

Originally published in "Galileo" #4.

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THE CHANNEL'S EXEMPTION

by Jacqueline Lichtenberg

Look at you! Yone Farris berated himself. *You can't even take your eyes off her!* To his left and a few strides ahead marched Livya Jeter, her pony tail bobbing over the tantalizing swell of her hips. *You've got a full scale Imprintation if ever I saw one!*

For the last three months, Yone Farris had guided the band of shipwrecked Gens, his mutant Sime senses unfailingly alert. But now, he no longer noticed the sun-spangled forest around them, or the ominous cracking roar that grew ahead of them. *Stop dramatizing!* he told himself. *It's simply Coital Deprivation.*

The column of ordinary humans, the Gens, depending on Yone's far-reaching Sime senses, followed him right up under the falling tree while he argued with himself. So why don't any of the other women do this to you? Well ... but if it's Imprintation, there's only one thing to do. Right! Explain it to her and get it over with. Can't. She's a Sime-phobe like her mother. Dozen reasons why she's untouchable. Face it! You've got the CD's and an Imprintation too. Plead Channel's Exemption and just take her! It doesn't apply. She's under age. She doesn't have to consent. You're a channel. You're exempt. There isn't a planet under Earth's dominion where you can be tried for rape! You can do it right this minute. No! Few more months and we'll be back in civilization. I can hold out that long.

Yone tried to quell the voice of temptation by moving closer to Brian Inikar, one of the Gens walking point, but close, Imprintation is the channel's affliction. You were born a channel, a special kind of Sime with special problems. You can't help what you are! I can always help it! I am what I choose to be! You can't always choose. What if she just brushed against you now? It's not likely you need. I can control it. Yeah. You can control yourself right into an early grave and everybody else here right along with you!

At that point he saw the shadow blotting out the alien sun, and simultaneously the Gens around him also looked up to see the wall of living wood majestically descending. Behind him, shrill cries erupted from the children; women's screams joined them, and the deeper male voices rose over the panic yelling, "Scatter!"

Without thinking, Yone grabbed Brian Inikar and pushed him toward the column of Gens. "Move them to the right!"

Then Yone braced his feet wide apart and raised his arms as if to take the entire weight of the tree on his bare hands.

Yone was built like the typical Sime, spare-framed, delicate looking, but incredibly tough. Yet no mere human flesh and bone, however mutated, could stop that tree. He had to draw on the one thing that differentiated him from the Gens, and he was the only Sime among them, the only one with tentacles to do this job.

From the orifices at each wrist, he extended the six tentacles that usually lay sheathed along each of his forearms from elbow to wrist. Flexing them, he touched the tips of his fingers with each of the dorsal and ventral pairs. Then the two slender laterals at the sides of each arm stiffened as he threw self -- the very energy of life itself -- into his secondary nervous system and out through the four nerve-rich lateral tentacles.

It felt as if he were focusing four beams of psychokinetic power through those delicate laterals. And for an instant, the tree actually slowed in its fall and hung over their heads. He could see the deep, regular expansion cracks in the bark, the festoons of dirty cobwebs, the trails of insects, the runnels of dripping pink sap. It was a wall that filled the universe.

His feet sank into the matted forest floor as if it were loose sand. He strengthened his body by consuming selyn at one hundred times his basal metabolic rate, a "tenth level Augmentation," and he knew he couldn't maintain it for more than a few seconds.

In one final burst of determination, Yone thrust the majestic tree to the left of their path as far as he could -- only a few degrees -- and prayed the others had gotten clear. Then he turned to sprint, with the last burst of augmentation left in him, clear of the far-flung branches of the crashing tree. He had gone three steps before his racing brain told him that Livya Jeter was standing hypnotized in the path of the tree. Skidding wildly, he turned and raced back for her, caught her up over his shoulder, and raced again to get clear.

Amid a final crescendo, the tree settled to the floor of the forest taking many lesser growths with it. One of the upper branches, as thick as a man's upper arm, slapped across Yone's backside and sent him rolling with his burden into a tangle of leaves and twigs around a lower branch.

They came to rest between two of the giant's fallen limbs, buried in musty smelling, bruised leaves, and for a moment both lay stunned senseless.

Then Yone became acutely aware of the soft Gen body lying on his chest, of his arms encircling the hips he had so ached to touch. The scent of her hair overpowered the staleness of crushed leaves. The warmth of her beat through him deliciously reviving his seared nerves with that peculiar power only the Gen had. Only the Gen body could generate selyn, and even though Livya had never donated selyn, as she lay there senseless from shock her body throbbed with the life of it.

Yone was not in personal need of selyn, but he had just expended nearly the entire reserve he'd gathered painstakingly from the forty-four general class donors among the survivors. The pulse of newly created selyn he sensed in her body was balm to sorely scorched nerves. He let his lips touch her cheek, seek her lips. His laterals -- usually used only in drawing selyn from the Gen body -- caressed her skin through several large rents in her clothing.

The Sime empathic faculty opened her body to him, and he could sense not only the reviving throb of selyn production, but each and every ache, strained muscle, cut, and bruised organ. He knew that by direct-sensing that made Sime physicians supreme diagnosticians, that she was unhurt by the fall and would soon wake. He also knew that she was physically and emotionally a virgin.

The touch of his lips on hers changed from the coolly impersonal Sime contact. It became a kiss that rose from his loins and flowed inward from his limbs. His whole body was responding to the total presence of her and he was already growing and searching with the urgency that flooded him. Now!

She was still only semi-conscious. He could tell by the total lack of response to what he was doing. There was no feedback, as there must be for a channel to accomplish this purpose.

When she wakes, I'll get her to cooperate. It will only take a moment.

He heard his thought and suddenly it wrenched a moan from him. No! It's not right! It must be her will! He shook with the negation that coursed down from his mind ramming into the upwards surging culmination of desire.

No! I am a Farris. I am a channel. I swore to obey the Tecton's Principles of Action. He had taken the channel's oath to the Tecton, and he would not let his body violate that oath. My body is mine! I control!

Painfully, he forced himself back from the brink of instant release, accepting the anguish of frustration and making his peace with it. It was a truly heroic effort, but he was unaware of his heroism. And he was not enraged when she refused to accept his heroic deed graciously.

She came to her senses to find herself gripped by his rock-tense but tender embrace, to find herself being kissed deep and hard as she had never been kissed before. Her soft, yielding body, stiffened. Her peculiarly Gen fear lanced through Yone's unshielded laterals, hit him in the pit of the stomach.

And Yone was Sime. The reflex her fear touched off was even more deep-seated than the one he

had just conquered. Aggression they called it, Sime Aggression. The Sime mutation was nature's most perfectly equipped predator, and the prey was the Gen. But Yone was also a channel, the one type of Sime able to control that aggression. He forced his shaking arms apart and rolled her, squirming and flailing, onto the carpet of leaves.

But even being a channel, he had to get away from the fear emanating from her or succumb to it and strip her of her selyn. His last inner resources were depleted.

Half rising, he plunged over the next lower limb of the fallen tree, wavered a few more steps, stumbled and fetched up hard against a greater limb. Stunned, he lay gasping, sweat soaking through his trail worn Astrogator's uniform, unaware that he was shaking from head to toe with one spasmodic fit after another.

I did it. I got away from her. It's going to be all right now. I did it. Nothing worse can possibly happen. I did it. By the time Brian Inikar reached Yone's side, the channel was oblivious to all but that one saving thought. "I did it."

Yone was unaware that he was being tended by a Gen whose expert fingers and analytical eyes had been trained by Distect Simes, conspirators dedicated to destroying the Tecton. He knew only that it was a male Gen near him, and so he was safe from that awful temptation that still lived in him. The Gen who worked on him now knew no fear, so he was safe from that reflex too. This Gen soothed his raw nerves with an emotional nager of compassion, concern, and perhaps a tart bit of criticism which was as it should be. Yone knew he'd behaved abominably.

It was close to an hour before Yone was able to grip the memory that, here on this forsaken Beacon Planet, on this long trek across uncharted wilderness toward an emergency call beacon that might not even function, there was no Tecton-trained Gen Donor, no First Order Donor schooled to serve First Order Channels such as Yone Farris. His only Donor was Valyu Alamain, an earnest young man barely half trained to serve the lowest order channels, and no match for Yone's needs. Then who was this Gen?

No sooner had he asked that question than, to his utter horror, he could answer it.

Brian Inikar. Convict. Being transported with his wife and child to the planet of exile where the Tecton sent all Distect conspirators. In the press of minute-to-minute survival after the crash, such social distinctions had lost importance. The six convicts had saved many lives, lent aid where needed, but always had the prudence to keep strictly away from the one and only Sime among the survivors. Too many of the Tecton's most loyal channels had succumbed to the mysterious lure of the Distect after a brief encounter with a Distect Gen. Nobody knew why.

As if rising from the depths of the blackest ocean, Yone fought his way toward full consciousness, warding off the aid he had been so gratefully accepting. He knew that Brian's

Distect-trained empathic touch had already saved his life. The Gen's whole nervous system had slipped into perfect resonance with Yone's bespeaking a level of skill Yone had not been exposed to for more than four months.

On the edge of full consciousness, Yone fell back, spent. I'd forgotten how good it can be! The Sime uses selyn; the Gen creates it. Without the Gens to supply that energy, the Sime faces the bleak cold death of attrition. During those days when Need grew and his system ached to function, even the channels who store vast quantities of extra selyn look into that cold abyss and know deep-diving terrors beyond Gen comprehension. At that time in their physiologic cycle, the Simes' libido is totally paralyzed, but instantly when Need is satisfied, that paralyzed sensitivity blooms again, the more intense for the hiatus. The cycle is most pronounced in the higher level channels such as Yone Farris.

Even under Alamain's care, Yone had been ruled by it. Now he looked into a future of alternating tortures -- two weeks of the CD's within arm's reach of Livya Jeter, then two weeks of increasing need within reach of Brian Inikar. But maybe, thought Yone, there's still time to break the hold he's got on me.

Meanwhile, Livya Jeter dragged herself away from the limb over which Yone had half-fallen, and white with shock, she managed to struggle to her feet. Then Cheryl Inikar, Brian's wife,

reached her side, made her sit for a time with her head between her knees.

As Livya's color returned to its normal, healthy brown, Cheryl encouraged her to talk. "Tell it, honey, tell it all. You'll feel better to get it out." The Inikars were from In Brim, while Livya and her mother were from Port Alon, but they all sprang from the same Terran stock -- Sime and Gen alike shared the same mind, the mind of Man. The cultural differences were vast, but Cheryl might have been for those moments Livya's big sister as she held her and listened to her stuttering tale.

"I was so frightened! You've no idea how strong a Sime is! He could have crushed my ribs to powder! And I could feel his tentacles all over my back, and his tongue ... uhh!"

"Easy Livya, it's over now. Calm down and think. You're a woman, you ought to be able to tell. You just described how he was kissing you. Honey, that's not a transfer-contact kind of kiss. He wasn't looking to take selyn from you! He wanted you to feel that what he was doing was good, but when you responded with fear, you undid him. But, Baby, listen, the next time he--"

Livya rose, knees still shaky but forced to lock her upright. The realization of Cheryl's meaning struck a new note of horror. "There ... there isn't going to be a next time. What do you think I am, some sort of prostitute? So maybe he can claim the Channel's Exemption, but there's no court of law anywhere that could make me! He has no rights over me!"

"He asks no more of you than you have stolen from him!"

"Stolen! You're the one who's the convicted criminal, not me. You're the one who sells your body to any Sime who asks for it! Why don't you go play with him!"

Before Cheryl could deny that rumored Distect behavior, Livya caught her breath and went on, cold and fiercely brutal. "If that Sime tries to rape me again, so help me I'll kill him."

Cheryl drew breath for a scathing retort, but then let it out wearily. "You won't have to. He's Tecton and Farris. He'll kill himself to keep from touching you against your will. That's what your precious Tecton stands for, the sacrifice of the noblest channels to the whim of the non-Donors."

A new voice joined them "Distect whore!" They both turned to find Evelyn Jeter picking her way through the branches toward them. "Get away from my daughter or I'll do the killing shoulda been done to you a year ago!"

Mrs. Jeter wasn't old enough to be called spry, but she still retained the lean, wiry build of her vanished youth. At first, Cheryl stood her ground, drawn to her full height as if to launch thunderbolts of rage. But then she gathered a cool self-control around her and retreated toward the knot of people gathering and counting themselves beside the top of the tree.

"Mother!" Livya greeted suddenly when they were alone. It just now occurred to her that her mother had been in danger too.

"What's this about rape, Liv? Did that Sime get his slimy tentacles on you?"

"They're ..." she started, and then tossed a thoughtful glance toward the screen of leaves that cut her off from the channel, "They're not slimy, Mother." She let herself drop onto the leaves.

Lost now in a calmer reliving of the incident, Livya didn't answer, just stared round-eyed at the barrier of leaves. What she had learned of Simes in school was sparse, but she did know that channels were a secondary mutation from the Sime type, and required a lot of special handling. That was the province of the highly trained Technical Class Donors.

"I'm no Donor, Mother, but --"

"Well, I certainly hope not! Those professional donors are a little better than prostitutes!"

"Mother, this is no time for hysteria. I have to think!" She rose and took a step toward the wall of leaves, hands clasped together at her waist, face contorted with the effort to overcome her shock and think coherently. "I'm no Donor, but he kept himself from hurting me."

"Well, that's a relief! Then he didn't actually do it?"

"He almost did, but he stopped himself. I couldn't break loose, he let me go, Mama," she asked, eyes fixed on the wall between her and Yone, "are all channels like ... him?"

Mrs. Jeter got to her feet and went around in front of Livya to take her shoulders and shake her gently, "Oh, Liv, baby, what has he done to you? The Channel's Exemption is law, so we can't sue that filthy beast for trying to do that. But we can hate him for it. The Simes can't endure hate. If

you hate them enough, they'll stay away from you."

"Hate? Mama, he could have done with me whatever he wanted, and he had the legal right to do it, but he did not." He let me go by an act of will over --" she groped for a word "-- over want. How can I hate a man with that kind of strength?"

"There's not much else to do, Liv. It's your only protection."

Livya twisted free and backed up. "Maybe there's nothing else you could do, but what do you think he would do in the same situation? Just sit in a hole paralyzed with fear and hatred?"

"He's a Sime. What has he got to fear? Or hate?"

"He's a Man, an incredibly powerful human being. He chose not to do what he wanted to do. I don't know his reason, but I'm sure he had a reason and he followed it even though it hurt him. I've never known you to do anything like that."

Mrs. Jeter shook her head wearily. Livya still looked a little pale around the lips, and her fingers were cold. "I don't know what's gotten into you, Liv, but I'm going to ask Mr. Flick for protection. That Sime won't be able to get near you alone."

"That's what you always do, run and hide behind somebody's protection. I don't need anybody to protect me, least of all from a man like Yone Farris!"

"From a man, maybe not, but from a slimy snake of a --"

"Once and for all, Mother, I'm telling you that I felt them and they ... ARE ... NOT ... SLIMY!"

Her words came out a fierce whisper though she wanted to shout. She'd been told so often that the Sime tentacles were slimy that, at first, she had felt slime. Only later had she been able to calm down and analyze the sensation. Her choking anger was in part at her mother for the untruth and in part at herself for being fooled by it.

"Livya Jeter, haven't I taught you better respect than to contradict your mother? You're only a child. You don't know what you're saying."

"I felt them," she repeated, cooler now. "They are not slimy. What else have you taught me that's wrong?"

"Livya!" She recoiled, shocked. "I'm your mother!"

Turning on her heel, Livya walked out from between the branches that isolated them from the main group. Her mother followed, and as they emerged they heard voices to their left. Cheryl Inikar, too, had heard the men's voices raised in brittle anger, and she came striding past them straight for the area to their left where Brian Inikar tended Yone. Drawn irresistibly, Livya, trailed after Cheryl around the end of the branch.

Yone had struggled to his feet and though he sagged like a man beaten in a fight, he faced off against Brian spitting words like bullets. "YOU. I. Forbid. To. Touch. Me!"

Brian sighed hugely and picked up his hat, slapping it against this knee to dust it off. Livya had only a moment to realize that Yone had used none of the filthy epithets, the handy labels and meaningless catch phrases with which everybody else addressed the Distect conspirators. Then Cheryl started toward Yone, finally stung to a tearful rage. "You ungrateful savage! If it weren't for Brian you'd be dead right now. You can't possibly think that bumbling incompetent Alamain could have done what Brian --"

Her husband stopped her advance with one out-flung arm and turned her to him. "Forget it, Cheryl. How else would you expect a Tecton channel to behave? He'll be all right now, for awhile at least." He turned to Yone. "You better get Alamain to finish the job I started for you or you'll be in convulsions by midnight."

"I don't require your advice."

Brian's lips compressed briefly over a retort, but then he relaxed and said gently, "You may hate me, but you're alive so we've all still got a chance to survive." He turned to his wife and walked back the way she had come. When they reached Livya and her mother, Brian stopped to look down at the girl with a trace of sourness.

Livya tilted her head back, and for the first time since being marooned with the Distect convicts, she examined his face. Brian was a tall, lanky Gen with a face to match. But what she saw in those

narrow features was a kind of hard-bitten integrity incongruous in an outlaw. And it was coupled with self-control not unlike that she'd found in Yone.

When he spoke, his voice was low-pitched, roughened by suppressed emotion. "You. You ought to be ashamed for what you did to him. But it's not surprising, considering your upbringing!" He raked Evelyn Jeter with a glance of unfathomable contempt and took his wife on toward the spot where the other District convicts were gathering.

For long moments afterwards, Livya stood in a paralysis of mixed emotions, not hearing her mother's voice or seeing Yone pulling himself together to face the next task. She knew only that Brian Inikar, the one man who had every reason to feel shame before law-abiding folk such as herself had the incredible power to make her feel guilty. Not only that, but he had selected the one insult which she had never been able to ignore urbanely -- that she was what she was because of some external influence and not by her own choice.

Swamped by this nameless guilt, she was unable to defend herself against the insult and instead searched inwardly for the cause of her shame. How could saving myself be wrong? But at what price? He looked like death! I'm not responsible for that. Brian Inikar thinks so. He's District. He's an expert on Simes. But he's a convicted criminal, a conspirator bent on overthrowing the Tecton! I can't accept his values. Then why do you feel shame and guilt?

Never had she known such confusion in all her seventeen years. She was so intent that she didn't see Valyu Alamain finally make his way up from the rear of the column and start toward Yone. She didn't see Yone start to walk out to meet his Donor. The channel was just suddenly there before her and she had to grasp his words by force of will.

"Miss Jeter, my oath requires that I apologize to you. And I do offer that formal apology. But I want you to know, in addition, that I am personally shamed by my lapse of control, I have never regretted any act so much."

Her mother spoke from behind her. "You don't regret it half as much as you're going to! When we get back, I'll see that the right people learn that you let Brian Inikar --"

"Mother!"

As if realizing for the first time that she was giving the Simea good reason to see that she, at least, didn't get back, Evelyn Jeter subsided. Livya met the Sime's eyes firmly. And with a little shock, she realized that in the three months of walking with him, depending on him for her very life, she had not exchanged more than a few words with him. Now, suddenly, she wanted to know everything about him.

Yone Farris did not look like a typical member of the celebrated Farris family. There was only a shadow of family resemblance around his fine-sculpted lips, prominent nose, and wide forehead. His skin was lighter than the typical Farris, and his hair was almost ash-blond instead of jet black. His face was too young yet to show character lines, but now it revealed an inner tension very much like a man forcing himself "just-one-more-step" beyond endurance. He had, however, the solid black eyes typical of the Farris. Those eyes now locked onto her gaze as if he wanted to tell her everything about himself in one word but couldn't find the word.

"You must not worry, Miss Jeter. I will see to it that you all get home. But I can't promise that my reflexes won't betray me again, so I advise you to stay as far away from me as you can."

"I ... will ..." The tremble in her voice embarrassed her. "I can forgive your refusal to offer me the Exemption. I do not wish you to feel guilty or ashamed about it."

Her eyes were suddenly fever dry, and her voice steadied. "I have done nothing wrong to be forgiven for."

"You cannot comprehend the wrong that you have done, and so for you it isn't wrong. That is the only kind of wrong that I forgive."

"Then don't forgive me, because I do comprehend. Your 'right' demands prostitution, and I reject that as 'wrong'."

He sighed and shivered suddenly as if from a chill, clenching his teeth momentarily. "So do I, Miss Jeter. Utterly. I could gain nothing from such a person, and so could not be attracted to one."

"You must mean something different by it than I, then."

He drew himself together and took one step toward Alamain. "Possible, but I doubt it. And now," he said raising his voice toward the donor, "Valyu! Come, we must see that they are making camp. We can't go any farther today. You and I must do some recruiting among the donors."

Livya went about the business of making camp mechanically. She and her mother chose a spot against the giant fallen tree trunk between two of the large, lower branches which they shared with several other families they always camped near. While the men went out hunting dinner, she helped the women spread their porta-tents using the tree trunk as one side of the tent and anchoring the corners of the flat sheeting with small boulders.

The porta-tent was a thin film of shiny material on one side, black on the other. Powered by a small selyn battery, the sheeting was a very efficient heat pump. In the desert where they had crashed, the self-cooling tents had saved their lives day after day. Here they used the heat at night.

Now, Livya wondered if Yone would be able to recharge the selyn batteries for them. The accident with the tree had suddenly driven home to her just how vitally dependent they were on the channel while before it had just been a phrase said by rote. Their firestrickers were selyn-powered -- how could they even make a cooking fire without the strikers? And most of their cutting tools, the really useful ones, were selyn-powered vibro-blades. The hand tools took hours to cut down a little tree, and once she had taken a turn using the hand machete to hack a way through the underbrush. They couldn't survive without repowering their tools.

Livya had become the fire-specialist among these families, learning quickly which woods would burn best and how to design a safe fireplace. As she worked that afternoon beside the majestic tree trunk, she found a renewed awe at the size of the thing, and the incredible hardness of the wood which wouldn't burn. The trunk itself was more than thirty feet in diameter and some of the branches were more than six feet thick. She couldn't calculate how much selyn it had cost to deflect its fall, but she reached a kind of numb astonishment that such a feat could be done.

The tree had stood with its roots on the bank of a stream. Undercut by recent floods, the bank had given way and the tree had fallen into the forest. The campers used the stream for water and even caught a few fish, while they grumbled about how they were going to cross it.

As the hunters returned and the women began dressing the carcasses and digging up roots to make soup, the leaders gathered for muttered conferences at the tent of K. Martin Flick, their elected spokesman to the Tecton which consisted here among the refugees only of Yone and Valyu Alamain. There was much coming and going of grim faces past Livya's fire, and the air of crisis did not escape her.

Yone's tent had been set up, as always, a little apart from the main group. This time, it was on the opposite side of a rather large boulder, using the rock face as one wall, spreading over a convenient limb of a tree, and anchored on the forest floor with heavy branches. The side-flaps were tied down for privacy, and all afternoon, a trickle of Gen volunteers had been going to and from his tent, donating selyn. But the grim faces told her quite plainly, it wasn't enough.

Eventually, word came down the line that they would have to do without heat for their tents this night. "Conserve what you have left, and pray your batteries don't leak. Light fires from your neighbor's when possible, and conserve your vibro-blades, too."

When her mother heard that they would sleep cold this night and for the foreseeable future, she was indignant. "We can't get along without heat! You'll catch your death, Livya. They can't do this to us!"

"They? They! What do you mean, 'they'? That man," Livya said, waving the firestriker wand toward Yone's tent, "saved your life today, and nearly died for it. But he didn't use one bit of your selyn to do it."

Evelyn Jeter recoiled. "You don't talk to your mother in that tone of voice! You have to respect your mother. Remember, it's your welfare I'm looking out for."

"How can I respect someone who can't even stick to a subject for two sentences?"

"And I suppose criminals and weaselly Simes are respectable! Standing around in public talking to such riffraff as if they were worth listening to, and they don't even make sense. Then you turn around and won't even speak civilly to your own mother!"

"Riffraff! That ... that ..." she pointed a shaking finger in the direction of Yone's tent "... that riffraff talks better sense than you ever did. Why can't you see truth when it happens before your eyes? You're wrong about their tentacles being slimy, and you're probably wrong about everything else too!"

"You don't contradict your --"

"I don't, facts do. That man saved us all from getting crushed today. That's a fact. He refused to let himself take advantage of me. That's a fact. He's the only thing that stands between us and death. That's a fact. And you refuse to donate even a tiny dribble of selyn to run your own tent's heating unit. That's a fact.

"Right now, Mother, it seems to me that you're the riffraff around here, and everybody thinks I'm just like you. I'm so ashamed!"

Mrs. Jeter gathered herself up into her most self-righteous stance and pointed, "Go to the tent and get to bed. You'll get no supper tonight. Think what you've said about your own mother, and tomorrow you'll apologize on your knees. You're almost a woman, and you're going to learn respect if it kills me."

"With you as a teacher, I haven't got a chance!"

"Go!" Their screaming had attracted the embarrassed stares of half a dozen people, but none would intervene.

For one tense moment, Livya teetered on the brink of total defiance, but her own feelings were so confused that she didn't know where else she wanted to be except huddled in her own sleeping bag where she could fight her way through the whirlwinds that seethed in her. She would not refuse herself what she wanted simply to defy her mother, and so she fled to her sleeping bag. At first, while the camp was having supper, she surrendered to gales of tears that seemed to feed on themselves. Eventually, she cried herself into a feverish slumber.

When she woke, the deep silence of late night was on the camp, her mother asleep beside her. In the clarity of emotional exhaustion, she realized that her anger at her mother had stemmed from her need to make her mother earn the 'respect' she demanded and Livya herself so desperately wanted to give. She had never found anyone she could really admire. Except, maybe, Yone Farris.

He had used the community selyn reserves to save her life. That was selyn collected in tiny bits during the last three months from forty-four General Class donors out of the seventy-seven survivors. There were twenty-four kids not old enough to create selyn. And there were six Distect Gens he wouldn't touch with a waldo let alone a tentacle. It seemed fair enough to her that the community should support the kids. And it seemed reasonable to keep the convicts away from their only channel since it was known that any Sime exposed to a Distect Gen inevitably goes Distect, not caring whether they kill in transfer. (But Yone had rejected that lure, her mind told her.) The prisoners made themselves useful around camp, and then made themselves prudently scarce. They weren't freeloading.

But she and her mother were freeloading because they could donate, but didn't.

And that, she realized, was the basis of her reaction to Brian's words. Brian had called her a freeloader, and she agreed. He had implied that she was a freeloader because her mother was a freeloader, and thus she couldn't help it. That infuriated her, and she did not agree. She could always help it.

She had struggled half way out of her sleeping bag before she remembered Yone's warning: "But I can't promise that my reflexes won't betray me again, so I advise you to stay as far away from me as you can."

It was one thing to donate selyn, even over her mother's authoritative 'forbid.' When they got home maybe they'd put her in reform school for being intractable, but at least she'd be in the right.

It was something else to compromise her own integrity by risking something she had agreed was wrong.

Suddenly, the whole thing became too complicated for her, threatening to smother her in frustration and ignorance. She felt an irresistible urge to move and after a few restless tosses that threatened to wake her mother, she pulled herself out of her sleeping bag, wrapped a blanket around herself, and went out into the chill night.

She stood a moment, trying to catch a glimpse of the stars through the trees. In the distance, she heard the night watch tromping through their rounds, tending the fires. There were dangerous night-prowlers in this forest. Twice, Yone had saved them from losses, once wrestling a toddler from the very jaws of a cat-like hunter. He'd killed it bare-handed.

She set off through the trees towards Yone's boulder refuge. He had warned her to stay away. The responsibility was now hers. Somehow, accepting that eased her restlessness. Whatever happened, her action wouldn't smudge anybody else's record.

But it was there, in that tent, that the answers lay. She felt that without those answers, the problem would surely smother her to death. Yet, when she drew near and heard footfalls to her left, she hung back in the shadows behind a boulder.

The steps came purposefully nearer and an arm drew aside the tent flap, spilling dancing firelight out onto the ground, and onto Cheryl Inikar. She was dressed in her hiking clothes, but her hair was down about her shoulders.

From within came Alamain's tenor voice. "You! Haven't you done enough for one day? He doesn't want you here. Go back to your tent."

"My God! What are you doing! Give me that! Didn't Brian warn you?"

"Get out of here," said Alamain coldly.

Yone's voice, choked up as if he were suppressing a cough, said "Please!"

"Don't worry, Hajene," said Valyu, "I won't leave you."

"Oh, yes you will!" said Cheryl. "Yone, give me that."

Unable to contain her curiosity, Livya crept around the rock to the end of the tent not being used as a door. Her mind was a tumult of questions. Was the Sime injured? By her or the tree? How bad? There was a crack through which she could see what went on inside, and a little of the warmth spilled out.

The tent floor had been swept clean, and on a ledge outthrust from the rock face burned a merry little fire, heating and lighting the tent. It was vented through a small hole formed where the top of the boulder drew back from the material of the tent. The space within was just large enough for the three of them with Yone stretched out on his sleeping bag. A few steaming pots of water were set about him.

The 'that' they were fighting over was a folded strip of material being used as a hot compress around Yone's forearms. As Livya set her eye to the crack, Valyu began to wrap the length of steaming cloth around Yone's arm, starting at the elbow. Cheryl streaked across the tent and ripped the cloth from his fingers. "No, not like that!"

Caught off balance, the Donor went over backwards, the Donor his feet kicking in the air. Cheryl circled the sleeping bag on which Yone lay helpless and took the Donor's place, deftly wrapping and twisting the compress from wrist to elbow, finishing before Valyu could regain his feet.

Then she moved to Yone's other side where his other arm was clad in a similar, but cool, bandage and unwrapped it, dunked it into a steaming pot, wrung it out gingerly, and said to Alamain, "You may as well go. This is going to take a while, and you aren't very much help."

Valyu made a grab for the bandage. "Maybe, but he certainly doesn't want you in here!"

However, as Valyu's hand closed on the material Cheryl had begun to twist, Yone's other hand came over to clamp firmly over Valyu's fingers, keeping him from pulling the cloth. "Don't. Valyu, she's doing it right. It's helping. Let her finish. Watch."

Valyu withdrew his hand obediently and watched, but although Cheryl let him see, she said, "He'll

never learn by watching, Yone. It's something you have to know by experience. Look," she said as she finished the wrapping and fished a chain from around her neck. Taking the chain over her head, she slipped a ring off of it and held the crest to the firelight.

Livya choked back a gasp. The Distect outlaw had a Tecton ring, and not just any ordinary donor's ring either, but one of the rare First Order Donor's rings with the additional four stars, the very highest ranking of all the professional donors.

Lunging across her lap, Valyu grabbed for the ring, "Thief!"

With one hand, Yone caught Valyu's shirt and pushed. The Gen staggered back a few paces and stayed there. Shocked beyond words. "No," said Yone. "Not thief. It's hers. Traitor, perhaps, but not thief."

Cheryl put the ring on her finger. "It's been years since I've worn this. And I won't lie to you. I am a traitor to the Tecton oath I took. But there is still a great deal of that oath I keep. I came here tonight to finish what Brian started, to honor that part of my oath that I've never broken."

Valyu burst out, "Honor! What do you know of Tecton honor!"

"Between us," said Cheryl holding the Sime's gaze, "he doesn't count Yone. This is between Firsts. You and me. I pledged to you by our common oath to attend one another in times of need, that I will not take advantage of your weakness, and that I will use nothing that would not be used in any Tecton Center.

Eyeing her carefully, Yone said, "No Distect tricks?"

"No Distect tricks. It's my life that's at stake here, Yone, not just yours. If you go under, we all go with you. Your oath won't allow you to refuse my help, even if it means sacrificing your own interests for the good of all of us. My word is good. You know that, and that's all you need to know."

Yone nodded weakly. "Valyu, go and visit with your brother's family until she tells you to come back. It will be all right."

As the Gen left the tent, Yone wilted back onto his blankets and lay gasping, wracked with spasms that brought tears to his eyes. Livya found herself holding her breath, her heart pounding with apprehension at each seizure. Their channel, their only Sime, was deathly ill -- and she suspected she was the cause.

For almost an hour, Livya watched Cheryl battle to keep the Sime breathing. Between compresses, she mixed a broth of powders and crushed tablets and made Yone drink it between seizures. "What did you put in that?" he asked after one sip, leery of her.

She told him, adding, "You'll feel great when it hits bottom." So he drank and after a bit the spasms relented. She massaged his arms thoroughly from shoulder to wrist and the cramps were soon gone leaving him looking wasted and withered against the sleeping bag.

"There," said Cheryl finishing off, "that should teach you not to go tossing trees around the forest without so much as a warm-up exercise!"

"It wasn't all from that."

"I know. And you ought to be ashamed about that, too, getting yourself caught in a hyperbolic situation with that irresponsible... excuse me ... non-Donor and right on top of a protracted tenth-level Augmentation, too! Honestly, you could get yourself fired from that nice cushy Astrogator's berth for that."

"That's all right. Was my last run anyway. They were only transshipping me to a new Tecton Center. I'm a channel, not an Astrogator."

She chuckled, moving to kneel at his head and knead his shoulders hard with a rocking motion as if giving artificial respiration. "There. You feel a lot better now."

"Great."

"Could you ever teach that little creep Alama in anything like this?"

"No. But don't expect me to praise your skills in public."

"That's all right. You're the only one around who needs them."

He opened his eyes, tilting his head back on her knees to look into her eyes, upside down. "You

were right, Cheryl. It would have been deadly serious if you hadn't come, I should have let Brian finish the job this morning."

"Your instincts were sound, though. Brian's not Tecton trained, he couldn't have done it this way. And if he'd done it our way, well, you wouldn't be Tecton any more. He knew you wouldn't let that happen, so that's why he sent me."

She smiled quickly then and bent down to kiss him. "You know, my first husband was a Tecton Farris channel. Do you think I'm qualified to finish this job?"

He looked up at her for a long time before answering. "I told Livya Jeter that I'm utterly against prostitution."

"So am I. You know that. You know what I am."

"A very extraordinary Donor."

"No. Ordinary Distect."

"I find the Distect philosophy disgusting."

"I can't condemn you for an opinion founded on false information."

"As I couldn't condemn Livya for her ignorance."

"But I'm not ignorant. I used to be a Donor. I know what I'm offering you and what it means. It is not a demeaning prostitution for me, not even by Distect custom, because I know myself and I know what you've chosen to be."

"Tecton. Your enemy. That's what I am by choice."

"Not my enemy. Myself operating on different postulates. I learned my error and changed; you would also. Knowing that about you, I can offer this without compromise, without any Distect tricks."

She kissed him again and he kissed back. Then she moved down to lie beside him, "I promise we'll do this Tecton style. If you want the truth about us, you'll have to come and ask later when you're stronger."

She kissed him again and Livya blushed hotly but her eyes refused to blink as she watched what Cheryl's free hand was doing. Just when Livya was about to turn away, embarrassed, Yone shuddered and rolled free.

Cheryl propped herself up on one hand. "Yone. I said Tecton style. Don't you trust me?"

"It's not that."

"Yone, you have to do this. I've seen Coital Deprivation eating away at your efficiency. In this condition, the next time you try to charge a battery, the cramps will start up all over again. I might not be able to stop them with what we've got on hand. Get it over with ... with me!"

"I wish it were that simple," he said from his stance before the fire.

Something in his tone drew Cheryl to her feet and across the little open space. "Yone? Oh, no! No! You couldn't have!"

"She was the first woman near me after Valyu performed that first donation on the hillside by the lifeboat. He didn't know much about Imprintation and didn't take precautions."

"Oh, that incompetent fool!"

"It probably would have happened eventually anyway. It's a permanent Imprintation."

"Yone, she's no match for you! A non-Donor, a --"

"The girl is not so bad, it's the mother. I'd lay odds Livya would have been in here to donate two months ago if her mother would have allowed it. But she's under age where she comes from, so it would be a violation of oath for me even to talk to her about donating, let alone about ... this other problem. So you can't help me, and there's nothing I can do about it either. You may as well go back and get some sleep before dawn. I'll cope with the battery-charging when and how I can."

"Damn the Tecton and its unholy rules!"

"Not in my hearing!"

"I'm sorry. Yone, what if I talk to her?"

Livya found her lips compressed, a frown scoring her smooth forehead, and her body tensed as if to jump in there and yell something like, "You'll have to talk to me yourself, Mister Channel, if you

want anything from me!" The protest roared so loudly in her ears that she almost missed Yone's answer.

"I can't let you do that. If there's any talking to be done, I'll do it myself. Understood?"

"Yes, Hajene." Livya was sure she meant it. Cheryl was a woman who kept promises too, and that was so rare in Livya's sheltered world she had learned to recognize the 'different ones.' She had walked and lived with these two for months not knowing they existed. But now she felt a dawning kinship with them.

"Look, Cheryl, you don't seem to realize that the Jeters are genuine Sime-phobes." He paced up and down before the fire, his silhouette rippling across the shiny surface of the porta-tent,

"Sime-phobia is a disease, like some people are terrified of house cats, and some people can't stand heights. You can't blame a blind man for not being able to see -- and you can't blame a Sime-phobe for not donating."

"Was Livya pathologically terrified when you had her in your arms?" It was a rhetorical question. Yone took a piece of firewood from the pile in the corner and struck it a few times against the boulder, then tossed it onto the flames, dusting off his hands. He faced her squarely, "No. She was frightened, but it was the ordinary Gen's fear, not the all-consuming terror of a Sime-phobe. But it doesn't matter, don't you see? It's her mother that counts."

"No, I don't see. It's not an inheritable disease, it's an acquired trait. Livya Jeter has lived with it, but not acquired it. Doesn't that tell you something about her?"

"Yes, it does, almost more than I can stand to know!" His jaw muscles bunched visibly as he gritted between clenched teeth. "But she's a minor!"

"By Sime tradition," said Cheryl, "she became an adult when her body started to produce selyn." Livya's breath caught in her throat. Yes. I am old enough!

But Yone was shaking his head. "By the Tecton Principles of Action to which I am bound by oath, I am forbidden to approach her because her mother is a Sime-phobe and she's a minor by the laws of her planet of residence."

"Channel's Exemption supersedes the Principles."

"Ha!" He let out one burst of what might have been laughter. "You may be a great Donor, Cheryl, but you're no lawyer. I can't use the Exemption because it would be in violation of a higher Principle."

"Isn't that a contradiction within the Tecton's own rules?"

"No!" But he said it far louder than necessary. "It's not the letter of the law that prevents me, it's the intent. The Exemption was not devised to sanction rape -- though it's been used to do that -- it was meant to protect consenting adults from local laws that would interfere in their private affairs. She doesn't know me at all, so even if she were adult she'd have no basis on which to consent. And I can't get to know her because of her mother."

"Look," said Cheryl on a note of desperation. "By Sime tradition, she can give responsible consent; by Tecton law she can't. By Sime tradition, as the sole channel here (like the old Sectuib of a Householding), you have the right to take her; by Tecton Principles, you can't. Yone Farris, you must pass judgement on the Tecton Principles of Action. Do they serve the purpose for which they were devised? Are they right? Do they apply here? Will you be guilty of murder and suicide if you refuse to violate the letter of those laws? Is your interpretation of the intent of the law proper? Can rules of conduct which lead to such a dilemma be followed in the blissful certainty that they are always right?"

Yone turned from her, and for a moment faced the spot where Livya stood, but apparently lost in such deep thought he was unaware of her presence. After a heart-stopping moment, Livya figured that the selyn nager from Cheryl must be so strong as to obliterate her relatively low selyn field. She would have to leave when Cheryl did or risk being caught.

Suddenly, the Sime turned on Cheryl, suspicion drawing his clean-lined face into a new and fearsome countenance. "You! You can run back to your husband and tell him I won't let Distect sedition get to me!"

"Not Distect sedition -- common sense! I could tell you all the answers instead of asking questions. I could show you the fundamental error in your assumptions, but I promised not to try and convert you just now. I haven't, have I?"

He regarded her silently. "Yone, to what kind of government are questions seditious? To what kind of government are they destructive? Is that what the Tecton is?"

"No." His voice was quieter now, thoughtful but still desperate. He went to the door of the tent, looked out into the night, and thought. She busied herself putting the pots away and banking the fire as an excuse to outstay her welcome. At length, he sighed audibly and turned. "No. I would not associate with such an organization."

"I know. I wouldn't work for just any Tecton channel, Yone."

"It may be," he said quietly, "that the Tecton is 'wrong' in this immediate situation, but what happens when we get back and Evelyn Jeter starts screaming rape or seduction? The basis of the Sime/Gen Union is trust; trust in the channels and our absolute adherence to the Principles of Action. Maybe, just this once, it wouldn't matter. But suppose all the channels, everywhere, started interpreting the Principles for their own convenience? The Union would crumble, and we'd be back to the Chaos again where Simes killed Gens for selyn and Gens tried to exterminate Simes."

"I've heard all that before," she said, rising to face him. "Tell me, Yone, how can right lead to evil? Is that the kind of universe you live in? A place where wrong leads to good and right leads to evil?"

"No. The Principles lead to right action, and that results in good, in survival for the whole human race."

"But I'm not the whole human race. And I want to survive. So do you. So does she. How long are you going to wait before you do what you know is right, until these rules which you know are wrong lead us all to disaster?"

"The rules by which I guide myself are not wrong."

She sighed. "OK, I promised not to prove the Tecton wrong. Look. This time you weren't paying attention and led us up under a falling tree. Next time you'll walk us off a cliff, or lead us into an ambush because you didn't notice a tribe of natives getting set to roll boulders down on us. Your condition is dangerous to the group, so by Tecton standards it's unethical for you to allow it to continue no matter what the price to any one individual."

"The infringement of the sovereignty of any individual by any channel imperils a much larger group than this one. It may be hard on us, but we must do it for all humanity."

"Damn the ... ! No, all right, this way. You know the CD's are no joke for a channel, especially a Farris. How long do you think it's going to be before Entran sets in, too? I've seen those seizures actually break bones, and you know what that would mean out here! Entran and the CD's together! There's just so much the human body can take before it starts to give up and whether you like it or not, you're only human and you can't carry the whole human race on your back, at least not if you don't take care of yourself!"

There were tears on her cheeks glinting in the reflected firelight. "Shall I describe what a case of severe multiple deprivation looks like? Yone, I used to work on the frontier -- I've seen it, and I never want to see it again. It starts with a niggling little infection, a kidney or bladder infection, nothing serious. Fever and chills, then pneumonia. Finally, the liver starts to give out, and from there it's straight downhill to the grave, a very messy grave, Yone Farris!"

"It's only Coital Deprivation, nothing so bad as all that!"

"I'm giving you my professional diagnosis. Acute multiple deprivation with an Imprintation complicating matters. If I have to, I'll take you by the ear and march you over there and make you explain it to her sensibly!"

"It's not that simple, I told you. She's a minor!"

Cheryl sighed heavily, deflated but not defeated, weary but not vanquished. "It's almost dawn. This is getting us nowhere." She took off the Tecton ring and stowed it on the chain, tucking it

beneath her clothing. "You better get a few hours' sleep. Maybe your head will be clearer in the morning. I certainly hope so, because if you don't do something for yourself soon, I'm going to do it for you."

She paused at the tent flap, and Livya, recalling her resolve to slip away unnoticed, scurried around behind the boulder where the mass of rock would insulate Yone from her. As she moved, she heard muttered goodnights from the tent, and then footsteps, a few words with a perimeter guard, and silence.

She had wanted facts, and now she had them in blinding abundance. The Channel's Exemption was not, as her mother said, legalized prostitution.

If she was wrong, then she'd have to learn to live with it. But whatever happened, Yone Farris wasn't a man she could abandon.

She started around the boulder toward the tent door.

Half way there, Yone met her, and the graying dawn revealed his gentle smile, peaceful at last.

"Livya, I've got to talk to you."

"I know. I was listening to you and Cheryl in there all night."

"Yes, I felt you leaving. I couldn't let you go."

He considered her intently but didn't reach out toward her yet. She said, "What are you going to do?"

"We are going to do a lot of things, Livya. But first, it's time we had a little talk about what it means to be grown up enough to love."

END