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panic attack

The ship screamed. Its screens showed Mada that she was surrounded in threespace. A swarm of Utopian asteroids was closing on her, brain clans and mining DIs living in hollowed-out chunks of carbonaceous chondrite, any one of which could have mustered enough votes to abolish Mada in all ten dimensions.

“I'm going to die,” the ship cried, “I'm going to die, I'm going to”

“I'm not.” Mada waved the speaker off impatiently and scanned downwhen. She saw that the Utopians had planted an identity mine five minutes into the past that would boil her memory to vapor if she tried to go back in time to undo this trap. Upwhen, then. The future was clear, at least as far as she could see, which wasn't much beyond next week. Of course, that was the direction they wanted her to skip. They'd be happiest making her their great-great-great-grandchildren's problem.

The Utopians fired another spread of panic bolts. The ship tried to absorb them, but its buffers were already overflowing. Mada felt her throat tighten. Suddenly she couldn't remember how to spell luck, and she believed that she could feel her sanity oozing out of her ears.

“So let's skip upwhen,” she said.

“You s-sure?” said the ship. “I don't know if ... how far?”

“Far enough so that all of these drones will be fossils.”

“I can't just ... I need a number, Mada.”

A needle of fear pricked Mada hard enough to make her reflexes kick. “Skip!” Her panic did not allow for the luxury of numbers. “Skip now!” Her voice was tight as a fist. “Do it!”

Time shivered as the ship surged into the empty dimensions. In threespace Mada went all wavy. Eons passed in a nanosecond, then she washed back into the strong dimensions and solidified.

She merged briefly with the ship to assess damage. “What have you done?” The gain in entropy was an ache in her bones.

“I-I'm sorry, you said to skip so” The ship was still jittery.

Even though she wanted to kick its sensorium in, she bit down hard on her anger. They had both made enough mistakes that day. “That's all right,” she said, “we can always go back. We just have to figure out when we are. Run the star charts.”

two-tenths of a spin

The ship took almost three minutes to get its charts to agree with its navigation screens—a bad sign. Reconciling the data showed that it had skipped forward in time about two-tenths of a galactic spin. Almost twenty million years had passed on Mada's home world of Trueborn, time enough for its crust to fold and buckle into new mountain ranges, for the Green Sea to bloom, for the glaciers to march and melt. More than enough time for everything and everyone Mada had ever loved—or hated—to die, turn to dust and blow away.

Whiskers trembling, she checked downwhen. What she saw made her lose her perch and float aimlessly away from the command mod's screens. There had to be something wrong with the ship's air. It settled like dead, wet leaves in her lungs. She ordered the ship to check the mix.

The ship's deck flowed into an enormous plastic hand, warm as blood. It cupped Mada gently in its palm and raised her up so that she could see its screens straight on.

“Nominal, Mada. Everything is as it should be.”

That couldn't be right. She could breathe ship-nominal atmosphere. “Check it again,” she said

“Mada, I'm sorry,” said the ship.

The identity mine had skipped with them and was still dogging her, five infuriating minutes into the past. There was no getting around it, no way to undo their leap into the future. She was trapped two-tenths of a spin upwhen. The knowledge was like a sucking hole in her chest, much worse than any wound the Utopian psychological war machine could have inflicted on her.

“What do we do now?” asked the ship.

Mada wondered what she should say to it. Scan for hostiles? Open a pleasure sim? Cook a nice, hot stew? Orders twisted in her mind, bit their tails and swallowed themselves. She considered—briefly—telling it to open all the air locks to the vacuum. Would it obey this order? She thought it probably would, although she would as soon chew her own tongue off as utter such cowardly words. Had not she and her sibling batch voted to carry the revolution into all ten dimensions? Pledged themselves to fight for the Three Universal Rights, no matter what the cost the Utopian brain clans extracted from them in blood and anguish?

But that had been two-tenths of a spin ago.

bean thoughts

“Where are you going?” said the ship.

Mada floated through the door bubble of the command mod. She wrapped her toes around the perch outside to steady herself.

“Mada, wait! I need a mission, a course, some line of inquiry.”

She launched down the companionway.

“I'm a Dependent Intelligence, Mada.” Its speaker buzzed with self-righteousness. “I have the right to proper and timely guidance.”

The ship flowed a veil across her trajectory; as she approached, it went taut. That was DI thinking: the ship was sure that it could just bounce her back into its world. Mada flicked her claws and slashed at it, shredding holes half a meter long.

“And I have the right to be an individual,” she said. “Leave me alone.”

She caught another perch and pivoted off it toward the greenhouse blister. She grabbed the perch by the door bubble and paused to flow new aveoli into her lungs to make up for the oxygen-depleted, carbon-dioxide-enriched air mix in the greenhouse. The bubble shivered as she popped through it and she breathed deeply. The smells of life helped ground her whenever operation of the ship overwhelmed her. It was always so needy and there was only one of her. It would have been different if they had been designed to go out in teams. She would have had her sibling Thiras at her side; together they might have been strong enough to withstand the Utopian's panic ... *no!* Mada shook him out of her head. Thiras was gone; they were all gone. There was no sense in looking for comfort, downwhen or up. All she had was the moment, the tick of the relentless present, filled now with the moist, bittersweet breath of the dirt, the sticky savor of running sap, the bloom of perfume on the flowers. As she drifted through the greenhouse, leaves brushed her skin like caresses. She settled at the potting bench, opened a bin and picked out a single bean seed.

Mada cupped it between her two hands and blew on it, letting her body's warmth coax the seed out of dormancy. She tried to merge her mind with its blissful unconsciousness. Cotyledons stirred and began to absorb nutrients from the endosperm. A bean cared nothing about proclaiming the Three Universal Rights: the right of all independent sentients to remain individual, the right to manipulate their physical structures and the right to access the timelines. Mada slowed her metabolism to the steady and deliberate rhythm of the bean—what Utopian could do that? They held that individuality bred chaos, that function

alone must determine form and that undoing the past was sacrilege. Being Utopians, they could hardly destroy Trueborn and its handful of colonies. Instead they had tried to put the Rights under quarantine.

Mada stimulated the sweat glands in the palms of her hands. The moisture wicking across her skin called to the embryonic root in the bean seed. The tip pushed against the seed coat. Mada's sibling batch on Trueborn had pushed hard against the Utopian blockade, to bring the Rights to the rest of the galaxy. Only a handful had made it to open space. The brain clans had hunted them down and brought most of them back in disgrace to Trueborn. But not Mada. No, not wily Mada, Mada the fearless, Mada whose heart now beat but once a minute.

The bean embryo swelled and its root cracked the seed coat. It curled into her hand, branching and rebranching like the timelines. The roots tickled her. Mada manipulated the chemistry of her sweat by forcing her sweat ducts to reabsorb most of the sodium and chlorine. She parted her hands slightly and raised them up to the grow lights. The cotyledons emerged and chloroplasts oriented themselves to the light. Mada was thinking only bean thoughts as her cupped hands filled with roots and the first true leaves unfolded. More leaves budded from the nodes of her stem, her petioles arched and twisted to the light, *the light*. It was only the light—violet-blue and orange-red—that mattered, the incredible shower of photons that excited her chlorophyll, passing electrons down carrier molecules to form adenosine diphosphate and nicotinamide adenine dinucleo

“Mada,” said the ship. “The order to leave you alone is now superseded by primary programming.”

“What?” The word caught in her throat like a bone.

“You entered the greenhouse forty days ago.”

Without quite realizing what she was doing, Mada clenched her hands, crushing the young plant.

“I am directed to keep you from harm, Mada,” said the ship. “It's time to eat.”

She glanced down at the dead thing in her hands. “Yes, all right.” She dropped it onto the potting bench. “I've got something to clean up first but I'll be there in a minute.” She wiped the corner of her eye. “Meanwhile, calculate a course for home.”

natural background

Not until the ship scanned the quarantine zone at the edge of the Trueborn system did Mada begin to worry. In her time the zone had swarmed with the battle asteroids of the brain clans. Now the Utopians were gone. Of course, that was to be expected after all this time. But as the ship re-entered the home system, dumping excess velocity into the empty dimensions, Mada felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature in the command mod.

Trueborn orbited a spectral type G3V star, which had been known to the discoverers as HR3538. Scans showed that the Green Sea had become a climax forest of deciduous hardwood. There were indeed new mountains—knife edges slicing through evergreen sheets—that had upthrust some eighty kilometers off the Fire Coast, leaving Port Henocho landlocked. A rain forest choked the plain where the city of Blair's Landing had once sprawled.

The ship scanned life in abundance. The seas teemed and flocks of Trueborn's flyers darkened the skies like storm clouds: kippies and bluewings and warblers and migrating stilts. Animals had retaken all three

continents, lowland and upland, marsh and tundra. Mada could see the dust kicked up by the herds of herbivorous aram from low orbit. The forest echoed with the clatter of shindies and the shriek of blowhards. Big hunters like kar and divil padded across the plains. There were new species as well, mostly invertebrates but also a number of lizards and something like a great, mossy rat that built mounds five meters tall.

None of the introduced species had survived: dogs or turkeys or llamas. The ship could find no cities, towns, buildings—not even ruins. There were neither tubeways nor roads, only the occasional animal track. The ship looked across the entire electromagnetic spectrum and saw nothing but the natural background.

There was nobody home on Trueborn. And as far as they could tell, there never had been.

“Speculate,” said Mada.

“I can't,” said the ship. “There isn't enough data.”

“There's your data.” Mada could hear the anger in her voice. “Trueborn, as it would have been had we never even existed.”

“Two-tenths of a spin is a long time, Mada.”

She shook her head. “They ripped out the foundations, even picked up the dumps. There's nothing, *nothing* of us left.” Mada was gripping the command perch so hard that the knuckles of her toes were white. “Hypothesis,” she said, “the Utopians got tired of our troublemaking and wiped us out. Speculate.”

“Possible, but that's contrary to their core beliefs.” Most DIs had terrible imaginations. They couldn't tell jokes, but then they couldn't commit crimes, either.

“Hypothesis: they deported the entire population, scattered us to prison colonies. Speculate.”

“Possible, but a logistical nightmare. The Utopians prize the elegant solution.”

She swiped the image of her home planet off the screen, as if to erase its unnerving impossibility. “Hypothesis: there are no Utopians anymore because the revolution succeeded. Speculate.”

“Possible, but then where did everyone go? And why did they return the planet to its pristine state?”

She snorted in disgust. “What if,” she tapped a finger to her forehead, “maybe we *don't* exist. What if we've skipped to another time line? One in which the discovery of Trueborn never happened? Maybe there has been no Utopian Empire in this timeline, no Great Expansion, no Space Age, maybe no human civilization at all.”

“One does not just skip to another timeline at random.” The ship sounded huffy at the suggestion. “I've monitored all our dimensional reinsertions quite carefully, and I can assure you that all these events occurred in the timeline we currently occupy.”

“You're saying there's no chance?”

“If you want to write a story, why bother asking my opinion?”

Mada's laugh was brittle. "All right then. We need more data." For the first time since she had been stranded upwhen, she felt a tickle stir the dead weight she was carrying inside her. "Let's start with the nearest Utopian system."

chasing shadows

The HR683 system was abandoned and all signs of human habitation had been obliterated. Mada could not be certain that everything had been restored to its pre-Expansion state because the ship's database on Utopian resources was spotty. HR4523 was similarly deserted. HR509, also known as Tau Ceti, was only 11.9 light years from earth and had been the first outpost of the Great Expansion. Its planetary system was also devoid of intelligent life and human artifacts—with one striking exception.

Nuevo LA was spread along the shores of the Sterling Sea like a half-eaten picnic lunch. Something had bitten the roofs off its buildings and chewed its walls. Metal skeletons rotted on its docks, transports were melting into brown and gold stains. Once-proud boulevards crumbled in the orange light; the only traffic was windblown litter chasing shadows.

Mada was happy to survey the ruin from low orbit. A closer inspection would have spooked her. "Was it war?"

"There may have been a war," said the ship, "but that's not what caused this. I think it's deliberate deconstruction." In extreme magnification, the screen showed a concrete wall pockmarked with tiny holes, from which dust puffed intermittently. "The composition of that dust is limestone, sand, and aluminum silicate. The buildings are crawling with nanobots and they're eating the concrete."

"How long has this been going on?"

"At a guess, a hundred years, but that could be off by an order of magnitude."

"Who did this?" said Mada. "Why? Speculate."

"If this is the outcome of a war, then it would seem that the victors wanted to obliterate all traces of the vanquished. But it doesn't seem to have been fought over resources. I suppose we could imagine some deep ideological antagonism between the two sides that led to this, but such an extreme of cultural psychopathology seems unlikely."

"I hope you're right." She shivered. "So they did it themselves, then? Maybe they were done with this place and wanted to leave it as they found it?"

"Possible," said the ship.

Mada decided that she was done with Nuevo LA, too. She would have been perversely comforted to have found her enemies in power somewhere. It would have given her an easy way to calculate her duty. However, Mada was quite certain that what this mystery meant was that twenty thousand millennia had conquered both the revolution and the Utopians and that she and her sibling batch had been designed in vain.

Still, she had nothing better to do with eternity than to try to find out what had become of her species.

a never-ending vacation

The Atlantic Ocean was now larger than the Pacific. The Mediterranean Sea had been squeezed out of existence by the collision of Africa, Europe and Asia. North America floated free of South America and was nudging Siberia. Australia was drifting toward the equator.

The population of earth was about what it had been in the fifteenth century CE, according to the ship. Half a billion people lived on the home world and, as far as Mada could see, none of them had anything important to do. The means of production and distribution, of energy-generation and waste disposal were in the control of Dependent Intelligences like the ship. Despite repeated scans, the ship could detect no sign that any independent sentience was overseeing the system.

There were but a handful of cities, none larger than a quarter of a million inhabitants. All were scrubbed clean and kept scrupulously ordered by the DIs; they reminded Mada of databases populated with people instead of information. The majority of the population spent their bucolic lives in pretty hamlets and quaint towns overlooking lakes or oceans or mountains.

Humanity had booked a never-ending vacation.

“The brain clans could be controlling the DIs,” said Mada. “That would make sense.”

“Doubtful,” said the ship. “Independent sentients create a signature disturbance in the sixth dimension.”

“Could there be some secret dictator among the humans, a hidden oligarchy?”

“I see no evidence that anyone is in charge. Do you?”

She shook her head. “Did they choose to live in a museum,” she said, “or were they condemned to it? It's obvious there's no First Right here; these people have only the *illusion* of individuality. And no Second Right either. Those bodies are as plain as uniforms—they're still slaves to their biology.”

“There's no disease,” said the ship. “They seem to be functionally immortal.”

“That's not saying very much, is it?” Mada sniffed. “Maybe this is some scheme to start human civilization over again. Or maybe they're like seeds, stored here until someone comes along to plant them.” She waved all the screens off. “I want to go down for a closer look.

What do I need to pass?”

“Clothes, for one thing.” The ship displayed a selection of current styles on its screen. They were extravagantly varied, from ballooning pastel tents to skin-tight sheaths of luminescent metal, to feathered camouflage to jumpsuits made of what looked like dried mud. “Fashion design is one of their principal past-times,” said the ship. “In addition, you'll probably want genitalia and the usual secondary sexual characteristics.”

It took her the better part of a day to flow ovaries, fallopian tubes, a uterus, cervix, and vulva and to rearrange her vagina. All these unnecessary organs made her feel bloated. She saw breasts as a waste of tissue; she made hers as small as the ship thought acceptable. She argued with it about the several substantial patches of hair it claimed she needed. Clearly, grooming them would require constant attention. She didn't mind taming her claws into fingernails but she hated giving up her whiskers. Without

them, the air was practically invisible. At first her new vulva tickled when she walked, but she got used to it.

The ship entered earth's atmosphere at night and landed in what had once been Saskatchewan, Canada. It dumped most of its mass into the empty dimensions and flowed itself into baggy black pants, a moss-colored boat neck top and a pair of brown, gripall loafers. It was able to conceal its complete sensorium in a canvas belt.

It was 9:14 in the morning on June 23, 19,834,004 CE when Mada strolled into the village of Harmonious Struggle.

the devil's apple

Harmonious Struggle consisted of five clothing shops, six restaurants, three jewelers, eight art galleries, a musical instrument maker, a crafts workshop, a weaver, a potter, a woodworking shop, two candle stores, four theaters with capacities ranging from twenty to three hundred and an enormous sporting goods store attached to a miniature domed stadium. There looked to be apartments over most of these establishments; many had views of nearby Rabbit Lake.

Three of the restaurants—Hassam's Palace of Plenty, The Devil's Apple and Laurel's—were practically jostling each other for position on Sonnet Street, which ran down to the lake. Lounging just outside of each were waiters eyeing handheld screens. They sprang up as one when Mada happened around the corner.

“Good day, Madame. Have you eaten?”

“Well met, fair stranger. Come break bread with us.”

“All natural foods, friend! Lightly cooked, humbly served.”

Mada veered into the middle of the street to study the situation as the waiters called to her. ~ *So I can choose whichever I want?*~ she subvocalized to the ship.

~ *In an attention-based economy,*~ subbed the ship in reply, ~ *all they expect from you is an audience.*~

Just beyond Hassam's, the skinny waiter from The Devil's Apple had a wry, crooked smile. Black hair fell to the padded shoulders of his shirt. He was wearing boots to the knee and loose rust-colored shorts, but it was the little red cape that decided her.

As she walked past her, the waitress from Hassam's was practically shouting. “Madame, *please*, their batter is dull!” She waved her handheld at Mada. “Read the *reviews*. Who puts shrimp in *muffins*?”

The waiter at the Devil's Apple was named Owen. He showed her to one of three tables in the tiny restaurant. At his suggestion, Mada ordered the poached peaches with white cheese mousse, an asparagus breakfast torte, baked orange walnut French toast and coddled eggs. Owen served the peaches, but it was the chef and owner, Edris, who emerged from the kitchen to clear the plate.

“The mousse, madame, you liked it?” she asked, beaming.

“It was good,” said Mada. Her smile shrank a size and a half.

“Enough lemon rind, would you say that?”

“Yes. It was very nice.” Mada's reply seemed to dismay Edris even more. When she came out to clear the next course, she blanched at the corner of breakfast torte that Mada had left uneaten.

“I knew this.” She snatched the plate away. “The pastry wasn't fluffy enough.” She rolled the offending scrap between thumb and forefinger.

Mada raised her hands in protest. “No, no, it was delicious.” She could see Owen shrinking into the far corner of the room.

“Maybe too much Colby, not enough Gruyere?” Edris snarled. “But you have no comment?”

“I wouldn't change a thing. It was perfect.”

“Madame is kind,” she said, her lips barely moving, and retreated.

A moment later Owen set the steaming plate of French toast before Mada.

“Excuse me.” She tugged at his sleeve.

“Something's wrong?” He edged away from her. “You must speak to Edris.”

“Everything is fine. I was just wondering if you could tell me how to get to the local library.”

Edris burst out of the kitchen. “What are you doing, beanheaded boy? You are distracting my patron with absurd chitterchat. Get out, get out of my restaurant now.”

“No really, he” But Owen was already out the door and up the street, taking Mada's appetite with him.

~ You're doing something wrong,~ the ship subbed.

Mada lowered her head. *~ I know that!~*

Mada pushed the sliver of French toast around the pool of maple syrup for several minutes but could not eat it. “Excuse me,” she called, standing up abruptly. “Edris?”

Edris shouldered through the kitchen door, carrying a tray with a silver egg cup. She froze when she saw how it was with the French toast and her only patron.

“This was one of the most delicious meals I have ever eaten.” Mada backed toward the door. She wanted nothing to do with eggs, coddled or otherwise.

Edris set the tray in front of Mada's empty chair. “Madame, the art of the kitchen requires the tongue of the patron,” she said icily.

Mada fumbled for the latch. “Everything was very, very wonderful.”

Mada slunk down Lyric Alley, which ran behind the stadium, trying to understand how exactly she had offended. In this attention-based economy, paying attention was obviously not enough. There had to be some other cultural protocol she and the ship were missing. What she probably ought to do was go back and explore the clothes shops, maybe pick up a pot or some candles and see what additional information she could blunder into. But making a fool of herself had never much appealed to Mada as a learning strategy. She wanted the map, a native guide—some edge, preferably secret.

~ Scanning,~ subbed the ship. ~ Somebody is following you. He just ducked behind the privet hedge twelve-point-three meters to the right. It's the waiter, Owen.~

“Owen,” called Mada, “is that you? I'm sorry I got you in trouble. You're an excellent waiter.”

“I'm not really a waiter.” Owen peeked over the top of the hedge. “I'm a poet.”

She gave him her best smile. “You said you'd take me to the library.” For some reason, the smile stayed on her face “Can we do that now?”

“First listen to some of my poetry.”

“No,” she said firmly. “Owen, I don't think you've been paying attention. I said I would like to go to the library.”

“All right then, but I'm not going to have sex with you.”

Mada was taken aback. “Really? Why is that?”

“I'm not attracted to women with small breasts.”

For the first time in her life, Mada felt the stab of outraged hormones. “Come out here and talk to me.” There was no immediate break in the hedge, so Owen had to squiggle through.

“There's something about me that you don't like,” he said as he struggled with the branches.

“Is there?” She considered. “I like your cape.”

“That you *don't* like.” He escaped the hedge's grasp and brushed leaves from his shorts.

“I guess I don't like your narrow-mindedness. It's not an attractive quality in a poet.”

There was a gleam in Owen's eye as he went up on his tiptoes and began to declaim:

“That spring you left I thought I might expire

And lose the love you left for me to keep.

To hold you once again is my desire

Before I give myself to death's long sleep.”

He illustrated his poetry with large, flailing gestures. At “death's long sleep” he brought his hands together as if to pray, laid the side of his head against them and closed his eyes. He held that pose in silence for an agonizingly long time.

“It's nice,” Mada said at last. “I like the way it rhymes.”

He sighed and went flat-footed. His arms drooped and he fixed her with an accusing stare. “You're not from here.”

“No,” she said. ~ *Where am I from?*~ she subbed. ~ *Someplace he'll have to look up.*~

~ *Marble Bar. It's in Australia*~

“I'm from Marble Bar.”

“No, I mean you're not one of us. You don't comment.”

At that moment, Mada understood. ~ *I want to skip downwhen four minutes. I need to undo this.*~
= ~ =

~. *this undo to need I .minutes four downwhen skip to want I*~ .understood Mada, moment that At
“ .comment don't You .us of one not you're mean I ,No” “ .Bar Marble from I'm” ~ *Australia in It's .Bar
Marble*~ ~ *up look to have he'll Someplace*~ .subbed she ~ *?from I am Where*~ .said she “ ,No”
“ .here from not You're” .stare accusing an with her fixed he and drooped arms His .flatfooted went and
sighed He “ .rhymes it way the like I.” .last at said Mada “ ,nice It's” .time long agonizingly an for silence in
pose that held He .eyes his closed and them against head his of side the laid ,pray to if as together hands
his brought he “sleep long death's” At .gestures flailing ,large with poetry his illustrated He “ .sleep long
death's to myself give I Before desire my is again once you hold To keep to me for left you love the lose
And expire might I thought I left you spring That” :declaim to began and tiptoes his on up went he as eye
Owen's in gleam a was There “ .poet a in quality attractive an not It's .narrow-mindedness your like don't
I guess I” .shorts his from leaves brushed and grasp hedge's the escaped He “ .like don't you That” “ .cape
your like I” .considered She “?there Is” .branches the with struggled he as said he “ ,like don't you that me
about something There's” .through squiggle to had Owen so ,hedge the in break immediate no was There
“ .me to talk and here out Come” .hormones wronged of stab the felt Mada ,life her in time first the For
“ .breasts small with women to attracted not I'm” “?that is Why ?Really” .aback taken was Mada “ .you
with sex have to going not I'm but ,then right All” “ .library the to go to like would I said I .attention paying
been you've think don't I ,Owen” .firmly said she “ ,No” “ .poetry my of some to listen First”
= ~ =

As the ship surged through the empty dimensions, threespace became as liquid as a dream. Leaves smeared and buildings ran together. Owen's face swirled.

"They want criticism," said Mada. They like to think of themselves as artists but they're insecure about what they've accomplished. They want their audience to engage with what they're doing, help them make it better—the comments they both seem to expect.”

“I see it now,” said the ship. “But is one person in a backwater worth an undo? Let's just start over somewhere else.”

“No, I have an idea.” She began flowing more fat cells to her breasts. “For the first time since she had

skipped up when, Mada had a glimpse of what her duty might now be. "I'm going to need a big special effect on short notice. Be ready to reclaim mass so you can resubstantiate the hull at my command."

= ~ =

"First listen to some of my poetry."

"Go ahead." Mada folded her arms across her chest. "Say it then."

Owen stood on tiptoes to declaim:

"That spring you left I thought I might expire

And lose the love you left for me to keep.

To hold you once again is my desire

Before I give myself to death's long sleep."

He illustrated his poetry with large, flailing gestures. At "death's long sleep" he brought his hands together as if to pray, moved them to the side of his head, rested against them and closed his eyes. He had held the pose for just a beat before Mada interrupted him.

"Owen," she said. "You look ridiculous."

He jerked as if he had been hit in the head by a shovel.

She pointed at the ground before her. "You'll want to take these comments sitting down."

He hesitated, then settled at her feet.

"You hold your meter well, but that's purely a mechanical skill." She circled behind him. "A smart oven could do as much. Stop fidgeting!"

She hadn't noticed the ant hills near the spot she had chosen for Owen. The first scouts were beginning to explore him. That suited her plan exactly.

"Your real problem," she continued, "is that you know nothing about death and probably very little about desire."

"I know about death." Owen drew his feet close to his body and grasped his knees. "Everyone does. Flowers die, squirrels die."

"Has anyone you've ever known died?"

He frowned. "I didn't know her personally, but there was the woman who fell off that cliff in Merrymeeting."

"Owen, did you have a mother?"

"Don't make fun of me. Everyone has a mother."

Mada didn't think it was time to tell him that she didn't; that she and her sibling batch of a thousand revolutionaries had been autoflowed. "Hold out your hand." Mada scooped up an ant. "That's your mother." She crunched it and dropped it onto Owen's palm.

Owen looked down at the dead ant and then up again at Mada. His eyes filled.

"I think I love you," he said. "What's your name?"

"Mada." She leaned over to straighten his cape. "But loving me would be a very bad idea."

all that's left

Mada was surprised to find a few actual books in the library, printed on real plastic. A primitive DI had catalogued the rest of the collection, billions of gigabytes of print, graphics, audio, video and VR files. None of it told Mada what she wanted to know. The library had sims of Egypt's New Kingdom, Islam's Abbasid dynasty and the International Moonbase—but then came an astonishing void. Mada's searches on Trueborn, the Utopians, Tau Ceti, intelligence engineering and dimensional extensibility theory turned up no results. It was only in the very recent past that history resumed. The DI could reproduce the plans that the workbots had left when they built the library twenty-two years ago, and the menu The Devil's Apple had offered the previous summer, and the complete won-lost record of the Black Minks, the local scatterball club, which had gone 533-905 over the last century. It knew that the name of the woman who died in Merrymeeting was Agnes and that two years after her death, a replacement baby had been born to Chandra and Yuri. They named him Herrick.

Mada waved the screen blank and stretched. She could see Owen draped artfully over a nearby divan, as if posing for a portrait. He was engrossed by his handheld. She noticed that his lips moved as he read. She crossed the reading room and squeezed onto it next to him, nestling into crook in his legs. "What's that?" she asked.

He turned the handheld toward her. "Nadeem Jerad's *Burning the Snow*. Would you like to hear one of his poems?"

"Maybe later." She leaned into him. "I was just reading about Moonbase."

"Yes, ancient history. It's sort of interesting, don't you think? The Greeks and the Renaissance and all that."

"But then I can't find any record of what came after."

"Because of the nightmares." He nodded. "Terrible things happened, so we forgot them."

"What terrible things?"

He tapped the side of his head and grinned.

"Of course," she said, "nothing terrible happens anymore."

"No. Everyone's happy now." Owen reached out and pushed a strand of her hair off her forehead. "You have beautiful hair."

Mada couldn't even remember what color it was. "But if something terrible did happen, then you'd want to forget it."

"Obviously."

"The woman who died, Agnes. No doubt her friends were very sad."

"No doubt." Now he was playing with her hair.

~ *Good question,* ~ subbed the ship. ~ *They must have some mechanism to wipe their memories.* ~

"Is something wrong?" Owen's face was the size of the moon; Mada was afraid of what he might tell her next.

"Agnes probably had a mother," she said.

"A mom and a dad."

"It must have been terrible for them."

He shrugged. "Yes, I'm sure they forgot her."

Mada wanted to slap his hand away from her head. "But how could they?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "Where are you from, anyway?"

"Trueborn," she said without hesitation. "It's a long, long way from here."

"Don't you have libraries there?" He gestured at the screens that surrounded them. "This is where we keep what we don't want to remember."

~ *Skip!* ~ Mada could barely sub; if what she suspected were true ~ *Skip downwhen two minutes.* ~

= ~ =

~. *minutes two downwhen Skip* ~ ... true were suspected she what if ;sub barely could Mada ~!Skip~
"remember to want don't we what keep we where is This" .them surrounded that screen the at gestured
He "?there libraries have you Don't" ".here from way long ,long a It's" .hesitation without said she
";Trueborn" "?anyway, from you are Where" .look puzzled a her gave He "?they could how But" .head
her from away hand his slap to wanted Mada ".her forgot they sure I'm, Yes" .shrugged He ".them for
terrible been have must It" ".dad a and mom A" ".mother a had probably Agnes" .next her tell might he
what of afraid was Mada .moon the of size of the was face Owen's "?wrong something Is" ~.memories
their wipe to mechanism some have must They" .ship the subbed ~,question Good~ .hair her with playing
was he Now ".doubt No" ".sad very were friends her doubt no ,Agnes ,died who woman The"
".Obviously" ".it forget to want you'd then ,happen did terrible something if But" .was it color what
remember even couldn't Mada

= ~ =

She wrapped her arms around herself to keep the empty dimensions from reaching for the emptiness inside her. Was something wrong?

Of course there was, but she didn't expect to say it out loud. "I've lost everything and all that's left is *this* ." Owen shimmered next to her like the surface of Rabbit Lake.

"Mada, what?" said the ship.

"Forget it," she said. She thought she could hear something cracking when she laughed.

= ~ =

Mada couldn't even remember what color her hair was. "But if something terrible did happen, then you'd want to forget it."

"Obviously."

"Something terrible happened to me."

"I'm sorry." Owen squeezed her shoulder. "Do you want me to show you how to use the headbands?" He pointed at a rack of metal-mesh strips.

~ Scanning,~ subbed the ship. "*Microcurrent taps capable of modulating post-synaptic outputs. I thought they were some kind of virtual reality I/O .*"

"No." Mada twisted away from him and shot off the divan. She was outraged that these people would deliberately burn memories. How many stubbed toes and unhappy love affairs had Owen forgotten? If she could have, she would have skipped the entire village of Harmonius Struggle down into the identity mine. When he rose up after her, she grabbed his hand. "I have to get out of here *right now* ." She dragged him out of the library into the innocent light of the sun.

"Wait a minute," he said. She continued to tow him up Ode Street and out of town. "Wait!" He planted his feet, tugged at her and she spun back to him. "Why are you so upset?"

"I'm not upset." Mada's blood was hammering in her temples and she could feel the prickle of sweat under her arms. ~ *Now I need you,*~ she subbed. "All right then. It's time you knew." She took a deep breath. "We were just talking about ancient history, Owen. Do you remember back then that the gods used to intervene in the affairs of humanity?"

Owen goggled at her as if she were growing beans out of her ears.

"I am a goddess, Owen, and I have come for you. I am calling you to your destiny. I intend to inspire you to great poetry."

His mouth opened and then closed again.

"My worshippers call me by many names." She raised a hand to the sky. ~ *Help?*~

~ *Try Athene. Here's a databurst.*~

"To the Greeks, I was Athene," Mada continued, "the goddess of cities, of technology and the arts, of wisdom and of war." She stretched a hand toward Owen's astonished face, forefinger aimed between his eyes. "Unlike you, I had no mother. I sprang full-grown from the forehead of my maker. I am Athene, the

virgin goddess.”

“How stupid do you think I am?” He shivered and glanced away from her fierce gaze. “I used to live in Maple City, Mada. I’m not some simple-minded country lump. You don’t seriously expect me to believe this goddess nonsense?”

She slumped, confused. Of course she had expected him to believe her. “I meant no disrespect, Owen. It’s just that the truth is” This wasn’t as easy as she had thought. “What I expect is that you believe in your own potential, Owen. What I expect is that you are brave enough to leave this place and come with me. To the stars, Owen, to the stars to start a new world.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest, grasped the hem of her moss-colored top, pulled it over her head and tossed it behind her. Before it hit the ground the ship augmented it with enough reclaimed mass from the empty dimensions to resubstantiate the command and living mods.

Mada was quite pleased with the way Owen tried—and failed—not to stare at her breasts. She kicked the gripall loafers off and the deck rose up beneath them. She stepped out of the baggy, black pants; when she tossed them at Owen, he flinched. Seconds later, they were eyeing each other in metallic light of the ship’s main companionway.

“Well?” said Mada.

duty

Mada had difficulty accepting Trueborn as it now was. She could see the ghosts of great cities, hear the murmur of dead friends. She decided to live in the forest that had once been the Green Sea, where there were no landmarks to remind her of what she had lost. She ordered the ship to begin constructing an infrastructure similar to that they had found on earth, only capable of supporting a technologically-advanced population. Borrowing orphan mass from the empty dimensions, it was soon consumed with this monumental task. She missed its company; only rarely did she use the link it had left her—a silver ring with a direct connection to its sensorium.

The ship’s first effort was the farm that Owen called Athens. It consisted of their house, a flow works, a gravel pit and a barn. Dirt roads led to various mines and domed fields that the ship’s bots tended. Mada had it build a separate library, a little way into the woods, where, she declared, information was to be acquired only, never destroyed. Owen spent many evenings there. He said he was trying to make himself worthy of her.

He had been deeply flattered when she told him that, as part of his training as a poet, he was to name the birds and beasts and flowers and trees of Trueborn.

“But they must already have names,” he said, as they walked back to the house from the newly-tilled soya field.

“The people who named them are gone,” she said. “The names went with them.”

“Your people.” He waited for her to speak. The wind sighed through the forest. “What happened to them?”

“I don’t know.” At that moment, she regretted ever bringing him to Trueborn.

He sighed. "It must be hard."

"You left *your* people," she said. She spoke to wound him, since he was wounding her with these rude questions.

"For you, Mada." He let go of her. "I know you didn't leave them for me." He picked up a pebble and held it in front of his face. "You are now Mada-stone," he told it, "and whatever you hit" He threw it into the woods and it *thwoked* off a tree. "... is Mada-tree. We will plant fields of Mada-seed and press Mada-juice from the sweet Mada-fruit and dance for the rest of our days down Mada Street." He laughed and put his arm around her waist and swung her around in circles, kicking up dust from the road. She was so surprised that she laughed too.

Mada and Owen slept in separate bedrooms, so she was not exactly sure how she knew that he wanted to have sex with her. He had never spoken of it, other than on that first day when he had specifically said that he did not want her. Maybe it was the way he continually brushed up against her for no apparent reason. This could hardly be chance, considering that they were the only two people on Trueborn. For herself, Mada welcomed his hesitancy. Although she had been emotionally intimate with her batch siblings, none of them had ever inserted themselves into her body cavities.

But, for better or worse, she had chosen this man for this course of action. Even if the galaxy had forgotten Trueborn two-tenths of a spin ago, the revolution still called Mada to her duty.

"What's it like to kiss?" she asked that night, as they were finishing supper.

Owen laid his fork across a plate of cauliflower curry. "You've never kissed anyone before?"

"That's why I ask."

Owen leaned across the table and brushed his lips across hers. The brief contact made her cheeks flush, as if she had just jogged in from the gravel pit. "Like that," he said. "Only better."

"Do you still think my breasts are too small?"

"I never said that." Owen's face turned red.

"It was a comment you made—or at least thought about making."

"A comment?" The word *comment* seemed to stick in his throat; it made him cough. "Just because you make comment on some aspect doesn't mean you reject the work as a whole."

Mada glanced down the neck of her shift. She hadn't really increased her breast mass all that much, maybe ten or twelve grams, but now vasocongestion had begun to swell them even more. She could also feel blood flowing to her reproductive organs. It was a pleasurable weight that made her feel light as pollen. "Yes, but do you think they're too small?"

Owen got up from the table and came around behind her chair. He put his hands on her shoulders and she leaned her head back against him. There was something between her cheek and his stomach. She heard him say, "Yours are the most perfect breasts on this entire planet," as if from a great distance and then realized that the *something* must be his penis.

After that, neither of them made much comment.

nine hours

Mada stared at the ceiling, her eyes wide but unseeing. Her concentration had turned inward. After she had rolled off him, Owen had flung his left arm across her belly and drawn her hip towards his and given her the night's last kiss. Now the muscles of his arm were slack, and she could hear his seashore breath as she released her ovum into the cloud of his sperm squiggling up her fallopian tubes. The most vigorous of the swimmers butted its head through the ovum's membrane and dissolved, releasing its genetic material. Mada immediately started unraveling the strands of DNA before the fertilized egg could divide for the first time. Without the necessary diversity, they would never revive the revolution. Satisfied with her intervention, she flowed the blastocyst down her fallopian tubes where it locked onto the wall of her uterus. She prodded it and the ball of cells became a comma with a big head and a thin tail. An array of cells specialized and folded into a tube that ran the length of the embryo, weaving into nerve fibers. Dark pigment swept across two cups in the blocky head and then bulged into eyes. A mouth slowly opened; in it was a one-chambered, beating heart. The front end of the neural tube blossomed into the vesicles that would become the brain. Four buds swelled, two near the head, two at the tail. The uppermost pair sprouted into paddles, pierced by rays of cells that Mada immediately began to ossify into fingerbone. The lower buds stretched into delicate legs. At midnight, the embryo was as big as a her fingernail; it began to move and so became a fetus. The eyes opened for a few minutes, but then the eyelids fused. Mada and Owen were going to have a son; his penis was now a nub of flesh. Bubbles of tissue blew inward from the head and became his ears. Mada listened to him listen to her heartbeat. He lost his tail and his intestines slithered down the umbilical cord into his abdomen. As his fingerprints looped and whorled, he stuck his thumb into his mouth. Mada was having trouble breathing because the fetus was floating so high in her uterus. She eased herself into a sitting position and Owen grumbled in his sleep. Suddenly the curry in the cauliflower was giving her heartburn. Then the muscles of her uterus tightened and pain sheeted across her swollen belly.

~ Drink this.~ The ship flowed a tumbler of nutrient nano onto the bedside table. *~ The fetus gains mass rapidly from now on.~* The stuff tasted like rusty nails. *~ You're doing fine.~*

When the fetus turned upside down, it felt like he was trying out a gymnastic routine. But then he snuggled headfirst into her pelvis, and calmed down, probably because there wasn't enough room left inside her for him to make large, flailing gestures like his father. Now she could feel electrical buzzes down her legs and inside her vagina as the baby bumped her nerves. He was big now, and growing by almost a kilogram an hour, laying down new muscle and brown fat. Mada was tired of it all. She dozed. At six-thirty-seven her water broke, drenching the bed.

"Hmm." Owen rolled away from the warm, fragrant spill of amniotic fluid. "What did you say?"

The contractions started; she put her hand on his chest and pressed down. "Help," she whimpered.

"Wha ...?" Owen propped himself up on elbows. "Hey, I'm wet. How did I get ...?"

"*O-Owen!*" She could feel the baby's head stretching her vagina in a way mere flesh could not possibly stretch.

"Mada! What's wrong?" Suddenly his face was very close to hers. "Mada, what's happening?"

But then baby was slipping out of her, and it was *sooo* much better than the only sex she had ever had. She caught her breath and said, "I have begotten a son."

She reached between her legs and pulled the baby to her breasts. They were huge now, and very sore.

“We will call him Owen,” she said.

Begot

And Mada begot Enos and Felicia and Malaleel and Ralph and Jared and Elisa and Tharsis and Masahiko and Thema and Seema and Casper and Hevila and Djanka and Jennifer and Jojo and Regma and Elvis and Irina and Dean and Marget and Karoly and Sabatha and Ashley and Siobhan and Mei-Fung and Neil and Gupta and Hans and Sade and Moon and Randy and Genvieve and Bob and Nazia and Eiichi and Justine and Ozma and Khaled and Candy and Pavel and Isaac and Sandor and Veronica and Gao and Pat and Marcus and Zsa Zsa and Li and Rebecca.

Seven years after her return to Trueborn, Mada rested.

ever after

Mada was convinced that she was not a particularly good mother, but then she had been designed for courage and quick-thinking, not nurturing and patience. It wasn't the crying or the dirty diapers or the spitting-up, it was the utter uselessness of the babies that the revolutionary in her could not abide. And her maternal instincts were often skewed. She would offer her children the wrong toy or cook the wrong dish, fall silent when they wanted her to play, prod them to talk when they needed to withdraw. Mada and the ship had calculated that fifty of her genetically-manipulated offspring would provide the necessary diversity to repopulate Trueborn. After Rebecca was born, Mada was more than happy to stop having children.

Although the children seemed to love her despite her awkwardness, Mada wasn't sure she loved them back. She constantly teased at her feelings, peeling away what she considered pretense and sentimentality. She worried that the capacity to love might not have been part of her emotional design. Or perhaps begetting fifty children in seven years had left her numb.

Owen seemed to enjoy being a parent. He was the one whom the children called for when they wanted to play. They came to Mada for answers and decisions. Mada liked to watch them snuggle next to him when he spun his fantastic stories. Their father picked them up when they stumbled, and let them climb on his shoulders so they could see just what he saw. They told him secrets they would never tell her.

The children adored the ship, which substantiated a bot companion for each of them, in part for their protection. All had inherited their father's all-but-invulnerable immune systems; their chromosomes replicated well beyond the Hayflick limit with integrity and fidelity. But they lacked their mother's ability to flow tissue and were therefore at peril of drowning or breaking their necks. The bots also provided the intense individualized attention that their busy parents could not. Each child was convinced that his or her bot companion had a unique personality. Even the seven-year-olds were too young to realize that the bots were reflecting their ideal personality back at them. The bots were in general as intelligent as the ship, although it had programmed into their DIs a touch of naiveté and a tendency to literalness that allowed the children to play tricks on them. Pranking a brother or sister's bot was a particularly delicious sport.

Athens had begun to sprawl after seven years. The library had tripled in size and grown a wing of

classrooms and workshops. A new gym overlooked three playing fields. Owen had asked the ship to build a little theater where the children could put on shows for each other. The original house became a ring of houses, connected by corridors and facing a central courtyard. Each night Mada and Owen moved to their bedroom in a different house. Owen thought it important that the children see them sleeping in the same bed; Mada went along.

After she had begotten Rebecca, Mada needed something to do that didn't involve the children. She had the ship's farmbots plow up a field and for an hour each day she tended it. She resisted Owen's attempts to name this "Mom's Hobby." Mada grew vegetables; she had little use for flowers. Although she made a specialty of root crops, she was not a particularly accomplished gardener. She did, however, enjoy weeding.

It was at these quiet times, her hands flicking across the dark soil, that she considered her commitment to the Three Universal Rights. After two-tenths of a spin, she had clearly lost her zeal. Not for the first, that independent sentients had the right to remain individual. Mada was proud that her children were as individual as any intelligence, flesh or machine, could have made them. Of course, they had no pressing need to exercise the second right of manipulating their physical structures—she had taken care of that for them. When they were of age, if the ship wanted to introduce them to molecular engineering, that could certainly be done. No, the real problem was that downwhen was forever closed to them by the identity mine. How could she justify her new Trueborn society if it didn't enjoy the third right: free access to the timelines?

undone

"Mada!" Owen waved at the edge of her garden. She blinked; he was wearing the same clothes he'd been wearing when she had first seen him on Sonnet Street in front of The Devil's Apple—down to the little red cape. He showed her a picnic basket. "The ship is watching the kids tonight," he called. "Come on, it's our anniversary. I did the calculations myself. We met eight earth years ago today."

He led her to a spot deep in the woods, where he spread a blanket. They stretched out next to each other and sorted through the basket. There was a curley salad with alperets and thumbnuts, brainboy and chive sandwiches on cheese bread. He toasted her with mada-fruit wine and told her that Siobahn had let go of the couch and taken her first step and that Irina wanted everyone to learn to play an instrument so that she could conduct the family orchestra and the Malaleel had asked him just today if ship was a person.

"It's not a person," said Mada. "It's a DI."

"That's what I said." Owen peeled the crust off his cheese bread. "And he said if it's not a person, how come it's telling jokes?"

"It told a joke?"

"It asked him, 'How come you can't have everything?' and then it said, 'Where would you put it?'"

She nudged him in the ribs. "That sounds more like you than the ship."

"I have a present for you," he said after they were stuffed. "I wrote you a poem." He did not stand; there were no large, flailing gestures. Instead he slid the picnic basket out of the way, leaned close and whispered into her ear.

“Loving you is like catching rain on my tongue.

You bathe the leaves, soak indifferent ground;

Why then should I get so little of you?

Yet still, like a flower with a fool's face,

I open myself to the sky.”

Mada was not quite sure what was happening to her; she had never really cried before. “I like that it doesn't rhyme.” She had understood that tears flowed from a sadness. “I like that a lot.” She sniffed and smiled and daubed at edges of her eyes with a napkin. “Never rhyme anything again.”

“Done,” he said.

Mada watched her hand reach for him, caress the side of his neck, and then pull him down on top of her. Then she stopped watching herself.

“No more children.” His whisper seemed to fill her head.

“No,” she said, “no more.”

“I'm sharing you with too many already.” He slid his hand between her legs. She arched her back and guided him to her pleasure.

When they had both finished, she ran her finger through the sweat cooling at the small of his back and then licked it. “Owen,” she said, her voice a silken purr. “That was the one.”

“Is that your comment?”

“No.” She craned to see his eyes. “This is my comment,” she said. “You're writing love poems to the wrong person.”

“There is no one else,” he said.

She squawked and pushed him off her. “That may be true,” she said, laughing, “but it's not something you're supposed to say.”

“No, what I meant was...”

“I know.” She put a finger to his lips and giggled like one of her babies. Mada realized then how dangerously happy she was. She rolled away from Owen; all the lightness crushed out of her by the weight of guilt and shame. It wasn't her duty to be happy. She had been ready to betray the cause of those who had made her for what? For this man? “There's something I have to do.” She fumbled for her shift. “I can't help myself, I'm sorry.”

Owen watched her warily. “Why are you sorry?”

“Because after I do it, I'll be different.”

“Different how?”

“The ship will explain.” She tugged the shift on. “Take care of the children.”

“What do you mean, take care of the children? What are you doing?” He lunged at her and she scabbled away from him on all fours. “Tell me.”

“The ship says my body should survive.” She staggered to her feet. “That's all I can offer you, Owen.” Mada ran.

She didn't expect Owen to come after her—or to run so fast.

~ *I need you.*~ she subbed to the ship. “*Substantiate the command mod.*~

He was right behind her. Saying something Was it to her? “No,” he panted, “no, no, *no.*”

~ *Substantiate the com*~

Suddenly Owen was gone; Mada bit her lip as she crashed into the main screen, caromed off it and dropped like a dead woman. She lay there for a moment, the cold of the deck seeping into her cheek. “Goodbye,” she whispered. She struggled to pull herself up and spat blood.

“Skip downwhen,” she said, “six minutes.”

= ~ =

"minutes six", said she "downwhen Skip" .blood spat and up herself pull to struggled She .whispered she "Goodbye" .cheek her into seeping deck the of cold the ,moment a for there lay She .woman dead a like dropped and it off caromed ,screen main the into crashed she as lip her bit Mada ;gone was Owen Suddenly ~... *com the Substantiate*~ “no ,no ,no” ,panted he “No” ?her to it Was .something Saying .her behind right was He ~. *mod command the Substantiate*~ .ship the to subbed she ~. *you need I*~ .fast so run to or—her after come to Owen expect didn't She .ran Mada “Owen ,you offer can I all That's” feet her to staggered She “.survive should body my says ship The” “me Tell” .fours all on him from away scabbled she and her at lunged He “?doing you are What ?children the of care take ,mean you do What.” “.children the of care Take” .on shift the tugged She “.explain will ship The” “?how Different” “.different be I'll ,it do I after Because” “?sorry you are Why” .warily her watched Owen. “sorry I'm ,myself help can't I” .shift her for fumbled She .her made had who those of cause the betrayed have would she easily How “.do to have I something There's” .happy be to duty her wasn't It .shame and guilt of weight the by her of out crushed lightness the all ,Owen from away rolled She .was she happy dangerously how then realized Mada .babies her of one like giggled and lips his to finger a put She “know I” “...Was meant I what ,No” “.say to supposed you're something not it's but” ,laughing, said she “,true be may That” .her off him pushed and squawked She .said he “,else one no is There” “.person wrong the to poems love writing You're” .said she “,comment my is This” .eyes his see to craned She “.No” “?comment your that Is” “.one the was That” .purr silken a voice her , said she “,Owen”

= ~ =

When threespace went went blurry, it seemed that her duty did too. She waved her hand and watched it smear.

"You know what you're doing," said the ship.

"What I was designed to do. What all my batch siblings pledged to do." She waved her hand again; she

could actually see through herself. "The only thing I can do."
"The mine will wipe your identity. There will be nothing of you left."

"And then it will be gone and the timelines will open. I believe that I've known this was what I had to do since we first skipped up when."

"The probability was always high," said the ship "But not certain."

"Bring me to him, afterwards. But don't tell him about the timelines. He might want to change them. The timelines are for the children, so that they can finish the revol"

= ~ =

"Owen," she said, her voice a silken purr. Then she paused.

The woman shook her head, trying to clear it. Lying on top of her was the handsomest man she had ever met. She felt warm and sexy and wonderful. What was this? "I ... I'm..." she said. She reached up and touched the little red cloth hanging from his shoulders. "I like your cape."

done

= ~ =

"minutes six", said she "down when Skip" blood spat and up herself pull to struggled She .whispered she "Goodbye" .cheek her into seeping deck the of cold the ,moment a for there lay She .woman dead a like dropped and it off caromed ,screen main the into crashed she as lip her bit Mada ;gone was Owen Suddenly ~... *com the Substantiate*~ "no ,no ,no" ,panted he "No" ?her to it Was .something Saying .her behind right was He ~. *mod command the Substantiate*~ .ship the to subbed she ~. *you need I*~ .fast so run to or—her after come to Owen expect didn't She .ran Mada "Owen ,you offer can I all That's" feet her to staggered She "survive should body my says ship The" "me Tell" .fours all on him from away scabbled she and her at lunged He "doing you are What ?children the of care take ,mean you do What" "children the of care Take" .on shift the tugged She "explain will ship The" "how Different" "different be I'll ,it do I after Because" "sorry you are Why" .warily her watched Owen. "sorry I'm ,myself help can't I" .shift her for fumbled She .her made had who those of cause the betrayed have would she easily How "do to have I something There's" .happy be to duty her wasn't It .shame and guilt of weight the by her of out crushed lightness the all ,Owen from away rolled She .was she happy dangerously how then realized Mada .babies her of one like giggled and lips his to finger a put She "know I" "...Was meant I what ,No" "say to supposed you're something not it's but" ,laughing, said she "true be may That" .her off him pushed and squawked She .said he "else one no is There" "person wrong the to poems love writing You're" .said she "comment my is This" .eyes his see to craned She "No" "comment your that Is" "one the was That" .purr silken a voice her , said she "Owen"

= ~ =

Mada waved her hand and watched it smear in threespace.

"What are you doing?" said the ship.

"What I was designed to do." She waved; she could actually see through herself. "The only thing I can do."

"The mine will wipe your identity. None of your memories will survive."

"I believe that I've known that's what would happen since we first skipped up when."

"It was probable," said the ship "But not certain."

Trueborn scholars pinpoint what the ship did next as its first step toward independent sentience. In its memoirs, the ship credits the children with teaching it to misbehave.

It played a prank.

"Loving you," said the ship, "is like catching rain on my tongue. You bathe"

"Stop," Mada shouted. Stop right now!"

"Got you!" The ship gloated. "Four minutes, fifty-one seconds."

= ~ =

"Owen," she said, her voice a silken purr. "That was the one."

"Is that your comment?"

"No." Mada was astonished—and pleased—that she still existed. She knew that in most timelines her identity must have been obliterated by the mine. Thinking about those brave, lost selves made her more sad than proud. "This is my comment," she said. "I'm ready now."

Owen coughed uncertainly. "Umm, already?"

She squawked and pushed him off her. "Not for *that*." She sifted his hair through her hands. "To be with you forever."

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