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BLESSED BY AN ANGEL

PETER F. HAMILTON

From the short story collection The New Space Opera (2007)

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Prolific British writer Peter F. Hamilton has sold to *Interzone*, *In Dreams*, *New Worlds*, *Fears*, and elsewhere. He sold his first novel, *Mindstar Rising*, in 1993, and quickly followed it up with two sequels, *A Quantum Murder* and *The Nano Flower*. Hamilton's first three books didn't attract a great deal of attention, on this side of the Atlantic at least, but that changed dramatically with the publication of his *next* novel, *The Reality Dysfunction*, a huge modern space opera (it needed to be divided into two volumes for publication in the United States) that was itself only the start of a projected trilogy of staggering size and scope, the Night's Dawn trilogy, with the first volume followed by others of equal heft and ambition (and which also raced up genre bestseller lists), *The Neutronium Alchemist* and *The Naked God*. The Night's Dawn trilogy put Hamilton on the map as one of the major players in the expanding subgenre of the New Space Opera, along with writers such as Dan Simmons, Iain Banks, Paul McAuley, Gregory Benford, Alastair Reynolds, and others; it was successful enough that a regular SF publisher later issued Hamilton's reference guide to the complex universe of the trilogy, *The Confederation Handbook*, the kind of thing that's usually done as a small-press title, if it's done at all. Hamilton's other books include the novels *Misspent Youth* and *Fallen Dragon*, a collection, *A Second Chance at Eden*, and a novella chapbook, *Watching Trees Grow*. His most recent book is a new novel, *Pandora's Star*. Coming up is another new novel, *Judas Unchained*.

Here he shows us that, popular wisdom to the contrary, being visited by an angel may not really be all *that* good a thing after all...

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Imelda leaves her modest family home as the evening shade washes over the front garden, a coy smile lifting her maroon-glossed lips. She's off to see her lover, a prospect which lifts her heart and enhances her buoyant nature. The sun is slowly sinking behind the gigantic seven hundred year-old arcology that dominates the center of her hometown, Kuhmo, casting a shadow which methodically stretches out to darken the town's outlying districts. It is a sharp eclipse which she has witnessed every evening of her seventeen years. Yet the gloaming it brings does nothing to stifle her mood; she's a happy, beautiful girl with an enchantingly flat face and pert nose, her auburn hair flowing below her shoulders. Tonight she's chosen a sleeveless blue and white dress to wear, its semiorganic fabric swirling jauntily around her long legs. Wherever she goes, she attracts wistful glances from the boys who linger along Kuhmo's boring streets as they search for something to do before the night is out.

She turns into Rustwith Street, one of the broad thoroughfares which radiate out from the hexagonal base of the tapering arcology. Tall novik trees line this street, as they do all the major routes cutting through the civic center, their woolly blue-green foliage a deliberate counterpoint to the bleak mountainous walls of the arcology. There are vehicles driving down the wide road, primitive vehicles with wheels powered by electric motors. This world of Anagaska has never really benefited from the bountiful wealth flowing among the Greater Commonwealth planets, its citizens seemingly content to bumble along their own slow cautious development route, decades if not centuries behind the more dynamic worlds. And this provincial town is very set in its ways, manacled to the past by the arcology which dominates the local mind-set much as it does the landscape.

There are some modern regrav capsules in the air above the roads. Shiny colorful ovoids as big as the cars below, skimming silently along at their regulation fifteen-meter altitude, which puts them level with the upper branches of the trees.

Imelda pays the traffic no attention as she hurries along to the café where she has arranged to meet her lover; like the arcology, the buzz of vehicles is a mere background fixture. So she is completely unaware of the chrome green capsule gliding along at walking pace several hundred meters behind her, maintaining a steady distance. The two Advancer Protectorate members inside are observing her through sensors meshed with the capsule's metal skin, and a deluge of scrutineer programs they have scattered across the local net. Their organization might not be official, but they have access to police codes, allowing them to pursue their clandestine business undetected within the town's electronic and physical architecture.

As Imelda turns into the Urwan plaza with its throng of pedestrians, several wolf whistles and raunchy pings are thrown in her direction. The scrutineers examine the pings for hidden code, but the boys and young men who sent them are intent only on compliments and hopeful for a smile. Imelda does smile breezily, but keeps on walking. She is using virtually none of her Advancer functions, the macrocellular clusters supplementing her nervous system are barely interfaced with the planetary cybersphere. Exoimages and mental icons are folded back into her peripheral vision, untouched by her neural hands. Secondary thought routines operating inside her macrocellular clusters monitor several relevant events. She is pleased to see that Sabine, her younger sister, has finally reached their aunt's house in New Helsinki; there was a

long delay at Inubo station while she waited for the delayed regrav bus connection. Imelda is quietly relieved, she loves her sister dearly, but Sabine is quite a ditzy girl; that kind of foul-up was likely to panic her. Imelda's other interest is Erik Horovi, who is not merely on time, but well ahead of schedule, waiting for her in the Pathfinder café. An exoimage from the café's net reveals him to be sitting at a booth table ordering the steward-bot to stand by. Her neural hands grip the exoimage and expand it, sliding the focus in toward his face. His own clusters must be alerting him to the observation for he grins round at the camera. She sends him a tactile ping, hand-squeezing-thigh, and says: "I'll be there soon, order for me."

His grin broadens at the ping, and he calls the stewardbot over.

It is all manufactured. Erik, his location, his responses, are in fact all being cooked up by a simulacrum program running in a large processor kube on the arcology's seventy-fifth floor. The same suite of abandoned rooms where Erik's unconscious body is lying, fastened to a field-medical cot. But the program has fooled Imelda; she hurries on through the plaza.

Her route takes her out through one of the side paths before turning into a narrow opening between two buildings. The alleys here form a small maze as they link up to the rear of a dozen commercial buildings. But she's perfectly safe. The walls might be high, and old, and dark; there may be rubbish scattered over the concrete; and there may not be any people about, but this is Kuhmo, and she remains linked to the cybersphere. Imelda is a thoroughly modern child of the Commonwealth; she knows that safety and the police are only the speed of a thought away.

A lustrous green regrav capsule descends into the alley ahead of her. It's unusual, but she doesn't hesitate. She's mildly puzzled, because it's a large capsule, and she sees it's going to be difficult for her to squeeze around. Just how stupid and inconsiderate is the pilot program?

Her link to the cybersphere falls away. Imelda comes to an uncertain halt, frowning suspiciously at the capsule. She's never been disconnected since the macrocellular clusters became active the year she reached sexual maturity. The cybersphere and beyond that the all-embracing Commonwealth Unisphere are her eternal companions; they are her *right*, she thinks crossly. Even now, fear is alien to her. This is the Commonwealth.

A malmetal door expands on the regrav capsule. Paul Alkoff steps out. The Protectorate team's chief is a tall man, over four hundred years old, and twenty years out of rejuvenation; like just about everyone with an Advancer genetic heritage, his biological age is locked into his early thirties.

"You're in the way," Imelda protests. "And I think your capsule is messing with reception."

"Sorry about that," Paul says. A quick review of his exoimages shows him their kube is producing an optimum digital shadow of Imelda. Friends and family all think she's still walking along the alley en route to the café. He holds his left hand up toward her, and the smallest weapon he's wetwired with fires a stun pulse.

Imelda feels nothing. The world shifts around her, and she realizes she's fallen to the ground. There is no pain from the impact, though she knows she hit her head and shoulder hard. She heard the *crack* they made. There is no sensation from anywhere in her body now. She can neither blink nor move her eyeballs. However, her neural hands are not physical, she moves them across icons, triggering every security alert she possesses. There is no response.

Shapes appear above her. Men, but out of focus. There is more movement. She is carried into the capsule. It is dark inside. Her mind is screaming, gibbering for help. No one can hear, there is no linkage. She is alone.

The green capsule rises out of the alley and slips back into the designated travel path above the nearest thoroughfare. It is a brief journey to the base of the arcology, which now lies deep in the monstrosity's umbra, then the capsule rises up the side until it reaches the seventy-fifth floor and edges its way through a fissure in the outer wall.

At one time, in the decades after the arcology was built, the apartments up here on the upper levels were all packed to capacity, and the central malls buzzed with activity all day long. But that was seven hundred years ago, following the Starflyer war, when the entire population of Hanko was relocated to Anagaska. People were grateful for any accommodation they were given in the terrible aftermath of their homeworld's destruction. Once they had recovered their equilibrium, they began to build out from the arcology, covering the fresh open landscape with new suburbs. Families started to drain away out of the arcology to live in the less confined homes springing up along the new grid of roads. The vision back then was for a town that would continue to grow and establish new industries. Growth, though, proved expensive, and investment on poor old sidelined Anagaska was never abundant. Much cheaper and easier for the town council to refurbish sections of the arcology to keep their community going. In later centuries, even that philosophy stalled, and the whole edifice began to deteriorate from the top downward. Now the giant city-in-a-building is a decaying embarrassment, with no one capable of providing a satisfactory solution.

Dank water from a slimed ceiling drips on the immaculate green skin of the regrav capsule as it settles on a cracked and buckled concrete floor. The cavernous hall used to be an exemplary mall, with shops, bars, and offices. Today it is a squalid embalmed memory of the comfortable times long gone. The only light comes from rents in the outer walls, while the ancient superstrength structural spars are sagging as they succumb to gravity and entropy. Not even the town's bad boys venture up to these levels to conduct their nefarious affairs.

Paul and his team member Ziggy Kare carry Imelda from the capsule into one of the abandoned shops. Its walls are dry, if filthy, and the floor is reasonably level. The stun pulse effect is slowly wearing off, allowing Imelda to move her eyes slightly. She sees signs of the new occupants, plyplastic furniture expanded out to form tables and chairs, red-tinged lights, electronic equipment, power cells—all the elements of a sophisticated covert operation. In one of the small rooms they pass, she sees a field-medical cot. Erik is lying on it. Her eyes widen in consternation, but her throat remains unresponsive as she tries to shout.

The next room contains a great deal of equipment which she doesn't understand. There is, however, a face she recognizes. Only a face. Her gorgeous friend's head is sitting inside a transparent bubble with various tubes and cables impaling its neck. The top of the skull has been removed, allowing an invasion of gossamer-fine filaments to penetrate the exposed brain.

A terrified whimper gurgles out through Imelda's numb lips.

"It's all right," Paul says at the sound. "I know you probably won't believe me, but we're not going to harm you. And you'll never remember any of this, we'll give you a memory wipe."

She is placed on a field-medical cot, where plyplastic bands flow over her limbs before solidifying, holding her fast. Tears begin to leak out of her eyes.

Ziggy brings over a sensor stick, and sweeps it above her abdomen. "Damn it." He grunts in disappointment. "She's pregnant all right. Looks like that memory checks out."

"How long?" Paul asks.

"Couple of weeks."

"Can you tell if it's Higher contaminated?"

Ziggy sighs in reluctance, the sound of someone who is forcing himself to do the right thing. "Not from outside, not with our sensors. We'll have to run a detailed pathology scan." His hand indicates a clutter of equipment on a nearby table.

"Okay," Paul says, equally sad. "Take it out, and run the exam."

Ziggy turns to the collection of medical instruments, and picks up a disturbingly phallic device.

Imelda finally manages to scream.

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Of all the memories Paul was able to extract, arrival was the clearest.

The angel clung to the starship's fuselage as the big commercial freighter emerged from its wormhole a thousand kilometers above the bright blue expanse of Anagaska's major ocean. Dwindling violet light from the wormhole's exotic fabric washed across its face, revealing late-adolescent features that were carefully androgynous. With its firm jaw, it would be considered a striking and attractive female rather than classically beautiful, while, as a male, people would think it inclined to the delicate. The baggy white cotton shirt and trousers it wore offered no clue as to its gender orientation.

As soon as the wormhole closed, the starship began to decelerate, chasing down toward the planet where New Helsinki lurked behind the darkness of the terminator. From its position just ahead of the starship's engineering section, the angel could see the archipelagos rolling past beneath. The impression of speed was such that it felt there should be a wind blowing its long honey-colored hair back. Instead, it just smiled across the vacuum at the world which awaited it. Advancer senses revealed the dense electronic chatter of the planetary cybersphere ghosting through the atmosphere, with intangible peaks reaching out to connect with Anagaska's satellite constellation. When the angel accessed the starport's traffic control, it could find no hint that their flight was subject to any additional audit, security was light, no intelligent scrutineers were probing the starship's systems. The local Protectorate group didn't know it was here. Not that there was ever any active presence at the starport; but every visitor to Anagaska was quietly recorded and checked; if it had arrived incognito, there was a small risk their identity-examiner programs would raise a query. This way was safer, it was playing very long odds against detection.

As soon as the starship fell below orbital velocity, the angel let go. It configured the bionomic organelles inside its cells to provide a passive deflective field around itself, one that would surreptitiously warp the active sensor radiation pouring out from the starship's navigation network. The energy sequence flowing through its bionomics was even sophisticated enough to disguise its mass, leaving it completely undetected as the starship raced away.

The angel began its long fall to the ground. It expanded its integral force field into a lenticular shape over two hundred meters wide. Electric-blue scintillations slithered over the surface as it caught the first wisps of Anagaska's upper atmosphere, aerobraking in a long curve to subsonic speed. Its descent strategy was simple enough; the majority of its flight was out over the ocean where there would be no one to see the telltale crimson flare of ions against the force field as it sank ever lower, nor hear the continual thunderclap of its hypersonic passage through the air.

When it reached a three-kilometer altitude, its downward plummet had slowed to less than a hundred kilometers an hour, thanks to the protective force field which was now over three hundred meters wide and acting like a parachute. It was fifty kilometers out from Olhava's western coastline when it changed the shape of the force field once again, producing the dragonfly-wing planform which contributed to its name.

An hour and a half later, the angel swooped out of the nighttime sky to step lightly onto a sandy beach. It shut down most of its Higher functions, pulled a pair of soft leather sandals from its shoulder bag, and began to walk up the grassy slope to the coastal road.

They'd been lucky, Paul acknowledged, as soon as he'd reviewed the arrival. A lone yachtsman had been underneath the angel as it aerobraked, a man sailing out from Olhava to spend a long vacation amid the archipelagos. A true sailor, who knew the seas and the skies. He'd seen the glowing point flashing across the stars and known what it meant; and he had a friend who had a friend who knew a Unisphere contact code. Paul and his team had arrived at the coast that morning to begin their tracking operation.

It had taken them a couple of weeks to corner the sneaky creature as it began its mission in Kuhmo. The fight when they surrounded it had taken out three Protectorate members and created a firestorm in the town's college campus, but they'd eventually driven it into a force field cage which could contain its Higher energy functions. They loaded it into a big regrav capsule and ferried it over to the arcology as the flames from the art block building roared up into the night sky behind them.

"I would have just left," the angel said in its pleasant melodic voice as the capsule negotiated its way through the rent in the wall of the seventy fifth floor. "There was no need for all this."

"That depends whose viewpoint you're taking," Paul snapped back. He was still shaken and infuriated by the deaths; they'd left the bodies behind in the flames and now he was worried the heat might damage his colleagues' memorycells. Once they were re-lifed in replacement clone bodies they could well lose several hours of memories since they last backed up in their secure stores.

"The obvious one, of course," the angel said.

"That's it for you, isn't it? Game over. Shake hands. All go home."

The angel's pale mouth smiled. "It's the civilized thing to do. Don't you approve of that?"

"Ask my three colleagues that you slaughtered back there. They might have an opinion on just how civilized you are."

"As I recall, you fired first."

"Would you have come quietly?"

"So that you could perform your barbarisms on me? No."

"Just tell us what we need to know. Have you contaminated any of us?"

"Contaminated! How I curse your corrupters. You could have lived a rich rewarding life; instead they have condemned you to this poverty of existence."

"Screw you, pal. You Highers want to condemn us to your nonexistence. We retain the right to choose our destiny. We *demand* the right."

"Two hundred billion people can't all be wrong. The Central Commonwealth worlds have all embraced bionics—why do you think it is called Higher civilization?"

Paul gave the angel an evil grin. "Self-delusion? More likely: desperate self-justification."

"Why do you resist using bionics?" the angel asked, its beautiful face frowning disparagingly. "You of all people must be aware of the benefits they bring to a human body. Immortality without your crude rejuvenation treatments; a society which isn't based around industrial economics and its backward ideologies, new vistas, inspiring challenges."

"Challenges? You just sit and vegetate all day long. That and plot our downfall. What have you got to look forward to? Really? Tell me. The only thing that awaits a Higher is downloading into Earth's giant brain library. Why bother waiting? You know that's where you're all heading. Just migrate there and plug yourself into that big virtual reality in the sky, go right ahead and play mental golf for the rest of eternity. I know the numbers downloading themselves are increasing; more and more of you are realizing just how pointless your lives are. We're not designed for godhood, basic human essence cannot be tampered with. We need real challenges to satisfy ourselves with, we need to have our hearts broken, we need to watch our children grow up, we need to look over the horizon for new wonders, we need to build and create. Higher civilization has none of that."

"The Central Commonwealth is our race's greatest creation. To misquote an ancient lyric: do you think we don't love our children too?"

"I'm sure you do. But not enough to give them a choice. To be born Higher is to stay Higher, they can't escape."

"They could, they just don't want to. Yet tens of millions of ordinary Advancer humans convert to Higher every year. Does that tell you anything?"

"Yes. It's simply the last step in their adventure. They've *lived* first, they know there are different ways to exist. Only then do they go in for your defeatist digital dreaming; they've decided that they want to die then anyway, so what have they got to lose?"

"Is that what you'll do, Paul? Give in and download your memories into Earth's repository?"

"When I'm finally tired of life, then I might just. But don't expect it for another millennium or ten; it's a big galaxy."

"I am always saddened by how ignorant your views are."

"Is that: *my type*, by any chance?"

"Yes, Paul. Your type indeed, all you reactionary Advancers. Advanced genes have shown you how far you can extend human evolution and abilities; you've extended your life span, you're virtually immune to disease, you're naturally integrated with the Unisphere, and a lot more besides; all those abilities have brought you halfway toward us, yet still you refuse to take the final step. Why?"

"Reactionary, my arse! Biononics are not part of us, they are not derived from the genome and cannot be added to it, they are machines. They infect the cells of your body; that is why you have to be born with them to be truly Higher. They have to multiply in tandem with an embryo's natural growth. Only then can they be incorporated by every cell. It's impossible for every cell to be corrupted in an adult. That's the difference, the crucial one. They are alien, imposed."

"Listen to yourself: infect. Corrupt. Impose. Alien. How small your mind is, how closed."

"I am what I am. I like what I am. You will not take that away from me, nor my children. I have that right to defend myself. If what you are doing is an act of kindness and charity, then why did you arrive here the way you did? Why not be open about it? Every person on this planet can travel to the Central Commonwealth should they wish. Why are you here to spread your culture by deceit?"

"The lies and prejudice you sustain leave us no choice. You're condemning generations unborn to suffering they do not deserve. We can save them from you."

Paul tilted his head to one side, and gave the angel a superior grin. "Listen to yourself," he said with soft mockery. "And the best thing is, I know that you're in a minority among Highers. You disgust the majority as much as you do me."

"And yet they do not stop us."

"The price of true democracy. Now, are you going to tell me what I need to know?"

"You know I cannot do that."

"Then this is going to get very unpleasant. For you."

"That's something your conscience will have to carry."

"I know. But this isn't the first time I've had to break one of you. And I don't suppose you'll be the last." Paul maneuvered the cage into place at the center of the hastily prepared interrogation room. Equipment modules began to clamp themselves across the outside of the restraining force fields. Eventually there was no sign of the angel beneath the dull metal segments. Paul gave Ziggy a weary glance. "Let's get on with it."

It took nine days to defeat the angel's biononics. Nine days of negative energy spikes pounding away at the force field which its biononics produced. Nine days of draining out its power reserves. Nine days spent denying it food, water, and oxygen. Nine days smothered inside a sarcophagus of machinery designed to wreck its body and all the Higher functions it was capable of generating. Nine days to send invasive filaments into its brain, preserving the neurones while its ordinary body cells were burned and destroyed one layer at a time. Nine days to kill it.

Eventually, the inert head was removed from the charred remains and artificially sustained on the cusp of life. The filaments linked Paul's thoughts to the angel's undead neurones, allowing him to access memories as if the angel were now a subsidiary brain, nothing more than a recalcitrant storage system grafted onto his own gray matter. Burrowing through the stranger's thoughts was difficult, and not even modern biochemicals could sustain the neurones indefinitely. Decay gave them a very short time scale to work in. There was no neat index. Human sensory experiences were very different from electronic files, their triggers were unique, hard to guess. But Paul persevered, extracting the missing days since its arrival in confused fragments. Piecing together what had happened.

The angel had reached Kuhmo the day after it landed, renting a modest apartment on the arcology's fifteenth floor. It merged easily into the lives of the town's adolescents, signing on at the college, joining several clubs. For two days, it studied potential targets.

Ziggy takes less than an hour to confirm the presence of biononics in every cell of the tiny fetus.

"Son of a bitch," Paul grunts.

"I thought you'd be pleased," Ziggy says. "It means what we did was right."

Paul gives Imelda a guilty glance. The girl is crying silently, her face sticky with tears. Occasionally, she lets out a small piteous snivel. Traumatized though she is, he still cannot grant her the comfort of oblivion. There is one question he still has to ask. "I don't like being forced to do what's right," Paul says. "Not this."

"Right," Ziggy says. He slides the dead fetus into a flash furnace, eradicating the last trace of the angel's attempt to subvert their world.

Paul leans over Imelda. "One final thing," he says, "and this will all be over."

Fear squeezes yet more tears from her eyes.

"Did you know you were pregnant?"

The distraught girl opens her mouth and cries out in anguish. "Yes," she sobs.

Studying her face, Paul knows she is telling the truth. There will be no need to use drugs or other stronger methods of inquiry. "Thank you," he says. At last he activates the sleep inducer, and her weary eyes flutter shut.

"We'll need a replacement fetus," Paul says. "I can wipe tonight's memories from her, but if we take away that entire week she spent screwing Erik and the angel she's going to know something happened; that kind of gap can't be covered up. A doctor will find our tampering."

"Not a problem," Ziggy says. "We've got both of them; I can fertilize one of her eggs and reimplant before morning. She'll still have lover boy's baby. There'll be nothing for anybody to be suspicious about."

"Apart from their new friend vanishing."

Ziggy shrugs. "Kids their age, it's hardly unusual. They all have a dozen relationships a year,

more if they can. Erik was desperate to bring more girls back to the angel's apartment. You said he was always going on about it; he wanted to bed Imelda's sister for a start. Horny little devil."

"Yeah," Paul says. "It's about time Erik learned he has responsibilities."

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Erik Horovi was a perfect opportunity for the angel. Quite a good-looking lad, but still mildly introverted, which left him susceptible to any girl 'who befriended him. The angel shifted over into full female mode and spent half a day talking to Erik, who was first nervous, then delighted that such a beauty could show any interest in him. He screwed up his courage and asked her out for a date, trying desperately to disguise his surprise when she readily said yes.

The beer and mild aerosol narcotics legitimately available in Kuhmo's bars had a big effect on Erik's inexperienced bloodstream, making him pleasantly inebriated early on in the evening. He talked more easily than he really should have about the Viatak sisters, especially Imelda, the eldest, and how he'd worshipped her from afar. But his alluringly gorgeous new date didn't seem to mind talking about another girl; she was, she said with an eager smile, very liberal when it came to her own sexuality. The haze of subtle chemicals in Erik's head did nothing to dampen his arousal as they both smiled at each other knowingly.

Imelda met the angel the very next day; its memory of the event comprised a confused montage of faces flitting across the main quad in the collage campus, bursts of conversations, scent of the nearby roseyew bushes that decorated the quad. The scent of flowers in full bloom was a strong one, leading Paul onward through the memories until he was somehow walking through a city of soaring towers and delightful parks with vegetation that was sweetly reminiscent of Kuhmo's public gardens. Silver-white regrav capsules slipped silently overhead as the pink-tinged sun shone at the apex of a cloudless purple sky. It was Teleba, one of the earliest planets to be settled, now nestling right at the heart of the Central Commonwealth. A world of Higher culture, where there were no urban areas decaying like the entirety of Kuhmo, no economic hardship or market fluctuations to perturb the population, no crime, for little was forbidden or withheld—except for the angel's own purpose, but even that was open to its peers. It strode along a boulevard lined by semiorganic treesculptures whose prismatic ever-shifting leaves were modeled on New York's unique ma-hon tree. Information and thoughts from the superdense planetary cybersphere whirled into its mind like particles of a multicolored snowstorm to be modified or answered, its own questions and suggestions administered into the pervasive flow of knowledge, arguing its ideal and ethic to those who showed an interest. Agreement and disagreement swirled around it as it crossed a plaza with a great fountain in the center. It felt invigorated by the debate, its own resolution hardening.

The enlightened informed process was the democratic entitlement of all Highers. People didn't have to strive, with their material requirements supplied by Neumann cybernetics and their bodies supported by bionics, they could devote themselves to their uniqueness. Human thought was the pinnacle of terrestrial evolution, Earth's most profound success. Now each mind was yoked into the Commonwealth Unisphere, collecting, arranging, and distributing information. Whole districts of the city were given over to institutes that delved into science and art, multiplying into thousands of subdisciplines. Their practitioners communed in mental harmony. Higher culture was reaching for the Divine. *Can you not see the Rightness of it, the inevitability? The comfort?*

Paul had to wrench his thoughts away from the guileful desire Trojan. Even in its crippled state, the angel's brain was dangerous. There were many elaborate traps that remained empowered amid the waning neurones, quite capable of ensnaring the unwary. He pushed his own mind back into the memories of Imelda and Erik.

There were long lazy evenings spent in the angel's secluded apartment. Bottles and aerosols were imbibed leisurely, their contents complemented by a chemical designed to neutralize any standard female contraception troche. The lights were dimmed, the lovers' thoughts sluggish and contented, bodies inflamed. Paul experienced Erik in congress, his youthful body straining hard against the angel. There were loud, near-savage cries of joy as he climaxed successfully.

Deep inside the angel's complicated sexual organs, Erik's spermatozoon were injected with a biononic organelle.

Imelda's smiling, trusting face as she rolled across the jellmattress underneath the now very male angel, unruly hair spreading across the soft pillows. Her sharp gasp of delight at the impalement. Wicked curl of her mouth at the arousal, and piercing cry of fulfillment. A fulfillment greater than she knew as the modified semen was released inside her.

Under the angel's tutelage, the eager youngsters experimented with strenuous and exciting new positions night after night. Bodies writhed against it, granting each other every request that was whispered or shouted before granting its single wish. Each time it focused their arousal and ecstasy to one purpose, the creation of its beloved changeling.

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Imelda arrives home in the dead of night after staggering home an unknown distance along the street outside. The house recognizes her and opens the front door. She has clearly had a lively evening, her movements lack any real coordination; she squints at most objects, unable to perceive what they are; her electronic emissions are chaotic, nonsensical. Every now and then, she giggles for no reason. At the bottom of the stairs her legs fold gracelessly under her, and she crumples into a heap. She begins snoring.

This is how her parents find her in the morning. Imelda groans in protest as they rouse her; she has a hangover which is surely terminal. Her parents fuss, and issue a mild chastisement about the state she is in; but they are tolerant liberals, and understand the impulses which fire all adolescents. They are not worried; after all, this is the Greater Commonwealth, citizens are safe at night even in dear old worn-down Kuhmo. Imelda is helped upstairs to her bed, given water and some vitamins, and left to sleep off her night of youthful excess.

When she wakes up again, around midday, she quickly calls Erik, who himself is still recovering from his narcotic sojourn. Their questions are almost identical: "What did we do?" As are their answers: "I don't remember."

"I think we met up in the Pathfinder," Imelda says uncertainly. "I remember going there, but afterward I don't know..."

Erik jumps on this, relieved that one of them has some memory of the evening. "We must have struck a bad aerosol," he claims immediately.

"Yeah, right," Imelda agrees, even though the voice of doubt is murmuring away inside her head. But accepting that easy explanation is so much more comfortable than examining ideas

that may have unpleasant outcomes. "You want to meet up again tonight?" she asks.

"Sure, but maybe at my house. I thought we could have a quieter time. And we need to talk about the baby, we'll have to tell our parents."

"It's early days," Imelda says carelessly; she sends him a tactile ping of a very personal nature. "Maybe not too quiet, huh?"

Erik grins in disgraceful delight, last night already forgotten.

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Nine months later, Erik is grinning in an altogether different fashion as he is present at the birth of his daughter. The little girl is perfect and beautiful, born at the Kuhmo General Hospital with an ease that only modern Commonwealth medical technology can provide. Afterward, Imelda lies back on the bed in the airy delivery room, and cuddles the newborn, lost in devotion.

"We have got to decide on a name," she says dreamily.

Erik idly brushes her mane of auburn hair away from her shoulders. "How about Kerry?" he suggests tentatively. It is the name he knew the angel as; he often wonders where she is now.

"No," Imelda says. There is still some association about Kerry and his abrupt disappearance that she can't shake off.

"Okay, well, there's no rush. I'd better go out and see everyone."

The respective families are waiting outside. Imelda's parents are polite; happy that the birth has gone without a hitch, and, of course, delighted that they have another grandchild. However, there is a certain degree of strain showing in their outwardly civil attitude toward Erik. His own parents are less formal, and hug him with warm excitement. He goes over to Sabine and kisses her.

"Congratulations," she says.

Erik tenderly brushes Sabine's thick auburn hair. "This doesn't change anything," he says sincerely. Sabine smiles back, grateful for the reassurance, especially right now. She is Imelda's younger sister by forty minutes, and so genuinely doesn't want their special sibling bond soured by any jealousy.

As Erik confessed to Kerry, bedding the sisters was his fantasy since the first moment he saw them. Identical twins is a common enough desire in a hormonally active teenager; and Kerry of course made that particular wish come true readily enough. Even today, Erik still has trouble telling his lovers apart, and his memories of them during those wonderful long erotic nights in that apartment on the arcology's fifteenth floor are completely indistinguishable.

Now Inigo wakes up and loudly starts to demand his afternoon feed. Sabine is immediately busy with their infant son who was born in the very same hospital two weeks earlier.

She too rejected the name Kerry.

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