

The Tomb Wife

by Gwyneth Jones

Gwyneth Jones is the author of more than a dozen novels, including Divine Endurance, Bold as Love, and Kairos. She won the Tiptree Award for her novel White Queen and the Philip K. Dick Award for Life. She also writes books for young readers under the name Ann Halam. Her short fiction has been collected in Seven Tales and a Fable, which won the World Fantasy Award, but this, her first story to appear in our pages, is science fiction and not fantasy. Ms. Jones (who should not be confused with the Welsh soprano of the same name) lives in Brighton, U.K., and can be found online at homepage.ntlworld.com/gwynethann/.

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“In Lar’sz’ traditional society,” said the alien, “a lady would often be buried with her husband. A rather beautiful custom, don’t you think?”

The Active Complement of the interstellar freighter stared at him, slightly alarmed. Their companion, the illustrious “passenger” who had elected to share their vigil, liked to play games with their expectations. They never knew when he was joking. Humor glinted in Sigurt’s black eyes—sharply diamond-shaped as to the rims, a curious and attractive difference from the Blue Planet oval.

“No, no! Not *buried alive*. Not like that, not at all. She would live in the tomb: she would retire there of her own free will, to spend the rest of her days in peace and solitude.” He reached a claw-like fingernail to scratch his ear. “Lar’sz’ nobles and peasants continued the practice well into historical times. It’s the sons of the soil and the owners of the soil who preserve old cultural features, isn’t it? And the dispossessed, of course. Refugees.”

They were gathered in the mess: seven Blue Planet humans, vital components in the freighter’s wetware: plus one celebrated alien archaeologist. The hold was laden with precious ancient artifacts from Sigurt’s World, on their way to an exhibition. The Cultural Ambassadors and their staff were making the crossing in dreamtime, but this black-eyed, shadow-skinned, graceful creature preferred activity. They were not clear—they weren’t good at reading the small print—whether “Sigurt” was a generic name, or whether their archaeologist was also the actual “Sigurt” who had made first contact. None of them had yet dared to ask him.

It was a pleasant, low-ceilinged saloon, decorated in silver and green,

the traditional color scheme of the young culture of interstellar transport. Light gleamed from above like sunlight through leaves, the floor had the effects of grass and mosses. They sat around a blond wood table, actually extruded ceramic fiber, that faithfully recalled polished birch. The air was fresh and sweet, the whole impression was as if they were in a roomy tent, a pavilion pitched in sunny woodland, somewhere in the Blue Planet's beautiful temperate zones. But outdoors the blizzard raged, pitiless, unimaginable. The hum of the torus was never-ending; they no longer heard it. And if it ever stopped, that deep subliminal murmur, they would not have time to notice it was gone.

The Active Complement had just found out—Panfilo Nube, Payload Officer, had discovered the small print of the manifest, in an idle moment—that one of the pieces in the hold was supposed to be haunted. It was a tomb, but the ghost was not the official owner, so to speak. It was something called a "Tomb Wife," some kind of ghoul associated with tombs in Lar'sz' culture. Nadeem, the moody, black-browed Homeostat Commissar, had asked Sigurt—half joking—was this spook definitely dead? They didn't know much, but they knew that the people of Sigurt's World were very long-lived, with a propensity for long comas when times were hard. Sigurt had answered cheerfully that one could not be absolutely sure; and hence the explanation.

"A Tomb Wife did not provide for herself, you see," he continued. "She was a hermit, a *sadhu*." He smiled at Nadeem, who did not smile back. "Her family or her servants would supply food and necessities, but they never saw her. Among the peasantry of course the widow simply went to live in the graveyard, in full view of her neighbors. Her exclusion from society was formal, ritual...."

Rafael, the young Assistant Navigator, frowned uneasily. "But how can you say you're not absolutely sure she's dead? The relics down there are thousands of years old, aren't they? I don't mind, I'd just like to know. A ghost is cool, but a thing that lives in a tomb and isn't dead, well—"

In a starship's psychological topography, the hold is always *down*. Nobody laughed. Rafe suffered from transit nightmares, an affliction as crippling as seasickness—but it didn't affect his efficiency, or his passion for this strange ocean.

"I think we can *assume* she's dead," said the mischievous alien. "In the records of Tene'Lar'sznh, the royal house to which this princess belonged, it's noted that the food-offerings first went untouched about fifteen hundred years ago, our time. That's about four thousand of Blue

years, I think?”

The Active Complement nodded hurriedly, in unison. Vast timescales made them nervous. A little less, thought Elen, the Navigator. She was intimately aware of the relation between a Blue Planet “year” and the same period for Sigurt’s planet; as she was aware of every detail of the impossible equations of this journey. She wanted to put Sigurt right, but how would she reach the end of that sentence? But *when*, in what relation, at what particular moment? She closed the floodgates with an effort.

“The food went untouched?” she repeated. “And that’s how they knew? So, what did they do, when a Tomb Wife’s food ‘went untouched’?”

“Nothing at all.” Sigurt’s pointed teeth flashed: the modified aggression of a grin, which seemed to be a constant of humanoid life. “How quick of you, Elen, you’re exactly right. A lady of rank did not allow herself to be seen, once she’d taken up residence. Her servants or family would continue to supply her needs, but they were forbidden, by the lady’s own will and testament, to go looking for her, and the tomb could be a large and complex building. Nobody would know *when, precisely*, the offerings became offerings to the dead.” He paused. “Isn’t that beautiful? After a year—or thereabouts, depending on the liturgical calendar—the undertakers were allowed inside. The lady’s remains would be found and there’d be a funeral. In the case of our princess, however, legend has it that no remains were ever recovered. And that is how this particular tomb became known as ‘haunted.’”

“She probably legged it one dark night,” decided Rafe, with relief: and then blushed. “Uh, sorry if that’s a poor taste idea, Sigurt, no offense.”

“None taken.”

“Aren’t *you* a Lar’sz’ian, Sigurt?” wondered Carter, the burly ship’s doctor, who wore the captain’s armband. “Larziote, Larzy-ite, however you say it?” Carter was one of those people who have to assert themselves in the presence of celebrity or renown. He had a horror of showing deference to anything or anyone.

For a moment the alien bristled, a startled double-take of affront, thought Elen (although she couldn’t be sure). The Lar’sz’ were now (when is *now, where* is now?) an impoverished, short-lived remnant. The famous tombs, temples, ruins, were scattered over scratch-dirt, subsistence farming desert country. Maybe it was like telling a Brazilian you’d thought he

was Portugese.

“My family has Tene’Lar’t ancestry, but it’s a long way back.”

Nadeem the Commissar shifted in his recollection of a birchwood chair: restless with thoughts he knew nobody shared. “Why do you say ‘Tomb *Wife*,’ Sigurt? Why a *lady*? You beings don’t *have* our two biological sexes.”

Nadeem was a Diaspora-denier. He would bore the socks off you explaining, interminably, how actually there was *no* uncontroversial evidence that all planetary variants on the sentient biped model, all the possessors of “numinous intelligence,” capable of interstellar transit, were descended from a single species. He passionately refused to accept that the original species had been a hominid from the Blue Planet—a precursor of *Homo sapiens* who had flourished and vanished, leaving only the faintest and most puzzling of traces. *It’s only a theory*, he’d insist.

And yet the man was a scientist.

You had to excuse him (they *did* excuse him, they were very tolerant of each other’s foibles. Sigurt shared this trait, or he could not have joined them). You had to remind yourself that believing that the Earth was the center of the cosmos had once been good science and sound common sense, and many eminent scientists had clung to the old model, long after the new facts arrived.

Diaspora-deniers favored the term “beings.” They thought it made them sound rational and agnostic; which it did not. The rest of the Actives called their illustrious friend *an alien*, without embarrassment, because at home *alien* had become a term for the much-loved human practice of bodymorphing, and they’d forgotten it might be offensive. Sigurt didn’t seem to mind. He called *them* “Blues.”

He was not just eminent, he was an original, a Blue Planetophile. His skill in “Blue” languages had not been acquired for the sake of this trip; it was his hobby in real life. He had no trouble dealing with Nadeem.

“Ah, good point.” He pondered, raising his eyebrows, which were commas of black velvet, the same texture as the close mat of hair (or fur) that covered his skull and extended down his neck and across his shoulders, glimpsed at the throat of his ship-issue green jumper. “Let me think. No, I’m sure ‘wife’ is correct. The *wife* is the one who remains, who

cannot tear herself away. This is social gender, not biology.”

Nadeem was not satisfied. Ideally, he explained, all self-respecting other beings, when speaking human language, should call themselves *it*—

Elen imagined a dry landscape, a dustbowl sky: parched mounds with small stone markers (the graves she envisaged were Muslim, somehow). The burial ground was sown with sad hunched shapes outside little cardboard shacks; the villages were depopulated of grandmas. Did the tomb-wives really choose seclusion? Or were they compelled by the iron hand of custom? Which nobody inside the rules will ever admit is an oppression. The blizzard outside ought to be a sandstorm, she thought, to match their cargo. But it was whiteness she always imagined “out there.” A white darkness of quantum vacuum. She noticed that Sigurt had said wives, not widows, though his English was very good; and she wondered about that. They are not the widows of the dead but the wives of the tombs.

“Stop kidding yourself, Batman.” Nadeem was getting agitated. “It’s not a one-off planetary evolution that we have in common, it’s time, gravity, hydrogen bonds. It’s an accident of convergent evolution that we look more or less alike. You’ve let yourself get sucked in to a cheap, tourist way of thinking, denying your own difference, fantasizing that you can *understand* us—”

“You’re a racist jerk, Nadeem,” responded Sigurt amiably. “Anyway, you just did it yourself.”

“*What— ?*”

The alien raised his arms, spreading the webs between his slender fingers, hooking the air with his claws. “Anthropomorphizing. You called me Batman.”

* * * *

Elen suited up and visited the hold. The float tube delivered her to darkness, where she drifted from one handhold to the next, following track lights to the main cargo compartment. She flooded the great space with air and pressure, touched down as gravity embraced her, took off her helmet, passed through the lock, and walked into a cavern at the roots of a sea-mount. The habitat a green, sunlit island far above—

The artifacts were crated in force fields, but she couldn’t adjust the

light above art-conservation level. *Pedants*, she murmured, marveling at the dim, pixelated spectacle. The Lar'sz' part of the collection was the most impressive: so damned impressive you could almost justify the mad expense of the shipping. The haunted tomb was huge, multistoried. It caught her breath. She circled it slowly, calculating that their whole living quarters would easily fit into the Tomb Wife's portico.

There was a single doorway, a black teardrop without a door: set about two meters above ground level, amid a coruscation of carved and inlaid stone. It would be a scramble to get inside. Perhaps the front steps had been left behind, or there was a secret mechanism, something like ancient Egypt. She sat cross-legged, slightly awkward in her suit, gazing. Like most sailors of the strange ocean, she rarely got farther than the dockside when she made landfall. Even if there'd been more time and less bureaucracy she wouldn't have been tempted by a lightning tour of Sigurt's planet. What for? You'd see so little. You'd learn hardly anything.

She'd been interested in the cargo as a professional challenge, a factor in her calculations. The science of transporting massive material objects was in its infancy, and artwork was a *nightmare!* But here in the gloom she felt the value of these things. A virtual Lar'sz' tomb, freighted through the transit in a courier's brain, downloaded into the digital inventories of a limited-release of premier museums, could never have had this presence. The Exhibition was going to be a revelation.

There was nothing to stop them from breaching the force fields for a preview, without the fuzz. No areas were barred to Active Complement, except the fearsome threshold of the torus itself. She should come back with Sigurt, get him to give her a guided tour. But not the tomb, she thought.

If she went into the tomb, she'd like to do it alone.

The image of a dessicated heap of bones and skin, preserved intact, flitted through her mind. The Tomb Wife in a stone room, an old lady fallen down with a broken hip, too proud to cry for help when she heard her servants arriving and departing. But how old was she? Maybe she was still young when the food offerings "remained untouched." Sigurt would know. She would ask him. Or better, she'd look it up herself, and impress him by knowing something. It was probably all in the background files the Complement didn't bother to read.

If the practice had survived into historical times it could still be happening. *Suttee* had continued in India long after the Brits tried to stamp it out, had resurfaced even in the Space Age. But it was the haunting that

fascinated Elen. Do ghosts travel? Did pharaohs and Inca sacrifices ever wake up, bewildered, in glass cases, half a world away from home? Did they wake up in modern times, to find themselves replicated in software? What about a journey so immense that it has no duration? What damage would the relativity storm of the blizzard do to something as fragile as spiritual remains? How embarrassing if the loaned archaeology arrived stripped of its patina and pedigree.... How embarrassing for the fledgling enterprise of interstellar freight, if there should be a Missing Legend incident!

She listened until she was sure she could hear footsteps inside the ziggurat. No, it's okay, she's still there, still haunting. Unhurried, peaceful, timeless, the Tomb Wife was going about her quiet routines.

* * * *

Rafe had agonized nightmares in which the Lar'sz' ghûl crept around his brain and scratched at his bunk closure: seeking live human flesh. Seriously repentant, Sigurt dredged up (or fabricated) some potent ancient Lar'sz'ian prayers, which he translated into English phonemes, and taught Rafe to recite. Elen had said nothing about the footsteps in the tomb, but she felt equally responsible. She might have leaked it into the shared reality; telepathy artifacts were the bane of starfaring. You learned that you *had to* think no evil of your companions in the matrix, or there would be hell to pay. And don't imagine spooks, or somebody will get spooked.

She did not confess. It would only have made Rafe worse.

* * * *

At the end of a long shift she unplugged herself from the mainframe, meeting as always the adrenaline of panic as she returned to ship-time: clutching at her stomach, icy down her spine. Carter was the captain on this trip, thank God. But Elen was the one who crunched the numbers. She was finally responsible for all the lives on board (not to mention those huge ancient gewgaws in the hold). And the worst was knowing that if—*if!*—she'd let a transcription error get by, it would not manifest itself until the closing phase. Not until too late. That's quantum computing, no way around it.

The terror of the blizzard engulfed her. No radio, no GPS for this ocean. No ground control for this spaceship, not the slightest possibility of rescue. She saved-off their position meticulously, although off-frame storage was nonsense, no such thing as a Black Box; and let the solidity of the banks of instruments and winking screens reassure her. The freighter's

official name was *Pirate Jenny* (not that Actives themselves bothered much with names of starships); reflecting the Brechtian, Utopian leanings of the parent company, and its financial partner, the World State of Earth. Other ships were the *Clement Atlee* and the *Eleanor Roosevelt*. Their sisters were the *White Visitation*, the *Sacred Wicca*, the *Caer Siddi*. Elen decided she preferred the occult strand. No Black Box but this is Black Art. We don't know what we are doing; we conjure with monstrous forces, far beyond our control.

Footsteps behind her, a breath on the back of her neck, a mocking sigh.

"So you got out," she whispered, and turned slowly, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Tomb Wife's ghost. Nobody there. She never lets herself be seen—

* * * *

They grew accustomed to the extra presence. "I blame myself," said Sigurt, but in fact the symptom was a common one, technically harmless in terms of neurophysics: believed to be benign by superstitious Actives. Only Rafe was troubled, and he had his prayers. Sigurt told stories. Nadeem the Commissar and the Chief Engineer flirted. The Assistant Navigator, Chief Engineer's former squeeze, took up with Passenger Liaison. Elen visited the hold again, alone. She'd decided against the guided tour.

In the low light, looking up at that black, balanced teardrop, she fell into a reverie in which the Tomb Wife tradition was not oppression but a shimmering resolve. Not to move on, not to let go of the past: to decide, so far and no farther. The princess had chosen to *stick*, as they say in cards, at the grief of loss. To stay with the absence, never to let it fritter away into vague anniversaries, faded rose leaves of memory. Was refusing to let go a feminine trait? Or was it a Blue trait, which she was cutting and pasting onto the customs of another planet? It was an Elen trait. She told people (family, boyfriends, outsiders), that she was an interstellar navigator for the adventure of it. The most exotic of exotic travel. But we do not travel, she thought. Not a step. When the transcription is done—what does *when* mean, where there is no time?—we will make the crossing in almost zero extension.

What we do is stay, in the paradoxical moment—

Without deliberation she stood up, used her sleeve controls to open

the tomb's force field, and set her gloved palms on the doorsill. Her suit was limber, designed for active wear. A push downward, a bounce up, she had her knee on stone. As she stood up diffuse lighting welled around her. The tomb had been prepared for visitors. She realized, disappointed, that she couldn't possibly be the first to enter since the Tomb Wife's time: probably not even the first Blue! A short passage led into a stone room, where a table like an altar stood against an inner wall. Above it a life-size mural, in brilliant color, showed two people, same height, same build, sitting opposite each other, informally; knees up. They both looked like Sigurt, in a generic way. They were gazing at each other, their diamond-shaped eyes over-bright, their smiling lips full of sadness. Both had the short cape of black velvet fur. One of them seemed to be wearing a black half-mask. It was this figure who reached to the other, one slender hand outstretched, as if in an unfinished caress. Below them on the altar stood an array of diamond-shaped bowls: a curved platter, a heap of dry rags.

She looked into the bowls. Dead leaves, granular dust—

Are the conventions of mourning a universal constant? Elen thought of Etruscan tombs, Chinese ancestor worship. Her files contained no data, only the vaguest notions, but she was pretty sure that mural was a masterpiece. Her gauntleted hand must have brushed one of the artifacts. A label sprang into existence in the air, explaining—in Sigurt's planet's dominant script, in English, and in a third writing she didn't recognize—that the actual bowls and platters had been taken away, with their ancient contents. These were replicas. The dry rags were a replica of the decayed set of clothes that had been found—

The past as theme-park is a universal constant.

She explored the stone corridors of the ground floor, paying no further attention to the artwork: ghoulish and hopeful as a child, looking for the bones that had never been discovered. She found only dust, and very little of that. There were no stairways to the upper floors, and nothing she could identify as living quarters. The artful lighting started to make her feel like a tourist. She took refuge in the gloomiest of the courtyards and sat there looking at another black teardrop, halfway up a wall: quietly visiting the shade of a long-dead "princess."

Immense peace, engulfing spiritual quiet.

She listened for footsteps, suddenly terrified.

Abruptly she got up and returned to the entrance, dropped to the

floor.

As she closed the field behind her, embarrassed by her moment of panic in there, a black manta ray swooped across the ocean trench dark—ness. Elen yelped, and stared around wildly. The shadow cruised again. Her heart was thumping, my God, what is that thing? What's in here with me?

“Who's there—?”

No answer but the hiss of disturbed air. “*Hey!* Who's there?”

Sigurt landed beside her with a soft thump, wrapping slippery folds of bat wings around him. “Ah,” he said, with smiling interest. “So it's you, Elen.”

She stared, appalled: open-mouthed. “My God! Sigurt! What d'you think you're doing! *You can't fly!* This is *not* a game!”

“On the contrary,” said the alien cheerfully. “The whole universe is a game, is it not? A puzzle-mass of tiny units of information, the pattern of which can be changed at will—given the torus, and the fabulous software implanted in a trained, numinous consciousness. Such as yours, Elen. I'm not the expert, but isn't that the whole basis of interstellar ‘navigation?’”

Elen was shaking with horror. “You can't do this! You can't piss around doing impossible things in the transition! Our lives depend, every f-fucking moment—”

“On our conviction that all this is real,” he finished, unrepentant. He showed her the fx controller on his sleeve; and switched it off. The bat wings vanished.

“I can access a toy from the ship's library without damaging the equation, can't I? I was just playing. I'm much lighter than a Blue, and there's not a great deal of gravity in here. I've been jumping off the monuments.”

She dropped her head in her hands as relief thundered through her, leaving her spent and hollow. Starfarers live in constant terror, like sailors on the ancient oceans. You don't realize, until you hit a peak, how high the ambient stress is getting—

“Just for the record, Sigurt, there's no software, not the way you

mean.”

“I know that we maintain all this,” he waved a slender hand, shadow-pale in the dark. “Between us ... I’ve never been quite sure how it’s done. You Blues have all the secrets. Is it true that Starflight Actives have had brain surgery?”

Sigurt’s people had stunning cellular regeneration. They treated almost any trauma as a purely medical problem. The sciences of surgery and (worse!) gene manipulation had come as a horrible shock to them. Barbarism.

“No surgery. No implants. It’s more like a tissue culture. You have to have the right kind of brain to start with. The reason you can be awake is because you’re like us, Sigurt: but you’re a straight, a virgin. We’ve had the training that makes us grow the extra neuronal architecture, which doesn’t, er, exist in normal space—”

“Or you would be hydrocephalic Eloi, with heads the size of pumpkins.”

She nodded, though she had no idea what an Eloi was.

They sat with their knees folded up, like the figures in the mural—

“I’m sorry I fooled around, Elen. I scared you. I think I’m going stir crazy.”

“Or else you’re reacting poorly to racist abuse, Batman.”

Sigurt laughed, and scratched his ear. “*Batman!* Half-domino, cute little shoulder cape. Sounds too girly for my taste. If you like comparisons, we are more akin to frilled lizards than bats.”

“Nadeem must really annoy you.”

“He is *something I would scrape off my shoe*,” pronounced the alien, with relish. He tipped back his head. “Do you hear that, Commissar? Shoe-Scrapings!”

They started to laugh. The Active Complement lived in each other’s heads, accommodating each other as if they’d been workmates for a lifetime. They were a group mind: inhibited, licensed; in constant negotiation. Elen replayed the first remark Sigurt had made. Sigurt had

known that someone was visiting the artifacts, but because he was only supercargo, not A/C, he hadn't known who it was.

"I've been visiting the Tomb Wife," she said. "I'm fascinated by the idea of a ghost on an instantaneous transit. Do you know anything more about her?"

The alien shrugged. "Like what?"

The tomb crouched like a massive, patient animal. Ancient artifacts peered at them from the gloom, carving and shaping blurred into a vague sense of *life*.

"Was she old? Was she young...? Did she have a lover?"

"Widows are a danger to social cohesion," said the alien. "The relict of a partnership has to be neutralized, or there'll be *mésalliances*, inheritance disputes. Therefore the widow must marry again, harmlessly. She must wed the tomb—"

"That sounds very human. Nadeem would be horrified."

Sigurt seemed to think it over. "The ancient Lar'sz' kept state records," he said at last. "And accounts. Not much else was written down. I'm afraid we don't know much. There are the bas-reliefs, but they're high art, highly ambiguous. And not of her choosing, of course. They are the memorial her husband ordered."

Elen wanted to ask *what was her name*, but she was afraid that might be a lapse in taste, a cultural taboo. Another question came to her. "Is it right to call her a ghost? Or did a haunting mean something different to the ancient Lar'sz'?"

"It's different and it's the same, of course."

The constant cry of one numinously intelligent sentient biped to another.

Sigurt grinned, acknowledging the problem. "Let me try to bridge the gap. In my world we believe that people can, how can I put it, *leave themselves behind* at certain junctures, life events. Someone else goes on. When we speak of a haunting, that's our derivation. Not the, er, spirit of someone physically dead. D'you see?"

“Yes,” said Elen, startled and moved. “Yes, I think I do.”

She felt that she knew Sigurt better, after this conversation. There was a bond between them, the celebrated archaeologist and the navigator: unexpected but real.

* * * *

The country of no duration can't be seen from the outside. You can never look back and say *there*, I was. *That's* what happened. Everything that “happened” in a transit was doomed to vanish like a dream when they fell back into normal space. As the *Pirate Jenny* moved, without motion, to the end, without ending, of the paradoxical moment, everyone had a terrible psychic headache. The Active Complement suffered fretful agonies that swamped the ghost, Rafe's nightmares; all their shipboard entanglements. They regarded Sigurt, whose wakefulness was part of their burden, not so much as an exciting famous person, more as a demanding pet. Batman's favorite expression (of course!) set everybody's teeth on edge.

The captain had been interstellar crew for as long as there'd been commercial interstellar traffic, and he could see the writing on the wall. “The *Pirate Jenny* is a horseless carriage,” he moaned, in mourning for the sunlit green walls, the mossy ground, the polished birchwood. “Soon it will all be gone, all this. Nobody will bother. Passengers will transport themselves, we'll be obsolete.”

“Shut up,” muttered Elen, “shut up, shut up, I'm trying to concentrate—”

She was mortally afraid that she'd made a mistake. She scoured the code for a single trace of the ghost (there must be a trace!) found none, and knew she must have missed something. Mistake, mistake. The insensate, visceral memory that she *a/ways* felt like this in the closing phase was no comfort at all.

“What about freight?” Gorgeous Simone, Chief Engineer, looked up from a game of solitaire. “Who's going to carry the freight, doctor? Hump it through the indefinite void, if not people like us? Fuck, look at the size of *that* problem.”

“Swearbox,” piped Rafe, who had grown chirpy while the others grew morose, and was now a rock, a shoal, an infuriating danger to shipping.

“Go and eat your head.”

“They’ll paint the crates with essence of consciousness,” explained Carter, doom-laden. “Or some crazy Borgs will break the Convention. They’ll create actual supernuminal ‘Artificial Intelligence’ nanotech, and inject it into matter.”

“So fucking what. You won’t be redundant, you’re a doctor.”

“Ooops! Swearbox again!”

“Does not compute, man! If it’s a true AI, it’ll have civil rights and they won’t be able to make it do anything. We’ll unionize it, it will be on our side—”

The alien laid his black velvet head on his slender arms on the tabletop and sighed, very softly. All seven of them took this as an outrageous insult. They’d have fallen on Batman and torn him limb from limb, except that they knew there’d be hell to pay. The navigator quit the saloon and retired to her section. God, let this be the peak. Let us be over the mountain, this is unbearable.

They were over the mountain.

Elen reported their position, news which was greeted with exhausted relief. Now there was nothing for her to do but watch the tumblers fall: watch the numbers cascade into resolution, not a phase-point out of place. She loved this part and hated it—

* * * *

She went down to the hold to visit the Tomb Wife, for the last time. There was a rumor that they’d all be given free passes for the Exhibition, but she didn’t think she’d go. The relationship had been formed here, in the dim-lit cavern under a sea-mount. It wouldn’t be the same in normal space. The tomb greeted her with its shimmering silence, with the stillness of a grief embraced; set in stone.

“Hello?” she whispered. “I think I’m here to say good-bye.”

She was not surprised when Sigurt joined her. They smiled at each other and sat for a while; but the black teardrop beckoned. The alien succumbed first. He hooked his long fingers into twin curves in the carving

that she hadn't noticed, and was through the doorway in one movement. There weren't any steps, thought Elen. The entrance is supposed to be like that. She tried to copy his action but couldn't find the handholds. She had to make the same scrambling jump as before; and followed him to the chamber where the partners faced each other, the "wife" poised forever in that gesture of farewell.

Emotion recorded in art was the *rosetta stone*, the only (and frequently deceptive) common language of the Diaspora. Elen wasn't sure what a *rosetta stone* had been, originally. Sigurt would probably know. But she felt she understood the message of that unfinished caress; the speech in those bright, half-hidden eyes. The dead are gone. The Tomb Wife stayed with *herself*. She stayed with the life that had ended, rather than going on, a different person—

How strange, how beautiful.

Sigurt had gone farther into the tomb. At length she heard him coming back. She didn't have to look around, she could clearly picture him leaning in the ancient doorway. She imagined *staying with herself*, in the country of no duration. As often as she left this homeland and woke into forgetfulness, she never got used to the wrench of parting. Oh, she thought. I need not leave. I can stay. If I hadn't taken this berth, if I had never met Sigurt, I would never have realized that I could do this! With a rush of immense gratitude toward the alien, she knelt, she crept on her knees to the offertory table and settled there, curled against the stone.

"The Tomb Wife was obliged to remain," said the archaeologist, behind her, in a tone of mild apology. "For all eternity, with the partner to whom she was bound. But in special conditions it might be possible to make, well, a kind of exchange. One ghost for another. I may have lied to you a little. In *your* terms, it happened long, long ago. In *my* lifetime, the time I have spent awake, it was not so long ago as all that."

Faintly, in her mind's eye, Elen saw that she had let a transcription error get past her, and what was happening to her now was the consequence. In absolute terms there was no saloon, no eminent alien, no hold full of tombs, there was nothing but the storm, never anything but the storm, the blizzard, and she was falling into it, into the thrilling void of terror that every starfarer knew was waiting—

Emotion can deceive. The sentient bipeds barely knew anything about each other, as yet. Misconceptions abounded, wild mistakes were

only found out when it was too late. A family divided by a single language, thought Elen: knowing at the same time that everything, the stone against her cheek, Batman's deception, was a translation, and really there was only the blizzard. Yet in the last paradoxical moment, annoyed that it had to happen, that she would not stay here entirely, she felt herself splitting, giving birth to the person who would go on.

—and saw herself walking away with Sigurt, arm in arm: glimpsed, through the veil of Elen the Navigator's physical form, the Tomb Wife's caped shoulders, the delicate black domino of velvet fur, the gleam of the lovers' eyes.