

An aerial photograph of a tropical island. The island is covered in lush green vegetation and has a small white sandy beach. It is surrounded by a shallow turquoise lagoon with visible coral reefs, transitioning into a deep blue ocean. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The text "Shortcuts" is centered in the upper half of the image.

Shortcuts

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Speculative Fiction - MMolvray

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ISBN (epub edition): 978-0-9829518-7-3

Cover photo: Sean Connolly, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coral_Reef_aerial.png

Fonts: Museo Sans and Fontin Sans, Jos Buivenga, exljbris Font Foundry, exljbris.com

Chapter 1

The red rear lights of a vanishing bus care for nobody. They're a bit like stars that way but much closer, so it feels personal.

Johan stood there the way everyone does when she just missed the bus. Now what? He could wait forever, and then transfer three times on one of the night buses, and then arrive way too late for the big post-graduation concert. And arrive too late for Gwyn. And then miss the other ways they generally found to celebrate.

No, that was out. He wasn't going to let a stupid bus ruin his life.

Well, missing a party wasn't exactly a ruined life. He knew that. It only ruined today, this moment. And yet, in what other moment did anyone ever live?

The simple solution, the nice, easy one, would be if this slum called Rosepark ever had runabouts in it, but no, of course not. The city had stopped replacing trashed cars here decades ago. Maybe they'd stopped centuries ago, for all he knew. He checked how long it would take for the closest available one to reach him, but the answer on his comm was much what he'd expected. One hour. Which meant two. This was, after all, Friday night. He knew how that went. Why was he such a pinhead? Why did he volunteer to come all the way out here to help a bunch of juvenile droogs learn math? Why?

He noticed a woman walk by about three blocks away on the deserted street. He was already the only male out here. Another few minutes and he'd be explaining to cops that no, he was not loitering with intent and, no, he wasn't

trying to replay any part of the bad old days, and, yes, all he was trying to do was get home. He had to do something and he had to do it soon. Spend hours waiting for public transportation? Spend a fortune on a flitter rental?

Or walk through Greendale. Then it would take fifteen minutes to get back to civilization and a fast train stop. Or it would take the rest of his life.

Johan scanned up and down the empty street as if that could make a runabout appear by magic. Almost as magical would be if one of the satfeeds showed a current image of this area. Around here it would make sense to be antisocial and hack the transponder so the car would still be there when you needed it. But the feeds were only refreshed every day or so, and it wouldn't help to know there'd been a runabout here last night. However, he was tapping at the screen of his wrist comm at the same time as he was telling himself it was stupid. He stared at the time stamp. He was in luck for a change. The satfeed display floating in front of his disbelieving eyes showed something shaped and marked just like a city runabout and it was right around the corner.

He set off at a pace that made his loose blue shirt flap against his skin. He turned the corner. There it was, half way up the block, parked right next to the power grid markings. That was when he noticed someone else walking toward it from the other side of the block, although walking was a loose way to put it. More like toddling. She had to be a million years old – or at least two hundred and fifty. With the certainty of a psychic, Johan was sure she was aiming for the runabout, just like him.

Besides being twenty, Johan was tall, fit, and athletic. He could reach that runabout before her even though he was twice as far away.

He slowed down.

She noticed him as they both approached the little bubble of a car. She looked worried.

"I thought you might be headed here, ma'am," he said, trying to mask his disappointment, but not trying hard enough to succeed.

"Oh dear. Yes indeed. I appreciate you giving me a chance at it," she said with one of those kindly, crinkly smiles some old people specialize in.

She wasn't making this any easier. What he wanted was an excuse to take the car.

"It's not like I had it booked, ma'am." *Although if some people left their transponders on the way they were supposed to, he would have.*

"Me neither," she nodded. "I didn't know I'd need one until a couple of minutes ago when my granddaughter called. And then the closest one is on the other side of the moon, of course. I didn't want to let her down, cuz the poor thing's in such a lather, her oldest got caught bullying – *again* – so this time—and I'm not saying they shouldn't have—I mean, we can't have bullying, now, can we?—but it's sure pushed my plans out of shape." She smiled at Johan as if he knew what she was talking about. "So they hauled him off to the police station. My poor little Nellie has to go pick him up—it's not like she doesn't

have enough to worry about right now—and tonight was her turn on the babysitting pool, so suddenly there's nobody to keep an eye on five toddlers. You know how it is."

Luckily, I don't, thought Johan. However, it did answer the question. She had a real need for that runabout. Realer than a party, in any case.

"I'll manage, ma'am. You go right ahead. Which direction are you headed?" Maybe she could give him a lift.

"Oh," she said with an even bigger and crinklier smile, "you *are* a nice young man. I need to be in Orange in—" she checked the scuffed bracelet on her wrist "—about five minutes ago." The smile became wry and one-sided.

That was the opposite direction, and he didn't even know how late the buses and trains ran from there without looking it up.

"Well, good luck, ma'am." He turned and began walking back up the street.

"Thank you so much! You *are* a nice young man!" he heard her say, as the little car hummed to life behind him and rolled away.

He kicked at a piece of trash—a squashed, dirty, disintegrating paper cup he couldn't even kick properly. It fluttered up and tried to settle on his shoe. He wasn't sure "nice young man" was the way to put it. "Huge doof" was more like it.

There wasn't anything else he could have done ... well, there was ... but there really wasn't ... and now his own life was a whole hell of a lot more complicated. Why did he do stuff like that? Why was he even in Rosepark? Who else but him would take it into his solid ivory head that the rugrats here needed math tutoring more than he needed his Friday nights?

About five other volunteers, that's who, but that wasn't the point. And anyway, none of them had missed their rides home.

He wanted to kick another piece of trash, but even here in Rosepark there wasn't anything immediately available.

One thing was for sure, though. Elementary justice meant that he should not be cheated out of his Friday night after all that. He'd go cut through Greendale. He'd had to risk it a couple of times before. The real slicers were ten or even twenty blocks further east. How bad could it be?

You're pushing your luck said another voice inside his head.

You're just being even more of a doof, said the first voice. *Real men fear nothing.*

His feet weren't taking him to the night bus stop. They were heading to Greendale. Kind of slowly, it was true, but if they had a mind, it was apparently made up.

It wasn't like he hadn't tried to make it to the bus, but the Rosepark kids had their own priorities. He'd been putting tablets away when he noticed the clot of four of the oldest students and Jamie, twelve year-old wise guy, clustered around the big graphics screen. Before he could make sure they weren't up to anything, suddenly every screen in the room showed a close-up of a female ass,

gyrating.

Snickers twittered around the room, but the screen with the group of kids was the only one without the ass. Somebody was trying to distract him.

There were too many things to do at once. Kill the vid before someone decided he'd left it up long enough to be liable for perverting minors. Find out who did it. Figure out what to do with her. Figure out what the kids' secret project was that was worth all this. Stop the project. Finish buttoning up the room. Catch the bus.

He wasn't an older brother with a kid sister for nothing. They were counting on him simply killing the vid. Instead he used his teacher access to share it, which meant he could post feedback to the sender, which meant the girl looked shocked before she could stop herself. There he was, his hand closing around her comm bracelet before it stopped vibrating.

Then he killed the vid.

Then he held onto her while he strode over to the big screen. The kids didn't even have time to blank it before he was there.

Oddly enough, it looked like they were just working on the class topic some more. He'd been trying to show them how to think their way through word problems using some examples from chemistry. The screen showed ethylene glycol, Avogadro's number, salt, ammonia, a complex organic molecule

The little blisters were troubleshooting the cooking of meth.

As the woman had said who gave the volunteers their orientation, "The children here are interesting, and they want to learn."

He switched the hand he was using to hold on to his prisoner, put his right thumb on the ID plate, and wiped everything that machine had done for the last ten minutes.

"I know I keep saying you need to apply the math you're learning," he said, "but for God's sake, go and apply it on your own computers. Are you crazy?"

"This one's way faster," Jamie pointed out reasonably.

Johan rather liked him. The kid was taking the class under orders, like everyone else, but unlike most of them he seemed to want to learn something. He probably planned on going far as the brains of a drug ring. He obviously needed help.

"Listen, geniuses," said Johan. "There may not be any law against practicing your chemistry at school, but the cops can access any public computer just as easily as you can. Either practice on something harmless, or practice on a machine where you won't be explaining to your friends how you sicced the cops on them."

The kids shuffled off, pretending not to be embarrassed. One of the boys was trying to hide a pad of paper, which made Johan notice it and see the cartoon he'd drawn. Quite a good cartoon. Johan had no trouble recognizing himself, shaded medium gray to stand for his copper-colored skin, straight black hair, straight nose, straight cheekbones, and a straight arm stretched out and

pointing like an executioner at his next victim. In this case, it was a kid drawing cartoons. The only thing wrong with the picture was the massive Aztec headdress. Nobody in his family came from Mexico. Some of his family were Incas, not Aztecs, and he never wore so much as a hat.

The next thing on the list was to deal with this wretched girl he was holding. He couldn't let her get away with it. But reporting her meant letting everyone—in other words the principal—know that there'd been porn—worse yet, female porn—in his classroom. He couldn't stand the thought of what would happen then. He'd be willing to bet this kid knew that.

He looked at her and saw for the first time that she'd gone beyond sneering defiance. She was scared.

That wasn't the point.

Where she came from, she'd probably get beaten up for messing with someone more important. He let go of her wrist, but made sure he was between her and the door.

She lost the look of wide-eyed fear, and recovered enough sullenness to keep her self-respect.

"So, Amella, what do you think would be the right thing for me to do about this?"

"I don't care what you do. Go ahead and report me." She no longer seemed to see it as a merely theoretical possibility to sneer at. She kept looking for a way around him. Her fairweather friends hadn't stuck around to help.

"I didn't ask what you care about. I asked what was right."

Meanwhile, all he could think was, Grief. I don't have time for this. Maybe he could use one of his Dad's lines to get them both out of it.

"Okay, since you're not making any suggestions, we'll do it my way. I'm not going to make a planetary case out of a stupid trick. I just want two things from you. One is that you remember that it feels better when someone does right by you, instead of wrong. And two is that you say you're sorry for trying to get me in trouble. Then you can go."

Her eyes widened in disbelief, and then it took her a few more seconds to decide an apology really was the cheapest solution.

"Sorry," she muttered, staring at the floor again.

It didn't sound too heartfelt, but Johan let it pass. He stood aside, and she shot out of the room.

He locked up and ran to catch the bus – and that turned out to be the only thing on the long list that he couldn't do.

He stopped in front of the broad, ancient, weed-filled street that led into Greendale. Hulking warehouses and apartment blocks without glass in most of the windows lined both sides. The buildings stored only the occasional rats and people now, not goods in any sense of the word. The area had served a port once, hundreds of years ago, when cargo moved by land and freighters didn't offload to drone blimps far from shore. All anyone did now with the toxic mess

left behind was argue over who should clean it up.

He stood, undecided, and felt cold. The nighttime coastal mist felt more and more like clammy sweat. He pushed the heat tab on his baggy shirt and crossed his arms to wrap it closer to his chest. It had been washed too many times to give much warmth.

Nobody had appeared in the street the whole time he'd been staring at it.

He really should be taking the bus.

He walked into the dim street. There were just enough functioning street lights so he didn't turn back. But they were a problem in their own way. They didn't float on a magnetic cushion like normal lights and move out of your way if you were too close. Instead, he almost bumped into their massive vandalproof poles as he worried about people hiding behind shadowy jumbles of tumbleweeds. The brightness of the lights made it harder to see the dark. Long ago the huge town of Gabriel used to have several angels. But now it had only one. It felt like the others had all come down and joined Lucifer here to stalk the streets.

He took a deeper breath, and clenched his jaw. Real men weren't afraid of a street. Or weeds. If he got on with it, he could be out of here in fifteen minutes. The back of his neck felt as if one of the resident ghosts had given him a none-too-friendly pat, but he hunched his shoulders a bit, and got on with it.

Two kids scuttled down a side street between two gaping loading zones as he approached. For all he knew, he'd just finished teaching one or both of them minimum distance solution strategies. Nobody spoke to him. He began to hope he'd get through before anyone tried.

He wanted to stay away from the big car-sized masses of weeds. But then he pictured himself hopping around the street, avoiding weeds, and walked straight on. He passed them. There was no one there. He felt stupid feeling relieved. He noticed a couple of women down a side alley, pretended he hadn't seen them, and walked on, keeping his head down. They didn't yell anything at him. So far, so good.

The neighborhood changed to abandoned ancient three-story apartment buildings. The functioning street lights were down to about one per block, but the end of the warehouses meant he'd be out of this soon.

A woman came out of one of dead houses ahead of him. He looked at the scarred pavement and hurried on. He'd seen she had a jaw like a boxer and that she slouched like someone who spent too much time on game machines. He ignored her with every erg of energy he had.

"Hey, bud. Slow down. I have to ask you somethin."

He ignored her and hurried on. The problem was he had to pass in front of her to continue down the street. If he crossed to the other side to put more distance between them, he wouldn't be ignoring her.

"I bet you'd slow down if I was goodlookin."

So he slowed down. He glanced at her and looked away. The puffy slitted eyes

and the expression as if he smelled of turds. Like some kinds of beauty, you couldn't get that ugly without working at it. A second before he'd been thinking it wasn't fair of him to be put off by looks she couldn't help. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Sorry, what?" he said.

"Some of us too poor to get them satfeeds like you probly get on that nice wristpad of yours. Who won the Angels game tonight?"

Oh, well, if that was all. He felt relieved, in spite of the small spike of extra worry when the talk turned to "nice wristpads." Besides, although most sports except kitesurfing bored him, he happened to know the answer to that. The kids in class who'd been watching the game instead of listening to math had been talking about it.

"The Buffaloes, I'm afraid. The Angels never—"

He felt more than saw that two other women had come up behind him while he'd been looking at Bugly here.

Run, shouted a small voice in his mind.

Don't be stupid. You'll look like a complete nurkel running away. You could throw any one of them across the street. Nobody's done anything at all. Maybe they're also just sports fans.

You're not dealing with one of them. You're dealing with three. Run, you fool!

The thoughts passed through his mind in the blink of an eye, but even blinking an eye takes time. In that time, one of the women behind him stepped close enough to hold his forearm. The forearm that had his wristpad on it. He felt the prickle of static travel up his arm and fade. He stared stupidly at the dead display.

He stared stupidly at the woman who'd done it. She was north Asian, Chinese-looking, with shiny black hair done up in some kind of elaborate swirl.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I keep forgetting my flash ring ain't good for those expensive thingies."

She didn't look sorry. She looked at him with a meaningless lizard's smile.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's programmed to get the data first. So we can just transfer it onto your next comm."

God help him. Not that it mattered whether they had his data or not. They'd have his picture on one of their comm bands. A simple face ID, and any old hacked data bank could tell them anything they wanted to know about him, right down to which train stations his bus pass took him through.

Two more women came out of a house further down the street, cutting off all hope of safety. Another one joined the two behind him.

This couldn't be happening. There had to be some mistake.

Yes. There was. He'd made it.

Two of them had mace guns, and his comm was dead.

"Go on in, handsome," said the latest arrival too smoothly. "You know you want to."

They moved closer to him and he stepped back which put him closer to the door.

That was when he finally noticed that the house Bugly had come out of was not totally dark. There were some very dim lights in there, and now that he was near it he could hear something in there. Noises. Bumps. Steps. And they were herding him in.

He had to stall them somehow, or he'd become a statistic. He'd always thought statistics were supposed to be boring, but it turned out that their hearts pounded in their throats. He tried to keep his face blank. He tried to think. He looked at the old, dark tenements looming up on both sides of the street. As the night grew older, feeble glows became visible, lighting nothing in the blank holes of windows, as if everyone had fled too fast to turn off all the lights.

"Come on, handsome. Smile," said the Asian woman, her lizard grin on her face again.

A strangled sound, like a dog losing a fight, came from behind the door. God help him, there were others there already. This couldn't be happening. He had to get out. He had to. The too-smooth woman with brown hair saw him notice the sound. She had blue eyes, as flat as a shark's.

"We got company, handsome. You'll like that."

Dear God, he had to do something, he had to get out, there had to be a way out. But all he could do was observe everything in pointless detail. The Asian-looking woman's elaborate hair was held back with green enameled combs. They were metal. Maybe he could use them, if he could get a hold of them.

Underneath the panicked garble in his head, squeals like a tethered goat being fed to lions, he knew there was nothing he could do. Nothing. Nothing at all. He was trapped. He'd walked into it himself.

"Loosen up, handsome," said a smooth, light voice behind him. "You were lookin for us, weren't you?"

"*Weren't* you?"

"Or were you lookin for trouble?" she said. "We take care of troublemakers."

"The caretaker spirit lives," whispered a voice right behind him.

He could want it. Or he could be a troublemaker. He could be looking for them, or they could take care of him. He could be looking for them. Maybe he could make it through then. Maybe.

There was a scream. A man's body spun toward the window into the light from the dim faraway streetlight, someone must have pushed him. So much blood. How could there be so much blood? It was dripping down the window. The man made a smear against it as he collapsed.

His hands were tied behind him. He couldn't even try to stop his fall. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't even see. He had a bag tied around his head.

Dear God. Why was that bag the worst thing? It didn't hurt. It only set his whole mind screaming.

I'm going to die here. I'm going to die here. I'mgoingtodiehere. I'mgoingtodiehere. I'mgoingtodiehere.

"Go on in, honey. You want it, *don't you?*"

"Sure," he heard himself choke out. Anything. Just don't kill me. Don't kill me like that. I'm only twenty years old.

A block away, there was movement. A woman with a cloud of red-gold hair was crossing the street under the only light there. He yelled so loud he shocked himself.

She was probably just another slicer. But maybe a different slicer. Maybe something. Anything. Maybe she could help. Maybe she would help.

"Pisser," he heard one of the women mutter.

So at least the stranger wasn't one of them. And they'd stopped herding him, which was even better. But the closer the woman came, the more the brief flare of hope died away. There was something wrong with her. She wasn't normal. She was hurrying up with a smile as if she was pleased to see them all. Somebody who couldn't tell the difference between this and a walk in the park was going to be no use at all.

The gang around him moved toward the street and away from the house as she came up and he, surrounded by them, did too. The stranger opened her mouth to start talking while still meters away.

Then a look passed over her face, fast as a shadow, as she saw him and took in the women and the odd silence between everyone.

Now she'd back away, with something pretending to be a smile on her face, and say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else, bye."

But she didn't back away. The look was gone. Maybe wishful thinking was making him hallucinate. She was full of that weird galumphing good will again.

"Great Mothers! I am glad to see you!" Her accent stamped NOT FROM AROUND HERE all over her in even bigger glowing letters. "I missed a turning somewhere and the map I have—." She waved a huge wristpad, twice normal size with extra buttons. She was a foreigner. Maybe that was a diplomat's communicator? A whole posse might come when she called. "—is utterly outdated. Or something. None of the streets match."

Of course they didn't. Greendale was full of hackers trying to make sure the only ones who could find their way around were the gangs who owned that particular patch of land.

"Where you tryin to go, ma'am?" asked the too-smooth woman with the brown hair, all polite. She was older, seemed maybe to be their leader.

The gang tried to drift closer without being obvious, but the stranger with the cloud of red-gold hair was either God's lucky fool or smarter than she looked. She'd stayed back from the gang and he noticed her right hand resting easily on the ignorant wristpad, the red emergency button coincidentally under her thumb.

"The Dodecahedron," she said. "I've heard so much about it."

“Oh, that’s easy,” said the Chinese-looking woman with the flash ring, moving toward her. “I’ll drop the latest map to your comm.”

God, no! shouted Johan’s whole mind and he plunged forward, between them, closer to the stranger.

“I’ll be glad to show you the way,” he said, too loud, too fast.

Nobody jumped him. Nobody stopped him. If they did, this peculiar woman would know they weren’t just standing around for their health. She smiled as if she was pleased at his offer.

“I hate to break up the party but, well, when — Dr. Livingston, I presume? — offers help it’s most welcome.”

Nobody, Johan included, knew what she was talking about. *Was she quite right in the head?*

“Or at least,” she continued, still smiling pleasantly, “one of his local guides. I could definitely use a local guide.”

And she began to move down the street as if that’s all there was to it.

“Hey. We found him first,” somebody muttered.

She turned and looked puzzled.

“I beg your pardon?”

The slicers said nothing. What could they do? Laboriously explain what they meant? Or not explain and have her push that button? They weren’t going to want helicopters descending on them right here, right now. Not with that house and what was in it right behind them.

Not with that house. That house. He tried to wrench his mind away from that house.

With a look at him that was as good as a steel grip behind the elbow, the stranger with the red-gold hair moved on down the street.

Johan moved with her, holding his breath.

There was silence behind them, and a slight muttering, but no sound of steps. No pounding feet running after them. No reinforcements appearing ahead. Johan gulped some air. His neck was so rock-tense he wasn’t sure how he managed to get it down.

“Where do we go?” she asked as the main road curved left and a smaller road went straight.

“Left,” he said. His voice sounded strange to him.

Just like that, they left the slicers behind, and it was over, and he was alive. Sort of. In some weird way, he felt as if he was in a stranger’s body, moving the limbs from inside, carefully, like this was a puppet on strings. He became aware of this body taking a small breath.

He continued putting one foot in front of the other. So did she. Then she spoke, nearly making him jump, jerking his mind away from the ominous silence behind them.

“My name is Briony, by the way. Briony Hlanto.”

“Johan Antioch.”

Silence fell again, except for the faint sigh of a night breeze ruffling some weeds.

The gang still wasn't following. They weren't calling up any friends along the way. Yet.

"Not Livingston," he said suddenly. "What was that Livingston stuff?"

"Somebody who met a kindred spirit in the wilds of Africa long ago."

"Oh." But why bring her up when nobody knew what you meant?

"Should we be turning right to go toward those lights up ahead?" she asked.

"What? Oh, no," he said, looking up. "I'm not being a very good guide. We need to bear left for the Dodecahedron."

"Actually, Johan, that's not where I was going. It was the only tourist trap whose name I remembered. I was lost, but not that lost."

Now he transferred his attention from the pavement entirely to her. She'd answered the question about whether she was clever or God's fool. Although, on second thought, maybe they weren't mutually exclusive.

"So what was going on back there?" she asked.

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Chapter 2

They walked through the empty streets of Greendale. The glow of lights grew brighter. Briony said nothing. Johan said nothing.

What did she mean, "What was going on?" Where the hell was she from, if she didn't know? Or was this her way of saying, "What were you doing there?" He didn't look at her. His embarrassment thickened and changed the suffocation of terror into a more familiar feeling.

The sounds of the ordinary world drew closer, exactly as they always had been, different than he'd ever heard them. A leaden silence isolated every noise. He'd never been aware of it before.

Finally, he managed to put together an answer to her question.

"That's a rough neighborhood," he mumbled, studying the pavement. "I shouldn't have been there. I walked into that like an idiot. I It's lucky you came along. Uh. Thanks."

"*You* shouldn't have been there? How is it up to you? Does that mean I shouldn't have been there either? They never tell you the things you really need to know in the orientations."

He stared at her in complete confusion. He almost walked into the last vandalproof streetlight before civilization, but went around it at the last moment.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"They looked, well, dangerous. Nasty. Unfriendly. Was that just because we were trespassing?"

So she'd known they were hostile. But she was making no sense.

"Where are you from?" he asked. Mars, apparently. Or some more distant solar system, perhaps.

"The Islands," she said.

"The islands," he repeated. "Which islands?" He looked briefly at her, then back down at the pavement. She had eyes the color of sky, white skin with enough freckles for several women, and a rounded nose and cheeks that, like her cloud of hair, must hark back to Africa. She was small, but sturdy, and she looked very fit. Although that, by itself, wasn't enough to explain her courage.

He was even fitter, and he would have been a goner by now.

"Whichever islands you prefer," she was saying. "We have thousands."

What was she talking—then he heard her chuckle. Was she laughing at him for not knowing his geography?

"Oy, I better straighten out, eh? Or everyone will know I just stepped off the blimp, won't they?" She was still chuckling, and for a moment he forgot to be embarrassed.

"Uh, I guess so," he said before his brain could tell him that *not at all* was the correct answer. He began to wonder whether she knocked people off balance on purpose. It certainly worked.

What did she mean "the blimp"? She'd come over on a cargo ship? He found himself staring at her again. It bothered him less each time he did it because she seemed so at ease herself. Maybe it was catching. She smiled at his puzzlement, her eyes looking more like clear sky than ever. She had dimples.

"I'm from the Finleys. The Archipelago," she clarified. "Don't feel bad. Lots of people have never heard of us. We just call them the Islands at home."

The Finley Archipelago. He had heard of it, but only because one of the biggest kitesurfing championships was held there. He'd always focused on the videos of the events. He wasn't even sure if it was in the Pacific Ocean or the Indian Ocean. All he knew was that it had a wonderful climate and was poor, like most of the backwaters still outside the globe-spanning United Federation of the West. They didn't even have a clipper port, so nobody went there.

"I miss it already," she said after a while, "and I only arrived this morning."

She'd barely blown in, and yet she was already sightseeing in Greendale. She must be an odd sort of tourist.

"What brings you here?" he asked.

"I'm in anthropology, doing a doctorate on elementary school class sizes and power structures. I was trying to check out one of the Rosepark schools, but the place is a warren, and I just have an address, no actual contacts. So I figured tomorrow was another day. Gabriel is one of my field sites, because there aren't any large classes in the Islands."

He looked up from the pavement again to see her grinning slyly at him. She enjoyed being a "native" studying the rich and advanced First World.

"Oh. I thought you might be in the diplomatic service or something." Actually, she was only a bit older than him, which should make her too young for that. "Or your family."

She looked at him with wide eyes.

"The diplomatic service? *Me*? What gave you that idea?"

"Your, uh, comm band. It's kind of unusual."

She looked at it as if she'd never seen it before, and then let out a small snort of laughter.

"I'll bet it is, at least in the West. I got it from my great-grandfather for this trip. He had to have a good one because he works in air traffic control, and I

think it was top of the line when he bought it. Sixty years ago.”

They crossed a culvert over a huge, cracked, dry channel that marked the end of Greendale, walked past a block of simple, well-kept houses, and came to the big, boulevard where he'd been a hundred times. It was full of normal people, ground cars, and flitters. The background hum of electrical noise like a distant hive of bees was punctuated by the swish of tires and shouts of greeting and laughter and the small sounds of conversation up close. Everything was as it always had been. Except for him. If he'd had his legs amputated, and this was his first time out, trying to learn how to use his regrown limbs, he couldn't have felt more disjointed.

He could see his train station down the street. He supposed he should thank her and say goodbye, but he didn't know how. So far, they'd been acting as if the whole situation hadn't happened. Part of him desperately wanted to keep it that way. Forget the whole thing. Go back to living his old life, the one that was gone forever.

At least, he could help her find her way back to wherever she was going.

“Since you're not looking for the Dodee, where do you need to go?” he asked.

“I'm staying at one of the University dorms, downtown.”

“Oh, I see. That's not far from the Dodee which is why you knew about it, right?”

She nodded.

“That train there,” he nodded at the station a few blocks up the busy street, “can take you straight to Lima Place.”

In another few seconds, she'd walk up the street, and he'd go the other way, alone, with nothing between him and the rest of his life. He slowed down, unable to go forward.

“If it's all the same to you,” she said quietly and slowly, like someone just then thinking it through, “I'd rather sit down somewhere for a while, have a beer, and get back to normal before finding the train.” She looked at him inquiringly, as if she assumed he was included in her plans.

He just nodded, unable to frame the question he really wanted to ask. *Is rescuing people from themselves all part of the service?* On the other hand, she was an anthropologist. Maybe she just wanted to study the locals. Whatever it was, it worked for him.

She'd stopped at the closest sidewalk cafe, near a table on the edge of the cluster of round white tables and green wrought iron chairs.

“Is outside all right? I love watching the world go by.”

He nodded again and dropped into a seat. It was over. Well and truly over. He'd never run a marathon, but this had to be what it felt like, at the end.

If this was the end. If they didn't come after him. If he could get the scream out of his head.

He wrenched his mind away from all that, and picked up one of the menus wedged between a sugar bowl and a square dish of creamer packets. She'd

picked up a menu too, but she was looking at the street. A gaggle of University students was walking by, on their way to the big, post-graduation concert, no doubt. Once, it had been something he was going to do, too.

The waiter came to take their orders.

“One bill?” he asked, as if it was a mere formality.

Johan felt himself flush hotly under his dark skin, but Briony seemed as unconcerned as ever.

“Sure,” she nodded.

She passed up every opportunity to make a big deal out of anything. It made him want to give her something in return, even if it was nothing on the scale of what she’d done. They ordered beers, and when the waiter returned with their drinks and one bill, Johan reached for it. To hell with how it looked.

He asked her hesitantly,

“May I, may I pay for yours? I’d like to do something”

“Oh, no worries. It’s not like I did heaps.” But when he shook his head emphatically, she added, “If you’d like to, that’s very kind of you.”

She looked at everything, with a tourist’s interest in ordinary things. He saw her admiring the cornices on the San Gabriel Bank building across the way, tracking a late-model flitter that flew past just above the buildings, and then smiling as a drove of garish cyclists went weaving through the ground traffic.

Johan felt unaccountably better as he sipped his beer. At least he’d done something besides beg for help, even if it wasn’t much. Maybe someday he’d even get back to feeling normal.

Or maybe he wouldn’t.

“Who’s the lucky gal?” a hearty woman’s voice was saying. “Introduce me, Jonnie.”

He jerked his head toward the voice. Sara. A woman who hadn’t known when to leave well enough alone in high school. She’d resurfaced in University, still apparently having learned nothing. He felt himself flush hotly again, and opened his mouth to say Briony’s name, but the woman didn’t wait.

“Sara Webster,” she said, bowing slightly to Briony. “You know, I’ve been trying to get him to go out with me since he passed his single cert at the top of his class, and he won’t give me the time of day. You’ll have to tell me your secret.”

Briony smiled in the strained way of a polite person who is put off and trying not to show it.

“What? For free?” she said.

Sara looked taken aback, which Johan knew was not easy to accomplish.

Briony’s smile grew smaller.

“It’s a sliding scale, you know. Given that he and I just met and we’re not really doing anything except catching our respective trains, I’ll give you a special price.”

Sara realized at last that she was being joshed.

"You just met, huh? And already he's going out with you. Boy, some people have all the luck."

Johan saw her cast a look at the one bill on his side of the table.

"Absolutely," said Briony. "All the luck. The secret is to get lost." She glanced at Sara for a few extra microseconds.

Sara wasn't the noticing type.

"Men," she said, following her own track. "You know they want it, but only when they can't have it. Hey, Jonnie, would you go out with me if I came from some interesting foreign country?"

"I—." He had to pause to get over the echo in his mind of the dim street and the jeering voices. Then he had to find a way to rephrase *I wouldn't be caught dead in a ditch with you*.

Sara didn't wait, once again.

"And I always thought it was because you were being a gentleman about Gwyn. Well, keep your hair on," she interrupted herself at the sight of his scowl. "Can't you take a joke? Just count your blessings that it's nice, quiet, discreet Sara who bumped into you."

Johan didn't want to count blessings. He wanted to give her such a large piece of his mind that she choked. He wanted it so much, he had to tense his muscles to stop himself from speaking. It would be a relief to pound somebody to pulp right now. He wasn't feeling remotely normal yet, even if he sometimes forgot it for a second or two.

Sara switched her attention to Briony, and Johan managed to say nothing.

"So where're you from?"

"The Finley—" began Briony, but before she could finish, someone else walked up.

Johan turned and saw Gwyn, and for a moment he felt like his troubles might be over. A shoulder to lean on was what he needed right now, and a willing ear to listen, and someone to hold his hand. Gwyn, her silky brown hair billowing slightly as she moved, tall and thin and strong, calm and self-possessed, Gwyn was just what he needed. He was going to stand up to hug her when she said,

"I thought you said you were busy in Rosepark tonight."

She was more than calm. She was cold. Her attention seemed to be fixed on something down the road, as if she'd seen everything she wanted to see of the table and its occupants.

Johan found himself not standing up. Five things at once came rushing toward speech, so none of them came out.

"I was," he said.

"He just didn't say what he was busy with," said Sara, who thought she was funny.

Another awkward moment stretched until Johan muttered,

"Walking home."

"Walking?" said Gwyn, sounding incredulous. "All the way from Rosepark?"

He glanced up just in time to see her look at Briony again.

"It's not very far," Briony said with some surprise. "Maybe a quarter of an hour that way," and she pointed toward Greendale.

"You two found each in *Greendale*?" Sara hooted loud enough for the whole cafe to hear. "Gwyn, I thought you told me he was the quiet, studious type."

"We didn't 'find each other,'" Johan ground out.

"Oh, don't worry," said Gwyn. "It's all the same to me. I always thought it was a bit narrow-minded to be exclusive. Just remember that it works both ways."

Johan sat there, feeling even more alone than when he'd walked out of Greendale, and wondering whether he was going to spend the rest of his life unable to help himself every time something awful started happening.

"Oh, for—," exclaimed Briony. "Listen," she looked straight at Gwyn. "I don't know the customs here. I mean, it's his business—I shouldn't—anyway, he was surrounded by a gang. I happened to show up and distract them, so we got out. It was a bit nerve-wracking. We're having a drink. That's all."

"Oh," said Gwyn. Johan could hear her thinking, *Really?* "Well, sorry for the misunderstanding," she said rather stiffly. "I figured, since there was one bill"

"What about the one bill?" asked Briony.

"That pretty much says you're on a date, doesn't it?"

"It does? Where I come from, it says whatever we say it says. And I think we're in complete agreement," she looked questioningly at Johan, "that this is anything but."

"Definitely," he replied. He felt washed up—on rocks, not on a beach—after having been some days in the water. He was barely able to carry on a conversation. Dates were out of the question.

"So you're going to the concert?" was Gwyn's next remark.

"The concert?" he repeated, dumbly.

"Well, aren't you? I mean, you're here, I'm here, nothing really happened. It's our own graduation concert. Don't you want to go?"

Nothing really happened.

Should he tell her how much nothing had happened? Should he tell her about dying? Should he tell her ... about saying *Sure*? Would she say that was nothing?

Should he tell her, and see it always reflected in her eyes? Or, if she kept calling it nothing, would he have to see the comfortable ignorance he'd lost forever?

Once upon a time, he'd assumed people would know what he meant. Now ... he just wanted everything to go away. If he pretended hard enough, eventually, surely, it would become true. *Nothing happened.*

In some ways, it was true. Nothing had happened. He had done nothing. He was doing nothing now. And nothing felt the same, not the streets he'd walked a hundred times, not even Gwyn herself.

He took so long to answer, Gwyn said,

“Well, if you’d rather stay here, fine. Coming, Sara?”

“Nice meeting you,” she said to Briony, as she and Sara turned to go.

“See ya,” said Sara.

Johan just sat there, wondering whether the disturbances in the ether would ever die down.

“I’m really sorry, Johan,” muttered Briony. “I tried to make things clear, but I get the feeling she isn’t too happy.”

He looked at the antique white metal table as if there was something interesting there. It had holes punched in the surface in swirly patterns.

“None of it’s your fault, Briony.”

They sat in silence for a while again. She sipped her beer. He sipped his beer. A ground car trilled at a cyclist.

“So,” said Briony, “how many different species of jabberwocks do you lot have here? Or have I just been unlucky?”

Was she even speaking English? wondered Johan. *It sounded like it.*

“Really,” she said, the humorous glint back in her eyes, “don’t tell me you haven’t heard of that either. Alice Through The Looking Glass? ’Twas brillig and the slithy toves...? Your education has been sadly neglected, young Johan. Haven’t you read any of the good old books at all?”

If she was trying to distract him, it was working again.

“I try not to,” he mumbled. “It’s either about how men ruin everything, or it’s about two sisters who don’t get along.”

“Funny you should say that. Alice did have a sister, but she didn’t come into the story much. So people bore you, eh?”

“Well, I don’t know about that. Some people bore me. But mainly it’s all the stupid stuff they do. Who the hell wants to waste time going over and over all that bullshit? History, social studies, all that” He trailed off. He’d just remembered she was an anthropologist. She was grinning.

“No worries. Watching how other people think is meat and drink to me.”

She was looking at him as she said this, and Johan knew how the mouse felt, running the maze under the careful eye of the scientist in the white coat. It didn’t feel too bad, actually.

She continued, making conversation.

“So, if that concert has to do with your graduation, you must have just graduated.”

He nodded.

“If you’ll pardon my saying so, you look kind of young for that.”

“I just turned twenty.”

“You graduated at nineteen? Is that common here?”

“Not very. I was in accelerated classes pretty much right from kindergarten.”

“So you must have been at the top of all your classes—except maybe social studies—not just the ‘single cert’ one that your energetic friend mentioned.

What is that, by the way? I've never heard of it."

He stared at the white table top some more, studying its faint patterns of interlocking rings echoing long gone drinks of beer, wine, coffee, and tea. The waiting silence grew.

He started mumbling.

"We have classes in high school. And later. It means ... it means I can control my reflexes well enough so that ... so that a woman isn't likely to need other men to be satisfied."

"Oh, I see," he heard her say. "We just call it sex education." She seemed to think it was funny.

He became aware of sweat trickling down the sides of his chest. His shirt might not do anything for his looks, but now he was glad it was baggy.

"Although the certification part sounds a bit different," she said, after some thought. "That implies examinations and I'm having difficulty imagining how that would work."

He couldn't bring himself to explain how that worked.

"I'd always heard that everyone in the West was all for multiple partners, at least sometimes. But not you, eh?"

"No.... I never could stand the thought of other guys around while I'm ... trying to concentrate."

"Well, what about rafts of women?"

Johan looked at her, horrified. She was grinning. She seemed to think something was hilarious, but he didn't see the joke.

"Multiple *women*? No way. I mean, "*normal women aren't Caretakers, but*—even nice ones can get amazingly crabby when they're not happy."

"Stereotypes always end in a laugh," said Briony, chuckling as if that was really so. "Everybody assumes nobody here thinks it's sex unless there's a crowd, and then it turns out you're the same as everyone else. All different."

"They don't have, uh, crowds in the Finleys?" He was going to have to visit the place sometime.

"Well, people do their own thing, really. Most people are part of some kind of group."

"Oh. Like here."

"Well, not exactly. Sex isn't necessarily involved, and the groups can be legal entities in the Islands."

"You mean, like, group marriages?"

"I suppose so. We call them families. So, I guess, with a degree in sex education, you'll be going into teaching?"

"I don't have a degree in sex ed! I majored in math."

"Well, that's another good practical subject. Not like anthro."

"Practical," he said. "Sure. My mom's already telling the neighbors what a good job I'll get, now that I'm finished. And done for. I'll get to sit in a cubicle all day, doing computer security algorithms or stock trend research or

something.”

An amused glint appeared in her eyes.

“I have to admit, I went into a field science partly as a cubicle-avoidance maneuver. But there’s no money in it, and there’s pots of money in programming computers.”

“To hell with money, if it means you have to buy everything you enjoy.”

Her smile broke into an outright chuckle.

“I’m starting to see why you were on the accelerated track in everything. So what would you have done if your parents hadn’t told you to study something practical?”

He would have done something bold and interesting: swabbed decks on a tramp ship and seen the world, even the Caliphate; icesailed Antarctica and sold the story of his exploits; prospected for palladium on the Apollos using a duct-taped spaceship. *Something*.

“Oh, I dunno,” he muttered.

There was one of her silences, and when he glanced toward her, he saw a listening look on her face.

“Sure you know,” she said. “I could hear you thinking.”

He let out a sardonic snort.

“I’d run away from home.”

“Is that what you were doing, back there?” she asked, without any trace of a smile.

Maybe it was. He’d been taking risks, that was for sure, but he hadn’t been bold. *We’ve got company*, they’d said.

“What *is* it?” she asked. “You look like you’ve been diagnosed with leprosy. You’re out of there. You’re safe. It’s all right.”

“Yes,” he said. *That’s the problem*, he should have added.

There was another silence. Then, very quietly, she said,

“I shouldn’t be pushing. All my friends tell me I have a missionary complex, and it makes me rather clumsy.”

He’d been looking at the street, at the table, at the broad strip of night sky visible overhead, at anyone or anything except her. Now he looked at her. She was apologizing to him after saving him, by herself, from a gang of slicers. She was sitting here, spending time on small talk, so he could bear to go on. She was wishing so hard she could make everything better he could feel it like warmth from the sun.

Johan felt more tongue-tied than at any previous time in that long marathon of embarrassment known as adolescence, but he had to say something. If she hadn’t been a missionary, he’d be among the damned by now.

““You’re not clumsy at all,” he said, mumbling at the table while he spoke. “On the contrary.”

“Johan,” she said. He could hardly hear her through the roaring in his ears, even though the traffic wasn’t very loud. “Please tell me what’s going on. I

know there's nothing more obnoxious than clumping around in steel-toed boots on people's bare feet and saying, 'Problem? What problem?' But if you won't tell me what's wrong, I can't learn to do better."

"Briony," he said. He felt a knot in his chest big enough to squeeze all the air out of his lungs. "You haven't done anything. It's nothing to do with you."

"But." She stopped, then started again. "Look, I think it's hard for you to imagine how little I understand about all this. It's like we all speak English, but it's a different language. All the words mean something else. In the Islands, I would have assumed you or those women were interested in sex, but then I noticed the tension and figured that wasn't it. But if they were planning on robbery, or something, then why was everyone playing around and talking?"

He had no clue where to even start explaining. She'd saved his life. He'd do anything for her. But he'd become permanently paralyzed somewhere on that dark street, unable to do anything for himself or anyone else.

"It was about sex?" she said, after studying him for a while. "That makes no sense. You didn't look like you wanted to be there."

"No."

After another silence, she said,

"I don't get it. Having an orgy with a man who'd rather be anywhere else doesn't seem real satisfactory."

"No," he said again. He took a deep breath. "There are five different drugs you can get on the street that'll produce erections, and once it's erect, hell, that's supposed to be proof you can't wait. And I know that any real man spends his life waiting to be a sex aid, but I'll be damned if some bag I never asked for leaves a trail of slime all over me."

He stopped abruptly, surprised at how fast he shot over the line of social acceptability. When he risked a glance at her, he saw her looking appalled, distressed, hesitant. Not offended. He realized his hands were clenched into fists and relaxed them with a conscious effort.

"Anyway, that's not all. Not by a long shot."

"All I can think," she said, when he didn't continue, "is 'yeww, nasty.'"

That summed it up, he thought.

"So, if that's not all, what's next?"

"If things don't go the way the trash want, then ... capping."

She said nothing, so he had to look at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I need footnotes."

Now he stared.

"What?"

"I don't know what that means."

He stared some more.

"It means," he snapped, "cutting the head off a penis. What the hell do they call it in the Finleys?"

Briony turned red, fading to a blotchy pink. He saw her swallow.

"Great Mother of God. ...We don't call it anything in the Islands. It doesn't happen. I read about it in one of my textbooks. They called it resection."

There was no word for it in the Finleys. Somebody had told him, long ago at the dawn of time, that big boys didn't cry. Otherwise he might have done it now.

The thundering silence in his ears stretched on. He saw her swallow again, shake her head, and clear her throat.

"The textbooks said it was a rare aberration, right down there with criminal castration."

As opposed, of course, to the legal version.

"Yes," he said. "An aberration. Like in a lens. Nobody can see straight."

She was staring at the air, looking more appalled and distressed than ever. She had a patchy redness on her neck and cheeks, and she was looking more and more angry. For some reason, that made him feel better.

"If that's their game, though" she said slowly, "we really should have reported it. There's no reason why they should stop with you."

No, there wasn't, not in any sense of the phrase.

"Briony, they can get me long before the law gets them. If it even bothers."

"What!" she exclaimed. "'If it bothers!' There's people planning to commit torture and mutilation, and they wouldn't bother? That's insane."

Yes, he thought. It was, wasn't it? Of course, the part he could hardly admit to himself, let alone anyone else, was that he'd been fooled and trapped, that he was still trapped, and that he'd always be trapped. If he started siccing cops on them, they'd definitely come after him.

"I'm not saying it right," he clarified. "Sure, the cops will do something. I fill out a form. They put a detective on it. The detective asks me what I was doing in Greendale. I mean, the important thing is to make sure we don't go back to the bad old days of guys making trouble all the time, right? Meantime, I have a whole gang that knows which train routes I take. I should have said the cops will bother, but they won't bother anywhere near enough to do me any good."

He noticed that now she was studying the tabletop, and thought that they were certainly getting their money's worth out of it. Neither of them seemed to know what to say. She had an expression almost like a lost child's, but it changed to a quick, embarrassed smile when she caught him studying her.

"I'm just feeling really far from home." She went on, talking more to herself than to him. "There's good old Lem, worried I'll pick up ideas here. Practically the last thing he said to me when I boarded the blimp was, 'Don't go getting any funny ideas in that place,' as if I'd dive into group sex the day I got here. Well, I'm getting funny ideas, all right, but they're not the kind to make me laugh."

"Who's good old Lem?"

"My partner."

Her partner. It figured. He better not get too used to the feeling like a warm

breeze that she gave him, even if it also felt like the only thing keeping him going right now.

She was tapping at her comm, and took it off to show him a picture. "See? That's Lem."

Her eyes lost their loneliness and glowed as she looked at the small image. It showed someone nearer thirty than twenty, with curly, unkempt hair and a smiling face. He had a smudge of five o'clock shadow on olive skin, flat features and a strong jaw. He looked nothing like her, but his brown eyes shone the same way. She must have been the one who took the photo.

He passed her comm band back.

There was another silence, until she said,

"Johan, I'm not any kind of professional counselor, obviously. But, well, from what little I've learned in classes, the important thing is to remember that it is not your fault. And if talking would help I'm still rather time-lagged anyway. It's the middle of the afternoon, where I come from." She looked at him diffidently, the look of someone who thought she was clumsy, but wanted to help anyway.

The knot in his chest had definitely squeezed all the air out of him. He took a deep breath, but it didn't seem to do any good.

"It is my fault," he said.

"How do you figure that?" she asked, obviously trying to keep him talking.

He said nothing. The hum of the street roared in his ears.

"Um, Johan," she said after a while, "just tell me, if you don't want to talk. They're always saying it helps, but what do they know?"

Not much. If he talked and gave it a name, it would come to life like some monstrous golem in a nightmare.

But so what? Did it matter? His old life had curled up and died like burned paper, even if he could still see the writing that listed everything he'd lost. Why was he even trying to save anything out of the wreck? He pulled the words out of himself as if he was extracting shrapnel.

"They said they had company. They said I'd like it."

"They' being those nancygirls?"

It was a strange term, but he nodded.

"Why does that matter? Who cares how many of them there were. At this point."

"No, Briony. In words of one syllable: they meant I'd like the fact that it wasn't all going to be up to me. They meant other men. Who were probably just as ready as I would have been to take any drug on earth. So they'd have a chance of getting out of there in one piece."

"You mean—." A horrified expression spread over her face. "But then we left them there! It's been over an hour! We should have called the police immediately."

We didn't leave them there. *He'd* left them there. She'd known nothing about it.

“Great Mother of God,” she muttered, and moved to press the red emergency button on her comm band. “Hell. Where were we? I don’t know where that was.” When he continued saying nothing, she prompted him, “Johan....”

Did she have any idea what she was asking of him?

His mind was chained to that dark street forever. *You were looking for us, weren’t you? Weren’t you? We’ve got company. You’ll like that.* He wasn’t going to tell them any different. He was going to cave. Just like the guys he’d walked away from. Was he ever going to learn how to live with it? Was it even possible? He was going to be walking away till the day he died.

So much for being bold and interesting. He was never going to be either of those. He was going to be terrified for the rest of his life. And when he got that way, he’d found out he was despicable. Some things, you really don’t want to know.

She was staring at him, waiting for information. Then, gradually her expression changed. She leaned her head on her hand and made dimples and valleys in her cloud of hair.

“I’m pushing again. I really have no idea what risks you run. I won’t mention hearing anything from you. I’ll just report running into a suspicious gang. But you’ll have to tell me where we were.”

He’d thought he would do anything for her, and then she kept asking him for things that were so hard to give. He paused and tracked a passing three-wheeler to delay the point of no return.

Then he reached for a napkin and borrowed a pencil from a passing waiter so he could write down the name of the street and the block for her.

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Chapter 3

Johan stood in line at the University cafeteria, wearing his best black body suit and feeling like an alien life form. His student ID was good for another six weeks, but he belonged to some other species. Everyone was dressed in loose clothes. He looked like he'd come from a job interview, as, in fact, he had. They were twittering about which party to go to. He was worrying about what he'd say to the police an hour from now when he walked to the station to "assist them in their inquiries," as the polite phrase had it.

The police had called him within hours of speaking to Briony. He'd known they would. There were bound to ask her who was the guy she'd helped, and she would have to tell them. Soon, things would get even worse. The incident was already news. Next, the media would dig up who the mystery man was and what he'd done ... and what he hadn't done. Not reporting a crime carried some kind of penalty, he was sure.

He bent forward slightly at the checkout for the iris scan to pay for his meal, and then looked around the crowded, noisy hall for Gwyn. He was supposed to meet her here, but he was going to have to look for her. The last thing he wanted to do right now was wander through this packed place, meeting dozens of people he knew, and answering the same questions over and over again.

He finally spotted her at a table out on the broad patio, and he saw that there were three people with her. Three. All of whom would require polite conversation. What was she thinking?

As he came closer, he saw that one of the people was Ruy, his oldest and best friend. He was a thin, quiet, serious fellow who could be trusted not to say much, and hence not to say much wrong. Feeling slightly less put-upon, Johan slid his tray into the empty space between Ruy and Gwyn.

"Oh, hi, Johan," she said. "I called Ruy to see if he could come, and Marona and Suli stopped by to chat."

That meant two of these people weren't her fault, and asking Ruy was an excellent idea. She was trying to help.

He sat down, feeling relieved. Sometimes her idea of trying to help was to push him to get over it.

He could never understand that. Wasn't it obvious that he was more interested than anyone in getting over it? If it was an option, wasn't it obvious he'd have done it without any shoving? It made him feel alone and angry every....

He shouldn't be dwelling on that. He should be remembering that once he'd had a chance to talk to her and she'd begun to see what he was going through, she did try to give him some breathing room. Such as rounding up Ruy when he himself was too busy listening to phantoms to make a simple call. There were times when it wasn't hard to remember why he'd fallen in love with her, all those months ago, in some other lifetime.

"Haven't seen you around much," said Marona, a sharp-featured, sharp-eyed black woman who'd been in one of his tensor calculus classes. "Where've you been?"

"Oh, around," he said, reaching for the salt for his soymeat and sauce.

"Around,' huh? And dressed like that." She was looking at him appraisingly. "I'd watch him, Gwyn. He's obviously trying to impress someone, and it doesn't seem to be you."

"Yeah, right," he muttered, and chewed on fried plantains without going into explanations.

"He was trying to impress the folks at Simulation International," said Gwyn. "How'd it go?"

"You probably don't need to ask," said Suli. "If he's looking that glum, they obviously didn't hire him."

Suli was a baby-faced Filipina whom Nature had blessed with an expression that was always pleasant, and probably would be even if she was murdering someone.

He chewed plantains with more force than they needed.

"Or," said Ruy suddenly, "they did hire you."

"Yeah," said Johan.

"Then why are you looking like your dog died?" demanded Marona. "I wish I had half your complaint."

"Do you?" said Johan, feeling dangerous.

"Simulation's one of the biggest and bestest," said Marona, as if he needed to have it rubbed in. "It's not like you'll be shoveling shit after the May Day parades."

"No," he said. "I'll be figuring out how to push shit through the system all year long. The job is so-called 'modeling flow in zero gravity.'" Nobody looked like they were connecting the dots, so he added, "Designing toilets on space stations."

Marona continued looking on the bright side, no doubt because she wouldn't be stuck there under the daylight-balanced glow lights. "Hey, simulated toilets can't burp up on you when they don't work," she said. "Who cares what you simulate? You got your foot in the door, and S.I. pays really well. This guy may

be a keeper, Gwyn.”

And when, thought Johan, had he given any indication of wanting to be kept?

Gwyn grinned at her, and suddenly Johan felt out of place again. Why did she think she needed to support Marona in her stupid jokes? Instead of supporting him, for instance, and the fact that he wasn't in the mood for them?

He concentrated on eating and calming down. His mind was full of blue uniforms that he couldn't talk about, and voices he couldn't stop hearing. It took all his energy to be nothing worse than irritable. Gwyn faded back to being as irrelevant as the President's hairstyle. Both were striking, even interesting, but only in some world where he didn't live. An uncomfortable silence followed, the kind where everybody must be watching him chew.

“So when do you start?” Gwyn wanted to know.

That was another sore point.

“Middle of next week.”

He'd had to argue to get that much. The woman who interviewed him wanted him to start the very next Monday, and he couldn't do anything once he drowned in a cubicle. He had his whole life to live first. He'd promised to take Briony to about five different schools.

“They showed me where I'll be working,” he added. “On a floor with about fifty thousand other grunts in a sea of cubicles that goes on forever and disappears around the curve of the Earth.”

After that, he finally succeeded in killing the conversation. Marona and Suli fidgeted, finally decided they weren't having fun, and disappeared.

Ruy cleared his throat.

“So, you going kitesurfing this weekend?”

“Sure,” said Johan. “You?”

“Yep. Around two next Saturday.”

Johan nodded.

“Monk's beach?”

“Yep.”

Another silence followed, less uncomfortable.

Gwyn asked some more about the job, instead of letting him forget he'd been sentenced with no hope of parole, but he knew she was still trying to help, so he tried to answer. Then his comm band vibrated, and it was time to go meet Briony. It was time to make their way over to the police with their hard questions and their easy answers about what he should have done and when he should have done it.

Gwyn, Ruy, and he stood near the Dodecahedron in the main University quadrangle. It was part of a sundial sculpture that floated above a small pool and its faces reflected the sun to mark the hours. The next silvered face was almost at the point of releasing the flash that marked two o'clock. Where was Briony? He wanted this whole day just to be over. He did not want to stand around and wait.

Then he spotted her, all the way across the quad, talking to Miss Discreet herself, Sara Webster. Did the woman have nothing to do but wander around town, wasting people's time? He called Briony's comm band from the new and fancy one on his wrist, since the train station was closer to him than her. "Ready by the Dodee, whenever you are," was his message.

He saw her say something to Sara, he saw Sara babbling merrily and tagging along, and his heart sank. He realized there'd been a reason why Briony was talking to her as far away as possible. Then it turned out that Sara wasn't the extent of his troubles. She saw a few cronies as she crossed the quad, and by the time she'd reached Johan, she surrounded him with a mob.

She was nattering on about the concert, and she was being obvious about staring at a passing guy who'd either stuffed his crotch or had a medical abnormality. Johan was sick of them all. He was sick of not noticing what Miss Sara was thinking or Marona was saying. He was sick of tuning things out from the past, from the present, from the future. He wanted his mind to himself. Then he could concentrate on the important things, like figuring out how to get rid of Sara and her grinning friends without killing them.

"Well," said Ruy, interposing himself between Johan and everyone who didn't actually need to know he was going to the police station, "we'll all head off because you folks probably want to get started. I'll see you kitesurfing on Saturday." He nodded goodbye in his serious way to Briony, and moved toward the others, herding them with body language even more than with words. Gwyn, he noticed, was helping herd stragglers on one flank.

Saved was all Johan could think, until he remembered to call out, "Thanks, Gwyn. I really appreciate you coming out. And Ruy." Especially Ruy.

Gwyn nodded and waved.

Johan and Briony walked down the stairs to the subway, and he found himself scanning every passing face. He'd been doing that too much lately. The ganggirls weren't out on bail yet, as far as he knew, but once they were, he'd get even more paranoid. It was bad enough now.

"Do you kitesurf?"

Johan felt as if he'd been woken from a dream too suddenly. But since it had been a nightmare, he pulled himself together.

"Yes. It's my favorite sport."

"They hold a big kitesurfing championship in the Islands every year in October."

"Yeah, the big Pacific meet with all the world champions in it. Have you ever seen that?"

"Almost every year. It's right near Finley itself, the capital city, and even the main island isn't that big."

"How about you? Have you been kitesurfing?"

She shook her head.

"Well, if you'd like to try, come out next Saturday. I could get you started."

"That'd be wonderful," she said with a wide smile. "Something to look forward to besides work. And cops. Speaking of which, thanks for coming so far out of your way to take me through the tangle of trains to the cop shop."

"It's nothing, Briony," he said as he felt the artificial wind of air being pushed through the tunnel by the arriving train. "I was in the area for that job interview anyway." *And having just me for company isn't something I look forward to either.* If he was honest, he was glad of the excuse to see her.

"You're spending a lot of time on all this," she persisted. "After the cops, going all over town to introduce me to your old math teacher is definitely going to take you out of your way."

"Least I could do," he muttered. If he was even more honest, he'd admit he would rather spend time helping her than do almost anything else.

"Well, you may think it's not much, but I'm convinced that getting some referrals from outside the University clique is going to do my sampling no end of good."

The train hissed to a stop and settled onto its magnetic bed. They got on and took seats. The train began a subliminal hum, lifted, and gathered speed through the tunnel.

"Did you get one of those official notices too?" she asked. "On paper, with a big seal, all about how 'The Governorate of the Southland, in accordance with the laws of the United Federation of the West, requests your participation in a police investigation?'"

"Yeah. I wonder what they'd do to you, if you denied their 'request?'"

"I can't even figure out what they want me for, since I've already described everything I remember to one of the cops over the phone. I guess, in the fine traditions of the Force everywhere, they just want to ask the same things all over again. Did they tell you anything?"

He shook his head.

"Just said it was regarding the 'vigilantes.'"

The thought of them made him start scanning the passengers on the humming train.

"Who are you looking for?" asked Briony.

"Nobody."

They came to their first stop, waited for the second train, took seats, and listened to the maglev hum again.

"The gang is what I'm looking for," he finally said. "I know. The cops are holding them until they get bail. It's ridiculous to look for them. Well, my mind has obviously decided it needs the practice. Once they're out, it won't be ridiculous."

She looked distressed.

"Johan, don't you think that's rather unlikely? Wouldn't you be the last person they'd bother at this point? The police know who they are, they'd be caught and it would just make things worse for them. They've got to be aware

of that.”

“What they’re aware of is that they can’t let anyone get away. Start letting people get away, and who knows where it’ll all end. I mean, good God, everybody might start turning them in. They’d have to start watching their backs all the time. Can’t have that.”

Briony winced at his sarcasm, but said nothing, and Johan sank back into his own unpleasant thoughts. When she spoke, it took him a second to remember what they’d been talking about.

“But don’t they have to watch their backs now? Aren’t the cops after them? It’s not like they and the police have a gentlemen’s agreement to stay off each other’s turf.”

He didn’t know how to answer her. What she said was obviously true, and yet it wasn’t.

“They may not have an agreement,” he finally muttered, as they walked through the big double doors of the police station, “but both sides keep chugging along, making my life impossible. Even though they’re not working together.” He knew what he meant, but he didn’t know how to explain it.

At the police station, things started well enough. Briony asked where they could wait for each other once they were done. She seemed to be more focused on meeting his old math teacher than worrying about the cops. It must be nice.

Johan took a deep breath and followed two police officers to answer questions he didn’t want to hear.

The officers who led him to the small video room were female, which added another layer of constraint to the whole business. He could have asked for a male officer, but he hadn’t. He didn’t want to feel like a complete doof. The walls of the little room were bare and gray. The chairs were hard and bare, the brown table was bare of everything except the lone monitor.

He was over eighteen. He was of age. He should be able to deal with this on his own. He said he had no need for a lawyer. He was a witness, damn it, not a criminal. He had refused his father’s offer to come with him, and now he was regretting it. His hands felt cold and clammy as he tried to look calm, in control.

Positive identifications of the accused were the first item on the agenda. The images were processed so as to appear on a background of the same dim street where he saw the women. They looked totally different. Their clothes, their hair, and especially their expressions were different. He’d only seen them for a few minutes, even if it felt like forever, and large parts of his mind were trying to forget their horrible faces. However, he did his best to study the images. After looking carefully, he was confident about the Chinese-looking woman and the brown-haired one. A large, gangly woman was unmistakable. The other three were just a mass of hateful eyes and sneering mouths, and nobody really looked right as the officer switched different people into and out of the images.

“So what happens to the rest of them?” he asked hesitantly. “If they’re not

identified, they probably can't be charged." *Or kept safely in jail.*

"We have information from the four injured parties, as well as Ms. Hlanto. We get as many data points as possible, so as to avoid arresting the innocent."

The officer's name badge said Saticoy.

"Oh. Right," he said. *Was protecting him from the guilty also a priority?*

The other officer, whose name badge said Rossini, spoke for the first time. "We had a few questions, if you feel you've taken the IDs as far as you can."

He nodded.

"The circumstances under investigation were reported by Ms. Hlanto. The suspects noted that a third party had been present and subsequent inquiries established the fact that you were the person in question. Why didn't you come forward? You must have seen the news reports on this topic."

"Well, I didn't." He'd done his best not to.

"Why didn't you report the suspicious circumstances yourself?"

"I wasn't sure what was going on," he lied quickly. *What else could he say? He'd never even told Briony about what the gang had put him through ... and she'd never asked, oddly enough.* "They just made me feel very uncomfortable." The police were not, officially, allowed to have any truth-detection devices running without telling him. He wasn't a known criminal. Yet. He hoped they stuck to the rules.

"You noticed enough to feel uncomfortable. What did you think was going on?" Rossini was obviously sceptical.

Johan tamped down rising anger. He'd been set upon by six scumbags, and yet he was the one who had to justify himself.

"Should I be here with my lawyer?" he asked.

The woman he was starting to think of as the good cop, Saticoy, took over soothingly at this point.

"We're all on the same side, Mr. Antioch. Officer Rossini and I—and you—are all only trying to make a case that'll stand up in court. So just relax, tell us exactly what happened, and we can get this whole situation taped up. Can I get you something to drink? Tea or coffee?"

Why was it so maddening when people took it upon themselves to tell you to relax? Relax yourself, he felt like saying. He remembered just in time to answer,

"White coffee would be fine. Thanks."

Saticoy left the room to get it, leaving the door open.

"The suspects have been giving us their own version of events," Officer Rossini pointed out, not-so-subtly reminding Johan that his take on reality would have to fit with that of the horrible women.

With a sinking feeling, he realized that if they mentioned softening him up or telling him about the company they had, it would be plenty to give the lie to his glib statement of ignorance. Then the cops probably wouldn't believe anything else he said either. Maybe the women wouldn't say anything that gave him away. Maybe they would. In a weird partnership, his lies depended on theirs.

"Now," said the good cop when she came back and handed him his coffee with a smile, "why don't you tell us exactly what happened." She set a bookmark on the recorder, and Rossini closed the door.

"I was walking through Greendale, when those six women stopped me."

"Didn't you realize you were taking a risk by going through that neighborhood?" Rossini wanted to know.

Yeah. If I'd been bolder, smarter, stronger.... He took a deep breath.

"I was in Rosepark. I had to get to my train stop on Maxin Road to go home to Willow. I could take three other buses and two transfers from Rosepark, or I could cut through Greendale and walk for fifteen minutes."

"Well, it wouldn't be the first shortcut that turned into the long way around," said Officer Saticoy, still soothing. "Then what happened?"

"The women started, uh, implying things." *Implying* was so far from the right word he'd be up for perjury next. "Briony Hlanto passed by, noticed that something wasn't right, and said she needed directions. I offered to show her the way, and we left."

Put like that, it sounded like a walk in the park. Maybe he was overdoing the business about not being sure there was a problem.

"Well, if you were simply uncomfortable, that does fit with the fact that you did not report the situation and that you were, we've been told, out on a date shortly thereafter. This agrees with the suspects' version of events that they were joking around, knew nothing about any gang-related activities, and were misunderstood by a foreigner who is unfamiliar with local customs."

Saticoy was looking at him closely, making Johan feel that she was trying to see if that statement would draw a reaction from him.

Damn right, it drew a reaction. Maybe she wasn't really the good cop. Blood pounded in his head at the choice of pretending the gang was just girls having a good time, or of letting the world know he was a coward and a fool.

How's what happened up to you? Briony had said.

He might think he was a fool, and everybody else might think so too, but she hadn't, and she was the one with the blind courage to walk straight into a group of slicers alone. And if he let all that crap stand, her courage meant nothing.

"Every bit of that is wrong," he stated flatly. "I wasn't on a date, no matter what Sara Webster cooked up in her imagination. If those six scumbags were joking, they were doing it with mace guns. I don't know how much guts it took Briony to walk up to them—more than I have obviously—but the reason she and I were sitting in a cafe was to get over a bad experience, not to enjoy each other's company."

"They had a mace gun and you didn't report it?" Rossini was back to being sceptical.

"Two of the three I identified had holstered mace guns."

"Oh. *Holstered*. They weren't threatening you."

“Yes,” he said. “Holstered.” That made it all okay, of course. Women had the right to defend themselves. Next time, he was bringing a lawyer.

“All of this,” noted Rossini, “would have been less problematic if you’d come forward in a timely fashion.”

“Yeah. Just getting out of there seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Well, you did get out of there. Others weren’t so lucky because it took us so long to get there.”

Johan felt like he’d been drop-kicked into a vat of glue. There was only one thing the cop could mean. His delay had caused other men to get cut.

He’d been hoping, desperately, that only the one guy had been hurt – the one in the window – the one who fell. The one who wasn’t his fault. Even though he was so far from being faster, smarter, stronger, better. He’d been hoping that the lack of news about who was injured and how much and when meant that nobody else had been sliced. He’d been hoping so hard that his fear hadn’t ruined anyone’s life. Except maybe his own.

So much for that. He might as well have held the knives for the slicers.

He could think of no way to ask whether the men would be all right. There was no way for anyone to know, not even for the men themselves. The cops, being female, would probably say something flatbrained about a few months of regeneration therapy and being good as new. He couldn’t move. Voices reached his ears, but not his mind.

Saticoy ended the session with, “Please remain available in case we have further questions.”

He walked down the hall, feeling like he was moving someone else’s legs, like everything was happening to someone else. This must be where the phrase “beside yourself” comes from, he thought. You were supposed to be beside yourself with something, with rage, despair, or torment. Or all of the above.

Waiting room, he remembered. Briony would be in the waiting room. The directions about how to get there had fractured together with the rest of his ability to think. He had to ask. Even that felt bad. And he was the lucky one. Others weren’t so lucky.

He saw Briony give him a searching glance. No doubt, he was looking like he’d been diagnosed with leprosy again. Leprosy, however, was curable.

“Do you, um, still want to go to your old math teacher now, or should we put it off for a day or two?”

Math teacher? Oh, yes. Math teacher. He’d promised to take her to Voznic. His former high school was close to his house, and it had seemed, at one time, like an easy thing to do on his way home.

“Willow” he said. “We need to get on the train over there and head to Willow.”

She kept her eyes on the ground as they walked and had turned a pinkish color. He kept his eyes on the ground too, for the most part, but the blood still pounded in his head. They reached the station, waited for the train, and

climbed on board.

She was gradually growing less pink, and when the train was rolling, she said, more to herself than to Johan,

"I should have just taken that library job back home. I'm hopeless at field work."

"Oh, I don't know," he said, staring straight ahead. "You're not doing so badly. You haven't been here a week, and you've certainly got the story of my life."

She said nothing and the silence roared in his ears, overwhelming the hum of the train. He could tell she'd turned red again.

Just because the blood was pounding in his head, was it a reason to spread the disease around? What was he doing, making her feel bad, of all people? He opened his mouth to speak at the same time she did.

"Sorry, go ahead," he said.

"No, you—." He glanced at her and she changed course quickly. "I just wanted to say that I'm more sorry than I can say that I got you into all this trouble. I'm finally getting it through my thick head why the first rule of research is not to interfere."

He closed his eyes for a long moment, and when he opened them again, he looked straight at her.

"Briony. No. I'm sorry. Thank God you interfered. What happened in there isn't your fault."

"I don't know," she said, eyes fixed on the seat in front of her. "The look on your face says it was awful. If you'd done things your way, you wouldn't have to put up with any of this."

No, then he'd hear the screams every waking moment instead of mostly in nightmares. He'd hear the echo of those awful voices telling him they had company all the time instead of in flashbacks. Which were growing less frequent, he realized, with each time he fought that awful place instead of trying to forget it. Doing the right thing might have landed him in no end of trouble, but some infinities truly were smaller than others.

"No, Briony. You didn't get me in trouble. You got me out of it."

"You don't—didn't look like it."

"The cops took the time to point out that some of the men ... got ... cut. The cops pointed out that if I'd reported the crime immediately, I might have saved those other guys a lot of trouble. And that really is my fault."

"Great God," she whispered. "Nice people, huh, those cops?"

"Not very. But I guess they're not paid to be nice."

"Bullshit. They're supposed to be protecting widows and orphans, not beating them up."

"Well, they do protect. Men are supposed to be able to take care of themselves. And other people." *And not have nightmares. And not be afraid.*

She stared at him wonderingly, and looked away.

“You really mean it, don’t you? Look, Johan, I don’t mean to be insulting, if it is an insult here, by referring to widows and orphans. I just meant that you’re one of the wronged. The job of the police is to deal with the crime, not to slag you off for not being right.”

Maybe, instead of a lawyer, he’d take Briony with him the next time he had to defend himself from the law. If she was still here. She was leaving in another three weeks and three days.

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Chapter 4

Johan trailed down the airport concourse behind the mob of people seeing Briony off, as if his mere physical mass could drag the process to a halt. It didn't. It had no effect at all. Soon they were all at the gate to the shuttle bus that took passengers out to the blimp. The shimmering, midnight-blue oblong was small at this distance, and ended in a tiny, green, flapping flag. He knew that a blue flag would replace it just before take-off, which was at some unspecified time in the next few hours. They waited till everybody who was coming was on board. Schedules, for Islanders, seemed to be something that happened to other people.

Most people were saying goodbye here, others were going out to see the blimp up close. They were wishing Briony well, and promising to call, and laughing at jokes. Johan wanted them all to go away, and he wanted them all to stay forever. Once they were gone, she'd be on the blimp, floating away.

"I guess we may as well head back, too," said Gwyn, walking over to where Johan stood, apart.

"I—I wanted to see the blimp."

"It's just a big balloon, basically. What's to see?"

"It has decks and cabins and even a small public vid lounge, Briony said. It's like some antique sailing ship. I wanted to see it."

She studied him for a bit.

"What?" he said.

"I'm just trying to figure out whether you're finally taking a healthy interest in something besides the past, or what."

That would be "or what."

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He remembered the first time he'd done something fun with Briony, something not to do with attacks and slicers and the law. He'd met her at the train to take her to lunch with his family and kitesurfing afterwards. She nearly

missed her step getting off the train because she was staring at the view.

"Beautiful!" she said. He was surprised. It was the same view he'd seen since forever: low mountains indistinct in the hazy distance under a cobalt sky. There were some white adobe houses closer in surrounded by sparse trees and cactuses, scattered ponds with reeds, and sagebrush dotting the sandy ground. As usual at this time of year, there were swallows swooping above the water. She'd shown him pictures of her parents' house, standing on stilts in a sapphire lagoon, and the impossibly green mountains of her home island in the background. Now that was beautiful.

"What are those?" she asked, pointing toward the small, graceful trees which lined the banked ground along the tracks near the station. They were in full bloom with purple, trumpet-shaped flowers swaying on long slender branches in the breeze.

"Desert willows. They're not really willows at all, but after the township grew up around this station, they called the place Willow."

They took one of the runabouts near the station, and she thanked him for everything he was doing for her, for helping her find the schools she needed, and now for taking her on this outing.

He glanced over at her.

"It's nothing, Briony." It really was. The person he was doing something for was himself.

"How's the job going?" she'd asked.

"Oh, fine," he said.

"You mean you hate it just fine, huh?"

She had a little grin, with dimple, on her face.

His mouth twisted into a humorless smile.

"The first couple of days, the only way I knew that time hadn't stopped was that eventually I was supposed to go home. Even worse, though, was that yesterday I suddenly realized I've fallen into a routine already. Mid-morning, I sent another math in-joke making fun of the boss to the guy in the next cubicle. Mid-afternoon, I was yarning around the coffee pot with everyone else. At this rate, I'll wind up just like my Dad."

"You could do a lot worse, Johan," said Briony, "but I know what you mean."

That was the thing about her, he thought. She always knew what he meant. Even he didn't know what he meant half the time.

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Nobody would know, once she left tonight.

"—Greendale," somebody said.

Even though he hated it, Johan always picked that word out of the noise of conversations, as if it was his own name.

"You'll miss all the fireworks at the trial," somebody else said, as if it was going to be the best show on earth.

"One of the guys is going to sue for damages because it took the cops forever to get there."

What? thought Johan.

"For sure, or is that just a rumor?"

"It was an interview with the guy in *Tag End*," said Gwyn. "They paid him for it. He's just trying to make a boring story more sensational for them."

Johan stared at the floor, mind whirling. Gwyn knew all about it. She hadn't told him. Why? Was she trying to keep him from worrying, or did she really think it was "boring"? Or both?

Who was this guy going to sue? The cops? Not likely. Who else was there who'd caused the cops to be late? Who was going to be testifying to that shortly? Or perjuring himself?

He couldn't stand it if the rumor had any truth to it. It took more energy than he had to force his mind away from obsessing about slicers and cops. One more thing to ignore would cause a crash. His shoulders and stomach tensed to fight demons, as always, but the demons didn't show, as always, and all he could do was stand there.

If only he could rest. Get away from all this, leave it all behind, never think about it again. Like, say, in the Caliphate, where the law couldn't follow him. But the only person he'd met who'd been there didn't think much of it.

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He'd been driving Briony to his house, and she'd been talking about her research.

"That Rosepark school where you introduced me to the math teacher, that's going to be one of my best data points. I'm trying to make sure I include the full range of socioeconomic variation. The kids whose parents operate in Greendale would push the envelope even further."

"The weirdos in Greendale don't have kids. They don't even try to get the permits."

"You know what I mean. The kids whose aunts and uncles are in Greendale, if you want to be precise."

"If it's important to get off the beaten path, why not the Caliphate? That would really push the envelope."

"Have you ever been there?" she asked, giving him a look that for some reason reminded him she was several years older.

He shook his head. Nobody went there.

"They're off-scale, Johan. Our blimps stop over in Doha when they go around the world via the Indian Ocean. I took the long way around so I'd see the world."

I saw more than I wanted. There were children, children, begging outside the perimeter fence around the airport. They're kept away from the main terminal, but the blimp area is near the cargo planes, which is why I saw that. People still starve to death there, which hasn't happened anywhere else in, what?, six hundred years? Seven hundred years? I couldn't study class sizes among the poor, because they don't really have classes. They come out of school not knowing how to read."

He'd heard about the beggars, but he wondered what the fence could be for.

"Oh, here we are," he said.

The car stopped outside a chest-high white adobe wall with flame-colored paradise flower shrubs in front of it. He was glad they'd reached his house and would soon have something else to talk about, something neutral, like lunch. It always annoyed him that the Caliphate had to be such a good example of poverty. So they were a bit one-sided in how men ran the place. They were poor because they had no resources except a lot of desert and a few camels. It was not all the fault of testosterone poisoning.

After a brief silence, during which he switched on the runabout's receiver for the sidewalk power grid, she said quietly,

"The Caliphate is off-scale because of the choices they make, Johan, not because men run the place."

He opened his mouth in surprise, closed it, then started over.

"What do you do, read minds?"

"It wasn't too difficult. I mention the problems there, and you start looking like an Aztec king who's unhappy with his last human sacrifice."

"Oh," he said. "I see." She was wrong about one thing, though. "Quechua, actually. My mother has family in the Andes. I don't think they were ever kings, or that they were big on sacrifices. At least," he added as an afterthought, "I hope Nalini's in a good mood." He had a low opinion of his pesky younger sister.

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"So who is that victim going to sue? None of the other guys called the cops, but neither did he."

"Well, Johan here is the one who knows the most about that. I heard something about you being a witness."

He'd known this was coming. He'd known it all along. He'd known the rumors were flying about him, but he'd never had to stand face to face with them before. His jaw clenched so hard, he was surprised he didn't break a few teeth.

"You're a witness?" exclaimed somebody else.

"Nobody tells me anything."

“Really?”

“Wow. So what did you witness?”

“Didn’t you call?”

“How come you were in Greendale?”

“What did you do?”

“Didn’t you do anything?”

Johan’s jaw clenched even harder. *Was he going to have to listen to this sort of thing for the rest of his life?*

“The part I’ll never understand is how come *none* of those guys did anything” said one of the women’s voices. “I mean, a few months of regen therapy, and they’ll be fine, so what’re they so afraid of that they just act paralyzed?”

“Is that how it was when you were attacked?” His father’s low rumble behind him cut through the chatter. Both his parents were there.

“What? What do you mean?” said the woman.

His mother joined the fray. She was good at that.

“You spoke with such authority, Sandy. I think we just assumed you must be speaking from personal experience.”

That shut everybody up. His parents might be old fogeys who thought math was practical, but they’d been very good about the whole, awful Greendale affair.

“The shuttle’s about to leave,” he heard Briony say. “I better get going, or I’ll be the last one on board.”

Almost everyone started drifting back toward the main terminal. But he didn’t care how it looked. He was going out to the blimp. He just had to hope Gwyn wouldn’t make a big—.

“It could take hours to go all the way out and see the blimp take off,” said Gwyn. “You don’t really want to do that, do you?”

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

There was silence from Gwyn. He glanced at her. She was studying him again.

“Do you,” she said. “Johan, I know you need your space, and so forth and so on. But you’re going to have to get over it some day. Right?”

“Right,” he said, moving toward the last people boarding the shuttle. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want. I’ll see you ... later.”

“Yeah,” he heard her say. “Later.”

He couldn’t get used to the way she fitted into her old life, and she couldn’t get used to the way that he didn’t. But this time he didn’t try to cover it up. He could have turned and waved a more normal goodbye. Instead, he had his jaw clenched again from being told to get over it.

Two of Briony’s friends from the Anthropology Department were the only other ones of the whole party who went all the way out to the blimp. They were talking, joking about recalcitrant “research subjects,” also known as “children,” and he was staring into space out the window of the whiny little

bus. Part of him, a part he thought he'd outgrown years ago, wished his parents were there, or somebody who'd hold his hand and make him feel better.

Even worse than Gwyn and her obliviousness was everyone's curiosity. He'd never known it would feel this bad, even though he'd been dreading it. He'd never known he'd be able to see that hunger for secrets, bulging beneath the surface, like worms crawling under skin.

He started thinking about the one thing that could make him forget almost anything, even though he knew it would just make things worse. At least they'd be worse in a different way.

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Down at the beach, the last time he took her kitesurfing, he'd been there with a whole flock of people. He'd been checking out the rented kites for Briony, Nalini, and Nalini's useless boyfriend, who was Johan's age, while they struggled with their wetsuits. Nalini was tall, dark-eyed, intense, and—even Johan had to admit—beautiful. She'd had boys swirling around her since she'd started growing breasts, and every single one of the clothheads was hopeless, as far as Johan was concerned.

He laid out the room-sized parasails on the beach. In theory, the nanotech in the kites meant you could attach them to the waist harness, unseal the catch, and they would leap into the air, unfurled and ready to go. His own carefully packed kite worked that way. But with rentals, if you trusted them blindly you found yourself flopping in the surf like a gaffed fish. Johan liked to think he was a reasonably honorable person, so he checked the kite of the insufferable boyfriend along with everyone else's.

Ruy came wandering down the beach, as he'd said he would, although he was late, as usual. He took one look at the newbies falling over in the waves, grinned a bit, and started helping Johan with the kites.

Johan glanced over to see how far along people were with the wetsuits—and froze. A Chinese-looking woman was walking down by the water line. She had two combs in her hair.

Like people do when someone stares, she seemed to feel it because she turned and looked at him. Then she smiled and walked on.

He hadn't seen the smooth, vicious face since the horrible night, and at a distance, in broad daylight, at a beach with kids building sand castles, he couldn't even be sure this was the same one. Was he becoming the sort of idiot who jumped at shadows, or was this for real? The woman walking away from him was about the same height, she did her hair much the same way, and she was young and Asian. There were probably about ten thousand women in the greater Gabriel area who fit that description. Had she smiled because that's what many women did when he stared at them? Or had there been meaning

behind it? He wanted to run after the woman, get a good look at her, and find out she wasn't the same person at all.

"You okay, buddy?" he heard Ruy saying.

"What? Oh, yeah. Fine."

"Hey, Johan! How long are those kites going to take?"

He looked toward the bellower without understanding. It was the boyfriend who had bellowed because the women's voices wouldn't carry far enough over the pounding of the surf, but Nalini was the one standing there with her hands on her hips.

The kites. They were here to go kitesurfing. And some people had put on their own suits and checked four kites while other people did nothing but fall down when a wave hit them. However, he let it go.

He made sure Briony took a good kite, he helped her get the board under her feet when they'd fought their way out past the surf, and he watched her skim away till she was an elongated dot in the waves. The kite's nanotechnology compensated for her lack of skill since she had the sense to do nothing but go back and forth in a straight line and stay out of the surf. Judging by the look on her face as she came flying back, she was having the time of her life.

Ruy had been taking care of Nalini, to the chagrin of the boyfriend. Johan decided nobody needed his attention, and started doing what he liked best, riding the surf and using the wind and the waves to leap and fly and turn in midair.

Except ... he didn't. He didn't feel himself flying while his muscles took care of landing on the wave. He felt tense, and he looked down, and he remembered stories about surfers thrown into sand and rolled by the big waves and tearing half their skin off. He pulled at his kite just in time to keep from falling.

Was that horrible street the last risk he'd ever dare to take? Was he going to be afraid of everything forever? Even sand?

He clenched his jaw and carried on. He was going to keep on doing this until the memory was gone. They were NOT robbing him of flight.

The boyfriend's kite seemed to spend a lot of time struggling to get itself out of the water, which was hardly surprising since he was trying to do the same leaps and flights as Johan on the basis of no skill at all. Johan leaped higher and farther just to make sure he understood the full depth of his ignorance, and watched him wipe out yet again. Nalini took the opportunity to flop around in the waves with the foof, so Johan had to keep an eye on her and make sure nobody drowned. After nanotech won out over stupidity one more time and the kites righted themselves, he went skimming off after Briony and Ruy, who were human-shaped specks on the horizon.

All too soon, Johan's comm band vibrated, which he knew was his mother, letting him know that the grill on the beach was lit and it would be dinner time soon. He corralled Nalini and company and refolded their kites for them. The way they tried to let the kites fold themselves was a good example of why

rental kites had to be checked. One of Briony's friends was supervising the grill, and Briony lay on the beach, delighted with the whole experience.

"I was watching you, Johan. You're amazing at kitesurfing."

He flushed with pleasure.

"I started when I was about eight."

"I'd think you could be winning things. You don't look that different from the people I've seen at the Finley meet."

"Three years ago, I actually placed in the regional championships."

"You're really something, Johan. You know that? Somebody could probably know you for years and not even hear about half the things you've done."

He exchanged smiles with her, thinking how nice it was to hear good things about himself. Who'd be there to give him that after she left? He certainly didn't hear that sort of thing from himself.

And then the Chinese woman walked past, going back along the shore. She didn't look at him, now that he was surrounded by people.

"What happened, Johan?" came Briony's quiet voice.

Dear God, were those few horrible minutes going to poison all the good times of his life? And he was one of the lucky ones. Technically speaking, he had escaped.

He nodded toward the disappearing figure of the woman on the beach, and muttered,

"I thought she looked like one of that gang."

Briony sat up and studied the distant person.

"It's strange, but, you know, I don't think I can remember what they looked like at all. Too many other things on my mind at the time, I guess."

"Yes," he said. Exactly, he thought. "I'm starting to wonder if that means I'm going to keep seeing them everywhere."

"Oh, Johan," she said even more quietly. "I feel so bad about this. I wish there was some way to make everything bad just go away."

He gave a sardonic snort and stretched out at his full length on the sand. Yes. Exactly.

Nonetheless, to see her sitting there, outlined against the turquoise evening sky, was like a warm breeze in the cold. That was when he'd stopped kidding himself about her.

He loved her.

She had someone named Lem on her comm, and it made no difference. She'd never given any indication she thought of him as more than a good friend, and that changed nothing. There might as well be no connection between his heart and his head. He'd heard that it was a common condition. He didn't know how to tell her how much better she made everything without telling her a lot of other things at the same time. Life was a mess.

Seen close up, the blimp was immense, the size of an elongated cathedral. Briony showed the three of them all over the ship, and she seemed to know everyone on board.

“What?” he asked. “You know everybody in the Islands, or are these all the same people you came out with?”

“Everybody knows everybody. There aren’t that many of us.”

She was hugging all the people she knew from home, and they were all hugging her. Johan wished that he was somebody she knew from home. She introduced him to about twenty people, and though some bowed normally, others grasped his right hand and moved it up and down slightly. She said that before the flu plagues five hundred years ago, everyone had greeted each other that way. It took a bit of getting used to, how the Islanders touched everyone, even strangers.

Kids were running along the decks that lined the outside of the blimp, and whooping and hollering to their friends who were waving to them from the ground. Nobody told them to stop. Nobody even told them to quit climbing up on the railings. Admittedly, the ground wasn’t that far away, but none of them fell. They were horsing around like kids, but paying attention like adults. Maybe that was the price of nobody being on their case: they could do what they liked if they didn’t cause problems. In some ways, it was like the blimp leaving when the passengers were ready, not when the clock was. It was going to leave pretty soon, because the public address system said everyone was on board. Everybody’d showed up approximately when they were supposed to.

“You have to come visit,” Briony was saying to Johan. “Come for the October kitesurfing championship, and then I can try to do something for all the help you’ve given me here. Finding me that Rosepark school. Everything. I’d never have been able to set up as many vid links for my research observations without your help. I’d have no research to do all next year, I’d never finish my thesis, and my life would come to an end.”

She was laughing as she said it, but it was easy to see that she also meant it.

Johan didn’t say that he had no vacation coming to him for what felt like decades, or that he wasn’t sure he wanted to meet this Lem character. He said, “I’d love to.” That was at least part of the truth.

An increase in excitement and whooping was followed by an announcement for all non-passengers to disembark. At the gangway, Briony was hugging her fellow students. Johan wondered whether—and then she was hugging him and he didn’t have to wonder. His arms closed around her small, sturdy body, he felt the soft pressure of her breasts on his chest, and he knew he was never going to let her go. Her cloud of hair tickled his nose.

Then, as if his arms belonged to someone else, he found that he was letting her go. As if his legs belonged to someone else, he walked down the gangway. He stood on the ground, looking at the vast expanse of iridescent dark blue photovoltaic skin, at the tethers being loosened, at the long decks, and at the

red-gold circle framing Briony's face, floating away, unlike him, who had no wings to fly.

He'd lost everything. He'd lost his freedom to cubicles, he'd lost his way in his world, and he'd lost himself to fear. And now there wasn't even one pair of eyes that knew what he had seen.

Like a soap bubble, the airship rose higher and farther. There was no noise at all, because there was no sound to leak past the noise cancellers. It was a silent machine, except for the people calling to their friends. She waved, the distance swallowed her, and he turned away with nothing between him and the rest of his life.

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Chapter 5

Johan spent the days going to his job, and then going home. He hardly spoke to anyone. He had nothing to say. Math, he decided, really was very practical, because it could be done without talking.

Word spread that he was the one involved in the Greendale business. People kept asking him things, and looking hungry. What had happened? What had he done? What hadn't he done? Why hadn't he done it?

He just wanted everything in his life to disappear.

He went kitesurfing at what he thought of as Briony's beach. Sometimes he felt he could bear it, when shore was nothing but a distant line, when the only sounds were wind and waves, and when the only company was the occasional smooth, dark, glistening back of a dolphin rising briefly from her own world. Other times, he came close to becoming a statistic.

He tried to lecture himself out there among the quiet dolphins. He knew what he was supposed to do. Get over it. Move on. Be realistic. He shouldn't be mooning over Briony. He should be rebuilding his real life with his real lover.

He came in to shore, lowered his kite, slowly began what could have been the quick process of folding it. This was the worst part, when he knew it would be an eternity of getting through the hours until he could come back again.

He tried, sometimes, at odd moments, to let Gwyn know where he lived these days. But she kept talking about the future instead of the past, and he didn't know how to make her understand the dead, dark street where part of his mind always stood. He didn't know how to explain the deaf feeling, even though he could hear the strangled groan. He could always hear the strangled—.

"I see you around here a lot," said a chirpy woman's voice right next to him.

He was kneeling on the sand, holding two of the kite lines. He'd been coiling them up, but he'd forgotten about them.

He looked up. There was a woman standing so close he could have touched her, and grinning at him all over her irrelevant face. She was holding a pair of sandals in one hand, and the legs of her white trousers were rolled up.

"I like kitesurfing, too," she was saying. "I rented a kite once, and it was great

fun. The guy taking us out was okay, but I bet you'd be a much better teacher."

What gave her the impression he wanted to be a teacher? Or that he wanted to deal with her at all when he could barely stand the people he knew?

"If you're here again tomorrow, you could take me out and show me a thing or two."

He'd done nothing but stare at her. How could she not see that he lived in another universe?

Her smile was now bright and expectant.

Apparently, all she could see was the script in her head. The one that said real men always want sex.

He had enough sex. Or enough of sex. Or maybe he wasn't a real man. But he was past caring. It seemed to be getting through to her that he was doing nothing but stare.

"Well, you don't have to be so unfriendly," she said. "Smile. Try it. It won't hurt." And she showed him plenty of her own teeth so he could see how it was done.

Smile. Who the hell did she think she was?

For some reason, it was the last straw. He stood up slowly, all the way up. The top of her head didn't reach his collarbone. He could put his hands around her throat and kill her so fast she'd never even know what happened.

He felt as if the thought had physically hit him, it was so strong, so total. *Where did that come from?*

It took a frightening amount of effort to do nothing, to look out to sea over the top of her head. The thought came to him that, as a human sacrifice, this woman's heart definitely would not be up to spec.

So he managed to do nothing worse than turn his back on her and continue slowly and methodically folding his kite.

"Well, *excuse me*," he heard her huff. "Next time I'll ask whether you've taken your meds first."

He heard the sand swish as she marched off, and nearly ripped the kite's ballistic fabric as he stuffed it into its case. There better not be any "next time." This was his only sanctuary, his last sanctuary. If she robbed him of it by making him scan the beach for twits, he really would kill her.

And if he turned around and yelled, "Junker!" he'd be the one who was over-reacting.

Night was falling. He couldn't even go back out on the water and try to start all over. He shouldered the big, bundled kite and the overnight bag he'd brought and headed toward the train station. He had the notion of going to Gwyn's tonight and making another effort to be what she called "reasonable." Maybe, if he kept trying, he'd learn how again.

Then, as if his thoughts had somehow called her up, he saw Gwyn walking toward him from the direction of the station. He blinked. It was really her. Her hair billowed out in that way he loved as she walked, and he found himself

wondering if, just maybe, everything might feel right for a while if he could hold her long enough, and bury his face in the sweet smell of her silky hair.

She didn't say hello when she was close enough.

"So. You had a good time kitesurfing?"

Now what was she mad about?

"Gwyn," he started to say, one hand on the strap of his bag. "Gwyn, I—"

"I guess you forgot it's my birthday."

He stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk. He had totally forgotten. He'd also forgotten that he was going to meet her at the Dodee hours ago. He'd forgotten he was going to take her to dinner. He'd forgotten—.

"It's pretty pathetic when I have to call your sister to find out where the hell you are. Your comm's off again, you know."

"I was out on the water," he muttered, lowering the bundle of his kite to the ground. "Trying to be reasonable."

"What?" she bit out.

"No, Gwyn. No, I don't mean it like that. I'm not being sarcastic. I mean it. I go out there, and try to get myself to a better place."

"Well? Why don't you get there then?"

I got somewhere, he wanted to say. *I didn't kill anybody*. But he began as neutrally as he could, "I'm trying. I—"

"Trying!" she exploded. "Not very hard! You can't even be bothered to apologize for leaving me flat. One microsecond, and you're back to you again. Like there's nobody else in the world."

"Gwyn, for God's sake—"

"We're going to have this out right here and now. I've had it with this BS."

"Which BS?" he asked slowly.

"You always being off in a world of your own. You always on about something that didn't even happen. You forgetting the here and now because you'd rather spend your time in hell and gone."

"You don't think, maybe, I'd like to get out of hell even more than you want to stop hearing about it?"

"So, do it! I'm not spending the rest of all time being patient and understanding while you stand me up and don't even apologize."

"Gwyn, I'm sorry I forgot your birthday. I'm really sorry. I was thinking of coming over tonight, and—"

"What for?"

He was bewildered.

"What for? What do you mean, what for?"

"So I can hold your hand and make you feel better? Again? It's getting real old. Especially because it doesn't seem to be a two-way street."

No, he thought. It wasn't, was it? He was forgetting more than birthdays. He'd forgotten his whole life. He'd forgotten who he was. And she, no matter how well her hair billowed, was tired of helping him remember.

“So,” she went on, “that’s what I came out here to find out. Are you going to go on feeling sorry for yourself forever, or are you, at some point, planning on getting over it?”

Getting over it. That would be nice.

Was she right? Was he making a big deal out of nothing? Was everything he’d felt and gone through an illusion? Or was she the one who couldn’t see anything that wasn’t her problem?

“Well?”

There was obviously only one right answer, but he didn’t know what it was. If he’d been crippled by a scratch, he was a weed. If he’d sliced open a leg artery, it might not be such a good idea to get up and walk before the bleeding stopped. He had no way of knowing which it was. None of this had ever happened to him before. All he knew was that he barely made it from one hour to the next.

“You know, Gwyn, I nearly killed somebody on the beach back there.”

He glanced at her and saw her eyes narrowed into a hostile glare.

“Are you threatening me?”

“What?! Dear God. Gwyn. No. Listen. I’m just trying to tell you – , I’m trying to understand what’s going on – , I’m –”

“What you’re doing,” she said, as narrow-eyed as ever, “is making even less sense than usual. If you’re going to be like that, give me a call if you pull yourself back together. Until then, don’t bother.”

“Do you ... really ... mean that?” he asked, looking as far away down the street as he could.

“Damn straight, I do.”

A white runabout appeared at the end of the street. It had one person in it, and a large beige dog with its head out the passenger window. The runabout turned down a side street.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll call when I’m normal. It may be a while.”

“Fine,” she said.

He stood there, one hand resting on the bundle of his kite, watching her walk away, back toward the train station.

He stood there long after she vanished into the station at the end of the road. She hadn’t been much comfort, these last few weeks. She hadn’t kept his heart beating, the way Briony did. But now that she was gone, the air around him felt worse than thin. He might as well be trying to breathe vacuum.

After enough time passed to be sure she’d caught a train, he shouldered his kite again – and almost immediately put it down. It weighed more than he could bear.

He couldn’t stand here all night.

There was a runabout parked less than a block away. It’d be expensive, taking it all the way to his room downtown, but he couldn’t face the hassle of the train no matter what it cost. He reached the runabout, dumped the kite into

the dickey, climbed in, and set it heading east.

The closer he came, the less he could face the prospect of his empty room. He thought about going to his family, but he couldn't face that either. There'd be questions. They'd ask him things like "How's it going?" It wasn't an option.

The little car had trundled all the way to downtown. There were people on the sidewalks and music spilling out of coffee places. He caught a whiff from a fried chicken place and discovered he was starving.

He stopped the runabout, took his bag, and got out. He leaned back in, entered his parents' address, and sent his kite on its way. He messaged the house phone for somebody to look for it. Hopefully, it would all work out. Right now, it didn't seem to matter very much.

The greasy, heavy food was filling and settling. The breading crunched satisfyingly as he chewed. His mind felt blank.

Somebody was waving a hand in front of his face.

"Mind if I sit here? The other tables are full."

He looked around. They weren't, actually. There were other people with empty seats at their tables. But so what? It didn't matter. He shrugged. It would take more energy than he had to tell her "no."

She took it to mean that he was glad to talk to her. Or at least to have her talk at him.

He knew where this was going, but he didn't care.

She wanted to have fun after a big day at the office. He couldn't deal with the hassle of telling her she was wasting her time. She'd figure it out for herself in a few minutes, presumably.

Then, when she assumed he was going home with her, he had a choice. Argue with her now or take advantage of the distraction of following her some place, any place. Once he wound up in some new part of town that didn't remind him of anything, he'd wander off and never have to explain anything.

She lived in the opposite direction from his room, not that far from the clipper port. Clippers rose and descended in spurts, three, four, five at a time, and then a lull for a minute or two. The noise cancellers made them seem silent at a distance, but not this close. Human voice frequencies couldn't be totally damped out, so the clippers made a whispering sound as they passed, like people muttering to him, people whom he couldn't understand.

"Doesn't that bother you?" he asked, and waved at the air.

"What?"

"The people."

She gave him a strange look, then thought she'd understood. "Oh, the clippers? No, you get used to it. Besides," she gave him one of those looks women give when they think they're irresistible, "we're going to have better things to do than listen to clippers."

She turned to give the scanner at the door to her apartment building the full benefit of her irises.

He hadn't actually done anything to escape. Time had run out.

"Listen—"

The doors swished open.

"Well, come on. We're sure as hell not doing it on the doorstep. I need my space."

She grabbed his wrist and pulled him in as the door swished closed behind them. "It doesn't stay open forever, you know."

He was trapped. No way to disappear quietly now, no way to avoid a scene. Women didn't handle a lack of interest well at the best of times, and this was not the best of times.

Maybe it would be simpler to just go along. It was, after all, something to do.

Except that it turned out it wasn't. She'd got some kind of drinks. They were sitting on her couch. She hadn't noticed at any point that his mind didn't care. But his body didn't care either. She noticed.

"What's wrong with you?" she demanded.

"What's wrong with *me*?" he repeated. *He* wasn't the one who'd ferried a zombie halfway across town without ever seeing what he had.

"Well, for—." She seemed to think better of cussing him out at this point, while she still expected something of him. "I've never seen a guy as young as you with that problem, but, for Christ's sake, a gentleman would have taken something for it. Or are you *trying* to be insulting?"

Maybe this isn't about you! shouted his whole mind.

But going straight from zombie to murderous rage was not allowed. The fur on the back of his neck would have stood up, if he'd had fur. But he had none, and he said nothing.

"I asked you a question," he heard her say, spacing the words like somebody's mother.

"Well," he said slowly, carefully, "nobody said you couldn't."

There was some silence.

"I guess, if this is what your conversation's like, there's a reason you don't talk."

"Yes," he said.

There was some more silence.

"You know, I don't understand what the hell you're playing at. If you're that uninterested or nonfunctional or whatever it is, why didn't you just say so? What's the point of riding all over town, leading me on? Or do you get your jollies jerking people around?"

This time he was speechless not because he had too much to say, but because he had nothing. Then he made the mistake of saying the first thing on his mind.

"What planet do you live on?"

Her eyes narrowed, and a blood vessel stood out on her temple.

"Not one where that shit is funny. One of these days you'll try it on the

wrong person, and then you'll see how unfunny it is in a way you won't forget."

He reacted faster than thought. He was back on the dark street. Fury and terror pounded right out to his fingertips. He had no idea what kept him from moving. Maybe guardian angels really existed.

He realized that he'd been paralyzed for the last few weeks because the alternative was much worse.

He stood up slowly. He took his overnight bag. He walked toward the front door.

Don't even say anything, ran the voice in his head. *You're dead if she files a complaint. She has every single letter of the law on her side. Just leave.*

"What a loser," he heard her hiss behind him. He could hear her following him. "Not even man enough to apologize, To say nothing of not being much of a man, period."

He stepped out into the long, empty corridor between apartments.

He faced her across the threshold.

"You're good at insults. You must have had lots of practice. Myself, I don't know what to say. This," he said, looking at her fixedly, "has never happened to me before."

She hit the "intruder" panel so hard he heard her exclaim, "Ow!" as the door crashed closed fast enough for him to feel it right through the soles of his shoes.

He walked slowly away from there. Outside the building, he paid no attention to where he went.

Maybe she'd send the cops after him for something. Maybe she wouldn't. He didn't notice it make his heart beat faster or slower. He must have died somewhere, if he didn't even care about that.

The broad boulevard leading to the port had four, or was it five?—he stopped and counted—five lanes of traffic in each direction. The hum of all the runabouts and buses was so penetrating, it felt like it was inside his head. It probably was inside his head, echoing off his skull.

He followed the cars, and watched clippers rising into the air, and drifting down to port. Rising, and drifting. Rising, and drifting. All going somewhere.

It would be nice to go somewhere, instead of nowhere.

He walked into the port terminal. He'd watch all the busy people for a while, all the people who had somewhere to go.

A huge, four-story wall inside was covered with a map of the planet. Specks of light showed the port cities. Moving, colored specks showed clippers, green for inbound, blue for outbound, turquoise for connecting. There were even two squarish unmoving purple dots: the Islander blimps making their way around the world, one always going east, the other always going west.

He'd never known that seeing two dots could hurt so much.

He thought for a moment about hopping on one of them, and following the

wind till he landed where Briony was. But Lem was there too. He didn't even want to think about that.

Besides, he'd just have to come back. The Finleys never let anyone stay. It was part of their draconian population control. Briony had mentioned it once as if it was quite normal. Someone had to emigrate or give up their right to a child for a foreigner to get citizenship. Nobody ever did either.

The most noticeable thing on the map was a dark patch of no light. Nobody went there and nothing came from there. The Caliphate.

It was a whole different world.

He could do with a different world right now. He wondered how you got there.

He walked around and checked flight boards. Apparently, you took a clipper to Brussels. From there you went to Central Asia. From there, you had to figure it out.

Why not? It was easier than figuring out how to get from here to tomorrow. He had his toothbrush, a bottle of deodorant, and a change of underwear. He'd buy another set of clothes in Brussels. Or somewhere. He leaned in toward the iris scanner, and paid for his fare. One way.

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Chapter 6

The clipper came in to Brussels, and dropped into a layer of clouds obscuring the planet as far as the eye could see. Once it was through that layer, Johan saw another layer below. It was at least as thick, and the light became noticeably dim. But what took his breath away was that yet one more layer of clouds lay below that. It was a good, thick, respectable layer, perfectly adequate as standalone weather in any normal part of the globe, yet here it was a mere understudy. Below that, there was more cloud whipping past the window. Johan was starting to wonder if they were going to keep falling through clouds right to the center of the Earth when the glows of lights became visible through the fog, and then there was the ground and they'd landed. The clouds were so low, he could almost reach up and touch them. All the street lights were on even though it was morning.

Brussels was one of the ancient cities. The main square, called the Grote Markt, was an architectural wonder according to the tourist pamphlet he'd picked up in the security concourse. He wondered how they knew. That implied the fog must lift a bit every now and then.

He wasn't sorry to make his way to the connecting flight for Samarkand, although "connecting," he discovered, was a loose way to describe it. He hiked through the length and breadth of the terminal, he was funneled through twisted, underground passages, he waited for a shuttle bus near an obscure door, and finally he and three other silent souls arrived at the corner of the port from which the slow flights left.

It was very unsettling to feel the whole metal cylinder of airplane rumble with the effort of takeoff, laboring so long to become airborne that Johan began to think they were going to drive to Samarkand. After a while, they came out above the clouds, and after even more time, the clouds thinned out. The ground barely crawled by below, close enough to see individual buildings until night fell again and twinkling lights marked roads and villages. The lights grew sparser, the hours stretched longer, and Johan discovered that he'd never been bored in his life. This was the real thing.

It didn't help that he couldn't do anything. He tried vids, but playing them

felt like going through the motions, and watching them didn't hold his interest for more than minutes. He'd find himself staring at the black sky, but that would be boring in seconds ... until the next time he caught himself at it. He tried reading, and kept going over the same paragraph without any memory of what it said. He stared at the outer blackness some more. There was a plastic safety card stuck in the pocket of the seat-back in front of him. He looked at it. The blank-faced figures were putting on life jackets and jumping down slides as if it was a form of exercise. They were obviously very good at not-thinking about things.

Unlike him. For him, the price of not-thinking about some things was apparently the inability to think about anything at all.

He wrenched his mind away before he could start looking back. *Forward. Look only forward. What's the point of leaving it all behind if you take it with you?*

In desperation to force himself to face the right way, he started making a to-do list. That finally worked. There was plenty of stuff that belonged on a been-done list and that he could do where he was. He sent a polite resignation note to his boss at Simulation International. It would be a while before his family started worrying about him, but he pulled himself together and let them know he was gone, too.

But there was no way to do that without remembering. He was back at his house, in the garden at night, where nothing moved except those big moths shaped like small hummingbirds, visiting the flowers.

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He remembered the soft and heavy step near him, and how his father had sat down next to him on the raised rim of the fountain in the family courtyard. His father had that extra silence around him, which was always the only sign Johan's Dad gave that something troubled him.

He remembered him saying, "We're going to lose you, aren't we, son?"

Johan had floundered for a second at the unexpected question. It took him another second to get over the "son" business, which always made him feel like a category rather than a person. And then it took him many seconds to wonder what to say. He felt like he was already lost. His father waited.

"I—I'm not sure what you mean, Dad," was all he'd managed to say.

"You loved the Finley woman, didn't you?" his father asked.

Johan almost twitched from shock. Had it been that obvious to everyone? He couldn't lie about it without feeling like the lowest form of pond scum. He couldn't tell the truth without a voice to form the words.

"You never did do things the usual way," his father said. He stood up slowly, put a heavy hand on Johan's shoulder, and looked down at him. "You need any

kind of help—any kind—you let us know. You hear me, son?”

Johan couldn't do more than nod.

His father went inside the house, and Johan stared into the fountain while two tears that only the moths saw slid down his cheeks.

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He stared at the blackness again. The Stone Age airplane was still hours away from Samarkand. But he'd get there some day. And then it would be different. He'd never trip over any place where Briony had been. He'd never trip over scumbags. At least, not slicer scumbags. He wouldn't have to hear the same questions, over and over and over again. He wouldn't have to sit in a cubicle all day.

Which reminded him that the other thing on his should-have-been-done list was “find a job.” It was one of those tidy little items, like “design interstellar spacecraft,” that expressed hope rather than action. The real plan better not be to live on the money he had saved over a lifetime. There was enough to live on for a year or more, but that didn't mean it should be this year. He had, after all, just stepped off a cliff. He better hang on to any parachutes he had.

He could start finding out what his options were, search some of the Dohan job boards. He began tapping away at his comm. He'd never realized before just what it meant to have “no diplomatic relations.” Even network signals didn't travel directly between the West and the Caliphate. They went through protocol translators brokered by tiny Sao Tome for a fee. That search was going to have to wait.

The more immediate problem was getting there after he landed in Samarkand. The Western satellite country had ground transport to the border. Travellers crossed the border on foot. Then another bus trundled for a couple of days through a fiefdom of the Caliphate until it reached a town that had slow flights to Doha. There was an office in Samarkand which could process an entry permit for the Caliphate. They wanted a paper application and printed photographs. He filled out the form and attached a picture, together with payment for the printout and visa fees. He wondered whether he'd find out they didn't use scanners at the border, but rolled your fingers in ink instead.

The airplane landed in the small hours of the night at a port marked by a few straggling lights. The terminal was almost entirely dark. Except for the lighted security concourse and ID checking station, he was on his own. There were no screens to book a place to stay, no information booth, not even an entrepreneur selling print news and bad food. The other passengers all seemed to have somewhere to go. He wandered out in the same direction, was collared by an energetic cab driver, and had himself taken to the center of town, wherever that was. Surely, something had to be open somewhere. This was one

of the biggest cities in Central Asia.

The cab deposited him on a dusty street lined with low buildings desperately in need of paint and attention. The street lamps lost half their meager light to the sky, which seemed doubly stupid, but they gave enough light for him to see that he was being scrutinized by a disreputable dog. The animal didn't seem to think much of him. Greendale, by comparison, was a promising neighborhood full of desirable fixer-uppers.

He wandered down the street, keeping a wary eye out for moving shadows, completely at a loss. He couldn't walk around until dawn ... but it looked like he couldn't do anything else either. He should have curled up on one of the deserted chairs in the deserted terminal.

He passed a sign illuminated with its own feeble light. Victory Hotel. The place looked defeated and left for dead. Open 24 hours, the sign said. If this was what it looked like when it was open, what did they do to close it? Entomb it in concrete? The small print near the door said to ring a bell. After what felt like enough time to settle down and raise a family, a wizened little old man creaked the door open a crack.

Johan said he needed a room. The old man thought about this request, apparently never having heard such an odd idea before, and then said, "Ah. Follow me." Johan took a room, feeling a small sense of triumph that he remembered to ask the price first. It was outrageous, but not as outrageous as looking for another room. The old man gave him a key with a palm-sized wooden circle attached, waved vaguely toward some stairs, and disappeared through a door behind the counter.

Johan climbed the stairs, and hunted around until he matched the room with the number on the key. There was a small slot below the door handle, which he knew was how mechanical keys worked. When he opened the door, he'd never seen anything more cheerless in his life. The old, moldy-smelling carpet had a few bluish threads remaining, but was largely disintegrated right down to the grey synthetic backing. A huge bed occupied much of the room, looking more like a bier than a bed. A single, bare light bulb hung from the ceiling, giving so little light that the walls were the color of dishwater. Johan could imagine people booking into this place to commit suicide. The room was cold. An electric heater gave off a dull, hostile, red glow that made him feel lucky it wasn't sending out any actual heat. It was hard to remember why he'd left home in order to strand himself here.

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Sunlight streamed in the window at dawn and woke him after too few hours of sleep, but it was just as well. The bus to Hhorahsan left in the morning, and he still had to find the station. He scratched his leg absentmindedly. Then he

thought, “What?” He pushed the quilt away and saw a series of red spots, five along his left leg, four on his right. Mosquito bites were rare, and they should be impossible right through a quilt.

He caught himself scratching again while he waited at the downstairs counter for someone to whom he could give the key. The little old man finally reappeared. Was he the only employee and did he work twenty four hours a day? Or was he, God forbid, the owner? Johan felt like an orangutan when he noticed he was scratching again.

“Yes, sir,” the old man’s walnut face cracked in a grin as he hung the key on its peg. “Lively beds. You need hot water. Wait here.”

He shambled off somewhere, and Johan felt annoyed that he hadn’t had a chance to tell the man that he’d already washed—in the world’s most hopeless shower down the hall—that he didn’t need water, and that he needed to leave. The old man ambled back carrying a steaming pot and a washcloth.

“You need to take those trousers off,” he said, as if customers stripped down at the front desk all the time.

“What?”

“Hot water,” the old man said. “It helps.” He dipped the washcloth in the water and applied the steaming thing to his forearm to demonstrate.

Johan decided he’d try anything once. There wasn’t anyone there but him and the old man, so maybe it didn’t matter if he stood around in his underwear. The old man nodded approvingly.

“Put it on the bite as hot as you can stand it,” he said.

After an initial flare, the itch vanished.

“Huh?” said Johan, staring at the old man in amazement. No stimstick, no nothing, and the itch was gone.

“Always works.” The little old man took the pot and the washcloth, and opened the door behind the counter. “Good day,” he said, and disappeared.

Johan put his trousers back on, shouldered his bag and walked out into the street. It looked much better in daylight, but he’d forgotten to ask the way to the bus station. The good news was that it turned out to be only three blocks up the street. He picked his way past foraging chickens and started to feel at last like he was really travelling. The dusty street was somewhere rather than nowhere, his old life was a dream, and his new life might be anything.

Chapter 7

The bus, when it came chugging into the station two hours late, did not look like a promising vehicle for a three day trip. It had dents that had been hammered out with an actual hammer. Johan could see the circular marks left by the head. The roof was piled with shapeless bundles tied down with crisscrossed ropes and one large woven basket containing a supercilious goat. There were people at every window shouting to other people not more than an arm's length away. Officially, Johan had an assigned seat, but he thought maybe he wouldn't insist on it. There was an empty seat on the window side of a lean, sharp-looking man who grinned to show it was free. Johan climbed over him to get into it, since the man didn't stand up.

The primitive methane motor revved up its chugging, somebody outside the window tried to convince him he really wanted to buy a greasy object to eat on the trip, the bus let out a goose-like honk, and they were off, scattering street vendors and chickens like chaff.

The bus rode through town with a great deal of flash and rattle, but the first slope they climbed outside the city slowed it to a donkey's pace, though it made a lot more noise about it. At this rate, the trip would take three weeks, not three days. On the downslope, he found out why it only took days. The bus saved wear and tear on the brakes and the clutch, and it made up for lost time, all at once. Johan wondered if the goat on the roof was still feeling so smug.

"First trip?" asked his fellow passenger, speaking excellent English rather than the local dialect.

"Yeah. How can you tell?"

"You seem interested." He gestured in imitation of Johan staring out the window.

Johan noticed that many people, including a knot of women sitting together about halfway down the bus, were flopped over in attempts to counterfeit sleep.

"It'll probably take me at least a day to reach that stage," he said with a smile. "This isn't at all boring compared with the slow flight."

The man wanted to know which flight he'd been on, and where he was

going.

"My name is Habibullah," he said with another of those grins that seemed to have an odd edge to them. Maybe, with big black eyebrows and a hook nose, you looked fierce even if you were mild as milk.

The man was a trader, it appeared.

"Pharmaceuticals, mostly," he said when Johan asked.

Drug reps in the West wore body suits and flew in clippers, sometimes their own. Things must be different here.

They talked of this and that all the slow way up the next mountain range, but Johan kept losing the thread of the conversation while they careened down the other side. The man had asked something about his company.

"Takes a bit of getting used to, this," said Johan. "Sorry, I missed that. What were you saying?"

"I was wondering, since you are travelling alone, what you are doing for company on this trip."

"Nothing, yet anyway. I can't say I've been gone long enough to be worrying about it."

"Ah, well, prevention is always better than cure."

The bus took a last hairpin turn and jounced safely down to a valley floor one more time. In another few seconds, the driver even managed to steer off the shoulder and back onto the road.

"Sorry. Cure? For what?"

"Loneliness, my young friend. You don't find it unpleasant?"

There was something about the way he said it that made Johan transfer his entire attention away from the window.

"If you're trying to tell me something, I'm not sure I get it. What's your point?"

The salesman looked at him appraisingly, with a one-sided grin.

"Well, then, in plain language, my young friend, I find you interesting. And attractive." He raised his big black eyebrows interrogatively.

Oh. Johan shook his head apologetically.

"Sorry, but I'm about as mixed as they come." There were some buildings visible in the distance that were resolving into something too big and official to be farmhouses. This must be the first border crossing.

The man broke into subdued chuckles to himself.

"I love Westerners. It's just, 'sorry, no.' Try it in Hillafa. Get the wrong guy and you can find yourself being flogged through the streets."

Johan turned and stared at him in horror. Hillafa was the Caliphate in its own language.

"What! *Why?*"

The salesman's grin grew wider.

"They have, shall we say, issues with it."

"Issues'? You mean like committing crimes over it?"

“My young friend,” said the downscale drug rep, leaning back to look at him with eyes half-closed, “you’re going to love it there. Just love it.”

He sounded like he meant “love” the same way people meant interesting when they said, “that was a very *interesting* fracture.”

The guards at the border took forever over Johan’s passport card. They took forever over his flight bag. Well, he supposed it was a bus bag now. He was starting to worry that the bus would leave without him, because everybody else was done and the driver seemed to have the attitude that the bus was there for his personal convenience.

Habibullah sauntered over, then moved closer to the counter behind which the most officious guard sat. Then he began to speak in a voice that could only be described as oily.

“Officer, Excellency, he’s just young, you know. You’ll have to excuse him. He doesn’t realize there are various fees.” The salesman began sprouting the funny paper money that was sometimes used in these parts of the world.

Fees? What fees? Johan had looked up all the visa regulations carefully and there had been nothing about any fees he hadn’t already paid in Samarkand. He opened his mouth to—

Habibullah stepped on his foot gently but firmly, and also carefully, so that the guard couldn’t see it.

The guard took the bills, finally handed back Johan’s passport card, and Johan realized he’d just seen a bribe offered and taken. That damn guard had been waiting for a bribe the whole time.

As he walked back to the bus with the salesman—

—the pieces suddenly fell into place. He dealt in drugs, he was on a rattletrap bus, and he knew all about greasing border guards. The man was a smuggler, not a salesman.

Well, he could be whatever he wanted, for all Johan cared.

“Thanks for helping me out,” he said. “I’ll pay you back at the next town. I guess I should get some of that funny money myself, for future reference.”

“You don’t have any cash at all?”

“No,” said Johan. “Do you need it often around here?”

The smuggler was still chuckling minutes later when the bus rolled away from the guards’ outpost.

They reached the real border on the second day. This was a complicated matter because everything had to be off-loaded, carried to the first border, passed through, carried a few hundred meters across a no man’s land to Hillafa’s border, where everybody went through the same process, and then loaded onto a new bus. It was going to take hours. The goat had been taken down, freed from its basket, and staked to forage until new hay was put into its basket again. It was chewing its cud and seemed to feel that the servants were adequate, so far.

Johan stuck close to Habibullah in case a native guide turned out to be

necessary again. You never knew.

The border guard on the Uzbek side was a round man, with rolls of fat stretching his clothes as skin-tight as any Western body suit. He had full, pouty lips, and a rather disgusting little spot of mustache. He waved them over like a fussy grandmother.

The border guard fingered Johan's papers and fiddled around in his bag, but he wasn't even looking. He was leering expectantly at Johan instead, as if he was waiting for him to say something. This was different from the aggravating slowness of someone looking for a bribe. Maybe the tubby little guy was trying to give the foreigner a friendly welcome, in his own odious way. Johan tried to smile politely, and hoped he'd move on to the next person.

He did. He went through Habibullah's bag with more than enough thoroughness to make up for his treatment of Johan. Then he told him to turn out his pockets. Some paper money was among the first things to appear, then a small screwdriver, clasp knife, lint, and a thin cord with a little oval medallion. None of it seemed to satisfy the guard.

"You have other pockets," he said.

Based on Johan's recent experience, the guard wanted a bribe big enough to pay down his mortgage. The smuggler pulled out some more paper money from his sock, as well as a used tissue and a small cylinder of white paper rolled up at the ends.

"You are trying to cheat a working man," said the little guard in a soft, unspeakably tender voice. "You will be getting a bag of gold somewhere in Hillafa,"—for some reason, he glanced at Johan as he said this—"and yet you try to cheat a working man. Perhaps I should call a medical officer for a thorough search."

It made no sense to Johan—why would a doctor be any better at checking someone's pockets?—but the swarthy smuggler turned green with fear. The border guard acquired a oily grin.

"Khan," wheedled the smuggler, using the honorific for a noble. "Khan, I'm Azeri. We're not Westerners, but we don't do people."

"Don't do people"? What the hell did that mean? As opposed to, say, "doing" pharmaceuticals?

"Is that so? Just a good friend on a short string, ah? Do not insult me." He thumbed a button on the comm panel at his side. "Dr.—"

"Khan, wait. Wait, please. Khan," begged Habibullah as he put his arm around Johan's shoulders, like he'd seen men doing around here. "We are friends. Good friends. We will make much money, God willing. And then we come back through here. And friendship takes many forms, and change is the only reality. It takes only time. Just a little time."

"Is that so," said the guard, leaning back and using that silky tone again. "And will the change be desirable? From my standpoint, you understand."

"I will make sure it is," said the smuggler, not looking at Johan.

“See to it.” The greasy grin had expanded to the point where the guard’s eyes disappeared completely. “Otherwise I may need to alert the police to track your movements.” He took and pocketed all the paper money and the small white cylinder.

The smuggler, by now an even ghastlier shade of green, took back the other contents of his pockets, including the lint. He and Johan walked away. While they were within earshot of the guard, Habibullah said only that the trip was very tiring.

Johan just looked at him until a few more steps took them out of the guard’s range.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you just avoided arrest by promising fatface back there he could bugger me.”

“Might be an idea to use a different border crossing on your way out,” muttered the smuggler.

“It might also be an idea,” Johan bit out, “to report you to the authorities.” He felt radically less tolerant of Habibullah now.

The smuggler winced and started using that wheedling tone of voice on Johan.

“Have mercy, Khan. Don’t do that, don’t do that. Have mercy. Look, I owe you. I know I owe you. Where are you going? Doha? Well, tell anyone there that Habibullah the Supplier owes you. You’ll be able to call in a hundred favors.”

Johan continued to stare at him. The sorts of favors Habibullah’s business associates had to offer were probably either toxic or lethal.

“They’ll kill me, Khan. They’ll kill me. Don’t do that.” He looked in a hunted way back at the border post they had just passed and toward the one ahead. Guards were visible in both directions. It occurred to Johan that the smuggler did whatever it took to get by, that he probably had concealed weapons all over him, and that he, Johan, had just threatened him. Quite possibly, if the two of them hadn’t been in full view of the guards, his own life might suddenly become very short.

Despite that, Johan found he couldn’t hand over a fellow human being in cold blood to the likes of fatface.

“Yeah,” he scowled. “Favors. The only thing I want from you is for you to keep your favors to yourself.”

When the new bus took on its passengers after the next border post, he found a remaining free seat at the back, wedged between a snoring man smelling of onions and a semi-comatose man who smelled of many things, not one of them pleasant. Every bump and pothole in the wretched road was amplified at the back, to the point where staying in his seat began to feel like exercise. The explosions generated by the primitive motor were also much more noticeable. The smuggler got off in Hhasht. There was one more day of this fun-fair-bumper-car ride till they reached Hhorahsan. When people told you travel broadened the mind, they forgot to mention that you could feel it being

stretched.

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One advantage to slow flying was the length of time it took the plane to land. Doha lay spread out below Johan on the shores of the blue Gulf, like a cloth covering the land, with decorative domes and minarets reaching for the sky. A haze enveloped the city and he'd seen enough by now to know that it was a combination of dust, exhaust from those crazy methane motors, and smoke.

And also, as he found out when he stepped off the plane, heat and humidity. The place was a steam bath that plastered his shirt to his back within minutes.

The customs officials were all men. The number of men versus women had been increasing ever since Samarkand, but it didn't give him the expected sense of ease or comfort. They weren't friendly men.

"Welcome to Hillafa," said the official with no expression at all. "Do you have anything to declare?"

Johan's landing card had informed him about this local procedure. It was what came of not having security concourses, although it seemed like an ineffective and flatbrained way of compensating.

"No."

"Alcohol is not allowed anywhere in Hillafa," the official intoned, still reading from his mental script.

"Yes, my landing information pointed that out, but it didn't note which recreational pharmaceuticals are allowed."

The official stared at Johan so humorlessly, he dropped the subject. He found himself wanting to tell the man to smile; it wouldn't hurt.

The official checked his bag with that foot-dragging slowness Johan had come to associate with a desire for bribes. However, Habibullah had warned him, when they were still speaking to each other, that there was an art to giving bribes, and that done wrong, it could land you in much worse trouble than having to wait hours for your documents. There was every chance this stickler was slow because he was so full of the importance of his work, in which case offering a bribe to speed it up would be the wrong move.

"Purpose of your trip?"

"Just a visit." Habibullah had warned him this was the only safe response. Saying you planned to settle could lead to a vast array of tedious questions. The assumption, apparently, was that any Westerner who planned to move in was either criminal or insane. Johan knew that Westerners certainly thought so, but it seemed an odd attitude for the Hillafans to share.

The official was rescanning his passport card with aggravating deliberation.

"Your ticket is one way."

"I'm not sure exactly when I'm going back. I figured I'd buy the ticket when I

needed it.” That wasn’t a lie.

“Your visa expires in three months. Baggage claim is that way. The exit is on the other side of it.”

And that was that. With his one bag on his shoulder he stepped out into the street. He’d arrived. He had braved all the difficulties, even the Flea Palace of Victory, and reached ... what?

As a prize, Doha had a cut-rate air. There weren’t any actual begging children right here at the main entrance to the airport, but the overall seediness suggested they’d only stepped away for a minute. The prospect of finding a job here and a roof over his head no longer seemed bold and interesting. It seemed sordid, depressing, and tiring.

Tiring was the key word. He was just tired. He should go to that hotel across the street. He walked into a small boy with a large tray who was trying to sell him some of the ubiquitous greasy fried objects. A cab driver collared him, but he knew how to deal with them now. He shook off the driver, apologized absently to the small boy, and walked on. Tomorrow would be another day and maybe, as at the Flea Palace, everything would look better in the morning light. No slicers here. There was that to look forward to.

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Chapter 8

Johan leaned out his attic window, above the worst of the fumes and the dust from the street, and watched the sun rise while the shadows of the minarets grew shorter and their loudspeakers called the faithful to prayer. The faithful went, too. He could see people appearing on roofs all around him, men, women, and children, shoeless, kneeling to their God.

Their God was off to the west somewhere, apparently.

Johan's destination was in the opposite direction, although hopefully it was opposed in a purely geographic sense. Today he had a job interview at one of the big Gulf telecom companies. Its full name went on for a while, but everyone called it Al-Rashid. He'd found a furnished room simply by going to the local university and looking at the student housing information as if he belonged there. Nobody stopped him. Right next to that was a terminal that said "jobs." And here he was. If they hired him, he was all set. Even the work permit was a formality that Al-Rashid was going to handle.

His new landlord's work had something to do with onions. Al-Jabar had been the name listed in the ad, but everyone called him Abu Ahmed. His shoes had their place with the rest of the family's near the entrance hall, and they gave the whole foyer a faint aroma of fresh onion. Johan pictured him at work, wading in onions. Abu Ahmed's wife was round and comfortable-looking, but she seemed to run the house with an iron hand. Johan didn't understand the local language, but whenever she said anything, it sounded like a statement, and her husband's response sounded so much like, "Yes, dear," that a dictionary was hardly necessary.

The landlord also had a daughter, named Aliya, who would have been a vid star in Gabriel. She had curves that even the local, shapeless female clothing couldn't hide, which was saying something since it consisted of a sack-like thing called a "dress," covered in a big shawl that the women sometimes wore on their heads. She also had black eyes, generally lit by a shy smile, lips like a Cupid's bow, and long, shiny, curling black hair. Johan would have been all over her in a heartbeat, but she showed no sign of interest. He could barely catch her eye. She didn't say anything, and stayed on the other side of her mother. It

seemed like a waste, but maybe she wasn't oriented to men.

Umm Aliya, the lady of the house, had given him space for his food in the family's refrigerator and hospitably suggested he forage in their kitchen until he had a chance to shop for himself. Armed with a map, and dressed in a new set of the loose, local clothes, he tiptoed downstairs, made himself coffee, and felt ridiculously pleased. He had slept well in a bed he'd found all by himself. He had wrested coffee from an unwilling kitchen, despite its best attempts to hide utensils and ingredients in the most impossible cupboards. He had spread his map out on the handy kitchen table and found the route to Al-Rashid as easily as if he'd used paper maps since the days when he tried to swim in the family fountain. He found some tasty flat bread, delicate smoked fish, and some herbed pickled onions that he decided not to try right before a job interview. They smelled good, though. Somebody in the house was a good cook.

He set off on what promised to be a long walk, which was why he'd risen so early. Abu Ahmed had warned him that public transportation was haphazard in Doha. Johan was also trying to beat the heat. It had taken one day to learn that summers here were hotter—and damper—than bath water.

The landlord's house was on a slight rise, so the view when Johan started out stretched for miles and the world lay at his feet. The spires of minarets were the tallest structures anywhere in town because there had been a time when anything taller than a mosque was destroyed. The intervening centuries had not brought new high buildings, so he could even see the waters of the Gulf in the east, a dark greyish blue through the haze.

Objectively speaking, all he'd achieved was renting a room, not exactly one of the world's rarest accomplishments. And yet he felt like the king of all he surveyed, from the whole city before him, to the soaring date palms lining the broad boulevard, and right up to the curious sculpture of massive urns in the middle of the roundabout ahead of him. His mood even included the rather persistent children trying to sell him something that looked like shoelaces. He bought a shoelace, since that seemed like the right thing for a king to do.

He tried to catch the eyes of some of the women he passed on the street, but he couldn't. That was a new experience for him. Even when he was so obvious about it that he would have risked a privacy citation back home—in Gabriel, they ignored him. And yet the advertising implied it should be easy. He was, for instance, just passing a big freestanding wall with a stationary picture on it of a woman buying soap, smiling like she'd just seen her lover, with her breasts forward and her butt back. He'd never seen anything like it. Outdoor advertising was illegal back—in the West. But if mere soap was that much of a turn on, why wasn't there any interest in an actual guy who knew something about turn ons? Maybe it was all false advertising. None of the real women out on the street who were buying real soap looked anything like that.

He arrived at Al-Rashid in plenty of time, repeated the routine of waiting for a bigwig, talked to him, surveyed the sea of cubicles, and had to suppress a

laugh. There was an expression, older than dirt, about how the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. And when they hired him to troubleshoot routing algorithms, that was the same as well. Arabic wasn't a problem. English had been a second language in this relatively prosperous part of Hillafa for centuries, and the whole telecom world worked in English, even here.

The bigwig showed him which cubicle would be his, and introduced him to some of the workers who happened to be there. The cubicle dweller next to him was an outgoing, friendly fellow named Dari Al-Shawaz. At the opposite end of the scale was an untalkative, almost hostile woman named Noor Sharifa. She was one of a mere handful of women on the whole floor, and, like the others, she wore one of those scarf-things on her head that made it look like a little bullet. Once he started work, he hardly ever heard her say a word. She didn't even relax by the coffee pot with no boss in sight. It seemed a bit foolish to Johan. Even he knew that you didn't get ahead on nothing but the excellence of your math, but to each her own.

Dari gave him rides to work the first few days, until Johan had time to arrange to be part of a carpool. He was a few years older than Johan, but more than a head shorter and several head's-worth goofier. There was, for instance, the way he tried to make the tires squeal when he peeled out of the quiet residential street where Abu Ahmed lived. Johan had done the same kind of thing, but he'd been nine years old and on a bicycle.

However, in some ways, that made it easier to ask him some goofy questions. It had taken exactly one attempt to talk about sex to a woman for Johan to realize he needed a native guide.

Apparently, he'd brought up Dari's favorite topic. They were half way to Al-Rashid before he paused for breath in his catalog of all the women who wanted him.

"Well, good. Sounds like you're just the guy to tell me what the procedure is around here. I mean, no women at all is too much of a good thing, even if it gets old to scrape them off like barnacles."

Dari looked at him strangely.

"I've had three women after me at once," he said.

"I don't want three. That's too damn difficult. One at a time. So what's the approach?"

Dari turned to stare at him. There was a lumbering truck right—.

"Hey! Watch out!" Johan exclaimed before he could stop himself.

Dari twiddled the steering. He didn't seem worried, but Johan was starting to wonder whether wheeled groundcars without satnav were really as quaint as he first thought.

"I never had that problem," Dari was saying with a shrug, his eyebrows raised a bit, as if the whole idea had never occurred to him.

"Well, I'm not sure it was a problem. I'm just not that used to these

groundcars. It'll take me a while."

"I thought we were talking about women."

"Yeah, that's right. I was. And you were telling me what's expected around here." Or, to be more precise, he wasn't.

"I was saying I'd never had a problem with lots of women being after me. I'd—I like it."

"Well, great. I don't. But how am I supposed to tell that they want sex when they don't give any sign of it that I can see?"

"Hmf. They never do."

"So how does anyone tell when they're interested?"

"*Habibi*, you wait for that, and you'll get blue balls."

So they had a name for that condition here, too. That didn't bode well.

"So what's the deal? Nobody ever has sex? You don't really expect me to believe that, do you?"

"I didn't say that. I said you don't hang about, waiting for women. You have to do things."

"So," said Johan as patiently as he could, "what do you do?"

"You don't approach these things straight on, to begin with."

Yes, Johan was gathering that.

Then, losing his superior air for a moment, Dari added in a burst of honesty,

"You know, frankly, you're already doing the best thing you can do, which is work for a place like Al Rashid."

"Huh? There are hardly any women there, and none of them talk to anyone."

"No, no. It means you've got money to flash around. The girls'll flock."

Johan gave him a dubious glance, which he couldn't see because he was watching the traffic.

"I haven't seen any evidence of that. The flocking, I mean."

"Give it some time. They have to find out that you're a, heh heh, good provider." Dari turned his head to give Johan a toothy grin.

"Being a provider is a turn on?" Johan boggled for a bit. "I'm sorry, but I'm, uh, having difficulty imagining how that would work, as a friend of mine once said."

"You just try to find one willing female between here and the Maghreb without—." He held up one hand and made a gesture with his thumb rubbing past the tips of his first two fingers.

From context, Johan figured he meant money. O-kay. But he still had no clue as to what he was actually supposed to do.

"So what's the procedure? I get a roll of that funny paper money and wave it around when I introduce myself?"

Dari almost crashed the car because he laughed so hard.

"No," he said when he had a hold of himself. "You don't talk about it, you crazy Westerner."

"So, sex is important, but you can't talk about it. Money is important, but you

can't talk about it. What the hell do you talk about?"

"It takes finesse here, and practice. And it depends what you're trying to do. If you're trying your luck, you find a girl sitting alone somewhere, like the University cafeteria, and act charming. Talk about your job. Whatever you're good at. Anything you can think of."

"Oh," said Johan. He felt even more dubious. First he was supposed to corner the girl, and then drone on about his cubicle? That didn't sound right. "There are so few women at Al-Rashid, I wouldn't have guessed that they were very interested in tech stuff around here."

"They're not," Dari assured him.

"So does it make sense to start by talking about my job?"

"Then talk about sports or something."

"Sports? Well, I like kitesurfing, but it's not usually a big general-interest subject. What types of sport are most women interested in here?"

"They usually aren't," Dari admitted in another burst of honesty.

Johan tried to puzzle this into making some kind of sense, but got nowhere.

"I don't get it. I'm supposed to talk to her about all sorts of things that don't interest her?"

"You want to talk about women's stuff? Babies or her hair or something?" Dari chuckled incredulously.

"Her hair? Right off the bat? I don't think I could start talking about a woman's hair, immediately after saying hello. Babies, maybe."

"They'd just think you were weird if you talked about babies."

"Oh." Johan digested this, while Dari dodged traffic to pull into the Al-Rashid parking lot. It was all starting to sound even more complicated than he'd thought.

In some ways, Johan found himself settling into routines as the days went by. It felt strange that the strangeness of Doha could become ordinary so fast. In other ways, it stayed bizarre. He'd come here to find a more civilized class of women, but they were so civilized, they refused to talk to him at all. And the scary thing was they didn't just say no or laugh at him. They'd get *angry*. He'd left Gabriel because of mad women, thank you very much. He hadn't come all the way out here to start the whole nightmare over again. Then he tried as fast as he could to stop thinking about that. Sometimes he was able not to think about it for a whole day. One morning he'd wake up and realize he'd made it through a whole night without thinking about it.

What didn't make it any easier was that other guys would annoy women while he was around. He had to admit, in some ways he wouldn't have minded that. There was something very luxurious about being able to kick somebody around who was being obnoxious. The problem was, so far, in this place, it had nothing to do with women being obnoxious.

There was the day, for instance, when Johan was standing around with a bunch of co-workers during the morning coffee break. Several of them were

discussing women in a way that made Johan glance around to make sure none were within earshot. He didn't want to find out the hard way that they did have Caretakers here, after all.

Noor Sharifa came marching up the hall, looking straight ahead, coffee cup in hand.

The talk died down. She poured coffee and measured out creamer.

One of the men, a mean little grin on his face, said, as if continuing a conversation with his friend, "So I said to her, I said, 'Well, you wouldn't know, would you? Women have nothing there.'"

Johan felt blood and embarrassment rush to his face. The man was obviously trying to force some sort of reaction from the woman who was doing nothing but getting her coffee. All he could see was her back, all anyone could see was her back, and it had the stiffness of a coiled spring. Dari was chuckling along with the rest of them.

"Nothing?" said Johan. "You must never have had sex. Try it sometime. Believe me, it doesn't feel like nothing."

That made the other guys snigger. The culprit would have killed him, if looks could kill, but there wasn't much else he could do. The woman turned and left with her full cup of coffee and her stiff back. Johan wondered what he was doing, when he'd barely been there a week, defending women. As if they needed it. Now he'd made an enemy. And for what? It wasn't like the ramrod woman was about to be anybody's lover.

Johan was starting to worry he'd get a new kind of blue balls here. It was more of a figure of speech in the West, to do with what happened when women wanted you to hold it in past human endurance. He'd never contemplated a situation with no women at all.

Dari was also obviously having the same problem, no matter what he said, because he was always finding new video sites to show to Johan. A few weeks ago, Johan wouldn't have even understood what the point was of looking at pictures if what you wanted was sex. He even said so, he was so frustrated.

"Yeah. Great. She's got a big ass. You can't *do* anything with it, though, can you?"

Dari leaned back from the screen and studied him for a few moments. Then he started to smirk, and said with what was almost a wink,

"You seem like a discreet kind of guy. I can show you a sure thing, but keep it to yourself. This isn't the West. Not everybody understands these things."

"What things?"

Dari started talking about "the right sort of girls." The ones Johan had been dealing with were the wrong sort. Those, said Dari dismissively, were "nice" girls.

"Nice! I don't think so. There's nothing nice about being kicked to the gutter like a leftover food product." *Why hadn't this clown told him all this when he first asked? It would have saved him shovels full of aggravation.*

"These girls are different," said Dari. "They're hot, fast, and cheap."

"Cheap?"

"Well, twenty dinars. You don't want to get too cheap. There can be problems. Diseases. You know."

Johan didn't know, but he didn't want to ask. Still, he couldn't understand what they were paying them for.

"Sex, *habibi*. What's wrong with you?"

"I thought you said they were hot."

"The hottest."

"Then why do they want to be paid?"

Dari rolled his eyes.

"Just shut up and bring plenty of dinars."

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Johan was at his favorite spot, leaning out his window, waiting for Dari to show up, and surveying the roofs and minarets of Doha through the red color of sunset. As he learned his way around, he felt more and more that life here was laid out for him just like the city itself. Nobody was in his face. He could go visit these hot girls of Dari's, or do anything. It was all quite luxurious. Dari had told him he didn't even need to dress up. The dressing up, or otherwise, would be done by the women.

That was, it seemed, part of what he was paying for. Medicated condoms were also part of the service, Dari said, when Johan asked where to buy them around here. Neither food stores nor pharmacies had them, and after what he'd seen on the net, Johan was taking no chances. He'd also looked for an explanation of the whole strange setup of paying for casual sex, but he found nothing. Absolutely nothing. He gave it another try while he waited, but had no better results than before. All he found was sites offering services and none offering why. He was almost going to pay for the connection through Sao Tome to what he still thought of as the real net, because there had to be an explanation somewhere but then there was a knock on the door to his room, and Dari arrived in a strangely elevated mood.

He winked and grinned at what he could see of the screen in Johan's room.

"Not a bad one. But they just do phone sex. You shouldn't be ruining your appetite." And he laughed as if something was hilarious.

"I'm still trying to figure out what the deal is," said Johan. "Nobody explains anything."

"Explains what?"

"This paying business. If you pay for casual sex here, then why don't the men who want to pay just hook up with the women who want to pay and—"

Dari's eyes grew wide enough to show whites all the way around.

“Women! Are you telling me women pay for it in the West? When’s the next flight out?” He was chortling again.

“I’m not talking about the West. Nobody pays for it in the West.”

Dari snorted.

“I’m sure.” And then with another grin that was too big, “You expect me to believe that?”

“Well, sometimes people need therapy, but that’s different.”

Dari laughed out loud again.

“‘Therapy.’ Is that what you call it?” He winked and actually nudged Johan in the ribs. There was definitely something wrong with him. “How about we get *going* now?” he added.

“Sure. Just let me shut down here.”

They set off, walked between the walls lining Abu Ahmed’s street, and out onto the main boulevard.

They turned down a side street, and Dari started the wink, wink, nudge, nudge routine again to get Johan to follow him into an unmarked door. It didn’t look right at all. Dari was going to pull him in when Johan finally saw that it was one of the illegal speakeasies. That was when he also finally figured out what was wrong with Dari. The man was drunk. Johan shook his head. Dari still pulled at him. Johan shook his head again. No. They walked on.

“Just medicinal,” Dari was ... giggling was the only word for it. “Therapy, you know? You could use it.” He made a long, serious face to show Johan what his problem was.

“Look, Dari, you do what you want, but I’d say it’s stupid idea. Enough of that stuff can seriously crap out your performance. I know. It’s legal in the West. I tried getting drunk once and, believe me, I know.”

“Performance! Man, these are *whores*. You do whatever you want.”

Johan was starting to wonder whether Dari ever made any sense on this topic.

“Of course you do what you want,” Johan muttered. “How does that stop you from doing what she wants too?”

Dari guffawed.

“*Habibi*, you want to waste time having her tell you how great you were, you go right ahead.”

That wasn’t what he meant at all. The way Dari was behaving, Johan was starting to get an inkling why the women might want to be paid. Pretty soon, he was going to want to be paid himself, just to walk down the street with him.

The houses grew rattier, meaner, dirtier, but there were lots of people around, all men, and Johan felt only mildly wary. They reached a two story house with a pink sign and lurid purple lettering. The door handle was a metal replica of part of the female anatomy and to open it one put one’s hand in Johan let Dari get the door. It was gross, somehow, all out of context like that.

A woman who was too thin and too flabby and whose wig was on crooked

sat at a table near the door. Near her sat a man who could have been turned into two normal-sized men with something left over. His twin slab of muscle sat near the back door at the other end of the hall. Dari had given him the impression people came here for fun, but those two guys looked like anything but fun.

The woman for some reason—maybe it was her greasy smile—reminded Johan of the revolting Uzbek border guard. She took his twenty dinars, gave him a plastic circle with a room number on it, and he headed down a hallway. So far, this felt more like stumbling around, looking for his room in the Victory Hotel, than having heaps of fun.

When he reached the room, the door was closed. Now what? After a while, mainly because he didn't want to be caught standing stupidly in the hall, he knocked.

"Ah?" said a woman's voice from inside. It sounded bored, even annoyed, as if he was someone peddling church memberships. It did not sound hot. Not even lukewarm.

He tentatively opened the door. There was a room. There was a bed. There was a woman sitting on it. This was obviously where he was supposed to be. He stepped all the way in and closed the door. She just eyed him.

She looked inexpressibly strange, with her thin, fake eyebrows and her red fake lips. The paint on her face did nothing to hide the lines of contempt and calculation underneath it.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" she wanted to know, throwing off her thin, shiny robe as if the faster she got rid of it, the faster this would be over.

Johan had been trying to avoid thinking himself to a visible erection the whole way here. Now he had as much chance of one as a man in ice water.

Except for her expression, except for the way she moved, except for the way she sounded, except for everything about her, the woman looked like she belonged on one of Dari's web sites. But those were fantasies. They obviously lost something in translation.

She had turned and was fiddling with a piece of paper on the night table next to the bed. Johan saw a line of white powder on the paper.

"Wait," he said. "Wait."

She looked up. Her loathing felt like a wall. She'd never even seen him before this moment.

"If you want snow, it costs extra."

Her whole posture said *this is mine*. That wasn't the point.

"Are you doing that"—*for me* was not the right way to put it—"on my account?"

"You, specifically? You? No."

She turned back to her drug.

"No, wait—"

"Och, Shainab. You're not one of these who wants to *talk*, are you?"

"No," said Johan. "No, of course not. No, I, uh, I thought, I was told I ... you ... Look, I'm sorry. I misunderstood. I'm not from here—"

"I'd figured that out long ago."

"—I'll just leave, okay. And, uh," *for God's sake don't send anyone out after me*, "okay?"

"What a total waste of space," she said, looking straight at him.

"I'll—I'll What do you want from me?"

She stared at him, so dumbfounded it even replaced some of the calculation.

"What do I want?" she echoed. "What do I *want*?"

But then she said nothing.

He tried a different tack.

"Look, I'll be glad to pay you for your time. Whatever you want." He pulled another twenty out of his pocket. Dari had said twenty was the going rate at this place for half an hour, but Johan was starting to think he might not know much. He'd said nothing about contempt and loathing. Johan couldn't imagine a price that could compensate her for the look on her face.

She stared at him, waiting for her.

"A hundred," she said, sneering.

He pulled another four twenties out and laid them down on a chair. That way he didn't need to step closer to her.

She looked at the money, picked up her robe, and put it back on. She crossed the room, took two twenties, and then sat back down on the bed.

"Siamak," she said into the comm on the night table, next to the jar of lubricant and the camera and the tissues. "Remind Feruzan he owes me. Nothing for the next one, you hear me?"

The rumble in the comm indicated that some male at the other end was acknowledging his orders. Johan assumed it was an order, although she sounded too shrill to be sure of being obeyed.

He wondered what the customers normally got, that he was to have none of. They obviously didn't want the business of weeds like him, and that was fine. Absolutely fine. So long as they let him go in one piece.

"Take that," she said, as he turned to flee out the door.

He saw her nod at the sixty still lying on the chair. He took it, as ordered, and said,

"Thank you, ma'am."

As he backed toward the exit, all he saw was the strange, twisted look on her face.

He reached the front door, but it was too early, of course, for anyone, unlike him, who knew what he was doing. Johan paced up and down, as far away from the door and the scarred bouncer as he dared. It was a nasty neighborhood and the bouncer was another human being, of sorts. He wished Dari would hurry up.

An eternity trickled by. Somebody brought the bouncer coffee, and he said

something. A few minutes later, a woman brought Johan a paper cup full of boiling hot black coffee. He could barely hold it, and he certainly didn't want coffee at this hour of the night.

"Thank you," he said.

He carried the coffee by the rim of the cup as he paced up and down, up and down, up and down. Every once in a while the hot liquid sloshed and burned his fingers.

Another bouncer came to the door, carrying a lifeless-looking man. He dropped him on the pavement and Johan winced as the man's head hit the surface with a dull crack. Then he saw his face. It was Dari.

Getting nothing, Johan realized in the middle of his wave of shock, was a mark of favor.

He tossed the coffee cup in the gutter and threw himself toward Dari. He felt for a heart beat, for breathing, anything. Dari's pulse was as thin as a thread. Johan moved his comm band toward his mouth, when he felt the bouncer take his wrist and lift.

"We have to-to call an ambulance!" stammered Johan, rising as he followed the grip on his arm.

The bouncer stood so close he could feel his stinky breath on his face as he looked up. In the last couple of years, there weren't many people at whom Johan had had to look up.

"You bring anything with sirens here, boy, and you'll wake up missing arms or legs or both."

"But he'll die!"

"Better him than me."

Johan thought desperately.

"Look. Does the name Habibullah mean anything to you? Habibullah the Supplier?"

"Yeah."

"He's my friend. He owes me. He said so. Well, what I want is to call an ambulance."

"How do you know Habibullah?"

"We travelled together."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

There was a look on the bouncer's squashed and lumpy face that reminded Johan the smuggler was a samer. Oh, for God's sake, he hadn't meant—. And now, no doubt, the whole house would figure they knew why he hadn't spent much time with the woman.

"So, can I call an ambulance? *Now?*"

The bouncer shook his head, but he picked Dari up as easily as if he was a child. He put him down on the pavement a block away and around a corner.

"You found him here," the man-mountain said, and walked away.

With shaking fingers, Johan pushed the red key and said "Emergency."

Ambulance. Emergency. Ambulance.” After about the tenth repetition, he began to realize nothing was going to happen. After three more calls, he finally had a dispatcher, and five minutes after that, an emergency vehicle landed.

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He was at home in his attic room, leaning out the window, gulping air, and feeling like a shipwrecked sailor who’d found a floating log. Except for him, the scene seemed peaceful. Yellowish streetlights poked up here and there, helping the moon illuminate the city. Filmy tendrils of smoke from cooking fires rose up into the calm air and wafted away among the minarets that rose out of the dim sea of roofs. Red glows of burning embers in braziers could be seen on many of the housetops, surrounded by the dark shapes of people enjoying the cool of the night.

Dari would live. In the ambulance, Johan found out that Dari had taken some other drug, on top of the alcohol already in his system, and that was what had knocked him out. Nobody had had to do it for him. The fellow seemed as clueless as a man trying to get pregnant. When an inventory showed that Dari’s pockets were completely empty, the medics seemed to take it for granted that Dari had been offered exactly the drug that would make it easy to rob him. The few meters separating the pick-up point and the pink house hadn’t fooled them for a minute. They could have had him arrested for drinking, but they seemed like okay guys. They made rude jokes about beer corpses, stiff in all respects but one, but their official written diagnosis was “central nervous system seizure with respiratory involvement.” They also seemed to find it humorous that by the time he came to, his bank account might be as clean as a whistle.

Johan leaned on the window frame, and swore that he was never, ever, going to do anything again that brought him anywhere near the orbit of anyone who knew Habibullah. It was nice girls from now on, or nothing.

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Chapter 9

When Johan made the promise to himself about nice girls, “or nothing” was supposed to be a figure of speech. Instead it was becoming the only reality.

Johan talked to his landlord’s daughter and her mother because he’d see them in the kitchen when he was making his own dinner. Aliya was very nice. She was also the gourmet cook in the family, and was happy to teach him as much as he could learn about improving his pathetic attempts at meals. But that was all. Other than that, she did nothing but giggle and blush and hide behind her mother. Surely, now that she’d known him for weeks, she’d give him some sign of interest if she felt any. So she obviously didn’t.

He was getting nowhere. He’d have to have another go at his native guides, and hope something useful emerged this time.

However, the guys at the office laughed themselves silly when he asked a simple question at lunch one day.

“Meet nice girls?” one of them guffawed. “For what?”

“Why would a guy like you be looking for a ball and chain?” said another one. “Live it up. You got the looks and the money for it.”

“Uh ... what?” said Johan. Doha didn’t seem like the sort of place for chains, except maybe in the pinker houses, and that was precisely what he was trying to avoid. “What do chains have to do with it?”

“Why do you want to get married?” explained Dari.

“Married! I was talking about sex.”

Johan wasn’t sure they were ever going to settle down after that.

“Woo hoo!”

“Oy, Dari, I thought you said Westerners were shy!”

What did they mean, “Westerners were shy”? What had Dari been telling them?

“You great big Western goony,” Dari said when the hoots of laughter died down, “you have to marry nice girls. Not have fun with them.”

“Then for God’s sake, what’s the point?”

There were more hoots of laughter. “Good question,” said one fellow.

Dari grinned. “You know, a new place just opened. Music, dancing, and

oceans of easy girls.”

“As easy as the last place?” Johan asked before he remembered that Dari had told him not to mention it.

But it didn’t seem to matter. Dari didn’t look annoyed.

“No, no, this is totally different. You just try your luck, if you know what I mean.”

Johan was starting to feel disgruntled about the uselessness of his guides.

“Well, check the looks on their faces this time, to see what kind of luck they want to give you.”

“Faces? I got better things to look at than their faces.”

That was debatable, given that he had to chase women like they were some kind of endangered species, when they weren’t trying to kill him.

Of course, Johan couldn’t even find one to chase, himself.

Dari must have taken pity at the glum look on his face, because he finally gave Johan a real answer as they walked back to their cubicles together after lunch.

“If you’re that set on a sweet young thing, then you have to be properly introduced to the family and the whole merry-go-round. But you don’t have any family here.” He looked at him some more. “My family lives on the other side of the country. They’re no use. What about this landlord of yours? You said you’re on good terms with him.”

“Yeah. So how does that get me anywhere?”

“He could do the kind of things parents usually do. You know. Talk to his friends. Get you invited to some parties. That kind of thing.”

“So what do I do? Tell him I want to meet girls?”

“Ah. No. Look. Invite me to dinner. I’ll see if I can explain it a bit better, and pave the way for you.”

For a moment, Johan doubted whether that was such a good idea. Aliya didn’t strike him like the sort of woman who’d appreciate it if he never looked at her face. On the other hand, in polite company when he wasn’t drunk or trying his “luck,” Johan hadn’t noticed Dari making a spectacle of himself. It would be a relief to have someone to help him through Doha’s social minefields.

It was the best idea so far. Actually, it was the only idea so far.

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When Dari was introduced to Aliya, Johan had no complaints about his manners. The man practically tied himself in knots on the carpet. Aliya seemed to think it was funny, but she was also looking kind of pleased. About half an hour later, when everybody else was occupied in a big joke about some absent relative, Dari asked Johan in an undertone,

"If you're looking for sweet young things, *habibi*, why aren't you starting with her?"

"Aliya? She's not interested in me. And, anyway, at this point she's more like my kid sister. She's into babies and cooking, and she gets all wide-eyed about how dangerous windsurfing is. She's the gourmet cook in the house, by the way. Just wait till you taste dinner."

"Not interested in you," echoed Dari. "Really. She said so?"

"Well, not in so many words. But she's never given any indication she wants me. Hell, she practically hides every time I show up."

"Never given Tell me, Mr. Westerner, what would she do if she did, as you say, 'want you'?"

"In her case? All she'd have to do is give me one long look, but she's never even done that."

"I see," said Dari. "I see."

During dinner, Dari didn't seem to be making Johan's case to Abu Ahmed. Johan even muttered at him about it, since they were sitting next to each other, but Dari said that was something you talked about quietly after dinner, over the coffee cups. Apparently, what you did during dinner was talk to Aliya as much as possible.

She seemed to be glad to reciprocate. Johan noticed a couple of times that she'd glance at him, and then start laughing and joking with Dari, almost as if that was supposed to mean something to him. What it might mean, he had no clue. He figured it had to be one of the many strange things about Dohan interactions, like that way they had of nodding their heads, which wasn't exactly up and down and which seemed meaningless at first.

After that dinner, Johan did get invited to some very odd events around town. The parents would be there, kibbitzing up a storm, while the young folks sat at the opposite ends of couches and discussed their job prospects or some damn thing. It didn't look like that was ever going to go anywhere, and after the first few of the get-togethers, Johan gave up. He was starting to understand why Dari acted as if getting sex required a military campaign.

Actually, if he wanted pointers about how these things were really done in Doha, instead of what everyone told him, all he had to do was observe Dari. The man seemed to be in the middle of a campaign right now. He was after Aliya with everything he had.

That, Johan would have said, was not much. Dari was a goofball. If Aliya was going to fall for somebody, why couldn't it have been someone more sensible? Someone better? *Someone, for instance, like me, damn it?*

He was the only one who felt that way. He heard her mother talking approvingly about what a good job Dari had. And Aliya seemed to be talking about him every chance she got. Or, at least, she always was whenever Johan was in the kitchen. It was making his ears wilt. He wouldn't have guessed she could be interested in a guy who thought genital-shaped door handles were

funny. But apparently that was okay in Doha.

Or maybe she didn't know about it. Maybe he should tell her. And then, in the next moment, he admitted that maybe he was just jealous and hoping he could spoil it for Dari. What business was it of his, if that was what she wanted?

Besides, he couldn't figure out how to start that conversation.

"Aliya," he interrupted her in an attempt to stem the flow of another long story on her favorite topic. "What did you say I should add to the shawarma seasoning? It was so good the last time you made it."

"One of the days," interjected her mother in her accented English, "when she has family, she will must end all the fussing and get to work." Her mom was always talking about when Aliya would have a family, but she didn't make it sound like much fun. "Running the household is more than dusting the dinner with salt and pepper!"

"Well, I think it's brilliant," said Johan stoutly, and Aliya glowed. She was as good at that as she was at cooking.

Then she looked down, frowned at the stew she was working on, and bit her lip.

Doha was weird.

In the next breath, she was talking about Dari again. She seemed to be very excited about having gone to see a public vid with him the previous evening. He'd never heard her say anything that sounded like the Dari he knew. For that matter, he never heard Dari say anything about her hopes and dreams either. It was like they lived in parallel universes, and talked to the scripts inside their own heads. Like that woman he almost strangled on the beach, except that these two were supposed to be some kind of lovers.

As Johan listened to Aliya talk, he gradually realized that being together in public was tantamount to getting married in Doha, or at least announcing an engagement. The place really was full of minefields. He'd had no idea he could have blundered into a lifelong commitment just by going to a vid.

Doha was very weird.

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The weirdest thing was that it was making him weird. Take, for instance, the matter of Aliya. He was quite clear by now that he and she shared practically nothing. But if someone had asked him about his friends in Doha, she would have been at the top of the list. She was a dear, sweet ray of sunshine and the only person he really looked forward to seeing. So he wanted the best for her.

And that was not Dari. She was way too good for him. He was way too much of a doof. But that didn't make it Johan's business, now, did it? So there he stood, on both sides of the issue, wanting her to dump him, wanting him to be good to her, and making as much sense as Doha itself.

When he heard Dari tell Aliya about how highly the CEO thought of him at work, he had to leave the room to stop from saying, *The head cheese wouldn't know you from the janitor without looking it up. You got Employee of the Week because everybody else had already been tapped once.*

When Aliya mentioned that Dari had gone on a business trip, Johan started to say "To—" when he remembered to turn it into a cough. *To take the boss's daughter's cat to some vet hospital.*

And yet, even though he just about had to tape his mouth shut to mind his own business, he also got bent out of shape when he felt Dari wasn't treating Aliya right. The day the mutt had started joking with some crony on his phone in the middle of her talking to him, Johan had nearly pushed the mouthpiece right into his teeth.

So, did he want them to break up or did he want them to be happy together? What was wrong with him?

Whatever it was, it was operating at full strength right now.

It was lunch time, and the usual crowd of fellows was sitting around together. And Dari was, as usual, boasting about some woman. Johan glowered quietly at his sandwich. Strange as Aliya's concept of an interesting man seemed to be, he was pretty sure she wouldn't appreciate Dari turning the twosome into a group.

"Untouched," Dari had added with a smug grin.

Johan, of course, didn't get it. What was she? Under glass, or something?

The fellows didn't seem to think much of it.

"Oh, for sure," they said. "Right." "Tell me another."

One of them demanded to know if there was any blood, as if that was some kind of proof of something. Johan looked up from his sandwich, startled. He thought they'd been talking about sex, and nobody acted like anything criminal was Oh. Wait. There was one situation where that wasn't impossible. Dari must be boasting about sex with a virgin.

It seemed bizarre—kind of revolting, actually—that Dari was discussing a partner's anatomy with a bunch of guys who weren't even involved with her. But everybody acted like it was quite normal. And trust Dari to be mixing it up with a girl who wasn't even smart enough to deal with the issue ahead of time. Johan thought it was time somebody pointed that out.

"How come she hadn't been to the doctor about it?" he asked.

Everybody started talking at once.

"Doctor?"

"What doctor?"

"Western women go off and have sex with *doctors* first?"

"No, no, no," said Johan. "For the operation, obviously, to have the hymen removed."

"But," said somebody in the ensuing silence, "then how would you know if you had a virgin?"

“Well, if you’re that interested, you could ask, I guess. Or if she didn’t take sex ed, for some reason, and you had to teach her the basics, it might be obvious she’d had no practice.”

There was a silence while the other fellows looked as puzzled as Johan felt.

“Sex ed?” somebody said. “What does sex ed have to do with it?”

“Well, isn’t sex ed where you learn what to do?”

“What to *do*? Don’t you people know what to do?”

Johan said to nobody in particular,

“Maybe you people never talk to each other. Otherwise you’d get the answer to that.”

Then he thought maybe he better fill the uncomfortable silence that followed.

“So, what do they teach you here?”

Some of the guys snickered.

“Nothing, *habibi*. Birth control for when women are married. And condoms for the guys.”

“—and anatomy.”

“—in separate classes.”

“You mean it’s all *theoretical*?” he exclaimed.

“You mean in the West it’s *not*?” they shouted.

“Jeeee-sus,” he muttered before he could stop himself. He was trying to learn to say *Shainab*! He was trying to fit in.

But all of this was a side issue. He’d appointed himself older brother to Aliya, he was going to make damn sure Dari treated her right, and he was going to find out if these goings-on fell under the local definition of right. It didn’t seem possible. He wouldn’t have liked it himself, and he was from the supposedly freewheeling West.

“Aliya’s okay with all this?” he asked Dari. “I wouldn’t have guessed she’d be comfortable with” He trailed off. Dari was staring at him as if he’d sprouted two heads.

“The one I’m talking about looks like a vid star,” Dari said.

Johan felt a whole second roll by.

“You mean you’ve been talking about Aliya the whole time?”

Someone chortled,

“So that’s her name, huh? Got a phone address?”

“You don’t mention names,” Dari said to Johan, as if he was somebody’s father, lecturing a backward child on manners.

Meanwhile he was flashing his smug grin at all the doubters.

Johan sat there, stunned. For once, the Dohans had shocked him instead of the other way around. He, Johan, had introduced this guy to the family. They seemed perfectly happy with that. Aliya wanted to marry him. Just a couple of days ago, she’d been talking about wedding plans with her mother. So she wasn’t just okay with it. She was the one doing it. And Dari was discussing her

anatomy with strangers over lunch.

He really, really, really had a lot to learn about Doha.

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Chapter 10

Sometimes the carpool deposited Johan at his house early, sometimes it was late. Groundcars without satnav were definitely less quaint than he'd first thought. Today the traffic had been kind and his was the first stop instead of the last, so when he walked into the foyer, he saw only one pair of shoes there. He was the first one home, for a change, because the shoes looked like Aliya's—.

He realized she was standing in the hallway past the foyer. Just standing there, very still, looking down at something. She had her back to him and he couldn't see—yes, he could. The hall mirror wasn't that close, but he could see some of her face. She was looking down at her hands clutched together, tears streaming down her face.

The back door slammed, and he heard her mother talking to her little brother who was, as usual, yelling at the top of his lungs. He saw her eyes grow wide in desperation as she stared at her hands.

She grabbed one of those head scarf things and wrapped it around like blinders, so he could hardly see her face. She almost ran past him toward the door.

"I was just going for a walk."

Her voice sounded completely normal. If he hadn't seen the tears running down her cheeks, he would have assumed she was just going for a walk.

As it was, he thought it might be wise if she didn't go alone. Something was very wrong, and he could at least get her to tell him who to call to come and help her.

"Aliya," he said as he caught up to her, "do you mind if I walk with you?"

She didn't even look up. She let out a sound that was between a gulp and an, "Oh!" and scurried on.

"Let's go to the park," he said. "It's not far. I'll buy some bread. We can sit down and feed the ducks."

"Oh!" she said.

She seemed to be crying again. Or still.

This was not going well. However, she followed him to the park, without him having to put an arm around her to steer her there. He was relieved about that.

He doubted very much she'd feel like his kid sister if he did that.

She sat down on the bench he suggested they sit on. He gave her one of the little white bags of bread.

The thing about ducks is that if there's bread around, they don't care whose heart is breaking. A few of them were soon standing on Aliya's toes, trying to get at the bag clutched in her hands. They knew those bags.

She had no choice but to feed ducks for a while. When she seemed a bit calmer, he asked her,

"So, is there anything I can do? What's wrong?"

"Oh!" she gulped. "Everything."

"Well, how about beginning at the beginning, and we'll see how we go from there?"

Instead, she started crying again.

Johan took a deep, but quiet breath. He'd seen Nalini like this after one of her useless boyfriends was more than normally stupid. Given that Aliya had picked a doof like Dari, the only surprising thing was that this hadn't happened weeks ago. He knew there was nothing to do but wait.

And wait. And wait. And keep trying. When he asked who to call to come be with her, she just looked terrified, so he dropped that. When he asked what was wrong, she started crying again. But finally she said something. It was to do with Dari and things going wrong. Obviously. But the rest was incomprehensible. Something to do with showing something.

Showing what?

Suddenly, he wasn't even sure from where, the answer came to him. She meant showing a pregnancy. But he still didn't get it. If she didn't want to be pregnant, and it sounded like she didn't, then why would she continue it?

"And when I talked to Dari," she was saying between sobs, "because obviously we have to get married soon, he said, ... he said, ... he said he didn't think so. He said, his mother wouldn't stand for his marrying anyone who wasn't a nice girl."

Johan's jaw dropped.

"What!?"

Dari said that? Dari? But he was the one who....

Anyway, there were more important problems than figuring out Doha's crazy customs.

"Listen to me, Aliya. Dari was never really the right guy for you. Why would you want to marry him?"

"I have to. Nobody else would marry me now!"

"Huh? What? Why?"

"I'm not the *same* any more. What am I going to *do*?" She was crying and getting the words out between sobs. Johan could see passersby giving him weird looks.

He was going to say that of course she was the same, that Dari didn't have

enough presence to change a flea. Then it dawned on him that she didn't mean it that way. When she said "not the same," she meant they'd had sex and that changed everything.

"Grief," he muttered. "That is nobody's damn business. I mean, are they going to haul you off to check for a hymen in the" Aliya had given him one look. She hadn't said anything, but he thought maybe he better shut up. God only knew what the local lunatics got up to.

"I still say Dari wasn't the guy for you," he repeated, feeling useless. "You don't want him."

"No," she wailed, although very quietly. "I didn't. I wanted you. Now I'll be killed."

Say *WHAT?* The hits were coming off the bat too fast for him.

"*Me?*" Why hadn't she told him this eons ago? Why now, when she was When she was too desperate to stop herself.

She glanced at him for the first time. She wasn't just crying. She was also glaring.

"It couldn't have been more obvious, could it? Even that brat of a brother of mine was joking about it. But you were never interested in me."

"Me? Are you kidding? I'd go for you in half a second if I thought you wanted me. Any man would. But—"

"But not now. I know."

"Not now? Why not? Any time, as far as I'm concerned. But, look, I don't get it. How does having sex with me change anything about the fact that a long term relationship didn't work out?"

"Oh!" she said, as if he'd hit her. She was looking more appalled and distressed by the second.

"Aliya, for God's sake. I don't want to hurt you. I don't get it. Really, I don't. Just explain it to me in words of one syllable, okay?"

She turned her face away from him and spoke to the dirt underfoot. "Listen to yourself," she muttered from between closed teeth. "You wouldn't even think of marrying me now, either, would you?"

"Marrying! You don't want to marry me! I'm not the guy for you either. My mind's full of crazy stupid nonsense about doing big things, like icesailing Antarctica." *Not having a family and spending my life in a cubicle.*

She cramped up again as if he'd hit her.

"Nobody'll ever marry me," she whispered to herself, her face buried in her hands, sobbing.

Johan sat there, feeling undone, and not knowing what to do. For her, everything seemed to turn on being married. Not that finding as many husbands as she wanted would ever be a problem for her. And yet she obviously thought it was. As if she had no other way out. He had an uncomfortable vision of how easy it would be to get to her, since her need was so great. Then he had another uncomfortable vision of how Dari had probably done exactly that, since

he was starving to death too.

What a stupid way to set things up. In Gabriel—.

In Gabriel, he could get sliced. But, listening to Aliya sob over something that should have been nothing, this didn't seem so great either.

As always whenever he forgot not to think about why he'd left, he was back on a dark street with the blood pounding in his ears and—.

Aliya was talking again, but not really to him.

"What am I going to *do*?" she kept saying.

"Aliya, come on now. That can't be that big a deal. Get a few morning after pills."

She looked up at him, glaring again, her face all blotchy and streaked with tears.

"Who's going to give them to me?"

"Um. A doctor?"

She shook her head and let out an exasperated breath.

"A doctor would only give them to my *parents*."

"Oh." The more he thought about it, the less sense it made, even in a Dohan context. Especially in a Dohan context. "There have to be doctors here who'll quietly prescribe a few pills. I get the impression there are doctors here who'll sell you a live guy's kidneys, right off the street. A few pills can't be that hard."

"I can't go all over Doha, looking for a shady doctor."

"Well, how about if I looked for him? Would that help?"

That was the first thing he'd said that seemed to be a new idea for her, but then she visibly slumped into deeper hopelessness.

"It'll never work. There's no way I could keep it secret."

Judging by the look on her face, it was absolutely essential to keep it secret. But if it was that big a deal to be pregnant, and that impossible to stop being pregnant, then why hadn't she at least found someone intelligent enough to use a condom? He asked the question before he remembered to stop himself.

"But ... why'd you have sex with that fuckwit? You said you didn't even want him all that much."

She stared at the ground again, her face hidden by her scarf, motionless as a block of wood. There were no ducks to distract her. They'd found a new mark three benches further down the path.

Johan was busy kicking himself for blurting out stuff, but suddenly she spoke.

"I was trying to make you jealous," she muttered at the dirt. "At first. Things kind of went on from there. He kept saying I should show I really loved him. And I really didn't. So I did it. You see?"

No, he didn't see. Not by a light year.

"I thought it would make a difference," she said, still talking to the dirt. "Make him nicer. Make me love him more. Do something. I don't know."

Grief, what a mess.

He'd introduced the guy to the house. He'd introduced the jerk to Aliya. He

remembered him falling all over himself, bowing to her. She'd looked flattered. Flattered! By that piece of shit!

Now what? He had to get her to start finding solutions instead of problems.

"So, what happens next?" he asked.

"Once my parents find out, they'll kill me."

She wasn't sobbing any more. She'd been sitting in the same position, frozen, ever since he'd asked her why she had sex with Dari.

He could hardly hear her, speaking with barely a sound.

"Aliya, what exactly are they going to do to you? Ground you for ten years?

"My father will kill me," she repeated, as if he hadn't spoken.

"Uh, what? What do you mean, exactly?"

She turned and stared at him.

"Aren't you listening? He'll kill me."

Did she perhaps mean killed as in *killed*? Johan was acquiring the creeping sense that she didn't mean it as a figure of speech.

"Do you mean actually, physically, *killed*?"

She gave him that look of stunned disbelief again.

"What else have I been saying?"

"You—you mean—*murder*?"

She shook her head at the ground. She looked at him as little as possible.

"Honor killing."

Her stunned disbelief was catching. Now he had it.

"*Honor* killing?" he finally repeated. "That's not murder? You're less dead at the end?"

She shook her head again.

"Nobody goes to jail."

Dear God in heaven, this was impossible.

"I can't believe it. Your own father would kill you? You can't be serious. He doesn't look like a homicidal maniac."

"I can't believe it either." She was whispering to herself. "But it happened to one of the girls I went to school with."

He gaped at her.

This might, just maybe, explain why sex hadn't appeared at all in her conversations with her mother. It might explain why sex didn't seem to appear at all in anything women did. At least, among normal women who weren't trying to kill anyone themselves.

Aliya went on.

"She was walking somewhere alone, and ... and something bad happened to her, and, well, she wasn't the same any more, and her father and older brother, they had to maintain the family honor."

He couldn't say anything except, "Aliya, Aliya, Aliya," over and over again under his breath. He was staring at the ground too now. To murder a human being for suffering a horrible crime was so far beyond crazy and so far beyond

criminal, it came out on the other side in an alternate universe of utter evil. Honor killing was a good name for it. He couldn't imagine any greater annihilation of honor than that.

After he sat there, stupefied, for an eternity, his first thought shaped itself. *I am a total idiot.* He'd gone running after Aliya, figuring he could help. Now he felt like a man waving a band-aid at a tornado.

What had he gotten her into? It wasn't exactly his fault that she'd wanted to make him jealous. But it was his fault that he'd brought Dari there. It was even more his fault that he'd never said anything about what he knew of the man. That, he realized with a feeling of shock, was an almost Dohan sense of what he owed the family for the fact that he was living in their house. He was taking on the color of the place without even realizing it.

He should never have kept his stupid mouth shut. He should never have tried to fit in.

He also realized that he'd been wrong that she never did anything bold. She'd taken a bigger life-changing risk than ice-sailing Antarctica would have been for him. And he'd provided the scissors to shred the sail.

He had to do something to help her.

The only thing that would really solve her troubles would be to marry her.

Without any warning, Doha, the place he'd come to of his own free will, became Doha, the place he'd never leave. Suddenly, it no longer mattered that the minarets were beautiful and the food was delicious. He envisioned seeing garbage in the streets forever, and children begging forever, and door handles imitating female genitals forever. He couldn't stand it.

There had to be another way.

None of this would even be a problem in a sane world.

The thing to do was to get her to a sane world.

"Aliya, none of this has to be a problem. Nobody has to worry about murder. Move to a sensible place like Gabriel."

Did he just say that? He'd moved away because he couldn't stand it.

Aliya was speechless.

"Move ... to ... the ... West?" she finally said.

"Yes. Move to the West."

"But, but, but." She took a deep breath and started over. "How would I live? Where would I live? What could I do? How—"

He interrupted her before she could make it sound more hopeless. He'd assumed she would land, find a place to live, and find a job, like he'd done, but he could feel the stupendous impossibility of it all simply by looking at her. Come to think of it, he didn't even know if she had any money to call her own.

"You can stay with my parents for as long as it takes. My mom will help you find a job." *And see to it that Aliya received counseling, if she'd take it.*

"But—"

"You have a place to stay. I'll send you money until you have your own," he

added, thinking of another objection before she could make it. "I owe you that. So what's the problem?"

The first rule of research, he remembered Briony's voice, is not to interfere. He hadn't been doing research, but that didn't change the fact that he'd crashed into Aliya's family like a bomb. He was going to destroy them, steal their daughter and ruin their lives. The alternatives, however, were worse.

"But the West! They're all, well, kind of depraved there, aren't they? Drugs and ... things. I mean, how would I manage? All by myself?"

"Aliya. Listen to me. You won't be by yourself. My mother will help you. As a matter of fact, after some time with my little sister, you'll probably wish you were by yourself. And we're not—." He stopped. Whether Westerners were depraved or not depended on how you looked at it. He'd certainly gotten her in enough trouble without even trying. "We're not depraved in our own world," he finished rather dubiously.

"But what will your father say?"

He shook his head.

"It's different there, Aliya. My Dad won't be any sort of a problem." He was the one who'd offered the help Johan was going to call on in a big way. He wondered how he was going to feel about it.

However, that was the next problem. The first problem was to get Aliya home. Johan told her he'd call his family. He asked whether she was ready to go back. He walked with her, slowly. He told her mother when they returned that he'd needed a paper book for one of his colleagues, and Aliya had kindly shown him where the bookstore was.

Early next morning, after plenty of time to obsess about the crazy thing he was doing, he called his Dad at what would be dinner time there.

"Johan. Good to hear your voice, son."

Johan didn't know how to start. It seemed stupid to trade small talk about his job.

"So, is this a call, if you know what I mean?" asked his father.

"Yes, Dad." Even then it was hard to explain. "There's a woman, Dad. I'm trying to convince her to move to Gabriel. I'll send her money, but I need you and mom to give her a place to stay and show her the ropes."

After a brief silence, his father said,

"You're a bit young to be getting married, son."

"No, no, no. It's exactly because I don't want to get married—look, Dad, it takes too long to explain." *Each minute running through Sao Tome's satellites cost real money. Explaining a whole universe would take an infinite number of minutes.* "But could you and mom put her up? For as long as it takes?"

There was another brief silence, and Johan felt like he'd stepped out over an abyss on the assumption that a floor would materialize.

"Son, I meant exactly what I said when I told you to call, and your mother does too, so send this girl along. We'll meet her at the port. But at some point, I

would like to hear what's going on."

It didn't seem unreasonable, but how did you explain an alternate universe?

"I'll try, Dad. Things are kind of ... different here."

"Yeah. I know."

Did he? Could you just look all this stuff up? Somehow Johan doubted it. Even he, standing here in the thick of it, didn't understand it.

He thought Aliya would be happy when he told her how simple everything was shaping up to be, but she wasn't. She kept finding problems. She couldn't get a passport without permission from her father.

"But you're over eighteen!" Johan exclaimed.

That, apparently had nothing to do with it, and he'd been there long enough now to realize that "So, ask your mother" was not a useful alternative.

"I'll think of something," he said.

"Your mother won't be happy to have some stranger in her house," was her next objection.

"You're not a stranger. You're a refugee fleeing murder."

She looked at him with wide, fearful eyes.

"What did you tell them? Do they know why?"

He just helplessly shook his head. Translating the meanings of alternate universes didn't work in either direction.

Then she balked at traveling alone. She seemed to be trying to get him to go with her. What was that all about? She couldn't still be thinking she wanted to spend her life with him, even though he lived on a different planet. Could she?

"There's nothing to traveling by yourself," he said, "except that it can be boring."

"I can't go by myself. It could be dangerous."

Dangerous? Surely, she couldn't be worrying about missing connections unless someone helped her. And if the clipper went down, it wouldn't matter if she was with someone or not.

"What do you mean?"

"Traveling alone By myself Anything could happen"

The way she said it, the hesitation, the desperation, reminded him of a boy he used to know, in some other lifetime, who'd had to explain to a woman with red-gold hair what he was afraid of.

"You mean dangerous because you could be attacked?"

In the middle of her fear, he could have sworn she would have said, "What else, dildo?" if it had been in her vocabulary.

He managed to stop himself from asking *don't the men get cut to ribbons?* Obviously they didn't. Any more than the women did where he came from. It was just a matter of setting the ball rolling down one slope or the other, and having the will to do what it took to keep things that way. Like hardly look for the scumbags who did these things.

"So you can't get a passport, you can't travel alone, you can't ... , we've got to

figure out what you *can* do.”

He tried to remind himself that the Caliphate was off-scale because of the choices they made, not because men ran the place, but it didn't ring true any more. The men were the ones making the choices.

“There's nothing I can do,” she whispered.

Much as he wanted to say *horsefeathers!* and make her able to save herself through sheer will power, he couldn't seem to come up with a practical plan of action any more than she could. He wasn't used to women behaving like this. Normally, the problem was to get them to slow down long enough to get out of the way, but Aliya felt like a woman-sized mass of dough he'd been given to hold and couldn't put down.

He grew so discouraged he found himself thinking that this was just stupid. Why should he be doing all this just because a very nice girl had decided to get herself in trouble? It wasn't his fault.

No, and it hadn't been his fault that those slicers were doing their thing in Greendale.

How would it be if the sound of Aliya weeping joined all the other endless voices in his head? He wasn't sure he'd be able to stand that infinity without going mad. Doing the wrong thing hadn't helped him. Doing the right thing wasn't much better.

What a mess.

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A couple of days later she whispered to him as she was making dinner, just after her mother briefly left the kitchen.

“I have to leave. I found a test kit in my cousin's bathroom. It came up positive. I've been thinking maybe things were just late. But ... I have to leave. Soon.”

His mind had been miles away. It took him a second to realize she must be talking about a pregnancy test kit. And another moment to realize that she was finally determined to get out, no matter what.

“Right,” he said. “I'll get it arranged.”

He'd been trying for days to ask the silent, angry woman at work for pointers on how, exactly, one got out. She felt about as safe as a frayed high tension cable, but she was also the only person he could think of who looked like she might know the answer. He wasn't sure he could go to her cubicle without gossip that didn't bear thinking about. He'd looked for her when he could, during breaks or lunch. Now he gave up on trying to get any work done and just concentrated on hunting her down without getting caught.

Finally, he saw her, standing near the coffee pot by herself, waiting for the water to get hot. She would walk away if he approached. He'd seen her do it

often enough. If she didn't, he supposed the Daris of the world would insist on trying their "luck." It'd be enough to make anyone talk to no one.

He walked up and didn't pretend it was for coffee. He looked straight at her and put his hand up in a small gesture, so it was clear he had something to say and she couldn't simply march off. He didn't try any small talk. He had a feeling her sensors for blather would detect one part in a trillion.

"Ms. Sharifa. I need help," he said in a low voice.

She raised her eyebrows, making them almost disappear under her head scarf.

"I need to get a woman out of the country, but I don't know how. And she's scared. Nothing I say seems to help."

"Does she have reason to be scared? Where are you taking her, and why?"

"To Gabriel, and there is no why. It's just to get the hell out of here."

"To Gabriel ... ," said Sharifa slowly. "And how is she supposed to live there? What do you have planned for her?"

The way she said it made it sound awful. He wondered what she was thinking.

"Look, the idea is that she can get a job, or, I guess, go to school. Whatever. Until she finds a room of her own, she's staying with my parents. And—." He edited out *I'm paying for her*. That seemed to have even more connotations here than in Gabriel. "We're paying for her. She should be fine. I mean, she's explained to me that she has to be careful around here, but other than that, I have no idea what she's so up in the air about."

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. Sharifa glared at him with pure anger. He couldn't help a harmonic of fear forming within him. In Gabriel he wouldn't last very long, if he caught looks like that. But he needed her help and he meant her no harm. He tried to keep that thought uppermost.

"Come with me," she said, as if it was a threat.

He followed as she marched down the corridor with hard angry steps. In the warren of cubicles, a co-worker on his way somewhere came toward them. The closer he came, the more knowing he looked.

"Hey, how come you won't go out with any regular guys? Just rich Westerners for you, eh?"

She ignored him with so much energy, Johan felt the pressure of it push him back. Somebody else who heard the comment stuck his head out of his cubicle to see the sight of Sharifa going out with someone. It was the fellow he'd slapped down for trying to harass her.

"Shainab. What are you doing with a samer guy? Try a real man."

Say what?

When they were in her cubicle and the absence of any sound told him her noise cancellers were at their maximum, he asked,

"What was all that about?"

She shrugged to say that the habits of cockroaches were beneath her notice.

After a file appeared on her screen, she stood up, motioned him into the chair, and ordered,

“Read that.”

It was a collection of news reports. They came from various places in the Caliphate, none of them were very old. Every one of them detailed some form of horrifying violence against women.

“... a woman who was assaulted so often, she screamed at the sight of any man.” “... a nine-year old girl who was raped while her kidnappers were on the phone, extorting money from her parents.” “... a sixteen year old who was sold to her fifth owner, and who kissed him when she was told that this one wouldn’t beat her.” “... women held prisoner in the war, killed their own daughters to end their misery.”

He looked away.

“Do you have any more idiotic questions about why she is terrified?”

He shook his head, afraid to speak. If he opened his mouth, he might vomit.

She blanked the screen, and he managed to ask her,

“Why do you collect this?” He had always tried very hard to forget, when it came to slicers.

“Somebody must bear witness.”

What a lonely fight to carry on in one little cubicle. What a lonely fighter.

The Caretakers started to seem like more than a bunch of fanatical old women in a history book. But why did it have to end in slicers? What was it all for?

“I’ve tried not to know,” he muttered, but she misunderstood him.

“Yes.” She hissed the word. “Men are always not knowing. Does it occur to you, the greatest gift is being able not to think about it?”

It had occurred to him many times, whenever he had to labor at forgetting.

She’d put some sort of math up on the screen. Oh, yes. They were supposed to be working. Someone could check the monitor activity.

“So. What kind of help do you need?”

“Help,” he said. “Yes.”

He swallowed.

“I need to know if there’s a way to get this woman out of Hillafa.”

“You have to forge the passport,” Sharifa answered promptly, like someone who’d thought it all through long before.

“How?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be here either.”

With a sinking heart, he saw a hunt for Habibullah’s cronies in his future. It felt like planning suicide to prevent death.

“And then there’s the problem with traveling alone, even in the West.”

“So travel with her.”

“I’m not going home.” *I’m never going home*, he thought. *I don’t know how any more.*

"Do you have enough money to hire someone to travel with her?"

Now there was a thought, but it would have to be someone completely—

"Do you mean you?"

Sharifa gave one short nod.

"How much do you want?"

"Whatever will get me admitted to the country. Ticket, visa, sponsorship. I will have to look into it."

Now he gave a nod. A slow, dubious nod. They didn't need more like her in Gabriel. She'd be showing the gangs how it was really done before she had time to buy herself a normal set of clothes. It occurred to him that if he refused, she could blackmail him to the other side of hell, given the crazy local customs.

Maybe he should simply go home with Aliya himself. *No!* echoed through his whole mind. He wasn't going to come crawling back like some failure. If he ever went back, it would be for a visit, when he was a bigwig at Al-Rashid, or a rich wholesaler of Tabriz carpets.

"Let me know as soon as you can," he said. "I'll see what my friendly neighborhood forger says is the best route out."

That earned a strange expression from her, which could have become a smile if its edges hadn't been so sharp.

"Thank you, Ms. Sharifa," he remembered to say before he left, although he had a nervous feeling that he should wait to thank her until it was all safely over.

She nodded.

"You may call me Umm Leila."

That was the friendly honorific referring to women as the mothers of their daughters, which implied that Sharifa had an actual daughter. It didn't seem possible. Johan had never seen someone less motherly in his life.

"But, uh," he stumbled his way toward the obvious question, "you're not going to leave her behind are you?" At the rate things were going, he'd have to book a charter to get them all out.

"Who?" asked Sharifa.

"Well, your, uh, daughter."

"She's dead."

Sharifa had turned to her monitor before she spoke, and all he could see was her back. It was impossible to give even the usual polite expression of sympathy to a back like that. He retreated silently, feeling bad enough to be a cross between a criminal and a cretin.

As Johan passed the cubicle where the man had leaned out, he remembered the strange comment Sharifa had not explained.

He hadn't spoken to Dari in days. Not since he'd been feeding ducks in the park with Aliya. There didn't seem to be any point. But this bullshit had to have come via him.

When Johan stood in the opening to his cubicle, Dari looked nervous.

“Samers? I don’t know. People say so many things. You know.”

“No, I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

Dari hemmed. Dari hawed. Finally it came out that word had percolated up from his house of ill repute that there was something odd about Johan.

“Half the guys here know people in that part of town. It could have been anyone.”

Johan almost marched back to the original fatberg to lift him out of his chair by his shirt and let him know, in no uncertain terms, what he, himself, the authority on the subject, had to say about him being a samer. Then he thought about the fellow’s sneering, vicious expression and the sewage that came out of him at both ends, and decided he’d rather be a samer, politically speaking, than have anything in common with someone like that.

“Look, it’s not my fault,” Dari was saying. “I didn’t say anything. I don’t know where they got it.”

“Did I say you did?”

“No, but—”

“So what does this mean?”

“Well, obviously, nobody who matters is going to believe it. I mean, it’s just some guys making stories. You know.”

“And when somebody decides they do believe it? I annoy someone, say, and he decides to use it?”

“Oh. That might not be so good.”

Johan glowered at him. Dari seemed to be trying to disappear by shrinking into his chair.

“You’d probably get fired. It could get ugly. You know.”

“Ugly,” said Johan. “Right.”

It wasn’t just Aliya he had to worry about. It was every stranger’s face he saw.

“Okay. Next time shit like this comes down the road, why don’t you let me know, *habibi*?”

He strode back to his own cubicle, furious. He filled his screen with a routing problem, and thought.

Enough farting around, trying to do this on his own. The fastest way out was the blimp. Would the Finley Islands give asylum to three refugees? Probably not. If they started down that road, this whole homicidal place would empty out.

However, the blimp was his only real chance. When he left work, he didn’t go home. He walked to the main post office and public telecom building. He acquired a fistful of cash. He was making this call as anonymously and securely as technology allowed. Nobody had said that comm frequencies were bugged here, but he was taking no chances.

He was going to call Briony. Thinking about her made him feel as if he’d never left home. His old life had never receded. It had sneaked around to the future and was lying in wait, ready to pounce on him as soon as the novelty of

this life wore off.

He keyed in Briony's address at one of the public comm carrels. Just pushing the buttons squeezed his heart. Suddenly, the last month had never happened. He was standing next to her at the fountain in the courtyard, and she was holding her breath, staring with rapt wonder at a shiny red and green hummingbird only an arms-length away. He stopped pushing buttons, bowed his head, and closed his eyes.

When he had a hold of himself, he started over.

"Johan!" came the well-remembered voice, squeezing his heart to a size that felt incompatible with life. He heard her calling to someone else. "Yes, that's right. The man who showed me all over Gabriel. What? Oh, Lem, for heaven's sake" Her voice became louder and clearer as she turned back to her comm. "Johan, where the hell are you? My locator is saying Doha!"

He felt the first smile in what felt like years spread over his face.

"Hell is right. Has anyone ever told you, you're always right?"

"Well known fact," she said. "So what's going on?"

"Briony, we'll save the catching up for later. Let me just say that I'm in deep shit, I and two women need to get out of here fast, and I'm hoping you can rescue me again."

"Great Mother of God.... Johan, I'd be glad to do anything I can, but, you see, there's a minor detail. I'm all the way over here. What can I do?"

"We three need to walk onto the blimp without tickets, and without documents in the case of the women. We'll get off in Mumbai. We're not trying to gatecrash the Islands. We'll sort out payment and documents once we're safe."

He heard her let out a whistling breath.

"I see. Some kind of refugee or asylum status, I guess. It could be really tough. You see, there are all kinds of rules about how the blimp can only resupply at Doha. The Islanders are allowed to walk around and stretch their legs, but they don't let us go more than two hundred meters away from the blimp without all kinds of special visas. The Caliphate could revoke landing permits over something like this."

"Grief," he muttered to himself. There went that hope.

"I'll call my great-grandfather. He used to fly on the blimps, and he works in air traffic control now, so he still knows everyone. We'll see what's possible. Where can I reach you? When's the next flight?"

"One week. And you can message me. Just don't use any obvious words." The crazy hope flared again. The Islands, he couldn't help telling himself, was where they held the whole blimp if one person was late.

"All right, Johan. I'll be waiting with bated breath for the full report, once you're back in Western airspace."

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Chapter 11

Aliya looked so peculiar, Johan couldn't understand why their little trio hadn't been arrested on that basis alone. Under the trash picker's overalls, she had padding around her waist, padding at her shoulders, padding on her upper arms, and all it accomplished was a very padded-looking female. She kept looking over her shoulder like a startled young woman, and bending her head down like a little girl in trouble. None of her looked like a man, certainly not like a bored, menial picker-up of trash along the perimeter fence of Doha's airport.

Johan had found out what the fence was for. It was to keep out desperate people like him who were trying to stow away on ships, or steal ships, or blow them up. The wind trapped drifts of trash against the fence, and somebody had to pick the stuff up. A machine missed too many pieces, at least the machines they had here did. Johan knew he must look at least as out of place as Aliya, because trash-pickers were bored. They didn't look like ... like Aztecs afraid of becoming the next human sacrifice.

The only one who looked remotely plausible was Sharifa. She managed to move like a boy, and to spear trash with short, angry jerks that suggested she'd expected more out of life than this.

They trudged along the perimeter fence, Sharifa in the lead, Aliya some fifty meters behind her, and Johan about as far back again. He could see the blimp in the distance, but, like a mountain range on an interminable hike, it never seemed to get closer.

It was the middle of the day. The blazing sun was hot enough to poach eggs ... or brains. He was wearing three layers of clothing because he had nowhere to pack them. His clothes were going to kill him. He was soaked in sweat and everything chafed.

Any moment, someone might notice the unscheduled figures moving along the fence and decide to investigate. He couldn't even hope they were inconspicuous because the closer they came to the blimp, the more kids attached themselves to the other side of the fence and tried to beg from them.

This was the best Johan had been able to come up with. Briony's great-

grandfather knew the blimp captain. Dorje Hlanto had declared the three of them off-Island relatives. You could do that in the Finleys, apparently. People could enter into voluntary relationships besides marriage, and this gave them the right to visit the Islands. It wasn't even a scam. The only dishonest part was that they hadn't gone through channels in the Islands themselves. The captain was going to quietly let them on the airship and worry about documents retroactively. So if they ever reached the airship, they might be safe.

By dint of Western-sized bribery, Johan had managed to get the "loan" of three electronic IDs from a trash-picker and his friends. Just as the airport had no security concourses, Johan had found out that access required no iris scans, no face scans, not even any primitive inked thumbs. A silly piece of plastic with an electronic code was enough to get you in.

A slow plane taxied toward them, on its way toward a take-off strip somewhere. The pilots better have more important things to do than worry about wandering garbage collectors. Johan tried not to look at the plane's front windows to see how much attention he was getting. Aliya and Sharifa kept their heads down too. If they attracted the attention of an actual human being who checked their IDs and saw the unmatching pictures, it would be all over. The uniforms Sharifa had found at some bazaar could only stand scrutiny at a distance, and the same went for the airport logos Aliya had embroidered above the left pockets.

The three of them continued along the fence, pretending to spear trash. Would anyone notice that the bags were much too heavy? Johan was carrying a suitcase-worth of stuff, even though he'd abandoned almost all his own things. Even with an extra bag, it had been hard to get Aliya to pare down to what she could carry with his help.

Some kind of service vehicle whined in the distance, electric motors protesting a heavy load. It was probably water resupply, or sewage removal. It didn't turn toward them, and the three of them kept walking. If he squinted, he could convince himself the blimp was a bit closer.

At one point during the frantic, furtive preparations, Aliya had broken down and said she'd just stay. All they could do was kill her. Johan managed to jog her off that train of thought, but then she lost the will to make any decisions. She couldn't seem to bear to leave anything behind. At first he'd tried to talk sense to her, but she kept breaking down in tears. When she started crying over a first grade project she couldn't take, he finally saw that the difficulty was leaving her entire life behind. He was telling her to give up everything and everyone she'd known to go to some strange place without a single friend, without even her first grade notebooks to remind her of who she'd been.

It was too much to ask of anyone.

"I don't know, Aliya," he said then. "This bright idea of mine to throw you into a different universe ... , it seemed like a simple solution, but it may not work at all."

She seemed more upset to see him despairing than to see her own life in ruins.

"I'll go. You've arranged everything. I'll go."

"You're not doing this for me, Aliya," he'd said.

"Who else am I doing it for?" she wanted to know, with the first hint of defiance he'd ever seen in her.

So now he was lugging enough in his sack for it to be her younger brother in person, and hoping very hard that it looked like a bag full of light and fluffy trash. Especially because there was a small, low-slung ground car leaving the terminal on the side nearest them. It was dwarfed by distance, but if someone came out to check on them, it would probably be in a vehicle like that.

"Hey, Aliya, Umm Leila," he called. He had their attention instantly. "Speed up. I don't like the look of that. It can't get worse than a real person looking at us." He nodded toward the approaching car.

"Oh, it can always get worse," he heard Noor call back, as the two women began walking faster. Aliya looked more like a kid in trouble than ever. All she needed to complete the effect was a long shiny strand of her hair to escape the fat-looking cap. She'd been desperate not to cut her hair, and when Sharifa tried to make her, Johan had turned on the older woman with all the pent-up rage of the last few days. He'd been taken aback himself.

The car was headed straight for them. There wasn't anything out here except them. Johan gauged the distance to the blimp. At his fastest, he could probably cover the distance before the car reached him. Sharifa could probably shoot through a brick wall using nothing but determination. But Aliya would never make it. He prepared to buy her as much time as he could. Surely, even the Caliphate would think twice before harming a citizen of the United Federation of the West.

The car had three people in it: a driver, a bored-looking somebody in the narrow back seat, and an officious fusspot in the front passenger seat. The vehicle stopped about twenty meters away, which was as close as it could easily get to Johan on the track running near the perimeter. The official let loose a stream of Arabic. Johan hadn't been in Doha long enough to understand much, so he stared at the man as stupidly as the most stereotypical menial. He wiped away the sweat on his forehead that streamed into his eyes and stung them as soon as he raised his head.

Yes, *sir* might cover the situation, he thought, and he hoped the form appropriate for a white-collar math geek was also right for a laborer.

"Inshallah," he said. That had covered every conceivable situation at Al-Rashid.

The official rattled off more orders and waved his arm at the fence. Some new trash had already blown onto the section they'd done. Had he come all the way out here to say that that they'd missed a bit?

Johan tried "Inshallah" again.

The official barked a final command, and the car trundled toward a distant set of landing lights on what must be some kind of routine inspection tour. For a second, Johan thought the bones in his legs had become sand. He turned toward the blimp and started walking as fast as he dared. Sharifa was coming toward him, Aliya just stood. Johan fiercely motioned them both toward the blimp. He threw as many glances over his shoulder as he dared, but the car continued to drive away. The driver was looking at the track, the fellow in the back seemed to have died of boredom, and the official was too important to imagine that his orders might not be obeyed.

The two women covered the remaining hundreds of meters almost running. The car never turned back. The control tower must have noticed the three strange workers by now, but if they'd taken any action, it wasn't obvious.

Sharifa reached the ramp. Aliya couldn't stand it any more, broke into a run, lost her cap, and her long hair streamed like a flag. Johan reached the gangway, bounded up ... and ... and nothing. He came to a sudden stop, breathing hard. There was nobody kicking him out. There was nobody welcoming him in. An Islander leaned on the railing some distance away, but he seemed totally unconcerned, as if people ran for their lives up gangways all the time.

If Johan had walked off the edge of a cliff and found himself floating, he couldn't have been more at a loss. It was oddly cooler up here. It almost felt like there was a bit of a breeze. He dropped his heavy bag and started throwing off layers of clothes as if it was the only thing he needed to do in the world.

Now what? There wasn't an official person in sight. A couple of Islanders wandered onto the deck from inside and noticed them. One nodded in a friendly fashion.

The other one said,

"I think we're still waiting for a few. No hurry."

No HURRY? Johan wanted to yell at him. After the suffocating pressures of the last few days, the free and easy Islanders seemed like members of another species, about as close as dolphins, and about as easy to communicate with.

The two women were staring at the Islanders, at Johan, at the blimp.

"Captain," he finally pulled himself together to say. "Where's the Captain? We need to see him instantly."

"Her," said an Islander. "This way." He sauntered toward the front of the ship.

Johan motioned to Aliya and Sharifa to drop their bags, and then almost pushed the relaxed fellow showing them the way.

"Could we hurry it up?" he said after one second.

"You lot in some kind of emergency?"

No. We catch blimps for exercise.

"YES."

The man nodded and started running. At least when he was told to stop wasting time, he did.

Johan racked his memory to recall what sex the Captain was supposed to be. If this was some unknown captain, they could be in deep trouble.

They entered what was obviously a control room, but it was full of passengers. They had air conditioning in here, and his sweat-soaked clothes felt frigid. No, it turned out, it was not full of passengers. Most of them were crew. The Islanders must not believe in uniforms, which would fit with everything else Johan knew about them.

"Hoy," said the man, "Captain Simmons, a few people here."

A black woman turned around.

"Name?" was all she asked.

"Johan Antioch."

"And ... ?" She nodded toward his companions.

"Noor Sharifa. Aliya Al-Jabar."

She nodded again.

"That agrees with my information. Well, make yourselves comfortable, and—"

"Ma'am?" Johan interrupted her. "We need to leave as soon as you possibly can. We were stopped by an official. They may send someone after us any second."

The Captain raised her eyebrows and shook her head in a resigned fashion.

"It's always something in Doha. If the sewage trucks don't bring out the wrong coupling, then it's the government trying some damn thing. Wang, call out a return to ship."

The blue flag was hoisted. A second announcement went out over the public address system, requesting that crew be alerted if anyone was aware of a missing passenger. Then one of the officers, dressed in a loose shirt with pictures of palms on it, started carefully calling out the roll of all two hundred and forty nine passengers. They might wear funny shirts, but they were very serious about not leaving anyone in Doha. People responded from all over the ship.

It took years. By any real clock, it had to have taken years. No cars emerged from the terminal toward them. No flitters buzzed in and landed.

One person was missing. The person was spotted strolling around under the blimp. She was a walking antique and hadn't heard the announcement. She moved toward the gangway with excruciating slowness.

A red light started blinking on the main control console, and the first mate said something about the airport going to emergency status.

Everyone was on board. The blimp let out a little toot. The mooring line was cast off, and the airship floated skyward.

Johan sagged against a wall with relief. He wasn't going to get killed. Aliya wasn't going to get killed. Sharifa, he suspected, couldn't be killed.

He supposed the locals could decide to shoot the blimp down, but that seemed excessive, even for them.

The three of them were near the door to the control room, and Johan could

hear the chatter from air traffic control suddenly die down. The comm crackled with a different voice.

"Airship Levu. You have not been cleared for takeoff. Report your status."

"We received clearance two hours ago. We are within the window you gave us."

"The port has gone to emergency status. All craft are to remain grounded during emergencies. The signal was sent out three point four five minutes ago."

The Captain herself leaned toward the comm.

"Captain Simmons here. Our apologies. Our equipment may be faulty. We'll have to check it. We didn't see the alert."

"Return to your landing area. A missing subject has been reported. Aliya Al-Jabar. She may be associated with three suspicious persons currently in the cargo sector. The authorities are in the process of establishing their identities. All craft are to remain grounded."

"I think," said the Captain, pushing a button which cut the voice off, "that we're having trouble with our comm. I didn't catch that. Did you catch that?" she asked her first mate.

The blimp, flying as crows did, covered a surprising amount of distance in its effortless way. A monitor showed the edge of Hillafan airspace, some thirty kilometers away, out over the water. One of the fiefdoms lay ahead, but they had no control over the international air space above the open water.

The Captain switched the comm back on before they reached the edge, and apologized neutrally for the "malfunction." She needed air traffic control to repeat its problem a couple of times before she understood.

"Oh, Aliya Al-Jabar. Sorry, I'm not familiar with the language and didn't catch the name."

There could have been fifty Aliyas on the ship, the way she said it.

"Aliya Al-Jabar is an Island Affiliate. She came on board of her own volition and is a legal passenger. She, herself, does not seem to consider herself missing. Possibly, your information is in error."

"She had no exit permit!"

"Must have done," contradicted Captain Simmons calmly. "How else could she be on board?"

The voice from air traffic control made an involuntary dithering sound. Then he asked angrily,

"Is this some Western media stunt?"

That was always the Caliphate's line whenever something happened that ran against the party line about how free the place was. This particular minor airport official obviously didn't want to be the one explaining how the story got out and about.

"No idea," said Captain Simmons. "We don't list our passengers by profession."

The man at air traffic control sounded loud, angry, and much less sure of

himself.

“She is one of *our* subjects. You have no right—”

Sharifa stood there, glaring at the speaker with a scowl of pure hatred.

“‘*Subjects*,’” she was muttering.

The dot of the blimp crossed an imaginary line on the wall displaying the map.

“She may be one of yours,” said Captain Simmons, straightening up with a pleased smile on her face, “but she’s also one of ours. I’ll message you the forms momentarily. So we have every right. Go talk to your legal beagles. Airship Levu out.”

Johan felt the relief which had been building through the whole process burst out in a laugh. They were safe. He wanted to hug everyone on board, but the only person who wouldn’t think him insane was Aliya. But that sort of thing was Not Done in Doha and—. To hell with Doha, shouted most of his mind.

“Aliya,” he said, close to her ear. “May I? I have to celebrate.”

She turned. He saw her eyes, swimming in tears, and she threw herself on him and sobbed. All the padding made her lumpy.

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Three days later, Johan sat with Aliya and Sharifa at the Mumbai clipper port, waiting for the flight to Gabriel to board. He’d spent the last three days wondering what the hell he was doing, and why he’d emptied his bank account for this, ... and feeling more and more sorry that Aliya was leaving. Life was a mess.

He’d been an idiot to think he could help her by escaping Hillafa. He would have been at least as much of an idiot, if he’d thought anything else. And he would have been something much worse than an idiot, if he’d given up.

But it was never going to work. His bright-eyed notions about simple solutions had been wilting under the difficulties right from the start. Aliya’s reaction to the West had delivered the final blows.

It had begun almost as soon as they boarded the blimp. Johan felt he should tell the Captain what the problem had been, since apparently nobody had said anything. He explained the rumors about his orientation.

“That’s no picnic there, believe me. And Aliya,” he nodded toward her standing next to him, “was afraid she’d be killed over some guy who you couldn’t even call a lover, really, and so forth and so on and so on. When you’re not in Hillafa, the whole thing sounds so preposterous, you probably think I’m making it up, but—”

“I know you’re not. I’ve been doing this route for years. They’d pee in their pants rather than let anyone get away. Well, see you around.”

Johan wasn’t so sure. Aliya had suddenly gone radioactive and seemed ready

to kill him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

That seemed to make her go critical.

"You, you, you." She couldn't seem to get any words out, she was so angry.

Dear God, now what? "Aliya, I'm sorry. What's—." He remembered Briony saying, *There's nothing more obnoxious than standing on someone's bare feet in steel-toed boots and wanting to know what the problem is.*

Aliya seemed about to stomp away. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry to be so ignorant. Just tell me, okay?"

A miracle happened. She stopped in mid-stomp.

"You told her. You just went and *told* her. Why don't you put it up on a poster, in case anyone hasn't heard yet."

He almost asked "Heard what?" but stopped himself just in time.

"It's okay to have sex in the rest of the world, Aliya. It's okay. You don't have to hide or lie about it. It's okay. It's not a problem that the Captain knows. It's not a problem anyone knows." He wasn't convincing her. "Aliya, listen to me. People here would think you were weird if you hadn't had sex. They'd tell you to find counseling."

"Oh!" she huffed.

They'd been on their way to dinner, and she hardly spoke to him during the meal, but she didn't march away. Johan had never envisioned the possibility that he'd be glad of Sharifa's company as a calming influence.

Then there had been the problem about clothes once they reached Mumbai. People kept glancing at the two obviously Hillafan women, and Johan came up with one of his simple solutions. Buy a set of Western clothes.

No way were they getting into body suits, they both told him. Sharifa seemed willing to try the looser leisure wear, but Aliya stayed horrified.

"I can't wear that! People will ... look."

They were looking right now, but that didn't seem to be what she meant.

"It doesn't matter, Aliya," he said. "They can look, or not look. It makes no difference. What you do is up to you."

But she didn't start acting like a Western woman just because she could. He supposed it was no different from the fact that he'd never managed to act like a Hillafan man.

Only two good things had happened. One of them was that the ship's doctor had given her pills for the pregnancy, and that problem was solved. Aliya had been stunned at how simple it was. More important, when she worked up the courage to call home, to let them know she was safe, her mother spoke to her. Her father refused, but her mother answered the call. Aliya came away from that conversation so drained, her olive skin was greenish, but she kept saying, "At least she spoke to me. She did speak to me."

Sharifa had noted that her father would soon speak to her, once she started making Western money. Aliya had looked even more hurt.

Johan noticed that right now both women were staring at the floor with fixed expressions. He glanced around. Sometimes he could guess what had set them off and try to prevent problems for them, but sometimes he couldn't. Perhaps it was the graphics in the big print newspaper hiding the passenger holding it. The ad did make it rather clear it was for an erection-producing—

The call to board the Gabriel clipper echoed through the waiting area.

Sharifa said goodbye without any fuss, and went on ahead. Aliya had her head down as she walked. Johan didn't know what to say or do. He wanted to tell her that she was among friends, to take care of herself, that everything would work out. What he really wanted was for her to tell him that. Things were made more complicated by some of the same mix of exasperation and aching urge to help that he felt for Nalini.

"Don't take any guff from my sister," he said.

Aliya glanced at him, and back down at the floor.

"You tell me if she tries anything, and I'll give her hell." Holy, living hell, as a matter of fact.

"How are you going to do that," Aliya muttered at the floor, "when you're on the other side of the world?"

"I have my methods," he said, vastly relieved that she'd spoken at last. He wanted desperately to feel that there was some hope, somewhere.

"You'll let me know how things go, Aliya? Yes?" They were almost to the gate.

She said nothing.

"I'll message you. You write back to me, okay?"

She turned to him, eyes swimming with tears again, he hugged her, felt the grip of her arms as she held him, and then she let go and practically ran down the jetway.

She disappeared at the end without looking back. There was no way to wave goodbye to someone on a clipper. He turned away, walked back, and stood at a window in the main concourse where he could see the clipper lift off. He could feel it flying away by the empty space growing in his chest.

Chapter 12

Johan made his way to the Eighth District Mumbai Police Station to give evidence in the trial of the gang. In his old life, he would have been a knot of nerves, but now it didn't seem to matter. Not because he felt calm or courageous or competent, but because he felt numb. It was a single trial, but each of the slicers had her own lawyer, as usual, and any of the lawyers could grill him. It didn't matter. He would tell the court what happened. He was done with trying to prop up his good name when it wasn't much good to begin with.

For the second time, he'd found a place to live, he'd found a job as a temp. Finding a real job was hard in Mumbai. People were poorer than in Gabriel and hungrier for work, and he was just another Westerner among ten million others. Hundreds of people had the same skills as him. It was an uncertain existence that he'd fallen into, one that paid even worse than Al-Rashid, but it did pay, and that was what mattered.

Sometimes he felt that he'd never left Doha. The streets were even dirtier, the buildings even more ramshackle. He walked the streets every day, going to his various jobs. The last week his route took him past a construction site where the bamboo scaffolding surrounding the brick building leaned away from the wall in a lazy curve, while the wall itself tried to redress the balance by leaning the other way. He watched the progress of construction as he passed, and he took bets with himself whether the wall would have grown another few bricks since he last saw it. If it had, he would take it as an omen that his current job would need to keep him another day.

It would take complex math to find out how much weight a curved wall could support. Since the inspectors had either been bribed or couldn't be bothered to look, the limit might be determined empirically when the whole thing came crashing down. It might take no more than the landing of a bird who'd eaten too much. Or maybe it would take a heavy bookshelf with one book too many. He continued on past the building toward the event he should be dreading, but he had no feeling of weight. Maybe it was the same for the wall, before the last book was wedged in.

In some respects, Mumbai was nothing like Doha. There were no beggars.

Women didn't scuttle and they weren't swaddled. On the contrary, they were if anything, the most beautiful women he'd seen anywhere, their dark skin set off by clothes in brilliant colors, edged with gold. They noticed him too, of course, and, this being the West, it was relatively simple to do something about it, or to do nothing. It made very little difference, either way.

He sent part of his pay to Aliya. Except for a short message saying she'd arrived and that his mother was very kind, he hadn't heard anything else from her. His parents said she was doing well, but what did they know? Even Nalini was polite and uninformative, which was bizarre. He wondered if this was how divorced fathers felt when their kids didn't want to see them.

He wrote to Nalini to stop bullshitting him, and then she'd added that Aliya didn't seem to *do* anything. Granted, she's gorgeous, Nalini wrote back, but all she does is wait till someone else is going somewhere and then she tags along.

Johan frowned. What his sister needed was to be drop-kicked into the Flea Palace of Victory, and see how she liked it. However, he restrained any cutting comments. Instead, he just asked her nicely to do as much as she could to show Aliya around, but he hadn't heard anything in days. Maybe things were working out, and maybe they weren't.

He reached the palace that was the Eighth District Police Station. The police seemed to do rather well for themselves. Soon he was sitting in a bare room, with two female officials. They could have been mistaken for his sisters, but their Indian ancestors came from halfway around the globe in that most classic demonstration of the Europeans' pathetic grasp of geography. One of the women was the lawyer his father had insisted on paying for. Johan had accepted this time. The other difference was the bank of monitors. Instead of one lone monitor, eight stared at him from the opposite wall. He tried not to see them as facets of the multiple eye of a vast and hideous insect.

Most of the monitors tracked the lawyers and judge, but one showed the whole courtroom, including the six accused women, sitting in their own section of the room. The Chinese one still had two green enamelled combs in her hair.

Seeing the women felt like cold gas in his chest, but that was all. They changed nothing. Maybe that was because they were two oceans away.

He was glad Briony wasn't there, and he was sorry, both at once. It was easier to feel nothing. They'd taken one last deposition from her a week ago, and none of the lawyers seemed to feel a need for further questions.

There was an interminable time occupied in obscure legal back-and-forth, which his lawyer told him showed that all six planned to plead innocent. The fact that a foreign woman had suspected them probably wouldn't be enough to convict them. The gang members had, it appeared, been taking turns doing what they called "cruising." The sliced men and the two other kidnap victims had identified other women as well, and the lawyers were arguing that the victims had been too distraught to have a clear memory of everyone who'd

attacked them. It hadn't been their clients, according to the "vigilantes" advocates.

The term always annoyed him. As if the gangs were some kind of upstanding independent contractors for justice.

Once the lawyers finally worked their way around to Johan, the questions began to beat against him like rain.

What were you doing in Greendale? Walking *home*? Really? My client admits freely that she was looking for an interesting evening, as might be expected from someone who seeks out Greendale, but you would like us to believe that this was your normal route home? You wouldn't? That was the first time you took that route? Oh, it was the *third* time? How long have you lived in Gabriel? All your life. And you didn't know enough to take a bus? You didn't know about the train routes? You didn't know the city well enough to walk around a bad district? You were taking a *shortcut*? Are you going to tell this court that you, a native of Gabriel, didn't know that Greendale after dark is a rough neighborhood?

No, he said. He hadn't lived in Gabriel long enough to learn that he was only allowed in some parts of town. A titter rippled through the court, but the five judicial jury members, who would be deciding the case, didn't move a muscle.

So you knew it was a bad neighborhood. What were you doing there? You don't really expect this court to believe you were simply walking home, do you? Why did you talk to my client, if you were simply walking home? Yes, she talked to you first, but somebody has to start a conversation. If you didn't want to speak to her, then why did you? You didn't realize what was happening? You are a native of Gabriel, in a neighborhood famous for "adventures," talking to a woman, and you don't know why she's talking to you? If she was so unappealing, then why didn't you leave? They had you surrounded? If you didn't want to be there, then a reasonable person would expect some sign of resistance. Did you do anything at all that showed an unwillingness to be there? Anything?

"There were six of them," he pointed out. "Armed."

"My client's mace gun was holstered and not being used to threaten the witness. I trust nobody is suggesting that women do not have a right to defend themselves? We all know where that ends, don't we? Possibly, this witness's respect for the law is not all it should be?"

Suddenly, the questions were about Aliya.

Aliya! How dare they? Before he thought what he was doing, he sat straighter and glared. They could leave Aliya out of this. Gabriel was supposed to be a refuge for her, not a firing range where she was targeted by sleazy lawyers.

"You were recently involved in the relocation to Gabriel of this citizen of the Caliphate. The Caliphate is charging kidnapping."

"Objection," interposed his lawyer. "The Caliphate's procedures regarding their *subjects* are not relevant."

“The witness’s respect for law is highly relevant. If he broke Caliph—”

“If my learned colleague is suggesting that Caliphate law is valid in Gabriel, I suggest he start interacting very cautiously with his own client. My client’s respect for the laws of the West is germane to this case. The Caliphate is not.”

In polite legal language, the lead judge ordered the slicers’ lawyers to get on with it.

Another lawyer bowed her head with pompous respect.

“Mr. Antioch rather implausibly contends that as a native of Gabriel, he thought Greendale was a good shortcut, and that as a large, strong young man, he couldn’t make a move. If this witness is such an anomaly of a young man, perhaps he will also admit to having no interest in sex?”

Now what? thought Johan. This was ridiculous.

“What has sex got to do with being attacked?” he asked.

“Just answer the question, Mr. Antioch. Are you or are you not interested in sex?”

“Right now,” he said, looking at the arrogant and elderly lawyer, “no. Sometimes, yes.”

Suppressed chuckles erupted here and there again.

He admitted that there hadn’t been any sex that night in Greendale?

Admitted! His lawyer raised an admonitory finger, out of range of the camera. He managed to edit the *hell* out of his answer.

“There was no sex.”

The lawyer paused, and she resumed as if the case was now closed. “I hardly need to point out to the members of the court the anger they can see for themselves. He was obviously very unhappy about the lack of sex. What happened is clear. A young man goes looking for adventure, does not find it, and decides to get back at the women who rejected him with a farfetched story of violence.”

It was lucky Johan was two oceans away. He would have launched himself at the monitor and smashed it, except the policewoman stood up outside the camera’s range and waved him down, so he remembered where he was.

He had known the lawyers would try to discredit him. His own lawyer had told him so. What he hadn’t known was how it would feel, no matter what he’d been told. The gang’s lawyer went on talking, which was lucky because he was speechless with rage and couldn’t have answered a question to save his life. However, it was unlucky because of what she was saying.

“The version of events Mr. Antioch gave to the police, before he had time to nurse his hurt feelings, agrees with the evidence of my client and tells its own story. Allow me to read you some excerpts from the transcript of his interview with the police.”

Johan’s words, which even at the time and even to him had sounded silly, now sounded like the drivel of someone quite stupid enough to wander around Greendale for fun.

"I leave it up to the court to decide whether the facts indicate a respect for law and truthfulness on the part of this witness. Facts, luckily, speak for themselves."

If he'd come in to this small room with any doubt about exposing the humiliating truth of his encounter with the horrible women, it was gone now, swallowed up in the much worse humiliation of the lawyers' words. When his own lawyer pointedly said she would ask him no leading questions, he hardly heard her. When she told him to recount the events of that night in his own way, he began immediately. He recounted everything the slicers had said before they pretended to being ordinary citizens in Briony's presence. He recounted the threats about coming to find him. He told the court exactly what they'd said about having "company." And then, in a monotone, because there was no other way he could get the words out, he spoke for the first time about the scream, about the man, and the blood, and the smear on the window, and about being surrounded and being unable to do anything for himself. About knowing he might buy survival if he gave up. About knowing that he'd already done that.

"Mr. Antioch," said the senior lawyer severely. "Our clients have freely admitted that they were playing."

PLAYING! he yelled, but only in his own mind. He was sitting, rigid, staring at his hands in his lap, trying to calm down enough to look ordinary after his own testimony. He managed not to move. The lawyer was droning on.

"To suddenly raise objections to the activity for the first time at this late date seems contrived. If you didn't feel like participating, you need to explain to this court why you continued to do so. However, your allegations concerning what our clients said are both serious and, shall we say, novel. If those things were said, and you did not immediately report it, that would make you an accessory. Are you aware of that?"

Oh yes. Very aware. Very, very aware.

A swelling buzz filled the courtroom. The lead judge was pounding her little wooden hammer on its polished wooden base.

"It also contradicts your testimony to the police," huffed the senior lawyer. She had obviously counted on him avoiding self-incriminating truths at all costs. "Would you care to explain to this court why you lied to the police?"

There was an exchange of objections about the use of the term "lied," and then Johan answered.

"It is easy to explain," he said slowly. "I was afraid. I was afraid of revenge. I was afraid of insulting questions." He looked fixedly at the senior lawyer. "It took me some time to get past that."

He hadn't known how much it would cost him to say it in front of too many hostile lawyers and, worst of all, in front of the horrible trash themselves.

It was a simple, obvious admission, yet he might as well have lobbed a stink bomb into the courtroom. The whole place was buzzing, as if no man had ever

admitted to fear before. It was so obviously the truth, that everything he'd said earlier had to be true, too. And if his testimony was true, so was Briony's, and so was that of the four victims. The six slicers would be going to jail, but at a dreadful price. The judge began conferring with her legal equals on the jury to decide what had to be done about someone who lied to the police. There was nothing Johan could do but wait.

He noticed an intermittent prickle from his comm band. A message had been left ten solid minutes ago, and he hadn't even felt the initial vibration or the subsequent reminders. He glanced at it, and then stared. It was from someone in Finley.

The only person he knew in the Islands was Briony. He opened the message, while everything around him faded into insignificance.

However, it wasn't from Briony. It was from the Finley Archipelago Foreign Office. It said a formal charge of kidnapping had been lodged against him in Hillafa. The Finley Archipelago would be considered to have aided and abetted the crime unless they could present an affidavit from Aliya Al-Jabar that she had left voluntarily. The Archipelago's landing rights could be revoked. Dorje Hlanto's involvement would be investigated. The Foreign Office would appreciate receiving the affidavit at his earliest convenience. Failing that, the Archipelago would have to charge him with abuse of an Island Affiliation to commit breaches of international treaty.

"Well, Mr. Antioch?"

He looked up from his comm band, dazed.

Somebody in a courtroom half a world away was saying, "When it suits Mr. Antioch to give his attention to this court again, we can proceed."

What? Johan wasn't ready for any more problems, not yet, not for a year or two.

"I would think that Mr. Antioch would be pleased," the judge was saying in a ponderous way, "to hear that it is not the policy of this court to hound the victims of crimes. In view of the fact that you have told the truth now, and in view of your youth, there will be no prosecution for the irregularity in your police testimony. However, let this be a warning to you, and see to it that it does not happen again."

He was too scattered even to feel relief. Presumably, Aliya would provide the affidavit. The trial continued. But maybe she felt so put upon by now that she wouldn't, or she would hesitate, or there would be some other problem. A doctor appeared as an expert witness with testimony that was going to give Johan screaming nightmares for weeks. Johan would rather go to jail in Hillafa than let Briony's favorite relative get in trouble for helping him. A psychiatrist took the stand and talked about lasting damage. You forgot to interview me, thought Johan. I could tell you something about damage too. Johan was going to have to call Aliya, because he couldn't just hope she would answer a message. She hadn't so far. Some of the gang took the stand and their lawyers

made them sound like healthy free spirits, until his lawyer tore their stories to shreds. But Aliya obviously didn't want to communicate. Well, she was going to have to. She was just going to have to. It went on and on, until Johan started to feel he'd lived in this small room being scrutinized by the hideous insect's eye since early childhood.

By the time the judicial panel came back to give their verdict, he was beating futilely on the thought that doing the right thing was supposed to result in less trouble, or more bearable trouble, or at least a better class of trouble. The problem was, it was still trouble.

The verdict was that all six of the women were guilty, and then the judges sentenced them to the maximum term of five years. Johan left the small room without any feeling of triumph. It had cost too much.

The time in Gabriel was four in the morning. He'd have to wait at least three hours before he could try calling Aliya.

At a hole-in-the-wall curry shop, he ate a dinner he barely tasted, despite the scorching spices.

When he called Aliya, the signal said it was ringing, which meant she wasn't wearing her comm, which meant she was still asleep. It rang and rang. He sat there and listened to it not because he expected anyone to answer after the twentieth ring, but because he had no other plans. But somebody did answer suddenly.

Aliya sounded breathless.

"Alo, I mean, hello?"

"Aliya...." He found himself unable to speak.

"Johan!" She seemed to have the same trouble. "You called," she finally said, sounding surprised.

"Aliya...."

"I thought you didn't want to speak to me."

"What? No. No, not at all. I thought you didn't want to speak to me."

"Why would you think that?"

"Oh, Aliya ... , well, it's good to speak to you now. How's everything going? Did I wake you up?"

"No. I was taking a shower."

"So, how are things going?"

"All right, I guess. Your family is very good to me."

She sounded as polite as her one message.

"Aliya, tell me the truth. How do you feel?"

There was silence.

Then she said in a very, very quiet voice,

"I don't know. Everything is so strange. I don't know who to speak to. I don't know what to say. I don't know where to go. I don't even know what to wear. I—I wish you were here."

"Oh, Aliya...." He found that he wished he was there, too. "I guess I should

have returned with you. Isn't Umm Leila any help?"

"She's been very kind. But she found a job a few days ago. I hardly see her."

Somehow, he wasn't surprised. Any company brave enough to hire Noor Sharifa would probably be run by her within a year.

"How's Nalini behaving?"

"She's very kind. She explains things to me."

"God help us," muttered Johan. "Well, don't believe a word she says."

"She's very nice," Aliya protested.

"Well, good. Tell her from me she better go on being very nice." He didn't want to think about what she was learning from Nalini. He had to find Aliya a better guide to Gabriel. "Listen, Aliya," he decided to plunge straight into what he had to say, "I need your help."

"My help?"

"Yes." He explained the kidnapping charge and the message from Finley.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh. That's why you called."

"Aliya, if I'd known you wanted to talk to me, I would have called before you landed. I thought, when you didn't answer my messages, you didn't want to deal with me."

"Oh! How can I write? There is nothing there. Even talking. It is so hard ... so far away."

Her loneliness pulled at him like gravity.

"Aliya," he began. He'd saved her life, but for what? Now she had no life either. He took another breath and started over. "Yes, I called because I had to, but that was only because I misunderstood." They'd always misunderstood each other, right from the start.

"How do I write this thing? What do I say? Do I need to go to an official place for it?"

"It should probably be done by a lawyer. Ask my Mom. She'll set up a meeting, and the lawyer can take care of it from there."

"All right. I will do it today."

"Aliya, thank you. It'll be very good if you can do it as soon as possible."

"Of course. It is a debt of honor."

That, he thought, was exactly what he meant, although he wouldn't have put it that way. She knew what he meant. Maybe he was the only one who misunderstood everything.

"Speaking of a debt of honor," she began, and then stopped.

He waited. "Yes?"

"Well..., I should get a job."

As usual with Aliya, he didn't have any idea what she was talking about. What debt of honor? His debt to Dorje Hlanto? What did that have to do with her finding work? If she kept talking, maybe he'd figure it out, but she didn't keep talking. She seemed to be waiting for something.

"Aliya, I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you mean."

"Well, you probably don't want to keep paying for me forever, so I should find a job."

Something about the way she was saying it made it sound like half of an argument she'd had with herself.

"What's on the other side of the equation?" he asked.

"I mean, I know I don't know anything, but I could cook or clean for someone. And I'm good with children."

This sounded like more of the first half of the argument. He waited.

"Your mother thinks that's a bad idea."

"It seems like kind of a waste to me, too," he said. *Aliya as housekeeper? She should be a vid star.*

"That's what your mother said." Aliya sounded relieved. "She said I should go to cooking school, and learn to become a chef. She said there's only one Dohan restaurant in all of Gabriel, and I found out that's run by a Tajik."

The way she said "Tajik," the poor owner might as well have been a chimpanzee.

Johan had to admit his mother was sharp.

"That's an excellent idea. So what's the problem?"

"Well, if I don't have work, I'll depend on you longer."

"I see." That debt of honor. She was a genius at cooking. And surely, if she was doing something she loved, that would help compensate for the loss of everything else in her life.

"Do it, Aliya. It's an excellent idea. Do it."

"Johan.... I...."

She sounded like she might break down crying. He interrupted.

"It's no big deal. All I'm paying for is your food, and my mom said you've been feeding them so well, she's not sure it's fair to take it. So, just do it. Education is free in the West. I know the books and things will cost more, but it won't be that much, so don't worry about it. Spend some time looking for a school good enough for you."

She didn't say anything, so he continued before she did.

"Aliya, you take care of yourself. And don't let my Dad gain even more weight."

By the time he disconnected, he wasn't sure he didn't feel like crying himself. She pulled at him with a mix of love and pain that he had no idea what to do with.

One thing, though, that he could do was find her a better guide to Gabriel. He started searching, and after half an hour of useless results, he hit the jackpot. Gabriel's University had a whole office for foreign students. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of that immediately. They even had something called "cultural assistance" for Central Asians, since there were the occasional students who made their way over, and that was close enough to Hillafa. Luckily, the "assistant" was female, which he suspected would be essential for

Aliya. He sent a message to Nalini, telling her to take Aliya there immediately. He promised not to give a hard time to her next *three* boyfriends if she'd do it.

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After the trial, Johan felt even more numb, but better, which he hadn't expected. The worst was over. He'd faced it, been flattened by it, and survived. Maybe after enough years passed, he'd even do more than survive.

His family told him how well he'd done at the trial, and how proud they were of him. Even Nalini. The message that really surprised him came from Noor Sharifa. In terribly stiff language, she said how sorry she was to hear about his bad experiences, and that he had "fought well." She had a job, she wrote, with Simulation International, and Johan burst out chuckling. He wouldn't be surprised if she was keeping the same chair warm that he'd occupied.

And then, just when he started really believing he might get through the whole mess someday, he found out his troubles were not over. Not at all.

A long, legal message came from his lawyer. There was a suit pending against him, filed by one of the slicers' victims.

So, it had happened. It wasn't just a rumor anymore.

The suit was for unspecified damages caused by his delay in reporting the crime. The lawyer wrote that he should expect the legal notification shortly, he should come by her office, his physical presence would be required in Gabriel in six weeks, he should.... The message went on for a while.

He'd been trying so hard not to think about what had happened because of him. He'd been trying to put it behind him, not to dwell on it, not to obsess, like everyone told him to. You have to get on with your life, they said. He tried to. God knows, he'd tried. But how was he supposed to do that if it followed him for the rest of his life?

He couldn't take it anymore. He'd done everything. He'd fought the good fight, and all it ever did was get him more trouble. He stared dumbly at the meager furnishings of his room. He should be getting ready to go to work. His body went through the motions automatically, with no help from his spinning mind. When all else failed, habit was apparently the strongest force in the world.

His comm vibrated on his wrist. To hell with it. But habit overruled him yet again and made him look.

The little screen said more than just "Finley." This time it positively said "Briony Hlanto." He almost didn't answer it anyway, but after a couple more buzzes on his wrist, he couldn't quite bring himself to do that. He opened the connection.

"Briony," he said.

"Hallo, Johan! I was doing some field work in the outer Lau islands, and I

managed to miss the verdict. I just heard. I feel like taking a special flight to Gabriel and doing a victory dance at those turds while they have to watch from behind bars.”

“Briony”

“Oy, Johan,” her voice changed to serious, “are you all right?”

No. Not remotely.

“Johan. You still there? What’s going on?”

He told her. He found his voice, and told her.

“What you need,” she said decisively, “is a pig in your bedroom.”

She could have said any one of a million things and not shocked him out of his coma, but that did it.

“What?” he said.

“Oh, just a joke, out of an old book I read. Don’t mind me. What I mean is, you need some distraction from all this. Then you’d have some distance, some perspective, and you’d see that all it means is the hassle of appearing in court. The legal beagles will act like professional mourners at a funeral, because they don’t want to offend the poor guy doing this, but I bet they won’t be terribly sympathetic. Even if it goes against you, they’ll send him away with a dollar.”

“‘If’! what do you mean, ‘if’? I admitted under oath that I didn’t report the crime. There’s no question.”

“Yes, but his damages aren’t your fault, and that’s how any court is going to feel about it. You’d see it if you weren’t feeling so overwhelmed. You need a pig.” She paused briefly and went on, “The kitesurfing championship is coming up soon. You were supposed to come visit for that anyway. Don’t take a clipper to Gabriel. Take the blimp, and stop off here for a few weeks on the way.”

And have his heart broken every day, watching her with Lem. But at least he could see her, and talk to her. He could race over the water with the wind in his hair and forget everything.

He could even, perhaps, lose himself. There were thousands of islands in the Archipelago.

“So what do you think?” she asked.

“Briony, it’s a wonderful idea. But I don’t have the money, at this point. I don’t know how much that would cost.”

“Nonsense. You have to get back to Gabriel anyway. And while you’re here, you’ll stay with my parents.”

It was true, the blimp could be quite cheap if you brought a trunkload of your own food. While he tried to insist he couldn’t do it, Briony looked up prices on a terminal that must be next to her and told him to stop being silly.

A week later, he boarded the blimp at a normal, walking pace, and floated away without fearing for his life.

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Chapter 13

The airship floated toward an emerald island surrounded by turquoise lagoons outlined in white surf, far away in the endless sapphire sea. What would happen to the heartbreaking beauty when he saw it up close, Johan wondered. What would happen to his memory of Briony? When he had both feet on the ground, she wouldn't be a thought he could hold on by. She'd be Briony. And she'd be together with someone named Lem.

Lem could be ignored when he was nothing but a name. But what was going to happen when he stood there, in all four dimensions, and Johan had to be polite to him?

The blimp took much longer than a slow flight to come in to land. The plexiglas screening the decks at altitude retracted into the lower half of the barrier, and Johan held the railing, leaning into the surprisingly strong and cold tradewind. Soaring green mountains rose to a central ridge running the length of the elongated island. The airship pitched and yawed as it passed through the turbulence trailing from the mountain peaks, and then the wind changed to a light breeze as they floated into the lee of the range. Red and yellow kites made tiny arches of simple colors as they parasailed near the mountains in three places. Lower down, in a sedate string, a series of small iridescent dark blue blimps floated along a flyway. They were shaped more like fat flying wings than bullets, and the cabins were hidden on the underside. A few fishing boats lay motionless at sea. Kitesurfers flew over the water of a wide bay in the distance. Right now, Johan would have given the rest of his life to be able to join them.

As the ship floated down toward land, Johan could hear the growing thrum of waves rolling onto the fringing reef. Under the blue-green waters of the lagoon, clear as air, there were dark clouds of coral beds. Even darker shapes could be glimpsed between them where the occasional diver or large fish moved through a sunlit patch.

Like a firebird, the blimp never really landed. But it was moored at last, and the gangway lowered. Passengers streamed off, calling and waving to people on the ground. Every single one of them seemed to have someone to meet. Johan hung back, one of the last to trail off the blimp, the only stranger in a crowd of

friends. He didn't see Briony, but he didn't feel relieved. He told himself he didn't need anyone to meet him. He'd call her once he'd booked a room somewhere.

"Welcome to the Islands," said a woman's voice, and he found himself draped in an orange-scented necklace of flowers. She had a cloud of hair like Briony's, but jet-black, and she was darker than he was. With a smile that lit the world, she turned and left. The sunlight glinted in her cloud of hair as if it had thousands of tiny diamonds sprinkled in it.

She'd left behind the fragrance of flowers, and the feeling that he was part of this place. He glanced around, hoping to spot Briony and afraid to. Whenever someone noticed him looking, they'd smile and nod in a friendly way, as if they knew him well enough not to make a fuss over his arrival. He began to feel as if he'd landed in the midst of a crowd of unassuming relatives.

The security concourse was the only enclosed part of the whole terminal, except for one glassed-in room off to the side that nobody seemed to bother with. Johan supposed they had to have something for the occasional typhoon. Once he was out of the terminal, a red dirt road met him, with shacks dotted along the sides, a sugarcane field, and some sort of crop with enormous green leaves. More thatch-roofed shacks were visible in the distance, and behind that, the twinkling sea. Johan set off at random toward the water. The stillness and the sunlight swallowed time. All directions seemed equally good.

The dwellings, when he passed close to the first set, turned out not to be exactly shacks. The houses were small, containing maybe three or four rooms, but the whitewashed concrete walls were thick, and grayish ceramic tiles peeped out under the thatch. It was probably piled on the roofs mainly to keep the little houses cool. As at the airship terminal, one room usually had glass, but the rest had only large, wide openings with shutters folded back. Judging by the look of the verandas and gardens, most people spent most of their time living outside.

A shape blotted out the sun, and the next moment one of the small personal blimps was whooshing to a landing right in front of him. It was Briony. He hardly noticed all the other small blimps landing around him. She stepped out of her harness.

"Johan! Why didn't you wait? Or at least call? We had a headwind and got delayed and then we couldn't come into the airspace while the intercontinental was landing and then we almost missed you cuz you'd gone gallivanting off. Good to see you again!"

She was hugging him, but he barely had time to touch her before she started draping more flower necklaces over him—leis, she called them—and introducing people. He seemed to have no voice and no breath.

"Meet Dorje. Quit avoiding your relatives."

Dorje Hlanto, air traffic controller, and Briony's great-grandfather, was a tall, broad-shouldered Asian man with two long, thin braids down to his waist. He

just smiled so his eyes disappeared into arcs, and bowed.

Johan didn't have to figure out what to say. Right now, he felt more grateful for that than for the whole rescue this kindly man had made possible.

Then Briony was introducing her parents.

"Iris Amenatave. And my Dad, Rangi Tuiwawa."

They were both quite black. Johan boggled so badly, he forgot to hide it and he forgot to bow. Then the obvious explanation came to him: Briony was adopted.

"Very pleased to meet you," her mother was saying, and her father chimed in to complete the thought, "We've heard a lot about you."

They had? Such as what? That he never knew what to say?

"What's the problem?" asked Briony in her straightforward way.

"N-no problem," he stammered. "I just, I guess, sort of assumed your parents would have red hair too."

She didn't say, "Oh, I'm adopted." She laughed.

"Did you ignore biology as well as social studies? We have Shetlanders on both sides of the family, red-haired Shetlanders, and I just happened to get the right combination for it to show up. That's actually how Mum and Dad met. We've got West Africans on both sides too, so they kept meeting at the same folk festivals, until they decided there was no point fighting fate and they started a family."

Johan finally managed to say,

"I have Shetlanders on my Dad's side, too."

And then she was introducing him to someone he recognized all too well from a picture.

Lem was small, compared to him, and it would be simple to pick him up and throw him away. Johan was sorely tempted. However, the trick was to get Briony to throw him away, and Johan could launch him into orbit without accomplishing that.

Johan bowed because you had to, whereas Lem had his hand out. Johan found himself looking at it before he remembered that you were supposed to shake people's hands here.

Briony laughed again and said,

"They don't shake hands anywhere else, Lem. I keep telling you. You need to get out more, see the world."

I've seen the world, Johan wanted to say. *I've been everywhere.*

He shook the man's hand, awkwardly. It was a peculiar custom.

Lem was smiling at Briony as if there was nobody else in the world.

"Why would I waste time traveling, when everything I want is right here?"

She was smiling back. As if there was nobody else in the world.

Johan looked away at the distant blue ocean and a column of wheeling gulls, crying like people should when everything they loved was lost.

"—dinner at Spratly's," her mother was saying somewhere to his right.

“That’ll give you a chance to try some of the local cuisine, and then we’ll—”

“Uh, Ms. Amena—,” he’d forgotten the rest of her complicated name, Why wasn’t she just plain “Hlanto”?

“Amenatave,” she said helpfully, “but you’re not in the West here. Call me Iris. What’s the problem?”

“Well, I need to book somewhere for the night. I should have done it coming in, but—”

“You’re staying with us! Didn’t Briony say? Hoy, *kirikiri*, didn’t you tell this poor boy?” she was calling to Briony. There was much back and forth. Apparently, everybody except Johan took it for granted he was staying at “Rangi and Iris’s.”

He’d assumed when Briony invited him that, of course, he wasn’t supposed to take that part literally.

“Some of the kitesurfers are at Spratly’s too,” added Briony. “Laisenia’s from my island and we went to school together. I’ll introduce you.”

What kitesurfers? Who was Laisenia?

Lem had his arm around Briony’s shoulders.

The whole group moved toward the Spratly place, towing their blimps like huge blue balloons. Rangi took Johan’s flight bag and looped the strap through one on his blimp, where it dangled without weighing anyone down. People were talking about a preliminary round of the kitesurfing championships, and Johan connected the dots. That championship. The one for the whole world. And one of the contestants was somebody Briony knew. Well, it would give him something to think about besides the easy magnetism Lem radiated. He looked like he always knew what to say.

“Laisenia didn’t exactly go to school with me,” Briony was saying. “She was in the same school, out on Kiribati, before we moved here, but she’s a few years younger than me, and she never studied, so we didn’t overlap all that much. But she’s a brilliant athlete, and strong as an ant.”

Johan heard Lem chuckle assent.

“Lem’s favorite person, isn’t she, Lem?” Briony was teasing him, giving him a friendly dig in the ribs. He said nothing, just caught her hand and smiled at her.

She kept trying to tickle him while she explained.

“Years ago, at the crazy boy stage, he was boasting at her about something, and she just picked him up and hurled him into the water.”

“I didn’t mind,” said Lem. “I landed on you, remember?”

A woman after my own heart, thought Johan, except she needed to work on her aim.

The group reached the shore and continued down the road running parallel to it. The sea was hidden behind a thick grove of trees on the right, which, unlike the sparse trees of Gabriel, formed a solid wall of greenery in the distance. As they approached, Johan could see fishing boats and one-story warehouses out on piers behind them.

"This is one of the bigger fishing ports in the Islands," Iris said. "And there's some fish and coconut processing plants back there, too."

"Some of the interisland boats dock there," added Rangi, "although most of those head to Finley proper down the road. See that white house? That's Spratly's."

It was a long, low building with columns running the length of a shady veranda along the front, and the ocean right at its back. It had the same simple and inviting look of everything Johan had seen so far. It was easy to see that the Finleys were poorer than Gabriel, but unlike Doha, they didn't seem to need any more than they had.

Thinking of Doha made him think of Aliya, and he wondered for the first time in hours how she was doing. He wished, again, she'd write and tell him that life was great, but he knew she never would. Any more than he could. Life was a—

Briony, with Lem always near her, had shepherded Johan to one of the larger round white tables on the terrace facing the sea. She was introducing him to Laisenia. He needed to start paying attention.

He realized now that Briony hadn't been exaggerating. Laisenia Karavi was almost as tall as he was—he could tell because she stood up to shake hands. Her skin was so dark brown she was almost black, and she had what he now knew was a Fijian-style cloud of hair. She had huge, expressive, black eyes, a straight, regal nose, and cheekbones sculptors would have paid to model. There were four men sitting at the table with her. Johan wondered whether they were all her lovers, or wannabes, or what.

She was smiling broadly as she said,

"Well, Briony wasn't joking when she told me I'd have to watch my step."

What? Once again, Johan couldn't find anything normal to say.

"What?" he said.

"She said she was bringing someone too big for me to throw around, who was a better kitesurfer, and better-looking, too."

Briony said that? Briony? He wished the blood would stop rushing to his face.

Once he got over that, he protested.

"With all due respect, I'm not sure Briony's a judge of kitesurfing form, and I'd hate to say she wasn't a judge of looks, under the circumstances, but the evidence is against her."

"Oy, I like your version better," Laisenia said, smiling even more happily, but Johan's mind was elsewhere.

If Briony thought that of him ... then ... what was he waiting for? He could outclass one damn pint-sized carpenter any day. Even if the guy did make her light up whenever she looked at him.

"We could test at least one part of it," he heard Laisenia continue. "I'll take you kitesurfing if you want, and we'll see if you can run rings around me."

"I don't think so," said Johan in a hurry. "I mean, I'd love to go kitesurfing, but I'm no champion. You can forget everything Briony told you. You're gonna

have to spend your time helping me not to look like a complete doof.”

Two of the guys at the table looked distinctly edgy. They didn’t seem to like how he made her laugh, but they didn’t have a thing to worry about. Kitesurfing was all he was going to do. Sure, he’d be all over Laisenia in a second—anybody would—but not if he had to fight his way through a thundering herd of guys. Contending with crowds wasn’t something he did. No way.

She introduced him to other kitesurfers, and the talk was all of wind speeds, kite angles, triple turns, the distances Tim stayed airborne, the even greater distances Jim had clocked, and the vast distances logged by Kim that topped them all. The presence of Laisenia and three other female kitesurfers seemed to make the men unable to stop themselves. Johan kept his mouth firmly shut. It took less self-control than he feared because in this group he had nothing to boast about.

Laisenia seemed to like that, judging by how she came and sat next to him after she went to get seconds. Hopefully, he wasn’t going to have to explain his attitude to crowds to her.

Although he did like the way she stayed out of the bull. He hoped she won whatever she was trying to win, even if, as he listened, it seemed that she wasn’t trying to win anything. She didn’t seem to have a care in the world. She was giving Jim, for instance, pointers about surf-riding that would hand him that section of the contest, if he took them to heart. And yet she had to care about winning, because she was here. It took hours of practice every day to reach these levels. He knew that. He wondered what it took to focus and be detached, both at once.

He could see Lem, a couple of tables over, holding his mug aloft and shouting “Cheers” about something, for the third time. Johan picked at his dinner some more. Maybe it was his free-floating malaise, but the food didn’t seem as good as what he’d grown used to in Doha. Maybe it was just bland, or maybe it lacked Aliya’s genius. He wondered again how she was doing.

“So where are you from?”

The question came from one of the kitesurfers, Tim, if he remembered right. The only true answer at this point was *I don’t know*, but it seemed simpler to say,

“Gabriel.”

“Uff. Quite a ways. Of course, almost everywhere is quite a ways. So what brings you here?”

Once again, the only real answer was *I don’t know*.

“Just a visit,” he said.

“Well, there’s no better place in the world for it,” said the fellow, although Johan would have been willing to bet he’d never been anywhere else. He seemed rather sure of himself, regardless.

Laisenia talked to Johan about times to go kitesurfing the next day, and one

of the guys, who was still looking edgy, said,

"I'll come, too. The winds are supposed to be really good, that time of day."

"It's a big beach. I'm not stopping you," said Laisenia, with the obvious implication that he was on his own.

Johan started mentally rehearsing ways of putting her off. Why did it always have to end in this? Why did it never end in this when he wanted it to? The whole thing made him tired. Night had fallen and a half-moon was high in the sky. Some peace and quiet with no jabbering and no sound except the waves lapping the beach was what he needed.

He wasn't going to get it. Laisenia stood up at the same time, and asked as she followed him out,

"Mind if I join you?"

What could he say but, "Not at all"? Besides, if she was by herself, he wasn't sure he cared. A roll on the beach would do him good right now, give him something else to think about besides that guy a couple of tables over. He didn't even care that the whole terrace could see them leaving together.

Laisenia just talked as they walked slowly past the black ocean, gleaming silver in the moonlight. She didn't try to flirt with him, or get reactions out of him, or do anything to him. She only seemed to want to talk about Gabriel.

When he commented that she seemed fascinated with the place, she said,

"Yes, it's one of my three Number Ones."

"What are the other two?"

"London and Tokyo."

"Huh? I assumed it was the kitesurfing at Gabriel"—or a way to keep him talking—"but there's none at either of those two."

"No, it's not the kitesurfing."

They were walking along the beach, lit by a half moon, and she gazed into the distance at the black and silver water as if she was seeing another world.

"I have Huntington's," she said. "That's why."

He had no idea what she was talking about.

"I've never heard of it," he finally admitted.

"It's a genetic disease. It never gets past the testing, these days, but I was born on an outer island. My mum didn't even have a midwife, just my *tata*. I was never sick. My first DNA sample was taken as part of my driver's license process. That's when I found out."

"What does it do? I mean, the disease. What happens?"

"It destroys part of your brain, and kills you around fifty."

Johan's mouth sagged open and he stared at her as she gazed at the distant world she could see out over the ocean somewhere.

She turned toward him after a while, when he said nothing, and he remembered to close his mouth.

"But" was all he managed to say.

"That's why I'm fascinated with Gabriel. It's not the kitesurfing. It's one of

the three places where they can treat diseases as rare as Huntington's."

Why haven't you gone and received treatment, he wanted to ask.

"Well, if you decide to go to Gabriel, let me know."

"I decided to go the minute I found out. It's being able to, that's the problem."

He tried to clothe his ignorance in an acceptable question.

"Being able to?"

"It costs too much. We're not the richest Islanders, not by any stretch, and even the rich ones have a hard time with First World prices."

Dear God. This was the woman he'd thought didn't have a care in the world. He was an idiot. That's what he was.

"I have a bunch of dumb questions, if you don't mind listening to them," he said hesitantly.

"Fire away."

"If it's a disease that's been known for years, they must have the treatment all worked out. Why can't they just send it here?"

"The gene is an autosomal dominant—I didn't know what that meant either, until a couple of years ago," she added immediately when he opened his mouth to ask. "It means there's a slew of regulatory genes that have to be altered as well, and it all has to happen perfectly, and that makes it a much more complicated treatment than you would think. The whole process takes about six months, you have to come in for treatments and monitoring every week, and the equipment and knowhow aren't as easy to ship over as the genes themselves."

"I see. And I guess there aren't any reciprocal agreements between Finley's and UFW's national medical insurance?"

"There are for emergencies. Not for this."

Dear God. To be sentenced to a sixth of a normal life span because you were born in a place that looked perfect, rather than one that didn't.... It was outrageous.

"I have some fifteen or twenty years before it starts," she continued. "Which seems like a long time. So I concentrate on now, and figure I'll find a loophole in the system at some point. In the meantime," she grinned at him, "I take every chance I get to learn more about my three cities, in case I hear something useful."

No wonder she had the discipline for that extraordinary detachment. Faced with death, a kitesurfing prize wasn't too important.

"I wish I could be useful, but, like I told Briony once, I don't have a clue about most things. I'll ask around when I get back, though. There has to be something that can be done." There just had to be.

"I like your attitude," she said, with a repeat of her brilliant smile.

She headed back to the gathering.

And that was that. She wanted to get him alone because he was from

Gabriel, not because she wanted to roll on the beach. He wasn't going to have to explain anything to her. And instead of being relieved, he was disappointed. He was definitely an idiot.

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When the first round of the championship rolled around, a week later, Johan had spent so much time in, around, and on the water, his nose had peeled and he'd had to start using a triple strength sunscreen formulated for white-skinned people. Laisenia found him a faded blue diveskin for protection against hours out in the sun, and a proper championship kite, fully manual with no nanotech, like they were supposed to be. He'd grown spoiled the last couple of years, flying the wimpy things regular people used.

There was also something else that happened, something he told no one. Watching Laisenia leap and soar, his mind flew with her, and when she glided to a landing, there was nothing but that breathtaking swoop and rush of flight. It was like his other life, long ago, before death was always near him, before even sand became something he could die on. Later, when he did his own smaller version of those leaps, his mind saw her instead of a nightmare. He had one small part of himself back, and he could have wept with relief. But he didn't. People would have asked him what was wrong, and they wouldn't have believed him when he said it was right.

The contestants parasails lay ready on the beach, billowing lazily in the breeze, as unconcerned about winning as Laisenia seemed to be. She was the one in the brilliant white diveskin, crouched down next to a competitor's kite—scarlet red with flames printed on the leading edge—helping the woman re-tension her lines.

"The lines lost some tension the last time she practiced, and she hadn't noticed," Laisenia explained when she rejoined Johan, Briony, and Lem. "That threw her control off, but we fixed it."

"I'm sure you don't need me to point it out," said Johan, "but, if you hadn't done that, there'd be that much less competition."

Laisenia was stretched out at full length by now, her head resting on her clasped hands, eyes closed. She didn't bother to open them.

"I thought it was supposed to be about skill," she said, "not about how bad your kite is. So," she grinned a bit with her eyes still closed, "I don't think I have very much to worry about."

"Is that what you'd do in your First World?" Lem asked Johan blandly enough, but he stressed "First" just enough to make it sound sarcastic.

"Nah. We're like Laisenia. Good enough that we don't need help to win."

Johan let his glance rest briefly on Briony as he said "win," and he could see a muscle jump in Lem's jaw.

So. It was possible to make Lem be something other than pleased and pleasing. Johan had to work on that. One of these days, he might make him mad enough to take the bait, and then, maybe, finally, Briony would start looking around.

Wait a sec, Johan argued with himself. Aren't you the guy who blasted out of Gabriel like a bat out of hell? Now you're pretending the place is wonderful just to get at Lem.

But he was getting at him. It was working. He didn't want to stop. And he didn't want to think about it.

"What they do in the First World," Briony said, looking out to sea as she had been the whole time, "is send their best here to compete with us. And they lose."

She said it as if she was talking to the sea. Maybe all she meant was the obvious fact that Islanders often took the top prizes in kitesurfing. But she had a way of talking on five levels at once, and the implication of every level except the top one wasn't so good. Maybe, thought Johan, he needed to be more careful about egging Lem on.

He turned to Laisenia.

"How come you're so much better at taking care of kites than the other people? That's only about the fourth person who had some kind of question."

"I make kites."

"You *make*—you mean kitesurfing kites?"

"Of course. I made mine."

"You *made* a championship kite? Well, hell, why are you wasting time on that tech drafting job you're bored with? Why aren't you in business selling your kites?"

"Right," she said, still not bothering to open her eyes. "With Tensor Sails right up the street, and no capital for any kind of machinery."

"The premier kite-making company is here? I didn't know that."

"Get used to it, grasshopper," Lem interjected, laughing. He seemed to find something hugely amusing. "The older you get, the less you'll know."

This time, Laisenia did open her eyes.

"And I'm sure it'll be a comfort to you to know that you can always stay ahead of him in that." By now she was grinning, as if she'd just tossed him in the water.

That took Johan's breath away for a second. He'd been just about to concede round two to Lem. Johan barely suppressed a smirk.

"Couldn't you work for Tensor Sails?" he asked her.

"Sure, if they hired me."

"They're stupid if they don't."

"Not stupid. Full up. Nobody who works there ever leaves. And I didn't pay enough attention in school to get one of their design jobs. If I could, I'd work for them six months of the year, and follow the wind around the world the

other six.”

It sounded like the ideal lifestyle to Johan.

“What about making kites and teaching people?” he persisted. “You’re obviously phenomenal at both.”

She smiled her thousand-watt smile, without any edge to it.

“That’s what I’m working toward. You need nanotech kites people can rent to make a go of it, and that takes capital.”

He couldn’t help thinking that she didn’t really have the time to sit there and wait for a pile of money to grow.

“Grief,” he said. “With the Huntington’s, I don’t know how you handle the frustration so well.”

There was the sudden, clotted silence that thickens around major social floaters.

Lem spoke at last.

“I guess I’m the only one who doesn’t know, but who or what are huntingtons?”

Laisenia sat up. She was looking out to sea.

“I have a genetic condition. It’s associated with a short lifespan.”

“Oh,” said Lem.

Briony said nothing, and sat there as if someone had farted in public.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” mumbled Johan. “I just assumed everyone knew—”

“It’s not the knowing.” Laisenia turned toward him. She was glaring, eyes wide, brows drawn down. “It’s that I do the telling. People don’t just rattle on about each other’s business in Gabriel either, do they?”

“They do,” said Briony, quietly enough to be talking to herself. “Sometimes I thought they didn’t have any concept of privacy at all, over there.”

No concept of privacy? Us? thought Johan. True, compared to Islanders, people rattled on about each other’s business all the time. This cross-cultural stuff was murder, no matter how free and easy people seemed.

“I’m sorry,” said Johan in a very small voice.

Laisenia’s expression changed. She rubbed her forehead.

“It’s all right,” she said, touching his arm. “You weren’t to know.”

That confused him until he realized it was the local way of saying *you couldn’t have known*.

“It’s not that I mind people knowing,” she went on. “It’s that I don’t want it to be the only thing they think about when they talk to me. People mean well. You know how it is.”

He did. Although in his case his disease was his past, and there was no cure at all for that.

“Live and learn,” he said, looking at her apologetically. “At least, I’ll try to.”

Her expression lost all of its thunderbolt-throwing quality, and she said,

“It’s all right,” again.

The long hoot of a conch being blown carried down the beach, and an

announcer began telling everyone something indecipherable. Many people didn't wear earhooks here. Instead, there was a public address system with a megaphone, like in the Dark Ages. People with kites began zooming hither and thither. On no apparent schedule to the untrained eye, the contestants set off to show their stuff. It must not have been Laisenia's turn yet, because she stayed where she was, but she did watch the action very closely.

Johan kept waiting for the devastating put-down that had to be coming from Lem, and trying to think of defenses.

But Lem said nothing. He started needling Laisenia about what a silly sport kitesurfing was. "Back and forth. Back and forth. All you folks do is go back and forth. You might as well lift weights."

"Don't tempt me," Laisenia growled, looking meaningfully at him. "And besides, that just shows how much you know. A person your age may have to work at it, but try not to fall into your afternoon nap until after the aerobatics contest, and you'll see something worth seeing. Johan and I have cooked up a surprise."

And with that she stood up and walked off to her kite.

"What's that going to be?" asked Lem.

He was just asking. He didn't sound sarcastic.

"It's something I came up with a couple of years ago," said Johan, "when I was playing around with the topological geometry of kite surfaces and Bernoulli effects. It changes the way a kite handles air flow, but I couldn't get it to work so I figured I'd made a mistake somewhere. Turned out I just wasn't good enough, because Laisenia managed to set up the resonance on her second try. And then she practiced."

Boy, did she practice. Every morning before work. Every afternoon after work. And he'd helped her as much as he could, off in a secluded cove away from competitors' eyes. It had earned him plenty of dirty looks from her flock of fellows.

"But what does it do?" Lem wanted to know. "You scientists"—he included Briony with a glance—"are always mumblejumbling."

"Hey, it's supposed to be a surprise," muttered Johan, trying to figure Lem out. Johan had just proved himself to be a social retard, and the guy seemed to be standing back, refusing to kick him when he was down. He was even putting him in a group together with Briony.

Every once in a while, a calm, slow voice came over the loudspeakers, announcing who had won something. The three highest scorers would go on to the quarter-finals.

And still Lem said nothing to show what a doof Johan was. Johan gradually realized he was never going to. Lem might worry—totally without cause, unfortunately—that Briony would start looking around. It was possible to make him resent sniping. But that seemed to be all. He didn't let it push him into doing anything.

Maybe that was another thing Briony saw in him. Maybe it wasn't what was wrong with you that mattered. Maybe it was what you did about it.

The announcer's voice made nasal noises over the beach again, and Johan exclaimed,

"Damn."

Boastful Kim had won the speed segment of the contest. He could see Laisenia's royal blue kite swinging around one of the two endpoints, but he'd lost track of which lap she was on, so he wasn't sure how far behind she was.

"What?" asked Briony. "It's a mystery to me how you have any idea what's going on."

"I only know because I spent the last week with these people and I know their kites. There's a definite feeling at these events that if you have to ask, you don't deserve to know."

"Uppity blighters," said Lem.

"Yeah."

The surf-riding came next. Unlike Gabriel's tame version, surf-riding here could have been a matter of life and death. The only real surf broke on the reef, well away from the beach, and any kitesurfer who lost a single wave would have broken on the reef too. Laisenia did well enough to place first.

Dorje Hlanto showed up with shaved ice concoctions to celebrate.

There was a relay event, a contest to see who could loft a downed wet kite the fastest, and a lifesaving race where the contestants had to rescue and either carry or tow a pretend-panicking swimmer back to shore. Kim won the lifesaving unfortunately, and that had a lot of points associated with it.

The kitesurfers seemed to be zooming about at random.

"Ah!" said Johan. "The best part. They'll start doing jumps and turns any minute."

And they did. They looked magnificent until Laisenia suddenly took flight and beat everyone to nothing by looking like a miracle. A collective gasp of "Oooh" rose from the beach, as if she was a firework. She did a turn, went higher instead of lower, and kept climbing. Nobody on the beach made a sound. With a final turn, she spiralled in like an expert parachutist, landed with a semicircle of spray to declare victory, and then skimmed in to the beach while everyone cheered.

"Holy Mother of God," muttered Lem. "So that's 'resonance,' huh?"

Briony said, "Mother of God is right. You've given her a place in the quarter-finals, Johan, and no mistake. She's worked so hard for this. This'll definitely put her over the top."

"I have to admit," said Lem, still muttering, "that when Laisenia does it, there's a lot more to it than going back and forth. But don't ever let her know I said that."

"It's way too late for that, Lemony," Briony joked. "There's a mole here," she nodded toward Johan, "and you just blabbed. It's all over. Now she's going to

find who her secret admirer is.”

“Well, just so long as you know not to get worried about it, the way I do.”

He pulled her toward him, and they started laughing and chuckling and carrying on, and Johan concentrated on looking at the kitesurfers coming ashore for the announcement of the winners.

How'm I supposed to use the guy's jealousy if he makes a joke of it? How'm I supposed to want to use it? Maybe, thought Johan, there was more similarity between Lem and Briony than he'd realized.

And yet, he could feel half of him refuse to give up. Briony was just too important to him.

And, even more yet, there they were, the two of them, making him, Johan, part of the joke, as if he was part of them all. It didn't matter if he made floaters. He said he was sorry, and they gave him the benefit of the doubt. Why couldn't his whole life be like that?

The announcer began droning over the loudspeakers, and, sure enough, Laisenia did place. She was third overall, ahead of Kim, who was fourth. Johan walked over to congratulate her, and saw her gloating at Kim with a smile that reached nearly from ear to ear. Johan wondered whether she would have tried tossing the fellow into the waves if he'd been just a little bit smaller. Johan considered offering his help, since they could definitely do it between the two of them. However, Kim was saved by the fact that she noticed Johan nearby and turned a glowing smile on him instead. She gave him an exuberant hug.

“Get out there and patent that idea,” she said in his ear, “before somebody else does.”

Patent? thought Johan. *Yes, he should.* But he was mainly occupied with resurfacing from the feeling that he'd been engulfed by a tidal wave. A female athlete nearly his size was something else again.

The feel of her was nothing like a man, even though her muscles were as smooth and strong as a cat's. Maybe it was her shape, or the different feel of her skin. He couldn't help thinking that an important part of female anatomy was a muscle, and wondering whether she'd feel as remarkable in that respect.

Then her flock of fellows surrounded her, other people came over, and Johan sauntered to the water line, imagining things. He thought about doing more than imagining. Then he thought not. No matter how good her muscles were—and the rest of her, for that matter—he couldn't deal with the flock. Besides, pleasant and friendly as she was, she'd never given any indication she was even aware he was male in any real sense of the word.

He'd stick to imagining, which was fun too, in its own faint way. He smiled to himself as he squinted at the sunlight dancing on the water. Everything could be so different.

The world around him briefly crystallized into a new universe, one where nobody was after him, where the love of his life loved him, and his only task was to make enough of a living to enjoy it. He would feel at ease, warm and

free, strong enough to leap mountain ranges ... with a little bit of help from a kite. There was nothing impossible about it. It could have happened in a parallel world, one step sideways from this one.

A punt rowed into view, now that the championship was over, with a couple on it planning to go oystering if the frames piled on the boat were any evidence. Before diving in, they stood silhouetted against the glowing sky, arms wound around each other in a kiss Johan could feel all the way on shore.

It was difficult to stand in a boat, unless they balanced together. They must have had lots of practice.

He looked away. A happy ending that wasn't for him was beyond painful. It was easier to believe there was no such thing.

The golden universe shattered back into the one he stood in. In another few days, he was due to lift off for.... Not for home. Home, they said, is where the heart is, and his heart was ... elsewhere.

In another few days, he'd be returning to lawsuits, to another boring cubicle, to fulfilling a hundred obligations he didn't feel any more.

"Johan." Laisenia stood next to him. "I'm going home to my village to show them my prize, before the quarterfinals. I've taken a week off." She fingered the bronze medallion on its rainbow ribbon around her neck. "You want to come visit for a few days? Until your flight is due to go?"

She came from hundreds of kilometers away over the wild blue yonder. There were dozens of outer islands, each tinier than the last. How hard could it be to disappear among them? Her invitation showed that it was meant to be.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you. I'd like that a lot."

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The post-contest cookout on the beach was going strong as twilight fell, and looked set to continue into the small hours. Dorje was one of the organizers—he often seemed to be at the center of things—and Briony was there, helping out. Johan helped, too. He'd learned enough from Aliya to be useful. He wondered how she was doing. He knew Lem could see him, standing next to Briony at the fish grill, and he said something funny to her. She laughed. The joke had been nothing more than how cooks always eat last, but Lem didn't know that. Johan saw him look away.

She put a few of the best pieces of fish on a plate and turned to go. A few minutes later, he noticed Lem had the plate.

After dinner, Johan wandered down the beach, feeling at loose ends. It was one thing to decide to leave everything behind, it was another to plan the nitty-gritty of the escape. There was something depressing about counting up how many changes of underwear to try to carry.

Then he slowed down. The back of his neck tingled, as if someone was

staring at it, and when he turned around, Lem was there.

Now what?

"You and I have got to get this business about Briony threshed out," said Lem, without any chitchat or small talk.

Johan couldn't read the man's expression by the dim light of the moon, which made him sure it was hostile.

"I thought Briony made the decisions about her business," said Johan.

Lem looked at him.

"She does. But when you keep trying to make me nervous about you, that's mine. I've decided we need to bring whatever is going on out into the open."

Damn Islanders. Openness wasn't going to help. Even Johan didn't want to know what Johan was doing.

It seemed stupid to stand there, like two mismatched prizefighters who'd wandered into the wrong division.

"I guess we may as well sit down," he said.

Then, once they were sitting on the cold sand, Lem said,

"You're crazy about her, aren't you."

The way he said it didn't sound like a question. Why did everybody, except Briony, see it so clearly?

"Did she point that out?"

"Briony? Are you joking? She thinks, if you feel that way, you just say so, without the need for a lot of guesswork."

"Is that what she did?"

The light of the moon fell straight on them here, and he could see Lem's expression smooth briefly into a smile at the sea.

"Approximately." Then it closed up again and he looked back at Johan. "How about you?"

"Haven't you asked her about it?"

"She said, 'Lem, I love you. Will you get that through your thick skull?' Which didn't exactly answer the question."

"If that didn't answer the question, you weren't listening."

"I don't like guesswork any more than she does," said Lem. Johan could see his jaw muscle clench, then unclench.

"If she said nothing happened, and I said something did, who would you believe?" The fellow had better answer that one carefully. One wrong word, and Johan was going to go after Briony as if he didn't exist.

Lem said nothing. He drew patterns in the sand.

"Good point," he finally muttered. Then he frowned at the sand. "But a bit theoretical. She doesn't say anything, even to a direct question. Figures I should get over it, I guess." The frown deepened. "Which, if I could do, I wouldn't need to. ... It might help if you weren't such a good-looking bugger. ... And smart ... in your own way."

Johan scowled in the dark. Bugger, he reminded himself, was just an

expression here. And he'd already figured out that he was smart "in his own way." He didn't need Lem to tell him he was an idiot.

"You know, you must wear blinders or something. There's Briony, bringing you the best of everything she can find, and there you are, worrying about it. What's wrong with you?"

Lem drew more patterns in the sand. They looked intricate enough for a cathedral's rose window.

"What's wrong with me is that I've never understood what she sees in me. What's wrong is that I think it's just a matter of time until she leaves."

Johan had some idea, at this point, of how much fearlessness it took to admit your own fear, how much it took to lay it out there for anyone to see, even your enemy. There was also the way he answered questions without shooting back, as if the truth was the only thing that mattered. It kept growing easier to understand what Briony saw in him.

Damn him.

This wasn't helping. Johan wanted Briony. He didn't want to understand Lem.

Although it might be useful to understand how little he thought of himself, and even more useful to see what could make him act on it.

Johan started sifting sand with one hand. Displacement activity it was called, she had told him.

The choice was simple. He could tell the man what had happened in Gabriel. Or he could not. Say nothing, and let Lem's imagination do the work.

Nobody would ever know what he'd done.

He took a deep breath.

"So what did she tell you about me and Gabriel?"

"She said you showed her around and made her whole trip a success. Seemed to me you spent so much time helping her, you sounded like a lot more than just some acquaintance."

"Yeah. And?"

"And nothing. That's all. I even asked her about it, and she laughed and said I was being ridiculous."

"You don't think, considering what happened when we met, that there could have been a reason for me wanting to do everything I could for her?"

"So she got lost in a seedy part of your town. There were some lowlifes who she reported. And you showed her the way back to civilization. It's not what happened when you met that bothers me."

"There was a bit more to it than that."

"I knew it." Lem was muttering to the sand, talking to himself.

"I mean just in terms of what's in the public record of the court case."

Lem looked at Johan with so much hostility he could see it even in the moonlight. "You went and ... talked about ... doing it ... in open court?"

Johan held his breath for a second. This guy was already convinced he'd slept with Briony. He didn't have to do a thing. But—

"You didn't read any of the court papers?"

"No." Lem looked back down at the sand. "I have better things to do of a Sunday than read court papers."

"Well, just from what Briony had to have told you—"

"Why would she talk to me about your court case?"

Every pronoun was stressed. *Why would she talk to me about your court case?*

"You mean because it's my business?"

"There aren't many things that are more your business than your own court case."

"But it's a matter of public record."

"So? That means I could read it if I wanted to be bored. How does it make it not your business?"

Which meant nobody would talk about it. Except him, Johan, himself. The privacy rules were next door to a religion here.

He'd always cringed at the thought of what people imagined they knew about him, as if by shrinking down small he could escape unseen.

But here other people were meant to leave him alone. He didn't have to shrink to nothing. He suddenly realized that freedom was something people give each other.

"Anyway," Lem's mutter broke in on his thoughts. "I don't give a rat's ass about what you said in any stupid court case. At this point, I don't want to know. All I want is for you to stop trying to get between me and Briony. Whatever you talked her into over there, she came back to me. So just get over it."

Johan could see Lem's jaw muscle clench, and stay there. Lem was the one who was desperate to get over it.

He wasn't even close.

It would be so easy to push him even further. Even when he did read the trial record, it wouldn't answer the sorts of questions he had. And then when Briony reassured him, he'd assume she was just trying to make him feel better. Eventually, she'd get tired of it. Johan had already seen her get exasperated once or twice.

So, should he do what he wanted? Or what he didn't want?

"I guess you figure that if Briony didn't want to follow me home, she would have just asked for directions, using the map on her comm."

Lem had started drawing patterns in the sand again, but now he dug a whole handful out and ruined the design.

"Bleeding obvious, isn't it."

Johan leaned back, propping himself up with one hand on the cold sand.

"You don't deserve her, you know that? You goddamn don't deserve her."

Lem went back to drawing patterns in the sand.

"I never have. I never could."

There he was again, admitting it for all the world to see.

This guy made her world light up. Johan had seen it more than once or twice. He'd seen it ... constantly.

He took the deepest breath of his life.

"Let me tell you what actually happened when I met her. I was taking a shortcut through a bad neighborhood when I was stopped by a gang. They were a really dangerous bunch of trash who were ready for anything, up to and including mutilation, and I would have been a goner. Except Briony walked by, sized up the situation, and pulled me out of it by pretending everyone was being polite. It was a huge gamble. She could have been killed. Then *she* walked *me* back to civilization, sat me down, and had me talk about things until I returned to feeling human.

"So, just to make it clear to the meanest intelligence," Johan looked at Lem, "while she's prying perfect strangers out of the jaws of death, all you can think is that she's sleeping around.

"Now," he continued after another deep breath, "what you need to do is measure the distance between reality and your imagination, and then you'll begin to understand how much you're shortchanging her. Not you. Her."

They sat there for a while, Lem drawing patterns, smoothing them over, and starting again, and Johan sifting.

"So ... I've been insulting her, eh?" said Lem.

"Yeah. Just a bit."

Johan looked over to see a faint grin on the man's strong and swarthy face. A mocking grin, perhaps, since what he said was,

"You look like you'd enjoy beating me up if I don't straighten out."

"Oh," said Johan, "I'd enjoy beating anything up right now." *Except Briony. Who I've lost forever. By my own hand.*

After another silence, a long one, Lem said,

"You are as kind as she is to be telling me all this. I can't say more for you than that." And then, in that archaic gesture they had in the Islands, he shook Johan's right hand, stood up, and walked away.

Johan lay back on the sand with nothing but the flowers around his neck and the cold moon for company, and not even one moth to see how he felt.

Chapter 14

Nobody could have been more thoughtful. Laisenia acted as if Johan was the guest of honor in her village instead of her. At the big feast for her, she kept bringing him the most delectable bits of food and glasses of drink. She took him snorkeling through coral beds like fields of jewels. She lent him one of her handmade kites, a glorious satiny thing, burgundy at the leading edge shading to white, that handled as if it could read his mind. It weighed heavily on him that he'd had to borrow it from her.

He'd get it back to her, somehow, some day. To make himself harder to find, he was tacking against the wind, something any reasonably competent kitesurfer could do, aiming for a small, green, rounded island on the horizon. The trick was not to blow past the island and wind up floating forever in the trackless Pacific.

The other trick was going to be surviving the marathon of reaching the island at all. It never seemed to get any closer. His comm band was in the bag tied to his back, together with water, food, and one change of clothes, so if he reached the point of staring death in the face, he supposed he could call for rescue. That was at least a couple of days away, though, and he persevered.

It turned out not to be as bad as he'd feared. The sun had an hour to go before setting when he steered himself toward a little semicircle of beach smiling at him from behind a formidable line of breakers on the fringing reef. He didn't test his surf-riding skills. With his kite straight up in the air and his body all the way in the water, he did the equivalent of crawling on his hands and knees through one of the narrow breaks in the reef.

Soon thereafter, he was sitting on the beach, having changed into his shirt and one remaining pair of trousers, which had stayed nice and dry in their sealed pouch. He was taking alternate bites of an energy bar and some kind of increasingly unpleasant jerky-like meat product, and he was considering his dwindling supply of water. Water, he now realized, was going to be the problem. He'd blithely assumed he'd refill on the island, but although the place was liberally stocked with coconut palms, there was no sign of fresh water. Well, he'd worry about it tomorrow. Laisenia had said people lived out here, so

there had to be fresh water somewhere. In the meantime, he opened up one of the fallen coconuts the way Laisenia's Uncle Huatare had showed him, had some dessert, fed crumbs of nut meat to scuttling ghost crabs, and felt rather pleased with himself. He could manage anywhere, doing anything, whether it was finding his way in Doha or conjuring up delicacies on a deserted beach.

He used the remaining twilight to locate a place for the night away from any coconut palms that might decide to shed their lumpy-cannonball fruits. He wrapped up in the kite like in a blanket and fell asleep.

He woke up suddenly, it seemed to be a few hours later. Someone was fingering him. In an instant, his heart went from sleep to pounding. Whoever it was gripped more tightly, showing he knew he was awake, showing—. Whatever it was skittered across his body and away.

It was a land crab. By the light of a waning half moon high in the sky, he could see an enormous land crab, as big as his head, just over an arms' length away, waving its eyestalks at him.

Land crabs kept trying to roost on him and kept waking him up the rest of the night. After the third time a couple of them cozied up, he realized he would have to become cold-blooded to keep them away. They were after his warmth, and they had a point. With a pre-dawn dew soaking everything, Johan was colder than he would have believed possible on a tropical island. The sky began fading to light, and he gave up on pretending to sleep.

Sea water was rather unsatisfactory for a morning wash, but better than nothing. The idea was to show up at the village looking like he'd stepped off his sailboat. He wrapped the kite into a neat package and tucked it in amongst the small trees at the edge of the beach. The Islanders all left their doors unlocked, even in the big town of Finley, so it was a safe bet nobody would bother the kite even if somebody did wander through this beach before he came back. Now he just had to find a track that led somewhere.

That was where the plan failed. The nice layer of green covering the island was impenetrable at ground level. There were branches that tried to skewer him and broke off, spiky palms, things that dripped sticky white sap on him, and vines like snakes. With a great deal of judicious ducking, weaving, crashing, and climbing, he could probably bull his way through it, but if his clothes were all stained and torn, he wouldn't look like a normal visitor. After enough tries to lose count, Johan sat back down on the beach.

There had to be a track somewhere. If this was anything like Laisenia's island, there should be tracks all over the place. Somebody was bound to come here to collect coconuts, if nothing else. After another couple of hours and a drink of the last of his water, he decided to give up and kitesurf his way around the island. It might not be how he'd planned on arriving, but he had no choice.

The village was on the opposite side of the island, and he would have missed the huts tucked away under the trees if there hadn't been a small jetty with some boats tied up. He surfed in to the beach, trying to look casual. He

attracted no obvious attention. Maybe people came sailing in like that every day.

He waited till he dried off again, knew he couldn't do that too many more times before he started positively itching for fresh water, and dressed again. He walked toward the jetty. Except for a wandering dog, the village seemed depopulated, and the peace and stillness of the place began to get to him. Tranquility was all very well, but you could have too much of it.

Tiny villages have no cafes. Johan supposed one of the buildings was a general store, but he'd feel like an invader if he wandered in amongst the huts and peered into them, trying to find the one he needed. He was at the point of attempting it anyway, when a woman appeared, walking toward the boats, carrying a snorkel, mask, and fins. He continued sitting on the jetty, and pretended he was enjoying the morning at his leisure.

"Hallo," she said. "Saw you blow in. Doing the grand tour?"

So, people did sail in all the time. Good.

"Just pottering about, really," said Johan, trying to sound like a native, and knowing he wasn't even close. "Earning my way as I go, you see."

She tossed her fins into a boat with a pile of square frames in it that looked very much like the ones Iris used.

"You going oystering?" he asked.

"Hrmm," she grumbled assent. "The little buggers'll be big enough to fight back if I don't stop putting things off." She looked at him appraisingly, and he felt himself turn cautious. She was old enough to be his mother. However, she was only appraising his competence, because what she said was, "You know anything about oystering?"

"Not much, but I could help hold the frames steady while you deal with them."

"If you know that, you know enough for me. There's a dinner in it for you, if that's good enough."

"And a shower?"

"Absolutely. That'll make dinner a better experience for everyone." She said it with a big smile.

Everything was going smoothly as they puttered off over the water. They discussed oysters and the outlook for the weather. She asked where he was going next and he countered by asking what she would recommend. Johan was feeling decidedly smug about how easily he'd found a new niche as an odd job man, when she had to ask where he was from.

He'd prepared for this.

"Roraima." It was a tiny island at the opposite end of the archipelago.

"Well, I'll be. My second cousin is from Roraima. She just married into a family recently. The Rewas. You probably know them. For that matter, you probably know Leilani, too. You're about the right age to have gone to school with her."

Johan's heart had been sinking all through this speech, and was down around his ankles by now.

"Actually, I come from an offshore island there, Raimakini. A lot of people haven't heard of it, so I just say Roraima."

"Leilani has mentioned Raimakini. I don't know anyone there though."

Johan breathed a sigh of relief.

She continued, "But I'm sure Leilani does. I'll have to give her a call and acquaint you two."

The place really was starting to remind him of a bunch of relatives, not so unobtrusive as they seemed at first, as is so often the way with relatives.

However, the woman wasn't done yet.

"It's a bit unexpected, you coming from Raimakini. Your accent sounds like it comes straight from a vid about the Southland."

Johan almost gave up at that point. It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "Yes, I watched too many vids at a tender age." However, he got a grip on himself and laid on a truth instead.

"My mother is from the Southland." Then, to jog her off this horrendous monomania about his friends and relations, he asked her about the money available in oystering.

She snorted with laughter.

"Money? What money?" But at least she talked about harmless mollusks for the rest of the boat ride.

He managed to get through dinner with her family by talking about kitesurfing and asking questions rather than answering them. He suggested they call Leilani tomorrow, because he wanted to set up camp while there was still some light to see by. They hospitably offered him a place to stay for the night, but he said he'd grown used to camping. *At least the land crabs didn't ask about his family.*

At first light the next morning he ate some more of what he now decided was dreadful jerky, and tried to figure out what to do next. The plan had been to stay on this island a week or two, then move on, but another encounter with that busybody would be fatal. It was also probably unavoidable, because he had to buy some more food before he set off, unless he wanted to survive on a coconut strapped to his back. The solution might be to kitesurf until he saw her go somewhere in her boat. Then sneak in, buy provisions at the hut she'd pointed out as the general store, and zip around to the deserted beach.

Contrary to all his expectations, it worked. He tried not to think about what he was going to do when his stock of cash ran out. The real problems were going to start when he tried to get work that actually paid money. A few hours later, he'd rounded the island, headed toward "his" beach, and was now trying not to think about a dinner that consisted of hard tack and more jerky. He noticed another kitesurfer far out to sea.

It was quite a surfer, moving as fast as a motorboat, with the green kite

positioned to make the most of the stiff ocean breeze. The person was leaping from wave crest to wave crest in a way that was flying more than surfing. Maybe that was a real “grand tour” surfer, in which case Johan hoped he wasn’t going to have to share his beach and answer yet more impossible questions.

Then he realized, as the surfer grew larger than an elongated dot, that she was wearing a snow-white dive skin, and he knew it was all over. For a brief, mad moment, he considered trying to outrun her, but he knew he didn’t have a chance. He crawled through the reef opening as before, and Laisenia flew through right behind him without even slowing down. She landed before he did.

“Nice little place you have here,” she said as he waded out of the water.

“Yeah,” he said. “Friendly land crabs.”

He capsized his “borrowed” kite onto the beach, and she did the same with one fluid motion. They stepped out of their harnesses. He couldn’t bring himself to meet her eyes.

“I was going to get it back to you,” he muttered. “Really I was.”

“I know,” she said, sounding like she really did. She touched his shoulder so gently, it was almost a caress. “Let’s sit down. I brought some food.”

“I did too,” he said, making a face.

She grinned at the tack and jerky.

“Good provisions. Bad dinner.”

She took off her backpack, and pulled food out of it. She had some kind of pickled greens as a salad course, and after nothing to look forward to but more jerky, it seemed next door to ambrosia. Then she had neat, banana leaf-wrapped packets containing rice, fish, and vegetables, the whole thing slow-roasted in a fire, probably that morning. And she hadn’t forgotten dessert. She had hearts of young sugar cane, also slow-roasted, probably in the same fire. Their sugary sap had caramelized until they melted in the mouth.

She hadn’t asked any questions.

The sun had an hour to go before setting when he said,

“It never would have worked, I guess.”

“No,” she agreed.

The sun continued sinking.

“So what happened?” he asked. “Did that oyster-catching busybody put me up on her webcam as an object of interest?”

“I don’t think so, although who knows? Most people do some oysters, and everybody’s a busybody, so I’d need a better description to figure out who she is. No, it was the fellow who runs the general store. He went to school with Uncle Huatare and called to congratulate me on my trophy. Apparently, you told him I was brilliant.” Her smile, as she said it, was well over a thousand watts.

He found himself smiling back.

“Well, you were brilliant. That’s a fact. But to tell you the truth, I was just

trying to make enough conversation to keep him from pestering me. If I'd known he had a direct line to your uncle.... I suppose I was stupid not to realize he was bound to, one way or the other."

"Yes. Everybody knows everybody, and there are so few strangers in the villages, it's impossible to blend in. So, Johan," she said in a different, quiet tone of voice, "tell me to mind my own business if you'd rather not talk about it. But if you don't mind telling me, what is it that you're trying to leave behind?"

Everything, he wanted to say. How could you explain everything to someone? And yet, it wasn't a long story. It was hopelessly simple.

So he told her. It felt strange that endless trouble could fit into so small a summary. Of course, he'd left out any mention of Briony. Or Aliya.

"Besides vendettas, lethal cubicle jobs, and lawsuits, I also managed to ruin a woman's life in Doha. That doesn't help either."

"Ruined her life?" repeated Laisenia slowly. "What do you mean, ruined her life?"

So he explained that, too.

Laisenia's long black fingers dug in the white sand for a moment.

"Sounds to me like she ruined your life, as well."

Aliya? Gentle, harmless Aliya? She'd done nothing but trust a jerk. Because he, Johan, had been too busy fitting in to say anything. Hadn't Laisenia been listening?

"Aliya never did anything to hurt me."

"Yes," said Laisenia, giving him a look that made his last sentence echo in his brain.

Aliya had never meant him any harm, had never done him any harm. What was this strange, dark, strong woman talking about?

She didn't explain.

His mind fell back to his days in Doha, and to the sick feeling when he realized what could happen to Aliya, ultimately because of him. He'd never meant her any harm.

Just as she had never meant him any harm.

"Oh," he said, sitting bolt upright from the shock of illumination. The setting sun burned greenish-purplish circles into his eyes until he remembered to look away. All they'd done was try to make it out alive. It was nobody's fault, except a psychotic system's.

He glanced at Laisenia, and she returned a look that said, *You've understood?* How had she known?

"Some problems aren't caused by people." She seemed to be speaking to his thoughts. "Not very many."

What did she do? Figure all this stuff out during the hours she spent kitesurfing? Because she was right. Even the core problem of the crushing responsibility he felt for what had happened to those guys in Greendale, which was the real reason he couldn't face going back, even that was a symptom of

being squeezed to fit an impossible system. Yes, he should have been stronger, faster, smarter, and, especially, braver, but he never should have had to choose between being superman or being despicable.

As the true measure of his guilt became clear to him, the task of mending what was broken seemed less impossible, and it became easier to see a future in which he could live with himself. A sense of peace came to him that he hadn't felt in months. In the golden light of the semicircle of setting sun, the world crystallized again into that perfect universe, where everything was right.

It faded more slowly this time, and it left an echo that he could remember. The last ray of the setting sun winked out. He lay back slowly on the sand, and looked at the deepening blue of the sky.

"You've decided to go back?" Laisenia asked.

Conversing with her was very strange in that he didn't seem to need to speak for her to hear.

"Yes. There was never really any other choice."

He needed to say one thing out loud, whether she already knew it or not.

"I owe you ... everything ... for what you've done."

"Oh, that's nothing," she said to the sand.

If that was nothing, what happened when she made an effort? He opened his mouth to protest, when she continued quickly,

"Should I call Dorje to come pick us up, or do you want some more time?"

"Dorje Hlanto? He's here?"

"Hanging about on the other side of the island, getting all the gossip from Rangji, until I call."

"You guys are really handling me with kid gloves. What did you think I was going to do? Threaten to kill myself?"

"No, Johan."

He closed his eyes for a moment, took a breath, and said,

"I'm sorry. I just feel like a fool in all this. But I would like to know why you're being so careful."

Laisenia stared at the sand so intently she could have seen a ghost down there.

"Because anyone who looks at their troubles too long can despair, and there is no way to tell from outside how deep it is."

This was the woman who Briony said didn't study. Maybe Laisenia didn't need to. She'd had teachers most people didn't face, and she obviously learned fast.

"Go ahead and call Dorje," he said quietly. "It's okay."

They fed crumbs of dinner to ghost crabs, who were out foraging in force as twilight descended. The ghost crabs looked funny, acting like desperadoes over the tiny gifts, but the corners of Laisenia's mouth pulled down at the edges. She obviously felt bad about something, and it wasn't hard to guess what. She'd gone to phenomenal lengths to help him, and he had to go be sarcastic about it

because he felt like an idiot. He wished there was some way to call the words back, or to wipe them out, but he didn't find it before a small blimp crested the hill and landed on the beach.

He had new cause for embarrassment as he mumbled thanks to Dorje.

"You seem to do nothing but haul me out of messes I made for myself."

Dorje smiled, in his no-big-deal way, but this time he didn't change the subject.

"No worries. It seems like only yesterday, I was picking her up from walkabout." He looked toward Laisenia as they floated skyward in the blimp.

"You?" said Johan.

"Mm," nodded Laisenia. "If you think it's difficult for a stranger to blend in, you should try it when everybody knows your name."

"And," continued Dorje, "it seems like only the day before yesterday when a kind soul was doing the same for me."

He made it sound like a long and honorable tradition. Johan stopped staring at the floor and mumbling. It didn't cure foolishness in any case. He began tapping at his comm.

"I'll see where I should catch the interisland blimp, since I know I missed my connection."

"You won't catch it," said Dorje, as if this was nothing more worrisome than a weather bulletin.

"But—"

"I checked already. However, if you're willing to rough it and sleep in your seat, I'll get you to Finley."

"But—" That little side trip would take both Dorje and Laisenia over a thousand kilometers and an entire day out of their way. He saw the two of them exchange a glance, and Dorje said,

"She's got to get back anyway, for her job, and the rest of the championship."

"But—"

"You don't want to run afoul of Finley Immigration. Believe me, you don't."

"Look, I just don't know how to thank you. How to thank either of you."

"You don't thank us." Dorje looked straight at him. "You pass it on, son."

It was no wonder, thought Johan, that Dorje was Briony's favorite relative. That, he'd found out, was why she had his name. It also began to make sense that she was who she was, if someone like that had helped her grow up. "Son" he'd called him. It didn't feel like a category any more. It was an expression of kindness, even of love.

"What is it with the Finley Immigration, by the way?" he asked to fill the silence. "The islands are gorgeous, I grant you that, but it's not that wealthy. People wouldn't break the doors down to get in, would they?" *At least, people who weren't madly in love with an Islander wouldn't.*

"It's not only immigrants they're worried about," said Dorje. "Population control for us is ironclad, too. The taxes for having a third child are the highest

in the whole world. Islands are just really close to the edge, ecologically speaking. You have to keep a rather tight rein on things, or before you know it, you may not have a place to live.”

That was all very well and good, but Johan still objected to the tight rein including him. One person would make no difference.

The day of leaving rolled closer, punctuated by sunrises and sunsets oblivious to how Johan felt. People were wonderfully friendly. They arranged get-togethers to say goodbye, and broke his heart five times a day. Laisenia even put off some of her training sessions. It was only a few days she said, so she might as well hang around and see him off. Briony was there when he floated away, together with a crowd of family. And Lem. Even Kim showed up. Johan had enough leis draped on him to feel their weight.

It was all so endless, and so hopeless. There was nothing he could do that mattered. He could make what amounted to a doctor's appointment for Laisenia, and that was all. He might not even be able to do that. He'd never heard of a doctor who worked for free.

The huge airship floated low over its home islands on its way to Gabriel. The sky grew emptier with each gull calling.

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Chapter 15

Usually, when it came right down to it, once things actually happened they were neither as bad nor as good as he'd expected. Johan tried to convince himself that returning to Gabriel would be no different. At first, it seemed that it might be true.

When the blimp came in to land, with the sun glistening on the ocean and the call of gulls in the air, Johan found himself glad to see the Gabriel mountains appear on the horizon and to watch the downtown highrises draw closer. He'd never been proud of living in one of the planet's great cities before. His family was waiting for him at the foot of the blimp's gangway, and he was glad to see them, even Nalini. He kidded her that she'd grown.

Then came the moment when he realized that the woman with long, curling black hair in loose, white clothes was—

“Aliya!” He hadn't even recognized her at first.

They'd stood there, looking at each other, Aliya dubious, hesitant, her lips parted to say something that didn't come out. Should he bow? What was he supposed to do in this new life of theirs? And then he decided to hell with hesitating, and swept her up in a hug. It made him feel for a moment as if he'd never left the Islands, and he heard her breathe, “Johan.”

However, things had gone downhill from there. He was desperate for something that wasn't exactly friendship, comfort perhaps, but he was too old to find it with his parents, and far from old enough to find it with Aliya. Besides, she was gone much of the time. As often as not, she spent the whole day all the way across town at the cooking school where she'd be starting classes in January. And her counselor at the University had put her in contact with the local Muslim community. It was a couple of hundred thousand strong, apparently, and she was taking part in a festival they had at this time of year. He and Aliya tiptoed around each other, always unsure.

He wanted to move out, but he had to find a job first, and finding a job meant going for interviews and acting bright. He had a trial for damages coming up in a few days. He did not feel bright. Aliya, bless her, had tried to help with a timid comment that it was bound to be all right because “even

Umm Leila” had found work. What the hell did she mean, “*Even* Umm Leila”? *She’d* be hired before she finished filling out the paperwork. He, on the other hand.... He must have scowled because she hadn’t tried again.

He tried to find free treatment for Laisenia, but that was another dead end. Foreigners could buy expensive insurance, and after they’d been on it forever, genetic therapy was partially covered. If she could afford that, she could afford the therapy itself. He assumed there had to be exceptions based on ability to pay, but there weren’t, not for foreigners. There was no way around it by becoming a student, no special grants for athletes. Nothing. He gave up. He didn’t write to tell her the bad news. He felt like too much of a coward even for that.

The trial passed by like a nightmare, right down to the sick feeling that stayed with him. Initially, Johan had felt so bad for the guy suing him, he hadn’t known where to look. He’d stood in the witness box and told everyone what he’d done without wasting anyone’s time, most of all his own. He was nailing himself to the wall with the truth. He knew that. But it seemed like the only thing to do anyway. He wondered whether doing the right thing was habit-forming. He seemed to keep at it even when it did him no good.

The man pointed out that he’d been through hell, and that, “Somebody owes me for that. Somebody owes me big time.”

Well, that was true too. And yet, when he insisted on it, it felt less true. Johan’s sense of guilt and remorse merged into an inability to care, which resulted in more guilt for not feeling guiltier.

Apparently, the court didn’t care much either. The judge awarded actual damages, which amounted to a couple of weeks lost work and bus fare to and from the clinic. But she didn’t stop there. She seemed to be kindly disposed toward Johan and wanted to help him become a reformed character. He needed, she said from the bench, to really understand what he had done. Johan felt he’d done nothing since that awful night except understand it. When the judge gave him two hundred hours of community service as if this was some kind of treat, it was all he could do not to swear. Then he was ordered to start work on the second Saturday after the trial at a youth camp in Rosepark.

Rosepark! Was the judge crazy? He already had enough trouble watching for women on street corners and in train stations. It didn’t matter that he knew those particular slicers were in jail. Their fellow scumbags could be looking for him. It didn’t matter that he’d never recognize women he’d never seen. He braced for attack whether he wanted to or not, and feeling stupid only made it worse. How was he supposed to avoid the junkers if he was plunked down on top of them? Did the judge like him so much she wanted to come visit him in a hospital?

He spent the next couple of days just floating over waves. Not looking for a job. Not speaking to anyone. Not eating dinner with his family.

It didn’t help. He found out that avoiding the gang wasn’t entirely up to him,

no matter how much he tried, and no matter how much he resented having to try. Strange anonymous messages started appearing on his comm. The first one just said, "Hi." He assumed it was a wrong number and erased it. A couple of hours later, there was another one. He erased that. Then there was another one. He pressed callback, so he could tell the person this wasn't working—and found out he couldn't. The address was blocked. That was highly unusual, so he looked up the sender, and found out he couldn't do that either. The message was untraceable. Only law enforcement and a few specific institutions could do that. Legally, that is. Law enforcement would not be sending out texts saying "hi."

What did it mean that the gang had his personal comm address? Was this really them? Was he over-reacting? Should he report it? Was he under-reacting?

The next time a message invaded his comm, he felt kicked in the stomach. The time after that, it felt like a harder kick, and the anger started building that he should have to put up with this. The anger stayed with him, and the worst feeling of all was that the gang could reach right into him, torment him, and he could do nothing. If he told anyone about this, they'd probably say, "It's just stupid messages. Ignore them. Or change your address, if it bothers you." *If it bothers you.* Fatbergs.

And if he did change his address, how long would it take before they found that one? Then, after he changed that, and went through the hassle of giving everyone the new address again, how long before they found him again? Why did he have to put up with this?

When yet another message buzzed on his wrist during dinner, he just about hit his comm, erasing the thing.

"Wow," said Nalini. "Testosterone poisoning?"

He turned on her, and she almost found out what real testosterone poisoning looked like. But he'd been told, times out of number, that he was older, that it was up to him to set an example of self-restraint, that he couldn't fight with his little sister. He succeeded in doing nothing but saying,

"No."

"Something's wrong, though," said his mother, stating a fact.

After a bit more prodding, he told them what was wrong.

"For heavens sake," said his mother, "you should have told us at once. Come on. Let's go over to the vidphone. We're reporting this."

The police officer was polite, a lot politer than they ever were to him. She didn't interrupt, she didn't say, "Are you sure this isn't just somebody you know who you've forgotten about?"

But she was bored. Johan could imagine her thinking, "God, the Nervous Neds I have to deal with. I did four years at the Police Academy for this?"

"The first step would be to change your address, if it bothers you," she said to Johan. "We have it logged. If the problem persists, that would be the time to pursue it."

What did she mean “if it persists”? thought Johan. This had been persisting for days. It was a plenty big enough problem for him, and he was the one who had to deal with it.

“When will we know, exactly, that you consider the problem a persistent one?” asked his mother. “None of us is in the mood to just hope this goes away, believe me. My son was attacked, as I’m sure you can see in your records.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the officer answered, promptly and without any comments. “It’s just that your son’s recent trial probably triggered this. The court appearance is a matter of public record, so they know he’s back now. Attention mainly encourages them, so it’s best to just ignore it for a while. It’s probably just a silly prank.”

“Just ignore it.” Did this twit have any idea how much effort it took to “just” ignore it? And if it was the law’s public records that caused the problem, why wasn’t it up to the law to stop it? Why was it up to him to “ignore” it?

The officer could see the expression on Johan’s mother’s face—she didn’t bother to look at him—so she added, “Please do report every occurrence, so we can build up the dossier.”

And then they’d probably give the dossier the time and attention it deserved. He kept his bad attitude to black looks. He was sure that if he said anything, someone would tell him to calm down.

“Well, be sure you do build a dossier,” said his mother. “He’ll be starting community service in Rosepark shortly, and if this is more than a prank, the fact that the gang seems to know where to find him could get very serious.”

The cop made soothing noises about how they’d keep close tabs on it, and his mother was telling him to be sure to report every incident.

“Yes,” he said. “No problem,” he said. *All I have to do is keep noticing these things, and spending time on them, and “ignoring” them.*

He turned off his buzzer. He set up automated forwarding to send anonymous messages on to the police. He tried to delete everything without looking at it, but too often he couldn’t stop himself. It was some kind of morbid fascination, or maybe the stupid hope that they’d stopped.

Now people he wanted to hear from, like Ruy, couldn’t reach him either. Ruy would come over every couple of days, to study, he said. He lived with five roommates, and the place was noisy. His silent companionship kept Johan from starting to count old nail holes in the walls, and helped in some mysterious way that didn’t actually change anything. But he didn’t come over as much when it became hard to call.

There was also the girl he’d met at the University commons, the one who seemed to want someone on the cafeteria plan, like him, someone to take or leave as the need arose. He lost track of her, and his world continued shrinking in his futile attempt to protect himself.

One day he happened to glance at his comm just as a message came in, and the ID said it was Noor Sharifa. That was so odd, he answered it instead of

ignoring it.

"Yes," he said to his comm.

"Aliya says you're looking for work."

He stared at his comm band in disbelief. Aliya? She'd put Sharifa up to this? Aliya's concept of taking no for an answer seemed to be similar to her mother's, all appearances notwithstanding.

"Yeah." He knew he sounded grumpy. He knew it wasn't Sharifa's fault.

"Simulation International is still in the middle of a boom."

"They won't want me," he told her. When she asked why not, he explained that he'd left that very company rather abruptly.

"Johan," she said. "There are whole countries which are smaller than SI. If you think anyone here remembers you, you have too big a sense of your own importance. Or did you do something bad enough to have a note attached to your file?"

"I don't think so. My immediate boss sent me a message saying he liked my work and was 'sorry to see me go after so short a time.'"

"Well, then."

That was how it happened that within a week, he was back at a clone of his old desk, sending math puns to Noor and his old neighbor, who hadn't budged. It made everything that had happened to him feel like a dream. If he stayed, he could see his life stretch out in an unending series of unmarked days, with nothing to remember any of them by, until the final one which spelled the end.

Was this, he wondered, going to be his life? A job he didn't want, the occasional woman he didn't mind, and himself settling slowly into someone he didn't know. He would have been better off putting up with Doha. At least that would have been different.

Johan stood on the fringe of his coffee-swilling coworkers, sunk in the certainty that things couldn't be worse. Noor was standing near him, and he remembered her saying, long ago and far away, "Oh, things can always get worse."

It was strange, working with her again. In Doha, her oddness had faded into the enormous strangeness of the whole place. Here it was particular and unique, a Noor-oddness, for which she made no apologies or compensations.

The conversation swirled around some kind of Greendale politics. He wished people wouldn't talk about Greendale.

"You look like the Angel of Death with a particularly big order to fill," Noor said to him quietly enough for nobody else to hear.

No small talk for good old Noor. Her blather detectors had survived the trip from Doha unscathed. So he didn't try blathering.

"I keep getting those goddamn messages. They're getting into my dreams. So I didn't sleep too well last night."

"Still saying 'Hi'?"

"No." He showed her the last one on his comm. "I see your back," said the

text. Just like the others, there was so little there, it should have meant nothing. But reporting them to the police made it impossible to deny what they meant, and yet, in spite of what it cost him, nothing came of it. The police could be using the messages for experimental interstellar communication, for all the feedback he got from them.

“‘I see your back,’” Noor repeated, puzzled. “What does that mean?”

“I think somebody flunked English. I think it means ‘I see you’re back.’”

“Ah,” said Noor again. “So buy a gun.”

He glanced at her, exasperated.

“Noor, this isn’t just Doha in reverse. You can’t go around buying guns here.”

“So buy one of those chemical sprays. I see women with those all the time.”

She had? Where?

“Noor, I can’t go getting a mace gun. Women have mace guns.”

“Heh?” she said, looking very puzzled.

“Well, I might as well wear a sign saying, ‘I’m not good enough. I need a crutch to get through life.’”

“But it doesn’t bother women to need a crutch, as you call it?”

“Well, they need ‘artificial defense’ to even up the score. I mean, isn’t it obvious?”

“‘Even up the score’? I’d say a mace gun goes a bit further than that.”

“Well, yeah, but it doesn’t matter anyway. I’d have to show ‘imminent cause’ to get a permit for assisted defense. And by then, of course, I’d be past needing it.”

Noor had a weird little smile on her face.

“You’re right. It’s not like the old place.” Her weird smile grew crooked. “When I was running from the mob that destroyed our village, I tried to get a gun. An old police sergeant with a pistol on his podgy hip told me a nice lady like me would just get hurt if I carried a gun. He told me to buy a whistle and blow on it for help if there was trouble.”

“He . . . *what?* You’re just trying to see how much I’ll believe, right?”

“Ah. If only. And you’ll notice that the result is the same. One side is helpless.”

“So what’s it like having a mob after you?” he asked with a black look. “You’ll have to tell me all about it. I need to know. I start at Rosepark tomorrow.” That was the biggest reason he was looking glum enough for Noor to comment.

“It’s not in Rosepark,” said a voice on his left. “It might work in Rosepark. But it’s in Greendale.”

What? thought Johan. Somebody had picked up on the word and crossed wires with a conversation he knew nothing about. Apparently, people were discussing some impending referendum on a bond issue to build office blocks and a ferry terminal in south Greendale.

“Oh, brother,” somebody else said. “Not again. I guess it makes more sense than last year’s proposal to bid on the Olympics and rebuild all of Greendale

into Glitzdale.”

“It’s a scam,” said Noor flatly.

“What do you mean? How do you know?” There was obvious skepticism about how this very new arrival could be so sure.

“I know that area. At Seaside and Golden there’s an old heavy metal dump. It’s not on the usual maps anymore, but you can still see the old red nalgene marking rods if you look behind the weeds. If the bond passes and taxpayer money is at stake, the developers will suddenly ‘discover’ the dump and demand more money to clean up the site. That way they won’t have to pay for it themselves.”

Johan could see everyone wondering why she knew Greendale so well. He was wondering himself. It explained why she saw lots of women with mace guns. If she knew Greendale that well, was it smart to shoot his mouth off to her about his troubles? Did it all get piped straight to her buddies at Seaside and Golden? You never knew with women. Even ordinary ones did the weirdest things, and Noor was three standard deviations away from average.

He’d been wrong about one thing, though. She had bought a suit of normal clothes before heading that way.

But that didn’t stop her from maybe having a point about buying a gun. *Why not?* he kept thinking. Women could carry mace guns because they could be in danger. Well, so could he be in danger. Why shouldn’t he get a permit? Although it was surprisingly hard to get over the feeling that he was doing something ... odd, turning up at the police station to ask for a mace gun permit.

The elderly police officer who kept the seat warm at the desk where these things were handled, looked at him kindly, when she really had no reason to.

“You need to consider carefully whether this is a good decision,” she said. “I mean, you and I both know you have a perfectly valid reason, but someone who just sees you, on a bus, say, is going to think the worst. Men are known to get overly aggressive, and something like that could just be inflammatory.”

“I know,” said Johan, spacing his words carefully to keep his annoyance from boiling right into plain view. Then she’d say “You see? Aggressive. That’s exactly what I mean.”

“That’s why, ma’am, I’d like to have a permit to carry a concealed mace gun.”

“Oh, dear,” she said. “You really should think about this. Sleep on it. A concealed weapon could cause so much more harm than good, not least for you. Someone could approach you, you might misunderstand the situation, and she would have no way of knowing the danger she ran. That could end very badly.”

Johan sat there for a moment, trying to get the pounding in his head under control. He couldn’t. He had to speak anyway.

“Ma’am, I *have* thought about it. I’ve done almost nothing but think about it. There’s also the danger I run.”

“Look, I understand. You’ve had a bad experience. You’re upset. But the

important thing is to reduce the chance of violence, not increase it.”

“I think, if I had a mace gun, I would greatly reduce the chance of violence against me.”

The officer’s next suggestion was that he might want to consider counseling.

“Excuse me a moment,” he said. “I’ll call my lawyer. She can speak to you.”

The police officer stiffened, but he was past caring. He had to concentrate to keep his fingers from shaking with rage as he keyed in the lawyer’s address. Even the slicers had treated him better than this. They’d stayed out of range when they tried to corner him. He’d counted for *something*.

He reached the woman who’d represented him at his last trial. The lawyer talked to the cop, and the cop started filling out the forms.

After a while, she handed him the permit. It was to carry an unconcealed weapon.

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Johan sat on the bus to Rosepark, ready to dislike every one of the little darlings he was supposed to be helping. He’d refused to do anything except stew about this crap till the last minute, so all he knew was that he was supposed to be at the Rosepark Community Center at eleven in the morning. He looked at the few details he had on his comm. His first stint was to be helping someone named Pakanaram Satya, who would be training him to “provide disadvantaged youngsters with enriching experiences.”

Right. The Rosepark kids he’d known tended to be rather good at enriching themselves with their experiences.

The bus dropped him off at the large dirty bus depot that he remembered all too well. Nothing had changed. Some of the same graffiti were on the lower part of the walls and the windows. The community center was a large leaden building on the other side of the square. It looked about as inspiring as a toothache. He made his way to room 203.

The room was overrun with hooligans bouncing off the walls, and there was no sign of anything resembling a Pakanaram Satya. They weren’t literally bouncing off the walls, of course. They were bouncing off the scattered hard plastic chairs and off the big desk in front of the whiteboard screen. He was pretty sure they were supposed to be sitting in the chairs, not playing with them. That was the way these enriching experiences usually worked.

A short, cheerful woman popped through the door, smiling and nodding and saying something. He could see her mouth forming words but he couldn’t make them out over the bedlam of the kids. He could probably bellow them into shutting up, but the woman might not see that he was trying to be helpful. She might assume it was male bossiness. Then he’d start off on the wrong foot with her, and he had to work with her for six months whether he wanted to or

not. But he had no idea what she was saying. She might decide he was being arrogant and ignoring her, and then she'd get at least as huffy. She was going to be writing his evaluations for the judge. Six months was forever if the boss was going to spend it telling him he was a loser.

Johan dithered, the kids screamed, and he wished, not for the first time, that he was back in the Islands. People there hadn't made up their minds about him without giving him a chance. On the contrary, even after he blew it, a simple apology was enough to get the benefit of the doubt again. It made everything much simpler.

She continued talking away as if the two of them were alone in the world, and then pulled a whistle out of her pocket and let out an ear-piercing blast. In what was obviously the normal procedure, kids started cascading out of the room. Everyone wound up in the gym. The woman unlocked a case, and produced a mass of volleyballs. The gym was big enough so that he could hear her speak, and what she was saying was that today would be easy because all he had to do was assist her and learn the ropes. Her idea of living large was playing volleyball in the gym before lunch, followed by story time.

Johan was on the verge of joining the kids who were flinging a volleyball around, because he wasn't doing anything useful standing there, when another teacher came in and Paka was introducing him. All the kids seemed to call her Paka, and Johan found himself doing it, too. She didn't seem to mind.

"Johan?" said the new teacher, a Ms. Melry. "You must have just signed up. I don't remember that name from the list of volunteers."

Paka didn't say anything. He didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say.

The other teacher did not mercifully move on. She said nothing, waiting for an answer.

"I'm not a volunteer," he forced himself to answer.

She still didn't move on.

There was going to be no escape.

"I'm here for community service." He managed to unclench his teeth long enough to say it normally.

"Oh, really? Why were you given service?"

Another silence.

"For being attacked." This time his teeth stayed clenched.

"Excuse me? That makes no sense."

No, he thought. It didn't, did it.

"There was a gang. Several people were attacked. I didn't report it in a timely manner." The only good thing was the kids were making so much noise, none of them could hear.

"Oh, really? That sounds like that Greendale thing that was in the news recently."

"It sounds like it because it was." It wouldn't have even been on the news if he'd kept his big mouth shut. He should have just let the slicers get away with

it, like everyone else did. Then he wouldn't have to listen to this twit.

Then he could be part of the problem.

Why weren't there any easy choices?

"Oh," she was saying, looking at him as if he was an interesting exhibit. "Pretty strange affair, that. They didn't have any actual evidence, but they convicted anyway."

The whole place seemed to go dark for a moment, and Johan was on a dead street. He heard the strangled scream.

When he looked up and saw the gym and heard the horde of shrieking kids, it took him a moment to remember that he lived in this universe. Not that one.

No evidence, the woman had said. None. Except for a world that didn't exist because it wasn't her problem.

"Very disturbing, when that sort of thing happens," the Melry woman was going on. "Anybody could accuse anybody of anything."

Johan ground out,

"I can't say that was the aspect of it that struck me as being the most disturbing."

"Well, sure. Sure." She'd gone all soothing. "You had a bad experience, and it's completely understandable that you'd be feeling, uh, strongly about it. My point is just that the law should be evenhanded and objective. We need to be sure that nobody's rights are trampled."

Johan had to clasp his hands behind his back to stop himself from taking one step over, lifting the woman up by her shirt, and yelling into her face, "*What about MY rights? Huh? What about them?*"

He couldn't go play volleyball with the kids now. He might kill somebody. And there really wasn't anybody he could kill, although there ought to be.

After that, he was supposed to carry on as if nothing had happened except that he'd met a new teacher in the gym.

Paka said, "Could you get the kids ready for the reading in room 203? I'll be right back. I have to check at the office about a student Ms. Melry said was cross-linked on our rosters."

"Sure," he said. "No problem."

It wasn't a problem. The way he felt, he was going to take no prisoners. She was gone. He could bellow.

"Listen UP!"

Gratifying, shocked silence. He had to hurry before they got over it.

"Anyone who's not in a chair in 203 and quiet on the count of ten will be doing the reading for today. One ... two ..."

Terror could be a wonderful thing. He didn't even get to five before they were all jammed into the chairs at the very back of the room and as close to the door as they could get. Every audience he'd ever seen always took chairs at the edges, as if they had secret information about a bomb and knew that only the first ones through the door would make it out alive.

Things did not improve when Paka began to “expose them to literature,” as she put it. Even Johan was bored, and that wasn’t easy to accomplish. The kids, who spent after-school hours learning how to steal ID data off the airwaves, didn’t even pretend to listen. They spent the time trying to kill each other in ways well below the radar of the cheerful Paka.

Suddenly, Johan was wide awake and twitched in spite of himself. He felt a hand pushing on his balls. What the—? There was nobody near him. There was nothing under him but his chair.... There was ... and then the obvious explanation finally hit him. The nanotech in the chair must be faulty. The seat had molded itself to him, of course, or else these hard plastic chairs would have been unusable, but, as was so often the way with machines, it didn’t know when to stop. He glanced around at the rest of the audience to see who else was being pestered by cheap-junk chairs. Nobody, apparently. Paka was reading. The kids were squirming, but just the same way they had been the whole time. Then, through the open doorway, he saw the woman out in the hall.

She was dressed in unremarkable, loose clothes consisting of a tunic and trousers, but she had enough gold chains dangling from her neck, shoulders, and hips to have walked out of an old Incan grave. And she had a cigarette—an actual cigarette—dangling from her mouth. Unlit, of course, but it was probably part of her gang’s dress uniform. She was staring at him with a smile that said there was nothing to smile about. Then she slowly and deliberately turned and walked away.

Her meaning couldn’t have been clearer. *We can get you anywhere.*

And he could do nothing. If he ran after her and collared her, what was he supposed to say? “Yeah, I chased this woman down the hallway because my chair wasn’t working.”

If the gang could target him so easily, why hadn’t they done it? Why didn’t they just get it over with?

Because they want you to know you’re hunted, Johan. It’s no fun otherwise.

“Now let’s go around the room,” said Paka in a penetratingly pleased voice, “and discuss what this marvelous description meant to us. Who’d like to start?”

Nobody liked to start. Johan knew what was coming, he—

“Well, why don’t you kick things off, Mr. Antioch?”

And so the long afternoon wore on.

Johan’s mind flapped about like a fish on a dock, trying to find a way out of this awful situation for the next twenty four Saturdays. He thought about saying he’d give the kids kitesurfing lessons. But then he’d be right out there, in Rosepark, either carrying a weapon that would make him the center of attention, or not carrying a weapon and totally defenceless. The gang could do a lot more than give him nightmares by remote control. They could imprison him in four walls with no way out.

After another hour of Denby’s “No Tomorrow,” he decided anything was better than one more installment of this. After the “activity group,” he floated

the idea of organizing kitesurfing lessons, assuming he could beg or borrow kites from area businesses. It would be an enriching new experience for the kids, he said. Paka thought it was a “lovely idea.” She reminded him he’d have to get liability waivers signed by the children’s parents or guardians, and doctor’s certificates for their physical ability to participate. Organizing all this would not count toward his total hours of service. For a moment, he hesitated, but then he remembered that things were only going to get worse. In future, he’d be the one doing the reading. At least Paka was able to help by giving him the name of a doctor who volunteered for the community programs, as well as a list of all the parents and guardians involved.

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Unlike everything else in his life, finding a bunch of kites went swimmingly. He called his kitesurfing friends, and one who was an instructor pointed him toward a couple of rental companies who were due to offload out-of-date kites. The companies were glad to donate their obsolete equipment to a maximally deductible cause, but they kept repeating warnings that the nanotech might not work too well. All they could guarantee was manual operation, but Johan finally managed to convince them that was okay. Within days, he—or, more precisely, the Rosepark Community Center—was the proud, if somewhat surprised, owner of ten kites. The doctor was also easy. She promised to meet the group on the beach and give them their certificates then and there. The whole idea, however, almost fell apart on account of the parents and guardians. By the time the following Saturday rolled around, he’d contacted a mere three quarters of them.

When the kids saw the school bus waiting for them, which Paka had arranged, and found out what was in store for them, all hell broke loose. Boredom was not an issue.

He was surprised to find Jamie, from the old remedial math class, suddenly taking part in the Special Activities Group, as these things were officially known.

Johan said, “Good to see you again. I didn’t realize you joined these sorts of, um, supervised things.”

“Wouldn’ catch me dead, SAGgin,” Jamie agreed. “But if you’re gonna do somethin max, thas different.”

The kid must have spies everywhere, if he knew about the kitesurfing project ahead of time.

“There’s paperwork, Jamie,” Johan began warningly.

“Brought that,” said the smartass kid.

Johan looked at it. It was probably all forged, but he didn’t care. He had something to file, so it wasn’t his fault, and he liked Jamie.

The doctor was already waiting at the beach, and turned out to be a wonderfully dreamy, wispy person with thin, blonde hair and a sunburn.

"Yeah," she grinned in a shamefaced way. "I forgot my sunscreen. You know how it is."

She ran her scanner over each kid with the apparent randomness of a bird building a nest, but, like a bird, she had results at the end. He concentrated on venting the kites so the kids couldn't become airborne, and by the time he was done, the doctor had certified the health of each child's lungs, heart, and connective tissue, and everyone was good to go.

The only ones who weren't good were the five kids without liability waivers, who had to sit on their hands. Johan began to fear murder would be done, or at the very least, that they'd cut all the lines on the kites. With the sense that he was probably going to go to jail for it, he told the kids they had to sit on the beach. "Except," he said, "you can do your sitting with the other groups around the kites. Just so long as you're perfectly clear on the fact that you did nothing but sit on the beach. *Understand?*" He looked his most forbidding. The kids scampered gleefully to join the groups clustered around each kite.

"Gee," said the doctor wistfully, looking at the colorful sails of kites laid out on the beach and lazily catching bits of breeze, "that looks like fun."

"It is," Johan assured her. "Feel free to hang around, if you want."

"Well, today *is* my day off. Would you mind if I called my daughter and she came too?"

"Sure," said Johan, feeling certain that if she heard about it, Paka would point out the organization didn't have insurance coverage for incidental doctors or their kin. He'd just have to make sure she didn't hear about it. The doctor was too nice to be deprived of all the fun because of some bureaucratic nonsense.

Teaching the kids might as well have been an exercise in herding cats. He started with a stern lecture on safety, and they listened about as closely as during the Denby reading. He went on to teach them basic maneuvers while they were on dry sand, and instantly all the ones behind his back were in the water. Then they all splashed around, fell over, learned nothing, and had a wonderful time.

He had to physically lift some of them out of the water and force them to stop horsing around so he could eat without playing lifeguard every second. Then it turned out he wasn't going to eat. Some of the kids had packed lunch without either common sense or adult supervision, so all they had was bags of corn pops. They were, they said, *starving*. Johan divided his own lunch among them and told himself he wouldn't die of hunger before dinner. Although it felt like it was going to be a near thing. He sat down with the doctor and her daughter, who seemed wonderfully civilized after hours of corralling twenty screaming meemies.

"Oof," was all he said. He definitely hadn't been bored. He was that much ahead of the game. He hadn't even had time to worry about the intentions of

some of the lowlifes littering the beach. If he died out here, at least it wouldn't be from listening to literature.

"It's good of you to be doing this," said the doctor, whose name was Mary Spangler. "The volunteers all mean well, but they're not usually that dedicated. Or maybe just not that energetic."

Johan glanced at her. "Perhaps that's because I'm not a volunteer. I was sentenced to community service."

"Oh," she said, looking rather less vague for a moment "Oh." But she didn't ask him anything, and Johan changed the subject.

"I've been talking to doctors a lot lately," he said "Well, on second thought, maybe I shouldn't really call a bunch of medical bureaucrats doctors, although a lot of them seem to have M. D. after their names."

"Yeah. They get all the way through med school, then they find out that patients are people, and that being a doctor means dealing with people. Some of them never get over the horror of it all."

"Well, they don't want to deal with me, that's for sure. All I ever hear from them is 'no.'"

"What are you asking them?"

"I met a foreigner who has Huntington's, and Gabriel is one of three places where she could have it treated, but she can't afford the gene therapy here. I've been trying everything to find some way for her to get it, but I keep coming up empty."

"Huntington's? The *de novo* mutations are very rare, and I thought the last expressed case happened at about the same time as the last case of flu."

"She comes from a tiny island in the Finley Archipelago, and I gather she never needed a doctor as a child."

"How interesting. Huntington's is all worked out, so it's simple, but tedious. I bet they'd love her in the student program."

"I don't know if she could get in to med school."

"That's not what I meant. Medical students have to practice on someone. They do it under supervision, of course, but they're still just goofy students, so treatment is free if you're willing to put up with the teaching environment."

"What?" exclaimed Johan. She began explaining all over again. He interrupted, "No, no, I mean, free? As in, totally free?"

"I believe so. I don't know if they charge for some of the pharmaceuticals. There might also be waiting lists for some conditions, although I doubt there would be for Huntington's."

"Good God," said Johan. "You'd think one of these asinine bureaucrats could have told me, while I'm beating my head against their brick walls. How do I find out about this? Who do I call?"

"I'd try any of the professors at the big University med school who teach anything to do with genetics or gene therapy. Somebody will be able to point you in the right direction."

With a very different attitude, Johan returned to not-teaching the kids to not-kitesurf. This community service stuff wasn't so useless, after all. It was a beautiful day. Nobody was complaining about the freezing water, and the kids were actually fun, even if they had the attention span of a commercial.

He wanted to write to Laisenia that very evening, but decided to wait until he had something definite. Medical faculty, however, turned out to be difficult to track down. Professor A referred him to Professor B, who wasn't there, so he tried Professor C, who was too busy to speak to mortals. After working his way through Professors D through G, and then several more after that, he finally found a Dr. Koiyama, a tiny, white-haired native of Japan, born and raised there nearly two centuries ago, so that Johan felt as if he was talking to living history.

He also had to talk to his parents about this habit he'd formed of filling their house up with females, but they were both glad to make room for Laisenia. After Aliya, they seemed to feel that it was worth seeing what he would come up with next. He'd had to explain that Aliya wasn't his lover. Now he had to explain all over again. Laisenia wasn't his lover either. Besides, she was different. Very different.

Then, at last, he could send his message.

Laisenia- Results. Finally. It turns out you can get free treatment at the medical school, if you don't mind being Exhibit A in a lecture and being treated by students. Dr. Koiyama has a course this spring on classical genetic therapy and says she can treat you in that context if you can be here by the middle of January, in time for the spring semester. There's a spare room at my family's house that you're welcome to use, so room and board won't cost anything either. Just bring enough money for incidentals, and everything should work out. Let me know what you think. I've attached Dr. Koiyama's address in case you want to contact her directly.

Bests,
Johan.

He pushed the send button, and felt like it was his luck that was turning rather than Laisenia's. Out of a never-ending string of loserdom, he had managed to accomplish at least this one small thing.

Her answer came back almost as fast as a bounced signal and was waiting on his comm the very next morning.

Johan- I just don't know what to say. Thanks is much too weak a word. I booked passage on the blimp arriving in Gabriel on the tenth of January. I've written to the doctor, too. I'll see you the tenth. I wish I was a poet.

Laisenia.

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Chapter 16

Johan took the afternoon off from work to meet Laisenia's flight. The blimp was an elongated dark blue dot that he could see from the train before he even arrived at the clipper port, but the airship always took all the time in the world, and he knew he wouldn't be late. As soon as he could make out the people on the deck, Laisenia wasn't hard to spot. She was the one waving both arms to him, and her grin was visible while the blimp was still out over water. Her first words were,

"Great Mother of God, this place is HUGE."

She stared around at everything: the clippers, the terminal, the train station, the iris scanner Johan used to pay for their train tickets. People stared at her too, although in their case they were trying not to. Gabriel's inhabitants came from every corner of the earth, but a goddess-size Fijian, taller than Johan including her cloud of hair, was unique.

"Where do we go to pick up your luggage?" he asked.

"This is it." She pulled on the strap of her flight bag.

It looked floppy, barely half-full.

"If that's as light as it seems to be, I could show you where the clinic is now, because it's more or less on the way home. And we can take the same train home that you'll be taking to go out tomorrow."

She nodded eagerly, as if that was a wonderful adventure in itself, and studied the shoe-sized robotic vacuum, nosing its way under the seats.

She told him all about the finals of the championship.

"I was out after the quarter-finals, but, still, that's the furthest I've ever gotten."

He told her about the kids in Rosepark. She laughed out loud. Westerners—or, at least, Gabrielites—generally did their best to appear inanimate on public transportation, even if it was just an elevator. Johan saw people sneaking glances at her, as if they were trying to figure out what it took to be able to laugh like that.

"That'll be like the time they shanghaied me into joining one of our cruise ships and teaching tourists. They did worse than not listen. Most of them

thought they already knew everything, and that was in the back of beyond, where they could blow to Australia if they did something stupid.”

“Yeah,” he said with a crooked smile, “I’ve got it easy because the wind blows them in to shore. Seriously, though, in four Saturdays all I’ve accomplished is two who can stand far enough up on their boards to fall over. Wind hasn’t been an issue in any real sense.”

“You want me to have a go at them?” she asked with a glint.

He stopped joking around. The Islands didn’t have people like the Rosepark kids, and she probably had no idea what she’d be getting herself into.

“These are real hooligans. It’s pretty much a waste of time. I don’t know if you’d want to bother, if you knew what they were like.”

“How old are they?”

“Around eleven, give or take a year.”

“And why are they there?”

“Some because their parents signed them up to get them out of the house. Some because they did badly in school the previous year and are supposed to be improving themselves. Most of the sessions are things like music appreciation. I, uh, couldn’t stand it myself, so I got into this kitesurfing thing. They’re not learning anything, but at least we’re not all crazy-bored.”

Her grin grew wide when he said he couldn’t stand it himself.

“They won’t be any worse than Uncle Huatare’s brood, I expect.”

“Well, if you really want to do it, that’d be great.” He pictured her throwing recalcitrant kids into the water and began to smile again.

It was lucky he’d taken the afternoon off, because Laisenia’s concept of walking seemed to match a toddler’s. Once they got off the train at the University station to go to the clinic, she stopped everywhere and looked at everything, whether it was gadgets in shop windows or standing in front of the Dodecahedron for half an hour while she studied the interpretive display about how it worked. Her complete enjoyment of everything was catching, and Johan found himself chuckling more than once. While he was explaining some of the math behind the Dodee to her, Sara Webster showed up.

Did the woman have nothing to do but stroll around campus? Johan hoped she would mind what few manners she had in front of Laisenia, but it was a forlorn hope. Her first words were,

“Oh, boy, Johan. Your new friend is even more ... exotic.”

“I’m not exotic,” disagreed Laisenia. “My family are just taro farmers.” Her smile stretched from ear to ear as she towered over Sara Webster, “And before that, just cannibals.” She stretched out her right hand. “Pleased to meet you,” she said.

Sara flinched back, and Johan almost broke a rib trying not to laugh.

He introduced them, and explained pleasantly to Sara, “They do something called shaking hands in the Islands. You give her your right hand. It shows friendship.”

In Sara, it showed capitulation, if anything. She got out of there as fast as she could, and Johan could finally let his laughter explode. Laisenia had the satisfied air that follows a job well done.

"Cannibals!" he chortled. "I love it. Man-eating smile and all."

"It's quite true, you know," said Laisenia.

He sobered up abruptly.

"Huh?"

"Well, a long time ago, it's true. The Fijians had the longest history of cannibalism of anyone on earth. Made it rather dangerous for the early European explorers," she said, with a return of the very wide smile.

"I'll bet it did," he said.

When they reached his house and Johan introduced her to his family, he was glad and disappointed, both at once, to see that Nalini had more sense than Sara. She said nothing that could have placed her at the receiving end of Laisenia's sense of humor. But what she and both his parents did do was study Laisenia with that extra intensity family members reserve for new love interests. It was exasperating. He'd only told them about a million times that she was a friend, not a lover. Sure enough, he had to repeat it to Nalini almost before she was done bowing to Laisenia.

"Wow," she said to Johan in an undertone, while Laisenia was looking at a purple-throated hummingbird flying through the mist of the courtyard fountain that Johan's mother suddenly pointed out. "You sure know how to pick 'em."

"*Nalini*," he said, and then stopped. "Nalini," he said, starting over. "I keep telling you. She's not my lover. Get it? Not my lover. Now leave her alone."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't tangle with *her* to save my life."

The subtext was that she had every intention of tangling with him to her heart's content.

Before he could start giving her hell, Aliya came running in from her room on the other side of the house. She looked pleased and excited. He'd been wondering where she was.

"Umm Nalini, my friend will be able to come to dinner tonight. I just—."

She stopped. She'd seen Laisenia, seemed transfixed by her, and all she said was, "Oh."

Johan approached to introduce them, and saw Aliya swallow with an effort. Was he going to have to explain even to her, who should know better, that there was nothing between him and Laisenia? What was it with everyone?

He introduced them, awkwardly for some reason.

"I'm really glad your friend could make it, after all," his mother said. "There's no such thing as too many unparalleled cooks. And," she smiled to Laisenia, "far from home, like you and Aliya."

Johan wondered where the mystery guest was from. She'd have to be from Antarctica to begin to match the distance Aliya had travelled, and even then, unlike Doha, the Ice Continent was merely far away.

The doorbell rang.

"That must be Sven," Aliya said quickly. "I was just going to say that he'd called from the train station."

He? thought Johan. *He?*

Sven Torvalds was a tall, blond, weedy-looking Dane. He was studying to be a pastry chef and he had brought dessert in a largish box. That was all very well and good. What took Johan by surprise was how much he resented the way this Sven obviously worshipped the ground Aliya walked on.

She was much too good for him. Interested men had to be lining up for her like salmon heading upriver. So why did she have to settle on such a complete weed? He looked like he hadn't worked out since early childhood. What was wrong with these girls? It was like Nalini and the hopeless doofs she kept bringing home. Aliya shouldn't be wasting her time on—

On what? He wasn't volunteering, now, was he? How was it his business what she did?

She really might as well be his little sister, the way he felt about her.

She was showing Sven the way to the kitchen, which he could presumably see for himself through the large double doors, to help him take care of the contents of the box. Johan could hear her musical voice receding into the distance, talking quickly and happily. She said something in Arabic, and there was the low woofle of Torvalds mangling a noun or two. His accent in Arabic was even worse than Johan's.

Johan stood in the living room, at a loss, oblivious to everyone there. He'd wanted Aliya to become independent. He was sure he wanted her to be happy. So what was he so upset about?

"Is that the woman whose life you said you ruined?"

He looked around, disoriented by the fact that there were other people in the world. Laisenia had asked him that.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, that's Aliya."

"Doesn't look very ruined to me," said Laisenia.

"Well, uh, yes. That's good, isn't it?"

"Is it?" she asked with a direct look that reminded him she could speak to his thoughts.

She glanced back toward the kitchen. "Not so many years ago, I would have killed to look like that."

"You! Why?"

"Why?" echoed Laisenia, and eyed him strangely. "Maybe you haven't noticed, Johan, but she's stunning."

"Well, so are you stunning."

"Oh, yes?" she said, one of her brilliant smiles starting to light up her face.

"Well, obviously. You don't need me to tell you that. I bet before you're here a week, you'll have a cloud of fellows around you bigger than the one you had at home. And none of them will look like weeds." He frowned briefly toward the

kitchen.

"Oh. Yes," she said. Her smile faded.

Dinner was a constrained affair, at least for Johan. Laisenia didn't seem to have a care in the world, as usual. She was telling funny stories about Johan trying to crack open his first coconut. Nalini, bless her mercenary soul, was considering Sven appraisingly and thoughtfully sampling some herbed cheese sticks he'd also brought that went with the mushroom soup. Objectively speaking, they were excellent cheese sticks. But Johan only took one.

Judging by the way the Dane looked at him from time to time, the low opinion was mutual. Aliya must have told Sven about Doha ... and how she'd felt about Johan, and what he'd done, and ... and things. The dinner table could have been a fence, and he and Sven two dogs eyeing each other across it.

When dinner finally wound its way down to dessert, Johan's father reached for a piece of almond cake. His eyes grew wide as he tasted it.

"I don't think I've ever had anything that good—except anything Milla makes," he added quickly with a big smile to his wife.

"Iss not mine," said Sven. "Hers." He looked toward Aliya. "Most people are so good coming out from the school, not going in."

She kept her eyes down toward her plate, and glowed under his praise. Practically everything he said was praise for her, all of it true, which only made matters worse.

"One of the school teachers noticed, but she probably has not told you, ja?"

After three years in Gabriel, Sven sounded like he'd barely left the farm. He came from some little village on the west coast of Denmark, and had his own pair of wooden shoes. He was obviously useless at languages.

Aliya was saying,

"Oh, it's nothing. Not yet. No, really."

"The teacher wants her to take an internship at the Hotel Montrose. With Chef Picardy."

"Good heavens," exclaimed Milla Antioch. "Even I've heard of her. She's been in the news."

"I don't have the official letter yet," Aliya was protesting. "It's just to chop vegetables. They just needed some kitchen help."

"*Kvatch*," said Sven with such finality that Aliya stopped downplaying it.

"They'll pay me," she said shyly instead, as if the fact still amazed her. "I was thinking of taking a room closer to school, if that's all right, Umm Nalini?" She looked to Johan's mother as if she needed her permission.

"Aliya, this is wonderful," said Milla, beaming. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Oh, it's not really definite yet. S-Sven is too kind." She was looking at her plate again, and glowing.

After the meal, Johan sat by the fountain in the dark courtyard and listened to the water fall. He'd wanted to set Aliya free, and instead he felt like he'd lost her. What, exactly, did he want? Now that Aliya had left him behind, was she so

much a part of him that he wanted her friends to be his as well? Apparently so. He had the same problem with Nalini, which was why he never approved of her boyfriends either. Life was a mess.

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Nothing Johan had done had ever impressed the Rosepark kids very much. Some of them would sit still for a few minutes because they liked him, but other than that he might as well have been Paka. However, Laisenia was another matter. They goggled at her, and when she saw them doing it and grinned, they'd get very busy with their comm bands or punching each other or anything else they could think of to avoid meeting her eyes. Down at the beach, she had them corralled and hanging on her instructions, Johan wasn't even sure how. It might have had something to do with the flight resonance aerobatics she did first, which had the kids staring spellbound without anyone having to tell them to shut up.

He had the easiest time since he'd started this whole Roseparkian kitesurfing affair. When lunch time came around, he wasn't exhausted, and Laisenia went racing over the waves purely for herself. Five of the kids had achieved some actual kitesurfing under her instruction. All but three of them had managed to raise their kites and stand on their boards. The buzz was all about how she was "the best." She herself had said it was "all down to the good lessons they'd had before." Johan wondered if he could get her to come with him every Saturday, and how he'd handle twenty disappointed hooligans if he couldn't.

It had also been a new feeling to ride the bus into Rosepark without feeling alone in a hostile world. There was no logical reason why Laisenia should make him feel less threatened—they be just as easy to take down together as singly—and yet she did. Just for that, he would beg her to come with him again.

He finished his own lunch in a few minutes, and took the opportunity to go shake out the sand trapped in some of the kids' parasails. Dunking a kite in the surf tended to have that effect. Getting all the sand out, down to the very last grains, involved lofting the kite while he stood on the beach and twitched it to dislodge sand grains. Meanwhile, he had to make sure he retained enough control not to be dragged across the beach by a sudden gust of wind. It took a lot of concentration, but he kept an eye on the no-longer-lunching kids, and, whenever he could, he enjoyed the sight of Laisenia flying over the waves with the ease of a wind spirit.

Suddenly, her kite dove till it was almost parallel to the water, catching every last erg of wind power, and she was racing straight for shore.

What was she doing? Johan remembered at the last minute to twitch the kite in his hands into a stable upright position.

She barely slowed down when she reached shore. She flew onto the sand,

kicking the board away in mid-flight. She lowered her kite any-old-how, unclasped the harness, and ran down the beach in immense, blurring-fast strides.

It didn't take her long to catch up to a woman who'd started running away. Laisenia gripped her shoulder, grabbed an arm, twisted it up her back, and then began frog-marching her back toward Johan.

There was silence from all the kids. They stared. Everyone on the beach stared.

The woman soon stopped struggling, and walked.

Johan could form only one coherent thought. Laisenia was going to be charged with assault and battery in the worst way. This was not good.

He brought down the kite he'd been working on and unclasped the harness.

"Call the police," said Laisenia, once she was close enough. "This one was mucking about with the kites." She nodded her head toward a specific kite.

The greasy-haired woman with bloodshot eyes hadn't been around some random old kite. She'd been around his.

"There," said Laisenia pointing. "I saw her doing something right about there."

He looked closely at the indicated spot on his kite, and saw that the insulation had been abraded on two of the lines where they met the parasail itself. The nanotech in the kite generated a weak current that could build up over an afternoon. At some point unknown, the charge would have leaped across the remaining insulation and given him a good size shock down his left arm and straight to his heart. Whether it would have been enough to cause fibrillation, who knew. But it only took a few minutes to drown if you were unconscious in the water.

He stared at the woman he'd never seen before.

"That could have been really dangerous," he said, inanely.

The police flitter landed. The officers booked the woman for attempted murder, took her into custody, photographed the lines on the kite, and then took that with them too. It was evidence they said. He'd get it back whenever.

Great.

"You can use the kite you lent me," said Laisenia, watching the expression on his face.

He shook his head.

"How did you know?" That's what he really wanted answered. "I was right here and I didn't notice a thing."

"You learn to keep an eye on your kite during competitions. Not that sabotage is really an issue, but you don't want some pinhead twisting your lines or standing on the parasail and tearing something."

The world still had that sharp-edged clarity of adrenalin. At least now he knew that the gang had gone past toying with him. He took a few deep breaths.

"Well, Laisenia, you've said once or twice that I saved your life. I still

disagree, but even if it was true, we're even now, that's for sure."

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Chapter 17

Something about Laisenia seemed to make troubles melt away. She didn't have a care in the world, and it was catching. The fact that in reality she had cares even bigger than Johan's only made it more catching than ever. While she was around, he'd find himself laughing, as if he was back in the Islands, working on flight resonance, and watching her take an especially spectacular flop into the water.

She was more than a hit with his kitesurfing friends, and Johan found his world expanding back out again. Sometimes he even forgot about the gang, their stupid messages, the useless cops, and the worse than useless Melrys. Until the day someone stole Nalini's phone.

He didn't know that was what had happened. He just got a text message to come quick and take her away from some dreadful dive in the south part of town. Was this really an emergency? Or was this her concept of how you asked for a ride?

She didn't answer when he called back, and her phone, he thought, must be smashed because he couldn't leave a message. He tried to reach his parents to see if they knew anything, but his mother was in a meeting, and his father was at work. He finally reached him there.

His father didn't dither at all.

"I'm pushing the red button right now, son. Nalini's never even been to Santana. She doesn't know anyone there. Not as far as I know."

That's the problem, thought Johan. *There were lots of things parents—and brothers—didn't know.*

He said he'd call around to her friends, see if any of them knew anything, while his father dealt with the cops.

Calling kids Johan barely knew was a thankless task. This was a time when he really did not want to listen to toad-like ringers or to leave messages. He reached a girl on his third try, but she didn't know where Nalini was. The girl seemed to be chewing something while she talked.

"She usually goes to Barry's on Fridays," she said, as an afterthought.

"Who's Barry?"

"It's a place. Music and coffee and stuff."

He looked it up. It wasn't in Santana. When he called there and asked for her, Nalini came to the phone. She didn't understand what he was in a sweat about. All that had happened was she'd lost her phone that morning.

"Why didn't you let us know!"

"Well, it's no big deal, is it? I was going to let you guys know when I had a minute."

He called his father back to let him know the cops weren't needed, and then he continued talking to Nalini.

"You didn't lose that comm. It was stolen, just so they could send a message that looked like it came from you so that I'd go to a place where they'd have an easier time getting at me."

The good news was that the gang was still targeting him, not his sister. The bad news was that they could obviously get at anyone in his family just as easily.

Johan talked to Nalini long past the point when he realized she was all right. It wasn't just his brain he had to convince. It was his heart.

"I'm going to come to the house for dinner tonight," he said. "I'll see you there, okay?"

"Yup. Later."

She sounded unconcerned, and Johan suddenly felt old. The gang had stolen his immortality, along with everything else.

He felt bad during the whole train ride home. He felt worse when it turned out Laisenia wasn't there yet. He needed her right now. He needed someone cheerful, who would tease Nalini, and make everything normal again.

Instead, his mother called from the living room to ask whether he knew where she was. Dr. Koiyama was calling to find out why she'd missed class.

"Laisenia isn't answering her calls?" he asked, knowing what his mother would say before she said it.

"No."

This was all he needed. He wanted to pound something. Instead, he tried to call Laisenia, even though he knew it wouldn't do any good. His brain was too busy to talk sense to his fingers, which were pushing buttons. Laisenia had got one of the scum arrested. The only surprising thing was that they hadn't targeted her earlier.

Then he heard a beep, which meant he could leave a message. In that case, she just had her comm turned off. It wasn't dead.

But why did she have it turned off? It was totally unlike her to skip dinner without letting anyone know. She might have grown up on a taro farm, but her manners were fine. It was even more unlike her to let Dr. Koiyama down. That was so strange, Johan almost pushed the red button on his comm. The only thing that held him back was that he didn't know where to tell the cops to go.

Where could she be? She didn't know all that many places in Gabriel. She

went to the clinic, hung out at the University, stayed at Johan's parents', and kitesurfed. That was about it. If she'd lost track of the time, gabbing with a bunch of friends, then there was no reason to have her comm turned off. If she was out kitesurfing, likewise.

Something had to be wrong. The only one of her normal haunts where she might be with her comm turned off was Monk's Beach. It was the place she knew best, and she said once it reminded her of home. He'd go check it out before calling the cops.

He rented a flitter for the purpose. To hell with the expense. If she wasn't there, and something was really wrong, spending an hour on the train before he found out was a bad idea. Minutes later, he heard the whine of the machine landing in the street outside, as close to the signal from his comm as its programming allowed.

"Here," said his mother, running after him with a container. "Take some dinner."

Dinner? He wasn't hungry in the slightest. But he took the container. His mom was probably right. Once he did get hungry, he was going to be ready to eat the flitter's upholstery because breakfast had been his last meal.

The sun had set and the sky was a blaze of pink as he parked the flitter carefully in the beach lot. He stopped at the iris scanner to pay the enormous fee, and walked out to the sand.

He saw her before he even really started looking. Laisenia was the sort of person who was easy to see. She was quite a ways down the beach, standing motionless, looking out at the rim of the world.

She seemed okay. But odd. Something was definitely wrong. He trudged toward her through the sand, while he sent a message to his parents.

She noticed him before he was half-way. She turned, but didn't move, not to walk toward him, nor to walk away.

He came up close enough to speak to her, but she said nothing. She nodded, and looked back out to sea, her face set as if she'd never smiled in her life.

He had no idea what to say. He'd been planning to ask her why her comm was off, but now that he saw her, he thought not. Besides, Islanders would probably consider it a rude question. Unless she volunteered the information, it was her own business why she didn't want to speak to anyone.

The sky turned deep turquoise overhead, and the brightest stars began to sparkle in the twilight. Then the color turned to deep blue, shading to black in the east. More and more stars came out until they were scattered like brilliant dust, and the great arch of the galaxy crossed the whole sky.

"It gets cold here at night," she said.

"Yeah. You need a high heat setting on your clothes for sure."

She looked at him strangely. "A high heat setting."

"Well, yes. Don't Islander clothes have different settings?"

"Some Islander clothes don't have any settings. They're just cloth."

"Are you telling me you're standing here with the wind blowing off the Arctic current, and you don't have heated clothes at all?"

"Yes," she said.

"Oh, for—. Here, take my jacket. No, no. Take it. I'll just push the heat tab on my shirt. Great Mother of God, as the Islanders would say. Don't you ever let anyone know what's bothering you?"

"No," she said. She wrapped her arms close to her body to get as much heat from his jacket as she could.

Was she telling him she didn't want to talk about the big issues either? In that other situation that seemed more similar by the minute, the one on the small crescent of beach full of land crabs, she'd simply asked him. Maybe he could do the same.

"Laisenia, tell me to mind my own business if you'd rather not talk about it. But if you don't mind telling me, what is it that's bothering you?"

She finally stopped gazing at the ends of the earth and gave her full attention to him. She even tried to smile, although it never quite reached her eyes.

"Let's go sit down on the dry sand," she said, nodding further up the beach.

They each brushed away the topmost, coolest layer, so they could sit on the sand that still held the warmth of the daytime.

"Dr. Koiyama talked to me today."

She stopped there, so he asked, "Bad news?"

"Sort of."

When she was ready to continue, she did.

"The problem with spontaneous mutations, like mine, is that the symptoms don't tell you much about the mutation itself. Mine's unique. It produces an even weirder protein than usual. Doctor Koiyama showed me color-coded pictures of the whole process. She seemed quite excited about the whole thing."

Laisenia did not sound excited. Not at all.

"Whereas you, on the other hand"

"I wouldn't care one way or the other. But it means she's going to need to use a designed drug to deal with that aspect of it. That means all sorts of special stuff which is very expensive and overdraws the budget for the course for this year. So if I want to get this over and done with, I need to find the money to fill in the blanks, or I can find the money to make another trip out next year when she'll have new funds for next year's class. She said that would complicate the treatment, but it 'should still work.' That's what she said. 'Should still work.'"

"So this is about money? Or is there more?"

"Money is plenty," muttered Laisenia.

"Look, I'm sorry to be thick about this. Just explain it to me, okay? Why are you going walkabout over a lack of stupid money?"

"Johan, I've been working for five years, off and on, and I saved up enough to

pay for this one trip. I don't have anything left. My family might be able to raise a tenth of what I need. I can't do it this year. I can't do it next year. I can't do it."

"You don't have to carry this all by yourself, you know. The whole kitesurfing community here is nuts about you. We could hold a fundraiser, or something. A bake sale. I don't know. But I bet lots of people would want to help."

"Maybe. But then I'd have to ask them."

"Is that a problem?"

"Johan, you may not have noticed, but I hate to beg. I really, really, really hate to beg."

It struck him that this explained a lot about her: her self-sufficiency, her confidence, and especially her air of not having a care in the world. She didn't ask anyone for anything. Not sympathy, and certainly not money.

"Laisenia, I know this is horribly blunt, but ... do you hate begging even more than death?"

She smiled a bit again, another one of those that didn't reach her eyes. "Yes, I thought about that. It seems really stupid when you look at it from that angle. And yet ... well, I'm not dying now. Or at least, it doesn't feel like it. So, yes, I do hate it more. That's why I'm here. Trying to convince myself I have to start asking. Trying to figure out what to ask and who to ask and where to ask."

"Look, how much money is Dr. Koiyama talking about?" He knew some of the designer drugs could cost tens of thousands of dollars.

"Five ... thousand."

Five thousand. Before he'd gone haring off to Doha, he'd had more than that in his personal bank account. If there was time, he could accumulate it in less than a year at his job. But she needed it now.

Well, he knew one person—two people, actually—whom he could ask for anything, whom he always had asked for anything. He pushed a button on his comm.

"Who are you calling?"

"My Dad."

"I can't ask him!" She looked horrified.

"You're not asking him. I am."

"But—"

"Hi, Dad. Just a second." Johan pushed the mute. "Laisenia. Honestly. Can't you see I'm on the phone?"

He smiled a bit and stood up to wander down toward the surf to have a private conversation.

"Dad, this is actually another call, if you know what I mean."

"How so?"

"I need rather a lot of money, and I need it now. I'll pay you back, but it'll take me a while."

"And what's it for?"

He didn't know exactly what to say. If Laisenia didn't want to talk about it, it wasn't up to him to go rattling on about things. He'd learned that by now.

"Um, a new full-nanotech kite with self-furling lines and programmable patterning."

"What's to stop you from saving up for it, son?"

For the first time in this conversation, his father sounded less than entirely sympathetic.

"Look, Dad, it's got nothing to do with kites. But I do need it. And I need it now."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No, Dad."

"Is it something to do with Laisenia?"

Johan hesitated, and then decided there was no point trying to pretend otherwise.

"Yes."

He heard his father chuckle.

"You have good taste, son. Take after your old man, don't you?"

"Dad," said Johan, then took a breath and continued. "Laisenia's my friend, not my lover." How many times was he going to be repeating this? Why did everyone, except Laisenia herself, jump to this conclusion?

His father said nothing.

Johan repeated the point.

"She's not interested in me that way, Dad. You know she only started talking to me because I'm from here and she was trying to figure out how to get treatment. I mean, we get along and we're good friends, but she doesn't feel that way about me."

He heard his father make a sound, something between a "hmpf" and a chuckle.

"And there, all these years, I've been thinking you got your brains from your mother. The joke's on me."

There was a pause, and Johan realized that, in the nicest possible way, his father had just called him stupid.

"Anyway," his father continued, "I'm transferring the money now. Let me know what's going on when you can."

"Th-thanks, Dad."

It took a minute or two for the sum to show up in his account, and then he made it over to Laisenia.

He sat back down next to her.

"Okay. Look at your account."

She fiddled with her comm band. Then she stared for the longest time at the little screen glowing into her face. Finally, she turned the backlight off and they sat in the dim grey glow of the rising moon. It was a day or so past full.

"You're really something, Johan. Even when you're ruining someone's life,

you're the kindest person I know."

She might as well have slapped him. He breathed in, sudden and fast ... and stopped himself. He tried to answer as mildly as he could.

"She seems to be pretty much over it by now," he said.

"Oh, yes?" said Laisenia, staring at the sea with too much intensity. "How would you know?"

Johan began sifting sand, disconcerted. He hadn't realized she and Aliya felt that much for each other. Or even that there was that much to feel bad for. At this point.

Laisenia kept staring at the edge of the world with a frown so fierce and fixed that Johan tensed again.

Then the gears of his mind finally engaged, and he decided there was no way she could be that angry about what had happened to Aliya. She'd never given any sign of being angry at all, so why would she explode now? This must not be about Aliya at all.

Laisenia shifted position, stopped staring, and slumped a bit.

"I'm sorry, Johan. I've been wound so tight about all this, I'm not myself. I shouldn't have said that. Forget it. All right?"

"It's—it's not—no worries," he managed to remember to say, while all the thoughts in his head raced around like flies in a jar, not getting anywhere.

There was only one thing that could explain it.

Everybody else was right, and he was wrong.

How would you know? She'd said. If he'd shown, time and again, that he never knew how she felt, then he wouldn't know, would he?

If he never had any idea how she felt, then it would feel like a life being ruined. He knew how that went.

But, for God's sake, he wasn't that stupid. Was he? She would have given some indication, *something*, that showed she was interested. He should have at least noticed her looking at him every now and then.

Of course, he'd done his best never to look at Briony for a fraction of a second too long either.

He remembered the way Laisenia had tried to give him the best of everything when he visited her home. He remembered her soul-saving gentleness during those hours they'd spent on the small deserted beach. He remembered how unhappy she'd been there.

She'd said, "*Oh, that's nothing*" about spending days to rescue him from himself. It would be nothing, compared to the superhuman effort involved in hiding her feelings. He knew how that went, too.

She was unhappy now, with exactly the same air around her.

Every memory he had of her recrystallized along the new lines, and it gave him the same sense of clarity as an elegant mathematical proof. His old theory required a large number of steps. This new one required only a few, and it explained everything.

He remembered how he'd felt the first time she'd hugged him, on another beach long ago, too happy to stop herself.

Now he felt as if a second tidal wave had hit him. This one was pure desperation to do something about it. Not to waste another single solitary second.

But he couldn't. He couldn't just start kissing her. She'd think he was insane. And then there was the small, or, actually, big problem of how to lose his erection.

That was definitely no way to start. He had to stop thinking about the feel of her.

Well, one simple remedy was to remember that back home she had a whole stable full of fellows. What about them?

And yet, try as he might to worry about them, he couldn't. They weren't here, and she hadn't found any in Gabriel, and he couldn't bring himself to care. Nothing existed in the universe except making love to Laisenia.

Why had it taken him months to be overcome by her perfection? His mind had been full of Briony. He'd been fixated on regrets about Aliya. And there was also the obvious fact that he was an idiot. How else to explain his inability to see a woman who was poetry in motion?

The longer he hesitated, the more difficult it became to do anything. He hadn't moved, and he felt as if he couldn't. He shifted position a tiny bit, pushed his right foot forward through the sand a tad, his left foot back. For a moment, he almost launched into babble about flight resonance, but he managed to stop himself in time.

She was sitting to his left, a darker shape in the dark, his jacket oddly large on her. Her arms were clasped around her knees, her chin resting on her forearms, and she still had the fixed frown, made sterner and blacker by the moonlight.

She looked like she was locking herself down against any outbursts ever again.

He turned to face her, and asked,

"Are you tying yourself in knots for me?"

She glanced at him, startled. Then she looked down at the sand between her feet. He saw the grip of her hands tighten and the muscles in her shoulders tense underneath the jacket.

"Trying to," she said to the sand. "Not doing very well, obviously."

He reached over and stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers.

"Good," he said. "I'm glad you didn't do well, just this once. I'm only sorry it took me so long to figure it out."

She turned to him with such a flare of hope and desire, he felt it as heat.

When she wrapped her arms around him, she obviously wasn't the shy type. The warmth he felt from her outclassed his feelings in solitary, so to speak, as flame does glowworms. And she liked the result, judging by the way she

pressed against him. Everything about her was wine for the soul.

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Chapter 18

Two months passed by in a heartbeat. Laisenia moved to Johan's apartment the very day after he finally understood her. She had so few things, she seemed to take up no space at all, and yet the whole place went from being a set of walls to something he ran toward after work. Even the gang ceased to matter. Messages arrived on his phone, and he didn't care. He just erased them. Work began to seem like fun. Noor muttered darkly that if she had to watch him fizzing all over the place much longer, she was going to "take steps." But she never did. His money finally had a purpose, although Laisenia wouldn't let him buy her half the stuff he wanted to. He felt higher than his own kite at maximum extension.

Today, she'd gone for her last checkup. She was pronounced cured. After the first flare of happiness, he thought ... great.

Now she was going home in a week.

He'd been trying not to think about her going home. He'd been trying not to think about her going home to more men than he cared to count. He hadn't said anything. He hadn't asked her anything. He hadn't done anything that would have interfered with enjoying the few months he had with her and not thinking about the future.

He met her at the clinic so they could go have a night on the town and celebrate. She was glowing.

"Johan, I feel like I could jump over mountains. I'm going to have a normal life! I could have kids!"

She looked down, smiling at the pavement.

"We could even, if you wanted, you know, start a family."

It was like a repeat of hearing she'd been cured. The flare of joy, thinking she was saying that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, and the dying of it when he reminded himself what Islanders meant by "family."

She glanced up from the pavement, and he saw the glow vanish from her face.

She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, apprehensive, and raised her hands, palms out.

"I'm not, you know, trying to push you into anything," she said. "I mean, I know we're too young for all that and everything. It's not a problem. I'm just so used to living on a triple-quick track. It's all right. Forget I said anything."

No, he thought. No, no, no, no, no. That wasn't what he meant at all. He didn't want less. He wanted more. More than the rest of her life. He wanted to be the only one in it. What would she say if he could finally bring himself to ask? Look at him, probably, and let him know he didn't own her in a way that would give him nightmares for weeks. Years.

He couldn't find words, and she'd already turned away and started walking on. He could either walk with her, or ... or start asking questions.

Maybe she wasn't the only one who never asked for anything. He didn't know where to start. He didn't know how to start.

Would this be going better if they'd had more practice talking about these huge things? But before it had never mattered. Now it felt like silence.

The silence grew. Everything began to matter.

"Where are we going?" she asked, as if they were having a normal conversation.

"I—I was thinking of Mona's." The words felt like pebbles dropped into a vast chasm. Nothing changed in the huge silence.

There was another problem besides men. Maybe an even bigger problem. She'd said "kids," plural. The only way he could stay in the Finleys would be if she was willing to give up her right to one of them.

Had she meant she didn't want to give up any? How could he ask? *Am I more important to you than one of those children?* What if he couldn't stand the answer?

Now it was him, looking at the pavement as they walked. Maybe he could ask something else that meant the same thing.

"Lali, have you thought about maybe just staying here?"

"Staying here?"

He glanced at her to see disbelief on her face. *Why the hell would anyone want to do that?* was written all over it.

Well, that answered that question.

"It's—it's not that bad here, is it?" It was the only useless thing he could think to say. The real question refused to come out: *Don't I mean that much to you?*

She looked at him wonderingly.

"You're the one who forgets things because of threats on your phone, and you're asking me that?"

Yes. He was. But she was talking about him. He'd been talking about her. It wasn't that bad for her.

Or maybe it was. He remembered his despair at a life sentenced to begging children and gross door handles. He wasn't a child and he wasn't a female, and he would have given anything not to live in a world like that. He did, as a matter of fact, give everything he had at the time.

Gabriel wasn't Doha, but there was a sameness deep under the skin.

And he lived in that, like a fish in water, not even knowing what it was. Except that he'd always felt suffocated. Because he wasn't actually a fish.

He'd go on living in it forever, and six days from now he'd watch her fly away forever, happy to be going home.

There were worse things than silence.

"I'm sorry, Lali. I shouldn't be making heavy weather at a time like this. We're supposed to be celebrating. I was thinking, after Mona's, we'd go to the Zero-G fair—you've been wanting to see that since you arrived—and then, maybe, head home?"

Once upon a time, yesterday for instance, her smile would have lit the street on hearing him suggest going home.

Now she said,

"Yes. That sounds good."

The sun, in its usual fashion, went round and round, totally ignoring the fact that he desperately needed more time.

He couldn't find words. She didn't seem to need any. Nothing cracked her self-possession. If she'd once asked, "So tell me, what's wrong?" he could have begun to talk, even if it was just babble at first. But she didn't. Once upon a time, she wouldn't have needed to ask. She would simply have read his mind. But whatever she was reading from his mind now wasn't something she wanted to talk about.

He managed to work up the courage to ask her, mumbling into the curve of her neck after they'd been making love like there was no tomorrow, which there wasn't.

"Lali, I wish you weren't leaving."

He felt her arms tighten around him.

"I wish I wasn't leaving you, Johan."

"So what's gone wrong between us?"

He felt her go very still, like someone counting carefully to ten.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

She took a deep breath.

"It happens all the time. I thought one thing. You thought another. It's nobody's fault."

"I wasn't thinking in terms of fault," he muttered.

"I know. I know. And anyway, if there is any fault, it's probably mine. Getting way ahead of everything."

"Lali, when—when you said 'family,' you meant in the Island sense?" He had to know this, without any guesswork.

"Well, sure. What other sense is there? A group of people who love each other, is what I meant."

At least she was up front about it. He hadn't realized that he'd been hoping it

was all a misunderstanding. He hadn't known a whole world could fracture in a second, without a sound. He couldn't shape any question, any remark, any words at all.

The corners of her mouth turned down, as if she'd expected him to like her explanation.

Women.

He reached out and held her, as if by that means he could make shattered perfection whole again.

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In the morning, it took her half an hour to pack, and they were headed toward the clipper port as if it wasn't a fatal thing to do.

There was a whole mob to see her off. His mother and father and Nalini. Two nurses from the hospital, three other patients, and about seven students. Most amazingly, five of the kids from Rosepark showed up, including Jamie, class brainiac. They all rode out on the shuttle, and looked around the blimp, and now they were all at the foot of the gangway, waiting for the blue flag to go up.

The only thing Johan wanted to say was to beg her not to leave, but how was he supposed to do that in front of a mob? He couldn't say anything that mattered, she couldn't say anything that mattered, and instead she was talking to the people gabbling all over the place.

His comm band vibrated and he glanced at it. Then he stared. The ID said "Noor Sharifa." It was a text message. The whole thing was only one word long. "Help."

The coordinates were plain as day. If the slicers ran true to form, it would be a dive far from any chance of rescue. He looked up the location, and it was right in the middle of the worst territory in Greendale. There wasn't even a dive there. There certainly wouldn't be any rescue.

The gang must be crazy to think he'd go charging off to a place like that because of a one-word text message. And Noor wasn't his sister. Why in hell would they think he'd race into the jaws of death for her? They had no way of knowing she'd helped save his life once.

Come to think about it, they had no way of knowing he knew her at all. So it made no sense for them to be sending him messages as if they came from her.

But if it wasn't them, then who? There was only one person who used Noor's phone and that was Noor. And if she was sending out cries for help, then the end of the world was near.

That led to a new rat's nest of questions. If this was really Noor, and if she'd gotten in some kind of trouble with her slicer friends, then did he really want to help? He supposed he could at least call back and see what she had to say.

Except he couldn't. He got a recording saying her voicemail was full. Did he

want to send text? No, he did not want to send text. He pushed the off button much too hard. She must not have checked her messages in a while, which was odd, because he'd seen her at work just—actually, now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen her in a few days.

He had to find out what was going on here. Maybe Aliya would know. Those two were as different as different could be, and yet there was a kind of alliance between them, as if they could communicate beyond the range of human hearing. There was nobody else he could ask.

"You couldn't have called back on that later?" he heard Laisenia ask him.

When he looked up, she glanced at his comm with the set look she sometimes got.

Here he was, fooling with his comm while she was leaving his world forever. But it wasn't like that. She'd been talking to everyone else. And the message How could he explain his whole life, and Noor's place in it, and the strangeness of the message, and how it might be a hoax, or it might not—how could he explain everything with a crowd milling around? With no time at all?

"It's not like that," he said, with a feeling of futility.

"Oh?"

Her self-control came back and Johan felt it like a physical shove. A bland smile appeared on her face.

"Don't think twice," she said, forestalling the protests he floundered around trying to find. "It's all right. Come visit if you'd like. There'll always be room."

The blue flag was hoisted at the end of the blimp.

He gave the love of his life one last hug, and she gave him one that felt no different from what she'd give to some Islander acquaintance.

She was walking up the steep, inclined plank, with the cross-bars tacked on every half-meter or so to make sure nobody slipped. She reached the top and went inside. She didn't hang around at the railing waving goodbye. She went inside and disappeared.

Johan sat down on the grass of the blimp's landing field, unable to follow, unable to leave. Most people got into the shuttle to go back to the terminal. Yes, he told his mom, he'd be home for dinner tonight. The Rosepark kids stayed, clowning around, waiting to see the blimp take off and float away.

Johan could have used some clowns. He needed something to fill the gap where his heart used to be.

There was nothing to do but wait until the blimp cast off its mooring lines. Maybe Laisenia had had to visit the bathroom or something. Maybe she'd come out and wave goodbye in a minute.

He might as well see what Aliya had to say. It would be something to do.

Sven answered.

Great, though Johan. Just great.

"Hi. This is Johan. I need to speak to Aliya."

"Do you."

The voice couldn't have been colder.

"Yes, Sven. I do. There's something very strange going on, and she's the only one who might know what it is."

"Vai should she solf your problems all the time? Vai are you always disturbing her? Can you never solf your own problems?"

No, never. He was, after all, an idiot. The blimp was now rising in the sky with no tall dark goddess standing at the railing and waving. That was proof enough.

There was silence at the other end.

"Look, Sven, make it a conference call, if you want. But I really do need to ask Aliya something."

There was another silence, a shorter one.

"Vait."

A few moments later, he heard Aliya's voice.

"Johan?"

The blimp turned toward the southwest, he couldn't see Laisenia anywhere, and the people who were standing at the railings grew tinier by the second. In no time, they'd all disappear.

"Aliya, listen, I—I—where was I?—listen, I just got a strange message from Noor. It says it's out of, uh, Greendale. Do you think she could really be there?"

"Umm Leila went there a lot. She once told me that it reminded her of the old place."

"I thought she hated Hillafa. Why would she go somewhere that reminded her of it? That's an odd kind of homesickness."

"She never talked about it. She was doing something with the police there."

"The *police*? The *police*? Are you sure?"

"I think so. They called her once about something to do with Greendale when she was at my place."

"Maybe she was involved with some of the bad people out there, and they had questions."

"I don't think so, Johan. When she said it reminded her of the old place, she was talking about the people. You know how Noor is. She would cut them to ribbons if she could."

But, then, if Noor was in cahoots with the police—for whatever unimaginable reason—why was she trying to get him out to Greendale? Why weren't the police flying in?

"Aliya, you may not know the answer, but, how should I say this?, what's Noor's attitude to me? I mean, as you say, when Noor's mad at someone, you get the feeling she'd shred them. Am I somebody she thinks needs to be taught a lesson, or something?"

"Umm Leila? Johan, are you crazy? She owes you a life-debt. She would repay it with her own life, if you needed it."

"Oh." *Then why was she trying to get him into Greendale?*

If everything Aliya said was true, the only answer was that Noor's world must be ending. She was that desperate for help.

"Aliya, thanks for telling me all that. I have to try to reach Noor now."

"What's going on?"

"I don't actually know. But as soon as I do, I'll let you know."

"Good, Johan. Glad I could help. Inshallah."

The Dohan goodbye. She didn't use it with Gabrielites. Nor with Sven, not yet, anyway. Somehow, that made Johan feel better.

Meanwhile, he had to find out more about what might be going on with Noor before he called the police. He stood next to Jamie as they all boarded the last shuttle taking visitors away from the blimp site.

"Jamie," he said as quietly as he could, "I need your help on something. Do you know the area around 5th and Golden?"

"No shit. You serious?"

"Why? What goes on there?"

"It's only totally covered in Hoodies. Why you wanna go there?"

"I don't. A friend of mine seems to be there. She sent me this." He took the irrevocable step of showing Jamie the message.

"No shit."

"Before I call the police for her, I want to find out what I need to tell them."

"Cops? I don't think so," said Jamie with an incredulous look at Johan's stupidity. "I toldjah. The place is covered in Hoodies. They know the place, and the cops sure don't. Sendin the cops is like signin her death stifficate."

"Well, then, how the hell is she supposed to get help?"

Jamie looked at him for a long second.

"A coupla my friends might get you in. Then you could help her get out. But no mob scene. I sure as hell ain't doin this for nobody I don't know."

"Jamie, do I look like Superman? How'm I supposed to get her out if the cops can't?"

"My friends know every rat hole around there. You could take her out the same way they take you in."

Sure. Piece of cake. And yet. As Aliya had said, there was a life-debt here, on his part no less than on Noor's. None of them would have escaped Doha without her.

Besides, what else did he have to do, now that the blimp and everyone in it was gone forever?

"Jamie," he said. "Ask your friends to take me there as soon as they can. Here's the phone address that goes direct to my comm. Don't go spreading it around."

Chapter 19

He couldn't keep the simplest promise to himself. Johan had sworn he'd never set foot in Greendale again, and here he was, following Jamie and two of his friends, with the improbable names of Switz and LaBrea, through abandoned buildings and weed-choked alleys. The two girls chose the weedy alleys deliberately, because they provided cover. They seemed to feel that Johan made himself tall and broad on purpose to be hard to hide. Jamie brought up the rear and watched for pursuit.

Johan carried a backpack with energy food bars and water. The kids had nodded as if they knew all about it when he showed them the satellite picture of the building that matched the coordinates.

"Figured there was somethin crook there."

"Why?"

"Rats been actin funny for days."

"Days? If you've noticed, everybody's probably noticed. They've probably got her by now."

"Nah. Hoodies are stupid. Specially big ones. Too busy wavin guns aroun to see rats. An the slicers look more like they's huntin than guardin."

And he was walking into the pack. He wasn't even sure why any more.

Johan had one of his kitchen knives strapped to his right thigh, with a slit cut at the top of that pant leg so he could pull it out. What he thought he was going to do with it, he didn't know. He had no idea how to use a knife in a fight. Somebody would probably wind up using it to skewer him, but, illogical or not, having it made him feel better.

One of the girls waved him closer.

"We go into the pipes here. You ain't no closet freak, are ya, mister?"

A closet freak? No, he was a lunatic right out in the open. What the hell was this idiot child babbling about?

"Doesn' matter either way. 'S the best way to sneak in, so jus' hold your breath."

The girls went behind an excessively healthy stand of sow thistles, and disappeared. There was a caved-in gap in the pavement back there, and he

could see the dank, yawning hole of an ancient storm drain. It was the rainy season, and there was still a layer of sludge and crap at the bottom from the last storm a couple of weeks ago. If it rained, they could all drown. He dropped down into it. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to meager light filtering in from gaps in the roof of the drain. The size of the thing was not too bad for a ten year-old. For Johan, it was torture. The girls' contempt for his overgrown condition seemed to deepen.

Their steps, especially his, resounded through the pipe, accompanied by disgusting sloshing and sucking noises when the mud tried to take his shoes off. Every whisper was amplified and echoed. Everything stank.

According to Jamie, the "grownups" didn't know about this route. His friends were "runners," whatever that meant, and they were runners for the Chaingang rather than the Hoodies, so they used sewers rather than streets in this area.

Johan would have liked to know whether the girls were Jamie's friends in any normal meaning of the word, and how much he could trust them, and how much chance they had of getting out of this alive. Leading him in under the noses of the grownups seemed to be their idea of fun, nor had they objected to the money he'd given them. However, doubled over and crawling through a drain wasn't the kind of guide services he'd thought he was paying for.

The tunnel grew darker. It became almost pitch black. The girls took a smaller pipe emptying into the big drain from the right. They had to crawl. Johan lay flat and pulled himself forward on his elbows. At least it was dry in here. Up ahead was a faint patch of something. Johan stopped for a moment to try to focus it, Jamie bumped into his feet, Johan made an apologetic noise, and one of the girls hissed, "Shut the fuck up."

Just one more comment, and he was going to ... he was going to nothing. He was stuck in this pipe and if he made any noise, slicers would come swarming down and dissect him.

He continued inching forward.

The faint light became more than a hallucination. Johan wriggled out of the pipe into a trashed utility area that, as the lowest point in the building, had been accumulating garbage for decades. The ceiling sagged, and steps had been worn into the mound of junk, leading up to a cavernous room in the sort of building that might have been full of cubicles once.

"This is it," whispered the one whose name was LaBrea.

Then she and her friend went back into the sewer pipe.

"Good luck," said Jamie, and disappeared after them.

Great. Just bloody great.

He grasped the handle of his knife, made sure it would slide out, and tried to walk purely on air toward a door frame in the distance with a rectangle above it. The thing looked like it might once have been an "Exit" sign, and those were usually found near stairwells.

He had a heart stopping moment when he glimpsed a human shape out in the street, visible through a gap where a window had once been. He froze. The shape didn't reappear. He reached the door frame, saw stairs behind it, and plastered himself to the wall near it, listening for any sound.

The roaring in his ears felt large enough to mask the approach of an army. If he could hear just one noise, just a rustling leaf, he'd have something to go by. But better no noise than the sound of stealthy footsteps. He ducked into the stairwell and started going up.

"Umm Leila," he whispered on the first landing, looking out on a trashed hallway with a very dead mattress at the far end. The sound seemed loud enough to bring all of Greendale running. However, nothing came running, nothing moved at all. He listened again. He went up another flight, tripped on a crumpled plastic can, and stood stock still for minutes after the echoes of its fall died out in the stairwell. He didn't know how old the building was—a couple of centuries at least—but the stairs seemed to be the best preserved part of it. He supposed, if they were emergency stairs, that made sense. The whole building had only five floors. Was she even here?

"Umm Leila," he whispered on the next landing.

Nothing.

He listened again, and looked for shadows all up and down the corridor, as long and straight as a rifle range. "Umm Leila!" he said, with some actual sound in it this time.

A rat the size of a small dog came squeaking and scuttling down from the fourth floor, through a gap in the ceiling about halfway down the hall. It disappeared through a collapsed wall. Had somebody up there startled it?

He tiptoed up to the next landing. Who knew what, or who, was up here? He crept along the hallway toward the middle distance. He avoided one hole in the floor, and another one.

And then the muzzle of a goddamn cannon appeared around a door frame, and Johan threw himself on the rubble on the floor.

"Umm Leila!" he tried one last time, just in case, the gods willing, it was her. No way she'd mistake someone calling her by that name for one of Them.

An eternity passed. Two or three seconds at least. There was no sound.

As cautiously as a snail coming out of its shell, he lifted his head, and saw a woman's head poke out from behind a wall equally slowly.

It was her.

His whispered "Umm Leila!" and her "Johan!" met in mid-air. He hurried toward her hideout, pressing the red emergency button on his comm as he went.

Noor Sharifa tried to jerk his hand off his comm, and he stared at her. He assumed she'd gone mad.

"Dispatch," said a calm voice. "Fire, police, or medical?"

"Police."

"And what is the nature of the incident?"

"We're in a *desperate* emergency," he muttered. "Send a bloody battle cruiser. We could be attacked by a gang. Keep these coordinates in case I lose my comm."

"Check," said the voice. "Coordinates logged. Keep your comm turned on, if you can. How many of you are in danger?"

"Two."

After a few more seconds, the voice resumed,

"We should be there in about ten minutes. I'm coordinating the backup we need for that area right now. Get up to the roof, if you can. Otherwise, try to find a defensible position."

Yeah, right, thought Johan, standing in the corner of the large room and looking at all the holes knocked in walls, and at the crumbling ceilings and floors. *Easy for you to say*. But he took what felt like the first breath since he'd entered the building. Now it was just a matter of holding on.

"Call if you need to update us," said the dispatcher. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"Bye."

Sharifa, he saw, had sagged against a wall and looked utterly defeated. He took his backpack off, pulled out a water bottle—and felt it yanked from his hands. She was pouring it down her throat in great, choking gulps, half of it going down her neck.

"Umm Leila," he whispered urgently, as he held on to the bottle. He had to grab her other wrist when she tried to hit him. Then she sagged back again. She was muttering something, speaking in Arabic. One of the words, he could have sworn, was "Leila."

He led her to the wall, sat her down, made her drink in small swallows. She did anything he said, which was so strange in itself, he was afraid she truly had lost her mind. He produced one of the energy bars, but she only nibbled at it.

She made a line across her throat and pointed at his comm. It implied she thought his comm would kill her. He still couldn't believe she was now insane.

When he did nothing but stare at her, she took his wrist and pressed the mute.

Then she let out a sigh that seemed to start from her feet and just keep on going up.

"So," she finally said. "It's all over."

"I certainly hope so," said Johan. "I didn't see any of the gang, coming in, except maybe one. So maybe we can hang on for ten minutes."

"I won't let them take me alive," she said, picking up the bloody great automatic rifle from where she'd silently put it down so she could drink water.

The bizarreness was coming at him too thick and fast.

"Noor," he said, forgetting to call her Umm Leila in the stress of the moment. "Noor, listen. The police aren't coming for you. They're coming for the bad

people. Do you understand?”

She looked at him with a mad grin. She might start cackling any second.

“You think I’ve gone crazy, don’t you?”

The rash impulse to say no died on his lips. She might be mad, but her tolerance for blather still looked close to zero. And she had the gun.

“You have to admit, you make it seem like a good guess.”

“Johan, I went mad years ago, from grief. I’m no crazier than I’ve ever been, while you’ve known me.”

Was this reassuring?

“So what’s all that stuff about not being taken alive?”

“The police will deport me, when they find out what I’ve done. I’m not going back. I’d rather die.” She cradled the gun like her lost child.

“Noor, listen to me. You’ve been under a lot of stress, and you’re not thinking straight. The West wouldn’t deport a murderer to the Caliphate. We think they’re nut cases.”

“They are.”

“So quit worrying about that. Anyway, what have you done?”

“I was trying to infiltrate the gangs. On my own. Your stupid police kept telling me not to do it. But they weren’t doing it either. They weren’t really looking for them at all. Finally, one of the big vigilantes took me into her circle. I was at her house. I stole the memory out of her computer. They discovered me. But I’d found the gun by then, so I managed to get out.”

“So you stole the memory. Big deal. Nobody’s going to do anything to you for that.”

“Johan. You live in such a gentle world, I could weep. I mean that I shot my way out of there. I killed the main *afreet*, Johan. That’s why they were too scattered to follow me, at first. They stared at her, twitching and spraying blood, as if such a thing had never happened before. I could have killed them all.”

“Oh.”

“Are you sure the West doesn’t deport murderers?”

There was thick sarcasm in her voice.

“I—I don’t think so, Noor.”

That wasn’t going to be good enough, for her.

She’d held them off for days after blowing away their leader. Sometimes she seemed more like a force of nature than anything human. He tried to think.

“You used that gun?”

She nodded.

“They can tell by the bullets, or something, which gun was used, right?”

She nodded again.

“And I guess it’s got your DNA and prints all over it.” After another minute, he said, “We need to melt the thing down, God help us.” He glanced frantically one more time around the barren, dusty, rubble-strewn space, but no blast

furnace manifested itself. "Or," he said suddenly, "we'll drop it between the walls." He pointed at the hollow space between girders in a broken section of wall. He tiptoed over to look, and saw a gap that extended down through the floors. If he was lucky when he dropped it, the rifle might not snag on anything. "They could find it, but they probably won't." He stretched out his hand to take the gun.

"Now it is you who is mad," she said, making no move to hand over the weapon. "If you want this, you will have to get it over my dead body." Her expression didn't change when she continued, "And since I have the gun, that may be quite difficult."

"Noor, for God's sake,"—no, he had a better idea—"for *Leila's* sake, get rid of the stupid thing. It served its purpose. If the cops find it on you, the slicers might even get off because their lawyers will turn the trial into something about you. And if they hire really good lawyers, you might even wind up in jail for murder. If there's no gun, then you can say you don't know anything about any shooting. It was probably an inter-gang rivalry. You were terrified. You got the hell out. Here," he said, pulling the knife from alongside his thigh, "you used this. Only you're pretty sure you didn't actually wound anyone."

She had flinched as if he'd kicked her when he said "*Leila*." She started to think when he mentioned lawyers. But the knife decided her.

"That is quieter," she muttered. "And simpler." She handed him the gun and took the knife.

He tiptoed over. It was going to make noise, going down. Nothing they could do about that.

"Okay, time to get up to the roof, if we can." She didn't move. He stretched out his hand to her.

She still didn't move.

"It is over," she said again. "This is where I die. I will see my *Leila* again. And my mother. And *Ali*."

Johan leaned down, took her wrist, and pulled her up, gently, but he wasn't taking no for an answer. When he got that way, she just seemed to do what he said.

"Your plans don't fit with mine, Noor. I am not going to die." Although, considering that he'd lost the love of his life, he wasn't sure why he felt so determined about that. He'd just be damned if he gave the trash the satisfaction. "Now, get us up to the roof. You probably know the best way up."

However, she shook her head.

"I never went up there. You're much more visible to any heatseekers on the roof. I hid in there the whole time." She pointed toward a hole in the wall that had been a closet once. "I hid on a high shelf. They even searched through here and didn't find me. Do you have any more water?"

He gave her another bottle and another energy bar, and went back toward the stairwell. They were almost there when they heard a whistle out in the

street.

They froze.

Did it mean anything? It sounded like a signal, but did the signal have anything to do with them?

There was silence. Johan edged toward the stairwell. It was silent in there, too. He almost wished for the sound of running feet, so he could stop waiting for disaster and get it over with.

"Come on, Noor," he waved her to follow him. If the stairs dead-ended instead of opening onto the roof, they might as well give up.

They ran up a flight to the fifth floor, and the stairs went on. Thank God and the emergency exit laws. There was still a door up there.

It was stuck.

It would have to be. Johan lashed out at the thing in one enormous, frustrated kick with his heel. Everything happened at once. There was a huge gonging sound from the old steel door and a grinding noise as rotten mortar gave way. The whole slab of steel crashed down on the roof, throwing up a choking cloud of concrete dust.

Through all the noise, he could hear several whistles. They were after the two of them. They were definitely coming.

"Over there!" he said to Noor, pointing to a grove of mushroom- and cane-shaped ends to what had been huge air vents. They were big enough to offer some cover. Too late, it occurred to him that they were also the only cover, so anyone who came up here would know exactly where to look for them. However, as he hunkered down behind a gray pipe big enough for him to fall into, he felt the heat coming off the metal in the sun. That would hide them nicely from any heatseekers, so at least nobody would know exactly where they were hidden in the grove of metal.

Where were the damn cops? It had to have been ten minutes. He glanced at his comm. It had only been five.

"We will die," said Noor. "Without the gun, we will die."

"Yeah, well, we could have died with it, too." He had to get her off that topic. There was another whistle, somewhere inside the building. "Tell me about Leila."

"Leila," Noor sounded as if she was calling her daughter, not as if she was speaking to Johan. She reached into a shirt pocket, or her bra, and pulled out a print photograph.

It felt warm in Johan's hand. It showed a stunningly beautiful little girl with laughing eyes and dark brown skin. He realized suddenly that those symmetrical, delicate cheekbones echoed the uncompromising lines of Sharifa's face, and that if the laughing eyes froze hard, they would look like her mother's.

"She looks like you," he said, unable to keep the wondering tone out of his voice. Noor continued to stare at the picture with that shattered expression on her face. He saw now that only the hard freeze kept the pieces in place.

She took the photograph and put it back inside her clothes.

“Leila died of hemorrhagic fever when she was seven. Ali had been killed. He was Ethiopian. They wouldn’t admit her to a hospital when I brought her, until she was so sick, it was too late. That is all.”

That was all. An entire universe of pain. There was nothing else.

“How do people get this way?” was the only thing he could say. “Why do they get this way? What’s it all for?”

Before Doha, he’d thought that the problem was losing, but winning didn’t seem like much either.

There was a movement by the wrecked door to the roof. A gun muzzle was poking out, very cautiously, at floor level, with a mirror sight on it to allow whoever was back there to see around corners.

Of course, they still thought Noor had the automatic rifle. Well, she didn’t, because of his bright ideas, and if the cops didn’t arrive *now*, it was the end. He couldn’t even scan the horizon for friendly flitters, because the slightest motion would show their position.

A woman dressed all in black edged out of the door and looked around. She threw a startled glance backward, as if she thought she’d heard something, and then continued scanning the roof. She was nervous. Good. Feeling manic from the surge of adrenalin pumping through him, Johan almost chuckled at the thought of little old Noor Sharifa terrorizing a whole gang until they jumped at their own shadows.

The woman checked around the back of the hutch surrounding the top of the stairwell. Johan hadn’t thought of it, but that was cover of a sort, too. She adjusted an earhook and said something. Another woman appeared, without a gun. Even the gang had only a limited supply of the things.

They began to walk toward the vents, the one without the gun flanking the other one and slightly behind her. The one with the gun—some sort of big pistol—kept swinging it around to point at noises she thought she’d heard.

Johan was breathing. Noor made no sound. She crouched, tracking the pair as if she was the hunter.

Where were the cops?

Without any warning, silence became mayhem. Noor threw a chip of old concrete at the gun-toting woman’s face, boiled out of her hiding place and ran straight at her and her gun with an awful, blood-freezing scream.

Johan couldn’t move. The woman with the gun seemed to be suffering from the same problem. She stood there stupidly for an instant.

It was long enough. Noor jumped on her and Johan saw the knife flash out.

He finally unfroze. The other woman was close, charging toward the fighting pair, but she obviously didn’t know he was closer.

He leaped out, without any shouts, pounced on her, twisted both her arms up her back—and felt a horrible *pop* at the same instant the woman shrieked. He’d yanked her shoulder right out of joint.

He was so shocked, he almost let go. He'd never fought with a woman in his life. He hadn't realized they were so fragile.

Meanwhile, the woman with the gun, still trying to fight off Noor, heard the scream, got one hand free, the hand holding the gun, pointed it toward—

Without thinking, he slewed the woman he was holding in front of him, and the bullets plowed into her. The body jerked with the force of them, but it was a body.

No reason why he shouldn't go on using it as a shield. Carrying it, he ran at the struggling pair. The woman screamed at the sight. He dropped the corpse, yanked the gun out of the woman's and Noor's hands, and for a second, he stood there, panting.

Noor dove for the knife, which must have been knocked out of her hand, and—

"Noor! Don't! The police'll be here any second, just in time to book you for murder!"

The woman put her hands up slowly, but he didn't want her for anything. He could hear a thundering herd of feet running up the stairs, toward all the noise.

Where were the damn cops?

He jerked his head toward the vents, and he and Noor hid again as the woman scrambled toward the stairs.

"Stop pointing that thing at me," said Noor, and took the overgrown pistol out of his hands. He didn't argue. He had only the sketchiest idea how to fire it, based on nothing but vids.

A crowd of people, six?, eight?, came out just as the woman in black reached the fallen steel door. She was clutching her side, screaming, and pointing at the body and the vents.

Well, now it was really over.

Silence fell as the woman stopped screaming and started gasping. The gang looked around, calculating their next move.

Then Noor spoke so seriously she made it sound as if the whole wide world was watching.

"You fought well," said Noor.

Johan felt that he'd been given the only medal that mattered.

"Not half as well as you," he answered, as a shadow blotted out the sun.

A flitter hovered there. He must have gone deaf, if he hadn't heard it approach. With enough adrenalin, did ears, like eyes, focus on only one thing?

The gang started to scatter, and the flitter's loudspeaker bellowed an order to stop. They didn't. The crackle of immobilization electroshocks spread across the roof. Luckily, the gang was closer to the door than the vents, because Johan could feel the tingle even where he crouched. He now noticed two other flitters spreading tanglefoot in the alleys around the building. Except for the kids' storm drain, there was no way out. He wondered whether he should tell the police about that.

Slowly, he and Noor stood up. Despite his best efforts, she was meeting the cops with a gun in her hands.

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He might as well have been killed on the roof and no longer have any business in this world. Riding in the police flitter, with the blood of the dead woman still sticky on his clothes and caked and itchy on his hands, sounds hardly reached him. When he leaned back in his seat and it felt all lumpy, it took him a while to realize he was still wearing his backpack. Noor, on the other hand, was just Noor. Two bottles of water and two energy bars, and, except for the fact that she really needed a shower, she was just the same as ever. The police officer was commending her on her bravery, and Noor stated flatly,

“It means nothing.”

“Nothing! At last count,” the officer checked a screen, “we have fifteen arrests, and we’ll get convictions this time. That’s far from nothing. We’ve been trying to get something on these perps for years, in some cases. Some of them will probably turn state’s evidence. This’ll change everything.”

“It will change nothing. They won’t change. The air that breeds them won’t change. You,” Noor turned her glare on the officer, “are you changed?”

The policewoman stiffened and tried not to show it. Any second now, she would say, “Just relax,” and then Noor would strangle her. Johan, in his alternate universe, swaddled in dimensions where time ran differently and prevented his brain from working, couldn’t figure out what to say.

“It’s been a tough few days,” said the officer. “Things will look different after a good meal and a sho—and so on. Then you and Mr. Antioch can be debriefed.” She kept talking soothingly.

Noor said nothing.

Johan leaned all the way back and closed his eyes.

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Chapter 20

Johan missed Laisenia. He woke up, saw the bedroom walls, and missed her. He'd get busy, go to work, do things, and then, all of a sudden, he'd feel a shot that wasn't there, in the middle of his chest. His breath would stop, and he'd have to start all over. He'd even sent her a message.

"I miss you" was all it said.

After about a week, she sent one back.

"I miss you too."

She could have been a mirror that returned as much as he gave.

Six weeks had passed, and nothing had changed. The leaden loneliness had settled into his bones, and made him move slowly.

Time didn't dissolve the fog of shock after the Greendale ordeal either. He started having nightmares about the dead woman. At the time, she had been nothing: a danger, a shield, a weight. But in his dreams he heard her scream when he broke her arm, and felt her warm blood pour over his hands when she died ... when he caused her to die instead of himself.

Several times after Laisenia flew away, he thought he'd call her, ask how the flight was, and listen to what she had to say, since she was on speaking terms with Death. But he loved her far too much to talk to nothing but her voice, so he didn't.

Johan sat in the clipper port, on his way to a new job at the Simulation International headquarters in Tokyo, and knew he might as well have stayed right at home. He was making a habit of leaving places in the ridiculous hope that the memories would stay behind. But the screams echoed in his ears, and he couldn't move. Nothing changed. Nothing would ever change.

He was sitting in Yeshi's Tibetan Restaurant with a good view out to the edge of the clipper port. He saw the small, slow-moving dot of the Islander blimp coming in. He'd timed his flight so he could overlap with Briony returning for her second stint of field work in Gabriel. He thought it would be nice to see her again. He didn't ride out to the blimp to meet her when she touched down. He didn't go down to the door where the shuttle bus discharged its passengers.

When he did see her, standing at the entrance to the restaurant and scanning

the room for him, he realized he'd never understood until that moment how much everything had changed. She was a dear, good friend. The world didn't stop.

He waved to her, stood up to hug her, and sat back down. A waiter came to take her order, buttered tea and momo dumplings, and went away.

"Uff! I feel like I've never been away," she exclaimed.

He felt like he had never been here before. That had been someone else.

"How was your flight?" he asked.

"Great. And since I took the long way around again, I met Aliya's mother in Doha, like we'd arranged. I brought two huge boxes of stuff for her."

"She's together with someone now, you know," said Johan. "A Dane, named Sven. He's a pastry chef."

"Then they'll both enjoy some of the stuff in those boxes. I gather half of it is spices that Aliya can't find anywhere."

Briony asked about his job in Japan. He asked about her research plans and how close she was to getting her degree.

"Don't," she said. "Everybody—my adviser, my parents, my cousins, my friends— *everybody* except the other students who are also trying to get finished, asks when I'll be finished. If one more person asks me that, I think I'll scream."

He could see that she was joking, and that she also wasn't joking. He was trying to think of another topic, when she said,

"I saw Laisenia when she returned."

This time the world did stop.

"And ... how was she?" he asked carefully.

"It's very strange. It seems like now that she's cured, she doesn't know what to do with the rest of her life."

Yes, he knew how that felt. If only he and Laisenia could have felt the same about everything.

"Johan, are you all right?"

"What? Oh, sorry, I was just thinking about something. So, uh, what do you mean, doesn't know what to do with her life?"

"She just seems very subdued. I saw her kitesurfing one day, and she didn't do any acrobatics. Just went back and forth, looking like I probably look out on the water. One of the men she was sort of steady with even asked me, *me*, what was wrong with her. She's dumped them all, apparently, and avoids them. It's all very unlike her."

Johan had thought there was nothing but a hole where his heart used to be, but there was something there after all, and it hurt like hell.

"You know, Johan," came Briony's voice, "you aren't going to learn bistro math just by staring at tables."

What? What, if anything, was bistro math? He had a degree in mathematics, and he'd never heard of it.

"So," she continued, "what's the problem?"

"I have no idea what bistro math is."

"No, no, no. I mean why did you go off into L-space about her dumping all those guys?"

"Oh. That. I was just thinking that I kinda feel for them. I'm one of the ones she dumped."

"OH."

The silence stretched. Johan felt like he couldn't move. The waiter came by to ask whether they wanted to order anything else.

"Another tea, please," said Briony. "How about you, Johan?"

Another tea? Sure. Why not? What difference did it make?

He was taking too long, and she answered for him.

"Two teas."

When they arrived, she told him to drink his.

"It'll be good for you."

He did as he was told.

"Johan," she finally said, "I know it's none of my business, but, I'm sorry, you have to save a human life here. I'll die of curiosity if you don't tell me what happened."

He managed a wan smile. That was Briony all over, figuring out a way to make him talk by turning it into a favor for her.

"Nothing happened, really. Laisenia's the love of my life, but we didn't see eye to eye on groups, and so everything fell apart."

"Didn't see eye to eye? How so? You asked her to stop having sex with other men and she said no? That makes no sense. She's dumped them all."

"No. Not exactly."

"So what did she say, exactly?"

"Well, it started when she mentioned families. She'd just found out for sure that the treatment had done everything it was supposed to do, she was really pleased and she was talking about having kids, and then she said we could start a family."

"Crazy. She gave you veto power and then said she was having other lovers anyway? Johan, you are making no sense at all."

"Veto power? What veto power?" He stared at Briony, wondering whether this was one of the peculiar turns her conversation took sometimes, just to keep people off balance.

"Families," she said, as if that explained everything. She looked at him, waiting for him to stop being baffled. He didn't, so she raised her eyebrows a bit and went on. "Well, a family's a group of people who've made a commitment to each other, isn't it? Nobody's going to bring somebody else in unless everyone agrees. I don't see how Laisenia could be planning on a house bulging with boys, if you'd said no. Not if she was talking about families. I must not be understanding something."

Briony's meaning came toward him from far away, like an asteroid might. He could feel what was going to happen when it hit him.

If you said no ... there wouldn't be any other men She gave you veto power And long ago, in another lifetime, he heard Laisenia say ... *we could, if you wanted, start a family.*

His world shattered into a million pieces, and reassembled itself along totally different lines. He had misunderstood everything. He sat there, trying to figure out which way was now up.

Briony waved a hand in front of his face.

"You're supposed to be answering my questions, remember? What made her decide she didn't care what you wanted?"

"I—I don't know if she did. We never really talked about it after that."

"Never talked about it? What do you mean, never talked about it?"

"We just ... never talked about it."

The silence stretched. Briony looked at him as if she was trying to read his mind, and he stared down at the table, determined not to help her. There were things that couldn't be explained to a clear-eyed Islander. Or they could be, but he'd rather die than do it.

"So you just made up your mind, and didn't ask. And neither did she."

Johan glanced up to see Briony looking pretty sure of herself. She wasn't exactly right. He had sort of asked. But sort of wasn't the same as doing it. He could see that now.

She was right enough. He wondered how it would feel to be always right. Maddening, probably. She must spend all her time restraining herself from knocking sense into people.

"You're looking at me like I have two heads," he said.

"Or three. What I'm really thinking, Johan, is that I'll never understand foreigners, no matter how many field trips I take. How does anyone survive, if you never give each other the benefit of the doubt?"

There hadn't been any benefit. Just doubt.

The silence stretched again.

"Drink your tea before the butter congeals," she said.

Her advice came too late. The globules floating at the edges already looked milky and the only thing to do was to throw the whole thing out.

Throw everything out. Laisenia had told him he was the love of her life, and all he'd found to say was, *Oh, I don't think so.* No wonder she hadn't asked him anything after that.

He sat and talked with Briony for another hour or so.

"Well," she said, standing up, "I better let you get over to your terminal. Your flight leaves in a bit, right? And I still have to get all the way to my dorm without a native guide." She grinned at him, wished him all the best in his new job, and told him to keep in touch.

He watched her walk away down the concourse with yet more sense of loss.

Maybe the point to having family groups was that you could keep the people you loved around you, even when you no longer loved them in exactly the same way.

However, it wasn't a choice he had to worry about. The remnant of his buttered tea was now horrible, and he was due to fly to a "very promising career," as his father had put it. He looked at the distant midnight-blue airship with its green flag flapping in the breeze. If he'd asked the right questions, he might be traveling on it when it lifted off for the Islands in a while.

He remembered the sapphire water and the curling line of white surf enclosing the turquoise lagoons. He remembered the green mountains and the people flying over them. He'd flown there, too. He'd flown there with Laisenia.

He saw a vanload of passengers clamber out of a shuttle bus and head toward the gangway. Many of them wore those funny flowered shirts.

The fight never stopped. He'd thought, long ago, that fighting bad things was hard, but that was the easy part. He could just let himself go and do what he wanted, which was beat the crap out of them. Fighting for what was good was much harder. That meant putting himself out there, a target for all the nice comfortable people who couldn't see what the problem was, except that he was making one. But the biggest and the hardest fight, the one that went on and on and never stopped, was the fight with himself.

He hadn't given Laisenia the benefit of the doubt. He'd been afraid of something. Disappointment. He'd been worrying about himself. Not her. He'd taken the easy way out, and done it so quickly and quietly, he'd never noticed.

Noor was going to have to take her medal back. He'd failed the only real test.

The trouble was that he didn't want to fight, not in a bad cause and not even in a good one. He just wanted to live in the golden place where everything was right. He wanted it to be easy. But there weren't any shortcuts to get there.

Another shuttle bus rolled off with a load of passengers for the blimp. If he remembered right, there'd be one more set after this, and then the blue flag would go up.

He felt himself running toward it, running toward the curling line of white surf and the green mountains he'd flown over with Laisenia.

It's a bit late to be running now, said a cold voice in his head. *Now that you've lost it all.*

But did he know that? Or was he afraid to ask? Again?

His right hand moved to push the one call button that mattered on his comm, and then he stopped.

Would she even talk to him, after what he'd said? And what he hadn't said?

He might get over talking only to her voice, but he'd never get over the sound of nothing at the end of a dead connection.

He couldn't call her. Like Aliya had said, it was much too far away.

You can't dump your whole career to go racing off after a woman in the hope that she'll still talk to you.

The cold voice sounded less cold. Maybe it was even a bit frantic at the thought of the crazy thing his feet were telling him to do.

What would his father say? Or his mother? What would everyone say?

If he tried to catch the blimp, he'd be going out of his way, no question about that. He could make it to the last bus taking passengers to the blimp if he ran. He just had to decide which way to go.

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