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Alien influences - Kristine Kathryn Rusch

I

The corridor smelled stale. John huddled against the display panel, replacing microchips with the latest models—more memory, more function. The near-robotic feel of the work was all that mattered: pull, grab, replace; pull, grab, replace. They should have had a ‘droid doing this, but they had given the work to John, sure sign that his contract was nearly up.

He didn't mind. He had been on the trader ship for nearly a month, and it was making him nervous. Too many people, too close. They watched him as if they expected him to go suddenly berserk and murder them all in their sleep. He wouldn't have minded if their wariness had been based on his work as a bounty hunter. But it wasn't. It was based on the events on Bountiful, things he had done—and paid for—when he was little more than a child.

Footsteps along the plastic floor. He didn't move, figuring whoever it was would have nothing to say to him. A faint whiff of cologne and expensive illegal tobacco. The captain.

“John, someone to see you.”

John looked up. The captain stood on the other side of the corridor, the lights from the display giving his skin a greenish cast. Once, John had fancied this man his friend, but John hadn't had any real friends. Not since he was fifteen years old. The day Harper betrayed him. The day they took Beth away.

“I will not see anyone,” John said. Sometimes he played the role, the Dancer child everyone thought he was. The one who never spoke in past tense, only present and future, using the subjunctive whenever possible. The one who couched his thoughts in emotion because he had nothing else, no memory, no ethics, no soul.

The captain didn't even blink. “She flew in special from Rotan Base.”

John stood and closed the display. A client, then. The time on the trader ship would end sooner than he had expected.

He followed the captain through the winding corridors. The ventilation system was out. The entire ship smelled of wet socks and too many people. Down one of the corridors, the techs were discussing whether they wanted to fix the system or whether they wanted to wait until next planetfall. John would have argued for fixing it.

The captain stopped at his personal suite and keyed in the access code. John had never seen this room; it

was off-limits to all but the captain himself. John stepped in, but the captain remained outside. The door snicked shut.

Computer-generated music—technically proficient and lifeless—played in the background. The room itself was decorated in whites, but the lighting gave everything a reddish cast. The couch was thick and plush. Through open doors, he could see the bed, suspended in the air, cushions piled on top of it. A room built for comfort, and for seduction.

A woman stood at the back of the room, gazing out the portals at the stars. Her long black hair trailed down her back, her body wrapped in expensive silks. She looked the part of the seductee, although she was the one who wanted to hire him.

John never hired out for anything but bounty work. He would tell her that if he had to.

“I would like you to work for me, John.” She didn't even turn around to acknowledge him. He felt his hackles rise. She was establishing herself as the adult, him the child in this relationship. He hated being treated like a child. The claustrophobia inched back on him, tighter than it had been in months.

He leaned against the door, feigning a casualness he didn't feel. He wanted her to turn around, to look at him. “Why should I work for you?”

“Forgive me.” This time she moved, smoothing her hair as she did. Her face was stunning: full lips, long nose, wide eyes. And familiar. “I'm Anita Miles. I run an art gallery on Rotan Base. We specialize in unusual objects d'art....”

He stopped listening, not needing the explanation. He recognized her face from a hundred vids. She was perhaps one of the most powerful people in this sector—controlling trade and commodities. Her gallery sold anything that could be considered art. Once, she sold a baby Minaran, claiming that since the species was nearly extinct, the Minarans could be appreciated only in an aesthetic way. He couldn't remember if she had won or lost the ensuing lawsuit.

Baby trader. The entire galaxy as an art object. If she had been in business when he was a boy, what would she have done with the Dancers?

“Why should I work for you?” he repeated.

She closed her mouth and gave him a once-over. He recognized the look. *How much does he understand? I thought I was explaining in clear terms. This is going to be more difficult than I thought.* “You're the best,” she said, apparently deciding on simplicity. “And I need the best.”

He often wondered how these people thought he could bounty hunt with no memory. He shook off the thought. He needed the money. “What will you pay me?”

“Expenses, of course, a ship at your command because you may have to travel a bit, and three times your daily rate—which is, I believe, the equivalent of four hundred Rotan zepeatas.”

“Eight hundred.”

Her expression froze for just a moment, and then she had the grace to flush. John crossed his arms. Too many clients tried to cheat him. He took them on anyway. If he tried to avoid those who treated him like a Dancer, he would have no business.

“I'm not a Dancer.” He kept his tone soft, but made sure the sarcasm was there. “I wasn't even raised by them. Just influenced. The trial is over, and I've served my time. When they released me, they declared

me sane, and sane for a human being means an understanding of time and an ability to remember. After that little stunt, I won't work with you for anything less than five times my rate, one month payable in advance."

The flush grew, making those spectacular eyes shine brighter. Not embarrassment after all. Anger. "You tricked me."

"Not at all." John didn't move. He felt more comfortable now with this little hint of emotion. He could ride on emotion, play it. That he had learned from the Dancers. "You had expectations. You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

For a moment, she drew herself up, as if she were going to renounce him and leave. But she didn't. She reached into her pocket and removed a credit flask. She must have needed him badly.

She handed him two chips, which he immediately put into his account. One hundred and twenty thousand zepetas. Perfect. He smiled for the first time. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

She glanced at the portals, as if the stars would give her strength. The story was an embarrassment, then. An illegality perhaps or some mistake she had made. "Several weeks ago," she said, "I acquired a Bodean wind sculpture."

Awe rippled through him. He had seen Bodean wind sculptures once, on their home planet. The deserts were full of them, swirling beautifully across the sands. No one knew how to tame them; they remained an isolated art form, on a lone planet. Someone must have figured out a way to capture them, wind currents and all.

"That's not the best part," she said. Her tone had changed. She still wasn't treating him like an equal, but she was closer. "The best part is the mystery inside the sculpture. My equipment indicates a life-form trapped in there."

No, no. Not allowed to leave the room, the wing.—If we grow up, we'll be able to leave, never see Bountiful again. If we grow up....

He shook the memory voices away, made himself concentrate on her words. Something inside the sculpture. A bodeangenie? But they were the stuff of legends. Traders to Bodean claimed that the sculptures originated to capture little magical beings to prevent them from causing harm to the desert. When the Extra-Species Alliance went to study the sculptures, however, they found no evidence of life in or around them.

His hands were shaking. She trapped things and called them art. "You don't need me," he said. "You need a specialist."

"I need you." She turned, her hair spiraling out around her. Beautiful, dramatic. "The wind sculpture's been stolen."

II

Sleep. Narrow trader bunk, not built for his long frame. Dream voices, half-remembered:

...we'll be able to leave...

...the Dancers do it...

...It'll hurt, but that won't matter. You'll grow up...

...Stop, please...

...Just another minute...

...Stop!!!...

...the other hand...

...ssstttooopp...

He forced himself awake, heart pounding, mouth dry. The trapped feeling still filled him. He rolled off the bunk, stood, listened to the even breathing of the other sleepers. He hadn't had the dream since when? The penal colony? The last trading ship? He couldn't remember. He had tried to put it out of his mind. Obviously that hadn't worked.

Trapped. He had started the spiral when she said the word *trapped*. He leaned against the door, felt the cool plastic against his forehead. The memory voices still rang in his head. If someone had listened, then maybe...

But no. The past was past. He would work for her, but he would follow his own reasons.

III

Her gallery was less than he had expected. Shoved into a small corner of the merchant's wing of Rotan Base, the gallery had a storefront of only a few meters. Inside hung the standard work by standard artists: an Ashley rendition of the galaxy, done in blacks and pinks; a D.B. portrait of the sphynx, a red-haired catlike creature from Yater; a Dugas statue of a young girl dancing. Nothing new, nothing unique, not even in the manner of display. All the pieces were self-illuminated against dark walls and stands, a small red light beside each indicating the place for credit purchases.

The gallery was even more of a surprise after she had told him her tale of woe: she claimed to have the best guards on Rotan, an elaborate security system, and special checking. He saw no evidence of them. Her storefront was the same as the others, complete with mesh framing that cascaded at closing each evening.

The gallery smelled dry, dustless. He wanted to sneeze, just to see particles in the air. The air's cleanliness, at least, was unusual. He would have to check the filtration system. The sculpture probably hadn't disappeared at all. Some overeager viewer probably opened the container, the wind escaped, and the sculpture returned to the grains of sand it was. No great mystery, certainly not worth 120,000 zepeatas. But he wouldn't tell her that.

Anita threaded her way through the displays to the back. He felt himself relax. There he would find the artwork he sought—the priceless, the illegal, the works that had made her famous. But when the door slid open, his mood vanished.

Crates, cartons, holoshippers, transmission machines, more credit slots. The faint odor of food. A desk covered with hard-copy invoices and credit records. A small cache of wine behind the overstuffed chair, and a microprocessor for late-night meals. A work space, nothing more.

She let the door close behind them, her gaze measuring him. He was missing something. He would lose the entire commission if he didn't find it.

He closed his eyes and saw in his imagination what his actual vision had missed. The dimensions of the rooms were off. The front was twice the size of the back. Base regulations required square sales—each purchased compartment had to form a box equal on all sides. She had divided her box into three sections—showroom, back workroom, and special gallery. But where?

Where something didn't fit. The wine. She sold wine as art—nectar of the gods, never drinking it, always collecting it. Wine didn't belong with the boxes and invoices.

He opened his eyes, crouched down, scanned the wine rack. Most bottles came from Earth. They were made with the heavy, too-thick glass that suggested work centuries old. Only one didn't belong: a thin bottle of the base-made synth stuff. He pulled it, felt something small fall into his hand. He clenched his hand to hold it as the wall slid back.

Inside was the gallery he had been expecting.

Holos of previous artifacts danced across the back wall. In those holos the baby Minaran swam. He wondered where it was now; if it could feel happiness, exploitation. He made himself look away.

A tiny helldog from Frizos clawed at a glass cage. A mobile ice sculpture from Ngela rotated under cool lights. Four canisters in a bowl indicated a Colleician scent painting. He had seen only one before; all he had to do was touch it, and he would be bathed in alien memories.

More valuables drifted off in the distance. Some hung on walls, some rested on pedestals, and some floated around him. None had the standard red credit slot beside them. They were all set up for negotiation, bargaining, and extortion.

“Impressed?” She sounded sarcastic, as if a man with his background could not help but be impressed.

He was, but not for the reasons she thought. He knew how much skill it took to capture each item, to bring it onto a base with strict limitations for importing. “You have your own hunters. Why hire me?”

She tapped on the helldog's cage. John winced. The dog didn't move. “I would have had to hire a hunter no matter what,” she said. “If I removed one of my own people from a normal routine, I would have to hire a replacement. I choose not to do that. My people have their own lives, their own beats, and their own predilections. This incident calls for someone a bit more adaptable, a free-lancer. A person like you.”

He nodded, deciding that was the best answer he would get from her. Perhaps she had chosen him, and not one of his colleagues, on a whim. Or perhaps she thought she could control him, with his Dancer mind. It didn't matter. She was paying him. And he had a being to free.

IV

Working late into the night so that the dreams would stay away, he did the standard checks: exploring the gallery for bits of the sculpture, contacting the base engineers to see if sand had lodged in the filters, examining particulate material for foreign readings. Nothing. The sculpture appeared to have vanished.

Except for the small item he had found near the wine cache. He set it in the light, examined it, and froze. A sticker. Lina Base used them as temporary I.D.s. Stickers weren't the proper term. Actually, they were little light tabs that allowed the bearer to enter secured areas for brief periods of time, and were called stickers because most spacers stuck them to the tops of their boots.

He hadn't touched one since he had left Lina Base nearly two decades before. The memories tickled

around his head: Beth, her eyes wide, hands grasping, as Harper's people carried her away; sitting on his own bed, arms wrapped around his head, eyes burning but tearless, staring at his own sticker-covered boots—signifying temporary, even though he had been there for nearly two years.

Dancer mind. He snorted. If only he could forget. He was cursed with too much remembrance.

He set the sticker down, made himself move. He had to check arrival records, see who had come from Lina Base, who frequented it. Then he would know who had taken the sculpture.

V

The next morning he walked into the gallery. The showroom was filled with Elegian tourists, fondling the merchandise. The security system had to be elaborate to allow such touching without any obvious watchful presence. The room smelled of animal sweat and damp fur. No wonder her filtration system was good. He pushed his way through and let himself into the back.

Anita was cataloging chip-sized gems that had arrived the day before. She wore a jeweler's eye and didn't look up when he entered.

"I need that ship," he said.

"You found something?"

He nodded. "A lead. Some traders."

This time she did look up. The jeweler's eye gave her face a foreign feel. "Who?"

A small ship out of Lina Base named Runner. Owned by a man named Minx. He worked with four others on odd jobs no one else wanted—domestic cats from Earth to a colony of miners on Cadmium; a cargo of worthless Moon rocks to scientists on Mina Base. No records older than twenty years. No recording of illegal trading of any kind. But he didn't tell her that. He still wasn't sure if he was going to tell her anything.

"No one you'd know," he said. "If it turns out to be them, I'll introduce you."

She removed the jeweler's eye. Her own looked less threatening. "You're working for me, which gives me the right to know what you've found."

"You *contracted* with me," he corrected. "And I have the right to walk away anytime I choose—keeping the retainer. Now. Do I get that ship?"

She stared at him for a minute, then put the eye back in. "I'll call down," she said.

VI

The ship was nearly a decade old, and designed to carry fewer than five people in comfort. He had computer access, games and holos, as much food and drink as he wanted. Only rules were not to disturb the pilot—for any reason. He guessed she had found out about his past, and wanted nothing to do with him.

He slept most of the time. His way of escape on ships. When he was awake, they reminded him of the penal ship, of the hands grabbing, voices prodding, violence, stink, and finally isolation, ostensibly for his

own good. When he was asleep, they were the only places that allowed him rest without dreams.

His alarm went off an hour before landing, and he paced. He hadn't been to Lina Base for twenty years. He had left as a boy, alone, without Beth, without even Harper, the man who had once been his savior and became his betrayer. Harper, who had healed his mind, and broken his heart.

When the ship landed, John didn't move. He was crazy to go back, crazy to look at the past he had been avoiding. No job was worth that, especially a job he only half-believed in.

You have to face your past, face yourself. And once you see clearly what happened and why, you must forgive yourself. Only then will you be whole.

Harper's voice. John shook himself, as if he could force the voice from his head. He had promised himself, when he left Lina Base on the penal ship, that he would never listen to Harper again.

He had a job. His stay on Lina Base would be short.

He drew himself to his full height and let himself out of his room. The pilot was at the door. She stopped moving when she saw him, her gaze wary. He nodded. She nodded back. Then he went out of the ship before her.

The docking bay had shiny new walls and state-of-the-art flooring. But it smelled the same: dusty, tangy, harsh with chemical cleaners. He gripped the railing, cool against his hand.

...cringing in the back of the ship, safe behind the upholstered chairs. Voices urging him to get off, and he knowing they were going to kill him. They believed he had done something wrong, and he was going to get a punishment worse than any his parents could dish out....

"You O.K.?" the pilot asked.

He snapped back to the present. He was not twelve, not landing on Lina Base for the first time. He was an adult, a man who could handle himself.

Down the stairs and into the base. No crowds this time, no holoteams, no reporters. No Harper, no savior, no friends beside him. Only ships and shuttles of various sizes. Lina Base had grown since the last time he had been there. Now it had three docking facilities instead of one. It was one of the main trading bases in the galaxy, and had grown instead of declined when the officials had closed Bountiful to any and all aliens. He stopped, remembered: If he went to one of the portals, he would be able to see Bountiful, its deserts and mountains etched across the surface like a painting, the Singing Sea adding a touch of blue to the art.

Odd that he missed the place when, as a boy, all he had wanted to do was leave it.

"You seriously O.K.?"

"Yes." He whirled, expecting his anger to deflate her concern. Then understood that she was speaking from obligation. He was her charge until he left the docking bay, and she didn't want the responsibility of handling him.

"Then get to deck three for inspection and hosing. They need to clean this bay for other arrivals."

He nodded, felt a bit numb at her lack of concern. Procedures. After an outbreak of Malanian flu almost three decades before, Lina Base had become fanatic for keeping unwanted elements off the station. During his first visit here, he had been quarantined for three Earth months.

He turned his back on the pilot, sought the elevator, and took it to a tiny corridor on deck three. There a blinking light indicated the room he was to use. He went inside.

The room was better than the one they had given him as a child. This one had a couch, and a servo tray filled with beverages. He stripped, let the robot arms whisk away his clothes, and then stepped under the pale blue light in the corner of the room.

Streams of light invaded his orifices, tickling with the warmth of their touch. He closed his eyes, holding himself still, knowing that, on some bases, they still used hand searches, and wondering how he could ever stand that when he found this procedure so invasive. When the light had finished, he stepped into the autodoc and let it search him for viruses, traces of alien matter, alien materials, and—probably—alien thought.

Alien influences....

A shiver ran through him. He had been twelve years old. Twelve years old and not realizing that what they had done was abnormal. Not human. Yet he was still human enough to feel terror at separation from all that he knew. Knowing, deep down, that the horror was only beginning.

The autodoc was beeping, and, for a long moment, he was afraid it had found something. Then he realized that it wanted him to leave its little chamber. He stepped back into the main room and retrieved his clothes—now cleaned and purified—dressed, and pressed the map to find out where he was and where he wanted to be.

VII

John huddled in the shuttle records bay. Dark, cramped, smelling of sweat and skin oils, it was as familiar as any other place on the base. Only, this was a different kind of familiarity. Every base had a records bay. And every base had an operator like Donnie.

He was small, wiry, scrawny enough to be comfortable in such a small place. His own stink didn't bother him—he was used to being alone. He monitored the traffic to and from the base, maintained licenses, and refused admittance if necessary.

“Left just as you were docking,” he said. His lips barely parted, but his teeth were visible—half fake white, half rotted. “In a hurry, too. Gave ‘em the day's last slot.”

The day's last slot. No other craft could be cleared for leaving, then, until the next day. John clenched his fists. So close.

“Where did they go?”

Donnie checked the hard copy, then punched a button. The display on the screen was almost unreadable. He punched another button, lower lip out, grimy fingers shaking.

“Got a valid pass,” he mumbled.

The shiver again, something a bit off. “Where?” John asked.

“Bountiful.”

The word shimmered through him. Heat, thin and dry; deep, flowery perfume; the rubbery feel of Dancer fingers...

“You done?” Donnie asked.

John took a deep breath, calmed himself. “You need to get me to Bountiful.”

“Nope.” Donnie leaned back in the chair. “I know who you are. Even if Bountiful were open, I couldn't let you go there.”

Trapped. This time outside Bountiful. John's fingernails dug into his palms. The pain kept him awake, sane. He made his voice sound calmer than he felt. “Where do I get the dispensation?”

Donnie gazed at him, scared of nothing, so secure in his small world of records, passes. “Level five. But they won't help—”

“They will,” John said.

VIII

He put in a call to Anita, told her to hurry, or she would never get her sculpture back. She would pull the strings and dole out the cash. He would spend his time digging out information about the traders.

Lina Base's paranoia about its traders led to a wealth of information. He spent half an Earth day alone with a small computer linked up to the base's mainframe.

And found the information he had already known, plus some. Lina Base was their main base of operation. They were well known, not popular. Two men worked with Minx: Dunnigan, trained as a linguist; and Carter, no formal training at all. The women, Parena and Nox, provided muscle and contacts. They had gotten the jobs on Calmium and Mina Base. And they had all hooked up twenty years ago.

After Bountiful had been closed to aliens.

When Minx had to expand his operation.

When Salt Juice had become illegal.

Salt Juice. That little piece of information sent ripples of fear through John. Food. He had to get food. Take care of himself. He stood, unable to stop his mind.

Salt Juice had started it all.

The very smell of it gave him tremors, made him revert, close all the doors on himself, close out the memories and the emotions and the pain. He would focus on the future for protection, Dancer-like, and no one—except Harper, base kiddie therapist—had been able to get in. The only way to keep himself intact, human, was to take care of his body so that the damaged part of his mind could recover.

He went to the cafeteria.

Wide, spacious, with long windows open to space, and hanging plants from all sides, the cafeteria gave him a feeling of safety. He ordered off the servo, picked his table, and ran the credit voucher through. His food appeared on the table almost before the voucher stopped running. He walked over, sat down, and sniffed.

Roast chicken, steamed broccoli, mashed potatoes. Not a normal spacer's meal. Heaven. He made himself eat, feeling the food warm the cold places inside him. As he nourished himself, he allowed his

mind to roam.

Salt Juice had been one of the most potent intoxicants in the galaxy. It was manufactured on Bountiful, using herbs grown by the Dancers. The main reason for the dispute with the Dancers was those herbs—and when the colony finally learned how to grow them without Dancer assistance, they tried to wipe out the Dancers.

With the help of children. Poor misguided children. Lonely little children who wanted only to leave the hell they were trapped in.

Once Lina Base discovered the scheme, Bountiful was closed. The best herbalists and chemists tried to manufacture Salt Juice away from the colony, but it proved impossible. A good thing. Later they learned that the drug everyone thought addiction-free had some nasty side effects.

Minx traded in Salt Juice.

Then Moon rocks, cats. Worthless cargo. But Calmium's northern water supply had a drug as pure as crystal meth. And the Minaran skin was poison that, taken in small amounts, induced a dangerous kind of high.

The five were drug runners. Good, competent, skilled drug runners.

So the bodeangenie had more than artistic value to them. It also had some kind of stimulant value. He leaned back. What kind, he was sure he would find out.

IX

But things happened too quickly. The call came from Anita. She had bought him a window—three Earth days—and she let him know that it had cost her a fortune. He smiled. He was glad to put her money to good use.

He located the pilot, and together they flew to the place from which he had been banned for life.

X

Once again he sat in his room on the ship, far from the uncommunicative pilot. He was glad for the solitude, even on such a short trip. He hadn't been to Bountiful since he was twelve. Then he had hated the planet, wanted nothing more than to be free of it. But the freedom he obtained wasn't the freedom he had expected.

The plastic frame dug into his forehead. Through the portal, he could see Bountiful, swirling away from him. They had isolated him, considering him the ringleader—and perhaps he was. He hadn't understood the depths of their anger. He was experimenting, as they had; only, he was trying to save the others....

He sighed and walked to the portal. Bountiful loomed, dark and empty. Only five humans on the planet. Five humans and hundreds of Dancers, thousands of other species. After the announcement of the murders, the authorities had declared the planet unsafe and had closed it to all colonization. Even researchers needed special dispensation to go. The Dancers were too powerful, their thought too destructive. He shook his head. But the Dancers hadn't been the real problem. Salt Juice had.

Without Salt Juice, the Dancers would never have become an endangered species. Without Salt Juice,

the colony wouldn't have made money, and wouldn't have tried to protect that base by allowing ill-conceived killings to go on. The colonists had tried to blame the Dancers for the murders to exterminate the entire species; the intergalactic shock had been great when investigators discovered that the murderers were children.

Salt Juice. He still remembered the fumes, the glazed looks in his parents' eyes. Colonists weren't supposed to indulge—and none did—but they all suffered from Salt Juice intoxication because of their exposure during manufacturing. Perhaps if he had had a better lawyer, if the effects of Salt Juice had been better understood at the time, he would have gotten off, been put in rehabilitation instead of incarceration.

A slight ponging warned him that the shuttle would land soon. He dug in his duffel and removed the sand scarf and some ointment. The woven material felt familiar, warm, a touch of the past. As children, they had stopped wearing sand scarves, and he had gotten so crisped by Bountiful's sun that he still had tan lines. He was older now, and wiser. He would wear the offered protection.

His throat had gone dry. Three days alone on Bountiful. The pilot wouldn't stay—probably due to fear of him. John strapped himself in, knowing it was too late to turn back.

The shuttle bumped and scuttled its way to a stop. Already the temperature inside had changed from cool to the kind of almost-cool developed when the outside air was extremely hot. John unstrapped himself, put on the sand scarf, and rubbed oil over his exposed skin. Then he slung the duffel over his back and got up and went into the flight deck.

The pilot made an exasperated, fearful noise. John ignored her. Through the windows, he could see the salt cliffs and the Singing Sea. The shuttle landed where they had always landed, on the edge of the desert, half a day's walk from the colony itself. He realized with a shudder that no one lived on the planet but the natives. The five traders and the sand sculpture were the aliens here.

He had no plan. He had been too lost in his memories.

“Familiar?” the pilot asked. Her expression was wary. She knew his history. Perhaps she thought that once he set foot on the planet, he would pull out a Dancer ritual knife and slice off her hands and feet.

He didn't answer her. “You're coming back in three days?”

She nodded. Her hands were shaking on the controls. What kind of lies had the authorities made up about Bountiful to keep the curious away? That one touch of the desert sand would lead to madness? That one view of the Dancers would lead to murder?

“Wait for me. Even if I'm not here right away, I'll be coming.” The words sounded hollow to his own ears. She nodded again, but he knew at that moment that she wouldn't wait. He would have to be here precisely on time or be stranded on Bountiful forever. Trapped.

The child inside him shivered.

He tugged on the duffel strap, adjusting it, and let himself out. A hot, dry breeze caressed his face. The air smelled like flowers, decaying flowers too long in the sun. Twelve years of memories, familiarity, and fear rose within him—and suddenly he didn't want to be here anymore. He turned to the shuttle, but the bay door had already closed. He reached up to flag her down—and turned the gesture into a wave. He was not twelve anymore. The adults were gone. The colony was gone. He was the adult now, and he wouldn't let himself down.

XI

The traders had made a brilliant decision to come to Bountiful with the wind sculpture. Here they had a ready-made empty colony, a desert filled with sand, and winds aplenty. They could experiment until they were able to duplicate whatever effect they needed, or they could use the planet as a base from which to travel back to Bodean. No one would have caught on if Anita hadn't started the search for her sculpture.

The colony's dome shone like a glass in the sunlight. The walk wasn't as long as John remembered. Still, he would have loved an air car. Air cars had always been forbidden here; they destroyed the desert's delicate ecological balance.

He stopped in front of the dome, stunned to see it covered with little sand particles. In another generation the dome would be a mound of sand, with no indication that anything had ever existed beneath it. The desert reclaimed its own.

He brushed the sand aside, feeling the grains cling to the oil on his skin. The dome was hot, hotter than he cared to touch, but still he felt for the fingerholds that he knew would be there.

And found them. Smaller than he remembered, and filled with sand, but there. He tugged, and, with a groan, the section moved. He slipped inside, bumping his head on the surface. He was a man now, not a boy, and crawling through small spaces wasn't as easy as it used to be.

Once inside, he closed the hatch and took a deep breath. The air wasn't stale as he had expected it to be. It tasted metallic, dusty, like air from a machine that had been turned off for a long time. Decades, probably.

The traders had been in here. Of course they would know that the dome could be breached from the outside. Bountiful's colonists had had a terror of being trapped in the desert.

All he had to do was go to the municipal building, and track them from there. So easy. They would have to wait three lousy Earth days together for the shuttle pilot to return.

He turned onto a street and started walking. He had made it halfway down the block, before the things he saw registered and his emotions stopped him.

The houses hadn't collapsed. They were old-time regulation colony homes, built for short term, but used on Bountiful for nearly a century. The lawns were dead. Brown hulks of plants remained, crumbling now that the air had come back on.

The lawns, the gardens, had been the colonists' joy. They were so pleased that they had been able to tame this little space of land, turn it into their ideal of Earth. Plastic homes with no windows, and Earth flowers everywhere. The dome used to change color with the quality of the light: sometimes gray, sometimes blue, sometimes an odd sepia to protect the colonists from the UV rays.

All of that gone now. No voices, no hum of the Salt Juice factory, no movement. Just John on a long, empty street, facing long, empty ghosts.

There, on the house to the left, he and the other children had placed Michael Dengler's body. He had been the last one, the true failure. It had seemed so logical that if they removed his head along with his hands, his heart, and his lungs, he would grow taller and stronger than the adults. But like the others, he didn't grow at all.

John sunk to the ground, wrapped his arms around his head as if he could shield himself from his own

memories. He and the others weren't covered under the Alien Influences Act. They weren't crazy. They were, according to the prosecuting attorney, evil children with an evil plan.

All they had wanted to do was escape. And they thought the Dancers held the secret to that escape.

He remembered huddling behind the canopied trees, watching the Dancer puberty ritual, thinking it made so much sense: remove the hands, the heart, and the lungs so that the new ones would grow in. He was on a different planet now, the third generation born in a new place. Of course, he wasn't growing up. He wasn't following the traditions of the new world.

The attorneys asked him, over and over: if he believed that, why hadn't he gone first? He had wanted to go last, thinking that to be the ultimate sacrifice. Dancer children didn't move for days. He didn't understand the adult reaction—the children weren't dead; they were growing new limbs. Or at least, that was what he had thought. Until Michael Dengler. Then John understood what he had done.

He stayed on his knees for a long time. Then he made himself rise slowly. He did bounty now. He traveled all over the galaxy. He had served his sentence. This was done, gone. He had a wind sculpture to recover, and the people were within his grasp.

He made himself walk, and concentrate on the future.

XII

He found where they had gotten in. Another section had been dislodged, letting too-bright sunlight into the dome. Footprints marred the dirt, and several brown plant stalks were newly broken. Being this close usually excited him—one of the few excitements that he had—but this time he felt empty inside.

His breathing rasped in his throat. He had a dual feeling; that of being watched and that of being totally alone. The hairs prickled on the back of his neck. Something was wrong here.

He followed the footprints to the municipal building. The door was open—an invitation almost. He couldn't go around to the windows, since there were none, and most buildings didn't have another doorway. He braced himself, and slipped in.

The silence was heavier in here. The buildings always had a bit of white noise—the rustle of a fan, the whisper of air filtering through the ceiling. Here nothing. Perhaps they had found the controls only for the dome itself. Perhaps they wanted it quiet so that they could hear him.

The walls and floors were spotless, so clean that they looked as if they had been washed days before. Only the dirt-covered tracks of the traders marred the whiteness, a trail leading him forward, like an Earth dog on the trail of a scent.

He followed it, willing to play out his little role in this drama. Some action would take his mind off the remains of the colony, of the hollow vestiges of his past.

He rounded the corner—and found the first body.

It leaned against the wall, skin toughened, mummified into a near skeleton. For a minute, he thought it had been there since the colony closed, and the air shut down, then he noticed the weapon in its left hand. A small hand-held laser, keyed to a person's print. Last year's model.

He made himself swallow and lean in. One of the traders. For a minute, he couldn't determine which one. He ripped at the clothes, discovered gender—male—then studied the wrinkled, freeze-dried face.

Not the old trader, Minx, who had run Salt Juice. One of the younger males. Tension crept up his back. He held himself still. He had seen this kind of death before, but where?

The answer required that he let down some internal shields, reach into his own memory. He did so slowly, feeling the hot spots, the oppression the colony imposed on him. Then it came:

A Cadmium miner on one of the many cargo ships he had worked for. The miner had slipped into the hold, trying to get safe passage somewhere, not realizing that to get out of those mines, he needed a series of shots, shots that protected him from the ways that the mining had destroyed his body, processes that wouldn't start until the mining ended.

The captain of the cargo ship had leaned over to John, expressing the view for the entire ship. "God," he had said. "I hope I don't die like that."

John touched the corpse again, figuring that if he was contaminated, there wasn't much he could do about it. Amazing that he hadn't died when he left Cadmium. They had been away from that planet for years. Amazing that the death would come now, here, in this faraway place, with a weapon in his hand.

He took the laser from the body, ran the diagnostic. It worked. He pocketed the laser. Better to use that weapon than his own. Cover his tracks, if he had to.

The footprint path continued down the hall. He brushed off his hands and followed it. All the doors were closed, locks blinking, as if they hadn't been touched since the colony had been evacuated.

He followed the trail around another corner, and found another body: this one a woman. She was sprawled across the floor, clothing shredded, blood everywhere, eyes wide with terror. No desiccation, no mummification. This time the reek of death and the lingering scent of fear.

She appeared to have been brutalized and beaten to death, but as he got closer, he realized that she didn't have a scratch on her. John's throat had gone dry, and his hands were shaking. He had never before encountered anything as odd as this. How did people die on a dead planet? Nothing here would do this, not in this fashion, and not so quickly. He knew about death on Bountiful, and it didn't work like this.

He pulled the laser out of his pocket and kept going. The dirt path didn't look like footprints anymore, just a swirl of dirt along a once-clean floor. He half-expected a crazed trader to leap out from behind one of the doors, but he knew that wouldn't happen. The deaths were too bizarre, too different to be the work of a maniac. They had been planned. And a little scared voice inside told him they had been planned for him.

XIII

John reached the main control room, surprised to find it empty and silent. Lights blinked and flashed on a grid panel nearly two centuries old. He checked the patterns, using guesswork, experience with odd grids, and a half-worn-down diagram near the top of the room to figure out how it should run. His instincts warned him to absorb the knowledge in this room—and absorbing it he was, as quickly as he could.

A door slammed somewhere in the building.

His skin prickled. He whirled. No one visible. No sounds. Nothing except the slight breeze caused by his own actions. He moved slowly, with a deliberation he didn't feel. He checked the corridor, both

directions, noting that it was empty. Then he left the main control room. There was nothing more he could do inside. He walked toward the direction of the slammed door. Someone else was alive in here, and he would find that person. He didn't know what he would do then.

His heart was pounding against his chest. Death had never frightened him before. He had never felt it as a threat, only as a partner, an accident. He never saw the murders as deaths, just failed experiments. No one he loved had ever died. They had just disappeared.

Another body littered the corridor. He didn't examine it. A quick glance told him the cause of death. Parts were scattered all over, hanging in the ritual position of Fetin killings, something he had seen too much of in his own exile.

The fourth body was crucified against a wall, upside down, blood still dripping onto the pristine floor. Perhaps he was wrong. One madman with a lot of determination, and perhaps some kind of toxic brain poisoning from a drug he wasn't used to. One man, Minx, the old trader, under the influence of the Bodean wind sculpture.

He hated to think Minx had done this in a rational frame of mind.

John had circled nearly the entire building. From his position, he could see the door, still standing open. Minx had to be outside, waiting for him. He tensed, holding the laser, setting his own systems on alert.

The dirt spread all over the floor, and a bit on the walls. Odd, without anyone tracking it. Was Minx's entire body grimy? John crept along as quietly as he could, trying to disturb nothing. Seemed eerie, as if Minx had been planning for this. It felt as if he had been watching, waiting, as if John were part of a plan. Even eerier that Minx had managed to kill so many people in such diverse ways—and in such a short period of time.

It made no sense.

John reached the front door—and went rigid, except for a trembling at the very base of his spine. Minx was there, all right; waiting, all right—but not in the way John had expected. Minx was dead.

The blood still trickled from the stumps where his hands used to be. His chest was flayed open, heart and lungs missing. Head tilted back, neck half-cut, as if whoever had done this couldn't decide whether or not to slice it through.

He hadn't been there when John had gone into the building. Minx couldn't have died here—it took too long to chop up a human being like that. John knew. He had done it half a dozen times—with willing victims. Minx didn't look willing.

The blood was everywhere, spraying everything. Minx had to have died while John was inside.

To kill an adult the size of Minx would have taken a lot of strength, or a lot of time.

The shivering ran up John's spine, into his hands. *I didn't mean to kill him!* the little boy inside him cried. *We just wanted to grow up, like Dancers. Please. I didn't mean....*

He quashed the voice. He had to think. All five were dead. Something—

“John?”

He looked up. Beth stood before him, clutching a Dancer ritual blade. It was blood-covered, and so was she. Streaks had splattered across her face, her hands. He hadn't seen her since she was fifteen, since the

afternoon the authorities caught them comforting each other, him inside her, her legs wrapped around him like a hug.

The first and last time John had been intimate with anyone.

She had hated the killings, had never wanted to do them. Always sat quietly when Harper made the group talk about them. Three years of sessions, one afternoon of love. Then prison ship and separation, and him bounty hunting, alone, forever.

“Beth.” He knew it wasn't her, couldn't be her. She would never do anything like this, not alone, and not now, so many years in the future. He walked toward her anyway, wanting to wipe the blood off her precious face. He reached for her, hand shaking, to touch that still-rosy cheek, to see if it was as soft as he remembered, when his hand went through her.

She was as solid as wind.

Wind.

She laughed and grew bigger, Minx now, even though he remained dead at John's feet. “Took you long enough,” the bodeangenie said. “And you call yourself the best.”

John glanced at the body, the ritual knife, found the laser in his own hand. A laser could not cut through wind.

“No,” the bodeangenie said. “It can't.”

John stopped breathing. He took a step back as the realization hit. The bodeangenie was telepathic. It had been inside John's head, inside his mind. He shuddered, wiped himself off, as if, in brushing away the sand, he brushed away the touch, the intimacy that he had never wanted. Had the others died of things they feared? That would explain the lack of external marks, the suddenness. That would explain all except Minx. Minx, who had died of something John feared.

Then the images assaulted him: the trader ship, full of sweat, laughter, and drink, hurtling toward the planet; the traders themselves, dipping into the bodeangenie like forbidden fruit, using him to enhance their own powers, tap each other's mind, playing; the Dancers, stalking out of the woods, into the desert; John, sitting in the cafeteria, his memories displayed before him; Anita, counting credits, peering into the bottle; the trap closing tight, holding him fast, a bit of wind, a bit of sand, a bit of plastic....

John was the bodeangenie's freedom if Bountiful didn't work. He could pilot the traders' ship back to Bodean, back to the 'genie's home. Fear pounded inside his skull. He didn't want to die like that. He had never wanted to die like that....

He slid to his knees, hands around his head as if to protect it. Harper's voice: *if you want protection, build a wall. Not a firm wall, a permeable one, to help you survive the alone times. The wall must come down when you need it to, so that things don't remain hidden. But sometimes, to protect yourself, build a wall.*

The sheets came up, slowly, but more easily than he had hoped because they were already half there. The bodeangenie chuckled, Beth again, laughter infectious. She went to the dome, touched it, and John saw Dancers, hundreds of them, their fingers rubbing against the plastic, their movements graceful and soft, the thing that had given them their name.

“Three choices,” the bodeangenie said. “Me, or death, or them.”

A little light went on behind his wall. The bodeangenie thought the Dancers frightened him. The 'genie could tap only what was on the surface, not what was buried deep, no matter what its threats.

Wind, and sand, and plastic.

John hurled himself at the dome, pushing out and sliding through. The Dancers vanished as if they had never been. He rolled in the sand, using all his strength to close the dome doors. The bodeangenie pushed against him with the power of wind. His muscles shook; his arms ached. The bodeangenie changed form, started to slip out, when John slammed the portal shut.

Trapping the 'genie inside.

The bodeangenie howled and raged against the plastic wall. The side of the dome shook, but the 'genie was trapped. A little boy appeared in his mind, alone in a foreign place, hands pounding on a door. *Let me out*, the little boy said with John's voice. *Please, I didn't mean to—*

His words, his past. Trapped. The 'genie was trapped. It had to be, or it would kill him. Trapped.

John started to run, as if that would drown out the voice. Across the sands toward the forest, toward something familiar. The sun beat down on him, and he realized he had forgotten his scarf, his ointment, his protection. The little boy kept pounding, sobbing. Torture. He wouldn't be able to survive it. Two more days until the shuttle arrived.

He could take the traders' ship, if he could find it.

The forest still looked charred, decades after the fire that had happened just before John had left the planet. But the canopied trees had grown back, and John could smell the familiar scent of tangy cinnamon. Dancers.

No!!! the little boy screamed in his head.

They came toward him, two-legged, two-armed, gliding like ballerinas on one of the bases. They chirruped in greeting, and he chirruped back, the language as fresh as if he had used it the day before.

His mind drifted into the future, into emotion, into their world.

I would like to stay, John said, placing his memories behind him. *I would like to be home.*

XIV

Sometimes he would wake in the middle of the night, stare through the canopies at the stars, and think: *Someday I will touch them.* Then he would return to sleep, incident forgotten.

Sometimes he would be touching a Dancer's hand, performing a ritual ceremony, and a child's scream would filter through his mind. He would drop the knife, plead apology, and wonder at it, since none of the others seemed to mind.

He loved the trees and the grass, but the hot, dry wind against his face would make him shiver. Sometimes he would think he was crazy, but usually he thought nothing at all.

XV

Perhaps days, perhaps months later, John found himself in the desert, searching for small plants. Food, he

was thinking; he would like food—when fists, a little-boy voice, pounded their way into his mind. *Let me out; please let me out.* Puzzlement, a touch of fear, and something against a block—

The memories came flooding back, the shuttle, the bodeangenie. He sat down, examined his fried skin. Human. No matter how much he wanted to be Dancer, he would always be human, with memories, guilt, and regrets.

The bodeangenie was still trapped. The shuttle was long gone, and John was trapped here, presumed dead, doomed to die if he didn't get out of the harsh sun and eat human foods instead of Dancer foods.

He looked back into the forest. He had no memories of the past few days (months?). Dancer thought. Dancers had no memories. He had achieved it, ever so briefly. And it would kill him, just as it had nearly killed him when he had been a boy. They were his drug, as potent as Salt Juice, and as deadly.

Please....

He stood, wiped himself off. The trader shuttle was hidden near the Singing Sea. The bodeangenie was trapped, the planet closed. He was thought dead, and Anita had lost her money.

Beth rose in his mind, pleading against the dome.

Beth. Her screams, his cries. Nights clutching a pillow pretending it was her, wanting the warmth she provided, the understanding of shared experience, shared terror.

Trapped.

The adults had punished him because he had felt trapped, abandoned, because he had killed to set himself free.

Like the bodeangenie.

John was the adult now.

He sank to the sand, examined his sunbaked skin. Much longer, and he would have died of exposure. He was already weak. His need to run, his longing for the Dancers, had trapped him as neatly as he had trapped the bodeangenie. He had been imprisoned so long that even when he had freedom, he imprisoned himself.

Beth and a handful of children huddled near the edges of the dome, waiting for him. Children he had killed, others he had destroyed. The 'genie was using their memories to reach him, to remind him how it felt to be trapped.

He needed no reminding. He had never been free.

He got up, wiped the sand off his skin. His clothing was tattered, his feet callused. He had been hiding for a long time. The 'genie wasn't able to touch the Dancer part of his mind.

John started to walk, feet leading him away from the Dancers. He glanced back once, to the canopied forest, the life without thought, without memory. Alien influence. The reaction was not human.

And he was all too human.

Please! I didn't mean....

Yes, he had. Just as the 'genie had. It was the only way they knew how to survive.

The sand burned under his bare feet. He wasn't too far from the dome. Perhaps that was how the 'genie's thoughts had penetrated. Saving him. Saving them both.

John nodded, a plan forming. He would take the 'genie back home on the trader ship, using Anita's credits for fuel. She would know that he was alive then, and she would be angry.

Then he would deal with her, and all the creatures she had trapped. He would find the Minaran, free it; free the little helldog. He would destroy her before she destroyed too much else.

Sand blew across the dome's surface. Almost buried, almost gone. He got closer, felt the presence inside.

Please....

In his mind's eye, half a dozen children pushed their faces against the plastic, waiting for him. Beth, a woman now, held them in place. No 'genie. Just his past. Face it, Harper had said.

He had been running from it too long.

He reached the dome, brushed the sand away, searching for a portal.

The 'genie needed him. It wouldn't kill him. Wind couldn't pilot a spaceship alone.

"I'm coming," John said.

And inside the dome, the children rejoiced.

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