



Mother Of Our Race



Nick Lorange

A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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Mother of Our Race

By Nick Lorance

My story begins in 2007. I was recently separated and had moved to Las Vegas to find work. It started out well; I found work almost immediately and I seemed set. But late in 2010, I made a stupid mistake and ended up unemployed; because of circumstances, I was unable to collect unemployment. I was looking at bankruptcy and living on the street. I searched for work but the economy had gone to hell, and I could not find work. I stopped at a bar to drown my sorrows and that led to the hell on Earth that followed.

I have always loved Newcastle, which is why that casino was my favorite watering hole. I sat in my usual seat and signaled for a pint. It came and I sipped the

amber nectar. I was bloodied but unbowed. I was sure I would find work soon, so I was willing to run up my non-maxed out credit card.

I had downed about half of the pint when I felt someone taking the seat beside me. I looked at a tall slender older man who ordered a black and tan. I enjoyed them but most bars charge extra and my card wasn't that strong. He looked at me, then smiled. He signaled the barman, and a black and tan landed in front of me. Naturally I was suspicious; a guy doesn't buy another guy a drink without an ulterior motive in this town.

"I'll pay for this." I told him, waving my card.

The man caught my arm. "At the moment, your money is no good here." He motioned and I picked up the drink. "We need you, Michael."

"How do you know my name?" I asked.

"In the last few months, we have found out a lot about you," the man replied. "Your age and your genotype are perfect. You are what we need."

I pushed the glass aside. "What 'we' need? What are you, a pimp?"

"No, I am a professor of genetics and nanotechnology."

I shrugged. As Tom Lehrer once said, "this I know from nothing." "Why am I so important?" I demanded.

He sipped his drink. "Tell me, Michael, what if you could save an entire race? Give thousands a chance at a full life. Would you do it?"

"I don't understand."

The man ran his finger around the rim of his glass and made a spot of condensation on the wood of the bar. "Let us say that a doctor told you that your genetic structure could save those thousands. That by allowing us to harvest those genes, all of those people would be guaranteed their lives."

"I'd say you've been drinking something stronger than this."

"I am deadly serious. We need you to save our race, Michael," he replied. "And we have run out of time."

"Pull the other one, it has bells," I snapped.

"Oh, we are sure. You will save us from our own doom. But it must be tonight."

"Piss off." I snapped, standing. That was when I saw the device in his hand. I felt a shock as if someone had hit me with a cattle prod and collapsed.

NEW WORLD

I came awake on a gurney as some men pushed me forward. Above me was that bastard from the bar. I found myself in an ambulance shrieking through the night. It was surreal. Then I was in a bright room, him standing above me with an attractive woman a bit younger. They talked as if I didn't exist.

-Genetic imbalance-

-Not basic genetic structure. Wrong dipliod-

-Restructure-

-Can lead to possible mortality-

-Incidental-

-No second chance-

-No time remaining-

-Agreed- Did she sound disturbed?

-Restructure now, then transport-

-Physiological imagery set-

-Now-

At that, the woman that had been arguing filled a huge hypodermic with a gray fluid and plunged it into my arm. I knew her look had some pity because as the shot took effect, she winced away. Every inch of my body felt as if it were on fire, and I screamed in agony. I wanted to curl into a fetal ball but the straps held me down. I screamed and kept screaming as often as I could draw breath. Then darkness enveloped me.

I do not know how long it was before I stopped screaming. The agony and the darkness seemed to last forever and were intertwined. I was looking at a white-painted ceiling, feeling my body again, and knew I was awake. I looked at the window and realized it had to be evening.

The room didn't look right but I couldn't put my finger on why. I scanned it slowly, trying to understand. Then it hit me. The furniture, what there was of it, was subtly wrong, as were the window and doors themselves. It was as if the person who had designed and built the room and its furnishings had been working from a description, and they had to build all of it instead of pulling it from a props room or buying it. Every piece was subtly wrong. Even the quilt that covered me and the sheet below it felt like one cloth, yet appeared made of something else. It looked like cotton, but felt like silk.

I had moved nothing but my eyes. As if it were scripted, the door opened and the man from the bar

stepped in. "Well, you're finally awake. Are you in pain?"

"No." Whatever paralysis affected me didn't extend above my neck. As he came forward, I was able to follow his progress to the chair beside the bed, where he sat.

"Before we continue, I felt we should explain why you are here. I am Professor Gaelor, and you are on a planet named Islyor approximately 700 light years from your own world. Our people are dying out and we need to relocate. Your home world has been chosen because it is the closest match in conditions so that we can be acclimated readily."

"Like I said in the bar last night, pull the other one."

"That was not last night. Three of your months have passed. You have been in a flotation tank so no pressure would deform your body. Until today."

I tried to sit up but it was as if I were pinned to the mattress. "Why can't I move?"

"I decided to limit your movement until we finish this orientation," he replied.

"So you're going to invade us. Why was I brought here?"

"Invade?" He chuckled. "There are only about three thousand of us remaining. Even with the technology we have that is superior, there is no way we could conquer and rule a city the size of your home, let alone a planet of eight billion. No, we intend to slip into your society like mineral salts mixing with water to make sea water. We will live out our lives there without a ripple."

"But there is a genetics problem we must address, or those of our people that arrive will be the last of our race. May I explain?"

I shrugged, all the movement I was being allowed.
"Go ahead, it's not like I'm going anywhere."

"On your world, you have an animal called a mule. Do you know of it?"

"Sure. Male donkey plus female horse equals a mule."

"Did you know that the males are always sterile, and the females rarely breed successfully?"

"Of course. Donkeys and horses are different species."

"Exactly, and the reason they do rarely breed is because the donkey has 62 chromosomes, whereas a horse has 64. They do not match across so one chromosome is not linked to another as they must be. Our races, yours and mine, are like horses and donkeys breeding.

"If we go to your world, we have one single generation of children guaranteed. However we cannot guarantee even a tenth of those children will ever have offspring. We will die out as a race within a century of your time." He sighed. "If we had found your world even ten years earlier, it would not be a problem, but without a minimum of thirty thousand people, we will die out."

"So you need my assistance?"

"More your cooperation."

"It would have been better if you had asked."

“We are running out of time. The structure we live in has a finite limit on resources and recycling capability. We estimate that it can be maintained for perhaps twenty more of your years. Then it fails, and all who still survive will die.”

“So what, you take my cells and use them to make what you need?”

“Were it only that simple.” He sighed, looking away. “We have the same number of chromosomes as your race does but like your own, one portion changes very little. Do you know what mitochondrial DNA is?” I shook my head. “The full DNA of a human being, or for that matter, us, is split between mother and father. But whereas several billion people have an astonishing degree of diversity in their *father’s* DNA, your science has found only 46 different mitochondrial DNA varieties, which come from the mother.

“Since scientists call DNA the building blocks of replication, think of it as if you were building a structure. The mitochondrial DNA is the foundation, assuring your structure is stable, and the father’s DNA decides what type of structure it will be. But none of the human mitochondrial DNA varieties are compatible with our species. We have already tested that under laboratory conditions; every attempt to initiate fusion between those human DNA strands and ours failed in vitro, usually within days. If we used normal procedure, as I said, we would be creating mules.

“We found only one variety of *paternal* DNA so far that would allow such continued crossbreeding successfully, though pretty much all of it would allow at least one successful birth. However, that one strain does not help, because if a child were born with it as the paternal DNA, it would still leave us again, with

mules, since our own mitochondrial DNA varieties would be the foundation. And unlike most paternal DNA, it is rare, found in only 1 man per billion, so there are less than ten with it on your planet. Your people have a saying about finding a needle in a haystack. We were lucky to find you, and that took years.

“We found you by pure chance and watched you as we worked to create a 47th mitochondrial DNA variety using your paternal DNA. We were successful, we think. But there is only one way to test it. We need to assure that it will work because if it does not, we must find another way.”

“Which comes back to me.”

“Yes.” He stood, and reached into his pocket. The same device he had held in the casino bar was in his hand, and I tried to flinch away. “Don’t worry. I am just releasing the restraints.”

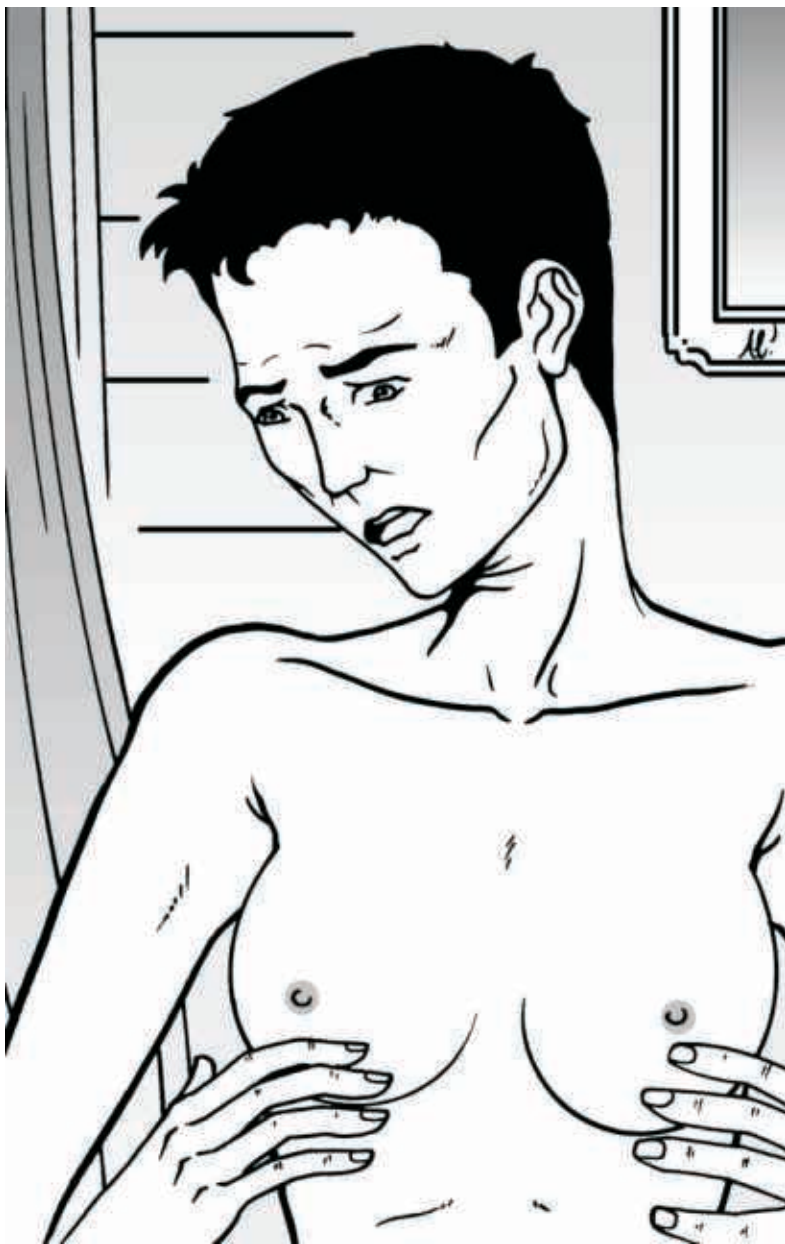
My body jolted. I hadn’t realized it, but I had been straining to move probably since I had awakened. Now I sat up, my lungs demanding more air than they were getting, my heart pounding like a drum. I clutched myself, and felt... odd. My hands were touching, breasts?

My eyes snapped open, and looked at my hands. They were clutching at my sides but holding them down were a pair of full breasts. Unwittingly, I ordered them to move. I was clutching the breasts, but they were on my own chest. Horrified, I clutched at my...

“What have you done to me?”

“We used nanotechnology to rewrite your DNA, creating what is called a diploid compliment. Your maternal DNA was rewritten to match you paternal DNA, and your paternal DNA was converted to a male version of the maternal. We started the transformation

while you were stunned before we left your home world."



I suddenly remembered that blurred time, the needle entering my arm, the agony. He was still talking even though, in my shock, I hadn't been listening.

"-which is why it will take a standard birth cycle to verify our attempt."

"What? Repeat everything after transforming me."

He gave a long suffering sigh. "We changed your body to female but to assure that our attempt is successful, we had to impregnate this body; we used my sperm, if you are interested. Then we will test the newborn child, which is why it will take a standard birth cycle to verify our attempt."

I stared at him in dawning horror. "So you kidnapped me, changed me into this-" I waved at my body, "then literally raped me so I can bear this child?"

"There was no rape involved." He looked repulsed. "We sped up your new biological cycle until you were fertile, then impregnated you using a syringe, though technically the child is mine."

"Whether you used a turkey baster or your dick, making me pregnant is still rape."

"I know this must be upsetting."

"You have no idea *how* upsetting!"

"But it is done and you will hopefully become the savior and mother of our race."

"Screw your entire race!" I started to fling the coverlet aside, but realized that I was nude. I clutched the covers to my chest. "Where are my clothes?"

"You have everything you need in the drawers there. We supplied everything the average woman might need."

"I want my clothes. Not something you wanted to see me in, not something that will make me more female. *My* clothes."

Again the long suffering sigh. "I will have them brought. Once you are dressed, I would ask that you come down for a meal so we can continue our discussion."

"Discussion! 'You're a woman, and you're pregnant, deal with it' is not a discussion, that is an ultimatum!"

"I would rather you did not see it that way. I know you had no say in the matter, but this is for the good of my people. We ask for your cooperation in this, but we do not need it. We can use harsher methods. You will be well taken care of as long as you do not attempt to frustrate what we need. If you do, you will be punished."

"What? Since you're technically the father, you get to rape me for real? That must be your fondest dream, you perverted bastard. Get out!"

He left. A few moments later, the woman I remembered from that blurred time came in. "Miyachi, I am Sela. I have brought your clothing, though they will not fit as well as they did."

"What is this 'Miyachi'?"

"Oh, you don't know our language. "Miyachi is our word for first mother." She came over, setting the clothing on the end of the bed. "Please get dressed."

"Leave."

"I am sorry but I was told not to leave you alone. Gaelor has told me that you are resistant to our needs. I have spent enough time in your world to know that

your people sometimes consider suicide as a last act of defiance. Once you have left this room, everything that could conceivably be used to end your own life will be removed, or rendered incapable of such use."

I snarled, climbing from the bed. "And if I try before you have made those changes?"

She held up the restraining device. "I will restrain you, have the changes made, and then you can get dressed." She looked chagrined. "I have my orders."

Oh you're such a good little Nazi." The words dripped vitriol. I picked up the T-shirt and pulled in, wincing as the cloth slithered across my nipples. Then I picked up the pants and pulled them on. The seat was tight, the waistband loose, and they were a couple inches too long now.

"I do not understand. 'Good little Nazi'?" Sela asked.

"If you're going to live among a people, you should learn their history." I snapped. The shoes fit like a row-boat, my shoe size must have shrunk at least two sizes. I put the socks on, and stood up. "So lead me to the Oberstrumbanfurher."

She looked confused, motioning to the door. I stalked past her into a railed deck. "The rooms are all equipped with motion sensors linked to the sensor implanted in your mastoid sinus. If you attempt to throw yourself over the rail, anti-gravity units will slow you to a stop before impact."

"Just remember," I warned. "Any psychologist will tell you that if someone really wants to kill themselves, they'll find a way." She looked alarmed at the concept.

I walked down the staircase, just a little cloud of doom for everyone I met.

THE RULES

The dining room was a large area with a table that would have seated 20. Gaelor sat at the head of the table, eating. Two women sat on the opposite side of the table from where I entered. He looked up, wiped his lips, and motioned.

“Daala will serve you. I assured all of your favorite dishes were prepared.” One of the women, a curvy redhead stood, and moved to an array of steam trays. I sat with my warden seated beside me, looking at the table. The dishes looked like something made for a space flight, thin, strong, yet flexible. Obviously, I wouldn’t be breaking them for shards. The glasses and coffee cups were plastic, but again soft. There was only a spoon of soft plastic in my setting.

“I am sorry for the restrictions on what you can use to eat. Your threats must be taken at face value. Now if you would merely accept...”

“Piss off, you bastard.” I snarled. “Your minions can’t watch me every second. When I have the chance, I’ll end it all.”

He shrugged. “Then you will understand why we must do everything in our power to stop you.”

“More power to you.” Daala set a plate before me and I was inundated in the delicious smells. My stomach grumbled and I picked up the spoon in one hand, a sausage link in the other. “You could have asked me to do this garbage.”

“I did, but you resisted even then. I had to think of my people.”

“Yeah, a race dying out, you told me that much.” I devoured the link, then another. The meat had an odd,

but nice flavor. "So you just expect me to give in and let you have your way?" I could tell from his expression that was exactly what he expected. "I would suggest you be very, very afraid. I will do what I can to end my life, or the life of this monster you fathered."

"And we will stop you."

"Go ahead and try." I sipped my coffee. "Why is it that I understand you?"

"We have a device that can implant memories. We used it to implant our language," he replied. "You have a strict regimen. Eight hours sleep every night, three good meals, vitamin supplements with each meal, and at least four hours of exercise a day. Walking, according to Doctor Sela, is best. She will examine you once a decad, starting today."

"Decad?"

"We do not use a seven-day week, we use a ten-day period, called a decad. Doctor Sela came today so she could examine you--"

"She can stay the hell away from me." I drained the last of the coffee. "As for this schedule you have for me, I will eat when and as little as I please. I will sleep when I get tired, and if you want me to exercise, I suggest you have a treadmill in my room along with a couple of men strapping me into it."

He sighed. "You can't fight us on everything, Miyachi."

"You don't know me, or my race," I warned. "And stop calling me that. I may be this first mother to you, but it's an honor I can do without. I'm a Texan by birth, and we always say the war between the states ain't over cause we ain't won yet'."

The as-yet unnamed blond woman looked at Gaelor. "I told you, professor, that this would occur."

"She will accept it."

"He," I snarled, "doesn't like to be discussed like a laboratory animal while 'he' is still present."

"I am sorry about that," the woman said. "I am Caela. When you were brought here, I explained that your people are like ours in form, but not in mentality. Our race has a tradition of acting selflessly for the greater good, balanced by the strength of personal choice. If you were a man of our race and this had been necessary, you would have offered to take this step for the few thousand that survive, or accepted it if you were our only hope, as you are."

"Having not been given a choice, I determined there would be resistance to our needs," she shrugged. "I was, however, overruled because of our desperate need."

"What are you? A psychologist?"

"Actually I am a sociologist. It was my job to determine what our society will face when we finally face your race as a group instead of as unseen observers."

"We have those traits," I told her. "But we also have the idea that you *ask* the person to sacrifice themselves, not just do it and expect them to accept it."

"We do not have the time remaining for that." Gaelor burst into the conversation again. "We have spent twenty Earth years just trying to find one of your race who would give us what we need. We did not have the time to coax you into it."

"Then you can accept my resistance as what you get in return. I will not merely accept this. I will not adapt

to be what you wish. I will fight back by every means necessary, even if that means I must end my own life, or the life of the thing you have implanted in me. Deal with that, people, and move on. Perhaps you can adapt to it."

"We did this for our race!" Gaelor leaped to his feet, facing me. "What is one human life compared to the survival of almost three thousand of us?"

I stood slowly. He was taller than I was now and had been when I was still a man. But I had never let size cow me. "Little miss Sociologist, perhaps you and your Gauleiter should have read our history as well," I said, looking at Gaelor. "A man named Stalin said, and I paraphrase, 'one man's death is a tragedy. Three thousand deaths are merely a statistic'. Another named Loyola said 'the ends justify the means' and that simple attitude has caused more pain and suffering through centuries than anything ever spoken before."

"Perhaps after the examination, we can speak like rational beings. Sela..."

"You can go to hell. I will not let that Nazi bitch touch me. If she does, you had best get some guys to strap me down so she can, or I will kill her myself." Caela gasped in recognition.

"She is a doctor..."

"Like I told her, if you're going to live among us, you had best learn more about us." I rounded on Sela, who looked confused. "About seventy of our years ago, we fought a war against a group called the Nazis. They, like you, thought that everyone, whether native-born or subjugated, had to give of themselves to the state; whatever the state demanded was acceptable. Those whom they considered enemies, some of them

only enemy because of their religion or life style, were packed into what we called concentration camps. But they didn't stop there.

"Over twelve million of those who ended up in them were worked to death, or if they were considered too young or infirm to last for long when they arrived, were sent to poison gas chambers on arrival. But worse yet were the 'doctors' who justified their actions as necessary for science and mankind itself.

"They did experiments that even to their own people would have been called medical torture on subjects who were merely chosen, not asked if they wished to participate. One, named Doctor Josef Mengele, experimented with twin children to determine how similar they are to each other, injecting dye into their eyes to see if the eyes would change color among even worse horrors, all without anesthetics. Another at the Ravensbruck facility, a woman's prison, removed samples of bone flesh and nerve tissue to determine if they could be transplanted successfully, again without anesthetics. At Dachau they put healthy men in vats of freezing water and recorded their deaths from hypothermia, so they could find treatments for their own soldiers. The list of atrocities goes on.

"So calling you 'doctor' cuts no slack."

Sela looked horrified. "I would never do such a thing!" Her hands clutched each other on the table.

"Then you must have a twin because I remember you and Doctor Mengele there," waving toward Gaelor- "discussing that large syringe full of gray goop before she injected me with it." I crossed my arms. "Oh, I know you felt some pity for me when you did, after all, I think the human lab assistants who spray things in an animal's eyes to see if it is safe for human

use probably feel pity for that animal as well. But like a good little Nazi, you obeyed your orders. Join that club of medical butchers; after all, the ends justify the means." If I had shoved a butcher knife into her I couldn't have hurt her worse, yet I twisted that verbal blade anyway. "Just remember, when those butchers stood trial, 'I was only obeying orders' wasn't considered an excuse."

I turned back to Gaelor, who had gone almost as pale as Sela. "Is there any more we need to discuss?" He shook his head mutely. "Then I will go to my room. I assume you have someone assigned to watch me?" He nodded. "I thought so. It was so pleasant to have everything nice and clear between us finally. The breakfast was good too." Caela stood to follow me out.

INTERLUDE

Sela burst into tears as Miyachi left the room. "Gods above, what have I done?" she whispered, her hands clutching the cloth piece, the 'napkin' beside her uneaten breakfast.

"She is understandably upset, Sela." Gaelor told her gently. "She will adapt."

"I did what had to be done and my soul is stained by that, Professor." She replied, hands coming up to cover her face. "When it comes time to stand judgment, they will not even have to ask the worst I have done. That worst has told us to our faces what monsters we are." She looked up. "Professor, I ask permission to go to a better world."

He looked at her for a long moment. "I must deny you that, Sela."

“Please!” She bowed her head. “There is no good I can do for our people that will outweigh the evil I have done.”

“You did what I told you to do.”

“And will our gods accept that I was ‘only obeying orders’ any more than those who used human law to punish their own?” She screamed. “Let me go on!”

“We need you, Sela,” he replied, walking over to stand behind her, his hands resting gently on her shoulders. “No one is more skilled among those doctors who remain. When we begin the cloning, we will need your skill to save all of our people from death.”

“I will not touch her again. I refuse.”

“You will not have to. Assign another to take your place as her physician of record. Go back to the medical center and use the ovaries we removed to begin cloning.”

She looked up, her eyes haunted. “We would not have had ovaries to remove from the clone if I had not injected her,” she said, half-accusingly.

“I know that,” he admitted. “Start the cloning.”

“But we do not even know for sure that the changes you made in her genetics will be viable yet, professor. What if they are not?”

“Then I have stained both of our souls for nothing,” he admitted softly. “But you know as well as I that we do not have the time to wait until the child is born. Not if we must wait, then clone the bodies, and age them properly.”

She nodded numbly, staggering to her feet. “I will do as you say, professor.” Somehow she found her balance, walking toward the door. Then she stopped.

“There will not be a body for me among them.” She looked back at him through eyes veiled with tears. “I will remain here when the others go to that world. I will contemplate all I have done to that woman as the pumps fail and the power dies, and the cold takes this place as it has all of the others. And I will consider it merely the first of the torments I shall lay upon myself when I stand before the gods. Perhaps they will consider it a good start.” She staggered from the room.

THE TRUTH

I didn’t speak to Caela as I went back upstairs. I wanted to work off some of my anger but when I tried to jog up two steps at a time, my new breasts bounced painfully. I returned to the room I had left. It didn’t look different at first glance but when I tried to move the chair from where it sat, it resisted as if anchored to the floor. On examination I noticed that the window and mirror had been replaced with some kind of plastic that resisted when I punched them.

Caela merely watched me as I tried to pull a drawer out completely and when I tried to fashion a rope from one of the sweaters in that drawer. While it felt nice and heavy, probably warm as well, the fabric shredded if I put any weight in my tugs. The sheet and quilt would fold down so I could get into bed, but would not come free of the mattress.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch me all day?” I snarled at her.

“No. If you wish, I can leave you alone. But are you not treating all of us as complicit in this? Are all of us that survive guilty along with the few who actually carried it out?”

I threw down the bra I had converted into confetti.
“Works for me.”

“Now who is being unfair?” she asked chidingly.
“Will you not at least look at what you are saving?”

I sighed, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath.
“All right.” I turned. “So what, I get a tour of my prison?”

“I would ask that you not call it a prison but yes. I can show you what is left of our world, and you can at least judge the rest of us by whomever you meet.”

“And how long does this tour last? The full four hours your leader told me I am required to do?”

“It can last for as little or as long a time as you wish. I am not here to coerce you in any way. Come. See us all as we are. Judge us by what you learn and witness.”

“Since this is all I have of my own to wear, it had better be enough.” I raised a hand before she spoke. “I know all of that-” I waved at the dresser and shredded clothing, “-was made for me, but I will refuse to wear it until I die.”

“The environment within the habitat is what you would call a shirt-sleeve environment, so what you wear should be adequate; though there are shoes...” She stopped talking. “Your feet will probably be sore before long, but you can walk barefooted if that is your wish. However, would it not be less painful to simply accept the shoes?”

“Every pain I feel will be because of what is done to me. Every sore muscle a reminder that I am being forced into this role. I will treasure them as mine, not something given to me.”

“As you will.”

We walked back down to the first floor and she led me to the large double doors on one end of the entry hall. She opened them and motioned for me to join her as she stepped outside.

I had not really looked out of the window, so it caused me to pause in wonder. A small city spread before me as far as the eye could see in the twilight, lit already by street lights. Delicate buildings so unlike the one we were in rose to perhaps twenty stories, with some kind of geodesic dome above them. I knew that because when I looked back, the building we had exited looked like an antebellum mansion from the Old South. The one orb in the sky looked small through that dome.

“This is the last surviving refuge of our people,” Caela said. “It was altered originally to house 20,000 of us, though only about three thousand remain. The building behind us was built so that you would have comfortable surroundings.”

“Yeah and your master would have a proper place to lord it over you all.”

“First, Gaelor is not our ‘master’. He is the head of our science council but he is only one of a dozen that acts as our government in these last times. There are few enough of us remaining to have a true democracy where all have a vote when needed.” She motioned to the house. “What do you think?”

“That if I had some weenies and marshmallows, it would look good burnt to the ground while I cooked them and enjoyed setting it on fire.”

She sighed. “If you will, where would you wish to go?”

“Home, and back to being a man for a start.”

“That I cannot help you with.”

“And if you could?” I challenged.

She turned facing me. “I told the council that this reaction would occur. I asked for some time, even just a few weeks, but Professor Gaelor had already injected you and there was nothing we could do. The nanotechnology is not well understood; only Professor Gaelor understands it fully. Those of our own people who underwent it reported horrible pain and nightmares. The very first time, the body survived, but the subject ended up as a mindless vegetable. Another time, they tried to stop and reversing the process caused the subject to die.”

“You did this to your own people?” I was appalled.

“We do not have stores of experimental animals to use as you have on Earth. Almost everything within the habitat has a specific use, food primarily. There are a few pets, but mainly they have followed our race into extinction. So what would you have us do? Seize a few dozen of the ‘street people’ from the city you came from? Steal animals that live on your world for it? Those who faced what you did were all volunteers. Except for those I mentioned, none of them were seriously injured.”

“So after you tested it on your own, you then used it on me?”

“We had to do at least one test on a human being to be sure. It would do us no good if the process worked perfectly on our race, but failed with your own. We found a man in your world who wished to be a woman. We know that your race doesn’t have full cloning capability yet and that you use plastic surgery to mimic what we do on the cellular level.

“That person was sounded out, then we approached him as a foreign scientific research company and told him what we wished to do. After about two of your months, he agreed. We brought him, injected him, and put him in the same tank you were in. He went into the tank and a woman emerged, perfectly healthy, but converted as you were.”

“All right.” I motioned toward the dome. “Is that the sun or the moon?”

“The sun. It is two hours after sunrise.”

“But why is it so weak?”

“It is a long story.”

“I have nothing but time.”

“Two thousand years in our past, a nearby star vanished from our heavens. It was a minor star but to one of our nations at that time, it signaled that our world would die. You see, it rested between a galactic dust cloud and our world and looked like a ghostly figure wearing a cloak. It was called the Eye of God by them. When it vanished, they believed God had turned his back on us. Within a decade, those people died or were scattered at the terror of it. ” She held up her hand as if the light from that feeble sun was too bright. “Back then, the Cloak was merely a black place in the heavens the size of your hand.

“About six hundred years ago, we reached something like what your people called the Age of Reason. During that time, as in your world, we studied our past, and the scrolls of that dead nation were discovered. We had just begun building telescopes and the Cloak as it was still called was studied. Yet the old drawings of the stars as seen from our world looked subtly wrong. The Cloak as seen then was as I had de-

scribed, but the area covered by it had grown. After a few years, the observers noticed that stars that were visible as little as a century before were also being obscured.

“Our age of space came as yours did, about three hundred years later. One thing we did was build a telescope like your Hubble; using other spectrums, we again saw that vanished star. By such telescopes, we were able to discover the star was barely four light years from us, the same distance as Alpha Centauri is from your own world. They examined the continued growth of the Cloak and finally reported 200 years ago that the cloud was headed for us, and would arrive within a century.

“Our world geared up to save our race from extinction. Picture every member nation of your world spending 90% of their annual budgets not on government or weapons, but on racial survival for that length of time! A series of habitats were planned 37 degree above and below the equator, with Richmond in Virginia to the North, and bisecting Uruguay to the South if this were your own world. With additional ones 25 degrees further toward the equator.

“We could go no further toward the equator since on our planet, our hemispheres are divided between North and South, rather than East and West. There is only one place closer to the equator than that, the island where this habitat rests. Remember what I said about a tradition of acting selflessly for the greater good, balanced by the strength of personal choice? This very dome was the first attempt to build a biosphere, a public zoo and arboretum built by a very rich man years before our impending doom was reported. When he heard of the coming calamity, he donated it as the

first habitat, then left our world going to a better world so someone else would have his place and live. That is where that balance of choice and sacrifice came from.

“We were more advanced than you in space, but not as far along in ground-based energy resources. We had gotten away from ground supplies because of environmental dangers; instead we had a swarm of solar power satellites. But we knew that the dust cloud would degrade that system. The theory of what your world calls pebble bed reactors had been discovered and we planned to use this form of fission not only for power generation, but for both power and heating so we could keep the habitats livable under conditions as low as -100 on your Fahrenheit scale. But here is where we had problems. We built as fast as we could, but in the years before the cloud reached us, we realized that less than half of our ten billion people could be saved.

“We had peace across our world when this occurred, but some nations acted as some of yours might. Nations withheld their supplies of fissionable materials, demanding more say in who would be allowed to be in the habitats; meaning they would choose, rather than giving everyone a chance. Those who disagreed with such coercion merely built railroads around those nations, discounting their supplies of such material. Yet other nations who would be among the first to freeze to death gave all they had and asked nothing beyond being remembered. At the center of our habitat is a pillar with slots of data discs; names of all of those that died willingly to keep the rest of us alive. Those nations and all of those who were not selected hold an honored place in that racial memory.

“We had those on the local level who also caused problems. Your nation spends billions on social pro-

grams; helping the poor survive. It is all well and good to help but we faced annihilation as a race and that money was needed for everyone. So we stopped the programs. Those poor had jobs they could do in those desperate times, but some rebelled, refusing to work, demanding that we kept them fed. When the selection occurred, they demanded placement where they could continue to be supported.

“We also had those who were rich, or held political power, who tried to grab space for themselves. Those were scorned by the common people and exposed. Think; if you were told that some man in his seventies thought he was more important than your child who would never live a full life, who would you choose to save?

“We told them instead that we would take their children. Children and pregnant women received favored status in our selection and that selfless nature came to the fore again. The average age of those selected was sixteen years of age, with a mere leavening of older peoples. Mothers handed their children to those who were selected; fathers went to a better world so yet another child could be chosen. ”

“You keep saying that, ‘Went to a better world’?”

Caela stopped walking. “We enshrined personal choice as I said and the one choice we hold most is the right to end your own life for the greater good. We call this going to a better world. Over a third of those who never reached the habitats went on to a better world giving their places to others. How could we not grant everyone that right?

She paced me silently for several minutes. “You cannot imagine the horror of those final days as the first outriders of our doom came between us and our

sun. Transports of every kind shuttled the chosen in; suddenly those who had thought it merely government grandstanding realized it was true. Those who would not be given space saw their deaths and some of them went mad. Most of the military and over half of our police forces were outside the domes; they found themselves fighting for enough time to move the last few hundreds of millions to safety.

“Those who lived within recorded that horror, watched our world die beyond our domes. Watched as those who had wanted more of that space or were just desperate to live fought with those who defended us as the cloud fully enveloped our system. Men and women who knew they had no chance of survival fought to save those who would live against those wanting to steal their place. Dozens of the first habitats were destroyed when the desperate ones used the few weapons of mass destruction remaining to destroy what they could not steal. Rail tunnels from habitats they had seized were blown so they could not use them to murder others who had been chosen to survive. On the warriors of our survival fought. They died in our defense and they saved almost half of our race with their sacrifice.

“They won but at a price you cannot imagine. Around our world, their tattered survivors would come to touch the dome, that remaining place where there was life, then departed to die unseen and alone.” Again there was silence. We had walked the better part of a mile, yet I had seen almost nothing of the habitat. Instead I pictured those last brave souls giving their lives not in fury and battle, but in silence.

“As we had expected, the satellite system soon collapsed, unable to survive the impact of even dust at

speeds of a hundred kilometers a second or more. Soon they began to fail, and as they did, the early habitats already buried under tons of snow and dependent on that fragile link began to fail. Those who could be relocated were moved toward the equator using underground railroads, and everything necessary to our continued survival was stripped from the dying habitats before the rail lines were collapsed to prevent heat loss. As the years passed, one after another of the habitats on that first line failed. But again, we could not save all, and almost three billion more went to a better world in that first century.

“We had still spent money on space travel in the hope that some of us could move to another world and a century ago, we finally developed two different technologies at the same time. One was what we called Slip Drive, which allowed speeds faster than light. We can travel to your world but it takes us seven years to reach it. But the few dozen scout ships we built did show us what we faced. The dust cloud is large enough that even at the speed it is traveling, it will take three centuries to pass through our system, a century longer than even our best estimate for our resources. We were looking at the end of our race. That fact caused many to go to the better world so others would live.

“Our population had dropped below a hundred million when those ships left. In the last century of searching for another world, it has dropped to hundreds of thousands. That is when finally, twenty years ago, we found your world and our present problems were revealed. Our population dropped as the last four domes beyond this one died, and we dropped finally to we few who remain.

“The other space travel technology is a stable wormhole gate between two places. We were lucky that it was discovered first, because the wormhole technology will link two worlds across the depths of space and allow instantaneous transport; but only to another gate. So when we found Earth, we had one there, aboard the scout. That fact will be our salvation if the genetics experiment works, though we will have to board the Ark, as you might call it, to travel there. There is not enough energy remaining to pass more than a few score through the gate before all of our power is exhausted.”

“Great.” I snarled. “I am your last hope, and you can’t leave until you’re sure.”

“We wish it were not so,” Caela replied softly.

“And if I wish to die, and have the right to die if I choose, how am I denied this?”

“Gaelor was only able to overrule your wish under our beliefs because of the child you bear. You cannot decide to murder an unborn child when you go on,” Caela replied. “No other reason would have been acceptable.”

TOUR

I stared at Caela, then turned to look at the dark city. I thought of billions of people willing to die so that others might live. Fighting in conditions that would have made winter in Stalingrad look like a beach party. All of that sacrifice distilled down to only three thousand lives. Was my former life that important? Then I refused the thought. They had been given a choice, made their decision, died to save others. I had not been given a choice. “So tell me of the world you have remaining.”

Caela nodded, accepting the change of subject. "The habitat is a dome, approximately ten of your miles in diameter. It has orchards for fruit, water to raise both fresh and sea water fish for food, fields of grass for our herds, and croplands to grow grain and vegetables. We even have a beach."

"A beach!"

"Yes," she smiled, "We can't think of just survival, we also feel the need for play. With only about three thousand of us left, most of the buildings have been sealed so they will not waste resources."

We walked through streets of beautiful buildings. People paused as we walked past. I hated the fact that every face I saw had one thing in common.

Hope. Hope that a conscripted human would save them.

Few came near, almost as if they were afraid of me, but Caela told me they were trying to give me space to decide to assist willingly. They felt that if they came, thanked me, or begged me, it would make the situation worse. Those who did come near, however, were people I might have liked under other circumstances, people I could grow to like in time. As much as I hated my situation, I couldn't hate them. That made me even more adamant.

Why did they have to be so nice?

I heard a sound I had not heard in all of our walk; a child's laughter. I turned and found her. It was a little girl, skipping along, singing a song, and laughing occasionally. Her hand was held by a woman walking along with shopping bags in her hand. The woman saw me and she looked away rather than give me hopeful cow eyes. The girl looked up at the woman, then saw

me. She stopped, causing the adult to be dragged to a stop. They talked for several moments, then the girl came toward me, towing her mother like a tugboat moving a liner.

"I apologize, Miyachi, but my daughter wanted to meet you." The woman said. "May I introduce Riiya-jen."

The towheaded girl came forward and held out a hand. I just looked at it and she gave an exasperated sigh. "Your people shake hands, don't they?"

I reached out, taking that tiny hand in mine. She couldn't have been more than six years old. "Yes we do, but I did not know your people did."

"Oh, we don't. I am learning about Earth for when we get there." She giggled. "Your name means 'first mother'. My name has a meaning as well." I saw so many of the watchers flinch in sympathy.

"What does it mean?"

"Last Hope," she answered brightly. I felt as if she had shoved a knife into my gut. "Momma told me after we found your world, she wanted all of our people to remember why we are trying to survive. I am the first child to be born in almost twenty years."

"Oh." I looked at the woman. "Yet another ploy?"

"No, Miyachi." The woman looked away, embarrassed. "She was born before we even knew if we could bear children on your world. She does not know of your present situation. I beg you, do not tell her."

"Tell me what, momma?" Riiya-jen asked.

"Nothing important," I told her, kneeling. "Shaking hands is our greeting, what do your people do to greet each other?"

She smiled. "It's good that you came down here, it can not be done if you did not." She reached up, placing the back of her hand to my cheek. I copied it, and she grinned. "There, we've greeted each other properly"

"It must be lonely being the only child among all of these adults."

"Sometimes it is," she admitted. "Any adult will play with me if I ask, but I think they only do it because they pity me." She looked woebegone.

"That isn't it," I said, blinking back tears. "People tend to love children. I bet they give you anything you want, don't they?"

"Oh no." She looked up at me wide-eyed. "They tell me that if they did that, I would never learn the worth of what is mine. That it would interfere with my choices in life."

"Yes." I stood. "Everything comes down to choices." I looked at her mother. "May I have your name?"

"I am Ola. I am in charge of material production."

"I am glad we met. It gives me more reasons to resist."

"Please, forgive me."

"Momma, why is Miyachi mad at you?" The girl looked distraught.

"I am not mad at her," I told the girl. Then I looked at Caela. "I am ready to go back."

"Yes, Miyachi."

"Will you play with me sometime?" Riiya-jen asked.

“Sure, another time.” I stalked away from them, Caela hurried to keep up. Once we were out of hearing, I snarled, “Damn you. ‘I am not here to coerce you in any way,’ you said.”

“Please believe me, Miyachi, If I had known Riiya-jen was there, I would have taken you another way.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew you would react this way!” She almost cried. “Have you not noticed that everyone who talked to you kept to safe subjects? Their day, how well you look, welcoming you but not thanking you? As few as we are, there are few secrets, and your arrival and why is known to all of us. They know you are upset by what has occurred, and resistant to it. Those who spoke to you took all of that into account.”

“Yeah, none of them have had their lives shredded by a callous hand,” I snapped. I knew immediately that I had said something wrong. She froze in place and instead of the furious face I expected, she turned eyes glistening with tears toward me.

“You have no idea what we as a people have gone through. What we personally have gone through. There were ten other habitats when I was born, six north of us, four south. By the time I was five, it had fallen to four. When all of those habitats still existed, we would have visitors coming and going all the time; technicians going to repair damaged equipment, people of what little government that remained assuring that we did not fight over resources. Visiting extended family in other habitats.

“Then those last habitats broke down irreparably and those in the failing one had to be shuttled to other

habitats that had room. Every time that happened, there was never enough room, and thousands would go to the better world. Picture living your life in one place, never moving, then suddenly you are packed on a train and sent to another place. When you arrive, you are among new people and you know there are hundreds or thousands of faces you will never see again." She gave an anguished sob. "That has happened so often to us that those in the habitats that accepted newcomers learned to treat the newcomers gently, make their new world as gentle as possible, and still know that a third to half would refuse to accept it and go to that better world!" She looked away and I could see her tears, like drops of crystal, fall on her hands.

Finally she spoke so softly I had to lean toward her. "When I was five, our habitat's heating system began to fail. There were fifty thousands in it, and some, barely two thousands of the children, were sent here. When I arrived, there were almost twenty thousand here, and they accepted us, treating us as the traumatized ones. My mother, father and two elder brothers stayed in the old habitat. Mother told me to be strong, and that I should not go to a better place while hope still lived.

"I did as she bid, going to the rail station every day, hoping to hear that a train had come in and I could go home. It wasn't until six months later that the station master admitted to me that the tunnel had been collapsed from the other end mere days after I had come here. My entire family had sent me off, telling me to be strong before they died in that frigid hell." She waved toward the dome. "By the time we discovered you and any hope of salvation, all but we had gone on.

"I think less than two hundred of those alive here now have not gone through that at least once as a refugee. All the rest of us came from other habitats, saw friends, family, waving goodbye, and knowing only later that they live only in our dreams. Do you know the nightmare most prevalent among our people for over a century?" she demanded. I shook my head.

"That you are sleeping and awoken because there is something different. That you wake up and the pumps that move air to keep it heated, that moves water to keep it liquid, have stopped. As you sit there, sure you must be wrong, you feel the air become more chill, then beyond the window of your room you see the lights that define our world die one by one.

"That is where the dreams diverge, depending on the dreamer. Some see themselves frantically trying to repair the machines, dying of the cold even as they fight on. Others see the other survivors sitting on benches and rock as they reminisce, and Death's cold hand summons them one by one. Others see everyone panicking; throwing books, flammable parts of buildings, clothing, anything they can find that will burn on bonfires as others cheer them on. All end with those few remaining slowly freezing as all their efforts are in vain."

She stood again wiping her eyes. "So yes, we know what you go through now, being dislocated from your life and forced into another. We have faced it and dealt with it and gone on." She turned away. "Come, it is near lunch time."

RESISTING

We entered the residence and I wanted to run upstairs away from it all. Their plight was real to me, yet how could I simply surrender and allow myself to be

used? The doctor, a woman named Karel, came, and escorted me to a room containing a medical table with stirrups. I had never considered how demeaning a pelvic examination is for the woman, so it was a unique and embarrassing experience. Feeling her probing and prodding, asking if this or that hurt. It was finally over and she handed me a packet of capsules. Vitamin supplements, I was told.

For three days I took breakfast with Gaelor's household, but lunch and dinner I ate alone, and I refused to leave the residence. On the fourth day as I dressed for breakfast, Gaelor came to my room.

"You were told that you must exercise and take dietary supplements," he snapped.

"And I told you I would exercise when I wished. As for your dietary supplements," I pointed at a panel on the wall that I had been told was the disposal unit. "I got rid of them."

He stared at it and his face was ugly when he looked back at me in fury. "I warned you there would be punishment--"

"Sure," I snarled. "You will no doubt rape me for real if I resist. Well, bring it on!" I stalked past him and went down. Daala had already prepared my meal and I fell to; I had always enjoyed what was served for breakfast more than any other meal. The food tasted a bit odd because there was nothing from Earth in it beyond the recipes and some spices, but Daala's cooking made everything delicious. I finished a breakfast worthy of a lumberjack, then went to the library.

I had found it that first afternoon and at my request, the works were replaced with English translations. I was searching for the one thing I did not yet have; a

map of this habitat. I could not very well escape without knowing which way to go. I considered, just escaping from any watchers wouldn't help; the only place to go here was out into the cold, where I'd die in minutes. I had to find the gate.

Caela came as she always did to offer to act as a walking companion. I put down the book, surprising her. "Sure." She smiled and we left. We walked through the perpetual twilight. She led me to the edge of a field of some kind of grain. As we approached, I noticed it was becoming brighter; by the time we reached the edge, my eyes were wincing at what could have been full sunlight.

"Why don't you have the light this bright during the day everywhere?" I asked.

"The plants need more sunlight to grow properly; we can use sun beds to give our bodies the equivalent of vitamin D and do so," she replied. "Having the entire habitat lit like the sun would be normally uses ten times as much power as merely lighting the fields and orchards. In fact, we had to create special lamps that generate this much light with less power just for the fields to maintain our food supply."

"Couldn't you ship food through the gate?"

"If we had the power, we could. But whichever way something moves, it still uses power. We used the same power as moving a human being just to ship in the cases of spices you are used to."

I considered asking. No, she wouldn't tell me. What the hell, I might as well try. "I've heard about the gate and read some of the non technical texts, but even those were too technical for me. Could I see it?"

She paused, then changed directions. "If you would like." I didn't believe it. They were actually letting me near the door to freedom? She led me to the edge of the dome, to a large metal door. "This is the entrance to the hanger where we have the Ark. The gate is inside the ship itself." There was no code to enter. She just pushed a simple button.

The massive doors didn't move, but a smaller door set beside them slid open and I stared at the 'Ark' in wonder. It was huge; the size of one of the humongous Ultra Large Crude Carriers, meaning almost a quarter-mile in length and weighing about half a million tons. "That's huge!"

"The ships of this class have to be. They were designed to move 100,000 people with space for population growth for up to a century. All of the various fields beyond have spaces aboard so that when the ship is getting ready to leave, they merely transplant all the grain, vegetables, animals and orchards inside for the voyage." We walked down that long side as I looked it like a rube in the big city.

"They built more of these?" I waved at it.

"Of course they did." She shook her head in exasperation. "We had hoped to move several hundred million people, not just a few thousand! Every habitat had one or more of these ships located there so that we would not have to send trains from every other habitat. The first tier habitats; the farthest north, had space for fifty ships each. The second and larger tier of habitats had almost twice that each. We, as the smallest habitat, only have this one."

"But if you can only sustain 20,000, why did they put a ship here capable of moving five times that many?"

“I don’t know a lot about even oceangoing ship design, but it was because you build such a ship from blueprints, I think you call them. I do know from those friends I have in production and manufacturing that you work from a design. When these Arks were conceived, they went straight to the larger vessels as soon as the last of the scouts were built. That meant; as it has been explained to me, that you need to do what is called retooling, changing the production facility to handle the newer ship.

“They knew such a large ship would be a waste for our habitat as you can understand, but they were worried about how long production could continue, and it would take almost two years from planning to finished vessel. Should they waste that time first building one for us alone, and perhaps leave hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions unable to leave because the production facilities failed before they built enough larger ones?

“Worse yet, except for perhaps two dozen factories, all of our production facilities for these ships were in our first tier habitats, where they had hundreds of millions of citizens to fuel the workforce and the yards already in place. They placed this ship first and when newer ones were completed, they were sent first to the second tier habitats.

“The cloud covered us and production faltered, then died. Not every habitat in that first tier ever received even the first of their Arks before the production lines began to fail. Some yards needed for construction had been built in the second tier; they were able to continue at least assembly before the last of the first tier habitats died.

“When they did, the ships that had been placed already in those dead habitats were loaded with all of the food plants, animals, supplies of necessary material, everything needed to survive and moved further south. So they were able to assure every habitat in that tier north and south were fully equipped. But the production lines that could manufacture the hull plating and structural ribs were long dead, and they could not recreate them. So...” She waved at the ship.

“One benefit of doing so were that people could live within them and eat their food, so for a time even we were supporting hundreds of thousands as their ships rested on the snow and ice beyond until their fusion plants died. We had no way remaining to separate out hydrogen for their fuel, and they were meant for travel a relatively short time, no more than a decade before having to find a star system with a gas giant to refuel from. So even those Arks finally died. If you go as little as ten miles from our habitat, you would see hundreds of Arks sitting there on the ice, frozen in memory. Their survivors moving into our habitat as the numbers within dwindled toward nothing.”

I started shivering as we walked on, but Caela said nothing. “Why is it so cold here?” I asked.

“We don’t waste energy heating the bay much above freezing. If you would like, we can go back to the residence and you can put on shoes and warmer clothes.”

“No.”

We reached the stern, where an equally huge ramp was. It was wide enough that a dozen Peterbilts could be driven up abreast into a large loading bay. Here forklifts sat, beside hundreds of flatbed carts to handle loading when those trucks stopped. She picked a

smaller one the size of a golf cart and drove on into the ship. I felt like a flea walking across a sleeping human as we drove on and on. Finally she stopped the cart, motioning toward a normal sized hatch. "The gate is in there."

We climbed out and she touched her palm to the panel beside the hatch. It snapped open and we stepped into the compartment beyond. It was large enough to hold fifty people. On one end of it was a simple ring of metal like the ring they used in the movie *Stargate*, with a ramp that led up to it wide enough for a smaller truck, maybe a five-ton. The hatch we had entered through was in the center of a hatch large enough for something that size and the passageway beyond that had been the size of a four-lane road.

In the center of it space seemed to curl and twist alarmingly. I started forward, but Caela stopped me.

"Do not get any closer. While we are to show you everything you wish to see and allow you to go where you wish, the Gate itself is forbidden to everyone." She pointed at something that looked like a small TV camera on the bulkhead. I saw there were a dozen of them. "Those are restraint projectors. If anyone not authorized approaches the gate, they will stun them." She gave me a look. "This is not just to stop you; how many of our own do you think would be willing to flee and live their lives, short as they may be, in your world?"

"Wonderful." My feet were sore and cold from the walking and she led me back to the cart. We rode in silence back to the cargo bay, then walked back into the habitat. I felt better as the warmth brought me back to normal.

We returned to the residence. I stopped when I entered the room I lived in. A treadmill like they used in

gyms had been installed in the corner near the window. On the bureau was yet another packet of vitamins that I dumped into the disposal chute. For once, I went down to the dining room for lunch.

Gaelor was already there, eating some kind of stew. "What is the treadmill for?" I asked as Daala set a bowl before me with several slices of homemade bread.

"You have not tried any of our dishes," she said. "This is Garnash stew, spiced with our own herbs and spices." She set a small carrel with salt and a dozen different spices. "In case you feel the need for what you are familiar with."

I dipped my flimsy spoon into it and tasted it. "It's wonderful, Daala. And your bread is always welcome."

She gave me a warm smile. "My thanks, Miyachi."

She left and I ate. Soon I was wiping the bowl to get that last smidgen of that delicious stew. "You have not answered my question."

"It has taken you days to decide to exercise and this is not good for either you or the child. Therefore I had the treadmill brought across so you do not have to leave the building."

"You might as well take it back out. I will exercise when I wish and you can go to hell." I stood and walked out and up the stairs. I reached the room before I realized he had followed me. I opened the door and started to close it in his face, but he shoved it open. "Get the fuck out of here!" I shouted. He stalked toward me. I started to swing at him, then felt myself fall as he hit me with a restraint field. As I lay there unable to move, he grabbed my arms and locked something like a pair of handcuffs onto my wrists. Then he

stepped back, holding the small chain that linked them as the field was released. Before I could react, he jerked me to my feet and started toward the treadmill.

I fought back, kicking at him, leaning against that inexorable pull, and was not even able to slow my progress. He snapped the chain into a ring set on the machine as I clawed my way to my feet.

“This is set to move at what you would call a jogging pace for four miles. Once I touch this button, it will start, so you had best get ready.”

I glared at him. “Fuck you.” He glared at me, then hit the button.

The treadmill jerked into motion but instead of trying to match its pace, I dropped to my knees. I could feel the belt ripping past, sawing through the knees of my pants like kneeling on an industrial belt sander. Still it ran and I felt like I was holding onto a door handle while a car dragged me at ten miles an hour. The cloth protecting my knees gave. I wanted to scream at the sudden agony as the belt bit into my flesh, but instead I bit my lip. I would not give him the satisfaction.

The treadmill suddenly stopped and I gasped, feeling blood running down my legs. I had almost bitten my lip through in those interminable seconds. I felt my arms move as he released the ring, then my arms fell as he removed the cuffs.

“Why do you fight us?”

“You,” I groaned.

“What?”

“Without Sela here, I am not fighting everyone. I am fighting you.” I tried to kneel up but my knees screamed in agony. I rolled on my side, looking up at

him, my face angry. "I don't care about those other people out there. If they had brought me and asked, I might have given your people what they wanted. But you didn't ask. Sela didn't ask. I did not want to be a woman, I didn't want to bear this child. You decided that for them, for me. So this is all you get from me.

"I will find a way to die if it is at all possible. If I have to, I will take all of their hopes and dreams with me when I do because you did this to me. If the baby dies before I do, I will fight you, her, and any of them who try to impregnate me again, and I will dance on the grave of your entire race when I do!"

"Your life could be pleasant if you would just accept this."

"Spare me that garbage." I staggered to my feet. The pants were soaked in blood from the knees down and it hurt to even stand but I was adamant. "If you want to understand my people, maybe you should read Dylan Thomas. Now get out of here and leave me in my misery."

He stood there, looking shocked. I could see his hands clenching, knew he wanted to beat me for my defiance, but he could not get past having hurt me. "I will have Daala come up and treat your injuries. Then I will have your clothes mended."

"As long as I don't have to bear your touch, I thank you for treating the wounds that you inflicted." He winced. "As for the clothes, if you mend them, I will stuff them down the disposal like all of the vitamins and clothes I tried to use as ropes to kill myself. All you would have to do is make sure to hurt enough of my body to replace all of the fabric with what you supply. As much as you might get satisfaction from it, I will not let you hurt me more, or wear what you supply. Now,

Get. Out." He sighed, head hanging and walked toward the door. "Oh, by the way, the poem begins, 'Do not go gentle into that good night'."

I heard the door close and only then did I fall back on the bed, clutching my knees and mewling in my agony. I heard the door open; after a stunned moment I heard Dalla whisper, "Oh, you poor girl!" She peeled the pants away, the cloth pulling as she reached the torn fabric, flesh, and blood that glued it to me. I lay quiet, my eyes closed as she sprayed something on the wounds that instantly took away most of the pain.

She worked silently and finally told me she was finished. Only then did I look at what had happened. My knees were a bright pink from some kind of gel molded over them. "It's a covering made from an artificial skin we grow for emergencies. It acts both as bandage and padding until your own flesh heals. There will not even be a scar."

"Too bad. A wound gained in a struggle for your life should leave a scar."

She merely shook her head, picking up the shredded pants. "I have been told you merely wish these cleaned, not mended. Is that a fact?"

"Yes. A reminder of what I endure." I looked up into her worried face. "Thank you for your gentle pains, Daala. But right now, I want to be alone."

"As you wish."

The next morning, the treadmill was gone.

INTERLUDE

Daala allowed the door to close before she began to weep. The injuries had not been life-threatening or even that painful, but the fact that they had been in-

flicted yet did not stop her resistance to what was happening disturbed her deeply. She walked down the stairs into the dining room where the Professor sat staring at the wall. "I will clean her clothes and return them."

"Thank you, Daala." He turned to look at her. "She has been throwing the vitamins away. I will have to ask you to add them to her meals from now on."

"No, Professor." She looked at him as he turned, astonished by her refusal. "I will not add anything to her diet. I will make sure to find out which vitamins she needs in this condition and adjust the recipes to assure that she gets as much as possible. If this does not satisfy you, you can replace me, but if you do, I think she would be smart enough to realize why." She bowed and left him alone.

He stared on at the wall, trying to think of something to use to convince the woman, but nothing came to mind. He heard someone approaching. It was Caela.

"You needed something, Professor?" she asked.

"Yes. I tried to have her use a treadmill if she refused to walk, but all I did was cause her injury. She spoke of someone named Dylan Thomas. Did you find anything by the person?"

She took something that a human would have thought was a e-book reader, touching the screen. "Dylan Thomas, he was a poet from a nation called Wales who died about sixty of their years ago." She looked up. "He was prolific. Did she give you any reference to a title?"

"Only a phrase. 'Do not go gentle into that good night'."

She scrolled down. "There is a poem by that name. Written for his father who had gone blind and was dying. I will bring it up..." She paused, then her face grew pale. "Oh my gods."

"Well, what does it say?"

She looked at him, then began.

"Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

"Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

"Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

"Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

"Grave men, near death, who see with blinding
sight

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

"And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

She stopped speaking, eyes filled with tears. "Oh gods, that a man of her world long dead could speak as

if to us directly!" She looked up, handing him the device. "That is all we are doing, any of us who see our deaths. We are raging to continue to live. In her own way, she is struggling to go into that night just to spite us."

"To spite me," Gaelor whispered.

"What?"

"She told me that while she feels nothing for our people, she might have helped if we had given her a chance. No, if I had given her a chance."

"Why did you merely hand her no choice, Professor? The Council never explained why they allowed you to do it this way."

He sighed and told her. If anything, the horror in her eyes grew as he did. He finally stopped speaking.

"Then tell her! Or let *me* tell her!"

He shook his head wearily. "She would think it is merely a ploy to buy her acceptance, as would I, I think, if I were in her place. We must stay the course."

"Even if she does succeed in killing herself?"

"Even then."

ESCAPE

I took weeks to plan, because I would only get one shot at my escape. I had found that there was an emergency hatch release in the docking bay where the Ark rested, I even found its location in the map of the city. When the Ark launched, they would merely blow the hatch rather than hope that possibly frozen machines would still work after centuries without being used. If I could reach it without being caught, I could pull it and smash that entrance to rubble. It would also sever all of

the power lines leading into the habitat and would cause the entire structure to shut down; after all, you only blew that hatch when there was no one still alive remaining.

If it were a choice between all of them dying and me escaping, I was sure they would let me go.

I thought of those that I considered friends; Daala, Caela, some I had only met who had treated me with utmost kindness; even Riiya-jen. I would be murdering them as surely as if I had a gun to their heads. I almost reconsidered. No. This might be a velvet prison with every want catered to, but it was still a prison. I had a duty to my own peace of mind to fight them, even if it meant all of them died.

So why was it so hard to get to sleep that night?

The next morning I was still dog tired from tossing and turning all night. When I was able to sleep, I had nightmares where I saw Riiya-jen looking up as everything suddenly shut down; Daala sitting at the table eating a meal she knew would be her last. Caela sitting at a desk looking out her window into that cold dead night as the chill rose around her and she lived out the nightmare all of her people shared.

I considered the poem I had told Gaelor to read. Rage, rage against the dying of the light indeed.

Daala clucked when she saw my face and she rushed into the kitchen to return with French Roast coffee that dragged me into wakefulness. I ate a larger amount than normal, fueling my body for my attempt.

Caela came in and I told her I was going to walk today. She looked at my bare feet but said nothing. While my feet felt the chill, I couldn't wear the socks because they were stuffed in my back pocket.

She was handling me as if I were a turn of the century Dresden china doll. "Where do you want to go?"

"Well I haven't seen the Beach yet. Where is that?" I asked.

"It's that wa-" I pulled out the tied socks filled with the handfuls of dirt I had collected and hit her behind the ear. She collapsed onto her knees and as she turned to look back at me, I hit her again. She fell on her face and I was running. I saw people on that run, people who looked up astonished as I raced past them toward the hanger. No one tried to stop me. I reached the entrance hatch. I hit the button and the door snapped open.

I ran toward the stern of the ship. The switch was near it. That was because whoever had to pull it would die in minutes if they didn't get aboard. I saw the switch and stopped, gasping. Not exercising every day meant I was woefully out of condition and I didn't have the wind I was used to. I leaned down, hands resting on my lower thighs, as I gasped painfully, trying to fill my lungs. I heard something and saw a dozen men in uniform running toward me from the hatch I used. They were police; I had seen enough of them during my time here, and was reminded of the old stereotype of a London Bobby, so polite and understanding.

I staggered forward, the switch only a few dozen feet away.

"Stop!" someone shouted. I broke into a lung-tearing run, reaching out-

Then my legs gave way. A restraint field! I fell, feeling my nose break as I slammed down, unable to stop

myself from hitting the floor. I heard someone come up behind me and gentle hands rolled me on my side.

There were several minutes of waiting before an electric cart arrived and I was lifted onto a stretcher, then loaded into it, still restrained. Soon we were back at the residence and Karel was already there. She hissed in sympathy and used something to numb my entire face as she set my nose.

"I will leave you something for the pain," she told me, setting a packet of pills on the side table as she closed her bag. She leaned forward, whispering. "I wish I could do more, Miyachi." Then she was gone.

I heard her leave and finally the restraint field released me. I wanted to hold my face and scream, but I didn't. I heard the door open. Without even looking, I knew who it had to be.

"Take your pain pills," Gaelor said gruffly. "We have something to discuss."

I rolled over, snatching up the pills, and stood. Then looking at him defiantly, I crossed the room and dumped them down the disposal.

"There is no reason you have to be in pain," he said, exasperated again. I did not answer him. Merely went to the window seat and stared out the window.

"How is Caela?"

"She had a headache and they think you might have given her a concussion, but she will be well in a few days."

"When you see her, tell her I am sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I turned at the fury in his voice. "That you didn't succeed in putting a gun to all of our heads to get free? That you didn't succeed in killing us

all so you can gain your revenge?" He stalked toward me and his eyes almost flamed in his fury. "We have done nothing that deserves mass murder!"

"You kidnapped me," my own fury rose in answer. "You turned me into a woman, impregnated me, caused my knees to be ripped, and cause me to break my nose! Why should I think for a second that I as a person am important to you beyond being your brood mare?" I glared up at him. "Caela told me about the people you tested this perverse experiment on. Of the first one who was a drooling vegetable when you were done. Why not do that to me now? Turn me into a mindless thing that won't--"

He slapped me and as part of me quailed in terror, the rest was exultant. Maybe he'd forget to stop and finally beat me to death! He slapped me again, this time backhand, the force of the blow throwing me to the floor. Before I could move, he grabbed me by the back of the neck and flung me face down on the bed.

What landed on my back was no longer human. I felt his hands grab the neck of my T-shirt and he ripped it down the back. Then he flipped me onto my back, hands clawing at the button of my pants. I didn't realize what he was doing until the button tore free and the zipper was torn apart. I grabbed the waistline, pulling it up against his trying to pull them down. After a moment, he grabbed the open fly on both sides in his hands and with a bellow, pulled the hands in different directions, even as he lifted. My weight and his insane strength ripped the crotch out of the pants.

He was snarling, flipping me back onto my front, and his hands turned my pants into two separate leggings. Only now, with both of his hands against mine, was he able to rip them from me. I rolled over, watch-

ing him storm over to the disposal, and the last of my old life was gone.

He spun around, and his eyes were insane. "Why can't you just do what you should?" he screamed. "I will not accept this madness for another second, Miyal!" He stalked toward me like a cat playing with a mouse. "You will do your duty, or be damned!"

My own snarl wasn't human. "So it's back to rape? Here, let me help you!" I lay back, feet on the bed, and jerked my pelvis up in a parody of sex. "Oh, do me baby! Make me feel it!"

Probably nothing would have broken through his madness except for that simple movement. He stopped in his tracks and his fury drained away. His hands fell to his sides and I reveled in it. "No?" I rolled over on hands and knees as if offering myself doggie style. "You want to dominate! You don't dare look a woman in her eyes as you take her, can you?"

He backed away, his head shaking in negation at my pantomime. "No? Oh, I know, you need to bind her and fuck her like a slave! You even want her to beg you!" I let my face fall to the bed, my hands behind my back, fingers interlinked, offering myself as if I were bound. "Please master, fuck your slave like the whore she is!" I said in a sarcastic tone.

He stopped, shaking his head, then buried his face in his hands. I rolled to my side, my face ugly with hate. "Since you can't get it up, I suggest you talk to the doctor and get a prescription. I am sure your race discovered something like Viagra." He lowered his hands and I saw a deep sorrow. But I didn't give a damn what sorrow he felt. "If you aren't up to raping me, I would rather be alone, if you don't mind."

“Miyachi,” he whispered, then one hand came up imploringly. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“For someone who didn’t want to hurt me, you’ve done an excellent job of brutalizing me. So why the hell should I believe you?” I rolled to my knees. “Get out.”

“Miyachi, please-”

“Get out.” I repeated, then my own madness sprang to the fore. I screamed. “Get out! Get out! Get out! Get out!” Every time I repeated it, he acted as my words were whips and he finally escaped. But I wasn’t done. Nothing in the room would move if I tried to move it but the pillows, and they ended up against the doors as I descended into madness as dark as his own.

A time so long I didn’t even know how long it had been finally lifted. I found myself laying on the bed in a fetal ball, as mindless as a shock victim. I heard Daala come in, heard her cry of disbelief, then felt ice pressed against my lip where I still bled. I clasped the bag against me.

“Miyachi-”

“Go away, Daala.” I whispered. “Leave me in my agony.”

“Miyachi-”

“Please, Daala.” I looked up into her eyes. “Leave me be.”

She bit her lip, then nodded. I watched her leave, then lay there for a time only gods would measure. I found myself at the window seat. I sat on it, leaning my head against the plastic, facing outward. I brought my fist up, and struck the glass, but it didn’t shatter.

INTERLUDE

Daala brought the tray, followed by Caela. The madness of the day before should have ended, but her heart fell as she saw Miyachi still kneeling on the window seat, her face pressed against the plastic on the window. They paused at the door in horror at the pathetic sight. Every few moments, a hand would lift as if controlled by a puppeteer to slam against the plastic of the window, to pause, then drop to her lap. She had not dressed since the screaming of the day before, so she knelt, nude and sleek as an animal of the sea so long ago.

“Please, Miyachi, this is unseemly.” Caela went to the bureau, drawing out a night gown. Miyachi did not resist as the woman dressed her, then grabbed a brush and brushed her hair until it shined. “There. That’s better” But the bright cheerful tone was as fake as a piece of glass pretending to be a diamond.

Daala came forward with the meal, but she felt trepidation. “You didn’t eat dinner last night or breakfast this morning. You have always enjoyed my bread, so I baked a loaf just for you.” She set it down before the woman. Miyachi looked up. Her eyes focused for only a moment, then went back to the blank stare.

Daala took a spoonful of the stew and conveyed it to Miyachi’s mouth, but it didn’t open. The eyes never focused on anything in the room, but her hand came up and Daala relinquished the spoon. For a moment it hung there, inches from her mouth, then she turned her hand and the spoonful of stew fell to the floor. Before they could react, her hand lifted the bowl of the Garnash stew she had so enjoyed, then dumped it contemptuously onto the floor. She set the bowl down,

then her hand caught the plate of already buttered bread and the slices hit the wall. One slice stuck itself, then dragged toward the floor, leaving a trail of butter like a snail trying to escape.

She stood, gathering the dishes, and dumped them into the disposal. For a moment, they thought they saw something in her eyes, then her hands came up, catching the nightgown's neck. Making the clothing as flimsy as tissue paper might have stopped her from killing herself, but it worked in her favor as she ripped it from her neck to her knees. She balled it up, stuffing it into the disposal, then she walked over to the dresser.

As they watched, every stitch of clothing in the drawers ended up down the same disposal. Now with nothing to wear, the pathetic, yet proud, figure returned to the window seat. Her head leaned into the glass, weary, yet still defiant. Then a hand came up, balled into a fist, and punched at the glass. Nothing else happened for several seconds. Then the other hand repeated that desperate plea for freedom.

DEFIANCE

I do not know how much time passed. I heard Daala, I heard Caela, each begging me to eat, to do something, but they were the song of birds for all I got from their trilling. I saw the sun rise and set and felt nothing.

A pair of hands dragged me away from the window and I found myself on the bed on my back. My nemesis looked down and I struggled as a tube went down my throat. I felt something pass down, knew it was food somehow, and resisted all the harder, but he had used his restraint field to force me to accept it.

"If you do not eat, it harms the child," he chided me.

I felt the field dissipate and his look of satisfaction faltered as I sat up, then shoved my fingers down my throat. Trust me on this; the only thing that doesn't taste bad coming up is peppermint schnapps. I know I liked Garnash stew but having it come up via projectile vomiting will convince you that a Cordon Bleu meal is not worth it. I had an instant of victory, then he triggered the restraint field again. As I lay there, unable to resist, he again fed the tube down my throat, and again filled my stomach. As I lay there, he cleaned me as gently as he might have done a child. When they changed the sheets, he needed Daala's help but I could tell from her expression that the only reason she did help was it would have been more demeaning to leave me laying in my own filth.

"I will leave you in the restraint field for an hour so you can digest." Gaelor leaned toward me. "You will eat as a human being or as an animal. It is your choice."

"Who is Miyal?" I asked.

His eyes widened. "No one you would know."

I let it slide. "Are you going to force feed me for the next six months?" I demanded. "I'll resist every second!"

"Resist and be damned," he snarled. "For my people I will condemn myself to all of our hells!"

I looked at him and for the first time I saw someone as adamant as I had been. As much as I wanted to resist, I considered months of someone force feeding me three times a day and my heart quailed. I saw his sensing that and knew he had sensed his victory. I looked

away at the shame of being willing to give in even this much.

I felt pathetic as part of me surrendered.

INTERLUDE

Daala felt soiled as she staggered down the stairs. She had refused changing Miyachi's diet, then found herself caught as Gaelor, like a desperate gambler going all in, went one step further. She had witnessed the second forced feeding, felt Miyachi surrendering, but looked at what had happened like a bible scholar wondering what had occurred.

Their brief contact with Earth had given the people of her world a glimpse of humans and Daala felt her spirit rise as she input the first clue into a blog; Who is Miyal?

Across the habitat, Riiya-jen was bored. The worst part of being a child is when you discover that all of the adults want to hide something from you. Since Miyachi had come, there had been a new 'blog' the adults swore by. Riiya-jen knew it meant 'web log', but what that meant did not interest her.

What did bother her was that it was one the adults had locked voice translation on which, since she couldn't read yet, should have been it. But she was a bright child and she had been in the room when her mother accessed one of her own locked files. She brought up the computer and leaned forward as she brought up the voice recorder. "Ola 11912," it spoke and she grinned as the 'voice repetition' prompt came up. "Play all regarding Miyachi," she ordered.

Her grin at her cleverness faltered, then died, as everything Miyachi had endured was shown and told to her. Between each recorded incident were comments

by others. She felt her heart clutch as Miyachi fought against her captors and heard so many voices taking her side.

Then terror as she had made a vain dash for freedom and been recaptured. She winced, wishing she could look away as her clothes were reported shredded, then the reports that she was in shock, staring from her window, unable to escape.

‘But perhaps if they asked Riiya-jen to speak with Miyachi?’ someone commented.

‘The human did react well to the girl, perhaps you are right.’

‘It may be our only chance’.

Ola came home from work to find her daughter weeping inconsolably at the terminal.

Gaelor poured some of the aged whiskey. This was the last bottle and part of him hoped it would last long enough to see the people safe. Dealing with Miyachi, he wasn't sure it would last at all.

He had to think of a way to break through to her! He had tried reason and threats, even force feeding her; nothing had worked. He considered the blogs he had read. So many had commented that she had reacted favorably to Riiya-jen, even played with her on occasion. Maybe he could ask the girl to help? He looked at the computer and brought up the database. He keyed the home number, leaning back as he waited.

“Ola.”

“Engineer, this is Professor Gaelor. I wish to speak with your daughter.”

There was a long pause. "Is this regarding Miyachi?" she asked in a suddenly weary voice.

"It is. I want to ask--"

"No."

He paused, surprised. "Ola--"

"My daughter recorded my voice password; She wanted to find out about Miyachi." Her voice broke. "I finally got her to sleep after she was crying for hours. I will not ask her to help and she told me she would rather die than do so."

"Ola--"

"No, Professor. She used the proper form to request going to the other world. The only reason I refused her was that she is too young. She told me if it were a choice between hurting Miyachi more or her dying, she would demand that the council vote on allowing her to die!" She sobbed. "Please, Professor. Do not ask."

He stared into the distance. "I will not ask." He ended the screen call.

DEFIANCE RENEWED

I came down the stairs. Daala almost screamed when she saw me. I was Duchamp's 'Nude Descending A Staircase' though anyone who wanted to look could really see me instead of his artistic offering.

Gaelor was in his normal place and he ignored that I was nude. "I see you have gained some sense," he said flatly.

I looked at the plate before me. "Maybe I didn't want a hose stuffed down my throat every mealtime," I replied dully. Daala came out and I saw shame on her face. "Just some of your bread and milk please." I

asked and she disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, several thick slices of fresh hot bread were set before me. I saw the honey she had added and nodded my thanks to her as I dipped the bread into the milk and sucked the softened grain into my mouth. I swallowed and almost closed my eyes at the pleasure of feeding myself after so long.

“Good.” His satisfaction burned me, and I felt my own defiance rise.

“What is good about it?” I asked, looking up at him for the first time. “You force fed me ! Do you think I enjoyed that? Do you think for one minute I have surrendered?” I laughed and even I knew I skated on the edge of madness. “You have won one battle but one battle does not mean you have won the war. I will still fight you every step of the way. You might win; I grant you that. But it will be against every bit of my resistance. Savor that victory and know you needed every trick to beat me!”

He sipped his coffee. “You dare sit there, unwilling to dress yourself, eating at my table, eating my foo-”

I stood and turned to walk out.

“Where are you going?” he demanded. I looked back. He stood there, confused.

I faced him, still defiant. “Anywhere in your world where I am free of you,” I whispered. I stalked out, hearing him moving toward me. Daala was pleading with him to leave me alone. I just knew that if he touched me, dragged me back to that room, I would never leave it again. I would be force fed like a goose being raised for liver pate. When they finally got this damn baby, they could just put a gun to my head and

pull the trigger, because nothing would be living in my brain when it was born.

Somehow, I reached the door. I threw it open and ran into the twilight world. I slowed after a time. I would walk until I was tired, then find somewhere to sleep. I would rather die than return to that hell.

INTERLUDE

Caela had refused to go the residence since Miyachi's fugue and refusal to eat or dress. The people of the habitat were polarized and as much as she understood what was happening and why, she found herself on Miyachi's side more and more. Gaelor's actions were insane and she wished they could remove him from the council. Perhaps reason would reach her but Gaelor had forsworn reason, as if he wished them all to die!

She had so much of Earth knowledge to collate for her people to learn, but why bother? She leaned away from the computer in surrender. Gaelor would drive Miyachi to death, would kill her and their entire race in the bargain for some insane reason! Why work to save them when Gaelor worked so hard to kill them?

She brought up the blogs. She had been the one who introduced her people to weblogs, and wished she hadn't. The one about Miyachi had done more to break her people into fighting factions than every racial and religious reason combined!

She saw a separate thread that asked, 'Who is Miyal?'. She noted that Daala had begun it and the negative answers so far posted did not dissuade her from setting her own mind to something that might be soluble. Unlike many within the habitat, she had access to information spanning centuries of their own history. A

pity really because the search centered on one woman dead almost a quarter century earlier. She suddenly knew why Gaelor had gone insane. But would it be soon enough?

REBEL STONGHOLD

I awoke in bed. I remembered wandering like a homeless beggar, the people standing aside as I staggered by them, naked. Some tried to dress me, to feed me but if they asked, I shook my head, and if they persisted I ran, though no one pursued me. Eventually I felt tired and I found a bench in a park to sleep on.

But that didn't explain the bed I was in now. I looked around and the room looked different from the one I had been in within the residence. I rolled over, looking at the end table beside me. I reached out and to my surprise, I found the lamp moved when I pushed it.

I sat up, seeing I was in a night gown, but this one resisted when I tried to shred it as I had before.

It was obviously a different room. I stood, looking at the mirror and the window. Both appeared to be plain glass. There was a hesitant knock and my head turned like the turret of a warship to focus on it. It opened a little as if whoever was there didn't want to disturb me, and Ola peeked in.

"Oh, I was just checking to see if you were awake." She was nervous. "I will bring coffee."

"I want nothing."

She came fully into the room, hands wringing. "Please Miyachi, do not condemn me too! I plead with you, drink the coffee and, if you wish, eat something, though I will not force you. Much has happened in the last few hours, and the Council has ordered the

Professor to leave you alone from this point forward. They also ask that you speak with them. If you will not speak, they at least ask you to listen." Her face was abject in her misery.

"Fine. Not like I have any say." Ola nodded jerkily and opened the door. Beyond it was Riiya-jen. The girl froze like a deer in the headlights, then fled. I looked a question at Ola.

"My daughter is very smart; so smart in fact that she recorded my computer password so she could have the blogs she can not read brought up as voice repetition files. She knows what you have endured in the last months; now she fears that they might ask her to plead with you. She will not, she is adamant enough to request permission to go to the better world instead."

I pictured the girl, then whatever process they used to euthanize someone. I knew it would probably be painless but thinking of her dying rather than helping Gaelor force me brought tears to my eyes. I found myself on my knees, sobbing. Then warm motherly arms held me as I cried.

I drank the coffee, then the milk Ola brought without complaint. When she offered bread, I accepted it as well. I finished my meal and went to the window seat, just staring out over the city. After a time, Ola came to lead me to the Council. As I stepped out the door, I saw Riiya-jen watching me from down the hall. "Riiya-jen." I called. She froze, then I knelt, opening my arms wordlessly. She ran to me and I hugged her to me as she cried and babbled incoherently. I just held her, making those soft sounds you make when you try to assure a child that everything is all right

I had a meeting, but if they thought it more important that this brave little girl, they could go to hell.

We went down the hall, Ola leading and Riiya-jen clutching my hand like a lifeline. The Council were all in what I would have called the living room, a broad room with couches and chairs, almost all of them full. The people there stood, and I counted almost a dozen. All were of an age with the Professor, meaning in their fifties or older. Each was in charge of a different science or technology; their leader here in the room was Professor Rhellen, who was chief of their medical services. She was a bit shorter than me and her hands were almost delicate; I discovered later she was a premier neurosurgeon.

“We are sorry for what you have endured. We thought we understood why Gaelor did not ask your permission but it was only recently that we discovered we were in error. Please,” she motioned, “sit.” I sat, looking at them. They had the look of people who were embarrassed that they had been wrong and angry about it in turn. Rhellen looked around at the faces, then as if she had found a consensus, she began.

“When we discovered your world, we hoped we could merely launch but we were cautious, and it is good we were. Professor Gaelor has told you about our problem and he did not lie to you; we needed your DNA to survive, though there was another who would have done as well.”

“Another?”

“Yes. We requested that Gaelor do a genetic analysis of you both and he selected you. At the time, we felt that he merely chose the most viable, but there was another reason we did not know about.” She drew out one of those computer/video phones they used. She queued up a picture and handed it to me.



I have never described myself as a woman; perhaps I should now. In a woman's body I was about five seven, with raven hair and blue eyes, the eyes probably from my mom, since I have brown eyes as a man. I appeared to be in my late twenties, rather than my fifties which was my true age. The picture looked like me dressed in one of the sleek shifts these people wore. "If I had ever worn your clothes before now, I would say it is me."

“You would be mistaken,” she replied. “That is, or rather was, Miyal. She was Gaelor’s wife.”

I stared at the picture. She was smiling gently, relaxed on one of the couches they used, looking into the camera with just a hint of a wicked expression in her eyes. “How did he know I would look like this?” I asked.

“To do a genetic analysis, he would have changed the DNA, as you were told, then the computer would fast forward through the process to maturity. At that time, he could see what you would look like. When he saw that view, he became obsessed. He brought you here and started the transformation without our consent. He told us that we did not have time to wait for your consent and we agreed.”

“He told me you had twenty years.” They looked at each other and I was confused. “You don’t?”

One of them, a man turned to Ola. “Leave us.”

“No,” I said. “You have had too many lies before now. I think she deserves the truth, as I do.”

The man nodded. “I would ask that you at least have Riiya-jen leave. And Ola, I ask you not to tell our other people. We do not need a panic on top of everything else.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“I won’t go!” Riiya-jen clung like a limpet.

“Riiya-jen.” I reached down, lifting her face. “While we do not like it any more than you do, there are times when you do not tell a child everything. Please, let them take you out for a time. I will still be here when you return.” She gave in with ill grace as Caela led her from the house

The man who had spoken last looked to me. "I am Professor Tannim. I am in charge of power generation. You do understand that our habitat is a delicately balanced artificial environment?" I nodded. "The problem with any artificial construct is that it will not sustain itself forever; our plight was obvious from the start, but it was the best we could do. If we had found your world even twenty years earlier, there would be almost 100,000 who would have made the trip, even without being able to survive as a race. We waited as Gaelor asked because we wanted to be sure that our remnant would have that chance.

"But we don't have twenty years. In truth, we have barely five years before our power is exhausted and we die."

"Then he lied."

"Oh, he didn't lie. He was, as your people would say, whistling in the dark. We might have twenty years if we have any luck at all; we know for sure we can survive five more, but there are no guarantees we can survive longer.

"That is why we accepted it when he gave us and you no choice. But his actions have caused you to fight us all. Now we know why he did it and we must correct this before you injure yourself or cause your baby to die."

"I still don't care."

Another man stirred. "I am Professor Kayl, I am in charge of population control. Would you change your mind if you knew that almost two hundred of our people would willingly go to the better world rather than accept their clones?"

"What does that mean? What clones?"

They shared another long look. Kayl looked at her. "I see there is more that you do not know. When you were finished in the tank, they fast grew a clone of your female body and removed the ovaries from it. Doctor Sela has begun using the eggs from those ovaries to clone new bodies for our people."

"That inhuman bitch!"

"Before you condemn her, please understand that she was as surprised as any who were not on the council at your refusal. She was already set up to begin the cloning process when she met you. Your harsh characterization of her actions at that meeting made her request permission to go to a better world but considering her mood, you do not realize how drastic that step would be.

"In our religion, when you die, you go before the gods in judgment, but they do not judge you. We believe that you drink of a vial of liquid that makes your life a panorama with brutal clarity. You see everything you have done to hurt others, no matter how small. There is no acceptable rationalization, no 'I am doing this for my people' or as you put it 'I was only obeying orders' or 'the ends justify the means'. You see every time you have ever harmed someone and you judge your own actions. What she was begging for was to go straight to a hell your own religion would imagine and throw herself into it willingly, begging for them to punish her.

"Gaelor was able to convince her that the cloning could fail if she were not there but what she said afterward should give you an idea of her mind even now." He drew out his own device. "This is the posting she made after that meeting. 'I tell you all that the cloning process has begun and I promise I will give it my full

attention so that you all may survive. But I ask you to bid me farewell now, for there is no body for me among them. When you go on to Earth, I will remain here. I will contemplate all I have done to that woman when the pumps fail and the power dies and the cold takes this place as it has all of the others.

“Do not gainsay me in this. I will consider my death merely the first of the torments I shall lay upon myself when I stand before the gods’.” He returned it to his pocket. “Others, as I said, are also willing to deny their chance of surviving. If this trend continues, by the time your child is born, over half our people will be willing to die rather than accept what has been forced from you.”

“What is so important about these clones?”

“The eggs were taken, the paternal DNA of each rewritten with the DNA of one of our people. Even now they are being fast matured. The first of them will be ready in a matter of months. When they are mature, we will use a device best called a plastic teacher. The memories of the person they resemble will be transferred to that body. They will wake up in it as if they had merely gone to sleep.”

“So six thousand of you will board the ship...”
Again they shared that look. “What am I not seeing now?”

“No. Our clones will board the ship. They will depart. We,” Tannim motioned to the people in the room, “will either go on to the better world before that or, like Sela, we will watch the ship leave and die when our world does.”

I looked from face to face as the true horror of their fate came to me. Oh, they would live on but all of the

people in the room were already dead and had accepted that. I felt a pain, clutching my abdomen. At a second pain, I fell from the chair.

“Quick! A doctor!”

“I will call Karel.” Ola was kneeling beside me. She started to stand and I caught her hand.

“No, get Sela.”

“But she has refused to touch you again!”

“I’ve been told she is your best,” I gritted out through the pain. “To save this child, we will need the best. Tell her... Tell her I asked for her personally.”

INTERLUDE

Sela jumped from the cart but slowed as she saw Ola’s house before her. She had wanted to send Karel but she had come because Miyachi had asked for her specifically. She clutched her bag and walked rapidly up the walk. Professor Jansi opened the door and directed her.

The room was well-lit with lamps and she came to the bed, setting her bag down. Miyachi’s face was twisted with pain and when she saw Sela, she reached out a hand. She gasped as the hand clutched hers in a fierce grip.

“I am so sorry for what I have done, Miyachi.” She shook her head.

“Do something for me, Sela.” She gasped around the pain. “Promise me.”

“Anything, Miyachi.”

“First save the baby, let your people live.”

“I will do everything I can to save the baby.”

“Then create a clone for yourself. Tell all those who have refused to have clones made as well.”

“But Miyachi-”

“You said anything.” She gave Sela a crooked smile. “I want you to live a long time so I can make your life miserable until this child is the same age as Riiya-jen,” Then she smiled, “so I can introduce her to the woman that saved her life. And as much as I treasure my own defiance, I don’t want others to die in my stead.” The grip became tighter. “Tell them from me, please.”

Sela felt tears on her cheeks. “All you ask, I will do.” Miyachi let her go.

The Council members sat, looking into their own hearts. Gaelor had arrived and sat ignored in the corner. They heard a door close and Sela came wearily down the hall. Ola leaped up, pressing a glass of whiskey into the doctor’s hand. She nodded her thanks, collapsing into a chair as she drained it.

“Well?” Tannim finally asked.

“She went into premature labor due to all the stress she has been under.” She pointedly ignored Gaelor. “I was able to arrest it but she is still fragile. Any more stress and she could lose the baby.” She looked up, spearing everyone including Gaelor with her gaze. “She could very well die.”

“Then we will assure there is no stress,” Kayl said. He turned to Gaelor. “We understand why you have done what you have but that does not excuse it. By order of the council, you will not come near Miyachi until the child is born, or she asks. If you try, we will send you through the gate to Earth and the crew of the scout will be ordered not to allow you to return until the child is born.” The councilors nodded in agreement.

Gaelor looked from face to disapproving face, then seemed to collapse inward. "As the council directs." He stood and left silently. It was a short walk to the residence and he walked it blindly. The house was empty. Daala had departed when Miyachi had and Caela refused to return there. He decided that he would return to his own empty home, tell the council and let Miyalno, let *Miyachi* have it to herself.

He went into the living room, pouring himself a glass of whiskey. He fell into a chair, staring at the wall. Unbidden, he found his recorder in hand, staring at that beloved face. He realized what he had screamed at Miyachi had been the last words Miyal had heard from him as well.

They'd had an argument that last day; he was supposed to go to a conference in the long dead Trainel dome twenty-five years ago. She had not wanted to go. It had been a bad day and the argument had started over something so stupid he didn't even remember what it had been but her refusal had been the last straw. *Why can't you just do what you should?'* he had screamed at her. *I will not accept this madness for another second, Miyal! You will do your duty or be damned!*

He had regretted his harsh words and was going to call her at their home in Coromand dome when the high-speed train arrived in Trainel but it was not to be. Upon arrival, he and other residence of Coromand had been taken aside.

Their people had known that there could be larger debris in the dust cloud and they had anticipated that satellites in orbit might be struck, or even the planet. So when the power satellites failed, they were all to be destroyed by self-destruct mechanisms inserted before the cloud arrived. But either one device had not

worked or another earlier strike had disabled it. Like a guided missile, one of the satellites had fallen on Coromand and with pinpoint precision on the hanger where the Arks rested, smashed the hatch, setting off the auto shutdown.

While he was thinking about what to say to apologize, she had been freezing to death, perhaps had already been dead. None of the Arks in that dome had made it to another habitat.

But that hadn't been the worst. She had sent him a message. 'I saw Doctor Moran before you left and wish I had been able to tell you that he says I am with child...' That had been all he read of the letter, enough to shatter him.

Part of him had died with her. All he would ask of the gods was the chance to make that apology before he went to his own personal hell.

Tears streaked that beloved picture as he hoped he could deliver the one he owed to Miyachi in person when that time came. He clutched the recorder to his chest as he silently cried.

RECOVERY

I grew stronger with good food and good company. Many of the people that had wanted to die in my defense, and others that had heard how close to death I had come, came to visit during the weeks I spent in bed recovering. Daala gave me a pleasant surprise when she delivered my breakfast on the third day and Caela came bearing messages of well-wishing from others on the fourth. Only Gaelor seemed to not care. I knew he had been told to stay away but with his dogged personality, I expected him to at least try.

By the second week, I had returned to the Residence but everything that had been done to stop me from killing myself had been returned to normal. They had placed their lives in my hands and I was humbled by that trust. I began to work on my strength, making myself go downstairs to eat, though even that short trip three times a day tired me out at first. They worried about me like a bird with only one chick but I explained that if I didn't exercise, it could cause the child to be injured. Sela moved into the building and spent every day checking on me for those first weeks.

I took the vitamins as I was supposed to and as my strength increased, the treadmill returned; but I used it willingly. First, just walking, then jogging.

I had watched the wives of friends go through this and I regretted every denigrating thought I ever considered as I went through it personally. In my second month, my nipples became very tender and I ended up in their version of a sports bra. It got worse from there, with mood swings and suddenly I started to balloon into pregnancy. By the fourth month, I was going through crying jags for no reason I could understand. By the time I was in my fifth month, I had to stop the jogging, but replaced it by walking the streets, visiting those who had wished me well. While others said I walked, I was sure I was waddling like a duck at that point. If anyone said the words 'good' and 'year' in the same sentence, I pictured myself with fins stuck to my ass, the words run together, orbiting a football stadium. Riiya-jen became one of my constant companions and I spent time with Ola getting a crash course in child rearing.

And still Gaelor didn't come. I wondered why I cared. Did I want to spit in his eye? Show him how

well I was doing when he wasn't deciding my fate? Did I perhaps pity him for his loss? I asked Caela and she told me of Miyal's life and death. I pictured him with a woman with my face, touching her face with his hand as Riiya-jen had done, then cupping her face, kissing her gently. Pictured him undressing her, not with the frenzied rage he had shown with me; rather with the delicacy of a man unwrapping a precious object...

If I had been a woman in mind, it would have been a romantic scene. To me, I felt what he must have thought when he saw what I would become, a chance to make amends and like most people who screwed it up the first time, trying so desperately that they messed it up even worse the second time.

I pictured him reading the letter telling him she was pregnant hours after her death. Yes, they had found that electronic letter. I pictured the hard man I knew falling apart when his chance of immortality died due to pure chance. Part of me that had once been male felt for him; knew he regretted every harsh word, wished he had seen the miracle I was living. When he found he would have a second chance, of course he had grabbed me! In my mind, I forgave him for what he had done, though I hated it still.

As my stomach swelled and I felt the life within kick me, demanding its freedom, I thought of him again. All of my friends whose wives had gone through this spoke of the awe they felt when the touched their stomachs and felt for the first time that the child wasn't their imagination, but a living being.

I felt a profound sense of awe myself for the first time. Sela asked what was wrong and instead of telling her, I took her hand gently and held it to my stomach.

She started to ask, then there was a kick, and she looked at her hand in wonder. Their people knew babies kicked, but she was the first person in almost a decade to feel it. My stomach became something of a tourist attraction from then on; everyone would ask permission to touch my swelling belly. Some would speak gently to that belly as if she could already hear them, calling her Kara-Shi, New Life.

Yet still Gaelor stayed away.

More time passed. I had to cut back on my walks and had urges to eat off-the-wall things like any pregnant woman. The scout crew sent through star fruit, chocolate and strawberry spread from Cost Plus World Market which I devoured stirred into creamed spinach from Boston Market, then Daala's recipe, which I felt was superior. I especially hated having the kid sit on my bladder and sometimes kick it. The bathroom was almost my new home.

But I still kept up with the people. They wrote blogs as if it were all they had to do and as I read them, I began to comment. It was as if a flood gate opened when I did. They wanted to know about my entire life and what Earth was like. I regaled them with descriptions of the Strip, of the light show that ran even during the day. Soon my memory brought up other things I had seen.

The Colorado mountains in autumn when the aspen leaves danced on the wind, New England where just watching the leaves change is a tourist attraction. The ocean in Hawaii so blue it looked like a liquid gem. Even a description of a field of corn in Iowa waving in the breeze entranced them.

I looked at the world they saw, beautiful inside the dome, a sterile waste land beyond. To them, it was like

your grandparents describing things they had seen that you never shared and hungered for now.

There were worries; they would be coming as beggars, but I told them that wasn't true. 'Our world,' I wrote, 'has gotten into space, but ships even as simple as your scouts are beyond us and to build even one Ark would need an act of God.' I considered. 'May I ask why all of those who I am saving must stay here to die while their clones will go on?'

The replies were phrased in that principle of Sacrifice.

'Nonsense,' I replied. 'The Ark would hold a hundred thousand! All of you would barely fill one of the dormitories aboard and could bring enough food to feed all those thousands.'

'Think in this way; all of you I have met have reached my heart, made me wish I had known you before this body and child were forced on me. There is none among you not worthy of surviving and taking all of you, clones and originals, would be a bonus.'

There was almost a scream of 'Why?' from the replies.

'Because all of you have knowledge so far beyond ours in so many ways! For example, cloning is just beginning among my race, yet you can not only clone but alter the DNA of the body to match ours. Showing our scientists not only the clones but the originals will give them something to strive for.'

'But think of the medical implications; picture someone crippled in an accident getting a cloned healthy body, or growing a clone for perfect transplants!'

It didn't stop there. 'Have you considered what your scout ships would be to Earth? You have the scout on Earth, any ships that still survive that have been ordered to land on the far side of our moon, and the half-dozen that sit in the hanger now. There are what, almost 20 of them remaining?'

There were those nervous about some of the movies they had heard of. Of governments seizing them and reducing their race to lab animals.

'You don't talk to our governments; too many of them would see the technology as disruptive. Instead you speak with an organization named SETI, Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. You have them choose nations and companies to reverse engineer them but tell the world that everyone will get copies of the technology. There are perhaps sixty nations with the technical capability to build them. Within the decade, our own ships, with crews made up of those trained and led by you, will survey everything within a thousand years of Earth. More importantly, you and they will eventually return to Islyor.'

"Why?" Someone asked. "Our world is dead, and there is nothing for us here when we leave."

'The Cloak will not be here forever; in about a century, it will pass and you cannot kill a planet, only alter it for a brief time,' I reminded them. 'When the Cloak has passed, a Scout can notify Earth. Those of you originals can still bear viable children together and those descendants can lead the Ark back to reclaim it in time. The DNA of those who died beyond your dome is still there and with that, you are a viable race again.'

'Think of thirty to fifty thousand of your people leading that mission with the rest of the ship filled with scientists of Earth who want to examine your world

and others of my race who want to emigrate. Before too much time has passed, there will be two worlds or more of mankind, because we need the room as yours would have if the Cloak had not destroyed them.'

In the eighth month the pains began and Sela was worried. "You're going into premature labor again." Then she leaped back as my water broke. "No, your baby is going to be premature."

I shook my head, then bit back on a scream as the second pain hit. "Sela, get Gaelor."

"You don't have to see him until the baby is born."

"I know that, get him. He deserves to be here."

She shook her head and went out to get him and have the hospital prep for an emergency delivery. Of all of the people, none were issued private carts except for me. Sela drove, Caela sitting in the back, holding me close as the cart raced down the streets toward the medical center. I almost crushed her hand as the next pain hit.

INTERLUDE

Gaelor ran into the hospital. The nurse saw him and pointed. He ran frantically, everyone moving aside as he passed. He pushed past people in the halls, wishing they would all get the hell out of his way. In fact, the part of him who was the administrator of the dome wondered if any work was being done today!

There was a double door ahead and Sela pushed her way through it. She stripped off her bloody gloves, dumping them in a disposal chute and Gaelor's heart chilled. She saw him and stopped as he came up to her.

"Miyachi, the child!" he gasped.

“The baby was three weeks premature but is well without the need of an incubator. Miyachi came through it well.” She caught his arm, drawing him through the door. They went down the hall to the room and Gaelor wanted to run forward, clasp her to his bosom, apologize abjectly to her.

Miyachi looked up and she motioned. A nurse picked up a bundle, carrying it to her. With hands surprisingly gently, Miachi took the bundle into her arms, then looked up at him, holding a hand out. Gaelor took her hand, looking at the small face sleeping against the blanket. “Meet she who is your daughter,” Miyachi said, intoning the old words. He felt his tears flow as she looked at the child. “My daughter, named Kara at my wish, greet your father.”

His hand reached out, touching her cheek tenderly. Gods, his hand was larger than her head! “Kara my daughter,” he husked. “I greet you with my hand, my eyes, and my heart for the first time. May I be worthy to be called father.” He knelt beside the bed and Miyachi delicately transferred the new life to his arms.

“It was a success, Gaelor,” she said, looking at the child in his arms. “You saved your people, now there is one more life you must save.” He looked up at her. “I told Sela to make sure you had a clone.”

He shook his head. “No, I am not worthy...”

“You may have been a royal pain in the ass, but you did what you had to do for your people,” she said. He looked away but her hand caught his chin, making him look back as she shook her head. “And you did what you could to make up for whatever you lost when Miyal died. I do not know what your gods would say to what I am telling you but if your people are going to live in my world, in the land of my birth, they have to

remember that most of us worship but one god. He forgives those who ask him in true repentance and strive to make their world better." She reached out, her hand touching the child's head gently. "With this child you have paid your debt to your people. By being her father, and raising her as your people would wish, you pay your debt to Miyal."

"And my debt to you?" he asked.

"Well, they have nasty names they call women who have children without a marriage," she told him with a deadpan expression. "If I am stuck in this body, I expect to be a married woman, not just some whore who got knocked up." She looked back to the baby.

"My mom joked about it when my older sister was born. According to her, after my father viewed his child, he came to her in joy. She grabbed my father by the throat after my sister was born and told him, 'Never touch me again!'. The fact that I was third of nine told me she had relented but I understand her reactions now." She grinned. "So at the very moment, I wish I had never met you, or that you had never done this to me."

She reached out, her hand touching the baby's cheek as her face softened. "If woman I must remain, I would welcome this feeling again in time. But no more turkey bastards."

He laughed, hugging the child to him. "Sela never told you?"

She looked confused. "Told me what?"

"We had samples of your DNA for months before we brought you across. At this moment 'Michael,' the man you were is alive and well in Las Vegas. It would be a simple matter to have the scouts capture him, put

your memories into the plastic teacher and give them to him. Give you back the life you lost."

She reached out and he returned the child, their child, to her. "To only think you are a horrible dream," she said to the child. "That I did not give you life and feel you grow within me, below my heart." She looked at him, then shook her head no. "I am content."

LAST DAY

I stood, Kara at my hip. I had described a basic baby carrier to them and the one they made held the child slung before me when she slept. As if she ever did. I understood why my mother had gone to bottles after the second week. But it soothed my soul in a way no man can describe. To feel I was the center of the universe for one person, to know that no one in her world was more important than me.

The Riiya-jen pair came in. Her clone had been decanted only a month before; the original wanted time to have a playmate her age and none of us had the heart to deny her. We had only waited because Gaelor's clone had not been ready. I still did not like him but with a child to love, and feeling in his heart that he had repaid his debt to Miyal, he would some day grow to be a man I could accept.

The door opened and he entered. He came to me, kneeling, his hand touching my face, as with every time he had to greet me. I touched his as Kara finally fell asleep.

"Is it ready?" I asked. He nodded.

"It is time. Riiya-jen should go to her mother," he replied, taking Kara from my arms. "And we must go to use the gate."

“Then I will say goodbye,” the original Riiya-jen said with false brightness. “I must join mother and go to your world.”



I shook my head, holding out my hand. She came to me like a fawn seeing the shape of a human, not knowing it could be her doom. I touched her face, greeting her. "I spoke with your mother last night, Riiya-jen. Both your mothers, Riiya-jen Shi." I used the word for new, so I had linked them to old and new. "None of us feels you have had a true life in this world and you would spend seven years reaching my world if I did not intervene. Even when the new children of both races are born, you will be alone, caught in the middle with nothing but elders and children around you.

"But you are at the stage in life where being with those your own age is most important and you would not get that aboard ship. But there is a way. Will you..." I bit my lip. "Will you, Riiya-jen of Islyor, the true one who reached my heart and you, Riiya-jen Shi, youngest of both our races, accept me as your mother until they arrive? Come with me through the gate to my world?"

Riiya-jen looked at me and I could see her fear. She had known she must die until I convinced her people otherwise, had even accepted that she would be alone through the voyage with no girls and boys her own age until arrival. Yet part of her wanted that life she would be denied in truth. One she would not have aboard the ship. "But Miyachi, I will never bear children," she cried.

"It's overrated. But when the ship arrives, there will be boys among her crew that you will meet. In time, if you wish it, you will have a child of your own. But that is not important," I told her from experience. I lifted her chin. "It is the measure of your life that you touch others, that your example, your life, changes others." I touched her cheek again. "As you have already changed mine. Will you accept this?"

She clutched my hand. "Will Mother let me go?"

"She, like me, wants you to live a full life, Riiya-jen." I pulled her into my arms. "Will you come with me?"

She nodded wordlessly and I extended my hand toward the clone. She had a look of yearning in her eyes and she took my hand, bending over it.

"I want that life," she whispered. "I want it with every part of me." She settled into my arms with her twin. "I will go, my mother."

We left the residence for the last time. I walked, holding both Riiya-jen's and Riiya-jen Shi's hands as I carried Kara. The survivors were aboard the Ark already and they waved me aboard. We got into a cart and were dropped at the Gate.

They were all there, the Council, both original and their clones, Caela, Sela, Daala and their clones, awaited us.

We walked down the line and while I said farewell to the originals, Gaelor said farewell to their clones. We felt tears flow and I wished all of them, both original and clone, luck on this voyage. I touched Daala's face, wishing I could have one more loaf of her bread. I wished I could ask Caela's assistance on one more puzzle. I was overjoyed to hear that almost 700 of the women were already pregnant, so more than I saw here would arrive on Earth in time.

We stopped before the gate, looking back at the two duplicate lines. "We will see you all in time," I told them. "We will ready my world to greet yours."

The originals departed. I was not sure who would go to my world and who would allow their world to die around them. Those who would die had opened

their own blog, saying that they feared the openness of the world they went to; that like a prisoner of decades, they would not be comfortable unless they were enclosed by a dome. I did not even hear of the blog until a day earlier when it was too late to try to convince them to merely build a dome on Earth and live in it until they felt comfortable.

I wanted to know which of those I had grown to love would die, but finally understood their view of choice. I refused to ask. I looked at the gate, with Kara asleep in the carrier, Riiya-jen on my left, Riiya-jen Shi on my right and Gaelor's clone behind me.

"Why did you ask that I be here?" Gaelor asked. Of all of them, I knew he would be sitting on his porch as he wished. When the ship left, his original would die. His reason was simpler than any. His wife lay here and he would not abandon her.

I squeezed his hand. "Because Kara needs a father," I told him. "And having older sisters makes it easier." Before any of them could speak, I stepped forward. There was a feeling of dislocation, as if the world shifted. The scout commander nodded, then vanished into the discontinuity, returning to join his clone and a new life. I walked out of the warehouse, seeing the Strip only a mile away to the east. I was home.

The other two men in the crew vanished through the gate, then it died. I looked at the building they had moved it into. Where was the scout? I didn't care yet; they had given us a map leading to it for the proper time.

I looked up at the sky I had been born to, feeling the gravity perfect and even as a woman, I felt content. Soon my family, all six and a half thousand plus, would be here; the dreams I had implanted would be

transplanted here on my home world. We would nurture that seed and one day, both worlds would look upon them and Kara as the beginning of my own race's reach for the stars.

"Come." Gaelor took my hand. "We have work to do."

I returned the grip. "Work learning how to be a family too." I looked at the sleeping child. "We have much to create for our children. For all Islyor's children." I squeezed the hand. "Let us begin, my love."

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