

TRANSIT

Stephen Dedman

“Transit” appeared in the March 1998 issue of Asimov’s, with an illustration by Laurie Harden. New Australian writer Stephen Dedman has made several other sales to Asimov’s, as well as sales to maga-zines such as The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Science Fiction Age, Aurealis, and Eidolon, and anthologies such as Little Deaths, Alien Shores, and Glass Reptile Breakout. His first novel, The Art of Arrow Cutting, was published in 1997, and was shortlisted for the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel. Upcoming is a new novel, Foreign Bodies. He lives in Perth.

In the compelling story that follows, he takes us to an idealistic Utopian colony on another planet, and paints a bittersweet portrait of two young lovers di-vided by every possible barrier: religion, politics, philosophy, and even physiology—caught, quite lit-erally, between two worlds.

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I had just turned nine when Aisha walked into my class-room, stopping the conversation and stealing my heart in the same instant.

I think we all stared, and then, as Aisha looked back defiantly, we dropped our gazes back to our books as though we were suddenly interested in Stigrosc prime number theories. Pat, our teacher for the day, smiled a little thinly. “Class, this is Aisha, from al-Gohara.”

A few of us looked up and muttered greetings, as Pat guided our new classmate to a seat near the doorway. A message from Morgan flowed across my book. *Pregnant*, e opined.

I glanced at Aisha’s golden-pale profile out of the cor-ner of my eye. *Don’t think so*, I replied.

Must be. Look at the size of those boobs.

It was hard not to, despite Aisha’s loose and very opaque sky-grey robe, but that would have been even more impolite than passing notes in class—and class was meant to teach us social skills: We would have

learned math much faster at home. *Can't be*, I protested. Aisha was taller even than Pat, at least two meters, but all the al-Goharans I'd seen were taller still, and Aisha probably wasn't much older than we were.

Morgan stared at er book for a moment, obviously gos-siping to someone else. I stole a quick glance at Aisha's face, which was beautiful. Especially those eyes, rounder and darker and larger than any I'd seen outside of books. I love you, I thought, and was startled to see I'd written it on my book. I erased it hurriedly, relieved that I wasn't still passing my notes to Morgan, and went back to my math. A few of the kids were starting to talk again, but none of them spoke to—or about—Aisha.

Maybe they don't have contraplants on al-Gohara, Morgan suggested, a moment later.

They must have, I replied.

Muslims aren't like us, Morgan countered, and then, *I bet they cut Aisha's thing off*.

What?

They do that. They used to, anyway. Ask my dad.

Why?

E couldn't answer that, and there was almost nothing about al-Gohara in my book or my ramplant, and I couldn't access the library during class without Pat notic-ing. All I could remember was that al-Goharans, being Muslims, liked to travel to Earth once in their lives, and their world was only one solstice jump from da Vinci, with the worlds being in conjunction every six point something years (math isn't my forte, and I don't think anyone human *really* understands Stigrosc cosmography). From here, they went to Marlowe or Corby or Ammon, but that usually meant staying on da Vinci for up to a year wait-ing for the next solstice. I was only three or four years old last time they'd visited, and the al-Goharans usually stayed near Startown, where they'd built a mosque, and didn't so-cialize much, but I'd never heard of them bringing their children here before. I wondered whether Aisha even spoke Amerish, and tried to imagine a voice that would match those eyes, that golden face, those breasts ...

Aisha suddenly looked up, jacked out of er book, and then walked over to Pat's desk and whispered something. Pat looked startled for a

moment, and then nodded. "Of course; I'm sorry, I didn't think of it. Will you be coming back today?"

Aisha smiled, whispered something else, and then walked out of the room. I remembered reading that Mus-lims had to pray so many times a day—though whether that was an Earth day, an al-Goharan day, or a da Vincian day, I had no idea. Maybe I could ask Aisha.

* * * *

Aisha was standing in the shade under the trees at the edge of the basketball court, leaning against one of the old cedars with a book in er lap, but it was obvious from the way er eyes tracked that e was watching the game, or the players, or maybe their clothes: Smoke and mirrors were back in fashion again, and modesty wasn't. I found myself watching Morgan's legs, as usual—e liked to wear the briefest, tightest shorts possible, to show them off—but I kept wondering what Aisha's must look like.

I'd accessed the library as soon as class was over, and discovered that the gravity on al-Gohara was .82, the cli-mate generally warmer but less humid, and the day nearly thirty standard hours; the ship, the *Arakne* (Stigrosc don't give names to their ships, but they allow the human pas-sengers to christen them if they wish to), had only arrived three days before, so e was probably still adjusting. I sum-moned forth all the courage I thought I might have and had never needed before, and walked over. "Hi," I said. "I'm Alex. I'm in your class." Aisha nodded, and we watched the game for a moment. "Do they play basketball on al-Gohara?" Another nod. I wondered what I was do-ing wrong, and realized that I was asking yes-no ques-tions. "How do you like it here?"

The only reply to that one was a quick glance, and an expression I couldn't read through er shades. The solstice isn't for nearly a year, I thought; you're going to have to talk to someone sometime ...

I saw Teri weave past Shane and slam-dunk the ball amid scattered applause, and Aisha muttered something; the words were unrecognizable, probably Arabic, but the tone said, clearly, "Not bad."

"Do you want to practice your Amerish?" I suggested.

Another glance, and then, quietly, "Don't you have any friends?"

"Sure," I replied, slightly nettled. "I'm just lousy at basketball, is all. If I were as big—I mean, *tall* as you, I'd probably be great. *You'll* probably be

great, when you get used to the gravity; everyone will want you.” At least I managed not to bite my tongue.

“The gravity isn’t a problem,” e replied, and muttered something that sounded like “initially.” “It’s less than Earth’s, and we’ve been training for that. It’s—”

“What?”

“Nothing. You just do things so differently here. I wanted to come to your school—it’s been so boring on the ship, with no one else my own age—and I had to pester my father to let me, but it’s ...”

I waited.

“Don’t girls go to school on da Vinci?”

“What?”

“I suppose I should have learnt more about the place before I came here. I’m sorry I didn’t, but there wasn’t very much about it in our library: we don’t travel much, except the men, and that’s usually only on Hajj.... Do your girls decide not to come after they turn twenty-five, or is there some sort of law against it?”

I stared, calling up words from my ram and trying to understand what Aisha was saying, and hoping that I didn’t look as stupid as I felt, if that were possible. “Or have they just sent me to a boy’s school by mistake? I haven’t even found a girls’, uh, bathroom—”

A painful silence followed. “We don’t have segregated schools,” I began, “or segregated toilets, or segregated *anything*. We can’t: we’re all... we don’t...” Oh, gods, I thought; this must be what Morgan meant when e said that Aisha’s thing had been cut off. “I’m not a ... I mean, I *am* a ...” I took a deep breath. “Can I ask you a ques-tion?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”

I tried to smile. “Do you know what ‘monosex’ means?”

It must have been Aisha’s turn to stare at me. “What? No. What?”

“Or ‘maf—’hermaphrodite’?”

“You mean, like the Chuh’hom?”

“Yes. Monosex is the opposite; it means to be male or female, but not both ...”

“But...” Aisha edged away from me slightly. “You mean *you’re* a hermaphrodite?”

I nodded. “We all are.”

“You mean, everyone in the school?”

“Everyone on the *planet*...” I replied, and then a thought hit me. “Well, except...”

Aisha slid slowly down the tree to sit with er arms wrapped around er legs, murmuring something in Arabic. I waited. “I’ve never met a hermaphrodite before,” e said, weakly.

“I’ve never met a—girl,” I replied, after a moment’s thought.

A suspicious stare. “How come you know what the word means?”

I shrugged. “Old films and novels. Besides, we call our sports teams girls and boys—no one wants to wear uni-forms, so the ones with the shirts are girls. I don’t know why; it’s probably something that used to mean something once, like giving out gold and silver medals, or talking about ‘going the whole nine yards—’ “ I glanced at the outline of Aisha’s breasts, and suddenly guessed the ori-gin of the custom. The feeling of knowing, discovering, *that* was more of a buzz, a jolt, than anything I could remember ever learning in class.

The game ended, and kids started drifting back into the classroom. I stood there silently, not wanting to leave Ai-sha.

When everyone else had disappeared, Aisha looked up, er golden face even more pale than usual. “This is too—” e looked around. “Do you think the toilets would be empty now?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, sure.”

“Great.” I offered my hand, to help er up, but e ignored it and struggled to er feet without my help. We walked to the doorway, and Aisha stopped, until I offered to go inside and make sure there was no one else

there.

“Can you tell the teacher that I’ll be back tomorrow, initially?” Aisha said, when e emerged.

“Sure,” I said. “Will you be?”

Aisha hesitated, and then shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll have to ask my father.”

I nodded. It had never occurred to me before that mono-sexes had fathers, though it probably would have if I’d thought about it for a few seconds. “See you,” I said, wondering if I’d ever see Aisha again, and knowing I had to.

* * * *

I spent most of the afternoon accessing the library, to find out what I could about monosexes. There was a lot of stuff I’d never imagined, like needing separate pronouns for each gender—“he” and “him” and “his” for males, “she” and “her” and “hers” for females. They seemed sort of redundant, but Amerish thrives on redundancy, and the female pronouns sounded exotic enough that I practiced using them whenever I thought of Aisha.

Monos were extremely rare away from Earth, except in some religious enclaves where no one had maf chromo-somes: otherwise, it required major surgery, which almost no one bothered with. The first human mafs were born a few years post-contact, but the chromosomes were dis-covered by humans, not Stigrosc: Stigs don’t believe in genetic engineering. Mafs remained a minority on Earth for more than a century, but many of them—us—traveled to habitable solstice worlds, where there was unrestricted birthright. Others became crew on the Stigrosc ships, or emigrated to the neutral worlds; Stigs can’t tell one human from another, and the Nerifar say we all taste the same, but Chuh’hom and Tatsu find it much easier and safer to communicate with mafs. Meanwhile, on Earth, as gene surgery became easier and cheaper and more countries adopted “one couple—one child” laws, mafs were seen by many governments as a way of avoiding serious gender imbalances in the population, and various incentives were offered to prospective parents—cheap health insurance, exemptions from combat service, places in the schools or the civil service or diplomatic corps reserved for mafs, that sort of thing. According to the library (which was at least seven years out of date), mafs made up 68 percent of the population of Earth—and more than 99 percent of the permanent populations of Marlowe and Avalon, where the al-Goharans

would also have to stop en route.

There was nothing in the library—at least, nothing I could access—about how monosexes made love. I was wondering about that when school closed, and I guess I still looked preoccupied when I went home: my mother, who is normally very careful not to invade our privacy, asked me what was on my mind.

“There was a new kid in class, today,” I replied. “Of the *Arable*. Her name’s Aisha.”

“Is that the one who’s pregnant?” asked Rene, without jacking out of er eternal *Vaster than Empires* game. Sometimes I think that unrestricted birthrights are over-rated; I get on okay with Kris, but I think Mum and Dad should have stopped when they’d had one kid each. “She’s not pregnant,” I snapped. “She’s ...”

“She?” asked Kris.

Okay, *sometimes* we get on okay. “It’s old English,” Mum explained. “I didn’t think the al-Goharans brought their kids with them....”

“They never have before,” Dad agreed, without looking away from the holo. “How long is the trip? Two or three years each way? Hell of a time for a kid that age to be traveling—how old is e?”

That was Dad all over, making a judgment before e had any of the facts. “I don’t know; she’s tall, and her Amerish isn’t too good, and she dresses like... I think she’s about twenty-five or twenty-six,” Kris stared, and almost dropped er book. “In al-Goharan years, which is—” My ram converted that into thirteen to thirteen point five stan-dard. “Nine, roughly, so she’ll be about twelve when she gets to Mecca.”

“Great,” said Dad. “Three years of er life wasted going to see a crater.”

“Mecca’s not a crater anymore,” I informed er. “Well, it is, sort of, but the radiation’s down to a safe level, and they’ve built a new mosque and stuff. There was a load of new data for the library on the *Arakne*—stuff about Earth and a lot of other worlds, and only a few years old.”

“Anything about how to get rid of razorvine?” e asked, sourly.

“Not that I noticed.” As far as the library was concerned, razorvine was unique to da Vinci (lucky us). It was probably a mutant strain of our terraforming fauna; it grew at about the same rate (much faster than the cyberfarms could process it into anything useful), and in everything from deserts to rivers, but was much harder to kill. Anything buried beneath it might be lost forever: it blocked infrared and radar, and thrived on spotlights and X rays. And it wasn’t even attractive—the same monotonous tarnish color as the solamat we use for major roads, with inedible seeds that you couldn’t pick without the risk of losing a few fingers. Dad’s a builder, so e regards it as a personal enemy, but most kids play hide-and-seek among the thickets at least once—or as often as we can without our parents catching us—and there are the usual stories about secret tobacco farms hidden within razorvine jungles. “There *are* some new games and shows, from Musashi,” I added, and Rene and Kris grinned, “and I don’t know what else.”

Dad grunted, and watched the holo for a few more minutes, then stretched. “Want to shoot a few hoops before dinner?”

“Sure, Mum,” said Kris, heading outside. Mum glanced at me, then folded er book. I was the last one outside. As usual.

* * * *

“A Muslim monosex,” Dad muttered, as e collapsed onto the bed. My parents’s room was well soundproofed, of course, but easy to bug on the rare occasions that I wanted to listen in. “Okay, e’s nearly an adult, e’s got er implants, you’d expect er to have crushes and fool around a little, but there are *dozens* of kids er own age here, why—”

“E’ll only be here a year,” replied Mum. “Besides, it may be good for Alex to get to know some off-worlders. You know e’s good at xenology; e might even be a dip-lomat.”

“Not if it needs math,” said Dad.

Mum sighed. “E’s better at languages than we ever were, and e enjoys them. I wouldn’t be surprised if e learnt Arabic before this friend of ers flies away.”

“What good will that be?”

“How many mathematicians do we need on a world this size? Biologists, builders, designers, artists, yes, but math-ematicians? And what

if e wants to go off-world?”

“Why would e?” retorted Dad. “What the hell can e get off-world that e can’t have here?”

* * * *

Aisha arrived in class a few minutes later than the rest of us, clad in the same loose gray hooded robe or another exactly like it. Her dark eyes were slightly clouded, and I guessed she was having trouble adjusting to the shorter days. I thought of pointing out that she’d get more praying done this way, but I wasn’t sure how she’d take it, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Our teacher for the day was Jai, an old fossil with a murmuring voice and an inexplicable enthusiasm for eco-nomics, both of which e used to try to explain the half-million years of human history pre-Contact. Most of us were already confused long before e came to the impact of third wave tech, and when e admitted that the whole thing had collapsed soon after the Stigrosc arrived any-way, most of us became irritated as well.

“This is irrelevant, isn’t it?” asked Teri, while a few of us chuckled.

Jai bit er lip. “I rather hope so. You see, history is a wonderful labor-saving device; it saves us reinventing and rediscovering so much. True, all these economic theories were based on the idea that resources were scarce and humans needed to work to survive. By the first century pre-Contact, of course, the scarcities were usually manu-factured for commercial or political reasons—so that the rich could stay rich, or nations could control their populace by denying them food—and the work ethic had be-come a cancer. Many people worked at jobs they hated because they’d been convinced that there was no other way to survive; by the time the Stigrosc came to Earth, it would have been cheaper to simply feed, house, educate, and entertain most of these people—but that would have violated the work ethic and destroyed the illusion of scarce resources. In this regard, capitalism and commu-nism were almost indistinguishable—and when the Sti-grosc arrived, and gave us cyberfacs and habitable planets, asking only for those ideas and data that were free to every human, both systems became, as you say, irrelevant. Our new economic system is, to a large degree, another gift from the Stigrosc—but, unlike all previous human economic systems, it is founded on the idea that human demand will never outstrip resource availability. If this happy state of affairs should change, then we will need a new system—and those of you who’ve been paying attention will have some idea which ones *not* to try.” E drew a deep breath,

and then—apparently for the first time— noticed Aisha. E glanced at the book open on her desk, and asked, “I gather things are the same on al-Gohara?” She was silent. “The cyberfacs and robots provide what is needed, and no one is compelled to do work that they hate?”

Aisha shook her head violently. “No, of course not,” she lied.

“Of course, there *are* some people who cling to the old ways,” Jai continued, “simply because they are human ways—or, more importantly to many of them, *not* Stigrosc ways. Most of these people are still on Earth, because they regard Earth as a human world, or because they *own* parts of Earth in a way they can never own part of any other world. What good this ownership does them now, I leave to you to imagine; if any of you succeed, please explain it to me. Aisha, it’s nearly noon; do you want to go and pray? Now, are there any other questions?”

* * * *

“Tell me about your world.”

We were sitting under the old cedars by the basketball court again. Aisha glanced at me, and shrugged. “Why?” she asked. “You don’t want to go there, do you?”

If all the girls there are like you, I thought, I might, but I didn’t say that. “I won’t know until you tell me,” I replied.

She smiled slightly, beautifully. “It’s warm, and much drier than it is here, and the sun’s not quite as bright—”

“I know all that. Tell me about the people.”

“People are people.” She looked warily at me, daring me to challenge her.

“How much difference does having two sexes make?” I asked.

She looked even more wary. “I’m not going to discuss sex with—well, you’re a *boy*.”

“I’m also just as much a girl as you are,” I replied, mildly.

She looked thunderstruck at that, then shook her head violently.

“There’s more to it than having a—besides, you don’t have ...” She looked puzzled for a moment.

“If you want to know what I *do* have—” I began.

“I don’t—”

“You can access the library.”

Aisha blinked, and then laughed. I waited until she’d finished, and added, “That’s how I know what you’ve got. Sort of. I mean, I... unless you ...” I sat there, trying to find the words.

“Have I been circumcised?” she asked, at last. “No. That was a primitive custom, much older than Islam and explicitly condemned in the Qur’an—you *have* heard of the Qur’an?—and while some Muslims on Earth did it, so did some Christians. By the time the Stigrosc arrived, it had been stamped out nearly everywhere, like foot-binding or breast implants. But there’s more to being a woman than just the body.”

“We can all get pregnant, if that’s what you mean.”

“No!” she said, shaking her head again. “More than that!”

“What, then?” I asked, but she stood and walked away. I tried following her, but she kept walking faster, and her legs were much longer than mine. I walked faster, and she began running. Finally, she ran out of the school and down the razorvine-edged road to Startown, and I didn’t follow her.

* * * *

The next day was Saturday, and I’d resigned myself to not seeing Aisha. Kris had slipped out early to play bas-ketball and get out of gardening, which we both hated.

Mum always maintained that if we did it often enough, we’d come to enjoy it as e and Dad did, but e let me go after an hour of cauterizing the razorvine that was begin-ning to encroach on the watermelons. I spent the rest of the morning with a portrait program, trying to see if I could produce a fair likeness of Aisha, and maybe slot both of us into an old movie, a pre-Contact one with monosex characters: *The Princess Bride*, maybe, or *War for the Oaks*. That way, I could just superimpose her face on a female

body, rather than have to try to imagine hers. Unfortunately, nearly all of the female bodies in the art history catalogue were of women from Earth gravity, while the few from the Martian Republic were *too* tall and slender. I'd always known that ideals of beauty varied between eras and ethnic groups, but seeing the demon-stration flash before my eyes was startling. I'd never imagined that there were so many ways to mutilate living bodies.

I managed to devote three or four hours to Aisha's face, and another two to her figure, before succumbing to the temptation to access some pictures of female genitals. They looked incomplete, even deformed, with just this little bump where the penis should be, but apart from that, they looked just like mine or Morgan's. Males, I discovered, had external testes where the vulva should be, in what looked like an uncomfortable, if not hideously hazardous, position.

After forming a recognizable template of Aisha, I scanned us into *Forbidden Planet*; the eyelines gave me a little trouble, but once I'd fixed that, it looked wonderful, and it even made sense.

On Sunday, I made the mistake of reading a love poem by Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"—*Had we but world enough, and time*—and became determined to see Aisha again, or at least to try. The library told me that Sunday wasn't a religious holiday for Muslims—their Sabbath started Friday and finished Saturday—and there was nothing to stop me walking up Tranquility Road to Startown; Aisha, a lightworlder, did it every day. Mum let me go with nothing more than the usual caution to be home before nightfall (razorvine is attracted by light, and can supposedly move fast enough to engulf anyone walking with a lantern), and I slipped out before Dad could object.

The streets of Startown were all but empty, but there was a soccer game in progress (if you can use soccer and progress in the same sentence) on Eagle Street two blocks from the mosque, and it had drawn quite a crowd—some of them in long-sleeved robes, some in jeans and shirts. I watched for a few minutes, scanning for Aisha, but though I noticed a few pale and beardless faces, I couldn't see any women present at all, or anyone under fifteen. I attracted some stares, not all of them friendly, but no one questioned my right to be there.

A few minutes after the whistle blew for halftime, I heard the sound of a single, powerful voice booming from the direction of the mosque, and everyone turned and walked toward it. I followed until the last of them had disappeared inside the doors, and then headed back toward my home.

I'd reached the edge of Startown when, suddenly, it began raining. I heard doors open behind me, and laugh-ter, and turned to see al-Goharans rushing out into the street, most of them staring at the sky and catching raindrops in their mouths as they laughed; a few even re-moved their skull-caps and let them fill with water before upending them over their heads. I turned about, but though I searched down every street, I couldn't see Aisha anywhere. Eventually, after the rain stopped, I returned home, hearing the waterfed razorvine growing around me as I walked.

That evening, I began learning Arabic: The library had teaching programs for most languages, even ones that had been dead since before contact. It was a little easier than Chuh'hom Oratory, and it might even be useful.

* * * *

"Why?" Aisha demanded.

"Why what?"

"Why are you learning Arabic? And why do you want me to help you?"

"Well, al-Goharans are going to be staying here after every solstice," I replied, reasonably enough. "We should have *someone* here who can speak to them without an interpreter."

"We all speak Amerish."

"Then why do you learn Arabic?"

"The Quran must be read in the original; all transla-tions are invalid."

"What do you speak at home?"

"My mother used to call it Amerabic," she replied, and a beautiful smile suddenly appeared on her face. "Some-times we'll start a sentence in one language and want to say something that's easier in the other language, so we switch. It's whatever language we think in—here, every-one speaks Amerish, so I think in Amerish."

I nodded. "I went to Startown yesterday, and everyone there was speaking Arabic."

“That’s—you did *what!*”

“I went to Startown. I watched the soccer game for a while; then it started raining, and everyone seemed to get a big kick out of it.”

“It doesn’t rain very often on al-Gohara,” she replied, looking at the cloudy sky with distinct approval. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen it rain like *that* before.”

“Then why weren’t you out dancing in it like everyone else?”

“I—” She turned to stare at me; her beautiful face turned pale, and then pink. “That’s none of your business. Anyway, I’m sure it’ll rain again before I leave, initially.”

I realized, suddenly, that all the times I thought she’d said “initially,” whether or not it made sense, she was really saying “inshallah”—“if Allah wills it.” “Oh, sure,” I replied. “Or maybe you can stop at New Seattle on your way back. Do you mind if I ask you a question?” She continued to stare, so I didn’t wait for her to answer. “Are there any other girls—or women—in Startown?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“That’s two questions. . . .” She turned away from me, and watched the basketball game for a while. I was beginning to suspect that the reason she almost always headed for this clump of trees at lunchtime was that she *liked* talking to me, but wanted to make sure there were always plenty of witnesses, as though she was willing to regard me as a girl from the neck up. “Do you remember what Jai was saying last week about scarce resources and the Stigs?”

“The parts I stayed awake for.”

“What she, he—what should I call him?”

“E,” I replied, without hesitation. “We’re all ‘e,’ except you.”

“Okay. What e said doesn’t really apply on al-Gohara. There’s one resource that’s still scarce, and the Stigs control it: that’s passage to Earth. The hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is one of the five pillars of Islam, but there isn’t enough room on the Stig ships for all adults to make the journey

even once, so places are awarded randomly by a computer. At least, they are on al-Gohara; I don't know how it's done on other Muslim worlds."

I thought about this for a moment, and asked, "And women aren't allowed to go?"

"It's a little more complicated than that... women *are* allowed to go, but not without their husbands, so unless the husband has also won a place on the ship, the woman gives it to her husband. Or sometimes to her father, or an adult son, or she can trade it, inshallah. And there are some who think the computer may not be perfectly ran-dom—"

"Trade it? For what?"

Aisha shrugged. "Favors. Prestige. Luxuries that the fads don't make. A. better marriage for her children, maybe, inshallah."

"Arranged marriages?"

She nodded. I refrained from whistling or swearing, but it was a near thing. "Some women complain about not going, but the men just blame the Stigs for not having bigger ships: some even say they're doing it to weaken our faith, because the Stigs won't even let us fill the ship, just in case someone wants to leave the worlds we visit en route, which no one ever does. The imams and califas have tried petitioning the Stigs, but they don't seem to understand about religion, and almost no one from," she hesitated for a moment, "other worlds, the non-Islamic worlds, ever wants to visit Earth. Anyway, if the Stigrosc cared enough to want to break our faith, they could leave all of us stranded on al-Gohara forever."

"Sounds like you're lucky to be here."

"Lucky?" She considered this, moving the tip of her tongue tantalizingly across her upper lip, as though tasting the air. "I'm lucky to be going on hajj, and glad I'll be an adult by the time I'm there, but I miss having other girls around. Men are boring."

I had to know. "How did you get a place when other women don't?"

"My father wouldn't leave me on al-Gohara alone."

"What about your mother?"

"She's dead," Aisha snapped. "Okay? Can *you* leave me alone,

now?"

I walked to the other side of the playing field, so I could see her and pretend I was still watching the basketball game. The game ended a few minutes later, and I saw Morgan, wearing little more than a translucent helix of swirling silver light, glance at me meaningfully before walking off hand-in-hand with Ten.

* * * *

Despite that setback, I finally *did* persuade Aisha to coach me in Arabic, after only four weeks of mispronouncing words and hideously mangling the grammar. In a moment of random curiosity, I learnt that she was named after Muhammad's third wife, and that her name was also Jap-anese for "manipulating an overly sympathetic or soft-hearted person," a discovery that we both found hilarious.

Weeks passed, and though I became fairly good at read-ing and speaking Arabic, I couldn't write it or think in it. Aisha couldn't invite me to her home, nor come to mine, but occasionally she'd let me walk with her almost as far as Startown, on the condition that I stayed on the other side of the road. The only people who ever saw us were the razorvine clearing patrols, and they must have men-tioned it to Dad, because one evening e said, with all the casualness of a sun going supernova, "Some al-Goharans volunteered for the clearing crews today, want Macleod and me to teach them how to handle the lasers."

No one spoke. I just stared at my dinner and kept chew-ing. MacLeod was Morgan's mother, and I wondered if e'd put them up to this.

"I don't know whether they were getting bored, or whether they just liked the idea of killing something," Dad continued, "but there were at least a dozen of them. There's nothing else happening at the moment, so we said yes."

"Maybe they want to thank us for our hospitality," re-plied Mum, mildly.

"Or maybe they don't want us coming any closer than we have to," said Dad. E seemed remarkably calm about the idea of armed al-Goharans: Of course, the lasers have genescanners and safety switches built in, so you can't actually aim them at a human, and bouncing them off a mirror is much trickier than the thrillers make out. Dad wasn't setting me up to be murdered, but I wondered what e thought would happen to Aisha. Kris looked from one to the other. "Why would they thank us for that? It's free. I

mean, if we said no, the Stigs would stop coming here, right?”

Dad shrugged, and turned er attention back to er soup. Rene’s eyes bugged. “No more Stigs? You mean no new games?”

“Relax,” I told er. “It’ll never happen. It’s in the treaty the Stigs signed before they gave us Avalon and Terra-nova—that a ship would visit every human world every solstice, so we could always go back to Earth, or out to any new worlds....”

“Okay,” said Dad. “What do you think would happen if, say, the al-Goharans landed and discovered that there was no mosque at Startown, or no food or water, or no cyberfac? Would the Stigs still keep coming?”

“The Stigs would,” I replied, “but the al-Goharans might not....” My voice faded out, and we stared at each other in silence until Mum said, softly but pointedly, “None of us understand the Stigrosc well enough to know what they’d do. Or the al-Goharans, for that matter.”

* * * *

Aisha heard about the al-Goharan crews that same night, and the next day she asked me not to accompany her home again, in case her father heard about it and ordered her to stay away from the school altogether. On da Vinci, that would be considered probable cause for a charge of child abuse, but I decided not to tell Aisha that: I was still wondering what I *should* say when she leapt up, and vol-unteered for the basketball game, on the sole condition that whatever team she was on would be the girls. I stayed on the sidelines and watched. Despite the gravity, she moved beautifully, like a gazelle with breasts.

To my irritation, this became a set routine for a few weeks: we’d be talking about something, when suddenly she’d stand up and join in one of the games. She wasn’t quite as fast as Teri, and she had trouble allowing for the gravity when she had to throw the ball any distance, but she knew how to use her height and her reach, so she was always selected, while I usually had to sit back and watch. On days when it was too wet for basketball, she would sit in the classroom and watch the rain through the roof. “This is wonderful,” she murmured. “Our buildings are made the same way as yours are—though the ceilings are higher—but they’re designed to keep the sunlight out; I don’t think this would ever have occurred to us. Even when it’s not raining, I love watching your clouds, all the shapes, the way they move....”

I've never been that enthusiastic about rain myself, but I nodded. "You should see it in winter, when it thunders— but I guess you'll be gone before then..."

"Yes," she said, still beaming, and then, unexpectedly, "It's my birthday tomorrow."

"Happy birthday. How old will you be?"

"Twenty-seven: that's about, oh, nine and a half of your years."

I hesitated, then plunged in. "Of course, you could stay here."

She stared at me, and then shook her head sadly. "My father would never let me, Alex."

"So don't ask er." There was a shocked silence as I did the math. "In half a year, you'll legally be an adult—"

"Not on al-Gohara—"

"Right; you're *not* on al-Gohara. You're on da Vinci, and subject to da Vincian law—so you might as well en-joy its benefits. When're you considered an adult on al-Gohara, anyway?"

She looked away, as though she was fascinated by the way the rain trickled down the windows. "On my wedding night," she said, finally, very softly.

"*What?*"

"Of course, most women don't really treat you as an adult until you have a child of your own. Boys are legally considered men after puberty—do you know about pu-berty?"

I grimaced, and nodded, remembering my first and (so far) only period, before I had my contraplants inserted. "Sure," I croaked. "Is this part of your religion, or—"

"Some of it," she replied. "Some of it is tradition, I guess. Our ancestors weren't just Arabs; they came from every continent on Earth, and they brought a lot of dif-ferent traditions with them." She shrugged. "My mother used to say it was intended to keep the birthrate up—we can't breed as fast as you can—but she may have been joking, I don't really know."

We sat there in silence for nearly a minute, before I asked, “Is this what you meant when you said that there was more to being a woman than ... well, having female parts, being able to get pregnant....”

She nodded. “Well, it’s also important *not* to have— male parts, or you’ll never be trusted around the women. If you were to come to al-Gohara, the men wouldn’t want to know you, and you’d be barred from places that were only for men *and* only for women, and you certainly wouldn’t be able to marry. Men are permitted to marry non-Muslims, but women can’t, so even if one wanted to ... it’d be the worst of all possible worlds.” She turned to look at me, and I noticed that she was on the verge of tears. “For you, that is. For us, it’s—”

“Home?”

“More than that. It’s ... a world we created for our-selves.” She looked down, and then scrambled to her feet and rushed out into the rain, looking at the sky, letting the rain run down her face. I just sat there and watched her, trying to think of the right thing to say, and finally I walked out behind her, stood within arms reach but too scared to touch, saying nothing, nothing, nothing.

* * * *

Weeks passed, and we spent them saying nothing, until Cori was giving us a lesson in xenology. Aisha was as fascinated as I was, possibly more so; unlike the rest of us, she’d actually *met* Stigrosc and Chuh’hom and Nerifar. Cori was becoming slightly bogged down in the details of Nerifar triads, thanks largely to Teri’s love for asking unanswerable questions, when Morgan interrupted to ask, “Nerifar don’t have any religions, do they?”

“No,” replied Cori, er relief apparent. “They have a complicated ethical code, which is almost entirely con-cerned with sex and food, but because they don’t believe in owning any more than they can actually carry—which isn’t much—it’s short enough for most of them to mem-orize.”

“Like a hafiz,” I interjected. Cori looked blank. “Some-one who’s memorized the complete Qur’an,” I explained.

Morgan glanced at me, er expression unreadable, and then smiled back at Cori. “But they don’t claim that this ethical code was handed down to them by any sort of deity?”

“No. It was originally composed as a series of songs— peace treaties from various wars, marriage vows, divorce decrees, medical treatises, lessons for children, proverbs and parables, that sort of thing. But because it’s never been written down, there’s no standard version; it’s sung differently in different clans, new verses are always being added, and a few were changed or edited out when they were discovered not to be true, like the one about kid-neys ...”

“In fact,” said Morgan, er smile becoming wider and er voice impossibly sweet, “none of the other species we’ve encountered—or that the Stigrosc have encountered and told us about—have anything we would call a reli-gion, or a deity.”

Cori considered this. “The Nerifar... don’t, the Chuh’hom ... don’t, the Tatsu don’t... We don’t really understand enough about Stigrosc or Garuda culture to be sure; they often seem to regard the universe as a sentient being on a time scale beyond our comprehension, which I suppose you could consider a deity....”

“But they don’t believe that it handed down a set of laws they had to obey?”

“Only mathematical laws—which for a Stig or a Ga-ruda, is pretty important. But not their ethical codes.”

“And none of them believe in a single ancestor for their entire species?”

“No.”

“What about the Garuda egg?” asked Jo.

Cori nodded. “Well, the first Garuda presumably *did* hatch from the first Garuda egg, but the ‘Garuda egg’ in their histories contained *everything*, so it’s probably a metaphor—or a poor translation—for the Big Bang. The Nerifar don’t have any similar stories—the only mentions of eggs in their coda are instructions on how to care for them and when not to eat them—but the Nerifar didn’t know the rest of the universe existed until the Stigrosc landed on their homeworld.”

Morgan nodded. “Do any of them worship their ances-tors?”

Cori considered this. “No. Chuh’hom worship the com-munity; they believe in a form of reincarnation, but they’re still arguing about whether

souls can travel between planets, and if so, how fast.” Chuh’hom love to argue, and their committee meetings should be avoided at all costs. “The Nerifar eat *their* ancestors, and never speak the names of the dead. Male Tatsu worship their mothers, and no one knows what the females think. Stigrosc revere their descendants, and if Garuda worship anything, it’s the sky.”

Morgan grinned, and sprang er trap. “Would you agree that only humans had religion because it was invented by human monosex males and enforced with violence, to compensate for the fact that they couldn’t bear children, that their role in creating children was ridiculously small and for all they knew, might have been nonexistent, performed by someone else—the same inadequacy that produced lunatic ideas like penis envy, sentient sperm, and women as mere incubators? That its mainspring was the idea that the *father* was the creator, not the mother; the father was omnipotent and omniscient, the father knew best—but not better than er father, or er father before er, and so on until the golden age before women fucked everything up?”

There was a brief silence while Morgan paused for breath. I glanced at Aisha; her face, normally pale, was the color of dried bone. Cori began saying, “Well, I think that’s a ...” but Morgan was unstoppable. “And that becoming complete, becoming mafs, so that *everyone* could create children, could know that feeling, did even more to kill off the old religions than the bombing of Mecca and Rome?”

Cori—who was only eighteen or twenty, and had never been a mother—gulped, and began again. “I think that’s an oversimplification; I don’t think there’s ever a single cause for anything as complicated as—” but I didn’t hear the rest, because Aisha had run from the room, and I followed her.

* * * *

She was running down Tranquillity Road, and I could *feel* her screaming, though she was saving her breath for the race. Her legs were much longer than mine, and she was nearly acclimatized to the gravity, and I didn’t have a chance of catching her before she reached Startown unless she let me. She was at least halfway there before she began to collapse; fortunately, she slowed down enough that I could catch her before she hit the solamat. Holding on to her wasn’t easy—standing up, my eyes were on the same level as her breasts—but I supported her as best I could while she cried onto the top of my head.

“It’s okay,” I murmured into her blouse. “E just doesn’t understand, that’s all.”

She sniffed. “Do *you* understand?”

“No, but... I’m *trying* to understand. Besides, I...” I took a deep breath and said it very quickly, “I’ve been in love with you ever since I saw you and ... well, Morgan and I used to ...” I tried to remember an Arabic term for “go steady,” and couldn’t think of one.

“What?”

“Well, I guess you could say we were ... girlfriends, or something. Nothing serious, just kid stuff—kissing games, that sort of thing.” She pulled away slightly and stared at me through her shades. “You don’t play games like that on al-Gohara?” She shook her head violently. “Well, I guess it’s different for you. We all have the same sort of, uh, equipment, and we get to see each other naked in the change rooms, at the beach, places like that, or look in a mirror... but I think Morgan’s a bit jealous.” I shrugged. “I guess that’s one thing we haven’t gotten rid of.”

Aisha raised an eyebrow at that, and then began crying again. “Thanks for coming after me ... I’m glad we can say good-bye.”

“It’s—what?”

“I can’t go back to school. Not after *that*.”

I stared at her, suddenly weighed down by a horrible feeling of heaviness, of sinking. “Good-bye, Alex.” She grabbed my head, kissed me quickly and violently, and then let go and turned away. I tried to yell something, but my mouth seemed to be stunned. I watched her walking, and then ran after her.

“And do what?” I panted. “Stay at home all day every day until *Olivia* arrives?” She kept walking. “Okay, you don’t want to go back to school, you don’t have to, neither do I, we can still see each other.”

“No we can’t.”

“There’s an empty house, way out of town, all on its own; it’s a great place, completely private, and I have a key.” She stopped, and looked

curiously at me. “It be-longed to Mad Cousin Yuri. It’s a long story. Anyway, it’s at the end of Barrows Road, you know, the turn-off we just passed...”

Aisha shook her head, and started walking faster.

“Send me a note if you change your mind,” I called. No answer. “Or send me a note anyway, any time you want to talk. Please?”

She stopped, and turned. “Inshallah,” she murmured.

* * * *

“Is this why you call him Mad Cousin Yuri?” Aisha asked, staring at the half-finished artworks that lined the walls.

I nodded, wondering how Aisha had convinced her father to let her out unchaperoned. “E was my father’s cousin, not mine: e wanted to be an artist, and e was pretty good at it, but e hated working.” Aisha laughed. “E convinced herself that the only way e was going to finish anything was by removing herself from society altogether, so e petitioned for a house out here, no one around but the friendly neighborhood razorvines. A lot of people tried talking er out of it, but e had the right to a house of er own, and the builders couldn’t claim to be too busy or anything, so it got done; they cleared the land, built a road and the house, and moved er stuff out here. E stayed out here for three weeks.” Aisha laughed. “E came back occasionally, staying for a week or two at a time—and usually with a model or two, rarely on er own. Dad never really let er live it down—it was the first house e’d ever built, which is how I got a key—but Yuri was too easy-going to get upset. E managed to finish a few small things—some portraits, a lot of sketches, a statue or two— but e was just too fond of the cafes and the bathhouses.”

“Isn’t there a bath here?” asked Aisha, a little nervously.

“Sure—down the hall, second right. You want to take a bath?”

“I’ll need to wash before I pray ...”

Stupid of me. “Yes, there’s a bathroom—down the hall, there.”

“Then why did e have to go to bathhouses?”

“Ah,” I said, sitting down on a chair that was twice my age. “Well. We go to the bathhouses for sex—I mean, / don’t, you have to be at least

eleven, that's about thirty-one of your years—but that's what they're for. I think that's where my parents met, or at least—" I noticed that Aisha was looking disturbed, even slightly revolted, and shut up. I'd had to wait five weeks before she contacted me, and another four before she'd agreed to meet me here, which left only eleven weeks and three days before *Olivia* arrived—Time's winged chariot hurrying near, as Andrew Marvell would have said.

"We may be more different than I thought," she said, softly, staring at the picture that Yuri had been working on on her final visit here. It was a sketch of her favorite model, Kai, the one she used to joke about being buried with. She was very pregnant, and topless—or bottomless, rather; Yuri hadn't drawn her below the waist, just a halo of curly hair, a beautiful round face, and beautiful round breasts with large nipples the color of Aisha's eyes. "I mean, I shouldn't be lying to my father, I shouldn't even be here with you, especially not *alone*..." I waited for her to say more, but she didn't. "Why not?" I asked. "I mean, we're not even *doing* anything—"

"But we *might* be!"

"—and what if we were? Whose business is that but ours?"

"You don't understand!"

"No! I don't."

We glared at each other for a while, and then she shook her head. "What do you want?" she asked, softly.

"Where do I begin? I want to—I want us to be able to see each other whenever we want."

"I'm leaving in eighty days."

"You could stay here; you could be happy here—" She raised her eyebrows at that, and then blinked as though the idea had never occurred to her before. "Anyway, we were talking about what *I* want. Next thing on my list is, I wish I knew what *you* wanted."

She continued to stare, and then shook her head. "So do I," she whispered. "Alex, you've been wonderful, you've been kinder to me than anyone since my mother..." She turned away, and I could tell she was about to cry; I reached up and out to touch her shoulders, comfort her, but

stopped when my hands were only a few millimeters away. “My mother,” she repeated, rather stiffly. “Was executed. For adultery. *Now* do you under-stand?”

I had the feeling that I was understanding less and less the longer I knew Aisha; I shook my head,

“My father brought me with him on this trip because he didn’t trust my mother’s family to watch me, he thought I might disgrace him—”

“That’s—”

She turned and faced me, tears in her eyes and a crooked smile on her lips. “And how do you get on with *your* father?”

“That’s not the point.” I took a deep breath. “Okay, so maybe it is the point. But I know *my* father is wrong about you—and about a lot of other things. Is yours?”

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?” She glared at me, then glanced briefly around at the windows, and then removed her scarf. As I stared, she shook her long hair free, pulled her jacket open, stepped out of her skirt, and then stood there wearing only a pair of pants and a strange harness-like garment covering her breasts. A moment later, that popped open, and then she removed her pants and sat down on a chair opposite me, legs slightly apart and one foot propped up on the seat. She was even more beautiful than I’d imagined.

“Now do you understand? On al-Gohara, I’ll be my mother’s daughter until I’m my husband’s wife. Here, I’d be considered a freak, mutilated, incomplete—and that in-cludes emotionally as well as physically, sexually. We couldn’t even have children naturally!”

I admit, I hadn’t thought that far ahead—I couldn’t le-gally switch off my contraplants until I was fourteen— and I was surprised that Aisha had. Of course, if “naturally” meant “without gene surgery,” then she was right, but so what? Or was that against al-Goharan law, too? Suddenly, uncontrollably, I began laughing.

“What’s up?”

I took a deep breath and leaned back in my chair. “I’m just glad I didn’t fall in love with a Stigrosc; that would have made my life *really*

complicated.”

Aisha stared, her eyes bugging slightly—and then she, too, burst out laughing, which set me off again. I slid out of the chair and kneeled in front of her, close enough to almost taste her, close enough to hear her heartbeat. I reached out and stroked her hair, running my hand along the side of her face down to her lovely neck—and felt/heard the cry of the muezzin, transmitted through the bone from a complant, calling her to *zuhr*, noon prayer. She looked into my eyes sadly, then grabbed her clothes and ran to the bathroom, while I collapsed face-first onto her chair.

I heard the bathroom door slide shut, and then open, and she disappeared into Yuri’s bedroom to pray (it’s con-sidered inappropriate to perform *salat* in a bathroom). When she reappeared, fully clothed, I was sitting back in my own chair.

“When *Olivia* arrives...” I began, as she walked to-ward the front door. She stopped. “Just in case I don’t see you before then,” I said. “*Olivia* won’t be able to wait for you; it’ll only have an hour or two to rendezvous with the shuttles before going to the jump point. If you’re not on the shuttle in time, your father will have to choose be-tween you and waiting another six years for er hajj—six years *here*. Which do you think e’ll pick?”

“We can hide here,” I continued, quickly. “Or, better still, we can hide in the razorvine; even if they can find us, they’ll never be able to cut us out in time—”

“I can’t stay here, either,” she said, “not in this house, not on this world...” and then she walked out. I stared at her back, waiting for her to turn around; then, when she disappeared behind the next hill, I grabbed one of the razorvines that was snaking around the house, feeling the thorns bite into my palm and my fingers, standing there silently, knowing that Aisha wasn’t coming back, and un-derstanding nothing.

* * * *

The clouds were the same gray as Aisha’s robes, and the razorvine rustled and groaned alarmingly as I biked down the road toward the starport. I’d crept out of the house as soon as the sun had risen, after the longest night I’d ever stayed awake through. I hadn’t heard from Aisha since Ramadan began, five weeks before, and that had been just another good-bye. She hadn’t even answered my mail; maybe her father had taken her book away. If e had, e’d know I was here, waiting; if not, she would.

I watched the first bus arrive as the shuttle hangar un-folded like a flower, then heard another bike behind me. I turned, and saw Morgan, dressed in jeans and a fine mesh jacket against the morning cold, dismount and walk toward me. "Saying good-bye?" e asked.

I didn't answer; I just turned my attention back to the shuttle. I couldn't see Aisha, but maybe she'd boarded while I'd looked away.

"I've been reading about monosexes," e said, sitting next to me. "Boys, girls... they were almost never friends. They didn't understand each other well enough, they were taught to want different things ... It was really a scary idea, not being friends with your lover. I was really glad we'd gotten past that." I said nothing. "E's not going to stay, you know."

I saw a figure in gray, slightly shorter than the others, walking toward the ramp, and reached for my nocs. It was Aisha, and she looked around before sliding up the ramp and into the ship. "I thought we were friends," said Morgan. "We were friends for a long time, since we were kids. I thought we might even be lovers, one day. You know, you hurt me pretty badly, dumping me like that."

"I'm sorry," I said, quietly.

"Especially dumping me for er," e said, with some real bitterness in er voice. "A monosex. Someone who's not even *complete*. How do you think that made *me* feel, knowing I couldn't compete with half a person?"

"She's not half a person," I replied, dully.

Morgan shrugged, as the first bus pulled away and an-other crowd of al-Goharans filed into the shuttle. "Well, e'll be happier with er own people."

I opened my book: no new messages. Morgan opened er jacket as the sun broke through the clouds. "So, what happens now?"

I looked at er for the first time that day. "We're friends," I said, gently. "You're one of the best friends I ever had, and I'm sorry I hurt you."

E smiled, and shrugged. I leaned over and kissed er. "And I'm going to miss you," I said, and ran toward the shuttle, yelling "Wait!" at the top of my lungs.

* * * *

The pilot was Jessi Vokes, Teri's mother, and e *knew* that I was still nearly twenty weeks short of turning ten—but e also knew that there wouldn't be another ship leaving for nearly four years. Faced with this dilemma and a strict schedule, e called my mother, who—to my astonish-ment—told er that I had er permission to leave, and woke Kris and Rene so we could say good-bye. Perhaps fortu-nately, fathers don't get a vote in these matters. We lifted off only a few seconds behind schedule, and docked with *Olivia* with time to spare.

The human crew here are doing their best to keep the mafs and the Muslims apart, so I haven't seen Aisha in a week—and, fortunately, her father hasn't seen me. But I have seen Nerifar, and Chuh'hom, and I hope to see some Stigrosc when they've finished shedding their skins. The ship's library is even better than the one on da Vinci, and full of recent data about the planets we'll visit.

The atmosphere on Marlowe is rich in neon and the aurora look like waterfalls of blood, especially during the season they call Not-and-Live. Aisha and I will legally become adults there, long before *I*sis arrives. I think I could be happy staying on Marlowe, despite the weather, but if Aisha decides to continue on her hajj, I'll follow. They say Avalon is as beautiful as Earth was between the Ice Ages, but if Aisha doesn't want to stay there, either . . . well, I've always wanted to see Earth. And after Earth, we have time. And worlds enough.

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