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THE DARK BEYOND THE STARS



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The Dark Beyond the Stars

by Frank M. Robinson

Chapter 1

The only thing I remembered was that I had seen extraordinary sights on the morning of the day I died.

I had gone in with the crew of the Lander at 0600, just as the system's sun began to cast a delicate lavender haze over the valley floor. I was the last one down the ladder, snagging a boot on the bottom rung so I had to make a desperate lunge to keep from sprawling on the planet's surface below. Nobody seemed to notice, but the stress indicators inside my helmet whirred and a dizzying series of readouts whizzed by in my heads-up display, stopped, then scrolled past again.

Pulse rate up, respiration up, body secretions up ...

There was a flicker in the smooth sequence of numbers where a tiny circuit had burned out, and I swore to myself. I had inspected the electrical harness and the helmet display on board ship and I knew somebody else on the team must have checked it again after me.

It shouldn't have happened.

I took a firmer grip on my small hand ax, readjusted the position of the sample bag on my equipment belt, then turned to watch as the rest of the exploration team climbed into the Rover. I was looking directly into the sun and had to shield my eyes against the glare. The visor polarizer wasn't working, either. I wondered if it ever had, then realized it must have been the first thing I had checked if for no other reason than that it was the easiest. I couldn't have missed it.

I glanced around again and promptly forgot about it, caught up in the overwhelming beauty of the planet.

Dunes stretched for half a dozen kilometers down to a shallow canyon and its dry creekbed while pink hills huddled under a peach-colored sky. Porous reddish rocks were half hidden in the drifted sand—*sand!*—and I kicked at one of the rocks with my flex-boot, grinning proudly at the little puff of dust I raised. On impulse, I laboriously scratched an *H* next to the rock.

Instant immortality. At least until the next windstorm.

On the far side of the canyon a shield volcano jutted up a good ten kilometers, the scarp at its base within easy reach of the ancient riverbed. We would take samples from the creekbed and scarp, record the terrain, and then...

I grinned. We would do all of that but we would also gawk, scuff our boots in the dust, and take only half as many readings as we should. There were no seasoned explorers on board—there were too few opportunities for exploration.

I glanced again at the figures in the Rover and waved, unable to wipe the smile from my face. The first planet I had ever walked upon, the first rock I had ever kicked, the first sunrise I had ever watched, the first clouds I had ever seen...

The stress readouts flickered again. My pulse rate was edging higher, as well as my secretions... the inside of my helmet was rosy with warning lights. Well, what had I expected? I was lucky that sweating was all I was doing. Besides, the suit *weighed*; the planet had a gravity of 0.8, while on board the ship there was none at all outside the gymnasium.

There was a crackle in my headset. I waddled to the Rover and climbed in, still staring openmouthed at the volcano and the shadows along its base. I shifted on the metal seat so I could see the Lander and the dark silhouette stretching away from its broad footpads toward the cratered horizon. The planet was ideal, the fourth solid-surface planet out from the primary, the last one before the two gas giants. An atmosphere with a pressure of 47 millibars, primarily carbon dioxide laced with argon and traces of water vapor and oxygen. An average surface temperature of 210 Kelvin...

The Rover jolted to a stop at the bottom of the creekbed. I turned around, startled. Either the Rover had made better time than I thought or I had been too absorbed in gazing at the landscape.

Once more my headset crackled. I cocked my head and tried again to make sense of the words but couldn't. One member of the team hoisted himself out, took a few steps, stretched, then trudged back for his sample bag. The sunlight glinted off his visor, turning it into a golden mirror speckled with worn spots through which I could glimpse the vague outlines of a face. I couldn't make out who it was.

Another burst of crackling. I frowned and hit the side of my helmet with my gloved right hand, then leaned forward and tapped the crewman in front of me. He swiveled around but the sun gilded his visor as well and I never saw his face. He watched in silence as I pointed at my headset, then shrugged and climbed out to join his companion.

They weren't going to return to the Lander just because I couldn't communicate with them—not with an entire planet out there to explore. The driver started the Rover and once again we bounced along the creekbed heading for the nearby scarp, leaving behind two team members to survey the flatlands.

I stared at the scenery, fascinated. It was the standard landscape for an iron-core planet of this size and surface temperature and at this distance from its primary—a mixture of rocks, sand, stony outcroppings, dry riverbeds, endless dunes, innumerable craters, and gigantic volcanoes. Almost everything reflected various shades of iron oxide, though an occasional streak of yellow was undoubtedly sulfur. The landscape had color and form and texture—everything I had expected and more.

I wondered what the others would think if they saw me smiling, and I inspected the landscape with more scientific eye. There were distinct signs of weathering, the results of a thin atmosphere and millions of years. We had been warned that the planet was still geologically active, that there was plate motion and—

And what?

There was no life, there had been no signature of it from space, I remembered that from the briefing.

I felt the first quivers of uneasiness. I couldn't recall the rest of the briefing, who had given it or

who else had been present or what else had been said. I worried for a moment, then put it out of my mind. ~~The grade was becoming steeper. I concentrated on gripping the safety bar across my lap as the~~ Rover climbed out of the creekbed and jostled over the rocks toward the scarp three hundred meters away.

A few minutes later we stopped at the edge of a debris fan running along the bottom of a small landslide. I climbed out, clutching my ax and sample bag. I tried again to talk to somebody but there was only the irritating crackle in my headset. I had a sudden urge to throw a rock at the driver and his companion, now fifty meters in front of me, just so they would turn around and I could see who they were.

Another twinge of worry. I didn't know their names, I couldn't recall their faces...

Fifty meters of climbing over rocks and the exertion started to bother me—my life-support system weren't handling it very well at all. My helmet was fogging up and I could hear the faint *sluffing* of the internal vacuum pump. By now we should have learned to keep the suits in better repair...

The rise was sharper than it looked and the boulders were getting larger—we had to thread our way between them instead of stepping over. At the foot of the scarp my headset crackled once again. I looked over at the figures inspecting the cliff face. This time, their helmets were in shadow. The smaller of the two pointed up at a light-colored sedimentary layer and waved at me.

I caught my breath. It wouldn't be easy, not with my sample bag and the weight of my suit. And I was afraid. You never fell on board ship, nor did anything ever fall on top of you. But it would be an all-too-real possibility climbing up the side of the cliff.

The face of the scarp was badly fractured; there were dozens of minor outcroppings and chimneys in the reddish rock. My boots were flexible enough for toeholds and I had a length of rope, a safety harness, and a rack with plenty of protection—chocks and hex nuts and small, serrated expansion cams that I could wedge in cracks to hold the rope.

And maybe in that pale sedimentary layer I would find what we were all looking for—the faint, fragile outlines of something that had been there before us, something that had once called this plane home and to which the endless wastes of sand and rock were more commonplace than beautiful.

I turned again to glance at the landscape behind me, the rolling dunes we had crossed, the craters in the distance, the spidery network of dry riverbeds and gullies—all of it bathed in the brilliant light from the system sun.

It was a perfect day for heroes.

Half an hour later, I was more than sixty meters up, clinging to the flaws in the cliff's rocky face. I could see the Lander from that height, and the range of mountains behind it, no longer hidden by the low dunes. I looked down at the other figures hugging the face of the scarp. Twenty meters below me was my belay man, and another ten below him, the third member of my team. I knew both of them were watching me intently, though once again the reflection of the sun hid their faces from view. At times the primary painted them in shining gold. The next moment it revealed them as tiny, fragile figures draped in dirty expanses of what used to be dazzling white permacloth, streaks of green verdigris dappling the metal fittings of their antique suits.

I thought I remembered the name of the smaller of the two but it had slipped from my memory as easily as somebody erasing a writing slate. I felt another surge of panic, then forced my attention back

to the rock face in front of me.

I had seen image pix of the different strata formed by layers of ocean bed and sediment that had buckled upward into sharp-ridged mountains, the result of colliding continental plates. The crumpled sheets of rock before me didn't look much like the pix, but this was the first time I had seen geologic reality.

I finished recording a three-meter strip of the surface, hooked the image camera on my harness, and pushed back with my legs to swing at the crumbling rock with my ax. I remember thinking that I just might be the one—

I wasn't expecting it at all.

There was a slight shimmer to the landscape and the scarp trembled. The rope sagged as two of the chocks slipped out of the suddenly shattered rock. I swung in toward the cliff, scrabbling for a handhold, terrified that I might be hit by something falling from above.

Before I could find a grip, the last of the chocks jerked out of the rocky face and I plummeted through the thin air, screaming into my helmet. A moment later, I was swinging from the harness around my chest and the rope tied to my belay man. I twisted slowly, just beyond reach of the stony surface. I was facing upward and I could see the other figures on the scarp looking down at me, each holding on to the rock with one hand and the rope with the other.

Suddenly, just above my suit, the rope unraveled like a piece of worn string as it rubbed against a sharp finger of stone. I fell once more, bouncing off ridges that exploded in small rock slides, desperately grabbing at the surface of the cliff that flashed past me.

I struck a boulder at the bottom, then slid to the ground, stunned, my left arm pinned beneath me. I was afraid to move, afraid to take a breath. I lay on my side looking at the field of orange boulders spread across the plain below. They looked as if somebody had painted fuzzy gray streaks on them; then I realized it was because the curved plastic of my helmet was covered with fracture lines. I was suddenly aware of my shallow breathing, the faint noise of the suit's pump and a high-pitched hissing sound.

I was losing air fast through the cracks in my helmet.

I couldn't believe that I had fallen, that the day was going to end like this. I moved slightly, uncomfortable because the rough weave of my ventilating garment was rubbing against my skin. The sweat that coated my body was starting to dry and I felt chilled.

My head was clearer now, the shock fading. My arm had started to throb and when I took a deep breath, I gasped—it felt as if my rib cage had been crushed. My feet were warm and wet and I was afraid the tubing had broken in my inner-weave. Or worse, that my urine bag had ruptured and I was lying in my own piss.

Then I felt the slickness around my chest and waist. I was bleeding and the blood was collecting in my boots.

I pleaded into my headset for help. Once again it crackled and once again I couldn't understand what was being said. I began to shiver. It would soon be 210 Kelvin on the inside as well as on the outside and I would be frozen stiff in minutes. Even if I weren't, I wouldn't last very long trying to breathe 47 millibars of CO₂ and rare gases.

I didn't realize I was crying until I felt the tears freezing on my eyelids. I ignored the pain in my

arm and chest and shifted so I could see the landscape beyond the field of boulders.

It was a beautiful morning on a not particularly important planet circling an obscure G-class star and I was bleeding to death.

Unfair.

Chapter 2

I lay there gasping for air, watching the numbers on the stress indicators flicker past before the displays frosted over from my breath. But I didn't need to watch their slow decline to know my life was gradually seeping into the cold. Minutes later I sensed footsteps behind me on the debris fan, two sets of them. I had never doubted that somebody would come for me; no exploration party could afford to leave anybody behind.

"... a good thirty meters, probably dead..."

The words cut through the static this time, but I was too cold and in too much pain to feel overjoyed. I peered out at the darkening world through slitted eyelids. The jagged breaks in my helmet were thick with frost and my face was numb. I could feel the cold wash down inside my suit, chilling my stomach and my groin.

I rolled slightly, crying out as my fractured ribs grated against each other. I smelled urine and felt vaguely embarrassed, knowing for sure that I had pissed in my suit.

"... all the way, careful..."

Hands grasped my shoulders and turned me on my back so I was staring up at the peach-colored sky. It was a deeper hue now, the pinkish red of sunset. I couldn't believe I had lain there that long, that it was now almost dusk. I wondered why my teammates had been so slow in working their way up the cliff face and why I hadn't frozen to death by the time they got there.

"... sealer..."

"... spray it on, hurry up..."

A face loomed over me, the first I could remember having seen all day. A woman, not old but not too young, her face distorted by the curvature of her helmet. She looked worried.

"... hear me..."

Her voice bellowed in my ears. I tried to nod. Ripples of something cloudy washed over my helmet and froze in thick, opaque smears. The hissing inside my suit faded. I could hear my own breathing again, ragged and deep. I also began to feel warmer as my life-support systems started to catch up.

"... on his side... have to try his arm or his buttocks... careful..."

Another shift and my cloudy helmet turned dark. I felt the suit bump against the rocks and promptly voided what was left in my bladder. They had turned me the wrong way so I was lying on my broken arm. I screamed with pain, though it came out more like a squeak. Somebody held the left leg of my suit and there was a brief prick as a hypodermic needle was shoved through the suit's disconnect, just below my bum.

"...don't know if I got it... have to try the arm, too..."

"... we're losing him..."

There was another prick through a shoulder disconnect. A moment later I couldn't feel anything from my neck on down.

"... internal injuries, heavy bleeding... he won't make it back to the Lander..."

"... he can hear you..."

"... then he's in better shape than..."

"... shut up..."

The inside of my suit was now warm and comfortable. I drifted off into a world that had suddenly turned vague. I didn't feel it at all when they lifted me up and carried me to the Rover.

I was unconscious during most of the bumpy trip along the dry creekbed to pick up the others, jerking back to awareness only when they hoisted me into the Lander. Once they put me down to get better grip on my suit and something tore inside my arm. There was a sudden spurt of warmth and I cried out again.

I was bleeding to death, didn't they realize that?

I had a hazy impression of a control room jammed with banks of finger switches and amber readout screens. My rescuers stretched me out on an acceleration couch and the four of them huddled over me.

"... helmet..."

One of them worked the thumb locks on my neck disconnect, then lifted off the plastic bubble. There was a rush of air as the pressure equalized. The air inside the Lander was warm and smelled of sweat but at least it wasn't laced with the acrid stink of piss.

A woman stared down at me, her helmet off. She was the same one who had inspected me at the bottom of the scarp. A meaty face, gray eyes, brows heavy enough to have been daubed on with greasepaint, short black hair, and the same worried look she'd had before. Tears glistened on her cheeks and I wondered vaguely what I meant to her or she to me.

Her voice was harsh, commanding. "Get his suit off—hurry it up but don't kill him."

My body had been numbed by drugs but it still hurt when they shelled me out of my cocoon of permacloth and metal. The woman knelt on the deck beside me and ran her hands over the bloody inner-weave, testing for broken bones with the expertise of a surgeon.

"Compound fracture of the left humerus, torn brachial artery—strip off the weave and get some tourniquets."

I gazed at the overhead, only half conscious, indifferent to the cold metal of the automatic shears against my skin as they cut through the cloth and tubing. One of the crewmen started to adjust a pressure bandage on my arm and I turned my head to watch him. He had slipped out of his suit and inner-weave, kneeling naked on the deck as he worked with the sticky-cloth.

He looked about nineteen, perhaps twenty. High cheekbones, a large mouth, pale skin, pale hair chopped at the shoulder, pale eyes that masked whatever he was thinking, and a thin, hairless body that looked more agile than strong. There was a delicacy about him that had eluded his teammates and he was cursed with the type of prettiness that some young men have before all the cartilage and baby fat turn to bone and gristle. He wrinkled his nose.

"He stinks."

The woman bent down for another quick inspection. "Clean him up. Strap on an IV pump, cover him with blankets, and lock him in."

The pale eyes made a judgment. "He won't make it to Inbetween Station." I wondered how he knew but there were no clues on that pale face.

They rolled me on my side. Another crewman—thicker muscled than the first, with rough features that looked not quite finished—fumbled with some toweling, doing his best to sponge up the blood and urine that had soaked the weave around my groin. He was stubby-fingered, clumsy and close to tears.

"I think he's going to die."

The crewman with the pale hair slipped the needle end of a thin tube into a vein in the back of my hand and adjusted the flow from the pump. He nodded at the woman behind him, murmuring, "She doesn't want to hear that."

But she had, and cut in curtly, "Everybody to stations."

They slid into their control chairs and seconds later I felt the mattress beneath me harden as the Lander leaped into the sky. I started to drift again, the sensations of my body fading. If I were going to Reduction, this was a better way than most.

After a minute or two of acceleration, the couch relaxed and I knew we were floating in the dark of space. The pain had long since vanished; the only thing that still bothered me was that I couldn't put names to the faces around me. I watched them as they worked their control panels and wondered who they were. Once the woman studied me for several minutes before going back to her board. Her expression was one of deep sadness and loss. I moved slightly on the acceleration couch just to reassure her that I was still alive.

The crewman who had sponged away the blood and urine, and another whom I hadn't noticed before—smaller and faintly apprehensive—were busy with their instrument panels. The first glanced back several times to check on me. The other only looked at me once, embarrassed for someone who was dying.

It was obvious they all knew me. I didn't know them at all.

The crewman with the pale hair was busy punching in calculations at his computer console. It was half an hour before he swiveled around to stare at me. I remember thinking he was more than just pretty, he was beautiful. But I didn't like him and I knew he didn't like me. For just a moment the pale eyes flared with feeling and he silently mouthed a few words.

What he said was: "*I hope you die.*"

I didn't know whether it was a hope or a threat or a statement of fact—my mind was too fogged to make much sense of it or even to feel much reaction. What worried me was not so much that I might die but that I might die not knowing who the other crew members were.

Or who I was.

Then the control room and those in it faded away. I wasn't aware of it when we transferred to Inbetween Station; I had drifted into unconsciousness and the first of many nightmares.

In my dreams, I relived every second spent in exploration that morning, starting from the moment I stepped on the first rung of the ladder and climbed down to the surface of the planet. There was something before then—not much. I was in a metal coffin with my arms folded across my chest, staring through the clear plastic lid at a jungle of thick, silvery worms that were reaching out for me. Behind them were faces, hundreds of faces. The most vivid was that of the woman who had been in charge of the exploration team below. Another was of a man with a faint smile and sardonic eyes who could see into my very soul—a cold man in a trim black uniform who frightened me more than the worms.

More than once I woke from the nightmares screaming and sweating and had to be sponged off by the nurse. "Drink this," was all I remembered her saying, though I know she talked to me frequently and even held me when I woke up shaking. She was a soft woman; everything about her was soft—her face, her hands, her olive-colored skin, her voice...

If she had been a hard woman, I would have died.

She was young, her chubby sixteen-year-old's body covered by a white waistcloth and a thin halter. I worried that her youth meant I was so close to death an experienced nurse would have been wasted on me. But I didn't worry all that much. Most of the time I slept, lost in my nightmares.

Then one time period I woke up and stayed awake. I was in a sick bay with the railings on my bed raised and thin plastic straps holding me down so I couldn't float off. There were other patients in the compartment, maybe a dozen all told. Several had IV pumps dripping fluid into their veins like I did and I assumed they were crewmen from other exploration teams.

A transparent glassteel partition blocked off an operating theater that was a forest of polished machinery. The bulkheads, the deck, and the overhead gleamed with soft white light from glow tubes inset where the bulkheads and the overhead met. Brightly colored anatomy charts enameled on one of the bulkheads were illuminated by light panels set to either side. Just beyond the hatchway's shadow screen I could see a corridor, alive with crewmen, that seemed to stretch for kilometers, the end of it fading into the distance.

The ship was *huge*.

Mounted directly over my bed was a small screen with pictures constantly flickering across it—entertainment, I supposed, though I seldom had enough interest or energy to try and make sense of the images.

But the real show was on the other side of the three large ports in the exterior bulkhead. From my bed, I watched the stars wheel slowly past and caught an occasional glimpse of a planet's surface far beneath us. I gradually realized the ship was in orbit over a world a thousand kilometers below.

"Drink this," my child-nurse said once again.

She handed me a drink bulb filled with a grayish liquid. I sucked on its plastic tubing and tried to keep from gagging.

"What's your name?" I mumbled.

"Pipit." Behind her smile, her expression was watchful and curious. It would have made another girl look sly, but on Pipit it only made me less sure of her age.

"What's mine?"

She didn't answer, but leaned closer to stroke my forehead with her soft hands. "Shush," she

whispered. "It'll come back to you."

Then one sleep period, when the sick bay was dark, somebody woke me up, murmured, "Down the hatch," and held a drinking tube to my mouth. But the voice didn't sound like Pipit's and the hands didn't feel like Pipit's. I twisted away, crying. The hands became more insistent, trying to push the tube into my mouth. I fought back, calling faintly for help and flailing at my enemy, too weak to do much damage but strong enough to keep the tube away from my lips. I suspected that if I swallowed the liquid in the bulb, I would never wake up.

Then whoever it was, was gone and Pipit was cradling me in her arms, calming my pounding heart. She asked me who had been there but I hadn't seen their face. Exhaustion finally closed my eyes and I slept once again. There were more dreams and nightmares, mixed with brief periods of wakefulness. The woman on the Lander came to see me often and I had distinct memories of the pale-skinned crewman leaning over the bed rails. He watched me for hours, his pale eyes as speculative as they had been on board the Lander.

He said nothing at all.

Once Pipit showed up hand in hand with the crewman who had been so clumsy and so concerned for me aboard the Lander. He wasn't wearing cling-tite sandals and had to grip the side rails so a sudden movement wouldn't push him halfway across the compartment.

"How do you feel?"

I remembered the harsh planes and angles of his face but I had forgotten the long brown hair that swirled about his head like a halo, lending him a grace his features lacked. But I didn't pay much attention to him—I was watching Pipit work the meal dispenser at the far end of the compartment and thinking how hungry I was. Then I blinked back to my visitor.

I didn't know his name but guessed he had come to see me because we had once been friends.

"Where am I?"

He looked worried. "On board the *Astron*."

"The *Astron*," I mumbled. It sounded familiar. "Who are you?"

He didn't bother masking his disappointment; he had wanted badly for me to remember.

"Crow."

Once he said it, I recognized the name, but that was all.

"Thank you," I said.

He looked blank.

"For your help on the Lander."

Pipit now drifted over and fastened a meal tray to the side rails. I pried off the plastic covering with my good arm and sniffed the steam from the meat and the thick, gooey gravy that held it to the plate. I filled a scoop spoon and swallowed a mouthful, enjoying the lingering taste of the gravy. Then I promptly vomited.

I lay back, turning my face away as Crow frantically tried to catch the floating brown globules with the loose end of his waistcloth. Whatever other purposes Crow had in life, apparently one of them was to clean up after me.

He looked down at me, stricken. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Go away," I said, and pulled the sheet over my face, too ashamed to talk any more and too filled with an envy that neither he nor Pipit would ever understand.

The memories of their sixteen or eighteen years filled their heads like sugar in a bowl. But I had no memories. For all practical purposes, I had been born a few weeks before. I had no recollections of a mother or a father or a brother or a sister or friends or enemies or lovers. The only memories I possessed were those of the planet below, the Lander, and my nightmares in sick bay.

They weren't nearly enough.

Pipit was always there now, usually with several small children who fingered the bedding and studied me with a grave curiosity. When she wasn't attending me—she never seemed to nurse the other patients at all—Pipit played with the youngsters as they floated about the compartment. She seemed to enjoy the role of older sister or surrogate mother and she was very good at it. She anticipated what the children were going to do before they did it, even plucking them out of the air to hold them over the vacuum of a waste chute when they needed it.

I discovered later it wasn't nearly as simple as motherly anticipation.

Finally, one time period when I awoke, the tube was gone. Pipit was waiting for me with a bowl and a scoop spoon, her chubby face starched with a grim determination.

"You'll have to keep this down." Her voice was surprisingly hard.

She fed me a mouthful of porridge. When it started to come back up, she clamped my mouth shut with her hands until the spasm passed and I had swallowed both the porridge and the bile that had risen with it. After ten minutes of turmoil, my stomach no longer had the strength to rebel. Several meals later, I was eating solids.

It wasn't many time periods after that when Pipit floated into the compartment, trailed by two more visitors. Both were old men wearing white halters, both had a caduceus stenciled on each shoulder, and both carried writing slates tucked in their sashes.

One was fat and bald and red-faced and looked as if he had better things to do. The other was thinner, more awkward in his movements, his eyes bright behind a pair of ancient spectacles whose wire frames had been wrapped and rewrapped with tape.

At my bedside, the fat one dropped three magnetic lines to anchor himself, folding his plump legs beneath him. He studied the instruments set in the bed's headboard, clamped chubby fingers around my wrist, and took my pulse by hand, obviously lacking faith in the automatic readouts. His grip had the clammy feel that too much flesh always seems to have.

I looked up at the thin one and mumbled, "Where am I?"

"On board the *Astron*—didn't Crow tell you?"

"He didn't tell me what it was," I said, sullen.

He gave me a reassuring smile. "The *Astron*'s an exploration ship, interstellar. So far as we know, the only one. From Earth." Somehow I knew that, though I knew nothing about the planet itself.

Both of them waited expectantly for me to ask something more. The thin one was patient, his smile bright. The fat one was nervous, frowning and plucking absently at his sash to let me know his time was valuable. I guessed that both of them were acting, that the thin one was really impatient and that

there was no other place the fat one would rather have been.

"I'm Noah," the thin one offered. "My friend here is Abel. They're names from the Bible."

It surprised me that I knew what the Bible was.

"They're just names," I said, still sulky. "Who are you?"

Abel glanced at Noah, then back at me, annoyed with both of us. Noah smiled again, patiently playing the game. "We're the ship's doctors. Abel is a body doctor. I'm more concerned with the mind. But that isn't what you wanted to ask, is it?"

I was reluctant to answer. I had no memories, no name, and no knowledge of the *Astron* or my relationship to it, and that made me the most vulnerable person in the compartment.

"Who am I?" I finally asked.

Noah looked secretive and nodded to Pipit. She closed the shadow screen so we were alone with the other patients, none of whom were paying any attention to us. Noah and Abel hunched closer to the bedside while Pipit lingered a discreet distance away.

"Who—"

Abel interrupted, peevish. "It would be better if you told us."

"I don't know," I said, turning my face away so they couldn't see my anger. "If I did, I wouldn't have asked."

"You don't remember," Abel corrected. He leaned closer, his breath heavy with reminders of his dinner. "Look at me," he said curtly. "It makes it easier if I can see the eyes of the person I'm talking to."

Whoever I was, I was young. You used that tone on boys, you didn't use it on men.

"I don't remember," I repeated, even more surly.

Abel snorted in disgust and glanced at Noah. "I told Huldah it would be no use," he muttered. "We're wasting our time with dangerous business."

Noah ignored him, his eyes huge behind lenses that were so full of scratches they were almost opaque. They went well with the antique spacesuits but not with the highly polished technology of the operating room beyond.

"Tell me what you do remember. Go as far back as you can."

I told him about exploring the planet below, about falling from the face of the scarp, and about my teammates who had carried me back to the Lander.

"Nobody ever called you by name?"

I shook my head.

"You don't remember anything before climbing down the ladder?"

For just a moment I stood before a door behind which were crowded all the memories I could no longer recall.

"I started down the ladder," I said. "I caught my foot, then I was on the surface and..." There was something more but it vanished quickly. "I've told you everything since then."

"We're wasting our time," Abel complained once more to Noah. But he made no move to leave.

"It's a form of amnesia," Noah said, watching me closely. "Retrograde amnesia. You remember the accident and what you did after stepping off the ladder. Before then it's... gone. The obvious cause was the fall from the scarp. It came very close to killing you."

"My memories will come back?" I asked.

He and Abel shared a brief glance, then Noah tried to reassure me.

"Memory loss is usually selective. You haven't forgotten how to talk, you'll relearn how to get around the ship, you'll start to remember a lot of little things. The first memories to return are those closest to the trauma. You'll remember more experiences and one will lead to another." He hesitated. "If the condition persists, we can always try hypnosis or drugs."

There was no hint of guile on his face but his voice was full of it. My memories were gone—probably for good—and, for reasons of his own, he was as bitterly disappointed as I was.

"Who am I?" I cried once more.

There was no more pretense at reassurance; that game was over. "Somewhere inside, you know," Noah said in a voice as full of desperation as my own.

I was tired and started drifting off to sleep. "I don't remember," I muttered.

"Somebody's coming," Pipit interrupted, her ear against the hatchway.

Noah pushed away from the bedside and Abel yanked at his magnetic anchors. I watched them as they scrambled for the shadow screen. For the first time I realized that both of them had been badly frightened all the time they were talking to me—afraid not only of the questions they were asking but of what my responses might be.

At the hatchway, Noah turned and blurted: "You're a tech assistant on board the *Astron*, You're seventeen years old. Your name is Sparrow."

Sparrow.

Unlike "Crow," the name didn't mean a thing to me.

Chapter 3

As my nightmares tapered off, I spent more of my waking hours exercising in bed and trying to talk to the other patients. Pipit never served them, though occasionally I saw one sitting on the edge of his bunk eating from a tray. There was a steady buzz of conversation as they talked to each other, and a few of them groaned with pain as they slept.

But they never looked at me or answered when I spoke. I wondered if my accident had scarred me, though my hands could find no evidence of it. I tried to catch a glimpse of my features in the polished metal of the bulkheads, but for some reason it would not yield a clear reflection of my face.

One time period I tried to strike up a conversation with the crewman in the next bunk, a man about my age who wore a cast on his right arm. He was obviously in pain and my first try was sympathetic.

"The planet took me by surprise," I said. "I guess it did you, too."

He ignored me and started talking with a friend in another bunk. Ordinarily I would have shrugged and turned away, but I had been ignored for almost a month. It finally proved too much.

I raised my voice. "You can at least say you don't want to talk to me."

He looked right through me, not acknowledging my presence at all, and began to rearrange his sheets.

"You can go to hell!" I shouted. I scrabbled about on my mattress, searching for something to throw at him.

Pipit appeared then, frowning.

"What's wrong, Sparrow?"

I turned away from her, still grumbling. I made a note to resume the conversation once we were out of sick bay—but then, I would do my talking with my fists.

Eventually I gave up trying to communicate with my fellow patients and concentrated on Pipit as she played with the youngsters. Once it sounded like she was holding class. I stayed awake to listen as the children chanted their "begats."

"Cuzco was begat by Ibis who was begat by Ophelia who was begat by Wrasse who was begat..."

Cuzco was perhaps three years old, a little girl who laughed a lot and was one of Pipit's favorites, though in reality they were all her favorites. I had no idea who Ibis was until I met a thin, nervous woman, a little older than Pipit, who was her coconspirator in farming a secret spice plot in Hydroponics. Ophelia was the woman who had been in charge of the exploration team on Seti IV, the planet where I'd had my accident, a planet now light-weeks behind us in the void.

The mothers usually picked up their children after shift. They were greeted with squeals of delight but few of the children failed to wave good-bye to Pipit and some were reluctant to leave at all. It was Pipit who kissed it and made it well when they bumped themselves floating around the compartment, it was Pipit who hugged them when they needed it most, and it was Pipit who entertained them with simple fairy tales before nap time...

Crow and Ophelia still came to see me, but for Ophelia it had become more professional than personal; whatever deep concern she had felt for me on board the Lander had withered as I grew stronger. On the other hand, Crow seemed less formal and more open, joking and talking with me as he might have with any crew member. Occasionally I caught a wistful look and was reminded that when I had lost my memories, both he and Ophelia had lost someone close to them, someone I doubted that I could ever replace. Or ever know.

Then the time arrived when Pipit lowered the rails, untied the straps, and pulled me over to the shower stall.

"You smell," she said primly. "You need a bath."

She helped me strip off the bandages, then pushed me into the cubicle and scrubbed my back—hard—as the water jetted out to be sucked up by the intake vacuum.

Nudity didn't bother her, though I was painfully aware of her naked body and olive skin. I bit my lip in a vain attempt to prevent the eventual erection. She ignored it and finally I did, too. It obligingly went away. At the same time I resented the fact that after numerous sponge baths she knew my body as well as her own. The baths and her touch had become a source of erotic pleasure for me: I resented

that, too.

She finished vacuuming the water off my back, then handed me a clean waistcloth. There was a mirror just outside the shower stall—it had been steamed over when I entered—and I wiped it with a corner of the cloth. For the first time in my "life" I saw myself.

I thought I was very handsome.

I was thinner than Crow and looked older—I didn't think by much. I was neither as tall nor as muscular, though there was no hint of adolescent babyfat. I had thick auburn hair, a reddish beard, and a straggling moustache. My eyes were a light green. Sometime in the past my nose had been broken, though I was convinced it made me look romantic. My skin was white even for someone with reddish hair—I hadn't spent much time under the sick-bay health lamps—and my shoulders were slightly hunched. I had a flat stomach, big hands and feet, and a curly mat of rust-colored fuzz on my chest. My fingers were spatulate, though the rest of me looked normal enough.

My name is Sparrow; I'm seventeen years old and a tech assistant on board the Astron.

I was vastly pleased with myself.

"Everything's there," Pipit said matter-of-factly. "I checked."

She had read my every thought. In the mirror, my face turned pink.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself," I grunted. I slipped the cloth up and around my waist and knotted it, realizing a moment later that whatever else I had forgotten, I hadn't forgotten how to do *that*.

Pipit took off her cling-tites and slipped them beneath her waistcloth. Then she switched off the shadow screen over the hatchway.

"Would you like to see the ship?"

I looked at the brilliantly lit corridor just beyond and watched the crewmen jostling each other as they floated down it, eventually to be lost in the distance.

I wanted to see the ship very badly.

We drifted through the hatch into the passageway outside, lined with color-coded piping that served as directions to the various living and working quarters. Names and assignments ran in a continuous illuminated strip along the bottom of the overhead. Pipit grabbed a ring jutting out from the bulkhead and pushed herself along, braking the same way.

"Do exactly as I do," she said. "It's more difficult than it looks."

But it wasn't—it was something I had done before and it didn't take me long to relearn it.

On that first tour, the *Astron* was a world spread over a dozen different levels, with compartments filled with gleaming machinery and passageways that went on forever. Pipit showed me the machine shops where they worked on maintaining the equipment, the enormous hangar deck for Inbetween Station and the Lander plus the balloon and submarine probes, then took me through the various tech shops where I saw exploration suits and support gear hanging in neat rows along the partitions.

I even caught a glimpse of a crowded mess compartment with crewmen eating at stainless-steel tables and working in the galley. None of them glanced up when I paused in the hatchway to watch, reminding me of the patients in sick bay. Pipit finally nudged me away, saying that most of the

divisions, my own included, had their personal mess.

The next stop was Communications, a large, gleaming compartment jammed with radio equipment and a dozen personnel too busy to pay much attention to us. On the bulkhead outside was a clipboard with a sheaf of the latest weekly messages from a remote Earth printed on crisp plastic sheets. I glanced at one or two, brief summaries of politics and economics, and then Pipit was tugging me away.

Hydroponics was in the after portion of the ship. I stared openmouthed at the troughs of green plants racked from deck to overhead in rows that stretched for hundreds of meters. Pipit motioned me to follow her and floated toward a distant section of the compartment, where some plant troughs were hidden beneath the nutrient piping. She pinched off a leaf, crushed it in her fingers, and held them out for me to smell. The fragrance made my nose itch.

"Mint," she said, reaching over to break off a leaf from another plant. "Anise." She put her fingers to my lips. "Don't tell."

She shot off and I trailed after, still bemused by the different smells on her fingertips.

In the stern, I was awestruck by the huge water-filled pool, blue with Cherenkov radiation, that housed the ship's Locke-Austin fusion engines. The compartment was three levels high, and I spent several minutes gawking at the nearly naked technicians, protected by their shields, hovering around the huge machinery. Then Pipit tugged at me once again, saying it was time to go.

The crew's quarters were small cubicles off the main corridors, subdivided by shadow screens into living spaces for families or singles. All of them were filled with comfortable foam furniture and magnetic tapestries that clung to the bulkheads. I wanted to stop and talk to the crew members I saw inside but Pipit shook her head, frowning.

"There's too much to see," she protested.

A number of the crewmen in the passageways wore clear plastic masks that covered their eyes and ears. I supposed they worked in the drive chamber, where the glare of the lights was almost blinding. Unlike the crewmen in the mess hall, several of them nodded and called me by name. I wondered how well I had known them and if we had ever worked together.

One crowded passageway was filled with flickering lights, flashing signs, and colored cloth awnings at which I stared, fascinated.

"It's the ship's bazaar," Pipit said, uneasy.

I took a closer look and decided this was where crew members traded or sold articles they no longer desired or objects they had made. I wanted to see what was for sale but Pipit clung to my arm, shaking her head.

"You're doing too much," she warned. "It's time to go back."

I was tired, but not *that* tired, and Pipit's concern had begun to irritate me. I dodged past her down the corridor, losing myself among the awnings and the piles of goods and crowds of crewmen.

But even though the shelves were piled high with bolts of cloth, musical instruments, toys, and bedding, the counters themselves were nearly bare. There wasn't much actually for sale—two or three books of thin plastic sheets, some tiny hangings knotted from colored string, a slate similar to the one Noah and Abel carried tucked inside their waist-cloths...

What finally caught my eye was a bookseller's stall. I fingered an ancient volume of poetry lying alone on the counter. ~~The book was beautiful, the print on the plastic pages still crisp and black.~~ I leafed quickly through it, entranced by the words that danced before my eyes.

"How much is this?" I asked the old woman who was selling it. The shelf behind her was thick with volumes but she was only willing to part with the one thin book of poems.

"A thousand hours," she murmured. "I can't read it anymore." For the first time, I noticed the cataracts that clouded her eyes. They shouldn't have been a problem, not considering the equipment in the infirmary.

Pipit caught up with me and clutched my shoulder. "We should go back," she warned again. "It's time to go back."

I laughed and darted down the corridor. When I spotted a hatchway, I dove through it—and suddenly had to catch my breath. I was at the hub of what looked like a gigantic wheel slowly turning around me. Crew members stood on the distant rim, working with exercise apparatus. Handholds on the rotating bulkhead led to the rim and I grabbed at the nearest one, eager to see what the crew members were doing.

I had no idea I would be among them so soon. I clung for a moment to my handhold; then it was torn from my grasp and I fell to the rim. I clutched at the handholds as they flashed by, breaking my fall, then flattened out on the deck at the bottom, staring up at the oblong hatchway twisting round and round far above my head.

I now had weight and found it difficult to move. My breathing was labored and I could sense that my heart was under a strain.

"You managed to find the gymnasium," I heard Pipit say behind me. Then, with less sarcasm and more concern: "You ready to go back now?"

I nodded weakly and she helped me to my feet.

"Easy does it," a voice said. I turned to find Crow steadying me. His skin was shiny with sweat, his eyes as worried as Pipit's. Others had stopped their workouts with the spring-bars and the exercise cycles to stare at me. I felt foolish, even more so when I noticed the pale-faced crewman among them. Crow and Pipit helped me back up to the hatch. My body ached where I had struck the handholds on the way down and I winced with every movement.

Reentering sick bay, I forgot to brake. I grabbed frantically at something to stop myself, then crossed my arms in front of my face as I sailed toward one of the beds close to my own. I braced myself for a jarring collision with the patient in it, my mouth already forming apologies.

The bed and its occupant turned out to be as insubstantial as the air itself. I didn't stop until I struck the opposite bulkhead, slipping through two more beds and their patients. They winked out of existence as I passed through, then flickered back into view as I receded.

I froze, concentrating on the other patients as they talked among themselves or sat on the edges of their cots while they ate their meals. None of them seemed aware of my sudden entrance or, as usual, that I even existed. I reached out to touch the nearest one and my hand passed through him with no resistance whatsoever.

I had watched them for weeks but never noticed their obvious lack of reality. They slept in beds with no restraints to hold them in, they ate from standard food trays and they sat as flat upon their

mattresses as if the sick bay were planet-bound.

I glared at Pipit, then made the connection with the crewmen in the corridor who had been wearing masks.

"Give me a mask," I said in a voice blurred by anger.

A dozen strips of transparent plastic were tied to a nearby bulkhead peg and Pipit handed me one without a word. I clipped it around my head, staring openmouthed as the familiar surroundings disappeared.

The sick bay was actually a small, almost empty compartment that held half a dozen beds. I was the only patient. The bulkheads were dull and oily looking; I could never have seen my reflection in any of them. The deck was a beaten sheet of metal worn by the passage of generations of magnetic sandals. A few of the glow tubes flickered where the bulkheads and the overhead met; two of them had burned out. The anatomy charts were discolored and chipped; one light panel was broken, the other was dark.

There was no glassteel partition through which I could see banks of shining machinery in a spotless operating theater. In fact, there was no operating theater. Nor were there any ports through which I could stare at the stars or watch a planet revolving majestically a thousand kilometers below.

I had been looking at the ship as it once had been, not as it was now. Beneath the images formed by the intersecting planes of light, the *Astron* was *old*, old past anything I could imagine.

Pipit stood there, biting her lip as she searched for words to calm me. I ignored her and dove for the outer passageway.

On my tour with Pipit, the ship had been spacious and clean, sparkling with chrome and stainless steel. Now it was ancient and cramped, the passageways shorter, the compartments tiny, the bulkheads stained with blotches of rust. The sight and feel and taste of aging metal was everywhere; the stink of oil was like a fog. I wondered why I hadn't noticed it before, then realized my eyes had blinded my other senses—I hadn't smelled the stench or noticed that the bulkheads were damp with generations of human sweat.

Communications was a small, cluttered compartment with three crewmen who stared at me curiously, then went back to idly checking their instruments. A writing slate with the latest communication from Earth—a brief message of encouragement—scrawled on it, hung on the bulkhead outside. It was dated from the year before.

The racks of hydroponic tubs were real, though not nearly as extensive as I remembered. The plants were just as green, but some of the grow lights were dim and others had burned out. The compartment that housed the fusion drive, while still huge, seemed smaller than before. There was no mess hall, no files of crewmen waiting in line to be served, no galley filled with gleaming bake ovens and ranges. Where it had been was a small, empty compartment that contained no odors of cooking, no crumbs of food.

The old woman was still in the now-bare corridor selling her one precious volume. There was no shelf behind her jammed with other books. She looked at me with pity peeking out from behind the clouded lenses of her eyes. I felt the same for her—the *Astron* held neither the equipment nor the knowledge to heal her sight.

On the way back, I glanced into several of the living cubicles, now devoid of their rich tapestries and elegant furniture. They were tiny cells, equipped with string hammocks, an occasional worn

plastic table, a shelf attached to a bulkhead... There was very little else.

I braked more expertly when I entered sick bay this time and yanked off my eye mask. The ports and stars promptly reappeared, as did the compartment beyond with its make-believe machinery. My fellow patients went on about their business, as oblivious of me now as they had been before. I held the mask before my eyes and once again was alone with Pipit.

I was seventeen years old, I thought bitterly, a youthful mariner on an ancient ship bound for God only knew where.

Pipit winced at the expression on my face. "You've forgotten the compartment falsies," she said. Then she burst into tears.

I was young and cried too easily, but this time tears were beyond me.

Chapter 4

I spent two more time periods in sick bay, most of it undergoing tests by Abel, who apparently wanted to make sure that my broken bones were healed and I was fit for duty. He poked and prodded, full of unconvincing "hmmms" and variations of "Does it hurt?" I was wearing the mask over my eyes and ears but neither he nor Noah mentioned it.

"You're healthy," Abel finally grunted. "You're well enough to work so you can earn what you eat."

I resented his attitude, resented the ship, and was full of sarcasm. "I'm your only patient but you seem to eat well enough."

Noah smothered a grin but Abel's plump features hardened with outrage.

"Nobody gets sick on board the *Astron*, they just grow old. Do you want to blame me for that?"

"We work at many tasks," Noah sighed. "Be patient with us, Sparrow. And with yourself." He meant well but I was too newly cynical to appreciate it.

The next time period Pipit told me that I had been reassigned to Exploration. I was to report there immediately.

There was nothing to pack; my waistcloth was my sole possession. I hesitated outside the hatchway. Pipit beside me, not knowing how to say good-bye. I hadn't spoken to her since I had discovered the real *Astron* and accused her of deliberately deceiving me. I recalled too late how she had probably saved my life. I flushed and turned away; I wanted to thank her but a seventeen-year-old's shyness had made me mute.

Pipit was smarter and more compassionate than I was. She said, "I hope your memories come back Sparrow," kissed me lightly on the cheek, and ducked back inside the shadow screen. I was left with my apologies dying on my lips.

It was the end of a shift and the passageways were filled with crewmen hurrying to their living cubicles or to the various shops. They were naked except for their waistcloths, color-coded for the division in which they worked, and their instrument belts. Like the caduceuses worn by Noah and Abel, their specialty insignia were stenciled on their shoulders. A few of them called out to me, but the children playing in the side corridors stared in silence as I drifted by.

I was a man without a past, a freak, and everybody knew it. I anticipated being pitied or patronized and was prepared for it.

I wasn't prepared for the reality.

Exploration was three levels down and I slipped in unnoticed. The first time I had seen the compartment, it had looked neat and scrupulously clean, the equipment racked in tidy rows against the bulkheads or strapped down in military files along the deck:

Everything was still tightly secured but now the compartment reeked of age, the dust hard-packed the corners, the ancient exploration suits still holding the shape of the crew members who had worn them last. It was already crowded with tech assistants like myself and the stink in the air was a thick stench of sweat and herbal perfume.

Ophelia had placed a star chart on the bulkhead and stood over it, pointing to various areas as she talked. Her bored audience hung from cluttered work tables or bulkhead rings like so many bats in a cave. I pushed my way past racks of ancient life-support gear and small heaps of motor parts covered with a dense frosting of dust and grease. There was an abandoned Rover in the corner, gaping wounds showing where it had been cannibalized for parts. I drifted over and sprawled out on its one good seat.

I stole a quick glance at Crow and his friend who had been with him on board the Lander, both perched nearby. Neither had noticed me. A few meters away, in another Rover lacking both wheels and a rear seat, a tech assistant my age dutifully stared at Ophelia with the unblinking gaze of one who is sound asleep. Next to me, hidden by a row of ancient exploration suits, a young machinist's mate explored other interests with a girl, both of them oblivious of my stare.

The crewman who had once wished me dead, and who had spent hours in sick bay studying me, slouched against the far bulkhead. I would have recognized him by his pale skin alone, skin so fine and free of hair that you could see the twitching of the individual muscles beneath. He chewed on a fingernail, ignoring Ophelia and watching me. I looked away but I could feel the hair on the back of my neck ripple.

I forced myself to forget the others and concentrated hard on what Ophelia was saying. There would be landing drills on the hangar deck, equipment familiarization, required attendance in the rotating gymnasium so we could adapt to a gravity-plus environment, and an endless list of lectures on possible planetary flora and fauna.

All of this would take up a major fraction of our lives, Ophelia assured us. We were coming up on Aquinas, which had at least one planet in the CHZ—the continuously habitable zone surrounding the primary. As we approached it and the spectrometers picked up more information, the drills would become increasingly intense and specific. The estimated time of arrival was expected to be eight months.

Eight months!

Too soon, I thought, startled. Even traveling at near light speed since leaving Seti IV, it was still too soon. Planetary systems didn't occur that close together...

"That's all," Ophelia suddenly announced. "Same time, same place two shifts from now. Sleepers will draw extra duty—your names will be posted."

There was a collective groan. My fellow techs broke for the corridor, heading for their living quarters, the gymnasium, or the division mess.

"Duncan," a voice suddenly said. An older, thin-faced engineer had drifted up to pump my hand. "Gannet," a young woman offered, with just the right amount of reserve and interest. Next was Roc, a chubby electronics expert with a nervous smile, then Crow's cocky little friend with the crooked grin and the cracked voice, who slapped my back, laughing when I jumped. "Loon—glad you're back, Sparrow." He had been a lot more restrained on board the Lander but that was when he had thought I was dying.

Most of the others filed up after him, with the pale-skinned crewman last in line. He was taller than I by a centimeter or two and looked in his early twenties. His skin had an odor that was vaguely pleasant, like the spices Pipit had crushed with her fingers. His pale eyes were steady and open, though I still couldn't read what was behind them. He shook my hand before I could pull it back.

"I'm glad you survived," he said. "My name is Thrush." His voice was husky and smooth as heavy silk.

I stared, uncertain how to react, while he searched my face, reading the state of my health with more accuracy than Abel ever had. I was still physically weak and psychologically vulnerable, and he knew it. He touched me lightly on the shoulder, then turned and dove down the passageway. A few meters away, he twisted into a graceful somersault, glancing back to flash a broad smile.

"Welcome back, Sparrow!" The words trailed after him like a ribbon of velvet.

I was still staring when behind me Ophelia said sharply, "Sparrow."

I grabbed a ring and spun around. Ophelia's eyes were narrow and faintly hostile, her voice brusque. "You've got a lot of catching up to do. You'll have to do most of it on your own but Tybalt will help you and so will I. If you need assistance, ask—you'll be disciplined if you don't."

It was more of a command than an offer. She didn't wait for an answer. I watched her as she left, her muscular legs kicking hard against the bulkhead when she rounded a corner. She was almost a matron but still an impressive woman, one that I admired in the same way you might admire a beautiful painting or a piece of sculpture.

Only Loon and Crow were left. I guessed that Crow had been assigned to keep an eye on me and suddenly felt irritated. I didn't need a keeper or a bodyguard.

"Ophelia asked you to watch out for me, didn't she?"

He looked hurt.

"I volunteered, Sparrow. And it's not to watch out for you, it's to show you around."

I recalled his clumsy concern for me on board the Lander and felt ashamed.

"I don't know where I live," I admitted.

His smile was quick. "Friends?"

I nodded and felt the chip slide off my shoulder. He laughed, hit me on the arm, then turned and shot down the corridor, followed by Loon. I sailed after them, leapfrogging over their shoulders when I caught up and almost panicking when Crow nearly collided with the metal deck. He caught a ring to slow himself and we continued to chase each other down three levels and over two decks, ignoring the annoyed shouts from crewmen in the more dimly lit passageways where some of the glow tubes had burned out. As adept as Crow and Loon were in flying through the corridors, I surprised myself by being even better.

They finally braked to a halt in front of a small, shadow-screened compartment halfway down a short corridor. "This is ours," Crow panted. "You're next door. Come on in."

I followed them through the shadow screen into a cubicle much like the ones I had seen before. There was a worn plastic pad sealed to the deck, a narrow ledge that jutted out from the bulkhead to hold an ancient palm terminal, a wider ledge that served as a table, and two string hammocks that were stowed on hooks next to a small locker. On the other side of the locker was an exercise rig of springs and cables. Judging by Crow's arms and shoulders, he used it often.

The opposite bulkhead was covered with a large foam model of an Earth-like canyon and above it a slate painting of a stream and a forest clearing. Both were exquisitely done.

Loon rummaged around in the locker for a battered harmonica and settled in a corner, hooking his feet through a floor ring. He watched me, curious, while he quietly played scales. He was a little more reserved than Crow—wary of me and protective of his friend.

Crow used the end of his waistcloth to wipe the sweat from his chest. "Take off your eye mask, Sparrow, I want to show you something."

I hesitated. I had been lied to once, I didn't want to be lied to again.

Crow shrugged.

"You want to wear your mask forever, go right ahead—but you'll go crazy looking at the same things all your life." He searched for the right words, trying to make me understand what Pipit hadn't been able to. "You're not on a sailing ship, Sparrow. If you want to see something different, you can't stare at the sky and watch the clouds change shape." He grinned and patted the terminal. "Besides, you've never seen it and I want to show it off."

Loon put down his harmonica, expectant. I unsnapped my mask. The falsie for the cubicle was a shock, though the first thing that struck me was the low murmur of music.

"It took us a long time," Crow said proudly.

The compartment was now a spacious room with huge windows overlooking a square two stories below. The windows were open, "sunlight" streaming in from a recessed glow tube and lace curtains moving in a breeze that really wasn't there. It was a nice touch. The painting of the clearing and the model of the canyon still hugged the far wall but now there were colorful tiles on the deck, an eating nook where the table ledge was, and a recessed pit holding a bed whose level was the same as that of the deck mat. There were overstuffed chairs, a swinging sofa suspended from the overhead in the same position as the hammock, and a large screen in the corner, alive with swirling colors.

They could sleep on the mat or in their hammocks, eat off the table or use the screen as a terminal for the ship's computer. There was little they might do that would spoil the illusion. I followed Crow over to the "windows."

"They called it St. Mark's Square," he said, filled with enthusiasm for his own creation. "Don't ask me who St. Mark was."

The plaza below was thick with flocks of birds and with pedestrians threading their way past them. Just beyond were an ancient bell tower and a canal with small boats bobbing on the choppy waves. Each boat carried several passengers and had a boatman manning an oar in the stern. In the far distance, several rocket trails marked the location of the local spaceport.

Crow had even included background sounds of birds pecking their jerky way over the stones of the

square, the distant rumble of the rockets, and the muted murmur of people talking.

"Loon did the sound," Crow added.

"It fits," I said.

Loon winked at me. "I didn't think he'd mention it."

I turned to Crow, accusing. "The two of you had help."

Crow nodded, pleased by my doubts. "We copied it from an image in the computer's memory matrix."

He leaned out of one of the open windows and I felt a touch of vertigo before I realized he had programmed his fantasy wall a dozen centimeters in front of the real bulkhead. His movements were practiced, the illusion perfect.

"I keep wondering who owned the boats and who traveled in them," he mused. "Or if they regularly collected the bird droppings and sent them to Reduction. I think they must have, don't you?"

I had no idea. Crow sat on the window ledge and for a moment I thought the compartment had gravity.

"I wish I had lived then—and there," he said slowly. He waved at the scene outside the window. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

He was homesick for a planet he had never seen, a city that no longer existed. He stared out the window for a moment longer, then "slid" off the ledge and swung into the hammock/sofa in one practiced movement. It wasn't just that the falsie was a work of art, it was how he moved inside it.

He curled up in the hammock, laced his fingers behind his head and looked at me with a face that was a study in innocence.

"If there's anything I can tell you, Sparrow, ask me. I won't lie to you."

The moment he said he wouldn't, I knew that he would. With the best of intentions and for my own good. And because, for some reason, he was oddly anxious to please.

I hugged my chest and floated with the air currents. "You and I were good friends, weren't we?"

He nodded in confirmation.

"What was my job—what did I do?" I asked.

"You worked in Exploration with Ophelia, myself, and the others. Planetary profiles, equipment checks, team monitor for drills—that sort of thing. You were pretty good at all of them."

Which wasn't really what I wanted to know from him. I'd find out soon enough what my job description was.

"What made me different?" I said slowly. "What made me... me?"

He was suddenly hesitant, trying to translate feelings into words—or trying to figure out what was safe to say and what wasn't.

"You liked to play chess—you used to play with Noah. You liked all kinds of games. You read a lot, you were hardworking, sometimes you were funny. And you were easy to be around."

He listed more of my virtues, but there was nothing personal, nothing of substance. Did I belch aft

I ate, did I talk in my sleep, did I wait too long between showers, had we ever raided Hydroponics together? ~~Who hated me and what had I done to deserve it? And if that wasn't the right question, then who loved me? And why?~~

Maybe Crow and I hadn't known each other very well after all. But I *knew* that we had.

When he finished, I said, "We didn't find anything on Seti IV, did we?"

By now both Crow and Loon were sweaty-faced and I wondered if they would contradict each other if I asked them the same questions separately.

"On Seti IV? No, we didn't find anything, Sparrow."

How long had we stayed? I wondered. Had there been any hint that life had touched the planet, if only for a moment? I could ask Crow but I couldn't trust what he might tell me.

"My mother—she never came to sick bay."

"She died years ago," Crow said quickly.

Besides the unexpected sense of loss, there was the suspicion that he had answered too fast, that perhaps he had rehearsed his answers with Noah.

"And my father?"

"Biological?" He looked genuinely surprised. "None of us know our fathers, Sparrow—you've forgotten that." His voice suddenly caught and he turned his face toward the windows so I couldn't see his eyes. "Your father is... whoever takes an interest."

It was very quiet in the compartment now, the only noise that of the crowds and the squawking birds in the square below.

"Somebody must have taken an interest," I said desperately.

"A lot of people did." Then, even more hesitantly: "There was another casualty on Seti IV. Laertes. Volcanic eruption, the hot gases cooked him in his suit." Crow must have been there when it happened, but he said it with all the emotion of a man who had memorized it.

"He was my father?"

"He took an interest."

I clipped the mask around my face, the plastic covering my eyes and curling into my ears. The windows and the fluttering curtains disappeared, the city below vanished, the murmurs of the birds and the people stopped. The three of us were alone in a tiny cubicle with sweating bulkheads.

"I want to see where I live," I said quietly.

Crow pushed off the ledge and disappeared through the shadow screen behind him. I followed, finding myself in another small compartment not that much different from his own. A table and a mat, a hammock and a locker and half a dozen waistcloths tied to a bulkhead peg.

Plus a bookcase with twenty or more volumes.

I gently broke the slight pull of the magnetic headband that held one of them to the shelf and opened it, the plastic "paper" feeling greasy and fragile in my hands. There were volumes of fiction, more of essays and history, a few of poetry, and some technical manuals that were close to crumbling.

Books were enormously costly and I wondered how I had ever acquired them. I glanced around the

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