

Venus of Dreams

Pamela Sargent

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Author Biography

Pamela Sargent received her B.A. and M.A. in philosophy from the State University of New York at Binghamton. She is the author of more than twenty stories which have appeared in Fantasy & Science Fiction, Universe, New Worlds, Eros in Orbit, Wandering Stars, Two Views of Wonder, Fellowship of Stars, and other magazines and anthologies. She is also the editor of numerous anthologies, including Women of Wonder, Bio-Futures, More Women of Wonder, and the New Women of Wonder. She lives in upstate New York.

To George

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Venus of Dreams

Part One

One

The night air was clear and cool. In the hour before dawn, the village of Lincoln was silent. Julia walked along the town's narrow main road; her granddaughter Iris clung to her hand. A dark wall of houses lined the road on either side. Julia moved slowly so that the little girl could keep up with her.

Julia had been born in Lincoln. The small town, one of hundreds in the Plains Communes of North America, took pride in its illustrious name; in the centuries before the Mukhtars of Earth's Nomarchies had brought peace to the world, a great Plains city, now a ruin, had borne the name of Lincoln.

The road began to curve upward as the two left the houses behind; it came to an end near the bottom of a small hill. Julia and Iris climbed the slope and stopped at the top of the hill, where the little girl could see a field of grain stretching to the northern horizon. Julia gazed at the sea of wheat silently for a moment before turning east, then sat down and covered the child with a fold of her warm cloak.

"There's your star," Julia said as Iris nestled under her arm. "That one there — the one shining steadily. I saw it the moment you were born."

Iris stirred restlessly. "Wenda told me," she murmured. "She said women born under that star have many lovers because it was named for love." The girl recited the words, not really sure exactly what they meant.

"All women have lovers," Julia said, "and any respectable woman has several. That's not what it means. Wenda believes a lot of foolish things." Her arm tightened around Iris. "You mustn't say that to Wenda, though. You'd hurt her feelings, and most of Lincoln would rather give her credit for wisdom."

Iris looked up at her grandmother. She had just begun to notice that Julia's voice often sounded hard and mocking; sometimes she seemed to mean the opposite of what she was saying. "What does it mean, then?"

"First of all, it's not a star — it's a planet. It's a world, like Earth, and it's being tinkered with so that people can live on it someday. Maybe your children will live there instead of here — that might be what it means. Maybe you'll become something different."

Iris was puzzled. She had known that the star was a planet, though she had only a vague idea of what a planet was. Planets, like Earth, circled the sun, but, unlike the Associated Habitats, they had not been built by people. What did Julia mean by saying that Iris's children might live on Venus? The boys would wander the Plains and the girls would stay in Lincoln and farm, as her family had always done.

Iris's mother, Angharad, was proud of her lineage; her people had been part of the Plains Communes even before the Plains became one of Earth's Nomarchies. Angharad could recite lists of ancestors, among them Indians and old farm families; a few had migrated to the Native American Nomarchy, but most had remained on the Plains. This lineage was preserved not only in Angharad's memory but also in the memory banks of the cyberminds that served Lincoln. Anyone could call up an ancestral list and listen to the musical chanting of names, and Angharad's list was more illustrious than many.

"Bet you don't know that it isn't really the light of Venus you're seeing," Julia said. "They had to build a

giant shield in space near that world to protect it from the sun and let it cool, so what you're actually seeing is the shield's reflected light. Wenda probably didn't think of that when she decided what that sign meant for you. There's more to life than Lincoln, you know. I left this town once."

"But you came back."

"Yes." Julia's voice sounded hard once more.

"You never talk about it," Iris said. "Nobody's ever even told me where you went."

Julia shrugged under her cloak. "There's no reason anyone should have mentioned it to you, but it isn't a secret. I went to live in the Atlantic Federation. They needed workers to repair a few of the sea walls."

Iris's mouth dropped open. "Really?" She shivered a bit, thrilled by the revelation.

"I worked on the dikes near New York. A few of us even took a trip into the city once, a boat tour."

"Oh, Julia." Iris imagined a boat with sails gliding among the nearly submerged towers of the old city. The girl had seen images of New York with the aid of the band that could link her to the cyberminds, and that had been almost like being there, but Julia had seen the sight with her own eyes.

"It wasn't a fancy tour. Manhattan in the morning, lunch at the cafe on top of the World Trade Center, a lot of gab from the guide, and a little diving for anyone willing to risk getting hit by another boat."

"Oh, Julia," Iris said again.

"I worked on dikes for over a year. Some of my friends went on down the coast afterward, but the rest of us weren't needed, so I came back home." The woman paused, as if wondering how much more to tell the child. "You see, they had enough workers on the dikes, and they knew my mother had a farm here, and that I could be more useful here than there. I had to come back."

Iris frowned. "They forced you?"

Julia chuckled mirthlessly. "The Nomarchies never force anyone, you know that, and especially not here. We're a free people — we always have been. I had a choice — come back here or risk being sent to a strange place where my skills might be needed. I guess I was afraid of where I might end up, and my mother was begging me to come back and continue our line." Julia drew up her legs. "The Nomarchies and the Mukhtars always give you a choice. The cyberminds can teach you anything you want to know, and if you don't take advantage of it, that's your decision. You can do anything you want as long as there's a demand for it. You can live anywhere you want, as long as you have work in that place. Why, you can even have as many children as you want, if you're prepared to ignore the Counselor telling you and all your neighbors that only one or two are needed, and don't mind people thinking you're being obstinate or selfish." Her low voice was hoarse; her fingers dug into Iris's shoulder.

Julia bit her lip. She was saying too much, saying bitter words that an eight-year-old child should not hear, yet she wanted Iris to hear them.

Julia glanced at her right wrist, gazing at the identity bracelet she no longer needed but still wore even though she was unlikely to leave Lincoln again. Turning her head, she looked south, past the town's sloping roofs, at the clearing where the floater cradle stood. The airship bringing her home had docked there; her mother Gwen had been there to greet it. Gwen's grasping hands had made her think of the clamps and tethers holding the helium-filled dirigible in its egg-shaped cradle. Even now, she did not care to watch when a floater, freed from its bonds, left Lincoln for the world beyond. Her own bonds still bound her.

She loosened her grip on her granddaughter's shoulder. You might still have a chance, she thought. You might find a way to bring greater glory to our line instead of losing yourself in dreams of the past, as my daughter does. If people could change a world, then they could change themselves.

Iris was feeling uneasy. She already knew, without a warning from her grandmother, that this was not a conversation to share with Angharad or anyone else. "I can do what I want, can't I?"

"Of course you can." Julia sounded as though she did not mean it. "But you'd better be sure of what you want first, and of how to get it. By the time I found out, it was too late."

Iris gazed at the distant morning star. She had never doubted the pattern of her life before; now Julia was saying that some terrible disappointment awaited her. She looked up at her grandmother's round face, which was nearly hidden by her hood; two tiny lines, the only sign of age, were already etched on either side of Julia's broad mouth. Julia was older than the grandmothers of Iris's friends; she had been nearly thirty when Angharad, her only child, had been born. Was that why Julia was unhappy? Had she waited too long to give birth? Had she wanted other children and been told by the Counselor that Lincoln had enough young ones?

Every Plainswoman valued her line; most bore at least one child before the age of twenty. Because most people could expect to live for more than a century, seven or eight generations of women might live in the same house or town, thus preserving the continuity of their line. The past lived on in the oldest; the future was reflected in the youngest, who could see what she would become. A line was a living bond in a household.

But Julia's line was not like others. Only three generations of her line were alive in Lincoln, and their grasp of the past and future was more tenuous. Julia's mother Gwen had died early, never reaching her seventh decade, and Julia's grandmother had died soon after that — of grief, according to Wenda.

Iris, feeling the weight of her own responsibility to her line, was suddenly afraid. "What should I do?" the child wailed, as she thought of the distant misery that might await her.

"Iris, Iris." Julia hugged her, then let her arm drop away. "What do you want?"

The girl was silent for a moment, wondering how much she dared to admit. But Julia would understand. Maybe her grandmother had already guessed why she had been awake so early. Iris had sensed the woman's restlessness before, had heard Julia creeping down the stairs in the night or caught a glimpse of her at dawn on the hill. Perhaps Julia had heard her too. Her grandmother hadn't seemed surprised to find her awake so early that morning.

"You won't tell anyone?" Iris said. "You won't tell Angharad, will you?"

"I won't say a word."

Iris believed her. Julia did not gossip with any of the townsfolk or even with the women of their household. "I want to find out things," Iris burst out. "Sometimes I wait until everyone's asleep, and then I turn on my screen or put on my band. First, I just wanted to see places. I swam around New York — it was just like being there."

Julia shook her head. "Better than being there, child. A mind-tour always shows you the nicest spots. Well, you needn't hide that. Everybody takes mind-tours — keeps us happy to stay put the rest of the time."

"Not just that, Grandmother. I wanted to see where it all was — how far New York is from Lincoln,

how far Tashkent is from Islamabad. The cybers showed me maps, just with pictures at first, until I learned how to read the names.”

Julia clutched her wrist. “You read the names?”

“You promised you wouldn’t tell.”

“And I’ll keep my promise.”

“I learned the names, and then the cybers showed me stories about some of the places. I saw pictures with the band and then a voice told me I could look at words on my screen and now I can look at the words and make up my own pictures in my head.”

Julia let go of Iris’s arm. The woman’s eyes were wide; Iris couldn’t tell if she was upset or pleased. “Go on.”

“I wanted to find out more things, about what New York was like before the flooding — things like that. Sometimes, when I think a question, I see a woman and she tells me where to find the answer and gives me codes to call it up and if I can answer her questions afterward, she gives me more to read.” Iris turned toward the town. Light shone through a few of the windows; Lincoln was beginning to wake up.

“Now she’s teaching me about numbers too,” Iris continued in a lower voice. “She says they’re another language, like words. She told me I can learn whatever I want. It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Of course it’s true. She’s a teaching image. Iris — you’re supposed to learn from her.”

“My friends don’t. I told Laiza about her and she told me she never saw anything like that. I made her promise not to tell or I’d tell everyone her secrets.”

“Of course they don’t know about her. I was just like your friends, playing games and using my band for mind-adventures. All I needed to know was how to run the farm equipment, and you don’t need reading for that.” Julia sighed. “Listen to me. Do what that image tells you to do. The more you learn, the more chances —” She paused. “I wish I had learned more. By the time I tried, it was too late. I can’t read anything except my name and a few others and enough figures to keep track of the time.”

“But that’s all anyone needs here.”

“Here.” Julia patted Iris’s head, smoothing down the long, thick curls.

Can I travel if I learn more? Iris wondered. That notion excited her, but disturbed her as well. Would she have to leave her family and friends? She wouldn’t mind traveling for a while, but she could not imagine leaving Lincoln for good; even Julia had come back. But Julia wasn’t happy. Iris felt bewildered.

She looked up at her grandmother. Julia wasn’t happy because she had not reached for enough; she had left Lincoln only to find that she was not really needed anywhere else. Julia was telling her to try for more than Julia herself had attempted.

The eastern sky was pale with light. Julia rose, adjusting her cloak. “Time to go home,” she murmured to Iris.

The teaching image, who called herself Bari, had become Iris’s friend. The girl knew that the image was not a real woman, but only a set of complex responses presented to her by the cyberminds when she linked herself to them with her band. The real Bari who had served as the model would be living her life elsewhere, unaware of Iris, or might even be dead, but Iris forgot that when she spoke to Bari’s image.

Julia, with her talk about Venus, had aroused the child's curiosity about that world. There, her grandmother had told her, was a place where people did great deeds; there was a place where people could do something new instead of what others had done before them, where even a worker was of value. It was Bari who explained what Venus's transformation might mean to humanity.

With her band, Iris was able to see Venus as it had been over four hundred years ago, before its transformation had begun. She floated at the edge of an atmosphere nearly two hundred kilometers thick, then dropped through the ionized layers toward the poisonous clouds below, where the strong winds howled as they swept westward around the planet. Venus was shrieking its warning to her and to all people: You tame me at your peril; you may have named me for love, but remember the wildness and cruelty that is so often part of love.

As Iris continued to fall, the winds died and the acidic clouds thinned into a haze. Now, she seemed to be standing on a barren plain of basaltic rock; to the west, lightning flickered above a volcano. The volcano's slopes made her think of a mountain of shields, thrown there by invisible warriors as they awaited a coming battle. An eerie orange light shone through the stagnant haze, illuminating the hellish world.

That surface, four hundred years before, had been almost nine times as hot as the hottest summer days on the Plains; the atmospheric pressure had been ninety times as great as Earth's. Even if Iris could have stood on the surface and endured the heat without being crushed by the pressure of Venus's atmosphere or poisoned by the sulfuric acid of the clouds, she would have had no air to breathe. The atmosphere of carbon dioxide, which kept the intense heat from escaping, would have killed her.

Yet human beings had begun to terraform that world, dreaming of making it a new Earth. If they could do that, Iris thought, then they could do almost anything; the light of the planet would show all the people of Earth their true greatness. She thought: If I could be part of it and work there, I'd be doing something wonderful. She would not return to Lincoln discouraged and unhappy, as Julia had; she would stand on the hill with her descendants and tell them proudly of her own deeds as she pointed at the beacon of Venus.

This dream had begun in one mind, the mind of a man who had somehow managed to look beyond the ruined Earth on which he lived.

Karim al-Anwar had been one of the earliest of Earth's Mukhtars; that simple title, which any village elder in his part of the world might have claimed, belied his power. The Mukhtars who had preceded him had survived Earth's wars over resources and had seen many of the ravaged world's people abandon Earth for space, to make new homes in hollowed-out asteroids and, later, inside vast globes built out of the resources sunspace offered. Those left behind on Earth had gathered together, seeing that the world could now be theirs and the destiny of their people fulfilled.

The New Islamic States became the first Nomarchy, which stretched from the eastern shore of the Mediterranean to the Central Asian plain. A few people in that region had seen their chance for power at the end of the last of the Resource Wars, when the Russians who had dominated them for so long had finally lost their grip on that territory. If the soldiers of the New Islamic States could seize control of the weapons in Earth orbit, the world would be theirs.

Those soldiers, along with the rest of Earth, endured the humiliation of being forced into peace, for those living on the space stations had repudiated any allegiance to Earth and taken control of the orbiting weapons, and it was then that the Islamic soldiers saw their opportunity. They became the first to negotiate with the spacedwellers, and swallowed their pride to plead their case, for they saw that the spacedwellers did not want the burden of holding Earth in check, and were already planning to abandon

the home world for habitats in space.

The New Islamic States did not win the Earth. It was thrown to them, a worn-out husk that the spacedwellers no longer wanted. Unity under one power might enable Earth to rebuild; it had not mattered to the spacedwellers which group held that power.

The first Nomarchy's old enemies, drained by war, made an alliance with the Islamic States; nations that had once been stronger were in no position to fight. Once, the Mukhtars and their people had been suspicious of the culture that had dominated the world; now they saw that they would have to make it their own in order to survive.

Earth began to rebuild. More Nomarchies were formed, each with some autonomy, but ruled at first by one of the first Nomarchy's Mukhtars, and later by those the Mukhtars had trained. The Guardians of the Nomarchies, all that remained of the armed forces that had once fought Earth's battles, would maintain the orbiting weapons systems and keep the peace.

Karim al-Anwar might have contented himself with helping to keep what Earth had managed to wrest from the ruins. But where others saw people finally at peace, Karim saw people who needed a new dream, a goal that might lift them to greater endeavors that would rival the accomplishments of the Associated Habitats and their people, who had abandoned Earth. The people of the Nomarchies needed more than the placid hope of preserving what they had. They had been fortunate; Earth's most destructive weapons had been used only intermittently during the Resource Wars. Yet Karim believed that, without an outlet, widespread violence might once again be visited upon his world.

Karim might have had hidden reasons for his dream. Perhaps he had wanted his name to live forever; perhaps his vision had been the product of a half-mad mind wanting to dominate human history. Maybe he had wanted to bury the shame of knowing that his own people would have had no power if the spacedwellers had not given it to them. There was no way for Iris, as she learned of Karim, to be sure, for Karim's true self had been swallowed by the legend he had helped to create.

Karim had dreamed of transforming another world. The ways of the Associated Habitats were a break with Earth's past, while Karim sought a continuity with the older culture. Planets were the proper homes of humanity, not the closed Habitats. There were worlds within Earth's grasp, planets that could become new homes.

Mars had seemed the most likely candidate for terraforming, but Habbars lived on the two Martian satellites and had already established their claim to the Red Planet. The gas giants beyond the orbit of Mars offered too many obstacles to transformation, and people inhabiting their satellites would be too far from Earth and its influence. That left Venus, Earth's so-called twin.

The ancient goddess who had borne the names of Venus and Aphrodite had been born of the sea and the blood and seed of the ancient god Uranus; she had risen from the sea in all her beauty, alighting on the island of Cythera to be worshipped. The death of the old god had given her life; his blood had become her beauty. So the planet named for her would also be transformed, and its people become a new Nomarchy of Cytherians.

Though the legend said that Karim al-Anwar had quickly brought others to share his dream, it was likely that many had thought him mad. His Venus Project would demand much from Earth, and there was little enough to give. Why should more resources be drained by such a task?

Karim, as it happened (though the legend might also have exaggerated his capabilities), was not only an engineer but also a student of history. The Venus Project, he argued, costly as it might be, would stretch Earth's abilities; the new technologies that would have to be developed would enrich the home world,

and Earth would acquire a new generation of knowers and doers, as the Associated Habitats had done. Earth, he believed, had suffered strife not because its resources were too few, but because the world had not seized the opportunities for greater resources that space had offered; it was no surprise that the spacedwellers, growing impatient, had escaped Earth's bonds.

In the future, Karim claimed, Earth might in fact need the knowledge the Venus Project would yield, in order to transform itself. Many had noted the rise in Earth's temperatures, the slow melting of its polar ice caps, the gradual flooding of coastal cities, the increase of carbon dioxide in Earth's atmosphere. When Karim thought of the barren, hot, dead land under Venus's clouds, he saw Earth's own possible future, and feared for it.

Karim al-Anwar spoke of revitalizing Earth's cautious and fearful culture with the great task of the Venus Project. From scraps of evidence gleaned by those who had studied the Cytherian planet and who had posed the possibility that Venus might have had oceans during its distant geological past, Karim composed a dreadful picture of Earth's possible future fate, and spoke of human history passing into Habber hands if Earth could not learn how to transform a world. Perhaps he also suspected that the Venus Project would occupy those who might otherwise have interfered with the Mukhtars and their control of Earth's Nomarchies, and did not voice those particular thoughts.

Karim lived only long enough to see a study of the Venus Project's feasibility begun, but he had imbued his followers with his goal, and died knowing that others would achieve it. That, at least, was what the legend claimed. Perhaps Karim, contending with those who considered him an impractical dreamer, had begun to despair before then; maybe some of those who at first opposed him took credit for furthering his vision later. Some, in the centuries to come, might even have thought that Karim was fortunate not to have seen the results of his dream; history, as always, would confound both visionaries and naysayers alike.

Karim, Iris saw, would long be remembered. Karim had not been content with what he had, even when his power was greater than that of most; he had reached for more. Somehow, Iris felt a bond with this man, even though he had been a Mukhtar and she was only one of those millions the Mukhtars ruled. She could share his dream. She could become more than another name in the list of her line, more than another farmer who kept the bellies of Earthfolk full. Making grain grow on the Plains was little compared to seeing a world bloom under one's hands.

Bari's voice would fill with pride as Iris viewed the history of the Project's beginnings. Without being shaded from the sun so that its temperature could begin to drop, Venus could not be changed; the Project's first goal had been to provide a shield. The immensity of that task alone was enough to cause even Karim's most devoted disciples to doubt the wisdom of the Project.

The space station called Anwara had been built, and circled Venus in a high orbit; soon, new modules were added to it to house those who would build the Parasol that would shield Venus from the sun.

A large disk, kilometers wide, was set up between Venus and the sun, and metal fans were linked to that disk. Iris gazed at images of the Parasol's construction; as more fans were added, Iris found herself thinking of a flower's petals, while the tiny ships moving near it reminded her of insects.

The Parasol had grown until it was almost as wide in diameter as Venus itself, and it had taken over a century to build. Dawud Hasseen had been the chief engineer and designer of the Parasol; his name was remembered. The names of those who had died building the vast umbrella were also remembered, and there were many such names, for the work had held its dangers. Their lives might have been shortened, but the beginning of a new world would be their legacy.

More people, undeterred by reports of injured and dying workers inadequately protected from solar radiation during the construction of the Parasol, came to Anwara. Often, the new arrivals were greeted by those who were ailing and who would soon be too weak to continue to labor for the Project themselves. A few arrivals lost heart when they saw such people but many more took courage from their example and came to feel that a short life doing great deeds was better than a long one waiting for the time when one would return to the dust of Earth. More modules were added to the station, but new dwellings were needed, new and more pleasant homes for those prepared to spend their lives with the Project.

The Cytherian Islands began as vast platforms built on rows of large metal cells filled with helium. Dirt and soil were placed on top of the platforms, which were then enclosed by an impermeable, lighted dome. The Islands were gardened; soon they bloomed with trees, grass, and flowers, and those who came to live on them longed for no other home. These Islands were part of Venus, the first outposts of those whose descendants would be the first settlers. The Islands, located north of Venus's equator, floated in the upper reaches of the Cytherian atmosphere above the poisonous clouds and were protected by the Parasol's shade; they were tiny beacons lighting humanity's way.

The Parasol was the greatest structure human beings had ever built and was a monument to Karim al-Anwar's dream. Venus was cloaked in its shadow. The Parasol had succeeded in cooling the world it shaded, but even with what the Project had done since then, Venus was still a hot and deadly place. Bari had spoken movingly of those who had died helping to bring life to a world that they would never live to see.

"Venus might have been a world like ours," Bari said, "but its development took a different path. Now our world is also changing. We may need to transform it in the future. Look at Venus, and consider how tenuous our grip on life is, and how easily it could have been otherwise on our world."

It's my star, Iris thought, my world. I might even stand on it someday. She was like Venus. Bari would shield her for a time as the Parasol shielded that world, protecting her as she learned. The clouds around her mind would vanish as Bari led her to light.

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Two

For several months after her talk on the hill with Julia, Iris kept her secret, telling only her grandmother about what she was learning, but she was betraying herself in other ways. Exhausted by her nights of secret study, she often napped during the day instead of playing with her friends, and the women of her house were beginning to notice her pale face and the shadows around her eyes.

In late fall, after the harvest of the summer crop and the settling of the farm's accounts, Iris was summoned to her mother's room.

Angharad was sitting cross-legged on her bed; Julia was seated in a chair by the window overlooking the courtyard. Angharad took off the slender gold band encircling her head and shook back her long brown hair as her brown eyes focused on her daughter. She scowled at the girl.

"You've been up to something," Angharad said.

Iris glanced desperately at Julia; her grandmother must have told her secret. Julia's green eyes narrowed as she shook her head slightly, then covered her mouth with one finger; she was signaling to Iris that she had said nothing.

“I listened to the accounts three times,” Angharad went on. “I thought there had to be a mistake, but there wasn’t. We have less credit than I expected and everyone else’s account is in order. You’ve been spending more than your allotment. Exactly what have you been buying?”

“Nothing,” Iris mumbled.

“Don’t you dare lie to me. I know you couldn’t have spent that much here in town or the shopkeepers would have told me about it, asked me how rich this commune was getting if a child could throw so much around. You’d better tell me now.”

Iris swallowed. “Lessons. Lessons with my band and screen, that’s all. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Angharad arched her brows. “Lessons? Lessons in agriculture don’t cost anything for us.”

“It wasn’t that kind of teaching.”

“Exactly what land was it, then?”

Iris looked down at the blue rug. “Reading, numbers. Stories about different cities, things about the Project on Venus.”

“Reading?” Angharad sounded more surprised than angry. “Stories?”

“A teaching image tells me how to find out things. Her name’s Bari. Sometimes she gives me things to learn that I don’t care about as much, but then I see how they help me with other stuff I do want to learn, and she asks me questions to see if I got it right. She says I know almost two years’ worth of prep studies already.” Iris paused, suddenly wishing she hadn’t bragged about that.

“Prep lessons? For a school?” Angharad choked on the words, as if about to laugh. Iris looked up; her mother had a crooked smile on her face. “What makes you think you’d be chosen for a school? Why would you want to fill your head with all of that? It won’t make you a better farmer.”

“I don’t know,” Iris answered. “I was curious.”

“It’s a waste of time and credit. I can’t keep you from spending your child’s allotment — you have a legal right to that. But I won’t have my own funds drained. Now I’ll have to program a restriction. I never thought I’d have to do that with my own daughter.”

Iris stifled a cry. She had never considered the cost of the lessons; her friends often spent hours on mind-tours and game scenarios without using up their allotments. Now there would be no more lessons until her next allotment was due, in the spring. She would not be able to bear the long, confining winter without her lessons.

“Iris hasn’t done anything wrong,” Julia said.

“Come here,” Angharad said to Iris, patting the bed. The girl reluctantly sat down next to her mother. Angharad stroked Iris’s hair, touching the brown locks gently. “You’re only eight years old. I suppose it’s natural to be curious about things. But none of that learning will be of use to you later — it’s only for people who are chosen for schools. People who learn more than they should become very unhappy, because it affects their minds. You don’t want to be unhappy, do you?”

“No.” How, Iris wondered, could her lessons make her happy now and unhappy later? Were they like Angharad’s pecan cookies, which made her sick when she ate too many?

“Spend more time with your friends. You’ll have to get along with them when you’re older. Forget your lessons, and I won’t do anything about what you’ve spent on them. You know more than you have to now.”

“No,” Julia said abruptly, brushing back a lock of her light brown hair. “I can give Iris some of my credit. There’s more than enough.”

Angharad gaped at the older woman; then her jaw tightened. She pointed her chin at her mother while Julia glared back. Both women had the same heavy jaw and strong chin; they made Iris think of Laiza’s bulldog defending a bone.

“Do you want Iris to end up like you?” Angharad said at last. “Do you want her to grow up wanting things she can’t have instead of being happy with what she’s got?”

“How can learning hurt her? Besides, even if there is hurt in some learning, it might still be right. She’ll have something to occupy her mind when there’s little work to be done. It’s better than spending her time in games and gossip.”

Iris realized that the two women had forgotten she was present. This was part of an old argument to them; she had heard their voices rise and fall in debate behind closed doors and in the common room downstairs. Iris had caught an occasional angry phrase without understanding what the disagreement was about.

“The learning might,” Julia continued, “even be of use to others here. Iris might bring more interesting tidbits to our gabfests.” Julia’s voice held its usual mocking tone.

“She might want to leave,” Angharad said. Iris kept her eyes down; that possibility had often crossed her mind. There was more to life than Lincoln, her grandmother had said. Iris might want to see the cities she had visited in mind-tours; even more, she wanted to travel to where the new world was being terraformed. She was sure, however, that she would return home. She would have to come back, as Julia had, but she would come back with accomplishments to relate and part of her dream fulfilled; she would have no regrets.

“And what if she does leave?” the older woman responded. “I did, and here I am. She’ll be back long before she has to take over our commune.”

Iris bit her lip. Her grandmother was not being honest. Almost every time they had spoken together lately, Julia had mentioned the few who had escaped Lincoln and the Plains altogether, implying that Iris might do the same. Already, the girl was beginning to long for the company of someone she could talk to about the things she was learning. Julia listened to her but could offer few thoughts of her own, and Bari was only an image.

But I’ll come back, Iris thought. I can do what I want and then come back. She could not yet imagine cutting herself off from Lincoln forever.

“I have to think of our line,” Angharad muttered. “It’s my responsibility now, and it’ll be Iris’s later.” She glared balefully at her mother. “You might have thought of your own responsibility to it earlier.”

Iris’s family had always lived here. All of the residents of her house shared equally in the farm, but Iris’s ancestors had owned the land and were considered the traditional leaders of that household. Angharad, although she consulted with the other women, had the power to make decisions whenever there was disagreement; she represented the views of the household in town meetings and town council sessions with the heads of other Lincoln farms. If Angharad had no more children and Iris left Lincoln, the

leadership would pass to Angharad's cousin Elisabeth, and Iris knew that her mother thought Elisabeth was not up to the task. She couldn't leave for good, in spite of what Julia might think; the farm would need her.

Iris had to speak up. "If I learn things," she said, "wouldn't that help the farm?"

"Useless knowledge won't help," Angharad replied angrily. "I've made my decision. You are not to continue these studies. If you must learn something, learn practical things — how to keep the land fertile, when the best times are for planting, what new strains are available, how to assess the weather."

"I can still give her some of my credit," Julia said. "What she does with it is her concern. You can't stop me."

Angharad swung her legs over the bed and stood up swiftly, nearly hitting Iris with her arm. "I'm in charge now, I'll decide matters." She clenched a fist, looking as though she wanted to strike the other woman.

"It's true I turned everything over to you," Julia answered calmly. "You can make us both abide by your wishes if you think the farm's interests are at stake, and I suppose you could argue that they are, since Iris is your daughter. Of course, I won't accept your decision now. I'll want to discuss it with the rest of our household. Maybe they'll agree with you, and since we all dislike unpleasantness and have to get along together, it would be hard for me to go against them."

Angharad smiled, looking triumphant.

"But maybe," Julia went on, "I can get some of them to agree with me, as long as Iris promises that her studies won't keep her from her chores or other obligations. And they might not take kindly to seeing you tell me what to do with my own money. It sets a bad precedent. They've always been free to spend theirs as they wish and they might wonder if you'll come up with your own ideas for their funds. You might produce bad feeling. In all the time I've lived here, I've never seen an argument about this sort of thing."

"They'll agree with me," Angharad insisted.

"Perhaps. And it will certainly give them a fine topic for talk at parties. They'll say that Angharad Julias can't even control her own child without dragging her whole household into the fight. They'll say that Angharad Julias tells her own mother how to spend her credit and shows ingratitude and disrespect for the old. That would be a pity, especially since you dream of being elected mayor someday. I don't think Lincoln would want such a leader."

"They won't want a leader who lets her daughter get above herself." But Angharad's smile had faded; her arms hung uselessly at her sides. "You old bitch," she whispered. Iris blinked, shocked by her mother's harsh expression.

Julia ignored the insult. "They might praise one who has a daughter with a brain. You can tell them that the studies will make her a better leader and a credit to the town. You can show that we're not the dullards Linkers and city folk take us to be. It's all a matter of how you present it, daughter."

Angharad sighed.

"Show some wisdom," Julia said. "A leader should know when she's lost, and accept it gracefully."

Iris felt torn. She climbed off the bed and went to her mother's side, looking up at Angharad's mournful, round face. "I'll do my chores, I promise," she burst out. "I always finish them, don't I? I won't talk

about Bari to anybody.” That, she knew, would be the hardest promise to keep. “Angharad, please.”

Angharad took her hand. “I’m afraid Julia’s left me no choice.” The girl’s chest swelled with happiness. “But if you slack off, I’ll have to bring the matter up, whatever happens. Just remember that.”

Angharad was smiling again. For a moment, Iris almost believed that her mother was glad she had lost. Was that why she was smiling? Or was Angharad only thinking that she would win out over Iris in the end?

Winter had come to Lincoln. The wind whistled through the streets and came to a howl as snow fell steadily; icy white dunes covered the fields and clogged the roads. The townsfolk rarely ventured outside during this season, preferring to socialize with the aid of their screens. Each house was well stocked with provisions, and the shops were closed until early spring. The climatic changes that had brought tropical springs and scorching summers to the Plains had also given the land brief but extremely harsh winters, as if in compensation for the high temperatures the Plains usually endured.

Iris had opened her window. She rested her hands on the sill, listening to the murmur of voices below. Her room overlooked the courtyard, which was surrounded on all four sides by wings of the house. The heated courtyard, protected by an invisible shield, was immune to winter, and the household often preferred to gather there instead of in the common room downstairs. Most of Lincoln’s houses had only domes over their courtyards; installing the force field had been Julia’s idea and she had spent a lot of her credit on it, yet she rarely sat in the courtyard with the others, whose talk made her impatient or irritable. Iris often wondered if giving the house the luxury of a force field had been Julia’s way of making up for her lack of warmth and friendliness. Her grandmother, whatever her feelings, was still a Plainswoman and had tried to treat her commune fairly before turning it over to Angharad.

Iris sat down on the window seat. She was too tired to study and not tired enough to sleep. She had to get more rest; it was her turn to help in the kitchen tomorrow and her room needed cleaning as well. Angharad had already scolded her for allowing it to become so disorderly, and Iris had not forgotten her mother’s threats.

The winter, imposing isolation, had given her more time to study. The afternoon hours that she usually spent with her friends during other seasons were her own. She still spoke with the other children occasionally over her screen, or joined them outside for games in the snow when the wind died down long enough; if she hadn’t, Angharad would have counted it as another mark against her.

She stretched out on the window seat, pillowing her head on her hands. Sometimes, when she couldn’t sleep, the sound of talk below would bring on drowsiness, soothing her until she drifted off there or stumbled hazily to her bed.

She knew why she could not sleep. Another teaching image, a man named Muhammar, had appeared with Bari that afternoon. He had said that he would be guiding her in some of her studies, and Bari had looked pleased, saying that this meant that Iris had done well. Iris had run to Julia with the news, longing to share it, but even her grandmother had frowned before offering a few words of praise.

Iris pressed her lips together. She now knew enough about customs in other places to realize that such news would have been cause for celebration elsewhere. No one in her household cared. They all knew her secret now; Angharad, knowing it couldn’t be kept, had been the first to reveal it, saying somewhat defensively that the studies might help her to manage the farm when she was grown.

Most of the women had been amused, though Iris supposed that mockery was better than outright hostility. Eric, the only child in the household who was her age, kept asking her silly questions she could not answer and then made fun of her when she did not reply. “Why don’t you ask the image?” he would

say as he sneered, or “I thought you knew everything by now.” He had nearly baited her into hitting him that morning; only the thought of Angharad’s warning had kept Iris from striking out.

She sat up and peered out at the courtyard. The women below had spread blankets on the grass; most of them wore sweaters over their long dresses or tunics. The house homeostat had been erratic lately, one of the reasons why the dust that the system usually cleared from the air was beginning to form a film on Iris’s furniture. The women would have to retreat to the common room later that week unless the man visiting them managed to repair the homeostat soon. Iris reminded herself to dust her room in the morning.

Wenda poured herself more whiskey. She was the oldest of the women, nearly ninety; she had been a friend of Julia’s grandmother. Her silver hair gleamed in the courtyard’s soft light; her stocky body was still sturdy. Rejuvenation might give the old woman another three or four decades of life, and she had always been strong. She had not only survived her old friend but had also outlived Julia’s mother, Gwen; the people of Lincoln, unaccustomed to seeing death carry off anyone before the age of ninety, still talked about Gwen’s tragic end. Disease might be forestalled or evaded, but a foolish accident had taken Gwen’s life.

Wenda passed the bottle to Sheryl; the slender, dark-haired woman poured her whiskey daintily, as if measuring how much she could swallow without getting drunk. Angharad whispered to LaDonna, who giggled and then murmured to Constance. The three young women had always been close, more like sisters than friends; LaDonna had left her old commune in Lincoln to live here.

Sheryl handed the whiskey to Lilia, who took only enough for a swallow. At fourteen, Lilia was old enough to sit up with the women, though she rarely had much to say; she had the large brown eyes and tentative manner of her mother Elisabeth, who was absent from the gathering. Iris had seen Durell, the man who was repairing their homeostat, enter Elisabeth’s room after dinner.

Iris didn’t like Durell, who had stood aside with a grin on his face while Eric taunted her about her lessons. Iris didn’t usually care for the presence of men in the house. The women would begin to act silly, batting their eyes and whispering invitations to their beds, and the handsome Durell was worse than most men. He strutted around the house, using any excuse to remove his shirt and reveal his muscular, dark brown chest. He joked with Eric, called the boy a “little man,” and laughed and clapped whenever Eric wrestled with LaDonna’s son Tyree, even though Tyree was younger and smaller.

Sheryl looked up at the north wing of the house. “Elisabeth’s light just went on,” she said.

Constance craned her neck. “Do you think they’re getting up?” She jumped to her feet, shaking back her long, blond hair. “Maybe a man like that’s ready for more than one woman.” She rolled her slim hips. Angharad, giggling, tugged at her friend’s trouser leg as Constance sat down again.

“I wish I didn’t have this belly,” LaDonna said. She rested her back against a slender tree trunk, rubbing a hand over her abdomen; she was pregnant, and her second child would be a girl. “He wouldn’t be with Elisabeth now.” LaDonna was telling the truth; with her feathery black hair, blue eyes, and rosy, clear skin, she was the most beautiful of them all.

“If I were twenty years younger,” Wenda said, “and not repenting of my sins, he wouldn’t be with any of you.” She rolled her eyes. “Maybe I should try my luck anyway. He might like a woman who knows a few things.”

“She just turned out the light,” Constance said, heaving a sigh. “I know Elisabeth. She’ll keep him there all night.” The blond woman grinned. “She could at least have given Lilia a crack at him.” Constance poked the girl while Lilia blushed and covered her mouth. “You can’t fool me — I’ve seen you looking at

him when you think no one's around."

Lilia shook her head.+569

"Come on. Now that Jacob's left town, you're looking, aren't you?"

Iris tried not to laugh. Lilia had talked of nothing except Jacob when the boy had been living next door; he had been her first love before he had taken up a man's life of traveling from town to town. Most men wandered, finding work as mechanics or repairmen in other Plains towns; some even left the Plains or Earth itself. Jacob had promised to come back in the spring; Lilia had told Iris that. Now she was ogling Durell, who wasn't nearly as kind and gentle as Jacob. Lilia was a fool.

Lilia hung her head; her pale bangs hid her eyes. "Durell's all right," she said in soft, slurred tones, "but I'm too young for him. I haven't even had my ceremony yet."

"A mere technicality," Wenda said, tripping a bit over the long word, "but it's probably best to respect custom." The old woman chortled. "Didn't see such modesty when Jacob was around, though."

"Maybe I should try my luck with Durell," Angharad said. "I've been missing a man lately."

"When don't you miss one?" Constance asked, to a chorus of laughter.

"I've been thinking," Angharad continued. "There's no reason not to have another child now, as long as our Counselor has no objection. I was putting it off until Iris got older, but maybe I shouldn't. I might like a pretty dark-skinned daughter."

Iris wanted to scream, unable to bear the thought of a sister who might be like Durell. How could her mother even think of it?

"Another daughter?" Wenda shook her head. "That might not be wise. You'd have to turn the farm over to one of them eventually, and the other might resent it."

"But a girl could stay here with us," LaDonna said. "I'm glad this one's going to be a girl. Tyree will have to leave us when he's older, but I'll still have his sister, and she's bound to be a lot like him, after all."

The other women were silent for a moment. LaDonna had reminded them all of an awkward fact; LaDonna, who could have chosen almost any man, had become pregnant by the same man who had fathered Tyree. No one could understand such unconventionality; it made no sense. Having two children by only one man was almost like having a bond with him.

"I think you ought to wait," Constance said. "You know what it was like with Iris and my Eric born so close together. We wouldn't want to lose the labor of two women at the same time. We were exhausted trying to keep up with everything."

"You're right," Angharad replied. "I've got time. I'm twenty-four now — I could even wait until Iris is grown, see how things are then. I don't know." An odd, unhappy look came over Angharad's round face; her brown eyes seemed to be staring into a secret place only she could see. Iris had caught that look on her mother's face when Angharad had not realized she was present. "I wonder." She shook her head and smiled again.

"You sound worried." Old Wenda waved an arm. "What are you thinking — that Iris will grow so addled by her learning that you'll need another daughter to tend to things here?"

Iris held her breath, wishing that Julia were awake and in the courtyard to say something in her defense.

“Of course not,” Angharad answered. “Iris isn’t addled. She’s better behaved than a lot of children.” She glanced at Constance; Eric sometimes beat the walls with his fists or shrieked when he was denied a game or treat, and since he wasted his own allotment, his mother often had to refuse his requests for part of hers. “Iris will do very well.” The eavesdropping girl loved her mother at that moment, wishing Angharad would say such things to her more often when they were alone. “Besides, it’s a stage. She’ll get tired of it soon enough, especially when it starts getting hard. When she gets old enough for a man, she’ll find other things are more interesting.”

The women chuckled. Iris’s eyes stung. Was that true? She couldn’t believe that she would ever want someone like Durell, loud and boorish and full of himself. A man would never take her away from her studies. She would prefer not to have a man at all. She tensed, surprised at the thought. There were a few women in Lincoln who had only other women as lovers or took no lovers at all, and though they were tolerated, most of the townsfolk disapproved of them.

“You’re probably right to let her go through it and get past it,” Sheryl murmured. “Best to let children do some of these things instead of forbidding them.” Sheryl, who had no children of her own, always seemed to know what other women should do with theirs. “Children are drawn to the forbidden. Anyway, it’s probably just a game to her.”

Iris pressed her nose against the raised windowpane, then drew back, afraid someone might look up and see her even though her light was out. Bari had praised her, yet Sheryl was calling her studies only a game.

“Maybe she’ll be chosen,” Lilia said in a high, quavering voice.

“Chosen!” Constance slapped her thigh. “Mother of God, Iris chosen! Wouldn’t that give Lincoln something to talk about! We’d certainly seem grand then — why, we’d be invited to every party in town.” Constance struggled to control herself. “Chosen! Why, if that happened, she might even become a Linker!” She shrieked with merriment.

“It’s nothing to laugh about,” Sheryl said, covering her own smile with one hand. “Linkers are strange folk — they’re almost more like Habbbers than other people.”

“Shut your mouth,” Angharad said, clearly shocked by Sheryl’s words. “They may have Links, but they’re nothing like Habbbers.” She looked around uneasily, seeming to think that a Linker might suddenly appear in the courtyard — as if such a person were likely to have any business there. “They go out of their way to show that they aren’t.” Iris wondered how her mother could possibly know that.

“When I was a child, a boy from Lincoln was chosen,” Wenda said. “Once his mother got over the shock, she couldn’t stop bragging. Of course, she knew the boy would end up leaving Lincoln anyway, and there was a rumor that she had a Linker cousin.” The old woman paused. “That’s really the point, you see. Some think anyone can be chosen, but it isn’t true. You need strings somewhere.” Wenda shrugged. “As it was, it brought only grief to the boy’s mother.”

“Who was she?” Angharad asked.

“Berinthia Sheilas.”

Sheryl’s mouth fell open. “Berinthia! You mean that old fool had a son who was chosen?”

Wenda nodded. “She was different when she was younger. Oh, she was quick then — clever and smart. But she loved her son too much, and loving a son like that is a waste. Being chosen changed him. He never returned, not even when she died. A woman of her house told me once that he had joined the

Habbers finally.” She sighed. “No one would speak of him after that.”

Angharad shook her head. “Why should anyone here be chosen? We’re needed here, on the Plains. If you think about it, we’re just about the most important people in the world, aren’t we? We feed most of it, and it’s our tongue people of different lands use to speak to each other. Didn’t our ancestors rule everything in the days before the Nomarchies?” She held out her glass for more whiskey. “We hardly need to prove our worth.”

Iris had heard her mother make similar statements before, often in the same insistent tone. The past of her people was a source of pride, but was also an excuse to leave things as they were, for it was an achievement that could never be equaled.

“It might be better,” Wenda said, “if you discouraged the girl a little. By encouraging her, Julia doesn’t have the interests of this commune at heart.” Wenda swallowed more whiskey, then began to sway a little; the gesture, Iris knew, usually preceded one of the old woman’s pronouncements. Many saw Wenda as a soothsayer of sorts, and she had learned something of the outside world. Wenda could read omens in the most trivial of events, and was often right. She could predict, through long experience, a better than usual crop or a long drought; it stood to reason that she might be able to predict other things as well.

“It’s that star she was born under,” Wenda continued. “It’s a sign. As people seek to change that world, so Iris tries to remake herself. But Venus has claimed many victims.”

Iris wished that she dared to lean out of the window and shout an objection. Why wasn’t anyone speaking? Didn’t they see that this statement was different from what Wenda had said about that omen before?

Angharad nodded. “Oh, Iris will give it up. There’ll be more to do when LaDonna’s child is born, and it’s time Iris learned more of our real work. She won’t have time for those studies of hers then. I think I can let her have the rest of the winter.”

No, Iris said to herself. I won’t give it up, you can’t make me give it up.

Wenda had said that she was like Venus, trying to remake herself; Julia had told her that she might become something different. The two, without knowing it, now agreed on the meaning of that omen; could that be evidence that they were right about it? Bari, Iris knew, would call such thinking silly and superstitious, but it gave Iris hope. She might even travel to Venus sometime. It wasn’t impossible; workers were often needed, and she might learn something that would make her useful to the Project. Wasn’t the Project, after all, a little like farming, sowing the seeds of life on barren ground?

Angharad spoke of past glories, but seemed to forget that her ancestors had dreamed of more than feeding the world. Iris had learned a little about their accomplishments; why wouldn’t her mother want her to be more like them? She would come home eventually. She would have tales to tell the people of Lincoln about her ventures, and the town might take pride in having one of their own as a small part of such an enterprise. Her life would be a long one, perhaps as long as Wenda’s. Why should she spend it all in one place?

“Did you hear about Teresa and Devlin?” Constance asked; her voice was slurred. “Gena told me he didn’t leave on the Tuesday floater, the last one that came through before the storm. She says that Teresa and Devlin are in love — he won’t even look at anyone else.”

“Those first days with a new man are the best,” Angharad said.

Iris rose. The women would gossip now until the whiskey made them too groggy to talk. She tiptoed across the room, feeling her way so that she would not have to turn on her light, and sat down in front of the screen.

This screen, no larger than her window, was much smaller than the one in the common room, which covered a wall. Her band, a flexible golden circlet, lay on the table in front of her small screen. The screen could show her words, numbers, and three-dimensional images, but the band, by linking her mind directly to Earth's artificial intelligences, could feed her sensations. She could travel in a mind-tour, experience an adventure, take on any of a number of roles in a story. She could even experience, in a small way, what it might be like to be a Linker, one of those whose implants permanently linked them to the cyberminds. Such people could call up any fact they needed at any time; the cyberminds were always at their command. But their training was rigorous; they had to know what to ask, how to direct their minds so that they weren't overwhelmed by an ocean of data, how to sort, how to know what was relevant and how an isolated fact might fit a pattern. Iris had begun to wonder if Linkers controlled the cyberminds or if those intelligences viewed the Linkers as extensions of themselves.

Iris put on her band. The dark world of Venus, shaded by its Parasol, was suddenly below her. She struggled with vertigo as her perspective shifted and the planet seemed to float overhead. Already, the Project's labors had changed that world. Venus's surface temperature had begun to drop, though it was still too hot for life.

As Iris fell toward the clouds, several tanks dropped past her and flared up into bright light as they opened to release their cargo into the atmosphere. These tanks, she knew, contained hydrogen siphoned off from Saturn; they had been hurled from that distant, ringed world years earlier. Here, they would combine with the free oxygen the changes in Venus had produced, and form water, while traces of ammonia in the Saturnian elements would also produce needed nitrogen. Another tank flared as it opened to release its solid, compressed hydrogen.

People had ventured far, out to the gas giants beyond the inner solar system, to get what they needed for the Project. Some of them had died out there, too, far away from Earth and the world they were transforming. It came to Iris that there was wealth in the solar system, more resources than Earth could possibly use; yet Earth reached for little while clinging to the few it still possessed. The Project was showing them what could be created from that wealth.

Iris continued to fall, dropping through the seeded cloud layer. Life was already present in these clouds, for an altered, hardy strain of algae was feeding on the sulfuric acid and expelling it in the form of iron and copper sulfides. A veil of soft rain surrounded her as she left the clouds and entered the mist; below, a sterile ocean had begun to form, an ocean that would have boiled away in the fierce heat if not for the intense atmospheric pressure.

She bobbed on the shallow sea, letting the waves carry her toward the black land. A small beam lighted her way; she was a probe, surveying one of humanity's future homes. Venus would cool, more oceans would form; the land, which had been locked into place by the heat for uncounted millennia, would begin to shift on its tectonic plates. Venus would writhe as the forces in its mantle and crust were released; new continents would form.

Iris's light suddenly went out; she was surrounded by a blackness darker than night. This was how Venus would look to her unaided eye, hidden as it now was from the sun. The blackness was that of a grave.

She took off her band. Someday, people would walk unprotected under those clouds, and the sun would reach Venus again. Everything would be new to them; they would be at the beginnings of their history. They would not hear stories from their mothers which made it seem that all greatness and

accomplishment were past. They wouldn't live in mind-tours and adventure games; their lives would be their adventure. She, or her children, might even be among them.

Iris stiffened. It was the first time that thought had come to her — the possibility that she might leave Lincoln forever.

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Three

The snow was beginning to melt, and the roads of Lincoln were clogged with mud and melting ice. The mud sucked at Iris's boots as she walked south. Carts of cargo were already rolling past her, moving north toward the town square.

A crowd had gathered by the time she reached the clearing outside the town. The first floater of the spring had arrived, and many were there to see it. The large airships came only infrequently during the winter months; now, they would arrive every Tuesday until winter came again.

The floater's cabin had been locked into the bowl of the cradle that made up the only port Lincoln had. The speeding trains that linked great cities did not come here, and there was no place for a shuttle to land. The ribbons of roadways on which streams of vehicles had once crossed the continent were no more than rubble beyond the fields. Only floaters carried the outside world's gifts to them.

Iris watched as a few passengers came down the ramp. Others stared out at her from the windows of the floater's cabin, which could carry as many as three hundred passengers. Chutes jutted out from the rear of the cabin, where crates and boxes rolled down on small, wheeled wagons, then on toward the town. The shopkeepers had gathered to claim their wares; a few people were following the carts back to the town square. Those shops, which surrounded the square, would not officially open until the next day, but farmers and children always came to see this early spring shipment, hoping to guess what might be in the crates.

No one had to make use of a shopkeeper's services. Orders for almost anything could be placed directly from one's home, and a floater would deliver them. But using a shopkeeper was simpler; the shopkeeper would meet the shipment, convey packages from the square to the customer's home, place new orders for goods at specified times, and issue advice on the relative merits of different products. Iris's mother, like almost everyone else in Lincoln, thought it was worth the extra credit for the service. But the shopkeepers also sold items in their stores that no one had ordered; much of their money was made anticipating what someone might want to buy immediately on impulse.

Iris looked up at the long, silvery, sausage-shaped dirigible attached to the cabin, then lowered her eyes to the ramp. Two men carrying satchels were making their way down to the muddy ground. Iris searched the crowd for Laiza and finally saw her friend, who was standing with her mother, Maria, and Peter, the head of Maria's commune. Iris waved; Laiza and the bearded Peter began to walk toward her. Peter was the only male farmer among the people of Lincoln; instead of wandering, he had stayed to take over his mother's farm. Iris liked the quiet, gentle man, hardly thinking of him as a man at all.

"You, there!" Iris started; one of the two men with satchels was speaking to her. "Yeah, you." His face was broad, his hair dark blond. "You look familiar."

She walked up to the man, sure now that she had seen him before, but unable to remember when. "I'm Iris Angharads," she said tentatively.

The young man grinned, barked a laugh, and suddenly lifted her up by the arms, swinging her through the air. He was hurting her; she felt as though her arms were being torn from her shoulders. She winced as he set her down. “Don’t you remember me, girl?” He ruffled her hair; his sturdy face seemed to swoop toward her from a great distance as he bent over her. “I’m Tad Ruths, your father.”

Iris rubbed her shoulder, not knowing what to say, dimly recalling a visit two or three springs ago. Tad slapped her on the back, then pushed her toward the other man, nearly knocking her over in the process. “Donny, meet my daughter Iris.”

“Hello,” she said, trying to smile.

“Why, hello.” Donny’s hand darted toward her. She was about to duck, then saw that he only wanted to shake hands. She reached out and touched his palm, reassured by his kindly brown eyes.

Tad clutched her shoulder. “You’re growing up. I bet you’ll be as pretty as your ma someday. Don’t have much time — I’m only here for a week. Let’s go to the house, kid.”

A week, she thought, wondering how she could bear it. Details of Tad’s last visit were coming back to her now. He had teased her in a rough, coarse way while sending her off to fetch him whiskey or sweets, and she had soon been avoiding him. “I can’t,” she said. “I promised my friend —” Iris caught Laiza’s eye. “I mean, we were going to —”

“Sure, sure.” His grayish-green eyes softened a little as he patted her more gently on her head. “It’s all right — I think I can find my way.” He picked up his satchel. “See you later, kid.” He and Donny strode off through the crowd.

“You be home by supertime,” Peter shouted as Laiza and Iris scampered closer to the floater. Iris stared up at the helium-filled dirigible as she entered its shadow; Laiza craned her neck as she peered around at the remaining shopkeepers.

“There she is,” the black-haired Laiza murmured. “Hey, Winnie!”

A stout, gray-haired woman smiled at the girls as they approached her. Two boys and another girl were already tugging at the woman’s long coat. “Oh, Winnie,” Laiza said, “I have to have some chocolate. I just have to, oh, please.”

Winnie’s smile widened. “Now, you children know I don’t open until tomorrow.”

“If I don’t have some today,” Laiza responded, “I’ll just die. Oh, please.”

Winnie stooped down, cupping a hand around her mouth. All of the children drew closer. “Tell you what,” the shopkeeper whispered. “All of you can come to the shop in a couple of hours, all right? Just knock on the door. There’ll be some nice treats in the shipment.”

“Oh, thank you,” Laiza said dramatically. Iris led her friend away as Winnie followed a cart toward the town. Laiza suddenly clutched at her arm. “Was that man really your father?”

Iris nodded. “I hate it when he calls me kid.”

“Peter was giving him the once-over.” Laiza giggled. Peter took only men as lovers and that had caused a bit of discord among the women of his household whenever an attractive visitor was more drawn to Peter than to them. “Anyway, he doesn’t seem so bad.”

Laiza, Iris reflected, could afford to say that; her own father visited her at least twice a year and always

took a kindly interest in his daughter. What would Tad think when he found out about her studies? Angharad was bound to mention them and he would probably find her lessons a fruitful subject for more teasing.

The crowd had thinned out. "Look," Iris said, pointing toward the ramp. A small, dark man had left the floater; he carried no satchel and wore white pants and a bright red silken jacket that reached to his knees. He looked around at the remaining townsfolk placidly; everyone had fallen silent at his appearance. He walked toward the town, passing the two girls, who gaped at him. A small white jewel gleamed in his forehead, the only outward sign of the implanted Link he bore.

"A Linker," Laiza gasped.

"What's he doing here?" Iris asked. If a Linker was expected here on a visit, everyone in town would have known about it. She had never seen a Linker before, though Angharad had told her one had come to Lincoln years ago to address the town council.

"A Linker," Laiza said again. The two girls began to trail the man, following him out of the clearing and along the road leading to the town square. A few women stood in the doorways of their houses, shaking their heads in wonderment as the Linker passed.

In the square, the shopkeepers waited as carts parked in front of each shop unloaded the shipments with metal arms. Eric, as usual, was getting in the way, sitting down on one of the crates until he was shooed away. The assembled townspeople were already huddling together as they watched the Linker stroll around the square.

"Let's find out why he's here," Iris said to Laiza.

"How?"

"Let's ask him."

"Mother of God!" Laiza's brown eyes widened. "You're going to talk to him?"

"Come on." Iris ran toward the man; Laiza hesitated and then followed.

The man was standing in front of the Marian Catholic Church, a large steepled wooden building on the west side of the square. His shoes and white pants were unmarked by mud; Iris had seen the soil slither off his clothing as he walked: She took a breath as she stopped in front of the Linker; Laiza nearly collided with her.

"Hello," Iris said.

The man gazed at her solemnly; he was nearly as short as Angharad, who was smaller than most women. "How do you do," he replied.

Laiza snorted and covered her mouth. "Are you visiting someone?" Iris asked.

"I am afraid not. I am only taking a little stroll until the floater's ready to leave. This is my first trip to the Plains, and I thought I would see the sights."

"My name's Iris Angharads. This is my friend, Laiza Marias."

Laiza giggled. Iris wished her friend could control herself; the man would think they were silly. "I'm happy to meet you both," he said. "I am called Jawaharlal." He said his name slowly. Laiza began to

giggle even more.

“This is our church,” Iris said. “I mean, it’s where we go.” Her mother and grandmother were not very religious, but attended mass out of habit. “The mosque’s over there.” She pointed down the street at a small, domed structure, then waved at a building on the opposite side of the square. “And that’s where the Spiritists go, to that white building next to the town hall, but only when the weather’s bad — when it’s nice, they have their meetings outside.”

Jawaharlal nodded absently; he was gazing through her. It was foolish to tell him all of that; his Link could provide such information.

“Are you from one of the Indian Nomarchies?” Iris continued. The man’s black eyes focused on her; he seemed surprised by the question. “It’s your clothes.” She felt her cheeks grow warm. “I saw people wearing them on a mind-tour of India. I thought that might be your home.”

“It is. It was.” He smiled. “Bihar — that was my home.”

“Iris knows how to read,” Laiza burst out, then nearly collapsed in a fit of more giggling. Iris wanted to scream at her to be quiet.

“Do you really?” Jawaharlal’s smile widened.

Iris nodded reluctantly. “I’ve been taking lessons, just a few. Prep lessons.” Jawaharlal lifted his dark brows. “Oh, I know I don’t need them, but — well, if I know some things, it might —” She felt flustered. “It might help me be a better farmer someday,” she finished, wanting to show that she knew her place.

“Perhaps it will.” Jawaharlal peered at her more intently. “You say that your name is Iris Angharads?”

“Yes.”

The man’s eyes went blank and his implanted jewel glowed; Iris was sure that he was communicating with the cyberminds through his Link. The blank gaze frightened her. A record of her progress in her lessons had to exist somewhere, and any Linker could probably call it up. Why did Laiza have to tell him? She couldn’t bear a Linker’s mockery; he might even tell her to end her studies.

Jawaharlal shook his head; his dark eyes were focusing on her again. “You should continue,” he murmured.

Iris’s mouth dropped open; had he really said that?

“Continue, child. It appears you’re doing well at them. Don’t be discouraged. I know only too well how easily one can be deflected from one’s chosen course.”

The man had praised her. She was still, unable to move.

“I must get back to the airship,” he went on. “Farewell, Iris and Laiza.” The dark-haired girl started at the mention of her name.

Iris lifted her head. “Good-bye, Linked One,” she said courteously.

Jawaharlal began to walk back in the direction of the cradle. Iris realized that several people were now staring at her from across the square, probably wondering what she had dared to say to a Linker. Eric was making a face; he would tell her whole household about the incident.

Laiza suddenly howled with laughter. “It appears you’re doing well,” she said, mimicking Jawaharlal’s

slight accent. “Oooh, Iris. You’ll be the smartest girl in town.” Laiza jabbed her with an elbow.

“Stop it,” Iris muttered.

“Oooh. Wait until they hear about this.” Laiza raced off, clearly wanting to spread the news immediately.

Iris lay on her bed. She had gulped her supper, and her stomach, heavy with Winnie’s chocolate and a hastily eaten meal, was beginning to hurt. Laiza had told all of the children in the store about the Linker; Iris could still hear their jeers. Tommy had insisted that the Linker was making a joke; Daria had said that Iris would soon be too smart for her company. Iris had somehow kept her wits, forcing herself to spend the rest of the afternoon playing a silly game of Jumpers with her friends instead of studying as she had planned, knowing what the other children would say if she went home early.

Supper had been almost as bad. Eric, who hadn’t teased her in almost a month, had started in again while the women made *O*’s with their mouths; Julia had finally silenced their chatter with an icy stare. Iris had not been able to look across the table at her father, where Constance hovered over Tad’s chair as if she had never seen a man before.

I don’t care, Iris told herself. Jawaharlal had told her to keep studying. A Linker had said she was doing well. He would have known if she were not, and had no reason to lie to her. She would show them all somehow.

Her door suddenly opened; Tad was standing in the hall. She sat up. “Can’t you knock?” she cried out.

He entered the room. “Can I come in?”

“You’re already in.” She glared at her father, wishing he would go away. He walked over to her screen and picked up her band.

“So you’re taking lessons, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid. My name’s Iris, in case you forgot.”

“You don’t have to get snotty with me.” He put the band down on the table. “It isn’t such a bad thing, you know — learning.”

She crawled to the edge of the bed. He sat down next to her. “I don’t think it’s so bad,” Tad continued. “You might pick up something useful.” The young man rubbed his chin. “Who knows?”

“You don’t think it’s silly?” Iris asked, surprised.

“No. Look, I’ve seen other places besides this hole. Linkers don’t go around handing out compliments to people like us for no reason.” He patted her shoulder with one broad hand. “Let me tell you something, kid — Iris. If you’re going to go on with this, you ought to stick up for yourself. If you don’t take some pride, nobody’s going to hand it to you. You can’t just sit there and look hurt, or they’ll really dig in.”

“I hate them,” she said fervently.

“That isn’t right. They’re good people, and I bet there’s others who might feel the way I do about it. I mean, if you go around looking unhappy or ashamed about what you’re doing, you’ll just prove their point — that it’s a waste.”

“You could have said something at supper,” she said, still feeling a little resentful.

“I’m only your father,” Tad responded, “and a guest in this house. I can’t hang around here just to prop

you up, you have to do that for yourself. Look, if you do all right at whatever you're learning, then you'll get to do what you want — the Linkers'll see to that. And if you don't, then nobody here's going to change that, either. At least you'll know you tried, and that has to be better than not trying."

She leaned back on her elbows, letting her feet dangle from the bed. "Did you try, Tad?"

His lip curled. "No, I'm doing what I want. I'm sort of hoping I might get a chance at satellite repair — they still need some people for that. I put in my name for sea wall work too. See, if I get to do any of that, I won't be coming by here again for a long time, maybe not until you're a woman, so I have to say whatever I have to tell you now. In a way, it's easier for a Plains boy. At least if he learns some skill or craft, he gets to go places."

"Julia worked on dikes once," Iris said.

"Yeah, but here she is, right? I've worked with a few woman mechanics. They do all right, but they always seem to get dragged home after a while, especially if they want kids. You can't go roaming around with a baby. Anyway, you need farmers. There's only one way out for a farm girl. You have to have something that makes you more valuable to the Mukhtars somewhere else."

"I wouldn't leave Lincoln," Iris murmured. "I mean, not for good."

"I don't know if you'd be studying if you didn't think of leaving."

Iris gazed into Tad's grayish-green eyes. He was more understanding than she had realized. His rough horseplay, like her feeble efforts to appease her friends, might have been only a way of hiding his real feelings.

"There's one place I'd like to go," she said.

"And where's that?"

"Venus."

"Venus! You want to work on the Project?" Tad snorted, then rubbed his nose on his sleeve. She looked down, hurt; he would laugh at her after all. "Hey, Iris, don't sit there like that. You just surprised me, that's all."

She tugged at his shirt. "Don't tell Angharad. She'd just —"

"Yeah, I know." Tad frowned for a moment; his drooping mouth and lowered eyelids made him look like a boy who had lost something precious. "I won't tell. But why would you want to go there?"

Iris bit her lip, unable to find the words to answer him.

"What do you know about it, anyway?"

"A lot. I've seen it all with my band — how the Parasol was built, why they brought in metallic hydrogen from Saturn."

"Why'd they do that?" Tad asked.

"Because otherwise, as the atmosphere changes, there'd be too much free oxygen. I mean, as it cools and the level of carbon dioxide goes down, more oxygen is freed, and they can't just leave it there, but when it combines with the hydrogen, it can turn into water. Venus didn't have enough hydrogen there before, so they had to bring it there, you see. It's complicated."

Tad frowned. "I guess it is." He was silent for a moment. "I don't know. I can't see people living there, but —"

"That's just one of the things they've done there. They have to do a lot more."

"Well, I know that much."

"They even had to make a new kind of algae for seeding the cloud layer. See, the rain has a lot of sulfuric acid in it, but the algae metabolizes —" She had mangled that word. "Well, it sort of eats the acid and changes it into other things — iron and copper sulfides."

"You understand all of that?" Tad asked.

"Sort of. It's not really part of the prep lessons, but — Venus is my star, it was in the sky when I was born. I wanted to know about it."

"Well, that won't get you to the Project." Tad raised one leg, resting his ankle on his knee. "And no one's going to live on Venus for a long time — if ever."

"You might be wrong. Some people think that if they can set up domes, domes something like those on the Islands but strong enough to stand the air pressure and protect everything inside, that people could live there in forty or fifty years."

Tad tilted his head. "It'd be hard living like that — maybe dangerous too. But I wouldn't mind trying it, maybe, building a real home. Wandering around gets sort of lonely after a while." He sighed. "Sounds like you know some things, even if I don't really understand them." He laughed. "You know, one time I was talking to my friends about our kids — we were talking about what they'd be like when they grew up. Most of them said the usual — wanting to take their boys along on jobs, or as apprentices — maybe taking their girls along, too, if they could do the work and their mothers'd let them travel for a bit. Donny wants his girl to be a shopkeeper in Ames. You know what I said?"

Iris shook her head.

"I said I'd want a kid who was so smart I wouldn't know what she was talking about." He chuckled; Iris smiled. "I'd want her to be better than me."

"You're all right the way you are," Iris said, blushing. Her father averted his eyes, looking embarrassed.

"You're the only kid I have, you know — not that I don't try for some more." Tad moved his hands awkwardly. "Well, I hope you get to that place someday. Listen to me — you just keep doing what you're doing."

"I wish the others —"

"Forget about the others. Just remember what I said."

She heard a knock. The door slid open; Angharad stood there, dressed in a sheer blue gown slit to her thighs. She beamed at the pair, as if pleased to see the father and daughter together. Tad rubbed Iris's head roughly and poked her in the ribs as he got up. "We'll go to the shops tomorrow, see the opening, all right?" He paused as Angharad draped her small, rounded body seductively against the door frame. "All three of us," he added, for Angharad's benefit.

An ocean of wheat, brown waves in contours rippling under the summer sun, surrounded the island of Lincoln. The strain was a strong one, able to endure, up to a point, scorching sunshine, heavy rainfall, or

cooler temperatures. Iris, for the first time, had helped to sow the seeds, putting on her band to link first with a plow and then with a sower, guiding the metal servants with her mind.

Part of her day was also spent in the greenhouse down the street, which her household shared with several others, where she checked on the carefully tended tiers of lettuce, beans, vegetables, and fruits. She had already heard Angharad and other farmers discuss the possibility of keeping the greenhouse in operation during the coming winter. Usually the communes kept most of the produce for their own use, but the agricultural coordinators up in Winnipeg, the Plains capital, had told all of the communes and towns that more of their greenhouse crops would be exported in coming years. That meant that there had to be shortages somewhere. The communes would get more credit, but also more work.

Iris felt that she had enough work as it was. She took her turn looking after LaDonna's infant daughter Mira, who had been born in early spring and had the unpleasant habit of spewing spittle into Iris's face or over her clothes. Iris did both her farm and household tasks, and all of it left little time for her lessons. She had been hoping to make up the time during the coming winter; now the greenhouse was likely to rob her of some of those precious moments.

She crouched in the field, hiding herself in the tall grain. Laiza had suggested a game of hide and seek earlier. Iris looked up at the clear blue sky. It hadn't rained for some time; Dory Trudes, the mayor, had already sent a request to Winnipeg for some rain. A few rainclouds might be routed their way if the rain were not needed more elsewhere and if the task could be done without altering climatic patterns too greatly. The Nomarchies tended to be cautious about such matters. It was not wise to tamper too much, to risk a possible miscalculation or a renewal of the conflicts over resources and fertile land that had nearly destroyed Earth more than five hundred years ago. At any rate, much of the grain could outlast even this drought.

I should be doing lessons, Iris thought. But she liked to get outside whenever the heat did not confine her to the house, and she would get in an hour of study before bedtime. Her friends still teased her about her pursuits, but more gently. The story of her encounter with Jawaharlal had grown in the telling until some believed that the Linker had predicted great things for her. If there was a chance the girl might rise, perhaps to a Counselor's post or even to a position such as Regional Coordinator, it would not hurt to be on her good side; at the same time, a little ribbing would keep her from getting a swelled head.

Iris heard a shriek, then a shout from Daria; the red-haired girl had tagged Tommy as he was racing for the tractor that was their goal. Iris peered out through the grain, watching while Tommy protested to Daria, then ducked back before Daria could see her.

Tad had sent her a message that morning. She hadn't believed her father when he had told her that he would send messages regularly, but he had sent three since spring and two had been confidential, for her alone. Those had been transmissions, recordings of his words and image, but the third had been a call where she had been able to talk to him. His image had appeared on the screen in the common room, as lifelike as if he had actually been present. Iris had accepted his call there instead of in her room, knowing that Angharad and Constance would want to talk to him also and not wanting to seem selfish.

Iris had sent messages to Tad, too, asking the system for his location and then routing her words to him. The first time, she had sent the normal transmission, but Tad had surprised her by asking for a letter next time. He could not read the words, but he liked seeing the symbols form on a screen while knowing that his daughter was tapping them out, and a voice would give him the words.

His fourth message, the one that had come that morning, had been different. She remembered the excitement in his voice. He had called from Bogota; he was leaving Earth, taking a job in satellite repair, and would let her know in a few days which space station was to be his home base. He had been

grinning; his flushed cheeks and slightly slurred voice had made her think he was a little drunk. She was happy for him, but she also knew she wouldn't be hearing from him as often. He could not spend all his credit on calls to her from so far away, and she couldn't afford many more letters, either. She had already spent much of her allotment on a keyboard with letters and numbers to attach to her room screen. Maybe she could transmit words alone, without an image and voice, to her father. That wouldn't cost as much, and he might find someone who could read them to him; on a space station, there would be many who knew how to read.

Constance and Angharad had not been pleased by Tad's news. "Tad thinks he's a Habber," Constance had said scornfully. "Going up there, when there's enough to do here." Angharad at least had the wit to object; Earth depended on such space ventures and Tad was working for the Nomarchies, not the Associated Habitats, who had long ago abandoned any enterprises near Earth orbit. But even Angharad had not managed to hide her displeasure. Anything that resembled Hab ways was open to some question, and she had seemed worried about the example Tad might be setting for his daughter. Angharad had watched Iris with narrowed eyes after the call.

She suddenly realized that someone was calling her name. Iris peered out from the wheat again, and saw Sheryl standing by the tractor, hands cupped around her mouth. Tommy and Daria were next to the dark-haired woman; Laiza and Greg had come out of hiding.

Iris hurried toward them, wondering what Sheryl could want. The woman shoved her hands into the pockets of her baggy shorts as she tapped the ground restlessly with one sandaled foot; her lips were pursed. "There you are. Come on."

Iris waited for an explanation.

"Come on ." Sheryl pushed her toward the road, not bothering to explain.

"Bet you're in trouble," Daria called out as the other children began to follow them.

Sheryl swung around, looking annoyed. "Go back to your game."

"What is it?" Laiza shouted.

"That's for me to know and you to find out. You'll find out anyway — I'm sure it'll be all over town."

Sheryl herded Iris along, refusing to speak until they had passed several houses and had left the children behind. "There's a Counselor at the house," the woman muttered at last.

Iris halted for a moment before walking on. "But he already came." The Counselor for their region, Bart Jennifers, had come in the spring, taking over his room in the town hall to listen to any requests, complaints, or pleas for advice. He usually offered little more than reassurance, but his presence made the townsfolk feel that the Nomarchies were not neglecting them, and the personal contact was more reassuring than messages from afar. Bart never stayed in Lincoln more than a month. He could recommend a more specialized Counselor for any specific problems a commune or individual might have that he could not handle, but Lincoln prided itself on not having requested such services for nearly a decade. Other towns might have children who ran wild, or uncooperative citizens, or the occasional crime needing a judge's attention, but not Lincoln. The townspeople were capable of settling their own small troubles.

"This isn't Bart," Sheryl muttered. "It's another Counselor — a Linker — and she asked to see you."

Iris swallowed hard, imagining how angry Angharad must already be with her. What could she have

done? Sheryl was striding briskly now, glaring at the ground, as Iris struggled to keep up with her. She tugged at the woman's shirt. "How did the Linker get here?" she asked. Another floater was not due until next Tuesday, but occasionally one made an unscheduled stop. She looked south, toward the cradle, but knew that she would not see a dirigible hovering there; she would have noticed a floater approaching from the field.

"She has her own hovercar."

Iris's eyes widened. A Linker, in a private vehicle — her visit had to be important, then, and it probably meant grave news. What could her commune have done to bring about such a visit? Why did the Linker want to see her? Why hadn't she simply used the screen?

People were walking about in the square, while others stood in front of wide shop windows that displayed goods; several women eyed Iris and Sheryl as they passed, but did not offer the customary greetings. Sheryl quickened her pace. "Mother of God," she said; she crossed herself and then made a curving motion over her belly with one cupped hand as they passed the church. "A Counselor unbidden means ill fortune unsought." The woman said the old proverb as if it were an irrefutable truth. "And that goes double if she's a Linker as well."

Neighbors were lurking in the road, staring at the small, domed craft parked in front of Iris's house; Sheryl glared at them as she and Iris entered. The woman paused in the hallway for a moment, smoothed back Iris's hair with one hand, then ushered the girl into the common room.

The entire household had gathered, except for Mira, who was taking her nap. Tyree, sitting on the floor, fidgeted at LaDonna's feet; Eric, looking vacant, sat next to Constance on the sofa. Iris glanced at her mother, who was sitting near the large window that faced the road. Angharad's lips were drawn back from her teeth in a tense smile.

"So this is Iris," the Linker said. "Now I've met all of you."

Iris turned toward the visitor. The woman had the brightest blue eyes Iris had ever seen, and her short hair was nearly white. A glass of beer, untouched, sat on a table near the Linker.

"My name is Celia Evanstown." The woman's lips curved in a slight smile. "You see, child, where I grew up, it was the custom to take the town's name for one's own. There are a lot of Evanstowns." She smiled still more, as if making a joke; Iris heard a few nervous laughs. "Please sit down, Iris. I've been trying to reassure everyone here about the purpose of my visit. Do put yourselves at ease. I know what some say about such visits."

Sheryl coughed, looking a bit paler as she seated herself near LaDonna. Iris went to the ottoman and sat down, folding her hands. "Can I get you anything else?" Elisabeth asked in a high, trembling voice. "I mean, if you'd prefer whiskey, or a glass of wine —" Angharad shot her cousin a glance; Elisabeth lowered her brown eyes.

"Please don't bother. Actually, I came here to speak of matters concerning young Iris. I must apologize again for not having warned you — you see, I was passing this way anyway, and thought it might be simpler to drop in now. You'll all be even busier later in the season."

Iris stared at the gem on the woman's forehead, unable to meet her eyes.

"Yes, Iris," Celia continued. "You were born in 522, so you'd be nine now, wouldn't you?" Iris nodded, wondering why the Linker was asking that when she must already know. "It seems you've been taking the preparatory lessons for schooling. Isn't that so?"

Iris nodded again. Angharad's mouth tightened; Constance's hazel eyes widened with fear. Iris could imagine what they were thinking. She had attracted a Linker's attention. Her brief conversation with Jawaharlal could be forgiven, but not this visit. Angharad had always fulfilled her duties as a citizen; now, through no fault of hers, her privacy and that of the commune had been lost. The record of their lives would be open to the Linker, who could call up any information about their farm, their assets, what their credit had been spent on, their recreation and past histories. Celia had probably already called up such information through her Link during her journey to Lincoln. Such information gave her, and all Linkers, power over everyone else. One could never know what such powerful people might do; it was better to live decently, in some obscurity, with only a regional Counselor poking into one's affairs.

"It seems you've done well." Celia took a small sip of her beer. "Almost three years' worth of lessons in little more than a year, and some supplementary studies too." Her blue eyes went blank for a moment as her Link glittered. "What drew you to studying, Iris? You won't need to know all of that to be a farmer."

Iris struggled to keep her hands still. "I was just curious. I didn't mean —" She paused, remembering her father. Tad had told her to stick up for herself; nothing she would say could possibly make matters any worse. She lifted her head, forcing herself to gaze directly at Celia. "First, I wanted to find out more about the places I saw in mind-tours, and then I started wondering how they became how they are now and how Earth had changed."

Celia tilted her head. "There are history mind-tours for that."

"But they didn't tell me what I wanted to know — they were more like adventures. Finally, Bari — the teaching image — told me that if I learned how to do certain things, like reading, I could find out more."

Celia nodded. "And exactly what do you intend to do with this knowledge?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know I'll be a farmer, like Mother, but I thought that learning some lessons might help me be a better one, I guess."

"But you're not just learning about farming. You're preparing for a school, and there is no school here."

Iris took a breath. How could she explain herself? "I just want to learn," she said, twisting her hands together. "When I figure out something that's hard, and learn how to do it, it makes me happy." She scratched her head. "I can see a kind of pattern instead of just something all by itself, how things go together and what made them that way and how people might change them." She paused; she had almost mentioned Venus, and her secret desire to go there. "It doesn't matter if I go to a school or not."

"And how long do you plan to continue with these studies?"

She sat up straight. "As long as I can. As long as there's something I want to find out and don't know."

Celia chuckled. "You have a lifetime of work ahead of you, then. Well. There is no school to send you to, but I see no reason why you shouldn't go on with your studies."

Iris nearly sighed with relief. "There's a school in Omaha," she burst out, surprised at her own boldness.

"Hush your mouth," Angharad said quickly. "That's not for the likes of us."

"There are children Iris's age in that school," Julia said; Angharad motioned to her mother to be quiet.

Celia glanced at Julia pensively. "You've been paying for many of the lessons, haven't you?" the Linker asked.

Julia stared back. “There’s no harm in that.”

“Even if schools demanded payment, which they don’t, and you could afford the credit, there would be no place for the child.”

“Because the children of Linkers and Counselors and such get preference,” Julia replied.

“My mother is one who speaks her mind,” Angharad said in nervous tones. “Forgive her talk.”

“She’s right,” Celia said: “But there are reasons for that. We have to allocate our resources carefully. Educated people are a resource we need, but schooling can be wasted on some. We need at least some assurance that the training will be put to some use, and the children of Mukhtars and Linkers and Counselors are more likely to use it. Their parents guide them in that direction. That doesn’t mean we neglect others.” She turned toward Julia. “You’ve encouraged the girl when she needed that, but there’s no need for you to spend more of your credit on this. The Nomarchies will cover the cost of her lessons from now on, provided she wishes to continue with them.”

“Oh, I do,” Iris said, overwhelmed by such good fortune.

“Even if nothing comes of it except the learning itself?”

“Oh, yes. I can learn just as much here — I don’t care about not going to a school.” Iris shifted a little on the ottoman, certain that Celia had caught the dishonesty in that statement. She wanted to tell the Linker of her wish to work on the Venus Project, but could not do so in front of the others. Angharad would find a way to keep her from reaching that goal if she learned of Iris’s wish; Iris knew she would have to keep her dream a secret until Angharad was powerless to interfere. That thought pained her; to reach her goal, she would have to deceive those she loved most.

Celia looked around at the others in the room. Wenda’s face was stern; Iris could not tell what the old woman was thinking. Eric glared at Iris resentfully with his dark eyes. He wanted, she knew, to be a shopkeeper someday, but there was little chance of his becoming one. Eric was bound to make the rest of the day miserable for her, but Iris didn’t care. The Nomarchies cared about her lessons; even Angharad could not stand up to a Linker. Celia had to feel that Iris might accomplish something with the lessons being given to her.

“It would help,” the Linker said softly, “if Iris were able to set aside two or three hours a day for her studies in the morning. She’d be fresher then, and would get more sleep at night. Of course, this is only a suggestion. She should be able to carry out all her other obligations without difficulty.”

“Oh, indeed,” Angharad responded. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“We’ll see what crop these seeds yield in the future.” Celia rose. “I’m glad I stopped by, but I’ve taken enough of your time. I did so enjoy meeting all of you — it’s nice to know that Iris has such a good home.”

Everyone stood up; Angharad showed her teeth in a relieved smile. Celia murmured a few words to Eric as she passed the boy, who beamed; the Linker then patted Tyree gently on the head as Sheryl hurried to press the door open for the departing visitor. Lilia blushed as Celia complimented her on her blue dress, which Lilia had sewn herself; the other children, Iris saw, would not feel left out.

The women began to murmur to one another as soon as Celia was outside. Iris went to the window and watched as the Linker’s hovercar moved down the road on its cushion of air, raising small dust clouds as it floated west. Constance and Sheryl had crossed the road, where they were now telling the neighbors

the news. Iris clasped her hands together. A Linker had traveled here to praise her, and thought enough of her to have her lessons paid for by the Nomarchies. She shivered, almost afraid to show her joy.

Angharad moved closer to her. “She didn’t make a special trip just for you,” she said to Iris. “She just happened to be passing by — she said so. I suppose it amuses her to throw a little something your way just to keep you from being troublesome or unhappy. Well, I’m pleased for you, but don’t let it go to your head.”

Iris averted her eyes from her mother. She continued to gaze out the window; the women across the road were pointing at her and shaking their heads.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up at Wenda’s wrinkled face. “You will learn much,” Wenda said in the low but forceful tone she usually reserved for pronouncements and predictions. “But your learning will only bring you into conflict with yourself.”

Iris pulled away, afraid that the old woman had seen too deeply into her soul.

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Four

An armada of floaters arrived in Lincoln in the fall. These airships were freighters; their elongated shadows floated over rooftops and darkened the streets as they moved toward the town silos at the edge of the fields. The silos were emptied; the winnowed and harvested wheat was carried to the granaries in Winnipeg, Omaha, and Kansas City. There had not been as much of a surplus that year, but the weather in other parts of the world had been favorable; the Nomarchies would be able to feed all of Earth’s citizens.

The people of the town had prepared a celebration. Tables had been carried to the town hall; special dishes and delicacies had been cooked, and Lincoln would feast until dawn.

Iris was helping Eric load their household’s contributions to the festival into a cart. Constance had prepared a stew; Sheryl and Wenda had baked a ham. They did not usually eat so much meat, but this was their most important feast, and Iris knew that even the Muslim citizens would surreptitiously sample Sheryl’s renowned ham. There were loaves of Angharad’s bread and bowls of LaDonna’s bean casserole and a salad Elisabeth had prepared. The women had been cooking for days.

“You’re going to be late,” Iris said to Eric as Tyree climbed into the cart. Lincoln’s few adult male residents, most of the older boys, and any men who were visiting would already be at the town hall setting the tables and keeping the food warm until the women returned from the fields.

Eric shrugged. “Can’t eat until later anyway.” Tyree stretched one chubby arm toward a covered dish; Eric pulled the younger boy’s hand away. “Aren’t you coming?”

“I’ll come over soon.” She searched her mind for an excuse. “I promised Angharad I’d make sure the common room was clean for when people come over later, and I forgot to do it.”

Eric pressed the panel underneath the cart’s visor; the vehicle began to roll toward the square. Iris walked back into the house. Her friends would be at the town hall, playing games and anticipating the feast; a few men would sneak them some tidbits. More men would be there than usual, some of them old friends or lovers, others strangers who had been near enough to Lincoln to travel there for the festival.

Iris went into the common room and surveyed the polished tabletops. The room needed no more

cleaning, as she had known. She now had the house to herself, and relished the silence; even little Mira was at the town hall, left there with the other small children in a crib-filled room.

The women of the household, and all of the women of Lincoln, had gone to the fields for one of their most important ceremonies, as they did every year. The autumn night was clear, a good sign; a full moon would shine down on the assemblage. All of the young girls who had passed menarche during the past year would be honored in the ceremony, and Elisabeth's daughter Lilia was among them. Lilia had begun to bleed shortly after last year's ceremony, and a small party had been held for her then, but she had needed to wait until now before being officially welcomed into the ranks of Lincoln's women.

Iris sprawled on the sofa, letting her feet hang over the side. One day, she would be taken to the field and would return to town as a woman. She was already beginning to dread it, and that had to mean that there was something wrong with her; other girls looked forward to the rite. She would lose her child's allotment and have to earn her credit with labor; the Nomarchies were not likely to continue the payments for her lessons then, for she would be more valuable as a working farmer. Her lessons would become only a pastime. She knew that children at schools postponed puberty with various biological techniques so that they would not be distracted from their studies; they prolonged their childhoods until it was time to work or attend a university for more training.

She could go to Letty Charlottes, the town physician. Iris sat up, shocked that she would even consider such an action. Letty would have to keep Iris's request confidential, but others were bound to find out Iris had gone to the doctor for more than the usual complaints if she could not make up a convincing story; illness was rarely kept a secret. Anyway, Iris was sure that Letty would refuse her. The physician had only basic medical training, and no Link; she always called in specialists for difficult cases, or sent such patients to the hospital in Omaha. Letty was not even likely to know the proper techniques for prolonging childhood. Plainswomen took pride in being women; menarche, the signal of womanhood, had become a symbol in their minds representing the fertility of their fields. If Angharad even guessed that her daughter had considered postponing maturity, Iris would suffer much more than the loss of her lessons. Wenda would probably say that Iris would put a curse on the farm if she succeeded in prolonging her childhood.

Iris leaned back. It might have been better if Celia had advised her to give up the studies. The pain of the loss would have faded by now; she would have been at the town hall with her friends, stealing bites of food and looking forward to her own celebration, instead of sitting in an empty house with her dark and irresponsible thoughts. She could still give up the lessons. Celia would not care, the Nomarchies would save that small expenditure, and Angharad would be relieved to see her daughter accept her responsibilities.

I can't, Iris thought. I can't give it up.

She had a little time; the women would probably not get to the town hall for another hour. She could review some of her work and put the time to use. As she stood up, a chime suddenly began to sound; someone was calling.

Iris hurried toward the screen console in the corner and pressed a button, wondering who could be calling now; everyone who knew them would be aware of the festival and would have called the town hall instead. She pressed another button, preparing to record the call for the household.

A woman appeared on the wall screen. Iris approached the image hesitantly; the caller's light brown face was contorted with grief.

"I am Miriam Acella," the lifelike image said, sounding as though the words were strangling her. She was

sitting on a small bed that jutted out from a white wall.

“I’m Iris Angharads,” the girl replied.

“Of course. Isn’t anyone else there?”

Iris shook her head. “They’re at our festival.” She had noticed that there was a slight delay between her words and the woman’s response; that meant Miriam had to be calling from space.

“I was going to send just a message, but I couldn’t do that — it didn’t seem enough. You’d better sit down, Iris.”

Iris took a few steps backward and settled in one of the chairs, terrified of what she was going to hear.

“I don’t know how to tell you this.” Tears were trickling from Miriam’s brown eyes. “Your father’s dead. I don’t know if anyone’s sent you a notice yet — he only died twelve hours ago.”

Iris was numb. She covered her mouth, unable to speak. As the full meaning of the words struck her, she nearly doubled over, feeling as though she had been hit in the chest.

“Oh, Iris, I’m so sorry. I know you never knew him well, but I saw your three letters to him here, and I know he meant something to you. He’d ask me to read the letters to him once in a while. He was going to send you a long one soon — he’d asked me to — to —” Miriam shook her head. “He was so proud of you. He used to brag about you to the crew here, how you could read, all the things you were learning. He used to say it showed he must be clever, to have a child like that.”

“How?” Iris managed to ask.

Miriam had started to weep during the delay; she lifted her head and wiped at her eyes with a small handkerchief. “Micrometeorites. You probably know about them. He was outside, working on one of the solar panels. One went right through his helmet, like a bullet. He never knew.” Miriam coughed, then cleared her throat; her eyes were narrow with rage. “Damn the Nomarchies. They kept saying they’d get our systems repaired. If they had, we would have been warned. Tad should never have been outside.”

Iris stared at the screen mutely.

“... fucking pile of junk,” Miriam was saying. “Calculate the cost and figure the odds. It’d cost more to repair the system right away than to risk the small chance of losing a worker or two. That’s how Linkers think. They might as well be cyberminds themselves. It’s enough to make you want to escape to the Habs. I don’t care what they say about them — at least Habbbers look after their people.” Miriam coughed again; her eyes seemed glazed. “Well, I guess they’d have to, wouldn’t they? Habbbers all have Links, so they’re all equal. Habbbers wouldn’t let anyone get away with this shit.”

Iris swallowed hard. “What —” She paused, not knowing how to ask the question.

“I don’t think Tad wanted his body sent back to Earth, and he probably couldn’t have afforded it anyway.” Miriam had apparently guessed what Iris wanted to ask. “His friends and I said a few words for him before he — before he was put into the recycler. Of course, he’ll get his plaque on our memorial wall.”

The woman was crying again. Iris sat very still. A lump in her throat was making it hard to swallow, but her eyes were dry. It was all a mistake; Miriam would look up and tell her it was all a mistake. She would wake up and know that her father was still alive.

“Iris, I loved him very much. We had just started sharing a room. I’m going to miss him dreadfully.”

“Mother would be glad to know you were with him,” Iris forced herself to say. “She’ll be happy to know he had a woman there, to say some words for him.”

Miriam wiped her nose, then shook back her long black hair. Her tangled curls had hidden the small symbol on her collar; Iris gazed at it now with some surprise. The woman wore a tiny gold protractor, the sign of an engineer; she must have loved Tad deeply to ally herself with a simple laborer. Tad must have been more than even Iris had suspected. She would never know the part of her father that had attracted this woman; she could not bear the thought.

“I should speak to your mother too,” Miriam said.

“It’s all right,” Iris replied. “She’ll see your call. It must be hard for you — you don’t have to make another one. You could send her a letter, if that would be easier. You don’t have to program a voice — I can read it to her.”

“That might be best,” Miriam answered. “Maybe I’ll call again another time, when I — Well, at least I got to talk to you. I won’t ever forget Tad.” Miriam paused. “I’ll send you a letter, too, about his life here. You might like to know about that.” She lifted a hand to her lips. “Now I’ll have to call his mother, let her know —” Her shoulders shook.

“Thank you for calling,” Iris said.

Miriam and her room disappeared. Iris gazed at the empty screen. Angharad would grieve for a bit, and she supposed Constance, who had lured Tad to her room a couple of times, would also feel the loss. But to them, Tad was still just one of a number of men who had dallied with them for a while, an occasional visitor who had left a daughter for the commune. Miriam had clearly loved him.

Iris’s shoulders slumped as she began to cry.

Iris strode toward the square, fighting to hold back her tears. The feast might already have begun; for Lilia, it would be one of the most important days of her life. Iris couldn’t walk into the hall carrying this news; her grief would cast a shadow on the feast, and some were sure to call her message an evil omen. She could not spoil the celebration for others.

Angharad would tell her that mourning so much for a man she hardly knew was inappropriate, that most fathers vanished from their daughters’ lives sooner or later. She would probably say that Tad had chosen to risk his life by leaving the safety of the Plains, and make a lesson out of his fate for her daughter. Angharad would say a prayer for Tad, perhaps even arrange for a mass, and then go on with her own life. She had never known the Tad who had smiled as Iris displayed symbols on her screen and pointed them out to him.

Iris would have to go into the town hall and pretend to be as happy as the others, keeping her bitter news to herself until the feast was over. It was going to be the hardest thing she had ever done.

The square was bright with light; she could hear the sounds of merriment through the open doors of the columned town hall. She felt as though she were going to start crying again. Halting near the shadows around the church, she concealed herself as the silhouettes of two women appeared in the doorway of the hall. They might be wondering where she was; Angharad might assume that she was reading, and had forgotten the time.

She could not face anyone yet. She waited until the women had gone back inside the town hall, then

hurried up the steps and opened the church doors.

The church was dark, its only illumination the moonlight that shone through the plain glass windows. Iris crossed herself and then cupped one hand over her belly for a moment as she crept past the simple, straight-backed pews. When she reached the railing in front of the altar, she knelt and gazed at the crucifix and the images before her.

A statue of Mary the Co-Redeemer had been placed to the left of the altar. She wore a long, flowing robe, but the carved wooden face had the thin, sharp features of many Plainswomen, and She held a sheaf of wheat. Her Son, standing next to Her, held a carpenter's saw; like the men of Lincoln, He had left His Mother to wander his land.

Mary had wept for Her Son at the cross. Tad's mother might be weeping for him now.

Iris bowed her head, trying to pray for her father and herself. Give him peace, she thought. Give me the strength not to show my grief.

Her hands began to shake; rage seized her, threatening to burst from her lungs in a long scream. You could have saved him, she thought. You didn't have to let him die.

She stood up and gazed at the statues coldly. They seemed more distant from her, and less caring, than even those who controlled the Nomarchies. An individual life was no more to them than part of a pattern, a thread broken off when that part of the design was completed.

The air inside the church was oppressive. You've done nothing for us, she thought, unsure of whether she was thinking of Mary or of the Linkers and Mukhtars. Once, it had comforted her to think of all the saints who could carry her prayers to God; now, she imagined a host of saints who looked down at her with vacant eyes as the jewels of Linkers gleamed on their foreheads, who granted some prayers and refused others.

Mary's eyes seemed to glitter as the moonlight wavered. Iris covered her face, knowing that Mary could see her thoughts. Her own prayer had been granted; Celia had given her what she wanted.

Forgive me. I have a prayer for you now, Mother of God. Let me learn, let me do something fine, let me be someone my father would have been proud of.

The prayer seemed pointless. For the first time, Iris felt as though her words were addressed to a mindless void. Those who had granted her wish had taken her father's life. There was no reason in that, only chance and the thoughtlessness of men and women.

She turned and walked down the aisle. Tad had talked of going to Venus someday when they had been together; now he would never have that chance. She might be one in her mother's line, but Tad's genes were part of her as well. She would find a way out of Lincoln. She would go to a place where people built what they wanted instead of accepting what they were given.

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Five

The two men sat on blue cushions in a small, lighted room bare of any ornament except for a shelf on the wall above them. A cloisonné plate, a porcelain vase holding one blue flower, and an ornate headdress that might once have been a crown stood on the shelf. The men had sipped their tea, but had hardly touched the small cakes arranged on the low glass table that sat between them. They spoke in low

voices, and nodded politely from time to time as they drank from their white cups.

Pavel Gvishiani was beginning to grow restless. He shifted on his cushion and plucked at the long white robe that covered his folded legs. He smiled at the other man; the smile was making his jaw ache. He had not been pleased to see Yukio Nakasone arrive on his doorstep; there had been no need for the Guardian commander to come here aboard the shuttle arriving from Anwara. Pavel had already endured at least an hour's worth of allusive and indirect conversation while waiting for Yukio to get to the point.

Yukio's Link glittered on his forehead; his ceremonial weapon, a slender wand, was at his waist. Pavel had always thought that Links were wasted on high Guardian officers, who rarely had what he considered proper training in their use. Guardian commanders drew on the cyberminds for their own limited purposes, seemingly unaware of the intellectual riches a Link could provide.

Yukio put his cup down. "I've enjoyed our talk," he said to Pavel in Anglaic; they had been speaking in Arabic before, and Pavel began to hope that this change signaled an end to the conversation. "It's a pity, really, that we have to rely on the Habbits at all."

At last Yukio was being direct. "Habbers," Pavel responded, still smiling. "They don't care for the term Habbits."

"I don't care what they like to be called," the younger man said forcefully. His broad nose wrinkled. "I don't spend enough time with them to know their preference."

Pavel nodded. "Of course not." He was surprised at the Guardian's emotional tone; Katy Szekely, the Guardian commander who had preceded Yukio on Anwara, the space station that orbited Venus, had never displayed any of her feelings quite so openly.

"It's best to have as little to do with them as possible, even if you must put up with them here."

"Indeed," Pavel said.

"I just wanted to make that point. Some people here seem to forget it. You *will* see the Linker who came here with me as soon as possible."

"I'll see him tomorrow at the latest," Pavel said, smiling now with some genuine pleasure. The young Guardian commander had to be somewhat insecure in his new position to have come here to the Islands to make that request; Pavel had known that he would have to see the returning Linker. Yukio was only trying to impress Pavel with his authority.

Pavel lowered his eyes to the gold star on Yukio's black shirt. Through his own Link, Pavel had gained access to the younger man's record, and had suspected that Yukio was one who longed for more power than he now had, but he had not expected the Guardian to confirm his suspicions so soon. That was good; a man who could not hide his feelings well could be manipulated more easily.

Poor Yukio, Pavel thought. He didn't belong in the Guardians. He would sit inside Anwara with the small Guardian force that space station had, waiting in frustration for a battle that would never come. The Mukhtars held the Guardians on a very short leash, making sure that they kept the peace instead of disturbing it. Yukio would have to be careful, or those above him might remove him from the Guardian force and assign him to the training of a city militia, thus stifling any ambitions he might have.

Yukio might have been happier doing useful work for the Project, where he would have had a constructive outlet for his energies, but the uniform of a Guardian allowed him the chance to strut. Luckily, the Islanders had no Guardians living among them; their tiny militia, volunteers drawn from

among the Counselors on the Project, was enough to keep order. They needed no Guardians here.

“I’m very glad you came to see me personally,” Pavel went on. “It’s good to see that you take our little problem so seriously. Perhaps I’ll even see that returning Linker this evening.”

Pavel waited until the other man stood up before rising himself. “Shall I accompany you to the airship bay?” he asked.

Yukio shook his head. “That isn’t necessary.”

“To the entrance, then.” Pavel ushered the smaller man out of the room. They walked down a curving hallway of closed doors adorned with Arabic script until they came to the wide, open doorway that led outside. “God go with you,” Pavel murmured. “Have a safe journey back.” The Guardian bowed slightly from the waist.

Pavel watched Yukio’s broad back as the man descended the steps; the younger man’s shoulders were stiff and his back straight. Pavel’s mouth twitched. The Nomarchies had no shortage of such people, restless and overly proud men and women who were grateful to the Mukhtars for the chance to feel important. The three Guardians waiting at the bottom of the steps stood up as Yukio approached them; the commander clicked his heels before the group marched away. A few workers were passing by along the white stone path; one of the women giggled and rolled her eyes as the Guardians strutted off.

From the entrance to the Administrators’ residence, Pavel could see a green park of trees and shrubs; a few tables lined the pathway below. To his left, nearly hidden by the trees, he glimpsed the round stone structure housing the Habbers who worked with the Project. Overhead, the lighted dome covering Island Two glowed with a soft, yellow light. The Islanders still marked their hours and days as Earthfolk did, with a golden glow overhead during their twelve-hour days and a dimmer, silvery glow as the twelve-hour night passed.

The domes were their only source of light, for the Parasol hid them from the sun, and the world below was cloaked in that massive umbrella’s shadow. The Islands floated in the Venusian atmosphere, above the dark cloud layers, drifting slowly around the world they sought to tame. Venus’s gravity held them; the thin upper atmosphere in which they floated offered some protection against meteor strikes. The scars and repaired punctures on the dome, where debris had managed to wound the protective shield, were invisible from where Pavel stood; he could forget, looking out at the green expanse and the people strolling by, that he was on a platform, dwelling on one of eleven Islands above raging winds and a still-deadly world.

Pavel turned and went back inside, relieved at being rid of the Guardians. An Island airship would carry Yukio and his aides to Island One, where a shuttle would return them to high Venus orbit and Anwara. That space station was their link to Earth, the place where spaceships docked and shuttles carried the spaceships’ cargo to the Islands. Representatives of the Project Council usually stayed on Anwara, along with other Linkers and some specialists, but the small group of Guardians was with them to remind them of their loyalty to the Nomarchies. Here on the Islands, it was sometimes easy for Pavel to forget that he served the Mukhtars as well.

He stopped in front of his door, pressing his hand against the lock panel. The door whispered open and he entered, seated himself on one of the cushions, then opened his Link, listening to the hum of the cyberminds as images, equations, projections, and other data flowed out to the specialists and workers.

Pavel had been born on Island Two. His grandparents had come to Venus as workers; his parents, taking advantage of the schools on the Islands that were open even to the children of workers, had been able to rise and become engineers. Pavel had surpassed them. Though the study of mathematics had

attracted him, he had seen how he might acquire some influence, and had supplemented his studies with work in the muddier and more ambiguous area of psychology. Often, even in his present position, he wondered whether he had made the right choice. He thought of Yukio and the man's silly pride in his Guardian uniform, and sympathized with the commander for a moment.

At the beginning of 533, two years earlier, Pavel had become a member of Island Two's Administrative Committee. Though each of the other Islands had such a Committee, Island Two's dominated the others, and Pavel in turn dominated his own. Many already addressed him as "Mukhtar" instead of calling him by name; occasionally, he chided them for doing so while feeding his pride secretly. Venus would have a Mukhtar someday, when it became one of Earth's Nomarchies, and he could hope that Earth would consider him the logical choice for such a post.

The Project was his life. Pavel had taken no bondmate and had fathered no children; he wanted to live in the memories of the first Cytherians through his own deeds rather than those of his descendants. Happily, few of the five thousand souls on this Island, or the other forty-five thousand on the other Islands, held this decision against him. Though most of them, whatever their previous customs, had come to place great importance on family ties, which promoted social stability among the Islanders, Pavel's freedom from such ties gave him an air of impartiality. He would be fair, and favor no one above another, as if he were the father of all.

Sometimes, when he viewed the Project's past, and considered the arguments that had been raised against terraforming, he could feel a bit of sympathy for those who had wanted to preserve Venus as an object of study. Those scientists had seen Venus as a planetary laboratory, one from which they might gain insights into planetary evolution. They had tentatively painted a picture of a young Venus with lakes and a shallow ocean orbiting a cooler sun billions of years ago, until the sun had grown hotter and the water evaporated under the increased heat, separating into hydrogen and oxygen. The scientists had imagined a landscape of volcanoes spewing carbon dioxide into the air, while the lighter hydrogen atoms escaped the Cytherian world and the heavier oxygen atoms combined with carbon and the surface rocks. They hypothesized a possible further catastrophe, the impact of a large asteroid or other body on Venus's surface, to account for its slow, retrograde motion.

Those wanting to preserve Venus had found enough evidence to make their hypothesis tenable, if not certain. Oxides were locked in the terrain and the proportion of deuterium atoms to hydrogen, a hundred times as great as on Earth, showed that an ocean might once have existed on the surface. Traces of organic material had even suggested that life might have begun to form billions of years earlier.

But these speculations had doomed those standing in the Project's way, for those wanting to alter the world could claim that they were restoring Venus to what it might have been. Even now, terraforming was destroying whatever other evidence might exist for those hypotheses; Venus, always a mysterious world, would keep many of its secrets. Pavel could sometimes regret the loss of that knowledge, while accepting it as part of the price of the Project.

Dimly, through his Link, Pavel sensed the questions of a Habber who was probing the cyberminds. Habbers had worked with the Project almost since its beginnings; even the Mukhtars on Earth had seen that Habber help was needed here. Without the Habbers, the three installations on Venus's equator could not have been built, though few cared to admit that openly. Habber robots had built those pyramids on Venus's surface, had sunk the rods anchoring them deep into the crust. Habber technology had constructed the gravitational pulse engines inside the pyramids and had captured the mini-black holes that would power those mighty engines. Eventually, those engines would release their power, and Venus would rotate more rapidly; the magnetic field thus created would protect the planet from solar radiation even when the Parasol no longer shaded it. Habbers had made that possible; Earth could not have built

the installations alone. The Habbbers who had forced peace on Earth long ago still doled out a few small gifts from time to time.

Pavel shook his head. The Habbbers were only consulting with the Project now, living among the Islanders as observers. It was necessary to tolerate them. Earth, whatever its resentments, depended on the Associated Habitats and their technical accomplishments more than the Mukhtars cared to grant openly, and the Project had to abide by the agreement that allowed a few Habbbers on the Islands. But now Pavel wondered if the Project would have to turn to the Habbbers for even more help when work on the surface settlements began. This possibility made him uneasy, but it was the Project's future that mattered more.

The Nomarchies were growing impatient. Each Island, floating in the atmosphere atop its giant helium cells, could support only the weight of about five thousand people and the objects that sustained them. The whole point of the Project had been to settle a planet, not to have permanent settlements around it, which was something the Habbbers might have done. Earth wanted to see people housed in domes on the surface, claiming Venus, even if it meant that the early settlers would be almost as cut off from the planet around them as they would have been on an Island, and exposed to more danger as well.

Pavel was not pleased with Earth's impatience for surface settlements, but he had made his peace with it. Earth's politics and motives were matters to study and use for his own ends, not issues on which to take a stand that could jeopardize the Project. Earth had waited a long time. It needed an outlet for its restless and energetic souls, and a dream to soothe and challenge those left behind on the home world. Without Venus, a frustrated, bounded Earth might again turn on itself.

Pavel sighed, withdrawing from the hum of his Link. He had avoided thinking about the Linker whom Yukio had pressed him to see, and already knew what that man would tell him.

Some of the Islanders had grown careless, were spending too much free time in the company of Habbbers, and that presented its own dangers to the Project. Working with a Habber was one thing; becoming too friendly was quite another. Unfortunately, people had to be reminded that their loyalty must be to the Nomarchies. If one grew too close to Habbbers, one might begin to see the Project, and Earth itself, through their eyes. Questions could be raised, doubts could infect the Project, and the Habbbers, with their talk of how their ancestors had escaped Earth, might even lure some to their worlds. Those working on the Project had to be warned, shown the consequences of too close an attachment to Habbbers. A few would have to be reprimanded, perhaps even exiled from the Islands. Others would get the message, and the exiles would be more circumspect if they were ever allowed to return.

Pavel rubbed his chin. This was a task he did not welcome. He longed to let the matter pass; most Islanders cared too much about the Project to allow themselves to fall under the spell of the Habs. But he had to act now, while this potential problem could still be controlled. Only the Project's future mattered, the dream to which he had given his life; those who might stand in the way of its fulfillment would have to be chastened or disregarded. The cyberminds could select a few examples from those who had sought the company of Habbbers a bit too often. The sooner he settled this, the sooner he could clear his mind and peruse the mathematical papers a scholar in Tbilisi had recently transmitted to him.

Pavel opened his Link and summoned Ari Isaacson, the Linker who had returned from Earth.

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Six

A shuttle was decreasing its speed as it entered Venus's upper atmosphere; then it began to raise its rounded, stubby nose as it positioned itself for a landing on Island One. That Island was known to most

as the Platform, or the Field, for it had no dome. It was on the Platform that shuttles returning from the Bats or from Anwara docked, where waiting airships ferried passengers back to the Islands.

The Platform seemed to float under the ship's tail; the Island's dark metal surface was studded with circles of light. The shuttle was returning from the northern Bat, one of the two large, winged satellites sunward of the planet's poles. Each Bat orbited the sun rather than Venus, thus maintaining a stable position; the wings of each Bat extended past the shadow of the Parasol in order to capture power from the sun.

Liang Chen had been working on the northern Bat for over two months; he had earned the period of rest he would now have on Island Two. Though he would have some work to do there, it never seemed like work after a shift on the Bat.

Straps held Chen in his seat; he kept his eyes on the seat in front of him and tensed as the ship dropped closer to the Platform. He wondered why anyone would want to pilot the craft, or be a pilot at all. An invisible weight pressed against his chest and he knew that the shuttle's retros were firing, slowing their descent toward the circle of light; the weight dissipated, and he knew that the craft had landed safely.

The floor under his feet had become a sloping wall. A slight hum filled the ship; Chen waited until a light on the panel above him signaled that the ship had been safely lowered into its dock and the dock sealed off above. His friend Fei-lin was already out of his seat, nimbly making his way down the jutting handholds on the sides of the seats. Chen shouldered his duffel and followed the other man, careful to keep his hands out of the way of the feet above him.

He went through the exit and climbed down a small ladder to the floor; he was standing inside the wide, cylindrical dock that held this shuttle. People were crowding through the dock's door; Chen pushed through after Fei-lin and entered a lighted tunnel, then climbed into one of the waiting cars that would carry the passengers to the airship bay.

Chen wedged himself into a seat next to Fei-lin, ignoring his talkative friend's chatter with the other workers. The car began to move, rolling past walls filled with graffiti in several languages. One passenger who could read howled with laughter as he read one inscription to the others; the inscription, apparently a recent one, concerned the personal habits of a particular Guardian commander who had visited the Platform not long before.

Chen settled back, resting his head against the car's dome. He had survived another shift on the northern Bat, where he had worked repairing the systems that supported its docks. The Bat was largely tiers of docks designed to service the automatic shuttles that traveled to and from the installation on the polar surface. That structure, like the other at the south pole, had been built in order to remove excess oxygen from Venus. Chambers in the structure drew in the atmosphere, separated the oxygen from other elements, and compressed it. Robots then ferried the oxygen in containers to the shuttles, which carried it up to the Bats where much of it was flung into space. The rest was used on the Bat itself, or ferried away for other purposes.

The oxygen-removal system was an automatic one, but people were needed on the Bats to service the steady stream of hundreds of shuttles, and they all lived with the fear that the volatile oxygen might explode. That had happened before, and the memorial pillars engraved with the names and images of the dead back on the Islands always reminded Chen of the danger he would face once more on his next shift inside the Northern Bat.

That danger, however, was not his greatest fear. He worried more about the polar installation below, about the possibility that a malfunction might occur and that the robots would not be able to handle it. He

could be one of those sent down to the surface to deal with such a problem. He had never been sent down yet; though he could think calmly about being a settler during the decades to come, the thought of actually descending to the barren land below still frightened him. He hoped that his dream would be strong enough to overcome his fear, which he had never admitted to anyone; how foolish it would be to labor for a goal his own fear might keep him from reaching.

Fei-lin nudged him. "You look as if you're going *to* the Bat, instead of coming back."

Chen shook his head, unable to form a reply.

"Cheer up. We're almost home." The corridor suddenly widened as the car came to a stop at the entrance to the airship bay.

The dirigible floated toward Island Two. Its cabin had no windows, but a large screen near the front of the airship revealed the darkness outside.

This airship, like most of those used by the Project, had a small cabin with fifty seats covered by a worn, pale fabric, and the aisle was scarred by tiny dents and scuff marks. The two pilots in the front of the ship, bands around their heads, were concentrating on the panels before them, ignoring the talk of the passengers.

Chen sat near the back of the airship, listening to the swirl of conversation around him as he polished the small piece of wood he held in his hands. He had managed to finish the carving on the Bat; a friend had salvaged the wood for him from a dead tree on Island Two destined for the recycler. The face he had carved in the wood stared up at him sightlessly; it was the thin face of a man whose eyes seemed to look inward instead of out at the world.

Fei-lin was entertaining some of the other passengers with a story, moving his hands as words flowed easily from his lips. Chen envied the small man his fluid speech; Fei-lin could make words sing and dance. Chen, with his own speech, chipped at stone, each word struggling to force a chink through the wall around him; even in his boyhood tongue, he had never been able to remove the barrier. The wall only vanished when he listened to others and let their words flow into his thoughts; the wall reappeared whenever he tried to express his own.

On the screen, through the darkness illuminated only by the lights on the outside of the airship, he saw a faint gleam in the murkiness. Chen was going home. He thought of Island Two as his home now. He had been with the Project for four years, ever since he had turned seventeen. He could hardly believe that he had once feared coming here. His poor way with words had saved him; he had been unable to form any coherent objections to his Counselor's suggestion that he apply for the Project.

Island Two was the only real home he had ever known. In spite of what the Nomarchies had been able to do for his region of Earth, there had been too many children in his village, too many people in the cities nearest it, and not enough work for them all. His people tilled the land and were grateful when they raised enough to feed themselves without having to prevail on their Counselor for more aid.

Only a few had been able to escape the village, and Chen had been among the fortunate ones. He had been taken from his family at the age of nine and sent with other children to be an apprentice mechanic in Shanghai, and he had been glad to go. Children's allotments for his town had been cut in half by then, making him useless to his parents, who had been promised more credit if they gave him up. They were practical people; one son would not be missed when they had two others, and Chen had been more useless than most, spending his days whittling and carving. The pastime his parents had mocked had rescued him from them. Chen had given a carved wooden boat to the Counselor during one of that man's visits to the village, and the man had remembered the gift when it was time to select a few apprentices.

Chen had never missed the father who had beaten him whenever he couldn't find words to answer the man's barked questions, or the mother who had hissed angrily or sighed in exasperation. But the couple had not entirely lacked the strong sense of family common in their town. They had wailed and wept when he left them, though they had been careful not to protest against the Counselor's plans for him.

In Shanghai, he had lived in a dormitory with others like himself. He had learned how to avoid the bullies, how to use his fists and feet when necessary, how to alter a few circuits in the dispenser so that he could get more than the allotted rations, and how to sneak into the girls' dormitory at night without being seen by the sensors.

Along with the skills that would make them useful Earth citizens, the apprentices had also been taught Anglaic, the official tongue of the Nomarchies, the remaining legacy of an old and once-dominant culture, and the language the children would need if they were ever sent outside their own land. There had been no need to teach them the formal Arabic still popular among the Mukhtars, for when were they likely to encounter anyone so grand?

The Anglaic words had entered Chen's head easily enough with the aid of his band and hypnotraining, and he had not needed to master their written symbols. He had imagined that the new language would finally free his tongue of its clumsiness. He had finally realized that he would be awkward in the second language too.

Fei-lin had finished his story; the passengers nearest to him seemed to be waiting for more. The small man glanced at Chen, then began another tale of a boyhood prank he had pulled on a Counselor. Chen had heard the story before, and suspected it wasn't true; Fei-lin always added new details each time he told it. Chen kept his face still, used to looking as though he were listening while following his own train of thought. He had always had friends who were talkers — a boy named Li at the dormitory in Shanghai, another boy named Benzi when Chen had first worked in space. He had been grateful to them for filling the silence, while they had appreciated having a listener. Fei-lin was slender, while Benzi had been stocky, but something in Fei-lin's manner now reminded Chen of the old friend he had met in Earth orbit.

At the age of thirteen, Chen had been sent to a space station. The orbiting platform was an old one; he and the others with him spent their work time repairing old, salvaged satellites and some of their free time tinkering with the platform's ancient circuitry. They were afraid to complain about the wretched conditions there, about the tiny, crowded rooms, the nearly constant problems with plumbing, and the faulty homeostat that filled the air with the smell of rotting vegetation; too many people were available to replace them. Benzi had claimed that children were sent to work in such places because the Nomarchies could afford the loss of a child more easily than that of an experienced worker.

Chen had been surprised when he learned that some people from other Nomarchies had chosen to work in space, had even waited months or years for the chance. Gradually, he came to understand them. Earth was a bounded world, while space was limitless. Even on an old space station, one might dream of escape — to a newer station, or to an asteroid mining operation, or even, if one was daring and had no gratitude to the Nomarchies, to one of the Habitats. The platform workers rarely spoke about the Habs; such talk could make trouble. The Mukhtars might deal with Habbars, but they did so only in the interest of Earth and not because they approved of Hab ways. Yet stories of the Habs, where everyone could have a Link and no Mukhtars ruled, had reached even the space stations around Earth.

Chen had been afraid of coming to Venus. The danger had not frightened him; the orbiting platform had offered enough threats of its own. Death was not even the most dreaded consequence of work in Earth orbit. An injury could send a worker back to Earth; a serious disability might sentence a person to life on the basic allotment, without the credit for the extra medical treatment that could repair a broken body. Venus, he knew, would not be any more dangerous. The Nomarchies had invested heavily in the Project

and had to protect the scientists and specialists; the workers benefited from that.

Chen had feared joining the Project because he had been afraid of the hope it might awaken in him. He had been grateful for what he had; wanting more could only bring pain. He had been happy with what the Nomarchies had given him; he had forced himself to be.

Now, he welcomed his hopes. The true reward of working on the Project was not the extra credit, or even the frequent rest periods that gave him time to do his carvings; it was knowing that he would be part of a new world. It said so in his agreement with the Project, which had been read to him before he consented to it; the first settlers would be chosen from those who had labored for the Project, who had already proven their devotion to its ideals. Earth always abided by its agreements, even those with the Habs. Earth had to keep to its promises; all knew what had happened in the past when people had not kept them.

He might live to see domed settlements on the surface; he might even be one of the settlers. Later, in the centuries to come, even the Islands would drop slowly toward the fertile soil below, and humanity's arks would settle on the surface of a world rescued from sterility. Those who had labored on the Project would become the ancestors of people freed from Earth's history. All of these thoughts were formless and vague in Chen's mind, but the image of free people standing on a green, new world was sharp and clear.

Chen frowned. He would have to overcome his fear of the dark planet below before he could become a settler. He steadied himself, certain that he would find his courage when he needed it.

Fei-lin poked him in the ribs. "Look happier. Tonie's probably waiting for you right now. Better become bondmates soon, before she flies away."

"Tonie can fly my way any time," Olaf said as he leaned across the aisle; his companion Catherine jabbed him with an elbow. On the screen, the lighted dome of Island Two swam toward them.

The airship had landed in its cradle, which drew it through the lock and then into the bay, where it sat among a row of cradled dirigibles. The workers scrambled down the ramp at the cradle's side, making their way toward the entrance to the Island; Chen and Fei-lin were the last to enter. The door slid shut behind them as workers hurried off along white-tiled paths.

The two men were standing in a garden. Among the blossoming flowers and small green shrubs, slender trees stood with outstretched limbs capturing the light of the dome. A woman was leaning against one of the trees; she was tiny and slim and wore the gray shirt and pants of a worker.

Chen hurried toward her. She smiled with her delicate mouth, showing small, white teeth, and took his hand. Fei-lin was right; Chen would have to ask Tonie for a promise soon, but he had never found the words to ask her to share her life with him. He spoke of his love with his hands, cupping her breasts with his long fingers or caressing the silky skin of her thighs.

"Tonie," he said. "I wasn't sure you'd be back yet."

"I've been back for almost a week. We'll have two weeks together, maybe more. I asked if I could be assigned to your work crew next time, but you know the Committee." She shrugged. She had meant the Workers' Committee, which in its zeal to keep from offending any Administrators, often seemed more of an obstacle than an aid to the workers it was supposed to represent.

If he and Tonie became bondmates, the Administrators would do their best to keep them together. Formal bonds were encouraged here; the children of bondmates were the representatives of the future

the Project was trying to build.

A tall, thin man was walking toward them, his face a replica of the wooden one inside Chen's pocket. Fei-lin's dark eyes narrowed; Tonie moved closer to Chen. Her fingers were cold as they brushed against his palm.

"Greetings, Ibrahim," Chen said.

"Hello, Chen," the man replied. He, like the other three, was also wearing a gray shirt and pants, but the cluster of silver circles on his collar showed that he was not a worker. Ibrahim was a Habber; though no jewel glittered on his forehead, he had his own Link. Habbers wore no outward signs of their status, a habit that made others uneasy; Habbers might not care about such distinctions, but Earthfolk did. Without a jewel on one's forehead, a stranger might not even know that one was a Linker; it seemed an affront for a Habber not to have one. The Administrators on the Project had insisted on the pins of silver circles to mark Habbers as such.

"Uh, I think you already know Wu Fei-lin." Chen gestured at his friend. "And Tonie Wong." Fei-lin was biting his lip and looked ill at ease; the small woman plucked nervously at her short black hair.

"Indeed." Ibrahim nodded to them; Tonie took a step back and stared at her feet.

"I finished it." Chen took the carving out of his pocket; Ibrahim grasped it and held it up.

"Nice seeing you," Fei-lin said abruptly; it seemed that his usual clever speech had deserted him. "Have to go." He adjusted his duffel and hurried off, casting one fearful glance back at Chen before disappearing around a bend in the path.

"It's quite lovely," Ibrahim murmured as he gazed at the carving. "I'll treasure it." He tucked the carving into one of his large shirt pockets. "I must give you more for such a piece."

"You paid me already," Chen replied.

"Really, it wasn't enough."

"A meal, then," Chen said. "You can buy us both something to eat."

"I'm afraid I can't join you," Tonie said; her clear, musical voice sounded strained. Her eyes met Chen's. "I promised Dorcas I'd meet her in the gym." Her oddly intent gaze told him she was lying. "I'll drop your bag off on the way, if you like." She grabbed at his duffel, shouldered it awkwardly, then kissed him quickly before she strode away.

Ibrahim rubbed his chin. "I may be doing you no favor by dining with you in public."

"It doesn't matter," Chen replied. "You're paying me for some work, that's all."

"Things have changed since you left for the Bat. Your people have been avoiding us even more than usual."

The two men walked along the path, leaving the garden and passing a low, glassy structure that housed a hydroponic food plant. The Islands produced much of their food, importing as little as possible from Earth.

Ibrahim seemed lost in musing, as Habbers often did. Chen thought of what the man had said. It wasn't wise to be seen too often with Habbers; their help might be needed occasionally, but one did not have to

associate with them socially. Chen knew all of that, but he had never been able to share the feelings of others about the Habbers. Ibrahim, like his fellows, was invariably courteous and kind in an abstracted way; the stronger human emotions did not seem to trouble him. Others might resent such serenity, but Chen welcomed it. Ibrahim did not even mind his lack of graceful and fluent speech, and often anticipated what he might say, thus relieving Chen of the necessity to say it.

The two men came to a small pool, around which tables and chairs had been placed. Five Linkers sat at one table; one of the women stared coldly at Ibrahim before turning back to her companions.

Chen touched the Habber's arm, leading him away from the pool and along the path to another group of tables near a trellis of vines; Habbers never understood that it was not suitable for someone like Chen to sit in a spot frequented by Linkers. As they sat down, a servo rolled toward them; the squat robot stopped at their side, awaiting their order. Chen looked around, relieved that no one else was present.

"What would you like?" Ibrahim asked. "Some new imports arrived recently. We could have some pate, if you wish."

"Anything's fine." Chen rarely spent his credit on imports, usually contenting himself with the workers' simple but adequate rations, and had no idea of what to choose.

"Let's try the lobster, then. Our substitutes really don't taste the same. Really, the Project ought to set up a tank and breed its own. It wouldn't be difficult." His brown eyes widened a bit as he gave the order silently through his Link.

Sometimes Chen wondered why the Habbers were interested in the Project. He knew that they found it odd that people should terraform a world when one could be built inside an asteroid, or from scratch, with less trouble, but Earth's reasons for the Project were involved and Chen had never troubled himself with them. He had his own dream, and the Habbers would help him and others realize that dream; he felt he owed them some consideration for that.

The Habbers had lent Earth their resources. They had brought in the hydrogen from Saturn, a fact Chen had not known before coming to the Islands. Habber robots had built the three vast installations on the Cytherian surface. Chen had seen images of those dark, looming pyramids, each so large that a million people might have been housed inside one. At some future time, the engines inside the pyramids would release their power, and Venus, which now turned from east to west only once every one hundred and twenty days, would begin to rotate more rapidly; Chen already looked forward to that great event, and the surface settlements that would follow.

The people of the Habitats had made that possible, and they seemed to want nothing in return for their efforts except whatever new knowledge their techniques might yield. But it was hard to guess what motivated such people, who at times seemed almost like another species. Chen drew his brows together at that thought, recalling stories he had heard about the Habbers' biological techniques. Some claimed that they had gone beyond the normal types of genetic engineering, which on Earth were limited to correcting flaws, and had even altered their own hormonal systems. Catherine, Chen's fellow worker, had claimed that Habbers could no longer breed with other people in the usual way, although Chen was sure that wasn't true.

Ibrahim made a steeple with his hands; his eyes gazed placidly past Chen. It was not necessary to distract the Habber with talk; he always had the company of his Link.

"I'll have time to do a little more carving now," Chen said, breaking the silence. "I can use the credit."

"You'd do it whether or not you were paid," Ibrahim said. "It's a pity you can't devote all of your time to

it, maybe get some artistic training.”

Chen shrugged. “They don’t need carvers here. Can’t use art on the Islands.” It felt strange to call his hobby art, as Ibrahim did.

“Because beauty isn’t useful doesn’t mean that it’s not needed,” Ibrahim replied. “At any rate, I’m sure many more of your people would appreciate your work.”

“I thought some of your friends might.”

“That might not be wise.” Ibrahim leaned forward as the servo returned with plates holding chunks of lobster, a bowl of fruit, and a small bottle of wine. “You’ve been kind to me, Chen, but I don’t think you should seek out my company again, or that of other Habbbers, unless we have to work together.” He speared a piece of lobster with his fork. “I wouldn’t want to endanger you.”

Chen frowned. He could tolerate disapproval, even a reprimand; what other danger could there be?

The corridors of the building in which Chen lived were filled with the hum of voices. The workers kept their doors propped open during much of the day. People were squatting or sitting on their heels in groups near the walls; a few children passed Chen on skates, weaving their way expertly past the men and women sharing beer or gossiping in the open doorways. The door frames bore pictures of their rooms’ occupants; some were holo portraits, while a few were carvings Chen had made for friends.

He greeted five men who were kneeling near one door as they gambled with small sticks and dice, then stopped in front of his own door, where his own carved face nestled next to Tonie’s. His was a broad face with full lips and a slightly receding chin above a muscular neck; Tonie had never liked the carving, insisting that Chen was handsomer.

He palmed the door open and entered; the door slid shut behind him. Tonie was wearing her band as she idled away a few moments in a game scenario; she took off the circlet and turned toward him.

“I hope you won’t see that Habbit any more,” she said.

“I won’t. Anyway, he doesn’t think we should.”

“Well, at least one of you’s showing some sense.”

He sat down on his bed, resenting her tone. Their room was small, though the two beds could be pushed into the wall to make more space. Drawers inside the walls held their few clothes and other possessions. On their one shelf, a small carving of Tonie was the only ornament; the figure was naked, one arm crossed modestly over the chest. He and Tonie had waited months to move from the quarters they had each shared with other workers to this room. He wondered how long they would have to wait before having children; the Islands could support only so many.

“It just isn’t smart,” Tonie continued as she took off her shirt. “Habbits give people funny ideas — that’s what Catherine says. I don’t know why they stay on, anyway. We could get along without them now.”

“They must still be needed.”

“I don’t know what for. They’re probably spying on us.”

“Anyway, Earth has an agreement. They can’t break it.”

“The Mukhtars shouldn’t have made one. Now, we’re stuck.” She opened a drawer, then shed her

pants. Chen reached over and cupped her small buttocks in his hands. She dropped her clothes inside the drawer, then turned toward him, drawing his hands to her narrow hips.

He had to ask her. "I love you," he said in a low voice, pulling her gently toward him. The words lodged in his throat. She might prefer to leave things as they were; she might not want to make a promise.

"I love you," he said again, brushing his lips against her abdomen as he ran his hands over her smooth skin.

"I love you, Chen," she whispered. "I love you enough to form a bond with you, I think."

He looked up quickly, surprised. "I was — I was going to ask you."

She was smiling; her dark eyes glowed. "Well, why didn't you, then?" Her hand touched his cheek. "I had to say something — I'm really getting tired of waiting. Will you be my bondmate, Chen?"

"You're sure?"

"Oh, Chen. Yes, I want to be your bondmate. I already feel as though I am. How long, then?"

"How long?"

"For how long do you want the bond? Ten years? Fifteen? Twenty might be best if we have children, and I know we both want them. What do you say?" She sat down next to him, circling his waist with her arms.

"As long as you want." For a lifetime, he thought. I want you for as long as we live, I want to be with you when we're old, I want to be at your side when our children become true Cytherians. The words were inside him; why couldn't he say them?

"Always," he said at last.

She loosened his shirt. Her hands were arousing him; he could feel himself growing stiff. "I'd make a lifetime promise," she murmured, "but a Counselor might advise against it. They might say we're too young for that, or that we'd change our minds later — a lifetime bond's the hardest and most expensive to break, and it doesn't look good on your record to make promises you can't keep." She was probably right, but her practicality dismayed him just a little. "Would twenty years do?"

"Yes." He pushed her down gently against the bed and rubbed his thumbs lightly along her nipples.

"Soon, before we have to go back to work."

"Oh, I wish I had a silk shirt to wear when we pledge, or a gown, but then we'd have to wait, wouldn't we? I know you'll want Fei-lin to be your witness, and Dorcas can be mine. Do you want to make the pledge in one of the gardens?" She sounded as though she had already given the matter a lot of thought, and seemed as taken with the idea of a ceremony as with the pledge itself.

"It doesn't matter. Whatever you want."

"Of course." She drew his face close to hers. "And after twenty years, we'll form a new bond, I know we will. Oh, Chen."

He rested his head on her shoulder, unable to speak of his happiness. His hands, speaking for him, lingered lovingly on the open cleft between her legs until there was no need for words.

His Counselor summoned him two days later. Chen strode quickly through the curved and empty

corridor of the Counselor's more peaceful building, suspecting that she wanted to discuss his pledge with him. He was sure he had nothing to fear from the encounter; at worst, the Counselor might ask them to shorten the duration of the bond and renew the pledge in a few years.

He knew that something was wrong as soon as he entered the Counselor's room. Corazon Delgado was frowning, and a Linker Chen had not seen before was with her.

"Please sit down," she said, gesturing at one of the chairs; Corazon's room was somewhat larger than a worker's quarters. "Liang Chen, this is Ari Isaacson. He just returned from Earth about a month and a half ago, and he's the new head of the Counselor's Committee here."

The stocky Linker nodded at Chen. Ari Isaacson sat with folded legs, as if he were not used to sitting in chairs. Chen seated himself across from the Linker.

"Ari worked with the Project for almost three decades as a physician," Corazon went on, "but it appears that the Nomarchies would now like to make use of his talents in counseling." Her tone was sharp.

Chen looked into the man's gray eyes, wondering what Ari Isaacson could want with him. He was not even sure of how to address the man. When meeting a Linker for the first time, it was polite to use a title, while Counselors, like almost everyone else, insisted on first names. "Greetings, Linker Ari," Chen said, compromising. Even Corazon seemed intimidated by the Linker's presence; she sat stiffly upright in her chair, but her fingers fluttered nervously.

"I was going to speak to you next week," Ari said in a smooth voice, "but events have made it necessary for me to tell you this immediately, and my time is going to be taken up with many more of these little meetings. You see, we're going to prune the work force here a bit. We have people waiting to have children, and that's quite important now, since the time for planning our surface settlements is not far off. We must think of the future. Then, of course, there are the graduates of the Cytherian Institute to consider — of course, many of them will be assigned to Anwara, at least at first, but we need places for them here. Now, there's always attrition — those who can't adjust and want to leave, those who don't do their work well, those lost in unfortunate accidents or who are called to God at the end of their long lives, but we are now compelled to dismiss more people from the Islands."

Chen was very still. He was irritated at the Linker for explaining such obvious matters to him, and also frightened at the man's calm tone.

Ari rested his hands on his knees. "You see, Chen, you're one of the people we've decided to send back."

Chen was silent.

"It may be only for a while," Corazon said hastily. "Work will be found for you on Earth. I know how you must feel, but you'll be first on the list along with anyone else who's worked here when it's time to bring in more workers. You'll have a chance to be part of the Project later."

"If, of course, your work on Earth is satisfactory," Ari added, "as I'm sure it will be."

Chen stared at his Counselor mutely; her black eyes revealed her unhappiness, as if she were feeling his pain as her own. Perhaps she did. Corazon, he knew, had grown up on an Island; her parents and grandparents had worked here.

"I wanted to tell you personally," Ari continued. "I realize that this must come as a surprise. Anyway, we felt that some of you might like the chance to go home, to see old friends and familiar places. The change

will do you good.”

“I can’t go,” Chen said at last. “I have an agreement. There’s nothing wrong with my work.”

“You’d better listen to your agreement again, my boy.” Ari’s voice was a bit sharper. “There’s a clause in it that allows us to send anyone back with cause. You know perfectly well that we don’t break agreements, and we have reasons for choosing you to return.” Ari’s eyes narrowed as he stood up and rubbed his hand over his graying brown hair. “I’ll leave you with your Counselor now — you may want to talk. Unless you have any questions for me —” He raised his brows.

“I can’t go,” Chen repeated. “I’m needed here. It isn’t right. You’re not doing me a favor — you’re punishing me.” He swallowed, trying to control himself.

“Be sensible. Others can take up the slack. Really, Chen, I thought I was being considerate in coming to tell you this myself instead of leaving it to Corazon here. Believe me, you’ll see that it’s for the best.” Ari frowned for a moment, as if he regretted bringing this news to Chen, but his frown seemed rehearsed. “You’ll be given a good job back home.”

Home, Chen thought. This is my home. “And when do I get to come back?” he asked forcefully.

“That I cannot answer.” Ari was glowering. “I rather think that’s up to you and how you get on, don’t you think?” The door opened; the Linker left without waiting for a response.

The door slid shut. Corazon leaned back; her stubby fingers drummed against her armrest. “Bastard,” she muttered. “I’ll have to go through this with two more people.”

“Who?” Chen asked listlessly.

“I really shouldn’t tell you. They should hear it from Ari and me. No one you know well, anyway.”

Tonie wouldn’t be one of them, then. Chen twisted his hands together. “I can’t go. Tonie Wong and I were going to become bondmates.”

“I heard. That’s why you were called in now. I can’t tell you what to do about that, but I’d advise against it at this point.” Chen grimaced; advice from a Counselor was as good as a command. “You can’t be expected to keep such promises when you’re separated — one of you would probably want to break the bond sooner or later, and that would be extra trouble and expense you don’t need, and a mark against you on your personal record. Of course, Tonie could ask to return with you. That’s entirely up to her. I think she might be allowed to go, under the circumstances.”

Chen looked down; he couldn’t ask Tonie to do that. He recalled Ibrahim’s warning. “I’m being punished,” he said. “That’s what it is, isn’t it? I’ve been too friendly to the Habbars. He could have said it instead of making it seem —”

“Oh, Chen. I wish I could do something for you.” Corazon bit her lip. “I’ll tell you what Ari thinks. He thinks we forget our duty here, that we already think of ourselves as Cytherians instead of as Earthpeople. He thinks we forget that we’re part of the Nomarchies and that Earth still makes the decisions. He even asked me if I might like a trip to Earth. Home, he called it. Home! I’ve never been there, and he knows it. Earth means nothing to me.” She could say that in front of Chen, who knew that he was hardly in a position to repeat it.

Chen swallowed. He couldn’t accept this; he would have to fight it. He could appeal to Ari, or to the Administrators themselves through the Workers’ Committee; he had the right. But no one would want to argue his case, under the circumstances, and Chen knew that he could never be eloquent enough to argue

for himself. He might even ruin any chance of returning by filing a protest. Ari would twist Chen's words, make it seem that he wasn't being punished at all and had no reason for complaining; then, after Chen's appeal was turned down, the rumors would start, and everyone would know why he had been sent away. Rumors were often useful to the Administrators in such cases. Chen would be punished, but no one would ever admit openly that he had been.

"I'll make out a report," Corazon said. "I'll note that you've been a good worker. I'll do everything I can to make sure you return someday. I guess I haven't been a good Counselor to you, Chen, or I would have warned you more forcefully, would have insisted —"

He waited for her to finish the sentence, then realized that even Corazon would not openly admit the truth about his expulsion.

"You mustn't despair," she continued. "Even Ari knows that the good of the Project has to come first, that it makes more sense to bring back experienced workers when we need replacements instead of training new ones. Just do well at whatever job you're given and don't give them anything to hold against you, and you'll come back. You have a lifetime ahead of you — decades."

He was mute, thinking of decades of exile, of waiting. He couldn't bear it.

"Isn't there anything you want to ask me, to tell me? Say what you like, Chen. You know that I have to keep it in confidence."

Chen rose, suddenly suspicious of the Counselor, unable to tell if she was speaking from the heart or only trying to console him as part of her job. "It's all right, Corazon. I just have to get used to the idea."

In the hour before the dome's light began to fade into silver, it was the habit of many of the workers to gather on the grassy expanse in front of the steel-blue building where they lived. Parents knelt beside cloths laden with small bowls of food, feeding their young children with chopsticks, spoons, or fingers; others sat mending clothes as they gossiped. Young couples strolled along the white stone path under the watchful eyes of parents or other adults. A few children sat alone, gazing at the writing on their flat pocket screens; one young girl pointed at the words on her screen as she said them aloud for her proud, beaming mother.

It was easy to tell which workers had only recently arrived on Island Two, for they sat near the entrance to the windowless building, prepared to be the first to find refuge inside. Once during the years Chen had spent on Island Two, the sirens had wailed and the Islanders had run for the nearest buildings, sealing the entrances off and waiting for the repair crew on duty to mend the new puncture a meteorite had made in the dome. Recent arrivals on the Islands often believed that air would rush through such an opening in a great gust, or that the dome might suddenly collapse around them, while in fact a small puncture meant only a slow leak; taking refuge inside a structure was simply an added precaution.

Chen recalled his own fears when he had heard the sirens sound; he had been on Island Two for less than a year, and had even considered returning to Earth. He glanced at the workers near the entrance as he entered the building; these people were hiding their nervousness, but he saw a few cast furtive glances at the diffuse light overhead. Most of them would have liked to trade places with Chen now; in another year or two, they would lose such fears. The Project would claim them, and they would begin to dream.

A few women greeted Chen as he moved through the corridor toward his own room; they smiled as they called out their congratulations on his approaching pledge with Tonie. Olaf slapped Chen on the back as he hastened by. Chen bore all of this passively, wondering how many would still speak to him so readily when they learned that he was going to be sent away. They would all guess the truth about that, no matter what they were told, and draw the proper lesson from his fate.

Tonie was sitting with Dorcas and Catherine in an open doorway. Dorcas giggled as Catherine held up a gauzy, transparent blouse and sheer pair of panties; Catherine's pale cheeks grew pink as she looked up and saw Chen.

"Look what Catherine's giving me," Tonie said.

Catherine shook her blond head. "He wasn't supposed to see it until after the ceremony."

"Let him whet his appetite," Dorcas said as she rolled her brown eyes. "Not that he hasn't seen the goods before, but a new wrapping can make all the difference."

"Fei-lin came by before," Tonie said. "He'll be a witness, but —"

"I have to talk to you," Chen said quickly. "Now, alone."

The women stood up; Tonie's smile faded as she gazed at Chen. Catherine, looking worried as she caught Chen's eye, quickly led Dorcas away.

The door closed behind Chen and Tonie. "You don't look very happy about our pledge," Tonie said, sounding affronted. "Dorcas and Lise are going to give us a party afterward. I was going to ask just the people on your crew and mine, but I think they want to ask more, so I said that was fine as long as we didn't have to provide the beer and wine for all of them. What do you think?" She did not wait for an answer. "Dorcas and Lise said they'd take care of the extra beer and wine. I guess they'll expect us to do the same for them later, when they make pledges."

Chen sat down across from her, folding his arms. "I have to tell you something."

She pouted a little. "Oh, my. Don't tell me you've changed your mind already." She shook out the garments Catherine had given her and dropped them on her bed. "Dorcas would never forgive me. She'd probably have the party anyway — she'll use any excuse for a party."

"I haven't changed my mind," he said dully.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Tonie stretched out on her bed seductively, leaning on one elbow and arching her back a bit. The gesture, tickled Chen's memory; Tonie looked exactly like an image he had seen on an erotic tape, almost as if she had studied the image's postures. "Did that damned Counselor tell you that we can't have twenty years?"

"I have to tell you." He stared at the wall behind her, unable to gaze into her eyes. "They're sending me back to Earth. Corazon told me today."

"Sending you back?" Tonie sat up; her hands fluttered. "But you haven't asked to go."

"They need more room here."

"When?"

"I don't know exactly when. Probably before my next shift on the Bat's due to start. As soon as a ship's leaving Anwara."

"Oh, Chen. It isn't fair."

He bowed his head. "Corazon said it's only for a while." He tried to sound as if he believed that. "She'll write a good report so I'll have a good chance to come back."

“How long?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t ask? How could you listen to that, and not ask? They can’t do it.”

Chen raised his head. Tonie’s face crumpled, as if she was about to cry; then her eyes suddenly widened. “Do they expect me to go back with you?”

He shook his head. “Of course not. We don’t have a bond yet. It wouldn’t matter even if we did. I wouldn’t ask you to come back with me, Tonie. Listen, this doesn’t have to change our plans. We could become bondmates anyway.”

She drew up her legs. In her slightly baggy shirt, with her thin legs and pretty, pouting face, she looked like a wounded child. “How? How do I know when I’ll see you again?”

“Corazon said I could be near the top of the list.” He struggled for words. “She doesn’t think we should be bondmates now, but we can still make a pledge. I’d keep my promise for years if I had to. Don’t you see? If I had a bondmate here, they might let me come back sooner. We could even start a child — you could ask Corazon about it. If I had a bondmate and a child here —” Another idea occurred to him. “You could file a protest, say that your bondmate’s being taken from you and that —”

Her mouth twitched. “How do you know they wouldn’t send me back if we did that? And Corazon doesn’t even want you to make a pledge now. She’d never approve of us having a child, never. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“They’re sending others back. There’ll be more room here.” A lump was forming in his throat. He couldn’t tell her how much he needed her promise now; he might be able to endure Earth if he knew his bondmate and child were still on the Islands. I love you, he thought, and you’re sounding as though you don’t really love me.

He wasn’t being fair. Tonie was suffering for his deeds; he had to be more considerate of her feelings. He could not ask too much of her.

“We can modify the contract,” he mumbled. “You could do what you want, even form a second bond with another man if you like while I’m away. A Counselor could write the clauses for us. I wouldn’t ask —”

“No, no, it wouldn’t work.” She paused. “I don’t want anyone else anyway.” That statement sounded like an afterthought. “Look, it doesn’t make sense to form a bond of any kind now. When you come back — we can make a pledge then. Can’t we?”

“Oh, Tonie,” he groaned.

She stood up, holding out her arms. “Chen, you know how much I care about you. Believe me, if I thought — if you could tell me how long I’d have to wait — I could wait for a year, or two years, or maybe even longer. But I don’t know when you’ll come back, or even if you will.”

“Corazon said —”

“I don’t care what she said. Without a public statement, her word is useless. You know that.”

His hope was fading. “There would be a better chance for me if I had a bondmate here.”

“Chen! I’m only nineteen. We could both change — we might not feel the same way later on.”

He ground his teeth. “You were willing to pledge twenty years before.”

“When I thought you would be here, at my side. You fool.” She was now speaking in Chinese. “What do you expect from me? Should I pledge myself to you and risk being sent back too? Do I have to share your fate and lose what I already have? Do I have to be chained to a child?”

“I thought you wanted one.”

“Later, not now — not with an absent father.”

He knew she was right, that his poorly thought-out plan was ridiculous. He would not be here to help raise the child when Tonie was working on one of the Bats; they would not be able to divide the burden. The Island nursery, tended mostly by groups of parents under the direction of Counselors, as well as by workers trained for the task, could not be expected to take on the entire responsibility for a child. Corazon, whatever her sympathies, would never allow Tonie to bear his child in his absence. Tonie saw how things had to be, and he understood that at last, but she might have tried to ease his pain now. Whatever she was losing, she would still have her part in the Project.

He opened his hand, palm up, as he prepared to speak more gently to the woman he loved.

Tonie’s eyes suddenly narrowed. “It’s that cursed Habbit. I know it. That’s why they’re sending you away. They’re punishing you, warning the rest of us not to spend any time with them.” She had grasped the truth quickly. Ari, he thought bitterly, would be pleased; Tonie and her friends would spread rumors and warnings for him. “Oh, I knew it. I told you not to talk to that Habber dog and his kind. What can he do for you now?”

Chen stood up. She wasn’t thinking of him at all.

“Why didn’t you listen to me?” She was almost screaming now, her face so contorted that it was uglier than he had believed possible. “I’d be mad to become your bondmate now, I’d just be punished along with you. It’s true, isn’t it? That’s why they’re sending you away. It’s bad enough that I lived with you all these months. What if they begin to think I’m like you? You’ve shamed me, Chen. I warned you, I told you — this is all your own fault. I told you not to —” She shrieked and stumbled back, raising a hand in front of her face.

He had lifted his arm, making a fist, ready to strike her.

“Go on, just try it! Do you think I can’t defend myself?”

He was shaking. Spinning away from her, he struck the wall, bloodying his knuckles.

“Oh, Chen. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

He ran from the room, thinking with horror of how his hands had nearly betrayed him.

Chen hurried along the corridors of the workers’ residence, paying no heed to shouted greetings or the grumblings of those he jostled as he passed. He continued on his way until a door at the end of the hall slid open.

He was outside, in one of the courtyards at the side of the building. This courtyard was a triangle of flat stones bounded on two sides by two wings of the star-shaped building. A few couples had already gathered there; two young people, huddled together in one of the large wicker chairs, looked up at Chen

with startled dark eyes as he lurched past them.

The dome's light had faded into the silvery glow of an Island evening. A small hill sloped above the courtyard; Chen climbed until he reached the top of the slope, then sank to the grassy ground. From this hill, one of only a few on the otherwise flat Island, he could see much of the building below. A few families still sat near the front entrance; most had already returned to their rooms.

The Island seemed least like the Earth he remembered at dusk. During an Island day, the chatter of people and the noise of their activities filled the air; at night, a heavy silence blanketed the land under the dome. But in the evening, Chen heard only the intermittent chirp of a cricket. Few birds sang here and no creatures roamed through the wooded grove on the other side of the hill. On Earth, even in its great cities, birds still nested under eaves; dogs and cats roamed and snarled at one another over scraps. The Island seemed as insubstantial as a dream, a place where one could believe that all reality was encompassed by a human mind. At such moments, Chen understood why people needed to root themselves on the Cytherian surface below. Without that goal, the pleasant Islands could become a trap, a closed circle, a place where everything was in balance and nothing would change.

He sighed as he stared at the home he would soon leave behind. The pain of that thought was a blow; he realized, with guilt and unhappiness, that this pained him even more than the loss of Tonie. She had guessed the truth; she was like him; she would put the dream first, and cut herself adrift from anything that might rob her of it. He was no longer surprised that she had spoken to him so bitterly.

He put his feet under him and rose, then descended the other side of the hill until he came to a pale stone path. The path wound through the grove of trees, leading him past five girls with flowers in their hair and by a table where a few Linkers were enjoying an evening meal. The shadows swallowed him; he strode on until he came to the edge of the small wood and heard the soft drone of human voices.

Chen had come to the place where the Island's memorial pillars stood. The twenty pillars lined either side of the path; faces cast in metal gazed down at him sightlessly as he bowed his head a little. Names in several languages also adorned the pillars, and bouquets of flowers had been placed on the ground below.

Four old men stood near one pillar that was not yet completely filled with names and faces. They swayed a bit as they finished saying their prayers. Chen wondered if they were praying for one long gone or for themselves; their gray hair and wrinkled faces were signs of their own approaching death.

Chen stopped at the pillar and bowed from the waist, wanting to show respect. "My son," one man said, gesturing at one of the faces. "Gone these many years. Lately, I've been remembering him again."

"I'm sorry," Chen said.

"Do not mourn. He was a bad young man in some ways, quick to fight and too free with women, but I loved him, and at least he had a purpose here."

"You should rejoice, young man," another man said, smiling bitterly. "Here, you see four old ones who will soon be gone to make room for your children."

"Not my children," Chen replied. He hurried away, refusing to explain his response.

After a few more broad strides, he had come to the northern edge of the Island, where the path ended at the bottom of a flight of stairs. He climbed the stairs to a curved platform and leaned against the railing.

Island Two was over two kilometers wide, and the platform curved around the Island's diameter. He

gazed through the dome at the blackness outside, feeling it fill his soul. Venus was below, hidden from him, beyond his reach.

He and Tonie had decided to make their pledge here, in sight of the world their children might have settled. A bitter taste filled his mouth.

Venus would not be his world after all. He understood how empty Corazon's promise probably was. Another worker would eventually take his place; others would finish building this world. All he had to offer the Project, besides the skills many others had, was his youth and strength, which would ebb away every year he was gone.

Footsteps sounded on the platform. He glanced to his left. Tonie was walking toward him; she had thrown on a blue knee-length robe over her shirt. He was about to wave her away; she held up a hand.

She said, "I shouldn't have spoken to you as I did."

"You said what was true."

"I wish I could take it back." She put one hand on his; he did not pull away. "I want to ask you something, Chen. Tell me the truth. If they were sending me back to Earth, and keeping you here, would you make a pledge to me? Would you follow me back to Earth?"

He was silent for a time. "I don't know," he said at last.

"That's not what you mean. You do know, I think. The only difference is that you wouldn't have been so cruel if you had to tell me you were staying."

"Tonie, I—"

"I love you, Chen, but I want to stay here. I would have kept loving you if we could be together. Maybe that's the point. It would be easy for us to love each other if nothing was in our way. That might mean we don't love each other enough."

"It sounds like something Corazon might say," he replied.

"She'd be right too. We both want the Project more than we want each other. Maybe this way, we can find people we'd love more than we love the Project."

"That isn't possible."

"Someone we love as much, then."

"I don't think," he said, "that I could love anyone who didn't share this dream."

"Then you would have stopped loving me if I went back with you, if I were willing to give this up."

"You twist words, Tonie. You try to make something good come out of this."

"Maybe it will." She leaned against him and rested her cheek on his chest.

He had been right to fear coming here, to open himself to the dream and have it taken from him. He had been wrong to want more instead of being grateful for the life the Nomarchies had given him.

He would never see the pyramids below glow when the power within them was released to move the planet. He would never see domes rise on the surface and the land beneath them blossom. He would

never kneel down and grasp the soil of a new world in his hand. Venus would become no more than a star in the sky.

Chen's hands curled around the railing as he stared at the world he had lost.

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Seven

The night sky was cloudy, and many of the women of Lincoln had brought light-wands into the field. Iris stood at one end of the line of girls, next to Laiza; in front of her, Angharad's face glowed in the light.

Dory Trudes, the mayor, was speaking; Iris had already lost the thread of Dory's speech. Iris would be a woman when she left the field.

She had known her own ceremony would come soon; the changes in her body had shown her that. Her breasts were already forming; a fine down was beginning to sprout between her legs. She had prayed that she would not begin to bleed until winter, longing for the extra year of childhood that would give her, but she had spotted and then flowed at the end of August.

Iris had known that by starving herself, she might postpone menarche; she had gleaned that bit of information from her studies. She had skipped as many meals as she could and had picked at the rest. Angharad had finally noticed her frailty and the loss of weight and had dragged her to Letty Charlottes, where she had received a stern lecture while a tiny implant was placed in her arm. The lecture had enraged her; the substances the implant had released had made her ravenous, and she had already gained back most of her lost weight. Iris rubbed at her arm; Letty had removed the implant earlier that week, replacing it with the contraceptive implant that a young woman would need until it was time to have children.

"I welcome you all to our communes as women," the mayor was concluding. "May your life's blood enrich our fields as you become part of life's cycle." Dory's arms made the sign of a helix as she pulled out a needle and moved to the head of the line of girls.

Angharad was smiling; Iris tried to smile back. This was supposed to be the happiest day of her life so far; her mother would expect some sign of joy. Iris glanced at Julia; her grandmother looked away.

Iris had received a message from Celia Evanstown that morning. She had expected the worst, and had been pleasantly surprised at Celia's news. Iris, the Linker had said, would continue to have her studies paid for as long as she completed each year's work by the summer. The news had lifted her spirits throughout the day, and she had been too busy with preparations for the ceremony and feast to think about what Celia had said. Now she was sure that the worst had only been postponed.

When the feast was over, she would have to take up a woman's life. There would be more to do around the house, more work in the greenhouse, consultations with her mother about farm business and how much grain to plant on their land next year, and more distractions. She would be expected to join the women for their almost-nightly gabfests; if she was going to be part of the community and eventually take over the commune's leadership, she would, like her mother, have to learn which bits of gossip might be useful or revealed a problem that would have to be solved.

She was behind in her studies as it was. The disciplines of biology, chemistry, and physics required concentration and careful study of the simulated laboratory work as she entered her assumptions and watched each experiment's results. She would have to make up the work this winter, and wondered how

she would find time to do it.

Iris's studies, and the way in which she worked, were similar to what students in schools did, but students in schools were also part of a community of scholars, with seminars and discussion groups and the chance to be with those who shared their interests. The teaching images occasionally set up such discussions over the screen for Iris and other solitary students, and encouraged them to seek one another out. Iris, after a few awkward and embarrassing calls to young people who had seemed either uninterested in her attempts at conversation or unimpressed by the insights she had to offer, had at last found a kindred soul.

Her name was Alexandra Lenas. She was Iris's age, wore her blond hair in two long, fat braids, and was a shopkeeper's daughter; she lived in a town near Topeka. Alexandra's family were Spiritists; her mother encouraged the girl's studies a bit, but then Alexandra had a sister who would be able to take over the family's shop. Alexandra did not have to worry about the future of her line, and already had a clear idea of her goals. The subject of biology was her greatest interest, and embryology the field that especially attracted her.

With Iris, she also shared a desire to work on the Venus Project. Alexandra had mapped her own future. First, she would be chosen for the Cytherian Institute, a new school where students in various fields were trained specifically for the Project and absorbed a sense of its purpose while learning their subjects. After that, she would take more training in her specialty. Then, she would be sent to Venus, where she would live on one of its Islands. Such a goal seemed nearly impossible to Iris, who had feared that she might never get to Venus except as a greenhouse worker if she got there at all, but Alexandra had pointed out that the Institute contained many students of much humbler origins.

Iris, partly encouraged by Alexandra's devotion to her own field, was beginning to become more interested in the study of climatology. She would gaze for long hours at models of Earth along with the graphs and charts and mathematical symbols showing the effect of a slight rise or fall in temperature, the harvesting of trees in one region, a volcanic eruption, or a slight emission of sulfur dioxide from one of the factories that had once dotted Earth's surface before such industries had been moved into space. She studied models of Venus's meteorological history as well, noting the circumstances that had made that world so different from Earth. The subject gave her a sense of how much a tiny, seemingly insignificant event could alter a great deal; at the same time, it made her conscious of how much still lay outside humanity's control. She studied the mathematics that outlined chaos and the points where systems began to break down, and saw her world as a reflection of those symbols.

Such pursuits also had a practical benefit. She could soothe Angharad's doubts by saying, quite truthfully, that she was learning about weather, a subject that could only help a farmer.

Iris longed to meet Alexandra. The other girl had hesitantly mentioned inviting Iris to her home for a visit, or traveling to Lincoln herself. Iris had been forced to put her off with excuses, knowing that Angharad would not approve. Studying was one thing; actual contact with a girl who would only encourage such nonsense was quite another. Iris was afraid of pushing her mother too far, of losing what she had already gained.

Dory was standing in front of her. The mayor seized Iris's arm, pulled out another needle, pricked the girl's finger, then held Iris's hand out. "You are a woman, Iris Angharads."

"I give my blood to the communes," Iris replied. She had been so lost in her thoughts that she had almost forgotten the importance of this ceremony. Dory let go; Iris reached into her pocket for the handkerchief her mother had given her earlier and wrapped it around her lightly bleeding finger. Angharad had carried the same handkerchief to her own ceremony, as had Julia; Iris felt the weight of generations.

The field was suddenly silver with light; the moon shone down through the purple clouds. “A good omen,” she heard Wenda whisper.

The ceremony was over. Iris thrust her handkerchief back into her pocket. Angharad linked her arm with Iris’s as they began to leave the field. “I’m so proud of you,” Angharad murmured. “You didn’t even flinch.” Iris did not reply; she had been so preoccupied that she hadn’t had time to flinch. “I thought you were the prettiest girl there.”

Iris bowed her head, imagining that the other women were telling their daughters the same thing.

“She looked just like you did, Angharad,” Wenda said as she gestured with her walking stick. “I could almost believe it was you standing there if it wasn’t for those green eyes of hers — same thick hair, same budding bosom.” Wenda cackled. “Bet some of those nice young men back at the town hall would like to get their hands on her.”

Iris swallowed, annoyed at the thought. The studious boys she had sometimes talked to over her screen, to her relief, had never seemed interested in such matters; she had been able to forget that they were males.

“Why, before you know it,” the old woman continued, “she’ll be going to Letty to have her plug removed.”

“I’m only fourteen,” Iris said. “I’ll have my implant for a while.”

“Your mother was sixteen when she had you. The years’ll go by before you know it, child.” Wenda sniffed. “Guess I can’t call you child now. The moon coming out like that — it’s a good omen. Maybe now you’ll stop that nonsense with your lessons.”

Never, Iris thought as they approached the houses ahead, following the rows of shining wands. She shivered a little in the cool air, and tried not to think of her obligation to her line. I won’t give it up, not until Celia takes the allotment away. She tried not to dwell on that.

Iris carried her plate to the table in the center of the room, where she and the other young women would sit. They had been first on the line; already a few young men were lingering near the table as they eyed the young women, who were conspicuous in their long white dresses. Laiza batted her dark eyes at one man; her white silk dress revealed much of her shoulders and a little other small breasts. Iris sat down next to her friend, smoothed down her own skirt, and wondered how she would be able to eat in her tight-waisted garment.

Daria and Madeline began to giggle as a young man sat down across from them. He arched his brows as Daria patted her red hair and loosened a button near her collar. “Can I have that?” the man said, pointing at a chicken wing on Daria’s plate.

The red-haired girl simpered. “If you get me another one later.”

“I’ll get you anything you want.”

Daria giggled again. People were seating themselves at other tables, talking loudly about how this would be the finest feast Lincoln had seen; the loud voices and shouted remarks were making Iris feel dizzy. A woman put a large bottle of wine on the table; a man set a tray of glasses next to it.

“I wish my father were here,” Laiza said. “He promised he’d come, and he didn’t even send a message.”

“I’m sure he tried,” Iris said.

“He said he’d have a special surprise for me too.”

“Well, he’s always kept his promises when he could,” Iris said. “There’ll probably be a message from him when you get home. Just be glad you see him as often as you do — most girls don’t see their fathers so much.”

“Mother of God.” Laiza put down her fork. “I shouldn’t have said what I did. I’m sorry, Iris. I wish your father could be here.”

“It’s all right.” Iris had not thought of Tad for a while, but the autumn feasts always reminded her of him. She poked at her food, then nibbled at a piece of bread. Angharad and Maria Fays, Laiza’s mother, were laughing together as they chattered at their table; they seemed almost like girls themselves. A few members of Lincoln’s small Muslim community were discreetly pouring wine into cups. At the other end of Iris’s table, Patricia and Bess draped their arms gracefully over the backs of their chairs as they flirted with Eric.

Would it be so bad for her to give up her studies and accept her life here? She would still have what she had already learned and could buy herself a few more lessons during free moments. Few mocked her now; even Eric had given her a grudging respect. The boy, rapidly approaching the age when he would have to take on a man’s responsibilities, would have stayed in Lincoln if he could. Swallowing his pride, Eric had asked her to teach him how to do his own accounts and to read labels so that he could apply for work as a shopkeeper, but Lincoln’s shopkeepers had enough apprentices among their own children. Eric would never understand her desire to leave.

I could be important here, she thought. If she quit now, others would respect her a little for having tried to master difficult subjects while praising her for remembering her responsibility to her line. But if she waited for Celia to take her allotment away, she would once again look like a fool.

She thought of Alexandra, The blond girl would be disappointed in her if she gave up now. Iris couldn’t give up; there was too much left to learn.

“Hello.” A young man set his plate on the table as he sat down across from Iris. He reached for two glasses and began to pour some wine. Patricia and Madeline rolled their eyes as they ogled the new arrival; as she gazed at the man, Iris could see why. His blond hair curled around his lean, handsome face; his gray work shirt was unbuttoned nearly to his waist.

“I haven’t seen you before,” Laiza said as she pushed her own glass toward him.

“Just came in on the floater this morning,” the young man replied. “Might have come sooner if I knew someone like you was around.” He stared directly at Iris, who felt her cheeks growing warm; she picked up her glass hastily, almost spilling some of the wine. Why was he looking at her? Laiza, with her revealing dress, had to be more attractive. “My name’s Jon Ellas. They got me in here to do some work on the silos, but I guess I’ll be able to enjoy myself a little first.”

“I’m Laiza Marias.” Laiza fluffed her dark curls and then let her dress slide a little farther down from her shoulders.

“I’m Iris Angharads,” Iris said. Her modest dress, with its full skirt and lace collar, suddenly seemed childish compared to her friend’s.

“Heard anything interesting on the floater?” Daria asked, always hungry for gossip.

“Sure have.” Jon glanced at Daria, then turned back toward Iris, who was hoping the man would

attribute her blush to the wine. “Heard a real good story on the way here, as a matter of fact.”

Another young man sat down to the right of Jon; Peter, who was passing the table, stopped and set down his own plate on Jon’s left.

“I was talking to a man on his way north,” Jon continued. “Said a man was murdered over in Spencer.” He paused, clearly wanting to draw out the tale and make it more suspenseful.

Laiza shrugged. “It happens sometimes,” she said languidly, as if she heard such stories all the time. “Bet they’ll get a lot of trouble from their Counselor now.”

“There was a murder here once, a long time ago,” Daria blurted out, beaming when she saw that she had Jon’s attention again. “My mother told me about it. Everybody knew who the murderer was, though, so they held a town meeting and then decided to string him up from a tree, so they did. The murderer said he was drinking, as if that’s an excuse. Our Counselor wasn’t too happy when he heard, but he couldn’t arrest the whole town, and anyway, it saved everybody a lot of trouble, the way I see it. Lincoln got off with a warning, and we haven’t had any trouble since.”

Iris glared at the red-haired girl; such stories did not make a good impression on outsiders. “That happens in lots of places,” Jon said casually. “As long as there’s real evidence, or a confession, I don’t think most Linkers care — keeps things under control. I always figured it was better to handle your own shit instead of dragging Linkers and Counselors into it.” He paused. “But that isn’t what happened in Spencer. This man who was killed — the fellow on the floater told me he was a Counselor.”

Daria gasped; Laiza arched her brows. People at some of the nearer tables had fallen silent, anxious to overhear more.

Peter leaned back in his chair. “Why, in the name of the Spirit,” he asked, “would someone kill a Counselor?”

“I don’t know.” Jon ate a forkful of stew and wiped up some gravy with a piece of bread. “Maybe the Counselor told him something he didn’t want to hear. Maybe he just didn’t like the Nomarchies or something. Anyway, this man on the floater told me the guy just walked right in during the Counselor’s visit and shot him.”

“Was he there?” Iris asked.

“The fellow I talked to?” Jon shook his head. “No, but he said he heard it from a woman who knew someone who was. I’ll tell you something else. In the past couple of months, I’ve run into a lot of mechanics here and there, and not one of them mentioned being anywhere near Spencer.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Laiza said. “Spencer’s even smaller than Lincoln, isn’t it? Maybe they didn’t need anybody. Maybe somebody else was there and just didn’t tell you about it.”

“Maybe.” Jon sipped some wine. “I didn’t think anything of it then — I mean, I hadn’t heard the story yet. But now, I wonder. We jaw a lot when we run into each other, most of us — we always talk about where we’ve been and where we’re going. It just seems funny — like they’ve closed off that whole town.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Peter said. The bearded man had been casting oblique glances at Jon before apparently realizing that the young man was more interested in the girls. “Why, if anything like that had happened, the news would be all over the Plains.”

“Maybe not,” Jon replied. “Not if Spencer really was closed off.”

“But why would they close it off?” Iris asked.

“Do you think they’d want people to find out about it? How would it look? Counselors have to be able to make their rounds — having one murdered isn’t going to make them feel secure, and having the word get out could give other crazy people ideas. The murderer had to be crazy. He must have known he couldn’t get away with it.”

The large room was humming with murmurs; Iris could hear gasps at the other end of the room as people heard the story for the first time.

“How could he do it, anyway?” Peter said. “I doubt he could have wandered into a session with a shotgun.” Shotguns and rifles, often used to take potshots at mice and rats, were the only weapons Lincoln had.

“Maybe he got hold of a pistol somehow, or a beamer.” Jon munched on some salad. “Who knows? But the guy who talked to me said this woman told him it happened, all right.”

“I think you might have been misled,” Peter said. “You can’t keep something like that a secret.”

“You sure can,” Jon responded. “It’s like this guy told me. First, you can close off the town, and then you maybe send in Linkers or militia or maybe even Guardians to see if anybody knew what the murderer was up to — they have plenty of ways to find out. I know — a friend of mine did some work on the bands that police in cities sometimes use for questioning. Then you throw such a scare into everybody that they’re afraid to talk. Maybe it wouldn’t matter even if they did talk. This fellow on the floater said they could keep a place like Spencer closed off for a long time, bring in workers from outside the Plains who they trust, say, or who won’t talk. Oh, there’s lots of things they can do.”

“They couldn’t keep it closed up forever,” Laiza said. “People would wonder why after a while.”

“Yeah, but nobody would *know* .” Jon finished his food and put an elbow on the table. “And after a while, things get back to normal and it’s just another rumor a lot of people won’t believe.” He gestured at Peter. “This fellow doesn’t believe it.”

“I certainly don’t.” Peter stood up and carried his plate to another table. Iris doubted that the bearded man’s disbelief would keep him from passing the story on. She shivered as she thought of Jon’s tale; their feast would be enlivened by speculation for most of the evening.

“I’m going to help myself to some more.” Jon rose. “Anything I can fetch for you?” He grinned at Iris, who shook her head.

She smiled as he wandered off. People were glancing at the young man who had brought such an interesting rumor to them; he was the center of attention, and he was interested in her. Iris swallowed some wine. She was a woman now; Jon might be interested in more than flirting. That thought was sobering. Handsome as he was, she didn’t know him; she did not know if she could talk to him or if he would understand her. She knew what her mother would say to that. Angharad would say that if a man was a good lover, there was no need for talk; she would tell Iris that she might have done worse during her first time with a man.

“He likes you,” Laiza said, sounding annoyed. Daria and the other girls had already turned their attention to the man still sifting across from them. “I just thought of something. Isn’t Bart Jennifer’s Counselor for Spencer too?”

Iris put down her fork. “I think he is.”

“Then he’d be the victim. He’d be dead.” Laiza grimaced. “Mother of God. They’d have to send another Counselor then, in the spring. That’d prove it.”

Iris shook her head. “It wouldn’t prove anything. Counselors get promoted or replaced.”

“Maybe Peter’s right, and it’s just a rumor. It’d be hard to hide something like that, wouldn’t it? You ought to know, Iris. You’ve spent enough time on those lessons of yours.”

“I wouldn’t know about that. I think it could be hidden, though. They could program a restriction, or even erase the records and put in another explanation of what happened.”

“I wonder what happened to the murderer,” Laiza said.

“He’s probably dead.”

Laiza shuddered. “Do you really think so?”

“They wouldn’t even have to execute him. They could send him someplace where they’d know he’d die soon and get some work out of him in the meantime. Maybe they could even make him forget what he did, so he’d never talk. There are a lot of ways they could handle him.” Iris looked around the room for Jon; the young man was standing near the tables of food, surrounded by a crowd wanting to hear more details of his story.

It was still night when the townsfolk, at last sated by food and drink, began to leave the town hall for their homes. Iris stood near the members of her own commune as a few people passed and murmured their congratulations to her. She gazed enviously at Laiza, who was clinging to the arm of a tall, brown-haired man; her friend had lost no time in snaring a catch. Iris thought of Jon. He had attracted an eager audience wanting to hear his story from his lips; he would have plenty of partners to choose from. He had not talked to her for the rest of the evening.

“Come by the shop tomorrow,” Winnie said as she passed. “I’ll have some special treats for you and the other young ladies.” Winnie craned her short neck. “My, you do look pretty. No fellow to walk you home?”

“No,” Iris mumbled.

“Well, time enough for that after the feast, I say. Sometimes they’re just too full of food and drink to do more than pump and fall asleep on top of you, and a young woman deserves more than that.”

Winnie hurried outside; Iris and her household followed the shopkeeper down the stairs. Eric let out a yawn. “Jorge said he’d come by later on,” LaDonna said to Constance. “I just hope I can stay awake for him.”

“If you don’t,” Constance replied, “I will.”

They began to cross the square. A few people who had overindulged were weaving their way toward the streets; others rode in carts filled with empty dishes. Elisabeth and Lilia had remained in the town hall to visit with friends; they would bring their cart home later. Iris sighed, feeling let down. She had not eaten very much, and the wine had given her a slight headache.

“Hey, wait up!”

She turned. Jon was running toward her; he halted and took her arm. Angharad beamed as she motioned the other women forward, leaving the two young people alone.

“All right if I walk with you?” Jon asked.

“Sure.”

“You wouldn’t want to get pawed by some guy who’s too drunk to know what he’s doing.”

“We can handle drunks in Lincoln. They don’t try that kind of thing very often.”

They passed the church and entered the street leading to Iris’s house. “Tell me about yourself,” Jon said. His hand was gripping her elbow; in spite of the cool night air, she felt warm.

“There’s not much to tell. My mother’s the leader of our commune. My grandmother’s still alive, but she thought my mother could handle things better than she could. My grandmother went to New York once, a long time ago.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. She worked on the dikes once, before she came home. Then there’s my mother’s cousin, Elisabeth. She was the daughter of my grandmother’s brother William and Tillie Ethels — Tillie’s house is the first one on the road leading from the cradle. Elisabeth grew up there, but she decided to come live with us after I was born.”

Jon draped his arm over her shoulder. She stiffened, about to shy away but at the same time wanting him to hold her. “You’re not telling me about yourself,” he said.

“Well, I’ve always lived here. Not much happens in Lincoln.”

“Guess you’ll be the leader of your commune someday.”

“Maybe. I mean, it *is* up to the household even if Angharad — even if my mother passes it on to me. They’d have to approve, and my mother could always pass the leadership to Elisabeth or her daughter instead. That’s one reason Tillie didn’t mind letting Elisabeth live with us.”

“Can’t think why your mother’d do that.” His breath smelled of mint, his skin faintly of cologne. He didn’t reek of onions and sweat the way some of the other men did after a feast. “My mother’s the leader of a commune in Wilkes, and there’s no question of her giving the farm to anyone except my sister. Ellen’s still a kid, though, so it won’t be for a while. She’s cute, my sister. Hasn’t gone through her own ceremony yet and the boys are already starting to hang around. Bet a few must have made the moves on you already.”

“No,” Iris said. “I just started —” She could feel herself blushing.

“You’re kidding me. I know a few girls have dealings with boys before their ceremonies.” She thought of the time Eric had groped at her blouse on the stairs; she had nearly knocked him over the railing and had threatened not to teach him more accounting if he ever did it again. “You’re pretty enough to draw somebody.”

She had never thought of herself as pretty. She was too short, with stocky, muscled legs instead of slender ones like Laiza’s or LaDonna’s. Her legs, of course, were hidden by her long white dress. “Boys are just friends to me,” she said, knowing why they would not have flirted with her even if she had looked like LaDonna. She was too serious, too preoccupied with her lessons. She had never been able to feign much interest in the chatter of the boys she knew, in their talk of games, or athletes who won glory for the Plains and credit for themselves in contests with other Nomarchies, or the adventure scenarios they followed with their bands.

“It’s faces that attract me,” Jon said. “That’s why I liked you when I saw you. I like strong bones in a woman’s face, and big eyes, and a nice, wide mouth.” Even though he was talking about her as though she were a type instead of an individual, she warmed at the compliment.

Lights shone from the windows of the buildings they passed; farther down the street, Iris could see the shadowy shapes of women entering a house. She and Jon had been walking so slowly that she had lost sight of her own household’s members. Jon stopped and leaned over her as he drew her closer to him; his lips brushed against hers lightly. She stepped back, startled. He cupped her chin and kissed her again.

“Hasn’t anyone ever kissed you before?” he asked. She shook her head, afraid of what he might think of her.

They continued along the street. “It’s all right,” he went on. “I don’t want to push you. I’ve been with a couple of others during their first time — I know what it’s like. I was mighty damned scared during my own first time. A friend of mine took me to a woman he knew and practically pushed me into her bed. I wondered if I’d ever get it right.” He chuckled. “It’s important. If you mess it up then, or have a bad time of it, it can take a while before you get it right. Don’t worry. I’ll come in and meet your household tonight, and if you don’t feel ready, I’ll go or maybe stay with one of them, if they’re willing. I’ll be here for another two weeks — there’s plenty of time.”

She smiled at him gratefully, but wished that she had the courage to invite him to her room anyway. He did understand; she could talk to him. “My mother would like you,” she said. “I think she’s been wondering if anyone would want me.”

“Why would she wonder about that?”

“It’s my studies, I guess. She says some men don’t like it if you know too much because they think you’re putting yourself above them.”

“But you have to know about farming and managing a commune. That probably is more important than what we do. We just wander around fixing things and having kids we hardly ever see until we’re too old, and then they stick us in a hostel somewhere so we can sit around jawing about old times and training apprentices.” He sounded bitter. “I don’t know. I’ve met men from a couple of other Nomarchies — they have real homes they can go back to someday.”

“I haven’t just been learning about farming,” she said. “It’s other things. I started taking lessons over the band when I was little, and then a Linker came to see us and told me the lessons would be paid for if I kept doing well, so I’ve been studying ever since.” She had not kept a tone of pride out of her voice.

“Lessons?”

“Prep lessons, the ones they teach in schools.”

He let go of her arm and halted. “Can you read?”

She nodded.

“But what for?”

She shouldn’t have spoken, but it was too late now. “I just wanted to learn everything I could. I can’t explain it.”

“You must know enough by now.”

“That’s just it. There’s always something new, something that makes what you learned before seem different. It’s like a puzzle you try to fit together, but there’s always more pieces to find. It makes me happy.”

“You sound like you’re talking about a lover.” He began to lead her down the street once more. “What are you going to do with it?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care if I ever do anything with it.”

“I think you do care.” He shook his head. “Well, you are a surprise.”

“You probably think it’s useless.”

“No, Iris. I don’t think that. But wanting something you can’t have — nothing good comes of it. That Linker might not have done you a favor by letting you have your lessons. Push too hard and you just bring trouble — and to other people besides yourself. It’s better to take what comes.”

They were in front of her house. “We’re here. You don’t have to come inside if you don’t want to,” she said, though she still clung to the hope that he would stay. “I’ll understand.”

“Oh, Iris.” He gripped her elbows. “You’re still a woman. That stuff inside your head isn’t going to change that. You want me to stay, come to your room — I can see it. I’ll show you something better than all that learning, believe me.”

He didn’t understand after all; her learning was only something to be pushed aside. She wanted him in spite of it, but some of the joy had gone out of anticipating the encounter.

She led him inside to meet the others.

Lips touched her forehead. Iris stirred and reached out with her arms.

“Have to go,” Jon said. “I’ll be back before supper.” He had already put on his work clothes; she gazed at his back as he left the room, remembering the feel of his muscles under her hands.

She sat up, yawning. Her nights had become long sessions of lovemaking punctuated by periods of dreamless sleep. Jon had been in the house for over a week. She couldn’t sleep when he was with her; she could not rest or concentrate when he was absent and thoughts of him kept intruding on her mind. She would recall his hands on her breasts or his tongue probing her slit and she would ache, longing for night.

She glanced at her keyboard, screen, and band guiltily as she climbed out of bed. She had been neglecting her lessons. One night, she had punched up an essay she had written, wanting to read part of it to Jon, to share that part of herself with him. The essay concerned an early period of Plains history; she had thought he might be interested in that. Jon had listened for a moment, looking bored before he began to fondle her again, and had led her back to bed. She had not been able to explain how that had hurt her.

She was falling behind; she would lose her allotment. She would have a hard time making up the work, and Jon had already mentioned that he might be able to stay with her for an extra week or two. That possibility tore at her; she wanted him to stay, but feared what might happen if he did. What did she matter to Jon? He would go on to another town and another woman; he would not be there to console her at the loss of her dream. She closed her eyes, seeing the bracelet on his wrist, the identity band that carried his codes and the record of his accounts, the band that all travelers wore and that was the symbol of his freedom from the bonds that held her.

She would never be chosen for a school. That dream, so wild and impossible that she had shared it with no one except Alexandra Lenas, would die at last. She feared that Jon was only the first of the men who would silence her questions with kisses and fog her mind with caresses. She would look at the Parasol's reflected light in the sky and think of the world she would never see, a world whose people would shed the past and be free.

She crossed the room and sat down at her screen. She smelled of sex; Jon's odor still clung to her. She could not even study when he was away from the house; he had robbed her of the power to concentrate. Even now, she saw his face, and remembered.

She folded her arms, knowing she had to make a decision. She had to make sure that Jon didn't stay the extra week. There were plenty of arguments she could use. Lilia was finally expecting her first child; Iris would have to help care for it. Jon would be spending credit instead of earning it if he took off time to stay here. She could even flatter him, tell him that she feared becoming too strongly attached to him.

She stood up. The matter was settled. She felt a pang, wishing that Jon had been less of a man and had never awakened her feelings; it would be hard for her to repress them.

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Eight

The spring of 537 promised to be hot and sticky. The women sat in the common room, fanning themselves as they gazed at the image of Bart Jennifers on the screen.

The Counselor had not come to Lincoln that year in person, and that breach of custom had caused talk. Some remembered Jon's story, and whispered that the murder must have frightened Bart, and wondered which Counselor had died in Spencer. Several townsfolk had learned that Bart had not been seen in other towns, either.

Iris watched the friendly, bearded face of Bart Jennifers. He sat in a straight-backed chair, his hands folded over his pudgy stomach. He nodded in an oddly mechanical way as Angharad spoke of her plans. "I've been thinking of having another child," she said to the Counselor. "Maybe in a couple of years, when Lilia's child is older. Eric will be leaving us soon, and I don't want to wait too much longer — I'm thirty-one now."

"Were you planning on a son or a daughter?" the Counselor asked.

Angharad shrugged. "I hadn't really decided."

"You already have a daughter," Bart said. "Is Iris sure there won't be any dispute about which of two daughters would take over from you?"

"It's up to Angharad," Iris said. "I wouldn't go against her wishes, or anyone else's."

Angharad folded her arms. "Maybe when Iris is older and puts some of her foolishness behind her, I'll feel better about leaving things to her. As things are now, I might prefer to have Lilia take over in the future." Iris bowed her head. "And Lilia has a daughter now," Angharad continued. "The farm is the most important thing. My feelings as a mother are not going to make me do anything that isn't in the commune's interest."

Iris looked up. Her mother had often said such things in front of the Counselor, as if trying to shame Iris into obedience. Lilia adjusted her blouse as her daughter Sylvie nursed at one breast; she watched Iris

with apologetic brown eyes. Iris forced a smile; she did not hold anything against Lilia, who often protested in her gentle voice when she felt that Angharad was being cruel to Iris.

“At this point, you could choose either a son or a daughter,” Bart said. “The Nomarchies have had to take some of our Plainsmen from us for work elsewhere.” He motioned with one hand. Iris narrowed her eyes. The Counselor seemed unlike himself. Usually he had anecdotes to offer, examples of how other people might have settled a particular problem; his responses today had been terse.

“Iris.” She sat up straight as Bart uttered her name. “You’re fifteen now. I see you’re still pursuing your studies.”

She nodded. “At least until summer.” She had completed most of her work, but the extra labor had taken its toll, and she was often too tired to do more than review what she had studied earlier. “I don’t know if I’ll have the lessons paid for later,” she added, thinking Bart might know something about that.

“We’ll see, we’ll see,” the Counselor responded. “You’re getting on toward the time when you’ll be thinking of a child of your own. You and your mother should probably discuss which of you has a child in the next few years. You could wait, of course, but you might prefer not to.”

Angharad rested her chin on one hand. “If it’s that way, then of course Iris should give birth. We must think of the line’s future. Maybe having a child would bring my daughter around.”

“She’s hardly going to have a child,” Constance said, “if she doesn’t have a man.”

Iris sighed. She had known that the session would get around to that.

“What’s this?” Bart leaned forward.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with her,” Angharad said. “Last fall, on the night of her ceremony, she was with a fine young man, from a good family — his lineage goes back almost as far as my own. Not only was he good-looking, but I have no reason to think that he wasn’t a good lover as well. He stayed here two weeks and didn’t even look at another woman, but ever since, she’s been avoiding men altogether.” She frowned. “I’ve talked to her, and she admits he pleased her, but she doesn’t even look at anyone else.”

“Dear me,” Bart said, folding his hands again. “Is this some sort of infatuation, then, a fixation, perhaps?”

“No,” Iris said.

“You’d better be frank with me, young lady.”

“It isn’t. I don’t love him that way.” She stared straight at the screen, knowing she spoke the truth and hoping Bart would see that.

“I know that some young women your age can develop such fixations. It isn’t healthy. I could recommend that you talk to another Counselor, perhaps a woman who would understand the problem.” Angharad glared at her daughter, obviously angry at the suggestion that Iris might need the help of a specialist; they had always solved their own problems before. “But I think,” the Counselor finished, “that the surest cure is another man’s attentions.”

“It isn’t a fixation,” Iris said. “It’s just that I haven’t met anyone else I want to make love to, that’s all. I’m sure I will.” She could not tell him the real reason. She wanted her mind clear and undistracted; no one could understand what that desire had cost her, when her body often seemed ready to turn against her. Angharad would have been gratified to know how normal Iris actually was, how often she had to

push thoughts of men and their bodies from her mind.

“We’ll see,” Bart said. “If things haven’t changed in a year or so, maybe we’ll call in someone for Iris to talk to. Well, it’s been very nice talking to you, especially nice to see Wenda still going strong.” The old woman smiled in satisfaction. “I hope we’ll get a chance to speak again. You’re a fine commune. There is some chance I may be transferred to another post, though.”

“Nice to talk to you, Bart,” Angharad answered. “Best of luck, whatever happens. I’m sure our little problem will resolve itself soon.”

The image of the Counselor faded. “A specialist,” Angharad muttered. “You’d better damned well not need one. No one in our family ever has, as far as I know. Even my grandmother Gwen, with her problems, didn’t —” Angharad bit her lip; she almost never mentioned Gwen.

“It wasn’t Bart,” Iris said.

“What are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t Bart, Angharad. I think we were only talking to an image. It wouldn’t be hard to do. The cyberminds could send a hologram that looks just like him and responds to questions the way he would, but it didn’t sound like Bart somehow, so I guess they didn’t have time to do it right. I think Bart’s dead. He must have died last year, in Spencer. That’s why he didn’t come here.”

“You idiot.” Angharad jumped to her feet. “I had to speak to a woman in Spencer just last month. She didn’t say anything about that ridiculous story. In fact, she’d spoken to Bart over her own screen just the day before.”

“It doesn’t matter. Maybe she really doesn’t know what happened. Maybe only a few people were witnesses. Maybe every call or message going in and out of Spencer is being monitored. I’ve had to learn a little about cybernetics — I know what can be done.”

“Don’t you dare spread your suspicions around town! What do you think would happen to us if you did?” Angharad glanced fearfully around the room; from the nervous looks on the faces of the women, Iris guessed that even Constance and Wenda would not tell anyone else what she had said. “You cursed girl. Why did you have to learn all that stuff? What good is it?”

Iris shrank back in her seat.

“She thinks she’s better than we are,” Constance said. “She’s even passed some of her nonsense on to my son.” She glared at Eric. “Letting him think he can be a shopkeeper, teaching him figures.” Eric’s hands became fists; his knuckles were white.

“This business has gone too far,” Angharad continued. “I don’t care what that Linker told you — it was a mistake for her to offer you lessons. I should have protested then. All your learning has done is make it impossible for you to act like a woman.”

“Do you think everyone does things the way we do?” Iris burst out. “In some places, women my age treat men only as friends. Sometimes, they even have a bond with only one man.” Sheryl gasped; Wenda shook her head. “And in schools, the students are discouraged from sex, at least until they’re older — they think it distracts them from their work. They even prolong the time before puberty so that they can —”

“I won’t listen to this!” Angharad cried. “You think that because you know some useless facts, you can act any way you like. Where would the world be without us? We feed most of it, don’t we? Mother of

God, we ran the world before those fine folks in Amman and Tashkent even knew what a computer was.”

“That was long ago,” Iris said coldly. “We don’t rule now. The Nomarchies want to keep us the way we are, feeding them and thinking we’re still free. That’s why we have mind-tours and games and spend our time seducing men, so we won’t have to think about anything or want anything else.”

“You wretched child.” Angharad shook a fist. “I’ve heard enough. I’m going to call Celia Evanstown, if I have to, and tell her I want your lessons discontinued for the good of our commune. And I’ll call in a specialist too. Maybe a psychologist or social engineer can force some sense into you.”

“You can’t stop me, Mother,” Iris responded. “I’ll pay for the lessons myself if I have to. I earn my own money now, and I’m a woman. Once I give the commune its share, you can’t tell me what to do with the rest.” It was an idle threat; at the level she had reached as a student, she could afford only a few of the courses she would want.

Angharad was suddenly standing in front of her. The woman’s hand darted out; the slap stung Iris’s cheek. LaDonna covered her mouth, clearly shocked by the violence. “If you go on like this,” Angharad screamed, “you won’t be part of the commune. I’ll force you out, even if you are my daughter.” Iris was stunned by the threat. “You’ll see how much good your lessons are to you then, you’ll see how you’re treated when you’re living on Basic in some dreary shelter somewhere, having to do whatever work is found for you.”

“Hadn’t you better ask the rest of us what we think of that idea?” Julia said.

Angharad turned toward her mother. “This is all your fault, Julia. Well, you won’t stop me now. I think everyone else will go along with me.”

“I won’t,” Eric said. Constance gestured at him in irritation.

“You have nothing to say about it,” Angharad replied. “You won’t even be living here soon.”

“She doesn’t mean it,” Constance said to her son; then the blond woman turned toward Angharad. “Do you?”

Angharad was silent. LaDonna drew her children to her protectively; Tyree gaped at the household’s leader, while Mira sucked her thumb, looking bewildered.

“Your threats are useless,” Julia said. “You forget the town election this fall. How do you think it’s going to look if you begin protesting to Celia, or call in a psychologist to counsel your daughter? What do you think people are going to say if you expel Iris? They’ll think you can’t run your own commune. You’ll never be mayor then. You may not even remain on the town council.”

Angharad looked around at the members of her household. LaDonna refused to look up; Wenda tapped the floor with her walking stick. Constance exchanged glances with Elisabeth. Iris knew what they were thinking; with Angharad as mayor, they would all have more influence, and gifts from people seeking favors of some kind would bring the household more credit.

“Julia’s right,” Sheryl said. “That Linker has to decide soon about continuing Iris’s lessons anyway. Leave the matter to her, and say nothing. She may decide to cut off the allotment, and then it’ll be settled. Iris will see which way the wind blows after that.”

“Or Celia will continue the payments,” Julia said, “in which case it will mean that the Nomarchies think Iris’s studies are of some worth to them. That has to come first. You can’t go against the Nomarchies,

even if you think it's best for you.”

Angharad lifted her head. Iris knew that her mother would have to reassert her authority quickly. “Perhaps I spoke hastily.” She smiled weakly. “I may have said harsh words I don't really mean, but that should show you how important this matter is to me. I'm concerned about the welfare of this household. If Iris is going to live here and take over from me someday, I must know that she'll be able to handle the task.” She put a hand on Iris's shoulder; Iris kept still, even though she longed to pull away. “I wouldn't really have thrown her out. I'm sure she'll behave herself, now that she understands the depth of my concern. I don't think we should speak of any of this outside these walls.” Angharad did not have to add that statement; the women were not likely to jeopardize the position to which they all aspired, and Eric would bully Tyree and Mira into silence.

“I'll behave,” Iris said bitterly, knowing that she had almost pushed her mother too far.

Iris hurried along the road, heedless of the summer heat. She continued to run until she reached the small hill at the edge of town, then climbed the slope and threw herself onto the ground.

She stared at the rows of houses lining the streets that converged at the square. Dark bands swept across the fields of wheat as the wind stirred the grain. Small robots with pincers, each guided by a farmer sitting in a cool house and wearing a band, rolled along the contoured rows, weeding and tending the crop. In the north, she could barely see the gleam of one of the metallic surfaces near a station that drew its energy from a solar-power satellite in orbit far above the Plains.

Iris should have been in the house guiding one of the robots; Angharad or someone else would soon notice that she was neglecting the chore. She took off her shirt and stretched out on her stomach under the hot sun. Her mother would see Celia's message, and perhaps be puzzled enough not to castigate Iris later.

Iris had prepared herself for the worst. She had completed the necessary course of study, but the work had not been up to her usual standard, only enough to get by. She had gone through her accounts, seen that she had saved enough for some lessons during the winter, and had told herself that she would be content with that.

Celia, however, had not given her either the good news she had wished for or the bad news she had expected. Instead, she had cut the allotment in half, saying that it was now up to Iris which lessons she chose and that she was free to pay for others. The Nomarchies would give her some encouragement and help, but a full investment in Iris was not in their interest if she was unlikely to use the knowledge. That was the message Angharad would find, and she was likely to wonder why the Linker had given Iris even that much when Celia had admitted that it was probably a speculative investment at best.

Angharad would not hear the rest of Celia's message, which had been confidential. Iris had almost not listened to it herself. Hurt by the impersonality of a message when Celia might have spoken directly to her, she had been about to turn off her small screen before she had seen the signal indicating that there was more the Linker had recorded.

“I fought for you,” Celia had told her. “I disagreed, I thought you deserved another year at least. I know why you didn't do as well. I told them they didn't understand your circumstances, that it was surprising you've done as well as you have. They don't understand the obstacles you face. I told my colleagues that you deserved another chance, and they said that this was all that they could give you. They calculate everything, costs and returns on what was spent, and it shouldn't be like that.”

Iris reached out with one hand and pulled her shirt over her shoulders, not wanting the sun to burn her. The Linker's words ran together in her mind.

“Listen to me, Iris,” Celia had continued. “I’m more like you than you realize. I’m a shopkeeper’s daughter, and I was chosen. I know what it’s like when everyone around you mocks you for what you have to do, how it feels when you want something different. You’re being tested. I shouldn’t tell you that, perhaps, but it’s true. To take an entire allotment away from one who shows talent could provoke resentment, and of course we can’t have that, so we’ll leave you something. Some in your position will take what we offer, others will take it and pay for more with their own funds, and still others will be discouraged, and give up. You may be thinking that you should abandon your studies now, and make your peace with your household while you still can.

“I can’t say this to your family, but I can say it to you. Don’t give up, don’t ever give up. No one can take away what you’ve already learned, what’s in your mind, and no matter what happens, you’ll always have that refuge and that joy and know that you did your best. That’ll make up for everything else in time — please believe that. Things may change. Even the Mukhtars know that it’s time to take chances again, that they’ll smother the world in caution if they don’t. Don’t give up.”

Iris had coded the message and had filed it away in her private records, knowing that she might need to hear it often, yet she wondered if the message was also part of a test. Maybe Celia, who had stood up for her, was only trying to cover herself, lest she look like a fool for pleading Iris’s case.

Iris sighed. Alexandra’s allotment had not been cut. Envy gnawed at her insides. She bit her lip. Alexandra would agree with Celia; the blond girl would be angry with Iris if she gave in now. Somehow, she feared Alexandra’s scorn even more than she feared the Linker’s.

A shadow fell across her; she sat up. Eric was standing over her. She buttoned her shirt as the boy sat down and wrapped his arms around his legs; a lock of straight brown hair fell across his eyes.

“I heard the message,” he said, “about your lessons.”

She was silent.

“At least they didn’t cut off the payments completely.” Eric rested his chin on his knees. “Funny, isn’t it? I want to stay, and I have to leave next week. You probably want to leave Lincoln.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want. I’ll have to stay anyway.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes. Look, you can still have some of your lessons. Something’s better than nothing. And when you’re older, you’ll get the farm too. You won’t have to be an apprentice and wander all over the place. I don’t know what you’re complaining about.” His mouth twisted. “Too bad you weren’t born a boy. Angharad wouldn’t have cared as much about your lessons then. You would have left Lincoln anyway, so it wouldn’t matter if you were a student or something.”

“Well, I won’t get chosen now.” She paused. “Eric, didn’t you ever — I mean, didn’t you ever want to learn about things?”

“Naah. That’s not for me. I just wanted to have a shop and hang around here, and I can’t even have that. Maybe Constance would have done more for me if I’d been her daughter instead of her son.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Iris responded. “She loves you just as much as if —”

“Don’t give me that shit, Iris. You’re smarter than that. If a lot of men started staying in their towns instead of leaving, then the women would have to share what they’ve got with them, and that’d probably fuck up the economy or something. See, I know a few things too.”

“Yes, you do,” she said. “Look, maybe you’ll find a way later to have a shop. Things could change.”

“Come on. They won’t change for me.”

She watched him solemnly. He was no longer the boy who had teased and tormented her as a child, and she had become the only member of the household who sympathized with his longings. But she had never really spoken to him about her own dreams.

Eric had spent the last couple of nights in her room, which had pleased Constance and had relieved some of Angharad’s worries about her daughter. The two women would never know that she and Eric had only talked and that he had slept on her window seat; embracing him would have been like making love to a brother. The boy had only wanted comfort and someone to listen to his complaints. She and Eric were content, for their own reasons, to let Angharad and Constance believe what they liked.

“Where would you go if you could?” Eric asked.

She knew that she could trust him now. “I’ll tell you where I’d go,” she said. “I’d go to Venus and work on the Project.”

Eric gaped at her. “Why?”

“Because it’s something new, something different. Because it’s the best thing the Nomarchies ever tried to do, the only place where they reached for something noble instead of just trying to keep everything the way it is.”

“I guess that makes sense, when you put it that way,” he said.

“I think you’re probably the only man I’ll ever meet who understands it, then.”

“I don’t know. You might get to Venus someday.”

She laughed. “You know I won’t. The closest I’ll ever get is those images the band shows me.”

Eric let out a breath. “My father’s going to meet me in Omaha and stay at the hostel with me. I’ll get to see him more. That won’t be so bad, will it?” His voice had a hollow, forlorn sound.

“It’ll be fine. Ray’s all right.” Iris did not have a lot of evidence for that assertion, since Eric’s father had stopped at the house only two or three times; she dimly recalled a taciturn young man with a vacant smile.

“Who knows? Maybe I’ll go to a town where somebody needs a shopkeeper, and I’ll be able to tell them I can do some figures, thanks to you. It wouldn’t be home, but it’d be something.”

“I hope so.” She put a hand on his arm, remembering what Celia had told her. “Don’t give up. If you have something to hope for, that makes other things a little easier, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know if it does. Constance says it just makes things look worse.”

“Well, she’s wrong.”

They sat together on the hill, mostly in silence, idling away their time in daydreaming until the sun was lower on the horizon and it was time to go home.

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Nine

Chen walked the streets of Winnipeg, carrying his duffel on his shoulder, and listened to the babble of voices as knots of people passed him. He was used to the noise now; when he had first returned to Earth, he had found the crowds disorienting, the noise deafening.

Hovercars drifted by in the wide street while people carried by moving belts flickered past behind glassy walls. Towers pointed toward the gray, wintry sky; in the distance, he caught the gleam of a latticework's facets. A gust of cold wind whistled by him; he shivered.

Chen had arrived at the city's port only a couple of hours ago on the suborbital flight from Little Rock. He had been sent here to rest and spend a little of his credit until he was assigned to another Plains village. He had gone to the nearest port screen, where he had been told that there was no room for him in any of the workers' hostels, but that a room would be provided for him in a hotel. He had been too pleased by this unexpected news to wonder why such an important city would have a lack of space; having a room to himself would be pleasant for a change, and if it was going to be paid for, so much the better. He would enjoy it while he could; he would probably be sent to a hostel or another town in a couple of days.

The screen had shown him a detailed picture of the hotel and had given him directions to it. He had taken the tubeway train into Winnipeg, then had left it a few blocks from the hotel, wanting to walk the rest of the way. He had not realized how cold it would be. His teeth were chattering by the time he reached his destination.

A glassy door adorned with the hotel's insignia opened as he entered. The small lobby was modest; simple chairs and sofas stood against the pale blue walls. He glanced at the desk, surprised to see a clerk behind it; that meant that this hotel offered more luxury and service than its interior indicated. A young blond woman sitting in the lobby smiled at him, beckoning him with one finger. Chen looked away awkwardly. After two years of working for the Plains Communes, he had not been able to get used to the manners of their women, the frank looks and suggestive invitations; the women on the Islands had never been quite so bold. The Plainsmen were even worse, exchanging lewd talk about their various encounters with no sign of shame. Chen was no stranger to such talk; the Island workers were often blunt in their speech and had their share of erotic diversions, but Plainsfolk seemed to fall into bed with one another casually, with no thought of love or caring at all. At the same time, however, they seemed oddly intolerant of those who sought love with members of their own sex, and that made no sense in a place where men and women lived such separate lives. There was no doubt about it; Plainspeople were baffling.

Chen walked to the desk and put his left arm next to the small screen's eye; the band on his arm was scanned as the clerk read the symbols on the screen.

The man gazed at Chen and smiled stiffly. "I see that your room's already paid for," he said. "The cost of your meals has also been covered." The clerk surveyed Chen coldly with eyes as pale as a demon's. "Do you wish to have your bag carried to your room?"

Chen shook his head. "I'll carry it up." He was not used to having a clerk inquire about his needs and wasn't sure how to respond.

"You may go to that lift, then," the clerk said, indicating the second of four doors to the left of the desk; a silver arrow on the door pointed toward the ceiling. "You'll be let off at your floor, and a servo will guide you to your room. I hope you have a pleasant stay with us." The man smiled again.

"Thank you," Chen said, bowing a little. He hurried to the lift, feeling conspicuous in his plain clothes and suddenly anxious to be away from the lobby. The door opened, humming slightly as his bracelet was

scanned and his identity confirmed.

The transparent platform under his feet carried him up through a wide, lighted corridor; he passed a stream of doors until one opened and the platform came to a gentle stop. He entered a hall carpeted in blue and stepped aside quickly as a man and woman rushed past him to claim the lift. The door slid shut; he was alone. On the door, a painted hand pointed toward the ceiling; next to it, another door had a painted hand pointing toward the floor.

Several servos, small domes on wheels, stood near one wall; one rolled over to him and beeped. Chen held out his left arm so that the servo could scan his bracelet; it beeped again and rolled down the hallway, stopping in front of one door. Chen glanced at the numbers on his door, noting a twelve followed by two fives; though he could not manipulate such symbols, he could recognize their shapes.

The door opened and he stepped inside. The room was small, with a bed and two chairs; a small screen, keyboard, and band sat on a table in one corner. Another door faced the bed; Chen opened it and saw a shower, toilet, and sink. He grinned, surprised at the unexpected luxury of a private bathroom.

Stepping back, he dropped his duffel on the floor and then sat down on the bed, wondering if he should eat first or enjoy a long shower. He had decided on the shower when he heard a chime.

“Administrator Nancy Fassi wishes to enter,” a voice said from the wall. “Will you speak to her?”

Chen tensed, wondering what an Administrator could want with him, then stood up quickly. He shrugged out of his coat, looked around the room, folded the thin cloth garment, and thrust it into a drawer near the bed.

“Will you speak to Administrator Nancy Fassi?” the voice asked again.

Chen smoothed back his hair. “Yes, of course,” he replied. “Please let her in.”

The door opened as a tall, dark-haired woman stepped inside. “Liang Chen?”

He nodded, trying to relax; there was a note of uncertainty in her voice, and she was slouching, as if trying to minimize her height.

“I’m Nancy Fassi.” Do sit down.” She stepped around the duffel he had left on the floor, took off her fur coat, tossed it onto the bed, then went to the screen. “Have you eaten yet?”

“I’m not hungry,” he said as he sat in one of the chairs, his appetite suddenly gone.

“I’ll get us some wine, then.” She gave her order to the screen, then seated herself in the other chair. “Sorry about the room. I would have found you something larger, but this was all they had available.” She rubbed at the gem on her forehead, as if unaccustomed to her Link.

“It’s fine,” he murmured, feeling like an intruder in the room.

“Still better than a workers’ hostel, I suppose,” the Linker said. “Don’t be fooled by those signs on the lifts, by the way. You’re so close to the top floor that, if you need to get to the lobby, you can take the lift going up and then ride it down instead of waiting around for the other one.” Her voice trailed off; her fingers plucked at one sleeve of her blue silk shirt. She seemed almost as uncomfortable as he was; he was now certain that she hadn’t been an Administrator for very long.

“I’ll remember about the lifts,” he said.

“Well. You’ve probably guessed that we didn’t send you here because of a lack of space. As a matter of fact, I have some important things to discuss with you, and fetching you from a hostel would have caused a bit of talk. Here, we can talk privately, and people will think I brought you here as a lover.”

Chen looked down, understanding why the desk clerk had smirked at him.

“Let’s get one thing settled immediately,” Nancy Fassi went on, sounding as though she had regained her composure. “I’ve looked at your records. You do your job well enough, and you’re not inclined to idle chatter. That’s just what we’re looking for.” She paused. “You used to work on the Venus Project.”

He nodded.

“But when you came back, you asked not to be sent to your own Nomarchy. In fact, you said you’d be willing to go anywhere else. Now, we always appreciate a willing and adaptable worker, but why did you make such a request?”

He fumbled for words. “It’s hard to say. I just didn’t want to go back. They have too many workers like me there anyway.”

“You didn’t want to go back because you would have felt trapped again. You’d rather wander around and go where you’re sent until the time comes when you can return to the place you think of as your real home.” Why, he thought, had she asked him the question if she already knew the answer? Nancy tilted her head, watching him with her round black eyes. “You *do* want to rejoin the Project.”

“Yes.”

“Well, maybe you’ll get a chance to go back. It depends on you, Chen.”

He sat very still, trying not to let the hope he felt show in his expression. The chime rang again; after a moment, the door opened and a cart carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses rolled into the room. He got up and poured the wine, handing one glass to the Linker before seating himself again.

“I’d like to help you,” Nancy said. “Personally, I think it was a mistake to remove committed people from that Project just so the Nomarchies could reassert their authority over it. It hurts morale. They need the patient ones there, the ones who are willing to spend their lives there shaping a world many of them won’t live to see. It isn’t just another job to such people, and they don’t work as well when they feel that their position may be precarious. They have to feel that their children might benefit from the work. People with that land of commitment to an uncertain, long-term venture are hard to come by.”

Chen felt uneasy. One could never tell, with Linkers, what part of their talk was sincere and what might be a trap for the unwary. “I was angry when I came back,” he admitted. “But they told me I’d get another chance, so I put my anger aside. I tell myself I’d be a better worker there now because I know what it’s like to lose the chance.” That answer seemed to have the sound of sincerity, and for once he had not tripped over the words. He could never admit to the rage he still felt at his loss.

“I certainly think you deserve such a chance,” Nancy said, “but we need you for another task first. I came here to speak with you about a new assignment. We need people like you for this particular job, people who have some familiarity with the Plains but who are also outsiders and less likely to talk. You have even more reason to keep silent than most if you ever want to return to Venus.”

Chen sipped his wine nervously as Nancy leaned back in her seat “We’ve had some problems recently,” she said in a low voice. “A while back, a Counselor was killed in one Plains town, and recently, another was attacked. We had quite a time hushing it up, but luckily, there were few witnesses to either event.

You must have heard rumors.”

“A few,” he admitted.

“Stories that can’t be proved, of course. We made sure of that. Even the witnesses are no longer quite sure of what they saw. But this sort of thing can be contagious. Most of the Plains Counselors know the truth, and they’re nervous. If someone strikes out at a Counselor, he’s striking directly at the authority the Counselor represents, and we can’t have that. Counselors are our primary representatives in most of these Plains towns, the one personal contact most people have with the Administrative Committees for whom the Counselors speak. The Council of Mukhtars is worried — our Counselors must be protected.”

He longed for more wine, but restrained himself. She was leading him into dangerous conversational currents, and he needed a clear head.

“That’s why I’ve brought you here. We need your help, and the aid of a few others like you. We’ve developed a new device to protect Counselors on their visits. It’s really quite simple. A small alteration in the scanner of a door can allow us to detect any weapons concealed by someone entering the room. The Counselor would then see a light on his desk; by pressing a button, the Counselor would then set up a sensing shield around himself.” Nancy took a breath. “If the visitor reaches for a weapon and makes a violent move toward the Counselor, a beam from the scanner will disrupt the cranial blood vessels of the visitor. The intruder then dies instantly, the Counselor removes the weapon from the body, and the town finds out that one of its people is tragically dead of a stroke.”

Chen’s mouth was dry; his shoulders ached with tension. “A stroke?” he asked.

“I know — it’s an unusual way to die, but it still happens sometimes.”

“But Counselors know the people in those towns, and they’re trained to care about them. Some of them come from towns like that themselves. How can you get them to go along?”

“They know they must protect themselves. Anyway, the Counselor won’t be responsible for what an assassin brings upon himself by triggering the scanner.”

“What if someone enters with a weapon,” Chen said, “and then changes his mind?”

“His meeting with the Counselor goes on. The screen won’t block sounds, and the program is very specific about the presence of a weapon and violent emotions. The assailant could speak to the Counselor without ever knowing that the screen is there. The Counselor would probably recommend a specialist and treatment at that point. If it isn’t accepted, of course, the visitor is unlikely to leave the room alive.”

Chen set his glass on the cart. His hand trembled a little. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because we need workers like you to go to these towns and install the equipment. You’ll be trained while you’re here. It shouldn’t take long. You’re already familiar with the installation of scanners.”

“Why me?” Chen asked. “You could send in your own people.”

“That might cause talk. We can’t risk it. People would wonder what Linkers were doing in their towns.”

His eyes narrowed. “Surely you could disguise yourselves.”

“That’s not so easy as you might think. We train for years, you know. It’s difficult to fit in with those who

are — with those we serve. Our training changes us. A careless gesture could give one of us away. And most of us aren't skilled in such work." She pressed her fingertips together. "And we can't send in workers who are Plainsfolk themselves. They might become divided in their loyalties." She grimaced, showing her teeth, then picked up her glass again, gulping the wine.

"There are Guardians," he said. "It sounds like work for them."

The corners of her mouth turned down. "Never. We don't want Guardians —" A veiled look came over her face as she gazed past him. "Your presence won't be noticed. You'll have other work to do as well, and will be expected by the townfolk in the places you visit. You see the point. We can't arouse suspicion — that would do more damage than a wave of assassinations. We can't destroy the trust people have in their Counselors."

Chen felt sick. The same thing might be happening in other places; he imagined a Plains worker installing similar devices in a Chinese town. He recoiled from the task, wondering why he felt so revulsed. He would be protecting lives, and a quick death for an assassin was merciful compared to some punishments he could imagine. But what was going on?

He had always thought of Counselors as the kindest members of the Nomarchies' administration, the ones who sympathized even when their recommendations and advice were painful. Even his encounter with Ari Isaacson on the Islands had not completely robbed him of that attitude; Ari had probably been given little choice in the matter. Now he was seeing the crafty ruthlessness that the smiling faces of Counselors masked.

Something could go wrong with such a device; nothing human beings made was infallible. Worse still, a Counselor might find it very convenient to get rid of troublesome people for his own reasons. Did Nancy believe that a Counselor's training and empathy with others would always restrain him? If so, she was a fool; she would only corrupt those she was trying to protect.

If I had any courage, he thought, I'd refuse. Even an assassin supposedly had the right of a hearing and an appeal. He imagined a beam striking his own skull, putting an end to such a pointless stand. He could be sent someplace where it wouldn't matter what he knew or to whom he told his story. Nancy Fassi had undoubtedly studied his records and had known that he would agree, or she wouldn't have brought him here in the first place. She would know that his fear of losing his dream forever would be enough to keep him in line.

"Maybe we should have taken steps earlier," Nancy murmured. "I don't know. It didn't seem necessary, and there were technical problems. As it is, it's going to cost us, divert some of our resources."

He poured more wine for her, keeping his eyes averted from her face, then refilled his own glass. His hand shook a bit as he lifted the glass to his lips.

"I wish it hadn't come to this," she went on, and he was surprised by the pain in her voice. "I don't like this sort of thing any more than you do. I hope that it's only a few isolated, unhappy individuals who are moved to such actions, that we can stop it and keep it from spreading beyond them. If it isn't, if it's growing, then even this plan won't work for long. People will start to wonder why presumably healthy people are dying during visits to Counselors, and if the dead ones have co-conspirators —" Nancy clutched her wineglass tightly. "I pray that this puts an end to it, that it's all we have to do. We've devoted our lives to serving Earth. It took so long for us to crawl up to where Earth is now, to overcome the wretchedness and conflicts that set back our civilization and nearly destroyed us centuries ago. You and others like you have your problems, but you have enough to eat, a place to live, clothes to wear, a choice of recreation. You aren't given weapons and told to make war on others. Unifying the

Nomarchies saved Earth. Without that, there'd be nothing to hold us together. If you do your part to ensure that we keep what we have, you'll be rewarded for it."

It was odd to look at the world through the eyes of a Linker. He had thought that they were people who were primarily interested in keeping their own status and privileges, whatever their secondary concerns. In space, he had seen another symbol of their power, the orbiting platforms of ancient beam weapons that the Guardians maintained and the Mukhtars controlled, and which could strike at any place on the planet's surface, and had thought of them as a threat. But Nancy saw herself serving Earth, and probably believed that the weapons preserved the peace. To Chen, that seemed more fearful than simple venality; a person with such views might excuse any number of cruel actions, believing that they were for the best.

"Are you with us, then?" she asked.

He nodded. "Of course," he said wearily.

"If you do your job, my recommendation will help you return to Venus. Obviously, once you've done what you have to do, we'd rather have you there than here. Of course, you will keep silent. You wouldn't want your friends there to think less of you."

He hated her for saying that; the woman had sullied his dream with her words, shown her contempt for him.

"Well, that's settled, then." She stood up, setting her glass on the cart. "You'll have some free time while you're here, and any bills will be covered. I think it would be best to pursue any recreation within the confines of this hotel. You wouldn't want to run into any curious acquaintances, and this hotel has a fair number of facilities."

He nodded passively, trying to look properly grateful.

"You had to know. You might have guessed and given it away by accident. You won't regret this."

He got up and helped her on with her coat, longing to be rid of her.

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Ten

The wind howled as Chen stepped off the floater: the thick, slate-gray clouds overhead promised an icy rain. A couple of his traveling companions shouted farewells as Chen walked down the ramp; they had assured him that the women here would make him feel right at home. Winter would come early to the Plains this year, and he was likely to spend much of it in this town, with all the tasks assigned to him. He had been to one town already this season, and had been properly discreet; he had concentrated on his work, trying not to think of its purpose. He could change nothing anyway.

Carts carrying shipments were already rolling toward the road leading into town. Chen shouldered his duffel, picked up his bag of tools, and followed the carts, trailed by another cart that was carrying the rest of his equipment. He saw no one in the road, but glimpsed a few faces through the wide windows of the houses he passed.

The carts led him into the town square, then rolled on toward various shops. His cart stopped in front of a large building with white columns; Chen had seen images of the town before, and recognized the town hall. He climbed the steps, dropped his bags inside the wide door, then went back down to the cart and began to unload his equipment, carrying it up to the door and depositing it in the hall. It would be safe

enough there; only his handprint could open the cartons. As he carried up the last box, the cart spun around and rolled away.

He lingered in the hall, his hand on the door frame, and watched as a few of the town's shopkeepers came out to claim their cartons. He had been the only passenger headed for Lincoln; the floater would be leaving soon. Nancy Fassi had not needed to warn him about keeping silent; he was a stranger in towns like this, dependent on the good will of the townspeople. He would have to share their food and shelter; towns this small had no workers' hostels. He would undoubtedly be expected to share someone's bed as well, at least part of the time.

He thought of the woman in the town he had just left. She had been intrigued by his appearance, which to her had seemed exotic and unusual; she had spoken to him about having a child after knowing him for only three weeks. He recalled the puzzled, hurt look on her face when he had explained that he could not give her a child he would rarely see, whom he would scarcely know. He had not told her his other reason — that he did not want a child he might have to leave behind on Earth. He thought of Tonie, missing her again, but his pain had dulled and he could think of her calmly now. She had done her best to make their last days together on the Islands pleasant ones, and had not wept until he left her to board the waiting airship. She had sent him no messages since, and perhaps that was best; he hoped that she had found someone else by now. He could even wish for that without feeling more than a twinge.

"There you are!" a woman's voice said behind him. "Come away from that door now before we lose all our heat." He turned; two women were walking down the hall toward him. The hall was wide, with a high ceiling; chairs stood against the walls near closed doors. "We've been waiting for you. I'm Dory Trudes, the mayor here."

He stepped forward and bowed as the door closed behind him. The tall woman extended a hand; he shook it. Dory Trudes had a long, thin face; her light brown hair was silver at the temples. "Glad you got to Lincoln before the town hall falls apart," Dory continued. "Damn homeostat doesn't work properly — first we swelter and then we freeze. What's your name, young fellow?"

"I'm Liang Chen."

"Clad to know you, Liang."

"It's Chen. Liang is my family's name."

"Oh, of course." Dory giggled. "We don't get people from your parts here as a rule." She motioned to the shorter, younger woman. "I'd like you to meet Angharad Julias — she's on the town council and was elected mayor just a couple of weeks ago, so she'll be taking over at the beginning of the year."

The younger woman held out her hand; she had a firm grip as she shook his. Angharad Julias was short and slightly plump. He gazed down at her wide, pretty face, relieved to find a Plains citizen who was shorter than he was for a change. "Pleased to meet you," Chen said.

"Pleased to meet *you*," Angharad replied; she arched her dark brows and lowered her thick lashes over her brown eyes. "You'll be staying at my house, if that's agreeable. Of course, when you get to know people, you'll be able to stay elsewhere if you like, but I think we'll make you feel at home."

"You've got your work cut out for you, Chen," Dory said. "You may be here for the winter. I can't understand why they sent only one man for all you have to do."

He shrugged. "They need most of them in other places." Even the mayors and town councils did not know the true purpose of his journey, and other workers would not be in the town hall to wonder about

the equipment he was installing. He would have to complete his work on the Counselor's room quickly; he was sure that other men would be coming through Lincoln to visit before winter set in and the floaters stopped arriving as regularly.

Angharad pulled on the brown jacket she had been carrying over her arm. "Come on — I'd better take you home before it rains. You can leave those cartons there."

He picked up his duffel and bag of tools; Angharad took the bag from him, letting her fingers brush against his palm.

"Nice meeting you, Chen," Dory said. He nodded at her, then followed Angharad outside. A few people were strolling past the stores around the square; he gazed at the windows displaying pastries, candies, clothes, toys, and liquors. The Plains were prosperous, and he wondered why anyone there would want to attack a Counselor.

Angharad linked her arm in his as they crossed the square. He wondered if she was expecting him to pay a visit to her room later; she might be offended if he did not. He had adapted to Plains ways, but the memory of his first encounter with a Plainswoman still embarrassed him. He recalled how his ears had burned when he overheard the woman discussing his lovemaking in intimate detail with her friends. Even his shyness hadn't protected him; that only seemed to make the women bolder, or else caused people to murmur that he must prefer men.

Angharad was pointing out various shops to him, telling him of the goods they offered; her voice was filled with pride in her town. Plainspeople talked as though there could be no better place to live. "Excuse me," he heard himself say. "Is there a shop that sells art supplies?"

Her brown eyes widened. "Art supplies?"

"Just tools for carving and modeling, pieces of wood, some clay. I have my chisels in my bag, but —"

"You carve?"

"It's just a hobby. I have no training."

"Well, you can order anything you like. We're not artsy here, though a lot of us do handicrafts — sewing or pottery, things like that. We like to make a few things for ourselves. I guess you'd have to order your things directly from my house and pick them up yourself when they arrive. That's an odd hobby — carving."

"I may not have much time for it."

"Well, if you do, feel free. I think it'd be simpler to link your account with mine while you're visiting, let our computer keep track of your expenses. I doubt they'll come to much, anyway. Oh, I almost forgot." Angharad turned and pointed to a small, wooden building next to the town hall. "The Spiritists go there during the winter to worship." She turned back to him as they walked on. "And this is our church — I'm a Marian Catholic." She waved a hand at a larger structure with a steeple as they passed it, then hooked her arm through his again. "And the mosque is there." She was leading him down a street where the domed building sat. "I don't know what faith you follow, but you'd be welcome at any of them."

"I have my own gods," he replied. "I can say my prayers to them by myself." The three buildings had already told him something about Lincoln. The Spiritists' temple was much smaller than the church, which had to mean that they were not as prominent here as in other towns he had visited, though if Lincoln was like most Plains towns, many Spiritist customs would be followed even if the religion were not. He knew,

for instance, that Lincoln celebrated a fall festival and held a ceremony for its young women then; his traveling companions on the floater had mentioned attending a feast here. The size of the church showed that many of the townsfolk were Catholics. The mosque was the smallest building of all, but the gilded dome and stone facing revealed that its congregation included some of Lincoln's wealthier citizens.

The Plains were filled with gods. The Spiritists worshipped nature, the Catholics prayed to a mother, the Muslims identified with the dominant religion of the Nomarchies' centers of culture. There were still other sects in other towns, so many that he could not name them all. Plainspeople fogged their minds with prayers and strange rituals; even the few skeptical Plainsfolk thought any religion was better than none at all. Chen had learned to keep silent about his own lack of belief, which only encouraged the mote zealous believers to try to convert him. A god who did nothing to help him, he thought, was worse than no god at all.

Angharad greeted the few people who passed, smiling when a couple of women ogled Chen. At last they stopped in front of one house, a square structure with steps leading to the street.

"Here we are," Angharad said. The door opened; a girl was looking down at him. Her shapeless brown shirt and loose trousers hid her short, stocky body; her thick brown hair was pulled back from her face. There was no guile in her face, no seductive lowering of her dark lashes over her large, green eyes, only a distant, curious gaze. She was looking at him almost the way a Linker might.

"My daughter, Iris," Angharad muttered as they ascended the steps; he thought he sensed a tone of disapproval in her voice. The girl did not smile.

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Eleven

LaDonna hummed as she sewed. Chen was sitting next to her, sipping whiskey, as Iris entered the courtyard. A lantern hung in a tree limb over the pair, bathing them in a bright, yellow light; Nicky, LaDonna's cat, had curled up at her side. The rest of the household was asleep; the younger women had given up on trying to lure Chen away from LaDonna this evening.

Chen had been with them for a week, and Iris knew that he would be in the house for much of the winter. That bothered her, and yet something in the man drew her as well; he seemed more contemplative than other men. Maybe she was drawn to him only because he had seen more of the world than the Plains. Angharad would expect her to approach the young man; Iris's mother had kept her own flirting to a minimum, not wanting to get in Iris's way.

Now Angharad was muttering about calling in Counselors again, but Iris still remembered the two weeks she had spent with Jon Ellas. She could not allow herself to fall into that besotted state again. She had kept her mind clear for her work, had even made enough progress to get a message from Celia praising it. The praise might gain her little, but it was good to have the encouragement.

LaDonna looked up from her embroidery. "Well, look who's here," she said as Iris sat down. "No studying tonight?"

"I finished early." Iris began to rub Nicky behind the ears; the tawny cat stretched, showing his white stomach.

"Iris must know everything there is to know by now," LaDonna said to Chen, though the man was already aware of her odd pursuits. He had never joined in the teasing; he had even looked impressed and

a little awed when Constance had recounted the tale of Celia's visit and the grant. But then, Chen rarely spoke. His room was down the hall from her own, on the other side of Angharad's room, though he had spent most of his nights with LaDonna. Iris had passed him a couple of times in the hall on her way to the bathroom, and though he had always smiled at her kindly, he had never spoken to her.

Nicky purred as she scratched his stomach; Chen grinned at the cat. The man's unusual face, with its odd, almond-shaped eyes, attracted Iris, and he was quieter and more courteous than many of the men who came to Lincoln. If she invited him to her room, Angharad would be pleased and might stop hinting about specialists and abnormality. Perhaps Iris could satisfy her needs with him without clouding her mind. She frowned as she let her arm drop. Thinking about Chen in that way seemed unfeeling somehow; at any rate, with LaDonna's attractions, he might not even be interested in her.

The cat nudged her hand, then scrambled up and stalked off into the shadows. "What do you learn about?" Chen asked.

Iris gazed at him, surprised. He was watching her, actually looking curious. "Lots of things," she said as she plucked nervously at the blue sleeve of her pajamas. "The sciences, mostly, but some history too."

"Iris has been taking prep lessons," LaDonna said.

"So I heard."

"And other things too," Iris said. "I've even learned about the Venus Project, along with everything else. It must be wonderful to work there, see a whole world being changed. Not that I could ever go, of course — I couldn't leave the farm." She had added that for LaDonna's benefit. "But it's interesting to learn about —"

Her voice trailed off. Chen's eyes had narrowed; he leaned forward, and the intense look on his face startled her. "I was there," he said, "on the Islands."

Iris held her breath, hardly knowing what to say. He had been to Venus. It's a sign, she thought wildly. She had never imagined meeting someone who had actually worked on the Project.

"They needed more space on the Islands. They can only support so many, and the people there want to have kids and so forth. Usually, there's enough people who want to leave after a while, but they had to send some others back that time, and I was one of them."

"How interesting," LaDonna murmured.

"I want to go back some day," Chen said. He said the words calmly, but the veins stood out on his muscular neck, and his body seemed tense. "I was told I'd be given — that I'd get to go back."

"That's wonderful," Iris said. "How lucky you are. I wish —" She closed her mouth, afraid to say more in front of LaDonna.

The dark-haired woman shook her head. "I never understood why that Project was started. It seems like a lot of effort for little return. We could use those resources here."

"We can use what's learned there," Iris replied. "That's worth more than the resources. And having a new world to settle someday — that'll mean a lot to Earth. It'll mean a new culture we can learn from eventually — it'll renew us."

"I suppose they tell you such things in lessons," LaDonna smiled tolerantly as she resumed her sewing.

“I was happy there,” Chen said. “In a way, I still think of the Islands as my home.”

“I’ve seen everything about it with my band,” Iris said, “what Venus was like before, how the Parasol was built, what the Bats are needed for, why they had to build those big pyramids on the equator.”

“I used to wonder about those.”

“They’ll increase the speed of Venus’s rotation. Right now, it turns only once every two hundred forty-three days —”

“I know that,” Chen said. “I was there, I know what the installations are supposed to do. I just was never quite sure of why they were built, why we couldn’t just leave it the way it is.”

“Oh.” Iris was a bit taken aback; she had assumed, too quickly, that Chen might know little more than the members of her household. “They were going to, in the beginning. The Parasol could protect it. I mean, here on Earth, we have a magnetic field to protect us from solar radiation, because, as Earth rotates, its core generates that field. Venus doesn’t have that land of magnetic field, but if you left part of the Parasol in place, you could protect the planet. But you’d still have a problem with the weather.”

Chen nodded. “One side would get very cold when it’s turned away from the sun.” He shrugged. “Still, people can survive that. They’d find ways to live with it.”

“But you also wouldn’t have a Coriolis effect. The clouds wouldn’t move in Earthlike patterns to create Earthlike weather, you see — the wind patterns wouldn’t be similar. Well, at the beginning of the Project, they considered bringing in an asteroid, a large one, to strike the surface at an angle, and that certainly would have been easier than building those pyramids, but the computer projections showed that wouldn’t produce enough energy to speed up the rotation. Even if it did, the kinetic energy would have damaged the planet. Something would have had to be done about the heat the energy would have produced, and the impact might have set off quakes for centuries afterward. As it is, when the tectonic plates start shifting — when the ground begins to move and shift — there’ll be quakes anyway, but the settlers can be prepared for those.”

“You know a few things,” Chen said; there was no mockery in his voice.

“That’s why the equatorial installations were such a clever idea. Those gravitational pulse engines inside them will produce a large enough antigravitational pulse to speed up the rotation. It might tear the engines apart, but the surface won’t be as greatly damaged.”

“If the engines work,” Chen said.

“Oh, they should. The computer models show that.” Iris glanced at LaDonna, who seemed bored by the conversation. “The people who thought of it were really quite clever.”

Chen leaned back against the tree. “It was Habbers who did the work. Their robots did, anyway. Earth couldn’t have done it alone.”

Iris was startled. “I didn’t know that.”

“No reason why you should, I guess. Probably didn’t put that fact into the history lessons, but all the Islanders know it. Those installations couldn’t have been built without the Habbers.”

“But why would they help the Nomarchies? I know some Habbers live on the Islands, but I thought they only observed things. Why would they help?”

“They have reasons. Maybe they want to find out a few things from doing it. I don’t know. It’s hard to understand Habbers.”

She folded her arms. “Did you ever meet a Habber?”

“A few,” He took another sip of whiskey, obviously reluctant to say more.

LaDonna put down her cloth and embroidery hoop, then yawned, arching her back as she stretched out her arms. “Getting late.” She cast a sidelong look at Chen, who was ignoring her, then stood up.

“Coming to bed?”

Chen shook his head.

“Well, if you’d rather talk —” LaDonna arched her brows, then smirked at Iris before leaving the courtyard.

They were alone. Iris blushed, wondering if Chen expected an invitation from her. “Why are you learning about the Project?” he asked.

“You’re going to think it’s silly.”

“No, I won’t.”

“I’d love to go there, be a part of it all. Of course, I know I won’t.” It still hurt to admit that.

“I don’t think it’s silly.”

“Don’t say anything to anyone. They’d really laugh at me then.”

“I don’t know why they laugh at you at all.”

She gazed at him gratefully. “They don’t, a lot of the time, but whenever someone’s staying here, they start in sooner or later. Maybe they think a man’ll make me see sense. My mother thinks I’m addled. She was so angry with me when I started taking lessons. She says it won’t do me any good when it’s time to take over the farm.”

“Maybe it won’t. But you might not be on the farm. You could get sent to Venus.”

“Do you really think so?” she asked.

“Maybe. I’ll tell you this — they need people there who really care about the Project, and they aren’t so easy to find. There are Islanders whose families were there almost from the beginning, a few of them even before the Islands were built, when they had to stay on Anwara. But there aren’t as many of them as you might think. Sometimes their children or grandchildren wanted something else, I guess. Sometimes people just can’t last on the Islands. They make things as nice as they can, but it’s still a long time in one small area with a lot of the same people, and the only change you get is when you’re working on a Bat.”

Iris twisted a blade of grass in her fingers. “Well, I’m used to being stuck in one place.”

“Anyway, when they pick the first settlers, they’d have to come from the Islands. It isn’t just that they’d deserve it the most, it’s that they’d know what to expect. They’ll be closed in on the surface settlements for a while, but they’d feel —” Chen paused. “If you were a worker, you could apply. Know anything about mechanics or maintenance or airships, anything like that?”

“No.”

“Then they probably couldn’t use someone like you. You’d have to be a worker or else a specialist of some kind, and specialists have to go to a school.”

The small hope he had aroused in her died. “Well, that won’t happen.”

“How old are you, Iris?”

“Almost sixteen,” she said, exaggerating a little; her birthday wasn’t until spring.

“I know a few on the Islands who weren’t picked for schools until they were your age or even older. It happens sometimes — depends on if they think they’ll need you. One thing Earth can’t waste is brains.”

Alexandra had said the same sort of thing. Iris wrapped her arms around her legs. It was easy for him to say kind things and give her false hope while he was here; he would not be around to see her hopes dashed. “They can’t afford to waste farmers, either,” she said bitterly.

“I don’t know. Things could change. The Islands have to grow most of their own food, and we — they don’t have as much space to do it, so they had to find different ways — hydroponics, cloned animal tissue, things like that. They could do the same things here, and then they wouldn’t need as many farmers.”

“You know a few things yourself, Chen.”

He looked away for a moment. “I can’t read,” he said softly, “so I have to listen and look and learn that way. Sometimes I’d sit and overhear people talking and listen until they saw me there. I mean, Linkers and people like that don’t usually sit around explaining things to me themselves. I couldn’t understand everything, but I could pick up a little — Linkers, Habbers, it didn’t matter who. Sometimes I’d make a carving for one of them, and they’d talk to me. It’s funny. Some of the Habbers took more trouble if I asked a question than the Linkers or others did. I used to wonder why. I think it’s because, in a way, the Habbers think we’re all the same. They don’t much care if you’re a Linker or whatever. We’re all just people trying to hang on to old ways the Habbers gave up long ago, and the Linkers aren’t any different from the rest of us. The Habbers went into space and took what they wanted and changed themselves when they had to. The way they look at it, we’re the ones they left behind.” He brushed his black hair from his forehead. “I never said all this to anybody before. I never thought anyone would understand.”

“I understand, Chen.”

“You know —” He waved an arm. His eyes gazed past her; his brow was furrowed. She seemed to feel his expression on her own face, almost as if she were touching his thoughts. “The Linkers don’t see. They listen to the cyberminds, but they don’t see. Everything that doesn’t fit into the pattern they want gets left out, and you can’t do that. It’s like the devices I work on. If one module or microchip or anything isn’t there, it might go on working for a while, but it’ll fail, and one device can affect a lot of other things.” He shook his head. “I’m not saying it right. I just don’t have the words.”

“But you do. You just said it very well.”

“They don’t see people. They see pieces that have to go in certain places for everything to work.”

“They might be right about that. What would we have without them?”

“Maybe they were right once.” Chen closed his bottle of whiskey and set it down next to the tree. “But now — I don’t know. Look at this house. They all do the job they’re supposed to do and drink and talk and, instead of learning something with their bands, they just take mind-tours or whatever. They don’t see, either.”

“Maybe they’re better off,” she said. “Even now, I sometimes think I was foolish for wanting to do more.”

He grabbed her wrist. “Don’t say that. I didn’t even get your chance. Where I came from, I didn’t even have a band to learn on because my parents needed the one we had. There were too many of us. I was lucky to get what I did. No matter what happens, you’ll have what you know. That’s something, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

He let go of her wrist and touched her hand gently; she shivered. “I think I understand you,” he said. “Listen, I can talk to you, and you can tell me what you know, and I can try to learn it and remember it.” He took a breath. “Should I come to your room?”

She did not reply.

“I don’t have to, if you’d rather not.” He bowed his head. “I think I like you more than anyone here.”

She swallowed. “I’d better tell you, Chen. My mother thinks there’s something wrong with me. I’ve only had one man in my bed since becoming a woman.” Her throat tightened at the admission. “She thinks there were two because I spent a couple of nights with Constance’s son Eric before he went away, but we didn’t make love. You might be disappointed.” Part of her was hoping that this would discourage him; at the same time, she feared his rejection.

He squeezed her hand. “You’re the first Plainswoman I ever had to ask.” He smiled as he looked up. “It’s all right. Customs are different where I come from. I wouldn’t hold that against you. I was going to be the bondmate of a woman on the Islands.” A look of pain crossed his face. “LaDonna looks a little like her, except for having blue eyes and being taller. I guess that’s why I went to her when I came here.”

“A bond?” Iris said, intrigued and a little appalled. “You mean, just her and you — for years?”

“Years, maybe for life. I loved her. It’s over now. I never thought it would be, but it is.”

She knew about such customs, but she had never met a man who would want one woman so much. Angharad would be shocked; she might not even want Iris to spend time with Chen if she found out about this. “You’d better not say anything about that,” she warned.

“Don’t worry. I know that much.” He stroked her arm. “Maybe you won’t want me in your room now.”

“But I do.” She could hardly believe that she had said that. She suddenly felt dizzy, and wondered if she would be able to stand. He might come to love me, she thought, both frightened and drawn by the possibility.

He stood up and reached for her arm.

He was asleep beside her. Iris stroked Chen’s dark hair, remembering how he had been inside her. He had been gentler than Jon, his smaller body more matched to her own.

Chen opened his eyes and touched her face. She ran her hand along his smooth chest. “Only one man?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, he taught you.” He stretched; her nipples brushed against his chest. “Have to get ready for work.”

“Not yet.”

“Right now.” He kissed her and then sat up. “Don’t you usually do some lessons in the morning?”

“When there’s time.”

“Then you should get ready to do them.” He reached for his robe as he got out of bed, then turned his head. He was looking at her strangely; she could not tell if his eyes revealed joy or sorrow.

“What is it, Chen?” she asked, longing for him again.

He seemed about to speak, then pulled on his robe and hurried from the room.

The first snow of the winter had fallen in the night. Iris watched from the front door as Chen made his way toward the square; he lifted his booted feet as he waded through the drifts.

“Get away from that door,” Angharad said as she entered the hall. “Do you want us to freeze?” Iris stepped back as the door closed. Angharad pinched her daughter’s cheek. “Can’t wait for the night, I expect.” She smiled. “I want to talk to you for a minute.” Iris moved toward the common room. “Not there, upstairs.”

Iris followed her mother up the stairway, feeling apprehensive; she was so used to Angharad’s finding fault with her that she was already trying to think of what she could have done.

They entered Angharad’s room. Iris sat in the straight-backed chair near the window while her mother seated herself next to the small screen on her desk. Angharad looked rested; the rose-colored blouse she wore lent some color to her face. “Don’t look so woeful. Iris. I know I’ve said some hard things to you, but you’re a good child, a good daughter. You seem to be settling down lately.”

Iris relaxed, leaning back in her chair.

“Chen seems a decent young man,” Angharad continued. “He’s not idle, he’s been doing his job at the town hall, and he’s been a very pleasant guest these past three weeks. Of course, he isn’t very talkative, but I don’t suppose you mind that.”

Iris kept her face still. Angharad would be surprised if she knew how many conversations she and Chen had shared, and what they had discussed. She could share her thoughts with him as she had with no one else, and the words he had never been able to utter with others had spilled from him in a stream of whispers as they huddled together in her bed. Unlike Jon, he did not distract her from her lessons; he had made a game of her studies instead, refusing to yield to her caresses until she had finished her work. She was growing as close to him as she had ever been to anyone.

There was danger in that, she knew. Only the night before, he had frightened her with his intensity and a whispered, repeated phrase. “I love you,” he had said, “I love you, I can’t leave you, I want you with me.” She had not even protested the words, the impossible demand. Already, she was beginning to dread the time when he would have to leave.

“LaDonna even says that he treats Mira and Tyree as if — well, he’s very good to her children,” Angharad said. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Tyree will be old enough to leave us before long, and Mira and Sylvie will be the only children left in the house. Constance is hoping to have another, but I don’t know if the Counselor —”

Angharad paused and picked up the carving Chen had made for her, smiling as she gazed at her own face captured in the wood. Iris frowned. The carved Angharad, with its strong chin and wide, blank eyes, had an appearance of stubborn foolishness; it was the look of a woman proud of her ignorance and obstinacy, yet her mother did not seem to notice the subtle criticism.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Angharad said. “He’s doing one of LaDonna now. Maria’s longing for one. Chen could probably sell these here and make a little bit — they’re much nicer than holo portraits, more personal.”

“You were saying,” Iris began tentatively. “Are you planning another child?”

A sigh escaped her mother’s lips. “I have a few hopes. You know Ronell Tinas. I sometimes think of having one with him. He comes through here often enough to see his relatives. And I’m only thirty-two, so —” Angharad sighed again. “I wish the Counselor would just tell me to go ahead, but —” She set the carving on her desk. “There’s nothing to stop you, though. I thought perhaps you might consider it.”

Iris tensed. “I’m not ready.”

“I was about your age when I became pregnant with you, and without much more experience. You’d have plenty of help, because Lilia’s Sylvie is over a year old and Constance isn’t likely to get approval before next year. It might be good to have the group of children grow up together.”

Iris twisted her hands together, feeling trapped. “I can’t,” she whispered.

“I thought you were quite taken with Chen. Is there something I don’t know?”

Iris shook her head.

“Then I don’t see the problem. He’s a good man, and he’d bring some new genes into our line. He hasn’t gone near anyone else for the past two weeks, so he must think something of you.” Angharad rested an elbow on her desk. “These early days with a man, they’re the best. You never quite recapture them afterward. They’re even better to recall when you have a new life inside you.”

“Chen might not want a child,” Iris said.

“Don’t be silly. Why shouldn’t he? Any normal man does. He’ll be flattered that you think enough of him to bear his child, bring something of him into the world.”

Iris was not so sure. She knew Chen’s thoughts, his dream of leaving Earth again. He might not want to leave his child behind. “Anyway,” she said, “I don’t know if I want a child yet. I might want to travel first, like Julia.”

“How?” Angharad struck the desk with a fist. “Julia had a skill and was needed somewhere else for a while. There are mind-tours if you want to travel, and you wouldn’t have all the trouble and expense of moving around. I don’t understand you, Iris. I thought you were finally getting some sense into your head. Julia didn’t have to tell me when it was time to have a child — I knew.”

Iris wrapped her arms around herself. A child would bind her to the farm forever, and she would not even have the consolation of Chen’s occasional visits if he managed to get back to the Islands.

“What’s wrong with you?” Angharad went on. “Don’t you care about our line? Do you want Elisabeth’s descendants to be its only branch? A line is stronger when there are many branches, and ours —” She paused. “We have only three generations of my line in this house, thanks to my mother’s foolishness in waiting so long to have me. We need another generation, and I want to see great-grandchildren someday.” She waved a hand. “Look at you, in that old shirt and pants, with all your hair pulled back in that plain way — you don’t even try to make yourself attractive to men. How soon do you think you’ll get another good man in your bed?”

Iris was wounded. “Chen thinks I’m pretty,” she burst out.

“Then take advantage of that. Oh, Iris, I don’t mean to be cruel. I just know that when you have a child, things will seem different to you. You’ll be proud of bringing a new life into the world. You won’t be so lost in your own thoughts. You value those lessons of yours so much — well, you’ll have a child to tell them to, if you want. I don’t know if I’d like it, but I’d go along if you don’t addle its brain with too much learning. Those lessons of yours won’t be good for anything else except telling a child a few stories.”

“Don’t say that!” Iris screamed.

“Do you want the household to hear you?”

“I don’t care! You’re my mother, and you don’t know anything about me. You don’t know what I think or what I feel and you don’t care as long as I don’t get in your way or make you look bad in front of your friends. You never wanted anything except this house and the farm.”

“Why should I feel ashamed of that?” Angharad replied. She wiped at her eyes with one sleeve, looking as if she was about to cry. “This has been our farm for generations. It’s you who don’t understand me. You treat everything I’ve done as if it’s worthless, and then accuse me of not loving you. Who do you think I’ve worked for? For Lincoln, for my household, for you. Everything I’ve done has been for others, even being on the town council or being mayor. It may help my household, but for me, it’s just more worry and more work.”

“You must get something from it for yourself,” Iris said.

“Not as much as you might think. Oh, I won’t say I don’t like the position, but if that was all there was to it, I’d have given up trying for it long ago. Don’t you see? I just want you to be happy, to have what I’ve had, to take some joy and pride in our line and our home.”

Angharad covered her face. Iris went to her quickly and clasped her hand. “Mother, I know. I shouldn’t have said what I did. But what if I want something else?”

Angharad looked up; her lashes were wet. “Think about it at least,” she murmured. “You might change your mind, and want a child. You could always travel later — I’d even pay for it myself if it’s what you really want. You’d probably find that you’d be glad to get back here.”

“I’ll think about it,” Iris said, feeling defeated by her mother’s tears.

Iris trudged through the snow, squinting in the bright, reflected light. The sun, white against the blue sky, was a cold flame emanating no warmth. Two old women were entering the church, clutching rosaries in their gloved hands; a small group of women and visiting men went into Lincoln’s only tavern. The shops were shuttered, the square empty except for one bundled figure moving in Iris’s direction. A mittened hand waved; Iris saw Laiza’s face under a fur hat.

Her friend hurried toward her, kicking up small clouds of snowflakes with her feet. “Iris!” Laiza grabbed her arms. “I was just going to your house, I wanted to tell you in person.”

“Tell me what?”

They linked arms as they walked toward the town hall. “You’ll never guess. I’m leaving Lincoln.”

Iris felt a sharp pang of envy. “How did you manage that?”

“My father. He just called me yesterday to tell me. He did some work in the Mountain States last year, and got to know this woman pretty well, and one thing led to another — anyway, the Linker this woman works for in Denver needs a tier gardener, and my father talked his friend into setting up an interview for

me. The Linker just called me this morning. She asked a few questions, then said I could have the job this spring.”

“Oh, Laiza, that’s wonderful.” Iris tried to sound happy. Laiza’s job would not be too demanding. Machines could have done the work, or the Linker could have tended her own garden, but Linkers were busy people and having a human gardener was a sign of prestige. The gardeners also encouraged the belief that a garden would not fare well without human aid.

“I don’t know that much about the work,” Laiza said, “but I’ve worked in the greenhouse and it can’t be too different. The Linker seemed to think I knew enough, and I’ve got some time to learn a few things before I go. Anyway, the worst that can happen is she won’t like me and’ll send me back, so I’ll get a free trip and some credit out of it.”

“You’re lucky your father thought of you.”

“I know. Look, if it works out, maybe Angharad’ll let you visit. We could see Denver together. Just think of all the men!”

“You’d better be careful about that,” Iris replied. “Linkers are funny about sex. Some of them go for a long time without a lover. Some of them even have bonds.”

“I guess you’d know. Must be all that thinking they do.”

“And from what I’ve read and seen, some of the men in cities are different. Plainsmen know how to act around women. Some of the others — well, you wouldn’t want to know about some of the things they do.” Iris stumbled a little, then righted herself. “What does Maria think?”

“She’s kind of mad. She says I can go, but she thinks I’ll hate it. She’s sure I’ll come back, so she isn’t making that much of a fuss.”

They stamped up the cleared steps of the town hall and entered the warm building. The wide hall was empty, and the doors of the rooms on either side were closed. Little town business would be transacted here until Angharad’s inauguration, and meetings could be held over screens. In one sense, the town hall was an unnecessary relic, but the community enjoyed the ritual of gathering there for meetings or private chats with members of the council, and the hall could shelter visitors on those rare occasions when there was no space in anyone’s house.

The two young women took off their mittens and rubbed their hands. “Is Chen here?” Laiza asked.

“He’s probably in one of the rooms.”

“Peter thinks he’s funny-looking,” Laiza whispered, “but I think he’s handsome. He looks like he’s got a good body.”

“He does.”

Laiza giggled. “You like him a lot, don’t you?”

Iris lowered her eyelids. “I guess I do.”

“Going to have his child?”

“I don’t know. That’s what my mother wants. I don’t know if I’m ready for one yet.”

“You’re as ready as you’ll ever be.” Laiza smiled. “I might have had one myself if this gardening job

hadn't come along. Now I'll have to wait. It doesn't matter. Maybe I'll wait until I'm nineteen or twenty. I guess I'd come home by then."

"What if you like it in Denver?"

"Oh, I wouldn't stay away forever."

"I would," Iris said fervently.

Laiza gaped at her, clearly surprised. "No you wouldn't. You'd come back, just like your grandmother, just like everybody does."

A door near the left corner of the hall opened and Chen came out, carrying his bag of tools. "Guess what?" Iris said. "Laiza's going to Denver this spring."

Chen grunted.

"I'm going to be a Linker's gardener," Laiza said. "You know what? I'm going over to the tavern and call all our friends and then I'm buying beer for everybody. Why don't you both come over?"

"Have to work," Chen said.

"Come by later, then. I'm going to be there until supper-time." She glanced at Iris. "What about you?"

"I'll come over in a little while, all right?"

"Oh, I see." Laiza smirked. "A little fun with lunch, right?" She giggled. "Well, I'll see you later."

"Congratulations," Chen said. Laiza flashed a toothy smile at him and then hurried outside.

"Laiza wouldn't mind if you spent a night with her," Iris said.

"You wouldn't mind that?"

"Why should I mind?" she asked, surprised to find that she did. "She's my friend."

"Well, I don't want to."

The answer made her oddly happy. She wandered over to the room the Counselor used while visiting and bumped against the door when it did not open. "Something's wrong with this door."

"Nothing's wrong," Chen replied. "It's locked."

"That door's never been locked before."

"It is now." He paused. "Counselors have complained. They don't like to come into a room and find things strewn around and have to clear their screens and memories because somebody forgot to do it."

"That's ridiculous," she protested. "We always leave everything neat in there."

"Well, maybe you do, but some other towns don't."

"It's dumb to lock up a room, have it sitting there not being used for most of the year."

"I just do what they tell me." He sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall.

She sat down next to him, taking out a small package from one pocket and a covered cup from another. "I brought you some carrot sticks and a sandwich and some tea." She handed him the package and set the cup on the floor, waiting for it to heat the tea. Chen unwrapped his food while she shrugged out of her coat. "You don't have to worry about Constance pestering you for a while. A man she knows came by just before lunch today, and he'll come back later tonight."

"Good." He bit into the bean sandwich.

"You ought to spend at least a night or two with one of the others. I mean, it's making me look selfish."

He clutched her arm with his free hand; his eyes seemed to bore through her. "Is that what you want?"

She shook her head.

"Then forget it."

"It's just that it's harder for everybody in the winter. There aren't as many men to choose from."

"I love you, Iris. When you love somebody, you don't want anyone else."

She averted her eyes. "I know. I feel the same way. But it doesn't last."

"Sometimes it does."

"It never does. It didn't last with that woman you knew on the Islands."

"It might have, if we could have stayed together. I don't know. Maybe I didn't love her as much as I thought I did. It's different with you. I can tell you things I couldn't tell her."

She clenched her fists. "You'll leave Lincoln, and we'll both forget."

"You don't want me to leave."

"It doesn't matter," she cried. "Even if you stayed, it'd be over after a while."

He put his arm around her; she leaned against him, resting her cheek on the soft flannel cloth of his gray shirt. "I could come back between jobs," he said. "I could stay at your house with you."

Her longing for him frightened her; she could hardly believe that she wanted him so much. "People would talk if you did that very often," she said. "Not that I care," she added hastily. "But you'd have to spend more of your credit here instead of staying at a hostel for nothing. That doesn't make sense."

"Other men come back here to visit."

"But they have relatives or children, and they only come by once or twice a year at most."

"I'd have you to visit."

"You couldn't come just to see me, Chen. It'd look strange if you didn't go to other women's rooms. Anyway, it would only be until you went back to the Islands." She was silent for a moment, not wanting to dwell on that unhappy possibility.

He patted her head. "You combed out your hair."

She lifted her head. "Do you like it better down?"

“I like it any way you want to wear it. The light in here makes it look a little redder in places — sort of reddish-brown.”

“Angharad doesn’t like it pinned up.” She sighed. “She talked to me this morning. I’d better tell you what she said before she starts dropping hints in front of you. She thinks I should have a child, maybe your child. I tried to tell her that I didn’t want one now, that maybe you didn’t, either.” That sounded too harsh. “It isn’t that I wouldn’t like your child, it’s just —”

“I know.” Chen sipped his tea. “You’re kind of young to have one, even for a Plainswoman, aren’t you?”

“Not that young. My mother was pregnant with me when she was about my age. Besides, our line —” She swallowed.

Chen set his cup down. “I’d give you one if you wanted, and if I thought — I mean, I want you with me. I’d want the child with me too.” He stroked her hair. “There has to be a way.” His fingers dug into her arms. “Maybe there is.”

“How?” She knew that she should not be asking, that she should be trying to talk him out of such madness.

“I can carve. Angharad’s been telling me for the past week that other women in town want them, my carvings. That could pay for anything I have to spend here later. I could stay with you and the child then, whenever —”

She shook off his arms. “You fool. You’d still leave eventually, especially if you get a chance to go back to the Project. With a child, I’d never leave. Is that what you want?” She glared at him, wondering why she had ever thought that he was unlike other men.

“Don’t you see? If we had a child, then, when the time came for me to go back to the Islands, you both could come along. They like having families there — it gives people something to work for.” His eyes narrowed. “You’ve taken enough lessons to be trained for a job of some sort there. They’d have to let you come.”

“Families. My family’s here.”

“I mean we could be bondmates, with a child. We could have a bond. You wouldn’t be just a woman who had my child, you’d be my bondmate. They respect such contracts on the Islands. And you care about the Project — they need that. If we had a bond —”

She jumped to her feet, horrified. “Never. Not a bond. You must be mad.”

Chen stood up, grabbing her arms. “Listen to me. A bond with me, and a child — it’s your way out.” He shook her. “I love you. You don’t know what a risk I’m taking just to think of such a thing. Do you think you’d be the only one taking a chance?”

“A bond,” she said, struggling for breath. “You must know how impossible that is. Angharad would die. She might even throw me out of the commune. What would I do then?”

“It’s our chance. Don’t you see? At least we can try. I thought you cared about the Project, that you were like me, that you wanted that. Maybe it was only talk.”

“Oh, Chen. You know it wasn’t.”

“You love me,” he said. “I know you do.”

“Not like that.”

He pulled her toward him. “You do. Look at me and tell me you’d let me leave and you’d forget me.”

She opened her mouth; an invisible band around her throat was blocking her words. She couldn’t say it. Mary, help me, she thought. I’d make the pledge to keep him, I’d make it to get away from here and have what I want. He’s the only one who knows me, who has the same dream I do — I can’t lose him now, or I’ll never get out. Her vision blurred; she felt as though she were about to faint.

“You’d come to love me that way,” he said. “At least give it a chance. Bonds can be broken later, they can lapse. And it’s a chance for you to have what you want. You may not get another one.”

She buried her head against his shirt, trying not to cry, knowing that she would agree.

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Twelve

“You fool,” Nancy Fassi said.

Chen gazed steadily at the small image. He imagined himself reaching into the screen and crushing the woman’s tiny head. He had left Angharad’s house after supper, telling the women that he had a task to complete at the town hall before he slept; he would not have dared to make this particular call from the house.

“I know these Plainsfolk,” the Linker went on. “They almost never take bondmates, and the few who do are the objects of scorn. You’ll draw attention, and that’s exactly what we don’t want.”

“I love her,” Chen said.

“You love her.” Nancy sneered. “Idiot. I’d pull you out of there now if it wouldn’t cause even more talk.”

“I want her, and we’re going to have a child. Listen to me. I have even more reason to keep silent now, to protect Iris. I’ll do my work and come back here during my time off when I can, but I won’t say anything to anyone. Don’t you see? It isn’t just my life you hold now, it’s Iris’s as well.”

“You surprise me, Chen.” Nancy rested her chin on one hand. “And just how much have you told this young woman?”

“Nothing. She doesn’t know anything. I don’t want her to know why I was sent here. She might turn away from me if she did, and if she told anyone else, I’d be in danger.”

“True enough.” The woman was silent for a moment, apparently listening to her Link. “This Iris Angharads — she seems clever, according to her records. She might be able to learn more about you than you realize.” She paused. “Why not let her have the child without a bond?”

“You can guess.”

Nancy showed her teeth. “You want to take her with you to the Project. Well.” Her fingers drummed against her desk. “You’re smarter and greedier than I thought. I can’t stop you without jeopardizing this entire enterprise. We’d have to have another worker to take your place, and my colleagues would certainly call my judgment into question then.” She bit her lip. “Just what do you intend to do if the girl’s mother disinherits her? She can’t travel with you on your jobs.”

Chen was silent.

“You son of a bitch. You think we’d have to send you both back to the Islands then, don’t you? Well, you’re wrong. We won’t do a thing for you if you don’t fulfill your responsibilities to us.”

“Angharad Julia’s won’t disinherit her daughter, whatever she thinks. She has her position here to protect, and her line. She’ll want to keep the whole matter as quiet as possible.”

Nancy’s dark eyes had a cold, hard look; he imagined that her Link was barely keeping her rage under control. “And you know I’m powerless to stop you without putting myself at risk — why, I’ll have to help you get what you want, just to keep you happily doing what we want.” She let out a breath. “Do what you want, and be damned.”

The image winked out. Chen pressed a key under the screen, erasing the record of the conversation. He had made the call from the locked Counselor’s room, and the Counselor was not likely to check records of calls made during the winter, but it was best to be cautious.

He stood up, rubbing his temples. His heart was racing; his neck was stiff with tension. He could still turn back; he could tell Nancy that he had changed his mind. But she was already angry with him; changing his mind now would not alter that fact. He had spoken with more confidence than he felt. If he were wrong about Angharad, and Iris was disinherited, the woman he loved would soon learn to hate him for what he had brought her. But if he were right —

I love you, he thought, seeing Iris’s face and then remembering the darkness at the edge of the Island he had left. I love you, and you’ll never know how much. He could no longer imagine a life on the Islands without her; he could not reach for his dream while denying it to the young woman who shared it with him. The dream would be poisoned for him. Perhaps, he thought grimly, it was poisoned already. He stared at his hands, thinking of the device they had installed in the nearby door.

He might be bringing only pain to Iris. Guilt stabbed him. He shook off the feeling. She had chosen to take the risk. She had agreed to a bond, and he knew what that must have cost her.

Their bodies were still. Iris curled up at Chen’s side, her arm around his waist, sure that a child had already been started inside her.

They had gone to Letty Charlottes the day before. The physician had removed their contraceptive implants from their arms after doing a genetic scan and finding no potential problems there. Letty had explained the scan to them both, had gestured at the specks and swirls on the screen with one slender finger as she spoke of a few possible gene transplants that might be necessary if the embryo carried certain traits. She had praised both Iris and Chen for their health, almost as if they, rather than centuries of genetic tinkering, were responsible for it.

The talk at supper had been bawdy and cheerful; Angharad had laughed when the others began to call her “grandmother.” Only Julia had seemed somber. Iris was sure that her grandmother believed that she was throwing her life away, that she had given up her dream of travel and more study.

Iris shivered. Chen stirred; she clung to him more tightly. They would wait until they knew she was pregnant, and then they would speak to Angharad when it was too late for protests.

I’m going to do this, she thought. I’m going against everything I’ve been taught, my studies were nothing compared to this. Angharad would call a bond enslavement. But Mary had a bond with a man, didn’t she? Once, the church taught that we should all have bonds or else should live as priests do. Other people have bonds; they think we’re strange for not wedding others. Angharad thinks the Plains are the

world, and they're not.

Mary had a bond, even though Her Child was not Her mate's. Some Linkers have bonds. Some Linkers don't even have children as we do, and follow the ways of Habbers, who take the embryo from the mother and put it aside until it's ready to be born. Why shouldn't I be able to do the same? Why should my belly swell until the time when the pains start? Why should I be turned into a womb for nine months?

Why should I follow my customs instead of others'? Why can't I live as I want to instead of the way others think is best?

She could ask all the questions she wanted to, and that would not change how she felt. Her decision would separate her from those she knew even before she left this town, if she ever left. Maybe her mother wouldn't drive her away. Maybe she would only force Chen to leave, and would keep Iris here, imprisoned. A specialist could be called. Those in other Nomarchies might follow different ways because Earth, knowing how stultifying too much uniformity could be, had encouraged cultural diversity. But the Mukhtars and Linkers could not afford too many nonconformists within each realm; such people could be dangerous and create tensions. A specialist could find ways to bend Iris to her mother's will.

None of that mattered. Without Chen, she would have no chance to leave the Plains, no way of reaching the Islands.

Iris pressed her cheek against Chen's shoulder. She cared for him; she would be unhappy if she never saw him again. But her feelings for him would never have brought her to this, even if they had been as strong as his own. It was only the promise he had made, that he would take her to the Islands with him, that had convinced her. Perhaps Chen loved that dream even more than he loved her. If he had to choose between them, she was sure she knew what his choice would be.

I love you in my own way, she thought, but I don't love you enough. You're only my way out. She closed her eyes, feeling tears well up under her lids.

Iris and Chen entered the common room. Constance looked up expectantly; LaDonna opened her mouth, as if about to speak. Tyree was sprawled on the floor, playing with a pocket puzzle while his sister Mira watched.

"Well?" LaDonna said. "What's the story? What did Letty say?"

"I'm pregnant," Iris announced.

Constance beamed. "Wonderful!" The blond woman lifted her glass. "Very quick work, I must say," She grinned at Chen, who lowered his eyes, embarrassed but proud. "Oh, I hope I can start a child next year, give yours a playmate. You never told us — did you choose a boy or a girl?"

"A boy," Chen replied. Iris had talked him into that, insisting that he have the injection that would ensure it. He had argued for a daughter until Iris had pointed out that leaving with a daughter, a possible heir to the farm, would only cause her mother even more pain.

"I must have a daughter, then," Constance replied. "I wanted one anyway. A girl will always be with me." She arched her brows. "They'll have a lot of fun together, I'm sure."

"Come here," Wenda said from the corner. Chen led Iris over to the old woman. He was nervous around Wenda, often wondering if she could see his thoughts; he had heard of her reputation as a seer. She was a little like him; her eyes saw what others did not.

Wenda put her gnarled hands on Iris's abdomen. "I usually tell a fortune before a child is born," she

explained to Chen, “and another after it’s born. Let’s see what your child has to tell me.” She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them, glancing from Chen’s face to Iris. “He will wander. That I can tell you.”

Iris’s mouth twisted. “Most men wander. You’re telling me what everyone knows.”

“But this one will wander far, so far that I cannot see where his path leads.”

Chen fidgeted, feeling foolish for having feared Wenda’s words. A half-empty bottle of whiskey stood on the small table with Wenda’s glass; the old woman was sodden with drink. She would say nothing of interest.

“You haven’t told us much,” Chen said lightly.

“He will wander far, but he may return.” The wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she squinted. “Now I must speak of the mother. I see a destination hidden by clouds, covered in darkness. Iris is walking toward it and the child is with her. The clouds are thick. Iris is looking for something, thinking she’ll find it when the clouds lift.” Iris started; Chen grabbed her hand. “Beware of your dream. It will lead you away from all that you love.”

Iris choked out a laugh. “What nonsense,” she said. Chen noticed that her hand was shaking.

“Where’s Angharad?” he asked quickly.

“In her room,” LaDonna answered, “going over the accounts.”

Chen tugged at Iris. “We should tell her.” Iris’s eyes widened. “Now,” he finished.

“Beware,” Constance intoned. “Wenda, I think you’re losing your touch. I never heard you give a prophecy like that before.”

Iris and Chen hurried from the room. When they were halfway up the stairs, Iris halted and leaned against the railing. “She knows,” she whispered.

“She doesn’t. It’s just an old woman’s babbling. Come on.”

“I can’t. I can’t do this to my mother.”

“We have to tell her. You don’t have to say much — I’ll talk to her. You know what we agreed. It’ll be over soon. It won’t be as bad as you think.” He hoped he was right.

Angharad watched her screen, listening as a voice chanted amounts that had been spent and what the credit had bought. Angharad had only a shaky grasp of numbers, which, past a certain point, blurred into indistinct quantities almost impossible to understand, but she had some knowledge of the charts that accompanied the recitation. Yes, the blue line still exceeded the red; the farm was doing well. The image changed as she listened to projected crop yields and stared at other lines. Even with a mediocre yield, they would still be ahead after the next harvest. But credit did no one any good sitting around unused. Perhaps she could add a room or two to the house, prepare for the next generation that was now sure to come.

That thought, instead of cheering her, made her pensive. Angharad blinked, staring at the screen without seeing what was there. The inexplicable sadness that sometimes gripped her was reaching out for her again; that was happening too often lately, especially when she was alone. It was easier to keep the dark thoughts at bay in the company of people, even with the strain of maintaining a decisive manner in front of

others. Alone, she could wear no mask. Sometimes, the sadness even drove her to prayer — not the usual prayers, which she rattled off automatically, but the heartfelt ones that an old woman doing penance for the many sins of youth might have uttered.

Angharad feared for the future of her line. Sometimes, when she was alone in bed waiting for the whiskey inside her to bring sleep, she saw that line narrowing farther until there were no descendants at all.

She had always known how unwillingly Julia had returned to Lincoln. Julia had been as distant as a mother could be on the Plains, and had left much of Angharad's upbringing to her own mother, Gwen. Angharad had grown up under Julia's cold gaze determined to elicit some warmth from that chilly presence; she had wanted Julia's love instead of her resentment. Angharad had not even been twenty when Julia had finally turned the farm over to her; she had believed then that the gesture was Julia's way of showing faith in her daughter, and that the older woman had come to feel some contentment at last.

But Julia, she saw now, had never cared about the farm; she had simply not wanted to be bothered with it any longer. She had let Angharad shoulder the burden; even worse, she had filled Iris's head with silly ideas and had encouraged the girl along a path that made Angharad's own life, lived for her daughter and the farm, seem useless.

Their line had sprung from the ashes of a nearly ruined world. Tribes that had roamed the Plains in ancient times, and farmers who had fed the world even before the rise of the Mukhtars, had been among Angharad's ancestors. The world had not been able to destroy them, and their ability to survive had showed their strength.

But Angharad could see the future in the bits of data her screen and band conveyed to her. The world needed fewer farmers with each passing generation; the Mukhtars, through the Counselors and their advice, were pruning the branches of many Plains lines. Fewer farmers grew up to replace the old; even in Lincoln, a few farms had combined households, had merged into one commune, with a few of their lines coming to an end at last.

A time might come when Lincoln would be no more than greenhouses, hydroponic vats, glass cases of cloned animal tissue, and reapers powered by cyberminds. A way of life would end, and the world would not mourn it. Angharad had seen what might be coming, and had tried to deny it.

Her limbs were heavy; her body seemed welded to her chair. She could not rise; she could not will herself to rise. She was empty, her body no more than a shell around nothingness. At such times, when her black thoughts claimed her, she thought of her grandmother Gwen.

Gwen had died too soon. She had died in a foolish accident on the stairs, too drunk to see where she was stepping; she had died alone as the household slept. Angharad had found her body in the hallway below; it had been too late to summon the physician, too late to mend the broken body. They had blamed the mishap on a loose step, but Angharad knew the truth; Gwen had sought oblivion in one way, and had found it in another. She could still see Gwen's pale, sightless eyes and twisted neck. Perhaps Gwen had endured dark thoughts that had driven her to drink; perhaps she had glimpsed the future of the Plains in Julia's cold gaze.

Angharad sighed, thinking of her household. Lilia was too passive to lead a commune; she would give up any leadership too easily, would perhaps even merge this household with another. Then there was her distant cousin Sheryl, always waiting for some encouragement from the Counselor to have a child but never receiving it. And now there was Iris, who seemed to care less about the farm than Julia did.

Angharad, in spite of her faith, had her doubts about the life beyond the grave. She would have to live on in her descendants, in the line that would follow her. She could not let the world erase her from its

memory; she could not endure the thought of leaving no one to remember her and the countless generations that had preceded her.

A knock sounded at her door; it opened as Chen and Iris entered. Angharad turned off the screen as her lips formed a smile. "Enough for today," she said, hoping that the two would tell her what she wanted to hear. "Well, what do you have to say for yourselves?" She lifted a brow, then lowered her eyes to Iris's belly.

"I'm pregnant," Iris said, "with a boy."

Angharad felt a twinge of disappointment. No matter, she thought; a daughter could follow later. Iris would want one; Angharad would see that she did. The child would keep Iris from her studies and Angharad would be able to reassert her influence.

"I'm so pleased," Angharad said as she clapped her hands together. "And so soon. Oh, my dear."

"Letty said it would be born at the beginning of September," Iris said tonelessly as she sat down on the bed; Chen seated himself next to her. "She'll do another scan and analysis in a month, but she doesn't expect to find anything that needs to be repaired. She gave me something to take for my stomach."

Angharad perched on the edge of the chair; she was steady now, her smile firmly in place, her dark thoughts pushed aside. "You could look a little happier about it, Iris. This is one of the most wonderful things you'll ever experience. I'm a little sorry that you didn't choose a girl, but you can have one later on." She clung to that hope. She was the mayor, after all. The Counselor could not discourage Iris from giving a woman of such influence a granddaughter, especially if Angharad herself was to be denied another child of her own. That would be too upsetting to the town as a whole, and the Nomarchies prized stability. "And you shouldn't wait too long for the next. Oh, I must find Julia and give her the news." That, Angharad thought, would be particularly satisfying.

Chen said, "There's something else we have to tell you."

Angharad leaned back. The tone of the young man's voice disturbed her. She had, during household gatherings, noted the hard and determined look that sometimes came into his otherwise calm and inexpressive face. She had been reassured by that hint of inner strength, for Chen was usually so quiet that she had, for a brief time, wondered if he might be half-witted or weak. His oddly shaped eyes were hard now.

She glanced at Iris. Her daughter was looking equally as determined, but her green eyes held a trace of fear. Angharad was suddenly afraid; Iris had looked like that when she first spoke to Angharad about her lessons.

"It's hard to say this," Chen went on. "I've been happy in this house, and you've been kind to me. I don't want to lose your good will." His throat moved as he swallowed. Angharad tried not to fidget; if this matter involved her daughter, then Iris should have been speaking for herself. "I want to know — I would like to be your daughter's bondmate."

Angharad's mouth dropped open. This was so totally unexpected that she could hardly speak. She clutched at her throat. "Bondmate?" she rasped. "Did you agree to this, Iris?"

Iris nodded.

"I know what you think," Chen said hastily, "that I've deceived you." Angharad's ears throbbed as her heart pounded; she could hardly make out his words. "It's just that my ways are different from yours. I

can't have my child come into the world without having a bond with Iris — it goes against what I believe. My people value their bonds with their families, with fathers as well as mothers.” This, Angharad thought dimly, was news to her. She had never heard Chen mention his parents and had assumed that he was indifferent to them. “My bond wouldn't just be with Iris, but with my child too.”

Angharad sagged, resting her cheek against her hand. “A bond needs only two witnesses,” Iris said. “No one else has to know.”

Angharad glared at her daughter. This was what Iris's studies had taught her, that she could do whatever she liked with no regard for custom or decency. “The Counselor will find out,” she said. “Don't you think he'll see the contract?”

“He won't say anything. You can tell him we're only trying to follow Chen's customs, that it's just a formality, that it'll be almost as if it never happened.” Iris paused. “And bonds can be broken later, or can lapse. They aren't unknown on the Plains in special circumstances — some say that even a few women in Lincoln have had secret bonds. The Counselor will be pleased that we're willing to compromise a little to ease matters for Chen, and nothing else will change.” Iris spoke the words without inflection, reciting them as though she had rehearsed the statements.

Angharad could no longer restrain herself. “He's with us! He should abide by our customs!” Her face burned with rage. She would lose control and begin to scream, but even that was better than sinking into the passivity of despair. “How much pain will you bring me before you're done?” She turned from her daughter and focused on Chen. “I should never have let you into this house, you and your ways. Do I have to tell you what a child knows?” She bit her lip, unable to go on. Having only one partner, clinging to one person for years and years, could only lead to perversion. Passion would die; two bondmates, bound by contract, could easily turn to evil practices in their bed to prolong and heighten their love. It made Angharad sick just to think of it.

“I'll drive you out, Chen,” she said evenly. “I'll send you from this house and then take Iris to Letty Charlottes. I'd rather see that child aborted than have it born under my roof.” Mother of God, she thought wildly, forgive me for saying that.

Iris clutched at the bedpost. “Letty can't do that without my consent, and you'd have to tell the Counselor —”

“Then I'll drive you out too. Have your child and your bond somewhere else. You won't be my daughter then.” Angharad's dark thoughts were threatening to overtake her again; she had to drive them away with her anger. “I curse the day I had you! You've shamed our line, and bring nothing but pain.”

Chen had drawn near Iris protectively. The girl's face was white, her mouth tight with tension. “Is that what you want?” Iris said quietly. “A scandal? It would destroy you, too, and everything you've worked for here.”

Angharad nearly groaned. The air in the room seemed thick; it was hard for her to breathe. Her daughter knew how to call her bluff, how to win; she had learned it early, when Angharad had been forced to give in to her. But Iris still thought that it was only scandal her mother feared, or the loss of her position; even after all this time, she had never seen how much Angharad loved her. She had only tried to do what was best for the girl, to save Iris from the misery and regrets that were sure to come to her if she did not do her part for the farm and her line.

She could no longer fight off the depression that was enveloping her. She herself was to blame for this. She had encouraged her daughter to take Chen as a lover, never imagining that his pleasant face could hide such a vile purpose; she had urged Iris to have a child.

Chen got up and went to her side, kneeling on one leg as he put his hand on the arm of her chair. Angharad forced herself not to recoil. “Angharad, I beg you,” he said. “If I’d thought you would turn against Iris this way, I would never have spoken. I care for her too much to cause her such grief.”

Angharad lifted an eyebrow, a bit surprised at the uncharacteristic eloquence he was summoning.

“If I had wanted to deceive you,” he went on, “I would have said nothing, and found some way to hide all this from you. Is it so evil for a man to care for a woman the way I do, and to want a bond with a child as well? Iris will still be here with you.” He looked away as he said that, and his voice was strained; Angharad wondered if he was really being honest. “And bonds don’t have to bind people tightly. Iris can be free to love other men.” Those words seemed to be causing him even more difficulty. “It would be a bond for only fifteen or twenty years, until our child is grown.”

Angharad’s eyes narrowed. The two must think that she was a fool. “You’re not telling me the truth,” she said abruptly as Chen stood up. “You seem to want a bond and not want a bond at the same time. There’s something else here, some other reason for asking this.” Her mouth twitched. “Exactly why is this bond so important to you?”

Chen was silent. The mattress on the bed whispered, then footsteps padded across the room; a shadow fell across Angharad.

“I want this bond,” Iris said. “I want it for my son. Chen will finish his work here, and eventually Earth may send him back to Venus to work on the Project again. If we have no bond, he has no formal tie with my child. If we do, the boy may be able to join him there. The Project honors bonds — in fact, it encourages them.” She sighed. “A boy will have to leave Lincoln anyway, in time. I’d rather have him there, doing something important, instead of wandering the Plains.”

Iris’s green eyes were glassy. Angharad looked away, unable to think of a reply.

“It will do you honor. Mother,” Iris continued. “A grandson of yours might take a branch of our family line to another world. Wenda told his fortune already — she said he would wander far.”

Could that be? Iris had been born when Venus was in the sky; could this be what that sign had meant? Angharad gazed into Iris’s cold green eyes; could this be worth the secret shame of a bond?

“And your line can continue here,” Iris said. “I can have another child. Maybe the Counselor will even recommend that you have one — it’s still possible. You’re young enough. Let me have this bond for my son.”

“You’re a woman now,” Angharad replied. “You know that I can’t stop you.”

“You can’t stop me from doing this, but you can expel me from this house. The other women wouldn’t stop you if they found out why.”

“And lose what I’ve worked for? No, daughter. I’m afraid you’ve won.” Angharad’s eyes stung; she swallowed, refusing to cry in Chen’s presence, knowing how much some men hated tears. “If anyone finds out —”

“They won’t find out. I promise you that. I’ll place a call to our Counselor, explain the circumstances and the need for secrecy. You can be a witness, and I’ll ask Laiza. She’s leaving Lincoln anyway.”

Angharad shook her head. “Not Laiza. I can trust LaDonna. She always kept my secrets when we were girls. Anyway, she has two children by one man. She can hardly cast too many stones at you.” She looked up. “I have only myself to blame for this. I could have put a stop to your nonsense years ago.

Now, it's too late."

"Mother, I —"

"Leave me."

Angharad waited until the door closed before turning to her desk. She rested her head on her arms, but her tears refused to flow.

Some force outside of her had brought these events about. The star at Iris's birth had been a sign; the appearance of Chen, brought from that star to this place, had been another. She had always known that the way of the Plainsfolk would not endure; did God have some other purpose for her descendants? Mary's line had ended with Her Son, and yet Their names lived on.

Her thoughts were too grandiose, but she had always been prey to the sin of pride, as well as to the greater sin of despair. Angharad began to pray, knowing that doubts and dark thoughts would soon claim her once more.

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Thirteen

Iris turned off her screen and rubbed her eyes, feeling exhausted. She had been lucky; the Counselor, David Annas, had sounded sympathetic, offering only a short scolding before telling her that her bond with Chen would cause no problem. Their discussion had gone almost too smoothly; she had expected more obstacles. She would have what she wanted, but she felt no joy in the victory, only relief that the struggle was over.

She went to her window. Chen was below, in the courtyard, talking and drinking with Sheryl and LaDonna. He glanced up at her; she nodded and gestured with one hand, signaling that the Counselor would go along with them. Chen smiled as she turned away. He had said that the Counselor would not object; now she wondered how he had been so sure.

Her room was hot and oppressive; she had to get outside. She strode over to her clothes rod and grabbed her coat, then hurried into the hall and down the stairs.

Tyree, carrying Nicky, wandered into the hall as she was pulling on her boots by the door. "Where you going?" the dark-haired boy asked. Nicky began to squirm; Tyree set the cat down.

"I'm going out."

"But it's snowing."

"You should be in bed, Tyree."

"I know, I know. Don't boss me around. You aren't the leader yet."

"Well, at least you won't be around when I am," Iris snapped. Tyree pouted. "You're lucky," she said more gently. "You'll see a lot of new places."

"Bet Chen stays with my mother tonight," Tyree said.

"I hope he does," Iris replied, meaning it.

“He stayed in her room before. She still likes him, you know. You don’t have to keep him all to yourself.” The boy’s eyes narrowed. “You think he’s yours.”

His gaze was too knowing; she could almost believe that he somehow sensed her plans, even though he could not be aware of them. “Chen’s in the courtyard now,” she said hastily, “talking to your mother and Sheryl. If he stays with her, that’s fine with me.” She suddenly longed to forget their approaching pledge.

Nicky rubbed against her legs as the door opened, then jumped back as Tyree picked him up again. Iris went outside and hurried into the street.

The snow swirled, veiling the houses along the road; the lighted windows were beacons in the white mist. Ice crunched under her feet. She walked toward the square, thinking of Wenda’s prophecy.

Chen might have given her a chance to leave Lincoln, but he could not force her to do so. She could always break their bond later, whatever it cost. She tugged at her fur hat, pulling it down around her face. Now that she had a chance to get away, she was wondering if she wanted to leave. She had a place here. She would be leader of her commune someday if she settled down, and her actions could affect the lives of others in the town. Her studies might show her ways in which she could help them; within limits, she even had some freedom, for the Nomarchies’ Mukhtars were only a distant, outside presence whose lives rarely intersected with those of the townsfolk.

She walked into the square. The tavern’s lighted windows gleamed through the falling snow, promising warmth and companionship. Iris lingered near one window for a moment, staring through the glass at the people gathered around the bar; she suddenly envied their thoughtless contentment. A blond man glanced over his shoulder at the window; a familiar pair of blue eyes met hers.

Iris turned away and went on to the town hall. She stood in front of the steps and gazed up at the closed door. Since becoming a woman, she had taken part in the town meetings, and had often grown impatient with the talk of whether a new shop was needed, whose dog might be a menace to children, what new enzyme might be useful as a pesticide, or whose road needed repairs. The most recent discussion had concerned the Muslims’ request for the use of the town hall rather than a private home for feasts to celebrate the end of Ramadan, as well as who would host a New Year’s party for the town’s children. Iris had thought of such matters as insignificant, dreaming of greater things. But the meetings were a sign that Lincoln’s life was its own in most respects.

She might be leaving her home for a place where she might lack the power to change anything, even the smallest details of her own life. She might not know what she had lost until she stood on one of Venus’s Islands and saw a dark world that might mock her efforts.

The wind sang, gathering strength; by morning, it would howl over the town’s rooftops. Iris shivered. Near her, a shadowy shape loomed, growing more distinct as it emerged from the falling snow.

“I thought it was you I saw before,” Jon Ellas said. Snowflakes glistened on his hat, caught by the dim lighting around the town hall.

“Hello, Jon.”

“I’ve been here for a week, over at Zandra Jeannines’s place.”

“I know.”

“I was going to come over and see you, but then I figured you’d leave me a message at Zandra’s if you were interested. Still doing those lessons?”

“Sometimes.” She shrugged. “I’ve got a lot of other things to do now. I’m pregnant. The baby’ll be born in the fall.”

“Who’s the father? That Chinese guy who’s staying in your house?”

She nodded.

“Zandra told me about him. Says he’s artsy, carves stuff. Doesn’t talk much to anyone, though.”

“He’s shy,” she said.

“But not shy where it counts, huh?” He put his gloved hands on her waist. “I miss you a little.” His breath smelled of beer. He had not spoken her name; she wondered if he even recalled what it was.

She took his arm and impulsively led him up the steps. The door opened and they entered the hall, then stopped in front of one door. I’m not a bondmate yet, she thought. “We can use this room,” she said. “It’s the mayor’s office — that’s my mother. She won’t mind.” She had not made her pledge to Chen, and yet she could not even bring Jon back to her room. Chen would not yield to Jon gracefully; he might even provoke a confrontation. She suddenly resented Chen’s love, his possessiveness; he might be waiting for her now, in her room, disappointing LaDonna once again. She was bound to Chen already.

Jon was staring at another door. “They lock up the Counselor’s room here yet?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Those rooms are being closed up like that everywhere,” Jon said. “I don’t know. I keep thinking of that story I heard about the Counselor in Spencer. I think they’re worried.”

Iris froze. She stood in the doorway of the mayor’s office, suddenly sure that she knew why Chen had been so confident that he would be sent back to Venus, so certain that David Annas would not object to their bond. He had worked on the Counselor’s room; he had been careful to keep others away while he was working. Had he been there to install only a lock? What could the Counselors want to hide? They might have to keep Chen happy, reward him for his silence, and Chen, she thought sadly, might be deceiving her even now. If he could lie about one thing, he could lie about others.

She turned toward Jon as he followed her into the room. “It wouldn’t be smart,” she murmured, “to voice your suspicions, would it? If you’re right, and people find out what you think, you could get into trouble. Even if you’re wrong, you could have problems.”

Jon peered at her. “You haven’t heard anything, have you?”

“No, but I don’t think anything happened in Spencer. I’ve learned a lot — I know how to ask the cyberminds questions about different things. If a Counselor had died in Spencer, I would have seen some clue to that fact in the records somewhere, a discrepancy that couldn’t be accounted for.” She hoped he would believe that story, feeling, without knowing why, that she was somehow protecting Chen.

Jon shrugged out of his coat. “Maybe you’re right. I guess if you’re so smart, you’d know.”

“It’s better not to talk about certain things, don’t you think?”

“Sometimes it’s better not to talk at all.” Jon helped her out of her coat, then led her to the couch. She was already regretting her impulse to ask him in here. His blue eyes looked up at her expectantly as he pulled her down to him. He wasn’t seeing her at all; she was only another woman to enjoy, one he would forget in time. His hands groped at her pants, pulling them down over her hips. Her body was already

responding to his touch, but her mind seemed to be gazing at the encounter from afar.

She thought of Chen. He had infected her with his love; she might always compare other men to him. Chen shared her thoughts and her dreams, as Jon did not and never would.

Jon groaned. She pressed her mouth to his lips, silencing her own thoughts.

Chen and Iris became bondmates at midnight on the first day of February, saying their pledge before the screen, the eye of the cyberminds. LaDonna was solemn as she spoke her name, witnessing the pledge; Angharad's voice was steady, but her brown eyes shone with tears.

The pledge was recorded. Iris locked it away with a code only she and Chen knew; no one in Lincoln would be able to call it up, but it would remain in the cyberminds' memory banks, another bit of data filed away in their circuits until the time Iris might need it.

Angharad and LaDonna left Iris's room without speaking. Iris sat down on her bed, suddenly weak. She and Chen would be bondmates for twenty years, and all of the clauses and provisions she had been careful to add to the contract would not change that fact. Angharad had wailed when she heard the length of time.

"Well, I've done it," Iris said tonelessly as Chen sat down next to her. "I kept thinking I'd back out, but I didn't." She covered her belly with one hand, feeling as though the child she carried was already robbing her of her strength.

He squeezed her arm. "I wish it could have been different," he said. "You should have had a new dress, maybe some flowers. Some women like to carry flowers when they make a pledge. You should have had a new dress and a party afterward."

"There's nothing to celebrate. I'm not doing this just for you — you know that. Once I was pregnant, I couldn't turn back, or I'd be here forever with no chance to get away." She knew that those words would wound him. "I've deceived my mother, lied to everyone else in my commune. Even if we do get what we want, I wonder if anything good will come of it."

"Iris, I love you. I won't let you down."

She stretched out on the bed. He stroked her hair, seeming to sense that she did not want to make love. "You've lied to me too," she murmured. "You're not here just to do normal work. I know it, I can feel it. I can't believe the Counselor would have given us so little trouble unless he and others had some reason to keep you content. There's something you don't want anyone to know."

"There's nothing. You're just upset." His uncertain voice convinced her that he was lying.

"Don't worry, Chen. I won't ask you what it is. There's no reason for me to care about your secrets as long as I get what I want, is there?" She would, after all, have her own secrets to keep from him.

Iris covered her face, wondering how she would endure the coming years.

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Fourteen

Iris sat inside the nearly empty town hall, waiting outside the Counselor's door. She had already had two meetings with David Annas, one in the company of her commune. The second meeting, a private one,

had been harder. David had asked her questions about her bond with Chen and how she felt about it; she had given him the responses she had rehearsed, hoping that they did not sound too practiced. She was sure that she had convinced him that the bond would not alter her behavior or cause any problem with the commune. She had even gently mocked Chen's insistence on the pledge, saying that she had agreed mostly because she did not want Chen to think that Plainsfolk could not generously adapt to a stranger's ways, and because Chen had wanted the bond with his son.

David had praised her for her thoughtfulness; he had, in fact, seemed almost deferential, but male Counselors often behaved that way with Plainswomen.

The entrance to the town hall opened; a carpet of light fanned out over the floor, then disappeared as the door closed. Peter and Maria walked toward Iris and sat down in the chairs nearest to hers.

"Don't tell me you have an appointment too," the bearded man said. "If I'd known we'd have to wait —"

"You won't have to," Iris replied. "I'm just waiting for Constance and Eric." She paused. "Any news from Laiza?"

"She sent a message this morning," Maria answered. "She'll probably send you a message soon, though I told her not to spend too much of her credit. You should see her room — why, it's hardly more than a closet. You'd think a Linker in Denver would have provided something more."

"It's a crowded city," Peter said. "They probably don't have much space."

Maria folded her arms. "She'll get tired of it. She'll be glad to get home then. She's already complaining a little, says it's hard to meet suitable young men. She's afraid to walk around the city for fear she'll get lost, and she can't read a map, so every time she goes out, she hires a hovercar or a guide, and you can imagine how much that costs." Her thin lips curved in a smile. "She'll give it up."

"She might get used to it," Iris murmured.

"She'll give it up." Maria lowered her dark eyes to Iris's abdomen. "She ought to be home, having a child, following your example."

The Counselor's door opened. Eric emerged, followed by Constance and Fatima Miriams. Peter rose, adjusting his long brown jacket; Maria smoothed down her blue tunic over her pants and then poked at a loose, dark hair.

"David says it's all right," Eric burst out, though his smile had already told Iris that. "He said I could go ahead."

"What's this?" Peter asked.

"Eric's going to be a shopkeeper." Constance pointed her chin. "Fatima's taking him on." The blond woman, who had argued with her son when he first mentioned his plans, seemed satisfied now.

"How interesting," Peter said.

"It wasn't my idea," Constance said, glancing at Iris. "But it's what Eric wants, so we'll see."

"I don't know what the world's coming to," Maria muttered. "I've got a daughter gallivanting around Denver and you have a son who's staying home, and then there's this wise one over here, with her lessons."

Peter frowned as he ushered Maria into the Counselor's room; he was, after all, another man who had remained in Lincoln.

Iris followed the others outside. "We'll see what happens with my business now," Fatima Miriams said. "My, my. I'm almost looking forward to this new venture. Still, new businesses can be a problem."

The square was cloaked in late afternoon shadows; patches of grass were already thriving under the spring sun. Townsfolk carrying packages hurried toward the roads that would lead them home; Fatima craned her long neck and watched them through narrowed blue eyes, as if assessing her customers. "When do you want to move in?" she asked Eric.

"I'll come over tomorrow," Eric said, "before you open."

The lanky shopkeeper nodded, then hurried off toward her shop. "We can go to the tavern and celebrate," Eric said. "I'll buy."

"I have to help with supper," Constance replied. She pursed her lips; the hollows in her cheeks deepened.

"Go on, then. We'll be home in a little while."

Constance turned from her son to Iris. "I hope this works out."

"It will," Iris said.

"I don't know. It's not that I mind my son being a shopkeeper, being close to home, but —" She sighed.

Constance walked with them in silence to the tavern, clearly lost in her own thoughts, then left them at the door. The two walked inside. Three visiting men stood at the bar, drinking; two women were gossiping in a booth. Eric and Iris walked toward the back of the room and sat at a table.

"I couldn't have done it without you," Eric said. "I wouldn't have thought of it myself."

"Yes, you would."

"I won't forget it." He got up and went to the bar. Iris rubbed at a ring on the tabletop. All she had done was to propose the idea to Fatima and Eric.

Chen had, during the time he was in Lincoln, interested a few of the townspeople in his artistic pursuits. He had soon attracted a circle of young women with pretensions who had not only wanted to buy his carvings but who had also wanted him to teach them his craft. That had required paper for drawing, pencils and pens, chisels and knives, modeling clay, materials for carving. Fatima, who ran the toy store, had known an opportunity when she saw it and soon began to order the materials; now, the extra business was taking up too much of her time and her daughter's, and she needed help. Iris had thought of Eric, who had been on his way home for a visit; she had grabbed at the chance to help the young man.

She had tried to warn Eric of possible pitfalls. The women might grow tired of their new pursuit when they realized how difficult such crafts were; Eric would have to anticipate that, and steer his customers toward other goods he could provide. He had said he would take that chance, but he had seemed so enthralled by the possibility of realizing his ambition that Iris doubted he had actually heard her warning. Eric had changed during his time away from home; his thin face had grown harder, and he seemed more sullen and resentful, as if great misfortunes had befallen him on his travels.

Eric returned to the table with a beer for himself and a milk-and-fruit drink for Iris, who had been advised

by Letty to abstain from alcohol. “David said I could be given a few other jobs to do here,” he said as he sat down, “but he seems to think working with Fatima’s a good idea. It’ll save the Administrators the trouble of sending a man here to do jobs I can handle, and I can make enough to cover whatever Fatima spends on me.”

“You can make a profit. You have to sooner or later. You can make more when Chen comes back to visit. He’ll do more carvings, and you can sell them too- He won’t mind having you make a little from them just to save him the trouble of keeping track of it.”

“That wouldn’t hurt. But how often will he come here after a while? This isn’t his home.”

“He’ll want to see his son. He isn’t like most Plainsmen.” Speaking of Chen made her realize how much she missed him. After becoming his bondmate, she had been anxious for him to go, feeling oppressed by his almost constant nightly presence; now she wanted him near. “He said he’d definitely come back when our son’s born, and stay for a while. But you mustn’t depend on him. He might not always stay in the Plains.”

Eric lifted a brow. “You sound like you’re not so sure about me now.”

“It isn’t that,” she said hastily. “You have to create a demand for more goods. Order some light sculptures, or holo landscapes — whatever. Tell people how nice they’ll look in their houses. Once they start buying, they’ll want more. They’ll collect them, want different ones for different seasons.”

Eric smiled sourly. “It’ll cost, and I might not make it back.”

“I’ll order something from you. I’ll put a landscape in the common room where all the neighbors can come to see it, and I’ll tell them where I got it. It isn’t hard to make people want something new they don’t have.”

“You’re clever, Iris. Maybe you can come into business with me someday. You could keep the records and tell me what to get.”

“You’ll learn all that for yourself.”

“Constance was disappointed that I’m moving in with Fatima and Jehan, even if David said I should. I told her I had to be there anyway, and it would look funny to have a grown son living at home — people might say I’m like Peter.” He grimaced. “But you know what they say about Muslims.”

Iris laughed uneasily. “You don’t believe that,” she said. It was rumored that some Muslim women, in keeping with the old tenets of their faith, sometimes made secret pledges to men before sleeping with them and then dissolved the bond when the dalliance ended. “If those stories were true, some man would have told the rest of us by now. Anyway, you can always go to Jehan’s room and find out.”

Eric sniffed. “Maybe they don’t apply it to Catholics.” He finished his beer, then went up to the bar again, returning quickly with another beer and a small glass of whiskey. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t talked to Fatima.”

“What you were doing, I suppose.”

“I hated it. You don’t know how much I hated it.” He gulped some whiskey, washing it down with beer. Iris watched him apprehensively. She had seen him in the courtyard late at night stretched out next to an empty bottle, barely able to rouse himself enough to stagger off to his room. “I don’t know why I couldn’t have stayed here in the first place. If I’d been born to a shopkeeper, I could have. If I’d been like Peter, or there weren’t enough daughters in the commune —”

“That doesn’t matter now. You’re here, aren’t you?”

“I hated it.” His voice rose. “Go here, fix that, stay in a house where some woman you don’t want keeps trying to get you in her bed, or in some damn hostel with a bunch of men talking about where they dipped their wicks, just because some Administrator or other tells you to.”

“Shush.” She looked around the room nervously, but the two women had already left and the men at the bar were absorbed in their own conversation.

“You ought to understand,” he said more quietly. “You haven’t been doing what people thought you should, either.” She looked down guiltily, even though she was sure he could not know about her bond with Chen. “You’ve never been away. You don’t know what it’s like, how lonely it can be when it isn’t what you want. You don’t know how some other people feel. I’ve talked to men who say we don’t need the Mukhtars, that it’s time to run things ourselves. And what do we need Linkers and Counselors for, anyway? If we ran into some sort of trouble, the cyberminds could come up with an answer.”

“You’re wrong, Eric. We wouldn’t know what questions to ask, and we might not understand the answers. That’s what Linkers are trained for.”

He finished his whiskey and swallowed more beer. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? You thought if you studied, someone’d decide to make a Linker out of you. You always thought you were smarter than anyone.”

“Eric, do you have to talk like this now?”

“You don’t understand. What’ll happen to me if this business doesn’t work out?”

She stood up hastily, bumping her rounded belly against the table. “We should go. It’s almost time for supper.”

“I need another drink.”

“You’ve had enough.” The men were looking at her; the stout woman behind the bar was scowling. “Listen,” Iris said in a lower voice, “do you want Constance to see you like this right after everything’s been settled? What’s Fatima going to think? You won’t be able to drink in her house.”

Eric got up. She took his arm as they passed the bar and went outside. He rubbed at his face. “I’m sorry, Iris. I didn’t mean it. I know I should be happy. It’s just that —”

“I know. Believe me, I do. You have what you wanted, and now you’re afraid it won’t work out. Well, it will. You have to make it work, that’s all.”

“I will.” He stuck out his chin. “I have to,” he said more quietly.

Iris stood in the kitchen, listening to the voices in the hall. She put the sandwich she had been about to eat on the table, having lost her appetite. Absently, she closed an open shelf door, then backed toward the recycler; the door behind her opened and she turned to enter the courtyard.

Chen had come back. She was once again afraid of having him see her. She had not gone to the floater to meet him, had excused herself with a complaint about her swollen ankles.

Her few messages to him during the past months had been brief and impersonal, mostly talk of the farm and its affairs, or stories about Eric’s business and his plans. She had been reluctant to speak of other matters. She had gone back to some of her studies with even more intensity than before, but wondered if

she was only trying to prove to herself that a mind still lived inside a weary, heavy body that had become a symbiote's host.

What would Chen think when he saw her? When sending her messages to him, she had been careful to conceal her body behind her desk or in voluminous blouses and frocks. Her pregnancy had deformed her small body; her belly had become her most noticeable feature. Her legs and ankles had grown thicker; she could lift herself from a chair only with difficulty.

Chen's messages to her had been as brief as hers to him. She knew that some men, however proud they might be of siring a child, avoided the women who carried their babies until the children were safely born. Chen might share their revulsion. Worse still, what if he were having second thoughts about being her bondmate, and wanted to break the contract? She could hardly fight him without making the bond public and bringing shame on her household. She might be trapped here, without a bond and with a small child to care for and no chance of leaving Lincoln. She should never have agreed to have this child; she had put her life into Chen's hands.

She walked toward a chair that had been set under the tree for her and sat down heavily. The door leading into the kitchen opened; she averted her face, afraid to look up. The air was still; the summer sunlight shone through the shield overhead.

A shadow fell across her lap.

"Iris."

She lifted her head. Chen stood in front of her, alone. She glanced toward the doorway. LaDonna and Sheryl were standing there, apparently waiting to be beckoned into the courtyard. Iris waved them away and the door closed.

"I missed you," Chen said. "You don't know how much. I wanted to tell you in my messages, but I was afraid the others might see them, that I'd give something away. I was afraid if I said anything, I wouldn't be able to stop."

"I missed you too," she said, searching his face and seeing only warmth and concern. "I almost —" She had been about to say that she was growing to love him in the way that he loved her. She pushed that thought from her mind; she was only relieved that she had not lost him.

He sat down on the ground next to her, and leaned against one leg of her chair. "They gave me a month here. I'll have a little work to do, and I can carve. I'll be here when our son's born." He reached for her hand. "I wish there'd been another way, that I could've stayed with you the whole time. I worry, I don't like putting you through this. I wish you could have even had the child the way the Habbars do, instead of having your body —"

"You think I'm ugly," she said sadly.

"Oh, no. How could you ever be ugly? I just don't want to see you in pain." He reached up and rested one hand against her abdomen; the child kicked inside her. "I love you."

"I didn't know if you still would. You loved someone else once. I thought you might have changed your mind about me."

"I only thought I loved her. I'll always feel something for Tonie, but she told me I'd find someone I loved more. I can talk to you, you share my dream — even more than she did. You risk a lot for me."

"I took the risk for what I want. I can't deceive you, Chen. Don't deceive yourself."

“Love can grow.”

“I’m afraid.” She could admit it to him. “I know that we both have our secrets. What if I can never feel as strongly for you as you do for me? You might lose your love for me then. You might decide to go back to the Islands alone and find a woman who can share your kind of love.”

He slipped his hand into hers. “Never. Is that what you think of me, that I’d bring you to this and then leave you? I couldn’t do that.”

“I wish I could feel the way you do, have the same love,” she said. “Everything I’ve been taught tells me it’s impossible, but I wish I could feel it anyway. I don’t want to hurt you, and I’m afraid I will.”

“If you feel that, then you share some of my love already. I won’t ask for any more.”

She tried to stand. Chen leaped to his feet and helped her to rise. “You’ve been tormenting yourself,” he went on. “I should have been here, to ease things for you. I’ll make it up to you, you’ll see.”

A few members of the household had gathered in the common room to gossip and share some after-dinner whiskey. Angharad was discussing the coming harvest with Julia and Elisabeth while Chen sat with Eric on the sofa, listening to the young man’s plans. Eric was planning to acquire what he grandly called “commissions” for Chen’s carvings; he had already received enough requests to keep Chen busy for months. Above the two men hung a holo landscape of pine-covered mountains; the scent of pine filled the room.

Iris knew that she should be content. Eric had curbed his drinking, and his new business was bringing him more credit. Angharad had been gentle with Iris, easing her fears about childbirth; she never mentioned Iris’s secret pledge and almost seemed to be oblivious of it. Chen had reaffirmed his promise to her. Yet she was still restless, still fearful of what might befall her.

“Listen to me, Eric,” Elisabeth said from the corner nearest the window. “I don’t want Chen promising anything until he finishes my carving.”

“It’s almost done,” Chen said.

“Unfortunately,” Eric said, “I won’t make anything from that one.”

Chen shrugged. “What I do for this house is a gift.”

Iris had seen the carving of Elisabeth’s face; Chen had given her visage a look of bovine passivity. Elisabeth had sneaked into Iris’s room for a look at the piece, and had seemed delighted. No one else saw what Iris perceived in the carvings. Chen had not yet carved one of her, saying that he doubted his ability to capture her. She was not sure that she wanted him to carve her, afraid of what she might see.

The screen hummed. Angharad turned toward it. A woman’s image appeared. Her hair was silver, a gem glittered on her forehead, and her gray eyes had the fixed, penetrating stare of a Linker.

“Greetings,” the woman said.

Angharad sat up quickly, smoothing her green tunic; Elisabeth patted her hair. “Greetings,” Angharad said tentatively. Iris cupped one hand over her protruding abdomen, wondering what the Linker could want.

“You are Angharad Julias, the head of this household, are you not?” the Linker asked. Angharad nodded. “I wish to speak to your daughter, Iris Angharads.”

Iris started; her fingers curled around the arms of her chair. The Linker might know everything about her; perhaps she would be forced to break her bond with Chen. She heard footsteps behind her as Constance entered the room, then stopped at Iris's side.

"What has she done now?" Angharad cried out as she glanced apprehensively at her daughter.

"Something most praiseworthy. She has demonstrated curiosity and the willingness to learn, as well as some aptitude. The Nomarchies need such people. Do you understand? She has been chosen. If she accepts the opportunity we offer, she will be sent to a school and given the chance to learn even more."

"Mother of God," Constance blurted out. A muscular man, Constance's guest, had followed her into the room; the slim blond woman grabbed his hand. "Did you hear that, Allard?" The man grunted, looking bewildered.

Iris's child was kicking inside her. "Where would I be sent?" she asked hoarsely, unable to believe what she had heard.

"We've looked at your records. It's been decided that you should go to the Cytherian Institute in Caracas. It's a very special school, designed to train people for the Venus Project."

Iris was too startled to speak. The news was too much for her to absorb; not only had she been chosen but she would also be sent to the place where she would have the greatest chance to have what she wanted.

"Yes, indeed," the Linker continued. "We need people who share our devotion to that Project. Your studies show your interest in it, and some of those trained at the Cytherian Institute may be among the first settlers. Those who do well at that school will be rewarded with the chance to work on Anwara or the Islands."

The baby kicked again. Iris closed her eyes for a moment, suddenly aware of her dilemma. "But I'm going to have a child. How can I take it to a school?" Anger rushed through her; the chance she had longed for and had never expected to get had come to her, and Chen and the child soon to be born would keep her from taking it.

The Linker leaned forward, resting one arm gracefully on the small glass table next to her. "Surely you don't want to reject the opportunity we've offered you. Can't others care for your child?" The woman's voice was smooth, without inflection. "Believe me, I sympathize with you, but there are others in your household, and the child's father can be given time to visit it. Your student's allowance will allow you enough credit to send messages to the child when it's older. I'll leave such arrangements to you, but if you accept, you must be ready to leave your home by the beginning of next year. And think of the child. The love and care of a parent are important, but so are other things. You can give your child greater opportunities. In time, you can give it the chance to be part of a new world. Those in your household can give the child the attention it needs." The woman smiled. "You'll have time to consider these matters while we draw up a student's contract for you. I'll call back in a week for your answer."

The image vanished. Julia had a look of triumph on her face. Angharad twisted her tunic in her hands, looking confused.

"Chosen!" Constance cried, grabbing Allard by the shoulder. "It just shows you. Even people like us can be chosen. I always knew Iris was clever, I always knew she'd get somewhere." Iris gazed at the woman sourly, trying to recall when Constance had ever made that assertion. "Oh, my. Lincoln'll talk about this for weeks. I'm going to call everybody." She raced into the hall; Allard hesitated, then followed her. "Iris has been chosen!" Constance shouted as her feet pounded toward her wing of the house; Iris could not

make out Lilia's distant response.

Angharad leaned back in her seat; her face was slack. "I'd like to speak to my daughter and the father of her child alone," she said in a weak voice. "I'm sure the rest of you will want to spread this news." Elisabeth got up and left the room with Julia; Eric shot Iris a grin as he passed her. The door closed.

My child, Iris thought. I'm being tested — they want to see if I'm willing to leave my child to do this, if I have the strength. She had thought that Linkers valued the bond between a parent and child, and perhaps they did, in their way. The Linker would tell her that she would show her son more love by thinking of the future she could provide for him as a member of the Project, instead of clinging to him when he was born. Maybe the Linker already suspected that Iris had seen Chen's child as her way out of Lincoln, and would leave him willingly.

Chen got up and moved to Iris's side, taking her hand. "I don't know what to say to you now," Angharad murmured. "Earth has reached out for you. You'll be lifted above us and given a life I can't share."

Iris opened her mouth, about to utter a protest.

Angharad waved a hand. "No, child. Don't start saying things you don't mean. Don't tell me that this won't change your feelings for us. It will. You always wanted something else, and now you'll have it."

"Do you mean I should go away?" Iris asked.

"Of course you must. How can you ask that? There isn't a commune in Lincoln that would hold a chosen one back, whatever their feelings. I can't stand against the Nomarchies' plans for you. You've beaten me completely at last."

"It isn't a defeat," Iris said.

"I tried to do what I thought was best, but there was a part of you I could never reach. That Linker said you might go to that other world. She wouldn't have thought of training you for such a place unless she knew it was what you wanted, that your wishes would make their investment worthwhile. She admitted that herself."

Iris could not deny that.

"You lied to me about your reasons for wanting a bond with Chen here. You said it was for the sake of your son. Now, I see that you wanted it for yourself as well. You were getting ready for the time when you would leave with him, you were trying to find a way to leave us all along. Perhaps it's best that you leave this way, with some position and honor."

"Mother, I —"

"Why don't you smile?" Angharad's voice shook. "Why don't you celebrate this news? You should be happy."

Iris pressed her lips together. Angharad wanted her to show her joy, yet at the same time seemed determined to rob her of much of it.

"The signs were always there. God was showing me your destiny, and I refused to see it." Angharad continued in this vein for a bit as Iris listened unhappily. Her mother had never sounded quite like this before; she was speaking as though she were already an old woman facing death instead of a young one with most of her life ahead of her.

“Be happy for her,” Chen said during a break in Angharad’s mutterings. “I never dreamed this would happen. You’re still young, Angharad — you can have another daughter.”

Angharad shook her head. “No. My branch of this family line has ended here, and must continue somewhere else. The Counselor will tell me that Lilia is capable of running the farm, and her mother is my cousin, so at least that branch may continue for a time.”

Angharad went on, speaking of lines and branches and ancestors in her flat, despairing voice, until Iris could no longer bear it. “Mother!” she cried.

“Don’t try to comfort me. You think that, because I have no learning, I can’t understand the world. You hid your dreams from me, and yet you think I never hid my thoughts from you. I know that the Plains will change, I’ve seen it coming these past years. This generation has fewer children, and there’ll be fewer in the next. I’ve seen the signs. I denied them for a long time, but I can’t any more. Oh, I thought that at least our line would live on here, that we’d find a way through this, but it isn’t so. Some day, this farm will pass into other hands, and your children on that other world will forget me.”

“I won’t let them forget you,” Iris said.

“Oh, Iris, how can they not forget? They won’t see what we’ve built here. Our line will be only a list of names to them.” Angharad lifted her eyes and gazed at Chen. “How proud you are. I see it in your eyes, in the way you stand, as if you’ve been chosen yourself. Beware, Chen. Iris may feel, one day, that you’re the one holding her back, and then she’ll cast you off too. She’ll see you the way she’s come to see me.”

“It isn’t true,” Iris said. “Don’t say that.”

Angharad’s lip curled. “You think you know so much. There’s still a lot for you to learn. When you have a child of your own, you’ll see.” Her voice broke. “Pray that he doesn’t cut at your heart as you have at mine.”

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Fifteen

Iris’s memories of her labor faded after her son was born. Dimly, she recalled how she had walked the floor of her room, clinging to Angharad’s strong arms while the small scanner Letty had brought to the house hummed as it monitored the birth. There had been no reason for the physician herself to be present, no sign that Iris’s delivery would be anything but normal, but all of the household’s women had been with her to aid the birth. Chen, against his wishes, had been barred from the room. Angharad had not cared what his customs or feelings were in this case; birthing was women’s business, and she would not risk a possible curse on her grandchild by having a man present at such a time.

Iris lost the memory of her pain, but remembered her mother catching the child and placing him on her chest while Constance bathed him with warm water in the darkened room before cutting the cord. She had gazed at the tiny, wizened creature with his shock of straight dark hair, thinking hazily of how soon she would have to leave him. She would have some time to nurse him and care for him, but she had wondered if it might have been kinder to leave him immediately; it would only be harder later.

A month after the baby’s birth, the priest arrived in Lincoln, making her rounds of the towns in that part of the Plains, and Iris, following her mother’s wishes, took her son Benzi to the church to be christened. The priest told Iris about the child she had borne before she had taken her vows; she said nothing about

the boy's odd name, which Chen had given to him in honor of an old friend, but she was startled when Iris said he would be known as Benzi Liangharad instead of as Benzi Irises.

"I want him to carry his grandmother's name," Iris said firmly, ignoring the old priest's disapproving eyes. She said nothing about the fact that Benzi would carry his father's name as well. It no longer mattered what anyone thought; she would be leaving.

Before the baptism, Angharad and Wenda had taken Benzi to the edge of the fields to be blessed by a group of the town's Spiritists; not knowing what might befall the boy in the future, Angharad wanted to be sure he would be protected by all the gods. She had prevailed upon a visiting man who followed another of the Plains' faiths to pray for the child; she would have taken Benzi to the Muslims to be circumcised if Chen had not vigorously forbidden it.

Iris had expected the townsfolk to treat her as they treated other young mothers, but few came to her house to praise the healthy baby, or to bring her gifts and offer advice. Those who did seemed too deferential; they rarely gossiped in front of her, or stayed long to talk. She had been chosen; people were uneasy around her. She had brought honor to the town, and the communes were happy to take credit for her accomplishments, praising themselves for having such talent in their midst. They treated her with respect, but they were already withdrawing from one who would no longer be part of their community.

Iris rarely left her son's side that fall. She carried him everywhere in her sling, letting him nestle against her heart. The women in her household murmured approvingly about her devotion, surprised at how little time she wanted to herself.

Her attention to Benzi masked her true thoughts. He was only a small creature demanding nourishment and care; she had formed no emotional bond with the boy. She looked at his small, golden-skinned face and felt nothing; guilt kept her at his side. She wondered if the knowledge of her approaching departure kept her from loving him, or if that feeling would always have been absent. She came to realize that her son meant less to her than her dream.

She had once seen the child as a way to gain what she wanted; now, she wondered if she would ever really care for him and how he would feel if he ever knew how she felt. She bathed him, fed him, rocked him in her arms, and sang to him while she worried that she was planning to do him a great wrong.

Iris awoke. Her eyelids felt gritty. She had hardly slept, even though Angharad had moved Benzi's cradle to her own room a few days ago so that Iris could get more rest. She huddled in her bed, almost unable to move. Benzi had been weaned; Iris had gone through her belongings, packing the few things she would take with her. The day had finally come; she would be leaving.

She threw back her coverings and sat up. Her stomach fluttered as apprehension warred with anticipation. What if she failed at the school? Other students might be better prepared than she. What if the work was too hard for her? She shivered at the thought, which had been plaguing her for a week, ever since the town's New Year's celebration. Angharad, as part of her mayoral duties, had given a short speech about their expectations for the coming year of 539, and had faltered when mentioning that her daughter would then take up a student's obligations; Angharad would be pleased if she failed and had to come home.

She couldn't fail. The Nomarchies would not have chosen her, wasted extra credit on her, and paid the commune for the loss of her labor if she were not ready for a school. She would not allow herself to fail.

She washed quickly, returned to her room to dress, then hurried downstairs. The household had gathered around the long table in the middle of the kitchen, where Sheryl was dishing out oatmeal from a large bowl. Benzi rested in Angharad's arms as she fed him his bottle. Iris felt a pang; the boy would not miss

her.

“Let me see,” LaDonna called out. Iris held up her arms as she displayed her new green tunic and pants, then thrust out her left arm, showing her identity bracelet. “Are you sure you’ll be warm enough in that?”

“I have my coat,” Iris replied. “It’ll be warmer in Caracas.”

“Are you coming home for the next harvest?” Tyree asked.

“I don’t know,” Iris said. “They’ll be giving me a lot of work to do.” Angharad lowered her eyes. “I’m sure I’ll get some time to visit,” Iris added hastily, not sure at all.

She sat down at the table between Lilia and Constance and forced herself to eat as she listened to the household’s advice:

“There are thieves in cities. Make sure you don’t wander around with anything valuable they can steal.”

“Don’t stay in the port too long. Someone’ll try to sell you something and you’ll never see either your credit or what you bought.”

“Make sure your door is always locked. Don’t ever open it to anyone you don’t know.”

“Don’t talk to strangers. You don’t know what they’ll want.”

“If you want a man, try to find a good Plainsman. You don’t know what kinds of habits or sick practices others might have.”

“Don’t eat any food unless you know what it is and where it came from. Make sure you get plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, even if they cost you more there. Don’t eat any meat unless it’s good North American or Argentinian beef — you don’t want any of that animal tissue they clone in vats.”

“Don’t study too hard. It’ll unbalance you and drive you mad. If you read too much, you’ll strain your eyes and go blind and have to have a cornea transplant or special lenses put in.”

Iris was silent as she absorbed the advice of women who had never left Lincoln. Only Julia, who alone knew something of the outside world from experience, said nothing.

She ate hastily, then rose. “I’d better go. The floater’s probably already here.”

Angharad tried to thrust Benzi at her. “Kiss your son.”

Iris shook her head. “Please. That’ll just make it harder.”

Tears rolled down Angharad’s cheeks. “We’ll take good care of him,” she wailed. “You make sure you send him messages. It doesn’t matter what you say, but I want him to see your image, and remember you.” She sniffed. “I’d go with you to the floater, but I can’t have people see me like this.”

“Please. It’s all right. It’ll be easier for us if you don’t come with me. You can all stay.” Iris kissed her mother quickly, then hugged Julia, who seemed almost ready to cry herself. Other arms reached for her. At last Iris managed to extricate herself from their embraces. “I have to go. I’ll send you a message as soon as I can.”

She entered the hall, trailed by LaDonna and her daughter Mira. “I’ll look out for Chen when he visits,” the dark-haired woman said.

Iris smiled gratefully. “You’d think I was going away forever.”

“In a way, you are.”

Iris’s gray coat was lying on top of her bags. She pulled on her coat, then hoisted the bags to her shoulders, trying to remember if she had forgotten anything. Mira waved at her solemnly as Iris stepped toward the door. The young girl would be almost a woman by the time Iris completed her studies. Iris felt a twinge of guilt. She had taught Mira how to read a few simple sentences before Tyree’s mockery and the girl’s own lack of aptitude had made Mira give up on trying to learn anything more. Perhaps Iris might have encouraged Mira if she had stayed.

Iris turned away and stepped outside; it was too late to think of that now.

Eric and Laiza were waiting in the street. Laiza had returned that fall, ostensibly for the fall festival, but she had never gone back to Denver. She had been unwilling to talk of her short-lived job, saying only that she had missed Lincoln. Eric took one of the bags from Iris as they began to walk south.

“You make sure you send me messages,” Laiza said, even though she rarely had during her own absence.

“I will.” Iris glanced at Eric. He seemed sullen; in recent weeks, she had wondered if he might be resenting her departure. “Chen’ll be back sometime next month for a bit. Make sure you get him some commissions.”

“I already have a few.” Eric adjusted the hood of his jacket with his free hand. “We would have come inside before, but I didn’t know —”

“You were right not to. Angharad’s pretty upset. Maybe you could visit her tonight.”

The weather had grown warmer, at least temporarily; the snow was beginning to melt, muddying the road. Faces peered out at the three from the windows of the houses they passed; Iris lifted her head.

The floater was in the elongated bowl of its cradle; the long, silver dirigible cast a shadow over the small group of townspeople standing near it. As Iris crossed the field and came closer to them, a few waved at her; one woman held up her child. “Take a good look, Sarah,” the woman said. “She’s going to be a student.”

Another woman sniffed. “That’s all very well, and a credit to us all, but a farmer has nothing to be ashamed of, either.”

Daria was standing near Winnie, who was bragging to a couple of men who stood on the floater’s ramp stretching their legs. “There she is now!” Winnie cried as she gestured at Iris. “She’s the one who’s going to that school in Caracas. It just goes to show you. Anyone clever enough can rise, even if she isn’t the child of a Linker. We grow more than wheat in Lincoln.”

“She always was smart,” Daria said, with an edge to her voice. “Used to go off by herself to study.” The red-haired girl’s smile bore a trace of malice. “Wouldn’t tell us what she was doing.”

“Silly girl,” another woman said. “She needn’t have made such a secret thing of that. Who knows? She might even become a Linker herself one day, and that can only help all of us.”

“Good-bye, dear,” Winnie said, waving one chubby hand. Laiza hugged Iris as Eric clasped her fingers. She freed herself, took her other bag from Eric, and began to walk up the ramp toward the open door above. The two men on the ramp let her pass, then followed her inside.

A tall, thin man was standing in the aisle between the rows of seats. “Iris Angharads?” He pointed with one long finger down the aisle. “Straight down, first door on your left. Seems you get one of the rooms.” She hesitated. “Better get settled in. We’ll be leaving soon.”

She walked down the aisle. Passengers turned from the windows on either side of the cabin and watched her; she thought she heard a few whispers. There were seats for over two hundred passengers, though only half that number were present; all of them seemed to be staring at her, the new curiosity in their midst. She kept her head down and stared at the blue carpeting under her feet, grateful that she would be traveling in a room. More whispers followed her; she refused to look up.

“Stuck-up,” she heard one man mutter. “Must think she knows it all already.”

She passed the food and beverage dispensers and found herself in a short, windowless corridor. She pressed her hand against a door on her left; it hummed as its scanner read her bracelet, then opened.

She entered. She was inside a tiny, bare room with a small, cushioned blue chair that stood next to a small round window. “Greetings,” said an impersonal female voice, speaking in Anglaic, “and welcome aboard. This will be your room during your journey, but please feel free to join your fellow passengers outside when you wish.” Iris set her bags on the floor. “You will note a small door in the corner. This leads to your washroom and toilet. Next to that door, you will find a blue button. Press the button when you want to retire, and your bed will be lowered from the wall; for bed retraction, press that button again. Food and drink are available in the dispensers you passed on your way here. Please dispose of all receptacles properly in the recycler next to the dispensers. If you have understood these instructions, please respond by saying, ‘Yes, I have understood.’ Have a pleasant journey.”

Iris sank into the seat. From the window, she could see the townsfolk wandering back to Lincoln over the snow-patched ground. Her throat tightened. She suddenly wanted to run from the floater, back to her home and the safety of her household. I’m not ready, she thought.

“Salaam,” the voice said, and began to drone out a new set of instructions in Arabic.

“Yes, I have understood,” Iris called out. The voice broke off in midsentence.

The ground was dropping slowly away from her; the cradle had released them. She pressed her nose against the window as the snow-covered roofs of Lincoln drifted out of her sight.

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Part Two

Sixteen

March 539

From: Iris Angharads, Cytherian Institute, Caracas, Nomarchy of Nueva Hispania

To: Liang Chen, Commune of Angharad Julias, Lincoln, Nomarchy of the Plains Communes

Private Communication

I should have sent you a message before, I know. I guess I was overwhelmed when I first arrived, so all I did was let Angharad know I’d arrived safely, and then, by the time I was ready to send you a message,

she sent me one and told me you'd be back in Lincoln soon, so I decided to wait.

I'm just making excuses for myself. I didn't want to send a message to anyone because, for the first couple of months, I wasn't sure I'd be staying here. I can admit that now. I just wasn't prepared for what it would be like.

I'd better start at the beginning. By the time I got to Caracas, the floater had picked up five more students on the way. It would have been quicker to come here on a suborbital flight, and I was wondering why the Institute didn't just send me to a city where I could have caught one, but I think the Institute wanted us to have time to talk to other students, get acquainted so we wouldn't arrive not knowing anyone. We all had rooms on the floater until we got to San Antonio, and maybe that was just as well, because whenever we were in the rest of the cabin, people kept avoiding us. One of the other students with me was a Linker's son, but the others were just like me — they'd never been away from their towns, never thought they'd really be chosen.

And guess what! One of them was Alexandra Lenas. I finally met her. I told you about her, didn't I? I used to talk to her a lot over the screen, but after I was expecting Benzi, I just couldn't, because I didn't know what to say to her about that. I was surprised at how uneasy I felt around her, and I think she felt the same way at first. We'd gotten along so well over the screen that I think we were both wondering if we still would, but after a while, it was fine. I think she was a little surprised that I'd been chosen, frankly. Well, so was I!

One of the boys, Richard Matties, has a son too. He told me a little about his boy and I told him about Benzi, and that was probably a mistake, because I started feeling guilty again about leaving him. It's easier for Richard. He's only seen his son a couple of times, and he's just the father anyway. Well, you know what I mean.

Anyway, when we got to the port, we didn't know how we were going to find our way around it, let alone around the city. You have to take the tubeway train just to get from the floater cradle area to where the suborbitals land. But we'd all seen images of the port, and we'd been told where to go, so it could have been worse.

As soon as we were inside the nearest wing of the building, a couple of ragged-looking boys came up to us and asked us where we were going and offered to take us to the school for some credit, but Anthony — the Linker's son — warned us not to have anything to do with them. It seems that sometimes they'll show you the way, but other times, they'll simply lure you to some out-of-the-way place and force you to give them your codes. Then, by the time anybody traces you or you get away, they've exchanged your credit for coins or bills and have disappeared. I would have thought thieves could be easily tracked, but apparently there are too many of them, so the authorities tend to concentrate on the ones who murder their victims. Oh, that makes it sound awful, and Anthony says that Caracas is actually fairly safe. Well, you probably know all this, since you've traveled so much, but I was beginning to wish I were back in Lincoln even before leaving the port.

The port wasn't quite like the images I'd seen. The halls were the same, endless white walls with open doors and polished brown floors, but the noise was deafening. People were running to catch tubeway trains, sitting in the corridors, gathering in the rooms — I've never seen so many people in my life. I think everyone in Lincoln could have fitted into that one area of the port. We'd been advised to wait in one particular room near the entrance we came through, so we went there and met some other students. A few were from the Arctic Nomarchy, and they were looking a little uncomfortable even without their coats, and the others had arrived from Azania.

We started talking while we waited, telling the others a little about ourselves, and then I began to notice

something odd. Nearly everyone, except for Anthony, came from a family or a place where students were hardly ever chosen for schools; we were all practically the first people in our towns or areas chosen as students. One of the boys from Azania said that might be because the Nomarchies had decided to give more people a chance, that they've finally realized that we're wasted in our homes.

Anthony was smiling when he heard that, as if he didn't believe a word of it. He has kind of a disdainful expression anyway, with very fine features and a thin mouth and grayish, wintry eyes, but he was almost sneering this time. I got up then to go into the hall to get a drink from a dispenser, and Anthony came with me to get some food, and then he began to mock the other boy and said he didn't know what he was talking about.

"Why*did* they pick us, then?" I asked him.

He said, "I thought you might be smarter than that. They picked you because you'd be grateful, because you'd be so happy for this chance that you'd do whatever the Nomarchies ask. That's what they need on the Islands now — people who'll give their lives to the Project but who won't forget who gave them the chance."

So I asked, "Why did they pick you, then? You're a Linker's son. You don't have to be grateful."

He didn't answer for a while. He just stared at the people passing us and wouldn't look at me until we were back at the entrance to our room. Then he said that they'd probably picked some Linkers' children for the Cytherian Institute so that we'd think it was a real school instead of just a place where the humble and underprivileged could be molded into willing servants of the Mukhtars' interests. That was exactly the way he put it.

He made me angry. That remark about being humble was bad enough. My mother's a mayor, and I'll bet her line goes back as far as his on the Plains, if not further. But what was worse is that he was making it seem as if we hadn't done anything, as if being chosen was no accomplishment at all. After all, if we had ability, they could pick us for whatever other reasons they wanted; it didn't matter. Then Anthony muttered something about giving certain people a way out so that they wouldn't be frustrated or cause trouble.

I was about to start arguing with him about it, but when we went inside, an older student was waiting to take us to the Institute. That surprised me. I thought someone working for the port, or a servo, would do that.

The student's name was Esteban. He gave each of us a pocket map. You press a button, and it shows where in Caracas you are; then, you say your destination, and it shows you the routes to it by tube or hovercar or on foot. But Esteban warned us not to wander around too much until we learned more about the city and which places to avoid; apparently those pocket maps don't show you what might be risky. There's a story that a student once walked through the district bordering the shuttle spaceport field and was lured into a tavern, where he got drunk and signed a contract with an asteroid miner and was never seen again. I don't know if it's true; you'd think the Institute could have argued that his student's contract superseded anything else he signed, but then, he wouldn't have been in much of a position to argue that point, and maybe the Institute didn't think it was worth the bother. Some of the areas around the port are supposed to be the worst, which figures. Most of the people there live on Basic.

As it turns out, I don't know why they bothered to give us pocket maps. I haven't seen Caracas at all since we arrived at the Institute. We live in a pyramid just outside the southern end of the city, near the mountains, and everything we need is here. Even if it weren't, we wouldn't have time to go into Caracas anyway, with all the work we have to do. The Institute's almost like a city anyway. There are about

twenty thousand people here, including the teachers and some people who've come back from Anwara or the Islands.

I was homesick at first. I felt overwhelmed. I may know more than most of the people in Lincoln, but that doesn't help me here. I probably know less than a lot of the students. I used to cry a lot at night, thinking about you and Benzi, but I know you'd be disappointed if I gave up.

Chen, send a message when you can. Show this to Benzi, so he doesn't forget me, even if he won't understand any of it. Maybe he should just hear my voice. Say hello to everyone. I've put a privacy lock on this, but you can show some of it to the others, if you like — well, maybe not all of it. I don't want to encourage Angharad by having her think I'm homesick. I miss you.</S ALIGN>

Iris had been assigned to one of the dwellings on the eighth level of the Cytherian Institute's pyramid. The small, shell-shaped buildings overlooked green plots of grass and shrubbery, while palm trees lined the walkways bordering the level.

As Iris walked along the path toward her dwelling, a breeze whispered past, and she could almost imagine that she was moving through the street of a small town instead of along one level of a building that housed a small city. Each level, surrounded by high railings, was open to the outside; Iris shivered a bit as she felt the crisp mountain air.

All of the students who had arrived three months earlier were housed on the eighth level and the one below it, where they would live during their first two years at the Institute. Iris shared her dwelling with nine others. She recalled how awkward she had felt when she had first been shown to the dwelling. No one from the Plains had been housed with her. She had not even been sure of how to greet her housemates, who looked as though they came from every continent in the world and had more self-possession than she felt. She had worried about whether they would like her; it had been small consolation to know that she would have her own small room in the dwelling, as would each of the others, and that they could all ask to be moved later if they did not get along.

As she approached the door of her dwelling, she stiffened self-consciously and patted her hair before pressing her hand against the door lock. I don't belong here, she thought suddenly. I don't really know anybody, I have no real friends. Her longing for Lincoln was so sharp that she found herself gulping breath. She had dreamed of escaping the Plains; she had never imagined that she could miss the town so much.

She tried to steady herself. This was her home now, until she joined the Project. However much she missed Chen and her household and worried over Benzi, she would accomplish more by staying here. She was only feeling this way because she had idled away the past hour instead of concentrating on her work, and there was a lesson in that. She would have to study harder, so that the demands of the work would drive other, more disturbing thoughts from her mind.

The door opened; she entered the front room of the small residence. Edwin was sitting at one table, slouched over a reader as he ate; his blond hair drooped around his placid, wide face. At another table, Michiko and Sarah were conversing while, in one corner, Jomo and Ian were playing chess.

The familiar sight of her housemates eased Iris a little. She had come to know them better during the past three months, had been surprised and then relieved to find out how nervous some of them had been around her. Michiko had been shocked to discover that Iris already had a son, and had left him. Jomo had come to her room during their first week at the Institute; he was surprised when she turned him away, because he had somehow picked up the notion that Plainswomen slept with any man who asked. Iris herself had inadvertently offended Ian with a remark about his appearance; he was one of several

students who had delayed the onset of puberty and looked like a fourteen-year-old boy instead of the eighteen he actually was. They were more used to one another now and able to joke about their former lapses.

Michiko looked up. "Iris, you cut your hair."

"Had it cut this afternoon." Iris tilted her head. "How's it look?"

"Pretty good," Sarah replied.

"It'll be a lot less trouble. I don't have time to fuss with my hair." Iris wondered what Angharad would say about her closely clipped hair when she saw it on the screen; her mother would probably be too shocked by her clothes to notice her hair. She tugged at her skimpy shorts, sure that she would never get used to her revealing garments.

The door chime sounded; Iris turned. "Who's there?" Ian shouted at the door.

"Anthony Leilas."

Ian groaned; Sarah rolled her eyes. "Should we let him in?" Michiko asked Iris.

"Might as well."

"You're too kind," Michiko went on. "Just because he's a Linker's son doesn't mean you have to put up with him."

"Iris and Anthony are both from the Plains," Edwin called out. "It's natural to spend time with somebody who reminds you of home." Iris smiled at Edwin gratefully; there was a trace of homesickness in his voice.

Michiko made a face. "Anthony went to another university before he came here, that's what I heard. They say he had some trouble there." Michiko did not say where she had learned this, and Iris was sure that the other girl had not gained access to Anthony's records. Perhaps Anthony had let such a story out himself. That would be like him, to brag about past difficulties instead of concealing them.

"Oh, let the fellow in," Edwin said.

The door slid open as Anthony entered. The others nodded at him before turning away; he ignored them as he came toward Iris. "Thought you might want to go over Nimeró's lecture with me," Anthony said in a loud voice. "I know the math's giving you trouble."

Iris flushed as she looked up at his angular face. Anthony was smiling; his gray eyes seemed to be mocking her.

She led him up the ramp toward her room and opened her door. He followed her inside and sat down on the edge of the bed while she seated herself in front of her screen. She was about to call up the lecture, then turned. "Did you have to announce to everyone that I'm having trouble?"

"Oh, come on. I'm sure it's no surprise to them. I thought you wanted your friends to know that's the only reason I'm here, for some tutoring. I mean, it is, isn't it?"

She lowered her eyes. "Of course."

"You'll have to master this simple stuff. You've got a course in fractals coming up, and if you can't get through that, you won't make much of a climatologist — or anything else, for that matter."

She glared at him; he was baiting her again, playing on her fear of failure. “I’ll do perfectly well,” she responded. “I wouldn’t be here if the school didn’t think I could pass. The Nomarchies don’t like to waste money. And, after all, I have you to help me.”

He chuckled. “Oh, you’ll get through. You work hard enough to overcome your shoddy preparation. You’re just the sort they want for the Project — anyone who had an easy time might not be ready to deal with the Project’s obstacles. And you don’t seem to have the same trouble with that history of the Project course, since you so readily swallow all that propaganda.”

She sighed. “Did you come here for another argument about that?”

“Not at all, though you argue for yourself well enough, and that helps me sharpen my own arguments. It’s interesting to listen to people who are so devoted to the Project.”

“Well, why did you come to the Institute, then?” She recalled what Michiko had said about Anthony. “I’m sure you could have gone to another school.”

“I wanted to come. I was admitted, so I came. I just don’t deceive myself about what the Project will actually bring about. I don’t ignore its contradictions. Besides, I want to be a geophysicist, and what better place is there for it than here?”

“You’ll have to want more than that to stay.”

His smile widened. “I see you got your hair cut. I liked it better before, but you look more like most of the other students now. I suppose that’s why you did it.”

“It won’t be as much of a bother.”

“And looking like everyone else is only incidental, of course.”

She wanted to snap at him, but held back. He was a better student than she; he had helped her before, and tolerating his jibes was a small price to pay for that. She wondered what Anthony got out of the tutoring; maybe he was secretly homesick, too, and only wanted to be with someone else from the Plains.

“Let’s listen to the lecture,” she said. “There’s one thing —”

“Oh, we can listen to that later.”

“Now, Anthony. I have other things to review too.”

He stood up and stared at her for a long moment, then began to pull off his shirt and shorts. “Well?” he said as he stretched out on her bed.

She stared at his lean, naked body, too surprised to speak for a moment. She took a breath. “I don’t know about you, but where I come from, the woman has something to say about who comes to her bed.”

He lifted one dark brow. “Where I come from, a man can read the signals before the woman has to ask.”

Her lip curled. “What signals?”

“Oh, come now. We’re both from the Plains. I doubt you can be alone with a man for long without having it cross your mind.”

Her cheeks burned.

“I’ve been picking it up,” he went on. “I suppose your housemates have, also.”

Could that be true? She thought of Jomo, and how surprised he had been when she shoved him out of her room. She and her housemates might get along now, but barriers still existed, moments when she was all too aware of how different they all were from one another. Her friends in Lincoln, whatever their attitudes toward her and her odd pursuits, had at least been predictable, had shared the same assumptions. She swallowed. None of that mattered. She and the other students had all come here for the same reasons.

“If I’ve been sending signals, as you put it,” she said, “they’ve been inadvertent.”

“Probably unavoidable, too, since you haven’t had a lover here. I should think you’d be feeling a bit restless.”

“I don’t want a man now.”

“Are you afraid of what some of the others might think of our customs?”

She was, a little. The female students, she knew, would be likely to judge her even more harshly than the males; she had overheard their scornful tones while they gossiped about other Plains students. Iris had quickly learned not to be too blunt while speaking to other women of men. Her longing for her old home nearly overwhelmed her again.

“It isn’t just what people might think,” she said at last. “You know about my son. My son’s father and I—” She paused. She had nearly mentioned their bond. “We became very close. He isn’t from the Plains, and his customs aren’t ours. It might hurt him to know that I had lovers here.”

“Does he expect you to spend decades on the Project without lovers?”

“He plans to join me there. He lived on the Islands before, you know.”

“Did you make promises?”

She shook her head quickly.

“Then I don’t see your problem. He must know Plains customs, and you don’t have to tell him anything. He’ll probably assume you’ve been having other men in your bed anyway, so refusing them won’t make any difference. He has no right to expect that of you.” She winced at his words, since she had often thought the same thing herself. “Fighting yourself and your impulses is hardly going to help you clear your mind for your work.”

She rose slowly, wanting to tell him to put on his clothes and leave, but no words came to her. Anthony sat up; his fingers closed around her wrist. He pulled her down on the bed.

She lay there passively as he took off her shirt and shorts, surprised at how little she felt. I don’t want this, she thought. She tried to draw away; he pushed her down. She rolled on one side, concealing her breasts with one arm; he pulled her arm back. His hands were hurting her. She gazed into his face and thought she saw rage.

His mouth was on hers; teeth bit into her lip. She twisted away, but her struggles only seemed to arouse him more. The women of her household had sometimes talked about such men, ones who would try to mix pain and pleasures, who bore some hidden anger at the women who were at the center of Plains life. She should have seen Anthony might be such a man. She had believed that his arguments with her about the Project and its goals were only one mind testing another. Now, it seemed that they were continuing

their true argument silently in her bed; if he could not defeat her with words, his body would. Thinking of lovemaking that way seemed a perversion.

He entered her roughly, pushing at her knees with his hands. She felt her body shudder, then realized that she was responding to him. She fought against herself as a spasm shook her; a harsh cry escaped her lips. He moaned as he gripped her.

After a long time, he was still. He withdrew and lay beside her. She gazed at the lighted ceiling. She had been too long without a man; Anthony had known that.

“Feel better now?” he asked. She did not answer. “I’ll bet the only reason you made love is because I told you it would clear your mind for your work.”

“I wouldn’t call it love.”

He chuckled. “What difference does it make? You can put it out of your mind now, for a while. I’ll be around if you need me, and you don’t have to worry about what I think. You can concentrate on your studies and become even more valuable to the Project.”

She rolled over on her side, turning her back to him. “I don’t understand you, Anthony. I don’t know why you’re here. You don’t seem to care about the Project the way the rest of us do.”

“You’re partly right and partly wrong. *Ido* care about it, but *not* the way the rest of you do. I can learn more about planetary evolution here than anywhere else. But I don’t want to turn into some mindless slave of the Mukhtars doing it.”

Iris sat up. “We’re not —”

“You’re becoming one. You’ll swallow what they tell you and think you’re a part of some noble enterprise. Maybe it would be, if the Mukhtars let it alone and allowed it to become what it should be — another human society working for its own goals rather than Earth’s glory. The Mukhtars don’t want to think of that. They think of power, and glorifying themselves with this Project. If the Project doesn’t further that aim, they’d crush it without a qualm. They don’t care what they have to do to anyone to achieve their ends. And you won’t, either, after you’ve been here long enough, and you’ll tell yourself that anything you have to do is for a good end. You probably think I have cruelty in me, but wait until you see what you turn into. It’s a pity. I thought you might be different.”

“You ought to be more careful about what you say.”

Anthony shrugged. “I never have been.”

“Well, you’d better start. Just because you’re a Linker’s son doesn’t mean —”

“It means I know more about how things really are than you do.” He got up and began to dress, then reached into his pocket. “I almost forgot. I brought something for you.” He threw her a round blue crystal; it landed in the rumpled sheets.

Iris picked the stone up. The crystal felt warm, and it was oddly soothing to hold it. “What is it?”

“A mood stone. It affects the nerves somehow when you hold it, calms you. You can keep it — I have a couple of others.” Anthony smiled lopsidedly. “Better than looking for some man to calm you down instead.”

She let the stone fall. His eyes narrowed; he was looking at her as if he were judging her, and had found

her disappointing. She pulled the sheet over her shoulders, wondering if he had guessed that there had been only two men for her before him.

He said, "I really don't like to be cruel to you, but something in you just seems to bring it out."

"Don't blame me for what you are."

He left the room; the door slid shut. She would have to study Nimero's lecture alone, without Anthony's help.

She thought of Chen, and felt angry with herself for yielding to Anthony. She pushed the thought aside as she picked up the stone. She had made a mistake with Anthony; she would not make another. It would be better not to see too much of a student who harbored such doubts about the Project. She tried not to think of how Anthony had looked at her when he gave her the crystal, as though he had wanted to apologize but could not bring himself to do so.

She got up and walked to the screen, then sat down to review the lecture again.

Esteban was waiting at a table in the front room; he stood up as Iris came down the ramp. "We can talk here if you like," she said. "The others are all out."

"Let's take a walk instead," the bearded young man replied. He ushered her through the door, then took her arm.

They walked along the pathway in silence until they came to the nearest garden, then sat down on a bench near a flower bed. At one end of the garden, a few students were sitting outside a small stone dwelling as they listened to a young man play a flute. In the darkened garden, Iris could not see the group clearly; they seemed shadowy wraiths listening to a ghostly song.

"You've been here for nearly five months now," Esteban said, "and you've hardly poked your head out of your room except for seminars and discussions."

"I've had a lot to do. There isn't much time for anything else."

"Maybe you're working too hard. You ought to get out more, make some friends. You're getting along with your housemates, but I know from talks with them that you tend to keep to yourself. It has to be affecting you. I know you come from a place where people have a sense of community, where strong friendships are formed that have to last a lifetime, and the ones you form here will be even more important later."

Iris leaned back against the bench. "I'm more used to being alone than you think. Most of my friends in Lincoln never understood what I wanted."

"Even so, you ought to participate more in the life of the Institute."

She glanced at him. Esteban had been assigned to her and to several other students as an advisor; he was planning to be a Counselor when his own studies were completed. His suggestion was probably a warning that getting through her courses might not, by itself, guarantee her place at the Institute. "You may be right, Esteban. It just seems that most of the others are quicker, or have learned more. I have to work harder than they do."

"Some have had more preparation. Others were worse off than you — I certainly was when I came to a school for the first time. You've been using mnemopills, haven't you?"

She wondered how he had found out; maybe he had only guessed. “I got them from the physician,” she said. “She wouldn’t have let me have them if they were harmful.” She did not say what everyone knew; that if the school’s physicians didn’t hand them out, the students would have no trouble getting them elsewhere.

“They won’t do much good. Oh, they can help you on a test, but how important is memorizing when you’ll be able to call up anything you’ve forgotten? It’s your understanding of what you learn and how you use it that’s important. You’ve got to expect the unexpected if you want to terraform a world.”

Iris lowered her eyes. Perhaps he knew that she had tried suppressants as well, though they had been less successful than the mnemopills. She had found that she didn’t work as well when too calm; she had missed the rush of joy she felt when she was sure that she had done a good piece of work or had finally grasped some difficult concept.

Esteban folded his arms. “Well, what did you want to talk to me about this evening? It must be important to take you away from your studies.”

“I wanted to ask — we’ll have a month off at the end of June. I wanted to know if it would be all right if I went back to Lincoln then. My mother’s expecting me, and I could see my son. Chen may be in Lincoln then as well.”

“Do you want to go back?”

She thought of Benzi. Would she be able to leave him a second time, or would she find that he had finally claimed her heart? Angharad would no doubt do her best to keep Iris from returning to the school; she would play on her daughter’s longing for home. On the other hand, Chen and Julia would be there to help her resist Angharad’s pleadings. Her homecoming would only renew an old struggle.

“I don’t know if I want to go back,” Iris said at last. She caught herself; her old Plains accent had crept back into her voice. “It may just make it harder to return here.”

“You’re right about that. We’ve found that when students go home for visits during their first year, it is harder for them. Some don’t want to return, and the school loses them. Others feel even more alienated from their families and old friends, and if they haven’t formed strong friendships with other students, they’re even more lonely than they were before.” Esteban paused. “What you do is up to you, of course, but if it’ll make it any easier, you can always tell your people that the Institute advised you against such a trip now.”

“Thanks, Esteban.”

“Don’t thank me. It still has to be your decision. It’s just that, in your case, you might not want to come back to the Institute.”

Iris shook her head. “You’re wrong. I’d come back. I worked too hard to get here. You think I still feel guilty about leaving my son and my household, and maybe I do, but I wouldn’t give up my studies for them.”

“Your bonds with those in Lincoln are still stronger than those with the people here.”

“I have my studies,” she answered.

“Without the companionship of people you care about, work can be lonely. You’ll need to work with others if you’re sent to Venus. You’ll need to think of them almost as your family, and of the Project as your home. I don’t doubt your devotion, but you seem to be using your work partly as an escape. You

fear the claims others might make on you, and you're afraid that they'll interfere with your goals. I'm not surprised that you feel that way, but friendships here will only strengthen you in your purpose. All of you want the same thing, after all. The people here are not like those you left behind on the Plains."

"I have a bondmate," she said, "as you know. It's enough that he shares my dream."

"I'd guess that you fear his claim on you also."

There was a way to escape her fears and guilts. The Institute knew that some of the students would eventually choose to leave; she would not be missed. It would be easy to go home and not return. Angharad would be pleased, and Iris's duties in her household would not leave her too much time to reflect on the school and what she might have lost. As the years passed, she would come to believe that she was more important to Lincoln than she would ever have been to the Project. She would feel no more guilt, and might even be of help to any children in the town who wanted to learn. Angharad had hinted that Eric's business was not doing as well as he had expected; Iris was sure that he might welcome her advice.

Chen, of course, would be disappointed if he learned she would not join him on the Islands after all, but that would pass. By the time he left the Plains for good, it was likely that their love would have faded. He would be consoled if she promised to send Benzi to him when the boy was older. She could leave her dream to her son; the dream would not die completely.

"You're thinking," Esteban said, "of how easy it actually would be to give it all up."

He would be a good Counselor someday; it almost seemed that he could read thoughts. "Esteban." She was silent for a moment. "I don't know how to say this. I feel like a fake. I feel as if I'm impersonating someone else, that I'm not really what I'm pretending to be."

A smile appeared on Esteban's shadowed face. "Believe me, that's a common feeling here. Many of your fellow students share it."

"I'm never myself, except when I'm alone. Even then, I feel as if I'm losing myself. Sometimes I wonder if the cyberminds or some Linker made a mistake, and I'm here by accident."

Esteban laughed. "No one comes here by accident."

"Mistakes can happen."

"Not that kind of mistake. Look, you worked hard to get here. You had to set yourself against your family to have what you wanted. The Project, and what it means, must have become something of an obsession for you. Now, for the first time, you're in daily contact with others who are like you, and you don't like what you see in them — the drive, the ambition, the willingness to push everything else aside for our common goal. You're not afraid that you can't measure up, you're afraid that you will. You don't really think the cyberminds made a mistake, you're afraid that you have."

"Maybe I did," she said.

"You don't believe that, and neither do I. But I will say this, Iris. If you let these doubts fester too long, no amount of success in your courses will take you to the Islands or Anwara, but if you keep in sight what we're all here for, no failure or disappointment will stand in your way. It's time you drew closer to others here, and through them, accept what you are and have to become."

Esteban's voice was gentle, but his words seemed cold nonetheless. Had he been her Counselor in Lincoln, he might have been advising her to make her peace with her household and neighbors; because

she was here, he was telling her to loosen those old ties. She thought of what Anthony had said, that they were only being turned into tools of the Mukhtars.

Anthony was wrong. The new world was what mattered, and those who built it would never be slaves. She clung to that thought.

“I’ve decided one thing,” she said to Esteban. “I’m not going back to Lincoln this summer. I could use the time to review my work anyway. Thanks for talking to me.”

“I hope I helped.”

“You did.” She stood up.

“Going back to your room to study?”

She shook her head. “I think I’ll talk to them.” She gestured at the group of students in the distance. “I’ve seen most of them around — I suppose I ought to get to know them better.”

Esteban nodded. She took a breath as she began to cross the garden.

The flute player put down his instrument as she approached; his companions were watching her. “Salaam,” one young man said.

“Salaam,” Iris replied. “Is it all right if I listen?”

“Of course,” one slender young woman replied. “Tim always likes an audience. Have a seat.” She gestured at the ground; Iris seated herself. “Maybe he’ll play the song he wrote, the one for Venus. Tim thinks that if the Islands don’t have enough places for geophysicists when he’s through, they might still make room for one who’s also a musician.”

The flute player smiled, then lifted his instrument. A piercing note hung in the air; as he played on, Iris seemed to hear the sound of the Cytherian winds.

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Seventeen

Eric sat in the darkened common room and scowled at the wall as he drank. His mother hadn’t looked happy when he arrived for supper. Once, Constance had pressed him to come by more often; now, she didn’t seem to want him around. How could he explain to her that he could no longer stand to see Fatima and Jehan glowering at him in silence or nattering at him about his accounts? He was doing his best to pay off his debt to the two shopkeepers, and now even Constance was unwilling to give him credit.

Eric sipped from his bottle. Another message from Iris had come that afternoon, and he supposed that the women, who were out in the courtyard, were discussing that. Angharad would cluck over the message and worry about the strained look on Iris’s face and the weary sound of her voice. LaDonna would say that the school was giving Iris too much work and that the strain would make her ill and wither her ovaries. Sheryl would say that Iris should be home with her son and that Benzi was forgetting her already, and Wenda would no doubt have some ambiguous words of wisdom to offer for the occasion.

Since the summer, Iris’s messages had become even more infrequent. A month might pass with no word, and then a new message, shorter than the last, would appear on the screen in the common room. Iris would speak briefly of courses, sometimes of a new friend or teacher. She and her fellow student Chantal

Lacan had gone to the Museo de Bellas Artes. Her teacher Miro Demara had looked at her computer model tracing the causes of a cooler than normal summer in North America, and had pronounced it an adequate piece of work. She and several students from the Plains had decided that the Cytherian Institute should do more to prepare new students; Iris and her friends had personally contacted each of the recently chosen students from the Plains to tell them what to expect. That idea had proven to be so successful in helping the new students adapt that others had decided to do the same for those in their Nomarchies.

Eric shifted his head toward the window and watched the lightly falling snow. How would he cover his debts during the time Fatima's store was closed? Why hadn't Iris, who was so clever, taken those inactive winter months into account when she had advised him to throw in his lot with the shopkeeper?

Iris's talk was now flavored with high-sounding, obscure phrases; her voice had taken on a clipped, accented tone unlike the flat sound of Plains talk. There was always an excuse for not returning home during a break in her studies — a friend had promised to tutor her, Esteban had advised her to review her own work, she and other students concentrating on meteorology and climatology were going to spend a brief period with specialists on one of the orbiting platforms and she would be a fool to reject the opportunity. Always, she talked about keeping up with her studies, about how much preparation she had lacked — as if the household were to blame for that.

The women had begun to refrain from inviting her back, from asking her to make some time for her household and her son. What was the use? They would only hear another excuse, and Eric knew that they might no longer welcome a visit from a young woman who was becoming a stranger. Even Angharad and Julia now seemed content to take credit for Iris's accomplishments from a distance rather than to have her actually present in Lincoln, where whatever odd urban habits she had picked up might be an embarrassment. If it hadn't been for her baby, some had implied, it might be better if she never came back at all.

She should have come back. If she knew so much, she might have been able to tell him how to save his failing business. What could he gain from the few brief messages she had sent, messages she had probably rattled off while thinking about some damned lesson? She kept asking for a reply, but what could he say to her? To reveal his true situation fully, to tell her how useless her suggestions were, would humiliate him.

Eric gulped down more whiskey. Lately, it seemed to take him longer to reach the state of numbed oblivion he desired. The town had lost interest in his merchandise almost as soon as Iris was gone, and Chen, during his visits, wanted to spend most of his time with Benzi instead of carving. Eric had struck the child once, when no one was around, grinning as he listened to Benzi's wails until shame at the act had overwhelmed him. But he couldn't blame Chen for his troubles. The man had given Eric a share of money people in other towns had paid for a couple of carvings, even though Eric had nothing to do with acquiring those commissions. Eric, though shamed, had accepted that charity.

Iris was to blame, he thought darkly, Iris with her gab about selling beautiful things and increasing demand. Now, he had a shopful of items Fatima'd had to pay for and no place to sell them, while Iris romped around Caracas and played with her computer projections or whatever the hell they were and sat in seminars gabbing nonsense and, for all he knew, dallied with the male students of many lands. She had talked him into this. He never would have thought of it himself. He had been foolish enough to think she was helping him; all she had done was to puff herself up with her imagined good deed before going off to be a student.

Oh, she was too fine for Lincoln now. She probably thought that he was selling a lot of old junk; she probably laughed about it when she went to the Museo with her friends. He could almost hear her

laughing now. What did she expect him to do, run to every arriving floater like a beggar to plead with passengers to come to his shop?

Fatima and Jehan would throw him out soon. He imagined himself having to return to his old life, having to wander from town to town to spend lonely nights in a stranger's room or on a bed in a noisy hostel, having to endure the rough teasing, and worse, of those workers who would quickly sense his weakness. He had hated his old life before; now, it seemed even more oppressive, because he had believed that he had escaped it.

Even Constance would not help him. She would be too embarrassed to have him in the house when he could be out working, and the other women wouldn't allow it, anyway. Oh, they talked about men often enough, and flirted ridiculously whenever one was around, but they clung to this house and their lives with an iron grip and would never allow themselves to be bound by any man's wishes. Even Peter, who was liked by many, was barely tolerated in some circles, and he was the head of his household. Eric would have no such protection.

Iris had brought him to this, had lifted him up and then dropped him, not caring what became of him. How sick it made him feel to hear the town talk of her. That fool Laiza bragged of her friend the student to visitors when it should have been clear to her that Iris no longer had time for Laiza, either, had even discouraged her from visiting the Cytherian Institute when Laiza had offered to come and see her old friend.

Eric lifted his bottle and drank. Maybe Iris would not do so well at her studies; maybe the Institute would send her home. She wouldn't be worth much, then. He almost smiled as he thought of that possibility.

He turned his head toward the screen; the movement made him dizzy. He could almost see Iris behind it, hiding in the dark, laughing as she told him how to find commissions and increase demand. She was with her fine friends now, all those Linkers and Counselors who sat in their cities mocking the feeble efforts of people like Eric. They had all conspired against him; they would take everything from him — his shop, his home, his life.

He stumbled to his feet. Grabbing his bottle by the neck, he hurled it across the room. The bottle smashed against the screen; the glass tinkled from the unbroken surface to the floor.

After Chen's suborbital flight had landed, he followed the other passengers into the Caracas port. A guard at the entrance beamed obsequiously at those who were well dressed, then narrowed his eyes when he spotted Chen.

Chen held up his bag and identity bracelet for the scanner while searching for Iris among the crowd greeting other passengers. At last he found a seat near the entrance, afraid he might get lost and that she would not be able to find him. A young woman tried to sell him a cyberguide's services; a boy offered him a cheap room at a hotel; a patrolman asked to see his wristband.

The trip had cost him most of what he had earned on his last job, and he was beginning to wonder what he would say to the bondmate he had not seen in over a year. He should have been spending this time with his son; now he was unlikely to see Benzi before late summer or fall.

Chen was hungry, but if he went to fetch food, Iris might not know where he had gone, or might even think he had changed his mind and gone to Lincoln instead. He could ask for instructions on how to get to the Institute, but hesitated as he was about to rise. Iris might already be on her way; she'd be annoyed if he wasn't here. He cursed himself silently for not planning the trip earlier, for not preparing himself with images of the city.

He reached into his pocket and took out the carving he had finished. Iris's face gazed out at him from the wood; her eyes looked past him to another place. Her upper lip was curled in a cold smile. She had looked like that the last time he had spoken to her.

"May I see that?"

He gazed into the long, pale face of a blond woman; a Linker's gem shone on her forehead. He held up the carving.

"Did you do that?"

He nodded.

"I'll buy it from you." She held her wristband to her lips, ready to make the purchase. "Just tell me your name, Nomarchy of residence, and the price, and we'll put it into your account."

"It's not for sale."

"Ah, a bargaining ploy. Name your price, Citizen. I can afford it."

"It's not for sale."

She tilted her head. "Too bad. Do you do a lot of that?"

"When I can. It's a hobby."

"You have talent. I have friends who'd pay a lot for something original and handmade. I don't suppose you'd change your mind later."

Chen was silent as he thought of the cost of his trip. He could use the money, and Eric might need some help as well. He would hardly have to force the credit on Eric, who was deeply in debt to Fatima, but he wondered if Eric would pay the shopkeeper or simply spend the credit at the tavern.

"It's a gift," he said at last. "I can't sell it."

"I'll be at the Tamanaco for three days," the woman said. "If you like, just come there and ask for Arla Goddell — that's my name. Just tell the clerk that you're the craftsman from the port. Maybe you could do another for me. I must rush."

As the woman hastened away, Chen saw that Iris was approaching him. Her face was taut, her green eyes more prominent. He stood up and she stepped back, not seeming to see his outstretched arms.

"What are you doing here, Chen?"

"What kind of greeting is that?"

She eyed him warily; then her face softened and she kissed him awkwardly on the cheek, bumping her nose against his. "Well," she said.

"Didn't you get my message?"

"Of course. I couldn't get here before now. You didn't have to wait — you could have met me at the Institute. There's an express right over there." She pointed down the hall. Next to a doorway, signs in several languages were posted, while a woman on a screen repeated the information on the signs for those who could not read.

She took his arm, not even glancing at the carving as he put it into his pocket. He picked up his duffel and let her lead him toward the tubeway entrance.

An escalator carried them down to a platform, where they waited with other passengers until the magneto-train whispered through the tubeway to their side. Iris elbowed her way through the crowd and found a seat near the back of one car. He glanced at the back of her neck as she sat down; her thick brown hair was still short, and she was wearing light green shorts and a sleeveless green blouse. A couple of men across the aisle were staring at her muscular bare legs.

Chen sat down next to her. "I thought you'd want to see Benzi, as you always do," she said. "You came at a bad time. I have a lot to do."

"You always have a lot to do."

"You should have given me more warning."

"I wanted to see you."

The train shot out of the tubeway and hummed as it passed flickering towers, then hurtled past adobe houses and patches of green. In the distance, Chen could now see the mountains around the city. His view was suddenly obscured by more towers even higher than the last. Iris gazed out the window, her face turned away from him.

"You haven't said much in your messages lately," Chen said. "You used to tell me a little about your friends here, and now you hardly mention them. Is Alexandra Lenas still here?"

"I don't see much of her any more."

"Does that older student Esteban still give you advice?"

She was silent for a moment. "Sometimes," she said at last.

"I wondered. You haven't talked about him for a while."

"He grew up on Basic. I don't know if I ever told you that. He used to work in the port as a guide to get credit for lessons. A Linker found him there and became his patron, decided he should be sent to a school." Her voice held a trace of an accusatory tone, as if she were wondering why Chen had not shown such industry and ambition. She touched his hand lightly. "I am glad you came, really," she said. "It's just that I don't know how much time we'll be able to have alone."

"Better a little than none at all." He paused. "How's that boy you met when you first came here, the Linker's son?"

She shifted a little in her seat, then leaned back. "Anthony? He left the school a month ago."

"Why?"

Iris looked grim. "He had to. Oh, no one asked him to leave, but he soon saw he wasn't welcome. You know, he had some rather odd ideas, kept talking about how the Project was part of a historical discontinuity instead of being a natural outgrowth of Earth's development. He used to argue about that in some of our discussions, and the rest of us would keep pointing out that it was the Habbars who broke with the past, not us, that we seek to redeem it instead."

Chen nodded, not sure he understood what she was talking about but waiting for her to continue. "Does

it matter what you think, one way or the other?" he asked.

"It matters that we consider what the Project is for," Iris answered. She had grown more animated and seemed to have lost her unease for the moment. "It isn't enough just to know that we might have the technical means to transform a world. It isn't even enough to realize that what we find out there may someday help us here, though that's important too. A lot of people don't realize it, but the future progress of all the Nomarchies hinges on that Project. Earth might stagnate without it. But once Venus is settled, a new culture there can revitalize Earth, the way younger, newer cultures changed old ones in the past. Differences move history forward."

"I see," he said, remembering similar comments he had heard on the Islands. "But the Habitats are something new too. Why couldn't they —"

"We may need the Habs for certain things, but they're still a break, a discontinuity. They've given up the good of human history along with the bad. They pretend human beings are nothing more than a rational mind, and we're not. Their worlds are constructs of consciousness, planned and controlled. Their way can only lead to sterility. A planet is more like an organism, with both a rational mind and an autonomic nervous system, and it also offers something outside of ourselves for us to explore. No matter what we accomplish on Venus, no matter how much control we gain over its environment, there will always be that other, outside of ourselves, that we can't control, and that will both make us stronger and give us a sense of our true place in the universe. Habbars live in a closed environment that they dominate. They live in an illusion."

Chen considered her words, sure that he had at least grasped the main point. The Habbars he had known did not seem to fit her description; they had been only too aware of being specks on the sea of space. But Iris had more knowledge than he possessed; she had to understand these matters better than he could.

Iris was staring out of the window again. "What about Anthony?" Chen asked. "You didn't finish telling me about him."

"Oh." She fidgeted, looking distinctly uneasy. "I guess my talk must bore you."

She would never have said that before, he thought with a pang. She had already forgotten how often he had questioned her about her lessons, how much enjoyment he had taken in hearing about what she had learned even when he could not understand everything she would say.

"It wasn't just his questions," she went on. "We're supposed to ask questions, it's part of our training. But Anthony acted as though he already had the answers. He claimed that we didn't really understand what the Project would lead to, that once Venus was settled, it might even become something separate from the Nomarchies — as if it could. It would need Earth's help for centuries. Anthony was sort of simple-minded, in a way — he kept saying that there was a contradiction at the heart of the Project, that we wanted Venus to diverge and yet be part of us as well. He didn't seem to see —" She paused.

"It's not something you'll find out with talk," Chen said.

Iris shrugged. "Well, that wasn't why he left. It wasn't even that he started wondering whether or not the Project was being pushed too fast. That was another thing that bothered him, the plans to build domes on the surface as soon as possible instead of waiting — oh, he would harp on that."

"He isn't the only one. Some people on the Islands wondered about that."

"Well, it's either taking a chance on domes or waiting for centuries. People are getting impatient —"

they've waited long enough. You can understand that, Chen. You're waiting yourself. We have materials now that are strong enough for domed settlements there. If we couldn't do it, we wouldn't risk it. After all, it may be our lives that are at stake. We need space for settlers soon."

He took her hand. At least they still shared that vision. She let her palm rest in his, then drew her hand away. "I do run on," she said. "You can see why my messages are so short. If I let myself go, I'd just go on and on forever, and God only knows what that would cost. Anyway, Anthony began to get kind of disruptive — haranguing us in discussions, pestering other students, trying to bring others around to his point of view."

Chen frowned, feeling more ignorant than ever. "But if you're supposed to ask questions, then what was wrong?"

"He wasn't just asking questions." She sighed. "He was also trying to find out what all of us thought. I can't prove it, but we began to wonder if he'd been sent there to find out which of us might not be suitable for the Project. You know — a spy."

Chen kept his face still.

"It was little things that bothered us." Iris's eyes were cold. "A few months ago, Anthony got an increase in his allotment. We all have the same allotment, we have to get extra credit from our families or from work — as if anyone would have the time for a job. The rumor was that he'd done some job for a Counselor, even though he didn't appear to be doing any extra work. Then he began to get a few extra privileges, a couple of days off, a trip home when the rest of us were advised to stay at the Institute."

"Was his work better than anyone's?" Chen asked.

"Oh, he was better prepared than most of us when he came, but there were others doing as well at their studies. Then we heard that he'd been telling some of the Administrators about students who agreed with some of his notions. By the time he got smart enough to see how much we resented him, it was too late — no one would talk to him. He lost every friend he had, the few who remained." She scowled. "That's why he left. He must have realized that he wasn't useful any more. I heard he might be going to another school. I suppose he'll be spying there too."

"And I guess you didn't stay friends with him, either."

She lowered her eyes suddenly. "No," she said sharply. "I had reasons to be sure I kept my distance. I didn't want anyone thinking — well, you can see."

A formless doubt fluttered at the edges of Chen's thoughts. "But you don't know if he was really doing anything, do you?"

"Oh, Chen. Why else would he have left?"

"Because he lost his friends. Because you didn't trust him. It'd be hard to stay."

Her mouth twisted. "That wouldn't have stopped him if he were innocent. He could have complained, and brought things out into the open. He would have gone on if he'd really cared about the work. I went on with my lessons even when the rest of Lincoln thought I was a fool for doing them."

Her words were hard and merciless. Julia encouraged you, he thought. A Linker tried to help you, your friends still talked to you, and later, you had me. He felt a twinge of sympathy for the Linker's son he had never met. Whatever his transgression, Anthony's punishment seemed cruel, and the fact that Anthony had chosen to leave without a fight showed how effective the punishment had been. There had been

nothing against which he could have filed a protest.

The window darkened as the train entered another tubeway. “We’re almost there,” Iris said.

A platform, protected on all sides by transparent shielding, carried them up past the lattices of the Institute’s pyramid. Occasionally, Chen caught a glimpse of the green land below; Caracas gleamed in the valley, its towers pointed toward the cloudless blue sky.

Iris had greeted two of the other platform passengers. She stood with them now in one corner as they spoke in soft voices, then waved at another young woman as she boarded the platform. That young woman surveyed Chen; he was suddenly conscious of his gray worker’s garb, and looked away.

He did not look up again until the platform stopped and the other passengers left. Iris had known them, yet she had not even introduced him, and he had not heard his name mentioned in her murmurings to the others. He was invisible; somehow, he had disappeared and his bondmate had forgotten him.

She touched his sleeve, startling him. “Just one more level.” The platform stopped and they stepped out onto a surface lined with palm trees and hibiscus bushes. The level, protected by high railings, was open to the air; the trees fluttered in the wind.

“Sometimes, somebody tries to jump,” Iris said. Chen stepped back from the railing. “But if you climb on the railing, the sensors signal and a servo’s sent out to restrain you immediately.”

“What happens then?”

“The person’s taken to one of the physicians. If it’s just a momentary depression, something’s prescribed and a Counselor’s called in. If it’s more serious, the student gets a leave for treatment, unless his work’s going really badly — if it is, then he’s advised to leave. It happens once in a while — there’s a lot of pressure. It’s hard to think you might fail.”

“You wouldn’t do anything like that — jumping, I mean.”

She shook her head. “Of course not. I wouldn’t want that on my record. It’d be bound to hurt my chance to get to the Islands.”

He followed her past a few shell-shaped dwellings of pink and white stone until she stopped in front of one. “This is mine. If you get lost, just remember that I’m on the eighth level and this is the eleventh one in from the platform on the north side. That way, someone can always direct you. Or you can just tell the servo my name.” Her voice was impersonal, as if she were a tour guide.

She led him inside. A few students were sitting in the front room eating an early supper; the young men were shirtless while the young women wore sleeveless shirts and shorts. One woman looked up and nodded at Iris before turning back to her reading screen. One student was tall and blond, another looked African, a third had a flat, broad, copper-colored face, while a fourth looked like one of Chen’s people, yet their similar clothes and slumped posture as they perused their reading screens made them seem alike. The Institute had already begun to mold them, smoothing away their differences.

They walked through the room toward a ramp; Chen thought he heard one of the women giggle. Iris stopped in front of the first door at the top of the ramp, took his hand, pressed it against a panel, then put her own palm next to it, “That’s so you can get in when I’m not here,” she murmured, though she hardly had to explain that; she was treating him like a stranger again. “And the front door will now open for you too”

The door slid open. The room was small and bare. Iris’s clothes hung on a thin rod; her bed was a small

platform.

“What’s that?” He gestured at the room’s only ornament, a blue crystal on a shelf above her screen.

“A mood stone. When I hold it, it soothes me.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“It was a gift.” She did not say who had given it to her. “I guess we should eat soon. You’d better use your own account, though — my allotment only covers what I eat, and I don’t have much credit.”

He dropped his duffel. “Iris.” He reached for her. She drew back for a moment, then rested against him, her head on his shoulder. “It’s been too long.”

She stroked his hair, then freed herself. “Listen, I promised to meet someone about now, before I knew you were coming, but I won’t be long. I’ll just be outside. You can rest if you want, and then we’ll have supper.”

She had retreated from the room before he could ask her why she didn’t want him to meet her friend. He sat down on the bed. Perhaps he was making it harder on her by reminding her of her home; maybe her teachers would regard him as a distraction, and disapprove of his visit. He should have thought of that before.

He waited, growing hungry. He thought of walking around the level, but the journey had tired him. At last he stood up and left the room; he strode down the ramp and passed another student on her way to her room.

The front room was now empty except for one young man slouched over his portable screen. He looked up at Chen and shook back his long blond hair. “Looking for Iris?”

Chen nodded.

“I thought I saw you come in with her. She’s just out there. I’m Edwin Barris. Are you an old friend of Iris’s?”

“Yes,” he answered, unwilling to say more, not knowing what Iris might have told Edwin about him or what the young man might be to her. “I’m Liang Chen.”

Edwin grinned. “You’re her son’s father, then. She’s mentioned you.” He stood up. “You actually worked on the Project. She told us that too.”

“For a while.”

“I wish I could talk to you about it, but I have to study. Too bad you didn’t come here when we have more time off. Things get more interesting then. That’s what it’s like here — wild or dead. Not too wild, though. Wouldn’t want anyone to think we couldn’t be good, cooperative sorts on the Islands.” Edwin grimaced, and Chen became aware of the strain and fatigue in the young man’s face. “Staying for a while?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe we can talk, then. See you around.” Edwin walked toward the ramp and hurried up to his own room.

The student’s friendliness had eased him a little. Iris had spoken of him to others; maybe she still missed

him after all. He went to the window and looked outside. Iris was sitting near a bush with a dark-haired young man. The man suddenly jumped to his feet and pulled Iris to hers. She stroked his bare arm; as he leaned forward, his dark beard brushed the top of her head. He was saying something to her; she shook her head. Chen backed away from the window and went to the dispenser, not noticing what he had selected until the panel slid open and offered him a plate of beans and rice and a small bottle of wine.

Iris came inside as he was seating himself; she was alone. She fetched her own meal and sat down across from him.

“Who was the man?”

Her eyes widened. She looked down quickly.

“The one you were talking to outside.”

“Oh. That was Esteban.”

“Were you afraid to have him meet me?”

She raised her head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“He had to go someplace.”

He picked at the spicy, unfamiliar food; his appetite was gone. “Tell me about Benzi,” she said.

“He’s growing. Well, you know that — you’ve seen his image. He’s stubborn. Give him a toy, and he’s not about to let go of it until he’s ready.” Iris’s face softened as he spoke of the boy; her eyes grew more gentle. Chen went on speaking, telling of how quickly Benzi seemed to grasp the meaning of a word and of how often he would take a small object apart, as if curious about how it worked, and how loudly he cried.

Iris stifled a yawn as he finished, then smiled apologetically. “I’m tired,” she said. “I never seem to sleep enough now.”

He cleared away their trays, then walked back to her room at her side. They undressed in silence. When they climbed into her bed, he drew her head toward his, missing the long hair he remembered as he stroked her neck. Her hands clutched at him nervously; her hip bone dug into his side. She was unfamiliar; the body he touched was thinner, her smell muskier.

He was too impatient to wait. He rocked against her, moaning as he entered, crying out as he sought release, and finished too soon. As he let go, she fell back on the bed. By the time his hands reached for her again, she was breathing deeply, her mouth open, her body slack, asleep.

Chen awoke once during the night. A dim light glowed near the screen; Iris was awake, a band around her head. Still wearing the band, she crept back to bed. Chen pretended he was still asleep, and soon drifted off once more.

When he woke up again, she was dressing. Her breasts glistened with droplets of water. She swatted at herself with a towel, then draped the towel over the clothes rod.

“Iris. You should have stayed awake longer. More than a year, and I didn’t satisfy you.”

“It’s all right. It wasn’t your fault.” She smiled at him the way she once had. He got up and let himself into

the cubicle next to the room. By the time he had finished showering in the small stall, Iris was dressed and in front of her screen, staring at lines of symbols.

“How long are you going to stay?” she asked as she looked up.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be in the way. I can probably find my way around during the day.”

“I’d show you around myself, but I wouldn’t have time.”

“I could come to your discussions with you.”

“That wouldn’t be wise. You’d probably distract everybody, and they’d want to ask you what it was like for you on the Project, and then we wouldn’t get to what we’re supposed to be doing.”

“I wouldn’t say anything.”

“Oh, Chen. I don’t have time for this.”

He sat down on the bed, draping the sheet over his bare body, suddenly embarrassed at his nakedness. Her eyes had a distant look again, as if he were a stranger who had never shared her bed before. “Iris, do you want to end our bond?”

She gripped the back of her chair with her hands. “What made you say that?”

“I thought you might be thinking of it. You don’t really need me now. You have what you wanted without me. We’re growing apart. We’ll change even more by the time you leave this place.”

“Look, we’ve been separated. It’s natural to feel that way. But I never thought of breaking our bond.”

“Iris, you don’t feel the same way. I can sense it. You didn’t even introduce me to your friends. I shame you. You’ll be someone with schooling, and I’ll be a worker. You may want to be free from me then.”

Her fingers curled around the chair’s back. “You wanted me to come here. You told me it was the right thing to do. Maybe it’s you who wants to end our bond.”

He shook his head. “Never.”

“Then why did you bring this up now?” Her voice was shrill. “I have work to do. I can’t talk about this.”

He had meant to say he loved her. His words had flowed from his lips almost against his will.

“Chen, I made a promise to you,” she went on. “I’ll do my best to keep it. We still share the same dream, don’t we? Don’t we? It may be harder for you to return to the Project without me. I’ll be needed there when I’m trained. They don’t have as many people in my field there as they’d like, because they need so many of them here for weather control. They’ll be bound to keep you at my side. I can’t break the pledge now.”

Was this her way of saying that she still cared? He pressed his lips together, thinking that he had been a fool to speak.

“Anyway, be practical,” Iris said in a lower voice. “If we break our bond, the time to do that is when we’re on the Islands, not here. Once we’re safely there, it won’t matter.”

“I see.” Chen seemed to be outside of himself, unable to control his words. “You’re just waiting to break it. At least be honest with me.”

The muscles in her neck tightened as she leaned forward. “What do you want from me? I took you as a bondmate, against my mother’s wishes, when she could have expelled me from her house. I gave you a son, I cared for you as much as I could. But it isn’t enough for you. No matter what I give, you want more.”

“You took me as a bondmate because you needed me then. Now, you don’t. You can get to the Islands without me. You can have others, like that man Esteban.”

“So that’s what it is.” She hissed the words. “How wrong you are. He shows me some attention, nothing more. He has to counsel many of us, so he has to treat us all the same way, and he can hardly sleep with all of us.” Her eyes narrowed. “Not that I haven’t tried. I’ve asked him to my bed, but he refuses. There. You wanted honesty from me.”

“And there was no one else?”

“No one who mattered,” she snapped. In spite of her words, she looked wounded. “You knew what my customs were before. I don’t ask you what you do away from me. Our contract doesn’t forbid other partners while we’re separated.”

She didn’t understand. It wasn’t jealousy he felt, but the fear that he was losing her. Why couldn’t she see that?

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she went on. “What if you let it slip to someone else that we’re bondmates, that you aren’t just the father of my child? Esteban knows, and the Administrators must know, but they keep it in confidence. It wouldn’t even matter if many of the students knew, because a lot of their people practice that custom, but there are students here from the Plains, and gossip spreads. I don’t want to shame my commune.”

He sighed. “You should know by now that I wouldn’t give you away.”

“Now, you come here and take me away from my work. I can’t sit here talking to you. I have a discussion in a few minutes, and it’s too late to get to it in person, so I’ll have to use my screen. Maybe that seems like a small lapse to you, but here, they place importance on personal contact, since we have to be able to work together later.”

“You’re right,” he said angrily. “I shouldn’t have come. There are hostels in Caracas. I can find a bed at one until I leave. I can go back to Lincoln for a few days, see Benzi. He should feel that at least one of his parents doesn’t see him as useless.”

She turned back to her screen impatiently. Chen dressed quickly, then remembered the carving he had been planning to give her. He was about to pull it from the pocket where it had remained when Iris turned around again.

“I can’t have you leave like this,” she murmured. “Maybe you’ll understand if I explain something to you. Chen, I’m struggling here. It was easy to think I was clever back in Lincoln. It’s a little different when you’re with others who were chosen. This place isn’t just teaching us what we can do, but what’s beyond us as well. At best, I’ll get by and even get sent to the Project, not because I’m terribly wise or talented, but because they happen to need more people in my field there. At worst, I could fail, and then everything I’ve done will be useless.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

She shook her head. “Oh, I had very grand dreams for myself once. I thought I might even do something

original with my work. Well, I can see the patterns, but I can't make the leap beyond them to something new. That gift isn't inside me, and nothing will put it there. Angharad was right when she told me that my learning would bring me unhappiness. I might have been happier if I'd stayed in Lincoln. I could have always told myself that —"

"Would you really change it?" he asked.

"No, I guess not. Not even now." She blinked and wiped at her eyes. "Well, now you know what an imposter I really am. I sometimes think they made a mistake in choosing me."

"No they didn't." He stood near her and stroked her hair. "You knew it would be hard. They wouldn't give you the allotment if they thought you couldn't succeed. I'll go now. Don't worry. You'd better get back to your discussion."

She turned back to the screen. He was about to place the carving next to her, then decided to keep it. He had misunderstood her when he carved it. He had formed the face of a woman serene in her knowledge and disdainful of those who could not share it; to give her such a carving now would wound her.

He kissed her on the neck lightly before leaving. He would send her a message before he left Caracas, when he could think about his words before speaking them. He would tell her that he could wait, that his love was strong enough for that.

The floater rested in its cradle. Chen hurried down the ramp, nodding absently at the few shopkeepers claiming shipments, and made his way toward Lincoln. He would at last have some good news for Eric. Arla Goddell had paid handsomely for his carving of Iris, had asked for one of herself, and had spoken of friends who would pay for carvings. Almost without thinking, Chen had given her Eric's name and location, saying that she could make arrangements through the young shopkeeper.

The more Chen had thought of that impulsive gesture during his journey, the better an idea it had seemed. Eric could handle the commissions, send Chen images of those to be carved, make the shipments, keep the records. His business might revive when the rest of Lincoln heard that such folk were dealing with Eric. Chen hadn't stopped to think of how he himself would find time for the extra work; he would worry about that later.

He strode into the town square and hurried toward the tavern, expecting that Eric would be there and yet hoping that he wasn't present. He stopped in front of the tavern door and wiped his brow with one hand.

The door opened. He stepped into the darkened, cool room that was a refuge from the humid spring heat. "Where's Eric Constances?" he asked.

A man standing at the bar turned around. "The shopkeeper? Probably at the town hall. The Counselor's here — I saw Eric heading there earlier."

Chen had forgotten. He went outside and crossed the square. As he began to climb the steps, he heard a scream.

Suddenly, townsfolk were streaming out of the hall toward him. He stepped aside quickly to let them pass. "Go get Letty!" a woman cried. Someone was wailing. Chen looked up; Laiza was teetering at the top of the steps, as if about to fall.

He dropped his duffel and bounded up the steps to her. She pushed him away, and then fell against him; she was shaking as he gripped her shoulders. Letty Charlottes, followed by two women, was already

running across the square carrying her bag; she scurried up the steps and entered the hall.

“What is it?” Chen managed to ask.

“It’s Eric!” the young woman wailed. “It’s Eric!” He shook her, but she said no more. He let go and Laiza stumbled away.

His throat was dry. He entered the hall, afraid of what he would see.

A few people were standing outside the Counselor’s room. Letty emerged, the Counselor, David Annas, at her side. “I’m sorry to tell you this,” she said to the small crowd. “He’s dead. I don’t know how it could have happened. David here says that it was sudden — one minute, Eric was speaking, and the next, he just fell to the floor. Poor Eric probably didn’t even feel anything. David went to his side right away, but he saw that he was gone even before I was sent for. I won’t know more until —”

David Annas was already leading the others away; he shook his head and murmured to them in soothing tones. Chen stared at the Counselor’s broad back; his hands became fists.

Letty caught Chen’s eye and motioned to him; he moved toward her. “I know he was your friend,” the physician said. “It seems to have been a stroke, according to my med-scan. I don’t understand it. He was so young. I scanned him not more than two months ago. I warned him to stop drinking and gave him some medication, but I don’t suppose he took it. I told him I’d insist on an implant if he didn’t, something that would make him ill if he touched a drop, but —” She sat down in one of the chairs, cradling her bag on her lap. “Not that it matters now. I don’t know how I could have missed the signs. Somehow, I failed him.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Chen said dully.

“I should have. It was my duty to know, to see the signs.”

He knew he would find no weapon in the Counselor’s room; David had no doubt disposed of it immediately before calling for help. Chen had come back to Lincoln too late; he had not realized the depth of Eric’s rage and despair. He could imagine what David had told him, how sympathetic the Counselor had looked when he had said that it was time for Eric to give up his shop. Perhaps Eric had been prepared for that news.

He had failed his friend, failed the women caring for Benzi. Everything he had done had only brought Eric to his death. He wondered wildly what Eric had carried into the room with him — perhaps a small gun or knife, something easily concealed that would not be missed.

“I’ll have to look at my records again,” Letty was saying. “There has to be something I missed.” Her eyes met his. “Poor Constance. You should go to her house right away. She’ll need her friends now.”

He stumbled from the hall. He was about to cross the square when he remembered his bag. He reached down for it and slung it over his shoulder. A few people had gathered in front of Fatima’s shop; one of them called out to him as he passed. He ignored the caller and went on down the nearest road until he was in front of Angharad’s house. He stared at the door, not knowing how he could bring himself to enter. A few neighbors had drifted into the road; he could not meet their eyes.

At last he went inside. The door to the common room opened as he entered. Constance was sitting in a chair near the screen, her face pale and still. LaDonna was standing next to her, holding a glass of whiskey. Constance shook her head and pushed the glass away. Angharad paced the room, wringing her hands.

Constance suddenly noticed Chen. A scream escaped her; she tore at her blond hair. LaDonna dropped the glass; it rolled on the rug, spilling its amber contents. Chen stiffened, imagining that Constance saw his guilt and was blaming him for her son's death. She can't know, he told himself as he backed toward the doorway.

LaDonna held Constance by her wrists as the blond woman continued to scream. Her hoarse cry lashed at Chen's ears as he watched helplessly.

Chen crept into the darkened town hall and stopped in front of the Counselor's room. He pressed his hand against the door; surprisingly, it opened. David Annas, Chen realized, probably did not know that Chen had been the one who had installed the deadly protective device; there was no need for him to know that, and no reason for David to change the lock.

Chen went inside. David would be at Angharad's house for a while longer. The door slid shut behind him as the ceiling lit up. The heavy curtains over the window were drawn; no one would see the light. He stood there for a moment, almost expecting the beam to take his own life, then went to the desk and sat down.

I'm a murderer, he thought. My hands killed him. He stared at his roughened palms. His finger punched a console button as he spoke the codes he still remembered.

He waited. At last Nancy Fassi's face appeared on the screen; her lids were heavy, swollen with sleep. He had known that she would accept the call.

"I know," she said without preliminaries. "I'm sorry. I was going to contact you tomorrow. I have news for you, Chen."

"I don't want your news. I have something to tell you."

"You'd better hear what I have to say first. We think it's time you went back to the Islands. You've done enough for us. We'll make arrangements as quickly as possible."

He gritted his teeth. He would not even have the chance to tell the Linker that he would do no more of her evil work. She had already anticipated his words and had taken away his chance to stand up to her.

"Really, it's best that you don't stay in the Plains now," she continued. "There are others who can continue the work. It's my hope, and this seems supported by the facts so far, that this was an isolated incident, and won't be repeated. Your bondmate and son can join you when Iris has finished her course of study — I know she'll be encouraged in her own work when she hears you'll be going to the Islands. There's a group of workers leaving for Venus soon." She gazed at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to show his gratitude.

He had his reward, bought with Eric's life. His dream was poisoned; he wished he had never dreamed it at all. He wanted to refuse the offer, and yet knew that he would not. He might even harden himself in time, accept the fact that he had only been a tool of the Nomarchies and that another tool would only have taken his place.

"You knew the man," she said petulantly. "Couldn't you have dissuaded him before this happened?"

"I didn't know he was thinking of this. Maybe it came to him suddenly, before he knew what he was doing." He glared at the screen. "At least you know that I didn't betray you. I'll be silent now too. These people have enough sorrow." If they knew the truth, he and David would face Lincoln's justice together; the town would then pay the price for its revenge. He could not bring the wrath of the Mukhtars down

upon them, could not shatter their complacent community. Better to let them have peace, to think that Eric's death could not have been prevented.

"I'm sorry," Nancy said. "But I warned you about becoming too close to these people. You should never have —"

"Shut up." He turned away from the screen. "I did what you wanted. I knew what it might mean. I accepted it. I have to accept this too."

"You mustn't dwell on this. You'll feel different when you're back on the Islands. If your friend was so disturbed, he might only have brought more pain to others if he had lived. Perhaps he's at peace now."

"He's not at peace. He's dead. Don't pretend I'm some fool dreaming of a God and a heaven." He gripped the arms of the chair. "I'll take my reward. I did my best to earn it." You won't rule us on that world, he thought darkly. You won't spin your web there. I'll live long enough to do what I can to see that you don't.

"I have to go," she said. "I'll erase this message at my end. You'd better leave that room before the Counselor finds you there. You are in his room, aren't you? You can stay in Lincoln until we tell you which port to go to. I know it'll be hard, but I'm sure I can trust you."

Yes, you can trust me, he thought. Maybe you can even guess why I want to stay alive.

He turned off the screen. Nancy would brush him out of her thoughts. The others who would go on doing her work would be gratified to learn that a nameless one of their number had already received payment for his service to the Nomarchies.

David was probably still at the house giving comfort, pretending to the grief that Constance felt. Chen put his palms against the desk. Perhaps the man would forget his role as a Counselor and would comfort Constance in her room. Chen thought not; even David would not care to linger in that house.

He waited, staring past the chairs lined up on the other side of the desk at the door. Eric had come to that room; perhaps he had even pleaded with David for one more chance to save his business before trying to strike out at the Counselor.

At last the door opened. David started as he saw Chen behind the desk. "You shouldn't be here, lad," the Counselor said. "The door was locked. How did you —"

"I put in the lock."

"Yes, of course, I know you've done repairs here, but —" The door slid shut behind David. "You oughtn't to alter the —" The man's muddy brown eyes widened with comprehension.

"Murderer," Chen said.

"You're the one they sent."

"Murderer."

"Listen, I —" David stiffened as Chen held one hand over the desk. "You don't understand. I tried to tell him that we couldn't let him stay here, that already we were going to have to cover Fatima Miriam's debts until he earned enough to pay them back. How was I to know he cared so much about that shop?"

"You were his Counselor. You should have known."

“I couldn’t know that.”

“And you couldn’t even defend yourself, reason with him, or stop him some other way. That button was in front of you. You could just press it and make sure you were safe.” Chen moved his hand a little to the left and poised it over the button. “It must have been easy.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“But I do. I know how you felt.” Chen lowered his hand toward the button in front of him. “The light’s on, you know. Seems you came in with a weapon. Of course. You still have Eric’s, don’t you? You picked it up and hid it and forgot to get rid of it. Guess you were planning to do that now.”

The Counselor froze; his eyes shifted wildly.

“And you must be getting angry by now,” Chen went on in a low voice. “You might even try to lunge at me, get me away from this desk. Maybe I ought to shield myself.”

“You can’t do it,” David said quietly. “Do you really think you could get away with it?”

“Maybe I don’t care whether I do or not.”

“Listen to me! I couldn’t help it!” David wrung his hands. “He was acting so wild. You didn’t see what he was like. I set up the shield, and then he tried to leap at me — I couldn’t stop it.”

“You knew what could happen as soon as you turned the shield on. Look at it this way. Eric didn’t know what was coming, but you do. At least you can prepare yourself.”

David leaned forward slightly, clearly trying to decide if he could reach Chen before the button was pressed. Then he sank into one of the chairs and covered his face. “I didn’t mean to do it,” he moaned. “It was out of my hands.”

Chen got up and walked around the desk. He had seen himself punching the other man, beating him into a blubbing submission; now, his anger had fled, and he saw how useless his gesture had been. He was as guilty as David.

“You’re safe,” he said to the Counselor. “I have what I want. I’ve got friends here. I don’t want them to know what I’ve done.”

David looked up. “You really ought to seek some counseling yourself,” he said. “I could file a complaint against you, you know.”

“Yeah, you could. You’d be taking a chance, but maybe they could come for me before I talked about what I know. But two threats from two different men in one day — the Administrators might wonder just what kind of Counselor you are.”

“I didn’t mean it. You can see that, can’t you? I failed him. I know that. I keep running it over in my mind, thinking of what I could have done. I didn’t mean it.”

Chen strode from the room. David had not meant for this to happen; Chen had not intended it when he had followed Nancy Fassi’s request. But Eric was dead all the same.

June 540

From: Laing Chen, Hostel 8, San Antonio, Nueva Republica de Texas

To: Iris Angharads, Cytherian Institute, Caracas, Nomarchy of Nueva Hispania

We'll be leaving tomorrow, in the morning. A shuttle will take us up to the L-5 port and we'll leave for Venus from there on a torchship. I wanted to see you, but —

I have to be honest. I think I could have found some time to see you, but I didn't want to take you away from your studies. And even if I'd stayed on Earth, we wouldn't have had many chances to be together. There's pain in me now. I didn't want you to see me like this. I should be talking to you instead of just sending this message, but I didn't want to take you away from work or wake you up if you're sleeping. I always liked to watch you sleep, you look so peaceful then. So by the time you hear this, I'll probably be on the shuttle.

The taps against the glass door were distracting him. Chen turned around and glanced at an angry man with a bristling moustache, then put his screen on hold and pressed the door open.

"How long you going to be, anyway?" the man said.

"Not much longer."

"I've got a message to send too."

"There's another screen over there." Chen gestured with one arm, pointing at the opposite side of the room, which was filled with two rows of cots and reclining men.

"And another hog using it," the man replied. "Are you going to wrap this up, or do I have to haul you out of there?"

Chen rose slightly from his seat. "Guess you'll have to haul me out." He showed his teeth. "But then you'd miss your chance at the other screen."

The man turned his head, then began to bound across the room to the screen that was now free.

Chen sighed as he closed the door and tried to think of what he would say next.

They buried Eric before I left Lincoln. I don't know what Angharad told you. I know they all understood that you couldn't come home for that. Angharad told me that she didn't want you to come home. I think you'd want to know that. She said you shouldn't come home to face something so sad, that it'd give you bad memories of your home to take back with you.

This is hard, Iris. I have to tell you everything, because I promised them all I'd do it, and they just couldn't bring themselves to sit down and send you a message about it all. I know Angharad told you how Eric died, about the stroke. His body was taken to Omaha the day after, because the researchers there thought they might be able to find something out. David convinced Letty that it hadn't been her fault and that the people in Omaha would have a better chance of finding out why there weren't any warning signs or whatever. Then David told Constance that Eric's death, and what they found out about it, might give them a way to avoid such things in time. Constance said David advised her to have another child as soon as she could. I think she will.

Iris, I — I have to stop for a minute.

David had come to the house often. His voice had been smooth and soothing, his manner gentle. His voice had faltered slightly only when he met Chen in the hallway or the common room.

At first, David usually averted his eyes guiltily from Chen's accusing gaze. After a few days, he was able

to meet Chen's eyes without flinching. Toward the end, his own eyes had held anger and an unspoken accusation. Chen was as guilty as he, David's look said; Chen had given him the tools that had made his deed possible.

David had won, he knew. He had, in his mind, shifted some of the guilt to Chen, and could find a way to bear his own.

Anyway, Eric's ashes were sent back to Lincoln at the end of that week. Constance insisted on that. She said she wanted him home.

It was raining when we buried him. First, we went to the church, and the priest said mass. Almost everyone in Lincoln was there, and a lot of them had to stand outside. Why so many had to come, I don't know. Maybe it was the shock of having someone so young die of something like that. I brought Benzi. I had to say good-bye to Eric. Maybe someday I can tell you why I — forget that. I'll just say my place was there. Benzi behaved himself. He didn't know what was going on, but he sat still and didn't cry.

Chen had sat in one of the front pews, with Benzi on his lap, wedged in among the members of Angharad's household. He remembered the heat, the closeness of the bodies, the creaking of wood as people knelt or rose and then sat down again. A silver urn near the altar held Eric's ashes. Chen bit the inside of his mouth until it bled. They were all guilty, whether they knew it or not; their indifference to Eric, their insistence that he adjust to Plains ways, had pushed him into despair. They had not cared if his business failed and Eric had to return to a life he had hated; they were all to blame.

Those angry thoughts, oddly enough, had eased Chen for a moment until he glanced at the pew across from his and caught David's sardonic look. His brown eyes seemed to gaze into Chen's soul, as if he knew what Chen was thinking; David, he was sure, was thinking the same thing, mentally shifting more of his own guilt onto others.

Chen's face burned with shame at his own weakness. He could not bring himself to look at the urn that held the ashes of his dead friend.

After the mass, Fatima got up and said a few words about Eric and the shop, and I'd tell you what else she said, but I wasn't really listening because I kept thinking she could have helped him out more when she knew the trouble he was having with his business. I don't know. That isn't fair, I guess. Then Julia talked about what he was like as a boy, and then Constance went up to the altar and stood there for a while. She kept opening and closing her mouth while she looked at us, and I was sure she wasn't going to be able to talk — no one had expected her to try. Angharad was just about to get up and lead her away, and then —

Constance said that she wouldn't cry for Eric. She said that he had never wanted to leave Lincoln in the first place, that he'd wanted to stay, and now he would always be there.

She started crying then. She said she was crying for herself, because if Eric were still alive, she would have been just another person trying to force her son to be what she thought he should be instead of comforting him. Then she said she was glad he was dead, because at least now he wouldn't have to leave, and she started cursing herself because she had never really understood him.

By this time, the priest and Angharad were trying to lead her away, but Constance wouldn't move. She said that she knew why Eric had died and that all the doctors in the world would never see it, that he had died out of grief of not being able to keep the little he had. She said she knew that David was going to tell him he couldn't keep his business.

Then she started saying that it wasn't right that some had to live in one way, and others in a different way. She said that Lincoln was dying, that all the farms were dying, that they were all fools for trying to keep them going, that one day the whole town would die of grief. By then, some people were whispering that she didn't know what she was saying. Finally, the priest calmed her down and got her back to her seat.

We buried Eric outside, at the edge of the field. Constance wanted that too — she didn't want him in the town mausoleum. She said that would be like filing him away on a shelf.

I spoke to her before I left. She was a little better then, more like herself. She mentioned you, said you might be addled but at least you had what you wanted. Then I said good-bye to them all. They knew they probably wouldn't see me again.

I guess you know why I couldn't take Benzi with me. I wanted to, but the new Counselor advised against it. I forgot to tell you that before. A new Counselor was sent to Lincoln just before I left.

Perhaps David had lost, after all. No one knew where he'd been sent, or even if he was still a Counselor. A woman named Diane Derryville, another smiling tool of the Mukhtars, had taken his place.

She had advised Chen about his son, had said that it would be better for him to stay in a familiar place for now, that it would be easier for him to leave later on, when he was older and his mother came back for him. She had been sitting behind the Counselor's desk; Chen had found it hard to concentrate on her words.

The Counselor's going to contact you. She's going to set up some sort of program for you and Benzi, something with bands and images and so on so that you both feel you're actually having physical contact. She said they hadn't tried it before with parents and children, so I guess it's an experiment or something. She said they'd cover the cost as long as you're doing well enough at the Institute.

Two men had been waiting outside the glass door for a chance to use the screen. Chen glanced at them and saw that three other men, who had been playing dice in another corner of the room, had moved their game closer to him. The two waiting men had already been drawn into the game. The dice rolled across the floor; the man who had rolled them grimaced and shook his head.

Iris, I won't see you again until you come to the Islands. I know you will, I know you'll get through. We'll have to see how things work out then. Don't forget me, whatever happens. We still want the same thing, don't we? I love you still.

Chen stood up and stared at the blank screen. His last words had been a bit too hollow.

He could not face her. He imagined careless, damning words about Eric and his own role in Eric's death spilling from his lips in Iris's presence. He had not even been able to bring himself to talk to her directly over the screen. She might need him now, might have wanted to weep with him over Eric; he would not have been able to bear that.

His love for her was poisoned. He was relieved that she would not be traveling to Venus for some time. On the Islands, he might be able to forget Eric. There would be nothing present to remind him of his deed. He could tell himself that many lives had been lost to the Project, and that Eric's, however indirectly, was simply another such loss.

But Iris would join him eventually. He would then have to look at a face that would remind him of Lincoln and what he had brought to the people there. It would be just if Iris somehow saw what was inside him, and came to hate him. It would be fair if she turned away from him for good.

Another man was tapping on the door. Chen opened it and walked away from the screen.

Iris raced through the Caracas port. She had wasted at least an hour at her room screen checking on the next suborbital flights to San Antonio before realizing that she might have a better chance of getting aboard one if she were here.

She was panting by the time she reached the wing where the suborb passengers were waiting. A young girl was lurking near one of the consoles. "Do you need help?" the child asked in Spanish. "Do you want a guide?"

Iris tightened her grip on her bag; the child was nearly as tall as she. "I don't need your help." The girl wandered off as Iris went to the console and checked the flights again. The next would leave for San Antonio in an hour; it was full. The one after that would get her to San Antonio too late; Chen's shuttle would be gone by the time the suborb arrived. She gazed at the flight information rolling up on the small console screen and listened as a voice repeated it, then abruptly slapped a button.

"I want to talk to a clerk," she said.

The screen flickered. Iris leaned against the counter behind the console, tapping her fingers impatiently. At last a door in the wall opened. A young man stepped out to the counter.

"I've got to get on the suborb to San Antonio," she said before the man could speak. "It's very important."

He raised one sandy brow. "The next flight is full. We haven't had any cancellations. If you wait, there might be a place on the one after that."

"That'll be too late. Please, I have to get aboard this one." She swallowed. "You see, there's only one shuttle flight going from San Antonio to L-5 tomorrow — I mean today — and I have to be there before it leaves."

"If that's what you want, you ought to be in the shuttle flight annex. You might find a spot on one of the —"

"I don't want to get to L-5!" She lowered her voice. "I want to get to San Antonio. Couldn't you find out if someone else could let me have their place?"

He shrugged. "I'm not paid to do that."

You'd do it if I were important enough, she thought. She rumbled in her bag and took out a bill. "I'll pay you," she muttered. "Here's some credit. Just punch my request into the system, and give it priority, and then ask the passengers who've already checked in if one of them will —"

"You're wasting your time, Citizen. People on suborbs are usually in a hurry. If they weren't, they'd be on airships, wouldn't they?" He leaned against the counter. She took out another bill and passed it to him. "What's your name?"

"Iris Angharads." She held out her wristband.

He scanned it quickly; his fingers danced over the keys of his own console. "There you are. You'll be the first aboard if anyone doesn't show up." A panel in front of him slid open as he stepped out. "I'll ask around," he went on. "You can always wait until the suborb's ready to leave, and maybe someone will cancel by then. Next time, you'd be wise to make your plans in advance."

She took a seat near the wall. Chen should have spoken to her directly instead of leaving a message. He should have had the screen signal to her instead of leaving the message for her to see only after she had finished her evening's work. Surely he must have known that she would want to see him before he left.

She adjusted her bag on her lap. He had sounded strange over the screen. Eric's death had clearly affected him; it had been a shock to her as well, but Chen had been in Lincoln when it happened. It must have been even worse for him.

Her eyes stung as she thought of Eric. He would never leave Lincoln now; she supposed that was what he would have wanted. Now, Chen was being taken from her.

She rubbed at her face with one hand. It was ridiculous to think of Chen's departure in that way; she would hardly have had much time to see him even if he had stayed on Earth. She barely had time to think of him as it was, or to send him messages. She blinked as she recalled how she had behaved when Chen had come to the Institute. She had to reach him to make up for that.

The clerk was wandering back to the counter; he glanced at her as he shook his head. She tried not to feel too disappointed. Her request was in the system; if she waited, she might still get aboard.

Chen did not want to see her. That had to be why he had only left a message. She must have hurt him during their last visit more than she knew. He might be relieved at not seeing her, at being able to go to the Islands alone. Why was he going back so suddenly? Had he requested it? Had he wanted to get away now? Had he deliberately planned it so that he wouldn't have time to visit her? This was her last chance to see him, to speak to him of when they would be together again, to hold him instead of only speaking words for him into a screen.

She waited until all the suborb passengers had arrived. It was not until they were lining up in front of the gate that she saw how futile her hopes had been. She tried to tell herself that the flight would have cost too much credit, that she would have missed a couple of important seminars, that she had promised to show a group of visitors around the Institute that afternoon. The visitors, who had recently arrived from the Islands, were likely to be interesting people, and it would be a shame to miss a chance to hear what they might have to say. If Chen did not want to see her, she would look like a fool if she went to him now. Her bond with him would have to wait; there would be time enough to decide about it later.

She stood up and walked down the lighted hall.

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Eighteen

Benzi twisted on Iris's lap; he seemed restless. She stroked his dark hair. "I'm glad you liked your present," Iris said. "Two years old already. You're growing up fast." She hugged him again. "Do you want to hear another song? A friend of mine here named Tim taught it to me."

"Grandma song," the little boy said as he shook his head. "Grandma song," he said again, and Iris understood that Benzi wanted Angharad to sing to him now.

Iris bit her lip. "Then I'll say good-bye for now. I'll see you again on Saturday, all right? After you've had your nap. Don't forget."

"Good-bye," Benzi said.

"Good-bye." Iris reached for the band on her head, removed it, and gazed at her screen. Benzi was on

Angharad's lap; his grandmother was removing his band. Benzi rubbed his eyes.

"I wish you could have come home for his birthday," Angharad said. "Oh, well. Better this than nothing. I still don't know if —" The older woman shook her head. "Strange things they come up with nowadays, taking a mother away from her child and then doing this sort of thing with bands. I suppose it's better than nothing, and he does seem to know you now."

Iris smiled. "He's always good." Of course he was, she thought. She was never hooked up long enough for him to get too bored, and it was easy for her to be patient; she could disconnect if he got too irritable.

"I'd love to gab a while," Angharad went on, "but I promised myself I'd listen to the accounts tonight. You don't need any extra credit, do you?"

Iris shook her head.

"Well, if you do, just let me know. Had a message from Laiza lately?"

"No."

"I imagine she's busy with that daughter of hers. Goodbye, dear. Don't work too hard."

The screen went blank. Iris gazed at it as she thought of her son, and wondered if Benzi actually looked forward to their times together. Perhaps he sensed that he was only an intermittent obligation, one she could put aside without too many pangs.

She sighed. She had a model to study, one that showed the cycle of photochemical and thermochemical reactions that changed Venus's sulfuric gases into cloud particles. The cycle was complex, and a recent increase in volcanic activity on the Venusian surface meant that more sulfur, emitted by volcanic eruptions, would be entering the atmosphere. She would have to estimate how long the eruptions were likely to continue, how much sulfur dioxide would be emitted, and whether this increase in volcanic activity would require more seeding of the atmosphere with algae or if the level of sulfuric dioxide would decline to previous levels without increased seeding. She would have to hope that her model took all possible factors into account, and that her answer came close to what the specialists on the Islands might be concluding.

She sat back and sipped her tea, hardly noticing that it was already cold, as she prepared to study her screen.

January 541

From: Iris Angharads

To: Julia Gwens

I was glad to get your message and hear all about your Christmas. You asked me what I was studying now, and I'll try to answer your question without being too confusing.

At the moment, a lot of my work involves the study of planetary evolution, with Earth and Venus being our prime examples. From what we know, Earth seems, if I can put it this way, an exception to the rule, and we have to understand what made Earth the way it is in great detail in order to terraform a world like Venus. At the same time, the process of terraforming also gives us even more knowledge about planetary evolution.

I have to understand the role of a particular factor — rain patterns, wind patterns, vegetation patterns,

geological and biological events on a planet's surface, the presence of various elements in the atmosphere, and a great many other things — and then see how it affects the whole biosphere. This must seem either vague or confusing to you, and I am simplifying, but it takes a fair amount of study just to understand the role of one particular factor, and then even more to see it in relation to others.

Maybe it'll be clearer to you if I put it this way. If you've got a large carton sitting outside the house, and you want to turn it over or move it, you can get a lever and use only a tiny amount of force against it. Just a small push is all you need, and that big carton will move. The same thing's true of a planet; just a tiny change in one factor can change a lot of other things in time. Centuries ago, industries here on Earth began to release more carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere. This made it harder for heat to escape, and Earth began to grow warmer. The ice caps at the poles shrank a bit because some of the ice melted, less sunlight was reflected back into space from the ice as a result, and you ended up five hundred years later working on the eastern sea walls instead of visiting a city that might otherwise have been covered with snow for much of the year. This is a very general way of putting it, but you can see what I mean, and I'm not even discussing other factors here — deforestation, the growth of deserts, solar activity and its effects on Earth, and so forth.

My specialty is climatology, and we do a lot of work with mathematical models. Much of what we do wouldn't be possible without cyberminds, or without understanding the concept of fractals. Now you're probably asking yourself what a fractal is, so I guess I'd better try to explain that. Fractals are mathematical curves that can define some order in what otherwise might seem chaotic or disordered. They give us a mathematical framework to describe something that might otherwise appear to be random. With formulas using fractals, a cybermind can create an entire landscape down to the last detail and can alter it so that it mimics natural phenomena. A cybermind could do the same thing with an image of an actual landscape, but it would have to deal with billions of pieces of information; with fractals, it can create a landscape that never existed. This is one of the reasons you can take a mind-tour of Africa and see it the way it was millions of years ago, or why you can see a completely realistic image on a screen of something that's never been taped or photographed. By describing so many things with fractals — say, patterns of vegetation — and then simulating them, we're also able to make predictions about how they might behave.

We can create models that are almost as complex as a world, and we can even map the points at which a system might begin to break down, but we can't predict everything. We can't set up a mathematical model that will predict all possible results with absolute certainty, though we can come very close. A planetary environment is too complex for that; change is a constant. I could set up a model of Earth now, taking everything we know into account, and tell you what Earth's average surface temperature would be a hundred years from now, but if the people in Lincoln and other towns then decided to plant a lot of trees on most of the fields and raise less wheat for a while, I'd probably come up with a different figure in my next model. And that's just one factor — there'd be others to consider.

What it comes down to is that there's still a lot we can't find out until the actual experiment is done, although we know a lot more than people used to. We didn't understand certain processes in Earth's biosphere until, unfortunately, a lot of the damage to Earth was done. We know more now, and the Mukhtars and Linkers have probably prevented some real catastrophes, but the effects of what was done in the past are still with us. Earth is growing warmer; more of the land is desert. There's a joke here that, by the time the settlers on Venus leave their domes, Earthfolk will be building domes for themselves.

Am I making any sense to you, Julia? I'm trying to show you why the Venus Project is so important. When we've had the experience of terraforming that world, we can repair the damage to Earth, and we'll have real knowledge to work with. Making deserts here green again is not going to seem such a problematic undertaking if we can make Venus bloom. We'll be able to try new techniques of climate

and weather control there, without risking a disastrous effect in the future by trying them here on Earth. I know some people there say it's a waste to spend so much on the Project, but we're trying to alter in centuries what was created over a period of billions of years. Earth will benefit in the end, and not just because there's a new world to go to, but because of what we'll learn.

What it comes down to is that we either have to gain some mastery of planetary engineering, or eventually we may have no choice except to leave Earth and live as the Habbars do.

Did I answer your question, Grandmother? You used to ask me about what I was learning when I was little, and you usually listened, but I could never tell if I was boring you or not. I want to tell you these things because I want you to understand why I'm here and what I'm doing. I wouldn't be here without your help; I wouldn't have had a chance to be given more lessons by Celia Evanstown. I know I don't send as many messages as I should, but I haven't forgotten what you did for me with your encouragement. Maybe if you told some of what I've told you here to Angharad, she'd understand too. I know she worries about the future of the farm. Maybe, in some small way, what I do in my work will be useful to the Plains someday.

Thank you for sending me the image of Benzi. I keep the cube on my desk, where it reminds me of what else I'm working for.

Iris leaned back after finishing the message to her grandmother. She wondered if Julia would understand what she had really been trying to say, that she was finally content with her choice. Julia remained the one person in Iris's old household to whom she could speak without guilt; she often thought of what her grandmother might have done if she had been given a chance.

Her door chimed, and then opened; Edwin was outside. "Oh, you're busy," he said.

"I was just —" The door had closed again before she could say more. Something was wrong; she had glimpsed the unhappy look on Edwin's broad face.

She hurried out of her room and caught up with Edwin as he was leaving the dwelling. "Wait," she said as she took his arm. "What is it?"

He brushed back a lock of blond hair; unlike most of the other students, Edwin had kept his hair long. "I had a meeting with my Counselor today," he answered as they walked along the path. "They've decided to give me a chance to go to Chimkent next term."

"But that's wonderful. That's one of the best places for plasma physics now. They must think that —"

"Oh, Iris. Don't be an idiot. It isn't just for a term. I have to leave the Institute. That's all it means. I might make a good teacher someday, that's what the Counselor said. I'll get a chance to do research."

She was stunned. She should have guessed it as soon as he mentioned Chimkent. A few other students she knew would be leaving the Institute before the next term, and a couple of them would not get a chance to go elsewhere to study. She had been worrying about her own status for the past week until her Counselor had called over the screen. She had not considered Edwin's chances at all; she had assumed that he would stay and that they would be moving to the fourth level together next term.

"You and the others'll have to find another housemate," he said. "Or maybe you won't, if enough people are asked to leave. It's all right. I wasn't mad about sharing a dwelling with Chantal Lacan, even if she is your friend."

"Oh, Edwin. You two have been getting along fine lately." She paused; that was hardly going to console

him now. “At least you’re going to another school. That isn’t so bad.”

He pulled away from her. “Not so bad. No, it’s not so bad. Ever since I came here, all I’ve heard about is the wonderful Project and how nothing else is as much of an accomplishment as that. They’ve drummed it into my head. I came to believe it. Now, they’ve taken it away, and they expect me not to care.”

They had come to the railing. The morning fog had still not lifted; the mountains beyond were hidden by the mist. “But it can’t be your work,” she said. “You’re doing well. How can they ask you to leave?”

“It seems I’m not single-minded enough. I’m not ready to give up everything for the Project. I’m not willing to give them my soul — that’s basically what I was told. How can they possibly know that?”

Now that he had said it, she could see that it was true. She thought of all the evenings and nights Edwin had spent in her room when he might have been doing something else; he had teased her about her own busy schedule. He had never had to work very hard at his courses. He had assumed that his future with the Project was assured as soon as he came here; he had believed that the hardest part of his struggle was over.

He leaned against the railing. “I suppose I could try to jump,” he said bitterly.

She pressed herself against his bare chest. “You don’t mean that.”

“Of course not.” He pressed his cheek against the top of her head. “I’d be stopped, and then they’d think twice even about sending me to Chimkent.”

She raised her head. “Edwin, you have to appeal. You might have a case, especially since your work’s been good. You’ve got time to organize your arguments.”

“What case? They have a right to decide who can cut it and who can’t. It’d just be a waste of time.”

“But it wouldn’t. If you appeal, it might show that they were wrong about you, that you do care enough —”

“How do I know that won’t make things worse? If I start telling them I’d be unhappy somewhere else, then I might come out of the appeal with nothing, not even Chimkent.”

She stepped back. “You can try. I’d do it. I’d take the chance.”

“Yes, you probably would.” He looked down.

“You get along so well with most people. I could tell them how often you’ve smoothed things over with our other housemates. I’d speak up for you, and so would they. Seems to me that they’d need people like you on the Project.”

He made a fist. “They need driven people on the Project, and all you obsessive people will get along fine with each other. You’ll work your hearts out for the new world and won’t let anything stand in your way. You won’t have any other loyalties or feelings that’ll interfere with that, and maybe that’s the only way an enterprise like that is possible. You’ll all be bound together by it. What am I supposed to do? I gave what I could, but it wasn’t enough, and now they’ve made me feel that anything else I do will be insignificant in comparison.”

“It isn’t true.” She took his hand. “You have a chance to do something important still.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You weren’t asked to leave. You’re driven enough for them. You’re not the brightest student here, but you make up for it by working hard, and helping the new students adjust, and making sure most of your friends are people who can help you in some way.”

She tightened her grip on him. “Edwin, that isn’t fair.”

“It’s the truth.”

“I thought we meant a little more to each other than that by now.”

“How much do we mean, Iris? Would you go to Chimkent with me? They’ve got some good people in your field. They might let you in if you applied.”

“You know what I want. You wouldn’t want me to go.”

“You needed a bed partner, and I was handy. I guess you Plains girls always find another one fast enough.”

His words stung; he would never have said that kind of thing to her before. “Edwin, you’re my friend. I care about you. I wish I could help you.”

“Would you speak up for me at a hearing if you thought it might mess up your own chances, if you thought they might not like it if you criticized their decision?”

She was silent for a moment; that possibility had not crossed her mind. “Of course.”

“You waited too long before answering. I know what you’re thinking now. You’re trying to think of a way to get away from me politely so that you can get ready for your seminar, and you’re hoping I don’t make a scene and cause a delay. Or maybe you want to take me back to your room for a quick, consoling pump before you go about your business. Then, when I’ve left the Institute, you’ll sigh once in a while and think, isn’t it too bad Edwin’s gone — that is, if you think about me at all.”

“Edwin, please. I know how you feel. I’d feel even worse if they asked me to leave.”

He scowled. “But they won’t ask you to leave. You’re merciless, Iris. You’ll get through all right, and you won’t look back.”

“You have to appeal.”

“I don’t want to do anything. There’s nothing I can do. Maybe they’re right, and I’ll be happier. I hope you like it when you get to Venus, as I’m sure you will. You ought to take another look at those portraits of Karim al-Anwar they’ve got in the classrooms. Those are a madman’s eyes, you know. That’s the face of a man who didn’t care what he had to do to have what he wanted. You’re beginning to look more like him all the time.”

“If you feel that way,” she burst out, “then they’re right to make you leave.”

The platform a few paces away had stopped; an old man was hobbling out of the lift. Iris turned her head toward the man for a moment, recognizing him; when she looked back, Edwin was already striding away. She was about to go after him, then hesitated. The old man was alone; she might have a chance to say a few words to him, and there was nothing she could do for Edwin now.

She walked toward the man who had once been an Island Administrator. “Greetings, Linker Ngomo,” she said.

The wrinkles in the old man's dark, wizened face deepened as he peered at her. "Ah, the young woman who asked such interesting questions yesterday." She started, pleased that he remembered. "Did you enjoy my little talk?"

"Indeed I did."

"You seemed to be having a tiff with your young man."

"It's nothing." She tried not to think of how much she would miss Edwin; it would pass, and they would have parted anyway in time.

The Linker leaned against his cane as he stared out at the fog. Iris suddenly had the feeling that he was remembering the much darker Cytherian atmosphere, was still longing for the world he would never see again. He had paid for his dream, had lost a daughter in an airship accident when her ship had crashed on Venus. There was a rumor that his bondmate had left him for Earth.

"There was a question I didn't ask you," she continued. "We're alone, and you can say what you like. Was the Project worth it to you?"

"I am still part of the Project, child."

"I know you're on the Project Council, but that wasn't what I meant. If you weren't, if you'd come back to no reward at all, would it still have been worth it?"

He gazed into her eyes intently, as if studying her. "I can't think of anything I would rather have done. I wish that I could live long enough to see settlements, but I very much fear that God will have it otherwise. Are you looking for some sort of reassurance, child? You must have seen others who have returned here, and heard what they feel. You might be one of the first settlers. You should not be at this place if you have doubts."

"I have no doubts," she said firmly.

He gripped his cane as he watched her. "Then I will tell you this. I have only one regret — that I did not die there, that I grew too weak to stay on, that Venus herself did not claim my life at last." His mouth widened as he smiled. "Yes, young woman. I see that you understand me."

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Nineteen

As the platform glided down the side of the Cytherian Institute's pyramid, rain began to fall. Caracas became long, gray fingers reaching from the valley toward the overcast sky; mist rose from the green land below. Long needles of water spattered soundlessly against the platform's shield. By the time the passengers had reached the bottom of the pyramid, the sun was again burning through the rapidly vanishing clouds.

People streamed from other platforms, retreating from the cleansed and freshened air as they raced for the nearest tubeway. They crowded into the train, stowing bags on railings and under seats. Iris sat near one window, wedged in between Chantal Lacan and Edris Shaktiar as the train began to move.

Voices shouted, whispered, and babbled in different languages; one young man played his flute while his companions clapped. A few people were holding their heads; some of those who were standing in the aisle made room for one young woman as she stretched out on the floor, her head on a duffel. Some of

the students had celebrated the completion of their studies excessively, and were now paying the price.

The babble became more muted as the train reached the outskirts of Caracas and then disappeared into another tubeway. Iris noted a few downcast faces among the passengers; they might be students who would have to settle for assignments on Earth or in near space instead of being sent to Venus immediately, or they might merely be dreading the trip home to their families. She caught a glimpse of Chang Hsin-sheng, who stood near the front of the car. He had been hoping for a post on Anwara, and had been assigned to the Project Council center on Earth instead. She knew how much that had disappointed him.

Iris had been more fortunate; she would be sent to the Islands. Her work, which had remained merely adequate, would not have earned her that post, but the Counselor who had given her the news mentioned other factors, such as Iris's willingness to leave an infant son, her adaptable character, the fact that her bondmate was already on the Islands, and even her health. It had all amounted to being a great piece of luck, a combination of circumstances over which she had little control. She wished that she could feel that she had earned her good fortune.

"You don't have to look unhappy," Edris said as he patted her hand. "You're one of the lucky ones."

"Lucky," she replied. "How right you are."

A young man helped the resting woman to her feet as the train pulled up below the port. Iris grabbed her bag and followed the others into a hallway, then up the escalator into a wide, lighted space. Students hurried off in different directions. Chantal shouldered her bag and then threw one arm over Iris's shoulders. "Just think. Next time I see you, we'll be on the Islands. Wish I were there now. I don't know how I'll get through the next three months."

"Your patron'll find something for you to do," Iris said.

"I guess so." The slender young woman shrugged. Chantal had no family, or at least not one she cared to remember. She had lived in the streets of Marseilles, earning or stealing money for food and lessons until a Linker had found her there; she had become the Linker's lover, been given more lessons, and then been chosen for the Institute. The story, so like an old fable, had been embroidered by other students as they told it until Chantal had become one of the school's legends. Chantal had a somewhat different attitude toward her good fortune. Her once-enamored patron had tired of her; being chosen was a way for him to be rid of her without guilt.

Chantal had arrived at the Institute with less preparation than any of her fellow students; she had surmounted that, and had thrived. Iris had been flattered when the worldly young woman became her friend; she had hoped that some of Chantal's manner would rub off on her. Now, she was almost relieved at being parted from her, from the quick, lively friend who was everything Iris was not.

Chantal released her. "Good-bye, both of you." She hurried away toward another corridor. Chang Hsin-sheng waved at Iris and Edris as he passed; he was dressed in a loose jacket and baggy pants instead of the shorts he usually wore. Students embraced one another, then separated. Iris and Edris moved toward one wall and let the stream flow past them as they waved farewells to other friends. Iris wondered how many she would ever see again. In the end, the Institute, by wrenching them from their homes and then preparing them for a life away from their world, had trained them all for farewells.

She gazed at Edris silently. He had clipped his pin, the tiny gold microscope marking him as a microbiologist, to the band of white cloth he had wrapped around his head. "You'll miss your suburb," she said at last.

“There’s time,” he replied. She reached up, touching his dark beard; he took her hand. “It’s only for a year or so,” he finished.

“Unless you’re given a chance to do even more study. Then it might be longer.”

Edris shook his head. “They’ve just about guaranteed me a place on the Islands by then, and there will be many I can learn from there.” Edris was going home, and then on to Tashkent for a year of additional study. Iris had not bothered to request more training; even if her work had been more than adequate, there was Chen to consider, and her son. She frowned at that thought.

Edris put down his bag, placing it between his legs so that one of the tough-looking children lurking nearby would not try to grab it. “Maybe it’s better this way. You have your child to concern you now, and a bondmate to join. You made him a promise.”

“I was too young to make that promise, and he might have forgotten his own.” She was sure that wasn’t true even as she spoke; Chen’s infrequent messages, however brief, never failed to express how much he missed her.

“You were not too young. If so, then you were too young to commit yourself to the Project also.”

She lowered her eyes. That was, of course, the real reason she would keep her pledge to Chen. If one pledge were broken, those on the Project might have doubts about whether she could keep her commitment to their vision. Chen had to be aware of that as well. Having a bondmate on the Islands had weighed in her favor; Chen’s own status there might be a bit higher with a specialist from the Institute as his bondmate. Their bond was still too useful to them both to break.

“I have my own promise to keep now,” Edris said, sighing. “I expect my village is already planning a feast for me. My father will summon all of his friends and my mother will cook my favorite foods. The mullah will come to our house and speak of what a marvel I am and forget all the dire warnings he gave me about what happens to a man who forsakes his village. He’ll be watching to be sure I heed the call to prayer and to see what evil habits I’ve picked up. And then we’ll all plan my wedding to Nahid.”

Iris rested her head against his chest and put her arms around his waist. They had spoken of all of this when they met and then had never talked of it again.

“I hope you’ll be happy,” she murmured, meaning it. He was the only student, except for Esteban, who had learned of her formal bond to Chen; she had never even mentioned that to Chantal. She had told Edris about the bond the first night they had made love, not wanting to deceive him. Now, she wondered if knowing of that bond had kept Edris at her side for the past year. He had been free to love her, while knowing that she could not take him from the woman he had promised his parents he would marry.

“Nahid is kind and gentle. She’ll become my wife and wait for me to finish my studies and then follow me to the Islands because it’s what I want. They’ll put her to work tending hydroponic vats or maintaining machinery because that’s all she’s trained to do — she never cared for learning. She’ll bear whatever children we’re allowed to have, and she may miss the village, but she won’t complain. Sometimes, I wonder if, by keeping my promise, I’m not being crueler to her, but if I turned from her now, her life there would be harder. Some would wonder why I refused to take her as a wife. Her family would be shamed, and there would be bad blood between her father and mine.”

“She may change,” Iris said. “The Islands aren’t like your village. When she sees there are other ways to live, she may be happy you took her away from that life.”

“I hope so. I knew she would become my wife, but I never thought of what that would mean for her until

I came here. I want a true woman with me, not a child I have to lead.”

“She may not let you lead. She might change more than you expect. Perhaps she wants to leave the village and hide it, knowing that she can do that only through you. I made a bond with Chen when I believed he would take me away from Lincoln. I cared for him, but if he hadn’t shared my dream, I would never have made the pledge. Nahid may want her own life on the Islands.”

Edris cupped her face in his hands. “And then I could come to you. Is that what you think?” His smile was sad. “Let’s keep our memories, and not ask for more. I know you too well, Iris. You’re not a woman who can love only one man. You give everything of yourself to one, but only for a time. Maybe that’s better than sharing only a part of yourself for years.”

She thought of Chen. He would not reproach her for having had Edris as a lover; Chen himself would not have spent their years apart without companionship. But with Edris, she had a mental life that Chen, however interested he was in her studies and thoughts, could never really share. It was when she and Edris talked of the Project and their studies and sat together in front of a screen, not when they were making love, that she had felt most disloyal to Chen.

“I must go,” Edris said. He seemed about to kiss her, then stopped to pick up his bag instead. “Farewell.”

“On the Islands —” she began to say.

“You and Chen must greet us there.”

She watched as he walked away through the crowd.

She boarded a floater heading for Yucatán; from there, she would get on another floater making a stop at San Antonio and then go on to Des Moines, and the Plains. She had explained to her mother in her last message that she had waited too long to make her plans, and that there was no space on any suborbital flight to a Plains city. She had refused to dwell on her real reasons for preferring this longer trip.

The floater’s two hundred seats were nearly full; a few other students were among the floater’s passengers. Iris made her way along the aisle and nodded at the students she knew by sight, then saw a familiar face near the back of the cabin. She hurried toward an empty seat and sat down, then turned toward the young woman next to her.

“Alexandra,” Iris said.

“Iris! I thought it was you.”

Iris stowed her bag under the seat. “God, I’m tired. Takes too long to get around that port.”

“You’re telling me.”

“No rooms for us this time, I guess.”

“That’s fine with me. The Institute was paying last time, don’t forget. Anyway, I might want to stop over in Yucatán.” Alexandra’s voice seemed brittle. “You remember Richard Matties, don’t you?” Alexandra gestured at the young man next to her; Richard had grown a moustache. Iris recalled the down that had been on his upper lip before, when they were all traveling to Caracas for the first time.

Alexandra had changed as well. She no longer wore her braids; her pale hair had been clipped close to her skull, and she had darkened her lashes and eyelids with a black, sooty substance. Iris had rarely seen

the two during her last year at the Institute; the Plains students, who had banded together at first, feeling lost and unprepared, had eventually gone their separate ways.

Alexandra, who had shared her hopes so long ago, had rarely spoken to Iris after their first months at the Institute, and Iris had not sought her company. She wondered if Alexandra had felt the same way she had, embarrassed at the presence of one who had known her before the Institute had changed her. The Institute had done its work, implanting devotion to the Project along with a cool, studious manner; there was little of the Plains left in any of them.

Alexandra measured Iris with a glance, then smiled more warmly. There was no cause for awkwardness now; hadn't they both succeeded? Iris smiled back as the blond young woman spoke of her plans; after her visit with her family, she would go on to Tokyo for a year of work in embryology, but had a good chance of getting to the Islands after that. Richard, a metallurgical engineer, would be going to one of Earth's space stations for a while. They sighed with envy when Iris said she would be going directly to the Islands.

"Have you missed it?" Richard asked. "Home, I mean."

"Not much," Iris answered. "Well, I missed my son," she added as an afterthought.

"I didn't miss it at all," Alexandra said fiercely. "I wish we hadn't all been advised to make these damned trips. Oh, my mother won't give me any trouble, or my sister, either, but what am I going to say to them? I'll go out of my mind listening to their gab about their stock and their accounts."

"But they wanted you to go to a school."

"Oh, they didn't exactly put obstacles in my path, but to say they wanted it is putting it too strongly." Alexandra drawled the words; she, too, had lost her Plains accent.

"Well, it's only for three months," Richard said.

"Three months of listening to people jabber at me about when I'm going to settle down and have a child and think of my line. Well, I don't want a child, and to hell with my line. My sister can worry about that." Alexandra's lip curled.

Iris shifted in her seat. Alexandra had certainly taken on some new attitudes. "Kind of strange," she said, "your being an embryologist and saying you don't want kids."

"It's not strange at all. Maybe my work satisfies those instincts. If I ever have a child, it'll be for me or the Project's future, not just for my line." Alexandra leaned back. "Well, are you two going to stay over with me in Yucatán? We could take a tour, maybe stop in San Antonio for a couple of days too. It might be the last chance we have to see those places. What do you say?"

"Fine with me," Richard answered.

Iris found herself nodding in agreement, relieved at being able to postpone her arrival in Lincoln. She would have to send Angharad another message, another excuse. Her mother was probably all too used to her excuses by now.

She did not want to go home. Her household would try to pretend that she hadn't changed, that everything was as it had been. At the same time, they would probably speak of their pride in her, not understanding that she had been a mediocre student at best. They would also be trying not to think of the day when she would have to leave for good.

Iris waited inside the floater until the few cartons designated for Lincoln had been unloaded. Then she took a deep breath, picked up her bag, and walked down the aisle toward the ramp.

She felt the hot and sticky summer air as she descended; already, she missed the clear mountain air around the Institute. Angharad was waiting below; the women with her were all wearing light tunics and cotton pants. Iris suddenly felt out of place in her shorts and shirt. Her eyes were sore; she stifled a yawn. She had not had much sleep during her days with Alexandra and Richard, days filled with tours and sightseeing while they avoided talking about the homecomings they all dreaded.

LaDonna smiled as she took Iris's bag. Angharad grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and kissed her quickly. "Welcome home," she said as she fingered her daughter's collar and gazed at her pin, which bore the image of a cloud. "Aren't you grand. What do they call you again? I've forgotten."

"A climatologist," Iris answered, "Weather patterns." Angharad beamed with pride; Iris felt like an imposter. "It isn't quite so grand," she blurted out. "I'll just be mapping the patterns, studying the mathematical simulations, looking for the best sites for domes, studying the currents. Others will do the planning. I'll have to take direction from them." She fell silent. Angharad would never understand her talk of limitations and failure; she would want to believe that her daughter was doing great deeds, that there was some purpose in losing her. To Angharad, anyone with a specialist's pin was an imposing figure.

"What's that green stuff around your eyes?" LaDonna asked. "And do you actually walk around in outfits like that?" she continued before Iris could answer the first question. "It looks like something you'd wear for a man in your room. Leave something to his imagination first, I always say."

Iris stepped back. Julia was pushing Benzi forward. "Say hello to your mother," the older woman said. "Go on, child."

Benzi stared up at Iris with Chen's brown eyes. She knelt. "You remember me, don't you?" The little boy nodded solemnly, but refused her outstretched hand. "See, I'm just like the images you saw. We'll have fun while I'm here. I've seen how clever you are — you can show me all the new things you've been learning with your band." She reached toward his dark brown hair.

Benzi drew back. "You're going to take me away," he said, looking as though he were about to cry.

"Not right away. I'll be here for your fifth birthday, probably even for the fall festival. I'll tell you all about where we're going, we'll see images of it together. You'll like it, really you will. You'll be with your father again, too, and I know he'll be happy to see you. You don't remember him, but when you were just a baby —"

Benzi retreated toward Julia and clutched at her leg. "Come, now," the woman said. "Behave yourself. We've shown you Chen's image. You remember him perfectly well." Benzi buried his face in Julia's trouser leg. "Now, stop it. What's your mother going to think?"

"It's all right," Iris said. She wanted to hold the boy, but was afraid he would shy away from her touch.

"He'll get over it," Julia said.

Iris passively accepted another hug from Angharad, then began to follow the others toward town. She forced herself to smile, feeling as if her face would crack.

"Took you long enough to get here," Sheryl said as she walked at Iris's side. "You'd think the school would show more consideration, make special plans so you could get here sooner and have more time with us."

“They did their best,” Iris mumbled.

“Erica should be waking up from her nap. Looks a lot like her brother, she does. How that girl can cry! Constance spoils her a little — too much, if you ask me. Laiza’s coming over for supper later. Bet you two have a lot to talk about. Maybe she’ll bring her daughter along.”

The town had not changed, yet it seemed smaller and shabbier than she remembered. She walked on, retracing the familiar path to her home.

Iris stretched out on the bed, watching Benzi as he played a game on her old screen. She was an intruder in the room, which was now his. He had refused her efforts at conversation, but was tolerating her presence. She watched him, trying to remember that he was her son.

At last she stood up. “You should go to sleep,” she said gently. Benzi ignored her. “Tell you what — if you go to bed now, we’ll get up early tomorrow and go out on the hill and have a picnic. Would you like that?”

Benzi shrugged, but kept his eyes on the screen.

“Then we can go to Winnie’s afterward and have a treat.”

“All right,” he muttered. He stood up and moved reluctantly toward the bed. She drew the sheet over him as he lay down. “I don’t want to go,” he said as he yawned.

“On the picnic? Well, we’ll do something else, then.”

“I don’t want to go away.”

“I know you feel that way now, but you’ll be glad when we’re there.” She perched on the edge of the bed. “It’s a wonderful place, Benzi. You’ll be on one of the Islands, with a whole new world below. You’ll have new friends and a school to go to. You wouldn’t have a school here. Every child there has a chance to learn in a school.”

“What if I don’t like it?”

“Well, no one will force you to go to school. You could be an apprentice and learn a skill instead. The Project needs all kinds of workers, but you’ll want to do something useful, or they won’t let you stay on the Islands when you’re grown. You ought to give school a chance, at least. I would have been happy to have such a chance at your age.” She paused. “You’ll be able to do something you like, and be part of a new world besides. You’ll be part of something special.”

Benzi closed his eyes. Iris rose, recalling how certain Angharad had been about what was best for her.

She walked down the hall to the room she had been given. As the door opened, she saw that Angharad was waiting for her. A bottle of whiskey and two glasses were on the table next to Angharad; clearly, her mother was in the mood for talk. Iris entered and sat on the bed.

“You were awfully quiet while Laiza was here,” Angharad said. “You could have been a little friendlier. She was your best friend. Now, she’ll think you’re too good for her.”

Her mother was already chiding her. “You’re wrong,” Iris said as she leaned back on one elbow. “I don’t even think she noticed.” She had endured dinner, and had even managed to laugh at various choice pieces of gossip; Laiza and the others had been happy to have a new listener for the often-repeated tales. “I’ll go over to her house tomorrow, bring her a present. I bought a nice silver bracelet in Yucatán.” She

had bought it for herself, on impulse; she could easily part with it.

“I think you should.” Angharad lifted her bottle. Iris got up, accepted the glass her mother had poured, then sat down on the bed again. The room, always ready for any visitor, was small and bare; she suddenly felt confined, closed in by the yellow walls. “I hope you brought something suitable to wear to mass tomorrow.” Angharad sipped from her own glass.

“Tomorrow isn’t Sunday.”

“I know, but the priest’s in town, and I’d like to go with you, say a prayer to thank God for what’s been done for you. Mass is nicer when the priest’s here, better than having to put up the church screen and watch it.”

Iris folded her legs. “I never thought you’d get so religious at your age. I thought mass was just a way for you to see some friends and get a little town business taken care of afterward.”

“Don’t get snippy with me,” Angharad said. “I suppose that’s the kind of talk you learned at that school. I’ll bet you didn’t even attend mass the whole time you were away.”

“As a matter of fact, I did once, the first month I was there. There’s a place in the Institute set aside for worship, which students of all faiths can use, but not very many ever did. You learn pretty quickly that God isn’t going to get you through the work.”

“I don’t want to hear that kind of talk from you, Iris.”

“A few became Muslims. They probably thought it would look good on their records.”

“Hush your mouth. Don’t insult the faith of other people — that sin isn’t easily forgiven. Counselors know as much as you do, and they respect our beliefs.”

“Of course they do,” Iris said. “It keeps people content.”

“I’ve had my doubts. I won’t say I haven’t. But I’ve had some comfort too.” Angharad took another sip of whiskey. “Mary’s helped me. My burden would have been greater without Her. She knows what it’s like to lose a child.”

Iris leaned forward. “But you aren’t losing me. I’ll be on the Project. Your descendants will do great things there.”

“I’ve lost you already. You think I’m just a foolish old woman. And now I’ll lose Benzi too.”

“Mother.” Iris gestured with her glass helplessly. “You’re not old. You haven’t changed at all. You could still have another child. Talk to the Counselor.”

“I told you long ago why I wouldn’t.”

“And I can’t go to mass tomorrow. I promised Benzi I’d take him on a picnic.”

“You can take him afterward. I know you need the time with him, but you can do this one thing for me.”

“Very well.”

“I’ve done my best for him, Iris. Don’t think I haven’t. He’s always known that his place would be with you, that you would return for him someday. But it’s hard for a child to grasp those things. This is still the only home he knows.”

“I know.” Iris swallowed some whiskey. “I wish there could have been some other way. Linkers sometimes take an embryo of a child and store it until they have time to give birth and raise it. If we’d been richer or more powerful, we could have done that with Benzi. I could have taken him to the Islands and had him implanted and given birth to him there. It certainly would have been more practical.”

“I don’t want to hear about such practices. If Linkers cared so much for children, they wouldn’t have taken a mother from her baby.”

“It was an honor. I chose to leave.”

“And went to a place where people forget their ties to their homes. Dreams of Venus and symbols on a screen have more meaning to you than I do,” Iris winced at her mother’s words, which were so close to the truth. “At least Benzi had some time with us. Perhaps he’ll have happier memories of our home than you seem to have. Maybe that Project won’t seem so fine to him, and he’ll come back.”

“He’ll have a future there,” Iris said in a loud voice. “He wouldn’t here. Even you know that.”

“Go on, raise your voice. Let everyone know that we can’t spend one night under the same roof without a battle.”

“Angharad, I don’t want to argue. You’ve been a better mother to my son than I would have been, and I know it hurts to lose him. I don’t want our time together to be like this. I won’t see you again for a long time.”

“You won’t ever see me again. That new world will swallow you up. My daughter will be a voice and a face on the screen.” Angharad wiped her eyes with one sleeve, then refilled her glass.

The two women were silent for a while as Angharad composed herself. “I promised myself,” Angharad continued, “that I wouldn’t say such things to you, that I’d accept you as you are and be grateful that you’ve risen in the world.”

“Then we both broke our promises, Mother. I swore that I would be kinder while I was here. I was afraid to come home, you know. That’s why I took so long to get here.”

“I guessed that.” Angharad’s mouth twisted. “Are we so strange to you now?”

Iris shook her head. “It wasn’t just that. I have to tell you something else. I could choose to stay here, you know. A climatologist can work for the Plains. I could still give up this journey.”

“Earth’s made an investment in you. You’ll be expected to keep your part of the bargain.”

“But they already know that some students will ask to stay here, that when the time comes, some may not want to leave their Nomarchies. They allowed for that in their calculations. It’s why they sent us all home for these visits now — they want those who are sure of their choice afterward.”

“Do you tell me this now so I’ll weep and beg you to stay?” Angharad sighed. “Could I possibly change your mind now? You’ve made your choice. I fought you once, but you won. I won’t have you give up your victory and grow to hate me because I dragged you back here.” Angharad smiled. “I’ll still have your accomplishments to brag about in town.” Her smile faded. “And you forget Benzi. Chen would send for him. His bond is with the boy too. He wouldn’t leave him here. He dreams of having the boy live on that other world.”

Iris set her glass on the floor. “I’ve been silent about my bond with Chen, but some people from the Plains will be on the Islands, and I can’t hide my bond from them there. Sooner or later, someone will

speak of it in a message, and the word may travel here.”

“That can’t shame me now, Iris. Everyone here knows he’s not like other fathers and that we were like a family to him. They’ll think only that you have to practice the customs of that other place, and will remember how different you always were. We don’t have to say that you made that pledge here.” She finished her whiskey in one gulp. “He must be a very strange man if he still clings to that bond.”

“He’s never forgotten it.”

“And you? Have you lived all that time at the school without a man?”

“No. There was one in particular this past year that I cared for, but he made a promise to a woman in his village.”

Angharad stood up. “Just as well. That must have kept him from asking you for a promise. You seem drawn to such men. I don’t understand it. You should take love as it comes, without such ties.” She moved toward the door, then paused. “But it’s too late for me to give you advice.” Angharad’s face was still unlined, her body only slightly rounder than it had been when she was younger, but for a moment, her brown eyes seemed as weary and old as Wenda’s. “Good night, daughter.”

Benzi was trying to teach a game to Geri Laizas. He set his metal board on the grass, then put his carved pieces on the surface. “This moves like this,” he said, picking up one of the pieces. “You have to try to get it over here before mine gets there, or blocks yours.” The little girl let out her breath, pushed several pieces across the board, then giggled as Benzi rearranged them.

Laiza and Iris were stretched out near the children on the hill. A breeze ruffled Laiza’s dark hair as she toyed absently with the silver bracelet Iris had given her a few days earlier.

“Guess you don’t want to play,” Benzi said to Geri, who giggled again. “You’re stupid, Geri.” The little girl shook her head. “Yes, you are. You have to stay here. I’m going away. I’ll get to go to a school, and see my father, and do things.” Geri pouted.

“Don’t be nasty, Benzi,” Iris said. She had dwelled on the new life that awaited her son, had seen the boy begin to give up his fear and look forward to the journey. Now, she wondered if she had been too persuasive. She had made the Islands seem so wonderful that Benzi might be disappointed when he actually got there.

Geri picked up two of the carved pieces and made them dance on the board; she hummed to herself as they rattled against the surface. Benzi watched her; his mouth twisted in exasperation.

“So you’re sending him to a school,” Laiza said.

“Any child can be schooled there,” Iris replied. She had talked with her friend about her life at the Institute, telling Laiza of the friends she had made and the stories they had told about their homes, but she had never discussed the Project itself, for fear that Laiza would be bored.

“I guess your Project is only for people with learning,” Laiza said.

“That isn’t so. There are lots of workers there, and some of them will be the first settlers. They’re the ones who’ll make that world bloom.”

“Really?”

“They’ll need more workers there, maybe some farmers too. People like you.”

“Like me?” Laiza laughed. “I couldn’t leave Lincoln for long, I found that out when I was in Denver. Oh, I wish everything could stay the way it is, but it won’t. We’ll be using two of the new hybrids next year — I don’t know if Angharad told you. That may cut our growing season by a third and give us a bigger yield besides, and we all know what that means. We won’t need as many farmers. A couple of households are already thinking of merging in a few years, and that would mean having fewer children to take over.” Laiza tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I worry about Geri,” she said in a lower voice. “I sometimes wonder what’ll happen to her. If only she could be trained for something else.”

“But she can,” Iris responded. “I could spend some more time with her, see what she might learn, get her started on some lessons, if you like.” She had spoken too quickly; she was remembering Eric, and his failed business. She had thought that she was helping him when she had encouraged him, yet Constance still believed that the strain and the loss of that business had killed her son. Maybe it wasn’t right to encourage Geri.

“Would you really do that?” Laiza bit her lip. “But she’s still so young.”

“Learning should begin early. There are skills she can master now. And you can help her more than you realize.” Iris spoke in a whisper, so that the children could not hear her. “Just let her set her own pace, give her time for it, show an interest in what she’s doing, but make her feel that you’ll care for her whatever happens.”

“It’d be hard to see her leave Lincoln,” Laiza said, “but it might be even harder to see her stay. She’d probably never be more than a farmer in another’s commune if more farms begin to merge. There’d be no chance of her ever having a farm of her own.”

Iris sat up and wrapped her arms around her legs. Benzi had given up on his game, his bored eyes watching Geri as she moved the pieces aimlessly about. He glanced at his mother, then crawled to her side. Iris’s hand touched his shoulder. He stared at her steadily, accepting the gesture without reacting.

I don’t love you enough, Iris thought. I left you too soon. I only pretend I’m a mother, and you sense that.

The sea of wheat stretched to the horizon; tractors crawled among the shafts. Angharad was below, striding toward the field; she stopped, put her hands on her hips, and gazed out at her domain. Angharad had seen good harvests and bad; she had seen years when the silos nearly overflowed and others during which the wheat was parched and dry. She had accepted advice about new strains and untried methods of pest control, and she had learned from her failures that she could expect only an intermittent control over the outcome.

Iris thought of Venus. Terraforming, in its own way, was an extension of fanning, a way of forcing a world to yield to the needs of human beings. Venus, like Earth, would surrender to their efforts for a time, and then strike back at them; each season would bring its own battles. Venus would shape its people as they transformed that world.

Angharad looked up at the hill, then swung her arm in an arc, as if already saying farewell.

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Twenty

Benzi awoke early. As he recalled what day this was, he sat up quickly and clutched at his sheet.

I'm leaving today. He tensed, unsure of whether he felt anticipation or fear. He had come to look forward to this day and its adventures; now, he was not so certain that he wanted to leave.

His grandmother came to his room to help him dress; he tolerated her aid even though he already knew how to put on his own clothes. Angharad adjusted his blue tunic, picked up his bag, and then began to whimper softly. Benzi almost started crying, too, but steeled himself. Iris wouldn't want him to cry. Iris, in person, was not quite like the image he had come to know. The image had always been patient and forbearing; the real Iris seemed tense even when she smiled.

He followed his grandmother downstairs, where the rest of the household had gathered in the kitchen for breakfast. Benzi ate his bowl of oatmeal hastily, then sat quietly as the women offered advice to Iris. Constance's long hair was white-gold in the light; LaDonna made a graceful gesture with one long-fingered hand and opened her palm as she spoke. Angharad's eyes were rimmed with red.

He might never see them again. Iris had tried to pretend that when he was older, he might come back to visit, but Angharad had told him the truth. Never. Benzi turned that word over in his mind and was still unable to feel what it really meant. A lump rose in his throat; his breakfast was heavy inside him. If he were sick, maybe he wouldn't be able to go; Iris might have to leave without him. He poked at his belly, then looked up into his mother's green eyes.

Iris stood up. "We'd better go," she said.

Angharad began to wail; Julia was holding her by the shoulders. Arms reached for the boy as each woman demanded a hug; Benzi struggled for air as Wenda and then Elisabeth pressed his face against their chests.

"I can't watch you go," Angharad cried. "I can't watch that floater carry you off." Benzi was about to start crying himself when he felt his mother's hand on his arm.

Iris led Benzi through the square for one last look before they turned toward the road leading out of Lincoln to the floater cradle. He thought of the times he had sat in the mayor's office while his grandmother discussed town business with visitors.

A few people were standing in front of their doors as Benzi and Iris passed by; the boy waved at a couple of his friends and their mothers. He had said his farewells to his friends earlier; he hoped that none of them would come to the floater. He knew he would cry if they did.

Laiza and Geri were standing near the floater's ramp. Benzi swallowed. The little girl gazed at him steadily. "Let me see," she said.

Benzi held out his left arm and showed her his new identity bracelet. "You can have all my puzzles, Geri," he said in a burst of generosity. "Just tell Grandmother I said you could."

Laiza hugged Iris, then patted him on the head. At last he was on the ramp, carrying his small bag aboard the floater as he followed Iris into the cabin. She looked around quickly at the passengers, then found an empty seat. Benzi sat down next to her as she stowed her two bags under her seat; he placed his next to hers. He thought of his screen and the toys he was leaving behind; his eyes stung. He peered past Iris at the window next to her, but could see nothing except an empty field shorn of its wheat. His mother was not looking out of the window; her head rested against the back of her seat as her eyes stared ahead.

The door to the cabin closed. A pilot at the front of the cabin looked out at the passengers, and then disappeared behind another door. The field dropped away as the floater rose.

Benzi shifted in his seat, then leaned across the aisle. "I'm going to Venus," he said to a man sitting there.

"Really?"

"With my mother. She's going to work there, and I'm going to a school."

"A school, huh?" The man poked his companion in the ribs. "What do you know. Guess we're getting some high-toned passengers on this trip." He wagged his fingers at Iris, who was ignoring him.

Benzi bounced in his seat. "I'm going to Venus," he called out to a man and woman farther down the aisle.

"Hush," Iris murmured, "and sit still."

He was alone with her now, the woman called his mother. She had her impatient look on her face again, narrowed eyes and tightened lips. She had gone away from him when he was little; he could not remember that, but Angharad had told him about it often enough. She had said that Iris had not wanted to leave him, but Benzi wondered if that was true. If he didn't behave, would Iris leave him again? He stiffened with fear. If she did, how would he find his way back to Lincoln?

I'm going to Venus, he told himself again as he tried to recapture his enthusiasm for this new adventure.

The floater stopped at several Plains towns as it moved north, disgorging passengers and swallowing new ones. A few people smiled at Benzi, the only child present, as they boarded. Iris slept as he roamed through the floater, telling the other passengers about his destination. One woman listened patiently as he chattered. A man with a jewel in his forehead, who had come out from one of the rooms in the back of the cabin for something to eat, told Benzi how fortunate he was and even bought the boy a wheat cake stuffed with meat.

Iris found him sitting in the back with the man. She looked as though she were about to scold him before she noticed the man and smiled nervously. The man rose and went back to his room as Iris led Benzi back to their seats.

"He knows about Venus," Benzi said. "He says I might be a settler. He says —" He paused. Iris's eyes were wide, her mouth turned down; she looked unhappy. What was wrong?

"I hope I'm doing the right thing for you," she said softly.

What did that mean? Was Iris sorry she was going to Venus? He thought of his grandmother and the house in Lincoln that already seemed so far away. "Do we have to go?" he blurted out.

"Of course we have to go. The trip's already scheduled."

Benzi sighed. She had not really answered his question.

The floater's last stop was at a port outside Winnipeg. It was night when the floater arrived; Benzi glimpsed a sea of lights on the horizon before the airship began to drop toward its cradle. Other cradles, spaced widely apart on the airship field, held floaters; a few were empty. One floater cabin, without its balloon, was rolling on its treads toward a building where it would be cleaned and repaired.

Iris clutched Benzi's hand tightly as they descended the ramp and followed the other passengers toward the nearest building. A wave of sound assaulted the boy as they entered; hundreds of voices were a low, indistinct roar. Another voice, calling out numbers and the names of cities, echoed through the vast enclosure. Benzi blinked at the bright light.

Iris knelt next to him and adjusted the shoulder strap of his bag. "There. Now it won't seem so heavy."

An older boy with a shock of red hair was suddenly at their side. "Where you going?" he asked. "Need a guide?"

Benzi opened his mouth.

"Don't talk to him," Iris said as she stood up. She led him by the hand through a forest of legs. "And keep a grip on your bag," she shouted above the din. He followed more legs into a corridor and down a long ramp until they came to a train.

They hurried aboard and sat down. Benzi had never been on a train before; the car seemed much smaller than the floater cabin. He bounced happily in his seat as the train began to move through the tubeway, then yawned, suddenly realizing how tired he was. Iris propped up her feet on the bags she had wedged into the space between their seats and those in front of them; he rested his head against her leg. He yawned again.

"Don't doze off," she said. "We'll be at the shuttle port soon."

"Is that where the ship is?"

"It's where the shuttle is. I told you. We take a shuttle flight to the Wheel first, and then get on a torchship for Venus." She sounded impatient again. He was about to sit up when she began to stroke his hair; he nestled against her.

The whisper of the magnetic train lulled him; he did not feel it come to a stop and only realized that it had when Iris nudged him. He stumbled off, clinging to her hand, and followed her through more forests of legs until they came to a small waiting room. A scanner beeped; a door opened. Iris led him inside, then took his bag as he stretched out on two seats. He wanted to ask her for a glass of water, but was too tired even to phrase his request.

Benzi dozed off. He was floating above Lincoln, looking down through the shield over his grandmother's courtyard. Someone shook him gently. He sat up, startled at the room full of strangers until he remembered where he was and why he had not awakened in his room.

"Time to go," Iris said.

He straightened his shirt and picked up his bag. The passengers were lining up at another door; a scanner chirped as they passed through it. Benzi followed his mother outside.

They walked across a black surface. The people in front of him moved to one side; now, he could see past them to the shuttle. It stood in the distance on a circle of glowing light, its rounded nose pointed toward the starry night sky.

"Iris!" he gasped.

She squeezed his hand. "Don't be afraid."

I'm not, he wanted to say. His chest swelled as a wild, nameless feeling filled him.

Benzi had wanted to experience the beginning of his journey fully, to be completely awake during the moment when he would finally be free of Earth's gravitational bonds, but he was yawning again by the time he entered the tail of the shuttle-craft. He leaned against Iris, barely able to keep his eyes open as he waited for their turn to enter the ship's lift.

The lift carried them up through the center of the shuttle and stopped to let off pairs of other passengers; he and Iris were the last to be deposited at their seats. When they were safely strapped in, a voice began to bleat instructions at them. Iris pulled out a tube from the wide armrest between them, then handed Benzi a tablet.

“Better take it,” she said. “You don’t want to get sick.” He put the tablet into his mouth and sucked some water out of the tube.

The tablet was soon making him groggy. He stared absently at the screen overhead as a voice murmured more words; the screen showed him the dark field on which the shuttle stood. He closed his eyes.

Suddenly, a bright light reddened his closed lids; an invisible, giant hand was pressing him down hard against his seat. Benzi struggled to open his eyes; his lids seemed heavy. The shuttle field was dropping away rapidly; the ship was filled with a loud humming. The port shrank until all he could see were tiny lights against the blackness. Earth became a crescent, then swelled slowly into a blue globe.

Benzi floated up from his seat and twisted against his straps. He laughed, delighted at the sensation of weightlessness, at the feeling of falling endlessly.

“Iris!” he cried happily.

She glanced at him, then covered her mouth with one hand as she frantically thumbed a button on the armrest; she was soon vomiting into a plastic bag.

The journey on the shuttle became an adventure. Benzi, under the guidance of one of the shuttle attendants, learned how to propel himself along the corridor between seats using the grips on the floor and ceiling. The attendant instructed the boy in how to use the zero-g bathroom and told Benzi a little about himself. He was a young man from the Plains who had gone to work on the Wheel; he was now working as an attendant while training as a shuttle pilot. He had been in ports all over Earth, had seen cities in many Nomarchies. His life, it seemed, was one long journey punctuated by lively gatherings with friends.

Benzi envied the attendant. After only a few hours on the shuttle, the boy felt as though he had been traveling forever; he no longer wanted the journey to end.

The other passengers, with some exceptions, did not seem so delighted with the trip. A few of them were rarely without plastic bags in their hands. Benzi would float near a passenger, then turn slowly in the air until he was hanging upside down; this was often enough to bring on another fit of vomiting and curses from the unfortunate passenger. Soon, many passengers were hiding behind the partitions that separated their seats from the corridor whenever Benzi began to drift toward them.

Iris had recovered, though she still looked a little pale. After insisting that Benzi get some sleep, she seemed content to let him play with a numbered cube he had brought along in his bag or to let him wander the corridor. Even when she smiled at him, her green eyes seemed sad.

What could be wrong, Benzi wondered. Was she sorry to be leaving Earth? Was she sorry she had brought him along? Benzi did not dwell on those questions for long. He had the ship to explore, and an attendant to talk with; Lincoln was already fading in his mind.

After a second period of sleep, Benzi awoke to catch his first sight of the Wheel on his overhead screen. The Wheel was a large white circular tube slowly turning around a darker hub; tubular spokes ran from the hub to the Wheel’s inner rim. As the shuttle approached the hub, the Wheel’s docks became visible and Benzi could see the six torchships the decks held. The ships disappointed him at first, reminding him

of metal slugs, but as they drew nearer, he could see how large they actually were. One torchship could enclose several shuttles; he could not even begin to guess how many passengers such a ship could hold.

A bay higher up along the Wheel's hub opened to receive the shuttle. By the time Benzi and his mother had disembarked, the Wheel had become only another place of crowds, large lighted spaces, and elevators through which Iris dragged him until they arrived at another bay, where a small vessel with runners was to carry them out to the ship. The attendant had explained all of that to Benzi earlier.

He tugged at Iris's hand as other passengers climbed into the small craft. "What is it?" she snapped.

"It's so —" He broke off and stared at her wordlessly, too excited to say more.

"It's only a freighter," she muttered. "We won't have terribly luxurious accommodations." Her mouth tightened; she was getting impatient with him again. Benzi looked down.

Their room aboard the torchship was less than half the size of Benzi's old bedroom. By the time Iris had pulled the beds out from the wall, there was hardly enough space to turn around.

"You'd better get some sleep," Iris said. He obediently drifted over to his bed and floated above it as she attached his straps.

He drifted off into sleep. As he dozed, he thought he heard a distant sob.

He awoke. His back was flat against the bed; he felt heavy. He released his straps and sat up; he could no longer float. He recalled what the shuttle attendant had told him; the acceleration of the torchship's continuously firing engines would provide gravity for the passengers. Benzi sighed, already missing the buoyancy of weightlessness.

He crept through the darkened room to the door. He could hear Iris's even breathing; she was still asleep. The door opened and he entered the narrow hallway of the passengers' quarters. A man and a woman in gray workers' garb were leaving one of the other rooms; Benzi followed them to the end of the corridor and into a large room where tables and chairs stood against one wall. Two men were exercising in the center of the room; Benzi imitated their movements until one of them shooed him away.

Iris found him there and led him to one of the tables. Benzi pushed at a chair, discovered that it was fixed to the floor, then climbed into it, resting his hands and chin on the tabletop while Iris fetched some fruit and bread from the dispenser.

"You've been very good," Iris said as she sat down. "You really haven't been any trouble at all." She seemed happier now; she had taken off the shirt she had traveled in and now wore a sleeveless green blouse. "Well, I guess this will be home for a while, for a few days, anyway."

By the time they had finished their meal, three other people had joined them and introduced themselves; Benzi noticed that they, like his mother, were wearing small pins on their collars. Soon, the adults were absorbed in talk about the Institute and the Project. Iris giggled with the other woman over a story Benzi didn't understand; her cheeks grew pink and her smile widened as one of the two men leaned toward her.

Benzi stirred restlessly, then climbed down from his chair. Iris glanced at him. "Where are you going?"

"Back to the room."

"Don't go wandering off. We have to stay here, on the passengers' deck."

“Cute little fellow,” the other woman said.

Benzi wandered back along the corridor, slapping the locks of each door until the one to his room opened. Iris had pushed her bed back into the wall. Benzi stepped back, then went on down the hall, only to find his progress barred by another door.

“No passengers beyond this point,” the door said. Benzi pressed his hand against the pale surface, then stretched up to touch the lock as the door spoke phrases in other languages.

The door opened. A tall blond woman stared down at him. “Well, young man,” she said, “what are you doing at this lift?”

Benzi shrugged. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m a pilot. Just came down to say hello to the passengers. Now, what can I do for you?” The pilot had kind, hazel eyes; if her hair had been longer, she would have looked a lot like Constance.

“There’s no place to see,” Benzi said. “Isn’t there a screen?”

The pilot leaned against the door frame. “Have you been in the dining and recreation room?” He nodded. “Well, there’s another room right next to it with a screen and couches. You just go through the doorway across from the tables. You can see all you want to there. I’ll show you.”

“Are there other pilots?” he asked.

“Of course, but we’re up near the nose.”

“Can I go there?”

The woman tapped one finger against her temple, then suddenly ushered him inside. The door closed as the lift began to whisk them silently up through the ship. “I guess it’s all right,” the woman said. “Might as well give you the tour. I can say hello to the passengers later. What’s your name, son?”

“Benzi Liangharad.”

“Mine’s Rosa. Glad to know you, Benzi. You headed for Anwara, or the Islands?”

“The Islands.”

“Good for you. Of course, you’ll get to see a bit of Anwara anyway — that’s where we dock.”

The door opened, revealing a large room where two people were sitting in front of a row of panels and small screens. But it was the large screen above the panels, a screen covering nearly half the wall, that made Benzi gasp. There, stars shone steadily without flickering, pinpricks in an ebony expanse.

“We have a visitor,” Rosa announced. One of the men turned around and grinned when he saw Benzi; he was dark-skinned with woolly hair clipped close to his skull. Rosa began to walk toward him, then gestured at the boy. “Come on, Benzi.”

Benzi hesitated.

“Rosa’s the chief pilot,” the grinning man said. “Better do what she says.”

Benzi followed the woman over to the panels, where she helped him into one of the seats. “Did you greet the moles yet?” the other man asked as Rosa sat down. She shook her head. “I’ll go see them, then.” He

took off the band he had been wearing on his head, rubbed his bald pate, and stood up. “After that, I’ll get some rest.”

“Better wake Allie up when you get back,” Rosa said. “I’ll need some rest myself pretty soon.” She turned around slightly. “And tell them Benzi Liangharad’s up here in case his people are looking for him.”

“My mother,” Benzi said. “Her name’s Iris.” The man nodded as he disappeared into the lift.

Rosa leaned back. “Well, Benzi. So your mother’s taking you to Venus. You’re lucky to get a chance to go. The Islands can only take so many people.”

“My mother went to a school,” Benzi responded. “She went to the Cyther —” He couldn’t get the word out properly.

“The Cytherian Institute,” Rosa added helpfully. “Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“You should be proud of your mother. The Institute’s a fine school.”

“My father’s on the Islands now.”

“Did he go to the Institute too?”

Benzi thought a moment, then shook his head. “Did you?” he asked.

Rosa laughed. “Oh, no. I’m a pilot. They don’t train pilots there.”

“Where’s your home?”

“Oh, I usually stay on the Wheel when I’m not traveling, but I think of this ship as my home, in a way. You see, pilots have to travel from one place to another. I’ve taken the *Faisal* all over the place.”

Benzi bounced a little in his seat. “Where?”

“Oh, I’ve docked at L-5. We’ve orbited the moon. I got a chance to go down there and see what the astronomers were doing.”

“Did you ever see a Hab?”

“Certainly not,” the dark-skinned man replied, curling his lip. Benzi looked down, recalling that people did not like to talk about the Habitats, then glanced at Rosa again.

“They have pilots on the Islands, don’t they?” Benzi asked.

“Well, of course they do,” Rosa replied. “You need to use airships to get from one Island to another, and shuttles to get from there to the Bats or to Anwara. The pilots are trained there, and they learn how to run both types of craft.” She paused. “Is that what you want, son, to be a pilot?”

“I don’t know.” It might be fun to be a pilot, more fun than being a settler. “Maybe.”

Rosa smiled. “Then I’d better show you a few things. The *Faisal*’s a torchship. Know what that means?”

Benzi shook his head.

“Well, we’re powered by what’s called laser-induced pulse fusion. The lasers hit these tiny pellets of

deuterium, you see, and mass is expelled from the engine. That's what propels us forward. We accelerate continuously, and that's why we have the sensation of gravity. We keep accelerating until we're halfway to Anwara, and then we begin to decelerate so that, by the time we're ready to dock, we're moving very slowly. Understand?"

"I think so," Benzi said, not sure that he did.

"The ship pilots itself during most of our journey, but a couple of us are always here to keep an eye on things. When we wear our bands, we're linked to the ship directly." The pilot held up her own circlet. "Docking's probably the trickiest maneuver we have, but if anything goes wrong during the journey and the ship can't repair itself, the engineers take care of it. You'll probably see some of them during the next few days — they're on the level above yours, and they usually mingle with the few passengers we carry. Too bad you didn't get a chance to travel on a cruiser, a real passenger ship. We're pretty simple here."

Benzi looked up at the starry screen. "I like *this* ship," he said.

"You've made a conquest, Rosa," the other pilot said. "Maybe we should take him on as a trainee."

"Well, maybe we should." Rosa ruffled Benzi's hair as he smiled up at her friendly face.

During the rest of the week-and-a-half-long journey, Benzi spent most of his waking hours with the pilot. Rosa showed him how the ship calculated its trajectory, told him about its protective shielding, and about what the symbols on each of the small screens meant.

Sometimes, he shared a meal with the pilots in front of their screen. Boka, the dark-skinned man, was soon referring to Benzi as his copilot, and the others seemed happy to let him sit with them in the control center. They, unlike Iris, did not treat him as if his small presence were somehow worrisome and troubling.

Benzi preferred the company of the pilots to that of the other passengers. There was no other child on the ship except for one older boy who ignored him, and the passengers seemed bored by the trip. They sat at their tables gossiping or playing games, or had drinks in front of their screen while ignoring its panoramic view of the heavens. Iris seemed as bored as the rest, and content to let Benzi wander off in the company of a pilot.

Whenever Benzi lay on his bed trying to sleep, he wondered if his mother might have a change of heart when they reached Anwara. Iris had left him once before; maybe she would let him stay on the ship with Rosa. Somehow, he had the feeling that she would not really miss him, in spite of her talk about the Project and all the fun he would have with his father on the Islands. Rosa called him her apprentice; Boka had said that his own daughter might soon be traveling with the pilots.

Benzi never wanted his journey to end. He would be free on the *Faisal*, able to travel with his new friends through the timelessness of space instead of adjusting to a new environment and its demands.

By the time the torchship was nearing Anwara, Benzi had almost convinced himself that Rosa would ask him to stay aboard, and that Iris would agree.

Rosa had allowed Benzi to sit with the pilots during the docking on Anwara, and he had promised to be good and not to distract them. Anwara, it seemed, was even larger than the Wheel; three circular tubes turned slowly around its hub, and several new modules had been added to its rim. Benzi watched as the ship slowly glided between the struts of an empty hub dock.

They were under, or above, the hub; it was difficult for Benzi to tell which. By the time the ship was

tethered, Rosa had glided out of her seat. Benzi released his harness and floated weightlessly out of his chair; Rosa caught him with one hand and swam toward the door, then set her boots against the floor. The adhesive strips on her soles made a soft, tearing sound as she walked. Benzi giggled as he floated into the lift.

“Like it, don’t you?” Rosa said. He nodded. The torchship’s engines had shut down when they were near the space station, and he had welcomed the feeling of weightlessness. “Time to go find your mother.”

Benzi was dismayed for only a moment. Of course they had to find Iris. Would Rosa ask her, or would he have to do that himself? He had tried to prepare Iris by telling her of all the fun he was having with the pilots and how they had said he was their little apprentice, but she hadn’t appeared to be paying much attention to his words. She’d have to let him stay with Rosa. When she saw how happy that would make him, surely she would agree. Iris had left him before, had said that it had been best for him. She’d have to see that staying with Rosa would be best for him now. Iris could always travel up to Anwara to see him whenever his ship docked there, couldn’t she?

They found Iris and the other passengers in one of the ship’s bays, where they were waiting to board a small craft that would carry them to Anwara’s inner circle. Iris drifted toward them and handed Benzi his bag.

“I really enjoyed seeing your son on this trip,” Rosa said. “He’s quite a boy.” Benzi waited; Rosa would have to speak now. The pilot turned slowly toward him. “It was nice having you aboard. Good-bye, Benzi.”

“But —” Benzi jerked his shoulders and began to spin; Iris caught him. “Can’t I stay?”

“Come, now. You have to go with your mother, you know that.”

“But —” A lump rose in his throat. He stared at the smiling Rosa, feeling betrayed. “I thought I could stay with you.”

“The trip’s over, child. I have things to attend to.” Rosa moved away. Iris gripped him; Benzi swallowed.

“Come on,” his mother said. He blinked; a tear hung in front of him, glistening in the light.

Iris had no chance to speak to Benzi until they were aboard the shuttle that would take them to the Island Platform. She had barely heard the words of welcome an aide to the Project Council had uttered to the new arrivals; she had hardly glanced at the curving white corridors of Anwara as she and the others were led to the shuttle dock.

She was frightened. She had looked forward to these moments ever since she had arrived at the Institute, and now she was afraid. She had expected that this time would be the most joyous occasion of her life. Perhaps she had worked too hard for it; she might find that the reality did not match her dream.

She adjusted the straps holding her to her seat, then helped Benzi with his. The boy’s lips quivered; she could see that he was holding back tears.

“You were very good during the trip,” she said at last. He did not reply. “I should have paid more attention to you. You see, I’m just as nervous as you are. I’ve worked so hard for this, and I guess I was thinking more of myself than of you.”

He nodded. She watched the small screen in front of them as the shuttle glided out of the dock; Venus was hidden in the shadow of the Parasol. “I know how you feel,” she went on. “I know how hard it was

for you to leave Lincoln, and you were very brave about it. It was hard for me to leave, too, but please believe me when I say that you'll be happy here. You would have had to leave Lincoln anyway when you got older, and you'll have a lot of opportunities here you wouldn't have had there. Maybe someday, you'll do something that'll make the whole household proud of you, and then —"

"Why couldn't I stay on the ship?" he asked.

She glanced at him, stunned. "The ship?"

"With Rosa and the pilots. They liked me. They said I was the copilot. I thought —"

"But you couldn't have stayed with them. They were only —" She fell silent; she had been about to scold him for having such a foolish idea. What right did she have to scold him? She had left him for the Institute; she had taken him away from his home. Even now, she could not regret what she had done. Perhaps he was expecting her to leave again; the pilot had shown him more kindness than she had.

"I'll make it up to you," she said. "You'll see. You'll be happy on the Islands, and your father and I will help you in any way we can. I want you to feel that you can talk to us about anything that's troubling you. We won't leave you again, Benzi, I promise. You'll have a real home."

Even as she spoke, she felt somehow dishonest and wondered if the boy sensed that. She should have been enjoying her triumph instead of being disturbed by his worries; he should have been sharing her excitement instead of muttering some nonsense about staying aboard the freighter. Wenda would have called it a bad omen. Iris shook her head; she had left Lincoln behind long ago. She would put the past aside.

The shuttle fell into orbit around Venus. The future lay ahead of her; her line, embodied in her son, would begin here and share in Earth's greatest triumph.

Her spirits had lifted by the time they reached the Platform. Benzi seemed awed by the sight of the floating Island on his screen; he waved his hands happily as the Platform rose toward them from the darkness. She had been foolish to worry so much earlier, and Benzi had probably sensed her concern. It was no wonder he had seemed unhappy.

Iris was now impatient for the trip to be over. Her fellow passengers seemed to share her mood; they sat tensely in their seats as the cart carried them toward the airship bay. She said farewell to them there; she was the only one of the group going to Island Two.

"God go with you, son," one of the men said to Benzi. The boy pressed closer to Iris as she lifted their bags. "You're a lucky boy to be here."

"Lucky?" Benzi asked.

"You bet you are."

Benzi looked away from the man's intense gaze.

The airship they boarded was worn and shabby, smaller than the one that had carried them away from Lincoln. Other people bound for Island Two were already in their seats, most of them clothed in the gray garb of workers; a few were dozing. It was just another trip to them, probably one they had taken many times.

Two women glanced at Iris as she slid her bags under the seat; they wore the pins of engineers. "You're new," one said to her in Anglaic.

“Yes, I am,” Iris replied.

“I can always tell, even if I haven’t been informed of the fact earlier. Sometimes, they look like you, all full of thoughts about the wonderful deeds they have planned. Sometimes they look like they’ve made the biggest mistake of their lives, and sometimes they look completely panic-stricken. Welcome to the Project, young woman.”

“Thanks.” Iris settled Benzi in his seat and then sat down, feeling a bit deflated by the engineer’s greeting.

“Sometimes,” the woman continued, “the ones who have the most enthusiasm at the start are the ones who get most discouraged.”

“That won’t be true of me,” Iris said. “I went from a farm town to the Cytherian Institute. I went through too much to get here. I won’t be discouraged.”

The engineer lifted a brow. “I must say, young lady, that you don’t sound as though much could stop you.”

All the doubts Iris had been keeping at bay returned. What if, in spite of everything, all her sacrifices had been for nothing? What if she made no real contribution to make up for all the hurt she had inflicted on others to get here? Others could have done her work on the Islands. She had a sudden desire to flee from the airship and beg for passage back to Earth, to what was known and safe.

“Iris?” Benzi was tugging at her sleeve. “You look funny. Aren’t you glad?”

She put a hand on his head. “Yes,” she said fervently. “Yes, Benzi. I’m very glad.”

At last Iris stood under the dome of Island Two. She lifted her eyes toward the soft yellow light of the dome overhead.

She had wanted to view the airship’s approach to this Island in silence, but the two engineers had occupied her in conversation, and she had caught only a glimpse of the dome’s hazy light before the airship had docked. Other passengers had made their way to the seats near her; their talk, distracting as it was, had cheered her, and yet she had the feeling that a few of them were trying to recapture their own enthusiasm for their work through her. She had wondered how many of them might be harboring hidden regrets about their choice, or about the Project itself, or who might be longing for the people they had left behind who could not share their dream.

She lowered her gaze to the slender trees and bright flowers lining the white pathway ahead. The door to the bay slid shut behind her; her traveling companions were greeting friends.

I’m here, she thought; I’ll never leave again, I’m home. A wild joy filled her; her real life would begin.

A man detached himself from one small group of people; she found herself looking into Chen’s eyes. Iris started; her face felt hot. He would be a stranger after all this time; he might see her as a stranger too.

She looked away quickly and tugged at her son’s arm. “Your father,” she said. “You should greet him.”

Chen knelt by the boy. “Benzi! Don’t you know me?”

“Chen,” Benzi said.

“You know.” Chen rubbed the boy’s head and stood up “Iris,” he whispered. His eyes did not meet hers. “I do know what to say. I had so many words to speak, and now I can’t say any of them.”

He was the man who shared her dream. However much they both might have changed, that would be enough to bind them together. She reached for him and felt his lips brush against her forehead. I'm not the girl you knew, she wanted to say. Instead she said, "I've missed you."

He suddenly released her; she heard a short sob. Benzi was crying. Chen took his son's hand. "I know," he said. "You miss your grandmother and all the others. It's all right. Let it out if you have to."

Benzi pressed his lips together and wiped his face with one sleeve. "I won't cry," he said.

Iris picked up her bags and handed one to Chen. She would share her life with her son; in time, he would share her dream. She led Benzi onto the path; they left the garden and walked into the light.

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Part Three

Twenty-One

Fawzia Habib rarely stood on ceremony; she seemed unaware that some formality could be reassuring to others. This was one of her less agreeable traits, but then, as far as Pavel Gvishiani was concerned, she had few agreeable ones. Instead of alerting him through her Link, she had arrived on Island Two unannounced, and he barely had time to prepare for her visit to his room.

Fawzia sat on a cushion across from Pavel, smacking her lips daintily as she savored one of the candies he had set out for her. Fawzia's short black hair was curled around her oval face. It was a pretty face, with peach-colored cheeks, full pink lips, and long lashes framing large black eyes, but it was not a face that appealed to Pavel, who could see the cosmetic effort that had gone into it. Instead of her Guardian uniform, Fawzia was wearing a green silk robe over white trousers. Perhaps she was being considerate of the Islanders, who were always displeased at the sight of a Guardian, though she could hardly conceal who she was. Maybe it was only that the Guardian uniform revealed too much of her short-legged and slightly dumpy figure.

She had arrived, as usual, without an escort, as though she were only a simple Guardian soldier instead of Yukio Nakasone's second-in-command. She had brought a small package with her, but had not said what it contained. Pavel refused to look at the package, afraid that he knew what was in it. Fawzia couldn't know, he told himself; the package was sealed, and she could not have opened it.

"Yukio hasn't seen much of you lately," Fawzia said as she munched on another piece of candy. "You ought to pay him a call sometime soon."

"I sent him a message not long ago. You can give him my greetings."

"Poor man. He feels so useless on Anwara. There's so little for him to do. I keep telling him he ought to visit the Islands more, keep up with the Project's progress. There's no reason we can't all get along, in spite of how some of the Islanders feel about us."

"No reason at all."

"I think he really misses Earth," she said, "even after all these years at his post."

"Maybe he'll get a chance to go back. I'm sure you could handle his command."

Fawzia lowered her lids modestly, but not before Pavel saw the glint of ambition in her eyes. Yukio had to find the woman quite a trial; she was just waiting for a chance to push her superior out of the way. Yukio might miss his old home, but the Guardian commander had too much pride to give up his command; Fawzia might dislike Yukio, but would never act against him unless she was sure she would win out. He wished the two could think more about the Project, and less about themselves.

Pavel had cultivated those assigned to Anwara. Many of them longed for a place on the Islands themselves, and Pavel had gone out of his way to make them feel that they were as much a part of the Project as were the Islanders. He had sat through countless boring meetings in the stark, cramped rooms of the space station, and had arranged for other members of his Administrative Council to greet those from Anwara who had finally won an assignment to the Islands. He had taken a proper, if distant, interest in the Cytherian Institute, though he suspected that its somewhat naive students had been exposed to too much Earth propaganda. He had impressed the visiting Project Council members with the Project's progress. He had listened to their recommendations while making sure that, in the end, they followed most of his.

"I wouldn't make a bad commander," Fawzia said. "I'd cause less friction than Yukio sometimes does. He can't just do his job and keep order, he has to keep arranging little lectures on Nomarchic history while he harps at us about our loyalties."

"You mustn't hold that against him," Pavel said smoothly. "It's good that he reminds us of our loyalty to Earth. We mustn't lose sight of our purpose — Earth's greater glory and accomplishment."

Fawzia leaned forward. "Our loyalty is to the Project, Pavel." She smiled. "Isn't that how those of us here show our true loyalty to Earth?"

"How odd to hear a Guardian say that. You're the arm of the Mukhtars, after all."

"The Mukhtars want to see settlements. The sooner we have them, the happier they'll be." Fawzia popped another candy into her mouth. She could not look at food without devouring it; she could not gaze at anything on his shelf without handling it.

At least Fawzia and he had the same end in mind, the success of the Project. He did not deceive himself about her motivations; she would gobble up control of the Project, too, if she could.

Guardians, he thought bitterly. There would be no Guardians among the settlers if he could help it.

"The problem with Yukio," Fawzia continued, "is that he really believes what he learned on Earth and can't modify his views. I've spoken to him about this Habber business, but he simply refuses to allow them on Anwara."

Pavel lifted a brow. She should know that Yukio would never give in on that point. Habbars could not dock any of their spaceships at the space station and then take shuttles to the Island Platform, but had to travel directly to the Platform in their own shuttles. Their spacecraft could dock at the one Habitat orbiting the sun between Venus and Earth, which the Habbars had built before their agreement with the Nomarchies limited them to Mars and the region beyond; from that Habitat, reaching Venus by shuttle was simple enough. Yukio had presented the Habbars with only a mild inconvenience, but he had asserted his authority, complaining that allowing Habbars on Anwara might provoke incidents and anger the torchship pilots who stopped off there between flights.

"Of course we know," Fawzia was saying, "how necessary the Habbars are to this Project. It seems we could make a few allowances for that."

“Yes, we need them,” Pavel said carefully, “but the Project is Earth’s vision. We mustn’t lose sight of that.”

Was Fawzia trying to show how much more useful and sympathetic she could be than Yukio was? Pavel, in spite of his dislike of the woman, would have preferred to see her in command of the Guardians on Anwara, and could find ways to bring that about. He did not, however, want to make an enemy of Yukio, as he would if he acted overtly against the commander. He did not want Yukio to go back to Earth with resentments to share with others who had doubts about the Project.

Fawzia finished the last of the candies, then rose. “I must be going,” she said. “You needn’t show me out. I’d like to take a little stroll before I leave. Anwara can get tedious, and your Island environment is so refreshing. Oh, I almost forgot. I brought that along for you.” She gestured at the package; Pavel kept his face still. “I happened to run into the pilot carrying it. She was quite insistent that she wasn’t to give it to anyone but you, that you’d said you’d come out to Anwara to get it yourself, but I convinced her it would be simpler for me to bring it to you.” Fawzia’s eyes widened a bit.

“That was kind of you, Fawzia.”

“Is it so important that you have to go to all that trouble?”

“You know how shipments here can get bogged down in delays.”

“Indeed,” Fawzia’s lips curved into a smile. “But one would think that the Project’s Mukhtar could expedite matters for himself.”

“It isn’t proper to use that title with me, Fawzia.” Pavel picked up the package and pressed his thumb against the seal; the top opened.

Fawzia glanced inside, then turned toward the door. “Thank you so much for the sweets.”

“Enjoy your walk,” he replied. “Have a safe trip back, God willing.”

The door closed behind her. She had probably bribed the pilot into giving her the package. Well, perhaps he had convinced her that the package was of no importance; Pavel had, after all, opened it in front of her, showing he had nothing to hide, and she had seen no more than a couple of tools and an imprinted console panel. She might think that he had only ordered a new toy. He sighed. Whatever she lacked, Fawzia was not a complete fool. She would wonder why he would go to such trouble over a package that could easily have been shipped to the Islands with other cargo.

Pavel closed the small box. He had it all now, all the tools he needed, all the parts for the device. It had taken him four years to bring it here, years of bribes passed to a pilot who needed credit and of having her bring in the pieces bit by bit. He could now assemble the device any time, and no one would know that he had it.

He had been careful. A component from one city, a module from another; no one would miss them, or know where they had been sent. The pilot had been told whom to bribe on Earth, but even she did not know what he was planning to assemble.

He had found out about the device’s existence almost by accident. A visiting Council member had mentioned hearing a rumor in high circles. After that, Pavel had phrased his questions to the cyberminds carefully and innocuously until, without giving away his purpose, he had become convinced that the rumors were fact.

Over a decade ago, so the rumor went, the Counselors working in a couple of the North American

Nomarchies had been given devices that would protect them from assassins. A beam would strike the assassin, making it seem as if he had died of natural causes. It was a clever idea doomed to failure. A couple of Counselors had used the device, but had apparently been shattered by guilt afterward — no surprise, given their training and concern for those they counseled.

Other Counselors, it seemed, had protested, and perhaps someone near the Council of Mukhtars had second thoughts about allowing Counselors to control such a weapon, because the devices were now being removed from the places where they had been installed. Pavel supposed that those who knew about their existence had been silenced by bribery or threats. He did not care to speculate about who might still find such a device convenient or useful; at any rate, such people would have to answer to the Mukhtars for their deeds, and could hardly conceal the truth from them.

But no one would know that Pavel had acquired the weapon. He had been too cautious — a stolen piece in one city, a diagram from another, a slightly damaged but still usable component from another place. Unlike many of his fellow Linkers, he knew how to work with his hands; that was a point of pride with him, a connection with the humble origins of his ancestors. He would be able to figure it out, put it together, and install it; he might even make a few modifications.

His shoulders slumped. Now that he had what he needed, he was beginning to wish that he had never heard of the device. He had brought an evil onto the Islands, something that did not belong in a place where people dreamed of a new beginning. He would put this package away with the others and pray that he would never need to assemble the parts. The Mukhtars had been right to put a stop to the use of such a weapon; one fleeting moment of rage and an instant of terror for one's own life could be enough to condemn a man to death. The device would be a constant temptation.

It was the Mukhtars who were responsible for bringing him to this evil. Why couldn't they see what the Project needed? It had begun as one man's vision, and now it was bogged down in the constant bickering of committees. It needed another strong man to bring it to fruition. Here, they called Pavel a Mukhtar; he should have been given the power of one. Instead of appeasing the Project Council, he could have been ordering people to follow commands openly. Instead, he had to cajole and persuade one committee after another while keeping all of their different and sometimes conflicting aims in mind. He had to watch his fellow Island Administrators while wondering which of them might be conniving with others or with members of the Project Council on Earth to push Pavel aside.

Why couldn't the Mukhtars and the Project Council see what the Project required now? It needed more help from the Habbers. It needed their alloys to build safer domes; it needed their more sophisticated and durable robots to construct them. Earth had swallowed its pride before, when the pyramids below had been erected on Venus's equator; surely, it could do so again. In the centuries to come, no one would care what the Habbers had contributed; Earth's stamp would be on the new world, and Venus would be Earth's creation. It might be, perhaps, what Earth could have been.

Pavel rose, then picked up his package. He did not need it now; perhaps he would never need it, but if the Project's outcome ever depended on that weapon, he would be prepared to use it. In the meantime, he would try to put it out of his mind. He gazed at the container he held and felt suddenly that it had already contaminated his soul.

Three people sat on cushions around the low table with Iris, leaning on their elbows as they studied the diagrams on their flat pocket screens. A larger screen covered part of one of the walls, revealing a murky, black sky. Lightning flashed in the sky; a spark swelled, blossomed into a bright flame, and then faded.

There had been another volcanic eruption in the region of Beta Regio. That was not surprising in itself;

those massive highlands were one of the centers of Venus's volcanic activity, which allowed heat to escape from the planet's interior. The violence of this eruption, however, had not been expected. A probe on the surface had gathered data and images through lenses sensitive to infrared light before it had been engulfed by a lava flow.

"You could use an observer," Iris said, breaking the silence. Aryeh ben-Samuel looked up; Nelli Kazan arched her thin, dark brows.

"Nonsense," Marc Lissi murmured. "We'll send a drone, have it collect some atmospheric samples. We can analyze them here and then let the microbiologists have our findings. It's up to them to decide if the sulfur emitted by that eruption has affected the atmosphere enough to require additional seeding."

Iris gazed back steadily at Marc's handsome, olive-skinned face. "Drones are harder to control, and we've been losing too many. I could go out with an airship pilot and come back with your samples. In the meantime, I could make a few observations."

"But why risk it?" Nelli said. "You'd have to drop fairly low, near the cloud layer, to collect anything we could use. With the winds, that's too dangerous."

"I've been almost as low before." Aryeh and Nelli had only recently been added to Iris's team; they would take their cues from Marc, the team's head. "My observations have been of use in the past." Iris gazed steadily at Marc.

Nelli shook her head. "This eruption might have been much larger than others, but —"

"You can use samples, and maybe an observer as well. I'm willing to go." Iris paused. She had argued with the other members of her team before; they were all too willing to rely on drones and what she considered secondhand observations. They were cautious, like too many people here, unwilling to take any initiative that might provoke the Administrators who held authority over the Project.

Iris had come to rely on her observations and intuitions, however embarrassed she sometimes was to admit that openly. Often, she was only dimly aware of how such intuitions aided her in reaching her conclusions, but she had learned to loosen the reins on her thoughts. During her years on the Islands, away from the fear of failure that had haunted her at the Institute, she had come to see how useful she could be to the Project.

Others were more brilliant than she, but Iris had discovered her own gift. Her models were more useful than others' in making predictions. The cyberminds, of course, created the models, the formulas, images, and descriptions that mapped a planetary system, but they could only work with the data their probes and the Project's specialists provided. Iris could sense when some seemingly insignificant factor might have been neglected in a model; her observations aided her in intuiting what might be missing.

Often, her predictions were unimportant. Occasionally, they had been valuable. She had predicted a temporary change in wind velocities and patterns at the north pole of Venus, and a change in the programming of the automatic ships landing there had prevented the possible loss of a few of those ships. She had estimated, after a previous series of volcanic eruptions, that the level of sulfuric acid in the atmosphere would decline without an increase in the rate of atmospheric seeding, and had saved the Project the cost of that additional and unnecessary expense. Other climatologists had disagreed with her conclusions; but Marc had passed her thoughts along to his superiors. Marc, however disagreeable it might be, had come to rely on her, and others, in turn, relied on him.

It was a pity, she thought now, that her intuitions had failed her in her own life. Her need for calm, peaceful hours in which to consider her models and intuitions had blinded her to the mental climate of her

bondmate and son. She had not predicted their behavior, but could only trace its causes in retrospect.

Aryeh ran a hand through his thick, dark brown curls. “You take too many chances, Iris.”

“I do what works for me,” she replied. “Look at it this way. At this point, it would cost the Project less to replace me, a pilot, and an airship than to replace all of the drones we’ve already lost.”

“I think you and I had better talk,” Marc said. “Alone.” Aryeh and Nelli stood up; Iris thought she heard Nelli sigh as the two left the room. “I have to answer for my team,” he went on. “There’s been some concern about you in higher circles. I can’t continue to let you do foolish and unnecessary things.”

“You could settle that problem easily. You could disclose how useful I’ve been to you before.” She wanted to say more, but held back. She had been content, during her early years on the Islands, to let Marc present her conclusions as if they were his own. She had been an inexperienced Institute graduate, while he was the head of the team. She had been satisfied with knowing she was useful, and that her work would benefit the Project. She had been happy to have Marc on her side, and had not minded how much credit he took for himself. He had allowed her to work in her own way.

“I’m responsible for this team. I don’t think, in this case, that we need your observations.”

“You don’t know what I might find out. A drone can’t do certain things. Sometimes, you need people on the spot.”

“You’re superstitious, Iris. You have a misplaced faith in the power of human beings and their perceptions. You won’t see any more than a drone would. You’ll be in an airship, and you’ll be observing on a screen.”

She stared at him. This was the kind of statement Marc used to make, before she had proven herself. “I hope you’re saying what you really mean,” she replied. “I hope you’re not just worrying about what some superior might think of you. What is it you care about, Marc — your position, or the Project?”

“You ought to speak to your Counselor,” Marc said. “Don’t look so affronted — I say that out of concern. I don’t mind bravery, but recklessness is counterproductive, don’t you think?”

“It wouldn’t be recklessness if we had better ships and more equipment.”

“We’ve been around and around about that. We do the best we can.”

“Oh, yes. Earth won’t give us this, Earth can’t afford that. Sometimes I think that a few of the people in higher circles don’t want us to make too much progress. If we did, they might not have anything to do.”

“My, my. When you were fresh from the Institute, you couldn’t praise the Nomarchies highly enough.”

“When I was fresh from the Institute, I didn’t think Islanders were the kind of people who put their own interests ahead of our work. Someone’s probably looked at my record and finally noticed that my observations entail a slightly greater expense for the Project. You could speak up for me, and tell exactly how I’ve been useful to you, but you won’t, because then your own position might be in jeopardy. Someone might wonder who the head of this team should be.”

Marc drummed his fingers against the table. “I’ve been thinking. Since you’re so obviously restless, there is one thing you can do for me.” She was immediately suspicious; he hadn’t even responded to her accusation. “Find an airship that’ll take you over to Island Eight, have Sean Fitzwilliam introduce you to some of the geologists. You can stay for a day or two, see how you get along with them.”

Iris drew her brows together. “And why do I have to get along with them?”

“I’ve been thinking of bringing Sean back here, replacing him there with someone else. I’ll have to clear it with the Administrators first, of course, but you might be a good choice to go there.”

Iris stared past Marc at the blank screen behind his head. So Marc wanted her on Island Eight, as a liaison with the geologists there. She would have to keep up with their work, inform them of what the climatologists were doing, and function as a link between the two groups. The two teams could have kept up with each other through screens and bands, but there was always a chance that a person on the spot might see a connection that would otherwise be missed.

It had not mattered to her, when she first arrived, which Island she was assigned to, but she had ended up on Island Two because that was where most of the climatologist teams were housed. She had come to enjoy life on this particular Island. Island Two’s Administrative Committee clearly dominated those on the other Islands, and there were a few small benefits in that — quicker decisions from Administrators when requests were made, more contact with visitors from Anwara or Earth who might be influential, more of a feeling of being at the Project’s true center.

She could live with a transfer, but not with the fact that Marc wanted to push her aside. This was a demotion, whether he admitted it or not. She would be out of Marc’s way.

“I belong here,” she said quietly. “You know my work’s been good. Need I remind you of how often I’ve gone over your projections and recommendations and found problems? Do I have to tell you how useful I’ve been?” She thought of the evenings she had spent correcting Marc’s errors and glimpsing a tiny factor he had not considered — evenings she might have spent with her son. She had often been too preoccupied to keep track of Benzi. She could recall times when she had turned around from her screen to greet her son and had been startled at the changes in him, the growth and slight changes in appearance that seemed to have taken place without her noticing them.

“You’ll be useful on Island Eight, too, and you’ll have enough time for your own work. There’s no reason we can’t consult about it over the screen should you feel that’s necessary.”

She gritted her teeth. He knew that even her resentment would not interfere with her work. He counted on her devotion to her job and to the Project, and knew she would not neglect her work in order to get back at him. He would continue to rely on her, but on Island Eight, she would not be a threat to his own position. She had allowed him to use her because the knowledge that she had been able to help the Project had been enough of a reward.

“Soon, you’ll need me more,” she said. “When Venus’s rate of rotation is increased, that’s going to add another factor to our models. You’re going to need my input when decisions about sites for settlements are made. The rest of our team won’t like losing me.”

“The rest of our team will go along with me. And we aren’t really losing you, are we? We’re simply employing you elsewhere.”

“I should have had my own team by now.”

Marc waved an arm. “Don’t evaluate yourself so highly, Iris. You have a clever little talent, but it’ll fail you in time. Those things always do.”

She held in the sharp reply she wanted to make to his belittlement. You wouldn’t have stayed the head of this team without my help, she thought. “There’s another reason I can’t go to Island Eight,” she said. “My bondmate is here. My son lives here when he’s not stationed at the Platform.”

Marc coughed. “Oh, come now. You’re bringing that up rather late in our talk, aren’t you? You haven’t lived with your bondmate for years — your bond is dead in all but name. And your son has his own life to lead.”

“They’re my family. I can appeal to the Administrators and ask to be allowed to stay here.”

“Oh, really. It isn’t as though you’d never see them. You’d look like a fool making an appeal, trying to preserve a relationship that hardly exists. Of course, one could always settle matters by moving your bondmate and son to Island Eight as well. I don’t know how happy they’d be about that.”

She could not drag Chen and Benzi into her squabble; she had done little enough for them as it was. Typical of me, she thought bitterly, to think of them only when it might be convenient.

She had better grounds for appealing this transfer — her usefulness to her team here. At least a couple of the climatologists would testify to that; Marc was not the only specialist whom she had saved from a possibly damaging recommendation to the Administrators. Sometimes her advice had been no more than a suggestion that a particular model felt wrong, and a specialist had discovered his own error, but she had learned to trust her instincts.

She had to trust her instincts now as well. She could embarrass Marc with an appeal, but some of those who worked with him would not thank her for it. The Project was entering its most important phase soon; her colleagues’ work might suffer if they were dragged into her petty dispute. They did not need such a distraction now. She would have to make the best of the transfer; she could still cling to the small hope that those above Marc might turn his request down. At least he wasn’t trying to push her out to Anwara, or even back to Earth. In his own way, he was admitting that he still needed her.

“I wasn’t really planning an appeal,” she said. “But Sean might prefer to stay where he is.”

“He might. We’ll see.” Marc’s face softened a little; he had beaten her, and clearly knew it. “You’d better get ready to go. I suppose that if you find a pilot who’s willing, you could always make your precious observations and collect your atmospheric samples — they can be analyzed just as easily on Island Eight. But just understand that I haven’t recommended that you do this — you’ll have to take the responsibility.”

“Thank you so much,” she said as she stood up.

“God go with you.”

The door at the end of the hallway opened; Iris passed through it into one of the Island gardens. Two small, monkeylike creatures, tiny hoes in hand, were digging around one bush; another was cleaning a panel near the base of a nearby greenhouse. One monkey looked up and chattered at her; she strode by quickly.

She hated the monkeys, which weren’t really monkeys at all but altered primates tailored genetically to do certain simple tasks. The first of the creatures had arrived shortly after Iris had come to the Islands, as part of an experiment. There were still only a few, but eventually they would be allowed to breed and there would be more.

Once, robots had done their tasks, and workers had tended and repaired the robots. The workers had already complained about the monkeys; every one of the creatures meant one less place for a worker, one more person who would not be able to earn a chance to settle the new world. That was the main reason Iris disliked the animals, which were otherwise appealing in their way until she thought of what their presence could mean. Linkers would get rid of all the workers if they could, she thought. They’d like

a world of Linkers and robots and monkeys and no one else.

Just beyond this garden was the spiral where Iris had lived ever since coming to the Islands over a decade ago. She followed the path down a gentle slope and entered the spiral-shaped building. A few of the spiral's two hundred resident specialists had gathered in the common room to share a meal; she nodded at them as she passed their table and walked on through a curving corridor until she came to her own room.

Her name, in Anglaic letters, was posted on the door; a small holo image of her face was embedded underneath. She palmed her door open. She would have to pack a few things for her trip.

The tiny room felt close. She went to the wall opposite the door and pressed her hand against the frame of a square, mirrored surface. The mirror flickered, then revealed a rolling plain dotted with birch trees. She would have to change the image; she had stared at this particular view too often.

Unless she was working at her desk, or ready to sleep, Iris didn't care to spend much time in her room, for too much in it evoked memories of the past. She would recall that Chen had once used a particular drawer to store his chisels. She would remember how Benzi had perched on the bed when she had found the time to talk to him. He would speak quickly; his body was never relaxed, as if he expected to be dismissed at any moment.

She sighed; she had almost forgotten that she would not have this room much longer. Turning, she pulled out a drawer from the wall, took out a small bag, and began to pack. She would take one change of clothes, a brush and comb, and an extra pair of shoes; she could find anything else she might need on Island Eight. Her hand brushed against one corner of the drawer, and touched a large, round marble; she plucked it out, held it up to the light, and remembered.

Chen had shown her to this room when she arrived on the Island. The room had been meant for only one person, but Chen had assured her they would have it only until a larger room was available. Benzi was to have the room next to theirs, which he would share with another boy.

The boy's name was Ismail. He explained that his parents also lived in that residence and that he and an older brother had shared the room until recently, when his brother had taken a bondmate. Ismail was a year older than Benzi; he babbled of the Island where he had been born as Iris and Chen watched Benzi unpack.

Benzi seemed happy with his room; Iris wondered if he was relieved that he would not be sharing one with her and Chen.

"Come on," Ismail was saying to Benzi. "I'll show you around outside."

"Hadn't we better have supper first?" Iris said. "And maybe you're too tired to wander around just yet."

Benzi's smile faded. He glanced from her to Chen, then turned toward the other boy. "He can have supper with me," Ismail said.

"Is that all right?" Benzi asked.

Iris looked down at her son, trying not to feel too disappointed. Benzi would need more time to get used to her and Chen; perhaps it was just as well that he would have his own room during the adjustment.

"Anyway, you must want to be with him." Benzi jerked his head toward his father.

"Well, you can eat with Ismail, then. I'll come and tuck you in after supper."

Benzi grimaced with embarrassment; Ismail lowered his gray eyes. "I can tuck myself in," Benzi said.

"Well, just don't stay up too late." Chen patted Benzi on the head before following Iris from the room.

As they entered the room they were to share. Iris admitted to herself that she missed Benzi's presence; she would now be alone with her bondmate. She unpacked hastily as Chen showed her where to put her things. He was asking her about her trip; she spoke of her journey, relieved at having something to talk about.

The room had only one chair, in front of the screen; Iris sat down on a cushion while Chen sat next to her. He held out one hand; a marble lay in his palm. "It's a gift," he said. He held it up; she saw a tiny globe mottled with red and black. "Venus as it was." He turned it in his hand; the other side was blue and green. "Venus as it will be."

She took the marble from him and smiled. "Where did you get it?" she asked. He told her of a friend who had made it and how the friend might be willing to put it on a necklace chain if she liked; Iris barely heard his words. She was looking at the narrow bed where they would spend the night, at the small room they would have to share.

Chen fell silent. Iris quickly filled the silence with talk of her household's recent gossip. As she spoke of Constance's new lover, a pained look crossed Chen's face. Of course, she thought; he wouldn't want to hear about Lincoln now. She had not even asked him about himself, and there had to be much he hadn't said in his messages to her.

Tomorrow, she would be meeting with her new colleagues; she needed time to prepare for that. She needed to sleep, so that she would be fresh; making a bad impression at the start would hardly help her. She wanted to mention these concerns to Chen, but then he would probably lead her to their bed and she was already dreading that intimacy.

She was suddenly ashamed of having such thoughts. Chen had been on this Island, waiting for her; he probably felt as awkward as she. She owed him some consideration. She would have to make the best of this bond, for Benzi's sake as well as for Chen's. She had disrupted her son's life enough; she could not disrupt it more with a broken bond.

She had come here believing that she would at last be free to make her contribution to the Project; instead, she felt chained to problems and concerns that might only interfere with her work and keep her from doing her best. If it had not been for Chen, she might have come here from the Institute without being tied to a bondmate and son.

"Iris," he said as he took her hand. "I want it to be the way it was for us. I wish I had more learning so I could help you with your work. Listen, why don't we go outside and have supper in one of the gardens, so you can see —"

She released his hand and stood up. "I think I'm too tired to go anywhere. I'm almost too tired to eat."

"Of course. The trip."

"We'll have time during the next few days for you to show me around."

"I forgot to tell you, Iris. I've got to start another shift on the Bat the day after tomorrow. I won't be back for two months."

She was facing away from him as he spoke; he would not see either her relief or her bewilderment. Why hadn't he asked for more time to be with her? She had learned enough from his messages about his work

to know that he could have requested the time, especially under these circumstances. She thought of how quickly he had left Earth for the Islands, with only a message for her.

He made love to her that night as if she were still the inexperienced girl he had known in Lincoln. For the first time in her life, she pretended to a response she did not feel.

Iris put down the marble and closed the drawer, then set her bag on the bed. Chen had set his bag in the same spot while packing his things.

He had moved out of the room a year after she had come to Island Two. She should have realized that he would leave her, but she had not seen into his heart for some time. He had been away at the Bat during much of the year; during his time on the Island, except when they were in bed, they occupied themselves with Benzi and with talk about their son. Benzi had warmed toward them both, but it was Ismail's family he turned to most often for companionship, and Iris had to remind herself to set aside some time for her son.

She did not talk to Chen about her work, much of which he could not understand in any case. He had become what he was when she first met him, a man of few words.

"I have news for you," she said as they sat by their screen eating a light supper. Chen had returned from his shift that day, and she had not had time to speak to him earlier. "There's a larger room in this building we can have now, if we want it. It's just down this hall, so Benzi can keep the room he has, but there'll be space for him in the new one so he can stay there with me while you're away. You know how he feels about this one — it's so small he thinks that he's in my way when he stays."

"Isn't he?"

"Isn't he what?"

"In your way." Chen poked at his food with his fingers.

"Of course he isn't. I'll admit I haven't done as much for him as I should, but I've had to prove myself to my team. First Marc would pick at my models or dismiss my suggestions, and now he's actually starting to ask me for my opinion. I suppose that's good, but it means more work for me. Anyway, Benzi had his own schoolwork to do, and he and Ismail always seem to have somewhere to go with their friends."

"You don't often ask Benzi to stay here with you."

She set down a morsel of meat and wiped her fingers on her napkin. "Did Benzi say that?"

"He mentioned it."

That surprised her. She had thought Benzi preferred his own room and only stayed with her out of a sense of obligation. "I didn't think — well, you've seen the other room. It's Gerda Toland's, but she's moving to Island Nine, so she and her daughter will —"

"Is that what you want?" Chen asked.

"Don't you?"

"Fei-lin told me there's a free room over in the workers' quarters now."

Iris sipped her tea. "Don't tell me you'd rather live there."

"I'm a worker. Maybe my place is there."

“Well, I’m not. I’d rather stay here, and it’s better for Benzi too. He’s made friends here, and I’d rather not uproot him again, even if we will still be on the same Island.” They might, she knew, have moved to one of the residences shared by other workers and specialists who also had bonds, but Benzi would have been uprooted all the same, and she had not had time to make arrangements to move. “What is it, Chen? Do you feel out of place here? I don’t see why you should. You get along with the people here, you’ve even done carvings for a few.”

“It’d be better for me to be there.”

“It wouldn’t be better for me.”

Chen pushed his plate away. “I’m not asking you to come with me. The room is too small for two people anyway. It’s smaller than this one, and there’d be no place for Benzi.”

She stared at him, not knowing what to say. She probed her feelings, surprised to realize how hurt she felt. “I see,” she said finally. “Things haven’t worked out for us.”

“Be honest, Iris. I know why you haven’t said we should separate. You didn’t want to be in a battle with me that would keep you from concentrating on your work. I’ve seen how you look when you’re discussing something with your friends I can’t understand, and you feel you have to cut it short to be with me. You came here to give everything to this Project. I came here to do that also. If I thought staying would help you, I’d stay, but I won’t be a burden and have you feeling years from now that I kept you from doing what you might do. I’ll still be a father to Benzi, and he’ll see me as much as he does now. We tried. Maybe I didn’t deserve to win you back.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She twisted her napkin in her hands. “And do you want to sever our bond too?”

“Would you break it?”

“No,” she said forcefully. She longed to tell him that she still loved him in her way, that she was sorry her love wasn’t stronger, that her bond with him was somehow connected to her bond with the Project and that to break it might mean that the Project had cost them too much. “I couldn’t break it,” she continued. “I couldn’t hurt you that way.”

He gazed at her intently. “I’m glad you said that, Iris. It means I can still hope.”

“Perhaps,” she replied, feeling dishonest as she spoke the word.

“I can pack tomorrow. I don’t have much to move. We should tell Benzi — he has to be told that this doesn’t have anything to do with him.”

She had almost forgotten about that. She covered her eyes. “Oh, Chen.”

“If you want, I’ll tell him.”

“No. He should hear it from both of us.”

“He’s probably in his room now. I’ll fetch him.”

The door closed behind Chen. What would she do if Benzi cried? He rarely did, but she never knew how to handle him when he seemed unhappy; she could only pat him and tell him his unhappiness would pass.

The door opened as Chen led Benzi into the room, then seated him on the bed. “Chen said you have to

tell me something,” Benzi said.

Iris steadied herself. Benzi’s face was calm, almost indifferent. “We wanted to tell you,” she said, “that your father’s going to move out of this room and live in the workers’ quarters instead. Most of his friends are there, as you know, and you see how small this room is, so he’s decided to move there, but I’ll still be living here.”

“Do I have to move too?” the boy asked.

“Oh, no,” Chen said; his smile seemed forced. “You’ll still be with Ismail, and your mother here. Nothing’s going to change for you. I’ll still come to see you during my time off. You’ll see me just as much.”

“You’re away a lot now,” Benzi said.

“Yes.”

“Then why do you want to move?”

Chen seemed at a loss. “We told you,” Iris said. “This room is really too small for us, and —”

Benzi shook his head. “It isn’t the room.”

Iris swallowed. “You’re right, son. It isn’t just the room. You’re old enough to understand. Sometimes, a man and a woman are together for a while, and then it’s time for them to go their different ways. They love each other for a time, and then that passes, but they can still be friends and have their memories. You saw how it was in Lincoln, with the men your grandmother loved — well, this is the same.”

The boy blinked. “You’re bondmates. That makes it different.”

“Sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn’t work out that way. Anyway, Chen and I will still have our bond, and that means he’ll always be important to me. And we want you to know that this won’t change anything for you. We both still love you just as much, and we always will.”

“Maybe you won’t,” Benzi said; he sounded oddly composed.

Chen put his arm around his son. “Of course we will.”

Benzi sighed. His composure was unsettling; Iris wondered why she had thought he might cry. “You’re being very grown-up about this,” she said lightly.

The little boy fidgeted. “Guess I’m not surprised. You don’t act like Ismail’s parents. They laugh and shout and like each other.”

“We like each other too,” Iris said.

“If you did, Chen wouldn’t be moving.” Benzi slid off the bed. “Can I go?”

She knew she should say more to her son, but she could not find the words. “Yes, of course,” she said at last. “Good night, Benzi.”

“Good night.” As the door opened, he turned toward them again. “Guess you shouldn’ta had a bond.”

“Yes, we should have,” Chen replied. “Our bond gave us you.”

Benzi's mouth twisted. The door closed behind him.

Iris had eventually convinced herself that it was better that she and Chen had parted as they did, without arguments, harsh words, and useless weeping. But she had been unprepared for the hollow, empty feeling that still occasionally rose up within her when she was alone in this room.

She could not reproach herself; that was what Iris's Counselor had told her. She had not broken her bond with Chen and had kept on reasonably friendly terms with him, and that was the important thing. Iris had kept her promise to Chen, in her own way, and Chen had known that Iris's people rarely took bondmates. The Counselor's words had been soothing and reasonable.

Yet, even now, Iris felt that she had failed that the wound would never heal. Chen had claimed a part of her soul; he had awakened feelings in her that now had no outlet. If she could have found another man who would evoke the same strong feelings, she might have healed, but the men she had known on the Islands were colleagues or friends or bed partners and no more, and she feared risking yet another wound to her soul.

She glanced toward her shelf. A carving of Benzi sat there; Chen had made it when Benzi was ten and had caught his son's distant, dreamy gaze, for Benzi had often seemed to be staring past what was in front of his eyes to a place only he could see.

After Chen had moved to the workers' residence, Iris made a resolution. She would not allow barriers to rise between her and her son as they had between her and Chen. She could tell herself that her failure with Chen was as much his fault as hers; she could recall the times when he had seemed about to speak of whatever was troubling him only to keep silent in the end. Benzi, however, was only a child; it was up to her to strengthen their bond.

For a while, she kept her resolve. She set aside evenings for Benzi, and arranged to dine often with him and his young friends. She asked about his schoolwork and tutored him in a few subjects; she spoke to his teachers and made sure that they were encouraging him properly. She listened to Benzi's talk of his activities even when she was longing for solitude to do her own work. Whenever Chen was on the Island, she made sure that the boy always had time alone with his father, but also arranged for them to have moments together as a family.

In spite of her efforts, she saw that he still turned more readily to others with his childish problems. Had she stayed in Lincoln, others in her household would have shared in his care, and here, there were the men and women who were his nurses and teachers. She could not be everything to him, and she would be useless to the Project if she gave her work short shrift in order to be with Benzi. Marc Lissi, who had once been so condescending, was coming to rely on her more; she could not let Marc down.

It came to her now that she could remember nearly all of the occasions when Benzi had shared some of his deepest thoughts and feelings with her, because there had been so few of them. One such time had been when Benzi was eight, when she had already begun to break her promise to herself.

That day, Benzi had returned from the northern Bat. He had been there with other children for a few days to visit their parents and see what work they did there. It was Benzi's first trip to the Bat, and when he came to Iris's room, she could see how anxious he was to talk to her about it.

"I hope you enjoyed your trip," she said.

"Oh, I did. Chen showed me the docks."

"You'll have to tell me all about it. I really do want to hear." She forced herself to smile. "Trouble is, I'll

have to hear about it some other time, maybe tomorrow. You see, I have a meeting tonight with my team, and I have to be there. I know I promised we'd have supper together when you got back, but this meeting came up, and you see how it is. Maybe Ismail —"

"He's over at his brother's."

"Well, then maybe you should just have a small supper and go to bed early. You're probably tired anyway."

Benzi's eyes narrowed a little. "Is it that important?"

"The meeting? Yes, it is. You see, the crosswinds moving to the north have shifted a bit, and — well, let me put it this way. My team has some questions about my projections, and I have to be there to answer their questions."

"Can't they see if you're right already?"

"Benzi, if you were given a problem in school, and you knew your answer was the right one, but your teachers all said you were wrong, it wouldn't be enough to hope they found out you were right by themselves. You'd have to convince them. That's what I have to do tonight. This change in the wind patterns, according to my models, is likely to persist for some time — at least that's my conclusion. The trouble is, the others on my team, especially Marc, aren't so sure, so he's going to talk to them, and then he'll probably want to see me alone."

"What if you're wrong?" Benzi asked.

"If I am, then they'll have to show me my mistake. That's why we have teams, so we can check each other."

"I don't know why you have to go now," Benzi said. "Last month, you were late for my birthday, even though you promised, and before, you said we were going to Anwara on a trip, and we didn't."

She was surprised; he had been, she thought, unaffected by those broken promises before. "Benzi, that can't be helped sometimes. Things come up, and plans have to be canceled."

"You knew about this. You knew for days. Why couldn't you do that other stuff before? Why can't you wait until tomorrow?"

"Because Marc wants to see me tonight."

"You could have told him!"

She went to the bed and sat down next to him. "Benzi, stop it. This whining isn't like you. My work for the Project is important, you know that." He looked as though he did not believe her. "Son, you know I'd rather stay here with you, but I can't." She touched his shoulder; he pushed her hand away.

"No, you don't," he said in a low voice. "You just do stuff with me because you think you're supposed to. You try to act happy, but you really don't care. You do it with Chen too. He didn't want to move out — you let him."

"Did he tell you that?"

Benzi shook his head. "But I can tell."

So this was what all her efforts to be a good parent had meant to him. Iris stood up. "I have to go. If you

want to sit here and sulk, go ahead. If you're in a better mood tomorrow, I'll be happy to hear all about your trip."

Benzi had told her all about the trip the next evening. She had been relieved when he hadn't mentioned their little dispute. He did not protest when other promises were broken.

Another memory came to Iris. Her son's arms were around her shoulders. The unusual gesture of affection was so surprising that she was not sure how to respond.

She shut off her screen, then turned around in her chair and looked up at her son. At ten, he was still short, but he was growing; she had to lift her chin a bit higher to gaze into his eyes.

She stood up; his head reached nearly to her shoulders. His brow was furrowed with worry.

"What is it, Benzi?"

"I don't want to bother you."

"I'm not doing anything that can't wait."

They sat down on cushions; he reached for her hand, surprising her again. "Iris," he said, "do you love me?"

She almost laughed. "What a question. Of course I do. You're my son. I love you very much."

"I think you like what you do more."

"Now, Benzi, that isn't true. I love it as much as you perhaps, no more and no less, but in a different way. I know it keeps me busy, but that doesn't mean I'm not concerned about you." She paused, hoping that he was not about to reveal some hidden resentment. "Why do you think I do my work? What I do is going to make it possible for you to be a settler someday. Our analyses — not just ours, of course, but ours are important — will help in determining the best sites for the first settlements and the place where you'll live on the surface."

"Would you still love me if I wanted something else?"

She released his hand. "Why, Benzi. What else would you do?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. You're too young to know. I thought you were doing well in school. Is there something I haven't been told?"

The boy shook his head.

"Then you shouldn't worry about it. I knew what I wanted when I was your age, and you should be glad you don't have the problems I had. You'll be able to be a specialist and do something wonderful for the Project, maybe more than I've done. I'll be so proud of you then."

"But what if I don't want that? Would you be mad at me then?"

"Benzi, you shouldn't say such things. You don't know what you want. You won't feel this way when you have real work of your own to do. You probably think that schoolwork doesn't contribute anything to the Project, but it's preparing you for it. You'll see how silly your worries are when you're older." She had gone on to speak of her sacrifices and Chen's and of the opportunities the Project offered. She had

never answered her son's question.

Benzi had not revealed such notions to her again. It was he who began to cancel plans they had made for time together and who cut their visits short. He had not even come to Iris himself to tell her that he was leaving school to become an apprentice; he had sent Ismail to give her the news.

Now, it was Iris who pleaded with her son while he endured her with obvious impatience. She had pressed him to continue his studies, and he had refused to respond. Even while knowing that her words would have little effect, she could not stop herself from uttering them, could not give up hoping that he would come to see things her way. If she stopped pressing home her points, she might have to admit that she had lost him after all, yet her angry words only increased the distance between them.

Iris closed her bag and stood up. She had given Chen and Benzi all that she could; they had always known that the Project had an equal claim on her heart. Perhaps it would be better for her to live on Island Eight, away from this room and the memories it evoked. She would not have to encounter the son who had withdrawn from her; she would no longer have to gaze into the eyes of a man who was still waiting for her to erase all the past years with a few loving and heartfelt words.

The pilots' residence, with its two long, triangular wings, reminded Iris of a bird. Two Habbars passed her as she came to the entrance; she stared past them, refusing to acknowledge their tentative greetings. She had tolerated such people once, had even been grateful for their work on the Project, but that had been before Benzi had started to seek their company. Her son might be inside the pilots' building now; he had returned from the Platform a couple of days ago.

Two pilots greeted her as she entered the building; a Linker waiting in the hall gave her a cold stare. The first Linker she had met on Island Two had looked at her in the same way. She had noticed, soon after arriving, how people from the Institute were treated by Project veterans; the older specialists patronized them or complained excessively about their work. She had thought only that this was the way any group might have treated new arrivals; she had sometimes been a little lofty with new students at the Institute. But even Institute graduates who had been here for years were often treated that way.

She and those like her might have schooling, but some others could not forget their origins. The small circle of people whose families had been part of the Project for a century or more saw them as intruders, while those who came from prominent Earth families saw them as outsiders. She had believed that the Project would make them forget such distinctions.

"Iris!"

She turned and saw Rosarius Delan's friendly face; the pilot had been her lover briefly, and she hadn't seen him for several months. She walked toward him, telling herself that she owed him a little of her time now, refusing to admit that she dreaded a possible encounter with her own son.

Hong Te-yu walked over to Benzi's table and slid into a chair next to his. "Just saw your mother outside," she said.

Benzi stiffened, then swallowed more fruit juice. The room where the pilots gathered to talk or share food and drink was nearly empty; he glanced apprehensively toward the door.

"She told me she'd be right in. I think she just wants to talk to me."

"Let's hope so."

Te-yu rested her chin on her small hands. "Really, Benzi, don't you think you could be a little kinder to

her? You're old enough to stop acting like a child."

"You're a fine one to be telling me that, with what we've been planning." Benzi closed his mouth quickly. Even in a nearly empty room, it wasn't wise to allude to their plans. His neck was stiff with tension; he moved his shoulders, trying to relax. A lock of dark hair fell across his brow; he brushed it back with one hand.

Te-yu was right, he knew; he could be kinder to Iris. He had learned, early in his life here, that Iris became unhappy when he told her too much about his worries or pestered her with too many questions, but he no longer held that against her, and there had been Counselors and teachers to guide him. His mother had not neglected him, and had set aside periods of time to spend with him; she had rarely raised her voice to him when he was small, and he could not accuse her of any cruelty toward him. It had seemed at times that she was merely behaving properly as a parent out of a sense of duty rather than because of any truly deep feeling for him, but he could understand that as well. She had been no older than he was now when he was born, and had been forced to leave him; he could not blame her for that. It was true that her work meant more to her than he did, but a few of his friends had parents as obsessed.

What he blamed her for now, and could never explain to her, was her constant talk of his obligation to the Project. His duty to the Project was bound up with his duty to her in Iris's mind; there was no way to separate the two. If he did not give his life to Venus, she would never forgive him; that was clear, though she had never said so quite so explicitly. He could never tell her of his own doubts about the Project's goals, for his mother could never admit to any such doubts after all her effort to get here. He could not explain to her that he had come to feel that this whole enterprise, whatever knowledge it yielded, was a way for Earth to perpetuate its rotting culture. When he thought of Venus's future domed settlements, he saw prisons where the inmates would welcome their imprisonment and call it freedom.

He could not say any of this to his mother, and because of that, he had to endure her talk without being able to respond to her arguments. Instead of accepting him as he was, she seemed to grow ever more desperate to change him. He had come to see her as a representative of all that he wanted to escape.

His father, though he was as devoted to the Project as was Iris, did not provoke the same feelings in Benzi. He would not have admitted his doubts to Chen, but Chen seemed willing to take his son as he was. Chen attached no conditions to his love; he could continue to love Iris after years of separation, and could love Benzi as well. However consoling this quality of Chen's was to Benzi, there were times when it had exasperated or puzzled him; in this respect, Benzi realized, he himself was more like Iris. He wished that he could reach out to his mother; as things were, it was easier to avoid her.

Benzi had been on Island Two for eleven years. He had made friends and gone to a school and chosen his work, but he had never really felt at home here. He had been afraid to leave Lincoln, but he had gotten over that loss; he was even grateful for being freed from the life he would have led there. He had made a life for himself. But a dome enclosed him and cut him off from the heavens; he was only truly happy when on a shuttle to Anwara, able to look at the beckoning stars on the ship's screen.

Habbers lived in space. Eventually, they might free themselves of the tenuous bonds that still linked them with Earth's people and embark on voyages that would take them to other stars. He quickly pushed that thought aside.

Iris was standing in the doorway. Remembering Te-yu's advice, Benzi stood up and bowed in an exaggerated show of courtesy as Iris approached his table. He had grown during the past year; he was now a little taller than she. He waited until she had seated herself before sitting down again.

“Looks like you’re going on a trip,” Te-yu said as Iris set her bag on the floor.

“I am, to Island Eight. I need a pilot.”

“And I suppose you just can’t wait for another airship. There is one leaving at first light tomorrow, you know.”

“I have to go now. I’m expected. Besides, there’s been a rather violent eruption around Beta Regio. I want to drop lower, take some atmospheric samples from as near the lower cloud layer as we can get.”

Benzi lifted a brow; Iris could have sent a drone to do that. He suspected that her team didn’t restrain her more only because they might need such daring when Venus was finally settled. Too many, because of the drones and screens, were content to deal with their tasks through cybernetic intermediaries; the first settlers would have to be more enterprising. He glanced at Te-yu’s round, pretty face; the pilot would not miss a chance to show off her skill.

“Your friend Marc won’t be happy about that,” Te-yu said.

“Oh, he suggested that I could do it if I like. Of course, he won’t take responsibility for it. I’m not thrilled about going to Island Eight, so he threw me a bone.”

“I guess I can take you, then. Sometimes I think you believe I’m supposed to be your private pilot, Iris.”

“I’ll go with you,” Benzi said abruptly, wanting to make some gesture to his mother to ease the hard feeling between them. Maybe if she saw him piloting, she’d be happier about his choice of work.

Iris frowned. “I’d rather you didn’t come along.”

His gesture had failed; she seemed annoyed with him instead of grateful. “Why not?” he asked.

“You know perfectly well. Chen wouldn’t want us both in a ship taking a risk.”

“If it’s such a risk, you shouldn’t be asking Te-yu to go. You shouldn’t be going yourself. You don’t have to use an airship to get samples. Anyway, I didn’t think you still worried about what Chen feels.” He gulped down the rest of his juice, suddenly angry. All his offer had done was to start a new argument.

“Please, don’t insult me,” Te-yu murmured. “You’re not risking much when you’re on an airship with me. Benzi can come. I could use a copilot, and he’s put in his time on floaters and shuttles. He won’t be an apprentice pilot much longer.”

Benzi smiled triumphantly. Iris glared at him. “Very well.”

Te-yu stood up, adjusting the collar of her blue coverall. “I’ll go check out a ship, and I’ll probably have to get some cargo loaded for Island Eight just to preserve appearances. We don’t want everyone to know that we’re just running a private fleet for you.”

“Thanks, Te-yu. I’ll give you some extra credit.” Iris waved a hand as the pilot hurried away. “We’ll meet you in the bay in an hour or so.”

Benzi was alone with his mother. Her brown hair had grown a little longer, curling just above her collar in the back. “You look nice in green,” he said as he gestured at her shirt and pants. “You usually do.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I get you something from the dispenser?”

She shook her head. "I didn't realize you were so close to the end of your apprenticeship."

"Well, you didn't seem to be interested."

"I don't know why you have to be a pilot."

Benzi grimaced. "Iris, don't start again."

"You were doing well in school. You were a very good student. You could have been a scientist, learned from some fine people here."

"Please," he said softly.

"Do you know what some people said when you gave it up? They said it proves that most children of workers will never really stick to learning even with the opportunities offered to them here." Her green eyes glittered. "Even when they're doing well, they just don't stay with it."

"So now you're blaming Chen."

"I don't blame Chen. He feels the same way I do. You shouldn't have left."

"I take some lessons during my free time."

"Then why did you have to leave school at all?"

Benzi leaned back. Iris always began an argument after he thought a particular matter had been settled, when it was too late for her objections to have any effect. Nothing he did was ever a dead issue with her.

"What good is being a pilot going to do you later?" she continued. "There may be a settlement on the surface within three decades, if all goes well, and you won't be one of the settlers. You'll be someone ferrying things from here to there, that's all."

She was harping on that again, and he knew why, even though she had never admitted it openly. Her own disappointments wouldn't matter if she saw her son settle the new world; that dream was her obsession, and Chen's as well. In all their time here, neither had ever asked him what he wanted, and he could hardly tell them now, or reveal that piloting might provide him with an escape.

"I'll still be with the Project." He felt dishonest even as he said that, and wondered if she suspected his dream. "Maybe I don't want to be a settler. Just because that's what you and Chen want doesn't mean I have to go along."

"What did we do it for, then?"

"I hope you did it for yourselves." He pushed his glass away. "Look at you. Oh, they need their specialists there with the first settlers, but they don't want to grub in the ground themselves, so they took people like you and lured you to the Institute and filled your heads with dreams. So you'll go there and sweat with the workers and build a world, but it won't be yours, it'll be theirs. It's their children who'll reap the rewards, not yours. They'll come floating down in their Islands someday to claim it all." He kept his voice low. "And look how they treat the Habbers. When they're needed, fine. When they're not, pretend they're not here." He had said too much; he shouldn't have mentioned the Habbers to her.

"The Linkers and the specialists closest to them don't see it quite that way," Iris said. "Many of them would stay here just to learn even if we could never settle this world. Oh, I know how they feel. Once, simple learning was enough for me, before I—"

Benzi could feel some pity for her. She had given up a lot for her chance to come here, and had found that she would never be more than a handmaiden to those with more brilliant minds and more power.

Specialists and Habbers, he knew, could forget their differences while working together, and might even have drawn closer if they weren't always warned against it. Many specialists seemed to ask for little except the chance to do their work, and prolonged their physical youth as long as possible in order to keep their minds flexible and clear. Some of them almost seemed like children, living in the present, giving little thought to the time when their minds, in spite of rejuvenation, would age, and those with more supple minds would replace them.

Iris was gazing past him. "People who build a world," she went on, "who are strong enough to do that, are not going to stand aside and let that world be taken from them by anyone."

"Dangerous talk, Mother," he said. "Better not let the people on your team hear you. I mean, aren't we all working for Earth?" His lip curled. Whenever he thought of Earth, he saw a dead hand grasping his insides, refusing to let go.

Iris reached over and patted his arm; he did not draw away. "I'd like to know," she said gently, "that people of my line will settle Venus. I promised your grandmother that I'd try to bring that about."

Benzi kept his face still. The line again, that list of ancestors that only reminded him of everything he wanted to escape. Iris hadn't been thinking of her line when she left Earth; why did she speak of it so often now?

"Then have another child," he said. "You could choose a daughter this time. I'm sure your Counselor would at the least give you permission to store your genetic material or an embryo until there's space for the child. Chen would be willing."

"There's nothing between us now."

"Then it would have been kinder to break the bond when he left you. Leaving things as they are is cruel — it gives him hope."

"We made a promise, and the pledge will end before too long."

"So you keep to the form of that pledge, and violate its spirit. You let Chen think you might come to love him again."

"You foolish boy. I love him now. I haven't forgotten what he once meant to me. But he asked for too much." She bowed her head. "He agreed to the contract, he accepted the provisions. We never promised that there would be no others during the twenty years of our pledge, only that we would make no bond with them. I won't break the bond." She was silent for a moment. "You say he loves me, but don't forget that he chose to leave."

"You didn't try to stop him. He would have stayed."

"I gave him what I could. He loves the girl he made that pledge to, and I'm not that girl any more. I gave you what I could, but it seems it wasn't enough for you, either."

He could say nothing to her. You didn't want to have me, he thought. I was just a means to an end. Had you been chosen for a school sooner, you might never have had me at all. Iris had never told him that, but Benzi had come to know enough about her old life and her reasons for becoming Chen's bondmate to deduce it. I was your way out of Lincoln, he thought, until you were given another way and didn't need me. Now I'm only another link in your line, a bridge between you and the ones who'll settle Venus.

In all this time, he had never formed a true bond with his parents, one that was felt rather than only a matter of record. He had tried not to let that pain him. Occasionally, he could even feel relieved that such a feeling did not exist, for its lack would make what he had to do a little easier. People were together for a while, and then the time came for them to go their different ways; Iris had said so herself, when Chen had left her.

“Well, better that things are this way,” Iris said quietly. “Marc is thinking of having me move to Island Eight for a while.”

Benzi rested his chin on his hand. “Is this a move up or down the ladder, Mother?”

“Down, I’m afraid. He wants me to be our team’s liaison there with the geologists. What it means is that I’ll be out of his way, and won’t threaten his position.”

So this was her reward for her years of work. Marc’s claim on Iris’s time had always taken precedence over Benzi’s demands, and, as a child, he had often thought of Marc as his true rival. Perhaps Iris was not so important to her team as she had claimed. Benzi had often wondered if her work was merely an excuse to avoid the son she had never really wanted.

“Anyway,” Iris said, “I’ll be away, and you won’t have to see me as often.”

He had said almost the same words to her when she had told him to give up his plans to be a pilot. He had the sudden sensation that it was their similarities, rather than their differences, that separated him from Iris. He was already regretting that he had decided to accompany his mother and Te-yu.

He stood up; “We’d better go. Te-yu will be ready soon.”

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Twenty-Two

The cradle, clutching the small airship, moved forward into a lock. As the wide door opened, the floater was released from the cradle and drifted out into the endless Venusian night.

The two pilots had donned their bands; their eyes were focused on the panels and small screens in front of them. The airship, except for a few boxes that had been secured in the aisles, was empty. Iris sat in the front of the cabin with the pilots and watched the large screen overhead as the airship floated north.

The ship’s outside lights shone out over a dark formlessness upon which Iris could project her dreams. In times to come, when the Parasol was dismantled and the sun’s light again shone on Venus, a world shaped by men and women would be revealed. The lifeless, sterile ocean far below, an acidic ocean that might have boiled away in the still-intense heat but for the high atmospheric pressure, would teem with life.

Buoys carrying probes floated on the shallow ocean; other probes rested on the flatlands of Aphrodite and the mountains of Ishtar Terra, on the slopes of Theia and Rhea, and along the ocean’s shore. Other probes rode on the Venusian winds or orbited the planet. From the data they gathered, Iris and the other climatologists could, with the aid of the cyberminds, create their models and from them make their forecasts and predictions.

From an airship, Iris could not possibly duplicate the work of the probes, but, in the past, her trips had been useful. She had recommended new sites for probes, alerted to them by her odd instinct, and thus her team’s picture of this world had grown a little more complete. At the Institute, other students had

joked that a climatologist would study a computer model before planning a picnic, but would never go outside to look at the sky or study the behavior of birds and animals preparing for a storm. Iris had taken the joke to heart.

She rested her head against the back of her seat. Why couldn't her son share her vision? So often, his dark eyes had a haunted, unhappy look; in his small room at the pilots' quarters, his viewscreen image showed no Earth landscape, but a starry sky. Why didn't he see that nothing else he might do could possibly equal the accomplishment of settling this world? The first Cytherians would set the pattern for those who came later; their dreams would dominate, and they would be legends to those who followed. It would no longer matter what failures or disappointments they had suffered in their earlier lives.

The airship dropped slowly as the dirigible's empty cells took in some of the tenuous atmosphere. Iris would need only a small sample of atmosphere from the haze above the cloud level; when one cell was filled, Te-yu would take the ship up to Island Eight. If the wind below caught them, they would be in danger, but Te-yu was skilled; she would not let them drop too far.

"Let me hear some sound," Iris said.

Te-yu pressed a button. Iris could barely hear the distant whine of the wind; there was something new in the sound, a high pitch she had not heard before.

Iris shook her head. Marc had called her superstitious, and maybe he was right. Her observations, unlike those of a probe or a drone, could be shaped by imaginings and vague intuitions. She would have enough real work to do soon. Within the next few months, the pyramids on Venus's equator would send out their pulse of power. She and the other climatologists had already calculated how the increased speed of rotation that would result might affect the air patterns and the weather below, but even if their models turned out to be accurate, more study would be needed to determine good sites for the domed settlements.

Her fingers fluttered against her armrests. She had almost forgotten that she was likely to be on Island Eight by then, reduced to being nothing more than a link between her colleagues and the geologists. She would simply have to find a way to make her new post an opportunity; close contact with the geologists might help her in her own work. She would have to find some way to continue being useful. Otherwise, when Benzi's apprenticeship was over, and later, when her bond with Chen lapsed, the Project might have no reason to keep her here at all.

Marc, she saw, had her in a bind. If she continued to be valuable to him, he would go on claiming credit for her work. If she slacked off, he might not bring her back to Island Two, since he would have an excuse to recommend her dismissal then.

She could have borne that. She might even be able to stand a return to Earth, where there had to be many Institute graduates waiting for her place here, if Benzi had shared her goal.

Another thought was troubling her as well. The engines inside the pyramids below might fail; the pulse might not speed up Venus's rotation as planned. That fear was rarely discussed, but she knew that it troubled other minds. Earth might cut back on the Project then, might even disband the Institute and scatter its students to other schools. Any thought of settling soon might have to be postponed or reconsidered if the giant installations failed at their task.

Earth would have a convenient scapegoat if such a failure occurred — the Habbers, whose people had built the structures and engines. The Habbers might be forced to leave the Islands; some might even believe that they had deliberately sabotaged that stage of the Project. If the Habbers left, the Project would be set back for decades, or even longer; they needed the Habbers' help, whether Earth wanted to

admit it or not. Even she, who disliked the attraction the Habbers seemed to hold for her son, knew that.

Iris listened to Venus. The ship's sensors kept the sound low, but the whine had grown louder. Yet it seemed that the wind was beginning to die, as it would in the centuries to come.

"This is about as low as I care to go," Te-yu said.

"Fine."

Benzi was hunched over a section of panels; he straightened suddenly. "One pump's still on," he said in a flat voice. He did not have to speak; Te-yu, Iris saw, was already aware of that. The young female pilot pressed a button under one small screen alive with flickering symbols.

"It's still pumping atmosphere into one cell," Benzi said. "I think the pump's jammed."

"Better run all the pumps," Te-yu replied. "We've got to stop dropping."

Two screens filled with red symbols; the cry of the airship's alarm drowned out the sound of the wind. Te-yu cursed. "Another pump's jammed. Better not run the others. We're still dropping toward the cloud layer." The pilot's high, musical voice was oddly calm; she leaned over her communicator and opened the switch. "Island Two, Island Two, do you hear? This is Hong Te-yu. My ship's dropping, two of our pumps are jammed. Two people are aboard with me, my copilot, Benzi Liangharad, and one passenger, Iris Angharads. Advise."

"We hear you," a man's voice said over the comm.

"Advise."

"Have you opened the other pumps to push atmosphere out?"

"You must think I'm an idiot," Te-yu muttered. "We tried that already. Now we've got two jammed pumps." She glanced at another screen. "A circuit just failed — the ship isn't overriding. Who the fuck was supposed to keep this ship in repair?"

"What are you doing down so low?"

Te-yu whispered a few words in Chinese. "Listen," she continued in a louder voice, "once those cells are full of atmosphere, maybe we can keep from dropping any farther. In the meantime, get a fix on us and try to get us out of here."

"We'll do our best."

"Just do it." Te-yu slapped the comm switch. "This, my friends, is what happens when Earth gets stingy with new components. This balloon's going to take us for a ride." She hit another button, shutting off the alarm.

Iris stared up at the screen above them; the darkness seemed thicker and more impenetrable. She lowered her eyes to a small screen, reading the numbers. They were now little more than sixty kilometers above the planet's surface; the winds were only about ten kilometers below them. She did not want to think about what those winds could do to this ship.

"This is my fault," she said helplessly.

"Come on, Iris," Te-yu said. "I don't need you nagging at yourself. Seems this crate was due for some problems anyway. Better suit up, just in case."

Iris got up and put on the suit she had carried aboard; the suit wouldn't provide much protection, but at least getting into it gave her something to do. By the time she had sat down again, Benzi had put on his own suit and was controlling the airship as Te-yu donned her own. His helmet hid his face; Iris was relieved that she couldn't see him. She should have insisted that he stay behind. She tried to steady herself; Te-yu might need her son's help.

"Listen," Te-yu said. "We're running out of alternatives here. There's no choice now — I've got to turn on all the pumps and hope they start pumping out instead of in." Her voice sounded hollow over the suit comm.

The ship lurched abruptly; Iris clutched at the harness holding her in her seat. The airship's alarm sounded again. The wind caught them, sweeping the vessel west through the swirling clouds; the ship's outside lights danced dizzily.

"Pumping out now," she heard Benzi say, but the pumps had begun working too late. The alarm seemed louder; the ship lurched once more.

Iris could no longer hear the winds; perhaps the sensors had now been damaged. The ship veered as it rode the wind, then shuddered; Iris strained at her harness. Her ears throbbed as she sucked in air.

"Helium leak," her son said. "Shit."

Iris closed her eyes. That was it, then; if the dirigible lost its helium, they would never escape. She wondered what Marc was thinking. The Islands had to be aware of the seriousness of their plight by now, but she could not imagine how they could be rescued. Marc had warned her; she should have listened. He would be sorry, but able to absolve himself of blame, and maybe he would get along better with her replacement.

Her mouth was dry; she could hear only the sound of her own breathing. She was going to die; Venus would claim her in its own way. It was time to prepare her soul, recall some of the prayers she had almost forgotten. She thought of Chen. Her own suffering would be over before long, while Chen's was just beginning. He might have endured her loss, but to lose Benzi as well might be more than he could bear. He would grow to hate the Project, and his dream might die at last.

The ship shook. "Another leak," Te-yu said calmly. The pilot was losing control of the ship. Iris forced herself to sit up. They were still dropping, and being dragged to the west. Iris stared through her helmet at one small screen, where a map of the wind patterns flickered, then let out her breath. They might still have a chance.

The wind's speed had decreased; they were now caught in a wind moving at less than three hundred kilometers an hour — not much of an improvement, she thought acidly. They were still falling; there was no way, with the leaks, of gaining a higher altitude.

"Te-yu," Iris said, "how long will the helium cells hold up?"

"Not much longer. I'll bet the wind's doing some work on those leaks."

"Then we'd better start thinking about where to land." This suggestion was met with silence. "Airships have landed before," Iris continued.

"Reinforced ships," Te-yu replied, "stronger ships under better conditions, and they didn't try dropping through these winds. They came down where they aren't as strong." Te-yu, Iris realized, was still hoping somehow that she could bring the airship up; her pride as a pilot was warring with her common sense.

“Te-yu,” Iris said, “if you can pull this off, there won’t be a pilot on the Islands who can outbrag you. You won’t have to buy your own drinks for a long time.”

“And if we land,” Benzi said, “how do we get out?”

“Let’s worry about landing first.” Iris tried to sound confident. “The crosswinds lower down flow to the north. That’s our only chance. If we land in an ocean area, the acids will eat through this ship, even if we don’t sink. We don’t want to be near the volcanic regions, either — they’ve been a little too active lately. If we can get anywhere near the polar installation in the north, one of the Bat shuttles might be able to get to us, or we could get to it.”

“Nice idea,” Te-yu said blandly, “as long as I can control this ship. That, of course, is the drawback.”

The ship bucked as it continued to fall. Iris glanced at a gauge and noticed that the wind’s speed was decreasing. If they could land, if the leaks could somehow be repaired — she tried not to think ahead any further than that. Her neck was stiff; she shifted her shoulders inside her slightly bulky suit.

The ship trembled, throwing her against her harness. “Another leak,” Benzi said, “and it looks like a pretty big rip.”

Iris looked at the map. They were southeast of the Maxwell Mountain region; there was no chance of reaching the polar installation now, but a landing on the mountains might be possible. They were descending fast, with less than thirty kilometers to fall.

The ship veered, slamming her against the left side of her seat. “Can’t hang on,” she heard Te-yu say.

“Jettison the dirigible,” Iris said. She heard a sharp gasp as the pilot sucked in her breath. “You heard me. Jettison the helium cells. We’ll have to ride down on the cabin’s chutes.”

She waited, expecting Te-yu to object. Without the helium, they would lose even the small chance of getting off the surface by themselves. The chutes, like the pumps, might not work.

“Iris is right,” Benzi said.

Iris waited. A jolt shook the ship; without looking at the pilot’s panels, Iris knew that Te-yu had cut loose the cabin.

A northerly crosswind caught the falling cabin. At last, after a long, tense silence, the chutes opened, jolting Iris. Her gloved fingers dug into her armrests as the ship floated slowly toward the surface.

Here, the thick atmosphere was stagnant and still. The ship’s outside lights were swallowed by a black fog, and droplets dotted the large screen; here, the acidic rain was a mist. Iris could already see the tiny lines the acid was etching into the screen’s lenses.

The ship hit the ground suddenly, throwing them all forward against their harnesses, then bounced forward on its treads until it came to a stop. The cabin was leaning to the left, its floor at an angle. Iris heard a soft clicking sound as Te-yu released the chutes; on the screen, she saw one ghostly chute flutter past the lights.

One small screen showed them a schematic of the region in which they had landed; they had reached the southernmost part of the Maxwell Mountains, and the ship was perched precariously on a slope. Iris stared at the large screen, trying to imagine the high peaks around them. The atmosphere above them, even after the Project’s efforts, had a pressure fifty times as great as Earth’s, and she wondered how long the cabin, even with its heavy shielding, could withstand it; she could almost feel it pressing in around

them. Perhaps the intense heat would get them first. She was beginning to wish that she didn't know quite so much about the dangers of this planet.

"Not bad for a landing, if I do say so myself," Te-yu said at last. "Benzi, I think your mother missed her calling. She might not have been a bad pilot herself."

Benzi grunted.

"You're a pretty good one too. Guess we can safely say that you're through with your apprenticeship."

"Guess so." Benzi paused. "We're not going to get out of this."

"We're still alive, aren't we?" Iris heard the lack of conviction in her own voice. "There's still a chance they'll find a way to get us out."

Benzi's sigh crackled on her suit comm. "Oh, if we'd had a few Linkers aboard, or Mukhtar Pavel, then maybe they'd go to some trouble. I don't know what they're going to do for us."

Iris had nothing to say to that. She could already sense the decisions being made on the Islands. If they did nothing, they would lose only one malfunctioning airship, two pilots, and a climatologist who had been less than one of her specialty's shining glories. If a rescue were attempted, more might be lost. It made sense; the Project had to cut its losses. Of course, they would have to make some show of a rescue, lest they seem heartless, but they would dither about it until it was too late to take any truly effective action.

"They'll know where we are," Te-yu said. "They'll know we've landed by now."

"We have to let them know we're alive," Iris responded. "We've got to send them a message."

"I've got some bad news for you," Te-yu said. "The ship's comm is out."

Iris almost laughed. "You certainly know how to cheer us up."

"Got some good news too. The cabin's holding up, and we seem to have plenty of air. Guess the rebreathing system hasn't gone the way of those two pumps."

It was over, then. The Islanders wouldn't know if they were alive; they would have an excuse not to attempt a rescue. She thought of the crates in the aisle behind them. One of them might contain medical supplies, might hold some drug that could end their waiting quickly. Iris shuddered. She couldn't die with the sin of suicide staining her. It was odd, she mused. The old faith that she had neglected and doubted still had a faint hold on her mind; she could almost see Mary waiting for her, an old friend ready to forgive.

Te-yu took off her helmet; after a moment, Benzi and Iris removed theirs as well. The ship's air seemed stale and warm; Iris wondered how long the ship's systems would last. Te-yu stood up slowly, holding the back of her seat as she took a step along the sloping floor. "I don't know about you," the pilot said, "but I'm going to check out our cargo." She moved carefully toward the aisle; Iris looked away, sure that Te-yu was also thinking of drugs.

"Chen will know by now," Benzi said softly. She remembered that he was working a shift at the northern Bat. "The news should have reached him already."

He'll think we're already dead, Iris thought. She tried to recall her last meeting with Chen. They had shared a meal, they had gossiped about friends; they had pretended that their bond still had some meaning.

“I wasn’t a good bondmate to him,” Iris said, “and I could have been a better mother to you.”

“Well, I wasn’t the kind of son you both would have preferred, either. I would have hurt you even more eventually. I would have —” Benzi suddenly looked away.

“You mustn’t say such things, son. Before you were born, my own mother told me how much pain a child could bring to a parent, and perhaps you’ve done that, but you’ve brought joy as well. I’ve forgotten how often I myself had to battle with Angharad for what I wanted.”

Benzi turned a bit in his seat. “Mother, are you saying that —”

“I’m saying that I’m sorry for much of what I’ve said to you. If I had it to do over, I would have been kinder to you.”

“If you had it to do over; you would have done the same, and that’s all right. Maybe we would have been closer if you hadn’t been chosen for the Institute, if we hadn’t been parted. But you couldn’t have turned down such a chance.”

Iris shook her head. “No, I couldn’t have.”

“I wouldn’t have asked you to give up what you’ve done. But I wish you could see — that you could understand —” Benzi seemed to be struggling for words. “Your dream may not be mine,” he finished.

She wanted to protest that he would have come to share it, but she could not begin their old argument again, not now. She might have been able to face her death here bravely if she had known her son would make his own contribution to the Project, but her dream had only led him to his death. She reminded herself that Benzi would not have been in this ship if he were not a pilot, if he had heeded her protests against such a choice. That thought was unworthy, and shamed her. She thought of Angharad, whose line would end here.

Te-yu was making her way back to her seat; Iris lowered her eyes, afraid to look at what the pilot was carrying. Te-yu had to end it the way she thought best; Iris would try to talk her out of taking her life, but would not forcibly restrain her.

“Well, what do you think?” the pilot said. Iris looked up; Te-yu was holding small, glassy containers of food. “Oysters. How’s that sound? And we’ve got broccoli, bamboo shoots with mushrooms, and fish in wine. Or, if you prefer, we could try the smoked salmon and a piece of North American beef. Somebody on Island Eight is going to be mighty sorry about missing these imports — probably paid enough for them too.”

Iris let out a yelp, relieved, surprised that she could still laugh.

They ate in silence. Te-yu was clearly savoring the food; Iris, after waiting for the containers to heat hers, found that she could not swallow it. Benzi was picking at his oysters with his fingers.

“There’s one thing I regret,” Te-yu said, her mouth full. “I was always going to ask Chen to do one of his carvings for me, kept meaning to ask.”

“I didn’t know you knew Chen that well,” Iris said.

“Oh, I don’t, but I think most of his friends have a carving of his by now. He’s done a few for others. I hear that even a couple of Linkers have them.”

Chen, Iris thought, had never told her that.

“I saw him a few times with Benzi,” Te-yu continued, “gave him a few tips about piloting. Once, he came over to my room and put in some time on my band and simulator.”

Iris was puzzled. “Why would he do that?”

“He did it for me,” Benzi said. “It was a surprise. He wanted to know a little bit about it, wanted to be able to talk to me about what I was doing. He thought it might help him understand me, I guess. It was a nice gesture, when you remember that he wasn’t any happier about my choice of work than you were.”

Iris looked away, unable to meet her son’s eyes for a moment.

“I want to ask you something,” Benzi continued. “When you were on Earth, before you were chosen, when you were still in Lincoln, what drew you to this place? I don’t mean that business about working for the glory of the Nomarchies or whatever — that’s not what I’m asking.”

It had been a long time since her son had asked her such a question. “I saw a chance for something new,” she replied. “I saw that Earth didn’t have to live with its limits, that we could reach for more. I wanted to do something for the future instead of only clinging to what was.”

“Doesn’t it occur to you that the Project might only be another way of clinging to the past? Do you think the Cytherians are going to be any freer than Earthfolk in the end? Don’t you know that they’ll come up against the same limits unless they become something else?”

She couldn’t listen to this talk, which sounded like something a Habber would say. “You might have shed such a mistaken idea,” she blurted out, “if you’d stayed in school and learned more of the Project’s history.” She saw immediately that she had said the wrong thing; a muscle twitched in Benzi’s face as he stared past her.

Te-yu fidgeted, as if uneasy at hearing the conversation. “Well, maybe I’ll get a carving anyway,” the pilot said lightly. “Chen could always do one as a model for my spot on the memorial pillars.”

Iris looked up at the screen. The ship’s air seemed warmer; she could feel the darkness and the atmosphere pressing in on them. The ship’s two lights were feeble beacons. As she watched, one beam suddenly went out.

Te-yu cursed. Swinging one arm, she dashed the remains of her feast to the floor.

The tiers of the northern Bat’s docks were a lattice on which tiny lights, embedded in the metallic beams, seemed like ornamental jewels. The latticework stretched up to the Bat’s dark belly; above the Bat, bright wings reached beyond the shadow of the Parasol, dwarfing the structures below.

Chen crawled along one metal beam toward the entrance ahead. Next to him, on the lowest level of the docks, the pitted hull of a docked ship was a giant, curving wall. A component along the beam had failed just after the ship had docked; Chen had managed to replace it, and now the automatic ship’s tanks of compressed oxygen, which it had carried up from the north pole’s installation, were being lifted out by massive metal claws and placed in the lift. The Bat’s work would continue with only a small interruption; a steady stream of tanks would be flung into space.

The entrance yawned open. Chen pulled himself inside; the door closed as air cycled into the lock. As the inner door opened, Chen entered a small room where five other workers sat in front of consoles; one of the women glanced up at him as he removed his helmet.

“It’ll do for now,” Chen said to her, “but we’ve got to get a new panel of components in there soon.” The woman shook her head; he wasn’t telling her anything she did not know. He had replaced the failed

component with a slightly damaged but still usable panel, one he had repaired himself. “The Administrators ought to be tougher with Earth. They want to push everything to its limit, but it’d cost them even more if —”

The woman had a funny look on her freckled face; her blue eyes stared blankly at him. “Hey, Simone,” he said, “what’s the matter?”

“You better talk to them.” Simone’s head jerked toward the entrance behind her.

Wu Fei-lin and Tonie Wong were standing just inside the door. Chen made his way toward them, still holding his helmet. Tonie suddenly covered her mouth; Fei-lin was staring at him with small, sad eyes.

“They sent us to tell you,” Fei-lin said as he took Chen’s helmet. “Maybe a Counselor thought you should hear it from a friend. An airship — an airship’s falling toward the surface. The Islands are tracking it, but I don’t know what they can do.” Tonie gripped Chen’s hand. “Iris is on the ship,” Fei-lin continued. “So is Benzi.”

Chen staggered a bit; Fei-lin caught him. He drew in his breath in short, sharp gasps as his friends helped him out of his suit. “Their helium cell’s damaged,” Tonie said. “They won’t be able to —”

Chen covered his face as Tonie and Fei-lin held him. “They’re still alive,” he muttered. “They’re still alive” He would know if Iris were dead; he would feel it.

“Oh, Chen,” Tonie said softly. “I’m so sorry.”

He found himself remembering the moment, nearly ten years ago, when Fei-lin and Tonie had made their pledge at last. Chen had been Fei-lin’s witness; he had asked Iris to attend the ceremony with him, though he had expected her to make some acid remark about people who had faith in such bonds. Surprisingly, Iris had seemed moved by the ceremony, and afterward had joined the celebration. They had all drunk too much; Tonie had babbled about how everything had turned out for the best and how lucky they all were to have found out who they really loved. Iris had come to Chen’s room later; it had been one of their better times and, for that brief moment, Chen had believed that they might draw together once more.

But Iris had not come back to him, and now he would lose his son as well. He suddenly hated the pilots who had lured Benzi to their work and to his end.

A Counselor would mourn with him, but the Counselor would also point out how many lives the Project had claimed. The Counselor would say that Iris and Benzi would not be forgotten, but Chen knew that their memories would grow dimmer even in the minds of their friends. The Counselor would tell him that his bondmate and son would want Chen to go on with his work.

“They’ll have to be rescued,” Chen said as he withdrew from his friends’ arms and straightened. “They must be finding some way to get to them.”

“I don’t know,” Fei-lin replied. “The Islands haven’t said —”

“Let’s go.” Chen palmed open the door and entered the lift; after a moment, Tonie and Fei-lin followed. His head swam as the lift whisked him up past the docks; his ears throbbed. When the lift came to a stop, Chen stumbled out and raced through the curving corridor, then halted in front of one door, pressed his palm against it, and entered.

As he had expected, the small room where the Bat workers dined was crowded with people waiting to offer their sympathies. They would try to console him and soothe his grief; a few might sit with him

around his bunk later and wait for him to pour out his heart to them. Someone else would take over his shift and arrangements would be made to have him sent back to the Islands. Eventually, he would be expected to go on, to put his grief behind him, to accept what was unacceptable.

He looked around the room as Fei-lin came up to his side. Most of the people there were wearing the gray garments of workers, but in one corner, he saw that a few blue-clad pilots had joined the group. Benzi was a pilot; they were probably mourning the loss of one of their number. On the wall screen behind the pilots, a woman was speaking; Chen tried to concentrate on her words.

The ship was down in the Maxwell Mountain region. They were calling to the ship, but had had no response from Hong Te-yu, the pilot, or anyone else. The ship had jettisoned its helium, and was trapped. They did not know how much damage the ship's cabin had sustained, or even whether anyone aboard was still alive. The feasibility of a rescue attempt was being studied. The woman on the screen recited these facts in a toneless voice; the screen winked out. Several people in the room let out a sigh.

Hands stretched out to him; Chen waved them away, and then saw that Rose Milon was sitting at one table. The head of the Bat's engineering team had come to offer her condolences. Chen elbowed his way toward the gray-haired woman.

"What are they going to do?" he burst out.

"They're trying to decide. Please, sit down if you like."

Chen remained on his feet. "My bondmate and my son are down there. The longer they take to decide, the more danger they're in."

Rose gazed at him solemnly. "We don't even know if they've survived. You can't expect —"

Chen leaned on the table and thrust his face close to hers. "I can expect more than this."

"This isn't our decision," Rose replied. "It's up to the Island Administrators to consider all factors and —"

"Damn it, Rose. Why do we have to wait for them?"

A few people nearby murmured to one another. An idea was forming in Chen's mind; he had no time to examine it or to consider whether or not it would work. "We have automatic ships," he heard himself say. "Every one of them's been to the surface thousands of times. We could set a new course for one, send it down near where the ship is. The scoop that usually carries the oxygen tanks could bring the ship up again."

"And just how do you think the downed ship's going to get to the scoop? What if its treads were damaged in the landing? What if the ship's sensors are out? They might not even know a ship's landed, or be able to get a fix on where it is. And their comm's dead." Rose glared at him. "You have to face it, Chen. The passengers might be dead too. We can't take useless risks."

"It wouldn't work anyway," a man said. Chen stood up; one of the pilots had come over to Rose's table. "Those ships are set on one course, down to the pole and back. Sure, we can punch in a new flight path, but you'd have a better chance if you also had a pilot aboard, someone who could operate the ship manually and bring it down as close as possible." The tall, thin pilot paused for a moment. "This isn't just crating oxygen tanks up, you know. You'd need someone aboard in case a problem came up."

"We can't risk a pilot," Rose said firmly.

“Then I’ll have to go with the ship,” Chen responded. It had come to this; he would have to face his fear of descending through those thick, dark clouds to that deadly surface at last. He pushed his fear aside as he thought of Iris and Benzi; his fear for them was greater than his fear for himself. “The pilot who’s down there with my bondmate and son let me use her simulator a couple of times. I know a little about piloting.”

The tall pilot near him shook his head; his thin lips curled. “Don’t be a fool, man. There’s a difference between simulations and running a ship. You wouldn’t be safe alone.”

“I’ll take the chance.”

“No you won’t.” The pilot lifted one dark brow. “I’ll take the chance, though. You can come along for the ride, if you want. Might be wise to have someone like you aboard just in case we need some minor repairs on the way. We aren’t going to have time to give the ship a thorough check.”

Chen gaped at the man. “But this isn’t your concern.”

“There’s two pilots down there. That’s my concern.”

Rose slammed a fist against the tabletop. “You’re both mad. We can’t allow this. The Administrators have to decide if it’s worth the risk. What do you think they’re going to say if we lose one of our own ships? They have enough trouble getting us what we need here. How are they going to explain it to Earth?”

“We’re wasting time,” the pilot answered. His hand gripped Chen’s shoulder. “I say we suit up and get out of here while there’s still a chance of reaching them in time.”

“I can’t allow that,” Rose cried. The others in the room had backed away from the table, as if reluctant to interfere. “The least you can do is call the Islands and tell them your plan, let them decide if it’s worth trying.”

“There’s no time for that,” Chen replied. If the Island Administrators heard of this scheme, they were likely to order them not to try it. The others here, whatever their feelings, would then do their best to restrain them, and he could not fight them all. “I’ll take the blame.”

Rose’s face was livid. “I’ll have to save you from yourself, then,” she said. “I’ll alert everyone on the Bat. You won’t get near a ship.” She jumped to her feet and turned in the direction of the screen. Fei-lin leaped forward and grabbed her arm. Rose swung at him as Tonie locked her arms around Rose’s waist. “Do something!” the engineer screamed at the other workers. No one moved; Chen saw that most of the people were on his side.

“Come on,” the pilot said. Chen followed him as the two men pushed through the crowd to the door and entered the corridor. “This plan of yours had better work,” the tall man muttered as they hurried down the hall. “If it doesn’t, a lot of people in there are going to be in trouble. I bet old Rose is already noting names for reprimands.”

“If it doesn’t work, we’ll have troubles of our own,” Chen said.

The pilot slapped a door; they entered a lift. “Someone in there’s going to start thinking about what a reprimand could mean,” the pilot said, “and then they’ll send out a call. Better hope we can get to a ship before that happens.”

The lift hummed as they dropped toward the docks.

“Iris,” Benzi said, “there’s something you should probably know.”

Iris turned her head toward her son. “What is it?”

“Te-yu and I — we and some others — we’ve been —”

“Why speak of that?” Te-yu interrupted.

“Why shouldn’t we be honest now?” Benzi said. “We’re not going to get out of here, Te-yu. It doesn’t matter what we say.”

“If it doesn’t matter, then we might as well keep silent. Sharing any burdens our consciences carry isn’t going to make it easier to die.” Te-yu rested one hand against her harness. “We still have a chance. We can’t give up hope.”

Iris was silent. What could her son want to tell her? That he might have wanted to seek training as a torchship pilot, that he might have eventually tried to leave the Islands for that sort of life? She had often suspected that he harbored such a desire, though she had tried to deny it and had never mentioned her suspicions to Chen.

Benzi leaned over the dead comm. “Too bad Chen isn’t here,” he said. “Maybe he’d know how to get that thing working.”

The ship suddenly shifted under them, rocking Iris against the right side of her seat. “Harnesses!” Te-yu cried. Iris pushed the button on her armrest; the straps of the harness snaked around her. The ship bounced, then rolled sharply to one side; Iris hung upside down from her harness for a long moment before the ship rolled again, then righted itself.

They were now leaning sharply to the right. “Are you all right?” Iris heard the pilot say.

“Still here,” Benzi replied.

“I’m all right,” Iris said. She gazed at the small screens in front of her; at least most of the sensors still seemed to be working. One screen showed the position of their cabin; they were sitting on the edge of a rise, with a steep slope just below them. Part of their right tread was no longer touching ground; if the craft shifted again, they would be hurled down the slope. Iris shuddered and turned away from the screen’s diagram.

“Guess we’ve got more troubles,” Te-yu said in a strained voice.

“They’ve had time to do something by now,” Benzi said angrily.

Iris sniffed. A pungent eggy odor reached her nostrils. “The air,” she murmured. “It smells rotten, it smells like —”

“Get on your helmets,” Te-yu ordered. “Something’s wrong with the air, and it looks like the ship’s alarm’s out too. And be careful how you move.”

Iris grimaced as she released her harness slowly and crept to the side where their helmets had been thrown.

A voice over the comm was still speaking. “We advise you to return to the Bat as soon as possible. The Island Administrators —”

The pilot next to Chen slapped the switch under the comm, silencing the voice. He had waited until the

scooper ship was in orbit before beginning to program its path; it had been important to get out of the dock first, before they could be restrained. Chen adjusted a weak component, then slipped it back into the panel in front of him. He had hurried back to the lower dock level to fetch his tools, but there had been no time to check out the ship thoroughly.

Now that he could not turn back, he was wondering if he had acted too hastily. Maybe the Administrators would have agreed to his plan. It didn't matter. Iris's ship had been on the surface for almost four hours now. Had it been undamaged, it would have been safe for a few hours longer at least, but he suspected that its systems were badly crippled.

The workers in the bay had not tried to stop Chen and the pilot from taking the ship, and that had surprised him. He tried to imagine Rose issuing reprimands to everyone on the Bat, and almost laughed.

The pilot gazed solemnly at his panels and small screens; above them, the larger screen was black. "Ought to introduce myself," the pilot said as he rubbed at the band around his head. "Michael Anastas."

"Liang Chen."

"I know who you are. I know your son. I'm a friend of Hong Te-yu's also."

Chen gestured at the ship's controls.

"It's all right," Michael said. "It's piloting itself. Course is set — just have to nurse it along when we're close to landing. Winds up here don't barrel along the way they do at the equator and thereabouts, so entering the atmosphere shouldn't —"

"I know something about it," Chen said. "My bondmate's a climatologist. She told me some things." His heart raced a bit as he thought of Iris.

Michael leaned back and turned his sharp-featured lean face toward Chen. "Tell you one thing, Chen. If that ship's down, it's those ditherers on Earth who caused it. Costs more to keep them up to the best standard than to lose one once in a while — that's how they think, and how those dogs who call themselves Administrators think. I know Hong Te-yu. She wouldn't be in that fix with a good ship."

Chen glanced around the small enclosed space in which he and the pilot were sitting. A few empty seats with old, cracked cushioning were grouped behind them; a thick metallic wall shielded them from the area of the ship that usually carried the tanks of compressed oxygen. He gripped his armrests with his gloved hands. Several times, he had dreamed of landing on Venus; he had felt the atmosphere pressing down on him, and had awakened covered with sweat and gasping for air. He had imagined himself living under a dome, building the new world, but had avoided thinking too long about how he would have to get there, as if he might suddenly awake to find himself safely on the surface protected by a dome not unlike the one on Island Two. He had worried about the source of his fear and whether it might, in the end, bar him from the world he longed for.

Now, he was heading toward that surface, and realized that the fear was fading. His fear for Iris and Benzi, a greater terror, had driven it away. His jaw tightened. If he lost them, it would not matter that he had conquered this last obstacle; there would be nothing to hold him here.

"This isn't going to be like landing at the polar oxygen plant," Michael said. "Ship goes down, the hooks pull it inside — it doesn't have to sit out there for long. Our problem's a little different. We've got to set down, balance the pressure before we open our maw, and then we've got to wait until Te-yu can park herself close enough to roll inside or have the cargo loader hooks haul her in. If their sensors and screens are out, they won't even know if we're there, and their comm's gone, so nobody can tell them. Talk a

lot, don't I. You know what I'm trying to get at."

"I think I do."

"We can't wait. If their ship doesn't move or give us some sign when we're down, I've got to pull out."

Chen swallowed hard. "I know."

"I always liked to gamble, I guess. Nobody could ever set up a dice game around me without pulling me in. Couldn't sit on what I had without wanting to try for more. Not the best qualities for a pilot, maybe. Well, I hope we win this one, but I'm not crazy about the stakes." He waved an arm at Chen. "Better get on your helmet — think we're just about ready for entry."

Sweat covered her face; her helmet seemed fogged. Iris moved a little in her seat and wondered how long she had been sitting there, but did not look at the cabin clock. The large screen was etched with long, thin scars; the acid in the smoggy, dense atmosphere outside had marked the ship's lenses. The scars were white. The light inside the ship flickered and dimmed a little. The screen, except for the hairline scars, was black. A small screen in front of Iris showed her Venus in harsh infrared — barren, rocky peaks, higher than the Himalayas.

This, she and her team had thought, would have been the most promising site for domed settlements. Here, in the northern latitudes, as well as in the south, the planet was cooling more rapidly than at the equator. A beam of light cut through the darkness on the screen; the cabin's outside light had come on again. It had been teasing them like that for a while now, dying and then shining again.

Her mouth tasted stale. Sometime earlier, Iris had thought of a way they might have been rescued, and then Te-yu had started speaking of the same plan aloud, as if reading Iris's thoughts. A scooper ship, one of the shuttles that moved between the Bats and the polar installations, might have been sent. A new automatic course could have been programmed in; a ship could have been here by now. Te-yu had played with the idea in her lilting voice, examining it, but had concluded that the ship, landing in this terrain instead of at the flatter areas around the installations, might run into difficulties. A pilot might have prevented that.

But there would be no pilot; there would not even be a ship. A scooper was worth more than an airship; that was how Linkers and Administrators thought. A scooper shuttle was worth more than an airship cabin and three insignificant lives. Iris remembered the Linker who had appeared on the screen in Angharad's common room, who had told Iris that she had been chosen. The Linkers had reached out for her, had moved her across a board in some elaborate, unseen game; now, it was time to remove her from the board, for the game was what mattered, the game that the Linkers played among themselves and the larger, more impenetrable game they were playing with the Habbers.

Her mind was oddly calm. She could almost understand a Linker's point of view. They understood human history better than she did; they were haunted by the deadly games people had played in the past and had finally advanced beyond them. At least now, only a few pieces were sacrificed instead of armies; humankind's instincts could not be changed, but they could be subdued.

Iris saw what her own mistake had been. She had played a smaller game within the boundaries of the larger one, and had won it when she had left the Institute to come here. Then, instead of looking for a way into the larger game, she had contented herself with what she had; she had distracted herself with worries about Chen and Benzi, and now they would both lose as well. She had come to this new knowledge too late.

"I hate the Administrators," Benzi said. "I hate them even more than I did." His voice, over the suit's

comm, was a rasp.

She said, "It doesn't do any good to hate them, or to love them, or to feel anything about them. It just makes you weaker."

On the black screen, a tiny flame flickered, reddening a patch of the heavy clouds. Iris tensed, sure that it was an illusion.

Then Te-yu said, "A ship. Look at the panels."

Iris sat up. Above a radar image representing the slope on which their cabin was sitting, a long streak was dropping toward the mountainside below.

"Mother of God," she whispered.

The ground shook, rocking them. "We're going to go over," Te-yu shouted. "I've got to back up."

"Don't," Benzi cried.

"No choice." Te-yu had already taken control of the steering mechanism; Iris heard a crunch. The cabin rolled sharply to the right.

They were falling down the slope; Iris clung to the straps of her harness helplessly as the cabin rolled over three more times, then stopped. They were now on their left side, resting on the edge of the cabin's left tread. Te-yu was cursing. She pulled at a switch; the cabin righted itself and began to rock wildly.

Not now, Iris thought, afraid that the ship would roll again. Please, Mary, not now.

She waited as the rocking slowed; at last the cabin was still.

The shuttle outside had landed. A white image of the scooper shimmered on one small screen; the maw in its belly was still closed. It had landed nearly a kilometer below them, and the image showed a few small, sharp ridges along the path Te-yu would have to take to reach it.

"Looks like we'll have to take a little drive," Te-yu said. "Let's hope that scoop opens. If it doesn't, and we're next to that ship when it takes off again, we're finished."

Iris barked a laugh. "That hardly matters now." The muscles in her neck were tight. "Mother of God, they actually decided to try a rescue. They actually did it." Her lungs swelled.

"We aren't there yet." Te-yu strained against her harness as she carefully pulled a switch; the cabin began to bounce forward. The outside light swept back and forth in a small arc. Something scraped against their belly; Te-yu veered a little to the right.

Iris's face burned. The suit pressing against her limbs felt warm. "Is it my imagination," she said slowly, "or is it getting a little on the warm side?"

"The cooling system," Benzi replied. "I think it's starting to break down."

Perhaps the shuttle outside had landed too late; maybe the cabin was already at its limits. Iris bit her lip. It was just a show at rescuing them, a way for the Administrators to soothe their consciences without taking any real chances. Land a shuttle, take it out of there again, say that you did your best.

She glanced at the small screen. The scoop in the ship's belly was beginning to open. The cabin swerved sharply, then rolled on jerkily down the slope. The outside light danced over a patch of silicate rocks and

pebbles, then abruptly went out.

“Shit,” Te-yu said. If they lost their sensors, they would be blind. Iris’s suit was hot; she felt as though her hands were being seared inside her gloves. She wondered how Te-yu’s suit was holding out, whether the pilot could still feel the controls under her hands.

The cabin lurched to a halt. The scoop was still opening. Te-yu pushed at the steering mechanism; the treads ground uselessly against rock.

“Don’t,” Benzi said. “You’ll destroy the treads. Try to back up.”

Te-yu did not move. Her gloved hands were up; her fingers were claws scratching at the air, but the rest of her body was still. Benzi leaned over his own controls and pulled a switch as he took over the cabin’s steering mechanism. The treads reversed; the cabin moved back and again came to a stop.

Te-yu’s hands dropped. “I’m all right,” she said. “Guess the heat’s getting to me. Never did like hot weather — always thought we could use a little snow in the Island environments.” She paused. “Listen, you two. I have to push this piece of junk as hard as it’ll go, it’s the only way. We’re probably only about two minutes away from being parboiled, if that. We have to get down to that scoop fast.”

“You might lose control,” Benzi said.

“I might. I’m going to gun this crate and steer. Benzi, you hit the brakes when you think you have to, but not too hard.”

“I don’t know if I —” Benzi broke off. His voice made Iris think of the boy he once had been.

“Come on, friend,” Te-yu murmured. “You’ve taken a cabin through a bay into a repair area, haven’t you? This isn’t so different.”

“Oh, no,” Benzi replied, but his voice sounded steadier. “Not so different.”

Te-yu pushed her switch; the treads whined. They were suddenly rolling forward, bouncing as they descended the hill. Iris tried to focus on one of the small screens; the cabin was bouncing so much that she felt as though her seat would tear away from the floor. The movement was blurring the images on the screens; Te-yu’s helmeted head was a small black globe bobbing over the controls. A small image of the waiting maw below gaped at Iris as it grew larger; they were closing in on it. The cabin rocked, then bounced on.

The small screens flickered out. Benzi slapped down a hand; the cabin shuddered to a halt.

Te-yu’s hands fluttered over her controls. “No sensors now,” she said. “Can’t even see where we are. We’re completely blind.”

Iris tried not to scream. She could imagine the panels and screens before her melting, the cabin around them flattening from the atmospheric pressure. “The scoop was right in front of us.” Her voice seemed to be coming from far away. “We weren’t more — we aren’t more than ten meters from the ship, I’m sure,” Iris went on. “We have to keep going.”

Te-yu pushed at her switch. The cabin was still. Iris held her breath. Not now; why did the engine have to die now? Te-yu pushed the switch again. They rolled forward suddenly and bounced down the slope. Iris’s heart was beating rapidly. Her face was wet with perspiration; the air inside her helmet was hot and moist. The engine whined; as the cabin rolled to a stop, the engine died and their remaining lights winked out.

They had done all that they could. Iris sat in the darkness and wondered if it were enough. How close had they come to the shuttle? Perhaps not close enough for the scooper's hooks to reach them.

This was what it would be like to die. She would sit in the blackness. There would be one long, wrenching moment when her body succumbed to death and then her soul would enter the void, where the darkness would be pressing in around her forever. She couldn't die now; she wasn't ready. Her will was still too strong.

Dimly, she heard a clank. Was she dreaming it, or were they being lifted? Iris swayed against her seat, waiting. The cabin was still. Benzi was whispering; she could not make out his words, and wondered if he was praying. His voice broke off.

"Benzi," she said aloud, and heard no response. "Benzi. Son, can you hear me?" Her suit comm was gone; the last link to the outside was now broken.

Her mind began to drift. She was floating away from the Islands, soaring back toward the blue globe that was Earth. Lincoln was not far away; her household had gathered in the courtyard to wait for her. They know, she thought; they've come to say good-bye to me.

Suddenly, a weight was pressing against her chest. She tensed; the ship was succumbing at last. She muttered a prayer; the weight grew heavier. Then she realized what was happening; the shuttle was taking off, and they were inside its scoop. She gulped a breath; the air was a bit cooler. She let out a cry. "Te-yu! Benzi!" The darkness flowed into her as she fell endlessly.

Iris stirred; she was awake again. She had floated up from her seat; something was pulling at her harness. She opened her eyes; someone was leaning over her and helping her out of the harness.

She blinked, then grabbed the arm held out to her. The helmeted figure led her to the open cabin door; ahead, she saw three other suited people crawling along the strut of a dock. Two were small, like her; the other was taller. Te-yu and Benzi, she thought, and someone else.

They entered the lock. Air cycled inside; another door opened; Iris squinted in the bright light. The room was filled with gray-garbed workers swaying weightlessly on the soles of their adhesive boots; as she removed her helmet, she heard them cheer. The sound washed over her as she gulped air; a man grabbed her helmet.

"They did it!" someone was shouting. "They did it!"

Te-yu, helmetless, was suddenly at her side. She pumped Iris's arms. "Thought we lost you before. I kept calling to you."

"Comm was out," she managed to say. "I think I fainted."

"Then you don't know," Te-yu said. Others had crowded around the two women. "Soon as the cabin was inside the ship, I heard this voice inside my helmet. Thought I was hearing things. It was Michael — he brought the ship down for us. We kept calling to you, but you didn't answer. I wanted to get out of my seat and check on you as soon as we made sun orbit, but Michael said I'd better stay where I was. Chen was worried sick."

"Chen," Iris said.

"He was with Michael, on the ship. It was his idea, to rescue us."

Iris turned her head. Chen was next to her now; he had removed his helmet. He had been the one who

had led her into the lock from the scoop. He stared at her for a long moment, then pulled her toward him; she rested her head against him.

“Chen,” she murmured.

“I thought I’d lost you. I thought — Benzi kept saying you had to be all right. I couldn’t do anything, we couldn’t come into the scoop for you. I had to hope your suit was still working — the cabin’s systems were all dead by then. There wouldn’t have been any air for you without your suit. I wanted —”

“You don’t have to explain.” She drew back a bit and gazed into his eyes; she could see his joy, his hopes.

A tall, thin man was making his way toward them. “You can thank your bondmate for this,” he said to Iris. “It was his plan. Maybe someone else would have thought of it, but he’s the one who did it. Wanted to head down by himself, but I couldn’t let him do that.”

Her eyes widened. “And the Administrators approved?” That was surprising.

The tall man grimaced. “We didn’t wait to hear their views.” He smiled down at them, then turned toward Te-yu; a strange look passed between him and the young pilot, as if they shared a secret.

“You took an awful chance,” Iris said to Chen.

“Not really. Those ships land all the time.”

“But he said the Administrators —”

“We didn’t have time to wait.”

She trembled. “And you did that for us.”

“For you. For Benzi, too, but for you.”

They stood together, barely aware of the crowd around them. How could she have doubted Chen? Why had she believed that his love for her would finally fade? She owed him her life; he would feel more of a bond with her than ever. Something inside her was resisting that thought. She was suddenly ashamed that, even now, she still held back from him, that even her gratitude might not be enough to bring them together again.

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Twenty-Three

Iris cast a fearful look at Chen as they left her room. The door slid shut behind them. They passed two women in the curving corridor; the pair nodded brightly at them, and Chen was sure that he had seen them at a party. He had been at too many parties lately, during the past few days, to remember everyone he had met.

Rose Milon had attended the Bat workers’ celebration of Chen and Michael’s deed. She had smiled as she offered her hand to Chen, but her eyes had held a hard, angry look. She had said nothing about reprimands, and was clearly content to leave that to her superiors. She had hissed her congratulations through clenched teeth.

Chen and Iris had been back on Island Two for a week now. He had been awkward at the parties here;

he had stood silently next to Michael as the pilot related their adventure yet another time. No Linkers had come to any of these gatherings; Chen still did not know what the Administrators thought of his deed. He had heard rumors: He and Michael would be reprimanded for acting rashly; he and the pilot would be rewarded for their initiative; the Administrators had been preparing to order a rescue just before they had boarded the scooper; Pavel Gvishiani and his circle, embarrassed by their own inaction when a rescue proved to be possible, were waiting for everyone to forget the matter, afraid to punish those others clearly saw as heroes. He could not tell which rumors might have some basis in fact, but now he was likely to find out.

Chen had been sent away from the Islands once before; he had a black mark on his record already. He could hardly afford another.

Chen took Iris's arm as they entered the common room of her residence. A few of the people sitting there greeted her; her lips stiffened in a tense smile. It was worth it, Chen thought; it was worth it no matter what happened to him. He couldn't see how they could do anything to Iris, and Benzi was safe. His son and Te-yu had only performed their duties as pilots and had acted bravely in a dangerous situation.

They entered another corridor and rounded its curve; Iris's eyes were glassy as they met his for a moment. She had looked at him in the same nervous way during their moments together in her room. He had hoped that they would be together at last, that their bond would be renewed. Iris had muttered something about going to Island Eight a few days earlier; Chen had said that there might be room for him on that Island, and she had not responded to his statement. There had been no more talk about Island Eight; even the members of Iris's team, who had been at a couple of the parties, had not brought up that subject, though Chen knew that one of them had proposed sending her there.

He should have asked Iris what she wanted from him now, but he could not bring himself to say the words. She was grateful, that was all; her gratitude was probably becoming a heavy burden to her. She did not ask him to stay; she did not ask him whether he was planning to return to his room in the workers' quarters. She said nothing about their future; perhaps she felt that she did not have the right.

He did not want her this way. He did not want her enduring his presence out of gratitude; she might begin to resent him for his claim on her life. He would lose even her friendship then.

He stopped and drew her to one side of the curved hall. "I must say something."

Iris slipped her arm from his. "They're waiting for us."

"I have to say this now. These days were good, but I should go back to my own quarters soon, don't you think? There's no need for me to stay here with you now."

He saw the relief in her green eyes before she lowered her lids, and felt a pang. For a moment, he had hoped that she might object to that suggestion. "Is that what you want?" she asked.

"Yes."

Her arms circled his waist. "Oh, Chen. Why can't I give you what you want? You saved my life, you risked your own. That would be enough for anyone else."

"You would have done the same for me."

"I don't know if I could have been as brave."

"We'll still have our bond for a while," he said. "We have our son. That's enough." Somehow, he kept

his voice calm and reasonable. “Your life is yours, not mine.”

She let go of him. “My life is the Project’s,” she said in a low voice, “and so is yours. We’d better find out what’s planned for us.”

“Iris, I —” Chen fell silent; words were failing him again. He had wanted to say that he could not have loved a woman who did not share his devotion to the Project, but surely she knew that by now. He had wanted to tell her that he understood, that if she had loved him more, and had failed to do her best here because of that love, that he might have come to love her less.

They walked on until they were in front of her Counselor’s door. “Well,” Iris sighed. “Let’s get it over with.” She took his hand for a moment. “If they do anything to you because you acted to save me, I’ll never forgive myself.”

The door opened. Three people were sitting on cushions around a low, glass-topped table; the large screen on the opposite wall showed a rosy desert sunset. Chen nodded at Betha Simmes, his own Counselor; the tall fair-haired woman smiled back at him.

“Ah. There you are,” one of the men said. “Chen, I believe we’ve met before. I’m Terrence Kikuyu, Iris’s Counselor. Please do sit down.”

Chen and Iris seated themselves at one end of the table as Terrence poured out glasses of water. Betha was still smiling. Her smile was making Chen nervous; Counselors seemed to smile most when they had something disturbing to say. A Counselor’s smile may bring you tears; that was one of the first proverbs he could remember hearing. Terrence’s white teeth were gleaming in his dark face.

“I’m so pleased you both made time to meet with us,” Betha murmured, as if Iris and Chen had been given a choice in the matter. “Our other guest is Amir Azad.” She waved at the bearded man who was sitting between her and Terrence. Amir Azad wore a Linker’s gem on his forehead. Chen swallowed; he had heard the name before. Amir Azad was not only a Linker but also an Administrator; attention from such a person rarely resulted in anything good.

Terrence brushed a hand nervously over his thick black hair; he also seemed uneasy in the Linker’s presence. “Amir would like to converse with you both,” he said. “Betha and I will, of course, be happy to consult with you afterward, should you feel it necessary to share your thoughts with us.”

Iris was not smiling. Amir Azad leaned across the table, took a glass, sipped, then set the glass down. “You two have been responsible for quite a fuss lately.” His voice was smooth. “I would have invited you for a discussion days ago, but I don’t suppose your social schedule would have allowed that. You must be growing tired of recounting your adventures to everyone who invites you to a party.”

“Not at all,” Iris said.

“You risked your life, your son’s, and a pilot’s in an unnecessary attempt to get an atmospheric sample, and to make observations.”

Iris lifted her chin. “I would have risked nothing if a pump hadn’t failed, and that was hardly my fault.”

“If that pump had failed at a higher altitude, you would have been in no danger. You had no business asking a pilot to descend to that level.”

“Te-yu didn’t see any problem in doing so,” Iris replied.

“I don’t care what she thought. I suppose she’s partly to blame for the incident, but you bear a larger

share of the responsibility. You're a specialist. A pilot would naturally tend to follow your direction."

"My son was aboard," Iris said evenly. "I wouldn't have willingly exposed him to danger. You can't blame me for this."

Amir glanced at Chen. "You've been even more reckless than your bondmate here. You and the pilot Michael Anastas endangered yourselves and risked losing a needed scooper vessel instead of waiting to hear of our plans."

"We couldn't wait," Chen said.

"And here again, I must say that you bear more of a responsibility than the pilot. Rose Milon has informed me of what happened. You were determined to make a rescue attempt by yourself, and your colleagues on the Bat were disinclined to prevent you from trying. The pilot, seeing that you had no chance alone, wanted to increase the odds in your favor. Perhaps he should have attempted to talk you out of it, though I can understand why he acted as he did, in the heat of the moment. Still, it was your idea. I doubt that the pilot would have acted on his own."

Chen was not so sure about that, but held his tongue; he did not want to see Michael reprimanded.

"You had no business acting without our guidance," Amir continued. "Some might say that you mistrust our direction. Some might claim that you do not respect our authority, and that you've shamed us. Others might say that because we rely on cooperation here, individuals acting entirely on their own endanger all of us. An eye cannot decide to become a hand, a nerve cannot decide to ignore the commands of the brain."

"Cells can adapt to new circumstances," Iris said, "and a brain can sometimes fail the body."

"Be careful, Iris Angharads," Amir said in a low voice. "I don't care for the implications of that remark."

"I think we've done you a service." Iris pointed her chin at the Linker; she was showing no sign of fear. "Because of the failure of that pump, and what happened to us, you can demonstrate to Earth how much more aid we really need, so that such accidents don't happen again with more serious consequences. We've shown that a damaged airship can survive on the surface, something that will be important to know when such ships are traveling there regularly. Chen and Michael Anastas have come up with a way to rescue such ships. On top of that, the cabin and its cargo were saved. The ship's sensors observed a great many things before they failed, and we have all those observations to examine." A smile played around her lips. "Why, some on Earth might find our adventure quite an exciting mind-tour. The Project Council's bound to reap a little extra credit from that, and some of it will undoubtedly come our way."

Amir was still for a moment; then he laughed, shaking his head. The two Counselors chuckled, looking relieved. "You've said nothing we haven't said among ourselves, but I didn't expect to hear it from you." He paused. Chen became aware of an odd gleam in Amir's dark eyes; the Linker was staring at Iris in an almost predatory way. "This is still a bit embarrassing to my colleagues and to Administrator Pavel."

"It doesn't have to be," Iris said. Terrence fidgeted, clearly trying to get Iris's attention, but she was ignoring him. "It depends on how you handle it."

"I suppose you think there's nothing we can do to you, now that you're heroes to so many here. People might object to seeing you punished for such a brave deed."

"They might," Iris said. "Too bad that Te-yu and my son and I didn't go completely to pieces instead of hanging on and hoping for a rescue. Too bad that Chen and the other pilot didn't fail to reach us, so that

you could have been proven right.”

“Iris, *please*,” Terrence murmured; the Counselor was looking very unhappy.

“One fact does emerge from this incident.” Amir stroked his beard. “You two are clearly unsuited to hold your present positions. Marc Lissi has had his complaints about you.” He turned toward Chen. “And you, a worker, try to take command instead of appealing to your superiors.”

Chen had to speak. “We had to act. We didn’t have time to ask you what to do.” Chen was silent for a moment before plunging on. “We’re trained to look out for others on the Bats. We have to trust others in order to do our work there. It seemed right to act.” He might as well say what he thought; it was unlikely he could alter any decision the Administrators had made.

Amir tilted his head. “You were thinking of your bondmate and child, not of your responsibility to the Project and to us.”

“What would you have lost if we’d failed?” Chen asked. “An airship, a scooper, and a few people who could be replaced. If Earth didn’t give you another scooper shuttle, you could have turned to the Habbbers. Administrators have done that before. The Habbbers could give you better ships, better control units, more —”

Amir stiffened. Iris signaled to Chen with narrowed eyes and a shake of her head. He had gone too far; he had reminded the Linker of how important the Habbbers’ help had been to the Project.

“The Habbbers do nothing for us that we couldn’t have done for ourselves eventually,” Amir said in a low voice. “Their assistance has done no more than speed our progress. This is our Project, not theirs.” He scowled. “I wouldn’t speak so warmly of Habbbers if I were you, Liang Chen. According to your record, you were a little too eager to seek out their company in the past. I was sure you had mended your ways, I was sure you had given that up, that you were grateful to be brought back here after your temporary exile from the Islands.”

Chen shifted a little on his cushion, suddenly afraid that the Linker knew everything about him, even about his secret work in the Plains. He had not thought of that in a long time, had walled off his guilt; now, he remembered Eric and how he had died.

“Let’s get to the point,” Iris said. “Don’t you think it’s time to tell us why we were called here?”

“Don’t be so impatient.” Amir’s mouth twisted; he seemed about to smile again. “What neither of you knows is that we were planning to ask those on the northern Bat to attempt the rescue that was carried out. You merely anticipated our orders. A bit embarrassing still for us, since you showed a lack of trust in our judgment by not waiting, but not the infraction it might have been.”

Iris raised a brow. Chen was sure that the Linker was lying, but Amir and his colleagues could make everyone believe his statement was true. They might even convince themselves of its truth in time. Chen and Michael would no longer seem insubordinate and reckless, but only premature in their actions.

“Success,” Amir went on, “should be rewarded, especially if it furthers all of our aims, don’t you think? Please don’t think badly of me for keeping you in suspense. I spoke up for you both in my meetings with other Administrators, but I had to see what you would have to say for yourselves. I think you’ve shown that we’ve made the right decision about you both.”

Betha cleared her throat; Terrence sighed, looking relieved. Obviously Amir had not shared his intention with them. Chen was suddenly angry. The Linker had been toying with them; now, he probably expected

their gratitude.

Amir straightened a sleeve of his white robe. “Iris, the Administrative Committee needs a liaison with those trained by the Cytherian Institute. I’ve felt we’ve needed one for some time — after all, you people were trained specifically for this Project rather than coming to it from other work. Even some of the members of the oldest families here are coming to see that you should be treated with more consideration. I think you should be our liaison. We’ll listen to your suggestions and complaints. You’ll be an administrative assistant, but with luck and persistence, you may become an Administrator yourself someday.”

Iris seemed stunned; she lifted a hand to her face. “Administrators are always Linkers,” she said tonelessly.

“So they are. But we can provide the training for your Link if you do well.”

Iris’s eyes widened; her cheeks grew pink. “I never thought —” She turned her head toward Chen. He tried to look pleased. His hopes were gone; he knew that he would lose her now. He bowed his head for a moment, ashamed of his selfishness.

“You’ll remain here, of course,” Amir was saying. “No need to send you to Island Eight, as Marc was recommending. You’ll spend time on other Islands if a situation calls for that kind of attention. The rest of the time, you’ll continue with your work in climatology. We must all continue in our various specialties here, needless to say. Frankly, your intuitive approach might be better suited to aiding the Administrative Committee. When dealing with people, one can’t rely only on data and projections.”

“Of course,” Iris responded. “I’m grateful for your trust in me. Everyone from the Institute will be happy you’re thinking of us.” Her face was flushed with pride; her eyes had already taken on some of Amir’s predatory gleam. Her face had a hard, fierce look Chen had rarely seen.

Amir’s eyes met Chen’s. “And, since we already have a Workers’ Committee, it should be quite simple to add another to their number. I think you might do well in such a position.”

Betha was beaming, as if his accomplishment were her own. Chen averted his eyes from his Counselor. “I can’t,” he said.

Amir let out his breath. “What do you mean, you can’t? You showed some initiative. Clearly, that means you should be in a position where it can be used, so that you don’t disrupt the Project. You won’t have as much work to do, and you’ll have a little more time for that hobby of yours I’ve heard about.”

“It isn’t that,” Chen responded. “I wouldn’t be a good person in that kind of post. Words are hard for me. I wouldn’t be a good spokesperson for others.” He could not say what he really felt, that the attention of those in power was a dangerous thing. Nancy Fassi had taught him that. His life would be even more open to their scrutiny, his actions to their manipulation. Those on the Workers’ Committee were often distrusted by other workers; he would be separated from those like him without being fully accepted by anyone else. Even his carving would no longer be a pleasant and fulfilling pursuit; he would not be able to carve anyone in authority without being expected to speak up for the Workers’ Committee and its interests.

“You were persuasive enough in speaking up for a rescue attempt,” Amir said.

Chen waved his hands helplessly. “That was different. The only thing I want is just to go on with what I’m doing. I don’t ask for anything more.”

“He doesn’t understand,” Betha said quickly. “I’ll consult with Chen. I’m sure he’ll change his mind. He won’t refuse your offer.” Her pale eyes were wide with worry; the Linker, Chen realized, might begin to doubt how effective a Counselor Betha was if she did not succeed in bringing him around. Iris was frowning; even she seemed annoyed at his response. Once, she might have understood why he felt the way he did.

“I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful,” Chen muttered, hating the weak sound of his own voice.

“Well.” Amir rose from his cushion in one fluid motion. “I imagine both of you want to speak to your Counselors now. I’ll call on you in a day or two, if that’s agreeable. I trust that you’ll consider any decision carefully.” He left the room before anyone could say a farewell.

“I’m glad Betha finally talked some sense into you,” Iris said when they were back in her room. “I couldn’t believe that you’d want to refuse such an opportunity.”

“I still don’t want it,” Chen replied. “I don’t like the Committee.”

“What are you talking about? You don’t have to like them, you just have to work with them. Do you like everybody at the Bat docks?”

“That isn’t the same.”

Iris let out her breath. “You’ll be in a position to help some of your friends. Do you want to be just another worker forever?”

He sat down on her bed. “You didn’t mind that once,” he said quietly. “Now that you have a Link within your grasp, you must think a worker isn’t a suitable bondmate for you.”

“Oh, Chen. I’m thinking of what’s best for you. You’ll be more valuable to the Project now. You’ll be able to get more of what you want for yourself.”

Something in her voice made him think of Nancy Fassi. He leaned over and pulled out his bag from under the bed; his carving tools were already inside it. He stood up, opened a drawer from the wall, and began to pack his few clothes.

She said, “So you really are leaving.”

“I said I would.” He pulled out a shirt and then waited, wondering if she might still ask him to stay.

“Guess there’s no point in putting it off,” she said. She was sitting in one corner, next to the tiny desk top that held her band and small screen. Her shoulders slumped; a thick lock of brown hair hid her eyes. “You ought to check in over there before they decide to give your room to someone else.” She was silent for a moment. “I’m sorry, Chen.”

“Don’t be sorry. It doesn’t do any good.”

“I thought at least you’d be happy for me. I never dreamed I’d have this chance.”

“I’m happy for you, Iris.” He closed his bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Well. What are you going to do now?”

She lifted her head. “I ought to check in with Marc.” Her lips formed a half-smile. “He’s going to be surprised, I think. And I’d better arrange a meeting with Amir Azad as soon as possible. He’ll have to fill me in on exactly what he expects me to do.” She patted her hair, as if already preening herself for the

Linker.

“He’s attractive.”

“So he is,” she said.

“Probably knows it too. Probably knows you know it.”

She sighed. “He can help me. That’s all I care about. I can be of more use here. I can’t be distracted by idle feelings.”

“I see.” He rested his arm on his bag. “I promised Benzi I’d speak to him after the meeting with the Counselors. He’ll be worrying about what they told us.” He turned toward the door.

“Wait,” she said. He looked back; she was standing. “I hadn’t even thought — of course Benzi should be the first to hear the news. I’ll come with you. We should tell him together.”

Together, he thought bitterly as he opened the door.

Benzi was sitting on the lawn outside the entrance to the pilots’ building. An auburn-haired woman was with him; as Chen came nearer, he noticed the cluster of circles on the woman’s gray collar. As Benzi looked up at Chen and Iris, the Habber quickly got to her feet, nodded at them all, and hurried away.

“You shouldn’t associate with those people,” Iris said as she sat down.

“Another pilot and I are supposed to take her and some others to Island Four tomorrow. They have to consult with some engineers. I was only working out —”

“That doesn’t mean you have to sit out here with her in full view of anyone who walks by.”

“Ah, Mother.” Benzi rested one arm against his knee. “You’re back to normal, I see.”

“I’m giving you good advice.”

“So you are.”

Chen sat down next to Iris. His bondmate and son’s brush with death had hardened them both somehow; he had been a fool to think that they might grow closer again. Something in each of them had died on the surface of Venus, had been swallowed by the barren, harsh world outside their ship. He could almost imagine how it might have been for them as they waited for a rescue they were sure would never come; only the strength of their wills could have allowed them to hold out. Now, there was nothing left except that willfulness.

Benzi glanced at Chen’s bag as Chen set it on the grass. “Just my things,” Chen said quickly. “I have to take them back to my room.”

“I see,” his son said, looking disappointed for a moment. “What happened? What did they tell you?”

Iris brightened a little; her eyes were glowing again. “I have wonderful news. You won’t believe it.” She told him quickly about the meeting with the Counselors and Amir Azad; she was grinning broadly and combing back her hair with her fingers as she mentioned the possibility of becoming a Linker. Benzi’s face tensed as she spoke; a look of pain crossed his face for an instant, startling Chen. What was wrong? Was his son also fearful of what Iris’s new position might do to her?

“I was stunned,” Iris finished. “A chance for a Link, and Chen on the Workers’ Committee.”

“I suppose that means Michael will have good news, too,” Benzi said tonelessly, “maybe a bonus.”

Iris frowned. “You could look happier about all this.”

“I’m just surprised,” Benzi responded. “I’m happy for you, but —” He paused. “Don’t you see? You’ve shared the doubts others have about how this Project is going. Now, they’re dangling a Link in front of you, and you’re running after it. Pretty soon, you’ll forget that you ever had any doubts.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’d be mad to turn it down. All these years, I did my best and didn’t care if anyone else praised my work. It was enough just to be here and know that my work was of some small value. Now, I see that there’s more I can do. To be a Linker —”

Benzi leaned forward. “If you were on one of the Habitats, a Link would be your right, not just a privilege for a few.”

“Is this what comes of your talking to such people? I don’t care what happens on Habs. It’s mad to expect everyone to be able to use a Link.”

“Some are better at Linking than others,” Benzi said, “but all of them have a chance. Their Habs are —”

“You don’t know what they are. You only see such folk here, where they can tell you whatever they like and hide whatever problems they have.”

“They would share everything, all their knowledge, with us if we asked,” Benzi replied. “Look at what they’ve done here, or for Earth. We could have drawn closer to the Habbers and benefited more from them, but then the Linkers and Mukhtars would have lost the power they now have.”

Two pilots in blue were watching them from the entrance; Chen motioned to his son with his hands. “Please,” he said. “Lower your voice when you say such things. Benzi, you should be more careful. Too much time spent with Habbers may bring you bad luck. You’ve forgotten what happened to me.”

Benzi did not seem to be listening. “There’s a rumor,” he said, “a story that the Habber biologists may be close to finding or eliminating the mechanism that brings death. If they do, think of what that would mean.” He lowered his eyes. “Earth would refuse such a gift even if the Habbers offered it. Linkers would rather have a century and a half with power than an indefinite lifespan without it.”

“And what would we be then?” Iris asked. “I’ve heard those stories, I’ve even heard that Habbers have known how to evade death for some time, but I don’t believe it. If it were true, they wouldn’t expose themselves to danger here, they’d be too afraid of death. And how many could live such a long life without growing weary of it?”

Benzi’s mouth twisted. “Once, that was said of the lifespans we have now. Your arguments aren’t as good as they usually are, Iris. First, you say that people with indefinitely long lives wouldn’t risk death, and then you claim they’d be bored with their lives.”

Chen glanced from his bondmate to his son. Benzi had Chen’s features and coloring, but the stubborn expression on his face was Iris’s.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with you,” Iris said. Her voice had dropped nearly to a whisper. “I came here to tell you good news, and you speak of Habbers. You’d better regain some sense. You think too much about Habs.”

“Do you hate Habbers so much?”

“I don’t hate them at all, but I keep my distance from them, as you should. I’ve been given a great opportunity. I could be helpful to you now, but —” Iris glared at Benzi. “I won’t have the Administrators distrusting me because of my son’s foolishness.”

Benzi reached out and clutched her wrist. “Does this mean so much to you?”

“You must see that it does.”

“Iris, I have something very important to ask you. Think carefully before you speak.” Benzi’s face was taut; his throat moved as he swallowed. Chen watched helplessly, frightened by the intensity of his son’s gaze. “Would you give it up? If you were offered a chance for something better, would you give it up?”

Iris shook off his hand. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. What could be better?”

“Mother, just once, will you look at me and really hear what I’m asking you?”

“Why can’t you see what I’m saying? I can help you now much more than I could before. If you were still in school, I might be able to get you the best training possible. I could help you rise to a position where you could have some real influence on our work. I know I haven’t done as much for you before as I might have, but now I’ll finally be in a position where I can make that up to you, and you’re saying it doesn’t matter.”

Benzi seemed to withdraw into his own thoughts. Chen saw that his son was struggling with himself, and longed to comfort him; at the same time, he felt Iris’s pain.

“I’ve been thinking,” Benzi said at last. “I’ve had a lot of time to think, here and when we were trapped below. What you’ve told me today may make what I’m going to tell you easier to say. You have a new life now, but it’s not one I can share — I have my own. What I’m trying to say is that I think it’s time I severed my formal bond with you as a son. I’m old enough now to take such a step. It would free you of any obligation to me, and nothing I do could affect you then.”

Chen could not believe that he was hearing those words. Iris was very pale; a tiny vein throbbed at her temple. “You can’t mean that,” Iris said softly.

“Other children have severed bonds with their parents.”

“For cause,” Chen managed to say. “Have we been such evil parents to you?”

“And how do you think that’s going to look?” Iris said angrily.

“No one will blame you,” Benzi replied. “We were never like many of the families here. I wasn’t with you for most of my earlier years, and we were never as close as we might have been. People will understand, and think we did well to maintain our formal tie for as long as we did. This will be best for all of us.”

“Do you think that bond matters?” Iris’s hands were fists. “Do you think I won’t still be your mother when it’s severed? Do you think you won’t still be part of my line?” She pressed a fist against her mouth for a moment. “How much pain will you cause me?”

“I was a way for you to reach for what you wanted. You have that now, and I was always a disappointment to you. You can go on without a bond with me, and there can be others in your line. When you’re a Linker, you’ll surely be given a chance for another child.”

“Another child.” Iris’s voice shook. “Don’t speak to me of other children. You didn’t have to speak of severing our bond — I could have gone my way while you went along yours without that. But you have

to hurt me as much as you can. You have to show me that everything I've done means nothing to you." She stood up. "Very well. You're no longer my son. I won't speak to you again."

She hobbled away along the path, moving as an old woman might.

Chen was about to follow her when he saw Benzi cover his eyes. "I didn't think you had such cruelty inside you," Chen said.

Benzi looked up. "Please believe me when I say I was being kind."

"That wasn't a kind thing you did."

"You'll understand, Chen. I can't say any more. I've said too much already. It's better for Iris this way. It'll be better for you too."

"You're my son, without a bond or with one. You can live on Venus someday. Nothing else matters."

"That still means so much to you?"

"That, and Iris."

Benzi gestured at Chen's bag. "How can you still hope?"

"Do you think I weep for her like a baby? I can't force her to feel more for me. Sometimes, with another woman, I can forget for a time, but I think this way." Chen tapped his skull with one finger. "I'm here. I have a bond with her still. She may come to want me with her again, and I'll be here. If she doesn't, I'll have done all I could and have nothing to regret." Chen was silent for a bit. I've done evil deeds to get here, he thought. I brought death and discord to Iris's household. We both have what we wanted back then.

"I'm sorry, Father."

Chen said, "So you'll do this thing, break your bond."

"Yes."

"Iris and I are bondmates. If you break the bond with her, you break it with me as well."

"I know."

"You've wounded us, son."

"You have other things to think of now. You both have new positions."

Chen shook his head. "I didn't want mine. I must make the best of it."

"Better that the workers have you to speak for them." Benzi clutched Chen's shoulder for a moment. "I wish I could have been the son you wanted."

"You must be what you are." Chen looked up as Benzi rose. "Come to Iris's room with me tonight, and take back the words you said."

"I can't. It's too late. You mustn't think about me now. Farewell, Chen."

Benzi had promised himself that he would not look back, but as he reached the entrance to his residence, he turned.

Chen was walking away along the path. Had his father's eyes met his at that moment, Benzi might have hurried after him, but Chen did not turn around. It was just as well. To plead for forgiveness from his parents now, to go to them and soothe their hurt, would only cause them more pain later, when they at last understood his dream.

You taught me to dream, Benzi thought. You stood on Earth and looked toward this place and dreamed of your own escape. You planted your seed in me. Couldn't you see that I might in turn stand here and gaze elsewhere? That had been his parents' lesson to him — that a dream was worth any price one had to pay.

He gazed up at the dome above and envisioned the ships that might one day move toward distant stars.

Iris forced herself to concentrate. She was again losing track of what Amir was saying to her. She would hardly be a good liaison if she let her mind wander.

On the other hand, when Amir learned that Benzi intended to sever his bond with her, he might have second thoughts about this appointment. A woman with a son who had turned from her might not seem a suitable assistant.

Amir took her arm as they walked along the path; the light above was beginning to fade. His touch unnerved her a little, and she kept her eyes averted from his face as he spoke. His smile had been a little too warm when he greeted her in front of her residence; she had quickly suggested this stroll rather than a meeting in her room, saying that she wanted the exercise. She admitted to herself that she had been afraid of being alone with the Linker.

Since coming to the Islands, she had been cautious about choosing her bed partners. Too many people here did not understand Plains ways, and she had learned to be discreet. Harmless dalliances were tolerated, and she had taken no members of her team as lovers, feeling that this might only complicate their working relationship. Making that decision had been easy, for she had felt no strong desire for any of the men with whom she worked.

Amir was different; she had known that almost as soon as she met him. Part of his attraction had to be that he was a Linker and an Administrator, but his dark, intense eyes had also told her that he was a man who could feel love strongly. She was afraid of that, but even her fear seemed to fuel her desire.

Amir was simply being polite, she told herself; he would be relying on her, and wanted her good will, no more. She was foolish to expect anything else.

"The most important thing for you," he was saying, "is to let the Institute people, both new arrivals and those already here, know that they can trust you, that their complaints won't be ignored or dismissed as insignificant, that the days of treating them as the Project's stepchildren are past. But I'm also hoping you can anticipate any complaints before they become problems. Perhaps we need to arrange more meetings between new arrivals from the Institute and Administrators."

"You Administrators aren't the real problem," Iris replied. "It's the attitude of some of our co-workers, and the Linkers who supervise us. They're snobs, to put it mildly. They don't see a colleague who's been trained, they see a kid who's been plucked from a city street or country village. It's absurd, especially when some of the scornful ones are the children of workers themselves."

"That may be exactly why they're scornful," Amir said, "but don't forget that, whatever their origins, the specialists who grew up here had the benefit of our schools since childhood. They've grown possessive about the Project. They also find it difficult to believe that four or five years at the Cytherian Institute can remedy a flawed or haphazard education, or produce someone who is their equal. Maybe they should

learn more about the Institute.”

“I’m sure that if they really understood what we went through, and how high the standards are, they’d feel differently. But that isn’t enough. Maybe some of the younger people here should be sent to the Institute as students. That might seem superfluous, since they can learn as much here, but it would promote better feeling.”

Amir nodded. “It’s an idea.”

“It’s a young school,” Iris said. “Its graduates haven’t had time to prove their worth. We came here thinking that Islanders didn’t concern themselves with a person’s background. I suppose we were a little misled by the Islanders who came to the Institute to speak to us, but then, they were the ones who wanted to encourage us. What worries me is that some graduates may get disillusioned, and leave the Islands without doing their best work. Of course, some of the problem might be resolved in time, after Institute people have been here for decades, but in the meantime we’ll lose valuable people. If we lose too many, the Project Council may decide that the expense of maintaining the Institute isn’t worth it.”

Amir was silent.

“Some of this is our fault, as well,” Iris went on. “We arrive here all full of enthusiasm and zeal, and quite impressed with our accomplishments, and we expect everyone else to be impressed with them as well. We must be a little hard to take at first.”

“Well, I’ll be interested in your specific recommendations when you’ve had time to think things over. Don’t, however, neglect your other work. We know you’ve been useful to Marc Lissi and your team.”

She glanced at his shadowed face. “Not so useful,” she said, “that he wanted to keep me here.”

A smile played about Amir’s lips. “Needless to say, Marc has withdrawn that recommendation. Don’t you think we’ve been aware of your work? It’s our business to know such things. But Marc’s useful as head of your team. He gets results, he allows you all to work in the ways you find most congenial, and that makes up for other shortcomings of character. He might have been thinking of himself when he suggested transferring you, but, in light of recent events, even you must see why he might have worried about you, and at least he had the wit to discern that you might be useful as a liaison of sorts.”

Amir linked his arm more tightly through hers; again, she felt flustered. She might have been a young girl taking her first walk with a man.

The spiral was ahead; they would be at the entrance to the residence in a few moments. A few people had gathered on the lawn to enjoy the Island evening; she thought she saw a couple of them glance speculatively from her to Amir. She stopped along the path. “There’s something I have to tell you,” she said. “You may have second thoughts about giving me this appointment when you hear this. I’ll be happy to give you my suggestions anyway, and if you can use them, please do, but you needn’t feel that you have to work with me.”

“What is it, Iris?” he asked gently.

“My son wants to break his formal bond with me and with his father. I begged him not to, but he’s determined to request it.” A lump rose in her throat as she remembered Benzi’s cold words. “I could protest at a hearing, but that wouldn’t win his love back, so I’ll have to let him go.” She took a breath. “If this is all he wants from me now, I’ll let him have it.”

Amir suddenly put his arm around her shoulders. “Iris, I am sorry. It must be very painful for you.”

She looked up at his face; his eyes were filled with concern. “If this is going to cause you embarrassment, I don’t expect to be your assistant. If you have any reason to think —”

“My dear, I feel your sorrow. I know you had to leave him when you were young, and I know you’re innocent of cruelty and neglect.”

“You’re wrong. There were times he needed me, and I wasn’t there for him.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re not the first parent who has had love returned with ingratitude and rejection. I’ve seen such separations before — sometimes there was cause, sometimes not. Your son is a young man now, and maybe he wants to assert his adulthood. You and he endured much when you were trapped in your airship, and the ways people react to such dangers can tell them much about themselves. Perhaps he sensed a dependence on you then that he fears, and seeks to free himself of that. It pains me to see you reproach yourself. I’ve seen your record, and know something of your past, and I know how hard you tried to be a mother to him.”

He was speaking to her as a friend might. It was surprisingly easy to lean against him and listen to his soothing words.

“This is a matter between you and your son,” Amir said. “It has nothing to do with our work together. I still have trust in you, and I know you’ll repay that trust. You might have waited until your son made his petition for a break public, and faced me with the embarrassment of having appointed you without knowing of that. The Administrators would overlook your son’s action, most probably, but I would have appeared foolish for not knowing about it sooner. The fact that you were willing to tell me this now leads me to hope that we may grow closer.”

“You don’t think —”

“— that it might look odd on your record?” He shook his head. “He’ll be blamed as much as you, perhaps more. You’ve demonstrated your worth. You must forget the past, and look forward. You may find others who can accept what you have to give.”

His eyes held her; the intensity of his gaze drew her. She forgot the people sitting on the grass nearby and thought only of Amir. Perhaps, in spite of what had happened with Chen, it was possible for her to love a man more deeply; maybe, regardless of her son’s rejection of their tie, there was something in her to love.

Amir reached for her hand. “I’m too ardent, I know,” he said. “We’ve hardly met. But my heart went out to a stranger I thought might die on the surface of Venus, and then, when I met you, I saw the courage that kept you alive. No rescue attempt could have helped you without that courage. You’ve awakened something inside me, Iris. Now, I think of the years you spent here when I was only dimly aware of your presence, and I’ve grown impatient to make up for them.”

She stepped back. “I was afraid to have you come to my room before,” she whispered. “I would ask you to come there now.”

“And I want to be with you. But you carry a burden of sorrow over your son. I want to make love to you now, but you might only be trying to forget that unhappiness in my arms. I want us to enjoy love happily, without such shadows. I don’t want to open my heart to you, and then discover later that you wanted only a comforting friend — but I’ll be a friend, too, if that’s what you wish of me.”

“It’s not all I wish.”

“Your bondmate is a foolish man for saving you and then leaving you again. I would not have left you so easily.” His soft but forceful voice disturbed her a little; then he touched her arm lightly, and her apprehension faded. “We’ll be meeting again soon. There’s no reason we can’t wait until you know me better and are sure you want me as a lover. Anticipation can only add to our pleasure, if that is what you choose.” He bowed his head. “Good night, Iris.”

“Good night, Amir.”

She watched him walk away until he was hidden from her sight, and knew that thoughts of him would disturb her sleep.

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Twenty-Four

Chen’s first meeting with the other members of the Workers’ Committee had bewildered him. He had known each of the others, however slightly, for years; he had worked with a couple of them on the Bat. He had always guarded his words around them, had limited his conversation to talk about needed equipment or a too-demanding schedule. He had listened to the Committee speak to assemblies of workers, where they would tell of their plans for the future or ask for assent to a particular proposal.

The Committee met once a week whenever all of them were present on Island Two. Once every two months, they traveled to one of the other Islands to meet with the members of the nine other Workers’ Committees, or welcomed those people here. They could have conducted their business over the screens, but the others seemed to feel that the screens inhibited discussion, though it was perhaps also wise not to have a record of all proceedings. Meeting together also meant some additional time off to assemble, to acquire some free food and wine for sustenance; going to another Island involved a day for traveling and preparing statements and at least two days of meetings that often became excuses for parties.

Chen had been silent during his first meeting and had wondered exactly what they were supposed to accomplish. Charles Eves, who worked on dock maintenance at the southern Bat, had mentioned some complaints about two of the workers there, and the Administrative Committee had already issued a reprimand. Patrizia Dunn rambled on about Parasol maintenance, where those in charge were considering longer shifts, much to the dismay of the workers. Such talk had seemed useless. The Administrators would decide matters in the end; the Workers’ Committee would present its views and report back with the Administrators’ response. So Chen had thought, in the beginning.

Now, after almost five months on the Committee, the others had grown easier in his presence. Charles, always blunt, had grown franker; the others paid attention when he spoke. Chen had seen what their true business was at last.

Chen let his face go slack as Charles muttered about a worker named Mario Leggett. Mario, it seemed, had the unfortunate habit of speaking his mind, and Charles was among his targets. It was rumored that Mario was friendly with a Linker, and that he might be trying to win a place on the Committee for himself.

“You work with him, Laure,” Charles continued. “Any chance of a reprimand?”

Laure Girard looked up from her bowl of fruit. “I don’t know. He’s a good worker. Frankly, I’d hate to lose him.”

“See if you can find something.”

Laure twisted a lock of her blond hair. “There’s supposed to be an opening in one of the nurseries. My friend Dina wants to spend more time with her daughter.”

“We can recommend her, I guess,” Charles replied, “depending on what happens with Mario. Look, you don’t need much — just enough so he gets a reprimand.”

Chen leaned forward. “Does it matter? Why look for trouble with a man who’s doing his job?”

Charles smiled tolerantly. “I don’t care about his job — it’s mine I’m worried about. If he gets on this committee, one of us’ll have to go, and it’ll probably be me. They’ll say I’ve been on the longest, that it’s time for a change, that I need a rest from all this. Of course, they could bump one of you.” The others around the table nodded. “Stick a reprimand on him, and he won’t get picked, and he’ll be warned.”

“I was picked,” Chen said. “They didn’t bump any of you.”

Charles rested his broad face on one fist. “You’re a hero. You’re a special case.” He looked impatient. Chen wondered if he was now going to hear the other man’s usual tirade. I gave everything to this Project, Charles would say; I got us more credit and better contracts, I’ve appealed reprimands, I’ve seen more of our children get some schooling and gotten their parents more time to be with them. It was all true enough.

“I’ll talk to Mario,” Chen said.

Charles’s lip curled. “And show what we’re thinking? He’d be sure to make his move then.”

Chen shook his head. “Maybe he doesn’t want what you think he does.” He glanced at Laure. “You know him. Don’t you know what he’s after?”

The blond woman folded her arms. “I work with him. I don’t know him all that well.”

“What’s your problem, Chen?” Muhammad Feroze blurted out. “Never noticed you being friendly with Mario. What’s he to you? He got some hold on you or something?”

“I just don’t like to see a mark on someone’s record, that’s all.”

“It’ll be a warning,” Charles said. “It won’t hurt him all that much, and it’ll give anybody else with ideas the word.”

Chen looked down. The others had grown to trust him during the past weeks. If he made too vigorous a protest over this matter, he would make himself useless for other battles. “I’m only thinking,” he said at last, trying to choose his words carefully, “that this Mario might protest a reprimand if he thinks he doesn’t deserve it. He might have friends who’ll speak for him if he’s such a good worker. You’d be giving him a forum to say what he thinks. If the Administrators see all this surface, they might settle it by replacing all of us if they think that’ll calm things down.”

“He has a point,” Tadeo Toda muttered.

Charles sighed. “Maybe so. Well, I’ll let it go for now. Maybe I’ll talk to his Linker friend myself, see what I can ferret out.”

Chen relaxed a little. He’d won that one, at least temporarily.

These meetings always tired him. He had been disappointed, but not surprised, when the others had first revealed their real concerns. Each had a network of friends and acquaintances, and each tried to turn as

much good fortune their way as possible. Chen had felt the pressure from those he knew; even Fei-lin was angling for a recommendation to be head of his team of workers. Chen had told himself that none of it mattered, that the Administrators would do what they liked in spite of the Committee, and that the workers might as well take a few things for themselves. He had occasionally convinced himself that his fellow Committee members usually angled only for things that might benefit most of the workers and limited their greed to a little extra credit or a better job for a friend.

Lately, he had seen other maneuvers; Charles's worries about Mario Leggett were only the latest in a series. It followed, in a way; if some gained, others would have to lose, and there was only so much to go around. Chen rubbed his chin. That was the way all Earthfolk thought at bottom, bound by the limits of their world; he had hoped things would be different on Venus.

He had stood up for Mario, whom he barely knew, and had saved Charles from a possibly damaging confrontation; perhaps he had only helped Charles by doing that. Chen also knew that if he did not soon elicit a few favors for his own friends, he might lose their trust. When he had been powerless, his friendship alone had been enough for them.

He lifted his head, trying to look as though he were paying attention; the others were beginning to plan for their next meeting, a process that would go on for a little while and enable them all to finish the remaining food and wine. Muhammad was already recording those portions of the meeting they were willing to make public; he spoke slowly so that the others could add any of their own remarks. Because none of them could read, the beginning of the next meeting, as usual, would consist of listening to a recitation of these notes, and take up even more time.

Chen sighed. He would have to bring up Fei-lin's request at the next meeting; he should have been thinking of that instead of dithering about Mario Leggett. He was afraid to ask, afraid of what it would finally do to him. He would then become part of the network of favors and obligations; he would inevitably become involved in exacting retribution for real or imagined slights. He would have to defend any gains he might make for those closest to him by whatever means necessary, or they would begin to lose whatever he acquired for them. Chen thought of Eric and the price he had already paid to get back to the Islands.

"Anything else?" Muhammad asked. "Guess we're set, then."

Charles stood up. "This meeting's closed." The others rose and wandered out of the room. Chen's neck was stiff. He tried not to recoil when Charles casually threw an arm over his shoulders as they walked through the doorway.

"You were kind of quiet today," Charles said as he released Chen.

"That's nothing new."

"Quieter than usual, except for that one piece of business." Charles nodded at a few passing workers, who quickly nodded back as they passed in the hall. "Something bothering you?"

"No."

"Well, you let me know if there is." They came to the end of the hall and emerged into the softer, greener light illuminating the tree-lined path outside. "Must be that son of yours. Don't know how a boy can treat his own parents that way. Trouble is, they spend a few months or years in a school and then wind up thinking they're better than you. I'm all for giving them more than we had, but you'd think they'd show some gratitude."

Charles, perhaps intentionally, was touching one of Chen's deepest wounds. He glanced at the larger man. Charles's bulkiness, his expansive gestures, air of heartiness, and the strong smell of wine and onions on his breath suddenly repelled Chen.

"Benzi's always gone his own way," Chen replied. "He has the right to do what he likes. He wasn't able to spend his earliest years with me or his mother, so our bond was always a little weak." He hated mentioning these matters to Charles, but felt that he had to speak up for his son.

"I suppose. But petitioning for a bond severance with you and his mother, not seeing you, acting like you're not even here — that's a hard thing."

"He wanted it and so did Iris. I wasn't going to fight it."

Charles stopped next to a bench. "What I mean is that it doesn't look good."

"Some would disagree, Charles. They'd say we're well rid of a son who acts like that. They'd say we're better off without a formal tie to one who's so friendly with Habbers."

Charles slapped him on the back. "Good point. But I guess you'd know about that kind of trouble — lucky for you that you learned that lesson. Except I hear he hasn't been seeing his Habber friends, either."

Chen had not known that, but then he rarely knew what Benzi was doing now. "Well," Charles went on, "I'll see you next time." The big man walked on down the path and waved at two more workers as they passed him. One of the workers was a small, round-faced blond woman named Eleanor Surrey; her smile widened as she hurried past Chen. He smiled back. Eleanor had never liked him, he knew; but he was important now and deserving of her friendliness.

He sat down on the bench and rubbed his temples; often, he did not feel the strain of Committee meetings until they were over. At least Charles had not mentioned the carving he had asked Chen to do. He would have to finish it soon; if he refused to take any pay for it, he might be able to trade it for a favor of some kind.

He thought of Benzi. He had told himself that such breaks were not unknown and often healed themselves in time. What have I done to you, son?

The answer came to Chen almost at once; it was so clear that he was surprised he had not seen it before. This is what I think of your dream, Benzi was saying. This is what I think of being dragged here by two people I hardly knew, who thought only of what they wanted, who brought me into the world only as a means to their own ends. Your dream isn't my dream, and I have only one way of showing you that.

What is your dream, then? Chen wondered. What do you want?

He looked up. Fei-lin was approaching, with a duffel thrown over his shoulder. Chen had forgotten that his friend was returning from the Bat today. Fei-lin was gazing at him expectantly. Chen rose, trying to think of what excuse he could use to explain why he had not yet presented Fei-lin's request.

Amir's head rested against her shoulder. Iris stroked his dark hair. Their lovemaking often ended this way, with Amir nestling against her as a child might. He did not wear his arrogance when they were alone; he became a playful partner with few inhibitions. That quality had excited her at first; now, she wondered at the reasons for it. Perhaps he saw her as someone who would not judge his intimacies and more playful nature in the way that another Linker might. Perhaps it didn't matter to him how much he revealed of himself to a woman who was, after all, subordinate to him. It might only be a way of binding

her even more to him and his purposes.

She slipped out of the bed; he smiled up at her as she stood up. Wasn't there love in his dark eyes for her? He had spoken of his love; there had even been talk of a child, yet she had to plague herself with worrisome notions. Angharad would have called her daughter's thoughts a sickness; she would have said that too much thought destroys love.

She padded across the carpeted floor, opened a door in the wall, and entered his shower. The warm water flowed over her. Amir's water ration was no greater than hers or anyone else's, but his stall was larger than her own and he did not have to share it with others. It would be very easy for her to get used to his bigger room, his wider bed, and the occasional delicacies that often turned up on the tables of Administrators. It was time for her to return to her own room and forget about such distractions for a bit. She looked down at her stomach; she was gaining weight, a tendency that Amir, who admired plumpness, encouraged.

She felt a twinge of annoyance; he would shape even her body to please himself. As she dried herself, her annoyance faded. She seemed destined to love men who asked much of her, then to fail them because she could not be what they wanted. She might, in the end, fail the Project in the same way.

She scolded herself silently as she rubbed at her hair with a towel. She had what she wanted, didn't she? She would be able to help those who had come here from the Institute; she would be of more real aid to the Project.

She left the stall. Amir sat up and held out his slender arms. She felt a twinge of the fear she still sometimes had in his presence. Once, she had seen that fear as a natural reaction to an Administrator who had a Mukhtar among his ancestors; now, it was his love that she feared. She went to him and held him for a moment as his hands cupped her hips.

She loved him and she would not willingly hurt him. She wanted to be worthy of the trust he had in her and her abilities as a liaison. But he also had power and a position that she wanted to share, and she wondered if that fact distorted this new love. She wanted to love him freely, and worried that she could not. Her lips touched his forehead, near his Link. Perhaps their love could not blossom fully until she was also Linked and fully part of his mental world.

Maybe Angharad was right, she thought. Better to take love as it comes, without demands; better to let the flame burn and die and be happy with one's memories instead of trying to keep the fire alive. Better to live one's life in the company of friends and children instead of linking it to a man's. She had failed with Chen; she might also fail with Amir.

She released him. "I have to go."

"Stay with me," he said in Arabic.

"I have tarried here too long," she said in the same tongue, which she had learned at the Institute. "I must attend to my work."

"Your work is with me now."

"My work is also with my team, and it is even more important that I tend to it now, with what lies ahead." She began to dress.

"But you will not go back to your quarters right away," Amir said. "You will wander first, and perhaps your path will cross that of your bondmate, as it so often does of an evening."

She glanced at him. His expression had hardened. She looked away. "It may," she admitted.

"He still possesses your heart."

She straightened, trying not to show her fear. "I cannot deny that," she responded. "I shall always have some feeling for the man who encouraged me and who saved my life and who gave me —" She paused; she had been about to speak of Benzi, and felt a pang. "But that love does not diminish what I hold in my heart for you, Amir. Chen and I share only words and thoughts and memories of the past. You and I will share the future."

He was staring at her intently. She turned away and ran her fingers nervously through her hair. "You have never asked me to sever my bond with him," she said.

"A bond is a pledge. It should not be broken. You have severed one bond already, but I know that you did not seek to have that come about. If we are ever to have a bond, I would want to believe that you would keep it. It is not your bond with that other that concerns me, or your talks, or your memories of him — it is what you still carry in your heart for him."

"That is all past." She touched his cheek, hoping he did not see how much his words disturbed her. Amir's love might grow too strong; such a love could turn into hate if she ever disappointed him. It might be wise to avoid Chen, lest Amir's anger touch him. It might be best to tell Chen the truth about her love for Amir, which her bondmate might still see as a passing dalliance. It would be crueler to Chen to let him keep hoping.

"I love you, Iris," Amir said, and she felt the weight of that love.

The platform that circled Island Two was ahead. Chen climbed the steps to the railing, then leaned against it as he gazed through the dome at the darkness.

Several paces to his left, ten workers had gathered. One gray-haired man held up his arms and swayed a little; those with him moved their lips soundlessly, as if whispering a chant, then bowed their heads. One woman caught sight of Chen and motioned to the others; Chen held up a hand, palm out, and made a reassuring sign: Be at peace. I haven't seen you.

He turned back toward the railing. Charles disapproved of such gatherings; he would have expected Chen to scold the workers. Chen, however, could sympathize with them, even though he rejected their beliefs.

He wondered what they were seeing in the darkness, what vision might be taking shape in their minds. When he had first come to the Islands, an old woman had taken him aside and told him of beliefs that others shared: The transformation of Venus would release the spirits so long imprisoned there; the spirits would lend their power to those living on the surface of that world; in times to come, the Islands, the Bats, and all the artifacts of man would vanish, and the spirits would lend their powers to the settlers, who would become true Cytherians, free of both Earth and Habitats. Chen had mocked the old woman's words, yet had seen that he shared part of her vision. He wondered how many others secretly came here to whisper spells that might appease the dormant spirits below.

He waited. Iris, he knew, often came here at this time just before retiring, sometimes alone, occasionally with Amir Azad. Whenever she was with the Linker, Chen would greet them and then leave them to themselves, marveling at how much the two had come to resemble each other in their manner. They both had the same casual, relaxed walk and placid smile; Iris's eyes often held Amir's dreamy, abstracted stare, as if she were already a Linker listening to the soft voices inside her head.

A hand touched his right arm. He turned and gazed into Iris's green eyes. She was alone.

Her hands curled around the railing. "We'll have a lot of work soon," she said, "as soon as the pulse speeds up Venus's rotation." She often began their conversations like that, without a greeting, as if they had already been talking for a while. "We've studied our projections and models, of course, but one never knows. Let's hope those installations on the surface do what they're supposed to do."

"The Habbers seem sure that they will," Chen said. "They built them. They must know."

"Some people aren't so sure. I've heard arguments no one's brought up in ages — that part of the Parasol could be left in place to shield Venus from solar particles, that we don't need the magnetic field that rotation would create, that the settlers could learn how to survive long nights and days. Well, there's no use worrying about it now."

"What does Amir think?"

"Oh, he isn't too worried. He may not like Habbers, but he has faith in their technology." Her face had brightened as she spoke of Amir. Chen felt a twinge; things had been easier when he was sure that Iris did not love the Linker. She had forgotten her old warning to herself about the distraction of love.

He took her arm as they began to walk along the platform. The dome's silvery light had lengthened the shadows of the trees below; dark forms rippled on the steps as the workers descended them. Perhaps the spirits those people believed in had required special prayers to appease them before the Habber installations tore at their world.

"Charles mentioned Benzi to me today," Chen said. Iris's hand tightened on his arm. "He disapproves. I wonder if he'll try to use it against me sometime."

"I don't see how he can. At least Benzi's keeping the name we gave him. That has to mean he won't forget us entirely." She paused. "Unfortunately, I can understand why a child might need to break with his parents." Iris sighed. "Oh, Chen, do you think he might change when the Project enters this new stage, when we're actually beginning the work of planning the settlements? He's so young — maybe he's just impatient. Maybe he feels that all he'd ever do here is wait."

"Maybe," Chen replied.

"I think of having another child, but I wonder if that child would turn away from me too."

Hope flared within him, against his will.

"I should tell you this," she continued. "I should have told you sooner. Since Benzi cut his ties with me, I've been thinking of my line and what I promised Angharad. I've told myself that I could be a better mother this time. Amir and I have discussed it."

He gazed straight ahead, refusing to look at her face.

"We've talked of having a child together. Our feelings are strong, but I don't know if they're strong enough for that. Anyway, I thought you should know. I shouldn't deceive you by letting you think my love for him is less than it is."

"Do you want to break your bond with me?" Chen kept his voice steady.

"I couldn't do that. Amir would not approve — he has too much respect for such customs. And I certainly can't have his child while I'm still your bondmate without violating our contract. We'll just have

to wait and see.”

He slowed his pace. “Do you care for him so much, then?” He could barely say the words. “Would you give him all those years?”

“He’s not like anyone I’ve known. Of course, he’s a Linker. He can hold our world inside his head. When he communes with the cyberminds, he’s blind to me, I’m only another thread in the pattern. I sometimes think Linkers can only love one another, that only someone who shares that Link can truly touch their hearts. I won’t know what really exists between Amir and me until the time I’m Linked.”

“And yet you’re planning a life with him.” Chen could not keep the anger out of his voice.

“I love him enough for that. He loves me enough to plan for it.”

“He loves you for what he can make of you,” Chen burst out. Iris started; he saw that he had wounded her with that statement. “I love you for what you are, much as that pains me.”

“Amir loves me,” she whispered, “and he will not share my love with anyone else.”

So it had come to this, Chen thought. She would not have asked him to leave the quarters they once shared, but would wait for him to see that that was what she wanted. She would not cut her ties with him, but would manipulate him into doing so. She would then console herself by believing that he had made the choice.

He wanted to think more kindly of her. Iris had gone against all her upbringing when she had tried to make a life with him; he had known that a bond would be hard for her and that he could not ask for too much. Now, she was ready to give herself to the Linker, drawn to him by what he could offer.

Chen longed to lash out. “This is our last meeting, Iris.” He said the words harshly, and felt an odd, twisted satisfaction in the look of pain that crossed her face. “Seeing you now only torments me more. It’s time to end it.”

She reached for his hands. “Chen, I —”

He pulled away from her. “We had enough love before. Let’s leave it at that. We have some memories now. I don’t want to poison mine by hoping any more.”

Her head drooped. “I suppose that’s best. My Link would only separate us from each other later, even without Amir.” She lifted her eyes to his; her face was pale in the evening light. “You think I don’t care for you, Chen, but even now, I can’t imagine my life without some contact with you. Amir senses that — he’s jealous even of these moments we have together. I care for you enough not to want to give him cause to do anything against you. I knew that this would have to be our last meeting.”

“Don’t lie to me. I’m not a child you have to tell stories to. You have Amir now. I hope you find what you want with him.”

Her eyes glistened. He spun around and walked away, refusing to look back.

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Twenty-Five

Two small, round globes, probes sent by the Islanders, dropped through the Venusian clouds. Winds

shrieked as needles of acidic rain lashed the probes; a patch of sky was suddenly riven by forks of lightning. Life was in the dark clouds, where the strands of algae still fed on the poisons there; humanity's microscopic garden had taken root in the stormy atmosphere.

The winds died as the probes entered the still and stagnant cloud layers beneath the storms. Their destination was the equatorial continent of Aphrodite Terra where, around the shores bordering Aphrodite's highlands, a black and calm dead ocean lapped gently at the land.

The probes extruded their spidery limbs as they dropped toward Aphrodite; their bright lights swept the darkness as their sensors and circuits, drawing on what they saw in this region, created images and transmitted them to the Islands' distant screens.

If light from above had been able to penetrate the enduring Cytherian night created by the Parasol's shade, an observer would have seen a giant pyramid on the horizon, a structure that dwarfed the nearest slopes. Its thick, heavy walls concealed the mighty engines inside, the engines that would move the world upon which the pyramid rested. Rods anchoring those engines penetrated to the edge of Venus's core; the engines waited inside the pyramid, surrounded by the metal skeletons of the devices that had built them.

This pyramid, and the two others sitting at other points along the equator, were monuments to human will. Robotic slaves had moved over the rocky, desolate land around these monuments, directed from afar by minds in frailer bodies that would have been crushed had they stood on this ground under the oppressive atmosphere. The robots themselves were only small mounds of corroded metal at the base of each pyramid.

The two probes, separated by several kilometers, landed to the south of the massive pyramid. Sensors hummed as the probes searched the darkness.

The probes waited. In Island gardens and rooms, and in the tubular rings of Anwara, people gathered near screens to watch the beginning of a new phase in Venus's transformation.

The year of 555 was nearing its end; its conclusion would be marked by the release of the power inside the pyramids on Venus's surface. Some of the Islanders had given life to an old and once-discredited rumor: that the date for activating those engines had been chosen for other than practical reasons, that a seer close to the Council of Mukhtars had drawn mystical inferences from this date and had chosen this time as the most propitious one.

Everyone on the Islands had risen early; many had not slept at all. A few had crept secretly to Island platforms to whisper prayers in an effort to appease any Cytherian spirits that might be disturbed by the forces to be released. No one spoke of the Habbars, without whom the pyramids could not have been built. This would be Earth's triumph and Earth's day, whatever the Habbars had done to help. On Island Two, the Habbars had all retreated to their residence; whatever joy they felt at observing the results of their handiwork would be discreetly hidden from the Islanders they had served. On another part of that Island, in the common room of one spiral-shaped residence, nearly two hundred people had gathered near a wall-sized screen to watch this stage of Venus's history as revealed by the probes far below.

Iris was one of the last to enter the common room. A few people seated at one table greeted her, but most were staring fixedly at the screen, where the giant silhouette of a pyramid was outlined by an eerie, reddish sky. For a moment, the murky but vivid image seemed so real that Iris had to remind herself that it was a creation of the probes, only a depiction of what might have been seen by someone standing under an illuminated sky.

She searched the room for Amir, though she did not really expect to find him there. He would be with the

other Administrators in their ziggurat, regardless of his tentative promise to her; that was, after all, where he belonged at such a time. She lifted a hand to her throat, felt her necklace of green beads, and recalled that Chen had given her the beads years ago, on her birthday.

She had forgotten that while putting on the necklace. She had always imagined that Chen and she would watch this great event together; Chen's absence suddenly dampened her mood. She felt adrift, severed from a past that might have made this event even more meaningful to her. She wondered what Chen would be thinking as he watched with other workers, whether the beginning of this new stage of the Project would be, to him, only a sign of the end of his own dreams.

Chen, she thought, was probably not thinking of her at all. She was being foolish to wallow in such regrets. She had a new life ahead of her, with Amir; she had new dreams to replace the old, and Chen was also free to begin a new life.

She had known, early on, that Amir might be trying to use her in some game of his own, some plan to win more influence with the other Administrators; through Iris, he was beginning to win the loyalty of the Institute graduates she represented. She was, however, no longer a pawn, but one of the game-players herself. Amir needed her, and he loved her also; they spoke as often of love and a possible future bond as they did of their duties.

Perhaps Amir would not have come to love her if she had not been useful to him. Maybe she would not have felt so drawn to him if he had been only another specialist. She would not trouble herself with such musings, and she would not deceive herself. Amir loved her now, as she loved him, and part of his attraction was his Link and the promise that she would eventually be admitted to the ranks of those who touched the thoughts of cyberminds directly, those whose minds were honed to a sharp edge. She could not become such a person and still love Chen.

She saw that Marc Lissi was among those standing near the screen; he nodded and smiled as he caught sight of her. He had been dismayed, she knew, by her appointment to her current position, but had cloaked his resentment with a slightly obsequious manner while she, in turn, continued to acknowledge him as the head of her team. She had toyed with the idea of complaining about Marc to Amir, but had refrained from doing so. There had been no need; Marc could do little against her, and she did not care to make enemies. She would not allow herself to use the small amount of power she had carelessly; she would be fair. Her sense of virtue was slightly sullied by her knowledge that being fair was the most practical way to behave.

The room hummed with voices as people began to settle on tabletops, in chairs, or on the floor. "There you are!" a woman's voice called out; Iris turned toward Chantal Lacan. The slender blond woman made her way toward Iris. "I was wondering if you'd overslept."

Iris smiled. "Do you really think I would have?" She followed the taller woman as Chantal elbowed her way past the crowd to a table near one wall; Iris sat on the table as Chantal seated herself in a chair.

From here, she had a nearly unobstructed view of the screen. Those still standing quickly sank to the floor as the crowd grew quieter. A woman was hushing a few children sitting in one corner. "Be quiet now," she said as she shook a finger at the young ones. "You'll see great things today. This'll be something to tell your own children about." The comment made Iris think of Benzi, who no longer had a bond with her. She had sent him a message, had invited him to share this day with her and forget their differences for a little while. He had not even bothered to reply.

She glanced down at Chantal. At least her old friend was with her. There had been a place here on one team for another engineer, Iris had recommended Chantal, and Amir had arranged for Chantal to come

here from Island Nine. Iris might, in time, surround herself with more old friends from the Institute, more of the people from that part of her past that now meant the most to her. Alexandra Lenas would soon come to Island Two; Edris Shaktiar and his bondmate Nahid now lived in one of Island Two's residences. She would renew old friendships and forget broken bonds; she would remake her own small world.

The room was silent now; even the children had stopped whispering. The people near Iris seemed to be holding their breath. Iris tensed as she watched the screen. This was what she had come to the Islands for, to terraform a world and be a part of great deeds; she was outside of herself for a moment, oblivious of the thoughts that had been troubling her only a little while before.

The apex of the black monument seemed to flicker against the hellish sky. Suddenly, veins of light appeared along the pyramid's walls; the ground rippled. Patches of molten rock became thin streams flowing out from the pyramid's base. More veins appeared along the walls, which were growing brighter; the pyramid began to glow as the walls cracked. The ground lurched abruptly as the screen went blank.

Another image flickered onto the screen. The pyramid, now smaller and more distant, was at the center of a storm of lightning. The cracks were white against the red, glowing walls. The pulse of antigravity was oscillating as it wrenched at the world below, shifting tectonic plates that had been locked for millennia, assaulting a planet. The engines inside the pyramid were tearing themselves apart with the release of so much power.

A new image appeared, sent by a probe drifting in the upper reaches of the lowest cloud layer. A small red spot glowed and then swelled as the clouds swirled angrily.

Iris imagined what that sudden jolt of power was doing to the planet, to the crust and the atmosphere. Mountains were sliding and crumbling. Movements along the ocean bottoms were creating tidal waves. The atmosphere was stirring into violent patterns. Aurorae would be playing at the poles as the spinning iron core of Venus cast a magnetic net to catch the solar wind. The increasing rotation was stately, majestic in her mind's eye; on the surface, its effects were a catastrophic christening.

The walls of the three pyramids, riven with cracks and faults, would stand as monuments to the endeavor. A thousand years from now, people would stand on a green, sunlit world and marvel at the dark ruins, inside which massive gravitational shoulders had pushed against a planet's inertia.

The effort, the effort, she cried within herself: the work, the work to change a world. She felt her own inertia, her unchangeableness; a world could be remade before she could change.

She was again trapped inside herself. Images from other probes were appearing in rapid succession: a volcano spewing lava; a giant black wave rushing toward a barren shore; colorful bands of light dancing above the ugly, squat structure of the installation at the south pole. In the upper corner of the screen, diagrams and symbols confirmed for Iris what she already knew: Venus had begun to turn more rapidly.

A shout rose from the crowd, a wordless cry of triumph. Chantal jumped to her feet and pounded Iris's back. People were surging around them. "We've done it, Iris," Chantal shouted. "We've really done it."

Iris tried to smile, wondering why she felt unable to share in the jubilation. The greatest event I'll ever witness is over, she thought. She had anticipated it for so long, and now it was nearly past. All that remained was to wait for the planet's movement to verify what the symbols and projections and incoming data had already told them, that Venus would complete the first rotation marking this phase in its history in about thirty-four hours, hours the Islanders would pass in celebration until they were all called back to their familiar duties.

“We’ve done it,” Chantal said more quietly as she perched on the edge of the table.

Iris gazed into her friend’s pale blue eyes. “I don’t think we two can claim the credit.”

“The Project did it, and we’re part of the Project, aren’t we?”

The Habbers had done it, she thought, not that it mattered. She felt a bit of sympathy for the Habbers then; it was they who should have been honored in the celebration. They deserved a little more gratitude.

She sighed. There were still great deeds ahead, and a world to settle. She had a son, whose loyalty she would have to win back if he was to be part of her dream once more.

Ten pilots on the Platform had hastened to one of the shuttle docks. Benzi was the last to arrive; when he entered the dock, he saw that he was alone. The others had already boarded the waiting craft; they would be waiting for him.

He lingered near the tail of the shuttle. It was not too late to turn back. He could leave this cylindrical, enclosed dock and go back to the airship bay; he could forget that he had ever been part of this plan. Those aboard the shuttle would not wait more than a few more minutes for him. The warning alarm would sound; the wide circular exit above the shuttle’s prow would open, and the lift on which he was standing would carry the shuttle up to the Platform’s outer surface. He could walk back out into the safety of the corridor and watch them leave on a screen.

He had cut his ties; there was nothing to hold him here, yet he hesitated. He was still afraid to take this last step.

The door behind him slid open; Benzi spun around quickly. Jeffrey Arnold was entering the dock; his broad, freckled face broke into a smile. “Thought I saw you before,” the young man said. “When your car stopped in the corridor, I saw you bolt in here like you had a pack of dogs at your heels. Figured I’d come down and see why.”

Benzi was silent; he hadn’t even seen Jeffrey in the corridor.

“I was going to head back to the bay,” Jeffrey continued. “We’d better hurry, or we’ll miss the show — screen’ll start showing pictures mighty soon.”

Benzi thought of his friends inside the shuttle; he had to get Jeffrey away from the dock. He was suddenly angry with himself for lingering here. He had to get aboard; he might never have another chance.

“You go ahead, Jeff,” he said at last. “I’ve got things to do here.”

Jeffrey’s smile faded as he came closer to Benzi. “What’s going on?”

“Michael Anastas is taking a shuttle up, see if we can pick up some images from orbit. Ought to look —”

“Hey, you don’t need a shuttle for that. They’ve got plenty of other ways to get those images.” Jeffrey scowled. Benzi watched him warily. He should hit Jeffrey now, disable him long enough to get aboard, knock him out if possible so that Jeffrey could not warn others. The red-haired young man was taller, but Benzi knew that he was quicker and stronger than the other pilot.

He couldn’t do it. Even if he succeeded, Jeffrey might not be able to get out of the dock before the cylinder opened and the lift ejected the shuttle. Jeffrey was his friend; they had gone through their pilot training together. He couldn’t leave with Jeffrey’s death on his conscience.

Benzi grasped the other pilot's arms firmly. "Listen to me, Jeff. I've got to get on this shuttle now. Others are inside waiting for me. We're not going to be picking up images in orbit — we're heading out for the nearest Hab." Jeffrey started; Benzi held on to him. "You've been a friend — be a friend now. Walk out of here and pretend you didn't see a thing."

Jeffrey let out his breath. "How long have you been planning this?"

"A while. There's nine pilots on the shuttle. We'd talk about it, but we had to be careful. It was just talk when we started, but it grew. It's what we all want. The Habbers might go out to the stars someday, and we could go with them."

Jeffrey seemed stunned. "This was Michael's idea," Benzi said quickly; he wondered what his friend was thinking. "He saw that this would be our best chance. Everyone's going to be watching the screens today and celebrating later. It's why we all volunteered for Platform duty on this shift." Benzi let go of Jeffrey's arms.

"I can't believe it," Jeffrey said. "Never even suspected."

"We had to make sure nobody did. Jeff, I have to trust you now." Benzi took a breath. If Jeffrey fought him, Benzi would have to see that the shuttle took off safely, even if he was not aboard. He owed Michael that much; the man had saved his life. He swallowed. Chen had saved his life too; he tried not to think of that.

"You fool," Jeffrey said. "Get on that shuttle. I'm coming with you."

Benzi stepped back. "Are you sure?"

"I ought to knock you silly for not letting me in on this. Do you think you're the only pilot that feels that way? There's a few more of us, you know. Come on."

Benzi and Jeffrey were barely strapped in before the shuttle began to glide up on the lift. Te-yu glanced at them from her seat across the aisle. "Well, well," she said as she gazed at Jeffrey dubiously. "I see we have a new traitor to the Nomarchies in our midst. You certainly made up your mind fast, Jeff." She paused. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I'm sure," the red-haired pilot replied.

"I hope you do. There's no way back, you know, no way you could return to the Islands unless you want to face certain punishment. Even most of the other pilots will hate us for this — they'll feel we've betrayed their trust. The Island Administrators are going to be looking for people to blame." She settled back in her seat.

Benzi thought of his parents. He had severed his bond with them; surely, they would not be blamed for what he did. It had hurt him to break the bond, but it had been the only way to give them some protection from blame. He could not, however, shield them from the pain they would feel when they learned that he was gone.

He had told himself that he owed them nothing, that they did not have the right to bind him to them. Now, he felt that he had been too heartless.

"Course is set," Michael said over the comm. "Hope you're all settled." The pilot's voice was calm, as if he were doing no more than ferrying them to Anwara.

Benzi was pressed against his seat as the shuttle thrust upward. On the screen in front of him, the

Platform was falling away; soon, it had disappeared into the blackness. As the shuttle fell into its orbit around Venus, Benzi floated up against his straps.

“I hope I didn’t make a mistake,” Jeffrey muttered.

Benzi turned slightly toward the other young man. “Too late to think of that now.”

“They always taught us to act fast, to do something quick if it was necessary. So that’s how it went when you told me. I could have tried to stop you, but you would have fought, and a dock where a ship’s going to be taking off isn’t a place for a fight. I could have walked back out and done what you told me to do, but I might have gotten into trouble anyway, and I always would have wondered afterward if I should have taken this chance. This was the best thing to do, I guess.” Jeffrey was silent for a moment. “Did any of the Habbers on the Islands know what you were planning?”

Benzi shook his head. “We couldn’t tell any of them. We didn’t know what they’d do. They have an agreement with Earth. If they’d known about us and hadn’t said anything — well —”

A woman’s voice was speaking over the comm; Benzi caught the last of her words. “Well, then what *are* you doing out there?”

“Just taking a look,” Michael responded. “Might see something interesting up here.”

“It’s getting to be a habit with you, Michael. You seem to think every ship on this Project is yours to do with as you like.” The woman’s voice sounded familiar, but Benzi could not place it; she had to be another pilot on Platform duty. He felt a twinge; her voice might be the last Islander voice he ever heard, the last sound from those he was leaving behind.

He sighed. He had wanted to leave some message for Iris and Chen, a few words of explanation and apology, but had refrained. A message might have given his fellow pilots away too soon. A message might have made it look as though his parents had known of his plans.

He wished now that he had found some way of sneaking a message to them. He had even thought, impossibly, of convincing them to come with him; he had almost given himself away. Iris would only have betrayed him to her Linker friend, while Chen would have pleaded with him to stay.

“... ought to get a reprimand for this,” the woman went on, “but I suppose for such a hero, they’ll let it pass. Enjoy your sightseeing.”

“So you didn’t tell the Habbers,” Jeffrey said. “You didn’t trust them enough for that, but you’re expecting their friends to welcome us with open arms. How do you know they will?”

“They always say anyone can join them. They haven’t turned away anyone who did.”

“This is the Project, Benzi. They have an agreement. They might consider that.” Jeffrey’s freckled face was set in a frown; he looked as if he already regretted his impulsive act.

Benzi thought of the distant Habitat that was their destination. He had seen images of the asteroid, which was surrounded by parts of a metal shell. Their shuttle would have to dock at one of the Hab’s stationary poles; he now wondered what he would find inside that world. He might find nothing but an exile’s loneliness; even the Link that they provided to all might not be enough to make him truly one of them.

He stared at the screen. Against the Parasol’s ebony fans, he could see the tiny lights of the northern Bat, and felt guilt as he thought of his father. Lightning flickered on the shadowed planet below, and he remembered his mother, who had mapped Venus’s storms but had not understood the storms raging

inside her own son.

Colorful bands of light suddenly appeared above the north pole; Benzi caught his breath at the beauty of the aurorae. The lights became a fan of rainbows; the sun's corona haloed the edge of the Parasol. Benzi gazed at Venus one last time as the shuttle's engines thrust them out of orbit.

Several people had left the common room for other parties elsewhere. Iris stood near the door, groggy from hours of drinking wine, expecting Amir to enter at any moment. He would have known she would be here, and even the Administrators could forget their duties for a little while on such a day.

Near her, on the floor, Chantal was sitting with a group of Institute graduates who had wandered into the common room. They were already deep in reminiscences about their Institute days; having dealt with their awkwardness and uncertainty during their first months there, they had gone on to talk of their early blunders in discussions and had then arrived at tales of their first wild journeys into Caracas. Wine, along with the joyful spirit of the day, had lent the stories a cheery flavor; the most appalling and painful events had taken on the air of adventures. The group had now progressed to the Institute's legends — Kevin Telford, who had been given Linker training after only a year of study, and Hiro Fukuda, who had roamed the Institute with a mangy dog he had found in Caracas; who had insisted on bringing the dog to discussions, who had left the Institute after a famous party during which he had appeared on everyone's screens to give a drunken speech on hedonistic ethics, and who had somehow managed to find his way to the Project as a worker.

Iris sipped her wine. Everyone was speaking of the past, it seemed, steeping themselves in it just before Venus's new era truly began. A knot of celebrants were standing near the screen, speaking to a gathering on another Island. The image on the screen suddenly changed; now, a man was speaking to those nearest the screen, but Iris could not hear his words above the hubbub. A few heads turned; she realized that several people at that end of the room were staring at her.

"Iris?"

She turned. Edris Shaktiar had entered the room. His bondmate Nahid was holding a hand in front of her pretty mouth, and her large brown eyes were wide with concern.

"Iris," Edris said again. "Haven't you heard?" He plucked at his beard. "I guess you haven't. I just heard the story a few moments ago. I thought I should come to you immediately."

Before Iris could speak, Nahid seized her hand and thrust it into Edris's. "Not here," Nahid said; her accent seemed more pronounced than usual. "You tell her outside, Edris, not in front of all of these here." She patted Iris on the arm. "God help you."

Chantal was getting to her feet; Nahid drew the blond woman aside. Edris led Iris toward the door quickly. "Steady yourself, my friend," he muttered as the door closed behind them.

The small hill in front of the residence was a dark slope with the pale band of a stone path; evening had come to the Island. Iris had not realized it was so late. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know how to tell you." They walked away from the spiral, then stopped under a tree. "This is bad news." Her hand tightened around the glass of wine she still held. "It concerns your son."

Iris waited.

"He was on the landing Island. It seems he volunteered for this shift there, and —"

She dropped the glass and staggered forward; Edris caught her before she could fall. He's hurt, she

thought wildly, and then: He's dead.

"He was on a shuttle. The ship —"

"He's dead!" she cried out.

"No, no. He isn't dead."

She straightened up, but still held on to his hand. "He was with a group of pilots," Edris said. "They took the shuttle up and told another pilot on the Platform that they were going to watch from orbit. No one ordered them back — I imagine that by then everyone was too preoccupied to pay any mind to the shuttle. That shuttle set its course for the Habitat. They must have been planning it for some time, knowing that no one would stop them on this day."

Iris leaned against the tree. "But why?"

"They want to live with the Habbers. They've asked to stay there."

"No. Benzi couldn't —"

"He was part of the plan. Iris. The pilot Hong Te-yu was with the group, and also Michael Anastas, the man who rescued you. I didn't catch the other names, but everyone will know them by now." The bearded man released her hands.

"They'll be sent back. They'll be punished."

"The Habbers won't send them back against their will. I heard that before I came to you. They won't be given up." His lip curled. "They want to be Habbers and forget their bond with the Nomarchies. I suppose they'd call it a better way instead of what it is — disloyalty."

Iris covered her face. Hearing that her son was dead could not have made her more enraged. She pushed that savage thought aside. Her son had hidden his thoughts from her; he had thrown away the hopes Chen had held for him.

"There are Habbers here," she whispered. "We can force the Habitats to give our people back."

"No, Iris. We have no power over the Habs even with them. If they were threatened, the Habbers might cut all ties with Earth and the Project. We'd lose their industries, their tools, the scientific discoveries they dole out to us. They don't need us, but it would be hard for us to get along without them, much as we want to deny it. And think of this too. Benzi would have no place with the Project now. You would only see him punished if he returned."

"He deserves it. He would deserve anything they did to him."

Edris draped an arm over her shoulder. "What a piece of Habber work this day has been. Their engines move our new world, and at that very moment some of our people leap to them."

She should have suspected it all along. Benzi had never cared about the Project. She should have realized — Iris stiffened. "I'll be blamed," she said. "I'm his mother. They'll think I knew." Her fingers clawed at his arms.

"No one will blame you. How can you be blamed? You told me he had severed his tie to you and his father."

That was why he had done it, then. Rage welled inside her; Benzi had broken the tie to protect her and

Chen. She took no consolation in that possibility. He had manipulated them for his own ends and had left them to torment themselves worrying about how they had failed him.

She pulled away. "I must speak to someone."

"Come inside. Nahid and Chantal will —"

"No. I have to see someone else."

"Let me come with you."

"You'd better not, Edris. It might not help you if you're seen with me now." She hurried off before he could stop her.

A crowd had gathered in front of the round stone building where the Habbars lived. Iris watched from the trees as a man in the clothes of a worker spoke. "I don't care what you've been told," he cried. "They must have lured them there with lies, and now they won't give them back. They want something, don't you see? They'll take Venus and the Project for themselves, they'll let us do all the work and then they'll just take it for themselves."

"They have worlds already," someone shouted out.

"You call what they have worlds? Some place where the ground's over your head? Thinking they're better than we are." The man spun around and hurled a rock at the building. Soon the stone walls were being pelted by an onslaught of small rocks and clods of dirt. A few people rushed the nearest door and pounded against it with their fists, but it did not open.

Iris stepped back into the shadows. The Islands had only a small volunteer force of Counselors to keep order; they had never needed more. The Habbars would be safe enough inside their building until the mob's rage was exhausted.

She hastened on through the trees, suddenly conscious again of her own predicament. She was the mother of someone who had betrayed the Nomarchies, who had broken every agreement binding him. Amir would understand. She stumbled out from under the trees onto a wide pathway and saw the ziggurat of the Administrators. A crowd had gathered there as well; a woman on the steps was explaining what was happening at the meetings inside, pausing every so often to listen to her Link. Iris ran up the steps quickly, averting her face from the crowd.

The curving corridor she entered was bare of any ornament except for the calligraphic lettering embossed on each door. She slowed her steps and walked on through the hallway until she came to Amir's room. The Arabic letters on his door blurred as she stared at them; she wiped at her eyes, then put her hand against the lock.

The door slid open, showing her his familiar room. Amir was sitting on a red cushion. She reminded herself that this was a man who loved her, whom she had come to love in her own way. His dark eyes stared at her blankly, then focused on her face.

She moved soundlessly across the carpet and sat down on one of the cushions nearest him. "I was going to wait for you," she said at last. "I thought you might be at a meeting."

"I am at the meeting," he said tonelessly as he tapped the gem on his forehead. "The others can proceed without me for now, or perhaps they'll want to hear what you have to say through me." He brushed a sleeve of his long white robe, then folded his arms. "What have you come to tell me, Iris?"

She thought of the others who might be watching and listening to her. She searched Amir's face, looking for some sign of the warmth and affection she had so often seen there. His eyes were glassy, his face stern.

"My heart is heavy," she murmured in Arabic, hoping that the more expressive language they had used in their private moments would elicit his sympathy. "My son has thrust a sword through me. I am wounded, Amir, and filled with anger at the son who has deceived me. I curse him for what he has done. May he, if God wills it, find only misery in his new life, and be haunted by the memories of those he left behind. May he, God willing, feel the stabbing of the blade I feel inside me at this moment."

"Have you come to denounce him, then?" Amir asked. Her chest constricted; he was speaking in Anglaic. "Are you going to say you knew nothing of this?"

"Of course I knew nothing. I called him my son, but he is not my son. He severed his bond with me. He was lost to me even before he went to the Habbers. You can't believe that I had anything to do with this." She realized that Benzi had tried to protect her and Chen in the way he had escaped, but she pushed the thought away.

"Can I really be sure of that? You didn't fight him when he severed that tie. It could have been part of his plan, a device to protect you and his father. You might have been sure that, in your present position, under my protection, you would be safe enough."

Amir thought that she had used him. She leaned forward. "Aren't there ways to know if I'm speaking the truth? There are the bands used to question those suspected of crimes. If you used such a band with me, you'd know."

He looked away. "You wouldn't want to go through that. Sometimes such questioning leaves mental scars, makes some people useless for anything except the most undemanding work. Would you risk that to clear your name? What would you have left? You might become useless to the Project then."

"I would take the chance," she said, no longer so sure.

"No one here would care to authorize such a thing. Those bands may be useful enough when one is dealing with a simple, brutal mind, but they often fail with more subtle ones. Anyway, if we questioned you, the very fact that it was considered necessary would be enough to cast suspicion on you. Surely you see that."

She relaxed a little. Did his statement mean that she was safe from doubt? She stared at the geometric pattern of the red and gold carpet, then lifted her eyes to his. He was looking at her the way a falcon might gaze at his prey; he had looked at her the same way when she had first met him, when she hadn't known if she was going to be praised or punished. She thought: He already knows what's going to happen to me.

"Amir, I am sorry," she said. "This Project was what I hoped to be part of for almost all of my life. I wanted my child to be one of the first settlers — I wanted my line to be part of that new world's history. This doesn't have to change my dream. I must put it behind me and look to the future. I'm young. There can be other children." She waited, wishing he would put his arms around her and speak of the hopes they had discussed.

"You dare to speak of that now?" His tone was bitter. She had miscalculated, forgotten that others were listening to them; Amir would not want them reminded of how close he was to her.

"What a day this was to have been," he continued. "We witnessed the greatest event in Venus's history

so far — our minds were so full of that triumph that we were oblivious to everything else. But your son and the other wretches who were his accomplices thought nothing of that — it was only a distraction to be used to cloak their escape.” He bowed his head. “It was I who told my colleagues that the pilot Michael Anastas and your bondmate Liang Chen should be rewarded instead of punished for their reckless rescue of you and your son. It was I who said that the Project would be better served if we honored the courage and initiative you all showed. You and your son were facing death on the surface below. Do you expect me to believe that, in all the time you were trapped there, he wouldn’t have brought himself to reveal his plans to you, to unburden himself before his death?”

“But he didn’t,” she cried. “He said nothing of that.” Yet she recalled the questions he had tried to ask her, and that he had been about to speak of some matter before Te-yu had cautioned him to be silent. She thought of the times Benzi had come to her with his questions and the times she had dismissed them or had argued with him instead of listening. The Project had always been her son’s rival; maybe she had brought him to hate it.

The signs had always been there — the screen in his room showing a starscape, his talk of the Habbers and their ways. She had simply refused to see those signs.

“Perhaps your son spoke,” Amir said. “Then, when rescue unexpectedly came, you kept his secret. Perhaps you shared what you knew with your bondmate during your little talks, and assured him that you would both be safe because of my feeling for you. You thought of your son, and forgot your duty to the Project. You hid your thoughts from me.”

“It isn’t true!”

“No wonder Michael was so quick to aid you. Two of his accomplices were in danger. He took a risk to save them because he knew that this would strengthen the bonds he had with his other accomplices. His bravery would win their complete loyalty, and your son’s gratitude, and there would be even less risk of a betrayal before they carried out their escape.”

“Amir!”

“Even you would not speak. I’m an Administrator. I spoke up for you, and became your patron. Your son has wounded me too.”

“How I curse my son,” she burst out. “He’s shamed me and called my dream worthless with his deed. I wish he could be brought back here, for I would be the first to call for his punishment. I would stand in front of him and denounce him for choosing the sterile way of the Habs over our way.”

“How desperate you are, Iris. You must be pleased to realize that, with other Linkers now listening to your words, your denunciation is public. I see why you’re here, it’s to plead for yourself and deflect suspicion. What shall we do — send you back to Earth? That might be the right decision, since it would serve as an example to others who might be misled.”

She swayed; Amir’s bearded face blurred.

“But that might cause hard feelings,” he went on. “Some would say that you were bearing what should have been your son’s punishment, and think we were unfeeling and insensitive. The Project cannot move forward if we are not trusted.” His voice seemed distant.

“Amir, you know me. You must see that I’m not to blame.”

“Oh, some will indeed hold you blameless, but they may then wonder how a parent could have turned

her child so much against her, since your son seemed so unconcerned with the consequences his action would bring to you. Some will think you knew, and ran to me only out of desperation, thinking that I would shield you. And some who might believe you innocent of any previous knowledge of your son's deed will wonder why you were so quick to come here to denounce him."

"Anyone would!" she cried.

"No, Iris. Another would have retreated into solitude and wept for her child, would still have loved him in spite of everything. She might even have prayed for his happiness. That's what an innocent person would do, for she would know that she had nothing to fear from us. That is what someone who loved her child would do, for she would have wished him well in spite of his traitorous mistake. You are now a woman who, whether guilty or innocent, has failed her son, nurtured a traitor, and shamed the Project. You were lost as soon as you entered this room."

Her hand struck, missing his face and hitting his shoulder; he grabbed her wrist. "I raised you up," he shouted. "I spoke up for you, I convinced my colleagues that you had gifts we could use. I argued that we should save your life when your airship was first in danger, and when I came to know you, I even —" He thrust her arm away. "Others will remember that I spoke up for you then."

She had not stopped to think of how shaky his own position would be now. "Amir," she said helplessly.

"You came here. You pleaded for yourself. You didn't once show any concern for me."

"Have you thought of me? You've let me sit here without telling me what you'll do. What will happen to me?"

His eyes narrowed. "Why, nothing will happen to you. You've proclaimed your innocence, haven't you? You've even offered to undergo questioning under an interrogator's band, something a guilty person would never do. You'll simply go on, Iris. You can remain our liaison with the people from the Institute, but when they see how powerless you now are to intercede for them, they'll soon ask the Administrative Committee to appoint someone else in your place. But that must be left up to them, don't you think?"

"I won't be so helpless. I'll find ways to do my job."

"But you won't. The Administrators won't listen to you, and your Institute colleagues will worry that one so ignorant of her own son's feelings can hardly be aware enough of their needs to be of service."

Iris stood up slowly on shaky legs and wavered as she tried to keep her balance. "Then I won't wait for that. I'll resign at the next meeting."

"Then we'll wish you well. We might even give you a bonus for the services you've already performed for the Committee. We could give you a little time off, if you like."

Her knees shook. She was suddenly thinking of Anthony, the student at the Institute who had done no more than ask too many touchy questions. She was now sure that this was indeed all that Anthony had done, that he had not been spying on them or trying to ferret out those with dangerous views. But Anthony hadn't been punished for his skepticism, only rewarded. The school had let the other students punish him instead, had aroused their suspicions about him by giving him privileges until the students themselves had made his life there unhappy and impossible.

Anthony had come to her a few days before he left the Institute; he had needed a friend then. She could now recall her words to him: Don't make trouble for me, it's your problem, why do you want to drag me into this, it's your own fault, I have to think of my work.

There would always be doubt about her in some circles, and the forbearance and kindness of the Island Administrators would confuse the issue still more. Why punish her outright and risk provoking sympathy for her plight when suspicions could be fueled? The Administrators would see her punished in time, and others would profit by the example, and would be even quicker to denounce any suspicious or questionable activities on the part of their friends.

You think I'll leave the Project, she thought. You won't drive me away so easily.

"You may even have access to the Linker training I offered before," Amir went on. "Of course, you'll never become a Linker. We couldn't have that now. With a son among the Habbars, your loyalties could become divided."

She turned around slowly and left the room. When the door had closed behind her, she struck it with her fist, then wandered on down the corridor, not caring who saw her tears.

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Twenty-Six

Pavel Gvishiani closed his Link. He felt a bit of sympathy for Amir Azad. The young Linker had been just heartless enough in his dealings with the woman Iris Angharads to convince Pavel that Amir still cared for her. An impassive man, one who was indifferent to her, would have dealt with her more quickly instead of exacting every last bit of agony from her.

Pavel pushed the thought aside. He could not afford sympathy for Amir now. The young man would have to pay for his lapse in judgment. Iris Angharads was clearly innocent, but that made no difference; Amir, by drawing so close to one whose son had shamed them all, would be under some suspicion himself. There was no need to be harsh. He could suspend Amir from the Committee for a while, and perhaps all of this would chasten the man. Amir, with his efforts to win the personal loyalty of the Institute graduates through Iris, had been showing a few too many signs of higher ambitions.

He would see how the pair responded to their new positions. If they were weak of spirit, the suspicions of others might drive them from the Project. If they were stronger, they would stay and try to overcome suspicion by proving their devotion to the Project. He would not rid himself of those who might be useful.

What Amir and the woman probably didn't realize was how shaky Pavel's own position was. Pavel had been dwelling on this unfortunate incident, turning it this way and that, trying to see if some invisible hand had brought this business about. Somehow, he doubted that, yet the pilots had been plotting for months, and they had done so without the Administrators hearing even a whisper of their plans. That meant that the means his colleagues used to keep themselves informed were deficient, that Pavel himself was losing control. Something would have to be done about that.

The Linker rubbed his chin. The Project Council members on Anwara, and the Mukhtars on Earth, would be wondering about his own lapses. Other Administrators might be waiting to take advantage of Pavel's difficulties now, might try to use the incident for their own ends.

These musings were getting him nowhere. He knew what Earth would expect him to do now. He would have to expel as many Habbars from the Project as possible, remove any future source of temptation to those who might envy the ones who had fled to the Habs. He would have to do that before Earth requested it; that might shore up his position. He would expel as many as he could within the limits of Earth's agreement with the Habs, while keeping those Habbars who remained completely on the sidelines of the Project.

Pavel quailed at the thought. They needed the Habbars even more now, needed their help to build domes on the Cytherian surface. Without the Habbars' help, dome construction would strain their resources to the limit, and their engineers and robots were no match for those of the Habs. Earth would grow impatient with the progress of dome construction, and eventually Pavel would be blamed for that too. He might only be postponing his own fall from power. All the trends seemed to point in one direction, whatever he did — difficulties and delays for the Project, perhaps even failure, and his own disgrace as a result.

He rubbed his eyes with one large hand. Which did he care about more, his own position or the welfare of the Project? Had he become so corrupted that the two were now wedded in his mind? The younger Pavel would have put the Project before all, might have confronted Earth with the facts — namely, that they needed the Habbars even more now.

No, he thought. The Project Council, whose members had to balance the needs of the Project against the Mukhtars' desires, would not listen to him anyway. The Nomarchies might have ignored a flight from Earth, or those mining the asteroids deserting their posts for a Hab, but to see pilots abandon the Project that was Earth's greatest glory was especially humiliating. There were those among the Mukhtars who had wanted to rid the Islands of Habbars before now. The Habbars, most of them, would be expelled anyway, and Pavel would only lose his own position if he fought that.

It was too easy to give up, to make the noble gesture and wash one's hands of the outcome; better to stay on, do what had to be done, and wait for events to bring good fortune his way again. He had lasted this long as an Administrator; he would hang on long enough to see successful settlements, whatever it cost him or anyone else. That would be his triumph, and nothing else would matter.

There was yet another action, in addition to expelling most of the Habbars, that Pavel would have to take soon in order to shore up his own position. He closed his eyes and opened his Link, then sent out a call.

After a few minutes, Pavel's screen emitted a chime. He leaned over and pressed a button on his console, checking to be sure that he was on a closed channel. The face of Yukio Nakasone appeared on the screen.

"Greetings, Commander Yukio," Pavel said, trying not to betray his distaste for the man.

"Greetings, Pavel. Why the screen? Our Links would be adequate, and we could share our ideas more easily."

"I think it would be best if we closed our Links for this talk, and used only the screen. We're on a closed channel, and I don't want interruptions."

"Very well."

"You've undoubtedly heard about our recent embarrassment by now."

Yukio's mouth twitched. "I told you no good would come of giving Habbars the run of the Islands, where they can fill the heads of weak ones with their lies. You've been careless, Pavel."

"I agree. But perhaps some good can come out of this incident. The Habbars will be dealt with, never fear, but that isn't what I wanted to discuss with you."

Yukio gazed at him expectantly.

"This unfortunate incident has convinced me that the Project hasn't made enough use of the Guardians you command." A sour taste filled Pavel's mouth as he spoke. "Had we done so, we might have avoided

this traitorous activity. I have a proposal to make to you, Yukio. It is now time that we stationed Guardians permanently on the Platform. If a Guardian pilot accompanies each and every shuttle that leaves the Platform, we can at least avoid a repetition of today's incident. Perhaps Guardian pilots could themselves handle many such flights, and we could restrict more of our pilots to airships only. Such an act on our part will do much to reassure the Mukhtars."

Yukio smiled. "Not a bad idea. There's only one problem. My force here is small. I haven't enough people to do what you want."

"True enough," Pavel responded. "You will have to ask the Nomarchies for a larger force. I think, under the circumstances, they'll provide you with one. You will, of course, have to be given slightly more authority than you have now."

Yukio's smile widened; his eyes glittered.

"As you know," Pavel continued, "there are those here who, unfortunately, do not give your Guardians the respect they deserve. Perhaps we can overcome that. I would want Guardians who are disciplined, who will stick to their task and not interfere with the Project."

Yukio's smile faded. "All Guardians are disciplined."

"Of course. But as is true in all walks of life, some are more disciplined than others. I stress this point only because I think it's best if those Guardians who would be stationed on the Platform stay on the Islands when they're off duty. We'll rotate two groups in alternating shifts, and we can provide quarters for them here in the Administrators' residences." Where, Pavel added silently to himself, I can keep an eye on them.

"Your Islanders may not be happy with that," Yukio said. "They could come back here to Anwara instead."

"Indeed. But if they stay among us, they'll become familiar faces, acquaintances instead of a faceless, impersonal force. Their presence may also restrain any who might still have foolish notions. I suggest that we put your colleague Fawzia Habeeb in command of those forces. She fancies our Islands, and wouldn't mind the duty." Pavel was not delighted with the prospect of Fawzia's presence, but she shared some of his hopes for the Project, and that would make her easier to control than one like Yukio, who thought more of his own power than he did about the Project's goals.

Yukio was now frowning. "So I would be here, with Anwara's small force, while Fawzia has command of your larger one. I'm afraid I don't care for that."

"You misunderstand, Commander. Fawzia could command, and a subordinate could be left in charge on Anwara. You, of course, should return to Earth, where you can supervise the transfer of more Guardians here. With more Guardians here, and with many to be stationed on the Islands, the Project Council on Earth might have need of a liaison, and your advice and knowledge of our situation could be valuable to them. You would have a chance to meet some influential people, and Fawzia would still have to answer to you even at a distance. I suggest that you give her a glowing recommendation, and I'll certainly do the same for you. Needless to say, I'd prefer your company here, but you'll be far more valuable elsewhere, and I know your thoughts have often turned to Earth."

"Indeed they have." Yukio wrinkled his brow. "I don't know how the other Administrators on your Council are going to receive this proposal."

"I'll take care of that, never fear. They'll see that we have no choice, that it's this or a reprimand, or

Earth taking more drastic steps on its own. In the meantime, I think it might be wise for you to speak to the Project Council members there immediately, and offer my suggestions. You are free to inform them that you've already discussed this with me, and to tell them that we've already agreed on the wisdom of this course of action."

Yukio nodded. "Earth should be pleased that we want to act so quickly."

"There might be objections to the expense of bringing more Guardians to the Project, but once most of the Habbers are expelled, it will cost us less to provide for the Guardians than it did to take care of the Habbers."

"You'll expel them at last," Yukio said. "It's about time. They should never have been allowed there in the first place. Too bad you can't get rid of them all, but I suppose the agreement will prevent that, and we must at least keep to its letter."

"It's settled, then," Pavel said. "Go to the Council. I'll speak to the other Administrators here as soon as possible. I should be going to Anwara within a day or two to address the Council myself and show them that I'm doing all I can, and we'll make our final arrangements then. God be with you, Yukio."

"Farewell." The screen went blank.

Pavel slouched on his cushion. Guardians on the Islands. The thought made him ill. He cursed the wretched pilots who had brought this about; his goals for the Project seemed further away than ever.

Chen sat in a grove just beyond the entrance to the airship bay, lost in grief. He had sat here often to wait for Benzi to return from the Platform. In the days before Benzi had broken his bond, Chen had often been here to welcome him, to lead him to a table where they might share a meal and talk.

His son was gone, Chen's bond with him irretrievably broken; he would never see Benzi again. Somehow, the news of Benzi's flight had not surprised him, but the wound had been so deep that he had not even been able to feel rage. He had fled from the crowd of celebrants surrounding the workers' star-shaped residence. Those people would grow to despise Benzi and his companions; his son's name would become a curse. Benzi's fellow pilots, who were likely to suffer more restrictions now, would hate him most of all, either because he and his friends had deceived and betrayed them or because they had lacked the will or courage to join him and were not likely to get a second chance to do so.

He would have no son on Venus, no child to give meaning to his labor for that new world. In spite of that, he could not hate Benzi for his deed. Better for him, Chen thought, that he had succeeded; he could not have borne seeing Benzi punished. Better that Benzi had achieved his goal, whatever pain it brought to his father. Perhaps Benzi was thinking of him now; he wondered if the boy would regret his actions. Regret would do his son no good, would only poison his new life; Benzi could not turn back.

A tall man was standing near Chen. He was clothed in a long white robe without markings and was wearing the white headdress popular among some Linkers. Chen had not heard him approach. The man swept part of the head covering away from his face; Chen stared at the long, thin face for a few moments before recognizing him.

"Ibrahim," he whispered. He was about to rise. The Habber shook his head and hid his face again as he turned away. "I didn't know you were still here after all these years."

"I had left for a time. I returned not long ago." Ibrahim's voice was muffled by the cloth covering the lower part of his face. "Don't look at me. I come only for a little while. We are unobserved at the moment, but be careful."

“You shouldn’t have come.” Chen kept his eyes on the bay entrance. “It’s dangerous for you now.”

“Perhaps not too dangerous. No one will expect a Habber to be outside the protection of our residence here. I wanted to speak to you, Chen. I suspected that, since your son was a pilot, I might find you here. I could not risk leaving a message other ears might hear — at any rate, our screens have been shut down for the time being. I managed to sneak out when the mob cursing us had left to find other amusements. I sorrow for you, who once offered me what friendship you could, who made the carving I still have. None of us knew of what your son and those with him were planning, and yet I feel as though I’ve harmed you.”

“You’ve done nothing,” Chen said.

“You are kind. I expected you to curse me and my people for stealing your son.”

“You stole nothing. He chose to do what he did. If you had known, would you have tried to stop him?”

“No,” Ibrahim murmured. “And we cannot send him back. How can we demonstrate to all that we would punish someone for choosing our way? We do not have that capacity. All of us are the children of those who once fled Earth.” He was silent for a moment. “It will be hard for him at first, to prepare for a Link, to see himself as one of us, to accept what flows into his mind without fear and without losing his own thoughts.”

“He’s lost to me already,” Chen said, “yet I can’t curse him.”

“I’ve worked here for so long,” the Habber said. “Your people think we stay to have some power over you, that we have some hidden end. They don’t seem to realize that what happens on the new world might renew us in the way that it will renew Earth, that the people who build Venus may have something to offer both our cultures. I wanted to watch what will take root there, but that chance is gone. We have both lost much today.”

Chen glanced at Ibrahim’s stooped shoulders. “What have you lost, Ibrahim?”

“Something will have to be done. Most of us will be sent back to the Habs, I think. The few who remain, who are still needed here, will labor under even more suspicion, and their lives will be more lonely than before. By the time Venus is settled, there may be no Habbers on the Islands or aiding the settlers.”

“But the Project still has an agreement with you,” Chen said. “It can’t be broken, even now. They’ll need you to —”

“They’ll keep the agreement. They’ll keep it out of fear and because of Earth’s greed for what we can give, but the agreement will weaken. They’ll let us be the ones to let it lapse. A few on Earth are aware of our true weakness — that we fear losing contact with you, that we can’t yet make that leap beyond the history that we all still share even now, that we fear such a break and fear casting ourselves adrift.”

Some of Ibrahim’s words puzzled Chen, and yet he somehow grasped the man’s meaning. “Some have never understood,” Ibrahim continued, “how much meaning we can find in giving you what help we can. It was part of our purpose long ago — not just stepping outside Earth’s limits, but reaching out to those left behind. Yet they see only the rift, and not the extended hand. And those who do understand us use us and resent us for our help.” He bowed his head. “We may be cast adrift. Someday, we may leave this system to wander among the stars. The power that made Venus move may carry us away, and we may finally escape our history.”

Chen thought of that, seeing how such a dream might draw someone. It was not unlike his own hopes for

Venus, for a place where people could begin anew.

“Ibrahim, I —”

“Don’t look at me.” Chin averted his eyes. “I came here to tell you that I’ll seek out your son when I leave the Islands, and give him what guidance I can. I’ll tell him that you did not curse him for his deed, and that your thoughts were with him.”

Chen hesitated before replying. As he turned to thank the Habber, he saw that Ibrahim had vanished as silently as he had arrived.

Chen walked through the hall to his own room, grateful that most of the workers were either absent from the residence or asleep. As he passed by the closed doors, he saw that a few of his carvings were missing; no doubt those who owned them had decided not to display them until Chen’s position became clearer. He frowned; he had not given any thought to what might happen to him. Perhaps the fact that Benzi had severed his bond with him would forestall the worst consequences.

One door was open; Chen could hear voices inside that room. Eleanor Surrey was in the doorway with a friend; she sucked in her breath as Chen passed. He glanced at her; there was a malignant yet joyous glint in the blond, round-faced woman’s eyes. She had always disliked him, had resented him for not persuading the Workers’ Committee to give her a promotion she had not deserved, for having a schooled woman as a bondmate, even for his carvings, which had struck her as self-indulgent and pretentious. She had, according to some of his friends, always said that no good would come of such airs. She had been proven right, he supposed.

Farther down the hall, his own carved face, minus a nose, stared out at him from his door; a slash of red paint had been brushed onto the metal. He would be the father of a Habber now; the old stories about his past associations with a few Habbers and the price he had paid for them would no doubt be revived. Some would believe that he knew of Benzi’s plans.

A panel on the door was glowing, indicating that he had at least one visitor inside. He tried to recall who had access to his room. Perhaps Charles Eves had come to tell him that his presence was no longer desired on the Committee, that the other members would ask for a replacement even if Chen did not resign. Fei-lin, along with Tonie, might have stopped by to offer some sympathy along with his annoyance that Chen might now be powerless to win him a promotion. Even those friends who might assume Chen was innocent would hold a grudge now. He sighed. He would be glad to be rid of the endless meetings and machinations; if that was to be his only punishment, he would accept it as a blessing.

He pressed his hand against the door, lifting his head as he entered. Iris was sitting in his chair, her legs propped up on his bed. As she glanced toward him, he saw that she had been crying. Her eyes were rimmed with red, her face swollen with grief.

“Thought I might have to wait outside,” she said in a hoarse voice, “but I see you didn’t have the lock changed.”

“I wouldn’t bar my room to you.”

“You would have every reason to do so, Chen.”

He shook his head. “I knew how hard a true bond would be for you. I knew why we both wanted to come here. I wouldn’t have wanted you to do less in your work here because of trying to be what I might have wanted. Even in my anger, I couldn’t forget that you were the one who reached out to me when I had no one.”

“I reached out to you because you wanted what I wanted, and I saw a way to reach it through you.”

“I know that, but I loved you because of what you wanted, in a way. I wouldn’t have loved you as much otherwise. You thought of me as jealous, and maybe I was, but it wasn’t because of other men or because I couldn’t truly share your work with you — it was only because I feared losing you entirely.”

“And now I’ve failed at everything.”

He sat down on the bed and rested one hand on her leg. “They could send us back,” he said. “I hadn’t thought of that until now. Maybe it doesn’t matter, now that Benzi’s gone. We wouldn’t be working for the same thing any more.”

She wiped her eyes against her sleeve. “We won’t be sent back. Amir told me that. They wouldn’t want to create too much sympathy for us or look cruel. Oh, they’ll let us stay, if we can stand it, if we can tolerate all the suspicion and doubt. Amir is especially anxious to watch me squirm now. He’s wishing he’d never had anything to do with me.”

So that was why she was here. Chen should have guessed it. He was all she had left now. The flash of anger died. She was all he had left as well. He could imagine how she had warred with her pride to come here.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said, as if she had glimpsed his anger, “and I don’t blame you. I thought only that you might need me here now.” She sighed. “I’ll never be a Linker. You must be pleased about that.”

“It was what you wanted, Iris. How can I be pleased?”

“It was what I wanted! What a fool I was. Amir’s left me everything I had before I met him — my dream, my work here — and it’s nothing to me now. Even my own child threw it away.”

“Benzi’s dream wasn’t ours.” Chen leaned forward. “But he wouldn’t want us to give ours up because of him. We have to go on. Benzi wasn’t our possession. He’s our son, but that doesn’t make him someone who has to cling to us. Earth had to learn that with the Habitats when they were built. We didn’t think, Iris. We thought what others taught us to think.”

“I suppose some people won’t want much to do with us now. At least we’ll find out who our true friends are.” Iris closed her eyes. “Old Wenda was right when she told our fortune. Before Benzi was born, she said she couldn’t see where his path led. She said mine would lead me away from all that I loved.”

“No, Iris. It can bring you back to me.”

Her face crumpled. She sobbed soundlessly until Chen pulled her to him and drew her head to his chest. “I denounced Benzi,” she said, catching her breath between sobs. “I cursed him for what he did, and I’d do it again, and yet he’s done no more to me than I did to my own mother. Now I see how cruel I was to her.”

“You mustn’t say those things.”

She withdrew from him and sat up as she dried her tears on her sleeve. He touched the necklace he had given her, the beads that matched her eyes. “I’m sorry, Chen. I know Benzi meant even more to you. You were a truer parent to him than I ever could be.”

“He kept much of himself from me too. Iris, I know this isn’t the time, but —” He swallowed. “There’s still time for us, isn’t there? Wouldn’t we heal and come to accept this more easily if we were together

again?”

“You still want that?”

“Yes. Maybe it’s only that I’m afraid to face my sorrow alone.”

“I don’t know, Chen. It’s not that I wouldn’t want to try, but whenever we do, it doesn’t work. I remember — it may seem foolish now, but when you left Earth to return to the Islands, I thought your love was beginning to die. You left so quickly, and you didn’t try to see me. I went to the port in Caracas. I thought I could get aboard a suborb, and see you before you boarded your shuttle. I don’t know what I thought I’d accomplish — I just wanted you to know I still cared, I guess. Of course I didn’t get to see you, and after that, I told myself not to expect too much from you. When I came here, I saw you still loved me, but I also saw that something had changed you. You couldn’t share as much with me as you did in those months before Benzi was born. Maybe I should have tried to break through that wall you had around yourself so much of the time, but by then I couldn’t, and I had enough excuses not to try.”

Chen gathered his courage, knowing what he would finally have to tell her. “There’s something I should say to you, something I’ve hidden from you all these years. When I tell you, it may be that you’ll want to break our bond for good, but you should know what I am at last before you share any more of your life with me.”

She tilted her head. “I know what I have to know now. You’ve shown what you are in many ways, though I was often too blind to see it.”

“No. I must say this.” He began to speak of Nancy Fassi and of the true purpose of his first journey to Lincoln. The words came to him haltingly; he had to stop several times to regain his composure. When he came to the story of Eric’s death and his own inadvertent role in it, he could not bring himself to look at Iris, afraid of what he might see.

“Now you know what I am,” he finished. “You see what I brought to your household. It would have been better for you if you had never met me. I came sometimes to feel that there was justice in the way you withdrew from me, that I was being punished, that you somehow sensed what I was or that you would see what I had done and come to hate me for it. It was why I could bring myself to accept what you did to me. Many times, I wanted to tell you this, but then I thought you would turn away from me for good. It was better to have a little of your love than none at all.”

Iris was silent.

“I wanted Benzi to live on a world where he would never have to stoop so low as I have to get what he wants. I excused myself sometimes by saying that I had no choice, that I would only make myself useless to anyone if I refused. I failed Eric and I failed your family. Benzi’s deed is nothing compared to my own.”

“You couldn’t know what would happen to Eric.”

“I knew someone might die,” Chen said, “and that I would help bring that about. What does it matter if it was a friend or a stranger? I let myself be used to get what I wanted.”

“If that’s how Linkers use others, then it’s good I’ll never be one.”

Chen forced himself to look up. Surprisingly, there was no hatred in Iris’s eyes and no loathing, only a sad, pensive look.

“You took a great risk in loving me,” she went on. “You took an even greater one in asking for a bond. The Linker who sent you to us might have punished you for that, might have thought you would betray her to me and to the others you’d come to care for in my household.”

“By then, you were part of my dream. I couldn’t think of it without seeing you.”

“That evil is past,” she said. “It must never touch us here.” She put her arms around him. He leaned against her, accepting her embrace.

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Part Four

Twenty-Seven

Iris looked up. Above her, nearly a kilometer overhead, a large, bright disk cast a yellow light over the land below. A halo of fainter, paler light surrounded the disk; Iris lowered her eyes and saw a wide band of black above a metal wall.

She was standing on the surface of Venus, in the highlands of the Maxwell Mountains; she was no more than forty kilometers from the spot where she had been trapped inside an airship cabin over twelve years ago. The land on which she stood was part of a plateau; a dome one kilometer high and almost five kilometers in diameter now covered this land. The wall at the bottom of the dome encircled the area; the wall itself was anchored by rods sunk deep into the crust of the planet, rods that drew on geothermal power to maintain the dome.

A dark, rolling landscape stretched before her. Rock had been ground into pebbles and dust; the dirt under her feet was orange and brown. She had to search the barren land for long moments to see any sign of life taking root; at last she spied two small, fernlike plants. The soil around the plants was black; their broad leaves seemed wilted and fragile.

It had taken over six years to erect this dome, years during which engineers had directed machines through bands or Links. In the distance, a few tanks, a dark, metallic herd, rolled slowly over the land, crushing rocks as they continued to prepare the soil. Three helmeted figures were huddling together as they watched the machines; other suited people were loading a few rock samples onto a cart. A shelter had been built on one low hill; those working here could rest inside it while teams of botanists and microbiologists studied plant cuttings and new strains inside its small lab.

Several people, specialists and workers, had stood on the surface under this dome, but even with that protection, and with refrigerating units cooling the air inside, one had to wear a suit and helmet and carry an oxygen recycler on one’s back. The heat that remained would have boiled Iris’s blood and seared her skin; the atmosphere was unbreathable. It had taken another four years after the dome was in place to seed the ground with genetically altered microorganisms, to lay down part of a thin layer of soil, and to produce a few sparse plants struggling for life on the hot ground. Many more years would pass before settlers could make a life here.

More than ten years, she thought, just to get to this. The Habbers, much as she hated to acknowledge the possibility, might have done as much in two years or less. If the Habs had devoted even a small share of their resources to the task, several domes might have stood in the highlands by now, and Habber scientists might already have made the land under them bloom. Settlers might have been preparing to embark for these new homes.

But they had no Habbers to help them. Only a few remained in the residence on Island Two that had once housed many more. They were shunned, and any advice they offered was only reluctantly accepted. The Islanders had drawn on available Habber knowledge to construct the domes, but without the tools the Habs could have given to the Project, the work had been harder. Most of the Habbers were gone; Guardians, the dogs of the Mukhtars, had replaced them.

Iris turned and walked toward the edge of the dome. The wall was low, and she was able to peer over it. This dome, like those protecting the Islands, was transparent, but was also made of a much stronger material; the formula for the ceramic-metallic alloy had been a last gift of the Habbers. Tiny raindrops glistened on the outside of the dome, reflecting the light from inside the dome; the more rapid rotation of the planet had changed the weather patterns, and the rain had become a steady drizzle. In the distance, she could barely see another glowing light, where another dome had been built on the shelf of a nearby peak.

She tried to imagine the world as it would be, with tall trees growing on the slopes outside and a city of air and light under the dome. She could, with the aid of images and computer projections, visualize it clearly on the Islands, but here, the desolation resisted her vision. The domes were a precarious foothold on a sterile, hot planet; settlements seemed further away than ever.

The people of the Project imagined a world free of Earth's constrictions, a world where, instead of displacing other forms of life, people would be creating life from lifelessness. But the domes would shut the settlers away from the dangerous world outside; the first Cytherians would be prisoners. The shade of the Parasol would hide the world for many years to come; it would be a long time before people could come to this wall and view a living world.

She walked alongside the wall until she reached the entrance to the bay. This door, twenty meters wide and thirty meters high, was a thick sheet of metal; she pressed her hand against it and it slid open.

Inside the large bay, the light was dimmer. Engines, machines, giant hooks, gantries, and computer consoles sat against the walls. From this bay, robots had moved out onto Venus's surface, preparing it for the dome. She stepped into a cart and rolled past the detritus of construction; shadows flickered over her as she passed.

At last the cart rolled to a stop; Iris climbed out. Twenty widely spaced cradles stood in two rows, and three of them held airships. Iris made her way toward the nearest ship, hurried up the ramp, waited inside the ramp's lock until air had been cycled into it, then entered the ship's cabin.

She removed her helmet. Except for the sleeping pilot, who was stretched out on a seat in front of the controls, the ship was empty. She sat down near the back of one row of seats; the pilot did not stir. He was a slim, dark-haired man; his name was Hussein Said, and he had been reluctant to tell her even that much after he saw who she was. Twelve years had not dulled the memories of pilots; the presence of Guardians on any shuttles traveling to Anwara or the Bats was a constant reminder that pilots could not be trusted, and those pilots who had been closest to those who had left for the Habs were not allowed on shuttles at all. Hussein might bear Iris little ill will personally, but few pilots wanted to be too friendly with her; her son, after all, had betrayed their trust.

Benzi had betrayed the Project also. She wondered if he ever thought of that, if he cared.

In all this time, she had received no message from her son, but could not know if that was because he had not sent one or because the Islanders had refused to accept it. Perhaps he had feared sending any message; he and his companions, who had remained equally silent, might have worried about reviving old suspicions about those they had left behind.

It had been hard for her at first, when so many of the Islanders she knew had been prepared to believe the worst. Even her oldest friends, who were convinced of her innocence and knew that Benzi had hidden his plans from her, had not gone out of their way to seek her out. She had expected Marc Lissi to try to force her off his team, but he had not, and she had finally understood that keeping her near him gave Marc a chance to gloat, to jab at her and humiliate her in little ways.

She had done her work without complaining, as if it were a penance. She had remained with Chen, living among the workers, not caring what the other specialists thought. The sorrow of losing their son had united her and her bondmate; they had had no other refuge but each other. To her surprise, their bond had grown stronger; passion might have died, but friendship and a strong, quiet love had remained. She had willingly renewed their pledge when their first bond had lapsed.

She had resolved to think only of her work on the Project, to ignore the slights of those who doubted her, and to put aside any thought of rising to a position of importance again. She had avoided contact with any Administrator. Gradually, some of the workers she lived among had come to trust her; she became an intermediary between a few of them and their children, some of whom were taking advantage of the Island schools and the chance to become more than workers. Occasionally, she had interceded for the workers with some of the specialists who directed them, and she had found that the specialists, whatever they had thought of her before, were willing to pay heed to her because she was, after all, one of them.

She was again a liaison. Though she had no title and no official standing, she had some small influence; her lack of ambition had earned the trust of others. It was odd; the more she tried to shy away from representing others, the more they thrust themselves upon her. Without a formal position, she was free to appeal privately as one individual to another, to go before any Committee and say what she thought about a particular case. Even Pavel Gvishiani and his colleagues would grant her a meeting and a favor on occasion, since she could help them to resolve problems they might otherwise have been forced to handle themselves.

She had made her observations. The small sensors in her suit had recorded any minute changes in the climate and temperature under the dome. She had not needed to come here, but the Project, sensitive to complaints from Earth about the cost of maintaining people with little to do except tend machines and wait, used any excuse to show that those on the Islands were necessary, and she had been sent here to make her observations directly.

Earth was paying dearly for salving its pride with the expulsion of most of the Habbers. The Nomarchies should have been throwing as much as possible into the Project now to make up for the loss, but Earth could not drain off any more of its resources for the Project. Discouraged people had already begun to leave the Islands, and there was a rumor that Earth had considered sending others home. That possibility had united most of the Islanders who remained; even the Administrators had been heard to utter angry words about their colleagues on the home world.

Iris was already dreading her return to the Islands. She had postponed one meeting with a few workers who wanted to speak with her. What could she tell them? What could she possibly do? They would not want to hear the truth — that a long time might pass before even their children could settle this world.

The cabin door opened as Aryeh ben-Samuel came inside. He stamped his feet as he took off his helmet. “I think I feel the heat even in this suit,” he said as he set his helmet on the floor next to hers. “Sometimes I can just feel the ground burning through my soles.” He shrugged out of his air recycler.

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Not by much.” He sighed. “Damn the Administrators. They know what Earth wants to hear, so they load their projections with so many favorable assumptions that they almost get me believing them, and then they wonder why people get impatient for results.” He glanced at the sleeping pilot, then lowered his voice. “I used to wonder about the ones who began this Project, who knew they’d never see people settle here. I admired them, but I pitied them too. Now I think they had it easier, in a way. We’re so close, but just not close enough. It’s worse than knowing from the start that you won’t see results.”

Iris leaned back. They had only two completed domes, and a third that would soon be finished. If only Earth could see that they needed the Habbars now. The Mukhtars would still control the Project, and the Islanders would learn much from the Habbars. It wouldn’t matter to the settlers who had built the domes, and the Nomarchies could take most of the credit in the end. Even she, who had lost a son to the Habbars, had come to see all of that.

She said, “Sometimes I think we live too long.” Aryeh tilted his head as he gazed at her skeptically. “We can think there’s time enough for everything we want to come to us. Long ago, most people willingly built a future they knew they would never see, and they accepted that, and yet we think the Project’s originators were so exceptional.”

“I’ve heard that the Administrators are already talking about who to send back to Earth first.” Aryeh brushed back his thick, curly brown hair. “You can bet it won’t be any of them. Maybe they should hold a lottery.” He chuckled. “That might be the fairest way. Of course, no one but the Linkers would know if the results were rigged or not.”

Iris sighed. If the Project could not make more progress soon, and it was hardly likely that they could when Earth could not give them what they needed, they might return to the more conservative plan of gardening the atmosphere and waiting out the centuries it would take before the Islands could safely float down to the surface. Her own dream would end.

She had thought of Lincoln more often lately, wondering if she could ever pick up the threads of her old life. Old Wenda was dead; Julia was growing older. Angharad had lost her position as mayor; she would have more time to spend with her daughter. Maybe it would be better to return now instead of waiting for the inevitable. She would have the farm, and many stories to tell Laiza and her other friends; it would not be a bad life.

She gazed at the screen above the sleeping Hussein and saw a bay which might become only a graveyard for the machines Earth had sent, the resources that were not enough. Her own hopes might also be buried here someday, but she had learned to take some joy in her present life without looking as much to the future. She wondered if this was a sign of wisdom, or only the sign of a woman growing older who would take what consolation she could from her life.

“I’ve thought of going back to Earth sometimes,” Iris said aloud.

“A lot of people have,” Aryeh replied. “They’re tired of the waiting. They think of their old lives and remember only the good. It’s different for me.” Aryeh’s family, she knew, had been on the Islands for nearly two centuries. He stood up. “Hussein!”

The pilot opened his eyes and sat up.

“We might as well head back now. Nelli told me she’d come back with the geologists, so we needn’t wait.”

Hussein nodded and turned to his panels. In the bay, a wall slid down from the ceiling and touched the floor; the cradles were now separated from the rest of the bay. The cradle holding Iris’s ship began to

rise slowly as atmosphere cycled inside. At last the ceiling overhead slid open; the ship rose toward the dark clouds.

A Guardian was lounging near the entrance to the Island airship bay. Iris recognized his long face and sad brown eyes, and could not bring herself to scowl at him. The young man was often seen lurking near the workers' residence, and Iris knew that a young woman in a room near hers often slipped out to see him. Like some of the other Guardians, the man seemed to regard himself almost as an Islander, and such Guardians caused less trouble when their tentative gestures of friendliness were returned with kindness. She wondered if Earth and the Guardian commander had foreseen that possibility; Guardians with friends on the Islands might develop divided loyalties.

She nodded at the Guardian as she walked through the open entrance. As she had feared, two workers, along with Charles Eves, were waiting for her. She could tell by their stern expressions that they had a complaint; she masked her annoyance with a smile.

"I know you and Eleanor are acquainted," Charles said as he waved at the short, blond woman. Iris's smile faded; Eleanor Surrey was one person she usually tried to avoid. "And this is Yeh Tu-sen." The tall Chinese woman nodded. "We'd like a few words with you."

Iris let out her breath. "I'm tired and hungry right now, and I have to make out a report. Couldn't it wait?"

"No, it can't. I'll feed you." He clutched her elbow with one beefy hand and began to usher her along the path. She distrusted the big man, who seemed as concerned with his position on the Workers' Committee as with the welfare of those he was supposed to be serving. She knew that Charles had welcomed seeing Chen removed from that body, but he was friendly enough to Iris when he thought there was something to gain.

They soon came to a group of tables under ivied lattices, where they sat down as Charles began to order food from the small screen in the center of the table. "We can talk here," he said when he had finished ordering.

Iris had already noticed that workers were sitting at all of the other tables, and that all of them were looking at her. "Is this a meeting of some sort?" she asked.

"You can call it what you like." Charles rested his arms on the tabletop. "You can guess what we're worried about."

"I don't know what you expect me to do about it."

"People are leaving," Tu-sen said, "and they're not bringing new people in. I got the figures from my screen. There's room for over five hundred more people on this Island alone, and they're not sending people to replace them."

"I sympathize," Iris murmured. "I know how tiring it can be to see the same old faces all the time." She glanced at Eleanor. "There's hardly a face here I haven't seen a hundred times. Even when I don't know the name, I know the face."

"That's not the point," Tu-sen said; her pinched, narrow face was that of a person who rarely laughed. "Makes you think they're just waiting for us all to give up. Then they'll just shovel some shit about how the Project'll go on and the dream'll continue or something, but it won't do us any good."

Two small apes hobbled over, carrying trays of food and drink. Eleanor grimaced as they set the food

down. “Filthy things,” Eleanor muttered. “Bet they stuck their fingers into it. We should have gone over to the dispenser ourselves.”

Charles cleared his throat. “We’re tired of waiting.”

“I know that,” Iris said. “We all are.”

“But we’re the ones who have the most to lose. The Administrators, most of them, would stay on the Islands whatever happened, but what’ll they do about us?”

“They’ll still need some workers on the Bats,” Iris answered, “and for maintenance, and repairs here.”

“But they won’t need as many of us. What about the people in hydroponics, or the nurseries? There won’t need to be as much food, there won’t be as many kids.” Charles widened his eyes, obviously trying to show how concerned he was for others. “Well, there’s a way we can have what we want.”

Iris folded her hands, ignoring the plate of noodles and vegetables in front of her; she had lost her appetite. “And what is that?”

“Freezing. We can be stored until it’s time to settle.” Charles glanced at Eleanor, who arched her brows; the round-faced woman had probably given him the idea, then allowed him to appropriate it. “Then it won’t matter how long we have to wait.”

Iris tried not to show her dismay at the man’s ignorance. “You’d better talk to a biologist, Charles. It’s too risky. You could be damaged when you’re revived — there’s always that chance.”

“What are you talking about?” Tu-sen asked. “People have been frozen before, lots of times.”

“Isolated individuals, during an emergency, when there was no alternative,” Iris said. “They were people who had to be preserved until they could get medical attention. And they were frozen only for short periods, on a partly experimental basis. You may be talking about centuries, depending on what the Project Council decides to do. It’s never been tried.”

“Babies are stored all the time,” Tu-sen muttered, “and sometimes for quite a while.”

“Not infants — embryos and blastocysts. There’s a difference between freezing a few cells and preserving an adult, and occasionally even an embryo is lost. It’s why most medical people still prefer hibernation with adult patients, lowering the body’s temperature and slowing physical processes just enough to put someone into a deep sleep, rather than freezing.”

“Freezing, sleeping,” Tu-sen said. “What’s the difference?” She glared at Iris, as if resenting her for her knowledge.

Iris longed to utter a sharp retort about people who picked up bits and pieces of data from their screens and thought they knew everything, but restrained herself. “In one sense, there isn’t any difference,” she said, “namely, that neither method has been tried over a long period of time.”

“We could take the chance,” Charles said, already sounding a little more uncertain. Those at the nearest tables were still listening, and others had moved their chairs closer to Iris.

“Be practical.” Iris put her hands on the table, palms down. “How much do you think the Nomarchies would have to spend to store everyone who wants a chance to settle? And think of all the specialists they’d need to do the job. The cost alone would prevent it.”

Eleanor glared at her. "It might cost more at first, but it would still be less than paying us and supporting us while we're here." She lifted her head. "I know some figures — I've thought it out."

Iris was sure that Eleanor's mastery of such calculations was, at best, rudimentary. "It won't cost less than sending you back to Earth and giving you other work to do." She looked around at the other workers, hoping that some of them might understand. "Listen to me. We all knew when we started that we might not be the first settlers, that we might be working for future generations rather than ourselves. Do you want to risk having your children preserved along with you, without knowing what might happen?"

Charles slammed his wineglass down. "They'd risk no more than they would down there." His face was flushed with anger. "They told us we'd be settlers. Then they said it would take more time. Now they think there won't be enough domes for us all. You know what I think? I think they want Venus for themselves, that they never wanted us to settle, that they just wanted to keep us working until they didn't need us any more."

Iris took a breath. "Let's assume you're right about that, just for the sake of argument." She paused and gazed at Eleanor, then at Tu-sen, who was looking a bit more pensive. "Why would you be willing to entrust yourselves to such people, if they are as you say? How do you know you wouldn't be revived elsewhere, in a place where you wouldn't cause any more problems? For that matter, how do you know you would be revived at all? It would be easy to arrange an accident. And even if you were revived, what then? There'll be new tools, new ways of doing things. You might all have to be retrained, assuming you could fit in at all. And that's another expense for the Project, along with cryonic storage or hibernation for you and any future workers who might demand the same thing. It's impossible."

Charles seemed at a loss for words. "She might be right," a man behind him muttered.

Eleanor pushed her plate away. "If Earth won't help us, and we can't trust the Administrators to act, there are other places we can look to for help. There are the Habbbers."

"Habbbers!" a woman shouted.

Eleanor glanced at the crowd. "I don't like them any more than you do, but they have resources and they keep their agreements. They used to help us. Do we care who helps us now if we can have what we want?" She turned back to Iris. "Your son went to them. He and his friends brought us nothing but trouble, it's why the Habbbers were expelled in the first place. The Habbbers might listen to you and to others here who lost friends and relatives to them."

"I denounced my son for his deed, and he was no longer my son at that time."

Eleanor's fingers tapped against the tabletop. "A child is always yours, whatever such a record says. Once, I was sure you'd helped your son, but I suppose you've proven your innocence by staying here and being of service to us all. Still, you owe us something. You should try to help us fix the damage your son's caused. We'll see what the Administrators do when we get ready to appeal to the Habs."

Iris tensed. "Do you really think they'd let you? You'd destroy any chance of settling Venus if you made such an appeal. You'd certainly be sent back to Earth then."

"Do you think we'd just calmly walk onto the ships taking us back?" Eleanor shook back her short blond curls. "Oh, we stood by in the past, when only a few were punished, because the rest of us had too much to lose. We even learned to live with the Guardians. But if there's nothing left to lose —" She waved one chubby arm. "We'll see what happens to their precious Project then."

Everyone was silent for a few moments. “Why are you telling me this?” Iris asked at last. “There’s nothing I can do for you.”

Charles smiled. “Don’t be so modest, Iris. The Linkers might listen to you if you tell them how we feel.”

“I am sure they must already know.”

“But they aren’t doing anything about it, are they? Probably think it’ll all die down and go away. They might listen to you. They’d know that you wouldn’t go to them unless it was serious. The Administrators might see that they have to act.”

“You were cozy enough with an Administrator once,” Eleanor added.

Iris looked down. She had been aware of the growing impatience and discontent, but had refused to believe that it would give birth to such wild schemes. She should have seen this conflict approaching. It was Charles’s place to make the workers’ feelings known to the other Committees, but he would not risk being at the center of this dispute; clearly, he was already unable to quell it. He would rather have Iris as a go-between.

She stood up. “I’ll see what I can do, but don’t expect too much. I’ll need a little time to decide whom to approach.”

She hurried away. As she came to the path, a large hand grabbed her arm; Charles had followed her. “I’ve done my best to calm everyone,” he said in a low voice. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Of course.” The man would expect her to make that clear in any discussion.

“Eleanor’s been pestering me, and she’s got a lot of people on her side. I hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but matters can still be resolved. I’m sure we can all trust you.” His hand tightened. Charles knew how hard-earned that trust had been for her, and probably suspected how she feared losing it. But his words also carried a warning. If she failed to win any consideration of the workers’ complaints, she, rather than Charles, would be a target for their rage and disappointment.

“We understand each other,” he went on, “both of us being from the Plains and all.” She had known he would mention that sooner or later. “We got away, and I don’t think either one of us wants to go back.”

She did not speak, afraid to admit how much she sometimes longed for Lincoln now. But she could return to her own farm and the possibility of being her commune’s leader; Charles would be only another wandering man, while here he was a leader himself. He would not understand how Island life had palled for her. It had been different when a goal was in sight; now she was only going through motions and routines. Days passed with no seasons to mark the passage of years; even trips to other Islands offered only the sight of different faces among the same carefully tended environments.

I’m getting old, she thought. My life is slipping away from me. For a moment, she could almost sympathize with Eleanor, who probably wanted a change as much as anything else, even if that change jeopardized the Project.

Charles released her arm. “Give Chen my greetings,” he said. “Tell him that I hope things are going well for him, that they continue to go well.”

She watched him walk away along the right fork of the path, then frowned. He had always avoided mentioning her bondmate before, and she wondered why he had spoken of Chen now.

Chen said, “It’s a threat.”

He had been rubbing Iris's temples while she told him of the meeting. She lifted her head from his lap and sat up on the bed, covering her chest with the sheet. "Sending you greetings is a threat?"

Chen shrugged his bare shoulders. "I have to work with some of those people on the Bat. A lot of things can happen if you get in trouble and others don't help you fast enough. Charles just wants you to be persuasive." He leaned back against the wall. "I'm not surprised at any of this."

"You could have alerted me a little sooner."

"I did. I heard talk on my last shift. You just weren't listening. I guess you didn't want to believe it."

"Well, I do now." She rested her head on her knees as she wrapped her arms around her legs. "Mother of God, why did they have to come to me? I didn't ask for this."

He stroked her back. "You have influence now. You earned it."

"I don't want it, and I don't have that much."

"The Linkers would listen to you. In the end, they care about the Project. They probably just haven't decided what to do. It's easy to let things drift."

She sighed. "I'm getting old."

"You look the same as you did when you were thirty." He pinched the flesh on her hip. "A little fatter, maybe."

She did not smile. "We still have a place to go," she said. "If the Project's going to come to this, I'd rather leave and go back to Lincoln. At least there —"

"In your house? With a bondmate? Do you really think you could live there again, forget what you've tried to do here? Do you really think they'd accept you?"

"My household —"

"I don't care what they say in their messages. They may say they miss you, but they wouldn't welcome you back."

"My mother might need me later."

"Your mother made her peace with you. Do you really want to live there?"

"It might be better than a life under the domes," she replied. "The workers have some vague notion that they'd be freer there. They get tired enough of life on the Islands — what do they think it's going to be like on Venus, without what we have here?"

"How can you ask that?" He grasped her shoulder. "Whatever it's like, it'll be ours, and our children's." He lowered his arm. "You forget our own child. Would you really drag that child back to Earth, give up her chance at something more?"

She plucked at the sheet. The child he spoke of did not yet exist, was no more than a promise and some frozen sperm and eggs stored by the embryologists, but the child-to-be often seemed as real to Chen as if Iris were already carrying her.

She glanced at her bondmate. Chen looked almost as young as he had when they met, and she had not aged physically; there were years left in which to become parents again. That had been one of her

reasons for postponing the child's gestation; waiting until actual settlements seemed more certain was another excuse. It was comforting to think of the stored genetic material, and she no longer had to feel guilty when sending messages to Angharad, for her mother would have a granddaughter.

Iris would have the child, and yet part of her still resisted the idea, was happier thinking of the potential child than dealing with the actuality of one. She had failed with one child, had never really known him; she might fail again. She should not have waited after promising Chen they would have another; the waiting had only fed her doubts.

"We've waited long enough," Chen continued, anticipating her remarks even before she had spoken, as he often did. "We should have the child soon. You wouldn't think of leaving the Islands then — you'd have a reason to stay."

She touched his cheek. "I have a reason now. Whatever I say, I couldn't return without you, without knowing we could still be together." Chen, she understood deep down, would never be able to bear living in Lincoln, whether her household welcomed him or not; Eric's memory would haunt him. "I'd always want you with me." Admitting such feelings to him frequently would once have shamed her; now, she only regretted that she could not convey them more often, could still not easily admit to feelings that her household would have labeled a foolish weakness or worse. "Anyway, it seems foolish to think of having the child as things are now."

"You're right. You'll have to speak to someone."

"Charles's idea is ridiculous. I can't go to any Administrator with something like that. I'd be wasting their time." Her neck was beginning to ache again. "I'll have to go to Pavel Gvishiani, if only to convince him that he must do something."

She had spoken with Pavel only briefly and infrequently. She had not forgotten that he was primarily responsible for bringing Guardians to the Islands, but she had managed to forgive him for that, as she hoped he had forgiven her for her past mistakes. She had even come to understand him a little. He shared her devotion to the Project; he had never lost the devotion to it that had dominated her own life, for he had nothing outside of his work. Without Pavel, she realized, the Project might not even have come this far.

Yet, in spite of her sympathy for the Linker, she feared him more than she had feared anyone. In his presence, she had often felt that if she displeased him, that if he suddenly saw her as an obstacle to his wishes, he would sweep her away as if she were no more than a fly.

"I'm afraid to go to Pavel," she admitted.

"You think he doesn't know that? That's why he'll listen. He'll know you wouldn't go directly to him unless it was urgent, and it is. Everyone knows that things can't stay this way. I don't like to think of what some of them might try to do."

Iris pondered his words. Chen's carvings were popular even among some of the Administrators, and because many preferred to sit for him instead of letting him use a screen image as a model, he sometimes heard useful bits of news. Carving had been an outlet and escape for Chen after Benzi's defection; he had worked at it compulsively. His work had intrigued those bored with the Islands' usual amusements, and some had come to enjoy the presence of the carver who would add a little beauty to their rooms. He could now pick and choose among the many who requested a little of his time; those who had once shunned him now offered him credit or favors. His success was as unsought for and as inadvertent as her own.

“You’ve never carved me,” she said, digging an elbow into his ribs, “even after all this time.” This gentle accusation was almost a ritual with them. She would look a little hurt; Chen would say there was no need to carve when he had the original with him, and the conversation would end with his hands roaming over her body as he showed her how he would shape the clay and the wood. “I’m practically the only person in this corridor who has a holo of her face on the door instead of a carving.”

“I carved your face once,” he said, surprising her. “I carved you when you were at the Institute, but I didn’t really see what was inside you then. I couldn’t give that carving to you, and I couldn’t keep it, so I sold it. I never tried to carve you after that, and now — I can’t imprison your soul in a piece of wood.” He paused. “It would be good for you to see Mukhtar Pavel for another reason. Some are saying he’s grown weaker. Some think he’s no longer able to act.”

“I pray that they’re wrong,” Iris replied. Pavel might not be able to stop some of his own colleagues from moving against him if they sensed weakness, and the Project would suffer during their squabbles. “I had better request a meeting immediately.”

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Twenty-Eight

Iris could rarely go to the Administrators’ ziggurat without being reminded of her last meeting with Amir Azad. She had gone out of her way to avoid him ever since, and that had been difficult in the Island’s closed environment. He had come toward her almost every time she had glimpsed him; she had snubbed him when she could and muttered some excuse for not conversing with him when she could not. At first, she had kept away from him because her anger was still fresh and later, out of consideration for Chen, who knew that Amir was the only other man with whom she might have shared her life. She could think of Amir calmly now as she climbed the steps, could feel grateful that she had not tied her life to his and had kept her bond with Chen.

Three Guardians were standing by the entrance. She held out her wristband, thinking that they wanted to assert a little of their authority, but one of them waved her on into the hall with only a glance. She walked past closed doors, nodding whenever she passed a Linker. She tried to tell herself that Pavel Gvishiani would be sympathetic to the workers; his grandparents had been workers themselves. Pavel, however, would be unsympathetic to anyone who might threaten the Project.

She hesitated in front of Pavel’s door; it opened quickly after scanning her. Pavel Gvishiani was not alone; Amir Azad was sitting on a cushion near him. Amir had been restored to his place on the Administrative Committee a few years earlier, but she had not expected to find him here.

“Greetings,” she said as she stared past the men at the shelf above them, where a carving of Chen’s sat. The carving showed a broad face with hollow cheeks; Pavel’s mouth had been captured in a smile, but his heavy brows hung over watchful, observant eyes. Somehow, Chen had captured two of the Linker’s qualities — Pavel’s willingness to be charming when that served his purpose and his ability to be harsh when necessary.

Iris was suddenly afraid. She glanced back at Pavel, who had risen to his feet courteously instead of waiting for her to seat herself. “Greetings, Iris. Do sit down.” He gestured at another cushion.

She sat down and folded her legs. “Greetings,” Amir said. Iris did not reply. “When I heard that you would be meeting with Pavel,” he continued, “I asked if I might be present, and Pavel generously agreed.” Iris nodded coldly; she was in no position to demand that Amir leave.

Pavel arched his thick brows, which were as white as his hair. “When you requested this meeting, you said that you had something important to tell us. Our Links are closed. No one else will hear our conversation.”

“Several workers asked me to speak to someone in authority,” she said quickly. “Those who spoke to me spoke for many. I thought this was something that might require your attention. They feel that the Project is stalled, that Earth isn’t doing what’s necessary now. They feel that they’ve been given false hopes, and they’re no longer content with that.”

“The workers have a Committee of their own,” Pavel said. “They might have requested a meeting with one of us themselves.”

“They weren’t sure you’d listen to their Committee. They thought —”

“— that I’d be more likely to listen to you,” Pavel said. “Or, that if I didn’t, at least their Committee wouldn’t be blamed for your failure. I suppose that at least one of its members came to you with this request. How transparent they are, and what an odd choice they’ve made for a spokeswoman in this case.”

“Is it so odd?” she asked. “I’ve come to you before.”

“Yes, but in this case — I haven’t forgotten that it was your son and his friends whose actions brought these problems upon us.”

Pavel had never alluded to that incident before. Iris lowered her eyes. “I want to do what I can to repair the damage, to keep matters from getting worse. The workers are getting impatient and desperate — they may do something foolish that could set the Project even further back, and Earth could be quite severe with all of us then.”

Pavel nodded. “We’re well aware of how impatient the workers are growing.”

“But you haven’t done anything about it.”

“Because I’m apparently too feeble to act.”

She forced herself to gaze directly at him. “There are some who say so, Administrator Pavel.”

“And what did these people tell you?”

She bit her lip. “They told me that they want to be stored cryonically or put in hibernation until the domes are ready. I told them how foolish an idea that was, and then they said that if Earth won’t give us what we need, they’re prepared to ask the Habs to do so. That’s how far things have gone. You know how they feel about Habbbers, and yet they’re willing to do that.”

“Some of them work in communications,” Amir murmured. “I suppose that if they were desperate enough, they’d get a message through to the Habs and not worry about the consequences. And if the Habbbers were then willing to return, and we refused to accept them, we’d have a great many angry workers to deal with and no way to do so. The Guardians we have here could hardly control them all.”

Iris glanced at the bearded man, and realized that he and Pavel must have known what she would tell them as soon as she had asked for this meeting. The Island cyberminds to which they were Linked must already have predicted the possibility of this problem and could probably even determine which workers were likely to be most discontent.

“In the end,” Pavel said, “all of us want the same thing, do we not? All of us — Earth, Linkers, the workers, everyone.” He paused. “I want to ask you a few questions, Iris, and you must be honest with me. There are complexities in human behavior that sometimes adversely affect the projections of cyberminds. You live among the workers. Tell me this. If I appealed to Earth, perhaps even to the Mukhtars themselves, and asked them to allow the Habbers to help us again, would the workers be satisfied, even if it took years to get Earth to agree?”

Iris folded her hands. “But if you asked the Mukhtars, wouldn’t they see that they couldn’t wait?”

“They’ll think of their positions. Even making such a request would provoke a struggle among the Mukhtars, and until that’s resolved, and one faction wins out, no decision would be made. You haven’t answered my question. Would the workers wait?”

She shook her head. “I think it’s gone too far for that. They’re tired of waiting and seeing nothing done to make it possible for them to be settlers. Some believe that Earth might even find a reason to abandon the Project.”

Pavel leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “Tell me something else. Why should I believe your assessment? Your son was plotting with his friends, most likely for months, while you, his own mother, suspected nothing. Don’t tell me that you weren’t close to him, either. You saw him on occasion and you faced a dangerous situation with him — people often reveal much about themselves when they are dealing with danger. Why should I believe that you understand the feelings of other Islanders and can predict what they might do when you failed to see your own son’s intentions?”

Somehow, Iris kept her face still. Pavel had given her an opening; she could admit that she might be wrong, leave this room, and wash her hands of the matter. She could tell Chen that Pavel had not listened to her; she and her bondmate could return to Earth and admit that their dream was finally dead. But something in her would die as well; once, she would not have given up so easily.

She took a breath, then spoke carefully, trying to keep her voice steady. “I knew. I knew about my son. I don’t mean that I knew consciously what he was planning to do, but all the signs were there. He sought the company of Habbers, he didn’t care about the Project as I did. When he was gone, I understood at last that I should have seen it coming. He’d given me all the clues. But I was distracted by my own ambitions at the time, and I simply refused to see. What I’m saying is that, even though I’ve convinced others of my innocence by now, I was, in fact, guilty.”

Pavel was silent.

“I made up my mind,” Iris continued, “that the only way I could atone for my negligence was to stay here and do as much as I could for the Project. I told myself that I would never avoid seeing the truth again. I have no ambitions to distract me now, and do not willingly turn away from whatever I sense because it might be unpleasant. I’ve heard the workers — more important, I’ve sensed their mood in our residence, and one close to me has convinced me that I can no longer let this pass. The workers want something done now. Some of them are so tired of waiting that they’ll risk anything to bring an end to it, even their own punishment. And if you do punish them, you’ll only provoke others and convince them that they have no more to lose. Please believe me. You must act soon.”

“I believe you,” Pavel said softly. “I am also moved by your willingness to admit your lapses and faults.” His words carried a sardonic tone. “Here is another question for you, Iris Angharads. What do you think I should do?”

How could he ask her that? She could not decide such matters for a Linker. Perhaps he really was as weak as others thought. She looked into his dark, glassy eyes and saw no weakness there. “I think,” she

replied, “that you must appeal to the Habbars now, because they’re the only ones who can give us the help we need. Once they’re here, you’ll have nothing to fear from the workers, and you’ll show that you can act. Earth might see that it would be wiser to go along with you, even if you act without the authority of the Project Council and the Mukhtars, and may find some face-saving way of living with your action. If they do not, we can be no worse off.”

“Do you know what you’re saying?” Pavel asked.

“I know. I still hate them for stealing my son from me, for giving me no chance to be closer to him than I was, but I would go to them and beg them for help myself if I could. I told you that I don’t turn away from the truth. I see what we must do, distasteful as it is. You may call me a traitor for it if you wish, and punish me for speaking this way, but at least I’ll know that I’ve done what I could for this Project in my small way.”

Pavel sighed. “I had already decided that I must do what you say.” She started at those words. “Hearing you propose such an action convinces me that I was right, for I know how the Habbars have wounded you.” He was silent for a moment. “I face a dilemma. If I ask the Habbars to return, I set myself against Earth. If I do nothing, I’ll lose control here and pay the price for that. And if I root out the most discontented and dangerous folk and rid the Islands of them, I risk fanning the flames.”

Pavel’s face hardened. “I’ve given my life to this Project,” he went on. “I won’t see it set back because of Earth’s pride and obstinacy. We have no choice. We must call upon the Habbars for help before the workers, or others, do something rash and endanger everything.”

Amir tensed. “I didn’t think you would actually decide to do this, Pavel. Do you think the Mukhtars will simply stand by and let that happen?”

“How many ways does Earth have to enforce its will here?” Pavel said. “They count on our loyalty and on our desire to keep our places as Administrators. Once the Habbars are here, Earth will risk a conflict with them if it tries to act, a conflict it cannot afford and that it would surely lose. They’ll see that they have to accept it.”

“But the Council,” Amir protested, “and the Guardians —”

“I’ll deal with the Council. Most of its members on Anwara will understand. As for the Guardians, they must follow their commander, and I believe that Fawzia Habeeb will have reason to throw in her lot with us.” Pavel scowled. “Right now, our immediate problem is the Habbars. They have to be told that it’s we, not Earth, who want them back, and they may not want to return under those conditions.”

Iris twisted her hands together; her fingers were cold.

“It’s good that you came to see us, Iris,” Pavel continued. “I’ve been told there have been rumblings on the other Islands as well. You may be useful when it’s time to convince your fellow Institute graduates of the need for this action — I know how schooled you all were in loyalty to Earth.”

She lifted her head. “Our first loyalty is to the Project.”

“How reassuring to hear you say that.” The Linker was sounding sardonic again. “Now, we can’t risk sending a message directly to the Habs ourselves — if others somehow pick it up, our plans will be exposed prematurely. I’m afraid that I’ll have to visit the Habbars here, and make our request.”

“No,” Iris said almost without thinking.

“No?” Pavel frowned. “Has your courage failed you so quickly?”

“You don’t understand, Linker Pavel. Your few dealings with Habbbers have always been public. There would be talk if you were seen going to them yourself.”

“I could disguise myself.”

Iris nearly laughed. “On an Island where everyone’s seen your face so many times, that would be difficult. I could go in your place. I have an excuse — I can say that I seek some news of my son, and then no one will wonder why I’m there. If they refuse me, and if after that anyone finds out why I went to them, you can say that I deceived you and went to the Habbbers without your sanction. You could then punish me and still be free to try to convince the Mukhtars to save this Project.”

Pavel straightened. “I never suspected that you had such devotion to me, Iris Angharads.”

“It isn’t devotion to you, Mukhtar. It’s only that I’ve come to feel that the Project needs you even more now.” Iris paused. “You know what I’ve done. I saw my son wound this enterprise with his actions. I swallowed my shame and remained here, partly because I believed my team might still need me, and I was right about that. Marc could make use of my mind and talents while being certain that I could no longer threaten his position. And you know I’ve been useful to you. I’ve helped, in my small way, to settle complaints or disputes that might otherwise have grown larger, and I asked nothing for myself. I won’t have what I’ve done be for nothing. I must make up for my son. I’ll plead with Habbbers if I have to. I ask only that my bondmate be free from any blame for my actions if I fail. I do not want him to suffer because of me.”

Amir seemed pained as she spoke of Chen. Pavel nodded. “I see,” he said slowly, “that we may not have made quite as much use of your abilities as we might have.” Before Iris could respond to this unexpected praise, Pavel held up his hand. “We had better discuss what you are to tell the Habbbers here.”

Iris strode quickly through the hall, but lingered on the steps of the Administrators’ residence, worried about what might happen now. Pavel was gambling that, once the Habbbers were here in larger numbers, Earth would find some way to accept the situation and that a crisis would be averted. Earth, however, might decide that the time had come to act forcefully, regardless of the consequences. If the Mukhtars saw control of the Project slipping from them, they might feel compelled to assert themselves. The Habbbers, who had always avoided open conflict, might not be willing to stand against Earth then, but if they did —

She sighed. Even the Project might not be worth such a battle, which might free old instincts humanity had long held in check.

“Iris.”

She turned. Amir had followed her outside. He offered her his arm; she accepted it only reluctantly. They descended the steps.

“You’d better wait before you go to them,” he murmured. “If you go to their residence directly from here, after a meeting with Pavel, someone might wonder —”

“I have enough sense to know that.”

“Forgive me for mentioning it, then.”

They walked along the path, ignoring the few people who were sitting at the nearby tables. She unhooked her arm from Amir’s. “I was certainly surprised to see you with Pavel,” she said. “I hadn’t

realized that you two had grown so close.”

“I asked to be there. He granted the favor.”

“He knew what we might be discussing. You indicated that he’d shared some of his thoughts with you earlier. He must trust you a little.”

“Pavel didn’t draw me into his plans because we’re close. Quite the contrary. He knew that if he could get my support for any risky action, another possible obstacle would be out of his way. Pavel is a wise man. He makes accomplices of possible opponents. Now, with you as an accomplice also, he’ll be sure that I’ll do my best to help him succeed in his plans.”

“And why does he assume that?” Iris asked.

“Because he knows that I won’t want you exposed to the consequences if we fail. Because he knows that I still care about you.”

She halted near a shrub, afraid to look up at him. “You picked an odd way to show that during our last encounter.”

“I was angry, Iris. I spent my rage. I’ve tried to speak to you, but you always turned away from me. I’ve wanted to come to you, but there was your bondmate, and I couldn’t —”

“I know you’ve tried. I thought you only wanted to apologize.”

Amir folded his arms. “It seems we’ve both become persons of some influence again, in different ways, so I did assess your talents correctly. Perhaps this scheme will actually succeed, and Earth will give in. We might even make you a Linker after all, when all this is past.”

She lifted her eyes to his face; his dark eyes seemed weary and pained. “You may not believe this,” she said, “but I don’t want to be a Linker. I have no ambitions any more.”

“I’d heard such rumors about you. I thought it might only be a pose.”

“I suppose that’s what a Linker would think. Well, if this plan of Pavel’s works, you’ll be in a good position. Someday, you might even take Pavel’s place. That must be a pleasant thought.”

“Must you say such things to me now?”

Against her will, the emotion in his voice had moved her. “I’m sorry, Amir,” she whispered. “I loved you enough to want to share my life with you, but that’s over. I can’t let Chen think that I might turn to you again, for he knows how I once felt. I can’t mislead you by letting you think I might love you again.”

“I ask only for your friendship,” he replied. “I have no hopes for anything now. I agreed with Pavel only because I could see no alternative.” Amir’s arms fell to his sides. “I want to give you whatever help I can, but I think we’re lost whatever we do. Earth won’t forgive us so easily.”

He turned and began to walk back to the ziggurat.

Iris went to the Habbers two days later.

She had spoken to Charles Eves. Without telling him of Pavel’s actual decision, lest rumors spread and somehow find their way to ears on Earth, she had convinced him that the Administrator would take some action. Charles had seemed mollified by the fact that she had gone to the most powerful man here, and had promised to keep others calm, at least for a while. She wondered if Charles still had that power.

She crept out of her residence after dark and took a roundabout route along the paths to the Habber building. She had not even told Chen the details of her meeting with Pavel. It was better that Chen knew nothing. He would only worry, and might be drawn into Pavel's plans himself, if the Linker saw some use for him; she wanted Chen safe.

She had never entered the Habbers' residence before. She stared at the gray stones of the circular structure, gathered her strength, and approached the door. Two Guardians, a tall young man and a sullen young woman, stood outside the entrance.

As she came near, the female Guardian blocked her way. "What do you want here?"

"I would like to speak to the Habbers inside." Iris held out her arm, showing her wristband. "My name is Iris Angharads. You'd probably like to record that fact."

"And just why do you want to talk to them now?" the man asked.

"It's a personal matter." Iris swallowed. "My son was one of the pilots who fled to the Habs over a decade ago. I've heard nothing of him since. My thoughts have turned to him lately, and I'm hoping one of those inside can give me news of him."

"After all this time?" the woman said. "Why do you want to know about him now?"

"I was angry at what my son did. He had betrayed me, and everyone here, and I swore that I would put him out of my mind. I was also afraid to come here, to let anyone think that I might have sympathized with my son's actions." Iris looked down at her feet; speaking of Benzi made the pain of his betrayal seem fresh. "You know how the Project is going. More of us may be sent back to Earth, and this may be my only chance to speak to someone who can tell me of my son. It's not so easy to put aside the feelings a mother has for a child, even if the child has hurt her deeply. I only want to know that he's alive and well. Surely you can understand that."

Iris lifted her head. The woman's expression had softened; her blue eyes gazed at Iris sympathetically.

"If that's so," the young man said gently, "it might be wiser for you to keep your distance. Wouldn't want people wondering about your loyalties."

"I'll take that chance."

"I'll have to tell my commanding officer that you came here."

"I'm aware of that."

"It's not that they're such bad sorts, as individuals, I mean, but it's better to have as little to do with them as possible."

"I understand. Are you going to let me pass?"

The Guardians stepped aside. The door opened. She entered a bare, empty room and stood there for a few moments, not sure of where to go next until a wall at her right opened and revealed a dimly lit corridor. She entered the curving hallway, continuing to walk past several closed doors until one opened at her left.

Five Habbers were sitting inside the room. None of them looked up as she walked inside. The room's screen, which covered one wall, showed the stars of deep space.

A woman looked up at Iris. "I shall speak to you," she said. "What is it you seek?"

Iris sat down on a mat in front of the woman; the Habber's steady gaze made her uneasy. "My name is Iris Angharads," she said awkwardly.

"I know who you are." The woman folded her arms. Her long brown hair covered her chest; her only garment was a white loincloth, the same sort of clothing her companions were wearing. All of them were watching Iris now. One of the men had an African's dark skin, another was so pale that his skin seemed translucent. The two other women might have had Asian ancestry. All of them had the same contemplative, almost sorrowful, expression on their faces, the same dreamy eyes and downturned mouths, the same tilt of the head. "What is it you want, Iris Angharads?"

"I must ask something of you. A Linker, one of our Administrators, has sent me here." She swallowed, feeling uneasy. "We need your help again."

"We have always tried to help, but often our help has been refused."

"I didn't mean just your help," Iris responded. "We need more of your people here now, we need your tools. The Project is stalled. We have to build more domes, and we don't have the resources to do that ourselves. You've seen how slow our progress has been."

The Habber woman nodded. "An enterprise such as this must always be measured in centuries."

"Yes, but too many of our people have waited for the chance to be settlers. Earth doesn't understand how high their hopes have been in the years just past. Earth would rather wait some more instead of giving us what we need." Iris paused. "Pavel Gvishiani sent me here. If you'll agree to help us, he'll arrange for your people to come to the Islands."

"Ah, Pavel, the one called Mukhtar." The woman lowered her eyes. "He could not have asked us himself?" She lifted her head again. "He could not have spoken to us through his Link?"

"He doesn't want anyone else to know of his request yet, until he hears your answer. Someone might betray him to Earth before you can act."

"I see fear in your face," the Habber said, startling Iris. "You want us to call to our people for you, to speak for you, to have the people and resources you need sent here, and you don't even have Earth's agreement to this. Why should we do this? What will happen if Earth objects?"

"What can Earth do to you?"

The brown-haired woman smiled. "Those of us on this Island and those who would be brought here may not want to take the risk of finding out." She drew her brows together. "You sent most of our people away, and allow those few of us who are left to do nothing except observe. Your Linkers have often closed your cyberminds to us and share only enough with us to remain within the letter of our old agreement. Your people often scorn even the most innocuous gestures of friendship. Why should we help you now?"

Iris clasped her hands together. "The Project may be threatened. Our people are impatient. They want the new home that's been promised to them. If no progress is made soon —"

"We know what they think. We know that some may take rash actions. We could argue that all of this means only that we should depart from this place and leave you to face whatever comes. There is nothing in our old agreement that requires us to stay — it may be time to let it lapse."

Iris leaned forward. "If you help us, and we succeed, generations on Venus may be grateful to you. You might win some power and influence on a new world, and Earth might even have to bow to you at last. It would be your triumph, that Earth couldn't achieve its dream without you."

The woman's brown hair swayed as she shook her head. "You deal in subterfuge, and think of power and humiliation. You practice deception so often that you don't even know your own thoughts."

"Are you so different from us?" Iris burst out.

"Why, what a surprising question. You have just implied that we are human after all." The woman's pale eyes glistened, as if she were holding back tears. "We have almost forgotten how to hide our thoughts from one another, for our Links are often open to everything. We seek no power, for how can one have it on a world where all is shared and all needs and wants can be met? We pity those who grasp for power, for they are sieves that can never be filled, but you honor those who seize it. An illness pervades you, and makes you see health as a disease. It is as though you would rather have the delusions of a fever than the perceptions of an untroubled mind."

Iris bowed her head, afraid that the Habber would see too much of her anger. She saw again how easy it was to hate the Habbers, with their air of superiority and their apparent immunity to the more troubling emotions of people. Habbers lied and pretended, too proud to admit that their own people probably had as many flaws as anyone, knowing that others were not likely to discover the truth. They had seduced her son with their lies.

At last she raised her head. The woman's face had become even more mournful. Iris had expected to see a smirk, a glimmer of satisfaction at the wounding words the woman had uttered. Instead, the Habber was looking at Iris as if pleading silently with a friend for understanding.

"What are you called?" Iris asked.

"My name is Erena." The Habber raised a brow slightly. "I should have told you that at the beginning, but we've grown used to the fact that Islanders often don't care what we are called."

"Will you help us? Or must I beg so that you can feed your pride some more?"

The pale-skinned man held out a hand to Iris. "Do not say that," he murmured. "We know how hard it must have been for you to come here."

"We shall send your message," Erena said. "I believe that our people will answer, and I am sure that they will help you. What else can we do? We cannot refuse you now, whatever the circumstances. It may be that we'll need your help sometime."

Erena probably thought she was soothing Iris with such a remark, but Iris resented it anyway. Habbers too often made a show of having high motives for everything that they did.

"We are not being purely unselfish," the Habber continued. "It would be more interesting work for our people. That alone will attract some to it, and many of our younger people seek challenges. We've made a few advances that might speed work on your domes, and there's more we can learn." She was silent for a moment. "That's all that really matters, you know — learning and sharing what we've learned. But I think you see that, don't you?"

Iris raised a hand to her throat. Erena's words, and her gentle tone, had suddenly reminded Iris of a girl in Lincoln who had wanted only to learn without caring where that might take her. Her own mind had been clear once, unmuddied by thoughts of ambition, unclouded by the deceptions and grabbing at

opportunity she had been forced into later. What might her life have been like if those around her had shared that child's longing? She might have been more like this Habber, who already seemed entranced by the possibility of learning something new, unperturbed by the motives of those who were seeking her people's aid.

She had succeeded with the Habbers, she supposed. Somehow, she didn't think Erena would have promised help without being sure that her people would give it, whatever the risks. Perhaps the Habbers were so sure of their power that they felt there would be no danger. Iris knew that she should feel relieved, but she was already fearing what might happen.

"Is there any other inquiry you wish to make?" Erena asked.

Iris thought of her son. A Habber must have enticed him with reasonable words and a gentle voice. Iris felt the woman's spell; to lull a young boy must have been even easier. She stiffened and felt the muscles of her face growing hard. "A son of mine is with you," she said.

"I know."

"His name is Benzi Liangharad — at least that's what he was called here. Maybe he took a new name along with his new life."

The Habber shook her head.

"I want to know how my son is."

The woman closed her eyes for a moment. "I do not hear him now, but he is well, and just beginning to master his Link. It's been hard for him and his companions to adapt to our ways, but your son was young when he came to us, and in time the barriers will dissolve. He would tell you that he has no regrets." The woman was staring at Iris once more. "No, that's not quite accurate. He has one — that he had to deceive those he loved to find his way to us when he knew that they would not choose to follow him. Be at peace about your son."

The sanctimonious sound of Erena's voice galled Iris. How could she know the truth of the woman's words? The Habbers might do anything to keep Benzi from returning to the Islands and thus embarrassing the Habs by admitting that he had made a mistake, though the certainty of punishment here was probably enough to keep him away.

"Do you have a message for your son?" Erena asked. "I'll be happy to convey it to him later."

How could she tell this impassive soul about the pain Benzi had caused? She wondered if he had ever asked about her or Chen. "Tell him that I hope he is content," she said finally. "I've renewed my pledge with his father. You may tell him that his father and I will have another child soon." As soon as she spoke the words, she realized that she had at last made that decision. "That is, we'll have a child if your help results in success, and settlements seem possible for us again. Perhaps our second child will be more loyal."

Erena nodded. "I hope that we can work together again. Please forgive me if my words have caused you any hurt. Some of us have been observers here for so long that we forget how to conduct ourselves."

Iris's anger flared up again; the woman had implied that the Islanders had contaminated her somehow. She stood up, longing to get out of the room. "Thank you for your kindness," she said, hearing the hard edge in her own voice. "Let's hope that these matters resolve themselves."

Pavel had resumed his old habit of walking around the grounds of Island Two. In the years after he had

first joined the Administrators' Committee, he would stroll along the paths past buildings, greenhouses, gardens, and tables, and occasionally a few specialists would invite him to join them for a meal. The workers were rarely so bold, but their children would greet him; sometimes, he would sit with the young ones and tell them of his own parents, who had also been the children of workers. He had thought of all of them — those here and the children on the other Islands — as his progeny, the ones who would carry out his dream.

Then most of the Habbars had gone, and the Guardians had arrived. There had been no more walks for Pavel; he had hidden himself inside the ziggurat, concealed himself from angry and resentful eyes. He had felt control of the Project slipping away from him.

He no longer cared about his own position; whatever he lost would make no difference if the Project succeeded. So he told himself most of the time, though there were moments when he thought he might be deceiving himself. But if the Project were set back now, it would show that his life had been a useless exercise, that all his efforts had failed, that the years of balancing one group's interests against another's and of bargaining with Earth had been wasted. His name would be erased from Venus's history; it would be as if he had never lived at all.

The path along which Pavel walked was shadowed by trees; patches of golden light shone on the pale stones. He did not like to leave the ziggurat at night, when the Island's eerie silence and the strange silver light evoked his darker moods. The memorial pillars were just ahead; Pavel emerged from the trees and stood in front of those solemn totems.

He had not paid his respects to the dead for some time. He passed among the pillars, bowing his head before each. The faces of the dead did not move, but he almost felt their eyes watching him. He looked up at the metal face of one woman and imagined that he heard her whisper: *We have no life now except what you give us; we have no rest until people live below. Tell us, Pavel: Have we lived in vain?*

No, you have not, he answered silently, and then: Neither have I.

He had known all along that Venus would never be only another of Earth's Nomarchies, that the settlers would some-day claim the world for themselves. He would hasten that inevitability. He would see the Cytherian planet live, and would not trouble himself with worrying about the means that were necessary to bring that about.

He walked on until he came to the steps leading up to the platform. Fawzia Habeeb was standing above; she turned and watched him as he climbed toward her.

"I have news for you," Pavel said.

"I thought as much." Fawzia's black uniform seemed a bit too tight; she had put on a long black vest over it, no doubt to conceal her round hips. "What's your news, then?"

Pavel rested his hands on the railing. "I've had the final word from the Habbars through their people here. They've decided to help us."

The Guardian let out her breath. "Well. Now it starts, I suppose. I wasn't sure that they would agree. Maybe I shouldn't have listened to you."

"It'll work. There's little Earth can do. They'll have to find some way to accommodate my actions in order to keep control of the Project. They can't afford to do anything else."

"I'm not so sure," Fawzia said. "It all depends on which faction is stronger in the Council of Mukhtars —"

the one that wants us to succeed in whatever way we can, or those who would be willing to throw that away to maintain their power. Judging by what's happened so far, I'm guessing that the second group is more powerful."

"That could change," Pavel responded. "Anyway, we have no choice. If we don't act, the workers will, and they're likely only to make things worse. We'd pay for that, you and I, for letting things get so out of hand." He had said all of this to her before, and was annoyed at having to repeat it.

"True enough, and I have come, during my time here, to care about this Project." Fawzia lowered her eyelids modestly. Did she think he was fooled? She had thrown her lot in with him only because he had promised her more influence in the future if his plans succeeded.

He said, "You can still back out. You can arrest me and turn me over to Earth. You'd be honored for it."

Fawzia grimaced. "And then I'd have to deal with angry Islanders. There won't be any honor for me. Our friend Yukio has done his best to poison the air on Earth as far as I'm concerned." Pavel was not sure that this was true, but it served him to have Fawzia believe it. "He won't let me rise, whatever I do. If I move against you, he'd find some way to take credit for it and turn it to his advantage. It's time for me to carve out new territory for myself — it's what warriors used to do in old times." She smiled. "Yukio will have to explain why he gave me such a fine recommendation for this post."

Her talk of warriors and grudges and territories was making him ill; she would be a difficult ally. Pavel pressed his lips together, bitter at having had to draw the Guardian into his plans.

"You're sure," he said at last, "that your subordinates among the Guardians will follow your orders."

"But of course. It's what they're trained to do, and I've made sure that their loyalty is to me. Many of them have grown closer to your people — they won't exactly mind throwing in their lot with you. Even if they did, they would have to follow a commander's orders until the commander is removed or the orders countermanded. There's no problem for them. If you succeed, there'll be a more important role for them. If you fail, I'll shoulder most of the blame for the Guardians." Fawzia paused. "There's one thing that worries me, Pavel. I don't like not having control over events on Anwara. The small force of Guardians there is not likely to go along with me, and the Council —"

"We've been through that. We don't need Anwara. By the time they know what's happening here, Habber ships will be in orbit around Venus, and Earth is days away. The people of Anwara won't be able to do a thing except alert Earth. There might even be a delay there — some of the Anwarans will understand what I'm trying to do, and may convince others to stand with us. It'll be too late for Earth to act without risking conflict with the Habs, and the Mukhtars can't afford that."

"Perhaps not, but there may be some Guardians on Earth itching for a fight. They may want to test the fabled Habber technology and discover if it's real or only an empty boast." Her eyes gleamed, as if she would welcome such a battle.

"I must return to my room," Pavel said, "and prepare my announcement." He walked toward the steps, anxious to be away from the Guardian.

People had died for the Project; accidents had taken many lives. Anger had flared at times, and fights had erupted, but the Islands had generally been peaceful, a place where people, whatever their differences and disagreements, could bring themselves to work together for a common, transcendent end. It had been one of their triumphs; it had made many believe that a new world free from the horrors of the old was possible.

He had hoped that Venus might be settled in peace. No life forms would be displaced on the new world; no inhabitants of its continents existed to be conquered. They might have created a planetary civilization that did not carry that guilt, as Earth's civilizations did.

He might be bringing the evil of war to this world, the ancient evil that even the Nomarchies had forsaken. Only fear had reined in those old instincts; the instincts themselves still remained. The Mukhtars might fear the loss of their power more than the threat of a battle.

Pavel felt that he had poisoned his soul. His thoughts had turned more often to the device he had smuggled here so long ago, to the means by which he could rid himself of an obstacle if necessary. He had been prepared to rid himself of Fawzia if she stood in his way; he was already determined to do away with her if he succeeded and she grew too greedy for more power over the Islanders, as she inevitably would.

Better that I shoulder the guilt, he thought, and leave others free of it. Maybe that was only another rationalization.

He might bring murder to this world. He wondered how much of the poison in him would seep into others.

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Twenty-Nine

Chen hesitated at the entrance leading out of Island Two's airship bay, then followed the other workers through the open door. As usual, a few groups of people were waiting for friends and family members who had returned from another shift on the Bat, but this time the greetings seemed more emotional, the faces happier. Chen nodded at those he knew as smaller groups broke away from the crowd and hurried off along the path.

Chen craned his neck, looking for Iris. She had told him where she would be when he returned, but he thought she might have changed her mind and decided to meet him here. He felt a hand on his arm, and turned; Fei-lin was grinning at him.

"Don't forget," Fei-lin said. "We'll be expecting you later."

"Sure," Chen said.

Tonie beamed at them both. "Make sure Iris comes too," she said. "We have so much to celebrate now." She adjusted her shoulder bag, linked her arm with Fei-lin's, and the two began to elbow their way through the crowd. Fei-lin had been even livelier than usual during their trip here from the Bat, while Tonie, who must have heard all of her bondmate's stories many times, had laughed at them all as if she had never listened to them before.

Chen waited as the crowd dispersed. He had been in the second week of his shift on the northern Bat when Pavel Gvishiani made his announcement. The workers, at first stunned by the news, had absorbed it quickly; their routine tasks had become imbued with a new purpose. The Habbars would help them; they would see settlements after all. They did not concern themselves with how Earth might react, certain that Mukhtar Pavel had either come to some secret agreement with the Project Council or had good reason to believe that Earth would see the wisdom of his course.

Chen had seen how much the spirit of the Islands had changed when his shuttle had landed on the

Platform. He had seen Habbers, Guardians, and pilots speaking almost as friends. Six Habber ships were already in orbit around Venus, and a steady stream of shuttles was carrying people and supplies to the Platform as well as robots and equipment to the surface. Impatience, resentment, and despair had vanished; hope had been renewed, old rivalries and disputes almost forgotten. The Project had again become what it was meant to be.

Chen lifted his bag and set off along the path. Happy as he had been to know that the Habbers were helping again, he could not rid himself of apprehension. The Habbers had been here for over two months, and Earth had remained silent. Most took that as a sign that Earth had given in, but Chen wondered if it meant that the Mukhtars were plotting against them, trying to decide what to do. He thought of the Linkers he had known; somehow, he couldn't believe that those on Earth would let this happen.

Two men passed him; only the pins on their collars that showed a cluster of silver circles revealed that they were Habbers. They nodded at Chen; he nodded back, realizing that he no longer had to avoid their company. He thought of Ibrahim, and then of Benzi. His son would not be among the Habbers here; even now, his son was not likely to risk returning to the Islands.

At last he came to a group of tables under ivied lattices; Iris had said she would meet him here. At one table, three workers sat with a Linker; at another, three Habbers were sharing a meal with two Islanders. Once, only workers had assembled in this spot; now, people mingled freely.

Iris was sitting at one of the tables farthest from the path; she was talking to Amir Azad. Chen stiffened; he had hoped that she would be alone.

He approached the two, trying to smile. Amir looked up and murmured a greeting as Chen sat down. Iris had spoken to the Linker a couple of times before Chen left for the Bat; in one of her messages to him there, she had mentioned that she had spent some time with Amir. Clearly, she had nothing to hide from Chen, and yet Amir's presence still disturbed him.

There were others on the Island who had been Iris's temporary companions in the past. Chen could ignore that fact, could even be friendly with the men. He knew that Iris had occasionally sought out others while he was away on his shifts, but those men were only passing entanglements. His jealousy, once so strong, had faded as Iris's love for him had deepened; it had been only his fear of losing her completely that had once fueled his anger. Iris had remained his bondmate; he could not expect her to change altogether.

Amir, however, was different from other men. Iris had cared for him deeply, had even considered having his child, and Amir had repaid her by betraying her when she had needed his understanding most. Chen remembered that only too well, because he had gathered up the pieces and won Iris back. How could she even bear to speak to him? Yet she did, and Chen felt threatened by it.

He picked at the pieces of fruit on Iris's plate as Amir continued to speak. Iris interrupted; musical words flowed from her lips. The two were using Arabic; Chen hated to hear them talk in that emotional, sensuous tongue, which made him feel as though they were sharing a secret pleasure and shutting him out.

"We should use Anglaic," Iris said suddenly. She glanced apologetically at Chen.

"Excuse me," Amir replied. "You two will want time to yourselves now." An odd look passed across the bearded man's face; Chen could almost believe that Amir was jealous of him. The Linker stood up. "I must be off anyway. We're having another conference with a few of the Habbers, and I must prepare myself for it." He left the table quickly.

Iris leaned over and kissed Chen on the cheek. "I've missed you," she said. "Everything's changed so

much since you left.”

“I noticed. Fei-lin and Tonie asked a few friends to their room tonight. I told them we’d both come. I think they’re finally going to tell us they’ve decided to have a child — they’ve been waiting long enough. Fei-lin told me they’d talked to a Counselor on the Bat about it, so —”

She touched his hand. “We could do the same thing now.”

“Maybe.”

“If all goes well with the dome construction, we could all go there together as settlers, and our daughter would still have some years on the Islands first, to prepare herself.”

Chen frowned. “I don’t know.”

“You haven’t changed your mind?”

“It isn’t that, Iris. I just can’t help worrying. This may not last.”

“Now you sound like Amir.” She nibbled at some fruit. “He’s worried too. Earth hasn’t done anything, and he wonders what they might be planning. I keep telling him that there’s probably nothing they can do at this point — the longer Earth waits, the less they’ll be able to do. But Amir’s been exploring, trying to get some answers through his Link, and he keeps running into blocks. Apparently our cyberminds here aren’t picking up as much information from those on Earth. When a Linker runs into blocks, he begins to wonder what’s being hidden.”

Chen felt uneasy; Amir’s concerns only gave his own worries more substance. “I thought he agreed with Pavel and the other Administrators.”

“Oh, he felt they had no choice. But we have, as he puts it, faced the Mukhtars with a dilemma. The Mukhtars don’t want to threaten the Habbers, because they don’t know what the Habs might be able to do against them. At the same time, if they leave things as they are without coming to some sort of agreement, they’re acknowledging that they’ve lost control of the Project. People will begin to think the Mukhtars are weak, that they can’t act, and some Nomarchies still resent the Mukhtars. There could be uprisings on Earth if people believe the Mukhtars are powerless.” A line creased Iris’s brow. “I sometimes wonder what might happen in Lincoln then. That’s one thing that does worry me. Sometimes it seems that everything we do is bound to bring grief to someone.”

“Your household may be safer than we are now.”

“You do sound like Amir. It’s odd — in a way, I’m more worried at hearing this from you than I was from him.”

He said, “I don’t know why you have to talk to him at all.”

Iris reached for his hand. “There’s nothing between us now. You know that. I don’t think there ever really was.”

How could he say what he felt? He would have preferred to see her go to Amir’s bed; he had accepted that part of her nature. “Why do you see him at all, then?”

A look of annoyance flickered across Iris’s face. He sighed; he had thought that they were past these useless confrontations.

“I don’t know, Chen. He seems to need to talk to me now. I haven’t encouraged him, believe me, but he says he still has some feeling for me, though I think that’s mostly guilt about what happened between us before. He’s sorry about what happened, and in spite of it, I can’t condemn him. I’ve been guilty of enough cruelty to others myself. It’s time we forgot those old wounds. We can’t carry them to a new world, and I don’t want to pass on old hatreds to our daughter when she lives.”

“I see. I suppose Amir would be useful to you then.”

“You know I don’t care about that any more, but if it troubles you so much, then I’ll try to avoid him as much as possible.”

“I won’t ask that of you,” Chen said. “How can I blame him for feeling the way he does? Just as long as you don’t feel that way about him —”

She laughed. “You know I don’t. You have to know that by now.” She leaned forward. “I haven’t even asked you what you’ve heard on the Bat. Has anyone told you about the progress we’ve been making?”

“I’ve heard a little. Not much, though. We’ve had enough to do just keeping up with our own work.”

“Then I’ll have to fill you in.” She spoke rapidly, almost tripping over the words; as Chen listened, his own worries began to fade, and he began to feel that he had been foolish to entertain them. The Habbers, according to Iris, were making improvements on al-Anwar and Oberg, the two completed domes; it seemed that the domes had already been named. The third dome, al-Khwarizmi, also named for a scientist prominent in Earth’s history, would be completed in less than a month. Iris gestured expansively as she talked of planned excavations, robots, improved structural materials for the domes, and ecosystems designed with rapidly maturing plants. The Habbers, interestingly, had not simply usurped the place of supervisors and Administrators; they were sharing their knowledge freely, consulting with the Island specialists at each step. The Islanders would learn much; everyone would benefit from that.

“Once, you hated the Habbers,” Chen said during a break in the conversation.

“It’s true. But now, I can even feel that everything that happened might have been for the best. Think of it, Chen. Someday, we might even see Benzi again. He might be able to come to Venus.”

Chen was almost afraid to hope. His darker mood was beginning to pull at him again. He had entertained hopes before, only to see them dashed.

“Are you worrying again?” Iris asked. “Look at you. Aren’t we together? Hasn’t everything turned out well after all?”

He nodded, shaking off his mood. “How much work do you have left for today?”

“I’ve got a meeting with my team in about an hour. A few Habber climatologists are supposed to show us some of their computer models. Apparently they’ve analyzed —”

He stood up and reached for her hand. “Then we’ve got another hour. Let’s go home, and I’ll show you how much I missed you.”

She thrust her arm around his waist as they left the table.

As Chen had predicted, Tonie and Fei-lin had made their announcement. Their contraceptive implants would be removed in less than a week; they were planning on a son.

“Using stored stuff?” Olaf asked.

Fei-lin laughed. "I think I still have enough here to make a kid." He cupped his groin.

"Well," Catherine said, "since you're not going to get to work on it tonight, I guess we can all stay."

Eight of the couple's friends had come to the small room. Chen sat on the floor, wedged between Iris and another woman, as Tonie's friend Dorcas passed them a plate of raw vegetables. Catherine and her bondmate Olaf were sitting in the open doorway; the sound of conversation in the hallway outside was dimly audible. Chen listened as the group inside the room laughed and talked. Some of the people here had not come to see him off thirty years earlier, when he had been exiled from the Islands; a few of them had avoided his presence after Benzi's flight from the Project. All of that had been forgotten; as he looked around at these people now, he could almost believe that no time had passed. Olaf had grown only slightly heavier with age, Fei-lin was as lively as ever, rejuvenation had kept Tonie's beautiful face smooth and unmarked. The past had been erased along with the signs of aging, it seemed.

"And when are you two going to stop putting things off?" Dorcas said to Chen. She seemed about to say more when a man suddenly thrust his head through the open-doorway. "Turn on your screen," the man shouted.

Fei-lin was sitting on the bed; he stood up quickly, nearly putting his foot in a bowl of food. "What is it?"

"The screen," the man replied. He disappeared, and Chen realized that the corridor outside the room had grown silent.

Fei-lin turned on his screen. "... will be here in one day," a voice was saying. A gray-haired woman was speaking; shadows darkened the hollows under her tired eyes. "We've been ordered to allow these ships to dock here. We must follow that directive." The woman paused and tilted her head, apparently listening to a message through her Link.

"Who is she?" Dorcas muttered. "What's she talking about?"

"I'll repeat the message," the woman said. "I am Kerie Ord, a member of the Project Council on Anwara. I have just been informed that a fleet of eight ships carrying Guardian forces left Earth orbit more than a week ago and will be here within one twenty-four-hour period. All Habber vessels in orbit around Venus must leave this area immediately and return to the nearest Habber world. If the Habbars disregard this request, the Guardian forces have been ordered to attack any remaining ships with missiles. This is not an idle threat. The ships from Earth are armed, and will act."

Fei-lin stepped back from the screen; Tonie reached for his hand as he sat down again.

"There is another message for the Islands from Earth," Kerie Ord continued. "I'll speak it now." She lifted her head. "People of the Cytherian Islands, hear our words. Occasionally, well-meaning people can be misled, and the Habitat-dwellers are always prepared to take advantage of such weakness. We do not seek to harm those who might have felt only that they were acting in the Project's best interest, but the Nomarchies cannot let this incident pass. The Habbars must leave, but be assured that the Project will go forward. There is no shame in acknowledging an honest mistake. The Habbars, by acting as they have without a request from the Council of Mukhtars, have violated our agreement."

Iris's hand was in Chen's; her fingers were icy against his palm.

"The Habbars will fight them," Fei-lin said; his face was taut with rage. "They must have ways."

Iris said, "Their ships here, as far as I know, have no weapons."

"They'll have to do something." Fei-lin looked around at his friends.

“I have one last thing to say,” Kerie Ord went on. “Those of us on Anwara were not privy to your actions. Before we knew it, Habber ships were on their way to Venus. We wish you no harm on the Islands, and can even understand why you acted as you did, but we will not oppose Earth — we haven’t the means or the desire. You must see that —”

The image disappeared, as if someone had cut the Linker off.

“I thought Anwara agreed with us,” Olaf said.

Iris sighed. “They probably did, as long as they thought we’d get away with it.”

“But didn’t Mukhtar Pavel tell them what we were going to do?” Tonie asked.

“I don’t know,” Iris said. “He might have told those he trusted. He might have figured that, after the Habber ships were here, it wouldn’t matter what Anwara did.”

“There’s one thing we can do,” Olaf burst out. “We can flee to the Habber ships and get away. They won’t stay here to fight our battle, I bet.”

Chen turned his head toward the big man. “Would you really leave the Islands for a Hab?”

“Your son did.”

“Our son was wrong,” Iris replied. “You’d better calm yourself, Olaf, you’ll just spread panic. Anyway, use your head. There are almost fifty thousand people on the Islands and Bats now, counting the Habbbers. We couldn’t possibly get them all to the ships in time.”

“But the Habbbers can leave by themselves.”

“I suppose they can, if they leave soon.”

Chen was silent. He was sure that some of those on Anwara must have known ships from Earth were on their way before now; had they warned the Islanders earlier, an escape might have been possible. He scowled. The Anwarans, whatever their sympathies with the Islanders, had proven their loyalty to Earth by remaining silent until this moment.

“The Habbbers can fight,” Fei-lin said as he struck his palm with a fist.

“And then what?” Iris asked. “What happens to Earth? Things would be harder there if there’s a battle with the Habs. And what happens to us?” She held out a hand. “Listen, Earth has to be careful. If they’re so concerned about controlling the Project, they can’t risk destroying us. This might just be a show of force designed to show everyone the Nomarchies aren’t afraid to act. Maybe Earth is ready to give us the help we need, now that they’ve seen how desperate we’ve grown.”

Chen bowed his head. He felt no surprise; somehow, he had been expecting something like this to happen, and he suspected that this wouldn’t end the matter. Given a choice between preserving the Project and showing their power, the Mukhtars might risk the destruction of everything here.

Iris felt that the dome had closed in around her. She would pace along the paths or stumble through a garden or wood, and no matter how far she walked, she would always come within sight of the platform that circled the Island and the dome that imprisoned them all.

The threat from Earth, she knew, however she tried to minimize it, was real enough; this was only the first move in the game, and she was not sure where it would lead, yet at the same time, the threat seemed

unreal. During the past hours, the Islanders had clustered around the screens that were their only link to outside events. They had seen images, transmitted by orbiting sensors, of the Habber ships, those oddly elongated slender cylinders attached to the giant globes that housed their engines. They had viewed charts and diagrams that plotted the course of the approaching Earth ships. They had listened to the hum of messages from the other Islands, whose people seemed to be looking to the Administrators of Island Two for some sort of solace. Yet it all seemed distant, as if the Islanders were enclosed in an impermeable bubble. Words flowed over them and faded; the diagrams and images were only pictures of events that were happening elsewhere.

Pavel had taken advantage of the air of unreality. His face had appeared on the screens intermittently; his voice had been soothing. Iris could no longer recollect what he had said, but it didn't matter; he had sounded unperturbed, with no worries for the Islands' future. He had seemed prepared for Earth's move; she wondered if he had in fact foreseen it or was only trying to avert panic.

She heard voices up ahead, beyond the trees; people had gathered in front of the Habbbers' stone dwelling. The Habbbers would have to leave very soon if they were to join those on their ships above; she wondered how the crowd would react at seeing them go. She turned away and walked on until she came to the wider path in front of the Administrators' ziggurat.

More people had assembled here. Iris stood at the edge of the crowd. A few Administrators stood at the top of the steps, flanked by a few Guardians. Iris shivered. What would the Guardians do if Earth ordered them to act? Would they continue to obey their commander here, and understand that they were too few to act against the Islanders? Or would they try to take control of the Islands? It would be futile to do so, but many people could die or be wounded in the meantime.

"Listen, all of you!" one of the Administrators was shouting; his voice could barely be heard. Amir Azad was near him, gazing out over the crowd. "Pavel will soon have more to say. Go to your residences, keep your screens open for messages. There's no need to gather here."

The people below were silent.

"Very well, then. If you must wait here, we'll give you Pavel's next message as soon as we can." The Linkers began to retreat toward their entrance.

Amir had caught sight of Iris. He descended the steps as the people around him began to seat themselves. She waited until he had come up to her, then tugged at his sleeve as she led him away toward the trees.

In the dim light and the shadows, she could not see Amir's face clearly. "What are the Habbbers going to do?" she asked.

"What do you think? They're going to remove their ships."

Iris felt mingled relief and disappointment. "Then they can't defend them."

"That isn't what they've said," Amir replied. "They say that if they showed their true strength, many lives would be lost. They say that they won't take the lives of those aboard Earth's ships, who are only following the orders of those above them. Pavel is with some Habbbers now. They'll make the announcement with him."

Iris leaned against a tree. "There's more," Amir continued. "The Habbbers who are here now intend to stay. They say they want to go on with their work."

“But Earth asked them to leave.”

“Their ships were asked to leave. The Habbbers here will stay on the Islands. It’s a technicality, I suppose, but Pavel believes it may be to our advantage. There won’t be hard feelings and possible disorder, as there would be if our people had to watch them escape. It also shows that the Habbbers here don’t fear any action Earth might take.”

“But if their ships leave,” Iris objected, “that will show fear.”

“That’s not how they see it. They want to avoid a destructive conflict. They’re prepared to back down for now. But the Habs will warn Earth that if any harm comes to the Habbbers here, Earth will pay for it, and their presence may give us some protection as well.” Amir chuckled mirthlessly. “Why, I’ve been told that the Habbbers have enough materials on the surface now to continue with dome construction for some time, as a sign of good will and a demonstration that they believe this crisis will be resolved.”

She let out her breath. “Then we’re safe?”

“For now. Until Earth decides what to do next.”

She plucked at his sleeve. “You have a Link. Why aren’t the Linkers here speaking directly with those on Earth, trying to —” She paused. “Or have you already?”

“Oh, Iris.”

“Some on Earth might listen to you.”

“Don’t be a fool. First, it was blocks, closing us off from certain channels of information, so that we couldn’t ascertain Earth’s plans. We are now cut off completely. Do you understand? We’ve been severed. Even our cyberminds are no longer Linked with those on Earth.” His fingers dug into her shoulder. “I shouldn’t be telling you that. If others knew —”

“You know I won’t speak.” She shook off his hand. “What have we come to?” She recalled her meeting with Pavel. “What have I done?” she whispered. “I should never have gone to Pavel. Amir, we’ll lose.”

“That may be. I’ve thought so almost from the start. Then you came to Pavel, and I had second thoughts. I knew after that I wouldn’t change Pavel’s mind, and I wanted to protect you however I could. I believed I might be able to exert some restraining influence on him. I was wrong, of course, and now we cannot turn back. There’s still a chance that some of the Mukhtars will restrain others, that Earth will limit itself simply to rattling its swords at the Habs.”

Iris felt dizzy. The unreal atmosphere of the past several hours had infected Amir, too, and, as a Linker, one who had always dominated others, he probably felt that he couldn’t be touched. The world, to him, was only data to be manipulated and understood.

“Iris,” he said. She felt his breath on her face. “Pavel and the Habbbers with him will speak soon.” The Linker was speaking in Arabic now. “Come with me, to my room. We shall hear him speak together. We can still seize a bit of joy for ourselves at such a time, and the danger that may await us later will add some —”

“I don’t want to hear him,” she cried. She spun around and ran; she was panting by the time she emerged from the trees. She hurried along the path and passed some people sitting in a garden; someone had set up a screen there, and she could hear the calm, measured voice of Pavel Gvishiani. She moved more quickly until the voice faded.

After a while, she noticed that the Island had grown quieter. She imagined that everyone had suddenly vanished, that she was alone.

She rounded a bend and saw two women sitting on a bench. One of the women looked up; she was holding a pocket screen. She gestured to Iris wordlessly.

Iris walked toward the women and peered over their shoulders at the screen. A Habber ship was moving against the backdrop of space; in the right corner of the screen, eight tiny bright specks flickered. The Habber ships were leaving now, she saw, and Earth's ships would soon be near Anwara.

"They're leaving us," one of the women said. Iris saw that the woman was barely more than a girl. "I wonder what'll become of us now."

"You mustn't think that way," the other woman said. "The Project's still safe, we still have Habbbers here to help us. Pavel knows what he's doing. He got help here when we needed it, and he'll see that we're safe. You heard him. It was clever of him to persuade the Habber ships to leave while getting those Habbbers here to stay on."

Iris's mouth twitched. She could imagine how Pavel had twisted his words to convey that impression; he would even make the Habbbers' decision seem like his own, part of his plan. She stared at the screen and watched the Habber ship grow smaller until all she could see of it was its dimly glowing globe.

For a week after the departure of the Habber ships, there was no word from Earth or Anwara. Four of the arriving ships from Earth were in orbit around the planet; the others had docked at the satellite.

The Islanders had begun to resume their usual tasks. Chen was grateful for the work, which kept him from worrying, at least for a little while, about what Earth might do; it also kept him from thinking about Iris. During the past days, she had sunk into a morose silence, and he had been unable to cheer her even for a little while.

Before the departure of the Habber ships, Iris had convinced herself that Pavel Gvishiani's gamble would work; now, she seemed to have lost faith in his actions. Chen, on the other hand, could feel grateful that Earth had, at least so far, not reacted more harshly. A battle had been averted, and Chen had no way to affect the future course of events; therefore, he would do what work he could in the meantime and refuse to think about the matter.

He had been sent to the residence of the Habbbers to replace a few worn circuits in their door. He stood in the open doorway as his hands moved automatically along the wall bordering the entrance. He took off panels, tested components, replaced defective ones with new parts; the routine work, which he had done so many times before, was soothing. Occasionally, a Habber walked through the bare and empty room and greeted Chen; otherwise, the place inside was silent, with no sound of chatter in the halls.

Two Guardians sat outside on the grass near the path leading to the door; one of them threw back her head and laughed. The two seemed carefree enough. Chen supposed that they could afford to be calm; they had done no more than follow their commander's orders, as they had been trained to do. More important, the fact that they had thrown in their lot with the Islanders had eased more of the hard feeling against them.

The door's scanner seemed about to fail. Chen pried out the damaged component and installed another, then replaced a panel. He dropped the worn-out component in his bag; if he could not repair it, he might find use for bits of it elsewhere. Earth's stinginess had made all of the workers more economical.

Chen was about to pick up his bag and close the door when the wall screen inside the stone building lit

up. The angular, stern face of a dark-haired man stared into the room; Chen imagined him reaching for the door with one giant hand. Two Habbbers had just entered the room; they turned toward the screen.

“There’s something on the screen,” Chen shouted to the Guardians; the two got to their feet and hurried toward the entrance.

“People of the Cytherian Islands!” the man on the screen called out. “I speak for the Council of Mukhtars and all of the Nomarchies of Earth. You know me as Abdullah Heikal.”

Chen tensed as one of the Guardians gasped. Abdullah Heikal was a Mukhtar, and it was rumored that he controlled the Council of Mukhtars. Clearly, Earth had come to a decision, and a Mukhtar was addressing them directly, instead of having someone on Anwara speak for Earth. That was ominous.

“You Islanders have acted without consulting us, or our representatives on the satellite Anwara. Not only have you shamed us but you have also shamed yourselves. You have turned to Habbbers instead of seeking our guidance to overcome your difficulties. Do you think that we are so lacking in resources? Do you think that we are so lacking in power that we would let this pass?”

A few more Habbbers had entered the room; they were gazing impassively at Abdullah Heikal’s lean, implacable face.

“People of the Islands! You have conducted yourselves as if you were independent of us. Your Administrators have led you astray.” Abdullah showed his teeth. “But we know that most of you cannot be held responsible for this. Here is our message to you, and note it well, for it will be the last one I send. If you give us the Administrators who betrayed our trust, all of them, every man and woman on each Island’s Administrative Committee, we shall allow the rest of you to remain with the Project. If the Guardians among you will give up their commander, they too will be forgiven their actions. We know that many Habitat-dwellers still live among you. They will be allowed to leave peacefully, though the shuttles carrying them must dock at Anwara first so that we can be certain no Islanders are trying to escape with them. From Anwara, the Habitat-dwellers will be allowed to return to their homes.”

Chen moved away from the door. A Habber woman glanced at him; he could not read her expression.

“We shall provide new Administrators,” Abdullah continued. “They’ll study the situation and decide what future course is best. The Project will go on, under our control. Now, some of you may be thinking of resisting us even at this moment. I warn you that such resistance is futile. Our ships are orbiting Venus, and Anwara is under our control. All movement of shuttles to and from the Islands will be blocked. You’ll be cut off from the Bats, from Anwara, and from any sources of new supplies. If a shuttle moves, it will be shot down. If the Habbbers are so foolish as to defy our blockade, their ships will also be attacked. We are prepared to wait as long as necessary. You will have to give in eventually.”

Chen clenched his teeth. The Islanders could feed themselves; at worst, rations might grow short. But without new equipment, some of their machines would begin to fail, and their life-support systems could be affected. The Bats, cut off from the Islands, would be likely to give in first; the Islands could last for a time, maybe for years, but their resistance would condemn all the Islanders in the end. They would never be settlers. All they would have was the faint hope that Earth might tire of the expense of a seige, or that the Habbbers might find a way to break the blockade.

“You have heard my words,” Abdullah said. “We expect your reply within the next twenty-four-hour period. I warn you, do not resist us. May God guide you to a sensible decision.”

The image vanished.

Thirty

October 567

From: Administrator Pavel Gvishiani

To: All residing on the Cytherian Islands

Fellow Islanders! Less than two hours ago, you heard the words of Mukhtar Abdullah Heikal. I have now consulted with my fellow Administrators here and with the Administrative Committees of all the other Islands. I shall speak for all, since it was I who brought Earth's wrath upon us.

My heart is heavy. I believed that the Mukhtars would see the necessity for our action, and would accommodate themselves to it. I had good reason to put my faith in such a possibility. I have given my life to this Project, and now I have failed it, and failed you also.

We Administrators cannot take sole responsibility for the decision that now must be made. You must decide that, each of you, every adult, every specialist and worker, every Linker, and every child over the age of twelve. Enter or speak your vote into your screen, and we shall abide by your decision. If it is your will, the other Administrators and I will depart from the Islands and face Earth's punishment. The rest of you will, if the Mukhtar spoke truly, escape our fate.

I must speak frankly before you record your votes. Earth has said that if we are given up and the Habbars leave, the rest of you may remain with the Project. You all know how carefully Earth's governing body measures its words. You all know that the Mukhtars have kept to the letter of every public agreement they have ever made. I must say now that I find it curious that Mukhtar Abdullah Heikal has not promised settlements in the near future, but has only said that you will be allowed to stay here. Perhaps this means that Earth cannot, by itself, guarantee such settlements soon, and cannot promise them to you. Perhaps, on the other hand, the Mukhtar intends to give you as much help as you need, though, if that is so, it is odd that he did not say so, since such a promise would be an incentive to all of you to give in to him.

The Mukhtar has said only that new Administrators will be sent here, and that they will decide what course is best. This may mean that none of you will be settlers, and will only be allowed to labor for the future generations that will be. It may be that these new Administrators will be free to call in more Guardians to enforce their will here. Though I myself have brought Guardians to our Islands, it has been possible for me, along with a wise and compassionate Guardian commander who has come to share our dream, to limit the scope of their activities. Some of you have come to call individual Guardians friends, and have seen them for what they truly are — young men and women far from home who are lonely and can respond to an extended hand. Scorned and often despised on Earth, misunderstood by the people they must protect, unlikely to rise much further, is it any wonder that our dream can evoke a response in them?

If we give up the Guardian commander, a new officer will be free to order these Guardians elsewhere, for, if you recall the Mukhtar's words, he has promised only that they will escape punishment. Perhaps some Guardians will not be displeased at leaving us, but others will be saying farewell to new friends and loved ones. The Mukhtars might send no more Guardians here, or they might send those whose loyalty is unquestioned and who will act swiftly should any Islander give them cause. How well we all know, or have heard, that a small number of Guardians have come to regard their positions as an opportunity for exercising their more brutal instincts.

In spite of these reservations, I cannot advise you to ignore the warning of Mukhtar Abdullah Heikal. You must decide our fate and your own, and if you give us up, you will be safe from the worst consequences of our actions. You may not be settlers yourselves, but perhaps, someday, your children will be.

I must inform you of something else before you vote. The Habbars among us have promised to abide by your decision. Should you vote for surrender, they will leave the Islands. If you vote not to give up, they will stay here with us, and will continue with constructing the domes to the best of their ability, for there is enough equipment still here to build more domes. This means that, even during a siege, much of our work could go on. Earth threatens our shuttles, but not our airships, for they cannot leave the Venusian atmosphere and break the blockade. We will still be free to move among the Islands and down to the surface.

The longer the siege goes on, the more it will cost Earth, and the more likely it will be that some of the Mukhtars will see that another way must be found to resolve the dispute. The more progress we can make on the surface, the more likely it is that some of the Mukhtars will see that we were right, and that Earth has much to lose if it does not come to an agreement with us that preserves both Earth's authority and our chance to realize our dream. And if the Habbars remain with us, the Habitats, in order to insure the safety of these people, may have to act against Earth.

Consider this as well. Earth can take no action that endangers the Project's future existence. The Mukhtars can set up a blockade, but they cannot attack the Bats or the Islands directly without risking the end of the Project. The Mukhtars, who have had centuries to convince all the Nomarchies that this Project will enrich Earth and be its greatest glory, would never survive such a loss. The Habitats would recoil from such brutality and might aid Earth no more, and, without the Habs and with the costs of battles to endure, Earth would never see settlements on Venus and would inherit only ruins and dashed dreams. Earth cannot defeat us outright; it can only persuade us to surrender.

I tell you all this, fellow Islanders, and yet am forced to admit that surrender now might be the wisest and safest course for all of you. You would not be punished; the Mukhtar has promised you that. Though your lives here might be altered in many ways, and the course of the Project, without the Habbars' help, might be set back for a time, at least it would go on. Your other alternative is a siege of indeterminate duration with an uncertain outcome.

I have lived on these Islands all my life. My grandparents came here as workers. Like many of you, they had no learning; like all of you, they dreamed of a new world where the accomplishments of the Cytherians-to-be would add new luster to humankind's history and lead us another step along the road to our historic destiny — bringing life to worlds where no life has existed, and restoring life to worlds deprived of it. I have given my life to this Project. Yet I would also give up my life for it. If you so choose, I will accept Earth's judgment gladly and be at peace knowing that you are safe and that the terraforming of Venus will continue.

Fellow Islanders, you are as dear to me as my children would have been. You must decide my fate and that of my associates. Take an hour to consider my words, and then vote "aye" if you wish to surrender, "nay" if you are willing to endure the siege. So that there will be no doubt in your mind about whatever decision you take, at least sixty percent of you, rather than only a simple majority, must vote yes or no.

May God guide you. May God's will be done.

October 567

From: Fawzia Habeeb

To: All Guardians under her command

Private Communication

As you know, my fate, and yours, are now in the hands of the Islanders.

Let me make one fact very clear. Until and unless a Mukhtar or a higher Guardian officer issues orders to you directly, I remain your commander. If the Islanders decide to surrender, then that will be that. I'll give myself up and accept my responsibility.

If, however, the Islanders refuse to bow to Earth, you will all be faced with what some of you may regard as a dilemma. We were all sworn to follow the Mukhtars; if we remain here under such circumstances, we'll be violating our oath. So some of you will believe.

I'll point out a few facts. I have reason to believe that the Council of Mukhtars is divided on this matter, and that, by linking our fate to that of the Islanders, we are acting in the interests of the Mukhtars, whether some of them realize this or not. The longer a blockade goes on, the more it will cost Earth, and the more likely it is that the Council will back down. And do not believe that there is nothing we can do in the meantime except wait. Opportunities to force the issue are certain to come our way. If I were not sure of this, I would not have taken the risks I have.

I tell you this, Guardians. You may have a chance in time to be part of this new world if you show your courage now. Should the Islanders refuse to surrender, I shall not stop any of you from leaving this place and giving yourselves up to Earth. But consider this: You may not be punished, but you will never rise. Those who will command you will remember the past, and will not give you more than the lowliest of tasks. If, however, you stay, and stand with me, you may eventually gain more than you realize. Earth will be forced to make concessions, and the Islanders will find ways to reward you. Let me be clear; you have nothing to lose now by remaining here, but you may lose if you leave.

Think hard on these matters, and then ask yourselves which course is the right one. Ask yourselves if you were better off on Earth or Anwara, where people scorned and despised you, or here, among people who can regard you with respect and even sometimes with affection. Ask yourselves if I, a Linker and Commander, would risk my position in a futile stand.

My thoughts and prayers are with us all.

Chen stood in his doorway. The hall outside his room was filled with people shouting to one another in a multitude of languages. Some were arguing with fearful souls who were still undecided about how to vote.

Charles Eves moved through the crowd; he nodded absently at Chen as he passed him. "Why shouldn't we give up the Administrators?" one man across from Chen was saying. "Have you all forgotten how they used to treat us? We had to beg for anything we got. Oh, they might have changed their ways lately, but we all know how they really feel. They didn't act because they cared about us or the Project, but because they were afraid for themselves."

"What do you think?" a woman called out to Charles.

The bulky man rubbed his chin. "I see your point," Charles said to the man who had spoken. "On the other hand, Earth is trying to divide us, don't you think? And what's going to happen if we give them up? You heard Pavel. Besides, Earth would just send us other Administrators, and the next ones might be worse."

Iris was elbowing her way through the crowd; her face was drawn. Chen took her arm and led her into

their room; the door slid shut.

“Where were you?” he asked.

“In the common room. Pavel came on the screen just as I got there.”

“How do you think people will vote?”

She sat down on the bed; her head drooped. “They won’t vote to give up. I saw that much. They’ll let Earth set up its blockade. Oh, Pavel was convincing. He almost moved me to tears. I think he would see us all die if he thought he had lost. He would sacrifice all of the Islanders if he thought it would save the Project. I know what he is. I see what I might have become in him. Oh, Chen. What have I done? I’ll never forgive myself. I should never —”

“But you have done nothing you need to forgive.” He sat down next to her; they were silent for a long time. “What are you thinking of now?” he asked at last.

“I’m thinking of the child we’ll never have.”

“But we still might —”

She shook her head. “I think we’ll lose. At least we’ve spared her this. Earth will win, you know. The Islanders will stand up to Earth now, but a siege will wear at us. Others will begin to think about their children and what might happen to them, and they might be willing to give up if Earth spares the children. In fact, if I were Abdullah Heikal, that would be my next move — an offer to spare all the young children and their parents if the rest of us give ourselves up. That would divide us, I’m sure. I should never —” She bit her lip.

“There’s still a chance, Iris. I’d rather die here than be sent back. I won’t go back again. There was nothing on Earth for me before. Now, there’s even less.”

She stood up and opened a panel in the wall, then took out a bottle of wine. “I had this shipped a while ago,” she said. “I was saving it for your birthday.” She began to open the bottle. “We might as well enjoy it now. We won’t be seeing any more shipments from Earth.”

She poured the wine and handed him a glass. He sipped the ruby liquid slowly. “Do you know what I used to see sometimes when I thought about the settlements?” she asked.

“Tell me.”

“I’d see Lincoln, a new Lincoln, the way it should be, growing instead of dying. I’d see children able to reach for what they wanted instead of being held back. My line is going to end here, Chen. I won’t be able to keep my promise to Angharad.”

He pulled her over to the bed, then kissed her, tasting the wine on her lips. “I love you,” he said. There were tiny lines around Iris’s mouth and a speck of gray in the hair near her right temple; he had never noticed that before.

“I love you too. I finally love you the way you wanted me to.”

Pavel had expected to win, but even he had been surprised at the vote. Fewer than ten percent of the Islanders had voted in favor of surrender. He had been wise to leave the decision to them; they had thus committed themselves to his course of action and could not blame him if anything went wrong.

The Bats, except for those who had volunteered to stay on, were already being evacuated. The people remaining there could hold out for at least another year, and if necessary would shut down the automatic flights of the scooper ships.

Pavel nodded absently to the Administrators who were leaving his room; Amir Azad was the last to depart. Amir had not seemed pleased by the vote, but then Amir thought that the Islanders could not win. Pavel would have to speak to him privately; he did not want Amir to infect others with defeatism. They would all have to keep their spirits high to endure the blockade and outlast Earth.

Pavel crossed the room and pulled out his bed from the wall. He would have only a few hours to rest and prepare his reply for Abdullah Heikal and the Mukhtars, who could have avoided this situation by giving Pavel the authority he needed. Now, he would force them to give it to him.

He stretched out on his bed, not bothering to remove his robe. He had no victory yet, only a stalemate that Earth would not tolerate indefinitely. He would have to anticipate Earth's next move, and find a way to counter it. He closed his Link as he prepared for sleep.

His door chimed; Pavel tried to ignore it. "Iris Angharads," the door announced. Pavel pressed his arm to his forehead as he waited for the woman to go away.

"Iris Angharads," the door said again. Pavel gritted his teeth.

"Tell her to go away," he called out.

"Iris Angharads asks to be admitted. She says it is important."

The woman was getting above herself; it appeared that he would have to throw Iris Angharads out of the residence personally. "Let her in, then."

Iris hurried into the room. Pavel raised himself up on one elbow. Her shirt was rumpled; her hair looked uncombed. She had always been tidier about her appearance before. He had sometimes wondered what Amir Azad had seen in her. She was reasonably intelligent, but not brilliant enough to be alluring; she was moderately pretty, but her features were a bit too coarse for true beauty.

"I must speak to you," she said as she sat down on the floor in front of him.

She had been of use to him before; he wondered what she wanted now. "I have an important message to prepare for the Mukhtars," he said evenly. "I need my rest. Unless you have something important to tell me, your message can wait."

"It can't wait. I must speak to you now, alone."

The grim look on her face made him sit up. "My Link is closed," he replied, "and we are by ourselves. Say what you have to say, and be quick about it."

"You won the vote."

"You came here to tell me what I know?"

She shook her head. "I came here to plead with you, Pavel. You're not thinking of the Project now. Maybe you were before, but now you're thinking of yourself."

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you deluded enough to think any of us will gain anything if we don't resist Earth? The Islanders chose this course."

“And you made sure they would. How carefully you chose your words. I came here to tell you to ignore that vote.” She took a breath. “I came here to ask you to give yourself up to Earth.”

“You fool. That would accomplish nothing. You saw how the vote went. Earth now has a demonstration of how deep our feelings run.”

“I know that.” She brushed back some of her tangled hair. “You’ve shown Earth that a blockade will be long and expensive, that we’re willing to resist. Some of the Mukhtars may be looking for a way out of that action. If you give yourself up now, and take as much of the responsibility for the Islanders’ actions on yourself as you can, the Mukhtars would have an excuse to reconsider their blockade, and they would have you to punish. After that, they might find a way to allow the Habbers to return that isn’t too shameful. Give them a way to back out, Pavel. Give us a chance to save the Islands.”

“I am giving us all a chance,” he said. “It was you who told me that you believed the Project needed me. You helped to bring these events about.”

“I knew we needed the Habbers. I believed you when you said Earth might not act. Now it has, and I see what must happen.”

He said, “You give yourself a lot of credit, don’t you?”

“I’m used to analyzing atmospheric models, Pavel. I’m used to revising my projections when a new factor has to be considered. I thought Earth might not act, but now it has. Earth can be given someone to punish, and thus an excuse to back down. Or, they can blockade us, and eventually we’ll have to give in. You know we can’t exist indefinitely without new supplies, and Earth knows it also. The Project would never be the same after that. The Mukhtars would forever keep it on a very short leash. The hopes people had for the new world would begin to die.”

He struggled to control his annoyance. “There is another possible outcome,” he muttered. “Earth might give in after we demonstrate our resistance. The Habbers might —”

“You cling to that. Your concern for yourself is blinding you. Give it up! You’ll see how people will weaken when they see children grow sick because we won’t have the medicines to treat them. You’ll see how fearful we become when components we need fail, and we have no replacements. Do you have to destroy us all because you can’t give up your power?”

“How easy it is for you to talk.” Pavel got up and began to pace the room. “Easy enough to tell someone else to surrender himself.”

“I came to tell you that I would surrender myself as well.”

He turned to look at her, surprised.

“I helped bring this about, as you said. It might ease your own punishment a little if you can shift some of the blame to me. The Mukhtars will recall what my son did, and may find me a convenient scapegoat. At the very least, you would not have to face your punishment alone.”

He went to her side and stared down at her; she was gazing up at him steadily. “Do you imagine that they’ll let two prisoners share a cell, or perhaps even a bed? For me, that might be punishment enough.” He had wanted to wound her, but she seemed unaffected by his words. “At any rate, we don’t require your sacrifice, or mine. Our course is set. I’ll abide by the decision of the Islanders.” His mouth twisted. “If you still feel you must give yourself up, and Earth will have you, then make your little gesture.”

Iris lowered her eyes. “I would, if I thought it would do any good. But you know I’d be worthless to

them without you. I'm simply not important enough. I doubt I could make the Mukhtars believe that I bent the whole Project to my will."

"Earth will give in, and you'll see I was right." He tried to lend conviction to the words.

"How you cling to your power, even with so small a chance of keeping it."

He was losing patience with her. "Go on, Iris. Spread your doubts to others, and I may decide that you should be restrained so that you don't discourage us all."

"Do you think you can frighten me with that?"

He wanted to kick her. "Get out of here. I'll try to forget this and remember only your good deeds and past help."

Iris flung out her arms. "Listen to me! Maybe you've been here so long that you underestimate the Mukhtars. The Project's your own little world, and others call you Mukhtar here. Now, you're ready to risk that world in the slight hope you'll be able to keep it. What makes you think that the Mukhtars, for whom the Project is a more distant concern, won't let it die to preserve their own positions?"

"The Project is too valuable to them for that." Pavel sat down on his bed. "There are those among the Mukhtars who are looking for a way to come to terms with us. They'll grow stronger in time."

"Not if you don't give them a way to back down." Iris paused. "Let me tell you a story, Pavel. I may be only another specialist, but I've seen something of how people in power act."

"Have you now? Has your short-lived dalliance with Amir Azad given you such insight?"

"This isn't a story about the Islands. It's about Earth. It's a story you don't know. I imagine few people do."

Pavel sighed as he rested his hands on his legs.

"I was so grateful when I was chosen for the Institute," Iris began. "Whatever doubts I might have had about the way things were, I was grateful for that chance, and willing to pay for it with my loyalty. Sometimes, I would hear of some unpleasantness in another part of the world, and of harsh steps the Mukhtars might have taken to quell it, but that wasn't my concern. It's odd how you can hear of hundreds of incidents, and feel little, and then have one small incident near you open your eyes."

"What are you talking about?" Pavel said impatiently.

"There was a boy in my household named Eric. He died, very young, of a stroke. I was at school at the time. I mourned him. In time, the pain faded."

"How sad," he said mockingly, trying to ignore a twinge of apprehension.

"I didn't learn the truth about Eric until about twelve years ago, on the day my son fled from the Islands, in fact." She bowed her head. "Eric didn't die of natural causes. He was killed — murdered. There were rumors that a Counselor had been attacked in another town. Our Counselor had been given some sort of secret device to protect himself in case anyone tried to attack him. I know that people capable of planning such a weapon, something that would make it seem Eric had died of a stroke, could have given a Counselor the means to protect himself without killing his assailant. But it was easier just to get rid of Eric and eliminate the problem."

Pavel was able to compose himself before she lifted her eyes to his face. His neck prickled. The woman was from the Plains of North America; he had noted that fact long ago without paying much attention to it.

“Eric couldn’t have been much of a threat to anyone,” Iris continued. “All he wanted was a life in Lincoln as a shopkeeper. But he made one mistake and lost his life. When I actually grasped what had truly happened to Eric, I couldn’t believe that any Administrator could sanction such an act — not because of any scruples, but because it seemed so useless and risky. A Counselor had to use that weapon, a Counselor who had been trained to guide us and help us, a person who wouldn’t have had such a post unless he was capable of some compassion. A Counselor would be the one sort of person most likely to suffer guilt over the deed, a person who might finally turn against those who had urged the weapon on him. The Nomarchies depend on Counselors and the trust others have in them, yet here were people in authority willing to gamble with and pervert that important institution, to take the chance they could keep such a weapon secret, in order to eliminate a few troublesome people. Imagine what might have happened if word had leaked out about that device. It would have become useless, but more important, the trust people have in their Counselors, the Mukhtars’ most effective means of control, would have been destroyed.”

Pavel swallowed. “I’ve never heard of such a device,” he said carefully. “How is it you found out? Have you contacts in higher circles I know nothing about?”

“No,” she replied. “My bondmate told me of it. It was he who installed the device in our Counselor’s office. His reward for so doing was being given the chance to return to the Islands.”

So two people here knew of such devices. Pavel’s neck muscles tightened. He thought of inviting Iris and her bondmate to another meeting in his room, then dismissed the idea. One person dying suddenly could be explained, but two dying of the same cause in the same place would defy probability. His own device was useless to him even as a last resort if two people here knew of the existence of such weapons; they might tell their story to others and fuel suspicion.

“Chen’s suffered much guilt over Eric, and so have I, since Chen told me of this. I’d thought Eric’s death was unavoidable. When I learned the truth, I kept thinking that I might have been able to help Eric if I’d stayed in Lincoln, and kept him from bringing that fate upon himself.”

“It’s a very sad story,” Pavel said, “but I don’t see why —”

“Please, let me finish. After that, I spent some time checking records and statistics from the Plains, and I’ve found nothing that indicates any other such suspicious death for the past twenty years — there was no one dying of a stroke in a Counselor’s room. I told Chen my findings, and convinced him and myself that someone in authority must have seen reason at last, and rid the Plains of such an evil. We mourned Eric once more, and put the incident behind us. We swore that we would tell no one of what we knew, and Chen had never told anyone else. We knew that speaking of it to anyone would serve no purpose and might only put us in danger.”

“It serves no purpose to speak of it now.” Pavel closed his eyes for a moment. “Why have you told me this?”

“Because I have no other way to convince you that you’re making a mistake by not giving yourself up.”

“And how can this sad tale convince me?”

“If you push Earth too far, they’ll still win in the end, but their victory will cost them much. They won’t take the chance of ever losing control of the Project again. Someone will recall the weapon our

Counselor used, and might believe such things would be useful here to rid themselves of troublemakers slyly. If some were willing to use such a subterfuge against poor Eric, you can imagine what they might do to ensure future control of the Islands. But if you give yourself up, and allow Earth a small victory, wiser people may not feel the need to take such a secret and expensive action. Give the Mukhtars who might sympathize with us a chance to prevail. You've got to let them win something, and allow them to feel that the Project is still theirs in some way. Give them someone they can punish, and save the Islands."

Pavel did not reply.

"Will you go with me and surrender yourself to them?"

"Never."

Iris stood up awkwardly. "Then there's nothing more I can do."

"You might strengthen your resolve, Iris. I'm disappointed to see such weakness and doubt in you."

He watched her leave his room. It was unfortunate that she had told him her story. He might have to do something about her and her bondmate eventually. It was a pity; she had been useful.

He stretched out again, hoping he would be able to sleep.

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Thirty-One

The sirens began to wail. Those sitting outside the workers' residence jumped to their feet and hastened inside. Chen picked up his pace as he hurried toward the door.

The door closed behind him. "Just a puncture," one man was saying to another, though the pitch of the siren and its intermittent bursts of sound had already told them that. Chen could see the strain on the faces nearest to him. People were seating themselves at tables near the walls; few spoke. No one was looking at the wall screen, where a diagram outlined the place where a tiny meteorite had punctured the dome of Island Two. Once, the workers would have gone about their business unperturbed while joking with any new arrivals who seemed fearful as they all waited for the puncture to be sealed. This time, however, the puncture had reminded them of how vulnerable they were.

Four months had passed since Earth's ultimatum. During the first month, their spirits had been high, and the barriers that had often divided the Islanders from one another had disappeared. Workers joked with Linkers; Guardians shared meals with young Islanders. It seemed that nothing could touch them. The Habbars had continued with their work on Venus's surface, and there had been rumors that the Habitats would find a way to force concessions from the Nomarchies.

Now, wherever Chen went, he saw despairing eyes and furtive glances. They had enough food, and yet he knew that some were already laying away secret stores in their rooms, as if expecting the food and water to give out. Others had become obsessed with running checks on the Island's life-support systems, planning for the time when an irreplaceable component failed. People snapped at one another, or lapsed into sullen silences. Gradually, they were losing hope. They had deluded themselves into thinking that their defiance would cause Earth to back down quickly; now, as every day passed, they saw that Earth was prepared to wait them out. The longer they waited, the more they would lose; they might wait for nothing and be punished by Earth more severely in the end.

Chen had heard rumors of plots, of pilots trying to find some way of attacking the orbiting Earth ships or

of specialists preparing to move against the Administrators. So far, it was only talk, and Pavel Gvishiani or Fawzia Habeeb usually brought such talk to an end with a rousing address filled with strong words and assurances that the Mukhtars' will would weaken. Eventually, such speeches would have to be followed by actions, or the Islanders would cease to listen to them.

Earth did not have to act. In spite of Pavel's assurances, Earth had apparently assessed the situation accurately. The Nomarchies would not have to defeat the Islanders; the Islanders would defeat themselves. The Islands had become their prison.

Chen left the common room and walked down the hall that led to his own room. A few children sat near one wall, playing with some marbles; otherwise, the hall was empty. People no longer propped their doors open or gathered in the corridors of the residence. Even greeting a friend was hazardous now; one never knew if one would receive a smile, a scowl, or a curse. Some people resented any show of cheerfulness or determination, while others grew even more despondent when they saw that friends shared their fears.

He opened his door. Iris, as usual, was lying on the bed reading. When she wasn't reading or attending yet another useless meeting of her team, she was either staring into space or droning on about old times in Lincoln. There were times when her passivity had made Chen want to strike her; because he loved her and feared his own bottled-up anger, he avoided her as much as possible, returning to the room only to sleep.

He tiptoed past, not wanting to disturb her; she looked up as he sat down on the floor. Her eyes were blank; she had been drinking, he was sure. Iris's secret stores included as many bottles as she had been able to lay her hands on; she made him think of Angharad and the times he had seen Iris's mother alone in her courtyard with an empty bottle. He wanted to scold her, but restrained himself.

She rested her chin on her hands as she watched him. "You haven't carved anything lately," she said.

He gazed down at his hands. "Haven't felt like it. I don't like what I see in people's faces now."

"You could carve other things."

"Maybe."

"You could carve me. You've got the time now. Or are you still afraid you'll steal my soul?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I am." It was easier to admit to that than to tell her he had no desire to carve her doleful face. "Iris?"

"What is it?"

"Let's not eat in this room tonight, or the common hall. Let's go for a walk and eat in one of the gardens and maybe —"

"I don't feel like it."

"You never feel like doing anything."

"I do what I have to do. Anything else is a waste of energy."

"Well, you might feel better if you —" Chen stopped. He didn't want to endure more useless bickering. Once, he would have been happy to have been able to spend so much time with her; he was already looking for an excuse to leave the room again. He clenched his teeth, wondering if his love for Iris was

finally starting to die. He could not allow that, could not endure that defeat.

“I’m sorry, Chen,” she said. “I could stand it if I thought we had a chance. I don’t know what I’m more afraid of — that we’ll just go on like this, waiting, or that someone will suddenly try something mad.”

“You can’t do anything about that. You could do something about yourself. I can’t see you like this.”

She sat up. Strands of hair hung around her face; her green eyes seemed lifeless. “What you don’t know is that I helped to bring this about. I didn’t just go to Pavel that time to inform him about the workers — I told him what I thought he might have to do. It happens that what I said agreed with what he was planning, but I went along. I keep thinking now of how I could have prevented it.”

“You couldn’t have stood against Pavel.”

“It was I who went to the Habbers for him. I kept thinking I could make up for things, that I could help save this Project. Everything I’ve done —” She sank back on the bed.

Chen went back into the hall. He longed to get away from the building; he hoped that the puncture would be repaired soon.

“Chen!”

Tonie Wong was leaning against the opposite wall. He nearly gasped when he saw the bruise marring her cheek; her mouth was smeared with blood. He hurried toward her.

“I have to speak to you,” she said.

“You need a physician.” He touched her shoulder; she winced. “Come inside my room.”

“Not there.” She tugged at his arm and drew him along the corridor and then through a narrower passageway until they came to her door. She pulled him inside.

Her bed was rumpled; the floor was littered with empty food containers. The screen was streaked with dirt; clothes were strewn around the room. “What happened?” Chen asked. “Who did this to you?”

Tonie sat down on the bed. He sat next to her, angry at seeing marks on her beautiful face. “Chen, you have to help me.”

“Tonie, who did this?”

“Fei-lin.”

Chen was shocked. He was about to rise and summon help through the screen when her hand closed around his wrist. “Listen to me, Chen. There’s a plot. Fei-lin’s involved in a plot. This isn’t just talk, either. They’re going to do it, maybe today, maybe tomorrow. Fei-lin hid it from me, but I knew he was involved in something. He finally told me, and then he made me swear to keep silent, so I did. I was a fool, I thought he’d change his mind, and then I told him today that I’d go to someone and tell what I knew. That was when he beat me.”

“He did this, and no one heard? No one tried to stop it?”

“You know what it’s been like around here. We aren’t the only ones who’ve been fighting.”

“And he left you here like this?”

“He knocked me out, I think. He probably thought I couldn’t tell anyone then. Maybe he thought I was dead.”

“Tonie.” Chen felt her head; she grimaced as he touched a bump. “What kind of plot is this?”

“They’re going to take an airship to the Platform. They’ve got hold of some of the small nuclear charges we use for surface construction. They’re going to take them to the Platform, and then threaten to destroy it unless Earth backs down and calls off its blockade.”

Chen let his hand drop. “But why?”

“Don’t you see? Without the Platform, shuttles can’t get to us. The Islands would die before the Platform could be rebuilt or the damage repaired. It might set the Project back for good. Earth would lose, but so would we. We’d be cut off.”

“It’s mad.”

“I tried to tell him that. I told him the Guardians there would stop him. He said that by the time they knew what was going on, the charges would be set and they’d be powerless to stop him and the others. He kept saying that it was better than waiting, and that Earth would have to give in.”

“He’s willing to gamble all our lives on that?”

Tonie covered her bruise with one hand. “Mukhtar Pavel has gambled them already. Fei-lin claims this plot isn’t a gamble, that Earth can’t afford to see the Project damaged so badly. He says that it’ll show how determined we are, that we’d destroy all the Islands before giving in. He thinks once he and those with him make this move, then other Islanders will rally behind them and the Mukhtars will back down.”

Chen swallowed hard. In a way, it made sense. The example of Islanders choosing to die and destroy all that they had worked for rather than giving in might rouse other discontented souls on the home world. The Project would end, and the rule of the Mukhtars with it.

“What’s happened to Fei-lin?” he whispered. “How could he do these things?”

“He hasn’t been the same. He was so happy before the Earth ships came, when we were planning for our child. He couldn’t bear it when he saw —” She clutched at him. “Chen, you have to help me.”

“They have to be stopped.”

“Listen to me!” Her eyes glistened. “Don’t you understand? If they’re stopped, the Administrators here will have to punish them somehow. I can’t do that to my bondmate. I can’t betray him that way. He won’t listen to me, but maybe he will to you. I was going to you before when he beat me — I only wanted you to talk to him, I wouldn’t have —” Her voice was growing hoarse. “He’s always respected you, he might listen to you. You might talk him out of it, and then you could go to the Administrators together. He wouldn’t be punished then.”

“We could all be lost now. How can you care what happens to Fei-lin after this?” He gestured at her bruised face.

“I think of what he was before. It wasn’t his true self who did this to me. He was your friend. Haven’t we meant something to you? Didn’t we stand with you, on the Bat, when Iris was in danger? Can’t you do this for me, at least try? Fei-lin may already be sorry, and may listen to you. If he doesn’t, and you fail, then I’ll see that the Fei-lin I loved is no more, and I won’t try to protect him.”

He steadied himself. “You said you don’t know when they’re heading for the Platform. There may not be much time. I’ll have to go to the bay, in case they’re already there. If they are, I’ll try to talk to Fei-lin alone — if not, I’ll find him and talk to him. Let’s hope the alarm and dome puncture delayed them.” He took a breath. “You’ll have to do something for me too. Are you sure you don’t need a physician now?”

“I’m sure.” She dabbed at her mouth. “I blocked the worst blows.”

“If you don’t hear from me in three hours, you have to go to the Administrators and tell them the whole story. Ask to see Amir Azad — he’d listen to you. Wait here until you hear from me, and then do it. Promise me.”

“But —”

“You have to think of yourself, Tonie. You knew about this plot, and had suspicions, and you didn’t speak out. You’ll have to tell what you know and show what Fei-lin did to you if you don’t want to be punished yourself. Promise.”

She nodded. “I promise. You’ll convince him, won’t you? You’ll find a way, I know you will.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said as calmly as he could. “I’ve talked Fei-lin out of foolishness before.” He tried to smile. “By the time you go to the Administrators, you’ll probably find that we’re both already there, that it’s over. But promise me you’ll go.”

“I will.” A tear trickled down her face.

Chen touched her cheek, then hurried from the room.

Chen had to wait for only a few minutes until the alarm sounded again, telling the Islanders that it was safe to leave their buildings. As he raced toward the bay, Chen realized that he should have told Iris where he was going, and why. She, however, would have wanted to go to the Administrators immediately; he would have had no chance to save his friend from punishment.

He owed this to Fei-lin, who had stood by Chen when it counted. He owed it more to Tonie, whom he had once loved himself. He did not know what he would say to Fei-lin, but he would think of something. He would give the other man a chance to redeem himself, and prove that Tonie was right about her bondmate, and if Fei-lin ever hurt her again, Chen would see that he paid for it.

He was panting by the time he reached the bay. The wide door opened; some pilots and workers were going over a few of the cradled airships with their scanners. At the end of the row of cradles, he saw that a few people were already boarding the airship nearest to the lock; Fei-lin was with the group.

Chen was too late; they were already preparing to leave. If Tonie went to the Administrators, the few crews remaining on the Platform could be warned before the airship reached that destination; the bays there could be barred. He wondered if he could count on Tonie.

There was a small screen next to the entrance. Chen went over to the screen, checked to make certain no one was near enough to hear him, then whispered Iris’s code.

Her face appeared on the screen almost instantly. “Iris, listen,” he said quickly. “There isn’t much time. Don’t ask me how I know this, just assume I do. An airship is going to leave Island Two and head for the Platform. It mustn’t be allowed to land, or the Platform may be destroyed.”

Iris’s eyes widened. “But why —”

“Don’t ask. It’s a plot to pressure Earth into backing down or seeing the Project destroyed. You’ve got to go to Amir and tell him that no airship can be allowed to land at the Platform now.”

“But who —”

“I can’t tell you that now. Just do it. Go to Amir.” Another thought occurred to Chen. “But tell him that he mustn’t try to stop the airship from leaving here first. They’ve got explosive charges. If anyone tries to keep them from leaving, they could threaten this Island. This is important. They can’t know they’ve been found out until they’re away from the Island and can’t do any harm. Will you do it?”

She nodded; life had returned to her eyes. “I’ll go now. Chen, are you all right?”

“Don’t worry about me.” Before she could protest, or ask any more questions, he had thumbed the screen, blanking it.

He turned toward the bay. If he had any sense, he would leave now, but he had made a promise to Tonie. There was still a slight chance he might be able to help Fei-lin. Chen lifted his head and began to walk past the cradles toward the airship.

Six people had boarded the ship; he did not know how many others might be inside. Ten others were standing below the ramp; they were all workers. Somehow, they had managed to acquire nuclear charges and get them loaded onto the ship without attracting any notice, if what Tonie had told him was true; they probably had weapons as well, since they would need them to subdue the Platform crews. Eleanor Surrey was with the group; Chen was sure that she and the others could not have planned this alone. Someone had helped them, perhaps even someone among the Administrators; they could never have carried out their plan otherwise. He shivered. Whatever he thought of Amir, Iris could trust him, but Chen was already wondering how many might be involved in the plot. Even Amir might not be able to stop it.

He tried to compose his thoughts. Somehow, he did not think the Administrators, even Pavel, were capable of planning such an action. They would never destroy their handiwork unless there was clearly no alternative, and perhaps not even then. Pavel might not balk at sacrificing individuals, but he and the others could not destroy their entire life’s work.

Eleanor glared at Chen as he approached; he bowed his head slightly, and kept his face still. “What do you want?” the blond woman asked.

“Have to talk to Fei-lin here.” Chen waved casually at his friend. His hand shook a little; Chen lowered his arm and thrust his hand into his pocket.

“Well, make it quick.” Eleanor jerked her head up at the airship cabin in the cradle. “We’ve got a shipment to take over to the Platform, and we’ve got repairs to make there.”

Chen struggled for words; it did not seem that he would be able to talk to Fei-lin alone. He stared at his old friend. “You can’t go, Fei-lin.” He spoke in Anglaic, afraid that Eleanor would get suspicious if he used the Chinese she did not know. “Tonie’s ill. She needs you back in her room.”

“What?” Fei-lin seized Chen’s arm. “Is she all right? Tell me!” His eyes were filled with guilt and remorse; perhaps Tonie was right about her bondmate.

“She’s all right,” Chen said, “but she’ll need a physician. You should go to her — she’ll need you with her. She wants you to come. Someone else can take your place here.” If he could only get Fei-lin away from here, at least his friend would be safe. Chen could tell Fei-lin that Tonie had told him of the plot

when they were outside the bay; if Fei-lin saw that the plot was doomed, he might be willing to go to the Administrators with Chen. Chen would lie for Fei-lin if he had to, claim that the other man had come to him to expose the plot.

“Is it serious?” Eleanor asked.

“I don’t know. I was told —”

“Well, if it is, Fei-lin can’t do her any good, and if it isn’t, he won’t be needed.”

“She’s my bondmate,” Fei-lin burst out.

Eleanor’s eyes narrowed. “Something’s funny here. I never knew Tonie Wong to be sick. And if it was serious, they would have sent a Counselor here.” She motioned to two men. “Grab him,” she said in a low voice.

Fingers dug into Chen’s arms painfully; he looked frantically around the bay. He could still cry out for help, tell Eleanor she would never land at the Platform, but then she might threaten this Island.

Fei-lin stepped toward Eleanor. “Wait, you don’t have to —”

“Get him aboard,” Eleanor said. The two men, still holding Chen’s arms tightly, hustled him up the ramp. When they were inside, he was dragged to a seat and thrown into it. The other passengers watched him silently from their seats; he saw a few young people among them, including Eleanor’s son. They had to be mad if they had dragged children into this.

Eleanor was next to him, standing in the aisle. “Don’t expect any help from anyone else in the bay — they’ll just think you decided to come along for the trip. You lied, didn’t you? Didn’t you?” One of the men near her struck Chen in the face, numbing his cheek. “I want to know why. What do you want with Fei-lin?”

He was struck again; his mouth was bleeding. Fei-lin was protesting to Eleanor. The woman, Chen thought hazily, was a bit more perceptive than he had realized; if she guessed what he had done —

Chen spat out some blood. “I heard rumors,” he said. “Heard you were planning something, I don’t know what. Thought if I could get Fei-lin alone, he’d tell me what was going on and maybe I could talk him out of it, that’s all. We always tried to look out for each other.”

Fei-lin averted his eyes guiltily. Chen stared at Eleanor, hoping she would believe him; he had told her enough of the truth to be convincing.

“Well, isn’t that something,” Eleanor replied. “I suppose you thought he’d listen to you, and then you could both march off to Pavel Gvishiani and be heroes.”

“Something like that.”

“You’re stupid, Chen. Can’t leave things alone, can you. You think you’re something, with your schooled bondmate and your pretty carvings — think you’re special. But you’re stupid. A smart man would have tried to have us stopped instead of worrying about his friend. A smart man would have told somebody else about his suspicions instead of coming here.”

“Maybe he did,” one man muttered.

“No,” Chen said. His mouth felt cottony; his face was beginning to swell from the blow. “I wasn’t sure. I

didn't want to get Fei-lin in trouble if I was wrong."

Fei-lin was shaking his head. "You should have stayed out of it." He turned toward Eleanor. "Let him go. He won't —"

"He's in this with us now," Eleanor answered. "I'm afraid we can't let him go. Wait until he sees what we have planned." She waved Fei-lin away; the small man stumbled to a seat. Chen was almost disappointed that his friend had not defended him more, but Fei-lin couldn't fight everyone in the ship, and right now it was more important that the airship leave this Island. He wondered what Eleanor would do when she discovered that she would not be able to land at the Platform.

"Tie him," the blond woman said to her comrades. "I don't want any trouble from him. We're leaving now." She walked up the aisle to take a place beside the pilot.

The airship floated out into the upper Venusian atmosphere. Chen, with bound feet and hands, had been harnessed to his seat. He glanced at the passengers across from him; they had suited up, as had most of the other thirty passengers. Chen swallowed. There would be no suit for him, nothing to protect him if the ship's systems failed. The Islanders could simply let them drift, unable to land; Chen wondered how long the airship could last without recharging its engines.

He was a dead man already. He thought of Iris; she would have warned Amir by now. He should have left the bay when he had the chance. The other passengers would probably take out their frustrations on him when they found out that the Platform crews were aware of their plans.

He had caught glimpses of most of the people in the airship; except for Fei-lin, none was a person he knew well. Most of them were, in fact, people he had usually avoided, people with hard faces and wild or resentful eyes. They seemed just the sort of people one would recruit for a mission like this. Eleanor Surrey seemed somehow to be in command, and she had always been one who carried grudges, but even now, he could not imagine her planning this alone or with any of the people aboard.

He might be wrong about that. He had thought he understood Fei-lin, and yet the man had thrown in his lot with this group. He thought back on all the years he had known his friend, and began to see Fei-lin's cheerfulness and garrulous manner as a kind of camouflage that hid darker moods, but perhaps Fei-lin was less complicated than that. He might simply have been drawn into the plot and been unable to extricate himself later; had he been completely committed, he would never have revealed the plan to Tonie.

Now that Chen knew he was a dead man, it seemed important to try to understand what had happened and why. Fei-lin and the others might have simply become unbalanced; he could see how that might happen. He looked up at the large screen in front of the cabin. They were always closed in here. Domes covered the Islands; Islanders traveled in airships or shuttles, sealed off, with only screens, sensors, and diagrams in place of direct perceptions. On the Islands, however far you walked, you always came to the edge and always saw Venus's eternal, Parasol-created night. When you thought of anything beyond the Islands, it often seemed vague and formless; Earth, the Habs, Anwara, and space were encompassed by the phrase "out there" or "outside." The screens might show you one thing, but your eyes often contradicted it; it was as if the screens created another reality somehow. There were always intermediaries; while working, a machine or scanner or cybermind told you something, and you acted on that, and then had your judgment confirmed by another device.

Chen struggled with these slippery thoughts, trying to make them coherent; too many of them seemed just beyond his reach. For a moment, he understood the people aboard the airship; even the destruction of an Island, when they thought about it, must seem like something that would happen on a screen, something a

machine might verify for them, not an event that would actually affect them.

The Islands were always the same. The climate never altered; most of the Islanders measured their progress by what they were told rather than what they themselves saw. Earth had been more — Chen searched for the concept — more chancy, more indeterminate. He wondered if he could even endure Earth now, after being here for so long. When he had first returned, he had imagined himself disappearing among the crowds, becoming hidden even from himself. The Islanders were not only becoming prepared for Venus, they were also becoming unfit to live anywhere else. Earth, by now, would have overwhelmed most of them.

He glanced at the passengers nearest to him. Of course they were mad, but Earth had made them that way. They could not live anywhere else any more, so they would die instead. There was a logic to it.

Everything was a dream. They stared into the Cytherian night and dreamed. The settlements might have given them a chance to awaken, when the future Cytherians looked up through their domes and again saw the light of the sun.

His thoughts were fading. Chen tried to cling to them, but they were like gossamer threads dissolving inside him. He did not have the tools to think them out properly, or to hold on to them.

He became conscious of his body again. One side of his face felt paralyzed, his mouth was sore, and his wrists stung whenever he moved his hands. His hands were tied tightly in front of him; his legs, also bound, prickled.

A woman moved down the aisle, passing out weapons; she pointed one wand playfully at Chen as she passed. Chen gazed at the front of the cabin. The screen above the pilot was black; the pilot was hunched over her panels. Chen caught a few of her words; she was already calling to the Platform. He stiffened in his seat.

The pilot sat up, whispered to Eleanor, and then slapped another panel.

The amplified voice of a man filled the cabin. "... can't land," he was saying. There was a pause. "I repeat — your airship will not be allowed to land on the Platform. If you attempt to approach us, action will be taken against your ship. You cannot be allowed to land here. Neither can you land elsewhere unless you jettison all cargo and prepare to surrender yourselves."

Eleanor released her harness and stood up. Her face was livid as she stumbled down the aisle to Chen. "You warned them," she shouted. "You told them after all. How did you know?"

Chen was silent.

"How did you know?"

He glanced at Fei-lin, who was on his feet. "I guessed."

A man slapped Chen. Fei-lin grabbed the man by the arms. "Leave him alone," Fei-lin cried.

"We ought to jettison him," someone shouted.

"No!" Fei-lin protested. "Don't you see? He's a hostage now." He gazed apologetically at Chen.

"As if anyone cares what happens to him," Eleanor said, but her eyes had narrowed and she seemed to be thinking. "We might still be able to pull something out of this," she muttered in a low voice.

Eleanor turned around. “Teofila,” she shouted at the pilot, “can you take this ship down to the surface?”

The pilot nodded.

“Then do it. Now. Head for al-Anwar. The bay’ll admit our ship automatically, and once we’re inside, we won’t be stopped.”

“But why there?” a young man asked.

“Use your head,” Eleanor replied. “We can still threaten a dome, can’t we? And there are people down there, Habbers among them. They could be useful. We’ll have hostages, you see. Maybe the Habs will act then, and put some pressure on Earth. Are we agreed?”

A few people standing in the aisle nodded; they had no real alternative. If they gave themselves up, Chen knew, they were lost.

“Then sit down and strap in. If you don’t have your suit on, put it on now.”

“We’ll be tracked,” the pilot said. “The Islands’ll see where we’re going and track us. They’ll try to warn —”

Eleanor held up a hand. “Then we can’t let them know what we’re doing. We have to look like we’re in trouble, that something’s wrong with the ship, confuse them. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know. I could shut down automatic and take us down manually part of the way. I could lock the pumps, make it seem they’re not working. But it’s risky. I won’t have as much control, and the pumps could stick later on. We could be trapped down there.”

Eleanor laughed harshly. “What are we risking? Nothing we wouldn’t risk on the Platform. If Earth backs down, we’ll get away from the surface in another ship. If it doesn’t, it won’t matter anyway. You’re a good pilot, aren’t you? You can take us down that way.”

Teofila pointed her chin. “I can take us down.” She turned toward her panels as Eleanor strode up to the front of the ship.

The airship was still dropping. Chen wondered how long they would continue to fall. Teofila had taken the ship north, where the high-altitude winds were not as strong, before beginning the descent. He could hear nothing except the uneven breathing of those nearest him.

In spite of his predicament, he was beginning to feel a little respect for the pilot. It was true that, as Iris had once told him, the Venusian wind patterns had been altered by the planet’s increased rotation, and that made surface landings a bit less difficult, but Teofila was piloting a deliberately crippled ship. He wondered how a pilot had become involved in this business. Perhaps she was involved with one of the plotters; maybe she was simply nursing her own hatreds and resentments and had needed an outlet for them.

He stared at the screen. The ship’s outer lights still danced over black clouds; they were surrounded by a black fog. The Islanders might see through the pilot’s ruse, but somehow, he doubted it. The Administrators would have guessed what Chen had grasped when he first entered the Island bay — namely, that others must have been involved in the scheme besides those on the airship. With the threat to the Platform deflected, and the airship apparently in trouble and perhaps doomed, the Islanders were probably already trying to discover who might have aided the plotters. Those in the al-Anwar dome might not be warned in time.

Chen strained at his bonds. His fate was tied to that of the plotters now.

He squinted. On the screen, through a smoggy haze, he could see the eerie reddish glow of a dome. A sliver of light appeared and then widened as the bay's roof slid open to receive the ship. The cradles, except for one holding an airship, were empty. The pilot, Chen knew, was probably inside the dome's shelter with the specialists; pilots usually made themselves useful by fetching meals from the dispenser or picking up things while the specialists worked until it was time to take passengers back to the Islands. No one had been here to notice the approaching ship and override the automatic controls.

The airship sank into the light toward a cradle. The entrance to the bay was soon sliding shut above them. Eleanor was calling out orders to her companions. People donned helmets and moved toward the exit as they waited during the few moments it would take for air to cycle into the bay.

Fei-lin lingered in the aisle, then moved closer to Chen. "I am sorry you got involved in this," he said in Chinese.

"I'm sorry you did," Chen replied in the same language.

"Tonie told you."

"Yes," Chen said. "She didn't want to betray you, she wanted to speak to me. She thought I could get you away from the others, talk you out of this. She didn't want to see you punished."

"I thought — I was afraid —"

"She's all right. You did an evil thing, Fei-lin."

"I did not mean to strike her, but then — You'll see, Chen. The Habbers will make a move now. The Guardian told Eleanor —"

"Fei-lin! Stop jabbering!" Eleanor shouted in Anglaic. "Get ready to unload some cargo."

Fei-lin pulled on his helmet. Eleanor shot a baleful glance at Chen. "What a pity," she said. "The Linkers might lose both a dome and the man who makes all those pretty carvings for them. You'd better hope that they can convince Earth to be smart." The blond woman turned toward the pilot. "Leave all channels open. We'll listen through our suit comms. You know what to say, don't you? You'll have to change it a little."

The pilot nodded. "It'll be close to what we were going to announce from the Platform. I can make changes."

"And make sure they keep the Habbers down here in mind." Eleanor put on her helmet, waited for the cabin's lock to cycle open, and stepped inside.

Chen was alone with the pilot. On the screen, he could see the dome's entrance at the far end of the bay; the wall separating the cradles from the rest of the bay had already lifted itself. In a few moments, three carts carrying helmeted people and the boxes holding their deadly cargo were rolling toward the entrance.

"It won't work," Chen said. "They might not get inside."

The pilot turned toward him. "Who's going to stop them?" she said. "No one in there has weapons. They'll let them in, and if they don't, we can take care of the dome from out here. Eleanor will make it very clear that they'll be in less danger if they cooperate."

The carts were approaching the entrance; the wide door began to open. Teofila had been right. The carts rolled inside.

Teofila turned toward her panels. “Time to send a message.” She turned on the comm. “People of the Islands!”

Chen shuddered at her hard, forceful voice.

“People of the Islands,” Teofila repeated. “Turn on your screens, open all your channels. I have a message for you.” The pilot was slouching in her seat again, and had removed her band. Chen suspected that she was not transmitting her image; her disembodied voice emerging from a blank screen would be more intimidating.

“I see that you’re receiving me now. Listen well, Islanders.” The pilot sounded exultant. She seemed to be enjoying this, knowing that thousands of people were waiting to hear her. Maybe that was why she had joined the group; perhaps she had only wanted attention.

“My name is Teofila Marquez,” the woman continued, “and by now, you will know where I am and who has accompanied me here. You should have realized how determined we were. You should understand that we’re now prepared to die if necessary. Earth wants to save this Project. Earth had better understand that, if it does not give in to our demands, the Project will be lost to them.” This part of Teofila’s speech seemed rehearsed; her voice had a practiced tone.

“It is time for you to send a message to Earth,” Teofila said. “Tell Earth that if it doesn’t call off its ships, this dome will be destroyed — this dome, and the people inside it. Now let me outline exactly what that means. If even one dome here is destroyed, the Project will be set back. And let me remind you that some of the people inside al-Anwar are Habbars. If they die, the Habbars won’t be likely to aid the Project further, and Earth, as we all know, does not have the resources to complete construction in a reasonable length of time. On the other hand, the Habs may finally act to save the people here — they may force Earth to come to an agreement now. You see what that could mean. The Project may be saved, but Earth will suffer a great humiliation and will lose control of this Project, for the Habbars will expose the weakness of the Mukhtars.”

Teofila appeared to be improvising here. She was, Chen thought, clearly rising to the occasion and the altered circumstances.

“And let me make another point.” Teofila sat up. “If Earth does not come to an understanding with us now, there will be others who will take actions similar to ours. We’ll only be the first. Be certain that there are others who will sympathize with us. Earth will be taking a great risk if it ignores our demands.” She took a breath. “Here is what we want. We must have a public agreement from Earth, transmitted on all public channels so that the Mukhtars are bound by the promise. Earth must call off its ships. It must leave control of the Project in the hands of all the Islanders here now. It must allow us to call on the Habs for help, and must come to an agreement with the Habs to allow this. It must pardon all of us, and punish no one now on the Islands, or the Bats. In return, we will honor the Mukhtars and give them their due. Our allegiance will remain with Earth, and we shall issue a statement praising them for their wisdom and forbearance, for strong ones can afford to be merciful.”

Teofila was silent for a moment. It might work, Chen thought. It might very well have worked if they had planted their charges on the Platform. He shook off the thought, which seemed to corrupt everything the Project had been meant to be.

“I warn you,” Teofila went on. “Do not move any machines down here with your bands or Links. If you do, the consequences will be severe. Tell Earth that it had better not trick us with its agreement, for there

are five among us, including myself, who can read and understand such contracts and ferret out any loopholes. You must leave the channel to Earth open, so that we can listen to negotiations. You have two twenty-four-hour periods to settle this. If you do not, the dome goes, and so does everyone inside.” Teofila slapped a panel. “Well, that’s it,” she said. “They’d better listen.”

Chen tugged at his bonds, feeling helpless. “Are you really prepared to die?” he asked.

The pilot turned her seat toward him. Her face might have been pretty in repose; now, her fine features were contorted, and her dark eyes were slits. “Do you doubt it?”

“You could get away. You ought to check the ship, see if the systems are still working. You might have damaged them coming down.”

She seemed unmoved by the suggestion. “If we succeed,” she said coldly, “then we can leave in that other airship, or have one sent here. If we don’t, no one’s leaving anyway.” She leaned back in her chair, showing her profile to him. Her face was hard; she had already embraced the darkness.

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Thirty-Two

Tonie Wong lay on Amir’s bed. A physician had been summoned to treat her; a drug had been given to Tonie to make her sleep. She had come to Amir just after the Linker had alerted Pavel and the Platform crews; Iris had listened as the small woman gasped out what she knew of the plot.

Iris could forgive Tonie for trying to protect her bondmate. It would be harder to forgive her for having put Chen in danger. She would never forgive her if Chen died.

Iris swallowed. The pilot Teofila Marquez had said nothing about Chen during her fearsome speech. The names of those who had been aboard the plotters’ airship were in the bay’s records; Chen had entered the bay before their departure and had vanished. She had to assume Chen was still alive, that the plotters would not have killed a possible hostage, that Fei-lin might have found a way to protect his old friend.

The people inside the domes on the surface had been warned that the airship might attempt a landing there, but too late for any of them to have attempted to escape before then. The plotters’ ruse, if it had been a ruse, was successful; the Administrators had been too busy worrying about who might have aided the plotters to think of the domes or the threat the apparently troubled airship might pose to them. There had been time only to tell the people inside the domes not to offer a futile resistance that would put them in more danger.

“We have to go,” Amir said. “Pavel wants us with him now.” He opened a drawer, took out a white robe, and pulled it on over his shirt and pants, as if he were going to a formal meeting.

Iris got up and followed him out of the room. They hurried along the corridor until they were in front of Pavel’s door. Several people had gathered in the hallway; the Guardians in front of Pavel’s door allowed Iris and Amir to pass.

They entered the room. Pavel, also clothed in a white robe, was seated on one cushion. Two Administrators sat in one corner; three Habbers were near them, and Iris recognized Erena, the Habber whom she had begged for help. Fawzia Habeeb sat next to Pavel, one hand on the ceremonial wand at her waist; her eyes narrowed as she looked up at Iris.

“What’s this woman doing here?” the Guardian commander said without preliminaries.

“Let her stay,” Pavel replied. “She’s played her part in recent events.” Iris looked away guiltily as Pavel motioned toward the cushions in front of him. “Please sit down.”

I’ve failed, Pavel thought. There would be no forgiveness this time. He steadied himself; he would have to look as though he were still in control of events.

The plotters could not have acted alone. Without aid, they could never have laid their hands on the charges and weapons they needed without raising questions. Of all the people on the Islands, Guardians were most likely to provoke a possibly violent confrontation in order to settle matters. He suspected a Guardian’s hand in all of this, perhaps even Fawzia’s, though she would have been careful to distance herself from the plot through a trusted intermediary; even the plotters might not have known who was manipulating them.

If the dome and the people inside it were destroyed, the Habbers, who hated bloodshed, might withdraw their aid from the Project, while Earth, seeing the damage done to the enterprise, would have no reason not to attack the Islands directly in retribution. Earth could, of course, give in, but that would depend on how many enemies the Mukhtar Abdullah Heikal and his circle had, how many in the Council of Mukhtars would be prepared to let Abdullah be a scapegoat. Pavel did not want to count on that.

If he could find some way, however, to save the dome and make the plotters give up without forcing Earth into a humiliating agreement, both Earth and the Habbers would be grateful to him. He could then point out to Earth that other Islanders might be moved to make similar threats in the future, but that Earth and the Islands could settle their differences before that happened. Earth would retain its pride, and the Project could proceed. The plotters could be punished, if the Mukhtars demanded it, when the time was right. And, most important to Pavel himself, he would make it clear to Earth that it was he who could control the Islanders and deflect such threats. It was a slim chance, but his only one.

All of these thoughts ran through his mind in an instant. Pavel cleared his throat. “You’ve all heard the words of the pilot named Teofila Marquez,” he said. “She and her cohorts are now in control of the dome called al-Anwar. I’ve consulted with Administrators here and on the other Islands through my Link, and they’ve agreed to allow me to do what I think best now.” Once, he had had to extract such power from the other Administrators; it had taken years to assert his dominance. Now, he thought bitterly, they were all too willing to let him take responsibility for anything that happened. If he failed, Abdullah Heikal would not be the only scapegoat.

“I’ve replied to Teofila Marquez,” Pavel went on. “I told her we would consider her demands. There are fifteen Habber geologists, botanists, and engineers inside the dome, along with one pilot and five Islander scientists who are now prisoners. They, quite sensibly, did not try to resist. A worker named Liang Chen is a prisoner aboard the airship with Teofila Marquez. He has not been harmed. Liang Chen confirmed this himself.”

“He’s alive,” Iris said; her eyes glistened with tears.

Pavel looked at the woman. The recent months had aged her a little. He thought of what she had told him during their last talk; maybe he should have listened to her.

“It was Liang Chen who warned us of the danger to the Platform,” Amir said. “Had he not alerted us, the Platform instead of a dome would have been threatened, and consequently all of our lives. He would, I am told, not have been a prisoner now if he had not been trying to save a friend from throwing away his life in this scheme.”

“All this talk!” Fawzia burst out. “It’s time to act. My words are for the Habbers.” She glared at the three Habbers who were present. “Fifteen of your people are threatened with death. Don’t you have the

power to force Earth into an agreement if that would save them?”

The Habber named Erena plucked at the collar of her plain gray shirt. Her pale eyes were staring at Fawzia as if the commander were a member of another species. “I’ll answer your question,” the Habber said, “as any one of my people would answer it. Yes, we have the power to force Earth into an agreement. We have more power than they suspect. But we will not use it.”

Fawzia sneered. “You’ll let fifteen of your people die? You won’t defend them at all?”

“If we defend them, many people will die in any battle with Earth. We can demonstrate that Earth could not win against us, but I suspect that your people would not accept such a demonstration. We could protect ourselves, but Earth would throw its forces against us, even knowing it was futile, and insist on testing us. Many would die. We won’t soil ourselves with the blood of others.”

“You’ll let fifteen Habbbers die,” Fawzia said, “without fighting for their lives?”

“It’s true,” the Habber woman responded. “We’ll let fifteen die if hundreds, maybe thousands, can be saved. Our friends inside the dome would not want us to act otherwise, they would not buy their lives with the deaths of others. Earth, on the other hand, would send thousands to their deaths to preserve the interests of a few. I’m content to let others judge which is the more civilized course of action.”

“I think you have no defenses,” Fawzia said. “I think you don’t want Earth to see how weak you really are.”

Erena smiled. “We shared your heritage before we changed ourselves. We know only too well that our desire for peace alone would not have protected us.”

“And if those Habbbers die,” Fawzia went on, “what will you do then?”

The Habber shrugged. “Those of us here will share your fate. We won’t flee from those we’ve tried to help, or appeal to the Earth ships to let us pass unharmed. I don’t imagine our people would then want to have much contact with Earth or whatever’s left of this Project.” She glanced at Pavel. “You may tell your Mukhtars that, if you think it will make any difference, but this is your dispute, not ours.” She paused for a moment. “Those people inside the dome could speak to Earth directly, yet they want you to speak for them. Why haven’t they asked to speak for themselves?”

Pavel’s lip curled. There were times when the Habbbers had impressed him with their brilliance, and other times when they seemed to have no more sense than a child. “That should be obvious,” he said evenly. “They want us to be part of their deed. They want Earth to see that this won’t be just an isolated incident, that, to win against Earth, we have to stand with them now. It strengthens their position.”

Only a Habber could have asked such a question. The woman simply did not seem to grasp the situation. Habbbers pretended there were no problems, or ran away from them. That was probably their total defense against Earth — that they could simply retreat into their Habitats and run away. They were like sheep who were protected from wolves only because the wolves needed their tools and also knew that the sheep, if necessary, could escape them.

Pavel had to find a way to buy time, and there was little time left. The plotters either had to be brought to believe that they had won without really winning anything, or they had to be made to back down when they saw that they might have to die to carry out their threat. At least some of them had to be bluffing, had to be unprepared to take that final, deadly step. He wished that he had time to study their profiles, to look for weak spots and possible avenues of persuasion. If he could resolve this matter somehow, and save both the dome and Earth’s pride, then the Mukhtars would find it difficult to take steps against him.

“Here is our dilemma,” Pavel said aloud. “The dome is threatened. The plotters intend to set their small nuclear charges around its perimeter. The radiation produced would be minor if an explosion occurs, but it could set off a severe quake in that region. The Habber seismologists have assured me that the other domes can withstand a powerful quake, and I am assuming they’re right, but we’ve asked the few people in those domes to leave. We have to deal with Earth over this, yet I don’t know how we can. The Mukhtars may risk losing the dome. We may not be able to save the rest of the Project or ourselves unless we distance ourselves from that act instead of passing on demands and negotiating for those below. But if we don’t negotiate, we lose anyway.”

Fawzia leaned forward. “Then contact Earth,” she said. “Let those plotters think you’re working for an agreement. Tell them that you’re even willing to send some of your Administrators down there to the dome to negotiate with them as well.” The Guardian struck her thigh with a fist. “You won’t be sending Administrators, of course, but Guardians. Let me and some of my people get inside, and we’ll find a way to disable them. It’s time to act, Pavel. It’s the only way.”

Pavel sighed. Such a plan, dangerous as it was, might work. Fawzia, of course, would take the credit for it if it did. If she had actually had a hand in the plot, she would also have a chance to erase anything connecting her to it; he doubted many of the plotters would survive, and some of their captives might die as well.

“I’m afraid,” he said, “that we have no other choice.”

“No!” a woman cried out, Pavel glanced at Iris, who had spoken.

Iris knew what she might be able to do. Her hands grew colder as she considered her idea, turned it this way and that, almost hoping to find some flaw in it that would keep her from speaking it aloud. She thought of Chen. Do I love you enough to do this? How can I do less than what you would do for me, what you’ve already done?

“You mustn’t send the commander,” she said. “It’s too dangerous. Perhaps I can speak to them.” Her voice trembled a bit. “I know some of them, you see. Administrator Amir punched up the list for me. Wu Fei-lin was a friend. I’ve spoken to Eleanor Surrey. I’ve helped a couple of others there with problems in the past. They might listen to me.”

“Why should they listen to you?” Fawzia asked. “There’s only one message they want to hear, and you can’t deliver it. They’ll only close the channel.”

“They’ll listen to me if I go there, to the surface.”

“Iris,” Pavel said softly, “are you willing to take such a risk?”

“My bondmate is down there,” she answered. “I must try to save him. I might be able to convince the others to let him go. There are Habbers there, and if they die, their people will turn from us. I have no love for Habbers, as you know, but my son is one of their people, so I have, however much I dislike it, a bond of sorts with them. And there are five young people among the plotters who are hardly more than children. They don’t deserve to be in danger because of their parents’ madness.” That cursed Eleanor had dragged her own son into the plot; she might try to appeal to Eleanor’s feelings for the boy, but wondered how many feelings such a woman would have. She grimaced; she herself had failed her own son. “Perhaps I can convince them to let some of the captives return, and once they do that, they might reconsider other things as well.”

“They might become more implacable,” Fawzia said. “Why should they listen to you?”

“I know them. I know that some will be having second thoughts now, and I can find a way to use that.”

“They might only believe,” Fawzia said, “that you’re trying to save that bondmate of yours and would even lie for him. They won’t listen to you. You have no power here, no standing.”

“But they wouldn’t believe that of me,” Amir said. Iris looked at him, too surprised to speak. “I’m an Administrator. I can speak for all of us, I can tell them that we’re negotiating with Earth already. I have some minor practice in this sort of discussion in, of course, less drastic circumstances. They’re not likely to believe I’d go there if I thought there was danger. Let me be blunt — I’ve never had a reputation as a brave man. I would be willing to travel there with Iris.”

“You think you can settle this with talk?” Fawzia shouted.

Iris forced herself to look directly at the Guardian. “Better my way than yours,” she said as calmly as she could. “You’d put everyone inside the dome at risk. I wouldn’t put them in any more danger than they’re already in. We’d have a chance to settle this peacefully.” She turned toward Pavel. “Please let me try.”

“I won’t stop you,” Pavel said. “I’ll speak to Earth. I’m hoping they’ll agree to negotiate over an open channel just to keep the plotters calm when the Mukhtars realize we’re trying to deal with this matter in another way as well. You’d better prepare to leave as soon as possible. We have less than forty-two hours left.”

The pale yellow light that passed for an Island dawn shone down on the people who had gathered in front of the ziggurat. Those standing on the steps parted as Amir and Iris descended; Iris nodded absently at those who greeted her. It seemed that over half of the Island’s residents were present, and several people had climbed up into the trees lining the path.

At the edge of the crowd, a man with a Linker’s jewel stood next to a small cart. He stepped aside as Iris and Amir approached. “The pilot Hussein Said has volunteered to take you to the surface,” the Linker said. “He’ll be waiting for you in the bay. God go with you.”

As Iris climbed into the cart, the murmuring of the assembled Islanders died. She looked back. Pavel had come out onto the steps to speak to the Islanders; as he lifted his white-robed arms, he seemed like a king about to address his subjects.

“Fellow Islanders!” Pavel called out in an amplified voice. She saw him touch the tiny microphone at his neck. Amir pressed a panel and the cart rolled forward; the crowd was soon hidden behind the trees. “Fellow Islanders,” Pavel repeated; his voice was already distant.

She and Amir had taken tablets so that they would not have to sleep; there had been no time to put implants containing the drug into their arms. The cart passed a small garden, and Iris was struck by the vivid, colorful beauty of the flowers; the pill was already imparting a false euphoria. She supposed that the plotters had taken similar substances to fuel their determination, and that worried her. Eleanor and the others might have only a shaky grip on rationality; Iris, who had not slept at all during the past hours, would have to keep her wits.

“Why did you decide to come?” Iris asked Amir.

“I have little to lose. If we succeed, I might strengthen my own position. I might even end up dealing with Earth in Pavel’s place. If we don’t, I’ll be no worse off.” He reached for her hand and held it for a moment. “You may need me there,” he said more gently.

God, help me, she prayed silently. Mary, guide us. Touch Eleanor’s heart, give us success. Save Chen

who loved me as Joseph loved You. She suddenly wondered if she should be making an act of contrition, preparing her soul for the worst. Not yet. She would carry her sins a while longer, she would assume that she would live and have time to repent. But not now, she told herself; repenting too soon was like giving up on this life. Mary would understand. The Holy Mother might not take kindly to seeing Iris cling to a faith that she had doubted and had not practiced for years only because she was thinking she might die. Mary, let this world be built, and let Chen live, and let me see my daughter born, and I'll ask nothing more.

The dome above had grown brighter; Iris lifted her face to the light.

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Thirty-Three

Teofila had left the amplifier on; Chen recognized the voice of Pavel Gvishiani. Earth was having second thoughts, according to Pavel; Earth was willing to negotiate. Abdullah Heikal would be speaking to Pavel directly. In the meantime, as a sign of good faith, an airship with a pilot and two passengers was on its way to the surface; the passengers would not have risked the trip unless the crisis was being resolved.

Eleanor had seemed oddly amenable to receiving those visitors; Chen recalled how pleased she had sounded over the comm. But Iris was on that ship; now she would be in danger as well.

The pilot turned off the amplifier. The voices of Pavel, Mukhtar Abdullah, and others were now a low murmur as they spoke of agreements and argued over provisions. Teofila laughed harshly. "We were right," she said as she turned her chair toward Chen. "Even a threat to one precious dome and a few people is enough to make them back down. Just think what we might have wrung out of them if we'd taken the Platform."

Chen was afraid to reply. The strain on the pilot was beginning to show; she babbled intermittently or sat in a sullen silence. He could only guess at the mood of those inside the dome.

Teofila thumbed open her comm again. "And don't forget," she called out, interrupting the voices for a moment, "that we aren't to be punished. Better not leave that out." She closed her own channel. "See what happens when people are ready to act? Abdullah Heikal himself has to listen." She leaned back. Her fingers drummed against the armrests as she jiggled one leg.

Chen was silent, not wanting to provoke her.

"Why don't they put their talk on a public channel?" The pilot scowled; her mood had changed again, going from fierce, triumphant joy to anger and resentment in an instant.

"You're able to listen in," Chen pointed out quietly, "and so are the people inside."

"Why don't they put it on a public channel so that everyone can hear it?"

Chen swallowed as he thought of something convincing to say. "Because they'd want to keep it private until everything's worked out," he answered. "You wouldn't want them distracted by messages from people with other ideas. They'll make it public when they're done."

This comment seemed to assuage the pilot. Her leg stopped moving as her chin dropped toward her chest. "You shouldn't have come to the bay," she said. "You shouldn't have interfered."

"Maybe not. Right now, I'm hoping your plan works even more than you are." Chen paused. "Wu

Fei-lin said something to me about a Guardian and Eleanor before he left.” If he kept the pilot talking, he might ease her dangerous mood. “I’ve been wondering what he meant.”

“A Guardian officer helped her lay out the plan. I only saw the man once. Most of the others don’t know who he is.”

“I wouldn’t have thought a Guardian would get involved in this,” Chen said.

“He pointed out that the only weapon we had was the Project itself, that because Earth can’t afford to see it destroyed, we had to be willing to destroy it. The Mukhtars would have lost then. It makes a lot of sense, when you think about it. They practically handed us that bit of leverage when they refused to attack and just set up a blockade.”

Chen’s fingers were numb; his bonds were cutting off his circulation. His feet tingled as he wiggled his toes. “My bondmate’s aboard that other ship,” he said. “She may want to see me. I don’t want her to see me like this. Can’t you untie me? I can’t do anything to you.”

“You could try for the other ship when it lands. You could try to overpower me.”

He shook his head. “I don’t have a suit. I couldn’t survive out in the bay very long. And if I try to fight you, you could just call out to Eleanor and the others, and I wouldn’t want to provoke them. They have to stay as calm as possible now, or we’re all lost.” He gazed at her in appeal, hoping that he could touch some residue of feeling in her. If he could win even a bit of her empathy, his own danger might be lessened. Teofila might come to her senses long enough to have some influence on the other conspirators.

“I guess there’s no harm in it.” She stood up and went to him, cutting at the bonds around his hands until he was freed, then stepped back quickly. She held a wand aimed at him as he struggled with the ropes around his legs; his fingers throbbed with pain. He stared at the welts on his wrists, then stood up and stamped his feet, which felt full of sand. His legs were unsteady; he sat down again.

Teofila perched on an armrest across the aisle. “Don’t tell Eleanor,” she whispered. He nodded. He had already driven a small wedge between the pilot and the other conspirators. “When they come back to the ship, I’ll have to tie you up again.”

“No one’ll care by then,” he murmured. “You’ll all be returning to the Islands in triumph.” He tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. “Do you have anyone on the Islands — a child, a bondmate?”

“I had a bondmate once. Our contract lapsed, and we didn’t renew it.” Her voice was gentle now. “I’d visit him sometimes when I took a ship out to Island Nine.”

“He’s still there?” Chen asked.

“He went back to Earth a long time ago. He said the Project was dying, that Earth was barely maintaining it, and only for show. He offered to renew our bond if I went with him, but I wouldn’t. I couldn’t go back.” She frowned. “I know about you, and what happened with your son — I guess everybody does. Did you and your bondmate ever have another child?”

“No, we haven’t. We’re going to have another, though, as soon as —” He shrugged. “Did you know my son Benzi?”

“No.” She brushed a hand through her cap of short black hair. “Knew one of the pilots who went with him. Luckily for me, I didn’t know her too well.” She let out her breath. “God help me, I can understand why they went now. The Habbers never did anything to us, however creepy they sometimes are.” She widened her eyes and stared at him with a supercilious Habber expression. He smiled. Teofila smiled

back. At last she was seeing him as another person and not simply as a prisoner.

“You’re right,” he said. “They never did. It might not be a good thing to threaten some of their people this way.”

She jumped to her feet. “Maybe they’ll act now, and force Earth to give in.” Her voice was harsh again. “Stay in your seat, and keep your harness on, and don’t move. I don’t want to hear anything out of you.”

The friendly mood had been destroyed. The pilot strode back to her seat and sat down, keeping her wand aimed in his direction.

The wall dividing the cradles from the bay was rising again. On the large screen, Chen saw the airship that had arrived only a few minutes ago. Iris, he thought, you shouldn’t have come.

Teofila was already arguing with the other pilot. “I don’t care,” she said. “There’s no reason for your passengers to come in here.”

“Iris Angharads wants to see her bondmate,” a man’s voice replied. “She wants to be sure he’s well.”

“He’s well enough. She can see him later.”

“Teofila.” Eleanor’s voice had broken in over the comm. “Let her see her precious bondmate. Just leave the channel and amplifier completely open, and make sure they use Anglaic. We’ll be listening to everything they say.”

“Very well.” Teofila fidgeted. “I don’t want any tricks,” she said to the other ship. “I’ll be watching. No arms, understand?”

“We have no arms,” the other pilot replied.

Teofila glanced back at Chen, waving her wand as she motioned to him to stay in his seat. She turned toward the screen. Two suited figures were descending a ramp, their faces hidden by helmets; the taller one hovered over the smaller protectively. Amir Azad, Chen knew, had come with Iris; he felt a sharp pang, hoping the Linker could protect her.

The two disappeared from the screen. Teofila got to her feet and went to the cabin’s lock, covering it with her wand. At last the door opened. The two people stepped inside; Iris reached up and took off her helmet.

Chen was about to release his harness and stand, then recalled Teofila’s earlier warning. Iris hurried toward him; she dropped her helmet in a nearby seat before she knelt and reached for his hands.

“You’re all right,” she said softly. “But you’re hurt.” She touched his bruised face lightly.

“Iris.” He held on to her. “I wish you hadn’t come.”

“Don’t worry, I’m safe. We’re all safe. Nothing’s going to happen.” She seemed to be speaking as much for Teofila’s benefit as for his. “This will all be settled,” she said as she turned slightly toward the pilot. “Pavel is optimistic.” He could hear the tension in Iris’s voice and wondered if Teofila had caught it too.

Amir had taken off his helmet. Teofila tapped her foot as she trained her weapon on the Linker. “Why did you come here?” she said harshly. “Earth is talking to the Islands now — what can you possibly do here?”

“We want to talk,” Amir replied. “Administrator Pavel thought that the presence of intermediaries here

might be necessary. Our presence should reassure you that everything's being done to bring this matter to a happy conclusion."

"You'll have to talk to Eleanor," Teofila burst out. "I don't think she'll listen. You're up to something." Chen saw that the pilot was beginning to work up another rage. "You're just trying to confuse us."

"We've put ourselves in your hands," Amir said. "We wouldn't have done so if we didn't think these negotiations would be successful. We're even willing to stay until this matter is concluded."

"You may not have any choice," the pilot replied.

"Send them inside," Eleanor said over the comm. "We're in the shelter. We'll hear what they have to say." Chen hated the sound of her voice, and was even more fearful for Iris.

"I love you," he said to his bondmate, not caring who heard.

"I love you too. It'll be all right. We'll be back on the Islands before you know it."

"I'll make a carving of you. It's about time I did."

Iris tilted her head. "You're not afraid you'll imprison my soul?"

"I don't think anything could imprison it."

She rested her cheek against his hand, then stood up and crossed to the lock. "Our pilot will stay in his ship," Amir said to Teofila. "He has no desire to provoke anyone."

"Good. And I don't want him talking to me, either."

Iris cast a glance at Chen, then turned toward Teofila. "You don't need Chen here," she said. "Couldn't you let him wait in the other ship with our pilot?"

"No," Teofila snapped. Iris closed her eyes for a moment. "He has no suit," the pilot added more quietly. "He has to stay here."

Iris gazed at Chen one last time before she put on her helmet. The door opened; Amir followed her into the lock. A knife twisted inside Chen; he wanted Iris safe and was powerless to help her.

Teofila was suddenly at his side. She tied his hands swiftly and then bound his feet.

Inside the dome, a bright yellow light illuminated the reddish, rocky land. The cart rolled forward as its treads ground against the rocky soil. Diggers and tractors, idle now, were distant, indistinct shapes near the shadows at the dome's perimeter.

They passed a gully where a bush had taken root; the plant's leaves were spread wide, soaking up the light. Iris could now see patches of grass; microorganisms were enriching the soil, and the land was beginning to yield to its gardeners. Iris was suddenly angry at those who were willing to destroy the years of effort.

Another bit of green caught her eye; these plants were small, but in a few years they would be the beginnings of a grove. She could finally imagine how the settlement would be, with its rolling hills and green land. She could see it as her home.

The cart moved on until they were near the shelter. The square, windowless building was almost directly under the dome's center; two other carts were parked at its entrance.

Amir braked the cart and they climbed out. Amir leaned over, resting his helmet against Iris's; they had kept their suit comms closed. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine."

They walked toward the entrance. The door slid open, then closed behind them; they waited in the lock until the inner door opened.

A row of cots stood against the wall of the large room. The opposite wall held a screen; a table and chairs were in the center of the room. A few people were resting on the cots, but didn't seem to be asleep; others, all of them armed, sat at the table with Eleanor.

Iris took off her helmet. Fei-lin, who was sitting at the table, looked away.

Eleanor ran her fingers along her wand. "How nice," she said, "to see you two together again." She smiled maliciously at Amir, who had also removed his helmet.

"Greetings," Amir said calmly. "I would like to verify that those you are holding are safe."

"They're safe," Eleanor said. "Odd that the Habbars don't care more about what happens to their friends here."

"Let me assure you that they do."

"Then they ought to be putting pressure on Earth. The Mukhtars drove us to this."

Amir cleared his throat. "The Habbars don't want to act rashly and distract Earth with a confrontation when it is so likely that you'll win your demands without their interference. I'd like to see that the people here are safe, and assure them that they'll soon be out of danger."

Eleanor motioned with her head toward the back of the room. "They're behind that door." Two armed men stood near the door. "We put them in a storeroom. They've been given some food and water. We put their suits and helmets in the lab, of course, in case anyone got ideas about trying to escape. Antonio." A burly man with a moustache stood up. "Take the Linker to the prisoners. Let him see them for a minute, and then bring him back out."

Antonio glanced sheepishly at Iris as he began to lead Amir toward the door. She had helped Antonio when his quick temper had caused trouble with his team of workers; she had argued an engineer out of giving him a reprimand. Apparently he was remembering that; Iris hoped it would be useful to her.

Eleanor continued to stare at Iris. The blond woman's face was slack with fatigue; her hands were clenched so tightly around her weapon that her knuckles were white. Iris balanced her helmet on her hip; the silence was growing oppressive. Amir and Antonio disappeared behind the door.

"I hope," Iris said carefully, "that you'll release the people you're holding soon. You see, Earth is already prepared to reach an agreement with you — they have no choice. But we'll need the Habbars' help to continue the Project with any real hope of success. The Habbars on the Islands don't like seeing their people placed in jeopardy here. They might withdraw from the Project even if you have your agreement with Earth."

Eleanor's face was white; Iris had to be careful here. "The Habbars, you see," she continued, "won't bargain for the lives of the ones here. You know how strange they can be. We're responsible for their safety, we asked them to return. They stayed with us even after Earth threatened its blockade and their ships were forced to withdraw. They felt that at least they had nothing to fear from Islanders. Now, you

hold some of them here, and they wonder if that might happen again in the future if we want some concession from them — it's why they won't bargain now." Iris took a breath; that sounded reasonable enough. "If you continue to hold prisoners here until you have your agreement with Earth, the Habbers may not want to aid us any more, and Earth may find it hard to give us enough to replace the loss of that help. Your victory may be an empty one." Sweat was trickling down the back of Iris's neck; her face felt hot.

"She might be right." One of the armed men in the back of the room was speaking. The door behind him opened as Amir and Antonio entered the room again. "We could let them go. We still have —"

"Be quiet!" Eleanor cried.

Amir came to Iris. "They're all right," he said. He faced Eleanor. "May we sit down?"

"There's the floor," Eleanor replied.

Iris and Amir sat down awkwardly; the bulkiness of their suits made it difficult to squat and bend. Iris glanced at the screen. A tall, red-haired woman was sitting there, listening to the low murmur of voices over the speaker.

"You shouldn't have come." Eleanor's voice had grown more hoarse. "You won't change anything. We made our demands clear."

Amir said, "We came to ask —"

"I know. Iris says she wants us to release the people we're holding. Well, we're all going to stay until we have our agreement."

"Please listen to us anyway," Amir said. "What do you have to lose by listening? You've won, you know — the rest is only detail, things to be sorted out. You've got most of the Islanders at least partly on your side, however reckless some might have thought your action was." His voice was warm and soothing; Iris could almost believe Amir herself. "I assume that you've already planted your charges."

Eleanor tapped the tabletop with one finger. "We set the charges near three of the rods. Once they're set off, the dome will collapse, ripped apart, and the outside atmosphere will flow in." Eleanor said the words as though she had memorized them. She waved at a small box on the table in front of her. "There's the controls. Once they're triggered, the charges can't be disarmed."

Iris gazed at the box; her mouth was dry. "I see," Amir said. "Well. There is another matter I'd like to bring up, if I may."

Eleanor nodded.

"You have five young people among you. I can well understand that they often are influenced greatly by adults, especially loved and respected parents." Amir turned toward one corner of the room, where Eleanor's son Wilhelm was standing with a young girl. The blond boy's eyes shifted nervously; Iris wondered if Wilhelm had come here out of conviction or only because he feared his mother. "My Link informs me that the oldest is no more than fifteen. Couldn't you let them go back to the Islands?"

Eleanor clenched her hands. "They joined us willingly. They'll return safely later, if what you've told me is true. Why should they go back now?"

"As a gesture," Amir answered, "so that Earth will see that it's dealing with reasonable people who are concerned for the lives of their children."

“As if Earth cared for children.”

Iris looked up into Eleanor’s eyes. “You are a mother,” Iris said softly. “Your son has already proved his courage. Let him and the other young ones return. You lose nothing by granting that, and others will be more sympathetic to you.” She held out a hand. “Wouldn’t you remove a possible source of strain by knowing they were safe? I was a mother myself, Eleanor. I would find it hard to maintain my resolve if I thought my actions might endanger my child.”

Eleanor’s smile was bitter. “Your son broke his bond, and preferred the Habs to you.”

“We could let them go, couldn’t we?” Fei-lin said.

“Be quiet!” Eleanor burst out.

“What harm can it do?” another man asked.

“Why don’t you ask your son what he thinks?” Amir said.

Eleanor’s hands fluttered. “I’ll stay,” Wilhelm said, but his statement lacked force.

“They could return in the ship that brought you here,” Amir said. “There’s no need for your pilot to stay, with two other ships here. You could let Liang Chen go as well. He —”

Eleanor jumped to her feet. “No!” She tapped her foot. “The young ones can go. I’ll go that far. But not Chen.” She gazed down at Iris. “You came here for him. Oh, yes, I see why you two want to save him. You didn’t want his ghost haunting your bed.”

“There’s no reason to keep Chen,” Fei-lin said.

“Shut up!” Eleanor cried out. “You’ve caused enough trouble.” She turned back to Iris. “Why should you be concerned for Chen if Earth’s going to give in? Have you been lying to us?”

Iris was afraid that Eleanor might become uncontrollable. “We’re here, aren’t we?” Amir responded. “We wouldn’t have come if we weren’t sure everything would be settled. We’re just trying to remove a few complicating factors.” His words had a sarcastic edge.

“The children can go. Chen stays.” Eleanor spun around. “Gabriel, bring that pilot we’re holding out. She can take the young ones back in her ship. We can afford to let her go, just as a gesture.”

Iris bit her lip. The children would be safe, but Chen was still a hostage.

Eleanor had embraced her son before he left with the other young people; the affectionate gesture had made Iris feel even more bitter. Eleanor did not deserve to have her son live. Iris pushed that savage thought aside. Wilhelm had not deserved such a mother.

A few people were fetching food from the dispenser. The mood in the room had eased, now that the young people were safely gone. Iris started as a man at the table jostled the control box with his cup. She tried to stay calm. The box could probably be knocked to the floor without triggering the controls; arming the charges would require a precise procedure, for safety’s sake.

She was thirsty. She bent her head and pushed her chin against a small button inside her suit collar. A tube slid up from the collar to her lips; she tasted water and then soup. The tube retracted.

Someone moved in front of her. She looked up into Fei-lin’s face. “Here,” he said as he handed her a fruit bar and a cup of water.

“Thanks.”

“Did you see Tonie before you left?”

“Yes.”

“Was she all right?”

“She was, no thanks to you.”

Fei-lin covered his eyes for a moment. “I can’t believe I struck her. I’ll make it up to her when this is over. We’ll have our child. It might already be started inside her — we were going to have our implants put back in after Earth decided to move against us because we didn’t know what might happen, but we never got around to it, so she might be pregnant by now.”

A lump rose in Iris’s throat; she could hardly breathe. She thought of the daughter she and Chen had been planning. “Get away from me,” she managed to say. Fei-lin retreated toward the cots; too late, she saw that she might have rebuffed a possible ally.

Iris leaned toward Amir. “How much time do we have left?” she asked him in Arabic.

He was silent for a moment as he listened to his Link. “Thirty-three hours,” he replied. Her hand rose to her lips; she had not realized so much time had passed.

“Speak in Anglaic,” Eleanor said. “I don’t want any tricks.” She stood up. “Olivia, isn’t anything coming in over our channel?”

The red-haired woman next to the screen shook her head. “I told you. They said before that they had to take matters under advisement and consult with —”

“That was at least two hours ago.” Eleanor tapped her booted foot impatiently. “What’s taking them so long?”

“Any contract takes time,” Amir replied, “especially one as important as this.”

“You’ve got a Link,” Eleanor said. “Can you hear anything?”

Amir shook his head. “The Mukhtars are probably consulting with one another about the public announcement.”

Iris stood up clumsily; Amir gripped her hand as he got to his feet. “Just where do you think you’re going?” Eleanor asked.

“Just stretching my muscles,” Iris said. She held on to Amir as they walked around the room. Her eyelids felt gritty from lack of sleep. The people perched on the cots were growing restless again; she wondered if some of the plotters were having second thoughts. Her bones ached; she was exhausted from waiting. Even though the tubes inside her suit could take care of her wastes, she felt soiled and dirty. “I’d give anything for a shower right now,” she said to Amir.

He drew her into a corner, away from the people nearby. “It is time to plead with our antagonists once more,” he whispered rapidly in Arabic. “The Guardian commander once again has Pavel’s ear. If we do not find means to alter the situation here, the Administrator may be forced to unleash her upon us.”

Iris clutched at his arm. “Get over here!” Eleanor suddenly barked at them. “Say your little endearments out loud in a tongue we can all understand.”

Iris and Amir walked back toward the table. “I must speak to you again,” Iris said to the blond woman. “May I?”

“Very well.”

There were a couple of empty chairs at the table. Iris sat down directly across from Eleanor while Amir seated himself at Iris’s left.

“I have been mistaken about you, Eleanor,” Iris said. “You have qualities of leadership I had not suspected. It occurs to me now that we have not made proper use of them. I shall be sure to point this out when we are all back on the Islands.”

A smile played about Eleanor’s lips.

“You’re going to win,” Iris continued. “The problem is that you must allow Earth to grant your demands without shaming itself too much. A wise leader knows when it’s time to give in a little. You must consider the Project’s future now. We’ll need the Habbbers. They may not help us unless you let the Habbbers you’re holding go.”

“You’re telling me nothing new,” Eleanor said.

“Yes, I know. I also know that only your concern for Venus’s future has brought you to this action, so I ask you to consider that future now. Earth will grant all of your demands, and will be bound by its public agreement. You’ll return to the Islands unpunished. But if the Habbbers leave because you refused to release their people and used them as pawns against Earth, we’ll be unlikely to see settlements in our lifetime. You’ve seen al-Anwar here, you’ve seen what the Habbbers have been able to do for us. People could live under this dome in little more than a decade or so, and there will be other domes, enough for all of us who want to settle, but we need the Habbbers to make that possible.”

“You specialists are schooled,” Eleanor said. “Haven’t you picked up what the Habbbers know by now?”

“Some of it, but we need their resources as well. They came to us when we asked, we owe them more than a threat against some of their people. Eleanor, I have no love for the people who stole my son from me. I’ve cursed them a thousand times for that. But we must show mercy now.”

Iris looked around the room. She could see that her words had touched some of the conspirators, but it was Eleanor she had to convince. She focused on Eleanor again.

“They’re too useful to let go,” Eleanor said. “Maybe their people will act if we keep them.”

Eleanor, Iris saw, did not care about the Project. She should have seen that from the beginning. Perhaps Eleanor had once shared that dream; now, she was lashing out at the Nomarchies and the Islanders who had frustrated her own petty ambitions.

Iris would have to try another approach. “You have won,” she said. “The Habbbers do not have to stand against Earth for you to win. You can hold them until you have your agreement. Even those who feel your action was mad will have to admit that you were right. You’ll win some honor for yourself and your companions here — you may even be appointed to a Committee and given some power.”

Eleanor was smiling a little.

“But if the Habbbers leave us, and the Project is again set back, the Islanders will remember that you and those here brought that about as well. Earth may promise not to punish you, but many Islanders may not feel bound by such a promise.”

Eleanor's eyes widened. "Let them go," one man said.

"If I do," Eleanor said, "then what do I bargain with?"

"You have me," Iris said, "and you have Amir. We're here as Pavel's representatives. If we can help bring this matter to a happy conclusion, it strengthens Pavel. If we don't, he'll lose. He's in a very bad position. He has every reason to settle this, not because he cares for two lives, but because, through us, he sees a way to save himself as well as the Project." This was a line of reasoning Eleanor could understand.

"We can let them go," Antonio said.

Eleanor did not move. More would be needed to convince her. "There's something we were told not to tell you," Iris said, "but I see I must now. A few seismologists ran some new projections after your pilot sent her message. If you destroy this dome, you may set off quakes that could persist for decades." This was a lie, but Iris knew that none of the conspirators was likely to know enough to detect that.

Amir started; Eleanor glanced at him suspiciously. Iris caught only a glimpse of Amir's puzzled, surprised look before he recovered himself. "You shouldn't have said that," he murmured.

"The other domes could be damaged," Iris continued. "At best, there would be a constant threat of a breach with so much seismic activity." She had just piled another lie on top of the first. "It wouldn't be possible to build here for a long time, and these mountains are the best possible site for settlements now, for several reasons." That, at least, was the truth. "You see, Eleanor, your position is even stronger than you realize. Pavel didn't want you to know it, because he feared you might demand even more. You can afford to let your prisoners go."

Eleanor swung around in her seat. "Is this true, Olivia?" she shouted to the red-haired woman by the screen. "You're a specialist."

The woman shrugged. "I'm not a seismologist." She leaned toward the screen's speaker. "Pavel's been listening to us. He says that now that we're aware of our true situation, the Mukhtars are prepared to draw up an agreement as soon as our prisoners are safely aloft. He says that they must have that concession first, to make it seem that Earth hasn't given in under duress, even though he's well aware that we could still ruin the possibility of having settlements in this region."

Pavel was playing along with the lie; Iris repressed a sigh of relief.

"Let them go," another woman said. "We don't need them now."

"All right," Eleanor said. "Fetch their suits. We'll let them go."

"You can send them back with your pilot," Amir said. "Liang Chen could go along. There's no reason to hold him now."

"No." Eleanor's eyes narrowed as she turned toward Iris. "They'll go back with your pilot. Since you know we've won, you won't mind."

Amir covered Iris's hand. "No," she said, feeling defeated. "I don't mind."

The voices coming over the comm had told Chen that the prisoners would be returning in the ship that had brought Iris. There would be no freedom yet for either of them. He tugged at his bonds.

Teofila was running a check on the ship. "A sensor's out," she muttered. "Pumps are still jammed too."

“I could help you,” Chen said, “if you untied me.” Teofila did not reply. “I won’t make trouble, and I can’t get to the other ship without a suit. I know a little about a ship’s systems. It’d give me something to do.”

She stood up and walked over to him. “I suppose you could help.” She cut off the bonds around his wrists. “There’s tools and spare components in the back. Ever worked with pumps?”

“A few times. I tried to learn as many trades as I could. That made me worth more to the Project, the way I looked at it. I’m guessing your problem isn’t the pumps, but the components controlling them. I don’t think you could have done enough to the pumps to damage them.”

He got up; his feet prickled with pain. As he walked toward the back of the cabin, it occurred to him that he could overcome the pilot. One swift blow on the back of her head with the toolbox would do it. He could put on her suit and make his way to the other ship; the other pilot could conceal him before the hostages and their captors arrived.

None of that, however, would help Iris, and too many things could go wrong. He couldn’t risk it. Eleanor would get suspicious if she called to Teofila and heard no answer; Iris would be in even more danger.

He picked up a toolbox and walked back down the aisle.

Getting the twenty remaining captives to the airship bay had taken hours. Eleanor had insisted on bringing them out in groups of two or three; a few of her confederates had then taken each group to the bay in turn. Eleanor was taking no chances; each group of hostages had been forced to surrender their helmets again as soon as they were inside the ship’s lock. There had been no chance for the prisoners to overcome their captors or to wrest the control box from Eleanor. Such a possibility had been Iris’s last faint hope.

A few people had taken off their suits and had stretched out on the cots; the room was beginning to smell of sweat and unwashed bodies. Iris’s head swam; the pill she had taken before was wearing off, and she longed for sleep.

A muscle in one of Eleanor’s round cheeks was beginning to twitch. “Why haven’t they said anything yet?” Eleanor asked. She was pacing the floor again, still in her suit; she crossed to the table and sat down, then drew the control box closer to her.

“They will,” Amir said; he was sitting next to Iris. His eyes were on the box. “They’re probably just waiting until the prisoners are safely on the Islands.”

“Turn on the amplifier,” Eleanor said to Olivia. The red-haired woman pressed a panel. The silence seemed to fill the room.

“Maybe they’re thinking up some way to attack,” a young woman said, “and we’re just sitting here.”

“They can’t attack,” Iris said wearily. “There’s no way. They’d have to come through the bay. Your pilot would have time to warn you even if she couldn’t override the bay circuits.” But she was thinking of Fawzia Habeeb, who might by now be convincing Pavel that there was no reason not to try an attack. Pavel might come up with a pretext for sending another ship here.

The young woman who had spoken rested her hands on the table; her fingers danced nervously over the tabletop. Iris wiped at her face with one gloved hand. The longer they waited, the more likely it was that people would become irrational. Her suit felt heavy. She longed to take it off, but somehow felt safer in it, as if it were armor.

“I have another communication from Earth,” Pavel said over the comm suddenly. The people on the cots quickly roused themselves; Amir reached for Iris’s hand. “Earth is willing to grant you a public agreement. Earth will be bound by it, as you know, once it is sent out over public channels. But there is still a problem.”

The relief on the faces of the plotters was fading.

“The agreement,” Pavel continued, “can’t be made public as long as that dome is still threatened. It’s partly a matter of pride, making it public under such circumstances, but there’s a legal matter involved as well. An agreement made under duress may not be seen as binding. Earth could make it public now and then claim that it’s void later. This is for your own protection as well as Earth’s. You must remove that threat so that the Mukhtars can enter into the agreement freely.”

“Words!” Eleanor screamed. “Earth is good with words. Why can’t they put in another clause to cover that?” She twisted in her seat. “Olivia, you said you knew about contracts. Why didn’t you see this coming?”

Olivia’s face was white, making her freckles seem even darker. “I didn’t think —” She waved her hands helplessly.

Amir leaned forward. “If the Nomarchies make an agreement with you now, they’ll be admitting publicly that they can be threatened into such agreements. It’s not a good precedent. You can see that.”

“You must have known this could happen,” Eleanor said, “when you came here.” She pulled the box toward her chest. “Can’t they put in a clause to cover this?”

“They could,” Olivia replied, “but they could claim that clause had been put in under duress, and therefore —”

“Words!” Eleanor screamed. She clutched at the box. “It’s all a trick. If we give up before we have the agreement, there won’t be anything to stop them from acting against us.”

Iris had to calm the woman. “Eleanor,” she said as gently as she could, “they’ll make an agreement with you. Pavel said so, and Amir and I are witnesses to that. We could argue that this makes what he told you public in a sense. If Earth tried to punish you, which I doubt, you’d still have the right to an appeal, and we’d tell everyone what we heard at your hearing.”

“You’ve won,” Amir said. “Earth has always kept to the letter of all agreements. The Mukhtars know all too well what happened in the past when they weren’t kept. Their power rests on such trust. Make this concession.”

“Concessions.” Eleanor’s voice was roughened by fatigue. “They nibble away at us with concessions.”

“Earth will concede this much,” Pavel said over the screen comm. “If you dismantle your controls and disarm those charges, you can stay there until the agreement is read over all public channels. If anything displeases you, you’ll still be able to arm your charges again. That ought to reassure you.”

Iris’s head jerked up. She saw what Pavel was trying to do. Once the charges were disarmed, and the controls disassembled, there would be nothing to stop an attack on the dome by Guardians. She was sure that the Guardians had the means to force their ship into the bay if necessary. By the time the conspirators knew they were under attack, they were unlikely, in their present state, to be able to reassemble their charges. Pavel would win. She, Chen, and Amir stood a good chance of losing their lives one way or another during an assault, as did the conspirators; Fawzia and Pavel would sacrifice

them to take the dome.

“We should do what he says,” Fei-lin said. He sat on the edge of a cot; he was in his suit and held a helmet on his lap. “If Pavel’s telling the truth, we’ve won. If he isn’t, we can still appeal.”

“You idiot,” Eleanor cried.

“I don’t want to die down here,” Fei-lin responded.

Eleanor had lost them, Iris saw. Most of the people in the room were already checking their suits and searching for helmets; they were too weary to resist much longer.

Eleanor slumped in her chair, looking defeated. “The charges should be brought back here when they’re disarmed,” Amir said. Eleanor did not reply. “You should look happier. You’ve won.”

“Have I?” The blond woman looked around the room. “None of you want to refuse this demand?” No one answered. “Very well. Go get the charges then, all of you. We’ll take them apart here.”

Antonio stood up. “After we bring the charges back, I think we should go to the ship.” Eleanor did not look at him. “We can listen to the public announcement there, and be ready to leave.”

Iris kept her face still. If the others went to the ship, she and Amir might be able to disarm Eleanor easily; if she then told the other conspirators that they would be attacked if they did not give up, they might be willing to surrender. She waited as the others put on their helmets and walked toward the lock. In a few moments, she and Amir were alone with Eleanor and an armed man who was sitting near the screen.

The man stood up. “I can take the controls apart,” he said as he gestured at Eleanor’s box. “I put them together, after all.”

“The Mukhtars have won,” Eleanor said.

“No,” Amir said to her. “You have.”

“They’ve won. Just a few words from Pavel, not even a public promise, and the others are ready to give up. They’re weak. We needed that public promise.”

“But you’ll have it,” Iris said. “Pavel said —”

“Earth can make it seem that it’s beaten us, that no one can force them into anything. You two came here to wear us down. Pavel Gvishiani will find a way to hang on now, and you two will be showered in glory for helping him.”

The other man was walking toward the table. “No,” Eleanor said. Her hands moved swiftly over the box, pressing a sequence of buttons and levers.

Iris leaped toward Eleanor, too late. Eleanor jumped up as Iris fell across the table and knocked the control box to the floor. Eleanor backed away, laughing.

“Can you do anything?” Amir shouted at the man.

He shook his head. “She’s already armed them. They’ll go off in five minutes.”

Iris struggled to her feet. There was no time to reach the bay; even a cart would not get there in time. She darted toward the screen and saw that its channels were still open. “Listen, all of you,” she cried. “You’ve got to get to those charges fast. They’re armed now. You’ve got to take them apart out there.”

She took a breath. "Teofila. You've got to get your ship out of the bay now. We can't reach you in time. Get away as fast as you can. If we disarm the charges, another ship can come for us." She prayed that the pilot would listen. "I'm closing this channel now. Farewell, Chen." She closed the channel to the ship. Chen might be trying to speak to her. She did not want him occupied with that; she wanted him to get away.

Eleanor's fellow conspirator was staring at her in horror. "You bitch," he burst out. "You know they can't stop this."

Eleanor lifted her head. "I was prepared to act. Earth will lose after all. They'll lose this dome and they'll lose any chance of building in this region again. You heard what she said before."

"It was a lie," Iris answered. Eleanor's eyes widened. "You'll destroy one dome and lose your life for nothing. The Habbars are safe, and the Project will go on. You've lost everything."

Eleanor screamed as she aimed her wand; the other man knocked it out of her hand. Iris picked up her helmet as Amir hurried toward her; she touched his face before he put on his helmet.

They entered the lock together. In a few moments, the outer door opened and they stepped out under the dome. Two carts were still rolling toward the wall at the edge of the dome; a third suddenly swerved and moved toward the direction of the entrance. Iris did not open her suit comm; she would only hear despairing cries and curses. One cart bounced over a ridge and fell on its side. They would never reach the charges in time.

Amir leaned over and touched her helmet with his own. "I'm sorry," she said.

"We might have saved the Project." His voice sounded hollow.

It came to Iris then that she had always known she would die here. She had escaped from Venus once; the planet would claim her now.

She clung to these last moments of life; no prayers came to her. Amir embraced her with one arm. Against the dome's distant wall, a bright bloom appeared. The last sight she saw was a blinding white light.

"Farewell, Chen," Iris's voice said.

"Iris!" he cried. Teofila slapped a panel; on the screen, he saw that the wall was already being lowered.

"Get in your seat!" Teofila screamed. He stared at the screen numbly as he sank back against his seat.

"Iris," he said more softly. His heart hammered against his chest as the moments passed. "We have to wait. We have to wait for her."

"You heard what she said. Those pumps had better work now." The floor below was dropping away slowly as the cradle holding the ship began to rise. The devices might fail, he told himself; they might be disarmed in time. Iris was only being cautious for his sake. He cursed himself for falling into Eleanor's hands.

The comm was silent. Any moment now, Iris would call out again to tell him she was safe. He looked at the lights of the ship's panels; the roof above them was opening. The bay fell away as the ship, released by its cradle, began to float up. The dome was a large red blister veiled by the smoggy atmosphere; it suddenly blazed with a bright white light. For a moment, he thought it would hold, that the light would fade.

The dome shook. It seemed to rise a little, as if it were about to follow the ship, then fell in on itself; it continued to glow as it sank. The airship cabin shook violently as a shock wave struck it; Chen was thrown against his harness. The ship veered; Teofila's face was grim as she watched the panels and small screens. The ship continued to rise as clouds hid the destroyed dome.

Chen was numb. He couldn't have lost Iris, not now. He would turn and see her in a seat behind him. She would laugh and tell him that he should have known she would find some way to save herself.

The ship shook again. He could not care whether he lived or not. His mind was coiled inside him. He was dimly surprised at how little he felt, at how the shock had driven away pain. Iris couldn't be dead. Any moment now, a message would come over the comm and he would know that she was alive.

"We'll make it," he heard Teofila say. He turned his head toward her; she had put on her band. Something inside him snapped. He was suddenly standing next to the pilot; he did not recall releasing his harness. His hands reached for her neck. She struck him with her quick, strong hands, knocking him to the floor.

"Don't be a fool," she rasped. "You need me to get you back."

He staggered to his seat. "I didn't think they'd do it," she said. "I didn't think in the end — but I guess you don't care about that."

He gazed at her. The pilot looked ill. Her face glistened with sweat; there were two red blotches on her cheeks. She had chosen to live; he wondered why. Perhaps he had touched some cord in her, and she had acted to save him. More likely, it was only a reflexive action, a combination of her training and an unconscious will to live. She would be punished soon enough.

He heard a growl, a low animal's cry. It rose until it became a steady keening sound, a wail. At last he realized that it came from his own throat. He turned away from the screen.

Several Administrators seemed to be calling to Pavel at once. His temples throbbed. Someone on Earth wanted to speak to him. Teofila Marquez had been seized in the airship bay and Counselors were now questioning her; she had described a Guardian officer who had aided the conspirators, someone who, it seemed, was close to Fawzia.

Pavel closed his Link, welcoming the silence, then saw that he was not alone in his room. A Habber woman was standing near his door; he did not recall admitting her.

"Pavel," she said; her face swam in front of his eyes. At last he recognized her.

"What do you want, Erena?" he asked.

"We have been in contact with Earth. Should you come to any agreement now, our people will continue to aid you. I thought you would want to know that. It's true that a few of your people made captives of a few of ours, but others gave their lives to save them. Their example gives us hope for the rest of you, you see. We owe a debt to Iris Angharads and Amir Azad and the Project they worked for, and we will pay that debt."

"You might have thought more about them when they were alive."

"Did you?"

Pavel did not reply.

“I believe Earth is trying to find a way to resolve this whole matter,” Erena said. “I hope that you and they will come to some arrangement soon.”

He waved her away. The door opened and he caught a glimpse of the people waiting outside; the door closed again. He was alone.

Pavel thought of Amir. He had closed his own Link when he had realized that the younger man was going to die. Perhaps Amir would not have survived in any case, not if Pavel had found a way for Fawzia’s Guardians to take the dome; in the confusion of an assault, Amir might have been lost.

Pavel stood up, went to a drawer, and opened it. The device he had smuggled here from Earth so many years ago was there, ready to be assembled and used. If it turned out that Fawzia had in fact encouraged the conspirators, he could have his revenge on her with impunity; he would never have to pay for that secret crime. On the other hand, Liang Chen was still alive; his bondmate had accomplished that much. Chen might guess what Pavel had done, and might even spread his suspicions. Earth would not have to punish Pavel; the Islanders might take that upon themselves.

It was odd to realize that Iris Angharads was dead. She still had, it seemed, some power to affect his actions. He could almost hear her voice now, the insistent tone in her speech that he had heard when they were alone. Give yourself up, Pavel. Give Earth someone to punish, give the Mukhtars a way out.

He had lost already. He would have to resign from the Committee and let Earth decide what to do with him; there might be a chance for others to reach some agreement if he did. He could accept responsibility, and perhaps the Mukhtars would be mollified. Perhaps he could conquer the evil that he had come to embrace.

Iris had once trusted him; she had believed that the Project needed him. She would have hoped that he would do what he could to save it now, and he could do that only by allowing others to take his place.

He gazed at the contents of his drawer, at last seeing a possible use for his weapon. Destroying the secrecy surrounding it would make this particular weapon useless. It might make an interesting display when he spoke again to his fellow Administrators, and it would no longer matter what they thought of him for smuggling it here; he could point out that he had never used it. He could alert the Islanders to the fact that some on Earth had stooped to such means and perverted the function of Counselors. The Islanders would be more vigilant in the future, and there would be less chance of Earth importing such an evil to Venus in order to maintain its power.

He would also be able to remind Earth that its reliance on cyberminds, and on Linkers who were trained to piece bits of data together, made it unlikely that such a secret could be kept for long. It would be a useful reminder to those who still thought in old ways, who did not yet see that the tools they had created would inevitably shape them. It was unfortunate that he himself had not learned this lesson earlier.

Iris Angharads, he was sure, would have been pleased with his decision. He would not be haunted by her memory.

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Thirty-Four

February 568

From: Myra Hassan, speaking for the Council of Mukhtars

To: All citizens of the Nomarchies of Earth

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate, Whose Hand guides us all, Who saved us once from destruction at the beginnings of our history and Who watches over us now.

Heed our words! Misguided souls who were part of our most glorious enterprise, the terraforming of Venus, sought to subvert this most noble Project and endeavor for their own purposes. In thrall to ambition, they turned against Earth and attempted to take control of the Project for themselves. Forsaking all loyalty to their own people, these malefactors lied to the Cytherian Islanders and even dreamed of forcing their will upon the Mukhtars. Though it grieves us to admit it, we must also confess that one on the Council of Mukhtars, the former Mukhtar called Abdullah Heikal, took actions that only inflamed the situation.

God has judged the few who sought to destroy our noble Project when their own will was thwarted. They now lie buried under the rubble of the dome they destroyed in their madness. Let their names be erased from our memories. One of their number, a pilot who managed to escape from the destruction, has judged herself, and taken her own life; may she be forgotten.

Others must be judged by us. Know that Abdullah Heikal and those who misguidedly followed him have been removed from the Council of Mukhtars and its associated Committees; may they do penance for their deed in obscurity. Know that Fawzia Habeeb, the Guardian commander who forgot that she was our servant, has, along with her treacherous aides, been stripped of all position and honor. Know that Pavel Gvishiani and the members of his Island Council who were closest to him have been deprived of their Links and are no longer Administrators.

Know also that we can show mercy. Though Pavel Gvishiani acted against us to further his own ends and dreams of power, he and his colleagues once served the Project well before ambition led them astray. They will be allowed to continue laboring for Venus under the supervision of others, though they must never be allowed to rise again. In this way, we seek to heal the wounds that they inflicted on our noble Project, and will allow them to labor with those they sought to deceive.

Those who dwell on the Cytherian satellite Anwara are free from blame and will not be punished.

Those dwelling on the Islands were lured into seeking to betray the Project, yet the blame for their actions must rest with their leaders. Therefore, they shall not be punished. Let the Islanders ponder their past actions, and be grateful to those who show them such mercy. May they redouble their efforts as they work to settle the new world, and may they remember that punishment for any future traitorous activity will be swift and sure.

Those Guardians now residing among the Islanders are guilty only of following the orders of their commander, as they were trained to do, and they shall remain unpunished. Those who wish to remain among the Islanders may, if they have skills useful to the Project and are accepted by the Island Committees, resign from the Guardians to serve the Project. The others will be brought back to Earth and will continue in their Guardian service here.

Those living in the artificial worlds called Habitats will be allowed to aid the Project in their own small way, according to the terms of our new agreement with them. Though we do not need their aid to realize our dream, we shall allow them to do what they can to aid the construction of domes on the Venusian surface, since they wish to show their gratitude to us for our forbearance when we might have attacked their worlds. Misguided individuals sought to make allies of the Habitat-dwellers in their treachery, and though we might have acted forcefully against the Habitats, we stayed our hand and drew no blood. We shall allow the Habitat-dwellers to do penance for their misguided actions by giving what small help they

can to our Project.

Some will say that we should have punished all the Islanders. But we cannot find it in our hearts to condemn them all for being led astray by their leaders, whom they were taught to trust. Two of the Islanders, the specialist Iris Angharads and the Linker Amir Azad, gave their lives in an attempt to resolve this crisis peacefully, and saved the lives of others; we grant mercy in their memory.

Some will say that we should have acted against the Habitats. In spite of our commitment to peace, we were prepared to take such action. The fact that the Habitat-dwellers retreated from a possible conflict only proves that such action is unnecessary, and that we have nothing to fear from the Habitats, who are powerless against us. Let them render what small service they can to our Project and our dream under the supervision of the Islanders.

Many years ago, a small group of Islanders so far forgot their loyalties and responsibilities that they fled to the Habitats. Some will say that, if we allow more Habitat-dwellers to come to the Islands, such an incident might be repeated. We say that a few people in authority here and on the Islands overreacted to that incident, which was the work of only a few malcontents, and thus brought about a situation in which misguided action was inevitable. Now that actual settlements will soon be within our grasp, no Islander is likely to give up the glory of being a settler in order to flee to a Habitat and live among those who were powerless even to help those of their own people whose lives were threatened during this recent unpleasantness.

The Islanders have learned that the Mukhtars cannot be defied or tricked by evildoers. The Project will proceed. Most of us alive now, God willing, will live to see the day when Earthpeople settle a new world. Our great destiny seems inevitable, and that new civilization will enrich our own. A new jewel will shine in the crown of the Nomarchies.

Let God be praised! The guilty have been punished and the innocent, though misguided, spared. We ask that all of you, according to your various faiths, offer prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving that a potentially divisive conflict has been averted through our wisdom and the will of God. The Council of Mukhtars has acted, and is now stronger than ever.

The complete oral and written text of our contract and agreement with the Islands and the Habitats, which will be transmitted on all public channels, follows...

Iris was gone, and he could not bring her back.

Chen imagined that he was in Lincoln again. He remembered the girl with green eyes and the gaze of a Linker. He recalled the feel of the belly that had carried his son. Sometimes he dreamed of lying on her bed, watching her as she turned away from the screen, her face glowing as she told him of some new piece of knowledge she had seized and made her own, and he would long for her voice. At other times, he would remember the feel of her hands and mouth as she loved him, and his body would ache.

He had dreamed of a new life for himself and had made her part of the dream. Sometimes, he forgot that it had been her dream as well, and imagined that Death had led him to her, that he had paid for his dream with Iris's life. Venus had claimed her after all.

Chen remained in his room. He had asked for simple work he could do there with a band. A physician had brought him pills; Chen had swallowed them, welcoming the mindless calm they brought him for brief moments. A Counselor came, speaking to him of Iris's courage and Chen's own bravery; Chen drove the man from his room. He stopped taking the pills; they dulled his memories, which were all he had left of Iris. He received a message from Angharad, and heard her curse him as she wept for her daughter.

Five days after Iris's death, a few of her friends came for him, reminding him gently of the requiem mass they had arranged, and led him to a courtyard at the side of the workers' residence. Hundreds of people had assembled in the courtyard and on the nearby hill. A priest with the pin of a physicist next to the cross on his collar prayed for Iris's soul as the mourners bowed their heads. Chen refused to bow his head and kept his eyes on the priest, hating his useless words.

After the prayers, people filed past Chen and murmured words of consolation. Friends from the Institute, workers, and specialists passed by him; he touched their hands, unable to speak. If he spoke, he knew he would cry out his rage and be unable to stem the flow of words. His eyes stung; he could barely recognize the faces that passed.

He went back to his room without speaking to anyone. He fell into a deep sleep, and awoke, not knowing what time it was or how long he had been sleeping.

Someone was outside his door, waiting to come inside. The hum of the sensors had awakened him; the door's light blinked. The small screen beside the door revealed the face of Tonie Wong.

Chen said, "Go away."

"Please let me in."

"Go away."

"I know why you don't want to see me, but please let me in. If you keep to yourself much longer, pretty soon they'll start sending Counselors. Would you rather see me or one of them?"

"Come in, then."

The door opened at his command. Tonie entered. She was carrying a tray; she knelt as she set it on the floor next to him. "When did you last eat?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I brought you some soup, wine, and rice."

"I don't want it."

She sat down on the floor, poured the soup into a small bowl, then handed it up to him. He sat up in bed, realizing he was hungry, and took the spoon she gave him. He ate, tasting hot vinegar and bean curd and the meaty flavor of mushrooms; his body, craving the nourishment, was forcing him to live.

"You probably haven't seen what's going on," she said as she poured wine into two small goblets. "There's a delegation from one of the Earth ships here to handle the provisions of the new agreement. We'll have almost everything we'd hoped for. The Mukhtars have been able to make an agreement without looking as if they were forced into one." She sipped her wine. "Of course, they were, but they'll never admit it."

"The Island Administrators brought them to agree?"

"There's a rumor that the Habbers pushed them to it, said they'd stop supplying Earth with any more resources or help unless the Mukhtars agreed. It was sort of like another blockade, I guess. Earth needs those resources, so they agreed."

Chen gulped his wine and handed his goblet back to Tonie. "It's too late."

“I know. We both have people to mourn. I’m carrying Fei-lin’s child now.”

“So you’ll have his child after all,” Chen said bitterly.

Tonie bowed her head. “I’m sorry. If I hadn’t come to you, maybe —”

“No, Tonie. You did what you thought you had to do.”

“I could have handled it another way. I waited too long.”

“You tried, Tonie. You tried to stop Fei-lin.”

“I should have gone to someone as soon as I knew. They won’t punish me now, you know, because I did finally go to Amir, even though it was too late, and there was nothing more I could do.”

He could feel nothing for her, nothing for anyone else. She had lost Fei-lin; she had been punished enough.

“Back in my village,” he said, “some of the old people used to say that you were a fool if you expected kindness in the world. I used to think that was just an excuse for their cruelty. Now, I see they were right.”

Tonie handed him chopsticks and rice; he took them reluctantly, but did not eat. “You must heal yourself, Chen. The Project will go on now, and there’ll be more work for all of us.”

“That’s no concern of mine.” He leaned over and put the bowl back on the tray. “I can’t stay here. I’m going to ask to be sent back to Earth. I can find work on a space station, or work on an asteroid mining crew. I don’t want anything to do with this Project.”

“Do you think Iris would have wanted that?”

His heart throbbed as he recalled Iris’s last farewell. He drew up his legs and rested his head against them. “I can’t live here without her. She’ll haunt me.”

“She’ll haunt you if you leave. She loved you, she worked for the Project, she died trying to preserve it. You must know what she would want you to do.”

He was silent.

“Go ahead, then,” she continued. “Make your request. But some of your friends may ask that your request be refused while you’re still grieving. A Counselor could argue that you aren’t in any state to make such a decision.”

“That’s not their business.”

“It is. Iris is dead. There should be someone to speak for what she would want.”

“Get out of here, Tonie.”

“Chen, I —”

“Get out.” He lay down again, turning his face to the wall. At last he heard the rustle of Tonie’s clothing as she stood up and left the room.

Chen petitioned to leave the Project. His request was refused. He petitioned again. His old Counselor,

Betha Simmes, came to see him, spoke gently, then told him that he could not leave the Islands for another year. The Project had too much to do to make up for the loss of one dome; they could not afford to lose experienced workers at this time. If he petitioned again after the year was up, they would let him go then.

He went back to the northern Bat and put in his time on his shift. His friends had told him that the work would help him heal, but the Bat only reminded him of the time he had believed he had lost his bondmate and son, only to find them again. He had rescued Iris, had believed that she would always be safe after that, but Venus had claimed her soul after all. When he returned to the Islands, he remembered that Iris would not be there to greet him, and nearly wept on the ship carrying him back.

During his next journey to the Bat, he found that a woman named Miree Jond had joined his team. She was slender and bony where Iris had been round and fleshy, but her eyes were green and, in certain kinds of light, her dark hair had Iris's muted reddish tones. Miree became his lover for a little while. When he was tired enough, or drunk enough, Miree seemed to merge with his memories of Iris, but soon the slight resemblance became too much to bear, and only reminded him of what he had lost. He and Miree drifted apart; though he missed her for a while, he did not miss her very much.

Once, in the corridor outside his quarters on the Bat, a white-haired man passed Chen in the hall. Chen found himself staring into the face of Pavel Gvishiani. The flesh sagged on Pavel's old face; he wore a worker's gray garb, and a tiny white scar marked the place on his forehead where his Link had once gleamed. Chen let him pass without speaking; there was nothing to say.

Chen was sitting just outside the entrance to the workers' residence. A few groups of people had begun to gather there, as usual, in the hour before the dome's light would fade. The others had not asked Chen to join them; during the past months, he had made it clear that he preferred to be alone.

A few paces away, a male Guardian was talking to a young woman. The Guardian stroked her frizzy black hair; the woman dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Another farewell, Chen thought, and another Guardian who had likely been told by the Administrative Committee that he had no skills the Project could use. Most of the Guardians would be returning to Earth; there was a rumor that the Island Administrators had promised Earth secretly that most of the Guardians would not be accepted here. The Mukhtars had to maintain discipline among the force; it would not be wise to let future Guardians think that they might be rewarded if their commanders became bold enough to challenge Earth's authority.

The Mukhtars always kept their public promises. The problem was that they drove a hard bargain. The Mukhtars had promised that Guardians could remain if the Islanders would accept them; Earth had not promised that the Islanders would do so.

There was now a new force of Guardians stationed on the Island Platform. Chen had glimpsed a few of them on his way back from the Bat. They were hard-eyed men and women, reminders of Earth's authority. They would not spend their time off duty on any of the Islands, where they might become too friendly with the Islanders, but on Anwara. They did not seem the sorts one would want as friends anyway; the Mukhtars had selected them carefully.

A woman was walking toward the entrance; she stopped in front of Chen. She wore a white shirt and pants; the silver circles of a Habber were pinned to her collar.

"Liang Chen?" she said as she gazed down at him. He nodded. "One of your friends over there pointed you out to me, but of course I recognized your face. You won some honor for yourself with your courage."

"I did nothing."

“You saved the Islands from a deadly danger when you warned of the plot against the Platform.”

He was silent. He did not want to hear about that any more.

“May I sit down?” the Habber asked.

Chen shrugged. She sat down at the edge of the path, then ran a hand through her long brown hair. “My name is Erena. I met your bondmate only a couple of times, but my people here will remember her bravery.”

“And I’ll remember that she might be with me now if your people had tried to save their own.”

“I am sorry for that, but you must see that we couldn’t have done so. People would have seen that, by threatening some of us, they could bend the rest of us to their will. None of us would have been safe here in the future. We would have had to leave the Islands and give up aiding you. But I didn’t come here to speak of that,” Erena continued. “I have a message for you, from one who dwells in a Habitat. He wanted to send it to you directly, but you see how it is. Earth has become more reasonable, and we do not want to provoke the Nomarchies by taking too many liberties.”

“What’s the message?” he asked.

“It is from your son, Benzi Liangharad. This is what he says: I grieve for my mother. I know how bravely she died. But I grieve for you, too, Father. I was told that you had a life together during those years after I left you, and though you lost me, your renewed bond must have brought you some consolation. I hope it consoles you now, that you had those years, but I also know how it must make you ache that you had no more.”

The Habber’s face had changed while she was speaking. Chen could almost imagine that Benzi’s dark eyes, rather than Erena’s pale ones, were looking out of her face in the steady gaze he remembered.

“I wish that I could be with you now,” the Habber went on. “I wish I could speak to Mother again and heal the wounds I inflicted on her. I wish I could help you through this time of mourning. But I promise you this — that someday, when the rift between our worlds and yours is completely bridged, I’ll stand on Venus and see what you have built. Remember me, Father, when you think of her. Part of Iris will always live on in me.”

Chen waited.

“That is the message,” the Habber said.

Chen said, “He’ll never live long enough to be allowed to come to Venus.”

“Don’t be so sure. We live long lives in the Habs. Do you have a message for him?”

He was silent for a few moments. What could he say to Benzi? Could he tell him that he would build nothing on Venus, that his dream lay buried with Iris’s bones?

“Tell him,” Chen began, then paused. “Tell him that his mother will always be alive in me too.”

“Is that all?”

He nodded. Erena sat with him for a few more moments, then rose and walked away.

Benzi was only another stranger, so distant from the Islands now that he might feel no more than a mild regret at the death of a woman he had hardly known even while he had been with her.

A time came when Chen realized that days had passed with only intermittent thoughts of Iris to disturb him. The Project had claimed him once more, had drawn him out of himself. He had been doing his work without thinking of what it was for, using it only as an escape; now he was doing it for its own sake, for the Project.

He had come to the edge of the Island. He leaned against a railing and forced himself to gaze into the black clouds that concealed Venus. In less than two months, he would be able to leave Venus forever, if he chose to do so. He gripped the railing. Both the Project specialists and the Habbers were saying that at least one dome, Oberg, would be ready for habitation within ten years. Earth was already seeking out new people to replace the Islanders who would be the first to settle on the surface.

Iris, what should I do? he thought. Here, the pain of losing her would always be with him; he would never completely escape it. But he now knew that he could answer his question for himself. To leave now, to try to forget, would be to inter her dream with her bones; Iris would endure another death.

A pale-haired woman detached herself from another group standing on the platform and walked over to him. He gazed at her familiar face. "Hello, Alexandra."

Alexandra Lenas smiled. "Chen, you've been avoiding me."

"I've been avoiding a lot of people." Especially, he continued silently, the ones who were Iris's friends.

"I left you a couple of messages recently."

"I know," he said. "I haven't been answering most of my messages, either. I was going to reply to yours soon."

She propped her arm against the railing. "I heard from some people that you might be leaving the Project. Is it true?"

He shook his head. "No, it isn't true, not any more."

"I'm glad to hear it. You could be one of the first settlers, you know. Everyone would agree that you deserve to be after what you did."

"I didn't do anything. If I hadn't —" He pressed his lips together. That was the thought that still tormented him, that if he had not foolishly allowed himself to be captured by Eleanor and her group, Iris might still be alive.

"I think you know what I wanted to talk to you about," Alexandra said. "Iris is gone, but you can still have the child you two were planning to have. I have your genetic material in our facility and, under the circumstances, you would have no problem petitioning for the use of an ectogenetic chamber. I've been waiting for you to tell us what to do."

He had forgotten the child. "I don't know," he said.

"If she were born within the next two years, she'd have some time here before people start moving to the surface. She'd be old enough then for a little training before she leaves, but still young enough to adapt quickly." Alexandra paused. "Iris sometimes talked to me about that child. I know she worried about whether or not she could bring up another child. She used to say that she might only fail again as a parent, but at the same time, she wanted her line to continue. That means a lot to most of us, to those of us who come from Earth's Plains."

Chen was silent.

“You’d find consolation with a child, Chen. Iris would have wanted it.”

He turned away. “I don’t know. Part of me agrees with you, but the other part —” He could not put his feelings into words. The child would be an ever-present reminder of his loss.

“You needn’t decide this right away,” Alexandra murmured, “but I can’t act without a request from you. Please consider it.”

“Very well.” He could promise that much.

Alexandra returned to her friends. Chen stared at his hands and flexed his fingers. He had not carved anything since Iris’s death; now, he longed for a piece of wood and the feel of his chisels in his hands. He had promised Iris that he would carve her face. A lump rose in his throat as he realized he could no longer recall her face as it had been the last time he saw her; he kept seeing the girl he had met in Lincoln.

He bowed his head, giving in to the pain as his tears rolled silently down his cheeks.

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Part Five

Thirty-Five

An airship floated out from the bay of Island Two. From Island Three, another ship followed it; within a few more minutes, ten ships, one from each Island, had begun their journey to the domed settlement called Oberg.

The passengers who would be the first Cytherian settlers had spent part of the past years learning new skills that they might need on the new world. Those who knew little about plants had learned how to farm and how to tend hydroponic gardens, while those people less familiar with components and machinery had learned how to operate tractors, seeders, and sensor devices, for the first settlers would need a wide number of skills. They had all endured long conversations with Counselors, hours of probing and scanning by physicians, questions about what they had learned and the uses to which they would put their knowledge, and lectures by Administrators about the fulfillment of Earth’s glorious destiny. The new settlers had put up with it all willingly, proud to have been selected for this first group, but the most important part of their preparation had been their years on the Islands, where they had learned to live and work together for this day.

When the passengers from Island Two first boarded their airship, they had been full of talk about the world they would build. Some talked of a world of great cities, while others spoke of small villages or large houses surrounded by land. But now, as the airships drifted north and prepared to descend to the Maxwell Mountains, the passengers had grown silent, perhaps thinking of the years of labor ahead of them and the deprivations they were likely to endure.

Chen was sitting near the back of an airship cabin, in the midst of a group of families with young children. In a short while, he would be inside Oberg, his new home. A second dome, Tsou Yen, would be ready in another year; a third and fourth, Galileo and al-Khwarizmi, had been completed and were now being tended by botanists, microbiologists, and soil specialists. He would see many more domes rise on the mountain slopes and plateaus. More Islanders would arrive, and a steady stream of people from Earth would travel to the Islands to add their talents to the Project and to prepare themselves for a life below.

He wondered if another settlement would be named for Karim al-Anwar in place of the dome that had

been destroyed. That man, however, hardly had to be honored with a settlement's name. His dream had brought them all here; the whole planet was his monument.

A small hand tugged at his sleeve. Chen looked down at his daughter and smiled. Risa Liangharad would be eight soon. Her tilted eyes were dark brown and her hair was nearly as black as Chen's, but her round, strong-boned face was Iris's. Sometimes, when Risa stuck out her chin or stared fixedly at the letters on her screen, he had almost imagined that he was seeing Iris as a child.

The news of Risa's birth had mended the breach with Angharad. Iris's mother had not even wondered too much at the way in which Risa had entered the world, and had accepted it as some sort of bizarre but miraculous event. Part of Iris would live; Angharad's line would continue.

How could he ever have considered not bringing Risa into the world? He patted his child's hand, then leaned over to touch the bag under his seat protectively. Inside the bag, captured on a panel of microchips, were Iris's messages, records, school papers, notes — everything he had managed to salvage from the cybermind banks that had held it all. Angharad had transmitted some of the material from Earth; Iris's teachers at the Cytherian Institute and her friends on the Islands had helped him find the rest. Once, it had pained him to look at the old images and hear Iris's voice; now, he was glad to have them preserved. He had saved part of Iris for himself, and his daughter.

In the seats on Risa's right, two children were getting restless; their father, who was sitting next to them, shook a finger in warning. A woman just across the aisle to Chen's left leaned across and gazed at the fidgeting boy and girl. "Would you like to hear a story?" the woman asked.

The children's mother, looking weary, nodded. "They've heard all of mine," she said as she wiped a hand across her pale brow. "Maybe they'll listen to yours."

"Is it about Venus?" the boy asked. He was almost as dark as his father and his black hair, like his sister's, had been braided into thin plaits that made swirling patterns against his skull.

"No, it's about Earth, and something that happened long ago." The woman, Chen noticed, was speaking in the flat tones of the Plains. He peered at her more closely. He had met all of the first group of settlers, the ones here and those on the other ships when he had visited the other Islands. He had sat with them in meetings; he had learned many of their names and had grown friendly with a few. Yet he could not place this woman right away. He gazed at her narrow, plain face, and then recalled that she was a physician; he had seen the snakes of the medical symbol pinned on her collar. She wore no pin now; none of the specialists among the passengers did. Such distinctions, among the settlers, no longer seemed important.

"Who wants to hear about Earth?" the boy said.

"Jabç, don't be rude," the boy's father said in a deep, resonant voice. "Listen to the story, and keep still."

"I want to hear the story," Risa said as she bounced a little in her seat.

The physician loosened her harness a little as she turned toward them and shook back her long, reddish-blond hair. Chen could still not recall her name, though he was sure that he had heard it. "It happened long ago," she began, "before the rise of the Nomarchies, before the Resource Wars. It happened back in a time when kings and queens ruled, and people could speak to the spirits of the dead."

The boy looked skeptical, but his sister had stopped fidgeting.

“In a village outside a king’s castle, there lived a man and a woman in a hut made of wood and stone. Like all the villagers, they farmed the land, and because they had good land and worked hard, all the people always had more than enough to eat, even after giving the king his share.”

“Was the king a farmer too?” Jabç asked. “Why didn’t he grow his own food?” he went on, not waiting for an answer to the first question.

“He didn’t grow his own crops because he was a king,” the woman answered. “His job was to rule the village and counsel the people and protect them from the soldiers of other kings and queens.”

“Why couldn’t the people do all that themselves?” the boy said. “I would have gone someplace where there wasn’t any king.”

“Times were different then,” Jabç’s mother said as she shot him a warning glance. “They had kings, and we have Mukhtars.”

“He was a good king,” the woman continued. “He took only his share and no more. In this village, the man and the woman had a baby daughter. They were happy about that, because they’d wanted a child for a long time. She was a beautiful child, with hair as bright as the sunlight and eyes as black as night, and at first, her parents thought only that she was beautiful, but as she grew, they discovered that she had another gift as well. She could hear the thoughts of people, even before they spoke them out loud. She could know what anyone was thinking, both the good thoughts and the evil ones, but because the villagers were good people, their thoughts did not often disturb her.”

The story was a familiar one to Chen; he could recall hearing Angharad tell one like it to Benzi in almost the same words.

“She heard their thoughts?” Jabç asked, looking dubious. “What was she, a Linker? Why didn’t her parents have Links too?”

“Be quiet,” Risa said. “Linkers don’t hear thoughts anyway. They listen to cyberminds, and they can get messages right inside their heads, but they don’t hear thoughts.”

“They didn’t have Linkers in those days,” the boy’s mother said. “That was probably back in the time when one cybermind could be as big as a house without being able to do more than add a lot of numbers. You wonder how people got along.”

“Oh, this was even before that,” the storyteller said. “This young girl was named Marianne, and she grew into a beautiful young woman. With her gift, she was able to help the village. If a young man loved a young woman, but was afraid to speak to her of his love, Marianne could touch his thoughts and, by telling the one he loved of his feelings, could bring them together. If there was a dispute over a promise not kept, Marianne could discover which of the parties spoke the truth. All knew that she could read their souls and that she was just, using her power only when it would help them. They came to honor her as the wisest and fairest among them.”

Risa seemed entranced; even Jabç and his sister seemed more interested.

“One day, the king’s son came to the village, and knew that he loved Marianne the moment he saw her. He took her away from the village and brought her to his father’s castle, and the villagers sorrowed at losing her, but took some joy at knowing that her gift would now be of use to their king.” The woman paused. “At first, Marianne longed for her old home, but in the castle, she wore fine robes and ate from plates of gold and could listen to the thoughts of others who visited from other kingdoms. She soon forgot her old life. Then the old king died, and his son became the king, and Marianne sat at his side and

saw that everyone now bowed to her as well.”

The storyteller frowned. “Marianne had much — rooms of gold and jewels, gifts from every part of Earth. But having those things no longer satisfied her, for she knew other kingdoms were even richer and that she had the means to acquire their riches for herself. She began to speak to the young king of the thoughts she saw in the minds of those who came to him from other lands, how she could tell whose soldiers were weak and how easy it would be to take what other kingdoms had with their own soldiers, for another kingdom’s generals would not be able to hide their battle plans from her. At first, the young king refused to listen, but Marianne would not keep silent, and he saw that, with her, he could rule all the world.”

The woman was silent for a moment as her small audience waited for the rest of the tale. “One day, Marianne and the king rode out from the castle with their soldiers to the field where they were to do battle with another king’s soldiers. And then, just as the battle was about to begin, Marianne realized that she had lost her power. She could hear no thoughts except her own. Many fighting men and brave women lost their lives on that field, and the young king had no way of knowing the thoughts of the other king’s generals. He lost the battle, and was driven back to the castle with his surviving soldiers. A great rage possessed him then as he thought of those who had died fighting for him, and he expelled Marianne from his castle, saying that she would die if his eyes ever beheld her again.”

Risa sighed sadly.

“Marianne wandered for a long time, unable to hear even the simplest thought. At last, she came to her old village again, and wept at the memory of her wickedness and the loss of her power. Her parents hardly knew her, for her face had grown old and the shine of her bright hair had faded, but they reached out to the daughter they loved and took her back into their home.”

“Serves her right,” Jabç muttered.

“What a sad story,” Risa said.

“That isn’t the end,” the storyteller said. “One day, Marianne awoke. She heard the thoughts of her mother as she saw her baking bread and the thoughts of her father as he sanded a piece of wood. She went outside and heard the thoughts of those who were passing by in the road. Her gift had returned to her, and with it, some wisdom. She remained in the village, and thought of the castle and its riches no more.”

Chen looked down at Risa. Though he had heard the story before, its ending no longer satisfied him. “I don’t think that’s all that happened,” he said.

“Have you heard this tale before?” the storyteller asked.

He nodded. “The mother of the woman I loved used to tell it.”

“That is the ending.”

“I have another ending,” he said. “I think that Marianne returned to the castle, and that, when the king saw that she had grown wise, he forgot his rage and took her back, and, after many years, her gift helped her bring peace to all of the kingdoms.”

The storyteller smiled as she shook her head. “That sort of spoils the point of it, don’t you think?”

“No,” Chen said. “It makes another point, that’s all.” He gazed at his daughter and thought of Iris.

The roof of Oberg's bay slid open, revealing rows of cradles. Each ship dropped down and alighted; when they were all clamped to their cradles, the roof began to close. The passengers and pilots waited as air cycled into the bay.

"Welcome to Oberg," a woman's voice was saying over the comm. "Please wait inside your ships until the wall separating them from the rest of the bay has been lifted. It is no longer necessary to wear a suit in the bay. Supplies will be provided for you all when you are inside. We are pleased to be welcoming you to Earth's newest outpost." Most of the passengers in Chen's ship were paying little attention to the voice; they had been told the same thing before leaving the Islands.

Soon the new settlers, carrying duffels and bags, were filing out of the ships. Voices echoed through the wide bay as people jostled one another and parents herded children into the line.

When Chen and Risa finally reached the dome's entrance, a woman wearing a Linker's jewel handed Chen a pack. "Your tent," she said, "and some rations for the next two days. If you need more water, it's available there, at that building." She pointed to a long, one-story stone structure not far from the entrance. "Toilets and bathing facilities are there as well. You may use the toilets at any time, and shouldn't have to wait long until one is available, but times will be given to you for use of the showers."

Other Linkers were giving the same talk to other settlers. Risa frowned up at the Linker; the woman patted her on the head. "It's only for a little while, until residences are ready."

Chen took Risa's hand and drew her away from the crowd. Before them stretched a seemingly endless plain of grass broken only by the slender trunks of young trees, all of it illuminated by the dome's golden light. Microbes and earthworms had prepared the soil, and the growing plants were enriching the air. Chen sniffed, smelling the scent of a new world. He thought of the time when the dome would open to the outside, and wondered if Risa would live to see that day, when Venus lost its hostility to human life.

Chen had come home. He could almost forget that he was a man in his sixties; he felt young, as if he were just beginning his life instead of entering its last few decades.

A few of the nearly five hundred new settlers had already begun to pitch their tents on the plain; idle machines rested next to the foundations of new houses. The panes of a large greenhouse reflected the light; farther away, under the dome's center, wings were already being added to the old shelter. The air, enriched by the Habbers' sturdy, genetically altered plants, was warm and clean. It was hard to remember that outside, in the upper cloud layers, the great storms still raged and the rains still fell through the mist; that still-poisonous liquid, collected in receptacles and channeled under the dome's wall to be cleansed and chemically altered, would help feed the streams that flowed through the wrinkles of the plain.

Chen's arm was jostled. The storyteller was standing next to him; she glanced at Chen flirtatiously in a Plainswoman's manner. "I know I've seen you before," Chen said. "I'm afraid I've forgotten your name."

"Bettina Christies. My friends just call me Tina."

"I'm Liang Chen, and this is my daughter, Risa Liangharad."

Bettina lifted a brow. "I thought that's who you were," she said in her flat Plains voice. Chen tensed a little; mercifully, the woman did not go on to utter awed or respectful comments about his past exploits. "Hello, Risa. Did you like my story?"

The child nodded. "But I liked Chen's ending better."

“I can tell you more stories sometime, and maybe your father will provide some more endings for them too.” Bettina glanced at Chen significantly. “Maybe later, when I’ve set up my tent. Care to pitch yours next to mine, Chen?”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

The crowd was spreading out; more tents were rising. A town would take shape here. Houses would rise, land would be tilled, more trees would grow, more domes would rise around this one until Oberg was a cluster of domes.

Chen adjusted his bags and pack, took Risa’s hand, then followed Bettina until they came to a small rise in the land. Bettina flung her bag and pack down. “How about here?”

“Seems fine,” Chen replied. “Is it all right if I leave my things with you for a bit? There’s something here I have to see first.”

“Of course. I think I know where you’re going. Get back soon, though. You’ll want to pitch your tent before the light fades.”

“Maybe I should join you in yours, then.”

Bettina laughed. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Chen led Risa past other settlers, who were sitting outside their tents. They smiled and waved as the two passed them; their faces were bright with hope. Chen wondered if they could sustain that hope during the years of work ahead.

At last they came to the eastern wall. Several paces from the edge of the dome stood a small column made of metal, with an inscription on one side. Chen looked up at the top of the column, where the faces of Iris and Amir were embedded above the inscription.

Iris’s friends and a few Habbers had made the small monument. The Administrators, even in the midst of all the preparations for the settlers, had seen that it was placed here to greet the first arrivals. Chen himself had carved the faces used as models for those on the pillar.

Iris’s large eyes would see Oberg rise around her; her proud face would be honored by her descendants. Chen had gazed at her recorded image for hours, but then had carved the girl he still saw in his mind, the face unmarked by disappointment and failure, the face of one who dreamed. Some of her brave spirit seemed to inhabit Amir’s face as well, but his eyes were partly closed; Chen, not knowing how Amir had at last come to view the world, had carved a man at peace.

As he gazed at them now, captured together in the monument, he forgot the bitterness he had once felt toward Amir. Iris, at least, had not died alone. She had not forsaken the company of other men in this life; if there was a life beyond death for her, it was better that she had a companion share it until Chen joined her.

“That’s your mother,” he said to Risa.

The child stretched a hand toward the pillar. “Who’s the man?”

“One who loved her,” he replied. “Can you read the inscription to me?” Iris’s friends, who had wanted the monument to provoke some thought and quiet meditation, had not included a recorded voice to recite the words.

Risa drew herself up. “It’s in Anglaic,” she announced as she squinted at the inscription. “In honor of Iris Angharads and Amir Azad, the first true Cytherians, who gave their lives to save our new world. They shall not be forgotten. May their spirit live on in all those who follow them. They rest forever on the world they helped to build.”

“Is that all?” Chen asked.

The little girl nodded.

“Iris would have been happy to see you here.”

Risa rubbed her eyes with one small hand. “I’m hungry.”

Chen picked her up and lifted her small body to his shoulders. “We’ll have some supper with Bettina. Maybe she’ll tell you another story.”

He strode away from the monument, carrying his child across the tented plain.

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