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*For Julie M. Jones*

Melodie kicked her heels restlessly against her wheelchair footrests. At last he had come. The bare whiff of bitter smoke told her that John, her Friendly Visitor, had lit his usual pre-visit cigarette on the Mary-Le-Bow Center patio.

How Mel loved the smoke. It reminded her of the bonfire her younger brothers had set on a long-ago, lazy autumn afternoon while she watched from the caned rocker on Mum's porch. Before she had lost her sight.

The leaves, brown and yellow and orange, had fired up with a crackle as the boys laughed madly, the smoke billowing skyward, nearly the same color as the icy gray Midlands clouds.

John's cigarettes, like the burning leaves. He had told her the name of his brand. An elegant name, vaguely exciting. Mel wouldn't forget it, because it was like his name: John. Her voiceboard was ready. She hit the up arrow just as she heard his feet padding into the dayroom.

“John Player Special,” the voiceboard said.

“Aw, Mel, you caught me at it again.”

Mel laughed, honking like a lost gosling. Something was wet on her chin. Drool, she supposed. John's

hand touched her chest, then something soft and antiseptic-smelling wiped her face. Her bib.

The damn nurses had bibbed her, and she'd told them no bib, please, because John was coming. Today was her Friendly Visit. Furious at the nurses' betrayal, she kicked at the floor with her feet, rolling her chair back a few inches. John followed.

"You'll get me to quit," John said. "Just keep at me."

"You're too handsome to die young," Mel pressed into the voiceboard.

"Did your Mum call?" John asked.

Mel shook her head. More drool on her chin. "Don't wipe me," she said through the droning voiceboard. No intonation, no fury, just the bland voice with vaguely elongated vowels and clipped consonants, because that was how it made words, from vowels and sounds put together, depending upon how she rolled the smooth plastic ball controller and which of the four arrows she pressed.

"You're twenty-three, you don't need your Mum's permission."

"Twenty-four," Mel corrected. "I know," she added, about the permission.

"This is the chance of a lifetime, Mel. I thought you would have done it by now."

Mel nodded. John was right. She should be getting her implants by now. It wasn't every spastic, blind twenty-four year old cripple who won the lottery to explore the stars. Her number, chosen for the chance to be a probe controller for the ISA, sent light years away to Tau Ceti or Sirius or wherever they needed to send her.

"I thought today might be our last visit, so I brought you this. It's nothing much." John took her better hand, her left, and pressed something into it. Mel felt a delicate chain and small hard cubes that she rubbed between her fingers. A bracelet, with beads or stones, deliciously warm from being in John's pocket.

"For me?" Mel hadn't expected a gift. Especially not anything so personal, like a bracelet. Again, the wetness on her chin. Disgusting spit! Damn rebellious mouth! She heard herself making noises, but she couldn't reach for the voiceboard just then, because John was fastening the bracelet around her wrist.

"It's a W-W-J-D bracelet," he said. The cube-shaped beads had cooled because Mel hadn't any circulation in her hands. Cold hands, warm heart, her Mum had always said. The bracelet was loose. Mel was afraid that it would slip off as she jerked her arms around like a puppet, the way she did sometimes.

"Wuh, wuh, wuh," Mel said, with her mouth.

"What does it mean? Oh, sure—it means 'what would Jesus do?'"

"Thank you," Mel said through the voiceboard. Why had she thought it might be a real bracelet—that the beads might be pearls? Like boyfriends and girlfriends gave each other. She didn't believe at all in Jesus. How could she, after the way she'd turned out? No God she would ever believe in could let people turn out the way she had.

"I love it," she said, glad that the voiceboard was so easy to use for lies.

John steadied her wrist. Mel realized she'd been flailing again. "After you go, we probably won't see each other again. I mean, by the time you get back—" He paused.

"You'll be very old," Mel said.

"I'll probably be dead," John said, laughing.

Mel changed the subject. "How's your song doing?"

John didn't say anything for a moment. "Oh, crackers, you know. Fire it up."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good," John said. "We're doing the next one right now."

"Viddy, too?"

"Viddy too. And the first thousand are special release. The kiddies get Star Bars with every copy and the first fifty get a T-Shirt."

"Tres Fab," Mel said. "I wish I could see it," she said. She'd heard John's music, but wanted so desperately to see the videos. John was a viddy star musician. Played guitar and sitar. Hana, the morning nurse, had told Mel that John was "a God ... so totally fab."

"Look, Mel," John said. "Don't worry about your Mum. Or your brothers. Just go. If I had the chance, I'd take it in a heartbeat."

Mel shook her head. "I know. You're right," she said. They wouldn't wait forever. She wasn't the only one who could make the trip. There had to be lots of ... cripples. Waiting for the chance. Sitting in their chairs and drooling, waiting for their number to come up, for ISA to pick them and make them something like whole again. No. That wasn't it. Not whole, but something ... different. Turn the whole stinking, spastic body off. Adapt the brain which was functioning, discard the body that wasn't, and shoot it off to the stars. Live forever and go where no man could ever go. Not a whole one, anyway. Small things like brains could go in hardened housings. Big things like bodies couldn't. Or shouldn't.

"Mel, why on earth are you waiting?" John asked.

Because of you, John, Mel thought.

"I know it doesn't hurt," John said. "I saw a vid, all about it. It's like magic, how they put you in the probe."

Mel flailed until she found John's hand where it rested near her leg. His warm fingers stroked her cold palm. "I'm afraid," she told him, even though that wasn't true. She couldn't possibly say the truth.

"That's natural," he said.

Her head began to roll around, then her chin fell on the damp bib.

"I asked them if I would be able to see again," she continued. "They haven't answered me."

“I'm sure you'll be able,” John said, squeezing her hand. “You'll have better senses than any normal person.”

“I guess that's better than having the senses of an abnormal person,” Mel said.

John laughed loudly. Mel sensed that his laughter was forced. “That's what I love about you,” he said. “You've got a smashing sense of humor.”

Didn't all cripples?

“Take me for a walk on the patio,” Mel said, folding her hands in her lap. “You can smoke there. I don't mind.” John was a very good Friendly Visitor. He put his hand on her shoulder and guided her gently as they went.

\* \* \* \*

Mum brought sandwiches packed in a wicker basket. Mel smelled the sandwiches—pressed liver and spirulina paste, she thought—and also smelled the basket, hearing the crackle as Mum opened it. She'd taken Mel out across the wide field, where the pollen made Mel sneeze, stopping when they reached the small hillock in the middle. The sun burned the part on the top of Mel's head. She asked for a napkin. Sighing, Mum covered Mel's hair and laid out the food.

“Can you chew today, dear?” Mum asked.

Mel nodded. She seldom used the voiceboard with Mum. Mum preferred it that way; she liked Mel to use the baby talk and the grunting which had been all Mel could manage for most of her life.

“How are the boys?”

“Oh, fine. Jack's got a new girlfriend. Peter's still into his electric trains.” Mum fed Mel a piece of the sandwich. She had been right: it was liver sausage and stale-tasting spirulina paste.

“How about Davey?”

“Oh, the same,” Mum said. This meant that Davey hadn't quit using. Davey was two years younger than Mel. He was tall and athletic, but he'd started in with drugs at the age of twelve and had never held a job for longer than two weeks. Davey was Mum's favorite.

Mum sat by Mel's chair, spreading out her skirt with a rustle of fabric. “Listen,” she said. “About your e-mail.”

Mel deliberately pushed some chewed sandwich paste out of her mouth and made a choking noise. Mum got up, knees crackling, to wipe Mel's face.

“Dear, I don't think you should do this. It's horribly dangerous. And you'll never...”

“Never what?” Mel said through her voiceboard.

Mum roughly wiped the sandwich paste away, then stuffed another piece in Mel's mouth. “You know what I mean.”

“You mean that will be it once they do the implants and get rid of my body.”

“Yes. Don't be smart.”

“What does it matter, Mum? What good is my body now?”

“Dear, we've been over it. Don't you think if they can send a ship to another star, they might not find a cure for you? What if you do this, and the next day they come up with an operation which would make you...”

“Normal?” Mel said. “They can give me a prosthesis body now, Mum. But where would the money come from?”

Mum was weeping. “Christ on His cross, Mel,” she said. “Why do you always have to throw it in everyone's face?”

Mel said nothing. She thought of John, the way he smelled. She wanted to see his face, all fab, the way the nurse Hana described him. She imagined herself normal, wearing a white seersucker dress, running across the field with John, laughing. John's hair was long—she had touched it. Hana had told Mel it was dark brown and shone in the light. Soft, and a little bit curly. Mel's hair was thin and patchy, a muddy dark blond. It had gotten worse, since she'd gone blind. Before, she had been able to comb it on her best days; put ribbons and bows in it. Now, it was chopped off just below her ears, so it wouldn't fall in her face or get nasty with bits of food or drool. Practical, the way things needed to be at the Mary-Le-Bow Center.

“I'm going to do it,” Mel said through the voiceboard, glad of its impersonal drone.

“Mel!”

“Don't argue, Mum.” Mel remembered what John had said, about her being old enough. She wished she could have said it with his style, his carefree flair.

Mum's arms were around her. Mel's face was pressed uncomfortably between Mum's breast and her bony shoulder. “I'll never see you again, luv. Not if they send you off on that ship.”

Straining to move her arm, Mel got one hand on the voiceboard. “You never come unless there's something wrong anyway,” she said, knowing what it would do to Mum.

“Oh, Mel,” Mum sobbed. “How can you hurt me so?”

“John says I should go for it,” Mel said. The voiceboard droned on. “I think I will,” she said, although she did not mean it. Going would mean leaving John.

\* \* \* \*

The ISA counseling specialist was an American. Mel supposed that she should have expected that. The Americans had pioneered the technology for the space probes. No normal bodies could survive the trip to other stars, with the hard radiation and all the other myriad challenges. So, the essential part of people—their brains—had been placed in hardened housings and intimately connected to the probe itself. It was one way to do it. Not the only way—just a way—to explore and discover ahead of the complex and costly generation ships which would follow.

Because of the danger involved, condemned criminals were to have been the initial probe controllers. But that hadn't gone over. Why not give people a chance who deserved it? That was the public outcry, about the time Mel had gone blind. The ISA had decided that people like Mel should be selected, not criminals.

If you were a registered applicant and your number came up in the lottery, you had thirty days to decide. If you declined, your chance went to someone else: another waiting cripple. You couldn't be older than twenty-five. You couldn't be married, and couldn't have any children. If you were under legal age, your guardian had to give permission. Mel knew all this, but it was repeated for her during her orientation. She didn't know why she was surprised when the ISA people came to the Mary-Le-Bow Center. She supposed it was easier to bring the equipment and the specialists to the cripple, rather than transferring her.

The ISA counseling specialist, who had a western twang which Mel thought was very cowboy-like, told her how the implants worked.

“We put them into your cerebral cortex,” he said. “Bio-electrical devices. We also implant controls into the main nerve centers which control body function—cerebellum and pons and so-on. The probe will become your body.”

“I've never had very good control,” Mel said.

He chuckled. “This will be different,” he said. “After we start the process, you'll have two weeks to decide if you want out. In fact, you can stop it at any point up until the time we—”

“Get rid of my body,” Mel said.

“Yeah,” the counselor said. “You got it.”

“Can you tell me something?” Mel asked.

“Anything. I'm here to answer all of your questions.”

“Before you put me in the...”

“Housing,” he said.

“I want to know if I'll be able to see again. Is that part before or after?”

“Oh,” he said, drawing in his breath, as if she'd surprised him. “You could see some things, I think. You'll have your visual cortex connected and I suppose we could fix something up. I hadn't thought about it quite that way before. Not everyone we work with is blind.”

“Before the final step—will I be able to move?”

The counselor clicked his tongue. “Move? Well, you mean more than you can right now? I'm afraid not. We'll have to shut many functions down. You may not be able to move at all.”

“My voiceboard?”

There was a pause. “Possibly. I can't tell until we evaluate you further. With your degree of motor

impairment, it's difficult to know. There may be seizures. We are working with your brain, you know.”

“If I can't use my voiceboard, how will I tell you to stop?”

The counselor touched her hand. He tapped the middle of her palm with one finger.

“Twice a day until the final step, I'll tap your hand once. You move your fingers, if you want to go ahead. If I don't feel anything, I'll tap twice. Like this.” She felt him tap two times. “If you move then, we'll stop. Remove the implants.”

“That's good,” she said. “Is that it for today?”

The counselor patted her shoulder, impersonally. “If you're tired,” he said.

“No,” Mel said. “I'm not tired. But today is my Friendly Visitor day. I'm expecting someone.”

“Oh,” the counselor said. “Well, that's good. Who is she?”

“Him,” Mel said. “His name is John. He's a musician.”

“Very good,” said the counselor. Then, he left.

Mel waited in the dayroom for an hour. No one came. Finally, she wheeled to the door and pressed the call button. She guessed it had been about ten minutes when a nurse finally showed up. It was Hana.

“Yes, luv?”

“Hana, I was waiting for John.”

“Oh, he's not here?”

Mel was had to force her exhausted, trembling hands over the voiceboard. “Do you see him?”

“No, luv. I suppose he's not coming today. Let's give you a nice bath. You'll want to be all fresh for those nice ISA gentlemen. How lucky you are!”

“I suppose so,” Mel said, hoping that John would come later. It was so unlike him not to come, and not to call. He always called, and he was hardly ever late. After the bath, during which Hana had scrubbed too hard, Mel thought, though she couldn't say anything without the voiceboard, Mel sat by the window in her room, feeling the warm light on her cheeks. Why hadn't John come? Or called? No one knew anything, and it was too tiring to keep asking. She fell asleep in her chair. When she woke, it was cold. She was still by the window, and they were fastening a dinner tray on her chair and tying a bib around her neck.

\* \* \* \*

“Hana,” Mel said to the nurse, who was washing something, Mel thought perhaps her water jug, in the sink.

“Yes?” Hana began to hum a little tune, something Indian-sounding. Maybe that was what John's music sounded like. Mel had always wanted to hear it, but John always forgot to bring his recordings. He was so busy.

“Before I go any farther with this, I want to do something.” Mel paused, waiting for Hana's reaction. There was none. “I want to smoke a cigarette. Like John's,” she continued.

“Oh, luv! The way you breathe? You'll keel over! It's nasty, nasty. Why would you want to do that?”

Mel kept working at the voiceboard. “I want to smoke a John Player Special. I want to eat lobster. I want to feel what it's like to have somebody...” Mel meant John, but she wasn't about to say so. “I want somebody's arms around me. I want to feel a kiss.”

Hana turned off the water. Mel felt her sit on the bed, smelled her cologne. Hana's hand, damp from the water, brushed Mel's forehead.

“I think I understand.” Hana's warm lips touched Mel's cheek. She took Mel's hand, and rubbed Mel's wrist in a soothing way.

Mel tried to speak with her mouth. “I wuh-wuh-hunt s-s-s-s...”

“You want a bit of life,” Hana said. She raised Mel and held her close. “I'm no man, not like what you mean, but I love you, Mel-o-die.” Hana almost sang Mel's name. Tears stung in the corners of Mel's eyes.

“I'll see what I can do about that lobster,” Hana said. “My boyfriend's a chef. Have I ever said? He'd be proud to make something up for you. I don't eat meat, but I've heard that lobster is very good. You'll like it. But first, we'll get you dressed, for those ISA doctors.”

Later that day, the ISA technicians finished implanting her visual bio-electrodes. The counselor told her that they'd made something up for her: a special visor similar to one which had been developed for cold-fusion technicians, the ones who worked with the magnetic bottles which contained the reaction. A visor sensitive in the ultra-violet and infra-red, as well as the normal visual spectrum. Whatever she would see through it wouldn't be like she what she had seen before she'd gone blind.

Mel's old doctor had said, brutally, Mel remembered, that she'd really gotten the short end of the genetic stick. Cerebral palsy—a spastic—with a heart defect, and retinitis pigmentosa. It didn't get much worse than that, he'd said.

The ISA counselor arrived, just as the technicians were fitting the visor. He spoke to her, holding her hand while they fitted the metallic piece over her temples and eyes. “I know it hurts. Just stay with us. It's going straight into your optic nerve, which ain't damaged. You oughta see something, but we can't guarantee technicolor.”

Mel had shut her eyes. They'd said it didn't matter whether they were open or shut. It was going over the eyes, not into them. The implant went through her temples. The connection was so fine, he'd said, that no one could see it, and she wasn't supposed to feel it. Even so, Mel felt like they were breaking holes in her skull with a jackhammer.

“You can't move,” the counselor explained. “It won't work until you've adjusted thoroughly and the implants have integrated.”

Mel realized that they were drilling holes in her skull, not for the implant, but to stabilize the visor. She couldn't say anything. They'd taken her voiceboard away, promising to give it back when they'd finished.



She heard a voice, moaning. Hers. Something dribbled on her chin. They whacked the crown of her head, again and again.

The counselor squeezed her hand. His finger tapped, once. She squeezed back. “That’s great,” he said. “Now, they’ll activate it.”

Mel closed her eyes. It was as if she had opened them, but she hadn’t. A long, mournful-looking face appeared, grainy and hazy, like an antique telly when it was turned on. Big nose, and a wild head of bushy hair. The face smiled, crookedly, showing a mouth full of even, pale teeth. He must be the counselor, Mel thought. Her head was throbbing viciously, but she managed to smile in return. Somebody thrust the voiceboard in her lap.

“I see you,” she said. “You’ve got a big nose.”

“That’s right, darlin’.” The head turned. More shapes—the technicians’ faces, appeared. Hazy and wavering, but unmistakably concerned. “Hey, she’s got me!” the counselor called to them.

“I haven’t seen anyone in six years,” Mel said.

“And my good-looking mug is the first! I’m touched,” the counselor replied. The technicians were grinning. They were both young, close to Mel’s age. One blond-seeming, though colors just didn’t look the way she remembered, and the other darker, with a thin, nervous face. Another face appeared. Dark, pretty, soft and round, with large eyes and full lips.

“Hana,” Mel said.

“Ah, that’s right! You can see!” Hana wheeled a cart toward Mel. The technicians grinned, parting to allow Hana to approach, while the counselor stepped back, crossing his arms. Hana lifted the cover of a metal dish with a flourish.

Mel remembered what lobsters looked like. This lobster was huge, his eyes black dots on long stalks. Mel almost expected him to lift his claws and start snapping at her. He was bright red, she thought, but somehow the color didn’t look right. Too vivid, perhaps, as if he was glowing. He glowed with heat, she realized. She saw it, rising in waves from his shell.

Hana removed a claw and cracked it. She worked a piece of hot white flesh from the claw and brought it to Mel’s lips.

“Here’s your taste of lobster,” she said.

Mel took the soft flesh in her mouth and began to chew. It was silken and buttery, yielding to her tongue and her teeth. Beyond delicious. She closed her eyes, but the visor still worked—she could still see. They were smiling at her, Hana looking proud, the technicians nodding. The counselor took a handkerchief from his pocket, and blew his nose, trumpeting loudly.

Mel swallowed the lobster. “I can’t close my eyes,” she said.

“Yes, you can,” the blond technician said. “Tap your temple, on the left side.”

Mel flailed around a bit, then managed to slap the side of her head with her thumb. Everything went dark.

Her heart leapt with sudden fear. Had she broken it? “Now I can't see.”

“Do it again. Right side.” This time, Mel struggled with her bad right arm, and struck a glancing blow against her cheek. Nothing happened. She gritted her teeth, and tried again. This time, she hit her temple. Everyone reappeared, including the lobster.

“It works,” Mel told them.

The blond technician slapped his darker partner on the back. “I told you!”

“So,” the counselor said, leaning forward, causing his face to expand like a strange balloon. “What would you like to do? We have a day or two before we go further. How about a play? Something at the Globe? Or a museum? Would you like to see some paintings? Sculptures?”

Mel shook her head. “No, I'm okay. Maybe a book. I would like to read, like I used to.” Before the RP had gotten so bad, Mel had devoured every book she could get her hands on. Listening to books wasn't the same. It was nice, but not as satisfying. She thought of John. Sometimes he had read to her. Shakespeare; the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. One time, from *Alice in Wonderland*. She wanted to see John, but she was reluctant to say so, especially with the technicians there.

The counselor shook his head. “I didn't think you'd be so easy to please,” he said.

“I already told Hana what I wanted,” Mel said.

Hana stroked Mel's forehead. “Yes, and you've gotten your lobster. Go ahead, finish it all. He's five pounds.”

The blond technician whistled under his breath. “A fortune,” the other one said.

Hana began to feed Mel. Mel gorged, smiling with pleasure. She rested her hand on her stomach as the others began to eat the rest of the lobster, grinning and laughing. She couldn't possibly finish all of it. She was warmly happy, the ache in her head fading, as the others ate.

Mel felt sleepy, and she told Hana that she wanted to take a nap. She thanked the technicians, and the counselor, who shook her hand with a crushing grip, again reminding her of a cowboy. He needed a cowboy hat to complete the picture, but otherwise, she thought that he was perfect. She reminded herself to ask him the next day whether or not he was from Oklahoma, or Arizona, or one of those other cowboy places in the States.

Hana pushed Mel from the dayroom into the long corridor, which was not as long as Mel had thought, now that she could see it. It was lined with dull prints of horses and huntsmen. She wheeled Mel into her room. How small the room was. The bed was narrow, with four plump blue pillows at the head, topped with Mel's teddy bear. There were a few pictures tacked on a cork board to the right of the bed. The boys, Mel realized—how tall they had grown. A sink, where Hana and the other nurses washed things. A narrow window looked out on the roadway, where she saw rows of blockhouses across the street. Mel had often heard children playing in the morning. Now she knew where they lived.

She saw a daisy in a small vase on a table by the window. Spit tray beside it. A small closet was open on the opposite side of the room. Mel saw a row of open gowns hanging inside the closet, all the same, striped blue and white. Fuzzy slippers rested below the hanging hems of the gowns, which Mel realized

for the first time had teddy bear heads on them. Mum had brought them for her birthday—Mel had instinctively disliked them and thought that the odd shapes she had felt on their toes represented defective workmanship, since Mum was always looking for a bargain. Mel looked down at her feet for the first time since she'd been able to see. She wore pale pink socks. Her feet were turned toward each other, and curled into themselves, like pictures she'd seen of Chinese women with their feet bound. They'd turned that way since she'd been blind. Above the doubled-over pink socks, her legs were the width of a broom handle, and dead, waxy white.

There was a mirror above the sink. A polished mirror, not glass, but steel.

Mel flailed about with her left arm. She couldn't reach her head.

“You take your nap now,” Hana said. She left Mel in the middle of the room and went to the bed, getting the covers ready.

Mel stared at the mirror. If she moved a foot or two closer, she would be able to look into it.

“I'm sleepy,” she said.

Hana took the voiceboard from her lap and put it on the table by the vase with the daisy. Hana turned back, and something in her expression told Mel that she had sensed what Mel was thinking.

“There's time for that later,” Hana said.

Mel pushed the button on her chair which moved it forward, toward the mirror. Even though she didn't want to look, somehow she had to look. She gazed down at her stick legs a moment, then up to see her face in the mirror. Every bit of joy she had felt earlier, to see, and to taste, bled out of her. The visor was the least of it, like a big pair of blind metal sunglasses over her face. Bolted over the strange, barely-human landscape which had been her face.

“Th-ih-hut-ssss-zzz,” Mel said through her slack lips. She saw the wetness on her pocked chin before she felt it. Hana retrieved the voiceboard and put it gently on Mel's lap.

“It's Friendly Visitor day tomorrow,” Mel said. “If John comes, tell him I have been taken for more implants,” she told Hana. “Tell him I'm not coming back.”

“Oh, luv,” Hana said.

“Leave me,” Mel replied. Then, after a few seconds, she added, “please.” She looked at her wrist and noticed the bracelet. How could John have visited her? Spoken to her? Touched her? On the bracelet were four tiny square beads set among smaller seed beads, like colored pearls. W-W-J-D, she read on the squares.

Goodbye, John. Her lips trembled. She heard herself making noises. Goodbye. She flailed around until she struck her left temple with a strong whack, and everything went black. Tomorrow, she would tell the ISA man to take off the visor, and to stop everything. Part of her wanted to go into the ship, if only to get rid of her horrible face. Another part of her said that the stars would hate her. Recoil from her, and she would wander, cold and alone forever. Somehow, that seemed appealing, but no. She would stay in her place in her wheelchair. That was all she deserved. All that was needed.

She would tell Hana ... no. She would call herself. In the morning. She could see to go to the phone

now. She would make sure that John knew he was no longer needed.

What would Jesus do? Jesus would weep.

\* \* \* \*

“I won't go,” Mel told Hana, when she came to take her to the dayroom. “I'm staying in bed.” Mel knew that it was coming out as garbled moans—spastic talk—but Hana seemed to understand.

“I give up,” Hana said, after struggling to get Mel to sit up in bed. Mel should have called, tried to stop John. She had just been so tired. She buried herself in the covers, kicking as well as she could until it felt as though she was covered completely. Like a cave. She got part of the sheet hooked around her hand and dragged it over her head, then turned on her side, away from Hana.

“Today's your visitor day,” Hana said, trying to wheedle a response from Mel. “And those ISA men will be coming soon, too.”

Mel pressed her lips together, forcing herself to think about Mum, and her brothers. She tried to go back to sleep, but fell only into a drowsy half-sleep, vaguely aware of Hana moving about, cleaning things, pottering in Mel's closet.

Mel shivered, as someone touched her arm. “You're still wearing my bracelet.” It was John.

She jerked her arm, trying to pull it back under the warm, safe covers.

“I'm sorry to have missed our day.” John patted her shoulder through the sheets.

Mel heard herself mumbling. She wasn't quite sure of what she wanted to say. No matter what, he wouldn't understand. God, let him not see her face.

“Mel, please sit up. I've got something to tell you.” The bed sank down. He was sitting beside her.

She ground her face into the pillow. “Nuh-no,” she said. She tried to call for Hana, then realized that she hadn't heard her soft movements, or her humming, for some time. The traitor had let John in, then left them alone.

John was pulling on the covers. Mel struggled, using her hands as weights, but it was hopeless. The sheets slipped away. She flailed toward her head, trying to cover what she could of her face. Her rebellious hand struck the left side of her head. She could see once more.

“Look, if it's this thing they've put on for your eyes, I don't care. It looks like sunglasses, is all. Big sunglasses.”

“No!” Mel said. Desperation made her voice strong.

John grasped her shoulders. He turned her around as if she was a doll.

“Mel, I don't care. I've been visiting you for a year.”

Her face. He was seeing her horrid face, and she couldn't cover it. She caught a glimpse of him through her clenched fists. She tried to strike her left temple, turn off the visor, but her arm was completely rebellious. He had her hands, both of them. He drew them away from her face.

A groan escaped her lips as she struggled. John, so fab. His features were fine, almost feminine. His hair was as soft and shiny as the hair of a dark, lovely woman. He had a small beard and moustache, neatly trimmed around his chin and lips. She held herself as still as she could, though every muscle in her body was going wild. Her feet twitched beneath the covers, out of control.

John took her wrist, turning the bracelet. “That visor is nothing,” he said, smiling. “I’m glad you’re wearing the bracelet.” Something shone on John’s left hand. A ring—he’d never said he was married. Of course he was married. His wife was probably as stunning as he was.

“Muh-muh-muh,” Mel said. She jerked her body toward the table and the voiceboard. John looked uncertain. She moved her shoulders toward the table, and his eyes followed.

“Your voiceboard. Right,” he said. He retrieved it. While he walked across the room, Mel thought of covering herself again, but it was too late. He’d already seen her. And he’d been seeing her, for the past year. She had been a fool—a complete fool. She didn’t know why he had come to visit her, but it certainly couldn’t have been for any of the reasons she’d imagined for so long, in her self-deluded blindness.

When he put the voiceboard in her lap, she said, “it’s so kind of you to visit the ugly cripple.”

John looked puzzled, as he sat by her once more, then sympathy came over his face. No, Mel thought. Pity. She thought of hitting the visor again, going blind, but he was fab, as Hana said. The most gorgeous man she’d ever seen, she thought—and she had loved to collect pictures of the teen idols, before her eyes had gone. That had been stupid then, just the way this was stupid now. But she loved to look at his face, even as he looked on her with pity, as if she was some trapped laboratory monkey, or a freak from the vids.

“Come on,” he said, forcing a cheery tone in his voice, Mel thought, “let’s take a spin on the patio. I’ll get you into your seat.” Then, he retrieved her wheelchair from the corner (it was very worn and cracked on the seat, Mel noticed, shabby-looking), and brought it to the side of the bed. Mel allowed him to lift her into it. Shamed that she enjoyed his touch, Mel looked away from him, toward the window, and the vase with the daisy. The daisy drooped—that was the end for it. Mel wondered how long it had been there, and who had put it there. Probably Hana.

John guided her down the hall, though she no longer needed his help. Mel saw some of the other inmates of the Center peeking out of their doors. They looked jealously at them. Quite a few were elderly. More than Mel had thought. She hadn’t known how many there were during her blindness. She hadn’t realized, although she could smell them, of course, always smell their terrible smell—death and decay and disinfectant.

When they reached the patio, John parked her in a sunny spot. A small bird, a linnet, Mel thought, flew past them, wings whirring. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, and a lighter.

“Come on,” he said, shaking two cigarettes out. “Hana told me that you wanted to do this.” He lit the cigarettes. Their red tips glowed—her visor showed a round ball of whitish heat around the tips. John put the filter of one cigarette to her lips.

The filter was hot. The smoke burned her nostrils. She put her lips around the filter and drew in a breath. Choking, horrible. Her arms flailed. Couldn’t use the voiceboard ... couldn’t speak ... coughing, spitting.

John threw both cigarettes down, crushing them beneath his foot, then whacked Mel's back. "Oh, no," he said in an agonized voice. "I should have known!"

The visor blurred. Mel's eyes were watering, and she was gasping for breath between coughs. What a horrible, vile taste, like swallowing burning coals! Her throat began to swell.

At last, she began to breathe more easily, and the coughing slowed to little hacks wracking her chest every few seconds.

"That's the worst thing I've ever tasted," she told him.

John knelt beside her, patting her knee. He nodded, his eyes full of regret. "Oh, God, I was so stupid," he said.

"No," Mel said. "I asked for it. But I like lobster better."

"Hana told me what else you asked for," he said. Before Mel could react, he'd leaned forward and had his arms around her. His lips brushed her neck. His voice, so warm and soft, whispering, right next to her ear. Mel felt her body trembling, legs jerking around. Stop it, she told herself, but it was hopeless. Her chest grew hot; she felt the flush all the way up her neck, working its way over her cheeks. "Sweet Mel," he said.

She managed to get her hands on the voiceboard, even as John's body pressed against her lap.

"No," she said. "Please, John." How warm he was, how hard the muscles felt in his arms and shoulders. He smelled of John Player Specials and of some spicy cologne, and of his own clean, soft flesh.

He kissed her neck, gently. She glimpsed his face, eyes closed, moving in front of her, and though she closed her eyes beneath the visor, she still saw the patio, the canvas awning, the little bird flying over the cheap plastic furniture, as his firm, sweet lips touched hers. Not her mouth! She had seen the terrible teeth in the mirror; the misshapen lips, cracked and rough. What could she expect when she couldn't even stop herself from drooling, had to depend on others even to clean her teeth? It must be horrible for him to come so near. How could he?

"Why?" she asked.

His lips pressed tighter against hers, and his arms drew her close to his body, almost all the way out of the chair. Mel was afraid that she would explode with everything that was rushing through her; things she didn't even have words for. The patio wavered, her sight flickered, and she heard her heels rattling in the chair.

At last, he drew gently away, putting her back in the seat, and sat back on his heels. He was smiling, almost shyly.

"Hana said you wanted a kiss," he said. His voice was throaty and rough—a street-tough tone she'd never heard from him before.

Her hands fluttered over the voiceboard. At last, she made it say, "I was just saying that. I didn't really—"

"Yes you did," he said, putting his hand on her knee and looking into the visor, where her eyes should

have been. As if he knew what she was thinking, he said, “the bloody thing covers your eyes. You have beautiful eyes, Mel.”

She felt like he had stabbed her through her heart.

“Don't lie to me,” she said.

His gaze was steady. “I've never lied to you,” he replied.

She looked at his hand on her knee, where the ring glinted. “Yes, you have,” she said, even though this wasn't exactly true, as she'd never asked him if he was married. She had always assumed that he wasn't.

He seemed confused at first, then he realized that she was looking at his ring. “Oh,” he said. “That's what I had to tell you. Why I wasn't here last week. I got married.”

“Last week?”

He laughed. “Yes. I should have told you. But it was really a last-minute thing.”

Mel backed the chair across the patio. “Good luck to both of you,” she said. “I'm sure she's very beautiful.” She was thankful this time that the voiceboard droned mechanically. It could almost sound sincere. She didn't want John to know that she was foolish enough to care.

He stopped the chair with one hand, just as she was about to go through the open glass door into the Center. “She is beautiful,” John said. “She's going to have my baby.”

A cry came from somewhere deep inside of Mel. She masked it with a cough. Let him think she was still choked up from the cigarette. She would endure whatever she had to endure before he left, and then she would go back into her room. She would take away the voiceboard, and turn off the visor. When the cowboy counselor came and tapped her hand, she would not move. She would not jerk, so that he couldn't possibly imagine that she wanted to go on with it. She would wait until he tapped twice, then clench her hand tightly, with all her strength. She would let them think that the visual implants had damaged her. Somehow, she would get them to take the damn thing off. Tear it off herself, if she had to. She could make her hands obey, if she tried hard enough. Then, she would be blind again. She wouldn't eat. Eventually, they would hook her up to machines, which would feed her. What was left of her body would waste away; then, real darkness.

John was talking, in the hard, street-wise tone she'd heard earlier from him. Mel refused to look at him.

“Alexandra and I have been together for a while. When she told me about the baby, it seemed like the right thing to do. My Da took off when I was just a kid. I'm not like that,” he said.

“Good,” Mel said, when he said nothing for a while.

John took her hand. Mel stared at the blank patio wall. Ugly gray bricks. She began to count them.

“Look, I'll never forget you,” he said. “You've kept me going.”

“Right,” she said.

He squeezed her hand, then stroked her wrist and toyed with the bracelet.

“Take it away,” she said. “I don't want it.”

A wet drop hit her hand. John's voice, when he spoke again, sounded strange and thick. As if he was crying. It couldn't have been a tear, she told herself. Men didn't cry.

“No,” he said. “It was for you. I thought you might be able to put it in the probe. To protect you when you go off.”

“Take it,” she repeated. “Damn you. I'm not going anywhere.”

He tugged on the bracelet, but didn't remove it. “Oh, Mel,” he said. “You've got to go!”

“Never,” she said. “Go away. Take your cheap bracelet and go back to your wife.” There—she had said it. Now, he'd leave.

He said nothing for a long while, then she felt his hand, lightly stroking her hair. No—she would not turn. She'd never look at him again.

“I did lie to you,” he said, in a low voice. “That bracelet cost me a day's pay.”

“Bully for you,” she said. What a liar he was. It was just cheap beads, probably plastic.

“I had my eye on it for weeks. I had the fellow put it aside and I went after work to pick it up, the day I gave it to you.”

Work? What was he talking about?

“I lied to you about what I do,” John said. “I'm no viddy star. I work mornings at the Virgin store and afternoons I work at my step-dad's shop. Those were someone else's tunes you heard. Stuff I listen to for myself. Real musicians.”

Mel drew in a sharp breath. Not a viddy star?

“My step-dad repairs guitars and sitars and such. That's how I know about them. Yeah, I play a little,” he said.

Mel's fingers went to the voiceboard. “You should have said,” she said. “You didn't have to pretend. I—” she paused, moving her fingers tentatively back and forth. “I liked you for you.”

Another tear fell on the back of her hand. “I wanted to impress you. When I first came, the nurses made a big show of saying I looked like a viddy star. It pumped me up a bit. When you believed them, I thought, why not play along? It went from there.”

“You never told me why,” Mel said.

“Why what?” She turned toward him, to see his handsome face once more. His eyes were swollen—yes, he had been crying.

“Why you came to visit. Someone like me.”



“Oh, that,” he said, shaking his head. He drew the back of his hand across his eyes. “Uh, well, I’m a Christian. It was part of my service to the church. Every two weeks. We all do something and this was my thing.”

“Oh,” she said, turning away. Of course. It would be something like that.

John seemed to realize her disappointment. He reached toward her, then drew back, as if he knew that touching her was the wrong thing at this moment. His face grew serious. “It became more than that,” he said. “So much more. I mean, you’re so brave. You’re so much more than I’ll ever be, Mel. I don’t know how I can make you see that.”

“I’m an ugly cripple in a chair,” she said.

“No,” he said, and he grabbed the chair, whirling her around. He put his hands on her face, then kissed her again, hard. Just as quickly, he drew back, then put his face beside hers, holding her shoulders tightly against him. Again, that intoxicating smell of his cologne and skin, the warm feel of his body. His hands hurt her shoulders, but she didn’t struggle.

“You’ve got to go, Mel. You’ve got a chance to help everyone. You can’t throw it away.”

“How can you touch me?” she asked, feeling as though her heart was tearing itself in shreds.

His breath was hot, his voice fierce. “God, it’s not what’s outside. Look at me. Handsome, right? I’ll never be anything. I’m just another working man. I’ll live, I’ll die, just like everyone else. But you’ve got it inside,” he said, putting his palm against her chest, pressing down, toward her heart.

“John,” she said. “John.”

“You go on that trip,” he said. “Get on the ship. Your body’s nothing. Leave it behind.”

Tears streamed from Mel’s eyes into the visor, pooling around its lower edge. John moved his body, knocking the voiceboard to the patio. Mel heard it clatter, then a blinding colored light shot through the visor. Her body stiffened.

She heard John cry out, realizing dimly that she was on the patio, and she knew what it was—a seizure. She hadn’t had one for years. She had thought they were long past.

All she could see was white, not black. Mel’s body was jerking, out of control, and something hurt in her mouth, then came a strong, hot taste of copper. She heard footsteps, then Hana, crying for the other nurses.

“My God, I’ve killed her,” John said in a terrible, choked voice.

“No, no, damn it! You dumb kid, it’s the implants,” came a twangy, American voice. The ISA counselor was there. Mel’s arms and legs stopped jerking—the visor flickered in and out. She was off the patio. Somehow, they’d gotten her back in her room. Time passed strangely during seizures, she recalled. Her senses were not to be trusted.

Then, the white changed, became a field of stars. Mel felt suddenly warm and calm, completely in control. It was she, floating, toward a whole group of stars. Above her, a beautiful, pinkish nebula. Below her, blank space. How much more she wanted to go to the nebula than down into the blackness.

How beautiful it was. Complete, ordered, everything in its place. And exciting also, because a star before her, a bare pinpoint of light, was growing brighter and brighter until she thought she could kiss it. She sensed things, felt things she did not know names for; only feelings, instincts, pictures in her mind. It was approaching. Closer and closer until she could see it was a small red thing, nothing like the sun that she'd known as a child, though she'd never seen that from above, nor from such a distance.

Could John see it as well? No, he was not there; she was gone, and so was he. They were very far apart. How easily her body moved, how elegantly, powerfully and simply. She was aware, dimly, of how delicate this body was, but still, so infinitely perfect and beautiful. Like the small red star—the stranger—which she reached out to with her senses of spectral analysis, of direction, and asked it how long it had to live, and how long it had known life. It opened to her like a flower, like the beautiful flower of a hibiscus which her mother had kept outside their house. So red, so perfect, with a bit of a flare like the stamen of the hibiscus flower, and she reached with her senses ... and kissed the star.... It was exciting and intoxicating, magic and eternity; mystery and wonder and within it like a seed, the evidence she sought, that yes, it was alive, here there could be life.

Then, someone, a flesh-and-blood person, touched her. Fingers pressing into her, and the star-flower shrank into itself. The warm blackness of space became white.

Faces appeared before her, hovering. Hana, her expression serious. John, his hand pushing his hair out of his face, eyes wide and frightened. The cowboy ISA counselor. The two technicians, standing behind the others. Someone took her hand. A finger tapped her palm, once.

It was her decision, hers alone. And she knew what John had said was right. Her body really was nothing. And oh ... she had kissed the star. She did not know whether the vision had come from inside of her, or it had been something cleverly planted, perhaps something to make her want to go. She realized that she did not care, because she wanted to go now, more than anything else, because this was life—a new kind of life. It had been heaven to kiss John; but to kiss a star?

With all her might, Mel squeezed the finger.

The counselor laughed. “She's game,” he said. “She's going.”

Mel knew that she couldn't trust her voice, and beneath the visor, they could not see her eyes.

“What? Is she going to be all right?” John looked wildly from face to face, searching for answers. How Mel wished she could say something. She shook her arm, rattling the bracelet. Still, John didn't seem to understand.

“She's going to Epsilon Eridani, son,” the counselor said to John. “In about three weeks.”

Mel squeezed the counselor's finger again.

“Uh-uh-mmm go-ing,” she said, looking up at John's face, relishing the expression of joy as it spread over his face. The words came out so easily. It was like something which had been holding her back had broken away inside when she had flown the heavens. Now her tongue and lips moved as she wished.

John, beautiful John. If she could not be normal, then she could have this other thing. And John had been right—no one else could have it. Only Mel. She didn't need to believe in Jesus, only in what he would do. He would not stay.

“I know what Jesus would do,” she said.

John touched her cheek, smiling as he wept, his eyes silently questioning her.

“He would kiss the star,” she told him.

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