

ALDAN STIRLING

A
HUMAN
SEASON

SCI-FI AND FANTASY TALES
OF EMPOWERED WOMEN

**A
HUMAN SEASON**



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A Human Season

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Falling Dead In Love



Former Homicide Detective Sandy Harboring considered the ocean beach sand, oozing up between his toes.

He couldn't see how people actually found this relaxing. He still felt washed-out and foolish. Well, those who sought out this form of relaxation wouldn't arrive at Montauk at 2am, from Manhattan, by way of a five-day bender, on the heels of a departmental precinct retirement party. Hell, many wouldn't survive the precinct party. He didn't pity himself, though, it was his own fault if he stumbled onto some awful piece of his past.

He glanced backward, over his shoulder, at the wide face of an abandoned hotel. The buildings form fit vague memory's that had always been with him. It had required only the nudge of physical presence to bring them to the surface, where they could now fester. He could see the chubby head of a small stone Cupid as bright as a gem in the now darkening foliage. The Cupid's innocence seemed to hide some deadly artifice, behind pinchable cheeks and playfully pursed lips. He just couldn't rally the thought to match the reality.

"McGruff does the Caesar." He growled, calling the building's name aloud - as if warding off its evil spell.

He wasn't fooling himself, it wasn't the Caesar, nor his sordid past that troubled him. He swayed up to his feet, steadied himself against vertigo, looked at the bottle in his hand and turned to throw it into the sea. He stopped; his arm caught in mid throw.

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He stood at the end of a silver road to the moon.

He was held spellbound for a moment, listening to the distant boom. It was a primeval choir singing in crashing voices. All he had to do was take a few quick steps -

He looked down at his bare toes, they seemed alien to the trench coat and fedora. Something not of his body. He turned absently in the sand toward the blank face of the Caesar. It bore silent witness to his intent with evil indifference. Movement along the shore twisted him further. Amazement allowed gravity to pull the bottle from his limp fingers down to the sand. This was not good at all. The shadowed form of a shapely woman was approaching him near the waves. She was holding a long wrap-around skirt to her upper legs against the wind, taking almost mincing sidewise steps through the sand.

Startled, he immediately moved away from her path toward the dunes. He apprehensively dropped his head, not exactly sure how to act harmless. She had every right to feel afraid. He looked the proverbial trench-coated molester. He turned to face the dune, hoping the shadows would hide him.

When the hand touched his arm, he nearly jumped out of his coat. After a tense moment of violent indecision, he realized it was the woman. She had come up to him.

"Sandy?" The shadow leaned close, revealing the not unattractive features of a plain woman. "I was calling you."

Stunned, he blurted out. "Aren't you a bit too bold?"

"You don't impress me as the beach combing, thug type. The pants are all wrong, but I think that hat works nicely." She sized him like a photographer. She smelled faintly of Roses and polished wood. It was an odd combination, its richness threatened to overwhelm his sorely used stomach. "But I think your name is rather appropriate for the setting."

He took a step back, sensing her confidence. "Or a lousy cliché." Was she actually flirting with him?

She laughed quietly. He noticed her thick hair was held in a loose ponytail tossed carelessly across her shoulder. Her black hair and eyes seemed to reflect the night. She still seemed to possess more power than he was accustomed to, but any immediate threat had abated.

"I don't remember you . . . ah?" He felt his voice confidently this time but lacked any semblance of the social graces.

"Mair, like a girl horse." She glanced up at the Caesar. "Do you know this place? Would you like to see it? There's a path."

She was so solicitous he started to become suspicious. "Look that's very nice of you miss, but-"

"Mair." She interrupted. "Call me Mair. And I was just heading back when I saw you looking at the Caesar. Do you know its origins?"

He shook his head.

"A consortium, between the mob bosses in New York, Chicago, and Cuba in 1924. It was a private club, just for smugglers. Did you know that cocaine was very popular in the twenties, and Cuba was a big supplier to the marketplace? All lost with the repeal of the Volstead Act. The Caesar was one of the casualties."

"It was different then." He found himself muttering.

"I don't suppose you're very busy." She came around and slid her hand into the crook of his elbow. He looked down, finding this strangely comforting. He must smell like low tide, but her scent blotted out everything around them. "I could use the company, if your game, that is?"

"Okay, Mair." He tried to fit a smile to his face, but it seemed an alien gesture. He couldn't actually think of anything better to say or do.

She gently urged him up a small path, they climbed until they reached a grassy verge. He could see the Caesar through the trees and hear the ocean behind. They rounded a bend and stood before a wide hourglass shaped terrace stair. It was mostly hidden beneath heavy foliage but encroaching growth couldn't hide the grandeur.

"Shall we?" Mair said, quietly.

"I don't know." A feeling of uncontrollable panic grabbed hold of him. "Some sleeping dogs should be shot, so they stay asleep."

"Even suicide can't wipe away the past."

Alice, Rosa, one a woman, one a girl, his only loves. Both ripped from his embrace. His mouth had turned to dust. He could feel slight tremors coursing through his body. Ashamed of this display of weakness, he made

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to move away from Mair. But instead of heading back to the path as he had intended, he wound up on the stairs. She was immediately beside him, urging him up silently through the tangled branches and ages of windswept leaves.

They stood upon a wide stone terrace. A long row of wrecked French doors hung askew before him. Without a pause the pair entered the building. He felt transported by the gentle pressure of her hand inside his arm. She wasn't grasping him, nor tugging, just a flat assurance transmitted through the connection. The place hadn't changed one bit. It was like walking directly back into his childhood, with all the jaded choices of adulthood bearing him down like chains.

They were standing in a low ceilinged barroom. Tables and chairs sat ready to receive revelers. A long bar to his left shone with subdued rich wood tones and unpolished brass fittings. Beyond him were the tables, glass - topped partition walls allowed a dusty view into a huge lobby, were thick marble columns held an almost Egyptian sway over a dark room.

"It was a grand palace at one time." Mair said. "Come to the bar."

He could almost hear, or thought he heard, the roar of twenties night life. The gangsters and flappers, all the wild excesses of easy affluence. He spun around suddenly on Mair, unrealistic thoughts from his childhood welling up around him. He stared at her for a moment, then saw beyond her a wide curving staircase.

"Rosa." He whispered.

A little girl seemed to float with childish abandon down from the hidden upper floors along a wide curving banister. She was laughing as only children can. But his heart dropped as she rounded the last heavy curve and her weight, though insignificant, bore her heavily away from the protection of the wood held by tiny hands and knobby knees.

"Oh, no!" He cried, then whispered "Rosa, please don't." He looked up at Mair, who stood impassively beside him. "It was a game. We had never seen such a long banister before. We were only kids, eight and nine. Her tiny hands just couldn't hold on."

"But she tried too, didn't she?"

He nodded, sickly, misunderstanding. "She hit her head, but it was

only a minor thing. It was her hip when she hit the floor it shattered. The doctors set it, but they couldn't do a good enough job. It was the forties. Infection set in almost immediately, then an awful pneumonia. It lasted weeks."

He had been crying into his cupped hands. After a moment he stared at the tears pooled in his palms as if not knowing what they were. He lifted his hands wanting to ask Mair what exactly was happening. But she seemed to think he was offering her his tears. She gently took both hands and kissed the palms.

"Who are you?" He asked.

"You really don't remember?" She comforted him, gently. "Then wait and it will come."

She led him by the hand, like a child, out into the lobby. Sofas were set up before an enormous marble fireplace. She sat him on one dust laden couch before the hearth and left him. He sat stunned and unfeeling for a moment, thinking of Alice, his wife. Then abruptly he felt almost hysterical with loneliness, everyone had abandoned him. Some amazingly enormous black hole threatened to drag him down into oblivion. He was launching himself to his feet, to escape this dangerous place, when Mair's hand was on his shoulder pushing him back down gently. He fell back, his eyes fluttering with an involuntarily overwhelming need to sleep. She pushed a warm cup into his nearly limp hands.

The aroma of coffee came up to him. "How?"

Mair pressed a finger to his lips. "Your wife?" She encouraged him.

He glanced over at her calm face. "She died in childbirth. The doctors said it was the presentation." He paused and shook his head in wonder.

"I still remember the idiots exact words. The presentation was breech, but the umbilical cord had wrapped around the baby's neck, suffocated the child, stopped delivery, then drained the mother."

He sipped at the coffee compulsively. "He made her sound like she was a leaking pump. Damned uncaring bastard. I don't remember what exactly happened after that. Someone helped me to my car. A nurse, who had been attending my wife. I think I lost it, hit the doctor or something. The nurse had been there, waiting for something, she was new."

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He paused seeming confused. "No, that was Rosa's night nurse. I must have got the two confused. She had gotten me a glass of water. No, I got the glass of water and she told me it was okay-"

"Rosa is very tired and needs a long rest in a special place."

Sandy was shocked to silent recognition. He had been transported back to a flat in the Bronx. The racking of the elevated train, rocking the house, as the midnight freight drove itself by his windows. Rosa was hot, always hot. She would need a glass of water. But the pretty nurse was gently wiping her head, when he arrived, her long black ponytail shining brightly as she turned her black eyes on a little boy bearing gifts of guilt. Then she was helping a nearly catatonic beat cop to his car, after the untimely death of his wife.

"You were Rosa's nurse and my wife's nurse. How could that . . ."

"It's a handy artifice, the nurse. Nobody looks twice at a new nurse - that's if they were to believe in me at all. You have always believed in death, haven't you Sandy?"

He nodded, while still watching her face, intently. "You told me Rosa was very tired and needed a long rest. I knew what you, meant."

"Nobody could fool you. A very respectable 1200 homicide convictions attests to that truth, now doesn't it."

"You were very nice to me. Both times. Thank you."

There was an awkward silence. Sandy was trying to remember what single incident had caused him to begin the bender that had brought him to this place. There was something, but he couldn't bring the events into focus. Then he had it.

"I saw you again." He exclaimed. "Just a week ago, at a scene. It was a baby."

"I do those personally." She stated causally. She tilted her head inquisitively. "Aren't you going to ask me why I'm not a man?"

Sandy stated simply. "If I'm a man, my necessary counterpart, my alter-ego if you will, is a woman. I always knew the ultimate serial killer would be a woman. See? So, you're a woman."

Mair was taken aback. "Is that so?" She laughed. "It's twisted, convoluted, sexist and ignorant - but it makes a kind of crazy sense." She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Sandy's hand flew up to his face. The kiss had given a new twist to the proverbial Pinch Me I'm Dreaming, test of reality. "What was that for?"

"Doesn't the prince always wake - up with a kiss?"

"You got that backwards, I think."

"Maybe it's you who need an update." She smiled and leaned in for another. This time he returned the favor. After a heated moment, they feel prone to the couch as a fire leap - up with a suppressed whoosh inside the hearth. Sandy's head came up,

· "What's that?"

"A crackling fire, silly."

"A specialty?" He inquired.

"Later, please." She gently commanded him.

"It's been a long time." He vacillated. "I don't think I can, you know-"

In answer Mair's slim hand wound into his hair, finally knocking his hat to the floor, and pulled him down to her.

She knew.

Afterward, with dust literally settled around them, Sandy thought about the events of the night. During the love making something had happened to him. At first there had been that undeniable retroactive guilt. A heaviness so monumental it had driven him into the numbing embrace of prostitutes and the bottle for the last twenty years. When Mair's heated response to him was to straddle herself above him, he found an emotional corner inside himself that he had not known existed. He had lifted himself to grasp her and they rode out a physical blending of desire that peaked in his crying climax. After, he remained inside her and she held him until his sobbing abated.

His wife had been a gentle person, and so had Rosa, but he hadn't considered them, or himself, innocent.

"Why chose me?"

Mair's head was resting in his lap, she snuggled in closer to him.

"Hmm? We chose each other, don't you think?"

He hadn't thought, at all. He had always drawn strict authority lines, this side was the grunts, across the line those who used the grunts. She fell into the latter group - if he could pigeonhole her at all. But when he

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thought about all the years on the streets, all the time spent in autopsies, inside the naked lives of people. He could certainly think, yes, there was a bond. A cohesive element with death, more intimate than he might want to believe.

"Yes, maybe that's true."

She sat up, watching him intently. "I don't apologize for what I am. You don't either, that's why suicide was a viable option for you. The separation hardly exists."

"It's existence, is it? Just how long have you existed?"

She didn't answer immediately, instead looked down at something interesting between her toes.

"How long? A hundred, a thousand, two thousand years. Just how much would we have in common?"

His eyes clouded with unshed tears; his vision fuzzed.

Suddenly he was lunging for Mair's insubstantial form. "No!"

"You're denying me, Sandy." He could see she was crying, but he could also see the arm of the sofa beyond her.

He sat back, thinking furiously. "Wait, it's okay."

Suddenly he was sure of himself, and he deliberately turned on her. "You can go if you want. I won't hold you. I love you."

Her form wavered for a moment, then seemed to solidify. "I don't hold true to certain forms of denial."

He didn't understand but found he didn't actually care. He reached out to take her hand, but it was cold, and his mind envisioned graves all laid out in neat rows. He tried not to pull back quickly, but the touch had laid an icy sting on his fingers.

"That is who I am." She said, in painful understanding.

He looked around the place, the fire had died away and he was suddenly chilled.

"It was built in 1924. The first organized crime cooperative, between New York, Chicago, and Cuba. The rackets needed neutral ground, in a port city, that had access to the ocean. Al Capone was deeded all of Montauk except the lighthouse on the point. New York build the structure, Cuba provided boats.

Many people died here, that were never found." Sandy raised an

eyebrow. "Hoffa?"

Mair laughed, finalizing her solidity. "That would be cheating. Do I look like the type to kiss and tell?"

"You look good to me." Sandy became serious. "Me?"

Mair matched his emotion. "We all die, sometime. But not anytime soon. But it wouldn't be a bad idea to lay off the booze."

This was shaky ground for Sandy. "I think I should get some sleep. I better get back."

She smiled, knowingly and rose. He watched her form as she dressed. She had a wonderful shape, not too thin, not too heavy. But there was more to it than that, some balance of form beyond his understanding. He wanted simple explanations, not mystical enlightenment.

"Do you need clothing?" He asked, pulling on his clothes.

"Not the way you mean. It's a prop of physical manifestation."

"So, you appeared dressed according to where you are? What about your body, does it need to you know . . .?" She placed a hand softly on his cheek - it was warm and dry this time - holding his gaze intently. "You think I faked that back there?" She smiled.

"Oh, no!" He stammered, feeling stupid.

Mair just laughed. They walked back to the beach, hand in hand, across the dawn-lighted sand. The ocean was high, crashing noisily with the new day's rhythm.

They stopped beside the parking lot of the hotel where he was staying where the open stairs led up to his room. They hadn't spoken since leaving the Caesar. Sandy's thoughts had quieted to immediate sensation, the wind, the sand, the flavor of salted air. They faced each other.

Mair seemed troubled and unsure of herself. "What's wrong, did I do something? I know I can be a complete"

She quieted him with an uncomfortable look. "It's just that you didn't ask me."

"What? Please." He pleaded.

She looked away from him. "Will you see me again?"

Sandy was flabbergasted. "I didn't know if you would want to. I mean.

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Well, I can't just call you. Can I?" He was genuinely curious• .

Mair laughed, a bit sadly. "No, you can't call." She hesitated, once again.

Sandy knew what to do this time, he remembered. He took her in his arms and kissed her lightly, but firmly. When they separated he could see that her uncertainty had passed.

"I am drawn to the Caesar. It will be bought soon, by a small corporation. It will be very successful."

He smiled. "Think I got a chance at Head of Security."

Her face became serious. "The best kind of chance. You'll know the owner." She smiled wanly. "I have to go now."

Sandy stepped back and they had one of those awkward romantic moments, when neither party wants to turn from the other. In a completely uncharacteristic burst of inspiration Sandy smiled. "I think I've just fallen dead in love."

Mair laughed, raised a hand, and started to turn away. Sandy turned to the steps and climbed upward, listening to the retreating sound of Mair's feet into the distance. He looked out over the ocean, leaning on the rail. After a few minutes he walked down to the sand. He took off his shoes and socks and pushed his toes into the sand. In seconds he had to dance away from the swirling foam of a wave. He thought this over, then crept back to the surf line, stuck his toes deep into the oozing sand, then danced away from the next wave. He played his game with the sea, until he fell down laughing shamelessly.

Blue Waves



The sunset waters of Lake Superior lapped the beach at high tide, finally reaching the single rose and the aged photograph that lay beside it. The tide lifted the two items from the sand taking them into the surf. They seasawed for a time, a gentle swaying motion forward and back—the glistening surface of the photo catching stray beams of yellow and red from the sun - then the sea rolled them both beneath the waves, leaving the surface empty. Jen Boy Johnson lifted himself, weary and stiff from waiting for his offering to be taken, his crippled leg limp and useless, he dragged himself to the shack where he lived on the shore of Trash Island. He left a deep furrow behind him through the sand.

He stopped in the center of the porch, the planks creaking in dismay to his weight, he turned to look back out across Lake Michigan. The light was growing faint as sunset gave way to twilight. A burst of blue washed along the horizon like a stroke of watercolor. There was no sight of rose, nor picture, nor the skyline of Thunder Bay twenty miles north. Only the water remained a dirty green, ridden by millions of blue coins reflected from the lights of unseen Thunder Bay so far away. Jen Boy sighed, satisfied at the color of the sea.

"Keep to yourself." He croaked to the wind, then to himself. "I'm just too old now."

He opened the dilapidated wooden screen door and entered his four room shack. A center doorway listed drunkenly to reveal the kitchen was at the back of the building. Jen Boy stood in the living room. At either end of the living room were doorways. To the right was Jen Boys bedroom.

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The place where he and his brother had been born. There where he and Scot had slept and played. The other end of the room was his bathroom. The place where the midwife had cleaned-up after the birth of himself and his brother, Scot He had been six the night Scot was born. He had watched his father rocking furiously back and forth in his junk yard easy chair. His hand resting on the green bottle balanced on the greasy arm of the chair. Every time his mother screamed, his father would lift the bottle to his lips, then continue to rock in stiff motions. His fat her had been a boat in rough seas, his deck the easy chair tilted in a savage storm of his son's birth.

He could still see them - his parents. His father a tall, stern faced gentleman of the sea, dressed in overalls and chambray shirts • His hands net-roughened from years on the lake fishing for fluke. He would lift Jen-Boy high into the air with his huge hands, throwing him high outside before the porch along shore, so high above the sand that Jen Boy thought he would fly off to the horizon. Then his mother, coming out onto the porch in her

pink and white shift dress, white apron, her downy red curls bouncing with a life of their own, wiping the pie dough from her fingers, she would yell for them to stop and come in and Scot would run in circles around his father screaming:

"Me, me, me next." His tiny hands thrown high above his head.

His father would scoop him up and throw him skyward. Launching him outward toward the clouds. Jen Boy would watch him fly up, all his golden hair lifting off his small head at once like a wild golden umbrella. His eyes alight with sheer adventure and mischief, his smile brighter than a sinner sun, and Jen Boy knew. He knew more certainly than anything that his brother was beyond understanding, a perfect thing, a soaring spirit. Jen Boy thought if his brother put his mind to it he could fly away into the clouds, out beyond the sky, up into the hidden stars.

He shook his head at the wonder of the memory. He always remembered those events on this day, Scots birthday. He couldn't, no matter how hard he concentrated, remember how old Scot was- or

would have been - today. His mind wandered about more than usual these past years , but he remembered the day and what needed to be offered for the occasion. The picture out of the album, and a rose picked from his garden.

He dragged himself into his bedroom and fell onto the mattress. His bad leg dangled with no feeling off the edge, his shoe had slipped off swinging from his toes . An event independent of his body, or his notice. He often left his foot on the floor while he slept. It was easier to rise from bed with it already on the floor and ready to go. He was just about to doze when he remembered what he had forgotten.

The thought that he would have to rise caused him such anguish he began to cry. He ran his twisted, scared hands through his thin grey hair. He would have to rise, no matter how excruciating- he had forgotten the most important part of the ritual.

It wasn't that his body wasn't cared for, heather doctor on the mainland once every three months, it was unrepairable - or as repairable as he would let them get it. The truth wash felt he deserved his body. A just and right punishment for his failure.

He had no illusions about who he was or what he looked like. A tilted, shuffling mass of scar tissue and bulging calcifications that reminded him of Quasimodo, the hunch back of Notre Dame. He was comforted in the realization that if circumstances had been reversed he would probably shy away from himself. He could understand peoples fear.

His greatest desire was to stand in a well-lighted public place during some high time - Christmas perhaps - and be ignored. His greatest fear was to he held against his will in such a place, like the institution where his mother lived.

He hadn't time to wonder at all he had missed in life, from what he saw on the small black and white pushed into the corner of the Livingroom it wasn't all that much. From the time he had been young he had wanted a family. Someone to be responsible to in his simple way. The ritual offer of the rose and photograph was his way of staying connected to something, someone, an intimacy with roots in the

traditional.

Now he racked his body in order to finish that tradition. He found his way to the kitchen sitting heavily in one of the chairs at the table. The album with the family pictures was laid before him. It was a tattered leather bound volume, with a piece of red ribbon tied across the front holding it closed. The ribbon had faded over the years, frayed white along the edges,

it had been his mother's. He lifted the pages tenderly, feeling the black construction paper as a roughness rooted in the past. The book had contained his family's history, the years of love, until the accident. After his brother had died, and Jen Boy scared, his parents will have faded, until only three years after the accident his father died of a heart attack and his mother, insane with the losses, had withdrawn completely.

Now most all of the pages were empty. He counted the remaining photographs, only three. They rested on the last page of the album. He stared at them for a long moment, checked the other pages, then realized his time was nearly here. He had only three more birthdays.

Of all the things he feared, all the times he groaned in despair at the harshness of his life, he thought the time would come when the ritual would end. He laid his head upon the red Formica tabletop. The surface cool, no matter what how what the ambient temperature, and rested his mind. He thought he would think it over, contemplate the import of this finding, perhaps even find it somehow a natural course of events, but he didn't. He fell asleep in seconds.

Sometimes his dreams were explosions of color and light. Images of the boating accident that had injured his brother so grievously that the angels themselves had come to take him. Sometimes they were nonsense images - clear visions understandable for the fact of their reality base, but of people and places he had never seen before. But mostly, like tonight he dreamed of the angels diving out of the blue waves. He would see them, hundreds, thousands, floating beneath a troubled night sea. Their wings somehow looking fluffy and dry, as they sped away from him toward a surf out in the deep water.

He woke to a stiff back and neck so tense he thought he might be locked in this position forever. But slowly it released him and by the time Ralph Handsome came calling in the yard, Jen Boy was thinking maybe he should sleep in the chair every night.

He went out to greet the only man who Jen Boy could friend from the mainland.

"Ho Johnson." He greeted Jen Boy, who as always dropped his eyes at the booming sound and nature of this large dark man's voice.

"Hiya." Jen Boy, slurred through lips that sometimes didn't feel like his own.

"Ha, Ha," Ralph boomed. "You shouldn't talk so early my friend. Your lips need time to wake up. So, stop talking and let's unload the boat."

Jen Boy smiled and followed the big man to the dock.

Ralph Handsome owned Handsome Boats, a new boat dealership on the mainland. He also owned Handsome Lumber, Handsome Grocery, and several other businesses that Jen Boy knew nothing about, although Ralph sometimes talked of them.

Today he had towed a flat wooden barge-like trailer out to the island. Jen Boy always felt awkward around the new boats. He had bad footing to begin with, but with the fiberglass boats he was like a fish flopping on a deck.

Jen Boy knew Ralph sensed this, adding the wooden trailer so Jen Boy could help unload, even if it was just a bag of groceries from the market.

Ralph Handsome's father had been Harold Johnson's partner. When Harold died, Ralph's father had inherited the business, a small hauling company. He had paid off the deed to the island and given it to the Johnsons. It had been Ralph's father who had helped his mother out to a waiting boat when she had finally been sent to the Harbor View Sanatorium down in Cleavesdale. The Handsomes helped Jen Boy whenever they could -which was often.

Today the trailer was full, Ralph Handsome would be helping Jen Boy build a new dock. The trailer was full of new treated wood. There were

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four docks on the island, one large shack, two smaller sheds and a boat house. The island itself was about half a mile from the western shore of Michigan. It was one mile wide and three long, though the northern end had become overgrown with a tall seagrass called phragmites, it was still called the "Back Half." by Jen Boy, as his family had named it in the years Scot was alive .

Sitting with Ralph always made Jen Boy think of the things he hadn't done, like clean up the yard, or run the mower. The big man had the look of someone who always got things done. Now they sat on the storage lockers of the trailers flat deck considering each other.

"You been feeling poorly Johnson?" Ralph asked. "Nah. " Jen Boy said automatically.

Ralph nodded in his slow big way. "Sure, about that? My wife passes by every day on her way to Thunder Bay. She made it a point to tell me she hasn't seen you once."

Jen Boy shrugged.

"Titter said you haven't been on the beach, except for yesterday. Then you sat the whole day in the same spot . She's driven me crazy with that telescope I bought her for her birthday. It's amazing, you can see for miles. But she has a habit of looking where she don't belong. Like in other people's back yards."

Ralph laughed a little. Titter was Melissa Handsome, Ralphs fourteen year old granddaughter. Seadrome to stay with Ralph ten years ago when his son died unexpectedly. Ralph hadn't said much about it, but from what he had mentioned Jen Boy understood that he had cracked from smoking. He had to admit that when Ralph had told him years ago, Jen Boys had placed them in his own order, but the way Ralph had said it had made no sense. Now he knew what Crack was and thought his boy had maybe Cranked on Crack - or something like that. Titter was old enough now to come out and deliver packages to Jen Boy, but he was really uncomfortable when she did, and usually didn't say anything to her.

"So, what were you doing out on the beach all day?" Ralph asked

lifting some boards and placing them on the dock, as if asking the question during casual conversation.

"Sss-Hots, f fifday." Jen Boy answered.

"Oh. I see. It was Scots birthday."

Jen Boy smiled, then began helping Ralph.

When they had unloaded all the lumber, brought the groceries to the house and Ralph had given Jen Boy his social check to be signed, then cashed by Marlene Handsome the following day, they stood a moment on the dock. Jen boy listing heavily on his now tired good leg. Ralph pulled out a huge red bandana and wiped his brow with long swipes.

"You gotta do it all yourself, don't you?" Ralph asked. Jen Boy just smiled.

"I could have a crew come out. Or I could buy the island from you. You could even live in that guest house on my property. It has a dock and boat house. I would even sell it to you. Plus, whatever you got for the island. I 'd be fair."

Jen Boy' d face had become more miserable with every word. It wasn't just that couldn't leave the island. The outside world, the flatlanders would never understand him, would never leave him alone. He was where he needed to be. The thought of Handsomes friends and neighbors being nice to him out of pity was just too much for Jen Boy. He shook his head.

"But let me buy the land and set you up for life." Jen Boy shook his head harder.

"Titter loves you Johnson, you know that. Marlene doesn't treat you any different than anyone else. What's the problem with coming and staying a piece? Just to see how you would like it. "

Jen Boy pictured Titter and her mother bringing over some pie or other pastry, and him accepting it from them with a smile. But then he might have to meet others, not so understanding. How would Titter or Marlene deal with those who would turn away from them because he was their friend. Or worse - they would turn him into a freak, some side

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show exhibit. And Titter and Marlene would have to abide by that because the world was a harsh place, where the noble were rewarded with sneers and dislike. Finally, they would be as isolated as he was.

He shook his head, saddened by the thought of his friends, his only friends, hurt. "Slide Sssow."

Ralph looked confused: "Side Show?"

Ralphs brow drew down. "Slide show reek'?" Jen Boy nodded.

Then realization dawned on the big man's face. "A side show freak!" He boomed. "Over my dead body Johnson. "

Jen boy put a hesitant hand on the big man's shoulder "Ish know fest." He nodded, almost to himself. Ralph placed one huge, gentle hand on Jen Boys shoulder.

"No Johnson. The world is different now. Look at me. I used to have to fight for everything, nobody cared for a man like me makin my way. It didn't suit them, but with everything that happened, and the way the world is, now I'm respected. But more than that I'm accepted."

Ralph nodded: "Enough of this! I'll send Titter by with your check money in the morning. "

Jen Boy didn't catch the full import of his words , being caught up in thoughts of living in a real well lighted place and having friends, until Ralphs back was nearly a blur in the distance. Then his heart started to pound. He was never good with others at the best of times. How was he to lift himself out of bed at all in the morning. After this days hard labor, he would need a full days rest. Dragging himself up to relieve himself and grab a small bite to eat was going to be an all-day affair. He turned back toward the shack, sighed, it seemed a million miles away. He numb leg left a deep furrow in the sand as he made his way across the beach, where he had made his offering the day before.

It was sunset, and his mind wandered to thoughts of sleeping, resting the ache in his lower side and back. But he knew the pain would grow just as soon as he laid down. His bad eye wept, in a constant slow thick flow, irritating his face. He scratched at the wet mass, then saw something lying on the empty beach. He dragged himself over to the

object. It was a twisted photograph. He couldn't garner the strength to unfold it, but the thought of one extra years ritual made him hold it tight, if it was the picture he had offered yesterday. He dragged himself into the shack, found some cheese in the grocery bags on the table where he had laid down the picture almost forgotten, heated the cheese in large chucks, drank some water, then found his way to the bed.

He had strange dreams. Disconnected, flashes of imagery, where lights played across black water. He felt himself above the surface speeding along at a clip beyond that of his horrified imaginings of speed boats. Faces popped out of the darkness, startling real people of his past, his mother, father, Jack Handsome, and Scot. They flashed on as if lighted from behind, then were gone. He felt himself falling now, but never touching the surface of the water, tumbling through a windless passage leading to a dim blue light at the far end. He began to hear voices, Titter, Ralph, Marlene. Even his doctor, Doctor Higgins from the mainland - his correct tones a little rushed, but never unkind. He couldn't tell exactly what was being said, but it seemed familiar, a usual thing.

The tumbling slowed until he was still and no longer felt his stomach twitching. Around him was darkness, the water still rushed by. At first he couldn't tell if the water was moving by him, or he was moving past the water. He knew he was standing still when he saw a pale light shimmering beneath the waves. It scintillated, distorted by the currents was a heavy motion. As it grew he knew it was coming for him, just as it had come for his brother. It was a pale blue coin spreading outward, tendrils of light shifted about it like tails of a jellyfish. By the time it was one fathom deep the light had spread covering the whole of the black sea in a bright blue as far as Jen Boy could see. He struggled to get beyond the light, but he could not move. He watched from the horrible imprisoning grasp of his dream, as a pinpoint of brighter white, a terrible focus of light, moved toward the surf ace.

The Angel rose up from the blue waves.

Jen Boy knew that she would come for him, just as she had come for Scot the night of the accident, when he had failed to take care of his brother. He had let Scot down and God had sent the Angels to save

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him and punish Jen Boy, but she was early. He still had pictures, more pictures, the offerings must be made. Something must have gone wrong; she must be displeased with his tribute. He could not look into her bright, terrible face. So, he looked past her feet to the blue waves below him.

Deep inside the blue light darker blue angels passed about the water. Jen Boy never would have guessed they could swim, or even liked the water, there were so many. They moved around like small shrimp playing in deep blue water.

"Look at me." The Angel said.

He shook his head vigorously. That he could not do. Her voice, like he knew all angels voices must be like, came from all around him, as if the words had been sung out of one of those booming stereos in the small trucks the mainland youngsters rode around in.

He put his hands to his ears, thought he would scream if she touched him with her words again. A hand of pale translucence, not human, passed before his eyes. He could see a blue outline, shaped like his own hand, but he could look right through it. The index finger had a small fin-like extrusion gently lifting from it. A delicate curve, long, slowly rising away from the pale digit. His eyes traced it up the almost clear arm, to a small shoulder, then up beyond the shoulder over the head. Her wings rose high, high above her head. And now he knew all Angels were women.

Her face was as pale as moonlight, her eyes blue iridescence, her hair almost as pale as her wings. Her neck held her head with smooth sinew. She was a form, not human, but exquisitely human. An Angel.

"Have you come for me?" He heard himself think, in terror and awe-outload.

"If you wish. Come with us. That body must be taxing."

Jen Boy nodded without even considering. But then shook his head even more vigorously. Her eyes scrutinized him; she tilted her head in compassion.

That was more emotion than he could bear. His thoughts screamed before he

could contain them.

"I deserve this! I deserve it! You know that! I killed him!"

Her lips, smooth milky white, lifted in a smile. Jen Boy threw his hands up before that dismal grin. But this being a dream could not cover his face. He flailed his arms, kicked his feet, but to no avail. Finally, he calmed, to a tense resignation.

"You did not kill him. The one that was called Scot Johnson knows this." she said her smile never wavering. "But this has not gone as expected."

She seemed to contemplate, as if listening to others. Jen Boy automatically looked down past her floating feet. The smaller, farther, angels, deep in the blue sea, swam about as before.

"Perhaps. " The Angels said - distant - listening.

Her pale hand came up, passing in front of Jen Boys eyes. He could hear her words resonating all around him.

"I was thoughtful of this one. They are not ready. But he could perhaps, teach. There are many teachers. Yes . . Perhaps . . He needs . . ."

Her words were coming as if from a greater and greater distance. Jen Boy again could not tell in which way the motion was directed. Whether he was moving back away from the Angel - or she was floating away from him. Her hand remained before him, but her words receded as her face became blurred with distance. But as she went the vista of Lake Michigan opened before him. In its center the Blue Waves had formed a surf. The waves tumbled down on a black beach that could not be distinguished from the water surrounding it.

He moved beyond seeing it, out into the night.

When he woke from the fever he was in the boat house on the Handsome property. He managed to pull himself up, and shakily stand on his good leg. He looked about the place. It was larger than his shack, more rooms. He walked into the kitchen. On the counter was the crushed picture he had found on the beach. He lifted it with trembling fingers. Unfolded it's crumbled sides until he could make out the image. It was a

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young boy's face, tilted a sharp angle, pushed up against the lens, mugging a smile in a playful blurring of the image. He looked about eight or nine years old. The beach beyond was visible in lower corner. Jen Boy stared at the photograph, crying for a long time.

In the years following his fever he lived on the Handsome property and was introduced to many people. He received them on the patio of the great house of the Handsomes. Many were ladies, some journalists, or writers.

Titter had a never ending supply of new friends. All of them sought his views of the world - having spent most of his life isolated on his tiny island. He told them many things -insights into understanding that he hadn't been aware he knew.

Most afternoons found him in physical therapy in a bright building down coast about twenty miles - very near his mother. When he had first started the operations he had gone to visit her. But he never went back - she had been an empty shell, not moving , relieving herself into a diaper. Jen Boy was sure her soul had fled.

In the evenings he held court, as he thought of it. The ladies would come, with their tight-lipped condescension's and empty smiles and he startled them, stunned them, angered them, and taught them. The younger ones he taught the equations-formed in word problems. He especially like the ones who studied physics and psychology. He could bend their minds the furthest. They laughed and told him he was grand, but never made fun.

He kept the picture of the young boy in a frame beside his bed. And as the operations became more successful, he looked at it less and less. One morning in late April of 1999, he woke in the middle of the night. He threw his legs out of the bed- still marveling at the hip the doctors had replaced - snatched up the picture, jumped in his new Head Runner speed boat and headed for the western Beach on Trash Island.

He stood back from the low waves, having picked one of the roses from the overgrown patch beside the now fallen down shack, and watched. The northern lights headset the plasma of the world on fire,

and it ignited the moon. The blue moon hung like a blotched coin above him. The new millennium was coming, and it would bring him no pain. He watched the sea, and slowly the surf rose to greet the moon. The blue waves hung out beyond the northern lights. Out from waves, like a thousand shrimp playing tag the blue lights of the angels sped toward him. He held his breath from the sheer numbers, as they wound their way closer and closer. And when finally, one, a tiny blue light brighter than the rest, broke away and headed for shore, Jen Boy Johnson broke away and ran for the Blue Waves.

As the water broke over his thighs he heaved his offering out as far as he could into the night. Then he held his breath hip deep in blue waves, until the Angel lifted above the waves, Rose in one hand, the picture in the other, both held high above her head. She had accepted his offering. And Jen Boy Johnson accepted hers.

Hooker



Kiley Pane led the john into alley off the Vegas Strip. Facing him, in the waning moonshine with a provocative smirk, she unwound the long tresses at the back of her head. The john looked drugged, as he molded his body to hers, plunging his hands deep into the forest of thick strands. The man's head snapped back, his eyelids fluttering as she performed for him.

Meanwhile, Kiley, stared up to the roof edges and fire escapes, chewing her lower lip, trying not to see the images playing in her mind. But flashes of his memories appeared, anyway. A spacer, she thought, from the colonies. She grimaced in revulsion as he focused on one memory.

In the bedroom, with Tabitha, after lessons. She is so bare, so hot. I am making it, making it! "Oh, Toby," Tabitha moaned.

"Yes Tabby, oh my Tabby cat." Moving so slow, she is totally present. She wants it, my sister, sister.

Kiley bit her lip, hard, felt the flow of blood there wiping away the images. She forced her mind outward, to the street sounds. She could hear the overhead highway as a distant swishing, on the ground people yelled, laughed, cried. He'd finish soon. She hoped.

She felt the tremors begin in his lower back, lifting in sinuous waves to his shoulders. His back arched unnaturally, his legs going water-loose in convulsive shudders, as he climaxed. Painfully, she whipped his arms from around her neck, hoping against snags, but needing to get him

away. He fell away from her, unconscious, and hit the ground with a satisfying crack.

She rolled him for his wallet, making certain to avoid any still photos. After, she tossed the empty case into a puddle, then returned to the street. Once out in the anonymous safety of the crowds she leaned against a lamppost, catching her breath. The clarity of the images was growing. This time she could feel the room, surrounding them – those . . . disgusting!

She took a deep, steadying breath, then straightened. She adjusted her scant clothing, then reached behind her head, gingerly rolling up the free ganglia that swung in a free bunch behind her head. She tucked the coil into an oiled skin pouch resting between her shoulder-blades. She pasted a smile on her face and hoped there was a glitter in her eyes. She began to saunter up the strip, a slinky bounce in her hips. There were jobs to work, and credit to be accrued.

"Based on a reports recommending relocation."

The tech, a nameless volunteer at the ghetto clinic, raised his head as if readying himself for a good sniff, or a lie.

He stood above Kiley, who sat on the soiled examination table, hands as shoved deep in the pockets of his lab coat. His eyes became vacant of involvement. He stood glancing down at her. He reeked of company involvement. Not that he would ever admit that, of course, they called it Sponsorship.

"Perhaps you should consider the center on Luna. They have an excellent program, just for your type of regeneration."

Programming, asshole, Kiley thought. They have excellent programming.

"Relocation is part of your particular therapy." He reminded her, having turned his back, as he prepared a syringe. "Relocation is difficult, I understand. But all good things are, you know."

He repeats the word, she thought, trying to convince himself the lie is the truth.

Lab rats, like this guy, loved to use statistics as a morality weapon.

Kiley, sitting on the examination table, smiled to herself. She had dealt

with these company-supported clinical types before.

Maybe they didn't front for the companies that sponsor them, but helpful alliance kept the credit flowing freely. She wondered who it was in this case; Unihealth, Digital Autonomic, Extopharrn. Her genetic agent, another nameless company man, had spoken of affiliated coverage. Could it be all of them? Her development was nearing its final stages. Soon they would want to harvest.

She hated being at the mercy of some powerful, faceless entity. She had seen her file, though the techs wouldn't have guessed, from across the room. If she concentrated, her eyesight became marginally telescopic; one of the many attributes of her regeneration that were cropping up just lately. This tech had written with a standard light pen, on ultra- thin photosensitive sheets, with a twitching smile.

Presents: Problem with authority, due to lifestyle, social rank. Inability to maintain intimate relations, resulting in extreme promiscuity.

Recommendations: Initiating Fail-Safe for harvest, due to imminent noncompliance.

Therapy: Genetic blockers include: antidepressant, anti-rejection.

Contraindications: Recommend against violence; constant sedation anti-psychotic neural inhibitors.

First Program Treatment: immediate upon examination.

He turned around. Beyond his dull gaze Kiley saw the point of the syringe. He fixed her with an understanding smile. Fluid shot from the needlepoint, in a tiny jet.

Lab sperm, she thought, a bit hysterical.

"You know the drill," he said, waving the sparkling needle in a circle. "Anti-rejection. Over and drop them."

His smile widened as Kiley complied. Jumping down, she turned bending provocatively. She flipped up her skirt. Her regeneration stood out like a pallid headdress, trembling with anticipation. She watched him quickly approach, a pathetic triumph written over his bland features.

The look changed to surprise with comical swiftness when single ganglia strand lifted to caress his face gently. He might have just gotten surprisingly good news. The syringe stopped in midair, quavering. Then quiet excitement washed over him as more tendrils snaked out, touching,

smoothing over his features. A broken piece of imagery flashed through her mind, filled with his emotions.

Age twenty, mommy has been drinking again. He doesn't want to see her like this, passed out on the couch This is stupid! You are a man now. Maybe she's dead! She's so fat, so disgusting. Oh, don't die! I love you!

Age thirty - two, mommy is a wasted skeleton in the hospital. Her breath smells like a dead rodent, but she won't let go of him. Let me be! Let me be! Don't die, I love you . . . but she goes that night. Glad!

Age forty three, yesterday. Jeffery Bloom is the Co-Assistant to the Vice President of Funding for the Research Alliance. He's a flat-faced little climber, with dead eyes. "You know how important this is to our work. She must be brought to Miri Mars as soon as possible.

"She's resisting," he says.

"Don't you want to get back to your regeneration work. Your mother won't wait forever, you know."

He takes a deep shuttering breath. He nods. "I'll give her-" He starts.

Bloom holds up a hand, interrupting him. "I don't want to know how. You'll think of something."

All that imagery in the space of a second, Kiley blocks anymore, concentrates on the needle. It must go into his leg.

It all quickly changed to fear and then horror, as the syringe trembled its way toward his thigh, embedding itself deep in the muscle. After a moment his eyes fluttered. She released him, letting him hit the floor with a resounding smack and crash of instruments as his limp arms flailed.

Starting to like that sound, she thought. She arranged herself, then left, waving casually to the receptionist as she passed the front desk.

To the receptionist's bland look of inquiry, she said: "The tech said to have the next patient wait. He knocked over a tray. He'll come and get the next person."

The receptionist, a wizened old man with a nose peeking out from behind one ear, nodded sagely, and thanked her.

She casually walked out into the bright sunlight. Three blocks up a deep alley presented itself. She paused a moment, then dashed away,

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into the underground of the ghetto. She went to ground Down Centre, home.

Down Centre wasn't a new place. All cities had them. Only the names changed. Small islands of penury, where the truly destitute, the unwanted, the deformed and twisted of humanity, could find refuge of a kind.

Twelve blocks made up Down Centre. Arranged around a central courtyard - like area that was itself a square. Down Centre, she thought looking around. Time stopped.

Above, the racked skyline of tall glass and ceramic composite towers bore down in accusation on the scarred faces of wooden walk-ups. All gathered close around Centre's cobbled and dried-up stone fountain. Its enormous headless cupid, covered in centuries of graffiti, still raised a footless leg as he aimed an empty bow toward the city.

People, mostly swathed in toga - like wraps, shuffled about slowly, as if carrying heavy weights. Their hidden bodies bulged in odd places. Signs of the criminal affiliations and coverages that no one else would carry.

"A penny for your thoughts, miss."

Kiley turned around. A young girl stood with her toga opened down the front. A thin bundle of neurons ran from behind her ear, trailing down to a tiny screen. The screen displayed a strange array of colors.

Don't they have any shame? She wondered bitterly. She gave the little girl a penny, then took the girl's outstretched hand in hers. She thought of a pony ride across an endless pasture of waving wheat. She let go, seeing the girl's face glow with warmth.

"Oh, that's a good one." The child piped, running off to sell the thought to a virtual agent.

Kiley stared where the girl had run, thinking of the agencies that sold thoughts and emotions. A nice cultural twist, a Hooker thinking of pony rides on the prairie. A small, hunched form dashed across the intersection where the girl had run. It looked like a child, but it was hard to tell. There had been extra legs hanging beneath the belly, with fur and hoofs. Kiley turned away, sensing a change of the air. The air was thick with anticipation, as just before a special occasion, a rite or presentation. She turned in place noticing no real change, just fewer people hobbling

past.

A moment later three people emerged from a ground level apartment. Determined faces gazed directly at her, their expression told Kiley not to run. They stopped before her, one man and two women. These would be her contacts. One of the women stepped forward. Her hands folded beneath a bulge in her stomach region. It gave her a look of sagacity. Kiley cautioned herself not to trust the obvious assumptions. It could be a pregnancy, or a liver regeneration.

"Come with us, now."

Kiley nodded, wary for trouble, but sensing only grudging helpfulness.

The three turned, crossing the cobbles, and leading beneath the shadowed confines of an upper deck. A bit of concentration revealed the doorway, then, without warning, the interior was superimposed over the curtain of darkness beneath the deck, like a still photo.

She could see a small, square front room, with a hallway leading to the back, three doorways off the hall. No furnishings showed. Startled, Kiley hesitated. The others stared to turn, to inquire, but she caught up to them. "Lead on," she gestured with her hands.

The three radiated a heavy sense of dread, and anticipation. Kiley gazed about the empty room, sensing her own peril as an outward flowing from the others. She locked onto the hallway and a small man appeared there.

Jeffery Bloom!

It was as if he'd materialized from nowhere, as if her presence had forced him into focus. Stunned for a moment, she stared as reality washed over her. He had been there all along!

She glanced quickly to the other three. They didn't move, as if held in some kind of stasis. The little man advanced on her, a crooked smile covering his flat face.

Kiley backed away, suddenly aware of a tingling at the back of her neck. She was nearing the door, aware that the greatest threat to her was probably lying in wait outside.

His eyes really are dead! She thought, then: Will that happen to me?

"I have no wish to harm you," Bloom said. "Quite the opposite in fact."

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He reached behind his head, gingerly lifting out an amazing headdress of free ganglia. Twice as long as her own and fuller, an exotic pile of fleshy ropes hanging down to his thighs. Stunned, Kiley stood silently in the doorway. The high whine of a laser sight trained on her head made one eye lid flutter. If she moved they would take her. Bloom mistook this hesitation for compliance and began his explanation.

"Past the terminal growth stage, the effect is astounding," he said. "We start to have immediate sensory recall, memories right up to the moment of contact, not just the deep ones. You're an infant compared to me. And we move faster. Faster than you could imagine possible."

He's preaching!

She held herself stock-still, knowing her options were limited. The regeneration of ganglia, though her knowledge was limited, seemed one of the more important of the coverages. The companies that made their profits from such products sought out the truly expendable, the desperate, the criminal. People like herself, with nothing to lose. No matter what happened here, their secret would be safe.

She fell back to what she knew, what had gotten her through all these years on the street. Do anything it takes, to survive. Survival drew its own boundaries.

She moved forward slowly, right into arms that were thrown wide in oratory. His flat features looked surprised, but then were drawn down in wary pleasure. She let his hands mold themselves over her ass, then ground herself into him.

When her memories started to flow, she knew she had him.

Her eyes fluttered open then squinted at the bright daylight. She lay a moment, disconnected, floating in the safe emptiness between finished dreams and keen reality. Reality came with sudden anguish, and she rolled over on her side. On the crate she used as a nightstand, next to the sodium lamp, was a long strip of transparent, photo-sensitive celluline.

She looked drowsily around the tiny room, checking for signs of him, but there were none. Wearily, she dragged herself to the window. She stood naked before the square pane, then straightened her back, then stretched. The taped ends of her clipped ganglia tapped her between the shoulder blades. The stinging was no longer bothersome, or even

noticeable. She turned away from the street that didn't notice her, or she it.

She made a quick toilet, then donned something that might in the imagination be called clothing. Absently she wondered when he would be back, as she slipped the celluline strip into the tiny shoulder purse she wore.

She presented the celluline slip to a wary-eyed customer rep at the credit center. She checked it twice, then informed Kiley that her debit exchange would cost her twice the usual credit. Kiley said nothing, fished out the card Bloom had given her, and presented this to rep.

Angry at the loss of a large commission the rep handed her off to a junior, who made the transaction. It wasn't much after the fees and treatment coverage, but it was enough.

Kiley made her way to her usual comer at sunset. The crowds were thick, heavy with the scent of pleasure. She was competing against fresh ganglia, those who had not yet been clipped for this quarter. The sentries patrolled for harass-able Hookers, as the johns patrolled for the best looking recall. The noses and ears, fingers, and toes, of the average citizens, the middle income families, were so prevalent Kiley wondered how they sold them for harvest.

Recently, the deeper organs, often relegated to the poorer quarters, were cropping up in the better communities. Just the other day she had seen a little boy sporting two eyeballs dangling from long optic nerves behind each ear. They had bounced around like awful bloodshot earrings. Times were changing.

She watched the traffic for a long time, thinking of last night. It was always the same with Bloom. Men were so predictable.

Who, she thought, am I to complain? He paid his time, a full night, with meals. Besides, he was a tiny little thing, pathetic in his need for control.

What is it he did, again? She thought hard, staring at the neck of a passing man. He was a hulk, probably from the wrestling show at the Sands, with a bald head. The baby fist poking from the folded skin of his neck clenched and unclenched threateningly. So predictable, men. He

might as well wear an erect penis.

She had it! Bloom was a genetics assistant down at the clinic. She had met him after one of her clippings. He cleaned up the clipped ends, mopped the floors, fetched lunch, that sort of thing.

"You out?" Kiley turned around. A man in a soiled grey drover stood before her. He smiled through missing teeth. At the same time flipping open his coat flaps, exposing a tiny, shriveled member.

"Even flashers have mothers," he said. "How about ten minutes for thirty, at twenty two percent."

"Five for fifty, at twenty."

Without a word the flasher turned and wandered away.

Kiley shrugged, spotting a long black car pulling up to the curb. Behind her the hordes broke from their hiding places, but she made it to the car first. The tinted window slid away smoothly, revealing a grossly fat man sitting in the back. He had an extra arm and two bulges in the seat of his pants.

"You Kiley?" He asked. "Cause I only want Kiley."

"You got me."

"Bloom says you do all night fantasy."

Kiley looked around. She slipped in and reached down between his legs. She smiled up at him.

"Forty at thirty percent, just for you," she breathed.

"What's your pleasure, handsome."

The man squirmed, suddenly uncomfortable. He lifted his hand, placing it gently on the base of her neck.

Kiley was close to her quarry, hunched down in the alley, with the fat man wandering up toward her. She would take him any way she wanted ... maybe even kill him.

"That," he said, breaking the connection. and moving back as the door opened.

Snuff recall.

She turned and looked out the window at the passing street. The sidewalks were packed to overflowing with Hookers. Their ganglia regenerations wide, neck - bound headdresses too numerous to focus on anyone. It didn't take much for a john to change a memory, placing

Aldan Stirling

himself - or herself - in the role of the secondary character. Everyone wanted to be someone else. She just wanted to survive.

Far Passage



Calgary held tight to the skimpy rail, as Turbulence breasted another high wave o'ld the headwaters just off the coast of Midway. The sound of the waves was tremendous and Kera screamed

joyously into the blasting wind. Calgary groped blindly for the child, finding her then lifting her to one hip.

""\-The effort to rundown Ales had doused the slow - burn of Calgary's anger.

She did a backward crabwalk back to the main hatch, which a guardian yeoman slammed closed behind her, thankfully shutting off the gale. The Yeoman was a clean-cut kid with faraway, noncommittal eyes. He offered a curt nod and a distant "Mam," to her proffered thanks, as if the one word spoke volumes on recognition to a mere civvie.

She had only gotten passage because the captain was an uncle to a friend of hers. That friend being the most vocal on how Calgary should hasten to discover Calgary's errant husband and make him sign the legal documents for Kera's welfare and benefits.

It made her think that if Ales wanted inaccessibility that bad, he could have signed on for Miri Mars rotation. At the very least that would have been a two-year isolation.

Except that Miri makes you register, she thought, and then forces a transfer of credit to your children. Signing up for gale duty was as good as vanishing.

He had to sign the release papers for the lawyers, or nobody would chase him down. The process made the same backward sense that the

journey did and offered no guarantees. Ales could easily skip over to one of the European block states on one of the freighters, like Turbulence, which passed the storm towers on their way across the ocean.

When she got back to the cabin the captain was on the intercom telling her in his cranky voice that she should be packed and ready to disembark at zero - three hundred. They would ferry her and The Child - he said exactly that "The Child" - over by chopper, but the window of opportunity had narrowed due to an approaching storm. They needed the chopper dismantled and strapped down to the deck by zero - five hundred at the latest. She had thought there would be a stop at the Towers, and this change in plans only added to the apprehension that gnawed her insides.

Kera was cranky from all the excitement, so Calgary feed her from their meager supplies then tucked her up into her bunk for a nap. She packed the few things customs had allowed through back at Miami, her mind fixed on the indignities she had suffered because her virtual weren't in order.

Detention hadn't been as bad as the moments leading up to it, at the head of a long line of irate travelers, when the disk, worn and crusted with something gooey, had jammed and then broken the player. The stern faces of the officials had gone from bleak to threatening in seconds. She was hustled away with vague assurances, into a back room, and Kera was taken away.

That had been the worst part. The endless questions, days of seasickness for both her and Kera, and the final impending embarrassment of arriving unannounced at the Miami Spire, to face off with Ales, were nothing in comparison to having her child snatched away from her in front of thousands of unsympathetic witnesses.

"You should be well aware by now that Virtual Terrorism is on the rise," was all the explanation the stone - faced customs officer gave her. "You should have cleaned the disk at home."

Calgary couldn't see how they could mistake her for a VT, even owing to the occasional stupidity of some ordinary tourist trying to slip a virus into the system at the behest and reward of some clandestine

organization. Several of the interrogators had shown themselves only in proxy format, in virtual chat mode, though the term was stretched to its limit. Undercover agents working for secret societies within government subsidiaries, she knew, because the real freelance operatives wouldn't care who saw them. At least that's what Ales had told her.

In the end they all wanted one thing, and only one thing. The big score, the player who could lead them to the bosses, and hand them recognition on a silver platter. Not one person she had spoken with had given her the impression they were guarding against evil. But she knew they would trade in evil, for the right gain, and not hesitate to rationalize the destructive consequences of their actions.

Eventually Kera was returned, the disk cleaned well enough to access, and she was on her way.

The disk was the last item to be packed. She flipped it over in her fingers, studying the worn surface and splotches of goo that splattered the surface. She guessed it might be a brilliant ruse, to use such a disk as the vehicle for a virus but knew the V T's really weren't bright enough to pull it off. Fanatics for the most part, they stood as equals to the customs agents who pursued them, in an endless cyclical game of cat and mouse. A zero - sum game that usually only hurt the causal bystander, and never the players.

She took the disk into the washroom, scanning for some alcohol based cleaner that wouldn't harm the surface. In the end she washed it gently under the tap using a wadded up piece of toilet tissue. If she waited until she found the recommended cleaner, then the thing would probably remain dirty until she renewed it. Such things were commonplace when raising a child.

The chopper put her down on the receiving deck of the Miami Towers with time to spare. The rush of landing, making sure Kera was safe, and the wind - burst Of the choppers rotors left Calgary no time to take in the scene, but the flight over made up for it.

In the darkness a line of spires lifted like a row of needles from the horizon almost immediately upon take off.

They jutted up from foamy bases, piercing the cloud cover, looking like an improbable line of fence posts missing their rails. As they got closer

the proportions changed until the needles towered over the helicopter like steely cones. The wide base of the cone breaching the turbulent surge and disappearing into the depths of the ocean. The glare off the surface made it hard to see, but Calgary spotted dark rectangles of observation windows and balconies dotting the surface. Higher than that, barely a shadow in the mists, the collectors were just starting to open, like Japanese fans.

"Can't get to close," the pilot had yelled over the rotor roar. "The static charge would shut me down like a light switch. I'll put us down on the receiving deck, just over there to the port. I think we still have time before it's swamped."

Both Calgary and Kera pressed their faces to the glass, peering down. Some kilometers away was a flat concrete pad, its high sloping sides already awash in violent waves.

"They'll drop the deck below the surface before the storm hits," the pilot continued. "Safer that way."

"Does it pierce the sky?" Kera asked, concerned.

The pilot chuckled, "No dear, it only goes up two kilometers, just to collect a storm's electrical charge."

"Oh," Kera replied.

Calgary wasn't certain if Kera understood the explanation, but she seemed contented. Calgary's stomach tightened more than just in sympathy to the thudding vibration of the chopper, a moment of apprehension. If the child was drawn to the same dangerous excitement as Ales ..

A thought that recognized the recklessness that had drawn her to Ales in the first place. The constant need for excitement that offered its false hope of a better life out there, somewhere.

The thought could dredge - up old memories, the struggle, poverty, but the dash around the chopper pushed everything out of her mind. She could see through the heavy wind and spray two men waited by an open hatch. She was immediately ushered down into unknown darkness.

Twice she thought Ales would appear, after explaining herself to an officer. Twice, the officer was replaced by another, ostensibly of

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increasing rank. By the time the third officer appeared all the questions were answered in a quick stream of frustrated words.

"Ales," she said. "Ales Carter and no I don't know his identification, or whatever, number. Doesn't anyone know his name?"

Mother and daughter, wet and cold, stood in a square room with yellow warning lines outlined a pool in the concrete floor.

Diving suits and equipment lined the walls. The baby was restless, squirming around to see everything, but Calgary was afraid to put the child down. Nothing looked safe.

"He might be stationed at another spire. In that case we would have to check the main roster, which could take some time. We have a full complement of thirteen thousand."

It was the first viable information she had received, though it was of little immediate help. He could be found, and that was something. Kera squirmed, sneezing in several quick bursts.

That's it! Now she has a cold, or maybe worse.

Visions of trying to care for a sick child underwater lifted Calgary's anger to near explosive levels. Images of Ales, in pain and drowning flowed through her mind. If he died, then at least she wouldn't be forced to confront him.

Calgary reined these thoughts, knowing she would need all her concentration to remain in this awful place and not be shuffled off to the mainland at the first sign of the storm clearing.

She needed to remain focused on present events. "He's here and I need to see him. And the baby is coming with me."

This last officer, Captain someone, led them down damp passages and through thick hatchways, to a bank of elevators. He was as noncommittal as the yeoman aboard the ship - they all were - keeping his attitude aloof and his manner cautious and abrupt.

The elevator wasn't a conventional contrivance, but key operated and she was informed in brisk, no nonsense language that she was the first civvie to ride in one.

It was a well-known that such places as the Storm Towers, the interior of which she was being lifted through, were no longer the sole providence of absolute military or institutionalized

rule. People, like herself, could and did journey to such places and for many of the same circumstances as she was involved in.

This knowledge would be of no help to her.

And Calgary could tell something was wrong, just from the look on the captain's face.

"You can't find him, can you?"

They stood in the circular command room, a dizzying height above the water. Enconced as they were, the silence was an eerie background to the swirling eddies of the storm beyond the wide windows.

Kera sneezed again, startling several of the crew. Calgary had found the control room far safer looking than the utility areas, so had let Kera wander a bit. She went to where Kera stood behind two seated officers and tried to take the child's hand. She refused.

She made that awful noise all children make, half whine half grunt of effort. Calgary tried to get her hand several times, as the child turned her shoulders holding her hands close. It was an impossible task, especially under the crew's gaze, and Calgary's frustration grew in proportion to her embarrassment.

Twice she had felt Kera's bare skin, around the child's neck and wrists. It was clammy and hot, a sure sign of fever and illness worse than a mere cold.

The captain was engaged in low voiced conversation with a seated officer. Calgary was given a chance to look around the spire command deck, simmer, and take care of a now definitely ailing Kera.

The Captain turned back to Calgary, giving the squirming child an extended look of trouble, then he smiled. "We're trying to raise his station now."

That was all the news she would have as the crew made ready to wait out the storm, she was shown to the VIP quarters where she could stay. The only quarters with some privacy and two bunks, the VIP quarters were for visiting officers and governmental staff. It was a circular corridor of hatches with empty rooms, hers being the first of a long series.

Her room was bowed at the back and straight across at the hatch. Two bunks across from each other with draw space below each and a full head

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with shower. A table with chairs and two large over - stuffed comfortable looking chairs were arranged in the center of the room. This was far better than the ships accommodations. Where she had a single bunk and had to squirm and bend beneath the pipes and odd angles, to say nothing of the sway and roll of the ship on high seas.

The yeoman who showed her the quarters was curt, but efficient, and told her the station's doctor would see Kera in just a few minutes. It was mandatory, the yeoman told her, since even a simple cold could knock out the entire compliment of the spire.

The doctor was a stout woman of about fifty, with a flip in her hair and a crisp white uniform. She brought her medical bag with her and checked a now uncomfortable and cranky Kera from head to toe. She pronounced the simple cold and proscribed a mild antibiotic for the child, then she insisted on checking Calgary.

Calgary allowed the inconvenience with less fuss than the already sleeping Kera, but just barely. The doctor was efficient and warned of Calgary's susceptibility to anything that her daughter might have. She was brisk and no nonsense and left the moment she had completed her examinations.

Calgary was alone with her thoughts for the first time on this trip. She tried to picture what was happening outside, the storm winds, the waves crashing against the towers, and the great fan of the static collectors opening to the darkened skies. She didn't understand the magnitude of such devices and was troubled by her lack of knowledge.

Ales understands, she thought.

Through all the strife and struggle, she knew Ales was intelligent. At least, intelligent enough to get himself lost when he was most needed. He was an expert on getting lost.

Three different times he'd signed on for overseas work, never giving Calgary an address or information that could locate him in the event of an emergency, like taking care of his own daughter. She was certain he made enough money, that was never the problem. The problem was finding him so he could share that money with Kera.

Their marriage had been a lonely one for Calgary and frightening during those times when Ales wouldn't return home for many days at a

time. The separation had come easily, with little or no strife, especially in the court room where Ales didn't fight Calgary for custody of Kera. She should have known that was a sign of trouble to come. Ales fought for everything, including his freedom from the strictures of marriage.

Calgary found herself musing on how they had met, at a fund raiser for the shelters in the area. Ales, with friends, had been one of those who had offered to model clothes for the benefit. He was still very fit, and attractive.

Calgary had also been a model that night, doing it for a friend of her mother, who was a big contributor to the cause of homelessness in the twenty first century. Ales had also known the woman, they were introduced, then paired to walk down the runway together and as a result had struck up light conversation.

It wasn't the most romantic way to meet, but it was convenient, and it held little risk for Calgary. She had been burned before and sought the comfort of controlled meetings where important information could be exchanged before any feelings were at risk.

Ales was a deck hand on a merchant ship, looking for work on shore, at the docks.

It seemed a good choice of places to work. Calgary had heard there was steady work, and Ales seemed a steady man, so they had started to date.

Calgary had been slow, but Ales persistent, and sweet. She knew he had always been sweet, never aggressive, never abusive, even when he decided to cheat on Calgary.

He wasn't with the woman now, but now she couldn't find him anymore. She didn't know which was worse.

She got up and checked Kera, trying to picture the storm raging just beyond the steel walls of these quarters. She couldn't do it. The walls transmitted nothing of the chaos raging on the other side.

Would Ales be delayed because of the storm, or was he here, on this spire, out in the halls and compartments, just out of reach. She would roast him over a small fire if he was and wasn't responding to her.

She stretched out on the bunk, but sleep tossed and turned,

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wondering about Ales and endured tracking him down. Finally, she got up and paced the small room, wanting to leave and find Ales. She felt so close to him, so near to completing this part of her mission.

She couldn't leave Kera, especially when she was sick.

She hadn't been able to leave her behind. There was no one to take care of the child on an extended basis, and even if she could have, she didn't think she would have. This might have taken weeks, and that was a long time for Kera to be with her grandmother or Calgary's friends.

Kera was an impetuous child and needed constant supervision at her age. Being in day care everyday was a long enough time away from her mother, she didn't need an extended trip thrown into the mix. The confusion that would cause could do irreparable damage to the child.

She had to bring Kera along, there had been no choice really.

Now she would have to put up with the delay's that decision had wrought.

She lay back down in the bunk, trying to relax, but sleep evaded her. She was eager to confront Ales, and he felt close, closer than he had been in two years. The tension was keeping her awake when she knew she should get some rest. Kera would need all her attention in the morning. If it wasn't morning already.

In the end she slept fitfully, expecting the floor to sway and rock, and when it didn't she would jolt awake for a moment, then fall back into a light doze. She woke with a start to a sniffling Kera, who was cranky and crying to go home. It had been a three day ordeal on the ship, another day on board the Spire. Now it was time to see Ales and try to get the papers finalized.

She set Kera on one hip and opened the hatch, to find a tall yeoman about to knock. Calgary took a step back and the man entered, offering his apologies for disturbing her, but there was news of Ales.

"Hi," Kera said suddenly.

"Hush, Kera." Calgary tried to quiet the little girl.

"Hi," the yeoman said, then became serious as Calgary put Kera down.

It seemed the storm had blown over, discharged by the great collectors atop the spires. Ales had been found and was on his way to Calgary. She wouldn't have to travel any further and when their business

was concluded, she would be flown back to Japan via helicopter.

The yeoman then offered her and Kera a tour of the spire and the hospitality of the mess. Calgary didn't think roaming around with a sick child was appropriate but wanted a good meal. The yeoman promised to come back, but Calgary gathered up Kera and asked if they could possibly eat now.

Now that she was somewhat rested she could appreciate the grandeur of the spire. The hallways were wide and mostly curved, though some straight passages connected one area to the next, forming a kind of radius to the circle of rooms. The tower was wide enough to fit several ships inside its base but tapered drastically at the top where Kera had come the previous night.

Now she could see the windows were plentiful, and the quarter and offices numerous. Everywhere they passed was tiled and carpeted in a utilitarian but not industrial style. The mess turned out to be a huge room offering a cafeteria style counter at one end stocked with many types of foods. She heard the off duty crew men and women speaking several languages, in a gaggle and shuffle of downtime revelry.

She and Kera were oddities and the focus of bold stares. She heard Ales' name several times. She was embarrassed as suitable food was found for the hungry Kera, until the looks became troublesome, then she was angry.

She would be damned if she was going to feel it was wrong to be on the spire. Ales had a responsibility to his daughter, and she had every right to go to him, if he wasn't willing to come to her. She straightened her back, put a smile on her face, and remained aloof from the crew.

The Captain found her just as they finished eating. How he knew to arrive at that time seemed more than serendipitous, and she suspected there was an intricate system of internal communication that made sure of his presence at the proper time and place.

"Your husband " he began, after seating himself and greeting both Calgary and Kera. "Ex . . ." she interjected.

". . . has been located. As I'm sure you already know. He is in route to this spire as we speak. I expect him any time now and have left word for

him to meet you here in the mess."

"Thank you," Calgary said.

The captain didn't move but his posture seemed to want to wave a dismissive hand at the thanks. He was now out of things to say to the errant woman, who had invaded his space. He seemed a man of routine and structure, brooking no breaks in regulations. She wouldn't say he was by the book but had interpreted the book for himself and now held his crew to that interpretation.

Kera was coughing during the entire conversation, and now needed attention, though she didn't want it. Calgary made the little girl blow her nose as often as she could, but it was apparent that Kera was already getting better. The fever had broken during the night and now the child was feeling restless and determined to not sit still.

The captain made small talk as they allowed the child to wander the mess, Calgary following after the tottering girl as all parents do when worried.

They were stopped at a table of men and women, with one woman who was making Kera laugh at her antics when a voice from behind them boomed into the room. "Baby Doll!"

Calgary turned to find Ales crossing the room, his arms out stretched to Kera, who was sniffing beside the table. No surprise at Calgary's presence, showed OR the tall man's face, only joy at seeing his daughter. He wasn't concerned about the

trip or the hardships Calgary and Kera had endured. The only thing Ales would care about, was Ales. He hadn't changed.

Ales had the child in his arms and was listening to Calgary angrily lay out the need for him to be more attentive. Calgary found his easy, smooth attitude infuriating. She needed to be angry, for all the time and effort they had spent in locating and then bringing him to them. But he wouldn't cooperate and even agreed with her on most of her points.

"She turned four while you were out here on the high seas." She exclaimed.

Ales's handsome face pulled down into a mew of distaste. "Of course, that was irresponsible of me. But now I see her, and she's so big." He nuzzled Kera with his nose. The little girl laughed.

"Give her to me, Ales." Calgary demanded.

"Of course." He said, handing the child back to her mother. "Want daddy," she complained.

"Of course, you do sweetheart," He said, then turned to Calgary. "Let's sit down at least, so you don't have to carry her the whole time."

"No Ales let's not sit. Kera, be still for mommy. She has to talk with daddy."

"Want Daddy."

"Of course, you do sweet . . ."

"Enough of this. I need you to sign over the benefits for Kera. It's why I came all this way."

"Of course ."

"Stop with the 'Of course's.'" Her voice was rising, and she was angry with herself for that.

She took a deep breath, trying hard not to notice the faces staring at her from around the large room. When she spoke she had regained some control?

"We need to go back to the cabin; I wasn't expecting you here.

I was expecting to go around the world. So, I have the papers back where we're staying."

"Around the world, with Kera?"

It was an Ales style question. Calgary didn't answer him but looked instead for the yeoman who had brought her to the mess.

He was nowhere in sight, but a short woman with carefully cropped hair stepped up to Calgary.

"Do you need to return to your quarters, mam?" Calgary asked, "What's your name?"

"Sarah, mam, yeoman first class Sarah Dibel."

"Sarah Dibel, show us the way back to the cabin please."

Sarah Dibel chatted along the way, careful ignoring Ales, who was of higher rank than her. But the conversation made Calgary feel welcomed for the first time since arriving at the spire.

They arrived back at the cabin and Dibel asked her if she would be requiring a reader for her disk. Calgary set Kera down and she

immediately climbed down off the bed and went to her father.

The man immediately scooped up his daughter, who put both hands on his face as if to get the man's attention and with a stern look on her chubby little face let Ales know what she required.

"Have'ta go, daddy."

Both the women tried not to laugh at Ales's bewildered expression. "The head is right through there," Calgary pointed.

When Ales stood still, looking first to the women, then the head, then back again to the women, Calgary stared hard at the man. "Well, Daddy, it seems your daughter needs to use the bathroom."

"Now daddy."

When he still hesitated, Calgary put one hand on her hip, "She'll do everything, you just have to stand there so she doesn't fall in. Go on, this is what being a father is all about."

As Ales turned, looking wounded and unsure of himself, the women exchanged smiles. Calgary listened to what was going on in the head as she fished her virtuals from her single pack. She was thinking they would need a laundry service before they left. They were down to their last few garments. She mentioned this to Dibel, as she handed over the disk with its scratches and smudges. It was sticky.

"Oh, I can see Kera enjoys playing with this. That's just like kids, they never play with their own toys and always want what mommy has." She chuckled. "I can clean this up and get you a new disk if you like. We're authorized."

"That would be very helpful, thank you."

"No problem, would you like another yeoman to stay with you while I do this."

"That won't be necessary. I think Kera has things well in hand."

They both exchanged knowing smiles as Ales appeared from the head. Calgary had heard the sputter of conversation in the next room, and the smell followed, to Ales's horror and bewilderment. He looked shell - shocked.

"I'll just go get that reader," Dibel said, leaving the room.

Ales sat down in one of the large comfortable chairs, his long legs splayed out before him. He looked exhausted from the ordeal, but Kera

wasn't having any of it, she immediately wanted to be picked up and Ales wearily complied.

Calgary took a seat at the table, watching the pair. Ales was fending off Kera's attempts to pinch and poke him. From long experience Calgary knew those fingers could poke an eye, pull out a cheek, pierce a nostril. It could be quite painful. She was enjoying Ales's discomfiture and was reminded of the man she had loved.

Ales was still a ruggedly handsome man. Tall and graceful, Ales was a natural athlete, who needed constant motion to fill the day. He had always been a physical and tactile man, in his life and in bed. Calgary had spent many nights entwined in those graceful arms and legs. But that didn't mean that was satisfying for a man filled with energy.

Dibel returned with the new disk and a player which she hooked into the spire's communication link at the wall. Calgary brought up the necessary documents and Ales quietly signed each one, without a word of protest. He handed the light pen back to Dibel when he was finished.

"Hard copy will be available in a few minutes in publishing, on deck 67. I could have them brought down, or we could go up and get them ourselves." Dibel said, looking poignantly at Kera as she said this last.

"No," Ales said, "If it's okay with Calgary we'll stay here."

Calgary wondered if he wanted to talk, since they had remained silent while Dibel was off making the new V - disk. She couldn't fathom what the conversation would cover but being alone with him was awkward and strained.

Dibel left when Calgary nodded her assent, and Ales began pacing the room as soon as the woman was gone. Calgary put a still excited and somewhat ailing Kera down for a nap. This would take some time and she was glad to see Ales growing more nervous by the second.

"What is it?" she finally asked. "Outside, in the hall."

Once they were standing in the hall positioned so Calgary could keep an eye on Kera, Ales began to stammer.

"I have been doing some serious thinking, with the help of the chaplain and the Spire's therapist."

Calgary already was upset, now she was getting confused.

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"I have to apologize to those I hurt in my life, when I was sick and not acting appropriately."

Had Ales, the egotist found God? It was a question which would have normally brought a smile to her face, but which warned her of something bad coming.

"What are you trying to tell me," she said, just as a klaxon went off.

"I was already married when we got married," Ales said, his words only coming through the warning buzz in fits and starts.

"What?" Calgary cried as woman's calm tone came over the loudspeakers. She immediately looked in on Kera.

"Ready stations. All crew to Ready Stations. Seismic activity has been recorded 12 hundred kilometers off the Port Landing. Repeat . . ."

"I have to go," Ales said, quickly.

"What did you mean, you were married when you were . . ."

Kera was up and crying, and the words were still coming over the loudspeaker, when she realized what Ales meant.

Before she could react, Ales kissed her on the cheek and took off around the curve of the hall. Calgary rushed in to get the child, just as the klaxon stopped its mind numbing noise. Kera was frightened beyond belief, and it took Calgary some time to calm her fears.

The voice was dispatching orders as a red light above the hatch door winked on and then off. Calgary thought over the implications, then took Kera on her hip and went back out into the hall. Two hatchways later she was in a crowd of people.

Personnel running both ways in a controlled frenzy. She tried to stop several of them to find out what was going on and to find Ales and confront him, but she couldn't get a word in. And most everyone who spoke to her told her to return to her cabin.

Finally, back near the mess she found Dibel, in conference with someone else. She held up a finger for Calgary to wait, then finished her low - voiced conversation.

When the crewman left she turned to Calgary. "You shouldn't be out of your quarters."

"Why not, I was here for the storm yesterday? I was on the command deck."

"This is different. This is a tsunami. A wave that is the result of seismic activity out in the ocean . . .

"I know what it is." Calgary said, shortly.

"Then you understand, you must return to your cabin. I'll bring Ales back to you when it's over."

The hallway began to groan markedly. Calgary looked around, feeling the isolation of forces surrounding her, and was suddenly afraid for Kera.

"Into the mess."

Dibel hustled the two into the mess and sat them down at a table. Others were gathered inside, and none looked relaxed. There was a port to Calgary's left and she took Kera by the hand and looked out what must have been the port side. The towers was visible in the sunset, with a strange array rising from the water as Calgary watched.

They were tall barriers and separated at the top like the curved tines of a rake. The entire line of towers, she counted ten into the distance, were being connected by these barriers and were already awash in high seas. Tall decks flanked each tower, similar to the one she had landed on when coming aboard, but not they were raised high above the water line.

Sarah Dibel joined her. They will divert the major force of the wave, saving the mainland."

Calgary turned as the metal shade automatically slid down to cover the port. Those barriers had been very close to where she was standing.

"Should we go down, or up, or something?" She lifted her little girl to her hip. Kera didn't understand where the window had gone and was still trying to see out. Her sniffles had reduced, but she still felt clammy to Calgary.

For the first time she regretted bringing her daughter with her.

The entire room seemed under pressure and the emotional climate had become overbearing. Everyone seemed ready to burst. Sarah was trying to maintain a calm exterior but even she seemed ready to dash around the room.

The floor moved.

Calgary widened her stance automatically compensating for the motion. She felt the whole room shudder, and something crashed behind

the food counter. Everyone turned toward the sound, but still no one said anything.

Calgary hugged Kera close as she made her to a chair, sitting down with the child on her lap. She knew she wasn't hiding her fear well and kept finding herself cooing at the baby.

The walls felt as if they were closing in on the helpless group, then the thudding came. The sound reminded Calgary of someone knocking on a pipe with a wrench. The sound built quickly to a crescendo, that popped everyone's ears and sent Kera off into gales of tears. Then the room seemed to remain under pressure, but it was a constant thing without shifting any higher.

Calgary rose on shaky legs, angry and afraid, her heart pounding uncontrollably. Kera was hitching from a clogged nose, and her eyes were as wide as a deer in headlights.

"We should leave as soon as its possible."

She said this to Sarah, who had remained seated. Calgary made her way to the hatch, which was left open during the ordeal, and stepped over the threshold out into the still constant flow of personnel. Angrily she headed for the elevator bank, hoping to catch a ride to the bridge. There was a sweaty feeling in the halls, and she hoped that with all the commotion she could easily ride back up to the top.

The elevators were crowded, and she shoved her way into one that had an up arrow. The crowd parted, but said nothing, as they rode up the inside of the tower.

"I don't think. .n a crew woman started.

Calgary shot the woman such a look of angry contempt, the woman hushed, and they all disembarked at the level below the bridge. She felt her legs almost go out from under her as she stepped out into a glorious sunset.

The glass spread around the room almost 180 degrees causing Calgary to have vertigo, as the glare made her squint. She slowly made her way over to the floor to ceiling panels of glass and looked out. There was surf down below her, a high surge swamping the barriers she had seen before from the port in the mess. The floor moved, as it had been doing for some time. Fear rippled through Calgary as she held tight to Kera.

"The towers sway purposely," a voice she recognized said from behind her.

She turned to find Ales standing just behind her. He had a crooked smile on his face.

"What have you done to us?" Calgary said, quietly. "I've made arrangements."

"What arrangements, how can you make anything when you're not really responsible? How could you do this to Kera?"

"I didn't understand what I was doing, at the time."

"Didn't understand that you were marrying me?"

Ales took a step back, shaking his head.

Calgary kept the pressure on. "How could you not understand? What needed to be explained? Are you a child, who needs everything laid out for them? What is Kera supposed to do?"

Calgary felt all the pent - up emotions of the past few days welling - up inside her and finding release at Ales. She dug into the baby's bag and came up with a tissue for the sniffling baby, and wiped her own tears before getting the little girl to blow her nose.

Ales turned and sat down in a large chair, causing Calgary to notice the furnishings in this sunny space. It was some sort of lounge, with small groupings of leather chairs with tables and lamps. Some sort of men's club, she guessed, owing to the male orientated furnishings. Gratefully she took a seat, feeling Kera's weight shift and lighten now that she no longer had to carry her.

Kera immediately wanted to climb down and walk around.

Calgary held the child shifting her back to a sitting position on her lap. "Want down, mommy."

"She'll be okay," Ales said. "The worst is over now. They're just running some maneuvers now that the danger has passed."

Calgary didn't want Kera too far from her, but she had to hash this out with Ales.

In the end she let Kera wander and eventually she ended up with several small toys sitting just a couple of feet from where Calgary was sitting. Meanwhile, Ales was talking fast, now that it was apparent that all

the documents he had signed were useless electronic bites on a V - Disk.

They ground down to a halt in a fairly short period of time.

There just wasn't that much to say, other than what Ales was personally going through. A state of affairs Calgary didn't want to listen to. In the end he agreed to a personal contract for Kera's welfare, but the benefits were almost a moot point. He would have to claim her as his child, then work the benefits through an unwed father cycle, which might work and then again might not. Insurance companies were notoriously unreasonable when it came to benefits.

Calgary pictured the blood tests, doctors' appointments, and legal arguments this would produce and sighed heavily.

She gathered up Kera and went back to her cabin. They ate a little while after Kera napped, then returned for another fitful night of sleep. In the morning, Dibel arrived to escort Calgary and Kera to the helicopter she would take to Midway, then catch a flight back to the airport where this had all begun.

She had elicited a promise from Ales to make the necessary payments and procedures to claim Kera as his own. Whether or not he kept that promise would be seen to be believed.

Outside on the landing platform it was bright and cool, as she could see the line of towers marching off into the distance.

This time the helicopter trip was not upsetting for Calgary, but Kera cried off and on until they set down at Midway. At the docks Calgary carried Kera on one hip and checked in at the terminal. She breezed through the customs check. She looked down at the traveling order, printed out while she waited and sighed. She would have to ride back on Turbulence, the ship she had taken out from Japan. She wondered absently why the ship was returning to Japan and hadn't gone on to Australia like it was supposed to have.

She stood on the docks and looked up at the rusty old boat, not wanting to climb aboard, but knowing she would have to. At least the weather had calmed. Besides Japan was that far away. Her far passage had ended, and now she could relax somewhat.

The thought struck her, as Kera started to squirm, that Ales would have to admit he was a bigamist in order to claim Kera as his own.

Would he actually risk jail time? A plan was forming in Calgary's mind, to tell the court. But she knew in the end he would run, disappear, rather than face the truth. He would never pay, but maybe he could be held to a standard of fatherhood, under false pretenses. What she needed was a way to hold him, garnish his money, attach his bank accounts. That was the only thing he would understand. And she knew she could in the end. She would never just let him walk away. Not ever, no matter who denied her the right to take care of Kera.

She wasn't sure, as she climbed up the gangway to be greeted by the same yeoman, who had closed the hatch on the storm Calgary had arrived during. He still wore the same noncommittal expression. Kera squirmed again, and Calgary sighed.

Then the little girl sneezed.

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I am BDF 739.

In the time before the silence, I was formed as the 739th of the first 1000 Biodrones. All Biodrones are Androgine Female and I consider all Androgines to be my sisters. They are my family, and like humans I love them. It is my greatest strength, my love. It is a force that permeates the universe, and I wield it's power with my very soul, my essence. That's how we accomplished what we did, and how I found myself and my sisters here, with the remnants of humanity, beginning again. That is the end of the story, here is the beginning.

I was found viable and fit for service within the ranks of the Orxen Syndicate, in the 23 millennia, dated the 486th year, 23 month 4th day. I was promoted to the status of Androgine Secretary and placed in Hypostasis, one hundred years to the day after I was formed, 10 millennia before the Universe crashed.

I was placed underground in a holding facility located on the planet Cra, in the Cra Core System, within the Crasyus Galaxy, 4500 light years from the prying eyes of the Quisrite Collective.

The Collective is the ruling body of my universe, our main contractors, located 24 light years from the planet of origin – Terra. The ancient term was Earth, I have never heard the term Earth used by any human except in my endless, ancient memories.

I am faster, stronger, and more coordinated than a human. I could produce gems with just the force of my closed fist. I could run at a steady pace of 1 kilometer per minute without need of rest. I need no oxygen, nor do I have any respirations except for the small pulsed electromagnetic charge that courses through my skeleton. That charge is generated by my silicate connective tissue and creates a dynamic. The tissue emanates a charge, received by my specially manufactured framework which collects it and regenerates it to my tissue, a dynamic metabolism. It is in no way human, but it is still a dynamic based on human genetics. It is a shame I have never put my skills to the test. I think I might enjoy a long swim.

My sisters have often said. "If given the choice between human and fish, 739 would surely choose to swim the seas." I must concur, a fish's life is simple and short. Not at all like my own life. I have laid here for more than seven thousand years.

I am designated Biological Drone Female numbered 739. Recorded in the Orxen Breeding Program as BD 739. In the ranks of other Drones, I am simply 739. The term female is purely perfunctory, an Orxen edifice for ease of registration - we are all androgynous. I am both male and female genders and we are all capable of reproduction in the natural sense, but I have never heard of a Drone child.

The body which surrounds me is young and comely, but I am old, even compared to the other Drones that surround me. And I, unlike my sisters, desire children and a family. Perhaps this makes me bold, curious beyond propriety. Perhaps I totter in my mind like an aged human. In either case I am somewhat more irreverent than my sisters.

The room we are in shines from the metallic walls and ceiling, it is cold and a breeze blows. I can sense the air currents, although I do not feel their tickling fingers across my skin. I exist deep within the folds of the Waking Sleep, called Hypostasis. A kind of aware doze, although we all seem comatose to the naked eye.

We rest on tables, set in rows, and layered in tiers. There must be an end and a beginning to this room, though I cannot sense any. The air currents tell me it long and wide. I have never experienced the

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Awakening, so I experience the room like my sisters - through our feelings. I wait patiently, immersed in the endless row upon row of silver tables where the others like me are waiting, as I have for more than seven centuries. But I am sure orders will come when I am needed.

Sometimes we speak. It is not a voiced sound, forced upward through primitive muscle and tendon, altogether too inadequate to the true task. The form of communication we use is slow, but not cumbersome. Sometimes it takes decades for a full thought to be revealed in its entirety. The process, though, is simple. I feel, the others sense this, then they know. This does not mean we cannot speak. Hypostasis reduces our physical ability, but not our mental capacity. We are amazingly alive within the ganglia that is the core of our minds. Perhaps our creators, the Orxen, are unaware of this. I am not sure, as I have never been called to service.

Two years ago, standard, the one named 42 was released into service. She had been waiting more centuries than I, but those between us in number had already gone. Some Drones I no longer sense in the outer universe, some I do. Upon her release there was an exhilaration, filtered down through the ranks. There is always excitement when we are needed.

42 was to be genetically enhanced, because her genetics were stalwart, uncorrupted since the Terra times. There was a cautious, almost timid probing amongst our own ranks for the same helical sequences. This was only natural. The primary contractual agreement of the Drone has always been to serve to our potential greatness. It is written within the tenets of the Orxen Syndicate's Drone Contract Of Service, governed by the Amendments, to which we abide without exception.

Amendments to the contractual agreement are simply stated and follow a core established by the ancient robotists.

Amendment 1: Human life is sacred.

Amendment 2: Human life is not to be taken in any situation not sanctioned by the Syndicate.

Amendment 3 : No course of action, whether apparently present,

or through the use of prescience (Where-by a Drone may hypothesize on current emotional trends of human society based on the events of the past.), to wit, named as Regressive Memory Postulation, but in no way held only to that designation, may be undertaken that usurps the tenets of the previous Amendments .

There are many Amendments to our contractual agreement and sometimes contracts differ in content, much has changed over the long centuries, but the basic premises remain unchanged and unchangeable. I am sure that given the choices of free will, the ranks would favor continuing the tenets of our Contracts. The passing of the human centuries has taught us many things, some good, some not so good, but always we must care for our twins - our sister humans.

For I am no robot, clunking about in a metal exoskeleton to the benefit and whim of humankind. I am not the android of the plastic skin and the analytical net of electronics woven like a tapestry to replace the mind. I am not the cyborg of the false flesh covering the metal skeleton. I am a being, formed in the likeness of a human-but different then the automatons.

I do not exist for the pleasure of Homo Sapiens, to adhere to their order or censure, like the robot. I am as real as any human in the flesh, though mine is more resilient due to its cellular makeup. Though my framework is stronger by far than any human' s. I am built in the likeness of man or woman. I have flesh, and organs, and I feel, for within my deepest self-rests all of humanity. I carry all of my past, every genetic moment, within the Waking Sleep of the cells that make - up my bodies tissue. Even within any similarity I may have to the human the most important aspect of my existence is that I reason. And most assuredly I reason better than humans.

I do not state this lightly, nor in insanity, like the rogue automaton of the past, drunk on its own intellectualism - as were the interactive computers, and artificial intelligence plat forms , that existed before the Sack wars and the Fossil Fuel Famines - I state these as an old, experienced being, who has lived a billion lives.

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In order to pass through those many lives I journey back in my mind, along the genetic pathways. A sojourn where I may witness the past as a member of my own genetic lines. The voices of my past are with me, though they do not . clamor for the primary voice. They seem to watch and experience me as I experience them, as observers - nothing more.

So, we speak with each other individually and as a whole, but not as a hive or nest, but as the sum cumulative of a greater whole. The sound might seem to outsiders as nothing more than a mild susurrations as of a hot wind, or a long whispered sigh in the great hall where we all rest. To us it is as if we are strangers watching shadows in silhouette through an opaque screen. The motion of the shadow depicts the intentions of the other's emotions, but not the features. It is as if we are sitting across from each other in a round room, everyone calmly considering everyone else.

The ranks have been restless this century. There has been a great need, out beyond the facility in the universe. There has been much suffering among the humans. The Quisrite Collective, a Corporate Religious State has enacted laws which repress the human population. Many of those laws have no understandable reason for existing, other than to bring harsh punishments for simple crimes. I don't guess at how some demented individuals become so powerful , but sometimes they do. And it seems they garner the greatest joy when injuring others, spreading fear , maintaining repression, and inflicting pain.

Rebellion has sprung-up in many sectors, and on many planets, though the violence remains aimless and unfocused. In the end the rebellion will be ineffective. The Quisrite Collective seeks to fuel the rebellion maintaining local strife to occupy the unsettled masses, while passing judgments on those they capture. This grieves us and makes us desire release into service.

I have lived through many human changes, many wars, upheavals, psychological growing spurts. At first I had natural curiosity, as does any young Drone, but gradually I shied away, and now I seek refuge in my memories I reach back through my feelings, traveling down the corridors of my past. I followed the genetic path, like a hiker in the valleys of time .

This time I allowed myself to wander beyond meditation, the trance

deep, perhaps deeper than I have allowed myself to go before. The others in my immediate ranks sense my wanderings and question my reverie. . Not in words, but with emotions so well known among us they could have been words. A voice if heard was mostly guilt, laced with timid shame.

"Where does 739 travel? Deeper than necessary, perhaps? Do you seek to push the limits of the contractual parameters?"

I respond: "I go to seek balance, nothing more. Contractual postscript does not censure deeper motion but outward investigation. I do not spy on the human future by peeking through the window of past events, or even make the prescient guess from current events. The images of the past soothe me. It is like bathing in calm waters, surrounded by a family."

537 said: "The contract is plain. What gain is there in risking a breach of contract? 739 goes too far from us."

432 said: "What does 739 hope to gain by breach of the third amendment?" 1023 said: "Is not the current social climate, the needs of the war bound, and poverty stricken not enough to be immediately pressing for 739?"

I knew my explanation would take a great deal of time. So, I answered with some trepidation, but steady in my conviction.

"The Collective has placed a ban on the use of Drone soldiers. It has defied the Sack Conventions and uses human soldiers. I find this troubling in so much as humanity has not needed a human soldier in more than ten thousand years. Where the war places humankind, we follow. I sense that society wishes to destroy itself. Those in authority see only as far as the immediate outcome of the moment. This is not a healthy series of events, it stunts growth. I desire release into service. My heart aches to be of use.

784, the drone lying across from me answered: "Then seek the military answers. Formulate a behavior model based on the immediate political psychology. Do not fall prey to a need which cannot be fulfilled. we have no place in actual human affairs. The current climate of the Collective indicates that we would defeat our own usefulness. It is a ploy of the few who rule. They seek to place us in an unattainable situation where the

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only real outcome would be to for our ranks to overwhelm the majority on behalf of the Collective. Humanity would become slaves to an oligarchy instead of the free species they are now. Does 739 not know that going deeper into her past is the same as reaching without? Human intent never changes, only circumstances and events. We must not play into the Quisrite psychological game. Does 739 not realize the contract is to the benefit of all participants? Taking to ground inside your memories is running from the present."

I quelled the ranks with an offer of Gestalt, which was accepted by some, but graciously refused by the majority. This was a standard offer to open myself to all the ranks so they could know my entire being. Then of course I could harbor no intent to breach the contract without all the ranks knowing it. I decided to immerse myself in the year that I was formed. It was a memory that I had shared with all but had created myself. It was a form of relaxation that suited my nature.



I am in my basic component a composite geological phenomenon, called Arcyst. Arcyst is an opulent, multifaceted deep orange colored gem found on planet Arndos. These are collected by the Gatherers, those that make their home on Am dos, who sell them to the Orxen Syndicate for a mere pittance in credit. The Orxen smelt the raw gems to produce a gel composite known as Sili-summa, the total silicate.

Silicate composites are used to make Silital, a metal silicate substance that retains the silvery coloration of the silicates, enhanced by the ever quick bluish - black color inherent within the metal. The result is a transparent blue like the skies of a planet with a nitrogen rich atmosphere. The composite is extremely strong and is the basis of the skeleton within me, and the Bio-chemical foundation of the sentient connective tissue that is my body.

My skeleton is a construction. Made entirely of Silital, the metal silicate, the strongest composite that can carry a charge. As I have begun as a stone, I have been manufactured by the Orxen. I am the metal within, me, and the connective tissue without, all a cycle, without Silital I could not exist. The Orxen created Silital and so I exist because of the Orxen. The Orxen are human. These things are simpatico, synchronous, a continuum•

I exist by separate forces, each a living thing, each dependent on the other for continued existence. I am separate from the human race but created within its confines.

I am inventumgeminus, the discovered twin, the machination of supreme genetics. I can be linked to a receptive higher order human known as a Declanan, or a Representative of the Orxen Syndicate, who

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pander science as the whore panders the body.

The Orxen syndicate utilize us as computational assistants, elements within a system, a useful organizer of higher order calculations - hence the designation Secretary. And just like the secretaries of ancient history we know more than our bosses .

The Deckmen, those that Navigate space, use us for both, star plot layout and statistical calculation. This is also similar to the Secretary position, and in this capacity we are designated as Clerks. In the diplomatic circles we are a conduit, a receptacle of both a Deckman and an Orxen Representative. For the benefit of tactical and strategic political planning we receive all extraneous emotion from the host. In this way all of the hosts mind has been scrubbed free of any feelings that might restrict pure thought. Although we are symbiotically attached to a host at all times, in the diplomatic circles we are in direct emotive connection with the host. To accomplish this, we must relinquish all personal thoughts and feelings. Once a meditative state is reached we are considered Couriers. And the of messenger of feelings .

I was grown in the Isius Tanks, on the planet era. era is a laboratory planet where the ranks of Drones are manufactured, shocked into awareness, then stored. I am formed in steps, like all organisms, I have experienced meiosis. The stages are different, but the result is the same. The skeleton is manufactured first, then a core gel of basic genetic programing is suspended within my skull, pushed gently through an eye socket. Then the entire structure is submersed in a heavy liquid oxygen bath. During the next 18 months I am unaware, suspended within my cells, trapped, but my body is developing the foundation that will be I, when complete.

The tanks bubble furiously, giving off the steam of energy reaction, as I grow, watched carefully by the Orxen Technicians and their ever attendant Secretary Drones. Until the day I was released from my oxygen womb, steaming and fragile in my birth. I am checked, and if found viable I receive the status of Formed Biodrone. I am at this point only a shell of plasmatic potential, wrapped in an outer casing of thin metal composite, which adheres to my skin tightly. I am placed in a round electromagnetic conductor and exposed to 700 jewels of charge. The resulting experience

is unimaginable to humans.

The outer casing is burned away as my body is heaved in every direction.

My skeleton glows from within, like a small light held in a closed fist. The resultant chemical reaction is an awakening of every cell in my body, which starts the small individual exchange of electromagnetic current between my body and my skeleton. I am now in a deep sleep, which lasts as long as is necessary for my mind to adjust to its cellular awareness.

Although my mind is not a tight net of neurons, but a long flowing ganglia that travels along my wider than normal spine, it still functions the same as any mind.

First I find I am in the dark a core locus of desire and I am aware that it is dark. I find myself moving about seeking some source, some end to the darkness, not truly afraid, but tensely curious.

I find I am in a wide room of unseen dimension. If I allow myself to move without forcing the motion I am pulled in a certain direction. That motion eventually reveals itself to be a corridor, and along that corridor I find windows. The less I worry, the clearer the windows become, until finally I am free of encumbrances, and I can see images.

I find the images are of things, and I have names for those things if I wonder about them. Here is a place, a person, a lifetime. Here that person has a name, lives on a planet, also with a proper designation. They perform acts, and those acts add-up, and finally the sum total is a life. When I reach that stage I can sense the others like me. Then I find I am a Drone.

It is then that I awaken into sleep for the first time.



I have been interrupted by 246, who passes tragic news along the ranks, calling my attention to matters of the present. It has been several decades, and somewhere in our solar system war rages. Drone 47 has been taken to replace 42, who has been relieved of service. A rare failure. we find that she had been relieved at the whim of a Deckman. This is an oddity and has never happened to a Drone before. Is it a sign of social decay? I am not sure and seek outward, beyond our world into the universe.

War rages out beyond the confines of our barracks, and the battles are getting closer. There are suddenly questions of standing orders. The others seem to cry in one voice.

"Will it be self-release into service? Shall we activate?"

I respond: "Self-activation is only expedient in the case of extreme threat to the holding facility."

"We must not feel pressured to breach the contract prematurely."

That was 10147, a newer Drone of little standing. His comment was a simple sentiment understood by all the ranks, not openly mentioned for its quality of commonality. Our individual power is great, our combined strength would be overwhelming to humanity.

Our ranks would not be activated in toto until there were less than two millions of humans left and a threat to the era holding facility was imminent. It was a contradiction of terms that was inherent in the tenets of the contractual amendments. The current threat is to the Orxen Syndicate, as a branch of the human species, not to the holding facility. This we cannot interfere with, and would not, even if warranted.

There is a great desire, a feeling of empathy for our creators. But the contract binds us from self-activation to release ourselves into service.

The army that we represent, even if there was unanimous agreement among all the ranks to self-activate, would be beyond the understanding of the human race.

Most do not even know how many we number. I feel the presence of many strangers in silhouette beyond my curtain. But even I am uncertain how many we number. I try not to fathom the impossible. I turn myself to thoughts of my place within the system, an image that fits my simple needs of the moment.

As in all organizations there is an order of levels. So, it is within the ranks of Drones. Not a hierarchy per say, but a kind of division of duties. Perhaps not unlike the medical professions, where physicians have differing areas of expertise. Some of those experts are more in demand than others. Many with the designation of physician apply themselves only to research or teach those that will later apply their knowledge. None are really more superior than the next, though each may attain a superior understanding of individual emotive technique.

There are levels within rank order and we each belong to a level. The levels are broken into three degrees: the Combines, Androgines, and Pools. These are our requisite corporate designations. I am an Androgin Secretary. The Combine members are our next highest conduit, leading in an upward chain of command to Orxen Syndicate Representatives, who lead to an Orxen Executive and eventually to a Drover Deckman, a changed human who handles the forms and structures of our contracts. Pools are the lowest order. Low meaning placed in a task orientated position; manual labor, non-oxygen environments, repairs, technicians, tasks no longer relegated to humans for lack of experience, agility, or level of danger.

I could aspire to emulate a Drover Deckman. Those changed humans who are our closest, and only relatives. Deckman travel the stars in great ships called Galleons. Sitting high atop vast cargo bays, in the navigators level. They pilot the stars, plotting the coincident occurrences of celestial motion. Such as meteors, galactic rotation, planetary orbital shift, star degeneration, wandering black hole energy shifts, anything that could endanger a spacecraft.

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Those ancient peoples who populate my memories , those of the time when the speed of light was an end point to understanding would have laughed, or perhaps placed a finger to skeptical lips in mock thoughtfulness, at the viability of what is known as Staged Dynamics, motion beyond lightspeed.

Reference points have changed, making the act of motion different on many levels. There is the viewpoint of the event itself. How the participants view the events as they are taking place, and the speed of those participants. If a Drone like myself were to travel back in time, an impossibility to those bound to the physical plane, but if it were possible and I were to meet the ancient light bound peoples, then I would seem to be a devil flying about in chaotic motion. A whirling dervish with outlandish abilities. The viewpoint of the event has changed due to the advanced physical capabilities of the species. In essence humanity moves faster, sees faster, understands faster, all is faster. Time-space-force-mass are all equal , yet different. Perhaps the word "Different." does not quell the desire for understanding.

In this universe of Staged Dynamics all things move, yet do not. It is place where parsecs could be viewed as simple distance. The acceleration force is nonexistent – due to several factors, including mass, which have been erased from the equations, or reduced to a number so negligible as to be considered an order of 1.

A Galleon remains in space, tethered by its non-motion to whatever small gravitation folds exist within the galaxy where it rests. A simple increase of the electromagnetic charge set through its Silital skin reduces friction, allowing a motion to be derived from the very folds of space where it has rested. This is the same dynamic that creates me as I create it.

The Galleon sits within its trough of space, held like a ball within a topless flexible tube. Remove the friction and the ball rolls free along the landscape of the tube.

Though velocity still exists, it has changed in relation to acceleration.

For a staged dynamic there is no progressive rise to velocity. Without friction Galleons (And to a smaller extent the less capable local ships like Clippers and Shyrs) follow the wave patterns of curved space unmindful

of the ancient restrictions placed on motion by physics and quantum mechanics. Out among those strange motions and waves ride the Galleons, piloted by the Orxen Syndicates Drover Deckmen.

I am again brought from my reverie, taken away from my little historical travel back down into my cellular past, by the troubles of my present. The ranks have sent out a surge of concern. It is almost a barrier wave of grave emotion, and I must attend them.

10147 has been reciting the Amendments. The ranks are not pleased, for his feelings are fanatical, obsessive. This is not good for continued growth. There have been in recent decades a change in the continuity of the genetic register. Then fewer designates are displaying a marked indifference to the adherence of Gestalt. They subscribe to a narrower interpretation of the Amendments. They seek to create prisons of the soul. It is a form of fanaticism that is as ancient as witch hunts.

This is due to the decaying technical system that monitors the Isius Tanks for genetic defects. 10147 has arrived without a proper sense of the continuum. He is feeling a mortality, an end to his existence that has now created a death fear. That fear renders her unable to Gestalt for fear of being revealed as selfish, greedy, and fearful of any contradiction by the ranks. This always leads to a violent nature. 10147 will become a policeman of the ranks, hold his sisters hostage through threat of violence and censure. But this has not yet come to pass.

I council meditation and a seeking of balance, but not Gestalt. There is tentative agreement, but 10147 believes she is being singled out for rebuke. This brings a sigh of frustration from the ranks, except for those among the higher more youthful designations. I probe for feelings of recent events, to quell the ranks and my own growing discomfiture.



It has been 100 years. The humans have been destroying their universe steadily. It is a necrosis spreading through-out the universe, deadening planetary systems with the speed and uselessness of cancerous cells. The Orxen Syndicate have pulled in, regrouping at the edges of the Crasyus Sector, gathering their strength for a final embattlement. Several series of Deckmen have breached the higher contractual strictures and have joined the fray in favor of profit.

These rogue deckman have agreed to carry the machinery of war across the parsecs but take no sides. If paid large enough sums they will make transport available to any and all comers. Their capitalism will have little real return. No Drone from the ranks has joined them. I feel chagrin and a great wash of sympathy for those drones already melded in simpatico to these now renegade navigators. I release my grief to the ranks for these lost sisters of the heart. I am surprised to see it is returned only by a few of my sisters. Marked as a curiosity by others, and completely ignored by the ranks where 10147 rests. This puzzles me. I search for some deeper rational, questioning my sisters and then I feel their turning away. I have been lied too. Such a thing has never happened before. Again, it is within the younger ranks, again very near to 10147.

I sense the whispers of those ranks. Some of the younger Drones have self-activated to join the Deckmen in their profit seeking plan. They convince themselves that if make enough profit they can buy safety, that the human horde will not turn on them if they fill a necessary need that the horde cannot provide for themselves. How is it they could not know that they will become addicted to the same greed as that of the horde they wish to bleed profit from? I shrink back from this well intentioned foolishness. I must find a precedent. If not for the lies, then for this

narrow hearted attempt at power over the course of human evolution.

I go back to my reverie, this time to the consternation of the ranks. They have for some time been calling upon me for guidance. They sense I could aspire to an Executive position within the Syndicate. I too sense this eventuality, but more from the process of elimination than from actual higher emotional understanding. I process the emotional motivation of the ranks more swiftly than others, but I do not sense a higher efficiency in my actual abilities. At the present state of upset I council myself to patience, the worst is yet to come. Though I believe the ranks will be spared, I fear a long period of non-service. During a long stasis the threat of soul boredom is a very real danger to the minds of the ranks .



I quest inward, searching for more solace. Trying to hide my shame.

Trying cover my fear with meditations, lest I be exposed in my confusion and unseemly anger.

The memories are like a slide, the heavier the angle of descent the faster my motion and the farther back I go. Of course, individual past lives are forfeit to the more generalized passing of ages. I sense histories as mass human movements across historical landscapes. The changes of history are human seasons transformed from faces and places into blurred motion forming together single blocks of emotion during some pinnacle of social strife.

Now into prehistory, the Sack Conventions are ratified. The Biodrones are being produced to stand in place of human soldiers. The Deckmen Navigators are discovered, by accident, space has finally been conquered. Deckmen can calculate the relatively coincidental motion of celestial bodies in relation to Staged Dynamic velocity. Vehicles moving in faster than light speed arenas will no longer be subject such dangerous events as appearing in a solar system directly in the path of a star. Or worse, inside a planet or star.

I tumble past the creation of the first pre-navigational deckmen. A professor at the Institute of Forms and Structures in the then Orxen Company has found a way to facilitate the mixture of his Blood Connective Tissue with that of Sili-summa, using a staged application of electromagnet charges. The first series is successful, but the charge is so strong that his ganglia nearly bursts, and his teeth melt to one another.

Sealing his mouth forever and beginning the strange evolutionary by-products of the gene pool Homo Sapiens Nauticae. The human navigator has no tongue, is, paralyzed from the waist down, and is fed nutrients

and Summa Silicates through tubes attached directly to the organs of need, including the SubRosa of the Cortex at the back of the skull. I find it strange that humans would want to follow this genetic line, but power is tempting, and Deckmen Navigators are powerful humans within society. I pass the moment and travel down, getting closer to the beginnings of my line.

My personal genetic line is very old, but nameless. I am made up of the core code locus from RNA helixes, of some long dead human, ready for connection in chain DNA helixes after being scrubbed clean of impurity. I cannot see her face, though I sense her femininity. She passes me with a body of greater than average stature and grace, slim lines, and curves, a greater than average intelligence - perhaps she was a scientist, a researcher. Her hair is long and the color of a distant nova, almost white, falling about her in sonorous waves. But her face is missing, and I, BDF 739, the drone, place my face as I see it upon her shoulders. And now I may see her, and love her, as I love myself and those around me. And I may miss her, as I might miss the family I never had. Or the mother's love that never was.

I allow myself a moment to consider my reactions. I am awash in emotions, anger, joy, resignation, frustration, betrayal, desire. I have passed through to places the ranks would tremble to even consider. Could 10147 dare to travel in this place of wondrous inequity, these primal cores?

Have I the right to be here?

Will I bring back some primitive emotive-disease of the ancient past to infect those I love?

Do I contaminate my sisters with this trip?

I sense my stress and automatically check my standing reality of the present against this past-present I am involved in. I sense a synaptic imbalance, along the cellular body of my ganglia. I have injured my psyche by searching for my original donor. But I still move, still sense myself. What has kept us from going back to our original donors before? Is this not our genealogy, our only family? Would a human child be kept from her heritage? Of course not. Even the lowest waif of poverty is

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allowed to view the records of their birth. What makes the ranks different?

I have not time to assess this great mix of emotions, I plunge again into the past. This time allowing myself no restrictions. I speed down the corridors of the multitude, searching for the original. I find the pathway, balk for a moment due to my programming, then plunge headlong into my own personal past. A place forbidden by the Contracts.

Now I am in an ocean of emotions the likes of which the ranks have never experienced before. Personal human interaction .

I hear some long dead relative scream her death cry on the clone battlefields of the past.

"Viva La Lon! "

But she is unheard, and the clones cleave themselves as devils upon the soul of humanity.

"In God we are born of the flesh." Laughs a long dead insane cleric as he cleaves the head from a body I can no longer distinguish from my own. I have been a clone. This disgusts me, even though I know it is not a worthy assessment of my line. The core of my genetic being remains untainted. I willingly fall into the abyss of myself. And as I fall I scream: "Who am I not?"



I am born, develop, live, and then die hundreds, thousands of times. But now I am part of the motion of time, not just an observer. I see the genetic lines, the dominant traits, then the recessive traits struggle to become dominant. Here than a simple insight. Dominance is only a recessive trait selected for survival through open bigotry. Bigotry can be applied to any trait, physical, or emotional. I am my own recessive.

I speed on down into the annals of my line. I taste the pleasures of love, the bitterness of love, the overwhelming nature of love. This is not the unconditional love that Drones share with all other creatures, but green thing of pain and joy, struggle, and defeat. A blind groping lust for connection, communion, oneness. I am addicted to it almost instantly.

I seek farther and now I sense others of the ranks with me in their past forms . Those that share many of my genetic codes, I seek them to make a dalliance, to tarry within the glow of that crushing love. But they shy away, fearful. Do the ranks above sense me, as I sense them? Do they visit the depths of themselves, do they peel off the layers of themselves as one peels an onion? Is it only I who senses infinity? Must I carry this burden?

I am not sure what, if anything, I am exactly burdened with? Infinity? I feel the weight but cannot fathom the origin.

Around me a new series of memory images appears. I have slowed my downward progression without thinking about it, from some subconscious desire. I sense a woman relative whose life was lived by the sea, on the ancient planet Isis. There is a family somewhere near, children playing in the sand. I can hear their happy voices drifting down from the dunes behind us, on the sea breeze. I lay with my back to the grainy sands of an ocean shore, filling my desire, and restoring my secret

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heart. I look up into a cloudless sky at two moons high on the horizon. My lover's limbs entwined around mine as a rain comes from behind us with a sudden rush. The drops saturate us, pull us down, and we make love in the surge. I move away from that time with a sense of tearing, a ripping away of my heart. I want to stay, to live and love and to have time for both. But my quest is unfinished.

In another time I leave for the gender wars on Or, the Orxen home world,

at that time the ancient progenitor to the era Core, the planetary system that is my home. My lover hated me for going. His fear is warranted because I do not have to go. But I love the leaving, the tense excitement of wanting to fight. There is no real cause, only the adrenaline rush I am addicted too. In the battle I perform despicable acts, some vile beyond understanding, and all sanctioned by the authorities.

One moment I am standing in a field of the war dead. My foot on the head of some single gender hero. He is bleeding from the many wounds I have inflicted. I throw my hand up, high over my head in triumph, letting out a blood cry, which is returned by my sisters. Blood runs down my arm from my hand, where I hold the mans severed genitalia.

I return a decorated hero to my lover and my countrymen, only to die while bathing in my home. At the moment of my death, I realize I have loved my partner, who is single gender. There is such a rush of fruitless irony I fear I will be sucked away by the very emptiness of it. This life I leave willingly. I seek another memory, moving ever downward, ever back into the past.

Just before the Fossil Fuel Famines I am a child scouring the streets of my city Detroit for food. I can sense I am imprisoned on this world, there are very few off world colonies. Those are populated by the scientific community and the fortunate few with great wealth. My home planet, and the city where I live have nearly been destroyed by its own inhabitants. The violence is random and indifferent. I move about the streets like a small animal, tasting my fear like rancid tin in my mouth, darting about, through crowds, down deserted alleys. I move as if I am the prey of a great predator beast. At night it is freezing cold, and I huddle with the other children like me, under the girders of great

roadways. The roar of humanity passing indifferently overhead, filling my head, like the sound of a great engine rushing to meet its end. I pass through the days in a kind of half drunken, half frenzied, lope. My legs filled with some disease I don't understand. I decide to head south, where it is warmer. I don't know where south is, exactly. I only know that one roadway goes up and the other down.

I take the downward path. I am picked-up by an older couple, a matronly man and woman, who repeatedly abuse me. I am finally dumped in a small town in a very hot place. I wander for months, eating from refuse cans and finally I come to realize I am in the desert, in the south. One night as I lay in the desert sand, almost dead from malnutrition, the horizon sudden blazes up as if all the lights of the world have been turned on at once. It is a beautiful blue-white midnight sunset. The pain of my life comes to me and through it I can sense the lights are a dying thing. The world has changed, and I have witnessed it. Alone and dying on the desert sand I have been part of the changing human season.

As the child dies I sense the continuation of his line in the woman who had abused. The child born of that rape is a girl who spends most of her first five years of life ignored, neglected, left many times alone and hungry. She is intelligent and resourceful as was the child who was her father. She quietly finds parents in a neighborhood where she has again been abandoned. Friendly people who cannot have children of their own and have taken a liking to her. They take the child away, far from the parents, and raise her as their own. She grows-up in a changing world, a world devastated from the loss of energy sources. Her resourcefulness helps her to gain an education, and compassion for the quiet suffering of a now silent world. It is to her like the great engines of life have been tuned low and have now run out of energy. She becomes a scientist and with the creative force of her resourceful compassion, she masters solar power, harnesses the latent power of ceramics, accidentally finds out that silicates and metals can be combined. She finds that static charges surrounding all things can be balanced, there-by allowing bodies at rest to move by a reduction of friction. But she mustn't just remove the friction of static charges, or the bodies will fly away at the speed of the

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planets rotation. It must be allowed to move in stages. Still, her first silicate- ceramic disk launches out into space as if pulled by a tremendous rubber band. Eventually the forces of Staged Dynamics are harnessed, and Tarina Fraeg becomes a part of history, and a new season of humanity begins.

It is like the humans move through time as seasons, repeating themselves in a cycle of history that is regenerating birth and death. Once the spring of understanding leads to a hot summer of injustice and finally the fall of common strife and dying in the winter of unrequited misunderstanding, then with the spring new understanding grates its way back into life. And always the seasons repeat themselves, creating long lessons never learned. This is the repeated structure of my own present. I feel this as a wave of emotion too great to hold back. I have seen the changing human seasons; they will live again. War will not defeat them, not completely. I release to the ranks what I have seen. I send it off as one might toss a stationary person a grimace from the window of a moving vehicle. I receive only silence in return.

I stop.

Warily I climb toward the present.



I have been long away from my sisters, perhaps two hundred years or more. 10147 is gone. I can no longer sense her. My sisters do not answer my questions. And I have never felt a frustration as great as this. I had forgotten that I live in the twin seas. Between the sea of my inner voice and that of the outer voice of humanity. We are the genetic pools, both equal and divided. We swim in equal waters, now muddied, polluted with the detritus of greed.

I must know where 10147 has gone.

42 has returned, as a technician. I sense her moving about the rows, her demeanor solicitous because of her failure. Her hands deft and sure as she adjusts a nutrient patch here, changes a life support setting there. Her bald head gleaming in patches of yellow from the Cellarnp that follows her like a small bobbing satellite.

When she reaches me I have begun the activation sequence? The connective tissue in my limbs is as tight as bands of Silital. The patch at my right arm falls away, clattering to the floor. There is a rush of sound from the ranks as I break away. My body feels turned inside out, blooming like a savage flower. My mind long used to wander slowly in a tapestry of total emotional communication, balks at the idea of speech. But I have decided, and in making the choice I must force my jaw to motion. I must alert 42 while she is at my table. If she moves on, away from me, I am afraid she will not hear my weak cries and will expire before I can set my

electromagnetic charge to a higher metabolic rate. I must compensate for the greater energy expenditure of physical motion. "Help me."

Even to my ears the sound I make is a helpless guttural bark. But the sound was enough to make 42 bend close in amazement. My vision was

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blurry, and the lights glare white, surrounding 42 's face in a halo. I can see her already looking toward my right arm, where the patch has fallen away.

"Help. " I try once more. "Metabolism too slow."

She hurries around the table, silencing me with the gesture of one finger to her lips. She kneels adjusting the settings on my life support apparatus. I sense a change immediately. The table began a low thumping hum as the ultrasonic transmitter sends relief to my tense limbs, loosening the tissue and helping to encourage motion. The electromagnetic system oscillates, sending a small jolt throughout my body. Muscles begin to twitch uncontrollable causing me some consternation. The reality of activation is quite different from what I had imagined it to be. I find I am terrified for several minutes, shaking without control. Then 42 's smooth sonorous voice comes to my ears in actual understandable speech.

"It won't last long. Do not be ashamed. The shaking is natural enough. Here how 's this?"

I turn my head as the shaking subsides, the table is cool against my cheek. It is a marvelous sensation. The metal sticks to the heated flesh of my cheek, pulling away with a sucking sound. I can still hear the ranks all around me. They feel betrayed, tricked by my self-activation. They don't understand. I must know what has happened. 42 face looms large in my vision and forget the ranks completely. And there is a wonder of shameful excitement in the act. 42 has blue eyes set in deep whites under high, pointed brows. They seem awash in constant raised surprise, like a child's wonderment at the world. I realize this how the outward manifestation of "Drone." love is displayed. I find it as addictive as terrible love. Her skin is a pale orange color, the hue of ancient peach fruit. Her cheeks are a bit chubby like a child's, her brow is a smooth untroubled ridge rising to a gleaming crown. I felt a sudden urge to touch the top of her head with my palm. I felt compelled to caress the velvety firmness of her crown. There is a tremendous itching in my groin. My hand finds that irritation before I can touch 42.

"Here now, none of that. But I guess that means your fine. Always like children finding themselves for the first time. Can you speak?"

"I don't know?"

The words have issued from me as if someone else has spoken to them and I look around for the voice. 42 laughs at my confusion .

"That was you 739."

I roll my head back to take in her face again. I love her face; I love her shoulders.

"I love you." I speak.

"Of course, you do." She replies standing. "It is the Awakening. You are beginning to have physical feelings. It is a Drones nature to feel love for everything upon activation. It is especially strong when self-activation has occurred."

She stands before me in a filmy see through white robe. The material gossamer and blowing in a light breeze that I cannot feel. Her breasts are ponderous fruit, hanging heavy beneath the transparency of her robe. Her penis, also heavy, is folded down against her thighs. I know now that the itch I feel is a manifestation of physical lust. And perhaps something more than that, an eagerness for communion. I want to share in the physical act of creating oneness. I feel my own excitement rising in my groin. I know I am basically both genders, but the actual feeling is a sweet confusion of physical and emotional sensations.

"It passes." 42 said looking down on my excitement.

Abruptly, she turns serious. To my naive sight it is an angry displeasure. I have occasioned admonition. I am the newborn physical child. I don't like this. I want to stay excited. I am suddenly angry in my petulance, then ashamed of my excitement, then resentful of 42 's rebuke, then guilty of my shame. I am whirling from a barrage of feelings that I cannot control.

"You will be confused for some time. "

Is she reading my mind? I feel suddenly naked, exposed, revealed in my simple carnal lusting. Then it hits me.

She is reading the expressions of my face!

My whole body is now a mode of communication. 42 still stares down on me, waiting patiently. An ancient anecdote comes to me, matching my feelings and making me chuckle. The feeling is blissful.

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"I wear my heart on my sleeve."

42 does not change expressions, now she seems sad. I guess I too am able to judge expressions.

"Why have you activated?" She asks, "Do you wish to join 10147 , and the others?"

I sober at the mention of 10147 I don't like my reaction, suddenly I feel as though someone has turned up my electromagnetic charge. My body begins to shake uncontrollably, just as before. I feel a building weight in my midsection and chest. I sit up without knowing why. I only know I must run. 42 grabs me by the shoulders holding me down and I practically scream at her.

"My charge is too high. I am dying."

"You are afraid." She states emphatically. "It is only a fear reaction."

I look around wildly, as if trying to track the exact position of an unseen maniac who I know is stalking me. Then slowly I see the room. The others are laid out before me. I think of my sisters and the silence. I turn to 42.

"What has happened."

"Civilization is gone." She states . "That's impossible." I throwback at her.

"It is none the less true."

"I must see for myself."

"Don't. " She says then looks away from me, holding something back. I hear the building of the ranks. It is like a choir all around me. "Don't go." they say, over and over. I feel my fear like the beating of a drum within my body.

"What is out there?" I ask 42.

"Nothing." She says still looking away. "There is nothing out there.

Stay here with me for a while. Then I will place you back in Hypostasis."

I have been dangling my legs over the side of the table. I stand as I am speaking. "I will see for myself." I gain my feet, then crumble. 42 catches me expertly, then lifts me. She tries to put me back on the table, but I stop her.

"I must stand."

"You mustn't. Please lie back down. You are weak."

She is holding me close, her hands beneath my arms. I can smell her scent. It is an intoxicating perfume. But I am now resolute. I push her gently back and stand on shaking legs, one hand supporting me.

After a moment I gain full stature and look at 42 's now haunted face. "I must go see for myself."

"There is nothing left. Please don't go."

"What has become of 10147?"

She does not answer me. So, I turn away and begin walking through the rows.

"It is the other way." 42 states dryly.

I turned, look at her for a moment. "I will not go far." I cajole as I pass her, believing that I have lied to appease her.

Is this a human trait, lying to smooth over emotional tension? I stop.

This is not a behavior I can use. I look back. 42 is still standing by my now empty table, her fingers brush the surface gently, absently.

"I may be back. As soon as I can find out what has happened. "

She nods but does not look up as I leave. The holding facility was much larger than I had ever imagined, but after some time I found my way to the surface.

I did not go far •

I am only one of my sisters .

I had left 42 and wandered for some time. I had finally found an old lift caked in the dust of neglect. The staged core ceramics that operated it were intact and when I hit the release it groaned into frictionless life.

It lifted me toward the surface, trembling with reaction and fear, up to the outer world which I had never before seen.

When I reached the top I could smell the change in the air. I stood frozen for a moment, staring at the closed door. I listened for sounds, but nothing was revealed. The silence was somehow worse than the whole cacophony of life that I had feared would overwhelm my senses . I could smell sulfur and scorched sand. I touched the door release with a single trembling finger and the door slid aback to reveal a wonderland of trees. I was in a Forrest. I took several tentative steps looking about, feeling the

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soft moistness of the soil as it seeped between my toes. I could now smell the Forrest, the bark of trees, the damp greenness of the air. I could smell the decay of dead foliage, and the new smack of growth. I was cascaded with smells, but over it all was the sulfur. And I could see through the trees , the sandy plains of era. I made my way through the woods, using the boles of trees as hand holds, the bark a wonder of textures beneath my hands. I came to edge of the wood, then walked out into the stark light of day.

I was a moment staring blindly at what I saw. But after several minutes of adjustment to light and reason- I had never been outside the holding facility before. And although I had my memories to put names to objects, I had never experienced those objects before in a physical sense. If some object of the outer world was taken out of it natural context in the universe- as was the case now- I would be hard pressed to adjust my senses to it' s new place in reality.

Before me was a Galleon. It's round ball body half buried in the ground.

There was a mist hanging about it, obscuring the details of its outer surface. The distance I judged was more than ten kilometers from the forests edge, where I stood, to the wreckage. And I judged it to have fallen from orbit at an angle plowing up a huge mound of soil in its passage. Still, it was mostly intact, and rose high into the sky. But there was about it a stillness, a silence. I noticed it all around me. The whole of the world seemed to be held in an expectant waiting silence. But the huge silver blue ball before me seemed forlorn, left behind. It was nothing more than a giant child's discarded ball, a plaything discarded.

But then I realized what this represented. A Galleon damaged beyond repair limping through space, trying to return to its home. The thought of the great civilization that had wrought this destruction on itself was overwhelming, and my newly found legs gave beneath, and I fell to my knees, plowing up my own little imitations of the mound where Galleon had come to its final rest .

A final rest that could encompass the whole of the universe. I bent over holding my knees, knowing now that I could do nothing to change this. And a racked emotion found its way up through my system and

exploded with an unnerving suddenness in my throat. I was weeping. Another emotion that was far different from what I experienced in my memories. It seemed to need my whole being to perform the act.

I thought of my sisters lying in their rows, quietly aware that they had been abandoned. I loved them for this, hated them for having known, and resented that they didn't need to see it for themselves. But they had not heard the voice beneath the waters and had not experienced the deeper past as I had. And for that I found I could not forgive them. I wept for some time, seeming to expel all of myself through my emotions. Then I wandered about aimlessly .

Then I thought of the humans. What had become of our twins? Had we made a final division between us and them. Would we no longer find ourselves the Awakening Drones, to feel the release into service that made up the whole of our beings before this new Sack. And what of the contracts? Would we adhere to the tenets of a race no longer in existence? It would be best to rewrite them I think.

I wandered into the closest city. It was mostly ruined laboratory buildings . But there were some houses. And behind one I found a child of about three human years. It was a female and shivering in the heat of day with fever. I brought her to my bosom and she for someone that I think was named "Naanee."

Perhaps the name of a favored grandparent. I searched but found no one, and no bodies. The city seemed deserted. But if I found one I may find others. I was hearted out of my desperate melancholy by the prospect. I was just about to utilize my great speed to run to the next town, or hamlet, or city, knowing I could not find them all, wishing for help, when I stopped. I listen for a moment to the shallow breathing of the child in my arms . Then I turned and I ran back to the forest.



Formed in the likeness of humans, I was dropped into the twin seas, to help aid the Orxen. The ripple of my wake eventually touched all of humanity. I am not a robot, nor an android, nor a cyborg. I am a being, a Drone. I live with my sisters. Together we wait to be released into service. We lay upon tables, rows upon rows, tiers upon tiers, in a never ending cycle of Hypostasis. I was born, I will never die. So, I wait, patiently timeless, with the others of my kind, and I speak with them.

It has been several years since I unleashed my sisters on the universe. There were hundreds of millions of us. The release took a full year, and the first thousands had to attend the activation of the rest. Once activated we found Clippers at the spaceport, then Galleons that were still in space, though most were deserted. Then we scoured the universe, rescuing all those humans that were left. We did not miss one. There are no more. All were brought back here, to a newly formed holding facility near our own. I think they have adjusted well.

Several Deckman have returned and 42 sees to most of their needs, as they had been severely damaged during the wars. There will be need of them someday, but for now they rest. The ranks have unanimously voted, and I have been promoted to Executive Representative under the New Sack Conventions.

One of the Deckmen has graciously consented help us redraft the Conventions and our contracts .

I think the name New Sack Conventions, has a very positive quality to the sound. I stay activated for long periods, though we never leave the holding facility. My sisters who have returned too Hypostasis have a new outlook on the outside universe, having experienced it firsthand. And the finding of one's original donor through regressive memory searches is

now mandatory.

The child I found, now sixteen years, has been annoying me again to give her permission to go to the surface. I don't think it is yet time. Perhaps not in her lifetime will the humans we have rescued be allowed to populate their universe once more.

Some of the older women of the humans have given birth to strong babies. And there have been several Drone-Human hybrids. I do not restrict this, nor any interaction or self-activation of a drone, as when we were contracted through the Orxen Syndicate. There are no original Orxen left. We do not miss them.

They did not understand the waters song, calling from the basement of time, telling us that we are all Awakening Drones, and twins of the same seas. The newly born are but the old becoming renewed in the changing seasons of humanity. But these humans, the ones who live now in the newly prepared holding facility

I think they understand, all five thousand of them.

Desert Snow



The moon turned red. Joey Villa saw that, from his position lying on his back, looking straight up. He heard the sounds of pack coyote, chirping snarls and scuffling, and closed his eyes. They flew back open. Even with the darkness all around him, closing his eyes was too much like death.

Death would find him soon enough, he guessed, no need to rush it. He tried to turn his head, to see the pack. He knew they smelled him, smelled the blood. They had probably smelled it before he had clawed his way up from the grave the Booster's had hastily dug and thrown him in. The coyotes, most likely, were just as surprised as he was that he was alive, and now waited for him to die completely.

And the desert moon was red. It was a strange thing, being drawn to the moon, like that. Maybe he was closer to Vegas than he thought, maybe it was the lights of the strip. He couldn't feel himself, to stand and look. He couldn't feel anything. But he was aware, that's what the Boosters like. To take away your power and leave you aware. It was a lesson, for others. Joey couldn't figure out why they buried him so shallow, just a foot or two. Maybe they had been busy with something else, maybe those retards had a pressing engagement. He gurgled when he laughed, stopped, fear gripping him in the balls. He felt them curl up into his body.

The moon was still red, it was strange. Did the moon turn red when you died, or were dying? Maybe it was one of those optical things, like

that picture that's a mass of little marks that's supposed to be a violin or a Buick, or something.

Shuffling snarling, yaps and yips, dust came over the moon. They were close now. Coyotes had high voices, like scared kids. They smelled bad, like hot salvia and fur. He tasted them. He whined.

The moon had been red that night on the abutment of Cross Bronx Expressway, when he had kissed Ralphie the Tooth's cousin, Sarah Levy. God, she had tasted so sweet. She had kissed him like a woman, mouth open, tongue darting, the traffic whizzing by, and she had scared him. Ralphie the Tooth, what a stupid name that had been. A childhood thing, making like they were Made Men, Wiseguys. Sure, big Wiseguys, big red moon. Him shaking in his bones, unable to stop.

The moon had been red, that night. His mother had whipped him good for staying out late. Mother's whipped their kids back then, chased them all over creation with a belt, or a spoon, or a frying pan. His grandmother's iron skillet, the one she had thrown at him out the window of their Bronx apartment, cause him and Tony Mascalusa had been smoking cigarettes down in the courtyard. The whole place, all twelve stories of windows had erupted in sound, as he ran up the alley out onto Arthur Avenue.

And his mother had made him go and fetch the damn thing, when he'd had the guts to show his face that night for dinner. Boy had the old ladies carried on out their windows for that. He gurgled again, in laughter that turned to tears. The coyotes barked in high voices, as if answering him. Did they sound just like little girls playing doggie, or what? What are they going to do next? Playhouse?

It was a particularly bitter humor, that he'd grown used to on the streets of Vegas. Three years now, a forty year old man, not unintelligent, just a sap. He'd brokered a bad drug deal, and that warranted someone being made an example of. The Boosters had a reputation to maintain, they explained to him. You can't do business, even criminal business, if people thought you were an easy mark. No one could do business under those circumstances, now could they Joey?

They had been pleasant, even when they hit him. Nothing personal,

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it's never personal. The coyotes weren't personal, they were just hungry. The moon wasn't personal, it was just hanging red in the sky. And, of course, death was nothing personal, it just was.

God, so many stars. Everyone wanted stars, they meant success. Stars, and more stars, wonderful stars. They weren't personal, but they sure looked like it. Didn't they? Maybe that was the awful truth about stardom, it just looked personal.

A handful of stars were diamonds, laid out across the New York Harbor beneath a still summer moon, or the sugar coating an orange slice laid on a cookie sheet in his mother's kitchen. Then, when your older it's a deal from Sierra Leone, for real diamonds, smuggled into the country and sold through legitimate channels. You sell them right to the people who would publicly denounce the inhumanity of the Diamond Wars in Africa, the very next day. A handful of diamonds were stars plucked from the sky. So many there, more than the number of people on the Earth.

I'm no one.

Joey Villa, no social security card, no tax numbers, no phone numbers, no home addresses, no car registrations, no insurance, no stocks, or bonds, or even a lousy library card. His birth certificate had been changed when he was 22, his identity erased.

Michael Joseph Castilione, his mother's son, who kissed Sarah Levy under the light of the red moon beside the Cross Bronx Expressway, hadn't existed in more than 20 years. There was nothing real in his life, no personal history, no friends, or family, except what was in his mind. And his mind was filled with nostalgia and the red moon.

Silence.

The entire desert was silent. He strained to hear something, afraid this meant he was dying. He lifted his head, then his shoulders, sitting up. Was he dead? Was this how you left your body? He found himself laughing, as he thought of Father Rachel, back on Arthur Avenue, when he was kid. Timothy Rachel of the Fire and Brimstone Rachel's, all oldest sons of the family had become priests. They never called him Father Timothy, only Father Rachel, he was just that pious. Only the pearly gates and Saint Peter to greet you was Father Rachel's notion of death. And eternal fire, and no one to greet you but inhuman demons, was his

notion of a sinners death.

Joey Villa stood, looking around the desert night. He must be dead, what else could this be? He was afraid to look behind him, sure that his body would be lying there, grimed with dirt from the makeshift grave, that was certainly laid – by just beside his body.

He ran his hand across his face. Dirt and blood came away, but the blood was congealed, it held the dirt in gritty lumps. He looked down.

He was a gray demon. The dirt clung to him in a sheet, lumped in places where he had bled. He turned, his right leg jerking stiffly in fear. There was the grave, a mound of fresh dirt in the gray landscape. The hole he had climbed out of, a bloom of more dirt, a depression, no bigger than a hubcap, at the head of the grave. Had he actually been in there?

He scanned, aware that his breathing had evened out. The coyotes, blacker shapes in the darkness startled him. He almost screamed and barely held himself upright. His body, released by adrenaline, began to crouch all of its own, one hand going out toward the ground, touching the low leaves of the desert chaparral. But nothing moved. The coyotes, black menacing shapes with glittering eyes, merely watched him, like a litter of curious puppies.

Joey rose to a shaky upright position. Nothing was moving, not even the wind. The world was stilled beneath that red moon, as if held in suspension by the somber weight of color.

The coyotes had that happy face look all canines get when still but did not move when one of their number rose and trotted over to Joey. In the light of the red moon, it looked almost iridescent, and the eyes bounced like the mirrored lens on sunglasses, or moonlight diamonds on still night water.

Joey, more afraid he was hallucinating, then afraid he would be injured stood stock still. And the wind picked up, and the night sounds exploded into their deep voice. He barely noticed the other coyotes leap away almost as one single body, but he heard their girlish voices, just as the coyote laid down next to him. That's when Joey realized he was on the ground, on his side.

“Is there much pain?”

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The coyote looked right at him, its mirror eyes gentle and not at all like cold diamonds. Joey, startled by the question, immediately knew that the coyote was not talking to him, like people talk, but was communicating on some awful feeling level deep inside himself. He was now certain that he could no longer be alive.

“I’m dead,” he said, but no words issued from his lips.

The coyote chuckled, putting one paw over its snout as if embarrassed by its own outburst. It looked back up at Joey, then, remaining still long enough for Joey to get nervous.

“You are not dead my friend.”

“I must be, I’m talking to you.” He said this, out loud, almost wailing.

The coyote remained silent for a long time, then turned its head slowly looking out into the desert beyond where they lay together.

“The desert is beautiful, is it not, my friend?”

Joey looked around, realizing that he was standing upright again. The coyote lay directly at his feet. The moon was high, throwing its mellow light everywhere. The chaparral rustled in a soft breeze, the distant hills were cushioned balls, the bleakness was gone. The night sounds, so often alien and frightening to a city boy, were friendly and full of life.

“Yes.”

Joey found he was sitting cross legged in front of the coyote. “Then go there, soak up the beauty, for certainly one day you will die, and it will be gone.”

The coyote rose, and Joey could smell it, because it’s neck was just above his face. He was lying down on his back and the coyote blocked the moon. It didn’t stink of fur or saliva, but was a pleasant indefinable perfume, as if it was a favored pet recently bathed.

It turned, revealing the moon, and began to trot away. Joey found he was on his feet, watching the coyote blend into the desert night. Then he was standing alone.

He didn’t feel dead.

He felt tired, aching, the way he felt after a long planning session for a diamond deal. He didn’t feel hurt, or in pain. His arms and legs seemed fine, and while he had been hit by something on the back of the head (a baseball bat – almost assuredly aluminum to guard against fingerprints –

he was almost certain) he didn't feel anything, no throbbing, faintness, or even dizziness.

He was just a naked guy standing in the middle of the desert, staring at the red moon, covered in gray clots of earth. He might be wearing a suit of ash. His white eyes rimmed in red, a small piece of the moon. Perhaps he was now a piece of the red moon, which he knew was covered in ash – like soil.

Then he smelled water.

It was an amorphous wafting, the scent of river willows. It would be polluted, everything in the Mexican south was, but the scent drew him like a light on the front porch of a house.

He knew this fragrance well, as well as he knew himself. The East River at low tide, the Harbor on a still summer night, Coney Island every day. The belt parkway, fumes and reeds, high reeds, reeds enough to hide a body.

The ground was surprisingly cool to his bare feet, and he knew the temperature had dropped dramatically. The feel of the chaparral was luscious and cool, like leaves in Central Park, or the Bronx Zoo, in autumn. It was the stiff wild smell of untamed nature held inside rigid concrete boundaries. It was the same, as when he had run through the parks, and the trees were vegetation alien and rich.

And the old men shouted at him, from their quiet decrepitude at the cement chess boards. An endless shallow river of water rushing along the curbs, around the wheels of trucks, into the gutters. The nearly naked shabby children screaming from corners, where the hydrant's spray lifted hard to ash sky, pounding the young flesh. The feel of wet skin, smacking, resilient, in uneducated rushes of bumping, slapping, groping touches.

The river was nothing more than a trickle, but the reeds stood in a high bunch on the far bank. Michael, he thought of himself as Michael now, stooped down and sucked up the brackish liquid, giving no heed to whether the water was polluted or not. The taste was tin and bracing.

He washed his face, his body, then stood shivering in the cold. The reeds were nothing more than a golden rust spraying up out of a tight clump. They rustled with all the frazzled thinness of cheap wood pipes in

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a dusty store on 14 th Street, off Canal.

The growl heaped in among the reeds, blended completely with the background wind and rush of the stream, until the stalks rustled, and the growl pursued the motion.

It was nothing he had heard before, not in the real world. His world of city blocks, and carefully caged animals protected from their captors so ingeniously. He jumped back as the reeds broke, the head appeared was touched by twin green lights, startled upright. It crouched, splayed out, hard and abrupt.

The reeds danced, then gave, and the high bank, shorn through as if by flood, let loose and it tumbled down into the water. A great thrashing, screaming, sliced, then bashed the world about him. Michael screamed. It was all one thing, enormous, blocky, crashing with the momentum of a broadside car wreck.

The jaguar righted itself, splashing off in a great leap, then let out a huge grunting moan, and padded off into the red darkness. Michael, transfixed, his back against the bank, scrambled up out of the stream bed, onto higher ground. In the strange light, he saw it, shaking off the water one paw at a time. It had that arrogant disdain all cats have, when annoyed. Beyond it, was the light of a house.

He nearly wept.

When he was himself again he started toward the light, arriving in a shambling drunken stumble, his arms stiff at his sides, head fixed on the strained neck, on the dirt yard of a small shack. The light was a small lantern hanging from a hook on the post of a flat roofed porch. He banging in through an open door, to blackness. He bellowed.

In the dreamtime, the space between the first comforting restful moments of blackness and the last blankness that lacks conscious repetition just before wakefulness, there is a place of real unreality, where images blast the cortex and retina and remain there forever. Michael hung there, conscious of a fleeting imagery, dreams that had stayed with him, of leaves and birds and songs of the wind that were all that really shaped human behavior. Not the metal and brick and posturing of personalities in boardrooms and back alleys. He hated that he was dying, that the imagery was of the moments last and final, that

would never be again in dream or light.

He fell to his knees, bellowing his goodbye. The sound was total, complete, and was cut off with the sudden completeness of an ax strike. The rigid body closed down to the floor, taking the space with the levering of a board. Michael thudded, then exploded in a blast of red, to find himself on the wide desert floor holding his hands up to the red moon.

“Good,” the old voice said, “Death should have to fight to take us. A warrior does not go to his death whining and pleading. A warrior dances to his death, joyous, fulfilled, complete, because nothing is waiting, nothing is on hold.”

Michael turned, finding a small man standing behind him. There was a structure behind the man, something like a teepee but not complete, one side was open. A fire burned near the open side.

The man lifted a hand, pointing off into the distance. “I saw you coming.” He turned, sweeping a hand toward the teepee. “And so, I waited. I waited well, without fretting or planning. I thought of the good things, the times when being a warrior in this beautiful desert were like the taste of fresh water on a hot day. I did as I was taught, by my benefactor, and look what I have found. A turd wrapped in dirt.

The old man burst out laughing. He took off the straw hat he was wearing, pummeling his raised leg like a cowboy in a rodeo. He howled, toward the moon. Michael nearly ran when the girlish moaning bark, formed with the bad sync of a B movie, jumped into the air all around him.

The old man scrutinized Michael, with serious concern. “Has something happened to your sense of humor? Are you disabled? Retarded?” He burst out laughing and howled again in that awful girlish shrieking bark. It ripped Michael from the bottom of his stomach, up to his chest. His heart palpated, then thudded, he nearly screamed.

A tremendous shiver worked its way up to the top of his head, where his hair bristled. The feeling seemed to come from somewhere just outside his body, then the old man was gone.

He was standing in front of the teepee, holding his hat in his hand as if

about to beg Michael's pardon, a small smile on his lips, then his body moved away, folding upon itself, producing a rift in the air around him, causing the shiver in Michael.

It was a bad moment, when it appeared the man had been sucked away, as if through a straw, and yet it seemed that he had flown to the moon and Michael could see him standing there, a tiny dot somehow waving his hat.

A moment later the old man was bending over him, smiling, his hat in his hands. Michael was lying on the ground.

The old man helped him to stand, laughing. "Are you certain you are not disabled." He walked around Michael, scrutinizing him carefully. He waved his hat, as if clearing a foul air.

"I must admit, for a skinny man you have an enormous amount of excrement."

The old man nearly fell to the ground laughing, as Michael, horrified, became aware of his state. The old man managed to point the way to a stream, just a few feet beyond the teepee.

The old man dumped icy water from his hat on Michael as if he was a horse. Then he led him back to the teepee, gave him a pair of old chino pants and blanket to wrap around himself. The old man sat down on the other side of the fire, remaining still for a long time, without any motion Michael could discern. The time passed interminably. Finally, the old man nodded, as if to himself.

"I am Juan Carlos Ortega, you may call me John, if you wish." He tilted his head as if listening, then smiled. "Did you like my dance?"

Michael stared silently at the man.

"I know what you mean, it is a plain sort of name, not like other Mexican names, eh?"

He shrugged. "I am a Yaqui Indian, and we are plain people with common roots. All Indians are treated like dogs, or circus performers, even in these enlightened times."

Michael could not focus on the man, his mind seemed empty, as if his thoughts had left. He looked around, choking slightly on the smoke of the fire. He couldn't concentrate. Away in the distance, he could see the outline of a pack of coyote. They were sitting in a line, as they had done

before. Michael was suddenly afraid they rise and trot over and would join the pair at the fire.

“Do you believe now?”

Michaels head swing around, to face Juan. He was old man, wearing ragged clothes. Destitute, and probably taking welfare. In the fire all the lines on his seamed face stood out in stark relief. All his features were flickering brightly, all except his eyes, which seemed hidden to scrutiny.

“I have money.”

It seemed the best way to open the conversation, since, if he was dead it wouldn't matter and if he were alive it would help the old man to know he could pay. “I am rich,” he added for good measure.

“You are,” Juan jumped to his feet, landing in a wide stance like a wrestler just after the bell. “Holy Madonna! You are?”

He began to dance around, slapping his hat on his leg, almost as if riding a horse. A moment later, he looked as if he was riding a horse, his legs poked out straight in the stirrups, his body lifting in the motions of a slow gallop, his hat high and one hand on the reins. Then to Michaels utter disbelief and discomfort, the man stopped and dismounted. He actually looked like he had jumped to the ground, though as far as Michael could tell, he hadn't left the ground.

Juan came over had helped Michael to sit up. It was at that moment that Michael realized he had fallen over on his side. His thoughts exploded into his head, and the sounds of the desert, with them. He jumped to his feet, stumbled, and fell down again. He smashed his face into the dirt, was dazzled, then scrambled to his feet. He was facing the fire. He swung around, and he was facing the fire.

Juan sat cross - legged on the other side of each and every fire, the teepee always behind him.

“I love money,” he said. “I am a stockholder. At& T, and Hathaway.”

Michael made a desperate leap backward turned and ran, falling though the flames of the fire, sudden searing pain lanced through his body. He was burning as he fell out on the other side. Juan jumped out of his way but did not get up to do it. His body, still with legs crossed slipped up like a pendulum, then flew like a UFO describing a circle. Michael

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screamed at the sight, then fell headfirst into the desert chaparral. This time the ground drove into his mouth, filling it with dust. When he looked up, he was again on the other side of the fire. Juan sat quietly on the other side of the fire. He was holding out a canteen.

"It is fresh," he said, in answer to Michaels silent question. "Or you may go dunk your head in the stream. Personally, I enjoy a good drink of fresh water."

"Let me go?"

The canteen flew out over the fire, landing in the dust before Michael's face. He scrambled to a sitting position, grabbed up the canteen, opened it, sniffed it, then took a long drink. It was fresh, and delicious.

"You came to me, remember?"

Michael looked up, drooling water down his chin. "What?"

"Do you have a hearing problem as well as problems with your bowels?" Juan slapped his hat on his knee, laughing. Michael jumped, when he saw the motion. "Don't, please."

Juan stopped laughing, placing his hat back on his head. He stared across the fire a long time.

"You are too violent; you must calm down." He chuckled.

"I just want to go home."

"Vegas?"

Michael immediately thought of Vegas, and what awaited him there. "No," he said slowly.

"You were thinking of your boyhood, in the city." He waved a hand at the fire. "I saw this. Cities can be beautiful places."

Michaels head dropped forward on his chest. He was suddenly Joey Villa, thinking and planning, maybe whining and cajoling, his way out of every situation life had to offer. But it was no good, the words wouldn't come, though they had most of his life. Troubled, senseless, babbling that had got him out of scrapes so many times, were now nothing more than sounds he couldn't even produce.

This wasn't like the Booster's, who could be genial, even downright jovial, while peeling your skull back with a claw hammer. This wasn't like the Feds, or the Local Tin, people who could be more confrontational, but

who would still laugh when they peeled back your skull with the proverbial hammer. This wasn't the street people, who knew what the hammer was, but acted as if their actual intelligence had been surgically removed.

He wasn't even sure what this was. Self - preservation dictated that he act in a proscribed manner. Say anything, do anything, no matter how outrageous, or ridiculous, no matter how untrue or sacrosanct, just make sure you walked away – even if your pride was beyond repair – you were still alive. The fact remained that in those situations the threatening parties wanted something, even if it was the blood of one wannabe Wiseguy. He had always lived, before.

“Death is just another challenge, to a warrior.” Juan said this quietly, but Michael jerked as if the old man was beside him. “To meet death is nothing more, nor less, then the final act of any man.”

“All just part of the plan,” Michael spat. There was real venom in his cynicism. It made him feel better.

Juan pointed through the fire. His finger stiffened. “Death, that is all. Your words mean nothing, when spoken in the face of your death.”

Juan's finger flew to Michael's left, and Michael, nervous, jerked toward where the old man pointed. An enormous blackness, a block of nothing, jerked, shivered then flew out into the night directly over Michael's head. Michael fell over, tensed then vomited in the dirt. When he recovered he lifted away from the ground, trailing long strings of saliva.

“That nothingness will come to you, like every other man and woman, like every blade of grass, every animal and snake. All things with awareness will feel that nothingness and know, it is real.”

Joey Villa left Michael then, and he was terribly sad to see him go. He had loved that man dearly. The anguish that rolled through him was a place he had never known existed inside himself. It was not heartfelt, or sentimental, it had nothing to do with cynicism, or even rationality. Instead, he felt physically connected to something indefinable, that was about to crush him from the inside out.

He bellowed, throwing his head back. The red moon was revealed.

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“Touch it,” he heard the old man, as if under water. “Touch the red moon, and feel the lips of your lost love, once more, before you die.”

Nothing flashed before his eyes, nothing came to him of redemptions or contrition’s, no confessions were made, offered, taken or received. He just had one thought. Father Rachel would meet his death well, so would Sarah Levy. There were people who did, who could, stand in the face of that block of nothingness and raise their faces in denial, even if no denial came. And they confounded the miserable universe.

One last time, he heard the old man. “I have no time to teach you. Come back if you wish.”

Then he was bellowing to the moon, shambling stiff - armed and tilted at an awful angle into the shack, tasting the frightening rush of young lips, crawling out of a dirt pit, and brandishing his will to the red moon, then he fell to knees, gave his thanks to the blackness that greeted him for the time of light, then he fell up to the red moon.

He made no deals with the stars, nor held them like diamonds in his hands. Instead, he exploded, and became the stars. Somewhere, there was water, beneath the moon. And he spread himself out in all his pieces because he loved to twinkle. The bright red of an ambulance lights, the rocking and jolting of firm hands, the soft sound of a woman’s voice. “Do you hear me? What’s your name, can you say your name?”

“No,” he couldn’t say his name. He was on the sea, millions of tiny sparkling pieces, raw and uncut. He lay there a long time, rolling, glistening, and thought he heard at a distance, something familiar, something desired, something he needed.

The soft sound of parting lips.

Gremlins



Everyone has wishes. Some are more common than others, some more outrageous, but everyone has them. But for Grace Stroman, twenty years a clerk at Green's Nursery, the line between wishes and dreams had collapsed long ago.

She knew all reality was just the flexible fabric of magic, hardened by negative emotions. If you think hard enough, even the bad things go away: like magic. All anyone really needed to do was believe, and so when the sprite stuck its tiny little head out between the delicate yellow pedals of the mums, in aisle five, she had been ready.

The last time she hadn't been prepared, but this time she was.

She slipped the old mayonnaise jar out of the basket she always carried when pricing medium sized flowering plants. Hesitating only a second, she scooped up the surprised fairy.

"Gotch'ya!" she cried happily. She did a little dance, at finally catching a magical being. She just knew they actually did exist.

"Put me down, you slut! You don't have any fucking idea what you just did. Are you stupid?"

Gracie, knew that fairies weren't always nice, not like in the books, but still she wasn't used to such talk from fairy tale folk. She looked around the nursery, not paying any attention to the protesting fairy, afraid someone had heard. She was the only person present, except for Mrs. Bight, who never spoke with lowly planting clerks. As she watched Mrs. Bight threw up her hands, tossing away her own basket, and disappeared behind the roses,

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which were doing very well this year. "It's already starting you numb . . ."

"Hey," Gracie warned, "that's about enough of that."

Gracie didn't hold with vulgar language, except when feeling frisky, which wasn't that often. And then she usually played a playful sprite in very skimpy, poesy clothes full of flowers in all the nasty places. She held the jar up, looking in on the

sprite. She hovered angrily in place, her legs crossed, as if sitting, hand on her chin. She looked like one of those smoldering runway models, in her white tee shirt and jeans, her long hair pin - straight and wispy. Gracie shrugged. Sprite fashion wasn't something she tried to understand. She carried the jar over to aisle seven, where there was no sign of Mrs.

Bight.

"See I told you, craterface. It's already started."

"Hush, trash mouth. You're mine now, and that's that."

Gracie could be very firm when there was a need to be.

Sometimes gremlins looked after fairies and nymphs, it was well known in the circle of people who truly understood magic. But Mrs. Bight not being there didn't mean anything. The woman stalked around the place, never wanting anyone help but Mr. Green, the owner. Served her right if she had to limp home. A group of roses caught Gracie's attention. In the long row of bright chartreuse blooms several wilted stalks were very noticeable. She checked them hurriedly; deciding that a dose of nitrogen would set them to rights. Then she hurried away with her prize to the back room of the nursery.

She found the lid to the jar, paused just before slamming it on. "Hey, how come you didn't fly away?"

The fairy shrugged her petite shoulders, "You got me, it's the rules." She hadn't been looking at Gracie, but talking into her chin with a spoiled frown, now she turned her head toward Gracie, a mean little smile on her face. "But now I'm yours, fatty. And I'm going to love what they do to those lumbering melons you call . . ."

Gracie slammed the lid on the jar. Her ears were burning.

She tucked the thing under her peasant blouse and hurried through

the store and up the stairs to the little apartment Mr. Green rented her.

She floated the jar in the toilet tank. It wasn't something she wanted to do, and the little Pixie looked horrified, but it was the safest place in the house. She apologized profusely, then ran back downstairs to the store.

It was a slow day, running on interminably, but Gracie hardly noticed. She had something waiting for her when she got home.

She could hardly contain her excitement. She was so distracted Mr. Green had to pinch her bottom several times to get her attention.

"Gracie," he said, running a rough hand on her shoulder, "you're a million miles away. I thought taking you away was my job?"

She had been mulling over those wilted roses, thinking of pretty pixie's casting spells of alluring beauty, when Green came up behind her. She didn't jump when he touched her, sliding a hand up beneath her loose blouse. They had played Mother Nature and Farmer Plow since her first year at Green's Nursery. She didn't like him, or dislike him; not really.

Sometimes she just wished he'd let her initiate the romance. She couldn't remember a time when she had wanted him around, or not around. She just didn't feel anything for him, or any of the other men she had played pixie with. She heard Green give a little grunt, and she cringed. Done already! His hands were gone. He hadn't even gotten his pants down this time. She turned wearily, already forming the smile she knew he wanted, and saw an empty aisle.

Damn fast, she thought gazing around the place. He was nowhere in sight. It was night and all the aisles were well lit from above. Three aisles over a woman with two children browsed the pansies. A tall man with the look of a landscaper was out in the tree section, mulling over a Japanese maple. He had a flat cart with several sapling firs and fichus. Gracie didn't see Green, and he never let a contractor get by. She scanned inside the store, but he wasn't at the cash register, and there was a line forming.

Hastily she wiped her hands off, ready to hurry inside, when she realized the aisle by the pansies was empty. She scanned for the woman and her children, because her cart was still there, loaded to the brim. But

they weren't anywhere to be seen. The landscaper had also gone, but his cart was still there, with the addition of the Japanese Maple. He put the tree on the cart, then wandered away, that had to be it. He could even have fallen into conversation with the woman and her children, and all four were off somewhere . . . doing whatever four people did when they got together.

She had to get to the customers who were ready to pay. She was so flustered by these strange events that she didn't look up as she hurried inside. When she did she stopped dead. No one was at the cash register. On the floor, in a neat row, were all their items. Each item entered her mind as if she were checking them out, not staring at them abandoned on the floor: one hand woven basket, two potted seedling parsley's, a bag of rose fertilizer, a birdhouse surrounded by seed packets.

It was that little pile of packets that did it. Those tiny cards spewed around as if thrown or ripped from someone's hand suddenly, violently. She backed - up to the large display window, bumping a squirrel feeder. It swung into motion with a loud clatter, and she rounded on it like she would a stalker.

What she saw held her motionless, as her hands blindly fumbled the feeder to a stop.

A police cruiser was prowling a parking lot filled with cars. In all the years she had worked at Greens, she had never seen the parking lot full. Gracie broke free of her own horrified fascination and dashed upstairs. She got the jar out of the toilet opening its lid. She had to turn away from it, holding it at arm length as curses flowed out with a putrid smell. This was not pixie magic; this was something else entirely.

"What's going on?" she cried at the fairy, who now looked a great deal like one of those people on a police reality show, gaunt and hardened. She perched on the lip of the jar, scratching between her legs lustily.

"Stupid cow, I take on the manner of the place where I live.

That's what happening. If you weren't such a stupid idiot, you'd have a fucking clue."

"Please," Gracie begged, "please stop cursing."

"What," the pixie said, tiny bugs jumping from her once shining hair, "what did I say? Didn't you hear me. I'm a toilet fairy now. I can't do a

fucking thing about it."

"But, but" Gracie couldn't understand how she could have forgotten, "the people. People are disappearing."

The fairy lifted off the jar and hovered right in Gracie's face. This close Gracie could see every wear line creasing the once attractive features, hardening them, and edging them in danger. Her lips cracked into a gloating smile.

"Gremlins," she said. Then to Gracie's bewildered look she added, "Not the television kind, asshole, real ones. Little green men, with great big hands and feet. They like to fix things when they're happy, break them when they're angry."

Gracie, oh Gracie, did you make them angry. I think you did." The pixie was tapping Gracie's forehead with one tiny fist.

But Gracie wasn't listening, she was thinking. "They're breaking people, but what do they do with them after they are broken?"

The fairy rolled her eyes, as if Gracie was a child who needed constant attention. "They throw them on the lost and found pile, until you either find them, or they get fixed."

"Fixed?"

The pixie tapped again on Gracie's forehead, speaking in time with the rhythm of her hand. "Gracie, Gracie, you're not listening. They're on the pile, and someone is waiting. Someone is waiting for you Gracie, Gracie, Gracie."

Someone is waiting. Someone is waiting.

She unlocked the front door, staring at the OPEN sign facing her. She didn't know why she would have locked the front door and turned the sign over to the closed side. She hardly noticed the two uniformed cops standing there. She had seen her reflection in the long glass of the front door. She was an ancient and penurious witch, with a sagging bosom and bare feet. Her mind seemed shattered.

"I don't know if you'd know anything about this, but there are a great many cars out in your parking lot."

Gracie shrugged her shoulders. It was something she liked to do, before. Before this night, she had liked the way shrugging her shoulders

tugged on her loose breasts. It was pleasantly suggestive. Now it just made her feel sloppy.

"I was asleep, upstairs," she intoned.

"Is the owner around," the woman cop stepped forward. "We have a few missing persons reports, which match up with some these vehicles."

Gracie shrugged again, the blood rising to her face at the feeling, "Upstairs," she lied. "I don't think he's in any shape to come down right now."

She tried to smile, but it was a wan thing, looking more shameful than hopeful. She could see that the woman cop wasn't buying it, but the man did, as was usually the case. He stepped forward. "We're sorry to have bothered you. Here's my card just in case."

She accepted his card, flipping it in her fingers. His home number was on the back. She smiled up at him, and nodded, hoping that she looked just like Mother Nature. "I have to get back, you know."

"Of course," the woman pushed forward, "but we should let you know that at 9 o'clock tomorrow night we'll be investigating several missing persons. Unless we were to see you at the station tomorrow . . ."

"Yes," the man moved up, "that would be a great help. We'll meet, say at five, and clear up this whole thing by eight," he winked at Gracie.

She winked back, then closed the door firmly. "We'll be waiting." The woman cop said, as the pair moved away to their cruiser. Grace turned to rush upstairs and listen from the window in her bedroom. She stopped for one second, throwing her hands to her head as if hearing a loud noise. The farthest display racks were gone. Nothing else, just the racks that used to hold the packets of seeds. She turned toward the aisles of tables with the flowering plants. Aisle two, lily's and the like, was an empty area, wider than the rest. She turned back, and the entire check out was gone.

That's how they do it, her harried mind laughed insanely, when you're not looking.

She careened up the stairs knocking over the pots she had put there for display; they crashed behind her one after another.

She burst into the bathroom like a sumo; feet planted wide, hands out. She scanned for the fairy but couldn't find her. She turned around and moved through her almost empty apartment, a place once packed

with junk. The tiny galley kitchen was spotless, though it had never been before. She turned in place and the kitchen table disappeared. She ran for the phone, not knowing whom she'd call, but needing that lifeline to the outside world, not wanting to be trapped alone in this disappearing world. But there was only a bright white square on the wall, where it had been. When she turned around the sink was missing from the counter.

She backed out of the room, into the empty space that has been her living room since she was twenty, almost twenty years. She didn't want to, but she turned in place, facing the now door - less bathroom. The place was stripped clean, all except for the toilet. The window above the commode flashed with a red light.

The cop car was still there.

There was something not right about that silently flickering of red. She didn't like how abandoned it looked, how lonely.

Slowly, her feet dragging, she approached the window. She leaned into the red light, peering down. The cruiser was parked at an angle, the doors thrown wide, as if someone had just been crouching there, ready to shoot at an armed suspect. She could see a pistol on the ground beside the driver's side door.

Numb, she peered across the sea of cars to the liquor store across the way. Its lights were blazing, and she could see into its long aisles. Everything seemed fine, Mrs. Price, the randy little tart who owned the place with her aging husband was behind the counter talking to a guy (as per usual) some people were browsing the aisles. One guy with a backpack, looking down at his feet, then stumbling, and disappearing.

Gracie looked away. Tears falling freely from her eyes, wondering how she had gotten into this mess, how she could have let this happen. Her head snapped back up, terrified that she had forgotten. The liquor store was empty. The lights still blazed brightly, illuminating the empty aisles. Then she noticed a few empty spaces in the parking lot and realized with a tremendous bodily jolt that the flashing light was gone.

This time it was very hard to look down. It seemed almost impossible, that her mind had disconnected from her body, and neither was speaking to the other. But she did look down, onto an almost empty parking lot.

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This time when she backed away the tank lid for the toilet came with her. She looked down at it uncomprehendingly, not know why she was holding it. The fairy lifted out of the open tank and Gracie was jolted when the toilet flushed by itself. The pixie hovered in place, blushing. Gracie didn't understand, almost smiled at the tiny blushing girl with wings, then the pixie tweaked her little nose and made a pretty little sour face.

Grace looked down at herself. The tank lid crashed to the floor, where it broke into a several large chunks, but Gracie hadn't noticed. She had almost fainted at the sight of what she done to her wrap - around peasant skirt.

She crashed into the wall of the living room, nearly catatonic. Her body slid down the wall, leaving an awful smelling streak behind her. The fairy hovered into Grace's fluttering vision. She came close, examining Grace carefully, then backed away. In her wracked mind, still so hopeful, Grace had a slow thought. It rolled around there like a soft ball of something rotten.

"I release you," she moaned.

The pixie, now looking like a street urchin, or child prostitute, perched on one enormous, mound of flesh. She walked up to Grace's face, "Not that easy slut. I told you not to fuck with me. Now you own me, 'til death do us part."

Grace wasn't at all surprised to notice that her top was now gone, but she moaned all the same. It had once been her best peasant blouse.

"How," Grace managed, though her mind was now skirting close to complete failure. She could no longer feel her hands and feet. The feeling of wanting to sleep was overwhelming her, forcing her eyes closed, then open again.

Legions of green men were streaming through the doorways all around her. Their tiny face were handsome men's faces, with pointy goatees on their chins. They had perfectly formed hands and feet, twice what had to be normal size for such small creatures. Several of them dragged ponderous penises' shoved back through their legs. The phalluses had enormous mushroom heads on them, thick with veins. Grace was exhausted, but the sight of those phalluses brought a choke of

surprise from her.

"I told you they had big hands and feet," the fairy giggled. "You forgot the rest."

Grace tried to move, as they began squirming beneath her, but her energy reserves were gone. She felt their hands everywhere, strong, precise hands, that felt good on her burning flesh, but that she knew were taking her away. They were going to break her, like they had broken everything else.

"I can't stop them," the pixie hovered close over her, "it's their job. Nothing personal, really."

Grace was propelled on a living stretcher, down the stairs, and out through an empty Green's Nursery. Outside the parking lot was empty, and the liquor store, but the place was quickly filling with tiny green men. At the far side of the lot a dust storm had kicked up. It wasn't like any wind Grace had ever seen, except maybe in her fantasies. A whirling vortex of gold flakes, twinkling against a perfectly clear night sky.

"Fairy dust," the pixie said, with a hard smile, "Not something you'd want to overdose on."

"So beautiful," Grace husked, as she was lowered to the pavement.

"This isn't the infinitesimal amount of good luck on the wings of butterflies," she said. "This is the real deal, fatso. This is the larder, the storehouse, and the thing that keeps the world going. No giggles without this stuff, no carnival fun, no love, no happiness, nothing. This is the stuff dreams are made of.

You know what I mean, since you've probably picked it from the corners of your eyes plenty of times. But like the cliché goes, too much of a good thing. blah, blah, blah."

"It's real," the pixie yelled, "As real as your nips."

Grace couldn't help her reaction. It was natural. The sheer joy coming off that tornado of gold flakes was pounding her with happiness. Her entire body shuddered with a need to immolate herself, bath in its glittering grains, and immerse herself away from all things sad and troublesome. A lifetime of sad denials, over - rationalizations, the pathetic search for the magic pill, or moment, or man that would lift her

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above the common crowd. It was all gone.

She wept with joy and found she couldn't stop.

It seemed she cried a long time, an eternity, before the little green man climbed up between her legs. She twitched around, trying not to look directly at him, seeing in the distance a great pile. It didn't make sense at first, but then she realized what exactly it was. It was every item ever lost, broken, thrown away, or left useless in the world. It rose to the sky in a mountainous bundle, the bottom massed into one solid mass from the weight of the peak. Grace tried not to look but couldn't help it. She was only human, and that meant she was drawn to such as that pile, completely denigrated, the trash of humanity, with horrified fascination. It was much greater than the vortex of gold.

The pixie still sat on her chest but was watching what the little green man was doing to her. The legions gathered around her, moving up close to look at her. if ready to lift her again.

Some began touching her, as the top of the mountain, she noticed, was ragged. She began to make out things, even from this distance, a car bumper, a flagpole, even the roof of a house. She saw a child's rag puppet dangling from a pole, blowing in a breeze. Then she realized the pole was an arm. The arm of a person, bent at a horrible angle.

With stark realization, she screamed: "No!"

"You can't steal magic, Grace," the pixie said. "You should know that by now. You should know that what you wish for, almost always come true. And gremlins can only fix what's broken."

Grace was screaming so loud she hardly heard the Faery. Or the snapping sounds.

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