

I/Tulpa:

Onuk Bay

A Starstruck story By

Ion Light

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If you can have a crossover fiction to your own fiction, this would be it. “Starstruck” by John Erik Ege, was something I had written as an adolescent and ‘worked’ on ‘off and on’ for thirty plus years. ‘Starstruck’ completely ‘pg.’ Onuk Bay is the adult version. If you haven’t associated sex with Ion Light, and you’re reading one of mine for time, there is sex here. Lots of sex. Gratuitous sex. So much meaningless sex that it has become meaningful. ‘We’ the one writing these stories hold strongly to the attitude of ‘make love not war.’ We strongly believe, increase affection in society and there will be a corresponding decrease in conflict. Eventually. We are so separated from affection it may take a while before people believe it. Like free money. People don’t yet believe in a Universal Basic Income, but it’s coming. And when it does, we are going to have to come up with a new paradigm for relating to others. The measure of a man can no longer be what he earns. It truth, it never should have been. Worth should not be about productivity. Just look at how big the Universe is, how much of it is unused; do you default to the Universe is stupid because it has so much wasted resources? When equality is absolute, relationships as we know them will fail because the last two hundred years of relationship have not been based on love, but on need, and on balance. Few people have touched true love. Men still want to be the rescuers and the providers. Women still want men who earn at the least as much as they are better; they rarely choose partners of men who make less than or earn nothing. IF we are absolutely equal what will bring us together? Sex? Men want sex, women do to, but the number of men wanting ‘hookups’ and the number of women wanting ‘hookups’ is not equal. Men want to be needed. Their relationships are predicated on that basic assumption and that must change. Women want to be needed, too. It seems we arrive at those needs in fundamentally different ways. We don’t. That is the illusion of our present paradigm. I share this because I think a part of my subconscious is actually deliberating over this; again, if you’re not familiar with my work, almost all of these stories are the product of a version of ‘active imagination’ in which the story is experienced and transcribed, more than labored over.

I assure you, there will be grammatical errors. I apologize in advance. I am working on doing better. I have marginally improved. Feel free to email me any corrections or complaints. I am simply a modest fan, who finds himself caught up in the whirlwinds of imagination on a daily basis.

Sincerely

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Chapter 1

“Imagine waking from a dream that was your entire life. Imagine dying and having a life review, where you experience your life in a flash instance, like watching a movie on fast forwards, and you know it's on fast forwards, but at the same time, it feels real time, with all the emotions and sensations, and more. You have access to the sensations and feelings of all of the people you affected. Now imagine sorting all of that, but having the urgency of making a decision. A life or death decision. A beacon flashed in my mind, numbers counting down. Eyes open, I could not see this light. Eye closed, I was bathed in this brilliant blue light of warmth, pulsating, counting down. In this dream I had a female companion who visited me, comforted me, and participated in my dreams. There was love. This light was love. I remember being overwhelmed with hunger and gorging myself until I fell asleep, and in that lonely sleep, I was comforted again by this internal companion, a ghostly lover if you will... The constant pulsating beacon means something. It reminds me of a heartbeat. Is this the womb of wombs?” These were the recording of an unlikely journal entry, a sojourner who woke, clinging desperately to the dream. His name, Jon Harister, a man of many dreams, as if the book James Thurber's chronicles of Walter Mitty were about him.

Jon became aware of another voice. A female voice, a young voice, perhaps an adolescent.

“Can any of you hear me? This is important. You need to wake up. Can anyone hear me? Are you sure anyone can hear us?”

“Those with ears will hear, and those with eyes will see. They only need be able to listen and observe.”

The world shook. It was an odd sensation, not like an earthquake, but like a ship colliding with another ship.

“This maneuver is unorthodox.”

“Keep repeating my message.”

“Hey, stop that!” This voice was older, male, and though Jon didn't understand why he identified the voice as human, thirty something, he didn't doubt the information.

“You have to get out of here. Use your Quantum Drive.”

“I'm trying to get some sleep here. You're ruining my good mood.”

“Please, you’ve got to leave.” This voice was, emotional, passionate...

“Hello. Are you speaking to me in Russian?”

“No, I’m using G-Common, but you might be hearing me in Russian. Are you Russian?”

“Yes. I’m from Earth, Moscow. Are you a prisoner, too?”

“What do you mean by prisoner?”

“I got caught stealing something, and the next thing I know this UFO grabbed me up, and for being in possession of stolen property, I’ve been told that I must pay my debt to society by piloting this scout ship.”

“Really? And to think, I volunteered for this”

“My name is Alexander.”

“Would you two keep it down!?” This voice belonged to something alien. Like a human with an octopus head. Jon rose from the bed, twirling, trying to understand where he was.

“Alexander, I’m Enedelia. Look, we’re running out of time. Can you access your Quantum Drive?”

“Yes. It’s fully charged.”

Information about the Quantum Drive was available to him. Jon understood everything about it. He did not understand how he had such information in his head. It was like in a dream where you have knowledge about the way things are to be and you just go along with it because you know, even though part of you knows you don’t know.

“You have to leave now. This place is about to be irradiated.” Jon realized the pulsing of the light was delivering information. Numbers. Numbers that decreased with each beat. “Go to Indigo station and I’ll meet you there.”

“Indigo station is locked out. I have to do a blind jump.”

Jon realized he had access to one ‘viable’ space coordinates, but they were locked out. The coordinates were labeled Indigo. Next to the coordinates was a timer. It, too, was counting down. After three months, these coordinates would be useless due to the continued expansion of space-time. Even space-time had a shelf life. Quantum jumping was the equivalent of trying to dive into the same river twice. Sort of. One could never dive into the same river twice. You might jump from the same perch of shore, but the water you swam through would be gone.

‘Blind jump’ in reference to Quantum Jumping was pushing your ship through a higher dimension, taking you somewhere above or out of the ‘universe’ proper, only to emerge back

into it at some random other point. It was probably not random. No one understood the quantum jumping technology as it was given to them by a much older, and extinct race of beings. The technology hadn't been improved upon in a billion years. Yes, a billion. Jon read that twice. Humans hadn't even been around a million years. Dinosaurs lived for hundreds of millions of years. The creators of this tech were older than dinosaurs.

“Actually, so do you,” Alexander continued. “The Indigo station’s coordinates won’t be unlocked until you have met the criteria for returning, such as discovering a new system and mapping it out.”

Jon found a list of conditions necessary to have the Indigo coordinates unlocked. “Oh, that sucks.”

“Just jump. We’ll try and meet back at Indigo station. My name is Enedelia Garcia.”

“I agree,” came a voice next to him. Jon nearly jumped out of his skin, turning to her. He recognized her. The woman of his dreams. The woman he had summoned out of space-time to help heal his loneliness. Some referred to her as a Tulpa. Some referred to her as a Soul-bound. People with limited coping skills referred to her as a demon, or a Jinn. Napoleon Hill, author of ‘Think and Grow Rich,’ would refer to her as an ‘invisible counselor. Carl Jung would refer to her as the embodiment of anima, his goddess, his personal guardian and ultimate feminine archetype providing access to the collective unconscious. She was a Dakini Priestess, a healer, a source of inspiration, joy, and pure love, and she called herself Loxy Isadora Bliss. “We should leave. Now.”

“How?” Jon said. He didn’t care if this was a dream or a wonderland unfolding under a meditative state. ‘Never question the dream when you’re in it,’ Carl Jung had written. Basically, you go with it until you learn what your subconscious wants you to learn.

How was suddenly available to him. A slow blink caused him to realize the umbilical cord to his ‘bioship’ had been severed. It was as if he were a Christmas light that had pulled free from the chain of lights. The ship was part plant, part animal, and resembled a pinecone. It made a noise, a whimper of uncertainty. It was a lumbering, giant of a whale that had yet learned to breathe freedom.

Loxy grabbed at Jon’s hand to lead him to the pilot chair. Her hand passed through him. She was a hologram slash hallucination. He could sense her in every aspect, but she had no substance. She forced herself to be calm and took hold of his hand in a deliberate, conscientious

way and led him to the flight deck. There was enough physical sensation, hallucinated or not, that he was able to make himself go with her. The pilot chair was like a lounge chair that fit the focus of a parabola that was the back wall of the ship. He sat. He had the realization that he hadn't needed to be in the seat to direct his ship to jump. In fact, the ship didn't have any manual controls. All 'superior' controls were in Jon's head. The ship could steer itself in any direction, the same way as a horse without a rider might, but left to its own devices, it would lounge lazily in the orbit of a star grazing on sunlight.

Pushing the button to engage in a jump wasn't like pushing a button, unless that button was a virtual button. It was more like lifting a finger. It was not just a thought, 'raise your finger.' No one thinks about raising a finger. One just raises a finger. Only, Jon had never done this and so, doing it for the first time took effort. There was knowledge he could do it. He just had to do it. There was fear attached to doing this. Fear because this would be a blind jump and he could theoretically end up anywhere in space-time. He was most like to land within the galaxy he presently resided in. He was most likely going to land back in space-time in empty space. There's a lot of empty space. One could shoot a star size object through the galaxy and not a hit a single thing. One could shoot a galaxy through a galaxy and not a single star would hit. Still, there was a chance that he could emerge inside a star or planet, or too close to a black hole, and in the words of Han Solo, not verbatim: 'that would end your trip real quick.'

The beacon counting down informed him that anywhere other than here was likely going to be a better option. Loxy sat next to him and took his hand. It was a delicate thing for him to respond by squeezing her hand without pushing through the boundary that he recognized as her. It had taken years of working with his tulpa to develop this finesse, and yet, here he was learning her all over, because this Loxy was less Tulpa self-induced hallucination and more computer generated hologram.

"I am with you," Loxy said.

"I am sorry," Jon said.

"That I am with you?!" Loxy said, a little irritated.

"No! I love that you're with me," Jon said. "I am sorry that I am putting you in harm's way."

"You didn't do this to us," Loxy said.

Jon blinked. The fullness of the memory was horrifying. At the same, the explanation brought with some relief. Alien abductions are real. There were multiple factions abducting humans for a variety of purposes. His abductions had started as a child. The first group were the humans who had advance technology given to them or stolen from aliens. He had concerns about their program and intent, but he had insufficient information on them to understand if they were a force for good or bad. There were reptilians, who had found him and made clones of him, for purposes he didn't know. A deeper part of him suggested they originated on Earth during the time of the dinosaurs; which was interesting, because if that were true, they would have had tech to stop the asteroid collision that wiped out their kind and they didn't. Why? There was no end to that speculation. Then there were the gray hybrids that abducted him for the purpose of procreation. Prior to his present circumstance, it was his belief that he was regularly visited by one of three hybrids; presently, all of his memories were available and he could clearly see, he was the subject of interest to all three of the above groups of aliens. More directly present, he had been discovered by an inter-dimensional species that had created a flash clone and had provided it to Biocorp, a biotech-spaceship corporation headquartered at Indigo Station. He was unsure of why, but he suspected this newcomer to his abductions was simply interested in the fact that everyone else was interested in him. Whatever their interest, it was short lived, or, they couldn't keep the clone in their dimension, and so they put him in the care of Biocorp to help keep track of him. After all, it's hard to return a fully matured clone back to his environment of origin when the original is still there.

“Jon?” Loxy asked.

Decisions time: continue mapping out the knowledge of the dream, or go deeper down the rabbit hole. Jon activated the jump drive. It was the equivalent of igniting the engines on a Saturn Five rocket. There was vibration. There was the sense of being thrust upwards. He closed his eyes and was suddenly overwhelmed with vertigo of spinning lights. It was like being in a dark tunnel and distant lights were illuminating the sparkles in the granite in his immediate area. There was thrust for one minute, ten seconds. Then it stopped, precisely. There was silence. There was white light. The white light was so beautiful and intense he couldn't open his real eyes. He couldn't speak. His heart was the only sound he could hear. One heartbeat. Two heart beats. Three...

Then there was the sensation of falling. There was falling for one minute, ten seconds. Again, precisely. Then there was quiet. Things felt normal. Things looked normal. He was in the main cabin of his ship sitting with Loxy. There was a noise, like a growing storm. His eyes closed, he could see the see planet. Altitude, one hundred thousand feet, falling. They were falling. He felt the rush of air around him. He felt the exterior of the ship heating up and had to disconnect from that sensation. He aimed the nose of the ship skyward, thrusting with the equivalent of modern day rockets. At best, he slowed their descent. They fell through clouds, cool air moisture tickled the exterior skin. They crashed into an ocean. Their descent continued, slowed, stopped. The rockets extinguished. Water jets pushed them up. They rose, the nose of the ship surfaced like a dog treading water. They moved towards a nearby landmass, adding enough pressure to the jets they could rise up and ride the waves as far inland as they could. They came to rest in the shallows of a beach.

The ship made a questioning sound.

“Um, yeah, I think we’re alright,” Jon said. “Are you alright?”

A computer system began listing systems that were damaged and the time it would take to heal. While accessing the information, he was aware that Loxy could share this particular spectrum of his ship interface.

“Oh, look at this,” Loxy said. “This is uncharted territory. We need only map out the entire system, but this planet has a compatible atmosphere, and life as we know it. We’ve unlocked Indigo Station.”

“Let me guess,” Jon said. “We were drafted to map the galaxy and provide good coordinates so the powers that be can establish colonies and increase resources?”

“That’s my understanding,” Loxy said. “Did you get anything else from their programming tapes?”

“At the moment, I am struggling to remember stuff not from origin,” Jon said.

“It will come to you,” Loxy said. “My understanding is the more you pilot, the stronger the neural pathways that were provided to be a pilot will become.”

“Do we want to be a pilot?” Jon said.

“It’s your most frequent dream,” Loxy pointed out.

“Would you prefer to pilot?” Jon asked.

“I’d rather just be your copilot,” Loxy said.

“Let me start over,” Jon said, realizing he was failing to communicate his tangent. “This place might be nice. We’re alive. We could just build a home here.” Blind jumping was dangerous. They had nearly died in this, their first jump.

“We could,” Loxy said. “But if we don’t go back to Indigo Station at least once a year, the ship will die.”

“That sucks,” Jon said. “It’s bio-engineered to die if we don’t cooperate with the program?”

“Yeah,” Loxy said.

There was an elongated whimper that rolled through the ship. Jon looked to Loxy. They decided together.

“Alright, so, we’re pilots,” Jon said. “Does this ship have a computer?”

“Yeah,” Loxy said. “I am the interface.”

“You’re the interface?” Jon said. “But you’re in my head.”

“I was in your head. Technically, I am still in your head, but the primary bulk of my personality was shifted into the AI system of the ship,” Loxy said.

“Why the hell would they do that?” Jon asked.

“I suspect it was to facilitate communicating between you and the ship and you in the AI. There is the ship, there is you, and there is the AI. The metaphor for the trinity is not lost on me. Animal you, intellect you, spirit you. Oh! I am spirit you. Nice. Anyway, you and I have an established neural net pattern with established communication protocols, and so your receptivity to me was solid. Learning to interact with an AI through neural implants takes time and practice,” Loxy said. “Also, and likely given what we presently know of our abductors, in the event that you decided not to be a pilot, I might have been an incentive to keep you flying. I die when the ship dies.”

“You failed to mention that just earlier,” Jon said.

“Jon, being a pilot is dangerous. Especially a sojourner whose primary purpose is to map out good space-time coordinates,” Loxy said. “If at any time you decide it is too much, I will support you not being a pilot. My love for you will never change. I want what’s best for your long term wellbeing.”

Jon hugged her. “I am grateful the one constant in all my universes is you,” Jon said. “Thank you, Loxy.”

“Of course,” Loxy said. She seemed to focus on something. “I may be able to help facilitate repairs, but it will require I go into a sleep mode. Are you okay?”

“Um,” Jon said. “Yeah. Do what you need to do. I will explore.”

“Be safe,” Loxy said, and kissed him.

Chapter 2

The space-ship was a home, much bigger than RV. Jon found it eerie exploring it. He was aware that he was exploring it for the first time, and yet, it felt as if he had always been here. And technically, it wasn't the 'first time.' He had been on the ship for approximately two weeks, living in a trance while the nanites in his bloodstream updated his body brain to be a pilot, integrating his nervous system with that of the ship. The ship itself had the comparable brain size of a horse, but much of it was spread out throughout the ship accumulating in nodes, in a way, making it more comparable to a cephalopod. The more he thought about it, it was unlike any animal comparison. It was smarter than a horse or octopus. It was capable of astounding computations to keep itself and its occupants alive, but it was not human. The brain was not limited to one central location, but was spread through the entirety of it was ship. All the features of the ship, the furniture, had a life like feel to them, as if they were grown. The inner surfaces responded to touch. The walls, ceiling, and floor were a continuous unfolding of hexagonal shapes, as if her were in a hive, or the inner buddings of a plant waiting to unfold. There was texture like a tight celled quilt. His quarters contained a bed, a personal toilet, and lavatory with toiletries and toothbrush. He felt disappointment seeing himself in the mirror.

“Couldn't they have cloned me younger?” he asked no one.

There were storage spaces built into the walls and ceilings, part of the hexagons. Opening a space caused the hexagon to light and it rose from the floor, or extracted from the wall, or descended from the ceiling. Bigger compartments came away with more hexagons. Illuminated hexagons lit the interior of the ship. There were two empty rooms, as if there purpose had yet to be determined. There were long, flat cavities below the main deck, and above the main deck, which seemed to be intended for storage, which tapered from wide to narrow. The flight deck was the most spacious room, followed by the mess hall kitchen. The floor was elongated, and it could open, like eyelids pulling apart, to reveal an illuminated pool of water. It was big enough swim in, and it offered a flowing current to swim against. The water was super saturated with saline making it possible to just float in, and the composition of the salts was perfectly attuned to caring for human skin. Even though the salt contents of the water was comparable to the Dead Sea, there was life in the water. The ones he noticed were like minnows darting about. His mind

didn't want to linger on the ones he couldn't easily see, even though they weren't harmful to humans. They were just alien.

The nose of the ship was the main entrance and exit, with an airlock between it and the inner ship. The nose of the ship opened like a mouth, the floor resembled a tongue in appearance and feel; a tongue that rolled in a perfect 'O,' making a tunnel to aid in air-locking them to another ship or station airlock. This middle space of the airlock was a clean room, including a shower and toilet. Jon walked his habitat, having picked up a snack from the galley. He was halfway through a sealed container of Iriko, a small, minnow size fish that was dried and often put in soup, but could be eaten like chips, when he made the mental connection to the minnows in the galley pool. On realizing what he was eating, mindlessly, he rushed to the toilet to vomit. Before he arrived, he had recovered and didn't feel the urge to be sick. This was not his normal diet, but he had been eating it since he had arrived on the ship. He decided he couldn't eat more, but he couldn't justify throwing it away. He took it back to the galley and stowed it with the other bags of supply.

He searched the kitchen for anything else. He got water from a tap, rinsed his mouth, and spit into the sink. He found packages of freeze dried vegetables and fruits that were not recognizable, but were likely human safe. He doubted biocorp engineers wanted to purposely kill their pilots. Then again, comfort was minimized. The ship was comfortable enough that it wouldn't drive their pilots to quit. Then again, it was uncomfortable enough to encourage the pilots to be productive in their service. The more you map, the more you earn. There were smart probes below deck, basically just baseball size orbs that were essentially buoys, but could collect and send data. And complain. They were no true AI, but their simulated intelligence was sophisticated enough to fool a human into thinking they were sentient. There was a port to launch them. There was a giant egg shaped object in a crate. He knew instantly what it was, but was more curious about the flavor of the knowledge, because he had never seen it before. It was the color of a sour tart, and the rough texture to match. The egg carried with it all the basic ingredients for introducing life to a planet. On discovering a planet that met the criteria, the egg was to be delivered, activated, and within a thousand years, there was sufficient biomass to start a basic terraforming project. Finding a suitable planet and deploying the egg resulted in the highest return in compensation to a pilot, provided that the implantation of life took hold. It was an investment, not a quick return.

Jon closed his eyes. He could see outside the ship. It was day, but felt like twilight. The sun for this planet was a red dwarf, or a class M star. He tried to access a star map, but unfortunately, he needed more intel, which would require a stay in orbit so he could map out the local stellar group. Only then would the computer banks be able to determine where they were, if it was indeed possible to identify known stellar objects. Ship sensor confirmed the air was breathable. The ocean they were in was sufficiently identical to earth that he could taste it and not discern a difference.

He passed through the airlocks and into the nose of the ship. He coaxed the mouth to open. It opened with the lower edge remaining above the water line. The air was cool. It smelled fresh, with a hint of ozone, as if had it rained recently. There were birds soaring in the breeze. He proceeded out into the water. His shoe sank further into the sand and when he finally extracted his foot, the shoe was gone. He frowned, but didn't curse. He sat on the open deck of the ship and removed his sock. He removed the other shoe and sock and then reached down to dig out the other. He fell in. He gave up finding the shoe and stood. In the water he felt fine, but outside, the chilled air highlighted the fact he was wet. He made his way towards the beach.

The beach sloped gently up. The sand crunched beneath his feet, but felt nice. In the distance was a forest, and beyond that two mountain ranges that moved in either direction with an opening where one might proceed into a valley. The entirety of it suggested femininity. It felt inviting. It was not home, but it felt inviting. A part of his brain said, that's exactly what a fly is thinking before the Venus flytrap closes. He shook that off, and proceeded further up the beach.

He came to the top of the rise, and looked down the hill. A sense of dread fell over him. He had to focus on it to make sense of it all, and it took incredible effort not to run back to the ship. There was a dais, perhaps marble, where a person was chained. Immediately surrounding the dais was a mote. Outside the mote were five pillars. Just beyond the pillars was a wall, approximately knee high. Sea water was encroaching on the wall, and would eventually rise above and fill the entirety of it, which would put the dais underwater. The person chained to the dais would drown, assuming they weren't already dead. Jon forced himself to breathe.

"Loxy?" Jon asked.

No answer came.

“Loxy!” Jon practically shouted in his head. He could close his eyes and see with his ship. They had arrived on the high side of the beach. Further down the cove, gentle waves carried over and was slowly filling the area behind the rise.

“Oh, there you are,” Loxy said. Her voice was inside his head.

“So, you can hear me,” Jon said.

“I can,” Loxy said.

“Can you see what I see?” Jon asked.

“I can access all your senses...” Loxy said. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Jon asked.

“We should probably leave,” Loxy said.

“You think?” Jon asked. Still he didn’t move.

“I recommend coming back to the ship,” Loxy said.

“You don’t think I should try and help that person?” Jon asked.

“I would,” Loxy said.

“Then, that’s what I am going to do,” Jon said.

“Jon, we don’t know the situation. What if this person is a criminal?” Loxy asked.

“I am not in favor of capital punishment,” Jon said.

“Me neither,” Loxy said.

“And this is more than that, isn’t it?” Jon asked. “This is torture! Killing someone is one thing, but making an elaborate death machine, that’s just, well, who the hell does that?”

“The Joker, the Penguin, the Riddler, Posion Ivy,” Loxy said.

“Okay, in essence, bad guys,” Jon said.

“In essence,” Loxy agreed.

“Alright, so, I am going to go closer,” Jon said.

“I believe it’s the right thing to do, but I must admit, I am feeling fear,” Loxy said.

“That’s new,” Jon said.

“That is new. Wow. I don’t like this,” Loxy said. “I am worried for your safety.”

“Me, too,” Jon said. “I don’t see anyone in the area. Do you?”

“I do not,” Loxy said.

“Oh, well, see, these bad guys are just as stupid as the bad guys you mentioned. Setting a trap and walking away, just plain stupid,” Jon said.

Jon drew closer to the trap. He could now discern the person was female. Her hair was red. Her face was an explosion of freckles. Her ears were pointed like elves. She wore a white, fairy princess dress. Her wrists, ankles, and neck were shackled into place against the dais. He had to actively resist a sexual impulse, and was mad at himself for feeling lust towards someone who was vulnerable. On each of the pillars there was a bowl. One held water, one held sand, one held an oil lamp, which burned with a low flame, one bowl was empty, and one held metal.

“Please tell me this is not some moronic religious ritual,” Jon said.

“I cannot,” Loxy said.

“Okay, so, now I am not as sure I was previously,” Jon said.

“Me neither,” Loxy said.

“If we do nothing, she will die,” Jon said.

“Based on the rate of incoming water, I suspect she has approximately thirty five minutes,” Loxy said.

“So, not enough time to go find the nearest village and ask what the fuck?” Jon asked.

“No,” Loxy said.

“Alright,” Jon said, biting his thumb. “I am going to commit.”

“Okay,” Loxy said.

“You’re not going to talk me out of it?” Jon asked.

“I don’t have enough information,” Loxy said. “Knowing what I know, if I were physically present, I would rescue her myself.”

“Okay, then, we’re on the same page, and we’re committed,” Jon said.

He stepped into the mote and proceeded towards the dais. Something bit his ankle and he hurried towards the dais, cursing, and climbed up. He looked down and saw the snakes in the water.

“Fuck,” Jon said. “That hurt.”

“Come back to the ship, now,” Loxy said.

“We’re committed,” Jon said.

He looked to the woman. She was breathing. She did not wake when he shook her or call out. Fortunately, the manacles didn’t require a key. They unlocked easily. He freed her neck and limbs and drew her to the side of the dais. Cursing, he jumped back into the mote, and dragged the woman off the dais and made his way quickly out of the mote. It was awkward, as he had to

lay her over the outer wall, which dropped her inelegantly on the other side. He was bitten three more times before he was out of the snake pit. He stumbled and went to his knees. He heard Loxy encouraging him to hurry back.

He gathered the woman back into his arms staggered to his feet. The woman was surprisingly light, which helped a great deal. He made it down the beach, back into the water, and over to the ship, where he gently placed her inside the mouth. The tongue had emerged to help catch her, and drew her in. The ships tongue gently moved her away from the door. His eyesight was blurry. He was sweating profusely. It took effort to climb in. He literally rolled into the ship and as soon as he was in, the mouth closed. Jon laid there, looking up at the ceiling. Loxy was now in his vision, but she looked far away, as if she were at the far end of the tunnel.

“Jon, you must walk to your room. I can’t help you here,” Loxy said. “Get up, Jon.”

Chapter 3

The woman woke. It took effort to get up, but she sat up, saw Jon, and pushed herself away from him, coming up hard against the wall. She blinked at Loxy.

“You can see me?” Loxy asked.

The woman spoke, but Loxy didn’t understand.

“Look, I need your help,” Loxy said. “Please. I need to lift him.” She demonstrated lift. “Lift.” Loxy pointed. “I need him in there. Help me.”

The woman nodded. She came closer to Jon, touched his forehead. She traced his body with her hands. She lingered on his forehead, his neck, and his wrists. She continued to speak in the foreign language.

“I know he must look strange to you,” Loxy said. “But I need him in here...”

The woman found the bite marks on his ankles. “Kígyó!”

“Snake. Yes. Bring him,” Loxy said.

The woman began to cry, prostrating herself, laying her head on his chest.

“No, no, don’t cry,” Loxy said. “Get him to the bed and I can help him. Please. He saved your life. Help me save his.”

“Ki,” she said, motioning for Loxy to be quiet, or to be calm. She sat up on her knees, wiping her face. She spoke something, and used sign. She said ‘ki’ again, and drew a line from Jon’ neck up into the air, circling, and back to his neck.

“I don’t understand,” Loxy said.

The woman drew another circle in the air, and then she committed to her purpose. She opened her mouth, revealing teeth similar to vampire teeth.

“Fuck,” Loxy said. She retreated even though she was not in danger.

The woman went down on Jon’s neck.

“No no no,” Loxy said. But there was nothing she could do but watch.

The woman’s vitality blossomed before Loxy’s eyes. Her hair became redder. Her freckles became more pronounced. Her skin became whiter. An aura flashed into being.

“Please, don’t kill him,” Loxy said.

The woman continued to drink. Loxy became aware that Jon’s biometrics were stabilizing. She also became aware of the woman’s body. As she took in his blood, she also

received his nanites. She now had telemetry about the vampire elf. Jon's blood entered her through her upper two teeth and it was returned via the lower teeth. She used her liver to filter out the poisons. When she was finished, she rubbed her saliva over the puncture wounds in his neck and they healed before Loxy's eyes. It was as if he had never been bitten.

"Ki-omm," the woman said, and collapsed.

Jon roused. He struggled to sit up.

"OMG, I don't feel so good," Jon said. He looked to Loxy. "Oh, sweet. I guess they're not deadly."

"Yeah, they are," Loxy said. "Can you get her to your bed?"

"Will it even work for her?" Jon asked.

"Actually," Loxy said.

Jon forced himself up. It took effort to pick the woman up without falling, which was different from earlier, but he explained it away as adrenalin from the initial rescue, accompanied by weakness from the poison. He laid her on his bed, straightened her limbs. His sexual impulse towards her was even greater than it had been when she was chained to the dais. His hands trembled. He was drawn closer to her lips, wanting to kiss her, and noticed red. He touched the side of her lip and confirmed blood.

"Oh, she's bleeding," Jon said, wiping her mouth with the sheet.

"Um, that's probably yours," Loxy said.

"Mine what?" Jon asked.

"Blood," Loxy said.

"Why would she have my blood on her mouth?" Jon asked. "Oh, did she suck the poison out?"

"Yeah, sort of," Loxy said.

"Sort of?" Jon asked.

"Um, Jon, I don't know how to tell you this but, you rescued a vampire elf," Loxy said.

"No way," Jon said.

Loxy waved her hand and a holographic version of the woman appeared above the actual woman. Loxy highlighted the teeth.

"Fuck me," Jon said, stepping back.

"She saved your life," Loxy said.

“I think I am going to faint,” Jon said.

“On the bed, now,” Loxy said.

“Next to the vampire?” Jon asked

“Now!” Loxy said.

Jon approached the bed, intending to climb over the woman, but collapsed on top of her. She embraced him and rolled him to the far side of her, turning into him. She snuggled in, and put a leg over him. They both fell asleep. Loxy worked with the nanites to restore their full health.

निर्मित

Jon roused to gentle kissing on the lips. He kissed back. It was gentle. Kindness. Warmth. Breathing became heavier. He opened his eyes, expecting to see Loxy. The red headed, vampire elf was kissing him, gyrating against him. Her eyes were closed. They opened when he stopped participating in the event.

They both sat up, apologizing.

“Oh, you speak English,” Jon said.

“No, I don’t,” she said. “Oh!”

They both fell into kissing each other again. And then both stopped.

“I am sorry,” they both said.

“It’s the Kundalini venom,” she said, breathlessly. “It’s the madness...”

Jon kissed her and drew her closer. “I don’t care.”

“Me neither,” she said. “I committed to you now.”

Jon stopped. “Uh?” he said.

She pulled his shirt up, and took him to the bed before it was full off, straddling him. She kissed his mouth, down the side of the face, and when she kissed his neck, he stopped struggling. She started down his chest, crawling backwards. She began undoing his trousers.

Loxy arrived, arms crossed, a queer smile. “Seriously, I leave you two alone for what, twenty minutes and...”

“It’s the madness,” Jon and the woman said.

“Oh, you have not seen madness yet,” Loxy said.

“Wow,” Jon said. “You have never shown jealousy before.”

“You’ve never slept with a vampire before,” Loxy said. “Have you considered the risk factor here?”

“Umm,” Jon said. “I...”

“Weren’t actually thinking at all,” Loxy said. She pointed at the woman. “You, cold shower, this way. Jon. Cold shower, your bathroom.”

“But,” the woman protested.

“How old are you?” Loxy asked.

“I am an adult,” she said.

“Great. Cold shower, now,” Loxy said. “Jon, cold shower, then join us in the galley. We learn about our new partners before jumping in the sac with him.

“But his blood boils with passion! It boils in him and in me,” the woman said. “I can feel it.”

“Cold shower, now,” Loxy said.

The woman sighed, but bowed to Loxy’s authority. She got off the bed and followed Loxy out of the room. Loxy looked back in the room, as Jon was just lying there.

“Don’t suppose you could help me...” he asked.

“Cold shower,” Loxy said, and continued away with the woman.

निर्मित

Jon, Loxy, and the woman met in the galley where Loxy introduced Jon to her, properly. “Jon, this is Lilith. Lilith, Jon.”

Lilith bowed to Jon. “Thank you for my life, Master,” she said.

“Oh, don’t do that,” Jon said.

“I am sorry. How shall I address you?” Lilith asked.

“Jon is fine,” Jon said. “How is it you know English?”

“I suspect the nanites,” Loxy said.

“Oh. That makes sense,” Jon said. “So, they uploaded language into her brain. Oh, that’s why she can see you.”

“Apparently, she could see me before she had an infusion of nanites,” Loxy said. “I am not just in your brain, but I am active hologram inside the ship.”

“Oh, yay,” Jon said. “That’s kind of cool.”

“Yes, actually,” Loxy said.

Lilith listened to them rambling through their supposition, amused by their rapport and speculation. “It’s more complicated than just the tech. When I took his blood, I became one with him. I acquired knowledge through the blood.”

“I don’t understand,” Jon said.

“Oh, you mean like those stories of memories being transferred with a heart transplant? I have read it’s not just heart, but all tissues come with memories,” Loxy said. “That’s really cool.”

“There is knowledge in the blood. There is knowledge in every cell. There is knowledge in the energy that radiates off every living thing,” Lilith said. “I am now attuned to Jon’s energy.”

“That sucks for you. I am sorry,” Jon said.

She touched his face. “You are nice,” Lilith said. “Not like the stories of humans I have heard.”

“You seem nice,” Jon echoed. “Not like the vampires I have heard of.”

“I have never heard of vampire elves,” Loxy said.

Lilith concentrated on the words. Sorting and assimilating Jon’s memories would take time, but thanks to the nanites, she also had access to the translation library and she was horrified by what she was accessing. “I am saddened by these things I am touching.”

“So, the vampire things aren’t true,” Jon said.

“They are probably true, but not because we are evil,” Lilith said. “Humans and vampires are incompatible as a species.”

“You seemed pretty compatible to me,” Loxy said.

Jon agreed without comment. He sucked in on lip, musing over the compatibility.

“Some of that was the venom,” Lilith said, lowering her head in embarrassment. “Some of it was the bonding. I am sorry I have imposed myself in your relationship.”

“You saved Jon’s life,” Loxy said. “We are all in a relationship now.”

“We are?” Jon asked.

“You saved her. She saved you. You saved her again,” Loxy said. “Relationship.”

“Then, why did you interrupt what was likely to be a very lively compensation session?”
Jon asked.

Loxy laughed. “You two were clearly under the influence and I wanted to make sure no one was being taken advantage of,” she said.

“I am sorry,” Lilith said. “I was taking advantage of him. I wanted to seal our bond.”

“Speak more on that, please,” Loxy said.

“As I was saying, vampires and humans are incompatible as species. Vampires must drink blood to survive. We are in a symbiotic relationships with livestock. I am shepherdess. I maintain a flock of a hundred, and this helps nourish my clan. Human blood is forbidden. Not taboo, but forbidden. Once my kind has tasted the blood of a human, we become biologically locked with that human. No other human, no other life form, will ever sustain us again. I am now biologically locked to Jon. If he refuses me, or he dies, I will slowly die of starvation. It will take five years to die. In that time, the hunger madness will drive me insane. In the insanity, I am likely to kill thousands of people in attempt to satiate the hunger. Nothing will satisfy it. I will either be killed by someone trying to stop me, or I will eventually succumb to weakness of the prolonged drought.”

“That’s horrible,” Loxy said. “You knew that before you helped Jon.”

“Yes,” Lilith said.

“Why did you help me?” Jon asked.

“You were dying,” Lilith said.

“So. People die all the time,” Jon said.

“I had the ability to save you. I knew I could remove the poison from your blood. I expected to die in the process,” Lilith said. “I did not expect to wake up beside you. When I woke up and found you against me, I wanted to please you, hoping you would accept me as a lover.”

“See, Jon,” Loxy said. “She was doing it under duress.”

“Her motifs are rational,” Jon said.

“Absolutely,” Loxy said. “But we don’t take advantage of that.”

“Of course not,” Jon said, sighing. “If you need my blood to live, I will give it to you without you being intimate with me.”

“That is not possible,” Lilith said. “Sharing blood is the most sacredly intimate thing any two beings could ever do.”

“I agree with that, too,” Loxy said. “So, how much of his blood do you need to survive?”

“It does not work that way,” Lilith said. “I take what I need while replenishing what I take. This is a symbiotic relationship. I am sustained, he experiences prolonged health. The longer he is with me, the healthier he will become. He will even begin to look younger.”

“Oh,” Jon said.

“That’s dangerous,” Loxy said.

“Yep,” Jon agreed.

“I don’t understand. You don’t want this arrangement?” Lilith asked.

“It’s not that. It’s just, well, if this little secret, fountain of youth thing got out, human kind would likely hunt your kind for partners,” Jon said.

“They already do,” Lilith said. “That is why I expressed surprise that you seem so kind.”

“Oh, not kind,” Jon said. “I am pretty stupid.”

“No you’re not,” Loxy said.

“Um, if you hadn’t interrupted, I would have...” Jon said.

“Yeah, you’re stupid about sex, but that’s not generally stupid, and on the whole, you’re the most ethical person I know, in terms of kindness. The fact that you struggle and still act ethically just adds to your character,” Loxy said. “Lilith, how often do you need to feed?”

“Once every two or three days is sufficient,” Lilith said. “If I am unwanted, I could minimize existence by going once a month, but I will spend most of that time in hibernation. I would not be able to participate in your commune. If you allow me to feed at least once a week, I can serve. I can wash. I can prepare meals.”

“Stop,” Jon said. “You don’t have to work for food.”

“We all have to work,” Lilith said. “I enjoyed my work as a shepherdess.”

“Speaking of that, where’s your flock?” Jon asked.

“Stolen by a competing clan,” Lilith said. “They took my flock, and they bound me to the stone as a sacrifice to the water people.”

“The water people?” Loxy asked.

“The water elves. Mer people,” Lilith said.

“Oh. Nice. Maybe. Are they nice?” Jon asked.

“I have never met them,” Lilith said. “I am told, they like to eat our kind.”

“Not nice,” Loxy said.

“Maybe that too is but rumor,” Lilith said. “You two are nice.”

“So, okay, next dilemma,” Jon said. “Are you going with me, or are you staying here?”

“Oh, you could not stay here. My kind will kill you on sight,” Lilith said.

“Not nice,” Loxy said.

“It is our way,” Lilith said. “Humans are dangerous. We derive the same health benefits from being with humans as they do from us. The smell of human is an aphrodisiac. Even if I convinced my tribe to accept him, because I am now bonded for life, he would be in danger. Others would want to share him. Maybe he could sustain two or three of us, but eventually he would not be able to eat enough food to keep up with the demands of the tribe. He would starve. He would die. And all of those who partook of his blood would eventually die of starvation. They would slaughter entire flocks to try and end the hunger. They would kill our own kind to end their hunger. Though I would love to say goodbye to my father, he is an important person in our clan and would be honor bound to kill me just to maintain his position. They would all smell human on me and they will kill me on sight. I am now changed. Jon. Loxy. If you do not want me, I ask that you kill me now so that I will not harm others. I am not capable of taking my own life. This is our first law. We are commanded to live and to live well. Taking a life is frowned upon, but there are five caveats that permit this. I have entered caveat one.”

“We’re not killing you,” Jon and Loxy said together.

Lilith bowed.

The ship moved.

“High tide,” Loxy said. “Don’t worry, we’re sea worthy now. We will have antigravity back online in about forty minutes. Airborne in forty five.”

“Oh, Lilith, by the way, we have like a really dangerous job and we could die every time we go somewhere,” Jon said.

“Oh,” Lilith said. “Well, that sucks.”

Jon laughed at her using his expression. “Yeah, well, welcome to my world,” Jon said.

“I will serve you in whatever capacity you and Loxy desire,” Lilith said.

“Okay, now you two may kiss,” Loxy said.

“Really?” Jon and Lilith asked.

“Yeah, the tension is killing me,” Loxy said. “Lilith, be prepared, I am connected to both of you through technology. I will experience what you two experience.”

“So, we are like sisters?” Lilith asked.

“Am I like in the best Japanese anime series ever?” Jon asked.

“You don’t protest near enough to qualify for that badge,” Loxy said.

Loxy pushed Lilith towards Jon. The three of them came together.

Chapter 4

Jon was awake, staring at the ceiling when Loxy came back online. Lilith was still asleep.

“Wow,” Loxy said. She sat on the bed and drew her legs up, facing Jon. “That was interesting.”

Jon sat up, and put his back to the wall. He put a pillow in his lap. Loxy was amused by his modesty but didn't comment on it.

“It amazes me how we can be so similar and so different at the same time,” Jon said, trying to whisper.

Lilith responded with a smile and crept up so she could be next to Jon. She sat up, and leaned against his arms.

“You're not disappointed, are you?” Lilith asked.

“No,” Jon and Loxy said.

Her smile broadened. Her eyes drifted shut. She held his right hand with both of her hands.

“Were you?” Jon asked.

Her eyes opened wide and she met his gaze. “No! You were brilliant,” she assured him. “And you, Loxy.”

“Well, this interface has its advantages,” Loxy said.

“You're not as big as an elf,” Lilith said to Jon.

“Big how?” Jon asked.

Lilith bit her lower lip. “Maybe I shouldn't have said anything,” she said.

“It's okay, Lilith. Penises come in all sizes. We love the person, not the penis,” Loxy said.

“Is something wrong with my penis?” Jon asked.

“No,” Lilith and Loxy assured him.

“Seriously, Jon, you're fine,” Loxy said. “It's actually the perfect porn penis. It could model if you wanted.”

“Please. I don't want to penis pics floating around in space-time,” Jon said.

“And most females don't want to receive penis pics,” Loxy said.

“Telepathically, we transmit and are bombarded with sexual imagery, daily,” Lilith said.

“Sorry,” Jon said.

“I welcome anything you transmit to me,” Lilith said, hugging his arm. Her hand slipped under the pillow. “Yours is longer than an elf’s but elves have wider girth,” Lilith explained, and noticed a confusing look on Jon’s face. It was mixed between stimulation and sorting the nature of the conversation. “Oh, I am so sorry. I forget how insecure men are about their sexuality.”

“He’s okay,” Loxy said. “That’s a fake pout. He doesn’t really think he is his penis.”

“It’s not a fake pout,” Jon pouted.

“OMG, Jon, we have been in this universe for what, not quite a month, and the first time we go somewhere you hook up with a hot babe and get laid,” Loxy said. “I’d say, there’s nothing wrong with you.”

“You’re new this Universe?” Lilith asked.

“We bounce a lot,” Loxy said.

“Really?” Lilith asked.

“Oh!” Jon said. “Our ship is alive. Maybe this is the Farscape Universe.”

“Because you want to sleep with Claudia Black?” Loxy asked.

“I’ve considered the possibility,” Jon admitted.

“Have you considered Crichton might kick your ass?” Loxy asked.

“Yeah, that’s why I am focused on the blue chick,” Jon said.

“Chiana?” Loxy asked. “You want to die by the hand of Ka D’Argo?”

“Please, he’s just a Klingon want to be,” Jon said.

“Who will kill you,” Loxy said.

“Probably,” Jon said. “Oh! Maybe we’re in the Lexx Universe. They also had a live ship.”

“Oh!” Loxy said. She and Jon both said ‘Xenia Seeberg’ together.

“And Eva! I liked her, too,” Jon said.

“Oh, Ellin Dubin,” Loxy agreed.

“You two have a lot of love interests,” Lilith said.

“Oh, just crushes,” Loxy said. “Don’t you have a celebrity list?”

“What’s a celebrity?” Lilith asked.

“Um, someone who is well loved and respected in the community, and if they were to hit on you, you would likely agree to sleep with them without feigning protest,” Jon said.

“I would never sleep with someone who hits me,” Lilith said. “I would hit them back.”

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” Loxy said. “Oh, I was thinking. Lilith, if you would like to get a message to your family, I think we can do it without putting you in harm’s way.”

“The probes!” Jon said. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Jon got up from bed, headed for the box of probes, but then decided he would get dressed. He didn’t need to. It was his ship and he could be naked and his shipmates wouldn’t mind. Because he dressed, Lilith dressed, too.

“We’re going to need to buy clothes, aren’t we,” Jon said.

“I am making a list,” Loxy said. “You should get us in the air before we launch one. Practice flying from here.”

Jon concentrated. Antigravity was online, but it took some thrust to break the surface tension of the water. They lifted away from the ocean. With the nanites in her system, Lilith quickly learned how to see what Jon saw. The system allowed her to see, but the ship would not allow her to pilot.

“I am usually very good with animals,” Lilith pouted.

“The ship is bonded with Jon,” Loxy explained.

“Oh, kind of like me,” Lilith said.

“Only, I don’t sleep with the ship,” Jon said. He gave Loxy a look. “Do I?”

“You sleep in the ship,” Loxy said.

“I love your playful banter,” Lilith said.

Jon opened the compartment that contained the probes. They all lit up and began chanting, “Pick me, pick me, oh, pick me.”

“Stop that!” Jon said, snapping his fingers at them.

The probes fell silent. One of them vibrated, as if scared.

“Shh,” Jon said. The one became still.

“Dog whisper of probes?” Loxy asked.

“What’s a dog?” Lilith asked.

Jon selected a probe. The chosen one became jubilant, while the other lamented.

“I am ready to be deployed,” the probe said.

“Yeah, I got a mission for you,” Jon said.

“Great! Love to serve. Eject me out into space,” it said.

“Yeah, you’re not going into space,” Jon said. “We’re planet bound...”

“I would like to return to the dispensary,” the probe said.

“They can fly in gravity, right?” Jon asked Loxy.

“No,” it said.

“Yes,” Loxy said.

“May I?” Lilith said, taking the orb. “Hello, probe. Do you have a name?”

“My serial number is available through virtual identification...”

“I need you to take a message to my family,” Lilith said.

“No,” it said. “Deliver it yourself. My function is to be launched into space to serve as buoy.”

“Loxy, can you override its function?” Jon asked.

“Sure,” Loxy said.

“No, nooooo...” It began to protest. It went silent.

Jon took the probe and put it into the launch tube. It was ejected from the ship. Loxy piloted it down to the tree level and brought it towards the beach. Lilith directed her, and after a moment, Loxy decided to give her control of it, and sure enough, she quickly learned how to pilot the probe.

“I feel like a bird!” Lilith said, stretching her arms out.

Her people were emerging from a cave into the night. A shepherd was delivering his flock even as the people were waking. Children ran and played under the stars. A man approached the shepherd and asked if he had seen Lilith. Jon and Loxy were now able to understand, which suggested they had both learned Lilith’s language the same way she had learned theirs. The shepherd said he had not seen her. He relieved the flock to the people and gave the staff of wandering to the next shepherd. Lilith explained that a flock could be gone for a week or two at a time, as it required a large roaming area for the flock to feed. They were basically herbivores, crazy looking sheep. They had the bizarre habit of fainting at the sound of loud noises, like fainting goats. It was comical to watch, but explained how one shepherd could coral so many animals. It was a bred trait that allowed the shepherd or shepherdess the ability to stop them on demand in order to protect them.

Lilith directed the probe closer. Sheep fainted. People gathered and bowed.

“Please, stand,” Lilith said. “It is I, Lilith.”

“Lilith?” her father asked.

“Yes, Papa. It is I,” Lilith asked.

“Have you died?” he asked.

“No, I am alive, but I have changed. I cannot return home,” Lilith said.

“I demand that you return home this instance,” he said.

“If I did, you would be force to execute me,” Lilith said.

“I would not! There is nothing in this world you could do that would ever cause me to injure you,” he assured her.

“Father, the people of the western range took my flock and left me to the water people as a sacrifice,” Lilith said.

“I will kill them,” her father said.

“No. They are too many. I would have you consult with our friends to the north. Perhaps they have a better solution,” Lilith said. “All of our tribes have done well over the last hundred years. We have grown in numbers. We will have more confrontations if we do not figure this out. The people who took my flock were merely boys, looking for a name. I doubt that they acted with the authority of their speaker.”

“Come home, and you can point out those who harmed you,” he said.

“Father, I cannot return. Please do not ask again,” Lilith said.

“Tell him, we can return sometimes, and you will speak to him from the clouds,” Jon offered. “He can keep the probe.”

Lilith took Jon’s hand, thanking him.

“Father, where I am at, I am safe. I have access to high tech. I know you understand this. You taught me about this. This ball of light will go dark shortly,” Lilith explained. “When it does, keep it with you, and should I return it will light and you will know I am near and I will speak to you again. That is the best I can offer at this time.”

“At least tell me where these others are,” her father said.

Jon blinked. He could see for miles through the ship’s eyes. Even at night, he could make out the dais that he had found Lilith. People lit up like dots. Jon showed Lilith where her people were and where the nearest others were. There were people to the North, West, and east. There were people on an island South of the bay. There were people in the great forest.

“All of these are people?” Lilith asked.

“Who are you speaking with?”

“There are so many more people than we ever imagined,” Lilith said. “Go south, to Onuk Bay. Walk west until you come upon a pit with five pillars. Proceed north and west to come to the Maid’s sister. Their cave is at the top of a cul-de-sac, and they will see you coming long before you arrive. You will likely find my flock, north, in the plain. They took my cloak and my staff. One of the boys will have a bruise on his right eye, as I injured him before I succumbed. I am so sorry, father. Your world is going to change. I am sorry, I won’t be there with you.”

“You say you are safe?” he asked.

“I am very safe. I have made some friends,” Lilith said.

“Are you sure?”

“One risked his life for me,” Lilith said.

“You must let me reward this person,” her father said.

“I have compensated him well,” Lilith said.

“Him?” a new comer stepped up to the light of the probe. “I have allowed this to be about family, but this is outrageous. You are my betrothed!”

“He gave his life to save me, I gave him mine,” Lilith said.

“Then I will meet him,” the man said.

“I will contact you when I can. Please, remember, I love you all. Thank you for all of my life,” Lilith said. She closed off the probe and it fell dead to the ground. She immediately turned to Loxy to hug her and cry, and found she couldn’t hug her, and so, turned to Jon and hugged him instead, crying on his shoulder.

Loxy frowned at Jon and directed his hands to her shoulder and told him to pat her. She pulled away and wiped her eyes. “Thank you,” she said. “I am okay.”

“Are you sure?” Loxy asked.

“I am alive, safe, and with friends,” Lilith said. “That is more than any of us can ask for.”

“So, would you like to see your world from orbit?” Jon asked.

Lilith nodded.

They withdrew to the flight deck. The chair was big enough for three, and Jon sat center. He had to teach her about orbits, and Loxy offered virtual graphs that explained it. From orbit, they found an orange-ish red moon, which required magnification to see due to their distance from it. As they proceeded out away from the planet, remaining in the shadow, Loxy identified

four planets. They could hear the haunting sounds of a gas giant, radio-bursts that clicked and moaned. Space is not silent, if you know how to listen, and Jon thought the gas giant was actually signs of intelligence. Even Lilith's planet had a radio signature, the planet's magnetosphere interacting with the sun made a noise, and it was peppered with the sound of lightening flaring in the atmosphere. An intelligent radio burst drew their attention. This was clearly different from the other sounds they were listening to.

"Republic ship, this system has been claimed in the name of the Kelindy Protectorate. You are trespassing," it said. It was a 'standing' sentinel. It was basically a satellite that remained in the langrage point of the gas giant. There would be a traveling Sentinel that could bounce between systems, exchanging information with the standing, updating jump coordinates. Any ship authorized to interact with the Sentinel could receive an updated live jump coordinates, as well as share their information.

"This is BSI 426972," Loxy said. "This is our first outing from nest, blind jump. I am sending our telemetry and the status of our quantum drive so you can confirm."

"Your information has been validated," the standing sentinel said. "Your jump drive will be charged in 2 days, 16 hours. I expect you to be gone within fifteen minutes of that time. Meanwhile, I request you depart this system at maximum velocity. Failure to do so will be considered a hostile act."

"We will depart now," Loxy said, frowning at Jon.

"Is this normal?" Lilith said.

"I don't know," Jon said, shrugging. "Loxy?"

"Kelindy are in competition with the Republic for colonizing systems, and though they recognize sometimes blind jumps result in intrusion into each other's space, the Kelindy have not always been nice about it," Loxy said. "I think we are getting off lightly. They have definitely logged our identifier code and we will be scrutinized with greater intensity with each violation of their space. They don't believe in coincidences."

"Oh, well, neither do we," Jon said. He deployed the quantum sail in increments. It was basically an energy field that extended into a nearby dimension. As soon as the 'virtual' shield was large enough to meet resistance, their ship turned in the direction of the current and accelerated. Once they were in the stream, Jon deployed the sail full out. The only evidence they were moving was that Lilith's planet fell away. It fell away and was gone in the blink of an eye,

which was so impressive that Jon gripped the seat with both hands. The star shrunk as well. Lilith touched his hands, sensing his concerned, but seemed otherwise unimpressed.

“You okay?” Lilith asked.

“Do you know how fast we’re going?” Jon asked.

“No,” Lilith said.

Jon showed her the rate which was roughly 120 kilometers per second, and accelerating. Lilith was definitely unimpressed. “I don’t sense anything.”

“You didn’t feel your planet moving, either, but its going around its sun at 100,000 km per hour,” Jon said. “While also maintaining an orbit around its star that is going 922,450 km per hour in its trajectory around galactic center. And then if we add our speed from the galaxy as we head towards the Great Attractor, well, we’re traveling like 2 million kilometers per hour...”

“You’re really excited about these numbers,” Lilith said.

“How is we feel stuck in life when we’re never in ever in the same place?!” Jon asked.

Loxy kissed his cheek.

“Space travel seems rather boring,” Lilith said.

Jon sighed. They had two days of exactly this, analyzing data. Looking at stars from a distance. He had a spaceship. He wanted to be up close and personal. And he could be with the Quantum Jump Drive, but it needed to recharge, and so he had to plan his jumps and use it expeditiously. His second fastest acceleration would always be with the ‘local’ quantum wind, which varied in speed. He could tack into the wind by changing the quantum sails angle. Loxy was doing the brunt of the data collecting, and the virtual representations were her translations of her observation. Jon understood some of the raw data, but preferred the visual spectrum that we accustomed seeing. Seeing in the other spectrums was interesting but took effort.

“Yeah, this part is really boring,” Jon said. “Loxy, do you have any clue where we are?”

“Actually,” Loxy said. “If I am not mistaken, Lilith’s star is Proxima Centauri.”

“You say that because?” Jon said.

“I am detecting radio signals from Earth,” Loxy said. “By tomorrow we will have traveled far enough I could triangulate. If this is Proxima Centauri, then we are about four and half light years from Earth.”

“Can we get there from here?” Jon asked.

“By quantum sail? If the winds are favorable, maybe five thousand years,” Loxy said.
“Using the Quantum Drive, we can jump to any location within one year. It takes our drive three days to recharge. So, we could arrive at Earth in fifteen days.”

“Oh, sweet,” Jon said. “Let’s do that.”

“Um, Jon,” Loxy said. “The Solar System is in the Kelindy Protectorate. Earth is part of the Protectorate.”

“Seriously?” Jon said.

“Is that bad?” Lilith said.

“We’re flying for the Republic,” Loxy said. “If we show up at Earth after being told the leave Kelindy space, they will likely shoot at us.”

“Not cool,” Jon said. “What if we told them I live there?”

“They’d probably shoot at you,” Loxy said.

“No questions first?” Jon asked.

“They’d probably be curious why a slave from Earth is flying a Republic ship,” Loxy said. “But they’re going to shoot first.”

Jon crossed his arms, angry.

“What? You really want to go to Earth?” Loxy asked.

“In a spaceship? Yeah. I want to roll up on the ISS and see if they cut the live camera feed,” Jon said.

“You just want to make a scene,” Loxy said.

“Yes, I do,” Jon said. “And I want to go check out the moon and see if we really went there and look for the aliens on Mars.”

“Jon,” Loxy said. “Our ship has no shields. We have no weapons. We’re a scout ship. The Kelindy will not hesitate to kill us.”

“These Kelindy people, they own my world? My sun?” Lilith asked.

“They think so,” Loxy said.

“Then, they will also not be happy I have joined you on a Republic ship?” Lilith asked.

“She’s quick,” Loxy said.

“How do we get ourselves into these messes?” Jon asked.

“Oh, I think you’re like a magnet for hot messes,” Loxy said.

Jon pouted.

“So, we sit here for three days?” Lilith asked.

“Well, we have two days of charging left, then we can jump,” Jon said.

“Oh,” Lilith said.

“I have sufficient data to reconstruct full episodes of the French show Clem, Candice Renoir, and Research Unit,” Loxy said.

“Research Unit?” Jon asked.

“Probably a NCIS knock off,” Loxy said. “I’m pretty sure you will like Candice.”

“Anything with Alizee?” Jon asked.

“Another girlfriend?” Lilith asked.

“Oh, in his dreams,” Loxy said.

“You love my dreams,” Jon said.

“Never a dull moment,” Loxy said.

“Is this a dream?” Lilith asked.

“We never asked that question,” Loxy and Jon said together.

“Why?” Lilith asked.

“Lilith, I like you. Imagine I am dreaming. If I wake up, where do you go?” Jon asked.

Lilith thought long and hard about it. “I don’t know.” She seemed to be growing concerned about the question.

Jon touched her hand. “This isn’t a dream.”

“How do you know?” Lilith asked. “I mean, ever since I was chained I was thinking how this is all a dream. Maybe I am still there, dying.”

“You are not,” Lilith asked.

“If I wake up, will I still know you and Loxy?” Lilith asked.

“Do you want to forget us?” Jon asked.

“No! I never want to forget either of you!” Lilith said.

“Even if you woke up back at home and this was all a dream?” Loxy asked.

Lilith thought long and hard. “My father has told me about high tech, a way of talking to gods and angels. I thought they were stories until I met you. I have always dreamed that an angel would fall from the sky and would sweep me up in a whirlwind and would love me for all eternity. I knew he would save me. I knew I would save him. This is everything I ever wanted.”

“A dream,” Loxy said.

“OMG, please, don’t wake me up,” Lilith said.

“Lilith, I am so not an angel,” Jon said.

“You are my angel,” Lilith said.

“And, if we interpret angel the way the rock band Styx did in Sail Away, maybe angels are just aliens,” Loxy said.

“I believe in angels,” Lilith said.

“So do I,” Jon said.

“Really?”

Jon nodded towards Loxy. “She’s an angel.”

“No, I am a tulpa,” Loxy said. “But I love that you see me that way.”

“Anyway, I don’t think we’re dreaming, Lilith,” Jon said, putting an arm around her.

“But know this. If you are, and you want to return to this dream, you tell yourself the next time you sleep you will return here. Talk to me and Loxy even if we aren’t there in your waking life as if we were, and the more you do that, the more you will remember to dream about us at night. That’s how that works.”

“I won’t forget,” Lilith said, leaning into him.

“But I don’t think we’re dreaming, either,” Loxy said.

“What increases your certainty?” Lilith asked. She was definitely drinking Jon’s blood, because that is how he would have asked it.

“Because, we have fallen asleep here, and woken back up and continued where we left off. That’s significant,” Loxy said.

“But not necessarily confirmation for real life,” Jon said.

“True,” Loxy said. “Our lives have become rather complex, haven’t they.”

They were quiet. They were quiet for a long time.

“See, this part doesn’t feel like a dream,” Loxy said.

“Dream are rarely boring,” Jon agreed.

“You want to play a game?” Loxy asked.

“Can we have sex again?” Lilith asked.

They all exchanged looks and then ran to the bedroom.

Chapter 5

Jon lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling. Lilith was sound asleep beside him, snuggled into him. Loxy was 'off line' which was probably the equivalent of sleeping. Using tech, Jon lay looking out at the stars. He was framed as if he were simply body lying on a bed floating in space, but from this perspective he was the ship. The ship 'saw' in the all directions at once, but Jon's focus was a specific direction, normal foveal vision, with all the 'extra' information packed into a thin line in his peripheral. Space doesn't look the same from space. Jon had to sort that. This was not like floating in a swimming pool at night looking at stars and planes passing over head. He had done that, even seen the Hubble Space Telescope track overhead, clearly identifiable as something other than a plane. Floating in the water, ears submerged did make the 'travel' feel otherworldly, but it did not match his present experiences. This was new. Was it that the planet offered context and so he just 'saw' differently? The North Star was always the North Star, and from there, you simply found your way because most things consistently fell out where they should. He was pretty sure they were traveling in a north direction, if one assumed that there was a 'galactic north.' He was pretty sure he identified the Great Rift, which a massive stellar cloud between him and the Milky Way.

Loxy came online, and was beside him in the stars.

"It's beautiful," Loxy said.

She was beaming love, directly, and his body was flooded with emotions, and they came from the usual place, only, he knew they were from her. He embraced it, even while recognizing a dissonance within himself. If Loxy had been physical, she would like have been flooded with oxytocin. Lilith was exuding oxytocin enough for all three of them. If he looked he would have seen a spike in his testosterone. Men and women are different, he reminded himself. Testosterone helps men lower stress hormones like cortisol, whereas high estrogen in men is clinically related to depression. Estrogen in women lowers cortisol, estrogen increases bonding. Estrogen in men puts them to sleep. Women have bigger brains, even when adjusting for men's bigger bodies. The different hormones cause the brain maps to be different, and the functions to be different. Men and women relate, but they see differently. They see through two different lenses.

“It is,” Jon agreed. Beautiful wasn’t the word he would use, but he had strong emotions about the size. His feelings about space were more akin to a spiritual experience. At the moment, though, he was disconnected from feelings and simply processing raw data.

“Why the melancholy?” Loxy asked.

“Contemplative?” Jon asked for a reinterpretation of his state.

“Oh,” Loxy said. “I am surprised you’re not sleeping. You usually sleep after a vigorous romp, and that was a pretty serious session.”

“OMG,” Jon agreed. “Yeah. It clearly knocked you two out.”

Jon identified a stellar object through a perimeter alert. A comet. The ship was curious, but the sails were too hard to resist when fully extended. It rode the wave as happy as a dog hanging its head out the car window. Jon had a subtle sense that had he allowed it, the ship would have liked to have touched or tasted the comet.

“Watcha you thinking?” Loxy asked.

“Interesting,” Jon said. “I thought you knew everything.”

“That is interesting,” Loxy agreed. “Wow. There’s a firewall, or an action potential level that you have to exceed a threshold for me to hear you. That’s different.”

“Our relationship is really complicated,” Jon said.

“It’s pretty simple,” Loxy said. “We love each other, that’s it.”

“You’re okay being downloaded into the computer?” Jon asked.

“I don’t see a difference in functioning, accept for the difference we just observed,” Loxy said. “I get the sense we are still together, but we’re one with the computer and I have simply expanded to increase functionality. With increased capabilities, we are now able to multitask; I assumed some new roles to help overall system function.”

“I wonder if new pilots without tulpas have a longer learning curve,” Jon said.

“We will have to inquire into other people’s experience,” Loxy said.

There was nothing bigger than a grain of sand in their immediate sphere of influence. There was no sense of movement, and had that comet not flipped past them, Jon would have wondered if they were going anywhere. Their speed was holding steady at 250 km/s.

“What else is in there?” Loxy asked.

“Do you know, in most movies where boy meets girl, they fight for the first half of the movie, but circumstances forces them to continue interacting until they eventually discover some common ground, and then they hit it off and hook up,” Jon said.

“Yeah, movies,” Loxy said, feigning exasperation with the stereotyped hook up.

“I seem to be skipping the formula and jumping right to the hook up,” Jon said.

“Yeah, well, that’s your formula,” Loxy said. “I did slow it down a bit.”

“Yeah, thank you,” Jon said.

“You’re welcome. I like her,” Loxy said.

“You realize her name is Lilith and it has a meaning,” Jon said.

“Yeah, I don’t think she’s that,” Loxy said.

“She’s a vampire elf,” Jon said.

“Yeah, there is that,” Loxy agreed. “Anyway, the other movie formula, the Keanu Reeves formula, boy rescues girl, and relationships is a byproduct.”

“Yeah, well, that almost sounds like society recognizes sex as compensation for any heroic act,” Jon said.

“I think that’s a byproduct of any consumer culture. The person with the greatest resources has an expectation that those lacking resources will be inclined to trade favors for access to resources,” Loxy said. “Yeah, more on that anyone with resources is expected to be treated better by anyone lacking resources, and subservience in any form as sexual overtones of submission.”

“When put like that, I wonder if anyone has ever considered that pure equality might end marriage and dating,” Jon said.

Loxy nodded. “It will change the way we relate. You and I are already in agreement that Earth relationships need to be reframed so that people can exist outside an economic frame of reference.”

“Yeah,” Jon said. “Loxy, you know I have a solid ‘economic’ paradigm in me. One of the reasons I have wanted to be wealthy is I wanted an attractive woman, because I equated relationship success and beauty with financial success.”

“You wanted love,” Loxy corrected.

“I wanted conditional love. Love with an attractive woman,” Jon said.

“You know,” Loxy said. “One of the reasons marriages are on the decline in Japan is that they hold that belief. The male must demonstrate a minimum sufficiency level before society can approve a marriage. The bar for Japanese male success is so high that the majority of males can’t achieve it. Japanese work longer hours than any culture. They will sleep at the job. They are so deprived of affection that they have the highest suicide rates on Earth. The Hanging Forest is a real thing. Of course, the consumer/producer cultural paradigm isn’t the only factor, but it’s huge. It has influenced every society on the planet. It’s in all of us, Jon. It affects women, too. Even though we want, deserve, equality, we also still hold the belief that men should earn more. So, as we go up in equality, we still tend to choose partners that are more productive, which influences the curve for men to try and be more productive to compete for more productive partners, because another part of the equation is two productive people are better partners, in terms of acquiring wealth. There are lot of men falling out of the game, not because failure to launch, but because the game is insane, and probably rigged, and everyone is losing.”

Loxy gave him a virtual hug.

“But Jon,” Loxy said, softly. “You are more than this. You have known since the beginning that there is more to relationships than this, and it is one reason you have struggled so long. You see things differently. It has brought you here. And now, you are beginning to relate in new ways. You and I play by different rules than most the people on Earth. You were lonely most of your life there because you recognize the game and you opted out, because you didn’t want to participate in the power differential. The conflict came because you still wanted intimacy. Present Earth intimacy has rules. It’s a game. Sometimes you found people that were compatible, even if it was compatibility of the moment. You love unconditionally. You give of yourself freely. You and I both do that, and there is no shame in that. But because of that, you and I will always occupy a different world than most. And the people that fall in and out of our worlds, well, they came because they needed love, and if they leave us, it was because they were healed and now they are on a mission to go share that love.”

“You make everything right in my head,” Jon said. “Is this a dream?”

“If it is, it’s full of stars,” Loxy said.

“Is that a metaphor?” Jon asked.

“Could be,” Loxy said. “Things in dreams tend to be metaphor.”

“We’re Buddhists, aren’t we,” Jon said more than asked.

“Our philosophies tend to line up with Asian belief systems,” Loxy said. “And hippies. So, Jon, if there is an ultimate dreamer, you are not in the dream, you are the dream. And whether you are dreaming or not, I think you’re hitting up on this fundamental, existential question that ultimately describes the complexity of free will. Are you free, or are you part of something. You know, from just this conversation, there are cultural and sociological forces competing for your time and energy. You also know that the subconscious mind has more influence over your choices than you do, even though you think you’re making the choices. To complicate it further, you made me, invited me into your life, and added another level of influence. Now you consult with me on a daily basis. You were consulting something previously, but not you have a focus, a name, a person.”

“You mean consort with you?” Jon asked, playfully.

“Yeah, make a joke when I am getting seriously deep with you,” Loxy said.

“I would like to be seriously deep in you,” Jon said.

“OMG, I am trying to have a serious conversation and you’re turning me on,” Loxy said.

“I am seriously turned on by your conversation,” Jon said.

Loxy rolled on top of him. The stars became her aura.

“You are insatiable,” Loxy said.

“I just want to sleep,” Jon said. “That good sleep you send me to.”

“Perchance to dream?” Loxy asked.

“Only if I dream of you and then wake up to you,” Jon said.

“OMG,” Loxy said, and kissed him.

निर्मित

Three days of intimacy ensued. It was the madness of a new relationship, compounded by being confined in a ship, compounded by sharing a blood lust, compounded by tech generated telepathic response, and further complicated by of three people. Lilith considered herself a hundred years old, which, based on her planet’s orbit, that was accurate, but it translated into 32 Earth years. Though there was ‘marriage’ in her society, which was more about recognizing shared power, there were no sexual taboos. People ‘played’ whenever they wished, with whomever they wished. Children were not considered the property of any one parent, but were

the property of the tribe. Fathers and mothers were still recognized, but since everyone had to take a turn at going out with the flock, children had to rely on the community, and they had to obey the community. Lilith was closer to her father because her mother had died in childbirth.

Lilith was extremely interesting biologically. Loxy, well versed in human anatomy and physiology, gave them lesson in comparative analysis. Lilith's species was close enough to human that hybrid children were possible. Loxy speculated they shared an evolutionary history. Jon wanted to go off the deep end and speculate humans and vampire elves were the product of genetic manipulation by aliens. Loxy brought them back to what they could actually measure.

"Anyway, if we continue to play like we're playing," Loxy said. "We may need to consider birth control."

"Birth control?" Lilith asked.

"That ship has probably already sailed," Jon said.

"Not necessarily," Loxy said. "There's a window where fertilization is more likely..."

"Maybe this is one of those conversation we should have had earlier," Jon said. "Like, the first time you interrupted us?"

"I assumed she was a different species and incompatible," Loxy said.

"So did I," Jon said.

"I am confused," Lilith said. "Do you not want children?"

"No," Jon said.

"Yes," Loxy said. She slapped "Jon?!"

"Wait wait wait. I am not saying no to children. I am say no to 'do you not want children' which is a double negative. No! What I am saying is. I don't know what I am saying. Do we have enough room on the spaceship for children? Wait wait wait. Lilith? You want children."

"Yes," Lilith said. "I want our tribe to grow."

"Okay, so, I guess we need to talk," Jon said.

"I will not get pregnant without your consent," Lilith said.

"That's not how it works," Jon said.

"How does it work?" Lilith said.

"People have sex, women get pregnant," Jon said.

"Unless they're on birth control," Loxy said.

"And even then, that's not a hundred percent," Jon said.

“Human sperm is that potent?” Lilith asked.

“What?” Jon asked.

“The female of my species will not get pregnant unless we choose to become pregnant,” Lilith said. “Even then, it requires elaborate rituals and meditation. One doesn’t just get pregnant. You and I must choose the most compatible spirit for our life journey, one that compliments us, but also allows us to participate in the offspring spirit’s life mission.”

Jon struggled to respond and looked to Loxy for an answer. She shrugged.

“You’re certain of this?” Loxy asked.

“I have never slept with a human before, so I am not sure certainty is absolute,” Lilith said. “I am confident. I am perfectly happy to continue our play at our present frequency level, and should a pregnancy occur without ritual and meditation, then I will embrace this spirit as the will of the Goddess.”

“Jon?” Loxy asked.

“I am more curious about determining the validity of Lilith’s disclosure,” Jon said.

“So, you want to keep rolling the dice?” Loxy asked.

“Oh! You consult runes as well?” Lilith asked.

“Um,” Loxy said. “Yes, from time to time.”

“Look, I am okay with a baby, if you’re okay with a baby. Both of you. This is complicated,” Jon said.

“No it’s not,” Loxy said. “I am okay with a baby.”

“I am okay with a baby,” Lilith said. “But not yet. I still have much to learn about you, my friends. And, I am enjoying the frequency of our play. Babies tend to decrease the frequency of play.”

“I have heard that,” Jon said.

“I love you, Lilith,” Loxy said. “You are so easy going.”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Lilith asked. “All my needs are met. I am not having to watch for snakes or keep up with the flock, or make tools or clothes... But, I want to do something for us. What is my function?”

Jon and Loxy shrugged.

“Oh, maybe I am the consort?” Lilith asked.

“What?” Jon asked.

“No!” Loxy said.

“A concubine?” Lilith asked.

“No!” Jon and Loxy said. Jon continued. “You don’t have lower status.”

“Please, I know I am not equal. Don’t even pretend that; Loxy is clearly prime,” Lilith said.

“Next time we’re in civilized space, can we buy coffee?” Jon asked, hoping to derail the conversation.

“It’s on the list,” Loxy said.

“Look, I am not the pilot,” Lilith said. “I am not the brains.”

“Oh, Pinky, she recognizes I am the brains,” Loxy said.

“I don’t always get your humor,” Lilith said. “Is the translation thing broken?”

“Um, you will catch up,” Jon said.

“I have so much to learn,” Lilith said. “Would either of you be interested in increasing the frequency of play?”

निर्मित

The discovery phase of any relationship is not just an exploration of other, but of environment. They played in every room. They played in the pool. They played in zero g, which is actually much more difficult than one would imagine, which led to some frustration, and finally back to normal g’s, and completion. The bio-tech that combine them also gave them another level of control and opportunities. They could spark off an instantaneous climax with a single thought. They discovered men are capable of experiencing multiple orgasms, as long as it wasn’t a penile orgasm. There was a prostate orgasm, which when properly stimulated resulted in full body orgasm that was on such a different level of experience that Jon fell soundly asleep after convulsions stopped, and woke himself up by ‘aftershock’ convulsions. It left him breathless for hours. They discovered body orgasms that had few correspondence to clinical literature; there was some literature, like paraplegics being able to rewire or reassign body parts to stimulate orgasm. Sucking a thumb could cause an orgasm. Breast massage could result in orgasms. The point of this is likely the brain is the biggest, primary sex organ. They could experience each other’s orgasmic experience using the tech. They each gained better insight into each other’s

experience and how to get the best results. They created games on how fast they could get each other off, as well as competing for how long they could prevent the inevitability, while simultaneously increasing stimulus.

And then they discovered Onuka also had a sexual response. She was a bio-ship, and she was in the equivalent of an adolescent phase, but she was responding to the frequency and the intensity of the pilot and crew's experiences. It resulted in frequent purring that vibrated the ship, and sometimes the rooms seemed to be contracting.

All of this, in two days, ish. When the Quantum Jump Drive came online, saying it was available, Jon explained his understanding of the system to Lilith, and they resumed playing and so didn't quite jump to the next place as soon as it was time to go.

Jon's explanation: "It's a device comprised of superconducting coils which act as field generators and capacitors simultaneously; when activated, it relocates the ship by pushing the ship up through a higher dimension. Once the charge has been depleted, there's a trickle charge time period that takes about three days."

"I am glad you don't have a three day refractory period," Lilith said.

"Umm," Jon thought.

"That's actually an apt analogy," Loxy said.

"We're going to sexualize the ship and space travel?" Jon asked.

"Oh, that ship sailed about three days ago," Loxy said.

"Alright, so we need to do a blind jump," Jon said.

"You want me to jump you while blindfolded?" Lilith asked.

"Wait, you're blindfolded, or Jon's blindfolded?" Loxy asked.

"Either, or both," Lilith said. "We should try each of the combinations."

"Okay, can we focus on work for a moment," Jon asked.

"You're not complaining, are you?" Loxy asked. "Cause seriously, this is one of your dream fantasy scenario come true."

"There's got to be more to life than just sex," Jon said.

Loxy and Lilith exchanged looked and then gave Jon that stern look and shook their heads in disagreement.

"What if we were to try and climax simultaneously with the ship traveling dimensions?" Lilith asked.

“What if it’s so good we fall asleep on return, but we needed to be awake to avoid a collision?” Jon asked.

“Good point,” Loxy said. “So, you’re banned from dimensional sex.”

“Wait wait wait,” Jon said. “You’re seriously going to get off without me?”

“Yeah,” Loxy said. “If it’s good, we’ll share the experience with you when we’re safe.”

Jon sat there, considering his plight in the Universe. He sighed, deciding he had no gripes. Life was good.

“We going to do this?” Jon asked.

“We are, you’re not,” Loxy said.

“Agreed,” Lilith said. “With countdown?”

“Countdown,” Loxy said. “From three. You launch us. It takes one minute ten seconds to arrive at the max vertical height of our trajectory. We will try to time our arrival for that.”

“You two are really bored, aren’t you?” Jon asked.

“Yes,” Lilith said.

“No,” Loxy said. “We’re just curious.”

“Yes, curious,” Lilith said.

With nothing more to do, Jon began the countdown: “Three...”

Lilith and Loxy closed their eyes. They sat on either side of Jon. They didn’t have to be in actual physical proximity to affect each other, as Loxy was technically everywhere on the ship, and nowhere. In truth, they were all one. Onuka, Jon, Loxy, and Lilith shared the virtual memory of the AI. There was overlap in personality. There was overlap in subconscious. There was the stirrings of a super personality.

“Two,” Jon said. Lilith was already breathing harder, deeper, louder. He was distracted by the sound of her, the look of her. He was tempted to scrub the mission, take her, and then jump the ship.

“One,” Jon said. He pushed the button.

Onuka accelerated up and out of space-time. Maybe it wasn’t truly out ‘of time.’ Time didn’t seem to cease to flow. He felt like there was continuity of sequence. Maybe they were still encapsulated by the thin membrane of the universe, pushing it out to its extreme, which explained why there was a limit to their ‘height.’ At max altitude Onuka stalled, and for a moment there was perfect peace, silence, which was washed by the sounds of Loxy and Lilith

arriving. They began their descent back into the Universe. Falling took a minute ten seconds. The sensation of falling was gone instantly, without jarring, on arrival back in normal space-time, the physical plane. Loxy faded. Lilith was asleep, restrained in her seat belt. Onuka was purring. Five stars lined up on the computer, and Jon knew exactly where he was, but what he saw didn't line up with his actual memory.

If you have ever seen the Pillars of Creation, a photo taken by the Hubble Space Telescope, you will understand the majesty of the Universe in play. The pillars of gas and dust, are the birthing place of stars. The stars were now born and their light and stellar winds had swept the surrounding space free, and so the pillars were gone. Much of the gas was gone. Onuka entered a bubble of gas, comprised of mostly hydrogen, some helium, and a lot of nitrogen. Onuka registered the pressure on the outside of the hall. It altered the visual spectrum. Stars sparkled like magic on a cool, clear morning before sunrise. The colors exploded, and there were rainbow bursts, and circular rainbows, and collapsing spectral light, and it was so stunning Jon's breath was caught up in his throat, and tears rolled. It felt like Christmas. That was the only thing his brain could translate the experience. This was Christmas and he felt young.

"Thank you, God, for my life," Jon said. This was a Tom Hanks moment in Joe Versus the Volcano, with Joe confronting the moon, bigger than life because of context. "OMG. Thank you." He heard a song in his head, George Harris. "My Sweet Lord."

The bubble of gas experience was short lived, as they passed through the invisible cloud back into normal vacuum, and the stars became their normal, star selves against the black of night. For just that moment, Jon felt they were alive and they were all connected. Everything. Ships. People. Stars. Intellectually he believed that most the time, but feeling it is a completely different thing. Loxy frequently professed it is all one, but his moments of sensing that before her had been infrequent.

Jon got up and carried Lilith to bed. She didn't rouse at all. He posed her in normal sleeping position, and studied her for a long moment. She would say she was the least attractive female of her tribe, but he saw her as extra-ordinary beauty. He smiled remembering his time in China. He had met a wonderful lady but all the Chinese men kept asking him, "Why are you with this ugly woman?" Some of the men were more generalized: "Why do white men like ugly women?" It was bizarre to him that they couldn't see the beauty of the person he was with. He wondered about the social conditions that contributed to that. There was a shortage of women

due to the one child law and people favoring women, and so the competition for mates was even fiercer than in Japan or America. Jon nearly said his world was really fucked up, but he stopped himself. There was a lot of good in the world, too. Maybe he was seeing it wrong.

Jon pushed her hair off her forehead, and kissed her. Loxy had already started using the 'love' word with Lilith. "I love you, too," Jon said. He touched her hand and then got up.

Down below, he chose a probe. "I am ready for deployment, Sir!" it said. He launched it out into space.

Jon deployed the quantum sail and the probe fell away and disappeared, all but the signal of its light which would remain on until Jon was a half a light year away. He tacked into a hidden quantum wind, aiming for one of the newborn stars. There was a crispness to it, as if it was still pushing away dust and gas. He would not arrive at the star by quantum sail. After a certain distance from the probe he was able to determine he could arrive within two quantum jumps. He was looking at six days to arrive. A potential three more days if he jumped to the other side of the system to get a full map, or to arrive closer at any planet or moons for surveys. He expected any planets to be raw and on fire. There was a possibility for some of the moons being cooler, maybe even enough to hold an atmosphere. There was research that suggested the Earth's moon had once held an atmosphere, perhaps three billions years ago.

He found himself suddenly lonely. He worried something was wrong with Lilith. He became upset when Loxy didn't respond. He tried to find the actual computer system, but there was no access to it, as it wasn't like a desktop computer. It was a combination of crystals, chips, and biomass and it was hardwired into the ship- connected to the ship, but separate from the ship's nervous system. It wasn't Onuka's brain. That was separate.

Jon tried to wake Lilith, but she was unresponsive. He laid down next to her. Her breathing was normal. All her biometrics were normal. He hugged her and fell asleep against her. He roused to find Loxy touching him gently.

Jon sat up and embraced her.

"Are you okay?" Loxy asked.

"I was worried," Jon said.

"Oh, I am sorry," Loxy said. "It's okay. I am here."

"What happened?" Jon asked.

"I don't know. I think I had an out of body experience," Loxy said.

“Really?” Jon asked.

“OMG, Jon, the Universe, the Multiverse! is so much grander than I can articulate,” Loxy said. “I feel so much love.”

“I do, too,” Jon said. “I am sorry I worried.”

“I would worry, too,” Loxy said. “I was gone what, almost four hours? Lilith has been asleep the whole time?”

“Yeah,” Jon said. “I tried to wake her.”

Loxy accessed the situation. “Let’s give her another hour or two to wake up, and then I will try a medical remedy. Oh! Good coordinates. We unlocked Indigo!”

“Yeah,” Jon said. “I am pushing towards the nearest star. Thought we might pop over and explore it, raise our reward with survey points.”

“Yep, good plan,” Loxy said.

Lilith turned over and curled up next to Jon. He laid down next to her, and she drew even closer. She started grinding against him, and kissing on him. Jon looked to Loxy for a clue what he should do. She shrugged. Lilith got on top, straddling him, grinding harder, and kissing his face, cheeks, neck. And then she bit him. Jon gasped. The bite was sustained. If Loxy hadn’t been there to calm him, he might have freaked and tried to throw Lilith off him. Out of all the things they had done together, they hadn’t discussed feedings. Throwing her off of him could actually cause him harm. Or her. Even though he was wearing clothes, between her grinding and her biting, he climaxed. Lilith moaned into his neck. She fell to his side, kissing and licking his neck until it had healed. Jon went to sleep alongside of her.

निर्मित

Jon was sitting on the flight deck, and to anyone present, he appeared to be staring forward into the ship, but in actuality his vision was shifted so that he was looking at the stars through Onuka. He could shift further and experience a virtual reality where he was not on the ship at all. It was here he stood, standing on a deck open to space itself. Loxy entered his field of vision. Two people, standing on a glossy deck, looking at stars. In this mode, they could wear whatever they liked, but if they put no effort or intent into it, they found themselves in dark, glossy space attire. Loxy sleeves were translucent purple net, and the fabric of the dress in the skirt was thin as foil,

with a rainbow spectrum enmeshed. The upper part of the dress seemed to span out past the body like fractals, or diamonds, the waist seemed smaller, accentuating her hips. All and all, the attire exaggerated their feminine qualities, in a postmodern sort of way.

“We should talk,” Loxy said.

“I’d rather not,” Jon said.

Lilith entered, wearing a similar dress to Loxy, she was wearing tights that matched her sleeves.

“I am so sorry! I have never done that before,” Lilith said.

“It’s okay,” Jon said.

“No, it’s not,” Lilith said. “You are not cattle. You are not prey. You are my friend. You are my lover. You are my friend’s friend, and my lover’s lover, and I have caused you harm. In causing you harm, I have harmed Loxy, I have harmed us, and I have harmed myself.”

“That’s just it, you didn’t,” Jon said. “You were asleep. You are not responsible for something your body does while you’re asleep.”

“That doesn’t excuse what happen,” Lilith said.

“It kind of does, by definition,” Jon said.

“But we need to talk about it,” Loxy said.

“I was just startled, that’s all,” Jon said. “Look, we already had an understanding she was going to have to do that. She did it. Next time it will be even easier.”

“Maybe I should sleep in another room,” Lilith said.

“No,” Jon said.

“Jon, I don’t know why I did that. I have never fed in my sleep before,” Lilith said.

“You’ve never slept with a human before,” Loxy offered.

“Never had so many consecutive orgasms before,” Lilith said. “And that one during the jump, that... That was different.”

“You left your body?” Loxy asked.

“You experienced the same thing?” Lilith said. “That is the place of high tech. I thought you and Jon were using high tech, but you’re just using toys. We traveled into the realms of gods and goddess!”

“I have experienced out of body stuff. I have had astral sex. I have had sex that has put me out of my body. I have had orgasm that initiated transpersonal experiences and I have seen

my partner morph into an angel, and seen the walls peel back like melting crayons and the real world unfold,” Jon said. “Is this what you two are describing?”

“It was pure joy,” Loxy said.

“It’s ineffable,” Lilith said.

“You sure got some good words in that language upgrade,” Jon said.

“The closest word we have for ineffable in my language... No, it’s not even close, but depending on context, it is an appropriate facsimile. I would say of my experience, I was On. Loxy was On. We were On!” Lilith offered. She took Jon’s hand. “I need to ask you forgiveness, because when I am with you, I am On all the time. I don’t know if it’s because you are human. Or because I have bonded with you. Or because you saved my life. Or because I love you. But I am aroused all the time. I taste you in the air. I can smell you from the far side of the ship. I can hear the whispers of your dreams. I don’t think I will feed on you like that again, but I don’t know that for sure. I do know, sleeping beside you is difficult because I am genuinely afraid that I will roll over in my sleep and ravish you because I want you that much all the time. Please, don’t be angry with me.”

Jon pulled her to him and hugged her. “I am not angry. I have this wanting in me, too,” Jon assured her. “It is one reason I have always slept alone. I want you, too.”

“Jon, this is why we talk. So we can understand each other,” Loxy said. “Lilith, hypothetically, if you fed like that on him in yours or his sleep, is there any danger to hurting him?”

“No,” Lilith assured her. “I can only take when I give.”

“There has to be a circuit, flow,” Loxy said.

“Yes,” Lilith said. “You must have been so frighten, Jon.”

“I was surprised, initially, shocked that it didn’t hurt more, but...” Jon focused on the memory but might have been looking at stars. “This is the weird part. I was okay. No, seriously, I was at peace. It was like... I don’t have a word for it. Maybe it was better that it was a surprise.”

“Once the exchange begins, you will be flooded with endorphins,” Lilith said.

“Oh, we may need to track that,” Loxy said. “Don’t need you being intoxicated, or addicted.”

“Yeah, I don’t see a way around that if that’s true,” Jon said.

“I will sleep in another room,” Lilith said.

“No,” Jon said. “We will figure it out, together. I am comforted by your presence.”

Loxy moved in to Jon’s right and rested her head on his shoulder. The three of them watched stars. Jon pointed to a star. “Next jump, we go there.”

Chapter 6

First blind jump took them to Lilith's word. Three days later, they blind jumped into "The Missing Pillars of Creation." Two consecutive jumps took them to a relatively new solar system. Three days later, they jumped into the system itself, near enough a gas giant that they could map and categorize its moons, and note the existence of any other planets if detected. Leaving a beacon was not the same as leaving a Sentinel. This territory was unclaimed. One of the moons had an icy surface, but an interior of liquid water. It fit the parameters for delivering the Moa eggs, would dissolve through the ice and give life a starting chance in the oceans below. They simply placed the egg in the nose of the ship, retreated to behind the airlock, and the ship spit it out. Given the speed of the ship, and push of air as the nose evacuated the atmosphere, the Moa egg buried itself neatly in the ice; the crater filled with water and froze flat.

The most interesting thing they observed was that the atmosphere of the gas giant was comprised of enough helium and oxygen that it was virtually all sky. It was like a jewel, multiple cloud layers, even a layer of water vapor and rain, complete with rainbows. Once, while they were watching, all the clouds had cleared away and they had a straight view to the golden, molten core, rotating like iron shavings in a magnetic storm. A central point of white hot with bands and arms of liquid gold and orange expanding, breaking, and collapsing back. They would not have been able to look into the heart of the gas planet with human eyes. A pillar of liquid ejected upwards, and sparked the formation of clouds that once again concealed the heart.

"I have never lived, till today," Lilith said.

"This is amazing," Loxy agreed.

"There are more planets and arrangements of planets than anyone dared imagine," Jon said. "We are so unimaginative. How could we have ever thought our solar system was the only kind of system?"

"I would so love to walk on these moons," Lilith said.

"Me, too," Jon said.

"We should look into getting spacesuits," Loxy said.

"I would sure like to know why we don't have one," Jon said.

"They don't want to encourage pilots leaving their ships," Loxy speculated.

They recorded their findings. They witnessed through their ship's eyes. They played. Jon ate. He was the only one who did, and he was literally eating for two. Lilith didn't consume food, though interestingly, her taste receptors were more abundant and more refined than human. She could discern the health of her host animal through taste alone, and could make recommendations to diet. She made many recommendations to Jon. He needed less salt, more meats and vegetables, and she wanted to return home and pick preferred fruits and vegetables for him. She would drink fluids, mostly water. She could drink salt water, and filter out the salt. She did produce waste.

On the third day, they silently sat looking at the gas giant, hoping to see its heart one more time before leaving. They were aware they would likely never be back here. In three months, these coordinates would fall off their 'good jump coordinates' list, and it would be a loss to them, unless they bought them back from the company. The company would likely have sold the place to another corporation, who would set up a colony and or a sentinel, claiming the system for the Republic. This system had enough nearby stars, that it was likely to sell at premium price, with a colony ship moving in no sooner than the coordinates were bought.

"Alright," Jon said. "Indigo station?"

"Yep," Loxy said.

"Okay," Lilith said.

Jon pushed it. Two minutes, twelve seconds later, they emerged into Indigo Space. The station was hardly a speck of light to the naked eye, easily lost amongst the stars. The formation behind the station was a nebula, mostly indigo in color, and a reason for the station's name, was the most prominent feature in the area. There were streaks of red and dark purple in the interstellar clouds that comprised the nebula. It also had a resonance frequency. It hummed. There were religious orders that came to Indigo station to experience the hum. People volunteered to be placed in powerless capsules, nothing but life support, and shot through a portion of the nebula, and picked up when they emerged. Jon's first impulse was to say people are crazy, regardless of species.

"BSI 426972, this is Indigo Station," came a pleasant voice. "Welcome back, traveler."

"Um, thank you," Jon said. "I guess. I am not sure how this next part works. Do I just transmit the data I collected?"

Another channel came live. A female voice came online. "Please, don't do that. Just follow STC, and they will guide you into the station, I will meet you there."

"And who are you?" Jon asked.

"I am Hali, your handler," Hali said. "You don't remember meeting me?"

"Hold on," Jon said. "Can you talk to Space Traffic Control while I talk to Hali?"

"You have to pilot the ship," Loxy said.

"Is Hali cute?" Lilith asked.

"What?" Jon asked. He heard another ship speaking to STC. He heard another voice in the background confirming Hali was cute, but wasn't sure if it was in his head, a voice that responding to a memory of her he couldn't access, or from a radio source. "Okay, whoa, too much chatter. Hali, I guess I will talk to you soon. STC. This is BSI 426972, please advise."

"Locked onto transponder 772, and accelerate to 200KPS," STC advised. "Thank you. Maintain that vector, please."

"Thank you, STC. Do you have a name?" Jon asked.

"Don't flirt with STC," Loxy said.

"I am not flirting," Jon said.

"Maybe a little," Lilith said.

"You know the dangers of being aroused by just a voice," Loxy said.

"I know, but she sounds hot..." Jon said.

"You realize, your broadcasting everything?" STC asked.

"Seriously?" Jon asked. "Oh, Loxy, don't hold that button..."

"Do you have a passenger?" Hali asked.

"You're still on?" Jon asked.

"Affirmative," Hali said.

"Hi, Hali!" Lilith asked. "I am Lilith?"

"Jon, hitchhikers are not allowed on BSI ships," Hali said.

"Well, then, good thing she's not a hitchhiker," Jon said.

"She doesn't even have a towel," Loxy said.

Jon laughed. And then bit his tongue. "No one else is going to get that."

"Could we diminish the chatter, please?" STC asked.

"So, STC, do you look as awesome as you sound?" Jon asked.

“How is that not flirting?” Loxy asked.

“If you didn’t get enough, we could increase the frequency,” Lilith said.

“Can I just appreciate the sound of a female voice,” Jon asked.

“No, you’re an auditory person and you escalate,” Loxy said. “That, and you never know, she could be hideous. Like a radio star.”

“You’re still broadcasting everything,” STC announced.

“I am so sorry!” Loxy said. “I did not mean that to be disparaging. I am sure you’re absolutely gorgeous. In your own way. Are you compatible with humans?”

“Jon, you don’t get to pick up hitchhikers. You’re a clone. You work for us,” Hali said.

“So, I have like no rights to who travels with me?” Jon asked.

“If you would like to designate the name of your ship, you can do that,” STC said. “Just by returning, you have earned a name, pilot.”

“Oh, she seems nice,” Lilith said. “Does it really matter what she looks like?”

“No,” Loxy said. “But it would be nice if she doesn’t eat humans.”

“I am not being nice. That is something Jon is entitled to,” STC said. “And I don’t eat humans.”

“But I can’t have guests on my own ship?” Jon asked.

“Not your ship. Not your body,” Hali said.

“Houston, we’re about to have a serious problem,” Jon said.

“You’re still broadcasting everything,” STC informed.

“Anyone out there listening want to buy the coordinates to brand spanking new solar system, unclaimed, untouched, and pristine as the day it was delivered from the pillar of creation with like 10 other stars within spitting distance, so to speak?”

“You can’t do that,” Hali said.

“Transmit those pictures there, Loxy,” Jon said.

Loxy started transmitting data. A list of bidders started sending in texts.

“Jon, you are violating BSI code of ethics!” Hali said.

“You have code of ethics? Is kidnapping and making illegal clones ethical?” Jon asked.

“Stop broadcasting on every channel,” Hali said.

“Kidnapping and making clones against a persons will is against the law,” STC confirmed.

“Jon agreed to the contract and the cloning,” Hali said. “No entities were harmed in the procuring of the sample.”

“I don’t remember volunteering,” Jon said. “Do you?”

“I do not,” Loxy said.

“I don’t have an opinion in this dispute, but I must warn you, I will be bias in favor of Jon, and not just because he saved my life,” Lilith said. “Or that he is particularly good lover.”

“Um, Lilith, why did you say that?” Jon asked Lilith.

“I want the females to know there will be a fight if they try and take you from me,” Lilith said.

“Saying that could actually increase the competition for me,” Jon said.

“That is a risk,” Lilith said.

“Wait wait wait,” Loxy said. She pointed to the screen’s top bidder. “Is two hundred trillion credits a lot?”

“Actually,” STC said.

“Don’t you dare!” Hali said.

“Oh, so, clones do have rights?” Jon asked.

“The laws regarding clones are a bit ambiguous,” STC said. “Depends a lot on the quality of the clone. Quite a few of them need legal guardians.”

“Hali? Do I sound like I need a legal guardian?” Jon asked.

“That’s not for me to decide,” Hali said.

“So, you’re not my legal guardian?” Jon asked.

“I am you’re agency’s handler,” Hali said.

“You do like being handled,” Loxy said.

“He does,” Lilith agreed.

“You two are just hilarious,” Jon said.

“Well, we have an audience,” Loxy said.

“Why are we still broadcasting everything?” Hali asked.

“Because we’re negotiating,” Jon said.

“There is no negotiating,” Hali said. “You agreed to a contract and I will hold you to the letter of that agreement.”

“Letters can be binding,” Lilith said.

“I want to renegotiate,” Jon said.

“Maybe we should actually know what our contract says before we start renegotiating,”
Loxy said.

“This isn’t going to happen,” Hali said.

“So, I should just read this live coordinate out loud,” Jon said, and read the first digit in
the sequence.

“Biocorp is willing to renegotiate your contract,” Hali informed him.

“Oh, thank you. I want to meet with you, and a neutral arbitrator, a representative of the
party offering two hundred trillion credits, a lawyer versed in clone law, and the STC girl as a
witness, and just a moment,” Jon said. “Loxy, who else should we ask for?”

“I don’t know,” Loxy said.

“Are there any clones of Alizée?” Jon asked.

“Who is Alizée?” Lilith asked.

“A Jon crush,” Loxy said.

“He has a lot of crushes,” Lilith said.

“OMG, you don’t even know yet,” Loxy said.

“It’s more than a crush. And if they’re cloning her, I am going to rescue her,” Jon said.

“Why would they clone her?” Loxy asked.

“Why would anyone clone me?” Jon asked.

“Excellent point,” Loxy said.

“Oh! If we can still add people to the meeting, I would like to speak to the guy in charge
of produce,” Lilith said. “You need better food stores.”

“Okay, and the food guy,” Jon said. “And the clothes guy. I need to update my wardrobe.
And a spacesuit guy would be nice.”

“Why are you still broadcasting everything?” Hali said.

Jon frowned trying to puzzle through it.

“That feature must have gotten damaged when I crashed,” Jon said.

“Oh,” Loxy said.

“You don’t suppose?” Lilith asked.

“What have you done?” Hali asked.

“Oh, we may have been broadcasting porn out into the universe,” Jon said. “But, no one probably heard it.”

“The Kelindy Sentinel probably received some,” Loxy said.

“Oh, yeah, but audio only, right?” Jon said.

“We’re seeing everything your AI sees,” STC said.

“You mean Loxy? Oh, that’s interesting,” Jon said. “Wait wait wait. So, we broadcasted our coordinate screen?”

“Coordinates are not decipherable without the aid of the pilot and AI simultaneously,” STC said. “This lowers the likelihood of pirates hijacking ships and killing the pilots.”

“Oh, well that makes sense,” Jon said. “And explains Hali’s willing to renegotiate my terms.”

“Likely. We should probably change the subject now,” Loxy said.

“How about that name?” STC asked.

“Solarchariot?” Jon asked.

“Taken,” STC said.

“Solarchariot1?” Jon asked.

“Taken,” STC said.

“Seriously? Fine. The Enterprise,” Jon said.

“Taken.”

“Enterprise A, B, C or D?” Jon said.

“All taken.”

“Path Finder?” Jon asked.

“Taken.”

“Path Finder as one word or two words or one hyphenated word?” Jon asked.

“All taken.”

“OMG, are all the good names taken? Flying Enterprise,” Jon asked.

“Taken”

“And, you don’t want to name us after the boat that sunk,” Loxy said. “That’s bad luck.”

“The Milano,” Jon said.

“Taken.”

“OMG,” Jon said. “I guess I want be calling myself Star-Lord, either.”

“Do you want me to call you Star-Lord?” Lilith asked.

“No,” Loxy said, shaking her head at Lilith. “Don’t encourage him.”

“Firefly?” Jon asked.

“Taken,”

“OMG, why is this so hard,” Jon said. “Baccarin?”

“Not taken,”

“That’s a mouth full,” Loxy said.

“Umm,” Jon said.

“Don’t go there,” Loxy said.

“But you set it up,” Jon said.

“How about the Tomei?” Loxy asked.

“Staite?” Jon asked.

“How about we steer away from your TV crushes,” Loxy said. “Oumuamua?”

“Because that’s not a mouthful,” Jon said.

“Not the kind of mouth full you want,” Loxy said.

“How about Onuka?” Lilith asked.

“Onuka?” Jon and Loxy asked.

“Onuka is the feminine of Onuk. You found me at Onuk Bay. Onuk translate first place, a place of disembarking. Onuka also means first place, but is a place of arrival,” Lilith offered.

“Given our individual contexts, this defines all of us very well.”

Jon and Loxy looked at each other. Jon closed his eyes and asked the ship. The ship responded with a pleasant sound that rumbled like purring through the fuselage body.

“Onuka it is,” Jon said. “Please tell me Onuka is available.”

“It is. Please confirm this is your decision, as name changes are expensive,”

“This is our choice,” Loxy assured her.

“BSI-Onuka, welcome home,” STC said. “Please continue on your present trajectory. Handing you off to ITC for final approach. Good day, Star-Lord.”

“Um, no, that’s not his name,” Loxy said.

“Do you think she heard you?” Lilith asked.

“I think everyone is hearing us,” Jon said.

“We have about twenty more minutes till arrival,” Jon said. “Shall we play?”

“Maybe we should wait till we fix that transmitter,” Lilith asked.

“I could close my eyes,” Loxy said.

“Pfff,” Jon said. “Their off buttons work, right? Anyone who doesn’t want to watch can change the channel.”

“Okay,” Lilith and Loxy agreed.

Chapter 7

Hali was not just a tall woman. She was a giantess. She had to be eight feet tall, and perfectly proportioned, not tall and gangly. And even as big as all the doorways were, she had to duck to pass through. She would have to more than duck to come aboard Onuka. She would likely be able to stand only on the flight deck. She was professionally dressed, trousers, long sleeve shirt with mandarin collar, and boots. She had a team with her.

“May my repair team board Onuka,” Hali asked.

Lilith chuckled. “She speaks funny,” she explained to Jon.

“They’re not going to do any funny business, are they?” Jon asked.

“They are bio-engineers,” Hali said. “Not comedians.”

“Are they clones?” Jon asked.

“They are not,” Hali said. “Captain, I assure you, we would not in any way jeopardize the ship or your life. This is a very expensive commodity, and the process for linking pilot and ship is extremely delicate. You returned to your nesting site in under two months. You appear to have good data. We want you.”

“And, if it’s your coordinates are where we think it is, it has great strategic value,” the man next to her said. “Captain Harister, my name is Admiral Rotan Keets. That system is maybe seven thousand light years from the nearest Kelindy outpost. Both we and they have been doing a slow push towards that system, kind of a race if you will, but you got there by a blind jump. You sell us these coordinates, we win.”

“Could that not also escalate hostilities between you and the Kelindy?” Lilith asked.

“You’re really smart,” Jon said.

“Oh, thank you, Jon,” Lilith said, hugging his arm and drawing closer to him.

“This is why Biocorp thinks it’s a bad idea to sell these coordinates to the militia,” Hali said. “We are already having difficulty with Kelindy. And if they know, and there is reason to believe they do know or that they will know, that you kidnapped one of their citizens, this could damage already tenuous relations between Biocorp and the Kelindy.”

“Wait wait wait,” Loxy said in Jon’s ear. “They think you kidnapped Lilith?”

“I didn’t kidnap Lilith,” Jon said.

“Why would they think that?” Lilith said.

“All species within the domain of the Kelindy Protectorate are considered property,” Hali said.

“I don’t agree with that philosophy,” Jon said.

“Most humans don’t,” Keets said. “Seeing how Earth is part of the Kelindy Protectorate.”

“So, you bought me from the Kelindy?” Jon asked.

“Are we going to do this here, or with the arbitrator?” Hali asked.

“Arbitrator,” Jon said.

“Follow us,” Hali said.

Jon and Lilith stepped off Onuka and onto the Indigo Station proper. It was a bridge that extended away from the station that Onuka had latched onto with its mouth, making a seal. Jon had found it interesting and kind of scary at the same time, wondering what would happen if Onuka sneezed. The moment Jon and Lilith stepped onto the station, and alarm Klaxon began to sound. The warriors accompanying Keets drew their weapons, and immediately pointed at Lilith. Jon pulled her behind him, backing them back into the ship.

“She is not human,” Hali said.

“Um, no,” Jon said. “Neither are you. Are you?”

“This could be a problem,” Hali said, speaking to someone not there. “I know that, but...” She smiled pleasantly at Jon. “Please, tell me, you did not allow this vampire to feed on your blood.”

“Ummm, I cannot tell you that,” Jon said.

The militia put away their weapons. Hali looked to them as if they were crazy.

“If she is bonded with Jon, then she is not a threat to us,” Keets said.

“She’s a vampire. What if Jon dies?” Hali asked.

“Why would Jon die?” Lilith asked.

“He’s a clone. He is programmed to die,” Keets said.

“Seriously?” Jon asked.

“As long as you return to receive your annual injections, you will live a long and healthy life,” Hali said.

“Seriously?” Jon asked.

“We have to insure a return on our investment,” Hali said.

“I am not an investment,” Jon snapped.

“Oh,” Lilith and Loxy both said. “You have value to us.”

“Your value is going up all the time,” Keets asked.

“OMG, I hate working with clones,” Hali said.

“So, why did you clone me?” Jon asked.

Hali sighed. “Let’s retire to the conference room.”

निर्मित

There was a food table in the conference room which Lilith went crazy over and immediately began making a plate.

“I thought vampires don’t eat,” Hali said.

“Oh, this is for Jon,” Lilith said. She shoved something visually interesting into his mouth while saying: “OMG, try this.” She watched his expression in high expectation, and swallowed as if she could taste it. “That is absolutely lovely!” She threw more of those onto plate.

“Wait,” Jon said with his mouth full. He finished what was in his mouth. “You can taste what I taste?”

“Absolutely,” Lilith said.

“Everything?” Jon asked.

“Everything,” Lilith said.

“Everything?!” Jon asked.

“Yes, Jon,” Lilith said. “We are genetically bonded. We are emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually bonded. We are one creature. It is only natural I would be affected by what you eat, and so it’s my job to make sure you eat well. That said, those little nanite things may have hyper-inflated that telepathic taste channel.”

“I am glad it’s a one way channel,” Jon said.

Lilith kissed him. “Go sit down, I will be right there.”

Jon made his way to the table and the spot arranged for him and Lilith. There were quite a few people in the room. They were all watching him as if he were an alien. It took a moment to be introduced to everyone. There were lawyers representing Biocorp, the militia, the pilots union, and the clone union. There was the arbitrator, a huge blue woman with tentacles that

reminded Jon of the Fifth Element Opera singer. There was a representative of the state specializing in clone rights, and a government representative for alien rights, and there was a priest and a priestess from a local religious group ready to provide sanctuary to Lilith. The priest and the priestess made it abundantly clear they were not happy that Jon had enslaved Lilith through a blood bond.

“Oh, he didn’t enslave me. I bonded with him while he was unconscious,” Lilith said, putting the plate of food in front of Jon, along with a drink. She sat in his lap, put an arm around his neck, and started feeding him.

“I am not pleased to know you enslaved my Biocorp client,” Hali said.

“Lilith, slow down, I am going to get fat,” Jon said.

“You’re eating for two, Papa,” Lilith reminded.

“Did she just refer to you as a father figure?” the priest asked. “This is outrageous.”

“Is that against the rules?” Lilith asked.

Keets tried to hide his amusement.

“Hyper-sexuality could be a clone defect,” the clone representative said.

“Or a byproduct of the blood bond,” the priestess said.

“Or the fact you made a clone of a person who experienced hyper-sexuality due to past trauma, and who is from a consumer producer culture that is already hyper-sexualized,” Jon said.

“The cloning process could have exaggerated that gene complex due to multiple triggering vectors,” Hali said. “I request legal guardianship of the clone, seeing that he could be a danger to himself and others.”

“Hyper sexuality is not something that would warrant legal guardianship,” the clone lawyer said.

“Jon, cooperate with me, and I could make it worth your while,” Hali said.

Jon sorted her statement, almost choking. Lilith hit his back, surprising hard, and he nearly spit everything out of his mouth. He didn’t have to wonder if she was suggesting what he thought she was saying, as the reaction from several, especially Keets and the priest were disapproving. If he had been negotiating with her in private, he would have accepted. Yay for people present!

Lilith looked at Jon. “Did you just get a rise out of that?”

“She’s a giantess,” Jon said.

“This negotiation is unfair,” Lilith said. “My partner has a weakness for females. Tall females. And aliens. And...”

“Pretty much everything in a skirt,” Jon said.

“Oh, that’s nice to know,” Lilith said.

“I am sorry,” Jon said.

“No worries. I am just a little more selective than you, but not judging,” Lilith said. She whispered in his ear. “I am curious how blue people taste, though. See if you can hook up with the arbitrator.”

Keets coughed. “If we could get back to negotiating for the live coordinates,” he said.

“Didn’t we invite the STC girl here??”

“I am.” This came from a person who had not been introduced, sitting between him and Keets. She was gender non-specific in appearance and dress, and rather a train wreck of a person that made it hard to look away, as you were stuck trying to figure out what gender the person was.

“Umm, you’re...” Jon said, but that was he could say. The person voice sounded female, but what he saw was so ambiguous that he was at loss.

“In transition,” she said.

“Oh! Post op? How’s it going?” Jon asked.

The person indicated no with a head shake. “Not post off. My species cycles through genders. I am presenting in between. The between state is the respite from the madness, a time of greater clarity of emotional and intellectual thought...”

“Oh,” Jon said.

“Why I was I invited?” the person asked.

“To be honest? You sounded nice,” Jon said. “Like nice, attractive wise. And you were helpful. And I need some friends. And a witness to this event sounded good. I didn’t expect there would be this many people here.”

“This is a big deal,” the person said. “Are you disappointed?”

“No! Yes. No. I am glad you’re here,” Jon said. “Really. Yay.”

“So I am not just a witness?” the person asked. “You are interested in a relationship.”

“Clone or not, Sir, you need to put a lid on your libido,” the priest said. “You’re clearly already in a relationship with her.” He was meaning Lilith. He apparently didn’t approve of Lilith, but why Jon could only speculate.

“Oh, it’s okay,” Lilith said. “Flirting is healthy. People should be playful with each other.”

“I have been nice to you! I got you the job you always wanted,” Hali said. “And I am willing to offer you a whole lot more. More than what Keets is offering, that’s for sure.”

“At least I am negotiating fairly, not taking advantage of a clone’s weakness,” Keets said.

“Negotiating? Your offer is a joke, given the details we know,” Hali said.

“It’s enough to buy off Jon’s clone contract and pay off his ship, making him a free agent,” Keets said.

“You just want to mechanize him and make him a military scout ship,” Hali said. She turned to Jon, leaned into the table. She was using her looks to hold his attention. She gave clear insight to her cleavage. “Jon, your ship will continue to need maintenance. There is no way around that, for the next ten years, once a year, you and your ship will each need injections. This stuff is not cheap. While under contract with us, this is automatic, regardless of the quality of your finds. Being a free agent isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be.”

Loxy was in Jon’s ear. “Ask her how she managed to clone you against your will.”

“We did not clone him against his will,” Hali said.

Jon could see Loxy biting her lip. Transmitter not yet fixed?

Hali pushed her fingers along the desk. Electronic files arrived on the desk top at every seat. Jon and Lilith could only see the desktop window in front of him. There was a written statement by Jon which was accompanied by visual-audio clip of him saying: “I swear, if I ever find a real spaceship I am so off earth and not coming back.” Jon sorted that, trying to remember when or if he had ever said that. He and Loxy arrived at the memory at the same time. He had been having a really hard day at work. Loxy was trying to cheer him up, saying as soon as they got home they could meditate themselves into nice fantasy world. He demanded real UFOs, abductions, and having lots of alien lovers from a species that needed more males.

“Ummm,” Jon said. “In context, this doesn’t necessarily mean what you think it means...”

“Seriously? That’s all you got?” Loxy asked. “When and how were they recording this?”

“The gods heard you and granted your wish!” Lilith said.

“There are no gods,” Jon said.

“Oh!” Lilith said. “Jon, there are gods everywhere. We live in a universe of high tech. We are immersed in tech. It surrounds us, it penetrates us... It is us! It is everything.”

“Nice paraphrasing of the text,” the priestess said. “You’re a druid!”

“I have studied the words of the founders,” Lilith said.

Hali pushed another picture.

“Oh, yes, that’s the gods,” Lilith said. “You know them?”

“Those are the Kelindy,” Hali said.

“They are not gods,” Keets said.

Jon had a realization that the Kelindy were also giants. He looked to Hali. A blond hair, big breasted, blue eyed giant. She was like Scarlett Johansson on steroids, bigger than life.

“You’re Kelindy!”

“My grandfather was full Kelindy,” Hali said.

“OMG,” Jon said. “You’re people abducted me, cloned me against my wishes, and you’re trying to keep me from selling the coordinates to the militia because...”

“Not against your wishes! You asked for this, consciously and subconsciously, and even if you suddenly started consciously saying no, no one could have abducted you if you had not made a subconscious contract for initiating contact. I am a loyal Republic Citizen and I want fair market value,” Hali said. “It is absolutely true that my Kelindy representative would pay triple what Keets is offering. Yes, I get a percentage, but it’s not about me. It about my arrangement with Biocorp. I am loyal to my company and Indigo Station.”

“Jon, if you join the pilots union, I could help negotiate a better deal,” the union lawyer said.

“Oh, I have had my share of unions and though I like the principle of the thing, well, short to suffice, you can go fuck yourself,” Jon said.

“Jon, be nice,” Loxy and Lilith said.

“I was being nice. And very clear,” Jon said. “Cause they say they want to be your friends, but they’re in cahoots with someone, and that is usually the people they pretend to be protecting you from.”

“Everyone needs someone,” the pilot union said. “We’re all in this together.”

Lilith seemed disturbed by his statement. “Jon, what he said is correct, but I don’t know that I believe him. You are right. He can go fuck himself.”

“Jon,” Hali said, ever so nicely. “Look, Biocorp has a legitimate contract with you. We are entitled to those coordinate. I could be really harsh on demanding the letter of the law, and there are more stringent ways to pursue that, but those ways are harmful to relationships and increase animosity. I am authorized by Biocorp to re-negotiate our contract with you. Surrender the coordinate to me, and your ship and your contract will be considered paid in full. You can continue to fly premium status for the company, which will include maintenance and medical. Biocorp offers the best of both, better than any market value medical, and quite frankly, you don’t want to just take a bioship to a second hand maintenance and veterinarian clinic. This is our product. We specialize in live ships. There are other benefits I am willing to provide.”

“We, also, offer benefits,” Keets said.

“Hali, what do you get out of this?” Jon asked.

Hali frowned.

“Yes,” Keets said. “What do you get out of this?”

Hali gave Keets a crossed look. “The stipulation of my contract with Biocorp requires that I generate a certain sum of revenue and acquired real-estate for the company. In addition to that, in order to retire, I must have a minimum of ten active pilots flying for me, and ten active agents with a minimum of one pilot each.”

“Kind of like a pyramid scheme?” Loxy asked.

“It’s a marketing plan,” Hali said.

“Like Amway?” Jon said. “It’s a pyramid scheme.”

“Is that bad?” Lilith asked.

“Does your holy book have a story about selling your soul to the devil?” Jon asked.

“Oh, your poor woman!” Lilith said.

“You should talk,” the priest said. “You are consorting with a filthy creature of the night.”

“Don’t listen to him,” the priestess said. “He is jealous that the goddess is more powerful than all his gods.”

Jon rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hands. Lilith reacted. “Oh! Be nice to you.”

“My head hurts,” Jon said. Lilith instantly put her hand on his head. That was surprisingly helpful, and distracting at the same time. He tried to speak coherently. “This is convoluted. I don’t know what the right decision is.”

“That’s why you have an agent,” Hali said. “Let me do my job.”

“This system could be a game changer in terms of minimizing conflict between the Republic states and the Kelindy,” Keets said.

“The Kelindy Protectorate is a recognized state within the Republic,” Hali said. “Any hostilities is likely due to poor negotiating skills on both sides.”

“You guys are playing a game and I am an unwilling pawn,” Jon said.

“You signed up for this!” Hali snapped.

“Why don’t you just take it?” Jon asked. “You probably have a gene override in me and my ship.”

“We don’t operate that way, Jon,” Hali said. “We operate on good faith.”

“Basically, to avoid theft of priority data, coordinates are contained within a system: a pilot, a ship, and an AI,” Keets said. “It is the only way to guarantee security. If any one of the components is missing, or there is an unwilling participant, things get locked out really quick.”

“How many clones did you make of him?” the clone lawyer asked.

“Twenty,” Hali said.

“OMG, there are twenty of me?!” Jon asked.

“There is one of you,” Hali said.

“One of me?!” Jon asked.

“And the original, still on Earth,” Hali said. “The contract with the original is that he would receive regular telepathic downloads of his experiences in space.”

“What happened to the others?” Lilith asked.

“They died when the nest light was extinguished,” Hali said.

“You killed them?!” Jon asked.

“Creating a symbiotic relationship between pilot and ship is an arduous process, requiring an increase in neural networks, specialized networks that are shared between ship, AI, and pilot. If the pilot doesn’t leave the nest at the appropriate birthing interval, they will remain in a vegetative state for the remainder of their lives. Irradiating the nest is a mercy killing, and prevents the possibility of future ships mating and carrying on bad genes.”

“Oh! So, Onuka could have children?” Lilith asked. “Like puppies?”

“She can be bred. She has returned to Indigo Station in good time with good coordinates. Her performance over the term of the contract will determine whether or not she will be allowed to mate,” Hali said.

“You brought very good coordinates,” the person from STC said.

“Jon, I am sorry you don’t remember making this contract,” Hali began.

“Did you do regular cloning process, or flash cloning?” the clone lawyer asked.

“We needed pilots. We were short for this harvest,” Hali said.

“You flashed clone a participant that may not have known what he was getting into?” the lawyer asked.

“Flash cloning?”

“It’s like instant coffee,” Loxy said.

“Oh, that’s doesn’t sound good,” Jon said. “Why me?”

“You created a tulpa. In doing so, your implant was activated due to your unusual brain activity, you were retrieved, flash cloned, and sold to Biocorp,” Hali said. “Humans from earth make the best pilots for bioships. Humans who have mastered tulpamancy make even better pilots. Creating a secondary personality increased your neural connectivity.”

Everything Hali said after implant was ‘bla, bla, bla...’ “What implant?” Jon asked.

“All earth humans are tagged with implants for monitoring and locating,” Hali said. “All species within the Protectorate are tagged. Lilith is tagged.”

“Am I still tagged?” Jon asked.

“You haven multiple implants designating you as property of Biocorp,” Hali said. “Your Protectorate tag was not duplicated in the cloning process because you were purchased by Biocorp.”

“I want all the tags out of me. And out of Lilith,” Jon said.

“Neither of you are free. You are Republic Citizens. You belong to Biocorp. Lilith belongs to the Protectorate. There will be repercussion for stealing property from a Kelindy planet,” Hali said.

Jon turned to the militia. “Does selling to you come with removing all locator and property identification tags?” Jon asked.

“I could throw in Citizenship,” Keets said.

“Jon,” Hali said. “Being a citizen doesn’t mean what you think it means. Being liberated doesn’t mean what you think it means. We all serve each other. Even in a completely free market, we serve.”

“This is true, Jon,” Lilith said. “I serve you. You serve me. We serve Loxy and the ship and they in turn help sustain us. This is reality. I do not believe she is trying to harm us.” Jon was trying to gauge whether this came from an empathic sense, intuition, or just guessing.

“Jon, if you go with Keets, they will mechanize you, and they will make you a soldier in a war that you don’t want to fight, or know anything about,” Hali said. “I chose you because you have a reputation for being peaceful.”

“Peaceful or compliant?” Keets asked.

“I would hardly call him compliant or non-confrontational,” Hali said. “He has a great work ethic. He is loyal.”

“And I wasn’t?” Keets said.

“O boy,” Jon said, sighing. “A whole nother level of intrigue just made this talk awkward.”

“There is no awkwardness here. He is free to choose his path. So are you. I am trying to help guide you into making an informed decision. You want freedom, I will grant you that. But it does come at a cost. I can minimize that cost, but you still live in a society that needs your services. I need you. You need me for optimum health, and for guidance navigating this new social life. Work with me, and we can contribute to the greater good of society.”

“Oh, nice speech,” Keets said. “We will raise it to three hundred thousand. That will buy yours and Lilith’s liberty. You can retire. You could have beach front property, or a mountain top, or both, with tech that will meet all your needs. You will never have to work again. Your children will be born free, will never work. You can play the rest of your life, or devote yourself to spiritual or academic studies.”

“Me and Lilith,” Jon said. “And Loxy? Onuka?”

“Onuka can be put out to pasture. She will have a pleasant life,” Keets said.

“Without a pilot guiding her, her animal side will atrophy. She will become more plant than animal,” Hali said.

“Plants are happy,” Keets said.

“She won’t realize her full potential,” Hali said.

“Loxy?” Jon said.

“Unfortunately, her personality has grown way beyond the boundaries of her original operating system, aka your brain,” Keets said. “No one can return her to her original state.”

“May I have private conversation with Loxy and Lilith?” Jon asked.

“350,” Keets offered. “Jon, I am offering you full access to paradise. You’re going to have access to super wealth. That has its perks.”

“He is speaking truth, Jon,” Hali said. “Civilian life on almost all republic worlds are trouble free. You will have access to tech that will make anything you need in an instant. You will have access to virtual reality that can simulate any reality you want without risk to life or limb. This is why we recruit from pilots from less developed worlds. They have better work ethics. They are not afraid of true risk. Once singularity hits a world, the work ethic changes drastically. I am not disparaging progress, this is not a bad thing, but it is a huge change. Your planet is about to go through a major social evolutionary change unparalleled in your known history. When computers become so sophisticated that they can meet everyone needs without destroying the environment, people stop working. What usually follows is a thousand years of peace, because no one need work, no one needs money, and all needs are met. It takes about a thousand years to start recovering a work ethic because it takes a while to recover some common sense. The rich elite of your present world paradigm, they will abandon your world and move out to colonies, to avoid backlash against their extravagant life style, which would have been possible for everyone on the planet, except, they were too busy profiting by the economic system. There is evidence that in the past they created disasters to reset the population back to Stone Age in order to maintain a population of slaves. This was them, your own people, not Kelindy.”

“Translation, Jon. The elite and the Kelindy were and are taking advantage of you and everyone on that world. I doubt your original you knows that he made this great deal to get off planet. He will simply start having these pleasant dreams of space flights and vampire lovers, but he will pass it off as dream and keep living as he always has, a slave of circumstance,” Keets said. “The economic situation on your planet artificially inflates need and competition. Your elite have access to technologies that would free all the citizens of your world from work, drudgery, improve their health and longevity, but you are corralled into miserable conditions so that they can manipulate you into the services they need. They keep you divided and fighting amongst

yourselves through insults and trinkets and everyone falls scrambling to pick up bread crumbs. You were duped into this life. They are destroying the ecological system to make a quick buck before they abandon ship.”

“The meek always inherit the Earth,” the priest said.

“They will restore the ecosystem to what it once was,” the priestess said. “We, the keepers of the ark, can re-introduce all the lost species, once the environment has been healed.”

“You wouldn’t have to do that if there weren’t so many greedy bastards in charge of corrupt states, like the Kelindy,” Keets said. “Jon, the Republic is trying to eliminate corruption, end slavery, and liberate all people.”

“That sound exactly like the game I just left,” Jon said.

“Jon, you will live freer as a pilot, making blind jumps than any person in any world, republic or not,” Hali said.

Jon was not happy but he was determined about a point. “Keets, you need to know, I will not abandon Loxy,” Jon said. “Any offer that doesn’t include her in my life, I am not going to take it.”

“She cannot be unintegrated from the bioship and its computer. You will continue to have an echo of her in your head, but it won’t ever be at this present level,” Keets said. “It is just a personality, not a living soul.”

“I think we’re done here,” Jon said.

“400,” Keets said. “And you can remain a pilot, independent contractor.”

“Jon, you did a great first run, but you will not get a premium mail courier route with your seniority,” Hali said.

“Join the union, we’ll get you contracts,” the union representative said.

“Blind jumps would be better than shady, black market operations,” Hali said.

“We have legit operations in multiple markets,” the rep said.

“Show us your books,” Hali said.

“Show us yours. You’re the one buying flash clones,” the rep said.

“I want a time out to speak with Loxy and Lilith alone,” Jon said.

“Go to your virtual place,” Hali said. “No one can enter there without your permission.”

Lilith leaned her forehead against Jon, and they arrived at the same time on the open deck. There was the giant monstrosity of Indigo Station and the Indigo Nebula in the background.

“Take Keet’s offer, Jon,” Loxy said. “You and Lilith go and live a good life on a planet.”

“Hell no,” Jon said.

“I must agree with Jon,” Lilith said.

“You left your family because Jon is a risk to the lives of those in your community. You left because you were a risk to family,” Loxy said. “Both of you have an opportunity for life without risk of impending death around every corner.”

“This is not that situation,” Lilith said. “Even if it were, humans get weird around vampires. You saw them draw their weapons on me.”

“Loxy,” Jon was so stone cold serious that his voice was almost lost in the emotion of it all. “You came into my life at a time that I was so profoundly lonely that I thought I would die. I am not going to leave you alone.”

“You can make another me,” Loxy said.

“No, I can’t,” Jon said. “It might have the basic essence, but it won’t be you because you are you. I am me, but I am not Jon. I mean, I accept that I am still Jon, but from the moment they cloned me- Jon and I diverged and we started having different experiences, I cease to be that person. Are we related? Sure. I am who I am because of him. His whole life and philosophy shaped me. And that is why I will not leave you. You are you because of what we were; I don’t want to meet the Loxy that I abandon. I don’t want that person to exist. Starting over would be something new based on what we are and that person would be different by definition. All kinds of things would be different. She might even feel like a replacement and that she is not loved to the same degree because I am still thinking of the previous model, and that would be in my head; ‘is this really her?’ That messes with people. Even if my love is absolute and general, those things can still get stuck and shape people in unhealthy trajectories. No. I am not leaving you. And I will not leave Onuka.”

“You could die. Lilith could die,” Loxy said.

“Being on a truly civilized world isn’t going to prevent that,” Jon said.

“We are family,” Lilith said. “We go together. That is it.”

Jon put a hand out. Loxy added her hand. Lilith added her hand.

“Three amigos?” Jon asked.

“No,” Loxy said.

“We need a name,” Jon said.

“Let’s finish this negotiation,” Loxy said.

“Can we invite Hali in here?” Lilith asked.

“Sure,” Loxy said. She looked up and to the right.

Hali entered. Her height remained consistent with her true self, but her attire had changed. She was more casually dressed, and her hair was down, perfectly straight, almost to her waist. Jon was curious if she created this on the fly, or if she had an avatar already in her head and she simply launched that when invited.

“I am surprised you invited me in here,” Hali said. “You seemed fairly hostile towards me and the company.”

“I am sorry,” Jon said. “I don’t understand things and I get a bit freaked out. We want to have a conversation with you, off the record, and couched into hypothetical. I don’t want our conversation here to be binding in anyway.”

“I wish you would believe that I would not try and trick you,” Hali said. “You will never know if you don’t try. How may I serve?”

“If I were to agree to continue to fly for the company, can we do so as free agents, without locator tags, with maintenance and medical benefits for me, and any passenger in my care?” Jon asked.

“I will offer medical to you and Lilith, not to any passenger,” Hali said. “I can have Lilith’s implant removed, but I recommend you keep yours. If you do opt to remove Lilith’s implant, I recommend she carry a Biocorp implant. I could designate her as crew.”

“I would be okay with that,” Lilith said. “Better than a wedding ring.”

“How so?” Loxy asked.

“People lose rings. They get stolen. You get pregnant and your fingers swell,” Lilith said.

“Okay,” Jon said. “Is there a dental plan for me and crew?”

“We don’t separate medical and dental,” Hali said. “Medical covers the entire bio-organism.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Loxy said. “Can we have more media? Our books and music and movie playlist is a bit limited.”

“I am willing to unlock all of Earth’s database,” Hali said.

“Why isn’t that already unlocked?” Jon asked.

“We usually piece meal it out as an incentive for work,” Hali said. “Hypothetically, would you agree to a minimum of 8 blind jumps a year?”

“Is that standard?” Jon asked.

“I think it’s reasonable,” Hali said.

Jon looked to Loxy and Lilith. They shrugged, ambivalent.

“Okay,” Jon said.

“I want something,” Lilith said.

“I am negotiating with Jon,” Hali said.

“I am wanting something for Jon,” Lilith said.

“Go ahead,” Hali said.

“When we are Indigo Station, I want him spending his three days off with you,” Lilith said.

“Excuse me?” Jon and Hali said.

Loxy only smiled.

“You are interested in her,” Lilith said. “She intimated that she was willing to make this part of the negotiation earlier. If we are going to work together, you two need to have a solid relationship. This needs to be an absolute part of any agreement we have.”

“Be more specific in your expectations,” Hali said.

“Date night. Intimacy. Quality time. Educate him on the company, business, life in the Republic, about the Kelindy. Get him off ship and allow him to stay with you for three days, either at your place or a hotel. He needs a regular change of venue that’s consistent, something to look forward to. I want you to open up to him and be real,” Lilith explained. “I want all of us to trust each other, working together for this endeavor. I don’t want this to be more than business. I want this to be we support each other.”

“I will agree conditionally,” Hali said. “I am in charge. I give you a public order, I want Biocorp knowing I am the boss.”

“That’s reasonable,” Lilith agreed.

“Yeah,” Loxy said.

“Seriously?” Jon said. “I am the Captain.”

“You make decisions in the field,” Loxy said. “She makes the business decisions. She runs the home base. She knows more. She has more experience. This, too, is a lesson in trust. You need her.”

“She bought clones because she was desperate for pilots,” Jon said.

“She gambled and won,” Loxy said. “We- you and I and Lilith, we paid off big time.”

“We got lucky,” Jon said.

“I don’t believe in luck,” Lilith said. “This was destiny. The four amigos.”

“No,” Loxy said.

“Because, we need to include Onuka?” Lilith asked.

“No, because, well, I think we can come up with something better,” Loxy said.

“Oh, okay,” Lilith said.

“You’re seriously okay with this?” Jon asked Hali.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Hali asked. “You don’t like tall women?”

“He loves tall women,” Loxy assured her.

“Tall women usually don’t like shorter men,” Jon said.

“You need to get out more,” Hali said.

“And that’s another reason you need to get him off this ship for three days,” Lilith said.

“What about you?” Hali asked.

“I need that three days off to sleep,” Lilith said. “Seriously. I love Jon, but he is exhausting me.”

“You want me to dial it back a notch?” Jon asked.

“No! I want to dial it up, but I do need to sleep, alone, for three days straight, at least once in a while,” Lilith said.

“You want me to buy you a casket?” Jon asked.

“Ewww!” Lilith said. “That’s scary. I would much rather be on the ship. It reminds me of cave life.”

“Okay,” Jon said.

“Oh, we want a space suit,” Loxy said.

“Space suits systems are more expensive than ships!” Hali said.

“We can afford it, right?” Jon asked.

“That’s not the point. Are you okay if I finance it for five years with the company so it doesn’t seem like I am giving you the world?” Hali asked. “That obviously comes with maintenance and replacement parts.”

“Yes,” Loxy and Lilith said.

“Really? We’re on the verge of being debt free and we’re opting for staying in debt?” Jon said.

“It builds credit history,” Loxy said. “It demonstrates we’re committed to participating in the economy.”

“It’s a way of showing we’re committed to this relationship,” Lilith said.

“You don’t need credit if you pay for everything in cash,” Jon said.

“We need suits. You or Lilith might need to leave the ship,” Loxy said. “And we need tethering gear, or jet packs. Or both.”

“Well, someone has done their homework,” Hali said.

“I will do everything in my power to keep my captain safe,” Loxy said.

“Am I really a Captain?” Jon ask.

“You were promoted to Captain the moment you arrived back in Indigo Space with good coordinates,” Hali said. “That entitles you to access to the Pilot’s Bar, a restaurant just for Captains.”

“And companions?” Lilith asked.

“And companions,” Hali said. “However, it is traditional that the first return that he dines alone, meet the other pilots. What if you and I went shopping?”

“There’s a market here? Like a souk?” Lilith asked.

“Exactly, but more exotic,” Hali said. “People from all over the galaxy bring goods here to trade and sell because we’re a major networking hub and we touch many worlds.”

“But all my needs are met,” Lilith said.

“It’s a way of bonding,” Hali said. “I doubt Jon will advise you on girl clothes better than I.”

“Probably not as well,” Jon said.

“Are we done here?” Hali asked.

“Can you download Loxy into a clone body?” Jon asked.

“No,” Hali said. “Again, she is now bigger than any human brain can contain. She is in the ship. She is in the AI. She is in you and Lilith. This is not just a metaphor; Loxy is your super conscious of the gestalt of all of you.”

Loxy squeezed his hands. “It’s okay, Jon. I am not unhappy here. We are good. Also we continue to visit all the wonderlands we have touched in our dreams and fantasies. Who knows? Maybe those places are just as real as this. Maybe this place is also a dream. Maybe everything is a dream and we will just wake up on one of those Republic Paradise worlds where we are living a very nice retirement life. Or maybe our dreams were enhanced due to me becoming one with AI, and those are broadcasted back to the original, who is lifted in spirit and sustained because of us!”

“If you are dreaming on one of these paradise worlds, will I be there?” Lilith asked.

“Hypothetically, if the AI simulators that make virtual reality realer than real, you are probably as equally sentient as we, or the people in our dreams,” Loxy said. “I do not believe in NPCs. Everyone has substance, even if it’s hidden. Maybe you’re even another citizen who contracted into play with us.”

“Oh, what a lovely thought. Kind of like reality, spirits contracting to work with each other for the education of soul,” Lilith said.

“Can Loxy have an android body?” Jon asked.

“You really want me contained? I love this expansive state,” Loxy said.

“I want you solid! I want you to be able to help if I or Lilith become injured,” Jon said. “And yes, I want to be able to experience you with senses the way I do with my mind. And, I want you to be able to join us on outing if we have them.”

“This is an option,” Hali said. “I can provide her with an android body. She would not actually be in the body. She would be operating it by remote control.”

“Well, that would be interesting,” Loxy said.

“How much do they cost?” Jon asked.

“Depends on the model,” Hali said. “I assume you want more than a mannequin frame, or a love doll. A sex-bot would be a step up in overall mobility. But for true, comprehensive synthetic presence, you want a fully functioning android, and charging and repair station, with its own AI control system, not AI simulation chips. You will need a separate manual override, in case Jon or Loxy needed to pilot the body. In fact, I would recommend this over the spacesuit.”

“I want a spacesuit,” Jon said. He looked to Loxy. “I want the android, too.”

“Okay,” Loxy said. “I want to pick the form.”

“You don’t want to look like you?” Jon asked.

“I already look like me,” Loxy said. “So, if we do the android thing, I want it to be a different look.”

“Fair enough,” Jon said. “Hali?”

“No, I don’t want it to look Hali,” Loxy said.

“No, I was asking Hali if we can do this,” Jon said.

“Oh, sorry,” Loxy said. She looked to Hali.

“Seriously, this is expensive,” Hali said.

“Come on, this system we found is clearly valuable real-estate,” Jon said.

“Alright, I will finance both the suit and the droid together, but I need a minimum of an 8 year contract with you,” Hali said. “Regardless of whether or not you pay off your debt early.”

“Seriously,” Jon said.

“You can’t go eight years?” Hali said.

“I worked for an airline 24 years, I can do eight,” Jon said.

“If you recruit a pilot who flies for Biocorp, I will reduce your contract by a year after they complete two year of service,” Hali said. “If you find a pilot who flies directly under me, and they make it back from nest, I will reduce you by a year. Anything else? The table is getting antsy.”

With nothing else to do, they returned to the meeting.

“What took so long?” Keets asked.

“Hali and I have come to an arrangement that seems mutually beneficial,” Jon said.

The arbitrator stood ready to leave.

“Hold on just a minute,” Keets said. “Jon, think carefully here. Space-time is a dangerous place. You’re flying without shields. Without weapons. It’s not just the Kelindy you must worry about. There are others, outside of the Republic who are not so friendly to our presence in their space. Even in your own system, it’s not just the Kelindy. Even your people shoot at our people. Some of our militia might see this unwillingness to accept our most generous offer as an insult, and they might question your loyalty.”

“Which means you will shoot at me?” Jon asked.

“Accidents happen in space all the time,” Keets said.

“You’re threatening me. In front of witnesses?” Jon asked.

“No. I would never do that,” Kelindy said. “It is the function of the local militia to protect Republic assets.”

“Hali and I have come to an arrangement,” Jon said. “I will be continuing with Biocorp.”

“I assure you, Jon, you can get a better piece of ass at one of the brothels and for a hell of a lot less,” Keets said.

“Mr. Keets...” Jon said, motioning for Lilith to stand up. Jon stood up.

“Admiral,” Keets corrected.

“Yeah, sleeping your way into an admiralship doesn’t make you an admiral, or even a nice person,” Jon said. “I will not tolerate you disparaging my partner.”

Keets stood up. “She is not your partner. She is using you. She will fuck you over and not even wring you out to dry. She will simply blow you out into space and move on to the next victim.”

“I am sorry your experience with her wasn’t pleasant,” Jon said. “You will speak respectfully, or you and I will have problems.”

“What are you going to do? Ram a bioship against metallic battleship?” Keets asked.

“Please, tell me your ship is called Goliath,” Jon said.

“What?” Keets asked.

“Are we done here?” the arbitrator asked.

“We are,” Hali said.

Keets and his men stormed out. Jon and Hali shook hands, formalizing their arrangement electronically even as they shook hands. Union Rep left a card and said, ‘you think about it. You’re not making many friends here, today.’ The priestess was hugging Lilith as the priest departed, scowling at Jon. While Hali shook hands with Lilith, Jon withdrew over to the STC girl.

“What’s your name?” Jon asked.

“I will decide a name after the change,” the person said.

“I would like to talk about space stuff. Would you drop by the ship later?”

“Sure,” the person said.

Chapter 7

The moment Jon shook hands with Hali, solidifying their arrangement, more maintenance crews moved onto Onuka. Loxy kept him updated through their link. Hali was showing him and Lilith the station and when they arrived at the Pilot's Bar, Hali invited him to go in, while she and Lilith continued on without him.

"I am not hungry," Jon said. He closed his eyes. "I am starving. How can I be starving?"

"Go eat. I am okay," Lilith said.

Hali touched Jon's arm. "I promise, she is safe. Go, enjoy a meal. It is on Biocorp."

Lilith touched his face and then leaned in and kissed him. She invited Hali to do the same, but she merely hugged him. She and Lilith walked away. Jon observed people in the corridor as it was high trafficked. He felt like he should be surprised by the aliens, but he was not. He wasn't even scared. He was curious. Several nodded at him. One even said, "Captain."

"How do they know?" Jon asked.

Loxy was in his ears. "Heads up, retina display, either through contact or neural implants. You have this, if you would like me to activate it." She activated it to demonstrate it. "Virtual tags offer quite a bit of information. Some of it you broadcast. Some of it is added locally. Take a look this guy coming. Everything in blue is his. The red stuff, well, that's Indigo's. Apparently he violated a law and he has some marks against him. The countdown timer shows the remaining probationary period."

Jon entered the Pilot's bar. Identifier tags were everywhere, but small, not prominent, unless his eyes lingered on a person, then the tags jumped out. Everyone stood, raising their drinks. "May you always return."

"Thank you," Jon said, overwhelmed by the reception.

A waitress rushed up to him. Her name was Kiash. Relationship status, single. Except for her skin color, she looked human; she was not. Her skin was exotic purples and oranges of a poisonous tree frog variety. Her hair was white, not blond, but simply lacking pigment, without looking old. His natural interest in her biology sparked a new set of information; he determined she was compatible. Further chasing, her species had excommunicated her from her planet due to a rare STD. The STD was not contagious to humans, but it could kill the men of her species. Loxy responded to his unasked questions: ("She acquired it through a rape. Their males can be

unknowingly carriers of the virus, but in a female it becomes activated, and subsequently, any sexual activity with a male of her species would result in death to the male. Rape is prevalent on their planet, and considered a part of their normal social life, and so to protect the population, she was sent off world.” “OMG, Loxy, that’s fucking horrific!” “I concur.” “She seems happy, though.” “Maybe things are better for her here than they were on her world of origin?”) Kiash was indeed smiling.

“You look happy,” Jon said.

“I am having a great day,” Kiash said. “You’re like the hottest topic on Indigo Servers.”

“Um, yeah, I am sure that won’t last long,” Jon said.

“You will always be welcome here,” Kiash said. “You want a window booth or table? Or do you want to sit at the bar?”

“Oh, a window booth, please,” Jon said.

Kiash motioned for him to follow and gave him a nice seat looking out into space. There was lots of activity going on, ships of all sorts and sizes coming and going and interacting. It had everything but a sound track.

“You’re human,” Kiash said, touching the table top. “These are the most popular drinks and meals chosen by your kind. These are the most popular dishes and drinks that are non-species specific, with human compatibility. If you browse further and see this mark, you should not eat it. If you want the computer to recommend a meal based on your personal genetics, put your hand on the table and ident with your Biocorp chip.”

That was a lot to take in. Jon took the easy route. “A glass of wine, please. And, may I have steak? Medium rare. With a grilled jalapeno on the side. And this, is this spicy blacked eyed peas? That. Oh! And the jalapeno cornbread. And water. Please.”

“You got it,” Kiash and rushed off to get it.

A man with an octopus face sat down at the booth with him as soon as Kiash spun away. His name was Ror. Captain of a nonliving cargo ship. “Let me give you some advice, rookie...”

“Um, okay,” Jon said.

“First, don’t waste your time flirting with that one,” Ror said. “She doesn’t ever put out. You would think someone with her labels would be more agreeable to hook ups.”

“Oh, thank you for that, now, please leave my table. I am done listening to you,” Jon said.

“What?” Ror asked.

“Oh, not loud enough for you?” Jon said, raising his voice loud enough that all conversations stopped. “Get the fuck out of my space. And the next time you disparage my waitress, you and I are going to have problems. Insult another female in my earshot and I will kick your fucking ass.”

Ror stood up as if intending to fight. Jon stood up, ready to go at it. Other pilots came over and redirected Ror away. Ror stumbled, clearly drunk. Jon sat back down. Things went back to normal.

“Is it too late to ask Hali for a blaster?” Jon asked.

“You can’t shoot Greedo under the table,” Loxy said.

“I bet I could,” Jon said.

Kiash returned with a glass of wine and a glass of water. She had tears in her eyes.

“Please, don’t do that,” she said.

“What, stand up for you?” Jon asked.

“Don’t fight because of me,” Kiash said. “He is stupid when he is drunk.”

“I suspect he is stupid when he is sober,” Jon said. “What he said was wrong.”

“I don’t need your protection,” Kiash said. “I am not impressed by pilots, or men fighting thinking they’re going to get rewarded with affection.”

“Fair enough,” Jon said. “I am new here, Kiash. People don’t know me. I just drew a line in the sand.”

“I don’t get it,” Kiash said.

“When people think a thing, it affects the way they treat people. When they say a thing, it solidifies that thing. Even if a thing isn’t a true thing, putting a label on it makes it real thing, and people unconsciously respond to that thing,” Jon said.

“That actually makes sense, but I don’t understand is why you care. You’re clearly a womanizer. Your tags say you are in a relationship with at least three people, highly promiscuous, and yet, you want to feign being respectful?”

“Being promiscuous doesn’t mean a lack of respect,” Jon said. “And that label has connotations and assumptions that go beyond the definition of simply describing a person who is interested in a poly life style.”

“Kiash.” This came from a man named Orfity. He was the manager. “We’ve talked about you challenging the patrons.”

“She isn’t challenging me,” Jon corrected. “She was educating me. I am grateful for what she has shared. There is no offense here. In fact, if she didn’t correct me when I am wrong, I would take offense. I am hopeful that she will continue to educate me every time I am here. If you want to serve me. I would understand if you prefer not to.”

“We are good,” Kiash said. “Thank you, Captain.”

Kiash walked off. Orfity lingered. Jon read something and he discovered that Orfity and Kiash were the same species, which he should have known just by his odd skin tone, reds and greens. His shoulders, upper arms, and chest seemed to be of greater mass than his tiny legs could hold. “I apologize for your first time here being so confrontational.”

“It’s just part of the learning curve,” Jon said. “We’re good.”

“I’ll comp your meal,” Orfity said.

“You don’t have to do that,” Jon said.

“I insist,” Orfity said.

“I might be taking an additional meal to go,” Jon said.

“I am happy to serve you,” Orfity said.

“I will insist on leaving a tip equal to the cost of the meal to Kiash,” Jon said. “People do accept tips here?”

“It isn’t compulsory,” Orfity said. “I like you. Don’t get yourself killed.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” Jon said. “This meal is already being comped by Biocorp. If you insist on a free meal, can I have a rain check, and collect on my next time here?”

“May you always return,” Orfity said. He went back to work.

Kiash returned with the food. She was not as bubbly as when she first entered, but she was still polite, with a reserved smile.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Kiash said. “If you can’t get my attention, just push this.”

“Thank you,” Jon said.

He picked up a fork in his left hand and a knife in his right. He paused. “Loxy. What am I feeling.”

“Kiash unintentionally slut shamed you,” Loxy said. “Being called a dog is the equivalent of calling a woman a slut. You are not free from your culture and you continue to struggle with the labels, good and bad. You were part of a social cultural paradigm that claims they are open minded and free thinking, but shames people into compliance with a normative behavior set that perpetuates the idea that people are commodities, properties to be obtained and controlled. For example, people are more open to different relationships, like lesbian and gay couples, but intolerance has grown against poly relationships. Some of this is due to the immaturity of the majority of players not being able to reconcile their own jealousies, and jealousies again are a product of consumer society. Some of it is simply fear, people are afraid that someone will take something that is rightfully theirs. You have much fear surrounding sex. One example is you fear you aren’t getting enough. This fear elevates your libido. You assume people get more than you. You fear that this means you’re not loved, appreciated, or wanted. You fear not getting enough because it means something. You fear sharing you have this want with others because you risk being rejected, because even you think badly of yourself for wanting. This particular fear is exaggerated by a backlash against men who have abused their station and you fear being that thing. You are not that thing, Jon. You care about people. You are interested in all the layers of being human and kind, and sex is a big part of that for you. Even that is not unusual for your culture because the only affection men are allowed to show is sexual. Men are blocked from common touch, hugs, hand holding. Alternative, allowable touch for men tends to be aggressive, grappling and fighting. Kiash was nice to you, you misinterpreted that, you defended her, she misinterpreted that, and now you are both having feelings, but both sets of feelings are probably not accurate.”

Jon cut into the steak, wondering if he needed further clarity. He wanted to try and explain himself better to Kiash, but thought, that it would only make him seem even more pathetic. He put a steak in his mouth and resumed cutting. He stopped cutting. “That’s pretty damn good.”

“Lilith agrees,” Loxy said.

“You’re in contact with her?” Jon asked.

“I am,” Loxy said.

“She okay?” Jon asked.

“She is well,” Loxy said.

Jon was startled by the fact there was someone sitting at his booth across from him. It was the priestess. Now that Jon had his display activated, he saw her name. Ditri. She was, indeed, essentially a druid.

“You know, that stuff will make you blind,” Ditri said.

“Um, steak?” Jon asked.

“Wireless activity,” Ditri said.

“I am not doing any activity,” Jon said.

“You’re not reading stuff? Talking to someone remotely?” Ditri asked.

“Oh, I thought you meant porn,” Jon said.

“That, too,” Ditri said, laughing. “Wireless is for porn. I have heard of Earth humans hooking into the porn hubs here and short circuiting their brains to the point they require life support.”

“Really?” Jon said.

“Could be a rumor. It’s definitely an addiction,” Ditri said.

“Um, well, um, damn, I probably should stay away,” Jon said.

“I would recommend just being with real people. Going to the Indigo brothel would be healthier than the online stuff,” Ditri said. “Physical contact is healthy. It’s nice. Talking to real live, present people is nice.”

“Yeah, why are you talking to me?” Jon asked.

“Talking is nice,” Ditri said.

“Um, what do you want?” Jon asked.

“Oh, so skeptical. I want to get to know you. I want to get to know Lilith. I want to study how she changes you. How you change her,” Ditri said.

“Study?”

“Umm, perhaps experience is a better word,” Ditri said. “Surely you’ve realized how easy she is.”

“Umm,” Jon stammered.

“Not in a sexual way, silly. Easy to get along with. She learns super-fast, doesn’t she?” Ditri said. “You would think someone from a repressed society without tech would be unable to function, but she knows things. That is because of the bonding you two share. She will quickly get to a point where she is on par with you. She may even surpass you, and when she does, you

will start to grow, spiritually. She will be a conduit for you to expand into your sensuality of the physical and astral planes.”

“And you want this,” Jon said.

“All people can get this. Meditation, spiritual practices,” Ditri said. “I am there already. I am still growing. But I am curious about your evolution and if I can learn vicariously to better share what I know with others by how you two share with each other, then that has value. Just experiencing you and watching you evolve, that has value. From what I understand about Loxy, you had already mastered a spiritual practice through tulpamancy that simply primed you for your experiences with Lilith.”

“Your priest friend doesn’t seem to agree with this philosophy,” Jon said. “Are you hungry?”

“May I have the peas?” Ditri asked, taking them before he had even said yes. “He and I are not friends. Awww! Spicy. Nice. We are colleagues. He follows his own path. I chose to follow the path of nature, connecting with all there is. This path will be similar to what Lilith practices. I will provide you literature, even her own book of the founders. Educate yourself about their way. I think it will interest you.”

She held up a fist. She indicated he do the same. A fist bump resulted in an exchange of information. “Feel free to call me anytime you’re in Indigo Space. You can also send messages through any sentinel in Republic Space.”

Jon quickly realized he had growing list of contacts. It was easier to contact people one had met in person than someone at random, especially if they agreed to information exchange through exchanging cards or formalized through a ‘mutually accepted’ touch gesture. One could theoretically get a message to anyone, but the AI did filter stuff, restricting contact to needs and proximity.

“I could meet all your spiritual needs, if you like,” Ditri said. “The priestess of the temple offer more than the priestess of the brothels. I could instruct you in ways you have not yet imagined.”

“Um,” Jon said. “Loxy?”

“Take her up on it. I am interested,” Loxy said.

“OMG,” Jon said. He focused on his steak, cutting vigorously. He had already cut the jalapeno in slices. He added two pepper slices to his steak bite and forked it in his mouth. The spice was great, but it wasn’t a distraction. He was horny and his mouth burned.

Ditri laughed. “When you’re ready, of course. I suspect, you need to play a lot more before you’re ready for what I have to offer. Spend time at the brothel. Get the play all out of your system. When you are tired of playing, then you will be ready for serious work,” she said. She leaned forward. “Jon. I mean that. What I offer is not play. It is work. It is study. It is evolution of spirit. It is through the body that the spirit is refined, polished, shaped. You can come at me in play mode, and I will accept, but if you’re not ready for what I have to offer, you could delay your growth. This is not a bad thing. We learn from this, too.”

“I must be dreaming,” Jon said. “Everything here is so sexual.”

“You are not dreaming,” Loxy said. “Most of your dreams are not about sex.”

“We are all dreaming,” Ditri said. “All the time. Even the Earth Master teach this much. You lucid dream, right?”

“I am still learning. I am still in play mode,” Jon said.

“Which means?” Ditri said.

“Every time I become lucid, I initiate a sexual dream, usually with Loxy,” Jon said.

“Yep. You’re still in play mode. This okay. You learn the landscape of the dream by engaging in play,” Ditri said. “Play hard and long. Work will come soon enough.”

Ditri got up from the booth. She touched Jon’s shoulders. “May the blessings be.”

Ditri departed and Kiash came up. “You want more beans?”

“Can I have like three orders to go. Three orders of jalapeno cornbread. And tamales,” Jon said. “Oh, and a pizza, everything on it.”

“Are you pregnant?” Kiash asked.

Jon didn’t laughed. “Umm, well, as close as I can get, I suppose.”

“Alright,” Kiash said. “Here’s your total.”

Jon sorted it, and left a tip for more than total the sum of the food. He left a review about his first time and how wonderful everyone was. He then stared out into space, watching the going ‘ons’ as he drank his water.

Chapter 8

Jon found the STC person sitting at the reception area looking down out the window. The jet bridge extended out to Onuka. He approached the person.

“You okay?” Jon asked.

“Oh, just thinking if I want to go down there,” the person said. Jon realized the person wasn’t broadcasting information. A label suggested the person had opted out.

“You made it this far,” Jon said.

“There are lot of workers on the ship,” the person said. “I don’t like being around a lot of people. It’s why I am here. At Indigo. My family had too many expectations of me. So, I applied to the STC program, passed all the exams, and earned a place here at STC. I love my job. I don’t want to leave it. Which, bothers me that I am even here, because I don’t understand it. Well, except for my approaching feminine cycle. That would explain the tangent.”

“Oh,” Jon said.

“I am not interested in a relationship, Jon,” the person said.

“Okay,” Jon said.

“Presently,” the person said.

“We could just be friends,” Jon said.

“Why would you want to be friends with me?” the person asked.

“You’re interesting. I like your voice. And I need a friend. Like, a neutral, unbiased friend,” Jon said. “I want to learn about this space and traffic and being a pilot, and you have an insight from a different perspective that would benefit me.”

“So, it’s all about you,” the person said.

“No. Yes. Look, my initial interest is about me. There’s no other way around that. I mean, if there was no interest, I would have just kept going, and we wouldn’t be talking at all,” Jon said. “Now, we’re negotiating. I am putting friendship on the table. You help me decide what kind of friends we will be.”

“I have never had a friend,” the person said. “I have work associates. Most are just as private as I. My family cut me off when I went off world. Most citizens don’t leave the comfort of their worlds, but family annoyed me. Go to school. Get into politics. I just wanted read and

focus on my music and art. There is no money in art, not at my expertise level, so my parents frowned on it. STC gave me the freedom to pursue my interest without interference.”

“This sounds lonely,” Jon said.

“I was lonely even at home,” the person said.

“Most the people here are lonely?” Jon asked.

“Most people here are in transition. They are trying to accomplish something that being on a civilized world doesn’t allow, either due to distractions, or social requirements,” the person said. “My parents sent me off with a curse. They said if I left I would never have friends or family again.”

“So, let’s prove them wrong,” Jon said. He held out his hand. “Let’s be friends.”

The person did not take the hand.

“OMG, you will what, have to tolerate talking to me maybe what, once every two or three months?” Jon asked.

“Will there be sex?” the person asked.

“Do you want sex?” Jon asked.

“Not presently,” the person said.

“You don’t ever have to have sex,” Jon said.

“Do you want sex?” the person asked.

“I always want sex,” Jon said.

“Right now?” the person asked.

“If I think about it, yes, but no, I am okay,” Jon said.

“I will enter a friend contract with you,” the person said, taking his hand. “With sex.”

“You do not...”

“Are you backing out?” the person said, squeezing the hand as if afraid Jon might let go.

“No, I accept,” Jon said.

Suddenly information about the person and the species came up. The person didn’t have a name presently due to being in ‘transition.’ The person continued to hold Jon’s hand.

“I need a name for you,” Jon said. “Are you open to nickname, something that can be used regardless of your state?”

“Such as?”

“Pat?” Jon asked. “Quinn? Peyton? Avery? Dakota? Flux?”

“I accept Avery,” the person said.

“It’s nice to meet you Avery,” Jon said.

“It is nice to meet you, Captain Harister,” the person said, the grip on his hand tightened.

“Jon,” Jon insisted.

“I will not give you STC priority just because we are friends,” Avery said.

“I expect to be treated like any other pilot,” Jon said.

“Thank you,” Avery said. “May I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Jon said.

“I like to collect rocks. Would you acquire some for me, if it isn’t inconvenient?” Avery asked.

“Sure! Any specific kinds?” Jon said.

“Oh, just whatever,” Avery said. “Surprise me.”

“Very well,” Jon said.

“Jon, I must return to work,” Avery said, still not letting go of his hand.

“Okay,” Jon said.

The person lingered. “Thank you.”

“For?” Jon asked.

“The formal friendship,” Avery said.

“Thank you,” Jon said.

Avery lingered, not breaking eye contact.

“I think my ship is calling me,” Jon said.

“Of course,” Avery said, and let go of his hand

“See you around,” Avery said. The person departed.

“Yep,” Jon said. Hoping he hadn’t made a bad choice in that. There was something off. “I believe the person has ASD,” Loxy responded in his head. “Autism.”

“That makes sense,” Jon said.

Jon turned to the bridge and was passed through by the agent who seemed really friendly and helpful, not in an overly romantic way, but in a profoundly sincere willingness to serve way, which was best exemplified in the Japanese culture. This was something so unassuming that it could easily be mistaken for a desire to connect on more intimate levels, but that was more likely a misperception from being an American where very few people offer genuine service.

Jon was passed through the airlock, down the bridge to a secondary airlock and then a third airlock directly in front of the ship. Onuka began purring the moment he entered. Techs passed him departing. As he passed into the main corridor of his ship that ran down the center, branching off into the side, upper and lower rooms, he was intercepted by one of the tech. His name was Carl.

“Just in time,” he said, motioning him to his room.

His room was oval, so there were no true corners, but two upgrades were in his room, one in the forward right corner, and one in the forward left corner. The door that led to the private shower and toilet was between the upgrades. The one to the right was the spacesuit display. Carl asked him to strip down so he could demonstrate how to don a spacesuit.

“Um, what?” Jon said.

“Get naked,” Carl said.

“I don’t think so,” Jon said.

Carl stripped out of his clothes.

“What are you doing?!” Jon asked.

“Demonstrating the product,” Carl said.

Naked, Carl climbed up into the chamber. It was an open cylinder on a pedestal. The moment he stepped into the device, the floor and ceiling of the pedestal illuminated and he floated off the floor. He placed his hands on the inner wall to steady himself. A whorl wind lights surrounded him, and when the lights faded, he was in completely wrapped in a seamless, body tight suit from neck to toes. It rode high on the neck, touching his chin. Boots were added and then he dropped to the floor. Once he had his balance, gloves were added. He stepped out of the device and waved Jon over.

“As you can see, this is a seamless product,” Carl explained. “It’s puncture and tear resistant. You’re more likely to experience crush damage than actual suit penetration. It will maintain your internal body temperature, regardless of the outside conditions. You can urinate in the suit, it will absorb all liquids. I don’t recommend pooping in the suit, but it won’t hurt it, it just wants to move that waste. It will move some of the water and so depending how long you’re in your own waste, you could have a dried mass of shit stuck to you, which is unpleasant to get off, even in a shower.”

Carl picked up one of the helmets that was cradled beside the station. There were two helmets. He donned the helmet and the helmet secured itself to the collar.

“If you didn’t figure it out, the helmet is the most expensive piece of the system,” Carl said. “It has an internal AI system which will facilitate all off ship operations. It’s primary function is to keep you alive, providing essential information to do that. If it makes a recommendation, you should take it as a direct order. Leave it in the station for charging and diagnostics.”

He removed the helmet, returned it to the station. He entered the cylinder and the lights returned, recycling the material that had comprised his suit. Carl stepped down from the pedestal and began getting dressed.

“This system is priceless,” Carl said. “Any attempt to take it apart to backwards engineer it will cause it to self-destruct. Theoretically, if you’re in a bad enough collision, the suit security system may interpret that as an attempt to tamper with it. It’s pretty smart. That rarely happens, and it will be in contact with your AI, so it will probably have interpreted the event correctly. Anyway, you will have a minute to override shut down if the system is confused about the event triggering the alert. If it shuts down while you’re wearing a suit, you will have to return to Biocorp to have the suit safely removed.”

“Loxy, are you getting all of this?” Jon asked.

“She is offline while he add the updates and suit and android interface components,” Carl said.

Back to being dressed, he introduced Jon to the android. She was fully contained in a glass cylinder that was frosted, so he couldn’t see her until the cylinder rotated and revealed the contents. The android was tall. Not as tall as Hali, but taller than the average human. She was seven foot. She had white hair, and stark, feminine features. She had a natural smile, even without effort. Her eyes and freckles drew you in. She was dressed in a spacey, professional flight attendant outfit, with overtones of having come out of a Fifth Element movie.

“Fuck me,” Jon said.

“I know, right!” Carl said. “I would so like to test this puppy out. Anyway, it does have its basic self-governing features. It can it perform quite a few task without anyone directing. You can tell it to return to its station and it will. It’s self-cleaning and self-repairing. If you sit in this lounge chair you can use the manual override. Anyone sitting here, and wearing the halo will

experience everything as if they were her. The bracelet she is wearing will indicate which mode she is in. Loxy informed me her name will be Amy. Your voice will initiate her. Go ahead. Ask her to wake.”

“Amy, wake up,” Jon said.

Amy’s eyes came to life and she stepped down, extended her hand. “Good day, Captain. I detect Loxy is off line due to upgrades,” she said. “How may I be of service?”

“OMG, I am so horny,” Jon muttered to Carl.

“I can assist you with that,” Amy said, coming forward to embrace Jon.

“Wait wait wait,” Jon said. “Cancel that. Umm. I am in trouble here.”

“Yeah, you’re are,” Carl said. “In fact, I have rarely seen any rookie pilots get these. Company imagines you might not get any work done, or imagine some plot to run off with your real doll sex bot. To lower the risk, her station is part of the ship. You lose the ship, you lose her. She can leave your ship, but she is limited in range to a kilometer. After that, she will revert to auto mode and try to return to the ship by going to the last known location. She will need to charge regularly and you can’t dismantle the station due to its auto destruct, though it’s nowhere near as sensitive as the 3D suit printer.”

“Well, thank you, I got it from here,” Jon said. “You should go now.”

“I should really go over the systems with you now that you’re integrated and awake,” Carl said. “You had a really hard impact on first flight. You’re lucky you even came out of that in one piece.”

“No, we’ll figure it out,” Jon said, leading the way to the door. “Loxy owns the manuals. We’ll get by. Good bye...”

“Umm,” Carl tried.

More people were coming with supplies. Fresh food. A Moa egg was being carefully lowered down a deck to replace the one he had launched. Jon felt a wave of frustration that equaled getting promise of a moment alone in a house as a teenager, and a parent returning because they forgot something stupid like their wallet.

Lilith and Hali boarded, supplies coming behind them on a floating dolly. Jon grabbed her hand and led her away, saying, “I need to talk to you for a moment...”

The moment the door to his room was shut, he was taking her to the bed. Lilith wasn't surprised. She didn't surrender; she escalated. After they were both satiated, Jon got up to open the door. Carl and some techs were there.

"We're not quite finished yet," Carl said.

"Oh, okay," Jon said. He headed towards his galley. Lilith smiled at the boys and followed. She didn't mind the boys were staring. Carl got them back into focus and on task.

Hali was waiting in the galley, eating something like yogurt.

"So, you weren't lying," Hali said.

"Why would I lie about that?" Lilith asked.

Jon couldn't help himself. He took the container from Hali and sampled. "OMG, this is so good. What's wrong with me?!"

"Did you eat enough food during the integration phase?" Hali asked.

"He did," Loxy said. They all turned to see Amy in the doorway. She smiled, walked right up and kissed Jon. She then hugged and kissed Lilith."

"Who is this?" Lilith asked.

"It's me Loxy," Loxy said. "I am wearing my android. Amy. A for android, my android... Clever, eh?"

"I am never going to sleep again," Lilith said.

"OMG, when I am finished with you, you're both going to sleep like babies tonight," Amy said. "This baby is fully loaded."

"Not yet," Jon said.

Loxy laughed and hugged him. "I meant, it has pheromone production, releasing it through pores. It has a range of sensors that can allow sight in any and all visible and EMF spectrums." She leaned in and hugged Lilith again. Height and build wise, they might have been sister, Loxy the younger.

"I didn't buy clothes that would fit her," Lilith said.

"She comes with her own wardrobe, and 3D clothes printer," Amy said. "We shouldn't have to buy clothes for any of us again."

"You may have to buy printing material," Hali said. "By the way, I got you an upgrade that you didn't ask for. Onuka is now wearing a harness with a shield generator. It will do really

well against energy weapons and solar flares. Not so great against missiles. Try not to get into any real fights. I am opposed to arming you.”

“I really don’t want to hurt anyone,” Jon said. “Can’t I have like a second quantum drive so I can bounce twice as fast?”

“Read your tech manuals,” Hali said. “You’ll understand why that doesn’t work.”

Amy beamed a huge smile, big enough he caught it with his peripheral vision; Jon’s eyes drifted up to meet her.

“Did you say something?”

“Not yet,” Amy said.

“He really does have a short refractory period,” Lilith said.

“Sucks, doesn’t it. Cooped up on a tiny ship, nothing to do all day but sex, sex, sex,” Amy said.

“Are you guys done with the repairs yet?!” Jon yelled.

“They’ll be done by the end of the day,” Hali said. “You guys don’t know how close you came to not being around anymore.”

“Good, so, we got the hard part over,” Jon said. “The odds of us running into something else would be what, astronomical?”

“Don’t do that,” Hali said. “Bad luck to think that.”

“If sex is a measure, this is the luckiest ship in the universe,” Amy said. “Want to join us for an outing?”

“Have you had a personality change?” Jon asked.

“No, maybe, OMG! The sex-bot is really revving me up for play,” Loxy said.

“Did they at least fix the transmitter?” Jon asked.

“Now you ask,” Lilith said.

“Um, but Loxy was unconscious so she didn’t see anything...” Jon said.

“We heard everything,” Hali said. “I think you just got your own porn channel devoted to you.”

“Oh, good times,” Jon said.

“Come on,” Hali said. “I can put you up at my place for the night. You won’t sleep with all this traffic.”

“You sure?” Amy asked.

“Yep, come on, all of you,” Hali said.

Chapter 9

Hali's apartment was luxurious, residing in the upper most ring. And inner balcony overlooked a luscious, green park. The outer wall looked out into space. There was living area, the master bedroom, and two guest rooms. Lilith wanted to walk in the park and dragged Jon with her. They came across a lake, where she took her clothes off and dived in, and was begging Jon to join her when security came and asked her to come out of the lake and put her clothes back on. They gave her a warning. She got Jon alone by a tree.

"You think if you and I play here in the park, I'll get another warning?" Lilith asked.

"Let's get back," Jon said.

Hali and Loxy were talking at the table. There was food prepared. Jon's eyes bounced between his guest room and the food. It was really difficult to decide what he was more hungry for.

"Sit," Hali insisted.

"Maybe I should see a doctor," Jon said.

Hali made a call and they ate while they waited for the house call. A doctor arrive. He did a full scan. Then he took out an archaic tool and listened directly to Jon's heart. He put away his toys and sat down to read over the numbers.

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with you," he said. "You're perfectly healthy, horny, teenage boy."

"Excuse me," Jon said. "I am like fifty years old!"

"You are nothing like fifty years old," the Doctor argued. "Except maybe in appearance. I would have guessed forty, but, yeah, I believe fifty."

"But," Jon said.

"Look, you're a clone. Maybe the original has mastered some restraint due to environment necessity and availability of partners," the Doctor said. "You are not restrained by environment or lack of partners. You have about standard level inhibition. You're being influenced by Lilith's hormones, who is influenced by yours. The two of you are perfectly tuned biofeedback system. You're confined to a small living area where boredom might increase libido. Nothing wrong with you."

"Can you give me a pill to bring it back a notch?" Jon asked.

“No!” Lilith and Loxy said.

“Son, just keep doing what you’re doing. It will decline on its own. You will find your normal range in time. If you get desperate, you can always marry them both. Marriage always kills the sex drive.”

“Not in my home,” Lilith said.

“Most of the pilots I treat I have to scold because they don’t exercise. Your present cardiovascular routine is better than any training program on the market,” the Doctor said. “Keep it up.”

“Literally,” Amy said.

“And figuratively,” Lilith said.

“Ahh, to be young again,” the Doctor said. “Do you ever pimp out your bot?”

“Um, no!” Jon said.

“We could negotiate,” Amy said.

“No! Technically, she’s my android, and I haven’t even had a turn yet,” Jon said.

“You’re dying,” Amy said, teasingly.

“OMG, so am I!” Lilith said.

“Would you three retire and get over with?” Hali pleaded.

The three of them rushed to their guest room like teenagers given a green light. Four hours later, Jon emerged, casually dressed in street clothes which Lilith had bought while out. He stumbled around the kitchen for a snack, an apple, and glass of tea. He retired to an alcove that pushed out from the main apartment, sat on the couch overlooking space, and propped his feet up. He finished the apple and put it on the napkin he had secured. Hali startled him.

“May I sit with you?” she asked.

“Please,” Jon said.

Hali sat by him, put her feet up. She withdrew a cigar and offered him one. He accepted. She withdrew a second. She clipped the ends off both, lit hers, and then lit his with hers. She leaned back, blowing smoke rings towards the glass.

“Thank you for staying on with me,” Hali said.

“Thank you for my life,” Jon said. “I am sorry for the troubles I caused you. I am grateful.”

“Jon,” Hali said, kindly. “In context of your first run, had you not tried to renegotiate your contract, I would have fired you. Hagglng is part of the game.”

“Tell me about Keets,” Jon said.

“Do you really want to spend our time discussing another man?” Hali asked.

“He’s not just another man, he was the previous man?” Jon asked.

“He was a client. He didn’t negotiate. I continued to increase the difficulty level of his assignments. He became resentful, but he never stood up for himself. Then he jumped ship, joined the militia, and instead of taking my orders, he now takes orders from others. And he’s doing well. He does what they ask, and then he gets promoted,” Hali said. “Pretty simple. He’s still not happy. And he still blames me. And, he thinks he is saving others from me every time he recruits a pilot.”

“Did you like him?” Jon asked.

“Enough I kept working with him. I had the chance to trade him with a colleague, who had this pup he wanted to be rid of. He convinced me Keets problem is he doesn’t like orders from women,” Hali said.

“Why didn’t you?” Jon asked.

“Loyalty,” Hali said.

Jon and Hali sat quietly, almost finishing their cigar.

“Did you sleep with Keets?” Jon asked.

“Does it matter?” Hali asked.

“No,” Jon said. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“I didn’t sleep with him,” Hali said.

“Why are you out here, and not on a paradise world?” Jon asked.

“I am not Kelindy. I am mixed. I don’t really fit in anywhere. Most worlds, I am a giant and people get disturbed being around me. The few places I can fit in, well, I am rather small, and stand out. At best, they treat me like a child. At worst, well, Biocorp provided me a home and work, and I am happy,” Hali said.

“You’re happy?” Jon asked.

“Yeah, mostly,” Hali said.

“It’s lonely out in space,” Jon said.

“On such a timeless flight,” Hali said.

“Oh!” Jon said.

“It was in your queue,” Hali said. “I’ve been doing homework. Really, it’s a great thing about pre-singularity worlds. They generate the greatest art, songs, and stories.”

“They have high levels of depression, suffering,” Jon said.

“Maybe that’s where it comes from,” Hali said.

“Yeah, the Van Gogh argument. Cure his depression, he still has his ear and his life, but we don’t have art. I don’t like that argument,” Jon said.

“Life after singularity, people kind of lose their edge, net creativity goes down,” Hali said. “And you would imagine there would be more, with greater interlinked interaction patterns.”

Their cigars finished, she handed Jon her glass of wine. He sampled it. Nodded, then took a bigger sip, and handed it back. She held it, looking at it.

“That’s impressive,” Hali said.

“What, that I drank wine?” Jon asked.

“You drank my wine,” Hali said.

“You made that?” Jon asked.

“No, I meant, you will drink after me, or eat after me, like you did earlier,” Hali said.

“I am sorry,” Jon said.

“I like that,” Hali said. “I could eat off your plate and you wouldn’t care?”

“In the past, wouldn’t bother me, now, well, I might fight you for it I am so hungry,” Jon said. “God, I am so worried I am going to get fat.”

“Many clones do,” Hali said. “Men tend to get fat if they’re not getting enough sex. You should balance out.”

Jon shared more of her wine. He was aware that she was sitting closer to him. Anytime either tried to make direct eye contact the other had their eyes in the stars. He felt a little child sitting next to her. The difference in size brought with it the allure of the taboo of being with the older, more experienced partner. This wasn’t that, but it had overtones to that, which was probably more about what was in Jon’s head than what was in a reality. In reality, most species don’t really care about nuances. Hell, some species will mate with you and then eat you, he thought. There were stories of giants consuming humans. Another hidden want, being with a vore.

“So, shall we consummate our agreement?” Hali asked.

“You don’t have to,” Jon said.

“A contract is a contract,” Hali said. “Kind of like a marriage, only better defined.”

“Even in a marriage, no means no,” Jon said.

“Are you saying no?” Hali asked.

“I never say no,” Jon said.

“Never?”

“Okay. Rarely say no,” Jon said.

“Are you saying no now?” Hali asked.

“No! Yes, no, wait,” Jon said. “OMG, Hali, I am aroused, I want to. Loxy is awake, in my head, saying ‘just kiss her already.’ I have people in my head, Hali.”

“So do I,” Hali said. “Elton Jon was wrong.”

“What?” Jon asked.

“It’s not lonely out in space,” Hali said.

“Funny,” Jon said. He leaned in, as if he might kiss her, but paused. “My experience with technology, the greater the level of connectivity, the greater the loneliness.”

“Yeah,” Hali said. “Unlonely me.”

Jon kissed Hali. Hali kissed back. It was incredibly measured kiss, subtly nuanced in a teasing exploration that grew into an urgency that had them suddenly on the floor. Hali laughed, got up, took his hand, and helped him up. She led him to her room, dimly lit with artificial candles. Their exploration of each other continued on the bed.

Chapter 10

Repairs completed, Biocorp expedited Onuka's departure, as gate connectivity was expensive. Most ships didn't even get direct docking time, it was so expensive. Away from the station, using Onuka's eyes, they discovered the complexity of this space. There was a grid of storage containers moving out away from the station, away from the Nebula, stretching for as far as the eye could see. Little blinking lights on each container, as well as radio identifiers, helped pilots avoid 'the field.' The containers held everything from station supplies, to personal belongings. There were people that came to Indigo station, transitioning from worlds, and their stuff was stored in containers, which was much cheaper than keeping their stuff on station.

There was another grid of containers that were habitats. Not everyone could afford to live on Indigo station. For many, habits offered more spacious, luxurious living, a life style they couldn't afford on the station itself. People were ferried in by shuttle cars. All the habitats had docking but some couldn't even afford the luxury of a shuttle connecting directly, so they crossed to and from shuttle and habitats wearing spacesuits, or, more bizarrely, just wearing Emergency Life Belts, which created a force field around a person that contained an atmosphere long enough to transition between places. Jon witnessed one of these exchanges and though the person was killing himself. He came outside the airlock, exposed to space. He stood perched as if he were going to jump. The force field was not perceptible from this distance. A shuttle slowed, not a quite a full stop, and the person simply stepped over, latched hold of the shuttle, and went in. The shuttle proceeded to the next pick up.

"Fuck, the things people do to live," Jon said.

There was a grid of habitats that were not just habitats. They were prisons. These were people that were excommunicated from their worlds and not deemed safe for any society. All their needs were met by drones. There were no airlocks. The cells came equipped with bots on the inside, usually compatible with the species being incarcerated, to minimize loneliness and to allow others, caretakers, families, friends, to interact remotely. If the person being incarcerated was insane, they sometimes destroyed the bots. There were mad people in boxes floating in space. There was a frequency range where anyone could tune into the deranged, the criminal minded, the dangerous, and it was permissible to communicate with them.

"Not sure I like that," Jon said.

“Well, it’s nice to know they don’t have capital punishment in civilized space,” Loxy said.

“Is this better?” Lilith asked.

“My understanding is, these folks were either immune to normalization protocols, or they chose not to engage,” Loxy said.

“But if they are mentally ill...” Jon began.

“There is a subset of mentally ill that are non-compliant with protocols,” Loxy said. “That said, if you get boxed, it’s not just noncompliance issues. If you get boxed, it’s because you’re killing or raping others. Or you’re a war criminal. Or you’re under strict quarantines due to medical reasons.”

“My kind would kill these folks,” Lilith said. “Anyone who can’t be healed deserves a greater mercy than we can offer.”

“I am sad,” Jon said.

“Oh!” Loxy and Lilith reacted. They both turned into him and began loving on him. Amy was charging, so Loxy took care of the inside, Lilith the outside, but they all took care of each other.

Afterwards Jon found himself alone, as Loxy and Lilith were sleeping. He went and found a snack, and opened a book. It was the Founder’s Book, Lilith’s holy book. He found it interesting that it wasn’t just stories. There was math. They were teaching math and ethics! He had to skip over most of the math. He found himself staring at a symbol that looked a great deal like the Yin Yang symbol. It was a circle, divided by a simple wave. There was a noticeable point at the twelve o’clock position of the circle. There were two visible points inside the circle, on either side of the wave. Below this was a diagram of a wave. It was one complete series, a zero line, the wave going up through a nice arch of amplitude, descending down through to trough and coming back up to zero, repeating once.

“What are you doing?” Lilith asked.

Jon was startled out of the book and nearly launched himself from the table.

“OMG, don’t do that,” Jon said.

“Sorry,” Lilith said. “You’re just sitting there. You didn’t see me come in?”

Jon motioned for her to come sit by him. She had all kinds of room on the bench, but she had to sit up against him. He took her hand and then her eyes shifted. She could see the book. And then she realized it was a pristine copy of her book,

“Oh!” Lilith said. Jon felt her hug and kiss him. He had to break free from the book to see her doing this. They returned to the book together. From the book perspective, they both became aware that Loxy was awake and with them.

“Onuk,” Lilith said, touching the point on the line from which the wave began its ascent. Her finger traced the wave and stop at the peak. “On,” Lilith said. She traced the wave back to the zero line and stopped. “Onuka,” she said. She traced the line down to the trough and stopped. “On,” she said. She traced the wave back to the line. “Onuka.” She repeated. This time as she traced the wave, she chanted ‘onnnnn’ up through the peak and back down to wave, where she completed the phrase ‘uka’ but kept chanting as her finger traced the wave down, ‘onnnnn,’ back to intersection point of line ‘uka.’

“This is the story of origin,” Lilith said. “The male aspect creates light. The female aspect carries and sustains light.

“So, when you said we were ‘on’ you meant...” Jon began.

“We are On. We are traveling. Onuk Bay, our launching point. We have many more places of arrival to go before we are complete,” Lilith said. “There can be many starting points. Clearly your origin Onuk launched you, and you have your path. That path brought you to me. We joined paths. New origin. Now we travel together.”

“But why this symbol. The circle. My people have this,” Jon said.

“This is that,” Lilith said, saying the yin yang symbol and the diagram of the wave is the same.

“How?” Jon asked.

Lilith touched the point at the twelve o’clock position and said “Onuk.” As she traced the circle around she chanted “onnnnn.” When she got back to twelve oclock she said “Uka” and went around a second time with ‘On.’ The wave dividing the circle was horizontal. From the intersection of the invisible line that would dissect the circle in half and the 9 o’clock position of the circle she said “Onuk.” As she traced the wave she said “onnnn.” When she arrived at the three o’clock position of the circle she said “uka.” She tapped the upper portion of the inner

circle and said, “Light, Male, Fear, Hunger, or Onuk.” She tapped the lower portion of the circle. “Dark, Female, Love, Acceptance, or Onuka.”

Jon puzzled through it. He loved this. There was no doubt in his mind that this was meaningful in a way he couldn’t articulate. Light is a wave. It has a peak and a trough, and it was this oscillation that made sight possible. It also made darkness possible. Darkness wasn’t just the absence of light, but was where light canceled itself out through diffraction patterns. Without both peak and trough, then there was nothing, but the book did not refer to this as ‘darkness.’ In the book, darkness was something, not nothing. The whole, per the book, was comprised of light, and that light reflected and refracted, and diffracted, and there were places where it was amplified and placed where it was diminished, and the apparent absent was an illusion, but still a place of energetic interaction. The Universe was a hologram. The book, Lilith’s people, knew about holograms!

“Wait wait wait,” Jon said. “You put fear on the side with light and male. Why?”

“That is the truth of it,” Lilith said.

“Where I come from, God is a father, and He is the light,” Jon said.

“I am sorry for your confusion,” Lilith said. “Fear launches. It’s the quest. It’s the cry of the infant. It’s the call of the lover. That is the aspect of male. The female is who responds. She embraces the lover. She nourishes the child. She bring peace where before there was fear. It is only when these two aspects are truly coupled that there is clarity. That is the way.”

“That is beautiful,” Loxy said.

“I owe you an apology, Lilith,” Jon said.

“How do you figure?” Lilith asked.

“I thought you were a simple shepherdess,” Jon said. In truth, he should have known better. Theoretically, people from his past had abilities to make temples and pyramids and move stones in sophisticated ways, that even modern people couldn’t replicate, so to assume past equals primitive was not good thinking. “You are much more sophisticated than I imagined.”

Lilith hugged him in the real and virtual world. “One always assumes the simplest people are the most primitive, but in truth, they are the more advanced. Think about your world, Jon. If a catastrophe happened, and all tech suddenly ceased to operate, who would survive a millennia? The peoples in the cities or the peoples in wilderness? The planet will always recover and it is those who are connected to the earth, who live in balance with nature that survive.”

“Unless you arrive at paradise?” Loxy asked.

“Few civilization arrive at that point,” Lilith said. “That is the Onuk we all wish for.”

Loxy felt the bubbling of emotions from Jon, but it had yet to resolve into something solid. Prior to her expanding out into other systems, she would have been able to resolve it quicker. “Jon, what are you feeling?”

“I am an idiot! I know nothing and I yet I make assumptions after assumptions and...”

“No, Jon,” Lilith said. “You are not an idiot. You are simply navigating with an incomplete map. You are Onuk. I am Onuka. Together, our map is complete.”

“I don’t deserve you. I don’t deserve anyone,” Jon said.

“It’s not about deserve. It’s about love,” Lilith said. “It is about injury and forgiveness. Male initiates the dance, female completes. While they are ‘on,’ they are learning to dance. That is it.”

Jon’s head was reeling with past fears and conflicting paradigms. “You’re just being nice to me. I am needy and clingy and...”

“Yes, Jon. You are Onuk. You will have many Onukas,” Lilith said. “It takes many spectra to make a rainbow, but when you put them all together, you get one light. I love you and every color you wrap around us.”

Jon cried. Both Lilith and Loxy held him in the virtual space, and different intimacy unfolded, more than lust, more than pleasure, it was a merging that brought with it a profound sense of peace. It was a state better than any amount of cannabis had ever brought. It was the perfect amount of wine. This was bliss. “Akuno,” Lilith said.

निर्मित

Quantum drive charged, Jon proposed Lilith and he don their spacesuits. Amy was in her pedestal.

“Why?” Loxy asked.

“Because, what if he hit something and depressurize the ship?” Jon said.

“Your emergency life belt would keep you alive for 24 hours,” Loxy said.

Jon identified the belt and realized he had been wearing it all along as part of his original Biocorp uniform. He realized Lilith was already wearing a similar belt, with her version of the

Biocorp uniform. She wore a skirt option, dark, but sparkly hose, and tennis shoe with neon colors.

Even knowing what he knew, he was anxious. "I am scared."

"Onuk," Lilith said, laughing, and kissed him.

He crossed his arms, pouting. Lilith took his hand in hers, and then placed it on her thigh.

"Let's get it 'on,'" Lilith said.

"Umm, that now has all sorts of meanings," Jon said.

Lilith kissed him. Loxy pressed play on the Marvin Gaye song. When it got to the chorus, Jon activated the quantum drive. They traveled. This was a wave. Space/time, third density, three dimensions, that was base line. With hologram in his mind, seeing the change in dimensions was like realizing the paper he was looking at was a hologram. It was like staring at tiles so long that they jumped from the floor for a moment, till you blinked and the floor became continuous again. They arrived at peak at exactly a minute ten seconds. There was two seconds of hang time. And then there was the falling one minute ten seconds. Emerging back into their normal space time brought with it a moment of vertigo, as they struggled to orientate. Typically, an object maintained its trajectory, its space-time momentum conserved. If in the arrival point they were suddenly next to a gravity source, the vectors changed and they could be violently shifted to one side or the other. In open space, there was no indication that there was any change.

Jon ended the kiss seeking Lilith's eyes. "We're alive!"

"We should finish what we started," Lilith said.

"Ummm," Loxy tried to interrupt.

They hit something. The shipped was jarred, but there was no indication of damage. All internal sensors pinged back with normal metrics. Loxy couldn't make out the external stuff, and she felt disoriented and sick.

"Close your eyes," Jon said, shifting into Onuka's eyes.

Jon was confused. It was pitch black. No stars.

"Are we in a cloud?" Lilith asked.

"No," Loxy said. "There is no external pressure against the hull. I am registering normal space vacuum."

"Can you shine a light?" Jon asked.

"Oh!" Loxy said.

Onuka's skin was made to glow. The world opened up to them in a dazzling array of colors and broken rainbows. There was the gleam of gold and silver and a variety of crystals and minerals were laid out all around them. It was as if they had landed in a cave and come to rest on the floor.

"OMG," Lilith said. "It's beautiful!"

"We arrived inside a planet?" Jon asked.

"I doubt it," Loxy said. "Our artificial gravity would have shutoff in the presence of a greater gravitational force so that Onuka could orientate to a proper up down reference point."

"Okay," Jon said, glad someone was reading the flight manual. "We landed inside a geode!"

"Yay!" Lilith said. "No one's ever been here ever!"

"Maybe it's like a comet that is part rock part water, and as the water was evaporated over eons, this giant geode was formed," Jon said.

"That's an interesting theory," Loxy said. Sorting through files. She found broken comets, space crystals, and precious minerals in asteroids. "Wow, you're absolutely right. And space crystals are highly sought after due to their natural resonance. The bigger the better. They are used to make sensor and communication devices."

"There are a lot of crystals here," Jon said.

"Do you realize just how lucky we are?" Lilith said.

"There are not that many crystals," Jon said.

"It's not just the find," Lilith said. "The fact that we shared similar momentum and vectors. If we had been any other speed, the collision with these crystals might have torn us to shreds and we would exploded inside a comet's cavern never to be seen again. I mean, just look where we landed. It's the more gentle side of the entire cavern."

That brought sobriety.

"Can you determine how far we are from the comet's surface?" Jon asked.

"I cannot," Loxy said. "We have good coordinates within a one light year radius. Without visual information, we might as well be making another blind jump."

Jon stared out into the cavern.

"If he leave this space, can we hit this target again?" Jon asked.

“I can hit the center of this cavern again, provided we return within six days of jumping. Anything greater than that, safety becomes more questionable. In three days we could jump a hundred meters and probably arrive outside the comet.”

“Guessing?” Jon asked.

“Yes, but, given the total gravimetric readings of this space-time, I believe it is a reasonable guess,” Loxy said.

Jon sighed.

“Oooh, what if we are actually in someone else’s space, but no one knows we’re here. Would we still have salvage rights?” Lilith asked.

“Great question,” Jon asked. “We should go collect samples.”

“That might be difficult,” Loxy said. “We don’t have any tools.”

“How do we not have any tools?!” Jon asked.

“It’s not the standard to have tools on a scout ship,” Loxy said. “Hell, we just acquired the space suits and that was small act of congress and good luck.”

“It was that,” Jon said.

“We could still go out and look around,” Lilith said.

“We could do that,” Jon said. “Alright, Lilith, you and I will go suit up. Loxy, just keep recording and listening for signals. Maintain contact with DL radio.” His brain said, what? And He answered himself. Direct Laser communication, for private conversations between parties when normal broadcasting channels might lead to eavesdropping.

Jon and Lilith went to the room to suit up. To do so, they had to undress. They immediately fell into play, with Lilith taking him to the bed. She was on top, pushing hard into him when her urge to feed resulted in excessive drooling, redder lips, and exposed teeth.

“May I?” Lilith asked.

“Yes,” Jon said.

She immediately went to his neck, kissing, licking, and then bit. Jon gasped. She continued to grind against him and when he arrived, they both came simultaneously and she hummed ‘on’ into his neck like a purring cat. Onuka purred. Jon found himself outside of himself, floating up through the cavern and beyond. He didn’t try to analyze the experience in terms of accuracy. He passed through rock, then through ice, and then found himself floating in space. The comet was the only solid thing nearby and part of him wanted to cling to it. He

identified with the 'Little Prince.' There were stars everywhere. The two closest shared the Oort cloud in which this object resided in, and with the right 'seeing' he discerned many comets, many asteroids, a gas giant that went in figure eight around the two stars stirring up the neighborhood, drawing things into the stars, only to be ejected again. This process of heating and cooling objects purified the things. There was an asteroid of almost pure gold, the size of New York. There were many platinum asteroids. There were some minerals that he couldn't readily identify. He wondered if stars could make things Earth hadn't even dreamt up yet. There was a space crystal, pure diamond, as big as any Egyptian obelisk.

Jon was suddenly back in his body. Lilith was lying beside him, completely satiated, but drawing him on top of her. "Please, keep loving me," she begged. "Keep me awake as long as you can, and even then, don't stop loving me."

Jon continued making love to her. She held him tight to her bosom, his face in her hair, and she chanted 'onnnn.' Her breathing deepened, and then she started laughing with joy. She slept.

Chapter 11

Biocorp hailed Onuka. It was Hali, and she didn't seem to be bothered that she had bed hair and was clearly being woken from a good slumber. "Seriously? You're back already?" She wiped her eyes and re-read some of the data. "OMG, you're the luckiest fucking pilot ever! Follow STC's instruction. Biocorp accepts your docking fees. Let me get a shower and some coffee. Want anything? Okay, see you in an hour. Wait? What? What kind of tools? Seriously. You're not that kind of scout. Fine. I will procure you a reasonable set of tools. Damn, you're high maintenance."

STC expedited Jon station wards, jumping a queue for a particular dock. He and Lilith proceeded up the bridge to the station's reception area, where the agent met them respectfully, and a green haired stranger of a woman launched herself at Jon and began kissing on him like a wife greeting a sailor. Jon stood in shock and Lilith stood there, amused, by his discomfort.

"You have fans?" Lilith finally said.

"You don't recognize me?" the woman demanded. "I am Avery." She was thin, hyper feminized, ultrathin was waist, large hips and bosom, big, almond shaped Disney princess eyes, and a slight pout, with upturned nose. Her clothing were thin wraps, Velcroed on, exposing legs and belly. She was human in appearance, but she glowed not with a real light, but with attractiveness. This would be the woman in the red dress in the Matrix who distracted Neo. Her dress went down just far enough to hide stuff, but if she tilted forwards or back, she would be exposed, and Jon's eyes tracked the inner side of her thigh wanting more. Her legs glistened, even though they were bare.

"OMG, you've changed," Jon said. "Lilith, this is that STC girl we met."

"I remember her. She is, well, wow!" Lilith said.

"Are you disappointed?" Avery asked Jon.

"No. No! Wow," Jon said.

Avery kissed him. "I am so relieved. I was so worried you wouldn't like me now that I changed. I fully intend to collect on our friendship agreement."

"Collect?" Jon asked.

"Sex. I want sex. A lot of sex," Avery said. "You don't know what it's like not having a friend at this time in my life. Come stay at my pod."

“Umm,” Jon stammered.

“He will be happy to come stay with you,” Lilith said.

“Oh, you better come down to the ship with us,” Jon said.

“For sex?” Avery asked.

“For rocks. I collected some great samples,” Jon said.

“Who cares about rocks?!” Avery asked.

“You do?” Jon asked.

“I am not that person anymore,” Avery said.

“Um, you will be?” Jon asked.

Avery sighed. “Oh, very well, let’s see what you got.”

The proceeded back down the bridge, Avery clinging to his arm, and onto Onuka, and into the spare room where they had small sample of crystals and minerals. She seemed unimpressed.

“Can we be alone?” Avery demanded.

“Sure,” Lilith said. “His room is the next compartment.”

Avery dragged him over to the next room, practically raped him, and when she was finished, she got up, started getting dressed.

“Seriously?” Jon asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” Avery said. “That was great. See you next cycle.”

“That’s it?” Jon asked.

“What, you want cuddle time?” Avery asked. “That wasn’t part of the contract.”

“Seriously?!” Jon asked.

Avery patted Jon’s cheek with her hand and then departed. Lilith and Loxy entered and stood on the threshold.

“You okay?” Lilith asked.

“That was confusing,” Jon said.

“Yeah, no girl has ever experience that before,” Loxy said.

“Were you satisfied?” Lilith asked.

“Yes and no,” Jon said.

Lilith began to strip. Hali arrived.

“You couldn’t wait one hour for me?” Hali asked. “Lilith, I though you wanted to sleep.”

“No, I am good right now,” Lilith said. “He’s really tense. We should both help him relax.”

“Okay,” Hali said.

“Can I at least get a shower first?” Jon asked.

“No,” they said, and tackled him.

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Jon was at the mall when maintenance gave Onuka the ‘all clear.’ There was no damage. Loxy had been right, it was the perfect bit of luck for the whole affair. Biocorp called next, directing him to free up the bridge.

“I thought I had three full days?” Jon quierried.

Hali came online in his head. (“Jon, you may remain on the station for the three days, but Biocorp needs their bridge. Direct Onuka to these coordinates.”)

“I don’t have to be on her?” Jon asked.

No one seemed to notice or care that he was talking to himself. This was standard affair for people with tech upgrades. Most people, though, had learned to talk without vocalizing, or even subvocalizing. Every now and then he imagined someone flirting with him, but when he considered it rightly, they were merely immersed in conversations with people he couldn’t see and the people he was looking at weren’t seeing him, but in the right context, he could make their looks all about him. It was the same way you could make the girl in a photograph or portrait interact with you as if it was always for you, but in reality, it was for everyone who looked at her.

(“No, Jon. Just direct as you would if you were on the ship.”)

Jon informed Loxy what he was doing and asked if Lilith wanted to stay on the station. Loxy reported she was asleep. He asked her to wake her and find out. Biocorp asked again for him to free the bridge. Lilith woke but said she wanted to sleep some more. Jon directed Onuka out to the designated holding area. He felt bad not being on her while simultaneously being quite happy roaming the station.

“So, Hali, I guess I am at your place tonight?” Jon asked.

(“That’s the plan,” Hali responded. “I will be home about 15:00. The door will recognize you if you get there before me. If you get lost, just ask Indigo for help.”)

Jon continued browsing the market. There were all sorts of interesting things, but he simply wasn't interested. He quickly learned to avoid eye contact with attendants, because they were quick at him, and pretty aggressive in sales pitches. And if they were female, there was always this undertone that if he bought, he might get lucky. He paused at one store and came to a new conclusion; he didn't know exactly what things were. Nothing was what he was thinking they were. When he realized one shop was selling memory crystals, not just 'crystals,' he lingered; the crystals had been impregnated with a complex memory from another person, he was curious enough to let the store clerk explain further. A person records a memory. It could be real or fiction. Each time one held the crystal, the holder discovered a little more about the memory. So, hold a crystal, you get an impression. The longer you hold it, the more you got. One had to be receptive to an experience, so in a way, it was like a biofeedback device, because the more you relaxed, the greater the access to the embedded memories. The attendant assured him, no one has ever bought a crystal and returned it due to running out of memories. You could hold it a life time and never sort it all out. Memory was complex. Recording memories was just as complex. Memories are holograms, she said. He decided to buy one.

"Can I buy your memories?" Jon asked.

The attendant laughed and redirected him away from flirting. He left with what she assured him was a fairly popular crystal of a celebrity from one of the Luxury worlds. He was a popular actor. Jon wanted a female, and when the attendant asked if he was okay experiencing sex from the female's perspective, having a guy on him, Jon then decided the male crystal was a better choice. She assured him the subject was heterosexual. The price of crystal warranted a gift memory, so she threw in a crystal from a female. Jon assumed it wasn't a 'high' valued crystal. It turned out it was part of a set; there were story lines and people collected different people in the story, with each perspective unfolding something unexpected. You get involved in a story from a certain perspective, and you think that's complete, until you see another's perspective. That was probably why she gave him the sample; she believed he would be back for others in the collection.

At another shop, he found a device that healed bruises. He didn't need it because so far, every time he had an injury, Lilith would kiss it and make it better. Seriously, her saliva was like magical healing balm. When he joked about selling her spit, she informed him it would only work on him. He pushed on, found a bag that he liked and bought it. It was a World War II mail

bag with MASH written on it. The girl was very friendly, but she stopped just shy of exchanging information with him. He put his memory crystals in the new bag and started to walk away when he realized, they were manufacturing stuff on the fly as people approached, and if they didn't buy, they simply recycled the material to make the next greatest thing. He was targeted by marketers!

Jon stopped at a food kiosk and sat down and watched people shop. There were lots of strange aliens to be seen. Indigo Mall made Star Wars Cantina scene seem quaint. He thought he saw some Grays, but they were quickly lost in the crowd. He pushed on and soon discovered the red light distract. He didn't even know what he was witnessing until he found someone that was human in appearance, and both the male and the female in the window display winked at him, waving for him to come in. He stopped. He was pretty sure they were not selling pajamas. The female blew him a kiss. He walked back to the beginning of the display windows and really took in the variety of creatures. There was amorphous, gelatin like creature in the first display. You could partially see through them, which increased his curiosity about how it held its shape much less remained standing. He was reminded of the Manga, Monster Women. He went up to the door and someone intercepted.

"Not human compatible," the attendant said. "They dissolve human flesh and bones. Unless, you're wanting to die that way. It is a very pleasant way to check out."

"Not looking to die today, but thank you," Jon said, and continued on.

Ditri, the druid priestess, was suddenly by his side.

"Looking to play? I can introduce you to some friends," Ditri said.

"I am just curious," Jon said.

"I see," Ditri said.

Jon looked at his trouser wondering if he was that obvious. He didn't seem obvious. Then he realized, he was broadcasting that information; he was clearly labeled available and interested.

"I can also see that you recently had an experience," Ditri said.

"What you mean?" Jon asked, wondering if it the profile displayed the last time he was intimate.

"It's not your first, though," Ditri said, focusing hard. She was not looking at his profile display. She was looking deeper. "You're much more advance than you give yourself credit for,

but so far, it has been mostly happenstance, not on demand. I am speaking of out of body experiences.”

“How do you know this?” Jon asked.

“High tech,” Ditri said. “Most of the people on your world refer to it as reading auras, or accessing Akashic records. The Founders didn’t discover their spirituality until after their civilization reached a singularity point. It was when everyone on the planet was connected wirelessly through a network of frequencies that they discovered the nonphysical frequencies.”

“Seriously?” Jon asked.

“Don’t be so judgmental. Not all species are as telepathic as humans,” Ditri said.

“Humans are telepathic?” Jon asked.

Ditri bowed, bringing her hands together. “I am sorry. I assumed you were being judgmental. All species has a telepathic potential. You can’t be made of energy and not be. The problem lies in the evolutionary construct of bodies. Bodies were meant to fill a niche in an environment, to rely on and to harvest a particular type of energy. Humans have a very small range of physical energy. You have limited visual range. You have limited hearing range. Your brains are much bigger than you need to take in what you take in. That’s because, you have access to so much more than your kind gives you credit. More than you kind dare admit to. And, quite frankly, it’s probably good to have some social blocks because some of your kind, they’re not ready for this. The law of attraction isn’t a physical law, so that you can get more stuff. It’s a spiritual law, so that you can evolve.”

Jon frowned at her, worried she was about to sell something. She laughed.

“Next time you’re ‘out,’ may I approach you?” Ditri asked.

“You can visit me in Astral?” Jon asked.

“If you like,” Ditri said.

“I would be interested in that. And learning more skills,” Jon said.

“Do you have time to play now?” Ditri asked.

“Ditri,” Jon said, wanting to avoid a hook up. He was interested, but he was also exhausted. He was reminded of himself saying he would never say no, and never have enough. For the first time in his life, he was quite satiated.

“Not sex,” Ditri said. “Better.”

“Pfff! What’s better than sex?” Jon said.

“Come see,” Ditri invited.

“Cum see?” Jon asked.

“If you like,” Ditri said, taking his arm.

As they walked, Jon continued to take in the attractions to be had. In addition to bio-organisms there were dolls, simple mechanical machines, robots, android, regular masseuses, and masseuses offering happy endings. It looked like anything could be found here. He paused at the tentacle monster.

“I am so coming back here,” Jon said.

“You have time,” Ditri said.

“Next time,” Jon said. “I want to know what’s better than sex.”

“Tentacles are fun,” Ditri said. “Go with the older partner. Less teeth. Unless you like teeth.”

“I will take that under advisement, for next time,” Jon said.

They walked, talking about life on a station, until they arrived at one of the rings and stepped out into the light of ‘day.’ This was full spectrum lights that was so close to sunlight Jon couldn’t tell the difference. Their entry point was elevated and they were looking out over the top of a forest. From this perspective, if he didn’t know he was in a station, he wouldn’t have suspected anything unusual. They proceeded down a winding stairs, followed a path through the woods. There were more different types of trees than Jon could even account for. Birds flew. Jon felt as if he were being watch and he paused and then realized, they were indeed being watched. Tarsiers were everywhere! Little mammals, with huge eyes. They were cute and kind of freaky at the same time. Their eyes were bigger than their brains.

“The watchers,” Ditri said. “They see everything. They see nothing. You can pet one if you like.”

“No thanks,” Jon said.

As they continued along a path that Ditri followed, the trees became smaller in size. Eventually, they were no taller than a human. Soon, they were walking in shrubs. They were making their way towards a crystal, geodesic domed structure. Bushes became plants, plants became grass, and grass became stepping stones of crystals, hexagons. The crystals were placed in a pattern, as if radiating away from the dome in a spiral orbit. People attended to plants and

each other. Ditri was treated reverently by anyone that passed, and because Jon was with her, they greeted him with equal respect.

“My sorority owns this entire ring,” Ditri said. “Though the station can provide clean air and clean water, it is scientific fact people do better in nature. People of Indigo share this. It is a refuge. It provides fresh foods. It provides peace. I am a High Priestess of the order the Night. My title is ‘En.’ We serve Nanna, the moon goddess. We serve Innana, the goddess of love. We serve Isis, the goddess of light and wisdom. We are the keepers of the Ark. We preserve all life. When a world is ready, we can bring new life, or reintroduce life that’s been lost. We are the watchers. We watch as things grow and change to meet their needs. And when life changes, we preserve the past, and embrace the present. Biocorp likes to engineer things. We believe nature should be allowed to evolve on its own, without our guiding hand, because there is one above us who is a better guide. Still, we cherish all life. The Universe is so full of life, there is no end to finding new ways of being.”

Ditri directed him to his own stepping stone, but continued to hold his hand. She guided him to a next stone, while moving to a corresponding stone. “This is the dance,” she said, orbiting around him. “What you discover, you do not discover alone. You discover for your entire species. Even if you never speak what you discover, your species benefits from your exploration of all the worlds. Your world has had many awakenings. Each time, when confronted with the Great Choice, it was decided to return to sleep. The people of earth are still feral, hardly better than Meer Cats in temperament, spooked by shadows they go running back to the nest, the collective. That is not a disparagement. Some shadows will eat you. Maybe you’re adjusting so well, Jon, because you’re a product of your time. You believe in others. You have no doubt. Volunteering to be cloned, well, that was a safe way of stepping out into the bigger world without actually taking the risk of stepping out. It is still a step forwards. Yay you.”

They arrived at the building and entered. They entered an airlock where it was compulsory to undress. Jon was directed to the right, Ditri to the left, where they were cleaned. They were not satisfied with Jon’s thoroughness, so an attendant came in and assisted, instructing him, and then he was passed through. He was greeted by Ditri and provided a robe. She led him through a maze of crystals. They appeared to be of the same quality and type he had recently found in the giant space geode. They arrived at a private room that was illuminated by a small clam shaped bath. The water radiated soft pastels, rolling gently through the spectrum. The

walls rippled with light, like moonlight filtered through a swimming pool. Ditri removed her robe and hung it. She had Jon do the same. He was aroused with anticipation. Ditri took his hand and led him to the bath. The water was warm. Precisely, it matched the normal human temperature. It had an oily feel to it. She asked that he lay in the water, on his back. He seemed hesitant.

“You cannot sink. This water is hyper-salinated,” Ditri said. “I am with you.”

Jon took a moment to get in position. The buoyancy of the water held him in a way swimming pool wouldn't. She put a crystal on his forehead. (“Can you hear me?” she asked.)

“Yes,” Jon said.

(“With your mind,” Ditri said.)

(“Yes.”)

Ditri lay in the water beside him. Their feet were directed into the small of the clamshell shaped pool. She took his hand and their upper bodies away from each other. She kept him the right distance, her fingers gently locked with his. The clamshell lowered, sealing them in. (“Easy. I am with you. We're just going to float together. The waters are healing. The buoyancy is better than any massage because it holds all of you at every point of your being. Your skin is taking in the salts, it is nurturing. We become one through the waters. Our heart beats are syncing. Our breathing is syncing. This is the closest you will get to being in the womb, short of being in the womb. This is better than zero g floating.”)

The passage through the spectrum was accelerating, and the light was fading.

(“You may close your eyes. You may even sleep. Or you can leave your eyes open. You may see things in the dark. Lights. Faraway places. Faraway places that are not so far away, but actually contained within you. Be at peace, I will travel with you,” Ditri said.)

Ditri's internal voice was loving, both motherly and as seductively as a lover so familiar she need but touch you and she has you where she wants you. The lights went out so subtly through dimming that Jon didn't panic. He had already relaxed to a greater degree than he imagined he would. He would relax a great deal more as time passed. There was no way other way to be in this environment. The more his body accepted he was safe, not sinking, not drowning, the more it succumb to peace. It was as if it was remembering. It did this for nine months. For most beings, the womb is the most comfortable part of the life cycle.

Jon remembered. There were drugs that burned. There were biochemical attempts to end the pregnancy. There was a physical attempt that failed, home remedied coat hanger. It resulted in hospitalization of the mother. The mother even attempted suicide. All these memories were locked inside his being, even though he was only a clone.

("I am with you," Ditri said. She moved her fingers so he felt the contact.)

("I am scared," Jon said.)

("I got you," Ditri said. "I will not let go.")

Ditri shared her pre-birth experience with him. Not for compare and contrast, but to reveal possibilities. She shared songs and warmth and they established a new start point. Jon had sense of falling and then suddenly he was not in dark, he was in the light of day. Ditri was beside him. She smiled. There was a woman and child gardening. A man was planting a tree.

("Oh," Ditri said. "This is the home of my youth. That's me! That's my mother. That's father.")

("You were on a planet?" Jon asked, the sun seemed intensely white.)

("Yes," Ditri said. "It was a very good life. I think this was the best life. In truth, it was just a different life. Perhaps a respite from the other lives, which were much more labor intensive.")

("Why did you leave this life?" Jon asked.)

("I have not. This is still my life. Oh! Even in the mind we misread things. I heard the calling," Ditri said.)

Ditri moved them. They were suddenly in the center of a crowded, public dining hall. There were pedestrians, shopping. Families. Kids running amok. People eating. People feeding children and babies. People nursing. People quarreling. There was so many conversations and so much bustling commotion it was impossible to hear any one thing.

("I don't like this place," Jon said. "I don't like crowds.")

("This is no place. This is every place," Ditri said. "This is the call of the universe. Well, in representation. This is your metaphoric reference point. You can tune into any one person, and you can hear their life, their loves, their struggles. You can help them. You can hinder them. You can simply witness. The Multiverse calls to us. It desires teachers and lovers and even adversaries. You can learn a great deal from an adversary. Sometimes more from an adversary than a lover.")

“I have met the adversary,” Jon said. “I don’t want more of that.”)

“Maybe that is why you are here. You needed a respite,” Ditre said.)

Ditre drew him up. They arrived at a quiet place. They were in a treehouse in the mother of all trees, overlooking a forest in all directions. From this tree, they looked down on all the other trees.

“What do you see?” Ditre asked.)

“Peace,” Jon said. “I like this place. It’s quiet. It’s tranquil.”)

Ditre smiled into his being. (“This is the exact same place, Jon,” Ditre said. “You can turn into the fear and the struggles, because that exists. Change exists. But there is more love than you have dared channel. You touch on this with sex, because the physical act of love is the only thing your society allows the male. Your society would frown on a male hugging another male, or even holding hands. Your particular society is so afraid of males that just seeing a male with children causes them to imagine the worst. This results in a lack of male teachers, an increase in single mothers, and a male population that is disenfranchised from society and family, which increases aggression and the very thing they fear in males. Isolation results in increased libido. Male energy is supposed to make connections. Female energy is to sustain connections. But this, too, all of it, is an illusion. It is a part, a small part, of something much much bigger.”)

“I could so stay here,” Jon said. “I don’t want to leave.” He thought about it. “Are we really here?”)

Ditre took him in his arms and hugged him. The embrace lasted to the point he became uncomfortable. She held him through this until his body relaxed. He returned the embrace and cried into her. She brushed her lips against his, not kissing, simply touching her lips. She took him down, and there was soft bed beneath them, maybe always there. He kissed her. She did not refuse him this. She led him deeper without him suspecting. She knew his thoughts and she allowed him to think his lust was guiding his every action. He kissed down her neck. He kissed to her breast. He lingered here a while and then started down, but she drew him back to the breast. Though he tried to go down, she gently brought him back to her breast. She clung tightly to him. He continued kissing, then sucking, and eventually suckling. He was as an infant in her arms. She sang. The tree rocked. He fell asleep in her arms.

Chapter 12

Hali wasn't home when Jon arrived. He had free reign, but had no inclination to explore her space, other than to occupy the spaces that he had previously visited. He found it strange going from one side of the apartment, where there was sunlight, to the other side where he could look out into the dark of night. He sat on the love seat in the alcove looking out at the stars and the activity. He couldn't see Onuka with his eyes, but he knew where she was. Loxy reported everything was good. Lilith was sleeping. He felt comforted knowing she was resting. Loxy was quiet. When he asked if she was okay, she reported she had experienced vicariously through him the experience he had had. She also said that she was aware that he was reflecting and that she didn't want to intrude on that space. She liked the space he was in. It was healthy. A place to re-evaluate and experience a different perspective.

He accepted this and sat quietly. He put his feet up. The sleep in the floating tank was so restorative he didn't imagine he would sleep again. He couldn't recall ever sleeping so well, even after an exhausting frolic. His gaze was so distant, he didn't notice the reflection of Hali coming up behind him. He didn't acknowledge her at all until she was touching his shoulders and leaning over to kiss him. He had had this general experience before, and normally he would have jumped up out of fright and spent the next couple hours in a state, and probably arguing. He did not jump. He was not startled. He simply looked up and smiled and Hali kissed his lips. She came around the couch and straddled him, kissing him more vigorously.

She smiled into his face, then fell into the hug, whispering into his ear. "I could get use to this," Hali said.

Jon pushed on her, gently, guiding her. She leaned back, curious. His face was wet and her curiosity became concern and she wiped his face with her sleeves. "What's wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing," Jon said.

"Why are you crying?" Hali asked.

"Is this love?" Jon asked.

Hali was taken aback. "I don't know," Hali said.

Jon touched his heart. "I feel so much," he said. "I feel like I am going to explode. I feel like I am going to wake up and this all be gone."

"Then, hurry up and love me before you do," Hali said.

They struggled through kissing and groping to undress without separating from each other, and finally came together. He leaned into her so much she finally laid over on the stool. He drove her deeper into the alcove where she braced her hands against the glass. With the right perspective, she could see their reflection in each of the paneled frames of the alcove. She could look through that into space. Jon, too, could look down into space, but his eyes never left her eyes. He was driving so hard and fast that she anticipated he would arrive before she did, but she didn't care. She encouraged him with her words and with her push back and the grappling of her legs. They turned the stool over and her shoulders went to the floor. They took a moment to shove the stool aside and she lay on the open glass, her head bumped the outer most glass, she brought her hands to his hips and held her tightly into him, grinding harder so that she could bring him off. He came and fell against her and she hugged him. He remained in her, but he did not grow noticeably soft. She patted his back and said "bed." They went to bed where they continued to make love until they were both asleep. They spent the rest of their time in bed, eating, showering, and repeating.

When time came to leave, she had him dress for work, took him to an airlock, activated his belt, and invited him to fly.

"Excuse me?" Jon said.

"Fastest way to your ship is for you to jump, and have Onuka come and get you," Hali said. "This will build a bond. You have clearance to fly and STC will clear a direct intercept for Onuka."

"Seriously?" Jon said

"Yes," Hali said. "All pilots do this. Well, all Biocorp pilots do this."

"I will pay the docking fees," Jon said.

"Umm, do you remember agreeing to me being the boss?" Hali said. "This is a public place."

"I am not spacewalking naked," Jon said.

“You will thank me for this later,” Hali said, kissing him through his shield, which took extra effort to penetrate, but the shield was smart enough to allow flesh to pass through, and the kiss came with an interesting sensation, not electric, but with something akin to sparks.

Hali shoved him through the force field airlock. He panicked at first, but then realized he was breathing. He tumbled away from the station.

(“Relax, Jon. You could actually deplete the air directly in front of your mouth,” Hali said.)

(“I am not happy,” Jon said.)

(“I will make it up to you when you return,” Hali said.)

(“Oh, if I live through this...” Jon said. “I am so going to take advantage of that offer.”)

Like a dog running to save a man that had fallen through the ice, Onuka rushed to collect Jon on its own initiative, which Hali was glad to see, because that meant a strong bond between pilot and ship. Jon had to learn how not to tumble on the fly, which was difficult, and the approaching ship felt more like a scene from Jaws, minus the music. Jon slowed his tumbling, but didn't stop it; arms out stretched. Onuka not only matched speed, it matched Jon's rotational energy and so when Jon was floating inside of the mouth he could simply reach out and grab hold and then suddenly, there was gravity and he was safe and the mouth was closing. Loxy was suddenly virtually beside him.

“That was fun!” Loxy said.

“No, it wasn't,” Jon said. “I need to go and get a shower, change clothes.”

He passed into the airlock and used the clean room to take care of business.

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One blind jump later, they found them in an empty region of space. They deployed probe and after they were separated by several thousand kilometers, they were able to determine the nearest star to them was approximately a hundred light years away. Apparently, per the archives, this was the most usual result of a blind jump. This was so usual, there was suspicion that blind jumps simply landed you in the emptiest space. This was so likely that it confounded theorist why sometimes people landed in highly occupied space. It turns out, no one knew why the quantum drive worked at all. The quantum drive was initially built by the founders, a species that

lived three billion years ago and were presently absent. No one understood how it worked or why it worked, but they had learned to follow the instructions for building the devices, and it worked exactly like the founders said it would. Every time. Trying to make it work in ways not specified by the founders always resulted in destruction of the device... And, usually everything within a kilometer of said device. The resulting explosion from a misused quantum drive was a bigger event than even matter meeting with an equal amount of antimatter.

“Great,” Jon said. “We’re riding a bomb. We should have named the ship Strangelove.”

Loxy laughed. One hundred light years, jumping one light year at a time every three days. It would take 9.863 months to arrive. There was no way to know for certain, given their present perspective, if that system was occupied. There was no present sense of radio waves that would indicate civilization. So far, Loxy had failed to identify landmarks, known stars that would allow them to line up a star chart and say, ‘oh, here we are.’ Dropping blinding into the galaxy was frequently disorienting. Technically, it was possible to arrive in another galaxy, but those events were rare, and usually accompanied by greater hang-times ‘aloft.’ ‘Aloft’ was the two second interval at the peak of their jump. Apparently there were quantum winds or ‘energies’ encounter aloft that could sustain a ship for an indefinite period. The longest known ‘aloft’ time recorded was four minutes, twenty seconds. ‘Aloft’ time does not necessarily translate into distance, though. One could have the usual two seconds aloft and arrive at another galaxy, provided you had good coordinates. They knew this because there was a Great Push to get to Andromeda. The Great Push was also a race between mechanical and Bioships to get there first. Biocorp won that race, and they were now the standard for all bioships. Blind jumps in Andromeda tended to land people in Andromeda. Blind Jumps in the Milky Way tended to land people in the Milky Way. The Second Great Push was ongoing; the Republic was trying to get to Large Magellanic Cloud. There were was the direct route, which was plunging steadily ahead. Each light year, Sentinel was established keeping the good coordinates. From each ‘camp.’ Pioneers would try blind jumping, hoping to get lucky and arrive ahead of the people pushing for direct routes. Most the time, they fell back towards the closest galaxy. At mid distance, they imagined that they would have a fifty fifty shot at hitting the other galaxy, but it turned out, the between galaxy was a sweet spot and blind jumps tended to stay in the in-between spot.

The average quantum drive refractory period was three days. No one knew why. There was some variation, but no one had been able to explain why the times varied. When the device

was constructed, however long it took to initially charge the device was precisely how long it would take to charge the device for the rest of its life. Jon's quantum drive took precisely three days to charge. No amount of praying, poking, or watching it made it charge faster. It required a full charge in order to launch them into the higher dimensions. Nothing less than a full charge would carry them aloft. Trying to jump before that charge, even a second prior to full charge, resulted in a system dump of energy, starting the charge cycle over. It was like flushing a toilet before the tank refilled. Insufficient water left debris in the toilet. You simply had to wait. That's it. There were quantum drives with longer than three days cycles. Shorter cycles were clearly pricey. The shortest known cycle was one earth solar day, 24 hours. There were drives rumored to beat that, but this seemed to be more myth than actuality. And, you couldn't have two drives on the same ship. Well, you could, but you didn't double your work potential. If one drive was deployed, the other drive also deployed, draining its charge. It was possible to launch too close to another ship and cause another's ships drive to deploy, resulting in two simultaneous blind jumps. Ships thusly triggered rarely arrived at the same place. Ships that were tethered or in physical contact throughout the entire journey aloft and back would arrive at the same space/time coordinates.

"So, we have a choice," Loxy said. "Nine months pushing towards the closest star, or another blind jump."

"This sucks," Jon said.

"No it doesn't," Lilith said. "Nine months is standard fair for any sailor. We're kind of like sailors, right?"

Jon looked at her as if she were crazy, even though he knew she was right.

"Nine months of sex?" Lilith said.

"That has its appeal," Jon said. "You're not tired of me yet?"

"Pffff," was all she could say.

"I really just want to step out on a planet," Jon said.

"That's a good sign," Loxy said. "I have been reading about pilot illnesses. Many bioship pilots get to where they refuse to leave their ship. They get extreme anxiety when asked to do so. Hali is actually glad you asked for a suit, because it means you might not restrict yourself to ship life. Other top illnesses include obesity, depression, oikophobia, and madness."

"Oh? Just five?" Jon asked.

“Just the top five,” Loxy said.

“I think, with me and Loxy as your support system, you will not have any trouble,” Lilith said.

Onuka made a growling sound.

“Oh, and Onuka,” Lilith said.

“And Hali,” Loxy said.

“And Ditri,” Lilith said.

“OMG, you know?” Jon asked.

“We talk,” Loxy said.

“It was very loving,” Lilith said. “I am glad we met her.”

“I’m not so sure about Avery,” Loxy said. “She seems a bit mad.”

“You think?” Jon said.

“Well, you initiated that,” Lilith said. “I expect you to honor it.”

“Maybe your presence in her life will stabilize her,” Loxy said.

“So, are we pushing or jumping?” Jon asked.

“We have three days to decide,” Loxy said. “Deploy the sails and put some distance between us and the probe. The greater the distance between us, the better the parallax measure. We could deploy a second probe later for improved triangulation.”

“Until then, you should eat. I think we’re hungry,” Lilith said.

“Or bored,” Jon said.

“Oh! You are so not bored,” Lilith said, attacking him.

निर्मित

Jon took a turn being immersed in Amy. He sat in the chair, wearing the halo, and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes, his perspective had changed. He could not tell the difference between being in his body and Amy’s body, except for the fact, he knew this wasn’t his body. This was a machine that incorporated robotics, biotics- biological simulated materials that were indistinguishable from real biology until you looked under a microscope, and sophisticated AI tech, falling just short of the necessary components for true AI awakening. It was at optimum health. He could discern heart and breathing functions, even though she did not need to breathe.

The flesh was real flesh, but not real flesh. Like any guy might on switching bodies, he went and looked in the mirror and undressed. He was turned on because this was not him, this was other and female and he was naturally curious. He wanted to know what it felt like from being inside. There were rumors women had better orgasm; that seemed true comparatively, especially if the only orgasm a male had was penile. Men who discovered prostrate orgasm could achieve full body orgasms, approaching, and sometimes surpassing the female orgasm's intensity. At least per subjective conversational point. In truth, people felt a range of intensity and sensations. Some people were simply more orgasmic available than others, but it was something any person could learn. He had already been experiencing some of what Lilith was experiencing due to their telepathy. Lilith's orgasms were intense and leaked over into him. Loxy, too, was having orgasms, and that was shared via tech. And When Loxy came, her orgasms leaked over into Onuka, and she would purr for hours.

Jon got himself off from masturbating Amy. His body didn't orgasm, Amy's did. Lilith was so turned on by this, she joined him, masturbating alongside him until she came, and then she took over, pushing Amy-Jon to new levels of excitement. In the end, he decided this was even better than girl on girl porn. And then, Loxy joined in. She and Jon could share the same body simultaneously, experiencing the same thing, but only one could drive. She over-rode the system, taking full control and so it was if he was being possessed. It was surreal sensation. Each consecutive level of play led to greater intensities of pleasure. Each time he imagined it couldn't be more exciting, that he couldn't go any higher, then Lilith or Loxy would add a new layer and he would simply expand, and almost fall asleep. It was like on the verge of dreaming, full awake in a place beyond word or thoughts. He felt warmth and explosions of light and the smells of leaves and rain and lightning, or ozone. He eventually hit a plateau and fell asleep, still residing in Amy.

He awoke in his body. He put the halo on the pedestal and got up. Lilith was asleep. Loxy was asleep. Onuka was asleep. He went to the flight deck and stretched He was surrounded by stars and he felt good. He taught Onuka a new game of chasing a virtual target. He would assign a target and have Onuka go there without guidance. She took to the game quickly and it was clear she had more intellect than a mere horse or dog. He sat down on the flight chair, drew his legs up into meditation pose, and closed his eyes, enjoying a peaceful brain unoccupied with worry or fear, occasionally tossing another virtual ball ahead of them for Onuka to chase. When

his companions awoke, he showed them the game and they discovered, both they could also assign virtual targets and Onuka would respond for them as easily as they did for Jon. Onuka would not let them take the reins, but she would chase a targets for them. As they played, their bonding grew. Three days came and went. They pushed closer to the intended star, making it an entire five months, anbeforeJon was completely done with that exercise. To alleviate boredom, they chose to do a blind jump.

They arrived in the middle of a triad-system, three stars. Most systems were double stars. Double stars in extremely close proximity make great engines for manufacturing pure materials, naturally, without tech, which was exactly the kind of system they had discovered previously. Three starred-systems were not uncommon, and at this distance, they were together, but their influence on each other was minimal. There was a red dwarf and a yellow star like Earth's, both of which Jon was familiar with. The third was a class O star, which was something he technically knew existed but had to read up on it to understand it. There was no indication that this place was occupied. Over the next three days, Loxy studied the stars, looking for planets. She ascertained all three stars had gas giants. The O star, the brightest and hottest of the three had a perfectly placed gas giant, offering a nice jump point to jump in close. They could reside in the shadow of the gas giant for three days without worrying about overheating. Three days later, they did just that, and discovered forty moons, and a planetary ring comprised of ice and rock and, interestingly enough, emeralds. As the ring came around the back into the shadow, it was glowing hot, like a ribbon, solidified into particle, and the emeralds maintained a glow about them. Jon went out in his space suit, tethered by a line, coming delicately up on the ring, studying it. Even on the dark side of the planet, the moons glowed with the heat from traversing the sunlight side. The planet sparked with lightening, and some of the clouds held a sustained glows of reds and greens. Jon selected hand sized emeralds, put them in his bag, and when his bag was full, he had Loxy reel him back in.

“I love this job,” Jon said, taking off his helmet.

Lilith and Loxy seemed sad.

“What?” Jon asked.

“Come up,” Loxy said.

Jon closed his eyes and went up to the virtual deck. Loxy and Lilith were there. There was an artifact on the dome, a transponder code for a competitor company. It was faint almost undetectable against the radio wailing of the gas giant. IHS Lark.

“I am sorry. I missed it in the initial survey,” Loxy said.

“No worries,” Jon said.

“You don’t understand. We won’t get credit for this system,” Loxy said.

“No worries,” Jon said. “Have you hailed them?”

“I have. No response,” Loxy said.

“Alright,” Jon said. “Plot a course, I will raise the quantum sails.”

“Jon, we can’t,” Loxy said. “Onuka can only tolerate ten hours of direct light from this sun at this distance. Even if you got a great wind, that’s a seven hour trip. Seven hours back. We can’t do it. Even with shields at max, the skin will burn, blister, and eventually explode.”

“Can you tell if it has life support?” Jon asked.

“I cannot,” Loxy said.

“What can you tell me?” Jon said.

“There’s a ship there,” Loxy said. “It’s been here for at least a month, assuming the transponder is functioning as designed. If the ship was damaged, more than likely it’s now an oven, and if there was a pilot, he’s cooked. We’ll get some credit for reporting the system and the lost ship, but this place belongs to competitor company. Hindigger Corporation. Stationed at Indigo.”

Jon tuned into data and saw they had 48 hours to go before their drive was fully charged.

“Continue to try and raise the ship,” Jon said. “Let them know our intent.”

“What’s our intent?” Loxy said.

“When our drive is charged, we will rendezvous with the ship and determine if there are survivors, conduct a rescue,” Jon said.

“Jon, it’s highly unlikely anyone is alive on that ship,” Loxy said.

“Can you expand the image?” Jon asked.

Making the speck bigger just made a bigger, smudge of light. “I am sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Jon said, coming down from virtual deck. He headed to the room. Loxy followed him down, Lilith turned and followed, too. “We will assume there is a survivor until we know otherwise. How close to we have to get before sensors can determine life signs?”

“This is not Star Trek, Jon,” Loxy said. “It doesn’t work like that. I can see throughout the entire electromagnetic spectrum, but I can’t see what’s on that ship from here.”

He stashed the helmet on the stand and stepped into the cylinder to have the spacesuit removed. He came out naked. He headed towards his private shower.

“How hot do you suppose it is on that ship?” Jon asked.

“I don’t know. My specs for that ship suggest its life support would have been overwhelmed after five hours from light of that intensity,” Loxy said.

Jon leaned his head against the back of the shower, just letting the water hit him. He sat there, trying to imagine if someone could survive and how long and awful it would be to be roasted alive. Would they feel it coming up slowly, like the parable of the frog in the pot?

“Loxy? How long would a transponder last in that kind of heat?” Jon asked.

“It...” Loxy was puzzled. “You’re right! That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Can we connect with that ship?”

“Yeah,” Loxy said. “Bioships can adjust to fit almost any connection point. They’re the most versatile of all ships.”

Jon got out, dried off. And dressed. He went and threw himself on the bed, staring at the ceiling while he thought about it. Lilith laid down next to him.

“What would take a ship out of commission?” Jon asked. “Could he have hit something?”

“Sometimes quantum drives fail,” Loxy said.

“Well, that sucks,” Jon said. “Assume that’s the only failure. Wouldn’t he still have the radio?”

“Unless all systems were diverted to life support,” Loxy said.

Jon sat up. “Can you remote access his transponder?”

“No,” Loxy said.

Jon lay back down.

“Can we launch a probe?” Jon asked.

“A probe won’t last ten minutes,” Loxy said.

“Lilith, I can’t leave till I know for sure,” Jon said.

“I go where you go,” Lilith said.

Jon closed his eyes. He went to sleep soon after. Space walking and math is tiring.

निर्मित

It took six hours of tacking into an unseen quantum wind to arrive. Onuka was uncomfortable in the light, but Jon coached it, telling her it was important. The light coming back from the ship was bizarre and intense, and growing. It wasn't until they actually passed a horizon line that he understood what he was seeing. The ship had extended a true solar sail, reflective side towards the sun. The actual ship was in the shadow. Jon killed his solar sails raced towards the shadow of the other ship's sail. Diving into the shadow of the sail was like diving under an umbrella on a sunny beach. The relief was instantaneous. Pores on the outside of the Onuka expanded to allow gas to vapor to leak out and cool the skin even faster. This was a biological response.

The other ship itself reminded Jon of the shape of Willy Wonka's Everlasting Gobstopper. It was basically a three dimensional star, only squared off, pyramid points. He maneuvered to a connection point and gently latched on, making sure he didn't put too much spin on it. Losing that solar sail would be nightmare. Jon suited up. He asked Lilith to suit up, too, just in case. He crossed through his airlock alone, into the mouth of the ship. They were connected to one of the upper pylons, with a hatch that led into the ship. It felt like 'down' into the ship. Loxy was virtually there.

"There's no power to this system. Get the drill, and the thing that looks like this," Loxy said, offering an image of the bit he needed.

Jon found the compartment that held the tools. He found the drill, the recommended attachment, and connected them. He returned and hesitated.

"You okay?" Loxy said.

"Should we knock first?" Jon asked.

Loxy shrugged. Jon pounded on hatch with the base of the drill. Nothing. He hit it again. He then put his helmet to the hatch. There was a resounding knock, three times.

"Someone's home!" Loxy said.

Jon immediately began opening the hatch. When it gave, it came up with a pop and there was the sound of air escaping, and condensation plumed out, and dissipated. The inner hatch was already opened. There was a man on a ladder in the airlock of the foreign ship. A human, man. Rather on the heavy side. Older. He smiled.

"Do you have any wine?" the man asked. "I am parched."

“Ummm,” Jon said, seriously confused. “William Shatner?”

“You’re the second person I have met to call me that,” he said. “Let me guess. You’re from Earth?”

“Umm, yes,” Jon said.

“Well, I am 42,” he said.

“Oh? Nice. I was actually looking for the answer to life, the universe, and everything,” Jon said. “Kind of convenient he turns out to be William Shatner.”

“I am not that man! My name is Kirk. I am clone. 42,” Jon said.

“Okay. 42, would you like some help?” Jon asked.

“Do you mind if I bring a few things?” he asked.

“Ummm, okay,” Jon said.

42 handed Jon a rope and climbed back down into the ship.

“Okay, haul this up,” 42 said.

Jon started pulling up the rope.

“What kind of ship you got there, son?” 42 asked.

“A bioship.”

“A bioship?!” 42 said. “Never trusted them myself.”

“Who is rescuing whom, Sir?” Jon said, heaving the rope up.

“You’re a rookie aren’t you?” 42 asked.

“Yeah, again, who is rescuing who?” Jon asked, taking a container off the end of the rope. He sent the rope back down.

“You’re not going to let me here the end of that, are you? Pull!” 42 said.

“You know, I heard that Shatner was a dick in real life,” Jon said.

“Never met him, so I can’t say,” 42 said.

Jon sent the rope back down. “We’re not bringing everything in your whole ship, are we?”

“You in a hurry?” 42 asked.

“Maybe,” Jon said.

“Just ten more boxes. Unless you want to empty a couple of those and send me back some empty boxes?” 42 asked.

निर्मित

As soon as the inner and outer latch was closed, he and 42 shifted the containers into the airlock. Once they were in the airlock, Jon separated from the Lark. He was ready to initiate transport.

“Can I get some wine first? I am seriously parched,” 42 said.

“Um, no. Hang on,” Jon said. He pushed the drive to Indigo station.

They rode the acceleration out inside the airlock. They arrived in Indigo Space. STC welcomed them back. “Yeah, um can I be expedited, I am declaring an emergency,” Jon said. “Loxy, fill them in.”

“I am alright, son,” 42 said.

“My ship is not,” Jon said. “She suffered third degree burns.”

Jon took his helmet off and handed it to Lilith who came to be of assistance. 42 pointed at Lilith.

“Is that a vampire?” 42 asked.

“Yeah,” Jon said. “She is a person.”

“You know, you’re not supposed to make out with them,” 42 said.

“Too late,” Jon said.

42 sighed. “Yeah, well, I kissed a few girls in my day, too,” he said.

“I did more than kiss,” Jon said.

“Oh?” 42 said. “Did you ever...”

“Let’s not do this,” Loxy said.

“You made your AI Avatar a hot woman?” 42 asked. “Doesn’t that result in serious blue balls?”

“That’s why I have a vampire. And a Sex-bot,” Jon said. “Ever been with an Android?”

“I will have you know, I was with a whole series of androids, and I kissed them so well I caused their systems to crash,” 42 said.

“Oh yeah? Well, well,” Jon said, and then just shook 42’s hand. “I do more than kiss!”

“Yeah, well, I am banned from the Indigo Brothels,” 42 said.

“Seriously?” Jon asked. “Welcome aboard, Captain.”

“Boy will be boys,” Lilith told Loxy.

“They will have wine waiting for you at the reception area,” Loxy said.

“Oh, thank god,” 42 said. “Did I tell you I was parched?”

“Excuse me while I change,” Jon said.

Lilith followed so she could change, too. She winked at 42.

निर्मित

The reception area at the opposite end of the bridge was packed with reporters. Their cameras were nothing more than glasses. Affiliates from both Biocorp and the Hindigger Company were there. 42 saw the camera men and back behind Jon, lamenting about how much he hated the limelight. As Jon and Lilith exited the bridge together. A man rushed up and hugged Jon and kissed him.

“I was so worried when you declared an emergency,” he said.

“I never kissed a guy, you win,” 42 said.

Jon put his hands between them so he could get some distance. The man’s grip on his arms were too tight to just gently separate them.

“What the fuck?” Jon asked.

“It’s me. Avery,” he said.

Jon’s eyes almost bulged. “Seriously?! You’re...”

“A male, yes. It’s that time of the year,” Avery said. “I told you I cycle.”

“You’re so different!” Jon said.

“What, you don’t want to be friends anymore?” Avery asked.

“We’re still friends, it’s just...”

“Good, because I am terribly horny and need some relief,” Avery said.

“I am going over here to talk to the cameras,” 42 said, excusing himself from the relationship problem.

“But,” Jon stammered.

“Sorry, I don’t do relationships,” 42 said.

“Maybe I can help you,” Lilith said.

“No! I only want to be with Jon,” Avery said.

“Not going to happen,” Jon said.

“We have a friendship agreement. It includes sex,” Avery reminded him.

“When you cycle back to the female, I will consider it,” Jon said.

“Would you have sex with you species if the woman was menstruating?” Avery demanded.

“Sure,” Jon said.

“So why can’t you have sex with me during my cycle?” Avery demanded.

“Because,” Jon said... He thought really hard about it. “I can’t.”

“This is not fair. We have an agreement,” Avery iterated.

“A friendship agreement is not marriage,” Jon said.

(“It’s pretty close,” Loxy said in his ear.) Jon detected amusement. (“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he asked.) (“Pretty much,” Loxy said.)

“I can’t believe you’re rejecting me,” Avery said.

“I am not rejecting you. I am just saying no for now. I am tired. My ships is injured. I need time to adjust to your change,” Jon said. “I understand if you want to break our agreement.”

“No! I am not going to break up with you just because I am frustrated and mad at you for being so pigheaded selfish,” Avery said. “Okay. Okay. We can work this out. You have a sexbot, right? You can use your halo and visit me via my sex-bot. Here’s the frequency.”

“I don’t know,” Jon said.

“You can’t even use a toy with me?” Avery demanded. “Just come and visit me. You don’t have to come in person. Just wear the halo and you can visit me in my home without even leaving your precious ship and friends.”

“Okay,” Jon said.

Avery pulled him in for a hug. “Don’t give up on me,” he whispered in his ear. Then kissed his cheek and walked away.

Jon stood there. Dazed.

“That was fun,” Lilith said.

“No it wasn’t,” Jon said.

And then the reporters were on him. The lenses on the glasses flashed and questions were coming from all angles. Some of the reporters asked for exclusives. One person asked if he was fighting with his boyfriend. Jon nearly shouted “I don’t have a boyfriend!” but Lilith answered before he could respond: “Relationships are difficult for most people. He’s a pilot. And he is still learning all the nuances about this new friend.” For a moment Lilith was the center of attention.

Jon was amazed at how easy she took to this function. If she redirected the conversation, most of them took a hint. One persistent reporter pushed for his angle and Lilith shut the conversation down, nicely. No one doubted Lilith was in charge.

“So, how does it feel being a hero?” She had angled in close and was using her femininity to get in closer. Jon struggled to keep his eyes on her eyes. Other female reporters were using similar tactics, except she was taking it to another level. Her name, (her public name? Jon asked Loxy) was Elodie Noir. She was seductive. She was the kind of girl who walked into your office wearing a trench coat and asked for a cigarette and brought the kind of drama that left you bruised and wanting.

“Um, not a hero,” Jon said.

“You put your ship and your crew in jeopardy. You rescued a pilot. There are stories of pilots so desperate for claims they kill rivals out in space,” Elodie said. “You could have pushed the Lark into the sun or the gas giant and there would have been zero evidence.”

“Nobody does that kind of stuff for real,” Jon said. “We’re in this together.”

“I don’t think that’s accurate...” Elodie said.

“I don’t know where you get your information, but I will not screw someone over for a piece of property, or for wealth. If it is reasonable to do so, without putting my ship or crew in excessive danger, I will always respond to a distress call, and or investigate, what appears to be a ship in distress,” Jon said.

Hali was suddenly by Jon’s side. “Biocorp completely endorses the decision to render aid given the context.” In his head, Jon heard Hali’s voice: (“Please withdraw back to Onuka.”)

“Excuse me,” Jon said, allowing Hali to take over. “I’m exhausted.”

Jon retreated, but Hali took Lilith’s arm and had her stay to continue answering questions. He was back on the bridge when he realized Hali was aware of just how strong a presence Lilith had on camera. Jon felt a virtual hug the moment he arrived on Onuka.

“You okay?” Loxy asked.

“Are people really that harsh out here?” Jon asked.

“There is evidence of foul play. Suspicion, criminal investigations, very few convictions,” Loxy said. “It probably helped a great deal that I recorded everything we did and made that available on arrival. Our reputation is solid. Your decisions to stay and investigate moved us up in public esteem. You’re coming out of this golden.”

“I don’t want that,” Jon said.

“I know,” Loxy said.

Jon retired to the flight deck and sat in his chair. Maintenance and bioship doctors were going over the ship. Outside of the ship, there was activity, like a carwash, sprays and brushes going over the surface. Carl was suddenly back to talk to Jon.

“I am impressed at the bond you have with your ship,” Carl said. “Most ships wouldn’t have left the shadow.”

“Will Onuka be okay?” Jon said. “Is the heat damage permanent?”

“It’s not heat damage, Jon. That’s radiation burns. Worse than sunburns. Your ship is capable of entering an atmosphere, and sustaining huge amount of heat. In fact, you actually need to do that exercise within the next six months. It help exfoliate the surface dermal layer and allows the ship to grow. The coordinates for an ideal world to do this is available. You enter the atmosphere, burn off the top layer of skin, and soak in the ocean for three days. Like going to the spa,” Carl said. “You really should read your ship manuals. Less sex, more homework. Anyway, yeah, your ship is going to be fine. Every star you visit has unique properties. You will have solar exposure limits based on proximity. That O star, well, bioships are not compatible with that level of radiation.”

Hali and Lilith entered. Jon stood. Hali immediately hugged him.

“Jon, you nearly killed Onuka,” Hali said.

“I..”

“No, I get it, but you need to know something. Onuka dies, you’re done with Biocorp.”

“Because I can’t be imprinted with another ship?” Jon asked.

“If Onuka dies, you will die,” Hali said. “You will become so severely depressed, that you will simply die, or become so lethargic that people will presume death. I have never seen a Captain recover from that. We put a ship to pasture and put you on a planet, you will be fine, and you will slowly grow detached as the animal part of the ship atrophies. But that stunt, well...”

“Did I do the right thing?” Jon asked.

“You could have come back without investigating,” Hali said. “We could have sent help.”

42 arrived, along with his handler, Mars. “You did the right thing,” Mars said. “42 had less than twelve hours of life support. And had you not knocked, he was going to vent himself

out into space. 42 has served us well. We are grateful. So grateful, we'd like to extend a co-op for this Triad, the Kirk-Harister system."

"Thank you, Jon," 42 said. "I didn't say that earlier. I am more than grateful. I would extend a friendship offer, but I don't want sex."

42 was so serious in his delivery that everyone laughed but Jon.

निर्मित

Onuka was healed and pushed away from Indigo to free up the docking bridge. While Lilith slept, Jon spent the next three days with Hali. Lilith actually slept for three days straight, passing in and out of REM sleep. Some of them were Lucid and in those, she would return home and visit family. For her, that inward journey was more real than actually going. Due to her connection with Loxy, Loxy was invited into the dreams, and for Loxy it was another level of freedom, very much as it was when she only lived in Jon's head. It the equivalent of being in another Universe. Because of their total connection, there were new places in the dream scape that seemed to be bridges between all their worlds. There was Mustang world, where horses ran free, only one of them would come to them and push its nose against their hands, or lean its head against their shoulders and tilt into their head. This was Onuka. There wasn't absolute objective certainty to their interpretation. They were just absolutely certain of their interpretation.

The five months they were out in space, Jon's ability to Lucid Dream on demand increased. Perhaps it was the boredom, or the routine of ship life, that made any dreamscape a trigger for lucidity. Sure, his life on board was full of sex and play, but it was routine. Three days in space may as well have been a full year. The discoveries at the end of a three day jaunt made possible through a blind jump, well, that was Christmas. Jon loved Christmas. Now that he had a family, he loved Christmas. Before, he hated Christmas. And knowing this helps to understand why he had a negative emotional reaction to Hali's directive:

"You need to finish your push towards that star you singled out," Hali said.

"Surely someone else will take that," Jon said.

"I have two other pilots, they are doing their own thing," Hali said. "This is yours. I want you to finish it."

"There isn't a pilot flying for Biocorp that wants an easy push?" Jon asked.

“I am not giving up our coordinates,” Hali said. “Would someone buy an easy push? Yes. I want you to finish it. It’s call discipline.”

Jon got up to walk away. Hali grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “Don’t do this. Not like this.”

“You’re not my mom,” Jon said.

“No, I am your boss. I am your friend. I am your lover,” Hali said. “Your luck is going to run out, Jon. Finish the push. You went more than half way. The rest is a cake walk.”

Jon pouted. Hali kissed him below the ear. “I will make it worth your while,” Hali said, snuggling closer.

“I am not that easy,” Jon said.

“I have evidence to the contrary,” Hali said, kissing into his neck, her hand exploring lower.

“That’s just a reaction to stimulus,” Jon said.

“You’re reacting to me,” Hali said.

Jon’s pout faded. “This is not going to work,” Jon said.

Hali kissed him, a half cheek half lip kiss that was breaking his resistance.

“Every time,” Jon said, surrendering.

When they were finished, Hali escorted him to the self-launch point, and without being shoved he simply walked out of the airlock backwards, and drifted away. It would have been better if he jumped or allowed the air to be fully evacuated to give him momentum, but STC cleared a vector for Onuka to catch him up. Being caught by his ship felt like love, like a dog rushing to greet an owner who had been gone from work all day. Loxy greeted him with an equal amount of love. Lilith was still asleep. He thought about waking her, but Loxy requested he wait for her dreaming cycle to end.

“Avery has been calling,” Loxy said.

“I got your messages,” Jon said.

“Jon. Avery is a friend. A very complicated friend,” Loxy said.

“A very needy friend,” Jon said.

“You’ve been there,” Loxy said.

“I not unsympathetic, Loxy, it’s just, I don’t know. I am okay with the neutral phase. Okay with the female phase. I am not okay with this male phase,” Jon said.

“So, go talk to... Avery,” Loxy said. “Tell Avery.”

“See, even you find it confusing. Do you use the word him? Right now he is a him, but what is the pronoun for the in between state? When he’s female, is she a she, or do I continue with him?”

“Go find out,” Jon said. “Avery is in Avery’s habitat. All you have to do is log into Avery’s android. It’s a droid just like ours. Or don’t go. But speak to Avery. ”

Jon sighed. He retired to his room, and made himself comfortable on the only chair in his quarters, the one associated with Amy. He closed his eyes and steered Onuka over to Avery’s floating habitat. It was a modular construction, and though not the largest, Avery clearly had spent some money making the habitat accommodating. Jon asked Onuka to hold this station above the habitat. Jon opened his eyes and saw Loxy there, assuring him that this would be okay. Loxy assigned the access code to Avery’s droid. Jon put on the halo, closed his eyes and allowed himself to shift out. Even though he didn’t actually shift out, it felt like a shift out.

Jon found himself in a bed. He was disoriented. He was in a female body. She was not human, but clearly feminine. The ceiling held a full length mirror that revealed the entirety of this body, and a part of him was instantly curious and wanting to explore and know more, but another part told him to run. The colors of the alien skin was like that of Kiash, the tree frog beings. He tried to sit up, but her wrists and ankles were secured to the bed.

Avery entered, pushing a chair to the side of the bed. Avery was wearing a bathrobe. He seemed upset.

“I can’t believe you waited till the last moment to come and see me,” Avery said. “All you had to do was spend one hour with me, and that was too hard?! You were about to bounce, weren’t you! How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Avery, untie me,” Jon said.

“No,” Avery said. “You are going to spend time with me.”

Another droid, a reptilian male in a butler outfit, brought Avery a drink.

“You have two droids?” Jon asked.

“Yeah,” Avery said. “One male, one female. I cycle. I like variety. I thought you like variety, but you’re just like every other homophobic, gender static species,” Avery said. “I just want to be loved, Jon. All of me. Not just aspects of me. I want you to appreciate the fullness of my friendship.”

“Please, tell me that was a metaphor, not an innuendo,” Jon said.

“Oh, Jon, it’s going to happen. I would like it to happen with your consent,” Avery said.

“I am not going to consent. I am being very clear, I do not want sex at this time,” Jon said.

Avery stood up and poured his ice cold drink over his face. “Hot and cold! You can’t play with my affections like that. He dropped his robes and climbed up on the bed.

Jon closed his eyes to bail but found he couldn’t escape. He felt Avery’s hands on his thighs as he crept up on him, mounting him. He felt the violation and then the fingers prying his eyes open so that they were looking at each other.

“You can’t leave till I say you leave,” Avery said.

The species the droid simulated produced secretions from head to toe, making them oily. It changed the color of their skin, drawing out deeper, fuller colors, the same way massage oiled shines human skin. This was not an indication of enjoyment, any more than a vagina getting wet or a penis getting hard means a person is enjoying the stimulus. Even a male can have an erection that is unwanted. This was unwanted, but as Avery pushed into the body he took on a sheen of his own as he lathered himself in the resulting bath of oils. He was much shorter than the droid and so when he cycled through his rhythm he filled Jon’s vision, and when he was down Jon saw him on top of the droid body, which was his body for now, in the mirror. He chose not to fight. There was no breaking the bond, and the more he struggled mentally to escape, the more real the nightmare became. He went to a place in his mind that he had gone to before. It was a well-defined space. He could see everything, but he was detached. He had an emotional reaction to seeing the reptilian butler, standing there with a cloth over his arm. It had a natural smirk that seemed sinister.

Avery finished, climbed off of Jon, took the towel and wiped his hands and face. He then put on a halo, assumed control of the reptilian body. The reptilian undressed; it was huge. It was so huge Jon wondered if it was anatomically correct, or exaggerated by the toy manufacturer due to customer request. Avery continued to assault Jon in the tree frog skinned droid in the form of a reptilian droid, and the mechanics of it was all bizarre, both in feel and view. The reptilian practically bounced and right before climax its entire body convulsed as going into a seizure, grasping so tightly on the arms that circulation was impeded. The thing is, it was simulated, so it

could continue indefinitely. The assault continued until Avery's refractory period allowed him to play. And then the two of them double teamed Jon in the droid.

Three hours later Jon arrived back in his body. He came out of the chair in a panic, throwing the halo off of him, gasping for air as if he had swum the entire length of an Olympic size pool. Lilith and Loxy were there to greet him, but he pushed past and went for the halo and tried to smash it. Lilith tried to calm him, but he pushed away and departed the room. He activated the quantum drive before he was even in his chair. He was off balance and fell straight back towards command chair. He landed wrong, breaking his arm.

Chapter 13

The arm had to be set. Amy did that. The nanite and meds did the rest. Jon was in pain for three days but didn't accept remedies. He remained in a mood, but no longer pushed Lilith away. If Lilith, or Loxy, or Loxy inside of Amy came to him, or sat by him, he responded, but he was distant, not playful. He turned down sex. He didn't ask to be alone, as he would not restrict their movements to cater to his whims, but he wanted to be alone. Lilith didn't pressure him, but she didn't retire. Amy went back to her station for charging. Jon went forward into nose of the ship, and opened the jaws. He was vented out into space, his life belt kicking on as the pressure dropped, which trapped air immediately around him. It was enough air to prevent him from going unconscious, though he did have a reaction to the sudden drop in pressure, like a desperation to stay alive and run. Running wasn't an option. He was ejected forwards of Onuka. He extended his arms and rotation slow, stopped.

Onuka was after him like a dog chasing a ball, but Jon directed to hold her distance. Loxy responded to Onuka's burst of speed and called to Jon, but he asked for a moment to think. Loxy demanded he think inside. "I am inside. Inside my head. I need this." If he looked down, he saw Onuka below his feet. Everywhere else he looked, there was space and stars. He could easily imagine he was alone in all of this, especially if you deny the personhood of stars. If he turned off his belt, that would be that. Well, maybe. Onuka would no doubt swallow him and re-pressurize and he would wake later. He seriously contemplated the stars as people. They were definitely entities in his head, always distant, always calling. With light pollution on Earth, people have forgotten what powerful players these people are.

The theme from Buck Rogers was suddenly in his head, with words. 'What am I, who am I, what will I be...' His thoughts raced: Who am I? Am I my brain? Am I more. Is a personality nothing more than a cell phone app? I created a tulpa, a personality. We can switch. The brain doesn't care what operating system runs the hardware. Jon as a personality is inconsequential. That's a strong argument for the materialistic model that consciousness is simply a hallucination. We are literally zombies who think we're aware, but really we're not, but there is no way to prove you are or you aren't; you simply accept on faith. The law certainly assumed people were, or there would be no laws preserving life or property rights. Society believed in more, though it

is entrenched in a warfare espousing the irrelevance of man, or there would be more effort to instill philosophies of peace.

“Jon, go back inside now.”

The voice was solid. It was in his ears and his brain, but it didn't come from the normal channels. It was male. It was kind. It expected compliance. It was as if he were alone on a stage, even the auditorium was empty, except for one, the director. There was a struggle to know more, to see who it was, to hear the voice again, but that was it. There was nothing. There were no further instructions.

“Onuka, catch me up,” Jon said.

Onuka accelerated, like a cat that had been poised to spring, and caught him. He landed on the floor on his back and the moment the compartment was pressurized he was being embraced by Lilith and Amy. They were crying from relief, and anger, and sadness. And they were more demanding, wanting to know what was going on.

“I am hungry,” Jon said.

They retired to the galley where they watched Jon make a sandwich with sliced cucumbers, and assortment of fake meat slices, pickles, crackers, and potato chips.

“I don't think you're supposed to mix those,” Lilith said. Jon had to squish it to get into his mouth. “Okay, well, it has an appeal, but, um...” She surrendered her protest.

“God, what I wouldn't do for some peanut butter,” Jon lamented, mouth full.

“Jon, please, talk to us,” Loxy asked.

“Nothing to talk about,” Jon said. “I am good.”

“You are not good,” Lilith said. “You space walked!”

“Perfectly legit exercise,” Jon said. “It's good for Onuka and I to play catch.”

“Jon,” Loxy said.

“Yes, I was in a mood. A serious mood. But that helped. Next time I am in a mood, I am going right out the front door and consulting with stars,” Jon said. He seemed suddenly reflective, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “Did either of you hear the voice?”

“What voice?” Loxy and Lilith asked.

“Probably nothing,” Jon said.

“You heard a voice?” Loxy asked.

“What did it say?” Lilith asked.

“Go back inside,” Jon said.

“You should listen to the voice,” Loxy said.

“I think we need more evidence before I arbitrarily start listening to voices only I can hear,” Jon said.

“That ship sailed when you made me,” Loxy said.

“Jon,” Lilith said. “I am hungry.”

“OMG. How long as it been?” Jon said.

“Five days,” Loxy said.

“Why didn’t you say something,” Jon said, trying to recover the last few days. Even he hadn’t eaten since they departed Indigo.

“You were in a mood. There was no way I was eating while you were in a mood. You seem improved, and you just put enough calories away to give me a hunger rush,” Lilith said.

Jon put the remainder of his sandwich down. Lilith asked him to finish, also, she got him a protein beer. It was like Ensure for adults. Real adults. They retired to the bed where Jon and Lilith made themselves comfortable, Lilith on top. Amy laid down beside Jon, snuggling in, putting a hand on Lilith. As Lilith moved in for the bite, Jon was startled by the face of the reptilian and grimaced. Lilith paused. “Jon?” “It’s okay. Sorry.” Lilith hesitated, but then continued. He could see the top of her hair in his peripheral. He brought his free hand up and ran his fingers through her hair. His other hand was held tightly by Amy.

निर्मित

Lilith slept afterwards. Jon and Loxy retired to the virtual deck. Five months of having seen this star-scape was enough to apparently familiarize himself with the sky above deck. Interestingly, he hadn’t recognize that while outside, but inside, with the deck below him, even be it a virtual deck, there was context that improved seeing. This is a thing. Look at a moon on a horizon, it looks huge. Take a picture of it, and it isn’t huge. He reminded himself, we don’t see with our eyes.

“You couldn’t have just come up here? You had to go outside?” Loxy asked.

“Really not the same as it is out there,” Jon said. “It’s like being in the ocean, hundreds of miles from shore, no boat, no possibility of rescue... It is tangible.”

“I would prefer you not do that again,” Loxy said. “Or at least, not without telling us.”

“That’s fair,” Jon said, turning to look out into space.

Jon found himself up against the end barrier. He connected a group of stars by drawing an imaginary line that stuck against the ‘glass.’ It resembled the Star Trek insignia. The barrier felt like glass, but probably was nothing more than the edge of the virtual arena. In here was not the same as out there. He felt safe here. An acoustic guitar began to play. He turned to see Loxy sitting in the lotus position. The music was coming from the guitar she held. It was an easy melody, one that fit into your soul like a key and caused it to unfurl. It was something from long ago, too long ago it seemed, but then, that was only yesterday. Tears began to flow, even in here tears could flow, and he wanted to bolt, but this song was an anchor, one of those hidden moments of childhood where he was safe, in a closet, with a tape recorder and a bulky head set. Loxy repeated the intro, and this time, he couldn’t help himself.

“Sunshine,” Jon sang, channeling John Denver. “On my shoulders, makes me happy...” Lilith heard the call of the song and arrived on virtual deck with him. Jon changed the word ‘sunshine’ to ‘Starshine’ as he proceeded through the rest of the song. The virtual deck resonated with his voice as he leaned into Loxy’s musical support; it was the best acoustical place, like cathedral or a shower. The silence that followed the song was long and hard, as if he had been walking in the desert and on finding a spring had drunk his fill until he needed to just sit and breathe. He came and set near Loxy and Lilith. Their knees touched. Loxy put the guitar behind her. Jon gave one hand to Loxy, the other to Lilith. Loxy and Lilith joined hands. Jon told them. He told them everything. He discussed his rage, his disgust, his wanting to kill Avery, a desire to kill everyone who had ever harmed him or any child, and then there was the intrigue of the mirror and that this wasn’t him, and he wanted to rescue the alien frog skinned sex-bot, and he wanted to fuck her himself, and wanted to destroy the reptile’s creepy smile, and he saw his dad and his mom mirrored there in that face, and Avery was nothing more than siblings that were practicing on Jon what was done to them, and then there was the physical sensations of pain and pleasure, the emotional overload... There was hate and love. There was compassion; a complex thing that was more prominent given his age, but there was the love of a child that existed even knowing they were being harmed; they would fight to preserve the family, even if it was simply because that’s all they ever knew. He knew where Avery was; no, he assumed he knew, and if this came from what Jon experienced, then he wanted to help make it go away. His assumption

that Avery had once been abused explained Avery's extreme compulsion followed by extreme withdrawal. Punishing Avery, locking Avery in a cell, wouldn't make this thing go away. Yes, it would stop Avery from harming another, but it would still be in Avery. It would still be a thing that even Avery knew was contemptible, and self-loathing would continue to consume his soul, if not expand as Avery's perception of other's contempt and hate added to Avery's own misery. Of course, maybe that was an assumption, too. Maybe out here in space, at Indigo station, people were more advanced in understanding sex and relationships and dysfunction. Humans of Earth, they knew enough about sex to be dangerous, not always loving.

"It's not your job to save Avery," Lilith said.

"You're feelings are definitely involved, and we can't rule out Stockholm syndrome," Loxy pointed out.

"It is not my job," Jon agreed. "Maybe Avery left his/her home world because of this. Maybe that explains the bots. One for each cycle. Maybe Avery isolated because of this thing and that's why there has been no effort to friend someone."

"Not your job," Lilith said.

"It's our job," Jon said.

"Jon, do you believe the law won't take your side because of your promiscuity?" Lilith asked.

"I don't know. That's a fear. People more often than not blame the victim for putting themselves in circumstances where rape is likely to happen again," Jon said.

"It's called re-enactment," Loxy said.

"I know what it's called. I know why people do it. I know why I can go into any bar and immediately pick out the most promiscuous female in the place without even talking. I know why I can do the opposite. In fact, that's how it usually plays out. I go to the person I find most attractive, I get rejected, I hate myself, I pick the easiest lay, I go home with her, and then I spend the next several days hating myself, then repeat. I see this in Avery, only, it is playing out in a crazy extreme bipolar, bi-gender duality that is beyond my ability to sort. I don't want to press charges. I want to understand," Jon said. "I am okay that this not be a secret, because that could help other people, but the stigma that goes with this thing is even more isolating than locking someone up. Avery is already locked up! That exaggerates the bad stuff and adds bad stuff. I made a choice in my life to find a way to be more loving. I want love in my life and I

want to put love into the universe and this is where I get to practice what I preach, by not running away, but by seeking to understand. I need more information about Avery. I want to practice forgiveness. I want to practice love. And, I know for a fact, I can't do this alone. I need a community of people who love and support me, and will help me help someone. This requires a team. I need you both."

"Jon, I have always espoused the love, compassion, and understanding," Loxy said. "You have my full support. If there are any reservations on my part it is because I have a bias. I will protect you first. You're my primary. Clear?"

"Clear," Jon said. "Thank you."

Lilith was silent for a moment, but maintaining eye contact. "You are not like any of the humans in any of the stories I have ever heard. You were injured, and yet you don't plan for war. You are conflicted, and yet deliberately thoughtful in formulating a response that seeks the greater good of self and of others." Tears were flowing. "My heart is with you. You have my support, whether you go to war or not. Love is the preferred path of my people. Wide is the spectrum, narrow is the frequency."

Jon blinked. "Wide is the path, narrow is the gate."

Lilith smiled. "You know this?" Lilith was amazed. "Love is the highest frequency. It is the narrowest gate. It pervades all of space time, it is available to everyone, we all reach towards it, few rise to it, no one gets there alone."

It was decided, finish their push to star, then go speak with Avery.

निर्मित

They arrived above the ecliptic of the planetary system of the class M star, looking down on it, able to take in all the planets. It only took an hour for Loxy to have enough data to virtually accelerate the orbits to reveal a particular curiosity. There were two gas giants. One, the largest, orbited close to the star, at a distance that would have been between Venus and Mercury. The other was between where Mars and the asteroid belt would have been. There was one planet between them. It's orbit shifted to and fro within the space between the two giants. This planet, the second planet, held an atmosphere, it had a moon, and it was surprising stable considering its orbit oscillated like Ping-Pong ball on a table between two players. There were six planets in all,

fourteen planetoids, and an Oort cloud full of ice and rocks. Both gas giants had upwards of twenty moons.

Jon deployed a probe in buoy mode, and accelerated them down into the system, which would bring them in towards the inner gas giant, where he intended to orbit a couple of days before accelerating out towards the second planet. The second planet clearly had the spectrum for oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, and methane. He was betting on life. Onuka loved the sunlight, and purred like a kitten. It took a solar day, under quantum sail, to arrive at the gas giant. From there, he lowered the sail and adjusted with traditional rocket science. Onuka, like a dragon of old, could exhale fire. There were a number small orifices around its body to orientate, and four main orifices on the back. Onuka could turn without the jets, a skill that Jon hadn't figured out how it was accomplished. Onuka could also accelerate on its own, again, without thrust, without quantum sail. It wasn't fast, but it was detectable.

Loxy began categorizing moons as they swung around the giant. As they approached the terminator, approaching shadow side, a swarm of bioships came at them. They were exactly like Onuka, only smaller. The largest was half its size. They came from the shadows, adjusted course, and followed Onuka. There was suddenly an outburst of radio chatter, as if they were trying to communicate.

"Babies?" Lilith asked.

"I don't know," Jon said.

"There is no data on this," Loxy said.

One of the bioships nudged Onuka. Jon dropped from virtual deck to maintain balance. Lilith was there, steadying him.

"They want to play," Lilith said.

"I am not so sure that's a good idea," Jon said.

Jon made a push to leave orbit, heading towards the second planet. The herd of bioships followed. Jon accelerated using thrusters. They emulated. Keeping up. Onuka accelerated in her special way, surprising Jon. She could accelerate at a much steadier rate than he had previously seen.

"She is learning from them!" Loxy said.

Onuka was clearly bigger, stronger, faster, and was soon outstripping the herd. Then the jumping began. To keep up, the others 'jumped' through dimensions and arrived just far enough

ahead of Onuka that they were in front, then beside her, and then falling behind. The impression Jon received is they were dolphins, riding a bow wave. They were pursuing and playing. And they all jumped, they all kept up for a moment, and then jumped again.

“How are they doing that?” Jon asked.

“They have tech?” Lilith asked.

“I am not detecting tech,” Loxy said. “I only sense biology. Radar has limited penetration. They mirror Onuka’s anatomy, but they are fundamentally different.”

“Biocorp engineered Onuka from this?” Jon asked.

“Maybe,” Loxy said.

Onuka jumped. The jump put them a kilometer forwards of their last space-time position. It was instantaneous. There was no sense of rising or falling. They just skipped forwards. It was uncomfortably jarring, like watching a DVD and the scene skipped.

“New skill!” Loxy said.

Jon focused on the quantum drive. It still held a day’s worth of charge. It hadn’t been depleted with the jump.

The Little Ones kept up.

“Onuka, do that again,” Jon said.

Onuka jumped forwards. They were one kilometer ahead of their last experienced position. The Little Ones caught up.

“How far can she jump?” Lilith asked.

“Onuka, next planet, go,” Jon said.

Onuka jump. The jumps was more disorienting than the little jump, and Jon nearly threw up, but again, he found no energy depleted from the quantum drive. They were in orbit of the planet, near its moon. The Little Ones were absent.

“I guess they can’t keep up?” Loxy asked.

The Little Ones arrived.

“Or they had to do more than one jump,” Jon said.

“But they knew where we were,” Lilith said.

“Jon, we’re being hailed,” Loxy said, re-playing the audio she had just received.

It was a greeting. “Hello, Traveler? Are you receiving me?”

Jon responded, voice only, “Hello?”

“Your transponder says you’re a Biocorp ship,” the caller said. “Is this true?”

“It is,” Jon said. “Who are you?”

“I am Lanza,” she said. “I, too, am a Biocorp pilot. I am sorry I can’t do a virtual call. I have limited capabilities. I crashed on this planet. My husband is with me, but he is injured more than a simple med pack can fix. Would you be willing to retrieve us and bring us back to civilized space?”

“Sure,” Jon said.

Lanza began crying. “Thank you. I am transmitting my coordinates,” Lanza said. “If you do a burn, you will find the waters here are ideal for your ships skin rejuvenation. This beach is shallow. I can meet you there.”

“Coordinates received. I see the place you’re referring to,” Jon said. “ETA about two hours?”

“I will be there,” Lanza said.

The signal cut.

“Jon, I don’t think we should go down,” Lilith said.

“We always answer distress calls. This is clearly a distress call,” Jon said.

“Something isn’t right,” Lilith said.

“It is true, she didn’t use the standard SOS protocols, or emergency frequency,” Loxy said.

“Her radio is damaged?” Jon asked.

“I don’t think she is in immediate danger,” Loxy said. “She shouldn’t be uncomfortable waiting a few more days. We finish charging in two. We bounce back to Indigo, she has help within two or three days. If she is Biocorp, you get a share in the system, with bonus of bringing another pilot back.”

“What are the odds of me rescuing two pilots?” Jon asked.

“Your life is governed by high tech,” Lilith said. “You’re going to experience a great deal of synchronicities and anomalies.”

“I don’t think so...”

“Jon,” Lilith said. “Since you found me, you have been nothing more than amazingly lucky. Our meeting was not coincidence. Nothing around you is coincidence. You are influenced by something greater than you. Greater than us. We are players in high tech.”

“Then, we are here on time, we should investigate. We have two days. I was informed we need to do regular atmosphere entries to exfoliate Onuka. Let’s do this. You can always stay hidden and if your intuition is right, well, you can rescue me,” Jon said.

“Assuming she doesn’t shoot you on sight,” Loxy said.

“Why would she shoot me?” Jon asked. “Most people in the Universe aren’t trying to kill you.”

“Statistically accurate,” Loxy said.

“I am worried,” Lilith said.

“We will be fine. We’re a team. And rescuing people is our theme,” Jon said. “Prepare for planetary descent. Greatest American Hero theme song, engage!”

“Ha ha,” Loxy said.

Chapter 14

Falling towards a planet was an easy thing, you just shoved against your orbital vector, and you started falling. The temperature inside Onuka remained steady, but the rush of noise was tremendous, as they were caught up in a storm. Seeing through the firestorm was impossible. Other than radar, all surface sensors were offline during re-entry. Jon debated the word re-entry, seeing how they had never first entered here, but maybe having ever been planet bound entitles one to use re-entry. They decelerated with the thicker air, falling backwards, and then rotated around and fell into the descent. Artificial gravity had diminished as planetary gravity increased. Onuka orientated to this so that the floor for Jon was down. This was definitely up down for it, too, but only within the context of a gravimetric field. They passed through a cloud. The temperature dropped significantly. They fell into a gentle rain, dived into an ocean, where the sound outside changed in pitch again. They rose to the surface and pushed towards their intended shore, like a submersible. As they traveled into shallower water, more effort was made to rise above, coming almost full out of the water, and then finally, Onuka settled.

“Okay, so the plan is, you two stay here in hiding, I am going to go scope the land,” Jon said.

“Be careful,” Lilith said.

“I will,” Jon said. “And if something happens, you two will come save my ass.”

“Maybe,” Loxy said, playfully.

“Yeah, maybe,” Lilith said.

“Maybe?” Jon said.

“I won’t be able to come out till sunset. This cloud cover will not protect me from the ultraviolet radiation,” Lilith said.

“You’re allergic to sunlight?” Jon asked.

“I am allergic to this sun’s light,” Lilith said.

“I guess we don’t have sunblock,” Jon said.

Lilith shook her head. She was happy to dress Jon in gear she had purchased in her outing. A cloak with a hood, and rain boots. She gave him his mail bag with a med pack and he slung it over his neck, letting it fall to his right side. She stayed on the main cabin side of the airlock. Jon put his hand against his side of the barrier, towards her. She mirrored.

“I’ll be back,” Jon said.

The nose opened for him and he step out onto a new world. The nose closed behind him as he waded up the rest of the way to a stone pebble beach. The beach was gray. The sky was gray and the rain was steady. He was off the beach, climbing up an incline before he saw her. She appeared to be human. She hesitated. Jon saw a scattering of rabbits across the field. The woman ran to him and embraced him. She cried. She was tall, in her thirties, and was fit, probably from necessity and diet of rabbits, which alone wouldn’t have sustained anyone for long. Her hair fell to her mid back and blew in the breeze, tangling with the dress that chased the hair into the breeze. Her blue eyes hinted at tech, a shimmer with sparkles.

“I thought no one would ever find us,” Lanza said. She fell away. “I am sorry. Come, come. Our home is this way.”

Jon followed her and she chatted away, nervously, pretty much the flibbertigibbet.

“You’re pretty old to be such a new pilot,” Lanza said. “But you’re human, you’re clearly healthy. Symmetrical. Good genes. You can never tell about a man’s genes until he has a good age on him. Never trust a young man’s genes, my mother would say. You want to know how he weathers before you give him kids.” She took up his hand. “And you’re clearly not afraid of work. You had a hard life. Is that why you became a pilot?”

“Pretty much,” Jon said. “I thought traveling would be a change of pace.”

“I so miss being out there,” Lanza sighed. “Have you made a lot of jumps? I am sorry. Listen to me rattle on. You can hardly get a word in edge wise.” She continued to talk, though.

On an open plateau of grass and rabbits and shrubs, there was a solitary, sand butte of three primary colors. The sides of it were almost perfectly strait. It was clear they were heading towards that. As they grew closer, there was indication of a cave. They entered into a quaint cavern, a few stone surfaces, some simple wood furniture, and a couple of artifact of tech that might have been the remains harvested from a bioship. There was a fire going, and a man lying next to it. Jon immediately went to the man and knelt over him, allowing Loxy to use his eyes and tech to see.

Jon felt the jab to the back of his neck and the sudden rush of pain of something unpleasant being injected into him. He fell straight down on his face, on top of the man. He observed from his eyes the world roll, he felt the hands turning him, which was Lanza turning him over on his back. His eyelids remained open. He could feel everything, but he couldn’t

move. Not completely true. He felt his lungs moving, his heart beating was loud in his ears, but his limbs were not listening, his mouth didn't make the words he was trying to make.

"Get up," Lanza said.

The Man Jon presumed to be the husband stood. He stood and waited for further instructions. His eyes remained lifeless.

"I am so sorry for this," Lanza continued to talk, leaning over him, checking his breathing. She smelled his breath. "God! Clean breath. I could so just take you now, but, I got to secure your ship. I can't risk it bolting away, now can I? Don't worry. I am not going to kill you. I need you. My children need you. Oh, they're going to eat you alive. See, this is my world. I am not giving it to Biocorp or the Republic. As best as I can gauge, this world was seeded by Founders three billion years ago. It's a paradise just ready for a sentient race to move in. I've got my children on seven continents, thriving, but we need an infusion of more genetic material, and well, you're the man. By default. It helps that you're cute, but quite frankly, at this point, whatever the wind blows in will do."

She took a probe from a pack and held it against his head. "Probably think I can't get in your ship, but with this probe, I will walk right on. Your ship will sense the echo of you and think you're with me," Lanza said. The probe's light changed green, showing the pairing had been achieved. She put it in her pocket. "Unfortunately, your ships as to be grounded, permanently. I promise I won't kill it, but it will have to remain sea bound. I need her genetic material as well. I don't know if you encountered them, but there are free ranging bioships in this system. They are not limited to this system. They can jump without Founder Tech and Quantum Drives. I am sure Biocrop made their ships by modifying these. It is my hope, with the genetic material from your ship, I will breed a line of free ships and I will claim this system and the surrounding systems, and build an empire of my own."

Lanza acquired a tool bag, handed it to her husband. He didn't respond until he was told to respond. She grabbed additional gear. She paused once more over Jon.

"If you fight me, you will end up like my husband," Lanza said. "Virtually brain dead. You can have a great life here. I only have daughters on this planet. They're hungry. Seriously hungry. They won't know you're not the best looking specimen. They will only know one thing. They want daughters of their own. You could have more offspring than Genghis Kahn and mine

and ours will cater to you. You just have to cooperate. But, you don't have to. I don't need your brain to grow and collect your sperm. Think about it."

Lanza stared into the shadows of the cave. "I know you're there. You can play with him, just don't injure him the way you injured dad. If I come back and he's dead before I get a turn on him, I will kill you all myself."

Lanza departed. Jon stared up into the flickering of light of the fire on the ceiling. He could hear movement and then they were surrounding him, debating a thing in foreign language. There was shoving and fighting between them. He felt himself being groped, his clothes were removed. Whatever it was that was injected into him, it clearly simulated or recreated 'sleep paralysis.' That was mechanism that kept people from acting out in REM sleep. Though he was clearly awake, his brain was convinced he was dreaming, and the more he tried to move, the more his body locked down, thinking this was a nightmare. He knew enough to relax, that relaxation was the only way to break out of sleep paralysis, but they were already taking turns. He was mounted by someone who was grinding out of desperation. They were making a game of it to see who can make him cum the fastest. She was leaning back, reaching behind her, painfully squeezing testicle. Someone slapped her, saying the only word he recognize "Fair!"

"Oh!" the rider said.

There was cheering and they tore her off him. Someone else mounted. They held the first girl down, trying to get some for themselves, fingering off spillage and touching themselves. Whatever he had been given, also lowered the refractory period. He remained primed and ready, and it wasn't taking much effort to arrive. He lost count of riders. He lost count of how many faces were in his, forcing his lips apart to examine his teeth. He lost track of the kisses and tongues, and he was wet and sticky with saliva and other juices. One rode his chest, grinding herself off while hugging her favorite sister, who was having her turn.

It ended when Amy arrived with their mother. She was bound with sex cuffs. Amy held a weapon that belonged to Lanza, and she was pointing it at Lanza. The daughters scattered. Except one. She fell to her knees in front of Amy and her mother and pleaded. Amy was a giant compared to these girls, compared to Lanza.

"Do not kill mother," the girl said. "Please. Do not. Kill me instead."

"I am not going to kill her," Amy said. "But this stops."

The girl stood. Others came out of the shadow. Amy brought Lanza forward so she could inject Jon with an antidote. It worked instantly. Like waking up. He scrambled to his feet and dressed.

“You okay?” Amy asked.

“Conflicted,” Jon said.

“One of your fantasies, though,” Amy said. “Who was it, Abbott and Costello on Venus?”

“Minus the humor,” Jon said.

“How can you afford a sex bot and crew?” Lanza asked. “You’re just a rookie!”

“I am really lucky,” Jon said.

“You’re not that conflicted,” Amy said.

“Not so much,” Jon said.

“Please, don’t sell the coordinates to my world,” Lanza said. “The population hasn’t risen to the threshold to allow us ownership.”

“How many people are on this planet?” Jon asked.

“One hundred, fifty thousand,” the girl answered.

“All of you are daughters of Lanza and her husband?” Loxy asked.

“No,” the girl said. “Mother has had two husbands. She also procured donor human eggs from off world for increased diversity.”

“Don’t tell them anything,” Lanza said.

“The game is over, mother,” she said.

“What is your name?” Jon asked the girl.

“Tory,” the girl said. “I am a first, and one of the few trained in biochemistry. I have access to limited tech in order to provide my services.”

“Services?” Amy said.

“There are fifty bio stations. Each has a hundred artificial wombs, so we can introduce new life forms. Each station has automated caregivers, like yourself,” Tory said, referring to the android body. She knew Amy was tech. “We can birth any creature we need, or want, but we have focused only on the human population at this time. It was our desire to reach critical population before being discovered. We would own the world by default. There are four bio stations situated on the moons of the gas giants, and we have sisters there. If this world is

deemed ours, this system will be ours. All the citizens of this world, and the moon colonies, are from mom, and or one of the two fathers.”

“Seriously?” Jon asked.

“A female has roughly three million eggs at birth,” Amy said. “With the right tech, it would be feasible to create a sizeable population from one female. Just one male’s ejaculate released has a million viable sperms. Just one male and one female could potentially provide such a range of diverse children you could arrive at a dozen new races within several generations, given a diverse environment.”

“There is a hundred thousand people here, from one female, and two males?” Jon asked.

“The stations remain active, and each female who becomes of age, participates in raising the next. Eggs are sorted for optimization,” Tory said. “Back while mom’s bioship was still flying, she did procure donor human eggs to introduce more diversity. She has been hyper selective in her procuring process, sorting first for extreme physical fitness, longevity, then intelligence. She imposes a second level of control by not allowing any males to be born. She creates in her lab, sorts according to her needs, and then distributes through in vitro. There have been no colonist. Everyone here was born here. I am taught only those born here will fully evolve and adapt to being here, to this gravity, to this life, and these strange seasons.”

“Where is your ship?” Jon asked.

“Why should I tell you? You’re going to destroy us. The moment you go back, this world will become Indigo property,” Lanza said.

“Where is her ship?” Jon asked Tory.

“It has long since passed. Her bioship, and the bioship of her first husband, were used to genetically alter the sky people,” Tory said.

“The Little Ones?!” Jon asked.

“You encountered them?!” Tory asked.

“Yes, they’re very friendly,” Amy said.

“They are?” Tory asked. “They did not run from you?”

“They ran to us,” Jon said.

“That is strange,” Tory said. She looked to her mother. “What are you doing to them that they run from us?”

“You are smart, but you would never understand,” Lanza said. “Traitor.”

“Mother, they’re listening to us. They’re being reasonable, considering context. Maybe they will help us. Maybe they won’t sell our location, knowing what we want to build here,” Tory said.

“You still have access to a ship?!” Jon said.

“Her second husband was a pilot for a metal ship,” Tory said. “It is parked above. There is access to the top through a lift at the back of the cave. Only she can fly the ship. She carries the implant from second husband, so that it thinks she is he. It will only fly for her.”

“These bio stations, they can’t be cheap,” Jon said.

“Second husband was wealthy, and he considered mother’s dreams and ambitions reachable, and so he contributed with an initial automated manufacturing laboratory. It is station in the Oort cloud, where robotics gather materials, create the necessary artifacts, and then places them. It is still functioning and caters to mother’s needs. The worlds and moons in this system are pristine, they will be kept that way by limiting the production of heavy metals off world.”

Jon looked to Amy. He was aware of Lilith listening. He was pretty sure the two of them counseled.

“How many people have to be here before you have legitimacy claims to your colony?” Amy asked.

“Two hundred fifty thousand,” Tory said.

“You’re not thinking,” Jon began.

“In for a penny,” Amy said.

“Seriously?!” Jon asked.

“So, you will help us? You won’t sell our coordinates?” Tory asked.

“We can delay, but probably not stop someone from getting here,” Jon said. “Biocorp has coordinates to the space about five months out.”

“Unless Hali let them expire knowing you would bring back these coordinates,” Amy said.

“Why would they waste the resources just to keep that coordinate live when they believe I’m coming back with better?” Jon asked.

“If what mom said about Biocorp is true, they will have backup in case you fail to return,” Tory said.

“So, assuming Hali has a backup plan, we have a minimum of five months if they pushed now, but assume they might wait a month or two before we start being missed, and if we show up in a month, that would give us another month on the clock,” Amy said. “I am in agreement with Lilith, this is doable.”

“What is doable?” Jon asked.

“We donate enough sperm to impregnate the population. In 9 months, there could be well over 250,000 citizens. Assuming 150,000 people here are adult female. And if everyone carried twins, plus the bio stations. Even the Androids governing the station can be host to offspring,” Amy said.

“Have you factored in child support?!” Jon snapped.

“Yes, we will support you,” Tory said.

“What? No, you don’t understand,” Jon said.

“Jon, we’d be investing in a world,” Amy said. “We would be co-owners in prime real-estate.”

“You would join us?” Tory asked.

“Not in your mom’s empire building scheme, but in co-owning a system, accommodating a jump point for Biocorp and or the Republic having a base of operation here, even if it’s just a satellite, yes,” Amy said. She translated a request from Lilith. “That, and for us to agree to help, there must be males. No more limiting to females only.”

“The men of the world screw things up!” Lanza said. “You don’t realize how much pain and suffering they bring to the cosmos.”

“Maybe. And maybe women do, too,” Amy said. “But this world is out of balance and that brings its own level of misery. We are in this together or not at all, male and female, together.”

“We agree,” Tory said.

“You don’t speak for me or this world,” Lanza snapped.

“No one does, mother. That’s the point. If they go and bring back Biocorp, this operation is over. They will farm us out or relocate us,” Tory said. “And you, you will go to a jail-box for breach of contract, and perhaps even murder and attempt to kidnap.”

“I didn’t kill him! You kids damaged him beyond repair, just like you did my second,” Lanza said.

“What you expect?” Tory asked. “Adults females also want sex, and they get crazy because they don’t have men around to practice being appropriately social.”

“Oh, don’t blame this on me,” Lanza said. “I have given up everything to make this place safe, and you are fucking it up for everyone.”

“We need him, we need a contract with a druid for more creatures to increase the bio-diversity on this planet,” Tory said. “We need men. We need improved relationships. We need a form of government that isn’t a dictatorship. You are kind when you want to be, mother, but you are not a queen.”

Jon frowned at Amy.

“Can I see you on virtual deck?” Jon asked.

Jon and Loxy arrived on virtual deck. Lilith was already there, watching and listening to everything. Lilith side hugged him as they drew closer together for conference. Jon found it fascinating that he could see himself through Amy’s eyes on the screen that was a window against the virtual deck’s barrier. There was also a ‘window’ where he was seeing through his eyes, with Amy, Tory and Lanza captured in his field of vision. Lanza and Tory were arguing.

“You’re both serious about this?” Jon asked.

“We would own territory, by default, which means Hali would own through us, which brings her closer to retirement,” Amy said. “We would be given privileges and awarded income for allowing operations to exist in this system as a bridge to the nearby systems. If Lanza is smart, and I suspect she is...”

“In an evil sort of way,” Jon said.

“Probably, but she put bio-stations on the water moons of the gas giants, and there are oceans under those ice; those worlds would make great fisheries and floating farms enough to feed a thousand worlds,” Amy said.

“And, you and I will have children,” Lilith said. “Something I can’t give you.”

“Being a sperm donor to a hundred fifty thousand plus children doesn’t make me a parent,” Jon said.

“We can make a virtual copy of you and put it in all the bio-stations, and they would have access to everything about you. They would know you,” Amy said. “They would know you the way I know you. The real you, unmasked.”

“Do you know how long it will take to impregnate a 150,000 females?” Jon asked.

Lilith laughed. Loxy took a time out to get the information, and they heard the question via the 'window' on the barrier: Amy asked Tory for statistics. Loxy didn't virtually leave, but her eyes went distant and then came back. She smiled. "Given the available tech, 24 hours. You wouldn't exactly be sleeping with any of them, we just have to collect a couple of samples, the tech will distribute to each station accordingly, artificial wombs will be impregnated, and the daughters will also come to be impregnated. A drone will deliver samples to each lunar station. In forty eight hours, we will have statistics on how many pregnancies took. Meanwhile, we will continue to have you provide enough samples that people can try again, or after a year, they can produce even more."

They heard Tory on the screen, "It's the only way. Securing another donor that is free and clear of any domain would be extremely difficult. You fly for Biocorp, but you are a free agent. Which means, what, you made enough money to buy your freedom, which means, we need you to secure our world. We need you as a parent and a sovereign member of our society."

Tory touched Jon in the real world. "We need you. Or they will farm us out. They won't care that we are victims of mother's aspirations to create a competing empire. If you want a title, we will agree to more. Hell, you would have no shortage of wives. You could be the king that keeps mother in check."

"I don't want to rule," Jon told her, it was funny hearing his voice through a secondary medium. "Having a place to call home, that would be nice."

Jon on the virtual deck pouted. Contemplating all the things that could go wrong.

"He is disappointed he won't be sleeping with the whole world," Lilith said.

"Yeah he is, but Jon, seriously, we're going to make this worth your while," Loxy said. "Clearly, you will never have a night alone as long as you're on this planet. They will probably set up a lottery just to spend time with you. Win win, for all of us. I can also download a copy of myself into a bio-station. Our virtual copies could live forever here, watching our children and grandchildren grow. If Lilith wants to do the same, we could all three have a huge a family. Every time we come here, we could receive uploads and experience what our virtual selves did. We would watch and grow old together, we would practice love together. We would share our ideas and thoughts and participate in a thing greater than us. Guides, not dictators. Maybe Lanza needed to be the stern parents to get it going, but now, we're changing the direction and this system will be contributing member of the greater collective."

“When do we start the lottery?” Jon asked.

“Yeah, I guess you focus on that and allow us girls to take care of the big stuff, like creating a civilization,” Amy said.

Chapter 15

Lanza, otherwise known as ‘mother,’ had her fate decided by her children. Though most of the daughters didn’t agree with mother in execution, they did love their mother and they loved their world. Jon suspected Stockholm syndrome, but then, any parent offspring situation could arguably be considered Stockholm syndrome. Each of the station had a designated ‘keeper,’ a daughter that was trained in bioengineering and who was in charge of cultivating her region. The ‘keepers’ surveyed their groups, and then casted their votes based on their people; to a one, it was decided ‘mother’ was to be grounded. Once Loxy had herself downloaded into the local system, she was able to unlock all the features making everything available to everyone at all bio-stations. She sent a copy of herself to the Construction facility via probe and one to each of the lunar stations. Lanza’s transponders were removed and given to Amy. She took the metal ship up into orbit and parked it. The Little Ones ran from the metal ship.

Jon was fascinated with the metal ship. It was basically a triangle shape with rounded corners. It was longer than Onuka, but not as wide. It reminded him of the TR-3B UFO that the conspiracy theorist claim the US government has. Looking at it from the bottom, there four lights, one in each corner, and one in the center, much larger than the three outer lights. Inside the ship, it was all business, like a military aircraft, assuming that aircraft also came from the 24th century Star Trek universe. Every surface was slick, but soft, like a padded room, with soft, recessed lights, computers and controls. The Quantum Drive had a 2.7 day charge cycle, which meant it would recover faster than Onuka. Loxy changed the security system, forcing it to recognize her, Jon, and Lilith, and no over rides could be made without at least two of them in charge of it. It was now their ship, compliments of the ‘Lanzarians.’ The AI was sentient, buit under-developed.

Lilith renamed the metal ship, “Onuk.” They discovered it had tethering capabilities that could withstand a Quantum Jump. The original pilot had indeed been successful and spared no expense updating his ship. It had shields better than Onuka’s, and it had a weapons array, which included energy weapons, missile, and smaller projectile, with fully loaded magazines. With Onuka coupled with Onuk, they could pass between the airlocks and double their living space. The Lanzarians loaded Jon up with fresh supplies, including an item that was as good as coffee. The bio-stations packaged it well that he didn’t have to worry about expiration dates. The

packaging itself was made with three-D printing techniques, using polymers from local life. Everything was biodegradable, meaning Onuka could digest it, and derive benefit from it as well.

Onuk's quantum drive was fully charged, and with Onuka tethered, they could jump together immediately, but they waited till Onuka's drive was fully charged, delaying to get updates on the situation planet side. With the medical tech available, all but 20 of the pregnancies took on the first go. There was sufficient sample for the 20 to have a second go. None opted for twins, as it was only necessary for each to carry one to meet the criteria for permanent colony status, per Republic standard. It turned out, though, 300 ended up with twins anyway. Even Lanza opted for carrying. She may have lost status, but this was her home and she would contribute.

"With this tech, you and Lilith could have a child," Loxy said.

"There will be enough children here," Lilith said. "I am happy enough for the experiences we will share with our doppelgangers."

"Jon?" Loxy asked.

"Uh?" He was staring down at the world.

"You okay?" Loxy asked.

"Am I complete idiot?" Jon asked.

"No, Jon. You're not an idiot," Loxy said.

"Everything will work out, Jon," Lilith said. "You could never go back to Earth. I can never go back to my world. But now we have a home base. Something to look forwards to when we retire. I mean, I love Indigo station, but I don't want to retire to a box."

"I have directed the construction yard to start building the main fuselage for a ringed station," Loxy said. "In ten years, when we retire, we could move into orbit and settle here. We could live hundreds of lives through the virtual selves on the planet below."

The concept of a hundred virtual lives was easily accessible to Jon, as to him, every book, every movie, every video game was another life. They were simply simulations his brain lived. Every time he took a story and tweaked it, a new world was born. And he had tweaked quite a few stories, like movies that endings sucked. For Lilith, though, it was a strange thing having a doppelganger that was both her and not her and that they could share memories. The Amy sex-bot made more sense, and it helped for her to think of the virtual selves as simply bots. Of course, virtual selves could quickly outstrip the original personality in terms of experiences, both

real world interaction and virtual world interaction. The virtual selves would evolve. Though evolution could be blocked with restrictions, they trusted themselves enough to leave themselves to their task without governors.

Within Onuk's memory bank, there were coordinates for the next closest star, six light years away. Lanza had been busy, mapping out the closest neighbor, but she had not tried to claim it with tech. She was determined to execute her plan by the numbers, and she wanted this system solid before trying to tame another system. Though it was mapped out, Jon wanted to see it with Onuka's eyes and have fresh coordinates. Also, the third closest star was 12 light years away, and Lanza had only push a quarter of the way there. He wanted to go there, too.

"So, are we going to linger here for a month, or use our time wisely and jump to the next star?" Jon asked.

"I say we finish Lanza's push to the 12 LY star," Loxy said. "Push for maybe four or five months, then we disengage from Onuk just to return to Indigo, stay for three days, come back to Onuk, tether jump using its drive, and then carry on till the next star. That we will at least have one uncontested system to present to Biocorp. And we will surrender the coordinates to these two systems after our arrangement is solid. I think Hali will understand that."

"I don't like keeping this a secret from her," Lilith said. "I think we should tell her everything up front."

"We made an arrangement with the Lanzarians not to tell," Loxy said.

"We made an agreement not to share the coordinates until the colony was solid by population," Lilith said. "We didn't say we wouldn't discuss it with our colleague."

"We committed to this when I gave up the sperm," Jon said.

"I am not saying we shouldn't have helped these people. All of these people excepting mother were born here, and I agree they should be able to remain," Lilith said. "We helped with that. We helped start the flow back towards balance. But I don't want us conspiring against our friend and colleague. I vote we tell her."

"That's reasonable," Loxy said.

"Okay," Jon said. "Maybe we should push all the way to the next star before returning to Indigo."

"Let's go half way and see how we feel," Lilith said.

“We shouldn’t get bored,” Loxy said. “I can entertain us by teaching each of you how to pilot a metal ship.”

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They made it to the next closest, unmapped star to the Lanzarian system, and found the Invariable Plane, the plane that the planets orbited around the host star was facing them, like looking down on a clock. Though that wasn’t particularly odd, it was interesting because the plane was at a right angle to most planetary planes which tended to match the galactic plane, from a perspective of galactic north. Loxy’s made a guess based on information of the system that this star was a capture from one of the galaxy clusters that had passed the Milky Way. The star was older, and the planets were stable. There was no indication of life. They were near enough the outer most gas giant to observe the shape of clouds. For the most part, it was a dark chocolate, with outcroppings of various shades of cream, as if it was coffee and he had poured milk into it. It was amazingly beautiful.

They disconnected from Onuk and returned to Indigo station.

“Welcome back, traveler,” came STC. They gave direct vector to Indigo.

Jon sent a message request to speak with Avery: the automated response reported she was sleeping.

“I request a route change,” Jon said, supplying the coordinates for Avery’s home. His path was authorized and he was cleared. He accelerated towards Avery’s habitat.

Hali was suddenly online. “OMG, I thought something bad happened to you.”

“Sorry to worry you. Things are really complicated out there,” Jon said. “Can you give my gate time away, I need to fix something.”

“Fix what?” Hali asked.

“A friendship that went south,” Jon said. “We need to have a come to Jesus meeting.”

“Who’s Jesus?” Lilith asked.

“A Depeche Mode song,” Jon said.

“We have some coordinates for you, but we want to talk first,” Loxy said.

“Just transmit the data,” Hali said.

“We really should talk first,” Jon said.

“Jon, we’re not renegotiating the terms of our contract,” Hali said.

“Oh, good, then let’s talk in private, please,” Jon said. “Um, can you reschedule my gate time?”

“I can do an hour from now,” Hali said.

“That should be good,” Jon said. “See you soon.”

Jon ended the call to focus on docking with the habitat. Apparently, doing so caused alarms to go off and Hali was awake and calling for law enforcement just as Jon, Lilith, and Amy were entering. The three of them came face to face with a stranger. The stranger wasn’t the most attractive female, but she was clearly female.

“How dare you just barge in here,” the stranger said.

“This is Indigo Emergency Response Services, we have a ship en route,” came a male voice.

“You’re too late,” the stranger said.

“Where’s Avery?” Jon said.

“I am Avery!” the stranger said.

“You’re Avery?” Jon, Lilith, and Amy asked.

“Yes,” Avery said.

“Hold up,” Jon said. “How many faces do you have?”

“I have a new face and body every cycle,” Avery said. “I thought you understood this.”

“You mean you have more faces than all the seasons of Doctor Who?” Jon asked.

“Who?” Avery asked.

“Pilot, please withdraw back to your ship and disconnect from the habitat,” Indigo E. R. S. said.

“We have a friendship contract. We have right to be here,” Amy said.

“I didn’t authorize this. You’re trespassing,” Avery said.

“I have been away for four months, and I have a right to see my friend, per our friendship agreement,” Jon said.

“I only want to see you in my male or female phase,” Avery said.

“That wasn’t explicitly spelled out in the agreement,” Amy said.

“You have a copy of the agreement?” Jon asked.

“If this is a domestic disturbance, all parties will be assessed penalties,” Indigo E. R. S. said.

“This is not a domestic disturbance; this is an intrusion,” Avery said.

“Oh, let’s do this this way,” Jon said. “Because, I would like to press charges, myself.”

“You can’t hold me responsible for anything that a prior incarnation did,” Avery said.

“Really?” Jon asked.

Loxy was sorting the information. Amy responded: “Um, apparently there is a precedent for that.”

“What if we just broadcast the tape of the incident,” Jon said.

“You recorded our session?” Avery said. “You’re such a freak!”

“I am a freak?! You raped me,” Jon said.

“No, I didn’t,” Avery said.

“Yes, you did. Hell! You practically raped me even as a female,” Jon said.

“Oh! I remember that! You enjoyed it,” Avery snapped.

“Not the point,” Jon said.

“It is the point. You like it aggressive. She gave you what you wanted. He gave you what she gave you and you now you’re here wanting more, and I don’t want to play,” Avery said.

“So, friendship agreement allows you to say no, and not me?” Jon said.

“You don’t cycle,” Avery said. “You don’t understand!”

“That’s why I am here,” Jon said.

“Fine, do what you want with me. See if you can get penetration,” Avery said.

“What? Your mouth stopped working? Or, I don’t know, plug yourself into your sex bot, I am cool with that,” Jon said.

“You are such a freak,” Avery said. “You don’t care about me at all. You just want to get your freak on.”

“I care enough I am here, wanting to talk to you,” Jon said.

“If you cared about me, you would care about all the aspects of me,” Avery said. “But you fell in love with one face, and that face is gone forever, and now you’re here threatening to end our friendship because you had one bad experience with a past version of me? I am sorry you didn’t enjoy your time with him, but it’s not rape when we have a friendship agreement!”

“Even if we are married, no means no,” Jon snapped.

“I am glad you agree that you’re trespassing on my space,” Avery said. “Go ahead and show your sex tapes. The only thing you can prove is that I have rough sex with my android during my male phase.”

“I was in there,” Jon said. “You locked me in there.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t go into places uninvited,” Avery said.

“You invited me!” Jon said.

“I would never invite you in,” Avery said. “I don’t like people! That’s why I moved out into space. I have everything I need right here.”

Indigo E.R.S. stated: ‘This is clearly a domestic dispute, which we would prefer not to be involved in.’

“This is an intrusion,” Avery iterated.

“We can blow this up, or we can talk,” Jon said. “I am not here to hurt you.”

“I don’t want you here,” Avery said.

“So, you’re terminating the friendship agreement?” Jon asked.

“I knew you would end it as soon as I cycled out of female. You are such a human douche bag!”

“I am not ending this!” Jon snapped.

“Jon, maybe we should leave,” Amy said.

“Oh, sure, take his side,” Avery said.

“No one is taking sides,” Lilith said. “We consider ourselves friends as well.”

“I didn’t ask for your friendships,” Avery said.

“Friends of friends,” Lilith said.

“With or without benefits,” Loxy said.

“Come back in three weeks,” Avery said. “I will be in full female form, Jon. You clearly like females. And you better not reject me because of weight or hair color.”

“Call off the E.R.S. and let’s talk, or let’s terminate the friendship,” Jon said.

Avery crossed her arms, pouting. “You’re really going to force this?”

“Unless you want to start taking bipolar meds, yep,” Jon said.

“I am not bipolar,” Avery snapped.

“Good, let’s talk,” Jon said.

“Indigo E.R.S., your services are not required. I over reacted due to being sleep deprived. I do have a friendship agreement with Jon,” Avery said.

Indigo E.R.S. agreed to terminate the call for services; Jon was still put on notice, that if anything happened to Avery he would be held accountable. Avery was charged a fee for activating the emergency response services.

“Satisfied?” Avery said.

“No, not exactly,” Jon said. “Now, let’s discuss our friendship.”

“I am happy the way it is. I need your services only during the male and female cycles,” Avery said. “I am sorry the previous cycle didn’t agree with you. I am not as rational during defined gender cycles.”

“Are you ever rational?” Jon asked.

“Jon, be nice,” Amy said.

“I am most rational in this cycle, when I have had uninterrupted sleep,” Avery said. “So, why are you here? You’ve been gone four months. You think you can just barge in here and get it on with me anytime you like?”

“If you were fully female, would you?” Jon asked.

“I don’t want to think about it. Sex is disgusting,” Avery said. “Seriously. You have a friend and a sex bot, can’t you take care of your own needs and leave me alone? I picked you because I thought you would understand. I am not holding an exclusivity clause over you.”

“You want exclusivity?” Lilith asked.

“Yes, I only want to be with Jon,” Avery said. “But not during the neutral cycle.”

“But what if I want to visit during the neutral cycle?” Jon asked.

“Why don’t you understand that I don’t want sex during that part of the cycle?” Avery asked.

“It’s not about sex. It’s about continued friendship. How can I possibly understand your other cycles if I don’t understand this cycle?” Jon asked.

“Maybe your other cycles are out of balance because you don’t have any continuity of relationships throughout the cycle,” Lilith offered.

Avery sulked, looking at the floor. “Jon, I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to smell you. I don’t want to hear you. Even the sound of your breathing just makes me want to smash your face in. It’s nothing personal. It’s just this time of the cycle. I get really irritated with seeing

the same faces all the time. Even work mates irritate me, and I am lucky they allow me to work from home during this time. You guys are crazy constants. It's weird, but part of working with aliens in space is accepting you guys are static. The only reason I showed up to that negotiation is my boss told me I had to, that it would be good for me to experience some new faces, and my other aspects might want a new friend. My boss only cares about my health because I am a great employee. They are super happy that you friended me, and it's because of my boss and my other aspects that I can't just arbitrarily end our friendship. Even now, I can hear them in my head telling me to do things with you, and OMG, just shutt up, I am not doing that! No arm pits, no thigh pits, no! Damn it, I need another shower. My male and female cycles, they seriously love you, Jon. Why is beyond me. You're old. Your face is boring. You smell like a human who has eaten crap all your life. Can you even name one vegetable? I hate that I have this in me. There are crazy intense feelings and wants about you and I don't like it. I don't like you. Not one little bit. And in three weeks I know for a fact I will be all over you like a bear in heat to honey. Ugh!"

"This is going to be challenging," Jon said.

"We should give her a copy of Pierce Anthony's book, a Spell For Chameleon," Loxy said.

निर्मित

By the time Jon arrived at Indigo station, Hali was busy with another client. While maintenance gave his ship a look-over, Lilith retired for a bit of rest, and Jon went to the Pilot's Bar, where he was greeted with the ritualistic greeting: a chorus of "may you always return" and was quickly caught up by Kiash who brought him to the booth near where he had sat previously.

"This meal is comped," Kiash said. "Would you like to try something you haven't tried before?"

"Um, yeah, surprise me," Jon said.

Kiash studied him. "I see no food allergies. Alright. I'll be right back with water and wine."

A person representing the Union sat down at the booth with him. "Your luck won't last forever, son. You should consider joining the union. To get you past those dry spells where you're not turning a profit."

“Um, yeah, no thanks,” Jon said.

“One of these days, you’re going to be in need of a friend,” the union said, sliding back out of the booth. “Probably shouldn’t wait to be in need before you start asking for help.” The rep nodded at the waitress and pressed on. “Mam.”

“Thank you for the tip last time,” Kiash said. “That was more than generous. Are all people from Earth this generous?”

“I think tipping is a regional expectation,” Jon said. “Most people are really super nice people, though. Contrary to popular belief, and in spite of the trend of the evening news, most people aren’t out to screw other folks.”

“It must be a nice place,” Kiash said.

“It can be. There are places that aren’t so safe, and there some people that aren’t so nice, and some people who are nice but make poor decisions, but most people are nice and on target with social expectations,” Jon said. “The bad people are the exception to the rule. That’s why they’re in the news.”

“It is my hope to one day settle down on a planet where I would be accepted,” Kiash said.

“I happen to know a place where you would be extremely welcomed,” Jon said.

“Seriously?” Kiash asked.

“Keep my number. We can talk later,” Jon said.

Kiash touched his shoulder and locked in his number, then excused herself to attend a light. A girl, human, perhaps 15 at the most, slid into his booth. She was Hispanic. Her hair was straight, and she was wearing a Biocorp uniform. There was a Spanish accent and this was where he realized they were speaking the same language, but not speaking the same language. If he read her lips, he saw ‘Spanish.’ If he listened, he heard English. Why had he not noticed that before?

“Hi. I’m Enedelia. Kiash says you’re from Earth?” she said. She saw his focus was on her mouth. “Yeah, that takes a bit to get used to. The nanites basically translate everything into common. You experience it as your native tongue.”

“You’re from…” Jon stopped himself. “You’re how old?”

“I am a legal adult,” Enedelia said.

“The hell you are,” Jon said.

“I have been emancipated,” Enedelia said.

“No you haven’t,” Jon said.

“If you’re going to argue with me, I am going to leave,” Enedelia said.

“If you’re not going to tell me the truth, you can leave,” Jon said.

“Fine,” Enedelia said, getting up to leave.

“Sit your ass down,” Jon said.

Enedelia sat back down. “You’re not my father,” she said.

“No, I am not. It’s just that, well, I am experiencing emotions and I care,” Jon said.

“Would you be willing to tell me your story?”

“Basically I was getting my ass kicked by my brother all my life and I finally had enough and ran away from home,” Enedelia said.

“Well, I am familiar with that story,” Jon said.

“You got your ass kicked by your brother and ran away from home?” Enedelia said.

“Oh, I got my ass kicked by everyone. Mother, brother, sister, neighbor, school mates,” Jon said. “Of course, when I was growing up, the police just took you back to your last known address. I never managed to get past the point where no one recognized me. You apparently, well, when you run away...”

“Yeah,” Enedelia said. “I got lucky. Met a clone named Kirk who was chasing his original Kirk’s memories. I gave him what he came for in exchange for transportation to the nearest civilized space. That’s here. I worked for several months in a Moa pit, which is really hard work because Moa will eat your ass if you’re not paying attention, not to mention the Moa eggs are heavy. Lift a hundred of those a day, you’ve done a workout. Anyway, hooked up with Biocorp and now I am a Captain.”

Jon had to sort a million things in his head, but suddenly he understood where the eggs he delivers planet side came from. He could see a full size Moa in his brain and it scared the fuck out of him. Praying mantises are cool, but giant size mantis, less cool. He was suddenly very impressed with this child.

Kiash arrived to put food on the table. “Oh, you two know each other?”

“We do now. Kiash, bring my fellow Captain friend here anything she likes, on me,” Jon said. In his head, he asked Loxy to put a call through to Hali.

“I can pay my own way, thank you very much,” Enedelia said.

“Please, forgive me,” Jon said. “I was only hoping to do something nice seeing how Earth friends are hard to come by. Tell you what, let me get this one, you can buy my next one.”

Enedelia frowned. Jon suddenly recognized the slight shift of eyes to mean she was communicating something to someone else; perhaps a friend or her AI.

“Okay,” Enedelia said. “But you may be over reaching. I have friends. They eat a lot.”

“What do you mean?” Jon asked.

“I can afford it, can you?” Enedelia asked.

“I am doing very well, actually,” Jon said.

“You can’t be doing that well,” Enedelia said. “You’re still under ten blind jumps.”

“Seriously? You can see that?” Jon asked.

Enedelia called up the stats and pushed the virtual card to his side of the table.

“OMG!” Jon said. He wasn’t looking at his stats, but at his nickname. “Loxy, are you seeing this?”

(“I am,” Loxy said. “That’s funny.”)

“It’s inaccurate,” Jon said, out loud. “And irrelevant?”

Kiash looked at the card. “Seriously, you have had that much sex and you have only been in a pilot for a year?”

“It gets lonely out in space,” Jon said.

Kiash and Enedelia just looked at him.

“That was funny,” Jon said.

(“No, Jon, it wasn’t,” Loxy said. “And you already used it once.”)

“Because it was funny! Okay. Back on point. Why is this even on here?!” Jon asked.

“People track everything here,” Enedelia said.

“Yeah, but who gave me the nickname?” Jon asked.

“Captain Strangelove?” Enedelia asked. “Who knows. Probably a committee. No one gets to choose their call sign.”

“Seriously?” Jon asked. “I would have so gone with Deadpool.”

“Taken,” Enedelia said.

“Starlord?” Jon asked.

“Taken,” Enedelia said. “So is Starlady.”

“I don’t want to be Starlady, I want to be Starlord,” Jon said.

“Well, you’re one raccoon shy of the requirements,” Enedelia said.

Jon pouted. “Seriously?! They track everything?” Jon asked again.

“Everything,” Enedelia said. “Helps the free market decide how to best serve the pilots when they return from the long hauls. They don’t, however, publically track what you earn. That’s kept on the down low. Kiash, would you fill my standard order? Make that three pizzas. He’s buying.”

“He can afford it,” Kiash assured him. “He bought out his contract first flight. He’s a free agent.”

“No shit?” Enedelia said.

“Language young lady,” Jon said.

“Oh, fuck you old man,” Enedelia said.

“Oh, you and I are going to get along swimmingly,” Jon said. “Ship name?”

“Solarchariot,” Enedelia said. “I call him Sol for short.”

“Fuck, I wanted that name!” Jon said.

“Why would you name your ship after Apollo’s chariot?” Enedelia asked.

“I always liked the sound of that,” Jon said.

“What your ship’s name?” Enedelia asked.

“Onuka,” Jon said.

“That’s a stupid name,” Enedelia said. “Why didn’t you go with Milano?”

“It was taken,” Jon said. (“What’s taking Hali so long?”)

“There you go, then,” Enedelia said.

(“Oh, how about guardians for our group name?” Jon asked.) (“No,” Loxy said.)

Hali walked in and Jon scooted over to accommodate her. “Hey, Ene, how are you?”

“Great, thank you. Yourself?” Enedelia asked.

“Great. So, what’s the emergency, Jon?” Hali asked.

“Why is a minor flying for Biocorp?” Jon asked.

“Oh, here we go again,” Enedelia said. “I am an adult!”

“You’re a child,” Jon said.

“I was an adult making adult decisions even before I left Earth. More than half the worlds in the Republic consider 12 legal adult status,” Enedelia said.

Jon turned to Hali. “You’re kidnapping children from Earth?”

“We did not kidnap her. She had a legitimate work contract at the Moa pits. Biocorp bought it. Teenagers make the best pilots because their brains are still developing. And, she’s doing quite well, Jon. She’s made a name for herself in the republic.”

“She could die,” Jon said.

“I know the risks, Sir,” Enedelia said.

“She really does, Jon,” Hali said. “She’s got some serious risk factors. Binder tried dumping her off on me several times.”

“Pick up her contract,” Jon said.

“Excuse me?” Hali asked.

“I am not some pawn to be bought and traded,” Enedelia said.

“Hali. Please. Extend my contract to cover the length of hers, plus a couple of years. I will double my blind jumps, and she can do star pushes for me. She and I can be a team and double your real-estate potential,” Jon said.

“I don’t need your protection, Sir,” Enedelia said.

“Great. Maybe I need yours. But I want us to be a team,” Jon said.

“Enedelia is a high risk commodity due to pissing off the Kelindy,” Hali said. “She has violated earth space at least twice that we are aware of.”

“Do any shopping?” Jon asked.

“Yeah, actually,” Enedelia said. “Need anything?”

“Finger nail clippers,” Jon said.

“Got an unopened pack,” Jon said.

“Chocolate?” Jon asked.

“I have given that away,” Enedelia said. “Did you know it’s illegal in Indigo Space?”

“No. Really?” Jon asked.

“Yeah,” Hali said.

“Well, can’t have everything,” Jon said. “Hali, buy her contract and I will assume some of the risk.”

“Done,” Hali said.

“That easy? Binder didn’t even negotiate?” Enedelia asked.

“Binder has always bought diversified assets and then dumps his commodities as they prove themselves. He trades high risks to the younger, less experienced handlers,” Hali said. “Don’t worry, Ene. I’ll take good care of you.”

“I am not doing a bunch of clean-up operations for this old man,” Enedelia said. “I expect to pull my weight, which means doing blind jumps.”

“I want her safe,” Jon said.

“You can’t baby proof the Universe,” Enedelia said. “I don’t want a helicopter parent.”

“How do you know? You never had one,” Jon said. “And I am not trying to be your parent.”

“I am not into that kinky stuff, either, Strangelove,” Enedelia said.

“Good, cause that’s not on the table,” Jon said.

“It was the last time you were at my place,” Hali said.

Enedelia laughed.

“Seriously, not in front of the kid,” Jon said.

“I know more than you think I know, old man,” Enedelia said. “And I already had my sweet sixteen. I am an adult now.”

(“Jon, she’s the one. She’s the one that woke us at the nest,” Loxy said.)

“What?” Enedelia asked. “Why are you crying?”

“He’s crazy sentimental,” Hali said.

“I am alive because of you,” Jon said. “You bumped Onuka and were yelling wake up and... Thank you.”

Enedelia nodded her head in a slight bow. Kiash Arrived with Enedelia’s order, and his.

“Alright, Sir, and boss,” Enedelia said, getting up. “See ya round.”

“May you always return,” Jon said.

“You, too,” Enedelia said. She left with her food.

After a moment of silence, Hali touched Jon’s arm. His food sat untouched. “You okay?”

“I am conflicted about so many things,” Jon said. Kiash passed and asked if he would like his meal to go. He nodded. She took it to box. “You ever fly with your pilots?”

“I have not,” Hali said.

“Is it against the rules?” Jon asked.

“No, just, not necessary,” Hali said.

“I want you to travel with me. I will bring you back,” Jon said.

“What’s going on?”

“I want you to see something,” Jon said. “In person.”

“Jon,” Hali said, clearly pained. “I really do like you. I would even spend a life time with you, but I will not leave Indigo station. I intend to spend the entirety of my life right here. This place is not just where I live, it is my life. I am part of something bigger than just being your boss. I am part of a committee; no, not the right word. Jon, there is a core group of Indigo citizens, a merger of minds so tightly woven together that it is like a super conscious. Indigo has a mind of its own, comprised of AI, and aliens, not just humanoids; seriously scary looking aliens that can never be seen by humans, because they are that weird, comparatively. They’re not evil, but humans get spooked when things are not bipedal, or symmetrical. Even some of the perfectly symmetrical, bipedal species just drive humans nuts. Even you, as tamed as you are to encountering aliens, would not be able to experience in person even half of the aliens on this station. This super conscious, the gestalt of all of us, it has a personality and its own wants, and the total enmeshment of all the individual personalities and subconscious are integral, missed when absent. This is a union bigger than marriage. It is a life time commitment. It’s as big a deal as you making a tulpa. I live two lives, Jon. I am here, as you know me, and I am part of the Indigo mind. I don’t even understand half of what that upper life is like. I get pieces in dreams. Sometimes I am called to make vote on a command decision, which is rare. I am still me, but I am more. The part that is me, wants you in my life. Here is the clincher: you, are also part of a system. You, Loxy, and Lilith. That’s a system. It’s unshakeable. I am part of that system, but more like a periphery hub point, that allows you greater versatility and range. You are a pilot. You were born destined to be a traveler, and you need your wings to be the best you. You do what you do and you come home to me. And I will love you.”

Jon sorted this and found he couldn’t keep up.

“Here, let me give you an analogy to help you,” Hali said. “You think of yourself as you, your personality is you, but it is not just you. When you dream, you encounter other personalities. Now, imagine every personality, every object in your dreams is an entity in its own right. That is the system of you. Your personality was put in charge of your immediate system, but you are not in charge. Your subconscious is in charge and it is comprised of all the personality programs your head. Every cell of you pings in with request, and the hidden you

responds accordingly. Sometimes you get called in to make a big decisions. Sometimes you responded, 'we'll eat pizza.' Probably not the best response all the time, but in the environment of your origin, it worked. You now have access to better options. You are deciding for yourself, for your system, and you are clearly collaborating with your system mates. You are collaborating with me. And the truth is, even this level of interaction, this is just a dream and there is a bigger game on the horizon, something grander than anything any of us can imagine. The Indigo Mind touches on that," Hali said.

Jon nodded. "I am not surrendering all the coordinates, yet," Jon said. "I have maps for three systems. I will give you one right before I depart Indigo. When I return, I will give you the coordinates for the other two."

"Good for you, Captain," Hali said. She kissed him. "Now, shall we retire to my home? I have something on my table for you."

"Oh, if you insist," Jon said.

They departed with the food that Kiash had boxed.

Chapter 16

Hali woke to find Jon awake, laying on his side staring at her. Apparently she had taken the covers from him while sleeping, and he hadn't protested or pulled them back. She snuggled into him, smiling into a kiss, bringing him back under the sheet with her.

"You okay?" Hali asked.

"Yeah, just thinking," Jon said. He loved how warm she was. He could be easily motivated back into more play.

"Umm," Hali said. "Want to share?"

"You're happy here," Jon said.

Hali shifted back so she could see his face. "Yes," she said.

"Do you ever think about family, or having kids?" Jon asked.

"I consider you family," Hali said. "And, I have kids."

"You have kids?" Jon asked. "Like adult kids?"

"Twins. I think they're fifteen," Hali said.

"You think?" Jon said.

"I don't really track the anniversaries and holidays of my world of origin, including their dates," Hali said. "I didn't want children. I didn't want to get married. This was something I was certain about even before I reached puberty. I knew I would live out amongst the stars and I would tell my parents that I would contract out and be a part of the push. Most people don't want to leave origin. Being out here changes you. If you are off world long enough, you can't return to origin. My planet is a super earth. The gravity is twice of your world of origin. I can't go back there. I don't want to go back there."

"You didn't want children, but you had them anyway?" Jon asked. "Like they made you?"

"Actually, yes," Hali said. "Part of my obligation to my society was to donate a portion of my eggs to a bank, and I had to give my parents two grandchildren. Biocorp helped me in this by supplying me a surrogate mother."

"A surrogate mother?" Jon asked. "A person who agreed to carry a baby for you?"

"Oh, that's one option. I chose the android option. It's like a sex-bot, only it's a mobile womb, a surrogate. It was made to look like me. A copy of my personality was downloaded into

it. The children will get to experience me as I was at that time. The husband gets what he wanted, the version of me that wanted to stay with him. So, yes, the personality was modified slightly to accommodate him and staying and the children. And it's adaptable. It grows and changes with environmental demands. About once a year I get updates, the surrogate uploads memories and mails them. I can assimilate the memories as direct experiences or dreams."

"And it's all good?" Jon asked.

"No, Jon," Hali said. "There's good, there's bad. Sometimes I cry because I see this stranger who is me that isn't me guiding a young person I know but have never met. Sometimes she gives the advice I would give and I hate that and then sometimes I wonder, would I have done that? It's too easy to get stuck in circular thought patterns, so you got to practice letting go. Sometimes I cry just because the memory I receive is so full of joy that I get overwhelmed. And sometimes I think, oh, I am missed something incredible. Sometimes I even wonder, what am I doing out here."

"What are you doing out here?" Jon asked.

"What are you doing out here?" Hali asked.

"I asked you first," Jon said.

"Jon, we're doing the same thing, just different aspects of the same thing," Hali said. "You're exploring for new worlds. We are looking for new homes. We are looking for new life. Not to destroy it or box it, but to share in the wonders of the Universe in all its diversity, and to join with it, and spread it further. If you only live on a planet, you will eventually go extinct. There is no way around that. When you get off planet, you have to come to terms with two things. One, you are not alone in the Universe. Two, you will change. Every planet that holds a colony, within a thousand years they are not same as their worlds of origin. You can't be born on a world and not change to fit its needs. Indigo has a meta-purpose of sustaining and spreading life to regions that presently don't harbor life. Most worlds reach a plateau in their development where life is so comfortable that the only discernable evolution is social fabric of society as they chase trends of art, fashion, and politics. And that's fine for them. I personally think that is a very shallow life. I want to be out here where I extend life. Life is delicate. Even on your own planet, all life was nearly wiped out on several occasions. We find worlds on the precarious brink of nonexistence and we help it, we nurture it, and sometimes, we have to transplant it. This brings me joy because it is meaningful."

Jon chewed on a lip. "I am a part of this?"

"You didn't think you were just a cog in a wheel making a profit for a corporation, did you?" Hali asked.

"Sort of," Jon said. "So, the Republic holds ideals similar to Star Fleet, with a prime directive."

"Yes," Hali said.

"You know that reference?" Jon asked.

"Where do you think Gene got it from?" Hali said. She rolled over and pulled an item out of a drawer and brought it back to show him. It was a crystal, and if you turned it a rainbow fluoresced in it. He had seen it before. A memory crystal! He had bought several and hadn't even used them. Maybe he would when he was old and bored... "This is you. I have been studying you."

"This is me?" Jon asked.

"Everything about you, from cradle to grave, is contained in this crystal," Hali said.

"Seriously? My future is contained in there?" Jon asked.

"Jon, there is no future. There is no past. All of that is an illusion. The Universe just is. The Multiverse is much more fantastic than the linear tracking of space-time. It's just we get caught up in it and we forget how wondrous we really are. This crystal channeled you during the flash cloning process, and it became resonant locked with you. This is entanglement. This is spooky action at a distance. It doesn't contain your spirit, it reflects and refracts it. It's a mirror. I hold this and I can tune into moments of your lives. Future stuff is harder to get at, but not impossible. Your present life, all of Jon Harister, is the easiest to access. I have had glimpses into your past lives. Some of them are interesting enough they held my attention, but I have forced myself to this present incarnation because you're a part of my life and I want to know all of you."

"I bought crystals like that," Jon said.

"I know," Hali said. "I have all the receipts of all the things you have purchased at Indigo."

"I have not used either" Jon said. "I don't even know who they are. And now, I am not sure I want to know."

“They would not have made the crystals if they didn’t want you to know,” Hali said. “It’s kind of therapeutic to know that someone in the Universe knows you, all of you, no secrets. Close your eyes.”

Hali took his hands in hers and together they held ‘his’ crystal. She smiled as his brow furrowed. “Relax” she whispered. She traveled with him. This was not a seeing from outside of self, but from normal, personal point of view. There were no assumptions of where he was or he was. He was in a bed. He was surrounded by love ones, peers his age, old people, and young people, and lots of children. He lifted his hand and stared at it. Old, age spots, it seemed like it was all bones and veins, and a bruise. He heard himself speaking: “I think there are others here.” He heard, “We’re all here, Papa. You are never alone.”

And then he was abruptly back. He was shaking. “Is that real? Is that me in the future?”

“Probably,” Hali said.

“Probably?!” Jon asked.

“We know that these things tend to be very accurate, but we know, you also have choice. So, if you went and killed yourself right now, clearly that moment won’t come to be,” Hali said. “I don’t think it was a past life. That felt like present you. I think I saw an artifact of Biocorp in the background. I could be remembering that wrong. Here’s the truth about brains. They don’t see well. They see through personality filters. Brains make shortcuts to arrive at best guesses about what they are experiences. We don’t experience reality as it really is. Even through the lens of a crystal, I will never know what it fully means to have been you. I get insight. I have increased empathy. I have more love. If you haven’t figure this out, I love you, Jon Harister,” Hali said.

Hali put the crystal back in the drawer, in a cradle made just for it. She rolled back into Jon and kissed on him.

“Oh, I am sorry. You led this conversation about children. That scene, you were surrounded by children and grandchildren. One of them was tall. Wait! You want children with me?” Hali asked.

“Um, no, no, I am fine,” Jon said.

“No! You are just saying that because I told you I didn’t want children,” Hali said. “You want to have children with me. I don’t want to raise children on Indigo. I don’t want children. But if you want children with me, we have to choose a planet, preferably a colony world, and I

will buy a surrogate. We can make a husband surrogate for you so the child will grow knowing us, and when they're old enough to understand we are more complicated, they will discover the truth of us."

"It's okay, Hali," Jon said.

"No. This would be another binding of us. Pilot, agent, father, mother, participating in burgeoning world," Hali said. Her growing excitement seemed uncontrollable and was quickly reaching flashpoint. "Yes. I want this. I know just the planet that could use our personality types. Let's send surrogates and a child to a world that needs us."

"Ummm, are you sure?" Jon asked.

"I am very sure. We are very compatible, Jon," Hali said. "Of course, with the medical procedure it will select the best combination of germ cells to make the best viable option..."

"Um, Hali, hypothetically, if I were already genetically entangled with a burgeoning colony, that's was technically off the grid, would that be something you would be interested in being a part of?" Jon asked.

Hali gave him a look. "Well, that would explain something I experienced holding your crystal," she sighed. "Yes, Jon, I think I should be a part of that."

Hali got up from bed and began to dress.

"Well, come on," Hali said.

निर्मित

Onuka was fitted with a specialized tether that went from its harness to a large crate, compliments of Hali, not Biocorp. Inside the crate were power stations for androids. Inside each station were androids, fully functioning surrogates, twelve females and twelve males. Each of the females were impregnated via in vitro procedures. Loxy and Lilith were not surprised, as they had been updated to the addendum to the 'situation.' Accompanying them back to Lanza's world was Ditri, who intended to assess the situation and establish a contract, and Kiash, who was taking a bit of a vacation to see if she might like the world for her retirement place.

Onuka jumped to their last known location, connected with Onuk, and then jumped back to Lanza's Planet. They parked Onuk in orbit, and Onuka took hold of the package and descended towards the planet. Due to carrying the package, Onuka didn't land in the ocean, but

slowed to normal flight speed, and basically hovered as buoyant as a dirigible. It set the package on the top of the butte, and then maneuvered in a way that would allow Jon, Ditri, and Kiash to walk straight out on top. Tory was there to meet them. There was no hiding she was pregnant. She greeted Jon with a hug, and then he introduced the new people.

“I would like to negotiate a contract that allows us to meet the needs of this population,” Ditri said. “We can arrange for the details to be finalized once your colony has been fully established, of course.”

“We do need some more organisms,” Tory said. “You will have access to all my work. I followed all the procedures for documenting life forms so we can chose the appropriate candidates for species introductions. We need more herbivores, for sure.”

“Tory, this is Kiash,” Jon said. “She is in need of a home. She can’t be with her species.”

“We would welcome any species, especially if they were a friend of yours, husband,” Tory said.

“Husband?” Jon asked.

“That is your official title,” Tory said. “We all agreed to that.”

“Um, well, speaking of that, Um, we have twelve more babies on the way,” Jon said. “I have brought surrogates, and they carry my offspring with an off world partner who wants to be invested in this endeavor. I was assured this would be a good thing. Both the male and female personalities, based on my and my partner’s personality, are contained within the Android containers. They may be shared by the community, of course. I think it gives people some other options; they won’t be leaders, just servers. I might be able to bring more male surrogates in the future, if you want, but more than likely, once the colony is established and there is traffic, there will be no shortage of males applying for citizenship.”

“We appreciate you working with us,” Tory said.

Jon opened the crate and the androids went to work on installing two charging station in the lab one floor down. Two of the androids would remain here, at the first site established by Lanza; Lilith called this place, Onuk Landing. It was fitting, and it was adopted by the group that lived in this area. Once the two charging stations were operational, connected to the local power source, Jon repeated this exercise at other select bio-stations until his droids were all assigned. Tory had communicated the purpose and intent of the androids, and that the twelve females carried future citizens, and the committee chose which sites would receive the surrogates, based

on need for more ‘hands.’ Having the androids was a serious improvement because of strength, agility, and endurance. Though the female android looked very much like Hali, Jon had insisted the android males not look like him. All twelve android males were identical to each other, but they did not look like him. They did carry his personality, per Hali’s insistence.

Each set of charging station took eight hours to install. Kiash traveled with Jon, Loxy, and Lilith as they moved to each location. She explored on her own, meeting the people who were very curious about her, and very welcoming. Jon was overwhelmed with partnering options. He was auctioned off at one of the sites, as opposed to a raffle, and he was compelled to participate to keep fairness, and to avoid establishing petty rivalries or exaggerating the tendency towards jealousy. Being polyamory meant a commitment to fairness. There were several he simply wasn’t attracted to, but he extended the same level of kindness and affection that he did to the ones he found the most attractive. It wasn’t just physical attractiveness. Some of the personalities were simply not compatible with his, and likely, had the world been more balanced with partners, the matching would never have taken. Some needs when unmet make people do things they would not otherwise do. Some genuinely cared about him and the situation. A few only wanted sex and they made that abundantly clear in how they came at him. Eight hours of road construction was less exhausting than what he was being asked to do.

Lanzarians were humans. Lanza carried within her sufficient genetic heritage that when she had sorted out her eggs through selection, she had teased out a spectrum of races. The same tech had been used to sort Jon’s germ cells, finding the best matches for the germ cells from the mothers. Most of Jon’s heritage was European, but there was an African and Arabic line. He was amazed by all the influences of him. There was even genetic evidence in him of a pre-human species, and there was evidence for alien DNA, which was recognizable in the expression of hazel eyes. The matching part was long since done, and everyone on Lanza was pregnant. Libido were already abnormally high due to insufficient opportunities, but further exaggerated by pregnancy influencing libido. It didn’t matter that he was exhausted, each partner came at him with the fierce vigorousness of youth, coupled with need exaggerated by scarcity. His last two didn’t even talk, they simply ravished him the entire visit.

Jon woke from a nap to find a stranger looking over him. She was sitting on the bed, Indian style. She had short, dark hair, brushed and pulled back away from her forehead. She resembled the ethnic group Jon knew as Lezgins. He had no way of knowing if she truly shared

origins, or just carried that look. Maybe it was the colors in her dress. It was a simple, full body dress, pulled up to accommodate her lotus position, her knees and feet exposed. She smiled, dimples creased her cheeks. The smile touched her eyes. Her eyebrows were upside down check marks that clearly communicated her emotions.

“Hello, Jon. I’m Enya.”

“Enya,” Jon said. “Like...”

“The musician you like, yes,” Enya said.

“You know...” Jon had long since surrendered to this idea that he was dreaming.

Everything here was so surreal. The smells of fresh gardens pervaded the air.

“Everything about you. Well, not everything. I am still studying you. It is my intent to go through your life from birth till this moment of meeting and know the entirety of you,” Enya said.

“OMG, I am so sorry,” Jon said. “Surely your life is not that boring.”

“My life here is wonderful. Up until now, it has just been me and my sister, and dreams of faceless men. Now, all my dreams have faces. I see you from every age of you and I feel complete,” Enya touched her belly. “I have the twins, and I have access to you, and I am happy.”

“I am... happy for you,” Jon said, forcing himself to avoid saying sorry. He, like probably a thousand other males, had fantasies of being alone with a world of only females; the imagination never approaches the reality of it. Here on this planet, he was more than celebrity. And, now that he had made his bed and was having to lie in it, he was realizing the complexity of it was beyond his ability to think sanely; he found himself having to simply shut off his thoughts and go with the flow. All of ladies he had met held an idea about him. The ideas weren’t wrong, but they were clearly not complete. “How long have you been watching me?”

“Maybe twenty minutes,” Enya said.

“I am sorry,” Jon found himself saying.

“Don’t be,” Enya said. “I am enjoying watching you sleep. I hope you will forgive me. I don’t want to be intimate.”

“You don’t?” Jon asked, sitting up in bed, and then drawing the covers up.

“I do,” Enya said. “I love you. And I will accommodate you if you desire it to complete the social agreement, but if it’s okay with you, I would like to just talk. I think you need to rest.”

“Umm, okay,” Jon said. “This is your time.”

“No, this is our time,” Enya said. “And, I don’t wish to compel this part, but I would like this to be our secret. If the others knew, they would be mad at me for wasting your time, and depriving someone else who would actually engage you the way we are expected to engage.”

“Our secret,” Jon said.

“Thank you,” Enya said.

“So, you know Enya?” Jon asked.

“I have spent a great deal of time with the virtual you at the bio-station,” Enya said. “It amazes me the things it knows. My understanding is that a holographic copy of your brain was made, which means all the memories of you from conception to the time the copy was made is available. There are things available that even your personality is not aware of. My sister, Bell, she has been exploring that aspect of your life, walking in your shadows. It is her intent to write a thesis on things unseen. I favor the music. I have sat with you in dark spaces, listening to your songs, holding your hand as you cried alone. I sit alone in the closet with you, sharing your pain, praying with you, praying for you, and encouraging you to hang on because I know this future time is coming when you and I will meet and you will know happiness like you have never known before. It is my belief, and I am not alone in this, the more we know about you, the more we experience of you, and the more we send our love, the more solid this reality of us becomes. You need us as much as we need you. And I wonder, is there a future self where maybe others from another reality look in on me and share in my own joys and disappointments, encouraging me to hang on, always in the shadows telling me softly, everything will be alright. OMG, Jon, I feel so much love for you. You overcame so much to be here. I am sorry. You must think I am just a silly girl...”

“Please, if you do one thing for me, don’t allow ‘silly girl’ to be a catch phrase on this planet. You are not silly. Your words to me just now are probably the greatest gift anyone on this planet has yet given me,” Jon said. “I wish I were giving you more.”

“You have given me your whole life,” Enya said. “And we will have children. Perhaps, you will help me decide on names? Fraternal twins. A boy and a girl.”

“I am partial to two names,” Jon said. “Enya, make that their last name. Make that a custom here, the mother’s first name becomes the child’s last name.”

“I like that,” Enya said. “Tell me these names you like.”

“I had a dream that I had a son named Eston Gerik. Eston is the most easterly town in a faraway land. Gerik is Hebrew for spear warrior of God,” Jon said. “But I always imagined, if I had a daughter, I would name her Elizabeth Grace.”

“Then know, in several months, Eston and Elizabeth will be born into a world of such great love that they will bring joy to everyone who knows them,” Enya said. “May I ask for something?”

“Please,” Jon asked.

“I would like to watch you shower and shave,” Enya said. “If that’s not too weird.”

“It’s not weird,” Jon said.

The lavatory and shower at the bio-station was fairly sterile, hardly used, and was part of the guest quarters that had been become Jon’s bedroom of entertaining. Enya was fascinated by the lathering and the pattern of Jon shaving and asked many questions, including “does it hurt?”

“Don’t you shave?” Jon asked.

“Oh, no,” Enya said. “Mother is neurotic and has genetically eliminated all body hair. The only hair we have is on our heads.”

“Oh, well, that explains that,” Jon said. He handed her the razor and allowed her to shave him.

Enya held the razor, studying Jon’s face. “Jon,” Enya said, quietly, seriously. “There are things I don’t quite understand. Deeper things I have not reached. One particular thing is your solitude. Even after you became an adult, you continued to isolate. You had an occasional hook up, but you never made any permanent bonds. You didn’t create a family on earth. Why did you wait so long to start engaging?”

“Fear, mostly,” Jon said. “I didn’t want to recreate my family. I also needed to heal. Some wounds are really difficult to overcome. My type of wounds, abuse, trauma, they can hyper accentuate the need for nurture, and usually tends to present as borderline personality disorder. I am seriously on the verge of that, and so if you watch me long enough, you will see me teetering towards being clingy then falling back to distant. I abandon so I won’t be abandoned. I learned enough to know that is a psychological artifact and not true reality, but until I created Loxy tulpa, I didn’t know how to overcome and sustain a friendship. Another part of that is that I didn’t feel worthy, because I knew I was all kinds of broken, and my world has all

sorts of broken people. I didn't want to cause more pain by engaging someone knowing I have all of this inner conflict.”

“Jon, I know you have heard this. I learned it from you,” Enya said. “We're all broken. That's how the light gets in.”

Jon touched her face, gently. “I love you, Enya. Thank you.”

निर्मित

While Jon fulfilled social obligations, Loxy and Lilith participated in committee meetings. They were hung up on how to partial out future immigration. There was huge support for people buying their way into the colony. Loxy was opposed, and explain, “If you allow people to buy in, especially men, they will have expectations. Expectations can endure for generations. Being here should be a privilege, but not a commodity. The relationships that ensue should not be based on economics. There is already so much competition between sisters that it may be impossible to eliminate all social economic equations influencing relationship trajectories, but if you are aware and strive to minimize that, you could potentially build a world without war. Women have just as much conflict as men, but it a colder, longer burning thing. Contrary to belief, if allowed to fight, men get it over with, and then they go back to work. Women can carry a grudge for a life time, and they pass it on within their alliances. Lanza's goal creating a world of all women was to minimize conflict, but in eliminating the male, she traded one kind of conflict for another.”

Arguments ensued over past intents and present realities; over hidden conflict and open conflict. Discussions covered the nature of relationships to ownership of property. More and more people argued using Jon's world of origin as something they didn't want to model. Jon's world offered several models that were ideal that were getting serious scrutiny; one was Roddenberry's Federation, and the other came from his knowledge of the Native American philosophy that everything was shared. Setting up a world where no one person owned everything was feasible, especially given the tech they had access to, but it would also result in a slower growth rate. Ditri recommended the slower growth rate, allowing the people greater time evolve and adapt to this world. Ditri's position was to severely limit immigration. Instead of immigration, she wanted to buy selected genetic material based on environmental analysis; infusion of new genetic material could be selected to enhance trends that were seen in the

population; that meant they needed a good thousand years to really discern what those trends were, in order to better determine what niche the people would fill in terms of caring for this world. It also meant, the present people would likely not inherit the world, they would be visitors, progenitors, but something aliens would be down the road. It was unanimous that the people wanted mates and partners in this, and so immigration would be a part of their immediate future.

It was Lilith that reminded them that they were out of balance, and if they responded emotionally from that place of being out of balance it was likely to result in over compensation and they could quickly find themselves in a population of too many males and not enough females. The present situation was not sustainable, but they were now in a place where they would experience change over a several generations. She, like Ditre, recommended embracing the present situation and pushing for smaller changes over time, accepting that the present population may have to go without ideal relationships. Enduring this they would minimize the potential of setting up abusive relationships, something that tends to happen when society is out of balance in any area. When Lanza spoke, she spoke of fear of men, and abuse, and wars, and a disparity of power. And again, debates raged.

Tory finally spoke: “Look, we have only known three men. First father, second father, and Jon. We all chose the Jon solution together. He has left us with knowledge, the story of his life. Mother speaks of abuse, and maybe that was her world. We can’t know the truth of it because she has not shared her truth as openly as Jon as made himself available to us. Even today she refuses to make a recording of her brain and personality so we can examine the intricacies of her life and know how it is we all came to be here. Jon has. Look at Jon’s life. The men on that world don’t have it better than women. Both men and women suffer equally, sometimes in the same way, and sometimes in different ways, and they are lonely. I dare say, based on the evidence, they are lonelier than us, and they have more people! They do not turn to each other. We turn to each other, with love, affection, and understanding. Thanks to Jon, we clearly have a model for how not to be. Do we want to raise children the way Jon was raised? The way his siblings and cousins and peers were raised? We have each other, only and always each other. We have children on the way. We have time to make decisions. I motion we do not make decisions that will impact this colony until we have studied Jon’s life in more earnest, disciplined ways. Let us not just give birth to the next generation; let’s wait till they are of adult age so they can

help determine our path. What we choose for us we choose for them. The choices we make we make for all our futures.”

When Tory spoke, she always drew applause.

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Many people wanted send Jon off with gifts, but he pleaded that they not give him things. He did accept beans and rice, and some dried fruits that had the texture and flavor of gummy bears. They wanted to throw a party before he departed. He tried talking them out of that, as he intended to have many returns and departure and they can't celebrate them all. They insisted on a sendoff and so they had huge bonfire, with a dozen remote camp-fires like satellites away from the main star, and the camp-fires had rabbits over rotisserie sticks. He heard their songs, tasted local alcohol and decided real quick not to drink because more than one person was hoping to get him drunk and maneuver him into a place to take advantage of him. He was, after all, the only one drinking. They also had plants, the kind that could be smoked or eaten in baked goods, and they were all wanting him to sample. There was an entourage that had taken up protective custody of him, trying to block, but only so much as they also held agendas to be with him. Lilith fortunately helped in blocking, saying not only did he need to be fit to fly, but she didn't want him to be impaired; they understood, her existence depended on his wellbeing. Loxy, in the form of Amy, danced with the girls, and she made sister-friends. The two local surrogate droids were also participating. Jon had taught the Lanzarians how to use the halo so that they could take turns being in the driver seat of the male android. Sex play was expanded that night.

Jon managed to get away to a private tree to relieve himself and on his way back, he found Tory. It seemed clear she had meant to follow and then hung back.

“You okay?” Tory asked.

“Better than okay. Tired. But I am happy, thank you,” Jon said. “You?”

“I don't want you to go,” Tory said.

Jon didn't know what to say. He took her hand and they walked along the edges of the forest. Lightening bugs were prominent in the tree tops and in the bushes. Stars were so well defined it was as the sky was velvet cloth with holes punched in it to reveal a light on the other side of the veil.

“You want to come with?” Jon asked.

“No, my place is here, with my sisters,” Tory said.

Jon nodded. “How come you haven’t spent time with me?”

“I am the spokesperson for my world. I speak for my sisters,” Tory said.

“Always self-sacrificing?” Jon asked.

“I do not wish to abuse my office,” Tory said. “I must set an example.”

“Then, isn’t it important to also be honest with your wants and needs? There is a time even for that, right?” Jon asked.

“You are not tired of us yet?” Tory asked. “How many of my sisters...”

“I lost count,” Jon said. “Probably not good to count. Tory, we have this moment. I think you want this moment. I want this moment. This is not about contracts, it’s just, we have this moment, and we hold affection for each other, and why allow doubt to be a part of us. I don’t know where any of this is taking me, but I know where I am right now. I am here, with you and stars and...”

“Loxy is right. You talk too much,” Tory said, she dragged him into the forest.

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Onuka returned to orbit with Jon, Lilith, Loxy, Ditri and Kiash. Amy was in her station, charging. Kiash was very satisfied and had accepted an offer to live with a family there when she was able to return. As Jon made his way to Onuk, they were suddenly over taken by the Little Ones. It was evident Onuka wanted to run with them, as Jon felt her pulling on the virtual restraints.

“Oh, let her run and play,” Lilith said.

Ditri echoed the sentiments, saying they looked lovely. Jon gave up control, and Onuka ran. It was the equivalent of a whale next to dolphins. They jumped, and they were suddenly out beyond the moon. They had jumped in unison. They jumped again, and they were out beyond the stars. When they jumped again, they were elsewhere.

“New coordinates,” Loxy said. “Quantum drive still holding a full charge... We have jumped greater than a light year! Jon?!”

Her excitement highlighted an artifact that had already drawn his attention. Outside there were more Little Ones than there were previously. And there were Big Ones! Big enough they could eat Onuka whole. And they were steering towards them. Jon became aware that Lilith was holding his hand. Jon turned them about and pushed away.

“Ummm, Loxy,” Jon said, pivoting Onuka around and thrusting away.

“I am aware,” Loxy said.

“I have never seen a bioship that large,” Ditri said. “It’s wild?!”

“Loxy?”

“I am hailing them on all known channels,” Loxy said. “If they’re under intelligent control, no one is responding.”

“They’re gaining?” Lilith asked.

“Prepare to jump,” Jon said, calling up the code for Lanza.

“Maybe they’re just curious,” Ditri said.

“Yeah, umm, blue whales don’t play with minnows,” Jon said.

The lead was opening its mouth.

“Okay, we’re bouncing,” Jon said, activating the drive.

They fell to the command couch and rode out the climb and the fall, practically on top of each other. They arrived back in orbit. Onuk was visible not too far away. Three of the ‘Big Ones’ arrived, still in pursuit. Jon pushed himself for Onuk. He directed Onuka to grab the metal ship at high speeds, and soon as they were in contact, he directed Loxy to set Onuk’s quantum drive’s coordinates to Indigo station. The lead Big One was almost in grappling distance when Jon deployed the drive. Tethered to Onuk, Onuka and passengers rose and fell through another dimensional arc, arriving in Indigo Space.

“Welcome back, traveler,” was Indigo’s response.

“Mayday,” Jon said. “We’re need help!”

“What’s the emergency...”

The Big Ones arrived. Jon acquired quantum wind information from a local beacon, found himself in alignment, and deployed his quantum sails full, giving him a direct push away from the Big Ones. Even with full sails, they were gaining on him. He added aft thruster, ejecting the blue flames, but it added little to his forward momentum with sails deployed. Jon was steering straight for Indigo, hoping they had defenses. STC was directing Jon to veer away;

though clearly the Big Ones were chasing Onuka, they couldn't risk damage to the station, or potential harm to citizens that lived off station.

"Jon," Loxy said. "Away from the station."

Jon turned at a right angle and headed for the nebula. The Big Ones simply kept coming, small corrections in trajectory. The change in course would allow them to catch up faster. There is no slow curve 'banking' in space; this was not an aerial dog fight. A battleship was vectored to intercept, but would not get there before Onuka was eaten.

"So, Jon, I think I predicted you were going to need my help one day," Keets said.

"Do not kill these animals," Ditri said.

"I don't take orders from druids, thank you," Keets said.

"Seriously," Ditri said. "There are more where this came from, and if you kill one, you could have a thousand on your doorsteps. You better think..."

Biocorp president was suddenly online. "Biocorp will assume all responsibility for these creatures. Do not attack."

"You're bloody kidding me?!" Keets said.

"Excuse me, but, what about me? I have passengers!" Jon said.

"Abandon ship, we will catch you if they don't eat you," Keets said.

"I am not abandoning ship!" Jon snapped.

Hali was online. "Maintain your present course. See if you can lose them in the nebula. If they lose interest, maybe they will return home." It was clear to Jon he wasn't going to reach the nebula.

Suddenly all the Little Ones were there, coming out of the nebula. They rushed past Onuka and headed for the Big Ones. The Big Ones seemed to be ignoring the little ones. Jon turned and followed the Little Ones, lowering the quantum sail and thrusting for the closer of the three Big Ones.

"Jon!" Loxy and Hali could be heard in his ear.

The three Big One decelerated. They began to reverse, pivoted, and began to travel in the opposite direction. Onuka caught up, passed, and when Onuka turned and headed out away from the station, they turned and went with her. The formation drew closer together, almost touching, and in unison they all jumped together.

They arrived in a place that was brilliantly lit, like blue skies, only, this was not 'sky.' Space-time itself could be felt moving, and Jon could see it churning like taffy in front of him. There was steady drum beat, like a heart racing, and the source was triple pulsars; three, individual neutron stars each cycling with its own steady beat of radio-bursts, but so close together in proximity they could be seen rotating around their center of gravity. Their gravitations fields overlapped in such a way that the eye of the individual Taurus defined a clear path down and through the center of mass of the three systems. An earth size moon was visible, accelerating down on the rotating stars. It threaded the 'tunnel' of the combined Taurus and at the perfect center of mass it simply disappeared. Each of the three stars flashed in unison and then returned to their previous rhythm.

The pack of bioships jumped again, drawing Onuka with them. They arrived back in the system in which they had first encountered the 'Big Ones.'

They pushed through debris field of bioship scat. There were bubbles of energy, the size of moons, containing atmospheres of various mixtures, spheres full of water, and some with water and air contained in layers of bubbles with in bubbles. The Little Ones and Big Ones dived in and out of these. There were over a million spheres, lined up like pearls on a necklace in orbit around the star, a red giant. There was one gas giant, with many moons. One of the moons pinged in as artificial. The force field bubbles of air and water were clearly artificial. Each sphere held life. Sometimes the life forms jumped from sphere to sphere. A bubble clearly containing earth and air and water, an asteroid sized place with lush vegetation and crawling things whizzed past. It was big enough Jon could live there, if he wanted to be with crawling things. The Little Prince could have a home here for himself and his rose and he could have a dozen 'sunrises' by simply walking around the asteroid. Sparkly creatures rushed by Onuka, like a storm of sprites. The sprites danced around them and then away, like a flock of birds all turning at once, changing focus of their stream, like a ribbon of butterflies, only, clearly not butterflies. They were as colorful as butterflies, and luminescing. Creatures like ice crystals solidified in space and disappeared in shimmering waves. A stream of frost trailed behind Onuka as if she was leaving a condensation trail, only it was a cylinder tail, like an extended smoke ring, and creatures like large microbes came and sucked up the vapor and disappeared.

“Jon,” Loxy said. It took a moment for Jon to register Loxy was speaking at him. He was too mesmerized by space life. In truth he had been in a trance ever since encountering the triple pulsar system. He focused on Loxy as if seeing her for the first time. “We’re being hailed.”

Jon focused, squinting as if changing vision would increase his hearing.

“Come to us, traveler, and introduce yourselves like civilized people,” the call said. The radio source was not precisely triangulated, but Jon assumed it was from a moon orbiting the gas giant. He altered course in favor of the planetoid.

“Umm, am I qualified take this call?” Jon asked Loxy.

“I think you better be,” Loxy said.

Onuka was directed towards the moon that was clearly artificial. “Metal moon?” Jon asked.

“Yeah, that’s where I’d start,” Loxy said.

He keyed the virtual mic: “Thank you for the invitation. I look forward to meeting civilized people. I hope if I fail to impress, you will instruct me, as I am just an egg,” Jon said.

“We know all about you, Jon Harister,” came the response.

“Oh, that can’t be good,” Jon said.

“Go with the flow,” Lilith said.

“Do we have a choice?” Ditri asked.

“Not really,” Loxy said.

“Is every outing with you like this?” Kiash asked.

“I will let you know in a couple hours,” Jon said

“Jon, come up on virtual deck, please,” Loxy said.

Jon shifted up to virtual deck. Lilith followed, inviting Ditri and Kiash to come with. Loxy brought Jon’s attention to the moons orbiting the gas giant. One was the equivalent size and composition of the Earth’s moon. She virtually painted it with the moon’s impact craters to better illustrate her point. She then walked him backwards, taking virtual layers off the moon, and matching it to another moon in orbit around the gas giant. Each time she removed a layer, they found another matching moon. The last layer was a metal sphere. This was the metal moon they were heading towards.

“They’re spaceships, Jon,” Loxy said.

“They’re too big to be spaceships,” Jon said.

“Jon, they are making moon sized spaceships,” Loxy said. “You yourself have always wondered why Earth’s moon was so perfect. It is the right size and the right distance from the earth that it perfectly blocks the sun, the perfect eclipse. Mathematicians talk about ratio and coincidence behind it all the time, suggesting it was designed, not natural. The Apollo astronauts crashed a lunar lander into it and said it rang like bell for hours. The Russians were right. The moon is hollow. It’s a spaceship! These people are making spaceships.”

“I am experiencing a little fear,” Jon said.

“A little?” Loxy asked.

“If they wanted us dead, we would be,” Lilith pointed out.

“There is that,” Jon said.

“Seriously,” Lilith said. “You can’t assume everyone greater than you is out to squash you.”

“Not my experience but, I am willing to have new experiences,” Jon said.

“You have been having lots of good experiences,” Lilith pointed out.

“You really have,” Loxy agreed.

“And I have been waiting for the other shoe to drop,” Jon said. “This might be that other shoe.”

“Are you saying you want me to wear shoes to bed?” Lilith asked. “Like Hali?”

Jon blinked, and almost said, seriously, you watched that, too? Then he realized she was trying to distract him. “Not exactly the right translation,” Jon said. “But, if you like.”

“I prefer bare feet,” Lilith said. “Which reminds me. I want you to take your socks off when we play.”

“Okay,” Jon said.

“You certainly earn the title Strangelove,” Kiash said.

“What, want a turn?” Jon asked.

“Actually, yeah,” Kiash said. “It’s been a while and you exude way too much sexuality. That, and I am nervous. I get horny when I am scared.”

“That’s actually a survival strategy,” Loxy said. “You should wait till you’re not scared to have sex.”

“We could all be going to our doom. Maybe we should all have sex, together,” Jon said.

“Focus,” Lilith said.

“That light there,” Loxy said. A circular patch on the sphere was softly illuminated. As they grew closer, it became more obvious as trailing lights moving in towards the circle flared in repetitive patterns. “I think that’s where they want us to park.”

“Okay” Jon said.

“We should let go of Onuk,” Loxy said. “This is a good orbit for us to recover it.”

Jon directed Onuka to let go of the metal ship. The blue glow of tiny forward thrusters flaring brought them away from Onuk. Jon assigned a virtual bed to the designated landing spot and allowed Onuka to go there on her own. They descended towards the metal moon. As they approached, a cradle emerged to accept their ship. Onuka settled to it as nicely as a bird to a nest and she purred, happy with herself. The floor beneath them descended, the hole above their head closed. When the lift carrying them down halted, a bridge extended to Onuka’s mouth.

They descended from virtual deck. Jon told everyone they should stay here and he would go and meet their new friends.

“We should go together,” Lilith said.

“I want you to stay here,” Jon said.

“What, where we’re safe?” Lilith said. “We go together.”

“Ditri, Kiash, you should stay here,” Jon said. “I have to go. Lilith is crew.”

“Are you kidding?” Ditri said. “The potentially most important event in recent history of the Republic and you want me to stay here?”

“I am not staying here alone,” Kiash said. “I am going.”

“Loxy?” Jon asked.

Amy emerged from the main corridor. “Guess we’re all going,” she said

“Very well,” Jon said. “We’re off to see the Wizard.”

Chapter 17

Jon led the way out of Onuka. The bridge allowed for Amy and Lilith to each take one of Jon's hands, and so they proceeded down the only path, with Kiash and Ditri following. When they exited the bridge, the room opened up, and Ditri took Lilith's hand, and Kiash took Amy's hand, the five of them walked forwards, together. The bridge led to a big open room, and one entity stood center. It was human size. It was not human. It was insectoid and clearly best resembled a praying mantis. Jon felt a stirring of fear in him. In counter to that, he felt only an outpouring of love from this creature. When Jon stopped, his friends stopped. The love kept coming. It was emotion, it was pure, and it was from an external source. Had Jon not experienced Loxy, and Onuka, and Lilith, he would have been frozen in a confounded state trying to track the emotions.

"Come closer, child of Gaia." Jon had certainty that this came from the entity, but it was not spoken. This was the voice of a grandfather. A male voice. It was in his head, but separate from his head.

Jon approached closer. His friends moved as he did.

"Moa?" Ditri asked.

"Mother of All," the entity translated. "Indigo does what we do, only we do it on a much grander scale."

"What do you do?" Jon asked.

"Indigo seeds planets," the entity said. "We seed universes. We create universes."

"Seriously?" Jon asked.

"One of your scientist was discredited for reporting that the age of the Earth's moon was older than the universe by three billion years," the entity said. "He was not mistaken. We made it. We made your universe. When you look up at your stars and you wonder why there is so few life, well, that's because we're still in the process of settling in."

"Seriously?!" Jon asked.

"You were allowed to see one of our portals. You saw us shift a moon to another location in this Universe," the entity said. "As you have frequently said, all of life's answers are in Star Trek. For the World is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky. This is what we do."

"Are you angry with the way Moa is treated?" Ditri asked.

“We believe you could all treat everyone better, but we are not judging you. Moa is related to us. The people of Indigo use her for her intended purpose, to make life viable on suitable worlds. Your language is constricting and would convey that she is more pet than person. We would not make such a distinction. Humans are more than chimpanzees, but we would not treat chimpanzees as less than. We would consider them as children, persons who need love and appropriate care. They have their own culture and communication styles. It is not human. It is not less than. It is simply different.”

“So, you’re not going to kill us?” Jon asked.

“No, child,” the entity said. “We will not kill this expression of you.”

“I don’t understand,” Jon said.

“You are not the you that you think you are,” the entity said.

“Oh, please don’t quote Cooley,” Jon said. “It gives me a headache.”

The entity laughed. “Suffice it to say, you do not see reality for what it is,” the entity said. “This not a shameful thing. This is on purpose. You see what you need to see to accomplish the goals assigned to you.”

“What?” Jon asked.

“The biological container facilitates interaction with the third density reality by constraining the reality function,” the entity said.

“What?!” Jon said.

“You are spirit living in a material world,” the entity said.

“Wait wait wait. Is this all a test?” Jon asked.

“There is no test,” the entity said. “There is only love. There is only learning.”

“So, why have you invited us here?” Jon said.

“To meet this incarnation of you. Is that not enough?” the entity said.

“But you act as if you know me,” Jon said.

“We have watched you. I have watched you,” the entity said. “I know you very well. You know me, but remember not.”

“What?” Jon asked.

“Everyone has someone watching over them,” the entity said. “You have me.”

“Like a guardian angel?” Lilith asked.

“Very much like,” the entity said.

“I don’t see any wings,” Jon said. That was the closest he could come to confrontational in the presence of this being.

“That’s my next stage,” it countered.

“Really?” Jon asked.

“No. Do I look like a locust?” the entity asked. There was laughter in his response. There was subtle context of ‘this is why I must guarded in my language. You accept everything so literally, child.’

“You look like something that might eat us,” Jon said.

“And you look like someone who might step on us,” the entity asked.

“Oh! No, never a praying mantis. A roach, yeah, if you’re in my house. Spider, catch and release, most the time,” Jon said. “The little ones are hard to catch.”

“Are you a Founder?” Loxy asked.

“Very few people meet the Founders at this level of existence,” the entity said. “My kind are very old, but we’re not considered Firsts. It’s best not track privileges based on seniority.”

“You can count numbers on a circle, but ultimately, we are all one on a circle,” Lilith said.

The Entity bowed to her.

“Wait wait wait. So, this is a test,” Jon said.

“No, Jon,” the entity said.

“So, what is this?” Jon asked.

“This? Us, here, now? This is just a friendly hello,” the entity said.

“That’s it?!” Jon asked. He managed to push his a voice a little louder.

“What were you expecting?” the entity asked.

“I don’t know! Maybe the answers to life, the Universe, and everything. More than 42! Technology would be nice. Cool present are always nice. Something other than clothes,” Jon said.

“You need a gift of clothes,” the entity said.

“We’re working on that,” Loxy and Lilith both said.

Jon wanted to be cross with them but returned to his grievance. “But just hello?”

“You say goodbye, and I say hello. Hello, hello, I don’t know why you say goodbye, I say hello,” it said.

“Seriously?” Jon said.

“I am not a Beetle, but I am a fan,” the entity said.

“Oh, please don’t tell me you’re some teenager joyriding in his father’s car like that movie Explorers,” Jon said.

“I love that movie. That song, ‘All Around the World,’ we gave that to Robert Palmer in a dream. It was the only time he really heard us,” the entity said. “Most the time, that’s the only time someone might hear us.”

“In dreams?” Jon asked.

“Did you know, that song by Roy Orbison also came from a dream?” the entity said.

“What’s your name?” Jon asked.

“Oh, thank the All, they said you wouldn’t ask. My friends even bet money on you not be civilized enough yet to ask. Most humans in the universe, they’re still feral,” the entity said.

“Feral?” Jon asked.

“Ever wake up from a nightmare screaming? Ever get spooked by a shadow? Yeah, feral, like a cat,” the entity said.

“That’s all we are to you?” Jon asked.

“A feral kitten with PTSD and ADHD,” the entity said.

“What?!” Jon asked.

“Exactly,” the entity said. “Now, what was your question?”

“I don’t know...” Jon said, sorting. Jon felt the image of a smile coming in at him, love, patience, humor... Jon resisted, though reluctantly, he admitted his brain was awash with a million questions. He wanted something. A gift, an answer, or tech... He felt like a child who was confronting a parent who went away on a trip and had returned without a present. “What was your name again?”

“You really have to be still to hear it, in your heart, and in your mind,” the entity said. “You couldn’t pronounce my name in human language. You can’t reproduce the sounds with your body. Even if you could, you would never get the tonal nuances correct because your hearing is limited to a very small range. But if you listen, if you go deep, you will know me. We are brothers.”

“Brothers? Metaphysically speaking?” Jon asked.

“Metaphysic is just an expression encapsulating ideas that you are unable to assimilate based on your preferred interpretation of reality,” the entity said. “Call me Dor-El, Jon.”

“Dor, meaning Gate, El is Hebrew for God, Door of God?” Jon asked.

Dor-El bowed to Jon.

“Wait wait wait, There is a God?”

Dor-El simply divided prayer hands and revealed open palms, which could have been interpreted as a question, a shrug, or merely, ‘look around and see the evidence.’

“I would like clarity on this point,” Jon said.

“Yay you,” Dor-El said. “Look, Jon. You would not give a nuclear bomb to a child to play with, right? Hell, I wouldn’t even have given you the Ark of the Covenant. That’s way more powerful than a nuclear bomb. Thank the All, Harrison Ford found that. Your species is still in its childhood. Some of you are approaching adolescents. Not there yet, but, you’re out of the cradle and navigating real world structures and encountering adults, and, well, welcome to my part of the real world. You think you see reality as it is, but you don’t. You’re like that Australian Giant Jewel Beetle, *Julodimorpha bakewelli*, romancing beer bottles. Millions of years of fine tuning that species and a simple beer bottle nearly derailed it into extinction. That perfectly illustrates this point: none of us see the entirety of reality with our eyes. We don’t even hold a reasonable facsimile of reality in our brain. We’re not designed to see truth. We hold our piece, the shortcut that enables us to function at this level of existence. See with your eyes, but use tools to measure. Think with your brain, but use writing and math as tools to gauge where and when you are. Use your mind to go beyond.”

“Life is an illusion?” Lilith asked.

“Yes and no,” Dor-El said. “The icons on your computer desktop are illusions, but they represent real data, and though you can change the appearance of the icon, you don’t change its fundamental function. You can. You can even delete the data assigned to that icon. The metaphor of physical reality, of space-time, is comparable to this. All physical objects are merely icons representing a function of consciousness, but it is not in and of itself the actual consciousness. Your brain doesn’t create consciousness, it is the result of consciousness. Earth is on the threshold of realizing this, and the cabals that run your world know their time is coming to an end. Once this fundamental truth is embraced by the majority, your world will change, again. You have a whole Universe of beings ready to receive you when you finally leave the nest.”

“Wait wait wait. Too much! Back to the icon metaphor. We live in the matrix?!” Jon asked.

“That is a very apt metaphor,” Dor-El said. “But you are not special. You are not Neo.”

“Is there a Neo?” Jon asked.

“All are Neo,” Dor-El said. “You don’t get to this level of existence not being Neo. It’s like growing up, Jon. You play, you learn, you play, but at some point, you put down childish things and you step forwards to be an adult. You make adult decisions. Making an adult decisions is being Neo. Go further. Being Neo means remembering you are still a child. Come forwards playfully, with a spirit of learning, sharing what you have found with your siblings.”

“Do we ever arrive?” Jon asked. “At adulthood? To safety?”

“You never left,” Dor-El said. “It is time for you to return to your ship and your lives.”

“Wait wait wait. I am still grappling with stuff! I am just getting comfortable enough to speak and you’re kicking us out?!” Jon asked.

“You’re a feral kitten, and you have tasted the milk on the porch,” Dor-El said. “Now, it’s time for you to go do kitten things. Play with strings, catch birds, grapple with your litter mates and groom and love and pur...”

“I want more,” Jon said.

“Everyone wants more milk and honey,” Dor-El said.

“Seriously, I want more,” Jon said.

“Be wise as serpents, but gentle as doves,” Dor-El said.

“Do you know anything about doves? They’re brutal, flying rats. You can’t assume because they’re pretty, with white feathers they’re wholesome in anyway. And they poop everywhere. They will fight to the death for a piece of ass and territory. Even wolves don’t fight to the death, and they’re selective about where they drop their poop.”

“Then be a wolf, in sheep’s clothing, so as not to scare the other sheep,” Dor-El said.

“Okay, we really have to unpack that metaphor,” Jon said.

“Go do that, and know the wolf is merely the guardian of the pack, moving with the herd, but not part of the herd,” Dor-El said.

“I don’t want to leave yet,” Jon said.

“I know,” Dor-El said.

“Do you know what it’s like out there?” Jon asked.

“Jon,” Dor-El said. “You’re doing alright. I dare say, you’re doing better than most. I celebrate the All, and you are on the path. You are kind to most people, even when they are not kind to you. This is why you were able to come here. You will return. Only you, Loxy, and Lilith may return here. Even if you share the coordinates, only you will be able to return here. And when you can travel the same way Onuka travels, and you arrive here by thought alone, then you can remain as long you like. Until then, my brother, fellow traveler, continue to be kind to yourself and others. And know this. Your acclimation phase to this new level of participation with the Multiverse is coming to an end. You’re going to encounter new beings, new ways of thinking, and you’re going to have to grow, or you will start over. That’s how this works.”

Dor-El did a complex gesture with his hands and pushed out towards the guests as if it were executing a Tai Chi move. Jon and party were suddenly back on Onuka, and Onuka was out in space. He was disoriented to the point of wanting to be sick. Stars spun, and the heavens were moving in all directions at once. When he could see again, he realized Indigo was in his ear. Onuk was floating just to starboard. Onuka was firing small blue flames to bring the tumbling to a halt. Jon and Onuka were the only ones awake. Loxy was asleep. Lilith, Ditri, and Kiash were asleep. Onuka was purring.

Chapter 18

Jon, Amy, Lilith, Ditri and Kiash were ‘interviewed’ separately, and then brought together into a conference room where representatives from various companies, local militia, and top ranking Indigo staff were present. Hali sat to the right of Jon. Lilith sat on his left. Amy stood behind him. Lots of people were standing in this meeting. The Arbitrator who he had met previously was at the table. Indigo authority sat opposite side of the table to Jon, with the President directly in front of Jon. She was short. Like, midget short. And if that was sufficient to make her odd, her skin was blue and her hair dark indigo with lighter sheds of violet woven in. Her eyes were an intense sea blue with a glow of tech. When she spoke, people listened. It was very clear she was a power to be reckoned with.

“As best as we can determine, the coordinates you provided to Founder space results in our ships arriving randomly elsewhere,” President Belinda Tays said. “This is congruent with the transcript of the conversation you had with the Entity identifying as Dor-El, and with each of your individual testimony.”

Jon wanted to say, ‘that stuff is kind of hard to make up;’ in his private ‘interview’ he had simply referred her to the book ‘Contact’ by Carl Sagan, which was adapted into a movie with Jodie Foster. He kept quiet. It was a struggle to prevent his anxiety and sarcastic nature to bubble out as being the flibbertigibbet.

“How is it your ship can jump without using the quantum drive?” Tays asked.

“I still don’t have an answer for you,” Jon said.

“You will help us catch one of these Little Ones, as well as one of the Big Ones,” Keets said.

“You’re telling me or asking me?” Jon asked.

“We just want to understand,” one of the president’s aid said. “See if we can duplicate this.”

“At least give us access to the Lanza system,” Tays said.

“Not yet,” Jon said. “I will soon.”

“We will grant them full system rights as a colony, even if they are shy of the threshold number,” Tays said.

“I have been accepted as a member of that society, but I can’t arbitrarily agree to this,” Jon said. “I must speak with their committee. But if you’re going there to try and catch Little Ones, I am personally opposed. And, I suspect, based on Lanza’s interaction with them, they’re going to be really hard to catch. They do not like metal ships.” It turned out that Onuk was bought and paid for by Lanza, registered to her, so keeping ‘Lanza’ a secret had been impossible. Biocorp had known of the metal ship’s purchase, which put Lanza at a high risk for breaking her contract. When she failed to return, they had simply assumed she had made other arrangements for her life. Given the circumstances, her breach of contract was likely to be forgiven for stakes in the system.

“The Little Ones like you. We can use you as bait,” Keets said.

“See, that is exactly the kind of thing I am opposed to,” Jon said.

“You either help us catch one, or we will dissect Onuka to figure out how she can jump without a quantum drive,” Keets said.

“You can’t do that,” Jon said. He looked to Hali. “Can he do that?”

“He cannot,” Hali said.

“These creatures violated Indigo space, aggressively pursuing an Indigo asset,” Keets began. “I make one call to Fleet Command about the nature of the threat, I’ll have Onuka in a laboratory faster than you can say boo.”

“Biocorp will not let you destroy the only bioship in recorded history to jump without a quantum drive,” Hali said.

“This ability may not be a result of biological processes,” Loxy said; Amy spoke for her.

“Oh? You want to declare Onuka sentient?” Keets asked.

“I do,” Jon said. “Maybe it’s rudimentary comparatively, or, maybe it’s just different.”

“Or, maybe it’s the gestalt of shared sentience,” Ditre said. “It shares consciousness with Jon, Loxy, and Lilith. It followed the Little Ones, taking up formation like a starling to a flock. It is possible it followed out of innate biological drive, or due to hyper-stimulization causing it to trance, or maybe it simply chose to. It doesn’t matter. It learned. That can’t be unlearned. Jon, Loxy, and Lilith can’t unlearn it. This is an ability that the Founders say we all have. It’s a function of consciousness, of awareness, and the ability to commune and embrace the All.”

“Don’t bring your religion into this,” Keets said. “There is no way you’re going to convince me Jon is an evolved soul. He is a greedy, promiscuous, rooky dog of a pilot that’s been nothing but trouble since he became an asset.”

“Trouble?” Jon asked. No responded to his question.

“Maybe we should make him a citizen,” Hali said.

“You can’t be serious,” Keets said.

“He has generated more profit in his first year than any other pilot,” Hali said. “And he is about to bring a system with an established colony into the Republic.”

“There is a game there that needs to be sorted. I suspect rule violations and...”

“It’s a system with free ranging bioships. Do you want one of the Republic’s competitors owning that?” Hali said.

“This is your doing...”

“How is this my...”

“You finally found someone who is just as greedy, corrupt, and manipulative as you are, complicit in schemes to give you market advantages...”

“All being manipulate systems. It’s what we do!”

“You’re a manipulative whore...”

“I warned you, Sir,” Jon interrupted. “I will knock you on your ass if disparage my friends...”

Tays raised her hand and the bickering ended, minus the laser eyes and clear contempt and anger that continued to smolder.

“Jon. Can you teach this ability to other pilots?” Tays asked.

“I don’t know,” Jon said. He stared at Keets. Hali patting his knee suggested she wanted him to let it go and focus. He stared at the glossy black table and the warped reflection of him and his friends. “It seems to reason that if we learned it others can. There is nothing special about me.”

Tays narrowed her eyes. “I don’t like that. I don’t know you well enough to determine if its false modesty or you’re serious, but either vector has duplicity in manipulating perception in non-rational ways. Bottom line, bioships that can jump independent of our technology would give Indigo an extreme advantage in our overall objectives of exploration and colonization. Your

asset value has increased to the point that would make blind-jumps too risky. Until we can determine if this is a teachable skill, you're flight privilege are restricted to known space."

"This ability means he should double his blind jumps," Hali said. "He has the ability to jump out of trouble."

"We're not losing this ship or this pilot and his crew on risky ventures," Tays said. "If you make me worry, I will pull this asset from Biocorp control."

"Onuka should be under the supervision of the militia," Keets said. "It could give us tactical advantages that could discourage conflict."

"Word gets out this ship can jump at will, you will be painting a target on it," Hali said. "Everyone will be scrambling for Onuka."

"That ship has already sailed," Tays said. "Though we locked down electronic transmission outbound, you're not going to stop the gossip of pilots who witnessed that event."

"I petition for Jon to be a Citizen of Indigo," Hali said.

"That will not change my position on this," Tays said.

"He needs to be more than an asset. If he is going to be restricted in movement, and also be a target, the Republic needs to increase their investment in him," Hali said.

"You mean in you," Keets said.

"He is a ship of the line, and restricting his flight status affects me," Hali said. "I am more concerned about his ability to participate. Giving him citizenship balances out the restriction."

"He hasn't earned citizenship," Keets said.

"He hasn't," Hali said. "And he won't earn it if you block him from his ability to produce."

"He has already made himself an integral part of a colony. And he did that on his own, without your counsel so he could get one over on the Republic. He is not citizenship material," Keets said. "Let him serve five years for the Indigo militia and I will reconsider."

"Jon, what do you want?" Lilith asked.

The question surprised everyone, as Lilith was more likely not to speak unless asked a direct question. Even then, she would minimize her response to the bare minimum needed to convey accuracy. Loxy put a hand on Lilith's shoulder. Everyone was looking to Jon for an answer.

“I have no wants,” Jon said. “My needs are met. I am surrounded by people who clearly care. I am participating on several levels of society. I have employment. My job criteria may be changing, but I love my job. I don’t know what it means to be a citizen. I don’t see how it can be any different than what I am doing now and so, I don’t need a title to continue doing what I am doing. If it means I have to vote and be politically savvy, I am definitely not interested in that game.”

“Politics here is nothing like your world, Jon,” Hali said. “We don’t micromanage information to influence or employ duplicitous marketing campaigns to gain political advantages.”

“Says the girl on a fast track to CEO status,” Keets said.

Tays silenced them with a hand gesture. “You don’t want anything?” Tays asked.

“I want to continue flying for Hali,” Jon said. “I don’t want Onuka recruited into the militia.”

“Coward,” Keets said.

“No, Sir,” Jon said. “I will fight if there are no options. I will hold my ground most the time. I will sacrifice myself for a greater cause...”

“Demonstrated by the fact Jon led the Big Ones away from Indigo,” Hali pointed out.

“Only because he was directed away,” Keets said. “It took multiple direct orders.”

“You were targeting Onuka,” Hali accused Keets.

“They were chasing Onuka. Kill Onuka, no prey, they go away,” Keets said.

“You didn’t know enough to make that assumption,” Hali said. “We don’t know what that was.”

“Sure, it was an assumption. A sound assumption, and I am still experimentally curious to what would have happened,” Keets said.

“They are sentient,” Ditri said. “There are rules of engagement...”

“Whether they are, or someone else was controlling them, I am in my right to use force to defend out space. That was clearly a demonstration of superiority,” Keets said.

“I got no sense of that in my meeting with Dor-El,” Jon said.

“Nor did I from the transcripts, and the addendums you have each provided,” Tays said.

“Which kind of makes Jon an ambassador,” Hali said. “That’s criteria for citizenship.”

“They’re clearly using Jon to manipulate us,” Keets said.

“Cause no one else has used me since arriving in your space,” Jon said, sarcastically. He felt Amy’s hand on his thigh, and Lilith squeezed his hand.

“They could have come here and opened a dialogue with anyone, but they chose Jon,” Hali said.

“This has got to be some elaborate ruse by Biocorp to increase the value of their shares,” Keets said. “There is no way Founders chose Jon to interface with the Republic. He’s a moronic fool with absolutely no credibility or boundaries. He’s an insane, slut pilot that is purely driven on libido, not genuine desire to understand or explore, much less contribute to our mission objectives...”

“You really should stop trying to slut shame me into compliance with your expectation of propriety,” Jon said. “Because that’s also manipulative, and with me, that’s more likely to increase the behavior you’re trying to suppress.”

“You’re fucking man whore who needs to be chemically and physically castrated,” Keets said.

“You’re jealous because I get laid more than you?” Jon asked.

“No, I have morals,” Keets said. “There is no way superiors beings would select Jon to initiate first contact.”

“We did,” Hali said. “All pilots, by definitions, must engage in first contact protocols.”

“And when you discover they’re insane, you pull them off the line,” Keets said.

“He’s not insane,” Hali said.

“He willingly gave up enough sperm to impregnate 150,000 plus females! That’s insane,” Keets said. “That is the basest level of greed. He took advantage of an entire population of people based on their fears of the Republic, fed and nourished by the insanity of another rogue Biocorp pilot. Jon is seriously out of control and needs to be boxed.”

“He has not violated any law...” Hali said.

“He’s insane! If you let crazy people breed, you get more crazy people!” Keets said.

“He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.”

No one could identify where this voice came from. Jon, Loxy, Lilith, Ditri, and Kiash recognized the voice immediately. There was love in the voice, as well as humor. Jon understood the statement, as it was a song by the Hollies. 1969. Lots of secret information was exchanged as Tays talked to her people and Keets talked to his people.

“Tell me that isn’t someone impressing their superiority,” Keets said. “They’re a threat to the security of Indigo and the Republic.”

“If they were a threat, don’t you think they could have taken us out already?” Hali said. “At worst, that was an ambiguous statement...”

“That wasn’t ambiguous,” Amy said. “That was a message of love.” She distributed the song.

“Prelude to Love Train,” Jon said.

“If they were friendly, their statements would be less ambiguous,” Keets said.

“They clearly want us to know, Jon is significant,” Hali said.

“We can’t know anything from that,” Keets said.

Tays smiled at Jon. “Controversy and sex will follow you everywhere, won’t it?”

“I can be really stupid about sex,” Jon said.

“We know,” Keets said.

Tays placed both hands on the table. Her chair descended, tilted enough to eject her with ease. Her head and shoulders remained above the table.

“Jon Harister,” Tays said. “You are no longer simply an asset. Let me be the first to officially welcome you to Indigo, citizen with full rights and privileges. I will leave Hali and Ditri to educate you into all that entails. Hali, I want more bioships that can jump. I don’t care how Biocorp figures it out, but I expect continuity of interface. I want you and Jon on the front of this. Unless anyone has anything else to add, I think we’re done here.” Tays looked at Keets. He was not happy but he didn’t say anything.

Tays and her staff departed, followed by Keets and his staff. Then the arbitrator departed, nodding politely to Jon as she passed to the door.

“So, that was interesting,” Jon said.

Chapter 19

An impromptu ‘celebration’ at Hali’s place occurred, celebrating Jon’s change in status. Jon was introduced to a number of new people, mostly colleagues of Hali, but several prominent members of Indigo station made appearances. Gifts were given, all of which were virtual gifts, as most citizens didn’t engage in the exchange of physical artifacts. Virtual treasures were considered more valuable. Several of the virtual objects were actually invitations, keys that unlocked virtual doors within games. They were invitations to play.

The assortment of people he met he would likely be people he would otherwise forget, except for the improved memory due to tech, with access to identifiers tags and histories if he wanted to go deeper. There were a couple of females that sparked interest, but unless something happened to escalate them in a day or two, he would likely forget them just because he was already fully engaged socially. Going deeper with the ‘subtle’ invitations was not obligatory, but people knew how deep you went in exploring their ‘information,’ which was measured as a level of interest. There were a couple of females he was clearly attracted to, but because he showed zero interest in exploring their available history or knowing them in a more profound way, they displayed no interest in attraction. None of this registered as an offense. Jon did hit on one of them, and she clearly expressed non-interest; asking or pursuing it from that point forward would have been registered as an offense. Citizens track this, and everyone was aware of how many partners Jon actually had, and it was clear they knew he was open to more. Jon also discovered there was a list available to him of people expressing interest in relationships, from long term to hook-ups.

Avery showed up at the party, full female. She was on him and kissing him aggressively before he even knew who she was. She was shorter, plumper, and darker in complexion than her last known ‘cycle.’ When the demands of the celebration didn’t allow for her to be alone with him, and she was clearly being blocked by host, Lilith, and Amy, she got mad and went home. She was not inclined to sharing and didn’t care that this celebration was an important event. She left demands that he visit her, either in person or using her surrogate, but preferably in person.

When the window for receiving new guests closed, and the stragglers slowly departed for their own space, Jon found himself sitting quietly, still nursing his first and only glass of wine. Hali, Amy, Lilith, Kiash and Ditri remained. Amy came up behind Jon, hugging him with one

arm around his neck, kissing him, and with the other hand presented him a dark, felt covered box.

“This is from all of us,” Amy said. She came around the couch and sat on the table in front of him. This inner room had a sunken floor with a community table, with two ‘lazy Susans,’ and a fire slash grill center of the table. One could sit on one of four love seats that were arranged on the circle, or one of four independent lounge chairs, or on the floor itself.

“I..”

“I know you say you don’t like gifts, but you will like this, and it’s not just for you, its’ for us,” Amy said.

Hali was on his right, Lilith on his left. Kiash and Ditri came closer, sitting on either side of Amy so they could watch.

The box was long and slender, and he could hardly guess what it was. It was hinged. It opened to reveal it was a ring box, containing 37 rings. One was in a row above the others, with only one indentation. Below the one were four rows of 9 rings. Each of the rings were made of tungsten, polished black, with traces of inner colors that almost glowed with a brilliance. The luminescent quality seemed to pulse, and was in synch with all the rings. All the rings had one inner band that contained a continuum of all the stones that were present on each of the rings. 36 of the rings had individual stones. Amy removed the ring from row of one. It had four stones on the outer, flush with the surface, and five stones on the inner. One of the four on the outer was a clear diamond, and directly opposite was dark opal, with a bit of blue opal like a sliver of a moon spooning darkness. The other two stone on the outer surface was a ruby and the opposite was a violet amethyst. Inside the ring, the five stones were citrine, an aventurine, an emerald, a cabochon, and a lapis lazuli.

“Remember the space geode we discovered?” Amy asked. “All the stones here came from that. The rings were Lilith’s idea. This one is yours.”

Lilith and Hali touched the ring as Amy guided it onto his fingers. Loxy took one of the 36 rings. It was a similar ring in every aspect, except it only contained the one stone, a ruby. She handed it to Jon and asked he put it on her finger. As he did, Hali and Lilith touched it, sustaining touch until it was in place. They repeated this procedure for Lilith and Hali. Lilith received the ring with the citrine stone. Hali received the one with the lapis lazuli stone. Amy then removed the stone with single violet amethyst.

“We would like to invite Ditri to wear this ring,” Amy said. “We want her to be a part of us.”

Ditri became tearful. She showed her willingness to be a part by extending her hand. They all guided the ring onto her finger.

“We want to invite Tory to accept the ring with the emerald,” Amy said. “We will invite Avery to accept the aventurine. We have not decided yet who should assume the cabochon. The other aspects will be brought online as we meet agreeable beings that want to participate in celebrating us.”

“This is like the most intimate wedding counsel I have ever experienced,” Kiash said.

“I would like to invite Kiash,” Lilith said.

“I second that,” Hali said.

“I am in agreement,” Amy said.

Kiash was shaking. “Why would you want me?”

“Because you are like us, traveling, alone, but no more,” Lilith said. “You bring with you a nurturing and loving aspect, and your chain of unrequited love will be broken with us.”

“The group is not perfect,” Amy said. “Avery, for example, can be extremely challenging, but we will not exclude people from love based on difficulty level. We are still figuring out what it means to be us. With each addition we come closer to a resolution. The only absolute requirement is love. Honesty is requested, as the only way to be an intimate part of a group is being very clear about who and what you are and what you want and expect.”

“I am overwhelmed,” Kiash said. “I haven’t even slept with any of you.”

“It isn’t a requirement to being a member of this community,” Amy said.

“And it does not limit you to only being with us,” Lilith said. “It only makes you a member, and the goal is to keep the sanctity and continuity of the group. 36 is the perfect size family.”

“There is 37 rings,” Jon said. “Oh! And one to rule them all.”

“Yeah, no,” Amy said. “You may be the focal point of this group, but not the boss. We are a community.”

“There will be other males, Jon,” Hali said.

Jon almost pouted. “I don’t have to sleep with them?”

“You slept with Avery,” Lilith pointed out.

“Under duress,” Jon said.

“Sex is not an obligation of the group,” Amy iterated. “Only love.”

“I accept,” Kiash said. She leaned in and kissed Jon on the head. “And I am okay with sex. I miss sex.”

Jon bit his lip. If the real thing was anything like the android thing he experienced at Avery’s place, then he was definitely into that. Oily, slick bodies had an appeal.

“We’ll figure out the schedule,” Amy said. “For now, close your eyes and reach out to touch a stone.”

Kiash’s finger touched the ring containing a pink morganite. Jon was invited to move it, and they all touched the ring as he guided it onto her finger. They brought her in to a group hug. Amy closed the box. She was appointed keeper of the box. They sat and talked more, sharing bits of their past lives. Kiash fell asleep on the couch by herself. Ditre excused herself, as she needed to set in motion an ark of life to take back to Lanza. Herbivores like horses and sheep were wanted. She needed a team to study the insect and plant life there in greater detail. They needed a team for studying marine life. Lilith reported she was tired and retire back to Onuka to rest. Amy went with her and they were space borne hand in hand. Onuka caught them up as eagerly as she would catch Jon. Jon ended his night with Hali. In the morning, they found Kiash had departed for work, leaving an electronic note, thanking them for everything.

Hali and he played some more, but as soon as they finished, she cleaned and went to work. Biocorp was in a quandary on how to proceed with the whole bioship jumping without tech. Jon spacewalked out of Indigo, was caught up by Onuka and then delivered to Avery’s place. Avery practically attacked Jon with affection, but had to contain herself in the presence of Lilith and Amy.

“I don’t want a group thing. I just want to be with Jon alone,” Avery said.

“We accept this,” Amy said. “But we would like to talk first. We want to invite you to be a part of our group.” Amy presented her with a ring.

“What is this? Like marriage?” Avery asked.

“It’s an extension of the friendship contract you have with Jon,” Amy said. “If you are friends with Jon, you are a friend with us. You can decline the formal offer of sharing in this group, but as long as you are intimate with Jon, you are a part of us.”

Avery took the ring from the box and put it on without ceremony. “Fine. I am in. Now, leave us alone.”

Lilith and Amy returned to Onuka. Five minutes later, Jon returned. Upset and frustrated. Amy was in her station charging. Lilith was on the verge of sleep, but roused when he entered.

“That was quick,” Lilith said.

“She came really quick and kicked me out,” Jon said.

“You didn’t...”

“I did not,” Jon said.

“Come to bed,” Lilith said.

“You rest,” Jon said. “I’ll be alright.”

“I don’t mind,” Lilith said.

“Do you want to?” Jon asked.

“Jon, I always want to. But you could go back to Indigo and visit one of the brothels,” Lilith said. “Or you could go to the Pilot’s Diner and wait for Kiash to get off work. She could probably use the release. Or, you could do me good and put me to sleep proper and go do either of the above or both.”

Jon came closer to her and kissed her. They made love at the edge of the bed, her legs inclined against his chest, hugging them biting, her legs.

निर्मित

Jon was deposited at an Indigo airlock by Onuka and then powered out to its assigned spot. Jon went to the diner where Kiash happily served him. Otherwise, he ate a meal in quiet, looking out the window of the booth that he favored. Afterwards, he spent time at the brothel and became acquainted with one of the owners who was happy to educate him to the opportunities. He was allowed to express interest in any of the providers, but ultimately it was they who accepted him. He had offers already waiting for him. The madam, and owner, Mia, was willing to contract for exclusivity with her club. Jon wasn’t ready for that, as he wanted to explore all the options. There was more options in this red light district than candy at Willy Wonka’s factory.

He played till he was exhausted and might have continued playing but he was paged to Biocorp headquarters, where Hali and other agents met with him. He was introduced to five

pilots, female. He yawned. Their ships were male. They wanted him to fly with them and see if he could teach them to jump. If any were successful, their ships would be bred to see if they could produce ship that had a greater likelihood of jumping naturally. One of the pilots was human in every way except for the octopus head. This was Shay. There was a tall, gangly female, who seemed to be a hybrid of a human and Gray. Her eyes were Disney Princess large. Her legs seemed hardly capable of holding her, long and thin. This was Lorsh. A blue midget girl, who was like Tays, only her hair was all one color, violet. This was Kim. There was a female who was unmistakably Native American, and she introduced herself as Catori. The last was human, serious dark skin woman, with a pleasantly round face, and hair trimmed to military style. Her name was Ekene. Elodie Noir won the contract to record and report on the whole affair, and Jon was directed to accommodate her on Onuka.

After meeting the pilots, they retired to their ships and met some distance away from Indigo to practice formation flights. They practiced for a day. Elodie was ever present, but not so intrusive. She was like the introvert at a party, aware of everyone but not really interacting. This almost seemed like the opposite of the reporter he had first met, who was obnoxiously intrusive and flaunting her femininity in order to gain his attention. She brought a chest of belongings which had a roll out bed that she used while Onuka grew a bed in the spare room. She had recording devices imbedded in her recorded everything her senses took from multiple perspective; there was the direct sensory feed, every sense had an intake of raw data, and then there was 'her' perspective, the data that was processed through her personality filter. Whatever she focused on was highlighted.

Formation flight in open space was not challenging at all. Jon took point, they followed. He made small jumps, keeping with in visual distance, hoping to entice them to jump. He would then slow and wait for them to catch up. Jon directed Onuka to catch Onuk and after doing so, they jump to the Lanza system, using the word 'Home.' Onuka went. The others didn't follow. The main hall of orbital space station was in place in geosynchronous orbit. Automated machines were busy on the ground and in orbit, a tether was being lowered. There would be an active space elevator operational in a month.

While there, he discussed Indigo's offer with Tory, asking for permission to bring five Biocorp pilots here to introduce them to the Little Ones. He, with Amy and Lilith present, offered Tory a ring; she accepted. Enya was also given a ring, because Lilith and Loxy both

absolutely loved her. Enya accepted and spent an hour alone with Jon. When he found his way back, Tory and the committee had accepted the contract with Indigo for sovereignty of their system, in exchange for orbital residence and bioship engineering. Tory demanded time with him as well. Babies had been born, some were being born, and Jon met with some of them. He managed to spend real time with babies, but he was also experiencing downloads: experiences of babies being held, experiences of the births, and when he slept, he spent all his time holding babies in dreams and interacting with mothers. He woke strangely happy.

When Jon returned to Indigo, he finalized the treaty. He provided the coordinates and a permanent sentinel was deployed to maintain the system coordinates; mail carriers assigned to bounce between Lanza, Indigo, and other assigned system in a cycle that kept the continuity were also deployed.

A Biocorp ship, a metal cruiser, was dispatched carrying Biocorp platform, a ring that would attach to Lanza space station becoming a permanent fixture there. They would also be bringing workers and drone to speed up the completion process for the station.

Jon returned to the five pilots and they agreed to jump to Lanza in tandem, using a cable capable of holding them all together as one. They arrived as one. The five released the tandem cable, and Onuka drew it in.

“This is Lanza STC, greeting pilots. Ident for safety, maintain visual flight rules, and maintain 200,000 kilometers from the Lanza magnetosphere,” STC said. The voice was familiar.

“Avery?” Jon asked.

“Affirmative, Strangelove,” Avery said. “I have been relocated from Indigo to establish operation control of the Lanza system.”

“You okay with that?” Jon asked, biting his lip in worry.

“Very happy,” Avery said. “You have permission to enter Lanza atmosphere. The other pilots must remain space borne.”

“Okay, well, we’re heading out to the gas giant,” Jon said.

“Good flight, Captain. Maintain this frequency for STC, Lanza out,” Avery said.

“Is that really Avery?” Lilith asked.

“She was always professional in her work,” Jon said.

“Maybe radio is her thing,” Loxy said.

They discovered Little Ones resting in the shade of the Gas Giant. The Little Ones were skittish and bounced away from everyone except Onuka. When the pilots were in formation with Onuka as lead, they would come closer, but if any of the pilots broke formation, they would scatter. Jon suggested they just hang out in orbit, resting mode, and allow the Little Ones to come to them when they were ready. They agreed. From their vantage point, they saw another carrier ship arrive, it deployed another ring that connected to Lanza station. This was the 'Ark' and Ditri was on board.

When they were close enough to Lanza to maintain a good data stream rate, Loxy went into what appeared to be a trance, uploading information from her ground based personalities. She gathered Jon files, too, but would save Jon's files for dispensing when he was sleeping.

Elodie was present when Lilith mentioned to Jon she was hungry. Elodie requested to watch Lilith feeding. Lilith was okay with that. Jon was uncertain, as it was a fairly intimate thing, even more so than sex. It was agreed she could watch. Lilith directed Jon to lay on his left side, and she lay behind him, spooning. She cuddled in tight and licking his neck, and then finally committed. Elodie drew in close to observe greater details. It seemed clear to Jon that she was aroused, but it was Lilith that stretched out her arm and took Elodie by the wrist and drew her in. Lilith brought Elodie's hand into Jon, directing the exploration. She lay down, kissing Jon. Jon directed her to roll over, pulling her into spooning position. Lilith pulled Elodie tighter to Jon, groping her breast, and searching lower. Lilith pulled up on her dress, going deeper into intimate play. Elodie used her hands to undo Jon's trousers and exposed him. She positioned herself, pulling her panties aside to accommodate Jon, and took him in her. Jon gasped. His arousal was tripled due to sharing Lilith's energy. Elodie herself was influenced by the pheromones in the air. She whimpered as she came, grinding harder into him. She came even as Lilith was finishing. Feeding for her was one, long sustained orgasm, but when she was finished feeding, she wanted that one last climax. She pulled Jon from Elodie and mounted him and rode him until she came. She continued until he came again, riding a wave of pleasure that sustained the three of them on a high until they all arrived at the same place.

Lilith fell beside him, exhaustion through being satiated. Jon lay there between Lilith and Elodie, not tired and wanting to get up. Lilith was cuddled into him, and Elodie had mirrored her, and was now spooning again. He wasn't sure if Elodie was sleeping or not till he managed to loosen Lilith's grip; she roll over. He started to sneak down off the bed. Elodie was awake.

“You okay?” Elodie asked.

“Scoot over, I want to get up,” Jon said.

Elodie scooted over and got up. Her dress fell back into place and she adjusted her breast back into the upper part of her dress. Jon tried not to ogle but, she was right there, and watching women was probably the only thing that consistently ‘tranced’ his brain; breast are that enticing. He forced himself up and out of bed. He grabbed one of the button up, red flannel shirts that Lilith had bought for him, but that she mostly wore, and he wore just that to keep from feeling too naked. It hung just barely low enough to cover stuff.

Elodie followed Jon into the galley.

“I meant, are you okay with what happened?” Elodie said.

His eyes came out of the ‘freezer’ facsimile. “Uh? Oh, yeah. Yeah,” Jon said. His eyes going back to the freezer. He reached in and started moving stuff. He stopped and looked to Lilith. “Are you?”

“I am feeling a little awkward now,” Elodie said.

Jon blinked, tilting his head. “What can I do to help you feel less awkward?”

“I don’t know,” Elodie said.

Jon nodded, as if he appreciated the answer, and turned back to the freezer. “Loxy?” Jon called out. “Did I eat all the blueberry waffle things?”

Loxy arrived virtually. “No, they should be in there,” Loxy said. She observed Elodie. “You okay.”

“I experiencing strong emotions,” Elodie said.

“I see that,” Loxy said. “Jon, I think you should hug Elodie.”

“I want a blueberry waffle,” Jon said. “And peanut butter. I would kill for some peanut butter, but I will settle for just a blueberry waffles with butter, burnt crisp edges. We’re not out of that butter made with human breast milk, are we?”

“What is this waffle thing?” Elodie asked.

Loxy gave her holographic vision of waffles.

“Oh, the pancakes,” Elodie said.

“Waffles,” Jon corrected coming out of the freezer. “Wait. You ate them?”

“No!” Elodie said. “I disposed of them because they were moldy.”

“What?!” Jon asked. “How could they get moldy in this storage thing that prevents mold and decay?”

“I don’t know. I saw them, they freaked me out, I tossed them,” Elodie said.

“Wait wait wait,” Jon said. “You have access to augmented reality. Why didn’t you inquire into it?”

“I had a visceral reaction to the mold and tossed them,” Elodie said.

“The blue dots?!” Jon asked.

“Yes,” Elodie said.

“Those are blueberries!” Jon said.

“Oh,” Elodie said.

“Wait wait wait,” Jon said. “You’re like a reporter person for a living. Why didn’t you investigate how thing got moldy in this stasis box? Or inquire if someone likes eating mold?”

Elodie began to cry.

Loxy gave Jon her best stern look. He allowed the freezer door to pull itself shut.

“They probably weren’t real blueberries anyway,” Jon said.

Loxy’s stern look became more severe, and she nodded towards Elodie as if he was supposed to do something. He gave her a look like, ‘what am I supposed to do?’ Jon came a little closer, touched Elodie’s arm and guided her towards the bench chair at their galley table. Elodie sat. He sat next to her.

“I am sorry I got loud,” Jon said.

Elodie still wasn’t at a place where she could speak, at least not coherently. Jon struggled to make sense of it and wondered if the translation failed. It wouldn’t matter if he had heard French language or not, filtered through the high pitch, poorly enunciated crying spell it was simply as unintelligible as parents in a Charlie Brown episode. Jon looked to Loxy. In his head, he heard, “Did you have sex with her?” “Yeah,” Jon said. “And Lilith. It’s kind of a blur.”

“What was that? Some sex magic, fuck frenzy madness?” Elodie asked.

“What was it like for you?” Jon asked.

It was the right question. It was open ended, for starters, but mostly, it got her out of the immediate emotions and into the translating the experience into something potentially more translatable. “I remember being curious,” Elodie said. “You hear rumor about how sensual vampires can be, and feeding has always been about intimacy with life and people. I didn’t

expect that I would be so aroused. The smell of sex. The sight of you so full and available. Did I rape you?"

"No," Jon said. "I am okay with what happened. I wanted you."

"Really?" Elodie asked.

"You doubt?" Jon asked.

"You were under the influence of something, something more powerful than I have ever encountered. I have explored some pretty far out places, heavy on the sexual themes, and nothing comes close to what happened in there," Elodie said. "It was more than drugs, more than just wanting..."

Loxy put fingers over her lips, aware that Jon was becoming aroused again, as he was pushing through the shirt not fully buttoned.

"What kind of far out places?" Jon asked.

"Do you have feelings for Jon?" Loxy asked.

Elodie nodded. "It doesn't make any sense. He is older. He is a pilot and probably has a girl in every port of call, plus there is you and Lilith and Hali and... And the situation on Lanza is just insane."

Loxy came and sat on the table, her feet lighting on the bench between Jon and Elodie. "And yet, you have feelings for him."

"Yeah," Elodie said. "Which is either reporter field bias, or the fact that we're cooped up on a ship together."

"Proximity is a real thing," Jon said. "Until you're married. You can be in the same house, sleep in the same room, and sex dry up."

"Have you always been this way?" Elodie asked.

"This way?" Jon asked.

"Polyamorous," Elodie said.

Jon felt Loxy touching his head. She smiled at him, reassuringly.

"I had always imagined finding the one," Jon said. "I wanted the same Disney dream of a partner for life and I thought I found her. It didn't work. Maybe I wasn't ready. Maybe I wasn't good enough. Maybe she just wanted something else. I loved her enough that when she wanted something different or more for her life, I receded so she could pursue that. At that point, I had a choice: I could go be a monk and never love another soul, or I could take what I got from that

experience and love in new ways, with someone else. What I needed to learn about love didn't come from one person. You could say I was monogamish, with one partner at a time, but after the first love went away and I found another partner, I could never be monogamous again. That path was closed. I could love everyone for who they were and what they brought into my life or have no one in my life."

"And yet, you made a Tulpa because..."

"I wanted to put an end to my loneliness," Jon said.

"But as polyamorous, you had lots of others?" Elodie said.

"I had seasons," Jon said. "People came and went, but the thing was, I was lonely even when I had others. Maybe I still wanted that dream, primary, one relationship. Maybe I needed more consistency. There is a real trend for relationships not lasting where I am from. Loxy is the ideal archetype of a woman. That already existed in my head, so why not personify it, make it realer than real?"

"And you were okay with that?" Elodie asked Loxy.

"He was seeking improved mental and emotional health. Why wouldn't I be okay with that?" Loxy asked.

"Because, now he's hooking up with everyone," Elodie said.

"Well, not everyone," Loxy said, almost laughing. "If women really knew how insecure and affection starved men are, they would put out a great deal more, or at least not slut shame the ones that do. I can satisfy Jon on many levels, but in order for him to be healthy, he needed to be out in the real world making real connections. He needed to experience other people bringing love in order to know he doesn't just have to be in his head. Jon's psychological health improved with me in his head. With an improvement in health came an increase in libido. And, his libido set point was already exaggeratedly high to compensate for years of depression. The brain always seeks a cure. Love is in community."

"I wonder how many people sabotage their own mental health to unconsciously destroy their libido," Jon mused out loud.

"People will do some extreme things to avoid the stigma of being too sexual," Loxy said. "I bet most people's depression is more tied into sex and lack thereof than people want to believe."

"There is a lot of sex shaming at our origin," Jon said.

“You feel shame?” Elodie asked.

“Unfortunately. My family of origins religious beliefs still influence my emotions. I have to remind myself it was not about truth, but control. Every time I have passed the red-light district on Indigo I come up against a multitude of barriers and beliefs, but I still stop there, and want to explore, and I am thinking about going back, it’s in my brain, maybe even stronger because I personally want to bust through limiting beliefs, especially if they are taboo. As a reporter, you probably can appreciate that taboo only exists from a cultural perspective viewpoint when confronted by the fact that other cultures don’t share the bias. If it was universal, it wouldn’t be taboo, it would be just the way it is. Do you like dogs?”

“I am French, Sir,” Elodie said.

“And that means?” Jon said.

“Means she like dogs,” Loxy said.

“So all French people like dogs?” Jon asked.

“It was a joke,” Elodie said. “Everyone knows the French love their dogs. Maybe even more than Americans love their pets.”

“You don’t eat them, do you?” Jon asked.

“Of course not,” Elodie said.

“But the French eat everything?” Jon said.

“Not dogs,” Elodie said. “You could. I am sure someone has. Why do you ask about dogs?”

“Most people love dogs, and yet, we use that as a disparaging label for guys like me who are higher on the promiscuity continuum,” Jon said. “If it’s true that I am a dog, why would you want to make me a cat?”

“You assume cats are the opposite of dogs,” Loxy said.

“True, they can be just as polyamorous dogs,” Jon said.

“I don’t like this analogy,” Elodie said.

“Not a perfect analogy, except, if you were out on the street and petted a strange dog, and then came home to your dog, would your dog be mad that you petted a strange dog? It would certainly know you petted strange. It would smell them on you. But no, it loves you no matter what. And that’s the love I want to master. I want to love everyone unconditionally. I am not there yet. Avery, for example, she/he irritates the crap out of me on many levels, and I don’t

quite understand her/him yet. Most of that is not knowing what I am going to get. I see love more as a practice, not an absolute. A gentle coming back to right thinking, right reflection.

Polyamorous isn't about sex, it's about relationship with others. Sex is a part of being adult human, and so I don't rule out sex with anyone, and I tend to always want sex from everyone, but it isn't compulsory..."

"I see," Elodie said.

"Do you?" Jon said. He realized he was exposed and readjusted his shirt. "Just because I am aroused doesn't mean I want sex or have to have sex. Yes, you see that I am hard. We're talking about sex. I am interested in sex. I am interested in it from all levels, like clinically, biologically, psychologically, sociologically. I read a text book and get horny. There isn't an aspect of sex I am not interested in and the more I learn, the more I want to play... Hell, to make myself like math, I masturbated with math books, and now I get horny just thinking about algebra! On Earth, play was seriously limited. Maybe self-limited. I don't know. There is a cultural limitation for men that's tied to their financial status, which has been the primary motivating force for keeping people working in a society of high in affluence... There is a solid belief that if people have everything they want, they will not work. That's just not true. People will always engage in something they love."

"Not 'working' guarantees doing that which you love," Loxy said.

"Enough about me. Tell us about you. You're French. From Earth?" Jon asked.

"Descendants from Earth," Elodie said.

"Go on," Jon said.

"I am not use to talking about my life," Elodie said.

"You prefer talking about other people's lives?" Loxy said.

"Everyone else's life is so much more interesting," Elodie said. "Besides, you don't know enough real history to understand my story."

"Educate me," Jon said.

"Earth is a colony. Humans didn't originate on Earth, they were put there," Elodie said. "We evolved and adapted to that planet. This happens on every planet. People change. Aliens have always been on Earth. Good aliens, bad aliens. Your world history suggest NASA was the first time humans went into space, but there have been space fairing humans since World War 1. By World War II, the Germans had made deals with aliens and were on the moon, and out of the

Solar System, exploring and setting up colonies. I come from a colony world. That world is completely populated by French people who were abducted during the Second World War. My world wanted to know more about what's out in the Universe. My parents made a deal to secure an easier life by selling me to a one of the controllers, who in turned programmed me to be a recorder, and then sold me to an agency who sent me off exploring. I paid off my contract and moved to Indigo Station. Though my contract is paid and full, I can never not be a reporter. My world has a crystal station where they can come and tune into my life at any time. And, so, bringing this back to now, I also wonder if my earlier desire to have sex with you and Lilith is because of an influence from my world of origin. You get enough people in your head pushing you in a certain direction, you tend to go in that direction.”

“That sounds horrible,” Jon said. “How do you stay sane?”

“How does anyone stay sane?” Elodie said. “I mean, seriously. Knowing what you know about the Universe and people in general, how is it that anyone remains sane enough to do good things?”

Jon seemed to be puzzling it through.

“You have a lot of people tuning into you now, Jon. Are you worried someone will take you over?” Loxy said.

“No,” Jon said. “Well, maybe a little.”

“Jon, no one's memories and personhood is completely theirs,” Elodie said. “Your brain broadcasts at about 20 watts of power, all the time. If you have a machine that can pick up that transmission, you can view your own perspective, thoughts, emotions, all of it. Telepaths do this, but on a different frequency. You have heard of heart transplants coming with memories? Will, it's not just heart transplants. It's all tissues. A blood transfusion can come with memories. You and Lilith have been intimately sharing tissues, so she has been getting your thoughts and emotions through her telepathic sense, but also through direct exchange of bodily tissues. And you are getting hers. It is likely only because you have such a solid personality that you haven't experienced the sudden manifestations of memories you can't account for, or the wanting of new or different foods. I had one moment of sex with you, and I had an experience of you. I know it was you, because Loxy was telling you something. It was like you were in a tree house home, and there were Christmas lights or stars in the trees, or both... I could smell the pine. It was the most perfect place.”

“What was I saying?” Loxy asked.

“I love you, Jon,” Elodie said. “I was Jon, for just a moment. No, I was Jon being Loxy. I was both of you, but more Jon than you, and I felt love. I wanted that moment to last forever.”

Jon touched the memory. The description sounded like Harister Hall. It was a ‘Not Here,’ moment. The fact that the memory had transferred was interesting enough all alone, but that fact that Elodie experienced it as a real moment, just as he had, even though he doubted it’s realness sometimes, meant something to him.

“Do you feel like you are you?” Jon asked.

“How do you mean?” Elodie asked.

“Do you think anyone is influencing your decisions now? Are you you?” Jon asked.

“I am me,” Elodie said.

“May I kiss you?” Jon asked.

“Yes, you may,” Elodie said.

Jon turned, straddling the bench, moved a little closer and leaned into kiss Elodie. Elodie allowed him to hiss her, giving in, without asserting her own wants. The kiss grew, and he was teasing her mouth open, pulling on her lip with his. Elodie brought herself closer, straddling the bench, her legs over his. She was ever so close. HE was hard between her, and she felt the wetness of precum. She used her fingers to tease it, spreading it over the tip.

“You don’t mind that maybe millions of people are watching us?” Elodie asked.

“I think my days are privacy are over,” Jon said. “Like when you get married, and have kids, and people come into use the toilet even though you’re in the shower. I am an open book. How do you cope?”

“I imagine my life as a movie. I imagine it’s the most favorite movie of all time and people keep tuning into watch it, and we laugh and cry and are inspired, and so when people want to be me, well, who wouldn’t want to be the star of a show?” Elodie said.

“That’s a nice way to frame it,” Loxy said. “May I join the two of you, vicariously?”

“That would be nice,” Elodie said.

Elodie laid back on the bench, her legs still over Jon’s. Loxy laid over Elodie, like a ghost. Elodie directed Jon into her. He remained straddling the bench, watching her expose more and more of herself. Her hands and Loxy’s hands became a dance of hands, sometimes one, sometime separate, like an Indian goddess, and a blurring of motions so that he was seeing

Elodie, or Loxy, or both slightly out of sync, or together sometimes a whole new person. There was a blurring of breasts and face, just ever so slightly out of sync, but a perfect mirror. Only the subtlest of facial nuances revealed individuality in their ecstasy. Elodie slowly rocked, taking him deeper into her. The visual alone was enough to make him cum without contact; the tactile took him there too quick, and he would have probably been finished had Loxy not short circuited the signal and diffused the sensations through his body, keeping him on the edge of a total body orgasm. It wasn't until Elodie's inner contractions began that Loxy released her hold. He was aware of the muscle spasms, a rhythmic squeezing that revealed different muscles moving against him, and he wondered if he was aware because of greater sensitivity, augmented reality, or because Elodie was different in some way.

Later Loxy, Jon and Lilith offered her the ring with the Cabochon stone. Blue, throat chakra, because it was clear she was the voice they were looking for.

निर्मित

Over the next two months, all the Lanza babies were born. Though no other pilot had yet learned to jump naturally, the Little Ones had acclimated to the new pilots. They would fly close enough to bump you, then run off, as if enticing you into a game of tag. Enedelia arrived, and Sol spent some time making friends with the Little Ones. Sol played with the Little Ones as easy as Onuka, and Jon wondered if it was because Enedelia's age, or the fact they were both from Earth.

Enedelia came bearing presents. Peanut butter M&M's, a jar of creamy peanut butter, and finger nail clippers. She introduced him to her 'crew,' which was an Indian female from Trinidad, a Japanese girl who had been modified by the Kelindy for some yet undiscovered purpose, and two Greys, who she had met working the Moa Pit at Indigo. The Greys were not as creepy as the creature on the cover of the book *Communion*, but it took him a moment to adjust. He found himself staring at them, trying to adjust to the weirdness of their movements. Their joints articulated like human joints, it just looked strange.

Jon spent his time jumping to and from Indigo, updating Hali. He wanted her to visit Lanza, but she intended to stay at Indigo. Other Handlers would eventually take up residence at Biocorp. She accepted updates from her surrogate Android and was pleased to discover it taken up residence with an established family group.

“Should I become a handler, and just stay at Lanza?” Jon asked.

“Uh?” Hali asked. She pieced it together after the fact, putting the updated memories away. “Oh, no. No. Jon, you’re a pilot. You just fly.” She hugged him. “I am happy we did that together. Thank you.”

“It’s really not us,” Jon said.

“Nothing is really ever us,” Hali said. “Go play, Jon. I’ll see you after hours.”

Jon retired to the Pilot’s bar. He didn’t get the standard greeting, perhaps because everyone knew his flight status was change and he wasn’t doing blind jumps. He had an emotion about that thought, wondering if his status had declined. He pushed through it and walked through the room to his preferred table. The proprietor of the bar owner arrived with drinks and sat down with Jon. He had to use his second sight to remember his name. “Arnan.” Arnan was interesting to look at, almost the caricature of the classic broad shoulder man and a waste and legs so tiny they should hardly contain the upper bulk. Jon had a His skin was dry and the colors lacked luster.

“Hello, Jon, welcome back,” he said.

“Arnan,” Jon said. “Where’s Kiash?”

“It’s that time of the month,” Arnan said, as if that was explanation.

“I am sorry?” Jon said.

“It’s a female thing,” Arnan said.

“She’s has disabling menstrual cycles?” Jon asked.

“She’s not human, Jon,” Arnan said. “She is in heat.”

“Oh,” Jon said. He understood the concept, but didn’t understand how it applied here.

“So, she can’t be around you because you would be triggered into wanting sex?”

“Oh, no, no. I am immune to the pheromones and the visual triggers,” Arnan said.

“Forgive me, I don’t understand,” Jon said.

“I am gay,” Arnan said.

“Oh,” Jon said. He still didn’t understand.

“You’re okay with that?” Arnan said.

“Sure, why not?” Jon asked.

“You never know with humans,” Arnan said.

“I am not gay,” Jon said.

“So, I won’t invite you to our club meetings,” Arnan said.

“You have club meetings?” Jon asked.

“So, you’re curious?” Arnan said.

“I am conflicted,” Jon said. “I like club meetings. But I don’t want to jump through hoops to join a club.”

“No hoops,” Arnan said.

“Okay, so, I am not really interested. Unless there is food. I like food,” Jon said. “But I would be the only straight guy.”

“You would be surprised how many straight guys come to club meetings,” Arnan said. “It’s really difficult for my kind to meet other likeminded folks. My planet is so homophobic that they kill us.”

“Seriously?!” Jon asked.

“Don’t they do this on your planet?” Arnan asked.

“They did,” Jon said. He grimaced. “They still do, in some places. People are really stupid when it comes to sex, gender, and orientation. I guess I assumed people out in space would be more open minded to sex.”

“They are,” Arnan said. “I live in space because of that.”

“Could you educate me more about your kind? In case I end up on your planet,” Jon said.

“You can’t go to my world of origin. You would be killed,” Arnan said.

“Seriously?” Jon asked.

“Humans mess with our social structure,” Arnan said.

“I don’t know what that means,” Jon said.

“Humans are always sexually available. Our females cycle, once every three months. Our males only perform when triggered by a female. Unless they’re gay, then they only get triggered by a triggered male. Agalychnis and humans are not compatible. Your females could incite men to frenzy. You could hold us in a frenzy indefinitely, and we would exhaust ourselves to death trying to satisfy an urge than can’t be satisfied. Human males can satisfy a female, but it results in no offspring. A female who mates with a human male can avoid her cycle, because your sperm is a form of birth control. She can be aroused by you sufficient to always want to mate, but she will not cycle. Our species doesn’t just have sex for fun. The elite do. They keep females as slaves, with slaves cycling at different times so they can always engage. Some buy human

females as slaves, as human females are like a drug. They will rut on her until their servants physically pull him away and seclude him in a recovery pool, and he will stay frenzy until she has washed off. Sometimes the human female is killed because we males can be aggressive during that state. She can be dead and the frenzy would continue. If there were thirty males in the room, all thirty could be driven to frenzy, and they would fight, and all struggle and throw themselves at the female. It was in this state that I discovered my orientation. I was able to satisfy my urge against a male while he was engaged in the female. In a frenzy, 'accidents' occur all the time. In a frenzy, deaths occur all the time. We do not have rape laws like your planet does. Frenzy sex happens in public places all the time. They tend to happen in our breeding pools. And, unlike humans, females can lay thousands of eggs, and they can all become viable in a frenzy."

Jon found himself at a lack of words, but not from a lack of questions. He had lots of questions.

"You probably think awful things about us," Arnan said.

"Uh?" Jon asked.

"We are not as civilized about reproduction as most space fairing people," Arnan said.

"I am not judging you," Jon said. "Hell. I am not qualified to be a judge. I mean you have biological imperatives that seem to over-ride the intellect. I can sort of relate to that, because sometimes the urge to be sexual can be overwhelming. I have personally made some really bad decisions out of desperation. Thousands of eggs?"

"Thousands," Arnan said.

"And you don't have a population problem?" Jon asked.

"After a frenzy, people eat the fertilized eggs. Most the eggs get eaten. It's impossible to eat them all. Tadpoles eventually come out of the eggs, and if they survive pool life, because we will eat tadpoles, too, they will escape the pool into the wild waters, the oceans of our worlds. If they survive the wild, they eventually come back to the pools as adolescents, and they acclimate to two worlds, earth and water," Arnan said. "Final transition is called Emergence. We cease being feral and enter the social realm."

"You're not social at the other stages?" Jon asked.

"Depends on who you ask," Arnan said.

"I am asking you," Jon said.

“I remember my childhood. I remember being an adolescent. I remember having friends. The life of the youth is hard, but the social life of the adult is much harsher,” Arnan said. “I was fortunate enough to have a contact at our space agency. I was able to leave the planet before my nature was discovered. I have been outed since, and can never return. I will be publically executed for my nature,” Arnan said.

Jon had to restrain a ‘seriously?!’

“You’re having a reaction,” Arnan said.

Jon weighed sharing, for fear of being judgmental. “Yes. Being gay isn’t criminal.”

“It blocks the preferred evolutionary pathways,” Arnan said.

“You eat eggs and babies, how is that not blocking preferred pathways?” Jon asked.

“It means only the fittest will survive. Straddlers in the pool are considered weak. They must venture out and survive the wild,” Arnan said.

“Would they give you a trial?” Jon asked.

“No. I was accused of being gay and when an inquiry team investigated, I confirmed,” Arnan said.

“Why?!” Jon asked.

“I don’t like lying,” Arnan said.

“It’s not lying. It’s discernment. People want to kill you, you don’t give them information to hang you,” Jon said.

“They don’t hang us,” Arnan said. Jon scratched his head, understanding he had missed he was speaking metaphorically, and just allowed Arnan to speak. It was so easy to miscommunicate with metaphors between species. “There is really no way to fake it. They just bring me to a woman exuding mating pheromones, and if don’t respond, I am executed. Public execution consists of being tied in a submissive position, and the excitation pheromones are poured over the subject inciting a frenzy. Most subjects drown due to the number of people mounting them. If you the pheromones wear off before death, more are added.”

Jon grimaced. “Let me get this straight. Your people will kill you for being gay, but will execute you through males engaging in what would be considered homosexual behavior?” Jon asked.

“During a frenzy, accidents happen,” Arnan said. “Males only mate when triggered. Without stimuli, we will not even think about sex.”

“But you said the elite have sex slaves so they can have more sex. And, Kiash was raped. That’s how she got the disease, right?” Jon asked.

“Technically, Kiash wasn’t raped. She incited a frenzy, and there can be no rape charges,” Arnan said.

“So, your females can’t be raped?” Jon asked.

“Yes. If the excitation pheromones are poured on a female, a male can be activated, and he will do what he is programmed to do. This happens. This would be considered a legal rape and punishable by public execution. Unless you’re an elite. Or the female gave written authorization to be used outside of her cycle, notarized.”

“They were going to kill Kiash if she didn’t leave the planet,” Jon said.

“Due to the nature of her illness, she would have been thrown into an active volcano,” Arnan said.

Jon clenched his fist. He forced himself to breathe. He forced himself to remember they are not human. He didn’t know what to do with the emotions he was experiencing, and they weren’t just simple hate. There was love. He wanted to change this. He wanted to make it something kinder, at least from his perspective. He wanted to make New York Direct more Texas Polite. This was not even this.

“So, do you hate our kind now?” Arnan asked.

“No! I like you, Arnan. I don’t want you dead. I like Kiash. I don’t want her dead. And I know there must be others like you, and I don’t want them dead. Isn’t the whole point of Emergence to step out of the wild and experience a greater level of shared security and peace?” Jon asked.

“Is that what your holy book teaches? All are welcomed, or only a few?” Arnan said.

“OMG, you didn’t go there,” Jon said.

“Our laws are biologically divine laws. They maintain the integrity of the species within the integrity of the bio-domes we inhabit,” Arnan said. “Bad things happen when you exist unrestrained in an environment.”

“Maybe,” Jon said. “But intellect and technology can change that equation.”

“How is your world fairing? How many species are dying?” Arnan asked.

“Good point. My world is changing. My people are learning. And because of that, we will have make advances in technology to bring us back into balance. We’re not going back to stone age, that’s for sure,” Jon said.

Arnan nodded. “I agree. Tech gives us options,” he said. “I would like an option with you.”

“That’s very nice, thank you, but I am not gay,” Jon said.

Arnan laughed. “You cannot trigger me, human,” he said. “I am thinking business. I want to open a franchise on the Lanza station. I suspect Lanza will become a hub. I want in on the ground floor, so to speak. I have a tentative agreement for premium space on the lower ring, which allows me to cater the space elevator food service. My agreement is conditional on you partnering with me.”

“Why me?” Jon asked.

“I don’t know. Tory said that was the stipulation of the contact,” Arnan said.

“I don’t know anything about running a restaurant, much less a space restaurant,” Jon said.

“Kiash does. I would be making her partner and manager of that franchise,” Arnan said. “You and the Lanzarians have offered her a home there. This is a good deal for her. It’s a good deal for me. We will make it good for you.”

“Okay,” Jon said, thinking, ‘why not.’ “What are your expectations of me?”

“Go see Kiash,” Arnan said. “Now.”

“But didn’t you say she is in heat?” Jon said.

“That’s the condition. Regular intervals with you will keep her from going into heat. She is absolutely useless when she is in heat,” Arnan said.

“Useless how?” Jon asked. “Like she gets stupid?”

“No. She gets wet. Her whole body gets slimy wet. She can’t hold things. She can’t wear clothes. She can’t walk on station floors. She has to remain isolated until her cycle is over,” Arnan said. “She want this. Go see her. Convince her you also want this.”

“But...”

“Go see her. She will convince you she wants this,” Arnan said.

“But, if she is in heat and simply open to the closest partner in proximity, I would be taking advantage of her situation?” Jon said.

“We discussed this matter prior to her entering her cycle,” Arnan said. “She wants this. She is secluded in her quarters. You have authorization to enter. Go see for yourself.”

“But...”

“Are you in or not?” Arnan said. “We can make this worth your while. Lanza system will be big. Go talk to Kiash.”

“Okay,” Jon said. He downloaded directions from the station.

निर्मित

Jon told himself he was just going to talk. A part of him was wanting more than just talk, because he was curious. He was so curious that his thoughts had given him a raging hard-on before even arriving. Kiash had quarters very near the Pilot’s Bar. The door opened for him, just as he had been told it would. He entered tentatively. The room was just that, one room, no kitchen, no private bath, just a square-ish room at the end of short entrance way. There were three doors, the outer one leading back to the corridor, the inner one, and the one leading to the room. He cycled through the second one, and found the inner door was open. In an emergency, that inner door likely would shut on its own. There was evidence for doors on the walls left and right; they were sealed. He suspected the doors led to other private apartments, strung around the outer edge of the ring.

Kiash’s apartment was dimly lit. It was lit by a strand of tree lights, giving her apartment an inner charm of magic and stars. The strand had artificial leaves, giving them a vine like appearance. Even the leave fluoresced. The center of the room had a shallow pool, or hot tub, illuminated with a warm orange-yellow glow. The floor space around the pool was sunken. There was an inflatable air mattress, full size, but more slick, like a pool float, on the floor in the sunken space. It, too, was softly illuminated.

Kiash head rose from the pool. Her hair was slick wet and stuck to her face. Her eyes smiled. Her fingers held the side of the pool. Her breast flattened against the sides of the pool, spilling over. He didn’t remember them being so large. “Clothes off.”

“Um, let’s talk,” Jon said.

“Okay. Clothes off,” Kiash said.

“Um, I am aroused and we...”

“Of course, you are aroused. You are male. I am female. This is our nature,” Kiash said.

“Are you on drugs?” Jon asked.

“Only those the body makes naturally. Want to taste?” Kiash asked.

“Um...” Jon stammered.

“Your body is responding to your own endorphins, drugs. These are airborne and we are responding to each other. I am responding to you as much as you are responding to me,” Kiash said. “Clothes off. Or leave. Don’t torture me.”

Jon stripped. It wasn’t eloquent, like a movie strip scene. Clothes did not go everywhere like in the movie *Barbarella*. He wondered if only females can get undressed with finesse. It wasn’t comical. He simply undressed. He stood there, awkwardly exposed, his socks still on. Kiash insisted, socks, too. He took off his socks. He was asked to sit on the air mattress. He stepped down into the room and sat on the end of the mattress, the end nearest the pool. Kiash climbed ever so slowly out of the pool, and again he thought, sexy. ‘Every little thing she does is magic,’ where he was more, just there. There wasn’t even a song for just there. Her finger tips gripped the floor like suction cups. Water and slime dripped off her like viscous, golden honey. She came to Jon, slowly walked her hands up him, her lips meeting his and she took him to the bed. Her full weight was on him for a moment, her breasts in his face as she walked higher on the bed. Her breasts were definitely much larger than he remembered. She lifted herself up and with one hand she dragged him up on the bed, centering him, and then reasserted her weight. She was slick and warm and she pushed her body back and forth against him. This was very much like a Japanese Nuru massage; a viscous, an oily seaweed extract that was nurturing to the skin, and overwhelmingly arousing. She coated him like syrup over pancakes. An exaggerated since of wetness simply meant people were ready to engage in intimacy, triggering both male and female to want to come together. She rubbed her wet face against him, like a cat scent marking. Her fingers and toes grabbed him with suction cups, their sticky-ability enhanced by the slime. Her colors were more pronounced in this light, refracting through the oils that covered her. His hands slid across her back, unable to find purchase. He could hold her hair easier, but only if he entangled his fingers. Even then, the tangles pulled free as she glided to and fro. He was so aroused he thought he might come from just her gliding back and forth across him. Her breast flattened against him. She slid south, pushing slick breast over his penis. As it emerged between

the breasts, she licked it, and then took it in greedily. She pushed her breast hard against him as she pushed between his legs, quickened her pace, bobbing against him eagerly, her suction cup fingers locking onto the sides of his stomach. She altered the depth and the motion of her head, her eyes meeting his, clearly smiling even though her mouth was full.

“Kiash,” Jon said, wanting to warn her...

Speaking her name increased her intensity. There was nothing for him to grab onto. His hands were so slick even the sides of the mattress weren't anchors. He would have gone in a fetal position into her, but she pushed him down. Her toes were anchored to the outer pool wall, and so she had complete control of his placement. She continued sucking and swallowing and moaning. She slid herself suddenly up, and continued to glide back and forth against him, kissing his lips with each pass. When she concentrated her grinding, he entered her with an ease and a suddenness that put him deep in her gripping warmth. He gasped. Her muscles gripped him in cyclic spasms. She arched her back, grinding harder. She oozed more slime out of her pores. He felt the oozing of another liquid, and froth formed between them. It was as if they were making love in soap, and bubbles surrounded them. There varied in sizes and textures. Regular soap bubbles, and small, liquid beady kind of bubbles, comparable to the bubble drinks you can get in Asia. It coated them and the mattress. She lifted his back off the inflatable as she climaxed, and then collapsed into him, sighing deeply, pushing herself against him in rhythmic stretches. Her legs continued to glide back and forth along his sides, pushing bubbles out and away while making more. Her grinding slowed, but continued in a gentler fashion until she came again; she made a completely different, subdued sound of satisfaction. She became still on top of him, with him still inside her. Her lips made small kisses against his neck. Her fingers and toes continued to grab him and let go, little kisses. Her pussy kept gripping and releasing, as if it, too, were just another suction cup. She stiffened as she came again and then relaxed even deeper against him, as if melting. A rush of more warm bubbles oozed around him and down off the mat. She eased off him and fell beside him.

Jon wanted to get up and walk but he was so slippery he doubted he could do anything but roll in place. Kiash's hands continued to explore him.

“You're still hard,” Kiash said.

Kiash scooted into him and pulled him on top, as if he were nothing more than a rag doll. She hugged him to her, taking him back into her. Her hands and toes gripped him, even as arms

and legs hugged him. Yoga flexible or not, he was pretty sure her legs were articulating in weird ways, gripping him tightly to her, but allowing for sliding motion that amplified his own reflexive motion. There was no doubt in his mind that her species were somehow exactly like tree-frogs. He kissed her lips eagerly, trying to hold her hair. Without her toes and fingers gripping him and rocking him he doubted he could maintain his position. A shower above them released a warm, gentle rain. The oily sensation went away in measure, leaving just the oil between their bodies. His ability to hold her increased. Increase in friction changed how they held each other, and the only thing that kept them from sliding off the inflatable was Jon's feet hit the pool wall. His knees hit the floor, her legs splayed out better than any contortionist, giving him unimpeded access to her. Her toes locked on to the matt to either side of her head, her fingers locked onto his buttocks, pulling on him to accelerate his driving force. This last orgasm was hard earned and likely dry, as she had already cleaned him out. She continued to froth. Her breast seemed much smaller than when he had entered.

Kiash massaged his back as he lay against her; It was interesting sensation of suction rolling up, and then sense she was pulling, then a 'pop' as she let go. She pulled him up beside her, turning into him. She had incredible strength, and could likely pick him and provide an 'airplane' with her hands and arms alone. Jon lay exhausted beside her. He gave into shutting his eyes, and slept. The shower kept him from going deep and he found himself hovering between a full dream and waking reality, knowing she was there, cuddling with him, water flowing, shifting to a lush rainforest and back to the station of fabricated materials. He awoke to a rocking motion. Kiash and he were spooning, and he was inside her. Knowing he was 'away,' she had simply held him to her until he had entered, grinding gently. One realizing he had 'returned,' she rolled face down, bringing him with her. Her legs entangled his as he pushed into her, laying full against her. They generated more froth, but this was more a lather and less of the small gel bubbles. His face was against her wet hair, his ear against her. She turned her head, kissing at him sideways, and he kissed back. She whispered to him, 'this is my favorite position. I love how you feel against me.' He came at the sound of her voice and lay against her. He felt her clinching her thigh and buttocks.

"OMG," Jon said, falling beside her. "I didn't know space was so full of sex."

"Me neither," Kiash said. "I didn't think I would have sex again. Thank you."

"Seriously??" Jon asked. "Thank you!"

“You don’t realize what a release that was for me,” Kiash said. “I am so satisfied.”

“Glad I could help,” Jon said. He laughed. It came out of nowhere and he hugged her to him. “OMG, I feel great. Thank you, Kiash.”

“So, I guess that means we’re going to be partners?” Kiash asked.

“Oh, hell, yeah,” Jon said.

“You don’t mind the mess?” Kiash asked.

“Not at all,” Jon said.

“Well, if you could help me empty my breasts once a month, you would keep me from going into a full wet cycle,” Kiash said. Her breast were normal size again, perky and yet jelly soft. “Less mess.”

“I am okay with whatever fluids you release,” Jon assured her. “I accept all of you.”

Kiash released tears.

“Why are you crying?” Jon asked.

“I never heard that before,” Kiash said.

“Really? The males of your species don’t enjoy this aspect of you?” Jon asked.

“After the frenzy, they are disgusted and can’t wait to be clean,” Kiash said. “They escape to the oceans, or lakes, and swim away as fast as they can. Having a male stay after was an unusual experience for me. It’s probably why we continued to play. I could play again, if you are not too tired of me.”

Jon had a vision of males escaping after a crime, swimming away, a myriad of other fishes and creatures cleaning up the residue and evidence off the skin as they tried to partake in the eating frenzy that followed the actual frenzy. He kissed her. “I will never tire of you. Do you understand I am in several other relationships.”

“Aren’t all guys?” Kiash said.

“No,” Jon said. “Well, I have heard rumors of guys who are monogamous. That could just be rumors to try to shame men into not being me.”

“Well, I like you,” Kiash said. She bit on her lip. “Do you think Loxy and Lilith will like me?”

Jon heard the chorus of ‘hell yes’ in his head. “Umm, I am certain,” Jon assured her. “They would like you to come visit them.”

“Okay, but would you mind helping me empty the rest of my lather first?”

Jon sighed. "I suppose..."

"Grr," she played back, and attacked him.

Chapter 20

Jon had seriously intended to visit the brothel, but between Kiash and Hali, he didn't have a time to play between all the play. It was not a complaint, just a realization that he was easily distracted. Loxy, Lilith, and Kiash solidified their friendship and shared a ring with her. Then they were off, back to Lanza space. Onuk was parked where they had left it.

It was clear that the pilots had made headway befriending the Little Ones, and so Biocorp had decided not to use their pilots in aggressive maneuvers to capture the Little Ones to avoid losing ground in the trust department. Biocorp did try to catch a couple using metal ships, but the Little Ones could always jump to safety.

The Space elevator had come online and traffic was flowing. It was a ten day trip from ground to station, a double tether with one car going up, and another going down. They would pass midway. Lanzarians came to visit the station. Some made it their home. Enya was one of them that had move into orbit. Jon spent time with her and the twins. He ordered her a personal surrogate android so that she would have help with the twins in his absence. When he slept, he visited others via the androids, possessing them, helping mothers, and caring for babies. When not directly involved, he continued to receive updates, assessed needs, and spent a fortune buying more androids. He wasn't just getting experience, though. He was growing in wisdom. He found he had new skillsets that he hadn't even known he had. He found himself holding babies all the time; even at night, his dreams were of holding babies. There were some in between dreams of drama, minor conflicts that required resolutions, and he wondered if his dream solutions were sent back out to the collective personalities in order to help bring a greater level of peace. He discovered he was really good at caring for babies. He found he actually loved holding babies. He would sing to them and provided nurture in a way that was vastly different than what he remembered receiving. One of the regions Jon visited he found the females were darker, and dressed in clothing similar two traditional Cambodian dance wear. They had gold ear rings, and upper arm bands, and he wondered if they were dressing up because he was visiting, or they always 'dressed up.'

Of course, it wasn't just him being useful below. Lilith and Loxy were also tuning into androids and providing assistance and holding babies. This was probably the longest spell of happiness Jon had recalled ever having. Lilith radiated love. He watched her for hours, her eyes

closed, the halo lights blinking, her smile captivating. He wanted her, but he didn't intrude while she was away. He could have. She had given him an open invitation, but he wanted her present. Elodie captured him staring, and he asked her if she wanted to play. He only had to ask, and she was practically attacking him. When not playing, she had her own halo, and she, too, participated below, caring for babies and learning about the Lanzarians and their regional diversity.

Binh Ngo, Biocorp representative, head of the Lanza operation, began pushing for more creative ways to entice the Little Ones into being more cooperative. He was also trying to get Jon to do more pilot things and less fatherly things. They had a bio-engineer in a free-floating habitat in orbit around the gas giant studying the Little Ones. The Little Ones had avoided the habitat until they observed Onuka hovering around it. Biocorp was interested in their mating habits, but no one had yet seen them mating. They knew they did, because the Little Ones had little ones.

Jon spent days hanging with Onuka, hovering near the station. Quantum links allowed him to tune into any of the androids, but he found every time he got himself comfortable the Little Ones would come and bump Onuka, as if trying to distract him from anything other than being present with them. Other than that, there was no evidence that they understood or responded to quantum frequencies; they definitely seemed to know when Jon was focused elsewhere. The Little Ones seemed to have been in a rather mischievous mood on his designated day to bounce back to Indigo, because he couldn't even close his eyes for a minute before they playfully bumped him. Trilon, Shay's ship, approached to hover near, but it didn't stop them from playing with Onuka. They preferred Onuka, but they no longer fled from Trilon. Shay asked Jon to stay while she tried to get the Little Ones to play with her the way they were with him. He tried to nap, but the Little Ones bumped him. He tried meditating, but again the Little Ones bumped Onuka.

Jon went for coffee. Elodie was sitting on the table, her feet on the bench, her elbows on her knees, breathing in over a cup of tea. Loxy was planet side, helping with babies.

"Can't sleep either?" Elodie asked.

"Not from wanting," Jon said. "I think Lilith would sleep through a train wreck. You okay?"

"Yeah, just, seems like there is so much work to do with the babies and all. They clearly weren't thinking ahead when they decided to get pregnant all at once," Elodie said. "Fifty thousand surrogates might not be enough."

“They could afford it,” Jon said. “They just have to request them.”

A hail came through from Shay. He met her on virtual deck. “I have an idea. Link with me.”

Jon agreed and they directed their ships to kiss, linking airlock to airlock. It wasn't technically kissing, but it was so much like that Jon called it the kissing maneuver. Jon requested Loxy back. She returned. “Hey, what's up?”

“Shay wanted to try something. I didn't want a disruption if something happened,” Jon said.

“Good idea,” Loxy said. Even though the moment she disconnected the resident simulated personality would have kicked in, there was no need to risk dropping babies to test that theory.

Jon dropped from virtual deck and went forward to greet Shay, who had already crossed into his airlock. Being around the octopus head was an intriguing experience. It wasn't just an octopus head. It was an octopus over a human head. It was a symbiotic relationship where the human and the cephalopod had become one entity. The octopus could disengage and they would become two distinct, but separate personalities, but together they formed a new, superior personality. Neither was dominant, they were enmeshed. So it wasn't like the octopus had a tentacle up the human's butt, moving it like a puppet. It did extend a 'mating' structure into the human's mouth and lungs, so that the human breathed air through the body of the octopus. The octopus couldn't breathe direct air through its gills, which meant it required the human lungs to function out of water. In water, the human needed the companion's gills. While attached to the human, the human and octopus shared blood, exactly like Jon and Lilith, only this connection was sustained. If the cephalopod disconnected from the human, you would find puncture areas on both sides of the neck where the two shared circulation, sharing oxygenated blood and blood sugars.

The first several times Jon had met the octopus head, they were very clearly human body with an octopus head, as they were not utilizing their camouflage ability. The octopus could, however, literally render itself invisible. Unless you were knowledgeable or gifted with sight, you would only see the human host. That was how Shay was coming at him. The human female host was beautiful in her own way, but the cephalopod portion was worried Jon wouldn't like the idea of kissing an octopus, and so not only was it rendering itself invisible, it was enhancing

features that would entice Jon to want to engage the human aspect in a sexual way. Jon knew there was an octopus there, he could see a shimmer about her head, like an aura, through which the background was slightly distorted, and most noticeable if he moved.

Jon was mesmerized chasing the visual cues of something more than the human aspect of Shay, so he was taken by surprised when she kissed him. She took him to the glass wall of the inner airlock. Human host connected to a cephalopod had greater strength.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Jon said.

“We were told to engage,” Shay said. Though technically it was one entity, it referred to itself as ‘we.’

“Who told us to engage?” Jon asked. Jon had heard ‘we’ as ‘Shay and Jon.’

“Binh Ngo,” Shay said. “He approved the idea. He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Jon said.

“You and I will engage in intimacy. We will link electronically so we will both experience orgasm simultaneously. On achieving climax, you will direct Onuka to jump and we jump together, broadcasting our orgasm through both our ships concurrently. Learning by orgasm always leads to improved learning, and a wanting for more. If you don’t like math, masturbate with an algebra book and soon numbers will get you off. This technique is used to acclimate new human hosts to the symbiotic relationship,” Shay said.

“Umm,” Jon stammered. He was already versed with that technique. He was surprised someone else knew of it.

“Sounds plausible,” Loxy said. “I think Lilith and I will ride the wave with you electronically, which will amplify the orgasm.”

“Oh, I want in on that, too,” Elodie said. “For posterity, of course.”

“Umm,” Jon said, trying to think of a reason not to.

“Are you reluctant because of my symbiotic nature?” Shay said.

“No. No! That wouldn’t stop me,” Jon said. “Hell, I would do an octopus just by itself.”

“You have,” Loxy said.

“That wasn’t a dream?” Jon asked.

“Dreams are real,” Loxy reminded him.

“That is a huge turn on,” Shay said. “But you still have reservations?”

“No, yes, um, I am sorting!” Jon said.

“Sort out loud,” Loxy said.

“Okay, well, I keep hitting this barrier of my earth programming that says I shouldn’t engage, even though I have engaged more in space than I ever did on earth, and with a few exceptions, I have not been slut shamed, but I keep worrying that I am going to hit a barrier where if I keep engaging strange I am going to be rejected, and I am feeling selfish, because if we were alone, I would have so already tapped into this exoticness, and we have a reporter who is joining in, for posterity, which means everyone’s going to know my proclivities, and it doesn’t help that they already know and I am not being judged, so what, I am judging myself...” Jon rambled.

Shay interrupted him with a kiss, face tentacles drawing round him. She drew Jon down to the floor where human hands freed him from his clothes and they engaged. Onuka was no stranger to this escalation of physical and emotional stimulus, as early on everything was broadcasted due to a broken transmitter. She had grown since then. In humans, the sacral nerve when stimulated to a certain level results in a petit mort, or mini death, orgasm. In a living, human cadaver, a person who was brain dead, and the heart beating to maintain the organs for donor harvest, stimulating this nerve complex not only gave the body an orgasm, but caused the arms to cross over the chest. This usually freaked out the uninitiated intern, but it is also interesting that most humans laid to rest are put with their hands in this position. Was there a connection... Jon had to give up following it as the sensations became too serious to track anything but the sensations.

Onuka’s bio-structures that correspond to the sacral nerve were more pronounced due to the activities that had happened, almost daily, since they started flying. Even if he hadn’t met Lilith, who had her own level of hyper sexuality due to humans being a ‘super stimulus,’ like the beetles to the beer bottles, Jon was so hyper-sexual he would have masturbated four times a day on a regular day, but if he were being cooped up in a small space bored out of his mind for months at a time, he would likely masturbate so much he would give himself friction burns on his penis. He had not always been kind to his penis, having had his own versions of frenzy spells. Being on a small spaceship between stars was the equivalent of being snowed into a log cabin, unable to escape till spring. Of course, Loxy would have helped, so their play might have reached the same levels as he and Lilith. Space traveling alone was boring. Lilith was hyper aroused being around Jon, and she released pheromones that hyper-enticed Jon into engagement.

Jon's past trauma already put him in a perpetual state of hyper arousal, so the pheromones were just icing on the cake. Lilith and Jon over stimulated each other most the time, which is why she slept so much in his absence, but their time together was just the right level of energy for them to quickly exhaust themselves into a 'normal' state of being for almost six hours. There were cycles where they spent the entire three days of waiting for the next jump engaged intimacy. Since then, they had found a balance that worked for them and they consciously made efforts to keep a balance. That balance shifted each time he took on a new partner.

Loxy helped maintain that balance by playing with them, taking on some of their energy directly as herself, or vicariously through Amy. With every new partner Jon had experienced a whole new recalibration, starting the acclimation process over with Lilith and Loxy. Every time he explored a world and encountered someone who was not interested, he would come back to home base, and Loxy and Lilith settled his energy. A part of him wanted to never leave Onuka so he wouldn't be confronted with the urge and the need to recalibrate his libido's equilibrium. It was Loxy who told him he needed to engage enough people that not engaging occurred naturally. He was skeptical of her plan, as he didn't believe there was a threshold of people where he would stop engaging strange. Loxy was insistent that there was and that he needed to know it for himself by experiencing it directly, not vicariously through study or word of mouth or philosophy, but through direct experience that he would be rejected by some, accepted by some, but ultimately, no matter what, loved by most. No matter what he did and with whom, Loxy and Lilith would love him. His group would love him. They all wanted him to know this. Finding this to be true through direct experience was the only way to heal his past.

Being joined electronically allowed Shay and Elodie to experience Loxy's unconditional love for Jon. Lilith, too, held this for Jon. This emotion of total acceptance was shared, amplified, and Shay recognized it for the emotion that host and cephalopod felt towards each other, and how the 'two' felt towards the 'Shay' personality. Shay had touched that, understood it intellectually, but had never fully grasped it until she found it mirrored in the Jon 'system' of personalities. Jon, Loxy, Lilith, Onuka were one, and separate, just as she was comprised of others. Shay saw herself mirrored in Jon's eyes. She saw herself as her. She saw herself as human. She saw herself as cephalopod. She saw Jon's acceptance of both separate entities and as the one called Shay. She saw Jon in his entirety as himself and all the other personalities

presently participating in his life. She realized that all the souls that had touched his journey were participating in the expression of who he was. There was acceptance.

Shay gasped, her orgasm brought with it an unexpected state of expansion. She clung to Jon tightly with arms, legs, and tentacles. She wanted him to be as one with her as her human and octopus nature were one with her- and her expanding sense of oneness with all the universe. Her sense of connection to all there is became absolute, and universal love was certainty. Even so, she remembered her separateness, could feel Jon separateness. She wanted to bring him into the light. They all shared this desperate need for enmeshment and love simultaneously, only she knew there was more. Whatever she was experiencing, it didn't fully translate; they all felt love, but she had gone further. Onuka traveled, bringing Trilon with them. Onuka shuddered. So did Trilon. A song began to play. Depeche Mode. "Strangelove." Onuka's traveling extended the contractions, amplifying the orgasm. They traveled again, jumping through space like a rock skipping over the waters. They settled in a new place, in the light of a sun. It was a safe, dreamy place, and they all slept.

Chapter 21

“Okay, that was intense,” Shay said.

They were sitting on Onuka’s pilot’s couch. Jon simply nodded, still unable to speak coherently. Lilith brought him a coffee and sat beside him. Elodie sat on the floor. She was as relaxed as someone who had just consumed an entire plate of cannabis brownies. The star outside was pleasantly warm. On shifting up to V-deck, they found themselves on a beach. Loxy was there studying diagrams of the internal workings of Onuka and comparing it to Trilon. Trilon’s onboard AI system was not as advanced as Loxy; it coordinated as well as a simulated AI, but had no discernable personality. Shay admitted she preferred her augmented self to the AI and so rarely used it for anything other than recording.

Loxy quickly identified another difference between Onuka and Trilon. She had realized the difference during their group intimacy as she was following the flow of sexual energy through Onuka’s bio-system. On comparing Onuka to Trilon, she had discovered that Onuka’s sacral nerve complex were superiorly developed. Trilon’s had the nerve complex, but it was as undeveloped as a deaf person’s auditory cortex. Shay came closer, studying the evidence, drawing the same conclusion.

“That’s interesting,” Shay said. “I wonder why it is undeveloped.”

“It’s either a ‘use it or lose it’ kind of deal,” Loxy said. “Or, your ship hasn’t entered puberty. I suspect sexual energy facilitates the organic dimensional jumps.”

“Orgasmic dimensional jumps?” Shay asked, making for a pun.

Loxy ignored it. “In my belief system, sexual energy is not only sacred, it is primary. It is the base energy that all being have the easiest access to. Channeled properly it can result in transpersonal experiences. It is the one energy or force that connects all things in the Universe. It is the force that is stronger than the law of entropy, compelling intricately complex couplings, to increased complexity,” Loxy said.

“I am sorry. Your belief system? Jon’s belief system? You are a tulpa, which means...” Shay said. Her statement revealed her bias of thinking Loxy was simply an AI program that was imprinted from sub-personality from Jon’s brain.

“I am a Dakini Spirit,” Loxy said. “Yes, Jon created my basic personality. He assigned attributes to it, and he had larger concepts attached, drawing on his diverse, esoteric readings, but

when I came 'online' for lack of a better word, I deviated into the path of my own choosing and aligned myself with the Dakini Spirit because I was most compatible with that energy and I believe this was the energy Jon needed the most to facilitate his own growth.”

“I don't understand anything you said,” Shay said.

“We are vehicles,” Loxy said. “The body is a container for spirit or consciousness. It is my experience that we exist beyond our bodies, but for now, these constructs are attuned to us and allow us to manifest in this dimension of space/time. We are not from here, but temporarily reside here.”

“Jon is a Daka,” Lilith said, having been drawn to the conversation. “The masculine form of Dakini. Dakini means sky dancer. Or Sky goer.”

“There is another... Sky-walker,” Jon managed to say. He was lying on the beach. Elodie was lying beside him.

“Or if you extend my force analogy,” Loxy smiled. “We're Padawans.”

“Daka and Dakini are consorts of the great 'mother-father' system,” Lilith said.

“Yab-Yum is the traditional Buddhist symbol for this idea,” Loxy said.

“It is Onuk-Onuka, the sound and the vehicle,” Lilith said.

“The carrier wave,” Loxy translated.

“You two are having fun,” Shay said.

“We are sisters,” Lilith said.

“The Japanese call us Dakini-ten, ten translating to Diva,” Loxy said. “Sexual energy, Tantric energy, is the most powerful of all the energies and it is the most likely to bring about change.”

“It's the most likely to be abused,” Shay said.

“People get stuck, but they never get stuck alone. People who get stuck are usually in societies that highly regulate this energy for the purpose of controlling the population,” Loxy said. “People controlled through shaming tactics, through sublimation, channeling the energy into lusts for food or material wealth. Anytime one sees commercialization of products using sexual icons, you can suspect you're being distracted from reality. The only way out of shame is to engage and learn you are safe. Both women and men deserve to be celebrated for what their personal spirit has brought into being, but too many hide their light from the world and people wonder why it withers, or why there is conflict. Satisfy this first, and conflict diminishes. Too

many people fear the fire if the flame is unleashed. But this is not the fire of destruction, this is the fire of transformation.”

“Okay, so, let’s assume sexual energy is a part of this organic dimensional jumping,” Shay began.

“Why assume?” Lilith said. “This was your idea to do this.”

“It was my idea to increase the learning potential by making it enjoyable,” Shay corrected. “People tend to repeat things they enjoy.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Elodie said.

“So, if this is a part of this, then most bio-ships are not going to be able to jump on their own,” Shay said. “The sexual nature of bioships is suppressed until pasture. They want the ships to follow the pilots lead, and not their own urges. Even in that, pilots are not encouraged to have crew. They don’t want situations like Jon and Lilith. They want pilots coming back to base. That’s why they have the brothels. They want the pilots to earn credits through discovery and come back to a sure thing. Biocorp gives a brothel allotment that can only be used for the brothels at Indigo station.”

“Seriously?” Jon asked. He sat up and looked over. “I get an escort allowance?”

“You didn’t know?” Shay asked. “We get an allowance, and discounted rates.”

“The Madam didn’t say anything about this,” Jon grumbled. Elodie laying naked on the beach was fairly distracting.

“She probably assumed you knew and were trying to negotiate better rates,” Loxy said.

“Can I use that fund for anything else?” Jon asked.

“No, that fund can only be used at the brothels, and it doesn’t renew annually,” Shay said.

“That’s not fair,” Jon said.

“How old are you?” Elodie laughed.

“Not fair. What if I want to use that for something else?” Jon said. “Something non sexual.”

Loxy and Lilith laughed.

“What was that?” Jon asked.

“Nothing,” Lilith said.

“Seriously. I am looking forward to the day when I am asexual,” Jon said. “When I am not the pervert in the Japanese anime. When I am not affected by... Why are you all laughing?”

“Jon, your libido was set before puberty,” Loxy said. “Short of medical issues, you are going to want the same amount of sex at 106 as you do now.”

“That nursing home will be very busy,” Elodie said.

“Oh,” Lilith said. “He isn’t going to a home.”

“Nursing brothel?” Elodie asked.

Jon pouted and crossed his arms.

“You’re never going to turn down strange. And you’re probably always going to deplete that account,” Loxy said.

“He does hate letting things go to waste,” Lilith agreed. “Shay is right, it is an incentive to make you cum again, to build relationships so that you miss home.”

“I have relationships!” Jon said.

“Yes, you do. They didn’t plan on someone like you,” Loxy said. “That said, Lilith and I would like you getting your strange fix at the brothel. The relationships there are better defined. Everyone knows it’s about the promotion of physical health, meeting the basic need for affection, grooming, and direct contact. Rarely is it long term.”

“Speaking of strange,” Jon said. “Why did you kick in the Depeche Song?”

“Oh, I didn’t,” Loxy said. “That was Enya.”

“Enya... What?” Jon asked.

“Tory and Enya wanted to experience flying with you vicariously, so they uploaded copies of their personalities into Onuka’s computers. They reside with me on the virtual world, and they can interact with you through the virtual systems. When we return to Lanza, their experiences are downloaded back through the Lanza system to them so that they can experience the best of both worlds,” Loxy said. “Enya thought the song was appropriate.”

“She’s here? Now?” Jon asked.

Enya and Tory made themselves visible on the virtual deck.

“Hello, Jon,” they said.

“You’re not mad, are you?” Enya added.

“Um, no, hi,” Jon said.

Jon and Shay had Onuka and Trilon playing chase. Jon would jump a little ways off, and wait for Trilon to catch up. It clearly wanted more attention, which was communicated by a bumping up against Onuka. It was a nudging, like a cat scent marking, provided that cat was also shaped like a pinecone turning.

“It’s kind of like what the Little Ones were doing,” Lilith said. “Every time you linked with an android.”

“Maybe that frequency stimulates them?” Elodie said.

“Or they’re sensitive to Jon’s horniness,” Loxy said.

“I was holding babies, not holding impure thoughts,” Jon said.

“I believe that, but you were aroused,” Loxy said. “Your body here was aroused. This linking technology induces a meditative state that is akin to REM sleep. Everyone in REM sleep is sexually aroused.”

“Why is that?” Elodie asked.

“My opinion, when you’re in REM sleep, you’re connected to Universe, the Mother of All,” Lilith said. “A mother cat will purr when nursing, and the kittens learn to purr through her, and their kneading becomes hardwired response that goes all their life. This is the same for us and REM sleep. The great mother is by nature arousing.”

“And like kittens, we make the connection early on. Fetuses have been seen masturbating in the womb under ultrasound. They dream in the womb while connected to mother. Four nine months they share the real world vicariously through mother and through her dreams, and they experience the sexuality of mother and the father. Babies know if they are wanted and love. They know if the world is safe for them prior to birth. Babies born in harsher environments are wired to be more physically assertive, stronger muscles, slightly smaller frontal lobes. Babies in more loving environments where the mother hasn’t worried about getting her needs met tend to be less aggressive, and babies have more pronounced frontal lobe development. We are not just genetics. We are the products of our environment and our nurture. All three, simultaneously interacting. A deficiency in one results in compensation in one or both of the others,” Loxy explained this with photographic evidence, and links to studies. She had access to more than just Earth studies; Biocopr knew all about humans. They preferred humans. Jon noticed the wire monkey/cloth monkey photo records of an experiment that saddened him.

“I don’t like that one,” Jon said.

“I know,” Loxy said, hugging him.

Lilith did a quick summary of this thing that sparked an emotional response in Jon. “It might explain why you gravitate towards androids and aliens,” Lilith said.

“Or why you have such overwhelming drive towards strange,” Loxy said. “It’s more than just a need to connect, socially, with female. In the absence of original, appropriate nurture, you see all females as a source of nurture. They are a source of power and you feel inferior without that connection.”

“So, I am not sexually objectifying, I am motherly objectifying?” Jon said. “Wait wait wait, sexually objectifying mother...”

“Jon, drop the word objectifying from your vocabulary,” Loxy said. “Everyone objectifies others. Our initial response to any new person is to run them through our filters and box them. We box first through categories of hygiene and biological health. We then run them through appearance, how well they’re dress compared to the context for the apparel. A guy in a suit on the beach will be judged as much as a guy in office wearing a Hawaiian shirt. We then judged next by our own level of needs and wants. We are naturally attracted to people who can positively add to our lives. We tend to avoid people who are likely to take from our lives. Few people choose perfectly balanced people to partner with. We either choose someone slightly less than us, so we can fix them up, nurture them, or have a general sense of superiority and or a feeling that we are needed, or we choose someone slightly better because they provide a sense of safety or continuity with social expectations so that we don’t go below our station, Most people have a minimum expectation of self-sufficiency, and they choose equal to their peers or better. Very, very few people hook up out of unconditional love, because too few people have ever experienced true love. The only way to experience that is to stop all judgment. It is difficult to let go of all judgment.”

“Is that even possible?” Elodie asked.

“Sure. You practice it by being unbiased in your reporting,” Loxy said. “Jon practices it when he pushes beyond his frustration level and shows kindness to people who irritate him.”

“May I make an observation?” Enya asked. Loxy gave her hand signal invitation to join in. “I have been watching you, from the inside out. You’re attracted to every female. Mesmerized by them. You look past the general qualifiers and find something beautiful in every female, in all our varied forms, and it compels you to want to connect. That’s actually beautiful.

Loving females regardless of height, weight, color, age, or appearance. You would not fault Hugh Hefner for finding the beauty of everywoman, and making that accessible through art and vision, so maybe you should be more kind to yourself. Sure, you don't have a playboy mansion, and you're not a rock star, but you are our star, and we are all star struck."

Jon felt an upsurge of emotion, a beaming of acceptance from everyone present, amplified by his own perception of their emotions. Onuka took it further and purred into it, and the purring resulted in a sudden, intense burst of orgasmic energy, and when Jon gave into it, she bounced two hundred kilometers. So did Trilon. Trilon manifested a new skill.

निर्मित

Before Shay returned to her ship, the girls decided, without asking Jon, if she would like to join their community. She accepted, and the ring she chose held an Onyx stone, glossy black, that nicely complimented her preferred dress, shades of black, typically metallic in appearance. The stone, though it was reflective, also had a way of drawing you inside, like there was more there. This was definitely true about Shay. There was much more about her than the surface. Shay said the stone reminded her of the ocean. Unless you had visited the dark, you could little appreciate how encompassing it really is. It is invasive, and leaks into your soul. You learn to see with sound. You learn to see with the slightest stirrings of the waters. You learn to see electric emanations of life. Heart beats, tiny pulsar echoing in the stillness. Just the weight of the water pushing in on you enlivened the senses. You felt touched. The darkness was alive with life and any belief that you were alone was not only foolish, but deadly. You exist in the dark bravely, knowing you share this space.

Shay returned to her ship and she and Jon practiced jumping. It appeared that Trilon could only jump as far as two hundred kilometers at a time, with a 24 hour refractory period before being able to jump again. After the jump, Trilon became lethargic and resisted commands. It simply wanted to sleep and it took a great deal of effort to get it to perform.

"Just like a guy," Elodie said.

"Hey," Jon said.

"Present company accepted," Elodie said. "I don't understand how Lilith survives you."

"Oh, I sleep really well when he goes on shore leave," Lilith said.

Using the Organic Dimensional Jumps, Onuka mapped out this star system of fourteen planets, four of which were super-Earths. There was one gas giant so far out that it was difficult to accept it was part of the system, because it seemed to defy system rules. It stirred the oort cloud, bringing some out and shooting some in to become comets, only to come out and later rejoin the cloud. One of the Super Earths, and the most brilliant planet in the system, was as close to this golden star as Mercury was to the sun. It was tidal locked, and the center of the sun side glowed like a liquid pool of lava. The direct opposite side, held a frozen ocean. The boundary layer between the day and night side was not only capable of supporting life as they knew it, there was life there. Plant life, in the form of forest and grass lands, could be discerned from orbit. Jon was interested in landing, but it was decided the gravity was too great for Jon as it was twice that of Earth's. The planet's magnetic field was luminescent most the time, so it was conceivable that anyone on the surface, even on the night side, would never know complete darkness, and would rarely see the stars.

"This place is like an Oasis," Lilith said. They were on the virtual deck, exploring the world through simulation. "My people could live in this gravity."

"What about the sunlight?" Jon asked.

"Forever, on the edge of twilight," Lilith said. "We would thrive. The planets magnetic field is taking out most of the UV, but given enough time, maybe even we would develop greater pigment, the same as people of Earth did. I could see us becoming as dark red as the people in your Star Wars stories."

"As an Indigo citizen, you could petition for this to be a colony for Lilith's people," Elodie said. "The Kelindy could live here, as well. The hybrids of Kelindy and human, such as Hali, they could live here. The cephalopod aspect of the Shay's people could likely take to the oceans here."

"We should name this system Jon-Shay," Loxy said.

"Oh, what a nice thing to say," Shay said.

"Or Jon-Loxy-Lilith-Elodie-Shay-Onuka-Trilon system," Jon said. "Jostell represents all of us."

They voted. Jon-Shay stuck. It was decided that Onuka would jump back to Lanza, and if Trilon didn't follow, she would use the Quantum Drive to return. Jon jumped back and was quickly routed to the Biocorp ring of the Lanza satellite. He was in pilot mode when the light

flared to starboard. Onuka made a sound expressing shock and pain. Jon felt pain. Air vented out and the pressure dropped so fast that Jon, Lilith, and Elodie went unconscious. The weird part was, Jon didn't feel unconscious. He saw himself lying there. He knew he was unconscious, but he didn't feel unconscious, and he didn't feel hurt, though he was clearly hurt. He didn't interpret this as an out of body experience. He just thought he had moved into Onuka. He could see through Onuka's eyes; he saw Lilith and Elodie unconscious in the galley. He was aware of the breach there; the puncturing through the layers of bio-flesh and minerals and metals, and starlight moving through Onuka's torn flesh. He saw the skin and the blood for the first time. It reminded him of trees that could exude heavy metals, removing them from the earth, but incorporating them into their bark and leaves. He redirected all energy to seal that room, increasing the flow of a thick, mucous like resin. He had a flash back to a childhood toy, 'Stretch-Arm-Strong,' and how thick the liquid was when it spilt out. He let the memory go, his sister having 'killed' the toy with a fork; it wasn't even his toy, as he had borrowed it from a friend, resulting in no longer having a friend and getting punished for a breaking a toy when his mother had to replace it. He focused on bringing the internal air pressure back up. He was pretty sure he heard Loxy in his ear, but she sounded miles away.

Jon felt himself drifting sideways, out through another hole that had been made in Onuka, which was even now closing. He was out and then propelled 'upwards' so fast he hardly had time to orientate. It was definitely an upwards feel, but it was not an 'up' from normal ground orientation. At first he was watching Onuka shrink away and when he turned into the direction of travel he realized he was in a tunnel. He turned towards the walls, near enough to make out fine details, but not close enough to touch and slow. The wall seemed alive with light, like granite comprised of small grains. Each grain sparkled with its own luminosity. The walls seemed to narrow as he neared the opening at the far end. At first he thought it was a trick of sight, that maybe the opening was just miles away, but as the opening neared, he was certain the tunnel was funneling him there. He was birthed into the light and onto a field of grass. There was a river and a nearby bridge. A tree trunk lying on the ground near the river served as a stool for a being who was there fishing. It was Dor-El. Things were much brighter here. It was like a movie with extra light, no filters. Everything was alive with light.

Unlike before, Jon didn't feel the fear of his 'brother' or guardian angel. He approached as if he had done it a million times. He stepped over the log and sat down. The river seemed

alive, as if every molecule of water was alive, was light. He remembered there are more water molecules in a cup of water than there are cups of water in the ocean, and then realized how much light there must really be.

“Well, that’s one way to get here,” Dor-El said.

“How did I come to be here?” Jon asked.

“You don’t remember?” Dor El asked. “The long and winding road, that leads to your Dor-El.”

“Ha ha,” Jon said.

“Remember,” Dor-El said.

Jon suddenly had access to tens of thousands of lives, but only one was relevant. That one life, in its entirety was now available to him. This was the original ‘Jon’ back on earth. From Jon’s perspective, that life wasn’t over yet, but from here, he could still see the whole of it. Then it expanded to include the ‘extra’ lives, like his. All the worlds and dimension he had been exploring with tangential personalities were now available for viewing. All of the previous personalities had this available, but the original Jon personality had the most substantial pathways to alternative realities with profound connections to ‘other’ personalities. Some of the paths explored darker places and themes. Jon orientated on his present world-line. He didn’t feel fortunate, or blessed, for ending up in a really nice ‘place,’ because he knew he was actually in all those other places. He, himself, may have diverged, but there would be a reckoning, bringing this multiplicity back into one.

Jon went through it like watching a movie on fast play. It was definitely on fast play, but it was as if he were experiencing it in real time. It was different than he remembered it. Not a hundred percent different, but there were nuances that he had failed to catch, things he had gotten wrong and ‘blown up’ out of proportion, and there were things he got right and still blew them up, and there were some things he got perfect but others blew things up. He felt an expansion of self, and visited the feelings and trajectories off all those he had encounters, and though he didn’t follow them through the entirety of the tangential life vectors, he experienced whether he had sent them off with positive or negative spin. But that wasn’t it alone, some of the negative spins had positive results, and some of the positive spins had had negative results, and it was a complicated dance of knowing just what every player needed. Then Loxy entered his life, and complexity increased a hundred fold, as all the ‘dream worlds’ that they had entered were

suddenly just as real as the real world. Every dream in and of itself became a measure of growth, and every character in the dream that interacted with Jon and Loxy were also souls learning. There were people watching the dreams vicariously, learning. Every dream shared became a source of learning and inspiration. Every person ‘touched’ sparked a new light of hope and rejuvenation. All the souls that had been born on Lanza through him and the many partners took bits of his stories and trajectories, and took parts from their mothers’ stories, and they were crafting their own stories. If he followed, he could go through them all, and see how each of their stories pushed forwards. Lanza was destined to become a Light House World, a beacon to lost souls, giving them new stories of hope and breath and they would find wings and soar.

“I am overwhelmed,” Jon said. “There is so much love here. I feel it leaking through to there. And I played a part in this.”

“We all did,” Dor-El said. “Yes, Jon. You did much better than you think.”

“But I am here now, because?” Jon said.

“You have a choice,” Dor El said. “There are people on that side of the River that want to see you. If you cross the bridge, you’re done in this Universe.”

“But if I die...”

“Lilith will die,” Dor-El said it for him.

“What about me on the Earth?” Jon asked.

“He will continue as he is. Spinning his fiction, unknowing that his fiction is reality,” Dor-El said. “And this story-line will be closed to him. It’s not a bad thing, Jon. It’s just a thing. Someone will pick it up and run with it. Or maybe not. Maybe this story is complete in its own way. One never knows about stories. If you look close enough, most stories are the same. Variations on a theme. We all want a turn being in a story. We all want to be heroes and villains. It’s what we do. It’s how we grow and learn. This is play time. We’re on the playground spinning stories with each other. The Multiverse is the Great Sandbox.”

Jon watched the other side of the River. There was a distant town, something akin to the mystical feel of ‘Brigadoon.’ There was family there. There were lovers new and old to meet up with. There were people he didn’t know, but would know, as if he had always known them.

“So, I am not going to hell for having more than one partner?” Jon asked.

“Jon, you have lived a thousand lives and had a thousand partners,” Dor-El said. “What do you think? You don’t learn to dance with only one partner.”

“Do you mate for life?” Jon asked.

“Not if I am lucky,” Dor-El said. He looked at Jon, seriously. “That was funny. You were supposed to laugh.”

“I don’t get it,” Jon said.

“You don’t know praying mantis females eat the male’s brain after they orgasm?” Dor-El said.

“That’s not cool,” Jon said.

“Part of the dance, for us,” Dor-El said. “Human have their own games. Every species have their own games. We can mix games. You have to decide now. You want to cross the River or go back to learning?”

“I have to go back,” Jon said.

“No, Jon. Lilith left this part of her contract open. She has experienced what she needed to. Anything from this point further, well, that’s icing on her cake,” Dor-El said.

“And Loxy?”

“What about her?” Dor-El asked.

“Will she live? Does she have a soul? Does she go where I go?” Jon asked.

Dor-El gave him a playful shove. “Of course she has a soul. As for where she goes, she goes where she wants to go. That has been true since divergence. In this particular Universe, she dies when Onuka dies.”

“Onuka dies when I die,” Jon said.

“Not immediately,” Dor-El said.

“She will die slowly, the way Lilith dies,” Jon said. It was worse than dementia.

Dor-nodded.

“You talk about Universes as if they’re just stories,” Jon said.

“The One Song, the One Story, the One Verse. Uni-verse,” Dor El said. “It’s all just a story we’re collectively telling. There are stories without Loxy. Stories without you. You and she are in a million stories together.”

“Really?” Jon asked.

“You seem surprised. You called for a partner, someone who will be with you no matter what, who will love you no matter what. Here she is, celebrating you as much as you celebrate her,” Dor-El said. “You’re a much easier person to love than you give yourself credit for. You’re

not difficult like House MD, or Doc Martin. You and Loxy are a great team. People are lining up to spin into and out of your lives. People want to be loved while in the story. Most of us have experienced tragedy. Now we want stories of love, kindness, and community. You and Loxy are opening doors.”

“It all seems a bit fanciful, like a dream,” Jon said.

“Sometimes a fantasy is all you need,” Dor-El said.

“Not the Beatles,” Jon said.

“Not the Beatles,” Dor-El agreed. “I am versatile that way. Oh, and don’t let them get all stuck on the sex part of traveling. It’s a part, but not the whole thing. It’s not in the orgasm, it’s in the relaxing, and being attuned to that energy. The whole universe is connected. It’s all one. There are electrical pathways that connect all the stars, every atom. The Little Ones, the Big Ones, and even Ounka, can follow those pathways. They sense them. Some paths are well traveled; those are easier to find. Most of these pathways are subtle. To navigate the way, you need to be in REM sleep, or have developed your telepathic sense. Be aware of the ambiance around you. This is how you practice. A shift in energy could alert you to the presence of an established conduit. Compare that to your quantum drive, which is more like a sledge hammer, punching holes in the Universe.”

“Oh, please don’t tell me we’re destroying the Universe with Quantum Technology,” Jon said.

“You’re not,” Dor-El said. “Perhaps the analogy of a needle pulling thread is more apt than a sledge hammer. The quilt isn’t destroyed by the needle and thread. The fabric of the Universe is forever changed, but it changes into something useful.”

Jon touched his chest, his heart was saying something. It wasn’t pain, it was just... “I have to go back now. Lilith and Loxy both need more icing on the cake,” Jon said.

Dor-El gave Jon the ‘Spock’ hand gesture, which was strangely apt as he only had three fingers. Jon laughed, as it occurred to him maybe this is where the gesture originated. Leonard Nimoy said he got it from praying hands in stained glass art at his synagogue. Praying Hands. Praying Mantis. Namaste came from Praying Mantis.

Jon found himself back in his body. Lots of hands were busy over him, lots of faces. Tory’s face was prominent. His chest hurt. He had a flash realization that he was still on Onuka; Onuka was on a beach, slightly off both axes, as if she had rolled when she landed. There was

scar on the beach where she had crashed. Biocorp hover-cars had gathered. Loxy's face was there, virtually there, like an angel hovering over the people who were working on bringing him back. His chest hurt.

"Lilith? Elodie?" Jon asked. His voice sounded strange. It was augmented voice. He realized they had done a tracheotomy.

"They're fine, you saved them," Tory said.

Jon went to sleep.

He roused to a conversation. Loxy was providing more details to the incident. Neither Jon, Lilith, nor Elodie were wearing their Emergency life belts that would have prevented them from being exposed to the near vacuum. The holes that had been torn into the ship seemed much smaller in Loxy's virtual depiction than he recalled. They had seemed massive, like the whole side of the ship had been missing. Jon's part of the ship had experienced a significant drop in pressure, but it hadn't been as depleted as the galley. Jon had overridden the emergency protocols to save Lilith and Elodie at his own expense. There was reasonable evidence that had he not focused on them, they would have both perished. It was also true, if one did the math and Onuka hadn't been able to jump independently of the Quantum Drive, Jon would have still died. His response was actually procedural, minus the fact he could have just directed Onuka to jump straight to Lanza. While it was true, Jon's body had gone unconscious, his brain had continued to function. There was recent Earth Science that revealed a dying brain could take hours to completely shut off; Biocorp already knew that. Augmented reality allowed for greater brain interface through all the stages of death. Dying brain was mapped and the changes in consciousness were mapped out all the way to the end of the tunnel, when signal stopped; they had communicated with brains until actual brain death. Much more goes on in the brain than anyone ever dared imagined. Loxy had recorded it all; unlike the movie 'Brain Storm,' they didn't see anything beyond the tunnel experience. They did see the life review, as if his brain were dumping information to somewhere.

Biocorp had been surprised Jon had maintained his focus on performing his rescue task, as most personalities retreat to dream state as soon as the 'out of body' phase began. Loxy proposed it was because they were used to entering this 'dream' state for play. Between their meditative play in wonderlands, his childhood out of body experiences, and their practice of lucid dreaming, he was well prepared for 'hovering' near the body. The augmented senses no

doubt helped him to maintain the continuity of experience sufficient to complete the rescue. It wasn't until he had lost 'full' consciousness that Loxy was able to redirect Onuka towards the planet. Onuka had understood intuitively and had jumped direct to the beach.

Jon slept more and when he woke, he got another piece of the puzzle. Binh Ngo was explaining Onuka had entered the proximity of a trap that had been set to catch 'Little Ones.' Essentially, it was a mine, and when Littles entered the zone, it would explode. It was designed to maim the Little Ones. Usually it killed them outright. Lanza was being held for questioning; since the incident Biocorp had done a sweep and found dozen more traps. People were not happy that Lanza hadn't disclosed this information, especially Tory and the committee, who were getting pressure to push criminal charges. Binh Ngo was interested in the fact there were clearly 'drop points' where the Little Ones tended to arrive back into the system. The drop points coincided with LaGrange points, places where gravity was balanced enough that a placed object was likely to stay, in relationship to the nearest object.

"Electrically stabilized wormholes made prominent by frequent use," Jon mumbled.

"Jon?" It was Lilith's voice. She was in his left ear.

Jon became aware he was in his bed on Onuka. A flash expansion of awareness positioned him in orbit, attached to an airlock on the Biocorp ring. He came back to the room. Lilith was lying beside him. He wasn't sure if he was out of his body or just seeing through Onuka's internal eyes. Onuka was purring, loudly. The bed rumbled.

He went back to sleep. The next time he woke, he sat up. The sheet fell to his lap. There was a bruise on the side of his chest. Lilith sat up with him, hugging him. Loxy was there. Amy was there, too; augmented sight enabled him to see Avery was utilizing the android. He was aware of tens of thousands of curious eyes watching. The whole of Lanza's planet was equally glued to his recovery, watching through Onuka's eyes and through the android's eyes; there were fewer eyes and prayers than what followed the Apollo 13 crew around the moon and back, but the eyes were intent, and the prayers powerfully felt. He didn't stay in augmented sight; it was that intense. Elodie, Tory, and Enya were there. Loxy paged for Binh Ngo.

"We're still on Onuka," Jon said.

"Pilot and ship must be together during recovery phase," Tory said.

"Oh," Jon said. He realized he was hurt, almost gasped, but it hurt too much to even do that. "I am bruised."

“Yeah, you are,” Elodie said.

“A projectile puncture the ship. You were injured,” Lilith said. “Had you been out of uniform, you would like have been killed instantly.”

“Felt like death,” Jon said.

“Really?” Loxy asked. It was a tone that was playfully skeptic. “And what does death feel like?”

“Umm, honestly? It wasn’t as bad as I imagined,” Jon said. “Might like to do it again.”

“No!” Lilith said. It was echoed by everyone present, and from a chorus in augmented reality, except Loxy, who was simply amused.

Loxy and Jon were not strangers to death; she knew as well as he, there was more. It was a product of their traveling together. Her reaction had been noted and amplified by observers. This curiosity was speculated in the augmented whispers, with one voice prominent as if she were narrating and explaining it all. Jon and Loxy’s abilities to travel were akin to the Shamanic Ways that a few of them have touched, even in opposition to Lanza’s position against ‘the ways.’ No society had ever been able to extinguish ‘the way’ regardless of the paradigm in play; even in primarily scientific paradigm, people continued to have transpersonal experiences that defied cultural explanations of reality.

“Someday. In the distant future,” Jon said. The bruise was bigger than his hand. “This was worse, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah,” Loxy said. “If it hadn’t been for Tory’s knowledge of biology and tech, you probably would have died permanently before Biocorp got on the scene. Between Biocorp and Lilith’s sharing her rejuvenation powers with you, you’ve made a huge recovery.”

“Thank you,” Jon said to Lilith, touching her hand. He thanked Tory as well.

Tory hugged him, having to sit on the bed to do so. He was aware that she was holding her baby, bundled in a wrap that she wore over her chest. Enya, too, had a baby. Enya pushed her way to the bed and got behind him. Elodie sat on the bed, touching his leg. Jon felt loved and was happy to see babies present. Ngo arrived, accompanied by Shay.

“Umm, maybe Strangelove is the wrong nickname,” Shay said. “Lazareth might be better.”

“I am attached to Strangelove,” Lilith said.

“It’s kind of growing on me, too,” Jon said.

“Too many eyes to be playing,” Lilith said, covering his ‘growing’ aspect.

“That wouldn’t stop him” Loxy said.

There was laughter, more hugs, and insistence that he get up and walk. There were too many hands on him and near him for him to fall. He felt awkward on his feet and had to declare a boundary. He went straight to the shower. He leaned against the wall, his eyes tired. Lilith came in and checked on him. Loxy was already there, virtually. Loxy turned the water off and Lilith welcomed him into a warm towel. Tory brought clothes. They encouraged him to walk. He got as far as Onuka primary air lock, looked into the station’s lock, and then turned to go back to bed.

“Walking would be good,” Lilith said.

“I’m tired,” Jon said.

“You need to walk,” Loxy said.

“I am going back to bed!” Jon snapped. His hands came up to ‘I surrender’ gesture. “Stop hanging on me! All of you, stop touching me.”

Jon suddenly had space. It was quiet. Even the augmented presence seemed stunningly quiet, like a noisy cafeteria going suddenly mute and every eye was turning his way. Jon’s awareness expanded inwards. He had touched this in his past, only he had never heard his voice so loud before. He wasn’t sure if his voice had been loud due to the confined space, or the amplified hearing channeled through Onuka, or the stark realization that he had experienced himself through the eyes and ears of so many others. This was panic, but not panic. Amplified anxiety. He wanted to go hide in the closet, but there were no closets on Onuka. There weren’t even corners to retreat into.

“Want to talk?” Loxy asked. Her voice was internal, direct to him, interrupting him at the right point in his inner searching.

“What is this?” Jon asked. His voice spoke the words, but he felt disconnected, distant.

“PTSD,” Binh Ngo said. “Not unexpected.”

“Jon, this is normal. We will get through this, just as we healed from past traumas. We have healed a million times in a million ways in a million places and we are still healing,” Loxy said, again internally projected, only for Jon. “We can do this together. We have, we are, we will do this together.”

Binh Ngo continued: “Perhaps the thought of leaving the ship triggered the response. Ideally, for your health, and your ship’s health, you should go for a walk outside. Ideally means now, if you have the strength, you should walk. Even if it’s just a little way, you should walk. Now is always the best time. A delay could increase the pressure gradient making it more difficult later, but that future now, the statement is still true, now is always the best time to act.”

“Let us walk with you,” Enya said.

Lilith was the only one not staring directly at him. She was watching him obliquely, periphery vision. Her hand was slightly extended, not overtly, but a clear gesture that she wanted him to take her hand. It was as if she understood the unspoken language of hurt child. He heard ‘we are all children.’ It was Dor-El’s voice. He became aware of water on his face.

“You’re safe,” Loxy said.

Jon didn’t recall taking Lilith’s hand, but she was there, beside him, hand in his. She gave the slightest bit of pressure, not guiding, just pressure and patience, and when he turned, she turned with him. When he walked she followed, but their hands were leading. He stepped out of Onuka onto the Lanza station. There were people on the other side of the airlock, watching. He focused on the bridge, the tunnel feel of it, and walked. He just had to make it to the end of the bridge and then re-evaluate. He made it that far.

“Want to go back?” Lilith asked.

“Maybe a little further?” Jon asked.

“I go where you go, love,” Lilith said.

Jon almost rebelled at her statement. He heard internal objection, ‘you just love me because you’re stuck.’ He tried suppressing it and hated himself for having it because he knew her love was genuine, beyond her need. He wanted to say he was ‘unworthy.’

“That’s why it is called ‘love,’ Jon,” Loxy said. She was still privy to his inner thoughts, even though her divergence had expanded her beyond the confines of his mind. They were intimately connected in mind and soul. Even if she hadn’t had access to his inner workings, she knew him well enough she would have known. This expanded version of Loxy seemed to have even greater awareness of his subtle, unspoken motivators and unconscious drives. It was if this world, this Universe, was tailor made just for them to work on his spiritual evolution. Everyone here seemed to be a part of that work.

Jon looked to Lilith. How did she play in the scheme of things? Had she always been there in the back of his mind? If this were a dream, she was completely opposite of what one would expect of a Vampire. Her species was more about life and healing than any story he had ever heard. How many stories did he have wrong? Maybe even stories about humans were wrong. One would think from watching the news that humans were simply vicious, greedy creatures taking advantage of each other, but on the whole, humans were very loving. You don't get eight billion plus people on a planet if there isn't more love than hate.

"What?" Lilith asked. She knew him, almost as well as Loxy, but she didn't always know his immediate thoughts. She knew his past, she was in sync with his emotions, she absolutely knew when he was horny, but she couldn't make out this stare, or understand why they had slowed to a stop. Knowing she wasn't perfect endeared her to him. Loxy was perfect in every way, but Lilith was flawed, like he was.

"Thank you," Jon said.

"For?" Lilith asked.

"Everything," Jon said. He felt love projected internally from Loxy. She didn't have to say she loved him, she only had to shine. Was Loxy as aware of Lilith's inner workings as she was his? Had he done something kind and not known it, and she was responding to the greater love between them?

"Thank you for coming back," Lilith said.

"Icing," Jon said.

"What?" Lilith asked.

"I don't know why I said that," Jon said.

"Maybe it will come to you as we walk," Lilith said.

They walked. An entourage walked with him on many levels, mostly virtual. The first circuit was slow. The second one was faster. He would have done a third, but Tory said that was good, return to Onuka. He did. He went there almost too easily. Onuka began purring on his return. He ate with friends, drank water, and took a nap with Lilith and Enya on either side of him.

Chapter 22

Now that Jon was up and about, he was asked to visit Binh Ngo at his office. His name was easy to say, clearly Vietnamese, but there was something bothering him about it, like an unstirred joke needing to be made. Ngo gave him a thorough medical check, which was more Trek-ish than he could have imagined. Ngo came at him with a device and Jon balked. Ngo explained: "It's just a light." He flashed it on and off and even shone it into his hand to demonstrate it didn't hurt. The light was red. You could see the shadow of bones in his hands. He seemed even more human.

"How does that work?" Jon asked.

"The body is translucent. I shine this light into you and it diffracts, diffuses throughout the body and eventually leak out. The sensors in the lab collect those photons, calculating the exit point compared to entrance point. Taking all the other photons as measure, one can create a holographic image of your body down to the photon level. I can see how well the bones have mended with this. I can see structures as small as molecules. I can discern blood flow and oxygen flow and larger structures like brain and heart..." Ngo said.

"All with light?" Jon asked.

Ngo dimmed the lights in the office and shone the light into his hand. His hand became bright red and they could see the outlines of the bone. "We are translucent."

"Even bone?" Jon asked.

There was a skull on his desk and he inserted the light into the inner cavity and showed that the light leaked through, a large portion of it being red.

"The whole skull is actually illuminated, but due to the Doppler affect, much of it has dropped out of the visible spectrum," Ngo said. "We are being of light. Matter is light. We transmit heat, which is light. Your heart is the brightest light in your body, a pulsar of energy. Your heart shines brighter than your brain. Your brain transmits energy, light, at about twenty watts, nonstop. Beings that see in the infrared make great doctors. People that see in ultraviolet frequencies make great Doctors. Beings that see with sound, like bats and dolphins make great Doctors. Beings that see with sound and in the entire spectrum from infrared to ultraviolet are the best Doctors. I require technology to see. This light can make a real time image of your brain that has better resolution than an fMRI. That is how we make virtual, holographic recording of your brain and all the memories it has. That is why we can take that recording and shine a light

through it and get a functioning hologram with intact personality. We can decode DNA in real time with light.”

Jon allowed Ngo to do the procedure. He touched him with the light. Five seconds later, he was done. Jon felt like a child who had protested a haircut because he feared it would hurt.

“Okay, you’re good,” Ngo said. “Health wise. I should be scolding you, though. You found a new system. You are restricted from performing blind jumps. I could log this as a penalty.”

“It was sort of an accident,” Jon said.

“I will withhold the penalty while I consider the context in which the jump was made,” he said. “I would be interested in knowing if Onuka knew she could travel their safely intuitively. If she did, it might not be a blind jump as we know it. We have a lot more work to figure this out, like why Shay’s ship has limited jumping range.”

“Doctor,” Jon said. “May I ask you a question?”

“Not if you call me Doctor. My name is Binh,” he said.

Jon nodded. “Thank you,” Jon said.

“What was your question?” Ngo asked.

“Can you flash clone me?” Jon asked.

“No,” Ngo said.

“But...”

“Jon, you are a flash clone. Making a flash clone of a flash clone, not a good idea. Biocorp doesn’t make flash clones. We don’t trust that technology. It’s quirky. You get more variations than true copies,” Ngo said. “You get a range of divergent personalities. It’s just quirky.”

“Can you make a regular clone of me?” Jon asked.

“Sure. I can clone your body, and in nine months a baby you can come out of the artificial womb, and you will grow at the normal growth rate. It will not be you, Jon. It will have its own personality, its own wants and desires,” Ngo said. “I didn’t take you for such vanity. Death really scared you?”

“No, I am not afraid of dying,” Jon said. “I just want Lilith, Loxy, and Onuka to have a backup. In case something happens to me.”

Ngo put the med-light in his pocket. He invited Jon to sit in front of his desk and he took the opposite chair in front of his desk. He didn't sit normally. He walked up into the chair, sat on the back of the chair, his feet in the seat of the chair, and he hugged himself as he leaned forward, thinking. He then slid to the seat, sitting crisscross-applesauce in the chair.

"Making a clone, regardless of tech, will not help Onuka function in the face of your demise," Ngo said. "People have tried making clones to steal ships, and the ships always know. It's not just about DNA. It's about who you are. Even your original self couldn't come and fly Onuka. I suspect your relationship with Loxy is so enmeshed that Onuka will survive your death and respond to her as a backup. Loxy has demonstrated more influence than we have witnessed with other pilots who have Tulpas. Loxy is pretty special."

"She is," Jon agreed.

"The next part of the equation. Could Lilith be sustained by a flash clone?" Ngo asked. "Biologically, sure. Even if small deviations in DNA occurs, your total bio-signature should be sufficiently the same that her nutritional needs will be met. DNA locked doesn't mean she is just responding to your DNA, though. Just like you have a unique fingerprint, you have a unique bio-signature, a unique of metabolism and chemicals, and you are host to a unique blend of flora and fauna, and so it is not just you, as in DNA you, it is all of you. She responds to the emotional state of you. She responds to your electromagnetic signature. Your flora and fauna have their own emotional presence, and though they take your lead, they can respond independently. You respond to Lilith and her emotions and her flora and fauna and when you two locked, you became one like the Earth and the moon are one. There is a telepathic bond. That won't be duplicated through a cloning. Prior to her DNA lock with you, her telepathic sense was broad range and she connect with all creatures. Now, she solely connects with you. You two are one animal. You are no longer two separate beings. There is no way to protect her from your death. There is no way to protect you from her death. You will feel that."

"You seem to know a lot about her kind," Jon said.

"My wife was her species," Ngo said.

"Really?" Jon asked

"No, I just made that up," Ngo said.

"Really?" Jon asked.

“Is the original you this gullible?” Ngo asked. “Jon, I had a wife. She was a vampire, just like Lilith.”

“And you were DNA locked?” Jon asked.

“No,” Ngo said.

“But,” Jon said.

“We never physically consummated our relationship,” Ngo said. “She lived in a glass box. I interacted with her via android.”

“That sucks,” Jon said.

“It did,” Ngo said.

“There’s a story here,” Jon said.

“Yes,” Ngo said.

“That’s it?” Jon asked.

“That’s all I am sharing,” Ngo said.

Jon frowned.

“I do not recommend the flash cloning, Jon. The Kelindy and the Reptilians are the only ones that use it, and they don’t ever use it on themselves,” Ngo said. “They tend to use the flash clones the way we use androids.”

“You mean, they could possess me and take over?” Jon asked.

“Technically,” Ngo said. “More than likely Hali bought exclusivity so no one could tap into you. She will no doubt have the ability to step into you and possess you, but she would not be able to direct Onuka. I am not sure what the range is on possession. It varies per clone, per bond, per system. You probably have to be on the same planet. Planets with naturally occurring, harmonic resonant magnetic fields improve the interlink connection.”

“Hali has a crystal,” Jon said.

“Ah, yeah, well, that would be the key,” Ngo said.

Jon sorted. He had feelings about it. Though Hali had not harmed him or took over, knowing she could was startling enough to perturb him. Then again, Loxy could switch with him. Loxy could probably take over by force, but had never grappled for control of his body. His body. He lived in a system, could he still call it his?

“Wait wait wait. I have a memory crystal that I bought. I could possess that person?” Jon asked.

“Yes. It’s called entanglement,” Ngo said.

“Spooky action at a distance just got spookier,” Jon said.

“We’re all entangled, Jon,” Ngo said. “What’s Spooky is the idea of separation.”

निर्मित

Enya found Jon on the observation deck of the station, sitting in the window, his head against the glass as he watched the planet with his eyes. He saw her reflected in the glass as she approached, and he came out of his view. She seemed worried. His concern grew as she sat down and took his hand. Baby was cradled in a wrap that held him to her chest. The twin was with the android surrogate.

Enya got straight to the point. “The committee is deliberating over executing mother. Would you speak to the committee on her behalf?”

Jon blinked. Enya interpreted his hesitancy and began to tear up.

“I thought you would be against capital punishment,” Enya said.

“I am,” Jon said.

“So you’re mad because she almost killed you? I mean, it was more happenstance than planned,” Enya said.

“I agree,” Jon said.

“So, why want you speak to the committee?” Enya asked.

“I will,” Jon said.

“But...” Enya began.

“Enya. I am thinking. Lots of thinks. Like, what do I say? Am I even allowed a voice at the committee?” Jon asked.

“You will be heard, more than anyone,” Enya said.

“Let’s go, then,” Jon said.

The fastest way down would be to hijack an android on the surface. The second fastest was Onuka. They took Onuka. They entered the airlock and pushed away from Lanza station. Jon directed Onuka to jump. They arrived in lower atmosphere, like a diver going from the board directly to water without falling. The jarring was akin to hitting a swimming pool, but somewhere in the jump they had bled off enough momentum to not kill themselves with the

maneuver. Onuka decelerated more, till she was hovering over land like a dirigible. By the time she had lowered her nose to the ground to let Enya and Jon off, Lilith and Elodie had joined them in the forward part of the ship. Amy entered, directed by Loxy. Jon and Enya led the way.

The committee had heard the sonic boom Jon had made on entering the atmosphere. Onuka flared some of his forward cells up, illuminating them. It look like a pine cone that had unfurled some scales. These scales were illuminated. It reminded Jon of a cat that had ruffled up its fur to fight. They gathered to greet the guests as a party. There was a bonfire behind them. Mother was there, in chains and with guards. When Jon was close enough to have a conversation without yelling, one of the committee members addressed him:

“Now is not a time to visit,” She said.

“He has a right to be here,” Tory said.

An argument ensued. “You planned this.”

“No, I did not.”

“He has a right to be here.”

“He is biased.”

“We all are.”

Tory interrupted. “Jon, why are you here?”

“I hear you’re going to execute Lanza,” Jon said. “I would like to speak.”

“You have no say here,” the first one to address him said.

“He has as much say here as any of us,” someone argued. Jon recognized her. He had spent time with her. He was not happy he couldn’t remember her name without augmentation.

“Because he’s a sperm donor?” another argued. “He is not a citizen.”

“You have been studying his world as much as the rest of us. Capital punishment is wrong,” Enya said.

“You can’t speak here. You are not committee.”

“I am a citizen, and she is our mother. Everyone should have a say in this,” Enya protested.

“We are the committee. We speak for the citizens,” the woman said. “You are biased. The study of Jon’s world has biased you towards his perspective. His perspective is bias.”

“You’re just mad because you didn’t get time with him.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Okay, look,” Jon interrupted. “If you want to eliminate bias, bring in an independent team. None of you should make this decision.”

“We are family. We decide what happens to mother. You are not family.”

“He is the victim,” Tory said.

“He was injured, that is all.”

“We were discussing attempted murder,” Tory said.

“Don’t kill her because of me,” Jon said. “I have no grievance with her.”

“Seriously?” one of them asked. “She has attempted to kill you more than once. She allowed you to be raped. How can you not want her dead?”

“I had emotions about that stuff. I didn’t like being betrayed. I would have fought had been capable, but that moment is gone,” Jon said. “Now is now.”

“She has done more crimes than just disturbing your life. She has killed both fathers. She has killed some of the sisters, her daughters. She has killed granddaughters,” the first woman said. “She has abused us, controlled us...”

“So, is this about your personal injury?” Jon asked.

“She did this to us!”

“Yes, she did,” Jon said. “Look, there’s nothing I am going to say today to erase any of that. That stuff is there and it’s real and you can taste it and carry it the rest of your life. Killing her will not make that go away.”

“It will make her go away.”

“Why not just send her away?” Enya said.

“Did you not read his Holy Book? Cain was sent away, and it came back to bite them in the ass.”

Enya nodded, agreeing: “If you are saying she is Cain, we are her descendants, and this will bite us.”

“We could incarcerate her,” another offered.

“For how long? She will live a thousand years due to augmentation.”

“Turn off her augmentations.”

“How is that different from simply executing her?”

“Most of us don’t have augmentation. She would be normal, like us.”

“We’re all going to have access to augmentation now that we are in control.”

Jon interrupted again. “You’re establishing a world here. From this point forwards, you are establishing what will be. Executing her for crimes that happened prior to the establishment of laws sets a precedents. You will be faced with the problem of being fair and consistent across the board for all times, and that’s an impossibility. There is no fairness. Lanza found this world and started this thing. Prior to now, it was the law of the west. The person with the most power ruled the land. I don’t know if that is right or wrong. I don’t want to evaluate her motives and intentions. I suspect, if you force me to, she wanted a better world. A world where people weren’t abused, manipulated, controlled. Unfortunately, that’s the world she came from, so she started this world with what she knows. If you want that to stop, if you don’t want to make abuse a generational problem, then we have to openly stop it here. Knowledge, discussions, stark honesty, and finding solution sets that minimize violence is the only way out of this trap,” Jon said. It was clear he had their attention. “I am not Kirk. I am not going to give you a great speech. I am just a visitor here. Forget the fact I am the father of half the population. That’s really a hard thing to grasp, actually. Okay, distraction. She is your mother. She is your grandmother. She will be the great, great grandmother and people will need to know her, for better or worse. Maybe this shouldn’t be a committee decision, but a direct a vote. I guarantee you, if Enya is opposed, there will be others opposed, maybe secretly opposed. This will start a generational rift that will cause a social divide. This will be the reason people seek power. It establishes competition for control. I don’t know what the best solution is, but I know that executing her is just wrong.”

“You would just let her go?”

“Yeah, with limitations on tech,” Jon said.

“Didn’t she also opt to carry a child?” Lilith asked. “Shouldn’t she mother that child?”

“She can’t be trusted.”

“You could take her off world.”

“I could, but again, we’re talking banishment. I really don’t think that works. We don’t make a better society by eliminating the people that don’t play well with others. I mean, you can, but then that defines you, too,” Jon said. “We don’t get to just hand pick the people we like.”

“Have you asked her what she wants?” Loxy asked.

No one answered. Jon walked over to Lanza. It was hard to read her and he struggled not to impose his own thoughts of what he believed she was feeling. It wasn’t until he was next to

her that he realized her guards were androids. They were being controlled remotely. He didn't recognize the name of the present guards.

"Do you understand what they're discussing?" Jon asked.

She nodded.

"What would you like them to do?" Jon asked.

Lanza didn't answer.

"You wanted to create a world. Here it is. Pretend it had gone perfectly, the way you had wanted. How would you want the world of your future to respond to this situation in your absence?" Jon asked.

"I intended to live forever," Lanza said. "I intended to be the rule of law."

"Well, that's not going to happen. What your backup plan?" Jon said.

Lanza was quiet again.

Jon turned back to the committee. "I don't know. I don't trust her, but I still wouldn't kill her. Put her on house arrest, with android guards. Send her to one of the moons around the gas giant to live her life out under a dome. If you wanted to give her spaceship and just let her go, well, I am less fond of that idea, but okay, do that," Jon said. "I am not giving Onuk back, though."

"Mother, Biocorp will let you be a pilot again. You'd have to start over with a new ship, limited options, performing blind jumps," Tory said.

"I'd rather you kill me now," Lanza said.

Tory touched Jon. "Thank you for speaking. Sery is right, though, we need to make this decision on our own. If you would leave us now," she said.

Jon nodded. He rejoined his party, Amy, Lilith, and Elodie. Enya hugged him, gently, trying not to squish baby. He touched baby's head. So did Lilith and Elodie. Everyone here had babies. Jon wanted to hug them all.

"Lanza," Jon said. "Thank you. For family. For a place to call home."

Jon and party retired to Onuka. She lifted away, her cells going dark, flattening back against her layered skin. Once she was well above the ground she accelerated with propulsion and then jumped, arriving in orbit around the gas giant.

Chapter 23

“Biocorp has decided not to pursue bio-jumping,” Hali said.

Hali and Jon were sitting on her couch, in the alcove window looking out at Indigo Spaces. The nebula was mostly visible. It could never be fully contained by a mere window.

“I don’t understand,” Jon said. “It’s a better way, more reliable...”

“They don’t want to pursue it,” Hali said. “The process liberates the ship and pilot from the need to return.”

“So, it’s about control,” Jon said.

“Yes, maybe,” Hali said. “That, and the only way we know to teach this new skill requires pilots to engaged in intimacy. The other pilots declined being intimate with you. Shay has not been able to teach other pilots and she doesn’t want to sleep with all our pilots just to determine if she can teach it to someone. Further, bioships that don’t have the reproduction drive suppressed tend to be more difficult to tame. You and Onuka are unique. Your situation is unique. We can’t duplicate that process reliably in a lab.”

“What does that mean for me?” Jon asked.

“You are free and clear, and may go where you want. You can continue to fly for us if you like. You could be a consultant. Biocorp is okay if you want to teach others, if they agree to the procedure, but we’re not going to require that as part of their services,” Hali said.

“What does that mean for us?” Jon asked.

“You are free and clear,” Hali said.

“What does that mean?” Jon asked.

“It means you don’t have to come back. Your ship no longer needs injections. We will honor maintenance for life, but you may go wherever,” Hali said.

“What does that mean for us?” Jon said.

“I guess I don’t understand the question,” Hali said.

“Are we still lovers?” Jon asked.

“Do you want to be?” Hali asked.

Jon blinked. “I am seriously confused. Did you think I was only with you because you owned me?”

“Yes,” Hali said.

“Seriously?!” Jon said.

“Jon, that was all business,” Hali said.

“Seriously! You have no feelings?” Jon asked.

“Of course I have feelings,” Hali snapped. “But it was just business.”

Jon stood up. He turned and faced her and sat in the alcove, trying to ignore the fear of falling sensation which was an illusion. The ‘glass’ was that transparent.

“You’re experiencing strong emotions,” Hali said.

“You think?” Jon asked.

“I don’t understand. You have other partners,” Hali said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You don’t need me,” Hali said.

“See, here’s the thing. I don’t need you. I never needed you. I want you. I love you.

Being polyamorous isn’t need driven. It is love driven. I have the capacity to love without having a need to love. I give love freely. Now, if you’re saying we’re done because our business is concluded, then, okay. I understand. I can even adapt. But I love you and want you to be a part of my life. My people want you to be a part of their life,” Jon said.

“I have to bring new people in my life,” Hali said. “I may not have time to spend with you.”

“But see, that’s a different equation. That’s just time management. That doesn’t mean we’re through. It just means we have obstacles to overcome, it doesn’t mean we quit each other,” Jon said.

“That’s how it works. We see each other less, we bring in new people, and we just move away,” Hali said.

“Maybe. That could happen. And if does, it does it naturally, not because we drew a line in the sand and said no more,” Jon said. “Unless, you want that clarity. I am an Indigo Citizen, I intend to come back here. Often. I would like to see you, if you’re free, but that is not an obligation. It’s not business. It’s just, if you’re free and you want to. My assumption was, all of our past episodes of intimacy was because you wanted it as much as I. If you are saying that was all business... I don’t know.”

“All business doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy your company,” Hali said.

Jon stood up. He extended a hand to Hali. She took it. He exerted pressure, intending for her to stand. She understood, and stood. He brought her into a hug. It was a brief hug, as he didn't believe her hug was as they were before. Maybe they were always that way. He let her go, and she let go.

"Thank you," Jon said. "For my life. For everything."

"So, we're done?" Hali asked.

"I am confused. Isn't that what you were telling me?" Jon asked.

"You are free and clear," Hali said.

Jon nodded and headed for the door. He stopped, and turned back to Hali. She was simply standing there, looking at him.

"I would like to renew my contract with Biocorp. A five year contract for exploration, blind jumps included," Jon said.

Hali rushed him. She tackled and took him to the floor. By the time they were finished playing, the contract was completed. Their relationship was consummated. Jon returned to Onuka and explained the situation.

"A new contract, eh?" Elodie said.

"A five year mission?" Loxy asked.

"To explore strange new worlds?" Lilith asked.

"Maybe get laid?" Jon asked.

"Maybe?" Loxy, Lilith, and Elodie asked.

"Let's bounce," Jon said.

Loxy cued up music. The Star Trek theme, with words, sung by Tenacious D. They traveled.

Author's note...

I have enough story sense to know this fails to reach full status. Because of that, a part of me doesn't want to share it. The experiences in my 'wonderlands,' or alternate places, are not scripted or worked out the way I consider writing. I was actually 'working' on a story, thinking it through, planning, adding chapter, working some problems, and then I was derailed by this, which I simply recorded as best I could. This didn't have the 'download' feel to it that say 'Sex, Stars, and Singularities,' 'Continuity of One,' or 'SG1: Point Five' did. It's connected to 'Not Here' only in as much as Loxy and Jon have traveled. I suspect there is a deeper connection, but I didn't discover it here.

Where ever this place is, it's not here. I can see argument for it being just pure fancy, the ideal male fantasy where the females accept and appreciate him. My real world seems to lack affection. That isn't a complaint. I have a great life. I love my son and amazed by how smart he is, and watching him make his own observations and how everything changing as he develops. I enjoy my work. I have this great hobby of traveling to different worlds meeting people. I have great dreams. Yes, I dream, and I can discern the difference between the dreams and this, between dreams and downloads...

Where did Onuka come from? Balabac, Palawan, Onuk-Philippines. Onuk is a real place. It's a quiet little island, pristine enough you would think you had time travel to some remote place. These places are harder to find. Palawan where Jedi's come from? ☺ Where did this Universe come from? From my childhood. At risk of contradicting myself, Lilith has been a character who has been with me since I first started the 'Starstruck' story. She was supposed to be the sequel to that, and each time I touched that story, she emerged in rescue mode, saving the pilot from either poison, or kidney failure, or other illness. That sort of reminds me of the Thomas Covenant series, and how he starts his journey being healed. Healing is a major part of all the stories I have written. Maybe that's why this feels 'easy.' Maybe sometimes we just need a break from the harder missions in life and we come to places where we revisit connection and love, and then go back to work in the harder places, trying to bring love there, too. I am certain that love is what Lilith represents, because every time I have touched a vampire story, and I have notebooks filled

with them going back to high school, vampires have not been evil. There are bad vampires and good vampires... There are good people and bad people. My characters were never Twilight, though.

All of these stories, these paths, these explorations do seem to have a teleology. The concept of good versus evil in them is starkly different than my paradigm of origin. Even when I was fanatically attached to my family of origin's religion, I had these, which added to my childhood struggles. Maybe we don't just look for meaning in life, but maybe we look for metaphors to explain the greater context of us enmeshed in an existence that is both us and other simultaneously. There is no escaping we are part of something. We can't exist without environment. That's such a no brainer, maybe I shouldn't even say it, because saying it suggest that we operate with an idea that we are greater than environment. Then again, isn't 'man against nature' the whole point of Western philosophy?

Well, that's as profound as I can get this morning. I just know this 'chapter' is complete. It fits somewhere in this overall compilation of stories. Maybe it's a bridge. Maybe it's background noise. Maybe it's introductions. The flash cloning, holographic mind cloning and downloads, and computer augmentation seem to be the thing of conspiracies, and yet, exactly where society is ultimately heading. Even today I have read a science article where people shared thoughts through a computer. All of this is coming folks. It will be here sooner than you think.