

THE NINTH OF AV

THIRTY days before the final fax, the posthumans threw a going-away party in the New York City Archipelago. Many of the 9,114 old-styles attended. The majority simply faxed in, but some arrived via glowing, transparent bio-zeppelins that tied up at the Empire State Building's mooring tower, some came by oversized squidsubs, an unimaginative five hundred-some arrived on the refittedQE2, and a handful flew or floated in via personally fitted sonies.

Pinchas and Petra faxed in on the second evening of the five-day fete. They had hoped that Savi would be there but no proxnet beacon blinked and a physical search of the archipelago proved fruitless. She remained absent and invisible. Pinchas and Petra were disappointed, but they spent a few hours at the party anyway.

The archipelago was ablaze with light. Besides the glowing Empire State Building and other lighted historical towers rising out of the dark waters, clusters of candleglobes floated among the swamp conifers and above the fern forest canals, festive bulbs burned in and above theQE2 where it was moored to the Chrysler Building, the luminescent, jellyfish glow of the zeppelins above and submersibles below lighted the scene, and skyrockets exploded in an almost constant barrage of color and noise. Far above the fireworks, both the e-ring and p-ring shifted through every color in the spectrum—and some beyond the human reach of vision—in honor of the first of a thousand pre-final-fax bashes.

"Quite a wake," said Pinchas.

Petra squeezed his upper arm. "Stop that. You promised."

Pinchas nodded and cadged a cold drink from a passing servitor. He and Petra moved around the small square of the Empire State Building's expanded observation deck, stepping aside to let parties of zeppeliners descend the wrought-iron spiral staircase from the mooring platform. Everyone seemed quite merry except for the occasional and inevitable voynix standing here or there like a sightless scarab forged in rusted iron and smoked leather.

Pinchas poured some of his drink over the carapace of one.

"Are you drunk?" asked Petra.

"I wish I were." Pinchas made a fist and clubbed the hollow-sounding voynix ovoid half a meter above him. "I wish the goddamn things had eyes."

"Why?"

"I'd stick my thumb in one." He flicked his middle finger against the chitinous ebony ovoid. It echoed dully.

The voynix did what voynix do. It ignored him.

A posthuman in the iteration known to Petra and Pinchas as Moira floated over to them through the crowd. She was wearing a formal gold gown and

her gray hair was cut close to her delicate skull.

"My dears," she said, "are you having an absolutely marvelous time?"

"Absolutely," said Petra.

"Marvelous," said Pinchas. He looked at Moira and wondered, not for the first time in his two centuries and more, why all of the posts were female.

Moira laughed easily. "Good. Good. Later on, the illusionist Dahoni is going to entertain us. I understand that he plans to make theQE2 disappear. Yet again." She laughed a second time.

Petra smiled and sipped her iced wine. "We were looking for our friend—Savi."

Moira hesitated an instant and Pinchas wondered if she remembered who they were. They had met a score of times over the centuries—or Pinchas assumed they had, based on the theory that it was the same post choosing the Moira iteration—but she had called them "My dears," thus fueling the old-style paranoia that all old-style humans looked alike to the posts.

"Savi, the cultural historian?" said Moira, exploding that theory. "She was invited, of course, but we received no confirmation from her. I remember that she was a special friend of yours, Petra, and of you as well, Pinchas. When she arrives, I will be sure to tell her that you are here."

Pinchas nodded and sipped the rest of his drink. He had forgotten for an instant just how readable his handsome but unrefined homosap face was to these constructs. Who needed telepathy?

"Who indeed?" agreed Moira and laughed again. She touched his arm, patted Petra's cheek, waved over a servitor carrying a tray of warmed handbites, and floated away among the revelers.

"She's not here," said Pinchas.

Petra nodded and looked at her palm. "No beacon, no compoint, no fax trail, no messages for us on far or prox. I know she does these solitude things, but I'm beginning to get worried."

"Maybe she final faxed early," said Pinchas.

Petra gave him a look.

"All right," said Pinchas, raising his empty hand in apology. "Not funny."

"Agreed," said Petra. She took his drink and set the glass on the observation deck's railing. Someone was standing on that railing a few yards away, ready to bungee jump toward the black waters thirty stories below. Petra turned her back on the crowd counting down to the jumper's leap. "Let's go find her," she said.

Pinchas nodded and took her hand. They faxed out.

* * *

Savi was dreaming of manhauling yet again.

Turning and tossing in her blue-lighted ice cavern, pinpoint heaters and a thick fell of thermoblank keeping her far from freezing, she dreamt of cold glaciers, naked cliffs, pemmican hoosh, and of smudge-faced, canvas-and-wool-garbed men leaning steep into leather harnesses as they man-hauled impossibly heavy sledges across the high Antarctic plateau.

Savi dreamed of Wilson's sketchbook and of windcut sastrugi. Tossing and turning in her blue-iced cavern, she dreamed of camping at the site of the Norwegians' frayed, black-bunting flag and of seeing their wind-softened ski tracks heading south the few remaining miles to the pole. She dreamed of Oates and Evans and Bowers and of Scott, a small man, half hidden by blowing snow and sunglare on the ice. She suspected that she was dreaming these things from Edward Wilson's point of view. At least she never saw Wilson's face or form, although the pages of his diary and sketchbooks often appeared to haunt her.

Savi woke and remained very still. She felt her heart pounding and listened to silence unbroken except for some creaking as her ice floe shifted in the northbound current.

She had flown out from her home a week earlier, but only after poring over orbital infrared photos for some weeks, finally choosing this iceberg for its size and solidity and for its path, already broken free of the milling icepack endlessly circling in the Barrier slush of the south Ross Sea. The berg was some hundred yards long by a third that height above the dark sea and it was stable; its bulk ran deep. The upper surface had smooth spots where she successfully landed her sonie in the dark and stored the machines and provisions she had ordered fabricated from the p-ring or had foraged herself from the old McMurdo dump.

What she had anticipated the toughest chore—using the big-bore burner to carve out her caverns and ladders and tunnels—had actually proved the easiest. And certainly the most fun. Twenty yards down into the iceberg, making sure to dip low and then up to create cold air traps, using handheld slashers for the steps and rungs and railings, she had found a natural and meandering fault in the ice which she had followed down another fifty yards, finally cutting away from it when it narrowed to a fissure.

Savi lighted the caverns with glowglobes and self-powered halogen sticks. There was no daylight so deep in the belly of the Antarctic winter. The heavy work came in hauling down her supplies and furniture to her living caverns, somewhere under sea level and burned into the heart of the heart of the iceberg. Using the pinpoint heaters, she managed to warm the air and space around her without melting her home. She slept on foam and thermoblank and fur and played with her old machines and documents.

As was Savi's custom when on sabbaticals from the world, she blanked all of the com and fax connections she was capable of blanking. But this time, with fewer and fewer days remaining before the final fax, she had added incentive to think. She pored over hard disks and vellum files. When claustrophobia threatened, she went up and out into the frigid night—visiting her hoar-frosted sonie, running the heater high, and tapping

into farnet babble without taking part. More and more in recent days, when restlessness claimed her, Savi merely burned another tunnel, adding to her blue-glow ice maze.

The dreams bothered her some. They had started before her sabbatical. Considering her profession and passions, the dreams were reasonable enough. But the urgency of them bothered her. She knew the ending of this particular expedition and seemed to be approaching it night by night for each of their days. Not much time was left.

PETRA and Pinchas had imaged faxing directly into Savi's foyer—every old-style with a home or apartment had a fax foyer—but they were surprised to find upon arrival that the fax-system failsafe had directed Pinchas's formal robes and Petra's party gown to add a molecular thermosuit layer, complete with hoods, visors, headlamps, and heated air veins.

It was a good thing. The foyer was a deepfreeze, black and cold.

"What the hell?" said Pinchas. He had not visited Savi's Mt. Erebus home before, despite the fact that he and she had been lovers for several years before she moved here, but he knew that she would never abandon her home to the elements just to go on vacation.

Petra nodded at the door to Savi's home. It was open.

Feeling like a trespasser, Pinchas led the way in. Savi's place was filled with furniture and scavenged goods, some of the stacks reaching almost to the low ceiling, but it was long and multistoried—she had built the house out of ancient apartment modules and even more ancient dwellings dug up from what was left of the Antarctic Republic's capital of McMurdo—and it took twenty minutes or more for Petra and Pinchas to wander through it.

Petra found a light switch, but the recessed lamps stayed off. Savi must have taken the house off the grid. But why?

Pinchas found some halogen sticks and their bright light added to their headlamp beams as the two went from room to room. Long, triple-glazed windows must have had an amazing view in the Antarctic summer—the house was high on the slopes of the volcano and the view would be to the north—but now only night pressed against the frost-limned glass. Savi's living quarters looked comfortable and less cluttered than the rest of the place and Petra said that she thought that some pieces of furniture were missing—she had spent time here with Savi a few times when the two of them had been lovers—but she was not certain.

The long, narrow workshops, libraries, and storage cubbies seemed surreal in the headlamps: ice particles floating in the air, surfaces covered with hoarfrost and spindrift, everything cold to the touch even through the molecular thermosuit gloves.

Pinchas touched some trilobite-sized, smooth, black lumps on a desk. "What are these?"

"DNA computers," said Petra. "Early 21st Century, I think. Savi dug them out of McMurdo dumps."

Pinchas had to grin despite the eerie surroundings. "Computers used to have shells? They were physical things?"

"Yes," said Petra. "Look." They had come back to Savi's central living module. Petra had lifted some old readers and bound books and was holding up a sheet of modern vellum. "This is Savi's handwriting."

Pinchas was impressed. "You can read?"

"No," said Petra. "But I recognize her handwriting. I know it would be adding trespass to trespass if we actually read this, but . . ."

"But it might be a note to us . . . well, to you," said Pinchas. He set his palm over the vellum, ready to activate a reading function and to let the golden words flow up his arm.

Petra seized his wrist. "No! Don't."

Pinchas was surprised and puzzled, but he lowered his hand.

Petra looked embarrassed behind her visor. "I just think . . . I mean, if you invoke a reading function, it has to go through one of the rings. I mean . . ." She trailed off.

Pinchas frowned at her. "Getting a little paranoid, are we?"

"I guess," said Petra. "But I'd rather find an old-style who can read and have them translate it for us."

"You know someone who can read?"

Petra stared at the vellum and nodded. "A scholar named Graf. And he knew Savi pretty well when the two worked on the Paris excavation. We can get in touch with him. Bring this with us." She folded the vellum and pressed it through the thermosuit membrane into her pocket.

"I think we should wait before reading it," said Pinchas. "We still have thirty days left. Let's give Savi time to reappear before before we start reading her private notes."

"Agreed," said Petra. "We won't bring this to Graf for a couple of weeks. But if Savi doesn't show up, perhaps this can tell us why."

The two stood in the cold desert of Savi's living room for an extra moment.

"Do you think that something's happened to her?" Pinchas said at last.

Petra forced a smile. "What could happen? Any serious accident and there would have been the record of a reconstruction transcription. When we asked farnet, they just said that she was all right."

"I wish they'd just tell us where she is," said Pinchas.

"Privacy," said Petra.

They both had to smile at that. Petra took a last look around and the two faxed north.

OATES died first. Everyone knows about this. Or at least everyone did know, back when history was of any relevance to anyone. So Savi thought with fifteen days until final fax. She had given up sleeping some days earlier.

Oates left Scott's tent on the night of March 15, 1912, saying, "I am just going outside and may be some time." Scott, Bowers, and Wilson all knew that the failing Oates was going out into the blizzard to his death. They did not stop him. Fourteen days later, on March 29, the other three would die in their tent only eleven miles short of One Ton Depot and their salvation.

Scott spent his last hours of strength scribbling notes and letters. He defended the expedition. He extolled the courage and manliness of his comrades. His last entry read—"For God's sake, look after our people." He wrote a short farewell letter to his dear friend, Sir J. M. Barrie—the author of Peter Pan. It turned out that it was Scott and his party who were The Lost Boys.

Savi's dreams had turned malignant and cold. She decided not to dream any longer. Sitting in the carpeted ice cavern in the heart of her iceberg, she popped stayawakes and drank mug after mug of black coffee. She pored over her notes and ancient computer records, checking her information, attacking but then confirming her conclusions. Things looked bad.

But she had a secret weapon. Literally. The pistol was black and ugly in the way that only mass-tooled artifacts of the postindustrial century could be ugly, but it worked. She had fired it on the shoulder of Mt. Erebus and she fired it again on the night-dark surface of her iceberg. The weapon roared when fired, and the first time she had squeezed the trigger, Savi had dropped the thing and not fired it again for some weeks. But now she rather enjoyed carrying the black weight of the pistol. It was reassuring. And she had boxes of extra cartridges.

With two weeks and one day left before final fax, she decided that it was time to bring her friends—especially Pinchas and Petra—into her plans. Leaving her caverns heated and lighted, thinking that this might be a good place for her cadre to fly to for their secret conferences, she went up into the howling dark and followed the guide cables to her sonie. The sonie was gone.

Savi tasted bile and fear, but fought both back. Her mistake. She had formatted the vehicle for three weeks' use, not thinking that she would be gone that long, and it had simply flown itself back for recycle at one of the supply stations at the end of that time.

Savi went back down into the blue-glow ice to think. Despite her newfound aversion to faxing, she decided that she did not have the patience to wait for a new sonie to be fabricated and flown here. She activated her fax function and imaged Mantua.

Nothing happened.

For a full moment, Savi could not even think. Then, in a panic unprecedented in her two centuries of life, she tried to access farnet and prox. No response. Silence.

Shaking badly, holding the black pistol on her lap, she sat on her beautiful Persian carpet and tried to think.

A shadow moved in one of the ice corridors behind her. Hobnailed boots crunched on ice.

Sari whirled. "Oates?" she called. And again, "Oates?"

DESPITE the summer heat and humidity—Mantua was surrounded by lakes and canals—some of the old-styles liked the city and gathered there now and then. With fourteen days until final fax, Pinchas and Petra and four of their friends were dining in the warm open air of the Piazza Erbe. The white tablecloth was spread with agnoli, tortelli di zucca, insalata di cappone, risotto, and costoletta d'agnello al timo. Everyone had enjoyed their frog soup and was drinking freely from the bottles of fresh, bubbly lambrusco. It was about eleven P.M. and the day's heat had all but dissipated from the cobblestones. A cooling breeze stirred the linen canopies above them. A half moon rose high, frequently eclipsed by the p-ring. Doves cooed in the nearby towers.

Graf leaned over the page of vellum. He was a dark man with a well-groomed beard—one of the few old-style men to sport facial hair—and when he frowned as he was doing now, he could have been mistaken for one of the long-dead Gonzagas whose frescoed images still graced the walls of the nearby Ducal Palace.

"Can you read it?" asked Penta.

"Of course I can read it," said Graf. "It's understanding it that may pose a problem."

"We were pretty sure that it was in pre-rubicon English," said Pinchas.

Graf stroked his beard and nodded. "Most of it is."

"For heaven's sake," said Hannah, Graf's current partner. "Read it out loud."

Graf shrugged, said, "It's more of a list than a note," and read it aloud.

- 1) Voynix = Voynich Ms.?
- 2) P's don't fax. 20th C. fax machines worked from origis.
- 3) Moira? Atlantis?
- 4) Jews. Rubicon. Tel Aviv.
- 5) We're fucking eloi.
- 6) Kaddosh. Haram esh-Sharif.
- 7) Itbah al-Yahud.

"I give up," said Stephen, who had faxed in from Helsinki with his partner Frome. "I was never worth a damn at riddles. What does it all mean?"

Graf shrugged.

" 'We're fucking eloi,' " quoted Hannah. "Is 'fucking' a verb or adjective in that sentence?"

"More to the point," said Pinchas, "what are eloi?"

Graf knew the answer to that. He told them about H. G. Wells's time travel tale.

"Great," said Frome. "Either way it translates, Savi's sentence isn't very flattering to the rest of us. Maybe it just means that Savi's lovers have been too passive."

Pinchas and Petra exchanged glances. Even Graf blinked and looked up from the vellum.

Not aware of the reactions, Frome continued, "And if we're alleloi, who are the Morlocks? The posts?"

Petra had to smile. "I haven't noticed the posts eating any of us over the past couple of centuries."

"Besides," said Graf, "the posts are vegetarians."

"What does 'Voynich Ms.' mean?" asked Pinchas.

Everyone was silent for a minute. Finally Graf said, "I'll check it." He raised his palm but Petra put her small fingers around his wrist, stopping him.

"I think we shouldn't call up any functions related to Savi's note unless we have to," she said softly, glancing to make sure that none of the servitors or voynix were close enough to hear. "Is there another way to research that phrase?"

"I have a physical library back in Berlin," said Graf. "I'll check there later tonight."

"Wasn't 'Ms.' an honorific for females back in pre-rubicon days?" asked Frome. "Some sort of honorary degree for not getting married or something?"

"Something like that," said Graf. "But it could also stand for 'manuscript.' "

"Anyone have any idea why Savi might have been writing about the post named Moira or about Atlantis?" asked Pinchas.

The other five sipped their lambrusco or nibbled at food. No one ventured a thought. Finally Hannah said, "I've never been to Atlantis."

It turned out that none of them had. It was not a place that old-style humans were likely to visit.

"I would guess that 'P's don't fax' means that posts don't fax," said Petra, "but why would she write that down? We all know that."

"But the part that follows is interesting," said Pinchas. "What was it exactly, Graf?"

"20th C. fax machines worked from origis," read the scholar.

"Origis?" said Stephen.

"I think it's short for 'originals,'" said Pinchas. "I've heard about fax machines. They were a way to send written documents digitally before the first internet existed. Way before the first successful quantum faxing borrowed the language."

"I think they still used them after the internet evolved," said Graf. "But the original mechanical fax devices just copied from an original, physical-on-paper written source. After the fax duplicate was sent electronically, the original document still existed. But so what?"

"Maybe Savi's saying that the posts keep an original of all of us somewhere," said Petra. "Bodies frozen like Popsicles, thawed out and lobotomized for their pleasure. Maybe they use the original us as slave labor up there or something. Sex slaves."

There was uneasy laughter around the table.

"Good," said Hannah, "that makes me feel better about the final fax. I was afraid that I'd stay a neutrino forever. They say that they'll take us out of transmission mode in ten thousand years or so, when they've got the Earth fixed the way they want it, but who knows? This way, if the neutrino stream is lost out there, they can just defrost the original me. I wouldn't mind being a sex slave . . . except that all of the posts are female and I don't lean that way."

Rather than laughter, this brought on a silence. Finally Pinchas said, "I thought that I was reasonably fluent in pre-rubicon English, but I didn't recognize lines six and seven in Savi's note."

Graf nodded. "Part of it is in Hebrew," he said softly. "'Kaddosh'—I think it would translate here as 'holy.' Maybe 'Haram esh-Sharif' and 'Itbah al-Yahud' are Arabic. Haram esh-Sharif is a site in Jerusalem. The Temple Mount. Where the Dome of the Rock used to stand."

"Wasn't the Dome of the Rock blown up during the dementia?" said Frome.

Graf nodded. "Before that, the First and Second Temples stood on that site. In fact, we're approaching the date called Tisha B'Av when the Jews traditionally lamented those events. A lot of sad things happened on that date."

Petra took the vellum from the scholar and frowned at the writing she could not understand. "Perhaps that's why Savi wrote this about—what was it? 'Jews. Rubicon. Tel Aviv'?"

"Yes," said Graf. "I think the first cases of rubicon were reported on or around the date of Tisha B'Av. In fact, a lot of people believed that the virus first escaped from . . ."

"Oh, Jesus," interrupted Hannah. "That old blood libel. Even I've heard the myth about the rubicon virus escaping from some biowar lab in Tel Aviv. That lie was a product of the dementia years."

Graf shrugged. "How do we know that? We weren't alive then and the posthumans sure as hell don't talk about it. And it's true that all of us—all nine thousand some—are descended from Jews."

"We're all sterile, too," said Hannah bitterly. "So what? A few of the Jews had the rare gene that offered protection from rubicon, but the by-product was that their descendents are all mules. Even the transcription doohickies can't fix that. And we're all descended from some African hominid as well, even the posts, but that doesn't mean that we remember anything about African tribal culture. The Jews were just that . . . a tribe. A primitive culture. A forgotten tribe."

"Not completely forgotten," said Graf, staring at Hannah. The couple carried some weight of anger separate from the burden of the current argument.

"Perhaps the Jew-connection could be a motive," said Pinchas. "A reason, I mean."

Everyone looked at him. The linen strips above them rustled in a rising wind. Clouds had covered the moon and rings.

"A motive for what?" asked Petra, ignoring his softer word choice. "Mass murder? Is the final fax a new, improved version of Auschwitz?" Everyone at the table understood the allusion. Even in the post-rubicon, post-historical, post-literate world, certain words held their power.

"Sure, sure," said Frome with an attempt at a laugh, "the six or seven hundred million posts are all—what was the name of the Jews' enemy?"

"Their enemies were legion," Graf said softly.

"Arabs," said Frome as if he had not heard. "All the posts are Arabs. Or maybe your whatchamacallem, Petra—Nazis. All the posts have swastikas and flatscans of Hitler up there in their millions of orbital bunkers."

Hannah did not smile. "Who knows? No old-style has ever been up there. They could have anything in the rings."

Petra was shaking her head. "None of this makes any sense. Even if Savi was clinically paranoid, she must have known that the posts could have eliminated us any time in the last three centuries. We're completely at their mercy every time we fax. If they wanted to . . . to kill us . . . they didn't have to give us a date for the final fax."

"Unless they wanted to torture us as well," said Hannah.

The five others nodded at this and quit talking while servitors cleared their dishes and brought coffee, gelato, and tartufo.

Pinchas cleared his throat. "That last part—'Itbah al-Yahud'—you say that it's also in Arabic?"

"Yes," said Graf. "It means 'Kill the Jews.'"

It was impossible, but the lights and heaters were failing in Savi's iceberg grottoes.

They did not fail at once, but one by one the glowglobes and halogen sticks faded and died and on every day that passed, the pinpoint heaters put out less and less heat. Not everything failed. She still had enough light to see by and enough heat to survive, but while struggling to stay awake and alert, Savi had to deal with encroaching darkness and deepening cold. She wondered if the grid was down and the world was ending out there in the world.

Savi slept in short, treacherous catnaps. Usually she still dreamed of manhauling, but more frequently now she dreamt of being in the tent with Bowers and Scott. Oates was gone. When she startled awake, the cold was still around her as in the dream, but she could also still hear the wind howl, smell the smoke and blubber, and share the absolute exhaustion of the defeated explorers. When she was fully awake, the wind still howled down her caverns and corridors. And she was still exhausted.

And there was someone in the iceberg with her.

At first she was sure that it was hallucinations, but the footsteps were more audible now, the corner-of-the-eye glimpses of movement more frequent. Savi would have thought that voynix were visiting except for the fact that voynix neither moved nor made sound. She often wondered about the voynix, those intruders that the posts referred to only as "chronosynthetic artifacts" or "temporal incongruities," but these half-glimpsed figures—always lurking in the shadows, disappearing around the curve of the next ice corridor—were short and canvas-wrapped rather than tall and blind and carapaced.

But there was definitely something frozen in the ice. Savi found it with thirteen days left until final fax. Something dark but solid, visible about two yards beneath the ice wall in the corridor she had carved down the natural fissure. She could see the shape of it in her flashlight beam.

Savi was burning new tunnels daily now—the big-bore burner still worked well—but she hesitated before burning in to the dark object. It was roughly pyramidal and roughly half the size of her lost sonie. But the shape was rumped, almost random. It disturbed her.

On November 12, 1912, at the approach of the next Antarctic high summer, a search party sent out to determine the fate of Scott's polar party found their tent. Apsley Cherry-Garrard, a veteran polar explorer who had almost accompanied Scott to the pole, was with Atkinson and Dimitri when they found the Scott death tent, a "mere mound" with three feet of bamboo centerpole sticking up from the snow. They burrowed down.

"Bowers and Wilson were sleeping in their bags," wrote Cherry-Garrard in his diary. Savi had a copy of this diary with her. "Scott had thrown back the flaps of his bag at the end. His left hand was stretched over Wilson, his lifelong friend. Beneath the head of his bag, between the bag and floor-cloth, was the green wallet in which he carried his diary. The brown books of diary were inside; and on the floor-cloth were some letters."

And later:

"We never moved them. We took the bamboos of the tent away, and the

tent itself covered them. And over them we built the cairn.”

The tent had been almost two hundred miles south from the Barrier Edge separating iceshelf from sea in 1912. But the ice had been moving out toward McMurdo Sound and the Ross Sea every minute since the day Atkinson and Cherry-Garrard had collapsed the tent on the three bodies.

Savi laughed aloud at what she was thinking. It was absurd. Even without access to a math function, she knew that the tent must have reached the Barrier Edge many centuries earlier. However deep it had been buried by accumulating ice and snow, it was long gone—carried north through the South Polar Sea and then to oblivion. She laughed again.

Somewhere deep in the ice tunnels, a man laughed as if in answer.

PINCHAS and Petra had other things than Savi’s whereabouts to ponder. The two weeks before final fax blurred into a gauntlet of farewell parties to avoid, friends to see, real farewells to tender, places to visit before the end, and emotions to sort. They did not quit waiting for Savi to reappear—nor did they give up their amateur sleuthing over Savi’s cryptic notes—but they had little luck on either front. “Curiosity,” as Petra said only half ironically, “doesn’t seem to be an eloi trait.” Perhaps it had been the “fucking eloi” line that had hurt Pinchas and her and made them less eager to find their former lover.

Graf called them the day after the Mantua dinner. His physical library turned up nothing on “Voynich ms” and so—he confessed to them—he had turned to farnet archives. There was nothing there either. But no jackbooted posts had shown up at his door demanding to know why he was interested in these terms. The only reaction. Graf said, had been a sincere apology from the librarian construct for not finding his reference.

With seven days until final fax, Pinchas took Petra on one last sonie flight across the North American Preserve. They picnicked in the Adirondaks, snapped photos of dinosaurs in the Midwest swamplands, put down to swim in a predator-free area of the Central Inland Sea, and had dinner near the Three Heads.

The days were very long so they had time to climb Harney Peak from its base. Both were in excellent physical condition, but both were panting a bit as they reached the rocky summit of the mountain. The view was very nice. The sun was close to the horizon far to the west. The three surviving heads of Mt. Rushmore were visible just a few miles to the northeast. Farther to the east, the Badlands burned white, deep black shadows lengthened between the ridges, and the dark green sea gleamed beyond it all.

Pinchas removed bottles of water and some oranges from his pack. Knowing that twilight would linger long after sunset this time of the summer, not worried about the descent, they took their time enjoying the oranges and watching the light deepen to a general golden glow.

“You know why I wanted to come here?” said Pinchas.

Petra nodded. “Center of the universe. Black Elk spoke. Savi brought you here before. Me too.”

Pinchas looked up at the rings moving majestically south and east above the deep blue South Dakota sky. "Yes," he said. "Of course, Black Elk said that wherever you go to find a true vision can be the center of the universe."

Petra licked her sticky fingers and set the orange rinds back in the outside pocket of their pack. Her brown eyes seemed very deep when she looked at Pinchas. "Have you found a true vision?"

"Yes," he said, and kissed her.

WITH three days before final fax, several hundred of the old-styles met on the Barrier Reef for a farewell barbecue on the beach. After the meal, they drifted off to dunes and spurs and private peninsulas to drink beer and watch the moon rise. Pinchas and Petra found themselves in a group of about ten old friends.

"Any regrets?" said a thoughtful man named Abe.

"For us personally or for the species about to go extinct?" replied a dark-haired beauty named Barbara. Her voice was light, mocking.

"Let's start with species," Abe said in serious tones.

There was a silence broken only by the wind and crash of white-topped waves. Then laughter came from a group a few hundred yards down the beach who were skinny-dipping in the surf while servitors hovered protectively over the water, watching for sharks. Finally a bronze-skinned man name Kile said, "I'm sorry that we never went out in space. You know, found life or anything."

"Maybe the posts did and didn't tell us about it," said Pinchas.

Kile shook his head. "I don't think so. They're not interested. I keep looking in the archives, but . . . nothing. And now we'll never know."

A woman named Sarah held up her beer and lightened the conversation. "Maybe the voynix are really aliens," she said. "Extraterrestrials."

"No, no, no," said a short, bearded man named Caleb. "They're temporal incongruities and chronosynthetic artifacts."

Everyone laughed and the tension lifted a bit.

"If the posts are telling the truth," she said, "and they bring us back from fax in ten thousand years, what do you think will be different?"

"Damned near everything," said a famous athlete named William. "Their goal is to eliminate all of the dementia-year experiments and get back to original plants and animals. I think they're even going to shift the climate back the way it was . . . well, whenever. Before all the shit hit the fan."

"There go the cycad forests, primitive conifers like araucarius, soda lakes, podocarps, tree ferns, turtles . . ." began Caleb.

"No," said Abe. "The turtles were here before rubicon."

". . . not to mention the tenontosauruses, microvenatars, camptosauruses, T-rexes, haplocanthosauruses," continued Caleb.

"Bloody good riddance," said a ruddy-faced man named Pol. "Never liked the damned dinosaurs. Almost got eaten twice. Here's to their quick demise." He raised his beer and the others raised theirs.

"Any other regrets?" asked Abe.

"Species or personal?" said Sarah.

"Personal this time," said Abe.

There was a silence. Finally Petra stood. "If we're going to get into that, we'll need a lot more beer. I'll be right back."

On the day before the final fax, Pinchas and Petra faxed to the former coast of Israel. Pinchas had ordered a large, 4-wheel drive vehicle and they picked it up at a supply station in the ruins of the old coastal city of Caesarea and drove through a gap in the tumbled-down Coast Wall and then on down into the Mediterranean Basin.

"I wonder if the posts are going to get rid of the Dam and all of this reclaimed land," said Petra at one point.

"I would think so," said Pinchas.

It was a mostly silent drive. In the rougher basin slopes they zigzagged past boulders, fissures, and frequent shipwrecks rising from the rocky soil. Lower down, dirt roads ran through the endless servitor-tended fields and wild cycad forests, but the whole basin had a dementia-era feel to it that gave both of them the creeps. Atlantis was no better. Driving through the wide streets—empty except for the inevitable voynix—Petra suggested that the abandoned posthuman city reminded her of a three-dimensional version of a circuit board.

"What's a circuit board?" asked Pinchas.

"Something that Savi showed me years ago," said Petra and dropped the subject.

There were several egg-shaped shuttles parked near the city nexus. Pinchas looked at the nearest shuttle and wondered idly what would happen if he and Petra somehow managed to get into one and ordered it to return to the e-ring with them. Nothing, he was sure. They had all learned that old-style humans and posthuman technology did not mix well.

The main nexus rose in a thousand short, irregular slabs, some topped with violet energy or shifting from phase state to phase state and place to place like the oversized electrons they were. It was an impressive sight, but not pretty to Pinchas or Petra. Alien.

Moira met them on the irregularly spaced front steps of the structure. "It was nice of you to come, my dears," said the post. A few other posts were visible moving in the nexus shadows and walking atop the airborne bronze conduits beyond it.

"Your message said that you knew something about Savi's whereabouts," said Petra.

Moira nodded. "Would you like a drink first? Lunch?"

Petra shook her head and waited.

"Your friend was found in a hollowed-out iceberg south of the Falklands," said Moira. "She had brought some life-support equipment there but the iceberg was breaking up—calving—literally falling apart around her, so it was lucky that we searched for her when we did."

Pinchas frowned. "What do you mean? Why didn't she just fax out? Is Savi all right?"

Moira nodded and wiped sweat from her brow. Her gray hair was only an inch or so long but it shined silver in the heavy Mediterranean light. "Physically she is well enough," said Moira, "but she appears to have suffered what used to be called a nervous breakdown. A neurological persona wavefront collapse."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Petra. "That sort of thing doesn't happen to us."

"Of course it does, my dear," said Moira. "All of the old-styles are prone to neurological and psychological problems. It comes from the extended life span. Stress, tension, and worries can trigger them and do, more frequently than you know. My dears, you were not designed for such long lives."

"Where is she?" said Pinchas. "Where is Savi now?"

Moira raised her finger. "In the fax matrix, of course. Undergoing transcription repair. I assure you that she will be well and happy upon her return."

Petra took a breath. "Do you keep . . . originals?"

"Original what, my dear?"

"You know, bodies," said Petra. "Original old-styles. Savi. Pinchas. Me."

Moira laughed easily. "No, no, my dear. The only originals we keep are the original quantum state patterns in fax memory. Surely you must understand that. And even those aren't 'original' as you put it, since updated memories and persona wavefronts are never the same from microsecond to microsecond, much less from fax to fax. No, my dear, there are no hidden originals."

"When will Savi be back?" said Pinchas. "Can we see her today?"

"I'm afraid not," said Moira. "The transcription repair will not be complete for two or three days."

"I understood that quantum state alterations were instantaneous," said Petra, suspicion in her voice.

Moira's smile was gentle. "They are, my dear, to all intents and purposes. But the organic reconstruction does take time. Your friend will join you in a few days."

"But we'll be gone in a few days," said Petra. She had not intended it, but her tone came perilously close to a whine.

Moira shook her head. "Not gone, Petra my dear. Merely in modulated quantum state, perfectly safe, actually, in the mobius loop of the neutrino stream. Savi will be there as well. Certainly you understand that there will be no sense of time passing. It will be less than a blink of an eye for all of you—even if it entails a rather tiresome ten thousand years for the rest of us."

"So you say," said Pinchas.

"Yes," said Moira. She smiled at them.

Pinchas and Petra crawled back into their vehicle and drove back to the Israeli highlands.

On the morning of the final fax, Petra and Pinchas went scuba diving in the Red Sea, down along the great wall. On their dive belts were palm-sized dissuaders in case the hammerheads or other sharks in the sun-shafted waters took interest in them, but the only attention they received was from sea fans and softer things waving slightly in the tricky currents.

They made love later, on the soft sand, and then made love again. Lying there afterward, as was their private habit, Pinchas's head on Petra's left breast, her fingers gently kneading his relaxed penis and scrotum, they spoke in whispers.

"Did you believe the post . . . about Savi, I mean," said Petra. Her fingers knew him perfectly.

With his eyes closed, smelling the distant iodine of seaweed and the much closer scent of Petra's skin and sweet perspiration, Pinchas said, "I don't know. I don't really give a damn."

"Well," said Petra, kissing the top of his head, "we'll know tomorrow."

Pinchas kissed her nipple. "Yes. We'll know tomorrow."

"If there is a tomorrow," whispered Petra.

"Yes," said Pinchas and moved his cheek across her breast. His penis stirred and stiffened in her hand.

"Good heavens," said Petra, grasping him tighter and kissing him as his face came up to hers.

"Yes," breathed Pinchas in her ear.

* * *

The final fax was scheduled for just after sunset in the Mid-East. All of the

old-styles on Earth would be faxed away at the same instant, of course. Many of them planned final parties for the event, but a majority chose to meet the event in solitude or—like Petra and Pinchas—alone with someone they loved.

The two faxed to Jerusalem for dinner. Pinchas had been there before, but Petra had not. The city was empty except for servitors who prepared them an excellent meal in the King David Hotel west of the walls of the Old City. A city empty except for servitors and voynix. There seemed to be a lot of voynix around.

The vegetables were fresh and well-prepared, the mutton very good, and the wine was excellent, but neither of them took much notice. They held hands from time to time.

After dinner, with the sun red and low above the trees to the west along Gaza Road, they strolled hand in hand through the Jaffa Gate and into the Old City. Avoiding David Street and the other main thoroughfares, Pinchas and Petra made their way through the souk-vaulted maze of the Former Christian Quarter and the Former Muslim Quarter. The souks were mostly in deep shadow, but near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre they came out of that shadow and crossed an ancient bridge in a rush of rose-colored light.

“Moving in glory, across a bridge of gossamer,” Petra said very softly.

“What is that?”

“Just some prophecy that Savi told me about decades and decades ago,” said Petra. “Some entering Jerusalem at the End of Days myth. I can’t remember if it was Christian or Muslim or Jewish. It doesn’t matter.” She took his hand and they continued walking toward the Haram esh-Sharif.

“We’d better hurry,” said Pinchas, glancing up anxiously between steep stone walls at the rings meshing in the cloudless sky. The orbital cities were brightening in the long rays of the setting sun.

There were, really, an amazing number of voynix in the otherwise empty city. Pinchas and Petra had to dodge around their motionless, rusted bulks as they hurried toward the Western Wall. It was five minutes until final fax.

Emerging on the raised area just above the plaza in front of the Kotel, both of them stopped their jogging and froze in place, still holding hands.

The plaza lights had come on, even though the twilight was still bright. Below them, filling almost all of the space between them and the Wall, stood hundreds or thousands of voynix, all of them oriented toward the Kotel—the Wall itself.

“Come on,” said Pinchas, a strange, thick urgency filling his chest and throat. He took her hand and started to lead her down the steps into the silent, inhuman throng.

A floating servitor blocked their way. The thing’s cartoonlike arms and hands tugged insistently at Pinchas’s sleeve. Pinchas understood. He took a paper kippa from the servitor and placed it on his head. The servitor slid

aside and let them pass.

Pinchas stopped again. "Look," he said, pointing. His voice trembled. It was one minute until final fax.

"I know," whispered Petra. "So many of them. I've never seen so many. . ."

"No," said Pinchas. He pointed again.

The empty Temple Mount was no longer empty. The last time he had visited Jerusalem, there had been only the rubble of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aksa Mosque on the raised area. Now a heavy structure of gleaming white Jerusalem stone was in the process of being erected atop the Mount. Voynix were visible everywhere on the rising walls and readied stones.

"Oh, damn," whispered Pinchas. "They're rebuilding the Temple."

"Who?" said Petra, totally confused.

Before Pinchas could answer, every voynix in sight—those thousands in the Kotel plaza, those hundreds more huddled at the base of the Wall, the many more spaced along the new Temple works—turned toward the two old-style humans.

The sound, when it came, was not an actual noise—certainly not speech or sound as Pinchas or Petra had ever encountered it—but more a modulated rumble that moved through their bodies and echoed in their skulls via some terrible bone conduction. It was loud enough to be the voice of God, but it was clearly not the voice of God.

Thirty seconds until final fax and the noise struck Petra and Pinchas to their knees, their hands covering their ears in a useless attempt to block out the roaring words, on their knees and screaming in pain in front of the countless blind but staring voynix as the bone-conducted rumble grew louder and louder in them and around them.

"Itbah al-Yahud!"

SAVI, still in her iceberg a few minutes before final fax, reading the time on the luminous dial of her watch, decided that it was time to act.

She used the big-bore burner to cut her way from the fissure-tunnel to the buried tent, but carefully, carefully.

It was the tent, of course. It had been collapsed, but the lateral pressure from the ice had forced it up almost into its original pyramidal shape and it seemed to expand as Savi finished melting the ice around it. She drove an ice piton into the roof of her new ice cave and clipped a carabiner onto the apex of the ancient tent canvas, using the piton to lift it as the bamboo centerpole once had.

Only one halogen stick worked now, but she kept it with her as she dragged her thermoblank and diary into the black mouth of the tent with her. The pistol lay forgotten in one of the abandoned caves. There were two minutes

left until final fax.

Bowers, Wilson, and Scott were exactly as Cherry-Garrard had described them. Savi knew that this was impossible after all this time, but she did not have time to worry about that. Making room between Bowers's body and Wilson's, Savi squeezed in and opened her diary to the last page. In such tight quarters, she subconsciously expected to be warmer, but the frozen corpses seemed to steal her warmth. The small space, briefly warmed by the big-bore burner but now cooling rapidly, smelled like a supply station meat locker Savi had visited long, long ago. Savi was still historian enough to note that—just as Cherry-Garrard had said—the rock-hard flesh of Scott, Wilson, and Bowers showed no signs of the men having taken morphine from Wilson's medical chest at the end. There were no dark circles under the dead, sunken, closed eyes.

Savi's hand was shaking with the cold but she managed to steady her stylus long enough to write—"We were all The Lost Boys. It was never the posthumans. It was always a case of . . ."

She stopped and laughed out loud. Setting her stylus back in her thermosuit pocket, tucking her frozen hands in her armpits, Savi continued laughing. Who was she kidding? The only old-style she knew who could read her last note without invoking a function was a scholar named Graf, and he would be gone in . . . thirty-six seconds.

Savi's laughter echoed in the lightless ice caverns. Suddenly, with thirty seconds until final fax, the laughter stopped.

The last halogen stick was fading away in Savi's lap, but it still shed a sick and dying circle of light in the tent. Enough for her to see by.

Wilson, Scott, and Bowers had opened their eyes.

Savi did the only thing that an old-style human being could do under the circumstances. "Fuck it," she said. "Fuck it all." And she laughed again.