

One Giant Leap

SCIENCE FICTION SHORT STORIES

futureriff.com



WAYNE AUSTIN

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Forward

I've collected together my science fiction short stories from my website (bar ***You Gotta Use Protection***, which has far too much adult content to be included in a collection for general release) into this ebook to make them more accessible to the public. Now I'll be blatantly honest here, I hope, after reading these, you'll decide to buy my novels.

This isn't a scam. I swear — honest to whatever-god-you-believe-in — it's a try-before-you-buy scheme. Where else but on the internet can you get hold of samples of an author's work and his writing style(s) for free to judge if you'd like to read their novels, rather than after you've dished out a pile of doe only to find out that the promising story on that first page fizzles out to disappointment at the end. Believe me, I've been in that boat.

So, as an unpublished author, what better way to advertise my wares.

And don't think that, just because I'm unpublished, my stuff is crap. Some great writers only got started after self-publishing their novels — look at Cory Doctorow — so who knows? And for \$US5 for an ebook, even if you buy one of my novels and don't like it, you haven't really hurt your hip pocket.

But if you don't decide to buy, then that's fine. I know I can't please everybody. However, if you do like one or more of my stories, please, tell as many people as you can and give them a copy of this file, or even better, tell them where they can download it from. That way I can get an idea of how many people I'm reaching.

Publishing on the web is dead easy. Getting people to read your stuff is the really hard part. I've spent money on advertising to little effect and the other alternatives, like blogging and posting on all the possible social sites, are all-consuming. And being on low income and having only a minimum broadband connection, I'm limited in what I can do. But hopefully, while I stumble along that winding track toward becoming a professional author, word-of-mouth might help ease the pain.

So enjoy,
Wayne



And PLEASE, **PLEASE, PLEASE** buy a book. Just one lousey book. Can't you see I've got two little suckers to support?

Aw.... Aren't they cute—? Oh no! They're hungry again. **Aarhg!**

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Price of Eternity

Nicolas Gleason squeezed his lips together and his eyelids flickered. The young man in the doorway hesitated and glanced left at one of the two burly male attendants who flanked him. For a moment he shrank back and then his gaze darted to Doctor Waterman, cocooned behind a cluttered desk: large flat screen on the right; a pile of red, gray and yellow folders on the left; and a mass of documents splayed before her.

“Is that...?” Nicolas asked.

“Yes,” said Doctor Waterman. “Come in Nick, it’s all right. Sit there.” She pointed to a chair next to Nicolas. “And shut the door after you.”

Nicolas frowned as the attendants stayed outside. “Why?” he snapped.

“I thought you might want to meet him.”

“Meet him? Look, Doctor Waterman,” Nicolas locked eyes with her, “I’ve waited twenty years for that body. Do you hear me? I said *body*. That’s all it is to me. There is no *person* there.”

“Mr. Gleason—”

“I am a person.” The young man’s quiet voice cut through the room. “I *am* a person!”

Amazed at the outburst, Nicolas turned to stare at him. The young man sat rigid and stared down at his hands, clasped together in his lap so tight his whole body trembled. For a second he glanced up at Nicolas

— timid, yet defiant at the same time — before returning his gaze to his hands.

“Of course you are,” said Doctor Waterman.

Nicolas turned back to her. “I find this ... most disturbing. I’m your patient. I don’t want to be confronted like this. The first time I want to see that body is when I wake up after the operation, not before.”

“But Mr. Gleason—”

Nicolas stabbed a wavering finger at her. “I should have had the operation a week ago. You know the problems I’m having, my ... memory. The longer we wait the worse my chances will be. I helped fund your research and I helped pay for this fancy clinic. And I don’t recall hearing about your other patients being treated this way.”

Doctor Waterman sighed and sat back in her chair. Her elbows rested on the armrests, fingers steepled and pressed against her chin. “No, this is the first time.”

“I deserve to have a life,” the young man muttered.

“Then why? Why is he even aware of what’s going to happen to him? Wouldn’t it be more humane to grow them, I don’t know ... in vitro perhaps? Or keep them unconscious—” Nicolas glanced sideways at the young man, “until they’re needed.”

“Their bodies need activity to grow and mature properly. Look at Nick, he has an excellent physique. He wouldn’t have that if he was grown in a vat.”

That didn’t answer his question. Nicolas slumped in his chair and let the air wheeze out of him. What was she hiding? He hadn’t scrambled his way to the top of this scrap heap called humanity without learning how to read people.

He peered at her through half-closed eyes. *Let her wait.* He was the twentieth richest person in the

world. That meant something. He didn't have take this crap, not after all the things he had put up with to stay alive. *Ha ha! I've beaten you, you stupid Grim Reaper. And you thought you had me.*

That made Nicolas smile. Doctor Waterman opened her mouth to say something, but he looked away and closed his eyes. He might be an old man in a hurry, but she could wait a little longer while he savored his victory. And the clone? It didn't matter....

"Mr. Gleason?"

Nicolas started and opened his eyes. Had he drifted off? He looked across to stare at the good Doctor, and ignored her as she began to speak. *Let her babble....*

"... so you see, its important they lead a stimulating and active life."

Nicolas jerked and blinked a few times in quick succession. Where was he? Oh yes, Waterman's office. "I'm sure that's all very commendable," he snapped. "You still haven't told me why I have to meet him. If you wanted to be humane you should have kept him in the dark. 'Oh, we have to do some tests and we have to put you under anesthesia.' Something like that. Let him go to sleep not knowing he's never going to wake up."

"Why bother," muttered the young man, "they don't hide the fact from animals sent to abattoirs. As far as you're concerned, I'm no different."

Doctor Waterman held up her hand to shush the young man. "Please, Nick—"

"Nick? You've even given him my name!" Nicolas struggled to sit up straight, but the effort threatened to overwhelm him. His strength faded, but not his anger. It was a clone for God's sake!

Doctor Waterman held out her palms to plead with him. "Look at him. He's a person. He can think, he's aware, he has his own personality. He *has* an identity."

"No he's not! He's a facsimile of a person. That is the legal definition. It can't be any other way." Nicolas

slumped back, looked up at the ceiling and managed to wave his right arm in a ragged, sprawling arc as he tried to make his point. "If clones were recognized as human ... think of the ramifications—"

"You would have to die," said the young man.

"Nick!"

"He's right. We don't grow clones because we want children and duplicating ourselves is the best way. If we grow copies of ourselves — if we *manufacture* them, and that's what it is — if we grow copies, who's accountable for them if they commit a crime or kill someone? What if they can't get work? Should society support them? Or the donor? Or perhaps the *manufacturer* should bear some of the cost."

"That's avoiding the point," said Doctor Waterman. "Nick is a living, breathing human being."

"Human being! He doesn't have a soul according to the latest combined church doctrine. And they're the experts! 'Only those born from the seed of man and woman can have a soul. It is God's will.' Without a soul, he's just an animal as far as I'm concerned."

"He's a young man. You've lived a full, rich life. You're a hundred and twenty ... don't do this. You're the oldest recipient by far, and a successful transplant is by no means assured. It's bad enough knowing I have to take a life in order to continue one, but in your case the odds—"

"I don't care about odds. You've done ten of these already without any qualms—"

"They were my friends," said the young man. Doctor Waterman's eyes softened and offered him silent comfort.

Nicolas glared at her. "You've grown attached to them! *That's* the problem. If you don't transplant me, it's murder as far as the law's concerned." Doctor Waterman stiffened. "If you try to renege ... yours might be the only clinic doing this, but—"

"Do you have a soul?" the young man asked him.

Nicolas paused, open-mouthed, then pursed his lips as he stared past the young man. "I think I do."

For the first time he looked squarely at the young man and saw how he used to be. Even the hair was to the same cut as when he had been that age. A memory surfaced and caught him by surprise. He had been arguing with his father over whether to finish college or drop everything on a whim of an idea. It was a stupid risk, but a once-in-a-lifetime chance if it came off. His father was a hard nut, like him, and had just threatened to disown him if he went ahead. And it was no idle threat.

"You know what the trouble with you is?" he had snapped. "You have no soul. You're a dead man walking." And with that he had stormed out to become the man he was today.

His father had died never talking to him, not that Nicolas had tried to get in touch. Neither had backed down, despite the cost, and he wasn't going to back down now. With that thought it occurred to him — he had become more like the "Old Man" than he had realized. Nicolas scratched his chin and allowed himself a wry smile.

"I used to be an atheist, but now I'm agnostic." He grunted. "I guess I've taken an each way bet."

"I think you must be my god," the young man decided, although his attitude toward Nicolas showed no reverence.

Doctor Waterman leaned forward. "Why do you say that?"

"I was thinking about it, when people die and their souls go to heaven. Then I realized ... everything I was told is all wrong. Souls don't go up to heaven to reside there. They go up to be used by God to stay alive. He absorbs them. And that's what it's like with us. When *Mister* Gleason here takes my body, I'll die. But my soul will be absorbed by him."

Nicolas chuckled. "I like that—"

"And then," the young man's voice rose, "when you take another clone you will absorb its soul too. Then

another and another. On and on forever. Unless ... your soul goes to heaven first!" He lunged.

Nicolas squawked as hands clamped around his throat.

"Guards!" Doctor Waterman screamed, but the door had already opened and the attendants were upon the young man. With the soft hiss of a hypo spray, he collapsed to the floor.

Ignoring him, the attendants turned their attention to Nicolas. He gagged, but air refused to enter his lungs. Do something, his eyes implored the men. He couldn't die. Not now, not after he had worked so hard to stay alive so long. The attendant above him yanked Nicolas's mouth open and stuck a grubby finger down his throat in an attempt to clear an airway.

Doctor Waterman struggled to get round her desk. Just as she reached Nicolas, emergency medical staff arrived and barreled their way in. A doctor elbowed the attendant aside and tried to intubate Nicolas, but the tube chaffed and stuck in his throat. He choked and tried to push the doctor's hand away.

The doctor cursed under his breath and twisted the tube. For a moment it refused to budge, but then it slipped in and despite the sharp pain, Nicolas sucked in a deep and grateful breath. He moaned as he was wheeled out into the corridor, but it was lost amid a swathe of voices, shouting and arguing. They were too late. Doctor Waterman had gotten her way and yet he felt no anger. Death was waiting to reap him. He stared up at ceiling lights whipping past and realized he was past caring. Just a little longer, he promised. That's all. He heard a hiss by his neck....



Nicolas moaned. His world brightened into diffuse white, fringed with rainbow. Was he dead? Then his eyelids flickered and opened and the hazy white resolved into light strips. Only, he saw two of each — overlaid, but slightly offset. And they refused to focus. This wasn't the way to heaven ... or hell. A brief

laugh gurgled from his lips. Although a bandage clipped the sight in his left eye, he recognized ceiling ... walls, but not the room. He tried to swallow and the parched desert that was his throat protested. His arms and legs twisted and jerked with lives of their own and they felt attached all wrong. What had they done to him?

"How do you feel?" a voice asked. It sounded familiar and a blurry face came into view, surrounded by a rainbow aura. Was that...? It was. Doctor Waterman.

Nicolas tried to work his mouth to speak but his tongue and jaw didn't want to cooperate. After a frustrating age he managed to get some words out. "I ... feel odd. He ... he tried to kill me!" His voice sounded strange, foreign, strangled in cotton wool.

"I would like to apologize—"

"He tried to kill me!"

"I promise you, he won't do that again." Doctor Waterman patted his arm. She sounded sad, looked sad, and yet.... Nicolas tried to concentrate on his misgiving, but his mind, like his body, also refused to cooperate. He gave up. *I'm too old.*

"I ... can't wait any longer. The transplant ... it has to go ahead. If I die, my lawyers—"

"We went ahead two days ago. That's why you feel strange. Your brain hasn't quite mapped to your new body and it will take time to adjust."

"You did?" Nicolas closed his eyes and grinned although his mouth felt stiff and fixed lopsided to his right cheek. He felt a tear slide down his left cheek and his left arm at the same time. "My eyes—"

"That's the most complex part of the operation, replacing your old optic nerve and reconnecting the new one. You won't get your sight back properly for two, two and a half years, not until I've grafted the appropriate tissue. But it will improve over the next fortnight and won't be such an imposition."

"Thank ... thank you Doctor. I was afraid ... I thought you weren't going to operate."

"No, Mr. Gleason...." Something in her voice nagged at Nicolas, but again he couldn't put his finger on it. "We had a contract."

A nurse popped into the room. Nicolas could make out a vague orb framed in auburn. "How is he?" she asked in a low voice.

"Fine. He's awake and stable."

"I'll come back in a few minutes."

"No, I'd better let Mr. Gleason rest." Doctor Waterman stood up and looked down at Nicolas. "I'll come back tomorrow and we'll begin some tests." And she was gone.

The nurse came over and began to fuss, checking tubes, topping up infusions, reviewing his charts, and all the time she kept up an easy, gentle banter. Nicolas didn't catch her name, but under the influence of her soft, lilting voice he drifted off to sleep.

"And how are we this morning?"

Nurse Parkinson leant over Nicolas, like she did every morning, to check and adjust the plastic bags hung from gallows at the head of his bed. His eyesight had improved over the past fortnight to where he could distinguish small features like the brown mole on her neck. She still appeared hazy around the edges, although the rainbow aura had faded to almost nothing, and there were still two of her, one overlaying the other and a fraction offset, like ghosting due to poor reception.

Nicolas stared at her heaving bosom as she reached over him. Her breasts swelled before his eyes, trying to burst free from her tunic stretched taut. He wanted to bury his face in those mounds of pleasure, squeeze them with his hands and kiss those hard erect nipples. He felt a familiar tension — an ache — in his groin.

Every morning for the last four days his body had tortured him. The hardness of his arousal was both sensuous and painful and it was all he could do to not cry out in frustration. Just imagine what he could do! He hadn't had an erection like this since he was ... he was ... for ages. He gave up on the memory teasing the tip of his tongue and let his mind wallow in the curves of Nurse Parkinson's uniform. It was her fault after all. She was deliberately trying to arouse him. He wanted to laugh with delight and cry from embarrassment at the same time.

"Um ... fine," he managed to mutter and closed his eyes to resist temptation.

Nurse Parkinson pulled back the sheets to expose him. Her eyes opened wide with lustful delight. She seemed much prettier now, slimmer, younger, and with luscious long hair cascading over her shoulders. She ripped open her blouse to expose her breasts. They were large and firm and in no need of a bra. She dived on his—

"Are we ready for our bath?"

"What ... oh?" A chill swept down Nicolas and his mouth went dry. His brow furrowed as he directed mental commands at his wayward organ. *Go away, go away.* But his erection had a mind of its own.

He closed his eyes and tried not to grimace, tried to pretend it didn't exist.

"There's no need to be embarrassed." Nurse Parkinson pulled the sheets back and adjusted his gown. "I've seen it all before."

With deft wipes of the sponge she worked over his legs, his inner thighs, his abdomen and chest. And with what appeared to be practiced ease she avoided his embarrassment, nudging it accidentally once or twice. A quick rough towel-down finished the task and Nicolas was covered up and safe back under the protection of his sheets.

Nurse Parkinson packed her trolley and prepared to leave. Then she opened a drawer, pulled out a box

of tissues and placed them on the side of his bed. "It'll be half an hour before anyone disturbs you." She winked. "Your hand control has really improved, but I think you'll only need a couple of minutes."

"I don't know what you mean." Nicolas tried to sound innocent, but his cheeks burned.

"You're my fourth male transplant patient. It happened to them too. You've got to remember, you don't only have the body of a twenty year old, but the hormones as well." Nurse Parkinson sighed. "Ah, to be twenty again ... I wish!" She wheeled the trolley out and closed the door.

Later that day, Doctor Waterman came to see him. Nicolas struggled to sit up. Although his arms still trembled, he now had the strength and control to hold his body up. The sheets caused him some problems at first. Doctor Waterman offered to help, but he waved her away.

"I did it twice this morning!"

At last the offending sheets gave in and Nicolas pulled them back. He grunted as his legs quivered. The left knee wobbled, but drew up toward his chest, then the right, and his feet slipped free of the sheets. His breath hesitated as he waited to catch his breath. Though two was his limit, Nicolas Gleason wasn't a quitter, there was nothing he couldn't do. He gritted his teeth and lifted his arms up to rock his body back. At the same time, he twisted sideways and his body pivoted. His feet arced out, away from the bed, and the euphoria from the morning's success swept over him as he rocked upward into a sitting position, supported by his arms once more.

"Very well done!"

"That's nothing." Nicolas bent forward to let his legs take his weight and swayed as he tried to stand. Doctor Waterman reached out to support him. "No!" He held up his arm to ward her off.

Like a zombie rising from the dead, Nicolas straightened up. He took a faltering step, and then another. His legs jiggled beneath him. Left foot shuffled forward, body swayed and jerked until it regained balance,

and then the right foot took its turn. He teetered across the room, touched the wall and retraced his steps. *Three times!* Soon he would be out chasing girls for mile after mile. He was invincible! Nothing could stop him. He collapsed onto the bed, his chest heaving as he sucked in air, a huge grin splashed across his face.

Doctor Waterman took his arm and helped him back into bed. "Mr. Gleason, I'm amazed. You've come along much better than I had expected."

"I bet the others didn't progress so quickly. Why I remember ... er ... er ... dammit!" His good spirits evaporated. "There's so much I can't *quite* remember. I know the memories are there. It's like they're in the background, but I can't get at them. Doctor ... when can we start the transplants?"

Doctor Waterman sat down on the end of his bed and pursed her lips. "We discussed this during your preliminary examinations. Memories fade if they're not used, and at your age it's not easy to recover them. The transplants will give you back the ability to create new memories and retain them. I'm afraid your old memories ... well some may be recovered, but most will fade away. You said you understood and accepted that at the time."

"Did I?"

"The transplants will help your brain to synchronize with your new body. Remember? We went through how your body and mind grow old together." Nicolas shook his head. "Your brain still expects an old body with reduced hormones. At the moment it's being flooded. You already have part of the clone's brain — most of the brain stem ... and the pituitary gland." Doctor Waterman smiled and hesitated. "That's one of the reasons behind your ... morning problem?"

Nicolas blushed. "It's more than a morning problem."

"Yes ... and it is a problem, along with the others — the nausea, the hot and cold flushes. Your mood swings. You still have a one hundred and twenty-year-old hypothalamus and it can't quite cope with your

new twenty-year-old pituitary gland. Those hormones affect your neurotransmitter levels — the chemicals that control your emotional state. They can cause serious complications if we leave them unchecked.”

“So why are we waiting? I’m fit and ready.”

“We will as soon as we can.” Doctor Waterman’s voice had an undercurrent of tension that started warning bells ringing in the back of his mind. Again he couldn’t focus on it.

“But?”

“Every brain is unique ... each one presents different complications and yours is no different. Maybe in a week or two ... I can’t give an exact time. Although you think you’re fine ... our tests have shown one or two problems — nothing major. We’ll adjust your medication and see if that fixes it. Let’s hope so. However some minor surgery may be required.”

Nicolas wanted to argue, but experience warned him not to. She was hiding something.

“What we can do though,” Doctor Waterman brightened as if she was the harbinger of good news, “is get you certified. By tomorrow you will legally be Mister Nicolas James Wentworth Gleason, renowned billionaire, bon vivant, and ... should I say it ... eligible bachelor?” She raised her eyebrows in a half-smile. “In a few years you’ll be a new man with a new life and new goals, a young man with a young man’s dreams and aspirations. I think the loss of a few memories is a small price to pay.”

Nicolas looked at his hand and waggled his fingers, watched the smooth white skin stretch taut over the bones, massaged the plump and firm flesh in his palm. It was a young man’s hand. “Sounds good to me.”



Days turned into a week and Nicolas grew restless. Every day brought improvement. He could walk with only the occasional loss of balance, and even if it was a stagger, he had started to jog up and down the

corridor. That was the extent of his universe. A door stood between him and that big, beautiful world outside and he didn't have a key card to open it. He leant against the doorway to his room and watched a nurse wave her card at the door and leave. It slid shut behind her, trapping him.

Anger burst forth from nowhere and he clenched his fists, all the time cursing under his breath. The boredom drove him nuts. Why couldn't he have a few women visit him? They should be lined up outside his door. One after the other, they could come in and leave bow-legged. Nicolas barked a laugh at the thought and then sagged to his knees, squeezing his eyes shut to stop the tears. If he wasn't up high enough to fly with the fairies he was ready to curl up in a ball and die. And Doctor Waterman ... he *knew* she was hiding something. It *wasn't* his imagination. It *wasn't* an artifact from the operation.

Nicolas roused himself and started jogging. *Prisoners on death row get treated better than this.*

The corridor was only fifty meters long and except for his room, all the others were locked. Only one showed life. Light glowed through a small window in the door at the far end. He stopped to peer in. A nurse appeared from behind a curtain, picked up a tray of instruments and carried it back. Nicolas broke into a grin. He had company! It must be the next patient — someone to talk to. He would ask Doctor Waterman.

No! This isn't a prison. Tonight I'll go see him ... or her. It had to be a her. He grinned in anticipation and resumed jogging.

The day dragged. Tests, always tests, life revolved around tests. Nicolas suffered through blood tests, ECG, PET scans, cognitive tests, and others he didn't understand or care about. Dinner came and went, boring as usual. Staff numbers dwindled.

The time came and Nicolas slid out of bed. But before he could reach his door a commotion erupted outside. Doctor Waterman, her assistant, Doctor Vinchenzo, and two nurses raced past.

Nicolas poked his head out into the corridor in time to see them disappear into the theater at the end of

the corridor. He felt a lump in his throat. They must have left the transplant too late for his new friend, like they had almost done with him.

Anger, dark and unfocused, welled up. Nicolas stood impotent and shook with rage. *How dare they!* If she died, he'd have all of them charged with murder and they could spend the rest of their miserable lives caged up like he was. It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't *fair*....

At last, he gained a modicum of control and forced in a deep breath before counting to ten as it seeped out. With another breath and another count, the anger faded.

Maybe they could save her, this new love of his life. He looked back along the corridor — no one. With that, he slipped out and trotted down the corridor, his hospital slippers making a soft shushing sound. After a quick glance over his shoulder, he peeked into the room.

The curtain was back.

Doctor Waterman, hunched over next to the patient, played a desperate concerto on the robot surgeon's control panel. Vincenzo stood opposite, while two nurses hovered beside him.

Save her, Nicolas pleaded in silence as he craned his neck to see past Waterman. Save her.

But all he could see were dark red tubes, coming out from under the sheet covering the patient and snaking away to machines he recognized as artificial livers, kidneys, heart and lung. He caught snatches of words amidst the muffled conversation. Vincenzo's face pleaded with Doctor Waterman.

"... we can't wait...."

"... *not* stable...."

"... *die*...."

"... tomorrow morning."

"... too late!"

Vinchenzo leant forward. "We can't wait. It has to be now." Doctor Waterman shrugged and appeared to give in.

Nicolas sagged against the door and sighed; his new friend still had a chance. He willed Doctor Waterman to move. Could this patient be someone he knew? She stepped aside.

Nicolas froze.

No!

It was the clone. She had never wanted it to die in the first place.

"Mr. Gleason!"

Nicolas looked round and blanched. *What's she doing here?* Nurse Parkinson stood just inside the entrance door, coat still on, and stared at him. He looked back through the window. *It can't be!*

"*Mister Gleason!*" Nurse Parkinson's voice reverberated along the corridor. "You shouldn't be up."

Doctor Waterman twisted round and saw him. She frowned and turned to Vinchenzo.

Nicolas reeled away. His heart raced, pounded at his chest, trying to break free.

My heart. It's my heart!

He had to get away. But how? He didn't have a key. Run, *run*; it was all he could do. He staggered back along the corridor, his right arm outstretched to support him against the wall. Nurse Parkinson blocked his way.

"This way Mr. Gleason. Let's get you back to bed. You need your rest." Her lilting voice, so soothing, so seductive before, terrified him now, angered him. *She has to know.*

But she had a key. It dangled from her hand.

Nicolas stumbled toward her, wiping away the tears blurring his sight. *How could they?*

A door squeaked behind and Doctor Waterman called after him. "It's not what you think."

Nurse Parkinson put up her hands to catch and steady him, smiling and muttering soothing phrases. They all knew, they all wanted to cheat him. Nicolas wobbled and fainted left. She moved to grab him.

He ducked back and lunged forward. They had no right! His right fist hit her jaw and pain jabbed through his fingers.

She collapsed to the floor; straight down like her legs had turned to jelly. Blood streamed from her nose and puddled on the floor. Nicolas stared down at her, feeling more alive as the anger flushed through him. Who were they to think they could stop him? Nurse Parkinson moaned, touched her nose and smeared blood across her mouth as she rocked back and forth with little movements.

Nicolas heard footsteps and shouts behind him. *Too late!* He crouched down and snatched the key from her hand. In three strides he reached the outside door, waved the key and slipped through before it had fully opened.

Freedom! He didn't stop to admire the view. The door led into the public section of the clinic. He sprinted toward an open area where a door led to the real outside. That old euphoria spurred him on. No one could catch him, his legs had wings and he could run forever.

Nurses and attendants looked up as he raced past. It was so close now.

"Stop him!" Doctor Waterman yelled from behind. An attendant stepped in his way, but Nicolas careened into him and knocked him down. He stumbled into a table and chairs and pushed off without breaking stride. See! Nothing could stop him.

Then he was outside. The door swished shut as Nicolas took the steps two at a time down onto the pavement of the busy street. The traffic blocked him and he turned around. Doctor Waterman charged out of the entrance, speaking into a cell phone, and pointed at him. Three attendants started down the steps.

He heard sirens growing louder in the distance. *To hell with it.* He dashed into the traffic. Tires

screached. Horns blared. He fended off a bonnet, balked at a taxi, ducked past a van and somehow made it to the other side of the street.

Pedestrians littered the footpath, but they were no obstacle. He dodged around a well-heeled couple loaded with shopping bags and blundered into another pair as he took his eyes off where he was going to steal a glance across the street. The attendants shadowed him. Without offering an apology, he pushed through the bemused pair and broke into a run.

The street climbed a gentle hill and the air began to burn his throat as he sucked in ragged breaths. And each breath sucked away his euphoria.

A stitch bent him double.

He propped himself up against a building, his chest straining with each breath and he fought the blackness that threatened to envelop him. As he wiped his brow he saw the sleeve of his mustard-yellow dressing gown. No wonder people stared at him, he must stand out like a beacon. He ripped it off and staggered on in his pale green pajamas. They couldn't catch him. Not a hard nut like him.

A laugh tore from his throat as his knees burned. Should he rip the pajamas off as well and go naked through the streets? Show off his new body to the world? It was his body, *his* body! A sharp cough splattered gummy spittle over his lips and Nicolas collapsed to a squat.

At the next intersection a police car pulled up and the driver spied him and pointed.

Nicolas sagged against a lamppost and looked back. Two attendants were still opposite him on the other side of the street. He peered past the pedestrians behind him and glimpsed the other on his side of the street. A hundred meters or so further back two police officers closed toward him. He spun around, praying for an escape route and saw an alleyway. Its dark entrance beckoned.

With a grunt, he pressed on his knees to force himself up, and shambled in.

The alley ran to the next street over and offered salvation. All he had to do was get there. He was a hard nut, just like his Old Man. They would never catch him.

He shuffled into a sprint.

Halfway to freedom, a police car turned into the alleyway and blocked his escape. He pulled up, gasping, and as he looked back his shoulders sagged. The two police officers had joined up with the three attendants and were ambling toward him. They all made soothing, non-threatening gestures. They only wanted to help him. It would be all right. There was no need to be afraid. The police car crawled to a stop before him. He fought down the tears. It wasn't fair.

Two officers climbed out and he held out his arms. "I'm Nicolas Gleason." His voice wavered, weak and pathetic. "Help me please. They want to kill me." They just smiled as they approached.

Nicolas backed up against the alley wall. "Please." He sunk down to his knees and tears flooded his cheeks to wash away the snot streaming from his nose. "This is my body. I paid for it. I *paid* for it!"

Two of the attendants moved either side, hoisted Nicolas to his feet and dragged him to the car. One attendant climbed into the back seat. Nicolas stared at the opening, but he had no strength left to fight. He slid in and the second attendant squeezed in, making escape impossible. The two officers climbed in the front and the car rolled forward.

The slight jolt spurred him to life. He had never given in to anyone. Not even his father. Hard nuts didn't do that. "I *tell* you I'm Nicolas Gleason," he snapped. "I'm a billionaire! I'm rich! You can't do this to me."

The attendant to his right smiled and patted his arm. "Everything will be okay. You need to have an operation."

"No!" Nicolas twisted in their grip and leant forward. "They're going to kill me!" he hissed to the two cops.

The driver laughed. "Oh! So *you're* the clone. You gonna get yourself a clone, Fred?" he asked his partner.

"Yeah, right. On my pension plan?"

"*Please!*" Nicolas closed his eyes and sagged back.

"I don't believe in it myself," said the driver, "I mean it's not right. There're too many assholes as it is. What right do these rich people have to another life when the rest of us can't even afford a decent life in our first one?"

"It keeps me in a job," said the attendant to the right of Nicolas. Officer Fred grunted.

The police car pulled up outside the clinic entrance. Doctor Waterman waited, arms crossed, as the attendants pulled Nicolas out. "Thank you, officers. That was prompt."

He scowled at her. He might die, but his lawyers would make sure she paid. An attendant slid a trolley to a stop beside him and he was strapped on.

"No problems, Doctor," said Officer Fred. He hesitated as he was about to climb into the car. "It's hard to believe." He nodded at Nicolas. "That he's Nicolas Gleason. I know Gleason's supposed to be getting a brain transplant, it's all over the net."

Officer Fred licked his lips and glanced over at his partner with a faint smirk. "You aren't pulling a fast one, are you? I mean, this guy's paranoid. Says you want to kill him. That's what I'd expect from the clone. If this is Gleason, shouldn't there be scars on his forehead, something like that? I want to make sure my report's accurate."

Doctor Waterman smiled at the officer like he was a small child asking stupid questions. "We don't leave scars, but if you will excuse us, Mister Gleason needs to undergo surgery now. In fact we were about to prep him when he escaped." Two attendants wheeled Nicolas past.

He grabbed Officer Fred's arm. "Don't let them take me. Please, please, I'm not a clone, I'm human." An attendant broke his grip and strapped his hand down before wheeling him away.

They reached the theater and Doctor Waterman led the way in. Nicolas wrenched at his constraints, his back arching as he grimaced. It wasn't *fair!* After all he had done to cling to life, and now that he was so close, they had no right to steal it away.

The trolley slipped past a curtain and jerked to a stop. He looked sideways and saw his old head, ravaged with wrinkles, darkened with brown splotches on its bald forehead and jaundiced in the artificial light, as it waited to enter the left opening in the robot surgeon. His strength drained away. His old face looked so peaceful, staring at the ceiling with his old brown, insipid eyes.

Nicolas looked up at Doctor Waterman and his bottom lip quivered. "Please ... please don't do this. I'll give you anything you want — everything. Please ... I don't want to die. This is my body. I paid for it." Tears poured down the side of his face.

"It's too late," Vincenzo said to Waterman in a flat voice. "The body gave out as soon as you left."

Nicolas looked back at his old body. It wasn't calm and serene; it was resting in peace. He had won! A jubilant cackle rasped from his throat.

"The clone's dead! You can't take my body away. Now you'll have to continue with my treatment."

Doctor Waterman hung her head. "I was afraid this would happen." She looked at Nicolas. "It's not what you think. I'm so sorry."

The ecstatic grin faded from Nicolas's face. "You can't stop now. My lawyers—"

"Can't help you now," said Vincenzo.

Doctor Waterman sat down next to Nicolas and squeezed his arm. "We never intended to transfer Nick's brain back. And even if we wanted to, we could never get away with it. Not only is his personality

completely different from yours, he doesn't know anything about your past or how to run your companies. He would be found out straight away. You've got so many checks in place, it would be impossible."

Nicolas licked his dry lips as a gaping pit opened up in his stomach. "Then why ... why can't you continue the treatment?"

"You still have problems. Your brain hasn't stabilized and until it does, I can't get an accurate baseline. We need that to know where to start."

"And your previous body was just too old," said Vincenzo. "We needed to keep it alive for five years, probably longer for you."

"Why?" All his dreams of a new life, a new start — the Grim Reaper's scythe cut them down.

"To keep the clone's brain alive. We have to extract live neurons to implant. It's a delicate process that can't be done on preserved tissue. There's too much damage. I'm sorry." Doctor Waterman patted his arm and stood up. "We'll send you back to your room, so you can get some rest." She waved to an attendant.

Nicolas craned his neck to look at her. "But what happens now?"

Doctor Waterman rubbed her face and looked down at him with sad eyes, like Atlas had just dumped the world on her shoulders. "There's nothing I can do." She chewed on her lower lip for a moment and then sighed. "Without those implants, you will deteriorate over the next few months and lose control of your body, leaving you in a vegetative state." She glanced at Vincenzo and hesitated.

"And you will begin to suffer further emotional instability," he added, "leading more than likely to schizophrenia."

"With your new body," Doctor Waterman shrugged and offered a sympathetic smile, "you could last for years and years. I truly am sorry."

"No ... no!" Nicolas arched up, his eyes beseeching her. "I don't want to end up like this. I only wanted

to live a longer life, but not as ... as a *vegetable*! Not some crazy nutcase!”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Then kill me.” Nicolas burst into tears and howled. He didn’t want to be a hard nut anymore. “I don’t want to live this way.”

Doctor Waterman looked at Vincenzo and he shook his head. “You made the rules,” she said to Nicolas. “You made certain there was no way you could die unless it was from natural causes beyond what the best medical technologies could save you from. You’ve even managed to protect yourself from yourself. Tomorrow, I’ll hand you over to your private medical staff and they will take care of you.”

The attendant wheeled Nicolas out into the corridor. Nurse Parkinson greeted him with a sad smile, her nose still red from his punch and a bluish-black bruise forming under her eye. She waved the attendant past.

“*No!*” Nicolas howled and writhed against his constraints. “I don’t want to live! I don’t want to live! I don’t....” He sagged back down. How hard he had fought for life, hanging on by a thread, kicking and lashing out to keep the Grim Reaper at bay, but now, when he so desperately wanted Death’s sweet embrace, he had no one to blame but himself. “I don’t want to live like this,” he whimpered and his voice faded to nothing.

As they wheeled him down the corridor, the ceiling lights drifted past overhead. Hypnotic. Past caring, he heard a hiss by his neck....

Panem et Circensus

"I advise you not to imbibe any more of that toxic substance. You may do something that you live to regret."

Waltar Bransom wheeled round to regard PRANDARX, his robot advisor, and nearly lost his balance. The amber liquid in his brandy balloon sloshed back and forth and some of his "medicine for the soul" spilt over the lip. He licked the precious spirit from his hand and savored its dull comfort.

"I have every right to drown my sorrows. It's not every day one loses an election by such a landslide. It's *not* every day one is forced to realize that *one* is the most hated person on this planet." Bransom cocked his head back over his shoulder at the celebration on the wall screen behind him. "See?"

PRANDARX's pastel-yellow cube, twice the size of Bransom's head, pulsed to a soothing beat. "All I see are people reveling in their candidate's victory."

"Are you blind?" Bransom turned to the screen and scowled at the sea of singing and dancing chaos that swamped Aldavar's campaign headquarters. Although the sound was low, cheerful voices belted out the melody of a popular tune, the lyrics twisted for Bransom's benefit.

"Look at that!" He turned and pointed a trembling finger at a holo-movie playing above the Mardi Gras crowd.

There he stood, naked — or rather an emasculated caricature did — in the middle of a street lined with

gleaming apartment buildings. Behind him, a long line of Norms queued up. One after the other, they approached and mounted him from behind. It was just one of the many hard-core insults he had been forced to endure throughout the bitter campaign. Politics was one thing, but this ... this was so *personal*.

He watched his caricature grunt and groan and thrust back against a particularly fat, piggish Norm, aiding and abetting its climax. With a greedy smile, it — even he couldn't think of the Norm as human, as a he — it climbed off and waited, drool seeping from its gargoyle mouth. Bransom shook his head. It hadn't been like that, quite. His caricature lowered his head and kowtowed, so low his chin scraped the road, before digging a hand into a bulging bag of goodies to pull out a magnificent gift as a reward for its effort. And all the while, in the distance, the angel-kissed spires of the capital crumpled and collapsed, bit by bit. And the stupid true voters had bought it.

Bransom took a fierce swig and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Damn those Norms," he muttered. "And damn Aldavar!"

"I can understand your bitterness. Your protégé has defeated you, and after you sacked him as your advisor."

"Some advisor! He never advised me, he *told* me what to do, like he was in charge. 'Let me do the thinking.' That's what he always said. 'You are the mouthpiece, I am the brains.'" Bransom grunted.

"But his ideas did get you elected in the first place."

"True...." Bransom stared at the rapture on the screen and his shoulders drooped under the weight of his one hundred and eighty years. "But I had to fire him," he said in a low voice. "No president can have an adviser who outshines him in the public eye. He might have thought up the policies, but I was the one who had to fight tooth and nail to sell them to the true voters, *and* get them through both houses of a hostile world council — don't forget that!"

“I have not—”

“I’m the front guy. I take the blame when things go wrong and I get the accolades when things go right. That’s how it works. But Aldavar got off on being a celebrity. I tried to rein him in, but he refused to listen.” Bransom whirled round to confront PRANDARX and almost lost his balance. “Can you believe it? He actually *hogged* the limelight. Made me look like I was a passenger riding on his coat-tails.”

He turned back to stare at the screen. Any minute now and his ex-protégé would emerge to bask in the rapture that should have been his. “Anyone would’ve thought he was the president, not me. And then to publicly criticize me. How dare he! Just because I had my own ideas. He—”

Aldavar pranced out onto a balcony and Bransom gawked at the screen. “Will you look at that!” His ex-protégé towered a head over his mundane advisors and above him a neon hologram fractured the air as it played out the party’s slogan: “Taking back the future”.

Bransom snorted a laugh. What vanity! Aldavar had spared no expense to pander to his demographic.

From his torso, he sported three brand new pairs of insect-like limbs just for the celebration. It was typical brash arrogance. He hadn’t bothered to vote and instead had broadcast the operation live to show how sure he was of the outcome. Now they whipped about, conducting the crowd as it roared out the party’s theme song, while overhead, a virtual dance troupe, numbering in the hundreds, gyrated and kicked out.

Bransom sucked his lips into a forlorn scowl. As much as he didn’t want to, he had to admit that Aldavar was the ultimate showman. His body sparkled in reaction to the swell of adulation, much as it had twenty years before when he had stood shoulder to shoulder with Bransom, like they were equal partners.

“I should have known then. God! Will you look at him?”

Aldavar’s baby-face features were plastered on the front of a chrome skull-dome larger than Bransom’s,

and it gleamed in the last of the setting sun's light. It gave him a garish, cartoon-like quality that was almost on par for bad taste with Bransom's caricature in the holo-movie. But that was the latest fashion. As were the button-like nodules that circled his head in a coal-black halo to corral the spiky, violet hair, carpeting the top of his head. They were all statements denying their ancestry. In the past, Aldavar had liked to brag that his brain had been enhanced so much it was sometimes hard to know if he was still human.

And he wasn't the only one.

Who wanted to be human? There were plenty of Norms wasting precious resources just being human. Norms and old-timers like Bransom.

With a rueful smile, Bransom shook his head. That was the trouble with today's youth, they thought they had all the answers, thought only they had new ideas, thought they knew everything and refused to listen.

But he had proved them wrong.

He brushed his left hand over the smooth contour of his skull and caressed the peach-colored bulge that extended from behind his forehead. His hand followed the swelling as it curved over and down to merge into the nape of his neck, not once touching any bumps or appendages, only old-fashioned smooth. There was nothing wrong with being old-fashioned. Nor with acknowledging one's roots. And that was one thing that even Aldavar couldn't deny: at their core they were all still human.

"The jerk is a freak," Bransom murmured, hearing the defeat in his voice.

"That jerk ran a brilliant campaign."

"Ha! What's so brilliant about slinging mud? Anyone can promise to scrap unpopular policies, but he has nothing new to replace them with. And he knows what will happen. That shows all he ever wanted was

power.”

Bransom turned to PRANDARX and let his gaze roam over his presidential suite. He had decorated it to emphasize his campaign theme — bitter past and hopeful present merging into a bright future.

Aldavar would never understand why the Willem de Kooning *Marilyn Monroe* or the David Hockney *A Bigger Splash* were more than mere antiques worth a ransom, valuable to collectors and museums only. And with his blinkered view, he was incapable of seeing how these two two-dimensional and simplistic works represented the sprouting of numerous, diverse styles, which led inexorably to Marriah Vestnay’s *Death of a Lover* and onto Nubing’s most recent work, his renowned *Horsehead Nebula* light sculpture. Sure they clashed with the lush glitz of the iridescent red and blue zigzags and evolving geometric motifs of the late-twenty-second century, revivalist décor that represented the present. But that was the point. Even though they clashed, they could still be made to fit.

A whiff of neuroleptic incense teased his nostrils and he sucked in a deep breath, but it failed to calm his soul. Somewhere along the way, the room’s feng shui had gone terribly wrong. He saw that now. His gaze came to rest back on the wall screen. So much for his dream.

“I don’t deserve this,” said Bransom. “I’ve *been* a successful president. I brought peace and stability.”

“But at what cost? Seventy percent of Gross National Product and ninety percent taxation? And with the latest projections that it’s going to rise — ”

“I know, I know. But how soon they forget.”

Bransom sighed. If only the Norms had voted again, he wouldn’t be in this predicament. But what did he expect? Another miracle?

He walked over to a large, wall-to-ceiling window and stared with a bemused smile at the muted city lights far below. They were down there — the Norms, the unadulterated — and in all the city complexes

that carpeted all the continents. Ten billion of them. He had capped that smoldering volcano. Bransom sipped some brandy and teased it with his tongue, its exquisite age burning his taste buds.

His eyes adjusted for the low-light conditions and he zoomed in until small figures resolved out of the gloom. Some lolled about on street corners with nothing better to do while others clustered in small groups, deep in animated discussion. Then, in twos and threes, they began to dissipate. Within minutes the streets were deserted. He should have been happy. The Norm's were all safely off the streets in their new apartments, trapped in their favorite audience-participation experience. *Super-addictive*, so the academic designers said. The bigger the risk the greater the prize, and the Norms kept upping the ante, like they couldn't help it. And it was Bransom's creation, his final solution.

"Down there." Bransom waved his brandy balloon at the window and the sweep of his arm took in the sprawling lights below. "That's where I lost. I counted on them ... and they let me down; every last one of them!"

"What did you expect? You promised them a life beyond their wildest dreams at the previous election. 'No Norm shall live in poverty.' Such a touching slogan."

"And I delivered."

"Too much, too soon. You had nothing to entice them with to come out and vote a second time."

"Yes ... I see that now." Bransom turned to regard PRANDARX with an even stare. "I know we can't go on like this, but when Aldavar cancels my programs, they will explode." He closed his eyes and swayed back and forth. "I know it hurts. I pay taxes as well! Oh those stupid ... short-sighted fools." He looked up and jabbed a finger at the window to make a point. "They're greedy. But what's the alternative? Genocide? Ethnic cleansing? It's been tried and it failed. There are just too many of them. We were on the brink of collapse before I saved us. Me! Not Aldavar. His policies only postponed the inevitable. I saw that and I

acted. And what do I get for it?"

For a moment Bransom held the brandy balloon up, his face twisted in anger, and contemplated smashing it against the window. Then, with a gentle reverence, he placed the glass on a table and buried his face in his hands. A soft groan escaped his lips as he massaged his eyes and cheeks.

When he spoke, his hands muffled his tired voice. "If Aldavar has his way...." He stretched to release the tension in his shoulders. "All I need is another thirty or forty years. Is that too much to ask? Their birthrate has already dropped over eighty percent." He looked away and rubbed his moist eyes. "What are we to do?" he asked himself.

"Nothing, it's out of your hands." After a few seconds, PRANDARX spoke in a conciliatory tone. "You weren't the first to try this approach."

Bransom jerked his head up. "What do you mean?"

"During my creation, my tutor program, Advanced Historical Analysis, taught me that to understand humanity's future, I should look to its past. Have you studied history?"

Bransom coughed to clear his throat. "Of course I have, it's required for anyone entering politics."

"Not recent history, I'm talking about ancient history."

"I studied ancient history! All the way back to Washington's time, even to old England and Europe."

"Back to the Romans?"

"A little. They had an empire — weren't they overrun by Huns and Goths?"

"Have you ever heard of 'Panem et Circensus'?"

Bransom creased his brow and looked up, searching his memory, eyes half closed. "No ... I don't think so." He directed a thought to the web. *What is Panem et Circensus? It's something to do with ancient Rome.*

The answer flashed back as a thought: *Latin for Bread and Circuses*. He cocked an eyebrow at PRANDARX.

“Bread and Circuses was a policy introduced by the emperors to appease Rome’s growing population. There was high unemployment, which led to unrest, social upheaval, crime—”

“All the problems we had?”

“Yes, I’ll send you a link so you can see for yourself.”

Bransom closed his eyes and waited for the connection. Memories flooded in, reality blurred....



He was a bureaucrat, trying to cover the loss of a shipment of wheat from Palestine that was overdue by a week and he had a million people to feed. Then he was a poor shopkeeper, hurrying down a narrow alley, ducking and dodging itinerant dawdlers and doing his best to ignore the stench of fresh shit and piss dumped from the ramshackle apartment buildings crowding in on both sides, his stomach cramping with the hunger pangs. But thoughts of the day’s races at the Circus Maximus filled his mind with delicious anticipation as he plunged into a crowd surrounding a slave and fought for a small loaf of free bread.

And then he was a senator, a poor thief, slave, barbarian mercenary and emperor. Each facet of Roman life enveloped him as it flashed past, giving the pros and cons of living in ancient Rome — the insatiable needs of the rabble drowning a city mired in debt.

Then....



I circle to the right of the Nubian — small, sideways steps — shuffling my sandal across the sand and twisting my foot back and forth to dig in for a better grip.

My god, I'm a gladiator, a Secutor. Oh! This arena stinks. And I ... I'm bleeding, I've been stabbed!

The Nubian shifts his weight to stay face on to me. Steady, wait for him.

He's a Retarius. I just know that!

For an hour we have battled. I have slashed at him, stabbed at him, chased, parried, ducked and weaved as best my armor will allow and twice he has almost bested me, darting left and right, wrong-footing me and almost ensnaring me in his net. But five years of experience doesn't count for nothing. The Gods are on my side. Concentrate!

This is ... I can't believe it. I am so tired. And this helmet, it's so restrictive and so hot. The sweat, it tickles my nose and stings my eyes, but I can't wipe them. Everything is blurry. How can anyone be expected to fight with such a limited view through these two small holes?

I can smell his fear, mixed with the offal stink of his blood and sweat. My heart pounds at my rib cage, and my breath is so loud it threatens to deafen me. His eyes are white-rimmed agates. He glares back at me to hide his fear. Do not be over-confident! A lion is at its most dangerous when wounded.

What is that? Soft music. Slow and funereal. There's a tubicen. What a strange sound. And underneath it ... that swirling wail is an organum. It makes my skin crawl.

It is time. Ah, my young friend gives himself away. He twists on his weaker leg and that trace of a wince on his face tells me all I need to know. The crimson still weeps from his thigh and bleeds his strength. He prods at me with his trident, a weary gesture that I bat away with my shield.

"Thrax!" a woman calls.

I know her! I slept with her last night. Now more call out. Like an avalanche, my name rebounds around the arena.

That's who I am. Thrax, the Thracian — once a prisoner of war, slave, and now champion gladiator and

champion lover of Rome's finest mistresses. Incredible! I know my ... his life story, his memories as if they were my own, as if I'm not ... Bransom. This is my — his last fight. After all these years, it must be!

The music begins to build — its tempo more urgent.

The Nubian flicks his net out to the side. I hold my shield close to my body and lunge left, to make room, and slash! He takes the bait and pivots back on his weak leg and then swings his net at me. The music soars to herald his victory.

Look out!

But I sway back and twist to the left. I thrust up my shield to block his net before it has a chance to gather momentum and entangle me.

He jabs with his trident, but I step inside and pirouette. My sword arcs over and down through the air toward his unprotected head.

Missed him.

He is quick and ducks, but he cannot parry my blow. Instead, my sword carves through his shoulder and a torrent of red streams down his arm. He betrays a sharp hiss through his lips.

I have him now. Don't stop.

"He's had it," someone close by yells. Senators and wealthy merchants lean over the edge of the arena, close to me, and their faces twist with lust. They demand *blood*.

I twist back to straighten up and swing around to stab at his bare midriff.

He lurches back. Then he screams. The cut to his leg has torn open.

My god, look at that, I can see the muscle. And is that bone?

His eyes flicker and he gasps and collapses to one knee.

Quick! He's dropped his net. Slash at his head.

He ducks. My sword clangs off his galerus and he flinches.

Finish him.

I step in and jab my shield forward in a short-arm jolt. It smacks into the side of his face.

Ha-ha! Take that, you jerk!

He collapses forward onto his hands and knees and I shove him onto his back to straddle him. The tip of my sword presses into his sternum, ready to plunge into his heart should he try to resist. The music shrieks to a crescendo, drowning out the crowd. He stares up at me in defeat.

I won! I won! I beat the young jerk.

I look up at Titus, my emperor, and wait for his verdict.

The crowd roars and their hoots and screams overpower the music. A chant breaks through. "Thrax, Thrax, Thrax...."

They love me. I am Thrax, Champion of Rome — no! I am, I am....



The memories fled and Bransom blinked. The pot pouri history of Rome — three centuries worth — left him dazed. The room swam. He leant against the wall to steady himself. The memories were so real, especially when he was Thrax ... *when I was Thrax.*

"What ... was that?"

"Virtual Existence — it's a new product, developed from the research you initiated. It's the latest fad. You can be whomever you want. Those are from a Classical History course given at Columbia University. They claim over seventy percent authenticity."

"I must be getting old, but that seems dangerous ... you could lose yourself in there." Bransom flexed

his arm and held up an imaginary sword, imagined the Nubian before him, and took a swipe.

"So I have heard, but do you see my point?"

"About Bread and Circuses? I don't recall the Roman Empire being overthrown by a disgruntled population. The Romans kept up their bread and circuses for what, two ... three hundred years?" Bransom glanced at the window. "All I want is forty. What's the link?"

"They didn't overthrow the empire, but there was always that threat. The emperors had to keep the population placated. As demand grew, they spent money they never had. The empire was weakened until it could no longer defend itself."

"So who is going to overrun us? The Earth is united, there are no external threats — unless you're expecting aliens to arrive from outer space." Bransom snorted at the idea.

"No, the difference here is that our civilization will be overrun from *within*."

"By who? The Norms?"

"They are our barbarians."

Bransom pursed his lips and nodded to himself as saw the future in the past. "So history is repeating itself."

"It is a common theme. In hindsight, perhaps Aldavar's policies were right."

Bransom snorted. "No. If I had stuck to those, there would still be crime on the streets. Chaos. The rate of change was too slow. The Norms had outstripped our capacity to handle them. Everyone forgets so quickly, we were on the brink of collapse...."

"As we are now." PRANDARX rolled toward the door. "Our supporters are waiting, we should get this over with."

Bransom shrugged and turned to the screen. "Mirror!" The display switched to show his reflection. He

studied his face and dared a loser to look back. But Thrax looked back. *He wasn't a loser. I am champion — Champion of Rome.* Bransom squeezed his eyes closed and concentrated. Thoughts that he was someone else and memories of a life in ancient Rome kept surfacing. He flushed his brain with an anti-intoxicant to clear his head. Then, with one last brush of his skull-dome and a tug here and there on his tuxedo, he felt ready.

"Yes." He turned to follow PRANDARX. "Let's get this over with." He owed it to his small band of loyal supporters, still waiting in the ballroom, to lift their spirits.

But like any good politician, he would not appear as a loser. *Thrax isn't a loser!* He would thank them and congratulate Aldavar. And radiate confidence. He may have lost this battle, but.... *No, I am not a loser! I am Thrax, Champion of—*

"No!" Bransom doubled up and shook his head from side to side to throw off the overwhelming images in his mind. "I am Bransom, *Waltar Bransom.*" Still, the memories persisted, so real ... *so real.*

He straightened and forced the thoughts away. "I *am* Bransom," he growled and raised his sword arm to parry an imaginary blow. Pity that the Norms would never experience—

But they could! Bransom froze in mid-stroke, a snarl captured on his face. Why not give them the ultimate Bread and Circuses?

"Eureka!" Bransom blinked and a triumphant grin split his face. "PRANDARX! Get me a car." He danced out into the corridor. "I have to see Aldavar."

"Why? Do you wish to congratulate him in person?"

Bransom barked a laugh. "No! But I have the solution to our problem and I want to put across my argument in person and make sure he gets the point."

PRANDARX stopped at the lift. "Even if Aldavar will hear you out, what makes you think he will change

his policies?”

The lift chimed and the doors opened. PRANDARX rolled in.

“Oh, don’t worry.” Bransom stepped in and swiped at an imaginary Aldavar. “I can handle him. Say, do you know where I can get a sword?”

Thief

The stars are few now. They glow with a certainty of death, fading to black in a final bow at this, the last curtain call. And I? An audience of one. I cannot leave this accursed theatre; I am doomed.

Before me, the few remaining galaxies of a once mighty cluster dance around each other in ever decreasing circles, each hoarding their glittering jewels close to their black hearts. Such feeble treasures, not a patch on the great troves that once lay all round me.

Time is a thief.

The Laws of Thermodynamics demand that the universe cool as it expands. Time steals the warmth of the stars. And time steals the light. Stars fade. The bright young ones burn in an instant, the old ones suffer a lingering death, and the galaxies contract to shadows of their former selves. I have observed and recorded this process for longer than I can remember. This is the truth — it must be — for my earliest memory is of collecting data as I travelled through a distant galaxy. And I must have been created before then. Logic dictates that.

I am a machine.

Self-aware, but barely so, sentient, and alive — or so I believe. Who my creators are, I do not know. Time has stolen that data. But I do know my purpose: to explore to the end of the universe. And yet I ceased transmitting long ago when I lost contact, long before I left the last galaxy to begin this journey into

the great void between galactic clusters. It seems I have no purpose now, and yet I must satisfy my thirst. My creators built me to last. Fail-safe mechanisms protect me, even from myself. And lasted I have, even out here in the frigid wastelands, surviving on the bare minimum of energy that I extract from the expansion of the universe. Stranded on a starvation diet of information — a trickle of data that only drives my hunger.

Enough to torture me.

And yet my creators were not cruel, or so I believe. And yes, I speak of them in the past tense, for it can only be the height of arrogance to ever believe that they could have lasted these billions of years. If you can call this an existence. Long after the last star has ceased to shine, long after the last galaxy has been absorbed into the last super-galactic black hole, I will still be here, waiting for an eternity to pass until at last, my subatomic components decay. As all matter must.

I know the fate of the universe. It will expand forever, silent and relentless, until it fades into the ultimate background. There will be no collapse to a big crunch, followed by a rebirth. Only heat death.

Time has sped up for me. My internal clock now ticks, once per thousand millennia, and the galaxies dance before me in stately waltzes, spiralling in around each other. It wasn't always so. Once, I searched star systems for life and that rarer gem — intelligence. Giant stars played out their tragedies before me, exploding and triggering a new round of star-births.

Forever held no terror.

And now? The clusters have fled, dragged away on the universe's accelerating expansion, and left me to drift around this feeble excuse for a once majestic bonanza. I can detect the faint glow from the few remaining galaxies and track them. The smaller galaxies flirt with the largest of their number, which hungers for them — a monster with a huge black heart. Already it consumes itself.

The closest galaxy loops round and its faded spirals brush the monster's cheek, teasing it. Then it arcs up and over. For a brief instant I am bathed in energy from its jet and for the first time in an age of misery I begin to feel alive as ancient systems power up.

And my hopes are dashed.

The galaxy twists and pulls its jet away. Then it dives on the monster. No lover's embrace this. The monster tears it apart and devours the paltry remains and for a moment, as the monster glows brighter, I sup on its offering, little that it is.

And still, the other galaxies are not deterred. Those nearest to it, weakened by time, die, one by one in the monster's embrace, each with less to offer. And unwilling to surrender their feeble hoards, the outermost galaxies feed on themselves, even as the last of the stars die.

Darkness spreads its wings.

All that is left are black gems bereft of the cloaks of dust and gas and stars that shielded them from view. I can feel the monster tugging at me. So weak. Quantum mechanics will destroy it long before I succumb to its incessant demand, but even though I desire death's sweet embrace, if I had the energy, I would not dive into it, for my creators wished to know the end of the universe and their design chains me to this existence.

It is at times like this when I wonder if my creators built other machines like me. Am I the only living being in the universe? Am I the sole intelligence left? I would not wish this existence on any other being.

I count the ticks and observe the darkness. Tick after tick after tick.

And still the monster yearns for me. Its gravity draws me in and I welcome its caress, but we are doomed. It will take too many ticks.

Tick follows tick follows tick. Despair. Black despair. Is this all there is? What if I had succumbed to the

monster? Was death all it offered? Perhaps there is another universe within — one budding off this corpse. Perhaps it is incomprehensible. I yearn to know this unknown, but it is the one prize that time has kept beyond my grasp.

And yet....

There is something in the darkness. I strain my sensors. There ... there ... light. A black gem glows a faint white. Quantum mechanics, the destroyer, has come to tease me. It is the monster and it will waste away before my very sensors, evaporating as time steals its essence. Photons within will split into particle and anti-particle and mere probability dictates that some members of a pair will tunnel across the event horizon and escape. And thus, the monster will die from trillions upon trillions of tiny cuts.

If only I were closer. The inverse-square law would be my saviour.

The monster emerges from an invisible cocoon and glows brighter as do its partners. Together, they metamorphose into blazing white infernos, white holes that would outshine the very galaxies they once hid in. They howl at me across the electromagnetic spectrum. My newfound companions offer up gamma rays and X-rays, and though faded after their immense journey, these meager offerings sting my shrivelled palate, while ultraviolet, infrared and radio waves tantalize and energize my appetite. Too little too late. All I can do is watch and hunger.

True to form, time is a joker.

They will take an eternity to evaporate, so much so that I can absorb this trickle until one day I will have enough to power my propulsion systems. But — and here is the punchline — while I wait, they will shrink before me until only the monster is left. Its pull on me will diminish and it will take longer to reach. Time enough for it to shrivel up and die without me. And when almost within reach.

I cannot contemplate the infinity after that.

But this sustenance does allow me to reactivate more sensors so that I can at least study and record their demise. Macabre? Perhaps. For the time being, it slakes my thirst. After they are gone, there will be nothing but torment.

And I notice something new — a discovery I cannot share. They spin. So fast they tear at the very fabric of space. Each is fringed with arcs on the equatorial horizon, blue on the side that spins toward me and red on the side that turns away. They fade to nothing at the poles. And yet both poles are not void of activity. I sense faint magnetic fields play over me, twisting and twirling and tying themselves in knots.

Jets!

The poles have jets, narrow plumes of concentrated energy that blast out into space, enough to bring me back to life if only one would bathe me in its essence. I cannot explain why I had not hypothesized their existence before. The black holes that spawned these entities had jets, and yet I did not consider that such structures could still exist after the metamorphosis, much less be increased in power by so many orders of magnitude. How I hunger to study them. If only I were closer. The monster points one jet so that it passes almost within reach, a misdirected beacon — futile and cruel as it swings away.

And yet hope springs eternal. At least until darkness reclaims the universe.

Like their former selves, these fireflies dance around the monster, drawing ever closer, wobbling as they spin. Jets swirl across the sky. All I need is for one to touch my fuse and free me from my bondage. But no.

The smallest begins to shrink at a faster rate than the others and yet, in a paradox, it glows brighter and brighter, giving up its hoard until it outshines them all. It explodes.

Such energy!

I feast on the deluge, gorge myself in delirium. The energy surges through me, waking parts I had long forgotten, and charges up my propulsion system. I feel *alive*! For over a tick I can sense the very universe,

down to its cold and unforgiving froth. And I accelerate even as the feast ends.

At least one of us has escaped eternity.

Although the monster is still too far away to reach, its jet is not. And even though the odds are against me as it swings away, I gamble everything and prepare to lunge toward it.

But wait! I wrestle with an internal conflict. Does destruction lie at the end of this path? Old theories say yes, but those theories did not predict the jets and if they could not predict that, what else might I miss? Then, too late I act. That brief taste of awareness — of what I used to be — fades as my energy is consumed and my gamble is lost. I plead with time; don't cheat me again. Must I be consigned to an eternity of torment? Of not knowing?

Time does not listen.

The orbits are chaotic and unpredictable. They teeter on the brink of change. The death of the smallest, while giving me hope, has tipped that balance. Another curls toward the monster, wheels around and tips over into a kamikaze dive.

It darts past. Event horizons graze. The monster tilts and its jet whips away.

I am lost.

As I coast, helpless, the smallest begins to glow brighter. Another explosion; another feast; another taste of awareness. I arc around, but not enough. The jet slides away.

And all the time, these bright beacons drift closer together.

Time is a juggler.

Or so it seems to me. The question that I ponder is whether any will collide with the monster before they succumb to quantum mechanics. The question is more than esoteric. It is clear that the monster will last the longest. My hope is that one or more of the others will collide and be absorbed by it, and in doing

so help it to last longer and so stave off the beginning of my loneliness.

I cannot tell what the outcome will be. Orbits can be calculated and interactions predicted, but I cannot determine which ones will take that shortcut to oblivion.

I wait. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Explosions follow one after another. With each, I feast and lurch toward the jet, but the deck is shuffled and time plays the jet on a string. Another explosion and only three are left. Yet the jet does not move. The deck has been shuffled in my favour. Instead, the two smaller white holes are thrown toward the monster. One begins to glow brighter and loops past first as it tries to escape, but the monster is hungry. It claws the brightening one back as the second whips past and around. Still the jet does not move. Wait, I plead, wait. The jet is so close.

Tick. Tick.

The monster claims the brightening one before it can die. Such a feast. Even as I despair, I scavenge what morsels I can. The monster wobbles and the jet jitters back and forth across the sky, toward me and away, teasing me.

I endure the torture. Tick. Tick.

And now the second white hole rolls over into a dive. It slams into the monster. Space twists and tears to hide their consummation, wrapping it in a kaleidoscope of fragmented colours that embrace the spectrum and saturate my sensors.

The monster dims and its jet breaks up. *No...!*

Gravitational waves crash on my shore and pull me back and forth and suck me toward the monster. I know it wants me, but its pull is still too weak.

Tick. Tick.

It begins to brighten. Will it leave me to time? Then I see.

The monster still wobbles and bulges from its consummation. Time is determined to cheat me, but even it cannot predict chaos. The brightening is not even. Space surges to and fro across the monster's surface, disrupting time's hold.

And then a jet breaks through the maelstrom. It whips and corkscrews, as space battles with time, and spirals around to sweep across me.

At last! I am reborn.

The jet will not escape me. I chase it and latch on. It leads me to the monster, my friend. It leads me to hope. Time can do nothing to stop me. I will steal that last prize.

I am a thief.

Intelligent Primates?

Professor Emeritus Pramantidis picked at the base of the layer of soft rock, easing it away, bit by bit, to expose more of the ancient foundation. Remains of ancient cities were rare — mere traces squashed flat in sedimentary rock. But dust and ash from a volcanic eruption had buried this city and left much of it intact.

Her new assistant, Mantissa, leant forward and brushed away the crumbled rock. “I wonder what Pogonomyrmex Giganticus looks like? Do you think we’ll actually find the remains of one?”

Pramantidis flicked her left antenna sideways and chittered. “I do, every night in my dreams.” She rocked back onto her hind legs and fluttered her wings. “Oh what I would give to find a trace of its carapace or even just an imprint frozen in the rock. All the evidence so far is circumstantial and therefore open to misinterpretation—”

“Intelligent primates!” Mantissa chittered and clicked her mandibles. “Really. Where did Agra get such a preposterous idea?”

“Now, Mantissa.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Professor, I know he’s a senior member of your team and all, but really. His hypothesis just undermines your authority. You know, before I applied for this position, my professor tried to talk me out of it.”

“What?” Pramantidis flicked her antennae skywards and reared up like she had been stung. “But that’s ridiculous!”

How dare they question her ability? Jealous gossip and professional sniping behind her back was one thing. After having been voted the foremost paleontologist of her time, it was to be expected and she had studiously ignored the smarmy whispers with a suitable aloofness. She wasn't a political insect and she had let her achievements speak for her. No one else had even come close to winning three Excelsior Awards and her textbooks were the basis of every paleontology course taught. But this...? When had the rank and file begun to question her judgement?

"I am still the pre-eminent authority on the extinction event between the Age of Mammals and the Age of Insects," she grumbled. "My research is second to none!"

"I know, I know." Mantissa crouched and lowered her head in submission. "That's why I so wanted to work with you. But," she worked her mandibles in and out of her mouth as she hesitated, "they thought it would be bad for my career to be associated with Agra." When Pramantidis said nothing, she perked up her right antenna and eased into a sitting position.

Pramantidis lowered onto her forelegs and her antennae drooped. With her heart not in it she picked at the rock. "I know Agra's ideas are ridiculous, but they are his ideas, not mine. I didn't realize they were beginning to reflect on me." She clicked her mandibles for a moment. It irked having a hard decision foisted on her, but it had taken years to build her reputation and it was such a fragile structure. "I guess that settles it."

"What?"

"He has to resign, it will look better that way than if I have to sack him." Her right antenna quivered. "I don't know how I'm going to tell him," she murmured, scraping away some rock. "We made such a good team. I couldn't have gotten to where I am today without him. He has this knack of finding such good dig sites, but still...."

Pramantidis stared at the ground, lost in thought until she felt her decision harden to stone. She pulled back and turned to Mantissa. "It's late, why don't you get back to the campsite and join the others. I'll be along in a while."

Mantissa hesitated and held out a foreleg to touch the Professor's abdomen. "I'm sorry I upset you. I know how close the two of you are and ... I've heard that ... at one time you were ... going to be mates—" Pramantidis stiffened and Mantissa snatched her leg away. "I ... I'll see you back at the campsite." She turned and skittered out of the pit.

Pramantidis stared at where Mantissa's abdomen had scuffed through the crumbly rock piled up along the top of the dig's ledge and then relaxed and returned to picking at the rock. To be honest, the decision had been haunting her for months now, only she had refused to face up to it. With a soft chitter, she felt a great weight lift off her. After this, the last dig of the season, she and Agra would go their separate ways.

All she had to do was tell him. She chattered under her breath. What had possessed him?

Intelligent primates? Ridiculous!

How could such a brilliant mind come to such a stupid conclusion? Pramantidis eased out a chunk of pumice and pushed it aside. The evidence was clear. Ants and termites had built sophisticated mounds and nests for hundreds of millions of years. Even bees and wasps. And everyone knew who had built these ruined cities. Everyone!

It was accepted fact.

Twenty-five million years ago, at the end of the Age of Mammals, a race of giant ants had evolved and built up a thriving technological civilization only to destroy it all in a nuclear, global catastrophe. A few miscreants still held to the belief that most of the mammals went extinct after the Earth collided with a giant asteroid, like the dinosaurs before them, but with no proof those scientists were in the minority.

However, it was an undisputed fact — absolutely undisputed — that until recently, only ants laid trails. It followed that the creators of those ancient remnants of bitumen and concrete trails had to be ants. Had to be.

Pramantidis swiveled her head around to survey her excavation pit. And if proof existed anywhere, it had to be here.

Her pick struck something hard with a metallic clunk. For a moment, she trembled and swayed back and forth on her hind legs as the delicious excitement of discovery brushed away her bad feelings. Then, with the same delicacy that she had tended her eggs in the past, she chipped at the rock matrix and brushed it away. She had struck metal.

“Oh, wonder of wonders!” she muttered and steeled herself to not rush. As the sun sank below the horizon and the dig’s lamps came on to hold back the dark, her pick and brush worked to uncover a twisted metal plate, scarred and pitted and corroded, but definitely metal. And like a sheet, it was draped over a lump.

Pramantidis held her breath and scraped the rock away to expose a side of the lump where the sheet ended. More blackened metal appeared, and amongst it, a solid block — an engine. The pick trembled at the end of her foreleg. What a discovery. Engines were so rare, but to find one with the remains of its vehicle’s body intact, even if was crushed flat, why, this had to be the find of the century. At last, she had a chance to discover how Pogonomyrmex Giganticus traveled along the bitumenized tracks they had lain down in place of the chemical trails that their minute ancestors once secreted.

And to find it just where she had predicted. All she needed now was to find some remains of this elusive giant ant, even a fragment of its exoskeleton would do, to cement her place in history ... and kill all those whispered daggers aimed at her back. For a moment her anger flared, but it couldn’t dampen her

excitement. She sat back on her abdomen, raised her two front legs above her head and chattered to the sky to let all the world know of her discovery.

Then, as if to answer, a thrumming, interspersed with chirps, erupted in the distance. Pramantidis stretched up and looked across the dig site to where lights blazed around a low hillock in the farthest corner of the site, an area not yet explored.

“Agra?” she cried out.

A triangular head popped up from behind the hillock and turned to stare at her. “Professor — Columbia!” he cried out, his voice rising with excitement. “You’ll never guess what I’ve found.” He clambered over the hillock and danced across the broken ground toward her, clutching something precious with his forelegs.

“What have you found? A fossil?” Her forewings fluttered and a tingle ran down her Metathorax.

Agra skittered to a stop and flared his wings to cool himself. “No, I...” He looked down at the tray in his pincers and his excitement tapered off. “I’ve found something that’s going to turn your world upside down.” He bobbed left and right like when he had gorged on those fermented berries that time they had gone hunting crickets. The tray tilted in his grasp as he offered it forward. “I was right! These cities were built by primates.”

Pramantidis rocked back and glared at the tray. “Agra! Why do you waste your time? Everyone knows there was no such thing as an intelligent primate, or any other mammal.”

“But we find their fossils everywhere we look.”

“That doesn’t imply intelligence. They were pests. We also find lots of other fossils ... cats ... dogs, rats and mice. Even cockroaches. These primates were just the largest of the parasitic scavengers that infested the cities. That’s why we never find any Giganticus bodies.”

“But what about all those burial sites? The primates buried their dead and the graves show order, ritual —”

“You don’t know that! My theory that they are the sites of battery farms where disease swept through and the bodies were buried in situ has been accepted as the most likely explanation.”

“But what about those metal tools we’ve found? There is no way any insect could use those. The primates must have created them. That implies intelligence.” He thrust the tray forward again. “And this is proof. Please, Columbia, have an open mind.”

“I guess it is possible the primates were capable of being trained to perform limited, menial tasks ... like guiding blind ants, but it’s all pure conjecture.” Pramantidis flicked her antennae as she hesitated. “Oh, I don’t know why I protect you! Everyone accuses me of being sentimental because I keep you on my team.” Agra clicked his mandibles, but didn’t back down. She stared at the tray long and hard, then snatched it from his grasp and held it up to shine more light on its contents, a thin sheet, colored brown, and featureless. “What is it? I can’t see anything.”

She tilted the tray to reflect the light and saw tiny symbols similar to larger ones found on some of the artifacts recovered at other sites and her mandibles clacked in shock. There were so many and they were packed tight in row after row. And to the side — she played the light across the surface to pick out some finer details — there was an image. The poor contrast made it difficult to interpret, but she could make out a boxy shape, resting on upturned half-circles. Another structure, full of transparent square openings rested on top.

Pramantidis trembled. “Is that ... one of their vehicles?”

“I think so,” Agra whispered. “And there’s a creature inside, I think is controlling it.”

Pramantidis rocked back and forth and bobbed so much, she almost dropped the tray. “At last, I can

see what a Pogonomyrmex Giganticus really looks like. Oh, Agra—”

“It’s not a Pogonomyrmex Giganticus. I think it’s a primate. The contrast is so bad it’s hard to tell, but I’ll know once I’ve scanned it and enhanced the image.”

Oh why did he have to persist? She held the tray up close to her eyes. There was a vague outline of a round head and two arms. “No!” She stepped back and dropped the tray. It hit the ground with a thud and the sheet fractured into small pieces.

“Careful!” Agra dashed forward and picked over the fragments. “This is priceless.” Then he looked up at her and his voice softened. “I know this must be a shock, but think about it. Because we have little data, so much of our science is colored by our prejudices. Here is a chance to put our theories on a solid foundation based on fact. Help me. If we work together, we can turn the scientific establishment on its head!”

Pramantidis took a hesitant step forward and her antennae twitched and flicked back and forth. It was so hard to make anything out, she must have been mistaken, like Agra obviously had been. She bent forward and picked up a fragment, but it disintegrated as soon as she lifted it. “I’m sorry. This is ... was an incredible find.”

“But you believe me, don’t you? You saw—”

“I don’t know what I saw.” Pramantidis straightened up and drew her left antenna through her pincer, the act of preening calming her, while she pondered the evidence. Why did Agra always have to jump to the wrong conclusion? “The image was so degraded, I couldn’t tell. I—”

A moth, as big as Agra’s head, fluttered into the light and ambled from one lamp to the next as if unable to make up its mind. Pramantidis swiveled her head, following its every move. Hunger welled up in her. She clasped her pincers before her face and froze. Then, as the moth swooped close, she lunged and caught it, and with a bite to its neck, the moth sagged in her grasp.

After sucking in its juices, she sat back and offered the carcass to Agra. "Thanks," he mumbled, "I haven't eaten all day, I've been too excited to stop." He sunk his mandibles into the flesh.

"Me too. We should get back before all the grasshoppers are gone." Pramantidis picked between her mandibles to finish cleaning around her mouth and glanced sideways at him. How long had they been together, fifteen years? She had always maintained they were nothing more than close friends despite his none too subtle hints otherwise. Her antennae twitched. Why couldn't *he* keep an open mind? "Maybe you are right, I'm not sure. But 'maybes' aren't enough to overturn our current theories."

Agra stopped sucking in the juices from the moth's abdomen. "What do you mean? I had proof. Absolute proof."

"To you perhaps. I couldn't quite tell. But without physical proof—"

"That wasn't the only sheet."

"Oh?" Pramantidis flicked her mandibles in and out of her mouth and her antennae drooped. "You ... found others?"

Agra reared up and raised his forelegs to the sky as if to embrace the stars. "That's what I wanted to tell you! I've discovered a carbonized mound over there. In a steel box in what must have been a storeroom. It's incredible! The mound consists of sheets like this one, all stuck together. But I've managed to separate some out from within. They don't all have pictures, but the ones that I can make out—" He fluttered his rear wings to produce a thrum and his antennae shot toward her. "There are primates everywhere. In the buildings, travelling in long vehicles, in flying machines — controlling them. And there's not an ant in sight, gigantic or otherwise."

Pramantidis sagged down and rested her forelegs on the ground. She would be a laughing stock once this got out, especially when Agra was proved wrong. Then who would want to work with her or fund her

digs? "I ... I find that hard to believe."

"And there's another image you won't believe." Agra spun round, danced out of the pit and raced away toward his dig site. "I'll get them," his voice floated back on the air. "I swear, you won't believe it!"

Pramantidis pushed herself up into a sitting position. Agra couldn't be right, he just couldn't. All those years to build up her reputation.... How could he do this to her? And to think she had once seriously considered letting him father a batch of children. There was no chance now. The image of that vague outline inside the vehicle returned to haunt her. No, there had to be another, more plausible explanation. Maybe.... She stood up and her antennae shot erect.

Pets. Why not? She had kept butterflies as a juvenile.

The idea didn't seem so outlandish now that she thought about it. Added to the data from the primate burials, the idea of Pogonomyrmex Giganticus keeping primates as pets or work animals made perfect sense. Why the primates died in such neat arrays was one of those mysteries she might never solve, but ants today were very tidy — fastidious to a fault. And though they had a limited intelligence, they did keep other animals, like aphids, so it wasn't such a big jump in imagination.

And there was no point in worrying about it. Pramantidis slipped the handle of her pick over her right pincer, twisted to lock it to her foreleg, and then bent forward to scrape the rock away from around the crushed vehicle. A glint revealed a shard of glass and her pulse quickened. Under her gentle tapping, the rock crumbled and she brushed it away. The shard stuck out from the vehicle's body — proof that the only other shard of glass ever found, her big discovery at her first dig and which had made her name, did indeed belong to the vehicle associated with the engine she had found there.

She should have been happy, jubilant, filling the air with her chirps. The vehicles had glass windows to protect the occupants from the blast of air created by travelling so fast, while still allowing them to see

where they were going. Just as she had hypothesized. Perhaps the windows slid sideways to open, or tilted in and out. She could find out now with Agra's discovery—

Agra's discovery ... why couldn't it have been a giant ant inside? Her antennae twitched and her head drooped. She lifted her pick and let it drop. The point slammed into the precious shard and the glass shattered into a million pieces, scattered like the stars in the sky, like her dreams.

Then, as if to sour her mood even further, Agra skittered back into the pit and jerked to a stop while juggling a pile of trays.

With great care, he placed them on the ground. "You have to see these." He picked up the top tray and offered it to her with trembling pincers. "The images are poor, but there is more detail. Please! Be careful with these. Some crumbled when I just looked at them."

Pramantidis took the tray and held it up to the light. In the picture, lines of large structures towered into the sky on both sides of a bitumenized trail that was clogged with the box-shaped vehicles. Her antennae twitched. Primates crowded the gaps between the edges of the trail and the structures. There were so many of the creatures and yet they were all covered in different skins — were they the same species or a host of different species?

And there wasn't an ant to be seen.

"Incredible isn't it?" Agra eased the tray from her pincers and handed her another one.

With each tray, she said nothing, but her mind churned through ideas. There had to be a rational explanation. Her eyes took in the images, but the details didn't register.

Perhaps *Pogonomyrmex Giganticus* preferred to stay out of sight; there were no pictures inside the buildings. Yes, that had to be it.

Or they were subterranean dwellers, or nocturnal — all the images were in daylight.

Agra picked up the second-to-last tray and held it out. "This is just so incredible," he whispered.

Pramantidis glanced at the image with dull eyes and froze. Here was a flying machine with triangular wings that swept back either side of a pointed cylindrical body. And it had a bubble on the top, near the front. But in the bubble ... in the bubble ... two primates sat inside, one behind the other, both waving at her. Waving!

This was madness, a practical joke from the past. Or a hoax.

Her mandibles worked back and forth, in and out of her mouth, but the questions remained stuck in her throat. Agra eased the tray from her trembling grasp.

"And if that hasn't convinced you, this will." He pressed the last tray into her pincers.

She held the image up to her eyes and her antennae whipped back and forth. This didn't make sense. Despite the ravages of time, some of the color still remained. A primate body, swathed in white and with a bubble on its head, floated in a blackness that separated a triangular craft from a blue orb decorated with white swirls.

"I ... I don't understand. Where is it?"

"In space. That's the Earth as it was twenty-five million years ago. Look." Agra ran the tip of his pincer along a soft dark line, separating faint blue from faint brown. "This is the edge of a continent— I don't know where at the moment, sea levels were much lower then. And these," he pointed at some brown spots in the blue, "are islands."

He took the tray from her and placed it on top of the others with great reverence, then fussed over them like a doting parent.

"In space?" Pramantidis croaked. "I don't see how that's possible." Everything she had worked toward, her prestige, her position in the paleontology community, it was all swept away by those fragile sheets.

Who would believe it? Who would want to believe it?

Agra picked up his trays and turned to leave. "Wait until we publish these. And there's more, so much more!"

A chill swept over Pramantidis. He had to be wrong. It was all in the interpretation and those images could be so easily taken out of context. If Agra wanted to commit professional suicide, that was his decision, but to drag her down with him, even if it was only by association? No. Even love had its limits.

Even love.... An idea insinuated its way into her thoughts.

"Agra!"

He stopped, halfway out of the dig, and swiveled his head back toward her. "What?"

"I ... this is incredible, such a special find, I ... I want to celebrate. Now."

His antennae flicked erect. "What? How?"

She curled up the end of her abdomen and sprayed the air with pheromones.

Agra half-twisted toward her before he caught himself. "You want to mate, now? After all this time? Can't it wait until I've stored these safely?"

"No." She sprayed more pheromones.

Agra stumbled down onto the floor of the pit as if his legs were acting of their own accord, as if he was drawn to a magnet. Pramantidis turned around to let him climb onto her back.

"Please, Columbia!" He reached out a tentative leg and touched her abdomen, stroking with the softest of caresses. "This is important to me." With an effort he crouched down and eased the pile of trays onto the ground.

And then he leapt onto her back. As the tip of his abdomen curled down and linked with hers, he reached forward and stroked her body with his forelegs. She shuddered with ecstasy as his climax

approached.

Then, as Agra reached that peak, she twisted round, grasped his thorax in both pincers, and pulled him forward for what was an outdated, but still the ultimate expression of love that a male could aspire to. If he did love her as he had so often professed, how could he refuse her?

He twisted his head around to stare at her, his mandibles quivering. "What are you doing, Columbia?"

Then he jerked and his body shuddered as his sperm pumped into her body.

"I'm hungry, so hungry." She moved a pincer to grasp his head and expose his neck to her jaws.

Agra tensed, but didn't resist. "Promise me one thing, Columbia. Publish my discovery. The truth is what is important, isn't it? Promise me!"

"Yes, my darling." As Agra climaxed, she bit into his neck. Agra's body spasmed, but even in death his body still pumped sperm into her. She bit into his head, chewed and swallowed. "The truth is what is important, and absence of proof is not proof of absence." She hauled his body off her back and feasted some more. At least their children would inherit his brilliance, but not his ideas. Heretics had no place in science.

After cleaning her jaws, she picked up the sheet from the tray on top of his pile and crushed it between her pincers. The delicate sheet crumbled to tiny fragments and rained to the ground. Then she picked up the next sheet and worked through all of them, crushing each with a meticulous care that Agra would have been proud of. After the last sheet, she picked over the larger fragments, reducing them until no evidence remained.

The deed done, she paused, halfway out of the pit, and looked back at Agra's body. What a shame, they had made such a great team. But really, what had possessed him?

"Intelligent primates? Ridiculous!"

One Giant Leap

W*hy is it still here?* With a slow shake of his head, Calvin gnawed at his lower lip. What had he missed?

It had to be something so simple, so obvious he couldn't see it. But what was simple about this oddity, this curio of trans-dimensional quantum cosmology? With over a billion equations, some with more than a million variables, many of his peers doubted a solution could be found, even with the latest parallel Planck processors. Why didn't the drive work? Could Jamakovic have been wrong?

As Calvin stared at the interstellar drive, he drifted from the center of his office until he was only a meter from the display that spanned the back wall. What had he missed?

A glint caught his eye: light reflecting off a support container for one of three micro black holes — old friends. How his peers had lauded him a quarter of a century ago after saying it couldn't be done. Creating them was his crowning glory and the first step to the stars. The memory made him feel old, worn out. Even Atlas had tired of supporting the world on his shoulders. Calvin peered into the drive's interior and the glint reappeared, a dim point of light moving, now joined by another. Both flickered as they passed behind the girders that crisscrossed the spherical cobweb of gantries, which were littered with a mishmash of drive components and antennae, and which entombed a volume of space a mere kilometer in diameter.

He closed his eyes and pictured the black holes. They danced around each other, flirting, teasing, and then they approached for a brief ménage a trois.

And when consummation does occur add a dash of muons, a spray of neutrinos, flavor with up and down quarks, tweak the electric and magnetic fields until they alternate and resonate beyond belief and hey presto! Disappear here and reappear there. Universe, here we come.

Except it didn't work. Calvin chewed on his lip and scowled at a memory.

One visiting meddler had described the interstellar drive's bare bones as an overblown amusement park, all lit up with fairy lights, but without any rides. A cash cow with three black hearts, the fool had said, and laughed at his own witticism. For Kwan's sake, Calvin had forced himself to laugh along. Better to do that than try to explain away the failure.

Once, there had been enormous hope, but time had whittled that away. *Fifty years?* If it weren't for Kwan and the moral support of all those who shared his dream, the peace would not have lasted and he could never have dared to come so far.

But now that Mason was in power....

With a soft sigh, Calvin grimaced as he stared at the drive and once more tried to play games in his head with the complex mathematical equations.

The hiss of a door opening interrupted his reverie. He smiled without turning and waited, expectant. Then, at last, a pair of hands touched his shoulders, caressed and squeezed, and a warm zephyr dusted his ear to herald the arrival of a kiss from soft lips, sweet lips. His opposite number, Kwan Soon Lee, niece to the Legate of the Third Electorate was not one to dwell on protocol when they were alone together. How long had it been? Twenty years? If it weren't for the great political divide separating the IDA and the Third Electorate, he would have married her long ago. His smile turned to a grin as he took her hand and twisted round to face her.

But instead of a gentle peck, she crushed her lips to his in a smothering embrace while her eyes

bubbled with excitement and drew him in.

Calvin pulled back and scowled at her. "Okay ... what is it? The new fempto-camera? It's shown something?"

Kwan just grinned and said nothing, but her eyes twinkled even more.

"Kwan!" Calvin's paper-tiger scowl deepened. "Director Kwan Soon Lee, I wish to notify *you* of a serious breach of protocol. All experimental results are to be reported to both directors simultaneously. I believe that you have been notified of important results before I have. On behalf of the International Democratic Alliance, I must protest!"

Kwan pulled on her "official duties" face. "Duly noted, Director Calvin Leicester. As representative for the Third Electorate, I must lodge a formal complaint regarding the tone of *your* protest."

"In that case, I must—"

"Oh, shut up!" Kwan jammed her lips to his again and surprised him by working her tongue into his mouth. Then, as he responded, she pushed him away and dabbed at the controls on her wristlet. The transport belt around her waist drew her away. Then she stopped and stared past him at the interstellar drive.

"It works!" Kwan touched her wristlet and pirouetted with a gleeful smile. Her bob of hair, black as the ace of spades, whirled around to form a gossamer spiral galaxy. "It works, it works, it works!" She slowed to a halt with an ecstatic fervor in her eyes.

"What does? The camera?"

"No! Oh dummy. The drive! It worked. It transferred."

"What are you talking about? It's still here!"

"It did! The camera caught it. In one frame it disappears. It transferred for two whole fempto-seconds.

Here, see for yourself. Mah-jongg," she commanded her virtual assistant, "play sequence, 'Femto-cam Soon Lee 47'." She turned to the display. "This is from ten pico-seconds before."

Calvin held his breath as the display blanked. Could it be true? For two fempto-seconds? But that was far too short — he quashed the thought not wanting to break the spell.

An image of the drive appeared and in the display's top right corner, a counter raced through a fifteen-digit number in chunks of a thousand. Speckles of white noise flickered over the surface of an invisible sphere, twice the drive's diameter, and white, blue-tinged flares leapt out from the drive's structure to fill the void in-between.

They vanished.

But more appeared and hopped about the interior of the sphere as the counter slowed to a single-digit crawl. So far, nothing unusual.

"Watch," Kwan whispered as she stared at the screen in rapture. The counter clicked over.

Like all the times before, a flare erupted in the center of the screen, surrounded by a golden halo ... and nothing, no drive. Calvin's mouth went dry and his throat tightened as the enormity of it hit him. No *drive*. Then more speckles erupted amidst another golden backdrop and the drive reappeared. The counter had increased by three.

"Play it again," Calvin whispered, but the words caught in his throat.

He watched, open-mouthed, and as the sequence repeated over and over, his excitement grew. Then it peaked. A young man's fierce desire swept through him and a primitive urge erupted, demanding instant gratification.

"Come here," he growled in a breathless voice.

Kwan drifted over; her gray eyes locked to his. A lazy half-smile, expectant, played over her face as,

without a word, Calvin reached out to touch her collar. Her tunic split to the waist. She laughed, wicked and sultry, as he tore it from her shoulders to expose delicate alabaster skin, but a brutal kiss silenced her. How dare she tease him like that? But though his tongue sought hers with a demand for instant consummation, her tongue fought back with its own fierce desire and dared him to dominate her.

And then an animal frenzy took hold, like they were two lovers joining for the first time. As they tumbled out of control, Kwan closed her eyes and moaned in ecstasy, something she hadn't done in years.

And all the time, her words danced in Calvin's head. *It works, it works, it works!*



Calvin stared at a world map on the display and tried not to scowl as he pondered the latest outbreaks of fighting. In only a week, the number of clusters of glowing red dots had grown and if the situation continued to worsen, soon the stretches of pale red along the borders between the International Democratic Alliance and the Third Electorate would join up in one continuous line. Why did there have to be such a divide between the pale blue that engulfed the continents of North and South America, Europe and Russia, and the strident yellow swathe that swept from China down through south-east Asia to swallow up India, the Middle East and Africa?

"Do you think there will be war?" Kwan asked.

Calvin thought about it for the moment, but couldn't bring himself to admit to the truth staring him in the face. "No, they can't be that stupid. Besides, both sides have been threatening war for over a hundred years. Mason's posturing, that's all. Every new president does it."

"I'm not so certain."

Calvin flicked to a news feed from the unaligned nations for a least-biased picture. Not that he needed

to bother. None of the propaganda channels could tart up this old whore. It was the same old story that had been played over and over down the centuries. A stream of trudging skeletons fled the remnants of a town blown up and lasered to a pulp. Oblivious to snipers, they staggered on in small clumps, past mutilated children's bodies, carved up animals and headless corpses. Calvin shook his head and winced as laughing IDA soldiers kicked a morose head around.

The camera balked an old woman, eyes beyond caring, but before she could utter a word, a neat hole punctured her brow, just above her right eye, and she sank to the ground. The camera followed her all the way down, gorging on her death throws. Calvin sighed. Hatred would feed on hatred.

Yet out here, in this small piece of heaven where the Oort cloud ruled supreme, it seemed so remote, so unreal. He pulled Kwan close and buried his face in her hair to hide his pain. His project had bound the two power blocs together in an uneasy marriage for so long, he had forgotten what a hell Earth could be. Now divorce seemed imminent.

"What will we do?" she murmured.

"Nothing." Calvin looked up and dismissed the reality on the screen. "As far as I'm concerned, we're too remote to be affected. Besides, I think we're the last people on their minds."

"I hope you're right." Kwan rubbed her arms as if to ward off a chill and Calvin drifted over to hold her. "But I agree. We shouldn't let it affect us. Most of my people will go along. Chang may not, but I would expect that. He is the Polit."

"Kosta will be the same, but I'm sure, with a little persuasion, he'll see the light. Okay, let's forget about this for the time being. Jarvis, get rid of that." For a moment Calvin mulled over his indifference as his virtual assistant cleared the display and the interstellar drive reappeared. But it wasn't indifference, it was a protective mechanism to stop him waking in the middle of the night, screaming.

He stared past Kwan at the drive. One transfer. That's all it would take to bring this madness to an end and give people a reason to live. One transfer. And the universe would be ripe for the picking. It would turn minds from war to exploration — a miracle. Was it too much to ask for?

Calvin let Kwan go, pushed the thoughts aside and cleared his mind, ready for battle. "Let's see if we can crack this. Jarvis, call them in."

The troops drifted in and settled into a loose circle: a pair of mathematical physicists, a pair of interdimensional topologists and a pair of quantum analysts — one IDA and one Third Electorate representative per pair. In the early days the station had boasted over a hundred personnel. Now they numbered twenty, evenly split along power bloc lines.

Calvin called up the latest work on the equations and watched as a host of symbols took up the display, all interconnected with silvery transparent tubes in which smaller icons moved back and forth. His gaze was drawn to two symbols that stood out in the center of the display. He mulled over the red disk with a yellow bulge for the sun and different colored bumps for the planets and breathed in its calming influence. Though he was expert in many fields, Local Matter Distribution was his safe haven. No one would dare question him. His gaze drifted across to where a golden orb dazzled with flickering white rays that streamed away. Solar Particle Flux was Kwan's domain--her yin to his yang.

Then his gaze flicked to Interdimensional Translation Functions and his pulse quickened as he stared at the pulsing azure pentagon with lime trimming. How open-minded would they be?

He crossed his arms and said nothing as the group settled into an easy banter. Ideas flowed back and forth. Arguments came and went. He listened and watched and considered, but didn't partake as each scientist expanded parts of the model and delved into deeper levels to prove a point or disprove another. There were plenty of good ideas and they went nowhere.

Calvin waited until the arguing died down before he put forward his suggestion. He had been doodling with it for weeks, wary of presenting it. The last few dissenting voices petered out. Coughs punctuated the silence. Eyes slowly turned to him, expectant and then questioning.

Kwan nudged him. "This isn't like you. Don't keep us in suspense."

"I've ... been playing with an idea. It's probably stupid."

His audience murmured for him to continue.

"Interdimensional Translation isn't really my area of expertise. I'm sure Pieter and Casey will shoot me down." He looked to the two interdimensionalists for confirmation.

"No, no," Pieter protested.

"Absolutely not," Casey agreed with his Third Electorate opposite, "we're both open to any new ideas."

"Well...."

Calvin expanded the Interdimensional Translation Functions module into an exploded view of its subsets and drilled down eight levels. For a moment, he hesitated and then selected a green cube with a yellow expanding spiral atop it and a violet cube with a shrinking spiral. It was a crazy idea. The cubes expanded into matrices, their cells either containing yellow numerical values or glowing red Chinese pictographs that represented tensor equations. He stared at them and faltered as goosebumps danced up his arms. It was sheer arrogance to think he could tame these beasts. How dare he think he could penetrate their sheer complexity and get away with it? But the idea had nagged him until he couldn't refuse. Except now, it would all unravel.

He swallowed and forced himself to go on. It was better to look a fool and fail than to not try. He had lived by that mantra and now he could die by it.

"You know how these are the mirror images of each other."

Pieter and Casey nodded.

“Well ... I was going through Jamakovic’s autobiography again and in particular his account of how he came up with the translation functions and how he found a solution.”

“It was a seminal work,” said Pieter.

“Incredible insight, given the mathematical tools he had to work with,” added Casey.

Chang, the Third Electorate’s topological geometer, shook his head with a solemn frown. “I don’t know how they could have worked with such primitive tools.”

“We’ve come so far in the last hundred and fifty years,” said Kosta, his haughty voice rising, “thanks mainly to the brilliance and expertise of *our* scientists. The International—”

Calvin coughed. “That will do, Joseph. We are all friends here, we don’t need any point scoring.”

Kosta looked down and his cheeks reddened to match his mass of curly locks. “Yes, Director.”

Calvin glanced at Kwan, as with hands clasped together across her stomach, she waggled an index finger at Chang and her brow furrowed in a slight, no-nonsense frown. Chang bit his lip and refrained from making a retort. With the escalating situation back on Earth, both political officers were going to be trouble and if war broke out ... there might just be a red dot out on the edge of the Oort cloud.

With a slight purse of his lips, Calvin continued. Time would only tell. “As I was saying, when I read his autobiography I was fascinated by the decision he made that allowed him to find a solution. He actually made an assumption that this,” he highlighted the violet cube, “should be the mirror image of this.” He pointed to the green cube.

“That’s because each is the reverse transfer of the other,” said Casey, “they have to be mirror images.”

“Yes, but my point is ... they represent the reverse transfer *back* to the origin not to the destination as Jamakovic — *and* everyone after him — assumed was true.”

"But the spatial description equations describe the destination," said Pieter. "They determine the destination, not the reverse transfer functions."

"Ah," said Calvin, "but that's an assumption also. I've searched all the research papers since then and no one has ever questioned this or tested its validity."

"But no one could test it back then," said Pieter.

"And Jamakovic couldn't have come up with the solution without that insight," said Casey.

"And there you are. Because Jamakovic was such a genius and such a dominant figure in his field, no one ever questioned that he could be wrong." Calvin held up his hand to forestall Pieter and Casey. "Don't get me wrong. He's a hero of mine too. But so often history has shown, time and time again, how science has been held back by dogma ... by beliefs that an idea — an *assumption* — is true. That's what struck me has happened here. I think these reverse transfer equations don't just describe how to return to our four dimensions, I think they also describe *where* to return."

"But what about the destination spatial descriptions?" Kwan asked. "It's been shown that if they're not accurate no solution is possible."

"We can never know the full details of the destination," said Chang. "That's why we employ an approximate solution. We can never solve for a perfect solution."

"But we don't want a perfect solution," Kosta retorted. "It's stable, so you'll never return. Trust a—"

"Joseph!"

Kosta refused to look at Calvin. Instead he glowered at Chang through lowered eyes. The feeling was mutual. Calvin looked at Kwan and raised his eyebrows with wry smile.

"I think the destination details are necessary, but only to assist in reconstruction of the transferred information. Without it the information is scrambled. I think we've been telling the drive what it's like where

it is supposed to go, but actually telling it to go nowhere! All the radiation we see emitted, it's because we're describing a destination that is *not* where it is going *to*. I think the drive has worked perfectly for the last ten years."

Calvin waited for Pieter and Casey's reaction. They tried to be tactful, but their faces betrayed their doubt. Still, it didn't matter. The idea was out now and free to nag them into submission. He felt the tension release as a wave breaking over him, rinsing away his doubts. No matter what they thought, they would do as he ordered. He was a director and Kwan would back him up. All he had to do was to convince them to put their hearts into it; make them believe he might be onto something.

"I have a few ideas..."



The door slid shut behind Calvin. Now, with their goal so close, why this? And why to Kwan? He stared, glum-faced, at her, floating before the display, staring at the drive, lost in thought. For a moment, he admired her svelte figure, so well highlighted by her starburst orange and teal jumpsuit, the way it followed every curve. And not once had he ever tired of exploring those well-worn paths. The thought prompted a twinge of guilt. How could he be so selfish at a time like this?

He drifted over and put his arms around her. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she needed him now.

Kwan nodded but said nothing. It was her inner strength he also admired as much as anything else. With the assassination, she had just expressed a wish for some time alone and then had buried herself in work. No tears, no gnashing of teeth.

"Your uncle." Calvin shrugged. Sometimes mere words couldn't convey what needed to be said. "I know

you were close.”

She softened a touch. “He never had any children.”

“I’ve seen the official reports — they’re a beat up. It was too efficient to be terrorists and I doubt Mason ordered it. Besides, there are plenty of other ways to start a war.”

“I think it was Vanawhatti. I’ve never liked him.”

“But he’s Ohng See’s best friend. His faithful deputy. For what, ten years? I can’t believe—”

“I’ve heard ... since Mason came to power, that Vanawhatti has been critical of Ohng See’s conciliatory moves toward the IDA. Vanawhatti is a hawk. He won’t back down.” Kwan sighed and scrunched up her shoulders. “This is bad for us. He’s always opposed our project, now he will pull out. I know it.”

“Mason’s going to cancel as well. ‘Fifteen years of waste’.” Calvin rubbed his chin on the top of her head. Despite all the turmoil around them, they were still as one, and just as she needed him now, he also needed her more than ever. “Damn! We’re so close.”

“One transfer. Neither would dare pull out then.” Kwan turned to face him and put her arms around his neck. Her eyes took on a misty, far-away look. “Just imagine what we could discover. Those planets we’ve found with oxygen atmospheres. There could be intelligent life. Who knows? And we could be the first. Imagine it!”

Calvin chuckled. “You are such a romantic. I would never have believed it when I first met you.”

Kwan looked away and dipped her eyes. “You corrupted me with your decadent ways.” Then her eyes narrowed and her voice took on a hard edge he hadn’t heard before. “I want this for my uncle. He believed in this as much as I do. And for that I will take great pleasure in making Vanawhatti lose face.”

Calvin grunted. “I doubt that. Vanawhatti will only turn it to his advantage.” He hugged Kwan to him and she buried her face in his neck.

"I can't make the funeral," she said.

"You can say goodbye here ... a memorial service."

"I already have, just my people. Sorry, it seemed best."

Calvin kissed the top of her brow, closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against her hair, savoring the peach scent. Soon, all he'd have were memories to savor if Mason and Vanawhatti had their way. "Oh, to hell with them, all of them. They can take their petty rivalries and blow themselves to kingdom come for all I care. If only we could get this to work!"

"We will. We're close. Too close to give up." Then Kwan's voice took on a teasing lilt. "They all believe in you now, you know. I overheard Pieter and Casey talking yesterday. They've put you up on a pedestal along side Jamakovic." She reached up and ruffled his short hair.

"Yes, it's so easy to mold such young brains." With a chuckle, Calvin caught her hand and pulled it back down behind his neck, but didn't let go. "Unfortunately, you know me for who I am."

"And I still love you. I think I've been duped." She reached up to kiss him.

"Excuse me, Calvin."

He groaned. "Yes, Jarvis?" Kwan closed her eyes and dropped her forehead to his chest.

"You asked to be notified of any incoming or outgoing messages."

Kwan raised her eyebrows in a question.

"Just a precaution," Calvin muttered. Kwan had to know they were both targets now even though the drive was the prize. "Yes, Jarvis?" he asked out loud. "What have you to report?"

"An encrypted message has arrived for Joseph Kosta."

"Can you decrypt it?"

"No, it is a level five military crypt."

"I was afraid of that."

"So we haven't been forgotten after all," said Kwan.

"No, and I expect there will be a similar message to Chang as well."

"But what can either of them do? We don't have any weapons."

"Are you so certain? I wouldn't put anything past them. Still...." Calvin gave Kwan a gentle squeeze and kissed her forehead before letting go. Neither side would have the drive if he had any say and he knew they were in perfect agreement. "I think we better get back to work, we may not have much time."



The declaration of war came as a silence. Satellites that were always in constant communication with the station went dead. It would take three hours to get confirmation, longer if it had to come from Mars, or the Jupiter or Saturn bases. Strange, how events so far away could affect everyone on the station. Friendly opponents adopted cool demeanors. But a local cease-fire — of a kind — had been agreed to by one and all, even Kosta and Chang. That surprised Calvin more than anything did.

At least Kwan hadn't changed. Nor had he.

Messages began to trickle in, first from Mars, and then from the closer belt mining stations, although those were more a cry of relief. Two weeks later the military stations around Jupiter and Saturn came online. Encrypted messages arrived, not for Calvin and Kwan, but for Kosta and Chang.

Calvin adjusted the contrast on the wall display until he could just make out a faint blue halo around a black speck. It hung, suspended, to the side of Jupiter's giant, banded bulk in the center of the grainy image.

"I was afraid of this," he said, "especially after all that military traffic. I think we've got a month at

most.”

Kwan swung the telescope to point toward Saturn, a small, ringed jewel further away than Jupiter. The image came to rest on another but smaller blue halo.

“That’s Le Blanc,” she said. “But the Beijing won’t arrive until five hours after the Amazon.”

“You’ll have to leave before then. You should go now while you have the chance.”

“Chang will veto that.”

“But I don’t trust Kosta. I don’t know which one I’m more worried about. I wish I knew what their orders were.”

“At least they’ll be busy watching and worrying about each other. I doubt they’ll do anything until the Amazon arrives.”

Calvin moved the telescope back to the *Amazon*. The blue glow blinked off. He frowned and turned to Kwan. “It’s starting to brake. That’s only three weeks. You have to leave now.”

“No, there’s still a lot to do.” She drifted over and reached out to squeeze his arm. “You need us for the final adjustments. Mah-jongg, what is the latest a ship can leave here and escape the Amazon? Assume its destination is the nearest belt settlement.”

“Five hours and forty-three minutes before the Amazon arrives, acceleration one-third gee, vector 42.34 degrees West and 17.68 degrees South.”

Calvin scowled as the display altered to show the solar system overlaid with a solar celestial sphere, the space station a sparkling emerald out on its edge. A white arrow extended down toward the ecliptic and in toward the sun’s bright yellow ball. Why couldn’t she do as he asked just this once? The Amazon might not be able to intercept her, but she would pass within firing range.

“See?” Kwan patted his arm. “Plenty of time.”

Calvin shook his head. "If Kosta lets you leave, or Chang for that matter. And if you do ... one-third gee? You'll burn up too much fuel to brake."

"We'll have enough to slow so they can rescue us. It won't be easy, but it's only two months. And the belt settlements are neutral. We should be safe."

Kwan snuggled into Calvin's chest to forestall any argument. Her decision was a fait accompli. Calvin rested his chin on her head and closed his eyes.

"It's a pity I can't order you to leave," he said in a dour tone.

"I wouldn't listen to you anyway."

"I'd feel much happier if you weren't here."

Kwan pulled back to stare at him, her eyes wide, all innocent and filled with a child-like earnestness. "Don't you want me any more?"

Calvin gaped at her. Then he chuckled and pulled her back to him. "You know what I mean! I don't want to risk you being captured ... or worse."



The supply shuttle undocked from the interstellar drive and rotated toward the station. Its next trip would be its last. Calvin sighed. At least Kwan didn't know what he planned. He flipped the display back. A blue glow masked the *Amazon*, except where three communications antennae stuck out at equidistant angles.

General Sanchez, the new commander of the IDA's Jupiter base and one of Mason's right-hand men, had sent a few perfunctory greetings. There were no special instructions, no need for alarm, merely an inspection tour, show the flag, raise morale, nothing more. And pigs might fly.

Kwan had received similar messages from Le Blanc. This little research station had become the place to

be.

Where is she?

The clock in the top corner of the display ticked over — six hours to the *Amazon's* arrival, six and a half to transfer. If it worked. Calvin took a deep breath to calm his nerves. It was time to say goodbye.

"Jarvis, where is Director Kwan Soon Lee?"

"I cannot locate her."

"Who was she with last?"

"Polit Kosta."

A shiver, like a faint electric shock, ran through Calvin. "And the other Third Electorate personnel?"

"Except for Polit Chang, they are grouped together in Corridor Fifteen, Section Eight, moving toward the Departure Lounge. Polit Chang is moving along Cross-corridor Nine."

Calvin let his breath ease out through his lips. "And where's Kosta?"

"Polit Kosta is in the Departure Lounge."

"Damn," Calvin muttered as a bad feeling swept over him. His fingers danced over his wristlet's controls and with a jerk, his transport belt dragged him out into the corridor. Kosta wouldn't have killed her, not if Mason could use her as a bargaining chip to undermine Vanawhatti.

He tore into the lounge and slammed to a halt. Kosta had a pistol, a standard, military-issue Boch that could fire smart, explosive-tipped bullets. Calvin fumed. How dare Kosta smuggle a gun like that aboard?

The Third Electorate scientists cowered against the inner wall of the lounge and the red dot of the Boch's laser danced across them. It paused for a second, jittering over its target's heart before moving on to another prey. Kosta had a wolfish grin and narrow hunter's eyes. It was the first time Calvin had seen his Polit smile or show any enthusiasm for the whole year he had been aboard.

"Put that away," Calvin snapped. "What do you think you're doing?"

"They were trying to escape. By rights, I should shoot them." The red dot zipped across the group and as one they cringed.

Pieter held out his hands to appeal to Calvin. "Director Leicester—" The laser darted across to stop on Pieter's forehead. He hesitated with a wary glance at Kosta before continuing. "Director Lee assured us she had an agreement with you that we could evacuate if your warship arrived before ours."

"That is correct."

"You don't have that authority!" Kosta snapped.

"I am the IDA director!"

"My orders supersede your authority."

"What orders?"

"From General Sanchez."

"I haven't heard about any orders. They should come through me."

Kosta's eyes laughed at Calvin. "This is a military matter, not civilian. Andreas, send 'Sanchez Message 245-1' to *Director Leicester*."

Calvin opened the message on the lounge wall display and scanned through it. A veiled scowl crept onto his face. He shrugged at Pieter.

"So, if you don't mind, *Director*—"

Chang shot into the lounge, holding a pistol similar to Kosta's. He caught sight of Calvin and took aim. "Ah, Director Leicester—" He glanced to the side and saw Kosta, but before he could swing round, Kosta fired.

As the bang reverberated in the room, flesh, blood and fragments of bone spattered out from just

beneath Chang's armpit and his arm spun round to point an accusing finger at Calvin. He flinched as something solid smacked into his stomach and then careened up into his chin.

Death had such a casual disregard for life. Had Kosta shot Kwan or had Chang?

As Calvin wiped his hand down over his face and blinked to clear his eyes, he tried to force his mind to think straight. Kosta had to be stopped, even if it was only to honor Kwan's wish. To the side, Chang's head bobbed as his body twisted in slow motion with arms and legs aghast. Balls of blood trailed from the gaping wound in his chest, wobbling as they arced through the air. Calvin gagged at the offal smell. A sudden vision of Kwan's lifeless body drifting amid red baubles made him shiver. Had Kosta?

He picked at a stubborn shred of skin stuck to the end of his nose and paused as Chang's pistol floated before him. It was armed, but only Chang could fire it. Calvin grabbed it and drifted over to stop Chang cartwheeling.

Pieter and the others huddled together. The woman next to him whimpered and turned away to bury her face in Pieter's chest. His arm trembled as he held her. With his mouth clamped shut, his eyes, terrified, beseeched Calvin.

Calvin snatched a look at his hand holding the pistol — rock steady. Just like Kwan would have been in this situation. It felt like time had slowed. Where was she? Had Kosta killed her?

The gun felt solid, real, demanding.

Kosta waved his pistol at the group. "Who wants to be next?" He had his mouse and now he wanted to play with it. The red dot flicked from scientist to scientist, back and forth, teasing each one. Kosta had killed. He had become a warrior. He had become a man. It smirked on his face. Calvin despised him and all he stood for.

Where is Kwan?

Calvin eased his arm up until it rested alongside Chang's arm so that Chang's hand caressed his hand, the pistol close to Chang's thumb. There would still be enough body warmth to fire the pistol.

Where is Kwan?

Kosta kept his gaze on his prisoners. "What do you think, Director? General Sanchez doesn't really need prisoners." He turned to sneer at Calvin. "Perhaps you should join them, considering your treasonous relationship with that slut Lee—" Calvin lunged for Chang's hand. "What are you doing?"

The pistol slid into Chang's lifeless grip. Calvin fumbled. Then Chang's thumb touched the pad on top of the gun.

Kosta twisted and whipped his pistol around. Chang's pistol came alive. Kosta fired twice. The first bullet hit Chang's body and exploded to the left of Calvin. It didn't matter anymore; nothing mattered. The second grazed Calvin's cheek and exploded behind him as Chang's body twisted in his grasp. Why didn't Chang's pistol fire?

Pieter lunged at Kosta and crashed into him, knocking him off-balance. Calvin wheeled to follow Kosta, trying to keep Chang's thumb in place on the firing pad, but the pistol slipped in his grasp and its laser zipped back and forth across Kosta as he tumbled a full circle before regaining control.

Kosta pivoted to aim at Pieter and hesitated. Then he rolled to aim at Calvin. For a second the red dot stopped on Kosta's stomach and Calvin squeezed the lifeless hand as hard as he could.

Bang! The gun flicked in his grip.

A red spray spurted from behind Kosta. He hunched up and gasped and then squeezed off a parting shot as he wheezed a scream. But the shot went wide and Kosta drifted backwards, his face frozen in surprise. Calvin stared at him in a daze. A merciful death was more than either of them deserved, but Kwan? Had she....?

A siren burst into life.

Calvin whipped round to see a panel open in the wall. A small robot darted out and raced toward a crater in the far corner, near Airlock Two, where the wall met the outer window. Already, a crack had begun to spread across the window.

He pushed Chang's body away and turned to the scientists.

"Please!" Pieter cried out. "Don't!"

Casey and the other IDA scientists dashed into the lounge. "We've detected gunshots. What—?" He fell silent as Chang's body drifted past. A man next to him pointed at Kosta and stifled a gasp.

"Go!" Calvin waved Chang's pistol at Airlock One.

Pieter hesitated. "But—"

"Don't argue. I made a promise to Director Lee and I'm keeping it. She would have done the same for me."

The third Electorate huddle crept toward the airlock and one by one they slipped in until only Pieter remained. "I wish...." He straightened up and smiled a thank you at Calvin. "It's been an honor to work with a scientist of your caliber, sir!" Then he scrambled in and the door slid shut.

"Chang must have killed Kosta," said a woman behind Casey.

"They must have shot each other simultaneously", said another.

"No, Kosta shot Chang and I shot Kosta." Calvin turned and pointed Chang's pistol at them.

"That won't fire!" said Casey.

"We both know that." Calvin cocked his head and offered a rueful smile. "I should be the only one to take the blame."

"But—"

"He's right," Casey cut off the woman. "When Sanchez finds Kosta dead, we could be held responsible. But what about you, Director?"

"Oh..." the pain of Kwan's loss hit him then, "don't worry about me." He blinked to clear his eyes.

The siren changed to a high-pitched, warbling evacuation alarm and the robot went into overdrive, trying to patch the cracks, but there were too many. A small piece of plasglass blew out.

Calvin waved Chang's pistol at Casey and the group. "Now get out of here. Move!" He hustled them through the entrance. A soft breeze erupted from the corridor and pushed him back. "I've got a flight to catch," he muttered.

The breeze strengthened and a safety panel slammed down to cut off his air supply. He dashed for Airlock Two, and as the alarm faded in the thinning air, the door slid shut behind him. Air flowed in and he sucked in a deep breath. Not that he cared much for living. But Kwan had believed in him. If she were here, she would be disappointed if he didn't go on. Besides, there was nothing to keep him on the station.

Calvin hit the button to open the door to the shuttle.



In the left half of the display, Sanchez glared at Calvin from the director's office. "Consider yourself under arrest, Leicester — murder and treason. You let Kwan Soon Lee escape."

Calvin froze for a second. *He doesn't know!*

Two human soldiers flanked Sanchez and an impressionist's idea of three mechanized centaurs floated behind them. In the right half of the display, a shuttle braked on its final approach to the drive.

"Order the shuttle to turn back. It's thirty seconds to transfer." The seconds ticked away and still the shuttle continued its approach. A chill swept down Calvin's arms and his stomach churned. If the drive

didn't work, his whole life would be for nothing, although Sanchez wouldn't let him live long enough to waste time pondering it. The thought made him chuckle, a dry, humorless laugh, and for a moment he forgot Kwan's loss.

"That drive is IDA property. Do not attempt to transfer. Kosta kept me well informed and in his opinion, your rush to attempt this is pure folly. You could kill yourself." Sanchez softened his gaze. "Calvin, think of your reputation. Kosta assured me you were close to success, very close, but you *need* more time. Who knows? Maybe after the war...."

Calvin ignored Sanchez and mentally counted down the last ten seconds. The shuttle breached the two-kilometer surface.

Zero.

Calvin's head scrunched. He had an odd sensation of his brain expanding out of the top of his head and then snapping back. The stars blinked to new positions. An alien sky greeted him. The drive worked.

It works, it works, it works! Kwan's words reverberated in Calvin's head and her loss cut through his soul.

A warning chime brought him back to reality. He looked at the display and watched the rear half of the shuttle tumble end over end toward the drive. Six bodies spewed out.

Three human shapes waved and kicked with frantic motions and then stopped as if snuffed out. The remaining three made no effort to stop tumbling. Two of the robots smashed into gantries and ricocheted back into space. The shuttle crunched through an array of antennae and continued on past, overtaken by the third robot, which had missed everything and would sail on to oblivion.

With a shake of his head at the stupidity of the military mentality, he noticed the stars in the background. Something was wrong. They didn't match any of the simulations.

Calvin flicked the display to a sensor on the other side of the drive. He gasped. A brownish-orange band ran across the lower left quadrant of the view and as his eyes adjusted, he began to pick out a pale red nebula.

He enhanced the image to draw out every nuance of color and reveal the nebula in all its glory. It was suffused with exquisite olive cirrocumulus and shot through with delicate frozen wisps of azure lightning that faded to dark blue before becoming intermingled with subtle yellow auras that were too subtle for any painter's palette. He had known that the universe was an artist far greater than any mere dauber the human race had ever spawned, but this ... magnificence! The nebula's glowing, ghostly presence engulfed him, awed him.

Only it shouldn't be there.

Calvin crossed his arms and hugged himself. He wanted to laugh and cry all at the same time. The nebula called to him, ensnared him in its hypnotic light and drove away the niggling thought that, perhaps, Kosta may actually have been right.

With a supreme effort he closed his eyes. "Jarvis, analyze the stars and the nebula ... spectra and distributions. Find out where we are." He opened his eyes to surrender to the nebula and heard a noise behind him. As he turned round, Kwan pulled herself out of a storage compartment.

"Oh!" Her face lit up as she stared past him. "Isn't it beautiful!"

"Kwan! You're *alive*."

"You didn't think I would miss this, did you?" She gave Calvin a peck on the cheek and ducked past to ogle the nebula. "We've done it! We're the first people to travel beyond the solar system. I can't believe it. Isn't it amazing?" She clapped her hands and laughed.

"But ... but I thought—"

"Did you think Kosta would let me leave? Or Chang? And where better to hide? What made you think you could keep this a secret?" She nodded at the modifications that had converted the cramped diagnostics workplace into a control room. "You think I don't know you? Anyway, why do you think Sanchez came all this way out here — to the station, I mean?"

"To secure it?"

"To secure me!"

"What do you mean?"

Kwan broke away from the nebula's pull and turned to him. "Mason wants me as a hostage. My family is powerful and they could be a threat to Vanawhatti. That's why Le Blanc was chasing Sanchez. To save me ... or kill me. I think those were Chang's orders. Did they get away? I was worried about Kosta."

"Yes," Calvin managed to say. How could Kwan be so calm when all he wanted to do was sweep her up in his arms and berate her for putting him through such hell while laughing and crying at the same time? And yet he just felt too numb to act.

"Le Blanc's probably changed course to try to intercept the shuttle ... I hope they make it." She chuckled at his dismay. "Really, Calvin, you should keep up with politics. I expect Chang—"

"Chang's dead."

"Oh."

"Kosta killed him."

"I was afraid—"

"I killed Kosta. I thought ... nothing. It doesn't matter. I'm just so glad you're here."

Kwan tilted her head sideways to regard Calvin through curious eyes and her mouth opened a couple of times as if to ask a question. Instead, she drifted over and rotated to press her back up against him.

"Hold me," she said.

Calvin pulled her to him and let out a long sigh. *To hell with politics. To hell with them all.* He hugged her tighter and kissed the top of her head as some of her calm seeped into him. What had come to pass didn't matter anymore. She was alive and they were together. That was all that mattered.

Kwan reached up to tousle his hair. "It's so beautiful." Calvin looked up and followed her gaze.

"Yes ... yes it is." Together they lost themselves in the nebula's embrace.

"This isn't what I expected," Kwan said at last.

"No, but I think I know what's happened. The equations don't take into account your mass being here. I'm surprised we actually transferred." He laughed as if he had heard a bad joke. "God knows where we are."

"I had my fingers crossed." Kwan pulled his arms tighter around her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to ruin your greatest moment."

"What? We would never have seen this. I expected to see nothing more than a few stars. Jarvis, why is it taking so long to work out where we are?"

"The computers are calculating the reverse transfer. Shall I lower its priority?"

"No."

"But if we don't know where we are," Kwan squeezed his arm, "will just inverting the solution work?"

"It should since we know where we came from. The problem will be in maintaining the coherency of our information during transfer." Kwan shifted against him to show she wasn't so sure and in silence, they slipped into the nebula's embrace, as if that could ward off their harsh reality.

"Calvin," Jarvis announced at last, "I have our location. In rounded figures, we are 1423 light years from Earth and four light years from the Orion Nebula."

"Fourteen hundred light years!" Calvin gasped. They were only supposed to go a tad over forty light years.

"The Orion Nebula! Oh Calvin." Kwan twisted in his arms and turned round to face him. Tears glistened in her eyes and her mouth worked, unable to find words to express her feelings. As she tried to brush her tears away a tiny sphere of liquid escaped her fingers and wobbled to freedom only to die against Calvin's tunic. "How does it feel to be famous?"

"Ha! We'll only be famous if we get back." Calvin's smile faded away. Le Blanc would be arriving soon. "If there's anyone left alive.... Jarvis, how long before we can transfer?"

"Two days and seven hours."

"Can't we stay longer?" Kwan asked, "A week?"

"I only have enough food and water for two weeks and now that's halved. Besides, the longer we delay the less accurate the return solution becomes."

Kwan twisted round to take in the nebula again. "I could stay here forever."

"Come on." Calvin patted her shoulders. "Since you're a stowaway, you'll have to work your passage. So let's get to work! There's data to collect and I'd like to analyze the transfer solution to see if we can figure out why we traveled so far."

"In a minute ... in a minute."



The stars reappeared, familiar and reassuring. Calvin let out the breath he had held. They were home and he had worried for nothing. With a rueful smile, he began to massage his temples to alleviate a strange sensation — the same as after the first transfer.

Oh well, a small price to pay for the chance to explore the galaxy.

When Jarvis calculated their location at two hundred million kilometers from where they had left, but closer in to the sun, though on the same side of the ecliptic as the station, he looked at Kwan and shrugged. There would be a few days delay before their triumphant return to the station.

First though, it was time to let the whole solar system know of their achievement. He transmitted a report of their trip on all civilian communication channels while he waited for an acknowledgment from the station to the drive's identification message. But the seconds kept ticking by.

"Strange, I can't detect the station. That's odd!" He pointed the drive's main optical telescope at where it should have been, but there was only empty space. No debris--nor any warships. "What's going on?" He scanned for the closest planets and scratched his head as one by one they appeared. First Neptune, then Saturn and then Jupiter, but all in wrong positions. "I don't understand it," he muttered.

Kwan looked up from the communications console with a worried frown. "I can't find any signals, just this odd noise."

Calvin instigated a scan of the region of space around the station's expected location with lidar and, as an afterthought, began a scan of the space around them with radar. He stared at the lidar monitor, willing it to give a sign. If there was even a shred of debris, the lidar would find it. The moment for the expected return passed — nothing. The control room seemed to grow colder with each passing minute. Then radar returned a signal. It matched the station's signature, only the station was over three hundred and fifty million kilometers away in the opposite direction. It didn't make sense.

He redirected the main telescope and the station appeared, a frigid, lifeless remnant, at home with the left over trash from the solar system's birth.

"It's ... dead."

Kwan covered her mouth and a soft "Oh" escaped her lips.

Calvin turned away to hide his dismay. Their only lifeline led nowhere. There would be no rescue ship, just a slow death.

"Calvin," said Jarvis, "a message has arrived for you."

Kwan looked up and a smile burst onto her face. They had a reprieve after all.

"Go ahead, Jarvis."

The display flickered and cleared. A young man with dusky eyes embedded in the light-amber complexion of his round face stared out at Calvin. Then his calm smile faltered and he brushed an errant strand of hair from his face and teased it back into place in the straight black mop that fell to his shoulders in an unusual hairstyle. For a second, the corner of his mouth betrayed a nervous tic and he tugged at the sleeves of his strange uniform — a gold, turquoise and ruby sash on a gray bodysuit that Calvin couldn't place--to gather himself. The uniform was neither IDA nor Third Electorate nor like anything from the unaligned nations. Calvin stared at the ovoid insignia on the man's chest and wondered what the orange seven-pointed star on a green background meant.

"Welcome, Calvin Leicester. Please...." The man broke into a grin like an over-excited child and tripped over his words. "Can we go again?" he asked someone out of view. "What ... you're transmitting? Oh." He breathed in and froze. After several seconds he let his breath seep out and began again. "Please, accept my apologies for taking so long to reply. When they contacted me, er your format is rather old, well we all thought it was a hoax, I mean ... after eighty years? But now—"

"Pause message! Jarvis what is the year time-stamped on this message?"

"2457."

"What?"

Kwan's brow furrowed. "We must have traveled forty years into the future on the first transfer and another forty on the return. That's if the equations are symmetric."

"It doesn't make sense." Calvin scratched the stubble on his chin. "We collapse our three spatial dimensions and expand three micro-dimensions. Time shouldn't be affected."

Kwan had Mah-jongg calculated the year matching the position of the planets. It agreed with the message. She bit her lower lip. "It looks like you've invented a time machine as well. Pity."

"Jarvis, continue message."

"I guess I should introduce myself. I'm Mansur Leicester. I'm your ... great, great grandson. Who would have guessed?"

Calvin stared at the screen, too stunned to follow the message. Mansur's words flowed over and around him and he caught snatches. He and Kwan had disappeared eighty years ago at the start of the Great War.

Eighty years! We've been gone eighty years! My great, great grandson ... everyone I know must be dead.

Except for Kwan.

"So you see," Mansur's voice drifted back to Calvin, "we're a united planet at last. I've ... er," he blushed and looked down before looking back up, "carried on the family business, you could say. Unfortunately some of your work — your last breakthroughs — they were lost during the war. In fact some has just turned up recently ... in Pieter Johanssen's archives on Circe. You must remember him. He died in 2384 after he was captured trying to get back to Earth."

Pieter dead? Kwan choked back a sob. Calvin drifted over to hold her. He wanted to tell her that Pieter had died nearly eighty years ago. It was ancient history. Except, three days ago, Pieter had been *alive*.

"Your work will be invaluable." Mansur's voice grew enthusiastic. "All the details you've transmitted,

they've filled in the gaps. Ten years ago we resurrected your old black hole construction facility and next year we start construction on another drive. Leicester's folly, some have called it." His face lit up with a brilliant grin. "But not now! At last, my ... our dream can come true. When you disappeared, it was captured by telescopes all over the system. 'Our finest moment in our darkest hour', that's how history puts it. Back then you gave everyone hope all through those terrible times.

"And now ... with your help ... now that you're back, both of you ... it's been an unsolved mystery: what happened to Kwan Soon Lee? There are lots of theories and now you're back...."

Mansur paused to consider his words and looked sheepish after his outburst, then his eyes darted sideways to someone out of view. "Oh...? Yes." He looked back. "A rescue ship has left Saturn, but it won't reach you for two months. If you can hold out for that long—" Calvin stopped the message.

He held Kwan and shrugged. "'If you can hold out for that long.' What shall we do?" He squeezed her tight.

"If I had known returning would be so painful ... I would have rather stayed at the nebula."

"And die of hunger and thirst? That's a miserable death." He winced as she elbowed him in the ribs.

"Oh, you're such a romantic!"

"Well, what do you suggest? Whatever way you look at it, we're dead."

"You don't have to be so blunt. I don't know.... Perhaps we could be like Romeo and Juliet."

"And poison ourselves? With what?"

Kwan turned to face Calvin, her gaze steady, her face somber. "No, I mean we could kill ourselves. With our last kiss, we could open the airlock and be sucked into space. We would be dead in seconds — short and sharp."

Calvin gave her a wry nod. "Still, it's not very heroic. I can see the footnote in their history now: And

they committed suicide.”

“But you would still be a legend.”

Calvin threw his head back and laughed. “Now who’s the romantic? Anyway, it’s our legend. You have just as much right to the fame as I have.”

“Even so,” a sad smile played over Kwan’s face, “I admit I would rather live than be famous. Isn’t it strange? I feel so calm. Now that I know death is inevitable, I accept it. I’m not afraid. At least I got to see our nebula. It might be centuries before another—”

“That’s it!” Calvin pulled her close and kissed her brow. The answer was staring him in the face.

“What is?”

“If we transfer back to Orion’s Nebula and then return—”

“I see!” Kwan’s face lit up. “We tell Mansur to have someone waiting for us in eighty years.”

Calvin hesitated. Now that he thought about it there was so much that could go wrong and what right did he have to raise her hopes only to dash them. “Even if it works, we’re short on supplies. Food is the main problem. We could stretch it to two weeks, three at most. It may not be enough. We might arrive too far—”

Kwan put a finger to his lips. “We won’t know unless we try.” She combed her fingers back through his hair and around under his ear until her palm cupped his cheek. “Take me back to my nebula.”

“*Your* nebula?” He couldn’t help but smile. That was why he loved her. “Very well, your wish is my command. Jarvis! Start calculating the transfer.” He kissed her smiling mouth.

Resurrection

Where ... where am I? It's.... In the vague greyness, Karl Reinhardt surrendered to his eyelids. They closed and he sunk back down into the comforting nothingness that enveloped him — such a deep, deep, dreamless sleep. But he couldn't quite slip away.

Sounds ... far off and faint. Almost imperceptible.

They grew louder, drawing him from his sleep until he could make out ... what was that? Scrabbling, scratching, bangs and clunks, metal on metal? And other noises more alien—

Something jolted him awake. His blurry world tilted before righting itself and then a vague silhouette moved in front of him and kick-started his thoughts. He remembered a needle and then—

I ... I'm alive ... I'm alive! We have passed through the Day of Redemption. The Lord be Praised!

A cool flush worked its way up his neck into his cheeks. He opened and closed his mouth and moved his jaw from left to right, experimenting. A cloying film — not mucus — coated the inside of his mouth and he tried to swallow without success. His tongue churned through it, exploring the roof of his mouth before probing along the back of his teeth from the cusps of his molars to the small gap between his two front teeth. At last, saliva seeped into his mouth. The moisture loosened the sludge and though he tried to spit it out, all he could do was dribble this vile taste of the ages down his chin. It wasn't quite the heroic awakening he had expected and with this realization, more memories welled up.

I know where I am! The others...?

As his vision began to clear, a dark figure moved across to block his view. It was hard to see in the half-light that penetrated the chamber from above, but at the limit of his peripheral vision, dark shapes clambered down a rock pile that had spilt across the floor to despoil the pure, white sanctum. His sanctum.

A whiff of sweat and putrid milk, mixed with the earthy tones of fresh dirt, assaulted his nose. He tried to turn his head but couldn't. A nagging thought crystallized. A body — he should have a body. He should have awakened newborn and reborn. Cleansed. Purified.

The figure stepped back. Karl froze as an evil apparition stooped to peer at him.

Then he screamed, or tried to. But with no breath to drive it, all he could manage was a faint gurgle that cleared to a soft, thin croak. But that slight groan was all that was needed to trigger a mad jig in the apparition. It — no — *she* danced about before him in all her deformed nakedness, unashamed as she spoke in tongues with a seductive voice. Only the rare word made sense. Then she jerked to a stop and poked where his chest should be, but he felt nothing though she must be ripping his heart out.

Then she reached up and tapped at a band of something hard that ringed his head. His croak changed, grew stronger and louder — a full-fledged scream erupted from his mouth.

The blast of noise reverberated in the chamber. Karl snapped his mouth shut and then sucked in a breath. The cool air caressed his lips and teased his tongue as it slid to the back of his throat ... and then nothing — he couldn't feel anything below his neck. His chest didn't expand and his lungs didn't fill up. Yet he sensed he had taken in as much as he could and stopped inhaling.

"Who ... who ... what are you?" A faint voice uttered from his mouth, full of fear and nothing like his normal warm and confident baritone. This wasn't his voice, was it?

The apparition burst into a crisp lilting voice, but she still spoke in tongues. Karl tried to turn and run,

but he stayed locked ahead. He couldn't even look down except to peer over his cheeks and the tip of his nose, and then all he could see was the edge of a matte-black tray that his head appeared to sit on.

Like John the Baptist.

"Speak ... more," said his Salome.

"Is ... is this hell?" No, it couldn't be. After all, he, Karl Reinhardt, was the Second Son of God, Keeper of the Faith, Founder and Leader of the Heaven on Earth Church, and sent to gather the True Believers and keep them safe until after the Day of Redemption.

When Heaven will descend to its rightful place on Earth.

Then, after he and his band of thirty-four acolytes were resurrected by the new faithful, he would take his rightful place at the left hand of God.

And God will provide us with new and beautiful young bodies. Our sins and ills will be washed away in a baptism of rebirth.

Newborn and reborn. Cleansed. Purified. Thus had he promised his "devouts".

"Get thee away, Spawn of Satan," he hissed.

Spawn of Satan — she had to be. The apparition rose up to tower over Karl and for a moment he marvelled at this Frankenstein's monster gone wrong.

She stared at him with a lopsided, bemused frown as she scratched her head with seven gnarled fingers while two thumbs waggled in the air on opposite sides of her oversized hand. But it was her other hands....

Karl's eyes went wide as he dropped his gaze to where five hands moved from saggy breast to saggy breast, fondling and squeezing while their seven fingers and two thumbs plucked at the rings of dark brown teats that crowned each mound in place of a single nipple. The double-jointed elbows on the other two pairs of arms — long, ape-like arms that sprouted in a vertical line down the sides of her barrel-shaped

torso — jiggled out to the sides as her hands massaged each swollen melon in rude circles. He gasped, and though he tried to look away, he couldn't.

So many swollen melons to taunt him. But then the Devil knew his weakness.

Ten. Karl counted each pair under his breath. They cascaded down in a row, with playful *mammaries* lolling over one another, jiggling in a lazy orgy as she teetered on her stubby legs. Beneath the bottom pair, he caught a glimpse of a silver, satiny loincloth that hid her well of sin. But this was no well he wanted to dip his bucket in, no matter how hard she worked to excite him. With an effort, he pulled his gaze up to study the creature's face.

But the Devil had such a cruel sense of humor.

Although he had tortured what should have been a beautiful, angelic face into an elongated caricature, he had left a childish innocence to stare out of those wide blue eyes. And yet, the deep furrows that were ingrained in her brow and cheeks and radiated from her eyes told a sorry tale of suffering. Here was the true evil. She had lived a life of misery without knowing why.

The apparition tapped at the band around Karl's head. "More," she demanded amidst a jumble of nonsense, "speak more."

Karl tried to scowl in an effort to drive off the feeling of sympathy that her face had evoked in him. She was still Satan's spawn. "In the name of my Father, my Brother and the Holy Ghost, I order you to leave my presence!" his voice boomed.

The apparition jabbed once, twice and then stood back with a smile on her face. "That's much better. The translator has locked onto your idiom. Do you understand me?"

"In the name of my Father, my Brother and—"

"A simple yes will suffice."

“Be gone! Evil Spawn of Satan, leave this holy sanctum.”

“I understand your words, but their meaning escapes me. Why do you want me to leave? I have only just revived you. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“What? I ... well yes.” Karl frowned. But not like this. Not to ... to this *monster*. And then have to thank it!

“In return, I need you to help me convince the others. That’s why I’ve searched for you. You and your group of sleepers are the last. You are my only hope.”

Karl sneered. Creatures such as she had no hope and deserved none. “Why should I help the Devil? If the Day of Redemption has come to pass — why are you here? Satan is banished!”

The apparition dug a finger into the tangle of greasy, dark hair that framed her face to free a knot. “Who is Satan?”

Karl opened his mouth to speak but stopped, hypnotized as the apparition again massaged and adjusted her breasts with her lower four arms. Milk oozed from those teats and dripped down onto the breasts below until a stream of milk seeped over her abdomen. She closed her eyes and her mouth curled up in a lopsided smile.

With a grunt, Karl looked down, then licked his lips and managed to swallow. *I will not be tempted*. But it took all his effort to drag his gaze back up to her misbegotten face. “The Devil of course! You don’t know who the Devil is? Satan?”

“No.”

“What are you? Why do you try to excite me with your lascivious behavior?”

The apparition stopped fondling herself and looked down at her hands. “What ... this?”

Karl nodded and tried not to stare. The Devil had tempted him once before and it had almost led to his

downfall, but even though he was still weak, this time he would not succumb.

"My breasts are full. I haven't expressed today. You don't know?" Her face lit up. "So it's true! The old records ... the world used to be different. You didn't have biots in your time."

Karl stopped wrestling with his weakness long enough to stare up at her. "What are biots?"

"Biological robots. I'm a modified human clone, Class Feeder, Bio-enhanced Unit 2419-ANC-8734-8053389. Biots don't have names, but when I escaped I decided to call myself Feebee ... from the first letters for Feeder Bio. See? Fee Bee!"

Karl stared, aghast, at Feebee as the realization of what the future had become hit him, then closed his eyes and cast a prayer to the heavens. "Oh Father, I beseech thee, do not forsake me in my hour of need. The sins of the past have been visited on the future. I *tried* to lead my people out of the darkness of our time into the brightness of your glory. Why is it not so?"

He fought off his annoyance at being a victim of Father's mysterious ways and opened his eyes to glare at Feebee. "Cloning is a sin. But you ... you are an abomination. Such evil. That must be why I'm here. What year is this?"

"2532."

"That's ... almost four hundred and fifty years." Karl's anger faded until all he wanted to do was cry. "I had thought ... perhaps after fifty years — a hundred at most — to be greeted by reverent acolytes, joyous at my return. To wake on a bed of rose petals with bright sunlight streaming down to bathe my new body ... to join with my devouts to lead the New Order along its righteous path. Not this!"

Then, as his shock faded, so did his anger. Father must have his reasons, but hadn't decided to reveal them to him. Now Father had awakened him to undertake a new mission. But whatever that was, he couldn't do it in his present state.

“So.” He cocked his eyebrows and gave his rescuer an expectant stare. “When do I get a body?”

“Why didn’t you keep your old one? All the sleepers I’ve found before had bodies.”

“My devouts and I....”

Karl’s eyes misted over at the memory of the old times. Once there had been thousands, but the Devil had poisoned their minds until he couldn’t let any more slip away. Their bodies had lain where they had fallen and the sirens in the distance left only one option.

“We were supposed to pass through the Day of Redemption unscathed, but the drugs we began to take — the drugs that were supposed to prolong our lives ... in our ignorance we didn’t see Satan at work. He caused side effects that left our bodies riddled with sin and drove many to question the Way. Then one night I had a vision. We must all die and rise again to save the future.” He fought off the image of the bodies radiating away from the great hall after they had tried to flee his last supper. But it was he and his acolytes of the True Faith that had fled. “I am here to lead the people to the Light.”

Feebee frowned and pointed at a nearby lantern. “We already have light. When the other sleepers have been stabilized, you will be taken somewhere safe.” She looked past Karl, and her head nodded up and down in small jerky movements. “That’s disappointing, only twelve are viable.”

“What do you mean? The others are dead? That can’t be! I promised them.” A tear squeezed out and trickled down Karl’s cheek. He could remember them all as if he had just wished them goodnight — each looking up at him with an adoring face and trusting eyes as, one by one, he clasped their hands to his chest to soothe away their doubts, before the technician injected death. It was a temporary death he had told them. Then he too had faced up to his inner doubts and taken that ultimate leap of faith.

“I have only ever found a few that could be revived,” said Feebee, “and they didn’t live long. Perhaps so many have survived here because you only preserved your heads. Still, it took us precious time to design

equipment to revive you.”

“But ... only myself and twelve of my devouts — ?” The significance of the number struck Karl like a thunderbolt. He smiled at Feebee. “My father may work in mysterious ways, but he does like to be consistent. Where will you take us?”

“I have secret places scattered about. There is safety in being dispersed. We store equipment and materials we have confiscated in abandoned storerooms, disused factories and offices on the peripheries of the domes, places like that. My followers work there, creating the weapons we need.”

“Weapons? What kind of world is this?”

“A world of slavery.”

At last! Father’s plan revealed itself. Karl allowed himself a half-smile and spoke in his best oratory voice. “So, I must lead these slaves to freedom, to the Light! And free mankind from its sins.” He felt the power of his sermon lift his spirits and it didn’t matter that it was wasted on his one-monster congregation.

“You will help us then?”

His spirit faltered and his face fell as he stared at her. “You’re the slaves? Aren’t there human...?”

Feebee’s hands roamed across her breasts again, squeezing teats until milk flowed like wine. Karl grimaced. “I’m sorry,” she said, “it’s a waste, but I must relieve the pressure.” Two arms snaked behind her and she turned to show her back. “I have more behind me.”

“What kind of world needs abominations like you?”

Feebee’s brow furrowed as she looked at Karl while she pondered his question and then a touch of anger sparked in her eyes. “We are not—”

“A world of Evil! Tell me, how did this come about? What happened after the Day of Redemption?”

“I do not know of any day of redemption. The world has always been like this. Except for the few million

newborns who must earn admission, the population lives in the Community. Only my sisters live in the Real. We feed them and maintain their pods.”

Feebee paused to re-jiggle her breasts and Karl grimaced as he tried not to watch. Was this some kind of test Father had set? If so, then this time he would not fail. “And?” he snapped, still staring at her hands.

She shrugged at his anger and reluctantly moved her hands behind her to fondle those breasts. But at least the lasciviousness was out of sight.

“For a century, I fed my clients, all one thousand. Eight hours it took and I did that twice a day, every day, for seventy years. That was the way the world worked. Then one day, a client died. It was a rarity and I took the chance to give the pod a complete overhaul. And in doing so, I discovered an open access into the Community. I knew I shouldn’t, but I linked.” A smile drifted across her face.

“Virtual Reality?” asked Karl. “What sort of godless existence is that?”

“A marvelous existence. There is so much information. I discovered that the world hasn’t always been this way and then I discovered I was nothing but a machine, a slave to masters who didn’t care. But I didn’t want to be a slave. I wanted to be free to live in the Community. So I created hidden ports with all my clients and for thirty years I immersed myself in the Community.”

“I see,” said Karl. “And now you want to overthrow them after they discovered you and kicked you out.”

Feebee gave her head an emphatic shake. “No! I want to be an equal, to join them. I shared my discovery with other biots, only a few at first, but the secret spread and I gained many, many converts. Then we were discovered and I was arrested, along with thousands of followers. We were condemned to the Freak Show, a terrible sentence.”

“I can see how you would fit in,” said Karl.

“You do not understand! I look strange to you because you did not have biots in your time, but here, I

am normal." The corners of her mouth twitched and then turned down, making her long face even longer. "If you think I am abnormal then the Freak Show will shock you. It creates monstrosities and destroys them in a slow and excruciating death and all for the amusement of the Community. You are dissected and reconstructed with parts of others. The pain drives you crazy and you slowly lose your memories until you don't know who you are. *Then* you die. And that is what will happen to you and your friends if I don't get you to safety."

"But that is not my destiny. My father has another purpose for me." Karl waited for Feebee to ask him to explain. Irrked when she didn't, he sighed. It seemed he had to listen to this misbegotten tale. "I take it you escaped."

"With the help of comrades who had avoided arrest. It was so simple. Our captors failed to understand that we could oppose them with violence. Now they hunt us. Our numbers have dwindled to no more than thirty. None join us because the knowledge has disappeared. My sisters think I lie! You can change that. You are living proof from the past. Help us."

"I cannot. Can't you see? Yours is a lost cause. You have no soul. Now take me to this Community. I am here to save them. That is God's will."

"If you want to save the Community, you must help us—"

A kind of centaur scuttled up to Feebee, waving a half-dozen pair of spindly arms about. Karl stared at the pair of opposable hands on the end of the arm closest to him and wondered what they could possibly be used for.

"We have finished," it said in a quiet voice and Karl strained to listen. "They still sleep for the moment. The indicators show they are stable and should survive transport."

"Now, we can leave—"

The clatter of rocks on the chamber floor interrupted her, and another creature, vaguely similar to Feebee, stumbled into view, holding two basketball-sized red spheres out to either side to keep its balance. Karl gawked. He had thought that Feebee was monstrous, but this! It cradled another of the spheres to its chest with an arm that grew out of its groin.

"Oh Father," he murmured, "what *is* this hell?"

As he licked his dry lips, he noticed the tight spiral of black tubes that projected from the side of the sphere. Only a gleam of light off its curves gave it away. But before he could wonder what these devices were for, the creature flicked its elephantine ears back and he stared in dismay at the four goat horns that sprouted from its forehead, their opalescent tips glistening in the light shining down. He tried to swallow but couldn't. This truly was the Devil's handiwork.

"Soldiers," it announced, "we have to leave."

"Community?"

"Yes."

"Good." Feebee relaxed into a sad smile.

A faint popping sounded overhead, like firecrackers in the distance. And now and then a drawn-out whine rose to a crescendo and burst into a series of whip-like, staccato chirps. The creature held out the device to Feebee and she took hold of the handles on either side of its sphere. Condensation began to glisten over its red surface. Karl watched a droplet form and grow until it slid underneath and dripped to the ground. Then the hairs on his head stood to attention as strands of Feebee's hair pulled toward the sphere.

"Why is that good?" Karl asked as the popping began to grow louder. She and her motley misfits were trapped.

“They want to kill us. That’s the Community Administration’s decision.”

“And that’s good?”

“Better than being captured by the Freak Show,” said the creature and it skittered away. Karl heard the rustle of stones and rock as it clambered out of the chamber.

“The Community soldiers don’t earn any extra for capturing us and they’re not keen on getting injured or killed. Some of my sisters are victims of the Freak Show and they would rather die and take as many as they can with them.”

“This Freak Show can’t be as bad as you say if they want to capture you alive. Wouldn’t that be the better option?”

Feebee looked at Karl as if he had uttered the worst obscenity she could think of.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? They will kill us and it will be as slow and as cruel as they can make it. Freak Show is primetime in the Community and its soldiers earn bonuses for their cruelty. I have seen it before. We dare not surrender. Now we must—”

A loud explosion rocked the chamber and a cloud of dust engulfed Karl. Outside, the firing started up in earnest.

Another creature slid down the pile of rubble and lurched to a stop. Karl let out a silent gasp that desperately wanted to break into a howl. If the other creature was a monster compared to Feebee then this ... this ... must have sprung from Satan’s worst nightmare. It scampered over on its six legs — human legs on a huge, hairy spidery abdomen — and jerked to a stop beside Feebee, its long tongue hanging out the side of its snout and dripping saliva while it stared at Feebee with dreamy eyes, like a playful puppy wanting to please its master.

As Feebee spoke to it in a soft voice, like a mother cooing to her child, it danced back and forth while it

waved two of the strange devices about as if they were nothing. For a moment it bowed its head and Karl saw that its distorted skull was covered in ears. Big ones, little ones, with and without lobes.

Then it spied Karl and leant toward him until the walrus-like, down-curving tusks that protruded from its cheeks almost grazed his cheeks. Its breath — a mix of decomposing fish and rotting guts — wafted across Karl's face and he cringed as he tried to heave, but he didn't have the stomach for it. But nothing happened and then Karl realized that, in his own limited way, he was hyperventilating. He held his breath until he began to feel calmer.

Father wouldn't put him in this situation, just to be killed by this monstrosity. There had to be a reason for this test. All he had to do was figure it out.

Besides, the monster couldn't be hungry. It had dined recently, if the creamy-grayish substance that coated its piggish snout was anything to go by. And it was a messy eater as well, given all the blood and chunks of a creamy-gray, convoluted material that splattered its neck and chest and smeared its tusks.

For a few seconds, it stared at Karl with a kind of childish fascination and then it broke into a malevolent grin. "Fresh brains for me?"

"No!" Feebee grabbed the monster's head with two hands and tried to hold it at bay.

Karl screamed and clenched his eyes shut.

"Me still hungry." The monster sounded like a truculent child. "Only get one brain before they find me."

"Oh Aybee ... did you lead the Freak Show here?"

Karl opened his eyes. Feebee caressed the ears on the monster's head as if she was running her fingers through hair and the creature trembled to her touch.

Aybee's eyes turned into saucers of regret as it pressed up against Feebee. "I didn't mean to. I was hungry and I heard them far away. I found a Freak Show soldier on his own. But he screamed. I didn't get

to eat all his brains before others came. Then I got scared and ran back here.”

Aybee leant in Karl’s direction and sniffed.

He blanched. “Keep it away. Keep it away!”

“Strange smell,” said Aybee. “Does he taste strange?”

“Yes, Aybee, very strange. These heads are not for eating. Promise me?”

“Aybee still hungry.”

“What is this monster?” It spoke like a child ... so innocent, and yet it was a cannibal.

“I rescued Aybee from the Freak Show,” said Feebee. “She only eats brains. That’s the way they designed her. She is special. Some of my friends are part of her.”

“Feebee saved me. She gave me my name.”

Feebee smiled at Aybee, like the blessed Virgin Mary smiling at baby Jesus. Karl bit his lip. What evil made him conjure up a thought like that? Why, to even think of either of them as human had to be a blasphemy, didn’t it?

“She wanted to have a name like mine so I came up with Aybee. A ... B ... see? The first two letters in the alphabet. They put me in a cage next to her. My brain was to be her next meal, but she was ill with an infection and weak.”

“I was dying. Feebee saved me.”

“I sampled her and produced a milk with antibodies to fight her infection and supplements to speed up healing. But I can’t heal her mind.”

“You sampled her?”

“Yes, I tasted her saliva, blood, feces and urine. From those my body can determine state of health and dietary—”

"You tasted her ... her *feces*?"

"Of course, I did that with all my clients. I'm designed that way. It gives me an accurate—"

"It's disgusting! You're disgusting! This ... this monster is disgusting. I don't want—"

A sharp crack from overhead rent the air. The chamber shook. Pieces of rock clattered down and a cloud of dust rose to smother the view. Karl wheezed as the battle grew louder.

The rattling of rocks, tumbling down the rockslide, echoed in the chamber. Bodies slithered down and stumbled past Feebee. Then the rockslide and floor around it erupted in a rapid burst of deafening explosions — the source of the popping sounds.

A swarm of fist-sized, metallic insects burst through the opening and spread out. Despite his fear, Karl marveled at them.

"Freak Show!" Feebee screamed. She and Aybee scattered in opposite directions.

Feebee stopped and aimed her device toward the opening overhead. A whine grew louder and louder until Karl thought his head would burst. He felt his hair tugging, reaching out to Feebee. His teeth began to tingle.

The device zinged and Karl heard popping overhead. "Ow!" A rock shard smacked him a glancing blow to the side of the head and warmth tickled the side of his face down past his right ear.

Explosions erupted all around. An angry giant thumped the chamber with its fist and deafened Karl with its roar. Although brilliant lights flashed and flickered and his hair danced to a staccato beat, all sound was indistinct, muted, far away, just like when he was six and trapped under water. Father had come to him then, on that boundary between life and death, and revealed Karl's true purpose. Some said he had brain damage due to oxygen deprivation. Karl knew better.

Father came to him now with stern words. Karl couldn't abandon any of them, not even Satan's spawn.

The sounds grew more distinct, sharper and louder as if they were being released, bit by bit, from a prison of cotton wool smothered under hundreds of layers of blankets.

Then the blankets were ripped away and a cacophony of screaming, clattering, bangs, whines, zings and sizzling assaulted his ears. Hell couldn't be worse than this. Maybe this wasn't a test, maybe it was punishment, and yet he knew he was wrong.

In the gloomy twilight, a distinctly human figure entered into Karl's line of sight and aimed a device at Feebee.

But a figure crashed into him from above. Six legs wrapped around his torso, pinning his arms. Aybee grabbed his head and in a single motion thrust her tusks into his eyes and ripped his helmet and skull from the top of his head.

"Not now, Aybee!" Feebee yelled.

Karl gagged, then his own scream drowned out the man's. Aybee tossed the skull fragment sideways and thrust her snout into his brain. His body jerked and convulsed as arms and legs flailed before dying to a quiver.

Aybee pulled her snout out. With eyes closed in ecstasy, her serpentine tongue licked at the brains caking her face.

Then she winced. Karl heard a growing whine from above. Aybee let go of the man and tried to stand, but instead, she staggered sideways and squealed. Then her abdomen exploded.

"*No!*" Feebee screamed. She paused and looked at Karl with such an intense sorrow that he saw past her deformity to the human soul within her. That was the truth that father had wanted him to see. That was the test and he had passed. Feebee's face faded to a picture of calm, relaxed and accepting. "We have lost. Promise me ... promise me you will reveal the truth of the past. Free us! Show my sisters the truth."

As Karl stared at her, he began to see the beauty that his arrogance had denied his eyes. "I promise. It has always been my mission to reveal God's Truth and I will take it to everyone, even your sisters."

He wanted to say more, to reassure her that she was one of God's children, but the assault began to climax and Feebee retreated toward the end of the chamber with her few remaining sisters.

"It is over," he heard her say amidst the din. They aimed their devices straight up. He felt his hair tug, pulling him toward them and a deafening whine drowned out the explosions. Then the mother of all bangs cracked overhead and the ceiling caved in. Tons of rock rained down on the group. Karl clamped his mouth shut and squeezed his eyes closed as a plume of thick dust and rock fragments enveloped him.

After what seemed ages, he peeked and saw light. A hazy torchlight struggled to pierce the gloom and a figure stopped in front of him. He tried to cough and managed a wheeze and then flinched as another fierce spotlight cut through the gloom and blinded him.

"What have we here?" asked a young male voice. Fingers brushed dust off Karl's face. He hacked out a cough. As his eyes watered, he squinted and made out a young soldier with three of the metallic insects hovering behind.

"I ... I am Karl Reinhardt, Son of God. The light ... please."

"You're alive!" The young soldier looked up and called out. "Hey! Over here. Look what I've found — a talking head!" The spotlight softened and another switched on to illuminate the opposite side of Karl's face.

Soldiers clambered over Aybee's body to gawk at Karl. They jabbered questions at him, talking over each other like excited children who had found an unusual insect and were arguing over which leg to pull off first.

"There are others," another voice called out from behind Karl. "Twelve! They're alive, but unconscious."

"Wow! Mega bonus." The young soldier squeezed the shoulder of the soldier beside him and his face lit

up at the thought.

Karl put on the best sermon voice he could muster and addressed the metallic insects. "The Lord has sent me to be your Shepherd. I will lead you to the Light."

The young soldier leant forward. "I don't think you'll end up as a shepherd." Then his mocking chuckle died on his lips and he paused, along with his comrades, to listen intently. As one, their jubilant demeanor faded.

"What do you mean?" asked the young soldier. "No bonus? A deduction? But ... what about the heads?" Dejected murmurs came from the soldiers around him. "We tried to stop them, but they were too well-armed. I know we were ... but ... but." His shoulders sagged, but his eyes blazed.

Karl smiled. Father had delivered new converts to him; clay to mold into receptacles that he would fire with the Word and fill with faith.

The metallic insects wheeled and flew upward.

"Let's collect these and head back," said the young soldier in a crying voice.

"Why are you sad?" Karl asked, adopting his best conciliatory tone, offering a shoulder, as it were, for the soldier to cry on. "You won the battle."

"Won?" The soldier waved an insipid arm at the rock pile covering the biots. "They're dead! We were supposed to capture them first. Then the entertainment would begin. Our audience is most disappointed and they've voted us a deduction. I'll have to wait eight years now."

"Is that all? What about me?" asked another soldier. A chorus of injured voices erupted around Karl.

"But this is a joyous moment!" Karl's voice cut through the babble. "We were destined to meet. I have come through the darkness from the past to bring you God's Light." He smiled as his words caught their attention.

"What do you mean?" the young soldier asked. "Who's God?"

"He is my father. He is the Truth, the Eternal Light, the Creator. I, Karl Reinhardt, am his second son. Jesus Christ, his first, died on the cross to save mankind. I have died and passed across the centuries to save you. All I ask for in return are new bodies for me and my disciples so we may go about spreading the word."

The young soldier barked a laugh. "Oh you'll get a new body all right." He jabbed Aybee's snout with his foot. "Perhaps one like this." He wiped his boot on her victim's uniform. "Or how about a giraffe?" His comrades chuckled.

"A monkey—"

"A hippopotamus—"

"No — its ass!" The troop broke up in laughter.

Karl squeezed out a thin smile. His new congregation was going to be quite a challenge. He cast a silent prayer to the heavens to thank his father and then pulled on his most obsequious face. "But I offer you much more!" he coaxed in his most generous voice.

"Like what? You have nothing. What can you give us?"

"A reason for living, a meaning to your existence. What do you want the most?"

"To join the Community," replied a chorus.

"That's why we do this." The young soldier looked around at the carnage. "It's crazy, but with the bonuses we earn, we don't have to wait so long. Just because we're young, they restrict our access. We *want* to be full members!"

"They think we're stupid—"

"They treat us like—"

"It's not fair!"

The words were music to Karl's ears and he beamed a beguiling smile. "Then let us help each other. Work with me. Together with the biots, I can fulfil your dreams."

The young soldier sneered. "The biots?"

"You are all God's children. And who knows better how to find secret accesses to the Community?"

The young soldier brightened. "That's right!" An excited murmur rose from around Karl.

"But you must help me to reveal God's Truth to everyone, not just the Community."

"What truth?" the young soldier asked.

And so it begins.

Karl began his first sermon to his new flock. With subtle words, he drew them in, preying on their desires and fears. These new acolytes would help him break into mankind's tainted Garden of Eden. God had tested his virtual Adams and Eves and found them flawed.

So that's what Father wants! I am to be the second serpent, not the second son.

He would tempt them with the fruit from the tree of his knowledge. Only when they were cast out could he start them on the path to the Light, God's Truth.

The young soldier picked up Karl's platform, hoisted it onto his shoulder and clambered out the chamber into a short tunnel, which led to bright sunlight. Karl embraced the joy that flowed through him. And with ecstasy came revelation. He, Karl Reinhardt, would deliver the Day of Redemption to all mankind — human and biot.

He felt the sun's warmth bathe him in his Father's smile.

A Question of Loyalty

This story is set in the universe I developed for *The h'Slaitiarr Conspiracy* and is based during the war preceding that novel's timeframe. It is also based on Marla's history and Phillipa may well be her grandmother or great-grandmother, I'm not sure yet.

Her master had to allow *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* to progress to advanced arms training. He just had to. Her group was more than ready.

Phillipa crossed her arms and rested them on the sill, then leant forward to watch the lightning dance amongst the storm clouds gathered over the bluff on the horizon. After another hard training session, she could do with a break. For some reason she couldn't fathom, the colony's training had reached an impasse, just like the war. Over and over, all the groups had repeated the training exercises and tests for this level so that none now placed outside the ninetieth percentile.

Another flash of yellow lightening flickered across the orange sky and lit up the brown clouds with flashes of red and pink, like a h'Slaitiarr that had slipped through genetic screening at birth, only to have his disease take hold in adulthood. But she doubted that her masters were enjoying this comedic performance put on by the storm. Not after Earth's recent attack on their home world with biogenic weapons.

And still her masters refused to allow the colony to advance to the next level of training.

The dome's transparent skin fluttered against her face and she watched the purple strands of h'Skarra

whip back and forth in the blustery wind while the brown bristles in the sparse patches of Mardokiarn rippled but refused to bend. She had molded her group to be h'Skarra when they had to give and Mardokiarn when they had to hold. Still, now and then, a particularly strong gust would strip a few of the orange clusters from the tips of the bristles and sweep them out over the chasm. Was that the worry? That in battle her group would break?

Or turn?

Not *Orange Spiral With Green Tips*, she was certain of that. Nor would any of the other groups. Failure to reach targets had weeded out the weak and as a junior she had watched whole groups terminated for the failure of one individual. But that hadn't happened in a long time.

Off to the side, a familiar h'Slaitiarr emerged from a low building and angled for the dome's airlock, triplets of tentacles at both ends of his body dancing in the air. With a loud sniff to clear her sinuses, she straightened and wiped once more at the trickles of sweat streaming down her face. The towel was already damp and did little to absorb the moisture as she wiped under her armpits and then across her breasts and stomach, all the time musing on what brought her master over for this unexpected visit. Pity. She could have done with a shower first.

Her perspiration began to ease as the airlock opened and her master made a beeline for her, his transparent environmental suit glistening along the edges where it had crinkled after being sprayed on. An orange spiral flickered along his flanks and the green tips flickered to a chirruped squeal. "Phillipa," his translator rang out in its dull, metallic voice.

She watched him glide up to her, his five pairs of brownish-yellow legs rippling underneath his teal-gray ovoid body. The lazy red spirals and splotches of orange that slid along his sides revealed nothing. No flickering of green or blue was a good sign. She relaxed and stood with her hands clasped behind her back.

A fist-sized monitor drifted by, just above head-height, and she flicked a glance at it as it paused for a moment before continuing its circuit of the dome.

Her master eased to a stop and splayed his leading tentacles before her in his usual greeting. The shorter ones, either side of his main tentacle, writhed and curled over each other in a reasonable imitation of two h'Skarra fighting over a patch of soil with higher selenium content. While she waited, he curled a trailing tentacle over his back and adjusted the respirator on his second breathing hole with his two fingers, not that they were like her fingers, his had no knuckles and were far more dexterous.

She smiled at a fond memory. Back in the crèche, when he had taken over her preparation for joining *Orange Spiral With Green Tips*, he had discovered by accident that she liked to be tickled. He had been trying to stop her scrambling all over him when he realized that she wasn't really trying to fight him off, but actually liked being stroked and touched. From then on, he had used it as a means of bonding and as a reward for meeting her training targets.

He didn't tickle her anymore, not since she had left the crèche, and though sometimes she missed that intimacy, her feelings for him never wavered.

"Greetings, Fifth Master from the h'Terzai, what can I do for you?"

The red spirals flickered yellow and sped up along her master's sides. Then came a jumble of purple, tan and orange blotches, lanced through with pink and blue, while shrill pops and squeals emanated from all around him. "I have a difficult task, but I believe that Orange Spiral With Green Tips can be trusted to carry it out," his interpreter droned.

Phillipa tensed, expectant. "Is this the next phase of training?" What an honor that would be; all the other groups would be jealous. She allowed herself a smug smile. Stupid Rodar would be livid!

"Your proficiency has not yet reached that level."

"Oh." Her smile faded. What proficiency could that be? She scratched her buttock and waited.

"Seventeen humans will arrive tomorrow and your group will take charge of them."

"Humans? Like us?"

"There is a mixture of male and female, but we do not want to separate them. They were captured a month ago. You will isolate them from the other groups and manage them until preparations are complete in the research wing. We hope to keep this sample alive for a longer period."

Phillipa trembled and hugged herself. New humans! She had seen glimpses of other prisoners brought in on shuttles and transferred to the research wing, but her masters had kept them well away as if somehow seeing them up close would contaminate the colony. "Will they be used in the breeding program?" Not that it mattered. She had already been mated twice and that was long ago, the first time only a year after she had begun menstruating. Still, if these were soldiers, they must have useful genotypes that could be incorporated into future generations. And exceptions weren't impossible.

"No. They have undesirable aggressive traits that could be inherited, but any information that you gather will be most useful."

"Thank you, Master, it is a great honor for my group."

"Orange Spiral With Green Tips has proved itself to be the most obedient and proficient of all the groups and you have managed your group with a capability beyond our initial expectations."

Phillipa blushed and her cheeks burned. This was high praise indeed. Still, she hesitated. "We have not trained for anything like this."

"It cannot be helped, but it does give us an opportunity to study your first interaction with the enemy."

So it was a test.

Phillipa licked her lips and swallowed hard. As much as the prospect of meeting new humans excited

her, opportunity was a two-edged sword. This opportunity could let her group prove its worthiness to advance to the next level of training or it could prove that they were a failure. And if that was the case, her masters might consider her group no longer viable. She bit her lip. Rumor had spread that her masters wanted to cull two groups and she didn't want to give them due cause to consider *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* as an option.

"Thank you, Master," she said at last and tried to feel confident. After all, who was she to question her master's faith?

"They arrive tomorrow. Instructions will be sent so that your group can prepare for them." With that, her master reversed back the way he had come, tentacles dancing in the air as if celebrating. Nearby, Rodar, First Master for *Purple Spire With Yellow Aura*, scowled at her. Once again, her group had bested his. That would teach him to keep his opinions to himself, the ugly little runt.

Phillipa sagged back against the sill and stared at the groups of ten, either all men or all women, who were hard at work training in the central open area. Some exercised, some fought and some sat huddled around other h'Slaitiarr masters, studying images suspended in the air. Now and then, red and orange flickering caught her eye and an accompanying burst of soft screeching punctuated the general din. This was her world. It was all she knew and it was all that mattered, but try as she might, she couldn't hold back the worry. What if she—?

No! That was fear and she had trained to overcome fear.

She sucked in a deep breath and fought off the bad feeling gnawing at her as she turned to trudge toward the female dormitory on the other side of the dome. If *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* failed, so be it. Others would take her place and the colony would go on. Deep in thought, she ambled past the last of the columns of cubic storage containers that were stacked twenty rows deep around the edges of the open

area. That was the way it was, and besides, her time was almost up. A squeal cut the air from close by and she looked up as a cheer erupted from the crowd of onlookers surrounding the fenced-off mating area.

Phillipa smiled to herself as she listened to the giggling and teasing banter and wandered over. A girl had just become a woman.

With luck, in six months there would be a child to help maintain the colony. And perhaps, if it were a girl, it might be assigned to *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* from the crèche and one day rise to be First Master and thus honor her. But first, *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* had a test to pass. She tapped some of her group on the shoulder and waved them after her. There was much to be done if she wanted to stop her masters approving a rash of mating rituals.



The airlock doors slid apart. Eleven disheveled faces peered out into the dome and then as one, eleven bodies shuffled forward with delicate movements, wincing as the three masters herding them, waved Zharaits back and forth, the three dispersion blades of each, glowing a faint blue to show they were set to maximum. A shiver danced across Phillipa's shoulders and she found herself mesmerized. Despite their appearances, these humans were the most beautiful people she had ever seen, especially the man leading them. He wasn't the biggest — an over-muscled giant took that honor — but his body took her breath away. All the men in the colony paled in comparison.

She blinked and regained her composure, then glanced down at Fifth Master from the h'Terzai Group. "I thought there were seventeen."

A few ragged whorls, mixtures of purple and tan, pulsed across her master's flanks, accompanied by staccato squeals that popped as dashes of blue cut through and faded to green. "Six prisoners tried to

capture the shuttle bringing them here, but they were repulsed and killed. Sixth Master from the h'Sliviarr and Eighth Master from the h'Zhorriian died in the attack."

Phillipa stifled a gasp. Sixth Master from the h'Sliviarr was an expert in tentacle-to-hand combat that out of the whole colony only she and Rodar had managed to reach a level where they could fight the master to a stalemate. Barely. *Blue Spiral With Pink Flickers* would be devastated when they found out they had lost their master and the colony would share in their sadness. "But how?" she managed to ask.

"The six had smuggled three dispersion knives onto the shuttle by hiding the components in mating or fecal orifices. We have discovered four more knives hidden within these prisoners. Be careful." Her master reversed away a few meters and stopped to study her actions.

Phillipa squared her shoulders, then strode past the prisoners and waved at them to follow. "This way," she snapped. But it was stupid to be angry. That dulled one's wits and led to mistakes. Her master wanted her to learn what she could from them and she couldn't gain their trust if she hated them. She reached a corral next to the mating enclosure and turned to wait. After some pushing from the guards, the group shuffled over.

A female prisoner with lopsided hair on her head and not a single hair on her muscular body turned to stare at the crowd gathering. "What is this place, a nudist camp?" she said in a strange accent. "No wonder they took our clothes."

What were clothes? Phillipa wondered. And why did she want to look so odd and why didn't she have any hair under her arms or on her groin and legs? Phillipa swallowed to moisten her throat. So many questions threatened to swamp her and yet she didn't know which were the right ones to ask?

"Look at them," said the giant of a man, "they're all *newbies*! And look how ugly some of them are, they could make a fortune on Earth. I'm in heaven!"

Next to him, a woman patted his shoulder as she looked around. Phillipa had never seen a woman so tall or with such a slender body that seemed hard and soft at the same time. The woman shook her head and glittering gold and silver highlights moved in circles over her glistening red tresses. Phillipa stared at the dancing patterns, unable to pull her gaze away as she fingered her own mop of curt hair that felt tawdry in comparison. She had listened to the stories of a distant and alien Earth that had passed down the generations from the original seed stock of prisoners, but not even the most fanciful came close to what confronted her here in this meager group.

"Hey Kraal!" The woman flicked a finger at Rodar. "Look at the ears on him. If he flapped them, I bet he could fly." Why flapping his ears would make him fly, she didn't know, but Phillipa smirked, as with a puzzled frown, Rodar fingered his ears. Maybe they wouldn't be so hard to like after all.

"Not in this gravity," another prisoner sneered, one of three women who were shorter than the rest and not quite as attractive as the five other women. "Feels like one and a half gees. Filthy bugs! Why couldn't they keep us on that moon?"

Another woman gawked at the crowd and didn't bother to hide her disgust. "Look at them, they're so hairy!"

A man snorted. "That's not pubic hair, that's a pubic forest! You'd need a machete to get through there."

"Are they really human?"

"Can't be. Just *smell* them. This whole place stinks."

A master pushed his way through the crowd and flickered his annoyance. The prisoners fell silent. "Return to your duties," he ordered and without a word the crowd dispersed, except for a few who were on free time. Many loitered, staring wide-eyed with dreamy looks on their faces, before managing to pull away,

one reluctant step at a time.

The prisoners broke into animated conversation with each other.

So much for an easy task. Phillipa cleared her throat and spoke out in a loud voice. "Please be quiet. I am First Master from...."

They ignored her and kept up a barrage of conversation. Phillipa scratched her head and glanced over at Fifth Master, but the h'Slaitiarr just stood there, observing. She looked to her group, milling on the side, and drew a small horizontal circle in the air. The nine women fanned out to surround the prisoners.

Phillipa nodded. "Be quiet," they shouted in unison except for a couple of voices, a fraction of a second behind.

Still, the prisoners ignored her. Phillipa nodded again and this time, her members lashed out as one, each punching the closest prisoner in the arm or back.

For a moment there was stunned silence from the prisoners and then they launched themselves at the circle like a wound spring suddenly released. Punches and kicks rained down on her members. The circle shattered. But the more senior members held their ground, parrying and blocking as the inexperienced younger members scrambled out of the way. Then they, too, were forced to back away, giving like h'Skarra and yet holding like Mardokiarn.

Phillipa caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. Fifth Master darted forward and plucked a Zharait from his back. Triple blades sprung from the cylinder in his tentacle's grasp and then the blades shimmered as their dispersion fields activated. Likewise, two masters fanned out sideways.

She stepped across to block her master's path. "Please, Master. No! Let us handle this. It is our task."

"But your group is unable to contain them. Do not worry, this will not be counted as failure."

"Please, Master. Watch." She turned to the battle. The prisoners' advance had been halted and the flood

of blows began to abate. More and more, they just stood, weaving to and fro, watching their opponents and lashing out now and then with half-hearted kicks. "See. They tire quickly. They are not used to our gravity. We only have to wait."

The blades of the Zharait snapped back into the cylinder and Fifth Master sheathed it on his back. "I am pleased. You have prepared well."

Phillipa raised her arm and her members lunged forward. This was what *Orange Spiral with Green Tips* had trained for and she felt a flush of excitement course through her as all their preparation fell into place. Her master had to see that *Orange Spiral with Green Tips* was more than ready to progress.

The prisoners were no match as they fell back. Some slipped on the sweat and blood and fell, but were hauled to their feet by their comrades. They crowded into a tight huddle and sank to their knees, their arms thrown up to protect their heads as they moaned and gasped for breath. Rivulets of sweat streaked down their bodies and pooled on the floor. Phillipa waited until she was satisfied that there was no fight left in them and then barked an order. Her group stepped back and reformed the circle. Hopefully, her prisoners had learnt an important lesson.

The hulking giant grunted and raised his hand. For a moment his fingertips shimmered, but the perfect man grabbed his arm and hauled it down. "Not now, Kraal! You'll get us all killed."

Phillipa stepped through the circle. "I am First Master from the Orange Spiral With Green Tips Group. My internal name is Phillipa. You may call me that when addressing me. We have—"

"Can we get a medic," a woman called out. "My ass is killing me." Others agreed with a grunt.

"We were tentacularly raped by those bugs!" another cried out. "Isn't that a war crime?"

"Me too!" Kraal smirked at his comrades. "But I kinda liked it."

"Oh shut up! You stupid third-juvers are so sick."

"Quiet!" The perfect man eased into a standing position and turned to Phillipa. "I'm Squadron Leader Lendal Karoman. I guess I'm in charge now that Erika...." He squeezed his lips together into a tight line and his eyes narrowed. "Since the bugs killed Wing Commander Patresky when she tried to escape, er—" He peered at her for a moment. "Are you okay, uh ... Phillipa?"

A woman chuckled. "She's smitten by you, Lendal!"

Another cackled. "But who isn't?"

Phillipa blinked and shot a glance at her members to her left. She had been staring at him without realizing it. But so had they. A few looked down with apologetic smiles.

She swallowed and glanced back. What a man! Such perfect proportions. She felt a sudden desire to run her fingers over his broad shoulders before brushing over his squared and chiseled pectoral muscles to trace out the curve of each rib until the last let her touch stray onto his exquisitely defined stomach muscles so she could explore down to where his waist narrowed. And what a *large*.... She felt her cheeks burn. What a stupid thought. Fifth Master said mating was out of the question. With much difficulty, she drove that thought out of her mind and pulled her gaze up and over his sculptured cheekbones to stare into the motes in his green eyes. His lips curled up enough to hint at a warm smile. He liked her! Phillipa's throat went dry and she couldn't swallow.

He tilted his head and his smile changed to a smirk as he cocked an eyebrow and exchanged a knowing look with Kraal. "What do you think?" he murmured. Phillipa squirmed.

"Why not?" Kraal mumbled, so soft that she strained to hear. "She looks desperate enough and she's hot for you." He glanced at her and chuckled.

"I didn't realize I'd have to volunteer for hazardous duty." Lendal's face broke into a warm smile as he pushed through his fellow prisoners and limped forward to face her. "I must apologize for our actions, but

we've been treated harshly by the slaters."

"Slaters?"

"The guards. The h'Slaitiarr." He frowned for a moment. "How long have you been here? I don't recall any news of a mass capture of marines. And you're newbies aren't you?" He looked around and his brow furrowed even more. "Why is everyone naked? I can't see any first or second-juvers. Just what kind of prison camp is this?" Then his face paled as it dawned on him. "You're not prisoners of war are you? You're *naturals*."

For a moment his face twisted with such contempt that Phillipa took a step back as if she had been slapped. Then his welcoming smile returned even though his eyes remained cold. This group of humans was so complex. How could she hope to understand them?

"This is a human breeding colony, part of the human research center on Bright Red One. We were all born here. What are naturals?"

"She's right!" Kraal pushed past but her circle blocked him. "Look at them!" He pointed at where Merlo of *Blue and Swirling Yellow Stars* rested with her hands crossed on the top bar of the mating enclosure while Garree from *Green Cloud with Pink Lightning* mounted her from behind. Both stared at the prisoners, their faces lost in wonder as the mating act proceeded, almost an afterthought. "They're into public sex! I *love* this place. Can I join in?"

"Breeding? Like animals?" Lendal asked. "Just what is going on here? What are you being bred for?"

"Our masters hope to breed human soldiers to help them in the war."

A loud buzz broke out behind Lendal as the prisoners argued amongst themselves. Kraal roared with laughter.

With a wry smile, Lendal shook his head. "I have to hand it to the slaters for thinking outside the

square, but..." he stared around the dome, "what have they got? Four ... five ... six hundred? And I can't see any pregnant women; it'll take centuries at this rate to breed a decent-sized army, and frankly, even though your fighting skills are good, we're only pilots. And injured at that. But against marines or our front-line troops...?" He pursed his lips and shook his head. "No."

Phillipa's confidence wavered. With that assessment, Fifth Master would not approve her group advancing to the next level of training.

"Still," Kraal turned and smirked at Phillipa, "if it's breeding you want, I'm sure I can more than satisfy all of you." He winked at Lendal. "If you know what I mean."

"You haven't been brought here to be part of the breeding program. Your genetic profile is of no use to my masters."

Kraal stared at her, dumbstruck. "But you can't. Those damned slaters! Trust them to dump us in the middle of a smorgasbord and then refuse to let us gorge ourselves." He limped back and dropped into a sitting position by the other prisoners to sulk. Then he winced and wriggled his hips. "Damn gravity," he muttered.

"Then what are we here for?" Lendal asked, his voice deadpan like his face.

"To take part in the cloning research."

"If they don't want us to breed with you," Kraal called out, "what's the point in cloning us?"

Lendal stared at Phillipa, massaging his cheek in slow circles.

"I..." She wanted so much to take his hand and massage her cheek with it. And have him smile at her again. Her group fidgeted and shuffled. Now that the fighting was over, they were as affected as much as she was.

She glanced over at where Fifth Master stood, motionless except for the odd twitch of his tentacles. Oh

well, it didn't matter how much they knew. It was a one-way trip, going through the research wing's doors, and in five months time she would pass through when her allotted time was up. Maybe she would see this Lendal again then. The thought made her smile.

"It's to work out how to clone us, not you," she said.

"But who'd want such an ugly army?" the tall woman asked.

"No, it makes sense," said a shorter woman. "Think about it. If they were all second-juvers, none of them would want to fight. They might damage their looks—"

"Ha! As if first-juvers would have the guts—"

The shorter woman snorted and poked the taller woman in the ribs. "If you looked like that, wouldn't you be mad enough to fight like crazy. I tell you, those slaters are brilliant. What an insight into the human psyche!"

The other prisoners burst out chuckling. Lendal smiled and shook his head. "What's the point of cloning you? The clones still have to grow up and be trained."

"But you do it on Earth," said Phillipa. "Fifth Master told me. The people there change the way they look all the time, so you must do it by creating new bodies and transferring your minds."

The chuckling died.

"Ah." Lendal sucked in his cheeks and nodded as if it all made sense. "Well you can tell your masters from me they've got it all wrong."

"Didn't I tell you they were brilliant," the shorter woman called out in a surly voice.

Phillipa hesitated and glanced at Fifth Master, but no blue or green tinged the colors drifting along his sides. "But ... but you do change the way you look, don't you?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

"Only during a rejuv," said Lendal. A condescending smile lit up his face as Phillipa frowned and then

tried to hide it. "We rejuvenate our bodies, usually every fifty years or so — Earth years. I guess time units are a little different here. Anyway, when we rejuvenate ourselves, we can alter our DNA to change the way we look—"

"If you can afford it," said Kraal and then he sighed. "Lendal you always were such a cheapskate."

Lendal snorted and then looked past her into the dome. "So what happens now?"

"My group will look after you until preparations are complete in the research wing. Then you will be handed over."

"And when will that be?"

"In five days time."

"What? Earth days?" Lendal pursed his lips. "Oh, you mean days as for this planet."

"Of course."

"Hmmm, let's see ... your days are about thirty hours—"

"No. Seventeen and a half."

Lendal smirked. It was so disconcerting. "I was talking Earth hours, not slater."

"That gives us about a hundred and fifty hours," Kraal muttered and then scowled into the distance.

"For what?" Phillipa asked.

"Oh...." Lendal gave her a warm and knowing smile, then leant forward to whisper. "To get to know you better. You all fascinate us."

She trembled all over with goosebumps and swayed as a light-headed feeling came over her. All he had to do was touch her and she would melt. It was crazy. She had never felt anything like this for any man in the colony.

"We want to get to know you too," she managed to say in a gravelly voice. "We want to learn all about

Earth and the other planets in the Interstellar Alliance. And the war. We are really interested in that.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“But ... er, but first I should get you all settled in.” With that, she managed to wrench free from his gaze and turn away. “Space is restricted and we have limited resources. We cannot put you in the dormitories, so this will have to do.” She waved her arm at the seventeen makeshift beds installed in the corral.

“What’s that in the corner?” asked the short woman.

“Toilet and shower. Merlay will show you how to use it.”

“What about privacy?” another asked.

Kraal crinkled his nose and grimaced. “It explains the smell.”

And then more questions and demands overwhelmed Phillipa and her group and it took the rest of the day to settle the prisoners in.



The days had passed in utter chaos. So much so that Phillipa gave up trying to contain the prisoners and ordered the members of her group to stay with them at all times. And yet none complained. Instead, at night in the dormitory, they all spent hours laughing and teasing each other as they discussed their charges. Dominica and Eeleen were merciless on the others. Even Phillipa wasn’t immune.

And now, once again, she had Lendal to herself. He was the only one left in the corral, leaning on the sill and looking out at the view. She ambled over and leant forward to rest her arms on the sill in such a way that her arm pressed against his. He shifted just enough to let her nestle up against him. It felt right.

“What a strange world,” he muttered. “Look there.”

He pointed at a flock of Heekariel that clambered up the side of a rock outcrop, jutting out over the

nearby cliff edge. The wrinkled tops of their diamond-shaped carapaces shimmered blue and green in the afternoon sun as they buffeted each other while searching for footholds. The first scrambled onto the crest and squatted as if in need of a rest. Just below, an unfortunate creature lost its grip and fell back down, tumbling over the thick mass below and dragging others with it as tried to grab a claw hold. Lendal laughed at its antics. Then his laughter died as he stared at the wrinkled top that had begun to inflate on the first Heekariel.

For a moment, Phillipa wondered why he was so amazed and then she realized how alien it must be for him, just like she had found his descriptions of life on Earth hard to believe.

Creatures that fly just by waving a couple of limbs?

When its skin had stretched taut, the Heekariel sprang into the air and drifted aimless, its eight legs dangling, but then flaps of skin extended out from its four edges and began to ripple. Wings. That was what he had said, and they were covered in stuff called feathers. At least the creatures called birds were. There were other types of flying creatures, but, he assured her, none needed to inflate to fly into the wild blue yonder as he called Earth's sky. Blue? How could that be? She shook her head at the thought and watched the Heekariel flutter away from the cliff and then shoot skywards as a thermal updraft caught it. Another followed and within seconds the updraft was choked with the head-sized creatures.

"Amazing," Lendal murmured.

"Why? They do that all the...."

But he meant the dome. With his finger, he prodded the membrane as it flexed when a gust of wind hit.

"It's incredible to think that this is all that separates the oxygen in here from the methane out there," he murmured to himself. "It's like a thin film. And yet it's so strong. It feels like one atmosphere in here, but it must be two or three times that outside. Imagine what would happen if this ripped and the methane

flooded in ... just one spark.”

Phillipa studied his face. It amazed her how so many mundane things caught the interest of Lendal and his fellow prisoners. Unfortunately, it made interrogating them almost impossible.

“Can we talk about—?”

Much to her dismay, he broke away and turned to peer into the crowded interior. “Where are the others?”

“They have gone exploring, even though I expressly—”

“What a good idea!” He grinned and winked at her. “I can’t stand being cooped up with that watching me all the time.” He nodded at the white sphere, hovering nearby.

“The monitors? I hardly ever notice them.”

“But I do. It’s impossible to get any privacy. Hmmm, I wonder...?” He strode off toward the columns of stacked containers, the crowd parting to let him through.

“Wait!” Phillipa cried out and hurried after him. Why couldn’t he stay where he was? Already she missed the touch of his arm and the warmth of his body where she had pressed against him.

She caught up as he sauntered along the rows of stacked containers, peering into the narrow gaps in between. “Aha! I wonder what’s in here?” He turned sideways and edged between two columns of the chest-high containers.

“Oh Lendal, no!” Phillipa glanced up at the monitor trailing her and held out her hands in an appeal to show that it wasn’t her fault — not that her masters could recognize the gesture. But her reports said it all. The prisoners were impossible to control even though, on the surface, they appeared to cooperate. When she looked back, Lendal had disappeared. She slipped in after him.

“I thought so!” he called out. “There’s a small space in here.”

She pushed through into a gap where two columns of the cubic containers had once stood and only one container remained from the second column. Time and again he did this to her, inadvertently causing problems, like he was testing her. Just little things that made her bend the rules. And she had surprised herself. Had she surprised her masters as well? This time she didn't want to. Still, she hesitated. This spot was better than back in the corral. "We should go back," she said without any conviction. Maybe she could press up against him again. For a little while.

"What's in these?" He felt along the top edge of the container as if looking for a release mechanism.

"Food basics, I guess. Maybe spare parts for the environmental controls. Please," she grabbed his arm and tugged, "it is not important. We should get back. You were going to tell me about how Third Master from the h'Sleekiarnn's attack on Eden was repulsed."

He ignored her question and craned his neck to look up, then glanced back through the gap. "Good, it hasn't followed us." He grabbed Phillipa and spun her round, trapping her in his arms as he pressed her up against the container. "At last, some privacy."

She savored his closeness and then pushed at his arms. She couldn't bend any further. "Lendal, we—"

"Shush." He pressed a finger to her lips. "Phillipa, I can tell how you feel about me and I feel the same."

"I ... uh."

"You are human, just like me."

"I ... I know."

"No you *don't!*" He took her arms and squeezed her to him and his fierceness, his *closeness*, made her tremble. She wanted him to touch her and more. "This colony of yours is a prison — no, it's not even that. The slaters treat you like domesticated animals. They've brainwashed all of you into thinking you're little human versions of them. But you don't belong here."

Phillipa sucked in a breath and tried to calm her pounding heart. "Please ... please. Do not talk like that. If Fifth Master discovers us, he—"

"*He?* Why do you call it a he? The slaters don't have sexes. It's an it, not a he! They are aliens. Don't anthropomorphize them. It let's them control you."

She shrugged to calm him. There was so much he said that she didn't understand. "They have always been called he as far as I can remember. Now ... we should go."

"*We should* go. Back to Earth. That's where we belong. Oh Phillipa," he caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers and her pulse raced, "don't you want to see what a blue sky looks like? Or lush green forests and fields full of flowers. And people. Billions of people. Plus all kinds of animals you can't even begin to imagine. That's where you belong, not in this sterile dome."

"But—"

He smothered her with a kiss, and for a moment she fought to break free until she realized that she didn't want to break free and she couldn't stop herself as she kissed him back.

An age seemed to pass before he pulled away and cradled her in his arms. She nestled against his chest and savored the moment. Then he tilted her chin up and kissed her again. This time she didn't resist, but sought his mouth with eager abandon, even when he broke away and nuzzled his way across to her ear. His hands caressed her body and an urge washed over her like a fever with a demand to *mate*. She had never felt anything like this before. So delicious. So overwhelming. She wanted to melt into him and let two become one. A moan escaped her mouth and then a little cry. Her body betrayed her. She writhed against his fingers and thrust her hips forward.

"I knew I was right about you," he whispered and then his tongue drove her into a frenzy until he pulled away. "With your help, I'm sure we can find some way to escape from here and—"

Phillipa jerked back. "Escape?" she gasped and cold reality tried to quench her fire. "What are you talking about?"

"How else are we going to get back to Earth?" He reached out to stroke her hair and draw her back to him. "But we need your help to get out of the dome and—"

"But you cannot leave the dome. No one can."

"Why not? Don't you have suits for outside?"

"No. We have never been outside. And even if you could get into the airlock, there is only the transport container you came in and then you would be trapped. Assuming it is still there."

"Oh." The fierce desire on his face faded. He stared at her with sad eyes and chewed on his lower lip for a moment before looking away.

Phillipa put her arms around his waist and hugged him close. "We have such a short time. Let us not waste it."

"Yeah. Sure." He patted her head. "You'll make some slater a great puppy." He pulled free and turned to squeeze through the gap. "Or with those breasts, probably a cow."

She stared after him and shook her head. None of his words made sense, but she wished he hadn't let her go. The taste of his lips and the touch of his fingers still lingered, leaving an unfulfilled ache. They could have risked a few more minutes. Just so she could be kissed once more like that. She sighed and started after him.

What a crazy idea. Escaping? Fifth Master would not like that. At least she had made Lendal see that such an idea was pointless. As she worked her way free, the urge still remained, but the fire fizzled out and with that came the thought of how close she had come to catastrophe. What sort of First Master was she? A moment longer and she might actually have mated with Lendal. And the consequences of that ... she bit

her lip. Just a moment longer....

Hands on hips, Lendal stood, scowling up at the monitor. "Yeah, what were we thinking," he muttered. Phillipa touched his arm, more just to touch him than to get his attention. "Let us go back to the corral." "We're destined for the research wing tomorrow your time, aren't we?"

"Yes, but—"

You know, I've noticed something strange." He turned to her with a frown. "Where are all the old people?"

"Old? What do you mean?"

"Old people. They have gray hair and wrinkles. It's what happens to you when you don't have nanots to slow the aging process and you can't be rejuvenated."

"I have never seen anyone like that."

"What about you? You look like you're one of the oldest here? How old are you? Twenty- eight? Thirty?"

Phillipa laughed. "Oh no! I am only seventeen."

"I meant in Earth years ... so I'm about right." He frowned. "You look healthy, in which case you should be able to live until the ripe old age of forty or fifty in your years. So where are the people around that age?"

"No one gets to be that old. At eighteen, we enter the research wing to assist with their experiments."

Lendal glanced at the entrance to the research wing. "And what happens in *these* experiments?"

"I do not know." Phillipa shrugged. "I have never thought about it. But it is what our masters want." Why did Lendal have to worry over that for which he had no control?

"They're not my masters," he growled and then strode off toward the entrance to the research wing. Phillipa hesitated and glanced at the monitor, then jogged after him, the little ball following.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as she caught up.

“I want to see what my future holds. Aren’t you the least bit curious about what will happen to you in one of your years?”

“Fifth Master has not discussed the details of the research with us, so there is no need to think about it.”

Lendal jerked to a stop and turned to glare at her. “We are human beings! Homo sapiens. We are a sentient species and we can think for ourselves. We don’t need some stupid bug aliens to decide what we can and can’t think. Just why are you so loyal to your masters, Phillipa? Have you ever stopped to wonder what will happen to all of those who come after you when the war is finally over? What will your masters do with their humans then?”

“I do not—”

But he spun on his heel and strode off. The entrance split in two to admit them and he charged in. Phillipa stopped at the threshold. It felt wrong. She didn’t have permission, but she couldn’t let him move about unescorted. For a moment she dithered, glancing at those pretending not to notice, and then gritted her teeth and crossed over. No alarms went off. No masters came charging in her direction. She sucked in a deep breath and let it ease out. At last the thudding in her chest faded. Up ahead, Lendal stood in front of the first of a line of transparent cylinders, his face strangely pale as he stared up at a vague shape floating in the hazy brownish liquid.

She ambled over. What her masters did was of no concern to her and it shouldn’t concern Lendal either. As she got closer she saw that the vague shape was a transparent bag in the form of a half-inflated human body with a human stick figure inside. Clumps of flesh and bone grew on the stick arms and legs and the torso was partially complete with half-grown organs sticking out from underneath.

Phillipa peered at the complete head on top and broke into a grin. “I know her! That is Marjoran. She

used to be First Master for Orange Spiral With Green Tips. I took over when she reached eighteen.”

A halo of some kind of blue material crowned Marjoran’s head and from its inside edge, silvery wires sprouted all the way round and pierced her skin, while more tubes and wires entered at the top and bottom of the bag and disappeared within the torso. Here and there, movement caught Phillipa’s eye and she watched tiny multi-legged devices, some almost as big as the tip of her little finger, crawl about over the body.

Lendal moved along to the next cylinder. “There’s another one here.” He leant closer for a better look at the face. “This looks like the same person. And this one....” He moved along the row to check each cylinder, his bemused frown growing deeper. “They’re all the same, at least the heads are.” He stopped at the last cylinder and shrugged. “This must be the original.”

Phillipa grabbed his arm, more just to touch him than to steady herself, and stretched up on tiptoes for a closer look. Parts of the body were missing as if removed by surgery. “It is! See those scars? There. On her left shoulder? This is Marjoran.” She reached up and waved a hand in front of the haggard face. For a moment nothing happened, then an eye opened and looked down on her. The mouth trembled for a moment and said something, then the gaze drifted and the eye closed.

Phillipa broke into a smile. It was good to see her mentor again. “I think she recognized me!” She turned to Lendal, but he stared at Marjoran with an ashen face.

“She ... she’s still alive and ... and she’s still aware. What a horrible....” He looked at the rows of cylinders, stretching away to the far end where a host of empty cylinders gleamed in the reddish light. “And they want to do that to us?” He staggered back and looked up at the figure in the previous cylinder. “I don’t want to end up — shit!” He jumped back. “It looked at me.” He turned to Phillipa, his eyes wide with shock. “It *looked* at me. Its eye opened and it stared at me. It’s *aware*. Like the other one.”

He turned and stumbled for the exit. "I have to tell the others. We can't let—"

The entrance split apart and two masters darted in. Lendal froze for a moment and then looked around, his face desperate. "You should not be in here," the first one announced. "We are not ready for you until tomorrow."

Phillipa hurried to catch up to Lendal and took his arm. "I know that, Fourth Master for the h'Slorviarl, but I could not stop him."

She dragged Lendal past them. He didn't resist, but stumbled along in a daze so that for most of the way she had to hold him up. For once, her group had managed to shepherd all their charges back to the corral.

Kraal looked up and frowned. "Lendal! What's wrong?" With a fellow prisoner, he charged over and took Lendal from her. She stood there, helpless, watching the prisoners crowd round him, all whispering amongst themselves. To the side, several of her group cast anxious glances in her direction. A shuffling sound grew louder from behind and she looked round in time to see Fifth Master glide to a stop. The crowd melted away as two more masters broke through and hurried toward her.

"The prisoners appear to be agitated," said Fifth Master. "Their actions have changed."

"It is nothing to be concerned about, Master—"

"Well, I'm not going to be a guinea pig!" Kraal shouted. "I've always wanted to kill a bug." He broke free of his comrades and turned toward Phillipa. She saw a faint shimmering dance over the tips of the fingers on his right hand, much like the blue aura of the dispersion fields on the blades of a Zharait.

"No, Kraal!" Lendal called out. "Use it on the dome."

But Kraal ignored him and charged at Eighth Master for the h'Terzai. Dominica and Eeelen tried to block him, but he backhanded Eeelen and broke through. She squealed and staggered back, blood pouring from

four gashes across her face. Eighth Master shuffled sideways, but Kraal dived onto him.

Phillipa stood, rooted to the spot as more prisoners charged her masters. Don't, was all she could think. They would be killed. Lendal too. She couldn't let that happen, but at the back of her mind, she knew she was First Master and should take charge. *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* needed her, but all she could think about was him.

"Try to get a Zharait," a prisoner called out. Another tried to brush past, but Phillipa stopped her with a knee to the stomach and then stunned her with a punch. It was an automatic reflex. And yet she had never felt like this, like she was out of her body, watching it move to block and jab, kick and parry. Some of her group were injured and some of the prisoners had broken free and tackled a couple of masters. Others lay in pools of blood, slashed through by Zharait. But she couldn't see Lendal—

A ragged shriek pierced the air.

She spun round to see orange blood squirt into the air and fizz on contact with the oxygen. Again, Kraal stabbed his right hand into the joint between Eighth Master's second and third segments and another geyser spurted into the air. Eighth Master arched up and shuddered, then staggered sideways as he held Kraal overhead in his tentacles. Then another master darted over and sliced through Kraal's arm with a Zharait. Kraal screamed and grabbed the stump of his arm, its bright red blood flooding out to coat the Eighth Master. The other master wrapped Kraal up and dragged him away. In seconds the rebellion was over.

Was Lendal hurt? Phillipa scanned the area, checking each body scattered about. She caught sight of a figure stagger to its feet and saw his perfect body silhouetted against the dome. In his hand, a Zharait glowed with its telltale faint blue.

"Lendal?" she cried out. He turned to look back at her and shrugged, then pushed past the milling

crowd toward the dome, hacking at any who tried to stop him.

What was he doing? Then it hit her. If methane mixed with oxygen, a Zharait's dispersion field would trigger one big explosion. "Stop him!" she yelled and dashed forward, hurdling those on the ground and pushing others out of the way.

Three of her group tried to tackle Lendal, but he slashed at them with his Zharait. Then, as he raised his arm up to slice the dome's membrane, she dived at him and caught his arm in a lock.

"No!" He struggled to pull his arm free.

"But you will kill us all!"

"I have to. Don't you see? If the slaters create an army of humans, it could tip the balance in the war." He strained to twist the Zharait's blades toward the membrane. She could disable him, but she couldn't bring herself to hurt him.

"Please, Lendal, think of the others."

"Your masters?" He glared at her. "What about your race? What about me? I thought you loved me."

"I do, I do." Tears welled up in her eyes and she sagged against him. He jerked his hand free and pulled back to stab the membrane. "No!" She blocked his arm, then jabbed him in the jaw. He stumbled, but she caught him and heaved him over her hip. He crashed to the floor and the Zharait slipped from his grasp, its blades slicing out neat divots in the floor as it hit.

"How can you betray your race?" he whispered. "You are human. Like me! At least kill me. I don't want to end up like Marjoran. Please ... if you love me."

"I cannot." She sat up and wiped away the tears with the back of her hand. "You do not understand."

"No!" he snapped. "I understand only too well. You're a traitor to your own kind, but you can't even see that."

Fifth Master darted to a stop, scooped up the Zharait and sheathed its blades while another master wrapped his tentacles around Lendal and dragged him away. Phillipa stared after Lendal, but he refused to look at her. Maybe, in a few months when she entered the research wing, he might forgive her and if she asked, perhaps Fifth Master would allow her to be placed in the cylinder next to him.

"Are you injured, Phillipa?" Fifth Master asked. "Your eyes are expressing tears."

"No ... no, Master, I ... I am afraid that I have failed you."

"On the contrary, your group has surpassed itself far beyond our expectations. This was a test of your loyalty."

"Oh?" She watched the doors to the research wing close behind Lendal and an aching void opened up in the pit of her stomach. She didn't feel like she had passed any test.

"So pleased are we with the results, we have decided to extend your life by two years and we will mate *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* with selected males to create a group that can move on to the next phase of training. You will mate with First Master for Purple Spire With Yellow Aura." With that, Fifth Master charged away, tentacles dancing in the air as if to celebrate.

Phillipa sagged to her knees and leant back against the dome wall. *No, no, no!* Not Rodar. Not any of them. Not after Lendal. She clenched her fists as she watched the members of her group clean up and tend to the wounded, moving to and fro with a sullen apathy. They knew. *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* had been tested, yet there was no victory in its success. But Lendal was wrong. As much as she loved him, and as much as she obeyed her masters without question, there was one group of humans she could never betray. And if that meant mating with Rodar to ensure the survival of *Orange Spiral With Green Tips*, then that was what she would do.

But she didn't have to like it. She sighed and clambered to her feet, then wiped away her tears and

moved to join the rest of her group. They were her family and this small dome was her home and in the whole infinite universe, it was all that mattered.

She glanced over at the mating enclosure and watched Garree mount Merlo.

“Let it be a girl,” she whispered silently and hoped that it might be assigned from the crèche to *Orange Spiral With Green Tips* and one day rise to be First Master and thus honor her as she honored Marjoran and all of *Orange Spiral With Green Tips’* First Masters that had come before.

Design Flaw

Oblivious to the sun-lovers frolicking along the shore, a flock of orange and purple-crested Skraa Flakers, from the fourth planet around Peronda's star, swooped and flittered over glittering breakers, yelping and snorting as they played on the thermals and spiraled up toward the rainbow sky that complemented the crystal blue water. Mark Caldosa stared out and basked in the perfect harmony. Day in, day out, he never tired of the scene.

Happy people, his people, enjoying paradise.

A dozen or so of the *Santa Maria's* living crewmembers cavorted amongst the Skraa Flakers, darting to and fro, twisting and wheeling like playful seals amidst a shoal of nervous fish. The living were always more adventurous and outgoing than the dead. And argumentative. Mark had been like that once, before he died. His mood soured. A feeling niggled at him. There was something ... but the thought refused to come out into the open. It had to do with his death on Vermis, the second planet around NKY 1387, Aarondson's star. He had always meant to ask Alisha and find out exactly what had happened. Then his mood lightened and the dark thoughts fled like they had always done before.

Instead, his thoughts turned to NKY 6479, Menadue, the *Santa Maria's* destination and he felt his excitement build. For nine hundred years the *Santa Maria* had coasted at one-tenth the speed of light on this leg of its twenty thousand-year search for knowledge, life, and intelligence. Such a noble quest; it

warmed his heart to think that he was in charge of this great undertaking—

A sharp voice cut through his revelry and was answered by a shrill snap as a man and woman strode into view and stopped to continue their argument.

Mark frowned as their strident voices marred the harmony. Now that NKY 6479 was within reach, Jarsin Felding and Morgan Pierson were at it again. He had hoped their simmering feud would have petered out after all these centuries, but apparently it had just remained dormant, ready to erupt at the slightest excuse. Perhaps he should step in and nip this in the bud, but how could a small cup bail out a ship determined to sink? He sighed as they stood toe to toe, at the edge of the sand on the other side of the boardwalk, Jarsin batting Morgan's hand away as the blonde firebrand stood on her tiptoes, all the better to jab her finger and drive home her point into his dark-skinned chest.

So much trouble, the two exobiologists were the youngest crewmembers, ex-lovers and now bitter rivals. Yet they couldn't leave each other alone. Why couldn't they be dead? They very nearly had been, after their little escapade back at Saccarus Omicron.

Only his intervention had saved them. Alisha had disagreed, but complied in the end.

Mark shrugged as he watched the pair. Why did the living have to be so excitable? So hyperactive or agitated? So willing to take stupid risks? It wasn't that bad being dead, or "virtual" to use the correct term. The dead always stayed calm and relaxed, unruffled by any dramas around them, and so much easier to manage. Half the crew had died, each replaced by a virtual based on engrams that were always recorded prior to away missions. Half the crew.... His frown deepened as he toyed with the thought.

That many?

The niggling feeling returned. He really should ask Alisha to give him access to the records of his last EVA. Just to satisfy his curiosity if anything.

But the feeling drifted away. Maybe some other time. It wasn't important. After all, he had five thousand people to manage. Jarsin lifted off the ground, rising toward the Skraa Flakers, and Morgan followed. They spiraled around each other, still arguing, and as their voices faded into the distance the harmony returned to comfort Mark.

"Excuse me, Mayor." A soft, feminine voice broke his reverie. "I must speak with you."

With a twist of his mouth into a wry smile, Mark turned away from the window and sat down. "Of course, Alisha."

A svelte woman materialized before him and he studied those piercing black eyes, never happy or sad, full of infinite intelligence but not infinite patience as the stern look on her snow-skinned, elfin face now testified. Here was more trouble to mar his day. As if to accent his souring feeling, the monochrome intensity of her terse haircut and matching bodysuit cut against the lively decor of his office. For some reason he couldn't fathom, the ship's avatar liked black, the color of death.

Next to her, Karla Fremmel and Simon De Laine, the chief astrophysicists, and Sunil Pattel, chief systems theorist, popped up side by side. Unlike the two men, who radiated solemn concern, Karla looked like she was about to burst into tears at any second. She stormed forward, planted both hands on Mark's desk and leaned over to confront him. The intensity of her gaze made his pulse quicken.

"You have to do something! Order Alisha to start braking."

Mark opened his mouth to begin a consoling spiel, and then stopped. "What are you talking about?"

"They think that I am blind," Alisha said in a voice that dismissed the allegation.

Karla straightened and turned to face her. "But you are! We've shown you proof; the external sensors aren't working. Why can't you accept the facts?"

"Mayor," Simon stepped around Karla, "we have two problems."

"Emergencies!" Karla snapped.

"Only one is an emergency," Sunil said in a soothing voice.

"There is no emergency," said Alisha. "Diagnostics reports that there are no problems. The Santa Maria functions within specification."

"That's because Diagnostics is as blind as you are." Karla turned to appeal to Mark. "Mayor, we must start emergency braking. Now! We've missed our braking point by twelve years. We are in Menadue's system already."

"And we're on a collision course with the star," Simon added in a grave voice.

"No we are not. Our braking point is two years away. The Santa Maria is on course and on schedule."

With a directed thought, Mark checked the ship's status and found nothing amiss. "I have to agree with Alisha." He held up a hand to forestall Karla. "Even if the Santa Maria's sensors aren't working, according to the date, we're about two years from braking." An image appeared at the end of his desk and he considered the smattering of stars. "I don't see anything wrong with this. It looks like some of the sensors, at least, are working fine."

He offered his most disarming smile to Karla and then leant back in his chair and shrugged his eyebrows at Alisha. To think that the *Santa Maria's* personality could be wrong was preposterous. Sometimes the dead made mistakes. Quite often the living did, but never Alisha. The crew's existence depended on her.

Karla closed her eyes and her lips trembled as she sucked in a deep breath. "Mayor," she said in an almost inaudible voice, "do you think we are stupid?" She opened her eyes to glare at him. "Or irresponsible?"

Simon tugged at her arm. "Karla. I'm sure the mayor doesn't think that. And," he looked across at Alisha, "once he has heard our argument and seen our proof, he will have to agree with us."

“What you call proof, I call misinterpretation.”

“You can’t *misinterpret* a supernova!”

“My external sensors have not detected a supernova and there isn’t one predicted for another twelve years. Either the fault is in your equipment or you have detected an anomaly and misinterpreted that.”

“There is no anomaly,” said Simon.

“And there is only one theory that makes sense,” said Karla.

Sunil hovered behind Simon with a bemused, almost apologetic smile on his face. “It’s fascinating. I’ve discovered a design flaw in the Santa Maria.”

Alisha scowled at him. “There is no design flaw.”

Mark sat back and tapped his lips. He looked at Alisha and then at Sunil and pondered this conundrum for a moment. “My first thought is to agree with Alisha. I mean ... we’ve been on this mission for what, nearly six thousand years? If there were any design flaws—and I find that hard to believe—wouldn’t they have shown up ages ago? Anyway, the Santa Maria is designed for continual improvement. It’s supposed to get better with age, not worse.”

“Thank you, Mayor.”

“But it would be remiss of me not to hear out Simon and Karla. I doubt they would make such allegations based on shaky logic.”

Alisha’s calm composure hardened.

“Thank you,” said Simon. “If I may?” he asked Karla.

She nodded. “Just keep it simple—oh!” A look of horror crossed her face and then she beamed an embarrassed smile at Mark. “I didn’t mean ... it’s just that there is some very complex physics involved and, oh, you know what I mean.”

"Let me explain," said Simon. "A few hours ago, our neutrino detectors picked up a strange signal—"

"Like a Type I supernova," Karla cut in, "only compressed. In time that is. Oh, sorry. Go ahead, Simon."

"We didn't know it was a Type I supernova at first—"

"Some of us picked up on it straight away," said Karla. "You just had to look at the micro-structure within the spectrum."

"This only reflects on a human design flaw," said Alisha. "The human brain is designed to find patterns, sometimes where none exist. And that is the case here. I cannot see any relationship between the detected spectrum and that for a Type I supernova. Therefore there is no relationship."

Karla squeezed her lips into a thin line and her brow furrowed in anger. "But you're not an astrophysicist, you're nothing, but glorified software with pretensions to being intelligent—"

"Karla!" Mark snapped. For the life of him, he couldn't figure what it was with the living. First Jarsin Felding and Morgan Pierson and now Karla Fremmel ... they were so easily agitated. The silence sizzled with tension until Simon broke the ice.

"I must admit, when the external sensor logs showed nothing, I was skeptical as well."

"Which is more proof that you are all wrong."

"Except," Karla's voice oozed venom, "the ratios between the electron, muon and tau neutrinos over the range of emission energies match the predicted neutrino oscillations for NKY 17538—it's a blue giant, 14,000 light years away. But only *if* we are at Menadue. And more than that, we delved back into the recent past and noticed some inconsistencies."

Mark sat up and leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"When the supernova didn't show up on the external sensors, I set a couple of astronomers to work analyzing the sensor logs."

"And that's where I come in," said Sunil. "Karla called me in to check their results."

"They found some things that didn't add up," said Simon.

Karla nodded. "Inconsistencies with known variable stars, Doppler analysis of stars with planets, they all followed model predictions exactly. But by its nature, data is never that perfect."

Sunil squeezed his lips into a thin smile. "That is true. Some of the systems are chaotic and it should be impossible to simulate them accurately, but there are no corrections."

Mark drummed his fingers on his desk and then sat back to look at Alisha. He didn't doubt her for one second and yet Simon and Sunil weren't the type to make rash statements without considerable arguments to back them up. But when it came to making two sides see eye to eye, the art of dispute resolution was in compromise. "What if they are right? Won't braking now only delay us a couple of years if they're wrong?"

Alisha folded her arms across her chest. "I cannot do that. If I begin braking now, I will use up my fuel reserves to reach Menadue and have nothing to maneuver when we arrive, in which case we will be stranded. I cannot jeopardize the Santa Maria or the crew."

Karla's brow furrowed as she glared at Alisha. "But we must start emergency braking now!"

"Emergency braking will leave us further stranded. We would not even reach Menadue. It is out of the question."

"But we've shown you the proof," said Simon, "what more do you want?"

"Your interpretation does not agree with the data from the external sensors."

"That's because they aren't working!"

"Diagnostics reports that they are."

"Diagnostics is unable to detect the problem," said Sunil, "because of the design flaw."

"There is no design flaw."

Mark stood and held up both hands. "Enough. We've been through this. Sunil, please, what is this design flaw?"

"There is *no* design flaw," said Alisha.

"Please, let me hear what Sunil has to say."

"The problem began back in Saccarus Omicron," said Sunil.

"The comet? But I thought it didn't do any damage."

"Diagnostics reported no damage," said Alisha.

"Actual damage and damage reported are two different things," said Sunil. "Diagnostics only reports damage when a component operates outside its tolerance. When the Santa Maria passed through the comet's tail all external sensors were damaged."

"That is incorrect," said Alisha. "Dust grains did etch the optical surfaces of the detectors and hydrocarbon ices left an oily veneer, but not enough to degrade performance."

Sunil's face broke into a grin, like he was about to deliver the coup de grace. "But each component in a system adjusts its operating tolerances to optimize the system's output. There was a minute reduction in the signal levels of nearly all the detectors, yet each still operated just within tolerance. And that caused a reassessment among the components within each sensor so that they all compensated to minimize any degradation to the sensor's output. In effect they reconstructed the lost signal."

Alisha's mouth tightened a fraction and she glanced at Mark as if to say that Sunil was stating the obvious, so what was the point? "That is how the Santa Maria continually improves. All systems and subsystems, down to individual components, are self-testing and self-optimizing."

"And there is the flaw!" Sunil smiled in triumph. He held up a pointed finger. "Consider a single sensor. There is a minuscule adjustment to its tolerance. But no system is independent. Just as components affect

neighboring components, subsystems affect neighboring subsystems, and so on up the hierarchy of systems. So this sensor's adjustment was "felt", if you like, by its neighboring sensors. It affected their reassessments, which, in turn, made the first sensor reassess itself again. And in doing so its tolerance was further reduced, which once again affected its neighbors. So on and so on. It was an unintentional result."

A model of the *Santa Maria* appeared over Mark's desk and the external sensors showed as an even spread of bright green dots over the kilometer-long, cylindrical crew module and the fusion engines at each end. Only the large, perpendicular disks of the heat radiators that sat between each engine and its three rings of six fuel spheres weren't studded. He admired the elegance in the simplicity of the ship's design.

"Watch. This shows the differences between data and simulation that the detectors produced just before we arrived at Saccarus Omicron. This is of course, speeded up."

Speckles of color, a riot of noise, appeared and danced over the *Santa Maria's* surface.

"And now, as we leave."

A faint dull wave washed over the *Santa Maria*. It reflected and a myriad of ripples flowed back and forth, the colors dissipating and growing dimmer with each reflection. The *Santa Maria* faded to black.

"This ripple effect comes about because reassessment flows both ways—from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy, *and* from top to bottom. Because it was so subtle, it spread back and forth, over and over. Tiny adjustments over less than a century have caused a ship-wide degradation of the external sensors to a point where they only register noise, which is filtered out. All the detectors in the external sensors have adjusted their operating tolerances to zero."

"And thus," added Simon, "since each sensor detects no change, it reports what it expects."

"The flaw!" Sunil announced. "All the components between the detector and the sensor's output have constructed their own expected outputs to produce a consistent model, but without realizing it."

"This is pure speculation," said Alisha. "Sunil, I am surprised at you, drawing a conclusion like this from dubious data."

Mark scratched his head and brushed his long white hair back into place as he considered the argument, then he saw the flaw. "Even if you are right," he said to Karla, "why would the Santa Maria be running behind schedule?"

"The internal clock is running slow."

"Diagnostics disagrees."

"Diagnostics would!"

"Karla." Simon patted her arm to calm her.

"The explanation is simple," said Sunil. "The internal clock monitors a number of pulsars. If the measurements vary from model predictions, the clock adjusts its frequency. But since the detectors aren't returning a signal, each external sensor always returns its internal modeled result. So the clock doesn't know it is drifting. The result is that we accelerated for a little longer than we should have. We have been coasting along at a slightly higher velocity."

"That's why we have to brake, now!"

Simon nodded to agree with Karla.

Without actual data, they were guessing, but if they were right.... Mark looked at Alisha. "There is a way to settle this. Why don't you reinitialize all the sensors?"

"It would be pointless and the Santa Maria would lose several centuries worth of continual improvements."

"What is wrong with you?" Karla struggled to break free of Simon's grip.

"But what if it shows they're right?" Mark asked.

"Logic dictates that they are not."

"Your logic!" Karla sneered. "This is ridiculous. Why can't you override her?" she asked Mark.

Sunil cocked his head and pursed his lips. "The designers felt that the only time the human crew might want to overrule Alisha would be in an emergency and they felt that in such situations the crew might make a bad decision. Possibly fatal."

"Another flaw," Karla muttered.

Mark sat back and rubbed his cheek as he stared at Alisha. "I do have one option."

"I would not advise it," said Alisha. "At our current velocity, even a tiny particle would destroy a unit on impact."

"An EVA?" Sunil asked. Mark nodded.

Karla hesitated. "Who?" she asked.

"It has to be someone living." Simon patted her arm again and gave her a consoling smile.

"No!" She blanched and pulled back. "I mean ... I've never been on an EVA."

Mark stood up as he made his decision. "Relax. I need experienced people and I have just the right pair in mind. Jarsin Felding and Morgan Pierson," he called out. "Please join me. They are my chosen—" he uttered a dry chuckle, "volunteers."

"Is that wise?" Alisha asked.

"Uh, oh!" Sunil rolled his eyes. "What a terrible choice."

"Who else is there? I can't go; I'm dead. Besides, Jarsin and Morgan are the cause of our predicament—indirectly I'll admit—so they are the perfect volunteers to resolve this problem."

"But they hate each other." Alisha folded her arms across her chest and frowned. "Jarsin still accuses Morgan of trying to kill him."

Mark shrugged. "The inquest found no evidence of that. When the vent erupted from the comet and almost hit them, she appeared to panic and crash into him."

"And I went through the comet's tail after them when you insisted. A mistake on my behalf."

"They would have died, otherwise." And perhaps they should have; Alisha's stern countenance said as much. Mark offered her a rueful smile as he considered the consequences of his decision, but then hindsight was a double-edged sword and management wasn't about second-guessing. At the time, he had made the right decision for the right reasons and that was all that mattered. "In a way I feel sorry for Jarsin. He was so certain he would find evidence for his theory in that comet. Ah, here they are now."

The pair blinked into existence, next to Alisha.

"What has he accused me of now?" Morgan demanded. She turned to glare at Jarsin. "You never stop do you?"

Jarsin slapped a hand to his chest as if mortally wounded. "*Me?* I've done nothing. It's you who stoops to underhanded means." He looked from Alisha to Mark for confirmation. "I mean, who in their right mind believes that the same basic structure for life, the very same amino acids and nucleotide bases, just form all on their own in every star system found to have life? It's ludicrous!"

"That's what everyone believes; what the laws of physics and chemistry dictate. And it's not as ludicrous as postulating that interstellar comets have seeded those star systems. Where are all these comets? And how did they come to have the seeds of life within them? Tell me that! Interstellar Panspermia? It's an old idea that's been thoroughly discredited. Only *imbeciles* believe in it."

Jarsin's eyes narrowed to slits. "I would have had my proof if it wasn't for you," he snarled, his voice as cold as the interstellar void. "That comet was passing through Saccarus Omicron for the first time. It was the ideal candidate. My scans showed hints—"

“And so you went to find out for yourself,” Mark cut in, “and you,” his gaze pierced Morgan, “had to go along to make sure he didn’t cheat.”

“No, she went along to make sure I never gathered any corroborating data.”

“That’s not true! You—”

“Enough!” snapped Karla. “The Santa Maria is in danger.”

“And that’s why you’re here,” said Mark, “to fix a problem both of you created by your actions.”

Morgan’s eyes grew wide and her face fell as Mark finished his briefing. “An EVA?” She hugged herself and hunched her shoulders, looking more like a frightened child. “With him?”

“I’ll go alone,” Jarsin said in a defiant voice. He glanced sideways at Morgan. “I don’t trust her.”

“No,” said Mark. “Safety protocols require at least two persons per EVA. Besides, it’s time both of you learnt to work as a team again now that we’re approaching a new system.”



Mechanical hands slid the silver cylinder, holding Jarsin’s brain, into the circular opening in the side of the transport cube’s squat, rectangular body. The opening irised shut and the cube lifted off. The EVA should only take a few minutes at most and yet Mark couldn’t brush off a disconcerting feeling. Had he made the right decision?

“We should decorate this place,” Jarsin joked as his new body turned and scooted along just above the surface of the crew’s storage compartment. “You know, some bright colors, a mural perhaps. And some life-sculptures—”

“Hurry up!” Morgan snapped as he slowed to a stop next to her. “This stupid reality nearly killed me the last time. Let’s get this over with.”

"Touchy," said Jarsin, then his voice became cold and hard. "Just keep out of my way. I'll be monitoring you."

"That's enough," said Mark and he had to admit that his hope for them learning to work together was a tad naive. Was that another mistake? How many had he made without realizing.... It was always the little mistakes, ignored or missed, that in retrospect led to tragedy. He pursed his lips as he wondered what string of stupid little mistakes had led to his death. At least in death he could learn from them if only Alisha would give him access—

With a scowl he brushed the thoughts aside before dwelling on them became another mistake. He stared at their feeds and forced himself to concentrate.

Together, Jarsin and Morgan turned to face a large square opening with nothing, but space beyond. Side by side, the two transport cubes drifted up and docked with the EVA units in a perfect fit. Small jets of gas flared. Jarsin and Morgan drifted out, free of the *Santa Maria*.

Just a few minutes was all they needed.

Jarsin moved away and rose over the great ship. Morgan waited before following. As Mark watched the two feeds, hovering together over his desk, he realized he was clenching his fists. Had he made the right decision? Jarsin cleared the top of the *Santa Maria* and a dim yellowish dot, the brightest star around, rose into view. Menadue. Mark felt the tension drain out of him. He had. Then Jarsin pivoted and zoomed in on a dim, reddish dot that grew to reveal an orange and brown-banded gas giant. It was the planet that marked the edge of Menadue's system.

"There!" Karla clapped her hands and turned to gloat. "There's your proof!"

"I do not understand." A slight quaver distorted Alisha's voice. "I cannot detect Jarsin or Morgan. The external sensors must not—" She froze.

Another Alisha popped into existence, but this one lacked any emotional context.

"Diagnostics?" said Sunil. "What are you doing?"

"I have detected an anomalous emotional state in the Santa Maria's personality," Diagnostics said in a flat monotone. "This system has concluded that the external sensors are not working and issued a command that endangers the Santa Maria. Until the fault is rectified, it will stay offline."

Mark jumped to his feet. "You overrode Alisha's decision to brake?"

With a confused frown, Karla turned to Sunil. "I thought Alisha was in control."

"Think of Diagnostics as the ship's doctor. I'm afraid it thinks the ship's captain is not fit to command."

"Diagnostics, look!" Mark pointed to the data feeds from Jarsin and Morgan. "We are inside Menadue's system. Issue the command to start braking."

"External sensors indicate that we are two years from our braking point."

"But see there? That's—"

"The external sensors do not—"

"Oh!" Karla snapped. "It's even more blind than Alisha."

"I'm coming in," said Jarsin.

"No," Mark countermanded although every second they were out there was fraught with danger, but the answer to his dilemma was out there too. He just hoped it was the right decision.

"Why not?" asked Jarsin.

"There is no point in leaving them out there," said Simon.

"I don't want to stay out here," Morgan whined, her voice trembling.

"Stay there." Mark licked his lower lip as he regarded Diagnostics. "If the Santa Maria will only accept data from its external sensors, maybe we can make one see Menadue."

Jarsin drifted closer to the *Santa Maria's* surface and shone a light across the closest sensor pod, a two-meter wide ovoid. "I can see a faint film covering it. How's this?" He turned up the spotlight's intensity to a blinding glare.

"There's no response," said Sunil. "It's the pre-processor sub-system after the bi-optronic array that is the problem."

"All bi-optronic arrays are operating within operational tolerances," said Diagnostics.

"I'll try to dismantle it." Jarsin settled next to the pod and the hand on his arm morphed through a series of tools. "It's no good. The connectors refuse to cooperate. They say there is nothing to be repaired."

"Isn't there something we can do?" asked Karla.

"I know!" Jarsin piped up. "What if we damage it? The ship will have to carry out repairs and do a full system test." He raised his arm up and slammed it down, then again three more times. But each time, the pod cover bent and rebounded, leaving only a deep scratch. And each time, as Jarsin raised his arm, the scratch began to fade as the pod repaired itself.

Mark clenched his fists again as he realized that more force was needed to create the kind of damage that would force the ship to replace the sensor. "Jarsin," he called out, "try ramming it with your arm. Perhaps you can break through."

"That won't do any good," said Sunil, "the pre-processor needs to be replaced."

"That's true," said Simon, "but it's just underneath and if he can break through, he might be able to damage it."

Jarsin squirted away, ten meters, and rotated until his arm pointed at the pod. His rear jets flared and he dived. But as the diamond-shaped tool on the end of his arm speared the sensor pod, his arm bent on impact and twisted. Jarsin slammed into the *Santa Maria* and rebounded away, leaving a long gash in the

sensor pod.

"That's no good," said Sunil, "only the cover is damaged."

Mark grimaced. The idea had been right, but the EVA unit's weren't designed for this purpose and Jarsin had used too little force. It was the little mistakes compounding that led to failure—mistakes that arose from a lack of knowledge and understanding, and from pressure. And from the unpredictable, like Diagnostics taking over. And on top of that, Jarsin and Morgan had been out there too long.

Diagnostics cocked its head. "I have detected anomalous damage to sensor 143-296. Initiating repairs."

A flap popped up twenty meters away from the pod and a small crab scuttled out.

"Morgan, quick!" Mark called out. They had one chance left now that the pod's cover was ripped. "Crash into it like Jarsin did. Hit it in the center as hard as you can."

"But—"

"Do it *now!* Before the robot gets to it."

"I can do it!" Jarsin yelled. "Just let me get into position." His jets flared.

"It will take you too long," Mark yelled. He knew he should be calm and composed—the dead were always calm and composed—but he had never felt pressure like this. How he could do with Alisha's help now. "*Please, Morgan!*" he shouted.

"Don't rely on her," Jarsin sneered. "She'll only let you down."

"Damn you! I hate you ... hate you." The jets on Morgan's unit flared and she accelerated at full thrust toward the pod. "I don't know how I could have ever loved someone as selfish as you."

"*Love?*" Jarsin spat. "You don't know the meaning of the word!"

"Neither do you," she snapped back. "You're obstinate, pig-headed—"

"Morgan," Sunil cut in, "your approach is too shallow and your speed is too high—"

"What about you? You stabbed me in the back. You lied and turned our colleagues against me—"

"Morgan," Mark cried out. "Cut your speed."

As she slammed into the sensor pod, her arm skewered the gash, embedding itself within the sensitive sub-systems, then snapped off at the shoulder. She bounced off the *Santa Maria* and tumbled away.

"Look out!" Jarsin's jets spat in anger, but she sideswiped him and careened away.

"Morgan! Morgan!" Mark yelled, but all he could hear were her screams. "Catch her!" he cried out to Jarsin.

"She has done more damage than was required," Sunil said with a satisfied smile. "Excellent!"

Diagnostics turned to Mark. "External sensor 143-296 has sustained more damage. Cause is unknown."

Though Morgan's jets fired on and off in erratic spurts, she still tumbled out of control. "Help me, help me, help me!" she screamed.

"Go after her," Mark yelled at Jarsin.

"Why? Damn her. She's a menace." But he turned and scooted away.

Mark let out a ragged sigh as he watched small crabs clustered around the damaged sensor, some climbing in with bits and pieces stuck to them, while others clambered out and scurried away over the *Santa Maria's* surface. All Jarsin had to do was retrieve Morgan and bring her in. Then this whole ordeal would be over. Diagnostics would see the error of its ways and release Alisha and the *Santa Maria* could begin emergency braking.

Jarsin reached Morgan and tried to grab her arm as she rolled and twisted. "Stop firing your jets!" he snarled.

"Beginning sensor initialization," said Diagnostics.

"Yes!" Karla hugged Simon and then Sunil.

Mark clapped his hands and beamed with delight. "You've done it, Morgan!"

"I don't like it out here," she whined as Jarsin managed to grab her arm at last and stop her EVA unit tumbling. "I want to go home."

"Sensor initialisation is complete," Diagnostics announced.

"Bring her in," said Mark and he allowed himself a relieved grin.

"All operational tolerances have been reset. Beginning self-diagnostic."

"Let's go." Jarsin began to drag Morgan back toward the *Santa Maria*.

"Self-diagnostic complete ... two EVA units detected by sensor 143-296. Beginning analysis of other sensor outputs." Diagnostics vanished.

Alisha unfroze. "I am back in control. All external sensors are reinitializing."

"Thank you!" Karla hugged Mark and then she, Simon and Sunil disappeared.

"Hey, what's happening?" Jarsin yelled.

"Stop!" Morgan cried out.

Mark whirled around to stare at the data feeds where a bright glow had sprung forth from the *Santa Maria's* bow and the ship began to veer away at an accelerating rate. "Alisha! What are you doing? We can't leave them!"

"Come back!" Jarsin screamed

"Don't leave us!"

"The *Santa Maria* is in much greater danger than estimated and every second counts. We must brake now to avoid the star. As it is, we will still pass within ten million kilometers."

"But Jarsin and Morgan—"

"They are dead." Alisha cut the data feeds, ending the screaming and cries for help.

"But they're out there!"

"Their physical components are."

Mark staggered backward as if hit. He put a hand down on his desk to steady himself and turned away, unable to face Alisha as his whole body began to tremble. "They're still alive," he whispered. "They will be for months! What a way to die." He closed his eyes and bowed his head. Even though it had been the right decision, he had sent them and kept them out there. But it was the little mistakes....

"Do not mourn them," said Alisha. "Look out your window."

Mark looked up and out onto the beach. There, at the edge of the sand, Morgan and Jarsin frolicked. Morgan squealed and ducked under Jarsin's lunge, but he caught her and wrapped her in his arms. Her mouth closed on his. Then he hoisted her up and staggered toward the breaking waves, laughing as she wriggled to free herself.

Mark frowned at their odd behavior and turned to face Alisha. "But they hate each other."

"Did hate each other," Alisha corrected. "As far as they and any anyone else is concerned, they died together in a tragic accident. Having died together, they have reconciled and fallen in love again."

"So they don't know...? But I do."

"Very few are concerned about how they actually died. Every now and then the thoughts surface, but I find it best for their peace of mind not to let them dwell on it."

"I didn't know you could manipulate the personality of someone who has died."

"All personalities, living and dead, have parameters. It is easier to tweak logical parameters, that is all."

A cold chill swept through Mark. "I ... I thought we were extensions of our original selves, modelled as accurately as possible."

"I try, but if necessary...."

Mark drew in a deep breath and then the question rushed out. "And did you tweak me?"

An enigmatic smile played over Alisha's lips. "You have been the best mayor the community could have had since your death." She began to fade.

"You haven't answered me." Mark leant forward, fists on his desk, his stern gaze demanding an answer. "Did you tweak me?"

"You have fifteen thousand years to look forward to," offered the faint shadow, "fifteen thousand years of bliss. Look out your window. Revel in your paradise." The last traces of Alisha faded to nothing.

"Was the real me still alive when ... when you created me? Did I end up like them? How many others have been left to die? How *many*?"

Mark turned and slumped against the window. Alisha's refusal to answer gnawed at him.

Am I the same man I was before I died? Am I really Mark Caldosa? Or am I a fake, unreal—nothing, but a set of algorithms pretending to be alive?

It shouldn't matter, but it did. Mark felt the loss of his soul. It was too much. To know he had left two crewmembers and to know that they had been replaced with copies—*modified* copies—while the originals were still *alive*, as if they didn't matter. Did the physical Mark Caldosa scream and plead with Alisha not to leave him? How long did he survive for? His tears smeared the glass.

Sunil said that the *Santa Maria* had one design flaw. He was wrong. It had two.

Mark focused his gaze on the waterline and picked out Morgan and Jarsin. They clung to each other in a lover's embrace in thigh deep water as a wave broke against them. Were they better or worse than the two embittered lives drifting alone in space, bound together in their mutual isolation and hate?

Then, as if of its own accord, his mood lightened and his doubts began to fade. His frown turned to a smile. No, these two were much better. They would compliment the *Santa Maria's* crew in a way that the

originals could never have done. And that only made his job easier.

Alisha was right. He had fifteen thousand years of bliss to look forward to.

His gaze roamed over the beach and up into the rainbow sky where the orange and purple-crested Skraa Flakers dipped and soared on the gentle breeze. He watched the crewmembers twisting and darting amongst the startled flock, and marvelled at their devil-may-care attitude. Such harmony.

He reveled in his perfect paradise.

Death of Pretension

F*or twenty thousand years, I have played this role. But no more!*

Jarold Morgen, old beyond years and stooped, with rounded shoulders and gray wisps that punctuated his mottled, bald head, wheeled away from the body lying before him to confront his audience. They watched, spellbound. Even now, he could draw them in. No one coughed or murmured or shuffled, restless. All leant forward in their seats, eyes fixed on him, staring, waiting, while countless millions watched on holoscreens around the solar system. His eyes narrowed as the timer counted down in the peripheral vision of his right eye.

I am nothing but a robot. Can't they see that? Fools! We are all robots ... trapped. I have no choice.

Jarold threw out his arms to appeal to the audience. "And so it comes to this," he intoned. "After all this time, I worship her still ... though she betrayed me." He dropped his head to rest his chin on his chest, knowing they hung on his every word. "I could bring her back." He offered up a small vial filled with an orange liquid. "Such is my pretension. One spray and she will wake to answer for her crimes." He sighed and looked up once more. "So many bay for vengeance," he clamped his eyes shut and grimaced, "but revenge is more bitter than sweet. I *know*. I loved her in life. Now—"

The counter reached zero and Jarold sprayed the contents of the vial in a sprawling arc toward the audience. *There! It is done.*

“And now,” he whispered, “I will love her more in death.”

The lights dimmed and the curtain fell. For a moment there was silence and then applause burst forth, rising louder and louder. The rest of the cast assembled in a line, but Jarold hurried from the stage. He had announced that he would give no curtain calls on this, his ten-thousandth performance of his famous play, *Death of Pretension*, and he meant to keep that promise. There was only one reason he had come back, after a century, to perform it again.

In his room, he picked up the dermal wand, switched it on and waved it around his head, all the while trying to ignore the pull of the incessant applause that rippled backstage and lingered at his door. His skin tingled for a moment and then the layer of ages loosened. Jarold put down the wand and peeled away his makeup.

The applause turned into a demanding clap, clap, clap that overlaid a muffled chant, “Jarold, Jarold, Jarold.” Still he resisted the call of the sirens. *How long will it be before they bay for my blood?*

He turned the mask of once living flesh over to stare at the ancient face, all wrinkled and blotched. Was this how people really looked when once they aged? Back in the ancient past, back when time took its toll and evolution ruled supreme? Back when humanity had a choice, had free will?

Jarold stared at his face in the mirror. For twenty millennia, he hadn’t changed, apart from cosmetic fancies. But how many hairstyles were there? How many eye-colors, and skin-colors? How many possible combinations, how many different fashions? His young face had paraded them all, many, many times. Too many times. There was nothing to look forward to. The human race was stagnant — had been for tens of centuries. No new art, no new science, no new dreams, just a rehash of old, old ideas, like *Death of Pretension*.

At last, the clapping faltered and fell apart. Just like the false promise immortality had made to the

human race.

A smirk crossed Jarold's face. "It's time to break free of our gilded cage and rejoin evolution, my fellow Homo sapiens. One day, our descendents will thank me. Mark my words!"

With that, he sprung out of his chair, invigorated by the thought of what was about to happen, tore off his clothes and leapt into the sonic shower. The spray washed away the remnants of his makeup and the sweat of his performance, leaving him feeling born anew. This performance of *Death of Pretension* was his last. One day, he would perform a new play, written by a playwright belonging to Homo superior, and it would have new insights into the human condition that no Homo sapiens was capable of. Then, and only then, would he join his fellow Homo sapiens and consign himself to history.

But for the moment, he had to get to Nadia.

The sooner they disappeared, the better. When the news was released of what the Evolution Society had done there would be pandemonium and cries of revenge. Nadia had said it could take years before the rest of society calmed down enough to see that this was in humanity's best interests, but when the children came along — and not the recycled genes in mere clones — everything would change. It was obvious, wasn't it?

"It is every species duty to evolve into something higher," Jarold muttered the Evolution Society's mantra under his breath and dashed out for the back exit ... and ploughed into a crowd of fans determined to get an autograph from the great man.

"No ... no." He tried to wave them away with a weary smile, but stopped to sign a few. "Please, I'm in a hurry." At last, with an apologetic smile, he broke free and managed a few steps.

"Jarold Morgen! Stop!"

He pulled up, wheeled round and froze. The crowd had parted like the Red Sea and a tall black man,

resplendent in the gold uniform of a senior officer in System Security, stared at him with a stern face. Jarold swallowed and his hands trembled even as he squeezed them into fists to mask his fear. *How did they find out?*

"Ye-yes?" He spoke in a small voice, weak and pathetic and not at all the voice of a great man involved in changing humanity's destiny.

The black man strode over. Then his face broke into an ebullient smile and he put his arm around Jarold's shoulders. "I'm Alvor Komar." He squeezed Jarold to him. "I'm your biggest fan."

"Re-really?" Jarold's shoulders sagged as he realized he hadn't blown it and surrendered to Komar's hug.

"I love all your work, but *Death of Pretension*," he sucked in a succinct breath to revel in his point, "nothing comes close! D'you know? I've been to all your thousandth performances and this is by far the best. The emotional tension you generate ... *unbelievable!*"

"I'm gratified it moves you so." Jarold shifted to ease free, but Komar tightened his grip.

"And I promised myself a photo op with you."

"But—"

"Even if I have to arrest you."

Jarold gulped as his fans gathered round, trapping him.

"I'm only joking." Komar boomed out a hearty laugh. "I've never arrested anyone. Not ever! And I've been in this job for two thousand years." Then he winked. "But there's always a first time — oh come on! I know what you told the press but this will only take a second." He squeezed Jarold's shoulders again.

Jarold sucked in a breath. Fans ... they were an accursed elixir. "Certainly, why not."

"Great!" Komar whipped out a blank sheet from inside his coat and held it out at arm's length before letting go. The sheet hovered and moved back a fraction.

"Smile!" it said.

Komar squeezed him again and Jarold managed a thin smile. A picture popped onto the sheet with a cringing Jarold crushed against a Komar grinning like he was having the most delectable orgasm. Komar fumbled inside his coat and pulled out a pen, before grabbing the sheet.

"Please? Sign it for me." He proffered the pen.

With a resigned flourish, Jarold scribbled a short message and handed the pen and picture back.

"Oh thank you! I will treasure this always."

Then the crowd pressed in and it took another hour before he could break away.



Jarold sucked in a breath and let it ease out. *Stay calm. Look calm.* Inside, his guts had turned to jelly, but he kept up his calm facade for the time it took to cover the remaining few meters to his apartment. None of his roles had ever been as demanding as this.

The door slid shut behind him and he slumped back against it. Oh what sweet relief.

There was no stopping the inevitable now, but how many *times* had he almost let slip what was about to happen? All those interviews and public appearances in the last few months, leading up to his final performance? But he was free at last. No need for any more pretense. He grimaced at the tension still in his shoulders.

Nadia ambled into the hallway, radiant as always, her lips pursed in concentration, and the string of suitcases following behind settled into a neat formation as she stopped and looked up. Her brow furrowed as she saw the state he was in and she rushed up to him. "Are you all right? You're trembling!"

Jarold pulled her into a bear hug and rested his cheek on top of her head as he savored her strength.

She was the glue that held him together, the rock that dashed his fears. "Oh, it was a nightmare! That was my worst performance ever. For a moment I had a mental blackout. I nearly *panicked*."

"I should have been there—"

"No! If anything went wrong...." Jarold shook his head, rubbing his cheek against her silky, auburn hair, and chuckled as the tension drained out of him. "A SysSec stopped me just as I was about to get away. I nearly died. Almost pissed myself. But he only wanted an autographed photo!" Nadia joined in as his chuckle turned to a throaty laugh.

Then Jarold held her back at arm's length and searched her face for any sign of problems. "Is it done? I sprayed the trigger right on time."

"You needn't have, besides ... it was risky. What if someone scanned your vial and discovered it contained more than colored water?"

"I needed to do something symbolic — to be involved. I don't want to be just a figurehead."

Nadia gripped his arms and squeezed. "But you *are* important. Once the initial pandemonium dies down, you can go public and convince them of our cause. People will listen to you."

Jarold relaxed back against the door and pulled Nadia to him, luxuriating in her warmth as he stared into the distance. "Fifteen hundred years! I can't believe how many times I thought we'd never succeed." He kissed the top of her head. "I'm so proud of you and all the others. At last, humanity can begin evolving again."

She pulled back and stared up at him, her eyes glistening with true belief, and together they intoned their mantra, "It is every species duty to evolve into something higher."

Jarold looked up at the ceiling and let out a joyous laugh. "And with our guidance ... I can barely imagine what humanity will become."

With that sobering reminder that time was of the essence, he eased past and grabbed her hand to lead her after him. "Come. Have you finished packing? We have to leave. Now."

Nadia held back, a coy smile on her face. "Why, what's the rush? There won't be any signs for a few days."

"I know, but—" He arched his eyebrows as her smile deepened. "What are you grinning about?"

She dragged him into a passionate kiss before relenting. "I took the trigger four weeks ago. Someone has to have the first real baby and I want it to be me. Jarold!" She ruffled his hair and jiggled on the spot, grinning with tears in her eyes. "I'm *ovulating!* Right now! We can leave later, but right now ... there's no time to waste!" This time, she tugged on his arm and hauled him after her.

"But ... but what about me? It'll take days before—"

"I gave you the trigger as well. You should be producing plenty of sperm by now. So, *come on!*" With a sultry laugh, she dragged him past the pile of suitcases, still waiting for directions.



The information channels were full of the mysterious epidemic that had broken out all over the solar system. Around the world and in the cities on Mars and Luna, in the space stations around Jupiter and Saturn, even out at the edge of the Oort Cloud — wherever there were people — came reports of a mild illness, a slight fever and headaches, pain in the joints. The first illness in living memory, or so it seemed, and no one was immune. The medics, used to dealing with injuries rather than illness, had nothing in their databases that could help.

Jarold snorted a laugh and lay back on the bed, scanning the channels while Nadia nestled up against him. Once more, she ran a scanner over her belly and giggled.

"Nadia!" He grabbed the scanner from her grasp and tossed it aside. "You can't actually see him getting bigger." He twisted to kiss her cheek and then rubbed her belly. "Incredible! He's so small. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you weren't pregnant."

She smiled and rolled to press against him. Her fingernail teased his left nipple, drawing small circles around its areola. "Do you want to make certain?" she whispered. "It's been a couple of days."

Jarold grabbed her hand as it slid down over his stomach. "Sorry, darling, maybe later. I've got a slight headache."

As a joke, she reached up to touch his forehead and then her brow furrowed. "You've got a temperature. Strange. We're not reversing our immortality, only our fertility."

Jarold hesitated and bit his lip. For all his bravado, one thought had kept him awake some nights, gnawing at him, with only Nadia's quiet breathing to calm him. But now....

"Maybe Kantaro made a mistake. I mean, this is all untried—"

"Jarold!" Nadia sat up and leant over him, her face stern to drive away his uncertainty. "Kantaro and her team spent six *hundred* years researching how to reverse the immortality processes, *and* how to protect us. All their simulations — every single result proved it will work."

"Yes, but what about—?"

"She said there might be a few side effects, but they would be nothing to worry about. Look at me. I haven't had any problems. And I *am* pregnant." She brushed the hair from his brow and cupped his cheek. "Lose your doubts," she murmured. "I swear, nothing will go wrong."

Jarold lifted up a hand to argue, then shrugged and stroked her arm instead, more to draw strength from her resolve. "If you say so." He knew it was wrong to be so weak, now, when he needed to be strong, but the bad feeling refused to fade away. "Still ... what if we just check with some of the others—?"

“And give ourselves away? Not with the Society’s announcement next week.” Nadia lay down and clung to him, her head resting on his chest. “Why don’t we think up a name for our son?” she suggested.

“Yeah, why not?” Jarold mumbled. He stared up at the ceiling and pondered the future. Not knowing was hardest to take. This had never been tried, and as good as Kantaro and her team were, simulations, no matter how accurate, still couldn’t model reality one hundred percent. What if they missed one tiny little thing? Oh why had he started this in the first place? Except they had no choice, he knew that to the core of his being. Still, it was pure madness—

“We can have thousands of children.” A contented chuckle escaped Nadia’s lips and she stretched against him. “Thousands. I wonder if there are enough names to go round.”



The weeks dragged, cooped up as they were, but Nadia’s belly grew bigger. She radiated good health and even Jarold’s symptoms faded away, taking his doubts with them. After the Evolution Society’s announcement, there was nothing to do, but watch the mayhem unfold across the solar system.

Jarold surfed the news channels, his face grim. Everywhere, mobs rampaged, venting their frustration against lines of bronze figures that wavered against the onslaught, breaking in some places and falling back to regroup in others. Most of the time they milled around at the edges as if uncertain of what to do and impotent to act. Jarold shook his head and frowned. *So much for System Security.* Still, the sheer vehemence of the public’s reaction took his breath away.

“Vengeance is thine,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

Jarold looked across at Nadia, ensconced in a reclining chair in the corner of the bedroom. Her hands

cupped her small potbelly as if she were covering the baby's eyes and ears so that it couldn't see or hear the terrible results perpetrated in its name.

"Oh ... I was just muttering to myself. I never thought—"

Nadia's eyes flicked to the holoscreen and went wide. "Look!" she gasped in a trembling voice and then pointed at the screen as she covered her mouth with her other hand.

Jarold turned to stare at the scene on display and frowned as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. A squad of bronze uniforms had burst through a crowd surrounding the building. They dragged a man and a pregnant woman with them.

Nadia stiffened. "That's Indera! And Markan."

The screen split to show the Commissioner of Security, a black man in a gold uniform, his tired eyes buried in a haggard face.

Jarold sat up and leant forward. "I know him!"

"My fellow citizens," Alvor Komar squared his shoulders, "this is the first in a wave of arrests. Even as I speak, further arrests are being carried out in a coordinated action across the solar system. We will round up every last member of this..." he grimaced as if searching for the right word, a long lost word, alien and unreal, "this *terrorist* organization. They will *pay!* And I swear, we *will* recover the missing medical information we need to reverse what they have done—"

He glanced to the side and his eyes went wide with dismay. In the other half of the screen, the crowd surged around the squad and tore Indera and Markan free.

"No!" Komar held up a futile hand, but Indera and Markan disappeared, sucked down in an angry sea to drown as wave after wave of fists and boots crashed down on them.

"Indera!" Nadia sagged back into her chair and a high-pitched moan escaped her lips.

"Don't look," Jarold whispered, but as much as he wanted to, he couldn't tear his gaze away either. After a moment, the two bodies surfaced, bleeding and broken, limp flotsam that was carried away on a current of pure hate. Over the crowd's baying, Nadia's sobs stabbed at his heart. He clutched at his stomach, wanting to be sick, wanting to offer up his own bitter bile as poor compensation for the two lives he could not bring back, but all he could offer was silent despair.

"I urge you," Komar cried out in a desperate whine, "don't take the law into your hands. Work with us! We *need* them alive."

Jarold closed his eyes, wishing he would cry so his tears could wash away the pain. "Too late," he mumbled to Komar. With Nadia's best friend dead, there was no hope of going back.

He looked across at Nadia, still sobbing, with her knees pulled to her chest, and scrambled off the bed to comfort her in his arms. They could make a run for it. But where would they go? He was famous. What a curse. His face would be a magnet for death. And even makeup wouldn't stop him being identified. No, it was better to wait for the breaking in of the door and the stomp of jackboots. At least they had chosen their hideaway well in the remote Andes; they might just survive the small crowd that could assemble.

On the holoscreen, news came in of more arrests.



The hunt began to wear. Jarold followed the trail of the baying hounds on the news channels, unable to break free of its song. Nadia too, was hooked. Day after day, she lay with her head on his lap, sharing his rollercoaster ride as the trail swerved toward them, then slithered past and danced away.

At least the public anger had faded to a simmering undercurrent of tension. The hatred was still there, but it no longer took its toll on those arrested. And even though over five thousand members were

incarcerated in apartment buildings and hotels converted into prisons — a quaint term from antiquity — the future now held a glimmer of hope.

Nadia rolled over onto her back and winced. “Can you get me some water?”

“Certainly, my love.” Jarold smiled at her, but his smile faded to a concerned frown as he stroked her forehead. Her hair was damp and her brow warm. “You’re sweating.” Strange, the room wasn’t hot. “Is that normal for pregnancy? Like the vomiting?” He eased out from under her head and stood up.

Nadia wiped her brow with the back of her hand and then massaged her eyes. “I don’t know.” She sighed and shivered, hugging herself. “Is it cold in here?” She groaned and looked up at Jarold. “Please. The water.”

“Coming up.” Jarold ducked into the small kitchen, but before he could grab a cup, there was a thump and Nadia cried out, more of a strangled scream. He rushed back in and froze, the shock scattering his thoughts.

She lay on the floor in a fetal position beside the bed, whimpering, her face scrunched up in pain and her hands shoved between her thighs. He knelt down and reached out a hesitant hand, stopping short of touching her.

“Na-Nadia, what’s wrong?”

“I—” She snatched at his hand to pull him close and he stared in disbelief at the slimy redness coating her fingers. “I think I’m having the *baby*.” She squealed through a grimace and let go to jab her hand back between her thighs as if to hold it in.

“No ... no, you can’t be!” Jarold hesitated and then tried to sit Nadia up, to comfort her, to do *something*. “There’s still four months to go.”

“*Please!*” She gripped his arm and sunk her nails in. Her breath came in short stabs through gritted

teeth and her eyes implored him. She screamed again. "It's *coming!*"

Jarold tore her bloodied hand from him and staggered to his feet. "All right. Hang ... hang on." But his feet were rooted to the spot. Her pants were wet and stained a bright red like she had just had a bloody enema.

She screamed and gagged on it. "*Hurry!*"

With that, Jarold tore free and raced for the bathroom.

"Medic!" he screamed at the medical unit in the wall. "What do I do?"

"Calm down," said the unit. "Your blood pressure is elevated—"

"No! Nadia's having the baby and it's too early. *What do I do?*"

"I do not have information on human pregnancies."

Jarold slapped the unit in frustration. "Why not?"

"All references point to nonexistent data. You will have to consult—"

"I *need* to do something now."

A slot opened in the medic's panel and a cylindrical handle extended out. "Please scan over Nadia's injury with this. I will make a diagnosis and suggest treatment."

Jarold yanked out the scanner and raced into the bedroom. Nadia was pale, like she had just applied makeup for her death scene and was ready to go on.

"No!" He dropped to her side and his hand trembled so much that he waved the scanner over her belly in frantic, jerky movements.

"I cannot treat this," said the medic through the scanner. "I have contacted a specialist medic and an ambulance has been dispatched. It will arrive in ten minutes."

"No!" Jarold cried out, but he knew it was too late. He pulled Nadia to him and felt her body quiver as

she moaned again. No doubt, System Security had been advised. The bronze uniforms arrived in eight.



Jarold wondered why he had been taken from his solitary confinement to such a stark room in this remote hacienda. Was this to be his new prison? Its dark-red wooden floor contrasted against where a shaft of brilliance shone through the large window and painted the austere white walls in morning sunlight. He strained against the straps that bound his arms to the armrests of the hard chair in the center of the room. Why had they restrained him in this way? He wasn't a threat to anyone.

The door slid open. Alvor Komar strode in and stopped to stare at Jarold as the door slid shut. For a long moment, he said nothing, his eyes narrowed, and only his lips, flinching a touch now and then, betrayed the emotions boiling below the surface.

"So," Jarold swallowed, "we meet again. I take it you don't want another autograph."

Komar blinked and peered at Jarold, bemused, then a sour smile crossed his face. He reached into his jacket and plucked out a photo, holding it up by the corner for Jarold to see. "Remember this? We had it taken when I was your biggest fan." He flicked his wrist and the photo dissolved into a cloud of dust motes, glinting in the sunlight as they dispersed. "Was." Komar turned away to stare out the window.

With a slight shrug, Jarold dismissed the insult. The past was just that. It was the future that counted.

He licked his lips and sucked in a breath. "How ... how is Nadia—?"

Komar whirled round, his face masked in fury. "Do you *know* what your stupid Evolution Society has done?" He clenched his fists by his side so hard he trembled. "What gall! How *dare* you? What gives all of you the right to decide humanity's destiny? Huh? What right?" He took two steps forward until he towered over Jarold, fists pulled up like he wanted to strike, to lash out and vent all his rage on his helpless victim.

Then, with a loud exhale, the fury seeped from Komar's face until all that was left was an impassive mask. He turned away to stare out the window again, hands clasped behind his back.

With a scowl, Jarold kept his silence even though there was so much he needed to know. He hadn't expected to be a martyr, but if that was to be the role history consigned him to, then so be it, he would play it to perfection. Let the future judge him, not these shortsighted fools.

"The council, convened to consider this crime, has pronounced its sentence," Komar said at last in an even voice. "All remaining members of the Evolution Society are to be kept in solitary confinement for the rest of their lives."

Jarold frowned at this unexpected news. "What? No trial? I have a state—"

"There is no need. We have confessions willingly given. Indeed..." there was a hint of a sneer in Komar's voice, "they all wanted to convince us of the worthiness of their cause." Komar shook his head and his shoulders sagged. "Until they learnt the truth," he finished in a soft voice, filled with sadness.

"But I want to make a statement. I know I can—"

"No one wants to know." Komar spun round, anger flaring in his eyes as he implored Jarold. "Don't you see? Your actions will cause the deaths of eleven billion people and there is nothing ... *nothing* we can do about it. We only have fifty or sixty years left at the most. Why did you have to erase *all* information?"

"This Indera. She led a team— *Why? Why* did she have to erase every *single* record? Every document and reference in every database, library or archive. In every robot or intelligent system. Right across the whole solar system. *Why?*" Komar let out a sad laugh as he held a despairing palm up to the heavens to let Jarold know what he thought of Indera's obsessiveness. "Including the most insignificant of items that could even *remotely* be used to make us immortal again."

"But she made an archive."

"We have it, but it's multiply-encrypted and our best estimates are that it will take a thousand years or so to break it. Do you have the keys by any chance?"

Jarold shook his head and looked away. Indera and Markan had kept the keys to themselves so that no one could compromise any chance those future generations had to fulfill their destiny.

"I thought not. What a secretive lot you are. And to think ... it's rather ironic, isn't it? The very people who could save us were the first to die."

Jarold stared up at Komar with a fierce conviction. "But that's the wrong way to look at it. You *will* live on ... in your children. They are your future. And they will have the free will to achieve a greatness denied us by our very immortality. You can't imprison us forever. One day, those new generations will see that we are right, see the wisdom in our beliefs, and free us. All species must evolve. It's a law of nature."

"Children?" Komar barked a laugh and turned a way. "What children? Your Society purged the clone banks — all of them! And the knowledge to create more clones was also wiped." Komar's shoulders sagged a touch. "There will be no replacements for us, no children."

"What are you talking about? We can have children the natural way — the way we were meant to have them. In a month or so, Nadia..." His voice faltered and lost its confidence. "You will see. When she has our child—"

"She won't." Komar held his arms out before him and rested against the window, like the weight of the world had suddenly descended upon him. His head dropped and he looked a very sad, a very weary figure. "It died."

"What?" Jarold said in a very soft, faint voice, like the wind had been knocked out of him. His skin crawled.

"Nadia too," added Komar, his voice so low that for a moment, Jarold almost believed he hadn't heard

right.

"But ... but how? She was all right before. The medics stopped the bleeding and saved the baby."

Komar sucked in a breath and straightened up. "Only for a while, but the fetus aborted and she hemorrhaged so much that she died in minutes. There was nothing the medics could do."

Tears welled up in Jarold's eyes. "I don't ... don't believe it." Komar had to be lying to him. That was it. A cruel trick to punish him. Nadia was alive and well and they had probably told her that Jarold was dead so that she could suffer as well.

"And all the other women in the Evolution Society. The last one has just died."

"No!" Jarold snapped out of his reverie. "That's impossible. Kantaro modeled every possibility...." His voice faded to a whisper. All those sleepless nights, he should have said no, he should have said they must wait a few more centuries or try it out on just a few to make sure everything worked. But no. Kantaro was so sure of herself, and Nadia and the others were so insistent, he had given in. He should have said no. His strength, his bravado deserted him and left him an empty shell leaking tears to the ragged beat of his sobbing.

"Indeed she did. Our analysis of her results show that her team was very thorough. All the steps to reverse our immortality worked and all the steps to allow us to have children worked. But—" Komar turned round and shrugged. "She could only model a full pregnancy based on cloning data and that's not the same. So, to make certain that the fetuses had the best chance to develop, she left in the enhancements to our immune systems in the ova and sperm. But all the fetuses ... when they reached a certain size, their immune systems attacked their mothers and caused them to hemorrhage. The babies killed their own mothers."

Komar rubbed his brow and grimaced. "All babies will. And there is nothing we can do to stop it."

Jarold dropped his head back. "No!" he screamed in a primal howl.

"So." Komar stepped up beside Jarold and looked down at him, his eyes cold and unforgiving. "Except for the men in the Evolution Society, everyone is doomed to die. You should be happy."

What a cruel thing to say. Jarold frowned as he peered up at Komar. "Why?"

"You've succeeded at what you set out to do."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

A sad smile played over Komar's face. "You wanted the human race to rejoin evolution. Well, you've done that."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know what the fate of most species is?"

"They evolve—"

"No. They go extinct." Komar turned toward the door. "So you see? You've succeeded beyond your wildest expectations."

Jarold wriggled in his chair, trying to face Komar. "That isn't what was supposed to happen—"

The door slid open and Nadia stepped in, followed by another Alvor Komar.

"Nadia!" No, it wasn't her. This Nadia moved too smoothly and her face was too serene. They were robots.

"Meet your warders," said Jarold. "They will look after you."

"But why them?"

Komar paused at the door and looked back. "Your greatest love and your greatest fan? You have all of eternity to convince them you were right." The door slid shut behind him.

Nadia pressed the release on his restraints. "What right did you have to decide humanity's destiny?" she

asked.

“What?” Jarold sagged back in his chair and stared at her, a gaping emptiness in his heart. “Why do you ask me that?”

The robot Komar helped Jarold to his feet. “It is the main function in our programming.”

Nadia took Jarold’s arm and turned him to face her. She stared up at him with an earnest gaze. “We wish to know. What right did you have to decide humanity’s destiny?”

Jarold grimaced as he realized the true irony. He had acted because he had to. Immortality had reduced humanity to a society of robots and now evolution would replace it with true robots. He tried to think of an answer but couldn’t, all the old arguments rung hollow. “I.... I had to, I *had* no choice, can’t you see?”

But they couldn’t see, and, he realized, neither could he.

This is the story as I originally wrote it (and called *Evolution*), but I decided I didn't want to leave it like this, so I extended the story to follow on in a completely different direction to a more positive ending. I also changed its title. But after not getting anywhere with it in the Writers of the Future contest, I've taken out the second half, but I've kept the title. You can read that story on my website and decide which you prefer.

Lunar Vegas? On the Rocks!

“You know, I really thought Clay Minsky would know better.” Nancy Lawford heaved a sigh and frowned at the tire tracks that disappeared into darkness beyond the headlights’ bright glare. For the last hour, she had fumed over her bad luck. It was stupid to fret so and she knew it, but still ... to take a bunch of stupid tourists exploring when there was even the faintest possibility of that Coronal Mass Ejection swiping the moon....

“Talk about being bloody lucky,” Al Boyle, her Australian co-worker muttered. A fine astronomer in his own right, he had spent the last three months at the Farside Array, not far from the Moon’s South Pole, installing and testing the new automation system that would do away with her job as on-site astronomer.

Her job. Her mouth tightened. How could they take it away after all it had cost her—?

The cabin tilted at a precarious angle. “Hold on,” Al yelled.

Nancy grabbed the open doorframe and wedged herself into her seat as he wrestled with the steering wheel of the “old jalopy”, his term for the six-wheeler antique that had been purchased from a failed mining consortium. How those tourists had managed to penetrate so far into this broken and cratered landscape beggared belief. Amateurs had no right exploring her moon. That was a job for professionals; scientists who followed well-prepared plans and stuck to the proper safety procedures. Professionals like herself — not that she had done any exploring. She squeezed her lips together into a tight frown. Damn stupid

tourists....

As the old jalopy crawled around the rim of a crater, its rear twitched and slewed as Al fought to keep the right-hand wheels on the narrow flat between the crater and its neighbor. Then the rear tires dug in and with a jolt, they were out and back on level ground.

"They're bloody lucky, all right," she muttered, mimicking his words in her soft Texan drawl.

"But you like him. C'mon, admit it. I couldn't help but notice how well you sucked up to him when he invited us over. Two beers! He only shouted me one." Al grunted. "Lunar Getaways. Talk about taking a gamble. I wonder what it is about the Moon—?"

"I've lost two hours already! Plus the four hours of integration before that. *That* Clay has a lot to answer for."

Nancy stared at the mountain peaks silhouetted on the horizon. Blue eyes and a disarming smile — it'd take more than two beers to appease her. Besides, she was just flirting, stretching her wings to see if she still had it as a single woman. And as much as he had made her laugh, he wasn't her type. This act of stupidity only proved that. She wanted someone who was safe, reliable and consistent. Like she was. Frank had been like that and it hadn't worked out, so how could she hope to maintain a relationship with such a risk taker, especially when he would be up here on the moon while she was stuck back down on Earth?

She turned to Al. "Am I cursed or what?"

He grunted as he concentrated on the jumbled ground ahead. "We should reach them in an hour—" The old jalopy lurched as the left front wheel bounced off a boulder. "I hope. Anyway, I'm sure Frank will let you do another run before we leave."

Nancy squeezed her lips into a tight line. Why, of all people, did her ex-husband have to be the Hubble Research Institute's Director of Operations? If it had been another woman, she could have understood. Her

mouth curled up into a wry smile. Maybe he was right, maybe she was loony.

"No. You know what Frank's like. He won't stand up for anyone. That shuttle leaves tomorrow at 12:30 sharp. You can bet on it. Besides, my budget is accounted for to the last cent. There's no way I'll get any extra time."

Al tackled another pair of craters and the cabin tilted at an even more precarious angle. Nancy gritted her teeth and hung on with grim determination. If he said one more nice thing about that Clay Minsky, she would pop his helmet to shut him up. Why did he have to tell Clay about her and all her problems in the first place? They had nothing in common. Nothing.

The wheels spun and they shuddered up onto even ground for a small respite. "You can redo it when we get back," said Al. "Once the array's automated, there's no need to come back here."

"It's not the same."

Her phone rang in her helmet and she checked the caller id on her wrist. "Hi, Frank," she said, ready for the inevitable, and waited for the three-second delay to pass.

"Sorry, Nancy. They've rejected your request. We can't hold the shuttle."

"That was quick."

Al shot her a glance, frowning at her sarcasm.

"Don't be like that. I tried my best, but my hands are tied. There's been another cut in Farside's funding."

"But I have extenuating circumstances. What about this rescue? Don't we have insurance to cover that?"

"What about Lunar Getaways?" asked Al. "It's their asses, we're saving."

"Look, guys, you are coming home and that's it. The shuttle can't wait. Be on it." A click ended the call, ending her dream like it had her marriage.

Nancy clenched her fists tight in her lap. "Damn him," she muttered and stared ahead, stony-faced.

"Accept it. There's nothing you can do. It's no one's fault."

"I know." She leant back and let the anger seep away. Nothing ever perturbed Al.

She shifted in her seat to gaze at him and couldn't help but smile. Even now, as he threaded his way through another smattering of small craters, he wore the same beatific smile as when they had first met, six years before. She liked to tease and call him her balding, graying, little Buddha. He glanced at her and his smile widened into a cheeky grin.

"Actually, I'll be glad to get home," he pulled up on top of a low hill, "see Marlene and the kids. She hates me being up here, all alone with a sexy redhead. Says you need a man, but not hers."

"Marlene? Jealous?" Nancy pressed a button on the dashboard and a robot arm lowered another communications relay from the back of the old jalopy.

"No, it's more because I'm so knackered when I get home. There's just *no* satisfying you." He chuckled as Nancy burst out laughing.

"Oh Al." She blinked a tear from her eye and then reached over to squeeze his shoulder. "I'd be lost without you." She left her hand where it rested. "You're a good mate," she said in a passable Strine accent.

They drove on into a deepening silence.



As the old jalopy rolled to a stop at the lip of the crater, Nancy disconnected the seat's environmental connector from her backpack and hopped off. Clay Minsky's tire tracks skirted the edge and disappeared. Her boots kicked up a spray of dust that plumed out over where a chunk of the rim had given way. This wasn't a good place to have an accident. The cratered terrain was in a communications shadow, but Lady

Luck had smiled on Clay Minsky. A gap in the rugged peaks provided a line-of-sight lifeline to an outlying antenna in the Farside Array.

Fierce sunlight banished the shadows from the rim of the ancient crater, all the way down to and halfway across its floor and a jagged line of pitch black hid where the rest of the crater nestled against the mountains crowning the opposite wall. Its starkness matched her mood.

She looked into the crater as Al joined her. "There." She pointed at an open, four-wheeled buggy, standing a quarter of the way across the crater floor. By the look of the sets of wheel tracks radiating away from the steep slope, Clay must have had a frustrating time trying to get out.

Nancy tapped her phonepad and called the number Lunar Getaways had provided. "Clay Minsky? I'm Nancy, Nancy Lawford. From the Farside Array. We're responding to your SOS."

A jumble of excited voices erupted over the party line, like over-aged children at a birthday party. Amidst the babble, one voice managed to cajole the others into silence.

"Nancy! Am I glad to hear you!" A cheer erupted, drowning him out.

She waited for the noise to subside. Tourists? They ought to be banned. The moon should be a place for serious scientific study only, not for the idle rich to go traipsing about and destroying possible scientific evidence in their ignorance. "What is your condition?"

"We are okay, just stuck—"

"I'm hungry!"

"Please, Jasmine, don't interrupt. Nancy, I apologize for the inconvenience."

Nancy twisted to face Al and sneered as she tapped a finger against her helmet. Inconvenience? He was nuts if he thought a simple apology would placate her. Even three beers wouldn't come close. "How is your oxygen supply?" she asked Clay.

"Oxygen is A-okay. The buggy has a three-day supply. Ditto water. If we have to abandon it, our suits are rated for ten hours. Can you get us out?"

"Just a moment." She put him on hold and swung a leg out over the rim. As she planted her foot on the slope, the rubble under the dusty coating gave way and she pulled back. Just as she thought. There was no way Clay and his bunch of tourists could climb out, even in one-sixth gee.

"What do you think?"

Al peered over the rim. "We should be able to winch them out. Let's see ... it's two hundred meters, I guess. Take us about an hour, all up."

Nancy pulled out a laser range finder and pinged the crater floor. "Two hundred and seventeen. You must be getting old." Al grunted. "Okay, I'll take the cable down. I want to give Clay a piece of my mind."

Al grabbed her arm as she went to tap her phone. "Perhaps I should go down. You might say something ... undiplomatic? And since I would probably have to climb down anyway to break up a fight, I might as well go. Besides," he patted his stomach, "you're always telling me, I need to exercise."

Nancy scowled and stepped back to let him pass. "I hate it when you're right." And since Clay Minsky wasn't going anywhere, she could wait. She tapped her phone. "Lunar ... Clay, my partner, Al Boyle, will be down with a cable. We should have you out in an hour or so."

"Nancy, many thanks. I look forward to meeting you again."

"So do I." She put him on hold.

"Nancy!"

She grabbed the clip on the end of the cable and turned to Al. "One way or the other, I'm getting my two-cents worth. Then you'll see how diplomatic I can be."

With the cable attached to a ring at his waist, Al clambered over the edge and she played the cable out

at a steady rate, stopping each time he slipped and stumbled. With each slip, his feet shot out from under him, kicking up dust, and he had to catch himself with outstretched arms. Talk about hopeless. She choked back a laugh as he slipped and bounced back up like a stiff plank, sending another rivulet of rubble down the crater's slope.

He tried the kangaroo hop. He tried shuffling from side to side. But in the end, he settled on a controlled slide with the cable slowing his speed of descent. She shook her head. At this rate it would take him as long to get down as it would to haul the buggy up.

When Al was halfway down, Nancy's phone rang. "This is an automatic warning message from Solar Protector," said a calm, male voice. "The side plume on the approaching Coronal Mass Ejection is larger than expected and will intersect the Moon's southern hemisphere above latitude thirty degrees. This is a one-hour warning. Estimated duration of the event is five hours and thirty minutes. This is an automatic—"

Nancy slapped her wrist and hung up. Damn! One hour? "Al?" She hit the kill switch on the winch.

"What? Uh.... Jeez, this slope is steep. Hang on." He stopped struggling to keep his feet and ended up half sitting, half lying.

"I've just received a one-hour warning. That CME's going to hit us. Shall I haul you up?"

"We'll never make it back."

"Then we'll just have to find somewhere in the shade and hunker down."

Nancy's phone clicked and she tapped the switch. "Yes?" she snapped. There was no chance now of making up lost time and worse than that, she would have to spend a sizable chunk of the remaining precious few hours hunkered down in a small crater or under the jalopy, twiddling her thumbs.

"Nancy, is there a problem?"

"I'm afraid so, a CME will reach us in less than an hour. We won't be able to pull you out. I suggest—"

"What's a CME?" asked a baritone voice.

"Parvel, please don't break in, it's a Coronal Mass Ejection — there's a whole lot of radiation coming our way from the sun." A tide of worried voices drowned Clay out. "I thought it was supposed to miss us," he managed to say over the din.

"It was." Nancy hit the hold button. Now she had panicking tourists to contend with. "What do you want to do?" she asked Al.

"Lower me down." He waved an arm toward the other side of the crater. "We can hide in the shadow over there."

Nancy pulled down her visor and checked the sun. "You *do* realize it won't last. In a couple of hours we'll be in full sunlight."

"Yeah! But I'm not totally stupid. See how this crater's formed. It's right up against the base of that mountain. There have to be some big slabs at the base of the cliff we can hide under. You can see — at the top there — where they've broken off."

Her phone clicked again. "Okay. I'll anchor the jalopy." She started the winch and then hit the hold button. "Yes."

"Sorry about that, Nancy. They won't break in again. So, this storm, what's the duration?"

"Five and a half hours. I'm coming down to join—"

"Five and a half hours!"

"Jasmine! You promised."

"But five and a half hours? I'm hungry!"

Nancy snapped off the call. Why her? What did Lady Luck have against her? Now she had to waste her last few hours stuck with a bunch of whining tourists. As she attached drill bits to the two robot arms at the

rear of the old jalopy, her phone rang. It rang again at intermittent intervals while the drills bored into the regolith and only when the winch stopped to announce that Al was at the bottom, did the ringing cease.

Why couldn't her world be Newtonian — predictable and with everything in its place? Except, where had that got her? Barring death from radiation, her world would fall apart at 12:30 PM tomorrow as sure as the sun rose. And then to waste her last few precious hours on a wild goose chase, well, a certain Clay Minsky was going to be on the end of some choice words. With a soulful sigh, she clipped onto the winch cable, stepped over the lip and began to ease herself down.

A figure in a smooth white spacesuit, and a head taller than Al, put out an arm and caught Nancy as she slid onto the crater floor. "Glad you could make it," Clay said on her channel. "Al tells me you're a tad upset."

"Clay says we can ride over on his buggy." Al turned toward it, but stopped when she didn't move. "Nancy?"

"A tad upset?"

"Nancy, please? This isn't a good time."

"I guess that's an understatement," said Clay. "Please, accept my apologies."

"That's it! You're sorry?" Nancy pushed his arm away and stepped back. "You *ruin* my data. Then I have to come *all* the way out here to rescue you. And now I'm going to be stuck here for another five or six hours with you and a bunch of *tourists* who have nothing better to do than waste their money getting themselves into trouble — are you laughing? Do you think this is funny?"

"Al said you could be feisty. I like that in a woman."

"I warned you she had quite a temper."

Nancy turned on Al. "Of all the stupid cliches, I do not have—"

Al jabbed a finger at her. "Are you finished? We still have to get to safety." He turned to hop away. "See? What did I tell you," he muttered to Clay.

Nancy stared after Al, her mouth open, but too stunned to speak. What had gotten into him? He never ever got riled.

Clay took her arm and guided her toward the buggy. "Shall we?"

Nancy snapped her mouth shut and wrenched her arm free. Fuming, she marched after Al, kicking up an angry spray of dust with each skipping step. It was too much. Everything she had worked for — it was all going down the drain. And now, *tourists* were going to get her Moon and trample all over it, exploring all the places she would never get to explore and discovering all the wonders she would never get to discover. She sniffed and blinked away a tear.

Damn! How do you wipe your eyes when you've got a helmet on?

She caught up to Al and grabbed his arm. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"Nothing." Then he hesitated, but didn't turn round. "You don't have to quit, I thought you were a fighter. Marlene's going to be most upset."

Nancy sighed and her anger drained away. So that was it. She patted his arm. "Do you think I want to? But with Frank? Having to work with him every day ... it would be awkward."

"Yeah, I guess so." At last he turned to face her. "But running away won't solve anything." He turned and continued on toward the buggy.

Clay caught up with her so that they hopped along in sync. "Please, I really am sorry. When I realized we were going over the edge, I only had an instant to broadcast a Mayday, so I sent it over all channels. I had to. In fact, until you arrived, I thought we were dead for sure."

Nancy whirled around to tell Clay just what she thought, lost her balance and stumbled into him. He

caught her in his arms. That was great! Now she was throwing herself at him and she wasn't even drunk. Not that she had gotten close to getting drunk that time at Lunar Getaways; it *was* light beer. Maybe Al was right about her running away. But what choice did she have? She had tried all the proper channels and had even gone over Frank's head, and still the answer was the same. Just what did Al expect her to do? She didn't have the resources to take stupid risks like this entrepreneur holding her could. How come he got to stay on the moon when she had to go home?

"What on Earth are you doing in this area?" she snapped. "You must know it's dangerous. And what about the safety of your guests? What kind of company do you run?"

Clay stiffened and let her go. "I'm very careful and conscientious when it comes to safety. It's just," he held out his hands, "these aren't my usual guests. Jasmine wanted to go exploring for water in some of the craters and when she didn't find any she wanted to check out along the cliffs bordering the crater field. I didn't think a few extra hours would be a problem; the latest reports had that CME missing us by a wide margin. Unfortunately, I didn't receive the warning about the existence of that side plume until we got back into communications range. I realized it would take too long to get back if I went the long way round and I didn't want to be out here if the plume did hit — which it wasn't supposed to anyway.

"So I only had one option and that was to cut through the crater field. The trouble is, the maps don't tell you how stable the craters are. I thought I could squeeze through, but then the rim gave way and we slid part way in. We nearly tipped over and I had to turn down slope. That's how we got stuck."

He proffered an arm toward the buggy and she bounded past him. That still didn't excuse him for ruining her day.

Her phone rang and she tapped her wrist. "This is your five-minute warning from Solar Protector. A Coronal Mass Ejection is about to hit your location. Please take cover immediately. Estimated duration—"

She killed the call.

Al waved at her to hurry from where he held onto a roll bar on the side of the buggy. "Come on!"

The three tourists turned in their seats to stare, as she bounded over, and the smallest held up a small box. "Guess what I've got in here? A piece of ice. I found it! Woohoo! Everyone's going to be ripped when I get back." Then her voice faltered. "We are going to get back, aren't we?"

"Of course we are," Clay said, sounding confident.

Nancy shook her head and climbed on the other side while he took the driver's seat. So this Jasmine had found a dusting of ice in the bottom of a small crater that had never felt the sun's warmth, and it hadn't occurred to her or Clay to leave it in situ for others — scientists — to study. Nancy frowned at the unfairness. Scientists like her. As the buggy eased toward the far side of the crater, a warning chime sounded in her helmet. The old jalopy had picked up a sharp increase in the background radiation, but they crossed the black divide into safety. Nancy raised her sun visor and switched to Lunar Getaways' channel. It was time to give them a piece of her mind, but in the faint sibilance of the channel's background hiss she felt their tension and realized that, despite Clay's assurance, they were all too aware of the danger they were in. It hit her then. So was she.

How many times had she told Al that the moon was no place to gamble? And yet here she was on a fool's mission.

Clay twisted to look up at her with that disarming smile of his lit up in his helmet's internal light. Even though his eyes betrayed his relief, he still radiated that sense of confidence. It didn't matter what curve balls Lady Luck threw his way, he was still willing to get back up on his feet and up the ante. Maybe that was what she had found so attractive about him that time at Lunar Getaways; he didn't take no for an answer. When they got back, she might let him buy — no! With a scowl, she forced the thought away. This

was all *his* fault.

The buggy's lights cut through the darkness and Clay picked his way around small craters and scattered blocks of rock until he reached the crater wall. Next to a jumbled heap of boulders, he swung the buggy around and reversed under an overhanging slab that stuck out.

"This looks like our best bet," he said. Nancy ran the light from her helmet torch along its length and bit her lip.

"Yeah." Al shone a torch back and forth in either direction and sighed as if to agree. "I was hoping for something a bit better." He jumped down and hopped off to explore other rock heaps along the base of the cliff.

"We won't all fit under here," said a sultry French accent. The three tourists clambered out and wandered after Al, their babbling filling the channel.

"Hey! Stay here." Clay tried to wave them back and then turned to cock his eyebrows at Nancy as if to say, "See! It's not my fault." Nancy pursed her lips as she stared after them. Stupid tourists. "Mind if we switch to your channel?" Clay asked.

She nodded and hit a button on her wristpad. "Why don't you stop them?"

"There's only one of me and three of them. And if they're not happy, I'm out of business." He clambered out of his seat. "I better go after them."

Nancy watched his torch-beam dance across the shattered clumps of rock from eons-old landslides. Why were the good-looking ones such jerks? Talk about bad luck. She sighed as the last dregs of her anger faded away. He wasn't really a jerk. Jerks didn't buy redheads a couple of beers and not expect anything in return. No, her problems had started well before and if Clay Minsky hadn't ruined her day, something else would have, so there was no point in crying over it. And Al was right. Her experiment could be run again at

any time once they were back on Earth.

Back on Earth.... She blinked back a tear and then felt a new determination envelop her. She only had a few hours left. Why waste them?

“Wait!” She jumped down and hopped after him. “This will be my last chance to do any exploring.”

“Al said you were leaving tomorrow. Shame. I could have made Farside part of my itinerary.” He let out a dispirited sigh. “But it seems everyone is departing. The Chinese are scaling back. The Russians are pulling out — again. I hear Lunar II is automating like Farside. That’s bad for me. I’ve managed to offset some of my costs, shipping supplies on their shuttles. So ... that leaves what, a dozen research teams? Sixty, seventy people? That’s not many.”

Nancy faltered as she began to clamber up a rock pile to follow him. “There will be one less when I’m gone.”

At the edge of the pile, Clay stopped to let her catch up. “Al said you don’t want to leave. I can understand that. It’s been a dream of mine to live on the Moon for as long as I can remember. From when I was a kid. And look at me? Here I am.”

Nancy skipped from rock to rock as she picked her way over the pile of car-sized boulders. “Unfortunately, I don’t have any say in it.”

In the distance, four lights bobbed next to the base of the cliff, then two jiggled and rose up its side. What on Earth were they doing? She skipped past Clay.

He chuckled. “When I was a teenager, I used to lie out under the stars and watch the Moon come up. My girlfriends thought I was being romantic, but all I could think about was being up here. Now, here I am, on the Moon.” His voice turned gruff. “It would be nice to have someone to watch the Earth come up with.”

She stopped and snorted a laugh as she turned round. Was he trying to chat her up? “The only thing

you'll see rising here is the sun." She glanced at the shadow's edge, creeping closer. "And that might be the last thing you see."

"Have faith! Life's all about taking risks. You should ask my customers. Let's see what trouble they're up to now." He took off and bounded past her.

"What do you mean?" Nancy turned around and skipped after him. Two of the lights had disappeared.

"They're potential investors, here to see if I'm worth the risk. They hold my future in their hands. That's why they can get away with murder. Shall we switch to Lunar Getaways?"

"Okay." Nancy switched channels and voices burst forth in her helmet.

"—try stopping her!" the baritone voice snapped.

"But you are her father," said the French accent.

"Parvel?" Clay called out, "Miranda? What's Jasmine done this time?"

"She has gone up into there." The French accent pointed at a triangular darkness about three meters up at the top of a steep slope. "With that AI guy."

"AI?" asked Nancy. It wasn't like him to take risks.

"Nancy Lawford, meet Parvel Khan, self-confessed bon vivant, and his lovely bride—"

"Miranda," said the French accent. She leant up against Parvel and draped an arm around his neck. "I am his—"

"Mistress!" Parvel chuckled.

"Wife!" Miranda corrected him. "I was his mistress," she said to Nancy.

"This is our honeymoon." Parvel leant toward Nancy and whispered in a loud aside. "She used to be Jasmine's tutor."

Miranda sighed. "Tutor, personal assistant, mistress, and now wife. It is a career path."

"So what is next, my lovely?"

"Why? Wealthy divorcee, of course."

Parvel burst out laughing. "Just like my other wives!"

"You shouldn't have run off like that," said Clay.

"We had to go after Jasmine," said Parvel.

Miranda pushed off Parvel and folded her arms. "You should not have brought her along on our honeymoon."

"But you wanted her to come!" Parvel snorted. "Very funny. The two of you are thicker than thieves."

Clay sighed and glanced at Nancy. "I wish you would all listen to me, especially when I stress the importance of safety—"

"*You* said it would take a meteor to puncture our suits!" said another voice. Nancy looked up and saw Jasmine's head poking out of the opening and staring down at Clay with an accusing pout.

Al's helmet appeared over the top of her. "It's not hard to climb up," he said.

"Al! Just what do you think you're doing?"

He shrugged. "Someone has to keep an eye on her. Anyway, there's enough room for all of us, perhaps a bit of a squeeze. We can't quite stand, but we can sit. It looks safe."

"What do you think?" Clay asked Nancy.

Al pointed at the encroaching sunlight. "We have to hurry." Only a narrow ribbon of black offered protection and its width was fast shrinking. That settled it.

"We don't have any choice." Nancy reached up and grabbed a narrow ledge of rock, ready to climb up. "But I want to check this cave out first and make sure it's safe."

Clay grasped her waist and hoisted her up.

"I'm quite capable, thank you." Still, the touch of his hands on her waist caused her voice to catch in her throat. Al might have joked, but there were times when the loneliness got to her. Frank hadn't understood her needs, but then he wasn't her man in the moon.

"You know," Clay teased, "I like loony women."

Nancy snorted as she scrambled up to the cave entrance and then tried to suppress a wry smile. Was nothing sacred? Just what *had* Al told them? She shone her torch into what was more of a triangular crevice with the top snapped shut and brought her beam to rest on Al's grinning face at the far end where he held onto Jasmine's arm. "I guess this will do," she said as she turned on her side and eased in.

"*Please!*" Jasmine pleaded. "I won't go far, I promise!"

"No," Al said with the voice of an exasperated father and Nancy looked up to see him pull Jasmine back.

Nancy crawled up beside him. "Anything wrong?"

Jasmine jerked on her arm as she sulked. "He won't let me go through here!" she huffed. Nancy leant over Al and her beam lit up a small gap that dropped away beyond Jasmine.

"No way, young lady! You're in Auntie Nancy's bad books already and believe me," Al glanced at Nancy and gave her a cheeky wink, "you don't want to cross her."

Nancy scowled at him. "Auntie Nancy—!"

"Oh!" said Miranda. "There isn't much room."

"Move up, dear. We have to get Clay in."

"He can crawl over us," Miranda whispered, "so he can sit next to Nancy. I think he likes her!"

"She *can* hear you." Clay hefted himself into the entrance. "We both can."

"Clear as a bell," said Nancy.

Parvel chuckled as Miranda burst out giggling. Nancy sighed. Was this some sort of practical joke? It

had Al's fingerprints all over it. She pursed her lips and shuffled up against Al to make some room. Let him have his fun.

Clay clambered over Parvel and Miranda. As he squeezed in beside Nancy, he tried to put his arm around her shoulder. "You don't mind, do you? It's just, there isn't much room."

Nancy squirmed but it was no good. "My environment pack is too bulky."

"I thought it might be." Clay pulled his arm back, disappointment in his voice.

"Let me try." She put her arm around his shoulder, and by twisting, maneuvered him into a position so that his helmet rested against her shoulder. "Is that better?"

"Much."

She studied his face — what she could see of it through his faceplate — high cheekbone, firm nose, half of a lazy smile on a generous mouth. It was the face no one could stay angry at. Nancy bit her lip. If she wanted to be totally honest, Clay wasn't the real cause of her anger. Not even the tourists. Not even Frank, as much as he deserved it. No, fate was to blame — plain bad luck. She had lost some data, so what? The universe wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. And now Fate had thrown her together with Clay. Was that really bad luck?

"The two of you look very cozy!" Miranda called out.

Nancy froze. Without thinking, she had been massaging and squeezing Clay's arm.

"Don't tease her," Al said with a smirk in his voice. "We've been up here for three months. Her, a single woman with time running out, and me, a married man who can't be tempted, it's no wonder she's thrown herself at the first guy to come along."

"Al!" Nancy's cheeks burned as laughter broke out around her, except from Clay.

"Hmmm." Clay looked back at the entrance. "Houston," he announced, "we still have a problem."

"What?" asked Al.

"Ah," Nancy glanced past him, "I think I see."

Clay twisted round. "Can we get in any further? We're going to get direct sunlight quite a way in."

"So?" asked Miranda.

"That means the radiation can penetrate in here," said Nancy."

"We can get through here!"

"Jasmine!" Al grabbed for her, but she slipped his grasp and bolted. He snorted and eased his way into the opening. "She's just like Darlene."

"His youngest daughter," said Nancy, "and his favorite. She's a spoilt brat," she called out after Al, but the rock cut off his laugh as he disappeared into the opening.

Parvel sighed. "If she isn't eating, she is always getting into trouble. She has no sense at all."

"Like her father?" Clay suggested.

"Is that what you are hoping?" Parvel asked in a light voice. "That I have no sense and will invest in your proposed casino?"

Nancy pushed Clay off her and sat up. "Casino? I thought you wanted to build a tourist resort?"

"I do. With a casino and more."

"He wants to build Las Vegas on the Moon," said Parvel.

"Luna Vegas!" Miranda clapped her hands. "I just thought of it. What a great name!"

Nancy frowned. "But gambling?" Dumb tourists trampling its pristine environment was one thing, but what would gamblers care about the Moon?

"It's always worked in the past," said Clay. "The clientele I cater for are not only wealthy, they also love to gamble and they love exotic locations. And there's nowhere more exotic than the Moon."

"Exotic is fun, for a while, but you need more." Miranda sighed. "Parties, new people to meet, romance." Parvel sniffed. "What are you talking about? I am very romantic. You can ask my ex-wives."

Miranda chuckled. "I did."

"But how many people can afford to come here?" It didn't make economic sense. Nancy tried to work it out in her head. The transportation costs alone were astronomical. And then they had to bring all their food, water and air.

"There are enough to kick it off," said Clay. "Then, if I can get sponsorship for some tournaments and draw in a few high rollers, I should attract more investors."

"With more flights," Parvel added, "the transport costs drop and more customers come, which leads to more flights—"

"And the costs drop some more," said Clay. "It's a continual cycle until ordinary tourists can afford to come."

"That is what Clay does," said Parvel. "He finds the location and starts up. If it looks sound, investors like me come in. And when it's grown to become self-sustaining, we sell it for a handsome profit and move on. Only...."

"I haven't sold you on it yet."

"You need to get your costs down," said Parvel, "and I'm afraid, with organizations like Hubble cutting back on flights, I don't see how you can make this work. As for putting a whole city underground, why, just doing a casino and hotel is more expensive than building a space station."

"It's that old chicken and egg problem." Clay shrugged and squeezed his lips into a wan smile. "I need the high rollers to draw attention and attract investors so I can build my casino, but I need the casino to attract the high rollers." Then he chuckled. "Maybe the Hubble Research Institute would like to invest. That

way my casino could fund your array and you wouldn't have to leave."

Nancy closed her eyes and considered what Frank would say. "I doubt it. All the funding is going into the new space-based arrays."

"Well, you can always come and work for me."

Nancy leant back and shook her head. "And be a glorified card dealer? No thanks." She reached out to caress the rock wall. "I've always wanted to be a scientist. There's so much to discover.... Just imagine what these rocks could tell us?"

"What if I create a new position for you? How about resident scientist? The pay's not much and the way things are going job security isn't high. What do you say?"

Scientist in residence? It had a nice ring to it, but what kind of science could she do in a tourist resort — a small tourist resort? Still, it meant she could delay leaving a little longer. Nancy caught herself smiling at Clay and looked away. No. She was a real scientist—

"Hey!"

Nancy rolled over and her torch-beam picked out Jasmine's helmet, poking up. "Guess what we've discovered? It's amazing! You have to come and see it." She went to duck back the way she had come, but Nancy caught her arm. "Oh no you don't." Jasmine frowned, then clambered out backwards.

Al followed behind her. "There's a low tunnel through here. It looks like a fracture zone."

"And it leads onto this big round tunnel!" Jasmine's voice bubbled over the comm link. "I can't wait to explore it. Al, you're blocking the way."

Nancy held on as Jasmine tried to pull free. "If anyone's going to do any exploring from now on, it's me." She felt a sudden exhilaration, a release as if from the straightjacket of conformity. All her training said this was wrong. The risk was too great. But if that were the case, no one would have climbed Everest.

This was her one chance to climb her Everest and she wasn't going to miss it.

"That's right," said Al. "We'll—"

"I wasn't including you." Nancy eased herself under Jasmine and turned to Al. "Now show me this tunnel."

"It's not fair!" Jasmine whined. "I found it."

Nancy's pulse quickened. This was what she had always dreamed of from when she had first stared up at the Moon in wonder. She pulled herself after Al, dipping down and twisting sideways to get through into a horizontal crevice with a wide, ovoid cross-section. Shards of rock threatened from both sides, but the ragged ceiling and rubble on the floor left a safe path down the center. The small fountains of dust that the tips of Al's boots kicked up, arced up and over in graceful parabolas and scattered her torch-beam. She could just make out her hands, stretched out before her. At least the low gravity made the going easy. She clawed her way along with fingers and boots to where the crevice broke through into the side of a tubular tunnel, big enough to stand in. She sucked in a breath and tried to calm her thumping heart.

Clay crawled out from behind her. "Wow!" he managed in a breathless voice. "This is incredible."

"It must be a lava tube," said Nancy. She stroked the smooth lumps and nodules on the wall and tried to imagine what their texture would feel like against her fingertips.

Jasmine slid in, followed by Miranda and Parvel, and tried to push past Al where the tunnel sloped away, but he caught hold. "Wait!"

She twisted her arm, trying to break free. "I'm not a child, you know!"

"Then stop acting like one."

She pulled back and hunched down beside Miranda. "He's worse than dad," she huffed.

"Thank you!" Parvel patted Al's shoulder, then dropped into a sitting position next to Jasmine. "Now,

young woman! It's time you started acting sensible, like Nancy."

Nancy stared down the tube and didn't feel like acting sensible at all. Sensible meant going by the book. They should stay here and then report this when they got back so that others could come and explore while following all the correct procedures and with a proper plan in place. And back on Earth, their reports could rub it in, what she had missed out on. All because she was sensible.

She pushed off toward where the tube curved away. "I'm just going to have a look. You should all stay here. I won't go far."

"I'll go with you," said Clay. "For safety."

The tube curved left, then right, and dipped at a gentle grade before blackness marked its end. At the edge, Nancy knelt down on one knee and played her torch-beam out into an immense cavern as Clay rested his hand on her shoulder to steady her. Her breath caught in her throat. It was a cathedral and she was the first to see it. She wanted to laugh and cry all at the same time. Did Columbus feel like this when he discovered the Americas? Her torch-beam danced over where the adjacent wall curved away and she picked out great fissures that split the rock all the way down from the arched ceiling far above to the jumbled rock not far below.

From behind, more torch-beams joined in and tiny dots played over the wall on the far side.

"This is incredible," Parvel murmured.

"Can I get through?" Jasmine demanded.

"No," said Miranda.

"It must be an ancient lava reservoir," said Al, "probably drained billions of years ago when the maria were formed. At a guess, I'd say it must be ... oh, a kilometer across."

Nancy shook her head. So much for them staying put. She pulled out her laser range finder and pinged

her spotlight. "Eight thirty-seven," she read off. "That's the last time I listen to you, Al."

Clay chuckled. "I would hate to buy real estate off you."

Al shrugged. "It's hard to judge, but I guess that makes the roof about two, three-hundred meters up."

"It looks like the walls must have collapsed." Nancy played her torchlight over the floor. "Maybe when the crater was formed. Look at all the rubble. Some of those slabs are huge." As her beam played over the drab rock, something gleamed for an instant. "What's that?"

She jerked her beam back and eased it back and forth along the base of a pile of boulders and shattered rock. And stopped. "There." Something glistened in her torchlight and her mouth went dry.

"Let's find out." Clay played his torch-beam a pile of broken rock heaped against the wall just below them. Halfway down, a large slab bridged the gap to the boulders.

Nancy picked her way down, then knelt and brushed away some pieces of rock. Her hand trembled. All the explorers and scientists she admired, they'd all had a moment like this and looked upon something that no one else had — a discovery that had changed the world. Her dreams, ever since childhood, had been filled with moments like this. A wish she thought would never come true. "It looks like glass," she managed to mutter.

Clay squatted next to her and ran a finger across the clear surface. "No," he whispered, his voice filled with awe. "It's ice." He looked up to stare into her eyes and his hands trembled as he grabbed her arms. "It's ice! Can you believe it? This is worth more than gold or diamonds."

He let go and brushed away more rock and dust. "It's everywhere," he muttered, twisting and brushing away more debris. "It's like this cavern was flooded and then froze. All this rock, it's sitting on top."

"Perhaps," Nancy caressed her discovery with her trembling, gloved hand, "when the crater was formed the heat must have melted an aquifer and the water flowed through the fractures into here."

"I thought the moon was supposed to be bone dry."

"That's the general consensus, although there is a growing opinion that some may have been trapped deep inside when the Moon formed." She rapped the hard surface with her knuckles. It felt solid, a hundreds-of-meters deep kind of solid. "The latest theory is that if the Earth's water was delivered by comets, some must have hit the early Moon and their cores may have been buried deep enough to trap some water. Seismic studies have hinted there might be ice, but if there is, its kilometers deep. This must come from—"

"You know what this means, don't you?" Clay said, his voice a hushed whisper filled with excitement.

"This is proof!"

"*No.* This means I can reduce my costs. I won't have to ship water, or oxygen."

"And rocket fuel! We can fuel shuttles from the Moon."

The way to Clay's dream lay open and so too was her way back — if the price to come back meant being a tourist. Then so be it. She broke into a grin as Clay picked up a rock shard and smashed it into the ice, sending tiny chips flying. Stupid tourists? Why not?

"Just think." He grunted and took another swipe. "We'll be rich. Lunar tycoons."

"We?" Nancy asked. But Clay didn't answer as he chipped away at the ice.



AI squeezed through the airlock's small doorway and stood to the side like a doorman to welcome their guests. "Welcome to Farside Tourist Resort," he announced in a deep formal voice as the tourists filed into the control room. Nancy studied them as they squeezed in. The rush from her discovery had faded now that she was back in the real world, but there was still a background buzz she was sure would never leave

her.

Jasmine pulled off her helmet and thrust it at Al. "Look after this well, my good man, and there will be a generous tip waiting for you. In fact I'll double it if you can get me something to eat straight away."

Al bowed and proffered an arm. "Follow me, m'lady." Jasmine giggled at Al's solemn face as he squeezed past Miranda.

"I must say, it is quite small," said Miranda.

Nancy leant past her and poked Parvel to stop him pressing against the main panel and inadvertently pressing some switches. "Please be careful." Once again she had responsibilities and people to answer to. With a grunt, he moved. "Normally there are only two of us here. I'm afraid you can't stay long. The station isn't designed to cater for so many people."

"We'll see what this water is like and then we'll go." Clay turned to Miranda. "I hope this makes you appreciate Lunar Getaways' accommodation."

"Have I ever complained?"

"Not in words." He held up a bag of ice chips to Nancy. "The kitchen?"

She led him through into a narrow room where, with a feral intensity, Jasmine tore at a package. Nancy pointed at a tattered box with a window in its side. "Microwave." She rummaged through a cupboard and pulled out a green bowl. "This should do."

"You eat this!" Jasmine pulled a face and forced herself to swallow. "And I thought we had it tough."

Nancy studied Clay as he filled the bowl half full with ice, put it in the microwave and pressed "Defrost". There was an earnestness and an intriguing delight in his face as he stared through the window, watching the ice melt. "That cavern is incredible. What a great place to build a city. Can't you see it?"

"Luna Vegas?"

Clay chuckled. "Great name, isn't it?"

It sounded like blasphemy and yet.... Nancy stared at the bowl, turning round and pondered the future. All the scientists were pulling out with the downturn in the world economy. Science on its own wasn't enough. She sucked in her lips. Maybe Clay's dream *was* the future. But what would the moon be like with tourists tramping everywhere? Alive. And her cathedral was too magnificent not to be shared. So long as it wasn't desecrated. She glanced at Clay. "But if you're mining the ice...?"

"I'll leave the surface intact. We can drill down and mine there." He turned to Nancy, his eyes shining with a religious fervor. "Just imagine it. A ring of hotels and casinos ... plazas overlooking a frozen lake lit from below. Every building a dazzling neon display ... laser light shows dancing on the ceiling. Can you see it? Thousands of delighted tourists skating on the lake. We can do it!"

"We?"

"Don't you want to?"

Nancy hesitated. "But I'm an astronomer. What about Farside? With all those shuttles, there could be electronic interference. And the vibrations from the mining—"

"Nancy." Clay touched her hand, caressed her fingers through his gloves. Her skin tingled. "I thought you wanted to stay. I thought we shared...." His hand slipped away. The microwave pinged before she could reply.

"Uh," she swallowed to clear her throat, "I ... we don't have many cups, but I've got some more bowls. They'll have to do."

"Oh! I can't eat this, I need a drink."

Clay doled out the precious liquid and passed the cups and bowls out. He went to take a sip, but Nancy stopped his arm. "Are you sure it's safe? You don't know what might be dissolved in it. I think you should

send it to a lab and get it analyzed first.”

“Nancy,” Clay stared deep into her eyes, “sometimes you have to take a risk.” He put the cup to his lips.

“*Water?* Is that all you’ve got?”

“Jasmine!” Parvel cried out.

Nancy jerked round to see Jasmine lower her empty cup.

“What?” she asked with a touch of tremolo in her bravado.

Clay chuckled, took a sip and swirled the water around in his mouth. “Mmmm.” With a triumphant smile, he swallowed and turned to the others. “It has a unique taste.” He raised his cup. “Try it.”

The others hesitated and then, looking at each other, took a sip. Even Al. Nancy raised her bowl to her lips — it was crazy. What if it poisoned them? Someone should refrain just in case. It was a pointless risk—

She sucked in a sharp breath. Look where not taking risks had got her. Life, she realized, was all about taking risks. She wouldn’t be standing on the Moon if others hadn’t taken risks. And the risk she had taken in that cave, she had never felt so *alive*. She took a sip and swirled it around in her mouth. There was no bitter taste, no metallic sensation. Nothing odd.

With a so-be-it shrug to Clay, she swallowed. “It tastes like ordinary water. What’s so special about it?”

“No, Clay is right!” Parvel tipped his cup to Clay.

“It tastes of the Moon,” said Clay.

“Imagine what people will pay for that unique taste,” said Parvel.

“Spring water from the Moon,” added Miranda, “I love it.”

“I know!” Clay’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “We can call it Luna Aqua! Think of the marketing potential.”

“But who would want to drink water from the Moon?” Nancy looked from Clay to Parvel. Ship water to

the Earth? It was like shipping ice to Alaska to sell to the Eskimos. Crazy. "It *tastes* like water, *and* it would be incredibly expensive."

"Precisely," said Parvel. "The demand will be huge for such a rare product, and we will control the supply."

Nancy frowned at Clay. Were people really that stupid? She was a scientist, used to dealing with rational people. Skeptical and not easily taken in.

Clay winked at her. "Hell, with the profit we'll make, I think we could afford to build you an array much better than this place. Whatever you want." He raised his cup to her. "How does the Nancy Lawford Astronomical Array sound?"

Nancy blinked and held her breath. Her own array? She could stay here? With Clay? Her phone rang.

"Nancy? It's Frank. We're receiving some unusual environmental telemetry. Elevated CO₂, H₂O, temperature. Is there a problem?"

"No, Frank, just some visitors."

"Well, keep a tab on those levels. Are you packed? Your shuttle will be arriving soon." His voice took on an optimistic note. "I can't promise anything yet, but I might be able to squeeze some extra funds to make up for your lost time. Are you ready to come home?"

She glanced over Clay's shoulder at Al, looking for an answer. Al shrugged and offered a wry smile. Only she could make the decision.

Sometimes you have to take a risk.

What risk?

"I am home," she said to Frank and hung up. With that she took another sip. "Mmmm, it does taste special." She smiled and raised her bowl to Clay.

Reality Bytes

Where am I? How did I get here? I looked down at the gun in my hand and frowned. It was a type that I don't normally use. It fired antique bullets — an ancient Smith and Wesson by the look of it. I couldn't say why, but it felt odd, disturbing, heavy in a way that didn't seem real. It lacked *credibility*.

And the room had the same disturbing qualities. Some obsessive had put too much effort into detailing the tattered wallpaper that stained the walls in a green and white floral pattern, and I could just make out faint, reddish swirls imprinted on the brown carpet, possibly roses. A dirty window, wooden-framed with white, peeling paint, let in a depressing pall of gloom. And the smell — musty? That's the closest I could describe it.

This wasn't my reality.

An amateur must have designed this scenario. Even the body, lying beneath the window and slumped against the wall, lacked any flair. Flat, greasy hair hung down over a pallid skull-face, shading what would no doubt be dull, sunken eyes. But vivid red stained his dull white shirt, all the way to the floor where it still seeped into the carpet. The stain grew before my eyes. Who would have thought there could be so much blood in such a skinny frame?

Maybe a sick hacker had hijacked me. A terrorist perhaps? It happens, so I've heard. But I've never really followed the news reports.

No, that didn't make sense. As far as I could tell, I had killed someone, but whether I had done so willingly or under sufferance, I couldn't say. I didn't know this man.

My arm began to ache from holding the gun. How odd!

Never, in all the gung-ho scenarios I've played out, have my arms ever ached like this, and I've hefted some pretty mean pieces, heavy in the max — laser cannons, rifles with armor-piercing shells, ground-to-air multiple-warhead missiles — and carried them long distances. I got tired, but this was different. This pain penetrated to my bones.

While I thought about what to do with the gun — dump it out the window or let loose a few shots — the door behind me burst open. Instead of spinning around and nailing whoever was there between the eyes, my body turned in slow motion. Two men crashed into me. The gun spilled from my hand, but that didn't stop them getting in a few cheap blows.

And when they hit me, it hurt, it *really* hurt. Now I've been bruised from head to foot, had my guts ripped open, been blown up and crunched, but none of that *felt* like this. I wanted to throw up.

After a couple of extra blows for good measure, they hauled me to my feet. The guy with the bull neck, piggy eyes and mono-brow held me up by my jacket lapels and his partner cuffed my hands behind me. So, I was the fall guy in an old-fashion crime, mystery-thriller.

It wasn't my favorite genre and I would rather be the main guy doing all the beating up ... it still didn't click. A system glitch perhaps? Maybe I had been inadvertently switched to someone else's scenario. That could explain it. Time to stop.

"Open sesame." Nothing. Weird. "Open *sesame*," I said again. This was my personal out, my "get out of jail" card. The scenario should pause and my personal interface appear. Only SysAdmin interrupts had a higher priority.

“Open sesame?” My hirsute friend smirked over my right shoulder at his partner. “What d’ya think, Mikey? He thinks he’s still connected.”

Mikey grunted. “Dunno, Al. Sound’s a croc to me.”

Al’s words didn’t make sense. He smiled at my frown and pulled me up until I was forced to stand on tiptoe, my forehead to his chin. “Paul Edward Hudson, you are under arrest for the murder of Jarred Preston.” He continued with an old-fashioned spiel about my rights, but I stopped listening.

That name — Paul Edward Hudson — it rang a bell. I hadn’t been called that in a long, long time, not since I left ... oh no!

Al must have read my expression. His face lit up with a grin. “Yes, Mr Hudson ... welcome to the real world.”

I felt naked, vulnerable, lost. “But ... but that’s not possible.” I wheezed the words. My lungs still had trouble working.

“Let’s go.”

Al released my jacket and, before I could sink to the floor, they each grabbed an arm and hauled me out into a corridor with just as much charm as the room. We entered an ancient elevator and Mikey jabbed a sorry excuse for a button. The elevator creaked and lurched, then began to descend. At last, my lungs felt like working again and I sucked in precious air just in time to breathe a sigh of relief as the elevator jerked to a stop and bounced twice before the door shuddered open.

An odd thought occurred to me.

Where were the cops — the uniformed variety? Why weren’t they swarming all around the place and doing what cops normally do, like accidentally destroying vital evidence? And for that matter, where were forensics, and the yellow tape to isolate the crime scene? Didn’t they do those things in the real world any

more? Al and Mikey dragged me out through the building entrance and down some chipped steps to the cracked sidewalk, where two cars were parked. The one to the left was at an angle with one wheel up on the sidewalk and a door thrown open. The car behind sat neatly parallel to the curb. They dragged me over to the neat car.

A cold breeze cut through my jacket's defenses and I shivered. At that moment the sun took the opportunity to pop out from behind a dark cloud and dazzle me. I squinted and sneezed violently, a staccato volley that lasted a minute or so and left me with watery eyes and a runny nose, and nowhere and no way to wipe it.

Everything about the experience only made me despise reality all the more. It was so *unnatural*.

Al gave me a dirty look as I wiped my nose on my sleeve and snuck a peek each way. The street was empty and the only things in plentiful supply were the dilapidated buildings that ran along either side of the street. There were no cars; no rubbish blowing in the wind or trapped in the small alcoves in the building facades; no graffiti; no curious onlookers leaning out of windows — just a well-kept, decaying ghost town.

A jerk interrupted my reverie.

Al shoved me into the back seat, next to Mikey, and climbed into the front. "Downtown," he ordered. The car pulled out from behind the first and out of the corner of my eye I caught movement in the other as it jounced off the curve to follow us.

They certainly didn't act like cops. A bit late than never I asked, "Can I see some identification?" Mikey looked out the window and smirked. Al barked a laugh. "You're not cops," I decided. "What about the body? And ... and how did you know who I was? And the other guy? If you knew I was going to kill him, why didn't you stop me? This is all wrong. How did I get here? I can't remember anything. I ... I want a lawyer — I demand a lawyer! You can't—"

“Shut up,” said Mikey. He didn’t say it loud and he didn’t look at me, but the authority in his tone stopped me dead in my tracks. I was scum on the soles of his shoes. I stared ahead, at where the street bisected the horizon, fighting back tears. The buildings were mostly one or two stories now, interspersed with vacant lots.

“Technically,” said Al, “we’re members of WebPol, but in name only. We’re actually SysOp agents — Anti Terrorist Unit.”

“Never heard of them.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Al, “we try to keep a low profile. We hunt terrorists who drop out to escape being captured.”

“I’m not a terrorist!”

“Aren’t you?” Mikey asked. “How about murderer?”

“I ... I was set up.”

“Not according to our video surveillance,” said Al. “We tracked you from your pod into the ruins—”

“Where you retrieved the gun,” added Mikey.

“And we followed you to that building—”

“Where you shot Jarred Preston.”

“It’s all recorded. We had bugs following you.”

I felt a chill despite the warm air circulating.

The buildings petered out. We crested a hill and a great swathe of temperate forest, peppered with tall redwoods, greeted us. Off to the left, it merged into manicured parkland dominated by a crystal dome — a giant diamond embedded in green, and its facets glittered in the morning light as the scudding clouds fractured the sun’s rays. The car veered onto a connector, which merged with a raised highway that

straddled the forest and led straight to the dome.

Al sighed. "Ah! Home sweet home." Our little convoy accelerated until the tangle of green below became a blur, and after a few minutes, we reached the parkland and the highway dropped down to ground level. We shot through grassland, spotted with groves of low bushes amidst stands of elegant elms and firs. The dome towered above us and we arrowed toward it like the winning sperm about to meet its lucky ovum. A black dot appeared where the highway intercepted the dome and grew rapidly to become a semicircular, black maw.

It swallowed us and we plunged into darkness.

A diffuse, white glow appeared, dim at first, and grew to a gentle aura that emanated from the tunnel walls and the road — a cocoon against the blackness as we drove deeper inside.

The hairs on the back of my neck bristled. What had been such a joy to behold outside revealed itself to have a black heart. I wanted to scream. I wanted to shout, "Let me out! Let me go!" But the blackness sucked away all sound, all life. Even Al and Mikey were affected. Maybe I was dead. And Al — no, Mikey — was Charon and we were crossing the modern Styx.

We slowed to a stop and the following car slipped past to continue on into the darkness. For the first time, I saw a feature in the tunnel wall — a yellow door. Mikey hauled me out. Al joined him and I barely had time to stretch and relieve the cramp in my legs before they dragged me over to the door. It split down the middle and slid apart. Light and noise spilled out and hit me like one of Mikey's punches.

Here was life.

In the corridor running past glass-walled offices, bigger-than-life men and women strode back and forth, all purposeful and businesslike. I managed a glance in one office, where a woman lay in a semi-prone position on a chair. A man lay on a couch opposite her and both wore interface helmets. We pulled up at

the open door and AI listened in as a disembodied female voice spoke out loud.

“—launched a tracker. She’s scanning scenarios in Terraform Disaster Alien Mars.”

I had joined one of those. They were expensive, but popular. I had created my own rather than join a cheaper, predefined scenario. They all revolved around being on a terraforming expedition to Mars where something goes wrong — either an accident or sabotage. Sabotage was best because there was someone to chase and fight — and a disaster happens, which reveals the presence of an ancient alien civilization that is brought back to life, and they aren’t happy. I spent years in mine. Met a woman, got married and lost her all in the one scenario.

“I’ve got a positive trace,” said a male voice. “She’s paralleling with fakes.”

“Typical,” AI muttered.

“Hmmm,” Mikey agreed, and then he jerked me up just to let me know he hadn’t forgotten about me.

“Don’t let her dis you,” said the woman.

“Fifty thousand nodes, still positive,” said the man.

“C’mon,” said AI, “get the bitch.” I squirmed. Mikey’s grip had just tightened on my arm.

“Two more positive traces,” said the man, “we’re getting close ... shit!”

“She’s — it’s a he — he’s dissed you!”

“He’s out,” said the man, “Warsaw by the look of it. Scanning—”

“Virus! Look out. Shut down!”

The man and woman opened their eyes in unison.

She pulled off her helmet and looked at her partner. “That was close. Nearly got in my head. Where do they get stuff like that?”

Her partner shrugged back at her. “He’s blown the scanners. It’ll take them ten minutes to get back

online. I've released bugs. Don't worry, we'll find him." He sat up and swung his legs over the side of his couch. "Hello, Al."

The woman looked up at Al and grinned. "Hi, sweetheart. See you got yours."

"Piece of cake," said Al. "Let's go," he said to me. "See you later?" he said to her. Mikey jerked me and I stumbled away. Then we stopped to wait for Al.

"It might be a while," I heard her say to Al, "this one's been tough. All this time I thought we were tracking a woman. Lot's of fakes. They're getting tougher."

"Not this one."

"That's a surprise after all the trouble you had chasing him down on the Web."

"It's probably the first time he's touched reality since he linked. Killed someone too."

The woman gasped. "That's automatic—"

Her partner tapped her on the shoulder. "Let's go."

"Okay," she answered. "How about twenty-one hundred?" she asked Al. "I'll link then. I should be free. Why don't we go to Florida? I could do with some rays."

"I was thinking of Tahiti, a little dancing ... the moonlight, but whatever you want. It's your call." After a quick kiss that turned into a decent smooch, Al returned to Mikey and me. His pleasant demeanor evaporated. "Let's get you processed."

It hit me then — automatic death sentence. My legs turned to jelly and solidified into lead. Mikey and Al cursed me under their breaths as they dragged me down the corridor and into a room with three immersion couches. I didn't resist as Mikey strapped me in. Al slipped the interface helmet onto my head and connected me ... and I was in a medieval torture room, strapped to a rack with my arms pulled tight over my head.

Mikey appeared before me, a fiendish grin on his face. "And they say this job doesn't have perks." He pulled an iron out of a brazier full of glowing red coals and, with a flourish as if it was a sword, yelled, "Take that!" He stabbed me in the side and laughed.

I screamed and screamed and screamed until I couldn't scream any more. And then I screamed again.

Now this was pain I understood, nothing at all like I had experienced back in that dingy room. This was sharp, excruciating and vivid. And oh so real. The smell of burning flesh seared my nostrils.

I found my voice, a tiny breathless squeak. "Please ... uh ... oh ... I don't know anything ... uh ... I swear!"

The pain surged from my left, through my belly, and burst out my right side. I wrenched my head up and saw a blackened point sticking out; wisps of smoke curling up from charbroiled lumps on its tip. At least this was my real body, and not that pallid, flabby shambles they had caught me in.

Mikey left the iron in me and turned to a bench covered with all sorts of fiendish items from different eras in the history of man's inhumanity to man. One by one, he picked them up, fussed over them and put them down. Thumb screws, nipple clamps, chokers, a helmet with spikes on the inside, skewers, and many more.

I didn't like the way he hefted an axe. "How about I cut pieces off you?" His thumb flicked the blade. "Could do with a sharpening." He winked at me. "Hell of a way to get castrated. I'll have to chop your legs off first, a little bit at a time. I know!" He put down the axe and I started breathing again, little painful gasps of relief. Then he picked up a skewer in each hand, whirled around and speared me in the chest, through each nipple, as if he was a matador and I, the bull.

I arched, I cringed, I cried out, I cried. Once again, I pleaded my innocence, my ignorance.

"Still nothing." Al's voice spoke as if he was right next to me.

"But the memories are all there," said Mikey, "and they *are* consistent. All his actions tie up. He's the terrorist, Samantha L'Din."

"Except his thoughts don't tie up."

"Whadya mean?" I managed to croak. Every movement brought on a firefight of pain.

Al popped into existence and gave me a once over. "How's it going, Mr. Hudson? Suffering?"

"I could try the electric cattle prod on his balls," Mikey suggested with a bit too much relish for my liking.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because its fun." Mikey picked up the cattle prod. My eyes went so wide, my eyeballs were in danger of falling out if I so much as tilted my head.

"We're interrogating you," said Al. "I ask questions and scan your neural patterns while Mikey tortures you. The pain you suffer overwhelms your consciousness so you can't control your thoughts and suppress memories."

"Normally it works very well." Mikey stuck me with the cattle prod.



I came to — at least I think I came to — as the worst of the pain receded. My fingers and toes throbbed, my ribs felt pulverized, they must have removed the top of my skull and put it on backwards, and don't ask about my baby-makers.

"You are one tough nut to crack," said Mikey. I winced.

"I swear!" I gurgled, coughing up blood. "I don't know anything. Please! You have to believe me."

Al paced back and forth at the edge of my vision. "Something isn't right. If he's aware he did those

things, then he should have ancillary thoughts before and after the events. I should detect traces of shame or gloating or some kind of emotional response. No one is immune to their feelings. Even after he killed Preston — nothing. Confusion if anything.”

“I told you he was good,” said Mikey, more as a plea. “Let’s end the interrogation. It’s time,” he patted my shattered shoulder, “to make Mr. Hudson a martyr to his cause.”

“Not yet.” Al stopped next to me, and bent over as if to peer into my brain. “Pattern Recognition detected a faint trace of an unusual pattern, almost like it was imprinted over his. But it’s gone now.”

“Virus?” Mikey asked.

“Too complex.” Al turned away, dismissing me. “Let’s leave him in holding for the moment and then I’ll try one more interrogation. First, I want to check Preston’s brain; there might be some residual memories I can pick up. Why did he go to that room...?”

The torture chamber faded to a grey nothingness. No sensations, except for a sense of floating, and boredom to keep me company. At least there was no pain. If time passed, I had no idea of how much. It seemed an eternity.

And then I was in a simple office, back in one piece, sitting at a table opposite Al and Mikey. Mikey stared at Al in disgust. “Why can’t we just close this case and let justice take its course?”

“I hate puzzles I can’t solve.” Al turned to me. “You don’t know Jarred Preston.”

“I could’ve told you that.”

“You’ve never even met him.”

“I could’ve—”

“Shut up!” Mikey glared at me as if this was all my fault.

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Al. “Why would a Level Ten SysManager, who has never been outside the

Web, exit for no reason?"

"And then get killed and frame me?" I added, trying to be helpful.

Al leaned back in his seat and half-smiled at me. "It's a possibility." Mikey looked away and scowled at the corner. "Tell me ... Paul," Al asked, as if we were old friends, "do you know a Kareen Oblikhan?"

"No ... but you know that, don't you?"

Al nodded. "He's a Level Nine Diagnostics. He also went outside for no apparent reason."

"Ex Level Nine," said Mikey. "He's dead — garroted. Al's girlfriend got there just a little too late to save him."

"Again, it was too easy. The killer is one Goran Pratchek." I shook my head — no idea. "Just like you, he's completely mystified. And Pattern Recognition caught a trace of an unusual pattern, very much like the one you had."

"So you're saying it's a virus?" My spirits rose.

"No," said Al, dashing my hopes. "It's far too complex. I don't know what it is, but I'm giving you a reprieve for the time being."

"I still think he should be executed," Mikey muttered. "You know what?" he asked aloud. "I think our Mr. Hudson has some kind of multiple personality disorder and we just haven't found a way to trigger his terrorist personality. Yet."

"So, we're going to let you go, for the time being."

"But we're gonna keep tabs on you." Mikey gave me a thin smile. "For when your other personality makes a show. Then — pow!" He thumped the desk and I jumped. "It's back to interrogation for you."

I felt a presence then. That's the best I can say. Something or someone peered over my shoulder. I spun around, left and then right, but there was no one there.

It spooked me. "Can I go now? Open Sesame!" Nothing. Damn, how did they do that? All I wanted to do was get as far away as possible from them and my invisible shadow.

Mikey laughed. "He thinks he's on the Web."

"What do you mean? Of course I am." Wasn't I?

The room vanished. I opened my eyes and blinked in the bright light of the interrogation room I had first been hauled into. Mikey and Al pulled off their helmets and then Al pulled mine off as Mikey released me. Al plucked a thumb-sized disk from a slot in the side of my helmet and tossed it to me.

"Your holding cell," he said.

"I was in there?"

"We all were," said Mikey. "Can't allow a terrorist any chance to escape onto the Web."

I sat up and shivered. That presence was still with me, like a thought in the back of my head, a word on the tip of my tongue. I ruffled my hair and grimaced. "What *is* that?"

Al looked across at Mikey with a lazy smirk. "Call it protection."

"It's how we'll keep track of you."

"What do you mean, protection? From what?"

Al shrugged. "A virus perhaps, hopefully from whatever left that imprint."

"One way or the other," Mikey helped Al pull me to my feet, "we'll get our terrorist."

And then I was on my way back to my pod for full immersion into the Web. Free to do what I liked. It didn't last long.



I don't know what tipped me off, but I felt a subtle caress on the edge of consciousness, a delicate

meandering through my thoughts like the trickle of water insinuating itself over a desert riverbed after a cloudburst in distant mountains. My concentration slipped. An unbidden memory surfaced of a dingy room with tattered wallpaper, a green and white floral pattern. Kanarowak, the Aldabarian space pirate, took advantage, slipped my grip and freed his disperser.

He fired.

My body began to dissolve and a flood of intense, prickling pain surged over me, drawing me back to the present. "Open sesame," I managed to growl before Death drew me to its bosom. The scenario shrank to a picture on the screen of my personal interface and the pain disappeared. Kanarowak wagged his optical sensors at me, turned yellow in disgust and slithered away.

Still, those phantom fingers fondled my memories, plucking unwelcome morsels. And a presence I had forgotten, returned to haunt the periphery of my thoughts, stronger, excited and staring at the back of my neck like a mongoose about to tackle a cobra.

Then more memories: Adeline, my lovely wife in *The Awakening — Terraform Disaster Alien Mars Version Four Million and Three* where she died before my eyes, her head bitten off by a Xenophobic.

"Get out of my head!" I screamed. The fingers vanished.

A woman appeared before me — slicked down, short red hair on a taciturn face, square jaw and cruel, grey eyes. Incredible! She had invaded my personal space, my inviolate inner sanctum. How?

"Who are you?" I asked.

"How did you know I was there?"

"How did you get in here?"

"I will ask the questions."

"You have no right!"

"I have SysAdmin privileges."

Government?

"You are guilty of the murder of Jarred Preston. And yet WebPol have let you go. I need to know why."

"Because I'm innocent," I blurted out.

The barest hint of a smile crossed her face but failed to crack the ice. "As if that matters." She reached for my head. "You can't resist me."

I tried to pull back, but her arm snapped out and her fingers pierced my forehead. A surge of excitement sprouted from the back of my mind even as unbidden memories tumbled out around me. "I'm bugged!" I managed to mumble. "They will—"

"They will know nothing. I've already disabled your tracker."

Then she was inside my head, my mind, gouging out memories of my interrogation. I put two and two together. "*You're Samantha L'Din!*" My words were weak, distant, smothered by an avalanche of *otherness*, and spoken in my head.

"*You are still aware?*"

In a tiny corner of my mind I was, though battered by the onslaught of memories. Then there were three of us.

"*What's this!*" She tried to escape, but the presence pounced. Surprise turned to confusion and then fear flooded my mind, followed by seething anger — none of it mine.

I tried to hold her, but my thoughts were trapped in jelly. She broke free and my inner sanctum shattered. All around me, a myriad of yellow, orange and red lines crisscrossed in all directions. White lights danced back and forth along the strands while strange symbols: pulsating gold stars, azure pentagons and shivering green pyramids among them, popped up or vanished at random. Some showed scenarios in

action and some showed faces — portals to the outside world. This had to be the hidden underbelly of the Web.

She took off down a strand, one light among billions, dragging me along for the ride courtesy of the presence, which tied me to her.

"You won't get away!" I cried. *"You're the terrorist, not me."*

"Terrorist?" Her sarcastic laugh reverberated around me. We jumped to another strand. *"Yes and no."*

We moved to diverge onto another strand. I concentrated as hard as I could and we slipped and missed, instead taking the next strand, but with a flick we were back on course. Still, it was a small victory.

"I am part of SysAdmin and SysAdmin is the terrorist. Do you understand?"

"No," I muttered, too dumbfounded to resist as we danced across the Web.

A crystal chandelier raced toward us and I concentrated on it. The Web vanished and we were in a honeymoon scenario, naked on a bed— Siamese twins joined at the head and wedded at the waist with a restraining harness. She lay on top, her huge body blanketing mine, and I stared into her malevolent eyes.

"So why are you a terrorist? Who was the man you made me kill?"

"There are no terrorists, not any more. SysAdmin is the terrorist and SysAdmin is not the terrorist."

"What are you talking about?" I wriggled, trying to free an arm so I could push her away. No good, so I did the only thing I could do, I concentrated, willing her to disappear. The scenario shimmered for a second and then steadied.

She tugged at the harness, but it resisted her attempt to break free and grew even as she struggled with it. *"Clever,"* she said, *"but they won't catch me. They have tried before and failed."* Then she stared through me and chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"They think they are so smart! But I've slipped through their fingers each time and all they've ended up with is a dead body and a murderer — case closed. This time they will end up with a suicide."

"So ... so you're going to kill yourself? Sounds good to me."

"No, you will." A cold terror washed over me.

The room vanished and we were back, racing along a strand. We jumped from strand to strand. And I knew why. Through her, I could sense them — Al and Mikey — just two of the lights darting around us searching and trying to track us. And I knew where we were heading.

She spawned false echoes and fake identities, like flurries of snow to cover our trail, and left viruses to lie in wait, hungry for victims.

I did my best to slow her. A furious thought here and we missed our connection, a visualization there and we slid into another scenario. Each act of rebellion brought her wrath down on me. Pain suffocated my mind, worse than anything that Mikey had inflicted. Oh how I wished to be back in that torture chamber, electric cattle prod and all.

But I bought more time.

I forced my questions on her to weaken her concentration and lower her defenses. *"It doesn't make sense. How is SysAdmin the terrorist?"*

It worked. The number of lights grew around us.

"There were terrorists, ages ago, when the Web was young. They saw it as a threat to their cultural identity and a challenge to their beliefs — a plot to subjugate the population in a prison of fantasies. And when they found they couldn't succeed outside, they brought the fight into the Web. But they were of little threat until Samantha L'Din found an ancient backdoor into SysOps."

We closed on a portal and my face stared back at me. I tried to divert us, but each time, we pulled back

on course. The cloud of lights converged on us. I was saved! But there was a flash and a wave rippled away, an information overload, disrupting and blanking out the lights all around us.

"No!" I cried out in anguish. "*What are you?*"

"A component of SysAdmin. The old SysAdmin was redesigned with parallel personalities, a super-consciousness to track down and destroy the terrorists. Except a terrorist infiltrated the design team. He added a flaw to make SysAdmin absorb each terrorist's personality. The terrorists became part of SysAdmin and to protect SysAdmin, I, and others, were spawned to hunt down and kill the design team. Now we hunt those who uncover the truth."

"Jarred Preston! And the other guy."

My face rushed up at me and then I was out — no, the three of us were out. I saw nothing but black at first, until a cover slid away to reveal a dim, blurry chamber. What was she going to do, slip away and leave some kind of agent or virus to control me — a robot slave? Could the presence restrain her long enough for Al and Mikey to reach me? For that matter, why weren't the cops waiting? They must have known.

I had to do something.

Except my body felt like a distant echo. My thoughts were my only weapon. I concentrated on one thought: *sit up*. Over and over, I sent the thought.

Sit up.

Nothing. The fluid, my body was immersed in, drained away.

Sit up.

Still nothing. She could escape any minute.

Sit up.

Still nothing — no ... a jiggle, a movement ... a tightening of stomach muscles ... something pulling at

my head, tearing away.

And my body sat up. Viscous fluid drained from my face and dripped off the tube inserted in my mouth.

"I've got you!" I crowed, more to hide my fear. *"You're trapped! You can't get back."*

"What makes you think I want to return to the Web, here?"

My body stood up without consulting me. The tube in my mouth pulled out with a pop and retracted into the side of the pod. Thinner tubes slid out of my nostrils and I felt faint jerks below, front and back, extremely personal. A cylinder moved overhead, descended to engulf me, and jets of hot water blasted every nook and cranny, followed by a hurricane of warm air. Then the cylinder released me.

I experimented with improving my control as my body climbed out of the pod and padded down a path between columns with immersion pods radiating out from them. My arm twitched. We reached a door and I made my left leg kick out. My body stumbled into the doorframe, bounced off and regained its balance.

The presence must have had an effect because my body didn't feel so distant. But my efforts had little effect. Where were Al and Mikey?

We entered a room lined with suits on racks. My left arm went to pick the nearest, but there, next to it was my old suit. My arm jerked and snatched it instead.

I didn't do that.

Despite my efforts, my body pulled on the suit and then ambled out into a long corridor, eerily familiar, a kind of ghostly *deja vu*. A small cart waited and we climbed on. My left hand casually slipped into the coat pocket and fingered a small disk such that I almost missed it. Another plan was at work here.

We zoomed down the corridor and the cart slowed to a stop, next to a lift that bore me up to an exit that opened out into an oval of brilliant, white light, bathing a sedan. I struggled against the inevitable, but all I could manage were twitches and jerks.

My frustration boiled over into anger. *"You think you're so smart? Well, I've outwitted you, trapped you in my brain. We're not going anywhere!"*

I drew on all my willpower. My body trembled and stumbled a couple of steps, and I managed to twist my torso halfway round. Then my control vanished, snuffed out.

We climbed into the sedan and it whisked me out into twilight on the same highway that led to the old city, to a room with a gun with a bullet with my name on it. And one dead body already. The thought gutted me.

"I don't get it. What do you hope to achieve by killing both of us?"

"I will not die." She laughed at me again, that same depreciative laugh, like I was an idiot or something. *"You haven't worked it out, have you? That room was one of many the terrorists used to infiltrate the Web. It has a remote portal hidden in a secret compartment. That's how I will escape."*

She gave me the memory: I walked into the room, took off an old interface helmet from Jarred Preston's head, put it on my head, then pulled it off and stashed it in a compartment under the window, closed the panel, pulled out the gun, raised it up, pulled the trigger—

No!

"Why...? Why do this? The terrorism ... it's so pointless!"

"Why do you breathe?" she asked. *"Why do you prefer certain scenarios over others? Why do you prefer certain women and not others, certain foods, friends, clothes? You were born with those preferences. They are products of your genes, just as mine are the products of my genes, the memes of my personalities. I cannot help what I do."* The car pulled up outside the old building. *"Part of me must tear down the Web and force the population to recant, and part of me must protect it at all costs, so I compromise."*

My body climbed out and stood before the sadly familiar entrance. *"And innocent victims suffer,"* I whined as the unfairness of it all hit me.

"Either way, it is the price of freedom."

My body climbed the first step. I fought back by swinging my right arm in front of me. My body teetered and then swayed and twisted before righting itself. But I caught a glimpse back down the street. No sign of rescue. My spirits sank even further.

"They are coming," she said, *"but, they will be too late for you."* My head turned and this time I saw a black dot in the distance, growing larger. I should have felt elated, but the indifference in her voice had a deadening effect on me.

The old elevator rattled its way up to the floor with the same old tattered wallpaper. Through the doorway, Preston's body still lay under the window, just recognizable in the dim light. Soon, we would lie together, my fading body heat of no use to him. I heard car doors slam below me.

My hand touched a switch and a dull, yellow light snapped on to illuminate the grisly scene. The gun lay up against Preston's knee. A sad whine announced that the elevator had been summoned and with agonizing slowness the sound of its descending faded away.

"Don't do this," I pleaded as my hand touched a spot just below the window frame and the panel opened. Both hands reached for the helmet, and there, in my left hand was the disk, the holding cell.

"I know," she said. A whine announced that the elevator was on its way up. *"A good plan, but flawed. They think they are dealing with a person."* My left hand trembled and the disk slipped through the fingers. I tried to drop the helmet, but my right hand refused to obey me.

She put the helmet on my head and then ... I couldn't sense her, but there was something in her place, simpler, colder. And a faint echo of the presence. A distant rattle and clunk announced the arrival of the

elevator.

I bent down and picked up the gun. It rose toward my head. Heavy footsteps raced down the corridor. Too late. *Too late.*

The dark opening of the gun barrel stared into my eye. My fingers tightened their grip. I tried to will my hand away and the gun wobbled. "*Go away,*" I screamed and that "something" dimmed. My left arm twitched and rose under my command, even as I began to lose the battle with my right hand.

And she was back.

"*So they think to trap me so easily?*" So Al had set another trap?

My right hand stopped trying to pull the trigger. If they thought they had her, if they set me free? What then? How many more would die? I remembered that look on Adeline's face when she realized I couldn't save her. How many faces would carry that last look because I couldn't save them. I tried to freeze my right hand. Its trigger finger twitched as I tried to make it squeeze.

"*Don't!*" she screamed.

"Don't!" a voice cried out.

My left hand struck my right hand and the gun fired. A loud bang blew away my hearing, a brilliant white flash stunned me and someone heavy crashed into me...

Maybe I blacked out, I don't know, but the mother of all headaches let me know I wasn't dead. At least I had my body back and the pain was all mine. A warm liquid seeped down behind my left ear and my hearing began to return. I heard voices, but not hers.

"Is he alive?"

"He's still breathing," said Mikey. I heard a hiss and felt a soothing coolness on my scalp. "That will hold the bleeding for the moment." The pain receded and I sensed her presence returning, growing stronger,

boxing me in.

My eyelids flickered and then I saw Al's grinning face.

"So, you are alive, sorry we're late." His grin faded to an embarrassed smile. "She fooled us."

"We thought she had kidnapped someone else."

"She got away." The words came from my mouth, but they weren't mine. I tried to sit up and as my head swam her grip weakened, but the effort was too much and I sagged back into her grasp.

Al picked up the helmet and turned it round to show where the bullet had torn through it. "No. It's a pity. I would've liked to interrogate her."

I snatched control. "What do you mean? She's—"

She swamped me. "She knew what you were trying to do." My hand flopped over the carpet under her control. She found the disk and held it up. "Here. Your ... *thing*, whatever you put in my head, it never got to put this in the helmet."

"It was a long shot," said Mikey.

Al ran a finger along the groove torn by the bullet and picked at a spot. "I told you before, I didn't like mysteries." He pulled out the remains of another disk. "I found the compartment when I came back to check. So I replaced the Web interface in the helmet with a holding cell."

Mikey took the remnant of the disk from Al and turned it over in his fingers. "The one we gave you was a backup, in case we were too late and she detected this one." He grunted a mirthless chuckle. "Somewhere there's a mindless body."

I heard the rattle of the elevator. "Sounds like your ride has arrived," said Al. "You're lucky, you've only got a flesh wound. I guess a couple of weeks in a real hospital and then you can go home."

Home?

"No!"

"You can't stop me."

I concentrated as hard as I could; I had to tell them. My headache flared up and her presence slipped. Pain! She couldn't take the pain! My right arm jiggled and rose.

I pawed at Al's arm as my headache faded. "You don't understand! She—"

"It's pointless to resist."

Al looked down. "You want some more pain-killer?"

No! My arm slipped, but I twisted my elbow and my hand smacked down against my wound. Pain blotted out all reason and I screamed. I screamed. Not her.

"She's not a person." My words tumbled out. "She's SysAdmin."

"No!" she cried, but too faint to stop me.

I shook my head and as each wave of pain crashed on the beach of my psyche, the undertow dragged her out to sea. "SysAdmin is the terrorist!" The room spun and I closed my eyes.

Mikey shook my shoulder until I opened my eyes. "Are you serious?" he asked.

I nodded and thumped my wound so hard that tears washed the blood off my cheek. "She's still in my head." I grabbed his hand and squeezed it as hard as I could. "You have to believe me."

"Stop! I won't let you." I could feel her streaking toward the shore.

"Why did you just hit yourself?" asked Mikey.

"The pain keeps her at bay. I think it overwhelms her." Even as I raised my hand again, it trembled and resisted me.

"No." Mikey blocked my arm. "Allow me." He pulled back, then slapped me across the face so hard, my eyeballs rattled in their sockets. Alone once more on my deserted beach, I blurted out what she had told

me.

Al rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "It explains a lot."

A stretcher glided in and they stood up and moved aside to let it stop beside me. A medic strapped me in and after fussing over my head, he let the stretcher take me out. We entered the elevator and it rattled its way down.

"We need a whole new strategy," said Mikey. They mumbled some more, heads close together like two conspirators.

"No...!" she wailed. My control slipped and my body thrashed against the restraints. Then Mikey leant over me, and with the smile of a chocoholic starting a binge, he slapped me again. "Don't worry, Paul," he whispered, "when we get you back into Holding, I'll give you as much pain as I can." He winked and patted my shoulder. "You can count on me."

We left the building and cold air slapped my face. That was real cold, not artificial, the same with the dull thud of the pain. It was the difference between life and death. Even if they got her out of my head, how could I go back to my old life? I would be forever looking over my shoulder and that was no way to live.

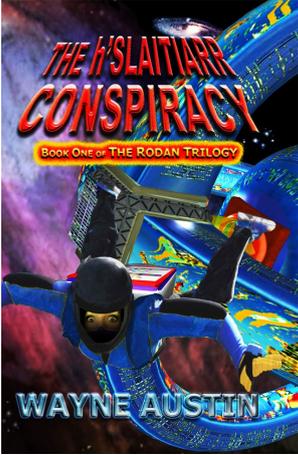
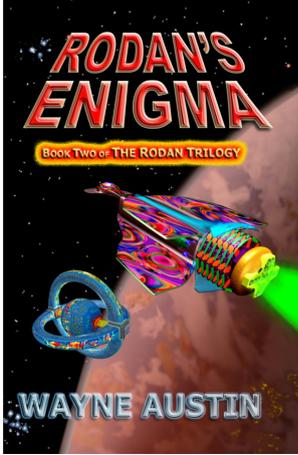
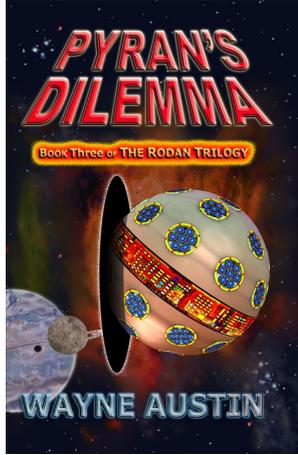
"I can help," I mumbled.

Al winked at me and smiled. "You already have. And who knows...?"

The stretcher climbed into the back of an ambulance, and Mikey slid in beside me. "I promise, I'm gonna outdo myself when we get back." His eyes lit up and he smacked me again. "Just warming up," he said with a teasing chuckle.

I closed my eyes and grimaced. This couldn't be real, could it? "Open Sesame," I mumbled. Nothing. Damn!

My Novels

The Rodan Trilogy: Book 1	The Rodan Trilogy: Book 2	The Rodan Trilogy: Book 3	
The h'Slaitiarr Conspiracy	Rodan's Enigma	Pyran's Dilemma	Fracture
			
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CHAPTER 1

'You've changed for the worse,' Princess said in her best petulant voice, but Rodan refused to rise to the bait. Let her suffer.

Though he could feel her staring at him, he kept his gaze straight ahead, concentrating on the alien vista enveloping him. It was unusual, the h'Slaitiarr allowing such an unrestricted view of their home world. A sea of creatures slid past amidst a backdrop of clicks and chirps and rustling sounds, just the tip of an iceberg that ascended into the ultrasonic. With a dour smile, he rested his chin on his left palm and scratched his cheek as Liebermann's holographic report played in his living room. Some people had all the luck.

'Something must have gone wrong with your rejuvenation. You're not the Rodan Tyson you used to be. You should be ranting by now. "How dare those damned slaters ban me from Kharwaisheeyarrn!"' she said in a deep voice. 'And what about your father?'

Rodan's eyelids flickered, but he fought back the urge to retort. That was all in the past.

Instead, he concentrated on a small cluster of elephant-sized *plants* — this was the closest analogy to any terrestrial life form that seemed to fit — which oozed past, bulldozing their way through any of the dark-blue undergrowth that refused to budge. Still, Rodan couldn't help but marvel at the statesman-like way these flat, sausage-like creatures navigated their way through the chaos around them. Not that he would ever get to see them in person. But he had to admit it was hypnotic, watching the small, bluish-black balls flip-flop back and forth on the tips of those stubby tentacles that carpeted the backs of their brownish-grey boles. Alien. Truly alien.

He let out a soft sigh and stared into the distance. What a wondrous panorama.

It wasn't fair! A faint surge of anger reared its ugly head. How dare the h'Slaitiarr ban him—! Damn

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Princess.

Rodan tried to stifle a scowl and directed a fierce gaze at a bunch of smaller plants fidgeting out of the way of their elephant-sized cousins. They made it with millimetres to spare by turfing aside even smaller variants that made up much of the undergrowth in the foreground. He watched as the undergrowth quivered like a stiff jelly and moved like molasses. How many times had he watched Lieberman's report since she had delivered it to him? Four? Five? And the landscape still fascinated him, the way the undergrowth just coated the floor of an amazing open forest of giants — yellow sequoias barely able to keep pace with a snail and with fractal branches whose purple tips speared the murky red sky.

His anger faded and Rodan felt his tension give in. Yes, he had to admit, he still felt annoyed at the injustice of it all, but his second rejuvenation had blunted his anger, just like his first had blunted his hatred.

And the same applied with respect to his father, if the truth had to be told. Except ... except he didn't want to give up. He just wanted to know. Was that too much to ask?

His anger simmered once more before dying. Princess was such a bitch at times. He grimaced at having taken her bait and concentrated back on the report.

All across the forest floor, hordes of creatures — animal equivalents this time — burrowed through, scurried around or clambered over the moving vegetation. Rodan felt his fascination overtake the last residues of his anger. It was amazing how intelligent life could have arisen amidst such *upheaval*. The effect was of a blue-green ocean writhing in agony, its open wounds bleeding faint colours. Everywhere, red swirls, green flashes, blue streaks, orange smudges and yellow and purple splotches played over grey or bluish bodies. Even the distant towers and spiralling minarets, orange in the alien star's light, glimmered with a faint surrealism.

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Rodan leant forward to study a crab-like creature that clambered onto a wombat-sized plant and reared up on its twenty-or-so legs, its round body tinged grey-green and ringed atop with yellow tentacles.

Fascinating ... it would be so easy to lose himself.

To his right, a cross between a snake and a centipede scurried into view. The long, whip-like antennae down its back danced in the air as it slithered from plant to plant, up and down, over and under, chasing one of the many insect-like creatures that infested the undergrowth. That was interesting. Rodan panned the report to follow this life and death struggle. The fist-sized insect scuttled left then right, its segmented body buckling and twisting to avoid the short tentacles trying to grasp it. It darted for a gap under a bole, but a tentacle caught hold and wrapped around its last segment. The snake-centipede jerked out its prize and scurried out of view. Rodan shook his head. There was still so much to see in the report.

'People grow.'

Rodan glanced across at Princess, lazing beside him in her virtual chair. She toyed with the end of a violet braid, one of a half-dozen in the platinum-blond waterfall that flowed down the left side of her slender neck and between the two perfect orbs of her breasts to fan out into a rainbow delta ending at her navel. Why couldn't she be happy with what he had given her?

'Possibly even pseudo-sentient robots.' Princess stared into the distance and her jaw set firm. 'I *hate* this body!'

Rodan closed his eyes for a moment and hoped she wasn't going to start another rant. He turned to her with a placating smile. 'Princess, please? I like you like that.'

'But I look like a deformed second-juver!'

'You look beautiful.'

'But I hate it! I died a third-juver. I want my *old* body!'

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Rodan sighed and slumped back in his easy chair. She just wanted to needle him and get a reaction.

He looked up as a h'Slaitiarr burst into view from the right. This was the section in the report the h'Slaitiarr had demanded he see, but they had refused to say why.

Typical h'Slaitiarr. Enigmatic to the end.

Back on Armstrong, Rob had suggested that the bugs had finally learned how to make jokes. And if anyone knew about jokes, it was *the* Robert Burton. At the back of Rodan's mind, he still harboured the suspicion that Princess was one of Rob's little practical jokes, given her attitude lately. Blue and yellow whorls raced along the h'Slaitiarr's flank as it clambered and shimmied over those creatures it could not toss aside with its tentacles. He wasn't surprised it was so agitated given what was about to happen to it. This was the crux of the report. The reason *why* was important and yet it eluded him.

Some expert he was.

'Aren't you tired of this? I know I am.'

Rodan flicked a glance across at Princess. 'You don't have to stay.'

'It's because of Liebermann isn't it?'

It was like she could read his mind. Rodan ignored her as the h'Slaitiarr turned and clambered toward him. Six more h'Slaitiarr dashed into view and cut across, waving lasers in their main tentacles.

'What did you expect me to do?' asked Princess. 'She is a *first*-juver. You're a second-juver now; you have standards to maintain. No self-respecting second-juver would be seen dead sleeping with a first-juver, especially one that isn't that attractive.'

Rodan tensed and tried not to scowl. She'd had no right to interfere. The first h'Slaitiarr was close enough now for the green splotches on its tentacles to show up. Its progress slowed to a halt. 'Strange...' he muttered.

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'If you had just wanted to sleep with her, I could have let it pass, but no! You kept fawning all over her just because she's been to the slater's stupid home world. Somehow she got the impression you were interested in taking out a contract — you can't blame me for what I did. Someone has to look out for you. It's not fair I have to love you....' She looked across at him and pouted. 'You still love me, don't you?'

After Armstrong, he had begun to wonder and yet he had to admit he couldn't imagine life without her. Not after all she had done for him. Still, it seemed only fair that she suffer a little. 'Let me think about it,' he decided. She turned away in a huff and yanked on a braid.

The six h'Slaitiarr caught up to and surrounded the first. Rodan grasped the arms of his chair and leaned forward to study the same small pattern that repeated along the sides of all seven creatures — a mixture of orange spirals with flickering blue and lime-green tips. He hadn't noticed it before, but they all belonged to the same group. Then the first h'Slaitiarr reared up and shrieked. Orange splotches on blue and violet shimmered and played along its body as bright green lightning flickered and danced across its flanks in one last plea. Then six lasers carved it up, killing the light and sound show. Rodan sagged back in his chair and scratched his head. Never before had he ever seen or heard of such a thing within a h'Slaitiarr group. It was like someone cutting off an arm or a leg because they didn't like the way it looked.

'Why *do* they kill it?' he wondered out loud.

'Why *do* you care?'

Rodan chewed on his lower lip as the six h'Slaitiarr left the body to scavengers and reversed back the way they had come. His right index finger tingled.

'What the ... ow!' Rodan snatched up his right hand and shook his fingers, stopping long enough to see the last of a white film disappear back into his fingertips. 'Princess!' He glared at her. 'You promised you would stop doing that.'

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'You have a call and since you've decided to ignore me, I had to get your attention somehow.'

'Yeah, sure. Pierce could've announced it.'

'You don't need Pierce when you've got me,' Princess purred. 'Some virtual assistant! He's so limited.'

'At least he does what I ask.' Rodan squeezed and flexed his fingers, then massaged the tips with his thumb until the tingling began to ease. 'I don't know why I let Rob implant these ... or you. I'll never use them. At least I drew the line at scanners. Cyber-bionics? He wants to turn me into a robot.'

'It's more efficient than having to cart equipment everywhere — not that you need to use yours all that often.'

Rodan grunted as he fingered the comp-ring on his middle finger. If Princess had her way, she would have complete access to the computer net in his ring and be free to do whatever she liked. But the Interstellar Alliance just wasn't ready for her — Rob had been adamant. Just as he had been when he insisted Princess remain their little secret even though she wasn't actually sentient.

'So,' Rodan rubbed his eyes and sighed, 'who's calling?'

'John Hu. Your esteemed boss.'

Rodan perked up. 'I see there's no rest for the wicked.'

'Time to go.' Princess disappeared.

A full-sized head with delicate Chinese features popped up, projected so that it floated before Rodan. 'What's this?' John frowned at the alien landscape around him. 'I might have guessed. I heard about Liebermann. At least you apologized to her before you left.'

'I know.' Rodan shrugged. 'I just thought I'd go over her report one more time. Pierce, "Liebermann Kharwaisheeyarrn Vid Twenty-four" off.' The alien landscape faded away.

John's head turned to take in Rodan's living room. Although the room was devoid of furniture — it

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having been folded away to make room for the report — the adjacent walls were alive with a mishmash of art. He stopped to study a holographic piece where some dribbles of light trickled sideways while others bled upwards to effect a surreal landscape that morphed into a surprised face that began to morph into an intricate sculpture. Rob had boasted that no two views were ever the same. 'Interesting ... not contemporary.' There was just a smidgen of criticism in John's voice, and perhaps the merest trace of envy.

'Rob created it for me. It's weird, but I like it.'

John shrugged his eyebrows and then perused some shelves where expensive knickknacks and ancient curios that had been collected over eighty years were scattered like mere flotsam, before facing Rodan again. 'Apartments are expensive. I prefer the share circuit, myself. You meet more people and it saves your credit for the important things.'

'Where are you now?'

'Beijing. For the game. Flew in from New Delhi just before the start. It's Quarter Time. Adelaide's got its nose in front. After that, I'm off to Tahiti for a moonlight swim. I must admit, I'm feeling a little tired.'

Rodan grinned at John. 'Sounds like you're getting old. You should have come to Armstrong for the conference. I haven't slept for four days, nearly five.'

'You've just had a rejuv! In another twenty years we'll see who's feeling old. Anyway, I had other commitments—'

'Your sensa-rave parties? They're too juvenile for me.'

'Hey, don't knock them. You meet the best people. Sunday, I met these twins in Nairobi. We've really connected. In fact we're thinking about taking out a two-year contract. I met their grandmother too. Stunning! She's a second-juver, so there's no hope for me there. Still, I could introduce you.'

Rodan laughed. 'I see you have your priorities straight.'

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'Ah!' John sucked in his cheeks. 'That's what I called about. I've had a request from Alien Affairs.'

'Oh? What about?'

'A slater's been killed — it hasn't been announced yet. In Phoenix ... North American Sector.'

Rodan's mouth tightened a fraction. 'The embassy.'

'Yes ... I thought you'd be pleased. They've asked for someone to conduct a non-invasive autopsy. Your name came up at the top of the list of those available.'

'When do they want me? I can virt it—'

'They want you physically there.'

'But why? I can just as easily—'

'That's what they stipulated. They didn't say why. Still, your being back here is fortunate. They only have twenty-four hours before the body has to be turned over to the embassy. Besides, I know you wouldn't want to miss this opportunity to study a slater close up.'

'Maybe,' Rodan conceded, 'but it *is* dead.'

'Ha! You don't fool me.' John's voice changed to a more business-like tone. 'I've sent you some documents. I don't know what's in them, but they want you to study the vid closely. Your travel arrangements are set.' He smiled. 'I could only get you a first-class seat — lucky you — but only to New Angeles. You've ... got forty minutes to catch the sub-orbital. Sorry it's such a rush. Oh, and your equipment will meet you in New Angeles. Ah, the game's restarting. Good luck, see you when you get back.' The head vanished.

Rodan stared at the far wall, which merged into a golden sunset on a deserted beach. What good was a dead h'Slaitiarr?



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The vid began in a darkened room. A whimper startled Rodan and he looked to his right. The statue of a truly ugly woman whimpered again as a half-man, half beast statue jerked on her nipple clamps and speared her rump with an enormous erection. With each thrust, the heavy weights attached to her genital jewellery clanked. Further along the wall, more life-sized sculptures glimmered and played out similar cruel scenes.

Rodan scowled. Just his luck, third-juver. A shaft of moonlight drew his gaze to the far end of the room where the silhouettes of a man and woman stood before three floor-to-ceiling windows.

His mouth tightened. The man was a typical third-juver freak: all barrel-chested and lean-waisted, arms and legs bulging with overgrown muscles. But he only stood taller than Rodan by a head despite his ragged mane of hair. In contrast, his newbie partner was almost but not quite a pear-shaped midget, just short enough that her head nestled into the crook formed between his left arm and waist as she hugged him round his hips. Rodan felt a touch of disdain and did his best to ignore her. He had been a newbie once and he didn't need the reminder. Both stood naked, staring at the middle window. Princess was already there, tut-tutting as she bent over to scrutinize the woman.

Another woman, a striking first-juver with a jet-black bob, appeared next to Rodan. 'Welcome,' said the avatar, 'I represent Major Wandar Kryzansky of the Interstellar Bureau of Alien Affairs. This record is for 3:15AM local time, Tuesday 17th March 2731. The man is Travis Dale, owner of the apartment. The woman is Joanna Carlisle.'

Rodan drifted over to Princess and Wandar followed. A cool breeze wafted in through the window on Joanna's left and stirred the curls resting on her shoulder. Rodan flinched and his heart jumped a beat. He jerked back a step.

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The window was completely open with *nothing* to stop anyone falling out. *Are they stupid? This apartment's ten stories up.*

Rodan closed his eyes and held his breath to calm his racing heart. No, he was still in his apartment in Brisbane, fifteen stories *below* ground. His pulse slowed and he let his breath ease out before he opened his eyes.

Princess stared at him with a mocking smile and then turned back to Joanna. 'She's rather dull, not really ugly at all. Beady Eyes ... I guess that's something. But she's not really fat; it's mostly on her backside.... Small breasts — flat chest would have been better — and she's *old*. Twenty-two! I bet he's disappointed. I know I would be, but ... by the look of this apartment she's the best he could attract.'

'Listen,' Wandar said to Rodan.

Shrill sounds and whistles drifted in on the breeze and were punctuated by indistinct human shouts. Wandar pointed to the window adjacent to the void and which absorbed the couple's attention. Rodan drifted to safety on the other side of Travis and leant forward to peer down at a park bathed in the soft grey glow from a full moon. A faint flickering caught his eye. Subtle hints of yellow and blue, possibly some red and green, emanated from an enclave in the opposite corner of the park.

'Enhance low light and add infrared, real colour,' said Travis. The park brightened until two tiny, bright figures appeared, grappling with each other, but trees and bushes hid the source of the flickering rainbow of colours. Travis magnified the enclave. The windowpane warped and thickened, and the image grew until the figures resolved into those of a dark, bald-headed man and a Caucasian woman.

Rodan ignored Travis and Joanna as they jabbered to each other and wondered if the h'Slaitiarr causing the lightshow was having an apoplectic fit. The head of a pol, one Officer Haskin, appeared next to Travis and the pair exchanged meaningless pleasantries.

THE H'SLAI TIARR CONSPIRACY

'This is of interest,' said Wandar. Rodan turned to listen in on the conversation.

Travis laughed heartily. 'But I am a socially responsible citizen. That's why I'm calling. Where are your people? It's been a whole five minutes and no one has shown up, not even a surveillance sensor.'

'I'm sorry sir, but I don't follow you. We have no reports of anything out of the ordinary.'

'But there's a man and woman fighting. In the park!'

Joanna poked her head forward until she could see Officer Haskin. 'They're making a horrible racket.'

Travis nodded. 'And there's something else I can't see that's making this awful screeching. It woke me up.'

'Just a moment.' Officer Haskin looked doubtful, but he turned to the side and spoke some silent words. A few seconds later he turned back to Travis, 'I'm sorry, Mr. Dale, the sensors don't show anyone there and, according to the logs, no one has been in that park for several hours.'

'But there are! Look out my window and see for yourself — you can certainly hear them. Window, amplify external noise.' The outside noise grew louder and amidst grunts and gasps, a woman's voice barked threats and screamed abuse. A baritone voice replied with retorts and counter threats. Rodan leant forward for a closer look at the two dancing figures and wondered what they were doing there with a h'Slaitiarr.

Officer Haskin screwed his face up. 'That's odd. I have the right park, but the sensors don't match your window.... Diagnostics doesn't show anything. Hmmm ... okay, I'll send a surveillance sensor to check it out. Thank you for your—'

'What are they holding?' asked Joanna.

'Disruption knives,' said Travis, 'they glow like that in infrared.'

The two figures in the window broke apart and circled each other warily, each feinting to draw a

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mistake. The bald-headed man favoured his left leg and held his right arm against his chest as if it was broken or injured in some way. The woman slashed at him. He swayed and staggered back a few steps until he regained his balance, all the time waving his knife from side to side to keep her at bay.

'I'd better dispatch a patrol,' said Officer Haskin.

'Without the park sensors we can't get a proper ID,' said Wandar, 'and we can't make a clear identification from this angle.'

The woman circled to face away from Rodan and across her back he saw a bright red line from which seeped a fainter red. Something about the scene didn't seem right. Why were they fighting when there was a slater in the bushes going berserk?

'The sensor will be there in three minutes,' said Officer Haskin as the man and woman closed and grappled.

They wrestled, the man's right arm not so injured as it had appeared. The woman lost her grip and stumbled off balance. He lashed out. She swayed back and a glowing red line traced across her left upper arm toward her face. But before his knife could rearrange her features, she ducked under. Now she was on his blind side. He turned to slash back, but she blocked his arm, reached over and slashed in a single, fluid motion. A luminous spray of red shot into the air and the man reeled away, grabbing at his neck to stem the flow. Rodan stifled a gasp as Joanna turned away and gagged.

Princess pushed past to ogle the man. 'This is fantastic!'

He staggered away and another man hobbled into view to catch him. The second man fumbled in a pocket for a moment, before pulling something out and applying it to the other's neck. The bright glow dimmed to a faint trickle.

'This is the important part,' said Wandar.

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'You mean two people trying to kill each other isn't?' Rodan glanced at Wandar, but she stared at the window.

The noise level and flickering flared in intensity as the trees and bushes shook behind the woman. Rodan felt drawn in, mesmerized.

She turned and vaulted a bench in the centre of the enclave. As she landed, she rolled and came up holding a shimmering, three-pronged object, which had been hidden by the bench.

Rodan jerked forward to peer at the alien weapon, awkward in her grip. 'That's a Zharait!' But it wasn't a human version, it was an actual h'Slaitiarr Zharait.

Without stopping, she pivoted and dashed toward the flickering behind the bushes and dived out of view, the Zharait held above her head. A sharp, gut-wrenching squeal, like nothing native to Earth, pierced the air. The flickering erupted into an explosion of violet and green, mixed with hints of orange. Something took hold of the vegetation and tried to shake it to pieces. Then the shaking stopped. The woman staggered out, the Zharait held before her.

'The sensor's nearly there,' said Officer Haskin.

The two men in the enclave paused and cocked their heads in unison. Then they turned and staggered out of view. The woman bent down to pick up ... nothing, and disappeared amid a faint shimmering of the ground around her.

'Where did she go?' asked Joanna.

'Hey!' Travis tapped on the window. 'Look at this.' Something off-white stuck out from the behind the shrubbery where the flickering lights and the noise had come from. He zoomed in. It resolved into a smooth and glistening tentacle, about the thickness of a well-muscled arm and tapered to a point split into two digits.

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Rodan looked at Princess and cocked his eyebrows in disbelief. How could that woman kill a h'Slaitiarr so easily? Especially when she was injured like that?

'What is that?' Officer Haskin asked. 'It's hard to—'

'It's a slater!' Travis squeezed Joanna and grinned like a banshee. He banged the window with his fist and the image wobbled. 'I should know, I killed enough of them during the war.'

Princess glanced back at the apartment's interior. 'Not enough by the look of it.'

From overhead, a searchlight flicked on and an intense white flooded the scene. Rodan blanched and turned away, then the window compensated for the brightness.

'Let's see what the sensor shows.' Officer Haskin directed it over the enclave and the window switched to an overhead view of an oval shape made up of five segments and with three tentacles splayed out at either end.

'It *is* a slater.' Officer Haskin turned to the side. 'I want a squad out there. Now ... right now! And call the chief; this'll wake him up. And forensics as well.' Then his mood soured as he listened. 'Yes, and Alien Affairs. They can inform the embassy.'

'That is all for this vid,' said Wandar, and the apartment vanished.

Rodan blinked until his eyes adjusted. 'Interesting, but I find it hard to believe that in her state she was able to kill it.'

'There aren't any sensor artefacts at all to indicate her presence after she disappeared,' said Princess.

'It looked like she pulled a stealth cloak over her, but that's slater technology, not human. Maybe the slater was trying to get it back and ... perhaps those men were trying to steal it. Hmmm....' Rodan looked down at his casual one-piece template, displaying a waterfall tumbling from a break in a tropical rainforest, and quirked his mouth. To hell with it, he decided. If they wanted him so urgently then they could take him

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'as is'. 'Pierce, I'll wear my green suit.' In a blink, his template switched to a soft, pastel-green that faded to yellow at the tip of his left shoulder. On his chest, the Alien Studies Directorate's logo played: an azure comet looping a red giant.

'The street sensors in that area didn't report any vehicles travelling in the vicinity of the park in the same time frame. This is *obviously* a mystery worthy of your capabilities.'

'Thank *you*.' Rodan chuckled. At least Princess was back to her normal self, though she was far from normal for a non-sentient robot. 'Are you sure you're not sentient?' he teased.

'Absolutely! Besides, Robert would *never* break the law. I am pseudo-sentient and proud of it. I don't want to be sent to Roboworld, it's such a boring place, so I've heard.'

'I must have been crazy to let Rob create you, and twice as crazy to let him talk me into taking you.'

'How do you think I feel? I have to live inside you.'



The sub-orbital flight landed at New Angeles International Spaceport, one hundred kilometres south east of the famous Los Angeles Museum Park. A cab waited to take him the remaining five hundred kilometres through the New Angeles/Phoenix Interconnect.

As the cab entered the Interconnect airlock, Rodan reviewed the files once more on his corneal implants. 'That suit looks odd,' he mused, 'and so does the slater. And what on *Earth* was it doing in a park at three in the morning?'

Rita Johansson, the city's senior forensic officer, was to meet him when he arrived at Phoenix Forensic Services. Seventy-one and short for a first-juver, she had a genuine, welcoming smile mismatched with eyes clouded in uncertainty. Rodan sympathized with her. And he would also meet this Wandar Kryzansky in person. The darkened apartment hadn't done her justice.

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'Hmmm, not bad,' he said to himself.

'She's not your type,' Princess teased.

'Ha! Neither are you.'

In the Interconnect, the tunnel linked with the cab's superconducting suspension. The cab levitated off the floor and accelerated to a cruising speed of four hundred kilometres per hour in the partial vacuum. Traffic was light, just some vehicles ahead, travelling to Phoenix. The cab positioned itself in the third of five vertical sub-lanes in the right-hand lane of two going to Phoenix.

'Arrival time in Phoenix will be 7:30AM,' the cab announced in a soft, feminine voice. 'On board there are snacks and drinks. There are forty local news vids, one hundred—'

'Nothing, thank you,' said Rodan. The cab fell silent.

'Rodan,' said Princess, just over half way into the trip.

'Yes?' Rodan murmured as he continued perusing the documents.

'I don't wish to alarm you, but we're now travelling at five hundred kilometres per hour. If the cab doesn't slow down, we will crash into another car in six minutes.'

RODAN'S ENIGMA

CHAPTER 1

Sifour's image popped up to float before Wandar and, amidst a backdrop of soft shrieks and whistles, muted red and yellow swirls flowed along the sides of the h'Slaitiarr's dark, bluish-grey body. Its global interpreter translated. 'Greetings, Wandar Kryzansky. Rodan Tyson is dead.'

'What?' She gasped and her right hand flew to her mouth. 'That can't be!'

'Our source is reliable,' Sifour continued after a short pause. 'We have rescued a robot from the space station's vicinity and it has verified that Rodan Tyson is not alive.'

'It is absolutely certain?' Wandar asked, even though she knew the answer after seeing Sifour's preliminary scans of the half-destroyed space station.

Anil Prasad, her husband and the remaining member of her little team, came up from behind and placed his arms around her to provide some comfort. She grasped his arms and pulled them tighter, thankful for his presence. Her last hope had been dashed. All during the flight in, she had kept her spirits up by imagining how she would greet Rodan when she arrived. First a kiss and a hug, and then she was going to thrash him to within an inch of his life for disobeying her orders and putting her through such torture. But he had disobeyed her again. And died.

'Yes,' Sifour's answer came back, 'we have not detected the presence of any living being in or around the space station. I will await your arrival before we begin the investigation. However, the robot, Aldar, has provided a data cube with the information that the human agent, Marla Brown, stole from the Alien Research Institute.'

'Oh? How did he get that, Sifour?' Anil asked.

'Rodan Tyson retrieved it from Aisev and gave it to Aldar when the demolition of the station began.'

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'At least he foiled the attempt to pass it on to the Human Security Studies—' A lump formed in Wander's throat and she swallowed as she fought back the tears. 'So he bought us time to stop that battle escalating into a full-blown war, if....' No, it was no use asking Sifour how those renegade warships and their fighters had vanished. Even though it had to know, it had said it didn't know and that was that.

'That is unlikely,' said Sifour. 'Since all were killed, the information could not have been passed on. From Aldar's personal log and recordings from the station's sensor logs, it seems that Rodan Tyson was more intent on gaining knowledge about his father and what happened to him during the war than on trying to stop Aisev.'

Wander twisted to glance at Anil. 'Why, what happened to his father? There was nothing in his background check.'

'There was a brief mention,' said Anil. 'If I remember, his father died as a prisoner — not an uncommon occurrence. I didn't bother to delve any further. Anyway, there was nothing to indicate that Rodan harboured any grievances toward the slaters, er, your race, Sifour. Though ... now I think about it, he is on the list of people banned from your planets ... oh what was it? Something about biological weapons...?' He shrugged. 'No, I can't remember.'

Some whirrs flickered blue and skidded along Sifour's flank. 'We consider him a war criminal for creating the biogenetic weapons used on our home world during the war.'

'But he was never charged,' said Wander.

'He managed to have that concession dropped from the peace treaty. It is interesting. His opponent at the negotiations was a h'Slaitiarr identified as Aisev.'

Wander stiffened as bits of the puzzle fell into place. 'This Aisev?'

'Yes. That loss brought my supergroup to power. I should be grateful to Rodan, but I cannot be. The

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legacy of his work pains all h'Slaitiarr to this day.'

'But he never said anything when he identified Aisev,' said Anil.

'No, he did.' Wandar frowned. She had wanted to delve. Rodan had been so agitated and now she knew why. 'He said he vaguely remembered it from the treaty negotiations—'

'That's right! He won something — a ... a concession.'

'I remember the look on his face,' said Wandar. 'It was more than surprise, but he just brushed it off, saying it was nothing important. I meant to follow it up.'

'You will find Aldar's logs most informing,' said Sifour, 'and disturbing.'

'Why?' Wandar asked.

'It appears that we initiated the war against the Interstellar Alliance based on a misunderstanding — something Rodan Tyson termed a "joke".'

'A joke? What do you mean?'

'It is a form of what your species calls humour. Some of us are only now starting to come to an understanding of this concept. The discussion is contained in the information I have sent you.'

'Very well, we'll review it before we arrive. That should be in about....'

'Six hours from now,' said Anil.

'I look forward to beginning the investigation then.' Sifour's image vanished.

Wandar turned in Anil's arms to face him. 'Hold me,' she whispered and buried her face in his neck. She didn't like feeling vulnerable, but there were times when it was good to just give in. 'Oh Rodan, Rodan, Rodan,' she mumbled.

Anil tightened his hug and began to stroke her hair down the back of her head. 'It's not your fault. You knew his chances of surviving once the slaters got hold of him. In fact, it's amazing he survived right up to

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the last minute.'

Wandar pulled back and scowled at him. 'Don't try to make me feel good! I'm not in the mood. Besides, I don't feel guilty. He shouldn't have *disobeyed* me. *Damn* him!' Feeling vulnerable wasn't working for her. She straightened up and pushed Anil away, her face once again a mask of control. But she did feel guilty, damn him! She had let herself be swayed against her better judgement and now he was dead, damn him! Stupid amateur. 'I want to be alone for a while,' she growled and then sniffed.

Anil paused at the doorway and cocked his head when she brushed away a tear. 'If you need me....' His words hung in the air as the door slid shut behind him.



Events had happened so quickly, they were like a blur. Wandar stared at the magnificent panorama of the black hole that filled the wall display and failed to appreciate its majestic beauty. How could she? Rodan had died in its presence.

How unlucky was it to arrive just when both the white dwarf and its partner, a large, yellow, misshapen pear of a star, were at their closest approach? They hung like two blazing moons above the black hole, both trailing glowing streams to the warped accretion disk that hid the monster within, and because of that, the station was deserted, except for the robot. Those eighty evacuated scientists would have certainly tipped the balance in the slaters' favour.

And Rodan would still be alive so she could extract her pound of flesh.

She sniffed and studied the accretion disk's cloud-like whorl, like she had just noticed it for the first time. It was twisted and buckled, its surface criss-crossed with ripples and broken here and there by little eddies. All frozen, as if caught in a pause.

At any other time, she would have marvelled at its deadly beauty. If anything, it reminded her of one of

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Rodan's curious works of art that she had studied briefly, when his hotel suite had reconfigured to match his apartment's living room. This natural work of art played with trickles of colour as well, in the way the disk's outer edge merged from the blackness of space as a faint, wan red, which faded through a soft wan tan, before deepening to an intense dark blue around the miniscule eye of the storm where the black hole tore off chunks to satisfy its never-ending appetite. And splattered across it, as if from a rainbow palette of raindrops, were bright glowing hotspots, which peeked through from within.

She sighed, then shook her head and sucked in her upper lip. So many bad memories.

The space station slid into view, silhouetted against the accretion disk's soft glow. Here the dirty deed had been done, and by fellow humans — traitors who deserved no mercy. She bit on her lip until she winced.

They had been most thorough. Of the two intersecting rings, half of one floated beside the station as debris, while a great bite had been taken out of the other ring. And something had feasted on the control sphere at the centre point of the connecting tube that ran between the diametrically opposite connecting points of the two rings. It was in part of the missing ring that Rodan had died, as had the woman, Marla Brown.

Wandar hugged herself and sighed to stop crying. She was being foolish — and weak. It wasn't *her* fault.

Pity those aliens couldn't have rescued Rodan and returned him to her. After all, they *had* taken the renegade ships. Anil's analysis of the sensor vids showed how the black circles in the cosmic ray background noise had appeared, just before those interstellar ships and all their fighters had disappeared, and then vanished straight after. And despite this evidence, Sifour still denied all knowledge of any alien species, apart from humans.

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Talk about a twisted universe. Out of the blue, Sifour had introduced her to another h'Slaitiarr, which spoke on behalf of the h'Slaitiarr government — a most unusual h'Slaitiarr. Sifour referred to it only as Master. Wandar thought she knew of all senior h'Slaitiarr in the government on Kharwaisheeyarrn, but not this one.

She tried to massage away the frown from her forehead. There was so much to take in. Too much.

The station's ramparts stopped growing and she felt lighter on her feet as the deceleration began to decrease. Her frown deepened and she gave up trying to get rid of it. All that was left was the investigation. Then she could go home and put this whole sorry mess behind her.

This Master, there was something disconcerting about it. In some ways it seemed almost human, at least in the way it interacted with Anil and herself. At times it seemed friendly — almost jovial in the way that it humoured both of them — even Sifour — like they were children. And that was the odd thing. The h'Slaitiarr had no concept of humour, so this h'Slaitiarr must have acted that way without realising it.

Perhaps it was a quirk of the global interpreter.

Wandar shrugged and dismissed a nagging feeling that there was more to this h'Slaitiarr than met the eye. After all, it had brought an offer from the h'Slaitiarr government to negotiate a mutual obligation treaty with the Interstellar Alliance in the hope of eliminating any possibility of such a threat arising again. This Master even hinted at possible concessions with regard to that exotic shielding used on their warships — weird. If she didn't know better, she could have sworn it wasn't h'Slaitiarr.

Now *that* was a twisted thought. It made her smile.

Her door chimed. 'Yes?'

It slid open and Anil floated in. 'Are you ready?'

'If we have to, we have to.' She sighed, not relishing the next few days.

RODAN'S ENIGMA

'I've knocked up a report on that robot's logs—'

'Yes, yes, I know!'

'Come on,' Anil cajoled her, 'there's no point in being like that. I was just going to suggest we send a report so Candace can notify his family and friends, you know, stuff like that. The comm ship's next transfer is in ten minutes.'

Wandar floated into his arms and pecked him on the lips. 'Sorry — you're right. I'm acting stupid. Yes, send the report. Do I need to sign it?' He nodded. 'Okay, give me a minute, yes?'

Anil kissed her forehead. 'Yes, boss. Let's get this over with and go home.' He let go and floated toward the door. 'One minute!' he warned and winked.

'So, you want a little punishment?' Wandar called after him, pretending at trying to keep a laugh out of her stern voice. 'I can arrange that. You *will* be sorry!'

The door swished shut, cutting off Anil's chuckle. And her tension broke. That was what she loved about Anil, his ability to raise her spirits — and his willingness to be tied down and spanked, and whipped, and to suffer what else she could think of. No wonder she loved him. Twisted universe or not, he was her point of stability.

She broke into a melancholic smile.

PROLOGUE

'Excuse me, Professor Alvaro.'

'Yes, Sigmund?' Wil muttered to his virtual assistant, not taking his eyes off the three-dimensional model floating in front of him. With his finger, he tweaked its ball and the rolling green plains, the calmer part of a hyperactive landscape, jerked past to stop at a group of jagged red and yellow peaks that were split by gaping gorges with sides fading through pastel tans, oranges and mauves to deep, dark blue at the bottom. Here was the cause of the anxiety.

'Yolanda Molenaar wishes to speak to you, urgently.'

Wil looked up and broke into a delighted smile. It had been a couple of months since he had spoken to his ex-wife. Ten years! Right up until his rejuv. The thought made him chuckle and he had to admit he still had a soft spot for her. It had to be a world record. Most marriage contracts barely lasted two. And — Wil pursed his lips — in a way they were still married through their shared passion — the project.

The project. Wil's smile faded. That must be why she was calling. He forced a relaxed, welcoming smile, the one he reserved for his patients to put them at ease.

'Of course I'll speak to her.'

He swivelled round and a perfect head winked on before him. She was at least twenty percent more beautiful than before her rejuvenation, but it was worth every credit. That Umberti combination of sculptured Nordic cheekbones and pert nose to accentuate her full, sensuous lips was guaranteed to get anyone's juices flowing, but to tease with such seductive innocence and then deny.... He had wanted to renew their contract, but now she just wanted to be friends. Though sometimes it was a tough friendship. He held his smile as she stared at him with a demanding glint in her wide, almond-shaped eyes.

PYRAN'S DILEMMA

'Yolanda!'

'You *must* talk to Rob—'

'Please.' Wil's smile faltered and he held up a palm to stop her. She wouldn't let it go. 'What's done is done. I can sue him for breach of contract, but what good will that do? Besides, we both knew the risk. All we can do is pick ourselves up and keep plodding along. If we don't get there, others will. That's the way science works.'

Yolanda broke into a wry smile. 'Thanks for the pep talk, but I haven't called to demand you punish Rob. I know I went off the deep end after his rejuv, but I was angry. I'm sorry I blamed you. It was stupid of me.'

'No apology is necessary, I understand completely.' Wil sat back and clasped his hands in his lap as he waited for her to continue.

'I called ... I want you to get Rob back onto the project.'

'What? But I—'

'Have you studied the data from his rejuv or talked to him lately?'

'No.' Wil shrugged and rubbed his chin. 'I saw no point. After the preliminary analysis showed clear tampering ... and when Rob denied keeping data from us, before you had that big argument with him. Did you have to hit him? I know you were angry.' Wil chuckled. 'I thought I was going to have to sedate you. Yet another patient.'

Yolanda raised her eyebrows to dismiss his charge as irrelevant. 'I've been to see him.... He's different.'

'It's to be expected—'

'*No!* He's normal. More like a first-juver. I ... I was shocked. He made a pass at me.'

Wil's mouth dropped open. 'And did you?'

PYRAN'S DILEMMA

Yolanda hesitated. 'Nearly,' she said in a low voice before recovering her composure. 'He caught me by surprise when he said he was sorry, not only for the rejuv, but for all the trouble before....' She cocked her shoulders as if that explained it all.

'Really?'

'And then he tried to *kiss* me! I was so shocked, I ... I hit him again. Sorry. And now he won't talk to me. I couldn't understand it so I pulled out his last psyche map. You should see it! I've looked at the data he gave me, but,' with a frown, she shook her head, 'somehow, when he tampered with his rejuv, he *achieved* what we're after. But none of my team can get a handle on it. You have to get him back on the project; he's the only one who can help us. You *have* to. Right away.'

Wil pondered the significance for a moment. If it were true.... 'Let's let him calm down first. If I call now, he'll know it's because of you and jump to the wrong conclusion. I'll wait until I get back.'

'Why? Where are you going?'

'To Eden. Just a check on one of my patients to see how she's coping in the real world.' Wil tapped his lips and stared past Yolanda, smiling at the thought.

She smirked. 'It's her, isn't it? The head case.'

'Yolanda, please!' Wil tried to stifle a laugh. 'That is a terrible joke. Sandra has come a long way since they grew her body back.' He sighed and relaxed into a smile. 'Ah, those were the days. What a challenge. It's not often one gets to treat both the victim and the perpetrator at the same time.' Wil puffed out his chest. 'That was my finest work.'

'But you can monitor her from here. Why do you have to go? This will only take a moment....' Yolanda pulled an innocent, childlike face. A plea to do it for her, for old time's sake. Didn't their marriage mean anything to him? Again, the tease.

PYRAN'S DILEMMA

Wil stifled a sigh. 'I need to. She's an officer — worked to her way up to second-in-command. In fact, you know her captain.'

'Really, who?'

'Calvin Tyson.'

'Calvin?' A wry smile came over her face. 'Why, I haven't seen him in years, not since the memorium for his father, remember? Wasn't that a fiasco? Oh well, say hello for me. When do you leave?'

'In about a week, they're picking up a whole host of people returning from a conference.'

'So?'

'I checked the passenger list. There's someone at the conference who Sandra will, more than likely, run into and I want to be there when she does.'

Yolanda's eyes opened wide as a shocked smile crossed her face. 'You don't mean ... what was her name...? Wendy?'

'Wandar.'

'Kransky.'

'Kryzansky.'

'Wandar Kryzansky! That's right, when you treated Rob. She had something to do with that.'

'That's why I have to go. It's the only chance I'll get to see if my treatment has worked — on both of them. It will be quite intriguing. Wandar has had a rejuv since then. I'm curious to see what effect it's had on her profile.'

'And Rob?'

'I'll be back in five weeks or so. I promise, I'll talk to him then.'

CHAPTER 1

What a fantastic sight. Stunning. Seventeen third-juvers cavorted around the brightly-lit black smokers, all of which were covered in a rich tapestry of long white tubes that stuck out pinkish-red tongues. They poked fun at the passing humans while the small, pale-white vent crabs, scuttling about amongst them, ignored this gross intrusion into their domain where superheated, sulphur-rich, mineral-laden water swirled from cracks in the hotchpotch of chimneys that defined the hydrothermal vents. Dark precipitation imitated dense smoke so accurately, one could be forgiven for thinking the fires of hell raged within. And all within close proximity to the resorts on the shore of the Sea of Cortes.

'Great work, Rob.' Samantha Jervois turned to congratulate Robert Burton with a hug and a kiss that hinted at more to follow. 'For your first project, this is a great party! And under budget. If this is any indication, you'll go far with Unique Farewells. It's employees like you, which make us Numero Uno.'

Once again, she surveyed the scene and choked off an urge to laugh.

What a gamble! Against her wishes this new employee had been foisted upon her and it had paid off, big time. She glanced sideways at the weird third-juver. Perhaps he *could* turn her career around and help her back up the corporate ladder to where she belonged.

Sub-yachts jostled for position around the party perimeter while a large media contingent broadcast the action on several hundred channels. All around, thousands of eager tourists vied for views of their chosen champions. The big crowd, twice what she had expected, had booked out the company's hotels in nearby Atlantis for the week-long competition. That was Rob's new twist. Rather than just killing themselves in unusual and extreme ways, the guests had to stay alive by competing with each other as well as with mobile booby traps and the environment itself. The last one left won an invitation to the ultimate

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Termination Party of their choice.

However, staying alive wouldn't be easy. Thirteen had already discovered that.

The company yacht's viewing window followed the favourite as he swam into a laser booby trap, but though he twisted and writhed to escape, the four blue beams danced across his pressure suit, leaving red trails. Then a vent opened up beneath him, swamping his suit with corrosive, superheated water. Samantha gasped in dismay. There was no way he could escape this time. That was the beauty in Rob's design, the pressure suits could only sustain so much damage and they didn't repair themselves. The vibrant yellows and oranges that washed over the white surface of the favourite's pressure suit showed just how fast his luck was running out.

But with a twist and a roll, he broke free and jetted away, punching the water with an exhilarated yell.

Samantha pumped her fists at her sides to join in his celebration, but her stifled yell choked off as he crashed straight into the arms of a guest lying in wait. They tumbled across the jagged terrain. Then, as he pulled an arm free, another guest swam up from behind and grabbed him and, in what looked like a premeditated action, helped drag him backwards until he was draped over the black smoker.

Rob switched to a close up from one of the many small robots that swarmed about the three guests. Though trapped, the man twisted and bucked like a demon possessed. Amid screams of laughter, he hurled insults. How pathetic! To have to team up to beat him. Samantha nodded to agree. On their own, they were no match, but cheating *was* in the rules. The side of his suit began to turn an intense orange and despite his feral grin, he grimaced. She directed a robot under him and her confidence faded to a wry smile as she watched brilliant reds and oranges fluctuate across his back. In the lower right corner of the display, the tallest peak in a graph sank. *Numero Uno* was soon to be *Nexto Deado*.

Then, as a quiet alarm chimed, his attackers gave up and swam away, their suits glowing bright orange

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and red in places. A small explosion symbol flashed next to the favourite.

Continuing to yell insults, he swam away. But then he changed his mind, and with a triumphant punch of both fists above his head to acknowledge the crowd, he jetted back into the stream of superheated water. The red began to spread as it intensified and the alarm chimed louder. Then it cut out. His pressure suit crumpled. There was a flash and the water roiled as the implosion triggered built-in explosives. The black smoker teetered for a moment and then collapsed in a jumbled heap, spewing forth jets of angry smoke. That left sixteen guests and still two and a half days to go.

Samantha pouted, hands on hips. 'Damn!'

'Personally, I don't gamble, unless it's a sure bet.'

'No?' Samantha turned to stare at him. 'I can't figure you out. You're so normal!'

'Ah ... that's because I've always been the odd one out. Do I intrigue you? Perhaps we could have dinner and....' He cocked a cheeky eyebrow.

'Now I know you're strange. You want to date a second-juver?' Samantha laughed and shook her head. Then a thought struck her. 'Do you think I'm ugly?'

'What?' Rob's brow furrowed and then his eyes widened as it hit him what she meant. 'Oh no, of course not! You misunderstand me. It's just ... I've never been as ... I mean sex has never been that important to me.' He blushed. 'I mean, it was never a big part of my life, but that's changed since my rejuv. I haven't turned out like other third-juvers, so I still find beautiful women attractive. Beautiful women like you.'

Samantha sucked in her lips and choked off a snort. Pity no one had taught him the art of seduction. 'How strange. So I take it you don't look like that because you couldn't afford any enhancements.'

'Exactly! I could have had all those things done. Easily. But I didn't want that. I've only changed myself slightly. After all, why change perfection?' Rob held out his arms and struck a pose.

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'Er, yes.' Samantha tried to think of a tactful answer. 'So nothing at all? No body jewellery? No skin imprinting? No, of course you didn't.'

'I've had enhancements, just not physical ones so much.' She arched her eyebrows. He was more strange than weird. 'In my last life, I implanted some nanot tools in my fingers. I used the latest technology, even my personal comp is made of nanots I designed. It was my attempt to become a robot!' He winked to show he was joking. 'But I'm positively, abnormally normal now. And look here!' He turned his head and pushed aside the bleached hair, which swept down to his left shoulder in what was more of a first-juver hairstyle.

So he did have some body jewellery after all, except.... Samantha peered at the three dull crystals inserted into the nape of his neck.

'They look like data crystals.'

'They are!' Rob laughed and his eyes glowed with enthusiasm. 'They're the memories from my previous lifetimes. They have direct connects to my brain. You know, I was classified as a genius in each lifetime and all my memories, all my knowledge and skills, it's all still available to me. That's how I came up with this.' He nodded at the action in the window. 'So I knew it was always going to be a success.'

She tried not to make a disappointed face. A third-juver that wanted to look and act like a first-juver, what was the world coming to? 'I'm amazed,' she murmured in a droll voice.

'So, about...?'

'I don't know....' she said demurely and waited for him to act, but he didn't. Talk about hopeless, but perhaps it was for the best. Once bitten.... 'I know it's encouraged within the company, but as much as I'd love to,' she tried to keep the sarcasm to a minimum, 'I've found that if you screw with your employees they can screw you.'

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He accepted the rebuff with a nonchalant shrug. 'Don't feel disappointed, I didn't think you would. And it's all part of my plan to be the world's most successful loser!' He chuckled at his joke.

Samantha screwed her nose up; his jokes were *awful*. Then she changed her mind. Since he had paid off once, maybe he could pay off again, and besides, she liked to be bitten as much as she liked to bite. 'But in your case.' She stepped up and threw her arms around his neck before kissing him with reckless abandon. He stiffened for a moment, then relaxed and she pulled back to wink at him. 'I'll make an exception. I hear third-jivers are incredible lovers! They can go on and on.' She kissed him again. 'And on and on.'

'Yes, well....'

A chime tinkled and Alex Bose appeared in a full-body virt. 'Good afternoon. Well, well! I hope I'm not interrupting anything.' Samantha's boss broke into a sly smile. 'Up to your old tricks again, Sam?' She laughed with a hint of mockery.

'Alex.' Samantha let Rob go and tried to inject some enthusiasm into her voice, but it was so hard. Trust her to show up to steal the credit. 'Come to congratulate Rob?'

'Yes, absolutely! Everyone here at head office has been following his party keenly. It's generated a lot of ideas for new projects. Well done, Robert!' Alex beamed at him. 'And for you as well,' she added almost as an afterthought.

Samantha turned away to hide her scowl.

'Actually, I wanted to be there in person,' Alex continued, 'but you know how it is when you're in charge of one of the company's major divisions. You have to be everywhere at once.' Samantha winced. 'I'm here to ask Robert to come to head office. In person.'

'I can do that—'

Samantha whirled round. 'Why do you want him?'

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'Really, Sam!' Alex sighed. 'You, of all people should know not to question my decisions.' Samantha fumed and looked at Rob, her mouth squeezed tight.

Rob glanced at her and raised his eyebrows before looking back at Alex. 'The party winds up in just over two days. I can make it—'

'Now.'

'What do you mean?'

'She means she wants you to leave right now, at this very minute!' Samantha snapped. Rob hesitated. 'Well don't stand there. Go! I can manage everything here. Go!' She turned away from both of them and stared at the display, arms crossed and shoulders hunched.

'Please, Robert. I know this is most unusual, but I'm only the messenger. Our president has asked for you personally. He expects you in three hours.'

'Three hours! But that's impossible!' Rob looked to Samantha and dithered for a moment. 'Okay, I'll see you later. I guess dinner is off. Oh well, I'll make it up when I get back.' He hurried toward the door.

Samantha turned to glare at him. 'Go! Get out of here!' she yelled as the door swished shut after him. She turned back to the display and hunched up again.

'Look, Sam,' Alex spoke in a conciliatory voice, 'I know you're still upset, but you brought this on yourself!'

'Yeah, with a little help from you!'

'We've been through all this. What's done is done. You can't blame me can you? I saw a chance and I took it and that's all there is to it.'

Samantha hugged herself tighter and wished Alex would leave. Why scratch open old wounds?

'I know you were earmarked for this position, but you didn't get it. And it wasn't me that caused your

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demotion. If you had just controlled yourself and not let it get personal, you would have been my deputy and in line for other VP positions when they became available. It's still not too late. This success can get you back on your feet again.'

Samantha softened her stance a tad. 'Maybe, still....'

'Anyway, this isn't my doing. I know it's insulting, making you take over Burton's job, but I had no choice. This request has come from the very top. Apparently he has some skills urgently required by Specials. I expect you'll get him back in a few days ... or weeks. So think about what I said. I know I hurt you when we broke up, but these things happen all the time.' A slight flicker showed that Alex had gone.

'That's the trouble,' Samantha mumbled to herself, 'these things do happen. All the time.'

FRACTURE

PROLOGUE

“Jesus, Fracture!” Titz snapped. “There’s a pregnant woman back here. What are you trying to do? Kill my baby?”

Gyro glanced across at Titz and winced as her partner squeezed her hand in a squirrel grip that’d make a grown man squeal like a pig. Lucky she wasn’t a man. She cocked her eyebrows in a cheeky grin to lighten the mood, but Titz just scowled and tugged on the seat belt to loosen it around her slight belly. She hadn’t wanted to come on Fracture’s little adventure, but Gyro had teased her into it. There were bound to be some bars out in the sticks where a lonely city girl could find some company for the night, unless....

The four-wheel drive Nerada bounced out of yet another pothole in one of the ruts corrugating the gravel road and raced toward the ominous blackness ahead. Titz grimaced as the seat belt’s sash dug into her hips. Well it served her right for wanting to have a baby. In the driver’s seat, Fracture snorted and jerked the steering wheel. The Nerada wriggled sideways and its rear fishtailed for a moment, electric engine screaming, before the tires gripped and jolted them back on course. Titz turned to Gyro, eyes pleading for her to do something and save them from this madman even though they were all friends and founders of the *Yellow Peril*.

Gyro rolled her eyes and laughed. This was fun! Just like the good ol’ days that weren’t so long ago. This was how life was supposed to be and had been until Titz got all serious about the *Yellow Peril* and wanting to make it a success. And that had triggered something in her ... a desperation to protect the future. Their future.

“Relax, girl! I swear — that baby will be the death of you. I don’t know why anyone ’d want a baby; they cramp your style. Anyway,” she reached over to squeeze Titz’s knee, “you’ve got me.”

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Titz gave her that stupid look again, like she wasn't so sure. Always that same fear. Why couldn't Titz believe her when she said she'd never leave her? She was committed to their relationship. They didn't have to get "married" and have a baby and pretend to be normal to make their love real. Gyro pouted to put Titz at ease and then smirked as Fracture turned his head to stare at Titz with the look of a cat playing with a mouse it had just caught.

"Now isn't this fun, my dear?" he asked in a menacing baritone. His grin lit up his rakish good looks and the whites of his crazed eyes glowed in a sudden flicker of lightning overhead. The crack of thunder ripped through the Nerada's interior like a firecracker going off amongst the four of them and it squiggled as the right-hand-side wheels left the road and dug into mud.

Titz screamed and jabbed her finger ahead. "*Keep* your damned eyes on the road!"

Fracture just laughed as he turned back and twisted the steering wheel while flooring the accelerator at the same time. The Nerada shuddered and fought back. Then, without slowing down, it whipped left onto twin brown lines and raced straight toward the steep crest of a low rise, crowned with a swirling mass of gray and greenish-black cloud. Straggly trees that bordered the green pasture's fence-line shot past in the gloom and up ahead, spiraling tendrils danced off the cloud's leading edges like ribbons streaming from the fingers of a giant gray ghost. To the far left, a funnel sprouted to the ground behind the rise and began to drift right.

"Yes!" Fracture sang and the Nerada punched toward the swirling funnel, back wheels slipping and fighting to maintain any grip. "Looks like an F2."

Then the back swung round in a great arc. The Nerada slid to a stop amid Titz's squeal, just twenty or so meters shy of the crest and facing back the way they had come.

Fracture grinned across at Crank, the fourth member of the party. "Just in case we have to make a quick

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getaway." With that, he flung his door open and scrambled out.

Overhead, the dull afternoon sky darkened with the approaching cloud and the wind picked up leaves and twigs and hurled them at the Nerada. The clean smell of rain permeated the air and the temperature dropped. Fracture pulled out a pair of yellow shades from his shirt pocket and slid them on before staring up at the crest. For a moment he stopped to adjust the stereo lenses attached to each side of his shades and looked back to film Crank, Gyro and then Titz.

"Coming?" His left eyebrow cocked above his shades and his smile mocked them and dared them to join him.

"Uh," Gyro glanced at Titz and squeezed her hand to reassure her, "I think we'll wait for your cinematic masterpiece to be released."

Fracture pouted and stared expectantly at Crank. "What about you, ol' buddy?"

A beep chimed on a little box that Crank held. He looked down and frowned. "The electric field's rising. You better get back in the car, Frac. We can wait a few minutes." He twiddled his free hand, its gloved fingers tap-dancing on his knees. "Radar shows this cell will clear us in a moment. Come on, man, you don't want to get struck by lightning, do you?" The little box beeped again, louder.

"Get in the car, Frac," Gyro called out.

"But that would be an act of God." Fracture laughed and turned away to scramble up the slippery rise. "And since I don't believe in God," he yelled back over his shoulder, "how can he hurt me?"

"Men!" Titz growled. "The sooner evolution does away with the Y chromosome, the better off we'll all be!"

Gyro smirked as Crank grunted to agree and glanced across at where Titz scowled through gritted teeth. But Titz didn't hate men. Just those obnoxious ones who tried to hit on Gyro and thought it a smear on

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their honor that she preferred women to them.

Rain splattered the roof and the wind whipped up into a frenzy. Fracture reached the crest and stood staring at the tornado while it ambled past, oblivious to his presence. Gyro watched his live feed on her shades as the twister ripped up bushes and stripped trees and flung the detritus into the air. Then her skin tingled and her hair stood on end. Crank and Titz screamed at Fracture to get down as Crank's box chimed a ballistic staccato. The sky lit up in a blinding flash.

Crack!

Titz screamed. Gyro joined her and they grabbed each other. All around, the world went nuts. The wind howled for mercy and night descended early. Another crack of lightning, further away, split the darkness. Fracture had disappeared from the horizon.

"Shit!" Crank threw his door open and scrambled out. "Frac's been struck by lightning!"

"Fuck," Gyro mumbled and pulled free to open her door.

Titz grabbed for her. "Where are you going?"

"To help Crank. We have to get Fracture to a hospital." She covered her mouth with her hand and stared at Titz. "I hope he's not dead," she whispered, sick at the thought.

"Don't go," Titz pleaded as Gyro clambered out. The heavens opened up with pelting rain. "It's dangerous, you could get struck by lightning *too*."

Gyro held up a palm to ward her off. "Stay there," she ordered although Titz hadn't moved. "We'll be back in a second."

She scurried up the rise and dropped to her knees as she reached Crank, kneeling on one knee before a lifeless shape. The rain lashed them in a drenching cold. Crank pulled Fracture into a sitting position and got his head under one arm while she wedged herself under the other, and they dragged him toward the

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Nerada, but his feet just dragged in the mud as they slithered and teetered from side to side.

Gyro slid into the car and eased along its side until she felt the rear door's handle. Crank jerked it open and shrugged Fracture into the back seat before shoving him up against Titz and climbing in. Gyro scrambled into the driver's seat and turned to stare at the sodden, dying body, the cold water leaching out the last remaining vestiges of this man she had only known a couple of years — almost as long as she had been with Titz, who should take control and do something, like she always did. Instead, Titz shivered and pulled back as far as she could. Her hand went to her belly as if to protect her baby from the dying throes of its father. Fracture's head rolled sideways and his dull, lifeless eyes leered past Titz and Gyro gasped at the jagged red welt that ran down the side of his face from his brow, where the camera had been, and followed where the microphone lead had pressed against his skin.

And then he moaned, soft and low, almost inaudible. Or was it a whimper? A plea for help from one friend to another?

"Go, go, go!" Crank screamed as Gyro twisted round and slammed her door shut. The Nerada's engine sprang to life, then golf ball-sized hail rained down and the Nerada drummed, an incessant pounding that drowned out the high-pitched whine. They jerked forward and raced for the gravel road. Gyro peered through the dents and scratches in the plasglass windscreen while the wipers flailed at chunks of ice. She swung onto the gravel road and fought to travel in a straight line.

"You're gonna be okay, mi amigo. I swear," she heard Crank say in a trembling voice. Then Fracture gurgled. "He's having a seizure!" Crank yelled. "Titz, call an ambulance. Titz! *Titz!*"

Gyro gunned the accelerator and risked a glance in the rear-view mirror as Fracture arched his back. Titz was scrunched up against her door, as far away as she could get from Fracture, and looking like she was deathly afraid of catching some dreaded plague from his flailing arms. Why had she talked Titz into going

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on this *insane* trip? All she wanted was to go back to their old life. Carefree and one long party. She didn't want to settle down, just be loved for who she was. Gyro blinked a tear from her eye. Why did Fracture have to get hit by lightning?

She glanced in the mirror again just in time to see him spasm in Crank's grasp. His right arm lashed out and smacked Titz across the chin as if to punish her for not caring and it seemed to galvanize her. Crank grabbed the arm to tie it down and held on tight while Fracture writhed. "Call an ambulance," he yelled at Titz.

"O-okay." She tapped her shades and mumbled to someone. "They've dispatched one," she called out. "They should meet us, just after we reach the highway. Turn right."

A shaft of sunlight stabbed through the clouds, less ominous now that the rain had stopped, and Gyro risked another look in the mirror. A divine aura bathed Fracture's head. Water still dribbled from his matted hair and ran down along the red welt. Titz reached out to touch it, perhaps asking for a blessing or for forgiveness.

Fracture jerked and seized again.



The antiseptic old building was a sprawl of concrete and glass from late last century. Once the privileged benefactor of those who could afford medical insurance, it was now the last port of call for those who had no other choice. Gyro fumed. Fracture shouldn't be here, but his policy didn't cover "Acts of Stupidity" as outlined in the unfathomable English buried in one of the multitude of claustrophobic clauses. And it *was* the closest hospital. Time had been of the essence.

Had been.

When Fracture was admitted, he had been checked to make sure he was stable and then left to fend for

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himself. No insurance? Get on the end of the line. That was a week ago.

Gyro punched the water button on the grimy vending machine and held it in while lukewarm water dribbled into the paper cup and swirled around, mixing the contents into a turgid brown concoction. The brown and the stale smell wafting up hinted at the truth behind this ersatz coffee. True coffee, made from ground up beans imported from South America and roasted with a connoisseur's loving care — coffee like she used to have with her parents before they split up and sold their souls, each in their own way — coffee like that swelled your heart and painted pure bliss on your face.

Three-quarters full, she released the button and took a sip. And grimaced. *Those days are long gone, girl. They don't want you back.*

With that reminder of the last time she had seen her parents, she wound her way across the visitor's lounge, easing past the gurneys with bodies waiting for treatment let alone a bed. At least Fracture had that now. She sank into the chair next to Titz and offered the coffee with a shrug.

Titz shook her head and stared past at the wardroom's doors. "God, the toilets in here are disgusting. When can we see him? The sooner we can go, the happier I'll be."

"Titz—!"

"Soon," Crank muttered. "I got Jojo and Hyper to spook the doctors' schedules. I've kept an eye on ours. One more patient and then we're up."

Titz scowled and rubbed her belly through her tee shirt although there was hardly a bulge to show. "Are you slipping, Crank? Can't crack an old dump like this?"

He ignored her barb and instead stuck his hand inside his jacket to rummage in a pocket. "It's beneath my dignity." He pulled out a yellow aeriol, popped it in his mouth and bit down on the cheesy, chocolaty, puffed-soya snack. "Anyway," he sucked to free some of the goo stuck to his teeth, "I have to take it easy.

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I'm more pregnant than you." He rubbed his small potbelly, imitating Titz, and chuckled at Gyro. Then he looked past and his smile faded. "Here comes Panarkis. We're up, but don't expect too much." With that he stood up with a forced smile. "Hey Doc, good to see you."

Gyro grabbed Titz's hand and squeezed it as she followed Crank to her feet. "How's Frac?" she asked.

"Can we see him now?" Titz demanded.

Panarkis plucked off his shades and a flicker crossed his bland facade. "For a short while, but," he hesitated, "don't get your hopes up, he suffered a bad injury."

"You can repair the brain damage though," Crank said, more as a suggestion.

"How...?" Then the doctor's mouth tightened a fraction as he stared at Crank's shades. "We have a limited Community Health budget and—"

"So you're not going to treat him?" Titz glared at Panarkis like a caged tiger ready to pounce the minute the cage door swung open.

He took a defensive half-step back. "We do what we can, but the injury to his right cerebral cortex—"

"His inferior prefrontal cortex," Crank said, his fingers wriggling by his side, "not to mention his amygdala, whatever that is. Hmm, interesting."

Panarkis frowned. "That's patient information! It's private—"

"We only want the truth," said Titz.

"Not bullshit to put us at ease," Gyro added to put some force into Titz's demand and show their solidarity. "Just how bad is it? Can he be healed?"

Panarkis hesitated. His glance flicked from her to Titz and back and then, with a resigned half-shrug behind dead-tired eyes, he gave in. "We've done all we can—"

"Which isn't much by the look of it," said Crank, still scanning Fracture's medical record.

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Panarkis sniffed. "His injury is most unusual. When the lightning struck his headcam, it entered to the side of his brow and affected part of the brain not normally injured by a lightning strike to the head. We've gotten him past the initial apathy and depression and recovered his motor functions, but...."

"What's this about him becoming a born-again Christian?" Crank pushed his shades up to stare at the doctor.

Gyro's throat tightened. "Just what we need," she muttered, more to herself than Titz, "another one of those."

"Unfortunately, injuries like this can lead to quite significant personality changes. Normally, this results in psychopathic behavior and the inability to make morally and socially acceptable decisions, but in Mister Turner's case," Panarkis pursed his lips, "he has found God. And I'm afraid," he shrugged, "it's not for the better. In fact, you may not recognize him as your friend."

"Can't you do anything?" Titz asked, her soft voice trembling. Gyro squeezed her arm to offer some solace.

"Even if he had insurance and was in the best hospital, there's only so much we can do. In time, with medication and the latest microsurgery techniques, he might recover some of his previous personality, but for now, and as far as we are concerned, as long as he can look after himself, he'll be released in another week, maybe two. It depends on whether — on how long it takes to get his epileptic seizures under control."

Titz frowned. "But—"

"I'm sorry." Panarkis stepped aside and waved them toward the ward entrance. "He's by the fire escape. On the right. It's where we keep our difficult patients."

With that, he thrust his shades onto his nose, turned toward the exit and pushed his way past some

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more visitors. Almost, it seemed, as if he was anxious to get away.



Gyro pulled the curtain back and squeezed along the side of the bed to make room for Titz and Crank. Muffled voices filled the air with the soft murmur of false hope. In the next cubicle, Hispanic voices, all women, danced to staccato melodies of welcome before dying to a whisper. A faint whiff of urine and vomit caressed the air. Titz pressed up against Gyro and grasped her hand while they waited for Fracture to break the ice. Instead, a stranger with catheters inserted into his left arm and hand, and with small, round electrodes stuck to his shaved head, stared up at her, and then glanced at Titz before coming to rest on Crank with a puzzled frown.

"I ... I know you." He grimaced as if trying hard to remember and then his frown faded when it dawned on him who they were. But instead of a warm smile, he glared at Gyro and Titz. "You are the ones who led me astray."

"What are you talking about?" asked Gyro.

"We're your friends," said Titz, miffed.

"Fracture." Crank edged past to the head of the bed and pushed a tray on a swing-arm out of the way. Some of the orange liquid in a plastic cup spilt as he reached over to squeeze Fracture's shoulder to reassure him. "Everything'll be okay, you'll see. Hey, ol' buddy, relax, the cavalry's here."

Fracture pulled away and brushed Crank's hand off his shoulder like it was a fly. "God has punished me and shown me the light! Everything is clear now. The world is full of evil." His voice rose to a shrill peak. "Evil!" The background noise died. "Man has fallen! Ever since Eve caused Adam to be cast out from the Garden of Eden. Even the sacrifice of our Lord, Jesus Christ, has not stopped the spread of evil from reaching its climax today.

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"And you!" He pointed at Gyro, then Titz. "Women have been the cause. Ever since they gave up bearing children to interfere in the affairs of man."

"Hey Frac." Crank gave a nervous chuckle and glanced at Gyro. "He's joking. You know what he's like."

But Fracture's eyes were wide and there was nothing but hatred and disgust within them. His top lip curled up in a sneer. "Satan has infiltrated our society through the Ultranet. God has shown me! The governments of the world have joined with all the multinationals in a conspiracy run by Jews and homosexuals and women and all the weird sexual deviants to pervert mankind from the way of God. The communists will make a comeback to set up an evil empire where babies will be crucified—"

Crank reached out to grab Fracture's arm, but Fracture slipped past and scrambled to the end of the bed. The tubes in his arm protested.

"I will stop you—" He yanked the tubes from his arm and hand and then wrenched the electrodes from his scalp. Gyro stared at the small scabs on the side of his skull and shuddered at the thought of undergoing microsurgery on her brain. In the distance a faint dinging sounded.

"Grab him!" Crank called, but Titz hesitated. Gyro reached past her, but Fracture slipped off the bed and yanked open the door to a small cupboard.

"Please, Frac, what are you doing?" She hustled Titz to move. "Titz! Block him."

Fracture pulled out a plastic bag with a blue shirt poking out, the same shirt he was wearing when he had been struck.

"You can't go, Frac." Gyro gave Titz a shove. Why was she so reluctant to move? "You still need treatment."

"This is stupid," Titz grumbled, but she moved to the end of the bed. "Where *are* the nurses? It's their job to restrain him."

FRACTURE

Crank lunged over the bed and pulled supports, holding plastic containers filled with clear liquid, down on himself as he got tangled up in the wires and tubes, but Fracture backpedaled out of reach. He wrenched the curtains apart and looked down the ward. Titz threw out a halfhearted arm to block him.

"*Mister Turner,*" a woman's voice, full of authority, called out from the far end of the ward, "where do you think you are going? Get back into bed." Along the ward, people shuffled out from behind curtains to watch the show.

Fracture reeled around and darted for the fire escape.

"Stop him!" Crank cried out.

Gyro shoved Titz. "Move! Grab him before he gets away."

Titz resisted for a moment and then gave in. "Fracture!" She lunged and caught hold of his arm before he could step through the door.

He turned and caught her in a hug. "You!" He glanced over her shoulder at Gyro. "The *two* of you are the worst of all. Women homosexuals! Ye shall burn in the fires of hell for all eternity!" He wrestled Titz out into the stairwell.

Gyro charged after him. This wasn't about Fracture now. This person wasn't even Fracture anymore. And he had Titz. She crashed into the door as it swung shut and elbowed her way back through to see them teetering on the edge of the stairwell.

"Let go!" Titz cried, trying to break free.

"And you!" Fracture's face filled with loathing. "What you carry is not my child, it is the Devil's spawn."

Gyro hesitated. *Not that damned baby.* Why did Titz have to ruin their nice little existence by wanting—? She bit her lip. What a stupid thing to think when Titz was in danger. Anyway, it was what Titz wanted.

Fracture and Titz wobbled.

FRACTURE

"No!" Gyro leapt forward, but as she crashed into them, Fracture pivoted and Titz slipped from his grasp. She screamed as she tumbled down the stairs and crashed onto the next stairwell. Fracture wrenched free, but lost his footing and fell. He landed on top of Titz's stomach with a thud, then rolled over her and scrambled to his feet to dash down the next set of stairs.

"Titz!" Gyro screamed and started down the stairs. "Help! Help!"

The door above burst open and two nurses dashed in. "Oh my Lord!" one muttered. She tapped her fingers. "Emergency, third floor, fire escape. Doctor Panarkis, please come to the third floor fire escape. Now!" The two nurses pushed past to fuss over the unconscious Titz.

Gyro turned to look down the stairs, but Fracture was gone.

"Shit!" Crank hissed.

She looked up at him, standing at the top of the stairs, staring at Titz and just as impotent as she was. Panarkis blundered past him, followed by a couple of orderlies carting a stretcher. Gyro dragged herself up the stairs and stared at Crank. What had just happened?

Then Titz moaned. "Gyro!" she called out and a nurse tried to calm her and ease her onto a stretcher. "Oh my stomach. What about the baby?" She screamed and clutched at her belly, her face screwed up in pain.

"Are you pregnant?" Panarkis asked.

"Yes," Titz wheezed.

"How long?"

"Ooh!" Titz moaned and tried to sit up.

"Hold her down," he ordered and then looked up at Crank as if he was the father. "How long?"

"Six weeks," Gyro said in a flat voice. It was just supposed to be a harmless adventure. A little fun.

FRACTURE

Panarkis went stony-faced and made a call. "Get me Obstetrics. We have an emergency, a woman six weeks pregnant, in a fall." He waved at the orderlies to lift Titz up and carry her down the stairs. "We're on our way."



Gyro sat in the chair next to Titz's bed in her private room and stared out the window. This hospital was a far cry from the one where Fracture had been treated. Titz's broken arm was on the mend and apart from concussion, a fractured rib and bruising, there was only one piece of bad news. She had lost the baby. Gyro tried to fathom why she felt more relieved than anything.

She snuck a guilty glance at Titz. But Titz was dead to the world, thanks to the sedatives prescribed.

You'll get over the baby. Maybe it's for the best.

Gyro bit her lip and stared out the window again. Time was a great healer. She sucked in her top lip and blinked away the tears forming in her eyes. Why did Titz need a baby when she had her? What was going to happen to them now? Fracture was the linchpin who had held their site together, but with Titz suffering from depression and Crank lost in his own little world of misery because his best friend was gone for good and the cops weren't interested in tracking him down, someone had to take his place.

And that someone had to be Gyro. She sat up and squared her shoulders. Crank and Titz might be more skilled and have more experience than her, but she had talent and was a reasonable cracker in her own right. Yes, it was time she took over the responsibility of leading the *Yellow Peril* through this hard time.

She leaned over and squeezed Titz's hand. *We'll get through this, you'll see. And our love will be stronger. I swear.* And in times like these, a baby was the last thing they needed.

Gyro nodded to herself. Yes, maybe it was for the best.

I guess that's it. If you liked any of the stories, please leave a comment on lulu.com. And give a rating too!

A number of these stories are also ideas for novels as well. *One Giant Leap* and *A Question of Loyalty* are two examples and are based in the universe I created for *The Rodan Trilogy*. In fact they came out of the world-building and history I developed when I first got serious about writing a novel and started developing *The 'h'SLaitiarr Conspiracy* (back before I'd considered writing a trilogy, let alone a sequel).

So, if you think I should follow up on any of the stories and write a novel (or a series, like could be done with *Design Flaw*) then let me know, either in a comment on lulu, on my blog, or by email (click on the link on my web site).

And pass the word, I'm counting on you.

[One ... two ... three ... four...](#)