FAR HORIZON

Jason Stoddard

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Illustrated by Paul Drummond

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The angel flitted away down the stage, towards other customers. Alex sighed. "I'm not worried."

Adele hugged herself, as if cold. "We shouldn't be here."











"Trust me," Alex said. There was a rough chuckle from behind him. Paul. Apparently he thought if Adele was to be a witness, he could be, too. Alex knelt in front of the angel. She looked down at him. Her mouth was parted, curved upward in a faint smile. Her brilliant sky-blue eyes seemed to sparkle with joy. She raised her arms to him, as if expecting an embrace. He wondered how many times she had done this, if she was engineered to enjoy rough acts of love. Alex blinked back the tears that blurred his vision and pushed her arms down. Her down was incredibly soft. He saw the strange muscles working at her sides as her wings fluttered. He reached out to touch her sides, to feel the muscles clench and release, in rhythm with the wings. "Alex!" Adele's voice, sharp, cracking. "Shh!" He took his arms off the angel's torso and sat back on his legs. "Do you speak?" he said. The angel cocked her head at him, like a dog. "Can you speak?" "Eeeek," it said, almost a fragment of birdsong. He tried for a while longer, but she just looked confused, and said no more. Alex sighed. "How much?" he said.



Alex ignored him. He held out his hand. The angel reached up. Took it. Her hand was soft and warm. For a moment, he wondered how fast her metabolism was, what she was made of, how fast she had grown, how long she would live.
It didn't matter.
"Do you have a name?" Alex asked.
"How about Lilith?" Adele said, behind him.
"I don't think Lilith is an angel," Alex said.
The angel just looked at him with huge, bright eyes.
"Adele—" he began.
But when he turned, Adele was gone.
* * * *
Smell of fear.
Everywhere.
On her nest, on the things the hairless ones covered her with, on the fuzz that covered the floor.
Pouring off the pink ones who came and went. Who brought food. In her food.

Paul's face crumpled. "Should've asked more."

She saw cool grass, blue water outside, but she could not walk there. She put her hand up against the barrier, but saw nothing. She pounded on the stuff-not-seen with a fist, but it only shook. Cracks near the floor brought the scent of water. She scratched at it, but could not dig through its hardness.

Prowling the big empty hard-edged places, she searched for escape. Dimly, far away, she remembered the past place, the warm room under the earth that smelled of yeast and pink ones, where there were sounds she could twist to, where the pink ones sometimes came to comfort. But those memories faded more with each day, and soon she would know nothing more than this hard-edged place full of frightened things.

"She," the constant-pink said. It had been there since she woke, bleeding fear. It had been there before, making those same noises.

"Ki," it said.

She went to sit by it. Its tiny dark eyes quivered. She reached out to it, looking for comfort. It took her hand and put it in her lap. Fear-smell surged. And something else. Something deeper, richer. Like acrid anger, but more complex. Something she could not place.

"Nah," it said.

She tried to touch it again. It put her hand down again.

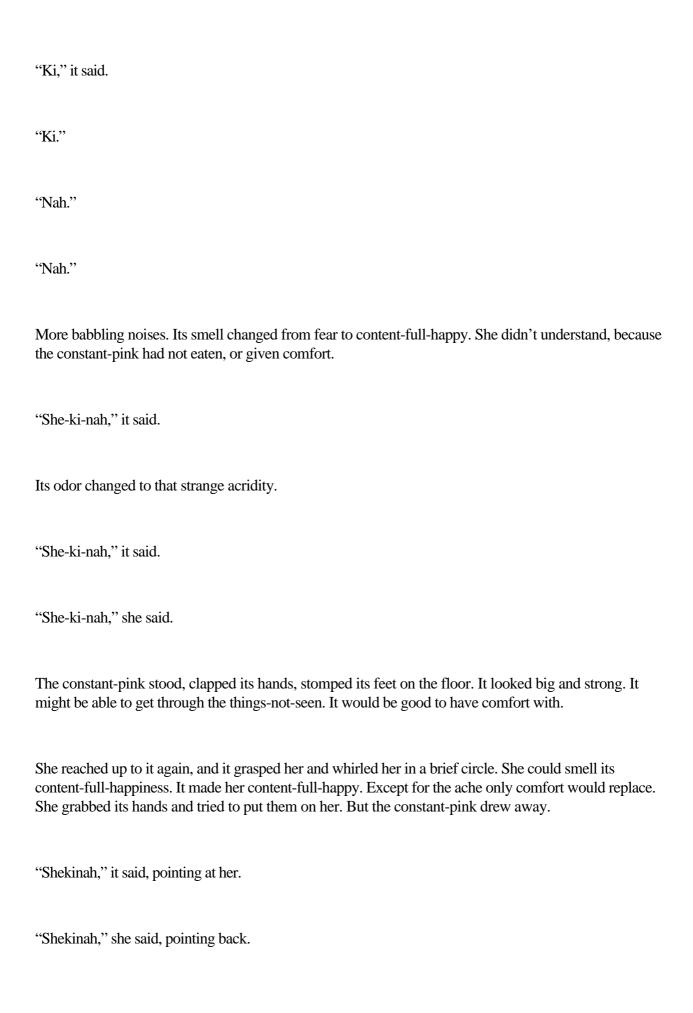
"She," it said.

It had made that noise before. "She," she said.

The constant-pink showed its teeth and babbled happy noises. It made a long string of sounds that she could not follow.

"She," it said, after a while.

"She," she said.



The pink thing hid its teeth and shook its head. Its smell edged slightly acrid.
"Shekinah," it said, pointing at her. It pointed at itself. "Alex."
She would play with it if it led to comfort. "Shekinah," she said, pointing at itself.
More jumping around, and rhythmic sounds. Content-full-happy smells.
The constant-pink repeated its gestures.
She pointed at him and said, "Shekinah."
Teeth-hiding and acrid smells.
She tried to get it to put its hands on her, but again it pulled away. She wailed and cried. She went to the place where she could smell the water outside and scratched at the hardness around it. She could smell the pink thing, shading down to that strange acridity.
"Shekinah," it said.
She ignored it.
Eventually, it went away.
* * * *
Alex would hate this.
The thought was sudden and clear, as if someone had whispered in Adele's ear. She sighed and put down the stylus. Winfinity's fighter airframe contract dimmed down into the surface of her desk.

She'd almost forgotten about their last night together. But now she'd have to think about that. She'd have to wonder what he was doing with his pet. Her traitor mind would summon images of them laying together, on the cool sheets of his house high above Malibu. And she'd have to wonder, again, why they'd never found any sustained flame.

And he would hate this, Adele thought, picking up the stylus again. Using his technology to build jet fighters for our new masters. Even if they did profess only to be helping the government-in-collapse.

Alex had been the one to extend the range of 3d atom probes down into the realm of organic molecules. He'd been the first to create an atomic map of a cell, then reassemble the cell with atom lasers. When the cell lived, the biotech professors of UCLA cheered, and money poured in to fund his new startup company, Nanolife. He was 19 at the time.

While others were using his bio-editing techniques and creating the Three-Day Death and terrorbeasts and chimeras, Nanolife's team was working on the fundamental energy-conversion bodies of cells, mitochondria, working to make them more efficient, to make them more like the all-purpose nanomachines that Drexler had imagined.

But, by the time Nanolife succeeded in growing complex carbon composites, Oversight had slated virtually every Nanolife application for regulation. Alex was talking at UCLA about growing free housing when Oversight stepped in and shut down Nanolife.

Adele remembered it well. She'd worked there four months when she came in to black-suited, blank-eyed Oversight agents in the halls, and Alex sobbing on his desk.

I don't understand them, he said. I don't know what they want.

Let me talk to them, Adele said.

He looked up at her, eyes shimmering with tears. And she knew he was serious, he really didn't understand, he really just wanted to play with his toys and be left alone. She wondered if he really understood what damage his technology was capable of.

Later that day, she made the first offer on his behalf. Regulate us. We'll work with you. We'll make sure only safe applications of the technology are used.

When she told him, Alex cried again. She laid an arm on his shoulder. It was like touching a living statue of a god. She felt light-headed, all-powerful. She felt unclean.

We have to do this, she said. It's that, or be shut down. Or disappear.

Alex shook his head and told her, *Better to be shut down*. He told her about shining cities grown from sand and rocks, free for the having. He told her about perfect products, grown to last nearly forever.

And she listened. And nodded. And agreed, yes, this is terrible, this is unfair.

And in the end, they submitted to Oversight control. Adele became CEO of the company, and Alex checked out. Because if you wanted to plant a seed to replace a slum, you had to make sure that seed was the right seed. One that the government said was good for you.

Like now. If you wanted to grow indestructible airframes, you had to make them for Winfinity. The new face in front of all the same old regulations.

It was no wonder Alex had walked away from it all. Leaving her to be the one who compromised.

If I could turn back the clock, if we both walked away, could we have found that flame? she wondered.

She sighed, coming back to the present. She spun her chair away from the desk and went to look out over sunset Los Angeles. The Nanolife tower was the tallest building on the west side. Tall enough that she could see golden ocean, sparkling in late sun. If she had a telescope, she could probably see Alex's house.

Or she could spy the modern way, with a handful of flyeyes feeding images to her dataspecs. But she didn't like wearing them, one thing she and Alex agreed on.

"Incoming call from Alex Farrell," her desk said softly.

Adele's heart tripped, once, and she whirled to face the desk. "I'll take it."

Alex's face appeared on the surface of her desk, covering the Winfinity contract. The POV shook and blurred. Greenery whizzed past in the background. She heard the sound of an engine, rough and choppy.

"Adele!" Alex said. "I can't believe we missed this. This is great! You have to come in!"

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Ecuador. Do you know what the USG did? You won't—"

"Why are you down there?"

Alex gave her an impatient sidewise look. "The space elevator!"

"Space elevator?"

"Yeah! Back when they were doing the Mars thing, it seems the USG started building a space elevator. Never finished it, but they did drop the tether about halfway before everything fell apart."

"The US government? A space elevator?" Adele shook her head, trying to put the two together. She'd never heard anything about it.

Alex gave her a big silly grin, his blue eyes flashing. His blond hair was messy and wind-blown, and dirt streaked his face. He grinned like an overgrown child.

The point of view shifted away from Alex. He was in a Humvee. Through the windshield, the jungle parted to reveal a broad expanse of concrete, crisscrossed with a hexagonal pattern of darker material.

"This is where the tether was supposed to be anchored," Alex said, offscreen. The Humvee stopped and the point of view panned around the huge flat pad. In the center was a smooth bulge that terminated in a flat surface. At the edge of the pad, low square concrete buildings huddled.



Alex closed the connection. On her desktop, the Winfinity contract came to the fore again. It cut through happy visions of her and Alex, alone in the jungle. Adele stared at the thing. She picked up the stylus. Hesitated for a moment, holding the stylus over the signature area. After a few moments, she sighed. And signed it. Because plans didn't always work out. On the day the space elevator's tether reached the anchor, the news came in about Winfinity's latest rejuvenation failures. Big movingink banners on the whitewashed Quito buildings showed grotesque corpses and claimed it to be the Año de Los Muertos. Talking heads pontificated about how rejuvenation was likely to be a dangerous, complex, and expensive process. Alex shook his head. Of course it would be. That's how they'd want it to be. "We're going out to the pad?" Adele asked, as Alex piloted the jeep out of the city. "I wouldn't be anywhere else." "What if the tether breaks?" "It won't." "You can't say that!" Alex sighed. They'd stripped out the old nanotube ribbon and replaced it with something from Nanolife's carbon portfolio, but the researchers were still arguing about transient stresses and point defects.

"If it breaks, I still want to be there," he said. Because if seventy thousand miles of nanoribbon came

down, there's no guarantee that Quito will be there afterwards.

"Idealist!"
"It's not like I'll live forever." Alex pointed at a newsboard showing pictures of the failed rejuvenations.
"You'll figure it out yourself by the time you're that old."
Alex shrugged. He could show her old Nanolife data that suggested the maximum lifespan of any human was less than three hundred years, even with some form of workable rejuvenation.
Three hundred years to make a difference. To make up for the first failure. It wasn't much time.
He pushed the jeep hard down the dirt road, hoping to make it to the site before the actual moment of contact. Some day, he knew, that dirt road might be the largest superhighway on the planet. Quito might be transformed into a super-megalopolis larger than Shanghai. And ships from all over the world might dock in Ecuador, to cart the riches of the solar system across the face of the Earth.
But will I live to see that? he wondered. There were so many things he was going to miss. Even without Winfinity's failures.
"Look," Adele said, pointing up.
Ahead of them, a tiny black line bisected the sky. Almost invisible. Blink and you'd miss it. But follow it up with your eyes, into the heavens, where it disappeared. Alex imagined stars, wheeling just beyond the brilliance of the blue sky. Maybe he should buy a few thousand square miles of Martian land, and dream about the day when the planet grew green. But that was far out, impossible. It would be a hundred years before people could walk outside without squeezesuits, a thousand years before they might dare to breathe. He would never see it.
There are so many things I'll miss.
"I can leave you off, if you'd like," he told Adele.
"No."



"That's it," he said, as the ribbon touched down.

The orange-suited team pounced, securing it under multiple layers of carbon composite and adhesive.

When they stood back, a thin black line connected Earth and the sky. The ribbon rose, completely straight and true, till it passed out of sight.

Alex's heart thudded, and he squeezed Adele's hand. She turned and hugged him close, turning her face up for a kiss. Alex obliged her, darting his eyes heavenward.

"We're not done yet," he said. "We still have to send the crawler down."

"Do you doubt it'll work?" Adele looked up at him, her eyes still faraway.

Alex shook his head, thinking, I always doubt.

"There you go," she said, and hugged him tighter.

The climber wouldn't be down for a day, so Alex took Adele back to Palos, his favorite bar. It had run a chimera show, full of clumsy surgical freaks, until Adele came down. Then the shows had ended. Alex suspected she cared for him, and that she had had something to do with the shows ending, but he didn't know how to ask, or what to do in return to thank her.

Because Adele was something like Shekinah. Embarrassingly sexual. He was almost glad that Shekinah had to remain behind in Malibu. It was easier. And he could always watch her dance on the remote monitors, even if it did seem to upset Adele.

Adele liked him, he knew. Maybe even loved him. But he didn't know what to do. He had never felt anything like love, certainly not the all-consuming force that was portrayed in the games and movies. He liked spending time with Adele, and he liked the nights they shared, but he could not imagine tying himself to her in a way that could not be undone. He had thought about it, briefly, shortly after they met, but he had never become any more certain.

Back at his apartment, under the glow of a screen that showed their BeyondEarth logo, he told Adele:

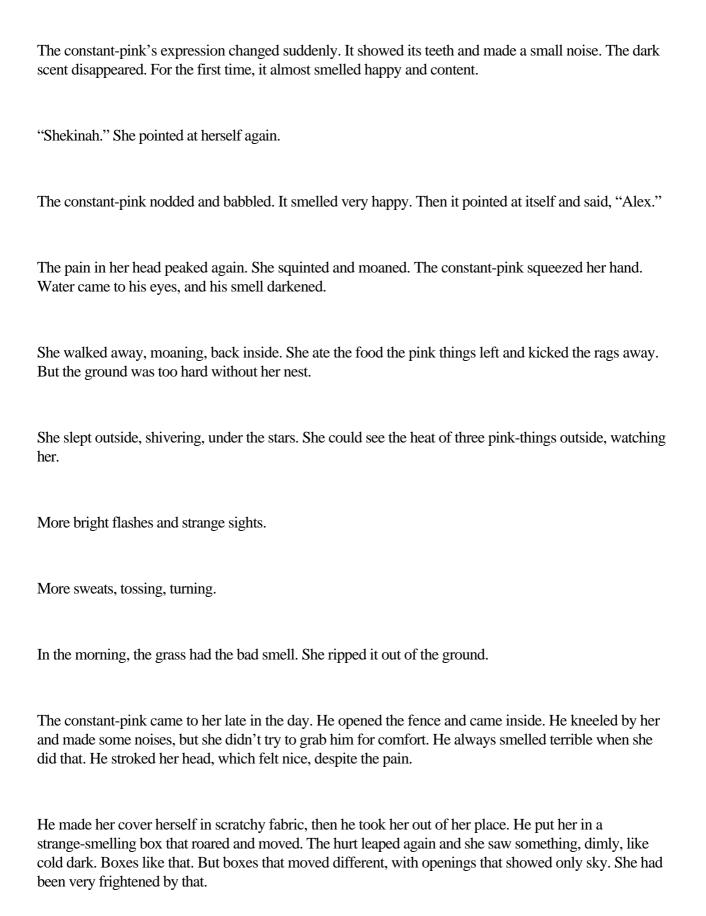
"I'm moving down here."
Adele looked at him, her eyes steady and clear. As if she was expecting something.
"After all, it's not like Winfinity really wants me back in its country, after I stole this out from under them."
Adele looked away and sighed.
"I have a lot of plans for Shekinah. There are new methods for increasing cognitive capacity."
"Something of yours?"
Alex frowned. "Something I bought. I don't make anything anymore."
"You should have called her Lilith." Adele's shoulders shook, and her voice was low, husky.
"Lilith wasn't an angel."
Silence for a time. Then: "What do you see in the thing? Why do you keep it?"
Because it's a reflection of what made it, Alex thought. Because maybe, just maybe, it can be a reflection of what we could be.
But he said nothing.
After a time, Adele lay down next to him, softly crying. When he tried to embrace her, she elbowed him away.

The pink things came and stabbed her, drawing blood. She yelled and clawed at one of them, raking his cheek with bright red stripes. Blood spattered her face. The pink things yelled and babbled and left her alone. In the place. The new place. Where she could go in or out. She could walk through grass. She could see the sun. A tall fence, slick and white, kept her from walking farther. She liked the sun, until she was sick. Belly-clenching pain. Throbbing pain in her head. She moaned and twisted, trying to evade the hurt. Tired, she went back inside and lay down on her nest. Sweats in the night. Strange things seen, bright, exploding. She woke to ruined rags. They smelled of pain and fear and something else, something deep and cold and hard and wrong. She kicked them away. She could never lay on them. The hurt in her head gnawed and pounded. She went outside and rolled in the grass, clawed at the fence. One of the pink ones watched her for a time, but it was not the constant-pink, the one that babbled at her longest. The constant-pink came later that day. It extended a hand through the fence. It smelled of fear and something else, that strange smell that it got when it talked to her, repeating that same sound over and over...

Suddenly, the pain in her head leapt up like a wild thing. She could feel it eating through her head. And

then it was like seeing a faint path, leading backwards to days (before).

"Shekinah," she said, pointing at herself.



She was less frightened by this box. Outside, green trees and brush passed. Then white buildings, like (something before).

He took her out of the box and led her to a small building with openings of many colors. It smelled of mold and dust and old things. It was very comforting.
Inside, sunlight made the colored openings glow brightly, and she stopped to look at them. The constant-pink held her hand and waited.
She walked in a little more. An unmoving pink thing in white had its arms outstretched. Above him there were other things in white, things with wings.
(Like hers).
The unmoving things above the white pink thing were (like her.)
"Shekinah," she said, looking up at the unmoving things like her.
The constant-pink jumped and babbled, smelling happy.
"Shekinah," she said, pointing upward.
The constant-pink showed her its teeth. "Alex," it said, pointing at itself.
(Was the thing called Alex?)
"Alex," she said, pointing at him.
"Yes, yes!" it babbled.
"Yes, yes," she said.

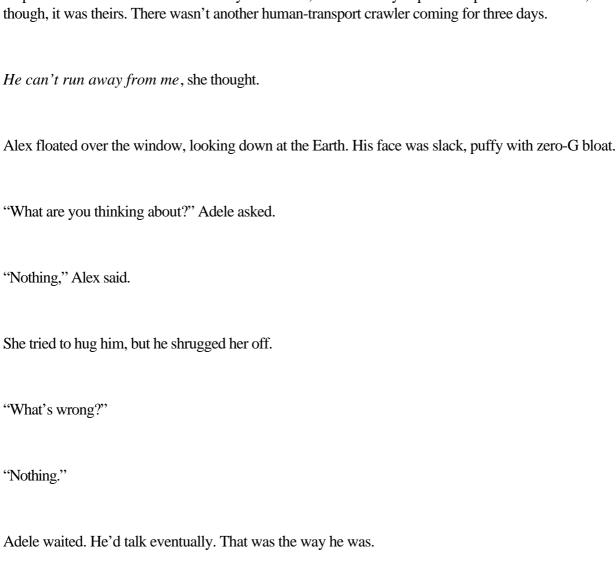
The pain exploded in her head. It babbled other things, but all she could do was hold her head.
It babbled more, smelling worried.
"Alex." She pointed at it.
It nodded and babbled.

Then other pink things came into the place and made loud noises, smelling sharply of fear and anger. They walked towards them, arms outstretched, forcing them outside.

* * * *

When BeyondEarth went public, Adele made Alex take her up the elevator to celebrate. At the geosynchronous station, dozens of spacecraft huddled outside. Some bore Winfinity flags, some wore corporate logos, some, old-fashioned, still had the symbols of the ESA or CEL on them. Spindly structures extended on either side of the geosynchronous station. Eventually, they'd grow the station to Earth's first true spaceport.

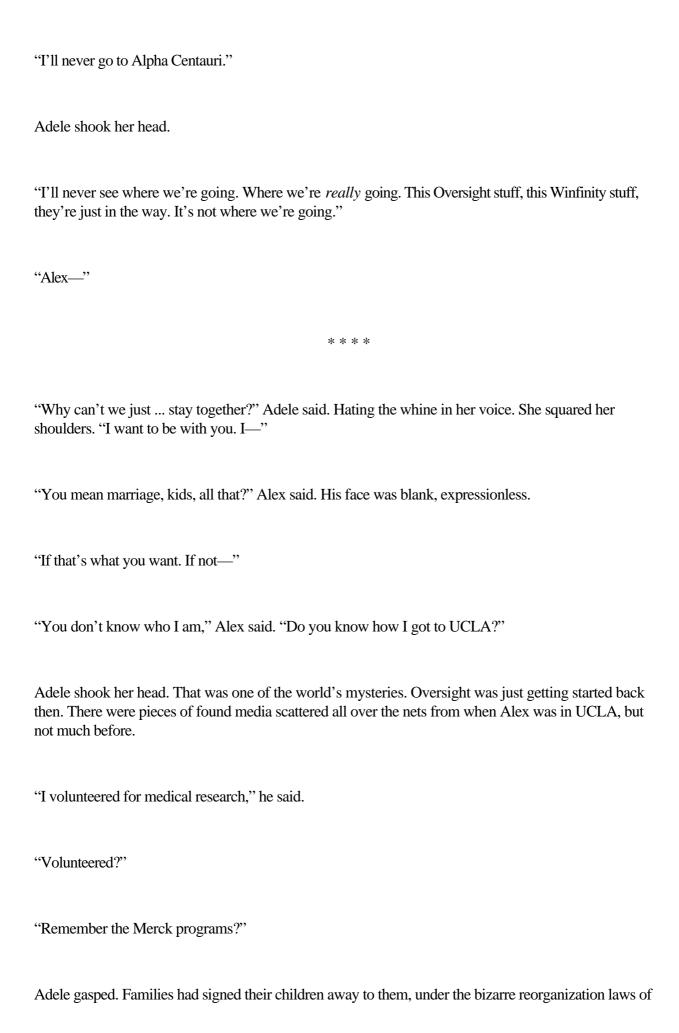
They took a room that looked down the ribbon to Earth, glinting gold in the sunlight. The Earth, cool blue, looked peaceful and far away. The room was still chill aluminum composite, unfurnished, but Adele suspected that it would soon be a luxury hotel suite, or an insanely expensive apartment. For now, though, it was theirs. There wasn't another human-transport crawler coming for three days.



"We could go up the tether and sling off towards Mars," Alex said. "No rockets. No fuel."

"And get there in years," Adele said.







ancient computers—iMacs, Dells, Compaq laptops—connected to complete working archives of the internet circa the turn of the century, hidden in matchbox-sized processors under the tables.

Alex preferred the bar. He'd been born at the advent of Web 2.0, and even if he understood how revolutionary the turn-of-the-century apps were, he couldn't understand the attraction of interacting with simulated personalities on old-time message boards, or bidding on Ebay items long since passed.

The white-haired bartender had deeply tanned skin, like polished mahogany. He hadn't spoken more than five words to Alex in all the times he'd been there. Today, though, a younger man was at the bar, and Alex caught the man looking at him.

When the bar got quiet, late that evening, the bartender came over and stopped. "You're the rich guy, aren't you?" he said, in perfect English, with no trace of a Spanish accent. Alex must have looked surprised. "Expat," the bartender said. "I just look the part."

"Oh. And yes, I'm him."

A nod. "What possible sorrow can you be drowning?"

Alex laughed. How could he explain? Adele didn't understand. Why would this man?

"I'm Rafael Quincero," the bartender said, offering a hand.

"Alex—"

"Farrell. Yeah, the rich guy. Why don't you go up the beanstalk, rich guy? Or at least go to a hotel tower in downtown? Are you pining over some woman?"

Alex shook his head. "I'm pining over all the things I'll miss."

"I don't know what you mean," Rafael said, frowning.



* * * *

Alex	didn'	t come	that	night.
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He did not come to Shekinah's room. They did not take their walk. He did not try to teach her harder words. He did not show her pictures or tell her things she did not understand.

"Play," she said. "Fun." Two new words. She wanted to remember them. So Alex would smile.

"Smile." Another new word. She'd almost forgotten it.

"Smile, smile, smile," she said, trying to press it into her mind. Her head hurt again.

She waited until it was dark, then lay down on the bed. Thinking about Alex coming to her, comforting her. It was good to think about that. It soothed the pain in her head.

One of the others had tried to comfort her, but he fell screaming on the ground. Shekinah had never seen him again. After that, the others besides Alex stayed far away from her. They didn't answer when she repeated her words to them.

Her words. Were there others she had forgotten?

She stood. She paced. The night smelled of clean vines and grass. She wanted to run. She wanted Alex. Her wings were restless, and her back ached. She leaned them against the wall, willing Alex to appear.

Eventually, she went back to lie on the bed.

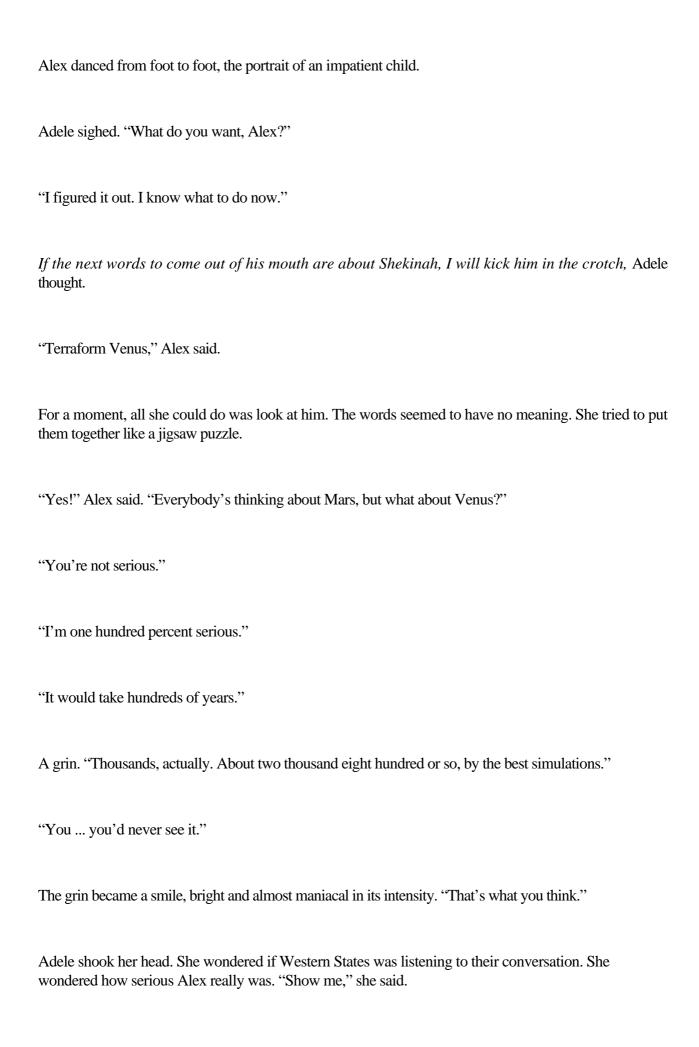
She wondered if Alex would come the next day. Or the next. Suddenly the days seemed to stretch out ahead of her, clearings along an endless path.

Shekinah whimpered. She had never thought anything like that. Things to come. Many days.

She imagined days stretching back behind her, but the path was shrouded in mist, gray and diffuse.
"Alex," she said, softly, as sleep came.
* * *
Western States Mining was in the middle of Nevada's Unincorporated Territories, where the last core of libertarians and socialists and constitutionalists and anarcho-capitalists had come to thumb their noses at the Winfinity-Reformed States conglomerate, which was only too happy to ignore them.
Until now, Adele thought, watching the tanks slowly fill with metallic silver.
They were inside one of the old mines. It was cool and dark, and smelled like dust. Support timbers, gray with age, bore graffiti with ancient dates: 1932, 1977, 2000.
The nanoextraction system made only the smallest noise, a faint liquid rushing. Deep in the mountain, she knew, water coursed through all the abandoned tunnels, all the played-out veins, binding and releasing silver in a mindless mechanical dance. The process ended here, where the silver was unbound, captured, dried, and eventually melted into ingots.
"What extraction rate are you running here?"
"About three grams per gallon per hour," said Charles Strathern, the golden-haired President of Western States Mining.
Adele nodded. It was about twenty times the rate of their best process. "This is built on Nanolife templates?"
A shrug. "If it matters. We don't recognize your IP here."
"And you have no nanoprocess permitting from Winfinity?"

Charles squinted at her. "If you aren't interested in buying, we don't need you here. The door's that way. Don't let it hit you in the ass on the way out."
Adele held up a hand. "Just getting the lay of the land." You may not recognize our IP, but you have no problem selling improvements back to us. She wondered briefly how long it would take the Nanolife labs to duplicate their feat, but quickly dismissed it. If she didn't buy it, someone else would.
Charles crossed his arms. "You've seen the process. Are you interested?"
"Possibly. How many cycles will the nano tolerate?"
"Seven, eight hundred."
"What's the efficiency delta between inception and end of life?"
"We define end of life as one sigma deviation."
Adele nodded. Good.
An anxious-looking man wearing a Western States Mining jumpsuit burst into the room, earning an irritated glance from Charles. "Ms Yucia," he said, "you have a visitor."
"A visitor?"
"Yeah. He's outside."
Adele ignored Charles's exasperated look and followed the other man out into the searing sun.

Alex Farrell paced underneath a personal VertiJet. As soon as he saw Adele, he rushed over to her. Little beads of sweat gathered on his forehead, like tiny crystals. His hair was spiky and unkempt, and his



"I can't do it here," Alex said. "Too bright."

Western States let them use one of their unused mineshafts. Adele didn't suppose they had it bugged, but she scanned and flashed it regardless. Alex waited until she was done, then showed her diagrams on a small smartfogger. Dust-motes danced inside the diagrams, sparkling like tiny stars.

"It's simple," he said. "All it takes is one little package and a lot of time."

First, he showed her the space elevator. At the far end of the tether, a small package was released into space. A closeup showed it packed with a cross-section of the latest nanotech: miners, shapers, builders, heavy instruction-units and overseers.

"A lot of industrial nano already runs at higher temps than the surface of Venus, and the extra heat energy lets us run it fast and efficient."

The viewpoint changed to show the package's trajectory, traced with a bright green line. The line intersected a brilliant white ball that circled the sun, well inside Earth's orbit: Venus.

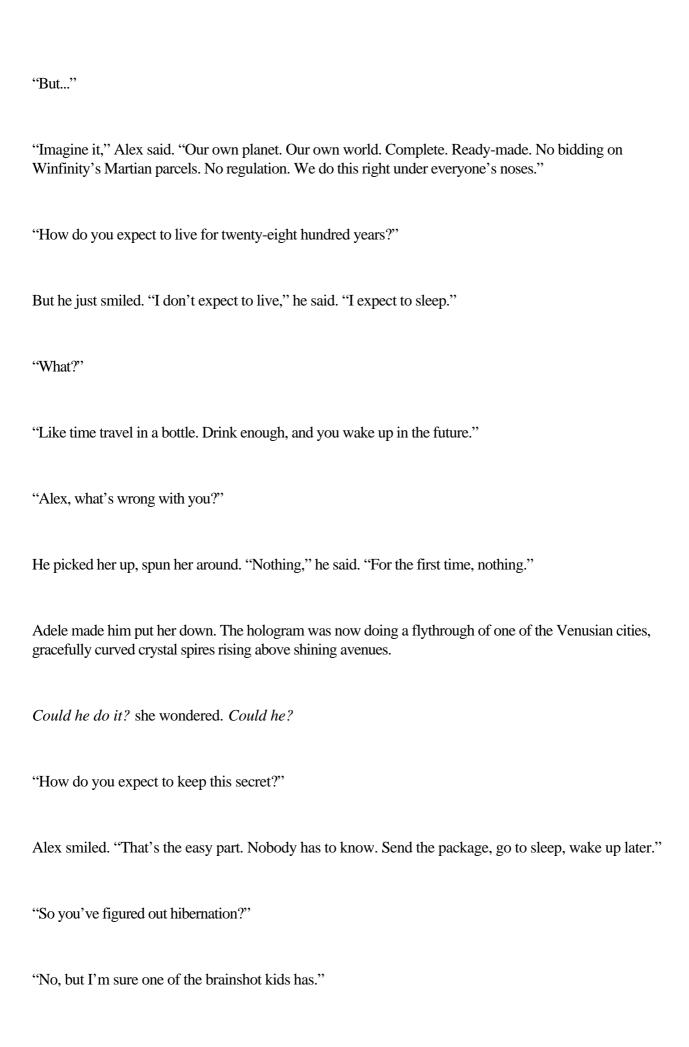
"Here's the best thing. Everything can be done under Venus's cloud cover, so nobody needs to know what's going on. We can even simulate the clouds later on, so it stays invisible."

The viewpoint changed again, to show the impact of the package on Venus. It spilled nanotech near one of the poles, where it started transforming the ragged surface of the world into a shimmering crystal city, edged by deep green jungle. "The jungle probably won't work," Alex said. "One of those old pulp ideas, kind of fun but impractical. But we can create the crystal cities. In fact, with the amount of carbon dioxide we have to bind, we need a diamondoid economy. We can literally pave the streets with it."

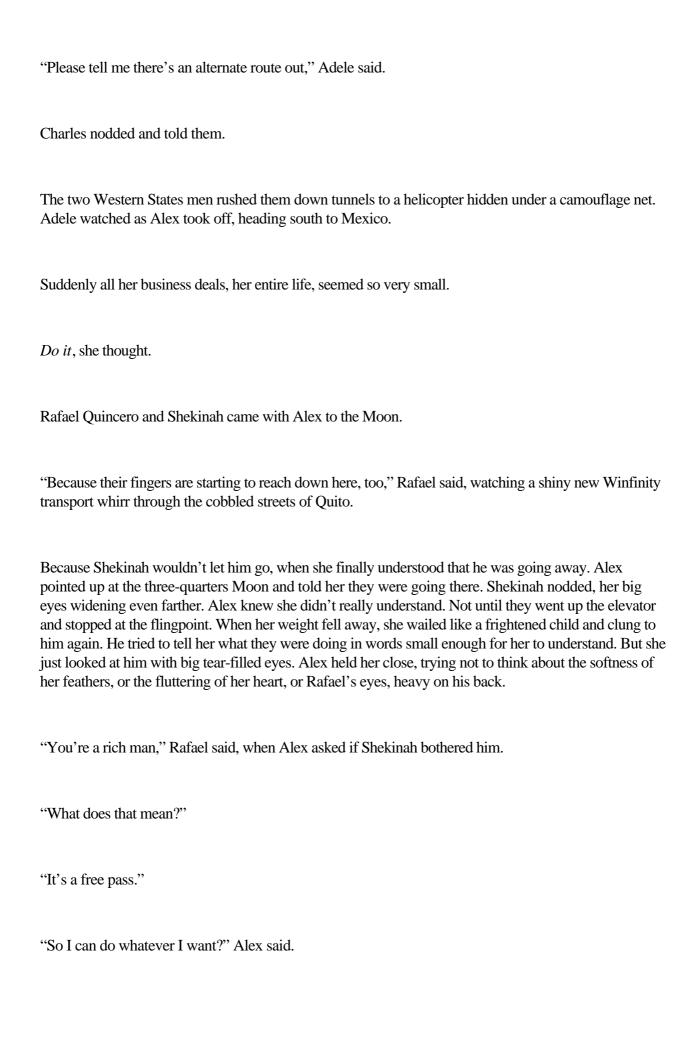
Adele watched, dumbfounded, as the planet sprouted pole-ringing crystal cities, green jungles, and far-scattered lakes. She blew out her breath. Until then, she hadn't realized she'd been holding it.

"But ... you said it would take three thousand years."

"Twenty-eight hundred. Don't exaggerate."







Rafael nodded. "Exactly."

But that's not true, he wanted to say. But Rafael, like Adele, wouldn't understand his failures as failures.

And there were things he didn't want to think about too much. He'd never looked at the results of Shekinah's gene sequence. He didn't want to hear a computer's voice tell him that she was 67% of this, 15% of that, 8% of something else, and shared less than 50% of her genome with humanity. Or whatever it ended up being.

On the Moon, the geeks who hadn't made it to Mars were trying to engineer their own escape. In the middle of the great Google logo, painted fifteen years ago in carbon black, railguns shot raw materials at an irregular blob of darkness that whirled in orbit. The first real starship, designed to carry an entire community across the light-years to a new place where the madness of humanity was unknown. From Torvalds, the main lunar settlement, the starship could be seen only by the stars it occluded, or the occasional orange-red cooling edges of the ceramics and aerogels spawned by the nanotech. Rumor had it that Winfinity or one of the other Earth governments had tried to probe the starship. Or maybe destroy it. The probe (or weapon) had disappeared into the seething darkness. By now, it was part of the still-growing ship.

Asked about their starship, the geeks grew silent, or gave sharp little nervous laughs and smart-assed remarks.

"When will it be done? Well, when it's done, of course."

"How big will it be? Well, we won't know until it's done."

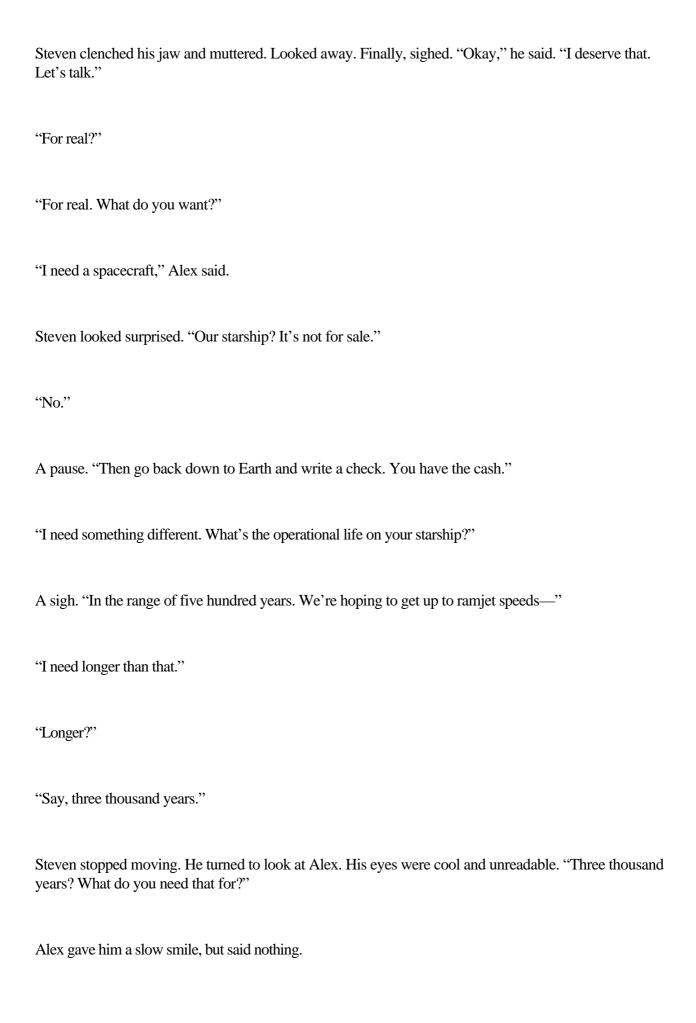
"What's its operational life? Well, it'll last until we're there. We hope."

And so on. Rafael quickly found employment as a bartender, but he got no more information than Alex. And Shekinah stopped conversation wherever she went. Until the whispers started. About the rich guy and his pet. Or his lover. Or whatever it was.

For once, Alex was glad that she didn't understand very much. Even then, he spent long hours calming her, explaining why she couldn't come with him, trying to tell her why she couldn't go outside.

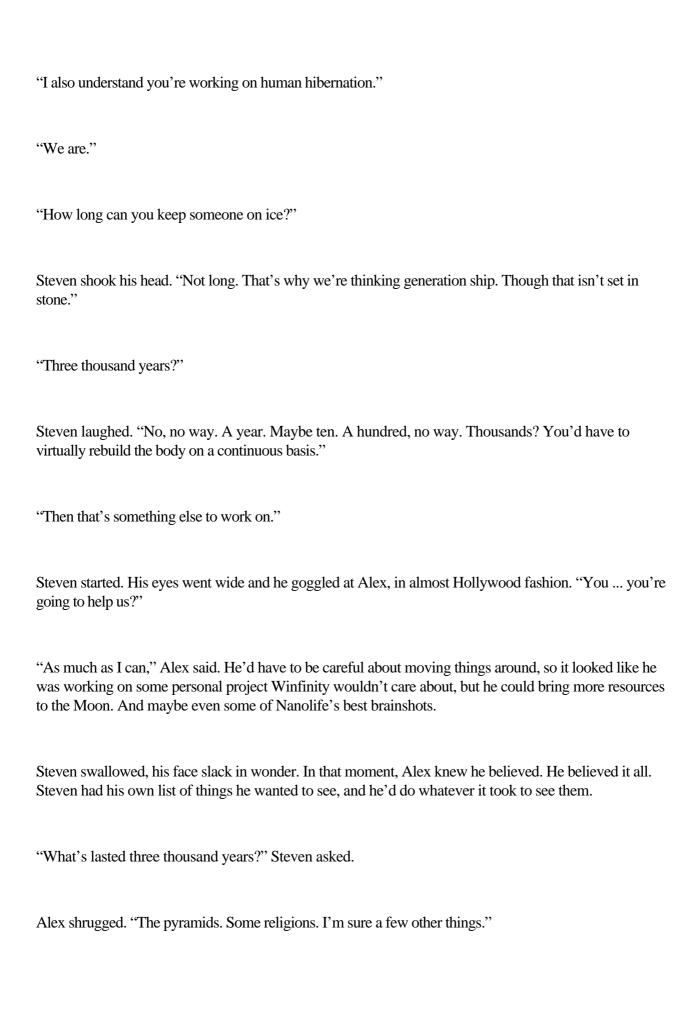




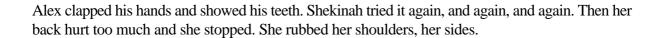




Steven shook his head. "Five hundred years is tough. I mean, the ship isn't so much manufactured as it is







Alex put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Are you all right?"

It was almost too much for Shekinah to understand.

"Back," she said. "Hurt."

Alex turned his lips down and kneaded the muscles in her shoulders and sides. Shekinah moaned. It felt good. Like the comfort Alex would never give her. Dim images of many nights spent trying to get him to stay, of crying alone afterwards, came to her.

Shekinah whirled to face Alex. Her claws shredded his clothes. She clung to him as he tried to scramble away, as his smell went to fear. But she could smell his need, too. She shrugged out of her thin dress. She clung to Alex, digging in her claws. He tried to push her away. He grew hot and hard, on her belly.

Shekinah pulled herself up and dropped down on him, feeling his heat, feeling him fill her. She groaned and threw her head back, shivering in comfort.

Alex's scent changed again, from fear and arousal to something deeper and more complex, something she had smelled on him before. When the words were hard, when she did not remember them.

But she writhed against him, and for a time they moved as one. Alex even gripped her to him, towards the end. Then she cried in the explosion of comfort. Alex made a low noise. His eyes spilled water.

Shekinah released him, strengthless and satisfied. Alex laid by her for a moment, then pushed himself away. He smelled strongly of that low scent and of fear as he picked up fragments of his clothes.

"Thank," Shekinah said. The sound he used when she brought him food. Another sound he tried to teach.

Alex looked up. His little eyes were round. "I'm sorry," he said.

Shekinah didn't know what he meant, so she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

When she woke, she was in the little room with the window that looked out over the gray land and night sky with sun. She remembered the night before. She smiled.

When Alex opened the door, later that day, there were two other men with him. They wore clothes that smelled like the new place, like cool stone. They smelled slightly of fear.

She went to Alex's arms, but he pushed her away, making lots of noises, beckoning her to follow. She did not want to play, but Alex stunk of fear. She followed.

He took her to a big room where there were many shiny things. She looked at her distorted reflection in some of the things. Alex talked to another man in the room. The noises he made were fast and low. Shekinah caught her name, and a few of the noises: more, small, fun. Alex kept looking at her when he spoke. He showed his teeth, but he did not smell happy.

A strange feeling came to Shekinah. She had not made him happy. She had failed. It was a dark, terrible thought. Images of sharp pins and headaches came. Before and after. The feeling of being changed.

Was he going to change her again?

Shekinah smelled something familiar-yet-not. It took her a few moments to realize she was smelling herself, her own fear.

Alex and the other man stopped and showed their teeth. They looked at her. Their teeth were like a cat's, bright white and sharp.

Shekinah backed away, but the other two men caught her arms. She struggled against them, but they were very strong.

She felt a sharp pain in her arm.

Then Alex's face, bending over hers.

Then nothing.

* * * *

In the smartfog, Adele fell towards Venus. Beside her, Alex looked intently forward, his face painted by the reflection of brilliant white clouds. He darted a glance at her, twitched an uncertain smile, and looked forward again, chewing his lip.

What's the matter? Adele thought. Don't tell me the ship is a no-go, and I came up to the Moon for nothing.

Venus's bright clouds stripped away as they fell, revealing a city of neon-lit crystal perched on top of the world. They swooped through forests of tall, long-needled trees and approached the city. The sun hung low on the horizon, spread wide and golden in layers of haze. It cut through the transparent towers of the city, painting them with a soft, warm light. The city glowed, as if in distant memory, Vaseline smeared on the lens of reality.

They flew between the towers, slowing to show beautiful details: etchings in the diamondoid in a neo-art-deco style, heroic men and women of science struggling to turn the gears of immense machines, sunrises dawning over rolling perfect fields, antique spaceships thrusting towards stylized planets.

Adele and Alex soared above the city to a room at the top of the highest tower. It looked across spires of tapered grace, and arches of mathematical perfection, down a broad avenue that led into the city, gleaming and perfect and clean. Inside, a man and a woman reclined on a couch, holding hands.

"Excellent work. Very detailed."

"EA Games already had most of the templates."

Alex gave a nervous little laugh. "Of course."

Their POV whizzed up and around the planet, from dayside to night. Dayside showed grasslands and deep-green forests, punctuated by bright blue lakes. Nightside showed frozen lakes and dead gray

forest. At the terminator, the trees slowly came back to life, the lakes slowly melted.
"Which is why the cities are at the poles," Adele said. "There's no good mechanism for increasing rotational speed, but with the limited axial tilt, polar cities will have a sun that's always just above or below the horizon."
"Climate?"
"We'll have to leave some reflectance in the upper atmosphere to get the poles to shirtsleeves."
"The equator?"
Adele shrugged. "Best guess says it won't be fatal on the dayside."
"What's not fatal?"
"Not much over fifty or sixty degrees C."
Alex nodded. "Sounds great. When do we start?"
Adele glared at him.
"What?" Alex said.
"You just don't understand, do you? Three thousand years, Alex!"
"So?"
"So all of this is guesswork! Get out the rabbits' feet, because you're going to need them. The bio you saw is guesses and BS. Nobody knows if we can really make trees that'll survive a Venusian night, so you might end up with a dead planet. And then there's the carbon problem. I'm still working out whether

it would be better to bind it and railgun it out—which increases our chances of being detected—or split it and oxidize it out. No matter what we do, the nano probably won't be stable for three thousand years, not even if we run cold backups in orbit and reseed."

Adele expected Alex to wave a hand and tell her it didn't matter, but he only sighed. She turned off the smartfog and they were back in Alex's drab gray cubicle. He hadn't even customized his wallscreens. He sat on an unmade bed.

"What's wrong?" Adele said.
"Nothing."
"Is it the ship?"
Alex shrugged. "Do you want to see it?"
"Sure."

* * * *

* * * *
Alex took her down to a hallway that looked over a smoothly-sculpted cavern. Two men in bright purple jumpsuits looked down into the dimness, their eyes shrouded by dataspecs. Below them, Alex's ship grew. Its rainbow-slick gray coating shimmered and danced, like a dirty soap-bubble. She could feel the heat of the nano coming through the diamondoid windows.
"Do they know what it is?" Adele said, nodding at the Moonies.
"They think it's a toy," Alex said.
"Are you sure?"
Alex frowned and handed her a pair of dataspecs. She put them on and looked down at the growing ship. In place of the gray blob, there was a cutaway. And a name.





Maybe we could challenge Winfinity.

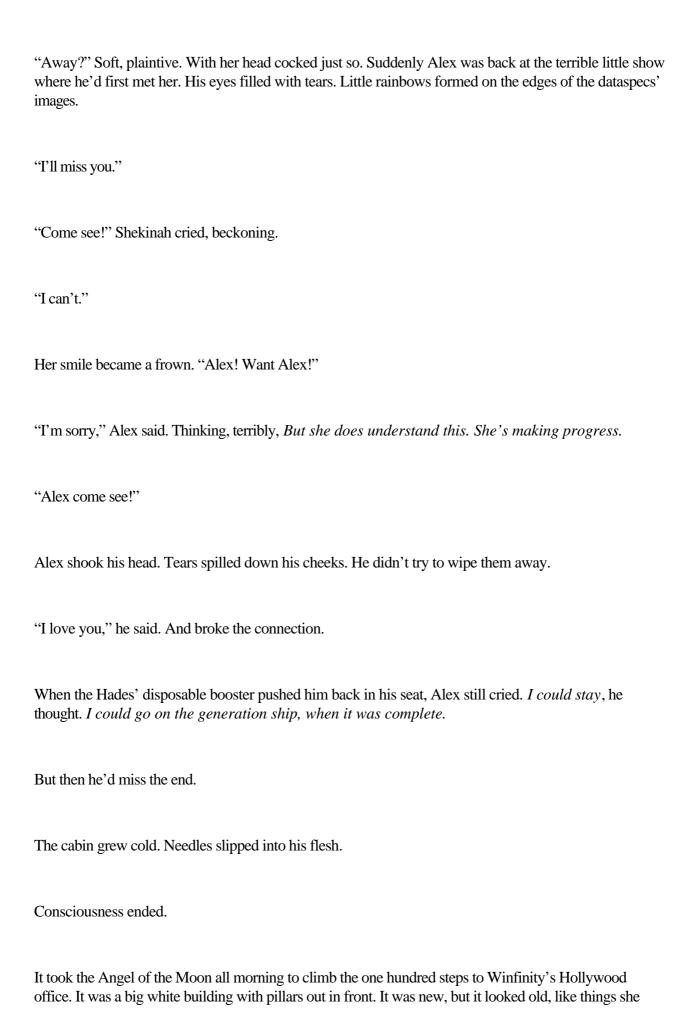
But that would mean staying. And waiting. And missing the grand ending. Winfinity was nothing more than an aberration, the corporation that ate the United States. In three thousand years, they'd gone from

pyramids to nanotechnology. In another three thousand years, surely they'd conquer their own internal demons. Alex imagined coming back to a system transformed. Three blue-green worlds to choose from. Maybe more. And perhaps indescribable wonders. Maybe there would even be a world where Shekinah could fly. She was still on the Moon. Alex had asked Steven to take Shekinah on their generation ship. He imagined her soaring in the skies towards the center of the habitat, where gravity was light. She would like that. Alex went back down the ribbon and took a fling out to where his ship Hades waited. A day into his fling, Adele called him. "You're clean," she said. "There's no activity in any of the infoswarms." "Good. Mission accomplished." Adele went silent. In his dataspecs, her lips pursed, like a child pouting when it didn't get its toy. *She's beautiful*, he thought. "They'll notice you're gone," Adele said. "Of course. That's okay." "What if they look for you?"

Alex sighed. Old conversations, well-worn into familiar grooves. He was the only one who knew the







had seen in history lessons. The Winfinity logo rotated above it, suspended in air.

People came out of the building to watch her. Some wore dark gray uniforms with bright green letters that read win-sec on the front. Others were just men and women in business suits, who watched her for a while and then went back into the building. Their eyes looked thin and angry, but they smelled like fear.

Once, a group of chimeras came out of the building. They all wore the little shiny collars that Paul had told her were for the ones who never worked their way to freedom. *Permanent indenture*, he called it, the words big and darty in her mind.

The chimeras walked right by her, only glancing. Their eyes were dead and still.

I was like that once, Shekinah thought. Faint images came to her, fragmentary and slow. Dancing in front of an audience in a place that smelled like alcohol and sex. Her second room, the one where she could go out and see the sky. Alex.

She closed her eyes, wishing she could remember his face. The treatments had done bad things to her memory. Alex was a shade, half-imagined. She heard his voice. *She-ki-nah*. *Shekinah*.

I remember what you did for me, Alex, she thought. I will never forget that.

She levered her thin body up another step. Her wings dragged on the ground. She had never felt this heavy before. She remembered soaring through the caverns of the Moon.

People came from the street to cheer her. They projected images of her flying. They projected images of other chimeras, in cages, at podiums, in sex farms. They projected words:

end the exploitation!

stop the cripples!

welcome the angel of the moon.

The people in the gray coveralls took those people away. She made it into the cool stone lobby as people passed, smelling of hunger. The man behind the desk tried to look through her for a while. When she said who she wanted to see, he laughed. She waited for a while, then asked again. And again. The WIN-SEC people drew close. Then, a voice. "I'll speak to her," it said. They put her in a lift with two WIN-SEC men, who would not look at her and smelled of terror. Shekinah wondered what they had to fear from her. She shuffled into a large room that looked out over Los Angeles. They were still fixing some of the buildings from the big earthquake. Evan McMaster, CEO of Winfinity, sat behind a bare stone desk. "Welcome, Angel of the Moon," he said. "I've enjoyed many of your videos." Shekinah paused. She did not expect welcome. But he did not offer her something to eat or drink, like they usually did. His smell was masked with strong fragrance, but there was something like anger underneath.

"Mister McMaster, I ask a favor," Shekinah said, repeating the words that she and Paul had rehearsed

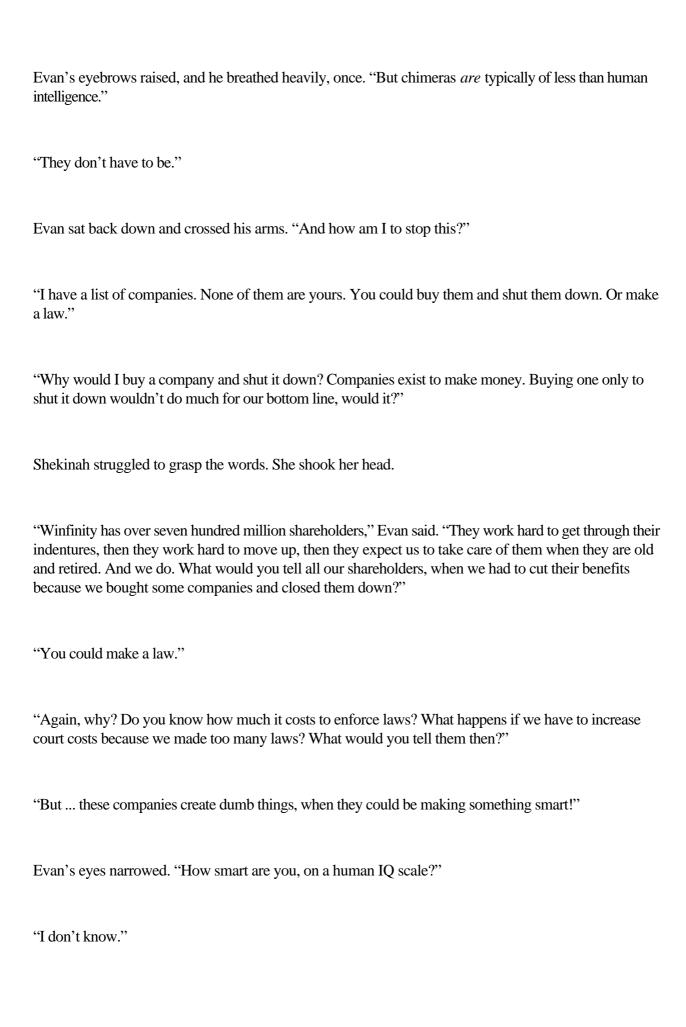
His eyebrows raised. "You're not here to raise a chimera army against my oppressive regime?"

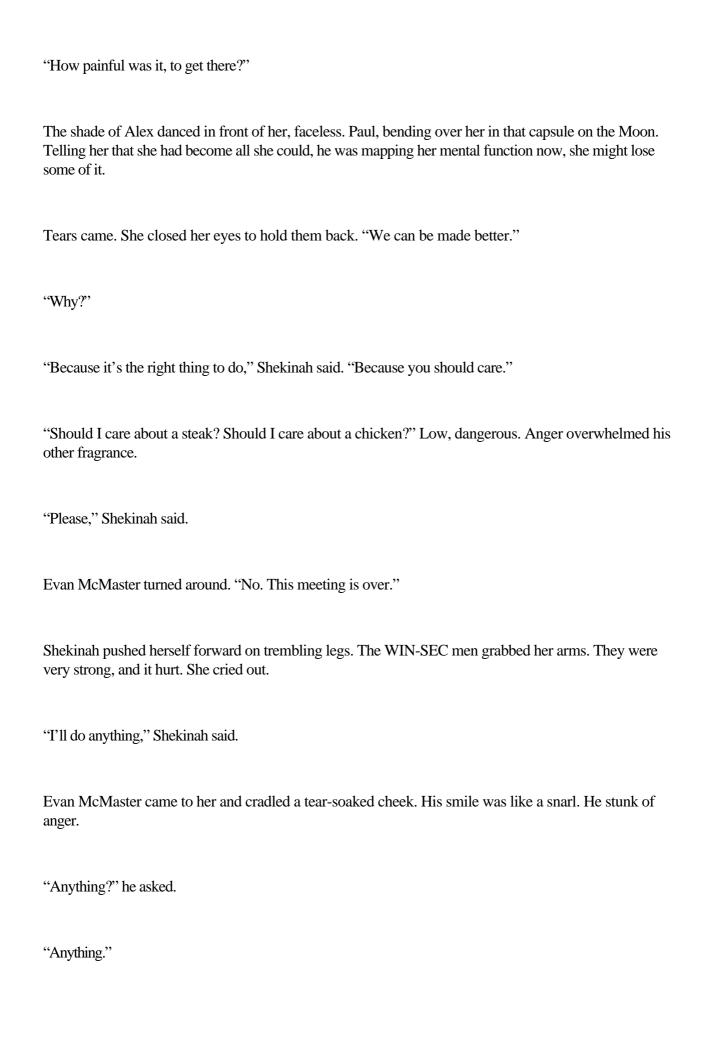
"No." Not understanding completely. Words too fast.

"Please, I want you to stop production of dumb chimeras."

Evan laughed. "That's good. I wouldn't want to lose my emperor's chair."

so many times.





Evan laughed, spraying spittle in her face. "You have nothing I want."
"Please!"
"This meeting is over." Evan turned.
The WIN-SEC people led her out to the steps. They let her go, but waited around and watched her.
She made her way down the steps. It took the rest of the afternoon. She had time. They would not let her go back to the Moon.
She was an angel, but she would never again fly.
Adele knew she wouldn't live through her third rejuve. Because of the doctors. Her optilink whispered inferred meaning into her ears, even when they didn't speak. And she knew the gossip. Once, mostly, twice, for some, a third time, for none.
If Alex was here, he would have figured out a better process, Adele thought. But he was probably outside the limits of the solar system now, still drifting along a long, slow parabola that would take him back to her, only about twenty-six hundred years late.
She also knew because of the requests. Before you go in, whisper one secret in my ear. Where is Alex Farrell? Where did he go?
Good luck with that, Adele thought. She'd had her own memories repatterned. She didn't remember Alex's trajectory herself. She didn't remember entirely what he did.
Self-preservation, really. Winfinity had absorbed Nanolife by fiat and made her a Chief Executive. Then a Perpetual, when she proved to have true skills. They had allowed her to rejuvenate once, twice, and now, a third time.
She hoped to open her eyes to the thrill and energy of a body young, so exquisitely sensitive and perfect. She remembered her last awakenings, the feeling of wonder, that perfect moment of realization: <i>I would do anything for this</i> .

Winfinity had treated her well. As good as it could. But she still wondered what would have happened if Alex had stayed, if he had worked on the problem of rejuvenation, if he had decided to see his project through in body, rather than by escape. But he had never been interested in the in-between work. He wanted to see the end.

There had been days, dark days, when she thought of telling Winfinity where he had gone. When people first asked, in reverent tones, what he was like. When they asked where he had gone. The mysterious man who reinvented the world, and then disappeared.

Then the inference algorithms began to get very, very good, and Adele went to Mars, to the Independent people who lived outside of Winfinity, and had a very small part of her memory erased. The other Perpetuals knew she did it. But it was easy enough to tell them it was too painful to remember Alex. Only the very, very old found that hard to believe. And only a few of the very old ranked higher than her in the Winfinity regime.

And, in some ways, they didn't really care. The Moonies' generation ship had gone out into interstellar space, and they didn't waste time looking for it. Alex's ship was considered as a relic of that same age. Because it was a new world. They had happened upon the great fortune of the Spindle Drive, and instantaneous interstellar transport was a reality. She had stood on the cold green surface of Alpha Centari A's single ocean-heavy world. She'd heard the songs of its fractal bushes. And she'd left, like the rest of Winfinity, because there was no trade to be had with the bushes, even if they did prove to be intelligent.

But they'd found other worlds, other life. None of it intelligent. None of it more than a shade of the Earth's teeming biosphere. Sometimes she wondered about the meaning of that, late at night. Winfinity had no answers. The Consumeristians thought they had answers, but she could not believe them. They were too convenient, too pat, too facile.

It wasn't a terrible empire they had created, she thought. In many ways, no worse than government at the end of the 20th Century. People didn't have to work for Winfinity. They could join a hundred rival corporations. Of course, Winfinity benefits were always greater. And when you were considering a ten or twenty-year indenture, why would you go with a lower return? And it did make sense to hold back rejuvenation for the vast majority of the population. It kept population in check.

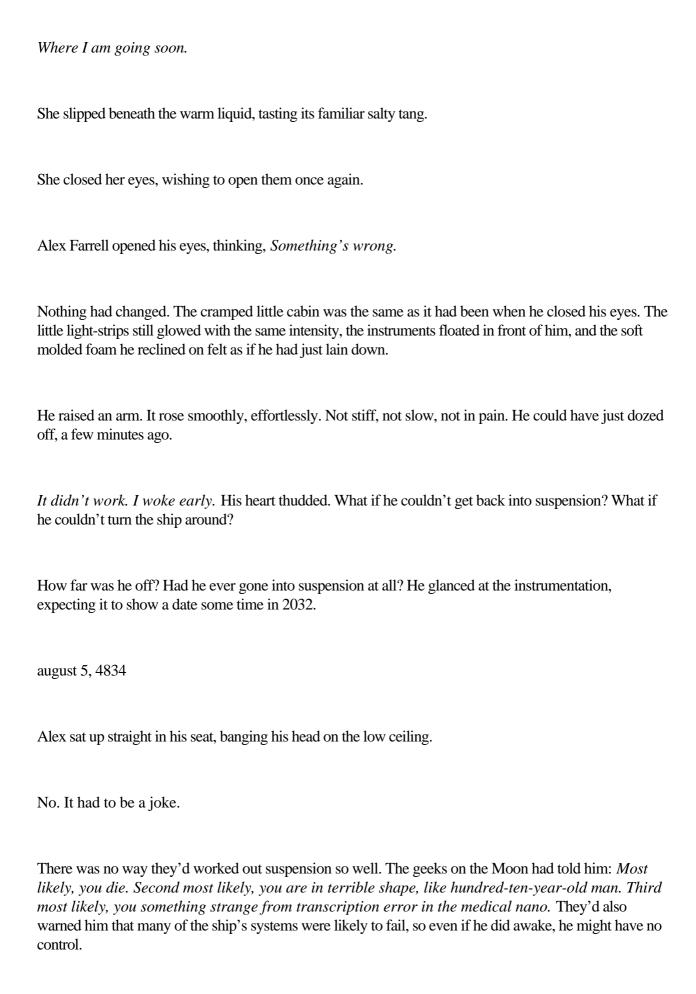
And it was the ultimate incentive. She would give anything to be young again.

They had given her a comfortable room in Winfinity City, overlooking the restored town of Rogers, and the rolling hills that framed the One True Shack. Those were icons too, for the people who did not

remember where they came from. They even surrounded her with young, cheerful medical staff who smiled too much, as if they knew she could read their minds. Like the young girl who came to see her that morning. "Are you ready to be young again?" she asked. They are trying to comfort you, the inference algorithms whispered. "Sure," Adele said. Her voice was screechy with age. "Nothing to it," the girl said. "You'll just wake up, young. Of course, you probably know that." This is a statement calculated to put you at ease. "If I wake up." She is shocked and afraid. She is thinking about calming you. Adele waved her hand. "Sorry. Never mind." Let me die with my mind intact, please. They wheeled her into the room with the tanks. It was always nice, going in the tanks. Warm and soft. They put her in. Her optilink fed her a last question about Alex. She thought, one more time, I could turn him in. I could tell them what he's done.

But she didn't remember. She didn't remember at all. She remembered helping him. She remembered putting something in space to spoof Winfinity. But she did not know where. She remembered being very relieved when Winfinity took the Spindle Drive and began venturing outward, rather than looking in.

She did remember the name of his ship, the Hades.



He scanned the display. Other things jumped out at him: nanotech runrates averaging 99.5%. Better than when he was launched. Nanosystems didn't refine themselves for better performance. Their timeline was always clear: increasing replication error, until the system dropped off an efficiency cliff to become dumb matter again.

Alex had the instruments display his relative position. It showed a dotted line, arcing through the orbits of the planets, terminating near Venus. He zoomed out and saw his entire arc, with time and distance markers. The ship thought it had been on a 2,800-year journey, at least.

The geeks. They sold me out. They never put me under. Win-Sec was probably on its way to pick him up.

Alex turned on the communications scanner. Nothing. It didn't even show the low-power blocks where the geeks sent packets between the Moon and Mars. Flat down to the noise floor.

He frowned. It should show Earth bleed, even in the inner system. He aimed the directional antenna first at Earth, then at Mars. There was nothing coming from either planet.

Of course, they disabled communication, he thought.

Either that, or he really had gone 2,800 years into the future, and humankind had moved so far beyond the electromagnetic spectrum that he couldn't even talk to them anymore.

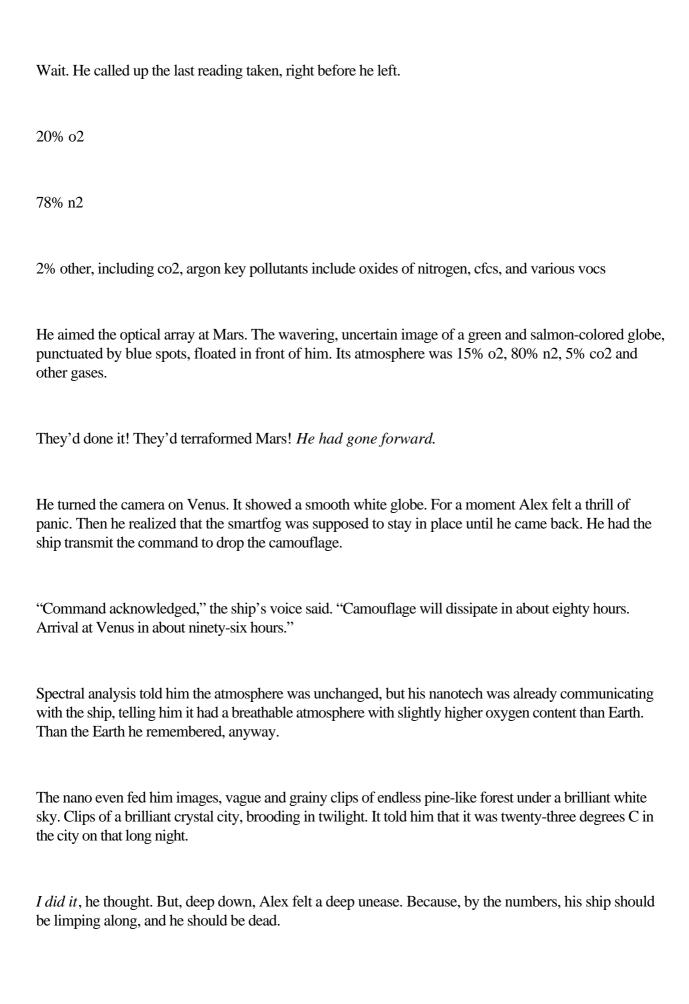
Pyramids to nanotech, he thought. Nanotech to ... what?

The instrumentation fed him visuals, but the optics were only rudimentary. Fuzzy images of blue-green Earth floated ahead of him. Spectral analysis of the atmosphere showed:

24% o2

75% n2

1% other, including co2, argon, and helium pollutants below detectable levels



Or did I have help? he wondered. And, if so, from whom? Or what?

On the display, Hades flickered a tiny bit closer to Venus.

* * * *

Venus howled. The wind cut through the channels of his empty polar city, picking haunting notes from the knife-sharp edges of the diamondoid buildings. Lights within reflected and refracted through their translucent interiors, bathing the streets in a cool blue-white glow. The sky was heavy and gray, like lead, the far horizon shading to lighter gray above the hidden sun.

I never named it, Alex thought, as he walked towards his tower. Walked because he had never thought of transportation. Or the nano had degraded to the point where it dropped off the design chart. In his dataspecs, the nano efficiency showed 27%. Barely hanging on the edge of the cliff that fell towards dumb matter.

Which answered one question. His nano had degraded in-line with his forecasts. So he really was in the future.

Or was he a simulated mind, plugged into some future virtuality?

Alex shook his head. He didn't want to think about that. But it would explain a lot. His too-easy reawakening. Hades' increased nanoefficiency. He could be nothing more than computation.

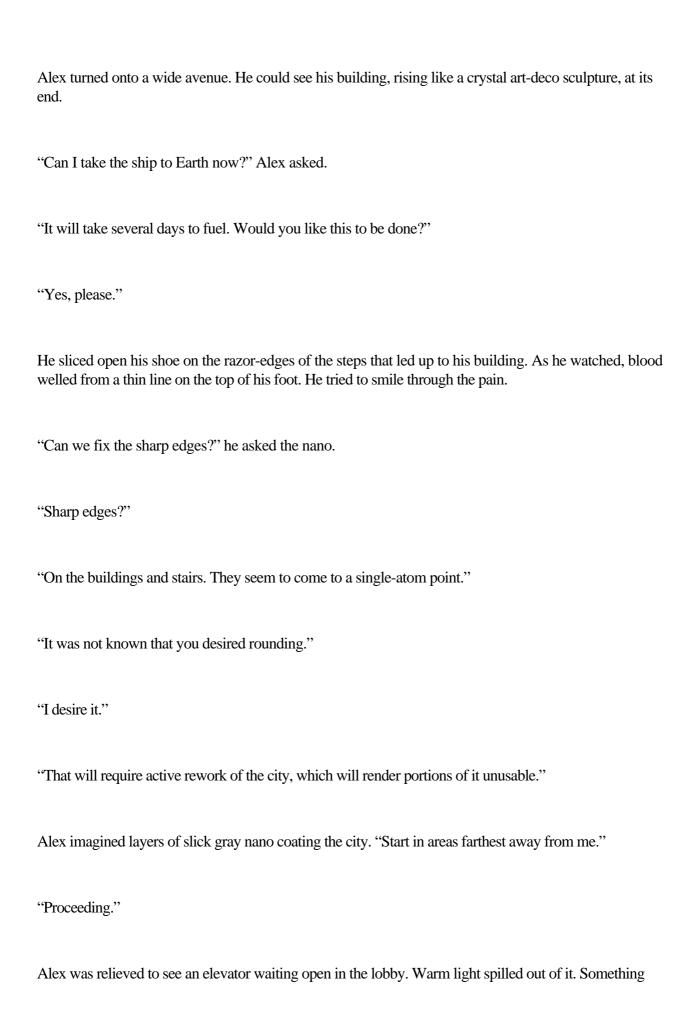
But Alex doubted it. There were too many things, done too right. The alien overtones of the wind on the edges of his buildings. The little errors, like the razor-sharp edges and lack of transportation. Even the smell of the city, sharp with the tang of co2 and an unfamiliar, astringent odor something like pine.

And the sense of being alone. His footfalls on the diamondoid pavement were the only sound other than the wind. Nothing moved, except his shifting shadow cast by the light of the buildings.

If Shekinah could see this, what would she think? Alex wondered.

"Communication restored," the nano interface whispered in his earpod. He had transmitted archived





like woodgrain decorated its interior. He put his hand on it. It felt too cool and too smooth, like the rest of the diamondoid.
"Do the other buildings have elevators?"
"Some."
Great, Alex thought.
The elevator rushed upwards and its doors opened on his penthouse. Alex gasped. The far wall, transparent, looked out over a blue-white fairyland. His city rose and fell, swooped and spired, towards black lands. The gray splotch of the sun was offset to the east. In a month or so, the sun would rise and cast shadows down the broad avenue that led to his building.
This was what all those futurists always wanted to do. Tear down the city whole and start anew. Not piece by piece. A single integrated whole, designed for utility and beauty.
I've done it.
Alex found food. Little tangerine-sized spheres with a foamy consistency. They tasted like oranges. Slices of something too perfect and regular to be bread. A large, slightly greasy red slab that looked and smelled a little bit like beef.
He toasted the 'bread' in an old-fashioned toaster and paced the living room while he ate. It tasted like very good whole wheat bread, despite its looks.
He went to the transparent wall and looked out over the city. In the city, nothing moved. He could hear nothing, not even the howl of the wind. It could have been a picture painted on a wall.
Suddenly, a strange feeling welled up in Alex. It felt as if his chest had been opened up and hollowed out. It felt like his guts had been carved from ice. He hugged himself and shivered.
I'm alone.

He used a wallscreen to access the city's entertainment library. He played music, Halfway and Kraftwerk and Antony Palmiero and The White Plague, very loud. He had the wall show old movies, *Genero* and *The Matrix* and *Fugue State* and *Windex*, with no sound. He pressed his face up against the diamondoid, wanting to touch the characters that glowed within.

* * * *

Tequila is like time travel in a bottle. Drink enough and wake up in the future.

I'm in the future, but I'm not sure I'm awake, Alex thought. It was three days since he'd landed on Venus. Four more until he could board the Aphrodite and see what had become of Earth.

He'd thought the silence around him was like the hushed time in the early morning. But it was more than that. It was as if the planets had stopped in their orbits. It was as if everything had fallen to absolute zero, and all atomic motion had ceased. It was the polar opposite of the grinding bump and garrulous buzz of the seedy end of Los Angeles. It was that pause at three o'clock in the morning, magnified and redoubled and magnified again. It was an ache in his chest, a physical thing, as if he would never be full again.

Adele walked through the door.

Alex stopped pacing and stared at her. All thought ceased. For a moment, it was as if the very ground beneath him rolled and gave way.

She crossed her arms, giving him a thin-lipped grin.

"You're not real," Alex said.

"No," Adele said.

Alex looked at her again. He noticed that highlights on her simple white dress bloomed and spread, like sunlight seen through haze.







Alex looked at Earth from orbit.
Earth was a wilderness, seemingly untouched by humanity. The Los Angeles basin was an endless sea of golden grassland, swaying gently in the breeze. Scrub-bushes, eucalyptus, and oak crowded what had been the Hollywood Hills.
He took the shuttle down and stood on the hills that looked out over the San Fernando Valley, trying to

Alex returned to Aphrodite. His hands shook. The diamondoid glass of water clattered against his lips.

divine the hint of an ancient grid. Any remains of the streets and buildings that had once risen there. Sepulveda. Ventura. He could see them in his mind's eye. But even when he hiked down to the valley floor, even when he dug into the ground with his hands, where he knew Ventura once ran, he found nothing. No trace that humanity had ever been. The ship's voice, blandly female, told him softly that there

was nothing buried.

"Will you talk to me now?" Adele's shade asked. Alex looked up, through the translucence of the ship to the softly-shrouded stars. "Did you know it was like this?" "Only since we arrived." Alex had Aphrodite image every square mile of Earth. In the middle of what used to be the Winfinity States, herds of buffalo grazed again. In Europe, great forests carpeted the ground, untouched by any axe. In Egypt, the Nile Valley was untouched by tombs. The Pyramids themselves had been erased. He stood on the plains. The buffalo looked up, once, then looked away. The herd walked past him as if he didn't exist. As if he had never existed. He stood on the banks of the Thames, and wondered if this was what the Romans saw when they first came to that land. A fox stopped to stare at him from the comfortable darkness of the forest. Its green eyes flickered. Then it leaped away. And he visited his past. His house in Alaska. His home in Quito. All gone, wiped clean, like the wrong answer on a slate. *Reboot*, he thought. Could every trace of civilization be wiped clean in less than three thousand years? Aphrodite's mind told him no. Could humankind have left to other stellar systems, to garden worlds discovered or created? Could they have wiped the slate? No, Alex told himself. If they had done that, there would have been monuments. We were here. We screwed up. But we fixed it. We leave it here, as we think it once was. Something couched in florid turns of phrase that would only underscore its idiocy.

And even if most had left, there would be ones who remained behind. Humanity never thought with a

single mind. And if they had left on generation ships, there would be those who turned around and came back. And if they had cheated lightspeed itself, there would be tourists. Footprints on the perfect Earth. Shops selling little trinkets, rocks encased in diamondoid, or tiny bits of the True Pyramids, or of Washington Fallen. Because that was the way people were.

"Will you talk to me now?" Adele asked. "I can help."

How can you help? Alex wanted to ask. How can you even begin to understand?

And the silence. Everywhere Alex landed, the silence. Not the silence of nothingness, but the silence of no human voice, no human activity. It made Alex feel like an ice-sculpture made of frozen oxygen, endlessly cold, infinitely untouchable. He imagined building a house on Earth and living there, and cried terror. There was nothing human there, nothing for him.

Have I come to a timeline where humans never existed? Alex wondered.

No, Aphrodite told him, after it had finished its analysis. The shoreline of the east coast of the former Winfinity States was subtly different from the records it had, different in ways that suggested conflict with hundred-megaton weapons, rather than natural erosion. There was evidence that Earth's oil reserves were still depleted by the predation of the 20th and 21st centuries.

And, it said, there is biological and silicon detritus that suggests nanotechological reshaping on a planetary scale. Much like what you have done to Venus.

Alex had a terrible thought. His plan to terraform Venus had gone awry. Part of his package had landed on Earth instead. He had brought about the complete destruction of humanity.

No, he thought. Venus's package was specific. It would only activate in Venus's environment.

"You didn't do it," Adele said, as if reading his mind.

But it was done, he thought. Something did this. Something wiped humanity out, like a wrong answer, poorly given.

"Mars," he told the ship.
* * * *
Mars was like Earth. Rockport, gone. Winfinity City, gone. The south polar settlements, gone. Semillon Valley farms, gone. But hardy gengineered grasses grew on the chill plains, and thin white clouds scudded across the blue sky.
Alex stood where Rockport would have been. Low, dark-green bushes crowded the sickly yellow-green grass. Here and there, salmon-colored boulders punctuated the landscape, their sharp edges slowly softening in the new rains.
He breathed in the chill air. It had a sharp tang, like chlorophyl and rust.
I'm standing on Mars, breathing, he thought.
He drew the air in deep. It was like standing at the top of Yosemite. Chill and thin.
I'm standing on Mars, alone, he thought.
After a while, he went back to the ship. Adele said nothing. But he imagined she was watching him, and thinking, <i>Will you talk to me now?</i>

"The Moon," he told the ship.

* * * *

The geek-warrens were gone, as well as their blob of a ship, but there was a monument.

If you could call it a monument. On the lunar plain, there was a crystal stalk set into a semicircle of white concrete. The stalk rose thirty feet in the air, branching and rebranching, thinning and rebranching, until the ends of its stalks were nothing but a rainbow shimmer. The sun shone through the tree and cast

At first, Alex paid no attention to the refracted sunlight. He went to the base of the tree, where a single glyph was carved. It looked something like a stylized 'y', with a thick base that arced up to graceful curves, one drawn back on itself like a curlicue.
"What does that mean?" Alex asked Aphrodite.
"I do not know," Aphrodite said.
"I do," Adele said. Her voice was soft, guttural, sad.
"What is it?"
Adele didn't answer for a long time. When she did, her voice was little more than a whisper. "It's a symbol of the Angel of the Moon."
"What?"
Silence again.
"Adele, please."
"You wouldn't know," Adele said. "After you left, your Shekinah became very famous. She was known as the Angel of the Moon."
Alex felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach. He went to examine the sunlight that danced on the white concrete. Its rainbows twisted and shimmered, changing slowly in the slowly-moving sunlight.
In the middle of the rainbows, Shekinah flew. Her wings beat slowly, dreamily. He caught hints of rock in the background. A cavern. Like that day, so long ago.

shimmering colors on the white concrete.





She nodded. And now he'll tell me I shouldn't have embodied, I should have waited, it wasn't the right time.
Alex took one step and stopped. He wavered. Gave a tiny moan. Embraced her.
Adele stood stiff. I could back away, she thought. I could leave him. I could fly away to Earth and live there. He would never find me. And it would serve him right.
Alex sobbed, his head laying cradled on her neck and shoulder.
Adele put her arms around him.
They stayed that way for a long, long time.
* * * *
After that night, they talked. Like broken talking-head dolls, parroting comforting phrases as their sun-cast shadows moved jerkily against the back wall of Alex's apartment.
"What happened to Earth?" Alex said.
"I don't know. Any more than you."
"Something changed it."
"Maybe."
He shook his head. "Not people. We'd leave monuments. We'd open shops."



when month after month passed without pregnancy. Alex welcomed her back with a hug and a smile. He never said a word.

Because, for some reason, it was all right. They were not supposed to reproduce. They were not supposed to continue. There was something he could learn from that. Something beyond, *There are always limits*.

Alex started his own project. He had all the old tools. Some even better than he remembered them, built with fragments of data from Adele's files she'd sent to Venus, fifty years after he left.

I will live for another two hundred years, Alex thought. I have that time to work on this. And I can always simulate my mind and rebody.

But that isn't me, he thought, deep at night when the silence was only relieved by the sound of Adele's soft breathing and the beat of his own heart.

Adele, to her credit, never asked what he was doing. On the night the new ship launched, invisible, from the other side of the planet, she came up behind him and said, "You seem happy."

"Content," he said.

"What do we do now?"

"What?"

"Keep rebodying? Keep waiting for God to pop out of the woodwork and say, 'Sorry for the misunderstanding, here's what happened'?"

And, in that moment, he wanted to tell her everything.

You were right. I loved her. She's what sent me here. To escape that scary, scary fact. Yes, I wanted to see what we could be, but that wasn't all of it, not by a long shot. And when I get here, the only monument I find is to her. Like everything I did was really for her. Not for me. And so I have to do this. Because it doesn't matter to me or you. We will find our own way, and Shekinah

will find hers.

But instead he just shook his head and looked out over Venus, and thought of the package now hurtling towards the Moon. A hack of the Venus nano. Maybe it would work. Maybe it wouldn't. His skills were rusty. The Winfinity docs were shortspeak for headshots. But he could hope. And, if it didn't take, he could try again.

And in a few thousand years when the Moon blooms, he thought, it doesn't matter if we're around to see it. In a few thousand years when Shekinah and her kind come back to life, your children will be the ones to meet them. And when Shekinah and her kin soar into the sky on brilliant white wings, maybe you'll feel something, something I could never truly express. Hope. Thrill of beauty. Manifold of possibility.

"I don't know," he told Adele, finally. "But I won't leave you. Not again."

Adele cried and fell against him. He held her, sobbing. Maybe they would make more bodies. Maybe they'd make themselves into something ready to meet Shekinah and her kind as equals. Or maybe not.

Alex closed his eyes, seeing beings like butterflies dancing under a full Earth.