

# THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN BALLOON

*Robert Reed*

*Taken from the Short Story Collection "Galactic Empires" (2008) edited by  
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*Robert Reed sold his first story in 1986, and quickly established himself as a frequent contributor to The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and Asimov's Science Fiction, as well as selling many stories to Science Fiction Age, Universe, New Destinies, Tomorrow, Synergy, Starlight, and elsewhere. Reed may be one of the most prolific of today's young writers, particularly at short fiction lengths, seriously rivaled for that position only by authors such as Stephen Baxter and Brian Stableford.*

*And—also like Baxter and Stableford—he manages to keep up a very high standard of quality while being prolific, something that is not at all easy to do. Reed stories such as "Sister Alice," "Brother Perfect," "Decency," "Savior," "The Remoras," "Chrysalis," "Whiptail," "The Utility Man," "Marrow," "Birth Day," "Blind," "The Toad of Heaven," "Stride," "The Shape of Everything" "Guest of Honor," "Waging Good," and "Killing the Morrow," among at least a half dozen others equally as strong, count as among some of the best short work produced by anyone in the '80s and '90s; many of his best stories were assembled in his first collection, The Dragons of Springplace. Nor is he nonprolific as a novelist, having turned out eight novels since the end of the '80s, including The Lee Shore, The Hormone Jungle, Black Milk, The Remarkables, Down the Bright Way, Beyond the Veil of Stars, An Exaltation of Larks, Beneath the Gated Sky, Marrow, and Sister Alice. His most recent books include two chapbook novellas, Mere and Flavors of My Genius; a collection, The Cuckoo's Boys; and a novel, The Well of Stars. Reed lives with his family in Lincoln, Nebraska.*

*In 1994, Reed launched a long series of stories (including novels such as Marrow,) about the Great Ship: a Jupiter-sized starship found abandoned in deep space by exploring humans and retrofitted into a kind of immense interstellar cruise ship, off on a grand tour of the galaxy (circumnavigating it, in fact), with millions of human and alien customers of many different races aboard. In the intricate story that follows, he points out that even on a starship the size of a gas giant inhabited by millions of passengers, there will be hidden corners where nobody has ever gone before, and enigmatic surprises to be found there—including a lesson in just how far the arm of the Empire can stretch, and how subtle and profound its touch can be.*

## [VERSION HISTORY]

v1.0 by the N.E.R.D's. Page numbers removed, paragraphs joined, formatted and spell checked. A full read through is required.

## I

Quee Lee learned about the Vermiculate from an unlikely source—a painfully respectable gentleman who had never taken pleasure from adventuring or the unexpected. But their paths happened to cross during a feast given by mutual friends, and after the customary pleasantries, he pulled the ancient woman aside, remarking, "I have some news that might be of interest to you." Then, with a precise, mildly perturbed

voice, he explained how one tiny portion of the Great Ship had never been mapped.

"How can that be?" Quee Lee asked skeptically. After all, the captains had made it a priority to investigate every shipboard cavern and tunnel, and today even the tiniest crevice wore its own intricate name.

"The captains were quite thorough," he admitted. "But the Ship is so very enormous."

That it was. With the mass and volume of Uranus, no machine was the Great Ship's equal. Its engines were as big as moons, its fuel tanks could drink oceans, and the variety and volume of its onboard habitats was nothing less than spectacular. Mapping such an enormous body proved a daunting challenge. Yet the early captains were clever and very stubborn souls. Their survey began with a few million robots—small, elegantly designed machines bristling with sensors and curious limbs. Scrambling through the Ship's interior, the robots memorized every empty volume, and whenever a passageway split in two, the robots would pause, feasting on the local rock and metal and then building copies of their obsessive selves. As prolific as carpenter ants or harum-scarum fleas, those early scouts soon numbered in the trillions, and, ruled by a set of simple unyielding instructions, they moved ever deeper inside the Ship, eventually scurrying down every hole and recording each turn and dead end, working with relentless unison to create a precise three-dimensional model of the Ship's vacant interior.

But the method had its limitations. Doorless bubbles and pockets and finger-wide seams lay out of reach; a few long caverns were sealed beneath kilometers of iron and hyperfiber. But with sonic probes and neutrino knives, the Ship's engineers eventually made even those buried places visible. The only major failure was hiding today in the Ship's distant core. But the peculiar world that would be known as Marrow lay in the remote future. The Master Captain was being honest when she stood on the bridge, proclaiming that her fabulous machine had been mapped in full, and its crew and countless passengers had little reason not to believe every promise that this voyage would remain routine—a blissful journey that would eventually circumnavigate the bright heart of the Milky Way.

"I understand how the Ship was mapped," remarked Quee Lee's companion. "What I am telling you is that despite everyone's best efforts, a few empty spaces are lurking out there."

"And how do we know this?" she asked, her tone politely curious.

"The Master Captain owns a team of AI savants," the gentleman replied. "They are brilliant machines designed to do nothing but ponder the Ship and its mysteries. One of those AIs recently made a thorough analysis of old data, and it discovered one glaring gap, one blank spot on the captains' map, and nobody seems to understand how this could have happened."

"And when did we learn this?"

"But we haven't learned anything," he countered, his calm voice breaking at the edges. "This is a very grave, very important business. Only the highest-ranking captains know about the flaw."

"And you," she pointed out.

"Yes, I know portions of the story. I can't tell how or why, however, and please don't ask me. But it occurred to me that you of all people would appreciate hearing this news."

Give a rich secret to the blandest soul, and he will dream of telling what he knows. And Quee Lee was a charming presence as well as a very desirable audience: a wealthy woman from Old Earth and one of a handful of humans on board the Ship who could remember that precious moment when their species turned a sensitive ear to the sky and heard intelligent sounds raining down from the stars. In that sense,

she was a remarkable, and very rare, creature—a lady of genuine fame inside the human community. She was also beautiful and poised, socially gifted and universally liked. Given the chance, any healthy, mildly insecure heterosexual male would work hard to impress Quee Lee.

"Our captains are worried," her confidant mentioned. "The Master Captain even took the trouble of waking one of the old surveying robots and putting it down a promising hole. And do you know what happened?"

"You're going to tell me, I hope."

"The robot lost its way." The man sighed, rather bothered by this turn of events. "The machine fumbled around in the darkness, and then, with nothing to say for itself, it climbed back out of the hole again."

"Fascinating," she exclaimed.

"I knew you would enjoy this," he whispered, offering a smile and quick wink. After millennia of traveling together, he had finally managed to engage this beautiful creature.

"Perri will want to hear this story," she mentioned.

"But I wish you wouldn't mention it," the man sputtered. Then a worse possibility occurred to him. "I understood that your husband is traveling just now. He isn't here with us, is he?"

"Oh, but he is," she exclaimed. By chance, Perri had just entered the festival room. For the last several weeks, he had been riding a saddle strapped to the back of a porpoiselike alien called the Gi-Gee, enjoying wild swims in a frigid river of water and ammonia. Of course, Perri would want to learn of this man's news. A thousand souls were scattered across the room, human and otherwise. Most of the partiers were dressed in gaudy, look-at-me costumes—which was only proper, since these were among the wealthiest, most powerful individuals to be found in the galaxy. But Quee Lee looked past the towering egos, waving at the only human male dressed in plain, practical clothes.

Instantly, her companion warned, "I don't want this to be known. Not outside our circle, please."

The tone said it all: Perri was neither wealthy nor important, which made him unacceptable.

But Quee Lee laughed off the insult as well as the earnest pleas for silence. "Oh, I'm sure my husband's already heard about the Vermiculate," she remarked. "Believe me, Perri knows the Ship as well as any captain does, and he knows everyone on board who matters, too." She winked, adding sweetly, "He knows you, of course."

"Of course."

"This won't be news to him," she promised.

Yet, for some reason, Perri wasn't familiar with this particular rumor. He listened intently as Quee Lee related the mystery, and yes, he was very familiar with that region called the Vermiculate. It was an intricate nest of dry caves, very few entrances leading to a million dead ends. But he had never heard evidence that some portion of those caverns had escaped mapping.

"Tell it again," he demanded, tugging at the fellow's elbow. "From the beginning, everything you know."

But there weren't many new details to share.

"I think I see what's happening," Perri mentioned. "This is probably just an old rumor reborn. The first

two passengers to come on board the Great Ship started this story. Over drinks or in somebody's bed, they convinced themselves there had to be secret places and unmapped corners lurking somewhere. It helped heighten the sense of adventure, don't you see? And that's why every century or two, that same old legend puts on a new costume and takes its walk in public."

"But this is no rumor," the man proclaimed. "And I don't approve of legends. What I told you is the truth, I swear it."

"Yet you won't name your source," Perri pointed out.

"I cannot," the man repeated. "Frankly, I wish I hadn't said this much."

Perri was a modern human, durable and functionally immortal. But unlike all of the well-moneyed souls in the room, he wore a boyish face and a pretty, almost juvenile smile. When it served his needs, he played the role of a smart child surrounded by very foolish adults. "It scares the hell out of you, doesn't it? You hear about this puzzle, and you're the kind of creature who won't fall asleep unless every puzzle is solved, every question mark erased."

"And what is wrong with that?" asked the rumor's source.

"What's right about it?" Perri countered.

Quee Lee had expected precisely that response, and when it came, she laughed softly.

The gentleman bristled. "My dear, I thought you would be interested in this matter. But if you're going to tease me—"

"I didn't mean that," she began.

But the man had his excuse to turn and march away. No doubt he would avoid Quee Lee for the rest of the day and, if genuinely angry, she wouldn't see him for the next fifty years.

"I shouldn't have laughed," Quee Lee admitted.

"He will forgive you."

True enough. Fifty years of chilled silence was nothing among immortals. All but the most malicious slights were eventually pardoned, or at least discarded as memories not worth carrying any farther. "It's too bad that the story isn't true," she said. "I wish there was some unmapped cave hiding out there."

"Oh, but there is," Perri replied.

Quee Lee worked through the possibilities. "You lied to me," she complained. "You'd already heard about the Vermiculate."

"I didn't, and I haven't."

"Then how can you say—?"

"Easily," he interrupted. "Your friend might be a wonderful soul. He might be charitable and sweet—"

"Hardly."

"But he has never once shown me the barest trace of imagination. I seriously doubt that he could dream up such a tale, and I know he wouldn't repeat any wild fable, unless it came from a reasonable,

responsible source."

"Such as?"

"One of the captains," Perri allowed.

"But why would any rational officer take any passenger into his or her confidence?" She hesitated, and laughed. "I suppose my old friend is rather wealthy."

"Wealthier even than you," Perri agreed.

"And if he happened to be sleeping with a captain..."

"That's my cynical guess."

Quee Lee knew her husband's mind. "You already know which captain it is, don't you?"

"I have a robust notion," he allowed.

"Who?"

"Not here," he warned, stroking her arm with a fond hand. "But my candidate has rank and connections, and she's desperately fond of money. And if you mix those qualifications with the fact that she, like that prickly man sulking over there, doesn't appreciate mysteries..."

"Is the Vermiculate unmapped?" she asked.

"If any place is," Perri allowed. Then, with long fingers, he drew elaborate shapes in the air between them. "If you wove all of those empty caves together and straightened them out, you'd have a single tunnel long enough to reach from your Earth to Neptune and partway home again. So yes, it's easy to imagine that some AI expert could massage the old data, and guess that one corner here and one little room there might have escaped notice and naming. And maybe after fifty thousand years of sleep, one of the original survey robots was awakened and shoved down a hole, and, because of its age, it malfunctioned, making everything seem far more mysterious than it actually was."

On her own, Quee Lee had narrowed the list of suspect captains to three, perhaps four. With a quiet, conspiratorial voice, she asked, "Who's going to make our discreet inquiries, you or me?"

"Neither of us," Perri said.

"Then you're not my husband," she teased. "The man I married would want to finish the mapping himself."

Perri shrugged and grinned. "We can make our own good guesses where to look." Then with a fond whisper, he added, "Besides, if we get ourselves noticed, what began as a tiny data anomaly mentioned to a lover will become much more: an area of potential embarrassment to the godly rulers of the Great Ship. Then our nameless captain will personally march into that empty corner... and keep me from having my little bit of fun..."

"And me, too," said Quee Lee.

"Or quite a lot of fun," Perri added, wrapping an arm around his wife's waist. "If you're in the mood for a little darkness, that is."

Yet nothing was simple about this simple-sounding quest. Finding holes inside the existing maps proved difficult, requiring months of detailed analysis by several experts paid well for their secrecy as well as their rare skills. Meanwhile, half a dozen of Perri's best friends heard about his newest interest, and, by turning in past favors, they earned slots on the expedition roster. Then Quee Lee decided to invite two lady friends who had been pressing for centuries to join her on a "safe adventure," which was what this would be. The Vermiculate might be imperfectly known, but there was no reason to expect danger. The dry caves were filled with the standard minimal atmosphere-nitrogen and oxygen and nothing else. There were no artificial suns or lights, and the only heat was thermal leakage from the nearby habitats and reactors. But even if the worst happened—if everyone lost their way and their supplies were exhausted—the end result would be a bothersome thirst and gradual starvation. Eventually, their tough bioceramic minds would sever all connections with their failing bodies, and, when no choice was left, ten humans would sit down in the darkness and quietly turn into mummies, waiting for their absence to be noted and a rescue mission to track them down.

But Perri didn't approve of losing his way. Meticulous in recording their position on the new, modestly improved map, he earned gentle and then not-so-gentle ribbing from the others. The Vermiculate was far too enormous to explore, even a thousand years. But their flex-skin car took them to areas of interest, and before they stepped away from each base camp, he made his team memorize the local layout of tunnels and chambers. He insisted that everyone stay with at least one companion. He begged for the others to carry several kinds of torches as well as locator tools, noisemakers, and laser flares. But eighteen days of that kind of mothering caused one of Quee Lee's friends to break every rule. She picked a random passageway and ran for parts unknown, at least to her. She was carrying nothing but one small torch and a half-filled water bottle, and after ten hours of solitary adventuring, she discovered that she had no good idea where she was in the universe.

One night alone was enough of a lesson. Perri and Quee Lee found the explorer sitting in a dead-end chamber, shivering inside her heated clothes—shivering out of hunger and anxiety. And from that moment on, everyone's wandering was done with at least the minimal precautions.

It was the boredom that began to defeat the explorers.

The Vermiculate's walls were stone buttressed with low-grade hyperfiber. No human eye had ever seen these tunnels, but the novelty was minimal. Some places were beautiful in their shape and proportions, but it was an accidental beauty. The Ship's builders might have had a purpose for each twist and turn, every sudden room, and for the little tubes that gave access to the next portion of the maze. But to most eyes, nothing here was strange or particularly interesting, and, after two months of wandering, the novice adventurers were losing interest.

One by one, the expedition shrank.

First to leave was the woman who hadn't gotten lost. Then Perri's friends complained about these dreary circumstances, each demanding a ride to the nearest exit point. The only ones left were identical twin brothers and that dear old friend of Quee Lee who had gotten lost and scared, and then discovered a genuine fondness for spelunking.

Or maybe it was the brothers who held her interest. One night, when the camp lights were dropping down to a nightly glow, Quee Lee spotted the twins slipping into her friend's little shelter—entering her home from opposite ends, and neither appearing again until morning.

Another month of wandering brought few highlights. Half a dozen tunnels showed evidence of foot traffic over the last few thousand years. The desiccated slime trail of a Snail-As-God was a modest surprise. Inside one cave, they discovered the broken scale from a harum-scarum shin, and a few meters farther

along, a liter of petrified blood left behind by a human male. And then came that momentous afternoon when they discovered a graveyard of surveying robots—ten thousand machines that had pulled themselves into neat, officious piles before dropping into what had become an eternal sleep.

Two days later, Perri brought his team to the bottom of a deep, deep chimney. Mathematical wizards had labeled that location as "mildly interesting." The Vermiculate had patterns, predictable and occasionally repeatable, and, according to sophisticated calculations, that narrow hole should lead to a large "somewhere else." But the unknown refused to expose itself with a glance. Two little tunnels waited at the bottom of the chimney, but every sonic pulse and cursory examination showed that they were merely long and exceptionally ordinary.

The five humans broke into two groups.

Perri and Quee Lee slipped into the shorter tunnel. As always, they brought tracking equipment as well as the sniffers that constantly searched for organic traces left by past visitors, and along with heated clothes and survival rations, they carried a variety of lights to offer feeble glows or sun-blazing fires. But the most effective sensor came in pairs, and it was the bluish-yellow eyes that noticed the sudden hole in the floor.

"Stop," said Perri.

Quee Lee paused, one gloved hand dropping, fingertips reaching to within a hairsbreadth of the emptiness.

"Look," he advised.

"I see it," she said. But she didn't know what she saw. After days and weeks of staring at structural hyperfiber, she recognized that something here was different. It was the area surrounding the hole that was peculiar. Holding a variable beam to the floor, she slipped through a series of settings. Hyperfiber was the strongest baryonic substance known—the bones of the Ship and the basis of every star-faring civilization—yet she had never seen light flickering against hyperfiber quite like it did just then. It was as if the floor was feeling their weight, and the photons were betraying the vibrations.

"Do you know what this is?" Perri asked.

"Do you?"

"The source," he announced. "The source of our rumor."

She shone a second light up and down the tunnel. There was no sign of disabled robots or the detritus left by mapping crews. But the captains could have cleaned up their trash, since captains liked to keep their secrets secret, particularly when it came to curious passengers.

"This hole is fresh," Perri decided. And when Quee Lee reached toward the edge, he said, "Don't. Unless you want to cut off a finger or two."

The floor was pure hyperfiber—a skin only a few atoms thick at its thickest. Because the stuff was so very thin, the light flickered. What they were trusting with their weight was close to nothing, like worn paint stretched across empty air, and the edge of the revealed hole was keener than the most deadly sword.

"But a robot should have noticed," she guessed. "If we can see that the floor here is different..."

"I've given that some thought," Perri offered. "We're about as deep into the Vermiculate as you can go,

or so we thought. A few surveyors probably started working above us, and when they were overwhelmed, they stopped and ate the rock and replicated themselves."

"Imperfect copies?" she guessed.

"Maybe." He shrugged, enjoying the game but taking nothing too seriously. "Whatever the reason, the machine that first crawled into this tunnel wasn't paying close attention. It didn't notice what should have been obvious, and that's why the Ship's map was incomplete."

"Just like the rumor says," Quee Lee agreed. "Except there isn't much mystery, is there? Because if the captains had found something remarkable down here—"

"We wouldn't get within ten kilometers," Perri agreed.

With every tool, including her warm brown eyes, Quee Lee examined the floor and the hole and the blackness below.

Perri did the same.

And then, for the first time in perhaps a thousand years, one of them managed to surprise the other.

It wasn't the adventurous spouse who spoke first.

Pointing down, Quee Lee said, "That hole's just wide enough for me."

"If we string tethers to the ceiling," Perri mentioned, "and if there's another floor worth standing on below us."

"What about our friends?" she asked.

"I'll go gather them up," he began.

"No." Then, for the second time, she surprised her husband. "We'll leave a note behind. We can tell them to follow, if they want."

Perri smiled at the ancient creature.

"This is *our* adventure," she concluded. "Yours, and mine."

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### III

What lay below was very much the same as everything above. Which was what they had expected. The only difference was that no public map showed these particular cavities and chimneys, and the long tunnels and little side vents always led to a wealth of new places devoid of names. According to Perri's navigational equipment, they had wandered nearly twelve kilometers before beginning their hunt for a campsite. A series of electronic breadcrumbs led back to the original hole and their left-behind note, and, speaking through the crumbs, Quee Lee discovered that her lady friend and the twins hadn't bothered to come looking for them. She speculated as to why that might be, and they enjoyed a lewd laugh. Then, following one promising passageway around its final bend, they entered what seemed to be the largest room they had seen for weeks.

The floor of the room was an undulating surface, like water stirred by deep currents. They selected a spacious bowl of cool gray hyperfiber, and, with the camp light blazing beside them, they made love. Then they ate and drank their fill, and at a point with no obvious significance, Perri strolled over to his



pack and bent down, intending to snatch some tiny item out of one of the countless pockets.

That was the moment when every light went out.

Quee Lee was sitting on her memory chair, immersed in sudden darkness. Her first instinct was to believe that she was to blame. Their camp light was in front of her. Had she given it some misleading command? But then she thought about their other torches and, realizing that the night was total, she naturally wondered if for some peculiar reason she had gone completely blind.

Then from a distance, with a moderately concerned voice, her husband asked, "Darling? Are you there?"

"I am," she remarked. Perri was blind too, or every one of their lights had failed. Either way, something unlikely had just occurred. "What do you think?" she asked.

"That it's ridiculously dark in here," Perri allowed.

Perfectly, relentlessly black.

"Do you feel all right?" he inquired.

"I feel fine," she said.

"I do, too." He was disappointed, as if some little ache might help answer their questions. "Except for being worried, I suppose."

One of Perri's feet kicked the pack.

"Darling?" she asked.

He said, "Sing to me. I'll follow your voice."

Softly, Quee Lee sang one of the first tunes that she had ever learned—a nursery rhyme too old to have an author, its beguiling lyrics about rowing and time wrapped around a language long considered dead.

Moments later, she heard Perri settle on the ground directly to her right.

She stopped singing.

Then Perri called from somewhere off to her left, from a distance, telling her, "Don't quit singing now. I'm still trying to find you, darling."

For a long moment, nothing happened. The darkness remained silent and unknowable. And then from her right, from a place quite close, a voice that she did not recognize softly insisted, "Yes, please. Sing, please. I rather enjoy that wonderful little tune of yours."

## IV

Quee Lee began to jump up.

"No, no," the voice implored. "Remain seated, my dear. There is absolutely no reason to surrender your comfort."

She settled slowly, warily.

Perri said her name.

Clearing her throat, Quee Lee managed to say, "I'm here. Here."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"But I thought I heard-"

"Yes."

"Is somebody with you?"

In the same moment, two voices said, "Yes."

Then the new voice continued. "I was hoping that your wife would sing a little more," it remarked. "But I suppose I have spoiled the mood, which is my fault. But please, Perri, will you join us? Sit beside Quee Lee, and I promise: Neither of you will come to any harm. A little conversation, a little taste of companionship... that's all I wish for now."

Again, with urgency, Perri asked, "Are you all right?"

How could she answer that question? "I'm fine, yes." Except that she was startled, and for many rational reasons, she was scared, and with the darkness pressing down, she was feeling a thrilling lack of control.

Her husband's footsteps seemed louder than before. In the perfect blackness, he stepped by memory, and then, perhaps sensing her presence, he stopped beside her and reached out with one hand, dry warm fingertips knowing just where her face would be waiting.

She clung to his hand with both of hers.

"Sit, please," the stranger insisted. "Unless you absolutely must stand."

Perri settled on one edge of her soft chair. His hand didn't leave her grip, and he patted that knot of fingers with his free hand. As well as she knew her own bones, Quee Lee knew his. And she leaned into that strong body, glad for his presence and confident that he was glad for hers.

"Who are you?" Perri asked.

Silence answered him.

"Did you disable our lights?" he asked.

Nothing.

"You must have," Perri decided. "And my infrared corneas and nexus-links, too, I noticed."

"All temporary measures," the stranger replied.

"Why?"

Silence.

"Who are you?" Quee Lee asked. And in the same breath, she added, "What is your name?"

Something about that innocuous question was humorous. The laughter sounded genuine, weightless, and smooth, gradually falling away into an amused silence. Then what might or might not have been a deep

breath preceded the odd statement, "As a rule, I don't believe in names."

"No?" Quee asked.

"As a rule," the voice repeated.

Perri asked, "What species are you?"

"And I will warn you," the voice added. "I don't gladly embrace the concept of species either."

The lovers sat as close as possible, speaking to each other with the pressure of their hands.

Finally, Quee Lee took it upon herself to say, "We're human. If that matters to you, one way or another."

Silence.

"Do you know our species?" she asked.

And then Perri guessed, "You're a Vapor-track. Nocturnal to the point where they can't endure even the weakest light-

"Yes, I know humans," the stranger responded. "And I know Vapor-tracks, too. But I am neither. And believe me, I am neither nocturnal nor diurnal. The time of day and the strength of the ambient light are of absolutely no concern to me."

"But why are you down here?" Quee Lee asked.

Their companion gave no response.

"This is a very remote corner of the Ship," Perri said. "Why would any sentient organism seek out this place?"

"Why do you?" was the response.

"Curiosity," Perri confessed. "Is that your motivation?"

"Not in the least." The voice was more male than female, and it sounded nearly as human as they did. But those qualities could be artifacts of any good translator. It occurred to Quee Lee that some kind of deception was at work here, and that what they heard had no bearing at all on what was beside them. "I could imagine that I am a substantial puzzle for the two of you," the voice allowed.

The humans responded with their own silence.

"Fair enough," their companion said. "Tell me: Where were each of you born?"

"On the Great Ship," Perri volunteered.

"I come from Earth," Quee Lee offered.

"Names," the stranger responded. "I ask, and you instantly offer me names."

"What else could we say?" asked Quee Lee.

"Nothing. For you, there are no other polite options. But as a rule, I prefer places that don't wear names. Cubbyholes and solar systems that have remained uncataloged, indifferent to whichever label that a passerby might try to hang on its slick invisible flesh."

Quee Lee listened to her husband's quick, interested breathing.

After reflection, Perri guessed, "And that's why you're here, isn't it? This is one place inside the Great Ship that has gone unnoticed. Until now."

"Perhaps that is my reason," the voice allowed.

"Is there a better answer?" Perri asked.

Silence.

"You have no name?" Quee Lee pressed.

The silence continued, and then, suddenly, an explanation was offered. "I don't wear any name worth repeating. But I do have an identity. A self. With my own history and limitations as well as a wealth of possibilities, most of which will never come to pass."

They waited.

The voice continued. "What I happen to be is a government official. A harmless and noble follower of rules. But when necessary, I can become a brazen, fearless warrior. Except when my best choice is to be a determined coward, in which case I can flee any threat with remarkable skill. Yet, in most circumstances, I am just an official: the loyal servant to a exceptionally fine cause."

"Which cause?" both humans asked.

"In service to the galactic union," the entity replied. "That is my defining role... a role that I have played successfully for the last three hundred and seven million years, by your arbitrary and self-centered count."

Surprise and doubt ran through their bodies.

Quee Lee took it upon herself to confess, "I'm sorry. But we don't entirely believe you."

"You claim you were born on Earth. Is that true, my dear?"

She hesitated.

"'Earth.' Your home planet carries a simple utterance. Am I right?"

She said, "Yes."

"I do happen to know your small world. But when I made my visit, the stars were completely unaware of that self-given name."

"And what do you know about Earth?" Perri asked.

"Actually, I know quite a lot," their companion promised. Then once again, it fell into a long, long silence.

## V

Separately, Quee Lee and Perri had come to identical conclusions: The voice was rhythmic and deep, not just easy to listen to but impossible to ignore. Every word was delivered with clarity, like the voice of a highly trained actor. But woven through that perfection were hints of breathing and little clicks of tongues or lips, and, once in a great while, a nebulous sound that would leak from the mouth or nostrils... or some other orifice hiding in the darkness. Whatever was speaking to them was slightly taller than their

ears, and their best guess was that the creature was sitting on a lump of hyperfiber less than three meters from them. There was mass behind the voice. Sometimes a limb would move, or maybe the body itself. Perhaps they heard the creak of its carapace or the complaining of stiff leathery clothes, or maybe a tendril was twisting back against it-self-unless there was no sound, except what the two humans imagined they could hear out in the unfathomable blackness.

As far as they could determine, their nameless companion was alone. There wasn't any second presence or a whisper of another voice. And it somehow had slipped into their camp, perhaps even before the lights died, and neither one of them had perceived anything out of the ordinary.

Maybe the voice was just that.

Sound. Or a set of elaborate sounds, contrived for effect and existing only as so much noise, produced by nothing but the unlit air or the fierce motions of individual atoms.

Perhaps somebody was playing an elaborate joke on the two of them. Perri had many clever friends. A few of them might have worked together, going to the trouble necessary to bring him and Quee Lee into this empty hole, snatching them up in some game that would continue until the fun was exhausted and the lights returned. Quee Lee could envision just that kind of trick: One moment, a mysterious voice. And then, just as suddenly, a thousand good friends would be standing around them, congratulating the married pair on one or another minor anniversary.

"Is this a special occasion?" Quee Lee asked herself.

That route seemed lucrative. She smiled, and the nervousness in her body began to drain away. How many months and years of work had gone into this silly joke? But she had seen through all of the cleverness, and, for an instant, she considered a preemptive shout and laugh, perhaps even throwing out the names of the likely conspirators.

The creature continued explaining what might or might not be real. "My preferred method of travel," it proclaimed, "is to move alone, and always by the most invisible means. This is standard behavior for officials like myself. We will finish one task in some portion of the Union, and, with that success, another task is supplied. Since news travels slowly across the galaxy, an entity like myself is granted considerable freedom of action. Few organizations are confident enough to tolerate such power in their agents."

"What kind of tasks?" Perri asked.

"Would you like an example?"

"Please."

"I am thinking now of a warehouse that I had built and stocked. A hidden warehouse in an undisclosed location. And in the very next moment, I was suddenly dispatched into my next critical mission."

"A warehouse?" Perri asked.

"A vast, invisible facility full of rare and valuable items. I haven't returned to that particular location since, but it most likely remains locked and unseen today. Unused, but always at the ready. Waiting for that critical, well-imagined age when its contents help with some great effort. But that is the Union's way: We have an elaborate structure, robust and overlapping. Enduring and invincibly patient. Which is only natural, since we happen to be the oldest, most powerful political entity within this galaxy."

"The Union?" Perri said dubiously.

"Yes."

"That's a name," he pointed out. "I thought you didn't approve of such things."

"I offer it because you expect some kind of label. But like all names, 'the Union' doesn't truly fit what is real." A smug, superior tone had taken hold, but it was difficult for the audience to take offense. After all, this was just a voice in the night, and who could say what was true and what was sane?

"Simply stated," their companion continued, "my Union is a collection of entities and beliefs, memes and advanced tools, that have been joined together in a common cause. And what you call the Milky Way happens to be our most important possession. The central state inside a vast and ancient empire."

"No," Perri said. "No."

Silence.

Quee Lee felt her husband's tension. Leaning forward, she told their companion, "There are no empires."

A long black silence held sway, and then came a sound not unlike the creak of a joint needing oil.

"Many, many species have tried to build empires," she continued, naming a few candidates to prove her knowledge of the subject. "The galaxy's first sentient races accomplished the most, but they didn't do much. The galaxy is enormous. Its planets are too diverse and far too numerous to be ruled by any one government. And starflight has always been a slow, dangerous business. When a species rises, it can gain control of only a very limited region. When you measure the history of empires against the life stories of suns and worlds, even the most enduring rule is a temporary, very tiny business."

Quee Lee concluded by saying, "No single authority has ever controlled any significant portion of the galaxy."

"I applaud your generous sense of doubt," the stranger replied. "May I ask, my dear? What are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"By blood, I think you must be Chinese. Am I right?"

"Mostly, yes," she admitted.

"And the city of your birth?"

"Hong Kong," she whispered.

"Hong Kong, yes. A place I know of, yes. Of course you understand that your China was a great empire, and more than once. And as I recall from my long-ago studies of Earth, there was a period—a brief but not unimportant time—when the port of Hong Kong belonged to the greatest empire ever to exist on your little world. There was a minor green island sitting in a cold distant sea. It called itself Great Britain, and, with its steam-driven fleets, it somehow managed to hang its flag above a fat fraction of the world's population."

"I know about Britain," she replied.

"Now tell me this," their companion continued. "There lives an old rickshaw driver who plies his trade on the narrow Hong Kong streets. Does that lowly man care who happens to serve as governor of his home city? Does it matter to him if the fellow on top happens to have yellow hair, or is a Mongol born on the plains of Asia, or even a Han Chinese who is a third cousin to him?"

"No," she admitted. "He probably didn't think much about those matters."

"And what about the peasant farmer struggling to feed himself and his family from a patch of land downstream from Everest... the ruler of a farm that has never even once fallen under the indifferent gaze of the pale northern man who works inside a distant government building? Does that farmer concern himself with the man who signs a long list of decrees and then dies quietly of malaria? And does he care at all about the gentleman who comes to replace that dead civil servant... another northern man who bravely signs more unread decrees before he dies of cholera?"

Queen Lee said nothing.

"Consider the Mayan woman nursing her daughter in Belize, or the Maasai cattle herder in Kenya who happens to be the tall strong lord to his herd. Do they learn the English language? Can they even recognize their rulers' alphabet? And then there is the Aboriginal hunter sucking the precious juice out of an emu egg. Is he even aware that fleets of enormous coal-fired ships are landing and then leaving from his coast each and every day?"

"These souls are busy, embroiled in their rich and complex, if painfully brief, lives. Within the British Empire, hundreds of millions of citizens go about their daily adventures. The flavor of each existence is nearly changeless. Taxes and small blessings come from on high, but these trappings accomplish little, regardless of which power happens to be flying the flags. A peasant's story is usually the same as his forefathers' stories. And if the peasant's children survive, they will inherit that same stubborn, almost ageless narrative."

Neither human spoke.

"Do these little people ever think of that distant green island?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't," Queen Lee allowed.

"But if they did think of Britain," the stranger began.

"What?" Perri prompted.

"Would they love the Empire for its justice, order, and the rare peace that it brings to the human world?"

Neither responded.

"Of course, they do not. What you do not know, you cannot love. This is true of emperors as well as mates. So long as the peasants' lives remain small and steady, they won't be capable of hating the British.

"Which is not to say they are unsophisticated souls. They are far from simple, in fact. But their lives are *confined*. By necessity, the obvious and immediate are what matter to them. And the colors and shape of today's flag could not have less meaning."

"Suppose we agree," said Perri. "We accept your premise: For humans, empires tended to be big, distant machines."

"As they are for most other species," was the reply.

In the dark, Queen Lee and her husband nodded.

"But I don't agree with that word 'big,'" the stranger continued. "I believe that even the greatest empire, at the height of its powers, remains vanishingly small. Nearly invisible, even."

"I don't understand," confessed Quee Lee.

"Let me remind you of this: Several million whales swam in your world's little ocean. They were great beasts possessing language and old cultures. But did even one species of cetaceans bow to the British flag? And what about the tiger eating venison on the Punjab? Did he dream of the homely human queen? And what role did the ants and beetles, termites and butterflies, play in the world? They did nothing for Britannia, I would argue... except for what they would have done anyway if left to their own marvelous devices."

Perri tried to laugh.

Quee Lee could think of nothing useful to say.

"The trouble," the voice began. Then it paused, perhaps reconsidering its choice of words. "Your mistake," it continued, "is both inevitable and comforting, and it is very difficult to escape. What you assume is that the *names* in history are important. Because you have smart, educated minds, you have taught yourselves much about your own past. But even the most famous name is lost among the trillions of nameless souls. And every empire that you think of when the subject arises... well, that political entity, no matter how impermanent and trivial, was visible only because it wasted its limited energies making certain that its name would outlive both its accomplishments and its crimes."

"Maybe so," Quee Lee allowed.

"Names," the voice repeated. "The worlds you know share that unifying trait. A name brings with it a sense of purpose and a handle for its recorded history. Attached to one or a thousand words waits some center of trade, a nucleus of science, and you mistakenly believe that the most famous names mark the hubs of your great cosmopolitan galaxy."

Perri squeezed his wife's hand, fighting the temptation to speak.

"But the bulk of the galaxy... its asteroids and dust motes, sunless bodies and dark corners without number... those are the features that truly matter."

"To whom?" Quee Lee asked.

"To the ants, of course. And the lowly fish. The beetles and singing whales, and our rickshaw driver who knows the twisting streets of Hong Kong better than any Chinese emperor or British civil servant. The nameless citizens are those who matter, my dear." Their companion shifted its weight. Perhaps. Something creaked, and the voice drifted slightly to one side. "And I will confess that my empire is like all those others, if not more so. The Union that I love... that I have served selflessly for eons... is vast and ancient. But where England made maps and gave every corner its own label, my Union has wisely built itself upon places unknown."

Husband and wife contemplated that peculiar boast.

Then Quee Lee remembered an earlier thread. "You have visited Earth, you claimed."

"I did once, yes."

"Before or after your invisible warehouse?"

"After, as it happens. Soon after."

"You mentioned receiving a new mission then," Perri coaxed.



"Which leads directly to an interesting story, I believe." The next sound was soft, contented. "My new orders came by a most usual route. Whispered and deeply coded. Instructions from my superiors that were designed to resemble nothing but a smeared flicker of light thrown out from a distant laser array." The words were strung together with what felt like a grin. "Alone, I left my previous post. Alone, I rode inside a tiny vehicle meant to resemble a shard of old comet, using a simple ion motor to boost my velocity to where my voyage took slightly less than forty centuries—"

"By our arbitrary and self-centered count," Perri interjected.

"Which is not a very long time." Those words were ordinary and matter-of-fact, yet somehow with the sound of them—in their clarity and decidedly slow pace—the voice conveyed long reaches of time and unbounded patience. "I traveled until I came to a nameless world. There was one ocean and several continents. The forests were green, the skies blue with white watery clouds. To fulfill the demands of my new mission, I selected an island not far from the world's main continent: a young volcanic island where the local inhabitants built boats driven by oars and square sails, and they put up houses of wood and stone, and they planted half-wild crops in the fertile black soil. And their moments of free time were filled with the heartfelt worship of their moon and sun—the two bodies that ruled a sky that they would never truly understand."

"Was this Earth?" Quee Lee asked.

There was a pause.

In the darkness, motion.

And then the voice told them, "When these particular events occurred, my dear, there was no world called 'Earth.' "

Quee Lee wrapped both hands around her husband's arm.

"Remember this," the voice continued. "The Union is the only power that truly matters. And the Union is interested only in those dark realms that appear on no worthwhile map."

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## VI

"A king happened to rule that warm, sun-washed island. He was simple and rather old, and I was tempted to kill him in some grand public fashion before taking his throne for myself. Yet my study of his species and its superstitions showed me a less bloody avenue. The king's youngest wife was pregnant, but the child would be stillborn. It was a simple matter to replace that failed infant and then bury what was Me inside its healthy native flesh. Once born, I proved to the kingdom that their new prince was special. I was a lanky boy, physically beautiful, endowed with an unnatural strength and the gentle grace of wild birds. I didn't merely walk at an early age, I danced. And with a bold musical voice, I spoke endlessly on every possible subject, people fighting to kneel close to me, desperate to hear whatever marvel I offered next.

"The wise old women of my kingdom decided that I must be a god's child as much as a man's.

"On a daily basis, I predicted the weather and the little quakes that often rattled the island. I boasted that I could see far into the skies and over the horizon, and to prove my brave words, I promised that a boat full of strangers would soon drift past our island.

"I made my prediction in the morning, and by evening I was proved right. The lost trireme was filled with traders or pirates. On a world such as that, what is the difference between those two professions?"

Whatever their intentions, my people were waiting for them, and after suitable introductions, I ordered the strangers murdered and their possessions divided equally among the general populace."

The voice paused.

In the darkness, Quee Lee leaned hard against her husband.

Then, without comment, the story continued. "I was almost grown when that little old king stood before his people and named his heir. Two of my brothers were insulted, but I had anticipated their clumsy attempts at revenge. In a duel with bronze swords, I removed the head of the more popular son. Then I turned my back, allowing my second brother to run his spear through my chest—a moment used to prove that I was, as my people had always suspected, immortal.

"With my own hands, I yanked the spear from my heart.

"In anguish, my foe flung himself off one of our island's high cliffs.

" 'Someday I will follow my brothers into the Afterlife,' I promised the citizens. 'But for the rest of your days, I will remain with you, and together we shall do the work of the gods.'

"And that was the moment, at long last, when the heart of my mission finally began."

Their companion paused.

Finally Perri asked, "Are you going to explain your mission?"

"Hints and teases. I will share exactly what is necessary to explain myself, or at least I will give you the illusion of insights, placing you where your imaginations can fill in the unnamed reaches."

"About these natives," Quee Lee began. "Your people... what did they look like?"

Quietly and perhaps with a touch of affection, the voice explained, "They were bipedal, as you are. And they had your general height and mass, hands and glands. Like you, they presented hairless flesh to the world, except upon their faces and scalps and in their private corners. As a rule, most were dirty and drab, and on that particular island, their narrow culture reached back only a few generations. But their species had potential. Following ordinary pathways, natural selection had given them graceful fingers and an evolving language, busy minds and a compelling sense of tribe. In those following years, I showed my people how to increase the yields and quality of their crops. I taught them how to purify their water, how to carve and lift gigantic stones, and I helped them build superior ships that could chase the fat fish and slow leviathans that could never hide from my godly eyes. Then, in the shadow of their smoldering volcano, I laid out a spacious palace surrounded by a solid home and wide avenues, and for three generations, my devoted followers built the finest city that their species had ever known."

Once again, the voice ceased. But the silence was neither empty nor unimportant, accenting a sense of time crossed with clear purpose. Then came a smooth laugh, and their companion remarked, "If the two of you were dropped into similar circumstances, you would accomplish most if not all of my tricks. You are borderline immortals. Spears through your hearts would be nuisances at day's end. Armed with the knowledge common to your happy lives, you could visit some nameless world and convince its residents that you were divine, and in the next breath you could call for whatever riches and little pleasures that your worshippers might scratch together for you.

"What pleasures *me* is serving the Union.

"What I wanted... what my orders demanded from this one place, inside this single moment... was the

construction of a significant machine, a device that would demand the full focus of a half-born civilization."

"What kind of machine?" asked Perri.

"If it proves important to know that, then I will tell you."

Except Perri couldn't accept that evasive answer. "How many people lived in your city? Five thousand? Fifty thousand? I don't know what you were building. Granted. But you're implying advanced technologies, and I'd have to guess that you'd need a lot more hands and minds than you would ever find on a tiny island in the middle of the sea."

The first answer was prolonged silence.

Then came the sharp creak of a limb or cold leather, and with quiet fury the entity replied, "You have not been listening carefully enough, sir. Pay strict attention to everything that I tell you."

"Remind me what you said," Perri snapped.

Another pause.

Then the voice continued, explaining, "I sat on my throne for seventy summers and several months. Then one day I abruptly announced that my city was failing me. With a wave of my fist, I told my followers that they were not truly devoted, that they were not sufficiently thankful for my wise counsel, and I was contemplating the complete obliteration of their island-nation.

"With the next sunrise, the great volcano erupted. The rich rocky earth split wide. Ash was coughed into the sky, lava flowed into the boiling sea, and boulders as big as houses dropped onto the cowering, inadequate heads around me. But then I pretended a sudden change of mind. I showed pity, even empathy. On the following day, after the dead were buried and the damage assessed, I dressed in a feathered robe and walked to the summit, where I told the mountain to sleep again. Which it would have done on its own, since the eruption had run its course. But a single moment of theater erased the last shreds of doubt. Again, I had convinced my followers that I was supreme. You could not hear one muttered complaint about me, or doubts about my powers, or the slightest question concerning each of my past decisions.

"That seamless devotion was necessary.

"You see, the eruption was not a random event. And I didn't make the mountain tremble and belch just to scare the local souls.

"Even as I sat on my throne, I had been working. My assignment demanded the kinds of energy generated by top-grade fusion reactors. But reactors produce signatures visible at a great distance. Neutrinos are difficult to shield, and I didn't want prying eyes to notice my industrial plant. So instead of a reactor, I employed the lake of magma directly beneath our feet, creating an inefficient but enormous geothermal plant. When that plant awoke—when the first seawater poured down the pipes and into the reaction vessels—my island was shoved upward like a balloon inflating. Watchful eyes noticed that every tide pool was suddenly baking in the sun. Our island was significantly taller, a thousand hot springs flowed out of the high crevices, and the black ground was itself warm to the touch.

"On that good day, I ordered every woman of breeding age to come to the palace, to arrive with the evening bell, and I welcomed each of them individually, giving them a feast and plenty to drink, as well as jewelry and robes finer than anything they had known. Then to this nervous, worshipful gathering, I announced that each of them was carrying a child now. My offspring were riding contentedly inside them.

"I promised my wives untroubled pregnancies and healthy, superior babies.

"Both promises came true.

"And you are correct, Perri. Sir. Fifty thousand followers would never have been enough. No natural species can bring the mental capacity demanded by this kind of delicate, highly technical work. So I enlarged the natives' craniums and restructured their neural networks, flinging them across fifty thousand generations of natural selection. Then I served as the children's only teacher. I taught them what they needed to know about the high sciences, and I made them experts in engineering, all while carefully preparing my kingdom for the next change."

Perri said, "Wait."

In the dark, Quee Lee felt her husband's body shifting. She recognized his excitement and interest, his emotions mirroring her own.

Again, he said, "Wait."

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking about what you've told us."

"Good."

"Where your logic leads..."

Silence.

"If you were willing to rewrite the biology of one species," Perri began, "you could just as well reshape others, too."

"Ants?" Quee Lee blurted. "Were you a god to the island's ants?"

"Ants have no need for gods," the voice corrected. "They demand nothing but a queen blessed with spectacular fertility. But you've seen my logic, yes. You are paying attention. But then again, I sensed that the two of you would prove to be a worthy audience."

Some small object clattered against hyperfiber—a clear, almost bell-like sound expanding and diminishing inside the gigantic room.

Then the voice returned, explaining, "By the time my first grandchildren were born, the ocean around my island was lit from below. Which was only reasonable, since the city above was just one portion of a much greater community—a nation numbering in the billions. My people supplied the genius, but to serve them, I had built a multitude of obedient minds trained for narrow, exceptionally difficult tasks. A full century of careful preparation had made me ready to begin the construction of a single mechanical wonder.

"Which was the moment, I should add, when my troubles began."

## VII

In the smothering blackness, Quee Lee held her husband by an arm, by his waist. And then she twisted her body in a particular way, inviting a groping hand, not caring in the least that the nameless entity might be able to make out their timeless, much-cherished intimacies.

Perri started to offer a new question.

"What troubles-?" he began.

But the voice interrupted him, claiming, "Human beings are an extraordinarily fortunate species. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I feel lucky," Quee Lee said.

"Lucky because of the Great Ship?" Perri asked.

"Tell me your opinion: Is this vessel a blessing for you?"

Perri laughed. "I know at least a thousand other species that could have found it first. That should have found it before us. They were more powerful than we, and far more numerous. One of them should have grabbed it up before we ever knew it existed."

"It's a magical machine," Quee Lee offered.

The entity made a few soft, agreeable noises. Then it continued, saying again, "Our galaxy has stubbornly refused to be dominated by any single species. But your kind stumbled across the Ship while it was still drifting on the outskirts of the galaxy. You claimed the prize first, and you have held on to it since. A single possession has lifted the human animal into an exceptionally rare position. Your best captains have no choice but to thank the stars and Providence for this glorious honor. Today, your artisans and scientists are free to drink in the wisdom of the galaxy. Your wealthiest citizens can make this journey in safety, sharing their air with the royalty of a hundred thousand worlds. But I think your greatest success rises from the hungriest, bravest souls among you.

"Each year, on average, seventeen and a third colonial vessels push away from the Ship's ports. How many of your willing cousins are dropped to the surface of wild worlds and lucrative asteroids? How many homes and shoppes are being erected, entirely new societies sprouting up in your wake? Now multiply those impressive numbers by the hundreds of thousands of years that you plan to invest in this circumnavigation of the galaxy. The totals are staggering. No society or species or even any compilation of cooperative souls has enjoyed this human advantage.

"And now consider this: How many aliens buy berths on board the Ship? Thousands arrive each year, and, in trade for a safe journey, they surrender every local map, plus cultural experiences and open-ended promises of help. That's why each of your new colonies has a respectable, even enviable, chance of survival. And that's why your species is hugging a small but respectable probability of dominating the richest portions of the galaxy.

"So now I ask you: When will this wilderness of ours, from its dwarf satellites to its black core, be known everywhere and to every species as 'the Milky Way'?"

"In other words, when will the galaxy be your possession?"

Considering that possibility, the humans couldn't help but smile.

But then Quee Lee sighed, shaking her head as she said, "Never? Is that the answer you want?"

Quietly, the voice explained, "That kind of success shall never happen. Never, no. Even in your blessed circumstances, this little whirlpool of creation remains too vast and far too complex for any single species to dominate. And your makeshift empire is doomed at its birth. The best result that you might achieve-and even this is an unlikely future-is for the Great Ship to complete its full circuit of the galaxy

without being stolen from you, and for you to leave behind twenty million human worlds. But what are twenty million worlds against those trillions of rocks big enough to be called planets? And I can promise that no matter the blessings it starts with, each one of your colonies will struggle to survive. It is inevitable. Your species is relatively late on the scene; easy rich worlds are scarce and typically belong to someone else. By the minute, our galaxy grows older. And with every breath, the sky grows slightly more crowded. New species are constantly evolving, thinking machines are being born every moment, and almost everything that lives strives hard to live forever, or nearly so."

The smiles had vanished.

For a long moment, neither human spoke.

Then Quee Lee suggested, "Maybe our empire should stop naming our worlds. If we emulated your Union... if human beings decided to rule the dark and empty and the unmapped-"

"No," the voice interrupted.

Then, with a palpable scorn, it added, "I will share with you one common principle known by every true empire. Whether you are British or Mongolian, Roman or American: You may never, ever allow any competing empire to sprout within your sacred borders.

"My Union stands alone.

"Never forget that.

"And when the inevitable future arrives... when the final star burns out and the universe pulls itself into a great empty cold... my Union will persist, and it will thrive, living happily on this galaxy's black bones: a force as near to Always as that word might ever allow."

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## VIII

The humans felt chastened and a little angry, powerless to respond but nonetheless intrigued by the stark implications. They held each other in ways that spoke—the touch of fingers, the pressure of a plump knee, and the shared tastes of expelled air carrying odors that could only come from Perri, and only come from Quee Lee.

The voice returned, quietly mentioning, "My mission had begun so easily, with much promise. Yet now its nature changed. In relatively quick succession, three problems emerged, each one capable of threatening the project and my sterling reputation."

A thoughtful pause ended with a brief, disgusted sound.

"Remember the pirates mentioned before? The seafarers whom I let my people kill? They had floated out from the main continent, and with another hundred years of experience, their descendants were eager to return. That rocky green wilderness still lay over the horizon, but now it was speckled with dirty cities and fledging nations. Unlike my little island, those far places had always enjoyed culture and a deep history, every corner of their rich landscape adorned with some important little name.

"Bronze-and-brick technology was at work. Kings and educated minds were beginning to piece together the first, most obvious meaning of the universe. Their largest triremes could wander far from land, and their captains knew how to navigate by the stars and moon. That those captains would try to visit my island was inevitable, which is why I took precautions. The leviathans patrolling my bright waters were instructed to scare off every explorer, and, should fear not work, they were entitled to crush the wooden

hulls and drown those stubborn crews.

"A few ships were sunk off our coast.

"The occasional corpse washed up on shore, swollen by rot and chewed upon by curious or vengeful mouths.

"One of the dead had been a scientist and scholar, and, while he drowned, he managed to grab hold of his life's work—a long roll of skin covered with dense writing and delicate sketches.

"The body was looted, and the book eventually found its way into the appreciative hands of one of my grandchildren.

"The island's original natives could never have understood the intense black scribbles. But my grandchild wasn't merely intelligent and highly creative, he was also curious and unabashedly loyal to me. Using code-breaking algorithms, he taught himself the dead man's language. In his spare moments, he managed to translate the text in full. His purpose, it seems, was to make me proud of his genius. He was certainly thrilled of his own accomplishment, which was why he shared what he had learned with close friends and lovers. Then he walked to the palace and knelt before my throne, presenting both the artifact and his translation for my honest appraisal.

" 'They speak of us,' the young man reported. 'The rest of our world believes that we are gods or the angels of gods, or that we have descended from the stars. They have convinced themselves that if they defeat the sea monsters and outsmart the currents, they can row into our harbor and stand among us, and they will be heroes in the gods' eyes. And for their extraordinary bravery, we will award them with the secrets of All.'"

A brief pause.

"I'll ask this question again," said Perri. "This species you're telling us about... were they human?"

There was a sound, soft but disgusted.

"Atlantis?" Quee Lee whispered. "Is that what this story is?"

"My thought exactly," Perri confessed, hugging her until her ribs ached. Then he said the ancient word for himself, pronouncing, "Atlantis," in the appropriate dead language.

"Once again," the voice replied, "you have forgotten: The galaxy had no name for that world, much less for that long-ago island. But I cannot stop you from imagining your Earth and its legendary lands. And I won't fight the labels that help you follow what I happen to say."

In the darkness, Perri squeezed his wife again, and she pushed her mouth into his ear, saying, "It must be," with relish.

They had decided, together.

Atlantis, yes.

"My grandchildren," the voice continued. "Several generations had passed since the first of them were born, and I should confess to one inevitable event. I have always taken lovers from the locals. A lover serves as a source of information, and oftentimes a tool for good methodical management. Bedding those who are most beautiful and intriguing is just a natural consequence of my station. But one of those grandchildren proved more irresistible than usual. She was a young woman, as it happened. Though it's

just as likely that she could have been a man.

"By the standards of her species, she was small and exceptionally lovely.

"Among her gifted peers, she was considered brilliant and singularly blessed. The finest of the fine.

"That I took her into my bed was perfectly natural. That she retained her virginity until that night only enhanced her reputation with her own people and, to a degree, with me. The bloodied sheet was hung from the palace wall for a full day, and when she appeared again in public, cheers made her stand tall as a queen—the center of attention smiling at her appreciative world.

"I was very fond of that little creature.

"As a lover, she was fearless and caring, bold and yet compliant, too. And when we were not making love, she would ask me smart little questions about all matters of science and engineering. Her particular expertise involved the heart of the device that we were building together. There were puzzles to work through, matters that I didn't understand fully myself. I had never built such an object, you see. That's why the brilliant grandchildren were critical to me. But even though she understood many of the ideas behind our work, she always wanted to know more and, if possible, hold what she knew more deeply.

"Charming and crafty, she was, and I let myself be fooled. I confessed that there were subjects that could never, ever be discussed with her people. 'You will not repeat any of this again,' I warned. 'Not even to the wind.'

"She promised to remain mute.

"Then I explained to her the true shape of the galaxy, and its great age, and I told the violent history of our glorious universe.

"And yes, there were occasions when I mentioned the Union and my small, critical role within it.

"Then, because she seemed so very interested in the subject of Me, I confessed my true age and delivered a brief but thorough accounting of past missions as well as some of the tricks that I was capable of."

The voice fell away.

In the blackness, a body stretched until the bones or carapace creaked and gave a sharp dry crack.

"That lover was my second challenge," said the voice. "Although at that particular moment, I didn't appreciate the danger."

Quee Lee leaned away from Perri, begging her dark-adapted eyes to find any trace of wayward light. If she could just make out the creature that was sitting so close to them—

No. Nothing.

"One of our shared nights never seemed to end," the voice offered. "Normal fatigues don't trouble me, but my lover, no matter how much improved genetically, needed sleep. She lived for dreams. Yet the girl somehow resisted every urge to close her lovely dark eyes. Twice in the dark, she managed to surprise me with tricks she had never shown before. I was appreciative. How could I not be? But then as the full moon set and the bright summer sun began to rise, she whispered, 'I was wondering my lord... about something else.'



" 'What?' I asked.

" 'But maybe I shouldn't,' she conceded.

" Ask me anything,' I said, never voicing the obvious possibility that I wouldn't reply, or that I might simply lie.

" 'I am curious,' my lover confessed, her voice sleepy and slow. 'When you speak of old missions, you usually seem to be out between the stars, or huddled beside some dying star, or cloaked inside a storm cloud of interstellar dust.'

"For a moment, she seemed to drop into sleep.

"But then she roused herself with a gasp, straightening her little body and asking, 'Why come here? Why visit our little world, my lord?'

" 'It suits my present mission,' I conceded. 'Your volcano and the seawater are rich with rare elements and useful minerals-'

" 'But you have told me before this... on other nights, you explained that in the baby days of any solar system, some, if not most, of the new worlds are flung out into the night. Their oceans freeze. Their atmospheres fall as snow. But radiation keeps their iron cores molten, and volcanoes still bubble up beneath the bitter ice, and a god like you could surely bring a temporary life to those unnamed realms.'

"I listened, perhaps not quite believing just how bright she was.

"Then, very quietly, I reminded her, 'Like those cold places, this world possesses no name. As far as the universe is concerned, your home is a random lump of dust and still-simple life-forms.'

"For a long while, she stared at me.

"Those beautiful dark eyes... I cannot mention those eyes and not feel shame... a burning shame that keeps me from describing to you just how deep their hold was on me...

"But then the eyes closed, and my lover drifted into a rich, much deserved sleep. I thought the matter was finished. I didn't want to entertain any other possibility. And really, what reason did I have to believe that this worshipful little creature was a threat, or, even if she was, that she could be ever be a genuine danger to the likes of me?

"I covered her with a fine linen sheet.

"Then, for the following days and months, and years, nothing changed. No word or incident raised even the tiniest suspicion on my part. My lover was the same to me as she had always been, and I was as pleasant and giving to her and to all of my people.

"And then my third challenge arrived. This danger came from the sky and, even at a great distance, it brought the worst possible trouble. Out on the edge of the solar system was an automated probe. A harum-scarum probe, as it happened, moving at a small fraction of lightspeed. The harum-scarums have always been aggressive in their explorations and colonizations, and now one of their sharp-eyed robots was plunging out of the darkness, threatening to fly past my world while taking note of everything that might bear interest.

"I couldn't allow myself or my good work to be seen.

"And sadly, the machines that I had left in orbit couldn't protect me. I needed to leave the island. Wisely, I didn't offer reasons or predict when I would return. As far as my people knew, I would be back among them with the next sunset or the coming full moon. But I begged them to continue our work-the delicate fabrication of a single machine that meant everything to me and to them."

In the dark, the voice seemed to sigh.

Then quietly, but with an unhealed pain, their companion said, "This was the moment when the rebellion began. And I think you can guess who stood on the silk cushions of my empty throne, whirling a titanium hammer above her head, shouting to the throng, 'It is time to save our world, my friends! To rescue our futures and gain control over our souls!' "

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## IX

Within the silence lay emotions rich and fresh, born out of a sadness that could not be forgotten. Or maybe there was only silence, black and seamless, and the misery and burning sense of loss were supplied entirely by the human audience. It was impossible to tell which answer was correct, or if both were a little true. But then the humans heard a limb flex, the invisible body creaking as it shifted, not once but three times in quick succession. When the voice returned, it seemed slower. Each word was delivered alone, and between one word and the next lay a tiny silence, like a cold black mortar pushed between warm red bricks.

"I could have destroyed the automated probe at a distance. I could have used methods that would have made harum-scarum scientists believe that bad luck was responsible. Just some random rock, a cosmic hazard that slipped past the machine's various armors. Nothing would seem too unusual about that. But erasing the danger was not the only problem. Harum-scarum probes are relatively common in our galaxy, and if I blithely obliterated them whenever our paths crossed, somebody would eventually see the pattern in my clumsiness.

"No, what I did was rise up into the sky to meet the danger directly.

"Like you, I am the loyal subject to a variety of laws concerning motion and energy. I had to race out into the solar system for a considerable distance, and then, with methods that I cannot share, I invisibly changed my trajectory, racing back again, making certain that my momentum carried me close to the probe's vector.

"Together, that machine and I dove into the hot glare of the sun. I studied my opponent while it absorbed images of the two inner worlds. Then we climbed away from the sun and, at a moment when I would escape notice, I drifted close and touched the machine with a thousand fingers, allowing its giant eyes to do their work even as I changed a small portion of what it could see.

"Together, we passed between the gray moon and my blue-green world.

"Soon the danger was finished. The probe turned its attentions to the little red world coming up next, and, with my chore accomplished, I happened to glance backward, examining my home with my own considerable eyes.

"The rebellion was well under way.

"Twenty different security systems had been fooled or, by various means, disabled. And now my clever little grandchildren had full control over their land and the ocean around them.

"Feigning loyalty, they had continued to build the machine.

"Pretending subservience, most of them moved through their lives in the expected ways. But others openly prayed that I was dead, even while they planned my murder should I return. And still others pretended to die, their names removed from the city's rosters, freeing them to journey over to the mainland, taking with them tools and skills as well as a story that would inspire the primitive souls they would find waiting there.

"I was furious.

"In ways quite rare to me, I felt a powerful, consuming need for revenge.

"But motion and energy still held sway. I could not roar home in the next instant, and if I didn't wish to be noticed by the probe beside me, I would have to be patient enough to obey my original plan.

"Easing out the probe's view consumed many days.

"I spent another month pushing against the universe, slowing myself to a near halt before turning and plunging back into the brilliant sunshine.

"By then, the harum-scarum eyes were distant. If the probe happened to glance back at my world, it could have noticed an island exploding, a dark cloud spreading, and a deep bubbling caldera left in the island's place. But I resisted that instinctive violence. Destroying my own work would have been an unacceptable cost, and worse, it would have been graceless.

"And I could have remotely shut down the entire operation, protecting my investment from malicious hands. But that meant new risks as well as long delays.

"Instead, I decided to dance with complete disaster, but aiming for total success."

After those words, a long pause seemed necessary.

Finally Perri said, "You won't tell us. I know. But we would appreciate knowing what the stakes were."

"I'd like to know," Quee Lee voted.

"What exactly you were building?" her husband pressed.

"Britannia," the voice replied. "Like any empire worth its salt." A weak laugh washed over them. "How can you separate a true empire from all of the little pretenders? What did the British possess that their vanquished opponents lacked? Why were those northern men superior to the peasants in the field and the dogs in the street?"

"Any good empire holds at least one skill that is its own.

"The Greeks had their highly trained hoplites and several unique if competing forms of government. The Chinese had the most enduring civil services ever seen on your world. Romans were possessed of their engineering and their brutal legions. And so long as British boats owned the seas, their power was accepted by a world that saw no option but bow in their mighty presence.

"An empire is always smarter than its competition.

"And my Union is far, far smarter than the human species. Or any other species you can name, for that matter.

"The device I was building? Well, I will tell you that it was just a single component meant to be set inside a much larger machine. And that it was extremely rare and very valuable, embodying sciences that you

have never mastered. Once assembled, the full apparatus can wield principles that your most brilliant minds might recognize as possible, but only that. The apparatus is magic. It is gorgeous. It was, and is, worth every cost."

A brief pause ended with Quee Lee's voice.

"So you returned to Earth," she said. "To Thera, or Atlantis. Although it wore different names then, I suppose."

"Whatever the world, whatever the island," said the voice. "Yes, I returned, yes. To find my grandchildren engaged in an artful rebellion."

There was a long, contemplative pause.

Finally Perri asked, "And what happened?"

"Worth every cost," the entity said once again. "I speak without doubts, telling you what I did that day. And for that matter, what I would do on this day, in an instant, if I saw that there was any threat to my enduring Union."

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## X

Until that moment, the voice had been just so much noise. It was interesting and entertaining noise, the words intriguing if not completely believable. The narrative was compelling enough, the humans feeling empathy and hope for the creatures that could well have been their own ancestors. They listened carefully to every portion of the disjointed tale, trying to guess what would happen next and then next after that; but there was no moment when they stopped wondering what kind of body was connected to the voice. Until then, that was the central question that kept begging to be answered.

Then they heard the words "To protect the Union," and that simple utterance changed everything.

Wrapped around a bald statement was stiff, unyielding emotion. Quee Lee and Perri heard the threat, the promise, the conviction and purpose—and they instantly believed what they heard. Now both of them were considering what it would mean if this story, as unlikely as it seemed, was in some fashion or another true. And that was when the formless entity beside them—mysterious and unknowable, bristly and proud—became markedly less interesting than the grim bit of history it was sharing with them now.

Human hands grabbed one another.

Each lover felt the other's body bracing for whatever came next.

Another silence was what the voice decided to offer. And then, from the perfect darkness, came a sound not unlike a tongue or two licking against lips threatening to grow dry.

Quee Lee and Perri had been married for tens of thousands of years. But as long as that might seem to be, marriage was infinitely older than their single relationship. And there were species that took intimacy to higher levels than humans could manage. The Janusians, for instance: Their little husbands rooted into the body of female hosts, literally joining into One. But among human animals, Quee Lee and Perri were famous. Their relationship had evolved gradually, becoming something complex and robust, enduring and very nearly impossible to define. There were a few humans who spent more time together than the two of them. Unlikely as it seemed, some married souls enjoyed their physical lives even more than these two managed to. But no one could believe that any other human pair, on the Ship and perhaps anywhere else in the universe, was emotionally closer than that ancient Earth-born lady and her boyish life-mate.

At some point, everybody tried to tease them.

The happy couple generally welcomed good-natured barbs and admiring glances. But when asked to explain their success-when some friend of a friend insisted on advice for less perfect relationships-they grew testy and impatient, and even a little defensive. The truth was that they were helpless to define their relationship. A marriage was always larger than its participants, and what they possessed here was as mysterious and unlikely to them as it seemed to distant eyes. They couldn't understand why they had drawn so closely together. They didn't see why life had not yet found the means to yank them apart. But they were undeniably intimate and deeply dependent, up to the point where Quee Lee and Perri could never imagine being separated from each other in any lasting, meaningful way.

"Can you read each other's thoughts?" people wanted to know.

Not at all, no.

"But it seems like you can," some maintained. "The way you each know what the other wants, what they're about to say and do."

Did they do that?

"There's a trick at work," a few declared. "Dedicated nexuses that do nothing but let your minds share thoughts and feelings. Is that what you're doing right now?"

Not at all, no. In fact, they made a point of avoiding mechanical shortcuts to real conversation.

Eventually, somebody would ask, "When did you feel closest?"

What did that mean? Close how?

"When was the day-the incident-when you felt as if you were a single brain shared by two independent bodies?"

There were thousands of stories worth repeating, each able to satisfy their audience. They had a few dozen favorites that had become minor legends among the passengers. But the best answer was never offered, not even to the closest, dearest friends. It happened on that particular evening as they sat in that perfect darkness, deep inside the unmapped Vermiculate, immersed in the most isolated corner yet discovered within the Great Ship. That proud and stern and eternal voice told them that it would do anything to protect the Union, and for that singular moment, Quee Lee and Peril were one irreducible soul.

That was when they finally believed the unlikely story.

Then they heard the unseen tongues licking at dry lips, and the two lovers held each other with strong arms, sharing a flurry of thoughts, speaking with nothing but the touch of fingers, the sound of breathing.

"There *is* a Union," they decided voicelessly together. "It is real."

And, in the next moment, it occurred to them that the Union's loyal servant did nothing that did not, in small ways or great, help its ageless cause.

Quee Lee pressed hard against her husband, and she shivered, and just before the voice spoke again, she pushed an obvious thought into her husband's skull:

"Our new friend is on a mission! Now!"

And, in the next instant, with thrilled horror, Perri replied, "It's telling us the story for a reason... *we are the mission!*"

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## XI

With a sense of deeply buried pain, or at least an old, much practiced anger, the voice continued once again.

"At last, I returned to the island. At last, I touched down in the Sunset Plaza, on an ellipse of crimson glass brick reserved for my shuttle and my immortal body. The plaza was flanked by tall apartment buildings buried beneath masses of vines-engineered greenery that thrived in the volcanic warmth, producing enough fruit and sweet nuts to feed the residents within. A thousand of my grandchildren quickly gathered around me, while thousands more sneaked looks from behind the curtains of their comfortable little homes. Every face made an effort to smile. Every head dipped in a show of respect-gestures that I had never demanded from my subjects, that arose naturally long ago on their own. Only one important face was missing. But the brave traitors anticipated my first question. Several knelt before me, palms to the sky, and they explained that I had been gone longer than anticipated, and my arrival had proved quite sudden, but yes, my mistress was as happy as anyone could be. In fact, she was waiting for me at the palace, rapidly making herself ready for my pleasures.

"The avenue was lined with pruned trees thriving inside big copper pots and rows of intricate geometric sculptures cut from the black native stone. The smallest citizens barely noticed my passing. They were the ants and fat beetles that I had reinvented for the purpose of little jobs, and, unburdened by the demands of awe, they continued cutting down the weeds and disposing of trash. But a crew of enhanced crabs was pulling superconductive cables under the pavement, and when I passed nearby, they paused long enough to salute me with their elegant pincers.

"The grandchildren continued to stare, all working to appear nothing but worshipful, to shine with joy, and a few of them even managing to convince themselves that they were being honest.

" 'You were gone too long,' several complained, at different moments, but always with the same worried, slightly put-upon tone. And then one or two remarked, 'We feared you were lost, that some horrid disaster had claimed you.'

"If hope lay inside those voices, it was kept hidden.

"Then, at the mouth of an alleyway, I noticed a very young grandchild standing in the shadows, waiting for something. Not for me, it seemed... but in his stance and attitude, I could see anticipation.

"I paused and asked his name, even though I had already found his face in the public files. He introduced himself, and, with a charming little smile, mentioned that he had no memory of me. I had left for my errand among the stars while he was still just a toddler.

"He was barely more than that now. I smiled, telling him that it was my pleasure to meet him.

"He mentioned that I looked exactly as he expected me to look, except that I wasn't tall enough, and then his gaze drifted off toward the island's slumbering volcano.

" 'What are you waiting for?' I inquired.

" 'For you,' he replied. But before there was any misunderstanding, he added, 'I'm waiting for you to pass, and then I can go about my business.'

"Which is?"

"To walk down to the Sunset Plaza and watch the night come,' he explained.

"You like the setting sun, do you?"

"The young eyes smiled, and the mouth, too. Then a smart little voice said, 'Yes,' and nothing else.

"The bodies surrounding us began to relax.

"With a fond hand, I stroked the boy's thick black hair and kissed him on the nose, and then continued with my triumphant stroll to the palace.

"No one was invited to follow me inside, and no one asked to join me. My shadow passed first through the iron gates and beneath the brass arches and into the grand hall. The air was scented with spice and smoke. The floor and walls and high ceiling were tiled in a fractal pattern, cultured sapphires and diamonds lending accents to an example of mathematical beauty that I have always appreciated. My throne stood at the end of the hall—the oldest object in the palace, gold flourishes and silk laid over my adoptive father's original chair.

"My shadow hesitated, and so did I.

"My grandchildren stood in a crowd outside, waiting for me to vanish.

"Suddenly a great damp shape emerged from a back door, walking on long mechanical legs. The creature was a leviathan whose ancestors had swum in the local sea. I had made him small while changing his lungs and flesh to where he could thrive indoors, adeptly serving me with whatever little duty that I might require.

"With a high-pitched warble, he welcomed me home.

"Whatever plots were lurking about, I sensed that he was not involved and almost certainly unaware of them.

"I asked if I had been missed.

"'Always,' he replied with a quick series of clicks.

"'Where is she now?' I inquired.

"'In your quarters, lord.'

"'And has she been faithful to me?'

"'No,' the creature replied, without hesitation. 'I have seen her use her hands and several plastic devices. And once, the edge of a large pillow.'

"'Thank you for your honesty,' I said. And good evening to you.'

"No shadow led the way now. Alone, I climbed a long flight of dimly lit steps and entered a narrow hallway that only seemed endless... an illusion lined with tall doors meant to impress and confuse the rare visitor. I walked a short distance and opened what seemed to be a random door. There was only one bedroom inside the palace, and it never occupied the same position twice. I entered through a random wall, and my lover flinched in surprise, starting to pull the sheets over her naked body before realizing that it was me, only me.

"Together, we celebrated my return.

"I had been absent even longer than I had anticipated. The young creature that I had left in this bed was noticeably older. A few white hairs and a hundred little erosions marked the natural decline of a creature not born immortal and never told to expect such blessings. But she was just as fierce a lover as always, and maybe more so. She insisted on satisfying herself by various means, and whenever my attentions seemed to waver, she would offer encouragements or measured complaints.

" 'What kind of god are you?' she teased me once, in the dark. 'Are you going to let this old lady beat you at your game?'

" 'I am tempted to lose, yes,' I confessed.

"Perhaps she heard more than one message in those words, because she paused and pulled away from me. Then, like a hundred times before, she settled on my chest, legs spread, the smell of her thick and close.

"In a whisper, she mentioned, 'Your journey must have been considerable.'

" 'My task was difficult,' I replied.

" 'We have continued with our work.' She said, 'Our work,' to make certain that I would hear the loyalty in those words. Then, after a pause, she added, 'But of course you kept track of our progress.' "

" 'Always,' I said.

" 'Have we missed any goals?'

" 'Never.'

" 'Are you proud of us?'

" 'Along the narrowest tangents, yes. Yes, I am very proud.'

"She refused to be surprised by my measured answer. And what worry she let show was small and easily controlled. The creature was exceptionally bright, after all. And she was wise in rare, precious ways. Extraordinary dangers were lurking about, and she realized that there was no way to keep me from seeing pieces of her scheme.

"Silently, she dropped her face to my face and kissed me.

"Then I placed my hand against her little throat, feeling her breath and the flinching of soft muscles, and I eased her back up into a sitting position. Then with a flat, cool tone, I said, 'It was sensible, holding to the work schedule. And I was most impressed with the methods you used, how you managed to fool my security systems.'

"Perhaps her plan was to claim innocence. 'I didn't try to fool anything,' she might have said. 'I don't know what you're accusing me of.' Denial might have given the plotters precious time. But it might have angered me, which would have brought my wrath down on them even sooner than they had planned.

"So instead of lying, my lover decided on poise. She shrugged her shoulders, asking, 'What do you know?'



"That the good machine being built inside our mountain is almost finished. But your lieutenants have surreptitiously slipped other devices into its workings. You devised some very clever, extremely powerful bombs that you hope will obliterate the purpose of my coming to this world.'

"Most souls would have tensed, hearing those words. Many would have panicked. But for my lover, that moment brought relief. Her duplicity was laid bare, and the simple fact that she was alive meant that perhaps she still retained some little chance of success here.

"I felt her throat relax against my hand.

"Then with great seriousness, I added, 'I also know you hope to murder me. Tonight, if possible. You have an array of weapons hiding here, and you have modified any piece of machinery that might injure me. I can even see dangers inside *you*, darling. Your body fat has been laced with acids that can be set free with a thought... turning you into a burning puddle that falls over my writhing, helpless body'

"She stared down at me.

"In her gaze, I could see her asking herself if this was the moment for suicide. But why would I lie beneath her if I felt at all at risk?

"With a reasonable tone, she asked, 'Can we kill you?'

"If I was foolish and a little blind, perhaps. But I am not, and I am not.'

"She nodded, accepting that verdict.

"And then she tensed through the shoulders and along her back, and with a voice that was small and furious, she asked, 'But why shouldn't we try to kill you? When your work is finished, you intend to murder all of us. Isn't that so?'

"I didn't respond immediately.

"'You told me as much,' she claimed. 'When you sang about your secret Union and your need for nameless places... you practically confessed that when you were finished with this place, you wouldn't leave any witnesses behind.'

"'You don't understand,' I warned her.

"Then I dropped my hand, the fingers and broad palm stroking her body down to the point where her legs joined together. 'You are a special, special soul,' I told her. 'My work would have been finished in another few years, and my plan was to take you with me. Out to the stars, out into the rich cold darkness.'

"The shock rolled across her features.

"Quietly, almost angrily, she said, 'No, you're lying.'

"But I was speaking the truth.

"With a fond, slightly paternal voice, I asked, 'How do you think I was brought into the Union? No one is born into this noble service. The rank and responsibilities are earned only on exceptionally rare occasions. In my case, another servant visited my home world and built several marvels before retreating back into the darkness with his treasures, including the man lying beneath you now.'

"'No,' she whispered.

"And then, in pain, she said, 'Maybe. But this changes nothing. I wouldn't abandon my world, and I certainly won't let you to blow up this volcano and make it as though this place never was.'

" 'Is that what you think will happen?' I asked. 'That I would slaughter you and yours for no reason but my convenience?'

"She hesitated. Then with a figurative acid on her tongue, she asked, 'What do you mean?'

" 'Unless provoked, I will not murder.'

"By the light of the moon, my lover looked into my face. And then the beginnings of an explanation occurred to her. 'You won't murder, but you might take back all of your gifts. Our minds. The genetic manipulations. Wipe clean the ideas and concepts you brought down here to serve your damned Union.'

"I interrupted her by throwing my palm across her mouth.

"Then I yanked her close, and said, 'Yes. That was my kind, responsible plan. You would come with me, and my magical device would come with us, and the other grandchildren would wake that following morning to discover... nothing. Nothing but a shared dream of a magical civilization... a public memory that would turn to legend in another day, and, in another ten generations, vanish into a muddled, impossible story.'

"She lay against me, her heart beating against what passed for my ribs.

" 'I am sorry,' she told me.

"Into my ear, she said, 'Really, we haven't done anything wrong. Not yet. I can give commands, and every weapon will be put away, and you won't have to worry about any of us lifting so much as a lard knife against you.'

" 'That is not enough,' I replied.

" 'And you can kill me,' she promised. Then she repeated her offer, sounding as if she was begging. 'Kill me, and maybe the other adults. But leave our children. They don't know anything.'

" 'Like the boy I spoke to? The child waiting between the plaza and the palace?'

"She hesitated.

" 'At this moment,' I said, 'that tiny fellow is sitting beside the water, bare toes in the surf. And do you know what he is watching with all of his interest, every shred of passion? He watches the sky.'

"She did not move.

" 'The sky,' I repeated. 'And in particular, this night's very bright stars.'

"The woman could not breathe.

" 'You are a crafty soul, my dear. My darling.' I told her, 'I am extremely impressed by the thoroughness and audacity of your plan. Threatening the machine as well as my own immortal self... well, those are the tactics that anyone would expect. But you also dispatched a team of technicians to the mainland. You convinced the worshipful souls living there that they should help you. Since then, our people and theirs have been living in a distant valley, secretly fabricating an amazing machine of their own.

" 'A radio beacon, as it happens.

"To the best of your ability, you have been marking my passage across the heavens. You guessed that I was subverting a set of prying eyes, and you were correct. Your hope was to broadcast a huge, important signal. You wanted to be noticed. By the probe, perhaps. Or if you missed that mark, then at least there would exist a loud intelligent scream that would race its way through the heart of our galaxy.

"Your secret hope was to accomplish what I would never allow.

"You wanted to name your world, and to name it in exactly the way that would make the universe take note of your presence.

"You were right, my sweet darling. That would have been your only genuine hope of salvation.

"But just this morning, I visited that far valley and your secret beacon, and I destroyed the dishes and power plant, and I have slaughtered everyone in my reach, but left the local communication system intact. During these last hours, every time you spoke to your fellow rebels, you were actually speaking to me.' "

Finally, the voice paused.

In the perfect darkness, a deep useless breath was taken.

Then the entity was speaking again, quietly admitting, "I gave my lover one last freedom. She could be the last to die, or first. She chose to be first, and she did that herself, releasing the acids inside her body. But I was already standing at a safe distance from our bed, my back to the carnage. Hearing the screams and smelling the blistered flesh, I kept my eyes averted, reminding myself that the worst of this awful night was finally finished."

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## XII

The two humans clung to each other.

In the same moment, in a rough chorus, they asked, "What happened? What did you do? What about the other people? What?"

A tight slow creak was audible, old leather or old bones moving.

From a point markedly closer than before, a mouth opened and breathed and then breathed again.

"I did exactly what I promised." The voice seemed to be within arm's reach. "However imperfectly, I have always strived to serve my cause, and that includes punishing those who dare rise up against me. I had no choice but to gather the worst of the offenders on the Sunset Plaza, and, with the rest of the grandchildren watching, I removed them from the living world. Then I ordered the low animals to clean the bricks of blood and pink tissues, and the dead bones were ground up and piled high on the nearest beach. And within five years, those who had survived my justice had managed to make up for lost time. Within ten years, my work was finished, and I carved away the gray summit of the volcano and pulled from the hot workroom a single machine encased in the finest hyper-fiber-a wonder of genius and competence that made my stay on that world worth any cost."

The voice drifted even closer and, feeling the intrusion, Quee Lee instinctively leaned away.

Perri held her and spoke past her, asking, "When did the mountain erupt?"

Nothing.

"After you abandoned the world, did the island explode?"

A sound of amusement, weary and cool, ended with the simple pronouncement, "Never, no."

They waited.

"Your assumption has been that this was Earth. And that is a reasonable, wrong assumption. But I let you believe what you wanted. As a rule, every species, no matter how open to odd notions and alien fancies, will find its own stories to be the most compelling.

"No, this wasn't your cradle world. And its people were perhaps not quite as human as I might have let on."

"What happened to them?" Quee Lee pressed.

"As I promised my lover, I undid my fancy tinkering. I made her citizens simple again, just as I pulled back the engineering of the other species. The population scattered. The palace was abandoned. Without trained hands to make repairs, the city fell into ruins. Within a few years of my departure, the island was a mystery already famous across half of that world. But its mountain would never erupt. My work had stolen away too much heat, and the magma lake below had cooled and turned to stone."

The voice paused.

Then, with a matter-of-fact tone, it explained, "Earth is blessed in many ways. It has a mature, very stable sun. Comets are rare beauties in the sky, not constant hazards. And it possesses a relatively thin crust, easily pierced and quick to bleed. But this world that I speak of was notably different. Its skin is much thicker than Earth's, and much more resilient. As its core generates heat, oceans of magma build up slowly, millions of years required to reach that critical point when a thousand eruptions come at once.

"That harum-scarum probe surely recognized the inevitable—a world perched on the margins of a grand, yet thoroughly natural, disaster.

"I left that world and placed my magical machine in a secret place. A new mission called to me from the sky, and I was en route when that nameless world suddenly and violently attacked itself.

"The sulfurous gases and blistering lava flows achieved everything that I had counted upon. Every convincing trace of my visit was erased. The continents were wracked by quakes. Ten thousand volcanoes spat ash and fire, and then they exploded, flinging their poisons into the stratosphere. Every forest burned. Every breath brought blisters and misery. The ocean floors were wrenched upward, forcing salt water over the coast-lands. My little island was washed clean beneath a quick succession of tsunamis, erasing even the palace. The humanlike creatures were reduced to a few scattered populations, ignorant and desperate. And after another thousand years of geologic horror—when the skies finally cleared and the lava cooled to glass—not a single example of that very promising species could be found in Creation."

Those deadly words were absorbed in silence.

Then Quee Lee said, "How awful."

Softly, the voice asked, "In what way is this awful?"

"You allowed that to happen," she began.

"But the people were doomed long before I knew of their existence. And despite my considerable powers, there was little I could have done, except delaying the story's end by one day, or maybe two."

The humans said nothing.

"If you need righteous anger," it continued, "direct your emotions toward the harum-scarums. Their probe saw the same future that I saw. Three of their colonies were near enough and powerful enough to launch rescue missions. Better than I, they could have saved a worthy sampling of those people before they passed out of existence. But no missions were launched. The costs and the benefits were too much and too little, respectively. The battered world remained nameless until a starship eased its way into orbit. That particular ship was bringing colonists, I should mention-people who didn't care about the bones under their feet, people who wanted nothing but to start new lives on this rich empty place."

Quietly, Perri asked, "Is it another harum-scarum world?"

"No," the voice replied, "it is not."

"Then who?"

"Who else would be a likely suspect, my friend? Remembering all that we have discussed by now..."

Humans had claimed the empty world. The colonists might even be humans that had come from the Great Ship... people whom Quee Lee and Perri had met and even known well at one time or another.

Quee Lee was desperate to talk about anything else.

And Perri was, too. With a scornful, demanding tone, he said, "I still don't believe in your Union."

"No? In what ways do you doubt it?"

"When you describe this organization, it sounds like an exclusive club or somebody's secret society. Not the imperial underpinnings of a powerful political machine."

There was a long pause, and then the voice said, "Power," four times, each utterance employing a different emotion. Amusement was followed by disgust, and then came contempt, and finally, a different species of amusement. A joyful, almost giddy rendering of the word "Power." After that, there was a laugh that lingered until the voice decided to speak again.

"As you must have guessed by now," it told them, "I am embroiled in a new task in the service of my Union. A mission full of facets and difficult challenges, yes."

The humans held their breath.

And now the voice pushed even closer, less than an arm's length away, and from a mouth that they could only imagine came the reminder, "I did once visit your cradle world. Your Earth. Yes, I did."

Quee Lee nodded.

"Before it was named," Perri recalled.

"Moments before," the voice added. And then the bulk of an invisible body drifted even closer, hovering within a tongue's length of Quee Lee's ear, and an intimate whisper offered her a single date. A specific time. Then a place inside a city that she would never see again.

Quee Lee shivered.

Perri reached out with one arm, aiming for the face that had to be lurking in the blackness... but his hand closed on nothing, and nothing else came from the voice, and, after a few moments more of clinging

comfort, their camp lights returned-a scorching white glare of photons that left them blinking, blinded in a new way altogether.

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### XIII

They didn't sleep that night, and they didn't start missing sleep until the middle of the following morning. By then, Perri and Quee Lee had thoroughly explored the enormous room and most of the little tunnels leading out from it. But they didn't find any traces of visitors other than themselves. Their sniffers tasted surgically clean surfaces and cold air uncluttered by even a single flake of lost skin, and, just as puzzling, none of their machines could explain why they had failed last night. Whatever the voice was, it had been careful. With its absence, it proved its great powers... at least when it came to fooling a couple of peasants who were ignorant of the real powers of a galaxy that they had barely begun to know.

There was talk about returning to the flex-car, or at least contacting their missing friends.

But one last tunnel needed a quick examination. And with Perri at the lead, they marched up into an increasingly narrow space that turned sharply, revealing a pair of security robots waiting for anyone who might wander where they didn't belong.

The robots were in slumber mode, facing in the opposite direction.

Perri retreated, pulling his wife along behind him. "They're the last in a string of sentries," he decided. "I bet if we could find our way to the other side, we'd come across barricades and official warnings from the captains not to take one step farther."

"The captains don't know about our route?"

"Not yet," he allowed. Then, with a soft conspiring voice, he added, "Maybe we should hurry home. Now. Before we get noticed."

They discovered their friends waiting at the flex-car. An argument had just ended, and one of the twin brothers refused to say anything to anyone. Apparently he had lost out on the competition for the rich woman's affections, and his anger helped avoid any of the usual questions.

The tiny expedition abandoned the Vermiculate before evening.

Home again, the old married couple made love and ate enough for ten hungry people, and throughout the sex and the dinner, they constantly discussed what they should do next, if anything. And then Quee Lee slept hard for three dream-laced hours. When she woke up, Perri was standing over her. He was smiling. But it was a grim, concentrated smile-the look of a man who knew something enormous but unsatisfying.

"Want to hear a rumor?" he asked.

She sat up in bed, answering him with a look.

"Like we heard before, the captains did discover the hole in their maps, and they sent an old robot down into the hole. But it got lost and climbed out again, and it couldn't explain where it had gone wrong."

"That's the story I remember," she allowed.

"Engineers tore open the robot. Just to identify the malfunction. And that's when they found a message."

Quee Lee blinked, and waited.

"Addressed to the Master Captain," he continued, his smile growing warmer by the moment. "After a thousand security checks, the invitation was delivered. Except for the Master Captain, and maybe a few Submasters, nobody knows what the message said. But a few days later, alone, the Master Captain walked down that tunnel and vanished for nearly five hours. And when she emerged again, she looked sick. Shaken sick. The rumor claims that she actually cried in the presence of her security troops, which is why the whole story refuses to get wings and soar. It doesn't sound at all like the benign despot we know so well."

His wife agreed with a nod. Then she asked, "When did this happen?"

"Ten years ago, nearly."

"And since then?"

"Well," Perri allowed, "the Master Captain has quit weeping. If that's what you're curious about."

She lay back on her pillows.

"No," her husband said.

"Why not?"

"I didn't wake you just to tell you something that might have happened. Or even to give you another mystery to chew on."

"Then why am I awake?"

"I know a man," Perri said. "And he's very good at pulling old memories out of very old skulls."

\* \* \* \* \*

The magician was named Ash.

He was human, but he lived inside an alien habitat where the false sun never set. Sitting in a room full of elaborate machinery, Ash told his newest clients, "I can make promises, but they don't mean much. This date is a very big problem, madam. You were alive then, yes. But barely. This is a few years before bioceramic brains came into existence. You could have been the brightest young thing, but my tricks work best with the galactic-standard minds... brains that employ quantum many-world models to interface with a trillion sister minds."

Perri asked, "Can you do anything?"

"I can take your money," Ash replied. "And I can also dig into the old data archives. You claim you have a place in mind?"

"Yes," Quee Lee said. Then she repeated the location exactly as the voice had given it to her.

"I assume you think you were there then," Ash said.

"I don't know if I was."

"And this is important?"

"We'll see," she remarked.

Ash began to work. He explained that on Earth, for this very brief period of history, security systems as well as ordinary individuals tried to keep thorough digital records of everything that happened and everything that didn't happen. The trouble was that the machinery was very simple and unreliable, and the frequent upgrades as well as a few nasty electromagnetic pulses had wiped clean a lot of records. Not to mention the malicious effects of the early AIs--entities who took great delight in creating fictions that they would bury inside whatever data banks would accept their artistic works.

"The chances of success," Ash began to say.

Then he saw something entirely unexpected and, lifting his gaze, he mentioned to Quee Lee, "You were a pretty young lady."

"Did you find me?" she asked expectantly.

"Too easily," he allowed. Then he showed her a portion of the image--a girl who was nine or maybe eight years old, dressed in the uniform mandated by a good private school.

With a shrug, Ash allowed, "No need for paranoia. This does happen. On occasion." He gave commands to a brigade of invisible assistants and then said, "If I can dig up a few more records, I think I can piece together what you and the man talked about."

"What man?" she asked.

Perri asked.

"The man standing beside you," Ash remarked. "The man with the golden balloon." Then he showed them an image captured by a nearby security camera, adding, "I'm assuming he's your father, judging by his looks."

"He's not," she whispered.

"And now we have a second digital record," Ash said happily. "Hey, and now a third record. See the adolescent boy down the path from you? Wearing the medallion on his chest? Well, that was a camera and a very good microphone. His video has been lost, but not the audio. I can't tell you how unlikely it is to have this kind of recording survive long enough, in any usable form."

"What is the man saying to me?" Quee Lee asked nervously.

"Let me see if I can pull it up."

And suddenly, a voice that she hadn't thought about for several seconds returned. The young girl and the stranger were standing in Hong Kong Park, on the cobblestone path beside the lotus pond. A short white picket fence separated them from the water. In the background stood towers and a bright blue sky. With the noise of the city and other passersby erased, the voice began by saying, "Hello, Quee Lee."

"Hello?" the young girl replied, nervous in very much the same fashion that the old woman was now. "Do I know you?"

"Hardly at all," the man replied.

The girl looked about, as if expecting somebody to come save her now. Which there ought to have been: Quee Lee was the only child of a very wealthy couple who didn't let her travel anywhere without bodyguards and a personal servant. "Where are my people now?" she seemed to ask herself.



The voice said, "I will not hurt you, my dear."

Hearing that promise didn't help the girl relax.

"Ask me where I came from. Will you please?"

The youngster decided on silence.

But the strange man laughed and, pretending that the question had been asked, he remarked, "I came from the stars. I am here on a great, important mission, and it involves your particular species."

The girl looked up at a face that possessed a distinct resemblance to her face. Then she looked back down the path, hoping for rescue.

"In a little while," said the stranger, "my work here will be complete."

"Why?" the girl muttered.

"Because that is when one of your mechanical eyes will look at the most lucrative portion of the sky, at the perfect moment, and almost everything that you will need to know about the universe will be delivered to your doorstep."

The pretty black-haired girl hugged her laptop bag, saying nothing.

"When that day comes," said the man, "you must try to remember everything. Do you understand me, Quee Lee? This will be the most important moment in your species' history."

"How do you know my name?" she asked again.

"And that is not all I am doing on your world." The man was quite handsome but ordinary, nothing about him hinting at anything that wasn't human. He was wearing a simple suit, rumpled at the edges. His right hand held the string that led up to a small balloon made from helium and gold Mylar. He smiled with fierce joy, telling her, "It has been decided. Your species has a great destiny in service of the Union." In the present, two people gasped quietly. "What's the Union?" the girl asked.

"Everything," was the reply. "And it is nothing."

The girl was prettiest when she was puzzled, like now.

"You won't remember any portion of this conversation," the man promised. "Ten minutes from now, you won't remember me or my words."

One hand smoothed her skirt, and she anxiously stared at her neat black shoes.

"But before I leave you, I wanted to tell you something. Are you listening, Quee Lee?"

"No," she claimed.

The man laughed heartily. Then he bent down, placing their faces on the same level, and when he had her gaze, he said, "You were adopted, only your parents don't know that. The baby inside your mother had died, and I devised you out of things that are human, but also elements that were inspired by an old friend of mine."

The girl tried to step back but couldn't. Discovering that her feet were fixed to the pavement, she looked down and then up at the other adults walking past the long brown pond. When she tried to scream, no

sound came from her open mouth.

"I am not gracelessly cruel," the stranger told her. "You may think that of me one day. But even though I live to aid the workings of an enormous power, I make certain that I find routes to kindness and, when it offers itself, to love."

The little girl couldn't even make herself cry.

"Part of you," he said. Then he paused, and from two different perspectives, the audience watched as his free hand touched the girl's bright black hair. "The shape of your mind was born on another world, a world too distant to be seen today. And I once lied to that mind, Quee Lee. I told it that I could stand aside and watch it die forever."

But the man was crying, his face wet and sorry.

"I wish I could offer more of an apology," he said. And then he rose up again, pulling the balloon's string close to his chest while wiping at his wet face with a wrinkled sleeve. "But much is at stake... more than you might ever understand, Quee Lee... and this is as close to insubordination as this good servant can manage."

Then he glanced at the security camera hidden in the trees and handed the string and balloon to the girl beside him. "Would you like this, Quee Lee? As a little gift from your grandfather?"

The girl discovered that she could move again.

"Take it," he advised.

She accepted the string with one little hand.

For a brief instant, they were posing, staring across the millennia in a stance that was strained but sweet nonetheless—the image of a little girl enjoying the park with some undefined adult relative.

"I will see you later," he mentioned.

Quee Lee released the string, watching the gold ball rise faster than she would have expected—shooting into the sky as if it weighed nothing at all.

When her eyes dropped, the stranger had stepped out of view.

A few moments later, her father ran up the path to join her, asking, "Where did you go? I couldn't find you anywhere."

"I didn't go anywhere," the girl replied.

"Tell me the truth," the scared little man demanded. "Did you talk to somebody you shouldn't have talked to?"

She said, "No."

"Why are you lying?" he asked.

"But I'm not lying," she protested. Then with a wide, smart grin, the young Quee Lee added, "The sky is going to talk, Father. Did you know that? And he promised me that I am going to see him again later!"

\* \* \* \* \*