

# Aztecs

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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She gave up her heart quite willingly.

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After the operation, Laenea Trevelyan lived through what seemed an immense time of semi-consciousness, drugged so she would not feel the pain, kept almost insensible while her healing began. Those who watched her did not know she would have preferred consciousness and an end to her uncertainty. So she slept, shallowly, drifting toward awareness, driven back, existing in a world of nightmare. Her dulled mind suspected danger but could do nothing to protect her. She had been forced too often to sleep through danger. She would have preferred the pain.

Once Laenea almost woke: she glimpsed the sterile white walls and ceiling, blurrily, slowly recognizing what she saw. The green glow of monitoring screens flowed across her shoulder, over the scratchy sheets. Taped down, needles scraped nerves in her arm. She became aware of sounds, and heard the rhythmic thud of a beating heart.

She tried to cry out in anger and despair. Her left hand was heavy, lethargic, insensitive to her commands, but she moved it. It crawled like a spider to her right wrist and fumbled at the needles and tubes.

Air shushed from the room as the door opened. A gentle voice and a gentle touch reproved her, increased the flow of sedative, and cruelly returned her to sleep.

A tear slid back from the corner of her eye and trickled into her hair as she reentered her nightmares, accompanied by the counterpoint of a basic human rhythm, the beating of a heart, that she had hoped never to hear again.

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Pastel light was Laenea's first assurance that she would live. It gave her no comfort. Intensive care was stark white, astringent in odor, but yellows and greens brightened this private room. The sedative wore off and she knew she would finally be allowed to wake. She did not fight the continuing drowsiness, but depression prevented anticipation of the return of her senses. She wanted only to live within her own mind, ignoring her body, ignoring failure. She did not even know what she would do in the future; perhaps she had none anymore.

Yet the world impinged on her as she grew bored with lying still and sweaty and self-pitying. She had never been able to do simply *nothing*. Stubbornly she kept her eyes closed, but she could not avoid the sounds, the vibrations, for they went through her body in waves, like shudders of cold and fear.

*This was my chance*, she thought. *But I knew I might fail. It could have been worse, or better: I might have died.*

She slid her hand up her body, from her stomach to her ribs, across the adhesive tape and bandages and the tip of the new scar between her breasts, to her throat. Her fingers rested at the corner of her jaw, just above the carotid artery.

She could not feel a pulse.

Pushing herself up abruptly, Laenea ignored sharp twinges of pain. The vibration of a heartbeat continued beneath her palms, but now she could tell that it did not come from her own body. The amplifier sat on the bedside table, sending out low frequency thuddings in a steady pattern. Laenea felt laughter bubbling up; she knew it would hurt and she did not care. She lifted the speaker: such a small thing, to cause her so much worry. Its cord ripped from the wall as she flung it across the room, and it smashed in the corner with a satisfying clatter.

She threw aside the stiff starched sheets; she rose, staggered, caught herself. Her breathing was coarse from fluid in her lungs. She coughed, caught her breath, coughed again. Time was a mystery, measured only by weakness: she thought the doctors fools, to force sleep into her, risk her to pneumonia, and play recorded hearts, instead of letting her wake and move and adjust to her new condition.

The tile pressed cool against her bare feet. Laenea walked slowly to a warm patch of sunshine, yellow on the butter-cream floor, and gazed out the window. The day was variegated, gray and golden. Clouds moved from the west across the mountains and the Sound while sunlight still spilled over the city. The shadows moved along the water, turning it from shattered silver to slate.

White from the heavy winter snowfall, the Olympic mountains lay between Laenea and the port. The approaching rain hid even the trails of spacecraft escaping the earth, and the bright glints of shuttles returning to their target in the sea. But she would see them soon. She laughed aloud, stretching against the soreness in her chest and the ache of her ribs, throwing back her tangled wavy hair. It tickled the back of her neck, her spine, in the gap between the hospital gown's ties.

Air moved past her as the door opened, as though the room were breathing. Laenea turned and faced the surgeon, a tiny, frail-looking woman with strength like steel wires. The doctor glanced at the shattered amplifier and shook her head.

"Was that necessary?"

"Yes," Laenea said. "For my peace of mind."

"It was here for your peace of mind."

"It has the opposite effect."

"I'll mention that in my report," the surgeon said. "They did it for the first pilots."

"The administrators are known for continuing bad advice."

The doctor laughed. "Well, Pilot, soon you can design your own environment."

"When?"

"Soon. I don't mean to be obscure-- I only decide if you can leave the hospital, not if you may. The scar tissue needs time to strengthen. Do you want to go already? I cracked your ribs rather thoroughly."

Laenea grinned. "I know." She was strapped up tight and straight, but she could feel each juncture of rib-end and cartilage.

"It will be a few days at least."

"How long has it been?"

"We kept you asleep almost three days."

"It seemed like weeks."

"Well... adjusting to all the changes at once could put you in shock."

"I'm an experiment," Laenea said. "All of us are. With experiments, you should experiment."

"Perhaps. But we would prefer to keep you with us." Her hair was short and iron gray, but when she smiled her face was that of a child. She had long, strong fingers, muscles and tendons sharply defined, nails pared short, good hands for doing any job. Laenea reached out, and they touched each others' wrists, quite gently.

"When I heard the heartbeat," Laenea said, "I thought you'd had to put me back to normal."

"It's meant to be a comforting sound."

"No one else ever complained?"

"Not quite so... strongly."

They would have been friends, if they had had time. But Laenea was impatient to progress, as she had been since her first transit, in which life passed without her awareness.

"When can I leave?" The hospital was one more place of stasis that she was anxious to escape.

"For now go back to bed. The morning's soon enough to talk about the future."

Laenea turned away without answering. The windows, the walls, the filtered air cut her off from the gray clouds and the city. Rain slipped down the glass. She did not want to sleep anymore.

"Pilot-- "

Laenea did not answer.

The doctor sighed. "Do something for me, Pilot."

Laenea shrugged.

"I want you to test your control."

Laenea acquiesced with sullen silence.

"Speed your heart up slowly, and pay attention to the results."

Laenea intensified the firing of the nerve.

"What do you feel?"

"Nothing," Laenea said, though the blood rushed through what had been her pulse points: temples, throat, wrists.

Beside her the surgeon frowned. "Increase a little more, but very slowly."

Laenea obeyed, responding to the abundant supply of oxygen to her brain. Bright lights flashed just behind her vision. Her head hurt in a streak above her right eye to the back of her skull. She felt high and excited. She turned away from the window. "Can't I leave now?"

The surgeon touched her arm at the wrist; Laenea almost laughed aloud at the idea of feeling for *her* pulse. The doctor led her to a chair by the window. "Sit down, Pilot." But Laenea felt she could climb the helix of her dizziness: she felt no need for rest.

"Sit down." The voice was whispery, soft sand slipping across stone. Laenea obeyed.

"Remember the rest of your training, Pilot. Sit back. Relax. Slow the pump. Expand the capillaries. Relax."

Laenea called back her biocontrol. For the first time she was conscious of a presence rather than an absence. Her pulse was gone, but in its place she felt the constant quiet hum of a perfectly balanced rotary machine. It pushed her blood through her body so efficiently that the pressure would destroy her, if she let it. She relaxed and slowed the pump, expanded and contracted the tiny arterial muscles, once, twice, again. The headache, the light-flashes, the ringing in her ears faded and ceased.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"That's better," the surgeon said. "Don't forget how that feels. You can't go at high speed very long, you'll turn your brain to cheese. You can feel fine for quite a while, you can feel intoxicated. But the hangover is more than I'd care to reckon with." She patted Laenea's hand. "We want to keep you here till we're sure you can regulate the machine. I don't like doing kidney transplants."

Laenea smiled. "I can control it." She began to induce a slow, arrhythmic change in the speed of the new pump, in her blood pressure. She found she could do it without thinking, as was necessary to balance the flow. "Can I have the ashes of my heart?"

"Not just yet. Let's be sure, first."

"I'm sure." Somewhere in the winding concrete labyrinth of the hospital, her heart still beat, bathed in warm saline and nutrient solution. As long as it existed, as long as it lived, Laenea would feel threatened in her ambitions. She could not be a pilot and remain a normal human being, with normal human rhythms. Her body still could reject the artificial heart; then she would be made normal again. If she could work at all she would have to remain a crew member, anesthetized and unaware from one end of every journey to the other. She did not think she could stand that any longer. "I'm sure. I won't be back."

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Tests and questions and examinations devoured several days in chunks and nibbles. Though she felt strong enough to walk, Laenea was pushed through the halls in a wheelchair. The boredom grew more and more wearing. The pains had faded, and Laenea saw only doctors and attendants and machines: her

friends would not come. This was a rite of passage she must survive alone and without guidance.

A day passed in which she did not even see the rain that passed, nor the sunset that was obscured by fog. She asked again when she could leave the hospital, but no one would answer. She allowed herself to become angry, but no one would respond.

Evening, back in her room: Laenea was wide awake. She lay in bed and slid her fingers across her collarbone to the sternum, along the shiny-red line of the tremendous scar. It was still tender, covered with translucent synthetic skin, crossed once just below her breasts with a wide band of adhesive tape to ease her cracked ribs.

The efficient new heart intrigued her. She forced herself consciously to slow its pace, then went through the exercise of constricting and dilating arteries and capillaries. Her biocontrol was excellent. It had to be, or she would not have been passed for surgery.

Slowing the pump should have produced a pleasant lethargy and eventual sleep, but adrenaline from her anger lingered and she did not want to rest. Nor did she want a sleeping pill: she would take no more drugs. Dreamless drug-sleep was the worst kind of all. Fear built up, undischarged by fantasy, producing a great and formless tension.

The twilight was the texture of gray watered silk, opaque and irregular. The hospital's pastels turned cold and mysterious. Laenea threw off the sheet. She was strong again; she was healed. She had undergone months of training, major surgery, and these final capping days of boredom to free herself completely from biological rhythms. There was no reason in the world why she should sleep, like others, when darkness fell.

A civilized hospital: her clothes were in the closet, not squirreled away in some locked room. She put on black pants, soft leather boots, and a shiny leather vest that laced up the front, leaving her arms and neck bare. The sharp tip of the scar was revealed at her throat and between the laces.

To avoid arguments, she waited until the corridor was deserted. Green paint, meant to be soothing, had gone flat and ugly with age. Her boots were silent on the resilient tile, but in the hollow shaft of the fire stairs the heels clattered against concrete, echoing past her and back. Her legs were tired when she reached bottom. She speeded the flow of blood.

Outside, mist obscured the stars. The moon, just risen, was full and haloed. In the hospital's traffic-eddy, streetlights spread Laenea's shadow out around her like the spokes of a wheel.

A rank of electric cars waited at the corner, tethered like horses in an old movie. She slid her credit key into a lock to release one painted like a turtle, an apt analogy. She got in and drove it toward the waterfront. The little beast rolled slowly along, its motor humming quietly on the flat, straining slightly in low gear on the steep downgrades. Laenea relaxed in the bucket seat and wished she were in a starship, but her imagination would not stretch quite that far. The control stick of a turtle could not become an information and control wall; and the city, while pleasant, was of unrelieved ordinariness compared to the places she had seen. She could not, of course, imagine transit, for it was beyond imagination. Language or mind was insufficient. Transit had never been described.

The waterfront was shabby, dirty, magnetic. Laenea knew she could find acquaintances nearby, but she did not want to stay in the city. She returned the turtle to a stanchion and retrieved her credit key to halt the tally against her account.

The night had grown cold; she noticed the change peripherally in the form of fog and condensation-slick cobblestones. The public market, ramshackle and shored up, littered here and there with wilted vegetables, was deserted. People passed as shadows.

A man moved up behind her while she was in the dim region between two streetlamps. "Hey," he said, "how about--" His tone was belligerent with inexperience or insecurity or fear. Looking down at him, surprised, Laenea laughed. "Poor fool--" He scuttled away like a crab. After a moment of vague pity and amusement, Laenea forgot him. She shivered. Her ears were ringing and her chest ached from the cold. Small shops nestled between bars and cheap restaurants. Laenea entered one for the warmth. It was very dim, darker than the street, high-ceilinged and deep, so narrow she could have touched both side walls by stretching out her arms. She did not. She hunched her shoulders and the ache receded slightly.

"May I help you?"

Like one of the indistinct masses in the back of the shop brought to life, a small ancient man appeared. He was dressed in shabby ill-matched clothes, part of his own wares: Laenea was in a pawnshop or secondhand clothing store. Hung up like trophies, feathers and wide hats and beads covered the walls. Laenea moved farther inside.

"Ah, Pilot," the old man said, "you honor me."

Laenea's delight was childish in its intensity. Only the surgeon had called her "pilot"; to the others in the hospital she had been merely another patient, more troublesome than most.

"It's cold by the water," she said. Some graciousness or apology was due, for she had no intention of buying anything.

"A coat? No, a cloak!" he exclaimed. "A cloak would be set off well by a person of your stature." He turned; his dark form disappeared among the piles and racks of clothes. Laenea saw bright beads and spangles, a quick flash of gold lame, and wondered uncharitably what dreadful theater costume he would choose. But the garment the small man drew out was dark. He held it up: a long swath of black, lined with scarlet. Laenea had planned to thank him and demur; despite herself she reached out. Velvet-silk outside and smooth satin-silk within caressed her fingers. The cloak had a single shoulder cape and a clasp of carved jet. Though heavy, it draped easily and gracefully. She slung it over her shoulders, and it flowed around her almost to her ankles.

"Exquisite," the shopkeeper said. He beckoned and she approached: a dim and pitted full-length mirror stood against the wall beyond him. Bronze patches marred its irregular silver face where the backing had peeled away. Laenea liked the way the cape looked. She folded its edges so the scarlet lining showed, so her throat and the upper curve of her breasts and the tip of the scar were exposed. She shook back her hair.

"Not quite exquisite," she said, smiling. She was too tall and big-boned for that kind of delicacy. She had a widow's peak and high cheekbones, but her jaw was strong and square. Her face laughed well but would not do for coyness.

"It does not please you." He sounded downcast. Laenea could not quite place his faint accent.

"It does," she said. "I'll take it."

He bowed her toward the front of the shop, and she took out her credit key.

"No, no, Pilot," he said. "Not that."

Laenea raised one eyebrow. A few shops on the waterfront accepted only cash, retaining an illicit flavor in a time when almost any activity was legal. But few even of those select establishments would refuse the credit of a crew member or a pilot. "I have no cash," Laenea said. She had not carried any for years, since once finding in various pockets three coins of metal, one of plastic, one of wood, a pleasingly atavistic animal claw (or excellent duplicate), and a boxed bit of organic matter that would have been forbidden on earth fifty years before. Laenea never expected to revisit at least three of the worlds the currency represented.

"Not cash," he said. "It is yours, Pilot. Only--" He glanced up; he looked her in the eyes for the first time. His eyes were very dark and deep, hopeful, expectant. "Only tell me, what is it like? What do you see?"

She pulled back, surprised. She knew people asked the question often. She had asked it herself, wordlessly after the first few times of silence and patient head-shakings. Pilots never answered. Machines could not answer, pilots could not answer. Or would not. The question was answerable only individually. Laenea felt sorry for the shopkeeper and started to say she had not yet been in transit awake, that she was new, that she had only traveled in the crew, drugged near death to stay alive. But, finally, she could not even say that. It was too easy; it would very nearly be a betrayal. It was an untrue truth. It implied she would tell him if she knew, while she did not know if she could or would. She shook her head, she smiled as gently as she could. "I'm sorry."

He nodded sadly. "I should not have asked."

"That's all right."

"I'm too old, you see. Too old for adventure. I came here so long ago... but the time, the time

disappeared. I never knew what happened. I've dreamed about it. Bad dreams."

"I understand. I was crew for ten years. We never knew what happened either."

"That would be worse, yes. Over and over again, no time between. But now you know."

"Pilots know," Laenea agreed. She handed him the credit key. Though he still tried to refuse it, she insisted on paying.

Hugging the cloak around her, Laenea stepped out into the fog. She fantasized that the shop would now disappear, like all legendary shops dispensing magic and cloaks of invisibility. But she did not look back, for everything a few paces away dissolved into grayness. In a small space around each low streetlamp, heat swirled the fog in wisps toward the sky.

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The midnight ferry chattered across the water, riding the waves on its loud cushion of air. Wrapped in her cloak, Laenea was anonymous. After the island stops, she was the only foot passenger left. With the food counters closed, the drivers on the vehicle deck remained in their trucks, napping or drinking coffee from thermoses. Laenea put her feet on the opposite bench, stretched, and gazed out the window into the darkness. Light from the ferry wavered across the tops of long low swells. Laenea could see both the water and her own reflection, very pale. After a while, she dozed.

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The spaceport was a huge, floating, artificial island, anchored far from shore. It gleamed in its own lights. The parabolic solar mirrors looked like the multiple compound eyes of a gigantic water insect. Except for the mirrors and the launching towers, the port's surface was nearly flat, few of its components rising more than a story or two. Tall structures would present sail-like faces to the northwest storms.

Beneath the platform, under a vibration-deadening lower layer, under the sea, lay the tripartite city. The roar of shuttles taking off and the scream of their return would drive mad anyone who remained on the surface. Thus the northwest spaceport was far out to sea, away from cities, yet a city in itself, self-protected within the underwater stabilizing shafts.

The ferry climbed a low ramp out of the water and settled onto the loading platform. The hum of electric trucks replaced the growl of huge fans. Laenea moved stiffly down the stairs. She was too tall to sleep comfortably on two-seat benches. Stopping for a moment by the gangway, watching the trucks roll past, she concentrated for a moment and felt the increase in her blood pressure. She could well understand how dangerous it might be, and how easily addictive the higher speed could become, driving her high until like a machine her body was burned out. But for now her energy began returning and the stiffness in her legs and back slowly seeped away.

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Except for the trucks, which purred off quickly around the island's perimeters and disappeared, the port was silent so late at night. The passenger shuttle waited empty on its central rail. When Laenea entered, it sensed her, slid its doors shut, and accelerated. A push-button command halted it above Stabilizer Three, which held quarantine, administration, and crew quarters. Laenea was feeling good, warm, and her vision was sparkling bright and clear. She let the velvet cloak flow back across her shoulders, no longer needing its protection. She was alight with the expectation of seeing her friends, in her new avatar.

The elevator led through the center of the stabilizer into the underwater city. Laenea rode it all the way to the bottom of the shaft, one of three that projected into the ocean far below the surface turbulence to hold the platform steady even through the most violent storms. The shafts maintained the island's flotation level as well, pumping sea water in or out of the ballast tanks when a shuttle took off or landed or a ferry crept on board.

The elevator doors opened into the foyer where a spiral staircase reached the lowest level, a bubble at the tip of the main shaft. The lounge was a comfortable cylindrical room, its walls all transparent, gazing out like a continuous eye into the deep sea. Floodlights cast a glow through the cold clear water, picking out the bright speedy forms of fish, large dark predators, scythe-mouthed sharks, the occasional graceful bow of a porpoise, the elegant black-and-white presence of a killer whale. As the radius of visibility increased, the light filtered through bluer and bluer, until finally, in violet, vague shapes eased back and forth with shy curiosity between dim illumination and complete darkness. The lounge, sculpted with plastic foam and carpeted, gave the illusion of being underwater, on the ocean floor itself, a part of the sea. It had not been built originally as a lounge for crew alone, but was taken over by unconscious agreement among the starship people. Outsiders were not rejected, but gently ignored. Feeling unwelcome, they soon departed. Journalists came infrequently, reacting to sensation or disaster. Human pilots had been a sensation, but Laenea was in the second pilot group; the novelty had worn away. She did not mind a bit.

Laenea took off her boots and left them by the stairwell. She recognized one of the other pairs: she would have been hard put not to recognize those boots after seeing them once. The scarlet leather was stupendously shined, embroidered with jewels, and inlaid with tiny liquid crystal-filled discs that changed color with the temperature. Laenea smiled. Crew members made up for the dead time of transit in many different ways; one was to overdo all other aspects of their lives, and the most flamboyant of that group was Minoru.

Walking barefoot in the deep carpet, between the hillocks and hollows of conversation pits, was like walking on the sea floor idealized. Laenea thought that the attraction of the lounge was its relation to the mystery of the sea, for the sea still held mysteries perhaps as deep as any she would encounter in space or in transit. No one but the pilots could even guess at the truth of her assumption, but Laenea had often sat gazing through the shadowed water, dreaming. Soon she too would know; she would not have to imagine any longer.

She moved between small groups of people half-hidden in the recesses of the conversation pits. Near the transparent sea wall she saw Minoru, his black hair braided with scarlet and silver to his waist; tall Alannai hunched down to be closer to the others, the light on her skin like dark opal, glinting in her close-cropped hair like diamond dust; and pale, quiet Ruth, whose sparkling was rare but nova bright. Holding goblets or mugs, they sat sleepily conversing, and Laenea felt the comfort of a familiar scene. Minoru, facing her, glanced up. She smiled, expecting him to cry out her name and fling out his arms, as he always did, with his ebullient greeting, showing to advantage the fringe and beadwork on his jacket. But he looked at her, straight on, silent, with an expression so blank that only the unlined long-lived youthfulness of his face could have held it. He whispered her name. Ruth looked over her shoulder and smiled tentatively, as though she were afraid. Alannai unbent, and, head and shoulders above the others, raised her glass solemnly to Laenea. "Pilot," she said, and drank, and hunched back down with her elbows on her sharp knees. Laenea stood above them, outside their circle, looking down on three people whom she had kissed good-bye. Crew always said good-bye, for they slept through their voyages without any certainty that they would ever awaken. They lived in the cruel childhood prayer: "If I should die before I wake..."

Laenea climbed down to them. The circle opened, but she did not enter it. She was as overwhelmed by uncertainty as her friends.

"Sit with us," Ruth said finally. Alannai and Minoru looked uneasy but did not object. Laenea sat down. The triangle between Ruth and Alannai and Minoru did not alter. Each of them was next to the other; Laenea was beside none of them.

Ruth reached out, but her hand trembled. They all waited, and Laenea tried to think of words to reassure them, to affirm that she had not changed.

But she had changed. She realized the surgeon had cut more than skin and muscle and bone.

"I came..." But nothing she felt seemed right to tell them. She would not taunt them with her freedom. She took Ruth's outstretched hand. "I came to say good-bye." She embraced them and kissed them and climbed back to the main level. They had all been friends, but they could accept each other no longer.

The first pilots and crew did not mingle, for the responsibility was great, the tensions greater. But Laenea already cared for Ruth and Minoru and Alannai. Her concern would remain when she watched them sleeping and ferried them from one island of light to the next. She understood why she was perpetuating the separation even less than she understood her friends' reserve.

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Conversations ebbed and flowed around her like the tides as she moved through the lounge. Seeing people she knew, she avoided them, and she did not try to join an unfamiliar group. Her pride far exceeded her loneliness.

She put aside the pain of her rejection. She felt self-contained and self-assured. When she recognized two pilots, sitting together, isolated, she approached them straightforwardly. She had flown with both of them, but never talked at length with either. They would accept her, or they would not: for the moment, she did not care. She flung back the cloak so they would know her, and realized quite suddenly-- with a shock of amused surprise at what she had never noticed consciously before-- that all pilots dressed as she had dressed. Laced vest or deeply cut gowns, transparent shirts, halters, all in one way or another revealed the long scar that marked their changes.

Miikala and Ramona-Teresa sat facing each other, elbows on knees, talking together quietly, privately. Even the rhythms of their conversation seemed alien to Laenea, though she could not hear their words. Like other people they communicated as much with their bodies and hands as with speech, but the nods and gestures clashed.

Laenea wondered what pilots talked about. Certainly it could not be the ordinary concerns of ordinary people, the laundry, the shopping, a place to stay, a person, perhaps, to stay with. They would talk about... the experiences they alone had; they would talk about what they saw when all others must sleep near death or die.

Human pilots withstood transit better than machine intelligence, but human pilots too were sometimes lost. Miikala and Ramona-Teresa were ten percent of all the pilots who survived from the first generation, ten percent of their own unique, evolving, almost self-contained society. As Laenea stopped on the edge of the pit above them, they fell silent and gazed solemnly up at her.

Ramona-Teresa, a small, heavy-set woman with raven-black hair graying to roan, smiled and lifted her glass. "Pilot!" Miikala, whose eyes were shadowed by heavy brow ridges and an unruly shock of dark brown hair, matched the salute and drank with her.

This toast was a tribute and a welcome, not a farewell. Laenea was a part of the second wave of pilots, one who would follow the original experiment and make it work practically, now that Miikala and Ramona-Teresa and the others had proven time-independence successful by example. Laenea smiled and lowered herself into the pit. Miikala touched her left wrist, Ramona-Teresa her right. Laenea felt, welling up inside her, a bubbling, childish giggle. She could not stop it; it broke free as if filled with helium like a balloon. "Hello," she said, and even her voice was high. She might have been in an Environment on the sea floor, breathing oxy-helium and speaking donaldduck. She felt the blood rushing through the veins in her temples and her throat. Miikala was smiling, saying something in a language with as many liquid vowels as his name; she did not understand a word, yet she knew everything he was saying. Ramona-Teresa hugged her. "Welcome, child."

Laenea could not believe that these lofty, eerie people could accept her with such joy. She realized she had hoped, at best, for a cool and condescending greeting not too destructive of her pride. The embarrassing giggle slipped up and out again, but this time she did not try to stifle it. All three pilots laughed together. Laenea felt high, light, dizzy: excitement pumped adrenaline through her body. She was hot and she could feel tiny beads of perspiration gather on her forehead, just at the hairline.

Quite suddenly the constant dull ache in her chest became a wrenching pain, as though her new heart were being ripped from her, like the old. She could not breathe. She hunched forward, struggling for air, oblivious to the pilots and all the beautiful surroundings. Each time she tried to draw in a breath, the pain drove it out again.



Slowly Miikala's easy voice slipped beyond her panic, and Ramona-Teresa's hands steadied her.

"Relax, relax, remember your training."

Yes: decrease the blood flow, open up the arteries, dilate all the tiny capillaries, feel the involuntary muscles responding to voluntary control. Slow the pump. Someone bathed her forehead with a cocktail napkin dipped in gin. Laenea welcomed the coolness and even the odor's bitter tang. The pain dissolved gradually until Ramona-Teresa could ease her back on the sitting shelf, onto the cushioned carpet, out of a protective near-fetal position. The jet fastening of the cloak fell away from her throat and the older pilot loosened the laces of her vest.

"It's all right," Ramona-Teresa said. "The adrenaline works as well as ever. We all have to learn more control of that than they think they need to teach us."

Sitting on his heels beside Laenea, Miikala glanced at the exposed bright scar. "You're out early," he said. "Have they changed the procedure?"

Laenea paled: she had forgotten that her leave-taking of hospitals was something less than official and approved.

"Don't tease her, Miikala," Ramona-Teresa said gruffly. "Or don't you remember how it was when you woke up?"

His heavy eyebrows drew together in a scowl. "I remember."

"Will they make me go back?" Laenea asked. "I'm all right, I just need to get used to it."

"They might try to," Ramona-Teresa said. "They worry so about the money they spend on us. Perhaps they aren't quite so worried anymore. We do as well on our own as shut up in their ugly hospitals listening to recorded hearts-- do they still do that?"

Laenea shuddered. "It worked for you, they told me-- but I broke the speaker."

Miikala laughed with delight. "Causing all other machines to make frantic noises like frightened little mice."

"I thought they hadn't done the operation. I wanted to be one of you so long-- " Feeling stronger, Laenea pushed herself up. She left her vest open, glad of the cool air against her skin.

"We watched," Miikala said. "We watch you all, but a few are special. We knew you'd come to us. Do you remember this one, Ramona?"

"Yes." She picked up one of the extra glasses, filled it from a shaker, and handed it to Laenea. "You always fought the sleep, my dear. Sometimes I thought you might wake."

"Ahh, Ramona, don't frighten the child."

"Frighten her, this tigress?" Strangely enough, Laenea was not disturbed by the knowledge that she had been close to waking in transit. She had not, or she would be dead; she would have died quickly of old age, her body bound to normal time and normal space, to the relation between time-dilation and velocity and distance by a billion years of evolution, rhythms planetary, lunar, solar, biological: subatomic, for all Laenea or anyone else knew. She was freed of all that now.

She downed half her drink in a single swallow. The air now felt cold against her bare arms and her breasts, so she wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and waited for the satin to warm against her body.

"When do you get your ship?"

"Not for a month." The time seemed a vast expanse of emptiness. She had finished the study and the training; now only her mortal body kept her earthbound.

"They want you completely healed."

"It's too long-- how can they expect me to wait until then?"

"For the need."

"I want to know what happens, I have to find out. When's your next flight?"

"Soon," Ramona-Teresa said.

"Take me with you!"

"No, my dear. It would not be proper."

"Proper! We have to make our own rules, not follow theirs. They don't know what's right for us."

Miikala and Ramona-Teresa looked at each other for a long time. Perhaps they spoke to each other

with eyes and expressions, but Laenea could not understand.

"No." Ramona's tone invited no argument.

"At least you can tell me--" She saw at once that she had said the wrong thing. The pilots' expressions closed down in silence. But Laenea did not feel guilt or contrition, only anger.

"It isn't because you can't! You talk about it to each other, I know that now at least. You can't tell me you don't."

"No," Miikala said. "We will not say we never speak of it."

"You're selfish and you're cruel." She stood up, momentarily afraid she might stagger again and have to accept their help. But as Ramona and Miikala nodded at each other, with faint, infuriating smiles, Laenea felt the lightness and the silent bells overtaking her.

"She has the need," one of them said, Laenea did not even know which one. She turned her back on them, climbed out of the conversation pit, and stalked away.

\* \* \*

The sitting-place she chose nestled her into a steep slope very close to the sea wall. She could feel the coolness of the glass, as though it, not heat, radiated. Grotesque creatures floated past in the spotlights. Laenea relaxed, letting her smooth pulse wax and wane. She wondered, if she sat in this pleasant place long enough, if she would be able to detect the real tides, if the same drifting plant-creatures passed again and again, swept back and forth before the window of the stabilizer by the forces of sun and moon.

Her privacy was marred only slightly, by one man sleeping or lying unconscious nearby. She did not recognize him, but he must be crew. His dark, close-fitting clothes were unremarkably different enough, in design and fabric, that he might be from another world. He must be new. Earth was the hub of commerce; no ship flew long without orbiting it. New crew members always visited at least once. New crew usually visited every world their ships reached at first, if they had the time for quarantine. Laenea had done the same herself. But the quarantines were so severe and so necessary that she, like most other veterans, eventually remained acclimated to one world, stayed on the ship during other planetfalls, and arranged her pattern to intersect her home as frequently as possible.

The sleeping man was a few years younger than Laenea. She thought he must be as tall as she, but that estimation was difficult. He was one of those uncommon people so beautifully proportioned that from any distance at all their height can only be determined by comparison. Nothing about him was exaggerated or attenuated; he gave the impression of strength, but it was the strength of litheness and agility, not violence. Laenea decided he was neither drunk nor drugged but asleep. His face, though relaxed, showed no dissipation. His hair was dark blond and shaggy, a shade lighter than his heavy mustache. He was far from handsome: his features were regular, distinctive, but without beauty. Below the cheekbones his tanned skin was scarred and pitted, as though from some virulent childhood disease. Some of the outer worlds had not yet conquered their epidemics.

Laenea looked away from the new young man. She stared at the dark water wall at light's-end, letting her vision double and unfocus. She touched her collarbone and slid her fingers to the tip of the smooth scar. Sensation seemed refined across the tissue, as though a wound there would hurt more sharply. Though Laenea was tired and getting hungry she did not force herself to outrun the distractions. For a while her energy should return slowly and naturally. She had pushed herself far enough for one night.

A month would be an eternity; the wait would seem equivalent to all the years she had spent crewing. She was still angry at the other pilots. She felt she had acted like a little puppy, bounding up to them to be welcomed and patted, then, when they grew bored, they had kicked her away as though she had piddled on the floor. And she was angry at herself: she felt a fool and she felt the need to prove herself.

For the first time she appreciated the destruction of time during transit. To sleep for a month: convenient, impossible. She first must deal with her new existence, her new body; then she would deal with a new environment.

Perhaps she dozed. The deep sea admitted no time: the lights pierced the same indigo darkness day or night. Time was the least real of all dimensions to Laenea's people, and she was free of its dictates,

isolated from its stabilities.

When she opened her eyes again she had no idea how long they had been closed, a second or an hour.

The time must have been a few minutes, at least, for the young man who had been sleeping was now sitting up, watching her. His eyes were dark blue, black-flecked, a color like the sea. For a moment he did not notice she was awake, then their gazes met and he glanced quickly away, blushing, embarrassed to be caught staring.

"I stared, too," Laenea said.

Startled, he turned slowly back, not quite sure Laenea was speaking to him. "What?"

"When I was a grounder, I stared at crew, and when I was crew I stared at pilots."

"I *am* crew," he said defensively.

"From-- "

"Twilight."

Laenea knew she had been there, a long while before; images of Twilight drifted to her. It was a new world, a dark and mysterious place of high mountains and black, brooding forests, a young world, its peaks just formed. It was heavily wreathed in clouds that filtered out much of the visible light but admitted the ultraviolet. Twilight: dusk, on that world. Never dawn. No one who had ever visited Twilight would think its dimness heralded anything but night. The people who lived there were strong and solemn, even confronting disaster. On Twilight she had seen grief, death, loss, but never panic or despair.

Laenea introduced herself and offered the young man a place nearer her own. He moved closer, reticent. "I am Radu Dracul," he said.

The name touched a faint note in her memory. She followed it until it grew loud enough to identify. She glanced over Radu Dracul's shoulder, as though looking for someone. "Then-- where's Vlad?"

Radu laughed, changing his somber expression for the first time. He had good teeth, and deep smile lines that paralleled the drooping sides of his mustache. "Wherever he is, I hope he stays there."

They smiled together.

"This is your first tour?"

"Is it so obvious I'm a novice?"

"You're alone," she said. "And you were sleeping."

"I don't know anyone here. I was tired," he said, quite reasonably.

"After a while..." Laenea nodded toward a nearby group of people, hyper and shrill on sleep repressors and energizers. "You don't sleep when you're on the ground when there are people to talk to, when there are other things to do. You get sick of sleep, you're scared of it."

Radu stared toward the ribald group that stumbled its way toward the elevator. "Do all of us become like them?" He held his low voice emotionless.

"Most."

"The sleeping drugs are bad enough. They're necessary, everyone says. But that-- " He shook his head slowly. His forehead was smooth except for two parallel vertical lines that appeared between his eyebrows when he frowned; it was below his cheekbones, to the square-angled corner of his jaw, that his skin was scarred.

"No one will force you," Laenea said. She was tempted to reach out and touch him; she would have liked to stroke his face from temple to chin, and smooth a lock of hair ruffled by sleep. But he was unlike other people she had met, whom she could touch and hug and go to bed with on short acquaintance and mutual whim. Radu had about him something withdrawn and protected, almost mysterious, an invisible wall that would only be strengthened by an attempt to broach it, however gentle. He carried himself, he spoke, defensively.

"But you think I'll choose it myself."

"It doesn't always happen," Laenea said, for she felt he needed reassurance; yet she also felt the need to defend herself and her former colleagues. "We sleep so much in transit, and it's such a dark time, it's so empty..."

"Empty? What about the dreams?"

"I never dreamed."

"I always do," he said. "Always."

"I wouldn't have minded transit time so much if I'd ever dreamed."

Understanding drew Radu from his reserve. "I can see how it might be."

Laenea thought of all the conversations she had had with all the other crew she had known. The silent emptiness of their sleep was the single constant of all their experiences. "I don't know anyone else like you. You're very lucky."

A tiny luminous fish nosed up against the sea wall. Laenea reached out and tapped the glass, leading the fish in a simple pattern drawn with her fingertip.

"I'm hungry," she said abruptly. "There's a good restaurant in the Point Stabilizer. Will you come?"

"A restaurant-- where people... buy food?"

"Yes."

"I am not hungry."

He was a poor liar; he hesitated before the denial, and he did not meet Laenea's glance.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." He looked at her again, smiling slightly: that at least was true, that he was not worried.

"Are you going to stay here all night?"

"It isn't night, it's nearly morning."

"A room's more comfortable-- you were asleep."

He shrugged; she could see she was making him uneasy. She realized he must not have any money.

"Didn't your credit come through? That happens all the time. I think chimpanzees write the bookkeeping programs." She had gone through the red tape and annoyance of emergency credit several times when her transfers were misplaced or miscoded. "All you have to do-- "

"The administration made no error in my case."

Laenea waited for him to explain or not, as he wished. Suddenly he grinned, amused at himself but not self-deprecating. He looked even younger than he must be, when he smiled like that. "I'm not used to using money for anything but . . . unnecessaries."

"Luxuries?"

"Yes, things we don't often use on Twilight, things I do not need. But food, a place to sleep-- " He shrugged again. "They are always freely given on colonial worlds. When I got to Earth, I forgot to arrange a credit transfer." He was blushing faintly. "I won't forget again. I miss a meal and one night's sleep-- I've missed more on Twilight, when I was doing real work. In a few hours I correct my error."

"There's no need to go hungry now," Laenea said. "You can-- "

"I respect your customs," Radu said. "But my people never borrow and we never take what is unwillingly given."

Laenea stood up and held out her hand. "I never offer unwillingly. Come along."

His hand was warm and hard, like polished wood.

\* \* \*

At the top of the elevator shaft, Laenea and Radu stepped out into the end of the night. It was foggy and luminous, sky and sea blending into uniform gray. No wind revealed the surface of the sea or the limits of the fog, but the air was cold. Laenea swung the cloak around them both. A light rain, almost invisible, drifted down, beading mistily in tiny brilliant drops on the black velvet and on Radu's hair. He was silver and gold in the artificial light.

"It's like Twilight now," he said. "It rains like this in the winter." He stretched out his arm, with the black velvet draping down-like quiescent wings, opened his palm to the rain, and watched the minuscule droplets touch his finger-tips. Laenea could tell from the yearning in his voice, the wistfulness, that he was painfully, desperately homesick. She said nothing, for she knew from experience that nothing could be said to help. The pain faded only with time and fondness for other places. Earth as yet had given Radu no cause for fondness. But now he stood gazing into the fog, as though he could see continents, or stars. She

slipped her arm around his shoulders in a gesture of comfort.

"We'll walk to the Point." Laenea had been enclosed in testing and training rooms and hospitals as he had been confined in ships and quarantine: she, too, felt the need for fresh air and rain and the ocean's silent words.

The sidewalk edged the port's shore; only a rail separated it from a drop of ten meters to the sea. Incipient waves caressed the metal cliff obliquely, sliding into darkness. Laenea and Radu walked slowly along, matching strides. Every few paces their hips brushed together. Laenea glanced at Radu occasionally and wondered how she could have thought him anything but beautiful. Her heart circled slowly in her breast, low-pitched, relaxing, and her perceptions faded from fever clarity to misty dark and soothing. A veil seemed to surround and protect her. She became aware that Radu was gazing at her, more than she watched him. The cold touched them through the cloak, and they moved closer together; it seemed only sensible for Radu to put his arm around her too, and so they walked, clasped together.

"Real work," Laenea said, musing.

"Yes... hard work with hands or minds." He picked up the second possible branch of their previous conversation as though it had never gone in any other direction. "We do the work ourselves. Twilight is too new for machines-- they evolved here, and they aren't as adaptable as people."

Laenea, who had endured unpleasant situations in which machines did not perform as intended, understood what he meant. Older methods than automation were more economical on new worlds where the machines had to be designed from the beginning but people only had to learn. Evolution was as good an analogy as any.

"Crewing's work. Maybe it doesn't strain your muscles, but it is work."

"One never gets tired. Physically or mentally. The job has no challenges."

"Aren't the risks enough for you?"

"Not random risks," he said. "It's like gambling."

His background made him a harsh judge, harshest with himself. Laenea felt a tinge of self-contempt in his words, a gray shadow across his independence.

"It isn't slave labor, you know. You could quit and go home."

"I wanted to come--" He cut off the protest. "I thought it would be different."

"I know," Laenea said. "You think it will be exciting, but after a while all that's left is a dull kind of danger."

"I did want to visit other places. To be like-- in that I was selfish."

"Ahh, stop. Selfish? No one would do it otherwise."

"Perhaps not. But I had a different vision. I remembered--" Again, he stopped himself in mid-sentence.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing." Laenea had thought his reserve was dissolving, but all his edges hardened again. "We spend most of our time carrying trivial cargoes for trivial reasons to trivial people."

"The trivial cargoes pay for the emergencies." Radu shook his head. "That isn't right."

"That's the way it's always been."

"On Twilight..." He went no farther; the guarded tone had disappeared.

"You're drawn back." Laenea said. "More than anyone I've known before. It must be a comfort to love a place so much."

At first he tensed, as if he were afraid she would mock or chide him for weakness, or laugh at him. The tense muscles relaxed slowly. "I feel better, after flights when I dream about home."

The fortunate dreamer: if Laenea had still been crew she would have envied him. "Is it your family you miss?"

"I have no family-- I still miss them sometimes, but they're gone."

"I'm sorry."

"You couldn't know," he said quickly, almost too quickly, as though he might have hurt her rather than the other way around. "They were good people, my clan. The epidemic killed them."

Laenea gently tightened her arm around his shoulder in silent comfort.

"I don't know what it is about Twilight that binds us all," Radu said. "I suppose it must be the combination-- the challenge and the result. Everything is new. We try to touch the world gently. So many things could go wrong."

He glanced at her, his eyes deep as a mountain lake, his face solemn in its strength, asking without words a question Laenea did not understand.

\* \* \*

The air was cold. It entered her lungs and spread through her chest, her belly, arms, legs... she imagined that the machine was cold metal, sucking the heat from her as it circled in its silent patterns. Laenea was tired.

"What's that?"

She glanced up. They were near the midpoint of the port's edge, nearing lights shining vaguely through the fog. The amorphous pink glow resolved itself into separate globes and torches. Laenea noticed a high metallic hum. Within two paces the air cleared.

The tall frames of fog-catchers reared up, leading inward to the lights in concentric circles. The long wires, touched by the wind, vibrated musically. The fog, touched by the wires, condensed. Water dripped from wires' tips to the platform. The intermittent sound of heavy drops on metal, like rain, provided irregular rhythm for the faint music.

"Just a party," Laenea said. The singing, glistening wires formed a multi-layered curtain, each layer transparent but in combination translucent and shimmering. Laenea moved between them, but Radu, hanging back, slowed her.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't wish to go where I haven't been invited."

"You are invited. We're all invited. Would you stay away from a party at your own house?"

Radu frowned, not understanding. Laenea remembered her own days as a novice of the crew; becoming used to one's new status took time.

"They come here for us," Laenea said. "They come hoping we'll stop and talk to them and eat their food and drink their liquor. Why else come here?" She gestured--it was meant to be a sweeping movement, but she stopped her hand before the apex of its arc, flinching at the strain on her cracked ribs--toward the party, lights and tables, a tasseled pavilion, the fog-catchers, the people in evening costume, servants and machines. "Why else bring all this here? They could be on a tropical island or under the Redwoods. They could be on a mountaintop or on a desert at dawn. But they're here, and I assure you they'll welcome us."

"You know the customs," Radu said, if a little doubtfully. When they passed the last ring of fog-catchers the temperature began to rise. The warmth was a great relief. Laenea let the damp velvet cape fall away from her shoulders and Radu did the same. A very young man, almost still a boy, smooth-cheeked and wide-eyed, appeared to take the cloak for them. He stared at them both, curious, speechless; he saw the tip of the scar between Laenea's breasts and looked at her in astonishment and admiration.

"Pilot..." he said. "Welcome, Pilot."

"Thank you. Whose gathering is this?"

The boy, now speechless, glanced over his shoulder and gestured.

Kathell Stafford glided toward them, holding out her hands to Laenea. The white tiger followed.

Gray streaked Kathell's hair, like the silver thread woven into her blue silk gown, but her eyes were as dark and young as ever. Laenea had not seen her in several years, many voyages. They clasped hands, Laenea amazed as always by the delicacy of Kathell's bones. Veins glowed blue beneath her light brown skin. Laenea had no idea how old she was. Except for the streaks of gray, she was just the same.

"My dear, I heard you were in training. You must be very pleased."

"Relieved," Laenea said. "They never know for sure if it will work till afterward."

"Come join us, you and your friend."

"This is Radu Dracul of Twilight."

Kathell greeted him, and Laenea saw Radu relax and grow comfortable in the presence of the tiny self-possessed woman. Even a party on the sidewalk of the world's largest port could be her home, where she made guests welcome.

The others, quick to sense novelty, began to drift nearer, most seeming to have no particular direction in mind. Laenea had seen all the ways of approaching crew or pilots: the shyness or bravado or undisguised awe of children; the unctuous familiarity of some adults; the sophisticated nonchalance of the rich. Then there were the people Laenea seldom met, who looked at her, saw her, across a street or across a room, whose expressions said aloud: *She has walked on other worlds; she has traveled through a place I shall never even approach.* Those people looked, and looked reluctantly away, and returned to their business, allowing Laenea and her kind to proceed unmolested. Some crew members never knew they existed. The most interesting people, the sensitive and intelligent and nonintrusive ones, were those one seldom met.

Kathell was one of the people Laenea would never have met, except that she had young cousins in the crew. Otherwise she was unclassifiable. She was rich, and used her wealth lavishly to entertain her friends, as now, and for her own comfort. But she had more purpose than that. The money she used for play was nothing compared to the totality of her resources. She was a student as well as a patron, and the energy she could give to work provided her with endurance and concentration beyond that of anyone else Laenea had ever met. There was no sycophancy in either direction about their fondness for each other.

Laenea recognized few of the people clustering behind Kathell. She stood looking out at them, down a bit on most, and she almost wished she had led Radu around the fog-catchers instead of between them. She did not feel ready for the effusive greetings due a pilot; she did not feel she had earned them. The guests outshone her in every way, in beauty, in dress, in knowledge, yet they wanted her, they needed her, to touch what was denied them.

She could see the passage of time, one second after another, that quickly, in their faces. Quite suddenly she was overcome by pity.

Kathell introduced people to her. Laenea knew she would not remember one name in ten, but she nodded and smiled. Nearby Radu made polite and appropriate responses. Someone handed Laenea a glass of champagne. People clustered around her, waiting for her to talk. She found that she had no more to say to them than to those she left behind in the crew.

A man came closer, smiling, and shook her head. "I've always wanted to meet an Aztec..."

His voice trailed off at Laenea's frown. She did not want to be churlish to a friend's guests, so she put aside her annoyance. "Just 'pilot,' please."

"But Aztecs-- "

"The Aztecs sacrificed their captives' hearts," Laenea said. "We don't feel we've made a sacrifice."

She smiled and turned away, ending the conversation before he could press forward with a witty comment. The crowd was dense behind her, pressing in, all rich, free, trapped human beings. Laenea shivered and wished them away. She wanted quiet and solitude.

Suddenly Kathell was near, stretching out her hand. Laenea grasped it. For Kathell, Kathell and her tiger, the guests parted like water. But Kathell was in front. Laenea grinned and followed in her friend's wake. She saw Radu and called to him. He nodded; in a moment he was beside her, and they moved through regions of fragrances: mint, carnation, pine, musk, orange blossom. The boundaries were sharp between the odors.

Inside the pavilion, the three of them were alone. Laenea immediately felt warmer, though she knew the temperature was probably the same outside in the open party. But the tent walls, though busily patterned and self-luminous, made her feel enclosed and protected from the cold vast currents of the sea. She sat gratefully in a soft chair. The white tiger laid his chin on Laenea's knee and she stroked his huge head.

"You look exhausted, my dear," Kathell said. She put a glass in her hand. Laenea sipped from it: warm milk punch. A hint that she should be in bed.

"I just got out of the hospital," she said. "I guess I overdid it a little. I'm not used to-- " She gestured with her free hand, meaning: everything. My new body, being outside and free again... this man beside me. She closed her eyes against blurring vision.

"Stay awhile," Kathell said, as always understanding much more than was spoken. Laenea did not try to answer; she was too comfortable, too sleepy.

"Have you eaten?" Kathell's voice sounded far away. The words, directed elsewhere, existed alone and separate, meaningless. Laenea slowed her heart and relaxed the arterial constricting muscles. Blood flowing through the dilated capillaries made her blush, and she felt warmer.

"She was going to take me to... a restaurant," Radu said.

"Have you never been to one?" Kathell's amusement was never hurtful. It emerged too obviously from good humor and the ability to accept rather than fear differences.

"There is no such thing on Twilight."

Laenea thought they said more, but the words drowned in the murmur of guests' voices and wind and sea. She felt only the softness of the cushions beneath her, the warm fragrant air, and the fur of the white tiger.

\* \* \*

Time passed, how much or at what rate Laenea had no idea. She slept gratefully and unafraid, deeply, dreaming, and hardly roused when she was moved. She muttered something and was reassured, but never remembered the words, only the tone. Wind and cold touched her and were shut out; she felt a slight acceleration. Then she slept again.

\* \* \*

Laenea half woke, warm, warm to her center. A recent dream swam into her consciousness and out again, leaving no trace but the memory of its passing. She closed her eyes and relaxed, to remember it if it would come, but she could recall only that it was a dream of piloting a ship in transit. The details she could not perceive. Not yet. She was left with a comfortless excitement that upset her drowsiness. The machine in her chest purred fast and seemed to give off heat, though that was as impossible as that it might chill her blood.

The room around her was dim; she did not know where she was except that it was not the hospital. The smells were wrong; her first perceptions were neither astringent antiseptics nor cloying drugs but faint perfume. The sensation against her skin was not coarse synthetic but silky cotton. Between her eyelashes reflections glinted from the ceiling. She realized she was in Kathell's apartment in the Point Stabilizer.

She pushed herself up on her elbows. Her ribs creaked like old parquet floors, and deep muscle aches spread from the center of her body to her shoulders, her arms, her legs. She made a sharp sound, more of surprise than of pain. She had driven herself too hard: she needed rest, not activity. She let herself sink slowly back into the big red bed, closing her eyes and drifting back toward sleep. She heard the rustling and sliding of two different fabrics rubbed one against the other, but did not react to the sound.

"Are you all right?"

The voice would have startled her if she had not been so nearly asleep again. She opened her eyes and found Radu standing near, his jacket unbuttoned, a faint sheen of sweat on his bare chest and forehead. The concern on his face matched the worry in his voice.

Laenea smiled, "You're still here." She had assumed without thinking that he had gone on his way, to see and do all the interesting things that attracted visitors on their first trip to Earth.

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

"You didn't need to stay..." But she did not want him to leave.

His hand on her forehead felt cool and soothing. "I think you have a fever. Is there someone I should call?"

Laenea thought for a moment, or rather felt, lying still and making herself receptive to her body's



signals. Her heart was spinning much too fast; she calmed and slowed it, wondering again what adventure had occurred in her dream. Nothing else was amiss; her lungs were clear; her hearing sharp. She slid her hand between her breasts to touch the scar: smooth and body-temperature, no infection.

"I overtired myself," she said. "That's all... ." Sleep was overtaking her again, but curiosity disturbed her ease. "Why did you stay?"

"Because," he said slowly, sounding very far away, "I wanted to stay with you. I remember you." She wished she knew what he was talking about, but at last the warmth and drowsiness were stronger lures than her curiosity.

\* \* \*

When Laenea woke again, she woke completely. The aches and pains had faded in the night-- or in the day, for she had no idea how long she had slept, or even how late at night or early in the morning she had visited Kathell's party.

She was in her favorite room in Kathell's apartment, one gaudier than the others. Though Laenea did not indulge in much personal adornment, she liked the scarlet and gold of the room, its intrusive energy, its Dionysian flavor. Even the aquaria set in the walls were inhabited by fish gilt with scales and jeweled with luminescence. Laenea felt the honest glee of compelling shapes and colors. She sat up and threw off the blankets, stretching and yawning in pure animal pleasure. Then, seeing Radu asleep, sprawled in the red velvet pillow chair, she fell silent, surprised, not wishing to wake him. She slipped quietly out of bed, pulled a robe from the closet, and padded into the bathroom.

\* \* \*

Comfortable, bathed, and able to breathe properly for the first time since her operation, Laenea returned to the bedroom. She had removed the strapping in order to shower; as her cracked ribs hurt no more free than bandaged, she did not bother to replace the tape.

Radu was awake.

"Good morning."

"It's not quite midnight," he said, smiling.

"Of what day?"

"You slept what was left of last night and all today. The others left on Kathell Stafford's zeppelin, but she wished you well and said you were to use this place as long as you wanted."

Though Kathell was as fascinated with rare people as with rare animals, her curiosity was untainted by possessiveness. She had no need of pilots, or indeed of anyone, to enhance her status. She gave her patronage with affection and friendship, not as tacit purchase. Laenea reflected that she knew people who would have done almost anything for Kathell, yet she knew no one of whom Kathell had ever asked a favor.

"How in the world did you get me here? Did I walk?"

"We didn't want to wake you. One of the large serving carts was empty so we lifted you onto it and pushed you here."

Laenea laughed. "You should have folded a flower in my hands and pretended you were at a wake."

"Someone did make that suggestion."

"I wish I hadn't been asleep-- I would have liked to see the expressions of the grounders when we passed."

"Your being awake would have spoiled the illusion," Radu said.

Laenea laughed again, and this time he joined her.

\* \* \*

As usual, clothes of all styles and sizes hung in the large closets. Laenea ran her hand across a row of

garments, stopping when she touched a pleasurable texture. The first shirt she found near her size was deep green velvet with bloused sleeves. She slipped it on and buttoned it up to her breastbone, no farther.

"I still owe you a restaurant meal," she said to Radu.

"You owe me nothing at all," he said, much too seriously. She buckled her belt with a jerk and shoved her feet into her boots, annoyed. "You don't even know me, but you stayed with me and took care of me for the whole first day of your first trip to Earth. Don't you think I should-- don't you think it would be friendly for me to give you a meal?" She glared at him. "Willingly?"

He hesitated, startled by her anger. "I would find great pleasure," he said slowly, "in accepting that gift." He met Laenea's gaze, and when it softened he smiled again, tentatively. Laenea's exasperation melted and flowed away.

"Come along, then," she said to him for the second time. He rose from the pillow chair, quickly and awkwardly. None of Kathell's furniture was designed for a person his height or Laenea's. She reached to help him; they joined hands.

\* \* \*

The Point Stabilizer was itself a complete city in two parts, one, a blatant tourist world, the second a discrete and interesting permanent supporting society. Laenea often experimented with restaurants here, but this time she went to one she knew well. Experiments in the Point were not always successful. Quality spanned as wide a spectrum as culture.

Marc's had been fashionable a few years before, and now was not, but its proprietor seemed unperturbed by cycles of fashion. Pilots or princes, crew members or diplomats could come and go; Marc did not care. Laenea led Radu into the dim foyer of the restaurant and touched the signal button. In a few moments a screen before them brightened into a pattern like oil paint on water. "Hello, Marc," Laenea said. "I didn't have a chance to make a reservation, I'm afraid."

The responding voice was mechanical and harsh, initially unpleasant, difficult to understand without experience. Laenea no longer found it ugly or indecipherable. The screen brightened into yellow with the pleasure Marc could not express vocally. "I can't think of any punishment terrible enough for such a sin, so I'll have to pretend you called."

"Thank you, Marc."

"It's good to see you back after so long. And a pilot, now."

"It's good to be back." She drew Radu forward a step, farther into the range of the small camera.

"This is Radu Dracul, of Twilight, on his first Earth landing."

"Hello, Radu Dracul. I hope you find us neither too depraved nor too dull."

"Neither one at all," Radu said.

The headwaiter appeared to take them to their table. "Welcome," Marc said, instead of good-bye, and from drifting blues and greens the screen faded to darkness.

Their table was lit by the blue reflected glow of light diffusing into the sea, and the fish watched them like curious urchins.

"Who is Marc?"

"I don't know," Laenea said. "He never comes out, no one ever goes in. Some say he was disfigured, some that he has an incurable disease and can never be with anyone again. There are always new rumors. But he never talks about himself and no one would invade his privacy by asking."

"People must have a higher regard for privacy on Earth than elsewhere," Radu said dryly, as though he had had considerable experience with prying questions.

Laenea knew boorish people too, but had never thought about their possible effect on Marc. She realized that the least considerate of her acquaintances seldom came here, and that she had never met Marc until the third or fourth time she had come. "It's nothing about the people. He protects himself," she said, knowing it was true.

She handed him a menu and opened her own. "What would you like to eat?"

"I'm to choose from this list?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"And then someone cooks it, then someone else brings it to you."

Radu glanced down at the menu, shaking his head slightly, but he made no comment.

"Do you wish to order, Pilot?" At Laenea's elbow, Andrew bowed slightly.

Laenea ordered for them both, for Radu was unfamiliar with the dishes offered.

Laenea tasted the wine. It was excellent; she put down her glass and allowed Andrew to fill it. Radu watched scarlet liquid rise in crystal, staring deep.

"I should have asked if you drink wine," Laenea said. "But do at least try it."

He looked up quickly, his eyes focusing; he had not, perhaps, been staring at the wine, but at nothing, absently. He picked up the glass, held it, sniffed it, sipped from it.

"I see now why we use wine so infrequently at home."

Laenea drank again, and again could find no fault. "Never mind, if you don't like it-- "

But he was smiling. "It's what we have on Twilight that I never cared to drink. It's sea water compared to this."

Laenea was so hungry that half a glass of wine made her feel lightheaded; she was grateful when Andrew brought bowls of thick, spicy soup. Radu, too, was very hungry, or sensitive to alcohol, for his defenses began to ease. He relaxed; no longer did he seem ready to leap up, take Andrew by the arm, and ask the quiet old man why he stayed here, performing trivial services for trivial reasons and trivial people. And though he still glanced frequently at Laenea-- watched her, almost-- he no longer looked away when their gazes met.

She did not find his attention annoying; only inexplicable. She had been attracted to men and men to her many times, and often the attractions coincided. Radu was extremely attractive. But what he felt toward her was obviously something much stronger; whatever he wanted went far beyond sex. Laenea ate in silence for some time, finding nothing, no answers, in the depths of her own wine. The tension rose until she noticed it, peripherally at first, then clearly, sharply, almost as a discrete point separating her from Radu. He sat feigning ease, one arm resting on the table, but his soup was untouched and his hand was clenched into a fist.

"You-- " she said finally.

"I-- " he began simultaneously.

They both stopped. Radu looked relieved. After a moment Laenea continued.

"You came to see Earth. But you haven't even left the port. Surely you had more interesting plans than to watch someone sleep."

He glanced away, glanced back, slowly opened his fist, touched the edge of the glass with a fingertip.

"It's a prying question but I think I have the right to ask it of you."

"I wanted to stay with you," he said slowly, and Laenea remembered those words, in his voice, from her half-dream awakening.

"I remember you,' you said."

He blushed, spots of high color on his cheekbones. "I hoped you wouldn't remember that."

"Tell me what you meant."

"It all sounds foolish and childish and romantic."

She raised one eyebrow, questioning.

"For the last day I've felt I've been living in some kind of unbelievable dream."

"Dream rather than nightmare, I hope."

"You gave me a gift I wished for for years."

"A gift? What?"

"Your hand. Your smile. Your time..." His voice had grown very soft and hesitant again. He took a deep breath. "When the plagues came, on Twilight, all my clan died, eight adults and the four other children. I almost died, too..." His fingers brushed his scarred cheek. Laenea thought he was unaware of the habit. "But the serum came, and the vaccines. I recovered. The crew of the mercy mission-- "

"We stayed several weeks," Laenea said. More details of her single visit to Twilight returned: the settlement in near collapse, the desperately ill trying to attend the dying.

"You were the first crew member I ever saw, the first off-worlder. You saved my people, my life-- "

"Radu, it wasn't only me."

"I know. I even knew then. It didn't matter. I was sick for so long, and when I came to and knew I would live it hardly mattered. I was frightened and full of grief and lost and alone. I needed... someone... to admire. And you were there. You were the only stability in our chaos, a hero..." his voice trailed off in uncertainty at Laenea's smile, though she was not laughing at him. "This isn't easy for me to say."

Reaching across the table, Laenea grasped his wrist. The beat of his pulse was as alien as flame. She could think of nothing to tell him that would not sound patronizing or parental, and she did not care to speak to him in either guise. He raised his head and looked at her, searching her face. "When I joined the crew I don't think I ever believed I would meet you. I joined because it was what I always wanted to do, after... I never considered that I might really meet you. But I saw you, and I realized I wanted to be something in your life. A friend, at best, I hoped. A shipmate, if nothing else. But-- you'd become a pilot, and everyone knows pilots and crew stay apart."

"The first ones take pride in their solitude," Laenea said, for Ramona-Teresa's rejection still stung. Then she relented, for she might never have met Radu Dracul if they had accepted her completely.

"Maybe they needed it."

"I saw a few pilots, before I met you. You're the only one who ever spoke to me or even glanced at me. I think..."

He looked at her hand on his, and touched his scarred cheek again, as if he could brush the marks away. "I think I've loved you since the day you came to Twilight." He stood abruptly, but withdrew his hand gently. "I should never-- "

She rose too. "Why not?"

"I have no right to..."

"To what?"

"To ask anything of you. To expect-- " Flinching, he cut off the word. "To burden you with my hopes."

"What about my hopes?"

He was silent with incomprehension. Laenea stroked his rough cheek, once when he winced like a nervous colt, and again: the lines of strain across his forehead eased almost imperceptibly. She brushed back the errant lock of dark blond hair. "I've had less time to think of you than you of me," she said, "but I think you're beautiful, and an admirable man."

Radu smiled with little humor. "I'm not thought beautiful on Twilight."

"Then Twilight has as many fools as any other human world."

"You... want me to stay?"

"Yes."

He sat down again like a man in a dream. Neither spoke. Andrew appeared, to remove the soup plates and serve the main course. He was diplomatically unruffled, but not quite oblivious to Laenea and Radu's near departure. "Is everything satisfactory?"

"Very much so, Andrew. Thank you."

He bowed and smiled and pushed away the serving cart.

"Have you contracted for transit again?"

"Not yet," Radu said.

"I have a month before my proving flights." She thought of places she could take him, sights she could show him. "I thought I'd just have to endure the time-- " She fell silent, for Ramona-Teresa was standing in the entrance of the restaurant, scanning the room. She saw Laenea and came toward her. Laenea waited, frowning; Radu turned, froze, struck by Ramona's compelling presence: serenity, power, determination. Laenea wondered if the older pilot had relented, but she was no longer so eager to be presented with mysteries, rather than to discover them herself.

Ramona-Teresa stopped at their table, ignoring Radu, or, rather, glancing at him, dismissing him in the

same instant, and speaking to Laenea. "They want you to go back."

Laenea had almost forgotten the doctors and administrators, who could hardly take her departure as calmly as did the other pilots. "Did you tell them where I was?" She knew immediately that she had asked an unworthy question. "I'm sorry."

"They always want to teach us that they're in control. Sometimes it's easiest to let them believe they are."

"Thanks," Laenea said, "but I've had enough tests and plastic tubes." She felt very free, for whatever she did she would not be grounded: she was worth too much. No one would even censure her for irresponsibility, for everyone knew pilots were quite perfectly mad.

"Don't use your credit key."

"All right..." She saw how easily she could be traced, and wished she had not got out of the habit of carrying cash. "Ramona, lend me some money."

Now Ramona did look at Radu, critically. "It would be better if you came with the rest of us." Radu flushed. She was, all too obviously, not speaking to him.

"No, it wouldn't." Laenea's tone was chill. The dim blue light glinted silver from the gray in Ramona's hair as she turned back to Laenea's and reached into an inner pocket. She handed her a folded sheaf of bills. "You young ones never plan." Laenea could not be sure what she meant, and she had no chance to ask. Ramona-Teresa turned away and left.

Laenea shoved the money into her pants pocket, annoyed not so much because she had had to ask for it as because Ramona-Teresa had been so sure she would need it.

"She may be right," Radu said slowly. "Pilots, and crew--" She touched his hand again, rubbing its back, following the ridges of strong fine bones to his wrist. "She shouldn't have been so snobbish. We're none of her business."

"She was...I never met anyone like her before. I felt as if I were in the presence of someone so different from me-- so far beyond-- that we couldn't speak together." He grinned, quick flash of strong white teeth behind his shaggy mustache, deep smile lines in his cheeks. "Even if she'd cared to." With his free hand he stroked her green velvet sleeve. She could feel the beat of his pulse, rapid and upset. As if he had closed an electrical circuit, a pleasurable chill spread up Laenea's arm.

"Radu, did you ever meet a pilot or a crew member who wasn't different from anyone you had ever met before? I haven't. We all start out that way. Transit didn't change Ramona."

He acquiesced with silence only, no more certain of the validity of her assurance than she was.

"For now it doesn't make any difference anyway," Laenea said.

The unhappiness slipped from Radu's expression, the joy came back, but uncertainty remained. They finished their dinner quickly, in expectation, anticipation, paying insufficient attention to the excellent food. Though annoyed that she had to worry about the subject at all, Laenea considered available ways of preserving her freedom. She wished Kathell Stafford were still on the island, for she of all people could have helped. She had already helped, as usual, without even meaning to.

But the situation was hardly serious; evading the administrators as long as possible was a matter of pride and personal pleasure. "Fools..." she muttered.

"They may have a special reason for wanting you to go back," Radu said. Anticipation of the next month flowed through both their minds. "Some problem-some danger."

"They'd've said so."

"Then what do they want?"

"Ramona said it-- they want to prove they control us." She drank the last few drops of her brandy; Radu followed suit. They rose and walked together toward the foyer. "They want to keep me packed in Styrofoam like an expensive machine until I can take my ship."

Andrew awaited them, but as Laenea reached for Ramona-Teresa's money Marc's screen glowed into brilliance. "Your dinner's my gift," he said. "In celebration."

She wondered if Ramona had told him of her problem. He could as easily know from his own sources, or the free meal might be an example of his frequent generosity. "I wonder how you ever make a profit, my friend," she said. "But thank you."

"I overcharge tourists," he said, the mechanical voice so flat that it was impossible to know if he spoke cynically or sardonically or if he were simply joking.

"I don't know where I'm going next," Laenea told him, "but are you looking for anything?"

"Nothing in particular," he said. "Pretty things--" Silver swirled across the screen.

"I know."

The corridors were dazzling after the dim restaurant; Laenea wished for gentle evenings and moonlight. Between cold metal walls, she and Radu walked close together, warm, arms around each other. "Marc collects," Laenea said. "We all bring him things."

"Pretty things."

"Yes...I think he tries to bring the nicest bits of all the worlds inside with him. I think he creates his own reality."

"One that has nothing to do with ours."

"Exactly."

"That's what they'd do at the hospital." Radu said. "Isolate you from what you'll have to deal with, and you disagree that that would be valuable."

"Not for me. For Marc, perhaps."

He nodded. "And... now?"

"Back to Kathell's for a while at least." She reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. His hair tickled her hand. "The rule I disagreed with most while I was in training was the one that forbade me any sex at all."

The smile lines appeared again, bracketing his mouth parallel to his drooping mustache, crinkling the skin around his eyes. "I understand entirely," he said, "why you aren't anxious to go back."

\* \* \*

Entering her room in Kathell's suite, Laenea turned on the lights. Mirrors reflected the glow, bright niches among red plush and gold trim. She and Radu stood together on the silver surfaces, hands clasped, for a moment as hesitant as children. Then Laenea turned to Radu, and he to her; they ignored the actions of the mirrored figures. Laenea's hands on the sides of Radu's face touched his scarred cheeks; she kissed him lightly, again, harder. His mustache was soft and bristly against her lips, against her tongue. His hands tightened over her shoulder blades, and moved down. He held her gently. She slipped one hand between their bodies, beneath his jacket, stroking his bare skin, tracing the taut muscles of his back, his waist, his hip. His breathing quickened.

At the beginning nothing was different-- but nothing was the same. The change was more important than motions, positions, endearments; Laenea had experienced those in all their combinations, content with involvement for a few moments' pleasure. That had always been satisfying and sufficient; she had never suspected the potential for evolution that depended on the partners. Leaning over Radu, with her hair curling down around their faces, looking into his smiling blue eyes, she felt close enough to him to absorb his thoughts and sense his soul. They caressed each other leisurely, concentrating on the sensations between them. Laenea's nipples hardened, but instead of throbbing they tingled. Radu moved against her and her excitement heightened suddenly, irrationally, grasping her, shaking her. She gasped but could not force the breath back out. Radu kissed her shoulder, the base of her throat, stroked her stomach, drew his hand up her side, cupped her breast.

"Radu--"

Her climax was sudden and violent, a clasp wave contracting all through her as her single thrust pushed Radu's hips down against the mattress. He was startled into a climax of his own as Laenea shuddered involuntarily, straining against him, clasping him to her, unable to catch his rhythm. But neither of them cared.

They lay together, panting and sweaty.

"Is that part of it?" His voice was unsteady.

"I guess so." Her voice, too, showed the effects of surprise. "No wonder they're so quiet about it."

"Does it-- is your pleasure decreased?" He was ready to be angry for her.

"No, that's not it, it's-- " She started to say that the pleasure was tenfold greater, but remembered the start of their loveplay, before she had been made aware of just how many of her rhythms were rearranged. The beginning had nothing to do with the fact that she was a pilot. "It was fine." A lame adjective. "Just unexpected. And you?"

He smiled. "As you say-- unexpected. Surprising. A little... frightening."

"Frightening."

"All new experiences are a little frightening. Even the very enjoyable ones. Or maybe those most of all."

Laenea laughed softly.

\* \* \*

They lay wrapped in each other's arms. Laenea's hair curled around to touch the corner of Radu's jaw, and her heel was hooked over his calf. She was content for the moment with silence, stillness, touch. The plague had not scarred his body.

In the aquaria, the fish flitted back and forth before dim lights, spreading blue shadows across the bed. Laenea breathed deeply, counting to make the breaths even. Breathing is a response, not a rhythm, a reaction to levels of carbon dioxide in blood and brain; Laenea's breathing had to be altered only during transit itself. For now she used it as an artificial rhythm of concentration. Her heart raced with excitement and adrenaline, so she began to slow it, to relax. But something disturbed her control: the rate and blood pressure slid down slightly, then slowly slid back up. She could hear nothing but a dull ringing in her inner ears. Perspiration formed on her forehead, in her armpits, along her spine. Her heart had never before failed to respond to conscious control.

Angry, startled, she pushed herself up, flinging her hair back from her face. Radu raised his head, tightening his hand around the point of her shoulder. "What-- ?"

He might as well have been speaking underwater. Laenea lifted her hand to silence him.

One deep inhalation, hold; exhale, hold. She repeated the sequence, calming herself, relaxing voluntary muscles. Her hand fell to the bed. She lay back. Repeat the sequence, again. Again. In the hospital and since, her control over involuntary muscles had been quick and sure. She began to be afraid, and had to imagine the fear evaporating, dissipating. Finally the arterial muscles began to respond. They lengthened, loosened, expanded. Last the pump answered her commands as she recaptured and reproduced the indefinable states of self-control.

When she knew her blood pressure was no longer likely to crush her kidneys or mash her brain, she opened her eyes. Above, Radu watched, deep lines of worry across his forehead. "Are you-- ?" He was whispering.

She lifted her heavy hand and stroked his face, his eyebrows, his hair. "I don't know what happened. I couldn't get control for a minute. But I have it back now." She drew his hand across her body, pulling him down beside her, and they relaxed again and dozed.

\* \* \*

Later, Laenea took time to consider her situation. Returning to the hospital would be easiest; it was also the least attractive alternative. Remaining free, adjusting without interference to the changes, meeting the other pilots, showing Radu what was to be seen: outwitting the administrators would be more fun. Kathell had done them a great favor, for without her apartment Laenea would have rented a hotel suite. The records would have been available, a polite messenger would have appeared to ask her respectfully to come along. Should she overpower an innocent hireling and disappear laughing? More likely she would have shrugged and gone. Fights had never given her either excitement or pleasure. She knew what things she would not do, ever, though she did not know what she would do now. She pondered.

"Damn them," she said.

His hair as damp as hers, after their shower, Radu sat down facing her. The couches, of course, were both too low. Radu and Laenea looked at each other across two sets of knees draped in caftans that clashed violently. Radu lay back on the cushions, chuckling. "You look much too undignified for anger."

She leaned toward him and tickled a sensitive place she had discovered. "I'll show you undignified--" He twisted away and batted at her hand but missed, laughing helplessly. When Laenea relented, she was lying on top of him on the wide, soft couch. Radu unwound from a defensive curl, watching her warily, laugh lines deep around his eyes and mouth.

"Peace," she said, and held up her hands. He relaxed. Laenea picked up a fold of the material of her caftan with one of his. "Is anything more undignified than the two of us in colors no hallucination would have-and giggling as well?"

"Nothing at all." He touched her hair, her face. "But what made you so angry?"

"The administrators-- their red tape. Their infernal tests." She laughed again, this time bitterly.

"Undignified"-- some of those tests would win on that."

"Are they necessary? For your health?"

She told him about the hypnotics, the sedatives, the sleep, the time she had spent being obedient. "Their redundancies have redundancies. If I weren't healthy I'd be back out on the street wearing my old heart. I'd be nothing."

"Never that."

But she knew of people who had failed as pilots, who were reimplanted with their own saved hearts, and none of them had ever flown again, as pilots, as crew, as passengers. *Nothing.*

He was shaken by her vehemence. "But you're all right. You're who you want to be and what you want to be."

"I'm angry at inconvenience," she admitted. "I want to be the one who shows you Earth. They want me to spend the next month shuttling between cinderblock cubicles. And I'll have to if they find me. My freedom's limited." She felt very strongly that she needed to spend the next month in the real world, neither hampered by experts who knew, truly, nothing, nor misdirected by controlled environments. She did not know how to explain the feeling; she thought it must be one of the things pilots tried to talk about during their hesitant, unsyncopated conversations with their insufficient vocabularies. "Yours isn't, though, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes I come back to Earth and never leave the port. It's like my home. It has everything I want or need. I can easily stay a month and never see an administrator nor have to admit receiving a message I don't want." Her fingertips moved back and forth across the ridge of new tissue over her breastbone. Somehow it was a comfort, though the scar was the symbol of what had cut her off from her old friends. She needed new friends now, but she felt it would be stupid and unfair to ask Radu to spend his first trip to Earth on an artificial island. "I'm going to stay here. But you don't have to. Earth has a lot of sights worth seeing."

He did not answer. Laenea raised her head to look at him. He was intent and disturbed. "Would you be offended," he said, "if I told you I am not very interested in historical sights?"

"Is this what you really want? To stay with me?"

"Yes. Very much."

\* \* \*

Laenea led Radu through the vast apartment to the swimming pool. Flagstones surrounded a pool with sides and bottom of intricate mosaic that shimmered in the dim light. This was a grotto more than a place for athletic events or children's noisy beach ball games.

Radu sighed; Laenea brushed her hand across the top of his shoulder, questioning.

"Someone spent a great deal of time and care here," he said.

"That's true." Laenea had never thought of it as the work of someone's hands, individual and painstaking, though of course it was exactly that. But the economic structure of her world was based on



service, not production, and she had always taken the results for granted.

They took off their caftans and waded down the steps into body-warm water. It rose smooth and soothing around the persistent soreness of Laenea's ribs.

"I'm going to soak for a while." She lay back and floated, her hair drifting Out, a strand occasionally drifting back to brush her shoulder, the top of her spine. Radu's voice rumbled through the water, incomprehensible, but she glanced over and saw him waving toward the dim far end of the pool. He flopped down in the water and thrashed energetically away, retreating to a constant background noise. All sounds faded, gaining the same faraway quality, like audio slow-motion. Something was strange, wrong.

Laenea began to tense up again. She turned her attention to the warmth and comfort of the water, to urging the tension out of her body through her shoulders, down her outstretched arms, Out the tips of spread fingers. But when she paid attention again, something still was wrong. Tracing unease, slowly and deliberately, going back so far in memory that she was no longer a pilot (it seemed a long time), she realized that though she had become well and easily accustomed to the silence of her new heart, to the lack of a pulse, she had been listening unconsciously for the echo of the beat, the double or triple reverberation from throat and wrists, from femoral artery, all related by the same heartbeat, each perceived at a slightly different time during moments of silence.

She thought she might miss that, just a little, for a little while.

Radu finished his circumnavigation of the pool; he swam under her and the faint turbulence stroked her back. Laenea let her feet sink to the pool's bottom and stood up as Radu burst out of the water, a very amateur dolphin, hair dripping in his eyes, laughing. They waded toward each other through the retarding chest-deep water and embraced. Radu kissed Laenea's throat just at the corner of her jaw; she threw her head back like a cat stretching to prolong the pleasure, moving her hands up and down his sides.

"We're lucky to be here so early," he said softly, "alone before anyone else comes."

"I don't think anyone else is staying at Kathell's right now," Laenea said. "We have the pool to ourselves all the time."

"This is... this belongs to her?"

"The whole apartment does."

He said nothing, embarrassed by his error.

"Never mind," Laenea said. "It's a natural mistake to make." But it was not, of course, on Earth.

\* \* \*

Laenea had visited enough new worlds to understand how Radu could be uncomfortable in the midst of the private possessions and personal services available on Earth. What impressed him was expenditure of time, for time was the valuable commodity in his frame of reference. On Twilight everyone would have two or three necessary jobs, and none would consist of piecing together intricate mosaics. Everything was different on Earth.

They paddled in the shallow end of the pool, reclined on the steps, flicked shining spray at each other. Laenea wanted Radu again. She was completely free of pain for the first time since the operation. That fact began to overcome a certain reluctance she felt, an ambivalence toward her new reactions. The violent change in her sexual responses disturbed her more than she wanted to admit.

And she wondered if Radu felt the same way; she discovered she was afraid he might.

In the shallow water beside him, she moved closer and kissed him. As he put his arm around her she slipped her hand across his stomach and down to his genitals, somehow less afraid of a physical indication of reluctance than a verbal one. But he responded to her, hardening, drawing circles on her breast with his fingertips, caressing her lips with his tongue. Laenea stroked him from the back of his knee to his shoulder. His body had a thousand textures, muted and blended by the warm water and the steamy air. She pulled him closer, across the mosaic step, grasping him with her legs. They slid together easily. Radu entered her with little friction between them. This time Laenea anticipated a long, slow increase of excitement.

"What do you like?" Radu whispered.

"I-- I like-- I-- " Her words changed abruptly to a gasp. Imagination exaggerated nothing: the climax again came all at once in a powerful solitary wave. Radu's fingers dug into her shoulders, and though Laenea knew her short nails were cutting his back, she could not ease the wire-taut muscles of her hands. Radu must have expected the intensity and force of Laenea's orgasm, but the body is slower to learn than the mind. He followed her to climax almost instantly, in solitary rhythm that continued, slowed, finally ceased. Trembling against him, Laenea exhaled in a long shudder. She could feel Radu's stomach muscles quiver. The water around them, that had seemed warmer than their bodies, now seemed cool.

Laenea liked to take more time with sex, and she suspected that Radu did as well. Yet she felt exhilarated. Her thoughts about Radu were bright in her mind, but she could put no words to them. Instead of speaking she laid her hand on the side of his face, fingertips at the temple, the palm of her hand against deep scars. He no longer flinched when she touched him there, but covered her hand with his.

He had about him a quality of constancy, of dependability and calm, that Laenea had never before encountered. His admiration for her was of a different sort entirely from what she was used to: grounders' lusting after status and vicarious excitement. Radu had seen her and stayed with her when she was helpless and ordinary and undignified as a human being can be; that had not changed his feelings. Laenea did not understand him yet.

They towed each other dry. Radu's hip was scraped from the pool steps, and he had long scratches down his back.

"I wouldn't have thought I could do that," Laenea said. She glanced at her hands, nails shorter than fingertips, cut just above the quick. "I'm sorry."

Radu reached around to dry her back. "I did the same to you."

"Really?" She looked over her shoulder. The angle was wrong to see anything, but she could feel places stinging. "We're even, then." She grinned. "I never drew blood before."

"Nor I."

They dressed in clean clothes from Kathell's wardrobes and went walking through the multileveled city. It was, as Radu had said, very early. Above on the sea it would be nearing dawn. Below only street cleaners and the drivers of delivery carts moved here and there across a mall. Laenea was more accustomed to the twenty-four-hour crew city in the second stabilizer.

She was getting hungry enough to suggest a shuttle trip across to #2, where everything would be open, when ahead they saw waiters arranging the chairs of a sidewalk cafe, preparing for business.

"Seven o'clock," Radu said. "That's early to open around here, it seems."

"How do you know what time it is?"

He shrugged. "I don't know how, but I always know."

"Twilight's day isn't even standard."

"I had to convert for a while, but now I have both times." A waiter bowed and ushered them to a table. They breakfasted and talked, telling each other about their home worlds and about places they had visited. Radu had been to three other planets before Earth. Laenea knew two of them, from several years before. They were colonial worlds, which had grown and changed since her visits.

Laenea and Radu compared impressions of crewing, she still fascinated by the fact that he dreamed. She found herself reaching out to touch his hand, to emphasize a point or for the sheer simple pleasure of contact. And he did the same, but they were both right-handed and a floral centerpiece occupied the center of their table. Finally Laenea picked up the vase and moved it to one side, and she and Radu held left hands across the table.

"Where do you want to go next?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it. I still have to go where they tell me to, when there's a need."

"I just..." Laenea's voice trailed off Radu glanced at her quizzically, and she shook her head. "It sounds ridiculous to talk about tomorrow or next week or next month but it feels so right." "I feel... the same."

They sat in silence, drinking coffee. Radu's hand tightened on hers. "What are we going to do?" For a moment he looked young and lost. "I haven't earned the right to make my own schedules."

"I have," Laenea said. "Except for the emergencies. That will help."

He was no more satisfied than she.

"We have a month," Laenea said. "A month not to worry."

\* \* \*

Laenea yawned as they entered the front room of Kathell's apartment. "I don't know why I'm so sleepy." She yawned again, trying to stifle it, failing. "I slept the clock around, and now I want to sleep again-- after what? Half a day?" She kicked off her boots.

"Eight and a half hours," Radu said. "Somewhat busy hours, though."

She smiled. "True." She yawned a third time, jaw-hinges cracking. "I've got to take a nap."

Radu followed as she padded through the hallways, down the stairs to her room. The bed was made, turned down on both sides. The clothes Laenea and Radu had arrived in were clean and pressed. They hung in the dressing room along with the cloak, which no longer smelled musty. Laenea brushed her fingers across the velvet. Radu looked around. "Who did this?"

"What? The room? The people Kathell hires. They look after whoever stays here."

"Do they hide?"

Laenea laughed. "No-- they'll come if we call. Do you need something?"

"No," he said sharply. "No," more gently. "Nothing." Still yawning, Laenea undressed. "What about you, are you wide awake?"

He was staring into a mirror; he started when she spoke, and looked not at her but at her reflection. "I can't usually sleep during the day," he said. "But I am rather tired."

His reflection turned its back; he, smiling, turned toward her.

\* \* \*

They were both too sleepy to make love a third time. The amount of energy Laenea had expended astonished her; she thought perhaps she still needed time to recover from the hospital. She and Radu curled together in darkness and scarlet sheets.

"I do feel very depraved now," Radu said.

"Depraved? Why?"

"Sleeping at nine o'clock in the morning? That's unheard of on Twilight." He shook his head; his mustache brushed her shoulder. Laenea drew his arm closer around her, holding his hand in both of hers.

"I'll have to think of some other awful depraved Earth customs to tempt you with," she said sleepily, chuckling, but thought of none just then.

\* \* \*

Later (with no way of knowing how much later) something startled her awake. She was a sound sleeper and could not think what noise or movement would awaken her when she still felt so tired. Lying very still she listened, reaching out for stimuli with all her senses. The lights in the aquaria were Out, the room was dark except for the heating coils' bright orange spirals. Bubbles from the aerator, highlighted by the amber glow, rose like tiny half moons through the water.

The beat of a heart pounded through her. In sleep, Radu still lay with his arm around her. His hand, fingers half curled in relaxation, brushed her left breast. She stroked the back of his hand but moved quietly away from him, away from the sound of his pulse, for it formed the links of a chain she had worked hard and wished long to break.

\* \* \*

The second time she woke she was frightened out of sleep, confused, displaced. For a moment she thought she was escaping a nightmare. Her head ached violently from the ringing in her ears, but through

the clash and clang she heard Radu gasp for breath, struggling as if to free himself from restraints. Laenea reached for him, ignoring her racing heart. Her fingers slipped on his sweat. Thrashing, he flung her back. Each breath was agony just to hear. Laenea grabbed his arm when he twisted again, held one wrist down, seized his flailing hand, partially immobilized him, straddled his hips, held him.

"Radu!"

He did not respond. Laenea called his name again. She could feel his pulse through both wrists, feel his heart as it pounded, too fast, too hard, irregular and violent.

"Radu!"

He cried out, a piercing and wordless scream.

She whispered his name, no longer even hoping for a response, in helplessness, hopelessness. He shuddered beneath her hands.

He opened his eyes.

"What..."

Laenea remained where she was, leaning over him. He tried to lift his hand and she realized she was still forcing his arms to the bed. She released him and sat back on her heels beside him. She, too, was short of breath, and hypertensive to a dangerous degree.

Someone knocked softly on the bedroom door.

"Come in!"

One of the aides entered hesitantly. "Pilot? I thought-- Pardon me." She bowed and backed out.

"Wait-- you did right. Call a doctor immediately."

Radu pushed himself up on his elbows. "No, don't, there's nothing wrong."

The young aide glanced from Laenea to Radu and back to the pilot.

"Are you sure?" Laenea asked.

"Yes." He sat up. Sweat ran in heavy drops down his temples to the edge of his jaw. Laenea shivered from the coolness of her own evaporating sweat.

"Never mind, then," Laenea said. "But thank you."

The aide departed.

"Gods, I thought you were having a heart attack." Her own heart was beginning to slow in rhythmically varying rotation. She could feel the blood slow and quicken at her temples, in her throat. She clenched her fists reflexively and felt her nails against her palms.

Radu shook his head. "It was a nightmare." His somber expression suddenly changed to a quick but shaky grin. "Not illness. As you said-- we're never allowed this job if we're not healthy." He lay back, hands behind his head, eyes closed. "I was climbing, I don't remember, a cliff or a tree. It collapsed or broke and I fell-- a long way. I knew I was dreaming and I thought I'd wake up before I hit, but I fell into a river." She heard him and remembered what he said, but knew she would have to make sense of the words later. She remained kneeling and slowly unclenched her hands. Blood rushed through her like a funneled tide, high, then low, and back again.

"It had a very strong current that swept me along and pulled me under. I couldn't see banks on either side-- not even where I fell from. Logs and trash rushed along beside me and past me, but every time I tried to hold on to something I'd almost be crushed. I got tired and tired and the water pulled me under-- I needed a breath but I couldn't take one... have you felt the way the body tries to breathe when you can't let it?"

She did not answer but her lungs burned, her muscles contracted convulsively, trying to clear a way for the air to push its way in.

"Laenea-- " She felt him grasp her shoulders: she wanted to pull him closer, she wanted to push him away. Then the change broke the compulsion of his words and she drew deep, searing breath.

"What-- ?"

"A... moment..." She managed, finally, to damp the sine-curve velocity of the pump within her. She was shivering. Radu pulled a blanket around her. Laenea's control returned slowly, more slowly than any other time she had lost it. She pulled the blanket closer, seeking stability more than warmth. She should not slip like that: her biocontrol, to now, had always been as close to perfect as anything associated with

a biological system could be. But now she felt dizzy and high, hyperventilated, from the needless rush of blood through her brain. She wondered how many millions of nerve cells had been destroyed.

She and Radu looked at each other in silence.

"Laenea..." He still spoke her name as if he were not sure he had the right to use it. "What's happening to us?"

"Excitement--" she said, and stopped. "An ordinary nightmare--" She had never tried to deceive herself before, and found she could not start now.

"It wasn't an ordinary nightmare. You always know you're going to be all right, no matter how frightened you are. This time-- until I heard you calling me and felt you pulling me to the surface, I knew I was going to die."

Tension grew: he was as afraid to reach toward her as she was to him. She threw off the blanket and grasped his hand. He was startled, but he returned the pressure. They sat cross-legged, facing each other, hands entwined.

"It's possible..." Laenea said, searching for a way to say this that was gentle for them both, "it's possible... that there is a reason, a real reason, pilots and crew don't mix."

By Radu's expression Laenea knew he had thought of that explanation too, and only hoped she could think of a different one.

"It could be temporary-- we may only need acclimatization."

"Do you really think so?"

She rubbed the ball of her thumb across his knuckles. His pulse throbbed through her fingers. "No," she said, almost whispering. Her system and that of any normal human being would no longer mesh. The change in her was too disturbing, on psychological and subliminal levels, while normal biorhythms were so compelling that they interfered with and would eventually destroy her new biological integrity. She would not have believed those facts before now. "I don't. Dammit, I don't."

Exhausted, they could no longer sleep. They rose in miserable silence and dressed, navigating around each other like sailboats in a high wind. Laenea wanted to touch Radu, to hug him, slide her hand up his arm, kiss him and be tickled by his mustache. Denied any of those, not quite by fear but by reluctance, unwilling either to risk her own stability or to put Radu through another nightmare, she understood for the first time the importance of simple, incidental touch, directed at nothing more important than momentary contact, momentary reassurance.

"Are you hungry?" Isolation, with silence as well, was too much to bear.

"Yes... I guess so."

But over breakfast (it was, Radu said, evening), the silence fell again. Laenea could not make small talk; if small talk existed for this situation she could not imagine what it might consist of. Radu pushed his food around on his plate and did not look at her: his gaze jerked from the sea wall to the table, to some detail of carving on the furniture, and back again.

Laenea ate fruit sections with her fingers. All the previous worries, how to arrange schedules for time-together, how to defuse the disapproval of their acquaintances, seemed trivial and frivolous. The only solution now was a drastic one, which she did not feel she could suggest herself. Radu must have thought of it; that he had said nothing might mean that volunteering to become a pilot was as much an impossibility for him as returning to normal was for Laenea. Piloting was a lifetime decision, not a job one took for a few years' travel and adventure. The way Radu talked about his home world, Laenea believed he wanted to return to a permanent home, not a rest stop.

Radu stood up. His chair scraped against the floor and fell over. Laenea looked up, startled. Flushing, Radu turned, picked up the chair, and set it quietly on its legs again. "I can't think down here," he said. "It never changes." He glanced at the sea wall, perpetual blue fading to blackness. "I'm going on deck. I need to be outside." He turned toward her. "Would you--?"

"I think..." Wind, salt spray on her face: tempting. "I think we'd each better be alone for a while."

"Yes," he said, with gratitude. "I suppose..." His voice grew heavy with disappointment. "You're right." His footsteps were soundless on the thick carpet.

"Radu--"

He turned again, without speaking, as though his barriers were forming around him again, still so fragile that a word would shatter them.

"Never mind. . just... oh-- take my cape if you want, it's cold on deck at this time of day."

He nodded once, still silent, and went away.

In the pool Laenea swam hard, even when her ribs began to hurt. She felt trapped and angry, with nowhere to run, knowing no one deserved her anger. Certainly not Radu; not the other pilots, who had warned her. Not even the administrators, who in their own misguided way had tried to make her transition as protected as possible. The anger could go toward herself, toward her strong-willed stubborn character. But that, too, was pointless. All her life she had made her own mistakes and her own successes, both usually by trying what others said she could not do.

She climbed out of the pool without having tired herself in the least. The warmth had soothed away whatever aches and pains were left, and her energy was returning, leaving her restless and snappish. She put on her clothes and left the apartment to walk off her tension until she could consider the problem calmly. But she could not see even an approach to a solution; at least, not to a solution that would be a happy one.

\* \* \*

Hours later, when the grounder city had quieted to night again, Laenea let herself into Kathell's apartment. Inside, too, was dark and silent. She could hardly wonder where Radu was; she remembered little enough of what she herself had done since afternoon. She remembered being vaguely civil to people who stopped her, greeted her, invited her to parties, asked for her autograph. She remembered being less than civil to someone who asked how it felt to be an Aztec. But she did not remember which incident preceded the other or when either had occurred or what she had actually said. She was no closer to an answer than before. Hands jammed in her pockets, she went into the main room, just to sit and stare into the ocean and try to think. She was halfway to the sea wall before she saw Radu, standing silhouetted against the window, dark and mysterious in her cloak, the blue light glinting ghostly off his hair.

"Radu-- "

He did not turn. Her eyes more accustomed to the dimness, Laenea saw his breath clouding the glass.

"I applied to pilot training," he said softly, his tone utterly neutral.

Laenea felt a quick flash of joy, then uncertainty, then fear for him. She had been ecstatic when the administrators accepted her for training. Radu did not even smile. Making a mistake in this choice would hurt him more, much more, than even parting forever could hurt both of them. "What about Twilight?"

"It doesn't matter," he said, his voice unsteady. "They refused-- " He choked on the words and forced them out. "They refused me."

Laenea went to him, put her arms around him, turned him toward her. The fine lines around his blue eyes were deeper, etched by distress and failure. She touched his cheek. Embracing her, he rested his forehead on her shoulder. "They said... I'm bound to our own four dimensions. I'm too dependent... on night, day, time... my circadian rhythms are too strong. They said..." His muffled words became more and more unsure, balanced on a shaky edge. Laenea stroked his hair, the back of his neck, over and over. That was the only thing left to do. There was nothing at all left to say. "If I survived the operation... I'd die in transit."

Laenea's vision blurred, and the warm tears slipped down her face. She could not remember the last time she had cried. A convulsive sob shook Radu and his tears fell cool on her shoulder, soaking through her shirt. "I love you," Radu whispered. "Laenea, I love you."

"Dear Radu, I love you too." She could not, would not, say what she thought: *That won't be enough for us. Even that won't help us.*

She guided him to a wide low cushion that faced the ocean; she drew him down beside her, neither of them really paying attention to what they were doing, to the cushions too low for them, to anything but each other. Laenea held Radu close. He said something she could not hear.

"What?"

He pulled back and looked at her, his gaze passing rapidly back and forth over her face. "How can you love me? We could only stay together one way, but I failed-- " He broke the last word off, unwilling and almost unable to say it.

Laenea slid her hands from his shoulders down his arms and grasped his hands. "You can't fail at this, Radu. The word doesn't mean anything. You can tolerate what they do to you, or you can't. But there's no dishonor."

He shook his head and looked away: he had never, Laenea thought, failed at anything important in his life, at anything real that he desperately wanted. He was so young... too young to have learned not to blame himself for what was out of his control. Laenea drew him toward her again and kissed the outer curve of his eyebrow, his high cheekbone. Salt stung her lips.

"We can't-- " He pulled back, but she held him.

"I'll risk it if you will." She slipped her hand inside the collar of his shirt, rubbing the tension-knotted muscles at the back of his neck, her thumb on the pulse-point in his throat, feeling it beat through her. He spoke her name so softly it was hardly a sound.

Knowing what to expect, and what to fear, they made love a third, final, desperate time, exhausting themselves against each other beside the cold blue sea.

\* \* \*

Radu was nearly asleep when Laenea kissed him and left him, forcibly feigning calm. In her scarlet and gold room she lay on the bed and pushed away every concern but fighting her spinning heart, slowing her breathing. She had not wanted to frighten Radu again, and he could not help her. Her struggle required peace and concentration.

What little of either remained in her kept escaping before she could grasp and fix them. They flowed away on the channels of pain, shallow and quick in her head, deep and slow in the small of her back, above the kidneys, spreading all through her lungs. Near panic, she pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes until blood-red lights flashed; she stimulated adrenaline until excitement pushed her beyond pain, above it.

Instantly she forced an artificial, fragile calmness that glimmered through her like sparks.

Her heart slowed, sped up, slowed, sped (not quite so much this time), slowed, slowed, slowed.

Afraid to sleep, unable to stay awake, she let her hands fall from her eyes, and drifted away from the world.

\* \* \*

In the morning she staggered out of bed, aching as if she had been in a brawl against a better fighter. In the bathroom she splashed ice water on her face; it did not help. Her urine was tinged but not thick with blood; she ignored it.

Radu was gone. He had told the aide he could not sleep, but he had left no message for Laenea. Nor had he left anything behind, as if wiping out the traces of himself could wipe out the loss and pain of their parting. Laenea knew nothing could do that. She wanted to talk to him, touch him-- just one more time-- and try to show him, insist he understand, that he could not label himself with the title failure. He could not demand of himself what he could break himself-- break his heart--attempting.

She called the crew lounge, but he did not answer the page. He had left no message. The operator cross-checked, and told Laenea that Radu Dracul was in the crew hold of A-28493, already prepared for transit.

An automated ship on a dull run, the first assignment Radu could get: nothing he could have said or done would have told Laenea more clearly that he did not want to see or touch or talk to her again.

She could not stay in Kathell's apartment any longer. She threw on the clothes she had come in; she left the vest open, defiantly, to well below her breastbone, not caring if she were recognized, returned to the hospital, anything.

At the top of the elevator shaft the wind whipped through her hair and snapped the cape behind her. Laenea pulled the black velvet close and waited. When the shuttle came she boarded it, to return to her own city and her own people, the pilots, to live apart with them and never tell their secrets.

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