

## BREEZE FROM THE STARS

by Mary Rosenblum

**Mary Rosenblum has published SF novels and short stories since 1990. She has been a Hugo nominee and a winner of the Compton Crook Award. Mary lives and writes on country acreage where she also trains dogs. Her novels, *Horizons* from Tor Books and *Water Rites* from Fairwood Press, were released this past year. You can find out more about her books at her website [[www.maryrosenblum.com](http://www.maryrosenblum.com)]. In her new tale for us, she shows us what it might be like to direct space traffic while experiencing the...**

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Everybody in the graduating class went to The Hole where the working jocks hung out, up high near the hub on the NYUp orbital to celebrate ... or gripe ... when the rock jock postings went up. Sanya and Jorge got drunk fast, they had no tolerance to anything, and were already hooting and pushing each other around in the near-micro-g of the tiny bar. They'd been posted as new members of NYUp's elite Team One. Well, they had the reflexes of rock jocks, all right. But so did he. Jeri huddled back in the shadows, nursing a beer flavored with raspberries from the hub gardens. Up this high, where no tourists wandered, the walls were curved, no corners, and if you pushed a bit, you could bounce off the ceiling in the marginal gravity. The beer seemed to rise up into his head instead of going *down* and he felt drunk even after just half a bag. Not giddy, just a little disconnected from reality.

He sure wasn't celebrating. Wasn't sure why the hell he'd come. Jeri sucked another mouthful of bitter raspberry brew from the bag.

"Your face says *washed out*." A tall rock jock with tawny skin and a lot of fiber light tattoo-work drifted over. "But the wash-outs do their cryin' over in the Blue Moon." She put a decorated arm over his shoulder, breathed beer in his face. "What happened? You get posted to New Singapore and you hate Islam?"

He thought about shoving her arm off, didn't. Each tattoo meant a hit. He studied an emerald green Celtic knot, wondering what it meant. She might have taken out a piece of junk ... a floater, a danger to the orbital platforms or the traffic between. It might have been a rock coming in. Might have been a pirate raider carrying serious hardware. Rock jocks whacked whatever the dispatchers sent 'em to.

"I could take your mind off your bad post. Hey, you'll feel better when you're out hottin' after a rock anyway."

"Yeah." He didn't look at her. "Only they stuck me with a dispatch dock. Why? I had the best hit record in our class."

"Dispatch?" The arm withdrew. "They don't train jocks and put 'em on the cans to dispatch."

“Good.” He drained the last of his beer. “Go tell Delfinio that, will you?”

“Delfinio? *That* Dispatch.” Her tone capitalized it and made him look up, finally. She was nodding.

“When’s your birthday, kid?”

“Huh?”

“Let me guess ... somewhere between November 30 and December 17, right?”

“Yeah. December 5, so what?” He stared at her, waiting for the punch line.

“You’re an Ophiuchus. Like a Cancer or Aries, you know? The woo-woo zodiac thing. Only it’s some weird thirteenth house.”

He didn’t get it, kept his face still, not gonna help her to trip him into the punch line. Stupid coming here tonight. Should have just gone to the dorm and to bed. Oh, get it over with. He sighed. “That isn’t one of the Zodiac signs,” he said. “I’m a Sagittarius. As if it mattered.”

“Oh, it’s a sign all right. And it matters.” The jock winked at him. “To Delfinio at least. That’s why he picked you. He has this thing about Ophiuchus and people who are born in that sign. But look at it this way, Delfinio *is* Dispatch. The crews on the platforms just play backup. You’re at the center of the universe, bro. Del’s got eyes all over his bod ... never misses a molecule.” Her eyes narrowed and she looked past his shoulder. “Speak of the devil.” She chuckled, slapped him on the shoulder so that he nearly flew out of the hammock seat. “Keep your pants on, honey.” And wove her way through the crowded bar with the gliding grace of a native upsider who had never set foot on Earth.

He looked where she had looked, saw people in the bar move, give space, the way you only saw it when someone big walked the hallways in the orbital platforms. This little, skinny gnome with a naked skull, a micro-g body, and the big eyes and narrow face that said he had some Gypsy genes in him walked into that space. The Gypsies weren’t quite human ... so the talk said ... and the look made him old, because the Gypsies had left for the Oort in the Departure, years ago. He glided through the empty, respectful space, ignoring the murmured greetings, came right up to Jeri. Looked him straight in the face.

“Jeri Annunciato-Sontag?” His voice was high and reedy.

“Yeah.” Everyone was staring at them. “That’s me.”

“Let’s go.” The gnome twitched one narrow shoulder. “Save the cities the cost of a shuttle lift out to your post tomorrow.” He looked at the empty beer bag in Jeri’s hand. “Unless you need to get drunker first?”

Jeri spotted the rock jock with the light tattoos grinning from the edge of the

crowd. Bowed in her direction. “Sure, Delfinio,” he said and sailed the empty beer bag toward the bar. “Why not? Let’s get to work.”

“Oh, too soon yet.” A wide grin stretched Delfinio’s face. “But we can go home now. Work when you know your butt from a black hole.”

Jeri followed him out of The Hole. He felt as if he pushed through an invisible skin that sealed behind him, shutting him out of the warm, close world of Sanya, Jorge, and the other jocks he’d trained with. The rock jock—he’d already forgotten her name—winked. But she was on the other side of that skin, too. He didn’t return it.

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Delfinio shuttled them over to Dispatch in a slightly larger version of a jock pod, an egg with the spiderweb harness designed to keep you intact no matter what your pod was doing. Jeri had already had the navigation-interface implanted, way back when he passed into the program, so when Delfinio passworded them into the system, the hull vanished and Jeri found himself floating in vacuum, facing the blue-white disc of Earth. Even after all his training flights, the sight always brought a rush of awe clear up from his toes to choke him for an instant. The slowly spinning can that was Dragon Home caught the sunlight along the planet’s far perimeter, spangled with lights and buzzing with traffic. Not far from the orbital platform, the gleaming ribbon of the Elevator shimmered like a silver thread rising up from the planet’s blue surface, the terminal like a jeweled bead at the end.

I was going to spend my life out here, Jeri thought and another wave of resentment rolled through him. Now he was going to spend it inside a can, sending his former buddies out to chase rocks and pirates. So what if Delfinio was the primo dispatcher. This was still a dispatch job.

“You didn’t intend to become Dispatch,” Delfinio agreed as the pod accelerated and the webbing tightened around Jeri’s body. Like the jock, he capitalized the word. “No fun chases. No hunt and capture. No shoot ‘em up.” Delfinio cackled.

Great, a mind reader. Jeri wondered if Delfinio was a high-number empath. That’s all he needed ... get shut up in a can with someone who could read his every emotional shift. But if Delfinio overheard that, he didn’t say anything about it.

It didn’t take long to reach Dispatch. An even larger version of the egg-shaped jock pods, its matte black hull emerged suddenly from the star-sprinkled space between cans. The pod docked like silk, not a jar as it merged with the smart-alloy hull of Dispatch. A whisper of breeze told Jeri that the atmospheres were one. He didn’t need that whisper. He smelled ... well ... living space. Delfinio freed himself from his web with a single, fluid motion, kicked off, and arrowed through the port that had opened in the joined hulls. Jeri untangled himself and pushed after, feeling clumsy and slow compared to Delfinio’s fluid moves.

Dispatch didn't offer much. He hung up on the port and surveyed. Curved hull walls of off-white immediately bored him. Controls and decorations would be in virtual and he didn't have the password yet. A grav-gym occupied space and he counted two privacy closets that he could just about bet on would contain a simple micro-g hammock, the kind you'd sleep in if you rode a miner out in the 'roid belt. "There's nothing here." He didn't try to hide his surprise. "This is central dispatch, right? I mean, if you're processing all the input, sending it out to the platform dispatchers, where are the others?"

Delfinio hovered in front of a section of curved hull without answering. Jeri recognized a kitchen wall ... drink dispensers, meal oven ... the whole works.

"You want to eat?" Delfinio didn't look at him. "Or you want more to drink? You can get plastered tonight." He turned and bared his teeth at Jeri. "Not after tonight. But I think you will not wish to, eventually."

"I'm not hungry." Jeri pushed off too hard, arrowed across the space, rebounded from the hull beside the kitchen wall, managed to spill his momentum with a somersault. None of this made sense. "I want to know what this is and why the hell I'm here."

"Do you believe in Hell?" Delfinio sounded genuinely curious. He pushed away from the kitchen wall, a tube of gelatinous, pale goo in his hands. He sucked from it. "Gym you saw when you came in, you sleep in this space." He touched open one of the closets, nodded at the micro-g hammock Jeri had expected. "The rest of your question you will answer yourself. So what Hell do you believe in?" He looked expectant. Like a pet waiting for a treat.

This was *Dispatch*? Jeri stared at the crazy old man for a moment. Couldn't be. "What about my birthday? Does that matter?"

"Oh, he's a smart one." Without seeming to move a muscle, Delfinio somersaulted slowly and precisely in place. "I saw Zai talking to you. She told you."

"No, she didn't." Jeri looked around the floating closet, his mind full of stars and vacuum and the blue-white loom of Earth. Lost to him. "She just said it mattered. What the hell has my birthday got to do with my ending up here?"

"It is never wise to invoke something that you do not wish to experience." Delfinio blinked slowly. "As to your birthday, you were born up here on NYUp platform. In the sign of Ophiuchus."

"What has that got to do with anything? And I never heard of that zodiac sign and I mean who cares, anyway?" He stared at the slack hammock. "I had the best hit record in the class."

"Anyone can hit a rock." Delfinio somersaulted again, unmoving, violating a whole lot more laws of physics. "Seeing what is out there to hit is talent. Go to bed,"

he said. “Go to sleep and dream.”

“Dream of what?” Jeri said, but he muttered it under his breath and Delfinio didn’t answer.

Instead, he gave Jeri a password that allowed him to decorate the Dispatch walls to his taste and to see the control fields, although Delfinio told him he was locked out until he learned how to use them.

Jeri thought about landscapes to paint on the walls of the pod. Settled for a view of Earth, with the New York Up platform visible, and the glittering thread of the Elevator. Just to remind himself of what he wasn’t doing. He wondered if Delfinio knew what he had chosen, had a feeling that the old gnome did, but if so, he made no comment. Delfinio finished his goo and then floated silently in the center of the space, his eyes glazed, curled into a loose fetal position.

Checking sensors? Watching for hazards so he could send the jocks out? It sure didn’t look like he was doing much of anything.

Jeri went to bed, even though the raspberry beer buzzed in his blood and he wasn’t really sleepy.

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He didn’t dream ... not really. But at some point he woke to the soft darkness of his hammock with the sense that he had been listening to a murmured conversation. Delfinio, he thought, talking to himself. Almost before he could think this, he slid back into slumber and didn’t wake again until the light in his hammock increased slowly and the sound of music woke him.

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“Did you sleep well?” Delfinio floated near the kitchen wall, eating cubes of flavored tofu. He was upside down to Jeri’s orientation, silhouetted by the Earthscape with which Jeri had decorated the hull. Jeri didn’t change his position as he touched himself a squeeze of black tea from the wall. Let Delfinio change *his* orientation. He waited for Delfinio to ask him if he had dreamed, but instead, the old gnome simply went on eating, popping the pale cubes of soy curd into his mouth, chewing and swallowing without spilling a molecule.

Jeri sucked hot tea, sighed, and toed off the wall, torquing himself into a matching orientation with Delfinio. “I didn’t dream,” he said.

“Today, you get to surf the sensors with me.” Delfinio’s eyes crinkled. “You will dissolve. You will cease to exist and for a time ... it will be hard. But I will put you back together. And then you will begin to comprehend Dispatch.”

Jeri drew a deep breath. “Look, I know I’ve been ... angry about being here. I guess I still am. And I don’t understand anything. What makes this so special when all four platforms have twenty-four-seven crews watching the sensors?” He drew

another breath, saw not one flicker of response in Delfinio's pale eyes. "Would you explain about the zodiac thing? If I was supposed to dream something last night ... I didn't. So maybe you have the wrong person."

Without warning, without seeming to move a muscle, Delfinio drifted suddenly close. Jeri couldn't quite control his flinch and it set him drifting slowly toward the wall. He flushed as Delfinio followed, a few centimeters separating them, so close that he felt the heat radiating from Delfinio's flesh.

"You felt it." Delfinio drifted suddenly away, so that the space between them opened to a comfortable gap. "You are the right choice." His smile broadened, transforming his face. His eyes sparkled and Jeri had the sudden feeling that he was looking through twin windows into the sky of another world. Then Delfinio somersaulted, caught the kitchen wall, and looked over his shoulder at Jeri with a wink. "Breakfast," he said. "You will need it. What do you want to eat? I will tell you about the zodiac and your birth as you eat." Without waiting for Jeri's answer, he touched a tray of fruit and a hi-protein bagel from the wall, sailed it neatly to Jeri.

"Ophiuchus is a constellation," Delfinio began as Jeri popped the lid on the tray. "It is called the Serpent Bearer and is not part of the zodiac. You know why?" Delfinio's body seemed to rotate around his head until he was oriented at right angles to Jeri. "Back when the Babylonians invented the zodiac more than 3000 years ago, the sun passed through only twelve constellations ... the zodiac everyone knows." He cackled, drifting gently until he faced Jeri upside down. "But the precession of the Earth makes it appear that the sun now passes through thirteen houses. And the thirteenth, the one you were born into ... is Ophiuchus."

"So what?" Jeri picked the fat green grapes from the tray, one by one. Someone had told him that on Earth, grapes grew only the size of his thumb. Puny. "Who cares about zodiac signs? That's like magic ... fortune tellers, you know? And it's downsider stuff anyway." He popped another grape into his mouth, swallowed. "I mean, maybe it makes a good pickup line downside, but not up here."

"It made a good pickup line for you." Delfinio's eyes twinkled at Jeri's scowl. "But it is not about magic ... or perhaps it is, depending on how you look at it." He snatched a grape from Jeri's tray, sucked it from his palm and swallowed. "Now ... in a small window of time in the first part of December ... an interstellar wind sweeps over us, a helium wind flowing into the solar system from the direction of Ophiuchus. The sun's gravity and spiraling magnetic field focuses the material into a cone and Earth passes through it during the first weeks of December. We're inside the cone now." He smiled. "It flows over us ... the debris from the birth of stars." His pale eyes bored into Jeri's. "That is why I chose you now. It is easier for you to hear its voice."

"I ... didn't hear any voice. "Jeri clutched the tray as if it might blast off. "I told you. I didn't dream."

“You heard it last night and you heard it as you evolved from fish to monkey in the ancient sea of your mother’s womb.” Delfinio nodded and helped himself to another grape. “It changed you, that voice, and now you will listen to it again and learn to hear it forever. And learn to see. You will be good at this,” he said, and pivoted, drifting gently away. “Finish your breakfast. I am going to exhaust you today.”

As soon as Jeri finished the bagel and the last of the grapes, Delfinio passworded him into Dispatch.

“Don’t worry,” Delfinio said as the walls shimmered and warped around Jeri. “You cannot make any mistakes. You can only watch and begin to process.” He snickered. “There will be a quiz.”

About time to see the sensor controls, Jeri thought. Then, the walls of Dispatch vanished and...

...he dissolved.

A million simultaneous images crashed into his brain and he simply vanished into them. In a microsecond, he *was* NYUp, Dragon Home, New Singapore, Euro Two, black cans spinning, spangled with light, ship traffic, spilled garbage and lost tools, rocks caught in Sol’s grip, dust, jock pods, shuttles...

He gasped, struggled to process, dizzy, his stomach clamping down on the grapes and chewed bread. Too many ... the images blurred together and he seemed to spin down into chaos.

*Relax.* Delfinio’s voice in his ear. *Don’t try. You must dissolve. I will not let you get lost.*

Words didn’t make any sense ... Jeri sucked in breaths ... one, two, three ... all time suspended.

*Relax. Don’t look. Listen. Let the images themselves tell you what they are.*

Hand touching him. Warm. Comforting. Jeri focused on that one, tangible sense and his breathing steadied. Don’t look, he thought. How do you do that? He remembered a game he’d played with his best friend, Aimee, back when he was little. You looked at special pictures ... blurry dots. And if you relaxed your eyes just right ... a picture emerged.

He tried it. Relax. Relax your eyes, your mind, don’t try to find any patterns, let go. He wasn’t sure if he was thinking this or someone was telling him ... Delfinio? For a long time nothing happened, then, in an instant...

...it changed.

He saw the picture.

Just for a second. Just a glimpse. He was looking everywhere, all at once, in all directions, seeing *everything*. All at once. Then it all dissolved into chaos again.

“Very good.” Delfinio’s voice sounded in his ear. “I told you. You would see it. I told you. You are the right one.”

Jeri blinked, struggling to focus. Delfinio’s face filled his vision, bright with triumph, close enough to kiss. He shoved away, automatic reaction, and they drifted apart, Delfinio giggling. The hull slapped his back, and he rebounded before he could grab for an anchor, his reflexes slow. “What happened?” he mumbled, his tongue thick, feeling as if he had been drugged.

“It’s all right. It takes some time for the neural pathways to adjust. It interferes with speech for a short time.”

“*What* interferes?” Fear flooded him.

“Do you know what Dispatch is?” Delfinio pushed off, did one of his utterly precise halts in front of Jeri. “Do you understand what just happened?”

Jeri shook his head no, not trusting his voice.

Delfinio floated in front of him, his pale eyes full of ... compassion. “We have a thousand thousand AI eyes out there, from the asteroid belt inward. To look for rocks falling, for the dropped tool, the bit of broken rubble that will hole a platform or destroy a shuttle. The eyes look for pirates, illegal shuttles. A million eyes. How do you think Dispatch works?” Delfinio’s voice was gentle.

“A ... a program. Looks at all the images. You ... send out the jocks.”

“No.” Delfinio cupped Jeri’s face between his palms. “That is what the platform dispatcher teams rely on, but they are too slow. No. You have to see what *needs seeing*. A computer ... the best AI ... is too slow. It must look at everything. I ... you ... do not need to. As you learn, you will begin to see only what needs seeing.”

Jeri moved his head in a short arc of disbelief.

“And that is why my pickup line was Ophiuchus.” Delfinio smiled. “Because the breeze from the stars has to touch you at the right time in your mother’s womb before you can see what needs seeing. Before you can see with the eyes of the universe.” He looked sad, suddenly. “It does not touch all its children in the same way.”

None of this made any sense and Jeri concentrated on not throwing up and totally disgracing himself.

“It is overwhelming ... the first few times.” Delfinio’s hands were on him again, pushing him gently. “You will find it easier with practice. Sleep now. You



have done enough today. You have dissolved. Now we will begin to put you back together. This has been a good first lesson.”

Webbing brushed his face. His hammock. Delfinio webbed him in and his hands were gentle and too familiar and Jeri didn't much care. He had never felt this drained in his life, fell instantly into sleep. Later he woke to Delfinio's hands again, this time holding a packet of juice to his lips. He drank it, tasted things in it that weren't juice, and went back to sleep. In his dreams he chased after bits of junk that zipped around as if under power, trying to rip holes in the platforms. And all the time he chased them, he felt ... attention.

As if he was not alone.

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Time passed in a blur of exhaustion that never got any better. Jeri woke to Delfinio's face, hating him as he forced Jeri to down food that he didn't taste, then passworded him in, dissolving him again and again in a universe so vast that sometimes he thought that he had ceased to exist. Emerging, spent, he ate what Delfinio placed in his hands, slept, dreamed, and woke to do it all again.

Each time ... he *saw* more easily. Each time he saw ... less.

He stopped seeing everything all at once. In glimpses at first, then more and more often, the overwhelming images faded away and he saw only the threats. Junk. Rocks. Once, a ship slipping like a predator between the shadows of the platform cans where a ship did not belong. He sent out the jocks, that time, with Delfinio's supervision. He didn't dream at night anymore, simply slept.

And then, one morning, when he passworded in ... it worked.

He saw it. All of it. From the outer edges of Near Earth Orbit inward, as familiar as his family's apartment growing up on NYUp, as familiar as Delfinio's face. The little rocks drifting inward stuck out like strangers. Without thinking he pointed at one that was about to cross into a shipping lane. "Singapore Six," he said because they were closest and it was their turn up in the rotation of rock jock teams.

*Gotcha*, Six's dispatcher murmured over Jeri's implanted com link. *On our way, Dispatch.*

Jeri startled.

Because it had been ... like breathing. He hadn't once thought about what he was doing. And Six's dispatcher had responded to his point as it showed up on their direct link. Six had called him "Dispatch."

Delfinio wasn't passworded in. Jeri realized it and quickly passworded out. No Delfinio. He had vanished. Panic ... totally illogical panic 'cause where could he go? ... speared him. Jeri pushed off, somersaulted off the hull beside Delfinio's privacy closet, and slapped a palm against the lock plate. The hull cleared and there

he was, webbed into his hammock. Asleep. Holographic letters glowed in a rich, plum purple in the air beside him.

*It is a big job for one. The platform dispatchers cannot see it all, so it has been a long time since I have merely slept. It is your shift. We will celebrate when I wake. Congratulations, Dispatch.*

Jeri toed himself back from the doorway and the hull opaqued behind him. One alone. He thought about that as he passworded himself back into the system, skimmed the universe of Near Earth Orbit easily, effortlessly, thoroughly. Felt a ghostly shimmer through his flesh, as if a breeze passed through his cells, unhampered.

“What are you?” he whispered. “What am I?”

Felt that breeze, but no answer.

He did the shift and it was a long one. He passworded out to pee, to drink some juice, to eat something. But always, even when he was out, the images hung just inside his consciousness, a ghostly overlay on the walls of reality that he skimmed with the part of his mind that wasn't busy eating, or peeing, or drinking juice.

And he wondered how long Delfinio had lived like this.

An eternity later, Delfinio reappeared, his eyes gleaming, chuckling to himself as he selected a huge meal from the kitchen wall. “You'll have to learn to stop listening now,” he told Jeri as he sucked at a pint of guava juice. “When you need to sleep. It will take you some time, but there are two of us now. We will take turns.”

“I hope I can do it.” Jeri drifted, his head full of the ghostly presence of the Near Earth universe. “Delfinio ... what is it? What am I feeling?”

“The voice of the universe?” Delfinio rotated slowly in place. “I'm not laughing at you. I don't know either.” He sucked the last drops of guava from the bag, sailed it into the recycle slot. “You will feel it most strongly when the Earth's magnetic field funnels the helium wind down through the gravity well. So perhaps it is helium atoms speaking?” He took a big bite from a curried tofu slab without losing a crumb. “But it has changed you, that wind or voice. Forever.” Upside down to Jeri's orientation he wagged a finger at him. “You will always *see*. You will always *know*. You have heard that whisper of the universe since your cells began to divide, but you did not know how to listen or to see. Now, you know.”

Jeri closed his eyes, trying to banish the ghostly glimmer of Near Earth. “There's a bunch of junk ... nearly inside the...”

“I got it,” Delfinio said with his mouth full. Lost tawny crumbs of curried tofu, made a face. “I'll send Dragon Home's crew out in a moment. It's not really going to be a threat for another seventeen minutes. I'm on shift now. Tell yourself that.

Really *know* it and let go.” Deftly, he snatched crumb after tiny, drifting crumb from the air, sucking them from his fingertips. “You are very tired. I have exhausted you for four weeks now.”

Had it been that long? Blearily, Jeri tried to count days, but they blurred into a haze of sleeping and trying to sort through images. “It’s going to be like this forever?”

“Yes.” Delfinio tossed the empty tofu wrapper into recycle, did one of his impossible rotations until he faced Jeri on the same orientation. He put his hands on Jeri’s shoulders, gently, ignoring Jeri’s flinch. “It is not always a burden. Look,” he said softly. “Not for the junk. Look ... outward.”

“What do you mean?” Jeri blinked at him, wanting to push away from those long fingers on his shoulders. “We don’t have sensors out beyond Near Earth.”

“You don’t understand yet.” Delfinio smiled at him gently, softly, lovingly. “Just ... look. Look for Saturn. Look past Saturn. You’re not looking for junk. Just *look*.”

Jeri looked. It was like breathing now ... *look*.

“No.” Delfinio sounded exasperated. “Stop looking *at* and just *look*.”

Which made no sense. But Delfinio had said Saturn and he knew where it was. So he looked, remembered how it was when Delfinio first passworded him in to dissolve, didn’t *try* to see, just looked *out* and waited to see what happened.

Nothing.

Nothing.

And then...

...the universe opened like a flower unfurling. Stars, galaxies, planets whizzed past, with glimpses of brown/white/gray/green/blue. He was falling into forever, heard someone yell, realized dimly it was his voice, felt Delfinio’s arms around him.

“Look, just look,” Delfinio breathed in his ear. “You’re not lost, you’re right here.”

He saw ... forever.

“Come back now. That’s enough.”

Jeri blinked, his stomach curling with loss, cramped walls curved around him. Dumb, he stared into Delfinio’s eyes. Not windows into an alien sky, no. Windows into forever.

“It is not always a burden ... finding the trash.” Delfinio kissed him gently on

the forehead. “You get to truly see.”

“I saw ... worlds,” he whispered. “Blue. That’s water, right?”

“I don’t know.” Delfinio grinned, showing all his teeth. “I’ve never looked that close. Why?” His shrug didn’t move him one centimeter. “I can’t go there. You can look close if you want.”

He had seen worlds, infinite universes. He thought of the blue and white planets, the green and tawny ones. Flinched as Delfinio touched him.

“It’s like getting drunk,” Delfinio said softly. “Only *sometimes*. Only when you’re not looking for junk.” Darkness threaded his words ... no ... it was sadness. “Or you really will dissolve. It will suck out your soul and leave nothing behind.”

And Jeri shivered, hearing a reason why Delfinio looked for junk alone.

“I think you will be fine.” Delfinio grinned again, pushed him so that Jeri drifted toward the little shuttle lock. “Take the shuttle and go back to The Hole. You did not really celebrate your graduation and you should do that. You do not need to pay. They will never let you pay, now.” His grin widened. “Set the shuttle on auto and it will bring you home safely.”

Home. Jeri looked around the small ovoid of Dispatch. Looked back at Delfinio. “Thanks,” he said and hesitated, because he had been about to refuse. “Yeah, I’ll go.”

“Go get drunk. Find Zai. She had her eye on you.” Delfinio cackled. “When you’re all done, it’s my turn. It has been a long time since I have drunk bitter beer at The Hole.”

“What happened to your last trainee?” Jeri paused outside the shuttle. “Or am I the first?”

“Oh, not the first.” Delfinio looked away.

When it became clear he wasn’t going to say more, Jeri left.

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It was as Delfinio said. He pushed into The Hole and Sanya and Jorge were there with some of their off-duty NYUp teammates drinking beer and being as silly as Jeri remembered from training. They hollered and whooped when they saw him and the barkeep handed him a bag of beer as he made his way over to them through the crowded bar and waved away his attempt to pay. He had had no time for the Gym and even the slight gravity of The Hole dragged at him and made his joints ache.

“Hey, this is our buddy from training.” Sanya slapped him on the back, three tiny lightfiber roses gleaming on her left arm. Hits. “Hey, send me after some good stuff, will you?” She laughed. “I want something better than lost wrenches and junk.”

You guys, Jeri's Dispatch, can you believe it?"

They had no idea what Dispatch really was, but they were suitably impressed and for a time, he and Sanya and Jorge traded training stories of stupid mistakes, pranks, and good hits. He drank the beer and it was fun for awhile.

But it wasn't the same. He caught their brief sideways looks, read the hint of tension in Jorge's shoulders. He didn't belong here. The talk had turned to gossip and orbital politics and Jeri sat listening, looking into the invisible bubble of camaraderie. Outsider. Silently he finished his beer. Everything hurt with a subtle nagging ache and in spite of the buzz of beer in blood, the images of platforms, shuttles, and drifting bits of old stars lurked like a mist between him and the others as Jorge told a joke about some teammate's bad luck with love and everybody laughed.

"Hey, it's the new Dispatch."

Jeri looked up at the familiar voice.

"Hey, Zai." Sanya waved her over, respect in her tone as well as in the curve of her shoulders. "Jeri was in training with us. Jeri, this is Zai. She's NYU's Number One Team leader."

"Yeah, we've met," Jeri said as the tall jock carried her beer over. She had a few new tattoos, and her eyes met his, gleaming with laughter and maybe something more as she perched in a hammock next to him.

"I guess Delfinio's happy with you." She winked. "Congratulations."

"What about this Delfinio?" Jorge cracked his third beer. "Is he one of those weird Gypsies like I've heard, Jeri? Creepy."

With a single, fluid movement, Zai caught Jorge's foot and flipped him backward out of his hammock. He landed hard, even in the slight gravity, his beer skidding across the stained floor, trailing lacey foam. "Watch your mouth, newbie," Zai said very softly.

"Sorry." Jorge scrambled to his feet, rubbing the back of his head, his expression nervous. "Look, I'm really sorry." His glance skidded from teammate to teammate, finding no supporters. "I didn't mean..."

"Don't say what you don't mean." Zai turned her back on him. "Dispatch, I'd be honored to buy you a beer." She winked at Jeri, a bit of a leer in that wink. "Let's take it up to the hub garden, eh? My friend works there and I have a pass."

They collected fresh beers and left The Hole and Jeri was aware of some envious stares from the other jocks. Zai indeed had a pass, so they rode one of the elevators up to the core of the huge, rotating can that was the NYU platform. Here, thickly planted hydroponic tubes turned the hub into a jungle of leaves, fruits, and

vegetables in the hot, bright glare of Sol. In the green-gold light filtering through the leaves, they drank their beer and Zai pulled him to her, stripping him out of his singlesuit with casual, lustful purpose, her grin easy and bright with sex.

It didn't work. Not really. It was there, between them, the slow spin of the planets, the cans, the ships and shuttles and junk.

"Your mind's not on your work, sweetheart." Zai drifted with her arms around his waist, her cheek against his hip. "Sorry I couldn't distract you."

"It wasn't you." Jeri's face was on fire, figured he was probably blushing clear down to his toes. Felt so ... so... "I just..." He shook his head because how could you explain?

"Hey, when you get focused..." Zai pushed off, drifted a scant meter looking for her singlesuit, ... "look me up." She snagged it and kicked off toward the elevator, her singlesuit trailing from one hand.

Jeri stared after her, a metallic taste in his mouth. Pulled on his singlesuit, collected the empty beer bags and followed her to the elevator. He dropped down to the level where he had docked the shuttle and let it take him back to Dispatch.

\* \* \* \*

Delfinio was drifting in the center of Dispatch, his eyes glazed with seeing. He blinked to awareness as Jeri exited the shuttle, sighed and for once, didn't say anything.

"I tried to celebrate, Delfinio." Jeri let himself drift, upside down to Delfinio's orientation. He made no move to shift and match it. "It didn't work."

Still without speaking, Delfinio did one of his rotations, ended up eye to eye with Jeri.

"You knew it wouldn't, didn't you?" Jeri swallowed. "It's like there's a wall between me and everyone else." His voice trembled and he gulped in air, willed it to steady. "It's like I can't touch anyone. I'm not really living in their world. Like there's a sheet of glass between us." He sucked in a breath. "What did you *do* to me?"

"I am sorry." Delfinio's eyes, windows to forever, looked past him. At something Jeri couldn't see.

"I can't do this." Jeri spat the words through his teeth. "I won't do this. I wanted to be a rock jock. Do my part. Keep everyone safe. I didn't want..." He gulped, sucked breath. "I didn't ask to be turned into ... into..."

"Some kind of alien?" Delfinio smiled finally, his eyes windows into vacuum. "I did not ask to be born in the wind from the stars or to hear their voices either, Jeri. Gypsies. You've heard me called that by now, eh?" Delfinio smiled thinly.

“When my people, my family, left the platforms and moved out to the Oort, do you think I remained behind because of the pay?” He bared his teeth at Jeri. “How many ‘Gypsies’ have you seen on the platforms? We do not belong here and we do not live here. You are what you are. I did not make you this way. But I showed you how you can matter. How many people truly matter, child? No. You will never belong anywhere ... except here. I’m sorry and yes. I knew the price. I did not ask you if you wanted to pay it.” His eyes touched Jeri with cold. “It is a lonely job.”

*Shuttle approaching*, the system voice spoke up. *IDed as friend, personal name Shira.*

Delfinio blinked, his eyes narrowing briefly. “I have company,” he snapped and Jeri recoiled from his sudden anger. “Perhaps you are right and you do not belong here.”

“Wait a minute.” Jeri pushed closer. “I need to understand. You said it’s too late.”

“Leave now.” Delfinio’s eyes blazed. “You will take the shuttle back to NYUp now. Stay there over night, think about what you are and how you wish to fit into this universe. We will talk about your future after that.”

“No.” Jeri pushed forward. “I want to sort this out now. I want to understand.”

“And I don’t want to explain. You are an annoying child.” Delfinio pushed forward, so that Jeri retreated involuntarily. “Go now, *child*, and give me peace for my company. He has no reason to be annoyed by your problems.” He turned his back on Jeri.

“Fine.” Stung beyond words, Jeri palmed open the lock and pulled himself back into the little shuttle. So that was it? You are what you are, too bad, and don’t bother me when I’m busy? He closed his eyes, but Zai’s expression appeared against the darkness of his eyelids. *When you get focused*, she had said. Only he never would. Jeri gave a bitter laugh, passworded in, started to push off, head for NYUp. Go find a bar where nobody knew him and get seriously, stinking drunk, he thought. If nothing else, it might hurt less. For awhile. Then he hesitated, feeling like a kid sent off to bed so the grown-ups could talk. Pushed close to the lock door, touched the tiny viewscreen to life. Who was this friend whom Jeri would annoy?

Peeping tom, he thought. Delfinio will know.

So what? he thought and didn’t blank the screen. A silvery chime announced that a shuttle had mated to the Dispatch module. Delfinio floated where Jeri had left him, hadn’t moved. The hull shimmered and thinned to form a port and a small, wiry man with a tawny Bengali face dressed in an expensive spider-silk singlet drifted in. He had gym muscles and a big smile.

“‘Finio. It has been a long time.” Shira toed off from the lock. “Bet you’re surprised to see me,” he said with a Euro accent.

“I am.” Delfinio didn’t move. “I heard a few rumors about your new life.”

“They were probably correct. I am surprised that you did not delete my personal signature from your security waiver.”

“I should have done that. I suppose ... I let friendship blind me.” He didn’t smile. “It was a mistake, was it not?”

“You are getting old, ‘Finio. Once you did not make mistakes.” The Euro Bengali smiled, closing on Delfinio. “You have always believed that this talent implies ethics. That is your blind spot, old man. I sold my soul to Tai Lan the pirate. He paid me very well for it. And I am very useful to him. I find all the Security patrols for him. Only lately, someone has been finding my boss’s ships and sending jocks after them. You are bad for business, ‘Finio. Why are you interfering?”

“You are wrong about my belief,” Delfinio cackled and drifted suddenly backward. “I am less blind than you believe. And every awakened talent is my responsibility. Forever, Shira. So what is your soul worth?”

“Your life.” The Bengali thrust himself forward and Jeri caught a flash of bright steel. Then the two men rebounded, Delfinio’s back arching spasmodically, a bright, crimson galaxy of blood droplets unfolding between them.

For a frozen moment, Jeri could only watch.

“Get out,” Delfinio rasped, doubling over, trailing ruby beads.

He was speaking to Jeri. The words hit him as if Delfinio had slapped him across the face.

And Shira’s head came up, eyes narrowing, searching. “You found another one, old man?” He pushed off from the hull with a toe, arrowed toward the privacy closets with a predator’s intent.

Delfinio’s shoulders hunched as he curled into a fetal position. “Now, fool,” he whispered.

Jeri thawed. “Take off,” he snapped and the shuttle quivered to life, shoving him against the hull as it pushed away from Dispatch. “NYUp dock regular space. NYUP One, contact. One! Attack on Dispatch. Get a team out here now. Weapons.”

No response. None.

*Communication is blocked*, the shuttle voice told him.

It quivered and zagged sharply. Jeri bounced off the hull, slammed back



against it as acceleration flattened him.

*Evasive action, the ship said. Threat detected. Communication damper detected. Instructions?*

Shira was after him. "Status," he yelled.

*Closing fast.*

Shira would use some sort of close-range, low energy weapon to avoid detection by the sensor net. Serious weaponry would set off all kinds of alarms and make people notice Dispatch's silence. But all Shira had to do was punch a hole in the hull. That's why you wore a v-suit as a rock jock. And this shuttle didn't have one. Think fast. Jeri's head spun. What would Shira expect him to do? Run for a can. "Head sunward," Jeri snapped. "Full acceleration." He wasn't webbed in and the sudden change in direction flung him across the cabin one more time. Red and black stars exploded in his vision as he slammed face-first into the hull.

*Closing fast.* The shuttle's voice didn't change.

Damn it. Nothing, nothing, nothing he could do.

And then ... the hull vanished. It was like he had passworded into Dispatch. He could see ... everything. The matte black little ship coming up fast behind him, the huge blaze of the sun, a million million suns beyond it. For a second, Jeri relaxed. *If I have to die*, he thought ... A flare on the blazing surface of the sun caught his eye. He looked and his vision sharpened, as if someone had turned up the resolution. From the lazy curl of the sun's huge, fiery tongue, something like a swarm of tiny dust specks burst toward him.

For a moment, Jeri stared, squinting, trying to understand....

...proton storm. He got it, suddenly. A Super-X class event. The last one like this had happened before he was born. People had died. Usually you had warning. Usually, coronal mass ejections tossed protons out slowly, predictably. Usually you had time to get everyone in behind the ice-shields and radiation skins of the platforms.

But three times since the platforms began, they had come out fast, in a wild spray, caught in the spiraled magnetic field of the sun, and had slashed across Near Earth like a sword of God.

I can't be seeing this, Jeri thought. No password, no hardware to plug him into the sensor net. People would die. A lot of people. "New York One," he yelled in desperation. "Read me?"

*Yeah, Dispatch, what's up?*

Miracle! He wanted to cry. The voice was so damn normal. Either the

communication damper had failed or ... Jeri glanced over his shoulder, but Shira was still on his butt. “Super X protons coming. Get everyone in,” he yelled. “Now!”

No more time, no more time.... These little shuttles didn't have shielding, you weren't out in this kind of stuff. Which would get him first? he wondered. Protons or whatever weapon Shira was carrying?

And then he saw it. A 'roid, a rocky lump, stable in orbit, out of the traffic zones, so nobody cared as it plodded its way around the sun.

It would stop the protons. Enough anyway.

Got to get the timing right ... got to ... he grabbed for the webbing, got himself more or less webbed in, shifted the shuttle to manual, hands on the holoed controls that appeared. Zigged. Zagged. Evasive maneuvers, but they brought him closer to the 'roid. Not yet, not yet ... he could *feel* Shira's triumph and his back twitched, expecting vacuum. With his new vision he watched the sandstorm of sun-white particles speeding toward them. If Shira had the same sight—but maybe he was focused on Jeri.

He hoped so.

Not yet ... not yet. Sweating, Jeri held his course. Now! He imagined he could feel the crackle of a million electron volts of cell-destroying energy around him as he doubled back, nearly sideswiping Shira's ship as he darted into the shadow of the 'roid.

Nothing to see, nothing you could really feel. Red icons exploded in the control holos. Beyond the shadow of the rock he was hiding under, the energies climbed ... two hundred million electron volts, two-fifty. Caught in the full sweep of the sun's fierce burst, Shira's ship wavered and began to tumble. Something had gone out. How much rem was Shira absorbing in his light, unprotected ship, Jeri wondered. Three hundred rem? Four hundred?

In hours, he would be dead. Nothing could save him now.

“New York One?” Jeri said.

*Communication software was permanently disabled at launch*, the ship told him.

Jeri blinked. He called up the ship's log, ran through the communications. He found his original attempt to contact NYUp One, iconed incomplete. And no others. I talked to them, Jeri thought. I warned them. Without a link?

Not possible.

The storm-front had passed. Jeri waited for the energy levels to fall to something he could tolerate with radiation therapy afterward, images of Delfinio

bleeding to death alone at Dispatch haunting his brain. At least Dispatch was shielded. More than adequately. As soon as he dared, he headed back.

He didn't see Shira's ship.

Delfinio drifted in a galaxy of dark crimson droplets when Jeri burst into Dispatch. Swearing, Jeri pushed off, relief spiking through him as his hands closed around Delfinio's shoulders and his brain registered *warm*. Clumsy in his hurry, he barely managed to shield Delfinio from impact as he rebounded off the hull, scattering ruby beads of fresh blood.

Delfinio grunted and his eyes fluttered. His lips twitched into an almost-smile before pain twisted them.

"Just hang on." Jeri palmed the emergency med closet open. The coffin-shaped crèche unfolded and Jeri maneuvered Delfinio into it. Shira had stabbed him in the chest. "You die on me and I'll ... I'll kill you. Hear me?"

Delfinio's lips twitched again and the smile glimmered in his eyes for a second. Micro-tubes snaked out of the crèche, probing like blind worms, burrowing into Delfinio's jugular, carotid, into the veins on his arms and thighs as Jeri webbed him into place. "You're going to be okay," he said, his voice catching, ignoring the red icons glimmering on the sides of the crèche. "You have to be, because I want to know what's happening to me. You owe me that, hear?"

"I hear." Delfinio's words emerged as the faintest of whispers and pink foam bubbled at the corners of his lips. Then the drugs pumping through the micro-tubes took over and his eyes glazed.

Panicked, Jeri scanned the icons, but Delfinio was still alive, his heartbeat uneven, more red and yellow than green visible, but ... still alive. "Contact ... NYUp One," he said.

*Dispatch? That you, Jeri? The voice at One nearly yelled. Man, you saved our butts with that warning. We've got sick people all over, but we would've had a lot more casualties if we hadn't hit the alarm. Way to go.*

"Get a med team out here," Jeri said. "Pirate hit Dispatch. Delfinio's in bad shape."

*On our way. One's voice sobered. Be there before you can blink twice.*

*Oh, I do not think you need to worry, Delfinio's voice murmured in his head. I do not think you will be stuck on Dispatch without me.*

He couldn't be talking, not with the catheters in him. Jeri pushed across to the crèche. The icons glowed a cacophony of red.

"Damn it, you can't leave me here by myself."

And he could have sworn that Delfinio smiled.

Or maybe he just felt it.

*I agree, Dispatch. The whisper touched him. And the breeze will blow through others, too. You will find them. Not all will be Shira. But it is a lonely job.*

Jeri lifted his head and looked ... outward. Beyond the slow spin of the platforms to the distant dance of suns and planets like multicolored jewels. With a wrench, he brought himself back. Then he simply waited for the rock jocks to arrive, surrounded by a drifting galaxy of drying blood and crystal tears.

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