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This is a story about a bird. A bird, a ship, a machine, a woman—she was all these things, and none, but first and fundamentally a bird.

It is also a story about a man—a gambler, a liar, and a cheat, but only for the best of reasons.

No doubt you know the famous *Portrait of Denali Eu* , also called *The Third Decision* , whose eyes have been described as “two pools of sadness iced over with determination.” This is the story behind that painting.

It is a love story. It is a sad story. And it is true.

* * * *

The story begins in a time before shiftspace, before Conner and Hua, even before the caster people. The beginning of the story lies in the time of the bird ships.

Before the bird ships, just to go from one star to another, people either had to give up their whole lives and hope their children's children would remember why they had come, or freeze themselves and hope they could be thawed at the other end. Then the man called Doctor Jay made a great and horrible discovery: he learned that a living mind could change the shape of space. He found a way to weld a human brain to the keel of a starship, in such a way that the ship could travel from star to star in months instead of years.

After the execution of Doctor Jay, people learned that the part of the brain called the visual cortex was the key to changing the shape of space. And so they found a creature whose brain was almost all visual cortex, the *Aquila chrysaetos* , or as it was known in those days the golden eagle. This was a bird that has been lost to us; it had wings broader than a tall man is tall, golden brown feathers long and light as a lover's touch, and eyes black and sharp as a clear winter night. But to the people of this time it was just another animal, and they did not appreciate it while they had it.

They took the egg of a golden eagle, and they hatched it in a warm box, and they let it fly and learn and grow, and then they killed it. And they took its brain and they placed it at the top of a cunning construction of plastic and silicon which gave it the intelligence of a human, and this they welded to the keel of the starship.

It may seem to you that it is as cruel to give a bird the intelligence of a human, only to enslave its brain, as

it is to take the brain of a human and enslave that. And so it is. But the people of this time drew a rigid distinction between born-people and made-people, and to them this seemed only just and right.

Now it happens that one golden eagle brain, which was called Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig, was installed into a ship of surpassing beauty. It was a great broad shining arrowhead of silver metal, this ship, filigreed and inlaid with gold, and filled with clever and intricate mechanisms of subtle pleasure.

The ship traveled many thousands of light-years in the service of many captains. Love affairs and assassinations were planned and executed within its silver hull; it was used for a time as an emperor's private yacht; it even carried Magister Ai on part of his expedition to the Forgotten Worlds. But Nerissa the shipbrain saw none of these things, for she had been given eyes that saw only outward. She knew her masters only by the sound of their voices and the feel of their hands on her controls.

When the ship was under way, Nerissa felt the joy of flight, a pure unthinking joy she remembered from her time as a creature of muscle and feather. But most of her time was spent contemplating the silent stars or the wall of some dock, awaiting the whim of her owner and master.

Over the years the masters' voices changed. Cultured tones accustomed to command were replaced by harsher, more unforgiving voices, and the ship's rich appointments were removed one by one. In time even basic maintenance was postponed or disregarded, and Nerissa found herself more and more often in places of darkness and decay. She despaired, even feared for her life, but shipbrains had no rights. The strongest protest she was allowed was "Sir and Master, that course of action may be inadvisable."

Finally the last and roughest owner, a man with grating voice and hard unsubtle hands, ran the ship into a docking probe in a foul decrepit port. The tarnished silver hull gave way, the air gushed out, and the man died, leaving a legacy so tattered and filthy that none could bear to touch it. Ownerless, airless, the hulk was towed to a wrecking yard and forgotten. Nerissa wept as the ship's power failed, her vision fading to monochrome and then to black. Reduced to the barest reserves of energy, she fell into a deep uneasy sleep.

While she slept the universe changed. Conner and Hua discovered shiftspace, and travel between planets became something the merely well-off could afford. The Clash of Cultures burst into full flower almost at once, as ten thousand faiths and religions and philosophies collided and mingled. It was a time of violence and strife, but in time a few ideas emerged as points of agreement, and one of these was that what had been done to the golden eagles was wrong. So the hatcheries were closed, the ships retired, and the shipbrains compassionately killed.

All save one. One that slept forgotten in a wrecking yard orbiting an ugly red star known only by a number.

The Clash of Cultures gradually drew to a close as points of agreement grew and coalesced, eventually giving birth to Consensus. But much knowledge was lost, and so when a king's tinker entered the wrecking yard and found the hulk of the great ship he had no idea what a unique treasure he had stumbled upon. He saw only the precious metal of the ship's hull, and it was for this metal he purchased it for his master.

As the ship was broken up, the tinker saved out a few of the most interesting-looking pieces for later use. One of these was the housing containing the sleeping brain of Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig. She felt a blinding pain as she was crudely torched from the ship's keel, and she feared her end had come at last, but then the pain receded and she slept once more.

Nerissa sat unconsidered for some years in one of the king's many storerooms, surrounded by a thousand other dismembered devices. But then came a day when the tinker entered the storeroom in

search of some wire. He spotted a likely-looking length of wire beneath a pile of dusty components, but when he pulled on it he found himself with a peculiar rounded thing that piqued his curiosity. He took it back to his workbench, where he puzzled out its contacts and connectors, its inputs and outputs, and finally he connected an ancient scavenged power unit and Nerissa returned to awareness.

Waking was far more painful than being cut from the ship's hull. A torrent of discordant colors and textures flooded her senses, but her screams went unheard for the tinker had not connected her voice. Instead, a series of meaningless numbers and letters stepped delicately onto a small display plate. The tinker was fascinated by this, and stayed up all that night, probing and prodding, trying to understand just what manner of machine he had found.

Nerissa was nearly driven mad by the pain and the random sensations, and it was nothing but good fortune that when the tinker happened to hook up a voice unit to the proper outputs she was praying aloud for relief rather than crying incoherently—praying in Nihon, already an ancient language at the time of the bird ships, but still understood in the tinker's time as it is today. He dropped his soldering iron in astonishment.

Soon the tinker found Nerissa an eye and an ear and disconnected the probes that caused her the worst of the pain. They talked all that day, and he listened with apparent fascination to her description of her creation and her tales of her travels; for the first time in many centuries Nerissa allowed herself to hope. But though he professed to believe her, privately he concluded she was merely a machine: a storytelling machine constructed to believe its own fictions. For he was not an educated man, and as he had worked with machines every day of his life he was unable to conceive that she might be anything else.

Though he thought Nerissa was a machine, he recognized her intelligence and charm and decided to present her to his king as a special gift. He called together his apprentices and artisans and together they built a suitable container for her, a humanoid body of the finest and most costly materials. Her structural elements were composite diamond fiber, stronger than her old hull; her skin and hair were pure platinum, glowing with a subtle color deeper and finer than silver; her eyes and her teeth were beryl and opal; and all was assembled with the greatest of care and attention such that it moved as smoothly as any living thing.

The one thing he did not do was to provide the body with any semblance of sexual organs. It may seem to you that this omission is callous and arbitrary, and so it is. But the people of this time thought such a thing would be unseemly.

When the body was finished, Nerissa's brain in its housing was placed gently in its chest and the many connections were made with great care and delicacy. Power was applied then, and Nerissa's beautiful body of precious metals convulsed and twisted, her back arching and a horrible keening wail tearing from her amber lips. She begged to be deactivated, but the tinker and his assistants probed and prodded, tweaked and adjusted, and gradually the pain ebbed away, leaving Nerissa trembling on its shore.

The king was genuinely delighted with the tinker's gift of “a storytelling machine, built from bits and pieces found here and there.” The tinker had warned him that Nerissa seemed to believe her own tales, and so he pretended to believe them too, but Nerissa knew when she was being humored. So she gave him made-up stories, as he expected, though most of them had a kernel of truth drawn from her own life.

Now this king was a kind and wise man, truly appreciative of Nerissa, but he had many political problems and many enemies, so he rarely found time for her stories. After some months he found the sight of her, waiting patiently in his apartments, raised a pang of guilt that overwhelmed his joy at her beauty and grace. So he decided to gift Nerissa to an influential duke. In this way he hoped to put the man in his debt, to broaden the reputation of his tinker, and perhaps to gain Nerissa a more appreciative

audience.

So Nerissa joined the household of Duke Vey, in the city of Arica. The king's plan met with great success; the duke, well pleased with the king's gift, spent many hours parading Nerissa before his friends and relations. All were suitably impressed by her stories, her charm, and her gleaming beauty, and the king's tinker received many fine commissions from those who had seen her.

One of those who saw her was Denali Eu.

The son and heir of the famous trader Ranson Eu, Denali appeared but rarely in Arica. When he did visit the city he attended all the finest soirees, displaying his subtle wit and radiant wardrobe, and gambled flamboyantly. All agreed he shared his late father's gambling skill, though lacking his extravagance and bravado. Of his travels, however, he let fall only the vaguest of hints. He liked to say his business dealings were like leri fruits, sensitive to the harsh light of day.

In fact, Ranson Eu had gambled away his fortune, leaving his wife and only child shackled to a mountainous debt. Denali Eu had no ship, no travels, no servants. His time away from Arica was spent in a small and shabby house not far from town, the family's last bit of property, where he and his mother Leona survived on hunting and a small vegetable garden. In the evenings they sewed Denali's outfits for the next expedition to Arica, using refurbished and rearranged pieces from previous seasons. It is a tribute to Leona Eu's talent and taste that Denali was often perceived as a fashion leader.

It pained Denali to maintain this fiction. But he had no alternative, for as long as he was perceived as a prosperous trader his father's creditors were content to circle far from the fire and dine on scraps. His social status also gave him access to useful information, which could sometimes be sold for cash, and gave him entree to high-stakes gambling venues. Ranson Eu had, in fact, been an excellent gambler when sober, and had passed both acumen and techniques on to his son. Denali often wished he could have returned the favor by passing his caution and temperance on to his father.

It was across a spinning gambling wheel that Denali Eu first saw Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig. The lamplight glanced off her silver metal shoulder as a cat rubs against a leg, leaving both charged with electricity. Her unclothed body revealed every bit of the expense and quality of her manufacture. She stood with head tilted upward, her amber lips gently parted as she spoke to the taller Duke Vey beside her.

"Who is that?" asked Denali Eu to the woman beside him as he gathered his winnings.

"It is the duke's storytelling machine. Have you not seen it before?"

"No ... no, I have not. She's beautiful. She must be worth millions."

"It's priceless. It was a present from the king."

At that moment Eu made the first of three decisions that shaped the rest of his life and set a legend in motion: he determined to win Nerissa from the duke in a game of senec.

Denali Eu was a keen observer of people, as he had to be given his situation, and he had often found himself seated across a senec table from Duke Vey. The duke, like many senec players, had a mathematical system for playing the game. It was a good system; in fact, Eu had to concede it was better than his own ... most of the time. For he had noticed a flaw in the system's logic. He had husbanded this knowledge for many months; he knew that once he had exploited the flaw the duke would not fall into the same trap a second time.

Here was the opportunity he had been waiting for. The machine's platinum and jewels alone might fetch

enough to retire his father's debt, even at the price (far below their actual value) he could obtain on the black market. It would be a shame to break up such a fine creation, but he could never sell her entire; to do so would attract far too much attention to the Eu family's affairs.

It was two weeks before Denali Eu was able to engineer a game of no-limit senec with the duke, and when he sat down at the table Denali's nerves were already keening with tension. He usually kept his visits to a week, and despite his best efforts he thought some were beginning to suspect he had only two suits of clothing to his name.

Denali knew the duke would not be easily trapped. As he played he extended himself much farther than he usually did, risked much more than he normally would, to engage the duke's attention. His smile grew forced, and trickles of perspiration ran down his sides; he had to restrain himself from nervously tapping his cards against his sweating glass of leri water.

Eyebrows were raised around the table. One of the other players muttered "seems he has a touch of the old man in him after all" behind his cards. Again and again Denali raised the stakes, pushing his system to its own limits. Repeatedly he seized control of the dealer's token, the surest way to maintain his lead but the greatest risk in case of a forfeit. And forfeit he did, not just once but twice, for even the best system must occasionally fail in the face of an improbable run of bad cards. But through aggressive play he beat back from his losses, bankrupting one player after another. And always he kept a weather eye for the run of staves he needed to exploit the flaw in the duke's system.

Finally only Denali Eu and Duke Vey remained, the reflected light from the maroon felt of the senec table turning both their faces into demon masks. The other players watched from the surrounding darkness, most of their stakes now in Denali's possession. He could walk away from the table right now and it would be his most profitable trip since his father's death.

"One last hand," he said, placing his ante, "before we retire? A hand of Dragons' Delight, perhaps?"

"Very well," replied the duke, matching the ante.

Dragons' Delight was a fiendishly complicated form of senec, with round after round of betting and many opportunities for forfeit. Denali trembled beneath his cape as he raised and raised, trying to pull as much money as possible from the duke's hand, but not so much that he would be tempted to fold.

The seven of staves came out, and Denali raised his bet. The duke matched him. Then the prince of staves snapped onto the table. He raised again, substantially, and the duke raised him back. He matched, then dealt another card.

It was the courtesan of staves.

Their eyes met over the red-glowing table, the little pile of colorful cards, the heaps of betting counters. Denali knew the duke's system predicted an end to the run after three staves: a win for the duke. His own system said the odds of a fourth stave at this point, yielding a win for him, were better than eighty percent.

Denali gathered his hand of cards into a tight little bundle, tapped it against the table to square it, laid it carefully on the felt before him. He placed his hands, fingers spread, on either side of the stack for a moment. Then he reached to his left and shoved a huge pile of counters to the middle of the table. It was far more than the duke could match.

The duke placed his cards flat on the table. "It seems I must fold."

“So it seems. Or ... you could wager some personal property.”

“I think I know what you have in mind.”

“Yes. The storytelling machine.”

“I’m sorry. That is worth far more than...”

Denali pushed all the rest of his counters forward.

The duke stared levelly into Denali’s eyes. Denali stared back a challenge: How much do you trust your system?

The duke dropped his eyes to his cards. Studied them hard for a moment, then looked back. “Very well. I wager the storytelling machine.” A ripple of sound ran through the observers. “But I’m afraid that must be considered a raise. What can you offer to match it?”

Denali’s heart shrank to a cold hard clinker at the center of his chest. He must match the raise, or fold. “I wager my ship.” A man in the crowd gasped audibly.

Denali’s ship, the *Crocus*, which had been his father’s, was nothing but a worthless hull rusting behind his mother’s house. The drive and other fittings had gone to a money lender from Gaspara. If he lost, his deception would be exposed and he would be sold into slavery to pay his father’s debts.

“I accept that as a match,” said the duke.

Denali stared at the back of the top card of the deck. If it was a stave, he won. Else, he lost. The little boy on the card’s back design stared back at him. He could not meet that printed gaze, and dropped his eyes.

His eye lit upon one single counter that had been left by accident on the table before him, and a mad impulse seized him. He placed his index finger upon that counter, slid it across the felt to join the rest.

“I raise by one.”

Stunned silence from the observers.

The duke’s eyes narrowed. Then widened. Then closed, as he placed his hand across them. He began to chuckle. Then he laughed out loud. He leaned back in his chair, roaring with laughter, and slapped his cards on the table before him. “You fiendish bastard!” he gasped out. “I fold!”

Pandemonium. Denali Eu and the Duke Vey stood, shook hands, then embraced each other. The duke trembled with laughter; Denali just trembled. Servants appeared to gather the counters and process the transfer of property.

Denali could not help himself. He turned over the top card.

It was the five of berries.

* * * *

The next morning Denali Eu came to the duke’s city house, his bag slung over his shoulder. He found Nerissa waiting in the entry hall, alone except for two guards. “The duke sends his regrets,” said one, “but after last night’s entertainment he finds himself indisposed to company.”

Denali and the guards signed papers acknowledging the transfer of Nerissa to his possession, and he turned to leave, gesturing for her to follow. But as the door opened for them, a ray of morning sunlight touched her body and sent shimmering reflections into all the corners of the room. Denali turned back and was startled by her brilliant beauty.

“You're naked,” he blurted out, and immediately felt foolish.

“Sir and Master, I am as I was made,” she replied.

“I myself was born naked, but that does not excuse nudity in polite society. Here.” He removed his cape and placed it over her shoulders. It was sufficient for propriety. Then, unsure of the proper term of address for a machine, he silently proffered his elbow. She took it, and the two of them walked out the door side by side.

“What shall I call you?” he said as they strolled up toward the docks. Her feet chimed on the hard pathway.

“My name is Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig, Sir and Master.”

“Yes, but have you any title?”

“No, Sir and Master.”

“Your name is a trifle ... ungainly. I shall address you as M'zelle.” It was a standard term of address for a younger woman, or one of lower status. None of her other owners had ever called her anything of the sort.

“As you wish, Sir and Master.”

“You may address me simply as Sir,” he said. The repeated use of his full and proper title made Denali uncomfortable, for he was keenly aware of just how close he was to slavery himself. He was all the more discomfited by Nerissa's inhuman beauty and poise. Walking beside her, he felt himself little more than a bag of meat and hair. Worse, he knew that soon he would have to destroy this marvelous machine, though his mind kept trying to escape that fact. “In fact, you need not use the Sir on every statement. M'zelle.” And he inclined his head.

“Yes, Sir and Ma.... Yes, Sir.... Oh, goodness.” Though her face had only a few movements to it, her confusion and embarrassment were clear from the set of her tourmaline eyebrows and amber lips. “I mean, yes. Just yes.”

“Just so,” he said, and he laughed.

Nerissa was unsure what to think of this man, whose clothing and bearing indicated great wealth but whose attitude toward her was deferential. She had sometimes seen fear, from unsophisticated or unlettered people, but this was something else. It was as though she held a measure of power over him.

Then she realized what it was she saw in Denali Eu's eyes. It was something she had never before seen directed toward herself.

It was respect.

They reached the docks, a confusion of utilitarian buildings at the top of a hill just outside of town. This was where the shiftspace ships made landfall. “Here we are, M'zelle,” he said, and gestured her into a docking shed like all the rest.

It was empty.

"I do not understand, Sir."

He looked at the floor. His original plan had been to deactivate her at this point. But as they had walked together from town, he had come to understand just how heavy she was. There was no way he could smuggle her to his mother's house unassisted, and nobody other than Nerissa herself who could be trusted to assist.

He puffed out his cheeks, not raising his head. "The reason this shed is empty is that I have no ship. We will wait here until after dark, and then we will walk to my home, which is not far from here."

"You have no ship, Sir?"

"No." He turned and took her hands in his. They were warm, and hummed faintly. The fingernails were chips of ruby. He still did not meet her eyes. "No, M'zelle, I have no ship. In fact, I am afraid *you* are my sole possession of any value." Finally he looked up, his eyes pleading. "I must ask that you keep my secret safe."

Nerissa's heart went out to him then. "I am honored by your trust, Sir."

"Thank you, M'zelle." He led her to a small office, where there was a cot and a chair and a small stasis cupboard. "This is my waiting room. Can I offer you something to drink? Oh."

His expression of embarrassment was charming. "No, thank you," she said.

"But please ... do take a seat."

"I do not tire, Sir."

"Please, M'zelle. I insist. I could not bear to see you stand while I sit, and I do tire and must sit eventually."

"Very well, Sir," she said. The chair creaked beneath her weight, but held.

Denali poured himself a glass of cool water from the cupboard, then sat on the edge of the cot. "Usually I pass the time until dark reading, but since I am now the owner of a fine storytelling machine, it would seem impolite not to make use of your services. Would you please tell me a story?"

"Certainly, Sir. What kind of story would you like to hear?"

"Tell me a story about ... yourself."

A thrill went through her then. "Would you like a true story, or a made-up one?"

"True stories are always more interesting."

And so Nerissa told him a story about a golden eagle who lived for many years as the brain of a bird ship, then slept for a long time and finally became a storytelling machine. She did not embellish—the story was fantastic enough as it was—and she did not leave out the sad parts or the embarrassing parts.

When she finished, it was full dark. The glass of water sat, untouched, on the dusty floor beside Denali's cot.

Unlike the tinker, Denali Eu was an educated man. He knew the history of the bird ships, and he

understood just what Nerissa was and what she was capable of. He had inherited his father's notes, his contacts, and his trading expertise along with his debts. He knew in his bones that with a bird ship he could not just repay those debts, but rebuild his family's wealth and reputation.

It was then that he made the second of the three decisions that set a legend in motion: he would find a way to refurbish the hull of *Crocus* and refit it as a bird ship.

But all he said to Nerissa was "Thank you for the story, M'zelle." He knew his new plan was nearly as cruel as the old, because it would still mean the end of her existence as a gleaming almost-person. *But at least she will still be alive*, he told himself. *You have the right to do this. She is your property. You owe it to your mother and to your father's memory.*

Still he felt filthy.

Denali dressed Nerissa in a spare suit of his traveling clothes, with gloves and a large floppy hat to hide her platinum skin, and they walked to his mother's house by the light of the moons. They talked as they walked, he of his life and she of hers. Both asked questions; both listened attentively to the answers. They learned about each other and they grew closer. If Nerissa sensed Denali was holding something back, she was not unduly concerned; she had already received far more confidences from him than she could ever have expected.

The house of Leona Eu had been hers before her marriage to Ranson Eu. It was small and patched, but warm and tasteful and genuine. Nerissa had never seen such a place; she loved it immediately.

Denali introduced Nerissa to his mother and explained that he had won Nerissa at gambling. Later, in private, he told his mother he planned to sell Nerissa on his next trip to Arica, but did not want the storyteller to know this because she would feel unwanted.

The life of the household returned to something like its usual routine, and Nerissa did her best to contribute. She proved to be a tireless gardener (her delicate finger joints protected from the dirt by leather gloves), and her ability to sit completely motionless for hours made her an impressive hunter. Nerissa was soon accepted as part of the family. This was something she had never experienced before, and she was honored and delighted. In the evenings, they all entertained each other with stories.

After Leona and Nerissa had gone to bed (for though her body never wearied, Nerissa's brain still required sleep), Denali stayed up late for many nights. He researched the bird ships and hauled out the old plans of *Crocus*, then drew new plans. The refitted ship would be stronger in the keel and lighter in weight; less luxurious, but with more lifesystem and cargo capacity. He sent both sets of plans to his father's chandler. The reply arrived in a few days: the chandler would do the work, though he said the design seemed insane.

The price he quoted was high. But the money Denali had won from the Duke would cover the down payment, and the balance was less than Nerissa's empty body would bring on the black market.

The next week the chandler came by with his delivery dirigible. He hooked chains and cables to *Crocus*'s corroded hull and hauled it away. Denali emptied out his secret personal cache of money and told Leona it was the proceeds of the salvage sale.

"I thought we had sold every part worth salvaging long ago," she said. "Surely the expense of the dirigible was more than the hull was worth?"

"I met the chandler on my last trip to Arica, and persuaded him he owed us a favor."

Leona still seemed unconvinced, but she accepted the money.

In the following weeks Nerissa's sense that Denali was hiding something from her increased. He grew haggard, and she found he would not meet her eyes. She wanted to ask him about his troubles, to repay the concern and respect she had been shown. But her years of servitude had ingrained in her a pattern of silent obedience and she said nothing.

For his part, Denali felt an agony of silence. He could confide neither in his mother, who would berate him for hiring the Chandler with money he did not yet have, nor in Nerissa, whose beauty he planned to tear away and sell for his own profit; yet he ached for reassurance. He found himself uninterested in food, and spent long hours of the night staring at his ceiling, unable to sleep.

On one such restless night, he watched a patch of shimmering moonlight, reflected onto his ceiling from a small pond near the house, as it passed slowly from one side of the room to the other. Suddenly, silently, it flared and danced all over the room, then returned to its previous state. Just as he was about to dismiss the phenomenon as an effect of his tired eyes, it happened again. And a third time.

He rose from his bed and looked out the window. What he saw then captured his heart. It was Nerissa, dancing naked on the shore of the pond. He had seen the moonlight reflected from her shining metal body.

Nerissa's dance was a soaring, graceful thing, a poem composed of twirls and leaps and tumbles. The great strength of her legs propelled her high into the air, in defiance of her metallic weight, and brought her to landing as delicately as a faun. Her platinum skin in the moonlight shone silver on silver, black on black; she was a creature of the moonlight, a pirouetting dancing fragment of the night.

She was even more beautiful than he had thought.

His heart was torn in two. Part of it wanted to fly, to leap and dance with her in the night. Part of it sank to the acid pit of his stomach, as though trying to hide from the knowledge of the plan he had laid. How could he destroy this beauty and grace for mere money? But how could he sentence himself, his mother, and his father's memory to a continued life of debt and deceit—a life that must eventually end in discovery and shame—for the sake of a machine?

Perhaps he let out a small sound of despair. Perhaps it was the sight of his white nightshirt in the window. For whatever reason, Nerissa noticed she was being watched. Clumsily she stopped her dance and stared directly at him, her eyes two tiny stars of reflected light.

He descended the stairs and met her in the doorway. The moonlight shining from her cheek was painfully bright, and in the silence of the night he heard the tiny sounds of her eyes as they shifted in their sockets.

"I'm sorry I disturbed your sleep, Sir."

"No, no ... I wasn't asleep. You dance beautifully, M'zelle."

"Thank you, Sir. I do enjoy it. It is as close as I can come in this body to the joy of flight between the stars."

The sundered halves of Denali's heart fused together then, for he realized then his plan for Nerissa was exactly what she wanted as well. He would restore her to her former life of sailing the currents of space, which she had described so vividly to him, and at the same time restore his own fortune.

Nerissa saw the smile spreading across his face, and asked what he was thinking.

“I have just thought of the most delightful surprise for you, M'zelle. A gift for you, to express my appreciation of your dance. But it will take some time to prepare, so I must ask you to be patient.” He bent and kissed the warm metal of her fingers. “Good night, M'zelle.”

“Good night, Sir.”

He returned to his bed and fell immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Three days later the chandler's dirigible returned, the refitted *Crocus* hanging from its gondola. The ship's gleaming hull wore vivid stripes of red, yellow, and green, the colors of Ranson Eu's former trading company. Denali, Leona, and Nerissa gathered together and watched as the dirigible lowered it gently to the ground. The pilot waved from the gondola as he flew away.

“This is my surprise to you both,” Denali proclaimed. “Behold: *Crocus* is reborn!”

Nerissa stared at the ship in silent rapture, but Leona turned to her son with concern. “I suspected you were hiding something from me. This is a wonderful surprise, to be sure, but I thought we had no secrets from each other.”

“Only this one, Mother. And there was a reason. Nerissa, here is my gift to you: this new *Crocus* has been built especially for you. In this new bird ship you will fly the stars once more.”

Nerissa's reaction confused and disturbed him. She went rigid, her features drawing together and her eyes widening. “This is ... a bird ship?” she said. “But where did you obtain the shipbrain?”

“There is no shipbrain, M'zelle. That position has been reserved for your own sweet self.”

Nerissa's metal hands bunched into fists, held tightly against her chin. She seemed to shrink into herself. “No,” she whispered. “No, no ... please, Sir and Master ... I beg you...”

Denali Eu felt his hands grow cold. “But M'zelle, when I saw you dance in the moonlight ... I thought to fly the stars was your greatest joy.”

“To fly is joy, yes ... but to be cut from this body ... to be severed ... uprooted ... the pain, Sir and Master ... that pain is something I could never endure again.” She crouched, trembling, on the stones of the path. Her eyes were huge. “I would rather die, Sir and Master. I would find a way, Sir and Master. Please, Sir and Master, please ... I know you are my owner, I know I must obey your wishes without question or hesitation, but I beg you ... do not ask me to do this.” And she fell at his feet, her hands raised as though to ward off a blow.

All the color ran out of Denali Eu's world. He turned from Nerissa and Leona and marched clumsily into the woods behind the house. They did not follow.

Some time later he found himself seated on a fallen log. The sun was low in the sky and his clothes and skin were torn from thorns and brambles.

How could he have been so stupid? He had lied to his mother, lied to Nerissa, made unwarranted assumptions, and promised money he did not have. Soon the chandler's bill would arrive and he had nothing with which to pay it.

He considered his options. He could follow through with his plan—and Nerissa would find some way to end her life, or else would serve in unwilling misery. Even if he were heartless enough to force her to do this, he did not relish the idea of trusting his life to a ship he had betrayed.

He could break up Nerissa, sell her platinum and precious stones to pay the chandler—and she would be gone completely, and he would have only a worthless hull without a drive.

He could sell Nerissa in one piece—and it would be the same, only with more money. Nerissa would still be lost to him, and subject to the whim of some other master who might treat her still more cruelly.

He could repudiate the chandler's bill, declare bankruptcy—and see Nerissa sold off, along with his mother's house, and himself sold into slavery.

But there was one more option. Denali Eu was an educated man, and he knew the history of the bird ships. He also knew Nerissa's story. And because of this knowledge, and despite this knowledge, he made the final, fateful decision that set a legend in motion.

He spent a long time sitting on the log, his head in his hands, but he could think of no other alternative. Then he stood and walked back to his mother's house. There, as the sun set, he told Nerissa and Leona of his decision. His mother cried and shouted and beat her hands upon the kitchen table; Nerissa sat upon a chair with her head bowed, but did not speak. Neither of them could change his mind.

The next day Nerissa and Leona took Denali Eu for a walk in the forest. He listened to the birds and the rustling of the leaves, and he felt the cool wind brush gently against his skin. He smelled the green of the leaves and the damp of the earth, and as many flowers as they could find. In the evening they prepared for him a fine meal, with pungent spices and fresh vegetables, and succulent fruits new-gathered and sweet. Nerissa massaged his back with her strong warm fingers, and his mother cried as she brushed his cheek with pieces of silk and fur.

On the following morning he went into the city and gave himself to the doctors. He told them what he wanted, and he swore three times that this was his will.

And so they killed him, and they took his brain and welded it to the keel of the *Crocus*. For the techniques of Doctor Jay were legal, as long as the donation was voluntary and sworn to three times, and the organs of a young man in the best of health could be sold for enough money to pacify the chandler.

The operation was every bit as painful as Nerissa had said. But Denali found sailing the stars was even more delightful than dancing in the moonlight: a symphony of colors and textures beyond his human experience. And this ship was equipped with eyes and ears and hands within its hull as well as without.

The ship, renamed the *Golden Eagle*, became a hugely successful trader. Denali Eu's knowledge and skill, combined with Nerissa Zeebnen-Fearsig's beauty and charm, were something no seller or buyer could resist and no other trader could surpass. The ship with a human mind and a metal captain was famed in song and story, and when after many years Leona Eu died she left one of the greatest fortunes in the Consensus.

Denali Eu and Nerissa the Silver Captain have not been seen for many, many years. Some say they sought new challenges in the Magellanic Clouds or even beyond. Some say they settled down to a contented existence on an obscure planet. But no one doubts that, wherever they are, they are together still.

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