

*See
You
In
Our
Dreams*

Maía

In the lineage of the best science fiction and the register of today's new climate fiction – *cli-fi* for those who haven't been reading much – *See You in Our Dreams* weaves a rich tapestry: a near-future struggle for radical social justice, stopping the current system in its tracks, and setting out in the direction of a unique experience of community. Grittily and inventively narrated by multiple voices, the author leaves readers to ponder what is lost and what is won when we raise our heads up to look clearly at where we are. This book bids us to break the rules-- with courage, imagination, and love.

John Foran teaches at UC Santa Barbara, and with co-instigators Jessica Alvarez Parfrey, the late Michael Bean, and many others, has founded the Eco Vista Project

Set in the 2050s, this is not your typical “dystopian novel.” Here you’ll meet a kaleidoscope of characters guided by a mysterious presence in the dreams they discover they are sharing. As the maze of high-tech monopoly corporatism begins to break down, they form an underground community of friends and co-conspirators. Their planet-wide, shadow-resistance network gradually emerges into consciousness in a bid to break the hold of a civilization gone mad, held in place by ultra-surveillance, where “govcorp” structures impose rationing of water and other necessities, in an urban “wilderness” without wild animals. Dreaming finally becomes action, in a mysterious reckoning in the desert. With its aura of quiet courage and overtones of spirituality, *See You in Our Dreams* is sure to make its way into your dreams, as well.

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For human survival, we need another mutation in the destiny of reality, compared to which the shift from pre-history to history, seems like child's play.

Ariadne, via Raimon Panikkar

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Part One

*The Dream already exists—
what you are looking for is the entrance.*

Ariadne, 2050

Her Voice

Budd

“This place is a *maze*,” she said, “let me show you the way out.”

Her voice, the first time I ever heard it, sent shockwaves through my body—something like that morning’s NetNews bulletin: *Coronal Mass Ejection, magnitude XX3...heading earth’s way, capable of tearing through The Shield.*

A tawny sweetness came to me, like lemon flowers Ma used to smuggle home from the arboretum. Her hand clasped my wrist, tugging in a direction I hadn’t intended to go. Planting my legs, I didn’t budge.

“Believe it or not, I know where I’m headed.” I caught my strident tone, softened it. “Actually, I’m bringing this back in,” I held up a Talking Digital Guidance System, “in working condition. My job. Lots more in here.” I patted the bulge in my pak. “Shortages make reclam pay off these days. This one? Nobody could pin down the glitches, everything tested clean. Took her down to zeroes and ones, tuned myself to every quiver— massaged linkages, flattened c-nodes, put her back together and now she’s purring.” I passed the TDG over my cell triggering IRIS to ask, “*Solar or Thorium mode?*” I grinned. “Been doing this since I was a kid...”

She clicked her tongue. “So, when somebody asks what you do for a living, you say, *Oh I sweet-talk DGs?*” A chuckle from her. “But hey. Didn’t mean to push you around, you just looked,

hmmm, lost somehow. I'm picking up a Burner for MedArt. Containment Clinic south of here?" She stepped closer, stirring the air between us. "Techs I work with tell me giving unasked-for directions is a vice of mine—so don't take it personally!" The music of her laugh disarmed me.

I offered my palm—her fingers brushed mine and folded over, like a flower closing. This hand-talk between us was taking the place of what I couldn't put into words. Not yet.

She hesitated before her next move, until I began to doubt. Then her thumb traced mine in the familiar gesture, and I took a breath. We rested that way a moment before I pronounced the syllables of my name, separately and slowly. The way I'd learned to do after too many confusions. "Fran-cis-co. de Vas Budd. Just *Budd* is how it shakes out these days."

Her fingertips found the center of my palm, drew a spiral there, sparking an exquisite sensation. Then she pulled away. I welcomed each pause, each variation from the formal Labyrinth handshake.

"*Teri Donaghue*." Five quick syllables. "Unlike you, Budd—I like to say my name as fast as possible!"

I laughed. "Didn't mean to snap your head off. Could we, um, grab a hydro at the Wet Spot?" I turned toward an exit from the *maze* as she'd called it, the one I personally favored, though it meant taking the long way around. "When you get off work, I mean. At the Clinic." I bit my lip. "You *do* get off, don't you?"

A deeper laughter this time, from her throat and belly.

Sure I was about to hear *no thank you*, I'd already turned my back when her voice a second time made the hairs on my neck rise, and *Oh, I definitely do* came warbling toward me.

The Silence of Water

Six years later

Against rage, how will beauty hold

whose action is no stronger than a flower?

Get your head out of yesterday, focus on water. Budd, kneeling on the rough carpet of his unit, thought he heard roaches scabble away from his hand. “Poor bastards get thirsty, too,” he heard Teri tease in his head. Her actual voice in his life rare these days.

29.4 C Net was predicting. Along with the weekly catastrophe, *Another CME.* Or a hack? *Sector Five will be down for several hours...Unprocessed water has sickened more than thirty-three people...Drought Conditions.* How long had they been saying this stuff and calling it news?

6 am, his block’s water time-slot. He forced his hand under the sink, toward the Sector Outlet Pipe. Felt for the keypad and entered his bank code. When the beep went off, he brushed his wristcell by the sensor.

Day on the verge of breaking —he strained for an off-net clue to its nature. A crow barked outside somewhere like an impatient little dog, making him smile as he remembered peanuts flying from Pop’s hand onto their flat roof, the scrape of beaks, dry brush of wings. *Cuervo* whispered through him

and out of his mouth. Ma's word on his breath. He liked the feel of that.

How do crows find clean water? *Drifting again.*

He compressed the spigot handle unleashing a shudder that ran down the faucet-head and into his arm. What he dreaded most was the moment the meter clanked off and the gush diminished to a trickle, the last drops echoing:

The silence of water is the beginning of thirst.

He shook the words away. Ariadne's words. Like outlaw psalms Ma recited to him when he was a kid.

Hollow and loud, water rumbled out of the storage tank into the bucket. He wet his fingers, touched them to his lips and tasted, ground his teeth. Bitter. Spiked with anti-REM? He laughed. Probably spiked all along with things he couldn't think about now. Already thirsty. No choice but to drink.

He swallowed his first cup of the day, then stepped into the cramped enclosure outside the door of his unit, ironically called *the porch* on inspection sheets. Three more steps and he stood on bouncy turf. Sun scoured his face. He welcomed the faint pain of it.

Rationed water. He'd gotten used to a lot of sad shit but he would never get used to *that*. How do you weigh the quench of thirst— yours, a friend's— against a cool handful splashed down the back of your neck, coming in out of the heat?

~

By 11 pm that night, weariness pulled his hands away from their restless testing for flaws in the latest TDA. *Been doing this all my life*— taking delicate machines apart, *sweet-talking them*, Teri called it. Hard to explain how his work was liberation. Up to a point, of course.

He stowed his circuit-integrity tools, miniature interface-screens, system test-kits, arranged with elaborate care in floor-to-ceiling drawers lining the walls of his one-person burrow.

Sleep, how he longed for that total surrender. He'd always had trouble with sleep. Insomnia was a common after-effect of his illness and surgery. But when Dreams began disrupting both waking *and* sleeping, it was then that the enormous soothing concentration his repair jobs demanded, became his *rest*.

And there was music. With two fingers he fished the harmonica out of his breast pocket. Blues Harp. *Tesoro*. He rarely played now. But several times a day his fingers on their own would feel for the harp's reassuring shape. He licked his lips— a little spit-magic ritual— pressed them to cool metal, slid his tongue into a groove, bent the first note. Tried out a call and response with that crow still in his ears. *Mañana, she comes on dark wings*, a tune from his blind-child days, something he'd been playing around with ever since. But after a few distracted phrases, he quit, wincing at the bad omen of that song. *Mañana*. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow was the day. The day Teri, his best friend, his wife— ex-wife— would make up her mind. Go with Labyrinth? Or stay out of it like him? Tomorrow was just about here. His stomach made a fist. So little time left.

He slid the harp into his pocket, smoothed his hands over the table in front of him, remembering Teri earlier that night, on her way out the door, answering his questions with a statement that came like a blow, "I'm letting the Dream decide me, Budd," pronounced with baffling confidence that what she needed would inevitably find her.

Letting the Dream decide. The one she might be having now.

Hands shaking, he scooped water from the bucket into the locked sink, set a bit aside for brushing his teeth. He reined in

each movement toward a semblance of calm he did not feel or remember feeling—in how long? Dipping a pad, he scrubbed face, armpits, groin, drained the sink into the grey water tank that doubled as emergency backup.

Reaching for the cup, his knuckles grazed it, spilling most of the water. He cursed himself, swept the puddle from the counter toward the cup, trying to catch every drop. Breathing hard, he hung his head, dampened a palm on the counter-top, slowly massaged the precious wetness into the skin of his chest.

He was on the latest hypo-REM. For a couple weeks now. Its purpose? To dull the intensity and number of dreams. Most nights it did as promised, pushing him down through layers of pure sleep— which he craved more than Dreaming.

Teri let her eyes— *appearances*— dominate her senses. As long as he kept his face and posture in line with what she expected to see, she *didn't* see.

He caved in when REM-x turned up off-Rx at PharmCo. Once you made up your mind—or had it made up for you—you didn't want dreams coming like wild dogs to tear at the peace you'd bargained everything for, did you?

Climbing into his bunk— strangely cramped since it became all his own, no longer *theirs*—he kicked the sheet onto the floor, crossed his arms behind his head.

It's floating toward me— the moon, but changed. Teri, early on, was saying to him. *Budd, are you listening? Not a dream, a Dream. The moon melting. Then congealing. Peaks higher than any mountains on earth.* He'd felt her lean forward as she spoke, *Some mountains are far far taller than Everest.* There was more, she said. But the moment he heard *taller than Everest*, the ground fell away, and he knew he'd Dreamed those words himself. Ariadne's words.

How long ago? Six, seven years? A lifetime. Almost everything changed, rearranged, those years they discovered their Dreams were linked and nearly identical. Years so crazy-serious about every detail, all possible interpretations. Twentyfourseven. That was before they stopped living together. Afterward, everything went on like before—his underground organizing, Labyrinth coming into its own. Everything. Except Teri was no longer Dreaming beside him.

When they were first together there was no mistaking the intense, distinctive feel of Dreams as they came more and more often. Every morning, they questioned each other, analyzed, conjectured. Teri's early Dreams were, she said, *blurred and dark. Like looking at the world through heavy rain.* Each one, a whole world of peculiar, pulsing shapes. His too were mostly unintelligible, repeating patterns scrolling through space—vaguely biological, shrinking, merging, breaking apart. And sounds. Lots of sounds. Like birdsong. Glass or metal clinking. Windy roars. One sound especially haunted him. Pop would have hated it. A *whistler*; he and Teri called it, like shrapnel homing in.

Later on, even *his* Dreams turned visually more realistic. What he took to be earth's moon, he later realized was Io, Jupiter's closest companion.

Then there was the voice. Odd grammatical structure, elevated tone. *Shakespearean*, he'd joked. The voice was quoting The Bard, yes, but also dozens of other elegant minds. From as far as he could tell, every age, every culture. *Oracular* was the word they finally agreed on.

Her, they came to say. Though Teri preferred *They*. But even Labyrinth accepted the name Teri came up with—*Ariadne*. The one who shows the way.

Dreams did not come every night or in identical order, but essentially they were the same. Obsessively, the two of them, then with others, teased out what this stunning symmetry might mean. Fascinated by variations he described for her, Teri sketched them on blank papyrus from MCC where she was a graphics tech—and where she lived now. She painted these Dreamscapes whenever and however she could. But for a long time, she couldn't recreate the luminous colors surging beyond the borders of every object.

Ordinary dreams were one thing. *Dreams* were coming from *somewhere else*. They settled on that much. But what Ariadne wanted, whether She could be trusted, that was where they struggled and wore each other out.

Travel by way of zero.

Teri Dreamed the words before he did. Repeating the lines when she woke, she told him that was the moment she'd crossed a barrier in her mind—come to the place in the story where she gave up disbelief. But he could not or would not follow her there.

“Does *traveling by way of zero* come with an instruction manual?” he'd tossed at her.

“Budd, maybe *not understanding* is what zero's about.”

“Zero's a tough concept for humans—always has been. Greek philosophers rejected the concept of *nothing*. To them the idea of emptiness was, well, ugly. Frightening. Something like *the spawn of chaos*... Which guaranteed no chance of any functional mathematics, of course. They couldn't accept the cipher from Persia, preferred their clumsy *khilioi, myrioi, one thousand, ten thousand*, otherwise known to the likes of you and me as Roman numerals X and M. No real mathematics, no real science.” He chuckled. “Turns out what people secretly crave more than freedom is *limits*.”

“Everybody except you, Budd?”

Now when he did sleep, he welcomed his own zero as he never could in the beginning—what he called *silent nights*— no Dreams, no dreams at all.

Intending to finish the weedwater he'd brewed earlier, he moved through the dark by a map in his mind. He pressed the jar to his ribs, carried it to his bunk without spilling a drop, took a taste and set it on the shelf above his bunk.

Teri lived an hour away. But they still shared meals from time to time, at his place. Earlier, she'd been sitting across from him at what used to be *their* kitchen table. A dew of sweat filmed his forehead, gathered in his armpits. Her bare leg had kicked nervously under the table, tapping, tapping, oblivious, against his calf. Her hands made scratching sounds as she sketched over the table's dry surface, telling him a Dream. He nodded, asked questions, hoping she wouldn't ask about his.

They were finishing soup he'd concocted from three paks of potato powder, a pak of *Creme*, a serious portion of drinking water. His soup cried out for the biting luxury of salt paid for later by thirst. He was sick of blandness! But like a lot of things in this life, deficits could turn into virtues— mildness gave itself without protest to a pinch of strong flavor. He'd traded Jojo two liters of water for two cloves of garlic, plus a bit of fiery chili. Still fuming pleasingly on his breath even now.

As she often did, Teri'd brought a few handfuls of greens, *soakweed*. Mostly sow thistle. Tossed into the soup pot at the last moment, some saved for the drinking jar.

It had taken him awhile to understand why he craved leaves, weeds, the way he craved sunlight. There were at least *two* pathways through the retina to the brain, and only one of them was visual. The other was a chemical clock setting rhythms of sleeping and waking. Even in blind men. He craved leaves

because they lived by the rhythms of light. And because they were rare now. Whatever the reasons, he never felt water complete in its nature, until some sun-eater flavored it.

They sipped their water like wine—inexplicably sweeter at night—from scoured unbreakable mugs, toasting *the once and future rain*. Scarcity intensified small pleasures.

A more complex pleasure was that tap of her foot against his calf. *Accidental*. Generated by dread and by excitement, both she tried to hide—and tried to tell him. “I can't really *think* about anything but the Action, can you?”

He rolled onto the left side of his bed, against the wall. *His* side when Teri lay against him, on her stomach, an arm dangling off the edge. Affection between them, even desire, had never disappeared. She still slipped sometimes and called him *my Budd*. Sitting across from her tonight, his hands quicker than thought, had reached across the table and caught hers, made them be still. Her fingertips cold. She'd squeezed back, then pulled away. Slowly. Returned to sketching images on his table. Soothing herself. Agitating him.

My Budd.

He'd stopped using Francisco de Vas— Budd, one quick syllable, suited him. Besides, names that didn't keep tagging you with a particular past or location were safer— especially when your chief civic virtue was that certain authorities believed they could trust you. *Budd* was his father's name. *De Vas*, his mother's, and still something of a mystery. *Vas* itself had no meaning. Ma figured maybe it was a syllable broken off from something longer— *Vasco*, maybe. Or *Vaso*, *vessel*.

Then there was *Budd*— cousin to an obsolete word meaning somebody you hang out with—nobody you'd pant for.

Since Ariadne, he and Teri obsessed over words, as though learning a hidden dimension inside them. What you only found when you delved...

He sat up, sipped weedwater, checked the time.

The archaic meaning of Budd was his favorite. *The unopened delight of something not yet seen.*

Goddamn, he was doing it again, quoting Ariadne. Her words left him queasy. Exhilarated. Distrustful. Like the beautiful, broken promises his mother had clung to when everything went underground, the Church officially defunct— not quite illegal to mention saints and their miracles. Guadalupe, not quite banished. Mother of Lost Causes.

When he was nine or ten, his mother kept a Virgin-Who-Opens, very small, in a velvet bag stashed under her bed. His father rarely around then, no idea why, until much later. Before sleep his mother would have him crawl under the boards and bring the bag to her. He loved the feel of it in his hands. The dusty smell. Familiar hidden curves of Guadalupe's body down to her bare feet on a crescent moon. Mother of Night. Luminous eggs inside her, capable of birthing a universe.

Before he lost his eyes, she'd been *real*. When he was nine or ten, he might have said she was a member of the family. Later, he'd prayed to her to save his sight, his mother beside him. When surgery failed, her devotion didn't falter. For him, it was the end of easy believing. The end of a world.

When his mother was buried, the Virgin was buried with her.

He reached into his shirt hanging on its hook, pulled out his harp, blew a few random notes.

Where were Dreams taking them? Earlier, at the kitchen table, he'd blurted the question. "What do we really *know* about Ariadne?"

“More and more,” Teri’d said. No hesitation. “I had the clearest Dream yet of the morphology of the threads,” her words came rushing toward him, “Oh, Budd, I wish you could see the drawing I’m working on now, the threads are... they’re like the sexual fringes of flowers, masses of sentient tendrils...”

Stunned by the awe and longing in her voice, his questions faded. *Flowers*. No bees, all pollinators rare. Most weeds got by on wind and for that he was grateful. But most flowering plants had to be painstakingly cultivated. Gene labs, intensive-care arboretums, gigantic grow-sheds where human hands ferried pollen to pistil.

“Beautiful, maybe.” He’d admitted to Teri. “But harmless?”

Teri sighed, “Tell me, have you ever heard of an untrustworthy flower?” She drummed the tabletop lightly, rapidly, a signal he recognized. She was impatient, ready to leave him. Head home to her cubicle at MCC.

He’d tried for a humorous tone. “What if...we just don’t know enough botany?!” Silence from her side of the table. He savored the solemnity that transformed her voice whenever she contemplated something she wasn’t certain of, the way she would become to him again *unfamiliar*. And in that sudden strangeness, profoundly attractive.

Instead of an answer, laughter came floating back to him as she tapped open his door. Reflexively, he spoke to her back as she went through. “See you tomorrow?”

She threw him a question. “See me in our Dreams?”

Eagle, Eel, Everglade

Four years earlier

Exhausted, aching with a headcold, Teri was curled up in the alcove with a borrowed scanprint, *Eagle to Everglade*. She'd set herself the painful delicious task of reading all 26 volumes of *The International Wildlife Encyclopedia*, published in 1969 before almost anyone knew about The Great Dying. Her volume was open to *Eel*.

Feverish, fascinated, she was drawn into their heroic migration down freshwater streams— they even crossed stretches of dry land!—to the Sargasso Sea in the mid-Atlantic.

“Budd!” She called down the hallway, “you have to hear this!” Clinking sounds. She imagined him setting aside his tools, making his way to her.

He appeared, crouched on the floor, lay his head against her knee. “How now, my love?” his Elizabethan tease comically muffled against her sweaty flesh.

She roughed his hair and leaned into the shaft of light to read to him aloud. *The mystery of freshwater eels was at least 2000 years old before it was finally understood that these graceful beasts— like the earliest mammals, were creatures of the dark— they go down to the sea on a late summer evening and never return. Young elvers, orphans — she paused to let him taste orphans—of the next generation, make their way back, a journey of at least 3000 miles— the final word stopped her— blind.*

That word always stopped her.

But he didn't seem to notice, as though attending only to *her*. She loved the long, off-center line of his nose, cracked and imperfectly set, after a fall. Small ears sharply angled. *Fox ears*. His skin as though in permanent shadow and smooth as a woman's. Otherworldly.

Oberon in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. She'd seen and read that play so many times, starting as a girl of 13— fled there a thousand times in her mind. *Midsummer* was part of her senses now.

Budd rubbed his forehead against the bump of her knee as his free hand grasped one of her toes, "What's this? An elver!" He kissed the pad of each toe, planted a whole row of kisses up to her knee, turned toward her, blinking, shaking his head. "Always surprises me."

"You!? Nothing surprises you!" She smiled into his eyes—not the eyes he was born with, his *manufactured eyes*. Optical chips coated with iridescent genetecked cells from his own body. A cool inhuman beauty to them. Meant to give him sight, but a wildfire rejection—*too rare to make the stats*— left him with no more than a crude sensitivity to light. The blue of those eyes, not the blue of day, was nearer to black. Nocturnal. In those eyes she was a shard of dark against the light. Like anyone and anything else in his world. But he would say of her— contradicting what she imagined— *a mystery and a shining*. Like Ariadne.

"What surprises you?" Thinking she knew the answer, she tugged at his hair, pleasing herself with the texture and smell as he came into the halo of her own heat and odor. She had the habit of seeing herself from his point of view. From inside his darkness.

“Light surprises me. You surprise me.” His fingertips arced toward her face and landed on her chin. And by that gesture, his mouth knew its way to hers. Precisely. Though often his kisses fell askew— her nose, her cheek. She almost preferred them. The exploration they led to, as his mouth found yet another unexpected route to hers.

“Lie down with me?” Now she was twisting a strand of his hair between her fingers.

“Let me wash work off first...” He glanced down as though he could see the hand that left her foot and floated midair, just out of the beam of the lightbox bolted above their heads.

“But I don't *prefer* you washed!” His hands smelled pleasingly of something like charcoal, though that was not what it was. She didn't want to know, reached over to switch off the light.

He caught her wrist, said softly, “leave it,” crawled into the skinny bunk where they faced each other, heads flooded with the intense beam of the reading light. Intrusion for her, subtle dazzle for him.

She tugged at his shirt. He helped her pull it as far as his chin. When both of them let go, they fell apart, laughing. In their tiny, windowless bedroom, light stopped abruptly, knife-edge, just past the swell of his right shoulder, harsh as the terminator-line the sun burns while crossing the moon— the rest of his body winding away, a landscape of vibrating grays.

She pressed her face into the hollow between his nipples, breathing him in—Cherribark, charcoal, sweat. Loosening under pleasure spreading in all directions, she leaned back to look at him. With his eyelids shut, it seemed to her he was *not* blind— not until he opened them again. Those eyes that could never see her— this fresh blinding stung her.

He was smiling the faint swooning smile of a man falling into sex. From far inside him that smile shone on her like the sun's unseeing, unjudging benevolence. Feeling for the hem of her shirt, he swam his hands up and over her bare skin.

~

She woke. In his place beside her, lay a scansheet from *Love's Labors Lost*. She read it once, then again out loud, voice raised to let him hear, too, and he chuckled from his workbench as she swung high and low through the alternating voices.

Armando: Thou pretty, because little. **Moth:** Little pretty, because little. Wherefore apt? **Armando:** And therefore apt, because quick. **Moth:** Speak you this in my praise, master? **Armando:** In thy condign praise. **Moth:** I will praise an eel with the same praise. **Armando:** What, that an eel is ingenious? **Moth:** That an eel is quick.

~

Ariadne, swelling thundercloud, red, roiling; All Eye now, encircling the earth, the sun...

She startled awake. Budd gone again. The faint whirl of his magnet-brush appeared in the silence and for some reason she remembered the year she was 13, before her brother Brendan died, that April and May she and everybody came to call *Shay Virus Spring*. She was home from school, faking illness so she could read all day—her passion there was never enough time for, she devoured everything from Shakespeare's plays, mythology, archeology. Astronomy of course, and physics, even a bit of astrology, all her parents' lightfiles, though she begged for the crackle of *scratchpaper* real paper in her hands, cheap coarse stuff made from waste-husk on which she first learned to draw. To think in motion. To think with her hands.

She was allowed onto the top floor of the Antiquities Library at the multiversity where her parents taught. *The Refrigerator* those cold dry preserving rooms were called. She bundled up in layers, wore thin thermo-gloves to keep the pages spotless, a drymask to suck up every outpour of moisture and spores and bacteria from her dangerous breath. Precious books and art, even ordinary scanprints, were cared for by trained staff—Cece, her mother, called them *acolytes*— floating silently in white anti-electrostatic disposable uniforms. She imagined herself one of them, a kind of maiden-hermit's romance of service to Books.

“Like ants carrying their precious bundles,” Cece had teased.

“No, mother. Carrying time, our future.”

~

Ariadne. Budd, at his desk screen, spoke the name aloud.

From time to time he was compelled to go over the story he knew too well. For a lot of Dreamers, *Ariadne*, more than *Mistress of the Labyrinth*, had replaced *Jupiter*. But that underground metamorphosis could not migrate into his wallscreen or cell. *Ariadne*. He spoke the name like any other into the listening ear which told the official tale, not the one they were living.

Daughter of the King and Queen of Crete, who dared to save Theseus from... IRIS crooned. *Monstrous love-child of the Queen-mother and a great white bull.* Sacred Bull, Bull of Heaven, he corrected silently. *Once a year, the King offered the living flesh of men and women in sacrifice to the half-human Beast at the center of the maze.* Locked in, forbidden to leave until they'd killed the Minotaur. The Monster. Which, like

truth, was impossible to kill. They tried and failed, they panicked, hopelessly confused. Turned in circles, incapable of finding their way out again. The Minotaur had, it was said, devoured them. *The year Theseus was chosen to enter, the royal daughter, Ariadne, saw the shining brightness of the hero within him.* Offered a bundle of luminous yarn fastened to the entrance of the labyrinth so that in total darkness he could make his way safely back to her.

Now he was remembering *their* Ariadne learning to fit Her dream-voice to the slow-firing neurons of humans—her words, at first quick chirps, slowed down to honeyed English— Ma would have Dreamed Spanish. ***Every Dreamer Dreams in their native tongue.*** When he wasn't paying attention, his simplest thoughts took on Ariadne's liquid cadences.

For Teri, it was verbal color that mesmerized, compared to their own grey, post-post-modern, Tri-Am, acronymed One-English. Ariadne's speech in other languages, according to Labys who knew them well, though unique in exact detail were every bit as distilled and musical. Dreamers knew somebody who knew somebody else who Dreamed illegal or endangered tongues. But it seemed to him that Teri fell too easily, willfully, into the illusion that Ariadne was *translating* Puck or Lear or Ariel. No. It had to be simultaneous somehow, the way Dreams could resonate with Shakespeare, Basho, Oshanga Tahal, Mara Kai... and this weighed strongly in him toward trust.

Midnight. Teri still lost in her battered booklopedia? He made out a dull swarm of dots at the end of the hallway where his bunk she called *the alcove* was tucked away. *Elvin abode.* No bigger than a jet-berth. *Generous coffin* on a bad day...

Aiming for the light-swarm, he touched cool walls as he moved along, for pleasure now, not because he had to.

Beside her, he wedged himself between the wall and bunk.
“Teri, if you could ask Ariadne one question, what would it be?”

Confused, amused, she hid her face behind her book.

He went on with the game. “I will praise an eel, that an eel is ingenious...”

She replied from behind her pages. “What, Armando, more elverish humor?”

“...though an eel is not quick *enough*,” he said, and spread his hand over her pages. “What would you ask?”

She sighed and put down her book. “Mmm. To understand my Dream today.”

“What Dream, you didn’t tell me any...”

“You tell *me* everything? Anyway. It was...*after*,” her voice echoed pleasure. She pulled him down beside her, and when he was settled, told him the Dream.

“At first it was just a feeling. Time slowing down, gravity releasing somehow. Humans and things, wristcells, trees — palm trees?— insects, rocks, shoes, *everything* flying, shooting through blackness and stars. The only human I see is a young girl, and in spite of what’s happening, she’s smiling, not afraid, not at all. This gives me the courage to... Oh, this is hard to explain. To believe in the Dream and at the same time to know that I’m awake, we all are. And this streaming light speeds up, explodes. Everything disappears into Her, into violet light. Then everything comes back, and reverses. She’s all red now, all eye, all storm. The sun and the solar system and all of us *inside Her*. I look down and— nothing. No ground, we’re just sparks winding, coiling around each other. And then— it happens—we *fuse*!

“Fuse?”

"I woke up and didn't know where I was. *When or what* I was!"

"All eye, all storm..."

Teri nodded.

"I dig the cellspalmtreesinsects shooting through space... pretty deadly though without bugsuits," he chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"Bugsuits for bugs? Two sizes—super and normal."

"Now you're just being silly."

"Those coiling shapes — they weren't *eels* were they?"

"No more *eels*!" Adamant, laughing harder, her breath caught at what she thought next. "We were...bringing what the others *needed. Making* something. Together. Something that... never before existed." She clucked her tongue. "Not sure why I said that last thing, it wasn't in the Dream."

"So you *do* understand the dream, then?" he teased, laying a finger on her throat.

"Not dream, *Dream*. Not mine. And no, I *don't* understand it. But. I don't take it *literally*..."

"How *do* you?" he said. "Take it, I mean?"

She picked up her book. "*Literarily?* Maybe."

"Ahhh," he groaned. "That an eel *is* quick."

The Silence of Water II

Budd, The Present

After Teri left him with her question, *see me in your Dreams?* he'd stood a long time in the doorway, night's vivid touch reviving his body for a few more hours of work. Jupiter—Ariadne— somewhere in the western sky above a puzzle of winding walls. He kicked the footpanel and the door hissed shut. It wasn't alien to him, darkness, never had been. But without Dreams, a sensation of *waiting* permeated every corner of his life now. Waiting for something to be understood.

~

One forty-five am. Budd reached into his foot locker, snapped open a dosebox, set a second capsule in the center of his palm. Stared a moment. Then touched the cap with the tip of his tongue, curled it into his mouth, washed it down with exactly three swigs of water, and punched his stubborn, clumped pillow. Two REM-X and still he wrestled worries. How to tell Teri his choice on the Action was actually made a month *before* he'd been voted out by Labyrinth. Including The Local Group, including *her*. How to tell her he wasn't Dreaming? He didn't know what scared him more, her going with Labyrinth— or him not being there with her.

Why, why was he still so deeply uneasy about Ariadne?

He remembered the day he'd put his name down on one side, not the other. A SYNC contact, Lilly Brand, a Laby he knew,

had been there when he gave his answer— *go or stay*—she took his surv-proof battered envelope without a word. An odd tenderness spread through his chest at the dry, grassy fragrance of her coming toward him. His envelope made from a soup packet, contained: nothing. Nothing, as in NO. To say yes would have required the inclusion of any small object— broom straw, fragment of cloth. He held that packet for an extra beat before letting it go into her grip. Letting her look inside. His decision irrevocable. The heat of the Depot furnace glowed over his face as she clanged open one of the grates to dispose of what he'd shown her.

Now he tossed on his bunk. Contractions in his gut like hunger, kept him on edge. Each wave set off a volley of doubts. How could you trust what you knew nothing about? Except what Ariadne *wanted* you to know?

Ariadne didn't know *everything* about humans. The earliest Dreams were too speedy, compressed. Simple growth resembled violent explosions. Later, he understood what the problem had been all along.

That high-pitched *birdsong*, he'd played it again and again in his mind, on his harp, trying to grasp what it was. Recording some of the notes onto a logiclip, he got the idea of slowing it way down. Suddenly the rhythms resembled human speech. What startled him even more was that soon after this discovery, Dreams themselves began to change— rhythmic sounds were now permanently translated into lilting, intelligible speech. Not only in his and Teri's Dreams, they were hearing similar stories from Labys all over Tri-Am, even branches of SYNC on other continents.

~

Humans no longer trust visions that arrive while they're awake.

He couldn't trust the other kind, either. At least not the way Teri seemed to. And just about everybody else who was Dreaming — at least those who knew what was happening to them wasn't just plain madness.

In the beginning, they all doubted their sanity at times, Teri included. But when Rena told them Dreamers were showing up as long-term residents at the Department of Hygiene, they started to wonder if something about mental and physical illness might make it easier for Ariadne? Maybe Dreams showed up first in people who spent a lot of time sleeping, lying or sitting still, even facing a wall and rocking all day? In the Bin, who could you talk to about that voice in your head, nothing like a self-hater muttering accusations. *This* voice calmed you, helped you see you weren't just a case on a back ward. But even *outside*, which Rena called their only somewhat less institutionalized govcorp world, similar dangers were constant. Waiting for you to trip up.

Even if nothing went wrong at Calona— the longest long-shot bet— what if before she even got there, Teri's asthma kicked up and an Epi stick wasn't enough? What if somebody leaked the whole thing to MediaNet? He threw his pillow to the floor and got up to pee.

Back in his bunk, he curled on his side in Teri's spot, wished Pop and Ma were around to help him sort out his thinking— the whole Ariadne story barely added up.

Jupiter, basically a giant slushball, unlike Mars, hadn't ever been any romantic's *or* pragmatist's choice for harboring life. At least not beyond a few microbial tough guys. Extremophiles. Though one of Jupiter's moons, Io, did attract serious attention for a while after robotic expeditions recorded earth-like lava flows, permanently warm regions, a solid surface, iron-nickel

core and— he couldn't get over this detail— peaks dusted with *sulphur-dioxide snow*. But life? Superbugs, maybe. *D. radiodurans*, Conan the Bacterium. *Sulphurphilia*, sulfur-eating bugs, well-known on earth for a very long time. His parents were weirdly, enthusiastically devoted to the little beasts—their sixth paper, *Proteobacteria Of Sulphur-rich Environments*, was still up on ScienceNet a few years after they were both dead, infected by a kind of super-resistant bacterial pneumonia.

Life, maybe. But nothing complex. Nothing like *Ariadne*—translucent, myceliaform, soft semi-crystalline threads of self-organizing intelligence...

Before Teri named Her/Them, it was Dreaming that forced them both to recognize Ariadne's origin— almost a joke, a caricature—the solar system laid out before them like a circuit diagram— at the center, not Io, but Jupiter. Implausible in the extreme. Unmistakable. Shining in the center of going-on-one-hundred moons. Ariadne, they concluded, was weaving through deep belted layers near the chaotic threshold where the gas they knew as hydrogen, under inconceivable pressure, undergoes a phase-shift, changing to a sea of liquid metal.

Amber threads extending for ages at an imperceptible pace— then at some point, for some reason, shifting, *accelerating*: Until, not long ago— a decade? Two?— She/They girdled the Deep Zone, encircling the planet.

***When all threads connect with all others,
the being is complete.***

What followed those words still puzzled even Teri.

What remains is to create another.

Excitement distorted Teri's voice when she read aloud to him from *ancient* archives published and seemingly forgotten, by NASA . “Jupiter, during the last two of its 12-year orbital

periods, has been undergoing an exponential increase in the amperage of its magnetosphere...due to Io's volcanic plumes of ionized particles— primarily oxygen, sodium and sulfur.”

Nobody had followed up on later missions. Or it never hit the Net. This kind of stuff jazzed him, in spite of misgivings. He even memorized some of it, the way Teri memorized *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Mira Kai's poems.

“Changes both temporal and spatial... Jupiter is increasing in size, temperature, periodicity and electromagnetic agitation...” Then, the kicker. Had Jupiter been only a few tens of times its present size, the giant planet “would have been capable of stellar ignition.” *Becoming a second sun*.

Teri, himself and others, from guesswork and Dreaming plus endless research, concluded that Jupiter/Ariadne was heading toward this switching on from planet to star, feeding off the electromagnetic bounty generated between Io and the giant planet itself. Ariadne was not a grex, a moving heap, but a vast, beautiful complexity— learning Her own destiny, learning to communicate. *Why*, was the mystery for him. Always had been.

“She's feeding and growing,” Lonnie had joked one night at a Local Laby meeting, “where nobody'd ever think to look!”

Budd heard in this joke the echo of an old tale, *the last place anybody looks for something new is in a book they've already read and didn't care for...* the fifth planet offered no solid ground for a rover, or an underground city. Mars-Terra was still the grail, though the first two colony attempts spectacularly failed, a third was supposedly in the offing. Nobody's eye on Ariadne, She was safe to expand exponentially far under the stormy violence of the surface. To incorporate our world?

He'd shaken everybody that night with his response to Lonnie's innocent remark. Under pressure of chronic inability to concentrate, to play a song all the way though, sleep more than

half a night, or count on anything at all, the question exploded out of him. “*What I want to know is— what She’s doing under the surface of our skulls ?!*”

Teri’s quick comeback that night hit him solid as stone. “*Dreams,*” she said, “*are becoming Acts.*” Her blissful tone alarmed him.

Now he rolled out of his cramped bed onto the floor where he could stretch out, imagining Teri’s Dream, the one that would decide whether she’d go with Labyrinth on the largest SYNC Action yet. To demonstrate world-wide what Dreams— Ariadne— might help them do about everything gone so wrong on their planet. Floods and fires. Poisoned seas and dry aquifers. Water wars.

There were Dreamers who Dreamed but didn’t know why, who simply thought they’d cracked. Others turned Dreaming into lurid Net games and pressure ads for Anti-REMs. There were those who didn’t Dream at all, for unknown reasons, even without hypoREMs.

Last of all, practically impossible to reach, were those who didn’t Dream and didn’t want anybody else to— ready to do whatever they could to choke the movement— Dreams, Actions, *everything*:

Yes or No

Budd and Teri, the present

Profound action is without thought and the clearest intention.

“Just those words. That was it,” Teri said to him. It was two nights since she'd made her decision, they were at his place again, the kitchen table where they'd been sitting across from one another for so many years, telling Dreams. Holding hands. Debating. Sharing a cup of weedwater. Now, tonight, both of them seriously uneasy. She, fishing for encouragement, he radiating distance.

“Didn't roll over and memorize it or write it down like I usually do with Dreams,” she shrugged. “Not sure why. I kept lying there, letting myself doze. Ended up having...what seemed at first like an *ordinary* dream.

I hand over a fake wristcell, a Watch, to Lily at the Depot. It's very heavy— something inside. Meaning YES. Meaning I'm in, I give my consent. I'm curious about what's inside, don't remember putting it there, but I don't look. Lily just gazes at me, no expression on her face like she doesn't recognize me. Or somebody's watching us? Anyway, she slips this hooked rod through a ring, and when she pulls, a metal grate swings open, jumping with flames inside. She pulls a switch and a conveyor track starts rolling back into the mouth of the furnace. I drop my cell onto it, and it rides along into the chamber. We watch it

start to glow. To melt. Then Lily and me and the furnace, it all dissolves into light...

Budd got up from the table, laid his hands on her shoulders, then moved to the door and stood in the jamb, bracing his body there. Hard to believe the waiting wasn't over. Was just beginning. He leaned his head back, gave a soft growl.

She watched his face turning slowly, bathing in starlight he couldn't see. Would never see. "Budd?" He dropped his head, pulled out his harmonica— *fairie pipe* she used to call it —blew a jazz of notes, the babble that comes before language. From babes' mouths, from oracles. "I know," she said, "what you think about me going. Without *you*. But I'm relieved. Because the decision was made *for* me. That's why I trust it."

He stopped her with a jeering wail of a note. As always, more than the mirror-world of Dreams, what unnerved him was her euphoria, that breathy stoned voice. The way she echoed Ariadne without knowing it.

"Budd. Don't fight me, not now. We've got to get behind this Action, not undermine each other, it's too late for..."

"I'm the guy you voted out, remember?"

"Because you *do* have limits. Like everybody else."

"Not like everybody else, Teri!"

"*Like everybody else*, but you..."

"No!" he blew another wolf note. Rubbed sweat into the back of his neck the way he did on the edge of what he could hold. The harp slid into his pocket.

"Where do you think my life would be now if I'd accepted my *limitations* as you call them?" His right hand crawled along the wall ahead of his body, over meticulously ordered shelves. He stopped moving. "*I'll* answer that. What would I be? A DGS

drone! Talking Digital Clone.” Helpless, angry laughter. “King of shadows to your bright absence. Listening through a punch-hole in a goddamned Blind-School wall.”

In that magnified silence following those stinging phrases, his hand began traveling again. He turned to her, but said nothing, went on with his broken pacing. She forced herself to let him come around to his point.

“Teri, this isn't a discussion. You came here to get my opinion, but you don't *want* it. Because I don't buy your take on that Dream— pardon me, your *maybe just a dream*. Which is it?! There are other ways to get at the truth. I do it all the time, checking out Tries for Labyrinth...”

“You never talk about what you do for Labyrinth... but why don't those ways work with Ariadne?” He kept silent. “What did *you* Dream last night?”

He stopped pacing, having come to his desk, aching for the cool symmetry of tools in his hands. “All I know is there's *never only* one way to understand things. *Anything* at all. You said those words to me yourself once. Remember? No, you don't. Not now, not on the subject of Dreams, you don't!”

She got up from the table and slapped her hands on the desk between them.

He jumped at the sound, lifted his head to face her. Without waiting for her to speak, he pulled down one of his DGS repairs, sat and opened the unsealed halves like people used to a open a novel, a long meal of words. Rapidly, lightly, his fingertips interrogated the machine.

Helplessly, she watched him paint out dust with a tiny vacuum brush, adjust something with a miniscule driver. “You're so sure you know things about my life that I *don't*. Anybody would think *I'm* the one who...who's...”

“Want me to finish that sentence for you?” Bitterness in his own voice stunned him. “That word you don’t want to speak explains everything to everybody, doesn’t it, Teri? Including why I’m not going with you.” He waited, tempted to tell her he had himself decided not to go. And why. But he couldn’t get it out. Trembling, furious, he kept on, “*Do* you or do you *not* have the crank to just come out with it, Teri?!”

“Blind,” she said, “*Blind!*”

The Sky Of San Andres

In blindness, he became a lover of tastes and smells. His mother cultivated that in him, with all the wiles of kitchen and lab. By tuber and leaf, by heat and sugar. Bio, phyto, spiritual, elemental, all the chemistries she knew. She coaxed him, as they opened the bellies of squashes and roasted the seeds, to explore odors, textures and flavors, she taught him *sabor*, the wisdom of nose and tongue and skin. Life opened to him again. At times he even believed— convinced himself—that more was given than had been taken away.

Still, there would come the periodic slide. Ma and Pop would pass him back and forth, take turns shaking him into a fresh start. When the black moods descended, one of them would show up with something for him to learn, something he *had* to do, *pronto*, no excuses, right now.

Pop gave him the harp in one of those bleak seasons. “We’re going to learn music, you and me. I never did, *mijó*, and they always say an eager student’s the best teacher, so *vámanos*.” He thrust the cold hard instrument into Budd’s hand.

Budd’s response was to beat his own leg with the thing, bash the edge of the metal chair he sat on, hurl it across the room.

Pop, maddening in his patience, rescued the harp. “Only a nick. You haven’t done it any real damage, son. Now, let’s see that leg of yours.”

Budd, longing to hit the man, cocked back his fist. But the smell of his father, sharp and smoky and deeply familiar, made him drop his hand in shame.

~

He was ten and still had his eyes. The Sky of San Andres was a worn image on a card Ma carried around. A sky of deep gold, furrowed with incandescent clouds, a small handful of stars. Ma kept him with her, always, San Andres. Until the Church was forced underground by a campaign of vaguely Protestant-secular govcorp spiritual hygiene rants turned into laws— *superstitious tokens banned*— including Andres with his emblematic owl crossing overhead, the man himself crucified on a cross in the shape of an X. They murdered him all over again by forbidding his day of fiesta. Budd didn't understand it at the time, but he felt the blow, watching his mother drop that thumbed scrap from the end of the blocked-off pier— close as anybody got in those days to sea water, the near shore ocean blooming with inedible algae and infectious bacteria. Unswimmable. Unbearable.

Walking back down the pier, they passed a grey bearded man, face hidden, plinking a battered guitar. Not singing, growling his song. Ma stood with a bad wind pushing against her, under a sallow sky nothing like the saint's. The old man tugged the brim of his hat so low all Budd could see of him was his throat bulging and sliding, repeating the words of his song. *Got me no good place t' go, got no sunrise no mo', got me no fish in the ocean, no freedom in motion...* Budd had written down the words as soon as he could, compelled to finish the song. In a way, he was still trying.

Did that pier smell like death the way they do now? He didn't remember. Almost nothing solid or certain came to him from that time. Just the saint, the pier, the man, a few words from a song. A handful of moments from the years he could see. Only half aware in those light-filled days. How wasteful he'd been, how profligate. In a real sense, he'd been blind then, too.

He was twelve the year infection took his eyes and the flesh-chips they gave him failed. Twelve when he plunged into a suffocating density —not darkness, not light. *No sunrise, no freedom.* He couldn't find words to describe the stony endlessness.

Ma and Pop yanked him out of his misery, forced him to try and fail at whatever a boy with eyes would have done easily, a dozen times a day. His body learned like a baby's, by falling, by constant shocks. Running alongside them, they let him stumble, jerking against the cord clipped to a belt around his waist, the three of them tied together like mountain climbers, until he was bruised and exhausted, until he threw himself on the ground and refused to go on.

Ten months later, he was working as hard as they were against the one inside him who wanted to die. Two years more and he'd taught himself to adjust and repair, understand from the inside out, all the talking hardware he could get his hands on.

The Sky of San Andres flashed before him in unpredictable visitations. His mother bending at the end of the pier, letting the saint flutter from her hand into the waves. *Got me no good place no mo.* The wounded man and his guitar. The golden sky of the saint and the rank sky of that November day on the old pier. The owl crossing over. Ma said that bird was bad luck. *No owls now, Ma. That's a lot of bad luck.*

In the end, he mastered the instrument like Pop promised. In a way, the harp played *him* after that, birdsong of metal, singer snatched from extinction. And one day, he found his first song, *Cielo del San Andres.* For his mother, for the saint on his X with flowers at his feet. The melody woven from a handful of notes he imagined remembering— inconsolable notes— for himself and for the man at the end of the pier.

Part Two

In The Station

Teri, The Present

I stepped down onto Mag stairs vibrating with the chaos of shift riders, kicked through a drift of wrappers, and glanced at my cell. *Late for the meeting:* Thanks to another transport shut-down. Coronal Mass Ejection, Net claimed, as usual. Everything on the breakdown wait-list now— except security, of course. Nobody believed official explanations. But that sun flaming many-armed into black space thrilled me— so I let it repeat, lashing through 149,668,992 kilometers to singe our Net-girdled Earth...

My eyes flew to a man slipping something into a Security Drop. A glance passed between us before he turned and was swallowed by the crowd. Shouts, clashing currents, stink of harsh perfumes. Light-banners rippled every surface— waterfalls, lakes, snowy mountains, rain clouds, one after another funneling into giant electric blue drops, *Hydro-Pur* © shimmering inside.

A swirl of bodies, and me a stick of driftwood.

I stopped when I saw the girl, alone, about twelve, leaning against the far wall of the station. Wearing nothing but a long skimpy tee—engulfed head to toe in a drop of Hydro blue...

My own washed-out child-face looks back at me in the mirror: dark eyes caught in buzzing blue light. My father, unshaven in undershirt and shorts, watches my mother bend over the rust-stained sink, twisting

her drenched rope of hair. He watches until his eyes, watery and dull, swerve and come to rest on me. Skinny blue-tinged Teri, caught in the mirror. What's wrong, Dad? I ask. But I know. All of us mourning Brendan, my owl-faced compulsively funny brother. So young when Shay-virus swept through and took him. And half the people we knew...

I checked the time again and looked up. The girl's wrist was bare—instinctively she moved to hide that fact, shooting me a defiant glance. Eyes like two shadows looking at me. Was she living fresh, on her own like Jojo? I started toward her, wanting to buy her a coat or a meal...

Out of the corner of my eye, a Gaard approached. I flashed the girl a *get out of here quick* sign, and she disappeared into the Maglev tunnel. Unable to look away from the spot where she'd stood only moments before, I ached for girls on the margin. The gone-fresh ones, wandering ones. In my mind's ear, or straight from the air, words and music — *You come and then you're gone, like mist or early morning...*

Artificial Tears

Teri and Jojo, four years earlier

Teri recognized her right away— Jojo Vernette, the diva, the damp would-be Laby Budd kept prodding her to check out. Katina and WD had brought her along to hear the group, Artificial Tears. At first the three of them strained to talk, then fell silent for Dazzle Girl, the first number.

Teri focused on Jojo Vee, as she called herself. Surrounded by the band—crude guitars, patched drums, homemade flutes and rattles, pulsing infectiously. Lyrics mostly lost. Though she knew a few lines by heart from RedSpot Radio. *No, the rain the rain the rain, just don wanna fall!*

In bleached-out tee and parachute pants, Jojo sang all out, her hands fluttered and balled into fists, she swung forward, threw herself up straight again, straining the veins in her throat. *So young*. Silver-blue eyes. Blond crop. Cat-tongue licking dry lips. Joyous, furious shadows passed over her face. Strange—the longer Teri looked, the more that ordinary face became beautiful somehow.

“Doing her own stuff now,” Katina said, “Dazzle-girl is all Jojo. Isn't she crack?!” Katina’s long grey hair made her a stand out in this crowd. “*Language can go fresh, too. Words can snap off the grid.* I’m quoting the songbird, there. Couldn't think of a better tag, on everybody's crawler these days.” Katina gave a wet laugh and flung her hair.

Language can go fresh. Those were the words that got Teri here tonight. Curiosity overcoming doubt.

Whistles, thunder of applause. Jojo and all five musicians held hands, dropped heads to knees, came up grinning. Audience and performers cheered each other, and the tumble-down building echoed it.

Jojo hopped off their makeshift stage—stairway-going-nowhere— at the far ruined end of what once was a library. Falling apart like everything else. Perfect for Artificial Tears.

She headed straight to Teri. Scrubbing fingers through that ivory do, wiping sweat on her camo pants, she sat on one of the child-size stools, its strained joints squawking. Between them, the tabletop was cluttered with Teri's pak, water jig, cracked cups provided by Katina and W.D.

"Welcome to The Junkyard." Jojo swept her arm out, then folded Teri's left hand into her own, wriggling her thumb in a jokey version of a Dreamer's handshake, laughing. "Don't look so surprised, I'm not a mind leaper or anything! A mutual friend of ours—guess who?— told me you were coming. Plus a few things about you. Clued you in on me, too, right? He says your take on people is *numero uno*. After *his*, of course! Put me through the gauntlet, I can tell you." She stretched her legs to one side and crossed them at the ankle. "Guess he wants to see if you and me...you know." She slid her elbows into gaps in the table, rested her chin on her hands. Waiting.

Teri sipped homemade soak, offered it, but Jojo shook her head. "Katina said that great song was yours."

"Which? What'd I do?" Jojo put on an innocent face, then grinned.

"Dazzle-girl, my favorite. Joyful Sorrow yours too?" So easy a conversation surprised her. Like an old-style book made of

paper, the way they would sometimes fall open to the middle of the story—just the words you wanted to find.

Jojo shrugged. Her eyes shied away into the crowd. She reached for Teri's jig—*changed my mind, okay with you?* Got a nod in return and sipped with rapt attention, wiped her lips with a forearm. "Joyful Sorrow. That's me, yeah."

Knots of men and women milled, joked, peeled off layers. Crouched at spool-tables below the stage, knees to chins on low benches. Some spread out on bedrolls under the blown roof, others on their sides, heads propped on an elbow.

"How's it work with those two?" Teri tipped her chin to Katina and WD, arms around each other. WD towered over Katina, his chin on her head, big hand on her shoulder. "Their music, your words, I mean." She was stalling. Budd was going ask for a full report on his friend, before she joined their Local Group. Four so far. One more about right.

Another shrug from Jojo. "Most of mine are really Katina's. The old ones anyway. WD does notation. But, yeah a few of the new ones I can claim." She looked down. "I'm just getting started. But the way it happens is—since you ask— something shows up in my head. Not even words yet. Something like an echo?" Jojo bit her lip, searching for the word. "Maybe *twinning*."

Teri took another swig of soak and smiled, "Haven't met the word, care to introduce me?"

"Rhyming shapes?" Jojo tapped the table. "This stuff here isn't wood. A big siliconite spool's what it used to be back when, fishing line for training up bean-vines. Look at these marks in the cast. Got there by accident when somebody poured the mold. But if you keep on looking, they turn into...I don't know, weird little leaf-faces looking back at you. Follow?"

Teri lifted her soak. “Sow-thistle? Motherwort?”

“Maybe. But don’t you wonder why it’s *leaves* looking at me? And not something else? Cause I miss green? Cause everything’s dried up, flaking to dust? Cause I’m lonely? There’s a song right there!” She reached over cups and gear, fingered the collar of Teri’s shirt. “Take this Leafarillo logo burned into the threads here? *Buy some now*. Sure, it’s bull. But still, everything talks, see? Your eyes talked to me like that, beaming questions, when I was on stage, right? *Who is she, really? Can I trust her?* I’m sitting here now because I dig what you guys’ve got going. And because,” she gave a serious tilt of her chin, “and because I like your *leaf-face*.”

Teri dropped her gaze, making up her mind to shake off premature conclusions, along with her own shyness. She half sang one of Jojo’s lines. “*And will you ask her why the rain just doesn’t want to...hmmm-mmm-mmm*. What are you giggling about? I can’t deliver like you can, but...”

“No, no, not that!” Jojo couldn’t stop chuckling. “A very nice voice. Really.” She took a breath. “No, Ms. Donaghue. What broke me up was the way you pinched the lyrics.”

“The way I *what...?*”

“Tweaked the grammar— made it proper One English!” Jojo’s face showed regret as soon as she’d spoken. “Sheee-it. Boot in mouth, J.V.”

Teri shook her head. “Sorry, I don’t get it.”

“Okay. See. The line goes *this* way. ‘Jus don wanna...’”

“And what *I* sang was ‘*just doesn’t want to!*...fa-a-all?”

“Yep. But hey, not that big a deal.”

Teri rolled her eyes at herself. *Oh, you tork, you bleek. See, I do know how to sling the vernacular! Ah, never mind.* “I confess

I've got a thing for antique-speak. What's worse, I'm a Shakespeare freak..."

"No apologies." Jojo laid a finger against her mouth.

"Sorry!" Teri blurted, and they both burst into laughter.

"Okay, okay, how about let's get the people *dancing*." Jojo winked and turned around. "Katina! You guys got a number we could throw ourselves around to? But keep it easy. Don't know how to do those flash-jump tunes!"

"Like hell you don't!" Katina yelled back, and the room exploded into chuckles and whistles. Katina got up, dragging WD after her, a barge behind a tug. She waved the band up after them onto the third and final stair of the stairway to nowhere.

Jojo, nodding with the music, turned to see Teri opening her arms. "Shall we dance, then, Dazzle Girl?"

DAZZLE-GIRL

lyrics by Jojo Vee , music by Katina Jarvis

*You taste like starlight,
don't you now, Dazzle-girl?
In the air, and on my skin...
They say that fire's your real song,
fire on wings of water—*

*I'm smiling while I'm crying
cause the trees are coming down
We're watching and we're waiting,
for the rain, the rain...*

*We see you, Dazzle-girl,
shining the water though
the ocean's in ruins now
and rivers running dry.*

*Gotta ask you why...why...why
the rain jus don wanna fa-a-all,
no, rain jus don... wan-na fall.*

Rose Gate

Teri, The Present

Later than ever, resisting that battered, many-times-painted archway into Calabash's, I found myself stepping through anyway, into rippling pink shade and cool air. I stared at fat pouches of rice imported from flood plains of Oregonia, *Northern Tri-Am* these days. Squash. Apples. Green beans. Sealed in Gleam. I imagined them swelling from flowers Jojo might have coaxed into fruiting on a hand-poll team in one of Medina's gro-sheds. Without meaning to, I grasped a small orange, rolled it in my palm. A few ounces of bliss. *A whole day's wages*. Bitter excitement fumed off its skin, my throat contracted with thirst. I glanced back at the keeper in his faded uniform, thin hair ruffling a grimy collar, waiting for me to stretch out my arm like a good girl so he could scan my cell. But it wasn't this Keep raking in the BUs though, his wages likely less than my own. No. Medina was fattening on Calabash's profit. I set the orange back on its heap. *Sorry, changed my mind*—the man's baggy eyes narrowed at me but I leaped past him into the street.

A knot of boys jostled past, coming out of the new gaming emporium, wearing patched-together outfits and brandnew wristcells— DGS must be *giving* them away! One swollen-faced kid looked ill, eyes shiny, smoldering with fever— or a street hit? “Hey, maggie, wanna free tattoo!?” His loose gait made me jumpy as hell.

Dreading streetgaards was second-nature, but I wasn't sure I'd mind one now, even a WHACK with a scanner and stun gun. With everything else going to pieces, govcorp always had funds for surveillance—so where were they? I stepped into a flashing ad-strip beam, pretending fascination, waiting for the boys to lose interest.

The tang of that orange followed me down Melkorn where the crowd thinned, peeps pouring down stairwells like water down a drain. Not many coming up this time of day. I dug through my pak for some orange-flavored Froot, caught sight of my wrist, the calloused skin there. Irradiated bones. Little screen perversely blinking *ready-ready*, night and day. Frightening when I thought about it, the way DGS colonized our bodies with strapped-on organs of steel and thorium. *How come the more we're wired for words—* TruBlue said it on RedSpot once —*the more we gotta keep our trap shut?* I had cringed when Budd half-joked *DGS is bed, board— the eyes in my head.* Jojo liked to tease him about her own digital emancipation —*No DGs. No dogs!* Her play on words was irresistible—from then on *my seeing-eye DoG* was what Budd called the digital that got him around town without human help. A gift I couldn't deny. But one of these days they'd be *inside* us, too. Implants. TCDs. Total Comm Devices. *DGS giveth, DGS taketh away..*

Passing Sarsten, something turned my head— in a dim passage between two half-reconstructed buildings, I caught a glimpse of a hollow-eyed man with a wispy beard, his stash spread out on the ground for men on their haunches, picking through spotty apples, and Leafarillos. I shook myself. *Get stung that way.* Just then, I spotted a Gaard, menacing, insectoid, sorry I'd conjured it with that wish awhile back. The visored head swiveled, surveying the street. I faced straight ahead, starting off again with a brisker pace.

Didn't I know that grifter? A glance back over my shoulder threw me off balance, slammed me into a rail, and I crumpled to the pavement. Beyond the rail, row after row of freshly excavated pits and matching pyramids of soil heaped up, smelling of mold and iron. Like the hard dirt where Cece and Ryan and Brendan were buried. Pain flared through my shinbone, and I yanked up my pantleg— no blood.

What if I were Budd? What if his DoG got jacked when he was helpless on the ground? Adrenaline heated my cheeks as the streetgaard approached and I forced myself to stand, slapping at my pants. He/she/it nodded, gliding by. Unnerved, I hurried away from the mounds, unable to pinpoint what was missing, what had stood on that ground the last time I'd been here.

A few blocks on, I rested on a low wall, leg throbbing— could this stumble put me out of The Action? I checked again—only an ugly bruise.

Eyes closed, the world shrank around me. Pulling out my jig, I counted one-two-three swallows of water and put my head down, dizzy, as two women and a man chattered by. I shook a few cool drops onto my flaming cheeks, aching for a spill from the sky, for Jojo singing to me again *no rain at all...jus don wanna fa-a-all...*

Artificial Tears 2

Teri and Jojo, Four years before the present

“Starts here in my hand.” Teri opened her fist. “Drawing, I mean.” They were back at their table after dancing, no more than sweat and punctuation after the first round of their odd but compelling conversation. Teri traced two fingers over and over Jojo’s leaf-faces in the tabletop. “Didn’t even notice them before you showed me. Sometimes I don’t *see* things until my hand’s drawing them. I do *want* to see though.”

“What do you want to see?” Jojo piled jigs and paks, clearing space between them. She folded her arms, lay her head down, catching Teri’s face from an angle.

Teri licked dust off her lips. “Hmmm. Right now? Well, maybe...no, definitely, I’d like to know,” she laughed, “a lot more about you.”

“I wondered when we’d get around to that.” Jojo sat up, showing Teri her profile, smiling that sly smile of hers into her own shoulder. Joking or serious, who could tell? Jojo shook her head. “ImposSEEblay,” she said.

“Oh. So you’re going to be cruel.” Only half teasing. Drifting further and further from why she’d come here.

“Only to spare you,” Jojo teased, looking around at the old man just outside the library under The Lattice— he had his mask strapped on.

“What if I don’t *want* to be spared?” Teri coughed in the middle of a laugh.

Jojo got a mask-pak from the bag near the doorway and peeled off two. They were dark green and crudely made.

Teri clapped one over her nose and mouth, watching Jojo over the rim. A gritty wind blew in sideways from the yard, snuffing talk around them. Between them.

Through the missing fourth wall of The Library, patchy sagebrush made a kind of dried-up miniature forest. *Artificial Tears at The Library. And no wind.* That had been Katina's promise to her—*no wind*—K.D. knew how much Teri hated wind. A clump of sage shuddered loose in the breeze, taking off for parts unknown. Maybe wide open desert? If wind kept blowing long enough, *everything* would end up there.

Jojo broke the moment, raised her voice to include the room. "It'd be a whole lot easier to *communicate*...if we just didn't have to *breathe*! This whole city could crumble off into nowhere, and I wouldn't miss it!" Nods and groans. She covered her eyes against grainy particles, and faced Teri, "What was it you wanted me to tell you?"

Teri waited while the chatter came up again like a cloak around them. "Tell me a story nobody else could tell..."

"Can I steal that line? For my next hit song, I mean?"

"Sh—" Teri's lungs grabbed. A spasm of coughing. "Tell me. Something about. Before you hooked up with..." She waved at The Library, dug for an Epi and slapped it onto her inner arm, sucking air through the mask.

Jojo leaned forward, her hand coming down near Teri's.

"Just talk?" Teri said in a pinched voice. "Til. The Epi..." One spiraling hand trailed off in the air.

"Okay. You want me to keep talking... 'til the place I get evasive, right? Cause that's where I'm hiding something?"

Teri shook her head. "Everybody's. Hiding. *And will you... ask her... why?*" She coughed again. "*Why the rain... jus don wanna...?*" She took a breath and held it. Silence. Blew it out. "Got it. Right that time. Didn't I?" She took a deeper breath, relieved. The Epi was into her now, rushing her blood, heart picking up speed, lungs going soft, wide open. "Look. I'm a quiet woman, I've got secrets, too So tell me. What's in a name, *Dazzle Girl?* The name reminds me.."

"...reminds you? O quiet woman, reminds you of what, exactly?" Jojo leaned back, her body tense. Then she laughed. "Okay, okay, I'll spill. I'll tell you a Dream. Isn't that what you've been asking for all along?"

Jojo's Dream

We're swimmers, I guess. Hundreds or thousands of us! But not exactly human, our bodies long and black, and all of us on our way somewhere....

Nobody knows where, but we're happy just to keep swimming like we DO know, like something ahead of us is pulling us along. And there's a feeling this has been going on a long, long time, traveling this way. The water dark as we are, except for a few bright streaks, like strokes of lightning. We look down. Strange plants, no buildings, nothing familiar. When we come to where we've been heading, we kind of twirl up together in a tangle, and this part is really weird, because...it's the most intense pleasure I ever felt! Bodies. Bodies joining up...into what? I don't know. Nobody does.

Not yet. But we know what's happening is good.

Rose Gate 2

Teri, The Present

Bleached pink walls closed around me as I passed the dusty climbing-gym and sculpture garden, both of which depressed me. I much preferred MedArt's honest aluminum and paved-over dirt. The hip of a barrel-shaped woman grazed mine. She was wearing a wind mask, breathing hard. A beautiful dark-skinned boy in a ratty coyote-cap clung to her tunic.

Midsummer flashed through my mind— Bottom in his tall-eared ass's head startling the faeries. I wanted to kneel before this stranger's child, look into his eyes and ask him *tell me, are you Dreaming?*

At Budd's door, I felt myself a stranger. He used to say how he counted on my *prickly brilliance*, my *comedic good sense*. But after three years together, this place had still been *his* place, not ours. He'd closed me out the way those storage shelves shut out light from the only window. Until I saw what I needed to do. Or that was how I explained it to myself. Then to Budd. My decision to move back to MCC.

Suddenly, vividly, a memory of rain the winter we moved in together—

A faint drizzle spits against the barricaded window, driving her to a kind of delirium. She kneels behind Budd glued to his workbench, snaking her arms around his neck, tease-daring him to come outside with her. He goes on probing with a slender-tipped tool into the brain of his

ailing machine. She leaves him, steps through the door to catch a few drops on her fingers. Licks them off—sooty. And warm.

Behind him again, she rubs her lips against the corner of his jaw, murmuring your turn, come on. Turning finally, kissing her, he tastes the rain on her mouth, chuckling low in his throat, and they hurry out of Rose Gate, mist drenching their hair and their clothes. When they get back inside, they fall, clasped together on his bed, delighting in wetness, gliding over each other like sea creatures.

I whistled into Budd's door-mic— five notes of an extinct songbird whose name we'd forgotten. The door slid open and Jojo stood there looking about 14—her twenty-third birthday less than a month away. Flushed with energy, clearly delighted to see me. I kissed her salty forehead— our ritual— peeled my tunic down to an undershirt, knotted it around my hips and stepped inside.

Meeting

Teri, the present

Lonnie was sprawled inside the door, opening his arms to me. I pressed my lips against his damp receding hairline, and looked at him. His face pleased me. Including that scarred cheek with its unlikely origin. Heavy brows over black, spitfire eyes. That short, powerful body he worked on constantly.

“Heya.” His eyebrows shot up. “Bouncer says we’re *clear*—certified free of Ears!”

I laughed, thinking of the boy’s coyote-cap.

Budd made his way to me, grasped my hand with more force than usual. I looked into his face heavy with tiredness, his half-lit eyes never meeting mine. Pulled his head down, breathed him in. In spite of everything, he still smelled like home.

“You’re limping. You okay?” His grip on my hand tightened.

I squeezed back, still astonished at how much he picked up from so little. He listened to me as closely as always. “You *heard* that?! No, just clumsy, don’t worry. I’m unbreakable.” The double meaning of the phrase reverberated between us before I turned to Rena, lush and maternal in her too-tight clinic blues.

“Give.” Rena said, sizing me up with a brassy head tilt, one side of her face hidden under a swag of grey hair.

I gazed into her slightly bulging eye. “It’s *nothing*,” I protested. But got dragged off anyway for a quick exam. Captain of this loose ship, Rena never swerved once she’d set her course. Our ship was the five of us. *The Local Group*, was what we’d dubbed

ourselves. After that cluster of local galaxies the Milky Way calls home. Names were more than verbal tricks.

Word and World marry. Their child is Story.

Rena and Budd at the table, I got down with Lonnie and Jojo on the floor. “My blood was jumping when I got in,” I said. You know all the CME reports we’ve been getting? I saw it happen. Standing right there in the station, I saw this flame shoot out of the sun, cook the Mag, melt the cells off our wrists. Everything electric down. And I was *glad!*”

“No wonder you stumbled,” Rena murmured.

“No, that happened later. This was... like a Dream with my eyes wide open. Took me over in the middle of the crowd. That’s when I saw the girl...”

“What girl!?” Jojo rubbed her arms as if the room was cold instead of sultry.

“The Girl in Hydro Blue. Swallowed up in a Hydro-drop, she turned...*indigo.*”

“Sounds more like a nightmare.” Jojo shuddered.

I stood, covering a hot stab of pain with a little jig. “I just remembered. When I was in the street, I saw these trenches...these just-dug mounds. I’d swear something else was there before. What do you think our great leaders are up to?”

“A new kind of govprop,” Lonnie said dryly “to *convince* us Hydro and Medina and the rest of those brain-thumpers really *are* getting the city back into shape!”

We all laughed this time. Except Budd. Scanning the galley wall, his face like a radar dish. Listening. To what? Neighbors' blam on the audio? The baby whimpering? Something the rest of us could never hope to catch?

“Anybody know what was on that street before?” I asked.

Budd swiveled toward me. "Citizen Records. Melkorn and..."

"Sarsten, right," I said, "near The Works. And that scabby old hotel, Sea Reef?" He had a relief map of the sector in his brain. Along with Laby names, traits, fates and... "When were *you* there last, Budd?"

He shook his head. Meaning, something to do with Labyrinth. Who got in, who didn't. And why. Meaning, the blind man and his gift.

Anonymous

You ever see the blind man do his magic? He's the one trained me to it, in case he gets snatched. Calls me *stan in, stan by Stanley's* my name now. I call *him* Gate Man—a nod an you're in, a shake an you're out. He picked me outta six A-1 Tries—four chutes, two ladders. *The ear-dark, and the deaf-eyed* like Lady A. says.

Gate Man swears we got *extras*. More eyes than two, us blind folks do. More ears, more tongues. Got us an X-ray mind. Four hands to take things apart, four to put the pieces back together again.

Goes like this. Gate Man an some wannabe Laby sit down mano a mano in a coupla chairs—nothin else up in that grill room. Gate Man shakes your hand, never lets it go the whole damn time, cause he's feelin you on the in-side. Readin skin, see, steada blam? Always the weak hand, see—less the Try's a southpaw. *Pick the lonesome hand, it'll never fail you...*

So Gate Man's purrin questions, and the Try's spittin out tasty lines, givin us *sincere* that'd make you loan him your mama's jewelry. Gate Man don see none a that shit. Male, female, skimmer, exec. Some with a bit a sauce to em, some plain, never mind, he reads the hand, not the tongue-flap. Goes by the blood-thump, down in the fingertips, up in the throat.

Soon's you get the Try eased up a bit, you throw em your in-or-out-question. *The Voice ever order you to do a thing you feel in your bones is bad?*

Sometime you hear a long pearly silence. Then maybe—*don't think so. Or gotta mull that one.*

And sometimes they spring —SNAP! A plain ass NO flies outta that mouth, Gate Man still holdin their hand when it twitches the lie— the flip, the roll, the reveal.

That's how you spy it without eyes— the jump-worm inside the Try's heart.

Meeting 2

Teri, the present

“Okay,” I said, “somebody else’s turn.” This was our last hangout before The Action, no business allowed. But we weren't killing time.

Teach yourselves to trust.

At Calona, trust would be our water—a matter of life or death.

“When everything started,” Budd leapt in, “Dreams were *conversations...*”

“You sound like Ariadne!” Jojo teased, winking at me.

Were. I picked up on that past tense, how it turned whatever Budd said into an absolute. My drawing-hand began its habitual sketch over the harsh nap of the carpet, making what Budd called my digging-animal sounds. His head tilted in my direction.

“Remember?” Jojo said to no one. “The night we figured out what *screen-snow* was? You know, the stuff I Dreamed before anybody else did? How it turned out to be... *molecules?*” Her laughter spiraled up and broke off.

“Plain vanilla H two O?” Rena spoke with her eyes on Budd, a diagnostic stare. “Or some kinky variant?”

Jojo was on a roll. “And we all went *oooh*, because every time I told that Dream I kept on blamming how *screen-snow* reminds

me of bubbles?" She shook her jig, let it fizz between her lips. "Then I got it. That cool slippery *feel* was a *name*."

"Right," Lonnie said, "water wasn't just light and sound, it was *touch, too...*"

"Touch," Budd back in at full speed now, "our new dialect."

"Ariadne talking pretty!" Lonnie chuckled, his thumb unconsciously grazing the scar he still teased Budd about, his *friendship brand*. Budd being the one who'd accidentally carved his flesh.

"Ariadne picking up on our metaphors, figuring *us* out. But what about the other direction?" Budd let a few beats go by. "Hasn't been two-way for awhile. What do we really know...?"

Jojo switched the subject. "What about Dreamers who aren't SYNC? Like Black Rainbow. What's up with that?"

Silence.

"Ariadne's *word*," Budd drew the single syllable out. "That's all we've really got".

"Why are you saying this... now?" Lonnie, genuinely puzzled.

"It was never Ariadne's words I trusted, it was... the sense of mutual exploration."

"What you mean is," Rena on edge now, "back then, things weren't so scary." She was on the floor with us now, knees against breasts, rocking on her fleshy rear-end. She threw a heavy-lidded glance over her shoulder at Lonnie. A lot went on in an eye-lock when you'd been paired eleven years.

Lonnie broke Rena's gaze. "We can't get into this and you know why, Budd, not tonight."

"When did you stop trusting Dreams?" Rena, on Budd's scent now, set to drill into him.

That's the question, Doc. Right on target. I shut my eyes. The audio next door snapped off, the baby bleated on. Budd stayed quiet so long my eyes sprang open.

His chin was drifting toward the ceiling. "Action Dreams came late in the play, more or less set pieces, hardly any input from us..." He blinked as though the light were hurting his eyes. "We bought whatever got dropped into our heads..."

You definitely should not be doing this. I stepped over Lonnie's sprawl into the corner by the door, rolled face-down on the futon, rough cushions smelling faintly of Budd's shampoo. Like lying against him. I turned onto my back again.

"You didn't answer me!" Lonnie snapped. "Give us a clue, man."

"Where's ... the relationship? I mean, how did we get here, really? With the end, like you keep saying, hanging over us?"

Rena gave Budd a warning look.

"Or the beginning," said Jojo.

From across the room, I traced the lines of Jojo's tattoo— blue vines twining blond arms, leaves disappearing under razored-off sleeves. Vines made me think of Ariadne's threads inside us now, rearranging our nervous system. The difference between Budd and me was right there—the idea excited me.

Silence crackled around the room.

Jojo set a waterjar in the center of the table. Into it she poured from her own precious stash, urged us to do the same. With playful solemnity she chimed a spoon against the rim, reciting from Mira Kai's Prison Book, *Vine of Imagination*. "*A sip of these waters could quench hot blood...*" She held up an empty, long-stemmed glass—real glass—chipped around the rim, a rare jeweled thing scrounged at The Depot— knowing the moment would come, when Ariadne's local hotheads would find ourselves in dire need of a serious cool-down.

Jojo stalled to give Budd more time, telling us how she'd managed her Depot score that morning. Still, he hung back, unsmiling, contained as a mountain.

Words I would surely regret if I ever spoke them, heated my chest as Jojo bent and whispered in his ear. At first, he didn't seem to hear. After a moment he sat forward, faintly nodding. Jojo was humming Good Green Blues, something she and Budd used to play together. His harp, her voice. *My pipe, your pipes*, Budd would joke as they belted out chorus after chorus—call and response.

At last he reached for his jig, felt for the rim of the glass and added his own small portion. We all took a breath.

“Gotta admit, Jojo,” I said, “you scored a real supernatural with that goblet of yours.” Giddy with relief, Jojo's slang was pleasing in my mouth as I watched Budd swallow. One after another around the circle, we did the same.

Perfect, this moment under a waxing moon. Fourteen days before The Action.

When the glass around came to me, I held it up— *with this field-dew we consecrate...*

REDSHOT RADIO

Jackie Red-Clay

Hermes here, Electro-magnetic trickster at *RedSpot Radio* offline, riding the old fashioned airwaves, coming at you from the twilight caverns of Olympus, otherwise known as ...an undisclosed location...

Welcome to the kick-off in our thirteen part series, *Swiftway Heroes*, tonight featuring Jackie Red-Clay— she's the one got all this going for us—but before we get to Jackie, a nibble of etymology might be in order, especially for the damp-eared out there. Seasoned Gleaners who already know this stuff, be cool.

Swiftway didn't appear out of nowhere, it morphed into being from that tired old word *Freeway*, cause *freeway* was *no way* quick enough for Maglev super-speed routes! So *swiftway*, thanks to Jackie as we'll see in a moment, is now generic for any sort of Action at all. Let's remember it, let's honor it, let's keep it alive: the very first time “the latest *swiftway*” was on anybody's tongue, came shortly after Jackie lost her life...

It was 2055 when Jackie Red-Clay's face went up world-wide on FreeNet. She'd gone fresh after getting booted from her day job. Camped out beside the long-dry Reyes River, off Dedrick *Swiftway* exit. Nothing but tar brush and dust growing down there. But Jackie had a hunch. Two years ago today, she sent a live one to MediaNet claiming she'd found a persistent gush of water springing out of a dig...for her latrine. We've got that on audio— don't ask me how— let's listen to Jackie tell the story..

It's beautiful, and damn, drinkable, too... alive! Like water my family used to tell about in stories when I was coming up.

Granma took me to water in a canyon she called by a name I don't remember any more. This was more than thirty years ago. (Long silence) So, this week I happened to have a test kit on me and my spring checked out clean. Been cooking with it, washing up, hell, brushing my teeth with it, for weeks now, and I'm doing just fine, as you can hear...

Ah, Jackie could sweet-talk Net, could she not?! What comes next is Burt Hayes, the newsman on the other end of that call, reminding Jackie that the ground near Dedrick-Reyes had been heavily contaminated with amplitoxin. Here's Jackie.

I'm aware of that, Burt— but now it isn't! This water's clean ... clean as... Well, I don't have the metaphors right now, that's your job. I dare you to come and taste it! And bring your lab goons with their fancy machines...

Sad to tell, Jackie failed to disable her cell before they tracked her down, committed her to a Mental Hygiene Facility. A month later, MediaNet made this announcement: *Jackie Red Clay, forty-seven, born Jacklyn Red Clay on Northwest Native Land Reserve, was found dead this morning of a self-administered overdose— one of the new AntiREM clones, REM-x3. John Hovart, who discovered Clay in semi-conscious condition, said she'd apparently been stashing doses, and took them all at once. Clay explained, according to Hovart, she did it to stop the Dreams.*

Yeah right. Jackie, like the rest of us Hydro-clones would do anything at all to stamp out Dreaming! Actually, people from Native Land Reserves almost never consider fighting Dreams with REM-kill stuff. In fact, older ones teach young ones how to invite *more* Dreaming. Some say Jackie was one of the first to break silence between a NLR and the rest of TriAm.

To this day, warnings and smart-fences cordon off Jackie's campsite near Dedrick swiftway exit. But what about the wild water she tasted straight out of the ground?

Officially, Jackie's test results were *a product of delusion*. “Exhaustive analyses” done by HydroPur, went up all over MediaNet Global Interlink, showing— of course they did!— *serious Amplitoxin contamination*. Conclusion? There is no safe water. Anywhere. Except what we pay for, purified chemotherapized transmogrified through that state-of-the-art —art-of-the-State— *maze* of HydroPur filters. End of story.

Except it isn't! Karen Mollet— not her real name— Jackie's close friend of more than 15 years, is here sitting across from me at Redspot Basement Studios tonight .

Karen, what can you tell us about Jackie's state of mind— *was* she delusional?

“I went to Fourth Level with Jackie, and I can tell you she was nobody's fool. Picked arguments with her Chemistry profs about their research being soft— you know, because among other things, it was *paid for* by Hydro. Chemistry was her major, and I think Hydro even made overtures to her. But Jackie had other things in mind. Couple years back, they fired her over at ChemDat, and that's when she ended up going fresh. I tried to talk her into holing up with me, but she didn't want to lose me *my* job too. She told me she was Dreaming about sleeping outside, searching for water. Sounds crazy, sure, but... Like I said, she was somebody you trusted. Everybody who knew her did. So when she checked out that live spring and swore it was drinkable, *I* believed her. Took the sample she gave me—enough to knock out several my size, supposedly— and had me a taste...”

How was it?

(Laughter) “I'm still here! According to Hydro, I shouldn't be.”

Right. Karen, do you have any of that water on you now?

“You bet I do. This is it, right here.”

“Hmmm. An ordinary jig-cap full of ...nothing but water, not even any dust specks floating around in it. Have you run tests on this stuff yourself?

“I’m no chemist, but yeah, I *did* have somebody do that.”

And the verdict?

“Like Jackie said, what metaphors are left? Clean as *what?* Snow from Mt. Everest, mother’s milk? What a joke. *Nothing’s* clean anymore.”

But the numbers, what did the numbers say?

“A string of zeroes. Not a thing in this water but good old *aitch two oh...*”

No debris, no toxins? From what I understand, Karen, that isn’t even possible. And if it were, it wouldn’t even be healthy!

“Right. All water ever tested contains traces of this or that pollutant, most of it very bad news.”

But your numbers were *zero zero zero*, down the line, that’s what you’re saying?

“I am. And except for couple of harmless minerals, that’s what Jackie came up with— first time, tenth time, a string of *nothings*. Thirsty? Here, have a taste...”

(Laughter) Will you take a rain check on that? (More laughter) I left my winged helmet at home tonight!

And so, Dreamers and Gleaners, old and new, there you have it— another missing piece in Jackie Red Clay’s unfinished story. It’ll always be unfinished now. She gave her life to change the meaning of Water Action... forever. Jackie, we thank you for your courage.

And Karen, good luck to you!

This concludes our first episode of Swiftway Heroes.

Hermes here, for *RedSpot Radio*, signing off.

Meeting 3

Teri, the present

“Okay. Let’s get political,” Budd said.

“Let’s *don’t*.” Rena clapped down the glass—a dollop of sparkling liquid swirled in the bottom. “Politics is exactly what we aren’t here for. You seem to have forgotten that.” She retreated to the head, lingering after the timer shut off the light and fan. Maybe in those solitary moments of darkness, she made up her mind to take Budd on, because she came out like a bear. “Okay, I’m going to tell you straight—*no more*. Or I’m *gone*.” She looked at Lonnie for support.

“She’s right, debate time is over, this Action is *happening*; man. You know the rule on that better than anybody.” Lonnie rubbed the back of his neck. “Besides, this meeting is off limits for Laby business, it’s settled, Budd. We’re ... like astronauts in training or something, navigating psych-clash, not deliberately bringing it on, not...”

“...having a miserable time,” Jojo added, her tongue sharpening.

Budd opened his mouth to snap back, then turned his head. The click of an Ear? He pushed off his chair, felt his way into the back room.

I held my breath.

In a moment, he was back, something in the cup of his palms. With a kick, the unit doorway slid back, and he opened his hands— a tiny colorless moth spiraled free.

He heard it bump against the furniture back there? *Exactly why, my Budd, you ended up Labyrinth's Gate Man.* And why, when Tri-Am Regional broke away into local Laby groups, everybody wanted to be where Gate Man was. Until *Dreams becoming Acts* changed the game. And blindness became a liability again.

“Supposed to be a cele-*bra*-tion.” Jojo with a mock-gruff tone, ruffed up her bleached seven-point razor cut, put on a fake outlander twang. “Now don't curl up by your lonesome—get on into the circle, girl.”

Though she be but little, she is fierce. I didn't budge.

Jojo glided through the maze of Budd's storage stacks, her face dissolving into shadow as she left the glow of waxlights Lonnie'd snagged for tonight. Only govcorp knew what they were made of and they aren't telling, but they burned like the real thing. Budd had no working lightboxes, never bothered to repair them after I left. Now we took turns bringing our own illumination— a kind of game to vary the sources.

Jojo folded her lithe body backward onto the futon, gazed at me upsidedown. Making me smile. “Want some company, my Lady?”

“Mmmm,” I murmured, studying Budd who was back at the table with Rena and Lonnie. I unpinned my unruly hair, combing it irritably with my fingers, glaring at the ceiling—stained, nicked, never painted. What time was moonrise tonight? Check my cell?

Look with your own two eyes.

A Dream line I'd never mentioned to Budd.

~

The moment I announced a sudden need for air, Jojo popped up after me and we were out the door. She loped off to the

playground, grabbed the brace bar, propelled herself hand over hand, dragging her boots through gravel. She whooped and twirled, leapt down where I was pacing Turf. “Something's up with Budd. Don't mean the questions, he's always done that...”

“He's just scared, like Rena said.”

“More than that. He never talks about his Dreams, and I...”

We froze—a door alarm wailed. And it was coming from the direction of Budd's place.

Meeting 4

Teri, the present

My head snapped to the window at every crunch on the walkway outside. For the second time in this so-called meeting, my heart swelled and thrashed. When the steps diminished without stopping, I should have relaxed. But since that wailer went off, fear was loose in me. Was it really coincidence that Gaard came by?

“We weren't talking Action when the clamper showed,” Budd said. “Give us another scan, will you, Lonnie? See if anything's switched on or off in the last hour.”

We met at Budd's under pretense of reading printouts aloud, mostly Shakespeare. A few times we actually did. The month before, I'd shown a Gaard who popped in for a headcount, the script I'd made from *The Tempest*, we all had a copy, lugged it around in our paks. In case. The clamper tonight, Budd said, when he saw that printout, grunted and seemed satisfied.

Lonnie swiveled the Bouncer through the cardinal directions. “Clean,” he declared.

Jojo and Lonnie play-punched shoulders with giddy relief. Budd was impassive.

“Settle down, kids,” Rena drawled.

~

Lonnie's waxlights slowly pooling, I couldn't stop scraping hardened bits from the edge of the plate, rolling them in my fingers, holding up my odd shaped creations. This together-mode, this time apart, we'd Dreamed ourselves into was tougher than I'd expected, harder than straight-out Local or Laby agendas. A line from a poem kept passing through me. *Because we swim with you in your mysterious deep.* I could say the whole thing aloud as I'd done at a Laby meetup, repping for The Local Group. In my mind, I became the poet with her bare, tattooed head, whose lines on Ariadne hit me with a jolt.

I watched Rena turning Jojo's glass round and around on the table—like everything these days, made of cheap indestructible material. I ached for the beauty of things subject to ruin. Flowers. Songbirds. Dangerous information.

Budd clicked off his cell. "Gaard was new, didn't know what he was doing, turns out he tripped the alarm by accident. But checked us out anyway. T.J. and Gabby are guessing it's a new routine to keep us jumpy. It's working, too." He gave the air a wry smile.

Budd never told me where he stored his notes—to *protect you*, was what he said. All I knew was the mode. Squeezed sound archives with built-in destruct defaults. *Zogs*. Was that what he called them? Rena'd given him the idea— from *apoptosis*, the suicide-program in every living, non-cancerous cell. Every *earthling* cell, he'd joked. But me, I was always carrying. *Bio forms*, *Cosmographies*. *Sonographies*. Visual translations of Ariadne's voice. And other things I couldn't name or guess the meaning of yet. Before, I had memorized them, kept them to myself or showed Budd. Now, 4-D copies got passed to SYNC's international contacts who slipped them out of Tri Am. After that, they were gone. Scattered. I touched them, image after image in my mind. A few unfinished 2-D stuff still physically around. But safe— or so I hoped— behind my unit lightbox at

MCC. I picked the place after one of the Head-techs said he figured *anybody with anything damning to hide wouldn't be so dim as to bury it at work. And if they did, it wouldn't be something obvious like the lightbox. Who had time to do searches anyway, when they could barely cover their shift?* It was true. Equipment grinding itself to pieces, all of us doing more tech rescue than work orders ever called for..

I looked at Jojo asleep, beside me. *Everybody's safety.* If my stuff was ever found, I'd lose work, lose my roof. But the worst was, I'd be instant poison to everybody and everything I loved.

New Colors

Teri and Jojo, one year before the present

After too many hours, she'd finally finished MCC assignments and got her hands on real work. Her own. Lightpad on her knees in bed, Save and Print locked, cell-link off, she feathered orange and blue into each other, merging them in a way that left the essence of each intact, without creating a blur, a muddled grey.

The art in MedArt was a joke, of course, but supply stocks for patients made her Ariadne series possible. Around the time she started working with Natalie, all she could come up with was pencils with their stable, dull colors. Then she got a line from Jojo on black market art-chalks that cost the last of her stashed bills. She adored their brilliant jabs and slurs, the jewel-like colors. Messy. Easily ruined. Then Budd had Dreamed her a stabilizing method. With treated lab-papyr and electro-gloves, he showed her how to keep chalk from dusting off the page. Slipping the drawings into sleeves, cooking the brilliant particles permanently into place by exposing them to bursts of chromostatic light.

Most of her official time, she was stuck illustrating NetMed's latest health and water hazards, or ad copy for XYZ supposedly containing everything a body eating genetecked soy, corn and sugar beets might need. She did some preliminary composition onscreen— couldn't risk paints or chalks til she knew precisely what she was after. Tonight, she was aiming for a one-of-a-kind color she'd Dreamed.

...a color swims into her mind — clear violet lit from inside with warm yellow, a peculiar union of opposites she has no name for. She tries coaxing the shade from Paintbox, tries merge commands with combo shades. Every Preview Tint an insipid failure. Then, suddenly a sunny violet alive behind her eyelids, sprouts a coil of glowing coral red. On husk board, she fans the red sprout into a web of veins. Until scarlet vein-work fills violet entirely. Then from the tip of her optibrush, drops of gold spill into a ripple of black along the bottom edge of the world...

She remembered Jojo's Dream that had come before her own... *yellow sky with purple-grey clouds. One cloud has these red snaky things inside like it's heating up or something. A hot cloud? How can you have a hot cloud? Anyway, the curly things break through, and the cloud starts raining: Raining! Except the rain drops are yellow like the sky— it's raining drops of sky! But when I look down, I'm dangling in the air, nothing under my feet but pure darkness...*

Now, Teri worked blue-violet into coral, letting the two barely shadow one another. A sound stopped her hand. Adrenaline shot through her. She stashed her board behind the air scrubber, looked frantically around for anything incriminating.

Five whistled notes. A Local! Unless somebody'd picked up on their signal? She threw a poncho over her shoulders and cracked the door, peering into a slant of blue light. Jojo stood there chewing on her lip, eyes sliding sideways. She clapped her mangled cowboy hat against one hip and a cloud of dust rose up. Her spiky blonde head was backlit with an eerie shine from the exercise yard.

Teri took hold of her and pulled her through the frame where they bear-hugged a slow circle. Almost dancing, laughing with barely a sound.

~

They were leaning over one of Teri's paintings. Jojo looked up at her, slightly alarmed, a bit ragged, worn down. Dodging Gaard-sweeps was exhausting. Without a wristcell she could be hassled over imaginary infractions, hauled off for an implant.

“So this is what you've been up to,” Jojo said. Tenderly, she lifted Teri's slate out of her hands, then seemed to change her mind. “We don't have to do this, you know, I can find another place to stay.” She pointed to her ear.

“No, no, you stay put. A mutual friend of ours checks things out, there's never been anything, not even once.”

Jojo brought the painting closer. “Is this...? Do you really think She looks like this?”

Teri nodded and turned away— why shy about swirling golds, layers of creamy salmon, blue and violet?

Jojo waited, as if for the shapes to translate in her mind. “Who's this? This little figure down here?”

“What?” Teri stared at a swirl in the painting above Jojo's finger. One of those borderline cases—could be a face from the side, an eye, a mouth. Or a squiggle. Imagination. But didn't she recognize that almost-face? Dreamed an age ago? It was the day she stayed home from work, Budd teasing her mercilessly with eels and Shakespeare, the day she'd Dreamed Ariadne expanding, a red cloud, herself and rocks and everything on earth set loose from gravity, floating, winding together and pulling apart, falling again like rain. One face had stayed with her, pushed forward out of the background like mushrooms used to push out of the dirt. What a rarity both were now, children and mushrooms.

Jojo set the painting down. “You know. This isn't any kind of flower I ever met.” She glanced at her red-knuckled hands, a

rim of dirt under the nails, tucked them under her arms. “And believe me,” her hands in the air again, undulating, “I’ve known a lot of them. Intimately.”

~

While Jojo slept, Teri longed to show her *all* the paintings. She leapt up and covered the metal walls of her room, turning it into a kind of garden. She would take her friend from one to the next, stopping to drink in colors and shapes, the way bees used to go flower to flower.

But these were MedArt walls. What if there really were Bouncer-proof survcams like some techs joked about lately? Where would they be, those cameras? But if they *were* there, they’d already have spotted her with stolen pigments and ...

She dug through her pak for a tube of stickeeze. Jojo lay oblivious, helplessly asleep as a child, profile tender as any flower. Teri was tempted to draw her exactly like that. But she couldn’t wait for her to see Ariadne the way *she* saw Her.

The pattern of patterns shapes all the others...

Jojo went on snoring softly, hands clasping each other against her thighs. Teri climbed onto a chair, slid out the siliclear panel over her lightbox, reached behind the backing and pulled out a folder that could, like a bomb, wrench their lives apart.

New Colors 2

Teri and Jojo, one year before the present

“What's going on?” Jojo sat up, blinking, unable to believe what she was seeing— Teri's bare walls blazing with paintings. “*Oh*. Am I Dreaming?” She closed her eyes. Opened them again.

“Shhh! I wanted you to see them all at once. The way they *should* be seen.” Her face darkened. “Never done anything like this before...”

“Sure as hell hope not!”

“Anybody comes, I'll stash you in the closet and pretend to be sound asleep.” Teri was laughing now. “Don't worry. I would've disappeared a long time ago if anybody was watching what I do here most nights !”

The first painting looked into a tangle of branches, lines crossing, re-crossing. Shimmering like seaweed. Or beautiful long, coral and black hair. Except there were tiny knots all along the bundled strands, each strand studded with buds or beads, each of them glowing, lit up from inside.

Teri's eyes directed Jojo to the second painting—blues of every imaginable shade. Above what might have been the ground, a planet rose on the horizon—a gleaming sphere of turquoise.

The energy in every drop of water is infinite.

~

Next morning when Jojo was heading out the door, Teri stepped in front of her. “You don’t have a safe crash, you come back here tonight, promise?”

“Breaking rules for me could mess you up with MCC. *On the ground, sleep sound.* A fairy queen said that to me once.” She winked. “Anyway, hey, fresh is...awesome.”

“Fiercesome,” Teri tossed back. “Lonesome. I can’t stand you going thirsty. Or worse.”

“Nawsome.” Jojo grinned. “Look, Ma, no wristcell.” She slapped her bare left arm, rolled her sleeves down, buttons gone from the cuffs.

Right, Teri, thought. Until DGS makes implants mandatory.

Meeting 5

Teri, the present

Still dozing beside me on Budd's floor, Jojo gave a child-like snort, blinked open her eyes, slid back into sleep. Dreaming? Maybe it was never just REM, but *all* those dreamless regions where Ariadne worked?

Below Delta, Rena told us once, was where brains slowed down, sometimes to less than a single cycle a second.

Molecular transformations via vibratory shifts...

What was the rest? The closest I ever came to understanding Ariadne's learning curve, the thing Budd was so fixated on, was when Rena compared it to a healthy immune system—repeated exposure triggering ever more rapid, widespread but fine-tuned responses that gradually got better at distinguishing mistakes from useful hits.

I looked down. Jojo turned over, face hidden in her crossed arms. An optically-scaled iridescent question flashed from her back — *Remember Stars?*

Did I? Lonnie once said, *You can see by pure starlight in the desert*. I touched my cell and the screen said *27.4 degrees @ twenty-one hundred—9 pm*. Exactly. I plucked a strand of hair from Jojo's flushed cheek, and wanted out of the room. Out of the meeting. Away from Budd. *Keeping things under his heart* as Cece would have said. While simultaneously cultivating obsessive order. Even when we were together. Right here.

Every object he owned invariably, precisely ordered according to some set of rules only he could invent or comprehend—a single careless exception, I knew, might prove disastrous. But it was suffocating! *This is unlivable*. The phrase I used the day I told Budd I was leaving.

I stepped over Jojo and her eyes fluttered open. “Mmm. A Dream methinks...”

“Jumping ship again?” Budd, nailing me. As usual. I’d been so sure he was safely absorbed in that round of Memory he and Lonnie started a while ago. Rena, reluctant referee, gave me a probing look, anxious as I was to be elsewhere. This *trusting* assignment was coming apart. “Back in a few,” I called out.

Out on the miniscule porch, I sat blinking into the glare of lightboxes up and down identical rows. Russian architecture — flexible concrete, zero maintenance, built to stand through any disaster. Except mass despair. Not a weed between rows of gravel. I searched the half-lit sky.

Smogged, fogged. No stars, no planets. A man with a suitcase, a woman holding a sleeping child, crunched past. Out of an instinct to be unseen, I turned my face to the ground.

~

The body of the child is a biosphere.

Last year, without consulting SYNC or Labyrinth or Local, I’d done something possibly stupid. Gotten involved with Deena, Head Tech at MCC, who was quietly working on a case: six-year old fraternal twins, diagnosed with viral meningitis.

Management had given up, warehoused them in what was informally known *the slow-kill wing*: Containment humor. Grim reality. After a month, Deena managed to convince an off-site regional director to order new blood and spinal fluid work-ups. When the samples turned out clean, CMD played it

down—*mistaken diagnosis*. The kids were sent home to their family. End of story.

But it gnawed at me. I'd searched MedArt intranet, found all Miri and Reese Brenna files deleted. Violating MCC's own policy— records archived at least five years.

Dead-end, dead thread.

Meeting 6

Teri, the present

Laughter spilled onto the porch where I sat staring into the night. Budd's harmonica wheezed a few familiar phrases and the knot in my breastbone eased. I stood up. Lights blinked out in the unit across from where I stood hugging myself. Not cold. *Lonely*. In spite of this bonding meet-up, we were moons in our own eccentric orbits.

Leaning against the wall, my mind drifted to Calona waiting for us out in the desert. With a Work Pass, you could ride into open landscape spreading for miles into desert mountains with no names I knew of. Rumors of encampments there. For years, I'd fantasized hiking into those towering shadows. Joining some *literally* underground movement. But I'd never walked the desert, it was only a flat plain from a window, glimpsed on transport a few times. One week from tonight, I –we—would be out there. All of us. Except Budd.

The couple with the infant crunched back down the path in the opposite direction. The child's dangling hand reminded me of the first time Natalie, without a word, had picked up a paintbrush and dipped it into water. As though she'd always known how to do it. When the painting was done and Natalie glanced up, I realized I'd never seen her so bright-eyed, so alert. She held her painting close to the glass—and I was stunned to see that it mirrored one of my own — bolts of ruddy lightning slashing a yellow sky. Hadn't said a word to Natalie about that correspondence. Not until later.

After that, everything to do with the girl gradually began to work on me. A kind of gravity. A calling. The trouble was, there wasn't much time before Calona, before I'd be answering another, even more compelling call.

Still, tonight, there might be something I could do.

The door panel whooshed back, and I bumped into Jojo, sweaty and sleepy-eyed, cowboy hat tilted back on her head. I pulled her outside. "I need to see Natalie. Now. Will you come with me, no questions asked?"

Rena, cross and depleted, leaned out of the door behind Jojo. "What's up, ladies? Do I smell a conspiracy?"

Without turning to face her, Jojo answered, "Teri's gotta check on something at MCC. I'm taking off, too. I know this hang-out was supposed to go on a couple more hours... you guys can throw a few gleeks and tongue-dance all night if you want...but I'm beat."

Grey light etched Rena's face. I saw my getaway was causing the woman pain. Divided loyalties. Silently, I pleaded with Rena to say nothing about her suspicions—especially not Budd.

She opened her palms and brought them back together, meaning *I am letting you go this time but don't press your luck*. "I'll say your good-byes for you," she said, "but you get straight with Budd before we go."

I reached for Rena's hand. "I owe you."

Jojo handed me my pak, bent down to the walkway and picked out a chip of gravel, examined it, let it fly. "Who says he has to know everything?"

~

We sprinted to catch the Mag at Marsh Gate— Rose Gate still down from a sun-swipe— automatically we ducked out of surv-

cam range. “How about I deputize you, Volunteer-Trainee?” I said to Jojo and we laughed.

“Well, hey. Good thing I’m wearing my ten-gallon and not my two gallon!”

I gave her a dubious look. “Actually, about that hat...”

At the Auto-scan for weapons, I waved my wristcell. Grateful it was still possible, two women racing through the city on our own. At the last moment, stepping into the car, I searched the cloudy sky, trying to guess Jupiter’s— Ariadne’s— whereabouts.

Swaying on seats reeking of disinfectant, we kept silent. Cars could be bugged, as Budd reminded us. But like the dozing couple, the sullen-faced old man across the aisle, people never said much while riding. Dreamers didn’t find each other here.

Jojo and I, like everybody around us, stared bleakly out of the scratched windows at a blur of lights, repeating anonymous silhouettes. Passing through the half-empty city of Detrick. *Deadrock. City of the Dead.* Right about now we’d be over the Detrick-Reyes exit. A pang of grief.

Jojo turned and our eyes met, both of us remembering Jackie and the spring of water she died for.

Ten minutes later, over-heated hiss of Transport had done its work, lulling me. I yawned, curled into my bones, pushed everything out of mind, but could not shut my eyes.

A single drop of water on the outside surface of the glas caught my attention—one drop clinging to the hurtling Mag-car shuddering violently.

She bends, peering into the speck of liquid, and as she looks the drop goes perfectly still. A lens, a globe. Inside now— immense silence. Shimmering browns, greens, flecks of white drifting over blue. She can’t understand where she is until her brain grasps that she’s riding a soft

friction of air; far far above Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, the whole eastern coast of the African continent. Madagascar like a small clot of darkness in the sea. A great flock of migrating birds shimmering beneath her, winding slowly north...

REDSHOT RADIO: X And Y, Part One

Good-even, good twilight, good edge of the night, this is Hermes, quicksilver trickster delivering the news you'll never hear elsewhere, for RedSpot Radio— *offline*, riding the old fashioned airwaves.

And continuing our Swiftway series, with me here tonight are X and Y— not their real names (laughter)— how bout we call em Xavier and Yoli— two of *The Marlan Five*, here to fill us in on the special part they played in the infamous Test-kit Movement— remember, gleaners and streamers, The Year of Test-kits? That massive give-away of contamination detectors, free to anybody who asked? X and Y are gonna fill us in on what's been happening since. And what's likely ahead.

Good-evening, Yoli. Can you give us a quick review of Marlan Swiftway?

Yoli: Okay, sure. Most early Actions—except for Jackie Clay's—had been going along, but not much was changing. Then, as you know, there was a toxic spill off Marlan Swiftway. Five people camped there for two months in the abandoned mill, and were able to document a gradual clearing of groundwater contamination. But MediaNet, and HydroPur's enviro-safety crew, like always, “proved” those numbers bogus. Then Gaards shut us down.

Xavier: After Marlan, we uh, dreamed up the idea of giving kits away, as many as possible, letting people test their own urine and saliva— a kind of water, right?

Hermes: Right! And what did you do with the results?

Xavier: Posted the numbers on FreeNet all over the globe. Hundreds of mini-action sites started popping up. Until Net-cutters snipped them. We had to rebuild nodes every couple hours to fox the cutters. It was amusing, mildly dangerous stuff, at the time. Nothing like what's at stake now. Back then we could burn identity codes by hitting *disable*. A wiped cell looked suspicious, but didn't give away any details. .

Hermes: What was MediaNet's *public* response?

Yoli: Well. You know. They just blasted our numbers. Started posting their own. Blood saliva, urine, even tears, data strings, probably from weeded-out newborns, showing high levels of bacteria and chemical contaminants. Other dicey sources. Some of them showed zero for ordinary minerals, faking data in both directions...

Hermes: What was the point of that?

Xavier: Muddy the waters! MediaNet's real business is confusion and fear. Colluding with HydroPur and govcorp, the Gaard. Keep adrenaline high enough and we're deaf to the swan song of the planet.

Hermes: Whoa, there. *Swan song*?

Xavier: Sorry. That's retro-speak for... the song you sing when you're dying. Too young for that one?

Hermes: Possibly. (Laughter) But why *swans*?

Xavier: Swan Lake. The ballet...

Hermes: *Ballet!*

Xavier: You know, boffs and blinks on stage prancing in feathered skin suits...?

Hermes: Oooh, right, I knew that! (Laughter.) Speaking of muddy waters and swans... Yoli, we understand you're a dowser. What *is* dowsing, anyway? Can you tell us what part it played in the Test-kit Years?

Yoli: Well, a dowser is somebody who *feels* water, feels where it's hiding. Under a whole lot of dirt, mostly. (Laughter). My people could always do it, my family, I mean, wasn't anything woolly about it. Here's my Dad on dowsing. (Reads) *A dowser tracks water to its lair. But the big difference between a man hunting a wild animal and a man hunting water is crucial: the aim is not to kill, but to free the creature...*

Hermes: *Free the creature.* I like that. But how exactly do you free water buried under rock and soil?

Yoli: Before I answer that, can I say a bit more about finding it in the first place?

Hermes: Please do...

Yoli: Lots of dowsers see pictures in their heads. Not me. I *feel* it pulling on my nerves, like extra gravity. A sort of *coolness* to it, too...

Hermes: Fascinating. And you were doing this mystery-dance with water while Xavier was ducking Net-cutters?

Yoli: I was doing it at Marlan, and kept on after Hydro shut us down. Hydro really hates it when you find good water. Because then they have to come out with MediaNet and prove it isn't *potable*, prove you can't drink the stuff!

Anyway, I'd plan a douse for someplace near a well gone dry. Ten, twelve, twenty years dry sometimes. I'd walk the ground, feel water nearby. Or else I wouldn't. When I *did*, we'd map the shape of what was down there. Then we'd get hydrologists in—*Hydropurologists* we called them, they all worked for Hydro—like I said, we knew they'd "prove" that water was toxic, so, we...

Hermes: Did you bust the wall and go public on the wells, too?

Yoli: For awhile we logged GPS coordinates on FreeNet to prove we could do it. To let peeps know there was still good water if you could find it. But. (Sigh) We got tired of fighting for wells that'd just get locked up. Probably spiked. We started going out into the desert. Found *cenotes* and some limestone caves out there. Millions of years old. But, uh...we never told MediaNet about those.

Hermes: Limestone caves...*water* in the desert?

Yoli: All sorts of caves out there. Lava tubes, earth cracks. Fossil water is still carving stone in the desert...

Xavier: After that, we got test-kits going more than ever. Flooding MediaNet with thousands of anonymous sources. . .

Hermes: Who was manufacturing those kits, and how did you manage to pay for them?

Xavier: The kits came in from somewhere near the east coast of Afrasia—big donor, we'll call him Mfuti—came in on vessels fitted up for meteorological monitoring. Don't want to mention any place-names, but ...I'll just say this. There are a lot of small, extremely inhospitable islands where the main crop is trash-crabs, jellies, and gull shit!

Hermes: And a load of clandestine stuff can go down on a desert island...

Yoli: Exactly.

Hermes: Here we come to the end of Part One. We'll continue with X And Y, Part Two, *next* time. So tune in!

This is Hermes signing off for RedSpot Radio.

Part Three

The Clinic

Teri, the present, three days before The Action

Dark night, that from the eye its function takes, the ear more quick of apprehension makes.

MCC lit up the sky even from where we stood, a good half kilometer away, as the Mag slid off leaving us in the turbulent wake of its departure. The deserted station made me uneasy. “Race you!” I called to Jojo, taking off at a run.

We were panting, giddy, when we reached the nearly empty lot and walked the steps to Check In. I got Jojo through on a Prov Cell, using a so-called *magic number* that screwed with IRIS’s search function in an inconspicuous way. All we needed was a few days. Three days to be exact.

From the main hallway, I headed for quarters, eager to get us settled for the night. But Jojo had her own agenda, and called me back. “Natalie’s the reason we ditched the meeting tonight. I need to see who we’re doing this for.”

~

Without speaking, we made our way, to Natalie’s window. Walking nested hallways bright as day that wouldn’t dim for another hour, I remembered a Net mantra, *Cheap HydroGen Means Unlimited Energy*, and Budd’s own bitter twist on that. *Cheap HydroGen Means Unlimited Waste.*

Jojo pressed her hands against the smudge-proof transparent barrier, peering into 15B for a glimpse of the girl. Awake or sleeping? Somewhere between? Exotic creature in a glass box, hidden, shape-shifting. At first all we could see of her was a nest of shadows. “So you think she’s one of us,” Jojo whispered. I nodded. *She’s a Dreamer, all right. But we’re losing her.*

Finally she turned over, showing a sliver of face, an arm dangling from the blankets. Almost immediately, all sight of her disappeared again as she turned on her side, away from us. Through the live mic, we heard a tremulous strand of words, undecipherable, as though she spoke to the darkness itself.

Before I could stop her, Jojo answered, “We’re here, Natalie. You can rest. Rest deep.”

That quick, I marveled, my friend grasped why we were here tonight—and if we weren’t exquisitely careful, how much we had to lose.

Natalie

Teri and Natalie, one year before the present

Whenever she came in on her evening shifts, the kiosk at the entrance was always lit up like a nuclear dome. When she held her cell against the ID lock, moved through the door, down the hall, she would imagine Natalie's mother showing up here for visits the way Deena had described them. She could practically see the young woman leaning exhausted against the glas wall, never waking Natalie, dozing off herself, waiting for her daughter to open her eyes and call out to her. When she moved to the window and leaned against it, waiting as Susanna must have waited before she went missing, presumably dead, she felt she was in some way taking the woman's place.

Before Susanna disappeared, she'd signed off on Wireless Vitals for Natalie—one of those rare new technologies Teri was actually grateful for — allowing the girl to move around like a normal child, a normal sick child confined to a tiny equipment-packed unit, dragging blankets to huddle on her side of a transparent wall.

Some days Natalie had been well enough to sit up on the bench behind the glas between them. Visitor and prisoner, they spoke through a mic almost always *on*. The girl's eyes, a weave of cloudy greys, skin a darker grey, hair gone drab black, she was a sharp-boned, skinny thing.

Pure nightmare, a young girl trapped here, dying or not dying. She had tried convincing Deena to support an arts program. “If we could get her, and the others, painting, if we went about it right, we could hang the stuff, brighten up these damn blank

walls! If we got them listening to music, talking about their families... maybe we could keep them *alive*.”

Deena had listened, those amber eyes fixing her with a look she wore too often— a kind of pained curiosity. “Listen, Teri. After what happened with Miri and Reese? I’ve got to stay clear of it, that’s all. You aren’t going to get anywhere with long-terms like Natalie. Except straight out of here on your ass.” She’d waved a hand. “I know,” she said, “wasting my breath and all that.” She studied Teri with mix of fear and affection.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be more careful than I was with the twins, I’ll put everything in terms of peptide levels...” Teri had muttered with heavy irony. Deena’s tired smile, the way her long freckled hand rested on her hand, was still vivid. For a moment, they’d stood like that. Undecided. Then abruptly, Deena turned and walked away.

Creative Materials Therapy was the fancy name she invented for using art to help kids like Natalie in Containment. She made her case before Materials Board— *cerebellar stimulation of amygdali haywired in Containment patients partly due to chronic muscular stereotypy and under-utilization of...* talking them into cheap watercolors plus an extra ration of water. Soon paintings bloomed over Natalie's bleak walls.

Until the night that changed everything between them.

Natalie’s way of falling instantly and deeply asleep had gotten to the point where she rarely kept her eyes open long. Teri had been spending more and more time listening through the mic for that that insect rasp of a voice.

“It’s me,” she said, squinting, close to the mic, opening and closing her hand above her head, their greeting sign. Natalie’s eyes shut again, forehead bright with sweat, hair glued to her face and neck. Eyes dull, the hollows beneath them deepening

Her mouth's exquisite corners, the skin there growing thin. The translucent curve of her lips.

She stood, thinking the girl had fallen into one of her fever-world slumbers, when she heard a moan break into waves of grief.

“Talk to me, Natalie.”

The girl sobbed quietly, hiccupped, half sat to sip water through the tube angling out of a measured beaker. Intake and outflow precisely monitored. She wasn't keeping down much of that horrid NutriHi spiked with XYZ they had her on, was losing flesh. Deena said they were going to run a tube if they had to. How to tempt Natalie to eat? Make food herself? Protocol was strict on Natalie's virus getting out, but oddly lax on what might get *in*.

Natalie was forever complaining of being cold, though she was feverish. Hot to touch, Deena said, except her feet which were so icy even tech-aids mentioned it in notes.

Teri craved to be inside that room, rubbing those feet. She got up, checked the roster to see who was on duty. It was late. Staff consisted of exactly two Techs, both busy with a recent admission. In a nearby closet, the new cleansuits and well-worn older varieties hung like empty skins on their hooks. Once a couple of weeks ago Teri had watched while Deena opened that closet door. Let her see —deliberately — an Ekey with a phrase-prompt, in a hidden drawer.

Awkwardly Teri moved into one of the older, metalastic outfits known among the staff as *bugsuits*. Her nerves flamed adrenaline as she entered the Ion Scrubber, passed through the UV chamber until a timer popped the inner door.

Natalie was swallowed up in sterilized blue sheets. An aid had just changed them, bed-bathed her, and gone home, wouldn't be back tonight. A faint whistling came from the girl's chest.

Teri sat on the only chair at the head of Natalie's bed.

"Natalie?" It was the first time Teri had ever deliberately waked her. But time was priceless, every moment of it. She found the girl's bird-light hand in the bedclothes and pressed it between her gloved paws.

Natalie's eyes widened at the suited-up inhuman form before her. She jerked her hand away, squinted for better focus, then drooped with relief. She reached out to touch Teri's face-plate. "You scared me."

In *Midsummer* where Titania wakes to the sight of Bottom in his grotesque ass-head disguise, Puck thinks *My mistress with a monster is in love*. Budd liked to quote that line when, in his eyes, she got dangerously infatuated with Ariadne. Now this echo—Teri, the monster. Natalie the fairy child.

Cold feet in her hands at last, she willed her own heat into them. *Live*, she pleaded, with all the energy of her being. Sweating inside the suit, she was giddy with tension. If she got caught... she'd lose her hard won privilege of coming and going freely around Natalie. Maybe lose her job. But a young girl's sick body couldn't thrive on random ghost-faces swimming up behind a glass wall—touch is true in a way looking can never be. Budd taught her that.

"Surprised?" Teri said.

A fleeting smile, a nod, and finally, "You look *funny*." Natalie's eyes closed immediately after speaking as though that small effort exhausted her. "Everybody wears the other kind. You look like... an astronaut."

“Don't feel like one in this bulky old thing. But if *you* were an astronaut...where would you be off to?”

Natalie considered the question. “Earth,” she said.

Teri wanted to weep. “*Besides* Earth, silly.”

Long silence. The girl's eyelids quivered. Teri was about to change the subject when Natalie said, “The beautiful one. With those red swirls?”

“You mean storms? Some people call that planet, Jupiter. Why that one?”

Natalie's left shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. “I guess because of the colors in my eyes.”

“You *see* it? When you're sleeping, you mean?”

Natalie shook her head.

Teri brushed her gloved hand over the girl's damp forehead. *Why do they keep it so cold in this room.* “You don't have to talk, sweetheart, just rest.” She looked around at the paintings pinned with little magnets to the wall. One appeared to be an ordinary landscape, red and brown mountains. But there it was, *Red Lightning*. Several versions. One of them showed four white spirals on the planet's surface, each a different size.

Dreams grow quick in those who least resist.

“How come that one's storms are white and not red?”

Natalie yawned. “Red storms are on the other side. The white ones. Are. Different.”

The other side? Teri was shivering now. “Different? How? Can you tell me?”

“I think... they have more water in them. Red ones don't like water as much.”

Teri could think of nothing to say. How to gauge what she was hearing? Certainly didn't match anything she'd studied. Or even Dreamed. Maybe just the fevered imagination of an 11 year old who'd spent her life locked up with medical personnel? Or alone with her mind.

"It's better. With *you* here." Natalie's eyelids drooped as she spoke, head lolling to one side. "Aren't you scared. You're going to catch it?" She coughed. "What I've got?"

"That's what this silly costume is for." Teri fluttered her gloved fingers. "Wish I could take it off. And brush your hair."

"Look, the lights!"

"Lights?" Teri looked the machines blinking off and on.

"Not those." Natalie pointed to a corner of the ceiling away from the computer station.

Teri saw only tiles, shadows, a lightbox. Even leaning down so that her head-piece nearly brushed Natalie's cheek, trying to see the room from *her* angle, nothing.

Lightbees. That's their name today. They change their names a lot. And colors." She coughed again. "I think. They come. To keep me company."

Teri nodded, a weight of fear sinking through her. Why couldn't she see what Natalie saw? "What color are they, now?"

"Clear." She shrugged "If I think *blue* they go blue. Or red or brown. Mostly they make their own colors. And shapes. Whatever they want to. I don't know why..."

"What shapes do you mean?"

"There's... clouds of them. Some of the clouds stick together. Like this." Her hands clasped each other. "They spin around and make bubbles with different things inside them. And then... more clouds come and stick to the first ones." She

caught her breath. “And...pretty soon they’re all... one giant cloud. It turns and turns. And it’s ...*the whole world*.” She waited, out of breath. “When The World happens, it makes me really happy. But sad too. Because...they always make The World right at the end. Before they go away.”

Teri sat forward, examining Natalie’s face. “The lights, are they doing that *now*?”

Natalie’s rapt expression collapsed. “You don’t see them.”

Teri would have given anything not to let her down. “When you see The World, what’s it like? Do you mean...a planet?”

Natalie shook her head and looked away.

As the girl’s disappointment sank through her, Teri heard a sound from the mic and snapped her head around to face the hallway. Dread constricted her breathing. She should get out of here. “Natalie, I’m so sorry, but I’ve got to go...”

“I know,” she said, without looking at her again. “Because you aren’t. My mother.”

Teri squeezed Natalie’s hand. The girl’s face seemed to age in that moment, no longer a child’s.

“That happened a long time ago, Natalie. Susanna— your mother— she got sick, too. Like you. But different.”

Natalie pulled up her knees. “They come. So I don’t get lonely.”

“The lights, you mean?”

“I get sleepy when I watch them. I...” She coughed. “Try to stay awake. So I can see. Where they go when The World goes away. But. I never do.” She sighed. “They go out that way. Back there.” She turned her head, as though watching it happen.

“The pass-through door?”

She nodded. “Where Deena and everybody goes. Where you’re going.” Natalie’s eyes locked onto hers. “Everybody. Except me.”

She held Natalie’s gaze until she had to look away. “Maybe you could draw the lights, the shapes they make...”

Natalie shook her head.

She took the girl’s hands. “We’ll do it together, you tell me what you see and I’ll draw *for* you...”

Natalie looked at the tiled walls, at the screens scrolling numbers. “It’s better... when they’re *here*.” She stopped speaking. Simply breathed. “I draw them inside my eyes now.”

Clinic 2

Teri, the present, two days before the Action

The plan was to keep a day-watch on the bench by Natalie's window. I'd spend just enough hours at my station in the employee area, submit as many assignments as possible, legitimizing time in Containment wing. Jojo would keep notes on Natalie's condition, talking to her when she was awake, and otherwise make herself useful sorting supplies, stocking shelves, doing errands for staff, so they'd be grateful for her presence, disinclined to ask questions. We'd retreat for sleep to my quarters in the employee-housing wing of the complex.

It was morning. Techs came and went, some not showing at all. They checked machine readings, entered data, saw to repairs for whatever broke down that day—it was always something. Deena introduced us to maintenance and other tech-aids circulating through the building. I didn't know any of them except Chris— a shy young woman, meticulous worker with a Brazilian accent, words melting together into a slippery lilt.

Deena searched my eyes. "You ever planning a kid of your own? No? Sorry to hear that, you seem like a natural." She went on in this vein awhile, before turning her gaze to Jojo, casually asking for a cell read.

Jojo could barely get a word out before I interrupted with a light tone. "Oh it's in maintenance, all she's got is a Prov for now, but I can vouch for her, she's definitely a good one!"

Deena gave me a long look, “DG Maintenance?” then flicked a glance at Jojo's arm, unable to simply let it go. She checked something at her desk and after a few tense moments, signed Jojo in as my aide. “Okay. I'll put up a permission tag so day and night staff know what you're doing...we don't want them to think you're... terrorists or something!” She laughed at her lame joke, eyed me again, glanced meaningfully at one of the terminals. “Number 14 is mine,” she said, “and that's all I'm going to say about that. CYA.”

I nearly reached out to squeeze her hand and thank her, but stopped myself. *Cover Your Ass* is right.

~

Jojo on the hall bench watching Natalie sleep had fallen asleep herself— Dreaming? I sat beside her, matching admission and discharge stat read-outs. Dreaming or not, whatever Natalie was doing went on nearly around the clock. But when she woke, it would mean everything to have a real live human there. Meanwhile, I would see about digging more details from Natalie's med history, psych evaluations, anything.

Down the corridor, staff terminals in their hallway niche were deserted. Deena and Chris busy in the main building now, I sat down at #14 and keyed in, surprised to discover nearly all of Natalie's bio-files were Open Access.

Mother declined exact DOB. Nobody knew exactly how old she was. Ten or eleven? Oddly, the only image in Natalie's file was from about age five. A non-professional photo— cell-shot from her mother, Susanna?— a small dark-haired girl with crooked bangs and a chin-cut, ambled toward the photographer down a paved walkway. She was dressed up— her birthday?— in red tights. Left hand about to grasp something out of the air. Right hand pointing to something out-of-frame. Puckered mouth, raised brows, a wide-eyed creature inventing —for her mother's

sake?—some amusing comment on whatever she was seeing the moment the shutter caught her. Natalie's face and gestures seemed to transform that ordinary unit-block walkway into a wooded path winding into imaginary trees...

I was grateful MCC had hung onto the image, but why hadn't a newer one been added?

Vox off, I set up *Touch*, got into more guarded layers of Natalie's med history with a PLD code—Physicians Linked Database— which Rena, asking no questions, had slipped me months before.

What I saw threw me into confusion— Susanna Weber, natural mother, deceased, Viral Meningitis, no father listed. No date on the mother's death. No siblings, no grandparents. *What is this kid, a changeling?*

Weber, Susanna, When I entered the name I got an error message repeating with every try— even switching to *aux override* failed to execute Open File. Another dead-end? Or was this really all they had on the woman?

A clash of food trays and footsteps down the hall. Laughter. Doors shutting. I panicked, about to hit Exit, when the commotion mercifully faded.

Natalie's brief profile began, *admitted 2056*. I knew Natalie'd been *inside* most of her life, but no previous admissions were listed in her record. Official diagnosis: F.U.O. Fever of Unknown Origin. *Febrile Syndrome*— cough, fever, anemia, weakness, respiratory edema... *unknown strain of Gram Negative bacilli*. Extremely contagious. Resistant to treatment, including bio-amplified bactericidal chemotrophs, etc.

I hurried through *Commentary, Archive*, came across an insert...*death of normally occurring microbes may not cure but exacerbate the illness, since some serve the salutary purpose of*

restraining still other possibly deadly microbes.' Dr. L. Margulis, Symbiotic Studies, Archive 209, 1988. A truly ancient fragment. What was it doing here?

With *special search*, I found the rest of the quote. *In sterile environments, in the absence of microbial communities, health is simply not possible.*

I noticed a link to a folder, *Subject 22134*. When I touched the number, a screen slid up demanding another password. I started entering words, stopping every few tries to look around. Once a tech came by and I stupidly shut off the screen. But the woman barely gave me a glance— clearly exhausted, she punched up a print-out and left.

After a string of logical guesses, I was in a sweat, trying stupid things like Natalie's name backwards. Margulis' words had stuck in my mind, so I picked a few from the paragraph on Symbiotic Studies. Maybe there was a relationship, a reason that quote was there, not just a random bit of 20th century wisdom. I looked around again and rubbed my eyes, grateful for breakdowns, no shows, everybody hopping. But my nerves couldn't take a lot more, I was tense as a bedroom burglar with the owners asleep just on the other side of the wall.

I keyed in *symbiosis. Gram negative. Endosymbiosis*. Nothing.

I considered the nature of the discovery Margulis had made—to near universal disbelief—long before she was finally acclaimed for her discovery that Mitochondria, the energy-producing entities inside every human cell, were in fact symbionts of primitive bacterial origin with their own DNA and rhythms of being. Such mergers, as much as classical competition, were major evolutionary drivers.

I entered *mitochondria*, certain it would be my open sesame. *Wrong*: I stared at the screen, mind empty, aching. Closed my eyes, to see what might appear...

One of my own paintings.

Ariadne's salmon-red tendrils, bordering a soft pale center. As I watched, gleaming threads unraveled from the background, wove themselves through, tendril to core, all of them, it seemed, integral to Ariadne's being.

Symbiogenesis, which had appeared nowhere in the Margulis quote, popped into my mind. Eyes shut, I keyed the word in, but after the final letter **s**, inexplicably six more characters flew out through my fingers so quickly I had to open my eyes to see what they were.

X3=7AΩ I tapped the screen and gasped as the list of files opened. The most recent was *22134*.

22134

Subject Natalie W. (ID: 775811) shows evidence of multiple mitochondrial sources. Mitochondria rarely undergo sexual recombination, but when it occurs, mDNA influence from *both* mother and father are carried forward into the offspring, creating a new line passed on in the normal way, ie, through the female, but untraceable backward to the point of origin.

However in this subject, there are activation and shut-down patterns throughout the entire nuclear genome, ie all inheritable DNA. The source of these effects appears to be a third “parental line”: Unknown Activation Factor.

Test history summary is as follows.

Phase one: extra-somatic replication of genetic material with and without Ticord stimulation. Result: failed.

Phase two: sequencing of mitochondrial and nuclear genomes. Result: disintegration of mitotic processes, dehiscence of genetic materials.

Phase three: comparative zoological DNA survey: no similarities to any other known organisms.

Phase four: *in vivo* exposure of DNA/mDNA to typical mutagenic pollutants. Results so far suggest unknown clearance mechanisms, reducing, and in some cases, eliminating, pollutants, to levels compatible with survival. To determine if this effect is temporary or permanent will require further study.

Phase Five (in preparation): DNA/mDNA transfer into second subject. Results expected during immediate post-experimental period.

Subject's genetic anomalies appear to be irreversible and heritable. In extracted samples taken from an ovum, haploid DNA material showed identical anomalies. Therefore, we hypothesize that the subject's possible offspring will also show phenotypical expression of all three contributing sources (maternal, paternal and Unknown) though these would likely be altered in unpredictable ways. Whether Unknown inserted itself during conception or sometime during the first years of life before subject became a patient at this facility, is not known. Specimen from subject's mother (SW), showed abnormal levels of circulating macrophages and some extra immune factors, but overall results were inconclusive and could be attributed to exposure to common viruses or toxins.

Hypothesis: During recombination of the mother's mDNA and nuclear DNA, a critical bifurcation occurred during which Unknown Factor irreversibly influenced meiotic and mitotic processes, and therefore, the development of the embryo. Further changes to DNA spontaneously occurred during and/or after conception and gestation, which is consistent with mother showing no trace of UF.

To date, all attempts to modify subject's genetic materials have resulted in dysrhythmia in spindle formation and chaotic separation, followed by total failure of cell replication. Therefore, indirect approaches to inducing critical bifurcation have been initiated by random viral insertions into somatic and gonadal mDNA/DNA. While these attempts have failed so far, they have avoided the normally expected outcome—regression to lethal chaos.

Subject appears phenotypically normal. General health and well-being are poor at present, and have declined since admission. However, if it can be shown that...

“Okay, I’ll check on that as soon as I can get to it.” An unfamiliar male voice nearby triggered me to shut down.

I hadn’t understood all of it, except that Natalie was in a kind of danger I hadn’t imagined. I switched back to open system material and pretended rapt concentration as whoever had spoken strolled up behind me, stood over my shoulder, breath smelling of Cafelot. I kept my eyes on the screen, heart racing, not acknowledging his presence in any way.

A big hand came to rest on the table. One of his chunky fingers wore an odd sort of ring made of broken fragments of metal and glass— I couldn’t make out the design if there was one. After another moment without speaking, he passed on down the hallway and I let out my breath.

~

Back beside Jojo, I found Natalie laboring for breath. My own lungs sympathetically clenched at the sight and sound of a struggle I knew too well. She’d been put on Bronch and cold steam to treat acute congestion, but her body strained to pull in enough oxygen, using up her dwindling strength.

The List

Deena and LJ, the near present

She slipped into their booth at Crandy's, clicked on Boy James In Rio, set the sound-bubble for her side of the table, and ordered herself a rare treat. The hop, a bambi, brought her Cafelot steaming with a rich black bitterness that set off an anticipatory high. She eyed his shapely ass as he trotted away, still nervous about meeting LJ in a buzzbar, but LJ insisted it was safer— *never appear furtive*—just friendly colleagues having their weekly after-shift parlayvoo, nespah? LJ would certainly know about that sort of thing, wouldn't she?

Sipping her brew in its dainty toss-away she shuddered with pleasure. Tyler, longtime lover, gave that same shudder-sigh when he swigged from his canister of mash —strictly illegal with a kick she didn't care for. But Tyler, Afrasian, gorgeous, a little frinky in bed and out, could get away with just about anything. So far.

She upped the volume on Rio, almost glad L. J. was a tad late. *Don't you ever get tired of Boy James?* LJ liked to get on her about things like that. Besides, this way she had time to drop the chatty Deena Dixon Head-tech act, and be herself. Though, if she even knew what that meant, it was getting closer to impossible everyday.

~

LJ framed in the doorway, waved her cell at the read. Gliding through the aisle, she turned a few heads, dressed like the govcorp executrix she was—black power-suit with silver lapels

and sloped heels— brows, eyelids and lips darkened. The only color, a corp pin—the cutesy new logo: one blue drop with a smiling red leaf caught inside.

“You look fragged!” LJ gave her a brisk hug and sat down—
“Chief Sam a real eff-head today or something?”

Deena clicked off Boy James, rolled her eyes at LJ’s *eff-head*. All that puritanical Hydro training. If only she could say exactly how *fucked-up* things really were. But that wasn’t what they were here for, was it? “Usual breakdowns and no-shows. How about you?”

“You know me, game for the game, as they say. And, well. Atmosphere’s pretty upful lately—after the...uh, HM merger. Nobody’s clear on what’s next, but the whole shake-up sure cuts down on rumor-mill unemployment!”

“Can I get you some of what I’m ...?”

“I wish! Got to keep a straight head, that stuff zooms me so much I have a hard time focusing, though it’s supposed to get your brain *into* gear! You’re off time though, right? Go ahead, enjoy yourself, I’ll stick to Hydro like a good Hydro girl,” she smiled, slipped off her visor, tossed her hair, so smooth and glossy it looked steam-pressed. When the hop with his gelled do and fake smile brought LJ a mini-jig she left it untouched. “So...”

Deena looked at LJ over her cup.

LJ stared into the mirror behind Deena’s shoulder. Nobody in the place close enough to overhear. There was a nice noise level from the air-scrubbers and one rude dude who had his bubble off, spewing space opera. But just in case, she pulled up a bubble that included them both and asked Deena if she minded hearing Grave Diggers. A second later, that song title struck her as unfortunate.

“What if we say this is Melkorn and this... is Sarsten?” She drew two imaginary lines on the table between them. “Something *interesting* is going on...right here. She jabbed the spot where the two streets met. There’s a termite exterminator business going in. I’m not personally connected to any of the parties it’s going to concern— you aren’t either, not directly anyway. At least I don’t think you are.” Flash of irony. “But you do know a few who’ve... got their wings on, so to speak, am I right?”

LJ had a way of not actually putting the thing into words, sashaying around it. Why she bothered was a mystery to Deena. Easy enough for any Hydro-Ear to figure out the slippery phraseology. Underneath her Lady X, a frustrated poet? She claimed all this parlayvooving in public was best—everybody knew the two of them had been meeting here for years, nothing to flag those times useful info just happened to slip between them. When LJ got ahold of something she thought Deena ought to know, she’d bring it here. Still, if an HM type ever listened in to her word-dance, no matter how she frinked it to them later, they’d both be... what was the expression now? *Taking a reactor-dip with our best bikinis and a rubber duck.*

~

Days after their meeting, LJ back at Hydro, she eyed her blinking cell and pulled up Deena’s message *Meet me at 4 and half.? D.* She’d skipped lunch, got trapped in a meeting, it was now almost 4 pm exactly. “Aren’t we about done, here, Curt?” she said. He flashed her a pouty frown, then announced genially, as if it were his idea, “Enough for now. Back by 9 sharp tomorrow.” She gave him her best smile and hurried out.

~

“What’s up?” LJ slid into her side of the back booth, Boy James off for once.

“Could you out check some names?” Deena asked. “See if they’re...on or off?”

LJ’s stomach turned over. On or off the infamous List.

“Just a feeling.” Deena plucked at her collar, looking miserable.

Was this the showdown LJ’d been dreading? Time to find out what she was made of?

“Stick the names up here, okay?” Deena tapped the side of her head. “I’ll show them to you, and we’re done. Gotta get back to the Clinic...”

“Whoa, slow down.” LJ sighed. “Deena, I...” She was woozy with bad possibilities. Deena’s eyes burned into hers. LJ looked away.

Deena wrote with a finger on what she joked was her Palm Pilot. Her Skin Screen. Got the name from an ancient offline gadget no techier than the antique Etch-a-Sketch she used with kids in Containment.

LJ memorized as letters and names assembled in her mind.

“Done,” she said, light-headed, heart bumping like she’d downed a dose. As Deena watched, she wrote those names in the same order across her own palm, looking up between each for a nod or a headshake from Deena. She got them all finally.

“Okay. We shouldn’t meet again before our usual. I’ll shoot you a roak. If I can’t manage that, a pixelgram, a blind one. Soon. But I can’t promise anything...”

“I know.” Deena looked pained as she shoved her hands into her pockets and hunched forward.

“Good friends of yours or something? You’re shaking.”

“Not friends. No.” Deena’s eyes worked in her head. “It’s...I’m putting you and— if anything...”

“Don’t even finish that sentence, Deedee.” She hadn’t called Deena that in ages. “Listen, it’s going to be tricky. But if you

think something's important, that's a good enough reason to take a look. Then we'll have to see what we can do about it... either way.”

“Right. Well. I'm not like you, LJ, this isn't the sort of thing I'm cut out for.”

“You don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that!” LJ offered Deena her hand and stood up. “Gotta get. Take my advice? A double dose of REM-x tonight. You look like somebody just shot your pet rat.” She winced at the Hydro-robot she was becoming. “Sorry, Deena. That was a lame thing to say. Just a joke going around HM this month... forgive me?”

~

LJ watched Curt's hands in the 3-D filer, miming a physical search through data, picking out the next batch of names and faces for the A List. Not for the first time, she had the distinct impression he actually *enjoyed* this part of the work. Which was off-putting anyway she looked at it. A person should *not* enjoy rounding up perps, making sure they got herded into squeeze-cells for injections of REM-x and amnesiacs—who knows what else. A person might feel they *had* to do such a thing because word came down from HM, because they needed to keep their reputation, their job, their *fate* in hand— but the whole thing effing better at least *feel* distasteful, right? How could you trust a guy who got off on all that? He was attractive, for sure. Boyish grin, curly head of hair with a frost of grey. Which made her *want* to trust him. That's how it worked, she knew the rap. Attractives were invariably perceived as more trustworthy and honest than plains or repulsives. There wasn't a man or woman on the top Boards or a second-line exec who wouldn't qualify as good looking in anybody's wiki. A major piece of workplace lube was making sure underlings were properly wowed by height, fitness and elegant genes. She'd passed the tests herself, no problem. Well, okay. The definition

of attractive came down to, yes, looks, but mainly how you sold, how you could blather and blam, could hold a cheerful tone in a tight spot. Enjoying your work when it was a nasty piece of business did not seem to alarm anybody from Psych. But yeah, it was getting to her. Not that she was directly involved in the arrests. But she knew what was coming down— WHACKs would do a sweep, arrest every name on The List. She knew what would happen to them, too, at least in outline, and she hadn't raised a peep. So how exactly was she *not involved*?

When Curt shut down the filer and walked out of the data room, she flashed a light-stick into the survcam to blind it, switched it off and sat down in his still-warm seat. She had access, no problem, but she'd never done a list-break before and definitely didn't want to be tracked getting into the file Curt had just updated. Plus she had to protect Deena playing doubles with Sam like she was. She broke the laser beam and put a trace on the last session, watching profiles pop and animate—stats, gestures, walking style, taste in clothes, it was all there, as well as detailed activity logs.

Flicking through rapidly, an ear cocked for steps in the hall, she ran her eyes over each display to let it trigger a match with a Palm Pilot name— or not.

End of A-File. Repeat? flashed at her. Nobody she knew on the list. Not this time. She cleared the Session Cache, deleted all versions of what she'd just done. Pulled a wipe from the dispenser, ran it over the screenkeys. Covering her hand with the wipe, she set the survcam clock back 13 1/2 minutes so she was in her seat seconds before it started recording, smiling at the neatness of the elaborate maneuver. She wasn't second-level security for nothing.

But if she *had* recognized anyone on the A-list, what would she have done about it?

She swiveled to The Window and called up Seaside's fake ocean, the pixel view she loved to drift with. The white noise of surf made her sleepy. Though the waves shushed at intervals unnaturally exact. She'd asked for an upgrade, but nobody else seemed to care. Seaside, like nothing else, reminded her of that dilapidated beach town where she'd been raised. And never wanted to step foot in again. A faint scree of gulls came and went. The seductive mix of repulsion and attraction drew her, held her. Puzzling, the weird pleasure of lazily going over memories she actually detested—herself and her mother stuffing themselves with gob fish from the polluted bay off Cabriola, her step-father arrested for selling black-hand crab, leaving the family to get by on jellyfish pay— everything LJ had worked her ass off to escape.

Clinic 3

Teri, the present

On the floor of my unit, Jojo and I sat across from the window, watching daylight fade to darkness.

As if we'd been discussing it for hours, Jojo said, "I've been thinking. And I've got a proposition." She looked down. "How about if—when the time comes—you take the desert, Teri, and I stay here with the fairy child." Alternate excitement and worry crossed her face, reflecting my own equal and opposite attractions. One, Calona. The other, Natalie.

Jojo's words worked on me.

"You know what?" Leaning close, I kissed the top of her shoulder. "I'll never forget you offered to do that. Because I know you want to go as much as I do." I roughed up her hair like she was my kid brother. "*At least* as much as I do."

Doubt shadowed Jojo's face. Her body rocked a little. She looked up, eyes lit with her familiar I'm- about-to-be-witty look. "But I do have one thing you don't have, Lady."

"Oh yeah? And what's that?"

"*Youth*," Jojo grinned. "Chances are I'll be around for a few more Actions than you will." Her eyes roamed my face.

I shook my head, and the movement slight as it was spilled water from my eyes. My hands slid to my lap.

An image floated into my mind— Budd walking away from me. Carrying Natalie in his arms.

~

Listen to your breath. Bring up the sound of Ariadne's voice. We had chosen our Image: that red lightning and yellow sky from Natalie's painting. "I think she Dreamed that sky," I said. "Or, possibly," I added, only half serious, remembering the five-year-old in scarlet tights, "Natalie just likes red." Which finally got a full-on smile out of my nerved-up Volunteer-Trainee.

~

Next morning, I spent as much time as I could on the bench with Jojo, speaking in a low, slow whisper.

Breathe. Let red and yellow penetrate your blood cells, your bones. Don't think it, see it, hear it, feel it! Good. Now keep on that way. Until you feel a shift and it's effortless. Like you were born doing it.

How To Stroke An Image

Zog file 55680003

...not easy for A. to enter a noisy mind That's why She's in when we're stretched out like babes with our eyes and our traps shut, why She's in when we're zzzed, when we're innocent.

Stroking Images opens the doors and windows for Her while we're still awake...

One Dream lights up the next...

Let's say you Dream a swelling red sun. When you're awake, that's your focus, your Image. Stay with it, stay with it... and that sun will grow shadows, those shadows sink inward, hollow out into chambers, and the sun will become a beating heart about to burst...and that heart *does* burst, and you're *gone*, blown into light-dust!

That's what you're aiming for, see? When you and the Image are one and She's found you.

Clinic 3...continued

Teri, the present

Jojo was deep now. Not asleep, just above. How I longed to join her. But I had to keep an eye on the corridor. Nobody was going to catch me by surprise, not this time.

Sitting there, it struck me, an outrageous answer to my two dilemmas—Budd's alienation over being left out of The Action. And Natalie's need for protection. What if Jojo slipped out a few hours and practiced the sequence with Lonnie, who did the same with Budd? What if when Jojo and I were gone, Budd practiced the sequence with Natalie, here at the clinic, letting her know she wasn't abandoned?

Budd couldn't just hang around MCC on his own. Even if he agreed to, even if he was sure he could. Not without somebody Deena at least vaguely knew—and that would be Lonnie. Dr. Rena Gilken's husband. Lonnie wouldn't miss The Action, but he'd have to use his time differently. He was scheduled to come into Silver Canyon two days behind Jojo, Rena and me, anyway. I'd be asking them both to do a reframe. To see Lonnie shepherding Budd into Natalie's life as a crucial part of The Action. To see MCC as a wing of Calona.

Was there time? Would somebody get nosy, shut down Jojo's cover, throw us out.... today, tomorrow? Would Budd jump ship before Lonnie got him down here?

Again, a male voice in the hall made my pulse jump. Jojo didn't seem to hear. Where was the man, exactly? Why was this

guy showing up now? Never heard that voice before earlier today, I was sure.

When he didn't materialize, I told myself to calm down, slow my breathing and focus. I fixed on the crescent of Natalie's face visible through the glass, while speaking to Jojo in a nearly inaudible monotone.

Here we go. Sound, shape, sensation. Are you there? Now turn up the Image, see and hear it vividly—red lightning; yellow sky, Ariadne's voice—everything. When you lose it, start from the beginning. Are you there? Now, let go, let yourself fall and keep on falling..

And *pray*, I thought, shocked at that awkward word. Was that what it was? Just another kind of prayer?

Drops of sweat prickled my scalp, ran between my breasts. My lungs felt heavy. I thought about a puff of Vent, but decided to wait as long as possible. Air Quality was piss-poor in here today, scrubbers down again. Another CME? The excuse for everything now.

In spite of Deena's cooperation, my palms were sweaty, my mouth dry, as if we were already stranded in the desert, without water. I looked at Jojo's shut-tight, trembling eyelids and laid a hand on her back, drawing slow circles, spiraling up to each shoulder, down each arm.

“Easy,” I said, “don't work it too hard.”

Her shoulders dropped, her forehead smoothed. *I've got youth*, I remembered her saying. And it was true —she didn't look a whole lot older than Natalie.

~

After scraping together a dull porridge of bean-paste, soy, and Spice-Pak #4, the two of us made a nest for Jojo on the unit floor, where she'd insisted on sleeping, leaving the bed for me.

Only a few feet apart, we listened to each other breathe, while I combed through the tangle of jargon I'd managed to take away from file 22134.

Phase three: comparative zoological DNA survey showed no similarities to any other known organism. Phase Five: What did it say? Details unavailable until the end of the experiment.

Frightening, those cold phrases. *Continuing stability unlikely, general health and well-being poor at present, declined since admission...* Natalie seemed to be some kind of supreme puzzle they were desperate to solve. Which meant keeping her alive. Which is why all along they'd welcomed my efforts in that direction? And yet. They were putting the girl through dangerous testing... up through Phase Five. Whenever that might be. And when they lost patience, gave up on breaking the NW code? I shuddered. Then it struck me— how did they get an ovum? Didn't that mean they'd anesthetized her and...

Looking wide awake, Jojo turned over and stared straight at me. Startled, I figured we weren't going to sleep much tonight. Or Dream. At that moment, eager for anything other than my own dark thoughts, I tugged at a strand of her hair. "What're you thinking?"

"That I'm not much good for talk. Not the kind you like, you and Budd. All that, um, *book-dust*. Western Civ. Microbiology. Astronomy. *Shakespeare, for god's sake*. Like Lonnie's always saying, Rena's bad enough, but ..."

"Oh, stop." I leaned against the wall behind the bed. My packrat brain with a degree in English Lit. "I admit I'm the fool who started it all, the Shakespeare thing. Budd, me and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. When we were, you know, up late reading lines out loud, getting teary, laughing hysterically, it was such relief from worrying about the next bug war, about Dreams and Ariadne— did you know that She—They—even have a

mention in the play!? All wonderful, really. Til Budd started calling me Titania.” I smiled. “But...that's not the only kind of talk I like— quoting poets and playing around with words. Remember our conversation at The Library the night we met?”

“Sure do. I miss singing my heart out like I could back then. No time for it now. But what *about* Titania? Who is she really?” Jojo laughed.

I put a finger on my lips and whispered, “You don’t remember? *Queen of the Fairies*,” tears stung my eyes, surprising me, “who stopped consorting with Oberon when he...oh, sorry. I’m not going to quote that damn play!”

Jojo reached for my hand. “Read the damn thing to me sometime, will you?” She kissed my fingertips as though she were playing a part, mumbling into my hand, “Ah but, my Faerie Queen, not tonight.”

“Definitely not tonight!” I wondered what Jojo would think of me comparing her to one of the faeries? Or maybe Puck? Which was what I found myself doing. I shook my head. “Hey, I thought we were going to talk about you for a change.”

“Um, gotta go now,” Jojo grinned, threw on her jacket, and tip-toed off to the head.

~

We were hundreds of feet away in a separate wing of the complex, but I could feel Chris and Deena circulating through the corridors, tending cranky machines. In my mind, TAs dropped in for split shifts, suited up to clean Natalie's room, changed sheets, did manual blood gases— what a painful barbaric procedure. From a hundred years ago! *Why can't they use cold lasers on her like everybody else?* Jojo had asked Deena and she told us they'd been glitching, coming up with

junk too many times lately. Only way to be certain about blood gases was to punch through the skin under tendons and veins to get an arterial sample and check it out directly. *Way peculiar how fancy machines these days have to be verified by hand,* Jojo'd snapped back. The simplest, harshest methods, once again the most certain. Natalie's Vitals stable all day after the Bronch screw up. Which was when Deena mentioned noticing her fever spike every time she got anti-virals...

"Didn't mean to be rude," Jojo whispered, shutting the door soundlessly, crawling under her blanket. "My story's a long crooked tale I promise to tell you some day..."

"But not tonight?" A wan smile from me. "Maybe we should try and shut down here, get some rest? We're going to need it."

Jojo turned over. "You sure about leaving Natalie to Budd?"

I sighed. "It won't be Budd, it'll be Lonnie *and* Budd, two grown intelligent..."

"...men." Jojo finished my sentence. "Exactly." She yawned, pinched the skin between her eyes.

"Budd doesn't trust Ariadne. But Natalie could change that. I'm sure she's a Dreamer, but not like we are, I mean...she sees things when she's *awake*. I know she's feverish, dozing a lot, plus she's so young. Maybe she's mixing up Dreams and just...strange thoughts? What I do know is they both need help. Budd's on the verge of disconnecting from everything. Natalie's starting to realize she's trapped in a maze with no way out. Hell, I think if she could get well, she'd be a whole new kind of kid entirely...and if she makes it until we get back..."

Silence between us. Too much to say. None of it sayable.

"Aren't you...what did people used to call it? Playing god here?"

Playing Ariadne, you mean? I covered my face, eyes wandering under my fingertips. Was this idea even my own?

“What are you hoping for?”

“Me? I’m hoping with everything in me— I’m hoping this place isn’t going to kill Natalie.” I squeezed my eyes shut. “I’m hoping Budd quits running from Ariadne, and from...”

“You?”

I bowed my head. “I was going to say *Dreaming*. He never tells them lately, haven’t you noticed? And he’s more cynical than ever. I can’t help feeling Natalie could yank him out of all that—*fast*.”

~

Profound action without thought, with the clearest intention.

One day before the Action

“Chief of Medicine,” was how Brian Samarath presented himself to us. I’d heard this guy’s name before, all right, but couldn’t recall the face.

“I’m on inspection shift.” Nodding, he cut me off when I started to introduce Jojo and myself, “I know who you are,” and immediately launched into up-to-the nano-sec stats on Natalie who had, he said, *pulled out of her nosedive*.

Samarath studied our niche by Natalie’s window. “Your help with inventory and ordering’s appreciated. We’re down on staff. Keep an eye on the Central Monitor. Your VA, too, we need everybody on board.”

I took the man in. Burly arms and torso, heavy features under cropped grey hair.

That was the moment I recognized the ring on his hand.

“Thanks to my VA here,” I looked at Jojo, “ I’m going to finish assignments before my time off— can’t wait to catch up on my social life!” I joked, rushing past any question of credentials.

The guy did not crack a smile. “Yeah, you’re off tomorrow, I saw the schedule,” he muttered, and left us.

Jojo pulled me into a noisy corner. “I do *not* like the way he fingered us with that stare. Did you see his eyes flit away from us when he talks?”

Like Budd with his ears, Jojo grasped character and intention through gesture and nuance. Something she’d picked up, living rough, she said. Dealing with all kinds of people and hairy circumstances. On her own since her parents were— officially—caught in a Transport Explosion, Euro terrorists, MediaNet claimed, changing stories as it suited them. What her mother and father actually died of was uncontrollable infection. Jojo barely 15 when it happened. When she made up her mind to go fresh.

“There’s sweetheart thieves and hustler thieves and bully thieves,” Jojo said. “When you’re fresh, it’s natural selection. You better figure out which is which, and fast— hang with the sweethearts, set leg-traps for the rest. She bit her lip. “That Chief Medical is a nasty piece of business.”

A Little Specimen The Flamer Missed

Budd and Teri, the present

Budd's screen buzzed. He plugged in and Teri's voice flowed through him. Forcing himself to follow what she was saying, he struggled against a sudden urge to tell her everything. Tell her he wasn't Dreaming. That Ariadne wasn't going to protect them out there at Calona...

She wanted to see him *now*. Something about a machine that wasn't working. But that was code. He'd insisted on it when they talked by screen. She was worried about Natalie, the sick kid sicker every day. And something else he couldn't grasp.

"Just get out here and take a look at the problem, okay? It's getting worse and this morning there was a whole other sort of glitch you could make more sense of than we can."

Without explanation, he told her flat out she'd have to pop out the program board and bring it to him herself. A long silence. He was sure she'd shut down their connection, when she said, "Be there in a couple hours."

~

Exactly 2 hours 40 minutes later, after he'd managed a token wash and put on his last clean clothes, Teri was sitting next to him on the porch, panting after a sprint from the station. A shudder ran between her body and his, like a water-rush in the morning, that precious ration coming down to him. He heard her take a quick breath and hold onto it, as though she were going to spill a rush of words. Instead she let the breath go.

Chaos inside him. He was afraid. Of so many things. Most of all for her life. He ached to rest in her arms. Furious at her certainty, her distance. Ashamed of what he'd done at the last meeting, breaking the Laby rule never to try changing minds once they'd been made up, once they'd said yes to an Action. Not only wrong, but stupid. Dangerous...

"Budd, I..."

He pointed to his ear and shook his head. "You brought the program board?"

"No. Just the specs diagram. I tried to pull the board, but...it's too complicated for us to re-configure. I know you can't do the work there on your own. I talked to Lonnie. You and he, both of you, have got to come down..."

"Lonnie?" He felt her sit up and lean away from him.

"Rena and Lonnie decided...I talked to them before coming here. They agreed only *one* of them needs to check up on her mother who hasn't been well lately. Budd, I already told you all this. Lonnie's staying after Rena leaves for her Mother's, he has two days to help you..."

"But...we have no idea how long that visit will be, right? Or do you know something I don't?" He heard a neighbor crunch by on the gravel walkway. A screen-game beeped from somewhere to his left.

She had no answers. "Here. A little specimen the Flamer missed." She held something under his nose— its odor provoked him. Then he recognized the smell. *Soakweed*. She touched his lips with it. He opened his mouth and she laid the leaf on his tongue. He chewed. *We use this one*—his mother had told him decades ago— *to make a sop to stop babies' howling: You were a howler, mi'jo. Remember?* She'd laughed in that husky, tired way of hers, awake half the night with her

notebooks, her research, and he'd interrupted to ask about the weed. *Everybody eats this one— here taste it, good huh?— if they're hungry and have nothing else to make their stomach smile.* Remembering this, his eyes filled.

Doctors who'd saved his tear ducts so proud of their miracle.
Tears from dead eyes.

He went on chewing, tasting, every inch of him aware of Teri. Could feel the heat of her as they sat, arms nearly touching, on the bench Jojo had brought them when they were still together. It was broken on one end. Unbalanced. Together they'd banged it into shape. Teri sliding nails, one by one, precisely into his fingers, guiding him to the spot. He'd struck sharp blows, determined not to miss. He hadn't. Not once.

Without discussing it, they both stood and walked to the outside utility room. He always had a key on him, trading repairs for rent. "I'll show you how the program board for electrical feeds works. Maybe not exactly what you're dealing with, but you'll get something useful out of taking a look at it."

Inside the noisy room, words rushed out of her. "Budd, I need you to stay with Natalie while Jojo and I are gone. I found out some frightening stuff when I was going through her medical files, and there's a guy who might be...oh I can't explain it all even to myself, and I've got to get back before... all I know is I need you to let Lonnie get you to MCC. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?! Tomorrow is..."

"I know what tomorrow is. You could check out this Chief Tech guy after we go. Jojo had a feeling about him, but you're the expert on this kind of thing, you can figure out if he's just a shit head or...a threat...you could offer to help him out with the equipment, keep him looking in the wrong direction..."

Budd hesitated, afraid she'd ask him questions he wasn't ready to answer. Without a cell he was practically useless, but he didn't want her to know that, wanted her to believe his hesitation was for another reason. The one she'd be most likely to accept. "I can't get into that place by myself."

"I told you, Lonnie can take you down in the morning..."

"You don't understand. It's not that I'm *afraid* to go..." He couldn't bear her thinking him a coward.

"Lonnie is somebody Deena knows, at least as Rena's husband. But I understand there's more to it. You don't trust Ariadne, especially when you aren't going to be with us for what's going to happen. But Ariadne's been around so much longer than we have, Budd—"

She's been around, that much I know..."

"They know about *us*, our kind of life."

"They?" he said, impatient.

Teri tapped the weed against his cheek and softened her voice. "They've studied us long enough to learn our languages, how we dream. How we feel. What we need. From *inside*. How to communicate, and not just with us! Every life-form left on this planet. They...*She*, if you prefer, knows everything we know, knows a mistake could be the end of somebody's freedom, that every luxury we enjoy could cost a life. And you know what?" Teri blew out a harsh breath. "We don't even know what life *is*, Budd, we still can't agree on a simple definition. Pitiful, really."

He felt her turn—to look out of the window?

"What makes you think..." he resisted each word as it forced itself out of him, "we are ever going to be any smarter than we have been all along. *What makes you think it isn't too late.*"

"We will make you new, as you were from the earliest ..."

“Stop it! I want to hear what *you* think, not a rerun of Ariadne's greatest hits.” he twisted away, and she slid down to crouch beside him on the floor.

He waited, agitated, his face aiming at the sky beyond the roof.

“You're still wondering if this is all real, if Ariadne's telling the truth, if you can trust ...”

“No. No, I'm *not*.” He turned back to her. “I just don't think I can help...”

“You mean you don't want to. Look, Budd, if not me, will you do it for Natalie? She's only a kid but she's... if you come and stay with her you might fall for her like I have.” She waited.

“But the most important thing is if Natalie's going to make it, she needs somebody besides paid staff to be there. She's lost so much. Her mother. And now Jojo and I've got to leave her, too. Oh Budd, I'm *so sorry you aren't going*, it must be agony to have to stay here while something this big is...”

“It's *you* I don't want to go, goddamn it, Teri, why won't you understand!?”

She went stiff beside him. “I guess I knew that.”

“You just think you do.”

“But I *am* going, Budd. That's not negotiable. And I've got to get back now, it was hell getting time off today, Jojo's there on her own and...” She went silent. “The question is, will you help me, us? Or are you going to turn your back on everybody in Labyrinth and this whole planet, because you got turned down for the Action—because you happen to be...”

He stood up, pressed his hands flat against the wall.

“When I was a girl,” she said, “I spent a lot of time doing this, what we're doing now, questioning what's real. Where the lies are, where truth is. Everything both. Then neither...”

“Except!” He slapped the wall with his palms. “Except our whole lives weren't turning inside out, then!” Without thinking, he dropped down, his hand landing next to hers on the floor. He stroked her wrist with his thumb as he spoke, the way he used to, and she did not stop him. His voice quieter now. “Except we weren't constantly in fear.” He took a breath. “Except we didn't have to choose between a dying world and one that's totally... unknowable.”

She sat up, breaking their touch, a low sound in her throat, puzzlement or disappointment. “You're wrong, my Budd. We *always* had to do that.”

REDSHOT RADIO: Renegades

I'll speak to thee in silence

H: Greetings, children! Hermes here, ElectroMagnetic Trickster, *off*line, riding the old fashioned airwaves...

T: And I'm TruBlue, outlaw wave-caster, beaming straight at you through oceans of Indigo. We're taking you with us... into the center. Tonight, Hermes and I are going to dialogue...

Hermes: ...with each other!

TruBlue: The topic is Renegades— Dreamers who drop off the wire. Claim we'll never find our way out...

Hermes: Tell it, Lady-Sister, out of *what exactly?*

TruBlue: The mazy hold govcorp has on our spirits, on our lives. Some say we have to learn to get by, *get ours, and die*. Keep clear of visions. Clear of politics—over or underground.

But before we get to call and response, let's listen up to philosopher-poet, Sharon Russell Lang, echoing the former Constitution of the former United States, overturned when corporations gained suffrage and universal rights of persons.

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary to separate the governed from the government, we the people must remember our inherent powers of speech and of sacrifice—our true heroism —no force on earth or in heaven, is stronger than a people aroused in a just cause.

Well, the people are aroused and the cause is just!

Nobody has a grasp on all the Actions going down right now, there're just too many of them around the planet. Dreamers Dreaming, schemers scheming. Tonight, we take a look at Renegades...

Hermes: Floaters, crashers, drifters and grifters, stashers piling up contraband so everything vaguely worth scavenging ends up on its way to a make-over, a quick sale, and quicker re-sale...

TruBlue: Dreamers, you know if I got a soul line cause you can hear it fly out of my mouth every week of the year— or not— tonight is no exception— so *listen from the soles of your feet*.

Consider *Octopus*, a so-called *blade-gang*. One of their eight unarmed arms is Black Rainbow which you'll hear more about in a moment. These grabbers specialize in reclaim, first they mod, then they off-load. Off load what? *Whatever*. Octopus sets up shop in a warren of burrows where they survive, I'm here to tell you, not so *primitively*. Compared to all-out *freshers* without a roof, they live pretty well. The cash economy still has legs with renegades.

Hermes: *Octopus* and *Black Rainbow* have dicey reputations and even dicier relations. Only one thing unites them— the constant need for water.

TruBlue: Water and food, food and water. Bartered for, battled for, begged for, borrowed and bargained, boosted...

Hermes: *Octopus* crafts and sells blades— silastic, stone, ceramic. You might've seen one on the street, might be carrying one yourself— identified by a carving on the handle of an extinct being. A bee, a tree frog, a horned beetle, swordbill hummingbird, San Pedro cactus...the list is sadly very long and getting longer every day.

TruBlue: *Black Rainbow* is a clan of Dreamers claiming to be non-political. They lay it down this way— “personal freedom means more to us than the mass delusion that we are powerful enough, Dreams or no Dreams, to save the human or the natural world.”

This from the mouth of Persephone, their leader, “Nature will save herself, one way or another.” But check out her name, *Persephone*. And get this. *Zoa* is BR’s name for the ultimate source of Dreaming. They claim they came up with the name themselves. How did they get wind of this revelation? Dreams! In other words, *She chose Zoa*, they say, once she had full command of the language stream descending from Greek and Latin, and before that, Indo-European. She named *Herself*, they say. Never repudiated any other names, but this one is supposedly *the one*. *Zoa*. Unknown Mind. Embodied logos. Revealed to one special group and no other. Which is the same old story, isn’t it? What about peeps who speak Urdu, Turkana or Mandarin? What about the rest of us One-English speakers who don’t buy special revelation for that matter? Black Rainbow, we detect a smelly contradiction...

Hermes: Renegades get water every which way they can. From straight peeps who black-market their personal allotments, to MDs writing scripts for extra rations. And the list goes on...

Humans may or may not make it past 2075, but... frankly a lot of people don't seem to give a rat's derriere, just hand me my dose and my 3-D air-screen! Let me get by, let me hijack vehicles for parts, bribe PV drivers then claim theft, mod 'em and sell 'em off. A thousand other schemes. Renegades are big into party time, too, what they call *our daily survival*.

Though Dreaming doesn't ever disappear completely, even when it's systematically ignored, it tends, like every good thing, like ordinary dreaming, to go underground. Like clean, free water.

TruBlue: Water's the heart of the matter. Stolen and sold back to us by Hydro on the pretext of shortage and universal contamination—both engineered by Hydro ... sorry, Hydro-*Medina*. Nuke deSals were touted early on, but turned out to be very *very* expensive—in fact, de-sal, excluding transport over large distances, costs five times as much as other forms of water mining. And—big surprise—nuclear poses the usual waste dangers, disposal disputes and periodic meltdowns, for our already toxic Mother Ocean and Earth...

Hermes: Costs? We got anoxic/hypoxic, trashoxic and chemotoxic pollution zones, we got radioactive haystacks, got swarms of *Pelagia noctiluca*, sting-your-ass jellyfish— on the increase everywhere now, especially drought-ridden shores where jellies used to be repelled by low- salinity freshwater runoff. We can kiss those freshwater runoff days goodbye— plus all the jelly eaters like loggerhead turtles, sunfish, trigger fish, who have seriously declined or disappeared.

TruBlue: In the 20s, we lost whales and other large marine mammals. Also sea turtles, sharks, and almost all big fish at the top of the food chain... A few tough bottom-chainers still thrive in those warm toxic waters.

Hermes: What do renegades and jellies have to do with RedSpot Radio-heads? What does all this bad news about our biosphere add up to?

TruBlue: It adds up to a question: what can you and I do about it? We aren't pushing politics of sabotage, we're calling for what some call the politics of sacrifice. The politics of getting into the fray, giving up easy ways to score and get by, taking risks for the planet, for all the creatures, including you and me.

What will *you* do? Get a blade and join Octopus? Pretend to be neutral like Black Rainbow? Or get in on the Action? If you don't know what we mean, you haven't been paying attention!

Hermes: Hey, Gleaners, Hi-Beamers, Floaters and Freshers, Hydro-monkey-wrenchers and Hydro-insiders, we know you're out there. We know you're listening. We know you care. What we're saying is, Lady TruBlue and your Uncle Hermes, we need you. NOW.

TruBlue: How're y'all feeling these days about our ripped-off inheritance— this world once so rich in living water, living food, living beauty?

Hermes: How're you feeling about bees falling through zero, flowers going rare, fruits and greens disappearing from your table, your tongue, your blood? How're you doing on dosed and metered H2O?

TruBlue: How about REM-x pushers and peddlers, Dream Docs and anti-Dreamers writing the rules, the news and entertainment, running your world?

Hermes: *I'll speak to thee in Silence.* That's Shakespeare's Cymbeline, where we started tonight, remember? That line from the bard is instructive. *I know you know what I mean.* So give it some serious time and consideration. Give it some dedicated contemplation.

TruBlue: Open your ears. *In Silence* you'll learn. To act from what you find there.

Hermes: Listen up, children— get slippery, get real, get strong. Join up, take hands. Take Action!

TruBlue: Put your voice and your heart where your Life is.

Hermes/TruBlue, unison: *Let's turn this world inside out!!*

ReSource

Duane Lee Toller, 48, fit and fresh out of Gaard school, cocks his unhelmeted head, lays his stunner wand aside, snaps his fingers at a small tied-up, dirty-white dog, shutting it up so he can listen—he waits for the sound to come to him again.

Nothing but wind between walls where he passes on his walk-around—night duty at HydroGen. After a time, when the sound fails to repeat, he fingers a palm sized machine called ReSource— *We put it all in your pocket— everything you can't recall.*

Just then, a hallucinatory memory of a fragrance comes to him and Toller speaks *puter* to ReSource— *frgrnce, wld rse*. Roses common as weeds once, grew wild where he was raised. A perky genderless voice drones the name of the uncultivated rose for his birth area, *rosa Californicus*. The California field rose. *Frgrnce fnt bt plsnt. Lght pnk*, ReSource says, and shows him a color sample, it's flat prettiness.

The fragrance, the color, feel wrong to him. He almost remembers why. Shuts his eyes and sees *dark, fruity, light-edged. Blood under snow*. This color, this fragrance, has no name, he can't do a Deep Search, can't teach it to ReSource. In his mind he sees one particular, misshapen bush, leaves dusty and riddled with slits. Brown, almost burnt at the tips. Jagged stems holding up flowers like perfect bowls of watery light.

Back when he was a scorcher, he'd got himself into trouble. Trouble in his mind. Couldn't bear another day swinging that fire-wand, fuel tank strapped to his back, disappearing every green thing in his path. He stopped his dose. Pleaded a transfer. When that didn't work, told the boss he'd caught a bug, and took off camping in scrubby high desert foothills, as far from the city as desire could get him, with some crazy idea about joining up with a renegade camp.

After the last Maglev drop, he hiked into Hollow Canyon, too close to dark to see much. Set up a pop-tent, swallowed cold cheeze and soyfroot, conked out. Dreamed a rose he'd seen once, him a runny-nose kid. Its pulse of pure color hit him between the eyes, pooled in his chest. Over and over again. A kind of violent music. Woke in his tent and for a long minute didn't know a thing, let himself float that way.

Dressed, he wolfed a handful of Nutz with a swig of warm water. Climbed up canyon, a little blind in so much light. Not far in, there it was. A bundle of sticks. Withered hips. *Rose*. One rose. The color of his baby sister's breast. One rose like a song he'd heard once— *a long sip of water*. The sun roaring up, caught the petals, releasing a tender penetrating odor that blessed him as he brought his face close enough to drink...

The machine is busy thinking. Sifting through pulsing blue-gigabytes. The search halts—*rrslvbl*. A sad word, *irresolvable*.

Toller remembers how when he came down from the desert, he went straight to Sanitation Patrol and made his case all over again. The interviewer narrowed his eyes and offered to recommend him for Gaard training. Where high supervised doses of REM-x put his Dreams to sleep again.

The small, dirty-white dog that Toller will turn in to Animal Control at the end of shift, comes sniffing up to his boots now, sits on its skinny haunches and looks up at him. Looks him

hard in the eye. Searching for something in him. The way
Toller searches his memories— his irresolvable life in the
machine.

Part Four

Like A Child

Budd, the present

Once I got moving I'd calm down, my stomach would settle, maybe I'd finish yesterday's foodpak. Enough water for a quick wash? Hadn't done much of that lately. Grateful it was nearly morning after a night of almost no sleep. Damned leaf-craving was in me again. Why did Teri bring me that soak weed? God knows if I could find any on my own and without being spotted. Would they be the right ones? Ma always said *no bitterness means safe to eat*.

~

I woke to the clear, neutral sensation of not knowing who I was. Or caring. Anonymous internal weather, urge and inclination jumbled. Thirsty and short of breath. Sweat-smell sharp with fear.

Drawn to a blur of light, wondering what it was. My unit window! I felt for my cell and with a lurch of panic sat up, fighting tangled bedclothes, *naked*—how did I get that way? *Like a child*, my mother's voice—*child* sounding in my head, as though she were whispering to me. *Mi'jo, where're your shoes? Tienes hambre?*

Again I felt for my cell, a fresh wave of panic every time I confirmed it wasn't locked to my wrist. That band of sensitive skin where it had been. Not always. How long? My heart jumped and burned as I groped through the unit a second time...*it had to be here*. How could my cell come unlocked and

fall off my body without me knowing it? Without setting off the alarm program I'd invented?

Start over, calm down.

Systematically I searched through bedclothes, around heating lines, the freezer, even the Sector Pipe, shivering at the funky smell down there Teri always claimed she didn't mind.

After making another entire circuit, I dropped to the floor, panting, my brain rattled on adrenaline, sifting details like grains of sand. I tried to bring back Teri's dream, the one she'd taken to mean she was going— *should be going*— with Labyrinth. To Calona....

~

Again I woke to dread and confusion. Light from my window told me it was now late morning.

Feeling my way to the sink for the bucket, I measured the water level with my thumb. A quarter down. Most of it I poured into a jar for drinking. My jaw and throat bristled with stiff little hairs I buzzed off. Then soaped up and scrubbed off with a dry cloth. I spat, pushed back my hair, sucked air through my nose. Head clearer now. Finished up with bit of clean water to my eyes then my lips. A familiar, steadying ritual.

From the closet, I grabbed a shirt Teri used to wear— still smelling like her. Or was I imagining that? Suddenly her absence was a blow, a missing limb. I cried out and fell back onto my bunk.

~

“You here? Budd? Door’s unlocked, did y’ know that? Hey, it's Lonnie, your...”

“Lonnie!” Relief flooded me. Illogically, I felt for my harp. Somehow still in my pocket where it had always been. I

remembered my cell— the unimaginable difficulty of getting to DGS, applying for another one *now* of all times.

The mattress compressed beside me and I breathed in the good clove and smoke smell of my friend. *Relief.* In my mind, Teri's description of Lonnie had long ago become my own—high balding forehead, solid round features. Thin Y-shaped scar down the right temple and cheek to the chin, a landmark my own fingers knew well. “Listen” I said, “listen...” and did not know how to say more.

“You look awful, pal,” Lonnie laid a hand on my forehead, reflexively checking for fever.

“Thanks. You’re beautiful yourself.” I tried a smile to reassure us both. “Not sick,” I added quickly, “barely slept. And I ... lost my test-kit for work.” I pointed to my ear, then the missing cell. Heard the sharp intake of Lonnie’s breath.

“No! Oh, man, I can't...that's a crammer for sure, and... you know what, I don't have a solution for you.” Which might mean he didn't have a Bouncer on him. He squeezed my shoulder. “Here. Drink this.”

I ignored the cool touch of a water jig against my cheek. “Looked everywhere. All likely and unlikely places.”

“How long?”

“One, maybe two days? Not sure.”

“*Days!?*” Lonnie hissed.

“But the worst thing... I can't remember how it happened.” The jig's liquid weight shifted like a raw egg in its shell. I took hold of it, broke the seal and drank. “Yours or mine?”

“What else you need, man? You eaten?”

I shrugged. “What day is this?”

Lonnie whistled through his teeth.

To lighten the dread, I forced another smile. My head was killing me. I reached for my harp again, tried to blow a note and failed. Ran my tongue over the rough skin of my lips. Then it hit me. “Hey. Wait. Aren't you supposed to be... *visiting family?*”

He clapped the back of my head, “Not yet, Budd, you're stuck with me, remember?”

Dragging me into the front room, he sat me down, found my data stash, hesitated over the wipe command we both knew would cut to pieces everything inside— all my precious coded notes.

Destroying its own circuitry, flashes of light sparked. I could just make them out— and suddenly I was putting together a funny little machine with rows of fins, freezing cold, furry with needles of frost, heard Ariadne’s pleasing drone.

The energy in a single drop of water is infinite.

~

We were swaying, on our way to MCC. Lonnie had gotten me aboard on a general pass, let me doze.

He finger-wrote into my palm, *no DGS no new cell*. Any replacement request would shine a spotlight into my life.

Restless bodies. Air like my own skin disturbed by currents discerned as gestures— thin, nervous, staccato, or slow and rolling. I was breathing in the odor of meals, cloth fraying, lotions evaporating. And *fear*. Everybody around me afraid. Which alarmed and comforted me.

A blast of sound pierced my head—an ad bullet's brassy beat, sheer torment. Lonnie, in the path too, knowing how much worse it was for *me*, pressed on the back of my neck. Bowing

together, we escaped the beam as it traveled into the back of the car. Some people claimed to like them. There was always somebody got off on the latest comm-tech, no matter how barbaric. Beams better than audible blasts you couldn't get away from. But ad *bullet* was the perfect name.

I was soothed by vibrations of the maglev hurtling over a cushion of space just above the ground. Its thin singing reminded me of a Dream.

Sound of the right volume and frequency can alter the molecular structure of matter rendering what is harmful harmless.

Ariadne's promise. One among many. Action at Calona had got its start there. With Her help, a few mere humans could somehow undo decades of radio-pollution. Show the inmates what was possible? *With Her help*. And without it? Lost in the coils of the Minotaur's gut.

~

Lonnie gave me a hard shake and pulled me off Transport. Without my DoG, I had to cling to his arm. *Like a child*, I heard again, drifting in and out of clarity. Was some kind of virus fogging my brain? Constantly I reminded myself, *Teri's girl, Natalie. Natalie is the reason we're here.*

Head Tech, Deena— almost six feet tall— rustled clothing and jangled bracelets with a shiver of constant, slight movement. Smelled of Q Velvet, a man's cologne. Underneath the fidgeting and over-eager voice, a stumble in her speech betrayed uneasiness. Exhaustion. Hiding something. She aimed her scratchy patter exclusively in Lonnie's direction, never asking who *I* was, standing right in front of her. Lonnie would say *we*. Her response persistently singular.

“Teri got her free days this week the hard way, I can tell you, Mr. Gilkin. She and her friend were such a help, carting things back and forth, sorting gowns and such, but for you, we’ll come up with something more... well, you’re Dr. Gilkin’s husband, right?” A pause in the flutter of words. “Definitely going to be rougher here without Teri— she a good friend of yours? She told us you’d be coming in while she was gone—the place is so short we’ve got janitors doing tech shifts, fumbling with outdated equipment hooked up to untested stuff, satellites getting flamed, stations blowing, unreliable voltage...”

“Budd, here,” Lonnie interrupted her streaming syllables, “he can probably get any reluctant machinery going for you, that’s his thing.”

Deena turned to a screen-phone. “Ellen? Yeah, I’ll get to her in a moment.” She clicked off and turned back. “Well, I shouldn’t be telling you all our secrets... I... just want you to be prepared. Let me check on something. Yes, Natalie’s had her bed-bath and injections, and no tests today. Okay. Like I told Teri and her friend...”

A moment of intense stillness magnified her next words.

“Every minute I can spare goes to Natalie. And if it isn’t me, it’s Chris.” Another buzzer broke in. “Sorry, Mr. Gilkin. Okay. Let me put this one on hold. Like I said, we’re all grateful you showed up today...”

I ground my teeth at her incessant talk. But I’d picked up more about Deena than she ever would about me—I was for her, as for just about everybody, the *blind man*.

~

Alone on a hard bench, the sigh and bleep of machines pummeled me. In spite of the cold in this place, its pall of odors dragged me back to years in and out of institutions just like this. Faint mold and dust under the chemical clash of

biocide and harsh perfume, overheating silastic with a hint of damp underarms.

I could hear the main airway scrubbers about to fail—a chirp that started days or a week before the freeze up. But if somebody noticed such things, repairs and upgrades ate up funding, salaries tanked, making staff unreliable— one downhill push brought on to another. The occasional strike put down like a child's tea party with stingers and Gaards. E-bucks once in govcorp fists, rarely escaped. MCC turned out to be, like Tri-Am Renewal, nothing but hand-waving.

Lonnie rustled next to me. “She’s stable, Budd. But a truly sick kid. Teri told you...?”

“Some,” I said. Not much I could remember now.

Lonnie dragged me out of Eye range and we stood next to the air scrubbers, collars up to cover throat muscles. The Bouncer Lonnie’d grabbed on the way was useless in a scene like this. He spoke directly into my ear, using a low monotone matched to one of the machine's harmonics, almost singing.

Natalie’s story so far. Mother dead, no father on record. A single photo in the files, from when she was first brought in.

“You saw her?”

“Behind glas, yeah. Couldn’t really catch her face.”

“How old?”

“Eleven?”

It was flooding me, the smothering light of my hospital room after the operation that promised to restore my sight. Light and pain inseparable. The world turning black whenever I looked away from a light source. The oppressive bleakness that burned itself into me, a part of my nervous system. *So quick, bright things do come to confusion.*

I shook myself. “When’s Teri getting here?”

Lonnie put a hand on my arm, and I knew the answer. *Already gone*. She’d got me here. And she was on her way to Calona. It came to me again, the mild green smell of soakweed, the scrape of the utility door closing behind her...

From far away, I felt my legs buckle under me...

~

“Hey, you went down again, man, you okay?”

Barely on my feet, Lonnie guided me over slick flooring into a chilly room. “Remember the two softie techs?— that Head Tech we met, Deena? And Christine was it?— they’re letting us visit Natalie. I can’t believe it. Maybe help her numbers, they think. Teri must’ve really worked them, they were practically asking us what we needed to get in there and spend time. Here, put this on.”

I weighed the bulky suit’s stiffness in my hands. “We? You mean, *you*, don’t you, *Mr. Gilkin?* Don’t think Deena Dixon had the blind guy in mind.” Lonnie prodded me to snap the suit couplings. Teri’s face gleamed through me and sank away. My brain half-luminous, half mud. I longed for my DoG, my missing cell, my brain still locked to them. If you lost a cell, you’d likely be up for mandatory implant. Rumor at DS was implants were on the way for everybody anyway. Starting at ten or twelve. That would mean Natalie.

Was I this jittery ditz because I hadn’t slept or eaten? *No*. Even before I lost my cell, I hadn’t taken a single hypoREM. In my panic, I’d forgotten. Stopped without weaning like I should have. Vaguely I remembered a disorientation syndrome called *Abstinence Backlash*. Certain drugs— and ideas – carried built-in punishment for giving them up. Built-in incentives to go on

swallowing. Go on believing. Well, it looked like AB was kicking me to my knees.

~

Hunched on a chair in Natalie's icy room, cap rolled down to my eyebrows under the bug-suit headpiece. Lonnie shifted beside me. "Bouncer's working in here. Ears down or off at the moment. But we need to keep checking..."

The room smelled of alcohol and some too-sweet chemical. Probably a biocide. "Asleep?" I said, meaning the girl.

"Yup. Good thing, too. Imagine a kid's life in here..."

"Eyes moving?" Even as the words came out of me, I knew.

I heard the swish of Lonnie bending for a closer look, "Hmmm, yeah."

Inside the loose-fitting suit, I snaked my left arm out of its sleeve and got hold of my harp, grateful this was one of the cheap, older types, newer ones fit like a second skin. I blew a few awkward notes, somewhere between a wheeze and music, smiling at this minor triumph, happiness surging through me. I could feel Natalie's breathing slow down.

Lonnie, flat-toned through his mic, managed incredulity. "Tunes in a bugsuit? You must be feeling better."

I shrugged, kept on with some made-up melody unwinding on its own, complex rhythm, but *lento*, slow as a lazy wind. Part of my brain objected to playing in Containment with this girl close to dying, another part kept on.

Sound of the right volume and frequency can alter the molecular structure of matter.

Through mumbling machines, I heard or imagined I did, one of those rapid fade-away notes from the earliest Dreams. I sang an echo of that note, and heard Natalie stir in her sleep.

~

I gestured to the walls. “What do you make of the paintings?”

“What paintings?” Lonnie, sounding puzzled.

“I don’t get it. Teri said Natalie’s artwork was all over the walls...they’re *gone*?” After a beat of confusion, I said, “Okay. Why don’t you tell me about the photo in Natalie’s file.”

“What they had when she came in, I guess, she was what? 4 or 5? Never updated. Wish I could get a look at what else is squirreled away in there. Anyway, haven’t seen it myself, but Rena went into detail about that shot before I dropped into your chaos this morning. Dark hair and eyes. She was pointing to something off camera. Dressed in, um, red stockings with a hole in them and the knees all muddy...”

~

Alone again. Lonnie off for more water. But really to sweet-talk the Head Tech into letting him get deeper into Natalie’s file. Deena was risking jobs, especially hers, getting them into the girl’s room this way. Still the woman was infuriating. Her unease mixed with pity around blindness. Lonnie could ignore that, focus on the grinning and petting. Yeah, Deena had taken on consequences, first with Jojo practically living here, now Lonnie and me. But that sliding-away, hollow pitch in her speech the few times my name was mentioned, I knew it from decades paying attention to the way unconscious feeling shapes the muscles of the larynx, the lips and tongue...

I was restless inside the suit—muffled half my brain, magnified blindness. No way to get a real connection with Natalie. Which was the point all along, wasn't it?—me standing in for Teri—what I could do for the Action without actually being there? But my hands were trapped in silastic, and the girl—I could feel she was awake now—said nothing.

I undid the headpiece, gulped air, tore off my gloves. Immediately, the high-pitched whine of a vid-cam scratched the inside of my skull. *Like one of Teri's animal sounds.*

I ran my hands over a bank of machines for the switch that would put vid into hibernate. Teri said Containment used wivitals, but when she left, they'd turned vid back on?

My fingertips scanned for the bar, pressed until vid shut down. If anybody noticed, they'd likely think it was one more breakdown. At Natalie's side, I put out my hands and lightly touched her hair. I knew she was older now, but the image in my mind was that girl in muddy stockings. *The girl Teri loves.*

Bulky suit off, I could play *Mañana*, a kind of lullaby my mother sang, wandering between two estranged worlds—biological research and old-time religion. *Mañana, por favor/ falling tears of the sun /we are yours, por favor/feed your hungry ones.*

Gradually I drifted lyrics into pure notes set free in the room. Natalie woke. "You look...*real*," she said, making me laugh. Not at all surprised to find a strange man by her bed, playing a mouth harp.

I fluttered a high note, let the harp fall into my lap. "I *am* real. Here, you can test me, touch me right here on the top of my head." I bent forward as she hesitantly fingered my hair, then pressed her palm against my forehead.

"Hot." she said. "Like me."

“Like you?” She was right, I was feverish! Another Hypo-REM surprise? My whole body was radiant with heat, damp with a film of sweat. Was it possible that Natalie's virus...? Or was it something I'd brought in, putting *her* at risk?

Longing overtook me— to bathe my eyes in sunlight as I'd done in a Dream once. My eyes like closed buds. Teri in my kitchen, her teasing question. *Ever heard of an untrustworthy flower?* Still couldn't answer that one. It struck me Natalie might long for the sun more than I could imagine. Years under ice cold lights, years since actual sunlight touched her skin.

I turned to her. *She's looking directly into my eyes.* I knew this though I couldn't pick her out of the muddle of glare and shadow. Knew not to speak, knew words might break the fragile thread between us.

I felt for her wrist, pulse trilling fast and light. She wasn't ported, no lines in or out. Brushed my hand slowly over her hair to her forehead until I felt the fringe of her lashes. She blinked. *Yes.* Her eyes were open. She was laughing!

The List 2

LJ, the near present

“Hannah?” I waved my cell at the main door. 7am, well before anybody might show for the meeting: “Got reports to catch up on.” Number and voice-print a match, the lock popped, and I pushed down the empty hallway.

I sat down at the filer and scanned for recent entries. *There they were.* Deena's names. I raced through profiles, got out quickly and switched on Seaside to calm my blazing nerves.

In spite of following waves riding in monotonously, hard questions dogged me. If I told Deena her names were on that list, what would she do with that information? What was *I* going to do? Okay, the menu was simple. One, sit on it. Two, tell Deena, and she would warn everybody involved—which might mean getting all of us arrested. Deena and myself included. Three, let injustice take its course. But how did I know this *was* injustice? What if these guys really were terrorists? If I kept quiet and blew Deena off, that would mean the end of our exchange. Our... friendship. Still if I did what Deena wanted, and Curt found out I was the source of the leak...I did not want to imagine how badly that might go.

How had I gotten into this mess? Oh yes. The Dream.

I'd always been a company girl, as Curt liked to phrase it, classic SMP that he was. Until the night, in spite of mandatory dosing required of all Hydro employees, a Dream broke

through. If I'd told Pernerov about it, he would've put me on a stronger anti-REM. Maybe that's what I should have let him do.

Lost in city streets, a great crowd of peeps, nobody I knew. One, a woman dressed in white like a bride, hands me a shell. A seashell! I stare at the dark of its mouth, a tiny drop of water caught on the rim. In this drop, the whole Earth swims, as though from a thousand miles above, the sea far below. An explosion of happiness like nothing I've ever felt before. I look up, and the crowd is facing me now, gazing at me, smiling, crying, coming closer. Out of confusion, I feel I need to give the shell back to the woman in the white gown but the bride hides her hands. Cradling the shell, I sit down. Everyone around me sits, too. Unmoving, not speaking, we look into each others' eyes. I press the shell to my ear. Hear the sea inside. A million whispered sentences. One strand comes clear.

The spirit of justice is nothing... other than... the supreme and perfect flower of the madness of love.

All my life I'd dreamed like any water-hop, any vid-clerk or flamer. Bizarre fragments, convoluted situations I couldn't see the point of. But this! *The perfect flower of the madness of love.* Words I later found out were first spoken ages ago by a woman, a philosopher whose name I couldn't remember.

I never told Dr. Pernerov. Or anybody else. Except Deena.

One night at her place, after too many swallows of her boyfriend's mash, after he went to bed, the two of us sat up until sunrise. Somewhere in those blurred hours it slipped out of me. Deena's melting eyes, unblinking, seemed to understand. True or imagined, nothing was ever the same between us. Sometimes I still believed that spilled Dream, more than anything, was the real hold Deena had on me.

After that, I dropped *Lisa Jasper from Cabriola, Puente del Mar*—called myself LJ, forced Deena to call me that, too, and

threw myself into Hydro-girl fifth-gear. But I never entirely shook off the spell of that Dream. The voice in the shell. How did I put it to Deena? *A voice that tears through all your just-so fantasies.* As if a haunting and much more consequential world hovered right next to this trivial one—you just had to tune your ear to the right frequency, and words spoke themselves out of the air— out of a seashell—words that undermined, turned upsidedown, my every hard-won success and freedom...

I kept on taking my dose and didn't Dream like that again. Didn't have to. That once was enough to put a permanent crack in the foundation my brain refused to admit, turning it into a half comical, diagnostic headline: *LJ, Hydro Security second-exec, after a single Dream, finds her chosen reality dangerously torpedoed.* Though Deena agreed to forget what I told her that night and go on as before, the slip of my usually well-guarded tongue shifted the weight of our relationship. As if simply *telling* that kind of Dream, changed Deena, too—who, if she ever Dreamed herself, never spoke of it.

And now this mess with The List. *In deep shit, yes we are.* I focused on Seaside, tried to slide into the sickly allure of that past. But it all tilted sideways. Nausea gripped me as I saw in Seaside, for the first time, an obvious connection to the Dream. And was instantly repelled by the whole dangerous, sentimental business. Pernerov liked to say *Dreams override executive function.* Executive function! My meat and drink. *Increased the size and density of the corpus callosum* connecting up regions and synapses not in contact before. In other words, screwed up a person's priorities. Namely, the power to make hard calls.

Shaky, I buzzed Pernerov, made an appointment for that afternoon. Maybe if I got my brain on REM-x2 or even 3...? Maybe it wasn't just whether or not you remembered Dreams,

but whether you made a conscious decision to turn your back on them. And stuck with it. No matter what. Wouldn't tell Pernerov everything. Just had to convince him I wanted it back, that 100% *Credibility Enforcement Adviser...*

No. I was wasn't about to sacrifice everything for a handful of terrorists, however noble their cause might seem. Or tip-off Deena out of misplaced pity for her and her friends. If they were her friends. And if not, who was Deena really working for, anyway? *No*. She would have to believe it was too dangerous for me to get into the list. That I, Lisa Jasper, was a coward.

Because what Lisa Jasper, what I, wanted now was to be *LJ* again. Curt's right-hand man.

Labyrinth

Teri, Jojo, Rena—the present

I am a labyrinth of lives.

They were rocketing above the rails on a superspeed Mag called Lightning. Teri would have chosen a slower, more reliable way of traveling, but for once the sheer physical thrill of speed pleased her. They were headed to Riker Fantasy Pavilion for a command performance of *Shakespeare's Diana* by Fish Wives, the ripping all-women troupe of players. Last month, the Wives had put on their tour de force, *Five Fingers In A Velvet Glove*, a literal handful of the bard's plays reduced to a few minutes each.

Teri glanced at the security cam. As far as she was concerned, transport surv was mostly a sham, dummy lenses with vid loops nobody screened. Budd and Rena disagreed. Jojo sided with Teri— in fact, it had been her idea three weeks before, to ride out to Riker for *Five Fingers* mainly because it gave them a perfect excuse to be far from home. Afterward, when they checked in with Labyrinth watchdogs to see if their cells had been tracked, it seemed they hadn't. So their next trip was set in motion—this one, to see *Diana* on the day of The Action.

The city flashed by, hazy and mysterious. Some sectors boiling like ant-holes, others nearly deserted. Always it was the oldest, half-empty ones that drew her imagination— their narrow streets, crumbling walls scribbled with paint, lichen, and dirt.

Even the scudding trash fascinated her. Once she'd found an old watch-face fallen out of its casing like a coin from another world— no hands, but the delicate Roman numerals still readable. Later, polishing it, she had discovered a miniscule bronze sun, crescent moon, and stars that revolved behind the numbers in a tiny window shaped like a fan. When she put the watch into Budd's hands, he'd explored it with light flickering fingertips like the antennae of an insect. That analog face was set now like a jewel into a miniature sundial in a dish of stones above her bunk at MCC. How much richer time could be, not measured, but given a lively form, a story.

~

At The Pavilion, they scanned the arena. Teri recognized head execs from Hydro, MediaNet, Medina, some reps from MediCorp who ran MCC— they had their own inner circle of seats with white tablecloths and what appeared to be genuine glasses. Behind those came the slanting full-cost rows. And in the far back reaches of the stadium, al fresco benches, bare and noisy, no charge to employees of the attending Corps and their guests, oh-so generously allowing us plebs to bring along our own rations. At the Gate, rows of flavored Watyr—registered trademark, HydroPur— Rainbow Brew, Cafolate, all priced beyond us.

It was a farce, this grotesque wedding —a sleazy merge of Medina and HydroPur, the two most corpulent govcorp conglomerates in Three-Americas. Why bother to mark such greedy unions whose progeny would swallow the very last public freedoms, over or under the table? Fish Wives was on today because, Teri guessed, the show got raves from MediaNet— *trendy yet classic, a sexy comedy of errors and near tragedy*— and because, most of all, the giant and the giantess— which was which?— would rest easier in their boudoir after a day of furthering nefarious projects under the

imaginary glow of worker approval. What bigwigs might get out of the play, she couldn't imagine. *Diana* was conjured for two audiences— Dreamers and govcorp execs. Quite a feat, if they pulled it off, to present a script that bridged such wildly diverging motivations, without govcorp catching the trick.

The roar of audience chatter was oddly soothing. Teri was nearly certain there'd be no Ears here. Still, Rena sat several seats away behind a jabbering family of redhead sisters and what looked to be their mother and father. Jojo, behind Teri, leaned close and whispered, "What if they demand my *employee status*?"

"You're on my code— they're checking for weapons, not if every cell is attached to a body. Numbers only. Anyway, you're my VA at MCC, subsidiary of MedArt, subsidiary of MediCorp, subsidiary of HydroPur, soon to be Hydro-Medina. Got all that?! In case any HM goons do a sweep-check." She turned and flashed Jojo a reassuring smile.

"Hated that REM-x ad on the way down. Did you catch it?"

Teri shook her head. "Tell me." She glanced up as Rena approached. To her right, a young woman in a raincoat was nuzzling another woman's neck. A raincoat! What Net called an *ironic fashion statement*.

"It was a light-banner," Jojo said, " a Dream-bubble over some kid's head, with an X drawn through it."

Teri groaned.

Rena stopped near them, pretending to look over the crowd.

"You two see the strip-ad out front? Somebody's made a flick about a Dreamer."

Teri rolled her eyes and stared at the fake grass between the jump-boots Jojo'd snagged from the Depot.

“We can guess how *that* story’s going to end,” Jojo muttered.
“Heroina drowns in a poison well? A lesson to us all...?”

“Ssst!” Rena shut Jojo down with a sound like gas escaping, followed by a half-frown-half-Mona-Lisa-smile. “*Not exactly*, Jay-jay. But I’m going to leave you both hanging in unbearable suspense until I get back.” She made her way to the end of the row and on down the steps to the chem-port sheds.

Quarantine

Budd, Natalie and Lonnie—the present

“*Shit*, Budd, d’you know what you’ve *done*?!” Lonnie shook his shoulder every few syllables.

Budd put a finger to his lips. Natalie was sleeping. His mind pulled away, listening to what was passing through his mind. *She never...* He sang, “*Never had so sweet a child...*”

~

Next thing he knew he was coming to, his jaw throbbing. Back in a suit. On a bed. He didn’t recognize the smell of the room.

Lonnie’s hissing whisper beside him “...do anything like that again and I swear...you stay *put*! Hear? Don’t move an inch. I gotta go make sure no tech finds out about this stunt of yours. No singing, no nothing! And *do not* take this suit off again—promise me?” Lonnie pulled at Budd’s suit sleeve. “Climbing out of this might be the most impressively brainless thing you’ve ever done.”

~

Years drifted inside him. Instead of his head clearing, he was in a border zone where thoughts died like rain on desert ground.

He sat up, cold, startled, some icy chemical dousing him from inside the suit, stinging his lungs. A violent spasm of coughing gripped him.

“Virex. Get used to it, Budd, you're gonna be inhaling the stuff for awhile. Had to release the emergency bath in your suit. It's there for accidental exposures, I doubt any previous incidents have been *voluntary for god's sake*. Says in the write-up on BV28R— the bug Natalie supposedly has— there isn't one drug left that'll stop a real-world spread. Virex slows it down. That's all I could come up with. For now.”

“This isn't Natalie's room...” Budd broke off, confused. He recognized the absence of the girl's scent, the computer hum coming from a different angle. A hollow edge to every sound.

“We're in the Ice Box, Budd. Quarantine. Empty room next to Natalie's. Only good thing about it is nobody knows we're here, and no Ears. Bouncer said it's clean. So we can chat about whatever comes to mind—like why the fuck you broke your suit open in Natalie's room!” Lonnie's anger shook the bed.

“Yeah. I remember now.” Budd turned this head, feeling faint, breathing hard. “How is she?”

“Same, as far as I can tell. Got a look at her numbers and they're better than when we came in. It's *you* I'm worried about, idiot! You exposed yourself to...”

“I'm fine, I'm fine. I think I know why I was so messed up before. But I want to check Natalie's numbers again, see if that trend is holding...”

“Whoa, boy, have you got *any* conception what kind of trouble you're in? *We* are in? Never mind, you *don't*, do you?” Lonnie groaned. “Well, let me tell you, our asses just might be dust...”

“Did something go wrong?”

“Are you serious? *Everything's* wrong, man, get it? That's what I'm trying to hammer into that triple-hulled skull of yours.”

Budd touched Lonnie's faceplate, sliding his gloved fingertips across it's slick surface. “*Oh, this transformed scalp...*”

“Quit with the Shakespeare, will you, this is no joke!” Lonnie grasped Budd's sleeve, gripped so hard there was a crackling sound— immediately he let go. “Sorry.”

“Hey. I need that appendage of mine even more than you need yours!” Budd flexed his arm, and leaned back. “If I wasn't so damn weak, I'd get out this thing again and talk you out of yours, I've got a story to tell you...”

“Do you know what you're saying? You just exposed yourself to a lethal virus and now you want me to...”

“Lethal? No, no, Lonnie, that is *not* what's happening here, not to me or you...and not to Natalie.” He propped himself onto his elbows, let his head loll, attempted a smile. “I haven't gone slippery again. Give me a sec ... and I'll convince you.”

“Budd, don't talk now, we can...”

“I want to relieve your mind,” he said, “and your...” he nearly edited the next word out, then let it come--“*heart*”.

“Budd, listen to me...”

“I want you to know...” A bout of coughing. “I've got an idea...what's happening here. Well, it's not exactly *my* idea.”

Lonnie sighed and set him up with water—a sterile tube and socket projected into the side of Budd's headpiece, the bottle snapped to the chest. “At least we won't go thirsty in this place. Maybe crazy, but not thirsty.”

Budd smiled, opened and closed his jaw a few times, wincing. “Hey, did somebody...did you *hit* me?”

“Okay, you were acting kind of...so yeah, I hit you. Not too hard. I apologize. It was just a little knock!” He mimed a punch.

Hearing Lonnie laugh, his muscles softened. “Apology accepted. And you, Bartholomew, can make it up by getting me in to see Natalie again.”

“No way.” Lonnie’s fist came down on the mattress.

“Look, if I’m doomed by the so-called deadly virus, what difference will it make to expose myself *a second time*? Might even be a perfect diversion away from anything going on with The Action.”

“Is that what this is? Making yourself some kind of decoy?”

Budd touched Lonnie’s shoulder. “I’m just saying... it isn't going to tip The Action if I get into Natalie's room and keep her company and a couple of the big guys find out about it. By then, Natalie and I could be out of here.”

“*Out of here*? You've got serious bugs all over you, man, don't you know that?”

Budd laid his hands over his forehead and took a deep breath. “Okay. Why don't we look at my numbers, Lonnie. Pull up a blood analysis panel. Every suit's got a live link so if something goes wrong it can be checked out pronto. And the port's got to be there, ready to go, in every room.” He got up off the bed, shook off Lonnie’s hand, felt his way toward the computer bank, found the port and plugged in. “Right here, like I thought. Every isolation unit's pretty much like every other...”

“You were...?”

“Yep. In a place a lot like this. Not as long as Natalie. But Containment hasn't changed much.” He tapped his faceplate. “Doctors told me I'd have trouble sleeping for the rest of my life with these dead eyes. Melatonin deficit, among other things. Body clocks unhinged. But they never mentioned...” He laughed. “It never occurred to them I might not dream the way I had before, either.”

“You’re losing me. Start over. You were in a place like this and... you remember how the machines work, where laser panels are ported, et al. Well, that’s just dandy, my friend, but excuse me if I say *so what?*”

“Look at the numbers, will you, Lonnie?”

Lonnie sighed and clicked himself into the reader.

“Turn off Vox. Set up Virtual Text, No Save.” Budd pressed the release in his suit, activating cold laser blood analysis, sending a stream of bits from vessels under the thin skin of his right eyelid directly into the computer. He heard soft grinding clicks as Lonnie pulled up results, could almost make out the flickering screen turning data into strings of letters and numbers and abstract symbols legible to the eye. Any functioning human eye, that is. “Read them off,” Budd said.

Lonnie’s weight pushed slightly against him, his breath held. “Anti-body count and viral load within typical ranges. Receptors show...no new exposure.”

“Did you ask specifically about BV28R?”

“Yep. No receptor changes, no antibody fragments, no...”

“Didn’t I tell you? Okay. Now. What we want to do is check out Natalie’s numbers...”

“Hmmm. I’m getting *No Link*. Screen’s not responding...”

“No link? What the hell does that mean?!”

“How am I supposed to know, you’re the tech-whisperer.”

“Calm down. Go do your human relations bit with Deena and Chris. When you get back, we go next door. Don’t argue. Wasn’t I right about my virals? But don’t be long, it’s *fucking lonely* in this refrigerator. Oh. And that reminds me. I got another idea. A Dreamy idea. A really *cool* idea,” he was giddy with relief.

“What are you blamming on, man?”

“Water from air. Saw how to do it in a Dream on the way here. I know, you're thinking double nuts, now, aren't you?”

“At least!” Lonnie thumped Budd's headpiece, reassured by his playfulness.

“Water. Clean water. As much as we could ever need. And what if I told you...it was Ariadne's idea?”

“Water from...?” Lonnie said.

“...airy *nothing*.”

***Shakespeare's Diana:
A Sexy Comedy of Errors And A Near Tragedy***

This program synopsis you hold in your hand was printed on 100% synthetic paper. But, Reader, why do you need a synopsis, you may well ask? We are aware that many among us may not have encountered much of Mr. Shakespeare's peculiar English— our tale is composed of morsels from the bard, wound about with threads of our own devising—and so we thought you might appreciate a detailed summary of the action which you can consult both during the play and take with you, if you like.

In celebration of the Wedding of HydroPur and Medina (we aren't telling who is King and who is Queen, that's up to you to decide!), Fish Wives hereby offers to one and all a play for pur(e) enjoyment's sake!

Curtain Rises on Main and Side Stage

Act One. The Royal Wedding: Master of Revels presides. Young and glamorous, the King and Queen in most fashionable finery, exchange rings. Court Scribes in fishnet skin-suits, *ScrollNet* embossed on their frockcoats, scribble furiously. An electronic Lute sits on a plump

pillow playing Pomp And Circumstance all by itself, flashing an array of ever-changing colors.

Side stage: Bottom, in Ass' head and dirty clothes, scratches his behind and snickers throughout the proceedings. Puck, sprightly but ragged, watches the wedding solemnly, intermittently eyeing Diana, red-haired, shabbily-dressed Mistress of Faeries.

After the wedding, all exeunt (that is, depart) except for Puck who stays behind, tempted by the marvelous E-Lute needing no human hand to pluck the strings. He steals the Lute and exits.

Main Stage: A Scribe, having secretly witnessed Puck's theft, comes out of hiding, crosses the stage, scribbling as he goes.

Blackout.

Act Two: A Wedding In A Wood: Puck, in love with Diana, bribes Moonshine with his stolen Lute, exchanging it for a faerie love spell to capture her heart. Moonshine agrees to enchant Diana, but first Puck must undergo the spell himself.

All this he explains as he dips wild leaves in *moon dew* and lays them over Puck's eyelids. *On the ground, sleep sound. On the ground, sleep sound.* The double spell, when Puck wakes, will make Diana appear to him as

richly dressed and comely as the Queen, while he, Puck, shall appear to Diana as powerful and handsome as the King.

Side Stage: K and Q snort a line of Poppy, sip Morningglory tea (exclusively available from Royale Labs) and from their throne-bed, proceed to observe an incredible “vision”—the marriage of two ragged faeries.

Elsewhere, we enter a shadowy bower in Upsidedown Woods: a large moon and flock of stars hover above lush trees. One star outshines all the others, as a drop of dew outshines a grain of sand. Here, under that fortunate star, a poor wedding is about to take place, with mock pomp and paper crowns. Moth, Cobweb, and the others, imitate Court Scribes scribbling away—too poor for pens, they dip twigs in pots of ink. Bottom, wearing his Ass’s head, waves his arms about, imitating the Master Of Revels.

“*By Jove!*” cries Puck. But our would-be groom slumps to the ground in the midst of his vows. He is fast asleep before managing to kiss the bride, Diana, who rebuffs the spell and escapes. All exeunt. Except Bottom who steals the mock crown from Puck’s sleeping head and dons it himself, strutting pompously about.

Side stage: The King, in very short nightgown, tries to caress the Queen, but is so astonished by the ragged figures before him, can’t resist expostulating: “But I have had a most rare vision! Me thinks t’would need ten scribes to tell...”

The Queen picks up a Scroll headlined Puck Purloins Royal Lute. She interrupts King: “Nay, ten words will do, my love: he who would crown a thief, crowns an ass instead.”

Blackout.

Act Three: Trickery In A Wood: Puck wakes from a dream of unearthly beauty in which he is joined forever to Diana. But as he looks about him, sees instead that Moonshine’s love potion was in truth a sleeping draught! And Diana has fled to the woods.

Moonshine, to the audience: “Think no more of this night’s accidents but as the fierce vexation of a dream. The lunatic and the dreamer are of imagination all compact.”

Side Stage: Bottom, gawping at Moonshine, scratches his crowned ass/head.

Blackout.

Act Four. Faerie Play And Fowl Play

Queen, in Palace, to Master of Revels: “We would have rich banqueting, sir— will you arrange it? A juicy goose perhaps, whose neck is ripe for wringing?— and then we would have, too, a 'most original play' for our postprandial amusement. Know you of such a one?”

Master of Revels mentions “a most original Faerie Play”. Then immediately turns to the King and warns against it: “...a play, my lord, that is but ten words long. But by ten words, my lord, it is *too* long.”

King, swelling with magnanimity: “We will hear that play! For never anything can be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it. And well we know that faeries love their lords.”

Bottom, rolling his eyes, turns about and exposes his bottom to the audience.

Brief interlude

King and Queen, awaiting the play in their royal bed, spray water playfully over each other, rub priceless peaches and rare bananas over belly and thighs then lasciviously lick them off...

The Faerie Play: Moonshine, face painted luminous white, circles and repeats nine times his nine-word line, "A moon's a poor monarch even to a moon."

K and Q watch from bed, bored yet loathe to admit they do not understand this "most original play."

Queen: "His line is dull and one word short. I am weary of this Moon: would that he would *change!*"

King: "Have patience, my love. It appears by his small light of discretion that he is on the wane."

Side Stage: Diana attempts to pluck Moonshine's stolen E-Lute, which gives forth a muffled twang. Holding up a dangling cord, she laughs, "look, the umbilical's cut!", laughs again, "alas, I know not how... to give the poor thing suck." Moonshine grins. And thus do we see by amorous glances why Moon tricked Puck out of his wedding kiss : he himself is in love with Diana!

Diana, turns to audience: "The music of a cart wheel upon the pavement would do better for our dancing than this instrument! As for marriage, never! Instead I vow my heart more surely to these stars above us, like a mother and her little ones..."

Blackout.

Act Five: Wild Dogs and Moonshine. Moonshine, ignoring Diana's vow, lustily pursues her through Upsidedown Woods, accidentally stirring wild dogs from their den. (Howls and snarls offstage) Bottom is bitten by the beasts! As he rolls about, poor wounded Bottom tries to keep the mock-crown from slipping off his Ass's head.

Puck, not far from Bottom and bitten also, holds his own crownless head and moans: "Oh, wherefore, nature, did you wild dogs frame?! Now we shall die, die, die, die, die..."

Side Stage: King, fondling Queen, confesses: "I echo that fellow's outrage! Oh would that Fate who oft revenges dogs who bark 'gainst monarchs, might right *this* gravest wrong! I too can abide neither bark nor bite! Therefore much do we share, kings and beggars, in spite of rank. Though few believe our power is generous, mayhap I'll see a few coins set aside for his funeraries."

Main Stage: Puck interrupts his moan, discreetly removes the crown from poor Bottom's head/ass, claps it on his own head, lies back down, and resumes his moan.

Side Stage: Queen, having seen Puck act, while the King did not, says: “In truth, I see a different outrage here—of asses stealing crowns, and thieves crowning thieves for love of lusty sluts spurning marriage vows!” She folds her arms, foiling the King’s fondle.

King confused, chagrined, sputters, “With the help of a surgeon, he might yet recover and prove an ass.”

Queen: “To prove an ass needs no assist ’mongst those who mock their betters—and what is more, wild dogs have dined on prettier parts than those!” She tries again to concentrate on pleasure under the King’s renewed caress, then sits up in irritation at Bottom and Puck still noisily dying, dying, dying...

The King, considering this, kneads the Queen’s rear. “Perhaps you are right! A comic tragedy, when an ass will perish!” Considering further, he adds, “Yet, if we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they will pass for excellent...” He coughs importantly.

The Queen, whose crown had tumbled off into the bedclothes, re-crowns herself. “There is but one remedy to this distraction from our royal purpose.”

She calls *The Master of Revels*: “In our most generous mercy, we are pleased to fell a dozen trees from our nearby Wood to sell for coin, and grant this poor ass

meat and medicinals— perchance he'll soon be well enough...or... at any event, *removed*. “His moans do rob me of mine own.”

(Master Of Revels, bows, hiding a smile).

She points to Puck: “And as for thieving moaners, even so, let him, too, share in his ass’s provender... but first, let him quit Diana, who like the moon rules the night sky. Let her look, as we do, *(gazes alluringly at King)* to daylight’s far more constant love.”

(Master of Revels bows, exiting backward)

Queen: “And now, what say you, my Lord—what of *this* provender?” *King leers eagerly at Queen, throws off his nightgown, lunges under the covers in pursuit of her delicious nethers. She giggles, crown once again askew on the bed between them. She feels under the bedclothes for the King’s increasing generosity... which elevates the sheet, rising up directly beneath her crown—crowning Itself!!*

Side Stage: Moonshine and Diana turn away from the royal coupling to gaze on each other in mutual wonder. Diana crosses to the Main Stage, returns the stolen Lute, sliding it under the Royal Bed.

Moonshine, visibly torn, tempted to re-purloin the Lute, at last relents. Hand in hand, Diana and Moonshine, exeunt.

Main Stage: *Court Scribes, having been hidden behind the Royal Bedchamber, emerge now, scribbling, scribbling... until Diana returns the Lute. At that, they stop, start, stop, and, stumped, tear up their scribble, showering scraps overhead. Exeunt.*

***K and Q.** “Oh!” “Ah!” Rolling to it, hump and bump under the covers, they sigh and cry in heated acceleration of nuptial pleasure.*

Side Stage: *Puck, just before the climax, leaps up from near-death, crosses to the Main Stage...*

Main Stage: *...and declares to all:*

**“These things do best please me,
that befall preposterously.**

And yet, for modesty’s sake...

*(vigorously he shuts
the bedchamber curtains)...*

**the short and long of it
comes to this (All players in unison):**

“passion ends the play!!!”

Blackout.
Curtain Down

Queen screams!!!

Sky High

The present: Budd, Lonnie, Natalie

“Budd, Natalie's Viral Load isn't down,” Lonnie's voice was taut, breathless. “It's sky high.”

“Shit! How can that *be*, you saw mine...”

“Cause you're you and she's an eleven-year- old whose been sick how long? The up-trend in her vitals is still holding, but...”

Budd remembered Natalie looking at him, the certainty that flooded him—she was *fundamentally strong*. He was certain of this strength the way he was certain of the sound of Lonnie's voice in his ears. A fragment of Dream about sunlight still played through him, and as warmth spread over his face, he smiled at the awful insight that came with it—virus or no virus, Natalie was sick because she was *here*—without the sun, without fresh air, without weeds, without freedom. And what was in her water? He shook his head. This place was killing the girl one way or another. They had to get her out.

“You think you pulled off some Ariadne miracle, is that it?”

Budd cut off an angry reply gathering like a thundercloud, and listened to the laboring air scrubbers above them— something caught his ear, a short repeating growl that shouldn't be there. Like the bark of a crow.

“Lonnie, Natalie *never had* that virus”, he said. “Because it doesn't exist. Except on screen. Digital form, digital dream, digital nightmare.”

“You’re saying those numbers are faked?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” His brain was racing, testing out what he’d just said. He had no idea if his words were true. But he let them come. “If she did have that virus and I was exposed, it would’ve shown up in *my* numbers, wouldn’t it?”

“Unless there wasn’t time enough...”

“No. CL panels pick up receptor changes in seconds. How many times have MediaNet stats turned out to be cooked? Sometimes numbers are just numbers, Lonnie, blips on a screen. You can’t believe in them like you believe a friend is telling you the truth...”

“This isn’t MediaNet, Budd, this is... well, who would do such a thing?”

“Same guys gave us metered water, if I had to guess.” He bit his lip. *Water. Everything keeps coming around to water.*

“But why? Give me a clue. And how is it you know this?”

Lonnie paced—two steps up, two down.

“Ariadne told me.” Budd said with quiet humor, tapping his headpiece. “Mentioned that awhile ago, you weren’t listening.”

Lonnie stopped moving. “I thought you were the agnostic in the family.”

Agnostic accused him through the distortion of Lonnie’s mouthmic. He shrugged.

“And if you happen to be wrong about this virus, then what?”

“If I’m right, Natalie’s got a chance. I’m wrong, I die. And she dies like she’s dying right now.” His chest squeezed with shock at his own cool logic. “If I’m wrong, the story’ll be about some blind crazy who offed himself, and The Action won’t get blown.” He took a deep breath and tilted his head. “Ariadne, though, will have a *lot* of explaining to do.”

“You are incorrigible, man.” Lonnie cuffed Budd’s head with a clumsy glove. “What next? Gonna ask me to strip off my bug suit and run naked down the hall...Wait a minute. Wait!”

“What?”

“I just remembered something. Some kind of...weird chart in Natalie’s file. Well, not exactly *in* the file, it was a little daily log caught my eye when I went in through the index with Rena’s code. Didn’t get more than a glance cause I heard somebody in the hall, and got the hell out. But. Something about an S O D.”

“Standing Order Delivery.”

“Then, *hyp*, I think...”

“*In hyp*. Hypodermic injection.”

“After that, numbers that made no sense. That’s all there was to it. I don’t know. *4 pd @ 5, 9, 3, 9?* Bizarre to record times of day without saying for what...”

“There it is,” Budd gripped Lonnie’s arm.

“What are you talking about, they could be giving her anti-febriles, corticoids, anything, how do *we* know?”

“You’re married to a doctor. Ever heard of a med log listing *time* of injections without naming the substance injected?”

“I already said that, so what are you...?”

“I need to tell you a story about crows.” Budd held up his hands.

“Hold on. Just let me talk. When I’m done, you can tear my theory to pieces if you want. I’m counting on you to do that.”

Lonnie sighed. “Make it short. We haven’t got much longer.”

“Pop fed crows when I was a kid. Corn and peanuts, dirt cheap then. It was our ritual, every morning. After awhile those crows wouldn’t let us forget! They lined up on the roof, young ones, old ones, and nagged til they got their breakfast. Then one year,

the ruckus just stopped. Only a couple of birds showed up. Pop thought somebody else might be feeding them. Or picking them off with pressure guns—people still had those—or some bird virus got them. Pretty soon, *no crows*. Since then, Crows have made a come back in a lot of places. But that Spring, something knocked them out. And then, years later, Teri and I were tracking Hydro reports, researching bio toxins, poisons certain bacteria manufacture—don't usually kill you, but they can make birds and mammals pretty sick. Thing is, a sterile environment actually gives them an *edge*... because all their natural enemies have been eliminated. Plus, they mess up lab work, skew results. Medical water has to be certified free of every trace of the things..."

Lonnie stopped fidgeting. Listening intently.

"A common one that bungs up experiments is called a pyrogen."

"Fever inducer."

"Right. Pyrogens can even be produced by human cells exposed to toxins in contaminated water. Especially when it's used to dilute an injected drug."

"So the crows...?"

"We got hold of a report said they died of FUO, Fever of Unknown Origin. Gram Negative bacilli overgrowth, trouble breathing, fever, weakness—sound familiar? Practically a quote from Natalie's chart. Later on, there was a MediaNet denial that blamed those crow deaths on Dolzane from irrigation ditch water and other extra-muni sources. In other words, all water not straight from HydroPur tanks."

"Natalie was admitted FUO, wasn't she." Not a question.

"For some reason this place has a burning interest in keeping her here. *Alive*. Her condition is up and down, her charts are

totally whacked, the kid has no birth date, no father, all we have is the word of the mother, Susanna, who conveniently happens to be dead.” Budd shook his head. “And maybe that’s not true either.”

A sound made Budd hold a finger to his lips, waiting for whoever it was to pass down the hall. His heart pounded. Silence again. He took a deep breath.

Lonnie cleared the room with his Bouncer, and asked, “But if these toxins are so common, why aren't *all* of us running a fever?”

“We aren’t getting injections of the stuff! The easiest thing in the world would be to add contaminated water to an innocent drug they’re already giving her. But even with us, Lonnie, if they ever decided to do some genetic morph job...and, right now I’m thinking it’s possible something like that was actually going on years ago—the Retro-Epidemic, remember? Not a uniform disease, a bunch of different ones. And yeah it could be with all the die-off left and right, we just assumed the biomic immune system had reached its toxin limit. We lost a generation. Teri’s father. My parents. Yours. Including, if the record’s correct, Natalie’s mother— *bacterial meningitis*. Maybe somebody tried seeding the water with something, enough to make people a little bit sick, keep us certain the water was dangerous. Maybe the experiment went awry? Those things usually do. Some organisms couldn’t handle what *should have been* relatively harmless. The ones who couldn’t... are gone. Those who *could* are you and me.”

“So Natalie hasn't got the right genetics?”

“Don’t know. If she’s deliberately dosed, she never gets the chance to recover.”

“They’re trying to *kill* her?”

“No. Not trying to.” Pulling it all together, implications multiplying, he waited for a wave of nausea to subside. At least his brain seemed to be working again. “Don't forget Teri was encouraged to spend time with Natalie because it helped keep her closer to the balance line.”

“So they *don't* want her dead?”

“Looks like they might be going to great lengths to keep her alive. And at the same time, they or somebody, is inducing fever and all the rest of it, to keep her here.”

“That makes no sense! What's the motive?”

Another sound stopped him from speaking. They waited.

“Tolerance-level study, maybe? Prepping for some kind of mass experiment? She has no blood relatives to account to. Mainly she's had Teri. Now all she's got is you and me. Not sure about Deena. The details we don't know and maybe never will. Not likely we're going to get much more out of those records, either, even with Rena's code. And if the big guys are in on it, I'd say it has to do with them figuring out how *not* to kill anybody outright, while keeping us running scared. Not dead, *scared*. Not many of us so sick we can't keep the whole grindstone rolling uphill, but sick enough not to start a rebellion. Sick enough we're convinced we can't survive without Hydro-Medina and the rest of govcorp....”

“You think Deena and Chris ...”

“I'm betting the answer to that is no. Don't think staff's aware of what's going on. I've been hard on Deena, but she definitely cares about the girl. Nothing fake about that. But we've got to get Natalie out of here...”

“Out of here, how?! *Where?*”

“Uh, more on that later.” He sighed. “First, get me back into Natalie's room.”

“I told you...”

“I need to see for myself how she’s doing with a sky high VL. If she’s awake, I might be able to ...

“Wait. Before we do that, I’ll stay put while you check in with Deena, make sure nobody’s noticed anything funny with the files when we were checking v counts. See if you can find out when the most recent numbers went into Natalie’s file. And who made the entry.

“If you get into trouble, blame everything on me. What’s my motive? Tell them anything they might want to hear. Tell them,” he chuckled grimly, “Natalie reminds the blind guy of his long-lost cousin.”

Part Five

On The Way To Calona

Jojo and Rena, the present

After hours of zigzag Transport and walking, Jojo recognized Rena's head-high, arm-swinging stride coming toward her. They embraced. Both of them exhausted. Without resting, they started down Chase Colony Road—a desolate stretch rarely used anymore, except by tankers hauling to the waste facility. Those tankers rarely traveled past twilight, so they'd likely have the road to themselves after dark. Once they got to Silver Canyon, they'd pick up framepaks and water slings stashed by Labys under an overhang piled with brush. Two hours beyond that, they'd be in the Ten-K Zone, no-go territory around the abandoned test site at Calona.

As they approached the Canyon, Jojo's eagerness to see Teri grew. The dim light flickered and congealed, conjuring her friend's likeness coming to meet them.

Jojo had always been afraid of radiation. Nightmares about accidents and nuclear war haunted her before Dreaming ever started. And here she was headed for the Ten-K hot Zone. On the advice of a Dream! *Right out of Ariadne's manual*—an expression she'd invented to amuse The Local Group. Especially Budd.

As they came to the dry wash and dusty pockets of stone called Silver Canyon, her heart sank. Teri was nowhere in sight. “She should be here by now, shouldn't she? Let's...”

“Get off your feet a minute, cool down under that *Brahea edulis* and I’ll see if I can find out if she’s running late.”

“Bra...what?” Jojo twisted her tongue around the unfamiliar syllables.

“Guadalupe palm. Starting to set fruit, too. Delicious little things.”

Jojo stared at Rena who seemed unconcerned as she peered at her cell and brought up a holopad.

While they waited for the VN to get back to them, Jojo realized there was something more terrifying than Calona’s rad count—Teri not showing up. Ever. Dire scenarios exploded in her head. Teri caught in a Gaard net, Teri in a transport wreck.

Reading Jojo’s mind, Rena said, “Too soon for conclusions. Anyway you getting all heated up isn’t going to get her here faster.” As they pulled gear out of a heap of palm litter she announced coolly that they’d go on to the Outer Gate where the Zone began, and check in when they got there. “I’ll use a clean V-node, see if there’s a clue.”

Jojo gazed back down Chase Road and again materialized Teri out of the dusk. Then she feared somebody *else* would show up, somebody who’d wonder why they were geared up and where they were going. They’d agreed to leave this place as soon as possible to avoid that danger.

She sat heavily on slanted ground under one of the palms, fronds bowing and rasping at every stir of wind. A sound like rushing water. Like rain!

She looked up into the intricate arrangement of branches. Clustered white flowers took her breath away, made her feel the barrenness of places she’d lived all her life. Which only made her long to stay. She could almost see Teri exclaiming over the palms’ loveliness, the way she’d crooned over scrub

oaks long ago, the day they got assigned a Laby project outside city limits, the day they'd worked for the first time with *Dr. Rena Gilkin* who babbled scientific names for every plant they ran across. Teri loved the complex patterns and colors of leaves, branches, flowers, reminding her of Ariadne. Jojo understood what that meant now. "I wanna wait for Teri right here," she said, scraping tree litter into a nest around her.

Rena answered tartly, "You're being selfish, there are too many lives at stake."

"*Teri's* life is at stake!" Jojo struck her fists into the fronds.

"Action integrity first, we all agreed to that. Action integrity above everything else..."

"Well, you can do what you want, I'm waiting here." She shoved her framepak onto the slope just below her feet, one hand catching at a squat, thorny bush to keep from sliding down after it. She examined her palm. Tiny scratches, minute drops of blood. She spat, and with a finger mixed blood and saliva together the way Teri mixed colors.

"We could easily blow everything wide open if we don't keep on schedule. Let's go!" Rena adjusted and readjusted the straps on her pak, pulled off a boot, examined her sock and flicked something away. She velcroed the boot back on, a shaky pissed-off energy animating every move. "Completely irresponsible of you to make *us* late, too. Worry everybody at Calona. I'm out of here— with or without you." Rena pulled herself upright, her posture a challenge. She hitched her pak and headed up a rise that quickly leveled off, sloping down to the road veering hard east, disappearing into the distance.

Jojo watched her go, turned away from Calona, where there seemed to be an entire plain of palms like the ones here, winding into other canyons whose names she would never

know—and on as far as she could see. Everything in her yearned toward those trees. Toward Teri.

She listened to the palms above her, humming a note into their music. Drawing it out, letting it wander. When she tried to sing, she choked up, seeing Teri's hands sketching over Budd's table a few days before. Again she opened her mouth to sing, but the song cracked, her voice refused to come.

She stood, geared up, and sprinted after Rena.

Coming up behind, Jojo noticed Rena stumble every now and then under her load. She herself had fire in reserve, she was burning fear like acetylene.

Quickly she got too far ahead, stopped, turned around, impatiently waited for Rena, the mother who'd stalked off without her disobedient child, resenting that child racing far ahead, showing off her greater strength.

~

Less than an hour outside Silver Canyon, a handful of Guadalupe palms appeared. On slightly higher ground now, Jojo stopped again to wait. 6 km west to go, then roughly north another ten. Ahead, not a single palm. A flat plain broken by low clumps of brush and rock.

Labyrinth

Teri, earlier the same day

At Riker Pavilion when the curtain came down on Fish Wives, Zona Seca drummers exploded into *Edge*, a techno jump shimmering Teri's spine.

Hundreds of dancers flowed around her. In spite of a hot flush of anxiety at the thought of Calona, what they would discover there, how they might meet the ruined land, she couldn't stand still any longer and whirled into the crowd.

Too Beautiful For Words, a slow one, got Jojo miming a partner-dance in the aisle, and Teri, on a Dream current, slipped into her arms.

~

Having delayed her exit to give Rena and Jojo a good head-start, she was alone now. She passed through the scanner at the mouth of the out-flow tunnel leaving the Pavilion, pouring out with all the crowd onto Carlos Hayden Blvd named for the President of Tri-Am assassinated last year.

First she headed east— their ultimate direction. She would cross back and forth through Sectors on the way to Sandoz Limit. By the end of the day, she and Rena and Jojo would meet at Silver Canyon, pick up supplies, and head for Calona.

The streets hopped with shifters on foot like she was. Easy to blend, leave no tracks, if you didn't use e-bucks. Riker City was crumbling under wind, gravity and neglect, that trinity of

forces every built environment warred against. Large sections emptied out after the epidemic were the first to fall into full decrepitude. Squatters were periodically “cleaned out” by Gaards in a show of force. Exactly how was govcorp threatened by a few freshers setting up in empty stores and office fronts? Workers were provided with bare necessities, not out of largeness of heart, it was good economics— housing, food, water, medical care, in exchange for six plus days a week labor. If you got sick, you got fired, relied on friends to squeeze you in and share rations. Deal the black market for pain meds, insulin, bug-killers. Some even scrounged their own chemo.

A blur of green caught her eye. She pretended to look for something in her pak, kneeled to examine a patch of superweeds along a ruined wall, admiring baroque leaves and pods. *Green flowers* that didn't need Medina's hired hands— among the few that flourished in spite of flamers. Like the goggled man she'd seen on the way out of Riker, scorching with fire or poison, any green that dared to ruffle up in his path. Picked up a few e-bucks for destroying what for some was precious sustenance. Wasn't only Budd who craved greens straight from the ground. Most workers couldn't afford them when they showed up on market.

Risky, especially today. But the pull was strong and soon she convinced herself a taste of this one might actually be of help to her—a recently discovered hairless, semi-desert variety of speedwell, *veronica seca*. *Veronica of the desert*. Good for lung ailments, specifically asthma. How could a wild plant exist without water, month after month? Somebody illegally pouring a share of their ration? If so she was stealing their stash and should let it go. But the more she admired the leaves of Veronica that wouldn't flower til next spring, the more she longed for a taste.

With her back to passersby, she ripped a few handfuls, stuffed them into the zip-jacket knotted around her waist. Too hot to wear the damn thing, though she'd need it at night this time of year, where she was headed.

Officially, it was considered a mental derangement to eat weeds. Even had a name. *Grazing*: As in *grazing like a wild animal*. Innocent hankerings, criminal now. Still vivid in her mind, that stash of battered apples spread on the ground.

She walked, studying the long city wall still upright most places, crumbling to rubble in others. She slipped speedwell into her mouth and chewed. The taste like hearing the voice of somebody gone too long from your life. By the time she'd swallowed the last handful, she was acutely hungry, and thirstier than ever.

It was the music—East Indian and Slow Irish threading through each other—made her choose the place. A dark little eatery called Foggy Dew— there'd been a pick-up band from the 1990s by that name once, reels and jigs and ballads. Now all that sort of thing had melted into a brew of flavors merged with 2050 techno.

Inside, smoky amber walkabouts, a Vid-strip running scenes. Up on stage, a woman with a crew cut and unnaturally white skin— her starved, almost spiritualized body in ripped jean jacket and fake-leather skirt. The metal of a ring-mic in one ear broke light into spikes as she swung her head and purred indecipherable lyrics. Teri caught a few words, *Twice as long as dying... my own frontier*. The woman's eyes were surreal, green edged with black. On the tiny dance floor, couples shuffled slo mo through dingy air. She grabbed an open table and sat facing the singer who made her think of Jojo the day they met at The Library.

When Indra's Ireland stepped down for a bio-break, and sweaty bodies drifted back to insanely expensive shots of Rainbow, a small, wiry male— pale, scraggly beard, cracked vinyl jacket — appeared out of nowhere next to her.

“Name's Snowy,” he said and sat down without asking. Did she know this guy? A pair of metal wings snapped to his collar— his gang? His eyes a nameless color, fixed on her. The beam of his attention heated her skin. She stood, gave him a tight smile, mumbling, “Gotta meet somebody...”

“Cut the shug.” She'd never heard the nasty-sounding word before— spoken not with anger but a penetrating intensity. An outlander? Better for her if he was. Better than a local. Might explain the vinyl. Basic cottonese or labsilk, some homemade retro-mix, was what Tri-Ams sported these days. Grey, black, navy. No punchy colors, no flash. Music, religion, language, clothes. No pure strands, no rootstalks. Not anymore.

Snowy gave a quick glance behind him at what she guessed were three pals of his— same metal wings and black vinyl— slouching at the end of the bar. Hairs bristled along her arms and down her sweaty back. Hunger disappeared. One jerk she could handle, but four?

“That was lame, wasn't it?” She forced a laugh. “Actually. I'm on my way to a chick-bar. This place is too huzz-buzz for me,” she lowered her eyes. “You guys are welcome to my spot.” He wasn't listening, but she went on. “If I were straight...” she shrugged, “nothing personal.”

Snowy leaned back in his chair, staring, his expression revealing nothing. She stood, glanced at his friends, watching her. Slowly she turned her back to them, stepped through the weaponscan and out the door.

~

She forced herself not to run, a prickling over her back and chest like crawling insects. She was out of breath in spite of her careful gait.

Relief flooded her when she spotted the transport sign and hopped on with her general pass, zipping out of Snowy's range. By the time she got off and headed east again, Foggy Dew far behind, she loosened into a natural rhythm, swinging her legs a simple pleasure.

Daylight was thinning, going chartreuse. Shops dark for dinner break. Beans charring in a pan somewhere. Boots clanged up stairwells, doors slammed. A child's voice called, "Jaaaaydee? Jaydee!" Work-units behind high walls slick with X-graffiti. Tool and clothing and furniture factories. Dingy, weather bitten. No real windows. A few peepholes behind heavy bars. No eateries, just in-house feeders she'd need live ID to get into. She'd have to skip eating, see how her body held up on nothing but *veronica of the dispossessed, veronica of urban wastelands*.

~

Now she was entering an even more deserted neighborhood, no voices, no swarming peeps going about their business. Uneasiness grew as that stained and patched wall, blocking everything behind it from view, curved on and on.

Chips of plast and sand and trash heaped up wherever the wind swept them. One of the rubble bits drew her. She picked it up, remembering Jojo doing this...

It was April, 2053, when she got the Labyrinth assignment to check out a water source MediaNet had warned against for months. Hopelessly contaminated, they claimed. It was a well in an Out Sector between city land and wasteland. She'd done her research, right down to the Gaard's sex life. Duane L. Toller, still wet-behind-the-ears, her mother might have said, spent his days in a tin

shed not far from the wellhead, nights on patrol for HydroGen. He was carrying on in that desert shack with a woman his wife didn't know about— his check-list procedure, especially on Thursday and Saturday afternoons, was falling apart.

Jojo was a pick-up, first time out, the third Laby required on every out-sector gig, when The Local Group hadn't quite winked into existence yet. She and Jojo were set to meet up in a cramped village of factory workers on the edge of Sector Limit where enforcement tended to be lax. She recognized the cowboy hat from behind.

Jojo grinned at the sight of her. "You know the doc? The two of you'll be a peer-group and I'll be entertainment for the next 24 hours." Cocky as hell, like always.

On Elle Street near Carne Real, the smell of charred flesh, unknown provenance, made her stomach turn. A large attractive older woman stepped confidently toward them, gave them Laby squeezes, said, "Good. I like it when people are on time. I'm Dr. Rena Gilkin— Rena's fine."

A decade on me, Teri thought, almost two on Jojo.

"Done your homework?" Rena's flat, all-business tone.

Teri and Jojo popped their eyes at each other.

No Gaard in sight by the time they got to Saberling, Toller's shed bouncing sun for half a mile. "Right, it's Thursday," Jojo teased—she was up on Duane's sex life, too—and fluttered her tongue. Rena ignored this and pulled off a jacket lined with pockets, concealing a surprising amount of equipment. Her silence a clear rebuke. Behind Rena, Jojo put on a stern face, jerked in her chin and saluted. Teri made a point of saluting too, then got to work threading line through a breather, sucking well-water to the choke mark, filling samplers.

Six live trees shimmered around the wellhead. Every city tree had withered in place, or been hauled off years ago. Trees failed to thrive in sterile nurseries without native fungi and root-bacteria which mostly refused to take in Medina's chemicalized soil— most died in less than a year.

Teri gazed into the smallest tree directly in front of her. This rare green being struck her as surreal. A visitation from another world. "Anybody know who we're looking at here?"

"Genus quercus." Rena did not glance up or stop packing her kit as she answered.

"Quirky genius." Teri said, and Jojo winked at her.

"Drought-adapted dwarf evergreen oak." Rena said.

"How bleak my life without you, quirky genius." Teri ran her hands over fissured bark.

"A few decades back," Rena said, "you could've picnicked in those hills there under trees like these. But bigger. Used to do that with my mum. Still healthy as an off-cell 69 can be." She eyeballed a sampler. "We'll do stats on these, but here's my take. This well is going to dry up soon. Hydro's going to make sure it does." Rena shook the last vial of cloudy water, "Just silting up, nothing worse, I hope," slid it into a pocket, looked up at Teri's tree. "My mother'll outlive these scrawny specimens."

Jojo, motherless as Teri, scowled at this brag. "Can't believe it, your mother's alive!?" She snatched up a stone.

Teri squatted, watched her friend's anguish through a flicker of branches. She glanced beyond St. John's weed and star thistle, to the water tank behind the biggest oak— and daydreamed a break-in, a nude swim. How long had it been since her body knew the bliss of enveloping water so much like flying?

"Only govcorp soakers could afford acorns, never mind oaks, by the time I got out of med school," Rena said. She labeled

samplers rapidly as she spoke. "One exec I know has a hand-polled mulberry loaded with purple berries. Every summer they go for 30 BU an ounce and up. Can't do it. But that smell," Rena sighed, "makes my teeth ache." Silence. "No telling if I'd even like the taste though..."

Jojo yanked her sweat-dark cowboy hat over her eyes, still working the stone in her fist.

"Ready, ladies?" Rena stood, hands on her hips.

"Holy shit, why don't you just jump the goddamn fence and find out what those berries taste like?!" Jojo snicked her stone with a ringing bounce off the water tank.

Half into his uniform, Toller lurched out of the cabin, and the three of them took off...

Though they'd passed under dozens of Eyes that day, no tracks went out on them. Toller hadn't even filed a disturbance report. Easy to guess why he wouldn't want to do that...

~

Almost dark and nothing in her stomach thanks to Snowy, but she resisted the urge to start on what she was carrying. Veronica long gone, though she kept searching pockets for a leaf she might have missed.

Scanning windows and doorways bright inside, she saw nothing promising. She could use tokens if she paid this far out of sector. People liked them out here where govcorp still tolerated a bit of off-cell monetary inventiveness in work-towns.

Out of the corner of her eye, a sex-vendor, a fem, waved her over. She waved back and moved on, kicking trash. Like kicking dead leaves along the river. She hadn't thought of it in so long. Not even a creek, really, but The River was what they named it then, she and Budd. Where they went to remember

what they were missing. Until warning signs and smart fences went up...

Water scummy brown. Dimpled with small drowned things. Budd leans against a hump of granite near the edge of the slope, his face to the sun. But she can't wait. She runs down to touch the water winding through shattered tailings, a straggle of weeds. Examines a leaf, gets out her hand lens. Veins like minute rivers under the small magnifying glass Budd gave her the year Dreams began...

A sound halted her. Somewhere behind and to her left. Like a rolling aluminum can. No wind. She listened hard.

Here had buildings petered out, waste spaces dominated. Warehouses. Facades designed to distract the eye. She stood near an arched wall with faded painted-on windows, a painted door about to open...or close? Pretending to rummage in her pak again, she tried to look around. No one. Hot and cold electricity prodded her along, but she forced a slow pace for anybody watching. In the grip of fear, her instinct was always to give off the energy of fearlessness, a habit reinforced by years of friendship with Budd and Jojo. Human predators are geniuses at spotting the least sign of weakness. Can't fake it, have to believe it yourself, stay totally clear how you aren't going to let anything or anybody...

"Guess you remember my name." Not a question. The voice came from behind her. It was Snowy's breathless, intimate tone. He must have deliberately followed her. For hours. That was bad. Very bad. He was no casual jerk. That awful clarity burned through her .

She turned to look him full in the face, found exactly what she dreaded. Simultaneously attractive and repellent, small intense eyes a little too close together. Jaw cocked, teeth set on edge.

Considering her. Just the way he'd studied her back at Foggy Dew—what was he looking for?

His three shadows slouched against a painted wall gone indecipherable— their bodies impatient, sullen. One of them snapped off a branch from a dead tree still upright in its planter, hitting against the trunk in a lazy random rhythm. The bald one tucked in his shirt. The third one, a short thick-legged blonde, folded his arms. They didn't look at her. They were waiting. Waiting for Snowy's signal.

"Don't care for liars," Snowy said hoarsely, speaking softly, only to her. He wore a med-tag in one of his ears she hadn't noticed before. "Hurts my feelings," he said. A sickly smile involving only the left side of his mouth. His eyes widened and settled into hers, that failed grin erased as though it never existed.

She studied the ground, forced herself to take enough time. "A girl *has* to lie sometimes, Snowy..." her voice fell to a whisper, "...when she isn't available." She pushed her voice deeper, below the quaver. "It's...a woman thing."

"Why don't you just shut up." He pronounced each word without urgency. When she opened her mouth to reply, he swung his arm into the air and the other three, still not looking at her, languid, almost reluctant, came on as one.

Something To Tell You

The present: Budd, Lonnie, Natalie

“Deena’s not at her desk, Budd. I barely got a look at Natalie’s chart. . . my cell started blinking Laby code,” Lonnie pulled him into Natalie’s air-lock. Without speaking, they passed through a full cycle of Ion Scrubbers. When UV shut down, they pulled off their visors, and faced each other. “I’ve got something to tell you,” Lonnie said and laid his hands on Budd’s arms.

In fear of what was coming and to comfort the messenger, Budd returned the gesture.

The moment they were in Natalie’s room, Budd put the vid-cam into hibernation and Lonnie made no move to stop him. But when his hands found the couplers under his headpiece, and he struggled to free himself, Lonnie wouldn’t let him go further. *Something to tell you.*

The feel of Lonnie’s voice told Budd what he would hear even before his friend’s words fell like shrapnel around his ears. Everything in him tried to stop the final two — *Teri’s missing.*

His insides contracted, his lungs refused air. All desire to move or speak left him. He took the news as though he’d been expecting to hear it all his life. Since the morning his mother told him the infection in his eyes could not be controlled, when what was happening could happen no other way, and he could do nothing about it. All reassurances, his own natural strength, all medical opinion, never touched his lack of surprise at the way bad things avalanched from possible to undeniable. When

Teri moved out, and everybody, including her, held onto ways and reasons they might still end up back together, he knew. And now this. He knew this, too. What he was most afraid of losing, he'd been losing all along.

They slid onto the hard floor next to Natalie's bed, Lonnie's gloved hand on his back. He bent forward, arms crossed over his chest, forehead on the mattress frame, wanting only to burrow into emptiness.

He could not bear to hear her name.

Every time Lonnie tried one more reasonable explanation to reassure him, he held up a hand and stopped him. It was work to swallow, his throat parched, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. Fragments of Lonnie's message dug a groove through his brain. Missing...missing...re-route ...wait for more...*missing*..."

~

How much time had passed? Felt like days. He lifted his head. Natalie seemed to be sleeping. She didn't stir when he whispered her name and touched the skin near her hairline which even through his glove felt warm and slippery. He touched the Vitals Ring on her wrist. No doubt a Patch in her clothes, a trackable node.

He must be right about her not dying of some virus. If she were going into coma, there'd be an alarm...

Unless it was malfunctioning:

All certainty about Natalie, about anything, collapsed. *Missing, missing*. The drone of that word no longer only in his head, in the air now, all around. He stroked Natalie's hair to anchor himself to the world.

~

Next to him, Lonnie's head drooped and tipped up again. They were cut loose. Expecting to hear more any moment. Waiting for something mercifully to propel them one way or the other.

Sleepiness was the way his friend responded to helplessness, with no clear path ahead. That was how years ago Lonnie got the scar running down his face...

A great vortex emptied out the present, filled him with the past. He let his mind go where it would. Away. Anywhere but here. Any time but now...

Lonnie was seventeen when firearms were beginning to disappear. Weapon detector gates picked them up, the military stockpiled them, put a lock on manufacture of ammunition. You couldn't get through any door, including your own, without a weapon check. But suppression is the mother of invention. Non-metallic blades were suddenly everywhere—shaved plastic, ceramic, stone—fetishes in the oldest sense of the word, concentrating life-energy and prestige, focused around carved handles and unique ornamentation. Extinct birds. Seals, toads, turtles. Hand-dyed straps and tattooed pouches worn under clothes. Lonnie's blade with its swallow's wing had saved Budd's life and scarred Lonnie's face, all in a few harrowing minutes...

Lonnie dozed and jerked awake. They might have gone on sitting like that forever, except for the shock of a male voice snapping them to attention.

“Mr. Gilkin! This is Chief Tech Samarath. You and your friend have no authorization to be in that room.” With loud flat authority, the voice jarred their mics, addressing Lonnie alone, as though he, Budd, were deaf as well as eyeless.

Lonnie stood. “He's *blind*, he can't see Natalie from out there, that's why we're...”

“Don't care if he's got two heads, you'll follow regs in this building!”

Budd listened without turning in the man's direction, could practically see Samarath's mouth working, each distortion of anger and disgust. He noted a countercurrent of unease under the contempt in that voice.

“Look,” Lonnie said, “he's having some sort of... he's extremely upset, but I can talk him down if you give us some time.”

“Ten minutes!” Samarath barked. “Then get your ass down to the check-in desk. Understand?” He clicked down the hall.

Surprised the man had conceded anything—ten minutes seemed generous, Lonnie rested his hands on Budd's shoulders, “Let me talk to him. See if I can find out what he knows, what he's thinking. We've got to act like we're cooperating with this little dictator...”

Budd stopped breathing. *This is the guy*, this is the *glitch* Teri needed me to check out. He snapped his head to one side, clamped his mouth shut as the realization seared through him. He'd been so fogged coming off REM-ex, so goddamn busy worrying about his missing cell, manufacturing theories about Natalie—everything, *everything* but the one thing Teri begged him to do. He groaned.

“What in hell are we gonna do about...” Lonnie tapped Budd's bare wrist.

Budd gestured weakly to the spot where Samarath had been standing. “Doesn't matter. He isn't going to believe a word.”

Lonnie took hold of him, “Don’t do this! Don’t fade out on me, not *now...*”

Budd clapped his hand over Lonnie's mic. An unfamiliar sensation crawled over his skin as the vague figure of Samarath moved through his mind. Something in the room had shifted.

He felt his way to the check on the surv set up—Vitals link on, cam off. Moved back to Natalie and listened to her breathe. *Not* a coma. He turned to Lonnie, stuck his thumb up and mouthed *sleeping*:

Until this moment, the Bouncer had convinced them both there were no Ears operating in Natalie’s room. But something had changed. Not sure what he was listening for, he slowed his breathing to match the girl's. Yes, he could feel it, she was alert, aware of him. And of the danger they were in?

“Awake?” he said in a bare whisper. His hand hovered over her head, felt her nod. He pressed a finger to his lips, pointed to his ear, and with that finger, circled the room. Natalie responded to his movements. He could sense her excitement. His finger returned to touch his own lips again. Then hers.

She nodded.

He took hold of Lonnie’s arm to get his attention, pointed to his ear, then the ceiling. Slowly he spelled onto Lonnie’s face-plate. *O-n-e g-o-o-d t-h-i-n-g*. His closed fist separated each word. *Believes virus will kill him!*

On The Way To Calona 2

The present, Jojo and Rena

Shock waves from nuclear blasts had buckled the asphalt running up to and beyond the Gate. Locks had been torched and knocked loose by the four who'd gone ahead of them into the Zone. Jojo tensed against the possibility of Gaards, though none were needed—still lethal with lingering rads according to Labyrinth and NetNews. *Nobody sane would be here.*

She believed she could feel a subtle burn, a disturbance in her blood— but real effects would take hours or days or weeks to show up. And when they did, they wouldn't be subtle. Nausea, vomiting. Itching, reddening skin...

Rena dropped her gear and sat not far off, between moonlit clumps of dead brush. Running her hands through flakey dirt, Jojo breathed, aware that each breath might be poisoning their lungs. But the air tasted sweet and harmless, cleaner, livelier, than city air.

The distant mountain range, that crowd of stars in the sky, dizzied her. The test site lay invisible in the flatlands somewhere between the mountains and where they waited now. Waited for Teri.

What barren ground is this? She couldn't remember where the phrase came from. Calona had been re-built and abandoned several times during a long tug of war between test programs and protests. Massive civil disobedience worked at first, then fell apart under harsh reprisals, infiltrators, Hydro campaigns

around viruses and tainted water. The last closure in '39. Eighteen years ago.

Rena stood, switched on her powerlite. A stream of ants swarmed her wrist and fingers. After studying them with a frown, she said, "Pogonomyrmex nigrum nanus. the black dwarf ant."

Instinctively Jojo was glad for anything alive. Maybe the place was not so lethal as MediaNet made out. Or maybe ants could take a whole hell of a lot more radiation than humans. "Ants," She said. "Couldn't they be a good sign?"

Rena shot her a glance and said nothing.

"Maybe we should get Images going, maybe we could help Teri somehow..."

"Don't be stupid!" Rena glanced at her cell. "I'll check with Labyrinth again."

"We don't have to follow the plan. Not now. Teri not showing wasn't in the plan, was it?" She swept off her hat, swatted it against her knees.. "I don't have your MD or your Eco-Geo-Bio degrees, but..."

"That's right, you don't." Rena growled. "Why do I have to keep saying it? Going ahead is what we agreed on if one of us was late. Late doesn't mean something awful is going down." She seemed to have dropped all fatigue and uncertainty. "Teri means everything to *a lot* of us, you know."

"Hey, I get the sting! But don't I get a say about what we should do? If not, what am I here for? What's *my* area of expertise anyway?!" She kicked at the ground.

"Do you seriously expect me to answer that?"

Jojo forced herself not to break into a rant.

Rena took a swig from her canister. “Anyway. If you think I’m so brainy why don’t you ever *listen to me?*”

Jojo looked into the distance, considering. “Well, I do like to respect the wisdom of my elders.” She watched Rena bare her teeth at the word *elders*. “But only when it comes to things I know nothing about.”

With strained humor, Rena said, “You better watch it, kid.”

Jojo examined an ant on the back of her hand. “So what about you, what’s *your* opinion?” She peered at the insect, brushed it off into the sand.

Rena clicked on her cell, looked up and shook her head. “Okay. Gate Two. Now. Opinion ...and policy.”

No Teri. Jojo hitched up her pak and started forward. Those strongholds of rock, those palms at Silver Canyon, still vivid, she yearned to climb high enough to see the whole sweep of landscape they were entering, and then look west where Teri might or might not be moving toward them. Ahead, the moonlit earth repeated itself endlessly, tufts of strong-smelling scrub, nameless, ratty, low-to-the-ground things. Rena probably knew their scientific names, the chemistry of their medicine. Snatching a twig, she breathed its tarry odor. Like the ants, these plants were survivors.

Subsidence craters pocked the ground, even this far out. Collapsed under the force of explosions. Pure will, and Rena behind, kept her going. Gritty wind pushed her, pressing her forward, farther and farther from Teri.

~

Rippling asphalt under their boots disappeared into hardpan sometime before Second Gate. Gates hardly necessary this far inside the Zone where the land resembled the surface of the

moon, even the tough spiky plants far apart. They threw down their paks, drank, ate a little. Rena dozed, or so it seemed, after staring at her cell and shaking her head.

Jojo walked to a slight rise in the land which flattened out to the farthest horizon. She turned away from the moon and her shadow streaked out crookedly in front of her toward Silver Canyon.

Shivering now. Nobody on the road. Teri was *not* on her way to them. Jojo reeled back, clumsy, breathing fast. How could she have agreed to this! It was like the crash of some colossal dose, the long high collapsing into ugly reality. How had Dreams made them so certain? She could not remember.

The moon two days past full, burned hard, shedding light like sweat, stroking rock and brush, laying a shine over uprooted carcasses of long dead trees, roots snaking out in all directions. Like wild heads of hair. She approached one of them. Not trees. Nothing that was ever alive. Abandoned machines, menacing nests of wire. Rubbish piles. Like something from the Waste Depot.

Research photos came back to her. Simulated test-houses, blown-out windows, seared paint. Before— a brand-new dummy-wife dressed in a trendy outfit, waits for the blast. After— mangled dummy-wife on the kitchen floor, melted husband and three kids on the living room couch.

Vehicles, canisters, old tanks and planes, spectacularly obliterated in the interests of science. Or entertainment. Pricey permits issued for curious observers. Witnesses to the fascinating effects of nuclear destruction, put up in a special motel named after one of the bombs.

High cyclone fencing, no longer electrified, stretched away, lovely in the moon's gleam. All sterile and lifeless things so easily made to shimmer...

She yelped with fright at a sound, sighed relief when she whirled around and found herself staring at Rena. “Shit! You scared the...” Rena’s face stopped her.

Rena let her hands drop to her sides. “She didn’t show at all, never made contact. She’s...officially missing now.”

“*No!*” Jojo whirled away, hiding her face.

“I got a re-route with a date on it from a week ago. An official *no-show*. And *eight-eight-eight* tells us it’s Teri. That puts everybody behind us on hold. But there’s four of us at Calona now and we’re not calling anything off until we know more. No way of guessing what happened, it could be completely unconnected to...”

Jojo leapt past Rena, past their gear, running full-out for Silver Canyon. Rena tackled her from behind. They toppled over.

Rena took hold of her shoulders, shook her. “Too *late* for this kind of stuff! Listen to me, kid, listen, we’ve got to go ahead and meet the others, we can’t help Teri like this.” Briefly they wrestled. Rena shook her again, both of them panting.

Jojo broke free. “No! What if Teri gets there and nobody’s...”

“Mark and Fanta are on their way now, they’ll be there at the drop if she does show and we’ll find out immediately...” Rena knelt beside her, arms encircling her.

Jojo’s insides went icy. “This is no Dream, it’s a nightmare.” She stepped out of Rena’s reach, stared hatefully at the moon pouring its blank light.

When she dropped her gaze to Rena’s, the pierce of those eyes locked her into absolute stillness. The noise of terror quieted. Had she ever looked at Rena without flicking her eyes away? Or making a joke?

As long as she went on looking, the stillness was a deep relief she didn't want to move away from. Rena's face sculptured, anonymous, as though suddenly no one she'd ever known. Pale in this pale light. Except for her eyes, her black, black eyes. Darker than the night. Not even one star. Rena did not blink. Her mouth was stone, hair streaked with bright threads as if it had rained. *Rain*. Had it ever rained here? Jojo remembered Dreaming of rain— how long ago? Running and crying, rain beating down on her head, erasing all thought and sensation except those million small blows.

Rena stepped back without breaking eye contact. "We have to go now, kid. Come on. Let's meet the others." Her eyelids came down in slow motion, rose up again, the way Jojo had seen a horse blink once, ages ago, a long liquid motion with a wordless dignity. Where had this Rena come from?

"Ready now?" Her voice so faint this time, Jojo didn't hear really words, but read her lips.

Rena's arm floated toward Jojo's face, two fingers grazing her chin. The moment that touch came, Jojo could move again, could walk the plain stretching in front of them, deeper into the testing ground where their friends were waiting.

Song Man

The present, Natalie and Budd

Natalie opened her eyes—there were *two* men in inside her room. The one who played songs. The other with a scar on his cheek, she didn't know. In the hall, behind the window, Brian was yelling at the one with the scar. She wanted him to stop.

Natalie—she thought she heard song man call her name. But he wasn't talking, he was sitting on the floor, looking at her. Not at Brian, at her. When he winked, she got the idea it was a game, a trick they were going to play on Brian, but when she started to ask if this was true, he put his finger on his lips.

She didn't like Brian. Deena didn't either. Once he came into her room and sat in a chair with his arms crossed and told her she had to have *a little procedure... we're going to set up your room for a minor operation. That means just a little one. But we have to put you to sleep first, you won't remember any of it. When you wake up there'll be a bandage on your belly, but don't be scared, it'll just be a small sore place—it'll heal up before you know it. We need you to do this. So we can figure out what's making you sick...*

When Brian stopped yelling and left, song man got up and sat by her bed. She could see how much he wanted her to understand him. To understand without words. One of his hands moved in circles. Like the lights when they made The World, at the end, right before they went away. Excitement

made her want to tell him this. He knew the lights too, she was not the only one? Nobody else had ever understood. The way they swam out of the ceiling, making shapes that had no names, changing one into another and back again. Until she was too tired to follow any more.

Song man took her hand, opened and smoothed it flat like a piece of paper and drew a shape with one finger. Then he took *her* finger and drew with it like a pen on his palm. She recognized a word. Like the words on printouts Deena read to her and taught her to know, though she wasn't supposed to do that, she had to pretend she couldn't read, especially with Brian. Then she got really sick, sicker than before, and Teri came. After that, Deena never read to her, but told her stories about *Outside*. Mountains and streets and people zooming fast in long cars hooked together, without even touching the ground. Deena wasn't supposed to talk about outside. Brian said it would only upset her.

They let her watch Safari Boyz and old movie-disks and if she was well enough, play screen games with an elephant named Sir Richard Chattergee though that was for babies like Marci and Etien in 3-B. She wasn't allowed to use the Slate for anything but stupid stuff. She'd rather play chess with Deena—tiny animals on a tiny board, so small she could carry it in the pocket of her uniform. There were so many rules here. Some rules were *criminal* and some were *just dumb*, Deena said, a few of them were good. Sometimes she got them mixed up. So many things to learn. Deena had read to her about doctors figuring out what was wrong with sick people and how they always got them well. About ways to take skin from one place on your body and grow it like a plant on another place. About Sylvia, a girl her same age, allergic to soy, the plant almost every kind of food was made from and how they tried to teach her body not to be angry, so soy wouldn't make her sick

anymore. About how to grow funny little beans that tasted like blackberries.

And the running blackberry would adorn. . .

One of the last stories Deena ever read to her started up in her mind. . . *in the 20th century people believed that one day machines would invade their bodies and the human being would be a kind of mist or cloud of mind-stuff trapped inside the mechanism. Now it's clear that what's actually happened is — machines don't live in us, we live in them, burrowing with our animal bodies through one gigantic Worldmachine...*

Sorry, Deena said later, *never should have read you that one, too doomy for a young girl.* But something about it relieved her, made her feel more awake and she never forgot it. Though some days she forgot things as soon as she learned them. Because she was sick. Like the girl who couldn't eat soy, Deena said. When you're sick your brain gets full, it can't hold onto things, even ones you want badly to keep inside you.

She couldn't remember much about the time before she came here. The other hospitals she lived in from the time she was little. Not even the woman they said was her mother. What Deena told her, sometimes she believed they were her own memories. *Your mother was young. A skinny little thing. She'd bring lunch from work, she was a Pollinator like a lot of young women, wearing thick shoes and that yellow uniform with the green face mask dangling on her chest, and she'd sit right there on that bench in front of the window with her legs tucked under her and she'd watch you sleep. . . until she got sick too and couldn't come any more.*

Sleepy and warm now. Where was Teri? Today was one of the days Teri should be here. Brian didn't like those days.

She looked at song man and whispered, "Where's Teri?" Her words make him jump, but he didn't answer. She could tell

how much he wanted to answer. She remembered this was a game and they weren't supposed to speak. Covered her mouth, embarrassed.

Behind him, she saw something wrong—the walls of her room made her stomach hurt— her pictures were gone! Paintings Teri helped her make, what she saw and heard and thought. Teri told her once *some people hear in scarlet and salmon and indigo*. And she knew what Teri meant. *They have a mind that hears and feels everything they see. There was a man a long time ago who believed color and music were two rivers with their source in one mountain*. But where were her paintings?! Teri took them? Deena? She knew that was wrong. It must have been Brian.

Song man was spelling into her hand again. T-e-r-i. *Teri*. She was almost too tired to see Then she realized she didn't have to see. She could close her eyes and read what he wrote through her skin. “You know her?” a whisper slipped out and again she clapped her hand over her mouth, sorry she couldn't remember long enough to play the game.

He nodded, wrapped his arms around himself, swayed back and forth. She understood and was glad he was there, glad he loved Teri the way she did and most of all that he could see the lights — not even Teri could do that. She waited for him to tell her more, and everything flew out of her head and her eyelids drooped, though she tried and tried to stay awake.

Something about his eyes hurt her. He saw her and didn't see her, at the same time. The confusion of this made her dizzy. She raised her arm to his face and quick away in a circle. He did not blink or follow her hand. She knew then that he could not see with his eyes. Knew what this meant from one of Deena's stories about a woman who couldn't hear *or* see, how she taught herself to smell and taste and feel the whole world and to speak with her body. His blind eyes made him sad. But he

did see her, saw everything, in another way. And when he sang, she felt like she did when the lights came.

He woke her and when she nodded, showed her with his hands how he would pick her up and take her out through the door. Brian didn't want that, but they were going to do it anyway. Which made her smile. She would see *outside!* Where the lights came from. Then he wrote in her hand, *Scared?* She shook her head and pointed to the door at the back of her room, the one she'd never gone through, the door where everyone appeared and disappeared.

It was time. She took off her pajama top, and the patch on her neck, put on a dusty old bed-sweater she never wore, because there was a tiny machine sewn into her hospital clothes that would help Brian follow them. Her heart felt slippery and big. Her legs and arms were shaking when song man stood her up and wrapped her in a blanket and carried her into the place where Deena said a purple light killed viruses and other bad things. She heard loud banging sounds from inside her room. But song man smiled at her and whistled his song. So she wouldn't be scared. And she wasn't.

Escape

The present, Lonnie

A hairline crack would do. I smashed at the glas with a steel socket-driver. An alarm would announce the breach.

A whining bleep started up, flooding me with relief. I heard Samarath's loud bark through the screen, the man himself a safe distance down the hall at check-in.

I switched to one-way Vid so Samarath's upper body showed onscreen but I couldn't be seen. No speakers in the pass-through where Budd and the girl waited. I'd deal with this bullhead my own way.

"You can't get out of that room," Samarath boomed. "Pass-through's locked from outside and I want you to..."

"But there *is* a way! You forgot. We've got Natalie. She's the reason you aren't going to buzz any goons right now. Follow? If you need more persuasion, I'll give you plenty in a minute. Right now, keep that left hand where I can eyeball it. Good. Wave your cell by the read. Yep, Brian Wallace Samarath 778TRT33W. Okay. Confirm Intent To Disable and copy me on Natalie's screen." Couldn't stop myself pacing while I spoke. "I checked the employee log, Chief. Eight techs on duty besides you. Shift changes in... five hours. Deena Dixon up front."

"Deena's gone. Sent her home when I came in."

“You really are pissing me off! I suppose that was compassionate leave, was it? Or did you just happen to give her a very special assignment to take care of on her way?!”

“She doesn’t know about your plan if that’s what you ...”

“Eight ITDs!”

“You aren’t going to get away with this, Gilkin.”

“*Now!*” Agonizing moments until the screen laid out eight numbers and names. “Here’s the way it’s going to go. Listen good, cause my mood is definitely deteriorating— do *not* try to tell me you can’t do this or you can’t do that, I am sick of guys like you, wouldn’t take much for me to get personal before I go, *Mr. Chief Tech*, and I’ve got the weapon crawling all over my body right now!” Panting, almost believing the words flying out of my mouth, drawing on years of fury taking orders from arrogant Air Corps vips like this one.

“You, Chief, are coming back down this hall with everybody’s cells in a bag. Set the bag down and unlock Natalie’s pass-through. Get everybody into quarantine—room 22—and lock yourselves in. I’ll lock from *outside* when I’m there. And I’ve got a home-made trip alarm on me for that door, case you stick that head of yours out one second before I want you to...”

“Natalie is a very sick ...”

“And that reminds me! When you bring those cells up? Slip in a few morphine paks, enough to keep me and my friend here pain free for the next week, since you’re such a *compassionate kind of guy*.”

“Leave her with us and we’ll...”

“You don’t get it do you?!” I gulped air. “Since you saw him last, my friend here? Well, you must’ve made a truly bad impression on him because he jumped right out of his suit. And now I’m

outta mine, too. All three of us are *contaminated*. You listening, Chief? What's your medical opinion on *that*? We gave the girl a micromig of neurocapriline, enough to make her sleep. For a few hours. I've got, let's see, six more migs on me. Understand what I'm telling you!?"

"If you harm that girl..."

Grabbing the socket driver, I beat it hard against Natalie's metal bed frame. "You. Are *not*. Making decisions here!" Samarath winced. I was sweating though the room felt colder than ever. This was harder than any test I'd ever flown. "We've got no interest in hanging onto a sick kid, believe me, we just want out of here! You can pick her up soon as we get to someplace safe. We'll do a relay-contact with the front desk and GeeSat'll tell you where to find her."

"We can't let you spread that bug..."

He was buckling, I could sense it. "Yes or no?! Counting to six. Just to pick a random number. Starting now..."

Silence. Longer this time.

Samarath— his employers, *somebody*—was seriously afraid of losing Natalie. That must be why he didn't storm her room. Even if Samarath didn't believe the virus was real, he did believe the two of us were capable of harming the girl. Who must be a very special patient indeed, a long-running experiment like Budd said. "*Four...five...*"

"Hold on." Defeat dulled the man's tone. "Back up. Tell me again what you want."

I spoke slowly now. "That's more like it, Chief. Okay. Get everybody, and I mean *everybody*, into that quarantine room. Keep the door locked for three hours. Three full hours, got that? On my way out, I'm slapping on a trip-alarm linked to my

cell. If anybody tampers with the monitors, or that door cracks before three hours...we give the girl all six migs.”

Samarath took a breath. “I’m clear. As long as the girl’s not harmed, we’ll do this the way you want.”

I stepped into the pass-through. Budd and the girl were huddled together. She was quivering. I gave him an edited version of the deal I’d just cut. Natalie, who hadn’t seemed to be listening, examined me, trying to decide if I was anybody she liked or trusted. I gazed at her damp forehead, cheeks blotched with fever. Half asleep. Not a child at all, more like a small, old woman.

Budd whistled a few notes and Natalie shut her eyes. I heard the outer lock click open, footsteps receding. The lock next door in 22 chunked shut. I pushed open the outer door, half expecting to find Samarath’s stunner in my face, stuffed the bag of cells into my pak, moved the three of us into the emptied hallway. At the desk, I flipped on Intracom and saw Room 22’s people crouched on the floor, not talking, not looking at each other, Samarath on the only bed. I counted heads —*all there*— then looked more closely, took in the terror on their faces. Felt it myself. Sorry for everybody but Samarath. The whole scene made me wince. Seeing the world from their viewpoint—*me* the dangerous one. The monster.

I hurried down the hall and set the quarantine lock from outside. They were stone quiet, all those techs who’d shown up for shift and got caught in a nightmare. Making more noise than I needed to, I hoped they’d believe I was indeed slapping on a trip. Then I hooked up the Bouncer to a jambboard so any loud sound or major vibration from that door would set up a sonic feedback alarm. Volume on max, intracom would pipe the shriek to Room 22.

Back at check-in, Budd and Natalie were waiting on the reception bench, looking traumatized. Budd's cell-free left arm showed below the sleeve of his jacket. Anybody laying eyes on these two might fall for the virus story the way Samarath had. Though he no doubt had his plan—a haz-team would pick up Natalie, he'd use the virus-scare to clear the streets, send a small army to knock us out, scorch the place where we fell.

Not sure why, I hit *permanent disable* on my own cell instead of waiting til we got away. Dropped it with the bag of cells into the waste chute under Deena's desk.

Labyrinth 3

The present, Teri and Snowy

They forced her to her knees, sharp kicks and fists pummeled everywhere, she clawed at them, cries roaring from her. They dragged her, threw her down, pavement grinding her cheek. Then everything stopped.

No way to know if they were watching, she did not move for what felt like hours.

Her breathing shallow, lungs beginning to stiffen. Tears stung her nose, blood trickled into her ear. Ribs like stripped branches stabbed. She held her breath as long as she could, until craving forced air into her again.

She had to pee. *So thirsty*. Strange, the way the body no matter what insisted on its needs.

~

Smoky darkness blurred with light. She shook her head to clear her vision. Didn't help. Eyes sticky with blood, swollen nearly shut. *Alone?* She remembered their voices, arguing before they left. About *her?*

She faded out.

~

Silence. Odor of machine oil. Cement floor. A warehouse? If she could sleep and Dream... What time was it, she had to

know, brought her cell close. *Disabled*. Her head fell back to the floor. She heard a van outside. Doors slamming.

~

Something tapped her hip. Lightly. Twice. She opened her eyes, light like shards of glass. The toe of a boot, a tall shape against brightness. Not inside the warehouse anymore. On the ground, warm and gritty. Air thick with heat. Odor of creosote. *Outside*.

“Gonna tell us what you're up to?” Snowy's voice slid over her, words she forced her brain to make sense of. *Us* flooded her chest, turned her muscles to water. *My good buddies*. He said that once, didn't he? When? Again she saw the three of them looking up at Snowy's signal, starting toward her...

“Teri.” Wasn't Snowy who spoke. Who? She lifted her head.

Snowy growled, pressed the weight of his body through his foot against her hip, shoving lightly so that she rocked onto her side, cried out. *What did he want? What did he know?*

Shallow gasps all she could bear, enough to keep her from blacking out. When a faint started, she wanted to give in, never move again. When she couldn't put breathing off any longer, the ravishing relief of air and searing pain shocked her awake. “Why? Are you...?” Barely a whisper.

“Why is my line.” He kicked into her flank on *my* and again on *line*, coughed like an old man.

Resting between each breath, a pool of quiet gathered in her mind. She waited for words to appear. Words that might stop the next kick.

“Ter- ri...” he sing-songed, running a finger along her shoulder, his voice wheedling, almost tender, “you want me to get rough with you?” His breath was loud. “Is that it, Teri?”

Her name in his mouth nauseated her. His odor metallic. Not alcohol. Something else. *How does he know who I am?* She shook her head.

He had her by the hair, the weight of him climbing onto her, a knee forcing her legs apart.

~

She woke on her side, the dark in her head whirling.

Alive. Shaking violently. Tongue too big in her mouth. Her hands went first to her breasts. Between her legs— blood there. She was naked. Pak gone, jacket too. Aerolate, water, food, gone. Her raw, bare left wrist. No cell.

Some small, winged creature fluttered at her cheek, She tried to understand the landscape around her. Blurred humps. Boulders? Sky too bright. Carried or dragged here. Snowy really gone? What they'd done, was that all they were after?

~

Dark everywhere. No coolness in it.

The agony of sitting up forced her flat again, the ground under her gritty. They didn't need to finish her off, they must have seen that. In a hurry to get away from her?

What she wanted more than anything was water and sleep. Her lips and eyelids kept sticking together. Her skin was on fire. Images swam through her, swelled and vanished like scraps of cloth in the wind, she let them come and go without trying to understand. One image came clear— a woman she didn't know, offering fruit...

she takes it, punches her thumbs into the thick skin, splits the fruit open, presses it to her lips. She looks more closely, sees a

dark shape in the center of translucent flesh—her wristcell, her name, a string of numbers glowing across the Vitals screen. BP 82/55, Blood Glucose 64, 55, 43... Alarmed, she sucks on the orange, chews, swallows. Looks again, her BG numbers are turning around... 68, 72... A watery bliss dissolves her.

Dream? Hallucination? But now she wasn't so dizzy. The grab in her lungs had eased. That imaginary orange tricked her body into a surge of life? Without moving her cracked lips, she felt she was smiling.

Completely dark now. And cold. Again she strained to sit up, clamped her teeth against a sensation of ripping, fell back, tears stinging her eyes.

“Don't cry. Save every drop.” Hearing those words, pure panic shot through her. She shut off a scream. Listened with her whole body. “Get up,” the voice urged. Not Snowy. A woman's voice. Not Ariadne. Who? She shook her head, closed her mind against the command.

Budd crying. No sound. She reached for him and in that instant he blinked out. Wavy blackness. A smoky odor.

“Get up. Now!” The voice urged and she gathered the muscles of her belly to rise. Pain so acute she knew it was real. Her swollen tongue tasted like dirt, like bad fruit. She turned her head to retch, the world collapsing, sucking her mind into a dot.

~

“Stand up!” the voice harsher now. She did not care if she lived. The voice cared. Wanted her to live. There was so much *will* in it. It would not let her fall into the numb peace of sleep.

Easier to obey.

For minutes or an hour, she rested, then pulled hard against the heaped weight of her body, a whimper escaping her. She clamped her mouth shut, forced air through her nose, understood this was a good idea, but not why. Again she tried and failed to stand. Rested. Her legs, especially the left one, refused to work in any normal way.

She crawled toward what might be weeds, brush, the voice lashing at every temptation to roll onto her side— her own name the whip now, “Teri!”

Let me rest. A few minutes. Then I'll go. The voice did not answer. After that first time –*Don't cry, save every drop*— she never heard more than, “Teri, get up!” Her answers shorter and shorter, too. Finally, a single word. Everything she had left in her came down to one word. *Please.* Please to the past and please to the future.

She hated the voice. Stumbled on without caring where she was going or why. Only moving mattered. Pain a little less now. Thirst tormented her, dug into her brain, pulled her forward. She allowed it to animate her limbs, resting her mind while her body dragged on over stones and her knees knocked against ridges and she lost her balance, tumbled into a drop-off, clawed her way out, wounding herself beyond what Snowy...

“Teri!”

The voice came now not only when she was losing consciousness, but also when her lungs were about to close. Leaves of Veronica, she seemed to taste them, and somehow the attack eased. When she was about to remember what Snowy had done, she moved immediately.

Hours before sunrise. She couldn't stop convulsively shivering. Her feet were solid, stupid, bloodless, her hands slabs of wood. Lungs wheezing again. *Veronica of the Desert* on her tongue, and it eased her.

How she longed for the stars, for—*Ariadne*— but if she stopped, if she lay down to find that drop of light among all the others, she might never get up.

Real Light

The present, Lonnie

We were out.

I looked around, spotted a PV parked near the entrance, nobody in it. Driver might show any second. Somebody in containment who didn't get counted?

My hand on Budd, we moved across what used to be a vehicle lot, worn to loose bits Budd stumbled over, Natalie awkward in his arms. The lot curved down to a dry channel, the kind that criss-crossed every city, built before the drought.

I pulled the girl out of Budd's arms, lay her down on the embankment. She squinted against the sun, tears wetting her cheeks. "Your eyes aren't used to real light," I said, "we're going to let them learn *slowly*, okay?" She gave me a weak smile, but didn't protest when I covered her head with the blanket.

I swung around to be sure no stunners were sneaking up on us, gave Budd a hand and we skidded to the bottom of the channel rank with the odor of mummified rats. Then I hauled myself back up for Natalie.

~

We walked the channel for kilometers. I knew the old maps from Laby trainings, how stormways branched and dead-ended, likely places for an ambush or a moment of rest. Budd and I

traded off carrying Natalie, paks, water I'd grabbed on the way out of MCC. *Never go anywhere without water.*

At Sopal and Crawford Park, we climbed out of the channel, weaved through shift-end crowds in a hurry to catch a ride. I had the name of a guy Rena trusted— Sidney Poulter, Laby support, Priority Van driver. His schedule put him on duty tonight, a kilometer or two down Crawford.

Labyrinth 4

The present, Teri and Snowy

Her jacket fell over her from above. Her jacket! Smelling like Snowy.

“Brought you something,” he said.

Before she could stop herself, she was sobbing, shoving the jacket away.

“Ah, now is that any way to thank me?” He dropped the croon. “Cover yourself. Don't need to look at your *mess*.”

Metal clanked. She pulled the jacket around her, kept utterly still. He threw something at her. Her sock! She clutched it greedily.

He sighed. “You know, you're a real lucky girl, Teri. I was gonna leave you out here like this, but...” He splashed liquid roughly, missing her mouth.

She licked at whatever it was, bitter but welcome, wetting her lips. For a moment she savored the sting. Exhausted, she turned her head, choked, wept again, furious at the tears. She reached for her sock, pulled it onto one hand and contracted her body into as small an object as physically possible.

“I looked as bad as you look, once,” he shoved the bottle against her lips, his aim better this time. A trickle of the brew burned her throat. She winced, ready for him to strangle her, knife her. She realized with a start that the voice had left her.

“A few years back when I was with my br—well, let's just say a good buddy a mine, we were desert hiking. Right about *here*.” Humorless laughter. “Long story short, we ran real low on water.” More laughter. “And what'd he do about it? When I was passed out, he stole what was left in my jig, ditched me, took off into sagebrush, and poof, gone, me the main course for stink bugs...”

Desert. She heard him take a long swallow, swish his mouth.

“Thought by now you'd be thirsty as I was that time. Cold, too. And *lonely*.”

Her legs jerked at *lonely*. She tried not to comprehend his smell pervading her jacket.

“Hey, lady, think I'm gonna touch you? You know what you *look* like?” Disgust, almost wonderment, distorted his words. “Looks like those stink bugs got to you *already*. No chance I'm gonna touch you like you are...”

“Why are you...”

“*Why this, why that.* Why don't I just slit your goddamn throat for you, how about that?!”

His fury jerked through her body. But she heard fear, too. She could just make out his blurred posture, head between his knees, arms dangling. *No weapon?*

“Where was I?” He drank again. “Oh yeah. Yeah, so... so I ate a lot a sand an *froze* my *ass* off the night I was out here!” He coughed again. “Shit-sucking bastard took off on me and didn't look back!”

He was or would soon be very drunk. She'd never heard him laugh, the sound unnerved her. Familiar. Where had she heard that laugh before? “Do I know you?”

“Ah, Teri, what a sorry cunt you are.” tender again, genuinely disappointed in her. “An here I thought you were gonna be such a *bright* girl, I really did.” He waited as if imagining she might respond to this. “Had to go and ruin the story I was telling, didn't you?” He took several swallows from his jig. “Just when I was almost to the best part... about Sam and me.”

Sam? Samarath. Hadn't she heard techs call him Sam? Snowy did not just happen to come upon her listening to Foggy Dew. He'd gone after her on Samarath's order? To do what he did? He was *not* going to kill her, she felt that now. Not yet. Because Samarath was after much more. He was after *everything*.

Sidney's Van

The present, Lonnie

Sidney pushed off his cap, tossed it to the floor. The guy was hairless and proud of it. Shaved head and brows, even the tops of his toes and his privates, he said. That last, one of the latest body-style flips going down. He looked sixty, past the age for that stuff? Still, his name had come to me highly praised, direct from Rena's lips—before she kissed me goodbye.

After a few Ks had rolled between us and Sheridan, I told Sidney to head for Calona. The man gave me a look, but asked no questions, disabled his tracking system and his cell, swung the vehicle around and put on his siren— clearing the way to go 90 on the emergency lane of the swiftway. He took the East Teller Memorial offramp, and Teller to Chase, then kept going 16 more Ks til we reached the limit for Labys not in The Action— close enough to make it on foot the rest of the way.

We bumped over badly deteriorating road on the way to a spot where Sidney would drop us and head back to town— the long way around. Through the side window, I caught a blur of stars. Over the eastern range of the Spokeshee mountains at Red Chalk Rim, the moon sailed with us, two days past full. I'd flown my first karpjet over the Spokeshees a million years ago.

Before skimming over Io's bubbling surface in a Dream, a human swallow carving wind, casting no shadow...

Before I got my scar.

How Lonnie Got His Scar

Several years before the present

We were moving together toward The River. Me, Budd and Teri, a pack of strays on pilgrimage.

“I’m on Lockard walking my DoG,” Budd was saying, “when I hear some heavy breathing, and swivel...” He acted out this part, tipping Teri off balance, sending the three of us into fits of laughter. Teri’d heard this story in fragments, pieces out of order, a few of them missing—this time, she’d insisted, *tell it all the way through*.

“... so down comes a sack over my head like you’d do a guy who *could see*?! Figure they don’t know any better and the best thing is to keep my little secret as long as possible. Two big dudes hustle me down into what sounds and smells like an ancient sub train. Next, a woman— says her name’s Persephone!— ropes my hands behind my back, shoves me down four flights into an elevator, a real rattle-trap missing a cable. We bump to a stop and come out into a big, noisy space. A crowd down there. Turns out, I’m the *special guest* of Octopus, big bad blade gang. And they *do* know I’m blind— in fact, that’s exactly the reason they grabbed me.”

Budd kissed Teri, and again they laughed. I knew my own part and Budd’s nearly as well, but found myself enjoying it all fresh— from Teri’s angle.

We were following the edge of Medina's glas city— gro-sheds, greenhouses, processing plants. Abandoned now, not a living blade, flammers had taken care of that. Once we passed the east fence, a scatter of empty factories, a brushy slope. At the bottom, a row of strong-smelling trees —the borderland where we were headed, where one dead world merged into an older, still living one.

Budd went on. “Octopus was wrong about a lot of things. But one thing they got right, the blind guy was crack at finessing busted electronics. Rainbow policy is strictly snatch-and-peddle, whatever condition, trade or tokens. But they weren't much good at getting them back into working order. Figure they'll bully me into doing it for them, maybe dealing my water ration, too. But they're asking about everything else. *Your Dreams are boring, right? No pictures, no colors? You think a blind brain can match a seeing brain? Where'd you learn to grink machines the way you do?*”

“I give the bladers my not-all-blind-brains-are-the-same spiel, but they aren't interested. What they've got is a taste for my *defects*. But I won't cop to any.”

“Ah, that's the Budd we know, right, Lonnie?” Teri took my arm and the three of us half-danced along the disintegrating pavement.

“Like a scene from The Wizard,” I said. “Anybody remember that old vid? Dorothy, the Tin Man and...oh shit, that makes me the Scarecrow?!” I laughed. “Delete that thought!”

“So I'm Tin Man, huh?” Budd muttered. “Serves me right for bragging on my mechanical virtues!”

When we'd found a steady pace again, Teri urged me, “Your turn!” And I took up the thread.

“As you know, for awhile I'd been flirting with Black Rainbow or Octopus— in a shaky alliance back then. I was quitting the Corps, giving up flying to get out from under military shitheads planning to run the world like an upgrade on Hitler youth camps. At the time, the Corps was pretty much the only way you could fly for a living. Commercial air so restricted, you had to meet astronaut level specs just to get a license. Now, you have to do that to drive a Van!” I rubbed my scar and made a face. “Truth was I didn't have a clue what to do with my miserable carcass. Then one day, I got an invite to a meeting in the old subway. Octopus-types crashing down there with Black Rainbows. An underground metropolis! Couldn't believe my eyes, the whole place lit up—what were they sucking electric from was what I wondered. Everybody sporting a wristband—left arm, where a cell would have been...

“Skinny boff with a braided beard shuffles me through the place, declining to answer my questions. I was a total unknown, Rainbow-Octopus wannabe—why should he tell me squat? I guessed they rigged an illegal hook-up to old lines from when the trains were running. Then I noticed this one poor dude, his legs trussed up — had a cell on him, no rainbow band. Naturally that grabbed me—who was he and what the hell was he doing here?! He said something like, 'Just so you know, blind folks can't take loud noise. In fact, being down here too long might *ruin these babies*'— the guy cupped his ears — 'and I need them sharp to tune your ejunk.' That's where I caught the curve in his voice.”

“Blind Trickster, that's me.” Budd deadpanned. “But seriously, Lonnie? I'd never refer to the sonar as *babies*.”

“Just tagging along here in case *your* version needs editing!” I winked at Teri. “ But go ahead, set the record straight..”

“I believe what I said was... *party-mode is taking the edge off the X-ray ears...*”

By now I wasn't eager for our tale to end, but even I was catching some of the eucs' good medicine smell. Or was I imagining it? My own equipment usually didn't pick up more than baked dirt this far from those trees.

Teri cleared her throat, gave me a look.

"Don't make her beg," Budd said. "We're eating up the scarecrow's point of view but..."

Budd stopped speaking and pulled them off the road. When I protested, he shut me up. We made for a building out of sight of the road, my own hard breathing masking any engine sounds Budd must have picked up. While we waited, crouched in the dirt, a glint caught my eye. I bent down and dropped what I found into my pocket. Teri shot me a questioning look.

I felt it now, a low rumble, maybe a Gaard barge, trembling the ground. Then a solid grinding roar and a trailing dust cloud that blew past us. I expected Budd to tell us that barge wasn't sight-seeing on its own.

"No more coming." Budd said. Still nobody moved. Not good to be out this far. Cells off more than an hour. We could try to explain lost cell-time claiming we were, all three us, *erotically engaged during that interval*. Which was actually on a short list of quasi-acceptable excuses. Threesome high-jinks was kool. River pilgrimages, not.

Back on the road, too hot and jumpy to re-start the story yet, I said, "You know, Teri, it's permanently bur-r-r-ry down in Rainbow Ville. Even in summer. Like a desert cave, keeps a stable temp, come heat wave or hurricane on top. Heard tell some long-term no-cell types are holed up in caverns outside sector limits. Always wondered if it was true..."

"Doubt it." Teri said. "How could they keep supplied? What would they run their stuff on?"

“All I know is if I got lost in the desert, I'd sure as hell hope one of those cave-dwellers would find me! Ariadne ever editorialize on that topic...?”

“Wishful thinking,” Budd said. “For once, Teri and I agree.”

“*Once!*?” she looked at me. “Oberon *always* exaggerates.”

Budd laughed. “But never on the subject of Dea ex Machina!”

I was enjoying our banter. A day out of time. For them and for me. “Anyway,” I said, “Dorothy, as you know, my tour of Rainbowland turned out to be more bad-trip than recruitment — everybody passing taback and Xero, the *air* down there could get you wonked! Pretended to be into it though. A toke here, a sip there. Clearly I wasn't going to find out anything that mattered and I sure wasn't going to join up. But I had to look *good time*, or some rainbow-head might get paranoid I was gonna bust them to Hydro.” I looked to Budd for a sign of agreement, but Teri's eyes met mine. A sparkle of mischief there — her Laby name, Titania, was so right sometimes.

“That's when a bunch of Rainbows started grilling Budd again—what it's like to be blind, the usual lame-ass questions. Didn't he need one of *them* to feed him details on the machines, keep him from tripping and breaking his face, wouldn't he need an escort—somebody who could, well, *see?*”

Budd broke in, “Make that last phrase—*a guy with two live ones in his head.*”

I smiled. “But the blind guy was going ragged by then...”

Hydro, DGS, Medina. Rows of windowless buildings. I saw we were coming near the end. *Time to wrap this gig.*

“Okay, so Budd tries out a few funny lines, but the Rainbows don't seem to pick up on the laughs. Me, I'm outgunned a

hundred to one, and I admit, when I don't know the next move, I get stupid. Started nodding. Until the braided beard next to me snapped his fingers at a couple of hulks in black shirts to grab Budd—who threw a punch! They yanked his arms behind his back, threatened to rope his hands, too, if he didn't cut the crap. Budd is trying hard to deal, promising he'll come down once a week, help out with the balky inventory, if they let him go. And like that for awhile. Then he tells the blackshirts, *All right, can't fight you guys any more—but there's one thing we gotta do before we do any repair jobs...*

I looked at Teri, her face glowing with sweat and happiness, eager to hear whatever came next.

“Budd said what they definitely had to do first was tour him through the electrical hub, so he could decide if any special attention was needed there. Rainbows got debating that, more stoned by the minute and I was nodding again. But, if you can believe it, Teri, they swallowed his story, untied him, and off they trundled into the bowels of the operation, the mysterious intermittent source of Rainbow Voltage!”

River not far now. “Maybe a half hour goes by, the bash is heating up, I'm nodding...and ziiiiip! the lights ping out—pitch black in there! I mean, pandemonium. Everybody wasted, thrashing in the dark!”

Budd and I we're laughing helplessly. “Don't stop!” Teri tease-punched my arm.

“Right. So what do I feel but a hand on my shoulder. Whoever it is lifts my hand, touches it to his wrist, and *he's wearing a cell*. Only two of us in the whole place wearing. ‘Let's get out of here, my friend,’ he says, ‘I can get us to the elevator...’

“Elevator?! I’m thinking the elevator’s gonna be a brain-dead tin-can, last place we wanna be. But he tugs me along and we wind through the crush—in total darkness, you know? I was clueless, but Budd keeps threading the maze til he gets us away from the noise, and says, ‘We get back on top, I’m giving you your head, okay?’”

“Well, I was definitely in shock when I saw a ready-light in that can, I mean how in hell did he manage to bring the whole house down but the elevator’s still lit?! But that rattle trap made me seriously nervous.” A deliberate pause for Teri’s sake.

“Turns out our Buddy here knew *exactly* what was what in that e-hub and got the guys, wasted as they were, to do *exactly* what he wanted them to!”

Budd grinned. “My super-hero moment.”

“Thought that was when you saved Horatio, here?” Teri looked at Budd, then me. When neither of us answered, she rolled her eyes. “Okay, you got yourselves to the elevator and...”

“And this mean-looking long-hair races up with a blade like a goddamned ice pick, ready for the down-stroke. Everything happening lightning quick— Budd gets the blade, don’t ask me how, maybe *he* doesn’t know himself cause all this time I never did get that blow-by-blow. Next, longhair’s prying the blade out of Budd’s grip, turning it around, aiming for his gut, about to slash my new best friend! I jump in to stop the hit. But *oh shit* the tip gouges straight down my cheek...”

Budd groaned.

“I kick my way clear...but that blade gets me *argh!* a second time, right here. Everybody jumps when the blood starts

gushing, but now *I've got the knife*. And that's when I knock out the elevator light.”

“What? Why?” Teri burst in on cue, setting me up nicely.

“So the next wave of bladers won't be able see a fucking tank!”

“And Budd, of course,” Teri added, “would have the advantage.”

“Exactly. Even better, that blader must've fumbled in the dark on his way to reinforcements, cause he wasn't on our tail. Budd says, 'Going up'. I turn the key and we get our lucky behinds on top.” I sighed, reliving that relief.

“Yeah, with you *bleeding* all over me!” Budd shook with held-back laughter.

“I know, sir, and I do apologize. That DGS shirt you were wearing was a real fave, right? Well, hell, so was my left cheek, man! But, you know what, Teri? Rena swears it was this sexy gash caught her eye in the Magstat when we met. So Budd, all in all, maybe I owe you!”

“Wait, Lonnie,” Teri said, “you mean your own blade was the one that...”

“Yep, a genuine former-Octopus blank. Nothing on it but my own juice! Later, got it carved at The Swan, that tat-and-do-you-parlor? A swallow's wing—you can figure the reason. Kept it on me til I turned into a Laby, and stashed it in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Teri gave me a frown. “That one's for next time, I promise...”

“In *this story*, Persephone puts out an order on Buddy and me. We're sure a hit's coming our way. But one of her goons clued us the Lady only wanted to, *get this*, apologize for her boys' bad behavior. Smart move —couple of escape-artists on her gang's good side's better than two likely to sick Gaards on their nest! She even offered to let us crash down there, anytime we needed to. Still holds, far as I know.”

“Like I'd ever waltz into Hades again,” Budd muttered.

“Like you'll *ever*.” Teri tightened her grip on his arm.

“Maybe someday,” I said, “one of us'll *have to*. Rely on renegades, I mean.” Teri gave me a look, but I shook my head.

“What, no epilogue?” she said.

“The epilogue, folks,” I said with a flourish, “is this. Budd— coincidentally— got up-ranked at DGS.”

“And don't forget, something far better than that,” Budd said and waited.

“You mean *me* trying to push you around!” She laughed and they did a Laby shake like the day they met.

“So now you know,” Budd said to Teri, then touched my cheek, “why Lonnie calls this his friendship scar.”

“Now I know.” She said, and touched her own cheek.

In spite of everything, we were full of life together. That seemed enough. We'd deal with the future when it screamed up in a GPV and swung the door open for us...

No doubt about it, eucs were in the air. Even with my bum nose, I knew them and they knew me back. Knew us.

I sprinted ahead, grateful those trees were still standing, still speaking to us, still saying *river*.

Sidney's Van 2

The present, Lonnie

I unzipped its pocket, pulled out my marble, rolled it in my palm. Always on me, no matter what. Like Budd's harmonica. Like my swallow-blade til blades were *verboden*, got you out of Labyrinth. But *this* little thing? What could it harm? On me since the day I spotted it in the dirt on our way to The River. Before Hydro locked that water up, like all the rest.

Lights from Sidney's panel played inside the clear sphere with a swirl of dark like the iris of an eye.

Natalie coughed. I turned around to see Budd fold the blanket back, humming to her. She was flushed, her eyes too bright. And it hit me hard—where we were going, that hole in the desert we were headed for, wasn't any place to take a sick kid. Dizziness rocked me. So many reasons to be scared I'd stopped counting. Teri's no-show. That trance my friend had dived into, leaving everything but Natalie.

Samarath and his haz team could be on our trail in few hours. Contradiction undermined every move I'd made so far, would undermine every decision we'd be forced to make from here on. I zipped my lucky glass ball back into its pocket.

"Any extra hydrogen dioxide on ya, Sid?" I asked. "This girl's got to stay hydrated."

"You bet. Regs, you know." Irony puckered Sidney's voice. "PVDs carry 20 liters. Minimum. HydroPur certified. Though I heard the honeymoon's official...so maybe that's Hydro-*Medina certified* by now?"

Not about to touch that, I glanced again at Budd and Natalie. If I didn't know Budd was blind, I'd say they were *gazing at each other*. And Natalie— did she get that Budd couldn't see her? You wouldn't know it from the look on her face. I'd seen that look between them at the Clinic. Like there was some kind of *nerve* running through the air...

Shit, but we were fuel for the furnace now! The grand exit— heroes rush in, whisk little orphan-kid out of bad guy's frying pan... Yeah, I got us out. But Budd was the one she trusted. *Teri's friend*. "What else you got in this jammer, Sid?" I asked.

"Whadya' need?" He shot back. "Food paks, space blanket, epi kits, good ol' morphine..."

"Hey we gotta *tote* the stuff. ..."

"Take those duffels, too. Behind the H-gen—grey housing with a red light on?" Sidney pointed with his thumb, eyes examining Budd, then myself. "You boffs look good enough to carry a few days' life support..."

"Plus the girl," I reminded him.

"Plus the girl." Sidney looked soberly at Natalie through the rear-view mirror and shook his head, half his face pulling into a doubtful grin that showed a missing tooth.

"Rena G. says you're a good man in a tight place."

"*Rena*/Her name is gold. Amazing woman. Not a bad doctor, either," Sidney joked. "Known her long?"

"Married to her," I grinned. "Budd, you already know. And..." I swung my arm back, "this is Natalie. Our little fugitive."

Part Six

Labyrinth 5

Teri

Snowy talking, talking, she dozed and listened —*made me smash the thing with a rock because it wasn't really dead*. She tried to weave each word in with the others, tried to understand him. She had to hold onto his words, because somewhere in his story were answers she desperately needed.

“Wants another favor. Greedy bastard.” His unnerving chuckle. “And that favor,” he tapped her bare foot with his boot, “is you.” Tapped again. “Wants it bad, Sammy does. Real bad. And I'm gonna to give it to him, give him what he wants. Not like the other times. Snowy does for Snowy on this one...”

He hadn't tied her up. Because he believed she was too weak to run? Good. Was she? She rubbed her hands in the shelter of the sock. Snowy just happened to pick her?—*only her? Get him talking*: Her tongue caught on the dry roof of her mouth as she spoke a single word, “Listening.”

“Yeah?” Silence. “Never wanted to be one of the big shots like Sammy, sucking up to those bots over their pay-grade...”

What he said made no sense until she realized his need to talk had nothing to do with her. Except that everything about him had to do with her. Everything she cared about. “Water?” She winced at the stab of pain the word cost her.

“Change our minds, did we?”

A cold explosion against the side of her face. Liquid trickled into her ear. She shook her head, knocking his hand away and the bottle went flying, she heard him lunge after it.

He shoved her head back, dribbled liquid over her lips. She stuck out her tongue to catch it. "Shouldn't give you a fucking drop after a stunt like that," he snarled. "*I'm listening;*" he mimicked her words in a high whine, took another swig. "Not long now," he mumbled, "not long til my good buddies get back..." He hissed air. "Til then I 'm stuck with you, lady, and you're stuck with me." Silence. "Unless, that is, I get sick of looking at your ugly..."

She was grateful for *ugly*. Her bloody, swollen body, nothing he wanted. But maybe she was good for listening? He needed her for that, didn't he? Afraid as he was of the silence around them going on and on into the dark.

He swished water between his teeth. That liquid music made her swoon. He swallowed. "Interested in my troubles, are you?" He sniffed. "That another *woman thing*?" He kicked at the dirt near her legs.

"The guys piss me off, though. Real jacked up about not bending Sammy's *rules*, it's always goddamned *rules* with him, everybody jumping to his specs." He slammed his fists into the ground. "Except me. *Me!*"

She flinched at each blow.

He cleared his throat, belched. "What it is, is see, they don't get my *style*." He clucked his tongue. "Sno-wy!" His voice gone falsetto. "Why can't you just stick to the jooo-ob? Already told em," whispering now, "Snowy does what comes...natural."

More and more she relied on her ears. She closed her eyes and it seemed to her Budd was there.

“Sammy's the one. Oh Sam the man, oh yeah...” Snowy stood, his footsteps unsteady. She heard him close by, digging fast, heard the stream of his urine. Scooping sand again, crunching back, sitting down. “Well, he's not going to like this little side-track,” he emphasized words, tapping her leg with his boot, “*not* going to like it at *all*.”

Side track? What they did to her?

“Nothing ever good enough.” He snorted. “Not even when we were kids.” A long silence. “But now. Snowy's got something Sammy needs to keep his plan going...”

Plan frightened her. Snowy's voice slurred on, hopping around in time while her mind swam and cleared. She had to pee again. Bad. Stupidly she thought of asking him to help her up, then just opened herself, careful not to wet the jacket, letting the warm liquid pool underneath her. Why did her body go on leaking water when she was in such need of it?!

“...he...he made me hit Trip over the head.”

What was he saying? She forced herself to listen.

“Brian, he was 15. Little bro, 13. Brian the smart one. Lucky one. Everybody said so. Mom. Uncle Al and Uncle Eric. *Showpiece*,” Snowy spat the word, “*Showpiece of the family*.”

“One time I was playing around with Bri's gun—and I accidentally shot Tripper, my best hunting dog, ah, god, the way that dog crawled out of the trees dragging his hind end. I went straight to him. Wasn't bleeding much, but he was whining and I... I panicked, laid the gun against his skull but didn't know if I could do it, put him out of his misery. Right then Brian came up behind me, grabbed the gun, twisted my arm up behind me, gun against my skull...the way I was gonna shoot Trip! Christ, he was gonna do it, squeeze one off into my

brains, me on my knees, he just kept jabbing the barrel, *pick up that rock!* And he...he made me hit Trip with it.”

Silence. She felt he was looking off into the night.

“It was like...that dog was *never* gonna die. Like I was gonna have to go on bashing his goddamned head in forever. Every time I stop and can't do it anymore, Brian jams the barrel harder and I keep going.” He made a scraping noise in the back of his throat. “After that. I took off on my own. Didn't see family again. Til Mom died.”

She opened her eyes, strained to make him out, lying on his side, head on one arm.

“What he made me do to Trip, and later, that time in the desert? Never happened.” Deep breath. “Took twenty years to come around to Snowy's turn...”

She squinted to sharpen her view of him. His squeezelight shone on his face. Not repulsive. Not like his voice that nauseated her, twisting between self pity and hate, filling her with dread. One saving thing. Samarath did not tell Snowy to do what he did to her. He was after something bigger than her life. And Snowy was blowing that.

“I had...a friend once,” she said. Clumsily she licked her lips, tongue like foam rubber. “I was nothing to him...”

He sat up and she saw his face collapse into suspicion. Agitated, he stood and faced away from her. “What d'*you* know about it?! Shit, why'm I telling you anything?”

He wouldn't talk now. He was looking, she guessed, in the direction his buddies had gone— where he still believed they would come for him.

Whistling tunelessly, he rustled through his pak. Hers, too? Hungry? “Pop-Nuts,” she whispered, “left zip...”

“Yeah. Hey!” he said. “Had this stuff once. What the hell is it, anyways?” His sudden cheerful mood shocked her.

He chewed noisily. She smelled him again and reflexively pulled her legs up so more of her was covered by the jacket. When he stopped chewing, she tried again. “How did you survive? When he...” She did not want to pronounce that name.

“How come you're so interested?”

“Because,” she said, dreamily, “when you talk...time goes quicker.” And it was true.

“Yeah,” he said. “Time goes quicker.”

The heaviness of his voice told her his buddies were not coming back. The other three, she was almost sure now, had not done more than hit her, hold her for him...

Something moved in the brush to her right. An animal? Snowy grunted at the sound. “Nothing,” he muttered to himself.

After a time he said, “Pure dumb-ass stumbling’s what saved me. Going in circles, tongue turning to asphalt. But for once my luck came in. Found my way outta some dumb ass arroyo like all the other dumb ass arroyos. But this one turned into a dirt road going fuck knows where...

“Should’ve seen Sammy's face when I showed up!” Intense, distorted laughter abruptly shut off. “Shoulda beat the living shit out of him, right then.” He smashed his fist into the dirt beside her, again and again until she heard a choked whimper and she froze. The cry broke into rough, convulsive breathing, gradually quieting to a rhythm she thought she recognized but could not let herself believe. Not yet.

She let another few minutes pass. Peered at him through sticky eyes, amazed to find what she’d hoped for was true. *He was sleeping*. No weapon visible. Underneath him? Hardly anyone had guns anymore, but knives were another thing. Didn’t she

see a knife when he...? Maybe his buddies took it with them? Because after what he did to her, he didn't *need* a weapon to keep her in line? She looked at him again. Asleep. Definitely.

She pulled herself upright, stifling a yelp of pain. Crawled toward him. Snoring softly now. Conked on something. Out for awhile. But he would wake. Would come after her.

She saw his closed eyes roll under sweaty lids wondered if Dreams came to people like Snowy. Like the light of the sun, did they fall everywhere on everyone without exception?

Budd, Natalie, Jojo. Could she do it for them?

On her knees, the world bright with dizziness, she could not see his pak, hugged hers close. She would take all he had, whatever his water was dosed with. Leave him with none, like his brother.

But the jig lay close to him. She didn't dare put a hand on it.

They weren't coming for him, his buddies. But if he woke, if he found his way back... She sat down and hung her head. Heart pounding. Was she strong enough?

The fingers of her good hand came up against a rock and took hold of it. Closed around the stone's weight.

For a moment she hung there unable to move. Snowy's story, so fresh. Heavy and roiling in her gut.

His words, hers now. *Please don't make me do this...*

She crawled to a spot behind him. On his side, right arm pillowing his head. She aimed for a spot above his ear. Her arm shook uncontrollably.

She brought the rock down with all her strength.

Calona: Jojo's Vision

Flat on her back, arms spread wide, she looked up into black sky glimmering with unfamiliar stars. Her gaze wandered over them until they blurred and she had to rest from the weight of all that light.

"Come on, Jojo, do it for me," Teri says, gathering her hair over her shoulder, peering at the rippling tail. "Give me what you've got, what do you call it? Razor cut." Bitterness in her laugh. "Fashion for a fallen world..."

"Not funny," Jojo says.

"All this fur, my god." She lays her head on her pulled-up knees. "Miserable little beast," she shakes the hank of hair. "I mean, this is the desert!"

Jojo takes hold of the tail, pets a hand down its length. "Pretty thing. Shame to take a blade to it."

They are in a small grove of palms, beside a mountain of dirt and stone. A woman stands against the wall, her own grey hair cropped except for a single coiled braid above one ear. Her bare shoulders tattooed with intricate spirals. She smiles at Jojo. Turns away. Walks into a crack in the mountain.

In the palm grove, she and Teri sit in the shade of an awning rigged from a thin red blanket. They are stripped down to nearly nothing. Teri in breast-band and underpants, one cheek dark and sore-looking. No wind now. But Jojo knows it'll be up

soon. Stinging their faces, sucking juice from their eyes so it hurts to see. They'll have to follow the woman...

"Go on. Cut." Teri's eyes penetrate hers.

She waits, brushes away loose strands shivering over Teri's face.

Finally she begins, the scrutch-scrutch of her blade slicing, Teri's hair falling onto the ground. Its fragrance comes to her then. Salt and ashes. The sad, dry smell of cut hair...

"More," Teri urges her, when Jojo holds up the last coil and lets the air take it...

Labyrinth 6

Teri

The rim of the sun, brilliant and liquid, rose from behind a jagged line of blue mountains. She gasped.

On her back, awash in warm dazzling light, she saw the landscape she'd been crawling through all night. Couldn't move. Only her eyes. Each sight a stab of pain. Sage? Cactus? She didn't know the names, knew nothing about the desert.

Near her face in the dirt, a line of black ants shimmered over sand grains. She followed them with her eyes then lifted her gaze into the fronds of a palm, the tree's green gravity drawing her. There, too high for her to reach even if she could stand, hung a spray of dark fruit— was it fruit?— small, alluring, like a cluster of olives, like grapes. A sharp squeeze in the floor of her mouth.

She gazed without thought into a swelling and peculiar happiness. Completely emptied, body numb or asleep, she allowed herself to be fed and watered, tasting and drinking through her eyes...

Clouds drifted, pure and white, far above in searing blue space.

She listened.

Inside the wind, insect voices sang on a single dry note, bending it up and down. Like the stringed instrument her father bowed when she was a child. She was that child

listening, felt her father close. When she closed her eyes, she saw the child's face change. Not her own. *Natalie's*.

Those notes broke apart, becoming words. ***Fruit. Flower...***
Her mind playing tricks, turning the drone of bees into words.

No bees.

She turned her eyes to the right--didn't hurt anymore, nothing hurt anymore—three or four palm trees, only a little taller than she was. Masses of small yellow flowers.

Some in fruit, some in flower.

Calona 2

Jojo

She sat up out of her bivy between heaps of krete where she'd nested the night before, craving her own corner away from the others. Remembered her eyes blurring the stars when she looked up at them the night before. Wasn't her eyes now, there was mist in the air.

Sun not up yet. But soon. A chill in her belly. About to remember something.

A flutter at her cheek. Ants here, too? She brushed them away, rubbed her arms free of grit. Two flavors, two parts to it, the thing she did and didn't want to remember.

One was cold hard fact—*Teri missing*.

The other, a wonder. A vision. *Cutting Teri's hair in the desert*. They were together! In the desert but not here exactly. It had come to her as she was waking—not a dream, not a Dream.

She pulled on her hat, wound her way through snarls of cable, charred hulks of metal, to what Moon and Blaise and Rena called The Yard—rectangle of dirt surrounded by a jumble of barrels and boxes. Where they made a circle, lay down to Dream together. Only nobody could sleep.

Storage boxes on their sides like caves, humped bodies curled inside. Blaise and Malika. Budd and Natalie. Moon and—she smiled--Moon and Moon. Rena and Lonnie.

One of the humps in the largest bin uncovered itself— *Dr. Rena* in her makeshift clinic. Eyes like pieces of darkness. On the lookout for sickness, holding drugs that couldn't cure what ailed them now, maybe only float them out, if they were lucky, an easier ride at the end than otherwise. All of it too much for one woman. Even *Dr. Rena*.

She laid her hands on *Rena's* shoulders. “Hey, Doc, no symptoms yet, honest. I'm off to see how *Budd* and the kid're doing. “

Rena nodded, gave her a wan smile. “That fever of *Natalie's* is down from what she was running in Containment. Hard to get details, though, she's not wearing a cell and she...”

“Still can't believe they're here. Just need to get another look at them, is all.” That stunning moment from late last night still bright in her mind— *Lonnie* and *Budd* with *Natalie* in his arms, stumbling toward them out of the dark...

Lonnie dropped the bags he was hauling, exhausted, *Jojo* threw herself into his arms. “Is it you, is it really you, how did you get here?!” She ran to *Budd*, helped him peel off his pak, wrapped herself around him and *Natalie*, shaking her head to wake herself up. *Budd* squatted, resting the girl against him while *Jojo* brushed the ground free of bolts and bits of krete, threw down the blanket from around her shoulders. She peered into *Natalie's* sleepy face puzzling at her, trying to fasten on who she was. She smiled into the girl's eyes.

Then she remembered where they were, what they were doing here, and her smile died.

“We got the news,” *Lonnie* said, out of breath, hands on his knees, not looking at her, “*Teri*—and well, let's just say... a few little things went wrong at *MCC*. So we,” he panted, glanced at *Budd*, “scooped up *Natalie* and jammed.” He emptied his jig, swallowing in loud gulps, splashing his face, scrubbing hard.

“Sidney, Rena’s guy, know him? Drove his PV to the perimeter and dropped us.” He made a bitter face and bent over again. “Long story, Jo. I’m totally beat. Later, okay?”

~

She blew a faint breath across Budd’s lips. He lay, eyes shut, in his own tangled nest next to Natalie, and suddenly she knew what he was seeing.

Teri on the ground. Unconscious? He took hold of her, shook her, called her name. Then there was nothing. Not even the echo of space around them.

When she touched him, Joy blazed his eyes, a heartbreaking smile. He caught her wrist, felt up her arm to her chin. Realized whose arm he was holding, shut down into grief. But gave Jojo a shaky, trying-hard-to-welcome-her face. That first look, though, she knew what it meant, who it was for.

Moon

He set off, swinging his legs in the forbidden direction, violating Rena’s fiat—“Nobody goes into open desert.” *Too bad, madam, I’m going where I bloody well want to.* There it was again, the bloody bleeding Brit in him, barmy queer old thespian ancestress, Helen, admonishing. Helen, who sank a thousand hopes. Butting in, steering him wrong. Jinxing his chances with her rude crude peculiar remarks. Using his body and his brain...

Her taste for antique curse words, et al, got him into some sticky spots. Pursued by straight, and, as it turned out, dangerous young men. Then there was her penchant for invention, deliberately improper delivery of lines...on stage!

Rants on the shortfall of talent in this post-post-everything world. Oh, she, he, they could go on!

Rena like the wind moved against him/Helen though. Rena hadn't wanted him here in the first place, told him straight out. But against all advice, even Helen's, his overblown idealism got him into Labyrinth. Once he was in, he was hooked on coming to Calona. Dreaming backed him up on that, too. And he'd somehow got Budd on his side! Now he wasn't sure of anything.

Helen was the thread still tethering him to England, poor England, cut off on her own, after Wales and Scotland broke away, too. England no longer allied to the continent. He had no clear sense who Helen *really* was though. Nothing but a few feckin factoids, he liked to say. She liked to say? She'd kicked off and got herself buried in Hitler's end-days, '43 or so, when being a queer Jew was doubly lethal. Why couldn't he cut the old dame out of his exiled Tri-Am hide? England severed from Eurasia, One Ireland her closest ally. What irony! So who in hell was he? Always this was the question he circled back to. Without a gender, without a country. Split down the centerline.

Sand and stones flew from his soles as he tramped along. When he was a long way out, he caught something low and slender dashing away from his noise— a lizard? He halted, out of breath. Was he stroked? HM swore life out here had been obliterated. Save for a few tufty, weedy things Did anything eat them? Not lizards, surely. But didn't some little beastie always take bites of what was available, no matter how poor? Didn't life always find a way to keep going? Isn't that how it worked?

Maybe not when it came to radkill.

Another shadow rocketed out of the brush, then went stone still. He stared at its curvy roughness, round wet eyes that never blinked in all this blasting light. His own eyes teared up. The sides of its belly panted in and out. Euphoria heated his

chest. He'd flushed a lizard! *A miracle greater than sextillion infidels.* Words not his own. But utterly familiar. He must have lifted them. Stealing was half his profession. But where had he heard those words before?

He looked again and the lizardly creature was gone.

Against the drag of sand and fatigue and too much sun, like mad Hamlet, he trudged and muttered to himself—*A miracle greater than sextillion...? No.* Not sextillion infidels. That was wrong. What was it? The words altered in his heated brain, surely. They teased him, an itch, a tickle he couldn't pin down, couldn't ignore.

Again he came to a halt—*Ariadne.* Her words. *Sextillions of angels.* They made no sense to him the first time he'd heard them. Why *those* among all possible words in the English language? He used to wonder if She sometimes dropped things into their heads for the pure pleasure of the sounds, the kick of blowing their minds, forcing them to puzzle the *why* and *wherefore*. But seeing this reptilian creature just now, the words made utter and perfect sense to him. Except for possibly the last one? As though they'd waited patiently, such a long, long time, to find him. To find him now. At Calona. Not Dreaming. Awake.

So She was still with them?

Nausea gripped him, his head throbbed with heat. *Hot...* the terrible other meaning hit him now as he wobbled on his feet and doubt rose, huge and impossible to get round, making him question what he'd been so certain of and grateful for, only a moment ago.

Had they gone wrong, deviated from her plan? Had She abandoned them here? Was this the idea all along?

He glared at the flat searing screen of the sky. Maybe he hadn't seen a lizard at all. A clawed shadow scuttering in his own mind? Crazy-Helen playing with the weakness of his nature. His dread of death. A girlish longing after miracles, that spot in his soul Helen scoured away at, but kept growing back.

His knees buckled. Catching his fall near a stretch of gravel, he leaned over and puked.

Jojo

In her junkpile under a space-blanket awning, she picked sticky bits of Vita-bar off the wrapper, swallowing them like pills with tiny sips from her jig, swiped at her face and hands and under her arms with a few drops of water on a kleenscrub.

An odd swirl caught her eye on the tumbled krete in front of her—a bit of grey-green delicate as a brush stroke. She touched the whorl lightly with a fingertip. A curious texture like something glued-on. She looked around and saw dozens here and there, especially near the ground in pockets of shade.

“Knock, knock?” Lonnie’s head popped over the east wall of her fortress in his ridiculous sky cap. Catching his tense smile, she did not return it. Whatever news he was bringing, she wasn't ready for.

“Don’t worry, everybody's breathing...” he tried to calm her, but those brows hooked together in the middle of his forehead worked against him. He sighed. “Had a rough time last night sleeping in Munch’s shadow...”

When she and Rena had come to the Outer Gate their first night, she'd swept a lightstick over Munch's writhing ghost-face. Some govcorp goon 's brilliant idea to rivet a crude silibord repro of *The Scream*, a trans-language universal warning, keeping anybody and everybody the hell away from

Calona. Where they were camped right now. With their possibly insane directive to Dream rad counts back to normal.

She'd been so glad to see Lonnie last night, but she could feel it, he was holding some grudge nowhere in sight when he told how they'd kidnapped Natalie from the clinic that was making her sick. Where was all her happiness? "Spill, Bartholomew," she said. Small revenge, using that name he detested. Revenge for what?

He kicked at the yellow dust all around them. "Rena says there's no water in that water tank, radioactive or not, says protocol is to drain them when the site's abandoned, says the tank wasn't mentioned in archives on Calona and...besides it would be a waste of our time, a *diversion*," he sighed and looked at her, "unless we all agree."

He was lobbying her! He and Rena'd been up all night arguing about some ancient water tank? "That's what you're twitching about?!"

His scarred cheek facing her, he squatted, studying the dirt. "Rena's *wrong*." When Jojo said nothing, he went on. "If. *gigantic if*, we can get any rads down, we're going to live at least long enough to get very very thirsty..."

"Not *that* thirsty, thanks."

He chewed his lip. "She wants to re-focus. Work The Action away from radiation...and on water. But there isn't any water here...unless it's in that god damned tank! Can't keep my mouth shut much longer." He grabbed a hunk of rubble and pumped it.

The air tasted cooked. She looked away from him out to Jackrabbit Flat, east of Calona, a hundred kilometers from where their camp, where The Tower once stood *taller than the Empire State Building*. Teri had told her that. The Empire State

Building gone more than twenty years. Teri's been gone for...she cut off the thought and turned to Lonnie doing reps. "Why tell *me*?"

"Because you ordered me to!" He shot her a sardonic grin, "Hey, Jo, I need a little help here..." He dropped the weight, picked at one of the spiral patches.

She cringed and shot out her hand. "Don't. Do that!" Were they even alive? Mutant lichens? What did she know about lichens? What did she know about anything?

"Can't get to Budd, he's not talking— not to me or anybody. Doesn't care about anything. Except what's happening with Teri. What's *going* to happen to Natalie." He jabbed at another swirling patch.

"I said *stop!*" She shook her head, unable to explain. He yanked his flight cap down to shade his eyes. She hated that thing. He hadn't flown for an age.

"Sorry if this is hard on you, but I don't want to undermine Rena with what's eating me— *everything* is eating me— looks like she's elected herself leader, the one going to keep this thing together...now that everything's coming apart."

Go ahead, undermine Jojo, no problem. Her mouth tightened as she looked around at mangled girders, scattered spikes and rail ties— itching to run.

"We're doing the Circle in the yard now, but... semi-conscious states, falling asleep and Dreaming? What about over-flight surveillance, especially if this Action's blown... I happen to know there *was* over-flight for years after shut down..."

He rattled on, picked out a pair of rocks, hefted them over his head. A little radiation and a missing friend wasn't cramping his work-out routine. Or a full read-out on his spats with Rena.

“Could you hold onto this thing with me, Jo? Budd’s so *gone*, it’s pushing me off the edge. Plus we don’t have a clue how this decontamination thing is gonna work. Especially since a lot of us aren’t here. And equipment. Rena wants to get going with whoever is here, see if we can...” His head down, talking to the dust. “How much depends on what we think is true compared to what’s really true? How much is Ariadne going to help us do? And that’s another thing, Jo. I haven’t Dreamed since...”

“Do *not* call me Jo.” She shook her head. “Look, I don’t have any fixes for you, Lonnie. Not now. Especially now.” Don’t want this burned-out Action, not without Teri.

Something caught her eye in the fretwork of the trestle above Lonnie’s head. A tatter of dirty sticks tucked into a crevice. *No crows in the desert, Jojo*. Ravens? And if that’s what she was looking at...how long ago?

Lonnie dropped his weight-rocks, setting off miniature dust clouds. “It would help me to know if you think Rena...”

“I’m not in charge here!” She arched her body into a familiar knotted posture, yanking at one ear. What she did when she couldn’t hold fear or anger. Or both.

He was standing, hands on his hips.

She looked at him. “Soon as a clear thought pokes out of the mess in my brain, you’ll be the first to know, okay? Had a hard night myself. There’re two of us carrying your worries, that has to be good enough.” She grabbed her shoulder bag and Stetson.

He pursed his lips, walked away into the yard. She turned in an agitated circle, regretting her harsh words, then sat, clapping her hat on her head, adjusting it. After a moment she crawled to the slab of krete Lonnie’d been jabbing, touching lightly over each spiral. He’d torn one of them. The sight of it hurt her. She rummaged through her gear, took a mouthful from her jig

and sprayed the damaged one. Watched it darken. Spit a second time. A third. They thickened and gleamed. Droplets of water rayed light back to her eyes. *Beautiful.*

From another time, another life— meeting Lonnie for the first time. She, holding fruit up to the light...

Lonnie and Jojo

Four years before the present

She held the sunlit orange close to Lonnie's nose and let him breathe it. His eyes fluttered shut like a man with a kiss on his mind. She pressed the fruit to her own lips, letting its sharp clear odor prick her throat and water her tongue. Only then did she offer to him, this Laby she was meeting for the first time, what she wanted for herself. He cocked his head, eyes bright.

They were standing a few meters past the edge of town, awkward, antsy, behind one of Medina's brokendown green houses, dull silastic peeling like dead skin from the frames, the ground littered with tubing, half empty bags of GRO. "For *you*," she said. "A message...in a funny-looking envelope."

He smiled at the fruit. "Who from? Titania?"

She grinned. Examined the orange for the best spot to plunge in. The globe soft under her fingers, practically fermenting in the heat. Teri's voice passed through her — that poem Jojo'd heard many times. *We're thirsty/ for a sip of nectar/fleshy drupe swollen seed-pouch/ bruisable bliss...*

Lonnie stepped closer.

She tore into the skin, stacking petals of rind to soak later. A burst of odor brightened the air between them, a mist of droplets sprayed her wrists. *A rush through the greenhouse...* She pulled two segments from the clutch and handed them over.

He opened his palm, let the pieces rest there untouched.

She shredded one with her teeth, streams of juice glistening chin and neck, a hand cupped to catch the overflow. She licked her palms, each of her fingers. “*River- bottom dirt/torso of sweetpeas/ leaning against a white wall/ vibrating with bees...*” She laughed at his amazement. He made no move to eat.

She gestured for him to sit on a GRO sack, sat herself, and dropped a last bite into her mouth. “We can use our real names. That’s why we tramped all the way out here.”

He blinked, his carved, appealing face now doubtful but still smiling. Wind kicked up puffs of dust at their feet. “You’re Puck—uh, Jojo— Teri’s friend. From...”

“The WD. Waste Depot to you.”

“Some of us call that place *The Furnace of Hades.*” He winked.

“Where things and people disappear?” She studied him. Young for 45. Lots of eyebrow and forehead. A nervous pout coming and going on his full lips. Hands tucked under his arms.

“And knowledge. And art, I hear.” As he spoke, he looked through her— into the past or future?

She nodded. *What knowledge, what art?* Did he know about the paintings?

Now he looked over her head, so long and curiously that she followed his gaze into the flat white sky where an air-bus glided. VIP transport. Hydro-heads on their way to some pow-wow. Brainstorming the next ad-campaign. The next water war. Maybe a stash of artwork onboard they’d eye-ball for banners and Net campaigns. Logo entries for the HM merger. One of those entries— Teri’s leafstar-in-a-raindrop— communicating more than Hydro and Medina intended. She reached for her jig. *Shit.* Her fingers touched a not-so-innocent printout crumpled

into a ball, passed to her at Gamer's Dungeon, before she'd hoofed it here. *Art for burning*: Feeding the furnace.

"Art and knowledge, too bad they're not edible..." she said, anxious to get back to the Depot, rid of the evidence. Her fingers brushed the cool puzzle-pieces of orange rind. She'd found the fruit that morning. Gorgeous. Bruises, mold-spots and all. She'd stared at it— hallucination? materialization?— on the locker-room yard. One of the Ops must've dropped it. Tasty things could be snagged doing disposal. Two raisins once, at the bottom of a drawer. Potatoes green at the edges. A linty peanut in a jacket pocket.

She wiped her hands on her shirt. "We gotta re-wire this pleasure thing, everybody's rusty, now. Can't help ourselves, the way we live, we forget the bliss of eating dirt and sunshine. She grinned, set her hands on her hips, her voice a parody of male authority. "*We quench your thirst... by improving on Nature!*"

He chuckled, loosening up. "Rusty, yeah. That's me!" He brushed an orange segment over his chapped lips, dropped it whole onto his tongue. Pouched cheeks as he chewed, wet hands wiped on his trousers.

Jojo snapped her pak strap, thinking of that printout. She eyed what was left of the fruit. "Teri and Budd wanted us to meet. We met. Now what?"

He studied her, tongue searching out the last bits in his teeth. "We're, uh...supposed to check the other guy out...see how we like the idea of trusting our lives to each other. Trust'll make or break The Local Group. And everything else."

She squinted into the sun. Local Group didn't quite exist yet. But yes. "Thumbs up or thumbs down?"

He gave her both gestures, his mouth pulling a lopsided smile. "Trust based on *what* exactly?"

He shrugged. "What you can't get on screen?" Eyebrows up. Innocent. "We passed the Gateman, the Blindman's Hoop, or we wouldn't be talking now..."

"But Teri wants us to pass *each others'* test." She leaned against the greenhouse wall, gave him a long look. "Whatever that might be."

He bit his lower lip. "Did I ...pass the fruit test?"

She laughed.

"Not sure I can tell a test from a friendly gesture." His smile fell. "Anyway, like you say, I'm outta practice. Body dull. Mind nodding off a lot. *Be a good little drone. Pat, pat.* Isn't that how govcorp wants it?"

She handed him two more segments. "We forget how little it takes to come alive though. *One bite, a banquet.* Teri's poet. What's her name?"

"Shakespeare's sister?" He was on the ground now, stretching his legs, clasping big square hands over the top of his head.

"Right." she said. "Wait! Shakespeare's *sister*? I didn't know he had a..."

"Joke. Never mind." He sat forward, knowing he'd made a wrong move.

"What you mean is, how did this drop-out get into our Group?" Another genius-boy she did *not* need.

"Sorry. Didn't mean anything. Not what you think..."

She half stood, her shadow falling over him. "Why don't we get to business, friend. Test me for real? But make it fast...gotta get back to the Furnace."

He stood with hands in his armpits. "Oh, you'll do."

She watched him. Those pursed lips, that half-smile. Half-smart ass, half flirt. “*You’ll do?* Sounds like a wedding vow! *I do, you’ll do*, and off we go...”

“Wait... I’d trust you is all I meant. Plus I happen to take the *I do thing* seriously. Last several years, anyhow.”

Oh, those wide, rust-proof brown eyes. All the rest of him stuck, like he said. But not those eyes.

“Do I know the bride?”

“You will if you don’t. She’s passed everybody’s tests but yours.” His first full smile. “I have to say the wedding test is a lot like this one.”

“Really? This one’s missing a few juicy parts, I’d say...” She grinned, and plucked the last segment of orange still resting on her pak, half-cooked in the sun. “Get the message inside this little beauty?” She handed it to him.

“*The body unlimited.*” He was quoting Teri’s poet back to her. Their hands met as he took the segment. “Or something like that,” he said, boy-eyes laughing. Embarrassed. He glanced unconsciously at his cell. “Between her and me, I mean.”

“I like my *unlimited* a lot bigger than two.”

He considered that with an amused expression.

She gathered peels in a pretty heap. “What we’re gonna be up to, if all goes well? Don’t want any Jack or Jane joining up...”

“So, will I do? For The Group, I mean?” He squinted at her. “Or is this *dear Lonnie, nice ta meecha, so long?*” His hands, palm up, slid toward hers.

She played along with the mock rejection. “Yeah, it’s been fun, but. Not sure you’re my cuppa...”

She liked the way joking gleamed his eyes. But she was stalling, glanced at her bare left wrist, “still a few hours before I have to answer that— officially anyway, soldier. I’m off to my day job feeding furnaces . . .and on the side, just for fun, pollinating fruits I can’t afford to taste. Except lucky days like this, when they fall out of the sky.”

Suddenly, she remembered his unlikely middle name that had made her smile the night before when Budd pronounced it.

She slapped his hands hard. “You’re in, Bartholomew.”

Calona 3

Jojo, the present

“Gertie does not wish to open her legs for us!” Blaise in goggles, sun-shade, gloves, leaned into torching the lock on the double-hull metal doors she and Malika had dug out from a sandy drift. *All French*, Blaise had described herself the night before, with a pretty curl to her speech that made Jojo watch her mouth closely. Her exact age—same height, too. Skinny, but strong enough to lug torches, deal with locks and fences. Right now she was taking on the hidey-hole-lady, Gravel Gertie, who hadn't been disturbed in decades.

Malika—Mala—crouched with one long black braid hanging to her waist. This was the way she liked to wear it, she'd explained, except when she wound it into a *snail* at the back of her head or tucked it under a kind of bonnet. She was a technical photographer from Kerala, south India, with a couple of rad-proof cameras to document what they were betting their lives on—with Ariadne's assistance—a gradual clearing of contamination. Mala had shown her a vid and two stills. “The live-link's down for obvious reasons. But juicy data will be right here”—she patted the DV—“to take back with us when we...” she faded out.

You mean *if*, Jojo did not say.

Now Malika was filming Blaise burning through those metal doors, the look of which made Jojo's belly squeeze— like the

forbidden cellar doors at first-level school that had lured her to them, but gave her nightmares.

Blaise shut off the torch, pushed up her goggles. “Hey, Jojo, give us a hand? We need to...ah, dig the rest of this damn *dune* out of our way...so she’ll open up for us.” Blaise glanced at her, then Malika. “You two... get properly introduced last night? Ah, yes, I remember. You know, my brains are going down in this heat like the live-link!” She shut her eyes and sighed. “Also...not so much sleeping.” Malika swung around and playfully aimed one of the cameras at Jojo who with a pantomime of terror, shielded her face.

~

Once the three of them had freed the doors, their Z-T construction engineer, Lagarto— thick-muscled with a curly beard— pulled on his thermal gloves, grasped the handle of the left door and tugged with all his strength. When it didn't budge, he went at it again with a groan. A grating shriek, and the door gave with a billow of dust, all Jojo could see at first— then, concrete stairs heading down into the bunker.

“This Lady will shelter our sleep,” Lagarto said.

His musical English charmed her. But she had to disagree on Gertie. “Like some old-time horror flick,” she muttered. “Dunno about you guys, but if I'm gonna shoot out the other end of the hose, I'd sure as hell rather...” she looked up and spread her arms, “do it *fresh*.” As the laughter died, she gave another glance down the stairs, catching the ancient stink of burial. “Creeps me *out*.”

Malika and Blaise looked at her blankly.

“Oh. Yeah. Lemme translate...*gives my bones a chill?*”

“Ah!” Malika beamed. “You mean like if you would spread your bedroll...in a morgue?” Another camera came out and Mala swung her long braid over one shoulder, shot a few frames of the entrance, then stowed it. Clipping an Imaging Device onto the brim of her camo cap, she bragged, “These little x-ray eyes can peer through dust-clouds and walls and get super clear pics of what's down there.” After a beat, and a puzzled look at the read-screen, she muttered something about a lead shield, leaned down into *the morgue* for a second look, then pulled the ID off. “On second thought.” Mala fished out an old timey pair of frameless specs, lifted them to her face just as Blaise snatched them and slipped them on herself. The two of them chuckled at each other.

She found herself joining their laughter though she wasn't sure what the joke was.

“Ladies, we need to get on with checking this place out.” Lonnie brushed past them with his powerlite and started briskly down the stairs.

Jojo kicked at the air after him, mouthing *Ladies?* The three women eyed each other with irked amusement. She wanted to run the other way but forced herself down into air sickly sweet with bugkill, maybe? What bugs would hang out in this mausoleum? Lagarto was already coughing and so was she. Not much down here anyway. A lot of stuff under filthy tarps, kegs stamped HydroPur— sure as hell wasn't H2O in there, maybe re-used kegs storing chemicals? Suddenly the whole thing seemed insanely funny to her. Leaning in closer, squinting at one of the date stamps, she blinked. *2051?* But that couldn't be right.

Then it hit her. Hydro must have shown up here sometime *after* it was supposedly shut down for good in 2049— but why? Her eyes grazed over the tarped containers to the wall farthest from the entrance— another set of locked double doors. Why

would a bomb shelter have an inner sanctum? Exclusive suite for VIPs? She did not want Blaise burning a hole in that one.

The tarps might make them a little shade or double as ground-covers. But clouds of dust rose as she lifted one edge slightly. She held her breath and let it drop. Words rushed out of her, “We do *not* want Natalie down here.” No comeback from anybody, not even Lonnie. Clearly, they would not be sleeping here. But those inner doors locked-up with heavy chains pulled at her. The dirt floor seemed to slant in that direction.

Rena’s hooded head loomed in the light at the top of the stairs. “Air’s bad down here. Not going to work,” she muttered. Nobody tossed back any arguments.

Relief flooded Jojo. Lonnie was right. Rena had the *authority gene*. All her life, Jojo’d seen that gift go bad in a repeating pattern. No matter how cool they started out, they always ended up pushing too hard, hanging on too long — the way a junky holds onto a bag—even when it was hurting them and everybody around. Until somebody worked up nerve enough to rip the bag out of their claws. Was there any other way? What was Moonshine’s line? *A self’s a terrible monarch...?*

~

Not far from the bunker, Moon stood watching Jojo and the others file out. He was all got up in that long-waisted jacket of his with two shiny rows of buttons like something out of the 19th Century —same as he’d worn the night before when he and she had a glimpse of each other, no real intro. After he’d gone off to the latrine, Mala amused her with the news that Fish Wives claimed *one person of the sort-of male gender* — “and that person,” Blaise added, “is Moon—the guy just now heading off for a piss in the dark.”

Lonnie'd already given Jojo his own piece of the puzzle around this character, Moon, somewhere in the weeks before The Action. "A Brit," Lonnie'd said, "one of those child prodigies. Or maybe that's *his* line, I wouldn't be surprised. But it's what you hear about him, anyway. The dude can play any gender, any age, comedy or drama. *A creature of swift disguises*. How can you trust somebody who comes up with stuff like that?"

Last night when Moon stepped out of the dark again, not waiting for Blaise or Mala, he'd squeezed Jojo's hand, slinging odd words like *trek, trop, doyo*. His eyes bored into hers. She listened, he talked. No problem. But when he asked about *her*, she 'd come off defensive, and at the same time more open than meeting a stranger called for. Before they'd all said goodnight, she babbled something about how if Teri didn't show up, she didn't know if she cared *what* happened next. Then Budd and Natalie and Lonnie had magically materialized, shocking her out of that descent. She hadn't thought of Moon since.

She looked at him now. Yeah, he was a showman, a tongue-tripper. *Why are you here?* she wanted to ask, but kept the question in her pocket after imagining it coming back on her—why was *she* here? He was tall, not much flesh on him. Graceful. Still and settled in himself. Like he'd never even thought about going down into that bunker, just waiting around for everybody else to realize their mistake.

She came up to him leaning against shattered krete, glancing in the direction of The Tower. "So. What's your *real* name?"

His head in a gov-issue visor snapped around. But he was in no hurry to answer. "Moonshine," he finally said. "You know, from Midsummer? Only none a the other fairies've shown up so far...unless that'd be you?"

She resisted a smile and stared. *Sort-of male gender?* A moment passed, a delay between her ears and brain, a current passing between them. She gave him a doubtful look. “No, I meant your real...”

“All's real that ends real.” He raised his brows and gave her a think-about-it face. “Okay. I admit, it's *Silverberg*. Will that do you for an answer?” A full-on smile.

“Silverberg what?”

“Silverberg, John.”

“How do you spell that?”

“J-O-H-N...”

She snorted.

“But I warn you, call me anything but Moon, and I likely won't be answering.” He stood up straight, pulled in his chin.

“Nobody but Tri-Am troopers call me John. You aren't one of those, are you?” his voice took on a reedy, teasing tone, as he held up an imaginary magnifying glass, pretending to examine the frayed, dirty-white uniform she'd hooked from a bin at the Depot. “What sort of garment is this, my I ask?”

“Desert-wear. From the dump. Fashion for a fallen world.” His playful manner tempted her into matching him and at the same time irritated her. Didn't he know why they were here? Didn't he know about Teri?

“Fashion for a fallen world. Careful, I steal lines like that.”

The play at Riker came back to her, and she softened. “We loved you at the Pavilion.” She stopped avoiding his eyes. “Hard to believe Hydro-heads missed the stings and arrows, isn't it?”

Or maybe they didn't. But she wasn't going to start thinking out loud, not around this guy. “You know, when I was down

there,” she tipped her head toward the bunker, “I was chewing on a line of yours. *A self's a terrible Monarch...*”

“...*even to a self.*” The left corner of his mouth twitched.

Did he find *everything* funny? “You write that? Or were you. uh, just the mouthpiece?”

He folded over in an elaborate bow. When he rose, all teasing gone, his smile was full of warmth. “You said *we.*” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “ Ah. Teri? Right. Sorry.”

Silence.

Her eyes burned, flicking back and forth in her head, looking for something to say. Her shoulder herky-jerky again. She pulled at the earlobe still sore from the wrangle with Lonnie.

“Any Dreams on it?” Head cocked, he looked directly at her.

The List 3: LJ

“Get in here. Right away.” Curt’s voice through her console over-rode the speech pattern analysis memo she was working on. *Here* meaning his posh office. “What’s up?” she said, but he’d already shut down their connection. She locked down her files, slipped heeled boots back onto sore feet, adjusted her waistband, and clicked down the hall.

“Sit,” he said, his level gaze piercing her. Which she found alarming—he never really looked her in the eye. Even when arching above her in bed.

“Maybe you can clear up something for me.” He tilted his chair back, eyes still probing her.

“If it’s about last night...” They’d argued noisily after love making, about who should get the upcoming promotion in her department. She was for Ben, somebody she honestly admired— or herself. Curt was for Cassie who never said *no* to his face.

“Nothing about last night.” As he continued watching her, she felt her temperature drop. “I just screened footage of you in the Alcove. What were you doing in there?”

Shit! That survcam had been *off!* “I...”

“Hold on. Before you incriminate yourself...”

“...no, I was just *curious* about who was...okay. I know it’s a weakness of mine, but it only happened once and it’ll never happen again. I haven’t done anything I’m not entitled to do...”

He stood up. “Give me your wrist.”

“What for? This isn’t an episode of General Kraken, you know, all I was doing...”

“Give me your goddamn wrist, Lisa.”

Tentatively she held out her left arm. He hadn’t asked for her left, but she knew what was coming. He took hold of her wrist, unlocked and disabled her cell, dropped it into his steel drawer. No doubt he’d order a full read and copy. She’d wiped all her history with Deena, three levels down. Wouldn’t find a thing there. Unless...

“I said. Sit down.”

She sat, faint with fear and confusion. She’d done all the right things. Mentioned nothing to Deena. Been on REM-X2 for awhile now, and warmed up to Curt. More than warmed up. All her interviews turned in on time with good reviews. Her personnel files and research updated...

“We’ve been looking into your...personal habits. Who you hang with. Since two days ago, we’ve had an Ear in your console and a shot-boom on your tail. Don’t give me the outraged face, I don’t have much on you so far but that delve into the filer...wouldn’t have thought anything of it if you hadn’t wiped the record on the comps panel, covering the fact you were ever there. That doesn’t exactly smell like innocent curiosity.”

Thank god Deena wasn’t part of this. She stood up. “You know, Curt, if you really had enough to take me down, you wouldn’t be talking to me in your office politely, this way, you’d be on your way to H M with *evidence* of my disloyalty violation or whatever the hell...”

“Listen, Lisa, you need to take this seriously.”

“LJ,” she said, deadpan. “You’re repeating yourself. Anyway, I prefer to stand while getting reamed, thank you.”

“You're pushing your luck, woman...”

“Come on. You don't really have anything. I mean, besides me being a bit snoopy. Of course I deleted the entry file! My weaknesses aren't exactly something I want every body else knowing about. Especially my...*superiors*.” She gave the word a mocking twist. “Haven't gone near the thing since— that's on vid too, am I right?” He said nothing, and she went on. “Okay, I made one mistake, Curt. *That's all*. I'm human. I caved in to an impulse. And then got scared about it, all right?” She bit her lip and tried to look regretful. “Confession time. I was actually worried about Reiki, Worried he was on The List.”

“Ben Reiki?”

“Also, I admit... and this is pretty low...I was hoping to find Cassie Bergman ON it. If you get what I'm saying?”

Curt's head jerked back in a silent laugh. Buying it. Because he was only too eager to see her confess to something unsavory. Because he was jealous of Ben Reiki. Because he knew *she* had always been jealous of Cassie Bergman, everybody knew that. “But how do I know,” he said, “those are your only reasons?”

She laughed. It was working. “Darling, you can never be *sure* about anything, you ought to know, doing what you do for a living. But I promise, LJ's no roaker. Just a woman with a woman's...um, weaknesses. Not only do I want that damned promotion something awful. I want *you*.” She tilted her head. “Now.”

His smile widened. Still looking directly at her. Interested. More than interested.

Her heart rate came down even as she took hold of his hair and his mouth loomed up, meeting hers. She pushed her tongue between his lips and moaned.

Secret Ballot

Jojo

Malika's nervous fingers unraveled the weave of her braid. "Something's off here, guys."

They were sitting in the chalky gravel of the west-end main yard, under the walkway coming off the watertank. For the moment it threw them a little shade and that was enough. Behind the tank, overturned armored trucks, fence poles cemented in place, fencing long torn away. Beyond the yard, Jojo could practically *feel* The Shaft, the caged platform that once cranked down more than a kilometer carrying a live bomb to an underground ignition site.

It was noon. Her body pungent, sticky with sweat. Grit everywhere, even her teeth. Their shrinking water supply haunted her even as she swallowed, looked at the dust-streaked faces around her waiting for Mala to go on. Natalie lay under a bivy tent beside Budd. He was leaning against some bulky metal thing that looked like an ancient utility box. Just a few steps from her side, but he felt very far from her, from all of them. Just like Lonnie said.

"I'm not Dreaming." Mala burst out. "I thought, you know—okay, we're so buzzed getting set for coming in and all that. But last night... no Dreaming, again." She licked her lips, shaded her eyes. "What about...everybody else?"

Budd's head tipped up at Mala's speech, then turned away. Carefully he uncovered Natalie's face, pulling back a space blanket, one hand near her closed eyes—still sleeping.

Restless in the wake of Mala's bomb-of-a question, Jojo picked up her gear and dropped it next to Budd. He gave her that smile that hurt more than a scowl. Natalie's forehead and cheeks were a weird yellow gray—the color of the light drifting over their heads.

Any Dreams on it? Moon's words wouldn't leave her. She couldn't remember a Dream since before they'd left for Riker. All she could recall was the strange hair-cut scene from that morning. Not a Dream. More like a memory. *Let it be a memory of the future.*

Lagarto cleared his throat and as she looked at him, found herself liking him. A bear of a man, arms crossed over his chest, he was staring at the ground between his naked feet—he'd pulled off his boots and socks complaining his feet were too hot—now they were catching direct sun. She didn't want to see his skin turn raw. Realized what this thought would lead to and cut it short. Next to Lagarto, Lonnie rested his head on his pak, long legs curving into the circle. Rena had her eyes on Lonnie, too, then glanced at Jojo, quizzing her with a pointed look—*how about you?* She shook her head.

“Well, hmmm.” Moon rubbed his cheek with two fingers. He was bent into what looked like an uncomfortable position—legs to one side, an arm holding up a head too heavy for his neck. “No Dreams for me either...since before Riker. A week then? Sort of picked up on it during rehearsals, but... I was labmeat those last days, *bar-be-que*d—just getting my lines in order was all I could manage.”

Mala, agitated by this confession, held up her glasses smeared with sweat and squinted into the sun. She blurted a string of

words in a language Jojo didn't recognize. Blaise took the glasses from Mala, cleaned them on the tail of her shirt, stroked Mala's arm, set the specs back on her nose. *Nobody wears glasses like that.* Blaise said they weren't even Rx, Mala wore them when she needed to see *less*. Funny, those two. She was glad they were here.

Before Teri didn't show, at a moment like this Budd would've jumped in with one of his punched-up opinions. But he wasn't inside his skin the same way anymore.

"Last time I was Dreaming was four days before we came in." Lagarto wet his face with a few drops of water, rubbed his damp hands together. Will I tell you? Okay. You know, I'm walking the Chico—El Norte Chico—the country where I was born. A little like here, a few crooked trees and a lot of brush. Mountains. I was...looking for mis antepasos. My ancestors, the Diaguitas? Or so the Spaniards named them—half a hundred tribes on that land before there was Chile or Peru or Argentina. Before my papa's grandpa. Poppy Campillay, great grandfather, he gave me my second name—so maybe it was Poppy I was trailing?" The shadow of a smile crossed Lagarto's face. "Walking that ground for years without rain, and I was..." he glanced at Budd, "losing my sight. Things going blurred. Maybe I was crying? I think I was crying. Because I'm getting more and more lost.

"And then, I'm not only looking for Poppy and the others, I'm looking for *Her*. The one who talks to us in our Dreams. The way La Virgen used to talk to me a long time ago. I'm wanting so much *to see her face*, you know what I mean? I've always been keeping one small hope for that day...like when I was a boy and dreamed La Virgen would come to me? She never came to me. Mi tios y tias they were always telling me, voices and dreams you can't trust them, they're dangerous..." He shook his head. "I have *never* seen Her. The one who wanted us

to come here to heal the land, make it clean again.” He pressed his hands together and waited. “In my tradition, to hear a voice is a bad thing. Either you’re crazy. Or you are a saint.” He looked up at Jojo.

She listened to him, remembering one of Teri's paintings, *Unearthly flower*. At that moment of strange beauty, a thrill of fear had passed through her. She'd joked, shrugged it off. She had never feared Ariadne's voice. Not once. But the alienness of those...tendrils. *Masses of tendrils*. No human face anywhere to be found, no hands, no human eyes. Could it be our hands and eyes aren't only our own?

“Pero, pues...” Lagarto went on. “Her voice came to me. Sabes? I *heard* Her, understood the words. At the same time, I *don't* understand. Like in the beginning, eh?” He sighed. “Okay. *Gracias al cielo, en Espanol*. She talks to me in my own language. *I set the thread into your hands*.”

Nobody broke the stillness.

Moon jumped in. “Makes you wonder if what we have here isn't the thread of an extinct tapestry...”

A babble of talk broke out. “People!” Mala looked at Blaise. “*Mes amis*!” Mala wiped her eyes, knocking her glasses sideways.” She resettled them. “So you are saying...Dreaming has abandoned us?” She yanked the glasses off. “If we don't do this *right*, we are going extinct, for sure, like Moon says! Why would Dreams stop for us now? They are the reason we are here! We can't do this by ourselves, we...”

Lonnie gave Jojo a long look. She wondered if she was supposed to get some link between not Dreaming and all the stuff he'd said earlier about Rena? His bright idea about the water tank? She didn't see the connection. Right now what she needed was for Budd to leap in and cool them out. Because this so-called Action was falling to pieces.

Rena shut down the chaos with an ear-piercing whistle. “Let’s get focused!” She waited until they shut up. “I’ve got a few things to say.” The dry silence of desert air seemed to suck her words away the moment she spoke them.

“As you know, two of our people, Bill and Sarada, didn’t make it here. They were carrying the Scintillation Counter and personal dosimeters.” Waving down groans, she kept going. “They had to abort, drop out. No question. As soon as one of us went missing.”

Silence.

“That means we can’t do any testing at all. Not even with crude rad sensors in our cells because that would give HM an easy shot at tracking. So. Dreaming or no Dreaming, we have no objective way of knowing if we can clear rads or not—any Image work we might do will be, let’s say, inconclusive at best.” She closed her eyes. “Look. Here’s what we know. Some areas are not too far above background. Others, still lethal. Plutonium, Strontium, Cesium.” More silence. “Nobody’s been out here to take readings in decades. We can make some educated guesses—emphasis on guesses— about where safer ground, and I don’t mean safe ground, might be. Right here, for instance.” One hand touched the ground in front of her. “Like I said last night, do *not* go more than a couple of meters outside the yard...unless we get more information.”

Jojo wiped sweat out of her eyes, blinked against the light bouncing everywhere. Too bright. Too dazzling. What about those Hydro boxes? Hadn’t somebody been out here not so long ago? Wasn’t a bot-crew, either, they’d have too rough a time in such a crowded space. No, it must have been plain old homo sapiens. Sure as hell better equipped than *they* were. With haz-gear. Maybe some of them died out here? Maybe Hydro sent in a team to take bodies out? But those dates. Why leave such obvious evidence?

Then she understood. They must have been thinking nobody would be stupid enough to come into a radkill zone and open up a Gravel Gertie.

“Let me say it this way,” Rena touched her flaking lips and swallowed hard, holding back a little longer what was coming. “There *is no effective medical treatment* for high dose radiation. Especially not with continuous exposure. And if Labyrinth's been blown— and we don't know what happened, just that the others didn't come in after a no-show. We don't know. And so we have to assume the worst.” She looked at Jojo. “The next question is, what are we going to do about it?”

Nobody spoke. “We might *already* have taken lethal doses. No way of knowing that either. Unless we get sick. But, here's what I'm saying to you. Besides every other good reason for staying, going on with some version of what we planned, even without measuring results or a remote through Labyrinth— no, wait, hear me out. There *are* good reasons to stay— going home in lethal-dose condition could mean contaminating everybody and everything we touch. But with Teri...” For the first time, saying the name out loud, Rena looked about to break. She shook her head at Lonnie when he leaned toward her.

“Like I said. We have to assume the worst. And. If that's true. If the worst is true. Including no Dreams. Because... I haven't Dreamed either, and it looks like nobody has...”

“I say we stay and do what we can. For Teri. We turn this situation into a different kind of Action. Not what we planned, but... We do detox, we do Imaging without knowing results, we do it in the dark—not knowing if Ariadne is still with us.”

Lagarto murmured something inaudible. A prayer? Jojo's hand went to her throat and pressed hard, her mouth stone dry. She made no move toward her jig, only stared resentfully at it lying there in the shade of the trestle. Tempting her, daring her. The

thirstier she got, the more she resisted drinking. Compelled to save against the time when there'd be no water at all.

"We can still do we came here to do. I say we can. I say we've got to. We owe that much to..." Rena's voice shook as she spoke, though she was dry-eyed. "*We have to go through with this Action.*"

Wind devils swirled over the ground. Rena shielded her eyes from whipping strands of hair. "So. If we agree, we start today. We do a focus Circle to clear contamination. Except we radically simplify. We don't take on the whole site. We concentrate on *water.*"

Lonnie raised his brows in her direction. She flicked her eyes away from his.

"Straight down," Rena jabbed a finger into the dirt, "right underneath us is all the water we could ever want. We're sitting on top of the Coalinga-Cottonwood Aquifer System..."

What's all that unreachable water, Jojo wondered, going to do for us? Clean or hot? She began to drift, unable to take it all in. Before Teri, the plan was to gather October 20, in or near one of the rammed-earth Gravel Gerties that had sheltered fragile equipment and people a long time ago. Not far from the Tower built after the last round of above-ground testing got stopped—thanks to massive protests. After that, the tests went deeper. 2049 or 2050? Around the time Cottonwood started showing up hot. Must be hot now. Net announced the fact—the event—something they had previously claimed could never happen. *Plutonium 239 particles are unexpectedly hitchhiking on microscopic bits of clay down into the water table.* Did Rena believe they could change that? They'd all believed it, once. Except Budd? They believed it because they believed in Ariadne. Teri, more than any of them. Like the right music can make almost any story feel true, truer than true, convincing

you in spite of an incredible plot riddled with holes, that's how they'd believed in Ariadne, why they agreed to risk everything. Why their mad plan made sense. Because everything made sense when She was speaking to them.

Since Teri disappeared, nothing was going as planned, not anything at all.

Rena went on and Jojo found herself listening not to her words but the rhythm of her voice. At the same time, she was aware of Budd keeping himself so still. How easy it used to be, how distracting, how amusing, to cross swords with him. Now he sat like an old man watching the sky for a change in the weather. After awhile, he let his head tip down until it hung over his lap, one hand on Natalie, still sleeping.

She felt her own face becoming Teri's, her eyes Teri's eyes. *If only you were here.* It struck her Teri might be the one, of all of them, who would survive, the only one who might escape this poisoned world. There'd always been jokes about colonies on Io. And once a play on RedSpot about setting up a world there. An outpost-moon in Ariadne's shadow. She'd scorned the impulse to play space pioneer, escape the mess here and start over. Home for her was this planet, for sure, but...Calona?

Was she ready to die for what a Dream once told her? Did Teri ask herself this before they did? Did doubt make her careless?

Jojo tuned back in when Rena raised her voice. The wind had picked up. "I don't want to know who's voting how, understand me?" She was doling out bits of gravel, two for each of them. "This is how it's going to work— consensus or nothing. With it, we go ahead with clearing."

But even if we could clear the water under their feet, what then? Had she missed that part? How did they get that water out of the ground?

Rena passed around her headscarf, dried stiff in the burning air. Two bits for yes, one for no. If it's not 100% we re-think everything and keep voting. Jojo waited, forehead on her knees. Listening to her own breathing.

When the scarf came back around the circle to Rena, she added up the pieces— 15. Seven *yes*, one *no*.

Who was the hold out, the mutineer? And what about Natalie—who didn't get a vote? How was it going to work for her when they ran out of food and water?

Without Dreams, it was all unraveling.

Report on Calona

2056

Restricted Access Document, HP file 478225

2033. A series of nuclear tests were undertaken by the Nuclear Defense Commission (NDC). World war was averted, a re-alignment of territorial alliances was finalized in 2045.

However, official testing continued on the advice of the NDC and top military advisors until the end of 2049.

Ground zero: aerial photo (attachment A) shows the typical so-called gunshot-wound pattern. In the center of the detonation area is an approximately 100 meter circle of black fuse-glass created by the fireball. A second photo (see attachment B) shows the site post-remediation, 2052, with geo-bacter *metallireducens* and *Shewanella oneidensis*, and other species. Contamination was reduced but not eliminated.

In surrounding areas, Iodine-131, the most water soluble of common nuclear products with a half-life of 8 days, quickly ceased to be a danger to human health. However, half-lives of other testing byproducts, including Strontium-90, Plutonium-239 (> 24,000 years), Cesium-137, still pose a hazard.

In spite of near-universal sensitivity to gamma radiation, certain bacteria such as *Deinococcus radiodurans*, aka "*Conan*," in response to exposure, are capable of using repair proteins to recover from radio-oxidative damage to DNA. Manganese is essential to such repair proteins and this mechanism is the

subject of intensive current study. Dr. Edward Camber, in collaboration with Hydro-Tech University Professor Emeritus Allen Richard Selby, have suggested the possibility of a non-terrestrial origin for the newly discovered *D. radiophilans* with a proven capacity to digest radionuclides, ie, make efficient use of this energy source in place of sunlight.

2053: excavation of a mixed-level nuclear waste storage containment site at Calona, already off-limits and unusable for the foreseeable future, largely due to the very long half life of Pu-139. It was decided this area would become, for a period of years or until the facility was filled, one of several Tri-American primary storage depots. For public safety, transport of reprocessed NW materials would be limited to hours between sunrise and sunset, and high-grade safety protocols were utilized for on-site personnel. Once the facility was filled to capacity, evidence of its existence was obliterated. A WWII type bunker (the original demolished) was re-constructed over the entrance to the storage site

Calona was permanently closed and remains to the present as it appeared after the January 2049 test.*

2055: Project Re-evaluation was carried out to assess the overall condition of the storage-site and grounds. Results are classified and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Because decon and insulation procedures have largely succeeded, Calona is on the President's list for eventual re-purposing. Bids will be taken for building a state-of-the-art high security detention camp to accommodate spill-over from camps under construction in urban settings.

T.D. Riggs, Col. First Union States Armed Forces, Domestic

Calona 4

Jojo

In spite of Rena's rules, Jojo couldn't resist getting a look at remnants of barbed-wire holding pens where protestors had once been locked up. An experimental farm was around here somewhere, too—blasted walls, crumbling foundations, shattered plumbing, all that was left of the famous *biologicals shed* where caged pigs were deliberately exposed to radiation, their skin and organs so unluckily similar to humans. When testing started again, rumors flared—*political prisoners were going to take the place of pigs*. A wave of nausea hit her and she shivered in spite of the heat, wilting onto a rubble-pile.

It came to her then, the tail-end of that vision or memory, whatever it was that morning—

When it's done, when the cutting is finished, Teri looks lighter, light all over. Her back to Jojo, she reaches up and delicately feels over her stubbled head.

Jojo wipes her eyes with the back of her arm. Her skin is scratchy, radiating heat. Her mind gropes for something she needs to say. She looks up into the glaring sky. Then over the desert to the mountains, the canyon wall of rock where the woman is still standing, gazing at her. Saying nothing.

Inside her, a musical hum, indecipherable words riding it. She opens her mouth to sing, but a kind of panic tells her she can't sing yet, not yet, only speak the lyrics with a breaking voice.

“Something woke me. Woke me this morning; this morning like the color...”

“...the color of your hair.” Teri finishes the line Jojo leaves mid-air, digging her feet into dirty sand, her voice shearing off to a tuneless buzz. A pause before she starts again. “Missed you in my Dream last night, missed you...”

“... missed you,” Jojo echoes, reaching out to touch the back of Teri’s shorn head. She turns toward the woman who’s been watching them and finds she’s gone. In her place, a concave shadow, a cleft curving into the dark. An opening into the wall of the mountain.

Teri says, “Okay. Tell me. How do I look?”

Old. Just born. “Not exactly Titania.” Jojo tries a smile. “More like my cousin Tim.”

Bending down, Teri pushes her finger through sand, drawing something. “You don’t have a cousin Tim,” she says.

“I know.” Tears fill Jojo’s eyes, but she’s laughing, too. “Ah, poor cousin Tim...”

Burning Land (song fragments)

...an ordinary love song
singing it back to you...

...words we've heard before,
a more than earthly melody...

...like dusk and early morning
comes and soon is gone

...your well, your water music
hidden in a burning land ...

Calona 5

Jojo

Shadows offered them no shelter. They crowded together for a Circle in Mala and Blaise's bin, big as a railroad car. Everybody had slept badly. They were slit-eyed and worn out and tender.

She rolled up her sleeves, pulled off her hat. Before she had a chance to consider if anybody was ready, words boiled out of her. "Nobody knows all the changes Dreams have put us through. Ariadne's changing too, not telling us what to do." She could still see Teri's shorn head, hear the words she couldn't sing *missed you in my Dream last night*. "Maybe we don't Dream the way we used to. Asleep, I mean. Alone inside our heads. Maybe...we Dream *awake*."

"We don't fall asleep, we fall *awake*." From Moon, without irony or humor, her own words came back to her and sounded true.

Rena made no comment, didn't even look up. The wind huffed off and on. Otherwise only the sound of their own breathing. Now and then a rattle of wire in a gust that died quickly. Picking up speed, wind hissed through crosshatch struts of the trestle with an off-tune whistle. A trackless train roaring. Howl without a body.

Budd clipped his dust mask over Natalie's face.

Lagarto stripped down to his undershirt, spoke up. "When you were talking, Jojo? Something came to me from my Dream before." He looked to Rena who nodded, and went on. "I

opened my eyes in the Dream, and these, ah...meteors were falling. So many of them! Scratching the sky. Not just *falling*—flying around,” his arms swept wildly. “And then—I’m awake in the Dream or maybe I’m just awake, I don’t know—but that’s when Her words come. *I set the thread*. No. The *new thread*! *I set the new thread entre todas las manos*.” He gestured, including them all.

~

Near twilight, everybody crawled out of the bin for rest and food, an early night’s sleep. In the morning they’d start again. Talking, voting. Endless talk. Time like water running out.

Not far off, Rena stood near Moon, in absorbed conversation. Jojo wondered what egg they were hatching. “Let me pull the next shift with Natalie?” she said to Budd as she took the girl from his arms and held her. After a moment, he nodded.

Exhausted, propping his weight against the bin, he tilted his head. Listening. She knew it meant something, but didn’t have the energy to guess. Instead she raised a puzzle of her own. “I didn’t get all of what Lagarto was saying, did you? Especially the last part— *your hands?*”

“*In your hands*. Your *plural*. English has no good way to say that. Spanish makes it clear.” He felt his way along the bin. “It means all of us. Everybody.”

Jojo stroked Natalie’s hair, helped her to her feet. She was wobbly but not as weak as before, her color better, too.

He turned to Jojo, lips parted, eyes glittering with something more to say. Something from before everything went wrong? For a moment she longed to drag her stuff out of that solitary junkpile, stay here with him under the trestle. But when she took his arm, he gave her that biting smile, and she let him go.

“In your hands?” she said, and shook her head. “To me that sounds like *Hey kids, you're on your own.*”

~

Natalie hung on to her, stepping carefully as an old woman. But stronger for sure than when she came in. Budd must've guessed right about that clinic.

They headed for the collapsed wall where she'd found the spirals, still a comfort to her. Half way there, Natalie tugged them toward a heap of crack. She was pointing at what looked like nuclear glass. Shiny grit, fused sand. Then she saw the ants. A long glinting curve she traced with her eyes, winding out of sight. A few carried tiny flecks of something in their jaws.

~

Back in her nest, she settled Natalie who fell instantly asleep. *Lichens*—she decided. That was what her spirals were. She played her lightstick over them, dabbed water onto the driest ones, watching with satisfaction as even in the blue of twilight, they grew larger, brighter. More alive.

~

Next day, all nine of them gathered in the yard for another Circle. Natalie curled up, awake, beside Jojo.

“Natalie started it,” Jojo said. “Staring into a jig cup of water. Getting lost there. Whispering— I didn't know what. Not at first.”

Her back to the sun, Natalie bends over Jojo's cup, the shadow of her head darkening the water. At first all she sees is herself. Her own face. Eyes. Mouth. Strange. Familiar. Her face blurs into bright and dark tangling together to make

other faces. Human, not human. Not animal. A machine with wings that won't bend, its eye burning the ground. One after another, things she doesn't recognize. She gives up trying to see, to understand, and just listens. There is a sound, like hands-rubbing-together.

Jojo said, "What I saw...I don't know how to describe it. Lines crossing. Empty spaces. Holes in the weave of...what? Nets of light. Spreading wider and wider. Until space was all there was. *No net.*" She looked around the Circle. "I wasn't asleep, I was..."

"Dreaming Awake." Moon said.

Curt's Gift

LJ unwrapped what he'd given her, a box stamped with the new leaf-and-tear-drop logo.

"Thought you might like it. Got it off a guy we...off a clamper— last week."

She put the box down and waited.

Curt explained how he never keeps things terrorists carry around. "But this," he said, awe or wonder in his voice, "this was so fantastic, I couldn't let it go. Besides, the guy I took it off couldn't have put it together himself, I'll bet a giga-buck on that. Must have come from somebody higher up, somebody with access to such things."

She picked up the box again, curious. Opened the lid. Set the round shimmering thing inside on her palm. A hybrid, cobbled together from past and future— an ancient paperweight plus the latest miniature holographic tech-craft. Magic half sphere made of real glass. Set like a swimming jewel in a once-living frame. Eye of a god, she thought, and winced. One of the oldest with new names. All of them outlawed. Underground. She knew a few. HM knew them, too.

When she moved her head, ice-cream layers of cloud rippled. When she gazed into the glass, fantastically detailed scenes and beings appeared. The way it used to be before she fell asleep. Different every time she looked. *Dream in the palm of your hand*, she thought, and shook herself, looked away.

Curt yammered on. “The way it works is it uses the eyeball's own liquid, what's it called?” He checks his cell—“you know, the stuff swirling inside your eyes? Just a sec. Here it is, *vitreous humor*, yeah. Means glassy fluid. Like I said, in a way, it's your own eye, your own brain really, you're looking into.”

She knew she should hand it right back, this ill-gotten gift, this camera obscura, this griffin-eye, that so fascinated and frightened her. “Why *me*?”

He laughed. Shrugged. “You've done me a few,” he jiggled both hands in his pockets. “I've seen you at the Window. You always liked Seaside, didn't you? Well, this is better. Way better. Hey. You worried HM's gonna smell something's up?”

She shook her head, set the paperweight back into its tight-fitting box, and the box into her lock-drawer.

~

Her mind touched the paperweight many times a day. Like a fly and a sugar spill, impossible to resist. It unnerved her, this fascination. *The patterns in your own eyeballs. Your own brain you're looking into.*

She looked. Finally. One evening when the building was emptied out and sounds echoed like an underground chamber, she looked. She'd been brooding at her desk after reading and re-reading a formal reprimand from HM for sending out e-notes with unprofessional text— *too familiar, overly-friendly*—called down for bending petty regs about special friendships between execs and ad-staffers, execs and clericals, clericals and maintenance...though maybe what they actually had on her was far worse?

She looked. Roiling specks. Dim, spreading bands of light sweeping through, every few seconds. Bright water streaming into dark water. Disturbing the depths.

Part Seven

Calona 6: Exam

Rena

She cleared a place for Natalie near the west wall of her crate, bundled her into a sheet and gave her a sip of water.

“Vomiting is nothing to be scared of. We’re just going to see how this body of yours is doing.” She unlocked her cell and rubbed the sensitive skin of her wrist. The Circle had decided cells would be set to V-mode, allowing masks for Labyrinth and limited bio-functions, general comms disabled. She started to close the bulky e-cuff around Natalie’s slender forearm.

Natalie hid her arm in the sheet, dark eyes expressionless. She closed them and kept so still Rena thought the girl in her peculiar sudden way had fallen asleep. When she touched Natalie’s forehead, those eyes sprang open, and she was struck by the peculiar sensation that it was *herself*, Doctor Gilkin, being examined, not the other way around.

“Sweetheart, please, I’m not going to make you wear it, we just need it to take some readings, it’s the only way I can...”

Natalie bit her lip, turned her head away.

She brushed a strand of hair from Natalie's cheek and sat back on her heels, cocked her head. Puzzled. Keenly interested.

Showing both her hands again, Natalie moved her fingers. “Do it the other way. With your hands.”

Rena shook her head, amused. “Nobody knows how to do that, Natalie.”

“What if the machine’s sick, too?”

Laughter rose up inside her. This girl was doing better than she’d feared when Jojo brought her in a panic—because she’d thrown up a handful of soy pops. “I don’t know *what* I’d do,” Rena said. That look on the girl’s face reminded her of herself as a child, impatient with thick-headed adults who didn’t get why she was spending time with lizards and beetles when she could be...what? playing with bot-bears?

Natalie turned onto her side, pressed three delicate fingers into Rena’s wrist. “Listen here. Where the blood goes *ssshhh*.” She squeezed her eyes, concentrating.

Maybe it would calm the girl to go along. Fingertips on Natalie’s arm, she shut her eyes and looked into swirling black and white.

“You do it like *this*,” Natalie said, patient with her, “and you think ...*how hot am I?* Then you listen ... Are you listening?”

“Yes, all right, I’m listening.” She examined the hazy flowing space behind her eyes the way she’d spent months doing, preparing for this Action, entering deep-waters just-above-sleep that could slip her into Dreaming.

Pulse rate? She saw nothing but fields of light and dark, and opened her mouth to say so when she heard—whose voice was it? Her own—*seventy-eight*. Natalie’s pulse? She opened her eyes, checked the time, counting as she pressed more firmly into Natalie’s wrist. Seventy-six, seventy-seven, *seventy-eight*.

“Right!” she’d indulge the girl with this game. Simple coincidence. Pulse not so hard to guess.

“Let’s try something harder—*Blood pressure*.” Rena shut her eyes and waited for what she guessed was a full minute until

she heard *95* and *61*. Low-normal. Plausible. But Natalie who'd spent her whole life in a clinic could have guessed that, too.

Without speaking, she asked, *Blood Sugar?* And waited for what seemed a long time before she heard *90*. High after vomiting. But normal. No way to be sure without her cell.

What if she tried it on herself? She placed two fingers on her own wrist and repeated the question. Waited. Nothing. She checked the time. Two minutes had passed. She smiled quizzically at Natalie and teased, "If my blood sugar was *nothing* I'd have keeled over a long time ago!"

Natalie rubbed her nose, eyes wandering over the crate, as though tracking the flight of insects or birds. If the girls' eyes had been closed, Rena would guess she was following a dream.

"You can't do it by yourself," Natalie said.

"Really?" If those docs she'd trained with could see this. "Okay. You do *me*. But I'm not going to tell you the question." Hematocrit, percentage. "That okay with you?"

Natalie nodded and held Rena's arm. "*36*," she said.

Rena checked the number. There it was on her screen. *Thirty-six*. She did not believe an eleven-year-old with no formal education could invent a correct answer to that question. Maybe she's picked up things from TA's taking care of her, maybe by now she knows what normal range Vitals should be? But she didn't know the question!

One thing was clear. In spite of vomiting this morning— those soypops stale?—in spite of fear, bad food and rationed water, against all reasonable medical and human expectation, this girl was getting stronger, not weaker.

Calona 7: No Net

Moon

Noon, and he so very badly needed a nap. But his body would simply not let go. He shifted from one side to the other in the heat like a frying rasher. Unable to nod off, he got up and huddled in his corner of the yard repeating Jojo's words haunting him like a fragmented koan. *Wasn't asleep. Eyes open. Wasn't asleep.* Like Moonshine repeating his ten-word play, he was driving himself to bloody distraction.

Jojo's voice started again. How she and Natalie stared into water. *Larger and larger til empty space was all that was left. No net.* As he listened, it seemed to him that he fell through with them into the wide reaches of that space. That timeless time. Down and down into Cottonwood branching under their feet. He saw into that water, saw what seemed to him molecules, small and graceful, joining and parting in a kind of dance. This delighted him. But among the dancers, were monstrous, ungainly bristling molecules, too. *Not* water. This chilled him—even in the heat.

Where was he really? Somewhere in a light-blazed desert, chasing shadows in the bushes. Poetry dropping into his head. *And a lizard is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of...* Words morphing from a famous quote he could not quite remember. His heart pounded. A brightening spread through his chest. He saw Rena point into the ground and imagined an underground lake stretching for kilometers. Water, great

interconnecting veins and arteries of water, pumping through dark chambers of rock.

Asleep, awake, or in between, whatever wisdom came from Dream-soil was never stolen. But found. Together.

About the quote, it didn't matter who it once belonged to. Apparently that was how Ariadne thought, too, with all the lines She pilfered! Sowed? Re-broadcast?

Never mind if the words were jumbled or turned around, their original meaning could not be clearer. *A miracle greater than sextillion angels.* Not infidels, *Beings. Elementals.* Astounded the first time Ariadne spoke those same words to him—quoting Whitman—however many years ago. Deep pleasure to know that She, like he did, purloined some of Her best stuff. What he did not know back then, was *why* She chose that line from Song of Myself. And there was more to it than meeting a lizard in a kill zone. Miracle though that was.

Dreams grasped the origin and essence of things before they existed, before he needed them, before he understood himself to be in need of them. Before he could even wonder what else there might be to them. What dangers, what delights. Like a playful muse-child, Ariadne borrowed Shakespeare, but ignored the poet's admonition about love not altering what it finds. She *alters wherever She alteration finds*, better fit a Dream line, poet's inversion, matching the unforeseen circumstance, the unfamiliar language and ever-changing tempo. And all to make...another kind of love?

He smiled. Knew where he was. The wind was silent. Helen was silent. He wasn't Dreaming. And yet he felt he heard Her.

What is Love? *Love with the Love of all things. Love in endless guises.*

Including water? Including water.

He remembered Jojo and Natalie exploring the structure of water. Space? Time? Energy? He closed his eyes and watched water droplets like ants flow around the ugly bulbous knots. The droplets and then the knots began to spin, like planets rotating on their axes. As the giant knots spun faster and faster, they began to fray, shed particles, come apart, sift away. Dispersing. He had the impression those knots which seemed so menacing before, were no longer capable of harm.

Water of life never tasted before/ along what secret aquifer, are you arriving?

He opened his eyes. No. Definitely. She had not given up on us infidels yet.

Calona 8: Every Good Thing

Rena

Symptoms of radiation poisoning are not always immediately apparent, can come on very gradually. Nausea, insomnia, itching rashes, falling hair.

Heading back from the latrine where she'd been sick—like Natalie?—Rena pushed away the too familiar words from Merkson's radiopathologies and headed for The Clinic—her crate with its silly handmade shingle somebody had tacked up. She smiled at the joke— *Rena, MD*. Moon's doing most likely. His MO wasn't it? Let it stay. Humor out here was tonic, hard to come by. A boost to endorphins. Especially with Ariadne gone silent— every good thing, no matter how small, might help them stay alive.

“We need to talk.” Moon, out of nowhere took her arm, an unreadable smile playing on his lips. He put her off with his nervy histrionics—loping up behind her, saying things like “May I have your ear, Madam?” Which had bothered her from the moment it was clear he was in the Action— what bothered her now was the way he had firmly had attached himself to her, appointing himself, in effect, court jester. Or even more ambitiously, chief privy counselor?

“Okay, John, this better be impressive.” She shook off his hand and glanced at her cell. “You’ve got...five minutes. Wring out the moonshine and come to the point.”

“Something against *Moonshine*, Madam?”

She shot him a parched look, ducked into the maze of her gear and supplies, checked her cell again. “Four minutes. And sit down. If you can.”

He bowed his head and pointed to the spot where he stood, long legs and arms folding onto her threshold. “What we need here... is a joost.”

“Translation, please?” She snapped open her case of meds and went over them again, giving him half her mind, the other half buzzing anxiety as she ran a finger across epi, HC, x-v, x-f...

Tucked into their thermafoil caskets, and a row of possibly—likely—heat-degraded antimicrobials...

“A joost, a jump! Out of the plan we came in with. A leap. Deeper in and farther out than your Cottonwood switch. Which I bow to, and which I see as far more than mere resistance to the water tank,” He waved his hands as he spoke, presumably illustrating points. “The way we relate to the aquifer has got to change, too, into something... that grows as it goes, not just an edit-version of what we’ve been doing all along, assuming troops and tech were coming in behind us. When we thought we’d have *Dreams* on our side. And...well, the Dame Herself.”

Dame? Who did this oddity think he was? For a moment Rena was caught in a fantasy—gesturing for Lonnie to drag this gadfly off. Where was Lonnie, anyway?

“Got to shake it all loose. Ready for anything— and nothing. Otherwise we’ll simply fry our arses out here— official cause of death, *thirst*. A truly unoriginal way to go in the desert!” Moon looked into the yard, then leaned closer, lowering his voice. “In

short, a goose! A jolt beyond anything we've practiced. It isn't go to sleep and wait for a Dream anymore. Like Jojo said, it's *wake up*, let down our hair, and see what happens."

He finally had her attention. "Maybe. But what makes you think you know what the rest of us obviously don't?"

"Muse-provocateur, that's my job description, darling. You know, improvisation? Transformation? Magic, if you will. Turning a scared kid into a horny, outrageous but charming *Puck*. Turning an ordinary woman into a feisty *Queen*..." he gave her a meaningful look.

"And how do you plan to manage that sort of trick out here with a bunch of..."

"...amateurs? You mean those who act on the basis of love, expertise not required?"

"I *know* what amateur means!" The man was infuriating! Love? Was that what everybody in this open-air dungeon was supposed to be doing? And what did that leave for her? Doctor Rena pretty superfluous without her fancy equipment. It was true that what kept her going was how much she cared about Natalie and Jojo, Teri and Budd. Every one of them, even Moon, god help her. She wanted them to survive. More than survive. But what did she have to offer? A few safety rules, a bit of logic? At least Moon had...what *did* he have? Was she desperate enough to *let the jester try the throne*? A line of his, from Wives' 9-minute Lear, wasn't it? She looked him up and down. "We're going to need a great deal more than dramaturgy, more than your burning desire to... well, I'm not sure what. We're going to need..."

He clapped his hands, "Rhythm!" Tossed a red-gold scarf high as it would go. She watched the translucent scrap waver and whirl, a flame-colored jellyfish, undulating down between them. Like the Japanese nettle that once had so mesmerized

her when she was in her teens, before Seaquarium shut down. And later, like something she would see in a Dream— like Ariadne herself. Teri had tried to convince her of this, with one of her luminous paintings of a nearly identical being...

Dizzy with heat and nausea, she watched him throw the scarf again the moment it touched down into his hands.

After her first few Dreams, she'd been clear. Strong. But here, everything was ambiguous. As though emptiness was taking the place of beguiling colors so captivating for Teri that she'd found a way to portray them. Here, it seemed Ariadne was fading. Or... becoming something no artist could portray.

Moon snatched his scarf out of the air, tossed it in her direction. She tossed it back, found herself hearing Natalie, *Do it the other way*—and for a moment she was lifted out of gloom into another kind of world that might still be possible— not just scarves and jellyfish—Ariadne's offerings, coming through them again.

Natalie had said it this morning. *Do it the other way.*

She turned, suspicious suddenly of his enticements, pretended to check supplies again. Her eye lit on plump ampules of hydromorphone and Etorphine...counted how many times?

"I don't really know what you're up to, John, but we're running out of time, and what I've got in this case— this *Clinic*, all of it, with one possible exception, is pretty much worthless." ***And time is breath.*** She whirled to face him with a sensation of falling, not knowing if illness or a dopamine-spike or a jellyfish Dream was at the root of her surrender. "I'm going to let you try your stuff."

He bowed deeply this time.

She clicked-shut her meds case. "At least until you fall on your face."

Calona 9: Mothspit

Jojo

She found herself grateful, in spite of sweltering days, for the space blankets they'd lugged in. Perfect sunshades. And nights here in October were on their way to nippy. Before The Action, when they were sorting through piles of gear, she'd reminded everybody that true mountaineers would be willing to cut their toothbrushes in half to save weight. Lonnie'd said, *Okay, then, Jo, here's a solution for you— cut your blanket in half...and bring two!* Eye rolls. It was Teri who had the last word and left them laughing — *Only 50% funny, Bartholomew!*

Longing for Teri tore through her. She pawed sand to bury the aloe-scrub she'd just cleaned herself with, when a fragment of sound on the wind stopped her. Listening hard, she yanked up her pants and headed into the yard where the Circle was gathering, sun throwing long shade, on the way toward a merciful end.

Moon, hunched behind a heap of shattered krack, in loose black tunic, pants and boots, was humming to himself and painting his face from a box with a built-in mirror. With a dab of dark stuff on one pinkie, he blackened his lips, shadowed his eyes. Over his curly head of hair he rolled a black cap.

She enjoyed the fluid way he moved, the music of him. Would have hated it if things were reversed, if he were secretly watching her. She came around in front of him. "You always wear black in the desert?"

A few beats went by before he looked up, yellow-green eyes shimmering. “*Especially* in the desert.” A pleasing salty smell misted off him. A faint smile held on until his upper lip began to twitch.

Her body urged her toward a laugh—he was trying so hard to make it happen— but she resisted. Still threw her, the way he played with everything.

She scraped back her hair. “Does Rena know... whatever it is you're up to?” He gave her a tilt of the head, didn't drop his gaze. “The other night? I told you something nobody else knows about me. Today I'm dangling over the edge, so... I think I deserve some of the same from your direction...”

From his hip pocket came a fiery scrap of— labsilk?—bright material he wadded into a ball and clasped in his fist. The moment he opened his fingers, it sprang free, spreading outward like the opening petals of a rose. *A flower with a mind*, Teri said once. Jojo moved to catch the fascinating thing, but Moon whirled out of her reach, “*If I can't dance...*”

As usual, he made no sense to her. Not without Teri. Not now. Not here.

“This is the real jazz,” he said, “*mothspit*.” Knotting and tucking, he shaped it quickly into a cluster of petals, pretending to inhale its fragrance. She leaned forward, and again he spun away, this time going on toward the yard. She caught her breath— impressed by his sheer nerve.

Calona 10: Circle Dance

If I can't dance, I don't want your revolution.

Moon stood stone-still in the center of the Circle—nine of them counting Natalie, awake, focused on him.

He launched into a leap, hit the ground, broke into a stop-start frolic, then a slo-mo drag. Speedy, then glacial. Then still again. He threw into the air and stooped to catch the shimmering scarf, hurled it to Mala and when she returned it, on to Lagarto, to Lonnie— it fluttered, soared, never coming to rest for long.

Incredibly, they were *laughing*:

Everybody except me and Budd, Jojo thought, his watch-cap pulled down to his eyebrows. She wondered what he could be getting out of this fooling around? What a bizarre Action this was turning out to be— cooking in radiation, but here they were watching a painted-up prancer, a circus jinker with a scrap of mothspit—didn't he *get* how little time they had? How little breath. Until a surprise attack, Hydro Stealth swooping in on them? Or did he think they were protected from HS by the very rays that were poisoning them? Slowly. And what if they did hear Hydro coming, what could do they about it? Hide in their bins and chant?

Natalie getting sick to her stomach that morning had shaken her—she still felt the flash of alarm. Rena felt it too, but seemed to have stopped worrying, going along with Moon's stunts. Jojo was shocked all over again at what they'd gotten themselves into. Shocked Budd had brought Natalie into this

maze of dangers. No way out. Did he really think with or without Ariadne's help, they could undo radiation? Teri had always been sure they could turn rads into harmless particles. But without Dreaming? No wonder Budd never bought it. *Oh sure, we'll just stabilize a few molecules, rearrange sub-atomic particles, turn deadly stuff neutral with the energy of...?*

Sound of the right frequency can alter the molecular structure of matter. Yeah, those lines, they'd fallen for them every time.

Budd, scanning like a radar dish, located Moon, trying to see without seeing, to feel by the skin of his face. She was torn, tempted to whisper what was happening into his ear. But the Budd she knew would scorn such help.

But then it happened. Budd caught Moon's throw! And like everybody else, tossed it back. Even Rena was keeping time, slapping Lonnie's thigh. Maybe this was going somewhere after all? But they'd need a whole lot more than song and dance...

Moon got them all on their feet, laced his arms through Rena's, Rena took hold of Lonnie... over and under, an embrace traveled the Circle.

Their feet began to move in a rough rhythm that seemed to come up from the earth, from the aquifer, from the water down there, from the roots of the mountain, mind of the desert, a rhythm ragged at first, traveling left, circling right. Jojo frowned, but her arms wound around Mala and Lagarto.

Drumming feet, turning inside an empty center, dizzy exhilaration and the repeating pulses persuaded her, against every resisting fiber, every critical thought. She *wanted* to give in. Wanted to close her eyes, conjure Teri into the Circle, too. Call Budd out of his grief. Call Ariadne to them...

Before she opened her eyes, she felt Budd leave Natalie, and join the Circle.

~

Breaking free of their embrace, Moon crossed his legs and sat in the center, a penetrating hum working up from the depths of his belly and lungs.

He laid a finger on Blaise's throat and Blaise sang back his note. Moon pointed to Lagarto who hummed even louder. Then it was Jojo's turn and in spite of all her brooding, she found herself longing to sing a response to Moon's hum. A vibration, soundless, opened her throat. But when she tried voice the note, it cracked and she couldn't come up with a sound at all.

Moon flashed her a Mona Lisa, then pointed to Rena who tried and stumbled, but finally got a funny little riff out. She shook herself. Again, *laughter*.

Lonnie brought the pitch down and picked up speed, his new sound bouncing around the Circle just as the sun disappeared.

Moon tapped Budd's shoulder. Jojo held her breath. Budd shocked her again, pulling out his harmonica, and with a hand on Natalie's foot, blew a flight of notes that kept returning to Moon's jumping-off sound. He stayed *on it* so long she thought he was never going to lift away, never going to shift into something new.

Suddenly he swung it high, and higher! Her whole body loosening, she looked up at the real moon rising in the blue, over that northwest mountain she didn't know, might never know, but felt herself name *Largo*.

Blaise and Lagarto moaned and roared. Mala threw her head side to side, long braid swinging, sweat glistening her forehead, murmuring in her language *Sona kayalam undusum...sona sona kayalam...*

The moon dropped a cool sheen over their mangled, blown-apart wreck of a world where unbelievably, they were... making music.

Jojo couldn't sing, but it was music she was breathing.

Moon popped into existence beside her, sitting on his heels, the good sweat smell of him strong. Note after note flew out of his throat. She looked him in the eye. His silliness had got them slippery, for sure, seduced them out of fear. But as soon as she thought this, doubt like nausea gripped her, and though she longed to sing with all her being, something kept stopping her. *A singer who can't sing's a useless thing.*...she'd written that lyric years ago not knowing how one day it would echo back at her. And break her heart.

Moon caught her hands, shook her arms, wouldn't let her stay heavy, separate, pulled her right into the heart of the whirl. *Dancing with Teri at The Library, dancing with Teri at Rikers, cutting Teri's hair.* Teri, Teri, Teri. Teri and Natalie, so much alike, face to face or painting worlds, mirroring each other through the glass wall...

Teri inside her. Teri here in the Circle. Past, present, impossible future, spinning through her as she whirled, eyes burning, starting to spill.

She leaned away from Moon, fell to her knees, clawing her hands through sand and gravel. *Unbearable.* The hum went on without her. She held her belly, bowing low to the ground...

...*running*, she was running back to Silver Canyon, running to find Teri, leaving the nightmare behind in the desert. She stumbled, crumpled into the smallest possible ball, arms over her head, shouting Teri's name.

~

Moon was pouring water from a canister into his hands, brushing her forehead and cheeks with it. *Cold tears. Rain.* The feel of his thumbs mixing tears and water reminded her of her mother, the way she'd wipe Jojo's face, then wet her own face with her daughter's tears. She caught his hands, slid the wetness of her palms over his, and they stayed like that for awhile. She was grateful to him. When she tried to speak, he cocked his head back to the Circle which was gathering again.

"You're good now aren't you," he said quietly. No hint of a question.

She pressed her forehead against his chest and rested in the rhythm of his breathing. She looked up with half a smile. "If you call being lost out here without my best friend, all of us dying...if you call that *good*, then yes.."

He laughed and whirled away, bent to Rena, wetting her eyes and mouth. Rena leaned over Lagarto who opened his palms to the drops spilling into them— he washed his face as Jojo saw him do earlier, telling his Dream.

Lagarto looked right at her, beaming, and with his big wet hands, streaked Blaise's nose, then Mala's, making all three of them burst into tearful giggling.

Lonnie crawled through the sprawl of bodies to reach Budd, touched his friend's closed eyes, uncurled Budd's fist, dampened that hand and guided it to Natalie's cheek. Together they wet the girl's dry lips. Her eyes looked into theirs. She did not resist.

Jojo shifted closer to Natalie. Remembered Natalie's eyes at MCC, how they were tamer then, the grey of overcast sky— now they were stormy, black. The moment the girl's eyes struck Jojo, certainty flashed through her— *she knows what we're doing here.*

The List 4 : Part One

Deena

She looked straight at Samarath. “I asked her to see whose names...if the names you gave me were listed, but she...said couldn't risk breaking in again. So we don't know. If Gilkin and the others are on The List or not.” Sick over the whole thing, beginning to end. Starting with Natalie. Natalie the worst of it. “Chief, I'm sorry. But I know LJ. When she says no, she digs in, there was no way I could talk her out of...”

“I put you on a *crucial mission* and you fucked it up! So now I'm going to have to figure out what to do about that.” He was red faced. Terrifying. The way he'd been after Gilkin and his friend grabbed Natalie and got her out. When those lock-up hours were done, he was up on his hind legs over all the techs, telling them to keep their mouths shut or he would see to them personally *and it won't be a vacation in Afrasia*. He had a plan, he told her later when they were alone, a plan to get Natalie into the Clinic again. With relief she saw how badly shaken he was at losing the girl. Now LJ. gone, who knows where. Could *she* have had some part in his plan to get Natalie back? Had he been counting on LJ, to keep things off Security's radar? Meantime, he'd take his fury out on Deena, the fuckup.

“I have,” she chose her words carefully, “no idea what happened. LJ said security was tightening up. She stopped meeting me at Crandy's, she...”

“Yeah, yeah, you told me that.” He was cooling off a little.

“It's true, Chief.”

“I hope you aren't bullshitting me,” a look of disgust crossed his face, “because if you are...”

“I swear!” Mercifully, the message light on her cell was blinking. She blurted, “Oh, good, it must be Tyler about that leak in our sector pipe!”

Samarath looked like he was going to strangle her. “YOU are full-time busy helping me find LJ and Natalie, wherever they are. *However long it takes.* Natalie trusts you. If she's out there with...” he waved his hands, “*them* somewhere, if she's with LJ or that other bunch, she could still be alive. And if we get her back here, she sure as hell isn't going to talk to *me.*”

As he ranted on, a movie ran through her mind— herself not showing up for work tomorrow morning. Tyler and her taking off into the desert, disappearing into one of those enclaves she'd heard about. Not the violent ones, the other kind, hidden away in the mountains. Preferring to risk thirst and starvation to dying of too much civilization...

But. Natalie would keep her from running. Samarath knew her well, at least when it came to the girl. Natalie was the closest she'd ever come— ever would come— to a child of her own. A torment to imagine what might be happening to her. After shift, nights at home with Tyler were the worst. She did not want him in on it. Gave him a made-up story about being petrified of losing her job. Such things were real enough in his life, in all their friends' lives. Tyler's patience and 80 proof mash kept her quiet, kept her sleeping. For the time being. But she couldn't take it much longer. Her BP was going to blow.

She got Chris to fill in for her and went down to the gym where there was a rowing machine and an old treadmill that might get her adrenaline down. On the rower, each stroke took her farther from MCC, from Samarath, toward...Natalie. The

girl's face loomed. Those hands. Fingers deftly pinching a dust mote from one of her watercolors. When she'd stopped painting, she did that with her blankets, sometimes for hours, brushing over the weave, plucking bits of woolsyn, wadding them into a ball. *Planet Woolsyn*. She imagined so vividly, Natalie did, that she almost got Deena to see things, too. Like those lights of hers. Deena thought she'd seen them a couple of times, mostly when the real lights were dimmed for Natalie's bedtime. But that's when a person was most likely to see what she *wants* to see.

She rowed on through her back muscles protesting. Dopamine and endorphins like sips of Cafelot, were righting the glut of adrenaline a bit, she could feel it. She longed to see those lights because of what it would mean to Natalie. *That* was motivation for a lot of things she'd said and done over the last years. Even when she moved directly against Samarath's orders. He was desperate to keep Natalie alive, but she wanted more for Natalie than *alive*. He rarely showed up at Containment. When he did, Natalie knew how to calm his suspicions. Amazing the way she could do that, keep her mouth shut about what was going on behind the Chief's hulking back. Only eleven. Feverish and ill. But she could handle Samarath. So maybe she would somehow be all right wherever she was, with Gilkin and his friends?

None of them were murderers, she had sense enough to see through Gilkin's threats, though Samarath didn't. She knew only some of what Samarath had going with his research project. But because he so clearly wanted to keep the girl alive, when he ordered something for Natalie, she saw that Natalie got it. And Teri? Was she really on leave? How about that friend of hers— Jojo. Cell in maintenance? Right. If she were LJ, she'd check on that woman! But she'd jumped off LJ's bullet train long ago. Though, maybe not entirely...

She switched off the rower and locked herself into a cubicle to wash her sweaty hair in two metered-minutes of pounding water, the luxury ration allowed higher level employees. She needed it now more than ever. Water didn't just get you clean, it saved your soul. Your sanity. Her fragged muscles went blissful under the heat and pressure. She raised her face into the blast and as it hit her eyelids...*she saw Natalie's lights*. A swarm of tiny golden insects. Wings beating fast as light, flooding down from behind her eyes through her whole body and spreading out, spreading everywhere. In the dark center of the circling swarm...peace. And she was smiling. Smiling! First time in forever.

The timer clicked off. As she dried herself, deep chest-wrenching sobs poured out of her. The gift-vision she'd been given had come too late.

Calona 11: Lights

An irritable wind hissed over the ground, spitting bits of sand, stinging their arms and faces. It flattened their hair, jackets, ground cloths, made them hunch and hold on. Sent a jagged sheet of metal tumbling over the ground. They moved into the shelter of a corridor between crates.

When they were settled, they listened to wind shake every loose thing. A sob broke from somewhere, small and far away.

Budd, Jojo realized, and got to her feet. Rena, faster, sprang up, lifted Natalie into Mala's arms, stumbled out of the group, fell once, picked herself up, kept going. Moon kept the hum going, rising and falling through the wind's fitful blasts.

Jojo only half-heard what Natalie murmured to Mala. What the words meant, she couldn't tell, part of her glued to Rena's voice in the falling dark somewhere with Budd. She forced her attention back to Mala with Natalie leaning against her. Kneeling beside them, Jojo combed a hand through the girl's tangled hair. "What did you say, sweetheart?"

"Lights." Natalie looked sideways, pointing.

Jojo caught a glimmer along the blown-away fence. She'd seen those shining bits before— *fuse glass*. Melted and re-made in the heat of a fireball turning sand to liquid. Their molecular structure *transfigured*. She'd never forget that word, though she couldn't remember who said it.

Her mind and body leaned toward Budd as she smiled at Natalie and said, “All you got are these skimpy med socks?” She warmed Natalie's feet between her hands. Saw the girl was not so fever-flushed, her skin the rich brown of willow bark. The sort of willows she had tended from severed branch to sapling at Medina, and came to admire for their refusal to cooperate with bio-engineers forcing them into drought-tolerant hedges—they kept dying. Though always a few decided to live. Why?

Natalie sat up, pointing again, still as a girl carved from stone. Not a girl at all. A figure from what Teri called her *failed painting*; one of only two Jojo had ever found truly disturbing. Teri had shown it to her before destroying it.

Jojo spoke softly, “Natalie? Mala's going to give you some water. I'll be back soon, I promise. Gotta go help Budd, he's not feeling so good.” She pinched the girl's toes, then turned toward Moon, the hum in his throat spiraling higher. His eyes told her he understood.

The List 4: Part Two

Back at her desk, Deena sent Chris on an errand, checked her cell for the text that had come while she shivered like a beaten dog in Samarath's office.

You were right. That was all there was to the message. *You were right.* Sent from *Curtislake@HHH5607.hydro*. Curt?! The guy LJ loved to hate? Oh, *no.* In a cold fog, Deena tried to think. Looked at the message again. At the far bottom of the screen were three zeros,

0

0 0

aligned in the pattern which told her it was LJ and not Curt who'd actually sent that text, in spite of the address. For years, that little symbol had been their private signature. Nobody else in the world knew about it. Immediately she deleted at all levels and waited for Total Clear. If nobody scooped her cell in the next 48, she'd probably be all right.

You were right had to mean LJ wanted her to know that one or all of the names she'd given LJ *were* on The List. If HM knew about Rena's husband and his blind friend, they had to know about Teri Donaghue. And Jojo Vernette. Deena Dixon? Yes. And LJ? Because why else would Lisa be sending her this? After her flat refusal, after canceling Crandy's. Why would she send from Curt's cell? Unless. Unless her own was disabled, switched off, locked up. Unless Lisa Jasper was caught in Curtis Lake's October harvest.

Calona 12: Well of Silence

Jojo flung herself onto the sand beside Budd, a howl breaking loose from him, going through her like a spear.

Rena was stroking his back. "Vomited," she whispered, and they exchanged a long look. "Stay, Jojo? I need to get back. We need to keep the momentum going..."

Momentum? What could she mean? Wasn't everything crashing? But she nodded and took Rena's hand. They peered intensely into each others' eyes like that time that seemed years ago now, on the dune coming in. And like before, she did not want to let go. *Signs of poisoning: Vomiting: Itching:*

Rena shook her head and pulled free.

When she was gone, Jojo unhooked her waterjig, moved close to Budd and waited for his sobbing to quiet.

He shook his head when she handed him water. "Natalie?"

"Mala's got her, she's fine."

He took a deep, shuddering breath. Changed his mind, took the jig, and drank. As he swallowed, fresh waves of sobbing started and water spurted from his mouth, dribbled from his chin.

Without thinking, Jojo put out a hand to catch the drops. He didn't notice. "Should have been with Teri, I should have been with her..."

Jojo took him in her arms, held him, felt the nakedness of his left arm. Like hers.

The world unraveling.

Suddenly she was crazy-furious. Without meaning to, she found herself pushing and pounding at his chest until he caught her wrists and stopped her, clasped her tight until the breath was crushed out of her and she gave up. Went still in his arms.

They were silent a long time. Breathing together. She thought she heard Natalie's voice behind her, a high-pitched hum coming from the Circle. But that couldn't be. *Losing your senses? None to lose*, something answered. She smiled at that, in spite of everything.

Budd rinsed his mouth, leaned over to spit. She could just make out a dark stain in the sand where the water disappeared. She thought of the lichens and the ants and wanted to tell him...but immediately wondered what the point of that would be now? Her body so heavy. No place to lie down. Nothing but krete, grit, spools of wire...

Finally, they leaned against each other. Her back against his back. Heads tilted up to the twilight.

She told him then. Her memory of the future. Cutting Teri's hair. The woman in the sandstone doorway. How Teri sang. How she, Jojo, failed to sing back.

Calona 13: Like A Flower

Natalie lay with her head in Mala's lap. Mala worked her fingers into the intricate muscles of the girl's torso, finding the pattern of their joining, the insertion points where they dived into bone, all a bit unfamiliar to her now, though she'd made most of her living when she wasn't on photo-doc gigs, doing this— until Dreaming caught her up into another life. The girl's eyes flicked open and they looked at each other. Not adult and child. Two ageless beings. She helped Natalie across into Rena's arms.

That was how it began.

Like Moon's silk flower they passed her, a half-grown girl, from one lap to another. While she, sleepy, but still awake, unresisting, let them do it.

For a long moment, Rena rocked Natalie lightly side to side. Then eased her onto Moon's long legs and into his arms. Natalie felt to him infinitely strange and precious.

The girl began to move on her own then, half-crawling, half walking, first to Lonnie who embraced her. Facing Lagarto, she sat up and took his two hands in hers.

Blaise held her next, while Mala massaged her back again— what was it about the patterns of muscle and bone that struck her? *Strong: How long had she been in bed?* Mala looked into the girl's eyes again, and Natalie said, "It hurts when you do that. Because I'm growing too fast." Mala pulled her gently,

pressed the girl's head into her lap once more. "Shhh," she said, "shhh, you rest."

At that moment, arms around each other, Jojo and Budd stepped into the Circle and found their places next to Natalie, who reached for their hands. Budd kissed the top of her head. Jojo did the same.

Exhausted, without speaking, without knowing why, they arranged themselves so that they all lay on their sides, heads together. Left ear to the ground. As though listening to the Earth. To the Aquifer. Natalie curled into the center, into sleep it seemed, without warning.

~

After a time, a shadow passed over them.

Hermit Crab: Budd

Alone. And among them. His body a limb of the organism.
Natalie the center—and yet... alone.

Always had been. Even when he was with Teri. *Hermit crab* she'd called him once— and it suited him, squeezed as he was, backed into a private world.

Protection. Prison. Though crabs trusted their instincts, knew when to get out. When the fit got too tight, they dropped their hideout and moved into another big enough to let them grow.

Calona, nothing but wide open space. Too much of it!
Wrapping him, aching against him. Natalie didn't need him like she did when they came in. He'd seen this, felt it, as they passed her around the Circle. The truth of it sank into him. It was wrong for it to hurt so much. She had eight other people who cared for her as much as he did. *Nine* other people. Teri, too. *My love, I'm not giving up on you.*

That's when he heard it. An engine droning far above them. Descending. It seemed to pause there. Nobody moved. They didn't hear it yet. He couldn't speak.

Then the noise of it swelled into a wall of sound shuddering through him, blasting grit against his skin, forcing him to protect his face with his jacket. Where was Natalie?!
Disoriented, he had no idea which way to move toward her, so he kept still. Trusting— forcing himself to. She did not belong only to him now. He had to believe one of the others would keep her safe.

Voices around him scattering. Merging, became one voice—
Lagarto's voice. Shouting. Words that belonged to the aircraft.
He smelled rock burning. *Killing ship.*

As soon as that thought arrived, the drone of the engine shrank
and disappeared, leaving in its wake a vacant, penetrating
silence.

Hovercraft

The ship angled in from southwest, from the city. A grotesque, grey camo-craft with lit-up underbelly. A deformed metallic stingray, rotors at each end. The thing gave off a shuddering vibration that hurt their ears.

From a slot in its belly, a beam of blue light shot out and swung around. Out of another slot, a brilliant, white-hot beam burned a tiny smoking hole in a fragment of rubble, and quickly withdrew.

Rena yelled above the uproar, “Nobody move! Stay where you are.” Instinctively, they ignored her, scrambled for their crates, ducked behind mounds of rubble. Rena ran into the open yard. Caught in the blue beam, she fell as it spilled over her, rippling on over Lonnie's head and face—he yelped and leapt back into a shadow. She stood her ground.

Lagarto and Natalie clung to each other.

More shouting. Panic. The blue beam hit one wall of the bunker opened earlier, widened into a square and began projecting crawling rows of black letters. When Natalie moved toward the wall, Lagarto pulled her against him. He shouted out the words of the message for all of them to hear.

YOU ARE UNLAWFULLY CAMPED ON PROPERTY
BELONGING TO HYRO-MEDINA INCORPORATED. THIS
AREA IS RESTRICTED DUE TO RADIONUCLIDE

CONTAMINATION, INCLUDING PLUTONIUM-239. LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED. YOU ARE UNLAWFULLY CAMPED ON PROPERTY BELONGING TO HYDRO-MEDINA INCORPORATED. THIS AREA IS RESTRICTED DUE TO RADIONUCLIDE CONTAMINATION, INCLUDING PLUTONIUM-239. LEAVE THE AREA IMMEDIATELY AND YOU WILL NOT BE HARMED. YOU ARE UNLAWFULLY CAMPED ON PROPERTY BELONGING TO HYROD-MEDINA INCORPORATED. THIS AREA IS RESTRICTED DUE TO...

Transcript of MediaNet Broadcast

October 27, 2057

***MN Interviewer, Tom Jason:** We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a news bulletin. It was reported to us today by the Department of Internal Security (DIS), that 9, possibly 10, people have died of radiation exposure at Calona, former nuclear weapons testing ground. The bodies were spotted and photo-docked by a Tri-AM Rad Shield robo-craft directly over the contaminated site after a tip came into DIS.*

Colonel Becker, welcome. Would you fill us in?

Colonel Becker: Thanks, Tom. We believe these people were part of a much larger conspiracy, possibly involving hundreds, a conspiracy which failed, broke down into chaos...that's the reason only 9 or 10 ever reached the site and set up camp there.

Jason: You say 9 or 10? Do we know anything about these people other than the body count? There were 9 bodies in the photo. But you're implying there's another..

Col. Becker: That is our intelligence, yes. We believe the 10th person reached Calona, joined the others, and that...whatever happened, the body is hidden by a structural feature...

Jason: But isn't it possible the 10th person never got to Calona?

Becker: Yes, it's possible that person died on the way.

Jason: How can you be sure he or she is dead? Couldn't they be out there in the desert somewhere?

Becker: It's highly unlikely anyone could survive for long without water, food or shelter.

Jason: What about radiation exposure?

Becker: That too. Dangerous exposure, potentially lethal. Our most recent information is that the Calona area is still too hot to support health.

Jason: What do you think they were out there for? What sort of conspiracy did these people have in mind, Colonel?

Becker: Frankly, we believe they were terrorists, Tom.

Jason: But wouldn't they have been aware how short a time they could survive such conditions? How much damage could they do—and to what? What's out there for terrorists to be interested in? How much could they accomplish at a former desert test site?

Becker: Good questions. Most likely, Tom, according to our sources, they were operating under the mental delusion that...they would somehow be able to decontaminate the area.

Jason: Decontaminate? Strange assignment for terrorists!

Becker: Indeed, but...it's the sort of thing that happens when people believe their dreams are telling them what to do, that they are capable of god-like acts, that they are...invincible, and all the rest of it. This sort of thing is endemic, and it's a real danger to our society, our values, it's...unsafe for all of us. But here's the thing. We do intend to go in there and retrieve those bodies. But we also know it was part of their plan to make themselves, well, martyrs. Stir up pockets of resistance we haven't been able to root out yet...which is why...

Jason: You have that from an inside informant, I take it?

Becker: Sorry, no comment on that. But we will definitely continue to investigate, and, of course, eventually...

Jason: You know who they are?

Becker: We believe so. And some of their sponsors. But until we have the big picture...

Jason: You mean the full extent and nature of the conspiracy?

Becker: Our intention is to smoke out the rest of them. But I can't say more about any of that at this point.

Jason: Colonel, exactly when are you planning to send a haz team in to bring the bodies out?

Becker: We have every intention of going in, as I said, making positive IDs, notifying next of kin, all the rest. But the crucial thing is to get at the source. Cut it off at the root, so to speak. We can't go in immediately because of a complication in tracking down others who are involved, and this is something I'm not at liberty to discuss. If they were alive, we'd be there pronto, but. Well. They aren't going anywhere.

Jason: Right.

Becker: So for now, we're asking everybody to sit tight. I'm here to reassure everyone that we are onto this terrorist cell. I have not a single doubt we will bring them to justice. If any of you have information on anyone you believe might be involved, drop a note in a Security Enforcement box in your neighborhood. That is exactly what they're for. Sending information on your cell is not safe. I repeat, cell reports are not safe. We believe they may be hacked as soon as they are sent. Old fashioned paper and pen is best. Never thought I'd say such a thing, but it's true!

Jason: Things are getting...curiouser and curiouser, aren't they? Thank you, sir.

I've just been speaking with Colonel Mervin Randolph Becker from the Department of Internal Security on the tragedy currently unfolding at Calona. I'm Tom Jason and this is the MediaNet Breaking Newsroom.

Part Eight

RedSpot Radio

The Maze And The Minotaur, A Live Reading

Host: TruBlue

Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds

The words you just heard are from the Bhagavad Gita. Spoken by J. Robert Oppenheimer, who witnessed the first detonation of a nuclear weapon, in the Southwest desert of the former U.S.

This is TruBlue for RedSpot Radio, on the sly, on the fly, never sending from the same coordinates twice, so *you* get the real uncensored news. Tonight, coming in clear from North Star Headquarters, running free on Sun Juice Solarray, we'll be taking you into the center of the cyclone...

As you know, tonight's show was set to include a progress report on Project M. But of all those who started out, we are more than sorry to report, only a fraction of that number actually arrived at their destination.

On the other hand, considering the general uncertainty and questionable source of what little information we have, it just might be that some or all Project M people are, in spite of MediaNet's reports, listening along with you to this broadcast—let's keep that possibility alive.

With me tonight are three *amateur players*, as they call themselves, with an original live reading-slash-performance, composed this week especially for RedSpot.

Welcome, players. I understand you stole your names from three Greek Muses. But I'll let you incriminate yourselves...

Terpsichore: *Muse of dancing, here.* I'll be playing Tatania, adapted from Shakespeare's Titania, queen of the faeries.

Thalia: *Muse of amusing!!* I'll be playing Puck— adapted from Shakespeare's green-man queer trickster from A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Calliope: *Muse of poetry.* And I play Diana— Goddess of the Moon, stars and planets, wilderness and wild things...

TruBlue: Wait, wait. Calliope?! Are you sure faeries and goddesses strike the right tone, given the dire situation...

Calliope: *Dire* is when humans need poetry most, whether you know it or not.

TruBlue: But given the life and death dangers, and what's possibly happening, how did such a *fey* and archaic play come about?

Calliope/Diana: From She who speaks in cadences/ with voice neither male/ nor female/ with the assurance/ of an angel /saying, *Be Not Afraid*—even as the bolt/ descends.

TruBlue: Ravishing! But how did the script come about?

Calliope/Diana: (Laughter) Actually, we're all to blame for the *fey tone* as you call it. We got the bad news same as you. We were devastated—like you and so many others. We wanted to respond. We brooded, we paced. We dug through takes and bits of Shakespeare, ended up re-reading the whole of *Midsummer*. In the original. (Laughter) A couple of other plays, too. *La Vidanella*. *Angel of Music*. *We're With You*, by LeWanda F. Harper, a Black woman who risked her life for every word she wrote. And...Oh, but I can't tell you all our sources!

And, of course. *We slept on it.* Believe me—and muses do not

lie—it shocked *us* too. We resisted —especially me— a piece like this *now*? So after the second draft, we slept on the whole thing again. Literally! Sheaves of pages under our pillows...

TruBlue: And?

Calliope/Diana: And I woke up with another poem. *Once a queen aroused...* But I won't steal thunder from Puck's opening line...

Thalia/Puck: Go ahead and steal, darling!

TruBlue: Which Queen do you mean, Calliope?

Calliope/Diana: Some call her *She Who Shines For All*.

TruBlue: Ah. You're beginning to open my eyes. But Terpsichore, forgive me, I have to ask...what in Goddess's name does *dancing* have to do with Project M?

Terpsichore/Tatania: *If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution—*

TruBlue: Emma Goldman?

Terpsichore/Tatania: Emma Goldman. A very evolutionary gal, from ages ago. You see, the *true* monster is the one who never dances. Who binds and shames every dancer and singer and lover. Who makes it his literal business to *eliminate* dancing—even the *urge* to dance, the *memory* of dancing! Please hear me now. By dancing, we do not just mean shaking your ass to the Boom Brats at some after-shift blast.

TruBlue: I still don't see what this has to do with...

Calliope/Diana: When things are dire, listen for the deeper rhythms. *Earth has music for those who listen*. That last was Mr. William Shakespeare.

(Sings): *No fear, no armor. No meat and drink but love...*

TruBlue: Okay, what exactly are the three of you up to?

Thalia, Calliope, Terpsichore: (Hand-clapping, humming, dance-steps.)

TruBlue: Hey, *wait!* This is *radio!*

Thalia, Calliope, Terpsichore: Exactly!!!

TruBlue: To be continued... Next time on Redspot Radio.

Falling Away

Lagarto, the present

He watched calmly—Natalie safe between himself and Budd—watched as Jojo and Moon, who didn't look at him or each other, climbed out of their hiding-places. Behind them, Rena, her mouth and eyes angry. Blaise and Mala held each up other as they hurried toward him. Lonnie slipped out of the shadows, limping, cap pressed to his belly.

When they were all together, he was deeply relieved—everybody uninjured and, for the moment, still free. That was everything. He gave thanks to Her. Realized he'd been doing that from the moment the hovercraft left them.

Lonnie patted his pockets and looked up, confused. "Lost something?" Rena asked, impatient. "My lucky blue marble," he said, with a sad grin, and she shot back, "That why you didn't do what I told you to? When I said *nobody move* you ran right off! Might as well've said *let's get the hell out of here.*" She looked at the others. "Not that you were alone there."

Rena's eye fell on him. "Lagarto, at least you and Budd took me seriously and stayed where you were."

Lagarto cleared his throat. "I apologize, Rena but...we didn't actually hear you." He put his hand on Budd's shoulder. Budd shook his head maybe *no*, maybe he wasn't going to say.

Natalie spoke up. "We didn't know if what you wanted us to do was right or not," she said. "Lagarto wanted me with him. He

found Budd and brought him back here. We stayed because he thought the machine would hurt us if we ran.”

“Ah,” Rena said. “I see. But I think we need to have a talk about what happened.”

Unhappy glances all around. Jojo turned away to face her mountain.

“Rena,” Moon whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, “maybe we should be giving thanks. Or celebrating...”

“Stay out of this,” she said. “We need to discuss...”

“No more, *s'il vous plait!*,” Blaise's was face full of pain. Mala sat with her eye squeezed shut, shaking her head. Jojo nodded.

“If we were facing a bear out here,” Lonnie jumped in, “*don't run* might be sage advice, but in this case, Rena, with that craft coming at us from above, we were better off with duck-and-take-cover. Besides. Isn't that what *you* did at first?”

“Oh right, I forgot. This laser beam hovercraft stuff is *your* area of expertise, isn't it?” The lady was smoldering.

Lonnie mumbled, “I damn well better have at least *one*.”

Lagarto's gaze rested on Lonnie, trying to catch his eye. He saw how beaten down the man was. *My friend, you'll never convince La Patrona of what you don't believe yourself.*

“So Rena's the bear here?” She sent her husband a sour look.

Lonnie, surprised, “Come on. You know what I mean!”

“*Please?*!” Jojo barked, turning to Natalie, “Wanna go hang out at The Junkpile?”

Natalie gave her an uncomfortable smile. “Could I stay here for right now? Don't be mad.”

"I'm not mad, I just. Sure, Nat, you stay. I'm gonna get me some sleep." She stood and looked at them, one by one, Rena last.

"Maybe that's what we *all* oughta be doing."

"You're the boss," Rena said acidly, and got to her feet.

Lonnie held himself completely still, cap in the dust beside him. "Did you see the light hit me?" he said to Rena's back, his voice soft but urgent.

She stopped but wouldn't turn to look at him. Instead she looked at the ground and folded her arms. "Hit me, too. What about it?"

"I think it did something." He was pleading now.

She turned to him, but her face was closed. "What are you talking about, it wasn't a laser, Lonnie, for god's sake, it was just blue light!"

"Not just light," Lonnie said, "I don't know, but it changed something, it made me..."

"...lose your lucky marble?" she snapped.

Lagarto turned his eyes away, ashamed for her, for Lonnie, too, and for himself. Rena stalked off to her Clinic, making it plain in front of everyone she did not want Lonnie to follow. The Clinic was hers and he could find his own place now.

What Lonnie was trying to tell Rena was nothing to do with light. She was unyielding, La Patrona again. Didn't hear him, couldn't see him. Everything she saw, a reflection of her anger.

Lagarto felt the wound in their spirits. In all of them. He, too, blamed the craft. Fear was driving them apart.

The worst thing was, whoever was running that craft knew exactly where they were. And would be back to finish them off.

Mending

If you pardon, we will mend

Natalie, wrapped in a jacket, sat where Lagarto could see her, where Budd could sense her. But she felt far away.

Where the three of them were camped, she could see Jojo's mountain. Liked to run her eyes along the peaks, up and down against the sky. Wondering who might be living there.

Since the machine threw words at them, everything felt wrong. Dull voices. Separate camps. Mostly she woke with Budd and Lagarto, away from the yard. She'd stay an hour or two with Rena, then with Jojo. Moon. Blaise and Mala. Lonnie. One after another. That was how they wanted things. Everybody strange with each other. Not knowing how or not wanting to talk. Except sometimes to her.

After the machine, Rena stayed in her Clinic. Blaise and Mala dragged their things farther away. Jojo went back to the junkpile. She worried all the time about how to do it—how to bring them back together.

If you pardon. A voice like wind in her mind. Sometimes she said the words she heard out loud. *If you pardon.* Because she liked the way they made her feel, erasing the bad smell of burning dirt, the beating-sound still in her ears, the blue beam. *You will not be harmed.* Which she knew meant the opposite. They were already hurt. All of them. In different ways.

The first time it happened, she was sitting on a box in Lonnie's camp. Maybe the words spilled out of her then because Lonnie was the one in the biggest trouble— she didn't know what kind of trouble exactly, or how the words might help him. When the blue light hit him, it hurt his eyes. He didn't want to talk about that. Especially not to Budd. Not Rena, either. *We aren't exactly the happy couple these days. Jojo's mad at me, too, for some reason. Who else am I going to tell? I guess I'm telling you, Nat. But let's keep it to ourselves, okay?*

"If you pardon, we will mend," she said.

"Where'd you get *that* from?" Lonnie stared at her the way Brian used to do. Like she'd pinched him.

She shrugged, "*Look for the pattern that connects...*"

He flinched. "You know what you're talking about?"

She hummed a wordless song Deena taught her at the Clinic one night when she couldn't sleep.

"Did *Rena* get you to say that stuff to me?"

She shook her head and turned away. When he was like this, the air around him stung her skin.

"Well, you just tell Rena it's time we switched to a different kind of gov—a different way to run this show."

"Show?" The word confused her.

"This *thing* we're doing here, this *so-called Action*." He swung his arm out and let it drop into his lap.

She picked up a handful of sand and dug a finger through the crystals. "You want things to be different?"

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.” He clasped his fingers together, closed his eyes. “Maybe a little rebellion, *down with the Queen*, for starters...” A grunting laugh in his throat. “Do you know what *majority rule* means, Nat?”

She shook her head, picked up a strand of wire, ran her hand along its length, straightened it, then curved it into a loop inside a loop.

“Means whatever most people decide to vote for is right... how it’s supposed to go in a Democratic State. Not like this place. Calona, Sovereign Nation! One Ruler. Understand?” He mirrored her nod. “Say it back to me.”

The more he pushed, the less she wanted to stay or do what he asked. “You want the Action...to be Majority Ruled.”

“Way to go, Nat, I thought you were going to put the queen stuff in there and mess it up for me.” That laugh again, it made her stomach ache.

She handed him the wire she'd been bending. She had turned it into a spiral. He took it from her, puzzled, said nothing.

When she turned to go, Blaise stood in her path, reaching for her arm. She stepped away and was gone before hearing the question she saw in Blaise’s eyes.

Lonnie and Blaise

A few yards behind her, Lonnie stood watching the meticulous way she cleaned and organized her equipment. His own hands worked the wire Natalie'd given him. He couldn't put it down. Especially, losing the marble he'd picked up a million years ago on the yellow brick road. The wire kept his hands and at least one part of his mind busy, bending and straightening. Soothing him.

Blaise pulled out her torch. He stood, throwing a shadow, walked into it. She turned with a hiss of fear. "Shit!" Wiped sweat out of her eyes with a forearm. "Don't make a habit of doing that, will you?! My nerves are shredded."

Lonnie squatted near her. "You're really good at what you do, saw that the day we got here. But I've been wondering. Don't look at me like that, I'm not going to bite, I was wondering if you could...use any help?"

She turned her back to him, blew sand out of a groove along the handle of the torch.

"That torch of yours—how much fuel you think you got?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Why would you ask me that?"

He laughed. "Calm down, it's just...there's a project I have in mind and I'd need..."

"This?" She held up the torch and aimed it at him like a gun. "Remind you of anything? Maybe that HM laser burning a hole in the ground?"

A wave of vertigo reminded him of the blue light attacking him. "Hey!" He pushed the torch away. "What's up with you? It's me, remember. Lab-buddy, not some Hydro goon..."

"Stop acting like one, then." She rubbed sweat from her cheek with a sleeve. "And stop looking like a huzz on the make..."

That was a sting he hadn't expected. "No way. Look, okay, I'll let you in on something. There's a water tank above the trestle, you've probably noticed..."

"Thanks for giving me credit for a brain."

"Like I said, you're good at everything I've seen you do so far. And that's why..."

"You want me to burn a little hole in that tank for you?"

Her directness rattled him. "Well, uh. Actually. That Hydro craft gave me the idea."

"That hole they burned was just a laser rad-read. Probably figured we'd be glowing in the dark by now."

"I wanna find out for sure if there's water in that thing."

"You're serious?! Any water left in that thing would be..."

"...*hot*, right. Maybe. But isn't that what we're supposed to be here to do something about?"

"Turn PU tea into Oolong? Man, that's what I call a wet dream." She let loose a soft stream of French curses ending in a choked-off, unfriendly laugh. "Seriously. You must be spending too much time in the sun." She glared up at the flaming sphere, yanked her hat over her eyes.

He threw up his hands. "Is being out here at all any less crazy? Can you answer me that?"

She sighed. "What does Rena think?"

In his mind again, Rena laughed out loud when he told her his watertank idea. *Not a very appealing object for an Image Circle.* He'd glared at her and flung back *and I'm sick of your Elizabeth the First impression!* He, the royal bed partner, with no part in the rule. Not much bed lately, either.

"Rena doesn't call *all* the moves," he said to Blaise. "I've got a good idea. She approves of good ideas. Or she used to. Getting our hands on some actual water has got to be a better way of doing a rad reversal than trying to...vibe into an aquifer... how far down under our feet is it? Think about it, Blaise." He waited.

"You'd burn a hole in that tank on your own? One man show, without the rest of us in on the decision at all?"

"You'd be in." He stared at his hands. "Look, all I want to know is if there's water in that tank. If there is, I promise, I'll raise the next step we take in a Circle, everybody gets a vote."

"How generous of you," she sneered.

"Voting's not foolproof out here. Rena's headscarf trick, her secret gravel-count..."

She did not respond. Then to his surprise, she sighed, gave him a nod. "And if there *is* no water, if she's dry?"

"End of story. But judging from what's happened already, it's not going to help morale to get people's hopes up, waste a lot of time yakking, when we don't even know if there *is* any water...see my point?"

"Maybe." She went on checking and cleaning her equipment

"You sure as hell are better with that torch than I'll ever be...so you could blow the hole yourself, if that'd make you feel better. How long to eat through the hull, you think?"

"Maybe ten. Longer if it's a double hull, but I doubt that."

“Right. That’s how I see it. A simple steel sphere. That flame thrower of yours’ll lick right through it.”

Blaise stood, slapping sand from her pants. “I can't believe I'm letting you....”

“Is that a yes?” He flashed her a grin, chewed his lip, waiting on her answer.

Eyes slitted, she blew sand out of the housing and shoved the torch into its carrier. “I'll think about it. But Mala has to be in on it, too. We don't have secrets.”

“*Three* of us? Bad idea.” He threw up his hands. “Okay, okay. But you know what? This is starting to sound like *secession from the union*. Like Oregonia, Califia and Washingtonia when Tri-Am left the States and never looked back...”

“Don't sound so pleased with yourself *ma homme petite*.”

The Mirror

Natalie

She ducked into Rena's crate, crawling over stacks and piles into the far back corner where Rena was sleeping on her side. A mirror gleamed like a streak of water near her feet. She picked it up, angled it toward her face. Brown skin, dark eyes, black hair pinned back with hospital clips.

She set the mirror on Rena's toolbox and took down her hair, scratching her fingers into her scalp, delighting in the pleasure of it. Shook her head and let her hair settle however it wanted to. Divided it into two handfuls. Smoothed and combed them with her fingers. Each half, she separated into three strands, weaving them in and out, in and out, the way Deena had done for her so many times.

But there was more her hands wanted to do.

Left and then right, she twined each braid around a finger and pressed the coil flat beside her ear. When she let go of it, the coil sprang apart. Like Moon's scarf. She wound the braids again and this time pushed in clips to hold them there.

Rena sat up on an elbow, blinking, her skin gray and tired-looking. "What are you doing, Natalie?"

"Lonnie told me to tell you he..."

"Whoa, hang on. Give me a look at you." Rena put both hands on her shoulders. "Right now you seem ...I don't know, a lot older than eleven."

"I'm not eleven. I'm thirteen."

"*Thirteen!*" she frowned. "That's not right. Budd told me you were... Weren't you were born in '44?"

She shook her head.

Rena slid a hand over the nape of Natalie's neck. "I guess we'll never figure that or anything else out, will we?"

"If everybody didn't fight so much, we might."

Rena caught sight of the mirror and picked it up. "You were looking at yourself? Ah. Maybe you *are* thirteen!" She laughed. "I don't mean to make fun of you — you look beautiful that way. Those braids! Did your mother used to put your hair up like that?"

Natalie's face went blank. "You mean the lady who visited me at the Clinic? She's not my mother."

"Who is then?"

She shrugged. "Maybe I don't have a mother."

"What! Everybody has a mother, silly, that's one of the few things we can all be sure of."

She gave Rena a look of hurt confusion, opened her mouth to say something, changed her mind, and waited. "Lonnie told me to say he wants majority ruled."

Rena shook her head. "Oh, he does, does he? What else did he pontificate to you about? Pontificate? Oh, that's just a big word that means to make a fool out of yourself. Shoot off your mouth. What other words of wisdom did he have?"

"I think that's all."

"You think?" She tipped Natalie's chin toward her.

“He said...” Her eyes shifted, looking directly into Rena's. “He said for me not to tell everything.”

“And so you won't?”

“I promised.” Natalie bit her lip.

“Right, you promised.” She let go of the girl. “Okay, Miss Natalie. I respect that. I really do. A person who keeps her promises. For a change.”

“What's it for?” Natalie indicated the mirror.

Rena smiled, held the glass up and looked at herself, peeled damp hair from her neck. A small handful came off in her fingers. Rattled, she brushed it away. “If my hair was long I'd ask you to help me braid it like yours... would keep it out of my face, that'd be a relief. Better than this thing.” She snatched up a scarf and held it to the side of her face.

“What's it really for?”

“The mirror? You'll see.” Rena knotted the scarf around her head. “Let's get out of here.”

They were on their feet outside The Clinic when Rena, a hand on her belly, said, “Wait here a minute, I've got to use the pit. There's a new one behind the bunker, that way.” She handed the mirror to Natalie.

Sunlight bounced off the glass in her hands, sending out bright flashes. She played reflections over the trestle, over the blown-out walls of a building. Like a white bird, the light fluttered from place to place.

Confessions I

Jojo

When she took her place in the Circle under the trestle, the first thing she heard was Lonnie counting. “Would you *stop*? Bad enough to be dying of thirst with that scary-ass thing in the air about to come down on us any moment...do we have to listen to you count every damn swallow of water, on top of it!” If she hadn't got talked into this Circle, if she hadn't promised Natalie... She threw a regretful glance at the girl—saw that Natalie or somebody had brushed and wound her hair up in a peculiar style.

“I'll stop,” Lonnie said, “if you stop biting my head off, Jo.” He gave her a look of pure irritation. “I know what you're thinking—don't call you Jo.”

“Then why do you keep on doing it?!” But she was out of steam, Budd surprised her by speaking up and changing the subject.

“Back before everything started with Natalie— some of you already know this,” he hesitated. “I lost my cell.” He rubbed his bare wrist. “Woke up and it was gone. Searched everywhere. Many times. Just gone. Now I think I know why.” His lips pressed together to keep them from trembling. “I have to. I have to tell you...all of you. I think the reason was...I was coming off REM-X.”

Stunned silence. Rena shook her head. “So that's what was wrong with you at the last meeting.”

Jojo covered her ears. “I don't *believe* you! How could you *do* that when you knew the risk...?!”

As if she'd hit him, his body jerked, and for a moment he said nothing. “I had to.” Three words, barely audible. “After The Action plan got serious...*one* of us had to take a different angle...outside all the Ariadne romance.”

“No! That's exactly what we didn't need!” She dug a stone out of the dirt, threw it hard, hitting the trestle with a loud ping.

“It was the only way to keep a grasp on what was *really* happening. I couldn't figure things out unless I *stopped* Dreaming. For awhile anyway.” He mumbled the next words. “Never meant it to go on...”

“You were taking REM-X the whole time we were putting this Action together?!”

“If I could only say how sorry...”

She leaned over, yelling into the ground, “You *lied!*”

“I stopped taking it, but something went wrong, *everything* went wrong, I was so disoriented, must have unlocked my cell and hidden it without knowing what I was doing. A while ago I remembered the way it must have happened, saw it there in my apartment on a top shelf near the ceiling, what I don't know is if I set it to V-mode or Disable or what I did, so it might've been tracked by now...”

Her voice, her body shook as she spoke each word. “You. Risked. Our *lives*...” she rocked back and forth.

“And tell us, what did you learn from *not* Dreaming, Budd?” Rena this time.

He turned to Natalie who was sitting up, frowning with concentration.

“When I was coming off the drug, when the Action started and Lonnie got us into the Clinic,” he took a deep breath, “that’s when I started thinking maybe Dreams would just come, no matter what we did. Awake or asleep. That we couldn’t stop them. That we’ve gone past the point of no return. Because *Ariadne* keeps changing, and that’s changing *us*...”

A babble of voices. Rena whistled and everybody shut up. “Why didn’t you say any of this when Lagarto was telling his Dream? When Jojo said almost the same thing?”

Budd shook his head. “My only excuse is. I couldn’t. Couldn’t say anything. What happened to Teri,” his hands dug into his forearms, “cut a link to my tongue.”

For a long time he struggled but could not say more. No one interrupted the silence.

“I swear, Jojo, it’s true— I never thought of anything but...”

Jojo flew at him, fists pounding his shoulders. “*Liar*.” He grabbed her wrists and held on. She kicked at his legs. “*Liar! Liar!*” Quickly exhausting her strength, she sat back and rubbed her left arm where a cell would have been, breathing hard, facing him. “When I was Natalie’s age, my mother got sick— I was dying to unlock her cell.” She was crying now. “Unlock *her*. Smash it to a million bits. I might have, too—but. I knew it was risking her freedom, her life. And mine.” She glared at Budd. “You! You weren’t thinking about us when you made your big bold decision to take that horrible drug? You thought you could get away with killing Dreams and it would make no difference to the rest of us?” Again she pounded at him. “What is *wrong* with you?!”

Rena stood to intervene, but Natalie was quicker, ducking into the space between them, forcing it to stop. Jojo on her knees, caught her breath, hugged Natalie fiercely, stood up and walked out of the yard.

Accelerator

Samarath

The drug was the color of whiskey as it threaded through the cannula into his wrist-vein. He sat back, crossed his free arm behind his head, put his feet up and waited for the Mello to kick-in. Three parts downer, one part upper. If only it *was* whiskey. But firewater was as tough to come by these days as plain water.

Natalie was out of his reach, and no way to be sure those pathogens he'd exposed her to wouldn't spread. Or when. No reports he was aware of so far. Nausea, vomiting, reddening of the skin. Symptoms that resembled a lot of things, including an overdose of radiation. Worse, all his research was shot to hell.

I'll track the girl down myself if I have to.

In that blood of hers were three unique and mysterious substances. One, a pan-neuro-cytokin. Two, a universal immune factor. And three, most mind-blowing of all, a super telomerase that lengthened T-caps after cell replication—without going cancerous.

These things, especially the last, excited him to a nearly unbearable pitch. What tormented him as much, though, was that he couldn't trust anybody with his hypotheses. He was on his own with this world-shaking knowledge, entirely alone. But then hadn't he always been?

He could feel the Mello ignite a halo around every cell in his body, a shine swelling under his skin like he was turning into

light. Even his cubicle, piled with dirty clothes and sticky bowls, his own little rat cage, was starting to look almost good to him. And that was the trouble with the damn stuff. Made you go mushy sometimes. He closed his eyes...

Snowy's body in a drift of sand. Buried out there.

Made his nose run. Made him remember. Snowy blubbering like a baby over their mother at the funeral. Little bro— he'd given him a chance to make things right between them and, like always, Snowy'd fucked up, let him down.

Snowy buried like their mother.

But shit man, his golden Xs were gonna blow bio-sci wide open! Two ways to live forever. First, get yourself really famous. Second, *don't die*.

He ate, drank, shat, nothing else. Invented names for his threesome, his trinity. *Panokin*, neurotransmitter. *Euperon*, the immune factor that seemed to beat back pretty much anything he threw at it. *ProTel*, promising to expand the human life span. But what he was really after was a serum combining all three— Panokin, Euperon, ProTel— XXX! *Euteleron*.

He rolled his head back, savored his private name for the stuff— *The Accelerator*. Which would take him up like a rocket into the company of other great scientific minds. Shoot him beyond the usual fate of old men. His old man. And the rest of them going back to kingdom come.

At first, he'd planned to experiment on himself. Join that long rogue tradition among researchers. Lots of famous Nobels had done it. Dosed themselves with brain-enhancing substances from grass to LSD and beyond. Whatever it took to get funded, papers published, prizes won.

But when his proto-serum worked up from Natalie's blood was barely off the ground, he ended up testing it on the Brenna

twins instead of injecting himself. Kids in Containment made perfect subjects. That choice, it turned out, had been one of his most fortunate moves.

He sat forward, caught a miller's moth and rubbed it to powder—his thumb and fingertips gleamed with miniscule scales. He wiped them on his pants.

Those first crude transfusions did not take the way he'd counted on. He figured he might get the twins' blood to produce more of each X if he exposed them to a virus. That didn't happen. Though the infections that got them committed in the first place went into remission. After the fuss, he blamed Deena. He still wasn't sure about Deena. The twins were tested by an outside source, pronounced clean, listed *mistaken diagnosis*. Discharged.

He remembered with pleasure how he'd lucked onto Natalie at Small World, one of the best foundling nurseries, mother and father dead of HRDV-27 — Natalie his biggest piece of serendipity so far. Chief-of-staff, Dave Barton had gotten into a tizzy over the kid's symptoms— thought they might be due to infection by the same organism that killed her mother. Barton put her in iso and shot him a roak. Good man, Barton. Research buddies always willing to help a clade-bro out. A little or a lot. Because sooner or later it would come back...

When he got permission from Barton to test Natalie, he saw the obvious shockers right away, plus hints of subtler things he would clarify only later. It was easy to declare her officially infected with the parental virus, then commit her— with Barton's grateful cooperation—to his Containment ward until a “cure” could be developed. He'd invented Susanna and Daniel Wright as her parents, invented the whole fucking story. It was true the mother's name listed in orphanage records had been Susanna. Everything else? Fiction.

Instructed minutely in that fiction, Deena told the girl stories about Mrs. Wright, faithful mommy keeping vigil at the visitor's bench, and all the rest of it.

After the twins, he jumped to full-on experimental protocols with Natalie, not just working with her blood. So many things didn't add up. Like where the hell those Xs came from in the first place. He would love to get a look-see at some of the old intake samples. Did Barton still have them in the freeze? Have to get Deena on that.

Then there was the puzzling severity of the girl's symptoms. Even when she was testing out serilogically healthy. At first, he'd written up some stuff and posted it in Clinic records so he'd look good if he was ever investigated. But after Donaghue went sniffing through Natalie's file, he'd deleted everything but innocuous-looking, misleading entries. Investigators be damned. No matter how suspicious, the crucial thing was to keep Natalie going, and what he'd found out to himself.

Was he a little feverish? He was sweating now. *Shit*, he could not afford to get sick. Had to keep a clear head, see what he could do without Natalie to get the super-T to lift-off. Get it replicating in her blood. Gold mine. Golden Goose. X's endlessly cloning themselves...

He pushed up from his chair, leaned into the bathroom mirror. Looked a little green around the gills, as Mom used to say. He checked his cell. Normal temp and pulse. Hell, the Mell must be wearing off. Deserting him already!

He was paranoid about bugs in spite of his work with them. Maybe *because*. Slipperiest life-form on the fucking planet, shifting the contents of their trick-bags one hour to the next. You could never be sure about those tiny bastards, those micro-monsters.

Once he got Natalie back in Containment, he'd expose her to a pathogen specifically chosen so her blood would produce more and more Panokin. Combine that with proliferated ProTel, and he might very well get chromosome-cap preservation. Then he'd inject an onco-inductive virus as a test. The beauty of the combination action he had in mind was that any cancerous or defective cells should quickly self-destruct.

He sat back down at his desk. But if the abduction thing ever blew, he'd never get her back. His Nobel, his life's work, would be kaput. He sicked Snowy on Teri because the woman got closer to Natalie than anybody but Deena. For awhile it'd seemed like a good thing—but she was *too* interested, snooping around...

He saw Teri with new eyes—a direct connection to the snatch. To keep the whole mess quiet, he'd called in his brother and the guys, all of them owing him favors. Snowy reported in — as expected— Teri acting pretty suspicious. *Bring her in*, he told the guys, *vertical or horizontal. Either that or her cell.*

Snowy's buddies found him out there with his head bashed in. His poor dumb-ass brother who couldn't get it right. Teri gone. The woman was a nightmare. Had her cell, though—Christ, she was actually married to the blind guy, B.F. de Vas. “Friends” with Lonnie Gilkin and his wife. And that flat-liner “volunteer” Jojo Vernette—nothing on her anywhere, nothing. Which was the giveaway...

Teri must know where Natalie was.

Since the girl'd been snatched, his life had gone out of control, he had to get her back or blow a ventricle. That's where the Mell came in. As in Mellow Yellow. He chuckled, riding an echo of the high...

The Mell was definitely fading on him. Ugly grey daylight leaked through the glasbrik portholes in his office wall.

He couldn't do without Natalie— without XXX— but he could damn well keep himself busy, see what he could tease out of the girl's specimens stashed in liquid nitrogen—at least til he figured his next move.

Getting up to brush his fuzzy teeth, something clicked. The kid on ward six. *Carlito?* Kappa virus was going to take him soon, anyway. Meantime, he could see what Natalie's Xs might do in the kid's bloodstream...

He sprang back to his desk and got Deena on her cell.

Confessions II

Jojo

She slipped back into the Circle, nobody's eyes but Natalie's on her. Found a place next to the girl and studied the others. Budd opened his eyes like he could see her, his face full of relief. Had they all been sitting there, waiting for her? Working over the meaning of her breakdown?

But everybody was showing signs of cracking, weren't they?

"Rena." Blaise's voice, a jab of sound, tightened the muscles in Jojo's back. "Lonnie has something to tell you."

"What's she talking about?" Rena spun around toward Lonnie.

Fiddling with his wire, coiling it into a disk, he said, "There *is* water in that tank, Rena." He lifted his chin to look up at it. Everybody, even Budd, followed the gesture.

"And how in hell would you know that?" Rena hissed.

Silence.

"Want me to tell her?" Blaise, barely suppressing her fury. "Or are you going to get it up and do the right thing yourself?"

"Tell me *what?*!" Rena glared at Lonnie who stared at his hands.

"Okay, Buddy, if you won't do it." Blaise wiped sweat from her neck, draped her scarf on a prong of robar to dry. Her lips were white and ragged, she picked at bits of skin as she worked herself up to speak. "It's true, everybody," she said. "Lonnie and I think there's water in the bottom of that thing up there. Not

sure how hot it is, but it'll definitely be *wet*." Bitter, half-laugh, half cough. "I plan on burning a hole in the other side next time, lower down, so we can get..."

"*Lonnie and I*?" Cold rage in Rena's eyes swept over Blaise. Then took aim at Lonnie. "You talked her into this, didn't you." When he opened his mouth she said, "*Don't. You. Dare.*" He looked back at her for the first time as her eyes bored into his. She went on. "I don't want to hear what you think or what you feel. You broke your word to me and everybody here. You promised like the rest of us to do nothing of any consequence without a vote. You sat right there looking righteous while Budd told us his big mistake. It's always the same mistake. Going off on your own without..." She stopped, eyes still on him. "I want you to swear you will *never* do anything again without taking it to the Circle."

"Or? You're going to do what?" he said calmly, keeping an unnaturally still posture. Jojo caught the faint quiver of his lips, the zig zag of his eyes she knew so well, meaning he was far from the calm he was pretending.

Natalie touched Budd's arm. From behind Lonnie's back, Budd reached out and pinned Lonnie's arm to his side. "Hey, friend," Budd said in a low voice coming from his belly, and gave Lonnie a shake.

Lonnie quit fighting the vise-hold Rena and Budd had him in, and went limp. Rena stood up and looked around. "Who else has a confession? This would be the time to get it out! What's going to hold this Action together if we do whatever jumps into our heads. I want to hear it again from *everybody*, a promise right now," she ignored Budd and Blaise, turned to Moon and Lagarto.

Natalie rubbed her cheeks. "I know what could help."

They all gaped.

“Everybody,” Natalie said, “do what Budd did.” She reached out and touched Rena's cell. “Don't wear these anymore...”

Jojo sensing a live current in the air, sprang up and tapped Moon's cell with a knuckle, made a gesture like turning a key in a lock. For some reason she could not bear to speak a word now, but knew Natalie was getting them on the right track. Chucking their cells was a beginning. A promise. One they could not go back on.

Rena's hand went to her wrist. “Why, Natalie? Why would it help? We might need to check in with Labyrinth. Besides, it helps me...be a doctor. Cells didn't bring that hovercraft on us, we were all in V-mode. Safe mode, Natalie. When they try to track you and you're in V-mode, they get a signal that sends them to the wrong place...”

“Because,” Natalie took a breath, “when you wear cells, it means you belong to them. To the people who don't want us here.”

They sat in silence, Natalie's words echoing.

Mala and Lagarto looked at each other. Slowly, reluctantly they unlocked their cells. *Permanent disable?* flashed, they punched in code, and their screens went dark. Lagarto then Mala laid them like small black carcasses at Rena's feet.

Jojo took in the whole Circle. “Natalie's right. We need to stop keeping one foot in the system.”

“Don't know about this, you guys. But here goes.” Blaise unsnapped her cell and laid it with the others.

Lonnie, who'd dropped his into the chute at MedArt, looked at Jojo. “Why should you get a say on this, you never had a cell to give up? And what about our great leader? Don't see her taking *hers* off. I say, after you, Madam Captain.”

Rena's chest rose and fell, eyes squeezed shut. When Natalie again touched her arm, Rena blew out a long slow breath. With a sideways glance at Lonnie, she added her cell to the pile.

Part Nine

Braids

Natalie

She sat at the edge of the yard. Jojo came running toward her, relief and happiness lighting her face. “Been looking for you!” she stooped, out of breath, hands on her knees, eyes bright.

“Hey. Look. Sorry about everything back there in the Circle...”

Natalie kept silent, looked at the mountains.

“Been wondering what made you twist your hair up that way?”

“Don't you like it?”

“I do!” Jojo sat down. “I do. But it makes me think about Teri.”

Natalie flew her hands through the air until they met, fingers crossing each other. “*When all the threads come together...*”

“Where'd that come from? What you just said...”

“Here?” She pointed to her throat and Jojo made a silly face.

“Very funny, kid! Have you been Dreaming?”

She shook her head.

“Any more words like that in here?” Jojo cupped Natalie's head, pretending to peer inside. “Maybe a whole ant's nest of 'em?”

She smiled like she always did at Jojo being Jojo.

“Let's go over to my heap, Nat. Something I gotta show you.”

The List 5

Deena

“You mean you haven't heard how your good Buddy, Lisa, *disappeared* on us?” Samarath threw the news at her, taking pleasure in delivering the blow. She shook her head, numb to his words, their implications. *Disappeared* did not tell her any more than she'd already imagined after Lisa's *You were right*. But coming from Samarath who probably got it from Barton, chilled and devastated her.

Outwardly, she took his announcement with no reaction beyond a sudden stillness. The only part of her body that might betray her was her eyes—she kept them glued to a cloudlike stain on his desk.

As Samarath delivered his punch, then elaborated on it, she sank into an internal white space. But she had to speak, didn't she? “What do you think it means?”

“Means me and my project could be in serious fucking trouble.” She saw he was not so much angry as full of self pity, focusing away from her and on himself, his precious research.

She'd never heard from Lisa after that last shoot from Curt's cell. One more thing added to the short list she cherished precisely because Samarath did *not* know any of them— LJ's real name, for instance. And that L J was much more to her than a friendly colleague.

~

It was agony keeping up with the demands of her job now. Not sleeping, a trail of mistakes showing up behind her. She almost hoped Samarath would call her in and pink her. But of course he couldn't let her go. He'd have to think of something much more *complete*. If HM went after Lisa's connections, Deena would be high priority. Right beside Lonnie Gilkin and Teri and the rest of the them.

~

The second bombshell dropped later when Samarath told her what he was planning for Carlito, and gave her orders to set it up. Change his diet and water rations. Change his story.

At night, Tyler held her. She shook in his arms, dozed til the window lightened, detested the moment she had to pry herself out of his embrace, get dressed, catch the Mag by 6am.

~

Creepy how Samarath never mentioned Natalie now. Though once when Deena walked in on him in the middle of a call, she thought she heard the word *girl* and then *snow*. Was that it? The veins in his neck bulged as he clicked off. *Snow?* Some kind of code?

She would probably never know what happened to any of them. Ever. Not Natalie. Not Lisa. *You never belonged at Hydro, you never did, why couldn't you see that?*

Only a matter of time until they came for *her*-Deena. Aka Leah Jasper.

Lisa and Leah Jasper. Nobody knew they'd grown up together on the edge of Puente del Mar. Their mother, Irene, 36 when she died, leaving them her work boots, rubber apron and most of all, a clear principle for action in desperate straits—*proactive*

betrayal. In the face of oncoming peril, strike first— bring down what intended you harm.

~

Going through files, she gasped when she saw that somebody— Samarath?— had erased many of Natalie's records. Stunned, she heard him call her into his office where he immediately ordered her to find out if Barton still had any archived live-draws in the back of his freeze.

“Natalie? Or Susanna?” She struggled to flatten her voice.

“Whatever’s he’s got. Just get him on the horn. Him, not Francis that nosey-ass creeper. And tell him to send by courier. In a koolcase. *Tout suite*. Pronto.” He paused to glance up at her. “You look awful. By the way, how’s our boy doing? The one with Kappa?” he checked the roster. “Here he is. Carlito Ramos, father killed in that HydroGen meltdown a few years back when some satellites fried and we lost half of...you know the drill. I want him moved into Natalie's room. Today. That unit’s our best set up. Wipe the terminals, get all the equipment checked out...”

She hurried down the hall, her face hot. Was he giving up on Natalie? Maybe a vial of her blood, or even her mother's, would do him as well? Matrilla, Tim, Lorna, Akazi. Four dead this past year of Kappa. His supply of kids dwindling. Carlito was the only one left and he was going to die, yes, but the clinic would keep him going as long as possible—for Samarath's private research. She didn't know why, but adults weren't as good. Maybe because in children, Kappa was such a slow virus? Giving Samarath what he needed most—time.

With his attention on a new wave of experiments, her last shred of hope that he might actually track Natalie, she might be found alive and end up back at the Clinic, all of it, evaporated.

He wasn't going to start on Carlito, she couldn't let it happen again. But she'd never give Samarath the satisfaction of turning her in to HM. Which she had no doubt he would do if she flat out refused to help him destroy another child's life.

~

Morning and evening she passed by the HM chute on her way to and from MCC. The locked Drop like an old fashioned mailbox, diagonally half blue, half red. They were all over now—tempting ordinary and not so ordinary citizens to take action on behalf of Credibility Enforcement. If her form went in, there'd be an investigation. It would take her down too, but she couldn't think about that.

She kept the letter for CE close to her body. Caressed it as she passed the box every morning and every evening. Wondering if today would be the day she'd stop, turn around, let the form slide into the dark mouth.

Moon and Natalie

He called out to her. She was walking along the fence poles at the edge of the yard where he'd dragged his crate to be closer to the desert. "You may pass through the Portal!" he laughed, waved her in, bowed as she ducked through.

She liked the way he had fangled a door, hanging it with knotted strips of cloth that brushed her face and hair as she came inside. Liked the way they swung loose and ruffled in the wind, some white and black, yellow and brown and red, a few streaked blue on blue. She touched one of the blue ones and smiled. "What're these for?"

"Ah. To make you smile, of course."

His crate was even smaller than Rena's, but crammed with things that interested her, bits and pieces he'd picked up, that for everybody else were trash. Or invisible to their eyes.

"Besides making me smile," she said.

"Looking for a story? All right then. But first, take a seat."

His long legs bent, feet bare, he patted the ground and she sat across from him.

"Your shoes are off," she said, folding her legs like his, "how come?"

He wriggled his toes. "Makes a body feel more at home. Why don't you try it yourself, creature? Cooling off out here now, anyway. October on the way to November. Just keep to the shady spots and you'll be okay. I swept the yard, cleared away

the prickly gashy things, made a safe path, no worries on that now. I like your hair, by the way.”

Natalie unsnapped Jojo's flatbeds, too big for her and wound with tape, dark with sweat and dirt. Wind played through Moon's strips and the pleasure of air against the bottom of her feet was a shock. *No shoes*. She dug her toes into the dirt and thought of the ant she had tried so hard to understand that morning. She'd put down pebbles in its way, watching it decide what to do— go around, go over? But it didn't do either. It sat down and washed itself, making her laugh.

“You're smiling,” Moon said. She told him about the ant and he grinned. “A scout, no doubt. Lizard food! Yes, sir. Insects, our elders and betters.” He sighed. “So tell me, how's it going with the ambassador gig? *Ambassador?* I mean...you're the go-between around here, the peace-maker.”

“All we do is talk. Nobody listens. I want them to listen. To be...together like we were.” She eyed him. “Why are *you* all by yourself, now, too?”

Moon squeezed her hand. “Don't mind me. Always been a loner. Nothing new about me dragging myself off.” He rubbed sand from between his toes. “You miss her, don't you? Teri, I mean. Nobody mentions her, but...she's the subtext. Missing. And at the same time, right here, *everywhere*.”

“Teri can make colors show what's in your mind!” She closed her mouth, suddenly troubled. “Budd doesn't know that she's... what you said. *Everywhere*. Nobody does. How come you do?”

“Oh. Something I picked up my first night here. Just one more weirdity about me, I guess. Among a constellation, I'm afraid. Can't blame everything on Helen though! Who's Helen? A very long story, there. Ah, Helen. She was, let's just say, a progenitor of mine... an ancestor, a brilliant old gal who got me going without meaning to,” he shrugged, threw up his hands in

exasperation. “*Weirdities?* Hmmm. Things you do that other people don't even *think* of doing. Don't want to. Or don't have the jack-all to try. I've seen a few of yours, by the way...”

“I like the way you talk. I don't understand all the words but my brain makes up what they might mean. Things I forgot I don't know yet.” Moon nodded at this.

Wind fluttered through the strips in the doorway and touched her bare feet. The wind was like Teri. Nothing to see, but things happening anyway. Over the sand, over the walls, scratching sounds. Words almost. A different kind of talk. “It's like,” she said, “everything has a voice and sometimes you hear it...”

They listened.

She looked out through the strips to the desert where the wind came from. “Where did you get them? You said you'd tell me.”

“Oh, the décor? Yes. Well. If you promise not to mention anything to Rena. At least not yet.”

She shook her head solemnly.

“I brought them in with me, creature. All in one piece, you see, stuffed in my pak.” He pulled a strip toward him and let it swing. He did that with each one, held it a moment—in a kind of greeting—then let it go. “Each one's a part of a dress I stole. A wild print with a handful of colors and patterns, never saw anything like it. Belonged to my foster mother, Laura. Saint Laura. Never mind, just a silly name I gave her. When I wasn't much older than you.”

“You took a dress of hers? How'd you know you'd need it for your doorway?”

Moon threw back his head in a loud laugh that shook his whole body. He clasped his legs and rocked back, knocking his head against the wall of the crate. “Ooof! Watch it, Moonshine!” he

said, rubbing the back of his head. "I knew she never wore that dress herself, but I also knew she wouldn't give it to me if I asked. And so...look, Natalie." With some effort, he stood, took hold of a yellow strip with swirls of red and orange running through it, bit the edge and ripped off the end, so that he had a very thin shred. Did the same with one of the blue ones. Dug through boxes until he found a tiny coil of soft shiny wire.

She watched, amazed, as he knotted strips and wire, weaving them in and out the way she'd done with her hair.

He circled her left wrist with what he'd made. "Mostly, we don't know the why of things. Until the time comes when they find their rightful place." He turned her wrist over, pressed his finger to the inside where blood branched blue under tender skin. "You'll never wear one of *those*," he said, "will you?" He held up his left wrist that still remembered the imprint of what had been there so long, but no more. "This," he said, "is what's called a bracelet. A very different kind of wrist-gear, my dear."

Her eyes on the bracelet, mesmerized, she was about to answer.

"But hey, speaking of forgetting, I almost neglected to tell you about the paint kit I put together for you." He leaned back and fished out a strap-bag, opened a small metal case —inside were two rows of cups like one of Deena's medicine boxes at the Clinic. In the cups were colors. A different one in each. And tucked along the side, a tiny brush. In the lid, a mirror.

The Maze and The Minotaur: Part II

Truthful Mirror

TruBlue: So here we go again— *The Maze And The Minotaur*, an original radio-script. Co-starring my colleague and special guest, RedSpot trickster, Hermes, playing Theseus, young warrior from the big city. Yours *truly* will be reading stage directions and more...

~

Our play opens at twilight, somewhere between the Palace and the Forest...

The Maze And The Minotaur

Puck is *naked*, but for a large leaf. Slimly built, his skin shimmers like a hummingbird's throat, bronze-green and amethyst.

*Once a Queen, aroused,
followed The Bull Of Heaven
swaying fresh from fields of light*

*She licked the fur of his flanks
and from their union
came a Child...*

Puck holds up a finger. "I know you, humans!" He curls his lip. "You're well-known among the little folk for goading the messenger who dares deliver the slightest shock!" He breaks into a knowing laugh, turns around and bows, his rear-end shimmying at the audience. He turns back, shrugs, rubs his hands together. "But Puck is merciful and brave..."

And so, our tale begins.

"Once 't'was told and I tell it here again for your soul's sake, that in a certain age a Queen did cover a bull. The offspring of this rare union was imprisoned at the center of a great Labyrinth the King ordered his laborers to build. Now, as we know, when Kings and Tyrants give orders, faeries and forests do suffer. Every part of this Labyrinth was made from the wood of the Goddesses' felled forest. And every year innocent maids and youths were conscripted by the to be King and sent into the Maze to be fed to the poor monster-child called The Minotaur.

"Diana of Wild Things, drawn by the outrage against her sacred groves, came forth from every hidden place, drawn by the cries of humans and beasts alike. She declared she would banish neither monster nor rite, but establish this alteration: whoever came to the mouth of the Maze would face the *truthful mirror*. If all her questions be answered rightly, and with a good heart, Diana would set them free.

"That year, among the King's chosen, was Theseus, beloved of his daughter..."

Puck vanishes...and we are left on a treeless plain.

Tatania: half human, half faerie, draped in layered rags, yawns, circles, lies down and falls asleep.

Diana : Quiver of air, incandescent coil, heats and swells to a towering flame and this flame becomes the form of a Goddess writhing in a cloud. “By sun and star and moon, well-clothed, I am. And yet I mourn my plundered forests and every innocent inhabitant here.”

Tatania speaks in her sleep: “Mortals want their winter here...”

Diana: “No night is now with hymn or carol blest...”

Tatania: “...diseases do abound and through this distemper we see the seasons alter...”

Diana: “...and the maze'd world...now knows not which is which...”

Tatania opens her eyes on Diana's shocking form.

Theseus arrives, out of breath, mouth grim, fully armed and dressed for battle. He does not see Tatania, glances quickly past Diana toward the entrance to the Labyrinth. “Lady, let me pass!”

Diana flares red, rearing up in Her cloud. She taps an eye. “Bend first to this!”

Theseus does not remove his helmet, keeps his gaze away.

Diana bends him with Her gravity, forcing him to look into the mirror of Her eye. “What do you see?”

Theseus: A long time passes before he speaks. “I see...a man. One man who is two. A man who loves and a man who kills.”

Diana: “Let the man who loves come forth.”

Theseus drops his gaze. “Things growing are never ripe until their season...”

Diana reaches from Her cloud and grips him by the hair. “**Let the man who loves come forth!!**”

Theseus: “In truth, Lady ...” he struggles against his own words as he speaks them, “I would both murder *and* escape.”

Diana: “This truth of yours, Theseus, is grief to me!” She shakes him. “Earth groans beneath it...” She lets him go.

Theseus paces in agitation. “Unless the monster’s murdered... loss or gain is useless!” He slams a fist against his belly.

Diana: “Our so-named monster, Theseus, never *chose* its fate.” Anger deepens Her voice. “Alas that sacrifice cannot sacrifice *itself!* And so once more, the story goes awry...”

She turns and speaks to All. “I vowed to leave things human, to humans— Earth to Earth. And look what’s come of it!” She glances at the Labyrinth. “Who’s monster

here? Offspring of Bull and Queen? Or despot sending off to death your finest sons and daughters?"

She turns on Theseus. "You say you crave both murder *and* escape. *What is refuge, then? Escape where to, once murderer?"*

Theseus: "To lover's arms, if the thread do hold..."

Diana: "I ask you, Theseus. Do you choose or are you chosen?"

Theseus says nothing.

Diana: "*Look on me!* What is my *name?!*"

Theseus stares at Her.

Diana melts, shifts, stretches, sprouts horns, She the white bull shaking her neck hung with skull-bells, hooves pawing, She the lion with snake-mouths, bellowing flame, cinders falling over barren Earth...

Theseus's face falls into his hands.

Diana floats now, a tender green mist fogging the ground. She dissolves, raining sparks smaller than flecks of mica...

Theseus' hands fall away, his eyes wide with terror.

Diana: "*LOOK AT ME!* And say what I am!

Tatania speaks in her sleep, "...*like unto the moon
new bent in heaven...*"

Theseus kneels: "Lady, I see you now. The One who shines even in the depths of Hell."

Diana takes hold of his hair again, pulls him to his feet. "***Let
The Man Who Loves come forth!!!***"

Theseus: "But...what of our monster at the center!?"

Diana binds him closer. "*I myself will undertake him.*"

She lets Theseus go, reaches into Her cloud for a curved knife, lops an oak branch from a living tree growing out of air at the moment she begins the cut. She leaps from Her cloud to the mouth of The Labyrinth, and wherever she steps, grasses rise from bare ground...

Theseus staggers, jaw agape.

Diana: "Now will I break my vow."

Theseus: "*You, Lady?! Would enter the Maze and kill?*"

Diana: "Kill the killing, would I sooner call it! The beast is innocent, stolen from its forest, starved by force — before any

tongue might grow to protest, the prison-house towered round.
Yet this Tower shall fall...”

Diana gazes on Tatania spread over the ground,
peacefully sleeping once again. Bending down, She vanishes
into the woman’s body.

Tatania wakes, stands and speaks. “I dreamed *the child of the
Bull of Heaven and of the Queen... is free.*”

Titania-Diana: (two voices in unison): “The King is dying! Let
his flesh feed the innocence of ravens and maggots!”

She/They look about, addressing All: “Will you be
his? Or will you be *ours?* Decide. Now. Tonight! And we will
teach you to unhinge the Labyrinth, beam by beam...and trees
shall sprout and birds flock, and forests circle Earth again.”

Theseus opens his mouth but cannot speak.

Puck laughing, sprints off to tell what he has witnessed.

Spirals

Natalie and Jojo

She studied the krete in Jojo's Junkyard, saying over her shoulder. "This is how come you liked my hair, isn't it! What *are they?*"

"Some kind of lichen maybe?" Jojo wrapped her arms around her knees.

"Like-en? That's a funny name. I *like* it!" Natalie said, delighted with her word-play.

"*If* they're lichens. They're, well, part fungus— which *isn't* a plant— and part algae, which sort of *is*. You could say they're partners. Some of them grow in greenhouses where I used to work. Not like these, but...close."

"How do they make more of each other?"

"I seem to remember one way it happens is they get ripped apart, blown on the wind, dumped, and have to start over... if they're lucky. A rough life! Sometimes there's three kinds of lives, a tribe of bacteria joins in, riding along until they rain down someplace where it's possible to survive..."

"What about water, how do they drink?" Natalie leaned in about to touching one, deciding not to.

"I read they can suck up half their weight in water, and *fast*, too. Some of them live off water in the air, rain or no rain.

Fungus provides the housing. The algae kick in for groceries...”

“Groceries?”

“Food. You know, *sugar spun from starlight...*” she pointed up—“straight from the cosmos. Wish we could do that.”

Natalie gazed at her. “Why do you think we can’t?”

“We don’t have the know-how.”

“Can we eat them?”

“Well. I guess we could if there were a lot more of them...*and* if they happened to be edible for humans.”

“What about the ants? You said they...”

“Yeah, ants. They might eat them.”

“We could ask Rena. *Do ants like like-ens.*”

Jojo laughed, shook her head. “Rena’s not happy with me right now. Or anybody. Except you...”

“You don’t want her to know.”

“Hmmm. Maybe not. Or maybe I just don’t want to distract everybody with her expert opinion on what’s pretty much a fantasy, anyway.” She sighed, digging through her hair. “Even if they’re edible, not enough to keep even one of us alive...”

“There are a lot more.” Natalie looked into the open desert.

“We promised we wouldn’t go out of the main camp, remember? You know the reasons, don’t you?”

“The rays might be quieter here? But what if they’re not, what if they’re quieter out there?” Natalie folded her knees up to her chin, laid her head sideways, so when she talked her mouth moved like a sea creature rhythmically pulsing...

Jojo shook herself. “We don't know what's going on with radiation. Don't have the equipment to find out. Could be the opposite of what we think, it's true. But we agreed to...”

“Why don't we camp where the spirals are?” Natalie clutched a handful of sand and poured it out. “Maybe they like it out there because...because lichens *like* growing on rocks. Real ones. Not this stuff—what is it, anyway?”

“Natalie, we're not sure they're even alive...”

“They *are* alive.” She raised her chin.

“How do you know?”

“The way I know Rena's sick when she tries to hide it.”

“Rena's sick?” Jojo took Natalie by the arms, studying her face. “Yeah. I guess I knew that.” She let Natalie go, dizzy with half-formed thoughts.

“More than I was. Before. At the Clinic.”

“Before...? Yeah. You're stronger, aren't you?” Stunned by this though she'd been looking at it all along, she put her arms around Natalie and pulled her close. “Makes me happy to see you the way you are. But everything's so mixed up, it's getting hard to tell what's true and what isn't. My head's spinning in circles, know what I mean? Everybody split up the way we are. No connecting going on— if it weren't for you, we...” she sat again and hung her head. “Rena isn't making *all* the decisions like she was, but I honestly don't know if she's wrong...”

Natalie sprang up and took off running, heading west. Jojo lurched after her, then stopped. *Never been on her own, her whole damn life.* Which won't be long. Like the rest of us. She'd give the girl a few minutes.

She watched Natalie cross the boundary, a line of fence posts with no fence between. Watched her evaporate, a drop of water

in desert glare.

The List 6

Deena

She was adjusting the new lighting and scrubber settings when a screeching thud blew the transformer.

Pitch black. Silence.

She held still, panic burning belly to throat. *Why isn't the aux gen up?* If only there were windows in this place, she'd throw them all open— already she was straining for good air. The battery back-up panel fluttered, but nothing came back on.

Her next thought roused a fresh wave of fear... *Carlito*. Adults on the main ward might handle a temporary blackout, but a child? Kappa was killing him slowly, but without scrubbed air, he wouldn't last a day.

It was all coming down. Lisa gone. Samarath dragging her into a sadistic plan she'd have to fight every step of the way. Until HM started closing in, too.

And there was Natalie. The one she'd let down most of all.

She groped her way along twisting walls, left, right, dead end, turn around, start again. Gilkin's blind friend popped into her head. How could he, how could anyone, bear a lifetime in this kind of darkness? Sweating, panting, stopping every few steps to orient, a picture in her mind now, the layout of rooms and corridors, she tried matching this crude map with what she touched. Another image drove her on, the sick boy frantic by

now. Left and then right and right again, she remembered the way in her body.

A scream. Something shattered. A body slammed into her, scrambled off.

She blinked, dumbfounded to see Carlito's room dimly lit. The emergency lights thank god weren't wired to hydrogen backups or to the grid. She checked her cell. The screen blinked, did not respond. Sats and towers out, too? In a few hours, Carlito's air would be unbreathable. He'd suffocate. But only at the end of a drawn-out struggle.

She tried the outer door, breathing hard with every exertion. The pass-through had unlocked itself the way it was programmed to— like a reverse fire-door, it popped ajar the moment the current shut off. She felt for the suit locker, fumbled for the e-key, realized she couldn't get at it without her cell. The hand-held was back in her desk, all the way through winding black corridors she'd just navigated to get this far.

She slid down against the wall, thoughts racing.

If lights came on eventually, nothing would change. Natalie. Her sister. Samarath. HM. The whole nightmare wasn't going away. Not for her. Or Carlito...

...her mother, Irene, calls from the bedroom she never leaves the last months of her life. Coming, Mom! The week Irene died was the week her sister, Lisa, took off. Lisa did that whenever things got seriously rough. Deena—Leah—alone with their mother's last repetition of her life's best advice. Whatever you do, don't wait for the bad guys to bring you down— go after them first!

Irene on her back, skin grey and damp with sweat. This was one time her mother couldn't take that first strike against a mean slow neurovirus eager to finish her off.

As the days passed, Irene somehow grew younger. Lines that had always scored her forehead, between her eyes, around her mouth, went smooth. The morning she stopped breathing, her face was the face of a girl, the girl she must have been before Leah and Lisa, when their father was still around. When Irene could still keep up endless hours at her job. Hard labor, she warned her daughters, like me. That's what you'll both be doing, if you don't get yourselves onto that Bootstrap Track Hydro's recruiting for...

When their mother stopped breathing, emptied of fear or advice, she never looked so free. Free of worry and exhaustion and loneliness. Eternal rest. Leah never understood that phrase until the surprise of her mother's face, young again in death...

Now groping her way toward the boy, she felt she could hear him, the whimper of his struggle to breathe.

Without a cleansuit, without thinking, she let herself into his room—

“Carlito?”

Natalie Alone

Bare sky. Like water she could look into as far as she wanted to. Not Jojo's cup where shadows turned into faces and plants and machines. *This* sky showed her nothing but more sky.

This was not the sky they told her about. The sky she pretended she could see through the hospital ceiling. *Cloudy*, Deena said, *like air wearing bandages*. Sometimes at night the sky turns clear—*deep dark blue*. *Dark clear blue with a bit of rain in it, rain that forgot how to fall*.

This was not the sky she imagined when Budd laid her down in the light—so bright they had to cover her to save her eyes. The morning she woke up, the first morning here, it was the same—too bright to see.

Light didn't come out of the sun like a lamp, the way she thought it would. The sun moved through light that was already everywhere, until there was no time left and the day had to stop, to sleep. And the night had to Dream. Early and late, the ball of the sun hid behind the edges of things. That was when she started to see how the world was made.

Sky and wind and rock and weeds. No machines, no walls. No broken buildings, no crates. No arguments.

A jumble of rocks, little ones and big ones. She stepped inside their shade like Teri's watercolors, let it wash her arms. She looked down at her bare feet and remembered Moon's paints stashed in the pak Blaise and Mala helped her make.

She opened the box, spitting into one of the slots— its name was *blue*. Morning or afternoon or sundown blue? Not bothering with the tiny mirror, she streaked blue along her cheeks and over her forehead, the paste sticky on her fingers. Blue but not blue. Shiny like metal. No time in it at all.

She spit into the square again and mixed until it softened and dripped onto the sand between her feet. Blue paint was nothing like the sky and not like water, she couldn't see into it. It was like a wall, a locked door. Light couldn't get inside.

She shook her head and pulled her hair loose, unraveling the braids. Felt good, all unwound like that. Her scalp was sore and she rubbed it hard. She was hot and braids were heavy, too much work. She wanted her head to be as bare as her feet.

Her hands dug until the deeper sand felt cool. She rolled onto her back, scooped handfuls and rubbed the grains over her skin, staring up at the sky so bright it hurt her eyes like that first time. Tears blurred everything she saw.

After a while the burning went away and she thought she saw stars shivering the way she shivered when she was cold. Stars or lights spinning, coming toward her. But when she blinked, they jumped back and went still again.

Clumps of branches. *Witchweed*, Rena called them, angry at the plants for some reason. *A wicked ball of thorns that dries up, snaps off and rolls over the ground. Sometimes they travel all the way across the desert and right into the streets, practically knocking you down!* *Thistle*, Rena said, *Russian thistle*. Born far away, and long ago. *Bad news, no good for anything*. Rena warned her not to touch. But she liked the scratch of their branches. Their strong clean smell.

Dirt smelled dry and old, always there inside the other smells. Like the taste in your mouth when you're hungry, but can't eat. So many different smells coming and going, too many to catch.

Even the smell of heat coming from rocks or the ground or going away at the end of the day.

Sometimes she smelled the hospital. Maybe it was still inside her. Coming out of her somehow?

There were smells here like nothing she could think of. More like things she *heard*. And didn't understand. Moon's words. Lonnie's words. Words from witchweed, from the sky. Words inside that stayed there, others coming out of her mouth.

Over the dirt, ants sparkled. Disappeared into the ground. If she was lost she could follow them. On her knees, up close, she smelled their vinegar-smell that made her thirsty. *Where do you find water? How far down?*

Everything she looked at tricked her, turned into something else. A hole in the ground was really a shadow. A rock curled up like somebody sleeping. Every time she saw how things were, the next time she looked they were different.

Still on her knees, she studied round rocks rough against her fingertips. Hot. Even when the sun was covered up, even in the night, rocks remembered heat.

She turned her face to the sun and kept still, letting the colors blaze into her.

For a long time that was all she was. Rock. Sun.

She was crying, and didn't know why.

~

A few rocks were already dark like the end of the day, and that was where she found them— spirals. She breathed out a long breath over one of them, and after a while it glistened. Fatter, darker. Greener. Like a garden. Deena said there were people before the Great Drought who had roof-gardens and plants all over the ground where they walked. Green turned grey or

brown when it was burning cold and when it was too hot, but when the right weather came and water fell out of the sky, they remembered how to be green. Drought clouds, Deena said, were not rainclouds. They forgot how to turn into water. Or into snow. Snow! *Ice flowers, white and stiff and freezing cold.*

Leaves and grass and trees made out of water and air and light. Her breath was something they made, too. *They breathe your breath and you breathe theirs, round and round in a circle...*

And breath is time itself.

She licked one of the small rocks and tasted its taste like sweat when she had a fever and they hadn't washed her yet. She pressed her tongue into the groove of a spiral, winding-ridges like tiny mountains with valleys in between where maybe it rained and creatures lived. She tasted green, and something like a spark...

There was a song Deena sang to her. *Away from the river, away from the sea. The road goes on with un-cer-tain-ty. The road never bends, even when it sends/ you far, far far far —far from where you want to be...* As she sang the song, the words changed. *On the way to the river, on the way to the sea, the road runs away/ back to the mountains/ and we're far far far ...far from where? Where are we?*

The song went on and on until she didn't know what she was singing or if it would ever stop, and didn't care.

~

Jojo would come for her soon. She turned her back to the yard, peered at the spiral that drank her breath. Jojo once said a night fog crawled into the desert from the edge of the ground, but that edge was so far away they couldn't see it from here—maybe that was how spirals got water. It came to them in the night. And they waited all day.

She pinched off the tip of a witch-weed. Tasted its good sharpness. Water in it, too. And in her breath. Her body made of dirt and sky and water.

Everything she touched and looked at, took her farther from the girl at the Clinic. Once Deena told her they didn't know her real name, just the one on her records when she came in a van from Small World. Before she got to Brian's clinic, they called her *female child 3177*. Deena asked did she remember what her mother called her. She didn't remember any mother. But then she heard a name in her ear, and said it out loud. *Natalie*. Deena was happy and said the name back to her. Said it every time she came and when she went away.

She was still Natalie, but not that sick girl Brian asked questions when he took blood out of her arm and wrote about her on his air slate he called his magic slate, that popped with a music-sound out of his screen. When he was done, all the things she told him slid down inside his cell and he took them away with him. He believed her. He thought she told him everything. He thought she didn't know how to keep the best things— like the lights— from going down inside his wristcell.

She was not the girl too tired to paint with Teri. To keep her eyes open. Here everybody was afraid of dying and nobody had a home anymore. Here she was stronger. *Older*:

“Natalie!!” Jojo came running to her. Jojo’s voice and the sound of her feet running reached up and shook Natalie through the ground. Like the ground was yelling her name and running in her body. She meant to answer but her head turned to look at something else— two dark shapes far off in the sky. *Machines?* Men from the hospital coming to take her back?

A bird! Once in a painting, Teri showed her what birds were— birds flying and birds on a branch like leaves with eyes.

Two birds now in the light, swam the sky over her head.

A third one hurried to meet the other two, and they swooped this way and that way together. Happy. Then they dropped down lower, coming toward her.

For a second, all three of them hovered—and then they were inside her.

Into The Blue

Jojo and Natalie

Racing flat out, hat rolling into the dust, making Natalie laugh, Jojo didn't stop, made a face and kept going, throwing herself onto her knees in the sand. "You! Looked everywhere for you! Scared the holy yip out of me, girl!"

"Sorry," Natalie said. Sorry for Jojo who didn't know how to go where she wanted to. Didn't know *alone* didn't hurt here.

"What happened to the shoes I fixed up for you? And what's that blue all over your face? Moon's idea? Here, let me see your wrist. He made this for you, am I right?" Jojo shook her head, then hugged Natalie hard.

"I found more spirals." She pointed at the belly of the rock beside them. "On the other side, there's different plants, too. Not thistles, not spirals, don't know what they are."

Jojo peered at the spirals, counting out loud, whistling. "Hey, look at this one."

"I breathed on it. Water comes out of you when you breathe."

"I spit on em, you breathe on em! I guess the mist that comes in at night is kind of a breath, isn't it? Lonnie says when it gets dark, the heat of the ground twists up for meters and meters, pulls clouds in over the land. *Rainclouds too stubborn to rain.* "Too bad we can't drink air!" She put her tongue out, tasting. Laughing at herself.

Natalie was delighted with this laughing Jojo she couldn't remember seeing since before the aircraft came over them. "Budd said he could make a machine that does what you're doing right now."

"Really? Budd told you that? A machine that sticks out its tongue and licks the air?"

"But he doesn't have the right kind of metal and other things he needs to build it with."

"Hmmm. We could build a lot of stuff if we had the right pieces, couldn't we? But we don't. And the longer we stay here, the thirstier it's gonna be on down the road." Jojo twanged her words with a perky NetNews accent, in spite of the nausea that suddenly gripped her.

"What road?" *The road that never bends, even when it sends you far.*

"The Later On Road, kid." Jojo got to her feet, slapping dust from her pants.

To make her stay, Natalie told her about the birds. "Where did they go, do you think?"

"To the crossroads?"

"Why aren't there more birds here?"

Jojo bit her lip. "About a hundred and fifty years ago, I don't know, birds started disappearing. After being around for millions and millions of years before we were. Bad things in the water. We were poisoning everything, weeds and bugs and taking land for factories and gro-houses...until there wasn't any room for *them*. Birds. Bees. Dragonflies. Foxes. Weeds. Wild roses. Trees. Most of all trees."

"What did you and Teri do when they were dying?"

She looked down, pushing sand around with a finger, heaping it up, demolishing each heap. “You know— I wasn't a lot older than you are now. Hadn't met Teri. Or Budd. So many of us dying, mothers and fathers, friends, it was hard just staying fed, staying alive. I wasn't used to being on my own. When I got work at the Depot—a dump, a junkyard, kind of like here—they had me sorting trash, gave me a cot in the women's tent, which at the time was something to be grateful for.

“Once I found a nest in the rafters at the back of the Depot shed, like the nest on the trestle? But occupied for sure! Started putting out scraps for the mama, watched her take off and light down, poor skinny thing trying to feed her chicks. Named her Mother Courage. I spread stuff on the ground, too, whatever was edible that day, and she wolfed it, stale or rancid, didn't matter. She watched for me. Knew what I was up to. And that really worried me...”

“Why? I would've been happy...”

“We'll get to that part,” Jojo said.

“One time, another crow showed up and they got to talking the way crows do, a lot of croaky jabber back and forth, you can almost get what they're saying. I stopped sorting, and just listened. Those crows gabbed on, and I nodded off. Dreamed I was an old woman, dreamed I understood those crows were talking about time, how things change, talking about the future, too. How if it ever rained again, that future-rain wouldn't be the same, wouldn't be just water, it'd have seeds in it.” Jojo stared into the sky.

“This next part, makes me a little crazy. You know how it's against the law to feed animals? Nobody lives with them anymore like people used to. Nobody feeds the wild ones. Not enough food to go around. Not enough water. At the Depot, the rule was you could eat anything you found, but you had to

eat it right there and then, couldn't take it home or sell it or feed any human hungrier than you, let alone a crow..."

"Somebody found out what you were doing," Natalie said.

"Never told Teri this, don't want to tell it now. " Wind sifted through her sweaty hair. She raked a hand through it. "Okay. Travis. He was the boss man. Like Brian? The kind who *enjoys* stupid rules. Plus Travis hated animals, especially *crows and other vermin. Disgusting creatures.* I'm telling you his words, now. *Rats. Worms. Roaches. All the hunched up skittery things stealing what humans have first dibs on...*"

Jojo took Natalie in, the glow of life on her as she listened. Not only stronger, but thriving. *Here!*

"Travis caught me on the ladder with Mother. *Vernett! Get your ass down here!* I jumped off and he looked me over like I was vermin, too. Said he was going to do me a favor. He wouldn't fire me. If." She remembered his hand on her. "*If you clean out that filthy nest, get rid of the birds, and...one more thing: Learn to smile now and then.*"

Natalie held her breath.

Jojo's mouth was dry as sand. "That job with a safe place to sleep meant everything to me. I was *illegal*, no cell. I'd have to grift again— sell stuff the law doesn't let you. Sleep anyplace I could hole up.

"When Travis took off, I shoed Mother into some snags away from the Depot. She kept coming back. Didn't understand why I was acting that way. She trusted me..."

"So I climbed up and grabbed those chicks, put them in my pockets. Found a dry scrap to line a take-out carton and the chicks went in there, the carton in my pak.

"Hurt me to do it, but I tore the nest apart, threw in some feathers I saved, all of it into the furnace. Jjust stood there

staring into the fire — the smoke was terrible. The stink of burning feathers is like burning hair. I was coughing, tears running down...

“Travis got back from dinner with a smile on his face at that stink, it was a pleasure for him. I saw he would just as soon roast *me* in those flames, along with every crow on the planet.

“With the chicks in my pak, I was frantic to get out of his sight. Said something about needing to pee, and ran for the snags. All dead, you know, no live ones for kilometers. I hiked myself up one, hoping the wood wouldn't snap, opened the carton, and they poked out their heads like I was Mama going to feed them!” She took a breath. “But I had nothing for them. Their only hope was Mother figuring out what happened.”

“Did she?” Natalie was rocking the way she did on bad nights at the Clinic.

Jojo sighed. “You don't want a made-up happy ending, do you?”

Natalie stopped rocking, got to her knees and crossed her arms around Jojo's neck. “You have to tell.” She pulled Jojo into a back and forth sway. “You have to. Bad things don't leave you alone if you don't say the whole thing. Will you? If I promise to tell something I never told before all the way?”

Jojo nodded, head bent low over her knees. “I'm listening.”

“One time Brian took my blood,” Natalie said, “when I got so hot I was scared I was going to die. Deena brought me water and wiped my face, and I told her I lied when he asked me did I remember my mother. I told him yes I did. I didn't tell him... the woman Deena and Brian *said* was her, Susanna? She wasn't my mother.”

They watched a swarm of small clouds follow each other.

Natalie turned her bracelet on her wrist, light catching, jumping back to her eye. “The part I never told anybody all the

way is... I think I know who my mother might be. Except one thing. She doesn't exactly have a name."

Jojo's curiosity switched to alarm. Natalie wanted a mother so bad she was making one up? You could get lost like that! Motherless Child, *sometimes I feel*...she remembered that song in her flesh. Remembered Teri describing a young street-girl, motherless and fatherless, the one she'd felt sorry for in the Mag Stat, *the girl in hydro-blue*, swallowed up in a govcorp drop. Rinso-blue drop that dissolves you... And that's what happened to Teri, didn't it?

And Natalie? An orphan like she herself was. Maybe *she'd* made up her mother, too, maybe she made up that spring in the desert where she slept and Dreamed her first Dream?

They called us transition kids—born into a world coming apart. Mother with me inside her and a few others, slipping through a chink in the Wall, getting out of the main mean game into the desert at Ghost Spring...How did my mother feed us, what did she sacrifice, I never questioned that until later. All I knew was the misery of waiting, watching the sky, when she was gone to the city. When she got back, she barely spoke. Worn down to nothing. So everybody, including me, had to love her by leaving her alone...

"Natalie, those birds you saw before? Might have been *ravens*. Sort of like crows, but not exactly. Pretty tough hombres. Might be a few still here. I never saw a raven live, just pictures on the Net. Heftier than crows, beaks thicker, more business-like." She drew two ravens in the dusty grit. One with wings open, in flight. The other stood and peered between its toes.

Between those toes, Natalie drew a tiny shape. "An ant," she said, "because that raven looks hungry."

Jojo gave her a teasing frown. “Ravens don't bother with ants! They go for things that'll make a decent meal. Like...a lizard, maybe. Who knows if any are left.” Jojo drew a lizard-shaped branch, two claws on each side, two eyes in its head. “And here's the tail,” she dug a finger into the sand curving away from the lizard's hind end.

“I saw one of those!”

“You *sure*, Natalie?”

“In the witchweed.”

“Sooooo.” Jojo grinned. “Maybe we *aren't* alone here?” She took hold of Natalie. “It's like... discovering life on a planet you thought was dead!”

A long silence. They drew and scratched things out again.

“If you were going to make a world better than this one, what would you make?” Jojo asked.

“Hmmm. I'd make a world...where if you learned something or you had something good in you, you could never lose it, no matter what.”

“You mean there'd be... no such thing as doubt? Or forgetting? That might not always a good idea...”

“Does doubt mean you lose something?”

“In a way, it does.”

“Why do you think Teri...”

“I was a coward, Natalie. You know what that means? I never went back to that snag where I left the chicks. To see if they survived. *Coward* means you're so scared of the answer, you won't even think about the question. You turn your head and you walk away. Then lie to yourself about what you just did.

That kind of lying throws shadows that haunts you all your life. I swore I'd never do that again..."

"And did you? Do it again?"

"Don't know. Not for sure. Not yet."

"Was it about Teri?"

"Maybe. And maybe I still don't want to know..."

"When will you want to?"

"I guess...when Ariadne gives me a clue." She stood up.

"Meanwhile, I think your birds *were* ravens. Not because of that old nest in the trestle. I'm no Rena, but I think ravens used to live here. I think this desert and those mountains and the ocean before that, was all theirs. Ants and lizards and ravens."

"Maybe the ocean is taking the desert back?"

"Some places it's happening that way. Here, it's ... But if the heat of the desert brings clouds that can spring green out of rock, then anything can happen! All it takes is time... Unless something messes it up.

"Like what?"

"Like krete parks and dead trees. Locked up rivers and springs. People greedy, in a hurry. Funny how speeding up just makes things fall apart faster..."

"Why can't we... fall together?"

"Good question." Jojo smiled. "You said three birds, right?" She drew the third raven crouched, beak to the sky, yearning after the one in flight. Flying without leaving the ground?

"They were flying *inside* me. Like I was the sky! Then... they flew away." She pointed.

“Northeast? Hmmm. Not where we came from. I was sure they'd go for the palm trees— west of here—a good place to be if you're a bird. Or a human.”

“Why can't *we* go to the palm trees?”

Jojo sketched. “Awgh, my branches look more like feathers, don't they?! Teri could have — she was. She was...”

“*Is,*” said Natalie.

Piano Drop: Rena

At the far end of her crate in a jumble of boxes, Rena stared at the lit screen of her cell. Caught between longing and a sharp yen to get free of its allure. She was the only one who had the power to get anything the e-zoid might deliver. And the price?

She refused this line of thought, ducked out into the air and found Natalie squatting there, barefoot. Rena's eyes flicked over the girl, settled on her hands— one of them stroked something hidden in the other. “Were you waiting for me? You okay? What’ve you got there?”

Natalie opened her hand. A dull skinny rock with scratches on it. With it she drew in the sand, a few quick strokes.

Rena stood over her, puzzling at the shapes.

Natalie erased what she'd drawn with a swipe of her palm. “You were looking at the screen. I heard it make that ticking sound.”

“You couldn't have!” An explosion of heat in the pit of her belly made her shrink from Natalie's eyes.

“In the hospital I could hear it, too. When the sound was off and nobody thought I could.”

Rena steered her into shade behind the crate. “Will you listen to what I have to say? And try to understand?”

Natalie slid down, folded her legs, wearing an expression Rena couldn't read as she ran her hands over her head, pushed back her scarf—it fell to the sand.

Natalie handed it to Rena. “Why did you pretend?”

Rena looked away. What did a girl know about doctoring, her responsibility for their lives, needing all the information she could get? “It was best for the Action, that’s why. And now...now is not the right time. I didn’t plan to do it. I took my cell off like everybody else, you saw me. But. When I got back here, I thought a working cell could make all the difference, we might even hear something about...”

“Wouldn’t you even of told Budd?”

“Whatever I found out would most likely be...a *maybe*. Stirring him up, stirring everybody up, for no good reason. I didn’t want to risk that. You know how bad it’s been since that hovercraft flew over ...”

“What you found out wasn’t about Teri.”

Half frightened, half exasperated, Rena said, “No, it wasn’t.”

~

Rena sat in the spot where the girl had been a moment before. Unable to move. Caught out. A liar. Natalie saw things so simply. *Everybody do what Budd did*. What Budd did was an accident! Why should she shut down their only comm source as long as she could keep it under the wire?

It means you belong to the people who don't want us here.

She slapped dust out of her clothes, smoothed her hair, unlocked her med case, checked her cell again—maybe Sidney’d sent another reroute? *Nothing*:

So that was it. Hydro-Medina goons would be back. Her stomach clenched. Definitely ill, all the signs were there. *Too late*. But if she was going down, everybody else would, too.

Eventually. They didn't know that, yet, she did. How long would it take?

In spite of that rebellious outburst after the hovercraft, every Action had to have a leader. And she was it. Was *still* it.

She forced herself to focus on something nagging at her from the last shoot Sid had sent, right after she failed to disable her cell. Even as she picked up the bracelet and powered up, she could feel the hook. As bad as things looked in every direction, a familiar elation rushed under her ribs and prickled her scalp.

Almost as an afterthought, at the end of Sid's message, he'd added *piano drop possible*— WWII resistance slang. She'd dismissed this as totally unlikely. Not after that hovercraft! How much did Sid know about that? Maybe only the lies Net was putting out about Calona? But he didn't buy the whole thing, had made that clear. Which was why she'd taken a chance and sent him that last VM. Just two words appearing to come from outside TriAm— *message received*.

If there really was a radio drop and she somehow got herself there to pick it up— that would be soon enough to let everybody in on the rest of what he told her. It was her, had always been her, who had to keep people calm and on track.

But Natalie's face wouldn't leave her.

She popped up keys. Her hand shook as she touched a string of zeroes, hesitated, let the screen sit and blink at her awhile. A spike of desire, as she realized it was still possible to hit Cancel—and she nearly made that choice, once, twice...all it took was the touch of her finger, and everything would change.

You belong to them. Natalie's voice froze her in place. *The people who don't want us here.*

Part Ten

Water Tower

The first two steps of the ladder broken off, Blaise tracked solid rungs angling up to the catwalk. Using arm-strength, she hauled her weight, hooking a foot onto each sure perch. Like climbing crooked linden branches in her grandfather's garden.

At the top, there he was facing away from her, kneeling on the ledge skirting the tank, her torch in his hands, goddamn him—stolen while she slept— about to burn through steel.

Glancing at the ground, she gave Rena a thumbs up, and lifted her gaze to the shock of a bird's eye view of the entire structure around the tank, and of the desert going on and on, sending a shiver of vertigo through her.

But she was coming on him too quietly— if he turned and saw her, it might make him drop the torch, crack the housing. He might stumble and pitch himself off. For a moment, she saw both things happening simultaneously. Cautiously, she stepped forward, reaching for his back, her anger cooling to dread.

When she touched him, Lonnie started violently, shot her a furious look and the flame swerved off its mark. She didn't dare wrestle the torch out of his grasp, not up here. He didn't frighten her— that flame-throwing weapon in his fist this high off the ground *did*.

The flame broke through — a ragged hole gaped in the side of the tank, sending up wisps of smoke. He knocked the metal fragments away. With a yelp of victory, he set down the torch, gulped water from his jig, spit a mouthful to clear the smoke,

and peered into the hole to see if for all his trouble, all his confident predictions, even a few inches of water had waited all these years to see light again.

Crawling slowly, willing him not to turn around, she snatched the torch, got quickly to the ladder, and made her way down. She jumped, skipping the last missing rungs. Ankles stinging, she raced off.

~

Blaise stuck her head into The Clinic and crowed.

Writing in her log, Natalie asleep beside her, Rena looked up. “You got your torch back, thank god!”

“No thanks to the deity, I assure you! Lonnie blew a hole, he really did. Too small, though, can't tell exactly what's down there without widening the breach— so he's going to do everything he can to get his paws on this baby again.” She held up the torch and flamboyantly kissed it. “Our crazyman is up there to *prove he's right*. And if he *is* . . .” She glanced around.

“You want me to hide it for you? Here?” Rena looked helplessly at the barely organized chaos.

Blaise burst into unkind laughter. “Nobody's going to get this out of my hands— not even you, Rena. That man of yours can just run a line into the tank and suck on it, see if anything comes up, and take its temperature!”

“That water will almost certainly be hot . . .”

“Well, he'll be the first to find out. Sorry, but I'm out of patience.” She turned to go, then gazed at the sleeping girl and lowered her voice. “I think we should ask Natalie to work on him—she knows how to coax impossible knots to untangle themselves. The rest of us keep making more of them. No. Let

me finish! Lonnie needs to stop deciding things on his own. If the Circle says no, he just swipes what he needs and does it anyway?! Maybe you're right about the aquifer under us. Or maybe there's something else we need to know before anything's going to work. But whatever it is, we've all got to be in on it. So I say, let Natalie go up. If she can't do it, nobody can. And if we don't stop fighting each other, we're just dust with legs. . ."

Rena glanced at Natalie and shook her head.

"She's not the sickly little one, anymore! Use your eyes, lady, she's not a child." Blaise nodded at the girl who was awake now, watching them, went on talking to Rena. "I can get her on top with my harness—believe me, I'll watch her like my own baby sister, Marie. . ." Blaise's eyes went to Natalie's wrist, her *no-cell* of rag and wire. "I want one of those too, where'd you find it?"

"We made it," Natalie said. "Moon and me."

Bien que, ma belle. But—you know what? I liked your *plaits* so much, I mean the way they were before, how come you got rid of them, eh? That's how my mother used to do with me. Blaise lifted her hair from her neck. Her smile bloomed and faded. "Rena, open your eyes."

Natalie gave no sign she understood. But the moment Blaise was gone she said, "I can make Lonnie come down."

"Listen, there's a lot you don't understand. Did Budd explain why we're here, what Labyrinth is? The Local Group? Dreaming? All the rest. . ."

"Nobody explained," Natalie said. "I was listening."

"You mean in the Circle? We thought you were asleep or. . ."

She shook her head almost imperceptibly. "I wasn't asleep. Not like you mean."

“You were dropping off all the time when Budd brought you in, that’s all you did. And besides. Everybody sleeps.”

“You keep *saying* that.” Her voice trembled. “Everybody has a mother, everybody sleeps.”

“Oh, Natalie.” Rena pulled the girl to her. But she broke free.

~

Strapped into Blaise’s harness, Natalie balanced on the fourth rung of the ladder.

“No you don’t!” Rena clasped her waist from behind. “I need to try myself before I let you do this.”

“He’ll get madder when he sees you.” Natalie started up again.

Rena pulled her to the ground and turned to Blaise for support. Nothing there but a cold eye. She undid the harness, fastened it around her body, pulled herself onto the first sound rung.

She’d never been afraid of heights, but her balance had been off for days. Since she started vomiting? Blaise was right about one thing, it wasn’t Natalie who was sick now— it was *her*. And Budd? Possibly Moon and Mala. But she couldn’t be Dr. Rena up here, not now.

Wobbly, pouring sweat, she climbed, guessing it was 12 meters or so before she reached him. Her eyes level with the catwalk, she saw him scrunched into a knot, staring in the direction they’d come from. She could see it in his body—he was giving up, wanting to run. Get out of Calona, go home.

But they had no home anymore. When they came in, at least they had each other. Until *together* collapsed. She still couldn’t believe the selfishness of bringing Natalie here in the first place. Stealing a child from Containment, which must have been what brought the craft down on their heads.

Lonnie stiffened at the sight of her.

She crawled toward him, a buzzing in her ears. She could not make a mistake with what she said to him. He'd betrayed her, and the Action, but Natalie made her see how *she* had betrayed the Action, too, failing to shut down her cell, telling no one about Sid's news.

When she came a few steps away, he flung her a look of despair. "Don't, Rena, don't say a word or I'll..."

"Jump?" The word flew out of her mouth. *Exactly wrong:*

"Maybe." The hollow in his voice made her stomach churn. She'd never seen him as beaten as he looked now, bullying confidence gone. Once, when she and Teri were researching SYNC, they'd come across the Latin roots of *confidence*, surprised to find the word meant *with faith*. Faith in what? Maybe it didn't matter.

"You won't," she said, "you're not the type."

He stood, the toes of his shoes over the edge, and stared at the ground, alarming her.

"Stop it! Please, just sit. We have to talk..." Close to tears, nausea weakened her voice.

"It's all over, can't you see?" He swayed in the heat of the sun pounding down. "This tank is dry." He tilted his head toward the hole in its side. "I dropped in a pebble, it hit metal. You were right. As usual."

"I'm sorry, Lonnie, I know how much you were counting on things turning out another way..." She forced a reasonable tone. "Come down with me now."

"This Action's over. Been over for awhile. Doesn't seem like you noticed, but *Ariadne's not talking to us anymore!*" He raised his eyes and for a moment she she regretted what they'd lost.

“I know. I know. I've been thinking, Lonnie. Dreams are going to come through, *they are*. But more like compass needles than GPS. More like...” she suddenly realized what she was going to say had other, accusatory meanings, and one of those meanings pointed at herself. She hesitated, spoke the words anyway, “more like collaboration than following orders.”

“You aren't *listening!*” He slid one boot beyond the edge. “It was over before we got here! Budd was right all along. Isn't that an ass-kick? He never trusted Ariadne like the rest of us.” Lonnie wrapped his arms over his head, protecting himself from his own words. “It's even more over for *me*. You don't understand...”

“I understand you feel sorry for yourself,” she shifted position, exhausted, longing to get back down into a nest of sleep.

“Nothing left to fight with anymore. You and I...” He touched his chest.

“Because I abandoned you!? You've got things backward, you abandoned *me!* Abandoned *us*. Look, I'm right here in front of you now! I'm trying...”

“To get me to do what you want me to. So you can...take Ariadne's place.”

“So I can *what?!* You've lost your mind. What exactly has anything you just said got to do with you sneaking off with Blaise's equipment, climbing up here like a jackass and torching the tank—for nothing—all of which *none* of us agreed to?!” She was shaking now. “So now on top of all that, you threaten to take a dive, and leave the rest of us to... nurse your broken bones?” Her hands grabbed at the scarf on her head, wanting to rip it to shreds.

She stood unmoving in a long helpless silence.

“All right, Lonnie. Stay the hell up here forever if you want. Or take a dive and break a leg, I don't know if I care which, right now. You've accomplished that much. But you know what, you aren't going to stop this Action.”

“*Your* Action, you mean.” He let one boot dangle.

She looked at him, her vision blurred, stomach threatening to turn over. She would vomit over the side or faint if she stayed up here like this. He was forcing her to choose. To plead with him while their time ran out, to indulge him. Or do what everybody in Labyrinth was counting on her to do, Dreams or no Dreams.

She stepped back to the ladder, started down, one foot after the other, counting steps, unwilling to look at anything but her own hands, afraid now that *she* would be the one to fall and break her neck.

Like the watery voice of one of her own brain cells, Natalie spoke to her then. *Do it like this. . .you think a question. Then you listen.*

She clung to the cooler side of the ladder in a slant of shade, resting her head. *Then you listen.*

You listen.

~

“Okay, my girl.” Blaise gave Natalie a push. She was partway up the ladder, Blaise right behind her “Remember to sit,” Blaise reminded her, “scrunch across on your butt— play it safe, you're important to us, you know?”

Natalie did as she was told. Not because she believed it was the best way, but because she didn't want to frighten anybody. Especially Lonnie. She wriggled across the railing, scraping

her hands—metal surprised her, how hot it was in the sun, how cool in the shade.

As she crossed the catwalk, Lonnie held up his hands to stop her.

She kept moving.

~

“When you were a boy,” she said, sitting beside him, “and you played Star Raider, did you ever think some day you could *really* rescue ships in a storm and save people from waves?” Their backs against the tank, they were in shadow now.

Lonnie didn’t speak. Finally he said, “I don’t know,” and looked at her, really looked. “Rena told you about that?”

“Do you think we’re all going to drown— like the people you didn’t save? Because nobody’s going to help us?”

“Drown?” He almost smiled at this. “What are you talking about, kid, this is the desert,” he looked out at the fading western light. He turned his whole body toward her, puzzlement softening his face.

“The puddle you played with your boats in, you said you could see the sky in it.”

“I could. Down to the clouds swimming around like fat fish. Natalie, what’ve you got in that head of yours?”

“I found something.” She handed him a marble. Clear with a twist of blue inside.

He sat speechless, blinking at his lucky marble, rolling it in his palm. *Watery planet*. Suddenly he was looking into the Earth, oceans lining the inner surface of the globe, light like fire inside it. He kissed the top of her head.

~

“Did you know there's another kind of water tank underneath this one?” Natalie patted the metal.

“Another tank? What're you talking about?” He slipped the marble into his pocket and buttoned it down.

She wiped sweat from her upper lip, took a deep breath, closed her eyes. “When I was looking at the water in Jojo's cup? It was like the way *you* saw the sky in that puddle. Under this tank? I saw another one. Made of rock. Buried. A long time ago.”

~

Natalie, and then Lonnie after her, stepped over the edge of the trestle, climbed to the lowest good run, stood and looked at Blaise who was waiting for them.

Blaise held out her arms to Natalie, and when she was safely on the ground, sent Lonnie a quick, ironic smile. “And a child will lead us?”

REDSHOT RADIO : X and Y continued...

Hermes: Go ahead, Yoli, you were about tell us how to free buried treasure—what I mean to say is, *underground water*.

Yoli: (Laughter) Well, I'd love to get technical on recycling waste water to cool the bit and clear the bore, all that...but I'm gonna let my Dad answer your question with what he called The Law Of Compensation. You force a dry well, she'll resist you, you won't get anywhere. You don't blast deeper and harder to get at her, what you do is you *give water an easier way to rise up and meet you*...Because that's what water naturally *prefers* to do. You water witch. You map. Sink two maybe three gently-sloping bores— coming in almost horizontal— and most of the time you'll end up with two or three temporary gushers...

Hermes: Meaning they come and go?

Yoli: Everything does, if you pay attention.

Hermes: Right. And The Law of Compensation? Does it do the trick for anything besides drilling for water?

Xavier: Pretty much everything! Whenever we tried debunking MediaNet data directly, we never got any traction at all. But when we stopped debating and simply put up live data from thousands of ordinary peeps...

Yoli: ... undercutting Net by coming at the truth sideways, and from multiple angles...

Xavier: ...we coaxed a few gushers, didn't we?

Hermes: (Laughter) TruBlue calls that *strategical magic*.

Yoli: That kinda success happens small and slow.

Hermes: *Slow lightning!* So what's next?

Yoli: As you know, there's a mega-project on the burner.

Hermes: The Mother Project, so to speak, yes. You two are...involved?

Xavier: Yeah. We are. Us and a lot of other...

Yoli: ...*amateurs?*

Hermes: Details off-limits, of course, but could you give our Gleaners and Streamers a few clues as to what the Project is about? Xavier?

Xavier: We're staging an Action in such a way that results *can't be covered up*.

Yoli: I've thought a lot about how to put this. It's gonna sound strange. *We want what Orpheus wanted.*

Hermes: Orpheus? Isn't he the dude who, let's see...talked one of the gods into letting him go into the Underworld. Territory I happen to be very familiar with! Our friend Orpheus did his fast-talking without consulting my namesake, am I right? Hermes is supposed to be in on those round trips to Hades. Something about bringing back his dead wife, wasn't it?

Yoli: His lover, *Eurydice*— the name means *wide justice*.

Hermes: But he screwed up somehow— I forget that part. He messes up and he...

Xavier: ...loses her. Forever, as far as he knows. That's about it, yes. But we plan to do it right this time.

Hermes: Besides not consulting Hermes, what was the nature of the screw-up?

Yoli: Orpheus broke his promise to the one who gave him permission to find her and bring her back. *We have to tell the story differently.*

Hermes: What *was* that promise?

Xavier: No regrets, no second-guesses. One foot after the other. Keep going, even when you don't know where you are or where you'll end up... keep your promises!

Yoli: *Traveler, there is no road...*

Hermes: *...this road is made by walking.*

And there you have it, children.

This is Hermes for RedSpot Radio, signing off.

Digging

Lonnie and Budd

Give water an easy way to rise up and meet you.

“Natalie saw another tank, right about *here*.” Lonnie did not turn around, went on hacking at the ground under the trestle, with the flimsy portable digger they used to shovel latrines.

“I know what she saw,” Budd said. “But you sure you *heard* her correctly? How far down do you think she meant? What are you doing, man?” Budd laid his hand on Lonnie's shoulder. “That ridiculous shovel's going to wreck your wrists.”

“You got anything better?”

“Maybe.”

Lonnie sat back on his heels, wiped sweat out of his eyes. Covered with dust, panting, grateful to be in the company his friend who'd barely spoken to him in, how long now? At the same time he could not help resenting Budd's obvious mission. “Who put you up to coming after me?”

Budd shook Lonnie's shoulder. “Nobody put me up to it.”

“Like I told you, it was *her* idea.”

“Not exactly. But whoever it belongs to, didn't mean breaking your strength trying to bust through rock!” His grip tightened. “Come on, friend, give it a rest, will you? Let's talk.” Budd pulled him down into a triangle of shade under the tower.

“People always telling me what to do.” Lonnie muttered with strained amusement.

Budd rapped him lightly on the skull. “That’s because you keep churning out trouble for yourself, and the rest of us, too, or haven’t you noticed?”

“Is it ‘trouble’ to want to get us a water supply?! Excuse me, but we’re gonna die out here...oh, shit, I give up, nobody seems to care about that minor detail.”

“Hey, hey, hey! The trouble is, you’re going about it like a maverick ATV, roaring off on your own power source! The way to get water is? Remember? *Make it easy for water to come to you.* Remember when we first heard that line? When I gave you this?” His fingers traced the ridge of Lonnie’s scar.

Lonnie brushed his hand away.

“Remember how hopeless that situation looked at the time? Surrounded by a hundred demons with our specific demise in mind? Like there was nothing but chaos anyway so we might as well jam, each man for himself?”

“We *were* surrounded, it was hopeless, Budd! Like now.”

“And how did we get *out* of there?! Wasn’t running off on your own with one big idea screaming in your head! Which is what we’ve got going, right now.”

“Ideas? Hell, isn’t only me, we got eight ideas! Plus Natalie who’s turned into, I don’t know, Einstein’s daughter. Oh God, Budd. *Nine* of us plus Natalie, that’s what I meant...sorry... sorry, sorry...”

“Give me your hand.”

“Huh?”

“Just give it to me!”

“It’s every bit as crazy to sit around reading palms as it is to go digging for that...”

“Shut *up*, will you, Bartholomew?”

“Well, I love you, too.” He dropped his hand into Budd’s.

“Close your eyes. See if you can remember a conversation we had a few years ago. That day out by the greenhouse? When you were telling me how you came around to quit flying...”

Restless silence. Lonnie could barely bring himself to open his mouth.

He tried to take back his hand, but Budd wouldn’t let him go.

Universal Nervous System

Budd and Lonnie, 2055

One plus one plus one plus equals One.

“Budd, you're too stubborn to admit it, but what you're really after is your own *private* conversation with Ariadne. Like you thought you had in the beginning. *Just you and me, baby.* I get that. Everybody secretly wants to be the best beloved, don't they? But Paradise ain't gonna get regained without a few burning swords...or whatever the hell angels pack these days.”

“Maybe you're right, Lonnie. But, tell me something. What made you give up your beloved? I mean *flight?*”

Lonnie shook his head. “Oh, you know. A changing list of reasons.” Long noisy breath. “Got you and me together, though, didn't it?”

Budd gave him a frown.

“Because if I hadn't quit flying, I never would've checked out the Rainbows...” He chuckled and rubbed his scar. “Okay. Most of those reasons added up to...a stinking pile of ego. The chance to work with Prof M, to be the boy wonder— *assistant* boy-wonder— to a VP who knows flight like a micro-surgeon knows cell structure. And Mitchell, well, I admit, he was a seductive guy. His 4-D rtMRI, his bird-mind-bird-flight research archives could swallow you alive. *The Aerodynamic Interactions of Aircraft in Formation* based on studies of

starlings and cormorants and...I was star-struck. Visions of bio-mime abstracts, with my name across the top.

“Knew a guy in a wheelchair once, broke his neck on K-2 peak—ten years later, he was still reading Rock And Ice, cover to cover. I mean, everybody’s in some kind of denial. Especially what they say yes to, then lose big on. Everything — people, work, the place we were born— they all say *stay put, man, stop running*: And the thing we can’t quit running from?” He tapped a thumb on Budd's chest, then his own.

“So what are *you* after? With Ariadne, I mean.”

“Hey, you’re the one needs to fess on that. Always the resident skeptic. Without much cause that I could see.”

“Yeah? I guess.” Budd rubbed the back of his neck, considering. “Somewhere along the way, I got the impression Dreams weren’t just talking to us, but rearranging things. I mean physically moving stuff from one place to another. Sifting files, adding, deleting. Turning up the volume on a feeling or perception here, turning down another one there. Hooking this idea up with that one. Maybe all of them going in the right direction. But. I need to be *in* on that direction, you know? I mean, where it’s all headed. Remember Equation One?

One plus one equals one. One plus two equals one. One plus one plus one equals One.”

Lonnie laughed. “Wait, are you the reason we Dreamed that?!” More laughter. “The math is lost on most of us, we get there by another route. Yeah, sure we're all connected. And yeah maybe our EQs and our IQs are getting re-tooled...they have to be if we're gonna unpoison this world, right? And, hell, if nothing else, just in the light of general human *fucked-up-ness*. But. I'll tell you ...there's something else. Have you noticed any changes in your, uh, L Q?”

Budd tipped his face to the sky. "Give me a clue, man?"

"*Libido* ain't exactly the word." Lonnie imitated the wry, reedy tone of Barry Kip, stand-up philosopher from RedSpot.

"Ahhh." Slow smile. "*Libido*. Nice recycled noun. Got pared down to *genitals* around the end of the twentieth. Never really recovered. Ariadne likes bringing back the old syntax. But erotic delight is... not the whole show."

"Sort of a cooled-out love? Like you're a little smashed on everything and everybody, all at once."

"*Energy is Eternal Delight*. Teri used to slip Blake into the conversation whenever she could. And *Love Supreme*? That Coltrane piece? Like he was blowing heaven right into being? How about swallowing water when you're really really thirsty, the way you get high on every little burl going down? Or when somebody *else* is thirsty, and you get water into *them*, and you feel exactly the same as when it's you? Like you're part of their nervous system and they're part of yours. Not the Central Nervous System, the *Universal Nervous System*."

"I pledge allegiance to the UNS!" Lonnie was laughing so hard now his belly and cheeks throbbed. "How come you don't seem so surprised? You get some kind of early start on this stuff?"

"That kind of general bliss was around before anybody ever *heard* of Ariadne. Besides, a blind man's not so easily fooled by what his eyes think. Blind man pays attention to skin, nose, tongue. All channels on...some of which don't even have names yet! If you bet it all on the sky, you miss what's under your feet. What we're talking about is living closer to the waterline between pleasure and pain. The opposite of trivial pleasure is *pleasure profound*. The opposite of a little meaningless pain is *pain profound*, the kind you learn from.

We move back and forth between them, get to know the territory, try not to get stuck, stay fluid. We learn to dance it.” A beat of silence. “So when did you start picking up on UNS?”

“Remember when Jojo and I met for a mutual Local Group scan? She had an orange on her that day, snagged at The Depot. Started blamming about how she was really tasting things again...we didn’t have to be the little zombies HM wants us to be...and I mean she’s an attractive woman, you know, so I. Well. We got talking about marriage, and she started throwing around stuff like ‘I prefer my *unlimited* bigger than two.’ Scared the shit out of me, I can tell you.”

“Ariadnean mathematics. *Some infinities are larger than others.*” Budd said.

“What I couldn’t figure exactly, not then, was whether she was coming on to me or was I wired on fruit sugar ...or just horny or what! That night I Dreamed I was checking out a brandnew dark-metal Falcon, a needle-nose jet, not touching it, just looking— and you know that jerk-dance your eyes do when you’re scanning:?”

“Saccadic jitter.”

“Yeah, those little *touch-downs*. I could feel every damn one of them. Could feel the *warm* of black and the *cool* of glass... so good it was weird! Like the hull of that jet and my eyes were hooked up together. And then I got it. Doesn’t matter what something’s made of, makes no difference at all. Because Life doesn’t live more here, less there. It lives...”

“Everywhere.” Budd nodded. “But stay on the Dream.”

“So I hitched myself into the cockpit and fired the thing up, that rumble tickling my bones, making my ears itch...so high I didn’t even *need* to fly, I was already airborne! When I woke up, I thought I knew what I wanted to do. More than testing jets!

Payday flying was wrecking me. So I went after Mitchell and his bird lab to get the knowledge, sure, which is okay, but secretly...to get the strokes, the name. Didn't know that til later when I quit the lab, too. Why'd I quit? Saw what was I doing. Simple as that. Saw Dreams weren't only about getting high. Saving the world from Hydro, yes, but they were showing me—us— another kind of life we could be living...”

“...where pleasure's one of the faces of goodness and beauty,” Budd broke in. “Not addiction or intoxication or distraction, but a state of being that heals. I get it, I want that, too. But for me, every wave of Dreaming has to have *informed consent* — I have to understand, to say yes or no. Agree with the way I'm changing or being changed. Or... don't we all end up Ariadne's Dream-bots?”

“Maybe, Budd. But see the flaw here? Needing to be 100% before you make a move?”

Budd laughed. “Guilty as charged, Your Honor. Having to know everything's an addiction, too—might've been what pushed Teri out of my life...back to MCC.”

“Like me having to understand what flying *was*, where it came from before humans, exactly how it worked, where it was going, how far could I make it take me. And if I did all that, somehow I'd get the fix, get the magic back.” He hung his head. “Ambition got me to Mitchell in the first place. But a few months in that lab was worse than carting Colonels and grief-tourists to Wild World. Started off with some genuine passion, sure, but got sidetracked into a ditch.

"Starlings and crows and pigeons in steel cages. Stacked to the ceiling. Don't know how many I *sacrificed* for Mitchell so he could slice their little brains up...a million slides like sat-photos of Tri-Am at night, tiny cities all lit up. Ah god, Budd, I even went along with him on his Nobel hunting expeditions.

He was “decoding” birdsong at a conference, saying shit like *all that singing at sunrise and sunset? Vocalized chest-beating. Flight, gentlemen, is nothing but a fancy, very expensive, defense mechanism.*”

Lonnie went slack. “And you know the worst of it? In spite of everything I just told you, I’m scared I’m gonna get sucked right back into glory-hunting, having to be the guy who gets the credit. Wins the game. Loses what’s real.”

“We all do it, Lonnie. One way or another.” Budd laid his hand on Lonnie’s neck.

“And you know what else scares me?” Lonnie’s laugh spiraled, and broke off. “How much I like it when you to do that.”

Calona, 2057

Echoing all those years ago, Lonnie was laughing now, the shovel he'd been hanging onto, flung aside.

Budd took him into his arms. Deep in the evaporating shadow of the tank tower, they rested that way together. Lonnie laughed until his ribs ached. And when the laughter slowed and clenched into sobbing, he gave himself to it entirely.

Part Eleven

The Maze and The Minotaur

Part III continued

Tatania-Diana sets her eye on Theseus.

Theseus, unable to return Diana's gaze, looks away. "Sacrifice does, in *you*, Lady, sacrifice itself..."

Tatania-Diana: "Not by slaughter, Theseus. On Earth there must be *necessary sacrifice*. But here's the paradox— the power of it must not be fear, but *joy*."

Theseus puts down his weapon and his helmet, shaken.

Tatania-Diana: "Understand me! Death's not banished— Death, beloved sculptor's blade, my rake and winnow. Yet my plan, not being human, is the more humane."

Chorus: *Ruin, Altar, Circle, Child!*

Puck, suddenly appearing, smiles, plucks a grass blade out of the air, buzzes a fluty note, accompanying the Chorus.

Chorus: *Ruin. Altar... Circle. Child...*

Theseus: “This song is babbling madness!”

Chorus: *Altar! Ruin...! Circle, Child!*

Tatania-Diana whirls in a brief, leaping dance. “*Attend to what is most benign, yet most forbidden.* And my plan, impossible to tell, in ripeness *shall* unfold.”

Theseus slowly stands. “Have you not found, Lady, each heart a stranger to all others?” He twists toward Puck who flashes a mischievous grin, keeps his leaf-flute blowing. “So various is our human nature, warring within even as it wars without.”

Tatania-Diana— “*fancies uncountable as stars do rule each separate mind...*”

Theseus: “How's it to be done?!”

Titania-Diana : “*when minds transfigured so together/ more witnesseth than fancy's images/ and grow to something of great constancy...*”

She seizes his arm. “I will not let you go!”

Theseus: plants all his strength against her.

Titania-Diana: “I will not let you go...unless you live not half of life, but the *whole!*”

Theseus: He stands silent, eyes wild. As though he doesn't understand. Or understands too well.

At last he bows. “Lady, if love will not refuse you, no more will I.”

Puck bows to All a humble, proper bow:

“..and the moon, like to a silver bow

New bent in heaven, shall behold

the night of our solemnities.”

Curtain

TruBlue : To our players –and to Mr. Shakespeare — endless *thanks*. To all of you listening, wherever you are, *Let minds transfigure and grow to great constancy*.

And to you of Project M, return to us safe...

From the center of the cyclone, Goodnight, Good morning.
And Good Fortune.

Water Stories

Prologue: Moon and Rena

“John, it’s me,” she said to Moon’s inert body sprawled over his ground cloth. He didn’t stir, chest rising and falling. “*John!?*”

He shot up, arms and legs flung apart. He was pale, losing weight from his already slender frame. What could she do but try to get him laughing? “You look like that ghost you’re always going on about.” This awkward attempt hit dirt with a thud.

About to deliver a tart reply, Moon spotted Natalie’s blue-streaked face and his pique evaporated. “Hey,” he said, waving her close. On her knees beside him, she smiled with her eyes, her mouth undecided. The copper of her bracelet winked at him as she lifted something to her lips and nibbled. He questioned her with a look, and she opened her hand to show him. Weeds!

Rena squatted on the border of Moon’s groundcover weighted with stones against the rattling wind *getting into one’s nerves*, as he said— *making me nauseous*. Food gone stale, anyway. Cooked in the desert’s open-air oven.

Moon looked up, took Rena in. Catching in her some indefinable brightening of spirit

“*The real deal*,” She handed Moon the mirror, echoing his own words from the day he’d flung his scarf, talking them into a radioactive dance in the dust.

He peered into the glass. “You’re right, Rena, there she is, the old woman.” Hair down around his shoulders, baggy eyes intensely blue. Two white hairs sprouting from his chin. “Not so sexy these days, are you, darling?” he muttered. A pane of glass painted black behind, silver on its face. A bit of magic, really. He flicked sand from his cheek, slipped the mirror into his pocket.

~

She’d gone to Moon earlier that morning, guilt and confusion dragging her steps, and he’d put things into words for her—*the thing now is this...we have to stop running from each other. From ourselves. To start clean. Start with, not against. Inviting the aquifer under our feet, inviting Water, anywhere and everywhere...*

Hearing that, she longed for the beginning, not the end of the world.

~

A haggard, stringy-haired female looked back at her briefly before she buried the corners of the mirror so only an oval gleam shown at the center of the Circle. She’d listened to Moon and agreed that a way to gather minds together...might be to focus them on a common brightness, reflecting sky resembling water...

~

“I’m hungry,” Natalie says. Everybody in the Circle jolted by this ordinary declaration. Everybody but Moon. Has he heard?

We dig out remnants of Prochips, Popnuts, soyfroot, Greenstrips, Vita-bread— lay them out for Natalie. Malika pinches Froot into bits, arranges them in a wavering serpentine along the edge of her groundcover. The rest go around the Circle, savored, washed down with sips of water.

Natalie re-arranges each piece, settling on a curve that becomes a spiral. But doesn't eat. She holds up Budd's water jig, squints at the sky through the swirl in the bottom.

Rena longs for a swallow. Her ration of water for today nearly gone. "I've been thinking," she says. Not sure how to go on. She watches Natalie staring into a jig, not drinking, drifting, the way she likes to. Bored? The girl asks for food, but refuses it. Though she doesn't drink much, only water satisfies and entralls her.

How to begin? *Ask the question and listen.*

"If Ariadne's changing," she says, "so are we. Can we move with it? Stop wishing things back the way they were?" *And then you listen.* "We've got to listen. To each other."

She hears words line up in her mind. Hollow words. All her earlier, where was it now? She could barely remember morning now. *Hypocrite. Fool.*

Then it comes to her, why the mirror is wrong. This brightness doesn't flow like water under ground or in the air or alive inside us. Before Dreams, in memories...

"We've all got water stories," she says.

Murmurs. Silence.

Moon gives a wink that says he's with her. *We'll start here.*

"Everybody's got at least one." Natalie watches Rena, eyes shining. We might start fresh— in those eyes.

"Let's lie down. On our sides, way we were, before the hovercraft. Only this time, our feet in the center... with Natalie. This time we listen to the aquifer. To Water. Listen for a story that wants to be told..."

It's palpable, the resistance to what she's said. Because it's her idea, her *command*, as Lonnie put it? Can't blame anybody but

herself for that. She looks at him, but his eyes are shut—where is he?— face smudged with dirt and sweat. A shadow of that other face so close to her once. In another life.

Moon's voice is heavy with exhaustion as he gets down onto his side, “Water listens to Water...”

Natalie smiles at his words, shakes a few drops onto one hand, peers into them.

“Like our young lady here? Catch a line from her.” Moon puts his hands together into a kind of lying-down bow. He hums a fragment of melody they'd sung together, cranes his neck to see Natalie. She nods, fits herself into the center.

“Listen,” Moon says. “for a memory of water. Slipped your mind somehow...until now.”

Gratitude flows through Rena—not her command at all. Moon feels it, too, they're doing this together, making it up they go, this ceremony, this incantation. Improvisation. Imperative.

She presses her ear to the ground.

Rena

“Anyone?” she says. Nobody speaks. In the long silence that follows, doubt tears like wind at every loose thing.

“I'll go, then. Unless someone...?” Tension drains out of the Circle as soon as she says this.

She listens.

Out of her mouth slips a strange word. “Drowning.”

“You can drown in sand,” she says. “Drown in air without enough oxygen...” *Give it up, Doctor Rena. Time to come clean, be a simple human being.*

“You can drown a million ways. *Until you live the sad mad and glad of life, every drop.*” Was it Moon said that?

Light plays behind her eyelids.

“Going to tell a story about snow.” She opens her eyes. Surprised. “Nobody,” she says, thinking of Lonnie, “*nobody’s* heard this story before.” She wipes sweat off her neck, re-ties her scarf.

“I see the dark of my mother’s hands over my eyes. She walks me outside, to surprise me, she says—then her hands fly apart...and I see the world’s turned white. White and cold, so cold it hurts to breath at first. The ground crackles under my boots. If the world died in the night and turned to powdery bone... it would look like this! But she’s all patience, my mother, explaining *snow, Rena, snow, the second phase of the triple-point*—liquid, crystal, vapor— *a very rare form of H₂O*.

“I go jumping, running, catching shreds and feathers and flakes on my tongue, carving RENA MALORSA on every mound. Rolling handfuls into balls. Chewing them. Wondering *what should I make?*”

“For hours, I raise up my Snow Queen. High as I can reach. Her spear, a dead branch. With a penknife, I carve her breastplate and shield, flooring scraps from Uncle Hap’s yard. But more than anything, she has to have a crown. I am obsessed with a crown! And that crown has to be stunning. A *treasure*. Something I couldn’t bear to lose. Or else my queen wouldn’t be a real queen, *would she?*”

“Don’t have jewelry or keepsakes or anything that will do. And I see, even if I find her a crown, she’ll be robbed by the end of the day—a neighbor kid or some guy tromping by will take it into his brain to pinch the treasure for himself.”

“That day it snowed the first and last time in Barr Valley, showed me a puzzle I didn’t understand. A puzzle waiting for the right moment to dawn on me. Waiting for the day I’d be ready to accept it, understanding or not. And to say it out loud.

“If the most important thing in your life can’t be stolen— it’s yours as long as you live. But if it can be, you’ll lose it over and over again.”

~

No one breaks the spell. Silence deepens.

Blaise

“My grandfather Timon, I hear him calling. See his birdbath, the one he made himself out of pretty bluestone, rough-cut pieces he went upriver for, to the quarry a long way from our town. Ah that stone was *old*, so old, he told me, older than the oldest houses in Merceux where we lived. He built his birdbath back in the darkest part of the garden where the branches hung down and the grass was allowed to grow as long as it wanted to. Where I liked to hid and pretend to be lost.

“When I was very young and alone there one time, I climbed onto the pedestal and looked into the water in that bowl—like you did, Natalie—like we’re learning to do here, looking out of the water of our eyes into the world...

“No birds that day. Everything still. One dead leaf snaps, falls onto the water and spins around, slower and slower... And that leaf on the water, I can see behind it, underneath it, and what I see is my own face. My face floating there! Behind me, the sky, the world. For some reason, this makes my ribs and stomach *lonely*. At the same time, my brain feels like mud.

“Then I get it! Before that leaf on the water, I didn't know there *was* me—do you see? Everything changed. I was me... and I was, I am, the water, the trees and the sky...”

Malika

“I will tell you...about the mangrove trees where I was born—people said *walking trees* because the of the way those trees stepped out farther every year into the tides on long skinny roots and the tangle of them made such good places for fish, for shrimp, mussels, clams, for oysters and mud crabs, so many things to hide and grow juicy to feed the people— we lived on the edge of it, the Kandal Kadu, more than a thousand hectares of mangrove forest that had disappeared, and would again. For all the usual reasons.

“After commercial harvesting collapsed, mangroves started growing back, women planted the shores with them, though warm weather was bringing more and more flash tides every year. When the young mangroves grew strong and thick, we believed they'd help to calm the big tides. And they did.

“Still, big ones came. But they were far enough apart that we forgot and just lived our lives, you know? We girls had our own canoe, knew how to catch mud crabs in buckets and drag them home to play with, laughing at the way they jiggled over the floor. That was before Fata got the fire going bright and snatched our clever toys from us so Mati could boil their flesh to eat with rice or dahl and pradama leaves.

“But one time the water fell very low and my little sister K'liki and I were picking crabs out of the roots of the trees. We heard it coming. A growl, a roar. At first I didn't understand the sound coming through the water like that. And then I did. Because I'd heard the stories, we all had, all our lives.

“A big wild tide came crashing over our heads, and K’liki...she was just *gone*.” Weeping, Mala waves Blaise and Natalie away when they reach for her.

“I screamed and screamed for her. Knew I had to dive for her. But it was like my arms and my legs were roped to those mangrove roots I washed into. My hands clamped hold of them, and couldn't let go. I hung on while the tide rushed up to my waist... I was too little, I couldn't swim, was just bawling, gasping for air, clinging against the rush like I'd seen the mud crabs do my whole life. Scared to death, freezing cold. Exhausted. Dying!

“And then,” Mala shakes her head, “I just sank down onto the water. Not far from shore. That was all I could do. Just let myself down, dreaming I was in my bed at home. While up there in the sky going around with great slow turnings, some kind of bird circled, hypnotizing me, going round so peaceful that I stopped bawling. Everything stopped.

“The waves lifted me and let me down. Up and down, up and down. I don't know how long. Maybe a whole day? Not cold or scared or sad, nothing like that in me anymore. Almost a child in the womb...

“And that's how Fata found me.

“Years after Fa was gone, Mati told me what he'd said to me that day when the sea gave me back to them. Because, you see, I didn't remember much after he found me. Not until she told me his exact words, did I feel I had heard them before. He said to me, 'Your face, Malika! You opened your eyes like you'd been napping on the sea's big back. Trusting him. And you know what? Your Mati and I are *so glad* you didn't dive down to look for your little sister.' Fata was crying when he said this, Mati told me. I never saw him cry in my life. But the tears just poured from him. 'Glad... because', he said, 'that's why you

didn't drown, my Mala-girl, that's why we still have you with us.
Why you *lived*..' ”

The List 7

LJ

Heart pounding, weaving through knots of people, she was running, running from the freeze-frames in her head. *Curt on his side after the dose she gave him. Pernerov's shrewd eyes on her when she'd whined to him she wasn't sleeping, needed something strong to knock herself out.*

Curt had handed back her cell the day after he took it from her. After the big show he made, locking it into his drawer. *Just wanted to get your attention.* She'd laughed, hating him for that. She, the errant young woman, he the boss, teaching her a lesson. Plus making sure she went home with him most nights for noodles with salpy. They drank vodka, talked, made love of sorts. She played her part like nothing had happened. But her mind was absent. Elsewhere.

First she got herself in to see Pernerov. Talked him into a script for REM-X2. Pretended to take it a few nights, raved about how much it helped. Just long enough for him to trust her. Then she asked for a few nights more. *Careful with this stuff, Lisa. Puts you to sleep at the highest safe dose. For you? 2 migs. Came up with that using your weight. I'm going to give you three nights at a time and no more. Because if you ever got desperate and took 6 at once, it could damage your heart. More than that.* He made a gruesome face, *get the picture?*

She slowed down, allowing herself to move no faster than the average walker trotting along the street. In her long-sleeve worker greys and flatbeds traded down from a grifter for her HM skirt and vest and heels, she was an unglamorous female.

Hair shoved up under a gov-cap with an extra long visor hiding her eyes—better than the shades she'd started out with. Almost nobody but Security wore them anymore. They seemed to create a stir, turning heads as she passed through Mag stations, catching the eye of men and women bunched together in chattering flocks, on the way home from or heading off to their dreary jobs.

How to recognize a Laby? *Ants*, they liked to say around HM. Not officially, of course. Nobody called them Dreamers. Officially or unofficially. *Ants* for their underground burrows and their underground habits. Their brainless undermining of what HM was building up on the surface. What every ordinary citizen might, with a lot of hard work and clean noses, happily secure for themselves. Yes. But what did a Laby actually look and act like? Why hadn't she been briefed on that sort of stuff? Curt said he looked for two things, though surely there were more? First, what stood out that shouldn't? *For instance, some odd creativity with the get-up, the hair; the clothes, they can't seem to resist that. Second, what was missing that ought to be there? Not cells, not the obvious. An excessively quiet manner; for instance. Speaking in short sentences. A reluctance to give details about their lives—as opposed to the babbling straight-nose types...*

The morning she fled, shoving things into her pak that might prove useful, she realized she couldn't wear her cell. A direct line to her every move as long as it wasn't disabled. Useless, if it was. She left it in the top drawer of her desk as she went through the street-door— Hannah, luckily, had not yet developed the habit of checking IDs on the way *out*.

She approached a tall grubby-looking man with icy blue eyes, a deliberate smile. A grifter. *Let's see what he's got*. He opened his coat—a ragged tuxedo jacket— showing rows of cells in little pockets. Not real. Had to be *Watches*. “How much?” she

whispered. The appraising wince he gave unnerved her. He pulled out a sample and put it into her hand, mumbling a price. The thing was too lightweight. But eyeball street-cred was all she really needed. A Watch would do. “All-mechanical features,” he confided. “Pedometer, compass, alarm, radio, track-blocker, and she passes you right through vid-gates with a special gismo called...” She smiled at his lotech spiel. *Radio?!* But a voice in her head spoke up. *This could be your first mistake, LJ.* “Let me think,” she said and walked away to sit on the ledge of a pool made of sky blue siliclear under a fake waterfall.

She sat a meter from him, but he kept up his gabble in her direction. “I can whittle, if that’s too steep for ya.” He thought she was haggling! Or was that part of the janus? Frightening thought. At the same time, she wanted to laugh at the irony. Giving up a Watch—her “cell”— at just the right time and place, might convince an ant of her solidarity—her very own *reverse* janus. The guy’s price in free-bucks, which everybody in security carried, tempted her.

~

She snapped the Watch onto her wrist. Sooner or later the news she was gone would get back to Deena. *Leah.* How she wished this thing could send a roak, let her sister know she was all right. For the moment, anyhow. She owed her that.

Walking again, eager to get her mind off the list of things that could go wrong, she picked up the thread she’d dropped when blue-eyes back there in his greasy outfit distracted her.

Hords of Ants. No visible leaders. Somebody somewhere calling the shots? Their velvet underground queen? Some HMers claimed Dreaming belonged to the hive-mind. A quivering mass controlled by pheromones,— drugs basically. How many kinds of ants were there? REM resistors. Water

thieves. Net-cutters. Grifters and fresh-market pimps. Nose-to-tail, sneaking into places they had no right to. If you couldn't lure or bully them into useful service, like any trespassing arthropod, they'd have be exterminated. Eventually. Painlessly? She did not want to contemplate that part. Mass arrests. Barracks at Sarsten going up to corral them. Until HM could roll out a more... permanent solution?

In the next station, hungry and tired, she decided to stay put awhile, nibble some froot-n-cheeze grabbed from the employee lounge on her way out. Maybe brainstorm her next move while she sat on the shabby passenger bench, keeping her head out of ad beams, out of the gaze of a Gaard patrolling the far side of the enclosure. When he was gone, maybe she'd spot somebody with antennae and six legs— did she really have a knack for this street-hookup thing?—it could be somebody looking for *her*, or a woman *like* her—prize catch, ex-Hydro gal eager to join the freedom riders. Free-Dream Riders. Free Riders...

She brushed bits of cheeze off her lap and looked at her grimy paws. No way to clean up. Were there any what-did-you-call-them? Public facilities? Not that she wanted to explore the answer. Not yet. She smiled. At least she was beginning to smell right. Didn't ants give a sniff to check each other out?

She waited. If she didn't hookup soon she'd have to hoof it out to Riker on her own, wouldn't dare hire a PV. See if she could pass among the six-leggeds, and slip into the fray.

Water Stories II

Lagarto

From where we are lying, looking up, thin clouds veil the sky. Wind sweeps down from the mountains. *Largo*. Jojo's name for that place. One light glitters over the ridgeline and I know it is our star. The planet we used to call Jupiter. No more. *Ariadne. Majamaya. Zoa. La Dueña del Fuego y Agua. Lady of the Aquifer.*

I turn on my side again, close my eyes.

Bring me the right words.

“Water carving dirt. Water making trails in the dust like tears running down a kid's dirty cheeks. That's the water I remember. Water foaming along with a skin of dust, water you can't drink, water you boil with *arrozconalás*—winged rice, what we called termites—with shreds of bark and grass stems, chicken feathers, and you don't know what.

“Five years old, and I want to find out what *la serpiente de aguas*, water-serpent, is up to. So I follow wherever she goes. Forget I'm not allowed out from under Mama's eyes. A lot of time passes, I'm gone so long, half the people of our town come knocking the bushes for me.

“I find out later when they first caught sight of me? I was grinning, smeared head to toe with mud, a very happy boy, they said, until ay! Mama swats me good *hace caliente mi culito*. Everybody shouting and laughing, some crying, and I'm

rubbing my eyes. They're waiting for my promise I'll never scare them that way again. And I do promise.

But little as I was, I knew I would do it again. I knew why. Because there was nothing so much in this world I *wanted* to do, nothing else I was made to do. Though of course I was sorry for the fright I caused them, the ones who wanted more than anything to keep me safe... sorry until the next time.

"The water serpent gave me eyes to follow wherever she might go. Not to know, but to discover, where I would end up..."

"I ended up here with all of you!"

"Ariadne is gone and I understand why. "She's no longer *up there, far away, on that star*. Because She too follows the water-snake wherever it takes Her."

Lonnie

"A puddle. With mud at the bottom." I want to thank Natalie for my story. Her face is tipped away, studying a drop on her wrist. "But I could see sky in it." I remember the way she looked at me on the trestle, before the Circle, eyes steady, face streaked with blue. I smile at her, even if she can't see me.

Can't see Budd either, my friend who sees *me* so clearly. Something burns behind my eyelids, and I see it again, the blue light from the hovercraft. How it penetrated me. Harmed us somehow. Though Natalie and Budd still see in me what wasn't harmed at all. Can't be. No matter what.

"When I was a kid I had this box of toy jets. Silastic, nothing fancy. And these fat little aircraft carriers that wouldn't float right, just rolled on their sides. I'd take an hour to set up every one of them, propping them in the water with pebbles and

sticks. Than I'd whirl my arms like jet burners churning up a storm, and that storm would come crashing onto the planes and ships, a monster tidal wave, threatening tiny screaming peops inside.

Until I'd feel sorry for them. And then I'd rescue them."

Breathing hard. Worn out. Happy to wait for words to come when they were ready.

"I'm up, then?" Moon says, beginning to sit up, breaking the silence. Bare-faced, no paint. That film of powdery sweat we all wear like a second skin.

"Not so fast, my friend," I say. The gravity of exhaustion pulling on me. "Just catching my breath..."

Moon's voice, shaky, "Apologies. Carry on." And like a ratty umbrella, he folds up on the ground.

"Don't know why, but I didn't ever save those peops right away. I let a few drown. Sometimes more than few..." Everything out of my mouth feels like self-accusation.

"Wasn't long before I started feeling bad about it. Really bad. Sooner or later I'd zoom down, Ta-dum! Out of the sky. Whoever was down there still yelling their heads off, calling me to come. *Sting Ray Boy! Sky King!*" And thank you for this one, Natalie. "*Star Raider.*" I raise two fists in the air and hear her laughing. I laugh too until tears sting my eyes. And I know what to do.

Walking the Circle, I touch each forehead lightly. Rena looks at me and I realize she expected me to hurry by when I came to her, eager to get back where I started. Leave her out completely.

I sit beside her. On her left. For years in every Labyrinth Circle, that was the place I chose. We don't look at each other—not yet—as my hands come down on the crown of her head.

Water Stories III

Moon

“Water, like time, never goes straight— it fishtails.” I make a gesture, a curving movement. My mind swimmy with fatigue. I listen. Wondering: Any of you fish still alive down there in The Cottonwood?

“Water like time. That’s a Dream-line. I believed that one was specially for Moonshine.

“You never can force water to do anything! Not for long, anyway. What’ll happen is, she’ll shift on you. Then disappear. We call it drought. We call it dying of thirst. Human beings are truly gifted *forcers.*” My hands clench. I catch myself. Do I really want to tell this ancient tale?

“I was raised, after my folks died, by people had their minds made up—I was gonna to be their “perfect boy.” But I was queer, I was watery right from the start! Talking to a dead lady I never met. Blaming her for whatever dangerous stuff popped out of my mouth. *Slippery*, they said, and that I definitely was. But slippery was all right with me. They couldn’t pin me down. Not even this body and how it worked. Or didn’t. I liked it that way. I mean, what I have isn’t exactly standard equipment!” I shake my hands in the air. *“Hallelujah*, for that.” The word a relief. But it was... It was a truth hiding a lie.

“Definitely glad to fail at ‘perfect boy’. But it cut me, too.”

I laugh. “So, I reinvented John/ Stole my step-mom’s skirt, a pair of her shoes. Not exactly Mr. and Mrs. B.’s dream kid. *Mr. B.* broke a few sticks over my ass about that. But when nothing fixed me up the way they bloody wanted, they packed me off to Ellsward— the big-name globe-trotting psych surgeon? Committing Dreamers for Dreaming? By the time I figured what exactly he had in mind, *I was gone*. Hooked up with Black Rainbow in their crash underground. Did some cyber trash for Hydro, I admit it. Some double-backs, scoring zoomers for blokes at DGS. Kept on like that til I had the great good fortune to meet up with Fish Wives, and well,” I chuckle, “can’t say I went straight, can I?! But I did get clean. Dropped the pills and the swill, kept the swish.” A bone-tired, delicious laugh bubbles out of me. “After my clean up, The Wives let me join their troupe. And Labyrinth, too. With many deep thanks to The Gate Man! Guess I can say this now. Right, Budd?”

“He’s the one checked me out for this Action. I know a lot of you can say the same. Maybe I shouldn’t be so thrilled, given the way things’ve turned out, I mean look where we *are*, man! But seriously. *Thank you.*” Budd nods with a smile that might be merely a change of the light.

“Okay. Water. We’re listening for you, water. Water in the veins, in the air. Water everywhere *and where’s a drop to drink?*”

What’s moonshine got to do with di-hydrogen oxide?

“What I mean to say is don’t mind me. My nature takes after water’s own nature. And that’s what saved my life—for sure. Same way I knew it was me She was talking to when The Lady said what she said about fishes and then —this time I’ve got it.”
The true distance between two points is never a straight line.

“Natalie's got it. Water-nature. We all do. Whether we know it well or die before we do. Now or later, and every-when between, it's true. As for us here in the desert, even the ones didn't make it this far, if we're gonna get saved, it's our curvy ways, our water nature, that'll do the saving.

“Gate Man, take it away.”

Jojo

Budd stays quiet so long, I think he's going to give up his turn. Or break down. Unable to think of anything but Teri.

Waiting for him, I wonder what in this world am I going to come up with for *my turn*? After all our talk of water, I don't have water on my mind. Something more like a streak of fire. A thrown star...

Budd

“Bathing my eyes. She was bathing my burning, itching, swollen eyes. My nurse. Her name was Rachel. I was 12. This was right after surgery. Me scared to death the brand new bionic retinas weren't going to sprout and bring back my sight. And I was right. I was so right. Infection killed the nerves. Best docs in the world still to this day can't come up with artificial nerve-nets. Not on *this* planet.

“Won't try to talk about those days and months in the dark. I'll just say, I learned a few things from Rachel.

“It's *hope* that hurts most. She had a brother went missing at Three Gorges. The Second Water War? *Not knowing*, she said, was the torture kept her on the far edge of life. She kept

telling me things in that kind, beautiful voice of hers *'soon you'll know, Francisco, you'll know. One way or the other.'*

"I can still hear the plink of water from the cloth she squeezed into the bathing pan. In the dark, my ears could see what my eyes couldn't. Every sound magnified. The way she shook her fingers to rinse them. Then she'd stop, thinking of something maybe, letting the last drops fall. Each a separate note. Such small, friendly music.

"Rachel smelled like music, too. An old perfume in a midnight blue bottle, said her Grandparents gave her. The name of that perfume came from a river in Germany, from a dance people made up, before the first World War. That long ago.

"Another thing Rachel said. That it was people's kind words, their gentleness, not their meanness, that broke you. She could hold back her grief until somebody said something *tender* about her brother. *We know how much you miss him, can we help you in any way?*

"Tenderness is like water— you can't live without it. But it wrenches you, too. Tears you out of anger and numbness, into the raw, dumb ache of days and nights with no end to the pain in them.

"The name of that perfume is gone now. Blown away. But the music? It's still with me. And Rachel's kindness. I won't ever forget her kindness. Not as long as I..."

~

That last word lost in Budd's throat. We all know what it is. And why he can't say it.

Tenth Name

RedSpot Radio, one half hour before air-time

BestBoy: What is it, what's happening?

Hermes: All over the news for awhile now. Look at this.

BestBoy: That's a trafficked photo, bro, you believe whatever you see?

Hermes: Got too many details right, to be junk. The number of bodies. And you see the way they're lying together? In a circle, heads at the center? That was something we did at Laby meet-ups once, after we Dreamed it. Not much chance Net could know to fake that.

BestBoy: So it's over? Are we *sure* they're dead? They going to bring back the bodies? Have they figured out who they are?

Hermes: Well, we aren't sure about anything. What they're saying is that a robocraft picked up one cell sending a very weak signal. So distorted it was pretty much unreadable. That part might be true. Radiation might've cut the other links.

BestBoy: What if they're lying? I haven't gone as deep into this thing as you two, but...

TruBlue: There should have been 8 at Calona. Everybody but one reported in after the abort. We know for sure one of the eight never got to Calona. We know who most of the others there might be, but how would Net know? The really ugly thing is, not only did the Action fail, but this image of their bodies is being obscenely *used* right now, flashed all over the

world. To keep people in line. *See what'll happen if you try to outsmart the system?*

BestBoy: You said there was something else?

TruBlue: Word came in from a Laby who transported some Locals— one supposed to be at Calona, one not—they broke the girl out of MedArt Containment.

BestBoy: *Girl!* What in hell was a girl doing there?!

TruBlue: We don't know why they did that. Must have had one hell of a good reason. But if you really look at the bodies here, you don't see a girl, do you? One guess is she died. And they buried her.

Hermes: Another thing: The woman who went missing, Laby name's Titania. She never made it as far as the first checkpoint at Silver Canyon. Never called in.

BestBoy: So the 10th is the girl? *She* have a code name?

Hermes: TruBlue's calling her *Oberon's Daughter*.

Best Boy: What was she doing in Containment, anyway?

TruBlue: We don't know, yet. But that's another reason we think she might have died. Before the others.

BestBoy: Can't we get more out of this transport dude?

TruBlue: Somebody clamped him right after we talked to him. All we know is he drove the girl, and the two who napped her, right up to Calona.

BestBoy: Did you know any of them? Up close, I mean?

Hermes: Moon. I knew him, for sure. That was his Laby moniker. One of Fish Wives.

TruBlue: And Oberon's out there. The guy who put me through a grill, awhile back. Incredible what he could pick up from the sound of your voice, the way you move...

Hermes: Yeah, yeah, he was the one passed me, too!

BestBoy: Oh, hey. Wait a minute. We're talking about the blind guy, right?

TruBlue: Right. Titania and him? We're not sure what they were to each other... but... they were married once.

BestBoy: This is a disaster. Still can't believe it. I heard about Riker. Is it true there's going to be a massive protest?

TruBlue: Yeah. Unfortunately there's also a political prison camp set up in the middle of downtown— Sarsten and Melkorn to be exact. Ready to go...

BestBoy: Prison camp!?

TruBlue: In some parts of Afrasia where I grew up, just Dreaming can get you inside, let alone an Action. We've been luckier than most SYNC territories. HM's playing catch-up here in Tri-Am.

Hermes: We're going out there to Riker. Tonight. Blue and me. Want to come?

BestBoy: Scares the shit out of me. (Laughter) But absolutely. Count me in.

Water Stories IV

Jojo

I'm fluxed, flummoxed, blank-brained, staring with my empty mind, into bedrock below us, willing myself to see and hear water, touch water under the ground...

Nothing:

Beside me, Natalie shakes drops onto her wrist and licks them off. Shakes a few more and some of them hit my arm. Under the moan of wind, the girl is humming. Or is it Cottonwood? I look at the drops on my arm. In one of them, a spark of fire... I realize the story I've never told and swore I never would, is the one I have to tell.

"Hauling water was my job from the time I could handle a bucket back up from the spring. A lot of the year that water hid underground. I'd sing there sometimes where water came out of the ground, silly camp songs, or ones I made up. The start of my "lost calling" as a diva, you could say...

"Our burros were runaways, too. Some illegal mining operation had gone broke, turned their animals loose in the desert to die. But burros knew scrubland and didn't need coddling, 'Even after those miners, they still like the company of humans', my mother said, 'That's why they let us catch them.' Two of the first batch brought into camp, Casper and Dutchess, they found our lower spring for us, it kept us going when the high one went

dry. A seep in hard sand was all it was, but the burros smelled it and nothing could stop them from getting at it once they did.

“We dug salvaged pipe into the ground, lined the seep-edge with rocks. Called it Ghost Spring after my mother said the seep reminded her of something she’d seen once in her life—a mineral pattern, a *flower* made of sparkling gypsum—*ghost flower*. Being ghosts ourselves, the name stuck.

“I told my mother flat out I was gonna go to the city with her. *No you don’t*, Josephine, she said, and got Naxos to keep me from trailing her on my burro by roping poor Casper in a dead-end canyon. That’s when a taste for running the shadows got into me. I did it without a burro, kept my head down, brought my own water. Told Nax I was lizard hunting, which made him stupid happy, cuz I was so good at it, and lizzy’s prime-cut when you rarely taste meat. I headed in the direction away from the one mother always took.

“Got away with it, bringing back water jugs and rope, but secretly I was glad when she slapped my head for lying. Because after that, we went together, every time, me on Casper, her on Dutchess. Ghost-women on ghost-burros...

“We left the burros at a friendly rancher’s, and walked in. Lots of odd jobs for ghosts— illegals of every stripe— businesses eager to pay less for off-cell cut work, the dirty stuff like sifting trash pits. But it fed us, kept us alive, and outside the system.

“Then Ma got sick and... I had to go out alone, take more risks. Mostly I was lucky, nothing worse than a sprain and a bloody nose, fighting with some kid over scraps. Ma kept getting weaker, her skin too hot. One day she stopped eating.

Long silence.

“The night she died, I bawled so hard and so long I thought I couldn’t cry any more, no matter what happened.

“I don’t know how many nights after that, I dreamed some traveling show-makers asked me to come along on the road, to sing with them, and I did. Buildings in every town, blown to pieces, scattered. But it was peaceful. We walked and we sang, we made people smile, even though the world was ending...

“When the dream ended so did the peace. I left Casper, left everything, begged a job at The Depot, and a place to sleep.

“There was a man came by to pick up e-trash for reclam. When I was on shift there by my lonesome, I’d watch him sort. And I saw by the way he moved, he was blind.

“Once, he stopped sorting, told me his name, asked mine. He stuck out his hand and somehow I felt he saw everything about me, saw I was hungry and scared. Saw I wasn’t wearing. That I was on the run, always had been. Maybe always would be.

“But I just said, ‘Good to know you, Budd’.

“After that, he always brought me something—a walnut, a liter of water, half a tab of C— and we talked. He was patient with me, like he had nothing else on his mind, while I fidgeted, glanced over my shoulder.

“One day, I found something — nothing to most people, but to me rare as my mother’s rock rose. A weedy white flower a few meters from the yard.

“Didn’t plan what I did. When I saw Budd next, he told me how he missed the green ones, *more every day*. I tapped the white flower against his cheek. He was startled but he knew right away what it was. And he smiled a smile like I’d given him a taste of water straight from the ground. Then he told me a Dream. About a desert camp, learning to douse for water, for lost things of every kind. ‘Whenever we found water,’ he said, ‘we passed it around. We were strangers and we were family. Keeping each other free.’”

“A kind of hum started inside me. And for the first time since my mother died, I sang: *We were strangers,/ we were family/ keeping each other free*. There *are* others, he told me when I stopped. Did I want to meet them? I knew the rest of my life depended on how I answered. He gave me time. All the time I needed. Twirled that flower. I watched it spin and my mind turned to the spring that gave me my voice. To Caspar and Duchess who could live without human care or company. But mysteriously preferred it, however long it lasted, however it turned out. Could I do that? Let myself be caught?

“‘Any room for a runaway?’ I said. And just like that, I became a Dreamer.”

I take a breath, catch Moon looking at me. He winks. Surprise and pleasure like a stroke of lightning. Beside him Rena’s rocking side to side. Natalie touches my shoulder and I lie back, one drop of water still cool on my arm. And I see. Who got us here, doing what we’re doing now.

Natalie

“One time I was thirsty. So thirsty I didn't care if I drank that smelly water they gave me when I was sick.”

Jojo watches me. I hear my own voice like I'm her, not only myself. Like I'm everybody and myself, too. My voice, not sick or afraid or unhappy. I don't need anything but to be alive. Together.

“Deena brought me a cup of water and it tasted...blue. *I'm drinking sky*, my brain told me every time I swallowed it. I told Deena that, too, and she laughed, and she said, *Are you surprised, Natalie?* And I said yes because water used to taste sour. Because one of the things it's made of is really really sour. I used to taste water that way. But now it tastes quiet. Like it's all by itself. *Hydrogen*, Deena told me, *is the opposite of oxygen—opposites attract*, she said—*hydrogen and oxygen hold hands with each other whenever they can and whirl each other around. Dancing each other. And their child is water.* I still like to say it back to myself. ***And their child is water.***

“Deena said, *Natalie, people can't taste oxygen or hydrogen, either*, and I said, *why not?* She never would answer me that.

“Water tastes so good to me now.” I lick a drop from the back of my hand. “In this other drop, I see something—a girl swimming up from the bottom of a pool or a river, don't know how deep, and she's leaping, water streaming behind her, a stream longer than her body. She's naked and happy. She belongs to Water. Always has and always will.

“Rena, remember when I told you I didn’t know if I had any mother?” I push hair out of my eyes. “Everybody telling about water-snakes and water in our eyes and water with the sky in it—that’s how I figured it out.”

I lick the last drop off my wrist. “*Everything*... is water’s child.”

~

Jojo

I can’t believe how sharp a happiness floods me, listening to Natalie. And when Budd pulls out his harmonica— untouched since they all fell apart —and blows a strange harmony with Natalie’s hum. With the wind. Her voice and his notes and wind inside each other. Inside all of us. Everything in me yearns to sing, to join the song.

But as soon as longing tries be sound, it leaves me.

Protest

LJ

They were the ones. At Castle Station, certainty gripped her as soon as she saw them. The ones who might believe she was whatever they wanted her to be.

Martina and Randy looked wary as she approached — but she was right about her hunch that they were a couple, and that couples would be easier to attach herself to. Martina was very pregnant, in fact, about to pop. Randy, presumably, the father. Made her uneasy the way the woman kept running her hands over her belly. Was it pride?

In exchange for theirs, she gave them a fake name, *Lilly*. “Not sure where I’m going, is there a place I can make safe connections?” They gave her blank looks.

Finally she came out with the only real question on her mind. “How can I make contact with...? She raised her sleeve, let them see she was wearing because she’d make a juicier catch for them, wouldn’t she? “I’m still wired but ...I want to make a move...away from that, know what I mean? I just don’t know who to trust.”

Martina eyed her, appalled at her boldness, maybe, but interested. “We might be able to help, what are you looking for exactly?” said Randy.

She got a bit looser, started throwing *ant slang*: Said she was in need of refuge, on the run from HM fascists and Drop Boxes and the rest. As she spoke, she turned and spotted a Gaard who

might have been watching her, hard to tell what was under those helmets. “*And Gaards,*” she added. But she was babbling, losing them, making Randy and Martina jumpier by the instant. Her life could end up depending on these two. Then, an idea struck her.

She waved them into a corridor where they couldn't be seen and offered up her prize. Earlier she'd wrapped the thing in a scarf and shoved it into her bag. Now she unwound the shining globe and showed them how it worked, giving them her version of Curt's rap. “Like a magic mirror into your mind.”

Martina bit right away, reached out and took it into her hands. “Oh. It's incredible.” She tipped it this way and that, her gaze penetrating the layers. She was caught, the way LJ had been.

Randy clamped his hand on Martina's arm, but she pulled away. “Where did you get this?” he asked, unsmiling, drilling LJ with unfriendly eyes.

“My...my sister gave it to me. Not sure where she picked it up, she got scared, didn't want to risk carrying it around any more. It's mine now.”

Martina's face lost its grey exhausted light as she turned the glass. Randy, less stunned, but impressed, backed down. When LJ insisted they take the globe, nervously they agreed.

They were a little warmer after that. Though they kept insisting they couldn't keep such a thing themselves, would hand it over to somebody named Noreen.

“Can I come with you?” she asked.

They looked at each other. Randy said, “You okay giving up the cell?”

Curt, in spite of himself, had finally done her a major favor. That glamorous globe, that contraband, had opened a tunnel into an ant nest.

~

Night was falling over Carlos Hayden as she and Martina and Randy walked east. She wasn't sure at first where they were headed, surprised at the glow in the clouds ahead. Riker Pavilion, lit up. Not stadium lights. A dimmer, wavering illumination. "What's going on?" she addressed their backs. They did not answer.

Once they got to the cell-check at the kiosk, Martina told her, "Everybody here's agreed to get rid of the shackles. You'll hear the whole story later, but among other things, it'll slow down Hydro figuring out who we are. And...in your case, it's a kind of proof, you know? Shows you're willing to cut ties with the system, go all in." Martina watched LJ click her cell off and hand it to the kid in charge, who dropped it into a box with hundreds of others.

Inside, speechless at what she saw, she drifted away from Martina and Randy and found herself in a sea of faces, outlander costumes, homemade music. Silastic bottle drums and homemade violins. PVC flutes. Floating flower-kites lit from inside, tethered to half-dressed girls' bare wrists. People wrapped in scarves and sheets and ragged cast offs, bodies streaked with violet, red, gold, black. Packs of children. A juggler, an acrobat dressed up as a rat. Even a few flesh-and-blood dogs! She crouched down to one of the smaller ones and touched his stiff fur. Read the tag on his collar— *Rex Bona Fides*. She was as awed by this animal as Martina and Randy had been by Curt's otherworldly paperweight. Scratching his ragamuffin chin, she wondered how on earth had they kept him hidden from Hygiene? How did they feed him?

She turned in a circle, taking everything in. At the center of the crowd, something whopped up in flames—a huge cloth figure of a man dressed like an HM exec. Pop-eyed, rapacious

grin. Huge red erection. His pockets spilled green and silver paper. She picked up one of the bills swirling at her feet. *In HM we Trust! Mother Nature is a Dreemer and a Slut!*

She stepped closer to the burning man, let the scrap flutter into the fire. Watched it curl and blacken.

A woman in net stockings and an old fashioned swimsuit, smiled and put out her hand. "I'm Joan," she shouted over the roar of voices.

LJ hesitated. "Lilly," she said. "Lilly James." The name she'd given Martina and Randy at Castle Station. It would be hers with everyone from now on.

~

LJ spotted Martina's thin arms and huge belly. Martina's smile at seeing her seemed genuine, "I need to sit," she said, holding her belly like a heavy basket of fruit she was afraid of dropping.

They got down onto the bare ground beside the food tent, Randy nowhere in sight. Rex Bona Fides came trotting up, sniffing for a handout. LJ gave him a few bits of cheeze and he sat politely licking his snout. They watched a group at the back of the stadium where some of the benches had been ripped out. "Strategy meeting," Martina said, tilting her head in that direction, "Randy's in. I'm too exhausted."

Martina offered her half a soyfroot bar but LJ wouldn't take it, "You look like you need that more than I do." Bona Fides lunged for it. Martina shoved it into her pak, pushed him away.

LJ watched him scamper off. Ridiculous—worrying about a dog. Was she actually concerned for the woman's condition? Too thin. Too pregnant. *Pregnant*, she knew absolutely nothing about. Were there doctors? Or was birth a do-it-yourself project?

Suddenly all the dogs, including Rex, let loose a frenzy of barks and howls. LJ reached out a hand to soothe him, and he snapped around, nipping her. She grabbed her wrist and stared at her throbbing finger. Oh, she was a fool! Getting attached to a dog and a pregnant ant. How long til HM busted in and threw them into a holding yard at Sarsten? Without a cell to track, that would slow things, but eventually they'd do it, they'd realize her initials did *not* stand for Lilly James. She'd get a transfer to one of the *special blocks* for Security turn-tails.

Unless she could make a case for doubling? Could she invent something sexy enough to feed HM, juicy enough they'd be happy to believe her?

~

Hours later when she'd fallen into a doze, all the dogs started up again. Then eerily, every one of them stopped barking.

A rumbling screech shook the ground, making her jump. Martina grabbed her and they both, like everybody else, looked wildly around. She did not shake the woman off—Martina's frightened face stopped the impulse to move away on her own.

Shouts were coming from the direction of the cell-check entrance outside the stadium. At first, she couldn't understand what they were saying. Then their words came clear. "Grid's down! The whole city!"

A uniform dimness surrounded them. A soft, near-darkness broken only by a solarray, waxlights, a few small battery lamps. She wished she could get a look at streets and buildings with the city gone black. When had it ever been dark? Always when a grid sector went down, there were backups and re-routes. But this time... *the city*. And how far beyond that?

Sabotage. Some underground group must have planned the blackout. Couldn't be long before HM swept in and dragged them off...

Randy ran up to them. "Corey says it's true, everything's down or on its way down! Hit the main city first and kept right on going. He was on shift at MedArt when it blew there —says the place's deserted. Except for clean-up, he was in on that. They found...a kid in The Container— that's what he called it. The Container. Where they put the sickest ones. A woman was in there with him. Found the guy in charge of the place, too, I think...in bad condition. Some others. Had to go in with Haz gear to get them out. Something about a virus. Not sure. Shook Corey up bad..."

LJ's belly lurched. "How could power going out kill them?"

"Didn't. There was an explosion." Randy looked at her. "Corey says the woman and the kid, they were definitely..."

"The woman?" LJ said in a small voice. "Did you get a name?" But even as she asked, she knew, and a wall in her chest caved in. To keep from visibly shaking, she hugged herself, followed Martina and Randy to the kiosk.

Dream Catcher

Crickcrack we call it, bits of metal seamed together. Here, along the seams, the sweat and dirt and suffering of a thousand men before me in this solitary cell. Nine by nine by eleven. Slit of a window where I catch a little light coming and watch it go. No sun no moon no stars. No company. Because *Demeke*, that's me, he is so very dangerous.

They don't call me by my name, they call me Dream Catcher. *Catcher got caught*. A good joke. Whatever they pump into my veins—until it kills this body—does not wish to work on Demeke for long. Dreaming keeps on. Who would know when I'm down here in The Hole? But when the dose knocks me out and I'm in a coma up on the tier, sleeping it off in a med-cage, I tell whoever will listen. Try to get their spirit back. Though some don't want that. Keepers are the hardest.

“What we got solitary *for* is crazy old sluts like you,” Claude the Keep says, and slams the steel on me. Other times, that same empty-eyed, big-bellied man turns around, brings me scrawls on strips of rag. One time, in Amharic, my father's language. I never knew that language except to look at. Whatever tongue, I savor every mark. *The mind walks more ways than the legs*.

Mostly I don't know who they're from. Nameless shadows up on the tier. I guess who every note belongs to before I drown it in the piss bucket. Good place for hiding treasures!

Yesterday Claude showed me the extra dose of Special coming to me. My eyes watered when I saw how much. Scared this time it would do its work. Don't know why they don't strangle me dead. Why they're so afraid of the Dreams of an old man. Old man born in the worn-out hills of Ethiopia. Longing for the country he knew when he was too young to understand he was losing it.

That land some whites say, is nothing but a crack in the ground where some not-yet-humans climbed up from the dirt and spread themselves over Earth. Might be the one thing they got right. Our stories say that, too. Say it another way. But the people who know how it used to be, they are gone now. Bush gone too, torched for rows of maize and soy. Water stolen out of children's mouths to grow crops. Nothing they won't do.

When I saw the big dose coming, I said to myself, Demeke, this time Dreaming will surely fly from your body...

Last night all the block lights went out and they didn't bring us dinner. The tier came apart. Yelling. Blows. Nobody thought to come down here. I slept a long time. Dreamed a young boy wandering. Hunting water. His people and the animals, every one of them, thirsty.

When the boy walks, he holds his head high, but he is not arrogant, not hard, he is like a cloud roaming among clouds, knowing where he belongs.

I open my eyes, clouds still in my body. I see the boy, but he's changing, turning into that animal Whites call Grevy's zebra. All of this in a prison cell built of krickkrack.

The boy-zebra stands facing me, rump in the corner under the window. I know his exact kind well, by the length of his ears, the whiskers on his lips. By the close-set stripes over his pelt,

and most of all, by the *missing* stripes at the root of his tail and underneath his belly.

Sunlight falls across the black and white pelt that gave him his Black African name. *Iba*. Once an innocent name meaning only *zebra*. Now it's a slur. *Child of a vulgar union—Sub-Saharan with Caucasian*. *Iba* is meant to wound.

His proud head is raised. He himself is not wounded, he is strong. But his muzzle is dusty, I know he's longing for water. Two buckets in this cell. One for drinking, one for pissing. I offer him the last of my good water. He accepts. Drinks.

I know *Iba* well. Or I should say, the boy I once was knew him that way. Skinny child loping after *Iba*'s kind, in the happiness of running together. At that time there were many, so many. In Ethiopia. Kenya. Somalia, Djibouta, Sudan. All that land they call now East Afrasia.

Iba. After he drinks, his chin comes up dribbling. He looks at me with the sad night-eyes of a spirit. He speaks. I don't hear with him my ears, but in my chest, where words don't lie.

What he says to me is, ***Demeke, you are entirely free.***

Part Twelve

She is now...a young girl...

*free spirit who will inhabit the body of a
new woman...*

the highest intelligence in the freest body.

Ariadne via Isadora Duncan

For a long time, a sea of cold mist and wind and metal. While we were sleeping, the first-element you call hydrogen, water-giver, merged with the element you call oxygen, quickener.

The child of this union is Water, known to us first by the sound of constant joining and re-joining, the dance of first-forms.

Magnetic currents braid and unbraid, curve away and return. On this current we are carried, seeds of water and fire. When we enter The River, Dreaming returns.

Earth is the-rock- that- remembers water. Stone basin where water gathers and sings, rises and falls again...

When a song is forgotten, it must be learned from what still remembers.

One day the water of tears and blood, the rock and the wind of bone, the will of fire, they remember.

And the song sings itself again.

Natalie Alone II

When night goes black, voices come out of the sky. When everybody lies down and shuts their eyes, I hear them— voices inside other voices. Can't count them.

We have no voice of our own, like wind we take sound from what we travel through.

Witchweed talks to me the way water talks in stones and sand. Stones with spirals that grow from wind and starlight and don't know how to get back where they came from.

Tonight I want to keep walking and walking and never stop until I come to the mountains. Not where the sun comes up, or where it goes down, but there, the mountain where it goes dark first at the end of the day.

I want to find water. To find Teri. It's not time yet. I know that.

A long time ago, water fell out of the sky and ran through the sand drawing a river. That's what Jojo and Rena and everyone tells me. I want to see for myself. Want to see how to change fire into food the way plants do. How to hear under words, the quiet that can bring us together...

Water danced here when rain fell. I hear water breathing in this place dry so long.

At the Clinic they taught me names for things I didn't remember— leaves, wind, mountains. Brian said the food I ate was made of money. Deena said he was wrong, food was made

of dirt. I didn't understand. Until I saw witchweed. Sand growing roots, water inside branches making animal shapes and people-shapes and shapes I don't know yet.

We have no ears, no eyes, we know things all at once.

A new kind of ant lives here. I saw her this morning. She isn't like the others. Likes to stay by herself on a thistle branch. More legs and more eyes than the other kind. Her nest is soft. She breathed it out of her body.

Saw a lizard without legs at all, going fast as water over the sand. I want to show the others, the way they show things to me—but not yet. They're afraid of air without walls. Afraid of the shadow of fire.

***When every thread touches all others, the being is complete.
What remains is to create another.***

I look at the sun and threads come down like the thistle ant's nest, and I'm not sad anymore, not even for the sad things.

There was a bird this morning. Standing on the ground not far away. Her head and her wings hung down. She was so thirsty. I ran back for water. But when I looked for her, she was gone.

The sun sparks water with colors. I drink the colors, cool in my throat. I want to be like the sun in water. Wind and sand. Spirals and stone. Dust and clouds and mountains. Stars.

But I don't know how.

So quiet here. Quiet enough to hear water under the ground.

How can water swim up inside us from so far down? What makes water breathe clouds in the air?

How do we ever find the start of things?

Ceremony

Natalie, Jojo, Budd, Lonnie, Rena, Lagarto, Blaise, Mala

The girl moves the Circle into the desert. We follow her. Carry groundcloths and supplies, not asking why.

We don't speak. Movement and stillness the same inside us now as we walk over sand hills, around boulders—always in sight and sound of each other.

~

Camped in the desert, we come back to the yard for what we need for the Design. We sort through rubble, take what pulls our hands and senses— pixels of fuse-glass that wink at us, coils of copper, gun shells like long beads, fragments of this ruined place.

One of us braids copper like strands of hair. One ties thistle into bunches, wraps the ends with rags.

One shapes charred wood into creatures they almost resemble.

One walks hands over what can be reached, testing for smoothness, for weight and texture.

These treasures we heap at the edge of the yard. We keep on for hours, stopping only for sips of water, don't ask why we do this, why we quit just before dusk.

~

Near the place the girl chose, we will live together now. One of us hammers a ring-spike into the hard ground, knots a length of rope through a metal eye. The girl ties the head of the rope to a sharpened stick almost as tall as she is. She uncoils the rope, pulls it taut. With the tip of the rope-anchored stick, she draws a Circle in the dirt.

She steps into the center. Three times she inscribes a spiral, winding it out and out inside the Circle. Three times she deepens it...

~

Along the arms of the spiral, we arrange and rearrange what we've found and what we've made. Fuse-glass, blue cat's-eye, wristcell, paint box, glasses, wire woven into a spider's web. We add, we take away, follow what the Design asks of us.

The girl draws out the tail of the spiral until it breaks free of the Circle... and travels away from us. Away from the testing ground. Toward the mountains.

Only a little light is left in the sky, we are delirious with exhaustion, thirst, hunger and— joy. The joy of what we've made together.

~

We share the last of our food—except for the girl who does not eat—a few swallows of water.

We have no need to speak. We understand through our hands and our bodies. We know, we will know, what to do. Our minds are free. Wide open. This is why She brought us here.

~

The wind is rising.

We kneel, curl onto our sides, each of us fitting into one of the unfinished places in the Design. The ninth space we leave empty for the one who is missing.

Our bodies like petals of a flower, heads near the center, the tenth space. Here, the girl fits perfectly.

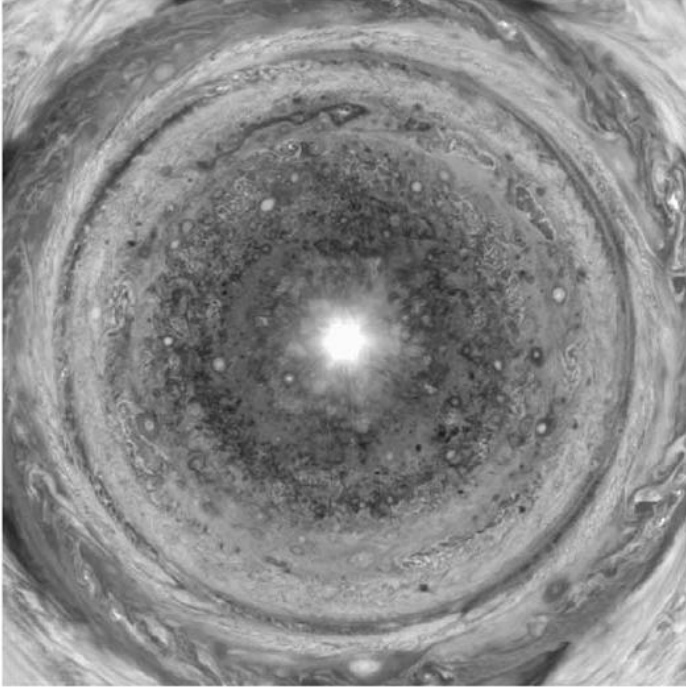
We are all Inside now.

~

Something cool as the shadow of a cloud passes over us.

Thunder shakes the ground, the sky reddens, roiling bright, too bright to open our eyes.

After awhile, drops begin to fall...



The Round

Dawn noon dusk dark. Our time is slower than your quick-silver time.

Wind shifts, twigs stretch. Branches bow and twist, without resistance.

Light-echoes back from earth. From rock, scale, eye.

We are green blue green grey gold our nets strong and bitter with resin. Tender shoots at the tip of young twigs good to eat.

Thistle moth glues her minute eggs. The little worm in his armor, his rolled-up leafcase, hollows stem after stem. Curls there. Stays a long time.

Flowers without petals wrap the stalk. Flare and shrivel to fists. A few drops of water, and the seed stirs— quicker than a sun-shadow coming and going..

Wind tears us loose, one world tumbles away into another.

Alkali flats or testing grounds, when rain falls, seeds burst. Root delves.

With his sleepless mouth the worm chews on and on. His frass sifts down and feeds the root.

When rain falls, fire remembers water. Radiance swims through realms you call darkness.

Returning

Older than firstborn stars. Younger than just-laid egg of tumbleweed moth.

Rock. Tooth. Bone. Shell. Carved by wind and water, gouged by root and tongue, heat and freeze and storm...

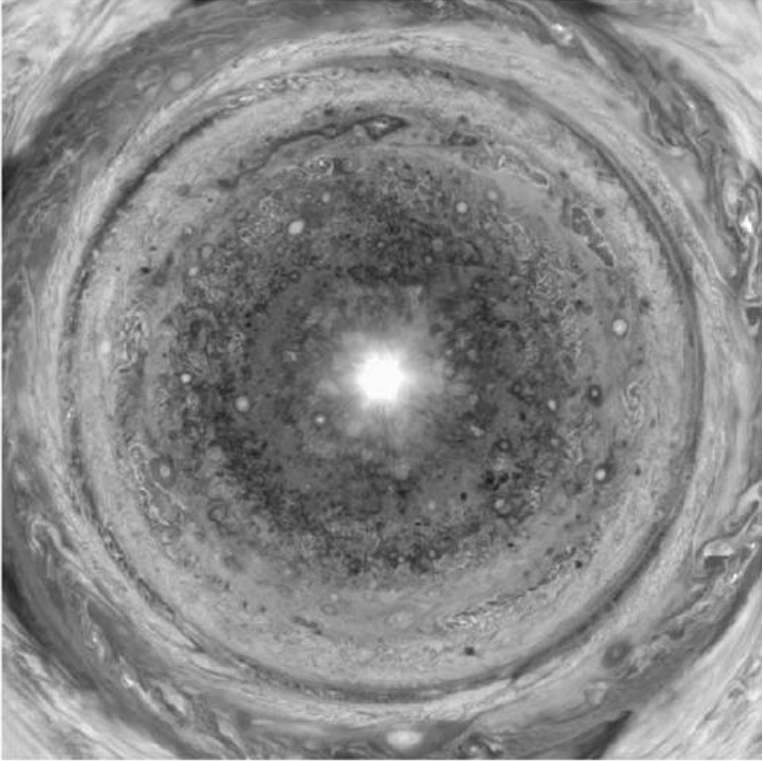
Daylight, dancers dance. Night, they rest.

Split the frame and the crack fans along lines of stress. Lines of weakness, lines of fear.

Forms slide away. Swallowed. Vanished.

Light, Dark, Light, Dark

Another round, another eternity beginning...



Echo

*...each drop a thread,
thread crossing thread...*

Desert again. As it's always been if you have patience enough to know it. Not dawn, not yet morning. Darkness lightening into day.

Desert transformed. When we've drunk our fill. *Rain. Already leaving, the echo lingering.* .

Earth and sky come to a standstill. Mist, freshness after storm. Like the tender clarity after weeping.

Dustless air, we fill our lungs with it, so full we're afraid they'll burst. When breath comes to its peak and we can't breathe in any deeper, some membrane softly gives, and we go right on breathing past the end...lungs, air, space, light.

No boundaries anywhere.

~

When morning comes, we'll forget everything we understood in the storm. Enveloped. Traveling underground, rising and falling...

What we know is like the fairy shrimp in a desert pool when the pool dries up.

What we know will sleep through months of skies turning day to night, til one morning a cloud splits, drops fall...here and there, then gathering, growing stronger, strong enough to tumble down in torrents...

Rain fills the rock-pool. Fairy shrimp whirr to life again, remembering everything—as if not a fraction of an instant has gone by.

Her Changeling Child

Budd

A hum rushes through him the way it did when Dreaming first started. He listens the way he's listened all his life. For a voice out of a cloud? Blakean angel?

If angels did exist, they'd be mute. *Porque, Mi'jo? Because*, he answered her, *they have no lungs, Ma, no need of breathing*:

Because for speaking and for singing, breath is everything.

~

A single mind occupying a number of people. Not perfectly, but in synchrony. Whose words? Not Ariadne. PKD. Philip K. Dick. Not from the novels, from the man's private journals, what he hoped and feared and imagined. Dreamed? Maybe She spoke to him? If She did, he would have listened— *A single mind*— would have written what he heard. For us. We who would meet that voice a hundred years later, face to face. On burned ground.

A single mind occupying a number of people. He would tease Teri with that quote whenever she proposed her *flowering weaver* theories, *threads pulling through our minds*— he'd counter *I just hope we aren't the puppets* at the end of those beautiful strings! Teri would smile and say, *Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms.* Titania soothing Oberon.

Past or future?

A little further on in Mid-summer, after *Sleep thou* comes this— *I then did ask of her, her changeling child.*

No past, no future. One thing and one thing only. *She with us and you, my love, with me.*

Part Thirteen

The Cave

“You with us?” A woman's voice, pitched low. Accent familiar. Vowels slippery, syllables drawn out. “Ah.”

Body heavy. Right arm numb, resting limp across her chest. She strained against the drag of deep bruising pain in bone and tissue, throwing her back, panting, head full of foam. Her good arm reached for the woman's wrist. *No cell.*

Darkness all around. Darkness above, pierced with lights. *Starry welkin.*

“We like it dim. Saves the brights for when we really need them. Cousins like it this way, too.” A low, throaty amusement.

“Who are...”

“Alea, they call me.” A rustle of clothing.

Heat of a palm hovering, almost touching her. Cheek, throat, chest, belly, feet. She lifted her eyes to the floating lights, their patterns almost recognized.

“Coolights, we say. *Sonhiya*. Anchored in the rock up there. Some creatures make light in their cells, no heat to it at all. No waste. At first you'll miss the colors left out. But you turn fond after awhile. Kema's pleasure was to arrange them like old Earth constellations.”

“Where?”

Alea's voice thick in her throat. "You've been injured. Badly. Won't remember much til you're stronger. We've got the pain down. But you ..." The woman yawned luxuriantly.

She could not give herself over to the woman's assurances. But was eased by the sound of the word *heal*. By that yawn.

~

She jerked awake, remembering a question. "Who's Kema?" Speaking drained her.

"*Kin*. Sister or Brother, you'd say..."

She tried to get a fix on the woman's face as she spoke with such certainty. While what she said came out in confusing phrases. Translating one language into another? Her eyes watered and stung, closed against her will. "Why *here*?"

"Hold on, Teresa, you'll wrench yourself into a fright. All you want t' know an likely more will come soon enough. Now it's bones and blood you need to listen to." Alea touched her forehead. "You don't believe in anything. That's the way of it. After what happened to you. Give it time and you'll see which things seem and which things are. Or never were..."

Teresa. Nobody called her that. Not since she was a child. Alea's lilt an echo of her mother and father's language held onto inside family. In their flesh. Outside, they didn't dare speak anything but One English. But inside, they tried never to banish the old rhythms. Because they loved them. Even Brendan her brother *took on the music*, as their mother said. Wore it like a fragrance. Took it on, even as *she* Teri got rid of it. Why? Can't remember. Why was she was eager to trade away lilt for the click of English? So quick to lose a tongue...

The plip of water. Water falling into water.

Thirsty. Her lips stuck to her cheeks and her teeth when she tried and couldn't speak. A jar came into her good hand. Her left hand. Even her good one, weak. The other throbbing, useless. She didn't tip the cup to her lips. She'd rest first.

When the jar came, a story came with it—a girl in a castle without light. Needs magically met by unseen beings, whispering spirits or animals, coming and going. Friend or enemy, she couldn't tell. Couldn't remember how the tale unwound. Except, in the end it went badly. Or did it? Stories she loved went wrong. Heroines drowned themselves. Left home, got lost, left behind, exiled. The heroine is abandoned after she gives the hero a luminous thread that leads him out of the Maze, saves his life. They sail away, he maroons her on an island, choosing his warrior-life. Or she marries the god of wild celebrations and they make their home on the island. Until their beloved forest is cut down. To build a fleet of warships, build a fiery city—faeries banished underground. Almost nobody remembers them, forests or faeries. Til they start showing up in Dreams. She always suspected the King was the one who locked the Queen Mother in with her poor bull-child, at the center of the Maze. Would Ariadne find a way to free her brother, let him go into the open where he belonged?

She sipped from the jar in her hands, and gagged, her face contorting. *Not water!*

“You need to drink it,” Alea said.

Teri pushed the jar away.

And back it came. “It'll bring you sleep. You need that more than anything. Maybe you'll find them there. The ones who lost you, the ones you belong to...”

The ones she belonged to. What kind of sleep was that?

Everything Alea said, too many meanings. She twisted away from the cup, her lips shut tight.

The jar insisted, coming at her from another angle. “Want to know what’s in it, do you?” Alea said.

She nodded.

Alea held the cup to her own face, breathed it in. “*Weeds* you call them. Roots, bark, leaves. Stronger than you are. Let them in and they’ll do their work...” Alea leaned close, smelling of the brew.

With a shock, she realized the woman was cradling the back of her head. *Had been all this time.* How had she missed it?

“Who are you? I need to *see*...”

“Do you?” Alea’s hand took hold of her fingers. “Go ahead, look. An if you find out who I am, please tell.” A laugh.

She tried to focus. Eyes, black, deep-set. Graceful mouth. Dark skin, dark hair streaked copper and grey, cropped close to her skull. Except for a coil of braid above the ear.

She slid her hand free of the woman’s and images knifed through her. She yelped, tried to rise and collapsed. *Snowy’s jacket coming down on her.* A suffocating weight. She fought it away. *Snowy.* His hideous story going on and on. His bashed skull bleeding into sand where she left him. *Budd. Natalie. Jojo. Calona.* The roar of pain shook her violently. Grief in every direction, all the way back to ma and da, Department of Hygiene carrying them off on stretchers, she and her brother pleading to follow them to the ward, DH turning them down time after time. Later, hiding out from Hygiene when Brendan refused their pills, nursing him herself, watching him melt away.

When Brendan turned into Budd, she began to sob.

"I'll put my hand on your forehead, *nimpiya*, will I?" When Alea touched her the images stopped. The wild pain of them gone. "Don't want to wrench those cracked ribs of yours, we'll have to start all over. Remember what you need to. But *slow*."

"You found me?" Tears slid from her eyes.

"One of us, yes. Out hunting *yatampi*—checking the well-channels, cisterns in the willow seep. *Yatampi*? Child of the bitter one, it means. Bitterest plant of all it might be, but not to look at, beautiful in its form. Bitterness is the taste of its power. One of six in this cup— including a cousin..."

"Cousins?" Waiting for an answer that didn't come, her will to resist collapsed. She gave in, choked the liquid down.

"You're going to hear us call about every creature there is *cousin* from time to time. Right now, the ones I mean are silky-cap and dewclaw."

"I don't..."

"I'll tell you about *Ingu*, shall I? First thing is —when there's nothing to eat because of the poisons, there's *Ingu*. Ones that love their own dark light. Silky-cap, Dewclaw — two clans. *Mushrooms*, you people say. Happy on dung and witchweed dust, once we got the spawning of them right, and how to keep out rot. The mothers showed us more after that..."

"Dreams?"

"Through our hands and senses. How to live in the harsh places. To make our life there. Some of us starved before we learned enough. How to cultivate *Ingu*... How to make soil for the light-eaters."

"*Ingu*," Teri tried the name in her mouth. "Who are you, really?"

“Not so easy to say. What you want is in the story I’m trying to tell. We came through a braid of times. Through soil and plants and all kinds of creatures.

“First strand was Africa. East. The seacoast. What you call Ethiopia and thereabouts. Those were the ones ate the dark-loving plants when they couldn't grow the flowering kinds.”

“Why not?”

“*Shappan*. Drought. That was the start of it. Ruined land, plantations drenched with GroTek. Lightning-farms, money crops, harvested quick for clockers. Clockers? That’s what we call them, the running-out-of-time ones. Some of us left for the mountains, others the desert. After a very long time, they—we—became the ones who listen ...”

“Listen?”

“To the mothers. To Ingu. What already knows how to thrive. Always something thriving, so we follow their ways. Plants that grow themselves and can’t be forced up to be sold. Fire turning water through its rhythms of too-much and not-enough. Rain slipping underground...

“After a time, we bubbled up, you could say, on the other side of the world. Mountain lands and desert lands. In Mexico. Some farther south. That’s what we call the second strand.

“Wherever we ran to, we joined with the runaways of that place. Welsh and Irish and African and more. Slaves by that name or other names, stolen for labor—the third strand. Maybe more than three, who knows? These we’re sure of...”

“How did they. You. Cross...?”

“The oceans?” Alea shook her head. “Too many stories about that! You don't need all these words.”

“I *do*,” Teri said. Her stomach finally settling, she was falling into a quiet need to hear Alea’s voice to go on and on.

“Nobody but the mothers know *all* the strands. In this desert, we have a name. *Ingudaii*. People-of-the-Mushroom.”

Silence. Alea began to hum, the sound passing through her, provoking more questions. *The mothers?*

First there was water. Pahpana. Water lit with fire. Warm light.

Alea’s song shook apart into tiny vibrating dots. Faded, grew stronger, resembling so many sounds it made no sense. The hum went on. Closer. More familiar. *Bees?* She opened her eyes to darting glints in the air. A Dream? “They’re not *gone?*”

“Starting up again. In a few places. One of those is Wild Buckwheat Wash. But she’s a brand new creature, this kind, she knows how to use the poisons, turns them into food, the way the cousins do.”

“In a cave...here?”

“We tend them other places, too. The bend of the cave they like best is down a ways, inside the roof-stone with a hole in it, where sky and sun comes in. And the moon some nights...”

“A new... species?”

“*Watsavi*, desert honeybee. Yes, a new kind. The hermit bee and the hiving bee came together to make her. The mothers drew a thread between them, you could say. The new one came when the others died. We heard them singing in a pocket canyon, in the flowering mesquite. Camped there and we talked, our kind and hers. They let us bring back a young queen and a few of her sisters, inside a mesquite pod like this one here, you see? Started a new colony. In the heart of this cave. They come and go as they please through the sky-rock in the big chamber. They make our cave-plants bear. Outside

ones, too. Light comes and, once in a while, rain. Rained last night while you were sleeping. Air's still damp, you feel it?"

"Last night?" *Where light comes. And rain.* Excitement was fading to exhaustion. "How could you hide so long...?"

"From The Gaardian State? Won't stand much longer. You know the meltdowns near SIRRUS Creek? The nuke-desal there? Clockers always run when things fall apart, leave the messes and what they call the wastelands to us. They're afraid of the desert! Clockers will stay in the cities... even now with everything down."

"Down?"

"Never mind. You rest."

"I need to..."

"Crawlers, they call us that name, because we hide in the Earth— stay out of their way long enough they come to believe they invented us. That we don't exist. Same as always ..."

Her eyes would not stay open.

"Caves like this, they take us in. Plateaus and high canyons, too, they've always been our refuge..."

Alea's voice penetrating her bones, her cells...

"We took the best of clocker-tech and shaped it to our own ways. Solarrays from '33 catch sunlight, save it— run what we need to keep going here. Solarrays outside, too, plain as rocks. Clockers walk right past them. No cells, no use for those, we've got radios, short-wave repeaters and things we put together from what they throw away. Instruments, musical and otherwise. Microscopes. Telescopes, some quite large, not here, though, up higher..." Alea's voice throbbed the air.

"We listened to water run down the needle of a cactus, saw how to run a current through metal, pull dew out of the air like

creatures do in every desert, specially with the sea rising, the coasts coming closer. Finns, we call them—filling the cisterns. Buried to stay cool. We don't need to take water from deep underground. . . .”

She had no words.

“Brew's working on you, isn't it? You were so close to gone. On your back in the sun. By the sweet-palms.” Alea drew a circle at her hairline.

Weed or root or fungus, she was grateful. Forced her eyes open, glanced up at the lights. Smiled. *Can you see her?* Natalie running. Opening her wings.

Like cool water, pleasure welled her veins and ran over. Alea's voice, Natalie's voice. A bright, immense peace.

~

She woke. Knew the sea-lights above her, their calming colors.

She belched. The brew stung her nose and throat, made her shudder like the dregs of rotting bean soup used to do when she and Brendan kept alive on it. Not poison. But hard to swallow. Or forget.

Now her eyes were saw more in the half darkness. Around the high bed where she lay, a room of stone. No mouth, no exit in sight. *Talalli?* Alea called the cave, *Talalli*. Maze of caverns inside a mountain— *Largo*. Teri thought she remembered hearing that name. And before that, Alea pronouncing the mountain's older name. Gone now.

Cool air soothed her, flowing in and out of her lungs without resistance.

Talalli. Desert caves named by those who sheltered in them. Burrows, hide-outs. Alea's people were no renegades. Cousins

to mushrooms. And the mothers? Threads of *Ariadne*? Alea's words like drops of water. Desert bees...

Above, the constellations had drifted left from where she remembered them. Like the dome of a planetarium. Didn't Alea say they were *anchored*? She wanted and didn't want, to know how this story would—eventually—go wrong.

She peered at storage structures crammed with what looked like light books. A library of them. On the left, a jumble of complicated, boxy machines like old fashioned radios. Next to them, something she did not like the looks of—racks of lidded trays pierced with holes, black tubing running between them...

Alea sat up. Teri could not decide how old she was. Maybe 40, maybe 60. "Good, good. You're stronger now." Alea said. "We'll give you something to fill that empty belly. Desert asparagus and silky-cap soup, easy to keep down."

"*Aspar*... You can't. In the desert?"

Alea grunted, rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Desert asparagus mated to blue scaled copperberry. Never mind. You're a woman has to taste before making up her mind." She laughed. "After soup, we'll give you a wash."

"That much water...?" Chilly in the cave, but Teri was sweating, salt on her lips.

"More than enough most days." Alea wiped Teri's forehead.

"Brew makes you sweat, that's one way it works. Here, swallow now—just water this time" Alea helped her drink. Hummed a moment. Fell silent.

"Ever see a waterwheel, Theresa ? Yes?" Excitement in her voice. For the first time. Contagious.

"Imagine...an over-ground aquifer. Bright, lit up. Arteries running into catches, climbing up the wheel, falling back,

circling stone basins, many levels and sizes, all connected... green with waterplants... and fish that..."

Teri shook her head, *no fish*.

"Enough." Alea tapped something on the wall. "After a wash, we'll take you further in where the brights are. And water gardens. The others are waiting to meet you."

Farther in? Others? Unease gripped her. She strained away from the platform, pain and dizziness brought her down like every other time. She lay panting. "Don't caves. Have exits?"

"Talalli goes deeper before it turns around. Some galleries big as canyons. The gardens, you'll see, so wide and bright you forget you're underground..."

Talalli goes deeper. Fear flushed through her.

"No need for alarm." Alea's hand calmed her. "Down the corridor, see that glow? The cave branches into galleries, each for different purposes. Like ants that tend their fungus groves, nurseries and middens and burial mounds..."

Burial grounds. A question growing all along came back to her. "You said *the mothers* show you things. Not in Dreams? Do they speak to you?"

Alea was silent. "You come to know the mothers, you don't talk much about them." Alea tapped the wall again. "I'll tell you about time, Theresa, shall I? And then, no more. It goes like this. We keep the Brights 10 hours on, 14 off. When we aren't working our gardens, we like to communicate with cousins who don't live the same and don't live near us. Those lights up there? They keep Earth time. for us."

Earth time. Earth. Syllables smooth as pebbles. They held her mind still.

~

A crow comes swooping toward her, lights down. A girl opens her arms like wings...

~

A wet rough cloth dribbles over her forehead, cheeks, belly, feet. Naked, her clothing gone. Arms wrap her in dry cloth. Alea sits her up like a child, helps her into a clean shirt, pours a few spoons of soup down her throat. Warm. Salty. Good.

~

Kema and Alea take hold of opposite ends of her stretcher. Kema at her feet, his slight body nothing like Alea's round form. But the rhythms of their speech alike. They wear identical loose tops and pants made of pieced-together geometric forms. The colors mesmerize, shimmering now green now blue-violet as they shift about.

She closes her eyes. *Natalie holds out a branch drenched in water, shakes it over her face like rain—rain!* As she reaches for the branch, she wakes. Natalie's black eyes fade into Alea's.

Traveling on her back, Alea no longer touching her, she remembers. One thing after another. Not much pain now. *What Snowy did. What she did to Snowy.* Unbearable vision inside a cloud of calm. How can this be? Brian shouting, veins bulging his forehead, waving Gaards off to hunt her down. Natalie at the Clinic with Budd. Safer than Calona? With Jojo now?—*when was now?*—

As they wind her through the cave, she's hearing water again. *Plip, plip.* Air damper. Warmer. She gives in to each sensation. The tap and slide of their feet as they carry her. Tidal flow of her breath, their breath, the three of them breathing in the

same steady rhythm. Grief and fear, small as flametips. Nearly harmless.

“How many of you?” she asks Alea. “Here.”

Alea curves her words around what might be a laugh. Words and meanings mixing, playful...“Not only *here*.” Another rustle of amusement.

“How many caves?” Teri, sleepy again.

Kema chuckles. “You mean in *this* desert?”

Kema sounds so young to her. Nothing either of them say makes sense. Can't remember her own questions. Getting harder to think. To speak.

“...around the planet?” Kema says.

“Not only *this* one...” Alea says.

Teri groans, too worn down for riddles.

Kema stumbles with the burden of her body, and for a moment all movement stops as the two of them find a new balance. “If I answer you, Teri,” Kema says, “I’ll need to ask *you* questions, too. If you want to know how many of us? My question for *you* is...”

She waves his words away, *no more puzzles, no more games*.

He catches her hand and smoothes it against her side. Touch makes more sense than anything.

“First question.” Kema slows his words as he speaks. “How. Many. Solar systems. Are in—this galaxy?”

His words float. Can't catch answers, can't push them off her tongue.

They come to a halt. “Don't think so hard on things,” Alea says. “Let them spring up on their own.”

As many as the seeds of Russian thistle. Did she speak? Out loud?

“Now, can you guess,” Kema says, *what the last question is?*”

Through her closed eyelids, a warm growing brilliance. She smiles. Thinking of nothing. And something moves her tongue. “*How many Milky Ways!*”

“Exactly,” says Kema.

And they carry her into the light.

REDSHOT RADIO: A Crack In The Sun

TruBlue: North Star Woman, aka Califia's Daughter, aka TruBlue, talking to *you!* Many or few. I say we are many! Wherever you are, were you there when it happened?

Hermes: Yes you were, because we *all* were! Watching the sun crack like an egg, throwing fire, a long rippling fire-wave hurtling toward Earth...

TruBlue: I'll never forget when the wave hit, transformers melting out of their harnesses, exploding with a whomp, stinking like scorched wire and burned electronics... For a moment that wave deep-fried even the air! Gaardlights and Maglev lights and every kind of light in every window, extinguished. Screens black. Clocks telling no-time but the time of the bolt— 6:53 am, October 28, 2057—the one that stopped the world.

Hermes: *Let the new world begin!*

Question And Answer : LJ

Moaning woke her. The child in Martina's belly was threatening to be born into the middle of the end of the world. Randy off somewhere, as usual. She looked up. After midnight, she guessed. She was learning— a little— to tell time by the sky. *Sidereal time*. Since everything but the Solarrays went down, there'd been a string of perfectly clear nights, no cloud-cover, stars in a wild swarming glimmer.

She knew every one of those stars had a name and a story. Stories older than anything she had ever known growing up under grey skies and shore lights drowning starlight. Before HM, before TriAm. Star stories. Heroes and murderers, animals that never were. Stories she hadn't learned or didn't remember. Not even one.

People called out those names the first night the lights went out. Everybody going crazy, shouting the way you'd call a friend or lover you thought you'd never see again. One guy had a star book with flex map that ran on stored sunlight, showed her how the patterns shifted all night and every night...like the sky above her now. She shivered. *Around midnight. Star time*. Curt would have a howling laugh at her now, wouldn't he? Was he on her scent? Maybe not yet. Now that the grid was down, she wasn't top priority.

Beside her, Martina rolled over. After a minute of what sounded like animal panting, she pulled in a noisy breath and said, "Lilly?" She wiped her mouth and neck, shook her head

like somebody coming out of a dream. “Lilly? You awake?” Martina's hand reached for hers.

“Awake,” she answered, and leaned closer, Martina's face by starlight young and trusting. Free of suspicion. That trust stung her. Knowing what she knew. Being who she was. *Who was she?* “Pains again? Should I get help?” Martina's hand squeezed hard. “Let me round up your friends,” LJ, said, “I'm not the best sort to have around. I mean, when things get serious, I tend to run— are they serious, do you think?” LJ pierced by a vision of a possible future: Martina's face turning to look back at her, eyes full of pain, registering *Lilly's* betrayal— Martina's friends, her husband, her child, the camp.

Martina murmured. “Not yet. Let everybody sleep.” She turned away, no comfort in any position. “I've had other nights like this, happens sometimes. Ghost Pains. Going nowhere.”

Let everybody sleep. Martina was drifting off already. Which was a relief. It was she herself who couldn't sleep. Her eyes springing open, thoughts twisting like wind devils. What a bad dream this whole scene was turning out to be. *Leah gone.* A scene flashed in her head—her sister caught, the explosion still burning. She pushed it away, sat upright. Her eyes hot and dry as stones in her head. Trapped in a nightmare with a thousand strangers and a shrinking water supply. *Grid down.* Grid smokes all the time. It'll be back up soon. But whatever this was, it was huge, and was happening all over.

Who were the ants now? Everybody? *Hydro-ants*—one of them Curt— swarming over choked machines refusing to respond. Stubbornly dark. How were they going to manage to keep their life-styles going without juice to feed the network? And water? Hydro could out-wait a few protestors. They'd seen something like this coming, every HD building had its own supply, and there were rumors of rivers up north still draining

into the old aqueducts, piped through HM filters, solar-pumped through strategy camps and... all the food they wanted. They'd take what they needed for themselves, as they'd always done, leaving nothing for the markets, for the streets.

What were they doing right now? No screens, no info from orbiters and repeaters, cells useless. What would matter to them now? What mattered to her? What did she miss of that world? What was there left to miss? She wished she didn't know things the ants here didn't know. She didn't want to think of them as *ants*. But they weren't her friends. Not if they knew who she was. They would detest her. Maybe even kill her, if they knew what she'd done, what her life had been before she lied her way in, putting them all at risk.

She looked up at the infinite dome above. The one Curt gave her prepared her for this one. In the city she never saw a star in the flood of lights. Forgot they were there. *Like looking into your own mind*. Except it wasn't like that, it was like flying far away from yourself. Leaving everything behind. Which was where she started as a child, wasn't it? Imagining expertise, prestige, would elevate her, make people look at her with awe, envy her beauty, her power... But she was still so hungry. Oh not for food or clothes or promotions. *What did she want?* Had her mind ever been like this glittering sky? Even when she was a child? And still believed in the future?

Curt's magic globe was in Noreen's hands. The woman had called her in, asked how and where she'd come by such an extraordinary item. She'd gone on the defensive right away, staring at her palms, red and itchy. Noreen said something about a *test*, and suddenly LJ got the panicked notion this chief ant would be able to read her, after all.

In the end, she'd gotten by— a grifter friend of hers, she said, had passed it to her—she admitted the lie about her sister, how her friend was desperate to get rid of the globe. Gaards were

onto him, so would she see it got into the *right hands*? Noreen seemed to accept that story. All the while the globe rested on the table between them. Pulling her in. When she looked up from her hands, a surge of the same fascination flooded her as it happened the first time and every time. As though that round window might show her exactly what she was and what might save her from that self. A live fragment of her life, her mother's life, her sister's— a fragment of Dream that might speak to her. Any moment. Tell her what she should do. She didn't want to let that magic mirror go. In the pit of her ribs, a pang, as the globe disappeared—forever?— into Noreen's tent.

Martina's back pushed against her shoulder. *What should I do?* She searched the sky for anything familiar. Stars glittered up there like broken glass, their beauty making no sense to her.

She had no sister. No future. Her life hung by a thread. On a question. She had no answers. Had almost nothing. She had the sky.

~

Martina went into labor around 4am. When the pains came, she made no sound, her face the face of someone in deep concentration.

LJ grabbed her stuff from the tent, told Martina to lean against her as they went to get help. Martina could not even stand straight. They moved, bent and awkward, slowly, carefully forward, managing not to wake a single sleeper on their way, humped bodies oblivious, as they passed.

I don't know if I can do this. LJ thought those words as Martina said, "Not sure I can do this," her face glowing with sweat.

“You don't have to know how to do it, your body knows,” LJ said, and wondered where in the world such an idea came from. Was it true?

You sound like Arianna, LJ thought she heard Martina say. “Which tent is *she* in? Your friend? Maybe you should sit down and let me go get her.”

Martina gave her a strange look. “My friend?”

“Arianna,” LJ said.

Martina laughed, in spite of her pains. “Oh, Lilly! What do *you* call Her? We call her *Ariadne*.” She stopped moving. “I thought you got your wisdom words from *Her*.”

LJ, confused, said nothing, and Martina went on. “Anyway we don't have time to find *her tent!*” she smiled broadly this time, then grimaced with another wave of labor.

~

Surrounded by half a dozen females and a couple of men, LJ was the outsider again. But she stuck around, struck by what Martina had said about Ariadne. The place was bubbling with noise and she could not find her place in the conversation. Someone was talking about the desert. Another one about keeping the faith. Faith in what? What did ants have faith in? This protest at least so far, was a honeymoon, a party really. As if they didn't know what was coming. These people were unfathomable sometimes. But maybe they knew how to get this child born. Martina was calmer in their company. LJ would let herself trust that much.

Hours later, Noreen swept in. Somebody whispered *midwife* with obvious awe. LJ hovered at the edge of the covey, trying to catch Martina's eye. There was a moment when Martina gazed back at her steadily, and the two of them seemed *together* like before under the sky, though here the stars were

invisible. Martina's smile gave her courage. Desire welled up in her. To be useful.

She stepped out of the tent into a brilliant morning. Dawn, everybody waking. The same sun that reached out and melted their world, the whole goddamn thing as far as anybody knew, blazed warm in their eyes, ran their star maps and strings of lights, somebody even had a solar radio going; she heard it muttering though she could only make out a few bizarre phrases—*the king's flesh... ravens and maggots*—voices rousing, not desperate but urgent. She went off to beg water. They had so little. Might live weeks without food, but not water.

As soon as she mentioned Martina's name, more and more water went into the borrowed bucket she lugged with her sore hand and underdeveloped muscles, pain shooting up her arm and into her back. She wasn't cut out for any sort of labor, hauling water or pushing babies into the air. But she was hardly a Hydro girl anymore, either. She wasn't a protestor. An intruder in an outlaw den *helping with the birth of an ant*. The concept made her feel ridiculous, and at the same time, ashamed. She set down the bucket, shaking. What was happening to her? She was never any good at caring about such things—the birth of a child. A fresh pair of eyes. A brand new heart that might not go on beating...because of her. Because of her kind.

When Leah was born, LJ had been there, feeling even more helpless and confused. A crowded room of strangers, mother in bed with her knees up, groaning. Two women shooed her out, banished her to the fish-farm docks, slimy banks gleaming with scales, burly scrapers eyeing her, flashing knives...not using them on fish, though, long out of work and hungry, most of them. No work because of strippers, robo-cleaners. Machine-laborers. Mostly the men threw their precious soon-to-be-confiscated knives into cardboard targets or into bare

ground marked with targets. Some targets wore familiar, hated faces. All of it puzzled and frightened her. She didn't tell anyone. There was no one to tell.

She passed the nearly full bucket to one of the women in the Med Tent, made her way through a knot of bodies closest to Martina. They surprised her, not edging her out. Though she was new here, with no obvious talents, somewhere between mildly and very suspicious, they tolerated her clumsy presence—for that she was grateful.

Her Rex-bitten hand throbbed. *Mala Fides*. She'd been sitting on her legs in one position for what seemed like hours, on hard ground, shifting to let the blood surge through her numb calves. Laurel told her to go walk it off, but she couldn't bring herself to leave.

Gingerly she sponged dots of sweat from Martina's forehead and around her mouth. Red-faced and wild-haired, Martina writhed, lost in a world of pain. Once when a spasm subsided, she grasped L J's hand. "Lilly," she said. L J surprised to hear that name, remembered how it came to be. What seemed like ages ago. "I'm glad you're still here. Tell me...tell me about your sister. Leah? Was that her name? Quick before the next wave..." Immediately Martina shut her eyes and went under.

When Martina surfaced again, L J started in. "I remember the day Leah was born." She desperately wanted, for some reason, to speak only the truth. Let her guard down, let the words flow. "There was a strike on the docks and mother joked about Leah growing up to be useless, because...she was always trying so hard not to hurt the poor *fishies*. What we did to pay rent and buy groceries was cull and gut them, every single day. We saved the rejects to feed ourselves. Trash-fish. Mostly bone and scales. Mother was right. Leah hated to see them choking in the air. But not just fish, she was a born rescuer, taking in strays. That was before Hygiene got serious about animal

control. In those days, there were still a few wild kittens. And crows that liked fish as much as we did. No matter how polluted the sea-pens got, we didn't care about all that then. We were just hungry. But Leah fed the kittens and the crows and the *fishies*. . . even when mother switched her legs and begged and explained." LJ, close to tears, stopped herself. A laugh burst out of her instead. "Just like mother predicted, Leah took the trash-fish right out of our mouths!"

Martina laughed weakly along with her, interrupted by a moan as she was sucked into a spasm of contraction. When she came up for air, Martina told LJ that when she herself was an infant, her own mother accidentally dropped her on her soft baby head and they were all horrified, convinced she'd turn out a cabbage when she was grown. Then she asked LJ to go on. About herself this time.

LJ didn't change a word of what flooded through her. What she'd never told anyone. "I detested my life growing up. And you know, when I finally did get away, it clung to me like the stink of fish after gutting all day." She shuddered. "Got myself into one of those recruiting programs for poor kids. Studied til I was cross-eyed, soaked my underwear and my smock every night, dreamed of eating one good dinner at The Blue Oasis, one pretty dress hanging in my closet. Someday a job that would leave my hands clean at the end of my shift."

Martina opened her eyes and gave LJ a look of commiseration, which made her squirm.

What LJ did not say, could never say, was that as the distance between herself and the fish pens grew, her work came to mean helping Curt turn people in to HM, abandoning them to security holding pens, and whatever horrors went on there, not even asking, not wanting to know what happened to them. . . aliens, terrorists, *ants*. She held her hands to her face and breathed in—swore she still caught a whiff of trash-fish.

She was thirsty, so awfully thirsty. She'd given Martina every drop of her water for that day. And half the next.

Martina let out a wail, and now her serious laboring began. Straining and crying out and exhaustion. Randy held one sweaty hand, a woman-friend, Gabby, the other. Gradually LJ was pushed from the center of the drama and found herself alone at the edge. Not exactly tears—for Leah or herself or even Martina, but whatever she looked at was blurred. Her body heavy, breathing took effort. Her sister, both close to her, and gone forever— little girl whose dirty face she'd scrubbed.

~

That evening in a circle of waxlights, Martina pushed out a tiny boy and, several minutes later, a girl. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, fraternal twins. Martina gave them improbably romantic names— Veronica and Willem. Randy was ecstatic. Martina slept, mouth open, still a child herself, one bundled infant in the crook of each arm.

~

LJ Dreamed. *Windy conch-voice coming and going in her ear. Slowly she understands who is speaking to her. She opens her eyes: Leah, her head tilting the way it always did when she spoke seriously—You can stop now, she says, stop running. As she moves to take her sister in her arms, Leah disappears. Willem and Veronica, fully grown, stand in her place. Waiting: For her? The twins' dark eyes are on her, as the shell-voice speaks again. **The Dream already exists.***

What you are looking for is the entrance.

REDSPOT RADIO: Report On Actions In Solidarity

Hermes: The King is dying! Let his flesh feed ravens and maggots! Will you be with us? Decide. Now. Tonight! And we'll teach you by minutest knowledge how to unhinge the prisonhouse, beam by beam...

Hermes here, your Swift-footed trickster. Tonight, my beloved companion and I will be your guides. To what? What's older than dirt and newer than...

TruBlue: moonrise! This is Truth-teller, for RedSpot radio, saying hello and good evening to Streamers and Gleaners everywhere...we're coming to you this twilight on the crest of a wave of a new kind of night...

Lets take a look at what's happening since the grid burned out— after the Sun threw her best flaming javelin, leaving us a No Net planet. No cell-locks, no links, no screens, no bots! But guess what? The old fashioned airwaves are pretty much untouched, beaming and re-beaming from underground studios powered by strategically located Solarray-repeaters.

Since the bolt, we've been holding marathon readings of Shakespeare—MidSummer Night's Dream— and Mira Kai's *New Earth*— in honor of the way the Brits read a marathon of sonnets and villanelles in WW II to confuse the Nazis listening in at the time. We're doing it for those who know or will soon have to learn, how to live without 24/7 screens strapped to their forearms. How to live without chem-fed nuggets washed down with slugs of HydroPur...

Hermes: Tell it, Sister!

TruBlue: Here's a quick rundown on how Solidarity got going, in case you don't already know. Days after MediaNet reported the deaths of the Calona 10, Solidarity With Calona went up. Not just in Tri-Am, around the planet! Some still say *Calona 9*, but here at RedSpot, we count the woman, code name Tatiana—and we thank her—who never made it. We count her, we count all the others who lost their lives on the way.

Our movement was the brain child of 16 women—8 of them Black, and yeah, I'm one of them!— deep underground in parts of the former state of California. 16 women took the story of courageous Black Califia and her Amazon territory, seriously! If you recall, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus schemed to marry an Amazon Queen. That way he could seize for himself her lands and horses, her followers, too. With Califia for inspiration, we plan on the opposite going down — Amazons taking back power, taking back the original domain!

We operate by council and consensus. Off-grid water sources showed us where we needed to locate. One of the first things we made up our minds about — before Riker, before the sunstorm, before we changed our name to Solidarity With Calona, SWC— our first vote was to go off grid, set up solarrays to juice our stuff— music, speakers, food storage, medical equipment and supplies. . . We were— are, will be— a web of worlds, interconnected!

We saw the contradiction— cells as links to HM — 24/7 trackable body-wear betraying us. According to HM, we were *already* terrorists. The end of underground, the start of *over-ground*. We could give up and give in. Or turn all the way around and unbuckle— *nobody in our thing who's wearing*. All cells *permanently disabled*.

At the big ceremony first night at Riker, we got up the alliance that became Solidarity. Took all night and into the morning to get the hold-outs to agree — follow our example, and permanently shut down. You can't even get into Riker now without dropping yours at the gate...

Hermes: *All* the camps doing that now.

TruBlue: We snapped our manacles! Torched the wrist-cuffs! Smashed the chains around our ankles! Some who were planted, tore the chips out of their arms! We have a doc-volunteer now to help us with that. So again. We're low-tech anonymous humans, untrackable women and men and every gender between. Even when HM aux-gens turn on a few Net-links here and there, gov-corp has been cut, people, the Technocrats are out of power!

Hermes: Solidarity Now! For RedSpotters old and new who don't know, Califia and the camps that followed, have roots all over. For example, a turn of the century Occupy Movement, a mass public show-up for radical change with broad goals like changing the basic nature of human economic and social intercourse— contrasting and supporting our early-on Actions with tight-focus goals like decontamination of local water sources. And there was Sacred Stone camp near the border of Canada where hundreds of First Nations and allies gathered to stop a dirty oil pipeline set to run under the Missouri and Cannonball Rivers. A few years later, came the world-wide Extinction Rebellion and ReGen movement. After that, too many to name!

HM forced us into the shadows, but we're *coming out Dreamers—let's say it! —coming into the sunlight of day and starlight of night!*

BestBoy, take it away— tell us what it was like at the Pavilion that first night.

Question And Answer II

LJ 's sleeping place was just outside Martina's tent, so close she could hear her breathe—the ocean at a great distance. The newborns like seagulls crying.

She was the only one awake. Or so it seemed. All night her brain crawled a tight circle, images repeating, accompanied by an off-key score with a driving mechanical rhythm marching her helplessly along toward her fate. She saw HM breaking down barriers, everybody screaming, hiding, Martina clutching the twins. In one version, LJ would run *with* Martina, grab one of the kids, prove herself a loyal ant. Everybody herded with HM stunners at their backs into waiting vans, driven off to prisoncamp. In the other version—they alternated like a broken machine with only two settings—she would save herself, grab a Gaard, tell him who she was, convince him she was still *Hydro...* then she'd turn and catch Martina staring at her in pure hatred. Randy would drag LJ down to the ground, protestors would circle around, kick her in the ribs, in the spine, call her horrible names—*traitor, murderer*— kick her until she passed out.

~

Martina, seeping bloody fluid, weak and sore, dozed most of the day inside the small green tent set up for her against the crush of sunlight. She dozed and nursed and sang to the twins. One song, a love song that felt like a lullaby. Unfamiliar to LJ. *Just*

an ordinary love song; love song / nothing to be afraid of/ an ordinary love song/ a more than earthly melody...

When she got up from her blanket and asked Martina about it, Martina smiled back hazily, said it was something she'd heard on the Radio.

Radio? LJ pricked up her ears, wanting to ask about this ancient ant-form of communication, how they kept it going, but she let it fade. Instead, she begged to hold one of the babies, and Martina sounded surprised. "Oh good, yes! You take cranky Veri, I'll take Willem," and handed off the girl to her.

"Sit in the rocker, Lilly—Randy hammered that chair together out of odds and ends from the ticket booths we took apart. All I've done is throw clothes over it, so far! Such a wicked clever thing and sweet of him to make it, deserves to be used, so toss everything on the floor, and break it in for me, will you?"

She rocked and Veronica quieted. Unbelievable that this child would trust her— would settle down, her own mother a few feet away. LJ's eyes burned with fatigue, yet she knew with horrible certainty if she tried to sleep, sleep would refuse to come. Punishment for her crimes? Some she had yet to commit. Others she couldn't remember. How restful this warm infant in her lap, the milky smell of her, cheeks and forehead soft as the skin inside her own bare wrist. The child's body brand new. Not yet ruined by what this world would do to her.

Visitors came in handfuls and drifted away. Saw that LJ was not entirely useless, sitting with Veronica, rocking back and forth, back and forth, soothing herself as much as the child.

~

That afternoon, Martina asked her to watch both of the twins while she went off with friends, and then to a meeting with

Randy. LJ still on probation, not invited to meetings. An impassible barrier. But also a relief.

Martina lay one baby between LJ's legs, one in her arms. Trusting her alone with them. She did not deserve this trust and even feared it. At the same time, it was a strange happiness to be here this way— sunlight glowing bluegreen through the tent, as though they were underwater. She could not remember anyone trusting her this way. Ever. Not her mother. Not Leah. Not any of the men who nevertheless believed and reassured themselves out loud that they did...

Martina pulled the flap back, and LJ called out, "Wait! Sing that song again before you go?"

"Only a minute, Lilly, I've gotta have a break!"

Martina's voice was rich with feeling as she sang to her babies, looking into their wide-eyed faces, first one, then the other.

~

Martina took Willem from her, left Veri lying across LJ's knees in the rocker. Later they traded places and Martina rocked, listening patiently to LJ's worries about water running out.

LJ touched her dry lips. "How can you be so in control, so unperturbed? You've got two infants to feed, you've got to drink lots of water to keep your milk coming. *Don't you?*"

Martina smiled. "We'll be all right. I promise you."

Martina hinted, then blurted the story of what she called *the old XY well*. Which was the moment LJ saw herself beginning to pass as one of them. A protester like anybody else, who could be told such things. Here was her possible freedom— a startling jewel she could offer up when HM busted in.

Shame flooded her, wanting to save her skin. Shame that fueled the tuneless music of betrayal, so that she instantly regretted knowing about the well at all. She babbled, “Leah and I used to haul water from dock tanks in buckets that cut up our hands, had to rub them with grease but they kept on getting infected...”

~

It was late afternoon when Martina suggested LJ go along with Randy, let him show her the well, and she found she was eager to get a look.

It was a dark mouth in a great slab of stone at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Hidden under seats at the back of the stadium. People were lowering buckets on thin shiny rope, voices echoing as they hauled them up slowly, carefully, half full of rocking water. Clean water. Precious water. Made her smile to anoint her cheeks from Randy’s bucket, rolling water like costly wine on her tongue. As she drank, Randy wiped his face with the wet tail of his shirt and told her the well had been discovered a long time ago by Yoli and Xavier—X and Y—following the blue lines of an old watermap, pointing straight to the basin under Riker. This well was the reason the protest was called at the Pavilion in the first place. Of course, it was.

After Community Meal, Randy and Martina brought her down from that sudden water-born euphoria, telling her the water in the well wasn’t plentiful—adequate for the people and three dogs— but it would last a good awhile, Noreen had assured them. A running well was nearly as much wealth as the sun! And the sun, they joked, was their very own Ambient Unlimited-Energy Reservoir, wasn’t it?

~

That night, as usual, LJ's eyes refused to stay closed. Even when she forced them shut, she swore they were still open, a bright light shining straight into her head like the single headlight of a Maglev coming right at her. She wondered how long it had been since she'd been unconscious.

One thing made sense to her now. The well explained that odd miracle of water appearing among them. Everyone thought, as she did, that HM had decided to thirst them out. What ants didn't know was how long HM could wait. Were they ready for that kind of standoff? Was she? She imagined a Gaard walking up to her— shouting her real name, pointing out the well, telling about the watermap, Martina's agonized face, the circle closing in, kicking her into oblivion, a place she might never reach any easier way. The flutter in her head so loud she thought it might wake the twins.

~

A week later, the XY was going dry. Now it was buckets going deeper, less water coming up, Noreen calling for stricter rations, storing what they could keep back from daily consumption. Washing severely limited, except for Willem and Veri, Martina's breasts and hands. Everyone beginning to smell like sour onions.

Clear nights gone, too. Clouds rolling in, stars lost. What they needed, she told herself bitterly, was an *ambient* well. All that H₂O wasted up there in the atmosphere— their lungs and skin damp with it— yet they were going to die of thirst.

Oppressive heat muffled her body, swelling her bitten hand with its lingering jangle of pain. *Mala Fides*. She longed to sleep forever, but could not touch even a minute of it. Every other creature, even dogs, drifted into it naturally and effortlessly as breathing. Martina and the twins murmured and tossed in luxurious slumber only a few feet away from her.

Sometime before dawn, she pulled on her jacket and run-down shoes, stepping quietly toward the aisle-way sloping to the gate. Which was shut tight. She grasped the rail ladder running from the ground to the top of the wall. Looked into the overcast night, finding no help there. She slid down, her back against the wall. To think, she told herself. Her head clanged like an empty bucket against the sides of a drying-up well. She could climb that ladder, leap onto the other side, make her way back to the city...

At that moment, Randy loomed over her. "Lilly, what's up?" He bent down, but she could not read his intention. Her head drifted over her knees.

"Can't sleep," she mumbled, though she was not really awake either. Had he followed her? "You on shift here?"

"Yup," he sighed, "took me a piss, got back quick, and there you were, scared the Zeus outta me. Didn't look like no woman sitting there at all, more like...one a those starved moon-dogs sitting on its haunches, thinking about eatin you in one big scarf— know what I mean?" He laughed. When she could give no response, he pressed his hand onto her shoulder. "We'll be all right, you'll see."

~

She wavered on her feet in the sweltering Council Tent in the glaring scrutiny of a few dozen women and a handful of men. All of them dusty-faced and thirsty as hell.

"My name isn't... Lilly," she said, voice hollow, as though the walls of the big tent had expanded around her into an echoing cave. "My name is. Lisa. Lisa Jaspers. And I." She took a breath. "I want to be part of Labyrinth."

Noreen watched her as she spoke, came toward her, asked for her hand. "This is how I was taught to check out a Try." From

her bag she lifted a shining object— Curt's hemisphere—— set it on the table between them, close enough for LJ to see into.

Like looking into your own mind What she saw was a ripple of water, a swarm of silver. At first she couldn't tell what the glittering fragments were or what they were doing. They looked like insects. Climbing over each other, saving themselves. Or going under, drowning in light.

Ants. Were they ants? No. But somehow the vision seemed to offer what she wanted. The promise of sleep. Only if she gave the right answer to the question? What was the question? What was the right answer? If she answered well, sleep would come to her. Sleep like a clear black sky full of stars.

It was a long minute before she looked up at Noreen whose eyes drilled her. She expected a trick question, some technicality, a nuance of membership she would trip over, betraying herself. She expected complicated language, disdain, suspicion. She expected Noreen to transfer their two hands as one to the globe, and ask in an urgent tone, *Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth...?*

Noreen did not move. Lisa's hand in both of hers, she closed her eyes and waited.

"Do you promise," Noreen said, "to love and protect your friends here— no matter what happens—*even at the cost of your life?*"

Startled, Lisa stopped breathing. Leah seemed to her to be a small figure in the globe, standing with all her weight on one leg, a soft look in her eyes...as if all this time she'd been waiting for Lisa's answer now—along with everybody else.

Behind Leah, Lisa saw them—Martina's grown-up twins, Willem and Veronica, elegant in their loose iridescent suits, their identically braided hair...

Even at the cost of your life?

Suddenly she wanted that future to be—the one Willem and Veronica were asking her for. *At the cost of your life?* She heard the question inside now, straight from the twins. *Do you promise?*

And she answered, “I do.”

Guadalupe Palms

We wake. We sleep. And wake again.

“Hey,” she says. Budd opens his eyes and seems to know her. Though she’s not the one he’s waiting for.

By now he can smell her, knows her that way. Could she know *him* without eyes? She takes his hand and breathes in his scent, sliding his fingers over her face. When she lets him go, he falls into sleep again. She touches Natalie’s hair, but she doesn’t stir.

Leaving them and the others huddled in their blankets, she walks away into the morning. Coming fresh now—touching slopes, picking out ridges, deepening shadows. Clouds lit from below, still dark above.

Wherever she sets her feet—between clumps of thistle and spiky cushions of grey and green whose names she’ll never know—a neat print, an image of her bare sole, left behind. No shoes. Each bare shape, proof of rain last night, pleases her.

Not Dreaming. Where she steps she leaves her mark on damp ground. One foot in front of the other as the sun shows a little more fire, and *there they are*, orphan drops of rain —*rain!*—rocks and weeds and air washed clean. Everywhere, lichens shining with their own green light.

Facing away from the sun, as far as she can see, the air shimmers clear, no smudge of haze from the cities.

Turning northeast, toward Largo, she remembers. Last night. How they didn't speak while making the altar. Lay down and waited. How She rained from the sky...

Afterward, they slept.

Lagarto's hand on her shoulder woke her. Still dark but she could feel morning coming. He was kneeling beside her, saying, we need to make a Circle. From now on, we do this every day. This morning, Rena has something to tell us. Behind him, Blaise and Mala in the faint glow of a lightstick. Jojo woke Natalie, helped Budd to his feet.

"You gave up your cells. You thought I did, too." Rena looked at Natalie. "I told myself... it was more important to keep that going for myself... than to keep my word. Maybe I'd hear news about Teri. That didn't happen. What I did hear..." She clenched her jaw, "I'd tell you when the time was right. I told myself you'd get your hopes up, lose courage, we'd never finish what we came here to do. I believed I was doing this... lying... for your sake.

"A lie inside a lie.

"She was with us last night. She was the rain. And somehow we were too. I don't understand that. But one thing's clear. We can't Dream a world we want to live in unless we trust each other. Enough not to lie. Enough not to tell the truth for lying reasons. Because truth is alive, and nobody owns it. Like water. Like rain returning to the ground..

"So. The news is—Grid-failure. All over Tri-Am. Who knows how far? When Net pronounced us dead, a protest camp went up at Riker. Camps everywhere. Protests and shutdowns in support of Calona. In support of us..." her voice caught.

They listened to each other breathe.

“What should have been yours. Everybody’s. I hung onto. A kind of thrill knowing what nobody else knew... Until we built the altar. Until the rain came, and I saw...” She looked at Natalie again. “Saw I couldn’t, didn’t want to carry it alone,” she winced at the word, “not one minute longer.” Rena looked at the ground.

“Yes.” Lonnie said. Speaking for all of us.

Behind them, Largo was growing brighter. Jojo kept her eyes there, taking in Rena’s news— 24 hours ago the world was dying: Last night, more alive than alive. And now, again, this morning, another. How many worlds were there?

Natalie leaned into a clump of witchweed, broke off a rain-drenched branch, brushed it over Rena’s face, arms, feet. “Brushing away shame,” she said.

After a time, Rena stood and went to Moon who’d taught them this simple blessing of hands.

One by one she touched each shoulder and forehead.

Lagarto opened his hands as she came to him, held her face between his palms. They heard her crying when Natalie’s arms went around her.

Last, she stood face to face with Lonnie. Held both his hands, searching his swollen eyes. He seemed to hold his breath, holding the moment still.

They all saw it happen, his whole being surrendered. He recognized her. Let her inside.

~

Jojo circles the mounded sleepers, blessing them. On the ground, sleep sound, on the ground, sleep sound. Circles back to Budd and Natalie, still unmoving. She won’t disturb them yet. Keeps walking.

Last night, impossible things real as rain. *Ariadne with them, they with Her. No separation.* Teri with them, too. End or beginning, who can tell?

But Teri is not here this morning.

After the rain, after Rena's confession, her revolutionary news, Jojo still can't bear that cruel fact among the others—Teri *not* with them now.

~

Back with Budd and Natalie, she kneels beside him. “Cold,” she says, mouth near his ear, speaking the word as quietly as moving air. She shivers, lets him feel her trembling. He hesitates. Opens the blanket and she wraps herself around him.

He holds her and they rock. At the same time, she knows he's longing like she is, for Teri. *Fire and water.*

Last night they found her. Or she found them? *Dreaming Awake.* If that's what it was. *We need a new language.* Exactly what Teri always said. A way of speaking and acting that passes through barriers—endless barriers built to keep Dreaming and Waking apart.

She breathes beside him, knows whose face floats behind his eyes. *If there is a way, my love.* They rock. First bodies, then minds, going empty, forgetting every word they've ever known.

~

Only last night they drank their fill—she touches her flaking lips—or did they? How could she doubt what was absolutely certain only a few hours ago? *And She will not fail to arrive.*

She remembers small creamy flowers, Guadalupe fan palms. The way she first saw them when she and Rena came to

Calona, when Rena answered every question about them, but one. Who would harvest those fruits come ripe in the fall—which was *now*

The sand beside her still damp. Wet fills her eyes. Convincing her all over again. Rain fell in the night!

They didn't think to save any for themselves. This morning, almost none to drink. *Palm fruits all juice when they're ripe*, Rena had said, *milky-sweet water in each one of them*. Her mouth and throat tingle tasting the memory now.

Hummingbird food. Oh she would *be* a hummingbird, taste that sugar on her tongue! Taste flight in her muscles and her bones. As she'd tasted Ariadne in the rain last night. Tasted life, tasted joy.

Guadalupes need almost no water. Don't need pollinators. Old fashioned that way. All they need is wind and there's more than enough of that out here! Rena's frowning smile, grave eyes, squinting against the overwhelming light.

Not much time. She'll go soon. Alone, if she has to. Moon, Rena, Budd, how far could they walk? Blaise could make it to Silver Canyon. But wouldn't leave Mala. Lonnie? Weaker than Budd. For awhile, almost more than anyone, Lagarto had seemed untouched. Not any more. Natalie, the strongest. Natalie and herself, then? But someone strong needs stay with the others.

She'll go alone. Empty her pak, hike out at night to those laden trees. Bring fruit back to suck, to soothe their sore mouths.

An inch of water in an overturned bin, all that's left of the rain. You don't think to catch it for tomorrow when the drops begin to fall, you feel it might fall forever.

She remembers, as they woke and the rain stopped, how the Spiral they made and became a part of, seemed to point toward *Largo*. Northeast. The mountains.

She sits up to tell Budd, but his eyes are still shut. Hairs bristle his upper lip and his chin. The bones of his face sharper now. Last night, leaving the altar, he stumbled more than once and she took his arm, made him lie down— he hadn't resisted. Didn't need to. Open to her, grateful for her help. His eyelids flutter and again she feels him take her in. Completely. A yellow slice of morning light falls across his nose and mouth. *He does see her, knows her directly.*

Above, small clouds —like Guadalupe flowers that won't leave her mind. Creamy yellow *clusters*. Some already withering. Some still budding. Some chewed by tiny beetles. Green, ripe, gone, all in a single season.

“Hey, friend,” she says, and his chest swells with air. “Got a riddle for you.” She longs to hear him laugh, wants that so badly that a joke goes through her mind. *How many Dreams of rain does it take to make a desert bloom?*

They turn at a rustling sound. The girl stretches out of her bivy, into a wide yawn, blinking in the brightness. “She's thirsty,” is the first thing Natalie says.

Budd feels for his jig, a swallow of water in the bottom.

Natalie stops his searching. “Not me,” a cluck of impatient humor. “*Teri*. She's much more thirsty than we are...”

Light-headed, he feels he might pass out. Lies down. Tears spill, making his ears itch. His lungs won't hold enough oxygen. He remembers last night when he could take in no more air. When something gave way, when he, when they, breathed past the end of breathing.

“You're crying.” Natalie on her side, touches his eyes.

Budd presses the starfish of her hand against his cheek, traces her fingers and draws the same shape on her forehead. Whatever Samarath did to keep her hovering between sickness and dying, he saw now it was all *to find out what she was*. The man had no idea that what was harming her more than bugs or drugs was what wasn't there. What was *missing*: Sunlight. Earth. Air. Friendly microbes. Weeds. Water from the sky. More things, subtler things than anyone can say. Humans are a kind of plant, aren't they? He knew it all along. Maybe the blind know sooner? Forget, too, like everybody else. He'd been like Samarath in his own way, holed up against the world, fiddling with machines, swallowing drugs that kill Dreams. Now he knows—too late? More than Samarath ever knew. One real thing about Natalie. *Ariadne's child*.

“You saw Teri last night?” he says to the girl, and feels her smile as though she might be going to answer him. Soon. But not yet.

“Want me to wind your hair up like it was before?” Jojo asks.

“Nope,” she says, firm and clear. Like she's been a long time considering the question before Jojo asked. “Want to cut it off,” she says, gliding a hand over her head to her shoulder. “So my head can be...a stone growing spirals.”

All three of them laughing now. The others still asleep, yet somehow joining in.

Natalie in her bleached clothes stained with mud. Lips peeling, fingernails torn. Skin darker every day, but like theirs, covered with dust. Even after a rain-washed vision, dust still reigns.

“Hey, you hungry? Haven't seen you eat since I dunno when.” Jojo spills a last handful of pop-nuts onto Natalie's blanket.

Natalie gazes at her.

How long can you feed on a vision? Like a hummingbird on nectar. The last tree, the last flower. Til the sun goes down and your heart stops? Heart's gonna stop anyway. Cuz that's how the story goes.

Natalie can't remember ever really knowing what she wanted to eat. But it isn't what they keep trying to give her. In her pocket, a twig of Russian thistle. A ruffle of spiral thick with water, pulled from its rock. She was sorry to do that. But ants keep alive that way, they showed her it was all right. She examines the scrap of lichen. How many woven into this life? Brings it to her lips and tastes dirt with a bit of sweetness in it. Hands it to Jojo, who tastes, too, and passes it to Budd.

"Rain still in it," he says. Wonder in his voice.

"This girl knows what to eat. What do you think of that?" Budd's hand circles Jojo's wrist, squeezes three times and three again. Jojo knows that wordless word Teri taught them—all of them, again somehow—last night. Or did they Dream it a long time ago? She sends the signal back to Budd.

Natalie, facing Largo, says, "Can you see her?"

Budd shuts his eyes, listening. *Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms.*

Jojo takes Natalie's hand, looks into her crow-black eyes. A wave of certainty rolls though her. *We're doing this—all over the Earth.*

"Can you see her?" Natalie says again. Budd kisses the top of her head.

In her mind, Jojo flies a crow-circle over the sleeping ones and the ones awake. *Wherever you are, stand your ground.* No matter how far from here, on this planet—or any other. If anything we ever Dreamed is true, we're... *with you.*

“Sing to her. What you sang to me,” Natalie says, and Jojo knows what she means, opens her throat and waits for the song that wants to be sung, one world singing to another—

*You've got to play the game
for keeps. All or nothing.*

*If you won't die for love,
love won't lend you her wings.*

—shuts her eyes to see what Budd is looking for. What Natalie already sees.

~ ~ ~

Coda

“Budd? You awake?”

“ I am. *We are.*”

“I’ve never seen so much light! Should I be talking so much about light...?”

“Listening to you is almost...seeing...”

“River of stars... One star like all the others, swells and stretches, tears itself apart. The sun and her stormy daughter, raining sparks...” She laughs. **“Ariadne Dreams Earth, our fire-in-water planet— raining, everywhere. Even inside us. Oh I can't describe it. Natalie, Jojo, everybody? Do you know?”**

“*Beloved water– the way We enter you.*” Budd says.

Natalie gives Teri a bit of witchweed. **“*Fire-eater.*”** Natalie says.

“Beloved fire,” Teri says, **“the way We wake you...”**

“Stellar ignition,” Budd says.

“Ignition!” She turns onto her side, squeezes Jojo’s hand. Then Natalie’s. Three times. And three again.

“Past or future?” Teri asks.

“Yes,” Budd says. And his hand slips over the fall of her shoulder, follows her arm along the swerve of her hip to the tips of her fingers, spirals her wrist—and comes to rest there.

End Notes

***Underlined Italics in the plays:** William Shakespeare

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* **And time is breath.**

Deena Metzger

***All or Nothing**

You've got to play the game
for keeps, all or nothing:
If you won't die for love,
love won't lend you its wings.

Carles Riba, *Salvatge cor*

(quoted on p. 1, Introduction, *The Rhythm of Being*, by
Raimon Panikkar)

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