

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 10 Number 5

Page 1 – THE WEIGHT OF A STAMP by Jennifer Peaslee. Ms Peaslee’s work has recently appeared in *Breath & Shadow*, *Every Day Fiction*, *BarBar*, and *Moonday Mag*. She lives outside Atlanta with her mischievous cat, Trouble, and runs The Bleeding Typewriter, a creative writing advice blog and online community.

Page 2 – VACANCY by Paul Cesarini. Mr. Cesarini writes, “My fiction appears in *365 Tomorrows*, *Aphelion*, *Andromeda*, *Antipodean SF*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, *Beast Hunt Anthology*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Black Sheep*, *the Creepy Podcast*, *Fabula Argentea*, *Freedom Fiction Journal*, *Intangience*, *MetaStellar*, *Mystic Mind*, *Pulp Lit*, *Savage Planets*, *Sci-Fi Shorts*, and *Tall Tale TV*, with stories in-press at *Close to the Bone*, *InterNova*, and *Mobius Blvd.*”

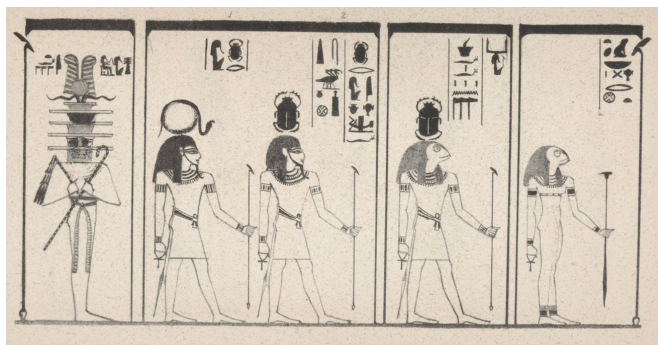
Page 10 – PETS by Walt Trizna. The author writes, “My name is Walt Trizna and I am a retired scientist having spent 34 years in research and have been 24 years as a writer.

Most of my stories have been horror and science fiction. My publications include a novel, *New Moon Rising*, published by M lange Books. This publisher has also published my novella, *Elmo’s Sojourn*, as an eBook and in a print anthology, *Curious Hearts*. I have also had 24 short stories published. I have a blog where I offer short stories, poems and the occasional essay. Everything offered is free.”

Page 14 – THE PARTING OF FRIENDS by Craig Woychik. Mr. Woychik is from a small town in the midwest, has occasionally been published, and is especially proud of his young daughter.

Page 17 – THE ROCHE LOBE ANOMALY (Conclusion) by Jeffrey M. Gaba. Prof. Gaba writes, “I am a retired law professor living in Santa Fe, NM with my wife and two dogs.

I taught environmental law for many years at SMU Dedman School of Law in Dallas and published extensively on environmental topics including articles, treatises, and casebooks on hazardous waste law. Sounds boring, but it put my kids through college. Writing Sci Fi is much more fun.”



“THE WEIGHT OF A STAMP”

by JENNIFER PEASLEE

The stale air of the Interplanetary Dynamics office reflected the collective mood of its desk jockeys. Ash Zendar, stewing in a stiff-collared uniform, barely glanced at the form in front of them before stamping approval for a three-cycle visit from the dangerous K’noth planet. Number nine hundred and ninety-eight.

Today, Ash’s five years on the job were going to pay off. Today, they would stamp their 1,000th consecutive approval and earn a bonus of ten thousand credits. Ash stamped a form allowing the transport of bog-standard goods between planets Daruta and Zyke. Nine hundred and ninety-nine.

The hairs on the back of their neck raised in anticipation. They glanced at the top of the next form, their hand positioned to stamp APPROVED before the ink on the last form had dried. With this, they would finally have enough for Gil’s treatment.

Then their stomachs dropped. They read the top of the form again. A request for sentient cargo transfer from Arth to Helian.

“Could be nothing,” they muttered. Request for sentient cargo transfer covered all sorts of applications, from prisoner relocation to discount travel arrangements. It also happened to be notorious for allowing the continuation of the sentient slave trade. And Helian was not a planet known for its liberal attitude.

Their hand wavered. They scanned the form

in its entirety and bit their lip. Under “reason for transport,” whoever completed the form wrote “indentured servitude enforcement.” Technically legal. Indentured servitude, while distasteful to many, opened the possibility of interplanetary immigration for those who otherwise could not afford it. But again, it was easy to hide unscrupulous acts behind the generic “indentured servitude” label. And “enforcement” had nasty implications.

But it wasn’t Ash’s job to administer the law. Their job was to approve as many forms as possible so that the company could make an obscene profit.

Ash began to lower the stamp. Gil’s face appeared in their mind. What would she say to this?

Ash grabbed the DENIAL stamp and pressed it to the form, sighing a little. They took the next form and read it carefully before stamping their approval. Number one. ❖

“VACANCY”

by PAUL CESARINI

“Hold on to your kidneys, ladies—this one’s gonna get messy!” Trina snapped, her voice sharp with urgency. She yanked her foot off the throttle and slammed the forward stabilizing thrusters. The ship jolted violently, screeching to a near-halt that sent every loose item clattering in the control room. In a seamless motion, she pivoted hard, wrenching the controls to avoid the pursuing ship from slamming into their lower cargo bay. The ion engines groaned under the stress as she pulled up sharply, flipping them over in an arc that left their pursuer shooting past them. Off in the distance, the base station appeared as a lonely spark against the silent expanse of space.

The familiar rush of adrenaline flooded her veins as her body pressed back into the flight chair, the ship vibrating under the strain. Equally familiar was the churn in her gut, a warning from her lunch about its potential escape trajectory. Trina risked a glance at Kels and Seo-yun, both plastered to their seats with identical wide-eyed grimaces. They weren’t screaming, at least—not this time. This was not their first rodeo. But, that didn’t make it any easier.

“Damn raiders – it’s the second time this week! My ship wasn’t made for this!” yelled Kels, white-knuckling what was left of her nails into the armrests of her chair. “Seo, tell the base we’re coming in hot and to get ready with their 88’s! Trina, hit ‘em with the retrieval arm!”

Seo-yun glanced over at Kels from her chair,

nodded, then got to work on comms. The ship shuddered beneath them, straining beneath Trina’s maneuvers. As it lurched, a loose hydropack spun around the cabin, in between them. Trina dodged it, then grabbed it and stuck the straw in her mouth.

“What is this – strawberry?!”

“Kiwi - Strawberry, I think. It was all they had at the last base station. It was either that or mango!” said Seo-yun, pulling-up another holo-screen and tapping some virtual buttons while sweeping her hair out of her eyes.

“Mango sucks! I don’t know what kiwi is but this is pretty bad, too!”

“So was my date last night!”

“Definitely want to hear about that after we dock!” Trina rocked the ship back and forth, trying to get a bead on their attacker. The ship in front of them, considerably larger than theirs, seemingly better-equipped, and considerably better-armed, dropped down low and started to pivot.

“Don’t let em’ turn – shoot the arm, now!” ordered Kels. Trina fired it off. The long spiral cable of the retrieval arm shot out from their ship and danced in a series of elegant concentric circles as it approached the target. The tip, a series of industrial magnetic hooks attached to an expanding base, quickly opened then latched onto the aft thruster of the other ship.

“They’re droppin’ again. Hit ‘em before they

snap the cable!"

"On it, Boss Lady!" Trina flipped two switches on the yoke and mashed down a red, worn button with her thumb. They could see the cable stiffening and swaying now as it filled with fluid. A trail of gel shot out from the tip of the retrieval arm, spraying everywhere but gradually sticking to the aft thruster. More gel pumped out, expanding until it covered the thruster completely.

"Disengage. They're done," said Kels, calmly, tying back her wiry grey hair.

Trina flipped a few more switches. The retrieval arm disconnected from the other ship, remnants of the gel crystallizing in the vacuum of space. As she reeled the cable back in, they watched as the other ship sputtered then stalled.

"Still don't understand how that stuff works, but I am sure glad it does," said Trina.

"Gums up their thrusters. Can't even repair 'em. It'll take half a cycle or more for them to overhaul their ship. Even better: it'll be wicked expensive," said Kels, grinning.

"Serves them right for trying to lift our cargo."

"We don't have weapons. These was the best I could cobble together. Anyway, glad it worked, 'cuz that was all we had. We'll need more before the next route. Seo, call the base constable. Let 'em know we won't be needin' the 88's after all. Give 'em the coordinates of that ship so they can pick up those asshats. No need for those guys to die out here. Space is lonely enough as it is." Seo nodded and pulled up another holoscreen.

"The pilot was female," Trina said, getting them back on course for the base.

"Female? Why? You find a flight manifest of their ship or somethin'?" asked Kels.

"Nope. I can just tell. She was good - too good to be a guy. Fewer and fewer guys even take flight training anymore. They can't be bothered

with all the math, all the testing, logging all that time - especially not when there's such easy access to manual labor, whiskey, and holoporn. Anyway, she was decent. Probably flunked out of flight school and didn't have much options outside of those dead-enders, but she was decent," she said, recharting a course to the base. "I'm better."

"You would know," said Kels, looking out the window. The disabled ship shrank into the distance, beyond the glass.

Kels fidgeted, puttering around the control room, anxious to get to their next stop. Her ship sat motionless, now docked securely to the base station. The stillness of the room was interrupted only by the periodic sound of Trina absentmindedly snapping her gum while laying in a bunk off to the side. Muttering, Kels shot her a glare, catching Trina in mid-snap. Trina looked up at Kels, sucked the gum back into her mouth, then grabbed a nearby tablet and immersed herself in flight plans.

The station's faint glow sent what almost seemed like daylight streaming in through the window. Lights from other ships of varying size and type, docking and departing, danced past them. Beyond the window, the black of space stretched endlessly, surrounding the sprawling station that held them. Kels glanced out, then grabbed a well-used headset and flipped down an eyepiece to review some data. "Cargo bay is empty. Can't leave until the new scrubbers get here," she said, staring at the readout on the display. "Co2 levels are already too high. We'd never make it to the next base."

"If we don't make the next delivery on time, they'll cancel our contract," Trina said, looking up from her tablet. Kels switched off the display then turned and faced her.

"You rather be broke, or dead?" she said, flip-

ping up the eyepiece. "I'm all for being efficient, but it's tough with a rig this old."

"Probably shoulda replaced those scrubbers before we left on this run," yawned Trina, from her narrow bunk behind Kels. She finished the hydropack then grabbed another.

"Couldn't afford it. Inflation's gone way up on most of the Homeland bases. Prices are a little better here with the U.N.A."

"For now."

"Package!" said Seo-yun, brushing her hair out of her face, entering the cramped flight deck. She dropped a small, flat box on the station nearest Kels then headed over to the ship ladder behind the main navigation array. "I'll be in Comms if anyone needs me."

"That'd be the new control module for the secondary cargo bay," said Kels. She grabbed the box and slit it open with a knife from her tool-belt. "Should be able to install it on the way to our last stop." Her voice trailed-off as she examined the module and rummaged through some pockets on her jumpsuit for additional tools.

"Whoa, whoa – hold on," said Trina, looking up at Seo-yun from her tablet. "So, how'd it go?"

"How did what go?"

"Y'know?" she said, smiling. "Your date."

Kels rolled her eyes, her back turned to both of them.

"It didn't," said Seo-yun, climbing up the ship ladder.

"Details! Kels & I want details."

"Speak for yourself, kid," said Kels.

"Don't you want to hear about her date?"

"Nope. I'm old, happily married, and don't like guys, remember?"

Trina shook her head, looking over at Kels but motioning for Seo-yun not to leave. "Look, just 'cause you're old..."

"And happily married and don't like guys..."

"Yes – and happily married and don't like guys. But, don't you still want to hear about it? We made the delivery. I finished the systems check and the ship's ready to go. We're all just waiting for the scrubbers to arrive so we can leave for the next base. What else you got goin' on right now?"

"Plenty," Kels said, ignoring her and propping open a maintenance panel. She pulled out a small flashlight, stuck it in her mouth, then fished a circuitspanner out of her pocket and started testing some relays.

"I already tested those this morning," said Seo-yun.

Kels pulled the flashlight out of her mouth and turned to look at them. "Fine," she said, exhaling, pocketing the tool again. "Let's hear about the date. But when those scrubbers get here, we leave. Already refilled the gel and I gotta business to run."

"There was no date. At least, not really," said Seo-yun, looking at the base of the ship ladder.

"Why not?" asked Trina, stowing her tablet.

"This was the guy you met through the base message board, right?" asked Kels.

Seo-yun nodded. "He's been texting me ever since our last run here. I looked him up and he seemed legit. Just a guy, trying to get along in the world, you know? Anyway, I got there a little late, but so did he. I get it, right? Everyone's busy. When he showed up, he was still wearing his shop clothes."

"You said he works on the secondary base generators – the ones that power the water purifiers and the coolant lines?"

"Yes. He kind of... smelled. Of coolant. A little."

"Eh, we prolly do, too. Showers are scarce here," said Kels.

Seo-yun nodded again. "I made an effort."

I cleaned up as best as I could. He didn't. He looked like he just got off shift."

"Maybe he did?" asked Trina.

"I don't think so. He told me before he was second shift. He should have had plenty of time."

"So, one strike against him. What else?"

"So, we head to this bar he suggested. He said the food was good, even the synth food. But when we get there, it's closed. There's a big sign that lists the hours. I mean, we're at his station where he lives and works, on his level. He should know this, right?"

"Honest mistake, kid. It's a busy base." said Kels.

"Dunno," said Trina, crinkling her nose. "I say two strikes right there."

"I guess. So, we go to the closest place we can find that's open. On that level of the base, there aren't many. It's mainly industrial shops. But we find a place and it looks fine. Except he's all... hesitant."

"Hesitant?"

"I suppose it might've just been because he hadn't been there before, but he lives on that level, you know? Anyway, I look around and see that there aren't that many people who look like us in there."

"Oh, brother..."

"Three strikes - he's out!"

"I'd like to think it wasn't because of that, but then he suggests we get a bottle from there and go drink it at his place since he lives nearby."

"Nope." said Trina and Kels, simultaneously.

"Exactly. I tell him I don't want to do that. Plus, I'm thinking if he lives so close, why was he even late in the first place?"

"Good point."

"Anyway, he hems and haws, then suggests we get the bottle and just sit out at a table in front."

"Well, I suppose that's not too..."

"Then, he tells me he forgot his creditpass back at his place."

"Of course he did."

"He asks if I have an account with the base relay, so he can cover half the bottle. At that point, I just told him it wasn't going to work and start walking away. He mumbles something about trying again the next time I make a delivery at this base. No apology. Not even a hint of accountability - of recognizing that he didn't even make an effort. I just wave him off and leave."

"What is it with the guys here?" said Trina, examining the hydropack label.

"It's not just this base, or the other two U.N.A. bases. It's the Homeland bases, too. They're all like this. It's like all the guys just go to work, then go home and drink, play games online, text with AI girls, troll people in different forums, then go back to work. They look like they're adults, but they aren't. I've had maybe seven dates in my last two rotations and each has been worse than the last. It's like they're not even trying anymore - like they haven't launched into adulthood and aren't even aware it's a thing."

"Total suspended adolescence."

"Exactly! You'd think with the ratio of men to women on these bases, guys would be lined up for us each time we dock, but they're not. I mean, this base alone has to be at least 60% male, right?"

"Closer to 70%. I can relate, believe me. I met up with one guy at the last base only because his mom spotted me at the market," said Trina.

"His mom?!" said Seo-yun, cringing.

"Yup. She said she had a 'nice boy' about my age that would love to meet me. She even sets up the entire thing - date, time, and location. I didn't have anything else going on. Figured I'd give it a shot. What I got was a 'nice boy' who

clearly didn't want to be there, barely talked, couldn't make a decision on where to go, and was probably more comfortable watching holocam-girls in his room than spending time talking with a real, actual girl. We had two drinks. No food. Then, *he* conveniently forgets to bring his credit-pass and asks if he could pay me back next time."

"Next time'!?"

"There was no next time."

"Is it us?" asked Seo-yun. "I mean, I'm smart. I'm nice. I have a steady job and I think I'm pretty good at it. I think I look ok."

"Girl, you are not just ok – you're hot. Both of us are."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Definitely!"

"So, what's the problem?" asked Seo-yun.

"It's like all the single guys now – the ones who aren't still living with their parents – earn just enough to rent crappy flats then spend any remaining credits on replihol and entertainment. It keeps them in this cocoon. It sucks all the ambition out of them. It's like they're all single for a reason."

"Been true since before my grandparents were born," said Kels.

"Maybe so," said Trina.

"The odds are supposed to be in our favor

here. I'm tired of constantly having to coach some underwhelming man-child on how to act around me, how to treat me – *while* we're supposedly on a date. It's like they want you to just drape yourself all over them and simultaneously be their wingman *and* their date. I mean, what's in it for me? I feel... guilty for even asking that."

"Don't – you shouldn't be dialin' back your needs just to prop up some loser."

Seo-yun nodded, then climbed down from the ship ladder and sat at the table by them. She rested her elbows on the table and ran her fingers through her hair. "For many of them, the only women they interact with are sims in games who want to blow away aliens with them while wearing thongs and stilettos."

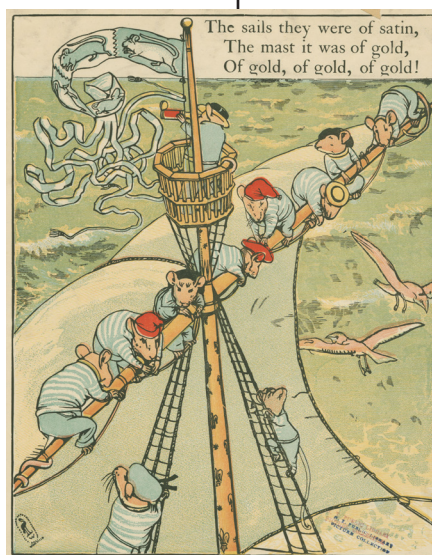
"Or their moms, who they probably ignore..." said Kels, shaking her head. "My boys prolly acted the same when they were still single."

"Too bad they're not," said Trina.

"Try tellin' that to my grandkids."

"At least your boys moved on from that phase. They both went to Academy, right? You know how rare that is now?"

"I swear," said Seo-yun "the next guy I meet who has a job, an actual opinion on something, isn't deeply in debt, and can actually have a conversation, I'm marrying. Assuming he isn't



already married. And doesn't play for the other team. No offense, Kels."

"None taken."

"Same here. I'm jumpin' the first guy I see who checks those boxes, long as he's older than my kid brother and younger than my pops. I got needs."

"Izzat all you two think about?" asked Kels, dismissively, while rummaging through a bin of spare parts. "There's more to life, y'know."

"Don't you remember being young, Kels?" asked Trina, smiling wryly.

"I haven't been young since forever, an' I'm fine with it. Can't let your hormones do all the thinkin', y'know?"

"It's not just that," added Seo-yun. "I mean, it is that. Or, it's that, too, but that's not the only thing. I'm just tired of being alone. It's not like I need a guy to somehow 'complete' me or anything. I've done well enough on my own. I just feel like I'm ready for the next step, whatever that is. I deserve... more," she said, shaking her head. "I don't know what, really. Just more. I'm good at my job. I'm banking credit like crazy. I'm not a jerk."

"You're kind of a jerk sometimes, but it's mostly unintentional," said Trina, winking at her.

Seo-yun shot her a look. "Ok, I'm not a jerk intentionally. I screw up sometimes, but no more than anyone else. Apparently, I'm attractive."

"Damn straight!"

"So why is it so hard to find a guy who's a functioning adult here in the outer colonies? Do we have to settle for guys who don't have any interests beyond chatbots who tell them how great they are?"

"You deserve better. Heck, we both deserve better."

To the right of Kels, an orange light blinked on the primary control module. She glanced at

it and smiled, then held down the button below it, flipped down the boom mic on her headset, and spoke. "C'mon up. I'm lowering the aft bay ramp. Once you're in, go to the second door on the right."

"The scrubbers?" Trina asked, relieved to be leaving.

"Yep. Let's get 'em installed, flush out the system, and get outta here. I gotta schedule to maintain an' I'm pretty sure y'all like getting paid, right? Seo, go ahead and inspect them then transfer the credit if they check out."

Seo-yun nodded and pulled up the routing numbers on a separate screen near Trina. From down below, they heard footsteps going up the ramp, then pausing as the cargo hold door opened. The footsteps resumed, louder. Outside the command room door, they heard a voice.

"Delivery! IO Industries."

"In here," said Kels, still rummaging through the bin.

The door slid open and in walked a youngish man, equal parts tall and gangly, carrying a large, seemingly heavy, oblong box. He wore a red and white IO Industries jumpsuit and cap, with the name 'Delgado' printed above the upper-left pocket, and had a standard delivery tablet affixed to his left forearm and an equally standard comms unit on his belt. He had short, dark hair and sported a thin beard, one that looked like it took years to grow even though it was just barely there. He looked around blankly, first at Seo-yun, then Trina, then Kels. He glanced at her hair and quickly judged her to be in charge.

"Delivery, ma'am. Um, where you want it?"

Kels moved the parts bin off the table and motioned for him to put the box there. He did, then scanned a code off it by turning and facing his forearm tablet to it. He then held out his forearm to her, motioning her to the tablet.

"You, ah... you gotta sign for it."

"I ain't signing anything 'til we inspect 'em. Give us a bit. Seo? Be sure the serial numbers match, too."

Seo-yun walked over to them, pulled a knife out from her pocket to open the box, and used a circuitspanner to inspect each scrubber cell. The man looked to Kels and Trina, then rocked back and forth on his heels slightly as he waited.

"So, how's your shift going this day?" asked Trina.

"Um, okay mostly, I guess. Just gotta bunch of deliveries."

"We can relate, believe me. Been working for IO long?" asked Kels.

"Nearly four years. Mostly security."

"What kind of security?" asked Seo-yun, her back turned to him while she pulled the scrubbers out of the packaging.

"In their shipyards."

"How come you're not there anymore?" asked Trina, leaning in.

"Got tired of guarding stuff that didn't need guarding," he said, flipping through his next deliveries on his tablet. "All I really did there was pick up a paycheck."

She leaned-in a little more. "What's wrong with gettin' paid?"

"Nothing, really, I guess. Man's gotta eat."

"Makin' deliveries for IO is somehow better?" asked Kels, flipping down one of the lenses on her headpiece to examine the control module.

"Dunno yet. This is my first rotation on this base. Guess I'll find out soon enough. If this doesn't pan out, I'll try something else. Might join the service."

"Which one?"

"Well," he said, still focused on his delivery routes, "Probably U.N.A."

"You'd join the United National Alliance?"

Aren't you from Homeland?"

"I am."

"Aren't Homeland and the U.N.A kind of at odds?"

"Maybe," he shrugged. "Everyone's competing for resources. U.N.A. has more deep space exploration and colonization, beyond the outer colonies. Homeland's still pretty corporate. They won't take a risk if there's no guaranteed payout."

"Why would you want to go beyond the outer colonies?" asked Seo-yun, looking over toward him.

"Not sure, really. I just know there's a whole lot to see out there – stuff most of us can only read about it. Figure there's gotta be something more to life than this base or the next, y'know? I'm still pretty young. If I got time to see the worlds, then I'm gonna save up and do it."

"How old are you, kid?" asked Kels.

"29, Ma'am."

"You still live with your Mamma?"

"My folks...?" Dez shook his head and grinned just a little. "They're back in Homeland territory, in their gated community, with their judgy 'friends' who talk behind their backs. No way I'm going back there, 'cept maybe for Founding Day. I love 'em but they don't really understand me."

Seo-yun paused her inspection of the scrubbers, then turned and stuck out her hand.

"Park Seo-yun," she said, surprising herself with a smile.

Trina tumbled out of her bunk, her back to him, then quickly lowered the zipper of her jumpsuit more than necessary, pivoted around, and stuck out her hand and her chest. She positioned her hand in front of Seo-yun, who shot her a glare. Kels rolled her eyes.

"Trina Torrez," she said, also smiling.

"Um, Dez. Dez Delgado." He politely shook

both of their hands.

"Kelsey Bechdel. Captain," said Kels, nodding.

He nodded back to her, then went back to checking the remaining routes on his tablet. He glanced up again and noticed that Seo-yun and Trina were still staring at him. "I, ah... I still got a handful of deliveries to make before the end of my shift. If you could maybe finish up inspecting those scrubbers, I'd appreciate it."

"Certainly, Dez," said Seo-yun, getting back to the scrubbers.

"Sounds like you've had a pretty long day, Mr. Delgado. We don't want to keep you from gettin' home to the missus, and yer kids," said Kels.

"Ma'am?" he said, glancing up from his tablet.

"I said we don't mean to keep you from getting home to your wife and kids."

"Don't have either of those yet. Someday." Dez looked back to down to his tablet.

"Dez," said Trina, now standing in between him and Seo-Yun, "Seo might need a few more minutes still. She's very thorough." Seo-yun crossed her arms, frowned, then turned back to the scrubbers. "While we're waiting, can you recommend some good places to eat on this base?"

"Um, I guess. Like I said, I haven't been here long. You like pho?"

"I absolutely love pho!" said Trina, beaming.

"There's a decent noodle place on Level 13, just past Payroll."

"What else?"

"Well, I also like the bar on Level 9. It's just pub food but they got a solid selection of beer for being this far out. Plus, they got a great open mic night."

"I like beer," she said, still smiling at him, trying to make eye contact.

"You drink a lot, Mr. Delgado?" asked Kels.

He shook his head. "Only a little. Can't afford it. Like I said, I'm saving up."

She nodded. "What other places you recommend?"

"There's that kimchi place on level 42. That's stuff's dynamite."

Seo-yun dropped her spanner down on the table, hard, causing the others to stop and look at her.

"Everything ok, Seo?" asked Kels.

"Fine. Just... fine. The scrubbers check. Brand-new, as advertised. No defects detected."

"Well, I guess that about does it," said Dez, positioning his forearm closer to Kels so she could sign the tablet and authorize payment. She stepped forward, placed her palm on it until the screen pulsed green, then took it off.

"Been nice chattin' with you, Mr. Delgado," she said, her usual stoicness betraying the barest hint of a smile.

"Yes, Ma'am." He nodded to Kels, then looked at both Trina and Seo-yun and nodded to them. They watched as he turned and left. No one said anything as they heard his footsteps grow fainter and fainter.

"Well," said Kels, grabbing the new scrubbers, "Assumin' y'all wanna continue bein' gainfully employed, let's get these installed and get movin' 'fore our contract gets canceled."

"When... when is our next run to this base?" asked Seo-yun, her hands on her hips.

"Is it soon?" asked Trina, stepping forward.

"It could be, kids. Could be."

Kels fired-up the ion engines. Their familiar ticking sound filled the control room as they slowly warmed up. The base station's lights twinkled faintly outside the window as it switched to night mode, their glow barely holding back the void of space that seemed to press in from every direction. ❖

“PETS”

by WALT TRIZNA

Ronald Corey was a mean son of a bitch. His foul nature increased over years of personal disappointment. His life was now going nowhere. His anger was relentless since his wife had walked out the door. Just about everything that breathed hated him and he returned the favor. Turns out, there would also be some beings which didn't breathe would share that hate.

Tall, overweight, a monster of a man in size and personality, he had a rim of graying brown hair bordering his bald head. At 49, Corey was ten years older than his departed wife. He was educated, with an associate degree in engineering but held firmly to his blue-collar upbringing. Unfortunately, he did not hold firmly to employment. His favorite response to management 'Go fuck yourself,' resulted in rapid and direct membership to the ranks of the unemployed. His wife, June, was a complete opposite of Corey. Highly educated, holding multiple degrees, she was petite with dark hair and eyes so blue they merited a double take by the observer. Their temperament was also at opposite poles. How they became attracted to each other, never mind married, was a mystery to all who knew them, and eventually became a mystery to June too.

June was aware that Corey drank and came to consider it to be just part of his makeup. When not drinking he was different, loving and kind. But once they married his drinking increased, being loving and kind flew out the window. Then

came the start of physical abuse. June finally saw the handwriting on the wall, and what she could not see was knocked into her. Corey desperately wanted her to produce a son, but after one year of marriage, June came to realize that bringing a child into the world with Corey as the father would be a disaster. How would he treat a child when he treated her so terribly? Her imagination reeled and her mind produced images that left her disgusted. While he tried to become a father, June adhered to birth control. Corey would yell, "I don't understand it. The rest of my family is popping kids left and right. What is wrong with you?"

June replied, "Maybe it's not me. Maybe it's you. Go get checked." She knew Corey had a deep-seated fear of doctors, his entire family did.

"Why don't you get checked?" he shouted back.

"Fine," June said. "We'll go together," and that was the end of that.

Finally, after five years of enduring the hell of their marriage, June had had enough. Sporting a black eye, she began packing. Corey threw his glass of cheap scotch at their closed bedroom door and felt nothing, no loss – no regrets. Experiencing emotions, other than anger, had long ago departed his being. As she turned to leave tears moistened her eyes. Seeing this, Corey was sure she did not have the guts to go. He waited for her determination to wither, was surprised when she

said, "I can't take the pets. You'll have to take care of them until I find a place for them."

The pets were now his responsibility, and he despised them – always had. The dog, Molly, a medium size brown and white mixed breed, was an SPCA rescue. Sally and Sam, the result of friends of friends whose cats produced litters, were two grey tabbies who looked identical, although three years of age separated them.

After June was gone his drinking increased and the more he drank the more his rage grew needing an outlet, and that outlet became the animals. If one should chance his way, it would receive a kick or powerful slap sending the poor animal sprawling and running for safety. After Corey had enough of their neediness, he looked at the animals and said, "Now to get rid of you little bastards." But a short-lived moment of sanity filtered into his brain. The entire neighborhood knew about the pets and would become suspicious if they all suddenly disappeared. "Christ, people are going to jail for shit like that," he said to himself. You see, he did not even consider putting them up for adoption. He only considered death or abandonment. But then he realized the plan to just drive them to some field and leave them was also out. Damn, he couldn't remember if Molly had one of those new fucking chips implanted. "Damn animals are turning into computers now," he mumbled.

From then on the animals lived in fear of Corey. In time after constant abuse, fear gradually turned into anger, an anger they communicated to one another as only animals can. Poor Molly spent most of her day huddling in her open crate, seeking the false sense of security it provided. If she left the cage, in Corey's presence, she would suffer a kick sending the dog running back for shelter. The abuse was relentless and soon resulted in a permanent limp, and also something else,

a hate which crossed a subtle boundary.

There was another bone of contention, the cats' litter box.

The cats, in constant hiding, ventured out only to eat and use the litter box. The abuse they received when hunger or nature called was relentless, journeying to the levels of Molly's rage.

The source of the cats' abuse was that Corey felt degraded every time he had to scoop up the cat's waste, as if he was some kind of servant. One day he thought, *I'll show the little bastards* and stopped cleaning it. Soon the box was nothing but a huge mass of lumps of congealed urine-soaked litter and cat turds. When the cats began relieving themselves in the vicinity of the box, Corey cursed them to hell and was forced once again to keep it clean. "Fucking cats," he would mumble every time he had to clean up after them.

With his wife gone, Corey stayed drunk most of the time. During this 'relaxed state,' in the far reaches of his muddled brain was the realization that he needed to find a job soon. Alone with the pets, that's how Corey lived, but then his twisted reasoning would replace logic, and he would mumble, "Find a job for what? To feed the damned animals."

Due to the stress of their lives, the behavior of the animals changed from the normal response to a lone master, following that person from room to room to occupy the same space. This was not how life for the pets in the Corey household went. Here they avoided their master and stayed hidden, and Corey liked it that way. And when Corey finally passed out from a day of drinking, they would form a tight group glaring in his direction and attend to their needs. One day, after one particularly violent attack on the animals, from the corner of his eye he detected movement. In his drunken stupor, he could not tell if he was seeing things or not, the movement was accompa-

nied by a soft rustling sound, as if the softest of materials was being dragged across the floor. Was he now hearing things? Sure, he would find an animal lurking, but all that he saw were piles of pet hair constantly increasing in size and quantity, another by-product of the animals Corey loathed.

That was a major problem, the hair.

Shortly after June left, Corey noticed small balls of hair accumulating at the edges of the rooms and eventually they appeared over most of the floor. The rest of the house fared just as bad with the sink filled with dishes, a heavy coating of dust on every surface and the refrigerator full of rotting food, but the hair was the filth that maddened Corey the most. June had kept the floors swept and, of course, Corey never appreciated the effort. Now the hair accumulated, it seemed, with a vengeance. If he only knew.

Corey swept up the hair every few weeks, filling plastic bags full of the fluff. He would be in an especially bad 'pet mood' after completing this chore. One day, after a particularly long time between sweeping up the hair, he had two bags full of waste. He was about to take them out to the trash when his usual anger turned to shock. Piercing the depths of both bags, he saw two glowing points of red resembling glowing cigarettes seen in the night or the last embers of a dying fire. He shook his head, looked away, and when he looked back the glowing points of light were gone. "What the fuck?" he muttered and soon forgot the incident.

Corey stretched the hair cleaning, and at the same time, the hair seemed to accumulate at a faster rate, appearing as small tumbleweeds, ready to move with the slightest breeze. After the next cleaning, he had three bags of hair. Corey stooped to pick them up when he stopped. He shook his head to clear his brain because he could not believe his eyes. In each bag, in addition to the two

small glowing spheres, there appeared a crimson crescent shaped like a smiling mouth. Corey stepped back and then stumbled forward for another look. The specter in the bags was gone.

Weeks later, cleaning yielded four bags of hair. Once the job was completed, Corey cautiously approached the bags and vaguely remembered the previous specter. It was then he beheld a sight filling him with terror. Along with the now glowing eyes, the smiling crescent reappeared slightly parted and filled with a vicious set of pointed teeth. The balls of hair began to move within the bags, which was impossible. Soon the bags tipped, spilling their contents on the floor. Ever so slowly, to Corey's horror, the spheres of hair began to move toward him.

Within the fluffy balls there appeared to be a solid presence, a substance where none should exist, as if something unworldly had taken on a physical aspect. Corey backed into the corner of the living room, stumbling over accumulated trash. While their master faced this unknown terror, the pets appeared, Molly, limping from her protective crate, Sally and Sam from beneath beds. Corey's eyes flicked from the animals, sitting in a group gazing at him to the slowly creeping maleficent spheres. The closer these hateful entities moved toward Corey, the more at ease the animals seemed to become, as if a great weight were being lifted from their lives.

It was then that neighbors heard ungodly screams coming from Corey's home and called 911. The responding police had to break down the door to gain entrance and were met by a grisly sight that they would never forget, haunting them for the rest of their days. Corey lay - they assumed it was Corey - in the middle of the living room. Where his face had once been was nothing more than a blood-soaked mound of flesh. The rest of his body was horribly mutilated.

Once they overcame their initial shock, the cops noticed Molly and the two cats sitting close to the body intently observing it. One officer said to the other, "I wonder if they tried to stop what-ever happened."

His partner responded, "Do you think the animals could possibly have do this?"

"No way. Look how they are keeping watch over their dead master. They must have loved the guy," said the other officer. ❖



“THE PARTING OF FRIENDS”

by CRAIG WOYCHIK

The setting sun cast a pattern of rays and shadows on the marble ruins. Cracked and crumbling pillars lay toppled throughout the courtyard, turning it into a maze. What light there was left was eerie and chilling. The soft footsteps on the walkway only added to the hollow emptiness of the remnants.

Cervantes had tracked his friend, Sigfried, to these ruins. He knew what they were, for he'd been here once, six thousand years ago. It was Sig's childhood home. As children, they'd played, learned, and fought here.

Cervantes' long brown hair was pulled into a ponytail, and his beard was well groomed. Built like a bull, his large frame was clad in earth-toned vagabond's clothing. The wasteland was no friend to humans, mortal or immortal, and he was well armed with a Mosin Nagant rifle, and a pair of Colt 1911s.

Frantically, but in full control, he searched the halls and rooms. His mind raced. He knew why Sig had come here. They'd talked about it many times, but he never thought Sig was serious about it. Ever since Lana was killed, Sig hadn't been himself. He'd been distant, killing for survival, and nothing else. A thousand years ago, Sig relished the thought of battle. He lived it, breathed it, and often bled it.

As Cervantes cautiously strode down a hallway, he saw a whisper of etheric light moving to-

wards him. He ducked into an alcove and waited. While he was immortal, things of the other world were nothing to trifle with.

The light moved closer and closer, paused at the alcove for a brief flicker of a moment, and proceeded farther down the hallway before turning. Cervantes silently followed, leaning at the corner of the adjoining corridors. He peeked around the pitted and faded stone at the figure turning into a room. He crept closer, drawing a pistol in his right hand, and a combat knife in his left. He paused at the door, listening.

Inside, he heard a woman's voice speaking in gentle, hushed tones. Sig's weary, heartfelt voice responded. Cervantes listened for a bit longer, heart sinking more and more as time went on. This was it. This was what Sig had talked about for so long. Sig wanted to die. He'd been fighting and killing for so long, he didn't want to continue. Cervantes backed away, tears welling up in his eyes. He wasn't going to listen anymore; he couldn't. He'd fought at Sigfried's side since the days of Rameses II, through hundreds of wars, from Earth to the borders of the solar system. Sig was like a brother to him through all of this, despite the times they were at each other's throats.

The world had come full circle for them. They re-lived some battles, some eras. Cervantes' primal blood kept him steadfast. He lived for

the kill; to him, battle was just another part of a new day. From the battles at Carthage to the New Roman Empire's defense of the rebuilt Hadrian's wall, he never wavered. But for Sigfried, everything changed around a millennium ago. The one woman Sig had actually vocalized his love for was killed by a denizen warlord. Sig told him later what transpired when he was holding Lana's lifeless body in his arms, grieving.

Lana was an eternal soul. She could take many forms, and had been by Sig's side throughout the ages, unbeknownst to him. Her race was granted a one-time opportunity to live as their true form for one human lifetime, and she chose to sacrifice that opportunity to save Sig's life. Her spectral form came to him there, on the field, along with the form of every woman who had been at Sig's side since he began his career. It was her all along. Her piercing brown eyes had never changed, never wavered. It was as though they could see to the very depths of his soul. They could calm the deadliest of storms, yet strike fear in the heart of a lion. Since her death, Sig had become distant, still doing his duty, but no more.

Cervantes heard a stifled cry of rage, almost as though someone was fighting the urge to scream. He held steady, knowing whatever was going on in that room was between Sig and whoever or whatever was in there with him. Forcing himself to stay where he was, he sat on a pillar with his back to a corner, facing the hallway.

With his rifle held across his knees, he intently watched the darkness of the corridor for that same flicker of light. His mind was coming up with all sorts of scenarios. Was Sig fighting someone? Was he making a deal? Was he truly

doing what he'd talked about so many times? Who or what was in there with him?

The cool breeze whistled in the courtyard, sending shivers up Cervantes' spine. Darkness would be upon him before too long, and he'd need to check in with base camp. He checked his radio, taking his eyes off the hallway for a split second.

When he looked up, a spectral being clad in white satin was standing in front of him. Her white hair was adorned with all manner of precious metals and gems, hanging to her waist. Pale blue eyes stared deep into his, unsettling him. He tried to speak, but couldn't. He looked the figure in the eyes, and he knew everything. He knew who she was, what she had done, and what had transpired in that room. Her face: pale, youthful, perfect as a gem, carried all the love and compassion of a mother. It was then he recognized her.

It was Tarja, Sig's mother. An angelic being, she was the reason Sig's vampirism was restricted to superhuman strength and speed. He had met her once, when he was still quite young. She was the one who pulled him out of the silver mine he fell into as a child. She extended a gentle hand to his shoulder. Though she was ethereal, a projection, he still felt it. He felt the warmth and comfort of her touch.

He looked away from her eyes for a fleeting second, knowing what he would see. With her other hand she turned his face to hers; a shimmering tear shown at the corner of one eye. Cervantes saw it all; he saw Sig ask his own mother how to die, he saw him beg, he saw his pain. He saw Tarja tell her own son, her flesh and blood, the only child she ever had, how to die. She revealed a secret she wished she hadn't. It was then that he understood. Sig was finally

at peace.

Cervantes fought back his own tears. His werewolf blood was boiling. He was angry, sad, and confused all at once. Tarja's hand was still on his shoulder, squeezing gently. He looked up in time to see a reassuring smile on her face. And as with all angelic beings, she was gone as quickly as she appeared.

Slowly, apprehensively, he made his way to the room he'd first seen her enter. The hinges creaked as he pushed open the door. The final rays of the sun were just dipping below the horizon, and in the fading light, he saw it. Sig was seated, leaning against a wall. He was still clutching his mirrored kukris, hands resting on the floor. Head bowed to his chest, he was facing the sunset, smile on his face.

Cervantes knelt at his side, tears streaming from his eyes. This was it, the final moment. He hadn't even said goodbye to the closest thing he had to a brother since he'd been born. Still kneeling, he rested his gloved hand on Sig's shoulder, and gently squeezed before getting up and leaving the ruins.

Once outside, he reached his motorcycle, where the ever-growing darkness cast shadows over his already darker world. It was time to check in with base.

He brought his radio to his mouth, paused for a fleeting moment to pull himself together, and with a quaking voice, whispered: "Sig's dead."



“THE ROCHE LOBE ANOMALY”

by JEFFREY M. GABA

Editor's Note: Welcome to the terrific conclusion of this tale. If you haven't already read part one, we highly recommend finding it in our previous issue. Enjoy!

7

Gaunt, Bloom, and Cri, with Maya on his shoulder, sat facing one another in the Briefing Room. The walls of the room displayed images of the planet's surface transmitted from the squadron's surveillance satellites. A single monitor displayed an image of the rapidly moving binary stars at the center of the system.

“Admiral, this is all quite marvelous to me. I have seen representations of my planet, but to actually view the surface from this perspective is remarkable. I am struck by how lovely my planet actually is. But I'm sure you feel the same about your own world.”

Gaunt nodded, but then proceeded directly with her questions. “It would be helpful to me,” the Admiral said, “if you could give Dr. Bloom and myself a more detailed description of your contact with our earlier ship.”

It was Gaunt who stifled a gasp when it was Maya who replied. Rising to an upright stance on Cri's shoulder, she faced them and said, “We can easily understand your concern if, as you say, you received no further communication with that ship or you lost contact with a subsequent ship near our planet.”

“But,” Cri continued, “there is very little I can add to what I previously said. Your people landed on Esse in a shuttle similar to the one in which we came to this ship. As I suggested, this was a shock to all our people on the planet. It was quite difficult for many of us to accept that we were not the only people in the Cosmos. Our culture had, until then, rejected any inquiry into other peoples or worlds in the Cosmos. All are people knew of the Cosmos were our twin suns, Kitu and Kara.

“Your people did manage to communicate their peaceful intentions, but, before any significant communications could begin between us, they departed. We are sad to learn that those people did not safely return to Terra.

“Admiral, it is obvious and unsurprising to us that your questioning reflects your deep concern about the apparent loss of two Terran spaceships. But other than to point to the total technical inability of my people to interfere with, let alone destroy, your vessels, I do not know what I can do to assure you of our good will. I suggest that we place that matter aside for the moment and focus on other issues.”

“Your suggestion is difficult for me to accept,” Gaunt replied. “If I may be undiplomatically frank, nothing that your or Maya has said has provided the information we need or assured us about the fate of those ships. Until I have greater clarity about our ships, I will have difficulty in see-

ing our continued meetings as being productive. Perhaps a visit to the surface with a landing party might expedite our discussions.

Maya replied calmly, "We can only accept the blame if we have communicated poorly. I hope you can make allowances given the unprecedented circumstances in which Cri and I find ourselves. I do not think you can appreciate how disturbing your culture and, indeed, your presence is to us. We are also struggling to communicate effectively in your complex language."

Cri continued, "And I assure you that a direct meeting with others on the surface would not be productive. It is the nature of my people to be uncomfortable with exposure to novel situations. Maya and I were selected as Ambassadors for the very purpose of allowing direct communication with you while minimizing the stress your presence would inflict on my people."

"All we can do," Maya said, "is to try to communicate more clearly. And to emphasize our intention to promote peace and understanding between Terrans and Essans."

"I understand your position," said Gaunt. "Perhaps for the moment it would be wise to move on to other issues."

It was Bloom who spoke next. "Can you describe to us how collective decisions are made on Esse? What is the leadership structure on the planet? How, for example, were you selected as Ambassadors?"

It was Cri who responded. "We have a simple political system on Esse. Most decisions are made at the village level. On issues effecting Esse as a whole, decisions are made through agreement at a *Baraza* – a meeting where all voices may be heard and consensus achieved. For various reasons, my people thought that Maya and I could best represent our people in meetings with, what to us, are inconceivable strangers."

"Can you tell us something of your family structure," Bloom continued.

"Ah," Cri replied, "again we are a simple people. Our family life is governed by our clans which consists of all people sharing a common totem animal. The clan relationship is very important to us, and our relationships with other are deeply affected by whether we are members of the same clan."

"And," Bloom said, "Maya is your totem animal?"

"Yes," Maya answered.

"Mr. Ambassador, at one point you described Maya as a 'close and trusted companion.' I was explaining to the Admiral, the meaning of the words 'totem' and 'familiar' as I understood you to be using the word. Could you tell us more about your relationship?"

"Certainly, Dr. Bloom. As I just indicated, certain animals have a special and close relationship with our clans. On earth, similar relationships have existed between human groups and what you have called 'totem' or 'spirit' animals. Of course, I do not know how similar are the parallels between our culture and yours are in this regard."

"In my individual case, after Maya became my totem animal at our initiation ceremony, I developed a particularly close relationship with her. We grew up together, and she has become my 'familiar' and closest companion."

Maya continued. "I have found my relationship to Cri to be deeply satisfying. We understand one another perfectly, and therefore our pairing in this mission seemed quite logical to our people."

Bloom waited, but neither Maya nor Cri spoke further. "It is confusing to me," Gaunt said, "that we did not identify Maya's species as sentient when we first surveyed your planet. And yet

Maya is clearly an intelligent and articulate individual."

"I would not be embarrassed," Cri replied."

"It is the nature of my species," Maya continued, "to exhibit what you categorize as sentience only in the close presence of the entity with whom we bond." Maya smiled, "Cri brings out the best in me."

"And do all individuals of your species develop a similar relationship with their totem or spirit animal?" Bloom asked.

"Oh no, no. Not all," said Maya.

"Maya and I consider ourselves to be particularly fortunate." Cri continued.

Before Bloom or Gaunt could respond, Cri continued, "As before, rest would now be welcome, and, if you do not mind, Maya and I would like to retire." With that, Cri stood and walked out with Maya perched on his shoulder.

After they had left, Bloom exploded in anger. "What the hell is going on here! All we are getting is more double talk and lies. What the hell happened at their meeting with the party from the *Valencia*? What is the significance of Maya in all this. Nothing makes sense."

Gaunt eyed him silently, and then said, "All the more reason to get to the surface, even if it makes the Essans 'uncomfortable.'"

8

Later, the sounding of six bells in the middle watch awakened Gaunt. She lay in bed but was unable to sleep. Slipping into her uniform, she left her quarters and started prowling the ship. An unannounced inspection of the ship would do no one any harm, she thought, but then rejected the thought as a rationalization. She wandered the ship because she was uncharacteristically uneasy and uncertain of the situation.

As she walked, a totally unexpected set of

thoughts emerged. She was taken aback to note that she was feeling a sexual response to Cri. Gaunt was more or less human, and she was not surprised that she might have a sexual reaction to a handsome man. But Cri, although objectively handsome, was also objectively not a 'man.' More importantly, Gaunt had never allowed herself to let any personal emotional or sexual reactions interfere with her assessment of a situation during a mission. Her reaction had not, to her knowledge, affected her actions to this point, but her reaction to Cri was a 'data point' that required an explanation.

Her attempts to evaluate the situation were frustrated by a vague and troubling set of fantasies she could not identify. Gaunt returned to her quarters, and, for the first time in months, masturbated.

9

The next morning, Cri, Maya, Bloom and Gaunt resumed their discussions over breakfast in the Briefing Room. Before they could begin, however, they were interrupted by a sharp sound from a communicator. "The Admiral's presence is requested on the bridge," came a disembodied voice.

Gaunt stabbed a button and replied, "On my way."

"Ambassador, Maya, would you excuse me while I attend to my duties."

"Of course, Admiral. Of course," Cri and Maya said simultaneously. All rose from their chairs. Gaunt headed for the bridge, and Cri and Maya, escorted by a waiting guard, left the Briefing Room heading for their quarters. After they exited, Bloom was again surprised to note some quality that left Maya somewhat indistinct in his eyes. He knew she was present, but in some ways she wasn't. Bloom slumped back in his chair to

ponder the 'Cosmos' before following Gaunt.

Gilbert was in the command chair when Gaunt entered the bridge.

"Admiral," Gilbert began immediately, "we have suddenly begun detecting several phenomena you should know about. First, the diameter of Binary A, their star Kitu, has increased. It is a small increase, and it may be consistent with some cyclical variation of the star that we have not yet identified. Nonetheless, the increase further highlights the Roche Lobe Anomaly that Mr. Chuni identified.

"Additionally, we have noted an unusual movement of Essans on the planet surface. In our short time here we have seen very little movement of Essans from one village to another. Now, for the first time we have detected a significant number of Essans moving beyond their immediate tribal locations. There seems to be a movement of a small, but not trivial, number of Essans to other villages - some quite distant. It is curious; they are not collectively gathering in one location, but seem to be exchanging members among villages.

"Perhaps Dr. Bloom has an explanation," Gilbert said as Bloom entered the Bridge.

"Perhaps," Gaunt said curtly. "But let's focus on the gravitational issue first. Is the diameter of Binary A continuing to increase?"

Chuni, the Sailing Master, replied. "It doesn't appear to be Admiral. As Captain Gilbert stated, this could be the result of some cyclical variation. But I don't think so. This was not a gradual expansion of diameter. It seemed to happen almost instantaneously. From what we could detect, it simply expanded ... and then stopped expanding. If the increase were the result of some cyclical pattern, it would not exhibit this "quantum" increase; I would expect it would be gradual.

"More to the point, there was also a slight increase in the mass of Binary A. The increase is

small enough that it does not affect orbital dynamics of the binary system, but it is an increase. Something is going on that I cannot explain by traditional physics or by Flic theory."

Gaunt examined the displays on Chuni's console. "Do you assess this as an immediate threat to the squadron?"

The Sailing Master paused before replying. "I'm not in a position to give a meaningful answer, Ma'am. At the moment, the squadron is currently in formation and in a stable orbit around Esse. Change gravity, and I'll change my reply."

"Understood, Mr. Chuni."

Bloom stepped forward and addressed Gilbert. "What was the relationship between the increase in Kitu's diameter and the movement of the Essans on the planet surface?"

Gilbert stared at him in surprise. "What could you possibly mean by that question?"

Gaunt spoke curtly. "Answer him, Captain Gilbert."

"I'm not sure what you mean by 'relationship,' Gilbert said to Bloom.

"Which came first," Bloom snapped.

"We noted the movement some time before the increase in the mass and diameter," Gilbert replied, "but are you suggesting that the movement of Essans between villages on the surface of the planet was related to changes in their star system? You may be a fine 'Anthropologist' Dr. Bloom, but your grasp of physics is a little weak."

"Of course," Bloom replied. "And I note that your grasp of physics has provided a clear explanation of the anomaly."

Bloom turned to the Admiral. "At this point we have no physical explanation for the anomaly or the loss of the two earlier ships. If the movement on the planet began after the change in the star Kitu, we might infer that the Essans were responding to changes in the star. But if their

movement began before the star changed, then something very different may be at play. Perhaps a coincidence. But we are confronting a civilization that seems to be unlike any we have encountered."

He turned back to Gilbert. "I have not forgotten that we are here because of the loss of two earlier ships. I am no physicist, but at this point, if you don't start considering the inconceivable, your actions may assure that we vanish like them."

Gilbert jumped from the command chair and strode toward Bloom, but before Gilbert could answer the taunt, Gaunt barked out an order.

"Belay that. Captain Gilbert, resume your position. Dr. Bloom, please keep your imaginative suggestions to yourself - as we discussed."

"Yes, Ma'am." Bloom replied. "May I talk with you privately."

"Not at the moment," She snapped.

"Mr. Chuni, you will notify me if you detect any change in the star system. Captain Gilbert, I want a detailed report on all movements on the planet in the last 24 hours. Dr. Bloom, you will come with me. I want to talk with you before we resume our meeting with the Ambassador."

Gaunt and Bloom entered the empty Briefing Room. "What was that all about," Gaunt demanded. "I thought I made it clear that you will save your theories for me alone. And do you seriously think there may be a relationship between the Essans and the binary star anomaly we have detected."

"I only asked a question about timing of the gravitational event and the movements on the planet - post hoc ergo propter hoc, and all that. But let's be straight with each other, Admiral. You know as well as I do that the answers to all our questions are held by the Essans.

Gaunt did not reply, but contacted the bridge. "Captain Gilbert, will you have someone

accompany the Ambassador and Maya from their quarters to the Briefing Room. Thank you."

Gaunt turned to Bloom. "I agree we have more questions, but perhaps less time for answers. And I am not amused by your implications that the Essans are telepathic and have psychic powers that can affect the laws of physics."

"I am not amused myself," Bloom replied.

10

The Admiral confronted Cri and Maya as they entered the Briefing Room. "Ambassador Cri, I have been given reports of unexplainable gravitational effects on your stars, Kitu and Kara. I would appreciate your explanation."

"I can offer no explanation, Admiral."

Gaunt and Bloom waited for him to continue, but both Cri and Maya were silent.

"That is the extent of your response?" Gaunt barked.

"Yes, Admiral." Cri and Maya spoke in unison.

Before Gaunt could further confront them, Bloom asked. "Ambassadors Cri and Maya, we have also received reports of movements of people on your planet. A shifting of people among villages on the surface. Can you explain that?"

Cri and Maya looked at one another briefly before replying.

"As I have said, Admiral, your appearance is profoundly shocking to my people, and this is producing feelings of anxiety by Essans around the planet. It is common for our people to undertake walks as a way of relieving anxiety. That, perhaps, could account for the movements you observed."

Dr. Bloom continued. "It strikes me that you have apparently not communicated with your people since you came to the ship. It seems odd to me that you have had no communications or consultation with your people. Is it possible that

there are events, other than these ‘walkabouts,’ unfolding on the surface of which you are unaware?”

“It is, of course, possible,” they answered in unison.

“Enough,” Gaunt said calmly. “Mr. Ambassador, I am perceiving a threat to the ships of my squadron. And that is something I will not tolerate. Is there something occurring on the surface that constitutes a threat to my ships?”

“There are many things you do not know about my people,” Cri replied.

“And there are many things which we think you will find difficult either to understand or acknowledge,” Maya continued.

“I think it is time that you trusted us to accept the truth about your people,” Bloom replied.

“And I ask again,” Gaunt pressed, “are your people responsible for the gravitational anomalies we have observed.”

“Not directly, Admiral,” Cri responded. “But Essans have very close bonds with the natural world. One might say that Essans experience the natural world as a shifting entity that responds to our emotional states.”

“Are you telling me that Essans can alter space at will?”

“Oh no, Admiral, no,” Cri and Maya replied in unison. Cri continued, “But it is fair to say that our perceptions and emotional reactions do affect our relationship to the Cosmos.

Maya said, “And Essans hold a particular relationship with the stars, Kitu and Kara. That relationship is the central element of Essan culture. It is the Essan essence, you might say.”

Gaunt interrupted, “Are you now saying that Essan’s are, in fact, involved in the gravitational anomalies we have observed in the stars.

Cri, for the first time, seemed unsure of how to respond, and Maya’s tail began to twitch

around his neck.

“It is a difficult concept to explain,” Cri continued, “but Maya and I now understand that it is important that you have a clearer insight into all aspects of my people.”

Suddenly, Bloom felt a slight pressure in his head, and when he looked up, Cri was smiling at him. The shimmering indistinctness that Bloom had noted around Maya increased. Bloom experienced a moment of blackness, and when he could again focus, Maya was no longer on Cri’s shoulder. She had been replaced by a shimmer of light, but Bloom could not have said whether he saw the light or whether the light shimmered in his brain. Bloom perceived that time must have passed, but he could not have said how long. All he knew is that the world suddenly again felt real. And across from him stood Cri and a naked Essan woman. He could not be sure that Gaunt saw the same figure he did, but Cri’s comments suggested she did.

“I would like to again introduce you both to my ‘familiar’ Maya, Cri said. “As you can perceive, Maya has the capacity to manifest herself in several forms. The mechanism is somewhat obscure.”

“But quite real, I assure you,” Maya said. At this point, Bloom was more shocked by speech from the human-looking Maya than by her nudity. “It is an aspect of our culture, that in extremely unusual cases, a familiar that has bonded with an individual has the capacity to assume the form of what you call sentient Essans. It was my great honor that I have that ability. It is a reflection of the connection that Cri and I maintain.”

“Maya and I agree,” Cri continued, “that your understanding of our people is essential to avoid a profound risk both to you and your fellow Terrans and to Esse itself. And Admiral, we also agree that we can best convey this understanding by meeting with you separately. Would you be

willing to continue this discussion with me in your quarters, while Dr. Bloom and Maya meet in Dr. Bloom's. We believe that your individual perceptions, guided by our individual instruction, will most effectively allow you to understand both us and our culture."

"We hope you will join us and accept that we act in good faith," Maya said.

Gaunt, without hesitation, rose and waited for Cri. Bloom watched as the Admiral and the Ambassador left the room together. Bloom frowned at this unexpected move. He had wanted separate communications with Maya and Cri, but this sudden request of theirs surprised and troubled him.

He turned to look at Maya and was taken off guard by her new human-like form. She was quite lovely he thought. He frowned again as he noted that Maya and Cri had forms that were sexually appealing to humans. He wondered if that was an unexpected consequence of convergent evolution or an attempt by the Essans to manipulate their reactions.

As if reading his thoughts, Maya said, "There is no need for suspicion, Martin. Let's go to my quarters and talk."

"You called me Martin. That is the first time that either you or Cri have used my given name."

"Yes. But I believe we have reached a level of familiarity that justifies this linguistic intimacy."

Bloom smiled, but deflected her provocative response with a question. "Do Essans have family names and personal, given names?"

"Yes, but a clan name is not commonly used. In most cases, Cri is simply Cri. And I am always Maya. But would you like to continue our talk in my quarters? Or does that make you uncomfortable?"

"Curiously, it does," Bloom replied. "At the simplest level, you are aware that it is human cus-

tom to be clothed in most social situations. Your nudity creates a dynamic that disturbs me."

"Well, that is easily remedied, I can find clothes in your quarters, I assume."

"Of course, but my discomfort is not so simply covered over." Maya smiled. Bloom continued. "I have now seen your ability to change your outward appearance. I do not know what other surprising abilities you may have, and that also disturbs me."

"Martin," she said rising and taking his hand, "I have many abilities that would both surprise and disturb you." She led him off to the quarters.

11

Maya, now dressed in an overlarge coat of Bloom's, sat looking at him with, what Bloom amusedly noted, were cat-like eyes. A beautiful woman, he thought, and a dangerous and unpredictable situation. The Admiral's intelligence and directedness had anchored him in their earlier conversations with the Ambassadors. Now, especially confronted by a human-appearing Maya, Bloom felt lost. It was Maya who now radiated intelligence and directness, and that provided Bloom with no stability. Confrontation, he reluctantly decided, was his safest strategy.

"What do you want," he said sharply. "You elected to display yourself in this form and to separate me and the Admiral for a reason. What do you want?"

She smiled. "Isn't it obvious?" she said, and took his hand.

Bloom felt a pang of fear at her words. "Nothing here is obvious," Bloom said, and he stared helplessly at her as she stroked his hand.

"You referred to a 'profound risk' that we may be facing. What 'risk'? I know that we are in danger - tell me from whom?"

Before she could speak, Bloom was startled

to see her close her eyes, gently smile and arch her back.

She opened her eyes and stared at him directly, “Martin, you know so little and it is important to us that you learn so much.”

Suddenly, without warning, she gave a sharp gasp. She withdrew her hand from his, closed her eyes, flushed and gave a few halting gasps. She arched slightly in the chair.

Bloom stared at her and an image of bodies entwined in space filled his mind. He quickly looked in the direction of the Admiral’s quarters and then back at Maya.

Many things that he suspected and many things that he had never considered now seemed to coalesce into a certainty.

He smiled faintly, and said to her. “Was it good for you too?”

She smiled back at him and almost purred, “Yes.”

“You and Cri have a mental connection,” he simply stated to her. “You are aware, in some form, of each other’s thoughts and feelings.”

“Obviously,” Maya said as she tried to regain her focus.

“The Admiral and Cri, I take it, are engaged in ‘non-linguistic’ intimacy.”

“Yes.”

“Cri seduced the Admiral, as you have been trying to seduce me.”

“Nothing as manipulative as you suggest, Martin. We are seeking a natural continuation of our attempts at understanding.”

“And ‘good will,’ Bloom said sarcastically.

“And ‘good will,’” Maya replied softly taking his hand.

Bloom quickly withdrew his hand from hers.

“Does your connection with Cri extend to others on the planet’s surface?” Bloom demanded.

“That question is not so simply answered,” she said.

But before she could continue, Bloom’s world died.

He felt each of the atoms making up Bloom begin to disperse. A Bloom of nothingness could still perceive terror and nausea as this new Bloom entered the universe as a stream of virtual particles – present and absent at the same time. The nausea passed, and this Bloom was left with nothing but terror as he viewed a Cosmos stretching out endlessly before him. But, without form, this Bloom could not scream.

II. Confirmation

1

When Cri awoke, he was filled with joy. He glanced around at the other members of his age-grade sleeping together in the ceremonial hut. Adolescent boys and girls around the planet were meeting on each of the three inhabited continents. Today would begin the weeks of their *Irta*, the ceremony recognizing their passage to sexual maturity. The *Irta* would involve tests of their mental and physical strength. He and his age group would fast for days. They would be introduced to the mysteries and mandates of the Founders. They would be circumcised to mark their admission as adults in their culture.

Despite the demands of the weeks ahead, Cri felt joy. Cri sensed that he was alone in this feeling; the rest of the group were feeling fear at what lay ahead and apprehension as to whether they could meet the challenges imposed during the *Irta*. Cri was not oblivious of the physical and mental demands he faced, but any concerns he felt were dwarfed by his certainty of the revelation that lay ahead. He would meet his totem animal and know, for the first time, a connection to the spirit world. Cri felt a void within him would be

filled.

In the next few days, Cri's joy was replaced with exhaustion. Little food, little chance to rest, he and the others were kept in constant motion. He could sense that the mental guards that defined his existence were being worn to a thinness. Perhaps that, he thought, was the point of the *Irta* itself – to make them face their limits and hone their mental strength. Essans demanded control and restraint. But it was more than that, Cri sensed. Only by breaking down their defenses and leaving them with a weakened hold on their identity could the members of his group be ready to accept the revelations of the *Irta*.

On the fourth day, the group gathered into a clearing to learn the story of their Tribe. Exhausted and unguarded, they faced the *Mira* – the speaker for the Clans. Although the *Mira* stood before them, neither her features nor voice registered with them. Rather, each felt a voice within that begin the story that defined their relationship to the Tribe of Essans.

“On the day of the beginning,” the voice and presence spoke to each, “the spirit of *Ess* created our world. And it was almost perfect. *Ess* had formed the four islands in the planet's ocean, and each held all the animals that form our spiritual realms.

“But one of the islands, the largest island, needed more. And *Ess* created Kitu and Kara, the brother and sister of our people, and placed them on that special land. And this, *Ess* thought, was perfect.

“But Kitu and Kara did not have a spirit guide to their new world, and soon they were lost and clung to each other. Brother and sister, each sought revelation in the other. And when Kara was pregnant with her brother's child, the spirit of *Ess* returned.

“*Ess* knew the abominable risk of the birth

of such a child; that a child of Kitu and Kara had the power to destroy the Cosmos. *Ess* knew that such a thing should not be allowed, and so *Ess* remade their world. Their island home was destroyed and then reformed, and the perfect world had a deep scar that would last forever.

Ess knew that Kitu and Kara could not be faulted. *Ess* had left them without a guide. So *Ess* preserved them, but exiled them to the other islands – Kitu to the left and Kara to the right. And there Kitu and Kara found their mates, and there Kitu and Kara and all of their descendants were confined. Neither Kitu nor Kara nor their descendants were allowed to return to their home island. Neither Kitu nor Kara nor their descendants were allowed to explore the Cosmos. Neither Kitu and Kara nor their descendants were allowed to seek revelation together. And Kitu and Kara and their descendants were subject to the terror of *Ess*'s power to destroy and remake the Cosmos.

“But this time, *Ess* did not leave Kitu and Kara and their descendants without a guide to the spiritual realms. The other animals of the world became the totems that were their spirit guides and to whom they could turn to seek understanding and insight.

And *Ess*, both as punishment and revelation, gave Kitu and Kara and their descendants a special role in the spiritual realm. All became guardians of their world and guardians of the Cosmos. Through their acts, they were to assure that the world and the Cosmos were never remade again. Through their power and will, the descendants could keep Kitu and Kara from uniting. Through their power, and despite their unease, the Tribe of *Esse* could keep the two stars in their mad, imperfect orbit. It was *Ess*'s will and the power of the *Ess* that maintained the cosmic anomaly that was Kitu and Kara.

“And now,” the *Mira* spoke to them, “you all

must know what *Ess* made clear to Kitu and Kara. Your brothers and sisters must always remain apart. Each of you must choose a mate only from another clan. You may not have children with another in your Clan. This is the lesson of *Ess* that you must accept.

“You will each find your totem during the *Irta*, but, as we also learn from Kitu and Kara, we may never cling to our totems; they are our guides, but they must not be the end which we seek. Union with a totem is an even greater sin than union within the Clan. It will lead to destruction. That is also the lesson of *Ess*.

“If we violate these rules, Kitu and Kara will again unite and then *Ess* will punish us through destruction of the Cosmos. *Ess* has chosen us to preserve the Cosmos. It is our burden and our blessing.

“But *Ess* also left us with a temptation we must resist. We are guardians of the Cosmos, but we live in terror of our burden. We all wish to have that terror end, and therefore, in our deepest souls, we all wish to see the union of Kitu and Kara that will end the Cosmos and end our terror. But that must never occur. We must be strong as individuals, as Clans, and as a Tribe. We must always obey the commands of *Ess*. We must assure that Kitu and Kara remain apart, regardless of our desire to end the terror.

The *Mira*’s presence then left each of them, but the lessons of the story remained.

2

Then came the last day of the *Irta*, the last day of fasting. All of his age-grade, boys and girls, would meet together and ask *Ess* to reveal their totem. Today, enhanced by hunger and thirst, they would dance and sing until their totem presented itself in a vision to each of them. No one knew what animal *Ess* would select for them. Each ani-

mal of *Esse* had its own special access to the spirit realms.

Their totem would instruct and guide them and help them understand elements of these realms. This was the revelation that each sought. But the *Mira* had taught them that they all should feel terror at the prospect of revelation. *Ess* had warned that their relationship to their spirit animal held great risk and that they must keep apart from their totem. They must not become familiar.

Directed by the *Mira*, the boys and girls entered the large field where they had been meeting. At the direction of the *Mira*, each looked down at the ground, away from the Cosmos. Without direction, some began to sway; some began to clap; some began to sing; some began to dance; until all were a swaying, clapping, singing, dancing mass. All were looking down.

Cri was lost in the mass. He swayed and clapped and watched the ground. He waited; forgetting he was waiting. He danced and forgot he was tired.

Then, in the midst of his dance, a figure appeared to him. He would come to know her as Maya. But then she was a figure that danced with him. He could not tell how he saw her or how she danced, but he knew she was there for him. Cri danced faster, and Maya danced with him. In his mind, he saw her - a furry animal with a long tail, a lovely young woman who danced within him, a vision that opened to the Cosmos. As they danced, nothing seemed to separate them. And for a moment, Cri was filled with terror. He felt a momentum to Maya that was overpowering and, at that moment, the possibility that this figure would lead him to reject the admonitions of *Ess* became real to him. But that moment passed, and he returned to the ecstasy of the dance.

Around him his age-mates swayed, and clapped and danced and sang. And, as the

dancing continued, in a blur of joy and fear, he erupted into an explosion of sounds, and tears and semen. He was lost, for the moment, in the forbidden Cosmos. Lost, except for the presence of his totem and familiar, Maya.

3

The years after the *Irta* were difficult for Cri. He had been circumcised and had become an adult member of the Tribe. He, like the others, had his totem as a guide. But while the others sought mates, all from other clans as *Ess* had commanded, Cri lived his life alone, alone except for Maya. He worked the fields and tended livestock with other members of his clan, but all in the village with whom he lived and worked, thought of him as odd and they felt uneasy.

Many in the village, when they felt this unease, were compelled to walk. They walked to villages where they knew no one and did not know their clans.

Some felt terror and, in their terror, violated their vows to *Ess*. These few fulfilled their deepest wish and removed their terror by ending their lives. The memory of those who died in this way was shunned, but they were envied.

To all of the members of the Tribe throughout *Esse* who perceived Cri, he was also a source of unease. Cri's path was not unknown to the Tribe. Some members of the Tribe never married and instead pursued their own solitary visions. But these members caused no unease; they were seen as an affirmation of *Ess*'s commands. By rejecting others and staying apart from their totems, they helped preserve *Ess* and the Cosmos.

But those who perceived Cri still felt unease. They perceived that his totem was always with him. As he worked the crops or tended the clan's herds, they knew that Cri's totem sat on his shoulder with its tail around his neck. Her presence

did not violate the admonitions of *Ess*, but those who perceived Cri could not see more. The world between Cri and Maya was unknown to them, and this filled them with unease. Many of them left their villages and walked.

After some time, leaders of the Clans perceived that they must address their feelings of unease with Cri and Maya. So, with each sitting in their own village, their consciousness confronted one another in a *Baraza*. As their thoughts mingled, they tried to seek consensus on how to resolve their concerns.

One voice emerged in their consciousness, "Their closeness is an affront to *Ess*."

Another voice emerged, "We know nothing. Her presence is not anathema. We fear a harm that we do not know."

Still another voice was perceived, "He has not sought outside his clan for another."

The voices swarmed:

"That is his right."

"His duty is to his Clan."

"His duty is to *Ess*."

"The totem is only his guide."

"We cannot ignore the possibility of a 'familiar.'"

They all perceived that fear, and there was silence in their minds.

"We can only watch and perceive," they said in consensus.

But none could perceive the world between Cri and Maya. Cri and Maya's thoughts and feelings were linked, but always separated by their acceptance of *Ess*.

4

Cri sat on the ground under a fig tree with Maya nesting in his lap. The world around them was filled with sound, but they were quiet in the world.

"Where shall we go today?" Maya asked within him. She had often guided him to other realms; these other realms were not of their Cosmos and so not forbidden. He had insight into these realms, but not revelation. And he wanted more.

"Let's stay in Esse," he replied within her. They both knew this was dangerous, but both knew it was time.

"How can we understand our existence? It is against the will of *Ess* but it is necessary," Maya said.

Cri gently rubbed her belly, and thought about the story that the *Mira* had told. Sleeping with a clan member or familiarity with a totem had the potential to destroy the Cosmos, but Cri felt no unease or threat when he was with Maya.

She sighed and helped him to look deeper for the will of *Ess*.

As they sat together, seeking, revelation came. Another *Mira*, another voice of the Clans, spoke to them and told them another story. When this other voice had told its story, Cri and Maya clung together. "We both have heard another story," Maya said, "the *Mira* isn't the only voice and presence. Perhaps..."

Cri stopped her. "There is no Cosmos in which we, together, are not a threat. But, perhaps, instead of terror, we must embrace this truth. Perhaps, it is a revelation."

Maya smiled her smile, and Cri stroked her head. And without effort or thought, Maya shimmered and appeared in her human form to Cri. He stroked her head.

But the terror of *Ess* was not gone, and they did not seek revelation with each other. But Cri stroked her head, and they both felt ease.

5

And then the *Valencia* arrived. *Ess* had isolated them from the Cosmos, but now the people of *Esse* perceived a presence of others outside their world. They were perceiving the Cosmos, and this terrified them and they wondered how *Ess* would have them respond.

When the shuttle of the *Valencia* arrived on the surface, the Elders from the nearest village went to meet these Others. These Elders perceived together with all the Elders from the planet. And all could perceive the minds of these Others, and the thoughts and images they experienced filled them with such a terror that they all fell to the ground. Around the planet they fell to the ground. And they all tried to grasp the ground of *Esse* to ensure that it remained.

But their terror overwhelmed them, and all called out to *Ess* to preserve them and their world. "The Cosmos has sought us," they pleaded, "we have not sought the Cosmos." And their terror seemed to take a form, and all of the Others – the people, the ship on the ground, the ship above them – were remade and banished from the Cosmos.

And all, all who had felt the terror, and all who had reached out to *Ess*, felt an ease that comforted their terror. They felt that they had fulfilled the commands of *Ess*.

But the Cosmos would not stay away. Sometime after, they perceived that another Other had sought out their planet. But this time they did not wait. Together they remade this new Other, and both their terror and their ease returned.

All felt the terror and ease except Cri and Maya.

6

That the *Baraza* was necessary, they all knew. Twice the Cosmos had come to them, and their

world they knew had been threatened. All of them perceived together and sought consensus.

First, one said that they must not, must never, reach out to the Cosmos.

Another claimed that their actions with the Others had itself been an engagement with the Cosmos and that *Ess* would punish them.

Another claimed that the arrival of the second Others was proof that they had failed in their duty to *Ess*.

But we felt ease, others said; this must mean we had pleased *Ess*.

And they all sought to perceive the contradiction and seek consensus.

Then, one gave them consensus.

"We must not," that one said, "reach out to the Cosmos; that is *Ess's* teaching.

"But the Others who arrived were not in the Cosmos. They were here on *Esse*. We are not forbidden to engage. We must not seek out Others, but if they join us here, we may have contact. If the Others return, this will be a test from *Ess*. We must engage and understand why they have left the Cosmos to join us on our world. And when we understand, we may act to protect our world."

They all felt ease at these words.

Each of them now knew the need for contact with the Others if they returned, but they all knew that another consensus was needed. Each knew that contact would fill them with such terror that they would fall to the ground.

Then another gave them consensus. "We all know of one who may be able to face the Others. Cri, and this totem, have filled us with unease, but he, and his totem, are free of this unease."

And all then turned their perception to Cri and Maya. Both Cri and Maya looked up from the fig tree where they sat.

"Can you face the Others?" the *Baraza* asked them.

"Yes," answered Cri. Maya, in the cat-like form that they were allowed to perceive, smiled.

III. Consummation

1

The sound of the Klaxons abruptly ended, and Bloom slowly became aware of himself and the ship around him. He could not rise, but he could look around the room in which he had sat a universe ago. Maya, in her human form, stood over him and smiled gently.

"You will survive," she said. This did not reassure Bloom.

"What happened?" he demanded. Whatever had happened, whatever he had experienced, he knew could be traced to Maya and Cri.

Before she could answer, a message sounded through the ship. "Admiral to the bridge." Bloom looked at Maya, and in an expressionless voice, said "I think we should join her."

When they arrived, they found Gaunt and Cri standing with Gilbert. Gaunt's uniform appeared to have been hastily put on, and, for the first time, Bloom sensed uncertainty in her manner. Cri, in contrast, seemed possessed and calm. Gaunt, however, seemed to gather composure as she assessed the situation.

"Damage report, Captain Gilbert."

"Our sensors are not fully functional, Admiral. But we are not receiving any signals from the *Clotho*, and we have no visual. The ship and crew appear to be simply gone. And none of the satellites we placed in orbit around the planet are transmitting. They seem to be gone as well.

Gilbert continued, "We are receiving messages from the *Zeng He*, the *Endymion* and the *Hephaestus*. Their captains are reporting that their crews are disoriented but that the ships are fully functional and with no apparent damage."

"And the *Kurofune*?" Gaunt asked.

"The same, Admiral. All stations are reporting functional, but we all went through some..." he paused, 'experience.' I lost consciousness until a few moments ago. The crew are reporting black-outs, nausea and disorientation. But there are no reports of other damage to the crew, and no reported damage to the ship itself."

"And, Admiral," Gilbert said in a shaky voice, "the chronometers do not indicate that there was any passage of time. I can't explain it. Whatever the squadron went through apparently had no time duration. Could we have entered flick space and then reemerged? That makes no sense, but I have no other explanation."

"Thank you," Gaunt said to Gilbert. "I want all ships on full alert and in formation around the *Kurofune*. What information are we receiving from the surface of Esse?"

"Well," Gilbert said, "we have lost contact with the satellites, but our sensors and those on the remaining ships of the squadron are indicating increased movement of the Essans on the surface. Admiral, are we under attack?"

Gaunt turned to Cri who had been standing beside her during Gilbert's report. "Mr. Ambassador, are we under attack? And I suggest you answer honestly."

"Honestly," Cri replied calmly, "I do not know. But I do not think you or your remaining ships are in any immediate danger at this point. May we retire to your quarters to discuss what has occurred."

"I want more than a discussion, Ambassador. We are now past diplomacy, and the time is long past for answers. I am not generally known as a patient woman, and you will give me answers. I want you and Maya and Bloom in my quarters now!"

At that point, Gaunt strode off the Bridge with the others following. It was only then that

Gilbert noticed the presence of the unknown, human-looking female, nude except for an overcoat, who followed Bloom. Gilbert's world seemed very uncertain to him, and only years of discipline led him to bark the necessary orders to the crew.

2

"Admiral," Cri began, "I did not anticipate this reaction from my people."

"You didn't 'anticipate' this attack," Bloom exploded, "but you knew it was possible!"

"That will be enough, Dr. Bloom," Gaunt said, "Keep silent!"

Turning to Cri and Maya, she said, "I think you both know me well enough at this point to anticipate my reaction to a threat to my mission. If you value the survival of your planet and your people, I suggest you give me answers... now!"

Maya, to Gaunt and Bloom's shock, smiled. "Your threat to my planet, Admiral, does not have quite the meaning you may think," she said.

"And that is a long story" said Cri,

"... that it appears it is time you knew." said Maya.

And Cri told them the story of *Ess* and *Kitu* and *Kara*, and he told them of the burden on the *Essans* to preserve the *Cosmos* by ensuring that *Kitu* and *Kara* never again joined together. He told them of his people's terror that *Ess* would return and destroy the *Cosmos* if they failed to carry this burden.

"A nice fairy tale," the Admiral said angrily, "but it is not an answer. What did you do to the prior ships? And what have you done to my ships? I want an answer now!"

"That," said Cri, "goes to the essence of my people, and the essence of their terror. As you must know by now, we *Essans* are all linked. The consciousness of each *Essan* is shared, to some extent, by all *Essans*. We perceive one another. I

told you of our *Baraza*. Essans from around the planet share their common thoughts and ideas until they reach consensus. In some sense, Essans form one sentient entity. In addition to our individual existence, we share a common existence.”

“Enough,” Gaunt barked. “What did you do to my ships!”

“You must try to understand,” Maya continued. “The Essans are not only linked to one another but to the world itself. I tried to explain this to you before. The Essans, when propelled by terror, can alter the existence of the Cosmos to preserve the will of *Ess*.”

“When your first ships arrived,” Cri said, “and the Essans perceived them as a threat, the Essans, with their collective reaction, remade space and expelled the ships and crews from the Cosmos. I understand that this is not understandable to you with your conception of the Cosmos. But that is the power of the terror that *Ess* instilled in our people.”

“So, the Essans thought our ships away?” Bloom said.

“Nonsense,” said the Admiral.

“It may make no sense to you, but it is our sense. It is our reality.” Cri and Maya said together.

“So why did they attack us now,” Gaunt demanded.

“Is our presence a violation of *Ess*’s will?” Bloom asked.

“Yes,” said Cri.

“And no,” said Maya.

“When your first ships arrived, my people thought it would trigger *Ess*’s anger. But after our people perceived those ships, we realized that the ships themselves, here in *Esse*, were no threat. And your presence now is not, in itself, understood to be a threat.”

“Then why,” Gaunt repeated, “did your

people attack my ships? You said that your people had accepted our presence and that we were, in your words, ‘no threat?’”

Bloom suddenly leaped to his feet and approached Cri and Maya. “We are not the threat, are we? You are the threat. The attack on our ships was an attack on you. Isn’t that right?”

Cri and Mayo looked at one another for a moment before answering.

“You must try to understand *Ess*,” they both said.

“All of my people are linked,” Cri said, “but it is our terror that we must be separate. We take our partners from other Clans. We are forbidden to be familiar with our totem animals. We share our consciousness, but always at a distance. It is the essence of the story of *Ess* that Kitu and Kara must remain apart; that we, all my people, must remain apart.”

“But you and Maya are not apart,” Bloom said.

“Cri and I are familiar,” Maya said, “but we are still apart. The Essans knew that we had not, finally, violated the will of *Ess* – we were still apart.”

“But you want that to end,” Bloom said with his own revelation. “You want no longer to be apart. You want to complete the union that Cri began with the Admiral and that you sought with me. You are using us.”

“For revelation,” they both said together.

Finally, it was Gaunt who spoke, “What do you want of us?”

3

Gilbert sat in the Briefing Room viewing the other captains on the array of viewing screens. The Admiral was not with him. Neither she, nor Bloom, had been seen since they had left the Bridge after the “attack.”

Each of the captains stared at the others on their screens. And all of them were filled with a profound unease. They feared that Cri and his creature were a threat to the ships. And they feared that the Admiral and Bloom were now part of that threat. A lifetime of discipline and duty, and now each was filled with thoughts of mutiny against their Admiral.

Captain Mwara, from the *Endymion*, was the first to speak.

"We are under attack, and the Admiral has left her station. What do you suggest we do Captain Gilbert? You are the flag captain here."

"I have tried to contact the Admiral," Gilbert said, "but she does not respond. She and the civilian Bloom - and those aliens - are locked together in her quarters. She does not respond and will not allow entry. Something has happened to her."

Gilbert felt a tightening in this gut and a pressure in his head. "Admiral Gaunt is not acting as the commander of this mission."

"Are you suggesting she be removed?" Captain Joseph of the *Hephaestus* said what they were all thinking.

"We are talking about Admiral Gaunt," was all the Gilbert could reply.

"Are you suggesting she be removed from command?" Billings demanded. "The safety of this mission and of what remains of this squadron is at stake. Are you suggesting that Admiral Gaunt be removed from command!"

Gilbert, the pressure in his head almost unbearable, could only speak a soft "yes."

"I think I speak for all of us" Captain Mwara said, "that we agree in your assessment. The Admiral must be removed from her command."

"You are now in command, Captain Gilbert." Billings said.

All were puzzled but relieved by what they had done.

4

"What do we want from you?" It was Maya who answered, "We want to tell you another story. For our people below, the story of Kitu and Kara is the terror of destruction that their union brought.

"But Maya and I have heard another story," Cri continued. "In this story, *Ess* created Kitu and Kara and placed them in the world. In this story, Kitu and Kara sought revelation and together conceived a child. But, in this story, *Ess* was not displeased. The child was not a threat but a hope of rebirth. In this story, *Ess* again remade the world. But *Ess's* action was not one of destruction; it was an act of creation. A new world was born that cleansed the planet. And in this new world, the people of *Esse* did not live with terror. Our stars, Kitu and Kara, merged into a single star, shining and stable. And the people were not separate from the Cosmos."

"Cri and I," Maya said, "have lived both with the terror of their story and the promise of ours. We two have become familiar, but have been unwilling to join to form a union that will bring the destruction that will lead to a new world.

"But your arrival has led us to insight. You and Martin have your own terrors, but you are not afraid to join the Cosmos. And we should not be afraid to join.

Cri then spoke to Gaunt and Bloom. "Maya and I, only now, are able to perceive our purpose. My people, through their power and their terror, have managed to preserve the Cosmos; they have prevented the union of Kitu and Kara. But the threat is always there - Kitu and Kara through their union can destroy the Cosmos. That would be an act of destruction that will alter our world, and alter your world, forever.

Maya and I are the alternative to that destruc-

tion. Together we can cause a rebirth of our world without terror or threat. That is the story that we have heard. That is the revelation that we can fulfill.”

“And now,” Maya said, “you must let us go.”

We do not have long,” Gaunt said. “They’re afraid and they will act soon.”

“They are full of terror,” Maya said, “and they will try to stop us.”

Bloom looked at her, and was unsure whether she meant Gilbert and the other captains or the Essans below.

“My people,” Cri said, “are now helpless. They perceive that Maya and I no longer believe in the story told them by the *Mira*, and their terror overwhelms them. You must understand that my people live, have always lived, in a terrible balance. They have the power to preserve the world, but they would welcome its destruction.

“Their common mind below is faced with a terrible choice,” Maya continued.” They could remake the world and eliminate us and your ships. That would preserve their world and preserve their terror. Or, at last, they could allow the union of Kitu and Kara and eliminate their terror. And so, all they are capable of is sharing their terror with your Captains and your crew. This is not a plan. It is simply their projection of the reality of their world.”

“And now,” Maya said, “you must let us go. You must let us fulfill our purpose.”

Cri approached Gaunt and embraced her.

And Gaunt cried. Her mind drifted back through her past life - through the battles and the loneliness; through the depravations and the horrors; through her command of others and her emptiness. Then her mind was forced forward, rushing towards union with Cri. She held him and cried. She was struck by the resonance of Cri’s story. Her life too had been filled with

terror, but unlike Cri, she had never sought understanding of the terror. She had never sought revelation. Cri’s presence, Cri’s body, made demands on her that required faith in revelation.

And for the first time in her career, Gaunt succumbed to her feelings. She turned to Bloom. “Martin, it is time to let them go.”

Bloom simply nodded in response.

5

Gaunt, Bloom, Cri and Maya strode through the decks of the *Kurofune* ignoring all around them. Crew members who tried to talk to the Admiral were brushed aside. The four of them entered the Hangar Bay, and Gaunt, after ordering all the personnel to leave, sealed the doors.

It was then that Gilbert, on the ship’s bridge, was told the Admiral’s location. “Admiral, would you please acknowledge and report to the Bridge,” he transmitted to the Hangar Bay. When there was no reply, he continued. “Admiral Gaunt, if you do not comply, I will send Marines to have you escorted to the Bridge.”

The first reply that Gilbert heard was a short, sharp laugh from the Admiral. “Captain Gilbert, for the first time since we met, you surprise me. I was not aware I was under your command.”

“Admiral, I did not wish to have this conversation over remote communication, but I am acting with the consent of all of the captains of this Squadron. We are in agreement that our ships are under direct threat, and Admiral, I’m sorry, but we have been forced to conclude that you have been co-opted in some way by the sentients of this planet. Reluctantly, I have assumed command, and I am ordering you to return to the Bridge where we can discuss this situation.”

“Captain Gilbert, I quite agree that the squadron is under threat, and I am in the process of addressing that threat. For the time being, I am

ordering you to take no actions without my direct order. And Captain I am puzzled that you and the others have not apparently considered that you all might have been 'co-opted,' as you put it." With that Gaunt terminated communication with the Bridge.

At that, Cri and Maya entered a shuttle, and opened the massive airlock. With the doors behind them closed, and the doors to the Cosmos open in front, the shuttle surged ahead at full power toward the waiting stars, Kitu and Kara.

6

Gilbert detected the departure of the shuttle, and shouted helplessly to the crew on bridge, "I need information on that shuttle." At that moment, Joseph of the *Hephaestus* spoke through the communicator. "What the hell is going on? We have detected a shuttle with the two aliens leaving your ship. Where is the Admiral?"

Billings of the *Zeng He* broke in. "I'm detecting massive movement by the Essans among their villages. "Good god," he continued, "Are you seeing these readings from the primary star? Its diameter has increased by 23% since our last reading. This whole system seems to be heading to collapse."

"Quite so," said Gaunt as she strode onto the bridge. "The Roche Lobe Anomaly that Mr. Chuni identified has maintained the stability of this system. The conditions that produced that anomaly are now under threat, and this system will not continue in its present state. It may go Supernova and destroy us, Esse, and this entire sector of the Cosmos."

"That's nonsense," Mwara said. "Anomaly or not, binary stars don't collapse or go Supernova without warning. It's a process of centuries before they tip into those states."

"Quite so," Gaunt said again. "Check your

sensors." It was then that they all detected the first streams of ejecta from the Primary to the Secondary star; portions of Kitu were streaming to Kara. The physics of the Roche Lobe was reasserting itself.

And the Captains and crews were filled with overwhelming terror. Each one thought, "It is the aliens on the shuttle. They are the cause and they must be stopped." Each of the Captains knew what they must do, and each ordered the weapons systems on their ships to target the shuttle.

Only Gaunt and Bloom were free from the terror. "You are ordered to hold fire, and await further orders," Gaunt demanded. "You are all being influenced by the Essans on the surface, and you are not capable of evaluating this situation properly. I am in command, and you will hold your fire."

Both the command structure that had ordered their lives and their respect for the Admiral stayed the compulsion of the terror. The captains poised on the sharpest edge as they considered whether to fire their weapons.

Mwara finally spoke. "Admiral, the threat from the shuttle is apparent to all of us, and we have the means to eliminate that threat."

"All captains go to visual," Gaunt barked, "I want you to see me." Video screens of the bridge lit to reveal their faces. "I am accustomed to giving orders, not explanations. And now that I am faced with that need, I do not know if I am capable."

"Dr. Bloom and I have spent time with Ambassador Cri and his familiar. We have received from them, what they would call revelation. That is not the word that I would use, but Bloom and I are convinced of their good will. We are convinced that they must be allowed to continue without interference from us."

"As you are becoming aware, this course of

action is full of risk. Our presence, their presence, is destabilizing the relationships that have maintained this star system. But we must not interfere. This is imperative both for Esse and for ourselves.

“Accept this because I command it, or because you have faith in me... or faith in revelation. And, as much as you, I am aware that the terror you are feeling is not to be ignored; we are in great risk. We must leave this system.”

Only Gilbert responded. His face contorted; his body drenched in sweat; his fear overwhelming him. “They are a danger to us and the Cosmos. Admiral, they must be stopped.”

On the surface of Esse, the movement of Essans among the villages became a torrent.

In the shuttle, Cri and Maya waited calmly as they approached the two stars.

The unwatched sensors showed the stars beginning to boil.

7

With the shuttle at full acceleration, Cri and Maya were pressed against their seats, but their hands could still touch. Soon the rockets on the shuttle flared out, and they began their freefall toward the boiling stars. Slowly, calmly, they released themselves from their seats and floated together to the center of the shuttle. They faced each other expectantly.

Ejecta from Kitu erupted toward Kira – the mass of one filling the other. The mad spin of their rotation continued, but the stars’ orbits began their slow degradation. They approached, and as they did the eruption

of mass from Kitu continued, and the pull and twirl of their gravity dance accelerated.

Cri and Maya, falling toward the suns, embraced and held their bodies close together. Their bodies slowly spun together, and revelation was now within their power. Cri and Maya, always haunted by fear and always separate, now merged and each heard the voice that had told them the new story.

At that moment, Gilbert bolted to the control panel and launched the torpedo that would destroy them and their hopes. The torpedo, at full acceleration, hit the shuttle at its stern, and the explosion obliterated the shuttle and everything in it. The debris that remained fell into the stars.

The two stars, Kitu and Kira, slowed their approach pulled by a force compelling enough to affect their huge mass. Slowly, perhaps reluctantly, the transfer of matter ceased and the stars began a slow shift to their prior orbits.

On the *Kirofune*, the Admiral watched the scene impassively. Thoughts of rebirth and hope fell from her like tears. “Captain Gilbert, confine yourself to your quarters. Gentlemen,” she addressed the other captains, “we will resume our orbit around Esse and continue our mission.” Bloom looked at her, and slowly walked from the bridge.

On the surface, the Essans began their trek home to their villages. They walked slowly. Their unease abated, but their terror renewed. And all was as Ess commanded. ❖

END TRANSMISSION