

Ej–Es

NANCY KRESS

Jesse, come home

There's a hole in the bed

where we slept

Now it's growing cold

Hey Jesse, your face

in the place where we lay

by the hearth, all apart

It hangs on my heart....

Jesse, I'm lonely

Come home

—from “Jesse,” by Janis Ian, 1972

“Why did you first enter the Corps?” Lolimel asked her as they sat at the back of the shuttle, just before landing. Mia looked at the young man helplessly, because how could you answer a question like that? Especially when it was asked by the idealistic and worshipful new recruits, too ignorant to know what a waste of time worship was, let alone simplistic questions.

“Many reasons,” Mia said gravely, vaguely. He looked like so many medicians she had worked with, for so many decades on so many planets...intense, thick-haired, genemod beautiful, a little insane. You had to be a little insane to leave Earth for the Corps, knowing that when (if) you ever returned, all you had known would have been dust for centuries.

He was more persistent than most. “What reasons?”

“The same as yours, Lolimel,” she said, trying to keep her voice gentle. “Now be quiet, please, we’re entering the atmosphere.”

“Yes, but—”

“Be quiet.” Entry was so much easier on him than on her; he had not got bones weakened from decades in space. They did weaken, no matter what exercise one took or what supplements or what gene therapy. Mia leaned back in her shuttle chair and closed her eyes. Ten minutes, maybe, of aerobraking and descent; surely she could stand ten minutes. Or not.

The heaviness began, abruptly increased. Worse on her eyeballs, as always; she didn’t have good eye socket muscles, had never had them. Such an odd weakness. Well, not for long; this was her last flight. At the next station, she’d retire. She was already well over age, and her body felt it. Only her body? No, her mind, too. At the moment, for instance, she couldn’t remember the name of the planet they were hurtling toward. She recalled its catalog number, but not whatever its colonists, who were not answering hails from ship, had called it.

“Why did you join the Corps?”

“Many reasons.”

And so few of them fulfilled. But that was not a thing you told the young.

The colony sat at the edge of a river, under an evening sky of breathable air set with three brilliant, fast-moving moons. Beds of glorious flowers dotted the settlement, somewhere in size between a large town and a small city. The buildings of foamcast embedded with glittering native stone were graceful, well-proportioned rooms set around open atria. Minimal furniture, as graceful as the buildings; even the machines blended unobtrusively into the lovely landscape. The colonists had taste and restraint and a sense of beauty. They were all dead.

“A long time ago,” said Kenin. Officially she was Expedition Head, although titles and chains of command tended to erode near the galactic edge, and Kenin led more by consensus and natural calm than by rank. More than once the team had been grateful for Kenin’s calm. Lolimel looked shaken, although he was trying to hide it.

Kenin studied the skeleton before them. “Look at those bones—completely clean.”

Lolimel managed, “It might have been picked clean quickly by predators, or carnivorous insects, or...” His voice trailed off.

“I already scanned it, Lolimel. No microscopic bone nicks. She decayed right there in bed, along with clothing and bedding.”

The three of them looked at the bones lying on the indestructible mattress coils of some alloy Mia had once known the name of. Long clean bones, as neatly arranged as if for a first-year anatomy lesson. The bedroom door had been closed; the dehumidifying system had, astonishingly, not failed; the windows were intact. Nothing had disturbed the woman’s long rot in the dry air until nothing remained, not even the bacteria that had fed on her, not even the smell of decay.

Kenin finished speaking to the other team. She turned to Mia and Lolimel, her beautiful brown eyes serene. “There are skeletons throughout the city, some in homes and some collapsed in what seem to be public spaces. Whatever the disease was, it struck fast. Jamal says their computer network is gone, but individual rec cubes might still work. Those things last forever.”

Nothing lasts forever, Mia thought, but she started searching the cabinets for a cube. She said to Lolimel, to give him something to focus on, “How long ago was this colony founded, again?”

“Three hundred sixty E-years,” Lolimel said. He joined the search.

Three hundred sixty years since a colony ship left an established world with its hopeful burden, arrived at this deadly Eden, established a city, flourished, and died. How much of Mia’s lifetime, much of it spent traveling at just under  $c$ , did that represent? Once she had delighted in figuring out such equations, in wondering if she’d been born when a given worldful of colonists made planetfall. But by now there were too many expeditions, too many colonies, too many accelerations and decelerations, and she’d lost track.

Lolimel said abruptly, “Here’s a rec cube.”

“Play it,” Kenin said, and when he just went on staring at it in the palm of his smooth hand, she took the cube from him and played it herself.

It was what she expected. A native plague of some kind, jumping DNA-based species (which included

all species in the galaxy, thanks to panspermia). The plague had struck after the colonists thought they had vaccinated against all dangerous micros. Of course, they couldn't really have thought that; even three hundred sixty years ago doctors had been familiar with alien species-crossers. Some were mildly irritating, some dangerous, some epidemically fatal. Colonies had been lost before, and would be again.

"Complete medical data resides on green rec cubes," the recorder had said in the curiously accented International of three centuries ago. Clearly dying, he gazed out from the cube with calm, sad eyes. A brave man. "Any future visitors to Good Fortune should be warned."

Good Fortune. That was the planet's name.

"All right," Kenin said, "tell the guard to search for green cubes. Mia, get the emergency analysis lab set up and direct Jamal to look for burial sites. If they had time to inter some victims—if they interred at all, of course—we might be able to recover some micros to create vacs or cures. Lolimel, you assist me in—"

One of the guards, carrying weapons that Mia could not have named, blurted, "Ma'am, how do we know we won't get the same thing that killed the colonists?"

Mia looked at her. Like Lolimel, she was very young. Like all of them, she would have her story about why she volunteered for the Corps.

Now the young guard was blushing. "I mean, ma'am, before you can make a vaccination? How do we know we won't get the disease, too?"

Mia said gently, "We don't."

No one, however, got sick. The colonists had had interment practices, they had had time to bury some of their dead in strong water-tight coffins before everyone else died, and their customs didn't include embalming. Much more than Mia had dared hope for. Good Fortune, indeed.

In five days of tireless work they had the micro isolated, sequenced, and analyzed. It was a virus, or a virus analogue, that had somehow gained access to the brain and lodged near the limbic system, creating destruction and death. Like rabies, Mia thought, and hoped this virus hadn't caused the terror and madness of that stubborn disease. Not even Earth had been able to eradicate rabies.

Two more days yielded the vaccine. Kenin dispensed it outside the large building on the edge of the city, function unknown, which had become Corps headquarters. Mia applied her patch, noticing with the usual distaste the leathery, wrinkled skin of her forearm. Once she had had such beautiful skin, what was it that a long-ago lover had said to her, what had been his name... Ah, growing old was not for the gutless.

Something moved at the edge of her vision.

"Lolimel... did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Nothing." Sometimes her aging eyes played tricks on her; she didn't want Lolimel's pity.

The thing moved again.

Casually Mia rose, brushing imaginary dirt from the seat of her uniform, strolling toward the bushes where she'd seen motion. From her pocket she pulled her gun. There were animals on this planet, of course, although the Corps had only glimpsed them from a distance, and rabies was transmitted by animal bite....

It wasn't an animal. It was a human child.

No, not a child, Mia realized as she rounded the clump of bushes and, amazingly, the girl didn't run. An adolescent, or perhaps older, but so short and thin that Mia's mind had filled in "child." A scrawny young woman with light brown skin and long, matted black hair, dressed carelessly in some sort of sarong-like wrap. Staring at Mia with a total lack of fear.

"Hello," Mia said gently.

"Ej-es?" the girl said.

Mia said into her wrist, "Kenin...we've got natives. Survivors."

The girl smiled. Her hair was patchy on one side, marked with small white rings. Fungus, Mia thought professionally, absurdly. The girl walked right toward Mia, not slowing, as if intending to walk through her. Instinctively Mia put out an arm. The girl walked into it, bonked herself on the forehead, and crumpled to the ground.

"You're not supposed to beat up the natives, Mia," Kenin said. "God, she's not afraid of us at all. How can that be? You nearly gave her a concussion."

Mia was as bewildered as Kenin, as all of them. She'd picked up the girl, who'd looked bewildered but not angry, and then Mia had backed off, expecting the girl to run. Instead she'd stood there rubbing her forehead and jabbering, and Mia had seen that her sarong was made of an uncut sheet of plastic, its colors faded to a mottled gray.

Kenin, Lolimel, and two guards had come running. And still the girl wasn't afraid. She chattered at them, occasionally pausing as if expecting them to answer. When no one did, she eventually turned and moved leisurely off.

Mia said, "I'm going with her."

Instantly a guard said, "It's not safe, ma'am," and Kenin said, "Mia, you can't just—"

"You don't need me here," she said, too brusquely; suddenly there seemed nothing more important in the world than going with this girl. Where did that irrational impulse come from? "And I'll be perfectly safe with a gun."

This was such a stunningly stupid remark that no one answered her. But Kenin didn't order her to stay. Mia accepted the guard's tanglefoam and Kenin's vidcam and followed the girl.

It was hard to keep up with her. "Wait!" Mia called, which produced no response. So she tried what the girl had said to her: "Ej-es!"

Immediately the girl stopped and turned to her with glowing eyes and a smile that could have melted glaciers, had Good Fortune had such a thing. Gentle planet, gentle person, who was almost certainly a descendant of the original dead settlers. Or was she? InterGalactic had no record of any other registered ship leaving for this star system, but that didn't mean anything. InterGalactic didn't know everything. Sometimes, given the time dilation of space travel, Mia thought they knew nothing.

"Ej-es," the girl agreed, sprinted back to Mia, and took her hand. Slowing her youthful pace to match the older woman's, she led Mia home.

The houses were scattered, as though they couldn't make up their mind whether or not to be a village. A

hundred yards away, another native walked toward a distant house. The two ignored each other.

Mia couldn't stand the silence. She said, "I am Mia."

The girl stopped outside her hut and looked at her.

Mia pointed to her chest. "Mia."

"Es-ef-eb," the girl said, pointing to herself and giving that glorious smile.

Not "ej-es," which must mean something else. Mia pointed to the hut, a primitive affair of untrimmed logs, pieces of foamcast carried from the city, and sheets of faded plastic, all tacked crazily together.

"Ef-ef," said Esefeb, which evidently meant "home." This language was going to be a bitch: degraded and confusing.

Esefeb suddenly hopped to one side of the dirt path, laughed, and pointed at blank air. Then she took Mia's hand and led her inside.

More confusion, more degradation. The single room had an open fire with the simple venting system of a hole in the roof. The bed was high on stilts (why?) with a set of rickety steps made of rotting, untrimmed logs. One corner held a collection of huge pots in which grew greenery; Mia saw three unfired clay pots, one of them sagging sideways so far the soil had spilled onto the packed-dirt floor. Also a beautiful titanium vase and a cracked hydroponic vat. On one plant, almost the size of a small tree, hung a second sheet of plastic sarong, this one an unfaded blue-green. Dishes and tools littered the floor, the same mix as the pots of scavenged items and crude homemade ones. The hut smelled of decaying food and unwashed bedding. There was no light source and no machinery.

Kenin's voice sounded softly from her wrist. "Your vid is coming through fine. Even the most primitive human societies have some type of artwork."

Mia didn't reply. Her attention was riveted to Esefeb. The girl flung herself up the "stairs" and sat up in bed, facing the wall. What Mia had seen before could hardly be called a smile compared to the light, the sheer joy, that illuminated Esefeb's face now. Esefeb shuddered in ecstasy, crooning to the empty wall.

"Ej-es. Ej-es. Aaahhhh, Ej-es!"

Mia turned away. She was a medician, but Esefeb's emotion seemed too private to witness. It was the ecstasy of orgasm, or religious transfiguration, or madness.

"Mia," her wrist said, "I need an image of that girl's brain."

It was easy—too easy, Lolimel said later, and he was right. Creatures, sentient or not, did not behave this way.

"We could haul all the neuro equipment out to the village," Kenin said doubtfully, from base.

"It's not a village, and I don't think that's a good idea," Mia said softly. The softness was unnecessary. Esefeb slept like stone in her high bunk, and the hut was so dark, illuminated only by faint starlight through the hole in the roof, that Mia could barely see her wrist to talk into it. "I think Esefeb might come voluntarily. I'll try in the morning, when it's light."

Kenin, not old but old enough to feel stiff sleeping on the ground, said, "Will you be comfortable there until morning?"

“No, but I’ll manage. What does the computer say about the recs?”

Lolimel answered—evidently they were having a regular all-hands conference. “The language is badly degraded International, you probably guessed that. The translator’s preparing a lexicon and grammar. The artifacts, food supply, dwelling, everything visual, doesn’t add up. They shouldn’t have lost so much in two hundred fifty years, unless mental deficiency was a side effect of having survived the virus. But Kenin thinks—” He stopped abruptly.

“You may speak for me,” Kenin’s voice said, amused. “I think you’ll find that military protocol degrades, too, over time. At least, way out here.”

“Well, I. . . Kenin thinks it’s possible that what the girl has is a mutated version of the virus. Maybe infectious, maybe inheritable, maybe transmitted through fetal infection.”

His statement dropped into Mia’s darkness, as heavy as Esefeb’s sleep.

Mia said, “So the mutated virus could still be extant and active.”

“Yes,” Kenin said. “We need not only neuro-images but a sample of cerebrospinal fluid. Her behavior suggests—”

“I know what her behavior suggests,” Mia said curtly. That sheer joy, shuddering in ecstasy. . . It was seizures in the limbic system, the brain’s deep center for primitive emotion, which produced such transcendent, rapturous trances. Religious mystics, Saul on the road to Damascus, visions of Our Lady or of nirvana. And the virus might still be extant, and not a part of the vaccine they had all received. Although if transmission was fetal, the medicians were safe. If not. . .

Mia said, “The rest of Esefeb’s behavior doesn’t fit with limbic seizures. She seems to see things that aren’t there, even talk to her hallucinations, when she’s not having an actual seizure.”

“I don’t know,” Kenin said. “There might be multiple infection sites in the brain. I need her, Mia.”

“We’ll be there,” Mia said, and wondered if that were going to be true.

But it was, mostly. Mia, after a brief uncomfortable sleep wrapped in the sheet of blue-green plastic, sat waiting for Esefeb to descend her rickety stairs. The girl bounced down, chattering at something to Mia’s right. She smelled worse than yesterday. Mia breathed through her mouth and went firmly up to her.

“Esefeb!” Mia pointed dramatically, feeling like a fool. The girl pointed back.

“Mia.”

“Yes, good.” Now Mia made a sweep of the sorry hut. “Efef.”

“Efef,” Esefeb agreed, smiling radiantly.

“Esefeb efef.”

The girl agreed that this was her home.

Mia pointed theatrically toward the city. “Mia efef! Mia eb Esefeb etej Mia efef!” Mia and Esefeb come to Mia’s home. Mia had already raided the computer’s tentative lexicon of Good Fortunese.

Esefeb cocked her head and looked quizzical. A worm crawled out of her hair.

Mia repeated, “Mia eb Esefeb etej Mia efef.”

Esefeb responded with a torrent of repetitious syllables, none of which meant anything to Mia except “Ej-es.” The girl spoke the word with such delight that it had to be a name. A lover? Maybe these people didn’t live as solitary as she’d assumed.

Mia took Esefeb’s hand and gently tugged her toward the door. Esefeb broke free and sat in the middle of the room, facing a blank wall of crumbling logs, and jabbered away to nothing at all, occasionally laughing and even reaching out to touch empty air. “Ej-es, Ej-es!” Mia watched, bemused, recording everything, making medical assessments. Esefeb wasn’t malnourished, for which the natural abundance of the planet was undoubtedly responsible. But she was crawling with parasites, filthy (with water easily available), and isolated. Maybe isolated.

“Lolimel,” Mia said softly into the wrist, “what’s the best dictionary guess for ‘alone’?”

Lolimel said, “The closest we’ve got is ‘one.’ There doesn’t seem to be a concept for ‘unaccompanied,’ or at least we haven’t found it yet. The word for ‘one’ is ‘eket.’ ”

When Esefeb finally sprang up happily, Mia said, “Esefeb eket?”

The girl look startled. “Ek, ek,” she said: no, no. Esefeb ek eket! Esefeb eb Ej-es!”

Esefeb and Ej-es. She was not alone. She had the hallucinatory Ej-es.

Again Mia took Esefeb’s hand and pulled her toward the door. This time Esefeb went with her. As they set off toward the city, the girl’s legs wobbled. Some parasite that had become active overnight in the leg muscles? Whatever the trouble was, Esefeb blithely ignored it as they traveled, much more slowly than yesterday, to Kenin’s makeshift lab in the ruined city. Along the way, Esefeb stopped to watch, laugh at, or talk to three different things that weren’t there.

“She’s beautiful, under all that neglect,” Lolimel said, staring down at the anesthetized girl on Kenin’s neuro-imaging slab.

Kenin said mildly, “If the mutated virus is transmitted to a fetus, it could also be transmitted sexually.”

The young man said hotly, “I wasn’t implying—”

Mia said, “Oh, calm down. Lolimel. We’ve all done it, on numerous worlds.”

“Regs say—”

“Regs don’t always matter three hundred light-years from anywhere else,” Kenin said, exchanging an amused glance with Mia. “Mia, let’s start.”

The girl’s limp body slid into the neuro-imager. Esefeb hadn’t objected to meeting the other medics, to a minimal washing, to the sedative patch Mia had put on her arm. Thirty seconds later she slumped to the floor. By the time she came to, an incision ten cells thick would have been made into her brain and a sample removed. She would have been harvested, imaged, electroscanned, and mapped. She would never know it; there wouldn’t even be a headache.

Three hours later Esefeb sat on the ground with two of the guards, eating soysynth as if it were ambrosia. Mia, Kenin, Lolimel, and the three other medics sat in a circle twenty yards away, staring at handhelds and analyzing results. It was late afternoon. Long shadows slanted across the gold-green grass, and a small breeze brought the sweet, heavy scent of some native flower. Paradise, Mia thought. And then:

Bonnet Syndrome .

She said it aloud, “Charles Bonnet Syndrome,” and five people raised their heads to stare at her, returned to their handhelds, and called up medical deebees.

“I think you’re right,” Kenin said slowly. “I never even heard of it before. Or if I did, I don’t remember.”

“That’s because nobody gets it anymore,” Mia said. “It was usually old people whose eye problems weren’t corrected. Now we routinely correct eye problems.”

Kenin frowned. “But that’s not all that’s going on with Esefeb.”

No, but it was one thing, and why couldn’t Kenin give her credit for thinking of it? The next moment she was ashamed of her petty pique. It was just fatigue, sleeping on that hard cold floor in Esefeb’s home. Esefeb efef . Mia concentrated on Charles Bonnet Syndrome.

Patients with the syndrome, which was discovered in the eighteenth century, had damage somewhere in their optic pathway or brain. It could be lesions, macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, or even cataracts. Partially blind, people saw and sometimes heard instead things that weren’t there, often with startling clarity and realism. Feedback pathways in the brain were two-way information avenues. Visual data, memory, and imagination constantly flowed to and from each other, interacting so vividly that, for example, even a small child could visualize a cat in the absence of any actual cats. But in Bonnet Syndrome, there was interruption of the baseline visual data about what was and was not real. So all imaginings and hallucinations were just as real as the ground beneath one’s feet.

“Look at the amygdala,” medician Berutha said. “Oh, merciful gods!”

Both of Esefeb’s amygdalae were enlarged and deformed. The amygdalae, two almond-shaped structures behind the ears, specialized in recognizing the emotional significance of events in the external world. They weren’t involved in Charles Bonnet Syndrome. Clearly, they were here.

Kenin said, “I think what’s happening here is a strengthening or alteration of some neural pathways at the extreme expense of others. Esefeb ‘sees’ her hallucinations, and she experiences them as just as ‘real’—maybe more real—than anything else in her world. And the pathways go down to the limbic, where seizures give some of them an intense emotional significance. Like...like orgasm, maybe.”

Ej-es.

“Phantoms in the brain,” Berutha said.

“A viral god,” Lolimel said, surprising Mia. His tone, almost reverential, suddenly irritated her.

“A god responsible for this people’s degradation, Lolimel. They’re so absorbed in their ‘phantoms’ that they don’t concentrate on the most basic care of themselves. Nor on building, farming, art, innovation...nothing . They’re prisoners of their pretty fantasies.”

Lolimel nodded reluctantly. “Yes, I see that.”

Berutha said to Kenin, “We need to find the secondary virus. Because if it is infectious through any other vector besides fetal or sexual...” He didn’t finish the thought.

“I know,” Kenin said, “but it isn’t going to be easy. We don’t have cadavers for the secondary. The analyzer is still working on the cerebrospinal fluid. Meanwhile—” She began organizing assignments, efficient and clear. Mia stopped listening.



Esefeb had finished her meal and walked up to the circle of scientists. She tugged at Mia's tunic. "Mia... Esefeb etej efef." Esefeb come home .

"Mia eb Esefeb etej Esefeb efef," Mia said, and the girl gave her joyous smile.

"Mia—" Kenin said.

"I'm going with her, Kenin. We need more behavioral data. And maybe I can persuade another native or two to submit to examination," Mia argued, feebly. She knew that scientific information was not really her motive. She wasn't sure, however, what was. She just wanted to go with Esefeb.

"Why did you first enter the Corps?" Lolimel's question stuck in Mia's mind, a rhetorical fishbone in the throat, over the next few days. Mia had brought her medkit, and she administered broad-spectrum microbials to Esefeb, hoping something would hit. The parasites were trickier, needing life-cycle analysis or at least some structural knowledge, but she made a start on that, too. I entered the Corps to relieve suffering, Lolimel . Odd how naive the truest statements could sound. But that didn't make them any less true.

Esefeb went along with all Mia's pokings, patches, and procedures. She also carried out minimal food-gathering activities, with a haphazard disregard for safety or sanitation that appalled Mia. Mia had carried her own food from the ship. Esefeb ate it just as happily as her own.

But mostly Esefeb talked to Ej-es.

It made Mia feel like a voyeur. Esefeb was so unselfconscious—did she even know she had a "self" apart from Ej-es? She spoke to, laughed at (with?), played beside, and slept with her phantom in the brain, and around her the hut disintegrated even more. Esefeb got diarrhea from something in her water and then the place smelled even more foul. Grimly, Mia cleaned it up. Esefeb didn't seem to notice. Mia was eket. Alone in her futile endeavors at sanitation, at health, at civilization.

"Esefeb eb Mia etej efef—" How did you say "neighbors"? Mia consulted the computer's lexicon, steadily growing as the translator program deciphered words from context. It had discovered no word for "neighbor." Nor for "friend" nor "mate" nor any kinship relationships at all except "baby."

Mia was reduced to pointing at the nearest hut. "Esefeb eb Mia etej efef" over there.

The neighboring hut had a baby. Both hut and child, a toddler who lay listlessly in one corner, were just as filthy and diseased as Esefeb's house. At first the older woman didn't seem to recognize Esefeb, but when Esefeb said her name, the two women spoke animatedly. The neighbor smiled at Mia. Mia reached for the child, was not prevented from picking him up, and settled the baby on her lap. Discreetly, she examined him.

Sudden rage boiled through her, as unexpected as it was frightening. This child was dying. Of parasites, of infection, of something. A preventable something? Maybe yes, maybe no. The child didn't look neglected, but neither did the mother look concerned.

All at once, the child in her arms stiffened, shuddered, and began to babble. His listlessness vanished. His little dirty face lit up like sunrise and he laughed and reached out his arms toward something not there. His mother and Esefeb turned to watch, also smiling, as the toddler had an unknowable limbic seizure in his dying, ecstatic brain.

Mia set him down on the floor. She called up the dictionary, but before she could say anything, the mother, too, had a seizure and sat on the dirt floor, shuddering with joy. Esefeb watched her a moment

before chattering to something Mia couldn't see.

Mia couldn't stand it anymore. She left, walking as fast as she could back to Esefeb's house, disgusted and frightened and...what?

Envious?

"Why did you first enter the Corps?" To serve humanity, to live purposefully, to find, as all men and women hope, happiness. And she had, sometimes, been happy.

But she had never known such joy as that.

Nonetheless, she argued with herself, the price was too high. These people were dying off because of their absorption in their rapturous phantoms. They lived isolated, degraded, sickly lives, which were undoubtedly shorter than necessary. It was obscene.

In her clenched hand was a greasy hair sample she'd unobtrusively cut from the toddler's head as he sat on her lap. Hair, that dead tissue, was a person's fossilized past. Mia intended a DNA scan.

Esefeb strolled in an hour later. She didn't seem upset at Mia's abrupt departure. With her was Lolimel.

"I met her on the path," Lolimel said, although nothing as well-used as a path connected the huts. "She doesn't seem to mind my coming here."

"Or anything else," Mia said. "What did you bring?" He had to have brought something tangible; Kenin would have used the wrister to convey information.

"Tentative prophylactic. We haven't got a vaccine yet, and Kenin says it may be too difficult, better to go directly to a cure to hold in reserve in case any of us comes down with this."

Mia caught the omission. "Any of us? What about them?"

Lolimel looked down at his feet. "It's, um, a borderline case, Mia. The decision hasn't been made yet."

"'Borderline' how, Lolimel? It's a virus infecting the brains of humans and degrading their functioning."

He was embarrassed. "Section Six says that, um, some biological conditions, especially persistent ones, create cultural differences for which Corps policy is noninterference. Section Six mentions the religious dietary laws that grew out of inherited food intolerances on—"

"I know what Section Six says, Lolimel! But you don't measure a culture's degree of success by its degree of happiness!"

"I don't think...that is, I don't know...maybe 'degree of success' isn't what Section Six means." He looked away from her. The tips of his ears grew red.

Poor Lolimel. She and Kenin had as much as told him that out here regs didn't matter. Except when they did. Mia stood. "You say the decision hasn't been made yet?"

He looked surprised. "How could it be? You're on the senior Corps board to make the decision."

Of course she was. How could she forget...she forgot more things these days, momentary lapses symbolic of the greater lapses to come. No brain functioned forever.

"Mia, are you all—"

“I’m fine. And I’m glad you’re here. I want to go back to the city for a few days. You can stay with Esefeb and continue the surveillance. You can also extend to her neighbors the antibiotic, antiviral, and antiparasite protocols I’ve worked through with Esefeb. Here, I’ll show you.”

“But I—”

“That’s an order.”

She felt bad about it later, of course. But Lolimel would get over it.

At base, everything had the controlled frenzy of steady, unremitting work. Meek now, not a part of the working team, Mia ran a DNA scan on the baby’s hair. It showed what she expected. The child shared fifty percent DNA with Esefeb. He was her brother; the neighbor whom Esefeb clearly never saw, who had at first not recognized Esefeb, was her mother. For which there was still no word in the translator deebee.

“I think we’ve got it,” Kenin said, coming into Mia’s room. She collapsed on a stone bench, still beautiful after two and a half centuries. Kenin had the beatific serenity of a hard job well done.

“A cure?”

“Tentative. Radical. I wouldn’t want to use it on one of us unless we absolutely have to, but we can refine it more. At least it’s in reserve, so a part of the team can begin creating and disseminating medical help these people can actually use. Targeted microbials, an antiparasite protocol.”

“I’ve already started on that,” Mia said, her stomach tightening. “Kenin, the board needs to meet.”

“Not tonight. I’m soooo sleepy.” Theatrically she stretched both arms; words and gesture were unlike her.

“Tonight,” Mia said. While Kenin was feeling so accomplished. Let Kenin feel the full contrast to what she could do with what Esefeb could.

Kenin dropped her arms and looked at Mia. Her whole demeanor changed, relaxation into fortress.

“Mia...I’ve already polled everyone privately. And run the computer sims. We’ll meet, but the decision is going to be to extend no cure. The phantoms are a biologically based cultural difference.”

“The hell they are! These people are dying out!”

“No, they’re not. If they were heading for extinction, it’d be a different situation. But the satellite imagery and population equations, based on data left by the generation that had the plague, show they’re increasing. Slowly, but a definite population gain significant to the point-oh-one level of confidence.”

“Kenin—”

“I’m exhausted, Mia. Can we talk about it tomorrow?”

Plan on it, Mia thought grimly. She stored the data on the dying toddler’s matrilineage in her handheld.

A week in base, and Mia could convince no one, not separately nor in a group. Medicians typically had tolerant psychological profiles, with higher-than-average acceptance of the unusual, divergent, and eccentric. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have joined the Corps.

On the third day, to keep herself busy, Mia joined the junior medicians working on refining the cure for what was now verified as “limbic seizures with impaired sensory input causing Charles Bonnet

Syndrome.” Over the next few weeks it became clear to Mia what Kenin had meant; this treatment, if they had to use it, would be brutally hard on the brain. What was that old ditty? “Cured last night of my disease, I died today of my physician.” Well, it still happened enough in the Corps. Another reason behind the board’s decision.

She felt a curious reluctance to go back to Esefeb. Or, as the words kept running through her mind, Mia ek etej Esefeb efef. God, it was a tongue twister. These people didn’t just need help with parasites, they needed an infusion of new consonants. It was a relief to be back at base, to be working with her mind, solving technical problems alongside rational scientists. Still, she couldn’t shake a feeling of being alone, being lonely: Mia eket .

Or maybe the feeling was more like futility.

“Lolimel’s back,” Jamal said. He’d come up behind her as she sat at dusk on her favorite stone bench, facing the city. At this time of day the ruins looked romantic, infused with history. The sweet scents of that night-blooming flower, which Mia still hadn’t identified, wafted around her.

“I think you should come now,” Jamal said, and this time Mia heard his tone. She spun around. In the alien shadows Jamal’s face was as set as ice.

“He’s contracted it,” Mia said, knowing beyond doubt that it was true. The virus wasn’t just fetally transmitted, it wasn’t a slow-acting retrovirus, and if Lolimel had slept with Esefeb. . . But he wouldn’t be that stupid. He was a medician, he’d been warned. . .

“We don’t really know anything solid about the goddamn thing!” Jamal burst out.

“We never do,” Mia said, and the words cracked her dry lips like salt.

Lolimel stood in the center of the ruined atrium, giggling at something only he could see. Kenin, who could have proceeded without Mia, nodded at her. Mia understood; Kenin acknowledged the special bond Mia had with the young medician. The cure was untested, probably brutal, no more really than dumping a selection of poisons in the right areas of the brain, in itself problematical with the blood-brain barrier.

Mia made herself walk calmly up to Lolimel. “What’s so funny, Lolimel?”

“All those sandwigs crawling in straight lines over the floor. I never saw blue ones before.”

Sandwigs. Lolimel, she remembered, had been born on New Carthage. Sandwigs were always red.

Lolimel said, “But why is there a tree growing out of your head, Mia?”

“Strong fertilizer,” she said. “Lolimel, did you have sex with Esefeb?”

He looked genuinely shocked. “No!”

“All right.” He might or might not be lying.

Jamal whispered, “A chance to study the hallucinations in someone who can fully articulate—”

“No,” Kenin said. “Time matters with this. . .” Mia saw that she couldn’t bring herself to say “cure.”

Realization dawned on Lolimel’s face. “Me? You’re going to. . . me? There’s nothing wrong with me!”

“Lolimel, dear heart. . .” Mia said.

“I don’t have it!”

“And the floor doesn’t have sandwigs. Lolimel—”

“No!”

The guards had been alerted. Lolimel didn’t make it out of the atrium. They held him, flailing and yelling, while Kenin deftly slapped on a tranq patch. In ten seconds he was out.

“Tie him down securely,” Kenin said, breathing hard. “Daniel, get the brain bore started as soon as he’s prepped. Everyone else, start packing up, and impose quarantine. We can’t risk this for anyone else here. I’m calling a Section Eleven.”

Section Eleven: If the MedCorps officer in charge deems the risk to Corps members to exceed the gain to colonists by a factor of three or more, the officer may pull the Corps off-planet.

It was the first time Mia had ever seen Kenin make a unilateral decision.

Twenty-four hours later, Mia sat beside Lolimel as dusk crept over the city. The shuttle had already carried up most personnel and equipment. Lolimel was in the last shift because, as Kenin did not need to say aloud, if he died, his body would be left behind. But Lolimel had not died. He had thrashed in unconscious seizures, had distorted his features in silent grimaces of pain until Mia would not have recognized him, had suffered malfunctions in alimentary, lymphatic, endocrine, and parasympathetic nervous systems, all recorded on the monitors. But he would live. The others didn’t know it, but Mia did.

“We’re ready for him, Mia,” the young tech said. “Are you on this shuttle, too?”

“No, the last one. Move him carefully. We don’t know how much pain he’s actually feeling through the meds.”

She watched the gurney slide out of the room, its monitors looming over Lolimel like cliffs over a raging river. When he’d gone, Mia slipped into the next building, and then the next. Such beautiful buildings: spacious atria, beautifully proportioned rooms, one structure flowing into another.

Eight buildings away, she picked up the pack she’d left there. It was heavy, even though it didn’t contain everything she had cached around the city. It was so easy to take things when a base was being hastily withdrawn. Everyone was preoccupied, everyone assumed anything not readily visible was already packed, inventories were neglected and the deebies not cross-checked. No time. Historically, war had always provided great opportunities for profiteers.

Was that what she was? Yes, but not a profit measured in money. Measure it, rather, in lives saved, or restored to dignity, or enhanced. “Why did you first enter the Corps?” Because I’m a medician, Lolimel. Not an anthropologist.

They would notice, of course, that Mia herself wasn’t aboard the last shuttle. But Kenin, at least, would realize that searching for her would be a waste of valuable resources when Mia didn’t want to be found. And Mia was so old. Surely the old should be allowed to make their own decisions.

Although she would miss them, these Corps members who had been her family since the last assignment shuffle, eighteen months ago and decades ago, depending on whose time you counted by. Especially she would miss Lolimel. But this was the right way to end her life, in service to these colonists’ health. She was a medician.

It went better than Mia could have hoped. When the ship had gone—she’d seen it leave orbit, a fleeting

stream of light—Mia went to Esefeb.

“Mia etej efef,” Esefeb said with her rosy smile. Mia come home. Mia walked toward her, hugged the girl, and slapped the tranq patch on her neck.

For the next week, Mia barely slept. After the makeshift surgery, she tended Esefeb through the seizures, vomiting, diarrhea, pain. On the morning the girl woke up, herself again, Mia was there to bathe the feeble body, feed it, nurse Esefeb. She recovered very fast; the cure was violent on the body but not as debilitating as everyone had feared. And afterward Esefeb was quieter, meeker, and surprisingly intelligent as Mia taught her the rudiments of water purification, sanitation, safe food storage, health care. By the time Mia moved on to Esefeb’s mother’s house, Esefeb was free of most parasites, and Mia was working on the rest. Esefeb never mentioned her former hallucinations. It was possible she didn’t remember them.

“Esefeb ekebet,” Mia said as she hefted her pack to leave. Esefeb be well.

Esefeb nodded. She stood quietly as Mia trudged away, and when Mia turned to wave at her, Esefeb waved back.

Mia shifted the pack on her shoulders. It seemed heavier than before. Or maybe Mia was just older. Two weeks older, merely, but two weeks could make a big difference. An enormous difference.

Two weeks could start to save a civilization.

Night fell. Esefeb sat on the stairs to her bed, clutching the blue-green sheet of plastic in both hands. She sobbed and shivered, her clean face contorted. Around her, the unpopulated shadows grew thicker and darker. Eventually, she wailed aloud to the empty night.

“Ej-es! O, Ej-es! Ej-es, Esefeb eket! Ej-es...etej efef! O, etej efef!”