

Jumpers

by Mary Rosenblum

One moment he was sitting on the edge of the Novo-Brazilia Plantation in a crappy government-built hut, his equipment stacked as crookedly as a child's blocks before him. The next instant, faceless camo-clad figures were bursting through the doors and windows of the hut, rifles in their hands. He had spent sweaty hours stapling that damn screening over every opening to keep the swarming jungle bugs out. Joaquin felt a single flash of annoyance as the mesh ripped loose, and then a rifle butt hit him in the temple, exploding annoyance and vision into meaningless shards of light.

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Night. Joaquin stared at the sky. Between the stars—darkness. "That's what matters," he was telling someone. "Not the stars. We know what the stars are, how old they are, how long they'll live. No, it is what lies *between* them that is the mystery." Shapes of blackness even more profound than the space between the stars fell like a slow rain down onto a canopy of green jungle.

Jumpers.

"Look," he cried. "Look, I was right, Czenko was right. They're real!" But no one was listening or there to see, and the falling, floating jumpers vanished.

Joaquin struggled to open his eyes. Dream, he thought hazily and winced as color assaulted his aching head. Where? He struggled to bring that light and color into focus. Not the hut. He was lying on a mat that felt like frayed string beneath his fingertips. Green and brown resolved into leaves above his face and thick hanks of dark red stems strung with dozens of orange and yellow fruits. Rainforest canopy, he thought fuzzily. But the Plantation hadn't allowed him access, so he couldn't be in there.

Memory rushed in—camo-clad intruders, ripping screens, the rifle butt.

He tried to sit up, winced and groaned as pain lanced through his brain. Green twilight surrounded him, thick with humidity, warm as spit. The strings of fruit brushed his face, filling his nostrils with the thick scent of overripe figs. Moss padded the huge limbs all around him, studded with drooping emerald fronds of miniature ferns.

Limbs.

Joaquin looked down ... *down* ... sudden, clammy sweat plastering his shirt to his brown skin, nausea twisting in his belly. The huge trunk dwindled into shadow below him. Clutching the flimsy platform he lay on, he lifted his eyes quickly as the branch seemed to tilt beneath him. More limbs radiated from the sleek gray trunk of the enormous tree, thick enough to walk on, to sleep on. Between two adjacent branches a platform had been built from branches, roofed with thick, leathery leaves. Familiar plastic boxes were stacked haphazardly beneath that flimsy protection. His equipment. Irreplaceable, some of it. He

scrambled to his feet, swaying over the shadowy abyss below.

"No." That single syllable, high-pitched and resonant, startled Joaquin so that he nearly lost his balance and fell after all.

It had been spoken in the mongrel Spanish/Portuguese/Native language that he had acquired through suppression and hypno-implantation. He looked up, wincing in pain, searching the leaf shadows for the speaker. Child? he thought. Up here?

She clung to the trunk a meter above him, head downward, hands and feet splayed on the smooth bark, wearing nothing but shorts. Joaquin found himself staring at her small breasts with their dark aureoles and blushed. Her skin was as dark as his, but she lacked his broad face—a genetic echo of his distant Mayan ancestors. Her face was elfin and pointed and she was smaller than an eight-year-old. Then he saw her hands and feet. Her fingers were longer than his, with thick spatulate pads and long, shiny nails. Her toes were as long as her fingers, and she clung to the slippery bark of the tree with those clawed fingers and toes, her dark eyes reflecting glints of green light.

Oh, God.

"I'm Zlia." She pushed lightly off the trunk to drop to the limb inches in front of him.

Joaquin recoiled, repulsed by her skinny child's body and her weird digits. A genen. Like the huge productive trees that had replaced the original wild rainforest. But it was illegal to alter the human phenotype. Death penalty illegal. "Hello, Zlia." His implanted numb brain supplied the right words. "How ... did I get here?"

"I used a cargo sling and a hover." The man's voice came from behind Joaquin, tinted with amusement. "It's designed to lift harvest tanks after the trees are tapped. In fact, I stole it from a harvest crew. I brought your stuff, too. Your buddies with the guns seemed to think it was valuable."

Joaquin blinked as he realized that the speaker was right behind him on the limb, as if he had teleported there. A head shorter than Joaquin, he was fairer, a euro mix, with curly auburn hair and muscles like a competition bodybuilder. "I hope for your sake it was worth the fucking effort," the man said and grinned. "Zlia? You get today's quota of frogs yet?"

She winked, bared small teeth in a feral grin, and skittered up the trunk of the tree, her movements quick and inhuman.

"You've met Zlia." The man noticed his reaction, and his grin mocked Joaquin, ugly with bad teeth. "Ah, we're such hypocrites! It's okay to change any of God's creatures to suit ... as long as we don't alter that human face and form. Although it's perfectly fine to fix us if we're broken inside ... long as we don't look different outside. I think Zlia likes your shirt."

Joaquin stared down at the bright T-shirt he'd bought at the shuttle terminal. Brilliant frogs climbed across the front—neon blue and black, screaming orange, and lime green. Retro, and out-of-style retro at that. He had ducked into a souvenir shop because he thought one of Father's watch dogs was following him. The shop had had an actual living clerk, and he had been too embarrassed to leave without purchasing something.

"Arrow poison frogs." The man nodded at the pictures, winked. "She probably figures that you're a long-lost cousin. You look a little like her."

"She just startled me, that's all." Joaquin flushed. "Who were the men who attacked me?" They wanted

money. Another kidnap, another payoff by his father. He wondered how soon this man would get around to money. "And who are you, and how did you manage to take me and my stuff away from them?"

"The frogs told them to take a nap." The man's grin had grown thoughtful. "I don't know what they were after. I recognized two of them. They work for Plantation security. Did you piss off the Plantation cartel?"

"They wouldn't give me a visitor's permit."

"I don't think they piss off that easily." The man raised one eyebrow. "Well, maybe you know and maybe you don't. I am Silvano. I live here."

"Joaquin Perrera." He gave his real name to see if Silvano recognized it. He didn't. "This is Plantation forest, isn't it? It's illegal to live here."

"No kidding. Buy they only care about the sap. They don't look up."

Fungus grew from the gray bark of the trunk, shaped like fleshy, trumpet-shaped blossoms. "Could I check my stuff?" Joaquin asked cautiously. "It's pretty specialized. Not worth much to anyone but me."

"Your friends thought it was worth something." Silvano smiled lazily.

"They were wrong." Joaquin stood up, no longer giving a damn about the drop. "Nobody gives a shit about what I'm doing, so the equipment isn't worth a *nuevo real*, except as scrap."

"Everyone is worth something. So, what is your research?" Silvano's tone was lazy, but his eyes had gone narrow and hard.

"I am looking for jumpers." Joaquin watched a small red and black wasp creep down the fungus-flower's throat. "Do you know what dark matter is?" He sensed Silvano's silent head-shake. "It's stuff we can't measure but we know is out there between the stars—too much of it. Nobody knows why, and nobody but a handful of theoretical physicists gives a damn."

"Neither do I." Silvano shrugged.

In the fungus-flower's throat, the wasp seemed to be struggling. "There was this crazy physicist back in the last century who worked with dark matter. He postulated that there are multiple universes, all expanding together, like Chinese boxes nested inside one another. He theorized that all that dark matter that shouldn't be there is from another universe beyond ours, and is falling through our own universe. Kicked out by jumpers," he said softly, the words echoing in his pounding head. "Perhaps people are ... escaping from their universe. Leaving it. Jumping. And we catch a glimpse of them as they fall through our universe, but since they're not part of our universe, we see them as dark matter." The wasp had escaped. It poised on the thick orange lip of the fungoid throat, shaking its wings in a dazed fashion.

"You want to find something that isn't there—because *maybe* that means there are people jumping out of other worlds?" Silvano's dark eyes were unreadable in the dim light. "Boy, you are indeed insane. I hope someone loves you enough to pay for you."

"I am not a boy," Joaquin said softly. "Doesn't it mean anything to you? That there might be other universes besides ours? That the beings there can ... escape?"

"There is no real escape." Silvano stuck out a finger to the wasp, and it climbed onto his hand. "The fungus there has infected the wasp with its spores. It will die, and its corpse will nourish the spores as they begin to grow. But it will not die before it has laid its eggs on the back of a green caterpillar. The

larvae will burrow into the caterpillar and eat it hollow. So you see?" His eyes bored into Joaquin's. "There is no real escape. Who loves you, kid?"

Joaquin watched the wasp stretch its transparent wings and shuddered. "My father loves his son. He'll pay for his son, if you demand ransom from him." He lifted his eyes to meet Silvano's dark stare. "Understand that he will punish you for doing that ... asking him."

"I'll take my chances," Silvano drawled.

"What do you want the money for?" He looked around at the crude platforms. "You want to go buy stuff? Live in a gated condo on a nice clean beach?"

"I would like your father's private access," Silvano said gently. "There is only one way to jump out of my universe, no matter what your dark friends may do."

Joaquin looked down toward the invisible, shadowed ground. "Two weeks," he said. "I want two weeks to record my jumpers. I'll pay you. Not as much as my father, but — you can take the money and be safe." He looked up, met Silvano's dark stare. "I just want two weeks. I just want to prove that other beings are passing through our universe. This is going to be my only chance."

"Why?"

"Because my father will make sure I never touch this equipment again, and nobody really believes Czenko's theory these days."

Silvano laughed, throwing his head back so that his ugly, crooked teeth flashed in the light that filtered through the leaves. "You really are nuts," he said. "I like that. You give me your father's access now, and I'll give you your two weeks. After that, I present your daddy with a fat bill."

"You'd be better off to take what I can give you." Joaquin shrugged at Silvano's head-shake. "My father will pay you whatever you want. Punishment rarely has anything to do with money." Joaquin recited his father's private access. It sometimes bothered him that he remembered it so easily when he normally couldn't remember an access for shit. There was a truth there that he didn't want to examine too closely. He closed his eyes, his vision webbed with blood red lightnings that danced in time to the throbbing in his head

Silvano grasped Joaquin's chin with surprisingly gentle fingers. He peered into Joaquin's eyes one after the other, then nodded, apparently satisfied. "I thought they had cracked your skull for a while."

"It hurts." Joaquin touched blood-matted hair and winced.

"Zlia will fix it. She'll feed you, too." Silvano pulled out a tiny remote-control unit.

"What about my equipment?" Joaquin scrambled to his feet as a miniature hover suddenly rose from the shadows. It had room for a single person, and cargo clasps beneath it.

"Go ahead and set it up." Silvano leaped lightly into the seat of the open cockpit, unperturbed as the machine shied skittishly. "Ask Zlia." The hover darted up and into the canopy, scattering leaves and torn blossoms as it punched through and up into the sky.

"You promised me two weeks," Joaquin yelled after him.

"He does what he says, Silvano." Zlia's voice right behind him nearly sent Joaquin headfirst off the limb.

"Don't *do* that." He faced her, sweating.

"Your head hurts." She tilted her face up to meet his gaze. "Sit."

He sat because he was feeling dizzy and this was not a place to be dizzy, but he couldn't hide his flinch as she laid claw-tipped fingers across his forehead.

"I bother you." She pulled something from her thick, black hair. He thought at first that it was a crimson flower or some kind of ornament, but suddenly he realized it was a small brilliant frog with black legs and belly, shiny enough to be made of polished plastic.

It stared at him with black beady eyes, its ruby throat pulsing. "No." He pushed her hand away. "No thanks."

She grabbed his wrist with her free hand and dug her thumb into his flesh. Joaquin's arm went instantly numb to the elbow. Before he could react, she had placed the frog gently on his shoulder. He yelped as it leaped onto the side of his throat. The cold grip of its tiny feet filled him with clammy horror, and he swallowed, dry-mouthed.

The pain in his head stopped. Just like that.

Zlia smiled as if he had thanked her. "Endorphins," she said as she lifted the creature from his neck.

Endorphins? Joaquin watched the frog burrow into her hair again. His head felt fine. Great. Even the gash in his scalp had stopped hurting. "It soaked through my skin," he said. "Are they ..." His brain groped for words. "Are they natural?"

"Silvano buys the eggs," she said and shrugged. "I take care of them and they grow." Then she gathered herself and leaped for the platform.

White-knuckled, Joaquin waited for her to miss, to fall, because you couldn't just jump across. She landed lightly. In balance. Suddenly, her long limbs and skinny-child body made sense. She was created to move like this. Just as the frog had been created to exude an endorphinlike compound from its skin. Because nothing here was natural—not the trees, not the creatures. "Drugs," Joaquin said with disgusted comprehension. "That's what Silvano does here, isn't it? Black market naturals." The current fad. Lucrative. He glanced around at the stark platform and wondered what Silvano did with his money. "How do I get over there?"

Across the chasm, Zlia crouched, her face expressionless in the dim light. Silently she uncoiled a thin line from around her waist. With a practiced snap of her wrist she whipped the free end at an overhead branch. It wrapped around the limb and held. "Like this," she said, and stepped off the branch. The line was invisible in the twilight, so it seemed that she glided weightlessly through the air toward him. She landed lightly beside him and handed him the pliable handle on the end of the line. "Silvano calls it tarzanning. It is a joke." Her smile transformed her face the way a shaft of sun transformed a blossom from dull crimson to a blazing scarlet. Her face was ... beautiful.

Unable to take his eyes away from her smile, Joaquin grasped the handle. Fear was about to seize him, freeze him. It occurred to him in a blinding flash of revelation that never once had his flesh really been at risk, that even when the soldiers had burst into the hut, he had known that it was just another of his father's games, that he was safe. Joaquin clenched his teeth and leaped from the limb. The dizzy rush of motion made him gasp, intoxicated him with the rush of flying and risk. Then the far limb jolted his feet and he stumbled forward, seized by an instant of terror before his knees banged the platform. The mat of woven leaves gave beneath his weight, bouncing so that a box tumbled from the stack. The corner hit his

wrist, and he sat up slowly, rubbing it.

Zlia leapt after him and, with a single tug, freed the line. Joaquin shivered as the thin coils fell to the platform.

"It only comes loose at my touch. Not yours." She was laughing at him as she coiled it up. "It is made of smart-fiber, Silvano says. He gave it to me. He says he gives me things to hear me laugh." She finished wrapping it around her waist and tucked the end securely into place.

She's his lover, Joaquin realized. The images that accompanied that thought were vivid and very disturbing, and he banished them by looking around the canopied space. The little platform was obviously a temporary home for Zlia and Silvano. A rumpled sleeping bag—double-sized—a few dishes, a water jug, and a tiny solar-powered burner made up the furnishings. Joaquin began to assemble his detector. He didn't really expect to find everything intact, but to his surprise, nothing was seriously damaged. There was even juice left in the storage batteries. Silvano must have intervened before the pretend-kidnappers could break anything.

The frogs told them to take a nap. He almost smiled, getting it finally. "Can your frogs really make me sleep?" He glanced over his shoulder as he ran a test sequence on a Rothberg inverter.

Zlia searched in her hair, then offered a small black frog with neon green spots.

"Wow." He began to set the units out on the gently swaying platform, testing the floor carefully. "I never knew that they could do that. Frogs, I mean."

"They are all gifts. From Silvano." The sadness was back in her voice. "He sells their sweat. So that someday he can buy my eggs."

"What?" Hands full of brightly colored leads, he blinked at her. "What eggs?"

"I should feed you. Silvano said so." And she leaped from the branch, arrowing outward on a trajectory that left Joaquin doubting gravity. He shrugged and went back to assembling and testing his apparatus, trying not to think about her.

Everything worked, but some of the software involved was temperamental and needed persuading. It wasn't until he found himself squinting at the screen that he realized it was getting dark. His watch was missing, but the first patter of drops confirmed that this wasn't sunset. The afternoon rains! In the hut with its umbrella-generator it hadn't mattered. He scrambled to his feet, spreading his body ineffectively over the stacked instruments. The patter increased to a sudden roar above his head. Water began to drip onto the roof of leaves above him, and the woven branches that walled the platform shook as a gust of wind found its way down through the canopy.

The expected downpour didn't happen, although the drips came faster and faster, merging into trickling cascades in places. The roof—no generated field, just leaves, bark, and twigs—didn't leak. His panic subsiding slowly, Joaquin squatted beside his equipment, watching the rainforest channel the water neatly into leaves, crevices, whorls of petals. A clump of fat red blossoms bloomed at the edge of the platform. The curled waxy leaves had filled like tubular goblets. Crystal water ran over and trickled down onto the clumps of gray-green moss that grew at the base.

"The frogs will lay their eggs in the water in the leaves and hollow stems." Zlia appeared beside him. "Listen! Hear them singing? You can hear the new voices. Ten rains ago, there were too few to hear. They are growing." Her face was full of a clear, unadulterated joy—like a child's joy—uncomplicated by conditions or confusions. Rain beaded her dark hair like bits of diamond and she shook herself like a

dog, splattering Joaquin with the warm water. He yelped, and she laughed again. "Here." She handed him a pear-shaped green fruit. "These grow on a Plantation tree. They only want the sap. They don't care what grows up here, so the trees suit themselves."

Joaquin took a cautious bite. The skin was leathery, not crisp like the skin of the tree-grown apples that his father always kept in a bowl on his desk. It was soft, and so was the flesh of the fruit—which was sweet, with a not-unpleasant musky taste. He realized he was starving, wolfed the fruit in huge mouthfuls, so that sticky juice ran down his chin and dripped onto his chest.

Zlia laughed and handed him some of the small yellow fruits that he had seen when he waked. They were sweet enough to make him dizzy. The rain had stopped by the time he wiped his sticky hands on wet leaves and scrubbed his face with his damp shirt.

"Are you going to turn it on?" Zlia had wandered over to his equipment, was randomly touching screens, readouts, leads with her long, clawed fingers. "Are you going to look at the ghosts?"

"What ghosts?" He lifted her hands gently away from a touch screen. "You can mess things up, okay?" His brain had to search for words that would convey that warning.

"The ghosts from the other worlds." She put her hands behind her back like an admonished child. "The ones who fall through our world. I want to see them."

"They're not ghosts." He blinked down into her elfin, childlike face. "They're jumpers. Real people like us, only from a universe a few nanoseconds ahead of ours."

"They have left their lives behind. They are ghosts." She nodded. "Show me."

"I have to set up my net first." It had taken him two days to suspend the hair-fine fabric of the sensor in the dead land beyond the hut. Once, someone had maybe grown a garden there. Now, the Plantation sprayed the ground every year with herbicide so that undesirable wild crosses from the genened trees wouldn't take hold and go to seed. The dead, ocher soil had looked like a painted floor. "It's going to take some time," he said doubtfully, staring out at the interlaced branches and gray trunks of the canopy world. Everything gleamed with moisture, and wisps of vapor floated among the leaves. "If I string it between branches, will animals tear it down? You know—monkeys or birds or something?"

"There are none here." Zlia's eyes gleamed with green light in the filtered sunset. "There is nothing here that is not important to the trees or the Plantation. The Plantation has no need of monkeys or birds. The trees like the insects, and the Plantation scientists have never been able to make the insects live or die the way they wish. So they let the frogs remain. And the snakes to keep the frogs from becoming too many. Although I kill the snakes." She flashed a quick grin, then frowned. "The frogs and snakes will not harm your nets, will they?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." He began to unpack the spare sensor net. Silvano must have left his main net behind when he had loaded Joaquin's equipment. "I don't know how I'm going to get this spread out." He eyed the huge limbs that formed the floor of this green world, the curtains of lianas and flowering vines that strung all together. "I'll probably fall and break my neck. It will just prove Father right—that the minute he stops babysitting me I go and kill my precious self."

"Is it a square? A circle? Does it need to lie level among the trees, or can it be uneven?" She reached for the carefully bundled fibers with her long—fingered hand, sniffed at it. "The thicker strand is the edge, no?"

"Yes." He kept expecting her to think like a child or some kind of halfwitted primitive. He still thought of

her as an intelligent animal, and his cheeks heated at that realization. "It's in the shape of ... a hexagon." He sketched the shape for her and showed her how to open the folds without tangling them. "These are the connects for the leads. I've only got about ten meters of lead, so it has to be close to the platform, I guess."

"Ha." She tucked the folded net into the waist of her shorts and leaped from the edge of the platform, arm stretched to snag a slender liana. The vine tore loose from some of its supports, so that she dropped three meters as she swung. Twigs and leaves showered down, and Joaquin stopped breathing until her hand closed around a small branch. She used that one to swing herself higher and then pushed off from a thicker limb to do the liana thing all over again.

Tarzanning. It was scary as hell to watch. Apparently satisfied with her location, she clung to a swaying limb with her feet while she attached the net to a lower branch. Her long brown toes, curled like fingers around the branch, jarred him. She looked more monkey than human like that. But as she unfurled his net into a perfectly level hexagon, he stopped noticing.

It was dark before he plugged the leads from the net into his softly humming system. The power indicator was low, but he should have enough battery for tonight. Worry about the solar panels in the morning. He powered up the net and started as Zlia leaned over his shoulder.

"What will they look like?" she whispered. "The ghosts?"

"They're not ghosts. You don't need to whisper, you can't scare them away." But he was whispering, too. "You won't really see them. They're not really here like you and I are here. The machines will detect their passage through our universe, that's all. The computer will create an artificial image from the input."

"What if they do not come?"

"I'll keep listening until they do." He shrugged. "Czenko reported that the concentration of dark matter is higher in this region than anywhere else in the world. He didn't know why."

"Of course they come here." Her eyes shone like a cat's eyes in the dark. "This is a good place to hide. It is the only place left, Silvano says. He may be right." She shrugged. "I have never left here."

Yeah. Joaquin stared at the blank monitor screen where the image of the jumpers would appear. Perhaps it *was* the only place left to hide.

"Watching your aliens?" Silvano stepped into the glow of the monitor.

"Shit." Joaquin jumped. "Do you two get off on sneaking up on people?"

"Do you know what the penalty is for trespassing on Plantation property?" Silvano's tone was cold. "A couple of bullets. Then you're fertilizer for the trees. You want your two weeks, you'd better practice your sneaking, *boy*."

"You talked to him, didn't you?" Joaquin looked away from the blank screen, struggling with outrage and a sense of futility. "You can always hear it in someone's voice when they've talked to Father." Fear, he thought. The sound of fear. "You promised me two weeks!"

"You have it." Silvano's tone was surly as he sat down across from Joaquin. "I told him I'd deliver you myself. Hell, kid, I drive a good bargain. Been doing it for years."

Greed, Joaquin thought. That was always the reason. He was a pot of gold, a cash cow, a dream of a big house, servants, a soft life. "You're wrong," he said softly. "I'm sorry. I would have liked to have the two

weeks."

"Don't worry. We've lived in the Plantation's lap for years, and they don't even know we exist. Nobody's going to find us after all this time. You're safe. You know, your old man didn't seem ... very surprised to hear from me. Or very worried." Silvano fished a plastic bottle from a sack hanging from one of the platform supports. "What is this? Some kind of elaborate game of hide-and-seek you two play?"

"You might be right." Joaquin laughed softly. "I hadn't thought of it like that. But I think that's it exactly." Joaquin stared at the uncooperative screen. "Maybe that's the whole issue here. Escape. Like the jumpers. Only I'm not very good at it."

"Here." Silvano passed him the bottle.

Joaquin sniffed and wrinkled his nose. Some kind of crudely distilled alcohol. Abruptly, he tilted the plastic bottle, tried a small swallow. Choked and coughed as the raw liquor burned his throat. Silvano laughed and took the bottle back. Tilted it, his throat working as he swallowed. "You going to watch that screen all night?" He wiped his mouth, replaced the bottle in the sack.

"I don't really need to sit here at all." The system would record any disturbances. He heard Silvano rummaging around, then the soft crunch of teeth biting into fruit. "So what kind of deal did you get?" He looked upward, hoping for the impersonal stars, but of course the canopy hid them. "A nice, fat, untraceable cash card?"

"I got what I wanted. I'm surprised, actually." Silvano had moved into the monitor's glow again. It turned his skin a dead gray color as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Who is your old man? A broker for illegal neurochemistry?"

"He is one of the very few people who gently and invisibly direct the economic and political course of the entire planet. You would be amazed at what you can do by opening a factory here, electing a mayor in some godforsaken village there, or driving down the price of soybeans a continent away. Tip over the right domino, and you control the world. And nobody ever knows." He shrugged, expecting disbelief, because no one believed anything that wasn't in the media six times a day.

"Amador Perera," Silvano said softly. "Sweet Jesus, you're his son." His laugh was low and bitter. "You told me your damn name. I guess I'm getting senile after all."

He was going to throw Joaquin out. Haul him off in the hover and dump him. You could hear it in his voice, like the whisper of frost forming on a freezing night. "Don't." Joaquin leaned forward. "I'm so close. I just need one good recording to dump into the net, and I've finally got all the bugs in this set-up worked out. If I get it uploaded onto the net, he won't ever be able to delete every mention of it, no matter how hard he tries. He won't give me another chance to do this."

"I don't get it." Silvano looked him, eyes hooded. "If nobody cares about this, why does he?"

"You *don't* get it. I just need the two weeks." He was begging and didn't care. "Let me stay here. Please."

Silvano was staring at him, his expression unreadable in the glow of the empty monitor. He let his breath out slowly. "It's too late to regret, I guess. Fine. You can stay." He rose to his feet, vanished into the darkness.

"He is afraid," Zlia breathed in Joaquin's ear. This time he didn't start.

"I warned him. He should have listened to me."

Zlia touched his cheek lightly. "Maybe the ghosts will not come if you watch. Ghosts are shy."

"I told you they're not ghosts." Suddenly angry at the blank screen, at Silvano's gift, Joaquin turned his back on the monitor. "There are no ghosts," he hissed at her. "That's superstition. Everything is phenomenon."

"Silvano is a ghost." She lifted her head and smiled a sad smile. "I think he died before he came here. Perhaps that is why he wants so much to buy the eggs for me."

"What eggs are these, anyway?" He crossed his arms, refusing to look at the monitor. An alarm would sound if anything fell through the net. "New frog eggs?"

"My eggs." She tilted her head. "So that there will be others like me."

"Others?" He leaned forward, the monitor forgotten. "You mean that you are the only one?"

She shrugged, her fingers in her mass of hair. "Once upon a time, Silvano says that my grandparents worked for the Plantation. They harvested the special fruits that the trees produced. They were better than machines. Then the engineers discovered that the trees could give more if they harvested what they needed from the sap." She lowered her hand. "Then the World Council passed the law that no one could ... be like us." She looked away. "The Plantation people one day ... killed my grandparents and all the others. Except for a few—like my mother—who escaped. I was ... a baby. I am the last, since my mother fell and died." A tiny frog sat in the middle of her palm.

It wouldn't have been her real mother, Joaquin thought. She had been crafted in a lab, started in a petrie dish. But maybe *mother* went beyond womb and genes. He looked at the frog in her palm. It was sky blue with a scarlet belly and throat. It stared up unblinking at Joaquin as Zlia reached for his hand and placed it gently, firmly down on the frog. It squirmed a little, cool and slick beneath his palm. He tried to pull away, wondering what chemical it was secreting onto his skin, but Zlia had him by the wrist, and then suddenly the shadows were brightening as if the sun had risen.

"Silvano did not buy the eggs for this one. This one happened on its own." Zlia's voice came from far away. "He wishes to freeze it for the engineers, but I wish it to lay its own eggs, hatch its own babies."

He barely noticed her words. He was standing on a slender limb that swayed with the subtle pulse of the enormous tree, utterly relaxed, poised between wind and sway and gravity, poised on a peak of utter *rightness*. A sense of balance filled him, utterly sensual—unity of muscle and tree-flesh and the tug of the earth. All were forces, and if you brought them into perfect unity you could ... fly. Muscles flexing, he pushed off, falling, flying, surfing down that slope of air, self, earth, riding it like you'd ride a wave. As if in slow motion, a limb slid by overhead. He reached up, caught it, shifted that balance and his trajectory slightly, surfed a new wave, reached for another branch ...

And suddenly he was looking at ... himself. Marveling at the broad planes of this stranger/self's face. "I'm feeling your thoughts," he said and lifted his hand from the frog. It crouched on her palm, its throat pulsing. "How does it do that?" he breathed, still dizzy with the ecstasy of his flight through the trees. "That's what it's like?"

She nodded, her eyes shining.

Full of echoes—of her joy, that perfect balance with earth, air, and self, he leaned down and kissed her. Her lips were soft, and she rubbed her smooth cheek slowly, gently against his face. Their kiss deepened, and she arched against him, reached up to stroke his face.

Her claws traced a delicate line along his jaw, and Joaquin recoiled, euphoria shredding like mist in the hot sun, seeing her inhuman proportions, her prehensile toes, the gleam of frogs in her thick hair. "I ... I'm sorry." He looked away, ashamed.

She shrugged, tucked the blue frog tenderly into her hair once more. Behind him, the monitor beeped softly and insistently. Joachim spun around, his heart hammering. Onscreen, a faint shadow twisted.

A jumper.

His brain had gone numb, but his fingers moved on their own, focusing the image, enhancing it. The fluctuating patch of gray began to shrink, taking on a sharper silhouette. It could almost be human, that figure. It shimmered and twisted for another handful of seconds, then it faded and vanished. It was falling through another universe, on its journey. Joaquin blinked and became aware that he was alone. "Zlia?" he whispered. She stood on the very edge of the platform, facing his net. Looking for her ghosts?

She looked at him, her cat eyes burning with green fire in the darkness. "I saw it," she whispered and leaped out into darkness.

"Zlia!" But she was gone, with only the rustle of foliage and the creak of a limb to mark her passage. And then the insect noise swallowed even that.

He wondered what she had seen in the darkness. Not his jumper, certainly. Only his machines could see that.

Perhaps she had merely seen herself, through his eyes. Joaquin stumbled back to his monitor, to crouch like a supplicant in front of its blank eye for the remainder of the night.

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Joaquin woke up in front of the monitor. In the green dawn light, its screen looked dull and gray, and his neck ached like hell. The platform was empty. Three of the green fruits lay on a broad, waxy leaf. No Zlia. No Silvano.

He had his jumpers. Joaquin touched the power switch, but nothing happened. Oh, yeah. He needed to get the solar panels up where they could generate some juice. No rush. He had what he needed. Proof. He closed his eyes, hugging himself, seeing those jumpers twisting, falling through space.

You can't take that away from me, Father.

Insects hummed in the leaves of this canopy world that had been allowed to evolve on its own because it didn't matter to the Plantation managers. Joaquin stood and walked to the edge of the platform, squinting into the soft green shadows, searching for Zlia. Spotted her in the distance, tarzanning between trees. He smiled, watching her.

She was at play. Diving from on high, plummeting in freefall, she reached, touched, pushed off, changed her trajectory and velocity, snagged a vine, swung hard and fast upward, looped up and over into an arc like a childhood memory of some fantastic roller-coaster, vanishing briefly into the upper canopy. Up into the blue sky? To see the sun that must be up there above the leaves? She plummeted down, so perfectly balanced. Not in control. In *balance*. Control was not part of her world. It came to Joaquin in blinding revelation. She had no need to control anything. Who else in the universe could ignore control? You either controlled or were controlled. Hide-and-seek, Silvano had called it. Joaquin laughed, and the bitter

edge of that note, like shattered glass, seemed to wing across the thick green air between him and Zlia to sever her wings. She dropped, snagged a liana, and tarzanned her way over to the platform.

"I left you fruit." She smiled at him, and the sheer *light* of her smile warmed him. He understood, suddenly, how Silvano could be her lover. The claws didn't matter. "I saw your ghosts," she said. "I am so happy."

"Me, too." It took him a moment to realize that these were two separate thoughts. "Why are you happy?"

"Silvano went to get my eggs this morning." Her eyes sparkled with emerald flecks, glints of sunlight on forest pools. "Oh, Joaquin, they will grow, I know it. I will take such good care of them!"

It was the first time she had ever used his name. "What do you mean?" His brain was slow, caught up even as the words left his mouth. Oh, God. "Where did he go?" Her blink of wary incomprehension enraged him, and he fought it down. "Zlia, where did Silvano go to collect your eggs? It's important to take me there." He spoke to her wary recoil, desperate. "He doesn't understand my father. It's a trap! If I don't help him ... he'll lose your eggs. Zlia, I want you to have them." These last words were utter truth. Maybe she heard that, because without another word, she unwound the line from her waist, whipped it around a branch overhead, and leaped lightly up against his chest.

The touch of her prehensile toes and the prick of her claws as she wrapped her limbs around him didn't bother him now. "Hold onto it," she commanded, and he grasped the tough, flexible handle of the line. "Jump hard!"

He did, and they swung outward into space, flying heavily and awkwardly, but flying.

They tarzanned through the canopy. He clung to her line with one hand, clutched her hard, lithe body to his with the other, aware of the combined beat of their hearts, the heat of her flesh, the rush of the thick, humid air against his face. She steered and he pushed off. Didn't look down. Tried not to imagine what he would see if he looked down there. They landed on limbs, bark and bits of vine showering them, scratching his face, leaped again, and again. His arms ached, his shoulders burned like fire, but still they leaped, swung, scrambled for balance on a new perch. He was too tired to be afraid any longer; the sight of the collection tubes and mains so many meters below had no meaning anymore. When he lost his grip and fell, he would feel no fear at all.

Another escape, he thought numbly. More permanent, maybe, than that of the jumpers.

Then she landed them on a big limb, thicker than most. It jutted into daylight, sun, empty space.

End of the rainforest, end of the Plantation. Beyond the trees lay the sere, ocher-colored savaged earth of the soil that the Plantation had no use for. You couldn't even see the hoses that carried the collected harvest from the trees to the processing and packaging plant. They were buried underground to protect them from UV and sabotage. Ragged weeds sprouted from sterilized reddish soil, struggling for existence. A bright steel and ceramic pumping station hulked in the center of the clear space. A mud-covered truck was parked beside it, and three men lounged against it. Two of them wore Plantation uniforms.

The man in the center was Silvano. He sagged against the side of the truck with his hands cuffed behind him. Even from this distance, Joaquin could see that he had been beaten. Blood gleamed wet and red on his face, and he would have fallen if the man beside him hadn't been holding him upright.

Zlia whimpered and tensed.

"No!" Joaquin grabbed her arm, digging his nails into her flesh. "I can fix this." Maybe. "You stay here. *Here!*" He shook her, frightened by the intent in her muscles. "Zlia, they'll kill him if you go out there! Do you understand?"

She looked at him at last, and the terror in her eyes was utterly human. "Yes," she whispered.

Joaquin looked down at the ground, twenty-plus meters away. Without a word, Zlia wound the smart-line around a limb. He would have to drop the last five meters or so. Joaquin wondered if that would break bones, was already reaching for the line. He slid down too fast, unable to slow himself, the supple line burning a streak of fire across his palms. He let go, fell, breath jolting out of his lungs, gasping for air as he struggled to his feet. One of the Plantation guards glanced his way, and Joaquin shrank back behind the tree, but the man's glance slid past, as if it couldn't penetrate beyond that boundary of shadow and sun.

He wondered what they were waiting for. The sound of a distant engine seemed to answer him, and one of the guards spoke a few words, his voice a little too loud and formal, as if he was speaking over a comm link. Silvano hunched his shoulders and lifted his head defiantly. Whatever he said annoyed the guard beside him, because he stepped in front of Silvano and backhanded him brutally. Silvano reeled against the truck and slid to his knees, hunched as if expecting more blows. The guard drew a small, ugly gun.

A streak of movement shattered the barrier of shadow and light. Zlia burst from the forest, running.

"No!" Joaquin yelled, but it was too late. The guards swiveled to face her, weapons coming up.

Zlia didn't belong on their ground. She moved awkwardly on her long-toed feet, clumsy, a crippled mistake where she had been grace itself. Light glinted on a blade in her hand as she launched herself at the guard who stood over Silvano. Without hurry, almost lazily, the other guard took aim.

"No! Don't!" Joaquin dashed through the invisible barrier of light, dazzled by the sun, stumbling over the rough ground, too slow, too late. For an instant they all seemed suspended—Zlia, the guard, and Joaquin—in the same perfect balance that he had experienced as they shared her frog. Then the weapon made a tiny spitting noise and Zlia's limbs went slack in the middle of her leap.

"No!" Joaquin screamed, but she was already tumbling, her sprawling limbs slack and ugly, too long and too thin.

Silvano gave a cry like a wounded animal, scrambling on his knees to her through the dust. Joaquin reached them, not caring if the guards fired or not, falling to the ground beside Silvano, skin shredding from his knees as he scooped her into his lap. She was so light. Like a child. And her bones felt fragile as a bird's.

One hand lifted, fluttering at the tangle of hair about her face. Her eyes were open, and she smiled gently at something in the air beyond Joaquin. "Look," she whispered, and her hand closed on his, the sky blue and scarlet frog squirming between them.

Her stare compelled him, and he looked out at the empty, baking ground. And saw ... a shadow, a figure that might be human, twisting slowly as it slid through the hot, thick air on a diagonal down and through the sun-baked clay. Transparent, ethereal, it vanished slowly into the earth.

A jumper.

Her hand went slack, and Joaquin became aware of Silvano weeping softly. He touched her throat,

feeling for a pulse, then laid her gently on the ground. And from the corner his eye, he thought he saw another shape drifting, falling slowly through the heat and light and earth.

Maybe they were ghosts after all.

A car pulled up beside him, and its shadow fell over Joaquin as he pulled off his tunic and covered her from the alien face of the sun. A door opened. Closed. "My, this is a dramatic scene." The tone was male, controlled, mildly amused. "My timing was perfect, it seems. I brought your illegal ova, Silvano."

Joaquin got slowly to his feet. "Father." He raised his head, found himself eye to eye with his father's expensive youth. "I am surprised. You have never come after me in person before."

"You were never really lost before." His father's tone was still amused, but a brief darkness glimmered in his eyes. "I'm pleased that you chose to deliver my son now instead of sticking to your ridiculous demand for time. Here." He stepped across the sterile dust in his handmade real-leather shoes, laid a small enviro-container on the ground beside Zlia's body. "There are four here. Two male, two female, as I promised. I am relieved that you have been found intact." He was speaking to Joaquin, never looked at Silvano. "Shall we go?"

"I succeeded." Joaquin looked up into his father's face. "You're too late, Father." Beside his knee, the blue and scarlet frog twitched, crushed and dying. Joaquin scooped it up, cool and moist in his sweaty palm. Surging to his feet, he grabbed his father's hand, and before he could jerk it away, he pressed the frog's mangled body against it.

For an instant he was seeing himself—young with a youth that couldn't be bought, with a world of possibility that had not yet lost its wonder.

Then his father jerked his hand from Joaquin's, knocking the frog to the ground, grinding it into a smear of guts and blue skin in the dust. "Disgusting." He wiped his hand on his pants, but he did not look at his son.

"Hide-and-seek." Joaquin looked down at Silvano with pity. "I told you punishment rarely has to do with money. I warned you." He reached behind Silvano, freed his bound hands, then picked up the container full of engineered eggs, created from Zlia's DNA. "You'll be safe, I promise you." He pushed the container into Silvano's lax hands. "Do you understand?" He addressed the guards. "If anything happens to this man, we will punish you." He smiled at them both, watched their eyes flick from himself to his father, then back to him, before they slid down and away and they nodded. "It won't matter who actually did the harm," he said gently. "You are responsible." They tensed. They would protect Silvano with their lives now.

Joaquin faced his father. "Let's go back. It's time I started to learn the business, isn't it?"

"About time, yes." His father smiled, but a hint of uncertainty showed in his eyes. "What about your precious project? We'll have to submit your results to experts, you know, a juried journal perhaps."

No expert would verify these results, his father would see to that. That was the old game of hide-and-seek. But he was finished playing. His father simply didn't realize it yet. "I'm leaving the equipment here. You can sell it for scrap, Silvano." He looked down at the man, bent over Zlia's body, pitying him, but feeling also ... envy. You didn't know what you had, he thought. But you at least had it. For a while. He wouldn't be lonely, anyway. He would have Zlia's sons and daughters to raise. Maybe this time he'd understand. "Let's go, Father." He smiled at his father's wary bemusement. "I have a lot to catch up on."

"Oh, I agree," his father smiled. But the uncertainty in his eyes sharpened a hair.

Silvano had scooped Zlia's body into his arms, stood unsteadily, tears gleaming on his battered face, the eggs in their container balanced on Zlia's flat abdomen, above her womb.

You can't run away from yourself. There is no escape in that direction. For an instant, Silvano met Joaquin's eyes. Then he lowered his head and limped across the scorched clay, back to the shadows of his world. Zlia had understood, Joaquin thought. You simply make your own rules. You simply fly. Like the jumpers. Not escaping anything ... just not part of this universe.

"Let's go," he said and turned toward his father's vehicle.

Without a word, his father followed him.

The End