

DIVIDING THE SUSTAIN

JAMES PATRICK KELLY

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ames Patrick Kelly made his first sale in 1975, and since has gone on to become one of the most respected and popular writers to enter the field in the last twenty years. Although Kelly has had some success with novels, especially with *Wildlife*, he has perhaps had more impact to date as a writer of short fiction, with stories such as “Solstice,” “The Prisoner of Chillon,” “Glass Cloud,” “Mr. Boy,” “Pogrom,” “Home Front,” and “Undone” (“Un-done” in particular has enough space opera tropes and wild conceptualization packed into its short length to fuel many another author’s eight-hundred-page novel), and is often ranked among the best short story writers in the business. His story “Think Like a Dinosaur” won him a Hugo Award in 1996, as did his story “10¹⁶ to 1,” in 2000. Kelly’s first solo novel, the mostly ignored *Planet of Whispers*, came out in 1984. It was followed by *Freedom Beach*, a mosaic novel written in collaboration with John Kessel, and then by another solo novel, *Look into the Sun*. His short work has been collected in *Think Like a Dinosaur*, and, most recently, in a new collection, *Strange But Not a Stranger*. His most recent book is the chapbook novella *Burn*, and coming up is an anthology coedited with John Kessel, *Feeling Very Strange: The Slip-stream Anthology*. Born in Mineola, New York, Kelly now lives with his family in Nottingham, New Hampshire. He has a website at www.JimKelly.net, and reviews Internet-related matters for *Asimov’s Science Fiction*.

Here he takes us voyaging across the universe with a crew of posthuman immortals who change their shapes and their very natures as casually as we change our clothes—but who find that *some* changes are a little too radical even for them...

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Been Watanabe decided to become gay two days before his one-hundred-and-thirty-second birthday. The colony ship had been outbound for almost a year of subjective time and the captain still could not say when they might make planetfall. Everyone said that dividing the sustain between the folded dimensions was more art than science, but what Been wanted now was a schedule, not a sketch. He couldn’t wait any longer to recast himself as a homosexual because he worried that he might go stale and lose his mind.

He’d been comfortable—too comfortable—hunkered among the colo-nists aboard the slipship *Nine Ball*, two thousand three hundred and forty-seven lumps, not one of whom had an edge sharp enough to cut butter. The lumps were all well under a century old and so had never needed to be recast. In moments of

weakness—in line for the sixth lunch seating, say, or toward the yawning climax of the daily harmony circle—Been worried that he was becoming a lump himself. Sometimes as the pacifiers nattered on about duty and diligence, he could almost imagine what it might feel like to pass through Immigration someday and actually be looking forward to planting beans or selling hats or running a botloader. It was an alarm-ing daydream for a soon-to-be hundred-and-thirty-two-year-old mindsync courier carrying a confidential personality transplant to the Consensualist colony on Little Chin.

Sandor, Nelly, and Zola, his podmates on the ship, did not greet his decision to recast as a homosexual with much enthusiasm. To become full-fledged Consensualists, the colonists had agreed to a personality dampening that would smooth away the sharper edges of their individuality. The treatment chilled passion into fondness, anger into simple annoyance. To get Been a berth on the *Nine Ball*, his client had provided forged records showing he'd had the treatment, had invented as well a resume as a genetic agronomist. But poor Sandor had certainly been dampened. In his own diffident way, he made it clear that he had no intention of redirecting what little sex drive he could muster toward Been. And presumably once he was gay, Been would not be spending any time in the sleep hutch that Nelly and Zola shared. The two women in Been's pod had their own sexual arrangement. They would occasionally invite either Been or Sandor to their hutch, although spending the night with the two of them was more work than swimming the Straits of Sweven in a spacesuit. It took Been hours to recover, while Sandor was usually pale and wobbly for a day afterward. If Been became gay, it would put a fatal kink in the sexual consensus of their pod.

Which was his plan exactly.

"I'm going to ask you a question," said Sandor, "and I want you to consider it in the spirit in which I am posing it, that is, without malice and with a genuine fondness for you as a person."

"Are you asking him or making a speech?" Nelly had wrapped herself in her comfort rug so that only her head showed.

"Did you want to handle this?" Sandor clutched his mug of coffee as if worried it might wrench itself out of his grasp and fly at someone. "No, I didn't think so." Been could tell how upset the others were by the way they were letting their manners slip. The three of them ought to report themselves to their harmony circles, but Been knew they wouldn't. "Well, then, Been," said Sandor, "how do you see yourself functioning as a member of our pod if you adopt this new sexual orientation? Because, forgive me for being frank, it seems to me that this unilateral action on your part is not in harmony with the principles of Consensualism." He took a careful sip from the mug.

"I don't understand." Been pushed off the couch. "I've been living with you

since we left orbit around Nonny's Home." In four quick steps, he had paced from one end of the common room to the other. "Have I been doing something all this time that bothered you?"

"Beenie," said Zola, "this pod has as much need for a gay man as we have for a singing kangaroo." She grinned at him from the tiny food prep bay as she melted her own coffee cup back into the counter. "We just wonder why you aren't thinking about that."

"Is that all I am to you, a hard cock?"

"No," said Zola. "You're also a tongue."

"And clever fingers." Nelly sounded wistful.

"I do more than just pop into bed whenever you two call," said Been. "Who asks all the questions? Suggests shows to watch, books to read? Who tells the most entertaining lies?"

He saw Sandor and Zola exchange glances. They would probably be re-lieved not to be fooled by any more of Been's entertaining lies.

Nelly just sighed. "It isn't as if you're about to go stale or anything. What are you, eighty-two? Eighty-three? You've got decades before you have to recast yourself."

Of course, Been had lied about his age, not merely for entertainment value, but in order to be accepted as a Consensualist. He slumped against the wall, closed his eyes, and tried not to smile. He already knew he'd be leaving the pod. He just needed to make sure that, when his podmates reached consensus, *they* were the ones to ask him to go. That way Zola would feel obligated to help him find a new place to stay until the *Nine Ball* reached Little Chin. Been knew that no other pod would take him at this late date. There were two gay pods on the *Nine Ball*, but one was notoriously over-crowded, and for the last few weeks Been had been busy annoying a key member of the other. Been's plan required that he move in with Zola's friend Ilona Quellan, the captain's ex-wife. Been thought he might be in love with Ilona, even though they had never even been introduced, but becoming a homosexual would solve that problem nicely. "So what do we do now?" he said.

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"Homosexual?" said Zelmet Emsley's talking head. "Sure, it's just a straight-forward recompilation." He settled onto a chair behind the intake counter in BioCore Receiving. The lightboard on top of the counter shimmered to consciousness and began to sing as he wagged his hand over it.

“As I remember, most of it is at chromosome seven, region 7q36.” Emsley tapped through a series of files. “Right, and chromosome eight, region 8p12. *Hmm*. I’ll need to tweak chromosome ten at 10q26.” He wiped the light-board with a dismissive wave. “Outpatient procedure, check in tomorrow after lunch and you can eat dinner first shift. Should take the sprites five or six days to spread to all your cells and that’s it, since you don’t need to grow anything you don’t already have.” Emsley’s talking head fixed Been with an officious stare. “But why do it at all?” His eyes bulged, suddenly as big as plums. “*Hmm?*” Even his thinking head blinked itself awake and squinted in Been’s general direction. “Trouble back in the pod?”

Strictly speaking, Been’s reasons for wanting to switch his sexual orientation were none of Emsley’s business. Zelmet Emsley wasn’t a colonist. He was crew, the *Nine Ball’s*, First Bioengineer; it was his job to look after the health of the colonists. This included performing reembodiments if re-requested, assuming that they posed no harm to anyone and did not make unreasonable demands on the resources of the BioCore. But Been was determined to be diplomatic with Emsley. In his decades of experience traveling on slipships dividing the sustain, he had learned the hard way that it never paid to provoke the crew.

“No, no trouble.” Uninvited, Been sat down on the float across the desk from Emsley. It settled toward the deck briefly, before bearing up under his weight. “The thing is that Friday is my birthday and...well...I’m afraid I underreported my age. I’m actually going to be a hundred and thirty-two. Born on April 11 2351. On Titan—that’s a moon you’ve probably never heard of back in the First System. Only eight and a half AU from Earth. Practically next door to the homeworld although I never did make it there. Somebody said the captain hails from Earth, or is that just a rumor? Because that would practically make us neighbors. How come we never see him—Captain Quellan, I mean? He’s not virtual, is he?”

“You see him every day on the lightboards.” Both of Emsley’s heads gazed at him sternly. “This is a colonial transport, Mr. Watanabe, not a cruise ship. The captain keeps a lean crew and likes to make sure things are done right, which means he’s too busy to be socializing with passengers.”

“My friends call me Been.” He pushed at the deck and the float bobbed and swung away from the counter. “Right, I understand he’s busy. So anyway, I’m a hundred and thirty-two and feel like I might be going a little stale so I’m thinking it’s time for a recast.”

“I take it you had some reason to claim that you were fifty years younger than you actually are?” Emsley seemed more amused than annoyed at Been’s confession. “You’ve deceived us, Mr. Watanabe.”

“Not you so much as Henk Krall and Lars Benzonia.” On another ship bound for a different planet, this might have been a serious matter. But the *Nine Ball* was no luxury liner and Been suspected that he wasn’t the only one on board who had

misrepresented himself. Zola, for example, seemed rather an unlikely Consensualist.

“*Hmm,*” said Emsley. “I thought you people were against changing per-sonalities.”

“We’re not against it, we’re just supposed to get consensus on it and that’s hard. Can you keep a secret?”

Emsley pointed at the lightboard and the hatch to BioCore slid shut. “Try me.”

“I’m not so sure I am a Consensualist anymore.”

“Mr. Watanabe, we’re bound for a colony that is almost entirely Con-sensual.”

“Been,” he said. “I guess that will make me someone special, won’t it? Actually, at first I was wondering if I shouldn’t recast as a woman but then I thought that it would be too much trouble in too short a time. I mean we *are* going to make planetfall soon, aren’t we? The captain’s first estimate was that it would take just eight months to divide the sustain.”

“Trouble, yes,” As Emsley tilted his chair against the bulkhead of the BioCore, the seatback cracked under the strain, re-formed and then knitted itself together to take his weight. His thinking head rested against his talk-ing head.

“You’ve been recast,” said Been, “am I right?”

“Three times.”

“How long did you wait for your first?”

“I was a hundred and forty-one when I had my personality transplant. At two hundred and thirteen, I became a heterosexual. And I was three hun-dred and four when I got this.” He tapped the temple of his thinking head.

There were only so many times a human could be recast before going stale and each had to be more radical than the last. Oak Suellentrop was currently the oldest living human. At four hundred and sixty-two, he had been recast seven times, most recently as a floating bladder that cruised the jet streams in the upper atmosphere of Jupiter.

“Well, the thing is,” said Been, “my grandmother went prematurely stale. We didn’t realize how far gone she was until it was too late. We tried ev-erything—transplant, bodymods, transgendering, total reembodiment—to shake her out of it.” He let his voice go husky out of respect for this ficti-tious

grandmother; Been had never known his real one. “She lived to be two hundred and eight but for the last sixty years all she wanted to do was watch old-fashioned porn and look up at Saturn.” Been pounded his fist into his open hand. “So yes, I’m a little nervous. Ready to embrace para-digm shift and grab a new point of view. Give me that electric kiss of anxiety and ‘Happy birthday, Been!’”

“You could grow another head,” said Emsley.

“I suppose.” Been looked thoughtful, as he pretended to consider the possibility. “But that would be at least as much trouble as becoming a woman, wouldn’t it? Besides, what would I put in it? I don’t think I’m smart enough to have more than one head. I mean, look at you. How much extra storage do you have up there, anyway?”

Emsley perked up. Like most people who had opted for radical bodymod in a late recasting, he was clearly proud of what he’d had done. He unfixated his shirt so that Been could admire the astonishing breadth of his clavical bridge and the bulge where his spinal cord split in two. His thinking head was smaller than his talking head and had only a vestigial mouth and smudge of a nose. It sat low on its own stubby neck and seemed not to have much range of motion.

“People used to think that symmetry was the key to beauty.” Emsley twisted his talking head to admire his thinking head. “But in my experience women are just fascinated by asymmetry.”

“I was hoping to be gay,” Been said.

Although it didn’t open its eyes, Emsley’s thinking head scowled. A flicker of embarrassment passed across the features of the talking head at being caught celebrating himself so thoroughly. “Yes, of course.”

“Are there side effects I should know about?” Been pushed at the deck and the float drifted a few centimeters closer to the counter. “I heard there were changes in the brain.”

Emsley shrugged. “The interstitial nucleus of your anterior hypothalamus will shrink over time, but no one will be able to tell that unless they peel your brain as part of a total reembodiment. The pheromone palette in your sweat will change. The people who you live with who are used to the way you smell might tell you that something’s different, without knowing what exactly.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad.”

As Emsley leaned forward, his chair cracked once again and recurved around him. “In some ways, sexual reorientation is the most subtle of all possible recastings. Your sexuality, however you decide to express it, does not reside solely in your

DNA. It's in your brain, your genitals, your memory, your image of yourself and your personality. Yes, we can manipulate nature but there is also nurture to consider. I was gay for more than two centuries and I was still having great sex with men some forty years after I became genetically straight. Just as you will have a hundred and something years of heterosexual nurture to deal with if you become gay."

"Thirty-two." He bounced off the float. "A hundred and thirty-two. My birthday is Friday, can you do it before then?"

Emsley never got the chance to answer. The high-pitched wail of a child in pain filled the passageway just outside BioCore Receiving. The hatch slid aside revealing two dazed colonists carrying a very pale boy, who was maybe five or six. His right hand was wrapped in a bloody towel.

"There." Emsley pointed to the float where Been had just been sitting and they set the boy down on it. Been pressed himself against the rear bulk-head to keep out of the way.

The boy tried to curl into himself around the wounded hand but the bioengineer gently rolled him onto his back. "What is this then?" Emsley's manner was so cool he might have been asking the time.

"The boys got into the air vent somehow and Joss stuck his hand into a fan," said the man, whom Been took to be the dad. "It was dark."

The expressions on Emsley's faces were calm but alert as he pushed the boy's hair aside. "Boys," he said, as he painted sensor sprites onto the pallid forehead with his medfinger. Been could hear the lightboard begin to sing the boy's vital signs. "Why is it always boys?"

"It's my fault," said the woman, probably the mom. She sniffed but did not cry.

"Our fault," said the dad.

"Yes, you're right," she said miserably.

"Let's make Joss comfortable." Been heard hissing as Emsley pressed the medfinger to the boy's temple. Joss immediately went limp. Emsley closed the boy's eyes and unwrapped the towel. "Oh, dear," he said. Blood spattered onto the float. "Were you able to find any of the fingers?"

The dad was already offering him a blood-smearred plastic bag containing the severed fingers.

Emsley held it up to the brightly illuminated overhead. "Hmm," he said. "Too

mangled.” He dropped the plastic bag into the trash. The mom gave off a strangled *yip* of protest as the lid closed for incineration.

“Don’t worry.” Zelmet Emsley smiled at the boy’s parents. “We’ll grow him better ones.” As he maneuvered himself behind the float to push it into the BioCore, he noticed Been still squeezed against the bulkhead. “Ah, Been. I’ll see you Thursday, then?”

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Been didn’t know exactly who had bought the personality transplant that he was carrying in his mindsync, but that was often the case in his line of work. Besides, it all was perfectly legal. Everyone had the right to be recast, especially when there was a possibility that the client might go stale. Of course, the citizens of Little Chin could ostracize anyone who was recast without consensus approval. Been suspected that he was working for one of the leaders of the colony, which was why the client had paid extra for covert delivery. Been’s problem was that he had no idea where he was supposed to download the transplant. His contact on Nonny’s Home had never shown up. There had been no final briefing. With a one-way ticket, false ID, the transplant, and a third of his fee in hand, Been had chosen at the last minute to continue on to Little Chin in the hopes that the client would contact him there.

But as the year aboard the slipship dragged by, he had come to regard his decision as foolhardy. How was he supposed to make delivery while remaining undercover? Sneak up on Lars Benzonia, Acoa Renkl, and Elma Stitch and ask if they were going stale? And if he couldn’t connect, he might be stuck on Little Chin with a personality transplant that only his client could unlock. His partial fee would pay for a ticket to someplace else, but probably nowhere he wanted to go. Meanwhile, the Consensualists would surely shun him once they found out that he barely knew the difference between agronomy and astronomy. Been needed a backup plan. He was sure that if he could only get a chance to talk to Harlen Quellan, captain and owner of the *Nine Ball*, he’d be able to strike some kind of deal for transport back to Nonny’s Home. He could offer partial payment and then join the crew to work his passage back. Once he was home, he could either insist on being paid in full or else return the personality transplant to AllSelf for a salvage fee. But first he had to see Harlen Quellan and the captain had proven impossible to see.

“Been Watanabe,” Zola said over the din of the second seating for break-fast, “this is Ilona Quellan.”

Zola had been standing between Been and Ilona. Now she stepped back so that he had an unobstructed view. Ilona sat by herself, as was her custom. She glanced up warily from a bowl of steamed rice, a short stack of pancakes spread with butter, a fillet of lightmeat, and half a grapefruit. Zola seemed to expect Been and Ilona would shake hands, but Been sensed that this was not an intimacy the pregnant woman would welcome. Instead, he circled to the other side of the long

table, put his bowl of Figs 'N Flakes down, and sat opposite her, fighting the absurd attraction he had felt ever since he had first seen this unhappy woman.

“Hello, Been Watanabe,” she said. “I understand you want something of us?”

Been touched his forefinger and middle finger to his eyes, nose, and lips before turning them toward Ilona. “Hello, Ilona Quellan. Tomorrow is my birthday.”

“Happy birthday to you then, sir.” She spread a hand over her huge belly. “This baby and I rejoice that you continue to exist.”

The rest of Been’s pod settled around the two of them. Zola inserted herself next to Ilona and introduced her to Sandor and Nelly. She had met Ilona at the Arachnophiliac’s Meetup and had twice taken care of Ilona’s marbled spider Rags while Ilona was getting the baby reembodied. Rags was an *Araneus marmoreus* that daily filled her terrarium with webs of hyp-notic complexity.

There was a long moment when nobody had anything to say. Zola and Nelly perched expectantly at the edges of their chairs. Sandor began to eat. Ilona gazed at Been, apparently waiting for him to answer her original ques-tion. Been smiled back.

There was nothing remarkable about Ilona Quellan, other than that she was extremely pregnant. She was a small woman, and her belly was so huge that the baby almost seemed to be more of her than she was of herself. She had fine features: subtle lips, steep eyebrows. Her black hair had highlights of gray. She looked tired, but that was only to be expected. She had been pregnant with her son for more than three years, if the rumors were to be believed. The babyface medallion that hung around her neck showed the baby to be asleep.

If he tried, Been could look at Ilona critically. For example, no one could miss her constant scowl. Been could count the wrinkles and hear the mis-trust in her voice and sense the wall she had built around herself to keep the world away. But he didn’t care; he imagined smoothing her wrinkles with his kisses and climbing the wall to win her heart. Of course, he had nursed his impossible infatuation from a distance because he was afraid of where it might lead him. She was the captain’s ex, pregnant, sad, unattainable, and aloof. Been had had many slipship romances, but never a secret obsession. It was so unlike him; he was at once delighted and alarmed.

Zola kicked Been under the table. He glanced over at her and she twitched her head toward Ilona. Sandor had his nose in a plate of eggs but Nelly had pushed back from the table, too nervous to eat. Been could tell that the women in his pod were going to start speaking for him if he didn’t speak for himself.

“For my birthday,” he said, “I decided to give myself a present. I’m going to be gay. Zelmet Emsley has already programmed the sprites; I’m getting them later

today.”

“And what made you decide this, Been?” said Ilona.

“I’ve never been gay.” He shrugged. “I’ve never really been anyone but myself. Rather boring, wouldn’t you say? And I suppose I’m worried about going stale.”

“At your age?” Sandor grunted in disbelief.

“We all go stale eventually,” said Ilona. “Immortality is for turtles.”

“Ilona is an authority on creative discomfort,” Zola broke in. They had all agreed that this was their best and maybe only chance to move Been out of the pod now that they were sure he was going to become gay. Zola wasn’t going to let Been ruin it. “You should see what she has done with her cabin. It’s like a maze.”

Nelly nodded vigorously. “Zola told me that just finding the couch made her feel smarter.” Her enthusiasm had an edge of desperation. “No one could ever go stale there.”

“I’d very much like to see it,” said Been.

Ilona nodded and then poured syrup over her pancakes, her fish, and her grapefruit. Zola and Nelly began to eat as well, as if something had just been settled, although Been wasn’t sure what.

Zola said, “I really appreciate this, Ilona.”

“Appreciate what?” Ilona teased a sliver from the fillet with her chop-sticks. “Don’t assume, Zola. What do you imagine I’m doing?”

“You’re talking to us,” said Been.

“You’re here. It would be impolite to do otherwise.” Her smile was chilly.

With a wrench, Been realized that he was wasting his time trying to charm her. Ilona Quellan would never willingly disrupt her life by letting him move into the spare hutch in her cabin.

At that moment, the babyface lit up. The eyes on the medallion blinked several times, awash in a blue glow. They took in the people gathered at the table. Nelly gave the babyface an uncertain smile; many of the colonists were spooked by the long-unborn baby Quellan. Zola waved. Finally the babyface noticed Been.

“Hullo, baby,” Been said. “You’re very lucky to have such a devoted

mother.”

The babyface regarded him with blue seriousness.

“And a famous father, captain of this marvelous slipship.”

Zola gasped. Not only had she warned Been not to mention Ilona’s ex, but the pod had reached consensus that he shouldn’t. Harlen Quellan was the reason Ilona still suffered through her endless pregnancy. After the divorce, she had refused to give birth to their son until Harlen agreed to honor a prenuptial agreement giving her a third of their joint assets, which included the *Nine Ball*.

A shadow passed over Ilona’s features. “This baby doesn’t speak to strang-ers, sir.”

“Really? I’m very good with children.” Been spoke with an easy obliviousness. “You know, I’m still hoping to meet your husband someday, Ilona. We’ve been a year aboard and I’ve only seen him on the lightboards, never in the flesh. That’s odd, don’t you think? It’s not that big a ship.” He peered into the babyface. “If your father has visitation rights, baby, would you put in the good word?”

The little mouth on the babyface twisted. “Googoo, gah, *ga, ga*”

Ilona’s head dropped so that her chin rested against the babyface. She covered her mouth with her hand and murmured to it. The babyface bur-bled back. As this went on, Been was pleased to see that mother and baby were arguing.

As one, Been and his entire pod leaned toward Ilona Quellan, hoping to catch some of the conversation. The rumors were that baby Quellan had long since achieved consciousness in the womb, but nobody knew what it did with it.

Finally, Ilona let her hand fall to her side. She gave Been a prickly glare. “On your birthday,” she said, “there is to be a party?” The babyface was watching him intently.

The question caught Been by surprise. He glanced at his podmates, but they just gawked back at him like he had sprouted another ear.

“Not that I know of,” he admitted.

“It doesn’t speak well of you, Been Watanabe, that no one cares to cel-eb-ate your birthday. These people, for instance.” She gestured at Zola, Nelly, and Sandor. “Zola tells me you have been living together for the past year.”

Zola shook herself. “We think Been is wonderful. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“Of course.”

“And we support his decision to.. .um.. .change himself,” said Nelly.
“Definitely.”

Consensus on this subject was also enthusiastically confirmed.

“It’s just that he doesn’t quite fit—”

Ilona interrupted before Sandor could finish. “This baby thinks your friend should have a birthday party.” She pushed her chair back and stood up with difficulty, her belly barely clearing the edge of the table. “If there is a party, this baby would like you to invite both it and its father.” She rested her hands on the table wearily. “I can’t speak for Captain Quellan, but I can assure you that this baby would be certain to attend.”

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Throwing a party on the *Nine Ball* was so complicated that very few of the colonists had managed it. Members of a single pod could gather easily enough in their common room, and they might invite a few guests, depending on whether they could reach consensus about intruding into one another’s personal space. But if more than one pod wanted to socialize, it would have to be in public space, which was at a premium on the *Nine Ball*. The AgCore had room enough, but was not particularly party-friendly. There was a pungent iron stink in the abattoir where Molly, the *Nine Ball’s* amiable fatling, sloughed off slabs of her living light and darkmeat. And the CO₂ in the greenhouse ran to six percent—good for the hydroponic plants, fatal for parties. There wasn’t much open space in the library. The virtuality shells lining the VRCore were ninety percent singles and ten percent doubles. The cafeteria was in continuous use, with the eighth seating for any given meal being immediately followed by the first seating of the next meal. When the two meeting rooms weren’t booked by one of the colonists’ sixteen Infrastructure Planning Groups or the harmony circles, they were being used by the various meetups which had formed during the run to Little Chin. These ranged from Amateur Astronomy to Zen League Baseball. The Space-Friendly Pet Meetup alone had a dozen subsections: spiders, ants, pretters, frogs, turtles, snakes, mice, gerbils, hamsters, ferrets, squee, and birds.

The other complication with throwing a party was drawing up a guest list. In a society where everyone was friendly but nobody was much of a friend, how were Been’s podmates to decide who to invite to his birthday party? For there *was* going to be a party, and in a most unusual place. To the general astonishment of all aboard, even the crew, Captain Harlen Quellan himself had offered the ControlCore for

Been's birthday party. It was widely assumed, at least among the colonists, that this meant the Captain would be making his first public appearance of the run. The guest list Been and his podmates finally decided upon was an odd mix of crew and colonists—especially odd because these two groups did not usually have much to do with one another. The colonists regarded the crew as outrageously idiosyncratic; almost all of them had been recast with custom bio or mechmods. Crew could be quarrelsome and vulgar. They held grudges. Sometimes they solved problems by screaming at one another.

The crew thought the colonists were boring.

The colonists who attended Been's party were Tedia Grossman, Grel Laconia, and Ydt, whom Been knew from the Artful Exaggerators Meetup. They were some of the worst liars he had ever met, but for Consensualists, they were fair company. Gala Lysenko, Beth Fauziah, and Foxcroft Allez came from the Future Farmers Meetup. They had spent the last few months subjectively trying to get Been to reveal what wonder food was stowed in the CargoCore. Been had hinted and dodged for months, since his credentials as a genetic agronomist were nothing but well-crafted lies. He didn't even like vegetables. Dizzy and Henk Krall, who were subsidizing the run to Little Chin, had invited themselves, no doubt to protect their interests. And of course, Nelly, Zola, and Sandor were there, hoping that the party might somehow help them move their superfluous podmate out. From the crew—aside from Harlen Quellan, baby Quellan, and of course, his mother—invitations went to Matty, Ment, and Vron Zink, who were the factors in charge of dividing the sustain so that the *Nine Ball* could slip through the folded dimensions. Everyone was eager to hear the Zinks' latest estimate of when the slipship would arrive at Little Chin. Zelmet Emsley was invited, as well as Kinsella Frecktone, who managed the *Nine Ball's* AgCore and was presumably a professional colleague of Been's, although they had hardly spoken since leaving Nonny's Home. Nobody could quite figure out why Kastor maven Lodse, the assistant cargo steward, was on the guest list.

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Been rode the lift to the frontmost level of the *Nine Ball* with Nelly and Sandor; Zola had volunteered to bring the birthday cake from the cafeteria.

Been was feeling a little flushed; Zelmet Emsley's sprites had been having their way with his genome for not quite a day now. He worried that his skin was getting tighter; he could almost feel his fingerprints.

The lift hatch slid away and he was gazing into the dazzle of the ControlCore's lightboards.

"*Hmm.*" Zelmet Emsley sounded as if he were a swarm of bees. "Here's the man of the hour."

Been blinked, distracted by the way the lightboards were singing their status reports.

“We’re here, Been,” hissed Nelly. “Step off.” When she nudged Been in the small of the back, her knuckle pricked him like a knife and he felt a surge of terror. How long had he been paralyzed by the sights and sounds of ControlCore? Sandor had a hand clamped over the shivering lift hatch to keep it from closing. Been realized then that he was having an unexpected reaction to the sprites. Adrenaline skittered through him and brain cells that had too long been dormant began to fire. He had to get in control of him-self. This might be his chance to talk to Harlen Quellan. “Is the Captain here?” said Been.

When Emsley’s thinking head grimaced, its face looked as if it were pressed against a window. “Not yet,” said his talking head.

Been let Gala and Beth peel him away from Emsley. They wanted him to see how Kastor maven Lodse could pull up real-time images of any single cargo container on board and then inspect their contents virtually.

“So that means you can tell us what’s in any container?” Gala rested a hand lightly on Lodse’s shoulder. “Say, for example”—she shot Been a mischievous grin—“Y7R in cold locker three?”

Lodse gestured at the lightboard. It sang back to him and then a green Lifetec container appeared on it. “Could.” He nodded at the lightboard. “But won’t. Not my job. My job is getting stuff from here to there.”

“*Please*, Kastor. We’ve heard rumors that we’re carrying some revolution-ary new seed stock that could save Little Chin.” Now Beth was testing Been to see if he would react.

Been thought he could see malice curling off her smile like smoke. “We’re planting seed, Beth, not rumors.”

“You won’t talk to us, Been Watanabe, so now we’re not talking to you.” Gala closed her hand on Lodse’s shoulder. “What about it, Kastor? Aren’t you interested?”

“Not really.” Lodse waved at the lightboard and it went back to the de-fault overview of the CargoCore. “To us, cargo is nothing but bins, barrels, and bulbs. Some of them have to be kept warm, some cold. Some of them need to breathe, others want to be airtight. All we care about is whether someone is coming to sign for them at the end of the run.”

More people arrived at the party and then Gala and Beth were gone and a

drunken Henk Krall was leaning against him so hard that Been had to brace himself to keep from pitching backward. At first, Been thought Henk might be flirting with him, but then the conversation turned rancid.

“I’m sorry to say, Been, that there have been some who question whether you are truly committed to Consensualism.” Henk’s voice slurred and he added a couple of unnecessary syllables to “Consensualism.” “I intend to bring this problem to Lars Benzonia once we make planetfall. You are a serious disappointment.”

Been looked to Dizzy to pull her drunken husband off him, but she just shook her head. “Henk, I’m wondering if Been’s personality dampening might not have been completely effective,” she said. “Do you think that’s possible, Been dear? Might that be why you are taking such drastic steps?”

“Have taken.” Been stepped away from Henk suddenly, and when the old man lost his balance, Been danced him to a bulkhead and parked him against it. “You want to see drastic steps?” he called out to the room. Dizzy watched, astonished, as he continued to dance away from Henk. “*Dra-astic* steps, Jan-tastic steps,” he crooned and caught a smirking Kinsella Frecktone up in his arms; he fit there like the key to Been’s lock. Been wondered if Emsley might not have been wrong and he had become fully gay overnight. “Come with me, darling, and together we’ll take enthusi-ass-stic steps to the stars.” Been swung him into a cross-body lead and Kinsella actually fol-lowed along for a few beats.

Then a lot of people were laughing and Been was laughing too and someone gave him something dangerous to drink and he took a sip that looked bigger than it was and when no one was looking, he spilled the rest into a trash container just before he fell in with the Zinks.

“So when are you going to post a hard estimate for planetfall?” Been could never tell Matty from Vron Zink, especially when their datacards were melded together. The brothers were wide, dark, grim men with breath bad enough to make engineers flinch. They never got jokes, no matter how obvious the telling. Their niece Ment was younger and blonder. She had come aboard the *Nine Ball* to learn the family trade.

“The sustain has been very folded tight,” said the brothers, speaking in unison as they always did when they were sharing mind.

Young Ment Zink wandered over, as if sensing that her uncles were talking business. The segmented datacard began to uncoil from around her neck. “Want me to meld too?” she said to her uncles.

“Not necessary,” they said. “We have enough processing capacity for this conversation.”

Ment wound her datacord back behind her hair in disappointment. “Happy birthday, Mr. Been Watanabe,” she said. “This is quite a coup. What do you know about the captain that we don’t?”

“Never met the man.”

“He’s asking that we’ll make planetfall when,” said the uncles.

“I’d say we have at least two scant folds to slip through,” said Ment.

“Tomorrow,” said the uncles. “Or the after day.”

“Tomorrow?” said Been. “You mean ship subjective tomorrow?”

“No, standard tomorrow,” said Ment. “In the broad dimensions. They must be thinking in real time.”

“So what’s that going to be in ship subjective time?”

“We pass currently twenty-three ship subjective days for each standard day,” said the brothers, “but the sustain very crunches our subjective space-time fast.”

Ment polished the tip of her datacord with her thumb. “This is all probability-driven, but it’s most likely we’ll reach one-to-one subjective-to-standard time in under two weeks.”

“But two weeks is also error margin,” said the uncles.

“Two weeks subjective?” It had always made Been dizzy when he thought about time dilation in the sustain of the six folded dimensions, so he didn’t.

“Subjective, yes,” said Ment. “And when we close the sustain, we should be just a day from planetfall.”

Been shut his eyes and tried not to look stupid.

“But what will we find there?” Zola had her arm tight around Nelly and was playing nervously with the ends of her podmate’s hair. Been was in the midst of a knot of colonists. He couldn’t see the Zinks anywhere.

“Ydt claims that the colony on Little Chin voted to dissolve,” said Nelly.

“He heard it from the Captain.”

“Actually, the crew heard it from the Captain. I had it from Kastor maven Lodse.”

“Lars Benzonia has gone stale because the teachers blocked consensus on a recast.” Foxcroft Allez’s cheeks were flushed. “There’s nobody to lead them.”

“Us,” said Nelly.

Ydt peeked over her shoulder. “Everyone on Little Chin will cram onto the *Nine Ball*. Once we get pushed off, they’ll come swarming. Captain booked the entire colony yesterday.”

“Is he here?” Foxcroft glanced around the ControlCore.

“Not yet.”

“He can’t possibly have heard any such thing.” Now that Been had to think about subjective and standard time again, it filled his head with fizz. “We’re still dividing the sustain, Ydt. No message can get from the broad dimensions to the folded dimensions because of time dilation.”

“Go ask Kastor if you don’t believe me,” said Ydt.

Sandor turned to look for the cargo steward.

“Don’t make a fool of yourself.” Been caught Sandor by the arm. “I don’t know how you can step onto a slipship without learning the first thing about interdimensional physics.”

“It isn’t true?” Nelly slumped against Zola in relief.

“It *could* be true.” Ydt beamed at his fellow colonists. “That’s the beauty of it. We just have no way of knowing.”

Been poked Ydt in the chest. “Ever think of trying out for the Artful Exaggerators, Ydt?”

Ydt grinned and poked him back. “I recruited *you* to the Exaggerators, Watanabe.”

“My point exactly.”

“You’re hot, Been,” Zelmet Emsley traced a medfinger just under Been’s hairline. “Your temperature is 39.3 degrees. Maybe you should go back to your hutch to rest?”

“Is the captain here yet?” said Been.

“At least sit down.”

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear...”

Been found that he was holding a plate with a slab of spice cake with a light green frosting that rippled like waves on a pond. On top of the frosting floated the dark green letters *p*, *y*, and *B*.

Ilona’s huge belly was hard as a fist. It bumped against him as she went up on tiptoes to whisper into his ear.

“Harlen put you up to this.” Her voice tickled him. “He’s using you to harass me. Make me let him go.”

“But I’ve never even met the Captain,” said Been.

Her face was too close to his. “That doesn’t mean anything.” Been could feel her anger burning his cheek. He wondered what would happen if he kissed her. No part of her personality had been dampened: she’d probably punch him.

“Is the captain here?”

She snorted.

“There’s a secret, isn’t there?”

“There are always secrets.” Her hand rested on the shelf of her belly. “Come down to my cabin,” she said. “He wants to see you.”

* * * *

Zola had been right, Been thought. The common room of Ilona Quellan’s cabin was a showcase for the creative-discomfort style of interior design. Her deckscape pitched and changed levels without warning, but at least it didn’t move. Panels of varying solidity slowly dripped from the overhead or melted back into the deckscape. They were not hard to avoid, but the point was that they had to be avoided. Mobile floodlights crawled across the overhead and down the bulkheads. The furniture was snug enough: a wide particolored couch, a scatter of low and high chairs. Three hatches, a food prep bay, and a head opened onto the common room. The hatch to each of the sleep hatches was a lightboard showing scenes from old 3D vids or alien landscapes. They rotated ninety degrees at random intervals, so that Been had to lean over and cock his head to make sense of them. Been knew that research showed that people who moved into a challenging environment showed measurable gains in intelligence and lived years and even decades longer without needing to be recast. But he had no interest in spending his life fighting his way

through an obstacle course every night just to climb into bed.

However, he could put up with it for a couple of weeks, assuming the Zinks had estimated planetfall accurately. “It’s an amazing place you have here,” he said.

Ilona sprawled on the couch with two pillows under her head and one between her legs. She had changed into a pair of loose silk pajamas, the top of which crept up her belly, showing a grin of white skin.

“I used to be beautiful,” she said.

Been didn’t hesitate. “You still are.”

“Please.” She pushed a hand at him wearily. “Throw away the script if you’re going to live here.”

“Am I going to live here?” He stepped around a tumescent panel and pulled up a chair to face her.

“He said to me, ‘I’ll give you the stars for a wedding present.’ And I was too young to realize that was one of the oldest scripts ever written.”

“How old are you now?”

She considered. “A hundred and forty-one? Forty-two? No, forty-one.”

“And never been recast?”

“I’m pregnant, Been. I’ve been pregnant for twenty-nine months. That’s all the recasting I can stand for the moment.” She nodded at the meter-wide yellow panel beginning to dribble from the overhead; in an hour they wouldn’t be able to see one another. “And I live here. In this ‘amazing place’ as you say. Tell me that’s not from a script.” She pleaded with the overhead. “Can’t anyone come up with some new lines?”

In Been’s experience, that was the kind of thing that people going stale said. Ilona was silent for a moment. Then her eyes fluttered shut. But the babyface was awake and watching him. The medallion had slipped on its chain and was resting against Ilona’s left breast.

“How does it feel to be gay?” said Ilona. Her eyes remained closed.

“It doesn’t feel like anything at all,” said Been. “I was a little dizzy back at the party, but that’s because I still have sprites swarming me. Zelmet Emsley claims that becoming gay is a pretty subtle recasting. I won’t feel the full effect for months. Or even years.”

She propped herself up on an elbow. “So did you have an active sex life when you were straight? I’ll bet Zola is a handful and a half.”

“You’d win that one.”

“And you?”

“I didn’t get any complaints.”

“Means nothing.” Her laugh was bitter; it left a bad taste in Been’s mouth. “Men complain. Women settle.”

“I’m not sure that’s right,” he said.

She let her head drop and her eyes shut again. Several long minutes passed. Been was tired too and he was feeling frustrated. He liked watching Ilona drowse but she’d said that Harlen Quellan wanted to speak to him. Where was he?

“Time?” He raised his voice, hoping to wake her up.

The lightboard hatch nearest him went into clock mode: *02:31:12, 02:31:13, 02:31:14*. It was later than he’d thought.

The babyface was smiling at him now. Been stood, walked uphill to the couch and leaned close. “Where’s your daddy, baby?”

“*Grrl, goo,*” said the babyface.

He tried to do the math. If Ilona’s baby had been actually born at nine months, that would mean it would be twenty months old now. What could babies do at twenty months? Talk? Walk? But then Zola had said that the baby had been reembodied several times to keep it from being born. What was it thinking there inside her? Other than having been an infant a hundred and thirty-two years ago, Been hadn’t had a lot of experience with babies. He had spent most of the last seventy years subjective ferrying per-sonalities to the Thousand Worlds on slipships.

“So, Been, you had an active sex life as a heterosexual,” murmured Ilona, her eyes still shut, “and you’re too new at homosexuality for it to have taken. Have I got that right? Is that why you’re staring at my chest?”

“Ilona!” The clock on the lightboard disappeared and was replaced by an image of Harlen Quellan. “Don’t start.”

She sat up abruptly, the babyface banging against her belly. “Why? Just because I’m pregnant, I’m not allowed to want sex? It’s almost three years, you

bastard.”

Been thought it cruelly unfair that he had to choose between hearing more about Ilona’s desires and meeting Harlen Quellen. The captain now presented himself, not quite life-sized, on all five of Ilona’s hatches. He appeared to be floating weightlessly in some private corner of his slipship, beyond the sway of artificial gravity. Harlen Quellen could have been fifty, one hundred and fifty, or three hundred and fifty. His skin was smooth and glossy, his hair green as a dream. He wore his dress uniform as if he had been born in it, the silver captain’s bars on his jacket catching the light, his pants with razor creases, dazzling white foot and hand gloves. He’d had his datacord grafted to his coccyx like a tail and it switched back and forth as he spoke. He was too perfect by half in Been’s estimation; nobody real looked that good.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t make it to your birthday party, Mr. Watanabe, but the press of ship’s business keeps me busy.”

“Continuously, Captain?” said Been. “For the entire run?”

He bowed stiffly. “I’m here now, sir.”

“I was hoping I might talk to you alone, Captain.”

“But there is no alone on my ship.” He gestured at the cabin expansively. “Every cubic millimeter is under surveillance. The crew must see every-where always. That’s our job.”

“I think he means me, Harlen. Go ahead, you two can conspire together.” Ilona heaved herself off the couch. “I need to use the bathroom anyway.”

Been waited until the hatch to the head slid shut. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you, Captain.”

“Yes, Mr. Watanabe,” he said dryly. “Forty-seven messages sent by you, all of them ignored by me. You’ve asked every member of my crew about me. You are now pestering my ex-wife. And you’ve had the goddamned nerve to try to speak to my unborn son.”

“So it’s a boy then?”

“Sir, I’ve been observing you for months now. What I’ve noticed is that you are adept at steering conversations just where you want them to go. You flatter, sir, and cajole and you will craft a lie whenever it’s convenient. I have a ship to run and have no time for such diversions, goddamn it, so let me get to the point.” He aimed a long foretoe at Been. “What is the expected rate of gene flow from transgenic corn plants to their wild-type cultivars?”

Been felt as if there were a rope tightening at his throat. “I beg your pardon?” He choked on the words.

“How do you use fluorescence quenching to monitor changes in carotenoid levels in living plants?”

He was suddenly dizzy and knew it had nothing to do with sprites.

“Of course, agronomy is a vast field,” said the captain. “Maybe these questions are too esoteric. In that case, what is the iron component of the synthetic hydroxyapatites we use in the *Nine Ball’s* AgCore?”

Been sagged onto a chair. “What do you want?”

Harlen Quellan’s image began drifting from the vertical to the horizontal. “Two days ago, you told Zelmet Emsley that you’re no longer sure that you’re a Consensualist. I say that you never were one. Neither are you a goddamned genetic agronomist. Yet when you passed through Immigration on Nonny’s Home, you gave a sworn statement to that effect. It is one thing to lie to these colonists, sir. It is quite another to commit perjury to planetary authorities.”

“I’ve been on several dozen slipships in my life, Captain, and not one of them had a passenger manifest that could stand close scrutiny.”

“Several dozen, Mr. Watanabe? Not many agronomists are so well traveled.” Harlen Quellan smiled grimly. “My friend Zelmet ran a scan on your brain while you were in our BioCore. I believe he forgot to ask your permission. My apologies. I assume it would not surprise you to know that you have a mindsync with a capacity of twenty-two exabytes embedded in your cerebrum. Clearly, sir, you are a courier. What information are you carrying to Little Chin?”

“Personality transplant.”

“For?”

Been spread his hands and shrugged.

“Yes. Discretion would be part of your contract.” Harlen Quellan’s tail lashed impatiently. “Well, this is my fifth run to Chin. I can think of several people there who have both the need and the resources for such a recasting.” He laughed. “Consensualism is for the young and foolish, Mr. Watanabe. Not for the likes of you and me.” His datacord coiled around something offscreen and he drifted off the lightboard until only his gloved feet showed. “I’ll respect your privacy for now, sir, and that of your client,” he called. “But goddamn it, you had better respect mine as well.”

“I don’t want to go back to live in my old pod.”

“So I understand. You can move in with Ilona. I’m ordering it now.” He pushed himself back onto the lightboard. “I take it that was your plan all along?”

Been could not help but grin.

“Well, you’ve succeeded, sir.” He saluted Been. “My compliments.”

“If you have a minute, Captain, there’s a business matter I’d like to dis-cuss.”

“A minute is what I don’t have just now, Mr. Watanabe.” Harlen Quellan shook his head. “You have already taken too much of my time.”

“Maybe later then?”

“Ilona!” Harlen Quellan’s image knocked on the hatch to the head. “Are you all right?”

Been heard the toilet swoosh.

“Ilona is difficult enough as it is, sir.” Harlen Quellan wagged his foretoe at Been. “Don’t make my life with her any harder.”

The hatch slid open. Ilona Quellan curled a hand around the threshold on either side and pulled herself through, “So,” she said, “what did I miss?”

* * * *

The common name for Rags, Ilona’s pet spider, was a marbled orbweaver. She was about two centimeters long and ate hapless and wingless fruitflies which Ilona raised in a jar next to her terrarium. Rags had a blindingly orange cephalothorax and black and orange banded legs. Her huge cream-colored abdomen was marked with a black pattern that looked like two faces screaming in pain. The spider reminded Been a little of Ilona herself, with her outsized belly and the babyface hanging around her neck, but he knew better than to remark on this.

While he couldn’t see his way to doting on Rags quite the way Ilona did, he did become fascinated by the spider’s web-building. She made one almost every day, eating the old one so that she could build anew. In nature, Ilona said, Rags would release a line of her webbing into the wind and wherever it caught she would pull it tight. In the terrarium she walked her first line from one end of the glass to the other. She would cross the center of the horizontal line and spin a web straight down, pulling it into a Y shape. She would then spin many radii of nonsticky structural webbing before finally finishing her structure with spirals of sticky capture

silk. Ilona usually dropped live fruitflies directly onto the web for Rags, although sometimes she just let them loose in the terrarium to find their own path to doom. Occasionally when Rags built a particularly beautiful web, Ilona would fetch her pet out of the terrarium and spray the web with some gaily colored fixative, so she could save it to a scrapbook. The next day Rags would get an extra fruitfly.

Been got his first look at Ilona's scrapbook four days after he'd moved in. She had been brusque at first, treating Been as if he were some naive colonist. Been wasn't sure how much Harlen Quellan might have told her about him and he saw no need to reveal his secrets to her unnecessarily. But he made no pretense to belief in Consensualism, and, if she had been paying any attention at all, she would have noticed that many of the colonists had stopped treating Been as one of their own. This was no doubt because Henk Krall had been lobbying to ban Been from the Little Chin consensus once they arrived, for being recast without permission and for other acts of egregious individuality. Of course, only Lars Benzonia himself, founder of Little Chin, could call for a consensus on ostracism, but Krall was busy laying the groundwork.

Lars Benzonia had first developed the principles of Consensualism while a young man working his way across the Thousand Worlds as an itinerant biographer. It wasn't until he was hired to write the biography of Gween Renkl, one of the richest women on Nortroon, that he got the chance to put his philosophy into practice. He struck up a friendship with Gween's son, Acoa Renkl, who stood to inherit his mother's fortune, but had no idea what to do with it. Lars Benzonia gave Acoa Renkl his mission in life: to help spread the harmony of collective thinking throughout the galaxy. The galaxy had not been overly impressed with Consensualism, however, especially after so many of its elders had gone stale waiting for a consensus to form around their recastings. But a century after Lars Benzonia and Acoa Renkl had first met, there were still enough Consensualists to populate a colony on the world Renkl had bought for his friend.

On the sixth day, Ilona finally stopped smirking as Been stumbled through her common room in creative discomfort. It was right after he tripped over a panel that had not quite finished melting into the deckscape and crashed into one of her low chairs, crushing it utterly. He rolled off the wreck-age, and stared at the eight-centimeter gash in his forearm. His blood was pooling in a deck pocket. She grudgingly went with him to BioCore and remained while Zelmet Emsley painted artificial skin onto the cut. Emsley also took the opportunity to run a DNA scan; he pronounced Been completely homosexual. Been did not know quite what to make of this since living with Ilona had only fueled his secret infatuation.

Even before he had moved into her spare hutch, Been had observed that Ilona was on edgy terms with the crew, who sided with their captain in the dispute between the Quellens. However, she was very friendly with Emsley. They chatted easily. She made fun of the colonists; he filled her in on the latest ship's gossip. When he asked after Rags, Been realized that Emsley had one of Rags's webs

framed on the bulkhead behind the intake counter.

“Is she ready for another Rich?” Emsley’s talking head was grinning.

Ilona shrugged. “I’m not having any sex, so neither is she.”

“Rich?” said Been.

“Zelmet keeps a couple of dozen male orbweavers on ice. I call them all Rich. Every so often we thaw one out and show Rags a good time.”

“*Hmm.* I have my doubts as to whether spiders enjoy mating,” said Emsley. “I would imagine that pleasure was reserved for vertebrates.”

“He keeps her egg cases on ice too. If we make planetfall on a terraformed world, I thaw them out and set them free.”

“Speaking of reproduction, don’t forget you’re due to have the baby re-embodied.” Emsley’s thinking head was simpering at Ilona’s babyface, trying to make it laugh. “You almost put it off too long last time. If you go into labor, my hands are tied.”

“I know, I know,” she said wearily.

They parted as they left the BioCore. Ilona wanted to be alone and went off to the VRCore. Been was considering whether to lift down to the li-brary to read up on the life cycle of orbweavers when he ran into Nelly. He accepted her invitation to catch the fourth lunch seating.

“So do you miss me?” Been rolled a wad of drigi noodles onto his fork.

“Of course we do, Beenie.” She reached across the table to touch his hand. “We had Sandor in the other night and. .. well...” She made a lemon face and laughed. “He tries, he really does. Of course, when we get to Little Chin, things are bound to change. There will be lots of trades and turnover. Some of our pods will probably break up and new ones will form. You’ll find your place.”

Been let that go by without comment.

“And pay no attention to Henk Krall.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “If you ask me, he should stop talking about how you got recast and think about doing it himself. Zola claims he’s already half stale.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Your friend was so bad the other night at your birthday party.” She sipped

darkmeat broth out of a cup.

“My friend?”

“The one with the name. Ydt? He really had us scared, pretending that the colony was going to disband because Lars Benzonia was stale. I was ready to stick my head out of the airlock. I can’t believe you actually practice lying in that meetup.”

“It’s actually harder to tell the truth.” As soon as he said it, he realized that it was true. Been had been surprising himself lately.

Nelly laughed. “How’s it going with Ilona? Zola says she’s all right, but she makes me itch. I mean, it’s not only the captain she’s holding hostage, but it’s her own baby too.”

“We get along all right, I suppose. I like her, although she’s not the friendliest person I’ve ever roomed with. It’s just that she’s lonely and that’s made her hard.”

“Well, you’re good company. Cheer her up. Tell her some of your lies.”

* * * *

Been had no chance to cheer Ilona up either that day or the next. She seemed preoccupied, absent even when she sprawled across from him in their common room. It wasn’t until late on the eighth day that she appeared on the threshold of his hutch and said that she couldn’t sleep. She was going to the cafeteria to catch the end of the sixth dinner seating. Did he want anything? He saw that it was only 23:12 and said that he’d go with her for a snack.

“It’s such an old story,” she said. “It’s embarrassing, actually.” Her hands were wrapped around a mug of coffee. The cafeteria was only about a third full at the end of the day and they were sitting alone at a corner table. “When we talked about the pregnancy, I thought it might bring us together. I was feeling like the backup wife.” She made a strangled sound that might have been a laugh. “No, not even.” She counted on her fingers. “Ship first, crew second, passengers third, Ilona a distant fourth.”

Been gave her a sympathetic groan and dipped his spoon into his salak yogurt.

“Nobody can force me to have this baby,” she said. “He tried to take me to court on Kenning and they laughed him right onto the street. The law is that the baby is me until it’s born and Harlen Quellan can’t make me do anything to myself.”

“Why do you always call the baby it? He’s a boy, no?”

“Of course it’s a boy!” She spoke so fiercely that the babyface woke up and cast its pale blue light onto her hands.

“We don’t have to talk about this if it upsets you.”

“It doesn’t, Been; we’re divorced.” She ran a finger around the rim of her cup. “After I was pregnant I found out that he’d been sleeping with Kinder Shwaa. He said it had been over months before, but still. He hired *her* to replace *me* in the cafeteria after we got married. The sexy first steward on a slipship. Orgasms in space! Another cliché, straight out of cheap VR. comix. I made him fire her.” She stood up. “I’m done here.” She hadn’t drunk any of the coffee.

She calmed down by the time they were walking down the companion-way to their cabin. “I know I’m going to have this baby someday. Harlen knows it too. He’s just determined that it’s going to be on his terms and not mine. He’s the captain, so he expects to get his way.”

“I heard you want part of the ship as a settlement.”

“It’s not about the money.” She paused at the hatch. “Well, it is, but what probably scared him more was when I said I wanted my share so I could sell to Transtellar.” The hatch slid away. Been followed her into their common room. “He worked over a century for them so that he could own a ship without any partners. And he hates Transtellar.” She noticed her reflection in one of the blank lightboards and shuddered. “Scenery,” she cried. “Show me scenery.” All the boards lit up with images of the salt castles on Blimmey. “Okay, I was hot and so I didn’t begin the divorce negotiations in the best way. It was a stupid thing to say. Things spun down after that.”

“He worked for Transtellar for a century? How old is he?”

“I forget. Over three hundred and fifty.” She settled gingerly onto the couch. “He’s been recast four times.” Been was about to sit in one of the chairs but she tapped her hand on the cushion beside her. “Do me a favor,” she said.

He almost hit his head on a descending panel but managed to slide in next to her. The babyface was gazing at him as if it were frightened.

Ilona noticed Been looking at the babyface and not at her. She picked it up and turned it so she could see it. “I’m not going to be your mother,” she told it. “I don’t want to be around you at all. Let the crew take care of you.”

Despite himself, Been was aghast. “You sound like you hate it.” Having Ilona and Harlen Quellan for parents wasn’t their baby’s fault.

She let the babyface fall back around her neck. “It knows that I do. But it’s part of me.” She caught his gaze and seemed to sense his shock. “There’s so much you don’t understand.”

Been chuckled bitterly. “I’m beginning to realize that.”

“I’ve lost everything,” she said. “I have nothing.”

At that moment, Been felt as if he were outside himself, looking in. None of his feelings for Ilona made sense. Before he’d become gay, that would have been reason enough to bolt off the couch and run for his hutch. He was a mindsync courier; he’d spent most of his life buried in the sustain with strangers. But after a year of enduring the pale emotions of the colo-nists, he felt irresistibly drawn to this woman, who was burning with anger and need. He’d never been particularly sympathetic to others, but now he was experiencing Ilona’s anguish as if it were his own. And maybe that was the real reason why he stretched his hand out and brushed the back of hers. He was one hundred and thirty-two years old, and he was certain that he had never felt so deeply about anyone ever before.

“Is there something I can do?”

“There’s another line I’ve heard too many times.” She slumped against the back of the couch and stared up at him. “Oh, come on, Been. You’re gay.”

“Not very. And you’re very pregnant. Now that we’ve covered the obvious, I’d like to kiss you.”

She looked dubious. “Is that all?”

He kissed her lightly on the lips but then pulled back, as if tasting her flavor to see if he liked it. “Not really.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

“I do,” said Been. “Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

“No.”

He touched the side of her face and she leaned hungrily into his caress. He said, “I’ll be careful.”

“No,” she said. “Don’t do that. I’m through being careful.”

Been reached around the back of her neck and pulled the chain with the babyface over her head. “Go to sleep, baby.” He tucked it between the cushions of the couch.

“He’ll be watching,” said Ilona. “Harlen.”

Been saluted the overhead.

“That won’t bother you?”

“It will,” he said. “But not so you’ll notice.” He tugged at the hem of her blouse and slid it slowly over her belly. She raised her arms as if in surrender and he pulled the blouse up and over and dropped it onto a panel melting into the floor. Her skin was so pale and so taut that he could see trceries of blue veins beneath it.

“He put you here to punish me, didn’t he?” said Ilona. “To make me uncomfortable? Is that what this is?”

“I wanted to be here from the moment I first saw you.” Been rested his hands on her shoulders and met her gaze full on. “Right here.” He grinned. “Well, maybe a little closer.”

“Thank you.” She was breathing into his mouth when she said it. Her breath was so sweet. “Thank you very much.”

It was not the most physically pleasurable lovemaking Been had ever had and it was certainly not easy. Ilona could never find a comfortable position for very long and he had trouble keeping his penis in her. But it was tender and funny and at the end he wasn’t careful at all.

Afterward, he lay spooned against her back, his arms draped over her belly. He was playing with the short hairs on her neck when the entire *Nine Ball* gonged as if struck by an enormous hammer.

“What was that?” Ilona started awake.

“The earth moved,” said Been. “Only I think it came a little late.”

“They’re closing the sustain,” she said.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” Captain Harlen Quellan appeared on all five lightboards in his dress uniform. He did not appear to notice that this particular lady and gentleman were naked. “Some of you may have been startled by the bump a few minutes ago. There is nothing to worry about. We are approaching one-to-one ship subjective to galactic standard time and are beginning to close the sustain.”

“Oh, Been” said Ilona.

He squeezed her. He could hear applause echoing down the companionways.

“It’s possible that there will be a few more such mild bumps,” said Harlen Quellen.

“Been, it’s wet here.”

“So I would encourage all of you...” The captain’s image froze in mid-sentence, his mouth still open as if he were surprised that he had nothing more to say.

Ilona heaved herself to a sitting position, grabbed at Been’s hand, and pressed it to the cushion where she had been lying. He felt a wet spot not quite the size of his palm. “It *is* wet,” he said.

“Get the float!” she cried and bolted for the head. “Get Zelmet.”

* * * *

“Nice timing,” Emsley said, as Ilona came out of the head, her face ashen. “Contractions?”

She nodded.

Everything happened at once, and, for some reason, Been found himself at the center of it, right by Ilona’s side. Zelmet Emsley had come with the float and Brend Diosia, the *Nine Ball’s* second bioengineer. They loaded Ilona onto it. As they were dodging her through the obstacles in the common room, Ilona reached out and grabbed Been’s wrist. He lurched toward her and almost upended the float.

“I want him,” she said to Emsley.

“Easy, Ilona,” said Brend Diosia. “All you have to do is ask. It’s your party.”

As Brend pushed the float down the companionway, Zelmet Emsley took Ilona’s vital signs with his medfinger. Both of his heads watched the lightboard at the end of the float. “*Hmm.*” Once again, Been was struck by his cool detachment. “I see you had sex.”

“Yes,” said Been.

“Vaginal intercourse?”

Ilona moaned.

“With an ejaculation?”

“I did,” Been said.

“Well, that’s one way. Did you know, Been, that your semen contains some prostaglandins? This is the same family of unsaturated carboxylic acids we use to induce labor. And if Ilona had an orgasm, she would now be producing oxytocin, the hormone that causes contractions. Orgasm, Ilona?”

“Yes,” she said through clenched teeth.

Emsley patted her arm. “Good for you.”

“But that’s not a reliable way to induce labor,” said Brend.

“No.” Emsley had removed the tip of his left medfinger and replaced it with a tip that was several centimeters longer. “But it passes the time.” He tapped his two medfingers together, the short to the base of the long, and nodded. “I’m going to give you the spinal block now, Ilona. This is all going to go just as we discussed. We’re going to place a urinary catheter into your bladder, we’re going to shave a little of your pubic hair so we can make the incision. You said you wanted to watch the operation, so we won’t cover you.”

“Operation?” said Been.

“She has to have a cesarean section,” said Brend. “The head is too big.” The hatch to BioCore Receiving slid away and they whisked the float past the intake counter and into the BioCore itself. The captain was still frozen in mid-sentence on the lightboard in Receiving. Been thought maybe he ought to be worrying whether something was wrong with the ship, but at the moment he had other problems.

When Ilona had been prepped and Been, Zelmet Emsley, and Brend Diosia were scrubbed, Emsley turned to Been. “We’re going to start now. You hold her hand, that’s what she brought you here for. This isn’t going to take long, but if you feel a little faint, you can sit on this chair.” He kicked a stool next to the float. “Shall we, Brend?”

Been watched with no little horror as Emsley skived a twenty-five-centimeter incision through the skin of Ilona’s abdomen. The skive coated the incision with dermslix, so there was no bleeding. He continued to cut through several layers of tissue and then suddenly a stream of clear fluid came blurbling out of the incision. Emsley waited while Brend suctioned it up. “We’re into the uterus, Ilona. You didn’t lose all that much amniotic fluid when your membrane broke, so we’re cleaning it up. Not much longer now.”

“Do it.” Ilona was squeezing Been’s hand so hard that the tips of his fingers were tingling.

Emsley reached through the incision and felt around for a grip. As he did, his thinking head turned to Been and winked. “Got it. Brend, forceps on the incision.” Brend Diosia clamped the cut in Ilona’s abdomen open wide as Emsley pulled the struggling baby out.

It was astonishingly ugly, covered with blood and amniotic fluid and a waxy white coating. But Been was certain that it was misshapen as well. The head was so huge that the little, pink squirming body seemed like a useless appendage. And it had a tail that was thick as Been’s finger and some thirty centimeters long.

Been didn’t recognize the baby’s face at first.

“Goddamn it, Ilona,” squeaked a voice as thin as a spider’s web. “Took you long enough! Don’t you know I’ve got a ship to run? And we’ve got to close the goddamned sustain.”

* * * *

On most planets of the Thousand Worlds, Captain Harlen Quellan might have been fined or stripped of his pilot’s license or even sentenced to serve a term of incarceration in a rehabilitationVR for dereliction of duty, had the proper authorities been alerted. While reembodied as a fetus, he was only intermittently available to command his slipship using the babyface. Originally, the Quellans had planned for Ilona to be pregnant while the *Nine Ball* was in drydock. But the divorce had wrecked everything. When the time had come to honor their next transport contract, the Quellans had to come to an accommodation with one another, or risk losing the *Nine Ball* to their creditors. So Harlen Quellan created a virtual captain to cover for him whenever Ilona decided to make it impossible to connect to the ship through the babyface. Each had sought to get what they wanted by making the other miserable. All of the crew knew that Ilona was pregnant with her ex-husband, but no one else did. Except, that is, for Been Watanabe, the sole outside witness to the birth of Harlen Quellan. He had his own reasons for keeping the Quellans’ secret.

The consensus of the colonists on Little Chin, as well as the new arrivals from the *Nine Ball*, was that Lars Benzonia should accept the personality transplant that Been had carried from Nonny’s Home. The entire colony had been shocked to learn that Acoa Renkl, Benzonia’s most trusted advisor, had secretly contracted to have the transplant delivered to him against consensus. However, Renkl had gone clearly and irretrievably stale while he waited, throwing the Consensualists into a panic that their founder might succumb as well. So Lars Benzonia was quickly recast. For saving the mind of the First Consensualist, the grateful citizens of Little Chin voted the heroic mindsync courier a tract of forty hectares of prime bottomland along the Thalo River in the Tenderland District.

In the decades following his first personality transplant, it was said that Lars

Benzonia became less dogmatic about the primacy of the consensus over the individual. Some point to the career of Zola Molendez, who in 2514 was named Pacifier Select, as another key factor in the reform of Consensualism. In any event, the fortunes of the colony soared.

As did those of Been Watanabe, formerly a mindsync courier, currently in the interstellar export/import business, specializing in hats. Caps, snoods, crowns, snuffs, turbans, fedoras, tricorneres, kimberlys, bowlers, bon-nets, toppers, helmets, and toques. As a young man, Been had never realized how many citizens of the Thousand Worlds felt the need to cover their heads. He and Ilona had been able to set themselves up in the hat business, thanks to the income from Been's holdings on Little Chin and the regular payments Harlen Quellan made to Ilona as part of the final divorce settlement. He was buying back her one-quarter share of the *Nine Ball* over time.

Whenever he was on Nonny's Home, Harlen Quellan liked to drop in on Been and Ilona to make a payment in person. Ilona maintained that he was hoping to find them split up, but Harlen Quellan claimed he just wanted to set eyes once again upon "the luckiest goddamned bastard ever to book passage on my ship." They watched him now from the porch of their house as he strode down their front walk to his hover. He swerved to tousle their daughter Benk's hair, but she slapped his hand away. Little Benk was busy teaching Rags's great-great-great-spiderlings to dance. And she was her mother's daughter.

"After all these years, I still don't understand why you did it." Been put his arm around Ilona's waist.

"What?"

"You were pregnant with your own husband, Ilona!"

She giggled. "Ssh! He'll hear you."

Harlen Quellen turned to wave a last goodbye and then folded himself through the hover door.

"Good." Been waved back and gave him the most insincere smile he could muster. "Maybe he'll take offense and stop coming around."

"It was his fifth recasting," she said as they watched their daughter twirl around twice and then drop to hands and knees, so she could press her face against the terrarium to instruct her spiderlings. "He needed to go radical. And I didn't want to be married to a minotaur or a wheelie." She sighed. "Mostly, it was because I loved him."

"You mean you *thought* you loved him."

She shook her head. “No, I really did.” She leaned into him. “Does that still bother you?”

Been considered. “A little.” He knew it had all happened a long time ago. He tried to remember what his life had been like before he’d become gay. It was hard, but he knew one thing for certain. He had never really been in love. “But not so you’d notice.”

As Harlen Quellan’s hover lifted straight off the landing pad and shot into the creamy sky of Nonny’s Home, Been gave a low whistle.

“What are you thinking?” said Ilona.

“I’m thinking”—he chuckled—“that I’ll never have to divide the sustain again.”

* * * *