

The Voyage Out

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i

'Do you want to dream?'

'No.'

The woman in uniform behind the desk looked at her screen and then looked at me, expressionless. I didn't know if she was real and far away; or fake and here.

'Straight to orientation then.'

ii

I walked. The Kuiper Belt Station -commonly known as the Panhandle- could afford the energy fake gravity requires. It wasn't going anywhere, it was spinning on the moving spot of a minimum-collision orbit, close to six billion kilometres from the sun: a prison isle without a native population. From here I would be transported to my final exile from the United States of Earth, as an algorithm, a string of 0s and 1s. It's illegal to create a code-version of a human being anywhere in the USE, including near-space habitats and planetary colonies. Protected against identity theft, the whole shipload of us, more than a hundred condemned criminals, had been brought to the edge: where we must now be coded individually before we could leave. The number-crunching would take a while, even with the most staggering computation power.

A reprieve, then. A stay of execution

In my narrow cabin, or cell, I lay down on the bunk. Walls, floor, fittings: everything was made of the same, grey-green, dingy ceramic fibre. The 'mattress' felt like metal to the touch, but it yielded to the shape and weight of my body. The raised rim made me think of autopsies, crushed viscera. A panel by my head held the room controls: just like a hotel. I could check the status of my vacuum toilet, my dry shower, my air, my pressure, my own emissions, detailed in bright white.

Questions bubbled behind my lips, never to be answered. I was disoriented by weeks of being handled only by automation (sometimes with a human face); never allowed any contact with my fellow prisoners. When did I last speak to a human being? That must have been the orientation on earth, my baggage allowance session. You're given a 'weight limit' -actually a code limit-, and advised when you've 'duplicated'. Gray's Anatomy; for old sake's sake. A really good set of knives, a really good pair of boots, a field first aid kit, vegetable and flower seeds. The Beethoven piano sonatas, played by Alfred Brendel; Mozart piano sonatas, likewise. The prison officer told me I couldn't have the first aid. He advised me I must choose the data storage device for my miminalist choice of entertainments, and specify the lifetime power source. He made me handle the knives, the boots, the miniaturised hardware, even the seeds. What a palavar.

But the locker underneath the bunk was empty.

Do you want to dream?

The transit would happen, effectively, in no time at all. I had no idea how long the coding would take. An hour, a week, a month? I thought of the others, dreaming in fantasy boltholes. Some gorging their appetites, delicate or gross. Some exacting hideous revenge on the forces that brought them here: fathers, mothers, lovers; authority figures, SOCIETY. Some even trying to expiate their crimes in virtual torment; you get all sorts in the prison population. None of that for me. If you want to die have the courage to kill yourself, before you reach a finale like this one. If you don't, then live to the last breath. Face the firing squad without a blindfold.

Scenes from my last trial went through my head. Me, bloody but unbowed of course, still trying to make speeches, thoroughly alienating the courtroom witnesses. My ex-husband making unconscious gestures in a small blank room, as he finally abandoned this faulty domestic appliance to her fate. He was horrified by that Death Row interview: I was not. I had given up on Dirk, utterly, long ago. Did he ever believe in me? Or was he just humouring my unbalanced despair, as he says now; in the years when we were lovers and best friends? Did he really twist his hands around like that, and raise them high, palm outwards, as if he faced a terrorist with a gun? I thought of the girl who had caught my eye, glimpsed as we sometimes glimpsed each other; waiting to be processed into the Panhandle system. Springy cinammon braids sticking out on either side of her head, that made her look like a little girl. Her eyes lobotomised. Who brushed her hair for her? Why would they waste money sending a lobotomy subject out here? Because it's a numbers game they're playing. The weaklings, casualties of the transit, may ensure, in some occult way, the survival of a few. Who may live long enough to form the foundation stones of a colony, on an earth-like planet of a distant star. Our fate: to be pole-axed and buried in the mud where the bridge of dreams will be built.

I wondered when 'orientation' would begin. The cold of deep space penetrated my thin quilt; the steady shift of the clock numerals was oddly comforting, like a heartbeat. I watched them until at some point I fell asleep.

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The Kuiper Belt station had been planned as the hub of an international deep space city. Later, after that project had been abandoned and before the Buonarotti Device became practicable, it'd been an R&R resort for asteroid miners, who would dock their little rocketships and party, escaping from utter solitude to get crazy drunk and murder each other (according to the legends). I thought of those old no-hopers as I followed the guidance lights to my first orientation session; but there was no sign of them, no scars, no graffiti on the drab walls of endless curving corridors. There was only the pervasive hum of the Buonarotti torus, like the engines of a vast majestic passenger liner forging through the abyss. The sound -gentle on the edge of hearing-made me shudder. It was warming up, of course.

In a large bare saloon, prisoners in tan overalls were shuffling past a booth; where a

figure in medical-looking uniform questioned them and let them by. A circle of chairs, smoothly fixed to the floor or maybe extruded from it, completed the impression of a dayroom in a mental hospital. I joined the line. I didn't speak to anyone and nobody spoke to me, but the girl with the cinammon braids was there; I noticed her. My turn came. The woman behind the desk, whom I immediately christened Big Nurse, checked off my name and asked me to take the armband that lay on the counter. 'It's good to know we have a doctor on the team,' she said. I had qualified as a surgeon but it was years since I'd practiced, other than as a volunteer 'barefoot' GP in Community Clinics for the underclass. I looked at the armband that said 'captain' and wondered how it had got there, untouched by human hand. Waldoes, robot servitors. . . It was disorienting to be reminded of the clunky, mechanical devices around here, that I was not allowed to see.

'Where are you in the real world?' I asked, trying to reclaim my dignity. I knew they had ways of dealing with the time-lapse, they could fake almost natural dialogue.

'Where is the Panhandle run from these days? Xichang? Or Houston? I'd just like to know what kind of treatment to expect, bad or worse.'

'No,' said Big Nurse, answering a different question. 'I am a bot.' She looked me in the eye, with the distant kindness of a stranger to human concerns. 'I am in the information system, nowhere else. There is no treatment, no punishment here, Ruth Norman. That's over.'

I glanced covertly at my companions, the ones already hovering around the day-room chairs. I'd been in prison before, I'd been in reform camp before. I knew what could happen to a middle-class woman, in jail for the unimpressive 'crime' of protesting the loss of our civil liberties. The animal habit of self-preservation won out: I slipped the band over the sleeve of my overalls. Immediately a tablet appeared, in the same place on the counter. It was solid when I picked it up.

I quickly found out that of the fourteen people in the circle (there were eighteen names listed on my tablet; the missing four never turned up), less than half had opted to stay awake. I tried to convince the dream-deprived that I had not been responsible for the mix-up, I asked them all to answer to their names. They complied, surprisingly willing to accept my authority; for the moment.

'Hil. . .de. . .' said the girl with the cinammon braids, struggling with a tongue too thick for her mouth: a sigh and a guttural duh, like the voice of a child's teddy-bear, picked up and shaken after long neglect. The braids had not been renewed, fuzzy strands were escaping. Veterans of prison-life glanced at each other uneasily; nobody commented. There was another woman who didn't speak at all -so lacking in response you wondered how she'd found her way to the dayroom.

We were nine women, four men and one female-identifying transexual (to give the Sista her prison-system designation). The details on my tablet were meagre: names, ages, ethnic/national grouping. Mrs Miqal Rohan was Iranian and wore strict hejabi dress, but spoke perfect, icy English. 'Bimbam' was European English, rail thin, and haunted by some addiction that made her chew frantically at the inside of her cheek. The other native Englishwoman, a Caribbean ethnic calling herself Servalan (Angela Morrison, forty three), looked as if she'd been institutionalised all her life. I had no

information about their crimes. But as I entered nicknames, and read the qualifications or professions, I saw a pattern emerging, and I didn't like it. Such useful people! How did you all come to this pass? By what strange accidents did you all earn mandatory death sentences or life-without-parole? Will the serial killers, the drug cartel gangsters, and the re-offending child rapists, please identify yourselves?

I kept quiet, and waited to hear what anyone else would say.

The youngest of the men (Koffi, Nigerian; self-declared 'business entrepreneur'), asked, diffidently, 'Does anyone know how long this lasts?'

'There's no way of knowing,' said Carpazian, who was apparently Russian, despite the name: a slim and sallow thirtysomething; still elegant in the overalls. 'The Panhandle is a prison system. It can drug us and deceive us without limit.'

The man who'd given his handle as Drummer raised heavy eyes and spoke, sonorous as a prophet, from out of a full black beard. 'We will be ordered to the transit chamber as we were ordered to this room; or drugged and carried by robots in our sleep. We will lie down in the Buonarotti capsules, and a code-self, the complex pattern of each human body and soul, will be split into two like a cell dividing. The copies will be sent flying around the torus, at half-light speed. You will collide with yourself and cease utterly to exist at these co-ordinates of space-time. The body and soul in the capsule will be annihilated, and know GOD no longer.' 'But then we wake up on another planet?' pleaded Servalan, unexpectedly shy and sweet from that coarsened mask.

'Perhaps.'

The prophet resumed staring at the floor.

'Isn't it against your religion to be here, Mr Drummer?'

That was 'Gee', a high-flier, corporate, who must have got caught up in something very sour: a young and good-looking woman with an impervious air of success even now. I marked her down as a possible trouble-maker, and tried to start a conversation about survival skills. But that quickly raised another itchy topic. Is there really no starship? Not even a lifepod? Are we really, truly meant to pop into existence on the surface of an unknown planet, just as we stand?

'No one knows what happens,' said 'Flick'; another younger woman, with impressive quals, and a completely blank cv. 'The ping signal that registers a successful transit travels very, very fast, but it's timebound. They've only been shipping convicts out of here for five years. It'll be another twenty before they know for certain if anyone has reached the First Landfall planet, dead or alive-'

When Big Nurse's amplified voice told us the session was over, and we must return to our cells, my tablet said that two hours had passed. It felt like a lot longer; I was trembling with fatigue. I went over to the booth while the others were filing out.

'Take the armband from me,' I muttered.

Annihilation, okay. Six billion kilometres from home, a charade set up around the lethal injection: whatever turns you on, oh fascist state authority that ate my country, my world and its freedoms. . . But I refused to accept the role the bastards had dumped on me. I did not stand, I will not serve. I didn't dare to resign, I knew the rest of them wouldn't take that well. The system gives, the system better take away.

'I cannot,' said Big Nurse, reasonably. 'I am a bot.'

'Of course you can. Make this vanish and appoint the next trustee on the list.'

Software in human form answered the question that I hadn't asked. 'All good government tends towards consensus,' she said. 'But consensus operates through forms and structures. Leader is your position in this nexus. The system cannot change your relation to the whole.'

The girl with the braids was shuffling out, last. She walked as if she was struggling through treacle: through the veil I saw a young, limber body, full of grace. I could not stop myself imagining the springy crease between her bottom and her thigh, and how it would move. I swallowed hard, and abruptly changed my mind.

Live to the last breath. Play the game, what does it matter?

In my cell, the ration tray that had been waiting for me in the 'morning', when I woke, had disappeared. Another prison meal had arrived. I ate it. I had a drinking fountain in a niche in my wall, and the water tasted sweet. My God, what luxuries!

Aside from the four people who never turned up, everyone attended the dayroom, including Drummer and the unresponsive woman. Most of us were playing the game to ward off madness and the abyss. Some of us genuinely got interested in setting up the ground rules for a new world: I couldn't tell the difference; not even in myself.

Carpazian said we would need an established religion.

'Religion,' he reasoned, 'is not all bad. It contains the incomprehensible in human life. People need deities, doorkeepers between the real and unreal. And the Buonarotti device has made the world stranger than people ever knew before.'

I don't think he meant to do it, but he started something. Mike, the fourth man, said he'd heard that the Panhandle was haunted by murdered prospectors. Flick said she'd felt someone in her cell with her, invisible, watching her every move-

'They say the Buonarotti Transit broke something open,' offered Koffi. 'They say it unleashed monsters. And here we are right next to the torus.'

We shouted him down, we rationalists (including Carpazian). We were all feeling vulnerable. It was hard not to get creeped out, with the ever-present hum of that annihilation wheel, Big Nurse our only company; and the knowledge that we had been utterly abandoned. We were little children, frightened in the dark.

I decided to go and see Hilde. We were all quartered on the same corridor, and the doors had nameplates. We were free to make visits, other people were doing it. I didn't know how to make myself known, so I just knocked.

The door slid open. She stared at me, and began to back away.

'Do you mind if I come in?'

She gestured consent, zombie-slow, and embarked on the difficult task of clambering back onto her bunk. There was nowhere else so I sat there too, at the foot of her bed. She fumbled with the room controls, the door closed, we were alone together. It felt perilous, uncertain; but not in a nightmare way.

'I just wanted to say, the sessions are obviously a strain. Is there anything I can do? Nothing's compulsory, you know.' Her braids were fuzzed all over, after days without any attention. I wanted to ask did she have a comb.

'I . . .am. . . Not like this. . .willingly. . .Captain.'

Beads of sweat stood on her brow, by the end of that momentous effort. Her eyes were dark, her lashes long and curling. Her mouth was very full, almost too much for her narrow face to bear. She would have been pretty, a misfit, awkward prettiness, if there had been any life in her expression.

'Oh no!' I cried, consternated by her struggle. 'I'm not the boss, please: the system did that to me, I'm not checking up on you. I meant-'

What did I mean? I could not explain myself.

'Do you have a comb?'

'Ye'uh. . . Ma'am.'

She clambered slowly down again, groped inside the dry shower stall and brought out a dingy ceramic fibre comb, Panhandle issue. Her hand flailed piteously as she tried to hand it over; and yet the same thought flashed on me as had come when I first saw her. She was untouched. She was not only the youngest member of my 'team', she was nothing like the rest of us, outlaws fallen from high places. She had been cared for, loved and treasured; and become a zombie on Death Row without ever losing that bloom. It was a mystery. What the hell had she done? Was she a psycho? What had made this gentle nineteen-year-old so dangerous?

'Turn around.'

I loosened her braids, combed out her wilful mass of hair and set it in order again, as if I were her mother. It was the sweetest thing. I was glad she was turned away, so she couldn't see the tears in my eyes.

'There. That'll do for a while.'

She faced me again, another painful, laborious shift. 'Th. . .an'. . .you.'

I had run out of excuses to touch her. 'Shall I come again?'

She struggled fiercely. 'Yes. . . I like. . . that.'

iv

The fourth session was a practical. We had been warned on our room screens, but it came as a shock. The dayroom chairs and the booth where Big Nurse sat had gone: as soon as the fourteen of us had arrived the doors closed and we were plunged into a simulation. A grassy plain, scattered trees, and a herd of large animals coming over the horizon. Disoriented, bewildered, we co-operated like castaways. The consensus decided to treat these furred, pawed, sabre-toothed, bison-things as potential transport. We tried to catch a young one, so we could tame it. My God, it was a disaster but it was fun. I had to set a broken bone. Koffi, tough guy, got through it without any pain-relief, we discussed bottom-up pharmacology and bull-riding. Sista and Angie (who had announced that she no longer wanted to be called Servalan) started bunking together, and no retribution descended. Gee hustled me for a simulated childbirth drama: thankfully I had no control over what the system chose to throw at us. I found out I'd been wrong about Bimbam the addict. She was a former school teacher, amateur mule. She was not addicted to any recreational drug. Her problem was a little girl of seven, and a little boy of five, from whom she'd been separated for two years. In prison on earth she'd had visiting rights, on screen.

Now she would never see them again. She crawled back towards life, carrying the wounds that would never heal. Drummer, too, crawled back to life. He asked us to call him Achmed, his real name. But he would never be easy company: a man who believed himself damned to all eternity, separated from GOD.

Once, I walked along the curving corridor and saw someone oddly familiar, oddly far in the distance, coming to meet me: a trick of perspective. I was mystified by a huge feeling of foreboding, then saw that it was myself. I was walking towards myself. I turned and ran; another figure ran ahead of me, always at vanishing point. I reached my own cabin, my nameplate. I clutched at the glassy surface of the door, sweating.

We all had experiences. They were difficult to dismiss.

I woke in the 'night' and heard someone crying out in the corridor. I went to see, hoping that it would be Hilde and I would comfort her. It was the elegant and controlled Carpazian, crouched in a foetal curl, sobbing like a baby.

'Georgiou? What is it?'

'My arm, my arm-'

'What is it? Are you in pain?'

He was nursing his right arm, he pushed up the overall sleeve and showed me the skin. 'I cut myself. I have no secret weapon, the ceramic won't cut you; I used my teeth. I was keeping tally of the 'days' and 'nights' in blood, hidden under the rim of my bunk. It's gone. I have asked the woman called Gee, she says I never had a mark on me. I've fucked her but she isn't real. This place is haunted, haunted-'

It wasn't like him to use a word like 'fucked'. There wasn't a scratch on his right arm, or his left. 'It's the torus,' I said. 'It's warming up. That's where the strange phenomena come from, they're all in our minds. Don't let it get you down.'

'Captain Ruth,' he whispered, 'how long have we been here?'

We stared at each other. 'Three days,' I said firmly. 'No, four.'

The Russian shook his head. 'You don't know. . . What if it isn't the torus? What if something got out, what if something is with us, messing with us?'

'Maybe the ghost of one of the old prospectors? I think I'd like that. You're the Patriarch, what should we do, your holiness? Hold a séance, try to make contact with the tough old bird?'

He went back to his cell, and I went back to mine. I wondered if the system itself was telling us something, through these spooky hints. That nothing is real? That only what Drummer called the soul, subtle distillation of mind and body, exists?

Hilde invited me to her cabin. Some of us were treating the Panhandle as a Death Row singles bar, and why not? Carpazian was being kept busy, and Koffi and Mike; nobody had dared to approach Drummer aka Achmed. As captain I got to know these things. . . I knew it couldn't be that. The girl couldn't possibly be making a sexual approach, but I was unspeakably nervous.

I'd been protecting her, covertly, with signs of my approval, being careful not to make her into teacher's pet. I'd had her on my team in the simulation room, things

like that. Small, threatened groups are hungry for scapegoats. I knew I wasn't the only one who'd been wondering why she'd been kept under such heavy medication. She was certainly a different person, after five days clear (or was it four?). There was light in her eyes, energy in her movements. It was enough to break your heart, because something told me she had never been free, never in her life: and now this child would go into the void without ever having walked down a street, bought an ice-cream, skinned her knee, played ball, climbed a tree.

We chatted about the animal-taming. She was going to confess something, I was sure; but I wouldn't rush her. I wanted to offer to comb her hair again.

'I don't believe it,' I said. 'This is too much.'

'You don't believe that First Landfall exists?'

I shook my head, letting my hand rest on the faintly warm 'mattress' where her body had lain. Tastes and smells are the food of the gods; and touch too-

'No, I can believe they've been identifying habitable planets hundreds of light-years away. I can grasp the science of that idea, and the science that says earth-like planets are bound to exist, though we know for a fact that there's nothing within our material reach except hot and cold rocks; or giant gas-balloons-'

She nodded. She had no life experience but she was not ignorant or stupid. She'd proved that in our sessions, as she came out from under the drugs.

'I can even, just about, believe that the torus can send us there, in some weird way that means new bodies will automatically be generated when we make landfall.'

The void opened when I said that. None of us really believed we would wake again.

The transit was a fairytale, disguising annihilation, annihilation-

I shook my head solemnly, pulling the conversation around. 'But I cannot, no, I'm sorry. . . I've tried, but your captain cannot believe in the gruffaloes.'

The tawny bison-things, with the clawed paws and sabre teeth, had instantly been named gruffaloes. Hilde began to giggle, helplessly. We laughed, leaning close together, white mice trying to understand the experiment. Gallows humour!

'If we wake on that plain,' said Hilde, and she stopped smiling. 'It will be the first time I've ever been outdoors in my life.'

Here it comes, I thought.

'Your hair's a disgrace again,' I said. 'Do you want me to comb it?'

'I'd love that,' she said. She reached for the comb, which was lying on the bunk: moving light and limber, with the grace that I'd seen like a ghost in the shell, when she was drugged to the eyeballs. But she didn't hand it over.

'No. . . Wait, I want to tell you something. I have to look at you while I tell you. I have a termination-level genetic disease.'

'Ah.' I nodded, shocked and relieved. So this was the secret.

'My parents are. . . I mean they were. . . members of a church that didn't allow pregnancy screening. Their church believed all children should be born, and then tested. So, when I was born they found out there was something wrong with me and my parents took me away, to a city; because the elders would have turned us in.

When I was old enough to notice that I was different from the children on my tv, my mother and father told me I was allergic to everything, and I would get sick and die if I ever set foot outside my bedroom door. I never wondered why no doctors ever

came, if I was so ill. I accepted the world the way it was.'

'What happened?'

'I don't know.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'I don't know, Ruth. I remember my sixteenth birthday, and then it's like a thick blank curtain with holes torn in it. A lot of screaming and crying and slamming doors. A hospital corridor, a horrible jacket that wrapped my arms together, another room where they never let me out. . . .' She shook her head. 'Just blurred scenes in a nightmare, until I was here.'

'What about your parents?'

'I suppose they got found out, I suppose they're in prison.'

'Do you remember what they thought was wrong with you? You said "termination-level". Who told you that? What gave you that idea?'

She wiped away the tears before they could fall. I saw her struggle, the way she'd struggled to speak the last time I was in here. This time she lost the fight.

'I can't remember. I know my parents never said it, maybe I heard something in the hospital, or I saw something on the tv.' She pressed her fist to her mouth, the knuckles staring white. 'I don't know, but I'm scared.'

The nail that sticks out will be hammered down. The USE saw certain 'traits' as enemies of the state. Not all of the proscribed genes were life-threatening.

'You don't have to be scared. They don't send just any condemned criminals to the Panhandle, Hilde. We have to be aged between eighteen and forty, and normally fertile. If you'd had a termination-level genetic disease you'd have been sterilised as soon as they spotted you; and you wouldn't be here.'

This beautiful girl was a recessive carrier for some kind of cancer they were trying to stamp out, or some condition that wouldn't harm her until she was fifty and past child-bearing. She'd been condemned like rotten meat by bad science-

I hoped I'd reassured her. Destroyed by longing, I was having trouble keeping my voice level. I was afraid I sounded cold and unsympathetic-

'If we have to be fertile, what about Sista?'

I shook my head. 'She's never had a re-assignment, she couldn't afford it. It's all cosmetic. She's classified as a normal male by the prison system.'

I wanted to hold her but I didn't dare to touch her. I despised the crude thrumming in my blood, the shameful heat in my crotch. Thankfully Hilde was too intent on her confession to notice me; still convinced that she was some kind of pariah. Poor kid, hadn't she grasped we were all pariahs together?

'You d-don't have anything about m-my criminal record on your tablet?'

'Not a thing.'

This was absolutely true. I had professional profiles, listed qualifications for ten prisoners who were far from ordinary (including myself). Hilde was one of the four non-violent common criminals, all young women, who seemed to have been added to the mix at random: nothing recorded except their names and ages.

'Oh. All right. But, but there's something. . . .' She drew a breath, like someone about to dive into deep water, jumped down and opened her locker.

I'd better go-

I couldn't say that, it betrayed me. I tried to frame a safer exit line. Hilde climbed back into the tray where I'd imagined blood and viscera, in my own cabin, the first

'night'. Her hands were full of slippery, shining red stuff.

I thought I was hallucinating. Her locker should be empty. All our lockers were empty, we had no material baggage-

'What-?'

'I found this,' she said. 'In my locker. There's a green one and a blue one, as well.' She was holding up a nightdress, a jewel-bright nightdress, scarlet satin with lace at the bodice and hem. 'I know it shouldn't be there, you don't have to tell me, I understand about the transit. Ruth, please help me. What's going on-?'

We'd all had strange experiences, but nothing so incongruous, and nothing ever that two people shared. I touched the stuff, I could feel the fabric, slippery and cool. 'I don't know,' I said. 'Strange things happen. Better not think about it.'

'My parents used to buy me pretty night clothes. When I was a little girl I imagined I could go to parties in my dreams, like a princess in a fairytale.' She hugged the satin as if it were a favourite doll; her eyes fixed on mine. 'If anyone had asked, when I was drugged, what I most wanted to take with me, I might have said, my nightdresses, like that little girl. But why can I touch this?'

'It's the torus. It's messing with our minds.'

It flashed on me that the veil was getting thin, orientation was nearly over. Hilde knelt there with her arms full of satin and lace. 'I've never even kissed anyone,' she said.

'Except my Mom and Dad. But I've had a life in my mind. . . I know what I want, I know you want it too. There's no time left. Why won't you touch me?'

'I'm thirty seven, Hilde. You're nineteen. You could be my daughter.'

'But I'm not.'

So there was no safe exit line, none at all. I kissed her. She kissed me back. The texture of her hair had been a torment. The touch of her mouth, the pressure of her breasts, drenched me, drowned me. I'd had men as lovers, and they'd satisfied my itch for sex. I'd hardly ever dared to expose myself to another woman, even in outlaw circles where forbidden love was accepted. But nothing compares to the swell of a woman's breast against my own, like to like-

There were laws against homosexuality, and the so-called genetic trait was proscribed. But you could get away with being 'metrosexual', as long as it was just a lifestyle choice; as long as you were just fooling around. As long as you were rich, or served the rich, and made ritual submission by lying about it, the USE would ignore most vices. I held her, and I knew she'd guessed my secret, the unforgiveable crime behind my failed marriage, my catalogue of civil disobedience. I can only love women. Only this love means anything to me, like to like. No 'games' of dominance and subordination that are not games at all. No masters, no slaves, NO to all of that- My sister, my daughter, put your red dress on. Let me find your breasts, let me suckle through the the slippery satin. Undress me, take me with your mouth and with your hands, forget the past, forget who we were, why we are here. We are virgin to each other, virgins together. We can make a new heaven and a new earth, here at the last moment, on this narrow bed-

When I went back to my own cabin, I found a note on my room control message board. It was from Carpazian.

Dear Captain Ruth,

Something tells me our playtime is nearly over. When we dead awaken, if we awaken, may I respectfully request to be considered for the honour of fathering your first child. Georgiou.

I laughed until I cried.

v

Hilde's bunk became a paradise, a walled garden of delight. We danced there all the ways two women can dance together, and the jewel-coloured nightdresses figured prominently, absurdly important. I didn't care where they had come from, and I didn't understand what Hilde had been trying to tell me.

Everyone knew, at once: the team must have been keeping watch on whose cabin I visited. I was as absurdly important as those scraps of satin. Mike and Gee came to see me. I thought they wanted to talk about pregnancy. It was a genuine issue, with all this rush of pairing-up. We didn't know if we were still getting our prison-issue contraception, which was traditionally delivered in the drinking water. None of us women had had a period, but that didn't mean much. They wanted to deliver a protest, or a warning. They said 'people' felt I ought to be careful about Hilde. I told them my private life was my own affair

"There's a hex on us," said Mike, darkly. "Who's causing it?"

"You mean the strange phenomena? How could any of us be causing them? It's the torus. Or the Panhandle system, keeping us off balance to keep us docile."

Gee made more sense. "She's not clear of the drugs yet, Captain. I can tell. There's got to be a good reason she was kept under like that."

The hairs rose on the back of my neck; I thought of lynch-mobs.

'Yeah, sure. We're all criminals, you two as well. But it's over now.'

After that deputation I sent a note to Carpozian, accepting his honourable proposal, should such a time ever come, and made sure I sent it on the public channel. Maybe that was a mistake, but I was feeling a little crazy. If battlelines were drawn, the team better know that Hilde and I had allies, we didn't stand alone.

We had a couple of very dark simulations after that, but we came out of them well. I felt that the system, my secret ally, was telling me that I could trust my girl.

The unresponsive woman woke up, and proved to be an ultra-traditional Japanese (we'd only known that she looked Japanese). She could barely speak English; but she immediately convinced us to surround ourselves with tiny rituals. Whatever we did had to be done just so. Sitting down in a chair in the dayroom was a whole tea-ceremony in itself. It was very reassuring.

Angie said to me, strange isn't wrong, Ruth.

Miqal, the Iranian, came to my cabin. Most of them had visited me, on the quiet, at one time or another. She confessed that she was terrified of the transit itself. She had heard that when you lay down in the Buonarotti capsule you had terrible, terrible dreams. All your sins returned to you, and all the people you had betrayed. The thrum of those subliminal engines filled my head, everything disappeared. I was walking along the curving corridor again, my doppelganger at vanishing point; but the corridor was suspended in a starry void. The cold was horrific, my lungs were

bursting, my body was coming apart. I could see nothing but Miqal's eyes, mirrors of my terror-

The hejabi woman clung to me, and I clung to her.

"Did it happen to you?" we babbled. "Did it happen to you-?"

"Don't tell anyone," I said, when we were brave enough to let go.

Carpazian was right, the stay of execution was over, and any haunting would have been better than this. We lived from moment to moment, under a sword.

H15750, N310, O6500, C2250, Ca63, P48, K15, S15, Na10, Cl6, Mg3, Fe1,

Trace differences, tiny differences, customising that chemical formula into human lives, secrets and dreams. The Buonarotti process, taking that essence and converting it into some inexplicable algorithm, pure information. . .

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"We'll have what we've managed to carry," I said. "And no reason why we shouldn't eat the meat and vegetables, since our bodies will be native to Landfall."

"We could materialize thousands of miles apart," said Hilde.

"Kitty says it doesn't work like that."

Kitty, the woman whose nickname had been 'Flick', had come out of a closet of her own. She was, as I had always known but kept it to myself, a highly qualified neurochemist. Take a wild guess at her criminal activities. I'd had to fight a reflex of disgust against her, because I have a horror of what hard drugs can do. She and Achmed knew more than the rest of us put together about the actual Buonarotti process. Achmed had refused to talk about it, after his first pronouncement, but Kitty had told us things, in scraps. She said teams like ours would 'land' together, in the same physical area, because we'd become psychically linked.

We were in Hilde's cabin. She was lying on top of me in the narrow bunk, one of the few comfortable arrangements. It was the sixth 'night', or maybe the seventh. She stroked my nose, grinning.

"Oh yes, Captain. Very good for morale, Captain. You don't know."

"I don't know anything, expect it's cold outside and warm in here."

I tipped her off so we were face to face, and made love to her with my eyes closed, in a world of touch and taste. My head was full of coloured stars, the sword was hanging over me, fears I hadn't known I possessed blossomed in the dark. What's wrong with her, what kind of terminal genetic error? Why was she condemned, she still has amnesia, what is it that she doesn't dare to remember? Oh they will turn you in my arms into a wolf or a snake. The words of the old song came to me, because I was afraid of her, and my eyes were closed so I didn't know what I was holding- The texture of her skin changed. I was groping in rough, coarse hair, it was choking me. It changed again; it was scale, slithery and dry. I shot upright, shoving myself away from her. I hit the light. I stared.

My God.

"Am I dreaming?" I gasped. "Am I hallucinating?"

A grotesque, furred and scaly creature shook its head. It shook its head, then slipped and slithered back into the form of a human girl in a red nightdress.

"No," said Hilde. "I became what you were thinking. I lost control-"

Hilde; something else, something entirely fluid, like water running.

"I told you I had a genetic disease. This is it."

"Oh my God," I breathed. "And you can read my mind?"

Her mouth took on a hard, tight smile. She was Hilde, but she was someone I'd never met: older, colder, still nineteen but far more bitter.

"Easily," she said. "Right now it's no trick."

I fought to speak calmly. "What are you? A... a shape-changer? My God, I can hardly say it, a werewolf?"

"I don't know," said older, colder Hilde, and I could still see that fluid weirdness in her. "My parents didn't know either. But I've thought about it and I've read about the new science. I've guessed that it's like Koffi said, do you remember? The Buonarotti Transit takes what Carpazian calls the soul apart: and it has unleashed monsters.

Only they don't "happen" near the torus—they get born on earth. The government's trying to stamp them out, and that's what I am. I didn't mean to deceive you, Ruth. I woke up and I was here, knowing nothing and in love with you—"

I wanted to grab my clothes and leave. I had a violent urge to flee.

"You didn't tell me."

"I didn't know! I found the nightdresses, I knew that was very strange, I tried to tell you, but even then I didn't know. The memories only just came back."

"Why did they send you out here? Why didn't they kill you?"

"I expect they were afraid." Hilde began to laugh, and cry. "They were afraid of what I'd do if they tried to kill me, so they just sent me away, a long, long way away.

What does it matter? We are dead, Ruth. You are dead, I am dead, the rest is a fairytale. What does it matter if I'm something forbidden? Something that should never have breathed?"

Forbidden, forbidden... I held out my arms, I was crying too.

Embrace, close as you can. Everything's falling apart, flesh and bone, the ceramic that yields like soft metal, the slippery touch of satin, all vanishing—

As if they never were.

vi

Straight to orientation, then. There were no guards, only the Panhandle system's bots, but we walked without protest along a drab greenish corridor to the Transit Chamber. We lay down, a hundred of us at least, in the capsules that looked like coffins, our gravegoods no more than neural patterns, speed-burned into our bewildered brains. I was fully conscious. What happened to orientation? The sleeve closed over me, and I suddenly realised there was no reprieve, this was it. The end.

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I woke and lay perfectly still. I didn't want to try and move because I didn't want to know that I was paralysed, buried alive, conscious but dead. Oh I could be bounded in a walnut shell and count myself the king of infinite space. I had not asked for a dream, but a moment since I had been in Hilde's arms. Maybe orientation hasn't begun yet, I thought, cravenly. The surface I was lying on did not yield like the ceramic fibre of the capsule, there was cool air flowing over my face and light on my eyelids. I opened my eyes and saw the grass: something very like blades of bluish,

pasture grass, about twenty centimetres high, stirred by a light breeze.

The resurrected sat up, all around me: like little figures in a religious picture from Mediaeval Europe. The team was mainly together, but we were surrounded by a sea of bodies, mostly women, some men. A whole shipload, newly arrived at Botany Bay. The romance of my dream of the crossing was still with me, every detail in my grasp; but already fading, as dreams do. I saw the captain's armband on my sleeve. And Hilde was beside me. I remembered that Kitty had said teams like ours were linked. Teams like ours: identified by the system as the leaders in the consensus. I'd known what was going on, while I was in the dream, but I hadn't believed it. I stared at the girl with the cinnamon braids, the shape-changer, the wild card, my lover. If I'm the captain of this motley crew, I thought, I wonder who *you* are. . .