

The Artist Makes a Splash

Jerry Oltion

They wanted to destroy his finest work. That wasn't the way the Terragen Council presented it when they came to Talan with their proposal, but that's what they wanted. He would create the best sculpture he could possibly build—for what artist could do less with each new project?—and then at the dedication ceremony for the new atmosphere, they would smash it to flinders for the crowd's amusement.

Ephemeral art was all the rage back on Earth. Perhaps it came from living in an open environment. Everything came from the soil and everything eventually returned to it; what matter, then, if you returned something a bit early? In humanity's far-flung colonies, however, where people lived sealed in domes and held a hostile universe at bay mostly through sweat and engineering, anything that might still have a use was carefully hoarded, repaired, and returned to service.

Of course the dedication of the atmosphere could change all that. For the first time in human history, a terraformed planet was about to be declared habitable on the surface. It required a generous interpretation of the term “habitable,” to be sure, but for the last few months a person could step outside on Nivala without an environment suit and live to tell the tale. Only at the poles, where Altair's intense ultraviolet rays came in at a low enough angle to keep from crisping an unprotected body, but there was still vastly more acreage available outside than in the domes. The icy ground—frozen for millions, maybe billions, of years—had begun to thaw. In a few more years, farmers could plant crops in the open, and people could sleep with the sound of rustling leaves coming in through their windows.

And maybe they could relax the intense code of recycling that they had lived under for so long. Lengthen the chain of processing steps between wastewater and drinking water. Bury bodies instead of rendering them down for their protein.

Talan considered his commission. An artwork that existed only to be destroyed. It did open new possibilities.

I want to capture the very essence of ephemerality,” he told his sister as they walked to dinner that evening. They lived side by side in apartments only a few doors down from their parents, as did most young singles in the colony.

“Ephemerality? That's easy: clone up a vat of mayflies.” Her laughter echoed in the corridor.

“Do *we* have mayflies?” he asked. “Never mind; of course we must. The gene banks are supposed to contain everything. But nobody has seen a mayfly in what, six generations? People wouldn't know what they were. And besides, DNA isn't my medium.”

“Well, that kills my next suggestion.”

She grinned and looked at him with eyebrows raised until he said, “What?”

“A steak dinner. Force-grow a cow, butcher it, and let everybody eat it.”

“Yuck!”

“That's what we're going to be doing once we move outside. Why not give people a little taste of what's in store for them?”

“No pun intended.”

“What? Oh. No, actually, it wasn’t.” She laughed again, turning heads in the cafeteria as they entered. People smiled, and Talan felt a twinge of envy. Everyone liked Nendy. Him they tolerated because they liked his work—several pieces of which adorned the cafeteria walls—but she was popular for herself. She *was* the work of art, and all the more so for being unconscious of it.

They picked up trays and went through the line. Dinner was some kind of stringy pasta with white sauce. Lumps in the sauce might have been synthetic meat or just lumps from not being stirred well enough.

“Maybe steak isn’t such a bad idea,” he said.

“How about flowers?” asked Nendy. “Made out of glass or something,” she amended quickly when he opened his mouth to protest that they, too, were organic.

Now there was an idea. Hand out glass roses at the door, and let everyone smash their own individual blossom.

And cut their feet on the glass shards, and accidentally stab one another with the stems. “No,” he said, “broken glass and crowds didn’t mix.” Besides, anyone could make a glass flower. He wanted something uniquely *his*. Something appropriately grandiose, that people would talk about for years to come.

As they ate, he studied the colonists around him. They dressed in soft synthetic fabrics dyed in equally soft colors, wore lightweight slippers with flat non-skid soles, and spoke in soft voices so they wouldn’t disturb the people around them. Everything about them was adapted to life inside a sealed environment. Even Nendy, with her infectious laugh and sparkling eyes, was a dome dweller. She was in many ways the most perfectly adapted of anyone to life in a bubble. She didn’t merely tolerate it; she thrived on it. She loved the close quarters and the nonstop personal contact, loved the sense of community and camaraderie in pursuit of humanity’s common goal.

“How does it feel,” he suddenly asked, “to know that the lifestyle you grew up with is about to end?”

She paused with a forkful of noodles halfway to her mouth. “Is it?”

“How many people do you suppose will stay in the domes when there’s an entire planet to spread out onto? Even if half of them stay, this place will feel deserted.”

“For a while.” She chewed and swallowed, then said, “We’ll drop the birth control laws. In a few years, the population will go right back up.”

“You want to live in a nursery?”

She smiled. “Babies are fun.”

He wasn’t so sure of that. He’d held one once, and it was heavy, squirmy, and wet. And noisy. If people started having more babies, he might wind up homesteading some acreage himself.

Funny to think that birth could spell the end of something else, but he supposed any change practically by definition killed the status quo. Sound killed silence, light killed darkness, food killed hunger. When you thought of it that way, everything was ephemeral. He could sculpt practically anything, and it would be appropriate.

After dinner he bundled up in his survival suit and went outside. He left the helmet unsealed, and his first

few breaths felt like he was pouring liquid nitrogen into his lungs, but the pain slowly subsided as he grew used to the thinner, colder air. It took longer to get over the smell: the dusty, chalky smell of bare dirt and an antiseptic, metallic bite that he eventually realized was ozone.

Injection towers rose like tree trunks from the polar plateau, spewing a sooty mix of ultraviolet-blocking gasses along with oxygen from dissociated permafrost. They wouldn't stop for decades to come, but they were past the critical point. Humanity had a second planet it could live on unprotected; he stood there as living, breathing proof of that.

A lifepod drifted past, its spiky antennae listening for an S.O.S. that might never come again. Like the injection towers, the lifepods had been genetically engineered to self-propagate until they covered the planet, blanketing the entire world with safe havens for the explorers and engineers who monitored the progress of the terraforming project. They would need a new mission now. Perhaps they could serve as taxis between villages, or trucks for hauling crops in from the fields.

Altair was in the southeast, a fierce blue-white disk that burned a whole quadrant of sky to white around it. There were no seasons on Nivala; Altair circled the horizon at the same height year 'round. Here at the pole, days weren't measured by cycles of light and dark, but by direction of the compass. Today was East. In a few more hours it would be South.

The ash-gray ground was peppered with craters, some as small as his footprints, others stretching over the horizon. Rain had already filled some of them, and tiny rivulets were busy eroding the walls of the rest. Farmers would have to shore up the ones they wanted to keep as reservoirs, or they would lose them to their new atmosphere.

Talan trudged across the plain to a full one and stood at its edge, looking at the stars reflected in its still surface. The starry sky was ephemeral, too, or so the scientists said. A thick enough atmosphere scattered so much light that even the brightest stars would only be visible during eclipse. Already they were dimmer than when Talan was a boy.

He turned to look at Satipur, low on the horizon to his left. The gas giant was three-quarters full and bright as an open flame, too large to cover with his outstretched hand. Its rings stretched across a quarter of the sky, a sharp line etched across the roiling cloudscape and the dark violet starscape beyond. Eclipse came every four days and seven minutes, regular as clockwork. The colonists wouldn't lose the stars completely, even when their air was thick as Earth's.

Talan picked up an eroded rock the size of his fist and tossed it into the flooded crater, watching the planet's reflection shimmer as ripples slowly spread outward from the splash.

Change. Motion. Fluidity. What could he sculpt that would illustrate it all?

He threw another rock and watched it splash.

"You want to design the meeting hall itself?" asked the president of the Terragen Council. He leaned forward over his desk, his eyebrows narrowed and his mouth curved into a deep frown. "We asked for something we could symbolically sacrifice. You can't destroy an entire building."

"Why not?" Talan asked, leaning forward just as aggressively.

"Because we'll be holding our dedication ceremony in it," the president reminded him.

"Yes, we will. And afterward, we'll all troop outside and watch it collapse."

“Outside.”

“Right. Involving each one of us dynamically in what we’re celebrating.”

The president’s scowl intensified. “I hardly think the celebrants will appreciate gasping like fish in the cold. The atmosphere is breathable, but nobody said it was comfortable yet.”

“I was outside for two hours yesterday,” Talan said. “It’s surprising how quickly you get used to it.”

“People will be wearing formal clothing.”

“I’ll supply overcoats.”

“And transportation home? The city’s air cars can’t handle everyone at once.”

“There are thousands of lifepods drifting around out there with nothing to do. Hardly anyone has ever ridden in one. It’ll be a great opportunity to find out what it’s like.”

The president’s chair squeaked as he leaned back and steepled his fingers on the bridge of his nose. “Hmm,” he said. “Hmm. Outside.”

“Outside. That’s what it’s all about.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?”

Talan poured everything he had into it. He had built interactive sculpture before, but never anything big enough to house an entire crowd. He wanted his monument to look like a droplet caught in the act of rebounding from its impact with a pool of water, but even if he exaggerated the bulbous tip of the rising droplet, the structure would be taller than it was wide. And from inside, where everyone would be gathered until the last moment, it would just look like another habitat.

He considered using antigravity to make the interior one big weightless chamber, but people wouldn’t like drinking out of zeegee flasks and talking to one another’s feet. He would have to divide the space into floors, but he could make each level grander than the last, until the top of the droplet became a huge dome, symbolic of the sealed city they were leaving behind.

Actually, he could have it all. In his stop-motion studies, he had seen how the top of a droplet often separated into several spheres; he could make the topmost one perfectly spherical and put the antigravity generators there. Anyone who liked to party in zero gee could rise up through a smaller spherical elevator to the top.

And down at the bottom, the rays of ejecta radiating outward from the impact could serve as both docking ports and observation decks. They could have clear domes so people could look up at the frozen droplet overhead as well as at Satipur and its roiling cloudscape.

Every step of the project brought complications. The structure had to splash when he triggered its fall, not just topple or explode, yet it had to be strong enough to support thousands of people while they were inside. It needed sufficient elevators and glideways to move everyone where they wanted to go without delay, yet everything needed to squeeze through the narrow neck. There had to be space for kitchens and serveries, storerooms, restrooms, cloakrooms, assignation rooms—he sometimes felt that he was designing an entire city. Yet each day he awoke invigorated, and each time he overcame a setback, he savored the rush of creation anew. It felt as if he were pouring all his anxiety and frustrations into the project, and the closer it came to reality the more he looked forward to watching it destroyed. It would

symbolize more than just the emergence of humanity onto the surface; it would symbolize his personal rebirth.

Nendy joined him outside one evening after construction began, finding him at the crater rim where he watched fabribots scurry up and down the central stalk with their modular building blocks. He heard her footsteps crunching through the crusty ground as she came up behind him.

“Gah!” she said theatrically when she drew close enough to be heard. “Nobody told me it was going to stink out here.”

He turned and smiled at her. “That stink is what keeps us from getting sunburn.”

“I thought ozone was supposed to accumulate in the upper atmosphere.”

“It will, once *we have* an upper atmosphere. Right now it’s still too thin to separate into layers.”

“And you’re going to make everyone breathe it the night of the ceremony.”

“I am.”

“You’re nuts.” She stepped up beside him and looked out at the tower under construction. “You build a pretty sculpture, though.”

“It’s looking good, isn’t it?” He couldn’t stop smiling. All his frustration, all his fear, all the tension in his life had gone into the droplet. If he felt so free now, he could only imagine how good it would feel to watch it collapse.

“You going to have it done in time?” Nendy asked. “The ceremony is only two weeks away.”

He felt a brief moment of anxiety at the thought that something could yet go wrong, but he banished it to the tower with a casual wave of his hand. “The hard part’s over. It’s ahead of schedule.”

Just then a fabribot fumbled its payload, a silvery rectangle which bounced off the ’bot just below it and spun end over end as it fell to the dry crater floor and stuck there, quivering.

“Half a percent entropic loss,” Talan said calmly. “It’s in the budget.”

The day of the big celebration saw the tower gleaming in the low-angled light of Altair, its antigravity sphere hovering like a captured moon overhead. The crater had been refilled, and the silvered walls of the droplet reflected its shimmering blue surface in all directions. Windows glowed brightly along the tower’s length as interior decorators made last-minute preparations and waitstaff stocked the kitchens and bars.

The whole domed city was abuzz with speculation; Talan had carefully spread rumor of what he intended, but had refused to confirm it. He had to spend the night with his sister to avoid the media, and he slipped into the tower disguised as a food delivery driver.

The last few hours before the guests arrived seemed to drag on forever. What if nobody came? What if *everybody* came? What if the tower collapsed prematurely? What if the food ran out? What if the *alcohol* ran out? He paced the grand ballroom, mentally banishing demon after demon into the fabric of his creation, but more rose up to replace them.

From inside, the walls had a checkerboard look. He had settled on blocks for his building material,

ferro-ceramic blocks just a few handspans across, magnetically bonded with superconducting coils embedded within. They would grip one another like glue until he switched them off, whereupon they would all become free-falling particles, as independent as individual raindrops. His creation would splash when it fell, and it would be a most impressive splash indeed.

Using superconductors solved the safety issue, too. With no resistance in the coils, the magnetic fields that held everything together would persist indefinitely. Only when he reversed the polarity and actively killed the fields would the blocks release one another. The command was coded and keyed to video monitors in every floor; nothing would happen until he made it happen, and fail-safes would prevent even his own control code from working if anyone remained inside.

The plain surrounding the tower was dotted with lifepods. He had broadcast intermittent distress calls until hundreds of them congregated, sniffing about for the source of the signal. Ushers would use handheld beacons to call them in when people were ready to go home.

Talan walked to one of the immense windows that ringed the ballroom and looked down. The docking ports were busy with arrivals and departures, and as he watched, a flurry of media vans glided out from the city, leading a long procession of passenger vehicles behind it.

The reporters erupted into the ballroom from the elevator, sweeping their forehead cams left and right while they spoke in a babble of descriptive adjectives for the stay-at-home audience. They descended on Talan like newlyweds on fresh cubic, and this time he welcomed them warmly into his latest creation. He gave them a quick tour, soaking in the moment of notoriety and answering their constant barrage of questions-except for the most persistent one. He neither confirmed nor denied the rumor that this would all be destroyed at party's end, but he did show them the cloakroom filled with heavy parkas.

He broke away when the president and his wife arrived, greeting them warmly and mugging for the cameras. The president took a look around, hands on hips, then slowly smiled. It clearly wasn't an expression his face was used to wearing, but it made him look ten years younger. "Well, my boy, you've certainly outdone yourself this time," he said.

"Thank you," Talan replied. "Wait until you see it in action."

"Hmm. Yes." The president's smile lost a few watts of charm. "Yes indeed. But we've got a lot of celebrating to do between now and then, eh? Excuse me." The elevator door opened again and the president turned to greet the new arrivals: his fellow councilors and several of the city's upper crust.

It was the president's party now. Talan slipped into the role of captive celebrity, mingling with the revelers and accepting their praise with as much humility as he could muster.

Humility became harder and harder to hang onto as the party wore on. Shuttles kept bringing guests until they numbered in the thousands, and the sheer volume of compliments threatened to swell his head. He kept reminding himself that fame, like the object of everyone's admiration, was ephemeral, but he couldn't shake the conviction that this was a pivotal moment in his career. A pivotal moment in his life.

He sought out Nendy, herself the center of a swarm of admirers, and the two of them retreated to one of the observation pods. With the party in full swing overhead, it wasn't hard to find an empty one, although two lovers were groping one another in the next pod over. Talan blushed and looked away, but Nendy watched with unabashed interest.

"Quite the little microcosm of life you've created here," she said softly.

"Isn't it?" he said. He flopped down on an oversized hassock, happy to get the weight off his feet for a

moment. "I can't wait to destroy it."

"Really? After all this acclaim?"

"Especially so." He took a deep breath. "I'm vibrating like a violin string that's tuned too tight. Every little compliment stretches it another notch. If I don't loosen the tension soon, I'm going to snap."

"The price of fame," she said.

"I just want to see it through. I've got this horrible feeling that something's going to go wrong at the last moment. Expose me as a fraud in front of everybody."

"Nothing will go wrong."

"Famous last words."

He watched his sister watching the lovers next door. Now her cheeks were growing red and her nostrils were flaring. Talan felt a brief moment of lust, instinctively shoved it away with all his other unwanted mental baggage, and said, "If you go back to the party in that state, there's going to be a riot."

She grinned, then turned around and leaned back against the glass. "Spoilsport."

"I didn't say that would be a bad thing."

"I don't want to steal your spotlight."

"Please do. I just want to go home and get a good night's sleep."

"You can do that after the party. The catharsis will be worth it."

He stared at her, seeing her as if for the first time. "You understand."

She shrugged. "I'm not as shallow as I look."

"That's not what I-"

"I know. Nobody expects happy people to need primal scream moments, but we do. We need 'em just as much as you tormented types." She pressed a hand against the glass bubble at her back. "I want to watch this tumble down just as much as you do."

"Good."

His wristcom wiggled for attention, and when he held it up, the screen displayed a single word: "Speeches."

"Ah, bugger," he said. "It's time to listen to the prez blather on about manifest destiny."

"Patience, brother," Nendy said. "Let him have his moment. Yours will be the one everyone remembers."

Talan carried that statement with him like a torch in the dark, letting it buoy him through the interminable introductions and acknowledgements and lame jokes as speaker after speaker stepped up to the podium at the center of the grand ballroom and thanked everyone who had played a role in the atmosphere project. At last the president took the stage, but Talan was only listening with half an ear by then. His hand kept stealing to his breast pocket, where the remote control for the destruct sequence awaited his

command. He could practically feel the rumble of falling blocks already.

A burst of applause brought him back to the present, and he realized that everyone was applauding *him*. He nodded and smiled and made a little self-deprecating shrug, but his smile melted like ice under flame at the president's next words.

"His original intention was to destroy it at the end of today's festivities, as a symbol of the transition from our old way of life to the new." A murmur rippled through the audience, punctuated with gasps from those who hadn't heard the rumors. "But," the president said, the word echoing like a gunshot, "I think we can all agree that we can't let such a beautiful work of art go to waste just for our momentary amusement."

There was a hearty cheer, but Talan barely heard it over his own shout. "*What?* What do you mean, you can't let it go to waste? It's *designed* to go to waste. That's the whole point of it. How can you not-that's what you-look at the *shape* of it! It has to fall!"

Faces turned to look at the gibbering man at the fringe of the crowd, but he didn't stay at the fringe for long. He shoved his way through to the podium while the president said, "Come now, Talan, surely you can't expect us to go along with the desecration of such a work of art. An ice sculpture or a crystal chandelier, certainly, but this needs to be preserved for posterity."

"It needs to come down!" Talan yelled. He mounted the stage and stuck his head next to the president's to make sure he was inside the microphone field. "It needs to come down," he said again. "You can't let sheer immensity, or even beauty, stop you from finishing what you've started. If we were that kind of people, we would never have terraformed Nivala in the first place."

The president tried to force a smile, but it looked like a death grimace to Talan. "I know that was the original intent," he said, "but none of us imagined you would come up with something quite this . . . this astonishing. You should take it as a compliment that nobody wants to see it destroyed."

"I want to see it destroyed. Nendy wants to see it destroyed." Talan looked out at the audience. "I bet most of you here tonight would love to see it destroyed, once you have a chance to get used to the idea." The president tried to speak, but Talan cut him off. "I had trouble accepting it myself, at first, but the idea grows on you pretty fast once you start thinking about it. It's a grand thing we've done here, turning an airless moon into a home for humanity. It requires a grand gesture to commemorate it. Not some cheesy ice sculpture; it *should* be something big. Big and beautiful and ephemeral, like—" He looked over at the president, now nearly purple with pent-up frustration, and the words tumbled out before he could stop them: "—Like the promise of a politician."

The audience laughed, and surprisingly, the president laughed, but then he shook his head and said, "I deserved that. I commissioned a sculpture to be sacrificed at the dedication ceremony, and I agreed when Talan asked if he could hold the ceremony inside the sculpture, but even with the considerable talent he has displayed in the past, I had no idea how beautiful it would be."

"Beauty doesn't enter into it," Talan said. "Except that beauty is ephemeral, too."

"Tell you what," the president said. "Let's let the people decide. Who wants to see it destroyed?"

The crowd murmured, and a few voices called out, "Yeah!" and "I do!" but the president had hit them too quickly for any groundswell of agreement to build. Not even Nendy, standing near an hors d'oeuvre table and shouting, "Do it, do it, do it!" could stir up a coordinated response.

"Tell you what," Talan said, trying the president's tactic. "Let's stick with the original program. There are

coats enough for everyone in the cloakroom, and there's a walkway from the docking level to the crater rim. Let's all convene outside and watch the show."

For just a moment, it looked like they might obey. A few people turned away from the stage, but the vast majority of them stood rooted to the spot, and then someone shouted, "No!" Another voice echoed it, and another and another until it became a chant.

"No" sounded quite a lot like "Boo" to a person onstage. Talan tried to start a counter-chant of "Yes, yes, yes," but even his amplified voice couldn't penetrate the outcry.

The president leaned in close and shouted in his ear, "You've lost the vote, my boy, but think what it means! They love you. When this all winds down, you can name your price for your next commission."

"Money isn't the point, either," Talan yelled back, but he might as well have been shouting at Satipur. He looked out at the crowd, thousands of faces with their mouths open, all yelling, "No!" Then he turned away and walked off the stage.

The crowd parted for him as he walked to the hors d'oeuvre table where Nendy waited, champagne bottle in hand. "Here," she said, handing him the whole bottle.

They proceeded to get smashed while the party started up again around them. People avoided them after Talan nearly bit the heads off the first few who came to offer their insincere condolences. He took perverse delight in scaring them away from the food and drink, even though there were dozens of other tables spaced all the way around the perimeter of the hall. He commanded this one, at least, and by the time he and Nendy finished their second bottle of champagne, he was sitting on the table and throwing chocolates at the dancers.

"This was supposed to be cathartic," he told her. "I im . . . imbued all of my frustrations and all of my anger into this damned thing, and they were supposed to disappear with it when I pushed the button."

She laughed. "There's an infinite supply of frustration. You'll never get rid of it all."

"You're probably right." He tilted the champagne bottle to his mouth, but got only a few drops. He cocked it back to send it after the chocolates, but Nendy held his arm.

"Not a good idea," she said. "Broken glass and crowds don't mix."

"Right." He lowered the bottle, but didn't set it down. "Right," he said again. " 'Snot their fault they're cheap."

"Cheap?"

"*Sheep!*" A few people glanced over at him, then quickly looked away.

He hefted the bottle—a heavy, pleasant weight in his hand—then looked out the window at the icy plain below, dotted with lifepods and air injection towers. "Sheep," he said again, and before he had time to think of the many reasons why it was a bad idea, he heaved the bottle through the glass.

He had designed it to shatter. The bottle made a satisfying crash on the way through, and left a hole the size of his head. Air began to whistle out through the hole, and people screamed as only people who are used to living in sealed domes can scream when a sudden wind begins to blow.

Talan stood up and grabbed the end of the table. "Give me a hand here!" he said to Nendy.

It was nearly too big for them, but they tipped it until all the food slid to the floor, and then they were able to heft it up to waist level and swing it *one*, *two*, and *three* right through the window.

Air howled out around them now, whipping their clothes and their hair, and Talan nearly stumbled out the hole before he caught himself and stepped sideways out of the worst of the gale.

People ran for the elevator and the glideways, but Talan and Nendy walked calmly to the next table and heaved it through another window. The last of the building's air whooshed out, and the familiar smell of ozone and dirt wafted in. Talan panted as the air pressure dropped and he endured the moment of burning lungs until he was able to stand up and laugh at the fleeing party guests.

"Broken glass and crowds don't mix!" he told Nendy happily as he led the way to another table.

The antigravity bubble from overhead slid down past the windows, emergency protocols overriding its original program and piloting its occupants to safety. Almost everyone was gone from the ballroom by now, but a few people had gathered in a huddle near the stage. They began to advance on Talan and Nendy, but Talan pulled the remote control from his pocket and shouted, "Time to leave! Self-destruct in five minutes."

"You can't drop it with people still inside," Nendy whispered frantically.

"No, but they don't know that," Talan whispered back, and sure enough, when he held the remote overhead with his finger on the button, the group of would-be heroes broke apart and fled down the glideway, leaving them alone in the ballroom.

The plain beyond the windows was alive with lifepods swarming for the bubble city. "I think it's time we joined everyone outside," Talan said. He picked up another bottle of champagne on the way out, stopped briefly in the cloakroom to get coats for himself and Nendy, then led her out past the base of the docking pods and across the wide catwalk to the crater rim.

"Think anyone's still inside?" he asked, turning around once they had put another few dozen steps between them and his creation.

"I don't know." She shivered and pulled her coat tight around her body. "What if there is? You can't risk someone's life just to make a point."

"You're right. That's why there are heat and motion sensors all through the structure." He pushed the button. "Nothing will happen if there's anybody left."

The gigantic droplet quivered, then slid downward like a spoonful of sugar poured into a cup of water. The ring of observation pods at its base stretched outward for a second, then fell to the surface, just reaching the edge of the crater as the surge of water displaced by the tower crashed against the rim and shot upward in a circular fountain. The rumble of blocks and water shook the ground, and wet spray pelted down out of the sky.

Water sloshed back and forth a few times, smoothing out the pile of rubble in the center of the crater. The waves subsided, giving way to ripples that chased each other around the crater, but in a surprisingly short time even those faded away and the surface of the water returned to glassy smoothness.

"Feel better now?" Nendy asked.

"Yeah," Talan replied. He pitched the remote control into the crater and watched the splash spread out in one last wave. "Yeah. But now I really hope people can live out here, because I don't think I'm going to be welcome inside the domes anymore."

Nendy laughed. “Well, you’ve already proven you can build a habitat.”

He scuffed a foot on the ground. “That was for show. There are more efficient designs for living.”

“Like what?”

He looked out across the flat gray plain at the injection towers rising into the sky. Tall, slender, graceful . . . and free. All they needed were a few tweaks to their genetic code, and they would be perfect. It would mean learning how to handle DNA, but he supposed it wouldn’t kill him to work in a new medium. He smiled at Nendy and said, “Ever heard of a treehouse?”