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# **A MATTER OF WEIGHT**

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**LAUREL ANN HICKEY**

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# CHAPTER 1

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THE SHIP HOVERED TEN METERS above the shore. What had been a cargo bay full of shipping containers and shuttles was now a conference hall with views of the island in every direction. Everywhere Abelard looked were more small islands, hazy with distance, and as far as he could tell, each indistinguishable from the next. Carrying his drink, he followed the broad yellow line on the floor to where he knew the actual hull opening was, the panel pulled to one side. He had been here when the walls became windows.

They had turned lights at this end off to improve the view and the ocean before him glittered with swirls of phosphorescence in green and electric blue. The glow was from the ember of the nearer sun as it rose in the night of its younger yellow companion like a tiny over-bright moon. Beyond that was the dusty glow of the Parsislil nebula, a nearly exhausted nursery of stars.

Parsis 4. Abelard found it amusing that the colonists hadn't been able to arrive at a consensus on the name and ended up using the astrological designation. An amalgamation of interests, a colony only in the most general sense.

He raised his face to the cool moisture-laden breeze coming through the shielding, expecting salt, or seaweed, or rotting fish. But anything he might put a name to had been filtered out, or more likely, didn't exist. The world was that alien. Perhaps it would never have a name.

Behind him, his associates still celebrated the agreement they had just reached. A shout of laughter and a part of him missed what he had just left, but not enough to turn around and go back. Drawn to solitude, he felt abandoned when he found it. Sarah, his wife, would accuse him of melancholy and it was true. His reaction to change. To endings.

*Come find me. If you loved me, you would.*

Instead of Sarah, what appeared were will o'wisp sparks, bright against the dark water. "Tell me what you sense of this," he asked them, not really expecting an answer. Like most dead, they were selfish with their own concerns.

Then a soft note from one brushed against his awareness as though new again. *You remind me so much of him...*

The general, her brother, his Sarah's great uncle.

Another light hissed as it circled tight around his head for a moment, scratching against his mind. Kevien. He imagined it had a red glow, like the man's dyed hair.

One of his promises kept. The death of the man who had betrayed her.

A hand in his; another took the glass from his hand. "From the look on your face, grandmother is being difficult again."

Sarah's dark skin and even darker hair reflected the phosphorescence of the ocean; she looked nothing like the grandmother she had been named for. "No more than usual," he said, relieved to be found.

"Come to the party with me."

The negotiators for the colonists were gone already, leaving only Qi'Sina, a diplomat with the Republic Council and her two assistants, and Tom Delaney who represented the Forsythe investor syndicate—he was the one with the loud laugh—and several of his staff. None of the scientists were present; he hadn't seen Lin Xui, the lead scientist, for days, at least not in person. Sarah had been almost as scarce. And even when with him, her mind was elsewhere, taken up by her computers.

He kissed her forehead, fighting off the image of the two of them together, even working. Possible pasts worried at him as constantly as futures did. He lived in a permanent state of *déjà vu*, haunted by his own life, past, present and future. “I wasn't expecting to see you so soon. Have you finished then?”

“My report's gone out, if that's what you mean.”

She sounded annoyed. Just her own reaction to the fight being over, he hoped. “Did you know the island is floating?” he asked, to change the subject. “All the land here does.”

She might have snapped at him, but only smiled indulgently. “Just find that out, did you?”

“No, of course...” And saw the laugh in her eyes and sighed. “It seems new again. Or something does. A change in the air, I suppose. I mean, the negotiations being over.”

He knew the details of the world's Republic classification, the extent of colonization allowed under the Charter of Settlement, the unusually high investiture required of the principals by the Court, the extreme risks and potential profit involved, the export regulations on anything derived from the botanicals that were the reason for the colonization of a world incompatible with human life. The other groups waiting with their own proposals if this negotiation had failed. He even knew the name proposed by one of the colonist groups: New

Eden, noting that only because it stood out both for its irony and too-familiar banality. Details were the air he breathed; he didn't have to keep track of the individual molecules to create the cognitive map he needed. Details were Sarah's job.

They weren't really islands, of course, but organisms made up of what were likely symbiotes, parasites, prey and predators. And now colonists. The investor syndicate he and Sarah worked for supplied the seed money and the science, the colonists ultimately the manpower and the infrastructure. Personally, he didn't think the risks were proportional. Or the profits.

Sarah took a sip of the drink she had taken from him, made a face, and passed it back. Fruit juice, but not any fruit he recognized. "There's land even if it's under water," she said. "And animals and plants. How is it different from other worlds?"

"But this one floats." He turned the glass to where her lips had touched. He could taste her along with the fruit. "It explains so much of the politics involved."

"If you ignore reason and causality."

He shrugged, conceding his illogic. By Republic law, any Charter of Settlement couldn't be finalized until the colonists were on-planet and able to see the conditions for themselves. Regardless of how accurate the surveys had been and generous the terms, already settled points in the contract always grew new life. "I wonder what will be remembered of this agreement. Who wins, who loses."

"Each side thinks they won. Isn't that what you do?"

There was an edge to her voice again. She moved from irritated to indulgent to amused to bored quickly and in that she was exactly like her grandmother.

"I meant in the long run."

"And why are we discussing this?"



There were three colonist groups, all pre-approved by the government, as had been the investment syndicate. The Bedford chief negotiator was very young, twenty standard years old at most, his attention sharp in fractured moments, penetratingly so. Abelard had found him unnerving. He wasn't sure the young man was entirely sane.

"Look at their negotiator, Kimal Lee," he said. "Every argument from him set the ground for more trouble. Isn't that what your analysis said?"

"And in *your* analysis?" she asked.

He never did one. He preferred air to be just something breathed. Not molecules. Everyone lied. By omission, at least.

Her expression was a familiar map. "I'm sorry," he added quickly. "I'm just tired."

A long moment, then: "Something more than grandmother and a put-to-bed colonization agreement is bothering you. It's not Lin being here, is it?"

"No, of course not." He rubbed at his eyes. "It's this world that is bothering me. We shouldn't be here."

"Anything in particular?"

"Perhaps it's just that the life here is more immediately interdependent than any world I've been to." A small smile. "Besides floating."

There was one thing the shielding didn't notice. To his left, three meters away, was a narrow column of what looked like brown smoke. Two more behind him. They rose from the land in a regular pattern, fading high into the atmosphere. They passed through the ship as though they didn't notice it. Where the windows were solid walls, he couldn't see them.

They noticed him. From when they arrived, it had taken three days before the first appeared, vanishing when looked at directly. Two more

days and they were solid and when he moved, the ones nearest him did too, just a little, swaying from the vertical to reach towards him.

“More what?” Sarah’s tone was sharp.

He began to shiver. He couldn’t stop. “Is there an underlying structure here? Three... nodes? Three nodes under the ship, under this area, I mean.”

“The island’s matrix is made of hexagonal components. Is that the structure you mean?”

He didn’t know. “Hollow?”

“The centers are. Small in proportion to the walls, but they line up vertically. Fluid circulation channels, communication channels—we don’t know yet. There are thousands of species in the structural matrix alone. Even with the original survey data, in a week Lin’s team has barely begun to catalogue what’s here, much less understand how it all connects together.”

The cargo. The equipment for the xenobiologists. “But where I said?”

He hadn’t said where, but she didn’t argue the point. “Yes.”

“Look there first, in the centers.” He was blinking rapidly, trying to clear his eyes. Then felt a hand in his, more real than Sarah’s, more *there*, and a warmth that filled his chest. *Abelard*, he heard. And he was a small child again, walking hand-in-hand away from where he was.

“We should go now,” he whispered.

“Now?”

“Now.”

*This* was the beginning, not when they had arrived here.

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## CHAPTER 2

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**A**LL HIS LONG LIFE, ABELARD PREFERRED beginnings to endings. In his mind, they were small perfect scenes, huge with possibility, unsullied by the compromises of experience.

His first beginning. New Eden where he'd been born. He had been perhaps 15 years old, he wasn't sure. There were no records of his birth.

And in that perfect sense of beginnings, he was there again.

The train stopped at Limsald Station at the foot of Mount Kinsa. As Abelard stepped off, the train compartment rocked slightly, and he remembered being startled at the movement when he had gotten on hours before. When you were inside, there was no sense of movement at all.

He pulled the collar of his coat closer around his neck. They had left the heavy rain behind them on the coast. All around him now, snow fell in tiny flakes. Limsald Station, Lim Prefect. He liked the words, how they built a structure in his mind. Someone named Limsald? A long time ago? Was he with the occupation, or before?

The war had passed beyond here twenty years ago, before he was born. Past the mountains, the desert stretched to the far shore. It took technology New Eden had lost and now couldn't afford to settle those lands; the New Republic Court had awarded them to the North Alliance second-wave colonists.

The two guards that had crowded past him in the train's corridor now stood at each open end of the landing, rifles pointed down. Personal guard for the general. They didn't like him, called him 'boy' in a sneering way when they said, boy go here, boy go there.

Before him was the station, and behind, the unrelieved smooth white surface of the train, already with a thin haze of fresh snow, a difference in texture, not color. He shivered, shrugging deeper into the heavy military-issue coat.

A grey-haired man in a uniform, the stationmaster, he thought, stood in the station's portico, more men on either side. Just behind, two girls in long pleated aprons held bouquets of red flowers wrapped with paper. The one on the right sneaked a look at him, a brief smile half hidden in a dimple. Pale hair, but not red. Blond. Mixed blood then.

The old general finally followed him from the train, hand to the earpiece he'd worn the entire trip here. "The connecting train still hasn't left Riverside," he said, a frown on his face.

Abelard wondered if the mountain train would be like this one. No windows from the outside, but when you were inside, there were windows like holes. No reflections. He thought of buildings like that. How strange they would be. Or people. How people could be like that. He tried to avoid those.

The general wasn't one of those, but Abelard wasn't sure what else he was. He'd earned nothing yet. Not the coat, not the food, not his continued existence. He took a deep breath. "General Candalla,

the track in the mountain is heated. As soon as the snow lets up, the connecting train should be on its way.”

A raised eyebrow. “Are you trying to impress me?”

Abelard felt his cheeks burn. But then softly, just to him, the ear-piece enclosed in one fist, the general finally asked the question he had been expecting. “Did you see anything, boy? Do you?”

Abelard shook his head, not trusting his voice.

The general grunted. “We’ll take the main waiting room. Can you manage to arrange that?”

He looked around. One man standing with the stationmaster caught his eye and gestured. As he started over, the stationmaster took that as a signal, stepped forward and bowed to the general. Then the girls curtsied and handed the flowers to the general and sang a song, and the old man smiled and chatted and gave them each a flower from the bouquets and teased them about boyfriends. And the armed guards stared out into a white nothingness.



He had lied about not seeing anything. He’d fallen asleep on the long trip here but didn’t remember waking, just arriving. From the windows that weren’t really windows, he had watched bright red kaska leaves following the path of the train across the plain. When they stopped, it had surprised him to see snow. The trees at least were real, growing in a narrow strip on either side of the tracks, as though along a river, and nowhere else on the vast plain that separated the mountains from the sea.

Except it was winter, and the trees were bare.



In the waiting room, he chose a seat next to the window furthest from the door. A real window, not like on the train. The general followed him in by minutes. They had the room to themselves.

The winter light failed, and he found himself looking at the window without meaning to, watching in the room's reflection the dead of those people who had lived at the foot of the mountain. Shy at first, they soon gathered as though warming themselves. They said they remembered the general, and he thought they might really.

The Republic dead didn't leave ghosts he could see then. He had wondered if the blond girl on the landing would leave a ghost.

The general ignored him as he had on the train. From outside he heard orders shouted and the sound of boots on stone. Trucks. Perhaps the train coming and going. He wasn't sure what the noise was. From inside, the train hadn't made a sound.

Kevien, the general's adjunct arrived. Abelard saw him first as a pale, red-topped reflection floating among the ghosts, a tray in his hand as he crossed the room.

The day before, Abelard had been picked up off the street by two uniformed military police and deposited into the back of a plain black car. In the passenger seat, looking back at him, was Kevien. Abelard recognized him from the history books.

From the tray came the scent of lemon. "Cheese soup. Bread with mountain butter," Kevien said. A glance to him as well, a raised eyebrow.

It wasn't a question, but a statement. *The worst could still happen, boy.*

The general might have caught it; he chuckled as he gestured to Abelard. "Have some." And to Kevien, "Do you remember? Soup

made in a can over the campfire. Milk, cheese, and butter brought by the shepherds. They wouldn't take money for it." Another chuckle.

"We had no money."

"They'd take it now."

"They would."

"They should be ashamed."

The general shook his head. "The battles are different now."

Kevien spat and ground the moisture into the floor with his boot. "Courts and lawyers."

"Are what will eventually win this war."

Abelard thought the conversation sounded well worn. He helped himself to some of the soup and tasted. Cheese and lemon, but he knew that from the smell. And in the back of his throat, catching his breath, wood smoke and wet animal. He put the bowl down.

His bowl bore the station's crest. Limsald. It would have been a company town, a transfer station for the trains carrying spec-rich ore to Sita Port for processing and shipping. Spec was why the war had started here, financed by the drug cartels, still financed by them. *The unofficial demand*. The ghosts had said all that, he just hadn't been listening to the fragmented talk.

He looked up. Both the general and Kevien had stopped talking and were looking at him. In the window, the ghosts were still. Suddenly desperate to break that silence, Abelard said, "Are we stayin' here then? Have we rooms?"

A curious look from the general. "Just then, you sounded like you were born and bred in Lim."

"From the attendants. They were talking about the kaska trees..." He hesitated, confused. Had they been? "The falling leaves. You saw them, they were the color of her hair..." He was lost. He couldn't remember what they had been talking about.

It got worse. "I helped my father plant..." That tree was still a seedling, the bark pink, not the maroon of the mature tree. Afterwards, he had brushed the soil from his hands onto his overalls just as his father had and washed them in the water from the tap just as he did.

They weren't his memories.

The general put his spoon down slowly. "Am I dead? Am I just someone you see reflected in the window? Would I know?"

Abelard shook his head violently. Getting lost in his own mind was a very bad thing. "I would know if you were dead," he quickly said. "We came from Sita on the coast, on the train ..."

"Through kaska leaves that fell and rotted a month ago."

Yesterday, that black car had been crowded with people, people in the reflection of the dark windows. And voices: *I remember seeing General Candalla once...* They all remembered seeing him or meeting him. Most of them never would have. *The general is a great man... hero... killer... prophet... murderer.*

The dead lied. He hadn't taken hope from their words, but a sense of inevitability. A sense of ending, but none of beginning. No arrest warrant. No statement of employment, military or otherwise. Just a holding cell all to himself until this morning. Then a heavy coat in place of his jacket and a sandwich and hot tea on the drive to the train station in Sita.



Had he slept? Where was the general? Abelard pushed himself to his feet, stiff. The window simply showed the outside, brown grass lit by a yellow light. The snow was gone.



Around him were people, civilians mostly, a few in uniform., some he was sure were from off-world. He stood there, waiting for what had to happen when he saw her approach by her reflection in the window. And knew he also saw this from far in the future and welcomed it with a hollow feeling under his heart.

“Excuse me?”

An off-world accent. He hadn’t expected that. And her hair wasn’t the red of the kaska leaves, but might have been when she was younger. It was darker now.

“The attendant said you were going on to Riverside from here. I was wondering if you could tell me about the area.”

“Mam? The hotel will tell you what you need to know.” He didn’t raise his eyes. “There’s nothing there but the spec mines.”

“I was hoping for ...”

The uniformed guard interrupted before she could say more. Just train security, not military, but he had his papers ready anyway, his posture non-threatening. As in the three times during the train ride from the coast, the guard slowly flipped through the document and handed it back without comment.

“I’m sorry,” she said when the guard had left. “I hadn’t realized you were native.”

For those who would surely be listening, “They were telling you.”

A moment. Then, “Are you staying in Riverside?” And when he nodded, “Perhaps I’ll see you there.”



Kevien was shaking his shoulder roughly. “You’d better have more than that.”

The snow was back. And the too-warm room for the coat he was still wearing and the suddenly overpowering smell of the cheese soup.

Abelard shrugged him off. He wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go. “And I usually get paid for this. Maids on their day off pay me. Grannies pay me.”

A crystal ball. Card readings, the numbers on the cards printed with shiny metal-based inks. Séances. The dead thick in the air, fighting for space in anything reflective.

A flat-handed blow to his shoulder and Keven seemed satisfied. He sat back down beside the general. “You’re listed as a deserter from your youth platoon. The Leeville Center is the only place that’s ever had a record of your existence. Scum bred out of scum.”

Leeville, just outside of Sita. It had started as a refugee camp built where the Sita shipyards had been before steamboats became technologically obsolete. It was a slum now.

He ignored Keven, looking at the general instead, leaning forward. “Your sister. Where had she been living? Her accent...”

No answer from the general. The habitual scowl had deepened. No answer from Keven either, but the threat was still there.

Pressure at his shoulder, as though someone had their hand there. A scent like rosewater. *Can it matter now?*

She wasn’t there enough for anything like an accent, but he knew her now. Of course, it mattered. The how and the why of her death. Whose fault it was. What she gave up and what she abandoned, who she betrayed and who betrayed her.

He wasn’t too warm now; he was shivering inside the coat. “Can it matter now?”

The general shook his head, and to Keven, “Get those rooms.”

Keven stopped at the door and turned. “Was I right?”

But it was him the general answered, not Kevien. “We had arrangements through the underground to establish contact here. There had been trouble in the mines, and I was supposedly on my way to Riverside to secure the family’s interests. Sarah was an off-world hire. There was no record she was from New Eden.”

Abelard could put the pieces together now. “Why were you in the resistance?” he asked. Less than a hundred years from re-contact to revolution. The general wasn’t from one of the ruling families, but compared to most, he must have been wealthy. And compared to what Abelard had come from?

He thought he might have gone too far, but the general just rubbed his forehead. “What would unite a well-off lawyer in Sita with a Kel shepherd in a hopeless war?” He sat back. “We were disappearing. *Our* culture, yours and mine. *Our* world.” And to the look on his face, added, “Yes, yours. Boy, you barely know who and what you are, the impossibility of you in their worldview.”

Abelard shook his head. “I tell fortunes.” And see ghosts. The general’s sister was back, stronger now.

“I can give you what he wants,” Sarah said. “What you need him to hear.”

At a price.

“Tell him I forgive him,” she added. “That I believed in what he believed in.”

Forgiveness.

He was on familiar ground now. Forgiveness was what almost everyone wanted to hear.



The room they gave him was at the back of the station. Floor covered in braided rugs, honey colored siskalanta wood showing at the edges. A thick curtain over the single window. Dark green sofa in front of the fire.

Nothing reflective. No mirror, not even in the bathroom.

A knock at the door was the girl he had seen earlier, a tray in her hands. He had been sitting on the edge of the bed and got up quickly.

She bent to place the tray on the low table between the sofa and the fireplace. Her hair was the yellow color of the wood floor. "I thought you'd be hungry. I saw what the cook had had sent up." She wrinkled her nose. "Cheese soup. Sour cheese soup."

He took the cloth off the tray. Steak sandwiches. Two bottles on their sides, each wrapped and tied in a cloth. "Thanks. I am. Hungry."

A smile. "Come sit here."

She sat beside him, opened one of the bottles, and handed it to him.

The smell of beer. He started to unwrap the cloth.

"No, don't." She took his bottle and retied the knot. "We don't need company, especially that kind." A sip from his bottle. She made a face and passed it back to him.

That had happened before. Fruit juice, not beer. Or had it happened yet?

He had an impression of a red twilight-touched ocean and rising columns of smoke. Then it was gone.

"Well?" she asked. "Are you just go'in to stare at it? You've earned it. It can't have been much fun sittin' with those old men all day. What did he want? The general, I mean. His fortune told?"

"Something like that."

"Silly old fart."

A booming sound from overhead and he jumped. It was much louder than what he thought earlier might be the train.

A hand on his thigh, warm, then gone. “Noth’in to worry ‘bout. There’s an air base near. The troops are new, though. Da says it’s just posturing.”

He shook his head. “There were trucks...?”

“Been troops coming by rail for days and go’in out by truck. Into the mines, I think. I think there’s going to be trouble. No one tells da anything.”

“Trouble? Now, you mean?”

She giggled and leaned into him. “I don’t think we have to go worry ‘bout tonight.”

“Was that your father on the platform? The stationmaster?”

She nodded as she unbuttoned the top of her dress. “Born here, but my grandparents are from Dantille Prime. Da married down, to his reckoning. My ma’s local. She says da married her to keep out of a reeducation camp after the Treaty gave this land back to us. Da says she married what of his money the Treaty didn’t grab.”

She wiggled out of her dress and let it fall to the floor.

He let her busy fingers unbutton his shirt. “But at the landing he seemed impressed to meet the general.”

“Well, and why wouldn’t he be?”

His pants were next.



A room without reflective surfaces creates a soft darkness, like being under a blanket. He slept without dreams and woke with his shoulder being shaken. He rubbed his eyes. “Is it morning?”

“Almost. Get your pants on. I’ve got something to show you.”

Stairs led down to what must be underground storerooms. Her hand in his was cold.

“This is the oldest part of the station. Was the Aeden manor before the occupation. Ma’s grandma’s Aeden.”

More stairs. There was nothing that reflected here either. “What’s your name,” he asked, wondering why he hadn’t asked before. Or why she hadn’t offered it.

But she just glanced at him and kept talking. “Before the occupation, coal barges were on the Sis each spring when the main channel through the marsh was deep enough from the melt. The Campbells din’t like the marshes or the people there so they put the train station on high ground like here where the manors were. Cept the Aedens din’t get along like the Candallas in Sita did.”

One last staircase, wood beams set in a darkened stone wall, and they faced a door with a padlock. He felt like he was standing at the bottom of a well.

She had a key. “You’d better go in alone,” she whispered.

“Suzie,” he said, his hand on the door. “Your name is Suzie.”

The door closed behind him with a click and the sound of the padlock being turned. A small room with dark walls, indistinct. Light coming from far above. Dim still though, it must be earlier than he thought, or the clouds and snow hadn’t cleared.

Then the light bloomed as though he had just opened his eyes and he saw what had been in shadow. Raw spec ore, tiny glittering crystals in the ribbons of coal. The room was built deep into a spec-rich coal seam.



Suzie was her sister's name, the other girl on the train platform. Danielle had never forgiven him that. Danielle and Suzie Campbell.



He remembered screaming, his hands torn from pounding on the jagged surface of the walls, blood streaks on the door. And he remembered seeing again the smoky columns, seeing them from far in his past, from his future, his present.

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## CHAPTER 3

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**T**HE SHIP WAS SAFELY IN ORBIT. “WHAT DID you see on the surface? Give me some details,” Sarah asked, lying curled against his right side, the both of them in bed, his arm cradling her, her right hand at his waist where the spec implant was. She got a mild effect from the skin-to-skin contact, the same as she did from her mostly organic quantum computers which used spec dust in their processors.

He described what he could even as he wondered what her computers told her. “The delay in seeing them, it was like I had to learn to, that they were too alien. They had to learn to see me too.”

“Sentient?”

“There was nothing I could sense as being an individual. Awareness, yes, but not necessarily sentient as we understand it.”

“How about the computers? Did you notice any movement towards them?”

Reacting to the spec dust? He shook his head. “After I was able to see them at all, their appearance didn’t change, just their reaction to me and that was small.”



He was what was called a terminal addict; he would die without constant exposure to spec dust. Like her computers. His registration number and medical record were embedded in the implant which only released the compound when triggered by multiple factors unique to his body.

He had been born addicted; both the natural background levels of spec dust on New Eden and the pockets of industrial pollution that concentrated it meant most native-born people were addicted to some extent, just few to his degree. For most, if they went off-world they got over it like getting over a mild cold, retaining only a heightened sensitivity to the effect of the drug. They passed that on through epigenetic inheritance in the maternal line, so Sarah had that from her grandmother too, as well as her temper.

She shifted onto her back, but still snuggled against him. “Then why the rush to leave?”

The ship had left when he had said leave. He hadn’t been asked for explanations. Explanations were Sarah’s job. “Aren’t I always right?” he murmured.

“Often enough. Except about Lin.”

“Except we’re not going to talk about him, are we?” This was familiar ground between them. The other man had been her academic advisor at university; Sarah one of half a dozen graduate students under him.

“Other than of course I would have married him if you hadn’t come along.”

“I never said that,” he protested.

“But there’s always so much you don’t say.” Her voice was softer now, and he felt the lessening of her attention. To sleep. To her computers. Sometimes when he woke in the night, he watched her whisper

nonsense, her eyes moving rapidly under closed lids, and wondered if she dreamed with her computers and they with her.

When Sarah was asleep, the will o'wisp that was the ghost of her grandmother appeared from the corner of his eye and circled them before fading away.

"I did what you asked," he whispered when even with dark-adjusted eyes he couldn't see her glow anymore. He had and he hadn't. He'd done what he could.

Their legends said that when humans had first come to New Eden, the world had refused to listen to their dead. Flesh dried until the skin was leather, the bones knives; the bodies didn't rot. Eventually, there were those who learned to hear the voices of the dead and to give them the peace the world couldn't.

Legends were a way of lying as well. There had always been ghosts and people who could see ghosts. Lifelong exposure to spec dust simply exaggerated the natural persistence of consciousness. And for a few, exaggerated the ability to see this as a reflection of the other person, figuratively and often literally. And for even fewer, see other forms of consciousness too.

People had added a layer of humanity to New Eden since the first brief wave of colonization, deepest in the wet coastal valleys where the land was made fertile for Terrain crops and the first large towns were built, then following the major rivers back to the mountains. It was in the mountains that the spec dust was mined, the crystals found in tiny pockets in seams of coal, the remnants of a long extinct plant. His ancestors had mined the coal for fuel, stockpiling it in the major port cities for shipping. Each spring, the melting snow and floods brought more spec crystals to the coast; people panned for it in the riverbeds and in the delta mud flats. There were always buyers.

It had taken him nearly twenty years to find his Sarah and keep what he could of that part of his promise to her grandmother, even if a generation removed. *Find my little girl, make sure she's safe.* That “little girl” had died shortly after giving birth to his Sarah. Sarah had known nothing of her New Eden heritage.



Abelard woke on the edge of the dream, his own long life like a cloud around him. Sarah was still asleep. All around was the heartbeat-faint drone of the ship's engines.

He died in a bed much like this one, being held, like this.

Sometimes the woman he saw was Sarah; sometimes it wasn't.

He shook his head to clear it; he wasn't at the end here. Absently, he rubbed at the scars on the heel of one hand. From the spec crystals in the room in Limsald Station. It seemed very close just now, as Parsis 4 had seemed close enough to touch then, when the panic had subsided. Floating islands. Smoke rising. Images that had meant nothing so out of context, out of his experience, except for the comfort of seeing a long life ahead and love in it. He had walked out of that room with hope rising like a sun in his heart. His beginning—what he had first felt getting off the train.

He had that feeling now. Another beginning, however imperfectly sensed. Not when they had arrived here or through the tiresome negotiations, or even when he had first realized the world was alive. Now.



He got out of bed without waking Sarah. Housecoat over his pajamas, slippers. The corridors were empty. Ship's night.

The bridge reminded him of the cargo bay after it had become a conference hall. All windows, all around, except these weren't windows at all. The bridge was in the center of the ship.

The crew at the controls barely glanced at him as he went to join the captain. The view before them was of the planet they still orbited, it was always of whatever was of interest. He found it unsettling not to know the direction he faced.

"Captain Risarda," he said. "I thought I'd find your second in command here. It must be late."

A sharpening of focus to him, then the captain went back to looking at whatever she had before. Neural implants, he knew, permanent ones, like Sarah had.

"Professor Aedan," she said with a distracted nod. "Orders from Ambassador Qi'Sina. And if it's your next question, there's been no effect on ship's systems from the manifestations."

"Can you detect them at all?"

"No."

"Have the colonists been informed?"

"I understand all parties involved have been told there might be a problem."

"Are all their personnel off world?"

"They say yes." For a moment, there was another view on the front screen: three ships connected and framed by scaffolding and in the process of being reassembled as an orbiting station. The perspective was from below, the ships lit by the reflected light of the planet, the glowing backdrop of the Parsislii nebula picked out in colors that said more about esthetics than what a person could actually see.

"I've interrupted something. I'm sorry."

“Decontamination.

“But the shields...”

“Didn’t see what you did.”



He sat on the bench under the viewing screen at the back of the bridge, blocking part of it, wanting to see the world regardless of what direction they were actually facing and what data the screens may or may not relay from the sensors.

He must have dozed off. Sirens startled him awake.

The same people on the bridge as earlier and paying him as little mind except that someone had put a blanket over him while he slept. “What happened?” he asked the captain.

She waited until the sirens stopped, then the front screen changed as well. “We can see them now.”

He stood and walked closer to the screen. Dayside, the curve to night was a thin arc at the bottom. The rest of the globe should have been blue and white but was instead, a mottled brown. On the high arc, he could see how the columns must have joined together into much larger ones, and then spread out in the upper atmosphere, ending in what looked like mushroom caps. There was little space between them.

The captain joined him. “Doctor Aedan says there is a high degree of interpretation involved in producing the visuals.”

More than for the nebula, he suspected. Was the change he saw on the screen simply a difference in what the computers were able to see, or had the columns grown? “They’re what I saw,” he said.

She nodded. “They’ve set up an observatory in the cargo bay, so you’ll have direct visual.” A pause, then a wide grin. “Doctor Aedan says for you to get dressed first.”



He made it as far as the entrance to the lift platform.

“Hold the lift!”

Tom Delaney. The big man shouldered his way past the already closing grill. The mechanism beeped at him, the door starting and stopping, clanking loudly.

“Stay put,” Tom snarled at the control panel and then to him in the same tone, “Just what the hell do you think you’re up to?”

The lift stayed, but the door kept clanking open and shut. Around him swirled several bright will o’wisp, passing through metal and plastic. His ghosts were back, responding to the charged emotions.

Putting a palm flat on the control panel, he concentrated. Two of the ghosts flew into the controls to reappear a moment later from the ceiling. An old trick, giving them something to focus on. The door stopped in mid-retraction.

Abelard tucked his hand under his other arm to warm it. “Are you complaining that I waited to say something, or that I said anything at all?”

Tom’s nostrils flared like he had smelled something bad. “Your bonus depended on the deal being signed. You do the math. Believe me, everyone else has.”

The ship was full of the kinds of windows that didn’t reflect, and which weren’t windows from the other side. The control panel was one; it just usually looked like a control panel.

“Sarah, dear,” he said, knowing she would be listening, “Can you use that new trick of yours to show the inside of the lift?”

She had always been an over achiever. Not just the control panel, but the walls too. On them, in infinite perspective as though the surfaces were mirrors, were Tom and him and five intense red lights moving like angry wasps.

All the Toms ducked, swatting wildly.

Actually, there were only three lights with him now, fading as they lost interest. Grandmother, of course, was one. He didn't encourage the others by calling them by name. Sarah's was the only one whose death he hadn't been directly responsible for. They weren't easy companions.

“Pull yourself together,” he said to Tom.

The big man squeezed out through the partly open door; he was breathing heavily. “We're not finished here.” An angry shake of his head and Tom strode off down the corridor.



The observatory consisted of a longish folding table, bare except for the coffee maker and a few mugs at one end, and three chairs clustered at the other.

Through the shielded cargo bay opening, he saw the broad disk ends of the columns nearest them where before there had only been clouds and blue ocean. A real change then, not a re-interpretation.

Sarah, Lin and one other of the science team, Angela, were standing, their backs to the wide opening, staring intently at nothing three feet above the table, talking in low voices.

He poured himself a coffee. He didn't see what they did, even walking behind to sit on one of the chairs.

Finally, Sarah pulled herself away with a shake of the head. She sat on the chair next to him. "Well?"

He looked out the cargo bay door. The nightline had advanced about a third over the globe. "Planetary gestalts aren't anything new and with such a highly integrated environment... they make their own environment... except for the water..."

"Meaning?"

He nodded towards Lin. Angela had left without his noticing. "What does he say?"

Lin took a step towards them then stopped. Sarah may have warned him off through whatever link they shared. Abelard looked to Sarah again. "What do your computers say?"

She glanced at Lin and back. "My computers can't do what you do. Spec dust simply helps them sustain additional states of any calculations."

The stock answer. Except most Republic worlds had banned them outright. Spec-based computers created their own gestalt and their own realities, past, present and projected futures. Constantly and at a speed humans couldn't near match. These types of negotiations were one of their few sanctioned uses.

"I need an outside perspective," he said.

A long pause and Abelard thought Sarah might not answer, then: "It's changed."

The reaction to what were usually low levels of spec dust had thousands of years to evolve on New Eden. They had lost the technology to create the kind of mess it had caused in the Republic when used in quantum computers.

"I need to see," he said.



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## CHAPTER 4

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THE CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY SARAH attended had been delighted with the idea that the famous Professor Aeden might be willing to do several guest lectures while on Caliden. Abelard had made the lectures conditional on the last one being a trans-discipline panel, surprising the chancellor with his choices outside the fields of history and inter-world relations. There was—of course—a reception afterwards, attended by the graduate students of each department involved. Sarah.

“Your mother, whose memory of her was it?” Sarah had asked him a short while after they had met. “Was it the gestalt?”

They were in bed, talking over a late breakfast of coffee and toast, both still eager to explain themselves to each other.

“My memory,” he answered.

“Not in that much detail. Not as an observer of yourself as well.”

“Mine now.”



On New Eden, he was a seer, inheritor of an ancient tradition, an advisor considered beyond politics. In the Republic, he was a political scientist and diplomat, his work instrumental in the rewriting of the Republic's contact and re-contact law. He had lived the results of failure.



In his opening remarks at the multi-disciplinary panel, he had described the pivotal events of his childhood in public for the first time, inviting the audience to add spirits of place, elementals, ghosts, and gestalts to the lexicon of their reality. On each of the large screens behind him was the title page of a peer-reviewed paper from the disciplines represented in the panel.

“Re-contact with New Eden proved to be a useful model in the negative,” he began. “To start, the New Republic Embassy to New Eden was utterly corrupt. They found a vulnerable people, and to their minds, hopelessly superstitious. Our possession of a uniquely valuable resource led to influence and coercion being bought to bear with no consideration of the public good. Enlargement of the embassy led to invasion under the name of police action, and then to occupation with forced labor and forced migration, and eventually to a police state ruled by Republic functionaries and drug cartels both. The two lectures I’ve already given dealt with the history and the impact—neither are the topic tonight.

“As you can see from those on the panel...” He gestured to the other speakers. “... I’m going to talk instead of the dilemma that the New Eden world view poses to the Republic. When we die, an image of ourselves persists in varying degrees and only in those forms which

actually exist around us. This requires no system of belief; nothing on faith.

“Each of the papers here illustrate this truth, and no matter how unlinked each conclusion may appear, how tiny the difference shown is from what is currently accepted, how evasive the language used, the facts remain. The truth of your own science remains.”

The full papers had been posted, his tablet on the podium before him showed the numbers of people accessing them, the branching out from the references, the discussions already started. The story of this was being created even as he spoke.

Lin Xui was the lead author of the paper on quantum computation which verified the persistence of discrete quantum states past the computer collapsing them. Sarah’s name was fifth in the string of authors. She was in the second row of the audience, sitting next to her advisor. He was leaning so his shoulder was touching hers, his head turned to her. He was whispering something. Her eyes were to the stage.

Looking directly at her, Abelard continued, lowering his voice to a more intimate level. “Let me tell you a story.”

His earliest memory. He was sitting in mud that was a mixture of dirt and coal dust in a sloping field of tall grass. Green shoots were just beginning to show through the moldy decay of the old leaves and stalks. Heavy winter rains had made any bare ground a network of temporary streams, eroding the soil around the large stands. Nearby his mother squatted, prying the larger pieces of coal from the friable ground with blackened fingers and putting them in the cloth bag beside her.

She wore a cutaway sleeveless top over a short skirt. Filth from the coal had stained the scalloped lower edge of the skirt greasy black. It was wet against her bare thighs. No shoes, her feet as black as her hands.

On her shoulders was a dark grey wool shawl, and she kept tugging it closer around her. She moved like a small winter-starved bird caught on open ground.

In the weak sunlight, her short hair was a frizzy halo of bright orange-red, her dark blue eyes framed by lashes the same color as her hair. Her skin, even with years of malnutrition and now stained from the coal, was like smooth alabaster. Her name was Lily.

Hers is the genotype people think of when they think of pure New Eden stock. Originally settled by the Celtic Alliance just before the Souffer-Minka wars that had escalated to destroy the Old Republic, founder effect and then genetic drift had done their work over the subsequent five thousand years of isolation. With low visible and ultraviolet light levels, there was no environmental pressure to select for darker hair or skin.

He couldn't remember further details of her features, but often looked for them in his own. He had been perhaps three years old at the time. He had never seen her again.

His frizzy hair was white now, not red, and so was his beard when he let it grow, but he had the smooth, very pale skin of his youth and he had something of the bird in him too, with narrow sharp features and a tendency to show his nerves.

The remnants of the coal yard extended from the shore of the deep-sea harbor, now long silted up, back a hundred or so meters to the fissured cliffs. Leeville straggled along the top edge and on the more gradual slopes, a shanty town where there had once been shipyards and warehouses. Sita was on the other side of the harbor.

Leeville had been settled first by refugees from the North Kila mountains. When the Campbells strip-mined the mountains, they brought workers in from outside the region to reduce the chance of trouble, forcing the locals out.

He remembered walking through the field, last year's seed stalks towering over him, ending in feathered bursts. Colder, the wind had come up. From the shore behind him, the sound of birds and the smell of the receding tide.

He could see himself now where he hadn't then of course, despite what he had claimed to Sarah. A thin child in worn blue overalls, no shirt or shoes. The same hair as his mother, the same eyes. His nose was running, and he wiped it on his arm. Even on bare stretches of dirt, he shied away several times as though startled and then looked around before continuing. In the grass, what frightened him was easier to see. Shadows darted at his feet, lights blinked from between the stalks.

The grass clumps thinned as the dirt changed to rubble and the incline increased. Then he was at the entrance to a narrow fissure in the cliff, garbage strewn around him, paper, rotting boards, broken glass. Coming from deep between the walls of stone was a yellow glow, bright even in daylight; it drew him. The ghosts and small elementals that haunted the shoreline had vanished. Then, a hand in his and he was suddenly warm like being held tight after waking from a nightmare. *Abelard*, he heard.



On their first trip to Earth, years ago, Sarah had picked up a souvenir for him, a replica of a Paleolithic carving, the Venus of Willendorf. The perspective for the carving wasn't that of an outside observer, but of the woman herself looking down at her own pregnant body. There were no equivalent carvings of men, or of children of either sex.

A prehistoric concept of goddess, perhaps. Iconic, absolutely. There was no face, and the sex was exaggerated, regardless of per-

spective. But what was unmistakable was the self-awareness the figure portrayed.

That is what he had walked into when he walked into the fissure in the cliff, hand-in-hand with the entity that was the spec dust-enhanced distillation of mankind on an alien world.

And what he had carried out with him from the small room in the depths of Limsald Station.



Earth had been a stop on the promotional tour for his book titled *Victory at Any Cost*. The book used General Candalla as the focal point and build around him the world of New Eden, past and present, and the factions, legal and illegal, that had built small empires based on control of the lucrative spec dust trade, and their struggle to keep that control in the face of a revolution that eventually exhausted the patience of the general population of the New Republic and brought down the central government.

The interview had been broadcast live. He thought of the man interviewing him, Scott Tullis, more famous than most he interviewed, his life played out in public, the whole as revealing as though he had no need for substance other than what people saw of him.

He had tried to explain to Sarah.

She didn't look up from watching television. "What are any of us really but how we affect the universe in our passing?"

She collected religions like souvenirs, put them on a shelf and dusted them off occasionally. "What faith is that from?" he asked.

She did look up then. "It's what you just said."



The interview was in a studio in New York, overlooking Central Park. After seeing him there, Sarah had gone shopping. That was Earth to her.

“Professor Aeden,” Scott Tullis said, leaning forward, elbows on the table between them. “What about *Victory at Any Cost* do you think has captured people’s imagination? What makes it more than just another reference book on the subject?”

“Ghosts.”

Scott gave his trademark soft laugh. “I thought I’d have to work around to that. By all means elaborate.”

“I was playing with you a bit there, Scott. I think people’s interest is due to their thinking I have some special insight into the truth of what happened on New Eden.”

“Do you?”

“Yes and no.”

“Still playing with me, Professor?”

He smiled. “Truth is a war where often there is no common ground.”

“Winner takes all, then?”

“Famously so.”

“You said last year in an interview by *Historian Now* magazine that you had been raised by a she-wolf. That’s an obvious allusion to the founding of Rome by the feral children Romulus and Remus. Do we have common ground on that?”

In the preview screen at the end of the table, Abelard saw the links that the viewer could follow for more information. He knew the reference. Another part of Terrain history, this one from the library in the youth detention center. He had been attracted to it. The orphan under

the protection of the gods and who became king. He had known where he was by then, who he was, had built the construct in his mind.

“I expected the question, but that was a remarkably awkward lead-in.”

Scott looked amused. “Just keeping the audience awake.”

“At any rate, it was a throw-away whim of a quote.”

“But the details of your life support the comparison,” Scott insisted.

“Only for someone with entirely too much imagination.”

“Or ratings to worry about?” Scott laughed again.

He raised his eyebrows then smiled. “Understand that at best my small consciousness would surface in fragments out of the gestalt of the mother. I wasn’t ‘me’ until years later.”

“The infamous Leeville Youth Center...”

“Didn’t think anything special of me.” Years after walking into that fissure hand-in-hand with the mother, he had been caught scavenging from a garbage bin behind a restaurant. “Street children weren’t that unusual in Leeville or any of the other slums of New Eden. That was the legacy of the Republican occupation.”

“And the dictatorship that took its place? Another legacy?”

“The extreme form of it, yes. As a feudal society, we had no tradition of democracy. Open, equitable trade with the Republic is what eventually changed our society. And that only happened after the final phase of the war.”

“You were on General Candalla’s personal staff for nine years until his death. Through the Winter Offensive and the long negotiation that finally had the Charter of Settlement revert to the descendants of the original colonists. Some historians insist you were the real architect of the agreement, something you ignore in the book.”



He waved his hand to interrupt but Scott continued. "Then, immediately afterwards, you were appointed Vice-Council to the Republic from New Eden. Despite your youth. Despite that your wife at the time was Danielle Campbell from one of the founding families of the occupation. Your eldest daughter, using the Campbell name no less, became the fifth president of the Republic of New Eden."

"Your point being?"

"Your credentials for writing the book."

He laughed. "Besides seeing ghosts?"

Scott leaned forward. "Are there dead people here?"

Dead, yes. And not dead. Around Scott were fragments of people, caught in the man's own personality until Abelard didn't know where one began and another ended. Or *when*—there was a sense of time here as well, the same thing, over and over, deep in history. He wondered what he would leave here.

"Why do you ask? Do you feel haunted?"

Scott leaned back, relaxing, then gave his laugh again. "Only by my ex-wives."

He joined in the laugh. "We've found some common ground then."

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## CHAPTER 5

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ON THE SECOND TIER OF THE GOVERNMENT SHIP'S cargo bay was their own small ship, Fancy. It took up most of the bay. The outer bay doors were sealed. Armed guards were at the single double-hatch entrance. He hadn't been in here since they had docked.

The rear half of their ship where cargo would normally be stored housed the three spec computers, salvage from a set supposedly destroyed after the Tsui ruling by the Republic High Court that restricted their use on signatory worlds to military operations and government-controlled negotiations and research. Their ship's registry of convenience was Winter, a world with more concern for income than ethics. Understandably so. It had been well named.

Two lounge chairs close together, one on either side of the center yellow line leading to the bay doors. Two coffee cups on the floor. Lin?

"The ship's moved," he said to Sarah. A couple of meters. A yellow line closer than before.

"They didn't like where they were."

Her computers. "When?"

“While you were snoring on the bridge.”

And while her computers were learning to see the columns. “And they like it here better?”

Sarah just shrugged.

Had it been a real difference for the computers, or simply a process of seeing what might make a difference?

Sarah followed him into their ship, always a step behind, moving to stand beside him only at the door to the cargo area. Three large biotanks, evenly spaced. Clear glass-like material netted with something else, darker, but still translucent. Banks of screens mounted on the walls and on the tanks themselves. Most were dark.

He walked to the biotank on the right. It looked like a standard regen chamber only boxy, not long and narrow. Inside though... not the floating brains he sometimes imagined.

A hand flat on the surface. Body temperature. With the touch came a shift in focus and he saw a column of smoke in the center of the tank. One cheek against the tank now and both hands. His eyes closed. He smelled marsh and grass. A tidal river with the tide receding.

“Was the...,” he whispered. He didn’t know the word.

“Organic matrix.”

“Organic matrix. Was it always like this?” A hexagon. A hollow central tube.

“No.”

He straightened and turned to look at her. “Did you know...?”

“It’s not that simple.” Sara shook her head. “*Seeing* them, yes. I mean, standing here, seeing them. The rest, what I *know*, what *we* know, is too shared.”

“Have you told anyone?”

“God no. And I’m still not sure they weren’t always like this, not completely sure.”

“Except they weren’t.”

“No.”

“Does the Bedford ship have these? That boy. Kimal Lee.” The colonist’s negotiator.

“We think so.”

We.

Had that bit of information been in her report? He tried to get a sense of the three shared consciousness around him and failed. “So their computer could be doing this too?”

“Yes.”



Back on the lower level, Abelard set a single chair within a hand’s reach of the cargo bay opening and sat. There was nothing else for him to do. After a while Sarah came and stood behind him, both her hands on the metal back.

The warmth of her body so close, her breath scented with coffee. He put one hand on his shoulder, and she put hers over his. *I’m sorry*, he wanted to say, but those words had been said too often.

There had been another change. Lining up with the merged were more worlds, faint images of this one.

“Do you see them?” he asked, meaning her computers.

“Yes.”

“Do *you* see them?”

She hesitated, then: “I’m not sure how well I’m separating what I’m getting as input from what I might be able to see on my own. I don’t think so. What is sure is that they aren’t reflections or images of Parsis 4, but different worlds.”

“How can you tell?” They all looked the same to him.

“Lin and his team have started to track relatedness, using Parsis 4 as the baseline. What we can get from orbit. The worlds we can see diverge along several phenotypes, suggesting reproduction or evolution with subsequent colonization of the next suitable world.”

He wondered if there had been more changes within the matrix of their spec computers to mirror what they saw here. They were in the open space created by the joining of three worlds. He had that sense of future that said this wasn't the end state, that the columns on what appeared to be a very large number of worlds would join together.

Abelard had once had it explained to him that the reality we experience is a horizon effect, the cumulative result of changes as small as the state of single subatomic particle. That reality itself shivered as the states continually collapsed into each other within the set of dimensions so much smaller than the four we could directly sense, the dimensions where matter and time were much closer together. That all the branches were still connected, down to the start of the expansion at the big bang.

The same science said time was unidirectional. In relation to the horizon of now, 'beyond' didn't exist until it did and wasn't the future anymore. But what of his visions then? It hadn't concerned him in that small room so long ago when he had seen all this happening. There was no possibility of it being an extrapolation of past experiences. As a boy he had accepted seeing the past and the future, with no difference in the ability to do either.

Was the horizon of their experienced 'now' part of something larger that he could glimpse into?



A while later, he noticed the warmth at his back was gone. Getting up, he dragged the chair back to the table. Sarah was sitting on the tabletop, apparently doing nothing other than watching him. There was a nearly empty box of pastries next to the coffee maker and mugs and he wrapped what looked like a meat pie in a napkin before sitting on the table beside her.

He peeled one corner of pastry back to see what he had taken. Ground meat and gravy with small bits of carrot. Lamb? “What about the colony ships?” he asked around a mouth full. It was lamb.

“Two of the ships blew the links to the scaffolding an hour ago and left. They’ve jumped already. The Bedford ship is in orbit in an open pocket, same as we are.”

“Are we sharing information with them?” He didn’t know how many laws the Bedford colonists would be breaking by having an unregistered spec computer.

“No.”

“Did... *this* ... notice the jumps?” He gestured to the cargo bay opening with the half of the pastry that was left.

“Not that we’re aware of. It might be too outside their experience.”

“Have you decided if they are sentient then?”

“I was going to ask you.”

He thought a moment. “It might depend on your definition.”

“In context, I’ll settle for who might be willing or able to talk with us.”

*With us first.* He popped the last bit of pastry into his mouth. “I wonder what it sees of us.”

The sound of the lift door opening, an argument, quiet on one side, not the other. Abelard twisted around to see. Tom Delaney and Qi’Sina. Three of Tom’s staff were still in the lift when the door closed again. From the glare he got, Tom wasn’t any happier than before.

Tipping the pastry box with one long slender finger, Qi'Sina peered into it first and then nodded towards them. "Professor Aeden, Doctor Aeden."

"Ambassador," Sarah said. "There's an apple turnover left. Angela hid it under a coffee cup for later."

"Enterprising girl." She found it under the first she checked, guided, Abelard thought, by the greasy fingerprints on the black tabletop.

Tom shook his head, a look of disgust on his face. "Ambassador Qi'Sina, we can order more."

Qu'Sina laughed. "Foraging is much more entertaining. I might even find a cheese tart if I'm lucky. Perhaps under another coffee cup?"

"Not that lucky," Sarah said. "I ate them both."

"Ah, a definitive example of possession in law."

Abelard finished licking buttery crumbs of the lamb turnover from his fingers. "Which is why you're here, I suppose."

Qu'Sina granted him a smile. "This is now a first contact mission. Tom, you can take this as your official notice." Two bites and the apple turnover was gone. "The syndicate has no further material interest in this matter."

Tom shook his head. "Besides the several billion dollars we have invested here, you need my expertise and my people's expertise."

"What I need is for you to leave."

When he had gone, Sarah slid off the table. "He was honest in his offer to help. He's just not that subtle."

"No, I suppose that's what they hired you two for."

"They did. As we're still here, I suppose we're now working for you. Do we have the science team?"

"The syndicate will gracefully transfer yours and the scientists' contracts to the government. But, beyond the formalities, do I have your support?"

Appropriation of their contract was what it actually was, Abelard thought, amused by the change in the woman's change of tone from brisk, even rude, to diplomatic.

"We're at your service," Sarah said, a smile on her lips.

A measuring look, then a matching smile. "Oh, I know you are, my dear. I meant the Professor." She turned to him. "Before I got here, you wondered what the Parsis 4 entity or entities saw of us. What do *you* see of us?"

That earned her a raised eyebrow. "Me?"

"In *Victory at Any Cost*, you talk about your experiences fighting in the Winter Offensive..."

"I didn't take part in the actual fighting."

"No, but you saw action."

"For a few minutes." A note of protest in his voice. "What has that got to do with..." He sighed. He knew. *And so the legend was born.* He heard the words in his mind with a sense of déjà vue as the present slid forward to catch up with the immediate future.

"I've read the book." Qi'Sina sounded amused. "I wonder if it was even more autobiographical than you had intended. Or perhaps..." A look to Sarah. "...biographical."

Sarah gave a short laugh. "No, it wasn't."

The book was exactly what Sarah had intended. She had written as much of *Victory* as he had, or more, creating and throwing down scenarios built out from what he remembered and the research he had compiled. He and Sarah had fought over interpretation, consequence, interrelatedness. In the interview on Earth, Scott Tullis had been wrong in saying that the events of his life supported the comparison. The nuances in *Victory* supported it in an undertow of meaning that pulled the mind to that end, and if not Rome in particular, then any of many similar god king myths. Sarah having fun.



Among all those Sarah collected, early religions especially fascinated her. The absolute impossibility of disbelief, she explained to him once. And more, the blurring of the line between the human state and the sacred where all of time existed in an instant.

Qi'Sina glanced away from him towards the cargo bay door, then back. "Six of you, a scouting party, came out of the network of caves you were using, right on top of a Republic peacekeeping patrol. And after the skirmish, you led your surviving men down into the mountain for safety and brought them back alive."

They hadn't been his men. He had been dumped on them courtesy of the general who had wanted to make sure his new aide had at least basic military skills.

The cave entrance had been in direct line of fire from the Republic patrol. He had panicked and run down the slope, scrambling between the house-sized boulders to a tiny opening, pulled rubble and smaller rocks clear. At some point he lost his rifle and heavy pack. The three other survivors had followed. Better trained, they pushed their packs and weapons in ahead of themselves.

The series of fissures and caves wasn't on any map except the one in his mind. A few minutes rough going, the rock just centimeters above them, and they dropped a meter or so into a small cave, the floor flooded with water. He stopped there, the others piling up behind.

They had their goggles on. He hadn't realized until then that he didn't; they were lost or left in his pack. He shouldn't be able to see anything but could. Grabbing the man closest to him, he shouted, "Use your grenades. Block the tunnel behind us."

If the patrol had had a burrow bomb with them, they would have died right there. The twenty minutes or so it took for the armament to be airlifted in gave them time to create two more rock falls between them and the surface. Then they waited, exhausted, bleeding from

rock-sliced fingers and torn knees. The explosions came. One muffled woof as the primary bomb split apart, followed almost immediately by the first of the secondary bombs finding dead ends as they followed any crevice they could, hunting trails of human scent.

From the three with him: *Can you get us back up?*

It took five days. He didn't remember much of it, fragments only, and lacking the sense of self that he had worked so hard for. He was blind sometimes and frozen in place, the bobbing lights of his companion's headgear like strange fireflies in his dark. Other times, the rock surrounding them blazed with light and presence.

Qi-Sina had asked what he saw of humanity. One fragment of memory: their backs pressed against the rock wall, inching along a wet slime-covered ledge far above a boiling hot springs. One of the times he had frozen, lost to everything, including his own mind.

Rising from deeper even than the water below was a presence like a second mist, cold to the heat of the water, and alien against the gestalt that had once again become his existence. Diffuse, almost without presence much less mind. Deep in the world where ancient seas had dried, and grass plains flooded, and all pressed and folded to make seams of rock.

He was human, but he had been born on New Eden, suckled on mud and coal and cold wet winters and two moons, not one, and a sun far older than Sol. And he saw, momentarily blind to being human, what it saw.

"We look like glowing lights in mist," he said to Qi'Sina.

Sarah was busy scratching her nose and trying not to laugh. She had heard the full story before of course. The three other men had been purple glowing lights in the steam rising from the water. The lamps on their headgear.

Qi'Sina wasn't laughing. "Elaborate, please."

“Not the headlamps,” he said to Sarah. Again. Then to Qi’Sina, “Not like will o’wisp ghosts either, not that simple a presence. What New Eden saw or felt of us included weight pressing down. Diffuse, but heavy. We carried the weight of ourselves and the five millennium we’d been on New Eden, all the people, their lives and their deaths. From Earth too. All the worlds we’ve been to. It’s all there, any place we are.”

It hadn’t been fear the other entity had felt, it wasn’t that defined. Intelligent life had never evolved on New Eden and its level of self-awareness was limited. And as on so many worlds man had colonized, the native gestalt had retreated, persisting only in the depths of the mountains, the wastes of deserts, the oceans.



In the next few hours, the columns on each world they could see merged into still larger groups, centering on the merging columns of an adjacent planet. And finally, one column joining each, the caps spread out in the atmosphere to form a solid layer that blocked their view.

“Do we still have sensors outside of this?” he asked Sarah hopefully. Meaning were his new limits of seeing, simply his own?

And got rolled eyes in return, but the play of a small smile around her lips. Then her face went blank all at once. “The Bedford ship is moving.”

“Jumping?” That close to the planet? Or planets... if you believed your eyes, believed the sensors that saw them in some ways, but not at all in most. Hands on her shoulders, he gave her a little shake. Nothing. “I need to know,” he whispered.

A moment, then distractedly: "Into the nearest column."

A pre-emptive move? Or had they been called into the column? Except it wouldn't have been 'they', but Kimal Lee, the Bedford negotiator.

"Stop them," he said.

A slight focusing of her eyes on him.

And the pulsing siren started. Bulkheads moved across the open spaces. Lights came on.

"She knows," he whispered into the noise. "Qi'Sina, I mean." About the Bedford spec computer, he breathed, but only to himself.

Sarah heard him anyway, both things he thought. She had better ears than he did, her computers joined now in a way they hadn't been before. Columns of smoke, twisted into one, going... where? What else beside the Bedford ship would need to be stopped?

Even though she bent to speak directly into one ear, he couldn't hear her over the racket of the sirens. It didn't matter, he knew the Bedford ship had been destroyed. As if in response to that knowledge, seemingly from Sarah's breath against his skin, appeared five glowing lights that previously only he could see. Now, her eyes tracked their frenetic movement with that new way of seeing her computers had. Or more now.

Another death. Hundreds actually, but in the way of war, the one that counted. A thoroughly dead one, he hoped. He didn't need another ghost.

Abelard held his hand out, palm up, and watched as one of the will o'wisps settled on it. Grandmother. And felt her weight, pressing down and up, in all ways, all in his mind. All that was human and what had become human. What was and is and might have been. And what she actually *was*, a persisting fragment of a woman who had lived and loved and died a long time ago.

The cost was worth it after all, he said in his mind to her. And I'm nothing like him.

The sirens stopped.

And he felt, but in memory only, a hand in his and a walk through wet grass. What was more real was the sense of being held at the end—his end—except the woman holding him wasn't Sarah.

It wasn't over. Did Sarah feel the call yet? Not as something separate, he thought. Her computers' need would become her need.

"They have no weight," he said into the silence. The worlds they could see from the cargo hatch door and all the others surrounding them, he was going to add, but saw Sarah had understood him.

"How is that possible?" she asked. "We can see the changes over time, here, I mean. And the evolution of the different worlds, their relatedness..."

"Yes, *we* see it."

"Perception then." Her eyes were back on the glowing ember on his palm. "Do they even exist in our universe? Not the worlds of course. I mean the gestalt."

"I don't know." No slipstream of time for them, instead, a universe of *what is*.

And what they saw of humanity? Back again and again to that question. What would music be to a creature who had no ears and no capacity to process sounds? Perhaps a faint vibration on touching a surface. A minute change in temperature. A shimmer in the air.

He was that shimmer in the air. And he didn't know what else. That analogy went both ways. What weren't humans capable of seeing? In what they could understand of the gestalt, did it create the future by seeing it contingent with the present and past, one thing all at once, all the possibilities, and then discarding them as they didn't happen,

and simply not being aware at any time of them having been options?  
How far forward and back did their *now* extend?

And our machines?

“How much weight does a spec-based quantum computer have?”  
he whispered.

Sarah didn’t answer but put her hand in his. She was trembling.  
“Can you do it from here?” he asked.

“It’s done. There’s a kill switch built into the tanks. Simple, mechanical.” Her voice was thin. “Lin was waiting.” She looked up.

All the panels in the cargo bay of their small ship would be dark now, he thought. And she had stayed here with him.

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## CHAPTER 6

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IT WAS ABELARD'S FIRST TIME IN NEW YORK since the book tour for *Victory at Any Cost*. For the new book, his marketing agent had argued for a different title than the one he'd given the manuscript. *A Matter of Weight* became *First Contact: The Parsis 4 Incident*. Marketable. Searchable. Precise. Boring.

Sarah had laughed and told him to get over it. There was a fragile edge to her laugh; writing the book with him had brought it back. The look that went distant and then came up short. She had nightmares of being trapped in a windowless room.

The same studio as his first interview. The host, Scott Tullis, half rose from his seat to shake his hand across the table. "And now our surprise guest. Welcome back, Professor Aeden."

"I'm glad to be back, Scott."

"For those of our viewers who haven't been following the news..." A chuckle and then: "Professor Aeden's latest bestseller is an in-depth and yet highly personal account about what transpired at Parsis 4 two years ago." And back to him. "Is there anyone who hasn't been following this?"

Abelard shrugged. "I'm sure I don't know."

Scott sat back with a smile then gestured to the small preview screen at the end of the table separating them. "The numbers say it's unlikely."

In just moments, the primary tracking chart index showing to one side of the screen had expanded its range by several order of magnitude. Links to commentary, dissenting opinions, and even video inserts of various demonstrations showed in the opposite margin.

Scott lowered his voice. "Do you have a comment about the protests that have followed you and Dr Aeden?"

Abelard shrugged again. "People are frightened by the unknown." Except he was the target, the unknown.

Scott looked at him silently for a moment, then: "There are some who say you should have waited in writing the book to gain historical perspective. As you did with *Victory at Any Cost*."

"I didn't feel I was given a choice. When I started *First Contact*, it was in answer to the Forsythe lawsuit."

"There was that." Scott gave his trademark laugh and the mood around them lightened instantly. "The lawsuit was a record, I believe. Did you find it surprising that none of the litigation was against you or Doctor Aeden?"

"How could it have been? Transition of our contract from the syndicate to the government included everything we'd done, essentially backdating it to when we started. After all, first contact is rarely a planned event; it's more often a stumble or a bump while doing something else. Whoever is available to represent the government has to be able to use what is at hand without worrying about who owns the information or resources. Commercial interests weren't Ambassador Qi'Sina's concern, survival of mankind was. We were lucky to have had her there."



“And yet even your book doesn’t settle the question of whether it actually was a first contact situation. Or even if the Parsis gestalt is even sentient.”

“Or a figment of my imagination?”

“No one is claiming that now.” After a quick but pointed glance to the tracking chart, he leaned forward. “Are we being invaded?”

Abelard spread his hands. “If so, very slowly.”

“How many colonies have been found so far?”

“Last I heard, three. And none larger than, well, this table here.”

“And each found in proximity to a facility employing a spec computer.”

“If being within the same planetary system can be called that, yes. Of the hundreds of spec-based quantum computers destroyed, only those three showed early changes consistent with what was seen at Parsis 4.”

“Hundreds destroyed out of how many?”

“There never were very many in the first place and most were destroyed a generation ago.”

“And ordinary quantum computers?”

“All quantum computers discard alternative states, otherwise even with their relatively focused scope of calculations, the results quickly get out of hand. The use of spec dust allows computational states to persist longer, allowing more variations, but in the end, to get results at all, these intermediate states also have to go. It was their very simplicity, their expanded *now* that allowed interaction with the Parsis 4 gestalt.”

“Simple isn’t what I remember about computer science from school.”

“I’ll concede that point, Scott. It’s not what I remember either. I’m relying on the experts here.”

“And yourself?”

“You’re asking if I or anyone with a sensitivity to spec dust could provide a focus to colonization? The short answer to your question is no. I was never a focus, even while on Parsis 4. Humanity isn’t simple. Humans don’t exist in a state of *now* and I don’t see that we ever could. That contact might be possible... well, at the physical level it already is. If one of those colonies was sitting on this table, you’d see it. Dripping off the table actually, killed by our atmosphere.”

“Remind me not to put one on my invitation list then.” Then more seriously. “Why the insistence both at the time and in your book that the interaction you did see was dangerous?”

“Dangerous at least in that it was outside of our control.”

“Our control? Ambassador Qi’Sina’s control? Or your control?”

As though condensing from the words, a bright spark of light appeared before him and began circling, spitting with energy. Kevien. And moving with the spark, the stronger energy attracting them, were faint shadows coming in from around the room, from the man in front of him.

Abelard’s lips thinned. “As you have already mentioned, the spec-based computers were reacting to the Parsis gestalt. *They* would have been outside of our control.”

Scott leaned to one side and tapped the surface of the preview screen. Suddenly, on the screen, the spark appeared and swirled, bright red and much larger and brighter than what Abelard saw. The shadows drawn to it were dimmer, like a trick of the eyes. A moment after the tap, the spark sank into the screen and the presence faded.

Scott’s eyes followed the movement of the spark until it vanished then leaned back and smiled.



Sarah was waiting for him just inside the building entrance. A guard stood at either side. In the glass door, shadowy figures crowded the slight reflection, their shapes mixing with the live people outside and the view of the park across the street.

Only a small crowd had had time to assemble—the interview hadn't been announced for just that reason. However, instead of the usual focused demonstration, they were broken into groups, watching handheld screens. Mouths opened and closed silently.

Sarah turned to greet him. Although it was warm, she wore a long-sleeved cotton sweater. The air in the city moved too much, she said, it bothered her skin. Two shopping bags were by her feet. He picked them up. From the weight, clothes.

He kissed her forehead. "Did you watch?"

"Of course."

"I feel diminished somehow."

Sarah gestured to one of the guards standing near the door and the glass door opened. Noise bloomed around them. She took his hand in hers.

He died far from Earth, being held by her. It was all he needed to know. As they walked down the stairs to the sidewalk, he leaned lower to speak closer to her ear over the noise. Only a few people looked up as they passed. "How did they get the technology?"

She smiled.



He had begun *First Contact* with the story of his arrival at Limsald Station when he was a boy. "Picture it: The year was 5670. I was 15. The train I had taken from the coast stopped at Limsald Station

shortly after dusk. I stepped out into a heavy snowfall, a thick coating of white already settled on the smooth exterior of the train. When you were inside, windows ran the length of each compartment. Windows on which the snow never landed.”

Truth is a battlefield, he remembered saying in the interview for *Victory at Any Cost* and saw himself arriving at Linsald Station as though a lifetime didn't separate him from then. *It had been early afternoon, the snowfall light.*

And the difference it made? He'd won that argument with Sarah.