of the agridomes north of Sudal. There were no survivors.”

“And Senta?”

“She's indeed an important person. Senta heads the sequencing labs that perform genetic analysis on all our food crops. She's the

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youngest ever to be named a full director of a branch of the Food Service -- a branch of her own invention.

“She was finishing her degree as a microbiologist studying the genetic history of some species of lentils. She discovered in one of the species, somehow, alien genes had been introduced. Someone spliced genes from the castor bean into the genome for this lentil, inducing the production of the biotoxin ricin. A single lentil contained sufficient ricin to kill a man, and those lentils came very close to entering our food supply.” He shuddered. “If that had happened, people would've died by the millions. It was a weapon of mass destruction in a few strands of DNA.”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“We don't know for sure. The whole affair is known as the Ricin Plot. It happened about five years ago. There's evidence a faction on the Altia colony was involved -- strong enough evidence to revoke the colonial charter and put the colony under direct High Legislature control. Six people were hanged for their roles in the plot -- the first executions on this world in over twenty generations. Senta feels guilt for their deaths. They were convicted on the basis of her testimony. She's considered a hero for discovering the plot, though it was mostly dumb luck. The High Legislature awarded her the Chancellor's Medallion.

“The Food Service asked her what could be done to prevent such an attack in the future, and she developed the sequencing labs. Now every crop undergoes careful genetic analysis prior to being planted in the agribeds. Senta approves each one personally. Now, she's too important and far too busy to pay much attention to me. I realize our marriage was a mistake.”

“God, Nykkyo. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd be the one to come between a man and his wife.”

“There was plenty between us already. I've known Senta since we were children. Her stepfather's an old friend of my dad's. He used to

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bring her with him to Sudal on vacations. Senta was still at university when she agreed to marry me. Her stepdad prodded her into it. He wanted it more than we did, to bind himself to the memory of my father. Marriage on this world is less about love and more about family alignment, anyway.”

Nyk placed his hand on Suki's shoulder as he looked out her window onto the city streets. Dusk had passed. The sky darkened and the city lights shone brightly.

“Do you have to leave me alone tonight?” she asked.

“No.” He opened the sofa into a folding bed and lay on it. Suki lay beside him. He held her and stroked her hair.

“Mmm, this feels so good,” she said and kissed his cheek. “*Bon'noka, Nykkyo.*”

Nyk pressed his wrist to the scanpad at the apartment. The door popped open. He glanced around for sign of Senta and figured she was at the lab. He showered and changed into a fresh tunic and *xarpa*.

He sat at a vidisplay and placed a call. “Nykkyo,” Veska answered. “Senta told me about your injured comm tech.”

“I did what I thought was right and time was of the essence. Veska, I need to schedule a return packet to Earth, for tomorrow.”

“Two seats? Well, our offworlder's better off there than here. I'll check the packet schedule and send a telemessage with the details.” The vidisplay went dark.

Nyk handed Suki a length of cloth. “I brought you a *lifxarpa*. It completes the woman's costume. I'll show you how to wear it.” He placed the center of it behind her neck and crossed it across her breasts.

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He crossed it again behind her back and brought the ends around to form a sort of belt. "The crease goes at the bottom, and the folds serve as a pocket for small articles." He knotted the loose ends. "There. You look great in Floran clothing, Suki."

"All the doctors and attendants came to see me off. I'm sorry to go home. Everyone was so sweet -- I love your people, Nykkyo."

He led her to the lift and they rode to the tubecar platform. Nyk pressed his wrist to the scanpad and ordered a ride to the shuttleport. A bullet-shaped vehicle stopped and the cowl slid back. He helped her in and started the car.

She looked up through the transparent cowl and tube. "Look at the color of that sky! Are those stars?"

"Yes, some stars are visible in broad daylight."

The car pulled up to the shuttleport terminal. They waited in the departure lounge until their flight was announced. Nyk escorted her through a movable bridge and they took their seats.

Suki leaned toward Nyk. "The interior of this shuttle is just like a small Earth airliner," she said. Nyk helped her fasten her safety harness. "This looks like what race-car drivers wear."

"It's a five-point harness. I should warn you, we'll experience some weightlessness on the ride up. I hope you're not bothered by motion sickness."

The shuttle hatch closed and it taxied and lifted off. Nyk gazed out the window as the ground dwindled below them. The sky outside the viewports faded from indigo to black. Suki reached and grabbed his arm. "This is such an unusual sensation. I think I'm having a panic attack. It feels like we're falling!"

"We are. Being in orbit's an endless, circular fall around the planet. Are you going to be sick?"

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“I don't think so. I'll try some meditation techniques.” She closed her eyes for several moments. “I'm better now, but it's still an odd sensation.”

The shuttle pulled onto a landing pad on the transit platform. Normal gravity returned as the shuttle felt the influence of the artificial gravity generators on the platform. Nyk guided Suki from the craft through the docking port.

He led her to a capsule resembling a tubecar. The vehicle sped from the shuttle pad to the lower level packet concourse. Nyk presented his wrist to a scanpad in the departure lounge, spoke to an attendant and turned to Suki. “She said we'll board as soon as the vessel is serviced.” He motioned her to a viewport and pointed to the packet being serviced by tender shuttles. “We'll be aboard the Myataxya and Lexal packet. They're diverting to Earth after the stop at Myataxya. This will be a treat.”

The docking port doors opened and Nyk gestured toward them. He and Suki boarded the packet. The interior resembled an Earth wide-body jetliner, except the seats faced to the sides rather than front-and-back.

“Fasten your belt. Sometimes the warp jump tosses things around a bit.”

“No five-point harness?” she asked.

“No, the packets have gravity generators. It should be a smooth ride.”

A row of indicators below the viewports glowed white and the viewport shutters closed. The indicators glowed blue and a jolt shook the vessel. “That was the subjump. We're now outside Floran's heliopause.”

“Heliopause?”

“The boundary between a star system and true interstellar space.” The indicators glowed blue again and another jolt was felt. “We're now

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outside the Myataxyan heliopause. The packets travel most of the distance between stars without moving at all -- at least not in normal space.”

The lamps glowed blue again, and a third jolt shook the packet. “Was that the Myataxyan subjump?” she asked.

“You catch on quickly.” The indicators went dark and the viewports opened. The passengers let out a collective gasp. “That always happens on the approach to Myataxya. Once we're in orbit, we can stand and look out a viewport. There's no transit platform here, so they'll dock shuttles with the packet and exchange passengers. We'll have some time to sightsee.”

An announcement was made on the vessel's PA system. “We're in orbit. Come look.” He unsnapped his belt and escorted her toward a viewport.

“Oh, my God!” Suki exclaimed.

Nyk slipped his arm around Suki as he gazed upon Mytaxya's parent planet, a gas giant. It was a golden sphere with brown and orange bands and surrounded by multi-colored rings. From their vantage, the planet was half in light and half in shadow. Lightning flashes illuminated the cloud cover on the dark side. Nyk pointed down at an Earth-like moon, with a small ice cap, sapphire oceans and brown continents. White clouds laced the Myataxya colony atmosphere.

“This is a favorite resort and retirement colony. On the surface, it's a tropical paradise. It's our version of Hawaii.”

“It's beautiful beyond description from here,” she replied. “What must it look like from the ground?”

“I've never been there. I've never been on any planet other than Floran and Earth. We'd better reclaim our seats.”

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8 -- You belong to your world and I to mine.

The packet's indicator lamps glowed white and the viewports closed. Next came blue indicators and the subjump jolt -- then the main jump. The viewports opened.

“Here's our stop,” Nyk said. The packet docked with the relay station. An attendant gestured toward him and he escorted Suki through the docking tunnel into the workroom.

“What's this place?” Suki asked.

“It's one of our communications relay stations. We have many of these -- they permit the colonies to keep in touch. This one's located just outside Earth's heliopause and it connects to Earth's Internet.”

Nyk stepped into the wardroom and emerged wearing his Earth clothes. “I'm sorry, but you'll have to wear the tunic. We don't have any women's clothing on the station right now.”

“Your shirt's covered with blood -- my blood.”

He gestured her through the pressure door to the awaiting shuttlecar, removed the power cables, opened the door and climbed in. She sat beside him. “We travel to Earth in this?”

“Yes.” He began manipulating the control panel to begin prelaunch diagnostics. The panel lit up in a blue go condition. The bay

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depressurized and the door opened. Nyk grasped the unistick and pulled it back. The shuttle responded by backing into space.

Nyk pointed out the windscreen toward a large, bright star. "That's Earth's sun. That's home."

"How far away are we?"

He made a mental calculation. "About five billion miles. I'm preparing for the subjump." The shuttlecar windows darkened. "Here's the jump." He pressed the actuator and the warp coil fired, jolting the craft. Transparency returned to the windows and a blue orb filled the windscreen.

Suki grabbed his arm. "That's a beautiful sight! Oh, Nykkyo, I wish I could share this experience."

He pushed the unistick fully forward and the craft accelerated toward Earth. The blue sphere grew in size. Then, using the craft's inertial sink, he piloted it through the atmosphere into the darkness of the North American night. Navigational images appeared on the windscreen. The shuttlecar punched through a high overcast and he could see street lamps outlining the small city.

Nyk piloted the shuttle to a landing on a country road and steered it to the faculty apartments. He reached into his pocket and handed Suki her door key. "I'll put the shuttlecar away and change my shirt -- then I'll come over. I'll help you clean up the mess in your bathroom."

Nyk helped Suki make her bed. "I suppose I owe you a sheet," he said.

"Don't worry about it."

"We must figure out our next move."

"What'll happen to you?"

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“I imagine Seymor will have a talk with me. I expect I'll be sent home. I won't call him -- I'll let him call me. That might stretch it awhile.”

“I've only paid the rent through the end of this month. I'll need a place to live.”

“There's a spare room with a bed in it at my house. You can move in with me, at least for a while. Suki, I know you've had a disagreement with your parents, but I think you should call them. If you thought enough of your mom to write her a note, you must think enough of her to call.”

“I don't know. I'm not ready for that. Did you read my note to her?”

“Of course not.”

“I'll destroy it. It'd be rather embarrassing, now.”

“There's something else. Aahhn told me he thinks you're a recovered bulimic.”

She looked away. “It's behind me. I don't want to talk about it.”

“Are you sure it's behind you? I'd be devastated to learn you're engaging in self-abusive behavior, Suki. Bulimia is a problem on my world, believe it or not. Please assure me you're not doing anything like that now.”

“I'm not, Nykkyo.” He touched her chin with his finger, turned her face toward his and looked into her eyes. “There's much you don't know about me and much I don't want you to know,” she said. “This is behind me. Please, let's drop it.”

“Aahhn's concerned for you. He wants me to encourage you to get some counseling.”

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She turned away again. "I'm not going to a counselor. I went to one in high school, and it didn't work. I'll thank you not to mention it again."

"But Suki... You've just tried to kill yourself. You must have some ... issues a counselor might help you resolve."

"I'll think about it. I promise -- okay?"

"Good. None of this changes how I feel for you. Remember that, Suki. There's nothing you can say to me that'll change how I love you."

"Nothing?"

"No, nothing." He stretched out on Suki's bed and she lay beside him. He held her and stroked her hair.

"Oh, Nykkyo, I wouldn't need a counselor if I had this. When you hold me like this the hurt goes away." She leaned toward him and kissed his cheek. Nyk started to kiss her cheek but she turned her head and his lips met hers. She ran her fingers through his hair. He kissed her lips again and felt her tongue exploring his mouth.

"This isn't a good idea," he said.

"Why not? You're the first man I've ever wanted, and I want you so much! I thought you looked so sexy in that Floran tunic. Your legs looked so good, with those sandals that lace up your calves. I could barely stand it -- I wanted you in the hospital room. Why can't we have each other?"

"It's because of the role Destiny's planned for you."

"What of my role?"

"Nothing specific. I do know making love jeopardizes it."

"How?"

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"I can't explain it. Please trust me. I want you just as much. We mustn't."

She cuddled against him. "So, tomorrow we pack up my stuff and take it to your place?"

"That sounds like a plan," he said as he stroked her hair.

Nyk dragged a handcart toward the house. Stacked on it were some boxes and a pair of suitcases. Suki dragged another suitcase behind her. "Eight boxes and three suitcases. All my worldly belongings."

He opened the front door and helped her carry the boxes into the house. "You may stake claim to the kitchen." He set down the carton containing her utensils. "You like to cook and you're good at it. You'd be appalled at what I've had for meals when I was alone. My idea of a fully equipped kitchen is a can opener and a spoon."

He led her to the spare bedroom. "You can sleep in here." He carried her suitcases into the room and helped her make up the bed.

Nyk surveyed the remaining boxes. "I think those can wait for morning." He picked up the telephone and handed the handset to her. "Now, call your mom."

She looked up at him, punched in the number and held the handset to her ear. She reached for the switch hook. "No answer... Hello, Mom? Yes, it's me ... I've been fine, just fine ... Oh, Mom! Please, don't cry. Mom, don't cry. I love you, too ... I'm in Wisconsin. I was just let go from a teaching position ... Campus politics, you know how that goes ... Well, I'm not sure what I'll do next. I was wondering... Thanks, Mom ... I'd rather not ... Please, Mom, I'd rather... Hello, Daddy." She held the phone to her ear and listened. Tears filled her eyes and ran down her face. "Yes, Daddy... Goodbye." She hung up the phone. "I didn't want to speak with my father."

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“What did he say?”

“He asked me to forgive him, and he said I was welcome in the house, if I wanted to come home.” She wiped tears from her face. Nyk held her. She began sobbing. He stroked her hair until she calmed herself.

“Will you forgive him?”

“I don't know.”

“Can you forgive him?”

“I don't know that, either.”

“Suki, please consider my situation. My parents are dead. I have some unresolved issues with my mom and dad, especially with my dad. Now, they'll never be resolved. If I had a daughter as special as you are, and if she had left my life because of some hotheaded act on my part, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. I think you should give him a chance and try forgiving him.”

“You don't know my father.”

“But I think I know you.” He kissed her forehead. “I'm exhausted. I'm going to turn in.”

“I'll unpack some more.”

Nyk undressed to his briefs, slid into his bed, switched off the light and laced his fingers behind his head. He closed his eyes and attempted to will himself to sleep. A knock came at his door. He switched on the light. “Yes?”

“May I come in?”

“Come in.”

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Suki entered wearing a short robe. "I'd like to sleep with you, Nykkyo. I need you to hold me."

"If you don't mind I'm in my underwear, come on in."

"If you don't mind I'm in my underwear, I will," she replied. She untied the belt to her robe and slipped it off. Nyk scanned her from head to toe to head. She, too, was wearing only a pair of briefs. He forced himself to look away.

She slipped between the sheets and cuddled to him -- he on his back and she lying under his left arm. He put his arm around her and stroked her back. She kissed his cheek. "I'm feeling better ... now."

He felt her fingers stroke his shoulder and arm, exploring the shapes of his muscles. She kissed his lips. Then, she rolled over with her back to him. He rolled beside her and placed his arm around her waist. She stroked his hand and forearm. She took his hand and kissed it, then cupped it around her left breast. "Oh, Nykkyo, I love you. I want you so, so much!" She pressed his hand against her breast and Nyk could feel her heart pounding through her flesh.

"Oh, Suki, I want you, too." She rolled over to face him and placed her hand on his chest.

"I'm yours, Nykkyo."

He shook his head. "We mustn't, Suki. We must be strong."

"I don't want to be strong. I want you!"

"What you and I want isn't important."

"Oh, Nykkyo, I wish it were different."

"So do I. Believe me, Suki, it's not because I don't desire you or love you, because I do."

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She caressed his shoulders. “I don't understand it! I've never wanted anyone like this before. I've never wanted a woman like this, and certainly not a man. I don't want you for me, I want you for you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, and I want you for you, too. How I wish we could.” He lay on his back and coaxed her to snuggle to him. “To think this started with a simple question about *miso* soup!”

Nyk handed Suki the house key. “I'm off to the lab. I must see what I can salvage of my cultures. I'm leaving the key with you in case you need to go out for anything. I'll be home around noon and we can do something for lunch.”

“Have a good morning.”

He walked to the lab and opened the door. He looked in dismay at the trays of cultures he had left two weeks before. With a shake of his head he began tossing out the spoiled ones and making a list of the ones he'd have to redo. He looked at the sprouting beds and began clearing them and replanting them with fresh seeds.

Nyk walked back to the house at lunchtime. Suki had set the table with chopsticks. He sat down to a bowl of brick-red liquid with white chunks, chopped onions and sliced carrots carved to resemble sunbursts and butterflies.

Suki pointed to the bowl. “*Miso* soup,” she said. “This is *aka*, or red *miso*. I put *soba* noodles with it -- they're made with buckwheat.”

Made with buckwheat, he thought. He picked up the chopsticks.

“A traditional Japanese meal includes nothing that can't be picked up with *hashi* or drunk from a bowl.” She used her chopsticks to pick up a chunk of tofu from her bowl and pop it into her mouth. Then she used

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the sticks to hold the solid constituents of the soup from the rim as she sipped the broth. “It tastes better than I remembered.”

Nyk looked at the bowl with awe bordering on reverence. She showed him how to hold the chopsticks, but he felt it an awkward and unnatural action. She assured him it became easier with practice. He took a sip of the *miso* broth. The flavor seemed to call out through the generations. He felt connected to Koichi more strongly than ever. It seemed to resonate in his genes, stimulating some race memory going way back through space and time, beckoning him to his origins. He sat savoring the smoky, salty, mildly acrid flavor of the broth.

“Nykkyo, are you all right?”

He nodded. A tear ran down his face. “Suki, this is ... unbelievable ... unbelievable. How do you make this?”

“I cheated. I bought some freeze-dried *miso* soup and added the tofu and the carrots and onions. My mother taught me how to carve the carrots. To make it from scratch, you start with *dashi*...”

“What's *dashi*?”

“It's a broth that's the basis for most Japanese cooking. It's made by steeping seaweed and... Oh! My God! I'm so sorry, Nykkyo! *Dashi* is made from fish!”

“It's all right. I'm not a vegetarian out of any particular conviction, only out of habit. This is very good, and it's the finest gift you've given me. I accept it in the spirit in which you gave it. Thank you.” He stood and embraced her. “Now, I understand.”

“Understand what?”

“What it means to be a child of your world. Florans aren't and never will be children of our world. Earth gave you life. Floran begrudgingly tolerates us living there. You draw nourishment from your sea. *Dashi*, *miso*, and countless other foods are all the mother's milk of

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your world. Our sea throbs with life, but none of it's edible. Our native life is unpalatable to the verge of toxic. You experienced meals on my world. We must struggle to produce some grains and lentils." He kissed her. "That is why your *miso* soup is the finest gift." He wiped tears from his eyes, sat and again savored the broth.

A small green block caught his eye and he picked it up. "I recognize this -- it's a sweet bean paste, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"We have something quite similar on Floran. It's a favorite treat." He took a bite. "It's very good."

"How are your cultures doing?"

"Not well." He popped the last of the bean paste into his mouth. "Most are spoiled, and I'll have to start over." The telephone began to ring. Nyk stood and picked up the handset. "Hello?"

"Nykkyo Kyhana!"

He rolled his eyes. "Hello, Seymor."

"Nykkyo, have you ever heard the name Illya Kronta?"

"No... Should I have?"

"He's a member of the Agency oversight committee and he's my boss's boss's boss. I just finished a very uncomfortable vidphone conversation with him, regarding the antics of someone I thought was one of my finest Agents. If you care to immolate your career, it's your decision. But please give me the consideration of having some respect for mine!"

"I'm sorry, Seymor. What did Kronta say?"

"He said you smuggled an injured Earth woman onworld for unauthorized medical treatment. I don't like it when my Agents'

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activities come to the attention of upper management. It tends to be a bad sign. You must've lost your mind pulling that stunt.”

“I did what I thought was right.”

“What you did was a wanton and reckless violation of our regulations. I can't imagine a more blatant and willful example of deliberate temporal interference than to smuggle an Earth person onto the homeworld.”

Nyk shifted into his native tongue. “She was dying, and beyond help here. I know she's destined to give rise to Koichi -- she's on the critical path. The interference occurred earlier, and I was attempting to repair the damage. I've succeeded. Think about it, Seymor.”

There was a long pause. “Lad, I think you might be right,” Seymor continued in English. “You've put me into a terrible bind. I must discipline you, Nyk. Otherwise it'll be my balls on the anvil at the next oversight meeting. I want to keep you in the Agency. You're a good contributor, and we don't have anyone else in the pipeline.”

“Thank you, Seymor.”

“I have to send you home, Nyk. I don't know what else to do.”

“Will you let me finish my tour?”

“Out of the question. I'll let you finish your current project. When your present set of cultures are ready to ship, you must take them to the homeworld yourself. Close up the lab and the house. You may not return to Earth.”

“Ever?”

“Forever's a long time. I'll put you on suspended status. You'll receive field reports -- you can keep in touch that way. I won't deny you your communications, and I'd like to keep in touch with you.”

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“It'll be two to three weeks before the cultures are ready. I'll arrange a trip to New York to turn in the laptop computer.”

“Leave the computer at the house. There's no need for you to visit New York.”

“I have some diamonds to deliver.”

“You can ship them to me ... Do what you want. I would like the opportunity to say goodbye in person. Agents on suspended status must participate in one field mission every two years to preserve that status. Maybe by the time that deadline rolls around, the dust will have settled and we can bring you back here.”

“Two years, Seymor?”

“It's the best I can do, lad. I'm sorry. I don't think it's fair because you did the right thing. But we must preserve the program, and no one on the oversight committee will understand.” He hung up the phone.

Suki was standing. “Well?”

“Two to three weeks, as soon as the cultures are ready. I'm being sent up.”

“No!” she cried.

“It's what must happen. You must walk your path, and I dare not interfere.”

“It's not fair,” she sobbed. “You're who I've been searching for, and now you're going away.”

He kissed the top of her head. “You belong to your world and I belong to mine. Remember, Suki -- I'll always love you, and there will be a way for us to be in touch.”

“Well, at least I have some time to get used to the idea. I suppose I'll have to move in with my parents.” She stroked a tear from his face.

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“Don't worry, Nykkyo -- I'll be all right. Seeing your world gave me something to live for.”

Nyk helped her close her suitcase. “The taxi will pick us up at six tomorrow.” He sat on the sofa in the living room with the computer on his lap. “Seymor told me to leave this here. I think I'll let you take it, instead. We can use it to communicate.”

She sat beside him and he demonstrated how to operate it. “If you connect it to a phone line, we can use it to speak with each other. If you connect it to a high-speed circuit, we can see each other, too.”

He typed some commands. “This is my locator code. Select this code and the call will connect to me, no matter where I am.” He began packing it into its case. “You can also send me an email message.” He wrote the address on a slip of paper. “I can even make phone calls from Floran, though you can't call me.”

“I'll take good care of it. I'm going to get ready for bed.”

Nyk sat on the sofa and buried his face in his hands. He felt her hand on his shoulder.

“Are you coming to bed?”

He looked up. She was in her short robe again. She sat on his lap and put her arms around him. He looked into her dark eyes. She took his hand and placed it on her knee.

He held her against him and stroked her hair. She kissed his cheek and his lips. She lifted her chin, held his face against her neck and he kissed it. She pulled open her robe to expose her breasts and guided his face between them.

“No, Suki! I want this just as much, but we mustn't!”

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“Why not? I love you so much. This is our last night together. What's the harm?”

“We mustn't! I love you, too. I wish we could, but we can't. Please, Suki, the reasons are far bigger than either of us.” He pulled her robe closed and kissed her forehead. “Let's go to bed.”

Nyk held two of Suki's suitcases as they climbed the steps to the front door of a house in a residential section of Queens. Suki rang the doorbell. The door opened and a Japanese woman in late middle age motioned them in. She threw her arms around Suki and they both sobbed.

“Mom, this is my good friend and savior, Nick Kane,” Suki said, wiping her eyes. “Nick, this is my mother.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs Kyhana,” Nyk said, bowing to her.

Suki bore a strong resemblance to her mother, though her mother's coloring was lighter. She had a pattern of tiny, brown freckles under her eyes and her black hair was streaked with grey. She spoke English fluently, but with a noticeable Japanese accent. She opened her arms to Nyk and hugged him. “I'm so pleased to meet you, Mr Kane. Thank you so much for caring for my daughter, and for bringing her home.”

Nyk glanced at the wall and saw a golden disk with three odd characters hanging from a cord. He approached it.

“That's the thing that I told you about. It matches Mom's pin I was wearing. Silly, isn't it?”

“Not at all. It's beautiful.”

Suki took it from the hook and handed it to him. He carefully cradled it in his hand and traced the characters with his finger. “Ky-Ha-Na,” Suki said as he touched the *katakana* characters.

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He examined it for the blemish from being bent and straightened. He couldn't find it.

He began to hand it to her. The disk slipped off its cord and fell to the floor. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he said, and he picked up the pendant. It was bent and he straightened it. "I'm so clumsy!" He looked at it again. His blood ran cold as he recognized the flaw.

"That's all right," Suki said. "It wasn't your fault. It's always slipping off the cord." She replaced the pendant on the wall. "I'll be staying in the apartment upstairs." Nyk carried her bags up the stairs.

"Well, I guess it's goodbye," he said.

"Wait." She scribbled on a piece of paper. "You said you could make phone calls. Call me when you get home."

"I'll do that. Remember, Suki. I love you and I'll never stop loving you." He hugged and kissed her. "There is a good chance we'll see each other again, someday." Nyk descended the stairs, said goodbye to Suki's mother and stepped into the awaiting taxi. He gave the driver the address for Seymor's office in Tribeca.

Nyk climbed the steps to the FloranCo offices. "Hi, Jaquie," he said.

"He's expecting you, Mr Kane."

He walked into Seymor's inner office, opened his case and handed over the sack of diamonds.

"Have a seat, lad." Seymor shook his head. "I've become fond of you, Nyk. I am terribly sorry, but my hands are tied."

"I understand."

Seymor stood and looked out the window behind his desk at the New York skyline. Nyk stood beside him. Seymor reached down and pressed his palm against Nyk's. Nyk spread his fingers and they held

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hands. "Take care of yourself, lad. You have a future in the Agency. We just have to get over this bump."

Floran's golden morning light filled the liftcar as it shot upward in its transparent shaft. Nyk stepped from the lift on the 353rd floor, approached the apartment door and pressed his wrist to the scanpad. The privacy code was set.

He pressed the doorchime. He pressed it again. The door slid open and he looked into Senta's green eyes. She was wearing a light, sleeveless robe. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I've been sent up -- my punishment for bringing Suki here. May I come in, or am I disturbing you?"

Senta stepped aside and he walked in. Andra was sitting on a bench, her face buried in her hands. "This isn't a good time," Senta whispered.

"I can go somewhere and come back," he said.

"No, don't bother," Andra said. She embraced Senta. "Don't worry. I'll be all right. Thank you so much. I'll call." The two women kissed and Andra headed out the door.

Nyk shook his head.

"What's that expression for?" Senta asked him. "For Andra?"

"You know how I feel about *ax'amfinen*."

"Nykkyo, I know you're a kind and decent man. I don't understand why you can't be more charitable toward Andra. I know you dislike the finishing schools. I don't like them either. It's not Andra's fault her parents sold her to the school. She's still a living, breathing human being with hopes and dreams and needs -- needs Zander isn't meeting."

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“Is Andra having difficulties? Is she in trouble?”

“She's not having the best time with Zander. I shouldn't say more.”

“She hasn't made an effort to be friendly with me,” he replied.

“She senses your hostility. She's an intelligent and sensitive girl, Nyk. If you made a half-hearted attempt to be friendly with her, I'm sure she'd reciprocate. She's really a very sweet person. Andra hasn't known many men in her life, and it would help her if you were just a little nice to her. I dare say Zander is not a good ambassador for your gender. Enough of Andra.” She eyed him. “It's a fine mess you've made of your career. You declined that Food Service job, and now you're crosswise with the ExoAgency. What are you planning on screwing up next?”

“I thought I'd spend some time at my old home. You remember the place -- Veska used to bring you there on his vacations.”

“What will you do there?”

“I'll use the time to clear my head and maybe finish my translation of Koichi's journal.”

“That's a fine idea. Maybe you can screw up a career at the museum. Or, if you'd like, I can find you a position to screw up in the sequencing labs.” She approached him. “I'm sorry, Nykkyo.” Her eyes began to fill. “I hate to see someone I once respected fall so low. Let's pick up the pieces together. I'm willing to forgive you for your infatuation with the Earth woman. I understand how it can happen. You're alone on a strange world. You meet someone and sparks fly. I can understand your attraction to her, too. She's quite... striking. Not pretty, exactly, but striking. But now you're here and she's there, and it's over. Let's try to patch things up.”

“I'd like it if you'd come to Sudal with me.”

“You know how I feel about Sudal... All right, if it'll help you, I'll come for a little while at least. I have some meetings tomorrow. We'll

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leave day after that. I'm getting dressed, now, and heading to the lab. I'll see you tonight. You won't get into any trouble between now and then, will you?"

"I don't see how."

He watched her climb aboard her skimmer. The pilot traded a salute with him and the craft disappeared into the distance. Nyk activated a vidisplay and selected the comm uplink in Wisconsin. A dial tone sounded as he accessed the Earth telephone system. He punched in the number Suki gave him. It rang.

"Hello?"

"Suki, it's Nyk... Nick. I made it home in one piece. How are you?"

"Oh, Nick! I miss you so much already. I'll be fine. My dad came home, and he's been so gentle and tender with me. I think maybe this was the right thing."

"What will you do?" he asked.

"I'm trying to get my life together. I'm trying to be strong, Nick -- for you. I'm going to call around and start networking with some of my old grad school contacts. There are more opportunities for someone with my credentials in a city like New York."

"I'm pleased. I'm sure everything will work out."

"I can't believe you're calling from... where you are."

"We'll stay in touch. Suki, I'd like it if you'd find someone to love you. There must be a man or woman who'd care for you."

"I've found someone to love, Nick, and I'm sure he loves me. Will we see each other again?"

"I hope so. I hope to return to Earth."

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“Then I'll wait for you.”

“No, Suki. I want you to find someone -- an Earth someone. Will you do that?”

“I don't know if I can. I know I'll never find anyone like you.”

“I'll always be your friend, Suki. I do love you, and I'll never stop loving you.”

“I know you do, Nick. I love you too.”

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9 -- The Residence

Nyk packed a case with belongings needed for the trip to Sudal. He rode the lift with Senta, summoned a tubecar and requested the train station.

He located the departure area and stood with her to wait for the Sudal Express. The train was capable of traveling at nearly the speed of sound. It could make the trip to Sudal, traveling down the eastern coast, in less than half a day.

The departure area was a large room with a row of sliding doors. A chime and an announcement indicated the train was ready for boarding. The doors slid open. Nyk and Senta each pressed their wrists against a scanpad as they entered the coach. Inside were two rows of seats. Senta sat by the window. Nyk could hear and feel the low vibration of equipment to run the train.

A double chime sounded and the coach doors slid shut. The train began to accelerate away from the station. Within the urban areas the trains ran through large, transparent tubes similar to the ones used by the tubecars. The coach was quite full, but Nyk knew from experience most of these passengers would empty out at the next stop, one of the larger residential areas on the outskirts of Floran City. Then the train ran as an express, stopping only at Tinam before terminating in Sudal.

The train ran at about a quarter of its top speed through the tube to the first stop, decelerated and came to a halt. A chime sounded, and the

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doors swished open. The coach emptied out leaving only Nyk, Senta and an elderly man as passengers. Senta leaned toward him. "See, no one wants to go to Sudal."

A double chime sounded, the doors closed and the train began to accelerate again, this time to achieve its top speed. Nyk watched the cityscape turn into a blur.

The next station, where the express would not stop, was for the power plant and for a connecting monorail line running to the west and servicing the mining cities in the uplands. Off to the east, on the seacoast, Nyk could glimpse the domes and towers of the power generating plant, one of two on the planet.

The train abruptly slowed to Mach 0.3. The coaches' inertial sinks permitted them to stop on a dime, if the need arose, and the passengers would feel nothing. The train passed the power plant station, then accelerated and sped through the Floran countryside.

Most of Floran's population lived in the cities, so the intervening countryside was quite empty. Vast areas of the planet's virgin vegetation whizzed by. The train was now traveling at its top speed of Mach 0.75, about 500 miles per hour -- too fast to glimpse nearby detail. Nyk looked out toward the west at the extinct volcanic mons rising into the planet's stratosphere.

Nyk's planet was younger than Earth by a half billion years or more. In its evolutionary progress it was about the equivalent to Earth during the late Devonian era. Most of the planet's life existed in a sea covering nearly ninety percent of the planet's surface. Life on land was limited to plants and microbes. There were no higher order land animals at all.

He could see the uplands on the lower slope of the mons. They were covered with a dense forest of tall, fernlike plants. The leaves were shades of deep violet, almost black, to soak up the low-energy orange sunlight.

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Closer still were the plains, dominated by a scrubby, horsetail-like plant growing about knee high. The vegetation was primitive and reproduced with spores, though some analogues of Earth gymnosperms were emerging.

Nyk's training taught him something about early life on Earth. He pondered what was to evolve on his homeworld during the upcoming half billion years or so. His people lived here five thousand Earth years - an instant in geologic time. He wondered how they would influence the natural development of native life.

Senta began to drowse. She rolled away from Nyk and slept with her forehead against the window. Nyk stood and started down the aisle. He walked through the cars until he reached the lead coach and found an empty seat in the first row.

Nyk enjoyed a child-like pleasure sitting in the transparent nose cone of the train, looking down the maglev line as they sped southward. From this vantage, the train appeared to bore its way through the landscape at close to the speed of sound.

The train approached the station at Tinam -- a small town known as the gateway to the agridomes. Some of the smaller and older domes had been visible in the distance for a while. Here, the first of the modern domes were visible. They were deceptive, looking smaller and closer than they were. A vast array of these domes stretched southward, to the outskirts of Sudal.

Nyk could see the mouths of the guard tubes for the station. The train switched onto a side rail and lost speed. He watched as the coaches slowed and stopped adjacent to the boarding platform. A chime sounded to announce their arrival.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, turned and saw Senta. "I thought you'd be here," she said.

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“You were asleep. I know sitting here gives you vertigo.” A double chime announced the train's imminent departure.

The train began to accelerate, its inertial sinks absorbing the forces so the passengers felt nothing. In no time, it had resumed top speed.

Senta glanced forward, then looked down. “Please, let's return to our seats before I vomit.”

Nyk followed Senta through the coaches. He sat, looking forward at the empty rows. She leaned against him and began to drowse again. He brushed her hair from his face.

Finally, he heard a chime announcing the train was approaching the end of the line -- Sudal. Senta awoke, smoothed her hair, rubbed her eyes and yawned. Nyk stood and retrieved their cases from the luggage rack. The train slowed, entered the guard tube and came to a stop at the station. The doors swished open.

The first thing he noticed was the increased ambient temperature. Sudal was located at the southeast corner of his planet's continent, near the equator in the tropical zone. The vegetation here was different than in the north, but it retained most of the same characteristics. The temperature averaged ten to fifteen degrees Celsius warmer than in Floran City. Nyk's urban garb betrayed him as a visitor from the North.

Nyk summoned a groundcar for the drive to the Residence. He put their bags in the luggage compartment and climbed in. “Car, the Residence,” he commanded. The vehicle slid out of its parking stall and headed toward the east. The Residence lay about twenty kilometres outside the Sudal city limits.

“Do you know what I think we should do tonight?” he asked.

“I hope you're not thinking about making love under the stars.”

Nyk watched the landscape roll past. The groundcar turned onto a narrow access road that led past the Residence.

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“I feel strange returning here,” he said. “I haven't been here since before we were married. Senta, I know it's too much to ask that you love this place like I do, but I so wish you could like it a bit.”

“You know how I feel about Sudal.”

The Residence was built for Nyk's father as a reward for overseeing a major expansion of agridome capacity. Although there was no private ownership of land or buildings among the Florans, Nyk owned the right to use the Residence. It passed to him upon the deaths of his parents, and would remain within the Kyhana family for as long as the line was perpetuated.

The structure was circular with a domed roof. Heavy steel shutters lined the house. These could be slammed down at a moment's notice as protection against the violent tropical storms that arose periodically in the area.

All the buildings in Sudal -- a city of about 100,000 -- had such shutters. Every so often the entire city would shut down and the residents would close the shutters to wait out a storm so violent as to be death to anyone foolish enough to venture outside.

The groundcar drew up to the house. The place was closed up -- the storm shutters were down. Nyk climbed from the groundcar and gave Senta a hand. He stood and regarded some native plants growing near the entrance. His mother had put them there as ornamentals. They had bamboo-like stalks and grew violet- black, gas-filled spheres that served as leaves. The spheres appeared impaled on the stalks. Between the spheres grew orange trumpet-like spore disperses. He approached the entrance and pressed his wrist against the scanpad. The house recognized his ID code and came alive. The shutters flew open.

He carried their travel cases into the structure and up the spiral staircase to the living quarters on the second level. There were no outside walls on the second and third floors. The wedge-shaped rooms had no back walls - - they were open and overlooked the sea.

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Nyk carried his case to his childhood bedroom. “Were you planning on sleeping with me tonight?”

Senta brought her case into the room and set it down. The sea breeze was blowing, bringing with it the musty, bitter scent of the Floran sea. It carried a faint trace of rotten egg. Nyk inhaled the air deeply.

“I don't know how you can stand that smell,” she said.

“I'm going to walk on the beach. Would you care to join me?”

“I can barely tolerate that smell from up here. Go by yourself -- I'm going to review some sequencing reports.” She sat at a tabletop vidisplay, brought up her reports and began dictating annotations to them.

Nyk walked out to the edge of the bluff and looked down at the sea. He could see the surf pounding in on the black, basaltic sand on the beach below. The surf was more violent than usual. He knew a tropical storm was brewing somewhere beyond the eastern horizon.

He climbed down the rocks leading to the beach, removed his sandals and walked barefoot on the black sand, dodging bits of marine vegetation broken loose by the force of the surf. He looked down and saw a specimen of Floran sea fauna, an arthropod-like animal with five legs. The surf had tossed it onto the beach and it was struggling to right itself. Nyk picked it up and tossed it into the sea.

He recalled reading Koichi's journal entries about Floran's sea and how it differed from Earth's. Koichi's family owned a summerhouse on Long Island. Koichi loved strolling the sands and appreciating the marine life. He expressed in early journal entries his repugnance for the smell of Floran's sea. Only in his later entries he wrote of developing a tolerance for it.

Dusk approached. Nyk climbed the rocks to the Residence. Senta was busy annotating sequencing reports. He went into the house's storage room, retrieved a couple prefab meals and warmed them. He

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opened the packages and placed one before Senta. Then he pulled up a chair opposite her and began eating his dinner.

“Will you take a walk on the bluff with me later?” he asked.

Senta looked up from the vidisplay at him. “All right, so long as we don't go too close to the sea.”

Night was falling. More stars became visible as the sky darkened. Nyk looked up and saw a pattern in the sky -- a bright star with four dimmer companions making up a lopsided rectangle. He knew from his training Earth's sun lay in the sky in that vicinity. He looked down. The land breeze was beginning to develop.

“It doesn't smell so bad, now,” Senta said. He walked hand-in-hand with her along the bluff, listening to the surf pound below.

“I wish you could learn to like this place. It's my home, and I love it. I know you grew up in the City, when you weren't on the transit platform. I understand what the City has to offer and why you like it. I wish you could like this place enough to spend a little time here during the year.”

“Nykkyo, it's not that simple. I can't be so far from my work. The sequencing labs are located in the City. It takes a half a day to get from here to there. If you need to spend time here, by all means, please do so. It simply won't work for me.”

“I think you could relocate the sequencing labs to Sudal. They'd be much more convenient to the pilot beds and the research facility.”

“Where would I find the staff to run the labs? None of our current staff would care to relocate to the south. I doubt we could find qualified technicians in this backwater.”

“Talented and qualified people must live here,” he replied.

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“Moving the labs here simply won't work. I don't wish to discuss it further.”

Nyk continued to walk, holding hands with his wife. “Senta, it's good to have some quiet time with you. Let's go in and share the gift.”

He led her to his childhood bedroom on the second floor and stood, gazing into her eyes. Senta's eyes were emerald green and Nyk considered them her most striking feature.

Although far from homely, her face didn't fit the Floran definition of beautiful. Hers was oblong, and she had a high and broad forehead. Her nose was strong and straight, with a discernible bump near the bridge. Senta had a prominent lower lip that gave her a perpetual pout. When she smiled, though, her stern visage softened, her eyes sparkled and Nyk thought she became almost pretty.

Her eyes began to glisten. She clamped them shut and bit her lip; then said, “Nykkyo... I do love you. I wish we could be the way we once were. If I seem harsh with you ... well, it's because I'm at a loss. I simply don't know what to do. I want to make this work. Will you at least try? Please?”

“I'll try.”

“Good.”

“Senta -- I've always thought you had a very pretty smile.”

“Why, thank you Nyk.”

Nyk grasped the hem of her tunic and lifted it over her head. She replied by lifting and removing his. He stood for a moment and regarded her nude body.

Except for her breasts, which by Floran standards were ample, Senta had the figure of a teenager. Her ribs and hipbones were prominent, her arms and legs were spindly and her knees bony. Her

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hands and feet were too large for the rest of her frame, giving her an awkward appearance. Her face was framed by bushy red hair which extended down her back to her shoulder blades. Her skin was creamy with a ruddy mottle and a pattern of broad freckles covered her shoulders and upper arms.

Nyk gestured toward the bed. Senta reclined on it and he lay beside her gazing into her eyes, stroking her cheek and awaiting her signal. She took his hand and guided it to her breast, and he placed hers upon his chest. He caressed her and kissed her neck and shoulders.

“Divide your mind,” she coached him. He attempted to focus the front of his awareness onto the cues her body was giving and to force sensations of her touch into his back mind. “Concentrate, Nyk. You're not concentrating.” Nyk closed his eyes and attempted to regain his focus. He began caressing her again. “That's better,” Senta said and guided his face to her chest. “Mmm... Like that...” He traded kisses with her. She caressed his body. “Now, you're rushing it. Did you forget what I taught you? For the technique to work you must keep your focus on your partner.” He closed his eyes again, took a deep breath and returned to caressing her. “No, Nykkyo. Not like that...”

Nyk lay on his back and held her beside him. He stroked her arm, playing with a vein that ran along her bicep. “I'm sorry, *korlyta*. My mind's too preoccupied.”

“Maybe we should've used performance-enhancers,” she said. “I did bring some.”

“Where are the drugs? I'll use one and we can try again.”

“No, Nyk, you don't have to do that, now. You've been through a lot lately, and I know you're not emotionally equipped to deal with it.” She smiled and kissed him. “I'll be patient.” She rolled with her back to him. “Good night, Nykkyo.”

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Floran's golden dawn waked him. Nyk arose and stood at the rear of his wall-less bedroom and looked out over the sea. Senta was asleep. He headed for the bathroom, shaved and showered and slipped into a pair of loose shorts. He began to brew a pot of green tea.

Senta stepped from his bedroom toward the bath. He could hear her showering. The vidisplays began signaling him. His wristscan answered the call and a blue, voice-only screen appeared. "Hello, Nykkyo?" a voice greeted him in English.

"Suki!"

"I'm trying the laptop computer. I'm in the apartment and I have it connected to the phone line. It works! I feel so much better knowing I can call you."

"Yes, our communications work well. How are things going for you?"

"I have a lead on a job. It's part time at my old grad school. They're looking for someone to be a contributing editor for an archeology journal the school publishes. It's not much, but it gets my foot in the door, and I can finally use my degree.

"Yes, Nykkyo, I'm beginning to believe what you say about Destiny tracing paths. What're you doing?"

"Nothing, right now. I'm taking some time to clear my head. Have you thought about what we discussed?"

"Yes ... Nykkyo, I'll follow my path -- to wherever and to whomever it leads. Right now, I have so many other things to occupy me."

"Fair enough," he replied.

"My mom's calling me for dinner. I'll call again later. See you, Nykkyo. I love you."

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"I'll never stop loving you, Suki." The session terminated. He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back.

"What was that about?" He heard Senta behind him. He jumped, turned and saw her standing, nude and dripping by the bathroom door. "Was that who I think it was? With what other woman would you be speaking in that language?" Nyk stood and faced her. Her lip was beginning to tremble. "I thought you said it was over between the two of you."

"You were the one who said it's over. I never said that."

Senta stormed into the bedroom and pulled the door shut. She emerged in her tunic carrying her *lifxarpa* and pounded down the spiral staircase to the lower level. Nyk headed after her. "It's definitely over between us!" she shouted as she headed out the main entrance.

"Senta..." Nyk followed her. "Senta ... Suki's my friend. She can't be my lover and she knows it."

"I don't believe you." Senta glowered at him. "You lied to my dad and now you're lying to me!" she said as she opened the groundcar.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the City -- and don't you dare set foot in my apartment."

"But Senta ... You're taking the groundcar. I'll be stuck here."

"It's not my problem." She pulled the cowl shut.

"At least let me ride with you to the train station," Nyk yelled. The car rolled toward Sudal. "Senta!" he shouted as she disappeared into the distance.

Nyk walked to the edge of the bluff and paced back and forth. On the eastern horizon he could see a line of grey storm clouds. He walked inside and took inventory of the prefab meals in the storage room. A check of the vidisplay gave him a storm forecast. A category three storm

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was approaching and would hit by nightfall. All Sudalese were advised to prepare for two to three days under cover. He pressed the house's control panel and the storm shutters slammed shut.

Nyk carried a meal tray to his vidisplay. Outside the wind howled and he could hear pelting of rain and hail against the closed shutters. The tempest had raged for four days. He poked the vidisplay and received the latest weather update -- the storm had been upgraded to category four. The vidisplay signaled an incoming call. He pressed his wrist to the scanpad and a vidphone session opened. He saw Suki's face break into a smile.

“Nykkyo! It's so good to see you! I love seeing you in that tunic. I must call more often.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“From my office at NYU.”

“You know you must be careful not to let others see this technology,” he said.

“Yes, I know. Don't worry, it's after quitting time. My office is on the top floor of the NYU union. The place is deserted.” He saw her fingers loom large in the image as she removed the digital camera. A panoramic sweep of her office appeared on the vidisplay. “See, no one's here but me. I share this office with a woman named Cathy. She's an inspiration to me, Nykkyo. Cathy's blind, but she gets around almost as well as a sighted person.”

“Does Cathy work on the same journal?”

“No, she's the editor of a newsletter the university publishes for the disabled. She has a computer that's set up with a speech synthesizer so she can hear what's on the screen. She's amazing. I've only known her for three days and we're getting along really well.

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“The office has a high-speed data port, so I decided to try the vidphone. I can't believe we're two hundred lightyears apart. I'm so happy to see your face again, Nykkyo.” She turned from the camera. “Hold on, someone's at the door.”

He saw her crack open the door. A slight woman in dark glasses and carrying a white cane walked in. Cathy spoke to Suki and closed the door. Suki held her hand over her mouth. Nyk strained to hear, but rushing air drowned out their voices.

The two women stood on either side of the doorway. Cathy cocked her ear to the hallway. Suki said something, and Nyk could lip-read Cathy's reply as “No.”

The office door burst open and swung in front of Suki. A rough-looking young Asian man entered holding a knife. He turned toward Cathy and spoke to her. She held her cane in front of her. The man touched the tip of the knife to her neck and began pulling at her blouse. He kicked the door shut.

Suki's eyes widened and she screamed. The man whirled around and glared at her.

Nyk stared at the image, his heart pounding in his throat. He poked the vidisplay touchscreen to open a second comm session. The ExoAgency uplink responded with a dial tone. He entered zero and heard the ring signal.

Suki backed from the attacker and out of the field of view of the camera. Nyk could see Cathy holding her cane. She backed away until stopped by a desk.

“Ameritech operator.”

“This is an emergency. I need 911.”

“Please hang up and dial 911,” the operator said. “The 911 system will route your call.”

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“No, I need 911 in New York. There's a man with a knife attacking two women and one's blind.”

“Where in New York?”

“I don't know. NYU, where's NYU?”

“Manhattan -- 212, I think. Hold on.” He heard ringing again.

Suki came back into view. The man held the knife to her face then touched the point to her throat. “No, Suki,” Nyk said under his breath, “Don't do anything foolish.” The man gestured with the knife and she lifted her top and unsnapped her bra.

“911. Please state your emergency.”

“There's a man with a knife. He's attacking two women... It looks like he's about to rape one of them.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“From... From Wisconsin. I'm in touch with New York via the Internet. Please send someone.”

“Where is this attack?”

“NYU union, top floor.”

“We'll pass this along to NYU security. Hold the line.”

“Hurry!” He pressed his fist to his lips.

The attacker fondled Suki's breast and nodded. He pointed the tip of the knife to the waistband of her jeans. She began unbuttoning her jeans and dropped them to her ankles.

Nyk heard the ring signal again. “NYU Security.”

“There's an attack in progress,” he panted. “NYU union, top floor. A man with a knife.”

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“Do you know which room?”

“An office,” Nyk said. “I don't know the number, but it's the one for an archeology journal, and a newsletter for the disabled.”

“We're dispatching. Can you describe the attacker?”

“An Asian man, about twenty years, height about 1.8 metres.”

“1.8 metres?”

“...Five foot eight! Short black hair, black jacket and a large silver earring in his left ear.”

“We'll send someone.”

The attacker grabbed the waistband to Suki's briefs and cut them off. He pointed the blade at her and she began to lie on the floor, out of view of the camera. “No, not like this!” Nyk said to himself, his eyes filling. He pressed his fist against his lips. “It wasn't supposed to happen like this!”

The rapist unbuckled his belt and dropped his jeans. He knelt and Nyk could see his head and shoulders in the image.

“Gaagh!” he heard Suki half gasp and half scream over the sound the ventilator. Cathy stood upright and moved toward her voice. She reached out with her cane and touched the attacker's back and began flogging him. The tip of the cane came down on his left ear, snagged the earring and ripped it from his earlobe.

“Yaah!” he cried and reached for his bloodied ear.

“I'm to blame,” Nyk sobbed. “My interference caused this!”

The rapist began to stand, holding his hands up and out of the way. Suki sat up and now she held the knife. He backed away from her until he bumped into Cathy. She began whacking him with the cane again. He started to the door and stumbled, pulled up his jeans, ran out and

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slammed the door behind him. Suki stood, looked down at herself and dropped the knife. She touched her lower abdomen, examined her finger and then bent over and vomited.

Cathy extended her hand and felt her way toward Suki. The two women embraced and sobbed. The door opened and a pair of security guards walked in. Nyk watched as they conferred with Cathy and Suki. One used his radio and headed into the corridor.

The second guard wheeled over an office chair and Suki sat in it. She placed her head between her knees. The guard patted and stroked her back. The door opened again and a pair of paramedics wheeled in a stretcher. Nyk saw Suki shake her head. The medics and guard spoke with her. She lay on the stretcher and the medics began strapping her onto it.

Suki pointed toward her desk. Nyk saw the guard approach the laptop computer. “You want this off?” he heard the guard say. The image went dark.

Nyk sat and buried his face in his hands. “It's my fault ... It's all my fault ... Oh, Suki, I'm so sorry!”

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10 -- Expecting

Nyk paced back and forth in front of the vidisplay attempting to call the phone numbers Suki gave him. Outside, the wind continued to howl, bright flashes of lightning seeped around the closed shutters and thunder boomed.

He placed another call. He heard it ringing. "Hello?"

"Mrs Kyhana? This is Nick Kane."

"Oh, Mr Kane! Have you heard what's happened?"

"Yes, I know."

"She gave herself to him. She taunted him and gave herself to him so he wouldn't molest a blind woman."

"I had no idea! That was a brave thing."

"It was a foolish thing. She could've gotten them both killed."

"It was brave and noble, Mrs Kyhana. May I speak with her?"

"I'll see if she'll come to the phone. Needless to say, she's distraught. Sukiko? It's Nick Kane."

"Oh, Nick!" She began sobbing. "Thank you, Mom. I'd like to be alone... Nykkyo!"

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He sobbed. "I saw the whole thing. If I could've jumped through that circuit to help you, I would've."

"I know you would. Were you the one who called the police?"

"Yes."

"To think help came from two hundred lightyears away. I don't know what would've happened if those guards hadn't shown up."

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm sore, I'm exhausted and I feel so, so violated."

"Your mom said you lured him from Cathy. That was a brave thing you did."

"It was another out-of-body experience. I saw myself, lying there on the floor. I don't know why I did it. I couldn't bear the thought of someone taking advantage of Cathy, and she feels so guilty he attacked me."

"What's next?"

"I went to the hospital for the tests. They offered me the morning-after pill, but I refused it."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like taking drugs. I've heard scary things about it. I need to go back for regular HIV testing until they're sure I'm negative or ... Oh, God, Nykkyo -- I don't know what I'll do if I test positive! I've been in the gay community. I've known people with AIDS ... It was so horrible..." She sobbed.

"Oh, Suki, I'm so sorry I can't be there to hold you."

"I'll be all right. What's worse is knowing we'll never get closure."

"Closure?"

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“The bastard got away. They'll probably never find him.”

“Didn't you or Cathy get a good look at him -- oh, not Cathy of course. Did you get a good look at him?”

“To be honest, Nykkyo, I was looking at the knife. NYU Security searched the union for him. Well, they have samples for evidence if they ever do catch him. And, they have his knife and earring ... and a piece of his earlobe.” She giggled. “I couldn't believe Cathy was hitting him with her cane. I'll never forget that...” She sobbed. “I'll never forget any of it!”

“Oh, Suki, I feel terrible -- it's all my fault. If it hadn't been for my interference, this might not have happened. I caused your suicide attempt, and now I've caused this. I'm so sorry -- I've messed up your life.”

“Nykkyo, you can't blame yourself. My life was messed up before I met you. You're my bright spot -- my savior. Please don't feel badly. I've never had good luck. I certainly don't blame you, and without you there's a good chance I'd be dead, now.”

“That's not likely.”

“No one knows what my life might've been without you. Might-haves don't count, remember? I'd rather have my life with you.”

“I called to comfort you, and now you're comforting me.”

“We comfort each other, Nykkyo. I'll get through this. Please don't blame yourself. Knowing you care helps so much.”

“You'll call and keep me posted?”

“Of course. Good bye, my love.” Nyk heard a click and a dial tone. He cancelled the vidphone session and sat, his elbow on the table and his forehead in his hand. He closed his eyes and sobbed.

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Nyk opened his eyes. He was slumped over the vidisplay. Wakefulness spread across him and he became aware the storm's winds had subsided. He stepped to the house's control panel and touched the screen. The shutters opened and a breeze blew through the Residence. He stood looking out at the roiling sea. Easterly winds were breaking up the overcast. Patches of indigo sky were becoming visible and shafts of golden light contrasted against the dark clouds.

He walked to the front of the house and looked out to the west. A large dune of black sand had blown across the access roadway. This was not unexpected -- storms frequently blew debris and blocked the road. Nyk accessed the Sudal civil authorities via the vidisplay to report the obstruction. Then he stood near the back of the house and watched the sea.

The vidisplays began signaling him of an incoming call. He pressed his wrist to the scanpad and it chirped in acknowledgement. "Hello," a voice answered. "This is Sudal Civil Support. Did you report storm damage?"

"There's a dune across the roadway outside the Residence."

"We'll send a crew to remove it. Do you have other damage?"

"No... No other damage."

"Do you need supplies? We can send a skimmer."

"Could you take me into Sudal?"

"Certainly." The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk stood outside the Residence and saw the skimmer approaching. It touched down and he climbed aboard. "Any place in particular you want to go?" the pilot asked.

"Shopping mall. I must restock our supply of meals." The pilot nodded and the skimmer lifted off.

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Nyk regarded damage to the vegetation. Branches from the indigenous palm-like plants littered the ground and violet-black leaves were scattered everywhere. “It was quite a storm,” the pilot said. “Two fatalities.”

“How?”

“A pair of visitors from the north were caught without shelter. City people ignore the storm warnings.”

“It never even rains on Floran City,” Nyk replied, “because of the rain shadow from the mons. City folk have no idea what these storms can be like.”

Nyk lugged a sack filled with prefab meals and beverage packs to a livery kiosk outside the shopping mall. With a wristscan he ordered a groundcar. He looked around the city's streets. Most shops and buildings still had their shutters down and he could see little traffic. The fleet of groundcars had been called off the street and he knew one must be dispatched from the garage. He paced back and forth until he saw the driverless vehicle approaching. It stopped adjacent to the kiosk.

He climbed in. “Car, the Residence.” The vidisplay showed a photoimage of his house. “Confirmed, car go.”

“Destination unavailable,” a synthesized voice reported.

“Car, power plant. Confirmed, car go.” The groundcar headed for the fusion plant on the coast south of Sudal.

Nyk approached the ash pile on the power plant grounds and spent the better part of the day sorting through it to select the largest and clearest crystals. He carried a large polymer fiber bag of raw diamonds to the groundcar and climbed in. By now the dune should be cleared, he figured. “Car, the Residence ... confirmed -- car, go.” The groundcar pulled onto the roadway and headed toward the east.

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Nyk walked into the kitchen and opened a cold breakfast package. The vidisplay signaled a call. He scanned his wrist and saw Veska.

“Nykkyo, Senta hasn't heard from you in twenty days.”

“Nor have I from her.”

“Hasn't this gone on long enough?”

“Why don't you ask her that?”

“Don't you think it's time to return to her?”

“You can ask her that, too. Veska, Senta left me, not the other way around. She left me stranded here without transportation. Since she did the leaving, she should do the returning.”

“Nyk, I know I shouldn't interfere with how a man and his wife manage their relationship.”

“But you will, in this case. You're hardly an impartial arbiter.”

“It pains me to see Senta unhappy.”

“I'm not sure she is unhappy. I don't think she misses me as much as she misses her control over me.”

“I'm calling to negotiate a truce between you two. Senta will have you back if you give up the Earth woman.”

“I can't give her up. I don't have her. She's two hundred light-years away, and I'm stuck here for at least two years if not forever.”

“Give up your love for her.”

“You might as well ask me to give up breathing. I can't turn on or off how I feel for someone. I'll always love Suki, even if I can't have her. You can't ask me to give up my love for her.”

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“I'm not asking you. Senta is.”

“Veska, what do you know of forbidden love?”

“More than you might imagine, Nykkyo.”

“Ask Senta how she'd feel if I insisted she give up Andra as my terms to return to her.”

“Is that one of your requirements?”

“No ... I don't care if she has Andra as a friend. I don't care if she has her as a lover. I won't give up my love for Suki.”

“Then we're at an impasse.”

“Senta's at the impasse.”

“I'll speak to her some more. To be frank, Nykkyo ... I think you're right. I don't see how your fondness for your Earth friend injures Senta. But ... I can't take that posture.” The vidisplay went blank.

Nyk walked out, onto the bluff and down to a shallow, bowl-shaped depression lined with black sand. He stretched out on the sand, laced his fingers behind his head and gazed at the indigo sky. Recollections of his childhood came to him -- his boyhood days in the house; how he had little to do but walk the beach and lie looking up at the sky. It was all he wanted to do. But that was then.

He arose, returned to the house and picked up a datacel containing the original Esperanto of Koichi's journal.

The setting sun sent shafts of bronze light through the open structure. Nyk sat at a vidisplay putting the finishing touches on his translation of Koichi's journal. He worked while munching some snack wafers. An incoming vidphone call interrupted him. He scanned his wrist.

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“Oh, Nykkyo!” Suki looked at him through the circuit. He could see dismay on her face. “I’m pregnant!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“I was expecting this, in a way.”

“I was expecting this, too. I’ve been sweating bullets for the past three weeks, ever since the...” She stroked away a tear. “I missed my last period. I never miss periods -- I’m never even late! A couple days ago I took one of those home pregnancy tests, and the results were positive. Yesterday, Mom took me to the doctor. They called this afternoon with the results -- confirmed.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know. I should’ve taken the morning-after pill. What do you think I should do?”

“I shouldn’t advise you,” he said.

“Mom thinks I should have an abortion.”

“Do you think so?”

“I don’t know that, either. I know what you say about destiny, and maybe this is my destiny. But I don’t think I have the strength to go through with it. I wish you were here. I’m scared, Nykkyo. I wish we didn’t have to be apart. I so long to feel you hold me. You have a way of holding me that makes the hurt and the fear go away.”

Nyk kissed his fingers and placed them against the vidisplay camera. Suki did the same. “That helps, Nykkyo. It’s like we’re reaching across the lightyears. Mom made an appointment for me at the clinic. It’s in two weeks, Monday at two.”

“Appointment for what?” he asked.

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“To have the abortion. Mom thinks it's the right way. We know nothing of the kid who raped me. We don't know his medical history or if there are genetic problems. It would set back my career. I'd feel fraudulent applying for a job knowing I'm pregnant. And then I'll have a baby to care for...”

“Those sound like reasons a mother would give. Is that how you see it?”

“I don't know... I guess I do see it that way. It'd be so much easier if I heard you say you see it that way, too.”

“I'm not sure it's right.”

“Do you have abortions on Floran?”

“Yes, but they're very rare. Our people plan families with great care. We have no choice, the fertility control policy ensures it. Make sure it's your choice, Suki, and not your mother's.”

“You're right, Nykkyo. Good night, and I love you.” The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk pressed his hand to his eyes. “Destiny wants her child,” he muttered. “I displaced the man who was to be in her life. Destiny needs her child. I can't be the father, so Destiny sent the rapist to her. Oh, Suki, will you understand? Will you ever forgive me?”

He stood and looked out to the west. He could see the tops of Sudal's tallest buildings silhouetted in the ruby disk of the setting sun. “Destiny must have your child, Suki. Don't ... don't terminate the pregnancy!” He paced around the living room and stopped to gaze at the sea. “Two weeks. Ten Floran days.”

Nyk sat at a vidisplay and composed a telemessage. He returned to his work on the journal, his mind wandering to Suki. The sun had set and the house's ambient lighting came on. He stood looking into the dark toward the east.

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The vidisplays signaled a call. He answered and saw Veska. “Nykkyo, what do you want? Are you ready to talk about Senta?”

“No -- I need transportation to Earth.”

“Whatever for? It can't be Agency business.”

“It's personal business.”

“Nykkyo, if you were on active status, I couldn't refuse your request. Since you're suspended, I must get approval from your superior.”

“There's no other way?”

“No way, Nyk.” Veska's eyes narrowed. “You're not trying to arrange an assignation with your Earth woman, are you?”

“No -- not an assignation. Please, Veska -- it's important. I'm your friend and son. Remember?”

His father-in-law regarded him through the circuit. “I remember you were, once.” The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk entered Seymor's locator code. The session activated. “Hello, Nykkyo. To what do I owe this honor?”

“Seymor, I need to travel to Earth on personal business.”

He chuckled. “Lad, I salute your audacity. Your request is, I'm afraid, out of the question.”

“Aren't there any assurances I can give you?”

“Nyk, I'd love to have you here. But if word got back to my superiors that I authorized transit for you, they'd have my head on a platter. If there's nothing else...”

“No, Seymor.” The session went blank.

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Nyk paced around the main living level, then composed and transmitted another telemessage. He went into his bedroom, slipped out of his tunic and lay on his bed. The night land breeze was wafting through the open house and he could hear the surf washing against the rocks at the base of the bluff. He laced his fingers behind his head and tried to relax.

Thoughts of Suki swirled through his mind. Could Destiny find another way? Doubts plagued him. This is the child -- of that he was sure. He couldn't drive these thoughts from his mind, and the more he thought, the more agitated he became.

He rose, headed for the storage room and rummaged through trays of drugs. His fingers touched a sleep aid cartridge. He picked up an injector, flipped it open, cocked the roller and loaded the cartridge. Back in his bedroom, he sat on the bed and jabbed the needle into his thigh. A touch of the trigger released the roller and sent the drug into his muscle. He stretched out and an unsatisfying sleep spread over him.

Nyk arose and found a cold breakfast in the storage room. The vidisplay called him from his meal. He pressed his right wrist to the scanpad.

“Nykkyo, what a surprise!”

His caller raised his left hand, pressed the heel of it to the vidphone camera and Nyk reciprocated. Nyk stroked his left wrist. Beneath his thumb was a mark Zander made. He recalled a day, years ago, when he and Zander were no older than thirteen each. They were sitting on the beach below the bluff.

“Are you ready to bond?” Zander had asked him. Nyk looked down at a scalpel, a bottle of healing salve and a polypack containing tiny silicone beads used for cosmetic scarification, a fad at the time.

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Zander grasped the scalpel and Nyk presented his wrist. "You must cut deep but not too deep," Zander said as he made an inch-long incision beneath Nyk's thumb. The wound oozed blood and Nyk began to feel lightheaded. "You're not going to pass out on me, are you?" Zander made a second, small cut adjacent to the first. He picked up some beads and pushed them into the cuts. Healing salve Zander dropped onto the wounds closed them over the beads, leaving two permanent bumps in Nyk's skin.

"Now, you do me." Zander handed Nyk the scalpel and turned his left wrist toward him. Nyk held the blade above Zander's wrist and hesitated. "Come on, don't be a coward!" Zander chided him. "If you can't make the cut, I will."

Nyk could feel his pulse pounding in his neck. He drove the blade into Zander's flesh and worked in the beads. Healing salve closed the wounds and he and Zander washed away the blood with seawater. Then Zander tapped his fresh scars against Nyk's. "This will be our greeting ritual."

Later, after Zander had left by groundcar for his home in Sudal, Nyk's mother called him into the Residence for dinner. Nyk and his mother frequently dined by themselves as his father often worked late. His mother pointed to the scars on his wrist. "How did you come by those?"

He looked at his wrist. "I ... I fell against some rocks on the beach, and scraped myself."

"Nykkyo, how many times have I told you not to climb on the rocks? What if you had fallen and hit your head? You could lie there half a day before someone missed you and came looking for you. You're not to go on the rocks by yourself."

"But Mom -- Zander was with me."

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“Zander Baxa! That boy is trouble. I wish you'd make a few new friends...”

“I received your telemessage,” Zander said. “What can I do for you?”

“I need transit to Earth, on personal business. I can't get there through normal procedures.”

“Yes, I heard about you smuggling that Earth woman onworld. I'm sure you're at the top of the Agency's shit list. That act earned you some of my respect, Nyk.”

“You're a Service career man, Zander. You know your way around the Agency. I thought you might have some ideas.”

“Right. A good operative won't let a few regulations or red tape get in his way. When do you need transit?”

“Nine days ... Or, sooner. I must be in New York before next Monday noon.”

“Perhaps I can be of some help. I'm finishing up some business on Altia, and I'll be returning to Floran City on dot-197. Why don't you stop at my apartment and we'll discuss.”

Nyk walked out of the Residence and pressed a control on the exterior panel. The storm shutters slammed down and the house went into a slumber. He loaded his travel case into the groundcar, climbed in and directed it to the train station.

After disembarking the train at Floran City, Nyk ordered a tubecar and rode it to the apartment building. He took the lift to the 353rd floor and pressed his wrist to the scanpad outside the apartment door. It read: “entry denied.”

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He pressed the doorchime. He pressed it again. The door unlatched and slid open. He walked in. “Senta, I'm just here to get some...” It dawned on him he was looking into a pair of pale blue eyes.

“Who's there, Andra?” he heard Senta call from the bedroom. She walked out wearing her robe, untied and open. She spied Nyk, pulled her robe closed and tied the belt. “I see you found a means to escape your prison. That's one reason I don't like living in Sudal.”

“Senta, I'm not returning to you. I came for some personal belongings.”

She gestured toward a stack of polymer packing crates. “Take them all.”

“Which one has the crest?” he asked.

“Top one.”

He opened the crate and removed the golden pendant. “Where are you going with that?”

“To the museum. I'm donating it, along with my translation of Koichi's journal.”

“You finished it?”

“Yes. My time in Sudal did me some good. Tonight I'm meeting Zander.”

“Then what?”

“It depends on what Zander has to say.”

Senta glanced at Andra and then looked into Nyk's eyes. “What are you doing with Zander?”

“I don't know. He may be doing me a favor.”

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“Don't get involved with Zander. You and I might have our differences, but please, Nyk -- stay away from him. For your sake!”

“He's an old friend of mine,” Nyk replied.

“Senta's right.” Andra shook her head. “Don't get wrapped up with Zander.”

“I'm late for my meeting with the Kyhana section curator at the museum.”

“Where are you staying tonight?” Senta asked him.

“At the hostel.”

“Nyk, you can stay here if you'd like.”

“I'll be fine at the hostel.” He headed for the tubecar platform.

Nyk ordered a groundcar from the livery kiosk outside the hostel and directed it to Zander's apartment building. The car carried him to an older section of Floran City, one not serviced by the tubecars. He rode an outside lift to Zander's floor, found the door and pressed the doorchime.

The door slid partway open and he looked into Andra's eyes. “Please -- don't,” she whispered.

“Who's there?” he heard Zander ask.

“It's Nykkyo.”

“Have him come in.”

The door slid open and Andra gestured him inside. Nyk involuntarily scanned her from head to foot. She was wearing nothing but a *lifxarpa*. The right side was folded down to expose her breast. The sash was secured at her waist in front with a pin bearing the Baxa crest.

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The loose ends hung to offer her a minimum of frontal modesty. "I'm sorry to interrupt something," Nyk said.

"No, not at all. Come in, Nyk." Zander stood and presented his left wrist for their private greeting ritual. Nyk joined him at the table. Andra took a seat in the corner and sat with her hands folded in her lap. She smiled at Nyk.

Zander made a sign to Andra. She stood and brought over a basket containing euphoriant inhalers. Zander picked one up and took a hit on it.

Nyk tried without much success to avoid gawking at Andra. "She's a beautiful woman, isn't she?" Zander said in English.

"Oh, yes. She certainly is."

"The *ax'amfinen* are reputed to be the most beautiful women in the galaxy. I'd say she's a fairly representative specimen." Zander gestured to her. "Inspection," he ordered.

Andra faced them, spine erect and shoulders back. Zander made another sign and she rotated on her heel and stood sidewise.

"What do you think, Nyk? What about that posture? Her arms, legs, hips ... torso -- every measurement is in perfect proportion to all the others. Feel her leg."

Nyk brushed his fingers along her calf.

"No, here..." Zander grabbed Nyk's wrist and led his hand up the back of her thigh to her buttock. "See? There's muscle in those legs ... but not too much ... just right. Her skin is taught as a drumhead and smooth as polished polycrete -- not a dimple or a ripple. I defy you to find a blemish on her." Then, addressing her, Zander said, "*Ax'amfin*, disrobe."

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Andra looked down at her meager costume. Nyk could discern a flash of panic in her eyes. She started to speak but checked herself; then slipped her thumbs behind the diamond-shaped Baxa crest pin securing the ends of her *lifxarpa*.

“That's right,” Zander said, “off with the sash.”

Andra began to unclasp the pin. “Stop,” Nyk said, “I get your point. She doesn't need to do that.”

Zander flicked his finger. Andra refastened the pin.

“As you were,” Zander ordered. Andra resumed her stance at attention. “I said as you WERE,” Zander barked. “Am I speaking in some alien tongue?”

Andra returned to her seat in the corner. Nyk glanced at her -- she was biting her lip and struggling to maintain her composure. Then, she caught glimpse of his sightline, sat up straight and smiled sweetly at him.

“Here, Nyk...” Zander offered him the inhalers. Nyk declined Zander's offer. Zander gave Andra another signal and she leaned over him. He whispered into her ear. She nodded, stepped into the apartment's kitchen and returned with two tumblers of a blue, fizzy beverage, handed them to Nyk and Zander, then returned to her seat. Zander lifted his. “Your favorite, if I recall.” Nyk sipped the drink. “I remember once in school, you drank too much of that,” Zander chuckled. “You didn't realize it's intoxicating. It made for an amusing class.”

“And, you supplied it, if I recall.” Nyk took another sip. “This is made with an herb extract from Gamma-5, I learned from my exobotany training.”

“Tell me about your travel to Earth.”

“I must get there no later than noon, Monday. Veska refuses to divert a packet for me without Seymor's approval.”

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“And Seymor doesn't approve. I'm involved in a project there right now and I could use someone to do some legwork for me. How long are you planning on being there?”

“At least a few days -- I really don't know. What kind of a project? For the Agency?”

“No, this is something else. I need someone to deliver a parcel to a contact in New York.”

“That'll work fine, I'm headed to New York.”

“Then, deliver another parcel to another contact in Oklahoma City.”

“That's it?”

“That's it,” Zander said.

“How do I get to Earth?”

“What's today?”

“6636.199” Nyk replied.

“Dot-199... They're departing dot-202,” he mused. “On dot-202, take a shuttle to the transit platform. Go to maintenance bay four on the lower level. Tell them I sent you.”

“I've never seen a maintenance bay on the lower level.”

“Lower maintenance level, beneath the main lower level. They'll take care of you. Do you have communications on Earth?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. We can play your return trip by ear.”

“I'll need money to buy airline tickets and for cab fare. I'm sure my Agency draw account has been closed.”

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“Oh, yes. Good you remembered.” Zander stood and retrieved a polymer case from a cabinet. He opened it and Nyk saw it was full of credit cards. “You still have your other identity documents -- passport and so on?”

“Yes.”

Zander flipped through the cards in the case and selected one. He started to close the case, then selected a second card. “What's your Earth name?”

“Nick Kane.”

Zander replaced the case in the cabinet and removed a gadget. He manipulated it and inserted the cards. He removed them and they were embossed with the name Nick Kane. “Here you go. Don't forget to sign the backs.” He jotted PIN numbers on a polycard and handed it to him. “Thanks, Nykkyo. This is a great help to me.”

Nyk stood and Andra escorted him to the door. He ordered a groundcar for the ride to the hostel.

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11 -- Destiny has led me back to you.

Nyk disembarked the shuttle and stepped onto the transit platform. He found a lift with access to the maintenance decks. The liftcar door slid open. He rode it to the lower level and proceeded to bay four. "Zander sent me," he said to a group of workers standing near a tender shuttle.

A worker beckoned Nyk to a corner and handed him a flat pasteboard box and a polycard. Nyk slipped the box into his travel case and examined the card. An address in Brooklyn was hand-lettered on one side, and one in Oklahoma City on the other. "We'll be boarding in half a segment. Don't stray too far -- we don't have the luxury of waiting around for passengers."

Nyk had no intention of straying anywhere -- the maintenance level was dark and foreboding. Workers maneuvered tanks and containers on levitating pallets. Some were marked hazardous. He wandered around the tender shuttle, examining it.

The hatch dropped and a worker called him inside. He sat on a bench along the rear bulkhead. Another worker sat in the pilot's seat. The hatch raised and locked into position, the pressure door closed and the bay depressurized. The spacedoor opened and the tender slipped into the void.

The craft pulled away from the transit platform. Nyk craned his neck to see where it was heading. A large spacecraft, much larger than a

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passenger packet, loomed in the viewport. The vessel had two nacelles attached to the main hull. The shuttle approached one and a door opened to admit the tender into the forward bay.

The worker lowered the hatch. "This is ExoScout 327. You'll want to keep yourself confined to this shuttlebay. They'll divert to Earth as soon as they get underway." He pointed to the aft bay. In it was a shuttlecar, similar to the one Nyk had used in Wisconsin, except this one resembled a minivan. "Feel free."

The workers unloaded some canisters from the tender and placed them on levitating pallets. The pressure door closed and the tender departed. Nyk walked around the aft shuttlebay.

White indicators glowed above the viewports. He found a jump seat and belted himself in. The viewport shutters closed and the lamps glowed blue. He felt the subjump; then the main warp jump. The indicators darkened and the viewport opened.

Nyk climbed into the shuttlecar and began prelaunch diagnostics. The pressure door closed and the bay depressurized. He pulled back on the unistick and the shuttle backed into space. As he drew away he appreciated the immensity of the vessel and recalled the 300-series scouts were the smallest in the fleet. He watched the cruiser vanish into her warp jump.

He tuned the shuttlecar's guidance to the comm relay station and pulled into its shuttlebay. In the wardroom he dressed in Earth clothing and picked up his wallet, keys and identity papers. Then he returned to the bay and backed the car into space.

The shuttlecar's subjump placed him in orbit around a familiar blue orb. He piloted the craft to his landing spot along the Wisconsin country road and guided it into the city, keeping a wary eye for police cruisers. He arrived at the house and pulled into the garage.

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Nyk unlocked the front door. The place was empty. He picked up the phone, heard a dial tone and placed an order for a seat on the 7 AM flight to New York, then ordered a taxi to pick him up at 6.

He planned his day. It was 2 AM Monday. His flight would arrive at LaGuardia around 10, and he'd take a cab to Suki's house in Queens. He'd be there by 11, in plenty of time to talk her out of her 2 PM appointment. Then he'd run his errand in Brooklyn. He stretched out on the bed and laced his fingers behind his head.

The cab deposited Nyk at Milwaukee's Mitchell airport. His ticket was awaiting him at the counter, and he paid for it with one of the credit cards Zander had given him. He walked to the concourse and sat in the departure lounge. A glance at the placard announcing his flight sent a chill through him.

It read, "cancelled."

He went to the gate podium and stood in line as passengers were rebooked. "We can put you on our 12:50. You'll be in New York by four."

"Four! That's too late. I must be there by noon at the latest!"

"I'm sorry. This flight has been cancelled due to mechanical problems."

Nyk picked up his new boarding pass and headed for a bank of payphones. He called Suki's number -- no answer. He called every fifteen minutes.

The gate agent announced the flight was ready for boarding. The clock in the departure lounge read 12:35. Nyk trod up the jetway and took his seat. He had one more chance. Once airborne, he'd use the air phone.

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He fastened his belt and settled into his seat. The time display on the air phone caught his eye. It read 13:40. The time zone -- Milwaukee is in the central time zone!

The aircraft taxied to the runway and lifted off. His heart was in his throat as he watched the minutes tick by. 13:55 ... 14:00 ... Her appointment was for two PM. Was he about to experience the ultimate conclusion of temporal interference? What would the other passengers experience as he winked out at the moment the fetus was separated from her womb? No! He never would have been there at all! If he were never there, he couldn't have caused the interference. Would he oscillate between existence and non-existence? Could timespace itself survive such a paradox?

The airplane droned on toward New York. Nyk continued to watch the time display ... 14:30 ... 15:10. He had no idea what Suki's procedure would be like. Would she be awake or asleep? What would she experience, suddenly shifting onto an alternate timeline? Would she have any recollection of him at all? Would she blissfully wake to a different life, one in which he never existed?

He heard the announcement for the initial descent into LaGuardia. The time display read 15:45. Nyk was hyperventilating and choking back tears. How long will it take? He pressed his fist to his lips and shut his eyes. An older woman in the adjacent seat put her hand on his shoulder. He jumped. "Are you all right, young man?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

The aircraft turned, made its approach over Long Island Sound and headed for the airport in Queens. It touched down. Nyk heard the pilot announce they must wait for their gate to be freed. The time display read 16:20 when the aircraft pulled to the gate.

He stood and waited as passengers retrieved luggage stuffed into overhead bins. His path clear, he left the aircraft and sprinted down the

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jetway and into the terminal. He ran toward ground transportation and hailed a cab.

Nyk stepped from the taxi and paid the driver. He ascended the steps to the front door of the house in Queens. It was now nearly six in the evening. He reached for the doorbell and contemplated his own hand. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps this wasn't the child...

He pressed the button. The door opened and he saw Suki's mother. Her eyes brightened. "Mr Kane -- so nice to see you. Please come in."

"Is Suki in?"

"She's upstairs, resting. You're welcome to stay for dinner, if you'd like."

"Thank you -- that's very kind."

"I'll get her."

Nyk looked around the room. An older man entered from the rear of the house and eyed him. "Hello. We haven't met."

Nyk approached him and extended his hand. "I'm Nick Kane."

"I'm Sukiko's father. I'm pleased to meet you. She told us how you helped her. Her mother and I are most appreciative."

Nyk saw Suki had inherited her coloring from her father. He was a steely-looking man in his late fifties. His eyes were penetrating and his English was purely American.

The apartment door opened and Suki stood at the head of the stairs. She started down, then Nyk's eyes met hers and she broke into a run. He opened his arms and embraced her. "Oh, Nick! What a surprise! I wasn't expecting you. I thought it might have been Cathy."

He pressed his lips to the top of her head and inhaled. "Shouldn't you be taking it easy?"

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“Pregnancy isn't a disease.”

“Didn't you have the... go to the clinic...”

She smiled. “I got cold feet. They understood. I'm supposed to go back, day after tomorrow. How long are you in town?”

“A few days, I'm not sure.”

“Maybe you can come with me and hold my hand. Do you have a place to stay?”

“I just arrived. I'll find a hotel.”

“You can stay right here. I'd enjoy that.”

Suki's father approached. “Dinner is served.” He gestured toward the dining room.

A low table was set upon a platform covered with *tatami* mats. One end of the table was over a pit, so western guests could sit comfortably. Suki's parents kneeled at the table. Nyk sat with his legs in the pit. Suki assumed the lotus position beside him.

Suki's mother handed her a bowl that she passed to Nyk. “We're having *donburi*,” Suki told him. “It's not vegetarian, I'm afraid.”

“That's fine with me.”

Nyk followed Suki into the kitchen where she was assisting her mother in clearing up after dinner. “Mom, I've asked Nick to stay over.”

“Shall I make up the guestroom?”

She looked toward Nyk and smiled. “No, I think I'll put him up with me in the apartment.”

Nyk followed her to the stairs. “How do you like my father?”

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“He's a man with presence. I felt a bit intimidated. I'm not comfortable around him.”

“That's all right. I've been around him twenty-seven years and I'm not comfortable, either.”

“I remember our talks of feudal Japan. I think, two hundred years ago, your father might've made a good *samurai*.”

She showed him around the apartment. He sat on the sofa and she snuggled against him. “Mmm...” she said. “I was so surprised to see you. Mom told me I had company, but I never expected it to be you. How did you get here?”

“I'm helping another Floran Agent with a special project.”

“I'm so happy you're here. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Hold me, Nykkyo -- it feels so good when you hold me.” He slipped his arm around her and held her. She leaned against him and ran her hand along his thigh. “Mmm...”

“Suki, we have something we must discuss.”

“Do we have to, now? Can't it wait?”

“No, it can't. I was desperate to get here before you had your ... operation. I was terrified I'd be too late.”

“It was an odd experience, today. Mom and I were in the waiting room. I was scared, and she was holding my hand. Then, I had another out-of-body experience -- just for an instant. I closed my eyes and I saw us sitting in the waiting room. Then it was over. I was spooked. I told Mom I couldn't go through with it. They told me second thoughts are normal and I should take a couple of days to resolve it in my own mind so I won't have any doubts. Mom made another appointment for Wednesday.”

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He looked directly into her eyes. “Suki, please don't have the abortion. I know it seems a lot to ask.”

“Nykkyo, I've had time to think this through. It's not an easy decision for a woman, believe me -- even under these circumstances. I'm not ready to be a mom. I don't think I'm meant for motherhood.”

“After your... injuries...”

“After this?” she held up her wrist. “Call it what it was. After my attempted suicide...”

“Yes, after that... we talked about your role in the founding of my world.”

“You told me you didn't know the specifics of what my role is.”

“No. I said I couldn't tell you the specifics. I was wrong. I must tell you what I know.” He shook his head. “I'm afraid you're not yet free of my temporal interference. You may never be free of it. My hope now is to keep the next generation free.” He looked down and took a deep breath. “Suki, your role is to bear a child.”

“A child?” She placed her hand on her abdomen. “You think it's this child?”

“I believe it to be. How many other children are you planning on conceiving?”

“I didn't plan this one ... Are you sure?”

“As sure as I'm sitting here. Destiny has traced a rocky path for you, I'm afraid.”

“How do you know?”

“Because of who you are.”

“Nykkyo, you're talking in circles.”

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“I implore you, please don't terminate the pregnancy.”

“It's my body, Nykkyo. I'm just starting to find career opportunities. I can't take a break to have a baby. Then there's child care, school, sniffles, everything that goes with having a kid.”

“Suki, you saw my world. You saw the Myataxya colony. You're on the critical path for the creation of those and more. If you terminate the pregnancy, you jeopardize all that.”

“Does the destiny for all that flow through me and only me?”

“We don't know the answer to that. No one knows the true result of temporal interference. No one knows the ultimate solution to the temporal paradox, or how malleable the future really is. We can't afford the risk to find out.”

“Nykkyo, I had reconciled myself to having the abortion and getting on with my life.”

“Suki, there's more.” He looked directly into her eyes again, his own filling with tears. “If you terminate the pregnancy, there's an excellent chance you'll also terminate ... me. It's the temporal paradox again.”

“You? How?”

“When we were on Floran, I asked you to call me by my real name.”

“Nykkyo, yes.”

“Nykkyo what?”

“Nykkyo Kane.”

He shook his head. “No.” He brushed a tear from his face. “My name isn't Nykkyo Kane.” He stroked her face. “It's Nykkyo Kyhana.”

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Her jaw dropped. “Your name is Kyhana?”

“Yes. You and I are related. You are my great, great, great... well, more than two hundred times great ... grandmother.”

“It's ... it's not possible ... how ... how can this be? How do you know?”

“Let me show you.” He opened his case, removed a handheld vidisplay and slipped a datacel into it. “These are some photoimages from *Floran*.” He brought one up. “This is my apartment. Senta's apartment, actually... Here we are -- Senta and me in happier times.” He pointed to an object hanging on the wall. “Do you recognize that?”

“It looks a bit like... the crest.”

“Here's a close-up.”

“That's impossible. It can't be the same one!”

“Suki, the destiny of me, of my people -- all twenty-four billion of us -- is funneled through the fetus in your womb. Your child -- your son -- will grow, marry, and have a child. You will pass the crest to him. For more than two hundred generations, the crest has been dutifully passed to the parents of the next generation of Kyhanas, just as your grandfather intended.

“You will have a great-great-great-great grandson, give or take a great. His name will be Koichi Kyhana, and he will be the greatest astral navigator Earth had seen. He and his pregnant wife will board the *Floran*, carrying this crest, and set out for Beta Centauri. After the warp jump -- and after the *Floran* finds herself lost in the fabric of time and space -- it will be Koichi who discovers the world they'll name after their vessel -- the same vessel whose hull sits in the center of Floran City as a monument to their sacrifice and courage.

“Without Koichi's skills, there's an excellent chance those thousand explorers will never find that world, and instead will die slow, cold

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deaths in deep space.” He brought up another photoimage. “This is Koichi. You're looking at the face of your descendant. How many have that privilege? What is he holding?”

Suki's eyes shifted between Nyk and the vidisplay. “Your grandfather's foolish notion becomes our family's most cherished tradition. The emblem on the crest is our family moniker.” He brought up an image of Senta. “Look on her shoulder.”

“What does that mean?” Suki asked.

“On my world a bride and groom exchange crests instead of rings. You never asked me about the tattoo I wear on my right shoulder. It's the Tibran crest -- Senta's line. Senta wears the Kyhana emblem on her shoulder.”

“Why? ... Why didn't you tell me before?”

“I was desperate to prevent influencing your future. I already had one brush with temporal disaster. When you told me you planned to terminate the pregnancy, I had to come here and tell you. I owed you the courtesy to tell you in person.”

“This is why you don't want to make love! It'd be incest!”

“Not to me or to my people.”

“Your people don't have laws against incest?”

“We certainly do. Our definition of incest is a sexual relationship between blood relatives with three or fewer degrees of separation, in any direction.”

She thought and then said, “So a relationship between someone and their great-great-grandparent isn't incestuous to your people.”

“Technically, legally, no. From a practical matter, it never happens. You and I have over two hundred degrees of separation. There are at least two hundred generations, and five thousand Earth years

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separating us. Despite a straight-line ancestry, you and I are not close relatives. You and I are less closely related than two strangers passing on the streets of Floran City.”

“Then why?”

“Because I didn't know your feelings about it.”

“God, Nykkyo, I'll have to think about this...” She stood and turned from him; then faced him again. “I'd still like you to sleep with me tonight and to hold me. When you hold me the pain goes away.”

She folded back the bedcovers. Nyk undressed and slid into bed. Suki slipped off her robe and slid into bed beside him. She snuggled to him and kissed his cheek. He kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair. “I still want you, Nykkyo. I want you so badly. Why would Destiny give us this love and not allow us to have each other? Is Destiny really that cruel?”

“Destiny is that cruel and She's singled us out for exceptional cruelty.”

Nyk awoke to a kiss on his cheek. “*Bon'matina!*”

“*Bon'matina,*” he replied.

“Nykkyo, I thought about it last night before falling asleep and I've been thinking about it this morning. I'll keep the baby.”

“That's the right decision.”

“I can't do it alone.”

“You have your parents.”

“I can't ask them. Nykkyo, I need your help. I don't know to whom else I can turn. I don't have the strength to do this alone, but I would

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with you by my side. You said I might never be free from temporal interference. You've interceded twice, maybe more, to correct temporal damage. Maybe Destiny needs you by my side to keep the timeline in balance.”

“Maybe this is the price Destiny demands -- my reparation for my behavior with you. I must replace the man who was to be in your life.”

“That's why Destiny gave us our love for each other. Can't you see it, Nykkyo? I promised you I'd follow my path to whomever it leads. It led me back to you. I see it as plain as day -- don't you?”

“Yes, I do see it. My Nick Kane identity is iron-clad -- I can slip into the population here ... find work ... there's nothing for me on the homeworld ... I despise Floran City and Sudal has nothing to offer...” He looked into her eyes. “This time I'll make a deal with you. You carry the child and I'll stay and help you raise him. Is it a deal?”

“Deal.” She grasped his hand and shook it.

“It's all making sense -- this is what Destiny wants. It even explains why She made me sterile.”

“You're sterile?”

“Yes -- There'll be no more Kyhanas after me. Do you remember telling me of your fight with your father? You told him the Kyhana line dies with you.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“You were wrong. It dies with me. I am the last Kyhana. I suffer a genetic defect known as atypical female syndrome. Genetically I'm a woman, but physically, anatomically, emotionally I'm a man. My sperm can't make a woman pregnant.” He closed his eyes tightly. “If there were one thing about my life I could change, it would be that.”

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A tear formed and rolled down her cheek. "Don't cry, Suki. All good things must come to an end. It's been a good family -- two hundred plus generations of Kyhanas. And -- Kyhana blood lives on. Early in my world's founding vigorous interbreeding was encouraged to build up genetic diversity. I'd estimate that from one in a hundred to one in a thousand Florans have some Kyhana blood. It all can be traced to you. That's between twenty-four million and a quarter billion people who can trace their line to you. Enough to populate New York City from a few to many times over." He kissed her forehead and she smiled at him. "Such a large family!"

Nyk descended the stairs holding Suki's hand. He walked into the kitchen and spotted Suki's mother. "Good morning, Mrs Kyhana."

"Please, call me Yasuko." Yasuko! Koichi's daughter's name!

"Then, call me Nick."

"Call me George." Her father looked up from a copy of the Wall Street Journal. "My parents wanted me to have an American name." He folded the paper, tucked it into a pouch in his briefcase and headed out the door. "Good day, all."

"Mom -- please cancel the appointment for tomorrow."

"Are your feet cold again this morning?"

Suki shook her head. "I've changed my mind."

"You'd be wise to change it back."

"Mom, if I change it back I can still have the abortion. There's time. I don't want to make a rash decision."

"Don't wait too long." Yasuko set plates of buckwheat pancakes in front of Nyk and Suki.

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Nyk examined the card with the address in Brooklyn. “I must deliver a package to this address.” He showed the card to Suki. “Could you show me the best way to get there? I suppose I could take a cab.”

“I’ll check a map.” She opened a cabinet drawer and removed a map of New York City. “Here’s where we are,” she said, pointing to the map. “Here’s where you’re going. You can get there on the subway.”

“Subway?”

“Yes, you know the trains that run in a hole in ground? If you’d like, I can come with you. We can go to my office at NYU afterwards.”

Nyk followed Suki to the subway station and down the steps. “Best plan is to buy a day card,” she told him. He walked up to the vending machine. “Put in five dollars.”

“I don’t have any currency.” He withdrew one of the credit cards. “Will this work?”

“Sure. Stick it in here and order a day pass.” He picked up the pass and they headed through the turnstiles. Suki demonstrated how to swipe the pass card.

He held her hand as they waited on the platform and boarded an inbound train. He looked at the service maps on the wall of the car. “Conceptually similar to the tubecar.”

The train stopped at the Jackson Heights station. “Here we transfer to a G train,” Suki explained, “then to an F train to Brooklyn.”

Nyk stepped from the train onto the platform in Brooklyn and Suki pointed the way to the street. He looked at the card and showed it to her. “Over there,” she pointed and he followed her. He located the office and walked in.

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“May I help you?” a late-middle-aged woman asked from behind a desk.

“I'm Nick Kane.” He displayed the box. “I'm here to drop this off.”

“Just a moment.” She pressed a buzzer twice. An inner office door opened and a man beckoned him inside. Nyk handed over the box. The man cut the tape, opened it and examined its contents.

He opened a safe, removed a plastic, hard-sided briefcase, handed it to Nyk and escorted him from the office. Nyk joined Suki, took her hand and headed toward the street and to the subway station. He rode with her under the East River to Manhattan and climbed to the street near Washington Square.

Suki signed him in as a visitor at the union. “I want you to meet Cathy. We'll get the latest police report.”

“Police report?”

“Yes -- Cathy's cousin's brother-in-law is on the NYPD and he's been keeping an eye on their search for the guy who attacked us. He'd like to be the one to bust him.” Nyk rode the elevator with her to the top floor.

Suki opened the door to her office. “It's me, Cathy.”

Nyk saw a slightly built woman with light brown hair sitting at a keyboard. Cathy removed headphones and felt for a pair of dark glasses. She stood, turned and extended her hand. Suki approached her, touched her hand and they embraced.

“Who's your friend?” Cathy asked.

“I brought Nick Kane to meet you.”

Cathy extended her hand again. Nyk reached for it and she stepped to him. “Pleased to meet you. Suki said you were out of town on an extended assignment.” She lifted her hand. “May I look at your face?”

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“...Yes...”

She felt Nyk's face. “You're right, Suki -- he is cute. Please, have a seat.” She reached behind her, turned her chair and sat.

Suki switched on her computer. “As long as I'm here, I'll check my email.”

“I'm surprised to see you,” Cathy said. “I thought you'd be home, recuperating.”

“No, I chickened out.”

“Are you going back?”

“No. Not right away, at least.”

“You're thinking of going through with it? Suki, you're the last person I'd expect to do such a thing! What changed your mind?”

“It's a feeling. I must do what seems right. What's the latest from the NYPD?”

“Nothing. They have no leads, no witnesses and no other similar assaults. It's a tough case.”

Suki switched off her computer. “I figured as much. Shall we all do lunch together?”

Nyk held Suki's hand as she led him to the subway station. “You and Cathy have become good friends, haven't you?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. Since the attack we've really bonded.”

“I feel so sorry for her. I can't imagine being blind -- it must be terrible. How did she lose her sight? How long has she been that way?”

“All her life. She was born blind.”

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“How does she manage by herself?”

“She lives with her brother and his wife. They're very supportive. Don't you have blind people on your world?”

“I suppose we must have a few, but I've never encountered one.”

“Don't your people have accidents and lose their sight? Congenital defects, or illnesses?”

“We can grow a new eye from stem cells, and we've eliminated all pathological microbes. Most congenital disorders were eliminated from our gene pool a hundred generations ago.”

“What about nerve damage, or a tumor?”

“Tumors can be neutralized. We can repair or create nerve pathways with neural induction. Aahhn used it to repair your brain.”

She looked up at him. “Was I that far gone?” Nyk nodded. “Oh, God, Nykkyo.” She squeezed his hand.

He followed her down the steps to the subway platform. “Eye contact is an important social cue to my people. I felt so awkward talking to Cathy without it.”

“So that's what it is about you and eyes.”

“Yes. Our training instructs us to avoid eye contact with Earth people, as it can be unsettling to them. I can't help myself with you, Suki -- your eyes are so beautiful.”

“It unsettled me. When I first sat with you and you looked into my eyes, I felt it. It frightened me.”

“Is that why you avoided me at first?”

“Yes. It felt like you were staring into my soul, and it scared me. Here's our train.”

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Nyk found a seat and placed the attaché case on his lap. Suki sat beside him and he reached for her hand. She pointed to the case. “What's next for that?”

“I must take this to someone in Oklahoma City. I'll check the airlines and arrange a flight for tomorrow or the day after. With luck, I'll return the same day.”

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12 -- A Little Quid-pro-quo

Nyk called for a taxi to take him to LaGuardia. He stood in the ticket line and automatically answered the agent's questions. "Has your baggage been out of your sight?"

"No."

"Did anyone other than yourself pack this?"

"No."

She handed him his boarding pass. He headed toward the security checkpoint and placed the case on the x-ray belt. A security attendant beckoned him through the metal detector. He picked up the case and waited in the departure lounge for the boarding call.

He stuffed the briefcase under the seat and belted himself in place. Soon the aircraft was hurtling down the runway and lifting off. As he settled into his seat something flashed in his mind. "Did anyone other than yourself pack this?" Yes! He pulled the briefcase from under the seat and examined it. It was equipped with a thumbwheel combination lock. He tried the latch but it wouldn't open.

Nyk waited for the seat-belt sign to extinguish. The light winked out and he headed, clutching the briefcase, for the airliner's lavatory. He secured the lavatory door and propped the case on the washbasin. His fingers began manipulating the thumbwheels, methodically running

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through the possible combinations -- 001, 002, 003.. He felt beads of perspiration on his forehead as he turned the knobs -- 083, 084, 085...

Someone knocked on the closed door. "Just a minute," he yelled. He continued to turn the wheels -- 255, 256, 257, 258...

Another rap sounded on the door and he recognized the voice of a flight attendant. "Are you all right in there?"

"Yes!" he called out. "I'm almost done." He twisted the knobs -- 328, 329, 330, 331 -- the case popped open. He gasped as he saw the contents.

It was stuffed with bundles of hundred-dollar bills. He estimated it contained at least a quarter million dollars. He snapped the lid shut, scrambled the thumbwheels and worked his way to his seat past a short line of passengers standing by the lavatory door.

The plane landed in Oklahoma City and he hailed a cab. The address was for a run-down apartment building. "Wait here," he told the driver. "I'll only be a few minutes."

The driver nodded, tapped out a cigarette and lit it.

Nyk proceeded to the apartment building and pressed the doorbell. "Yes?" came a voice through the intercom.

"Nick Kane. I have a delivery."

"Leave it outside the door and knock twice."

The door latch buzzed and he let himself into the building. He climbed the stairs, found the door and knocked twice. Nyk held the case to the peephole, then set it down. An acknowledgment rap came from behind the door.

The cab returned him to the airport and he caught the afternoon flight to LaGuardia. He returned to the Kyhana household and rang the

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bell. Yasuko answered the door. "Sukiko's upstairs napping." Nyk climbed the stairs to the apartment and opened the door.

He saw the laptop computer sitting on the table and switched it on. The incoming mail indicator flashed -- one from Zander requesting a vidphone call. He activated a voice-only link.

"Nykkyo?"

"Mission accomplished."

"Excellent," Zander replied in English. "What are your return plans?"

"Return?"

"To the homeworld."

"Indeterminate, right now."

"Nykkyo, are you going native? You surprise me! If I'd known that ... You don't know how useful it would be for me to have a full-time associate on the ground there. I would like you to do one more thing for me. I was figuring you'd need a lift home and this could serve double-duty. If you're not coming home, maybe you could do this for me as a favor."

"What do I need to do?"

"Where's your base of operation?"

"I'm in New York right now."

"No, where's the shuttlecar parked?"

"In Wisconsin."

"Oh, yes. I recall setting up the commlink there. I'd like you to go to Wisconsin and wait for a shipment. It'll come by truck. Load the shipment into the shuttlecar, and make a transit. You'll rendezvous with

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the same ExoScout that took you out. Offload the goods, and then you can return to Earth, if you'd like. Or stick around and we'll take you home to Floran." The vidphone session terminated.

Suki emerged, yawning, from the bedroom. "Whom were you talking to?"

"My friend on the homeworld. He needs another favor."

Nyk sat in the house in Wisconsin and looked out the window. A rusty panel van pulled into the driveway. He heard heavy steps on the porch and a loud knock on the door.

"Delivery. Where do you want it?"

"On the porch."

Nyk watched as the driver removed two dozen long, flat wooden crates from the van. He slammed the van's rear door, gave Nyk a salute and drove off.

Darkness fell and Nyk backed the shuttlecar from the garage. The crates were heavy and he struggled to lift them into the shuttle. He loaded half of them, secured the rear hatch, climbed in and headed out toward his country road. He passed a police car that had stopped another vehicle. He looked behind him. The officer was engaged in a discussion with the driver.

Nyk stopped on the shoulder and began prelaunch diagnostics. He checked for traffic. A pickup truck whizzed by. A pair of headlights came from the other direction.

The roadway was now clear. He launched and programmed the subjump with the rendezvous coordinates. Transponder signals from the ExoScout appeared on the sensors and he tuned the guidance system to them.

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The shuttle drew close to the cruiser. He piloted it toward the port nacelle. The forward bay door opened and guidance lights flashed in sequence. Nyk manipulated the unistick and touched down on the shuttlebay deck. The bay repressurized and the safety catch on the shuttlecar door released.

Nyk popped open his door and stepped out. He opened the rear hatch and began removing the crates. A Service corpsman helped him load the boxes onto a levitating pallet. "There's more -- I'll make another trip," he told the crewman. He climbed into the shuttlecar and awaited depressurization. The bay door slid open and he backed the shuttlecar into space.

Nyk piloted the shuttle to Earth, pulled up to the house and began loading the remaining crates. He made another transit and pulled into the ExoScout's shuttlebay. The crewman was awaiting him with another pallet. Nyk opened the rear hatch and unloaded the boxes. He climbed behind the controls of the shuttlecar and the crewman gave him the traditional Floran salute.

He pulled the shuttlecar from the scout. The cruiser's viewport shutters closed and she vanished in the flash of her warp jump.

Nyk climbed the steps and rang the bell. Yasuko admitted him. "From the looks of it, you've had a busy night. Would you like some lunch?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

"Sukiko tells me you're a vegetarian. It's made planning meals a challenge. George likes his steak."

"I'm one only out of habit," he replied. "I'm not adverse to consuming meat, so long as the item doesn't remind me of the creature from which it came."

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“If that's your definition of a vegetarian, then I am one also.” She set a cheese sandwich on the table and sat across from him. “Nick, I don't mean to be nosey, but what exactly are your plans?”

“I'm not sure. Suki has asked me to stay on, to help her raise the child.”

Yasuko's jaw dropped. “You can't be serious! She can't be serious!”

“I'm sorry, Yasuko -- didn't she tell you?”

“Has she really decided to carry the product of that assault? That's ... that's... that girl's gone mad!” She eyed him. “Did you have anything to do with this ridiculous decision?”

“We've talked about it. Suki thinks it's the right thing to do, but she needs help. I've agreed to help.”

“Nick, do you have any idea what it means to raise a child? This isn't even your child.” Her eyes narrowed. “Or, is it?” He shook his head. “Are you sure?”

“I'm positive -- our relationship is strictly platonic.”

“You two don't behave as if it's platonic.”

“Nonetheless, it is.” Nyk took a bite from the sandwich. “Besides - it's not the child's fault who his father is. Suki and I love him already.”

“Him? How do you know it's a him?”

“We assume it's a boy.”

“Do you have the ... means to help support a child?”

“I haven't thought too much about it... Yes, I think I do.”

Yasuko propped her elbow on the table and held her head. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. “I was pleased to see you

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walk in that door, Nick. I think Sukiko's at a point in her life in which a relationship with a man like yourself would be good for her.” She shook her head. “But for her to use this ... travesty of a pregnancy as an excuse to play house! She has no career, just that part-time job. She has no idea what she's getting into, and I fear neither do you. I must have some words with that girl when she comes home.”

“We can support her or fight her, Yasuko. I think we're better off supporting her.” He took another bite from his sandwich. “Suki told me a bit about her situation prior to moving to Wisconsin. You came close to losing her once.”

“Oh, Nick, I know. You can't imagine the heartache, not knowing where she was or if she was all right. I was so happy the night she called.”

“She called you right after her suicide attempt. Please don't let her know I told you that.”

Yasuko gasped. “Suicide attempt? Oh, God, Nick! Were you there?”

“I got to her in time.”

“Oh, thank you! She tried that once before. I had hoped she was beyond it.” Yasuko sobbed. “I can't bear the thought of my baby...”

“It was an epiphany for her. I think it snapped her out of an unhealthy mental state. She's been much happier, since. Yasuko, I know you love Suki. I assure you I love her just as deeply as you do.”

“I'm pleased to hear that.”

“Let's give her love and support. Let's let her make her decision and help her carry it out.” He finished his sandwich. “I'm going upstairs to lie down. I didn't get much sleep last night.”

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Nyk lay on Suki's bed with his hands laced behind his head. She spoke to him from the bathroom. "How did it go?"

"Mission accomplished, but I don't like it. It looks like someone's using Floran diamonds to finance buying something on Earth and shipping it to the homeworld."

"Floran diamonds?"

"Yes." Nyk hopped off the bed and opened his travel case. He removed a sack of raw diamonds, dipped into the bag and displayed a handful of the crystals. Suki's eyes popped. He dropped a few into her palm. "This is how the ExoAgency funds its operations on Earth."

"I've never seen an uncut diamond. They feel cold."

"A diamond is a good conductor of heat, like a metal."

"No wonder they're called ice in slang. That stone you gave me for Christmas came from these?"

"Indeed. These are so plentiful on Floran we truly pave the streets with them."

"Why on Floran?"

"They're the byproduct of our power generation. Our power comes from fusion reactors. Hydrogen from seawater is fused to helium, then the helium into carbon. These crystals are ash from our reactors. I brought some in case I need to raise some cash on my own. It appears someone else had the same idea.

"I assume the box we delivered to Brooklyn was full of diamonds - they're about the only Floran commodity with any value on Earth. The case I took to Oklahoma City was full of cash. The crates I took to the ExoScout were full of who-knows-what. I did not care for the look of those crates."

"What Earth product would be in demand on Floran?"

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“That's what I can't figure out. The way I see it, I've done my favor for Zander, and now I can get on with caring for you.”

Nyk lay on her bed and Suki cuddled with him. “Nykkyo, do you know what might've been wrong with my mom tonight? She'd gaze my way and look like she was about to bust out crying.”

“We had a talk about you and the baby.”

“Oh. She worries so much about me. I'll speak with her in the morning.”

He embraced her and kissed her hair. She rolled with her back to him. Nyk switched off the light and lay beside her, his arm around her waist. He closed his eyes and relaxed.

Sensations of her caresses roused him. He felt her kisses on his neck and shoulders. She took his hands and guided them onto her body, urging him on with her eyes.

Nyk lay on his back. She knelt, straddling his hips. His hands smoothed along her thighs, savoring her yellow-brown skin. “No! Stop!” came a voice from the back of his mind.

“Stop! Don't!” the voice grew into a cacophony. His dream image dissolved and he found himself on his back -- unable to move, unsure of his surroundings, panting and his heart racing. Wakefulness seeped into his consciousness. He caught his breath, his heart slowed and he recalled where he was -- the upstairs apartment at the house in Queens, in Suki's bedroom.

Nyk glanced beside him in the dim light and saw Suki sleeping, her back to him. He rolled beside her and slipped his arm around her waist. Her hand touched his. He closed his eyes and forced out a tear.

Suki caressing his face woke him. “*Bon'matina*,” she said.

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“Bon'matina.”

“Time to wake up and smell Mom's coffee.” She looked at him. “Is something wrong?”

“I'm a bit embarrassed. Last night I dreamt we ... you and I ... that we made love. I had to force myself awake before ... I disgraced myself.”

“I've had the same dream,” she said.

“This is a very cruel game Destiny's playing.”

“What if it's no game? Perhaps Destiny is trying to tell us something about our love.” She slipped out of bed and into her robe. “Come on down for breakfast.”

Nyk pulled on a pair of trousers and a polo shirt and followed Suki downstairs. Yasuko set two bowls of oatmeal on the table. Suki sat beside him. “How are you feeling this morning?” her mother asked.

“Fine -- no morning sickness, yet. Mom, you don't have to give me the concerned look.” She patted her stomach. “He hasn't been giving me trouble.”

“There you go again,” Yasuko replied. “How are you so sure it's a he? You're not far enough along for tests.”

“Call it a ... premonition,” she replied, “a feeling -- the same sort of feeling that's telling me keeping this baby is the right thing to do.” Yasuko shook her head. “Now, it's the you-don't-know-what-you're-getting-into look.”

“You don't,” Yasuko shot back. “You have no idea what it's like to bear and raise a child. It's much harder than you imagine.”

“I suppose you were so much better prepared when you had me.”

“In fact, I was.”

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“How so?”

“Well, for starters, your father and I had been married for five years. He had a career and we had medical insurance. Granted, things were different, then -- but we had no financial worries. And, we wanted a baby.”

“You think I don't want this baby?”

“You might say you do. I worry, though -- you might feel ... differently about a child conceived in a rape than for one you planned for.” Suki shot a look at Nyk and brushed tears from her cheeks. “I'm sorry -- but I don't know why you feel you must go through with this.” Yasuko sat beside Suki and looked into her face. “What if there are complications? What if the baby's early, or if you or ... he ... or both of you need extraordinary care? Those bills can mount up to the tune of six or seven figures. Your father and I will help, but that's beyond what we can do -- or should do. We have our own futures to consider, after all.” She took Suki's hand. “The smart thing for you to do would be to terminate this pregnancy. You're still young. Develop your career, and start your family when it's appropriate. This is all happening so fast. I'm thinking of your future, Sukiko -- and of that poor, innocent child.”

“I'm keeping this baby. I've made up my mind, and it's what I plan to do. Now, I'm going to get dressed.” Suki arose from the table and stalked up the stairs.

“I'm afraid I've upset her,” Yasuko said. She looked at Nyk. “Do you disagree with any of what I said?”

Nyk shook his head. “No, it makes perfect sense. Perhaps Suki finds herself in a situation that makes no sense. She's capable of making her own decisions, Yasuko. I think it's sweet how you worry for her, but don't you think the energy you expend worrying would be better applied toward some more productive activity?”

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She looked into Nyk's eyes. "Sukiko is my child, and she forever shall be. This is something no one comprehends until they have a child of their own. As her mother, I will worry for her. I might not act on my concerns as when she was a minor, but my worry is my right, as a parent, and my duty."

"I'm sorry, Yasuko. Please accept my apologies. I had no intention of offending you."

"You haven't offended me, Nick. You're young. I'd have said the same thing at your age. If you indeed carry out what you say you'll do, and the two of you raise that child... Then, you'll understand."

Nyk headed up the stairs. Suki stepped from the bedroom in briefs and a tee shirt. He opened his arms and embraced her. "It pains me to see you argue with your mother."

"That was nothing. Wait 'til you see me argue with my father."

"She loves you." Nyk held her and stroked her hair. "I can feel how much she loves you."

"What if she's right? What if there are complications?"

"Don't forget those Floran diamonds." He kissed the top of her head. "Everything will work out all right. The fact we're having this conversation means everything will be all right. This is the path Destiny intends we follow. Of that I'm sure."

She slipped into a denim jumper and picked up her bag. Nyk held her hand and descended the stairs to the front door. "I'll see you tonight," she said as she put on a pair of canvas shoes. He kissed her and she headed out the door.

The telephone rang and Yasuko picked it up. She looked toward Nyk. "It's for you."

"For me?" Nyk took the handset. "Hello?"

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“Nykkyo, I'd like you to rendezvous with the 327 again, next Thursday. There's another box that needs to be taken to Brooklyn.”

“What's going on, Zander?”

“Just a little *quid-pro-quo* -- a harmless exchange. Nothing the Agency hasn't been doing for hundreds of years.”

Nyk looked up and saw Yasuko straightening the furniture in the living room. “You're buying something -- what?”

“We have a special project here, Nyk. We're evaluating some Earth communications equipment -- to improve our uplinks -- so our Agents can perform better in the field.”

Nyk regarded the scars on his left wrist. “I don't know, Zander...”

“Don't you trust me?”

“It's that ... it's not convenient for me to make these ... trips. I must fly to Milwaukee and back. Each one kills two whole days.”

“Maybe we can do something about that, long-term. This is the last of these deliveries for a while.”

“All right, I'll do it.”

Nyk paid the cabby and trudged up the steps to the house in Queens. He rang the bell and Yasuko opened the door. “Another long night?”

He climbed the stairs to the apartment, set the pasteboard box on the table and looked at it. He picked it up, turned it over, pried loose the polymer tape sealing it and slipped off the lid. Inside were row after row of sparkling, finished gems. He counted two hundred of them.

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He removed one of the stones, slipped it into his pocket and descended the stairs. “Yasuko, what's the best way to get to Tribeca?”

“You can take the subway.” She produced a map and showed him the route.

“I'll be home for dinner,” he said, walked out the door and rode a bus to the subway station.

Nyk climbed the steps at the Canal Street station, walked ten blocks to the FloranCo offices, ascended the stairs and opened the door. “Hi, Jaquie.”

“Mr Kane! What a surprise seeing you!”

“Is Seymor in?”

“Just a moment.” She picked up the phone. “Sir? Mr Kane to see you. Go right on in, Mr Kane.”

Nyk walked into the office and shut the door. Seymor gaped at him. “Nykkyo! What in hell are you doing here?”

“I found my own way offworld.”

“How long have you been here?”

“About a month.”

“How did you -- never mind, I don't want to know. You have done it now! If the oversight committee finds out you've smuggled yourself here ... You'll be lucky ever to have transit privileges again.”

“Seymor, I'd like your opinion of something.” He reached into his pocket and handed over the stone.

Seymor examined it with a lens. “Interesting.”

“Is it one of ours?”

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“Could be... The cut's decidedly inferior. Quite ... pedestrian, I'd say.” He beckoned Nyk to look through the lens. “See? It's lopsided and the girdle's uneven. It's a shame to ruin such a stone with a poor cut. The size, color and clarity's good enough to be a Floran diamond. How did you come by this?”

“That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I was handed a box of these on ExoScout 327. There are a couple hundred of that stone's brethren in the box.”

“When were you onboard an Exo cruiser?”

“I arrived on Earth three weeks ago, courtesy of Exo 327, carrying a similar box. My transit was arranged by Zander Baxa.”

“Baxa!” Seymor stood and looked out the window at the New York skyline. “Go on, lad.”

“Zander had me take the box to an address in Brooklyn where I exchanged it for a briefcase. The case was full of cash, in my estimation nearly a quarter million dollars. I hand carried the cash to Oklahoma City and delivered it to persons unknown. Then, a few days later, I was asked to carry a number of heavy crates to the ExoScout. I just returned from another rendezvous with the 327.”

“How many crates?” Seymor asked.

“Two dozen.”

“That's ten grand per crate.” Seymor chuckled. “You might be a mule, lad, but you're no jackass. Do you have any idea what's in the boxes?”

“No. They're heavy -- I'd guess between fifty and seventy-five kilograms each. They hefted like machine parts, but I can't imagine what Earth machinery is of use on Floran.”

“Sit down Nyk. Have you heard the rumors about Baxa?”

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He shook his head. "No. What rumors?"

"That he's on the take. Did you ask him about any of this?"

"Yes, and he told me the Service is purchasing Earth comm gear for some special Agency project, and that it's all on the level."

"Level my ass! All such legitimate acquisitions go through this office." Seymor resumed his seat, picked up a pencil and drummed it against the desk. "Lad, this is our first hard evidence Baxa's involved in something. Zander must think you're as crooked as he, or that you're dim, naive or both."

"I think he thinks the latter. It's what most people think of me."

"Not I, lad. Not I." Seymor reached into his pocket and withdrew a key ring. He unlocked and opened a filing cabinet and retrieved a Floran photoimaging camera.

"Nyk, I'd like you to document this courier business from end to end. Don't let Zander think you're on to him. If he asks you to do something, go ahead and do it. If this follows the pattern, there'll be money to deliver and goods to ship. Photoimage it all.

"Then hightail it back to the homeworld. Transmit the images to me, keep a low profile and wait for instructions."

"Seymor, I went to considerable trouble to get here. Why would I want to go to Floran?"

"We'll need you there, lad. The investigators surely will want to debrief you. If Zander is breaking Earth laws -- I'd hate to have you fall into the hands of local authorities."

"I'll do this under one condition. You must assure me you'll authorize my return to Earth when this blows over."

"What is such a draw here?" Seymor regarded him. "Forget I asked -- I'm better off not knowing."

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“I mean it, Seymor. Guarantee my return or I refuse to help.”

“...Fair enough, you have my assurances.”

Nyk picked up the photoimager and pocketed the diamond. Seymor returned his two-finger Floran salute and he headed back to the apartment in Queens via the subway. He replaced the stone, photographed the gems and resealed the box.

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13 -- Return to the Homeworld

Nyk stood outside the address in Brooklyn. He took a photoimage of the building and of the door to the office. He walked in and announced himself. The receptionist buzzed him into the back office. His contact handed him a briefcase in exchange for the pasteboard box.

He headed out of the office and toward the stairs to the street. Footsteps were approaching him from behind. Nyk looked down at the briefcase and realized he held an Earth fortune. The footfalls accelerated as he sped his descent. A knot formed in his stomach. He reached the street level and put his hand on the door, prepared to make a run for it. "Mr Kane!" he heard a woman's voice, out of breath. "Wait, Mr Kane!"

He stopped and turned. The receptionist was half walking, half sprinting toward him. "You left this on the counter, Mr Kane," she panted and handed him the photoimager.

"Gee, thanks." He headed for the subway station.

Nyk climbed the steps to the house in Queens. He carried the briefcase to the apartment and placed a vidphone call. "Zander, when I agreed to deliver the box, I had no idea I'd need to make another run to Oklahoma City."

"I'm sorry, Nykkyo, didn't I mention it? Is there some reason you can't do this? Do you have better things to do?"

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“No, Zander -- I'll do it.” Nyk switched off the laptop computer. He twiddled the combination on the briefcase until it opened, took photoimages of the cash inside, closed the case and headed down the stairs. Suki's father was pacing in the living room. The front door opened. Suki walked in and slipped off her shoes. Nyk took her hand and headed toward the stairs to the apartment.

Yasuko poked her head from the kitchen. “Dinner's ready,” she said.

“I want to change my clothes first,” Suki replied.

“Change them after dinner. Your father is getting restless.”

Nyk knelt at the low table in the dining room. He glanced up at Suki's father. “Nick, would you like some *sake*?”

“No, thanks.”

“Are you sure? It's a good one -- imported from Japan.”

“Nick doesn't drink alcohol,” Suki said. Nyk picked up the chopsticks and fumbled with them. Suki positioned them in his hand.

“*Sake*, Sukiko?” her father asked. “Oh, you can't -- I forgot ... Yasuko?”

“Half a bowl,” her mother said.

Nyk took a chunk of chicken and placed it in a small bowl of sauce. He picked it from the bowl but it slipped from his chopsticks and fell back in, splattering sauce on his shirt. “I'm so clumsy.”

“Can I get you a fork?” Yasuko asked.

“No, thanks. I'm determined to master these.”

Suki wiped the sauce from his clothes with her napkin. “No harm done -- it'll wash out.”

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George sipped from a bowl. "Sukiko, have you done any more to find a real job?"

"Daddy, I'm happy with what I'm doing."

"For what you're making, you'd be better off somewhere flipping burgers," George replied. "At least you'd have some benefits."

"I'm using my degree. I worked hard for it and I want to use it."

"A hell of a lot of good that thing is," George continued. "Do you know what those initials stand for? 'Piled hip deep,' that's what. You should treat it for what it is -- a sunk cost."

"Does everything have a bottom line to you?" Suki asked. "Is Wall Street the only place someone can make a living? There are plenty of opportunities for someone with my credentials."

"I've seen those opportunities. I walk past park-bench professors daily on my way to and from my office." George lifted a porcelain kettle from a chafing stand and poured some clear fluid into a small bowl.

"Daddy, don't you think you've had enough *sake* already?" Her father's eyes narrowed. He lifted the bowl in a mock salute, drained and refilled it.

"Your father and I are concerned for your ability to support the child," Yasuko added. "You might not live upstairs forever."

Suki flashed a look at Nyk. "Are you threatening to throw us out?" she asked.

"Would you like me to pay rent," Nyk asked, "room and board?"

"No, no, Nick," Yasuko replied. "I didn't mean it that way." She reached across the table and took Suki's hand. "We're just concerned..." She looked at her daughter. "Whether or not you use your degree, wouldn't you rather have a secure job?"

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“What's secure these days?” She stirred the contents of her bowl with her chopsticks. “At least I have a degree.”

George glowered at her. “Is that a remark directed toward me, your mother or both of us? I think you owe us an apology.” Suki picked up her tea bowl, swirled it and took a sip. “Apologize, dammit!”

She looked down. “I'm sorry.”

“While you're there, you should sign up for some business courses at that university -- start a real career where you can make some real money.” George emptied his bowl of *sake*.

“Like I said,” Suki replied, “I'm happy with what I'm doing. Besides, who would hire someone who's three months pregnant?”

“Don't get me started on that topic, young lady.” George eyed Nyk. “Yasuko tells me she suspects you've been encouraging this lunatic line of thinking.”

“Suki is an adult with her own free will. If this is what she wants to do, I will support her and give her encouragement -- and love.”

“What about your so-called career?” George asked. “Will NYU hold your position for you while you're on maternity leave?”

“It'll probably be open for me,” she replied. “They can't give me any guarantees.”

George poured another bowl. “No guarantees...” He shook his head. “You're nuts,” he said and looked at Nyk. “You're both nuts.” He sipped from the bowl. “I'll say this about your ... degree. I wouldn't trade where you are today with that piece of paper for where I was at your age without it. The three years you spent on it were a waste, if this is all you can show for it.”

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“Daddy, the reason I haven't been able to use my degree is because of the time I spent married to that idiot son of your idiot business associate. That was the waste -- not graduate school.”

“That does it!” George shouted. “Leave the table.” Suki picked up a piece of chicken, popped it into her mouth and stared at her father as she chewed. George stood and pointed toward the kitchen. “I said, leave the table!”

Suki stood. “With pleasure.” She sprinted up the stairs to the apartment.

“If you'll excuse me,” Nyk said and picked up his and Suki's bowls. He carried them to the kitchen, set them on the counter and headed up the stairs.

Suki knelt on the sofa in the apartment, her arms draped across the back. Tears streamed down her face. Nyk sat beside her. “I'm sorry you had to witness that,” she said. “I'm twenty-seven and he treats me like I'm fifteen. Do you see why I can't handle this alone? I can't believe you want to stick around me and them.”

“I had similar exchanges with my father,” Nyk replied. “If you can't argue with your own family, whom can you argue with?”

“I'm not proud of how I handled myself tonight -- I let him goad me. I hope you realize the sort of family you're getting yourself mixed up with.”

“It's a family that's done all right.”

She looked at him and giggled. “I keep forgetting.” He slipped his arm around her. “Oh, Nykkyo -- when you're with me the pain goes away.”

A knock came on the apartment door. “It's unlocked,” Nyk yelled.

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Yasuko opened the door, stepped in and faced Suki. "I'm sorry for your father's behavior."

"I'd rather Daddy was sorry for himself."

"He did consume a bit too much *sake*, I'm afraid."

"No, Mom. He had just enough."

"I should've warned you -- the stock market was down big today and you know that never does his mood any good."

"We'll both get over it," she replied. "We always do. Just watch -- tomorrow he'll treat me like a princess."

Nyk sat on the sofa in the apartment. Suki leaned against him as he stroked her hair. "Suki, there's something I must tell you. I'm returning to the homeworld in a few days."

"No!" Suki said and pulled from him. "I won't let you go." She brushed tears from her eyes. "I won't let you. You promised me. You know I can't do this alone," she sobbed. "Nykkyo, you promised me!"

"I'll keep my promise. I'll be back."

"Why must you go? How do I know you'll come back?"

"Seymor told me he'll authorize my return. Suki, I have a duty to my people. Zander's up to something -- something no good -- and I may have the key to stopping it. I must do this."

"What if something happens to you? What about your duty to me?"

"This is part of the path Destiny's tracing for me."

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“Destiny! Don't you think it's possible we're responsible for our own destinies?” Nyk stood and reached for her. She jerked away from him.

“I will do everything in my power to return to you. And when I do, I'll be here to stay.” He took her hand. “I wish I could take you with me.”

She walked to a cabinet, opened a drawer and removed an object. “How long will you be gone?” she asked as she returned to the sofa and sat beside him.

“I don't know. Tomorrow I make another run to Oklahoma City. Then, I'm sure I'll be asked to make a transit from Wisconsin. I'll return to the homeworld after that. I don't know how long I'll be there -- a few weeks -- I can't imagine longer than a couple of months.”

“Two months!”

“At least it's not two lifetimes.”

“But still -- two months. I've gotten used to having you around. What'll I tell Mom and Daddy?”

“Tell them I'll be back after I complete this assignment. Seymor has given me his assurances.”

“Do you trust him?” she asked.

“He's a Floran, and a Floran's word is his bond. Do you trust me?”

“Yes -- but I don't know if I trust Seymor.” He slipped his arm around her and she cuddled against him. “I suppose a couple of weeks wouldn't be so bad. I wish you didn't have to.”

“So do I.”

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She handed him the object she had been holding. It was the silver Kyhana crest pin she had worn at the university. "Take this with you -- to remind you of me."

"I don't need this to remind me. You haven't left my thoughts since the day I laid eyes on you."

"Please take it." He took the pin from her. "Now, you're obligated to me. You must come back, so you can return the pin. Who knows -- maybe it'll bring you luck."

He slipped the pin into his pocket. "I'm sorry I have nothing to give you. Floran culture isn't materialistic -- I have no possessions. All I can give is my word that I love you and I will return -- or die trying."

"That's what I'm afraid of. You'll be careful?"

"Of course." He kissed her cheek. "Let's get ready for bed."

Nyk slipped under the covers. Suki slipped off her robe and slid into the bed beside him. He switched off the light. "I love you, Suki."

"I know you do. I love you, too." She ran her hand along his shoulder and arm. She leaned to him and kissed his lips. "I want you, Nykkyo. Family line or no, I want you. Incest or no, I want you!" She began kissing and caressing his body.

"No, Suki, no!" He switched the light on.

"Why not? It's not incest to you, and I don't care if it is or isn't. Why can't we have each other? I don't think of you as family. You don't even look like family. No one would guess we're related. What if something happens -- what if you don't come back? At least let's have this."

"You once said you wanted me for me, not for you. Now I must say no to you for you. I know how ingrained this taboo is to your culture. I want this as much as you do, Suki. We mustn't do something

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you'll wake up some morning and regret. I love you too much to allow us to do that."

"You love me too much to make love to me. I never expected to hear anything like that."

"I don't want to say no to you. I want you -- I want desperately to share the gift of pleasure and intimacy. But we mustn't take the risk of poisoning our love with an act either of us might regret." Nyk switched off the light. He coaxed her beside him, slipped his arm around her and stroked her hair until he felt her drowse. He closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

Nyk stepped from the taxi upon returning from Oklahoma City. He placed a vidphone call. "Zander, I must return to Floran. I'm needed there on a family matter."

"Is it anything serious?"

"No, Senta wants me there to help plan a celebration. Her stepdad's fiftieth anniversary with the Service is coming up."

"Fifty years! That's quite an achievement. You're in luck. Exo 327's making a pickup in a few days. I was planning on handling this one personally, but if you're headed this way, you could save me the trouble."

"What day?" Nyk asked.

"Let's see ... This Thursday."

"That'll work fine," Nyk replied. "I'm happy to help."

"Will you need transit back to Earth?"

"No. Going native's not what I thought it'd be."

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“No, it's not. I didn't think you had it in you, Nyk. Stop by once you're on the homeworld.”

“I'll plan on it.”

“Before I forget -- if you want to get on the good side of the boys on the scout, bring along a couple bottles of whiskey.”

Nyk sat in the house in Wisconsin, fingering the photoimager. The panel van pulled into the driveway. He photographed the van, then he directed the driver to put the crates on the porch. The van departed and he watched it head down the street.

He took pictures of the stack of crates. With a screwdriver he pried up the lid on the first box, then folded back heavy paper and removed some cushioning material. The sight of the contents made his jaw drop.

Inside were firearms and ammunition. The first crate contained assault rifles -- about a dozen. He photographed them and opened the other boxes. The second one contained handguns. Inside the third was what looked like a mortar and rounds. A fourth contained hand grenades. Nyk closed up the crates.

Nightfall came and he backed the shuttlecar from the garage and loaded the boxes into it. These were smaller than the first set but just as heavy. He loaded all of them into the shuttle, piling the smaller ones onto the passenger seat. He stuffed his travel case into the cockpit and pulled his door shut.

He headed out of town to his launching site and began preparation for transit. Nyk pressed the launch sequencer. The shuttle nosed up and settled back to the ground. A power overload indicator flashed on the control panel.

Nyk restarted the prelaunch program. The overload indicator cleared. He pressed the launch sequencer and again the shuttlecar nosed

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up and settled back. A touch of the control panel initiated low-level diagnostics.

The car's vidisplay signaled an incoming call. He pressed his wrist to the scanpad and saw Zander. “Nykkyo, where are you? The scout's waiting.”

“I can't lift off. I think the shuttlecar's overloaded and maybe low on power. These are heavy boxes, Zander -- awfully heavy comm gear.”

“You'll need to gang the two main power cells. Open the access panel to the left of the controls.”

Nyk flipped down the panel. “Okay, it's open.”

“Do you see a shunt for the number two power cell?”

“Yes...”

“Pull it out, turn it ninety degrees and push it back in. That'll gang the power cells and give you enough to lift off. You won't have enough for a return trip, but you're not headed back to Earth, are you?”

“No ... but I'm not comfortable making a transit with no reserve power. Maybe I should offload some of this gear and make two trips.”

“If you don't have enough power to gang them how will you have enough for a trip out, back and out again?” Zander asked.

“I suppose you're right ... Okay, the shunt's in ... I have a 'go' panel.” He pressed the launch sequencer. The shuttlecar lifted off and shot into the sky. “I'm on my way!”

“I'll tell the boys on the scout.” The vidisplay went dark.

The craft rolled into the comm relay station's shuttlebay. Nyk went through decontamination, dressed in Floran clothing and fastened Suki's

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pin onto his sash. He slipped the photoimager's datacel into a fold of his *xarpa*, inserted a fresh one, dropped the device into his case and walked toward the shuttlebay. Thoughts about the object in his sash began to trouble him. He stopped and returned to the workroom.

Nyk reached into his sash, withdrew the datacel and regarded it, turning it over in his fingers. He inserted it into one of the station's vidisplays. A touch on the screen accessed his comm cipher and he transferred the images into his private database. He stored the datacel in his personal effects locker and headed to the shuttlebay.

The bay decompressed and he pulled the car into space. The vidisplay began signaling him and he answered a call from a crewman on board the scout. "Where are you? We're on a tight schedule."

"I'm about to subjump from the relay station."

"What are you doing there?"

"I had to go through decontamination," he replied. "You don't want to get sick, do you?"

"We have decontamination onboard. You could've done that here."

"Now you tell me."

"You'd better hurry. The skipper's getting edgy."

Nyk terminated the vidphone, set the navigation coordinates and triggered a short subjump to meet the cruiser.

The windows and windscreen darkened for the jump and the warpcoil fired with a bang. Transparency returned to the windscreen and Nyk saw a spinning star field. He grasped the unistick and attempted to recover from the spin. The shuttle refused to respond. A low power indicator flashed on the panel.

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Nyk opened the access panel, removed the number two shunt and pulled on the stick. The craft continued to spin. The vidisplay signaled him again. "We see you. Control your spin and we'll pick you up."

"I have no power," he replied. "The inertial sink won't respond. I have communications and life support, that's all."

"Divert your number three power cell to the inertial sink."

"That's auxiliary power. I'll lose life support."

"You're only metres from the ship. We can't pick you up until your spin's under control."

Nyk grasped the number three shunt and pulled it out. The control panel and vidisplay went black. Darkness and silence enveloped him -- his own heartbeat and breathing were the only sounds. He felt for the shunt socket. The spinning star field was starting to blur from moisture fogging the windows. He found the socket and inserted the shunt. It slipped from his fingers and centrifugal force from the spin sent it to the floor.

He began feeling around his feet for the shunt. His finger touched it, but it was lodged beneath his seat where he couldn't grasp it. Perspiration began to bead on his brow and the air was beginning to taste stale.

He felt inside the access panel and pulled the number one shunt. Nyk counted the socket holes and plugged it in -- no response. The fog on the windows was turning to frost.

Nyk was beginning to shiver. He pulled the shunt and moved it one position to the right. The control panel lit up. He grabbed the unistick and began to neutralize the spin. The stars slowed and stopped, and he saw the approach lights to the cruiser's shuttlebay. With the heel of his hand he wiped frost from the windscreen.

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The cruiser moved toward him, her forward shuttlebay door open. He pulled on the stick to turn the shuttle to face into the approaching bay and rolled it to align with the deck. The bay loomed before him, a yawning mouth about to scoop up its prey.

The car crossed the threshold of the spacedoor and encountered the scout's artificial gravity. It hit the deck with a thud and rolled toward the rear of the bay. He pulled back on the stick. The car slowed, then the panel went dark again. Through the windscreen he could see the bay's rear bulkhead fast approaching.

He threw his arms over his face and braced for impact. An inflatable crash barrier deployed. The shuttlecar plowed into it and he was thrown against his safety restraint. He could hear the bay repressurize. The pressure door opened.

A crewman approached the shuttlecar and pulled open the door. Nyk stepped out, took a deep breath and wiped his forehead. He looked at the crumpled nose of the shuttle. "Are you okay?" the crewman asked. Nyk nodded. "That'll never fly again. Why didn't you stop?"

"I ran out of power." He grabbed his case, opened it and handed two pint bottles of Wild Turkey whiskey to the crewman. "Zander said you might like this."

"You're all right!" The crewman slapped him on the back and set the bottles down. "What else is in the case?"

"Nothing but my travel gear."

"Let's see." The crewman took his case. "Do you have any Earth food?" He popped it open and saw the photoimager. "Taking pictures?"

"I wanted some to show my wife."

"Hey, Zaggo!" Another crewman approached him. "Stand by our passenger." The crewman snapped a photoimage. "Now you take me." The two crewmen tossed the camera between each other, taking pictures

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of Nyk and themselves, making funny faces and goofing with it until a non-commissioned officer entered the bay and interrupted their horseplay.

“What's going on in here?” The sergeant took the camera, removed the datacel and inserted it into a vidisplay. “Not a smart thing to do.” He ejected the datacel and snapped it in half. “Oops. Sorry.” He tossed the photoimager at Nyk and smirked. “Maybe he took other pictures. Check his case.”

The crewmen dumped the contents of Nyk's case onto the deck and rifled through them. “Nothing, chief,” Zaggo said.

“Frisk him.”

The crewman removed Nyk's *xarpa* and shook it out. They patted him down. “He's clean, chief -- unless he has one stuck up his butt.”

“If you think he's got one there, you'd better check.”

“I was kidding, chief. You don't mean...”

“It'd serve you both right. We're about to get underway. Get those crates unloaded and the breakable gear stowed. On the double!”

Nyk picked up his belongings, packed them into his case and belted himself into a jump seat. The crewmen stowed the bottles and took their seats.

He felt the warp jumps. Zaggo beckoned him to the aft shuttlebay. Nyk heard the bay repressurizing and the pressure door opened to reveal a tender shuttle. The tender crew unloaded supplies and transferred them to levitating pallets. One of the crew motioned to him and he climbed aboard. Soon he found himself on the transit platform awaiting the final inbound shuttle to Sudal.

He boarded the shuttle, sat by a viewport and fastened his safety harness. The airlock closed and it lifted from the pad on the transit

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platform. Nyk felt weightlessness as the craft left the influence of the platform's artificial gravity fields. The shuttle drew toward his indigo world.

The craft changed orientation to enter the atmosphere belly-first. Weightlessness was replaced by intense gravity as the shuttle lost velocity. There was a quick maneuver, a brief burst of weightlessness and the shuttle became an aircraft flying toward Sudal.

He could see the enormous mons in the distance to the west as the craft lost altitude and headed southward. Below were the older agridomes, some a thousand years old. He could look further south and begin to make out the newer domes.

Nyk felt pride in the agridomes. They were Kyhana domes, named after his father who had developed an innovative means to construct them. The domes were enormous -- each covered an area of ten by ten kilometers. Inside were grown food and fiber crops of Earth plants -- vegetables, grains, legumes, cotton, flax and ramie. The domes provided growing conditions approximating those of his people's world of origin and isolation from the incompatible biosphere of their adopted planet.

The shuttle began its initial approach to Sudal. Nyk could now see the small city -- his home town. He watched through the viewport as the shuttle swept down over row after row of modern agridomes, deployed its landing gear and touched down at the Sudal shuttleport. He debarked the shuttle and ordered a groundcar, specifying the Residence as his destination.

Nyk stepped from the groundcar outside the Residence. The place was shuttered. He pressed his wrist against the scanpad, opened the main entrance and climbed the spiral staircase to the second floor living level.

He switched on a vidisplay, accessed his Agency data store and made copies of the photoimages. He started to place a call to Seymor when he heard a noise from behind. His heart leapt into his throat. "Hello?"

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A check of the second-level guestrooms revealed no one. Something moved and he caught it out of the corner of his eye. He spun around but saw no one. "Who's here? It can't be you, Senta!"

Nyk looked into the storage room. He heard footsteps on the spiral staircase as he walked from the kitchen. He climbed the stairs to the third level -- the bedrooms his parents had used were here. The door to one of the bedrooms was closed.

He approached the door and pulled on it. It was locked. He sprinted down the spiral staircase to the lower level and into the house's workshop. There he rummaged through drawers of tools, parts and junk until he found a door latch releaser. By the time he reached the third floor, he found the door open and the room empty.

He stepped into the hallway, headed toward the stairs and heard heavy breathing above him. Someone was crouched on the steps to the trapdoor for the observation platform.

"Hello, who's there?" He started up the steps.

The figure sprinted down and past him into one of the bedrooms. Nyk followed and stood in the doorway. A tall woman with oat-straw white hair stood with her back to the closed shutter. Her pale blue eyes darted around the room. She backed from him as he approached.

"Andra, what are you doing here?"

"Stay back! I'm not going back to him." He approached her. "Stay back." She reached into her *lifxarpa*, removed an injector and pulled off the needle guard. "This is loaded with nerve toxin. I was saving it for myself, but I'll use it on you. I'll use it on any of Zander's flunkies. I'm not going back. I'll kill you, or I'll kill myself, but I'm not going back."

"Andra, I won't hurt you. I'm not Zander's flunky."

"Stay back!" She jabbed the injector in his direction.

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Nyk stepped to a vidisplay near the door and selected Senta's locator code. She answered from her office at the sequencing labs. "Nykkyo! Where are you calling from?"

"From the Residence. Do you know what Andra's doing here?"

"I thought you were on Earth. Andra said you were on Earth acting as Zander's stooge. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe you'd tie in with that scumbag."

"Senta..."

"I'll tell you, Nykkyo, I've been talking to a solicitor about dissolving our marriage. I think you've given me ample grounds. I never in my life thought it'd come to this."

"Senta, please..."

"To think of a Kyhana falling to these depths. I'm still in shock." She turned her shoulder to the vidisplay. "I'm ashamed to wear this crest. I never thought I'd live to see the day I'd say that. I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. No one would believe it. It's beyond belief!"

"Senta! Will you calm down and listen?" She glowered at him through the vidisplay. "I'm not Zander's stooge. I simply did him a favor in exchange for transit to Earth."

Her mouth formed an O. "Now, that I believe. Nykkyo, I've known you a long time, and I know you're a good and kind and decent man at heart. I also believe you're still infatuated with the Earth woman, and she has you wrapped around her little, dark-haired figure. I believe you'd follow her to Earth for some ... tryst or something. I also believe you're foolish enough to be sucked into one of Zander's schemes."

"Senta, I'm working with Seymor to put a stop to what Zander's doing. Seymor sent me here until the investigators can start figuring this out. I was planning on holing up at the Residence until this all blows

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over. Now, please tell me what Andra's doing here. We're in one of the bedrooms and she's threatening me with nerve toxin.”

“She left Zander. She couldn't take it any longer. I convinced her to leave him and to petition for separation and protection. I thought you were on Earth, so I brought her to Sudal last night. I thought that would be the last place Zander would look for her. She's been horribly, horribly mistreated by that awful man.”

“I got a glimpse of his mistreatment when I visited his apartment. I'll admit I was wrong about her, Senta; and you were right -- I was wrong to feel the way I did.”

Senta smiled and nodded. “Why, thank you Nykkyo -- my opinion of you just went up a notch.”

“Would you please tell Andra I'm on her side and I won't hurt her?”

“Of course.”

He turned to Andra. “Did you hear that? Senta wants to speak to you.”

Nyk stood in the hallway while Andra and Senta held a conversation through the vidphone. Andra eyed him, then replaced the needle guard and slipped the injector into her *lifxarpa*. “She wants to speak to you again,” Andra said.

“Is there anything you'd like me to do?” Senta asked. “Do you want me to come to Sudal?”

“No, there's no sense involving you in this. I think we'll be all right.”

“Be careful, Nykkyo. If Zander's involved, you must be careful. He frightens me.” The vidphone session went dark.

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14 -- Andra

“Would you like to tell me about it?” Nyk asked. Andra paced around the middle level of the Residence. “Where's Zander right now?”

She paused and regarded him through narrowed eyes. “Altia.”

“Has he been spending a lot of time there?”

“Quite a bit.” She resumed pacing.

“I wish you'd tell me about it.” He activated a vidphone session and entered Seymor's locator code.

“Nyk, are you there, safe and sound?” Seymor asked in English.

“Safe and sound enough,” he replied. “I had a bit of a surprise. I found Zander's wife here.”

“Andra? What's she doing there?”

“She's hiding from her husband. I suppose that makes two of us.”

“Do you have some pictures to show me?”

“Yes.” He accessed the photoimages. “Here's the box of stones.”

“Quite impressive. They look to be between three and five carats. I wonder who's doing his cutting. Someone on the homeworld in all likelihood. The one you showed me was decidedly amateurish.”

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“Here's where the stones are delivered. ... This is what I took to Oklahoma City.”

“That sight's breathtaking,” Seymor said. “You think there's a quarter million there?”

“At least, and as much in the first case I delivered. Here's where the money goes.”

“Do you have the exact address?”

“Yes, I'll pass it along ... Here's what the cash bought.” Seymor gave Nyk a blank stare through the vidphone circuit. “Seymor?”

“I'm speechless.”

“It makes sense. I was trying to figure out what Earth goods would have any value on the homeworld. Drugs? Not likely, as we have ample access to far superior recreational chemicals here. Besides, the boxes were too heavy. Precious metals? The colonies have gold, silver and platinum in abundance. Petroleum? Bulky, messy and of little value. Technology? ...Don't make me laugh. But weapons...”

“Yes, lad. It's the one technology Earth leads Floran.”

“There's more, Seymor. Zander told me he has business on Altia. He's on Altia right now. Andra tells me he spends a fair amount of time there. The ricin plot originated on Altia. I wonder if Zander had anything to do with it.”

“Gads, lad -- you are a natural at this. I'll pass this information along to the oversight committee.”

“Be careful. Someone much further up must be coordinating all this.”

“Point well taken. Now I want you to sit tight. I'll be in touch if we need anything else from you.”

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Nyk switched off the vidisplay. Andra stopped pacing. “I'm sorry to invade your home, Nykkyo. If you'd like, I'll go elsewhere. I know you've never held me in high esteem.” She turned from him. “Is it something about me, personally, you don't like?”

“No, Andra -- you're welcome to stay. I made a mistake about you, and I am sorry. You and I are on the same side in this. We might as well try to get along and to cooperate. I'm willing to make a fresh start if you are.”

She eyed him. “All right, Nykkyo -- a fresh start it is.”

He slipped off his *xarpa*. “You might want to dispense with the sash. We're in Sudal, and no one wears it here.” She unpinned her *lifxarpa* and slipped it off. “Are you hungry?”

“I'm famished.”

“I'll see what meals we have.” Nyk stepped into the house's storage room and retrieved a pair of meal packages. He began heating them and brewed a pot of green tea.

He sat across from her at the kitchen table and watched her wolf down the meal. She pressed her hand against her stomach. “That feels good. I was very hungry and it never helps my mood.” He handed her a sweet bean and rice cake and she opened it. “Nykkyo, I'm sorry if I frightened you.”

“I think we scared each other fairly well.” He poured a cup of tea for her. “Now, would you like to tell me about it? If we pool our knowledge, we might be able to help each other. I never understood how a guy like Zander was assigned an *ax'a...*”

“An *ax'amfin*? It's all right, Nykkyo. I know what I am. When my parents applied to enroll me at the finishing school, I was thrilled. I was only a girl. I'd see news broadcasts of High Legislature sessions, of the colonial delegates and their glamorous consorts. I imagined myself in a palace on one of the colonies.

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“When Vebinad Academy accepted me, I was ecstatic.”

“You attended Vebinad Academy? Isn't that regarded as the top school?”

“Don't flatter it, Nyk. I assure you the thrill didn't last long. Vebinad teaches discipline, poise, protocol -- how to be the perfect companion, at least in public. I still had a dream -- of being whisked away to an exotic world.” She sipped her tea. “Then I was assigned to Zander. It was an abrupt end to my dream. My nightmare began.”

“Why were you chosen?”

“We were interviewed -- conducted in a special room with a one-way glass so we couldn't see the interviewer. I was asked to remove my sash -- then my tunic. They can ask you anything, to do anything. I had to pose, naked, in front of the glass. Then, I was dismissed.

“The next day, I was informed I was to be the new Mrs Zander Baxa. He chose me on my looks. He didn't care if I had a mind, opinions, taste or ideas. I had ten days to prepare myself, to have the Baxa crest applied to my arm, to say goodbye to my schoolmates. I was only twenty-three Floran years old -- not even the age of majority.

“My wedding day was a great day for my parents. On that day the school transferred enough working and living credits to them so they could retire, and move out of their dingy apartment. I was their ticket to a better life.”

She sipped her tea. “We're taught never to question our assignment, but I can't help question mine. I wonder if my background had anything to do with it. I never got along with the headmistress. I think she resented me because I came from such a poor family. Maybe she had something to do with my assignment. No matter -- what's done is done.

“Senta convinced me to leave Zander. I have no idea what's to become of me.” She looked into his eyes. “I'm damaged goods, Nykkyo.

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No one will want me, now. Leaving is an option for someone with skills." She swirled her cup and gazed into it. "I have no trade, no career. I'll be forced to petition Central Admin for maintenance. That's the fate of too many *ax'amfinen*. A chancellorhood can come to an end, and I'm afraid consorts of ex-officials often don't fare well. No matter what's next, it can't help be better than living with him."

"There must be something for you to do."

"Do what? Work as a housekeeper? I'm not much more than one for Zander. Then, there are the public brothels on some of the colonies. It's a short step from companion to whore. I'd rather live in a group home than submit to that."

"Oh, Andra -- I had no idea. I thought..."

"You thought we have the soft life, hosting state parties, hobnobbing with other officials." She shook her head. "We're disposable. Use us and throw us away." She drained her teacup. "I wonder about Janna."

"Who's Janna?"

"She was my roommate at the academy, and my best friend. She was given her assignment about half a year before I left with Zander. She and I were very close -- the other students referred to us as the Twins." She closed her eyes and lifted her face. "Oh, Janna. I love her, Nykkyo. I haven't heard from her since she was assigned."

"Where did she go?"

"To one of the colonies -- I'm not sure which one. The chancellor was looking for a consort. We both interviewed for the post, but he picked Janna. It was the last I heard from her. She could very well be a ward of the state by now, the way colonial politics operate."

Nyk refilled her cup. "So what about you and Zander?"

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“It wasn't too bad at first. Not, at least, compared with what came later. At first, Zander let me have my own social life. But, after a while, something happened to him. He began to be jealous. I told him he had nothing to be jealous of. He began to question me about my activities, about what I did during the times he was offworld. He'd forbid me seeing some people. I lost my social life and my friends. I couldn't go anywhere without Zander, or his permission.”

“You became friends with my wife.”

“Yes, I met her at a party at your place, if I remember.”

“Senta's place -- the apartment in Floran City is hers. This is my home.”

“It was about then Zander began controlling me -- with drugs.”

“What kind of drug? Something from offworld?”

“No. It's a blend of his own creation, a mixture he puts into injector cartridges. I don't know for sure what's in the blend. It has the effect of making me susceptible to suggestion. Once drugged, I'll do anything Zander instructs me to do. If he instructs me to jump up and down, I'll jump up and down. I can't stop until he orders me, or until the drug wears off -- even if I drop from exhaustion.”

“I've heard of drug mixologists. I had no idea Zander is one of them. Is this part of his ExoService assignment?”

“I don't know. I pay no attention to his Service activities.”

Nyk shuddered. “The thought it might makes my blood run cold.”

“Zander uses this drug to force me to do things to amuse himself and his friends. Most of the time, I inject myself with it voluntarily.

“Voluntarily? You voluntarily inject yourself with a hypnotic?”

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“Yes -- I learned it was in my best interest to cooperate with Zander, rather than defying him. If I pleased him maybe he would withhold... punishment.”

“Does he beat you?”

“No, he punishes me with the drug. When I'm under its influence, he can also suggest ... pain, and I'll feel that pain as if it were real. I remember once he was using inhalants with some friends. Zander never let me use drugs when he was entertaining. I had to serve him instead. Something I did displeased him. To this day, I have no idea what it was. After his friends left, he came to me and jabbed me with an injector. It was over in an instant, and it was a few instants before I realized what happened. 'Why, Zander, why?' I asked him. 'What did I do? Whatever it was, I'm sorry. Please don't punish me!' I pleaded.

“I felt myself being seized by the drug, my knees began throbbing and sounds began echoing in my ears. 'You make me sick,' he said to me, with such rage in his eyes. 'I'm going to make you sick. You are having the worst stomachache. You want to vomit but you can't.'

“I began to feel sick to my stomach. I was in agony. I tried to vomit but couldn't, and I was doubled over in pain. I begged Zander to stop, but he laughed at me and went back to his inhalants. Wave after wave of the most unbearable nausea swept over me. He left me that way until the drug wore off. My stomach still remembers that pain whenever I recall the incident.”

Nyk looked at the floor and clenched his fist under the table.

“His mixture is also effective as a truth drug. He'll order me to tell the truth, and there's nothing I can keep from him.”

Nyk stepped around the table and sat beside her.

“Senta saved my life, Nykkyo. Zander acquired that nerve toxin. One of his associates created it from an Earth pesticide. He boasted of it

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in front of me. One night as he slept I pilfered one of his cartridges, with every intent to use it on myself -- I was that desperate.”

“Why not use it on him?”

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

“His hypnotic drug. He planted a subliminal suggestion in my mind -- one of many, he claimed -- a post-hypnotic directive against lifting a hand to him. He'd taunt me -- goad me into striking him. No matter how I wanted to -- I couldn't -- I was paralyzed. And, how he laughed at me -- how he gloated...”

Nyk opened his mouth to speak but words wouldn't come.

“Finally,” she continued, “I made up my mind. I went to Senta's apartment, to say goodbye.” She turned away to compose herself.

“It ... it must've been the day I was sent up.”

She nodded. “Senta pleaded with me not to resort to a permanent solution to a temporary problem. 'Temporary, how?' I asked her. 'I'm an *ax'amfin* -- I was created to serve.' She told me no -- I'm a person with rights -- finishing school or no, Zander doesn't own me. She told me I could petition Central Admin for protection -- she promised to use her influence to help me start a new life.” She turned away again. “No one ever had told me I was a person...”

He looked in her face and she held her hand to her eyes. “I'm sorry...” Andra drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. “Vebinad grads are expected to have better command of their emotions. My instructors would be displeased...” She gazed into the distance for a moment; then faced him, her eyes dry. “I decided then and there to leave him, as soon as an opportunity presented itself. Senta truly has been my savior, Nyk.”

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“I'm the one who's sorry, Andra. I had assumed you no more than one of her paramours, another in a long string of lovers. I would've felt differently if I had known she was trying to help you.”

“The day before yesterday Zander left for Altia. I could tell from the gear he packed something was about to happen -- I knew it was now or never. I called Senta. She offered to conceal me in her apartment, but we decided it was too risky -- so she brought me here.” She looked up at him. “That's my story. Does any of this help you?”

“Indeed, it does. I wish it didn't.”

“How do you know Zander?”

“We grew up together here in Sudal. Zander was my best friend. His father, Gunder, was a middle-level Food Service manager under my father. Gunder perished in the same shuttle crash that claimed my parents. This isn't the Zander I knew as a boy. Something in him must've snapped.”

She finished her meal, picked up the trays and dropped them into the waste reprocessor. Nyk escorted her from the kitchen and sat beside her on a bench. “I'll be honest with you,” he said. “I never liked you, since I met you at that party. But I wouldn't wish what Zander did to you on my worst enemy. I'm horrified at his abuse. I was wrong about you, Andra. I disliked you because I saw you as a symbol of an institution I detest. It's not you I hate. You're merely a victim. I don't envy the life you've led. I felt sorry for you the night I stopped at your apartment and saw you in that degrading costume.”

“Zander likes to flaunt me. He had me wear that for your benefit. I feared he would order me to...”

“Do you mean when he asked you to disrobe?”

“He never asks me to do anything -- he commands it. Yes -- he has offered me to his associates before. I was surprised when you preempted

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him. It was my first inkling that you might be different from his other cronies.”

“I'm not a crony,” Nyk replied. “And, if it doesn't mean something -- if it isn't mutual -- I don't want anything to do with it. It's wrong to take advantage of someone.”

“I like your attitude, Nyk.”

“I'll admit my behavior toward you hasn't been exemplary. I'm truly sorry, and I hope the damage I did isn't permanent. I like you, Andra -- now that I know you and I'd like us to be friends.” He pressed his palm against hers and patted her forearm.

She looked into his eyes. “I accept your apology, Nykkyo.” She laced her fingers with his. “I'm sorry I haven't been more gracious toward you.”

“Can you tell me what you know of Zander's activities?” he asked.

“Nothing. I know nothing of what he was trying to do.”

“You're a smart girl, Andra. I don't believe you ignorant of Zander's doings.”

“At the finishing school they taught us to turn a deaf ear to anything political. It was for our own protection. What we don't know won't hurt us. Truth drugs have been outlawed on Floran, but not on all the colonies. If one of us knew something, it's a short packet trip to where one could be used. So, we were trained how to ignore anything that didn't pertain directly to servicing our assignments. Believe me, Nyk, I know nothing.”

“Did you know Zander was up to no good?”

She looked at the floor. “I suspect as much. That's why I decided to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to his activities. My assignment was to service him as his *ax'amfin*, and as his wife.” She shuddered. “We have

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an unspoken agreement. I don't ask about his business and he doesn't volunteer anything. I did my duty. I despise him, but I did my duty and it did not include collaborating with his schemes.”

“You never thought of contacting the authorities about your suspicions?”

“I have no proof. I was following my training and ignoring what he did.”

“But his drug mixture -- he was using a hypnotic and those have been outlawed.”

“It would be my word against his. Even a drug test would be inconclusive as none of the ingredients in his mixture are illegal on their own. Besides, he could claim I injected myself voluntarily, and he'd be right.”

“The nerve toxin...”

“It's not a controlled substance -- it's not a substance known on Floran. Possessing it is no crime, only using it.”

“But, his intent...”

“How can one prove intent before the fact?”

“So, Zander's been cautious not to do anything overtly illegal... You must be in a terrible dilemma. I think you made the right choice. You're better off not knowing. Andra, I'm scared. I'm scared for both of us. The more I think about it, the more frightened I become. I think people are likely to die before we reach the end of this. I hope we won't be among them.”

“I'm scared, too. If Zander finds me before I can petition Central Admin for protection, my miserable life won't be worth living.” She moved closer to him. “I've decided to trust you, Nyk.” He slipped his arm around her and she leaned against him. “I might try liking you.”

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Nyk stood. "It's late. Let's choose sleeping quarters. My mom and dad had rooms on the top floor. Mine was on the middle level. When I'm here, I use my old bedroom. I've never felt comfortable in my parents' rooms. You can have your choice of the guestrooms, or if you want more privacy, feel free to use one upstairs."

Nyk showed her the guestrooms and escorted her up the spiral staircase. "I like this," she said. "It looks feminine and comfortable."

"This was my mother's room. Do you have a case?"

"It's downstairs in the lower level."

Nyk returned with her travel case. "You might as well make yourself at home. We're apt to be here for some time." He set her case on the bed. Andra opened it, removed a pair of tunics and placed them in a drawer. Nyk picked up a polypack filled with injector cartridges. "Andra, what are these? Are you in the habit of using drugs?"

"Oh, no. Those are some of Zander's. The green ones are his special mixture. I wanted to keep them from his hands. I hate using drugs -- especially, now after..."

"I understand." Nyk opened a cabinet and tucked the pack inside. "They'll be out of the way, here. Sleep tight, Andra."

"Good night, Nyk."

He retired to his childhood bedroom, undressed, stretched out and attempted to will himself to sleep. Andra's story of abuse haunted him. "That poor girl," he thought. He closed his eyes and saw images of her doubled over in agony, as Zander laughed and took hits on inhalers. "Why, Zander? *Ax'amfin* or not, you had no right to treat her so."

Guilt plagued him. "She's not having the best time with Zander," he recalled Senta saying. What an understatement. "She deserves pity more than anything else." He had plenty of pity for her, now. "Andra hasn't known many men and it would help her if you were just a little

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nice to her.” Nyk wondered if Andra could trust any man. His eyes began to burn. He flopped onto his stomach and buried his face in the bedcushion. “That poor, poor girl.” Soon he was sobbing.

A rap sounded on his door. “Nyk, are you all right?”

He rolled over and switched on the lighting. “I’m okay.”

The door slid open. Andra entered holding a pillow in front of her. “What’s the matter?” she asked. “What are the tears for? For me?” Nyk nodded. She sat beside him and stroked a tear from his face. “Thank you for the tears.” She touched her finger to her lips.

“Andra, why didn’t Senta tell me?”

“I forbade her to. I forbade her to tell anyone. I was afraid word would get back to Zander.”

“I wish I had known. I’d have tried to help -- believe me, I would’ve.”

“I believe you.” She kissed his cheek and Nyk saw her lick her lips.

“Do you like the taste of tears?” he asked.

She smiled and gave a guilty nod. “For the past four years I’ve been tasting my own.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Andra. It wasn’t anything you did. You didn’t deserve it. You’re a victim -- the victim of a criminal.”

“Senta tells me the same thing. I love her, Nyk -- like a sister. I couldn’t have coped at all without her friendship. Now, I’m free. Please be happy for me.” She headed for the door, turned and gave him a little wave. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He watched her walk out the door and heard her mount the stairs to the upper level.

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Nyk descended to the ground level and led Andra out the front door. "Is this safe to do?" she asked.

"I think so -- we're quite isolated here. I've moved the groundcar into the lower level. I hate being shut up inside. Come on ... I'll show you my favorite places from when I was a boy." He walked with her to the edge of the bluff and looked down. "That sea is teeming with life. None of it's edible. Earth people take nourishment from their sea. Koichi understood what it means to live on a planet that's unwilling to nourish you. The surf's more violent than usual. There's probably a storm brewing -- the second one this year. We should check the vidisplay for a storm forecast when we go inside."

He guided her from the bluff. "I like to walk on the beach when the surf's strong like this. Sea life gets tossed ashore and some of it's very interesting. Would you care to join me? The smell can be quite strong down there."

"If you can stand the smell, so can I."

"I do more than stand it. I love it. It's the smell of home to me." Nyk helped her down the rocks. He slipped off his sandals and walked barefoot along the black sand, letting the surf splash against his ankles.

Nyk spotted a cephalopod-like creature lying on the sand. Its shell was a slender, curved cone about a metre in length. He picked it up and showed it to her. "The shell is cracked here. The surf must have thrown it onto those rocks. It's dead."

"Poor thing."

"This is its eye," Nyk said, pointing. "The mouth is in the midst of this tangle of tentacles." He took the shell to the edge of the surf and shook it to dislodge its inhabitant. He showed her the inside of the empty shell. The lining was glittering, iridescent blue-violet.

"It's beautiful!" Nyk handed her the shell.

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“That's a fairly large specimen. I once had quite a collection of those. They're probably still in the house, somewhere.”

Andra walked to the edge of the surf and into the sea until it was halfway to her knees. She turned around and waved at Nyk, beaming a smile. “The smell's not so strong here,” she yelled over the roar of the surf. A large wave dampened the hem of her tunic and she started back toward the beach. Nyk motioned her to a pool sheltered from the surf by some rocks.

“This one's my favorite.” He pointed to a five-legged arthropod. It was making a zigzag track along the bottom of the pool. “The mouth is in the center on the bottom. There are five segments, each with a leg and an eye. The animal has no front or back, only top and bottom. It can see in a complete circle and it can change directions at will.”

Nyk scooped a palmful of water from the pool, poured it into his mouth, then spat it out. Andra dipped in her finger and tasted a drop. Her eyes widened.

“Can you taste the sulphur?” he asked.

“It's bitter and it lingers in the back of my throat.”

“That's the taste of the native life on this planet. That's why this world can never nourish us. The sea is life -- our life originated in Earth's sea. We carry a bit of that sea within each of us, Andra. Every time you taste the salt of a tear, you're tasting the Earth's sea, the origin of our life.”

“Have you seen Earth's sea?” she asked.

“No -- it's something I want to do, some day. I wonder how I'll react to the smells of that world's sea.”

He held her hand and walked to the end of the beach. “Those are trivalves. This is an arthropod related to the five-legged one.” He picked up a shell. “Look how elaborate. It's still alive.” He tossed it into the

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surf. “Ninety-nine percent of our population neither know nor care that we share this planet. We share it with creatures that breathe water instead of air. Our world is fairly young, compared to Earth. Perhaps in a billion years or so, this world will evolve intelligent, thinking creatures. Or, would have, if left alone. No one knows our ultimate impact on this world's life.” He escorted her toward the bluff and started climbing the rocks.

“Over here is my favorite spot.” He led her down a slight slope to the bowl-shaped depression lined with sand. “This is the place. If you lie in the sand, you're below the rim of the bowl. The wind passes over you, and it's quiet. This is a great place to relax. I used to lie here and look up at the sky. Sometimes, I'd sleep here. I'd lie nude, look up at the night sky, listen to the surf and stay here all night.” He lay in the sand, gazing up as the indigo sky deepened in the Floran dusk.

Andra lay beside him. “This is peaceful.”

“Have you ever looked at the night sky from a dark location? There's too much stray light in a city. Even in Sudal, city lights wash out the sky. Some night, we'll come out here and look up at the stars. The night sky is Floran's most beautiful feature.” He reached and touched her hand. “Another thing I used to like to do was to stand in the rain, right before a storm. It has to be the right kind of storm, one that starts with rain before the wind. You usually know when that kind of storm is coming, because the air gets close. Then a gentle rain comes and a few gusts of wind. I used to like to do that in the nude, too. You might think I did a lot in the nude here. It's so private -- and I like to feel in touch with nature.”

She pressed her palm against his and he laced his fingers with hers. “Nyk, you're different than I expected. You're different from how Senta described you.”

“I should hope so.”

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“I didn't mean it that way. Senta told me you're a kind and decent man.”

“Senta said that?”

“Yes, and I can feel that about you. But you're deeper than I expected.”

“Deeper? What do you mean?”

“You think deep thoughts. I like that. I can feel your love of nature and the sea. I like that, too. I think I could love the sea.”

Nyk rolled to face her. “You're not what I expected, either. I was such an idiot about you.” He gazed into her eyes. “I welcome you as my friend.”

“I welcome you, too,” she replied. “I welcome you as my *amfta*.”

“You want us to be *amften*?” She nodded. “You'd share the gift with me?”

She touched his cheek and smiled. “I was afraid you wouldn't ask. Would you accept me as your *amfta*?”

“I ... of course, Andra.”

She caressed the back of his head. He closed his eyes, felt her lips against his and he kissed her. “Shall we here?” she asked.

“No, not here. I've tried. The sand can be uncomfortable. I tried to lose my virginity here -- with Senta. It was a disaster! I thought it would be special, because this place is so special to me. Senta never liked Sudal and this experience didn't help.”

Nyk escorted Andra into his childhood bedroom. He grasped the hem of her tunic and lifted it from her. She slid down his shorts and he stepped from them. Andra stretched out on the mattress and he lay beside her.

EARTHBOUND

“Nyk, are you nervous?”

He shook his head. “No... Maybe a bit... Why? Does it show? You're so beautiful, Andra. I understand the finishing schools teach exotic lovemaking techniques. I'm not an adventuresome lover and I hope...”

“Neither am I. You mustn't believe everything you've heard of *ax'amfinen*.”

“So I'm discovering. I'm very sorry I misjudged you.”

“As am I that I misjudged you.” She touched his face. “I am *ax'amfin*, Nyk -- I know what ... thing it is I am. But I'm also a woman, and I have the same feelings as any woman. The finishing schools can't take that from us. They would if they could, but they can't.”

“We don't have to do this,” he replied. “We can be friends without it.”

“I wouldn't have asked if I didn't truly want it. We learned at Vebinad how to read others. Even though I'm only beginning to know you, what I've read so far I like. I think you and I must be kindred spirits.”

“I was arriving at the same conclusion,” he said.

“Let's seal it by sharing the gift and becoming *amften*. I've met only one other kindred spirit in my life.”

“Do you mean Janna?”

“Yes, she...” Andra touched his lips. “...and now, you...”

“Is she also among your *amften*?” he asked.

“My only other.”

EARTHBOUND

Nyk stroked her face and gazed into her eyes. Her pale blue, nearly white irises were freckled with black specks. He realized what a beauty she was. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were the same pale blond as her hair. She had the finest features and not a blemish. Her beauty was flawless except for a faint, blue trace of a vein at her temple.

He brought his lips to hers and she kissed him. He stroked her hair, letting the fine, oat-straw white strands pass over and between his fingers; and he maintained deep eye contact with her, not letting his gaze stay below her collarbone. He could feel her breath on his face.

With his fingertips he traced her lips. They were smooth and ample but not too full -- just right -- and this he determined was the secret to Andra's astonishing beauty: All of her features indeed were in perfect balance -- perfect harmony.

Nyk regarded the shape of her face and traced her jaw with the back of his finger. Andra grasped his hand, kissed it and pressed it against her body. He continued gazing into her eyes; and he ran his fingers along her clavicle and then down her sternum. Then he brushed the backs of them against her left breast. Andra's body jerked.

"Was that all right?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I was wanting it."

He continued to caress her. "If you want something -- ask for it."

"I was enjoying what you were doing. I liked the attention you were giving me."

Nyk slipped his hands under her shoulders. Andra let her head and arms fall back as he lifted her. He kissed her neck and between her breasts. She held his head against her chest and ran her fingers through his hair. He could hear her heart pounding.

"You're gentle," she said. "I like that, too."

EARTHBOUND

He lowered her onto the mattress. Andra picked up his hand and guided it onto her body. "Like this," she said, showing him the sorts of touch she preferred. Nyk's eyes followed his hand as she led it. He regarded her skin -- how light she was compared to his own medium complexion.

Nyk caressed her, drinking in her beauty. Her figure was the epitome of the Floran feminine ideal -- slim but curvaceous; athletic but soft. Zander was right, he thought. Everything about her was perfection -- her long, shapely legs with perfectly proportioned thighs and well-formed calves ... her thin arms ... the muscle definition in slim torso ... her slender fingers ... her compact breasts. He placed his hand on her breast and watched her ribs move with her breathing.

"Do you know the delayed release technique?" she asked.

"Yes -- Senta tried to teach it to me. I'm not very good at it."

"I'm sure you're good enough. Let's try using it. It's the best one for becoming *amften*."

"Okay, we'll try."

He recalled Senta's coaching and began the meditative exercise, using Andra's eyes as his focus. Like everything else about her they had perfectly formed Floran characteristics -- a hint of epicanthic fold -- the outer corner slightly slanting upward -- set not too deeply in her face. He regarded her long, white eyelashes and her eyelids, each with a fine fold of skin perfectly bisecting it. It was the color of her irises, though, that made her eyes unique -- pale but pure blue and crystal clear.

Nyk was dividing his mind. Sensations of her touch he forced into the back while he directed the front of his awareness onto the response of her body to his. *Focus on your partner*, he recalled from Senta's instruction. *It's giving and trust -- give all of yourself to your partner and trust your partner to do the same...* He regarded Andra's body for little tells that might reveal her level of arousal -- her breathing slowing

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and deepening; her pupils dilating and her gaze appearing to aim through him at some object behind the back of his head.

Nyk's own arousal was building, like a spring being tightened; but he was keeping his awareness of it confined to his back mind. His front mind he focused laser- like onto Andra -- the depth of her breathing, her heartbeats telegraphed through her flesh, the warmth of her skin, the tone of her muscles, and especially her eyes. He was reading her body and modulating his touch in response, increasing the intensity as he tightened the spring in her body.

She was doing the same. The object of the technique was for each to drive the other to orgasm and beyond, while confining their own pleasure until the moment of mutual release.

Nyk placed his hand on Andra's wrist. She looked up into his face. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I lost my focus. Give me a moment to regain it." She nodded once. He gazed again into her eyes and stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

Nyk refocused his attention onto her; then he guided her hand onto his body. "I'm ready, now," he said.

Andra lay on her back and opened herself to him. Nyk lay atop her and locked his legs with hers.

"Oh, Nyk," she panted, "this feels so good..."

"Keep your concentration," he replied as he began moving his hips.

"I'm trying ... but I'm not so adept with the technique, either."

He gazed into her eyes as she held him. His heart was racing and he required all his mental discipline to maintain the division in his awareness.

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Nyk could feel her move with each breath. He embraced her shoulders. Her fingers explored the shapes of his shoulder blades and his spine. Andra caressed the back of his head and directed his face toward hers. He kissed her and again gazed into her face. A pink flush covered her cheeks and she was panting through parted lips.

Andra drew in a breath, held it and rolled her eyes upward. Nyk sensed she was releasing. He closed his eyes and smashed the barrier between his front and back minds, permitting his pent-up sensations to surge into his awareness. The spring unwound. He slipped his arm under the small of her back, grunted and pressed himself against her. "Oh, Andra!" he gasped.

She held her face beside his, caressed his neck and exhaled. Then she looked into his eyes. "*Amften*," she said.

"*Amften*," he replied. She lay beside him as he held her and stroked her upper arm. "Andra ... did you ... did you have..." he began to ask.

"Mmm... Yes ... a very nice one." She kissed his cheek.

"You didn't make a sound."

"We were taught to be discreet." She kissed him again. "Don't underestimate your ability with the technique, Nyk -- you were quite good with it."

He kissed her forehead and she smiled and pulled herself against his body. He watched her eyelids grow heavy. Her grip relaxed and her breathing became regular.

Nyk smoothed his hand along her back and shoulder blade. "Senta was right," he whispered. "You are a very sweet girl. I was such an idiot about you." He reached for a control and extinguished the lights.

EARTHBOUND

15 -- Unlocking Secrets

Nyk opened his eyes and saw Andra beside him. “Have you been awake for long?” he asked.

“Not long.”

He touched her hair. “I wish we didn't need the storm shutters down. I love being awakened by morning's light, and the sound of the surf. I don't even know what time it is. Andra -- I really liked feeling you fall asleep against me last night. I could feel your trust...” He regarded her face. “What's that expression for?”

“I was just about to say how much I enjoyed falling asleep in your arms.”

“I think sharing the melting, drowsy relaxation afterward is the best part of lovemaking.”

“So do I,” she replied. “Don't you see how alike we are?” Andra placed her hand on his. “Thank you, Nykkyo, for sharing the gift.” She kissed his hand. “After years with Zander I forgot it's possible for a man to be tender and giving.” Tears began to well up in her eyes and she covered them with her hand. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned him.”

“Andra -- we're *amften*. You've no reason to guard yourself with me, now.”

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She withdrew her hand. A tear traced a wet line from the corner of her eye down her cheek. She stroked it away and pressed her finger against Nyk's lips. He kissed it and tasted salty moistness.

Nyk stroked her face. "You're such a sweet girl. I'm amazed I don't see hurt and anger in your eyes. I'd be bitter if I had gone through what you have. But, I look into your eyes and see none of it. I can only begin to imagine what you've endured." A tear rolled down his face. "You poor girl."

She took Nyk's hand into hers, led it to his face and touched his tear with his finger. Then she guided it to her lips and kissed it. He felt her tongue against his fingertip.

"We've cried over the same hurt," Andra said, "and we've tasted each other's tears. Now, we're bonded fast and friends for life. It's the ritual of shared pain, from Vebinad Academy. By the time we're done there, everyone has bonded with everyone else. There seemed to be enough pain to go around."

"Andra, do you have any idea how much it disturbs me to know how badly you've been mistreated? The school mistreated you, even before Zander. What a waste of your talent, of your intellect. I've hated the finishing schools -- the concept of turning human beings into ... property. I've always believed the schools an abomination. Now I've seen firsthand the results of their work. This entire institution must be abolished."

"Without them I wouldn't be. I was made for the schools, Nyk. My parents realized they had the genetic raw material to produce a candidate for the schools. This was an asset they desired to exploit and they had little else. It took them years, working with genetic counselors, before they came up with ... me."

"Then you are one good thing to come from that institution."

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“But, Nyk, I'm not unique. All my classmates -- all those who went before me were all very much alike. Each of my classmates was a bright, pretty girl, full of hope and a love of life. I have no idea where they went, to whom they were assigned. I'm sure not all are as miserable as I. Not every man is like Zander.” She stroked his face again. “Not every man is like you.”

Nyk held her and stroked her arm. “I've been trying to understand Zander. He was my closest childhood friend and I loved him like a brother. I never imagined he has such evil in him. I wonder if the kindness he showed me was genuine. Or, was he playing an elaborate practical joke on me, picking on me like the village idiot? Was I his village idiot, too blinded by stupidity or need to see what everyone else must've seen he was doing? Was I blissfully ignorant I was his laughing stock? Perhaps I was...” He closed his eyes and pursed his lips. She stroked his face and kissed his cheek.

The vidisplay signaled an incoming call. Nyk arose, slipped into a tunic and answered the call with a wristscan. He saw Suki's image.

“Nykkyo, it's good to see you in Floran dress. I think your arms and shoulders look so sexy in that tunic.” He smiled. “Nykkyo, my mom's been after me about the abortion again. She's wondering what sort of man would promise to help and support me and then disappear for an open-ended length of time.”

“I wish I could tell you when this'll be over. Seymor might need my help on this end, and I need his okay for my transit. I will return, Suki. I promise. Nothing will keep me away.”

Suki began to wipe tears from her eyes. “Mom also told me that she'd pay for the abortion, but if I carry the child to term, it'll be my responsibility. I don't have medical insurance, and I can't afford the doctor's bills. I had a bad fight with my father last night, too. I wish you were here -- I think he's afraid of you. He doesn't hassle me when you're here. It's almost like I'm regressing to when I was in high school. That's

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the reason I left in the first place. And I had my first bad case of morning sickness today. I was late for my job at the university, and there's a deadline coming up.

“Nykkyo, I'm sorry to dump all this on you, but I told you I can't do this alone. It's not fair to demand you to put up with all this, either. I know what you say about destiny, about my role. I know I must do this. I miss you and I hope you can come home soon. I don't know how I'll manage or what to tell Mom. I'm scared, Nykkyo!” She started crying. “Now I'm a basket case and blubbering away. You must think I'm an emotional, weak, foolish woman. I'm so sorry.” She sobbed. “I can't stop crying!” She wept, her body shaking.

“Suki... Suki, everything will be all right. The fact that I'm speaking to you means everything will be all right.” She looked into the camera and began to regain her composure. She sniffed and wiped her eyes. Nyk kissed his fingers and pressed them to the camera. She responded with the same.

“This helps. Maybe some of this is my hormones raging from being pregnant. I'll try to get my act together; I'll try to be strong. I hope you'll be home soon. I love you, Nykkyo. You're all I have.”

“I love you, too.” The vidisplay went blank.

He felt Andra's hand on his shoulder. “Was that your Earth woman?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Why was she so upset?”

“She's pregnant...”

“Say no more.” Andra stepped back, her eyes wide. “Are you the...”

“No, of course not. Our relationship is strictly platonic.”

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Andra looked into his eyes. "Nyk, do you love her?"

"I love Suki with a depth that astounds me. Ever since I laid eyes on that woman, I've awakened and retired to thoughts of her. I dream of her. I'll die thinking of her."

"Then, Senta was right. She believes your Earth woman has displaced her as your love object. She has, hasn't she?"

"I don't know if Senta ever was my love object. I respect her -- I welcome her as a friend. I don't think I ever loved her. I certainly don't love her as I love Suki. And I'm sure Senta has never loved me."

"Then, after this? You're not returning to Senta, are you?"

"Andra, when I'm done with this business I intend to return to Earth and spend my life with Suki at my side. It's the role Destiny's defining for me. I've interfered with her life, and I must replace the man who was to be her husband."

"Why must you?"

"I told you she's a distant ancestor. There's a straight line ancestry from Sukiko Kyhana to me, and it runs through the child in her womb."

"Are you sure?"

He picked up his *xarpa* and removed the pin. "Look at this -- do you recognize it?"

"It looks like the pendant at Senta's apartment."

"It's at the museum, now. This was made by the same man -- Suki's grandfather." He turned it over. "The same initials -- the same design. Is that proof enough?" Andra held the pin. "Suki's unborn child is the founder of my family line. She doesn't have the strength to raise him alone. I fear for her child -- and if I fear for that child, I must also fear for our entire race."

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She returned the pin. "So that's why you wanted Zander's help for transit to Earth."

"Yes, and there I discovered evidence of his illegal activities."

"What will you do on Earth?"

"I don't know -- find a job sweeping floors if necessary. This is why Destiny gave me the love I have for her. We'll live our lives almost as husband and wife. There'll be one difference."

"What difference?"

"We'll be celibate. I love her, but I cannot consummate that love."

"Why not?"

"Because of our relationship. Suki is my direct ancestor. It would be incest."

"How many degrees of separation are there between you?"

"At least two hundred."

"No one would consider that incestuous."

"No Floran would. Attitudes on Earth are far different. There, if two people share linear consanguinity, their relationship is incestuous -- no matter how many degrees of separation."

"But no one need know."

"Suki does know, and it's her culture I must respect."

"Nykkyo, I shouldn't tell you this because I've been sworn to secrecy. I'll tell you because it's not right for two to have your sort of love and not share the gift. Senta knows something about your line. She discovered it while she was sequencing a hair."

"A hair? What does she know?"

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“I don't know the details, so you must ask her. You must press her on this, Nykkyo.”

Nyk opened a pair of breakfast packages, set them on the kitchen table and brewed some green tea. “This is my favorite,” he said, “as much as anything on this planet can be. The green tea's as good as anything found on Earth, though.” Nyk reached across the table and touched her hand. She stroked his forearm. “Your skin is so light and clear. You hardly have any coloring at all. I know I'm not dark, but next to you I look as dark as Suki. She once said a meal and conversation, with good food, enjoyed among good friends is one of life's greatest pleasures. You and I are good friends, so we're halfway there.”

The vidisplay signaled another call. Nyk scanned his wrist and saw Seymor sitting at his desk. The New York City skyline was visible through the window behind his desk, and it made Nyk homesick. Seymor addressed him in English. “Nykkyo, we're making progress. There'll be a major realignment in the Service as a result of this.”

“How much longer?” Nyk asked, also in English.

“I wish I had the answer to that one, myself. We're concerned for Baxa's wife. Is she still with you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Don't let her out of your sight. There are some who think she's an accessory.”

“I think they're wrong. She's incapable of involvement in something like that.”

“She's an *ax'amfin*.”

“She's a sweet girl.”

“*Ax'amfinen* are witches, Nyk. They're sweet on the surface but vicious underneath.”

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“Andra's not like that.”

“Nykkyo, I don't like it when I see a good Agent become emotionally involved. I saw it with the Earth woman, and I fear I'm seeing it now.”

“It's not emotion, it's logic. I don't believe she's any more than an innocent bystander in all this.”

“Nonetheless, don't let her out of your sight.” The vidphone screen went dark. Nyk paced around the main living floor.

“What's the matter? You look upset. What did he say?” Nyk stood directly in front of her, placed his hands on her waist and looked into her eyes. “What is it, Nyk?”

“Andra, I need to hear it from you. I need to hear you say you had nothing to do with Zander's plotting.”

“I know nothing about it. I've told you I know nothing.”

“Swear to me you had nothing to do with it. After our talk of bonding, of friends for life --after last night, after *amften* -- I need to hear you swear to it.”

“I swear, Nyk, I know nothing of what he was doing -- nothing. It's the truth, Nyk. Honestly, it's the truth. I know nothing.” Tears were filling her eyes. “I could never lie to a friend-for-life. We must trust each other with our lives.”

Nyk embraced her. “I believe you. Forgive me, but I needed to know for true. Some of the evidence implicates you, Andra. You may be detained for questioning.”

“Please don't worry about me, Nyk. I have nothing to fear. I'll submit to interrogation willingly.”

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“I do worry. Truth drugs have been outlawed on this world because ... because sometimes the person being interrogated ... isn't the same, afterward.”

“Worrying won't make things better. I trust you, Nyk.” She rested her head on his shoulder and he caressed her hair. “Do you think it would be safe to go outside?”

“Probably. I'll go up to the observation deck and scout around, and if it looks clear, we'll take a walk on the bluff. I'll go crazy if we have to stay cooped up inside.”

Nyk held her hand and led her around the perimeter of the Residence. He stopped at an outcropping of basalt and pointed to a memorial plaque.

In loving memory

Xarvo Kyhana, born 6569.084, died 6627.147

Jylla Retsa Kyhana, born 6571.201, died 6627.147

They loved the sea nearly as deeply

as they loved each other

“Your parents?” she asked.

“Yes. I took them for granted when I was a boy. Even now, part of me doesn't want to believe they're gone. It's why I can't sleep in their bedrooms.”

He and Andra walked out on the bluff. Andra stood at the edge and leaned into the breeze, extending her arms as if to embrace it. Nyk stood beside her and put his arm around her. She leaned against him as he

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savored the breeze. “The surf's even more violent today,” Nyk said. “We forgot to check for a forecast, but by the looks of things, a storm will hit us during the night.” He pointed to a grey line of storm clouds hugging the eastern horizon.

Andra pointed to an object in the distance. “What's that?” Something was riding the sea, rising and falling in and out of view with the waves.

Nyk shielded his eyes with his hand. “Probably the University of Sudal research vessel.” He looked a bit longer. “Or maybe it's someone watching the house. We'd better go back.” He pointed skyward toward an aircraft circling overhead.

He walked briskly into the Residence, secured the door and checked the vidisplay. “I was right, there is a storm approaching. It's category one, not a big one. It shouldn't last more than a day or so.” He sat on a bench, trying to calm himself. She sat beside him. “I'm spooked, Andra. With this storm coming, we can't even walk on the bluff to take my mind off it.”

The storm winds howled. Nyk sat at the kitchen table playing with the wrapper from a luncheon package, folding it and refolding it into abstract shapes. The vidisplay signaled a call. He answered with a wristscan.

Seymor spoke in English. “Nyk, is Andra around?”

“She's upstairs, resting.”

“The investigators want to question her. We think she may know something.”

“Andra told me she was taught to ignore what goes on around her. She was taught to let it in one ear and out the other, and I believe her.”

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“She may have seen something or heard something that could be of use to us. We can't coerce her, but I hoped she might volunteer.”

“I'll speak with her.” The vidphone session went dark.

Nyk climbed the stairs to the third level. The door to his mother's bedroom was partway shut. He rapped on the door, opened it and walked in. Andra was reclining in her tunic. She looked up at him.

“Seymor would like it if you'd answer some questions about Zander.”

She shook her head. “I've told you. I'd be of no help.”

“You must've seen something -- heard something. We must put a stop to whatever Zander's doing.” He sat on the bed. “You have some of his drug mixture with you. It acts as a hypnotic. Perhaps...”

“No! I won't use it.”

He held her hand. “Andra, we're bonded and friends for life. We trust each other with our lives. Won't you trust me with your mind? I'd never take advantage of you. All I want to do is to unlock some secrets so we can put an end to this.”

She looked into his eyes, then away. She nodded. “All right, I'll do it.”

“I'll call Seymor and make arrangements.”

Andra sat on a sofa in the living room. Nyk pulled a table near her and turned a vidisplay in her direction. Seymor's image was on the screen.

“Nyk,” he said. “I have Illya Kronta standing by. He wants to hear what Andra has to say.”

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Seymor's image was joined by one of a middle-aged man in a Floran tunic. His *xarpa* identified him as an ExoService official. "I'm pleased to meet you, Nykkyo," Kronta said. "I want you to know I'm a Kyhana scholar, and I've begun reading your translation of Koichi's journal. It's fascinating."

"Let's begin," Seymor said.

Nyk picked up a green cartridge and loaded it into an injector. He handed it to Andra.

She took the injector. "After the drug takes me, you must utter the words *zidev m'obe*. Whoever first says that, commands me." He nodded and placed his hand on her shoulder.

She removed the needle guard and lifted the hem of her tunic. Her hand hesitated for a moment, then drove the needle into her skin. Nyk heard the snap of the roller pushing the drug into her thigh muscle. She withdrew the needle and replaced the needle guard.

Nyk helped her recline on the sofa and propped her head with cushions. She folded her hands across her stomach. He watched her face as her eyes glazed and their lids grew heavy. Her lips parted and her jaw slackened.

"Andra, *zidev m'obe*," he said. Her eyes focused on him. "Andra, you now remember what you forgot about Zander. You will answer questions for me and for the gentlemen on the vidisplay."

"Andra, please look at this photoimage," Kronta said. An image of a young man appeared on the screen. Nyk recognized the photo as the one who handed him the box aboard the transit platform. "Can you identify him?"

"No."

"Andra, think hard," Nyk said.

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“Don't lead her, Nyk,” Kronta said. “We mustn't contaminate her memory.”

Andra stared at the photo. “Go deep,” Nyk said.

Recognition spread over her face. “Yes, I remember him. He came to the apartment.”

“How often?” Kronta asked. “Do you remember the most recent time?”

“Dot-200. Yes, Zander gave him a box on dot-200.”

“The day after I was there,” Nyk said.

“Excellent,” Kronta said. “Good job, Nyk, I think we've unlocked her. Andra, I'd like you to look at some more photoimages. Tell me if you recognize any of these men.”

Andra regarded the vidisplay. “Stop. He visited the apartment.”

“Rud Vadima.” Kronta said. “He's assistant adjunct to the chancellor of the Lexal colony.” More images flashed by. Andra identified additional men from the group. “An interesting bunch,” Kronta remarked.

“Yes,” Seymor added. “Some have done Agency tours.”

“All have had Agency training and conditioning -- training for Earth assignments.”

“Did Zander ever mention if these men were on Earth and why?” Seymor asked.

“Yes. They were on Earth for training.”

“What kind of training?”

“I don't know,” she replied.

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“Military training,” Nyk conjectured. “Weapons and tactics.”

“Andra, did you ever hear Zander speak of Earth weapons shipments?”

“Yes.”

“Did Zander say where the weapons were headed?” Nyk asked.

“Lexal,” she replied.

More photos flashed by. “Stop,” Nyk said. “Go back one.” The image was of a well-groomed late-middle-aged man in a jacket and wearing a large medallion. “Do you recognize him?”

“No,” she said.

“Think hard. Do you recognize him?”

“No. I’ve never seen him.”

“Andra, that looks like you standing beside him!”

“Gads, Nyk!” Seymor said. “You’re right.”

“Is that you?” Nyk asked.

“No,” she replied.

“Who is it? If it’s not you, it’s your twin.”

“It’s Janna.” Tears formed in her eyes. “Janna... Oh, Janna!”

“That’s Mykko Wygann, chancellor of the Lexal colony,” Kronta said, “with his consort and wife. She’s known on Lexal as Princess Janna.”

“Was she your roommate and friend?”

“Yes. I miss Janna. I miss her so much. I didn’t know she went to Lexal, or that she married.”

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“No wonder your classmates called you the twins.”

“There've been rumors,” Kronta continued. “Wygann is turning Lexal into an armed camp. Zander must've been supplying Wygann with Earth weaponry.”

“That explains the triangular trade,” Seymor said. “Floran diamonds are free for the asking. Zander arranged to have them cut and polished. There are plenty of buyers in New York for cut-rate gems. He found one willing to pay cash. I imagine finding an arms dealer willing to take his cash was no great difficulty, either.”

“Andra, why?” Nyk asked. “Why would Zander do this?”

“Revenge ... To avenge Gunder.”

“Gunder?” Nyk asked. “To avenge Gunder Baxa? Andra, I knew him when he worked for the Food Service. No one ever did harm to him.”

“No, Nyk,” Kronta said. “About thirty-five years ago, a junta seized control of the Lexal colony. Gunder Baxa was that regime's security chief. The junta was deposed by a political alliance led by one Zygon Vellod ... and by Mykko Wygann. Gunder was exiled.”

“He came to Floran and slipped into the Sudalese population,” Nyk said. “I never knew, and I'm sure neither did my dad. What did Zander say of revenge?”

“He said Mykko and Lexal were in for a surprise,” Andra replied. “Lexal will soon have a new princess.”

“This gives us a primary hypothesis,” Kronta said. “Wygann deposed the junta and forced Zander's father into exile. Zander is arming Wygann's forces on Lexal. He intends a double-cross to turn those forces against Wygann. Zander wants to establish himself as chancellor, and he'd have his own princess bride at his side.”

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“That's too ambitious a project for one man,” Seymor replied.

“That's where Altia comes in,” Nyk said. “The ricin affair started on Altia. The Altians want independence, and the ricin plot was an attempt to draw attention to their cause. Zander's been spending time on Altia. Let's suppose the Altians are providing personnel and materiel. Once Zander seizes control of Lexal, he can form an alliance with the Altian faction.”

“We're looking at civil war!” Kronta exclaimed.

“How unprepared are we for that,” Nyk added. “There must be an ExoService connection, too. Zander has at least one Exo cruiser at his disposal.”

“And a tie-in with Vebinad Academy,” said Kronta.

“Yes, Zander chose Andra because she's a ringer for Janna. Could it work? I thought Zander had snapped -- he'd gone crazy. This isn't madness -- it's cold, calculated ambition.”

“Thank you, Nykkyo,” Kronta said. “Thank Andra for us. This gives us what we needed.” The vidisplay went dark.

Nyk turned and stroked her hair. “Andra, now you will sleep. You will sleep until the drug frees you, and when you wake, you will have forgotten all this.” She closed her eyes and her breathing became deep and regular. Nyk kissed her forehead and resumed his seat near her. He closed his eyes and put his head back.

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Andra lay propped on the sofa, her shell across her lap as she scooped the last from a meal package. Nyk handed her a mug of green tea.

“Thanks for this,” she said handing him the empty tray. “How long was I unconscious?”

“For a while -- it's quite dark out.”

She sipped her tea. “How can you tell with the shutters down?”

He gestured toward a closed shutter. “The view port.”

“Every time I use that drug the effects are deeper and harder for me to shake off,” she replied. “I think that is Zander's intent. Did you get the information you seek?”

“Yes... unfortunately. It's a dangerous game he's playing.” Andra leaned forward and pinched her lips together. “Are you all right?”

“The drug makes me dizzy and that sometimes makes me nauseated. It'll pass -- I'll be all right.”

“I'm sorry to have put you through it, then.”

“If it helps put an end to this,” she replied, “it'll be worth it. Then you'll be free to return to your Earth woman.”

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“What becomes of you?”

Andra shrugged. “Senta has invited me to be her companion.”

“Will you accept?”

“I don't know. As I said, it's a short step from companion to whore.”

“You could do worse. Senta is an important woman with influential friends.”

“I know what I would like to do.”

“What's that?” Nyk asked.

She held up the shell. “This. I want to study the sea. I want to learn about the native life on this world. I'd like to make a career of that.”

Nyk laughed. “Why didn't I think of that -- years ago, that is? My life might've been so different.”

“Might-haves don't count.”

“They certainly don't.” Andra gulped the last of her tea and handed the mug to Nyk. “Can you stand?” he asked.

“I'll try...” Nyk helped her to her feet. “I think I want to go to bed. I'm exhausted.”

“You spent the whole day sleeping.”

“It was not a restful sleep, Nyk.”

“I'll help you upstairs.”

Nyk supported her as she climbed the steps. “I think moving around is helping me,” she said. “The vertigo is passing.”

“Is your stomach feeling better?”

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“Yes, that, too.”

They reached the bedroom on the third level. Nyk regarded the bed -- the one his mother had used. It was neatly made with a lightweight blanket. He folded it down.

“You use a cover,” he remarked.

“I got in the habit in Floran City,” she replied. “I never knew who Zander would bring in at whatever time of day or night.”

“It offers some modesty,” Nyk replied. “Senta prefers a cover, too. I grew up sleeping without one ... because of the warm climate here in Sudal. Of course on Earth it's a necessity. It can be so cold there.”

Andra fastened her oat-straw hair into a ponytail with an elastic band; then she turned from him and slipped from her tunic. Nyk scanned her back from head to foot and then averted his gaze as she slid under the cover.

“Good night, then,” he said.

“Please stay with me,” she replied, sliding to one side. “The bed is spacious enough.”

“It's my mother's bed. I've never been comfortable...”

“Do you believe her *sena* still inhabits this room?” Andra asked.

Nyk slipped from his tunic and lay beside her, gazing into her pale eyes. “I've never met anyone with your color eyes.”

“It's a desirable trait,” she replied, “and the most difficult one for the genetic counselors to isolate.”

“You have little black flecks...”

“Flaws ... nearly enough to exclude me from Vebinad. My friend Janna has perfectly clear eyes.” Andra hooked her arm around his neck,

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drew his face to hers and kissed his lips. "Nyk... I've cherished the past few days, despite the circumstances. You've been a perfect gentleman ... so kind ... so caring ... so healing. Nyk -- I love you."

"Andra... I know. I can tell you do. I'm privileged to know you and to be your friend ... your *amfta*."

"I know you're trying hard not to love me back. It would mean so much to me to hear you say you love me -- just a bit."

"I can't be your lover, Andra. I've promised my heart to..."

"...to your Earth woman."

"Yes, to Suki."

She caressed his cheek. "Isn't there room in that big heart of yours for a little love for me? Just a little?"

Nyk closed his eyes and turned away. "Andra I don't know how to resolve this. Suki is the one true love of my life. I hadn't counted on falling in love with you, too. Yes, Andra -- I do love you."

"Nothing we have need threaten what you and Sukiko share," she replied. "True love is generous."

"I wish I knew how to resolve this. I wish I knew what to do."

"I know what you must do. When this is over you must go to her."

"I can't believe you'd willingly send me into the arms of another."

"Yes, willingly. I love you too much to bear to see you unhappy, and I know your happiness depends on you being reunited with your Earth woman. I can feel the depth of your love for her. You do a poor job of concealing your feelings, Nyk. If you knew my happiness depended on being with another, would you stand in my way?"

"Of course not."

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“Then go to her, Nyk. I hope to meet her some day. A friend of yours is a friend of mine.”

Nyk heard his name. For a moment he couldn't recognize his surroundings. Slowly, in the dim light, he began to distinguish the furnishings of his mother's bedroom. Andra was beside him and shaking him. “Nyk, wake up. I thought I heard something.”

He arose and switched on the ambient lighting. “What time is it?”

“Nadir-one,” she replied. He slipped into his tunic and led her to the lower level. “There it is again,” she whispered.

Nyk approached the main entrance. He held his finger to his lips and cocked an ear toward the door. “Go shut yourself into your room! Someone's trying to scan their way into the house.”

Andra hustled up the stairs and pulled the door shut. Nyk could hear the exterior scanpad chirping. He pressed his finger against the actuator and the door opened. “Hello, Nykkyo.” A figure in Earth military fatigues stepped through the doorway and presented his wrist. Nyk demurred. “You wouldn't happen to know where a certain someone is hiding, would you? I know she's here, Nyk. I came for her. She's a critical part of my plan.” Zander walked into the lower level and headed toward the stairs.

“I demand you leave this house immediately,” Nyk said.

“You're in no position to demand anything.” Zander climbed the stairs. “Who might be behind that closed door?” He rapped on it. “*Ax'amfin*, I know you're in there. Open up -- I'm not leaving without you and you can't stay there forever.” He rapped on the door again.

The door unlocked with a snap and he pulled it open. Andra emerged and glowered at him. “I'm not going with you.” She stood beside Nyk and held onto his arm. “You don't own me.”

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“How pathetic you look, clinging to him.”

“Nykkyo's a fine man. He's kind and considerate. You never showed me kindness.”

“I showed you discipline. You'd be wise to cling to me. Unlike him, I have potential. Discipline is what I need to achieve it.”

“He's been protecting me.”

“Scant protection he'd offer you. This house is a good place to hide, though. I'll grant him that.” Zander approached Andra. “Come along, *ax'amfin*. I thought you knew better than to run away.”

She held onto Nyk. “I'm not going with you. I've tasted my freedom.”

“You weren't created to be free -- you were created to serve. What's the motto of your school? 'To do one's duty.' Do your duty, *ax'amfin*.”

“Nyk and I are *amften* -- we love each other.”

Darkness spread across Zander's face. “You love each other?” He stood squarely before Nyk. “*Amften* ... you screwed my *ax'amfin*, didn't you? Without my permission.” Nyk swallowed hard. Zander curled his lip. “Of course you did -- she stinks of you. That's totally against the rules. No one touches her without my permission.” He lifted his hand to strike Andra. “And you. You know the rules better than anyone.” She stood and faced him, holding Nyk's hand. Zander lowered his fist. “No. I mustn't damage her,” he muttered. “She's too valuable.” He turned to Nyk. “You, I can damage.”

Nyk felt Zander's fist jab into his stomach. He doubled over, the wind knocked out of him. “No one touches her, remember that. Now, *ax'amfin*, you're coming with me. There's an Exo scout in orbit. We mustn't keep them waiting.”

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“Neither of us are going anywhere with you.” Nyk said, straightening.

“I’ll die first!” Andra exclaimed.

“That’s rather uncharacteristic language from you. No, you’ll come and you’ll come willingly. My beautiful *ax’amfin*. You dreamt of glamour on a far-off colony. I could never give you that. Come with me now and you can have something very close.”

“Never!”

“We’ll see about that.” Zander reached into a pocket and withdrew an injector loaded with a green cartridge. He held it toward her. “Inject yourself.”

“I will not.”

“You must crave punishment. Inject yourself!”

Andra glanced across the room. Nyk followed her eyes and saw her *lifxarpa* draped across a sofa. She started toward Zander.

“No, Andra,” Nyk shouted. “Don’t!”

“I have no choice. The more I defy him, the worse his punishment.” She took the injector, pulled off the needle guard and flashed a glance at Nyk. She jabbed the injector into her thigh, through the fabric of her tunic. Nyk heard it discharge with a snap.

“Do you see, Nykkyo? Not only are the *ax’amfinen* beautiful, they’re smart. She just did a very smart thing.” Zander waited for the drug to seize her. Andra’s eyes glazed and her eyelids drooped. Her jaw went slack, and she dropped the spent injector. “Andra, *zidev m’obe*. Her will’s not her own, Nyk. It belongs to me. Andra, jump.” She began jumping up and down. “She’ll continue until I command her to stop.”

“I believe you,” Nyk said.

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“Andra, stop. She knows better than to disobey. She's unable to. Andra, you have a terrible, pounding headache.” She dropped to her knees, grasped her head and moaned. “The headache's gone.” She stood.

“Nykkyo, the thought of you and her disgusts me. I can't imagine you screwing my woman. I can barely imagine you and that scrawny redhead of yours. I must punish her -- she knows the rules.” He regarded Nyk. “Perhaps not.” Zander stroked his chin. “I wouldn't have to if it wasn't consensual ... Andra, you and he. It wasn't consensual. Tell me he forced himself on you.”

“He forced himself on me.” Her voice was flat and monotonic.

“You don't have to do this, Zander,” Nyk said.

“Tell me he raped you.”

“He raped me.”

“Don't punish her. She's suffered enough.”

“I'll punish you. You'll see where her loyalties truly lie. Andra, you hate him for this. Tell him.”

She approached Nyk with anger in her eyes. “I hate you!”

“Drug-induced loyalty,” Nyk replied. “I've seen her free from your evil mix.”

“Evil mix, how dramatic ... With each dose my control over her is more complete. Soon, I won't need the drug to command her.” He turned toward her. “Andra, spit in his eye.”

She spat in Nyk's face. “I hate you,” she screamed.

“Andra, *zidev m'obe*,” Nyk said. “Listen to me, obey me, not him!”

Zander laughed. “Nice try. She won't, she can't. Her will's mine. Andra, show him more how you hate him.”

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She slapped Nyk across his face, nearly knocking him off balance. He touched his cheek and could feel it swelling.

“You hate him enough to kill him with your bare hands. Kill him!”

“I’ll kill you.” She grasped Nyk around the neck and pressed her thumbs into his windpipe. His knees buckled. He grabbed at her forearms. She tightened her grip and his vision began to go grey.

“Stop,” Zander said. Andra released her grip. Nyk fell to the floor, gasped and felt his throat. “Andra, I can understand your hatred, but we mustn’t take justice into our own hands. We’ll convene a tribunal aboard the scout. I’ll be the judge and you’ll be the prosecutor. We’ll listen to the evidence, convict him, and then you can kill him. Nykkyo, you’re under arrest. I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me.” Nyk made a run for the staircase. “Not so fast,” Zander said and jumped toward him.

Nyk picked up the cephalopod shell and began swinging it in Zander’s direction. Zander ducked. Nyk backed away and swung the shell again. Zander ducked, but on the back swing Nyk connected and Zander’s temple oozed blood.

Zander shook his head and felt his injury. “You continue to surprise me, Nyk.” Zander pressed toward him. Nyk backed away and stumbled over a footstool. Zander lunged at him but Nyk planted the pointed end of the shell into the upholstery. The open end caught Zander in the solar plexus and he doubled over. Nyk scrambled to his feet and ran for a vidisplay.

Zander stood and headed for him. Nyk grasped the small end of the shell with both hands, lined it up with Zander’s head, lifted it and brought it down. Zander dodged and it grazed his shoulder. He grabbed Nyk’s wrist and bent it backwards. He dropped the shell.

Nyk wrenched free from Zander, hopped over a bench and snatched Andra’s *lifxarpa*. He located the injector. Zander grabbed Nyk’s arm and pressed a thumb into a tendon. Nyk’s hand opened and the

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injector dropped. Zander picked it up. "What's this? Andra, catch!" He tossed the injector to her. "Dispose of this."

Andra acknowledged with a snap of her head and headed for the waste reprocessor. Zander withdrew another injector. He grasped the needle guard in his teeth, pulled it off and spat it out. "Careful of this one, Nyk. It's poison."

Nyk backed away from Zander and found himself in a corner. Zander advanced and touched the tip of the needle to Nyk's arm. "Don't move or you'll feel this. Andra, there's a shuttlecar parked outside. Under the seat is a polymer case. Fetch it here." She started down the staircase. Nyk tried to edge away. Zander shook his head. "Don't, Nyk."

Andra appeared at the top of the stairs and handed the case to Zander. "Now, down on the floor, Nyk. Face down." Nyk lay on the floor. Zander began flipping through a collection of injector cartridges in the case. "Here we are. Don't worry, Nyk. This one's only a sedative, but a strong one. Something to make you a bit more cooperative." Nyk started to squirm away. "Careful, Nyk. Which one do you want?" Zander removed an injector from the case, flipped it open, cocked the roller, inserted the cartridge and snapped the gadget shut. He grasped the needle guard in his teeth and pulled it off. Nyk felt Zander lift the hem of his tunic to expose his buttock.

He eyed the point Zander held to his arm. The other needle bit into his backside. In the periphery of his vision caught some motion, and he tried not to betray what he saw. Andra was approaching Zander from behind. Something she held glinted in a shaft of light. She jabbed Zander's shoulder, and Nyk heard the snap of an injector's discharge.

"Aahhh!" Zander exclaimed, stood and dropped the injector. He started to grab for his shoulder, but fell like a board to the floor and began convulsing. His head thrashed from side to the side, his tongue slipped out and he began to froth at the mouth. He made a gurgle and was still, eyes staring at the ceiling.

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Nyk removed the undischarged injector from his rear and sat up. He glanced at Zander's lifeless body, averted his gaze and pinched his lips together.

Andra knelt and threw her arms around him. "Oh, Nykkyo, I hope I didn't hurt you! I had to make it look real." She peppered his cheek and neck with kisses.

"You made it real enough. I was convinced and so was he. How did you know to do that?"

"Colonial politics is serious business, and that's the assignment Vebinad Academy trains us for."

"They must've also taught you acting... How did you overcome his drug mixture?"

She smiled, lifted the hem of her tunic, and showed him a green splotch on her thigh near a cut where the needle grazed her skin. He stood and embraced her and she lay her head against his shoulder.

"His post-hypnotic directive -- how did you overcome that?"

She looked into his eyes. "I don't know ... I ... I saw him threatening you and I knew I had to stop him." She pointed to the spent injector, still embedded in Zander's flesh. "I was saving it for me."

Nyk placed a vidphone call to Internal Affairs and was told a skimmer was being dispatched. The vidisplay began signaling an incoming call. He answered with a wristscan.

Senta's image appeared in the vidisplay. Her hair was disheveled and she had a bruise under one eye.

"Nykkyo! Oh, Nykkyo, quick! Zander's on his way there -- he came here looking for Andra. I heard the chime, opened the door and there he was -- he forced himself in and ransacked the apartment. He asked me where Andra was -- I wouldn't tell him -- he came after me

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with an injector. We struggled and he overpowered me -- he injected me and I lost all my will." She began crying. "I told him Andra was in Sudal at the Residence -- I couldn't help myself -- I tried, but I couldn't keep from telling him! I know he's headed there -- he's after her. Do something! Hide her -- send her away!"

"You're too late."

"Oh, no! Don't tell me he took Andra!" She buried her face in her hands and began sobbing. "He'll kill her, or she'll kill herself. She said she'd die before returning to him, and I believe her. I can't bear it. Poor, poor Andra, it's all my fault," she wept. "I talked her into running away. I don't know how I'll live with myself. I love her so much."

"No, Senta. Zander's dead. Andra killed him with nerve toxin." Nyk beckoned Andra to the vidisplay and stood back.

"I'm all right, Senta."

"Oh, Andra, thank goodness, thank goodness! I'm coming to Sudal. I'll be on the next train. I'm so happy you're all right, and I'm so happy you're finally free from that horrid, horrid man."

Andra turned her shoulder to the vidisplay and touched the diamond- shaped Baxa wedding crest tattoo. "No, Senta. I'll never be free from him."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Senta, you shouldn't come down here until we get the all clear from Seymor," Nyk said. "It may not be safe. I'll call once I hear from him."

"Do you promise you'll call?"

"I promise." The vidphone window went black.

Andra stooped, picked up the shell and held it to her bosom. They climbed the spiral staircase to the trapdoor in the roof. Nyk pushed it

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opened and they stepped onto the flat observation deck in the center of roof and looked toward Sudal. Starlight illuminated the countryside to full-moon brightness.

“I can't believe you had the presence of mind to do what you did. I'm useless in a fight.”

“You were wonderful, Nyk. We defeated him together.”

“So you didn't really inject yourself all those times.”

“Cooperation was better than punishment. The academy taught us one lesson above all others. The first order of business is survival. I cooperated to survive.” He felt her arm around his waist. “I'd never have gone back to him, not after tasting my freedom. Senta's right -- I'd have used that toxin on myself, first. I'd have used it eagerly.”

Nyk pointed toward a large skimmer approaching in the distance. It set down beside Zander's shuttlecar and a squad of men emerged. They were armed with stunners and wore sashes identifying them as Internal Affairs officers.

Nyk led Andra down the spiral staircase. He stood by the main entrance and met the officers. “This way,” he directed them up to the main living level.

An officer gestured toward Zander's body. “From the look of it, he died a rather unpleasant death.”

“ID him.”

An officer approached Zander's body with a portable scanpad and held it to his right wrist. The scanpad chirped as it read the ID chip in his metacarpal bone. The officer looked at the scanpad. “The ID comes back for Frax Hawryt.”

“That's impossible!” Nyk exclaimed. “This is Zander Baxa, no doubt.” He lifted Zander's left wrist and pointed to scars. He showed the

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officer those on his own wrist. "Zander and I made these marks on each other as boys. It was our bonding ritual."

The officer consulted his handheld vidisplay. "We are requested to bring Frax Hawryt in for questioning. It seems he disappeared from Exo-401 over a year ago." He touched the screen. "Zander Baxa is wanted, dead or alive, for his involvement in the Ricin Plot."

"Do you have a photoimage of Frax?" Nyk asked.

The officer manipulated the vidisplay. An image appeared and he compared it with the body on the floor. "The resemblance is close -- quite close. We'll take him for positive genetic identification. Until that's done, I'll ask you two please not to leave Sudal."

"We're not leaving this house," Nyk replied.

The officers put Zander's body onto a levitating pallet and loaded it onto the skimmer. The skimmer lifted off.

Nyk led Andra to the house's control screen. He scanned his wrist, touched the screen and scanned his wrist again. "Scan yours," he directed. She pressed her wrist to the scanpad and it chirped. "Now only you or I can open that door." He touched the screen again and the door slid shut and latched.

Nyk heated a pair of dinner packages and set one in front of Andra. He sat at the table and opened his. "Ten days -- we've been cooped up in here with the shutters down for ten days." He held up his thumb and forefinger. "I am this close to going stark, raving mad. How can you stand it?"

She picked up the shell and put it to her ear. "I can hear the sea." She smiled. "I'm happy to be with you, Nyk."

Nyk stood. "More tea?" She nodded and he refilled her cup.

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“Senta called last night,” she said. “You were asleep. I think she's sorry for some of the things she said about you. She said she wishes you hadn't gone on that Agency assignment. Things might've been different. But might-haves don't count, do they?”

She reached across the table and took his hand. Nyk patted her forearm. “I can't believe what an idiot I was about you, Andra. You and I might've been good friends.”

“We are now, aren't we?”

“Yes, but I agonize over the time I wasted.”

The vidisplay signaled an incoming call. Nyk answered it with a wristscan. “Lad, I think the coast is clear. We've rounded up the lot of them. The assistant director of the ExoService has committed suicide. The headmistress of Vebinad Academy was detained, and has undergone interrogation.”

“With truth drug?”

“Yes, lad. She wasn't very cooperative, so she was transported to T- Delta. The authorities there are less squeamish about using truth agent. She became very cooperative once they started pumping the drug into her.”

“What was the Service head's role?”

“He was a double agent for the Altian faction. He arranged communication and transportation for the ricin plotters, and he recruited the crew manning the Exo scout. Zander was his right-hand man. The Vebinad headmistress was also his.”

“There's our link to the academy,” Nyk replied.

“Yes -- her cousin was one of those executed five years ago. The commander of ExoScout 327 has been detained. The Service overseer in

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charge of the 300-class Scouts has disavowed any knowledge and the commander is being permitted to twist in the breeze.”

“Tell me I'm not crazy, Seymor -- that was Zander.”

“No doubt. Internal Affairs made a positive genetic match.”

“What of the man whose identity he assumed?”

“Good question, lad. Frax Hawryt went AWOL from a 400-series Exo cruiser a year ago during a port-of-call. His shipmates said he had an assignation scheduled on Lexal.”

“So, Zander seduced him for his identity chip. Who looks at faces these days?”

“Zander could assume either identity at will.”

“What of Mykko Wygann and the weapons?” Nyk asked.

“Wygann has issued the following statement: 'I can with complete honesty categorically deny that anyone in my administration has received weapons from Earth or from anywhere else. Lexal is a peaceful colony, and the Lexalese a peaceful people.

'I can speak without encumbrance on behalf of the Lexalese colonial legislature and the Lexalese people. We deplore the transshipment of weaponry anywhere within the Floran hegemony, and we sincerely hope the perpetrators are captured and punished.' He also stated the man who visited Zander's apartment, one Rud Vadima, left his administration two years ago and his current whereabouts are unknown.”

“Do you believe that?” Nyk asked.

“I don't know what to believe. I do know the trail goes cold after Lexal, so it may have been a transshipment point.”

“Or Wygann's lying.”

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“It wouldn't be the first time a politician lied.”

“And Andra?” Nyk asked.

“Innocent -- or, an expert at covering her trail. It's something *ax'amfinen* are taught at the finishing schools. Her information was very useful -- she has the thanks of the Service.”

“I have a better opinion of those schools after this,” Nyk said. “Andra was taught some survival skills, and she outsmarted Zander in the end. I think the Service owes her something. She's been through a terrible ordeal and for no reason other than she was born with certain physical traits. ExoAgents take care of each other. We should take care of Andra.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Sudal University is establishing a sea research center. She'd like to be part of it.”

“I'll put in a word with the university. I think we can work something out. What next for you, lad?”

“I'm holding you to your assurances that I can have transit to Earth.”

“What are your plans here?”

“I have none, except to get there. I'll figure out my next move, then.”

“Nyk, you'll receive a commendation for this. I'm authorized to reactivate you as an Agent in good standing. Once you arrive here, be sure to stop by the office. I've an assignment that could occupy you nearly full time, if you're interested.”

“I'll think about it.”

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“Seize the opportunity when you can, lad. These assignments don't come along too often.” The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk touched the house control screen. The storm shutters flung open, filling the house with golden sunlight. He opened his arms to Andra and embraced her. “It's over.”

“Now you're headed to Earth, to Sukiko. Go to her, Nyk, and fulfill your destiny.”

“If I could take you to Earth with me, I would.”

“If I could go with you, I would,” she replied.

“Oh, Andra -- I hate the notion of losing a friend like you.”

“You're not. We'll never lose each other so long as we can communicate. That's what love is -- it's communication, and I know ours with Earth work well. You and I are friends and lovers for life, Nyk -- no matter where either of us may be.”

“Would you like to take a walk on the beach with me?” He took her hand and headed toward the bluff.

17 -- A Unique Laboratory

Nykkyo stood on the middle level of the Residence looking down the access road. He saw a groundcar approaching and he recognized Senta's red hair. He watched the car pull to a stop outside the main entrance. Senta removed her case from the luggage compartment and headed up the spiral staircase. She stopped. "Hello, Nykkyo."

"Senta, I screwed up again, didn't I?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what to think of you, now." She proceeded up the staircase and embraced Andra. "Oh, Andra, I'm so happy you're safe. Now you can lead a normal life. I can't wait till you're back in your apartment in the City. Or maybe you'd like to move in with me. My place is much nicer than that hovel of Zander's."

"I'm not returning to the City. I'll be putting Zander's apartment back to Central Admin. I'm staying here."

"Here?"

"Yes. Nykkyo showed me the beauty of the sea. I'm applying to join the sea research center at the university, here in Sudal."

Senta shook her head. "Here? In Sudal? Am I hearing you right?"

"Yes, and Nyk said I could use this house."

She glowered at Nyk. "You're letting her use this house?"

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“For as long as she wants. It's too nice to remain shuttered up -- I'd rather see the place used. I've asked Central Admin to convert it, eventually, into a center for sea research, and to name it after my father. It's a fitting tribute to him.”

“What're your plans, Nykkyo?”

“I'm returning to Earth at the earliest possible convenience. Seymor's hinting I may be restored to good graces within the Agency.”

“So you're headed to Earth to complete your Agency tour.”

“I'm headed there to find my destiny. Senta, I know how much Andra means to you. I was hoping you and she could be together, now.”

“Well, you've certainly changed your tune since the last time I saw her. What happened to all the snide remarks, the rude comments? He never approved of you, Andra. He disliked you for reasons I couldn't fathom.”

“I was wrong about her -- and about you. I've tried to make amends.”

“Nyk and I discovered we love each other,” Andra said. “It doesn't mean I feel any less fondness for you, Senta.”

Senta's lip trembled. “Fondness! Andra, I love you! I've been worried sick about you!”

“I never knew. Why didn't you tell me?”

“All those times we spent together? How could you not know? What could I have done differently to show you?”

“I'm sorry, Senta. I was too wrapped up in my own misery. You've helped me so much. I love you like a sister.”

“I love you like a lover! How could you stand there and tell me you've fallen in love with a ... fool like him?”

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“Nykkyo's a fine man, and he's no fool. If he hadn't been here when Zander came looking for me... I'd be dead, now, Senta -- without a doubt.”

“I want you two to be together,” Nyk said. “I told Andra she owes herself the chance for you to show her how you truly feel.”

“He did indeed say that,” Andra added.

“Why don't I heat some dinners?” Nyk suggested. “We can all take a walk on the bluff after dinner and then sleep on it. We might as well start working out sleeping arrangements. I'm using my old room and Andra's been using my mom's.”

“I'll use the other room upstairs.”

“I'll put your case up there.” Nyk picked up Senta's case and took it to the third level. He descended the stairs and began heating meal packages. He set them on the kitchen table. Senta glowered at him.

“If you and Andra would like to sleep together tonight, please do so,” he said.

Senta's expression toward him softened. “Thank you, Nyk. Andra, would you sleep with me?”

“I'd love to.”

Nyk lay in his childhood bed. He could hear, vaguely, Senta and Andra talking together in the room above his. He tried to fall asleep. The conversation from above was replaced by the muffled sounds of lovemaking. He couldn't stand it any longer.

He arose, descended to the lower level and walked out onto the bluff and down the slope to his bowl-shaped depression. He lay nude on the sand and looked up at the stars. His gaze caught the sight of a bright white star with four dimmer companions tracing a lopsided rectangle in

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the sky. Why, as a child, had he never heard his parents' lovemaking? He closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

Dawn awoke him. Nyk walked up the bluff and into the house. He showered, dressed and began brewing a pot of green tea. Andra came into the kitchen drying her hair.

She opened her arms. "Good morning," she said. He hugged and kissed her.

"Andra, I heard you and Senta last night."

"I'm sorry we disturbed you."

"That's not it. I heard you and it upset me. It shouldn't have, but it did. Certainly you're entitled to have whomever you wish as your *amfta* ... I'm sorry... I'm sounding like I'm jealous. I must be developing Earth attitudes."

Andra presented her cup and Nyk filled it. "Senta doesn't want me just as her *amfta*." She sipped from her cup. "She asked me to be her *amfin*."

"Senta wants you as her live-in companion ... her bound lover?"

"Yes. She and I have different needs, Nyk. Mine is for a roof over my head. As Zander's widow I have few options. If I were Senta's *amfin* I'd have some rights and some security."

"You're not seriously considering that, are you?" Nyk asked.

"I'd be foolish not to."

He shook his head. "You do know why she's asking this of you ... don't you?"

"Of course I do. I can read Senta's motives quite plainly."

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“You don't have to, Andra. My offer stands -- you're free to use this house. Suppose you're accepted into the sea research program? That would give you a career with living credits.”

“Suppose I'm not. I'd still need credits to buy food. I hope I am accepted into that program. If not ... at least with Senta, I won't be a ward of the state.”

“But, you'd be a kept woman. Is that any different than Zander?”

“Senta is not Zander, Nyk.” Andra glanced toward the stairway and made a hand signal that said, she's coming.

Senta walked into the kitchen wearing a light, sleeveless robe. She walked over to Andra and embraced her. “Good morning,” Nyk said.

“Nyk, who's the Food Service Ag Director these days?”

“Dyoman Hasse.”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, I've known him since I was a boy. He was an assistant head when my dad was in charge. Why?”

“Would you be kind enough to arrange a meeting between him and myself? As soon as possible.”

“He's your peer, Senta. You should be able to arrange such a meeting.”

“You've known him longer. I'd rather you set it up.”

“Whatever you want.” Nyk began scrolling through directory listings on a vidisplay. “It's been years since I've spoken to him ... He can meet with us this afternoon, is that soon enough?”

“Fine, thank you.”

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Nyk returned to his teacup at the kitchen table. “So who sleeps with whom tonight?”

“You and Senta should have a night together,” Andra said. “Maybe you'd like to catch up.”

“Senta, would you sleep with me tonight?”

“I'll sleep with you but don't you even think about lovemaking.”

The groundcar pulled up to the Food Service complex and parked. Nyk and Senta walked into the building and approached a receptionist. “Dyoman Hasse is expecting us.”

Shortly the Food Service director and a woman walked into the lobby. “Nykkyo, good to see you again,” Hasse said. “Senta, I'm delighted to meet you in person. It's not everyday one has the chance to greet a holder of the Chancellor's Medallion.” He embraced them both. “How's the exobotany business, Nyk?”

“I've been working on a project that's ... had nothing to do with plants.”

“This is my wife, Ryanna. Let's go back.” They headed for his office. “Senta, I hope this is in regard to my last memo.”

“Yes, Dyoman, it is.”

“Memo? Have you two been corresponding?”

“Yes. For the past couple of years, I've been needling Senta about the wisdom of moving the sequencing labs here to Sudal. I knew if I kept hammering away, sooner or later we'd see some results.”

“Really?” Nyk replied. “What a great idea! I'm surprised neither of us thought of it before.” Senta gave him a withering look.

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“Nyk, Ryanna is head of plant breeding for potatoes. I was hoping you could take some time to discuss a problem she's been struggling with. She'd like the opinion of an exobotanist. Maybe you and she can talk while Senta and I negotiate our little project.”

“Why don't we talk in my office?” Ryanna suggested and led him down a corridor. She was a large woman in early middle age with short reddish-blond hair, a round face and intensely blue eyes. Nyk took a seat in her cluttered office. “I don't know if you've heard, but we've had another native microbe invasion. It's the third in two years. We had to destroy an entire agridome's worth of potatoes and then sterilize the dome.” Nyk winced. “Fortunately it was one of our smaller facilities.”

“Have you identified the microbe?”

“Yes, and this one's turning out to be extremely difficult. We've had good luck in the past making subtle genetic changes, but this one hasn't responded. I was hoping you could give us a hand.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“We have a fairly extensive collection of potato cultures, some going back a couple hundred years. So far, we haven't found a single variety that's resistant to this microbe. We're about to start investigating cross-species gene splicing. I thought you might give us some starting points.”

“Potatoes are members of the *solanaceae* or nightshade family. Many nightshade species are toxic. Perhaps we can find some likely specimens there. Also, if you can get me a list of all the related cultures you have, I'll cross-reference them with plant suppliers and see if we can get the ball rolling. I'll also speak to Seymor about getting some help on the ground on Earth.”

Nyk walked back to Dyoman's office where Senta was completing her conversation. “Thank you Senta,” Hasse said. “I'm sure this will work out.”

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“Nice seeing you again, Nyk,” said Ryanna.

Nyk escorted Senta outside into the midday heat and popped open the groundcar. “I heard Ryanna say, 'Nice seeing you again,’” Senta said. “How do you know her?”

“She used to baby-sit me when I was little. I hadn't realized she married Dyoman.” Nyk brought up a list of destinations on the car's display. “Home? Or do you have somewhere else you'd like to go?”

“Home. It'll take me some time to be accustomed to Sudal as home.”

“Car, the Residence.”

“By the way, Nykkyo, you can dispense with the gloating.”

“Who's gloating? You made the right decision, even if you did it for the wrong reason.”

“What do you mean the wrong reason? It's simply become a necessity due to the logistics of working with the pilot beds, especially now we've added more crops to our sequencing schedules.”

“The fact this decision came on the heels of Andra's freedom is nothing more than a coincidence?”

“Yes, a happy coincidence for me, but a coincidence nonetheless. Now, I'm going to do you a favor and forget I heard you say that.”

The groundcar left the Sudal city limits and headed toward the coast. “How are you going to solve all the problems of relocating?” he asked.

“What problems?”

“The laundry list of reasons you give me every time I suggest moving the labs. For example, the staffing problem.”

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“Dyoman says we will have no trouble finding the necessary staffing. Some of the City based staff will relocate. We'll make it attractive for them. A few have homes here and will be happy to move ... Don't you dare say it!”

“Say what?”

“Don't you dare say I told you so. Nykkyo, we are doing this for the good of the program and it'll involve sacrifice on the part of everyone, not the least myself.”

Nyk lay nude on his childhood bed. Senta entered his bedroom wearing her light, sleeveless robe. She looked around in the subdued light. “No cover?” she asked.

“There's one in the closet if you must.” Senta retrieved a lightweight blanket and spread it on the bed, folding it back above Nyk's waist. She slipped off her robe, climbed into the bed and lay beside Nyk. “You have beautiful eyes, Senta.”

“I mean it, Nykkyo -- don't you even think about it. If you lay a hand on me, I'll kick your ass straight to the edge of that bluff and down onto the rocks!”

Nyk cracked a smile. Senta smiled and they both laughed.

“Would you let me rub your back?” he asked.

“You'd rub my back?” She rolled over onto her stomach. He sat up and began stroking her back between her shoulder blades. “That feels good... You used to do this after we made love...”

“Yes, to compensate for being a rotten lover.”

“I never said you were a rotten lover.”

“You never had to say it, I knew it.”

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“You've improved over the years...”

“Yes, under your tutelage. You're qualified to give master lessons in lovemaking. I'm afraid I shall forever be a novice.” He made strokes down the length of her spine with the heel of his hand. “I wanted this time with you, Senta, because we have some important things to discuss.”

“Yes, we do. Nykkyo, I'd like for us to consider reconciliation. I know you'll have responsibilities on Earth with the Agency. But you, Andra and I can make this work. There's plenty of room at this house, for the times your onworld. And when you're offworld -- if you'd like to maintain the occasional liaison with the Earth woman... I'll look the other way.”

“Andra? What does she have to do with this?”

“She's more than willing to be our *amfin*.”

“Has Andra agreed? I understood she was merely considering it ... as a last resort.”

“She will agree to it, I'm confident... Especially if you're in the equation, Nyk.”

“Me?”

“I've seen how you two interact. Believe me, I'm as surprised as anyone, but there's no denying it. I'm sure Andra wouldn't refuse you.”

“I figure THAT's the reason you want a reconciliation.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Senta -- you have all the trappings of a position of power. You have a luxury apartment in Floran City ... your personal skimmer ... assistants at your beck and call... There's only one thing you lack, and that's an *ax'amfin* consort. You want me as a way to have Andra.”

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“How dare you!” Her eyes reddened. “Have you totally discounted the notion that I might actually still care for you?”

“Not totally... Senta, do you know that, when you get upset and your face gets red -- it makes your eyes look even greener?”

“You do enjoy upsetting me, don't you?”

“I do not.”

Senta clamped shut her eyes and pursed her lips. “To demonstrate my sincerity I'm going to forget I heard your hurtful words, Nykkyo. I'm not letting you goad me into an argument. All I want is for us to return to the way we were. Andra has nothing to do with it.”

“I'm sorry, *korlyta*. It's out of the question.”

“Why? Why is it out of the question?”

“Because when I make transit to Earth, it'll be a one-way trip. I'll be Earthbound.”

“No, Nyk! You don't mean it!”

“I do mean it. I've wrapped up my onworld affairs, and I make transit tomorrow. There I'll join Suki and fulfill my destiny as father to her child.”

“What of Andra?”

“I thought you said she had nothing to do with it. Andra fully understands why this is what I must do; and she's sending me on my mission with her blessings. If you can't comprehend... Well, maybe you should ask her to explain it to you. She has tasted her freedom, Senta; and I doubt she'll ever permit herself to be bound to you, me or to anyone. If you were to ask her to join you voluntarily, as your peer ... she might accept.”

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“This can't work, Nykkyo. You can't be a father to an Earth woman's child.”

“I love her and I've agreed to help her raise her child. This isn't a whim, Senta -- it's something I must do.”

“Do you mean the bastard child from the rape? She'll be an unwed mother. I can't believe you'd involve yourself in such! If it were I, I'd be mortified. I'd ... I'd ... Well, I'd never carry such a child. What of the line?”

“You're talking of my line. Earth attitudes on unwed mothers are far different. Destiny has put this into motion. Her child's on his way, and he needs a father. Remember, without that child, there'd be no Kyhanas. There'd be no me, and perhaps no you ... perhaps no one.”

“I did this, didn't I? You're doing this to punish me, aren't you?”

“No, Senta. You and I have never been right for each other. That became clear to me during my Agency assignment. We married because Veska wished to bind to the Kyhana line. It's the wrong reason. We should admit we made a mistake and get on with being friends. I respect you, Senta -- I admire the work you do and the person you are. I welcome you as a friend.”

“Maybe it is good you'll be Earthbound for a while. It'll give me time to sort out my feelings for you. Maybe we can work things out when you come back. I think you will return, once the reality of what you're doing sinks in.”

“Senta, there's something else. Andra told me you know something about my family line. It's something you discovered while sequencing Suki's hair.”

She raised up on her elbows. “Andra told you that? I swore her to secrecy! I'll have words with her in the morning.”

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“It's my family. I think I have the right to know what you discovered.” She sat up and turned from him. “Senta, what did you find?” She pressed her fist to her lips. “Tell me what you found.”

“Nykkyo, please try not to be too upset. Promise me you won't be upset.”

“I can't promise anything until I know what it is.”

“Nyk, I'm afraid you're not as closely related to Sukiko as I led you to believe.”

“You said the probability of ancestry was eighty-five to ninety percent.”

“I said that probability applied to Sukiko's ancestry to Gordo Kyhana.”

“He lived over three thousand Floran years ago. Tell me the whole story, Senta.”

“Nyk, I'm speaking as a geneticist. When you delivered Sukiko's hair to me, I realized I had a unique opportunity to study how human genes mutate and become diluted through the generations. It's not every day a scientist is handed such a laboratory. I thought I had the raw material for a very interesting publication in the Genetics Journal.

“My plan was to use Sukiko's genetic sequence as a baseline. We have no sequencing data to fill the gap between Sukiko and Gordo, or even Koichi and Gordo, but the records are complete from Gordo on. I wanted to try applying to humans the techniques I developed for tracking genetic changes in our food crops.

“I began comparing genetic markers from Gordo onward, with the intent of extrapolating the changes back to Sukiko. I was especially interested in estimating exactly when the Japanese racial traits vanished. With the extrapolated data, I could reconstruct the likely appearance of any generation of Kyhana between Sukiko and Gordo.”

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“When you visited Suki in the clinic, you wanted to see for yourself her physical characteristics. It was for your research, wasn't it?”

She nodded. “Nykkyo, contact with her is a unique opportunity. It's much more rare than once in a lifetime -- it's once in a people's lifetimes.” She sniffed. “You are so lucky, I am so envious of you!”

“Senta, there's no reason you can't be friends with Suki, too.”

“No? Do you think so?”

“She'd probably welcome it. When you did the sequencing, what did you find?”

“The data all looked promising. I had nearly perfect correlation. Then the endpoint wouldn't fit. It was an obvious outlier.”

“The endpoint? Do you mean me? Am I the endpoint, the outlier?”

“Yes, Nyk. At first I thought I made a mistake. I double-checked, and obtained the same result. I started working backward from your sequence. I didn't have to look far.”

“Senta, can you explain what this means in language I can comprehend?” Her lip trembled and her eyes began to fill. “Senta, tell me what this means.”

“Nyk, you're not the biological son of Xarvo Kyhana. I'm so, so sorry.”

Nyk began to hyperventilate. He closed his eyes, clenched his fist and pressed it to his lips. “Who is my father?” Senta wiped tears from her eyes. “Senta, tell me who my father is!”

“I don't know.”

“How could you not know? You didn't do a search and find out?”

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“No, Nyk, it's not that simple. There's a good reason the family lines follow the paternal side. We can index the male side easily by tracing the Y chromosome. It's the only chromosome guaranteed to pass from father to son, and it changes little from generation to generation. You're a freak of nature -- you suffer atypical female syndrome. You don't possess a Y chromosome, so I had to sequence you as if you were a woman. On the female side, it's much more a game of statistics. There are billions of possible combinations, and billions of candidates. It's not practical to perform a statistical match on them all. If we could narrow it down, it'd be much easier.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” Senta sniffed. “Senta, why didn't you tell me?”

“Because I figured what you didn't know wouldn't hurt you. I knew how much it meant to you to be a Kyhana, with the crest and Koichi's journal and all. It doesn't matter. Xarvo and Jylla Kyhana took out your birth license, so legally you are a Kyhana and nothing can take that from you. You're the same Nykkyo today as you were yesterday. It really doesn't matter who your biological father was.”

“It matters to me! How dare you assume what matters and doesn't matter when it's my family and my genes?”

“I'm sorry, Nyk,” she sobbed. “I didn't want to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you. I do love you. You probably don't believe that, right now, but I do. Oh, Nykkyo, I don't want to lose you.” He pulled away from her as she reached toward him.

Nyk stood and walked, nude, down the spiral staircase and onto the bluff. He sat on a rock, listening to the sound of the surf wash in below him. He heard Senta from behind. “Nyk, please, please. I'm so sorry! Please come back to bed!”

He let the sound of the surf drown out her words.

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Nyk felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Andra, clutching her shell. “You've been here all night?” He nodded. “I heard you and Senta talking last night. Now, she's not speaking to me. Did it have to do with the hair?”

“Yes, it did. She told me I'm not my father's son.”

“Who is your father?”

“She said she doesn't know. I believe her. What she knows for sure is I am not a Kyhana.”

“This frees you for Sukiko!”

“It denies me what I thought was my heritage. I've known Destiny is cruel, and now I know just how cruel She can be. My father likely possessed the same Y-chromosome as the fetus in Suki's womb. To think that same chromosome had been passed along the generations for nearly seven thousand Floran years. For two hundred generations, all the Kyhana men have shared that same chromosome. Except me.” He picked up a rock, threw it into the surf and buried his face in his hands. “The Kyhana line starts with Suki's unborn child, and it ended, vaporized, in the shuttle crash. I'm an outsider looking in.”

He felt Andra caress his back. “We all must share some Kyhana blood. Each of us is the offspring of the original thousand settlers, and we know of the interbreeding in the early years.”

He looked up at her. “It's ironic -- there's a good chance you're more closely related to Sukiko than I am.”

“Nyk, we're all cousins.”

“In a way, I was expecting something like this. Two hundred generations leaves plenty of room for hanky-panky. I was expecting to find the Kyhana line broken, genetically. That's what I thought Senta's discovery was. To learn it was broken by my own parents.” He threw another rock.

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“They never told me. That's what hurts. If they had told me from the beginning, I could've dealt with it. Instead, they led me on. Everyone led me on, because no one wanted to hurt me.” He stood and faced her. “Look at me. Am I as dim and naive and weak as everyone surrounding me must believe?”

“I think you're a fine man. I salute the strength and courage you have to do what you're about to do.”

“Courage?”

“Yes, Nyk. You're leaving your home to spend your life in an alien culture. We were taught at the academy never to question an assignment, but to do our duty and to make the best of whatever situation we encountered. Destiny has given you this assignment. If, indeed, your duty is to love Sukiko and her child to secure the Kyhana line, then you will be a hero and untold billions will owe you their lives -- including me.”

“I feel so unlike a hero.” He stood and walked, his hand laced with hers, toward the house. He stopped to regard the memorial plaque. “‘They loved the sea nearly as deeply as they loved each other.’ That's a bald-faced lie. We tell such lies about the dead. My parents didn't love each other.”

“How do you know?”

“You're looking at the living proof. I am the issue of an adulterous liaison. A deliberate, adulterous liaison.”

“Are you sure?”

“Beyond a doubt.”

“How? How do you know you weren't ... conceived from a sperm bank?”

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“Because of my defect. No one would design a child with atypical female syndrome. A genetic counselor would've seen the trait and culled out my embryo. I am a natural child and not my father's. That's how I know it's a lie.” He approached the plaque and attempted to work his fingernails under it. “I'd like to pry it off that stone and fling it into the sea.” He picked up a small stone, threw it at the plaque and it bounced off. “Veska had that made, and I installed it. Such lies... Veska!”

Nyk walked into the house. He saw Senta sitting at a vidisplay annotating crop sequencing reports. His gaze focused on the Kyhana wedding crest tattoo on her arm. “Can you access birth sequences from here?”

She looked up from the display. “Yes.”

“If I name a short list of candidates, can you bring up their sequences and match them to mine?”

“Of course I can.”

“Let's start with your stepdad.”

“No, Nyk, I refuse. Don't make me do that.”

“It's my family and my genes. I must know. Bring up Veska's sequence and perform the match, or show me how and I will.”

Senta turned to the vidisplay and poked its touchscreen. Nyk awaited the results of the comparison. “I can't believe it!” she said.

“By rights it's his crest you should have on your arm.”

“What made you think it was Dad?”

“Because he's the only other man I ever saw spend time with my mother.” Nyk shook his head. “I should've suspected as much. This answers many questions. It explains why I was so unlike my father -- why Veska liked coming here on his vacations and why he stopped after

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my parents were killed -- why they kept separate bedrooms and why I never heard them making love.”

He headed into his childhood bedroom. “What are you doing?” he heard Senta call after him.

“I'm packing my case,” he yelled. “I have a transit to make.”

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Nykkyo stepped off the shuttle onto the transit platform and walked straight to Veska's office. He stood in the doorway. "My friend and son, you used to say. I thought you meant son-in-law. Now, I've learnt our relationship is much closer."

"Come and sit down, Nykkyo."

"Why, Veska? Why wasn't I told?"

"Nykkyo, there were two women in my life that I loved, and I lost them both -- Jylla and Lydda."

"My mother and Senta's."

"I'll start with Jylla. Xarvo and I were good friends from the time we were boys in Sudal. We were rivals for Jylla. She loved me more, I think, but chose to marry him because of the family line. You see, Nykkyo, I suffer the curse of a broken line."

"The Veska line's broken?"

"Yes -- five generations ago, a woman's contraceptive implant capsule malfunctioned, she became pregnant and refused to terminate the pregnancy. As a result, a son was born without benefit of birth license to an unwed mother. Have you ever seen the crest of a broken line?"

"No."

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Veska took a polycard and drew a pair of triangles in a circle. “This is the crest of the legitimate branch of my family.” He drew a slash through the circle. “This is what my bride would have to wear. There are women who don't care. Jylla cared. She didn't want a broken crest applied to her arm, or her children suffering the stigma of a broken line. She wanted to give her children the gift of the Kyhana surname, one of the most prestigious in existence. But she wanted at least one of her children to be fathered by me.

“She convinced Xarvo to support her in applying for the birth license. He wanted genetic counseling, to produce the best of the best their genes could supply. She insisted their first should be a natural child.”

“And she secretly employed contraceptives with ... her husband?”

“Yes, as if it were necessary. Xarvo and Jylla were never truly compatible. You know they kept separate bedrooms.”

“So when you came to Sudal on your vacations, it wasn't the sea or the Residence that drew you. It was my mom.”

“And you, Nykkyo. I'll never forget the assignation. Xarvo was busy with his agridome plans and crop forecasts. Jylla scheduled a sabbatical day from the product development labs and we met at their apartment -- it was before the Residence was constructed.” Veska pressed his hand to his eyes. “You were conceived in love, Nyk. There's something special about a man and a woman making love to conceive a child.”

“Something I'll never experience. My ... father was a cuckold. Did he ever know?”

Veska shook his head. “No.”

“I think he must've suspected. I was so unlike him -- I never had his drive or ambition -- or his talent. He wanted desperately for a son to

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follow in his footsteps. I had no interest. I was a disappointment to him. I knew that early on.”

“You were a sensitive and inquisitive child, Nyk -- and a gentle one. You had a love of nature, the stars, and, of course, the sea. Those destined for leadership are gifted with certain traits. You were gifted with others.”

“Why didn't my mother tell me?”

“She planned to. At my apartment I have a datacel containing a letter she wrote to you on the day of your birth. She intended to give it to you on your day of majority. She gave me a copy for safekeeping, in case...” Veska wiped a tear from his face.

“I'm past majority now,” Nyk said.

“I never found the right opportunity to broach the subject. I procrastinated. I didn't want to hurt you. I knew how much being a Kyhana meant to you.”

“So many wish not to hurt me, I end up hurt more.”

“I'm sorry, Nyk. When I go home, I'll transmit the letter to you.”

“No -- I don't want to read it.”

“I'll transmit it and you can save it. You may decide you want to read it some day. They are the words of a mother to the son she loved. Your mother did love you.”

“And the reason you insisted Senta and I marry? Not to bind to the Kyhana line, as I believed.”

“No. I was concerned for you. You were miserable after the shuttle crash, and you couldn't keep up with your studies. I had no idea what was to become of you. I wanted to make sure you were cared for. You are my boy, and I love you.”

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“Senta was on her way to a brilliant career.”

“Yes -- she had a guaranteed position with the Food Service after she completed her studies. I knew you'd have a roof over your head and meals on your table. I couldn't bear the thought of my boy petitioning for maintenance or living in a group home.”

“You didn't want a wife for me -- you wanted a mother. Senta's not a good substitute for a mother, Veska.”

A smile broke across Veska's face. “I suppose you're right about that.”

“After the ricin affair, Senta leapt over those Food Service positions. She's successful beyond anyone's expectations.”

“I am proud of her ... and of you too, Nyk. I was pleased with your acceptance into the ExoAgency, and of how you handled yourself in the Baxa ruckus. You've exceeded my expectations, also.”

“Everyone's expectations of me appear to have been rather modest.”

“Seymor has had nothing but good to say of you. Hearing it makes me very proud.”

“What of Lydda?”

“She found herself in a loveless marriage with an abusive husband. They moved to the T-Delta colony, and worked in one of the mines there. Lydda was quite athletic -- she enjoyed the physical labor. Senta was born on T-Delta.

“As their marriage fell into acrimony, I pleaded with her to leave him, to file for separation, and to return to Floran. Of course, we could never marry, but she could be my *amfin*. She would, she promised me, once this or that happened, or the promotion came through. Then, the explosion ... and she was gone.” He shook his head.

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“My only consolation is the accident that took my Lydda also claimed her tormentor. A hollow consolation, I can assure you. She asked me to wait. I'm still waiting.”

“I'm so sorry, Veska.”

“That was more than thirty years ago, Nyk. We're well past sorry. After the accident, I adopted Senta. She wasn't a year old. I did so she'd have a modicum of a family, and to have a bit of Lydda close to me. Senta always looked like her mother. Now she's grown and the resemblance is remarkable. She's a great comfort to me.”

“You know I'm petitioning for dissolution of our marriage.”

“Yes, I know. It pains me to see Senta unhappy. It also pains me to see my boy unhappy.”

“Senta doesn't really care. I'm not unhappy. I've found my true destiny, and it lies on the third planet orbiting a yellow star. And, with Suki at my side.”

“I'm pleased for you, Nyk. You are doing the right thing, although I can't let Senta hear me say that. It's what Lydda and I, or Jylla and I, for that matter, never had the courage nor the means nor the opportunity to do.” Veska stood, opened his arms to Nyk and embraced him. “I've longed to do this, Nykkyo -- to hug my boy as father and son.” He kissed Nyk's forehead. “What are your plans?”

“I'll meet with Seymor first thing. He has an assignment I might find acceptable. If so, I'll be an Earthbound ExoAgent. If not -- I was prepared to go native once. I am still.”

“I trust you'll find Seymor's offer attractive. Take care, my son and friend, and please stop by. Even Earthbound Agents find their ways to the homeworld from time to time. Have a good transit.”

Nyk exchanged the Floran salute with his father and headed to the departure lounge.

EARTHBOUND

Nykkyo trudged up the stairs to the FloranCo offices. “Hi, Jaquie. Is the Big Guy in?”

“He's expecting you, Mr Kane. Welcome back.”

Nyk poked his head into the inner office. Seymor was talking on the telephone but he gestured Nyk to enter and take a seat. “I'm happy to see you here in New York, Nykkyo,” he said upon completing his call. “I understand you're interested in a full-time assignment here. I think we can accommodate you.”

“I had an inkling you might have something for me.”

“Do you have an inkling of what it might be?”

“I thought it might be Zander's old assignment, of engineering identities for new Agents.”

“I'm sorry, Nyk. I've already given that assignment to another Agent.”

“Oh.”

“I hope you're not too disappointed.”

“It sounded like something I'd like to do.”

“What I had in mind was something a bit different. I'd like to offer you the position of Assistant Agent-in-Chief for North American Operations. It's a training post, and if you do well, you'd be the prime candidate for my position, when I retire. You can work out of the vacant office next to mine. I've been impressed with your ability to get things done, Nyk, and so has Kronta. I think you're a natural for this.”

“Has Kronta forgiven my earlier behavior?”

EARTHBOUND

Seymor squinted at Nyk. “Kronta and I have agreed we were mistaken in thinking you brought an Earth woman onworld.”

“What about Aahhn's report?”

“Your doctor friend's report was sufficiently vague as to preclude anyone inferring his patient was an offworlder.”

“Why would Kronta do this?” Nyk asked.

“Why? Because neither of us want to see you spend the rest of your life planetbound on the homeworld. You're too valuable a contributor here. Your record notes you engaged in an indiscretion with a native.”

“An indiscretion -- Agency jargon for a too-friendly relationship.”

“Yes -- you were sent up for that infraction, and your involvement in the Baxa affair is construed as a mitigating factor. We're doing our damndest to keep Agency Enforcement out of this, Nyk. They take a dim view of Florans contaminating the Earth population.”

“Seymor, I have a duty to tell you. I intend to stay here on Earth, to spend my life alongside Suki. I'll do this whether or not I have an Agency post.”

Seymor stood and looked out his window. “You are determined to make this difficult for me. Up to now, I've been willing to let my Agents' private lives be their own business. Most have restricted themselves to casual relationships.”

“I was willing to go native once. I'll do it now.”

Seymor sat and drummed his fingers on his desk. “You are an excellent contributor, Nyk. You're results-oriented, tenacious and a natural political troubleshooter. You also have an unfortunate tendency toward emotional involvement.”

EARTHBOUND

“My involvement with Suki transcends emotion. I'm doing this because it's what Destiny demands of me. Suki's practically an honorary Floran. She supports us one hundred percent.”

Seymor stared at Nyk. “You haven't told me any of this. I prefer to remain ignorant of my Agents' personal lives. So long as you do nothing to jeopardize our mission, you're free live whatever private life you want.”

“I have as much to lose as anyone from temporal contamination, Seymor -- maybe more. Don't you trust me?”

Seymor cracked a smile and nodded. “You'd still be planetbound, otherwise. You'll need to be discreet. If Agency Enforcement gets wind of this...”

“Thank you, Seymor.”

“Take a few days to think it over. Get acquainted with the lifestyle. There's no place in the galaxy like New York City.”

“No need -- I'll accept the assignment. When do I start?”

“On Monday. Be here at nine sharp and wear business attire. Good to have you back, lad.”

Nyk walked ten blocks to the Canal Street subway station and rode the train to Queens. He climbed the steps to the Kyhana household and rang the bell.

Yasuko opened the door. “Sukiko's at her job at NYU. Come into the kitchen. Would you like a snack? I have some biscuits.”

He followed her into the kitchen and sat at the table. She set a plate of sweet biscuits before him. “Nick, would you mind telling me your intentions? How long will you be here, this time?”

EARTHBOUND

"I'm here permanently. I intend to live with Sukiko, to help her bear and raise her child. I intend to ask her to marry me."

Yasuko's eyes widened. "You want to marry her?" She looked at him for a long moment. "I wish you luck, Nick. You will need it."

"We'll not rush into it. She is the one, great, true love of my life, Yasuko. I intend to stand by her, to live my life with her and to die in her arms, if Destiny permits. You asked my intentions, and I've told you." Nyk opened his arms and embraced her. "Yasuko, my parents have been dead for eight years. I love feeling part of a family again." He kissed her forehead. "I love you all." She proffered a faint smile. "May I help with dinner?"

"You may set the table," Yasuko replied, pointing to a stack of bowls.

He set the table with chopsticks. The front door opened and Suki walked in. She ran toward Nyk. He picked her up. She locked her legs around him and peppered his face with kisses.

"I promised I'd be back. I'm here for good." He handed her the silver pin. "I'm returning this to you. Maybe it did bring me luck. Suki, I found I do have something I can give you."

"Where is it?" she asked.

"I can't here -- maybe after dinner. Let's go upstairs and talk." He held her hand and ascended the stairs.

Suki stood in her bedroom and began to change her clothes. "What happened on Floran?"

"I don't know where to begin. I've petitioned for dissolution of my marriage with Senta."

"Because of me?" she asked.

EARTHBOUND

“No -- because of Senta and me. The man who orchestrated the smuggling is dead.” Nyk related the story of Andra and Zander.

“You mean your advanced civilization practices a near slave trade in genetically engineered women?”

“Yes -- it's a shame, a disgrace. Andra and I discovered we're kindred spirits. We became good friends and lovers. She wants to meet you, some day, and I hope it'll be possible. I'm sure you'll like her.”

“You're in love with Andra?”

“A bit. Not the way I love you, Suki. I could never love anyone the way I love you.”

She stopped undressing. “Did you sleep together?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Suki, I think it's important we be honest with each other. Otherwise, our relationship won't last. I'll never keep anything from you.”

“Did you make love?”

“Yes, we did.”

“Oh! I'm so, so jealous! I'll be honest with you about that. I won't keep that from you.”

“Suki, please understand -- sex to a Floran means something different than to an Earth person.”

“How different can it be?”

“To a Floran, sex is nothing more than a means to express friendship. It's a gift, the gift of pleasure and intimacy. Florans offer each other sex almost the way Americans offer each other snacks. It's how friends bond on my world. It's social.”

“I'll bet it's social.”

EARTHBOUND

“Suki, I know there's much more emotional involvement with it on Earth. I could feel it between us.”

She glowered at him. “I can't believe you'd come storming in here and announce, 'I'm home! I've been unfaithful!' I never imagined you'd leave and come home in love with another woman!”

“Nothing about Andra and me needs threaten how you and I feel toward each other. Faithfulness is different to a Floran. We'd think Earth notions of sexual fidelity laughable. But we take commitment and family more seriously than here. This is the Floran nature.”

“Nykkyo, I have news for you. An Earth woman doesn't like it when the man she loves and wants barges in and boasts he got laid by another woman. That's the Earth nature.”

“I'm not boasting. You asked me, and I don't want to lie to you. Suki, no Floran would think what Andra and I did was in any way improper, nor would one believe someone would object.”

“I'm not a Floran!” He approached her and reached to stroke her hair. “Get away from me. Don't touch me.” She pulled away and turned her back to him. “Was it good for you? Was it? Are you going to tell me the truth about that, or are you going to lie and say you hated every second of it?”

“Suki, this is ridiculous. I don't want us to have this sort of exchange. I expect this with Senta, not you.”

He could see hurt and anger in her eyes. “So I'm like Senta, now, am I? Fine, Nykkyo. Just fine. Go back to Senta. Go back to your touchy-feely homeworld. Get out of here. Get out!”

Nyk trudged down the stairs to the main level. Yasuko approached him. “Is something wrong?”

“Suki and I had a misunderstanding.”

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Yasuko shook her head. "She was so looking forward to seeing you. I'm sorry you're having this disagreement. I should tell you, although I love my daughter, I don't delude myself. She can be difficult, and she can harbor resentment. One thing George and I learned early on was how to have an argument and then kiss and make up."

"I'm prepared for some nights on the sofa if necessary," Nyk replied.

"We have a guest room. Feel free -- you'd be more comfortable. Come, dinner's ready."

Nyk climbed the stairs to the apartment and rapped on the door. He opened it and walked in. Suki was lying on her stomach. "Suki? Are you all right? You didn't come down for dinner."

"Go away." He sat beside her. "I said go away. I don't want to see you."

Nyk picked up his laptop computer and packed it into his case. He descended the stairs. He could hear Suki sobbing in the apartment above.

"May I use your telephone?" he asked Yasuko. "I'll call a cab."

"Where are you going?"

"I think I should go to a hotel for the night. It'll give her a chance to calm down."

She shook her head. "Nick, you can't let this deter you. This is how she is -- she takes a long time to get over things. But she will get over it. Please, use the guest room."

"Are you sure? It seemed she made her desires known quite clearly." Nyk picked up the phone and requested a taxi.

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He took his bag and headed out the front door. Yasuko called to him. "Nick, if you feel you must go ... please call us and let us know where you are."

He stepped out the front door, set his bag on the sidewalk and waited for the cab.

"Where to?" the cabby asked him.

"Hotel."

"Which hotel?"

"I don't care, the closest one that's likely to have a vacant room."

"Missus throw ya out? I'll take ya to the Anchor."

Nyk checked into the motel and unlocked his assigned room. The air was stale and carried lingering traces of cigarette smoke. He picked up the telephone and called the Kyhana household. "Yasuko? It's Nick. I'm at the Anchor -- room 201."

"Where's that?"

"It's here in Queens."

"Hold on ... Yes, George knows where it is."

"How's she doing?"

"She's still in the apartment. I haven't seen her since she came home."

"I'll call in the morning." Nyk hung up the phone and paced around the room. He unpacked the laptop computer, jacked it into the telephone and initiated a vidphone call. A blue voice-only screen appeared. The call connected. "Veska -- Dad..."

"Nykkyo. I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

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“I think I need transit home.”

There was a long pause. “Home? You only arrived there. Is something wrong?”

“I'd rather not talk about it. I may have made a serious mistake -- let's leave it at that. Just send me the packet schedule and I'll make travel plans.”

“I'll do that -- if you're sure.”

“Thanks...”

“Is there anything else?” Veska asked.

“No.”

“Then I'll send a telemessage with the schedule of packets I can divert. Good day, Nyk.”

“Wait ... Dad...”

“Yes, Nyk?”

“I could use some fatherly advice.”

“I'd be delighted.”

“Dad, did my mother ever send you away?”

“Send me away?”

“Yes -- did you and she ever have a ... a disagreement and she sent you away.”

“No. We did have our differences. Most lovers do.”

“You never did something so...” Nyk wiped a tear from his cheek. “... so totally unforgivable...”

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“Does this have to do with Sukiko? Nykkyo, I can't imagine you doing anything unforgivable.”

“I let slip about Andra and me -- that we're *amften*. Suki was so hurt -- so angry. She was furious. It kills me to know I hurt her so.”

“You and Andra are *amften*?”

“Don't sound so surprised.” Nyk could hear Veska laughing. “Is the notion really so absurd?”

“Not at all, Nyk...” Veska chuckled. “I was imagining Senta's expression when she learns...” He laughed again. “She's been trying to get Andra into her bed since she met her. How did you...”

“Andra and I discovered we're kindred spirits.”

“She's an *ax'amfin*...”

“She's a sweet girl and a good friend.” Nyk pressed his hand to his eyes. “I tried to explain to Suki what *amften* means to our people... She didn't understand...” He choked back tears. “She sent me away -- said she wanted me out of her sight. We were warned in our training about involvement with Earth women. I'm beginning to understand why.”

“How much do you love her?”

“I love her more than life itself. A day doesn't pass without thoughts of her filling my mind.”

“That sort of love rarely goes unreciprocated, Nyk. Love and anger are the two faces of the same emotion. I don't know much about Earth people, but I do know something about women. Ask for her forgiveness -- beg if you must -- I'd be shocked if she didn't grant it. You've gone this far. Don't give up now and do something you'll truly regret.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

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“Nykkyo -- son, I've wanted such an opportunity for years. Do you still want to divert a packet?”

“I'll let you know.” The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk undressed. The phone rang and he answered it.

“Nick...”

“Yes, Yasuko?”

“Nick, I wish you had used the guestroom instead. Not ten minutes ago Sukiko came downstairs looking for you -- as I knew she would once she came to her senses. I told her you left and she went back upstairs. Now, she's wailing. She's not crying -- she's screaming. Listen...” Nyk heard muffled wailing in the background. “That's coming from upstairs. I've never heard her do anything like this.”

“I'm so sorry, Yasuko. You're right -- I shouldn't have left. Should I come home?”

“I don't know if that would make things better or worse. I'm worried, Nick. She seems to be spiraling into hysteria.”

“Let's let her calm down overnight and see how she feels in the morning.”

“Fine, Nick. I'll call if anything changes.”

Nyk set down the handset, flopped on the bed, laced his fingers behind his head and attempted to will himself to sleep. As much as he disliked using Floran sleep aids, he wished he had one now.

Sleep was almost upon him when loud knocking at his door disturbed him. “Nick? Nick?” he heard a man's voice.

He stood and pulled on his trousers, switched on the light and opened the door. Suki's father was standing in the hallway. “You'd better come with me,” George said.

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“What's wrong?”

“I'll explain on the way.”

Nyk pulled on his polo shirt and slipped his bare feet into his running shoes. He grabbed the room key and followed George to the parking lot. George opened the door to a late-model Lincoln Town Car and Nyk sat on the passenger side. George slammed it into gear and stepped on it. “Nick, do you remember that antique *tanto* -- the *samurai* dagger that hangs on the wall at the house?”

“Yes... No, George! Don't tell me Suki's used it!”

“She's threatening to use it. She carried on for the longest time. Then she quieted down. Her mother and I decided to retire. Yasuko checked and found her with the dagger, summoning the courage...”

“No, George!” Queens landmarks whizzed past the car windows.

“Yasuko told her I'd fetch you. Sukiko doesn't believe you'll come, but her mother convinced her to wait and see. Yasuko kept her head. I'm proud of her.”

Nyk felt a knot in his stomach. “Oh, George, I had no idea. I should've stayed in your guestroom.” He pressed his hand to his eyes. “She must be in terrible, terrible pain, poor girl. Oh, George, I'm so sorry I didn't stay. I should've stayed. George, can we go any faster?”

George turned onto a main street. “She's threatened suicide before.”

“Yes, I know. She swallowed some pills.”

George shook his head. “No, that was the time she actually attempted something. She's threatened to kill herself numerous other times. We insisted she see a psychologist during high school, but we gave up when she wouldn't cooperate.” The car approached an

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intersection. George glimpsed in both directions and sped through the red light. “We were close to institutionalizing her, once.”

“It's a good thing you didn't. You'd have lost her, for sure.”

“You're probably right.” He sounded the horn and cut off a delivery truck. “She has us scared, this time. It's almost as if she's been seized by another, self-destructive personality. Nick, when we get past this crisis, Yasuko and I would appreciate it if you could ... encourage her to seek some counseling. She doesn't want to hear of it from us.”

“I'll do my best.”

“I'll be honest, Nick. I think she's crazy carrying that child. I question your sanity if you're volunteering to live with her and help her care for it.”

“I'm not volunteering. I intended to ask her to marry me, until she sent me away.”

George leaned on the horn and ran another red light, then looked at him. “Marry you?”

“I do love her that much, George.”

“Before you marry her, you must learn to recognize her histrionics when you see them. It's a rare woman who means it when she tells her man to go away.” George turned into their neighborhood. “Nick, you can count on whatever support Yasuko and I can give. If you need work, I can probably pull some strings at my office. We have a strong anti-nepotism policy, but until you're married you're not exactly family, so we can work through that issue.”

“Not exactly family. I guess that describes it. No, George, I already have a job.”

George pulled up to the house. He handed his house keys to Nyk. “She's in the apartment. I'll put the car away.”

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Nyk jumped from the car and headed up the steps. He fumbled with the keys until he found the one that unlocked the door. He walked into the dimly lit living room and sprinted up the stairs to the apartment. Inside he saw Suki kneeling on the floor in her short robe. She held the dagger, unsheathed, pointing at the ceiling. Yasuko was kneeling near her.

Suki's eyes were swollen, but her expression was placid. Nyk walked into the room. "Don't come any closer."

Yasuko grabbed his arm. "Stay back, Nick. She'll use it."

"Mom, leave us alone."

Yasuko glanced at Nyk, stood and headed down the stairs.

"You promised," Nyk said, kneeling to face her.

"I promised I'd think of you," she replied. "I've kept that promise. I am thinking of you."

"Suki, let me hold you and make the pain go away." He edged closer to her. "I'm here for you. Let me hold you. We'll solve this together."

"You weren't here," she said.

"I thought you wanted me gone." He edged closer yet. "I shouldn't have gone -- I'm sorry. I won't leave you."

"I wanted to feel you hold me but you weren't here. I know why you weren't here. You don't want me."

"You're wrong, Suki. I do want you."

"No, you don't. It's my fault. I showed you my true nature. You saw the real me, and you decided I'm not worth bothering with. I don't blame you. I don't want me."

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“I want you and I need you.” He continued to inch closer to her.

“No,” she said. “No one wants me. I’m at peace, and I’m not afraid.”

“Please don’t do this, Suki. Let me hold you instead. Let me help you. Let us all help you, we all love you. I’m here now, and I won’t leave. I’ll never leave, I promise!”

“I’ll make the pain go away forever.” She untied her robe and opened it. With her thumb she felt along the left side of her sternum, then placed the tip of the blade on the spot. She drew back the *tanto*. Her eyes turned upward and she closed them.

“*NE!*” Nyk yelled and lunged at her, intercepting the blade with the base of his hand. She thrust the dagger as he closed his fingers around the steel. He felt as if he’d grasped a red-hot poker from the razor edge slicing into his palm. A snap of his wrist broke the weapon free from her grip.

She opened her eyes and gasped, “Oh, Nykkyo! You’re hurt -- you’re bleeding. Oh my God -- oh my God! Mom!”

Panting, Nyk looked at his fist clenched around the dagger’s blade. A ruddy rivulet ran from his palm down his arm. He heard footsteps pound up the stairs.

Suki threw her arms around him. “Oh my God! Mom, Nykkyo’s hurt.”

Yasuko grabbed a towel from the closet and ripped a strip from it. Nyk opened his hand and removed the knife. “I’ll bind it. George will take you to the E.R.”

“No,” Nyk said. “I’m needed here.”

Yasuko wrapped his hand. “That cut requires attention.”

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“In due time. Suki and I need to be alone. Alone, Yasuko.” She picked up the dagger and headed down the stairs.

Suki kneeled beside him, stroking his hair and kissing his face. She caressed his wounded hand and kissed his fingers.

“In the bedroom closet,” he said, “on the top shelf is a carton with a polymer box. It's a Floran first-aid kit. Inside's a small, clear bottle with a dropper.”

She fetched the box, opened it, removed the bottle and brought it to him. He unwrapped his hand.

“Drop it into the cut.”

She opened the bottle and began dropping the thick liquid onto his wound.

He winced and grimaced. “Ow, it stings.” He looked at his hand. “That's good enough.” He watched as the bleeding stopped and the wound began to close.

“That's amazing,” Suki exclaimed.

He closed the bottle. “Healing salve. I never leave home without it.” He washed the blood from his hand and arm in the apartment's kitchen sink.

“It was another out-of-body experience,” she said. “As soon as I thrust the knife, I was watching from above. I knew it was wrong. I saw you grab for the blade.”

“I saw from above, too, and I knew what I was doing was right. Suki, these out-of-body experiences -- During the rape, did you know what you were doing was right?”

She nodded. “Yes. I knew it was right.”

“When you got cold feet at the clinic?”

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“I knew the abortion was wrong.”

“We're being guided by the hand of Destiny!”

He pulled her robe closed and tied the belt. He held her as they sat together on the sofa. She began trembling and sobbing. “Oh, Nykkyo, I have so many demons in my psyche. I can't believe I came so close ... I'm afraid to die. Hold me. Help me, please -- help me!”

“I'm here to shine a light into the dark places where those demons lurk. The demons won't withstand the light of love.” He caressed her hair, kissed her head, and stroked her. “I'm here, I love you and I won't leave,” he said over and over. He heard a knock on the door. “Come in.”

Yasuko entered. “Is she all right?”

“I think she will be.”

“How's your hand?”

Nyk showed her his palm. The wound was now a thick, red welt. “I'm a fast healer.”

“You'll have a scar from that cut.”

“It's one I'll wear with pride.” Yasuko hugged him and kissed his cheek. She kissed her daughter and embraced them. “I'll take her to the bedroom. We'll see you in the morning.”

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19 -- The Easiest Thing in Two Worlds

Daylight stirred Nyk. Suki was asleep in her robe with her arm across him. He leaned and kissed her forehead. "Suki?"

He watched her eyes crack open and close again. "Oh, God, Nykkyo, I feel terrible. My throat's sore, I have a splitting headache and my face is throbbing." He stroked her. "And I have morning sickness!" She stood and headed for the bathroom.

Nyk waited by the bathroom door. She emerged, holding her hand on her stomach. "I saw myself in the mirror -- I look awful."

"Do you feel like talking about it?"

She nodded. "Let's talk."

"That was quite a fright you gave your parents last night -- and me."

She opened a box of saltines. "And me." Nyk filled a tumbler with water and set it before her. She removed a stack of crackers.

"Are your demons herded up?" he asked her.

She ate a cracker. "For now. These episodes are so unreal to me. I remember everything, but it's like it never happened."

"Do you want to die, now?"

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She shook her head. "No. Except for my face aching, I feel perfectly normal. I don't want to die. I'm afraid of dying."

"I shouldn't have left you last night. I should've listened to your mom. Can you forgive me?"

"You've done nothing to forgive." She picked up a cracker. "I told you to go away. I got what I deserved, I guess. You've given up everything to be with me -- and I told you to go away." She looked into his eyes. "I didn't mean it. Remember, in the future if I tell you to go away, I don't mean it. What I mean is -- I need some time by myself to think things through. Okay?"

"Understood. I'll never leave you again. Suki, I love you."

"I know you do." She kissed his injured hand. The wound was now a thin, red line. She stroked it. "Does it hurt?" He shook his head.

"Suki, I want you. I want you desperately. If you still want to consummate our love, I won't say no."

"No, Nykkyo. Don't say that to me, now. I realize why things must be as they are."

"But Suki, I have something important to tell you."

"Please let me finish. I was about to tell you this last night. Then I discovered you'd left, and I completely lost it." She ate another cracker. "I've reconciled it in my own mind. Nykkyo -- it's not fair for you to live like a monk. If you want to spend time with your Floran girlfriend, by all means, do so. I can't deny you that. You've promised to help me with the child. I won't keep you from Andra."

"That was a Floran sentiment," he said. "Perhaps you're beginning to understand our approach to love. Love isn't selfish -- it's generous. We think it's all right to love more than one. Our language doesn't have a word for friend. We use the word *amfa*, and it means lover. To us a

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friend and a lover are one and the same, and so are friendship and love. We use one word for both.

“What matters is depth and commitment. Suki, I love you deeply, and I am committed to you. That Andra and I discovered we're *amfen* does nothing to diminish how I feel for you. Neither does our expressing *ama* by sharing the gift. Andra knows you're my true love. She sent me to you with her blessing.

“I'm not apt to alter my Floran ways, especially when it comes to dealing with other Florans. I expect we'll have cultural differences from time to time. With understanding we'll get through them. I'm much more sensitive about your feelings now, and I'll modify my behavior accordingly.”

“Will you ever forgive me? I'm so ashamed of how I behaved. I'm trying, Nykkyo, but I am so fucked up. Do you have a word for that in your language?”

“Yes, we do. Suki, I already forgave you.”

“It'll take me a while to forgive myself.”

“There's something important I was about to tell you before this ... misunderstanding. Suki, I've learned we're not really related. I'm not a Kyhana, I'm a Veska. I'm not my father's son. Well -- I am, but my father's not who I thought he was.”

“Are you sure?”

“Beyond doubt.”

“You're not just saying that?”

“No. I am not your descendant.”

She looked at him, her eyes wide. “This means... this means...”

“This means I'm yours, Suki, if you still want me.”

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She began laughing and crying simultaneously. “Of course I want you!”

“Haven't you cried enough?” he asked wiping his own eyes. “I'm surprised you have tears left!”

She opened her arms to him and he fell into them. “How do you know? How are you sure?”

“Senta performed a DNA sequencing analysis on you. I'm sorry if you feel your privacy was violated but I had to know.”

“Senta? How did she obtain a sample?”

“I found one of your hairs. She performed the analysis and discovered you are likely an ancestor to Xarvo Kyhana, my legal father - - but not to my biological father -- or to me. I was conceived from an adulterous liaison between my mother and ... another man.”

“Oh, Nykkyo, I'm so happy.”

“Please -- don't be too happy. This caused me considerable agony, and I'm not over it. I was proud to be a Kyhana and now I'm an outsider looking in. I'm a Kyhana in name, only.”

“You're my Nykkyo.”

“Are you feeling better about yourself, about us?”

“Better for now. Nykkyo, this is how I've been my whole life. Please help me rid myself of the demons. Without your help, I'll never raise this child without a complete emotional meltdown.”

“Of course I'll help you. It's the assignment Destiny's given me.”

“You'll be patient with me? It won't be easy. I have a lifetime of difficulties to overcome.”

“We have a saying -- *Urbafloran vi ne en un taka xi nefabrik't.*”

EARTHBOUND

“Which means?”

He kissed her forehead. “Floran City wasn't built in a single day.”

She finished the stack of crackers. “Oh, Nykkyo, I'd want you right now if I didn't feel so awful. I need to lie on my back with an ice pack on my face, until the swelling goes down to only twice normal size.”

“Your dad offered to drive me to the hotel so I can check out and retrieve my gear. I must send a message to the homeworld. I'll see you in a little while.”

Nyk brought Suki a fresh cold pack and she placed it over her eyes. He stretched out on the bed and pressed his palm against hers. She spread her fingers and they laced hands. “Last night, you called me Nykkyo in front of your mom. I don't think she noticed.”

“I'll be more careful, next time.”

“I hope there never is a next time.” He felt her grip on his hand relax and her breathing became deep and regular.

Yasuko poked her head into the room. “The door was open. Is she napping?”

“Yes,” Nyk whispered.

“Is she all right? Are you all right?”

“Yes to both.”

“Thank goodness.” She stroked away a tear. “I've seen suicide by one of those ... things. I don't want to see it again -- ever. I wish George didn't have it in the house.”

“You've seen it?”

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“Yes. George's father lost his business and killed himself. I'll tell you about that awful experience some other time. Thank you, Nick, for caring for her.”

“Caring for her is the easiest thing in two worlds for me to do.”

Nyk sat across from George at a small table. George was explaining the rules of “go” to him, and they took turns placing black and white stones on a gridded board. Nyk felt Suki's hand on his back. “It's a clear night. Shall we look at the stars?” He followed her into the back yard. “If my folks had doubts about you, they're gone now. I'll call tomorrow and get the name of a counselor.”

“I'll come with you, if you'd like.”

“I'd like that. It'll be easier for me with your support.”

Nyk looked up. Though it was a clear night, New York City's lights washed out all but the brightest stars. “I never paid much attention to the stars,” she said. “When you were there and I was here, I'd come out and lie in a lawn chair and look up. I wondered which stars you could see from your world.”

“Most of the brighter ones.”

“I thought you and I might be looking at the same star. The thought some sun was shining on both our worlds helped me feel closer to you. Which one is Floran's sun?”

“You can't see our sun from Earth without a telescope.” He pointed skyward. “Do you see the constellation that looks like a cross?”

“Yes.”

“That's Cygnus, the swan. Do you see the wings, the tail, the neck and head?”

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“Yes.”

“The bright star forming the tail is Deneb. Floran is in that general direction.”

“To think another world is out there, patiently waiting for the day when our peoples can be united,” she said. “Just a couple of days ago, you were walking the surface of that world. I wonder what's to come when we make contact.”

“My hope is for interplanetary friendship and cooperation.”

She embraced his arm. “Aren't you tired? I didn't get much sleep last night. How about some bed?” He laced his fingers with hers and headed into the house. “Nykkyo, I'm scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“That after last night it'll never be the same between us.”

“We have a saying -- *Xa kel mi nedetru mifort.*”

“Which means?”

“That which doesn't destroy me strengthens me. Our love is strengthened by last night. I certainly don't love you less.”

“Nykkyo, that's not Floran. It's Nietzsche!”

“Nietzsche?”

“That saying -- it's from Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century German philosopher.”

“Oh. I guess we can't have invented all the good sayings. We must've brought a few from Earth.”

She led him up the stairs to the apartment, closed the door and threw her arms around him. He kissed her lips. “Oh, Nykkyo, tonight

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was the only thing I could think about all through dinner. I can't believe I have you. I can't believe you still want me.”

“Of course I want you.” He kissed her again and felt her tongue against his. “This is all I could think about since I stepped aboard the shuttle.” He grasped the hem of her jumper and lifted it from her. “I've wanted you since I first laid eyes on you.”

She pulled his polo shirt from him and caressed his arms. He unbuttoned her blouse, slipped it from her and kissed her shoulders. She unsnapped her bra and let it fall to the floor. “I've always loved you,” he said. “I was born loving you.”

“How's that possible?” She guided his face to her neck and between her breasts. “We only met six months ago.”

He led her to the sofa and she sat on his lap. “When I gazed into your eyes, it awakened a love that had been sleeping in my cells.” She traded kisses and caresses with him. “Suki -- I love you so much -- I want you so much -- I can't believe how I want you.”

“Then take me. I'm yours, Nykkyo.” She lay on her back on the floor. Nyk knelt between her legs. “Take me,” she said, her eyes closed and her fists clenched.

He looked at her supine body. “No,” he said and shook his head. “Not like this.”

“What's the matter?” she asked and sat up. “Nykkyo, what's wrong? You said you wanted this -- I want to give myself to you -- for you. I couldn't do this for any other man.”

“Oh Suki -- it's supposed to be glorious. You looked as if you were bracing yourself for some ... unpleasant medical procedure.”

“But, Nykkyo -- I've ... I've never made love to a man before.”

“Never?”

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"I told you -- I find men repulsive." Suki looked into his face. "...not you, Nykkyo -- you're different. In my eyes -- you are not a man..." She put her hand to her eyes. "...oh God -- what I mean is -- you might look like a man but you don't act like one..." She let out an exasperated sigh. "No, that's not right either... I'm glad you're not manly because..." She rolled her eyes. "Nothing I say seems to come out right. I feel like some tongue-tied teenager."

"Don't be concerned about insulting my manhood. Florans might have healthy egos, but they're not gender-linked. I understand what you're trying to say."

"What I meant to say was ... you're not like any man -- or anyone I've ever known. It's why I love you and why I want it for you."

"But -- what about your first husband?"

"I told Mom how horrible it was with him. She told me I could learn to like it -- that she learned to like it with Daddy. But, I never did. It wasn't lovemaking -- it was lying there and letting him have his way with me. So you see, giving myself to the rapist wasn't so difficult -- I had lots of practice."

"That's not how I want us to be."

"I thought ... I thought maybe I'd learn to like it with you. I want to please you, Nykkyo. I was trying for you."

"Oh, Suki ... *korlyta*..." He embraced her, held her face against his chest and caressed her raven hair.

"Now I've disappointed you... I'm sorry, Nykkyo -- I didn't want to..." She started to cry. "... I'm such a mess..."

"Oh, no -- you haven't disappointed me." He stroked her back.

She wiped tears from her eyes. "Why does sex have to be so complicated?"

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He kissed the top of her head. "It's because we care so for each other. If we didn't, it would be easy."

"That's the paradox -- if I didn't care for you, I wouldn't want to -- I'd have no animal magnetism for you at all..." She smacked her fist against her forehead. "That didn't sound right, either."

He kissed her forehead. "Maybe you should quit while you're ahead."

She smiled and nodded. "... You might be right."

"It's my fault," he said. "I'm not proud of my performance just now. I lost control." With his finger he lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. "It was nothing but passion -- pure passion."

Suki kissed his shoulder. "You shouldn't underrate pure passion," she said and brushed a lock of his hair from his forehead. "It felt pretty good." She kissed him again.

"Do you still want this?"

"Of course I do," she replied. "Don't you?"

"I want nothing else. Maybe if we slowed down a little... Are you willing?" She smiled and guided his lips to hers. "Then, why don't we start over..." Nyk carried her to the bedroom, set her onto the bed and lay beside her, stroking her face and gazing into her dark eyes. She slipped her hand behind his neck and drew his face toward hers. His lips touched hers and he kissed her. "You've never made love to a man -- I've never made love to a pregnant lady."

"It'll be a first for both of us." She lay on her back and ran her hands along her stomach. "I'm starting to show -- and, I'm starting to feel pregnant."

"I can't wait to see your body change. And, it will change back, afterward."

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"I don't know -- I wonder if my breasts will ever be the same again."

He kissed and caressed her abdomen. "Maybe we shouldn't -- I wouldn't want to hurt him."

"I'm not made of glass -- and, pregnancy's not a disease. I saw my doctor last week and she said everything's normal. She gave me the go-ahead. Fat chance, I told her. Little did I know..." She placed her hand on his and pressed it against her belly. "Lovemaking won't hurt him. I heard his heartbeat."

He put his ear to her stomach. "I can't hear anything."

Suki giggled. "You need a special instrument."

"I wish I was there. I want to hear it myself. I'd like to accompany you on your next visit."

"I'd like that."

"Oh, Suki -- I was proud to be a Kyhana -- to hold the crest and to translate Koichi's journal. Learning I'm not hurt -- and what hurt most was discovering my parents lied to me. Do you have any idea how much that hurts?"

"Thankfully, no -- not like that at least."

He caressed her belly. "That is something we must never do -- we must never lie to him. As soon as he's old enough to comprehend, we'll tell him his origin -- of how he came to be. And, each day in word and deed, we'll demonstrate our love for him -- for the individual he is." Nyk returned to lying beside her and gazed into her eyes.

"Of course. You're absolutely right." She traced his lips with her finger. "Teach me your language, Nykkyo. Perhaps some day I'll return to your world."

"Okay -- lesson one. "*Suki, mi z'am.* I love you."

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“*Mi z'am,*” she replied.

“*Mi ve xiam z'am't.* I've loved you always.”

“*Mi va xiam z'am't.*”

“It's *ve*, not *va*. *Va* makes it “I will loved you.” He kissed her forehead. “Try this -- *mi nexiam z'ami nehalt va*. I'll never stop loving you.”

“*Mi nex...* I'll never stop loving you either, Nykkyo.” She kissed his lips and he felt her tongue exploring his mouth.

“One more. *Ni niva n'amor.*”

“What does it mean?”

“Go ahead and say it -- it's easy. *Ni niva n'amor.*”

“*Ni niva n'amor.* What's it mean?”

“It means -- let's make love.” He kissed her eyelids. “I love your eyes. I was in love with you the moment I saw your beautiful, dark, Asian eyes.” With his finger he traced her eyebrows. He took her hand and placed it upon his chest. She stroked his shoulder and arm. He felt her toes brush against the top of his foot. She smiled at him and he smiled at her.

Nyk caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. He kissed her forehead. She suppressed a giggle. He ran his hand along her shoulder and down her arm. She took his hand and kissed it. He kissed hers and gazed again into her eyes. She slipped her hand behind his head and kissed his lips. He traced her eyebrows again.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked.

“I was waiting for your signal.”

“My signal? Is this some Floran lovemaking ... thing?”

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“Oh, yes. When we make love, each partner signals readiness.”

“Do you mean readiness for ... touch? What sort of signal?”

“The guiding of your partner's hands is such a signal. This isn't an Earth practice?”

“It's not one I'm familiar with.”

“Then, how do you know your partner's ready?”

“You know, that's an excellent question...” She took his hand and placed it upon her body. “I'm definitely ready. I've never been so ready.”

“Show me.”

“Show you what?”

“How to touch -- we must teach each other the sorts of touch we find enjoyable.”

Suki twirled a lock of his hair with her finger. “Maybe you'll touch me in a way I've never experienced and I'll find it very enjoyable.”

“...you might be right. But, don't you think what we know we like is a better starting point for experimentation than something at random?”

She took his hand and began guiding it onto her body. “I feel self-conscious doing this.”

“Why? It's trust and sharing, Suki. Trust me and share with me what gives you pleasure.”

“It just seems ... unseemly. I'm sorry, Nykkyo -- it must be I'm inhibited.”

“Let's try something else, then... You touch me the way you'd like me to touch you. I'll do the same.”

“Okay...”

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“You go first.”

Suki placed her hand on his chest. “Like this... And, like this...”

“That feels good,” he replied. “Like this...” He guided her fingers.

“Yeah... I like this sort of thing too...”

“I don't have much, compared to you -- but my breasts are as sensitive as yours ... and I enjoy the same sort of touch.”

Suki continued to caress him. “You know -- when I was in college I had a girlfriend who wasn't much bigger on top than you.” She giggled. “She used to call herself my boyfriend.”

“So, you HAVE had a boyfriend.”

Suki laughed. “Oh, Nykkyo -- you do have a way of putting me at ease... It's your turn, now.”

“I'm almost afraid to touch you.”

“Don't be afraid...” He smoothed his hand along her skin. “And -- don't be too gentle...” She drew in a deep breath and released it. “Mmm - - your hand is warm... Oh, Nykkyo -- you have a very nice touch... I think being pregnant has made me more sensitive.”

“I'll be careful, then.”

“Not tender ... sensitive. The sensations are stronger. It feels good...” Her breathing slowed and deepened. “...really good.” He could feel her heart accelerate, its beats transmitted through her flesh. “You're right,” she said. “... this is so much better than something at random ... you seem to know...”

“I'm reading your body.” He held her hand over his left breast. “Read mine -- do you feel my heart?” She nodded. “We'll each learn the language of our bodies. Once we're fluent, we'll have touch conversations.” He stroked her forearm as she caressed him.

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Nyk caressed her thigh. "I love your skin," he said. "The color ... softness..."

Suki giggled. "You seem to like everything about me that I'm not so crazy about..."

"No, Suki. I like everything about you."

She placed her hand on his and caressed his forearm. Then she led his hand up her thigh and positioned his fingers. "I have to show you like this because you don't have one of these... Like this... Just like that. Perfect."

Nyk held her, gazed into her eyes and stroked her. Suki drew in a breath. "Oh, God this feels good. You have such an incredible touch..." He felt her body relaxing. Her breathing deepened and she parted her lips. "I like how you're holding me, too. It all feels so good ... so good..." She wrapped her arms around his neck and held his face against her breast.

"Suki -- you're heart is racing."

"I'm on the verge," she panted, "of a ... very ... powerful... Oh, God, Nykkyo -- it's perfect... don't change it ... don't change anything..."

Nyk felt her fingers in his hair as she pressed his head to her sternum. The throbbing of her heart filled his ear. He continued to stroke her as he held her tight. "Just a little more," she whispered. Her thighs began to tremble. "A little more... Oh, God!" Suki arched her back, closed her eyes, grimaced and swallowed a groan. "Oh!" she gasped. Nyk moved his hand to her face and caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. She drew his lips to hers and kissed him.

"Good?" he asked.

"Mmm... Best ever..." She moistened her lips with her tongue. "I suppose this means we've reached the moment of truth."

EARTHBOUND

Nyk took her hand and led it down his abdomen. She touched him and then drew back. Her eyes began to brim. "I was afraid," he replied, "that this part might be difficult for you."

"I've been trying to put the rape out of my mind."

"Images of that day haunt me yet. I can't imagine what it must be like for you."

"I do want this, Nykkyo -- I do. But, I didn't know how I'd react..."

"I understand," he replied. "I know men have damaged you. We mustn't do anything if it feels wrong. We'll have a rule. If you say don't, I won't. If you say stop, we'll stop. I'll never violate that rule, I promise." He led her hand again. "Remember -- it's me, Suki -- only me... It's a part of me -- as much me as my eyes ... my hair ... my hands." She bit her lower lip. A tear ran down her cheek. "I love you, and I'll never hurt you. I'll never use any part of my body to cause you pain. I'll die first."

"I know. Hearing it means so much to me."

"If we've gone far enough for tonight -- it's all right." He looked into her eyes. "It really is. If you want to stop, we'll stop. Just say the word."

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and another. "The word ... is go. I have enough demons in my psyche -- I'm not letting that punk ruin the rest of my life with you. *Ni niva n'amor, Nykkyo. Ni niva n'amor!*"

Nyk lay on his back, coaxed her atop him, and locked his legs with hers. He held her with his right arm around the small of her back and with his left he caressed her shoulder blades and her raven hair. Suki lay her face against his shoulder, her eyes closed. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes ... so far..."

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“Did I hurt you at all?”

She shook her head. “Uh-uhn...”

He ran his hand along her back. “Here we go, then -- we'll take it easy...” He began a gentle rocking of his hips.

“Oh, Nykkyo! Don't!” She clutched him. “Don't let go of me.”

He held her tighter. “I love you, Suki.”

“I know you do. I know...” He caressed her shoulders and lower back as he continued to rock his hips. He felt her warmth and her muscles move with her breathing. As his excitement built, he established a barrier in his mind -- forcing his own sensations to the back while focusing the front of his awareness on her, watching her as she lay atop him.

Suki tightened her grip on him and began making soft whimpers in the back of her throat. Then, she hoisted herself onto her elbows, opened her eyes and gazed into his. Her breathing grew heavier and he felt her breath on his face.

His heart began to race and he struggled to maintain the division in his mind. Suki slipped her hands behind his head and lifted his face to hers. She pressed her lips to his. He closed his eyes. Their breath mingled and they shared each other's airways.

Then, unable to maintain it, Nyk allowed his barrier to collapse. Sensations flooded into his awareness. He tightened his grip around the small of her back. With his arms and legs he pressed his hips against hers and let out a gasp. “Oh, Suki!” he exclaimed; then he relaxed his body and panted to regain his breath.

Warm drops fell onto his face as he opened his eyes. Suki was choking back tears.

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“Are you okay?” She nodded. “Remember, if you ever need a shoulder...”

“Oh, Nykkyo...” She exploded into sobs.

He held her face against his chest and caressed the back of her head. “My poor *korlyta*,” he said past a lump in his throat. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, Nykkyo -- don’t be sorry.” She wept. “We did it -- I’m so happy!”

“Let it out,” he said and kissed the top of her head. “Let it all out.”

He felt her body shake with her sobbing. “I love you so much ... you love me ... I felt it ... it was wonderful...”

“Did we slay a demon?”

She cradled his head in her hands. “We slew several,” she replied and peppered his face with kisses.

Nyk stroked her back as she lay atop him, her face against his chest. “I have never experienced the gift like that. I never have -- I never will love anyone the way I love you.”

“I know. I felt the truth -- the absolute truth to it.” With her finger she traced the outline of his bicep. “It felt so good. I never imagined it could feel that good.” She looked into his face. “I never imagined I could feel so loved. What was it you called me? Kor-something...”

“*Korlyta* -- it means sweetheart ... dearest.”

“*Korlyta* ... it sounds sweet. I like it. Oh, Nykkyo -- I thought it was so sweet you were holding your desire until you were sure I’d welcome it.”

“You must bear with me -- I know little of Earth lovemaking practices. It’s not a topic covered in our training.”

EARTHBOUND

“I hope you remain ignorant of Earth practices.” She worked her fingers under him and squeezed. “Mmm ... I still feel it...”

“Does it feel good?”

“Mmm...” She kissed him.

“What does it feel like?”

“It feels like...” She squeezed him again. “It feels like I want to hang on and not let go. I feel loved like I've never felt before. Oh, Nykkyo -- I'm so sorry I was such a baby about this.”

“No need to be. What you did took courage -- and trust. It'll be easier for you next time, won't it?”

“Easier? I can't wait!”

“You can't wait?”

“Unh-unh...” She kissed his lips. “Can you?”

“No...” She kissed him again. “I suppose if neither of us can wait...” Nyk ran the backs of his fingers along the sides of her breasts. Suki smiled and lifted herself onto her elbows.

A knock came at the apartment door. “Sukiko ... Sukiko?”

“Oh my God! It's my mom,” Suki whispered. “What, Mom?”

“Is everything all right?”

“Everything's okay, Mom,” she shouted.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes -- everything's okay.”

“I thought I heard something...”

“We're fine -- really. Good night, Mom.”

EARTHBOUND

“Okay. Good night.”

“Were we really that loud?” Suki whispered.

“I'm afraid we might have been.”

“Sukiko?” Yasuko called again from the other side of the door.

“Yes, Mom...”

“It sounded like crying. I was concerned.”

“Tears of joy, Mom. Good night.”

“Okay. Good night.”

“I'm so sorry,” Suki said, rolling her eyes. “She worries for me so.”

“I think it's sweet how she cares for you,” Nyk replied. “I could see a Floran mom behaving the same way.”

“Sukiko? Nick?” Yasuko called again.

“What is it this time?” Suki yelled.

“You weren't having another ... disagreement, were you?”

“No, Mom. Nick and I are fine.”

“You're sure?”

“It's all right, Yasuko,” Nyk called out. “Suki and I were making love. We just got a little carried away.” Suki held her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

There were several moments of silence. “Oh... Sorry to disturb you, then. Good night.”

“Good night,” Nyk and Suki yelled in unison.

“Why did you tell her that?”

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“I believe the best way to deal with such is with honesty. This will put her mind at ease.”

“Given my behavior last night, you're probably right. She's probably embarrassed, now.”

“I'll bet the incident will be forgotten by breakfast.”

Suki ran her fingers across Nyk's chest as he caressed her. “Mmm,” she said, “this feels so good ... so right ... more like you're doing ... just like that...”

“Sukiko? Nick?” Yasuko called from behind the door.

“Now what?” Suki yelled.

“I thought you said your relationship was purely platonic.”

“It was,” Nyk replied, “until a few moments ago.”

“Oh ... well, good night.”

“Oh, Mom?” Suki yelled.

“Yes, dear?”

“Mom! It was wonderful!”

“I'm delighted for you. I'll see you two lovebirds in the morning.” He heard her footsteps on the stairs.

“I'll bet she won't forget.” Suki kissed him. “Now, where were we...”

Nyk held her under his arm, stroked her bicep and gazed into her dark eyes. She stroked a tear from his face. “Hey... Crying after sex is a girl thing, not a guy thing. What are the tears for?”

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“It's who they're for.”

“Then, who?”

“For the child I can never father. My dad -- my real one -- told me of the joy of conceiving a child in love. Now, I understand what he was talking about. I long to share the experience with you -- and I know I can't. I must, I shall, I do love the child in your womb as if he were mine. But how I wish he was.”

She caressed his face and kissed his cheek. “He is yours, Nykkyo. He will grow with you as the only dad he'll ever know.”

“Destiny permitting, he will,” Nyk said.

“Would Destiny be so cruel as not to permit it?”

He brushed aside some of her hair. “I can't know the details of Destiny's plans for either of us. What I do know is our child's destiny is to father a child, so you can pass the crest to him. So long as we nurture him, and teach him well, and guide him along his path, his destiny will be fulfilled. And Suki, he will follow his path, or I wouldn't be here.”

EARTHBOUND

Appendix I -- Excerpts from Koichi Kyhana's Journal

Translated by Nykkyo Kyhana

Day 1 [0.001 APF -NK]:

For the benefit of posterity, I, Koichi Kyhana, set forth this journal. Today is our first day on our new world. After nine months in space, we all welcome the open sky and warmth of sunshine. ... This planet would not be our first choice for establishing a colony, but we had none. We have transferred the surviving members of our ship's company to the surface in our shuttlecraft, and we have brought the Floran down. Our first order of business is survival. None of our nearly thousand men, women and children harbors any hope of returning home. None of us holds any illusions that the upcoming days and years will be easy.

We are pioneers -- facing many of the same difficulties our forebears faced colonizing new lands on Earth. We differ in the absolute knowledge that return to, or even contact with, our homeland is impossible...

Day 311 [1.059 APF -NK]:

...How odd it is to look up at the night sky and not see the familiar patterns of stars. I recall looking up at the stars from the surface of Beta Centauri 2 on one of our scouting missions. Many of Earth's constellations were recognizable; distorted, but recognizable. There's no mistaking Orion from the surface of either sphere. But this planet's sky is so different, we can't positively identify a single star, even though we

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know the familiar ones certainly must be visible. One day, no doubt, astronomers will map this sky and name the patterns the stars make. I wonder what familiar forms will lend their names to these constellations. The shuttlecraft? The hydraulic ram? The cutter beam? This planet's night sky is very beautiful, dazzling in fact, compared with Earth's. I do miss the moon, however...

5.121 APF

... Our daughter Yasuko has become quite the big sister, helping Sarah with the chores of raising our second child, son Tetsui. Yasuko was born during our voyage -- she is truly a star child. She would be about four and a half Earth years old now. How different her childhood has been and will be from mine, without the wonders and diversity of Earth to inspire curiosity and reward with beauty. I remember walking the shore near my family's summer home on Long Island, hearing the calls of the gulls and watching the sanderlings scurry across the sand. Our children will never have that experience, here; and what saddens me most is the knowledge they will never know what they are missing...

9.043 APF

...Food, shelter and security. Those are the basic human needs. Our band of pioneers have all three, but little else. In the past nine-plus years on our new world, our agriculturists have produced a surplus of food, mainly in the form of beans and grains, using the hydroponic growing beds intended for Beta- Centauri 2. We have adequate water, piped in and purified from the sea.

Our needs for shelter are quite modest, the climate is warm and dry, and we have no enemies and no predators from which to be secured. ... Our population growth has been healthy. I am heartened the signateurs of the Floran Compact are adhering to the clause emphasizing the importance of enlarging our numbers. Sarah and I have done our part, she is due to deliver our fourth child within twenty days. In the past nine-plus years,

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we have seen the births of nearly four hundred children, and the deaths of only twenty-four of our band...

11.221 APF

...We are now able to draw upon the resources of our new world for all our needs. We are no longer cannibalizing pieces of the Floran, and we've agreed that what remains of her hull should be preserved to commemorate the hardships we have overcome. We have found sources of iron for steel, copper and tin, and aluminum. Our iron smelting facility became operational two days ago. We have begun construction of a polymer plant, now that our chemists have discovered how to build molecules of plastics from the oils produced from rapeseed and euphorbia...

15.013 APF

...After fifteen of what pass for years on Floran, our family is going on a vacation. We are spending a few days on our own, by the sea. We have been in need of some time away, so I expropriated the use of a land vehicle and we drove it toward the sea. We slept under the stars last night; we have no need for a tent or other shelter. Sarah and I have walked the sands with our five children. This world's sea appears as full of animal life as the land is empty of it. I have seen a myriad of shells and carapaces of sea life tossed upon the shore. The sea fauna is undoubtedly like the land flora -- inedible to the verge of being toxic. I may never become acclimated to the stench of decay on this world, but Sarah claims to have become accustomed to it, and to the children it seems natural. Hearing the sound of the surf washing against the shore fills me with deep longing for my family's summer home by the sea.

I can look up at the night sky and know the direction of Earth's sun; I longed to be able to leap the distance between our stars until I realized five thousand Earth years must pass before that house on Long Island will be built. Now, instead, I muse on how the construction of the pyramids is progressing...

EARTHBOUND

19.101 APF

Today was Sarah's funeral. Her death was mercifully swift, perishing from a cerebral aneurysm that ruptured after a fall, if I am to believe the doctor. Perhaps it was for the best. This mission did not turn out as Sarah and I expected, and the past nineteen-odd years have been difficult. Difficult, especially, for Sarah. I salute her strength and courage. She never succumbed to despair, as had some of our party in the early days. She so desperately missed the friends and family we left behind, and I was incapable of giving her the comfort she deserved. ... Yasuko has been a great comfort to me. I see traces of her mother in her face, even though her features remain more Asian than Euro. Yasuko never knew Earth, and she, like all the second-generation Florans, regards this planet as her homeworld... Following the traditions we have established, Sarah's body was cremated in the electric furnaces. We have agreed we do not wish to put our dead into this ground. I have taken Sarah's ashes and sprinkled them onto the surface of the sea. The children and I agreed it was a fitting tribute to her...

24.050 APF

...Today, my son Tetsui has married Phaedra Allen, the daughter of one of the machinists among the Floran crew. They tell me they are eager to do their part to enlarge our population, but they look so young to me. And they are young, and even after twenty Floran years on this planet I still prefer to think in terms of Earth years, of which Tetsui has seen merely sixteen, and Phaedra is a full Floran year younger. We are saddened Sarah won't number among us in celebrating this rite of passage. But this is what Life is -- the big circle of birth, childhood, maturity, procreation, aging and death. I am attempting to convince Yasuko that, with the children maturing and with Tetsui starting a family, I can manage adequately by myself and she should consider finding a mate of her own...

26.001 APF

EARTHBOUND

...We have survived a quarter Floran century and yet it seems like yesterday we were making the final orbital insertion maneuver around this peculiar planet revolving around its peculiar orange star. Through hard work, our population are thriving and finding joy and sorrow in everyday life. I now believe we can and will sustain what we have begun. I also believe the hope of every parent -- for his children to live a better life -- will be fulfilled for our children's children if not for our own.

This was, after all, the reason we departed Earth for Beta-Centauri 2, to plant the human seed, to grow a better human community -- not for us but for our children and our children's children, and for our children's children's children. And the seed has been planted, but in a different garden than we had intended...

29.248 APF

...I write this entry from the mining camp in the uplands, soon to be incorporated into a village to be called Vebinad. I rode here with Bryan Quinn, whose talents as chief engineer aboard the Floran were put to use devising means to coax minerals from this planet's crust... The ride took half a day. As we approached the piedmont, the vegetation became lush; the sparse desert growth gave way to tall reed-like plants. Once we reached the edge of the uplands, tree-like species were found; these grew more and more dense until we encountered a thick forest... It is water that enables this growth. Above the uplands many rivers form and flow down the face of the mons, fed by the melt of the snow pack in the high elevations. As these rivers flow downhill, their water is absorbed and used by the vegetation. By the time the streams reach sea level, their cargo has been spent, and what little water remains quickly evaporates in the warmth and dryness...

36.098 APF

...The past year has been the first since PlanetFall in which our population growth has flattened. We are still producing offspring at a

EARTHBOUND

satisfactory rate, but the inevitable has happened -- the death rate among the original crew and passengers threatens to overtake the birth rate. I've been feeling my own age, lately, and give myself the privilege of the elderly, that of permitting the youth to shoulder more than their share of the effort...

38.232 APF

...The most remarkable thing happened last night -- it rained! For the first time since PlanetFall, it rained on the main camp; about five centimetres in all. The cause undoubtedly was one of the many tropical storms that pummel the southern zone became lost and wandered here to die... We have two generations of native Florans who've never seen rain in their lives; unless they've spent some time in the agricultural camp [now Tinam -- N.K.] in the middle latitudes... This morning another remarkable thing happened. The land burst into life. Not that the land is devoid of life; there's a sparse growth of a hardy and frugal plant that's evolved to harvest the meager dews. What grew today was an explosion of foliage that grew so fast one could see it happen before one's eyes; and hear it, too, a rustling sound as the paper-thin leaves spread to catch the sun. By noon the land was covered with a dark violet crepe and fruiting bodies formed.

These opalescent spheres darkened and ripened in the sun and by dusk split to fill the air with thick, choking clouds of purple spores. No doubt these plants slept for many Floran decades awaiting a wayward storm, and their progeny will also sleep for thirty, fifty, a hundred Floran years until the next storm loses its way. [The vegetation Koichi describes is no longer to be found, as the entire small desert that held the main camp has been paved over to build Floran City. This species is a known casualty of the human invasion of Planet Floran. --N.K.]...

43.191 APF

...Today was a day of mourning among our people as we marked the passing of Captain Ty Davis. More than any single member of the

EARTHBOUND

Floran crew, Ty Davis was responsible for our survival. I am pleased Yasuko married his son Colin, and they have produced three wonderful children to carry the Davis name forward...

45.072 APF

...The fourth generation of Kyhanas came into this world today as my grandson Josh Kyhana and his wife Judith gave birth to my great-granddaughter Tobia. Tetsui has followed the tradition and passed the family crest to Josh.

45.072 APF

Knowing my children, my grandchildren, and my great-grandchild share this world with me gives me joy -- joy that is tempered by the knowledge we are demanding much from our young people, not the least of which is to dedicate themselves to the creation and care of children at an age in which they are not much more than children themselves... I do not know how much longer four generations will coexist on this planet, as my health has been deteriorating, and our medical facilities are yet primitive compared to what we left behind...

46.001 APF

...The new year is a traditional time for reflection and for hope. Our people have together survived the hardships of founding a new world. We've done more than survive -- we've begun to flourish. When we left Earth, we were a group of nations -- we were Africans, Asians, Europeans and Americans. Now, we all have become Florans.

What's most important is we have become so without strife or animosity, and with a deep sense of community, togetherness and love. It is my sincere hope this will be our legacy to succeeding generations of the Floran people.

48.076 APF

EARTHBOUND

This is to be my last entry. The stroke I suffered two days ago has rendered me paralyzed on my left side. Yasuko has been kind enough to transcribe these words for me. I had hoped to live to see half a Floran century on this planet, but it was not to be. I look back with pride on what we have accomplished. I must leave it to the succeeding generations to look forward. ... The doctors have told me my condition is exacerbated due to the lack of certain drugs -- drugs derived from plants. Warfarin, I believe, is the agent they would prefer to administer to me, but we have none. When I was living on Earth, I took for granted the abundance of life that nourished us and healed us. If we are to truly thrive as a people, it is imperative we return to the stars, return to Earth, and at some point return to the human community there. We will not survive otherwise.

[48.078 APF

Koichi Kyhana died today, 2 segments past zenith meridian. His children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were at his side. He had requested his ashes be scattered on the sea, so he will be with Sarah. Thank you, Father, for the gift of survival. --Yasuko Kyhana Davis]

Appendix II -- Lingwafloran

An Introduction to the Language of Planet Floran

Introduction

The language Esperanto was employed on the ill-fated Centauri Colony mission. Because the mission was multi-national, this artificial language was chosen. After PlanetFall, the colonists aboard the Floran continued to use Esperanto, and they taught it to their children and grandchildren as their first language. As the years progressed, the language evolved. *Lingwafloran* derives most of its native vocabulary from Esperanto, although new words continue to be coined.

Structurally, *Lingwafloran* differs from Esperanto in the following ways:

- Inflection has been greatly simplified.
- All verb conjugations have been abandoned.
- Word endings have changed. The -o ending to indicate nouns has shifted to -a. Verb endings have been abandoned, except for the -i ending on infinitives.
- Sentence meanings formed in Esperanto by inflection and conjugation have been replaced by the use of particles. These words change the mood or the tense of a sentence without otherwise altering its meaning.

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Lingwafloran is a spare, logical language with few irregularities and a very straightforward syntax and grammar.

Spelling

Spelling is phonetic using the following alphabet:

EARTHBOUND

A as in f ather	N
B	O as in e cho
C ¹	P
D	Q ¹
E ²	R
F	S as in s ee
G as in g o	T
H	u as in u ne
I as in f ish	V
J as in J uly	W
K	X ch as in ch ess
L	Y ³
M	Z

Note 1: Obsolete, used exclusively for proper names

Note 2: Pronounced as “e” in echo; unless at the end of a word, then as “ay” in say.

Note 3: Y is pronounced as a strong “ee” as in see. It is usually found in proper names

Note 4: “SH” and “TH” sounds are not present in the language

EARTHBOUND

There are no irregular spellings or pronounciations.

Grammar

Lingwafloran grammar and syntax are exceptionally simple and regular. For declarative sentences, word order is always subject - object - verb. For questions, word order is object - verb-subject. *Mi zi am.* I love you. *Mi am-zi?* Do you love me? Phrases and clauses follow the same rules as for sentences. In both the spoken and written language, common usage is to elide a pronoun object with the verb as a prefix, and to form contractions to eliminate adjacent vowels. Noun and phrase objects are not so elided. This usage is optional, and is employed (or, not employed) as a tool for emphasis. *Mi z'am.* I love you. (vs *Mi zi am.* I love you.) *Mi mimarx.* I walk.

Telescoping Syntax

Complex sentences may be formed by using phrases, clauses, or even complete sentences as the objects of verbs. These may be telescoped to any depth, although comprehension becomes difficult beyond a depth of four or five.

As an example, Andra tells Nyk that,

"My parents realized they had the genetic raw material to produce a candidate for the schools."

In *Lingwafloran*, this sentence would be (and is what Andra actually said):

Mu patrien lin genete krudemateria kandidat per xi lernien fabriki posed't kompren't.

If this sentence is rewritten with brackets identifying the phrases, the three- level telescoped syntax becomes apparent:

[Mu patrien [lin genete krudemateria [kandidat per xi lernien fabriki] posed't] kompren't].

EARTHBOUND

The phrase, “*kandidat per xi lernien fabriki*” (lit, “[a] candidate for the schools to fabricate”) is an infinitive phrase that modifies *krudemateria* (raw material); the infinitive *fabriki* must be at the end of the phrase. The phrase “*lin genete krudemateria kandidat per xi lernien fabriki posed't*” is a complete sentence that can stand on its own: “They possessed the genetic raw material to produce a candidate for the schools.” This sentence becomes the object of the verb *kompren't* (realized).

Elegant expression of complex thoughts through nesting is a cherished characteristic of Floran literature, and politicians admire the obfuscatory power of telescoped syntax in speechwriting. In conversation, however, Florans tend to employ simple and direct sentences.

Verbs

Verb usage is also simple and regular. There are no declensions. Each verb has a root, a participle and an infinitive. All verbs are transitive. Intransitive actions are expressed with reflexive objects: *Mi xi libra lej*. I read the book. *Mi mi lej*. I read. *Mi mi marx*. I walk. Adding “-i” to the verb root forms infinitives: *marxi* to walk. *Mi marxi ir*. I go to walk. Infinitives are used in lieu of a present participle. *Mi leji ju*. I enjoy reading.

Past tense/past participles are formed by adding 't. *marx't*: walked *Mi mi marx't*. I walked.

A special class of verbs exist known as *forkeverben* (fork-verbs). These can take two objects in order to express an action on a primary object passing from the subject to a secondary object. Sentence structure is subject - secondary object - primary object - verb. An example is *donati*, to give -- the subject gives a primary object to a secondary object. *Mi Kovina xi libra donat't*. I gave the book to Kovina. In this example Kovina is the secondary object and *xi libra* (the book) is the primary object. *Andra-lu patrien xi lernia lita vend't*. Andra's parents sold her to the school.

Particles

Tenses other than the simple present and simple past, and moods other than the indicative, are formed by inserting particles into the sentence. These are otherwise meaningless words whose sole function is to modify the tense or mood of the sentence. Particles may be placed anywhere within the sentence. Most commonly, particles are placed immediately after the subject; fine shades of meaning are developed by the location of the particle. The closer the particle is to the verb, the greater the emphasis on the tense or mood over the meaning of the sentence.

- Past perfect is formed by adding the particle *ve* to the sentence. *Mi ve mi marx't*. I have walked.
- The progressive tense is formed by adding the particle *vi* to the sentence. *Mi vi mi marx*. I am walking. *Mi vi mi marx't*. I was walking.
- The future tense is formed by adding the particle *va* to the sentence. *Mi va mi marx*. I will walk. *Mi va marxi ir*. I will go walking.
- Future progressive is formed with the particle *vavi*. *Mi vavi mi marx*. I will be walking. *Mi vavi marxi ir*. I will be going to walk.
- Conditional expressions, and the subjunctive mood, are formed with the particle *vave*. *Mi vave mi marx*. I would walk. *Se mi vave rixe vira es*. If I were a rich man. Future conditional is formed with the particle *veva*. *Mi veva mi marx*. I will have walked.
- The imperative mood is formed with the particle *dev*. *Zi dev xi libra mi donat*. Give me the book.

The language possesses a fourth mood in addition to the indicative, the imperative and the subjunctive: the suggestive. This mood is used in expressing the desire for agreement, and is formed with the particle *niva*. This mood is used extensively in discussions, as Florans are consensus-builders. The sense of the suggestive mood is difficult to express in

EARTHBOUND

English; the closest approximation is “let us”. *Ni ni marx*. We walk. *Ni niva ni marx*. Let's walk. *Ni niva n'amor*. Let's make love. *Ni niva amfen es, nu fortunen va kune edzek*. Let us be lovers, we'll marry our fortunes together. *Niva*, as a response, means “yes, let's” (colloq).

Nouns

Noun usage is slightly less regular than verb usage. Nouns are genderless. In general, nouns end in -a, but this is by no means a hard and fast rule. Plurals are formed by adding or replacing the ending with -en. Possessives are formed by adding -u. *xi viru libren*, the man's books. *xi virenu libren*, the men's books. Proper names do not form possessives. Instead, the name is followed by a possessive pronoun. *Mu libren*. My books. *Ilsa-lu libren*. Ilsa's books.

Nouns may be formed by joining other nouns or nouns with modifiers. This practice is optional and is employed as a tool for emphasis. Ex: *krudemateria* = raw material (*krude* + *materia*); however expressing this as either a single word or as two would be equally valid.

Nouns may be formed from verb roots in two ways. By appending the suffix -a to a verb root, a noun representing the action is created. Examples, *marxi* to walk, *marxa* a walk; *ami* to love, *ama* love; *amori* to make love with, *amora*, lovemaking. By appending the suffix -fa onto a verb root, a noun representing that which performs the action is formed. *marxi* to walk, *marxfa* a walker; *ami* to love, *amfa* a lover, *amfen* lovers; *amori* to make love with, *amorfa* a sex partner.

An unusual aspect of the language is the widespread and rich usage of endings to indicate diminutives and familiars. This is no doubt a feature of the language that evolved to facilitate the expression of love, as the Florans pride themselves on being a nation of lovers. The most common diminutive endings are -in, meaning little or fond, and -ta, meaning dear or sweet. Examples: *vira* man; *virin* boy (little man); *virta* gentleman (sweet man); *virinta* dear, sweet man, dear boy.

Modifiers

EARTHBOUND

Modifiers serve as both adjectives and adverbs, and generally end in -e. In some cases the same word serves as either an adjective or an adverb, depending on context. Modifiers may precede or follow the word being modified. Example: *malume* dark *brune* brown *malumebrune okulen* dark brown eyes. Modifiers may be constructed from verbs by adding the -e ending to the verb root. Example: *pele* to drive, *pele*, driven. *Li pele vira es*. He is a driven man.

Modifiers may also be formed by adding the -e ending to nouns. Example, *vira* man, *vire* manly; *virin* boy, *virine* boyish. *Xa dama damine figura hav*. That woman has a girlish figure.

Negation

The particle for negation is *ne*, which alone means no. Only verbs may negated. This is done by applying *ne* as a prefix. *Lingwafloran* does not recognize the concept of the double negative. Once an action is negated, additional occurrences of *ne* do not alter the sense of the negation, and multiple occurrences of *ne* are often inserted for emphasis. *Mi nexiam z'ami nehalt va*. I'll never stop loving you.

Articles

There are no indefinite articles.

Definite Articles

<i>xi</i> the	<i>xa</i> that	<i>xe</i> this
<i>xan</i> those	<i>xen</i> these	

Pronouns

<i>mi</i> i/me	<i>zi</i> you	<i>li</i> he/she
		<i>xi</i> it
<i>ni</i> us	<i>zin</i> you	<i>lin</i> they
		<i>xin</i> they

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<i>mu</i> my	<i>zu</i> your	<i>lu</i> his/hers
		<i>xu</i> its
<i>nu</i> our	<i>zun</i> your	<i>lun</i> their
		<i>xun</i> their
<i>ki</i> who	<i>ka</i> what	<i>ke</i> where
<i>kel</i> which	<i>ku</i> whose	<i>kil</i> how
<i>la</i> there		

Note 1: use of *xi* as an article or as a pronoun is determined by context

Note 2: *lin/lun* is used to refer to people or animate entities, *xin/xun* refers to objects

Note 3: diminutive endings may be applied to pronouns. Ex: *z'inta* (*zi+in+ta*)=dear, sweet you

Vocabulary

An exhaustive dictionary of Floran words is beyond the scope of this appendix. A list of words used in the relating Nykkyo's story is presented below.

EARTHBOUND

Lingwafloran English

<i>akwa</i>	water
<i>al</i>	to
<i>ama</i>	friendship, love
<i>amfa</i>	friend, lover
<i>amfin</i>	companion, concubine
<i>amfta</i>	dear friend, dear lover
<i>ami</i>	to like, to love
<i>amori</i>	to make love
<i>anke</i>	also, too
<i>ardi</i>	to want, to desire
<i>ax'amfa</i>	gigolo
<i>ax'amfin</i>	finishing-school grad
<i>ax'amorfa</i>	whore
<i>bele</i>	beautiful
<i>bone</i>	good, well

EARTHBOUND

Lingwafloran English

<i>bon'matina</i>	good morning
<i>bon'noka</i>	good night
<i>bon'taka</i>	good day
<i>bon'veni</i>	welcome
<i>bon'viv</i>	please
<i>brune</i>	brown
<i>demonde</i>	off-world
<i>denke</i>	thank you
<i>detrui</i>	to destroy
<i>dev</i>	forms imperative
<i>devi</i>	to have to, must
<i>diri</i>	to tell, to say, to speak
<i>doktor</i>	doctor (as a title)
<i>donati</i>	to give
<i>ekzamini</i>	to examine
<i>eltir</i>	to remove, to take out
<i>enxip</i>	to board (a vessel)
<i>esi</i>	to be
<i>fabriki</i>	to build
<i>feti</i>	to do
<i>forti</i>	to strengthen

EARTHBOUND

Lingwafloran English

<i>gamba</i>	leg
<i>halti</i>	to stop
<i>havi</i>	to have
<i>igi</i>	to get
<i>ji</i>	yes
<i>jui</i>	to enjoy
<i>kaja</i>	bed, platform
<i>kel</i>	which
<i>kelke</i>	some
<i>kor</i>	heart
<i>korlyta</i>	sweetheart, dearest
<i>ky</i>	and
<i>levi</i>	to raise
<i>li</i>	he, she, him, her
<i>lifaxarpa</i>	woman's sash
<i>lita</i>	she, her (colloq.)
<i>litu</i>	hers (colloq)
<i>malume</i>	dark
<i>manja</i>	food, meal
<i>medika</i>	doctor of medicine
<i>mi</i>	I, me

EARTHBOUND

Lingwafloran English

<i>mu</i>	my
<i>ne</i>	no, forms negative
<i>nexiam</i>	never
<i>ni</i>	we, us
<i>niva</i>	forms suggestive
<i>noma</i>	name
<i>nu</i>	our
<i>nun</i>	now
<i>obei</i>	to obey
<i>okula</i>	eye
<i>paketa</i>	packet, starliner
<i>per</i>	for
<i>perfa</i>	agent
<i>permesi</i>	to permit
<i>psykomedika</i>	psychiatrist
<i>recevi</i>	to receive
<i>regardi</i>	to regard
<i>reveni</i>	to return
<i>saluti</i>	hello, greetings
<i>sanga</i>	blood
<i>senta</i>	feeling, sensation

EARTHBOUND

Lingwafloran English

<i>senti</i>	to feel
<i>serva</i>	service
<i>sona</i>	sound
<i>taka</i>	day
<i>tien</i>	here
<i>tiri</i>	to take
<i>traduki</i>	to translate
<i>tre</i>	very
<i>trebone</i>	very good, very well
<i>tuje</i>	soon
<i>tuj'kiam</i>	as soon as
<i>un</i>	one
<i>urba</i>	city
<i>va</i>	forms future
<i>vave</i>	forms subjunctive
<i>vavi</i>	forms future prog.
<i>ve</i>	forms progressive
<i>veke</i>	awake
<i>veni</i>	to come
<i>vi</i>	forms progressive
<i>viva</i>	life

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Lingwafloran English

<i>vizitfa</i>	visitor
<i>voka</i>	a (phone) call
<i>voyaga</i>	journey, voyage
<i>xa</i>	that
<i>xarpa</i>	sash
<i>xe</i>	this
<i>xi</i>	the, it
<i>xiam</i>	always, for ever
<i>xin</i>	they
<i>zi</i>	you
<i>z'inta</i>	you (familiar)
<i>zu</i>	your

EARTHBOUND

Titles in the Series

Titles in the *Earthbound* Series:

Earthbound

The Lexal Affair

Planetbound

The Altian Plague

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