

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

MOTHER TO ELVES

THE WHEELS OF THE Mandelbrot screen whirled round and round, pixels flickering on and off on the liquid crystal screen, colors shifting as the fractal waves rippled through new equations. Clara, Mrs. Thompson's only daughter and the child of the late Mr. Thompson, God bless his soul, knelt before the screen, staring at the images, fascinated and totally absorbed. Mrs. Thompson watched her daughter, smiled at her and the other children and their parents, waiting as she had waited dozens of times before. She hoped that this time the long trip -- the four trolley changes to get across Urbus -- would be worth it.

Mrs. Thompson hoped that of all the doctors and therapists in Beyond's only city, that this one, with the tests he had ordered and the odd questions he had asked on their last visit, would finally be able to unlock the strange secrets of Clara's mind. She hoped that he could explain why, at the age of three, Clara had yet to utter one single word, and why she had become such an odd child.

Clara looked up at the screen with her huge, ice blue eyes. She had a long and strange looking face, but not an ugly strange or a hideous strange face--just different, almost cute, enough so that people often commented on it. Glancing at her mother, and then quickly away when Mrs. Thompson caught her gaze, Clara reached for the screen.

A re-set button lay just within a child's reach on the Mandelbrot generator, which was sort of the idea, and Clara stretched her long fingers and punched the button. The screen flickered to black, and then the cycle started again, a simple wave starting and then becoming more and more complex. Clara tapped the re-set button again, and again, barely waiting long enough for the cycle to start. Then, some chip of logic within the screen's microprocessor shut the screen down, and it stayed black despite Clara's continued pounding of the re-set button. Finally, she sat down, glared at the screen, and turned to Mrs. Thompson.

"Jesus Goddamn Christ, Mother, this fucker doesn't work," Clara said.

"Clara?!" Mrs. Thompson rose as if some rude man had pinched her behind, and went to her child. "Clara!" Her first thought was, Was that all it took, just sitting in that doctor's waiting room?

"Holy mother of Mary," Clara said. "Good damn it, Momma, this asshole thing doesn't work."

"Clara!" she screamed. "Oh my god! Holy Jesus!"

"Jesus erring Christ," Clara said.

"My god." The other parents looked at Mrs. Thompson, at the strange child quietly speaking obscenities and her mother shouting joyful praises.

A door opened in the wall separating the reception area from the mysterious

chambers beyond, and the doctor himself appeared.

"What's the problem?" asked Dr. Ramos.

"My daughter," Mrs. Thompson said, "can speak."

"Goddamn it," Clara said.

"Well." The doctor glanced down at the clipboard in his hands, thought for a moment, smiled, and then looked up. "You're Mrs. Thompson? Your daughter is Clara?"

"Yes, yes. My daughter can speak. She's never spoken before! Never! Ever!" Mrs.

Thompson waved at her.

"Fucking Hallelujah!" Clara said.

"Never?" Dr. Ramos flipped through the clipboard, then looked at Clara, then at the clipboard. "Well of course! It's amazing. She's never spoken until now? It makes perfect sense!"

"It does?"

"Sucking eggs Mary Lamb of God," said Clara.

"Absolutely," said Dr. Ramos, and he waved them both back to his office.

In the doctor's office Mrs. Thompson told Dr. Ramos the story about the Mandelbrot generator, about Clara turning it on and off. He asked Clara a few questions. Clara responded in more complete sentences. Dr. Ramos looked at Clara, at her long, droopy face, at her sweet smile and her eerie blue eyes with the strange star-shaped patterns in the iris. The two Beyond suns shone through Dr. Ramos' office window, lighting up Clara's downy blonde hair and making it glow like a corona. Dr. Ramos punched up her file on his desk slate, slapped a cuff around her arm and quickly checked Clara's blood pressure -high, as usual -- and then Dr. Ramos grinned, as if he had discovered a gold nugget the size of a potato underneath the clutter of his desk.

"She's an elfin child, all right," he said. "A pixie person. The proper term is

'Williams' Syndrome.' Clara has all the diagnostic signs: the facial characteristics, the eyes, high blood pressure. Have you had an image scan done?

Have you talked to a cardiologist?"

"Cardiologist? No, why . . .?"

"Well, I'll bet she has a supra-avalvular aortic stenosis, of course." Mrs. Thompson frowned at the term. "Narrowing of the aorta. We'll have to call the Navy, of course, standard procedure in the case of a genetic treasure like Clara."

"Genetic treasure? Navy? Wait a second, Doctor . . ."

"It's amazing," he said, almost ignoring Mrs. Thompson. "Incredible! What a

find!"

"She's my daughter."

"Oh, yes, well. . .She'll be cared for, of course."

"I care for her."

"No, I mean. . .Well, Mrs. Thompson, let me explain to you what you have, exactly, in your daughter, and why she's so special."

The Navy explained it better.

They came to her home within a week of Dr. Ramos notifying them, via a fast cruiser patrolling the sector that had to make six jumps to get to Beyond.

Four

officers drove out to her home in a private car, and Mrs. Thompson imagined all

the neighbors clucking in amazement that night when they reviewed the security tapes of the block. A private car! How rare and special! Hardly anyone could use

a car -- only doctors, or paramedics, or police officers. Not even Councilors could drive cars! The four officers walked up the short path to Mrs.

Thompson's

house, all dressed in bright silver uniforms made of some odd fabric that almost

glowed with its own light. Dr. Ramos tagged along, nearly ignored by the star sailors.

Mrs. Thompson met them at the door, waving them into her small but tidy house. She kept a neat home, of course, since it was so hard not to, the way homes were

built on Beyond, but she had made a point of dusting a little bit more, just to

be polite. She spent most of her time at home since Mr. Thompson's death; the pension, and the grant the government gave her to take care of Clara, allowed them a modest living.

Mrs. Thompson didn't know insignia or rank, but the way the three sailors -- all

men -- deferred to the tall woman showed who was in charge. The men carried boxes and various implements, and the tall woman led the way. All of them, of course, had shaven heads except for one long braid at the crown, a style many of

the Beyond young had once copied until a starship crew came into town a few years back and the crew clipped the queues. Only the Navy could wear that fashion, it seemed.

She showed them inside and made them comfortable and served them tea. When the pleasantries had been dispensed with, they asked to see Clara, and she brought her daughter out.

"Jumping Jesus, look at those bright guys!" Clara said when she saw them. Mrs. Thompson had persuaded Clara to drop the obscenities but couldn't quite get the religious epithets toned down.

The bright officers smiled, and then the three men opened their cases and began

playing games with Clara. Mrs. Thompson had a hard time following it all, but

the men seemed pleased and nodded a lot and Clara enjoyed it immensely. They asked her to draw pictures and she drew disjoint lines -a picture of a cat, an eye over here, a whisker at the bottom, two paws in the corner and a big fang in the middle of the page. Then they asked her to describe a cat, and she said, "It's got this mouth with all these teeth, and funny lines all over its fur, with sticky things that go out of its face and a tongue that's all rough but pads on its feet all soft. When you rub it, it murmurs monotonously like a rumbum running engine." That pleased them a lot, particularly the alliteration.

"She's an elf, all right," the tall woman said to Mrs. Thompson. "Do you know what that means"

"'Williams' Syndrome,' Dr. Ramos said."

"Right, after the man who first identified the pattern on Old Earth. But do you know what that means to Clara -- to us?"

Later, Mrs. Thompson kicked herself for not understanding immediately, but what did she know? What did she understand of starships, of the great long cone-shaped ships that connected mortals with the stars? The starships went off and explored other places and brought back interesting things, or took colonies to places like Beyond, but there were so few starships, and hardly anyone could fly away, that most earthbound souls forgot them while they sailed on their long journeys.

Of course, she understood that to the starfolk the journey didn't take that long, only a few months, but to the planetbound the journey took almost forever. She could still remember when the first ship had visited Beyond -after the one that brought them there -- and when it had come again. In all humanity's 210 years of starfaring history there had been maybe a hundred starships launched, and eighty of them still had their original crews. Hardly anyone thought of them, except in the vids, and Mrs. Thompson didn't watch those, since the Beyond Council more or less discouraged video broadcasts. Who had time, with Clara?

So the naval officers explained it gently to her, one step at a time, so when Mrs. Thompson fully understood what they meant to do, she had to believe it.

That Clara had Williams' Syndrome, that she was an elf . . . to the Navy, that meant one thing: she was special, and they wanted to take Clara away, away into space.

SPACE," SAID the tall woman, who told Mrs. Thompson her name was Anne, "space isn't quite what it seems. We think we understand it, but what we understand is like the soap that makes the bubble and we can't see through it to the air. You know what makes the bubble and you can see its shape, but suppose you didn't understand pressure, or air, or surface tension. You wouldn't understand the bubble, not really." Mrs. Thompson nodded, politely, because she didn't see

the
point.

Anne sipped her tea and put it down. "It takes a special mind to understand space, to understand the inside of the bubble, the place we take our starships to get to other worlds. I understand that space a little bit, intellectually, I think, but I can't feel it. I could take you into that space but I couldn't get you out. To get out, we need someone who understands it, who feels it. So far, the only ones who can . . . are people like Clara."

People like Clara? It began to dawn on her, a bit. "She's special, I know that."

"You don't know how special. Do you know how many other elfin children there are on this planet, in all the known worlds, out of all those innumerable billions of souls? None on Beyond, and of all humankind -barely fifty! Like so many genetic defects, we cured the pool of such problems. Only because not everyone has been completely screened has it been that the gene for Williams' Syndrome still exists. We'd change it back but first we have to find enough elfin children."

"We do not practice genetic screening on Beyond," Mrs. Thompson pointed out. "We're a little old-fashioned, like those Amish back home, only we choose to use the technology of the late 20th Century."

"Except for starships," Anne pointed out.

"Well, a Beyonder only uses a starship once," Mrs. Thompson said, "if at all."

Anne sipped her tea, said nothing. The other officers sipped their tea. When the silence got too heavy, Mrs. Thompson pressed on. She was beginning to understand, but she had to know.

"And these children . . . my Clara?" she asked. "They can navigate you to the stars?"

"So far, they're the only ones. They are a talent of incredible preciousness and rarity. Only these people can take us . . . out there." Anne got a look on her face, a look of longing so intense, Mrs. Thompson almost wept.

"You want my child, then?"

Anne nodded. "I will be frank, Mrs. Thompson. I have a daughter I buried last year. One hundred two. I think I understand separation. Yes, we want your daughter."

"You want my daughter forever."

"No," said Anne. "Only until she retires. Twenty years, maybe. Not forever. That would be slavery."

"For me it will be forever." Mrs. Thompson looked down at her hands, at the

flesh still taut and young, at her graceful nails and the long fingers. Harold had died just after Clara's birth, she had been twenty when Clara was born, Clara had been all she had. When Harold had died she had seen her life then, seen that she would have to care for Clara. The Beyond laws had seen that, too, had given her the stipend to care for Clara. Clara was her life, her job, her joy. Her existence. And these men and this woman in the silver suits with the shaved heads and the long braids would take her away, take away her child and destroy her life.

"Twenty years will be a forever, and forever will be too long" she said. "You cannot have Clara."

And she showed them to the door. That, she thought, would be that.

Of course it was not. Dr. Ramos called first. Only later did Mrs. Thompson discover there had been a finder's fee, a reward, a rather tidy sum, it turned out, half payable on finding, half payable on enlistment. So of course Dr. Ramos had some incentive. He was not so blatantly mercenary in his approach, however.

"Did I ever tell you of the prognosis for Clara?" Dr. Ramos asked. He had come by to visit a day later. Once Clara had had a fever, a raging fever, and Mrs. Thompson couldn't get a cab to come out so late and of course the trolleys didn't run then. Dr. Ramos had been on call that night at the clinic -- that's how she first heard of him -- but Dr. Ramos wouldn't make a house call, even though he could request a vehicle from the village motor pool. Today, though, today on a sunny morning with the buses and trolleys running, Dr. Ramos came out.

The prognosis? Of course she knew. "High blood pressure," Mrs. Thompson said. "She's on medication and it seems to be working."

"It will, too, for a while. I got the cardiologist's report. She fits Williams' Syndrome exactly: a narrowing aorta. It narrows just out of the heart, a dicey situation. The aorta can get clogged. This leads to even higher blood pressure, strokes, things like that. She'll need a new aorta, perhaps, eventually a new heart. We could do a transplant but you know the laws on Beyond."

"No harvesting of organs."

"Yes. Clara will die at a relatively young age. Without advanced medical care, she might live to be forty. Forty-five. Perhaps fifty. To save her, she'll have to go off-planet. That's rather expensive, you know. Even if you could afford it for her, you couldn't afford it for both of you. She goes off planet, she's gone for at least fifteen of your years -- twenty, I think, because she would have to go to Earth."

"That would be fine. I would wait for her."

Dr. Ramos shook his head. "Of course. And you'd be a little older and could still take care of her, at least until you died. You will die before she does in

any case, but you would die sooner relative to her subjective age. During the time she's on Earth, of course, you would not receive the stipend for caring for her. So you'd have to go back to work."

"I worked before." Mrs. Thompson sipped her tea. She always made tea when these people came over. She liked tea, the one good thing the starships brought with them, black tea from Earth as only Earth tea could taste.

"Oh, you would work the rest of your life, even beyond retirement." Dr. Ramos smiled, and Mrs. Thompson saw a glint of malice behind that smile she hadn't quite seen before. "You would have to pay for the travel, and the surgery, of course. Beyond takes care of its people, you know that, full medical care within our means and according to our principles."

"Of course." Of course -- she'd begun to pick up that little speech habit of Dr. Ramos' whenever he visited. She poured him more tea.

"Travel to Earth is outside our means."

"Others in need have gone. There are grants . . . we've looked into this, Dr. Ramos. We've discussed this before. You said that in such rare cases as this, the Council would appropriate the funds. 'We do not deny our people care,' you said."

"I did say that. I was speaking hypothetically, of course. After I thought some more about the special circumstances of Clara's case, I made some inquiries. A colleague of mine is a Councilor, you know. He said that given the limited funds, it would be unusual for them to pay for Clara's trip. She is retarded, you know."

"Special!" Mrs. Thompson raised her voice. "Special. The Navy has said that, and I know that."

"Special to the Navy, perhaps, to starfolk." Dr. Ramos shrugged. "To us, to Beyond, to we who never see space beyond the edge of our solar system...retarded. Others have far greater needs. The Council would not send her to Earth."

"I see where this is headed, Dr. Ramos. I understand the reality of the situation -- even the corruption of the situation. I am not naive. But I will not be separated from my daughter. Do you understand?"

"Even if she dies?"

"She will not die. What mother would let her daughter die?"

"Indeed," said Dr. Ramos. "I think that is precisely my point." He smiled that grin again, and left.

FOR A time, Mrs. Thompson thought the Navy, and Dr. Ramos, had forgotten about Clara. She quit taking Clara to Dr. Ramos; she had continued going to him because he had a minor specialty in speech therapy. When Clara opened up, Mrs. Thompson had ceased her visits. There were other doctors. None of them

pressured
her to send Clara off to Pilot's School. None of them seemed to forward
Clara's
name to the Navy. But the Navy knew . . . they always knew.

One day, the school where Clara spent her mornings called Mrs. Thompson. A
little problem, they said. Nothing to worry about, just a precaution, of
course.
Clara's blood pressure had gone up, she had seemed a little blue in the face,
so
the hospital . . .

Mrs. Thompson rushed into the hospital, biked there on the fast trails because
the buses ran late that day, and went into the emergency room all sweaty and
flushed. Her daughter lay on a table, tubes running into her nose and wires
running from her chest, liquid dripping into her veins. Through all the tubes,
Clara smiled up at her.

"She'll live," Dr. Ramos said, smiling and smirking by Clara's bedside. "This
is
her future, though." He waved at the machines, the limits of Beyond's
technology, the technology they had all accepted and desired no more of.

"You bastard. You. are not our physician."

Dr. Ramos shrugged. "I was on call. I knew the case. It was my ethical
responsibility to intervene." He waved at Clara. "But you see? This is the
best
we can do. We can only do our best."

"I will not let her go."

Clara smiled, her pale blue eyes cheerful, her face pale, lips pale. "Tiny
tubes
tingling through me," she said. "Hello, Mama. I love you."

"Won't."

"Silver man, bright man!" Clara said, pointing at a Naval lieutenant walking
into the room. "Bright woman!"

Mrs. Thompson turned, looked at the two starfolk: a tall officer and a shorter
woman, the woman in a silver suit like the officer, but with a purple sash
around her waist, a long braid down to her waist, also purple, and huge, light
brown eyes that looked all the bigger with her head shaved.

A pilot.

"Mrs. Thompson?" the officer asked. "Is Clara okay?"

"Fine," she said.

"My pilot," the officer said. "Ms. Severn. I am Commander Reitan, of the
Hospital Ship Mother Theresa. We were near system when Dr. Ramos alerted us."

Mrs. Thompson glared at Ramos. "You cannot have her."

The Commander smiled, approached Clara. "Clara? This is a pilot."

"Pretty eyes!" Clara said. Ms. Severn approached her bed, leaned forward, the

long purple braid falling across Clara's chest. "Purple rope, rope like the tubes that make me all tingly."

"You feel all tingly?" asked Ms. Severn. She spoke with the same soft voice as Clara, the same intonation.

"All tingly, snaking and snarling and making my insides itch!"

"Itching, twitching like that mouth of a raw snake?"

"Yes! Holy moly Jesus Mary of St. Bemadette, wow!"

"She's an elf?" Mrs. Thompson asked.

The Commander nodded. "A very good pilot. She's flown the ship since her teens."

"That is what Clara would become?" Mrs. Thompson looked at Ms. Severn, at her dignity and grace and respect -- the respect the others held her in, the way they gave her just that much more room, as if she always held center stage and they must step back from her spotlight lest they cast shadows on her performance.

Respect. Clara got respect, respect for her disability, for her differences, but it was a different kind of respect. It was the respect you gave someone who could never be normal, the dignity you tried to afford them because you knew it was right, but could never actually grant, because the strangeness of a child like Clara frightened people. Ms. Severn did not frighten people.

"If you so desire," the Commander said. "This is what Clara could become."

Mrs. Thompson watched her daughter chatter with the pilot, watched the way her daughter became animated -- despite the tubes, the monitors. Could she deny her this, her chance to be something beyond just a peculiar child?

"Are you here to take my daughter away?" she asked.

The Commander shook his head. "To help her --" Mrs. Thompson frowned; he held up his hand. "No, I mean that. To save her life, to do what should be done, to preserve a precious resource -- a potential resource."

"You would just take her up on your ship, heal her, and send her home?"

"If that is what she -- you -- desire."

Mrs. Thompson glared at Dr. Ramos, shook her head. "He said it would be a great expense . . ."

"Dr. Ramos did not inform you of all the options." The Commander smiled at the doctor, a cold, tight smile.

"You will take her up to your ship, fix her up, and send her back?"

"At no expense to you. At no obligation." "Why?"

"To preserve a valuable resource," the Commander repeated, then shrugged.

"And,

to be honest, in the hopes that you will then be convinced we have only your daughter's best interest in mind, and that you will allow us to educate her to her greatest potential."

"Can I go up with her?" She thought of rising out of Beyond's great gravity well, only for a moment, only for that slight chance.

"We'd hoped you would offer."

Mrs. Thompson had not realized that going up to the ship meant not only leaving

Beyond's surface, but going out of its system as well. The Commander had explained it simply: they would do the surgery in system -- not replacing Clara's heart, only strengthening her arteries with synthetic patches -- and then go to other systems while she recovered. They had other patients to pick up, others to take home, and would return to Beyond in little over a month's ship time, two years objective Beyond time. The Commander had personally made the necessary calls to the Beyond administrators, and they had agreed to maintain the Thompson residence as a favor to the Mother Theresa.

At the edge of the system, the Commander invited Mrs. Thompson up to the bridge

to watch the insert into Other space. The Commander quietly gave commands to the

bright men and women huddled over boards and before screens. As the hospital ship moved away from Beyond's furthest planets, past its Dort cloud and toward empty space, the ship seemed to shimmer for a heartbeat, and then enter a moment

of extreme calm. The Commander cut the ship's drives, its great engines that moved it through normal space but could do nothing in Other space. Mrs.

Thompson

had forgotten that feeling until then. The last time she had been on a starship

had been the out-migration with her foster parents to Beyond, and she had barely

been older than Clara. But she remembered the peace she had felt as the ship made its transit, and the complete calm of the ship.

"It's wonderful," she said.

The Commander smiled at her. "We do this all the time," he said, "and yet every

time I forget how soothing this can be. And then I wonder how I can ever forget.

But we have to get out -- that's the hard part, because we don't know how to leave and first we want to leave. We need to know the precise time to leave.

Ms.

Severn will take care of us."

The pilot walked onto the bridge then, short and yet commanding in her presence.

She wore the same purple suit and sash. Ms. Severn smiled at Mrs. Thompson, at the Commander, but at the same time she seemed distracted, as if she were listening for some sound others could not hear.

She sat in a chair just to the right of the Commander, and as she sat in the chair the chair seemed to envelop her, until only the top of her head was visible.

"Our pilot receives a complete sensory hook-up in her chair," the Commander explained. "She will experience Other space completely, understand it, and then explain it to us. Ah, here it comes."

Lights and read-outs and screens too complex to understand began to glow and flicker and change on the central console before the Commander. Ms. Severn's voice came over the bridge system, altered slightly by the electronics, but stranger still: almost incomprehensible in its absurdity.

"A hole," Ms. Severn said, "ah, oh: round and flat and wonderfully weathered.

.
. . There, the thin thing and the edge along the edge by the diaspora of the melodious match to that thing that's long and narrow and that other thing that puffs like a breath into a steamy system of chairs and hides. Oh! Oh! There's the moment, seize the moment, Commander! On my mark, on my bark on the three trees of the time and the tempest and the tires that go round and round, Commander, turn now, turn now!"

"Drives on," the Commander said.

"Drives forward, a degree there, two degrees, too sharp, too sharp, back off: yes, back, chair, legs dangle into threes, now three degrees, okay, okay, lose, Jesus fucking Christ, hit it hard, hit it hard, the elephant."

"Full throttle up," the Commander said.

"That's it: now turn," Ms. Severn said. "Flow, go, row, row, exit, fade to black, to pink: out!"

"Engage," the Commander said.

And the great drives kicked in, the calm left, and they returned to real space.

"Thank you, Ms. Severn," the Commander said.

The chair pulled away and Ms. Severn stepped out. "Commander, you have the corem," she said. She came up to Mrs. Thompson and hugged her. "Let's go see Clara."

As they rode the lift to the recovery room, Ms. Severn turned to Mrs. Thompson, and laid a hand on her shoulder. Although Beyonders generally gave each other much personal space -- it was part of the reason they came to Beyond, after all: to get both cultural and individual space -- Mrs. Thompson did not find the casual touch offensive or threatening. She remembered then Clara's own tendency to hug complete strangers, and how it had been hard to educate her in the rules of Beyond society. Not only did Clara enjoy it, but the victims of her affection seemed to as well.

"May I ask you a question, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Of course."

"Do you have a first name? Everyone calls you 'Mrs. Thompson.'"

"On Beyond we use titles, out of respect and to preserve intimacy. But yes, I have a first name: Beatrice. You may call me Beatrice." It violated all her rules of decorum, she thought. She hadn't even called her husband "Harold" until their wedding night. "Please."

"Beatrice . . . I am Sylvia."

"Sylvia."

"A nice name, Beatrice. The lover of Dante as Virgil guided him through Hell."

"You know Dante?"

Sylvia nodded. "Williams' Syndrome afflicts us in strange ways, you know. We read voraciously, you know, but I do admit I find other tasks extremely difficult."

Beatrice smiled, thinking of how Clara could read at age four -- barely a year after she started speaking -- but still could barely add two-digit numbers. The lift stopped at the cardiac ward, and Beatrice followed Sylvia down to Clara's bed.

"Bright lady!" Clara said, reaching up to stroke Sylvia's purple braid. "I felt the calmness and the wonder and the funny pink fuzz of it all."

"I could see you in it," Sylvia said. "I could see all the other ships and the navigators and the presence of our brothers and sisters, many more than we imagine." The pilot glanced over at Beatrice, smiled a thin smile, almost a grimace. "Would you like to join us?"

"Oh yes," Clara said, without hesitation. "Absolutely yes! Oh wonderful joy oh yes! Mother, could I? May I, should I?"

"Clara. . . ." Beatrice said. "I . . ." Mrs. Thompson looked down at her daughter, staples in her chest and glorious plastic holding her heart together, and despite the butchery of the surgery and the pain she must have felt, her daughter had the most wondrous smile on her face. She had always been a happy child, Williams' Syndrome children were like that, she had found out. In that moment, though, her daughter seemed happier than Beatrice had ever seen her. Could she deny her daughter joy, companionship, fulfillment -even duty?

"Excuse me," she said, and ran out of the room.

Somehow Mrs. Thompson found the ship's chapel. A ship named after a great Catholic saint must have a chapel, she thought, and a simple query of the lift took her there. Beyond had its religions and its principles, but few Beyonders adhered to any one faith except the faith of Beyond, so it was not her habit to seek solace in a chapel. Yet this chapel offered calm and peace. Neutral in its trappings of any one faith, it seemed to hold the essential elements of all faiths. A window backlit not by any lighting, but by the video recording of a setting sun, gleamed with abstract shapes of cut and ground glass. The shapes

seemed to be a Rorschach of images, so that if you stared at the stained glass in one way, it held the image of a man on a cross, or if you looked at it in another way, the cross lost the man and gained an extra arm, or the man became a squatting Buddha, or a woman with many arms, and so on.

In the stained glass, Beatrice saw the face of her child. She saw her daughter grow old, and she saw herself grow old, grow old alone and without a purpose in her life, because her daughter had found that purpose. That Clara needed help because of her condition had caused Beatrice to accept that her major task until her death would be to care for her daughter. Thus, it seemed odd that precisely because of her condition her daughter had made Beatrice's task useless. Beatrice had always seen the flaw in her purpose, though: she knew she would die before her daughter, or at least acknowledged the possibility, and wondered who would care for her then. Now she knew. She knew that this burden had been relieved, and that she could get on with her life. Clara would be safe and cared for and Beatrice could get on with her life.

Only Clara was her life.

That was the problem, Mrs. Thompson thought. She saw the truth of it then. The best thing for Clara would be to allow her to fulfill her potential, to go off to space and become a pilot, to share her great gift with the universe. Beatrice rejoiced at the fact that her special child had proven to be special beyond her imaginings, and that her child would become independent, respected, even revered. The awful selfishness of it, the sheer pettiness of it, she was ashamed to admit, was that she didn't want to let Clara go. She needed to care for Clara because she needed to feel needed. Beatrice could not let Clara go because, because if Clara went, her life would be useless, and alone -- but mostly useless.

Someone sat down next to Beatrice, and put an arm around her. She flinched at the touch and then turned and saw Sylvia, and smiled. "I have to let her go," she said.

"But you can't," Sylvia said.

"Did your mother, your father have the same problem?"

The pilot shook her head, her long purple braid swishing slightly across Beatrice's face. "My parents gave me up for adoption. I was born in a rather backward village on a backward planet. Fortunately, the orphanage recognized my condition while I was still young. My family has always been the Star service."

"But someone must have cared for you . . . a nanny, a teacher."

"I had many teachers, many caregivers. Most of us are raised in the pilot's school. They try to identify us elves while we are still young. It makes the training easier -- there aren't so many conflicting models of reality to disabuse."

"But you don't really have any parents? You don't have a mother? A father?"

"No . . ." Sylvia looked up, and in her bright eyes and bright face Beatrice saw a momentary flash of sadness. "No, no mother, no father."

"So if Clara goes off to navigator's school, she will have no parents."

"Caregivers, yes. . . . But you're her mother, she'll have you."

"But not at the school, right?" "I suppose."

Beatrice smiled. "I think I know what to do. We'll have to talk to the Commander, of course, and he'll probably need approval from higher up, but I think I know what to do."

AS SHE SAT in the chair before the Commander, a silk drape over her shoulders, Beatrice smiled at how simple it had been. The rarity of Clara's circumstance --

an elfin child who actually still lived with her mother -- had presented an opportunity the space service had never considered. The other children had been raised by a succession of nannies and caregivers, but they never had a mother or father, some other person they could bond with for life. In practical terms, Beatrice explained, Clara would need to preserve that bond.

The Commander pulled Beatrice's hair up into a single cluster at the crown of her head, precisely measuring out a circle exactly so wide and centered even on her scalp. He tied up the swatch of hair and let the rest fall loose. With the smooth strokes of a wand-like device he shaved away the rest of her fine blonde hair, the wand automatically destroying the hair cells.

To preserve that bond, Beatrice thought. That had been the key. Even elfin children needed mothers. Clara's highest and best purpose was to be a pilot. Beatrice's highest and best purpose was to be mother to Clara. It had been her sole occupation the nearly ten years of Clara's life, and she had not only done the job well, she had done it with joy and pleasure. Why could she not serve Clara in the space service? she asked the Commander. Why couldn't she join, go with Clara, and when Clara had gained a ship, continue to serve the space service by being mother to any elfin children who entered the school without a mother, without a human being to bond with?

The last of her hair fell away, long strands falling onto the silk drape. Across from Beatrice, Clara smiled up at her mother, and giggled. "Bare momma bald momma, momma with white rope on her head!"

"You should talk, Clara." She reached down and tugged at the same colored braid on her daughter's head.

The Commander gathered up the drape and shook the hair onto the floor. He held up an imager, and she looked at herself in the mirror. Beatrice thought she looked hideous, but she knew what the long braid meant, the respect it engendered.

"You're a spacer now, Mrs. Thompson," the Commander said. "Congratulations. We're happy to have you."

Beatrice saw it then, saw her future and Clara's future. She would spend the rest of her life in space, on the school ship where they trained the navigators, the very ship the Mother Theresa now sped toward to deliver its two new crew. Traveling in the same general subjective time as Clara would when she got her assignment, mother and daughter would grow old together, see each other often, and never be apart.

Mother to Clara; mother to elves.