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# A Bitter Shade of Blindsight



John Meaney

## **A Bitter Shade Of Blindsight**

TWO HUNDRED DAYS and sleepless nights after we burned the children, I led a different kind of Chantway, a new kind of tale. Black space strung with silver stars like pearls, and hanging there, like a baleful eye, the scull-gate's golden frame. I could not show the tachyon split, not literally; instead, I caused a maelstrom of chaotic colours like the worst peyote nightmare to spill across the hogan's interior. And I showed Balance, an emerald world which glowed with promise, and then...

Trembling, I cut the holoprojector. The hogan's interior remained dim, but green pre-dawn light streaked the patch of sky that hung above the smoke-hole at the ceiling's apex, casting a pale eldritch light across the proud faces of the elders of my clan. My maternal aunt, Josephine Begay, or Grey Woman, looked at me, and in the strange light her eyes were deep dark pits, seeing deep into my spirit and surely knowing me for the evil thing I was, or had become.

All night I had spoken, sometimes chanting, sometimes singing, but I had not revealed the worst of what we'd done, of what I had done, on the world we called Balance. I knew, suddenly, that this was not the place for expiation, for the restoration of harmony.

"That is all, I think." I spoke in English, now, as the trance-state left me. This wasn't the twentieth century: most of the elders were as fluent in English as in Navajo.

In the shadows, Red Woman sighed. "That was a part-ceremony to end them all, my daughter."

There were nods of agreement among the elders, and I accepted their verdict. I could not go on. There was more, far more, for me to tell them and, let's face it, it needed to be followed by a Ghostway, and that was a ceremony I surely could not survive.

A flap was thrown back from the doorway, and I squinted. Golden sun was creeping over the mesa's edge.

“You’re finished, aren’t you?” said my nephew, Dave. A straight backed youth now, not the child I had known.

“We’ve finished,” I said.

“Good. The cops are here.” He nodded, and ducked back outside the hogan

I powered down the holoprojector and stuffed it into my backpack. I pushed the pack aside, and crawled out of the hogan on my hands and knees, and got stiffly to my feet. A small flyer was coming from the east, out of the dawn.

“Cops?” I asked.

“Tribal Police,” said Dave. “I scanned ‘em.”

“You should be in bed. Haven’t you got school today?”

“Nah. I’m way ahead.”

The flyer dipped down below an outcrop, stayed out of sight for a while, then rose up into view, and headed straight for us. I could make out the insignia on its blunt grey nose.

It dropped into a landing, a fast but not showy manoeuvre, kicking up a cloud of red dust. I pulled my bandanna up around my nose and mouth.

The cockpit liquefied and made a slight popping sound as the man crawled out through the membrane and jumped to the ground.

“Hi, Cly,” said Dave.

“Hi. Howya doin’?”

His voice was deep. He had the narrow waist of the Dine’é, the people, and his wide shoulders strained the olive uniform of the Navajo Tribal Police. A heavy standard-issue blaster hung at his left hip. He shifted his belt’s weight in what looked like a gesture of habit.

“Ma’am.” He tipped his hat.

“Hi,” I said, loosening my bandanna and letting it lay back around my neck. I liked his manners, at any rate.

Watch it, girl. Some kinds of trouble you don’t need, right now.

“There’s been a bit of an accident back yonder.” He looked back at the outcrop. “A camel-drover called it in. Some, ah, Anglo guy.”

“*Poorbilagáana*,” I said easily. “Probably wandering round the desert without enough water.”

The officer, Cly, looked at me sharply. Couldn’t blame him. But I was only half Anglo, and he should have noticed that.

“Natalie’s from round here,” Dave said beside me. “Been away for years.”

“Right.” Cly nodded. “I was born for the turquoise clan, of the tangle people. I’ve only been based here for a year or two.”

All very friendly. I ran a hand through my hair.

“Nice to be back,” I said.

“Uh-huh. You’d be the astronaut, would you?” asked Cly easily.

“Ah. Yeah. That’s right.”

I held my breath.

“The burned Anglo, you see,” he said, and his eyes were watchful as his voice was soft, “Was a SWSA employee. Investigative Branch.”

“He... might have been keeping an eye out for me, like a bodyguard. The Space Agency do that, sometimes. Keeping an eye out for us...”

He nodded. He wasn’t dictating notes, and if he had a recorder pin on his person then it wasn’t showing the small blue light which regulations demanded. But I knew he wasn’t missing anything, and wouldn’t be forgetting anything either.

Damned IB. The gaps in Phoenix Seven Beta’s logs were probably becoming apparent after long analysis, though I had performed a virtuoso job of altering them, video logs and all, on the long solitary voyage home. And there were other inconsistencies: the medical scan they had put me through in Houston would have revealed the scars of childbirth, a fact that was missing from the logs.

Oh, Ash, my dear dead son...

And let’s not think what the psych reports might have said about me.

“The village’s microwards are standard, are they?” asked Cly.

I shrugged.

Dave said, “Sure. I bought them myself.”

The elders were out of the hogan now, and Aunt Josephine came up behind Dave and put her hand on his shoulder. I noted with dismay that she was carrying my backpack in one hand, strong despite her years.

“*Yá’át’ééh abíní,*” she said. “How are you doin’, Cly? What’s this about an accident?”

“Looks like some real strange resonance effect,” he said. “Guy with second-degree burns, found lying down by the perimeter. Old Kee found him and flew him to the burns unit in Phoenix General.”

There was a hiss of sharply in-drawn breath from Dave. No-one pointed out that I had set the microwards

last night. But they were designed to warn us and frighten off wandering coyotes who strayed too near the animal pens, not burn anyone who crossed their field.

“Impossible,” I said flatly.

“Forensic techs are on their way, but it looks like he was staking the place out and fell asleep in the micro-field.”

I said nothing. Perhaps an Anglo would have been drawn out by the silence, and maybe that was why Cly had spoken. But the half of me that was Navajo was content to watch and listen, undisturbed by silence.

Finally, Cly shrugged.

“I have to get over to Kayenta,” he said. “Hey, that’s a good pack. Mind if I look?”

“Ah — No,” I said. What else could I say?

He crouched and ran his hand over the pack where Aunt Josephine had left it on the sand. He admired the solar panel and the in-built nav-system, the water-trap in its pouch. He was very good. If I hadn’t been expecting it, I’d never have noticed him thumb on his scan-ring and pass it over the pack.

He straightened up, and my heart thumped like a hammer in my chest.

“Nice. You planning on hiking?”

Why wasn’t he cuffing me and reminding me of my rights?

“Yeah,” I said. “Or maybe going on horseback, up into the mountains.”

“But you’ll be around?”

“Oh, yes. I’ll — see you again.”

“I hope so.”

He tipped his hat to me and the elders, and walked back to his flyer.

“Cly?” called out Aunt Josephine. “Why are you flying all the way to Kayenta?”

Ye gods, I thought. He’s a police officer, and she’s interrogating him.

“Covering for Charlie,” he said, and I knew he meant Charlie Rivers, whom Aunt Josephine had known all her life. “Bad business in Flagstaff. He’s gone to help out.”

“Organising rescue squads?”

“Yeah,” said Cly. I must have looked puzzled, for he added, “Corp-wars. Micro-nuke at Nihon-Tel-Com offices. You think they’d learn.”

He meant, that ware viruses could be more effective. But not as demoralising.

“It’s chaos,” he added. “Uncontrollable.”

“Well actually — “I began.

“I know, chaos can be controlled. Small changes with big results can be used for short-term control. The butterfly effect. Stochastic resonance.”

I looked at him. He looked big and tough and dumb. Two out of three ain’t bad.

*Ma’i*the coyote, the trickster. Chaos. Two views, one phenomenon: the condensation nucleus of my understanding, as a fourteen-year-old girl, which had coalesced my twin cultural heritages.

Aunt Josephine had known, or guessed, about the Flagstaff explosion even though she had spent the night with the rest of us in the hogan. And, no, I didn’t think she was involved in any corp-wars herself. She’d always been fey that way.

“They’ve gotten much worse while you’ve been away,” she said to me. “The corp-wars. Much worse.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So I gather.”

“Welcome home,” said Cly dryly.

I may even have managed to smile at him as he climbed back inside his flyer. He nodded as the cockpit hardened, and we all stepped back as his thrust jets kicked up another dust cloud and his flyer rose, span on the spot, and set off, heading north. The direction of evil, it is said.

Red Woman touched my shoulder and I jumped. She was holding out a cloth-covered bundle.

“Yours,” she said. “I took it from your pack, inside.”

She unwrapped the bundle and handed me my blaster butt-first.

“Thanks,” I said, checking the power was off, and stuffed it into my belt.

“You’re welcome.”

As though at some unspoken signal, she and the others turned and went back inside the hogan, followed by Dave — though he winked at me before he ducked into the doorway. Only Aunt Josephine was left outside.

I unsealed my pack and reached in, felt the hard outline of the infocrystals. I didn’t think anyone had taken them. I just wanted to be sure.

I resealed the pack and straightened up.

“Do you walk *inhozro* , my daughter?” she asked.

I exhaled, a long shaky breath. “No. Not much harmony in my life, any more.”

“A pity. Still, it’s good you can take care of yourself, alone in the desert.” She indicated my belt.

I touched the blaster's butt. "Isn't it, just?"

"Do you plan on seeing her?"

I could have said, *whichher* do you mean. But there was no point in hiding things from Aunt Josephine.

"I *amnaakii*, the twin." Pointedly, I added the literal translation: "The one who is two."

"Something joyful," said Aunt Josephine, and her wise old face was burnished copper in the dawning sun. "Two of you, where before there was one."

"An abomination," I said. "She's alive, and I am *herchindi*."

Despite all her self-control, Aunt Josephine shivered. When a person dies, *herchindi*, her evil spirit is separated from her true self. If she is buried according to custom, with moccasins swapped to the wrong feet, then the *chindi* is confused and cannot follow the true person to the world below, but is trapped here in the world above, miserable and haunted, forever.

"*chindi*," I said again.

"No," she said, but she took an involuntary step back. "You can't mean that."

"No, of course not."

I laughed then, to make light of things, and squeezed her shoulder with affection.

She stayed with me while the sun rose, painting gold across the sweeping purple and red of the mesa, beneath a flawless blue sky, and the heat became a physical oppressive presence, beating down upon us, and I suppose I should thank Aunt Josephine for that, for staying with me, but the part of me that is bitter says no, it was from loyalty not to me, but to my other, my doppelganger, my nemesis, to the one who stole my life, the one with whom there would have to be a reckoning.



I piloted Aunt Josephine's old battered skimmer a metre above the ground. To my right, the stippled layers of green and black and white of a scarp slope marked the edge of the Painted Desert. Sighing, I took the wheezy old skimmer into a soft landing by the slope's edge, tucked behind an outcrop that would provide a little shade later, as the sun began to go down.

For a moment, a rattle behind the dashboard made me fear for the air-conditioning, but I raised my knee — supple as ever, thankfully — and gave a thumping kick with my heel. The rattle stopped. I breathed in cool scrubbed air.

I wondered where Aunt Josephine's loyalties truly lay, and where the powers of Investigative Branch ran out. Neither of them could stop me from reaching her, my enemy and progenitrix — but Aunt Josephine, at least, knew that I was carrying a weapon through a Disarmed Zone.

The IB had no search and seizure powers, but they could keep an eye out on TrafficNet, and if they were really bright, they might choose to check whether the occupant of Aunt Josephine's flyer was the owner.

I pulled the blaster out of my waistband — damn, it hurt where it had dug into me — and laid it on the seat beside me. Then I polarised the cockpit to darkness, and settled back to sleep.

And dreamed...

*...Of a golden eye hanging in space, Io in the background. Beside me, in the small control room — small compared to the vast hold and biome and fuel tanks behind the rear bulkhead — Mai-Li runs through the system checks yet again, delicate hands fluttering like butterflies through the holo-displays with a speed and elegance of control gestures beyond anything I have ever seen, while Robert scans breakpoints and traces and compares results. I, in nominal and rather temporary command, have the go/no-go decision, and so time on my hands to brood while the golden opening in space grows ever larger.*

*This is my first interstellar. Phoenix One has flown five times before, with five different crews. Did they all feel like this, when the scull-gate drew near?*

*Soon, it fills the viewscreen. The pulsing diaphanous rainbow hues of the displays, the figures and text scrolling through the air, the musical hum of auditory output and commands, all fade as the moment approaches. Small and red, blinking down the bottom right corner of my vision, the name of the ship hangs in the air before me.*

*Phoenix One.*

*Tiny itching sensation, back of left hand. An ant, a fugitive from our in-ship biome behind me, crawling over my rather bloodless hand. I hate insects. Very un-Navajo, I raise my right hand to crush it out of existence —*

*“Don’t.” Mai-Li’s soft voice.*

*She’s right. Ignore. Decision point approaching. The golden rim of the scull-gate grows beyond the edge of my vision as we get close. Now.*

*“Go,” I say.*

*A tearing golden light rips us apart and our scullied particles split, riven in two, and I pray with all my might, to the Old Testament Yahweh of my father’s race as to the Holy People of my mother’s tribe, and the golden lights seem to last forever, and then they go out.*

*Cool black. Normal space. Before me hangs Io. The small red ID still reads ‘Phoenix One’.*

*“We’re okay,” Mai-Li laughs, a silvery, tinkling sound.*

*I crush the ant as it crawls onto my armrest. Mai-Li, overcome with relief, says nothing. Then we begin the fall to Io, adjusting our approach for the swing-round that will kick us back towards home, towards Earth, where our friends and families, our familiar homes, are waiting...*

I woke in darkness, shivering, and a bitter silent laugh sounded in my mind. Cramps shot through me as I shifted in the seat. Damn Aunt Josephine. Why did she have to buy such a small flyer? Hardly the place for sleeping...



And the real memory came, then, not the wishful dream, and for a moment I remembered the Phoenix's control room so deeply I felt I was aboard again, felt the cool smoothness of my command chair's upholstery, the subtle polished smell, the familiar humming and chatter, the underlying deeper vibration of the drive, and Mai-Li and Robert...

*...The golden light burns brightly for an eternity, and then it is gone.*

*Black, cold space.*

*For a moment, the red ID still shows 'Phoenix One', and my mind plays a trick, tells me Io is still there, or that we've swung round and it's out of sight.*

*There's a kind of whimpering sound from Mai-Li, and her soft face is etched with fear.*

*The red characters crawl, and the ID rearranges itself.*

*Phoenix Seven.*

*"Oh my God," says Robert.*

*"Looks like we're it, kiddies," I say, but I feel something cold clutch at me as I say it.*

*"They did it." Mai-Li. "They really did it."*

*They. Already, they are behind us, though they are in fact ourselves. We're the scullied partner, tachyon duplicates dropping back to normal reality a precisely calibrated — I hope — number of light-centuries away from Earth.*

*There's a distant blue flash, unexpected, and a video volume expands to analyse the anomalous radiation, and just for a moment there is an awful twisting of perspective, an emerald globe somehow pulled apart and curved in a way beyond imagination.*

*Twisted...*

*And then Robert's fighting to recalibrate nav, and the geodesic, pulled to tatters by a strange attractor, rearranges itself as a steady curve in a phase-space display, and we're back to normal, I guess. The small video volume shows a green world, an Earth-type world, and space-time is back to rights.*

*"Things got a little... out of balance," I say, for the log's benefit, "But we're fine."*

*"There's our balance," says Mai-Li, gesturing at the display, and inadvertently names our home, the resplendent green world where we shall dwell forever.*

*The half-forgotten ant is crawling across my armrest. I encourage him to climb onto my finger, then gently let him down onto the console.*

*"I guess," I say, "We're all in this together."*

*The ant stops, antennae waving, below the green globe's image hanging in the air, a vast new*

*world. Home.*



Children screaming as they fell, no, that wasn't right, they fell silently, grim and pale-faced towards the flowing, glowing lava and burned up without a sound...

I wrenched myself back to wakefulness, breathing hard. In the skimmer, yes, that's where I was, and the crick in my neck was the result of sleeping in this damned seat.

I depolarised the cockpit. Clear, it held the night sky, deepest black, and a profusion of stars sprinkled across those infinite reaches. Childhood nights, sneaking out to watch the stars, grinning with delight when an asteroid shower sprayed briefly across the night...

I wasn't going to sleep any more this night. I pulled my seat into an upright position, gunned the skimmer's engine — startling thunder in the desert night — and lifted off, tuning the cockpit to IR as I did so: a film of smartatom scintillators now in an enabled state. The desert was painted in ghostly blues and pinks.

I let the skimmer resume its original course, the one I had laid in yesterday, while I accessed info and requested a terrain map and *her* address. The two intelligent facets interfaced, and the holoprojector drew me a floating miniature desert in the bright Martian reds of daylight, and amber trace lines marked sensible routes to the flashing terminus point atop a low mesa: her house, new from my day. I wondered what it looked like, how she had furnished it.

If I had a home on Earth to call my own, I suppose I'd fill it with infocrystals, a hi-res proj, and exercise equipment. But what do I know?

I killed the display and altered course for Kayenta.

Pure impulse. The image of Cly, the policeman, arose in mind's eye, and my heart beat a little faster. Was he the reason for my change in course? I didn't know. But I took a long sweeping curve across the featureless desert and powered on towards the town.

It was just before dawn when I landed on the outskirts. From the long-range viewer, it hadn't changed much: the long sweeping dome and arches of the hotel, the small string of stores, the small prefab domes of the locals. Not hovels, but smaller and meaner homes than the Anglos in the cities.

But they had *hozro*, some of them — the ones who weren't drunks or addicts, and that was most of them — and that sense of walking in harmony, of following the Navajo way, was part of what I'd lost.

And no damned corp-war was likely to spread out this far, either.

An unmanned freight skimmer passed by a metre above the ground, following the line of the old Highway 160, like a giant blind trilobite gliding almost silently through the air. Soon, it was out of sight.

I climbed out of the skimmer and limbered up. Then I began to run along the old cracked highway, heading into the dawn. As the potholes became worse, I moved out onto the sand, running steadily, veering off to one side whenever I neared a straggly mesquite bush which might shelter a rattlesnake at its base. I ran for half an hour, revelling in the ease with which I breathed, since SWSA medics cured my smoke-damaged lungs on my return with miraculous femtotech, and turned around, and ran back

towards the flyer with the warmth of the rising sun soaking into my back. Back at the flyer I stretched — easy when the ground is radiating warmth into your muscles, something I had missed in our region of Balance, though you didn't have to keep an eye out for scorpions there — and I worked my abs with two hundred sit-ups below a disconcerting sapphire sky, and finished with lunges and biceps and triceps curls with two small handy rocks I picked up.

Breathing heavily, I got back into the cockpit and retrieved a tube of smartgel from my pack., and slapped a handful of it onto my face. It left a cool minty tang where it slithered across my skin, and by the time I picked up the used puddle from the floor into my filter bowl, my skin felt clean and scrubbed all over, and my clothes smelled fresh as new. At least they'd let me in the hotel restaurant now.

I ignored my thirst — no good wasting the flyer's limited supply — until I got to the hotel. The restaurant was at the back, low and long and cool and dark. Ignoring the self-serve system, I slipped into a booth and waited for the waitress, a plump young Navajo girl, to take my order.

I reeled off the list of things I wanted to eat. "The works," I said. "And a pitcher of water, please. No, make that iced tea. Thanks."

"You're welcome," she said politely.

She checked on the other booths on her way through to the kitchen. Three tables were occupied, a couple of burly local guys complaining about the boss who worked them so hard, and —

My skin crawled. Those IB agents were good, very good. I'd been sure that no-one was tagging me, but one of them was here, slim and cold-looking, carefully not meeting my gaze while his pale eyes watched everything in sight. His movements, as he cut his breakfast steak, were controlled and precise.

I was light-headed, but that was partly low blood glucose, so I stayed and waited for breakfast to arrive, and pretended I hadn't noticed him.

How had they known I was coming? Extrapolated from my last course change, and sped here? But there hadn't been any high performance flyers out in the parking lot and besides, in Navajo territory you need a Navajo licence to fly anywhere but over the old highway routes. The parking lot had held one battered old pickup and a small black dart of a skimmer. Not professionally unobtrusive...

Something very wrong here, but I loaded eggs and pancakes into my system, replenishing lost electrolytes and sugar. Not overeating: I'd been scrawny for years, and planned to stay that way.

Someone turned on the hv, and images sprang up at half a dozen points in the room. I'd forgotten how hooked on media input some people could be.

I listened absently to the news while I finished off breakfast and ran my cred-ring over the table's sensor pad, thumbing the ring twice for a generous tip.

A muffled crump from each display, and I realised they were showing the explosions at Flagstaff, and I saw the man's eyes shift, then, and it came to me that he was not what I had thought, not an IB agent after all.

I left the restaurant slowly, then, out into the white sunlight, squinting my eyes almost shut. Damn, my eye-drops were back in Aunt Josephine's skimmer. Along with my blaster.

I jogged slowly across the old cross-roads to a low one-storied building that housed the local emergency services. Inside, the entire complement of the Tribal Police comprised Cly, leaning back in a chair, dusty boots up on his desk, with a phase-space holo pulsing in the air before him, and, from my viewpoint, mirror-image text which he waved away into oblivion as he dropped his feet to the floor.

“*Yá’át’ééh,*”; he said.

“One of the Flagstaff bombers is over in the hotel,” I said. “Pale skin, dead grey eyes. You’ll spot him. If you move quick, you’ll get him before he finishes breakfast.”

“What?” he asked, but he was already on his feet and moving. “How do you know it’s one of them?”

That floored me. A strange tingling on my skin, a sick feeling in my stomach.

“I just know it.”

“Like a witch, you mean?” he asked, cynicism and belief evenly balanced in his voice. “Is this a habit, with you?”

I let out a long shaky breath. “On Balance,” I said, “These things happened all the time. That’s the way things were.”

But I’ve brought it here, the sickness. Oh, ye gods. And had I, somehow, subconsciously, known how to arrange the microwards so that a surveilling IB agent would get second degree burns?

“I can’t arrest him because of your... feelings,” he said, but there was a half-questioning look in his dark eyes.

“As he gets in the vehicle,” I said, “You might spot... the other device. The second one, the one that’s with him. I’m not sure...”

He picked up his hat and jammed it on his head, checked his blaster’s status light with a glance, and looked at me, hard.

“Stay — No, wait in there.” He pointed to an office with an opaque door. “I don’t want him to see you. Don’t go anywhere.”

I nodded weakly.

“I won’t,” I said.

“Good.”

He left the office with a loping, easy stride, like a wolf. I wouldn’t want him for an enemy, I was sure of that.



I waited till I heard thumping and cursing from the cell next door, till I was certain that Cly had caught the man — a racist imprecation was cut off by the wet smacking sound of a fist, and I winced — then I slipped out of the office door, quietly, boot soles tuned to maximum softness, walking past an Anglo

slumped in his chair, so busy reading the tiny floating holo pages before him — the Bible, I think — he never even saw me leave.

There were ways of leaving false trails on TrafficNet scans, and when I got back to the skimmer I set about swapping codes with another vehicle. Compared to jinxing the Phoenix's logs, this was a piece of cake. I was the one who had, after all, rewritten the history of an entire world.

I worked furiously, hacking code, until it was done. Then I waited till a vehicle passed the Kayenta town sign with its sensor loop, and tight-beamed the transponder codes with my little switch program. It would only last a few minutes, ten at most, till the system polled all vehicles again and corrected its error, but in the meantime I could leave town and Cly's display would show I was heading east.

I powered up the skimmer and headed west over the old highway, constrained to that route for a while since TrafficNet temporarily thought I was someone else from out of state. Finally, no longer busy in the moment, I had time to think.

About doing things and not knowing the reason why, the way we learned to do things on Balance...

*Beneath a grey and lavender cloudy sky, air filled with the electric scents of Hope, our little settlement on the face of Balance, on a dark tilled field, the settlement domes a kilometre away and beyond, like a sculpture of an eagle, the proud white dart-shaped Phoenix Seven standing in the lee of a smoky blue ridge, trim now, for the huge bulky tanks that had comprised ninety percent of the starship's bulk were now the three big domes, the Terran-ecology biodomes, which form the triune centrepiece of the settlement. I shiver as the cold wind brings tears to my eyes, and return my attention to what I'm supposed to be doing.*

*I'm crouching in the rich loamy soil, and Claire, our best gaiologist, is a few metres away doing the same as me: pushing the spike end of the dull grey containers deep into the soil, then activating the feed. Pulsing blue surfaces and twisting red lines grow in the air above the small grey canisters: holo-displays mapping our success, with luck.*

"You think this is going to work?" I ask.

"Don't know," says Claire dryly. "You're in charge. Aren't you supposed to encourage me?"

"Ha. Ha."

*Claire grins. After Robert, Mai-Li and I landed the Phoenix and let the rear pods unfold like a flower's petals, we had some problems with the biodomes and, rather than play it safe, we decanted the entire complement of fifty colonists immediately. Everyone woke up okay, not a single sleep-tank failure, and that gave us all the expertise we needed, but fifty extra mouths to feed. The gamble paid off, and we three flight crew were voted Burghers of Hope, though there were some similar-sounding alternative designations.*

*Red traces tumbling, blue attractors turning strange: Claire's fingers flickered as she adjusted flow rates.*

"If they're too tightly coupled, the species," I say, "They'll never evolve to a significant optimum."

"My God!" She smacks her forehead. "Why didn't I think of that?"

*“And then you hold the egg like this, “I say, miming what I mean, “And suck just so, grandma...”*

*It’s fascinating, though, the way every software-evolution strategy an old coder like me can come with, some gaiologist has discovered its stratagem rules already, a decade before, just waiting to be used.*

*“They’re doing alright.” She points to scrolling figures, the scanned population of our little microbes, and it looks like they’re settling in to their new home.*

*The sky above sparkles silver as though in celebration, though it’s just some transient event in the smartatom film high above, where it surrounds the colony and reforms the atmosphere to suit us, the newcomers to this world. The barrier’s femtotech is rare and expensive enough on Earth; here on Balance, it’s both precious and irreplaceable.*

*Claire sits back on her heels and runs a hand through her long sweat-darkened hair.*

*“I’ve got something to tell you,” she says.*

*“Well,” I say, grinning, “I hope you’ve told Todd first.”*

*She smiles, colour rising to her cheeks. “Is it that obvious?”*

*I give her a hug, and kiss her warm cheek. “You’re pretty damned radiant.”*

*“Thanks. Am I the third, or the fourth?”*

*“Don’t know,” I say. “Tamarin, you mean?”*

*“Yeah. I think she is. But I don’t think it’s Steve’s.”*

*“Ah, right.” I think about that for a moment, sifting through possible candidates, then leave it aside for now. “So who’s going to pop out the first new Hoper? Place your bets puh-leez, ladies and gentlemen...”*

*“Don’t.” She places her hand across her still-flat abdomen. “I just know it’s going to happen the way it should.”*

*“Good. That’s what I think, too.”*

*We check the displays once more, then head back towards home. By unspoken agreement, we both take the low ridge trail that swings round the back of the settlement.*

*“Hi!”*

*A cheery wave. A small group, half a dozen of our colleagues, back from their various assignments, all happily heading back the same way at just the same time.*

*I nod towards Frank, tall and taciturn, and feel something tumble over inside me. God, am I getting broody?*

*Laughing and arguing, we walk down the grassy path past The Dumbbell, two physics-lab domes linked by a long steel and glass corridor housing a linear scullifier, just as pale blue flame flashes and there's the thump of an explosion and the shattering of glass. Black noxious smoke pours out of the destroyed panels.*

*"Peter's in there," says someone.*

*Two of the guys are already standing by glass wall, to one side of the billowing black cloud, and as they link their hands to form a stirrup I take a running jump, and they boost me up onto the corridor's glass roof, mercifully intact but burning hot.*

*I thump at an emergency handle and a triangular pane falls in.*

*Peter's partly blackened face looks up at me from amid a tangle of wrecked lab gear, and he jumps to meet my hand and I help haul him up though it's mostly his own effort. Then we're standing on the roof, ready to jump, and the rest of the gang are holding out a canvas sheet and I shove Peter forward so he jumps first and the canvas breaks his fall.*

*They struggle to roll him off to get the canvas ready for me but the wind shifts then, and acrid fumes blow into my face and, out of breath, I suck them into my lungs with an involuntary wheeze and tears blind my eyes but I see a flash of white light, that awful twisting sight, the second time that I've see it now, that strange feel of things bent out of their natural geometry and a sense almost of distant laughter and then the blackness comes and the vertiginous feeling of falling, endless falling, and no-one there to catch me...*



*Another memory fragment...*

*An unseen vision, greater far*

*Than optic might: yes, on a par*

*With dream-borne sight —*

*While in the chasm, deeper far*

*Than darkest death, black demons spar —*

*But we forget.*

*Coughing, I summon a nurse to my bedside, and point out this piece of doggerel which is in my bedside terminal's workspace. In answer, he uses his staff access to show the bed's previous occupant, I gather, sitting before another holo display, and someone out of view asks him to say something whenever a bird appears. The young man is pale, with blonde hair falling across his forehead. He doesn't look stupid, but he says nothing when one bird after another appears in the lower half of his field of vision. Only when an image flies overhead does he say he can see it.*

*"That's Paul," says my nurse. "Brain damage. Visual cortex."*

*The video log's still running, though. As random blue swallows fly through the video volume, appearing from his lower left or right, Paul is asked to raise his left or right forefinger, depending on where the bird appears, and he gets it right almost every time.*

*"But he can't see it," I say.*

*"The conscious part of him can't," says my nurse. "Or couldn't. Want to see him now?"*

*It's time for my exercise anyway. The nurse escorts me down the long white corridor's of Houston's femto-med centre, out onto a sun-drenched lawn, and I recognise the pale man sitting in a sun-lounger, and that blonde lock of hair is still over his eyes.*

*"Hi," I say. "My name's Nat. Natalie Silverthorn."*

*He nods. "I'd get up, but I'm not supposed to move about too much, till the interface is integrated. You a patient?"*

*"Yeah. I've seen some of your poetry."*

*"Oh, that." He looks out across the lawn, at the other resting patients, and his grey eyes are calm. "That was just depression."*

*"Oh."*

*"I'm going to be okay, though."*

*A buzzer sounds, then, and the medics begin to round up patients like sheep and herd them back indoors, and I follow along meekly.*

*These femto-med techs are fine people, and if they rework my lungs I'll be properly grateful. But if they touch my mind, I'll kill them.*



Another day spent in fitful sleep in the skimmer, its cockpit polarised to black. I powered up the hv and accessed a passive-drama channel. The default choice was *Bridget Goes to Mars*, an old serial I last saw long before I went into space, and I chose it in a fit of nostalgia.

Ten minutes into an episode called *Sisters Simulacra*, I shut it down. The plot resolution depended on not guessing from the start that this week's doomed heroine was a VR construct. "...And they took their helmets off, and it had all been a simulation." When I was at school, old Agnes Arrowsmith would have taken the strap to me if I'd turned in a story which ended like that. I wondered what had become of her.

I depolarised the cockpit. Looking at the desert through gritty eyes, I felt insubstantial as a coded construct myself, some programmer's reified twisted dream.

Time to act.

I checked the pre-programmed course I'd laid in, and it was fine. Awkwardly, I pulled my backpack over from behind my seat, and degaussed one of its handy pockets. I ejected the slim comms module from the dashboard and slipped it into the pocket, and sealed the pocket shut. Then I removed my



blaster from the dashboard's power feed and checked it: fully charged. I liquefied the cockpit membrane and scrambled out, blaster in one hand, dragging the pack behind me. I dropped it onto the rocky ground, and jumped down after it.

I sprang up, quickly sighting my blaster on a small boulder, and pressed the stud. I ducked back down as the boulder exploded, but something hit my cheek. Fragments of rock rattled against the skimmer's body, and I laughed.

My cheek felt warm. I touched it, and my hand came away red with blood. A tiny cut, insignificant.

I dragged my pack a few metres away then returned to the skimmer. I climbed up and reached inside, activated the drive, and jumped back down as the engines powered up. I backed away quickly as the skimmer rose, turned on the spot, and headed east towards a distant mesa.

I made sure my blaster was deactivated before I tucked it away inside my pack. Then I shrugged the pack up onto my back, sealed the strap across my front, and bounced a little to settle the weight evenly. Perfect.

Heat rose from the desert floor, pressed down at me from the endless blue sky, from the white searing sun, as I set off to find the one who had stolen my life from me.



Night. Clear desert night. I stopped for a rest, still standing, and looked up at the silver stars.

Phoenixes Two through Six were out there, somewhere, on distant worlds if they'd survived at all. Two sent return missions; one from a lush planet to which SWSA were planning more colonisation trips. Perhaps the others were merely delaying their triumphal returns.

Of the four Space Agencies with Phoenix-type ships and scull-gate tech, Phoenix has the highest success rate. God help those other crews.



Day. Searing sun. Step after monotonous step, while the heat burned, my memory drifted free...

Frank was gentle with me, and always considerate of my low stamina and my smoke-scarred lungs, and he never minded if I had a coughing, wheezing fit at an inopportune intimate moment. He didn't stay with me for the birth, though, and I never worked out whether he had timed his long rock-hunting field-trip deliberately to avoid the event.

I pulled the pack's sip tube round to my mouth, and sucked water sparingly. There's a non-linear equation governing the relationship between sweat lost and the effort required to bear a given weight of water, and I hoped I'd got the balance right.

Balance.

After Ash was born, Frank was around even less. He had a new colleague in Peter, whom I — or rather, whom the entire community acting in unconscious unison — had rescued from the lab explosion. Peter had sworn off research in decompactifying the hidden six dimensions of our ten-dimensional universe, declaring that those twists beyond our perception obviously didn't want humans blundering

around in their domain, not here on Balance anyway, and that the whole idea was way too dangerous. I was relieved, for I'd always feared he would one day raid Phoenix Seven's remaining hold for the one jump-gate we had and cannibalise it for its scullifier module.

Frank and Peter spent ever longer away together in the cold blue and violet mountains to the south, or in insulated tents down by the flowing rivers of molten lava in the smoking peaks to the north — Frank, whose parents had been killed in Seattle during the Mt. Rainier eruption, was an authority on vulcanism — and I was content to raise Ash for the most part by myself. I called him Ashkiidlohi, Laughing Boy, as his childhood Navajo name, for though he was a frail and sickly child, he always found joy in the world around him. He wore a microdoc strapped to his arm constantly, never complaining, even when he was too young to understand that it kept him alive, scavenging his system of the LXDS virus's by-products, keeping the symptoms at bay but lacking the femtotech, even nanotech, which would have hunted down the viral molecules and broken them apart.

Ash, my son.

I never thought of what his adult name might someday be. Perhaps I knew, even then, as was the way of things on Balance, that he would never have need of one...

I stumbled, cursing, kicking a rock, and a small black scorpion scuttled out of sight.

"I wouldn't have killed you, little one," I murmured, though in my youth I would have stamped it into oblivion, not the Navajo way at all.

Only people can commit evil, and therefore deserve to suffer, to die.

Not children, though, not like Ash, robbed of his future more cruelly than I was robbed of mine...



*Claire, standing at the doorway to my kitchen, shoos her son Jason outside to play. The sounds of children's chanting of some playtime rhyme drift through the open exterior door. I don't need to look out the window to know that Ash is standing off to one side, laughing as the other, fitter, children play skipping games through ribbons of holo light, but not joining in with them, not ever joining in.*

*I hand Claire a cup of coffee.*

*"Thanks," she says. "Sorry about Frank."*

*He and Peter, who spend so much time together when they're off on field trips, have decided to make the arrangement permanent. If I hadn't cried, I'd have laughed.*

*"I know," I say, and it's true that I know how she feels at that moment, and that her sympathy is genuine. Yet it wasn't a surprise about Frank: as with most relationships here, it's as though we all understand each other...*

*Claire and I both gasp, sharing a sudden sensation like a clenched hand inside our guts, and we realise the sing-song rhyme outside has stopped, and then we're both running out to the yard and I bump into Claire's back as she stops and I forget about her because that's Ash lying down there, Ash with his face pale, ashen, yes, eyes closed and lying on the ground with his hands crossed on*

*his chest and the other children are sitting in a tight circle around him, close to him, and they reach forward and I try to scream, do something, but a pale yellow glimmer accompanies that unnatural twisting I have seen before and the children reach inside Ash's chest, actually inside him, somehow, and I see their hands are moving though I don't know how they're doing it but that's my son and they're killing him and the thought frees me and I'm running forwards and Claire's with me, screaming too, and we pull them off, pull them away from Ash and their hands are glistening but there's no blood, no blood at all, and I'd like to believe it's an hallucination but not this time, this time I know it's real and Claire knows it too, looking at her son Jason in horror but the children's faces are blank, not even annoyed, and I kneel by Ash and feel for a pulse at his neck but I already know there's none.*

*Other colonists run up too, in that way we have of drawing together when danger threatens one of us, that way we've never even questioned, let's be honest, as the manner in which we talk and the way we act has changed since we arrived on Balance, and we've pretended somehow that it hasn't, but all illusions have been stripped away now and there's no going back to reclaim our innocence.*

*I have plenty of helpers to rush with Ash's limp white form to the medical dome and he's on the emergency table in seconds and sensor arms swing round and holo displays spring up but every vital display is flatplaned. The only decaying attractors belong to biochemical processes that are still proceeding in cells which don't yet know the organism is already dead.*

*No curse on my lips, nor tears in my eyes — some things are too vast for such petty reactions to count at all, as our remaining dreams and hopes are swept away like a feebly protesting ant tossed upwards by the mighty hurricane, impersonal, remorseless, and utterly implacable.*



Her house was a white and silver dome, like a second miniature sun by daylight, perched atop a dusty flat-topped column of red rock too narrow to be called a mesa. The clear gel coating my eyes extended itself on command; even at max magnification from ground level, the best part of twenty kilometres away, I could see no signs of movement around the house, no IB flyers parked outside on guard, only hers, its licence plate visible. Maybe she wasn't expecting me. Maybe the IB hadn't even told her I was coming; the little info I had been able to access on her, my sister and mother, my creatrix and betrayer, indicated her resignation from SWSA five years before.

A nice isolation. The IB, if they were monitoring at all, were watching the TrafficNet and maybe relying on a rooftop scanner or some similar device, though it would have to be damned small for my enhanced vision not to make it out, and I could see nothing. I blinked three times, rapidly, and the gel slicked back to its normal shape and function, protecting my eyes against the sun.

Nobody in her right mind would approach any way other than by air. Nobody in her right mind would cross the searing desert in the full heat of day, nor assay the sheer vertical climb in the darkness of night, but I was unbalanced as much as unBalanced, and I knew it. Mortal betrayal tends to do that to a girl.

The Arizonan sun grew hotter than a lava flow, molten rock turned fiery gold and white, and the children's bodies falling...

My mind shut progressively down, as the weight of my pack pulling my shoulders back and the need to keep walking, one step, then another, outweighed all other perceptions and became my universe, a Christian hell.

For burning hours, I walked.

The sun was crimson liquid dripping on the horizon when I reached the base of that great column of rock. I slipped my pack off and onto the ground, and sat down beside it, ignoring the burning heat beneath me, and waited for cooling darkness to slip across the sky.

I slept for a little while, I think, for when I looked up again the sky was pure black, frosted with starlight, and it was cool enough to breathe easily again, though still warmer than a summer's day back in Hope.

I slipped a tube of smartgel out of my pack and smeared my hands, and twisted the controls on my boots' ankles to set the soles' pores for max adhesion. I took out the handful of infocrystals and slipped them into my shirt pockets, and I took out the blaster — deactivated, good — and slipped it through my belt in the small of my back. I turned to the sheer rock face, and the blaster dug into me painfully. I wriggled my hips to settle its weight better, and it fell to the rocky ground with a clatter. This wasn't going to work.

I tipped the contents of my pack out onto the ground: water bottles, insulating sheet, comms module, map crystal, climbing line, light-sticks, protein bars. Then I put my infocrystals and blaster in the pack, squeezed it small and tightened it that way, and settled it on my back. No problem.

I blinked my eye-gel to night-vision and the night turned sparkling blue. I looked for hand- and foot-holds, jammed my fingers and toes into the first holds, and hauled myself up. First move. Reach up, stretch, and pull again.

I climbed for twenty minutes before a crack in the face enlarged into a chimney and I squeezed myself inside and forced myself to rest. I thought about the water bottles, lying below at the pillar's base. Time to move on up again.

Twice I nearly fell off and died. After the second time, gorge rising, I had to find a small ledge and hug the rock face until the trembling stopped and I could continue.

Stretch and pull. Stretch and pull. Climb.

The level top was a shock. I hauled myself over the crumbling lip, wriggled forwards across the flat rock till I was metres away from the edge, then just lay down on my stomach, face against the hard rock, and thought of nothing but breathing calmly and relaxing exhausted muscles.

When I could, I got to my feet and unslung my pack. Carrying it in one hand, I walked around the dome's perimeter, past her rather sporty little flyer, to the entranceway. A tiny holo indicated that Nancy Silverthorn was in. Two other names, Adam Craybourne and Samuel Craybourne, were displayed at a lower intensity, indicating their absence.

She had a family. Of course she had a family. Why hadn't I thought of that? I was the one who was alone and wretched, not she.

“Open up,” I said, and my voice was dry and cracked.

That, and years of different environments including toxic smoke inhalation, had caused divergence in our voice patterns. There was a twinkling red light as the house system scanned my retinal patterns to make sure — they, at least, remained identical — and the door membrane softened and I stepped right

through, into her house.

She was sitting in a soft easy-chair, a hardcopy book open on her lap, a cup of coffee on a small table at her side. I blinked rapidly to readjust my vision: a pale polished wooden floor, clean pastel walls, a Ganado Red rug on one wall. . . but my eyes returned to her. How strange. It was me sitting there, or almost. She was paler than me, softer and heavier, and she jumped with surprise when I dropped my pack to the floor.

“Nice room,” I said.

“Oh, my God. You!”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “Quite the happy reunion, isn’t it?”

“Not hardly. I didn’t want to see you when you got back to Earth, and I don’t want to see you now.”

“Can’t face your own guilt?” I asked, and saw with satisfaction that she flinched.

She said nothing as I walked around the room, taking in the pottery displayed on pedestals, the still holos of her husband and son. The boy looked pale and sullen, heavy black eyebrows drawn together, nothing at all like Ash.

“Which one’s Adam and which one’s Samuel?” I asked, but she didn’t answer.

She moved swiftly, then, out of the chair and heading for the nearest terminal, but I leaped for my pack instead of for her and the blaster came out faster than thought and I squeezed the stud and the terminal exploded with a loud bang.

She stopped dead, shocked into stillness.

“You’re crazy,” she whispered.

“Wouldn’t you be?” I answered, and realised what I had said, and laughed out loud.

My laughter died at the bitter look in her eyes.

“Don’t you realise,” she said, “That you’re the lucky one?”

“Really.” I aimed the blaster at her. “Do you believe I’d use this on you?”

She nodded. She knew me that well, anyway. It was a start.

“It’s a lovely night for flying,” I said.

She backed away slightly, and I knew she thought I meant to take her outside and throw her off the edge.

“Oh, no,” I said. “That would be far too easy. Let’s go.”

We went outside, sisters together, and the flat top was pale grey in the moonlight and soft cicada song enriched the night and I held the gun on her as she climbed into her flyer and slid over to the far side and I

climbed in after her.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

I said nothing, programmed the course with control gestures from my left hand she could read as well as I, and I settled back, resting my wrist on the armrest but not letting my blaster’s aim waiver from her torso.

The cabin lights were off, and I blinked my way back to full night-vision. I watched her swallow nervously, looking out into the darkness with unenhanced vision, as the night enveloped our little flyer.



The Canyon de Chelly rose up on either side of us, breathtaking sandstone cliffs glowing peach in the morning sun, as we trudged along the canyon floor, littered with the stone fragments of erosion and avalanche. Neither of us spoke; her breathing was harsher than mine, though my steps probably wandered more. It had been thirty hours or more since I had last slept.

The flyer lay abandoned hours ago, far behind us. I carried the blaster in my right hand, and the comms and holoprojector modules from her flyer, taped together, in my left. I would have preferred that she carry the modules, but she might use them as a weapon if my concentration wavered.

We walked for a long a time. At the foot of the sheer rock wall to our left, a cluster of tiny stone cliff dwellings nestled, abandoned suddenly a thousand years ago by the mysterious Anasazi culture. No knowledge of their passing remains; an object lesson to us all.

Two centuries ago, eight thousand Navajo — men, women and children, the battered survivors of Kit Carson’s violent campaign of ethnic cleansing — started their Long Walk along this route at gunpoint, a walk that would end at Fort Sumner, and the death of thousands more from exposure and disease. I was sure the significance of this was not lost upon her, the other Nat, my enemy.

Finally, as we rounded a twist in the canyon’s route, I knew we were at the spot.

“Stand there,” I said. My voice was rough.

She walked to the foot of the cliff and stood very still.

“Why here?” she asked.

I had no answer. I just knew that this was the right place, that there was no room on this Earth for both of us, that the existence of us both together was an abomination.

“*Naakii,*”; I said. “My twin. The one who is two...”

I placed the holoprojector down on the ground between us.

“Listen,” she said, and there was desperation in her voice, “I know the colony was hit by plague, what you’ve had to go through — “

I shook my head. She had no idea what I had had to go through, though I aimed to give her a glimpse of it before she died.

“But I — It wasn’t good here, either,” she continued. “You’re the heroic one, don’t you realise that?”

I stopped and look at her.

“I just generated you,” she said bitterly. “I flew out through the scull-gate, every particle duplicated as a tachyon, turned round and flew straight back home. The press used to hound me, wanting to know how you’d be feeling. You! Not me. As though I was just the cowardly one, the one that, that...”

She stopped. If it hadn’t been for Ash, I might almost have forgiven her just then.

Had I cared once about cowardice, or about what other people thought? Maybe. A long time ago.

“Do you still do image-sculpting?” I asked.

“Sometimes.” Her voice was calmer now. “Why do you ask?”

“The colony wasn’t wiped out by plague,” I said, thumbing on the holoprojector’s power unit. “I faked the video logs. We always had a talent for editing images, didn’t we?”

She swallowed uncertainly as I took the infocrystals out of my shirt pocket and slid them into the drive slot.

“Not plague,” I said. “But maybe a form of madness.”

The log images grew, dim in the blinding sunlight, but discernible all the same.



*A dark purpose has descended on the colonists, and I trail behind them as they bear the unprotesting children out of the settlement and up into the hills. Frank, the volcano expert, leads the way. I am at the rear, following numbly, and Ash’s dear sweet body is lying back in the med-dome’s morgue.*

*Floating glowglobes trail overhead like playful orange fireflies, but the camera-drones were sent back to base, and I’m probably the only colonist who hasn’t thrown away her video lapel-pin.*

*Who knows how long we march, grim and silent? Finally, we reach the place. A long stone bridge, a natural arch, spans a long deep chasm of blue-grey shadow-bound rock, and down below a viscous river of golden lava writhes and spatters and the air waivers with the heat, and the stink of sulphur stings the nostrils but no tears come, not for that, not for anything.*

*And all I can do is watch...*

*Watch while they march out onto the bridge’s apex, hear their muttering, know what is in their hearts: the deep knowledge that Balance has cursed them, and that their offspring are not as they.*

*I don’t follow them onto the bridge. From the abyssal edge, I can see enough.*

*See young bodies falling, arms waving, just a little, as they plummet down towards the lava.*

*There are no screams. It is the ultimate accusation: nobody truly human, child or otherwise, could go to such death without a murmur.*

*One by one the children drop, and as they reach the flowing molten rock there's a blaze of yellow light and at first it looks like flame as they're incinerated but I sense that twisting distortion of all that is real and solid and now I'm not so sure.*

*Nobody meets my eyes as they trudge back off the bridge. Nobody talks. They file back towards Hope, whose name now mocks us, and I watch the burning river for a while, and turn to follow them.*

*When we get back to the settlement, Frank is waiting outside the med-dome, and, shrugging hopelessly, I lead him inside to see his son. The morgue room is gleaming and sterile.*

*I press the button, and one of the corpse-drawers slides open, and Ash's white-skinned body is lying there, still and shrunken, hands crossed on his chest — its chest, the shell that was once my son — and his, its, eyes are closed, but not as in sleep. Our son is gone.*

*Silent tears track down Frank's cheeks as he reaches out to touch Ash's cold, still hands.*

*Ash's eyes open wide.*

*In them, a dark light is dancing.*



I told her, then, the other Nat, as I shut off the display, how the children had somehow reached inside Ash and killed him, or so we thought, and how they — and we, the adults — had always acted differently on Balance, as though reacting to things we could never quite see.

“What did you do?” she asked quietly.

“I grabbed Ash and a survival pack, and we ran for the hills,” I said. “Ash's LXDS virus condition was gone. We had no microdoc, but he seemed healthier than ever except that he never spoke, not once, not even when they...” “My voice faltered.

“They tracked you down, didn't they?” said the other Nat. “The other colonists.”

“Oh, yes, they were good at that,” I said bitterly. “We eluded them for three days, Ash and I, but they came upon us at dusk as we were making camp and there were too many of them, just too many, and it was dark and I couldn't get them off me, not while they, they...”

She was silent.

“Frank led them,” I whispered. “He was always good at tracking.”

“I'm sorry,” said the other Nat.

She took a step forwards, and I raised my blaster.

“I know,” I said.



She stopped, and death stared at me out of her eyes.

“Tell me,” I said. “In the video log, did you see something strange when they hit the lava? The children?”

“They didn’t scream,” she said. “Ah... A flash of flame, what you’d expect. That’s not the answer you’re looking for.”

I shook my head. Perhaps it was all in my imagination. Or perhaps you had to be there, to see that awful twisting of space, in a way that would not show up in the log. When I watched the log, for sure, it was my own memory I really saw.

“Remember old Agnes Arrowsmith?” she asked. “How she made us spend hours speaking and thinking in Navajo, then trying the same things in English and showing how impossible it was to transliterate thought?”

“I remember,” I said.

I didn’t want to remember. One thought filled my mind: one of us must die. Memories were an unsettling intrusion.

A verb-based, process-based language has a different view of the world. In Navajo, we would not have flown the flyer — only birds can fly — but would have caused it to fly (as pilots) or flown along with it (as passengers) in a way that would not admit of one entity being dominated by another.

“And Aunt Josephine angry at us for killing the scorpion that bit us? And how she would tell us how her grandparents were given their surname.”

“A hundred times,” I said. “A thousand.”

Her grandfather was a silversmith’s son, *‘béesh ligaiitsidii biye’*, and a well-meaning Anglo had translated *biye*, ‘son of’ as ‘Begay’, and that became his name. Not an uncommon story among our people.

“On Balance,” said the other Nat, “You had this other way of seeing things?”

“Oh, yes,” I said.

She knew what she was doing, establishing a bond, knowing I couldn’t kill her until she’d had her say.

“And that happened after the children were born?”

Cold claws running down my spine.

“No,” I said. “It seems to me, things were always that way there. We always knew, for example, if one of us was in trouble.”

“And is that what tells you I should die? That sense of the way things are?”

“*Naakii*,” I whispered. “The one who is two.”

And for a moment, then, I knew. I had not brought her here to kill her. But I had come here to watch her die. I knew, deep, deep inside, that if she just stood there in that spot for long enough, then she would die, for sure.

In the old Navajo way, crime was followed by a different kind of retribution; a murderer might support his victim's family, to restore the tribal harmony. In this, I prefer to follow the way of my father's people. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.

Death, now, was imminent. I had absolute certainty. I looked up at the pink and gold cliff stretching high above her, and death was fairly singing in the air.

"Surely not *naakii*," she said. "*Rathertá'i*, the one who is three."

I stared at her. Certainties began to crumble.

"What did you do after they killed your son?" she said.

"I healed up," I said. "And when I could, I stole the Phoenix and lifted off, and deployed its scull-gate and went through, and spent the long days coming home fixing the logs and working out my story. Something that would persuade SWSA not to mount an expensive follow-up mission. Missions to plague worlds don't look good on the budget reports."

"Yeah, right." She nodded. "So you found yourself replicated in the outer reaches of the solar system while the other Nat, our sister, is still in orbit round Balance, light-centuries away. You're the third Nat, not the second."

I lowered my blaster. Something was very wrong here.

"That's right," I said softly.

"Unless she's done something really foolish."

Like diving back into the atmosphere in an uncontrolled descent and burning up, deliberately.

"No," I said. "She wouldn't have done that. I know it."

"Because of the connection between you?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Because of that."

"Like the connection between you and me?"

I let out a long slow breath. That was it. That was what was wrong.

"Just like that," I said.

I was wrong. The second Nat's memories of betrayal flowed bitterly through me... but I was not her. She had duplicated herself to produce me, and she returned to face her fate on Balance, while I was safely here on Earth, stewing in my own guilt, focusing all my hate and rage on the first Nat when I was just as bad, just as guilty. I hadn't chosen to be the third, the one who got back to Earth — I had the same memories as Nat Two, up to her flight through the scull-gate she'd deployed in Balance orbit —

and I could just as easily have been her. Fifty-fifty chance. But by that token, I had the same memories, up to the first scull-gate jump near Io, as the Nat who stood here in front of me, fearing for her life. We shared our childhood memories, we shared our very lives — up to a bifurcating point — so I was the betrayer as much as the betrayed, equally deserving of death... No. More deserving, for the Nat before me was innocent of all that had come after, for she had not watched the children plunge to their death with not even her voice raised to stop the slaughter, had not let them take her son, her dear boy, her Ash, not let them take him and, and...

Then I saw it.

That rippling, twisting distortion of space, surrounded by a black glimmering, and high above us the canyon wall was cracking, splitting open, and a section spit off and fell straight down towards her, my sister...

“No!” she cried. “Don’t!”

I crouched as I raised my blaster two-handed and squeezed, and the falling rock smashed apart into a thousand fragments and span off in all directions.

That black ripple shook, and I swear I sensed it snarl, saw something like a black malevolent sneer, a rasping claw, then the distortion closed up and vanished, that force that wanted one of us to die, as though it had never been.

“Nat!” I shouted, and it sounded strange in my own ears.

There was blood on her forehead when I reached her, catching her before she could fall, and her eyelids were fluttering.

“*Tsé dah hodzílálii*” she said in a distant voice. “The Monster Who Kicks People Down The Cliff.”

Or burying them at its base. So she had seen something too. A contagious madness, then.

“Funny,” I said. “I thought it might be *Bits ’iis lizhin*, the Black Body.”

She gave a breathless shaky laugh.

“One of the holy *Haasch ’ééh dine ’é?*” she said dreamily. “Too much self importance. That’s your trouble.”

Then she went limp in my arms.



They’d made an effort with the decor — pink and orange pastel walls, flowering plants, free drinks dispensers, an hv terminal — but it didn’t help. Every hospital waiting-room’s the goddamn same, bleak and hopeless, tinged with the smells of chemicals and despair.

Cly was lounging back in the chair opposite mine, booted feet crossed at the ankles, and his hat tipped down over his eyes. His wide shoulders still strained his Tribal Police uniform.

He looked like a graven wooden statue. Maybe he was fast asleep. Or maybe he was content to be

silent, having nothing to say, just as a good Navajo should.

The Anglo half of me was more restless. I got up from my seat and switched on the terminal, and accessed the news channel.

A glass skyscraper, strewn in shards across a Shanghai street. Corp-wars again.

Cly gave a quiet grunt.

“At least it’s outside your jurisdiction,” I said, waving down the audio volume.

He smiled, and I was very glad that it was he who had responded to my distress call. His souped-up police flyer had sped us from the Canyon de Chelly to Phoenix — the city, not the starship — at a sickening velocity, while I had used his microdoc on Nat...

“You can come in, now.” A smiling orderly was standing beside a doorway, beckoning us in. “Just for two minutes.”

Cly got to the door ahead of me, but let me squeeze by first.

Nat, my sister Nat, was sitting up in bed, and I carefully squeezed her in a hug, and kissed her cheek.

“Very odd,” she murmured as I drew back.

“You’re telling me,” I said. “Or you’re telling you, if you’d prefer.”

The gel across her forehead was already a fine tan colour, and I needed no diagnostic displays to tell me she was going to be alright.

Her laugh was healthy enough.

“I’ll be here for another four or five days,” she said. “Adam and Sam will be here tomorrow. They were in Paris.”

“Very nice,” I said.

“I don’t suppose...”

I glanced at Cly, and he was grinning.

“She can’t make it,” he said. “She’s attending a Ghostway ceremony, with me.”

“You’re joking,” she said, but she knew as well as I that I needed cleansing of ghostly contamination.

“No,” I said. “But I’d like to meet them. Please.”

“Any time,” she said. “Sam’s my son, by the way.”

The orderly chucked us out then, telling us that Nat needed her rest and we could see her again tomorrow. Waving, we left the room and the door sealed shut behind us.

In the waiting room, Cly looked around, spotted a fire exit, and we left that way.

“It’s okay,” he explained. “I’m a law officer.”

The baking heat hit us, rising up from the parking lot, and we hurried to get inside his air-conditioned flyer. Tomorrow I’d be in a sweat ceremony and ready to kill for coolth like this.

He opened the holo display and placed a call to Aunt Josephine’s code, but it was my nephew, Dave’s face which appeared.

“I’ve got Nat with me,” said Cly. “We’ll be with you by nightfall.”

“Okay. Great-Aunt Josephine’s skimmer returned in one piece, even though it was flying on auto. So I guess it’s safe for you guys to come back.”

“Don’t be cheeky,” I said, leaning into his view, and blew him a kiss, then killed the display.

Cly blew out a breath.

“Where are you going to go afterwards?” he asked.

“Shanghai,” I said.

“You’re kidding.”

I shook my head. Until he asked the question, I hadn’t known the answer.

“It just seems,” I said slowly, “The right place to go, just now.”

“Where they’re blowing up buildings and stuff?”

“Yeah. Crazy, isn’t it?”

He gunned the engine into life.

“Crazy like a witch, perhaps.”

The parking lot and the sprawling white hospital fell away beneath us.

“So how do you control things with the butterfly effect, again?” I asked, teasing.

“Tame the butterfly.” He swung the flyer on a long banking turn to the left. “Shoot it, if you have to.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Within seconds, desert with scattered mesquite was flying past in a blur beneath us.

“You gonna need some help out there?” asked Cly, looking carefully ahead.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I expect to poke around, call a few people and tell them what I find. Nothing dangerous. I’ll be back soon.”

“Good,” he said.

Red desert below, blue sky above, and us, hawk-like, in balance between them both. It is the land, and the spirit of the land, which defines our souls, and I knew in that moment that I would never die away from home. Far and forever, the flat desert and winding canyons stretch, harsh and serene, immediate and timeless, the nursing mother of life and the snatching hand of death, while ma’ii the coyote howls defiance at the edge of chaos and with that, my sisters, we must be content.

— T H E E N D —



### About the Author



photo by Steve Davies

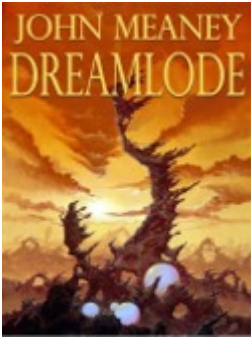
John Meaney is the author of three published novels -*To Hold Infinity* and the Nulapeiron Sequence, *Paradox*, *Context*, and *Resolution* . He also has numerous short fiction publication credits. His novelette "Sharp Tang" was shortlisted for the British Science Fiction Association Award in 1995, and *To Hold Infinity* and *Paradox* were on the BSFA shortlists for Best Novel in 1999 and 2001 respectively. The Times called John Meaney "The first important new sf writer of the 21st century."

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