

## Little Faces

by Vonda N. McIntyre

The blood woke Yalnis. It ran between her thighs, warm and slick, cooling, sticky. She pushed back from the stain on the silk, bleary with sleep and love, rousing to shock and stabbing pain.

She flung off the covers and scrambled out of bed. She cried out as the web of nerves tore apart. Her companions shrieked a chaotic chorus.

Zorargul's small form convulsed just below her navel. The raw edges of a throat wound bled in diminishing gushes. Her body expelled the dying companion, closing off veins and vesicles.

Zorargul was beyond help. She wrapped her hand around the small broken body as it slid free. She sank to the floor. Blood dripped onto the cushioned surface. The other companions retreated into her, exposing nothing but sharp white teeth that parted and snapped in defense and warning.

Still in bed, blinking, yawning, Seyyan propped herself on her elbow. She gazed at the puddle of blood. It soaked in, vanishing gradually from edge to center, drawn away to be separated into its molecules and stored.

A smear of blood marked Seyyan's skin. Her first companion blinked its small bright golden eyes. It snapped its sharp teeth, spattering scarlet droplets. It shrieked, licked its bloody lips, cleaned its teeth with its tongue. The sheet absorbed the blood spray.

Seyyan lay back in the soft tangled nest, elegantly lounging, her luxuriant brown hair spilling its curls around her bare shoulders and over her delicate perfect breasts. She shone like molten gold in the starlight. Her other companions pushed their little faces from her belly, rousing themselves and clacking their teeth, excited and jealous.

"Zorargul," Yalnis whispered. She had never lost a companion. She chose them carefully, and cherished them, and Zorargul had been her first, the gift of her first lover. She looked up at Seyyan, confused and horrified, shocked by loss and pain.

"Come back." Seyyan spoke with soft urgency. She stretched out her graceful hand. "Come back to bed." Her voice intensified. "Come back to me."

Yalnis shrank from her touch. Seyyan followed, sliding over the fading bloodstain in the comfortable nest of ship silk. Her first companion extruded itself, just below her navel, staring intently at Zorargul's body.

Seyyan stroked Yalnis's shoulder. Yalnis pushed her away with her free hand, leaving bloody fingerprints on Seyyan's golden skin.

Seyyan grabbed her wrist and held her, moved to face her squarely, touched her beneath her chin and raised her head to look her in the eyes. Baffled and dizzy, Yalnis blinked away tears. Her remaining companions pumped molecular messages of distress and anger into her blood.

"Come back to me," Seyyan said again. "We're ready for you."

Her first companion, drawing back into her, pulsed and muttered. Seyyan caught her breath.

"I never asked for this!" Yalnis cried.

Seyyan sat back on her heels, as lithe as a girl, but a million years old.

"I thought you wanted me," she said. "You welcomed me—invited me—took me to your bed—"

Yalnis shook her head, though it was true. "Not for this," she whispered.

"It didn't even fight," Seyyan said, dismissing Zorargul's remains with a quick gesture. "It wasn't worthy of its place with you."

"Who are you to decide that?"

"I didn't," Seyyan said. "It's the way of companions." She touched the reddening bulge of a son-spot just below the face of her first companion. "This one will be worthy of you."

Yalnis stared at her, horrified and furious. Seyyan, the legend, had come to her, exotic, alluring, and exciting. All the amazement and attraction Yalnis felt washed away in Zorargul's blood.

"I don't want it," she said. "I won't accept it."

Seyyan's companion reacted to the refusal, blinking, snarling. For a moment Yalnis feared Seyyan too would snarl at her, assault her and force a new companion upon her.

Seyyan sat back, frowning in confusion. "But I thought—did you invite me, just to refuse me? Why—?"

"For pleasure," Yalnis said. "For friendship. And maybe for love—maybe you would offer, and I would accept—"

"How is this different?" Seyyan asked.

Yalnis leaped to her feet in a flare of fury so intense that her vision blurred. Cradling Zorargul's shriveling body against her with one hand, she pressed the other against the aching bloody wound beneath her navel.

"Get out of my ship," she said.

The ship, responding to Yalnis's wishes, began to resorb the nest into the floor.

Seyyan rose. "What did you think would happen," she said, anger replacing the confusion in her tone, "when you announced the launch of a daughter? What do you think everyone is coming for? I was just lucky enough to be first. Or unfortunate enough." Again, she brushed her long fingertips against the son-spot. It pulsed, a red glow as hot and sore as infection. It must find a place, soon, or be stillborn. "And what am I to do with this?"

Yalnis's flush of anger drained away, leaving her pale and shocked.

"I don't care." All the furnishings and softness of the room vanished, absorbed into the pores of Yalnis's ship, leaving bare walls and floor, and the cold stars above. "You didn't even ask me," Yalnis said softly.

"You led me to believe we understood each other. But you're so young—" Seyyan reached toward her. Yalnis drew back, and Seyyan let her hand fall with a sigh. "So young. So naïve." She caught up her purple cloak from the floor and strode past Yalnis. Though the circular chamber left plenty of room, she brushed past close to Yalnis, touching her at shoulder and hip, bare skin to bare skin. A lock of her hair swept across Yalnis's belly, stroking low like a living hand, painting a bloody streak.

Seyyan entered the pilus that connected Yalnis's ship with her own craft. As soon as Seyyan crossed the border, Yalnis's ship disconnected and closed and healed the connection.

Yalnis's ship emitted a few handfuls of plasma in an intemperate blast, moving itself to a safer distance. Seyyan's craft gleamed and glittered against the starfield, growing smaller as Yalnis's ship moved away, coruscating with a pattern of prismatic color.

Yalnis sank to the floor again, humiliated and grief-stricken. Without her request or thought, her ship cushioned her from its cold living bones, growing a soft surface beneath her, dimming the light to dusk. Dusk, not the dawn she had planned.

She gazed down at Zorargul's small body. Its blood pooled in her palm. She drew her other hand from the seeping wound where Zorargul had lived and cradled the shriveling tendril of the companion's penis. A deep ache, throbbing regularly into pain, replaced the potential for pleasure as her body knit the wound of Zorargul's passing. Behind the wound, a sore, soft mass remained.

"Zorargul," she whispered, "you gave me such pleasure."

Of her companions, Zorargul had most closely patterned the lovemaking of its originator. Her pleasure always mingled with a glow of pride, that Zorar thought enough of her to offer her a companion.

Yalnis wondered where Zorar was, and if she would come to Yalnis's daughter's launching. They had not communicated since they parted. Zorar anticipated other adventures, and her ship yearned for deep space. She might be anywhere, one star system away, or a dozen, or setting out to another cluster, voyaging through vacuum so intense and a region so dark she must conserve every molecule of mass and every photon of energy, using none to power a message of acceptance, or regret, or goodwill.

Yalnis remained within parallax view of her own birthplace. She had grown up in a dense population of stars and people. She had taken a dozen lovers in her life, and accepted five companions: Zorargul, Vasigul, Asilgul, Hayaligul, and Bahadirgul. With five companions, she felt mature enough, wealthy enough, to launch a daughter with a decent, even lavish, settlement. After that, she could grant her ship's need—and her own desire—to set out on adventures and explorations.

Zorar, she thought—

She reached for Zorar's memories and reeled into loss and emptiness. The memories ended with Zorargul's murder. Zorar, much older than Yalnis, had given her the gift of her own long life of journeys and observations. They brought her the birth of stars and worlds, the energy storm of a boomerang loop around a black hole, skirting the engulfing doom of its event horizon. They brought her the most dangerous adventure of all, a descent through the thick atmosphere of a planet to its living surface.

All Yalnis had left were her memories of the memories, dissolving shadows of the gift. All the memories

left in Zorargul had been wiped out by death.

By murder.

The walls and floor of her living space changed again as her ship re-created her living room. She liked it plain but luxurious, all softness and comfort. The large circular space lay beneath a transparent dome. It was a place for one person alone. She patted the floor with her bloodstained hand.

"Thank you," she said.

"True," her ship whispered into her mind.

Its decisions often pleased her and anticipated her wishes. Strange, for ships and people seldom conversed. When they tried, the interaction too easily deteriorated into misunderstanding. Their consciousnesses were of different types, different evolutionary lineages.

She rose, lacking her usual ease of motion. Anger and pain and grief drained her, and exhaustion trembled in her bones.

She carried Zorargul's body down through the ship, down into its heart, down to the misty power plant. Blood, her own and her companion's, splattered and smeared her hands, her stomach, her legs, the defending teeth or withdrawn crowns of her remaining companions, and Zorargul's pale and flaccid corpse. Its nerve ends dried to silver threads. Expulsion had reduced the testicles to wrinkled empty sacs.

Water ran in streams and pools through the power plant's housing, cold as it came in, steaming too hot to touch as it led away. Where steam from the hot pool met cold air, mist formed. Yalnis knelt and washed Zorargul's remains in the cold pool. When she was done, a square of scarlet ship silk lay on the velvety floor, flat and new where it had formed. She wrapped Zorargul in its shining folds.

"Good-bye," she said, and gave the small bundle tenderly to the elemental heat.

A long time later, Yalnis made her way to the living space and climbed into the bath, into water hot but not scalding. The bath swirled around her, sweeping away flecks of dried blood. She massaged the wound gently, making sure the nerve roots were cleanly ejected. She let the expulsion lump alone, though it was already hardening.

The remaining companions opened their little faces, protruding from the shelter of her body. They peered around, craning themselves above her skin, glaring at each other and gnashing their teeth in a great show, then closing their lips, humming to attract her attention.

She attended each companion in turn, stroking the little faces, flicking warm drops of water between their lips, quieting and calming them, murmuring, "Shh, shh." They felt no sympathy for her loss, no grief for Zorargul, only the consciousness of opportunity. She felt a moment of contempt for the quartet, each member jostling for primacy.

They are what they are, she thought, and submerged herself and them in the bath, drawing their little faces beneath the surface. They fell silent, holding their breaths and closing their eyes and mouths, reaching to draw their oxygen as well as their sustenance from her blood. A wash of dizziness took her; she breathed deep till it passed.

Each of the companions tried to please her—no, Bahadirgul held back. Her most recent companion had always been restrained in its approaches, fierce in its affections when it achieved release. Now, instead of squirming toward her center, it relaxed and blew streams of delicate bubbles from the air in its residual lungs.

Yalnis smiled, and when she closed herself off from the companions, she shut Bahadirgul away more gently than the others. She did not want to consider any of the companions now. Zorargul had been the best, the most deeply connected, as lively and considerate as her first lover.

Tears leaked from beneath her lashes, hot against her cheeks, washing away when she submerged. She looked up at the stars through the shimmering surface, through the steam.

She lifted her head to breathe. Water rippled and splashed; air cooled her face. The companions remained underwater, silent. Yalnis's tears flowed again and she sobbed, keening, grieving, wishing to take back the whole last time of waking. She wanted to change all her plans. If she did, Seyyan might take it as a triumph. She might make demands. Yalnis sneaked a look at the messages her ship kept ready for her attention. She declined to reply or even to acknowledge them. She felt it a weakness to read them. After she had, she wished she had resisted.

Why did you tantalize and tease me? Seyyan's message asked. You know this was what you wanted. I'm what you wanted.

Yalnis eliminated everything else Seyyan had sent her.

"Please refuse Seyyan's messages," she said to her ship.

"True," it replied.

"Disappear them, destroy them. No response."

"True."

"Seyyan, you took my admiration and my awe, and you perverted it," she said, as if Seyyan stood before her. "I might have accepted you. I might have, if you'd given me a chance. If you'd given me time. What do we have, but time? I'll never forgive you."

The bath flowed away, resorbing into the ship's substance. Warm air dried her and drew off the steam. She wrapped herself in a new swath of ship silk without bothering to give it a design. Some people went naked at home, but Yalnis liked clothes. For now, though, a cloak sufficed.

She wandered through her ship, visiting each chamber in the current configuration, looking with amazement and apprehension at the daughter ship growing in the ship's lower flank. What would the person be like, this new being who would accompany this new ship into the universe? She thought she had known, but everything had changed.

She returned, finally, to her living chamber.

"Please defend yourself," she said.

"True."

Yalnis snuggled into the ship's substance, comforted by its caress. She laid her hand over her belly, pressing her palm against the hot, healing wound, then petting each of the little faces. They bumped against her palm, yearning, stretching from their shafts so she could tickle behind Asilgul's vestigial ears, beneath Vasigul's powerful lower jaw. Even Bahadirgul advanced from its reserve, blinking its long-lashed eyelids to caress her fingers, touching her palm with its sharp hot tongue.

Each one wished to pleasure her, but she felt no wish for pleasure. Even the idea of joy vanished, in grief and guilt.

The nest drew around her, covering her legs, her sex, her stomach. It flowed over the faces and extruded a nipple for each sharp set of teeth. The ship took over feeding the companions so they would not drain Yalnis as she slept.

"Please, a thousand orbits," she said.

"True," said the ship, making her aware it was content to have time to complete and polish the daughter ship, to prepare for the launch. But, afterward, it wanted to stretch and to explore. She accepted its need, and she would comply.

For now she would sleep for a thousand orbits. If anyone besides Seyyan accepted the invitation to her daughter's launch, they would arrive in good time, and then they could wait for her, as she waited for them. Perhaps a thousand orbits—a thousand years in the old way of speaking—would give her time to dream of a proper revenge. Perhaps a thousand years of sleep would let her dream away the edges of her grief. The ship's support extensions grew against her, into her. She accepted the excretion extensions and swallowed the feeding extension. The monitor gloved one hand and wrist.

The view through the dome swept the orbit's plane, facing outward toward the thick carpet of multicolored stars, the glowing gas clouds.

Yalnis slept for a thousand years.

.....

The kiss of her ship woke her. Water exuded from the feeding extension, moistening her lips and tongue. The tangy fragrance touched her consciousness. She drifted into the last, hypnopompic layer of sleep, finding and losing dreams.

She thought: It would be good if ... I would like ...

Loss hit her unaware. A chill of regret and grief swept through her and to her four remaining companions; they woke from their doze and released the nipples and squeaked and shrilled. The ship, after a thousand orbits of the irritation of their little sharp teeth, drew away its fabric.

The ship made Yalnis aware of everything around them: the ship's own safety, the star and its planets, the astronomical landscape glowing through the transparent dome.

And it displayed to her the swarm of other ships, sending to her in their individual voices that ships and people had come to celebrate the launch of her daughter and her ship's daughter. She recognized friends and acquaintances, she noted strangers. She looked for former lovers, and found, to her joy and apprehension, that Zorar's ship sailed nearby.

And, of course, Seyyan remained.

During Yalnis's long rest, Seyyan had never approached, never tried to attach or attack. Yalnis felt glad of this. Her ship would have surrounded itself with an impermeable shell, one that induced a severe allergic reaction in other ships. A defensive shell drew heavily on a ship's resources. Her ship was sleek and well-provisioned, but growing defenses while developing a daughter ship would strain any resources.

Instead of approaching, Seyyan's craft's course had closely paralleled her own for all this time, as if it were herding and protecting Yalnis.

Annoyed that she had not anticipated such a move—she had expected aggression, not a show of protection—Yalnis nudged her ship to a different course, to a mathematical center along the long curved line of other craft. Her ship agreed and complied, even to skirting the bounds of safety and good manners, in moving itself into a position where Seyyan would have difficulty acting as their shadow.

Yalnis stretched. The ship, understanding that she wished to rise, withdrew its extensions from her body. She gagged a little, as she always did, when the nutrient extension slid up her throat, across her tongue, between her lips, leaving a trace of sweetness. The extension collapsed; the ship's skin absorbed it. Excretion extensions and the monitor followed, and disappeared.

She raised her head slowly. The weight of her hair, grown long, held her down. She turned the dome reflective and gazed up.

Her hair spread in a wide shining fan across the floor, covering the whole diameter of the living room, drawn out by the living carpet as it lengthened. Its color ranged in concentric circles. The outer circle, spread out so wide that each hair was a single ray, glowed an attenuated platinum blond, the color she had worn her hair when she first met Seyyan. It changed dramatically to black, then progressed from honey to auburn to dark brown, and the sequence started over. She removed the palest color from the growth sequence for the future. It would only remind her.

Instead of cutting her hair to the short and easy length she usually favored, she asked the ship to sever it at a length that would touch the ground when she stood.

Despite the ship's constant care when she slept, she always had difficulty rising after a long hibernation. The ship eased the gravity to help her. She rose on shaky legs, and stumbled when she left the nest. The companions squealed with alarm.

"Oh, be quiet," she said. "What cause have I ever given you, to fear I'd fall on you?" Besides, their instincts would pull them inside her if she ever did fall, and the only bruises would form on her own body.

But even if I've never fallen on them, she thought, *I have* left them reason to fear. To doubt my protection.

Her hair draped around her shoulders, over her breasts, along her hips and legs to the ground. The companions peered through the thick curtain, chattering with annoyance. Bahadirgul sneezed. In sudden sympathy, she pushed her hair back to leave them free.

The wound beneath her navel had healed, leaving a pale white scar. Beneath her skin, the sperm packet Zorargul emitted as its last living action made a jagged capsule, invisible, but perceptible to her fingers and vaguely painful to her nerves. She had to decide whether to use it, or to finish encapsulating it and expel it in turn.

Without being asked, the ship absorbed the shorn ends of her hair. She and the ship had been born together; despite the mysteries each species kept from the other, each knew the other's habits. It produced a length of ship silk formed into comfortable and neutral garments: loose pants with a filmy lace panel to obscure the companions, a sleeveless shirt with a similar lace panel. She wore clothes that allowed the companions some view of the world, for they could be troublesome when bored. She left the silk its natural soft beige, for the horizontal stripes of her hair gave plenty of drama. She twisted her hair into a thick rope to keep it from tangling as she dressed, then let it loose again. It lay heavy on her neck and shoulders.

I may reconsider this haircut, she thought. But not till after the launch. I can be formal for that long, at least.

Messages flowed in from the other ships. It pleased her that so many had accepted her invitation. Still she did not reply, even to welcome them. Her ship looked out a long distance, but no other craft approached. The party was complete.

Yalnis closed her eyes to inspect her ship's status and records. The ship ran a slight fever, reflecting its increasing metabolism. Its flank, smooth before her sleep, now bulged. The daughter ship lay in its birth pouch, shiny-skinned and adorned with a pattern of small knots. The knots would sink into the new ship's skin, giving it the potential of openings, connections, ports, antennae, undifferentiated tissue for experiment and play.

"It's beautiful," she whispered to the ship.

"True."

The companions squeaked with hunger, though they had spent the last thousand years dozing and feeding without any exertion. They were fat and sleek. They were always hungry, or always greedy, rising for a treat or a snack, though they connected directly to her bloodstream as well as to her nerves and could draw their sustenance from her without ever opening their little mouths or exposing their sharp little teeth.

But Yalnis had been attached to the ship's nutrients for just as long, and she too was ravenous.

She left the living room and descended to the garden. The light was different, brighter and warmer. The filter her ship used to convey light to the garden mimicked a blanket of atmosphere.

She arrived at garden's dawn. Birds chirped and sang in the surrounding trees, and a covey of quail foraged along borders and edges. Several rabbits, nibbling grass in the pasture, raised their heads when she walked in, then, unafraid, went back to grazing. They had not seen a person for thousands of their generations.

The garden smelled different from the rest of the ship, the way she believed the surface of a planet might smell. She liked it, but it frightened her, too, for it held living organisms she would never see. The health of the garden demanded flotillas of bacteria, armies of worms, swarms of bugs. She thought it might be safer to grow everything in hydroponic tanks, as had been the fashion last time she paid attention, but she



liked the spice of apprehension. Besides, the ship preferred this method. If it thought change necessary, it would change.

She walked barefoot into the garden, trying not to step on any adventurous worm or careless bug. The bacteria would have to look out for themselves.

She captured a meal of fruit, corn, and a handful of squash blossoms. She liked the blossoms. When she was awake, and hunted regularly, she picked them before they turned to vegetables. The neglected plants emitted huge squashes of all kinds, some perfect, some attacked and nibbled by vegetarian predators.

The companions, reacting to the smell of food, fidgeted and writhed, craning their thick necks to snap at each other. She calmed and soothed them, and fed them bits of apple and pomegranate seeds.

They had already begun to jostle for primacy, each slowly moving toward her center, migrating across skin and muscle toward the spot where Zorargul had lived, as if she would not notice. Her skin felt stretched and sore. No companion had the confidence or nerve to risk detaching from its position to reinsert itself in the primary spot.

A good thing, too, she thought. I wouldn't answer for my temper if one of them did that without my permission.

Leaving her garden, she faced the task of welcoming her guests.

I don't want to, she thought, like a whiny girl: I want to keep my privacy, I want to enjoy my companions. I want to be left alone. To grieve alone.

In the living room, beneath the transparent dome, the ship created a raised seat. She slipped in among the cushions, sat on her hair, cursed at the sharp pull, swept the long locks out from under her and coiled them—bits of dirt and leaves tangled in the ends; she shook them off with a shudder and left the detritus for the carpet to take away. She settled herself again.

"I would like to visit Zorar," she said to her ship.

"True."

She dozed until the two ships matched, extruded, connected. A small shiver ran through Yalnis's ship, barely perceptible.

Yalnis hesitated at the boundary, took a deep breath, and entered the pilus where the fabric of her ship and the fabric of Zorar's met, mingled, and communicated, exchanging unique bits of genetic information to savor and explore.

At the border of Zorar's ship, she waited until her friend appeared.

"Zorar," she said.

Zorar blinked at her, in her kindly, languorous way. She extended her hand to Yalnis and drew her over the border, a gesture of trust that broke Yalnis's heart. She wanted to throw herself into Zorar's arms.

Do I still have the right? she thought.

She burst into tears.

Zorar enfolded Yalnis, murmuring, "Oh, my dear, oh, what is it?"

Between sobs and sniffles, and an embarrassing bout of hiccups, Yalnis told her. Zorar held her hand, patting it gently, and fell still and silent.

"I'm so sorry," Yalnis whispered. "I was so fond of Zorargul. I could always remember you, when ... I feel so empty."

Zorar glanced down. The lace of Yalnis's clothes modestly concealed the companions.

"Let me see," she said. Her voice remained calm. Yalnis had always admired her serenity. Now, though, tears brightened her brown eyes.

Yalnis parted the lace panels. The four remaining companions blinked and squirmed in the increased light, the unfamiliar gaze. Bahadirgul retreated, the most modest of them all, but the others stretched and extended and stared and bared their teeth.

"You haven't chosen a replacement."

"How could I replace Zorargul?"

Zorar shook her head. "You can't duplicate. But you can replace."

Yalnis gripped Zorar's hands. "Do you mean ..." She stopped, confused and embarrassed, as inarticulate as the girl she had been when she first met Zorar. That time, everything that happened was her choice. This time, by rights, it should be Zorar's.

"A daughter between us," Zorar said. "She would be worth knowing."

"Yes," Yalnis said. Zorar laid her palm against Yalnis's cheek.

Instead of leaning into her touch, Yalnis shivered.

Zorar immediately drew back her hand and gazed at Yalnis.

"What do *you* want, my dear?" she asked.

"I want ..." She sniffled, embarrassed. "I want everything to be the way it was before I ever met Seyyan!" She took Zorar's hand and held it, clutched it. "I wanted a daughter with Zorargul, but Zorargul is gone, and I ..." She stopped. She did not want to inflict her pain on Zorar.

"You aren't ready for another lover," Zorar said. "I understand entirely."

Zorar glanced at Yalnis's bare stomach, at the one shy and three bold little faces, at the scar left from Zorargul's murder.

"It wasn't meant to be," Zorar said

Yalnis touched the scar, where Zorargul's jagged remains pricked her skin from underneath.

"Maybe I should—"

"No." Zorar spoke sharply.

Discouraged, Yalnis let the lacy panels slip back into place.

"It's our memories Seyyan killed," Zorar said. "Would you send out a daughter with only one parent's experience?"

Zorar was kind; she refrained from saying that the one parent would be Yalnis, young and relatively inexperienced. Yalnis's tears welled up again. She struggled to control them, but she failed. She fought the knowledge that Zorar was right. Zorar was mature and established, with several long and distant adventures to her credit. Her memories were an irreplaceable gift, to be conveyed to a daughter through Zorargul. The sperm packet alone could not convey those memories. "Let time pass," Zorar said. "We might see each other again, in some other millennium."

Yalnis scrubbed at her eyes with her sleeve. "I'm so angry!" she cried. "How could Seyyan betray me like this?"

"How did you find her?" Zorar asked, as if to change the subject. "She's not been heard of for ..." She paused to think, to shrug. "Sixty or eighty millennia, at least. I thought she was lost."

"Did you hope it?"

Zorar gave her a quizzical glance. "Don't you remember?"

Yalnis looked away, ashamed. "I don't have all Zorargul's memories," she said. "I savored them—anticipated them. I didn't want to gobble them all up at once. It would be too greedy."

"How old are you now?" Zorar asked gently, as if to change the subject.

"My ship is eleven millennia," she replied. "In waking time, I'm twenty-five years old."

"You young ones always have to find out everything for yourselves," Zorar said with a sigh. "Didn't you ask Zorargul, when you took up with Seyyan?"

Yalnis stared at her, deeply shocked. "Ask Zorargul about Seyyan?" Zorar might as well have suggested she make love in a cluster of ships with the dome transparent, everyone looking in. It had never occurred to Yalnis to tell the companions each others' names, or even to wonder if they would understand her if she did. She had a right to some privacy, as did her other lovers.

"You young ones!" Zorar said with impatience. "What do you think memories are for? Are they just a toy for your entertainment?"

"I was trying to treat them respectfully!" Yalnis exclaimed.

Zorar snorted.

Yalnis wondered if she would ever be so confident, so well-established, that she could dispense with caring what others thought about her. She yearned for such audacity, such bravery.

"I asked about her, of course!" she exclaimed, trying to redeem herself. "Not the companions, but Shai and Kinli and Tasmin were all near enough to talk to. They all said, Oh, is she found? Or, She's a legend, how lucky you are to meet her! Or, Give her my loving regard."

"Tasmin has a daughter with her. She'd never hear anything against her. I suppose Seyyan never asked anything of Tasmin that she wasn't willing to give. Kinli wasn't even born last time anyone heard anything from Seyyan, and Shai . . ." She glanced down at her hands and slowly, gradually, unclenched her fists. "Shai fears her."

"She could have warned me."

"Seyyan terrifies her. Is she here?" She closed her eyes, a habitual movement that Yalnis did, too, when she wanted information from her ship's senses.

"No," Yalnis said, as Zorar said, "No, I see she's not."

"She said she would, but she changed her mind. It hurt my feelings when she disappeared without a word, and she never replied when I asked her what was wrong."

"She changed her mind after you mentioned Seyyan."

Yalnis thought back. "Yes."

"Would you have believed her, if she'd warned you?"

Yalnis remembered Seyyan's word and touch and beauty, the flush Yalnis felt just to see her, the excitement when she knew Seyyan looked at her. She shivered, for now all that had changed.

"I doubt it," she said. "Oh, you're right, I wouldn't have believed her. I would have suspected jealousy."

Zorar brushed away Yalnis's tears.

"What did she do to you?" Yalnis whispered.

Zorar took a deep breath, and drew up the gauzy hem of her shirt.

She carried the same companions as when she and Yalnis first met: five, the same number Yalnis had accepted. Yalnis would have expected someone of Zorar's age and status to take a few more. Five was the right number for a person of Yalnis's age and minor prosperity.

"You noticed this scar," Zorar said, tracing an erratic line of pale silver that skipped from her breastbone to her navel, nearly invisible against her translucently delicate skin. "And I shrugged away your question."

"You said it happened when you walked on the surface of a planet," Yalnis said. "You said a flesh-eating plant attacked you."

"Yes, well, one did," Zorar said, unabashed. "But it didn't leave that scar." She stroked the chin of her central little face. Just below her navel, the companion roused itself, blinking and gnashing its teeth. It neither stretched up aggressively nor retreated defensively. Yalnis had never seen its face; like the others, it had remained nearly concealed, only the top of its head showing, while Yalnis and Zorar made love.

Yalnis had thought the companions admirably modest, but now she wondered if their reaction had been fear.

Zorar pressed her fingers beneath the companion's chin, scratching it gently, revealing its neck.

The scar did not stop at Zorar's navel. It continued, crossing the back of the companion's neck and the side of its throat. "Seyyan claimed she behaved as she'd been taught. As she thought was proper, and right. She was horrified at my distress."

She stroked the companion's downy scalp. It closed its eyes.

Her voice hardened.

"I had to comfort her, she acted so distraught. *I* had to comfort *her*."

"She accused me of teasing and deceiving her," Yalnis said. "And she *killed* Zorargul."

Under Zorar's gentle hand, the scarred companion relaxed and slept, its teeth no longer bared.

"Perhaps she's learned efficiency," Zorar whispered, as if the companion might hear and understand her. "Or ... mercy."

"Mercy!" Yalnis exclaimed. "Cruelty and sarcasm, more likely."

"She killed Zorargul," Zorar said. "This one, mine, she left paralyzed. Impotent."

Yalnis imagined: Zorargul, cut off from her, unable to communicate with either pleasure or memory, parasitic, its pride destroyed. She gazed at Zorar with astonishment and pity, and she flushed with embarrassment. She had felt piqued when Zorar created Zorargul with a secondary little face, instead of with her first companion. Now Yalnis knew why.

Yalnis laid her hand on Zorar's. Her own fingers touched the downy fur of the damaged companion. Involuntarily, she shuddered. Zorar glanced away.

Could I have kept Zorargul? Yalnis wondered. No matter how much I loved Zorar ...

She thought Zorar was the bravest person she had ever met.

Would it be right to say so? She wondered. Any more right than to ask the questions I know not to ask: How could you—? Why didn't you—?

"What do you think, now?" Zorar said.

"I'm outraged!" Yalnis said.

"Outraged enough to tell?"

"I told you."

"You confessed to me. You confessed the death of Zorargul, as if it were your fault. Do you believe Seyyan, that you deceived her? Are you outraged enough to accuse her, instead of yourself?"

Yalnis sat quite still, considering. After a long while, she patted Zorar's hand again, collected herself, and brushed her fingertips across Zorar's companion's hair with sympathy. She kissed Zorar quickly and returned to her own ship.

. . . . .

Preparations, messages of welcome to old acquaintances, greetings to new ones, occupied her. Zorar's question always hovered in the back of her mind, and sometimes pushed itself forward to claim her attention:

What do you think, now?

While she prepared, the ships moved closer, extruded connections, grew together. Yalnis's ship became the center, till the colony obscured her wide vistas of space and clouds of stars and glowing dust. She felt her ship's discomfort at being so constricted; she shared it. She felt her ship's exhilaration at intense genetic exchange: those sensations, she avoided.

She continued to ignore Seyyan, but never rescinded her invitation. Yalnis's ship allowed no direct connection to Seyyan's glittering craft. Seyyan remained on the outskirts of the colony, forming her own connections with others. The ships floated in an intricately delicate dance of balance and reciprocity. As the people exchanged greetings, reminiscences, gifts, the ships exchanged information and new genetic code.

Most of their communications were cryptic. Oftentimes even the ships had no idea what the new information would do, but they collected and exchanged it promiscuously, played with it, rearranged it, tested it. The shimmery pattern of rainbow reflections spread from Seyyan's craft's skin to another, and another, and the pattern mutated from solid to stripes to spots.

Yalnis's ship remained its customary reflective silver.

"The ships have chosen a new fashion," Yalnis said.

"True," her ship said. Then, "False."

Yalnis frowned, confused, as her ship displayed a genetic sequence and its genealogy tag. Yalnis left all those matters to the ship, so she took a moment to understand that her ship rejected the pattern because it descended from Seyyan's craft. Her ship led her further into its concerns, showing how many new sequences it had considered but rejected and stopped taking in when it encountered Seyyan's tag.

"Thank you," Yalnis said.

"True."

That was a long conversation, between ship and human. She was glad it had ended without misunderstanding.

The ship did understand "Thank you," Yalnis believed, and Yalnis did understand its response of appreciation.

Maybe Seyyan was right, Yalnis said to herself. Maybe I *am* naïve. I feared direct assault, but never thought of a sneak attack on my ship.

She wondered if her encounter with Seyyan had changed the balance between the two ships, or if their estrangement had its own source. She wondered if she should try to exclude Seyyan's craft from the colony. But that would be an extreme insult, and Seyyan had more friends than Yalnis, and many admirers. She was older, wealthier, more experienced and accomplished, more limber of voice and of body.

"I trust your judgment," she said, remaining within the relative safety of simple declarative statements. She would leave decisions about Seyyan's craft to her own ship.

"True."

The shimmering new fashion continued to extend from Seyyan's to other craft, each vying with the next to elaborate upon her pattern.

Seyyan's popularity created a second center for the colony, decreasing the stability of the delicate rotation, but there was nothing to be done about it. It was ships' business, not people's.

Yalnis was ready. She made her last decisions, dressed in intricate lace, took a deep, shaky breath, and welcomed her guests.

Zorar arrived first, too well-established to concern herself with being fashionably late. Yalnis embraced her, grateful for her presence. Zorar kissed her gently and handed her a sealed glass ampoule.

"For your daughter's vineyard," she said. "I think the culture's improved even over what I gave your mother, when she launched you and your ship."

"Thank you," Yalnis said, honored by the gift. She put it on the central table, in a place of distinction.

More guests arrived; an hour passed in a blur of greetings, reunions, introductions, gifts. People brought works of art, stories, and songs. They brought ship silk as refined as fog, seeds of newly adapted plants, embryos of newly discovered creatures, unique cultures of yeast and bacteria. Yalnis accepted them all with thanks and gratitude. Her daughter would be well and truly launched; her ship would be rich, and unique.

Her guests ate and drank, wished each other long life and adventures, congratulated voyagers on their safe return. They exchanged compliments and gossip, they flirted, they told tales, they even bragged: Kinli had, of course, been on another great adventure that made all others pale by comparison. Guests complimented Yalnis's ship's cooking, especially the savory rabbit, and the complexity and quality of her wine. Everyone wore their best ship silk, and most, like Yalnis, wore lace so their companions could remain decently modest while watching the party. A few guests wore opaque garments to enforce a complete modesty; Yalnis thought the choice a little cruel. The very youngest people, recently debuted from solitary girl to adult, revealed their virgin midriffs.

Yalnis found herself always aware of the new connections leading from other ships to her living space.

The openings, glowing in the cool pastels of biological light, changed her living area from one of comfortable intimacy to one of open vulnerability.

Zorar handed her a glass of wine. Yalnis had based the vintage on the yeast Zorar gave her ship when it and Yalnis were born and launched.

Yalnis sipped it, glanced around, swallowed a whole mouthful. The effects spread through her. The companions squeaked with pleasure, leaning into her, absorbing the alcohol, yearning. She brushed her hand across the lace of her shirt. She had been neglecting the companions since Zorargul's murder. She drank more wine, and Zorar refilled their glasses.

Yalnis blocked out the rising level of conversation. She was unused to noise, and it tired her.

"What do you think?" she said.

Zorar raised one eyebrow. "That's the question I want you to answer."

"Oh," said Yalnis. "Yes, of course." She blushed at her misstep. "But I meant, about the wine."

"It's excellent," Zorar said, "as you well know. Your ship is of a line that seldom makes a recombinant error, and I can only approve of the changes. What about Seyyan? Did you ban her?"

"No. I want her here. So she knows she failed. Maybe she banned herself."

"Maybe she's trying to unnerve you. Or to wait till you drink too much."

Yalnis drained her glass again.

"Maybe if I do, I'll be ready for her."

She was ignoring the noise, but she noticed the sudden silence.

"And then I—" Kinli said, and stopped.

Seyyan stood in the largest new entryway, silhouetted by golden bioluminescence, her face shadowed, dramatized, by the softer party light. Yalnis's heart pounded; her face flushed.

"I thought she was so beautiful," Yalnis whispered to Zorar, amazed, appalled. She thought she whispered: a few people nearby glanced toward her, most amused, but one at least pale with jealousy for her relationship with the renowned adventurer.

If you only knew, Yalnis thought. I wonder what you'd think then?

Yalnis mourned the loss of the joy she had felt when Seyyan chose her, but she mourned the loss of Zorargul much more.

Seyyan strode into the party, greeting allies, her gaze moving unchecked past the few who had rejected her craft's fashionable offerings. Misty ship silk flowed around her legs and hips, shimmering with the pattern that newly decorated the flanks of so many craft. No one else had thought to apply it to clothing. She wore a shawl of the same fabric around her shoulders, over her breasts, across her companions.



But her hands were empty of gifts. Yalnis declined to notice, but others did, and whispered, shocked.

Then she flung back the end of the shawl, revealing herself from breastbone to pubis.

She had accepted more companions since she was with Yalnis. She bore so many Yalnis could not count them without staring, and she would not stare. Her gaze hesitated only long enough to see that the son-spot had erupted and healed over.

The other guests did stare.

How could any person support so many companions? And yet Seyyan displayed health and strength, an overwhelming physical wealth.

She turned to draw another guest from the shadows behind her. Ekarete stepped shyly into the attention of the party. Ekarete, one of the newly debuted adults, already wore new lace. Seyyan bent to kiss her, to slip her hand beneath the filmy panel of her shirt, so everyone would know that if she had neglected a launching gift for Yalnis's daughter, she had given a more intimate one to Ekarete.

Seyyan wanted Yalnis to know what had happened to the new companion, that she had easily found someone to accept it.

Seyyan whispered to Ekarete, drew her hand down her cheek, and continued toward Yalnis and Zorar. Ekarete followed, several steps behind, shy and attentive, excited and intimidated by her first adult gathering.

Seyyan's first companion, the assassin, protruded all the way to the base of his neck, eyes wide, teeth exposed and snapping sharply. Her other companions, responding to him, gnashed their teeth and blinked their eyes.

"What a pleasant little party," Seyyan said. "I so admire people who aren't caught up in the latest fashion."

"Do have some wine," Yalnis said. She meant to speak in a pleasant tone. Her voice came out flat, and hard.

Seyyan accepted a glass, and sipped, and nodded. "As good as I remember."

Yalnis wished for the ancient days Seyyan came from, when poison could still wreak havoc with a person's biochemistry, undetected till too late. She wished for a poisoned apple, a single bite, and no one ever to kiss Seyyan again.

Maybe I can have that last wish, she thought, and took action on her decision.

She let Zorargul's wound break open. The stab of pain struck through her. Her companions shrieked, crying like terrified birds, reacting to her distress. Blood blossomed through the lace panel of her shirt. All around her, people gasped.

Yalnis reached beneath the scarlet stain. Her hand slid across the blood on her skin. The wound gaped beneath her fingers.

Her body had treated Zorargul's sperm packet like an intrusion, an irritation, as something to encapsulate like the seed of a pearl. At the same time, the packet struggled for its own survival, extending spines to

remain in contact with her flesh. As it worked its way out, scraping her raw, she caught her breath against a whimper.

Finally the capsule dropped into her hand. She held it up. Her body had covered the sperm packet's extrusions with shining white enamel. All that remained of Zorargul was a sphere of bloody fangs. "This is your work, Seyyan," she said. Blood flowed over her stomach, through her pubic hair, down her legs, dripping onto the rug, which absorbed it and carried it away. Yalnis went cold, light-headed, pale. She took courage from Zorar, standing at her elbow.

"You took me as your lover," Seyyan said. "I thought you wanted me. I thought you wanted a companion from me. My lineage always fought for place and position."

"I wasn't at war with you," Yalnis said. "I loved you. If you'd asked, instead of . . ." She glanced down at the gory remains.

"Asked?" Seyyan whispered. "But *you* asked *me*."

Whispers, exclamations, agreement, objections all quivered around them.

Tasmin moved to stand near Seyyan, taking her side.

"You must have been neglectful," she said to Yalnis. "I think you're too young to support so many companions."

Seyyan glanced at Tasmin, silencing her. Anyone could see that Yalnis was healthy and well supplied with resources. She was her own evidence, and her ship the final proof.

As they confronted each other, the guests sorted themselves, most in a neutral circle, some behind Yalnis, more flanking Seyyan. Yalnis wished Shai had remained for the gathering. She might have sided with Seyyan, but the others might have seen her fear.

Ekarete, in her new lace shirt, moved shyly between the opponents.

"Seyyan was very gentle with me," she whispered. "She acceded to my choice." She twitched the hem of her shirt aside, just far enough, just long enough, to reveal the fading inflammation of a new attachment, and the golden skin and deep brown eyes of Seyyan's offspring, Ekarete's first little face.

"Very gentle," Ekarete said again. "Very kind. I love her."

"For giving you a cast-off?" Yalnis said. "For inducing you to take the companion I refused?"

Ekarete stared at her. Yalnis felt sorry for her, sorry to have humiliated her.

Tasmin stood forward with Ekarete. "Yalnis, you're speaking out of grief," she said. "You lost a companion—I grieve with you. But don't blame Seyyan or embarrass Ekarete. We all know Seyyan for her generosity. My daughter by her launched gloriously."

"You're hardly disinterested," said Yalnis.

"But I am," said Kinli, "and I know nothing against her."

Yalnis started to say, When did you ever listen to anyone but yourself?

Zorar yanked up the hem of her shirt, revealing the scar and her emasculated companion with its drooping mouth and dull eyes. It roused far enough to bare its teeth. It drooled.

The older people understood; the younger ones started in horror at the mangled thing, heard quick whispers of explanation, and stared at Seyyan.

"I loved you, too," Zorar said. "I told myself, it must have been my fault. I should have understood. *I* consoled *you*. After you did this."

"I came for a celebration," Seyyan said, holding herself tall and aloof. "I expect to be taken as I am—not ambushed with lies and insults."

She spun, the hem of her dress flaring dramatically, and strode away.

Ekarete ran after her. Seyyan halted, angry in the set of her shoulders; she paused, softened, bent to speak, kissed Ekarete, and continued away, alone. The main entrance silhouetted her formidable figure as she left Yalnis's ship.

Ekarete stood shivering, gazing after her, pulling the hem of her shirt down all the way around. Finally she scurried after her. Tasmin glared at Yalnis, heaved a heavy sigh, and followed.

The others, even Kinli, clustered around Yalnis and Zorar.

"You've spoiled your own party," Kinli said, petulant. "What now? A permanent break? A feud?"

"I shun her," Yalnis said.

"That's extreme!"

Yalnis hesitated, hoping for support if not acclaim. She shrugged into the silence. "If the community doesn't agree, why should she care if only I shun her?"

"And I," Zorar said, which made more difference to more people.

The light of the connecting corridors faded as she spoke. The openings slowly ensmallled. No one had to be told the party had ended. The guests hurried to slip through the connections before they vanished. Their finery went dim.

All around, the tables resorbed into the floor, leaving crumbs and scraps and disintegrating utensils. The rug's cilia carried them away in a slow-motion whirlpool of dissolving bits, into pores, to be metabolized. The gifts all sank away, to be circulated to the new ship.

Only Zorar remained. Yalnis's knees gave out. She crouched, breathing hard, dizzy. Zorar knelt beside her.

"I'm— I have to—"

"Hush. Lie back."

"But—"

"It's waited this long. It can wait longer."

Yalnis let Zorar ease her down. The ship received her, nestling her, creeping around and over her with its warm skin. The pain eased and the flow of blood ceased. The blood she had shed moved from her skin, from her clothes, red-brown drying specks flowing in tiny lines across the comforter, and disappeared.

She dozed, for a moment or an hour. When she woke, Zorar remained beside her.

"Thank you," Yalnis whispered. She closed her eyes again. She desperately wanted to be alone.

Zorar kissed Yalnis and slipped through the last exit. It sealed itself and disappeared.

Yalnis wanted only to go back to sleep. A thousand years might not be enough this time. She had never been among so many people for so long, and she had never been in such a confrontation. Exhaustion crept over her, but she must stay awake a little longer.

"I shun Seyyan," she said. Her companions quivered at her distress.

"True," the ship said, and let all its connections to all the other ships shrivel and drop away. The primary colony broke apart, resolving into individual ships. They moved to safer distances, and the stars reappeared above Yalnis's living space.

Seyyan's glittering secondary colony remained, with her craft protected in its center. None broke away to shun her. Yalnis turned her back on the sight. She no longer had anything to do with Seyyan.

"It's time," she said aloud.

"True," her ship replied. It created a nest for her, a luxurious bed of ship silk. It dimmed the light and mirrored the outer surface of the transparent dome. The stars took on a ghostly appearance. Yalnis could see out, but no one could see inside.

Yalnis pulled off her shirt. Her long hair tangled in it. Annoyed, she shook her hair free. She stepped out of her loose trousers. Naked, she reclined in the nest.

"Please, cut my hair."

"True," the ship said. The nest cropped her hair, leaving a cap of dark brown. The weight fell away; the strands moved across the carpet, fading to a dust of molecules.

Yalnis relaxed, gazed at her companions, and let her hand slide down her body. The little faces knew her intent. Each stretched itself to its greatest extent, into her and out of her, whispering and offering.

She made her choice.

Bahadirgul stretched up to seek her hand, moaning softly through its clenched sharp teeth. The other companions contracted, hiding their little faces in modesty or disappointment till they nearly disappeared. Yalnis stroked Bahadirgul's head, its nape, and caressed its neck and shaft. She opened herself to her companion.

The pleasure started slowly, spreading from Bahadirgul's attachment point deeper into her body. It reached the level of their ordinary couplings, which always gave Yalnis joy, and gave the companion days of pride and satiation. It continued, and intensified. Yalnis cried out, panting, arching her back. Bahadirgul shivered and extended. Yalnis and her companion released, and combined.

Their daughter formed. Yalnis curled up, quivering occasionally with a flush of pleasure, listening to their daughter grow. The pleasure faded to a background throb.

Inside her, her daughter grew.

Content, she nestled deeper into the ship silk and prepared to sleep.

Instead, the dome went transparent. Seyyan's colony of connected ships gleamed in the distance. The connecting pili stretched thin, preparing to detach and resorb.

Yalnis sighed. Seyyan was none of her concern anymore. She had sworn to take no more notice of her.

What happened next, Yalnis would never forget, no matter how many millennia she lived or how many adventures filled her memory.

The connections deformed, shifted, arched in waves. They contracted, forcing the craft closer even as they tried to separate and depart.

Seyyan commanded her supporters, and they discovered the limits of their choices. They tried to free their ships, tried to dissolve the connections, but Seyyan drew them ever nearer.

Seyyan's craft had infected their ships not only with beauty, but with obedience.

Tasmin's craft, old and powerful, broke free. Its pilus tore, shredding and bleeding. Yalnis's ship quivered in response to the sight or to a cry of distress imperceptible to people. The destruction and distraction allowed a few other people to overcome the wills of their craft and wrench away, breaking more connections. After the painful and distressing process, the freed craft fled into a wider orbit, or set a course to escape entirely from the star system and from Seyyan.

Person and ship alike suffered when fighting the illness of a malignant genetic interchange. Yalnis hoped they would all survive.

"What's she doing?" Yalnis whispered. Her ship interpreted her words, correctly, as a question for people, not for ships. It opened all her silenced message ports and let in exclamations, cries of outrage, excuses, argument, wild speculation.

Seyyan's craft gleamed and shimmered and proclaimed its ascension and gathered the remaining captives into a shield colony. With its imprisoned allies, it moved toward Yalnis and her ship.

Yalnis went cold with fear, shock, and the responsibility for all that had happened: she had brought all the others here; she had succumbed to Seyyan and then challenged her; she had forced people to take sides.

"Seyyan infected their defenses," Yalnis said. That's what the fashionable pattern was for, she thought. A temptation, and a betrayal.

"True," her ship replied.

Yalnis's ship moved toward Seyyan's craft. It quivered around her, like the companions within her. It had made its decision, a decision that risked damage. This was ship's business. Yalnis could fight it, or she could add her will to her ship's and join the struggle. She chose her ship.

Zorar followed, and, reluctantly, so did Tasmin's craft, its torn pili leaking fluid that broke into clouds of mist and dissipated in sunlit sparkles. The skin of the craft dulled to its former blue sheen, but patches of shimmering infection broke out, spread, contracted.

After all too brief a time, the stars vanished again, obscured by the coruscating flanks of Seyyan's shield. Yalnis's ship pushed dangerously into the muddle. Yalnis crouched beneath the transparent dome, overcome with claustrophobia. No escape remained, except perhaps for Seyyan.

Seyyan forced her captive allies to grow extensions, but when they touched Yalnis's ship, they withdrew abruptly, stung by its immune response. In appreciation, Yalnis stroked the fabric of her ship.

"True," her ship whispered.

Please, Yalnis thought, Seyyan, please, just flee. Let everyone go. Announce a new adventure. Declare that you've shamed me enough already, that you won our altercation.

She had no wish to speak to Seyyan, but she had an obligation. She created a message port. Seyyan answered, and smiled.

"Your shunning didn't last long," she said. "Shall I tell my friends to withdraw?"

Yalnis flushed, embarrassed and angry, but refused to let Seyyan divert her.

"What do you want?" Yalnis cried. "Why do you care anymore what I think? Leave us all alone. Go on more of your marvelous and legendary adventures—"

"Flee?" Seyyan said. "From *you*?"

Ekarete's craft, willingly loyal to Seyyan, interposed itself between Seyyan and Yalnis. A pore opened in its skin. A spray of scintillating liquid exploded outward, pushed violently into vacuum by the pressure behind it. The fluid splattered over the dome of Yalnis's ship. It spread, trying to penetrate, trying to infect. Yalnis flinched, as if the stuff could reach her.

Her ship shuddered. Yalnis gasped. The temperature in her living space rose: her ship's skin reacted to the assault, marshalling a powerful immune response, fighting off the infection. The foreign matter sublimated, rose in a foggy sparkle, and dispersed.

Seyyan lost patience. The flank of her craft bulged outward, touching Ekarete's. It burst, like an abscess, exploding ship's fluids onto the flank of Ekarete's craft. The lines of fluid solidified in the vacuum and radiation of space, then contracted, pulling the captive craft closer, drawing it in to feed upon. Ekarete's craft, its responses compromised, had no defense.

"Seyyan!" Ekarete cried. "I never agreed— How—" And then, "Help us!"

Seyyan's craft engulfed Ekarete's, overwhelming the smaller ship's pattern variations with the stronger design. The captive ship matched the captor, and waves of color and light swept smoothly from one

across the other.

"You must be put away," Yalnis said to Seyyan, and ended their communication forever.

Tasmin's craft, its blue skin blotched with shimmer, its torn connections hovering and leaking, approached Seyyan's craft.

"Don't touch it again!" Yalnis cried. "You'll be caught too!"

"She must stop," Tasmin said, with remarkable calm.

Yalnis took a deep breath.

"True," she said. Her ship responded to her assent, pressing forward.

To Tasmin, she said, "Yes. But you can't stop her. You can only destroy yourself."

Tasmin's ship decelerated and hovered, for Seyyan had already damaged it badly.

A desperate pilus stretched from the outer flank of Ekarete's ship. Yalnis allowed it to touch, her heart bounding with apprehension. Her ship reached for it, and the connecting outgrowths met. Her ship declined to fuse, but engulfed the tip to create a temporary connection. It opened its outgrowth, briefly, into Yalnis's living room.

The outlines of the younger craft blurred as Seyyan's ship incorporated it, dissolved it, and took over its strength. The pilus ripped free of Yalnis's ship and sank into the substance of Seyyan's craft.

Air rushed past Yalnis in a quick blast; the wind fell still as her ship clenched its pilus and resorbed it.

The shrinking pilus pulled Ekarete inside. Naked, crying, her hair flying, she held her hand over her stomach for modesty. Her palm hid the little face of her companion, muffling its squeals and the clash of its sharp teeth.

Maybe it will bite her, Yalnis thought, distracted, and chided herself for the uncharitable thought.

"How could she, how could she?" Ekarete said.

"Yalnis," Zorar said from the depths of her own ship, "what are you doing? What should I do?"

"Come and get me if we dissolve," Yalnis said. And then she wondered, Could I leave my ship, if Seyyan bests us? *Should I?*

If Seyyan had been patient, Yalnis thought, she might have persuaded her friends to defend her willingly. If she'd asked them, they might have agreed I'd outraged her unjustly. If she'd trusted them, they might have joined her out of love.

No shield colony had existed in Yalnis's lifetime, or in the memories of the lovers whose companions she had accepted: no great danger had threatened any group of people. A shield was a desperate act, a last effort, an assault. Extricating and healing the ships afterward was a long and expensive task. But Seyyan's friends might have done it willingly, for Seyyan's love. Instead they tore themselves away from her, one by one, desperately damaging themselves to avoid Ekarete's fate, but weakening Seyyan as well.

They dispersed, fleeing. Seyyan's craft loomed, huge and old, sucking in the antennae desperately growing outward from the vestiges of Ekarete's craft.

Ekarete cried softly as her ship vanished.

"Do be quiet," Yalnis said.

Until the last moment of possibility, Yalnis hoped Seyyan would relent. Yalnis and Zorar and Tasmin, and a few others, hovered around her, but she had room to escape. Seyyan's former allies gathered beyond the first rank of defense, fearful of being trapped again but resolving to defend themselves.

Yalnis's ship emitted the first wave of ship silk, a silver plume of sticky fibers that caught against the other ship and wrapped around its skin. Yalnis's ship balanced itself: action and reaction.

The other ships followed her lead, spraying Seyyan's craft with plume after plume: silver, scarlet, midnight blue, ultraviolet, every color but the holographic pattern their defenses covered. Seyyan's craft reacted, but the concerted effort overwhelmed it. It drew inward, shrinking from the touch of the silk to avoid allergic reaction. Gradually it disappeared beneath the layers of solidifying color.

Yalnis listened for a plea, a cry for mercy, even a shout of defiance. But Seyyan maintained a public silence.

Is she secretly giving orders to her allies? Yalnis wondered. Does she have allies anymore? She glanced over her shoulder at Ekarete.

Ekarete, creeping up behind her, launched herself at Yalnis, her teeth bared in an eerie mirror of her angry companion's. She reached for Yalnis's face, her hand pouring blood, and they fell in a tangle. Yalnis struggled, fending off Ekarete's fists and fingernails, desperate to protect her tiny growing daughter, desperate to defend her companions against Ekarete's, which was after all the spawn of Seyyan and her murderous first companion.

All the companions squealed and gnashed their teeth, ready to defend themselves, as aware of danger as they were of opportunity.

"Why are you doing this?" Yalnis cried. "I'm not your enemy!"

"I want my ship! I want Seyyan!"

"It's gone! She's gone!" Yalnis wrestled Ekarete and grabbed her, holding tight and ducking her head as Ekarete slapped and struck her. The companions writhed and lunged at their opponent. Their movements gave Yalnis weird sensations of sexual arousal and pleasure in the midst of anger and fear.

The floor slipped beneath her, startling her as it built loose lobes of ship silk. She grabbed one and flung herself forward, pulling the gossamer fabric over Ekarete, letting go, rolling free, leaving Ekarete trapped. The silk closed in. Yalnis struggled to her feet, brushing her hand across her stomach to reassure herself that her companions and her daughter remained uninjured. She wiped sweat from her face and realized it was not sweat, but blood, not Ekarete's but her own, flowing from a stinging scratch down her cheek.

Both she and her ship had been distracted. Seyyan's craft struggled against a thin spot that should have been covered by more silver silk from Yalnis's ship. The tangled shape rippled and roiled, and the craft



bulged to tear at the restraint. Glowing plasma from the propulsion system sputtered in tiny jets beneath the surface of the silk. The craft convulsed. Yalnis flinched to think of the searing plasma trapped between the craft's skin and the imprisoning cover.

"Finish it," Yalnis said to her ship. "Please, finish it." Tears ran hot down her face. Ekarete's muffled cries and curses filled the living space, and Yalnis's knees shook.

"True," her ship said. A cloak of silver spread to cover the weak spot, to seal in the plasma.

The roiling abruptly stopped.

Yalnis's friends flung coat after coat of imprisoning silk over Seyyan's craft, until they were all exhausted.

When it was over, Yalnis's ship accelerated away with the last of its strength. Her friends began a slow dispersal, anxious to end the gathering. Seyyan's craft drifted alone and silent, turning in a slow rotation, its glimmer extinguished by a patchwork of hardening colors

Yalnis wondered how much damage the plasma had done, how badly Seyyan's craft had been hurt, and whether it and Seyyan had survived.

"Tasmin," she said, quietly, privately, "will you come for Ekarete? She can't be content here."

Ekarete was a refugee, stripped of all her possessions, indigent and pitiable, squeaking angrily beneath ship silk like a completely hidden companion.

After a hesitation Yalnis could hardly believe, or forgive, Tasmin replied.

"Very well."

Yalnis saw to her ship. Severely depleted, it arced through space in a stable enough orbit. It had expended its energy and drawn on its structural mass. Between defending itself and the demands of its unborn daughter ship, it would need a long period of recovery.

She sent one more message, a broadcast to everyone, but intended for Seyyan's former friends.

"I haven't the resources to correct her orbit." She felt too tired even to check its stability, and reluctant to ask her ship to exert itself. "Someone who still cares for her must take that responsibility."

"Let me up!" Ekarete shouted. Yalnis gave her a moment of attention.

"Tasmin will be here soon," Yalnis said. "She'll help you."

"We're bleeding."

Yalnis said, "I don't care."

She pulled her shirt aside to see to her own companions. Three of the four had retracted, showing only their teeth. She stroked around them till they relaxed, dozed, and exposed the tops of their downy little heads, gold and copper and softly freckled. Only Bahadiregul, ebony against Yalnis's pale skin, remained bravely awake and alert.

Drying blood slashed its mouth, but the companion itself had sustained only a shallow scratch. Yalnis petted the soft black fur of Bahadirgul's hair.

"You're gallant," Yalnis said. "Yes, gallant. I made the right choice, didn't I?" Bahadirgul trembled with pleasure against her fingers, within her body.

When Bahadirgul slept, exhausted and content, Yalnis saw to her daughter, who grew unmolested and unconcerned; she saw to herself and to her companions, icing the bruises of Ekarete's attack, washing her scratches and the companion's. She looked in the mirror and wondered if she would have a scar down her cheek, across her perfect skin.

And, if I do, will I keep it? she wondered. As a reminder?

As she bathed and put on new clothes, Tasmin's ship approached, sent greetings, asked for permission to attach. Yalnis let her ship make that decision and felt relieved when the ship approved. A pilus extended from Tasmin's ship; Yalnis's ship accepted it. Perhaps it carried some risk, but they were sufficiently exhausted that growing a capsule for Ekarete's transport felt beyond their resources.

As the pilus widened into a passage, Zorar whispered to her through a message port, "Shall I come and help? I think I should."

"No, my friend," Yalnis whispered in reply. "Thank you, but no."

Tasmin entered, as elegant and perfect as ever. Yalnis surprised herself by taking contrary pride in her own casual appearance. Zorar's concern and worry reached her. Yalnis should be afraid, but she was not.

"Please release Ekarete," she said to her ship.

"True," it said, its voice soft. The net of silk withdrew, resorbed. As soon as one hand came free, Ekarete clutched and scratched and dragged herself loose. She sprang to her feet, blood-smeared and tangle-haired.

She took one step toward Yalnis, then stopped, staring over Yalnis's shoulder.

Yalnis glanced quickly back.

As if deliberately framed, Seyyan's craft loomed beyond the transparent dome of the living space, bound in multicolored layers of the heaviest ship silk, each layer permeated with allergens particular to the ship that had created it. Seyyan's craft lay cramped within the sphere, shrinking from its painful touch, immobilized and put away until time wore the restraints to dust.

Ekarete keened with grief. The wail filled Yalnis's hearing and thickened the air.

Tasmin hurried to her, putting one arm around her shaking shoulders, covering her with a wing of her dress.

"Take her," Yalnis said to Tasmin. "Please, take her."

Tasmin turned Ekarete and guided her to the pilus. The connection's rim had already begun to swell inward as Yalnis's ship reacted to the touch of Tasmin's with inflammation. Tasmin and Ekarete hurried

through and disappeared.

Seyyan's former friends would have to decide how to treat Ekarete. They might abandon her, adopt her, or spawn a new craft for her. Yalnis had no idea what they would choose to do, whether they would decide she was pure fool for her loyalty or pure hero for the same reason.

When the connector had healed over, leaving the wall a little swollen and irritated, when Tasmin's ship moved safely away, Yalnis took a long deep breath and let it out slowly. Silence and solitude calmed her.

"It's time, I think," she said aloud.

"True," replied her ship.

Yalnis descended to the growing chamber, where the daughter ship lay fat and sleek, bulging toward the outer skin. It had formed as a pocket of Yalnis's ship, growing inward. A thick neck connected the two craft, but now the neck was thinning, with only an occasional pulse of nutrients and information. The neck would part, healing over on the daughter's side, opening wide on the outer skin of Yalnis's ship.

Yalnis stepped inside for the first, and perhaps the only, time.

The living space was very plain, very beautiful in its elegant simplicity, its walls and floor a black as deep and vibrant as space without stars. Its storage bulged with the unique gifts Yalnis's guests had brought: new foods, new information, new bacteria, stories, songs, and maps of places unimaginably distant.

The soft silver skin of Yalnis's ship hugged it close, covering its transparent dome.

The new ship awoke to her presence. It created a nest for her. She cuddled into its alien warmth, and slept.

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She woke to birth pangs, her own and her ship's. Extensions and monitors retracted from her body.

"Time for launch," she said to her ship.

"True," it said, without hesitation or alternation. It shuddered with a powerful labor pang. It had recovered its strength during the long rest.

"Bahadirgul," Yalnis said, "it's time."

Bahadirgul yawned hugely, blinked, and came wide awake.

Yalnis and Bahadirgul combined again. The pleasure of their mental combining matched that of their physical combining, rose in intensity, and exceeded it. At the climax, they presented their daughter with a copy of Yalnis's memories and the memories of her lover Bahadir.

A moment of pressure, a stab of pain—

Yalnis picked up the blinking gynuncula. Her daughter had Bahadir's ebony skin and hair of deepest brown, and Yalnis's own dark blue eyes. Delighted, she showed her to Bahadirgul, wondering, as she always did, how much the companion understood beyond pleasure, satiation, and occasional fear or fury. It sighed and retreated to its usual position, face exposed, calm. The other companions hissed and blinked and looked away. Yalnis let the mesh of her shirt slip over their faces.

Yalnis carried her daughter through the new ship, from farm space to power plant, pausing to wash away the stickiness of birth in the pretty little bathing stream. The delicate fuzz on her head dried as soft as fur.

The daughter blinked at Yalnis. Everyone said a daughter always knew her mother from the beginning. Yalnis believed it, looking into the new being's eyes, though neither she nor anyone she knew could recall that first moment of life and consciousness.

By the time she returned to the living space at the top of the new ship, the connecting neck had separated, one end healing against the daughter ship in a faint navel pucker, the other slowly opening to the outside. Yalnis's ship shuddered again, pushing at the daughter ship. The transparent dome pressed out, to reveal space and the great surrounding web of stars.

Yalnis's breasts ached. She sank cross-legged on the warmmidnight floor and let her daughter suck, giving her a physical record of dangers and attractions as she and Bahadirgul had given her a mental record of the past.

"Karime," Yalnis whispered, as her daughter fell asleep. Above them the opening widened. The older ship groaned. The new ship quaked as it pressed out into the world.

"Karime, daughter, live well," Yalnis said.

She gave her daughter to her ship's daughter, placing the chubby sleeping creature in the soft nest. She petted the ship-silk surface.

"Take good care of her," she said.

"True," the new ship whispered.

Yalnis smiled, stood up, watched the new ship cuddle the new person for a moment, then hurried through the interior connection before it closed.

She slipped out, glanced back to be sure all was well, and returned to her living space to watch.

Yalnis's ship gave one last heavy shudder. The new ship slipped free.

It floated nearby, getting its bearings, observing its surroundings. Soon—staying near another ship always carried an element of danger, as well as opportunity—it whispered into motion, accelerating itself carefully toward a higher, more distant orbit.

Yalnis smiled at its audacity. Farther from the star, moving through the star's dust belt, it could collect mass and grow quickly. In a thousand, perhaps only half a thousand, orbits, Karime would emerge to take her place as a girl of her people.

"We could follow," Yalnis said. "Rest, recoup . . ."

"False," her ship whispered, displaying its strength, and its desire, and its need. "False, false."

"We could go on our adventure."

"True," her ship replied, and turned outward toward the web of space, to travel forever, to feast on stardust.

The End

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