

HALFWAY HUMAN

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PHOENIX PICK

an imprint of



Rockville, Maryland

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ISBN: 978-1-60450-440-8

www.PhoenixPick.com
Great Science Fiction at Great Prices

Published by Phoenix Pick
an imprint of Arc Manor
P. O. Box 10339
Rockville, MD 20849-0339
www.ArcManor.com

PROLOGUE

By night, the enclave of Djenga Shana glittered, and smelled. The palaces of temptation clustered around the waystation, feeding on the nutrient wash of tourists that issued from the wayports, ripe with money and desires. The Worwha Shana, natives of the enclave, made no secret of their wish to eradicate all infidels who didn't share their odd religion; but they had no intention of doing it by violence. Instead, they provided the deadly vices that allowed the infidels to destroy themselves.

It had just rained in Djenga Shana. The streets were smeary with neon rivulets, and a steam-haze rose from hot pavement. Down a dark side street, where the walls were plain gray brick, a door opened for a moment, exhaling a hot breath that smelled of stims smoke and ambergris. The light from the door silhouetted a figure that slipped out, barefoot and wrapped in a raincoat that was sizes too big. In the dim light it was impossible to tell whether it was a boy made up to look like a woman, or a large-boned woman trying to conceal her sex. Pulling the raincoat tighter and cinching the belt, the figure thrust hard fists into the pockets and headed for the street.

Participarlors, stimulation studios, creep shows, and druggeries showed their wares for the passing crowds. Beneath a patch of translucent pavement, a naked dancer writhed under shifting lights, first scalded red, then skeletal white, jerking like a marionette on piano-wire strings. The wanderer in the raincoat paused to watch, collar turned up high. Then a nearby door opened its moist, fleshy lips, and a feedback buzz of music issued, making the tense body under the coat flinch back. Over the music came a woman's laugh, sharp as a needle, and the wail of a pocket alarm going off. Then the door pursed shut, choking off the noise.

Underfoot, the pavement was strewn with discarded things whose pleasure-value had been used up: a fresh corsage, partly crushed; a tangled wad of shorn hair; a lost endorphin-brooch, the kind made to be pinned direct through skin. The barefoot figure stopped to reach out for the brooch, then thrust the outstretched hand into a pocket instead, where it closed over something hard. For an instant the light from a sign that read Every Wish Fulfilled picked out a glint of tousled golden hair as the wanderer turned down a narrow alley.

The sound of a sharp explosion ricocheted out onto the street. A panhandler paused in midspiel; two drunken students with songbirds tethered to their shoulders peered down the alley. But there was nothing to see, no novelty to lure them, and they turned away. The streetlights cycled through the spectrum, hallucination bright. Their glare hid the trickle of blood mingling with the greasy rain.

CHAPTER ONE

When the call came, Valerie Endrada was in the bedroom pawing through a jumble of unpacked containers, looking for her daughter's swimsuit. The mess frustrated her; lately, she had been feeling that her life was full of disorganized corners heaped with things she couldn't find. Moving had only made it worse. When she heard Max talking to the dinery screen, it was a welcome distraction.

He had blanked it by the time she looked in. "Who is it?" she asked.

"For you," he said. "It's Joansie."

That was Max's nickname for his mother when she was on a rampage of good works. Activism ran in his family; at the moment, Max was wearing a Freedom of Information shirt, with a red headband around his forehead. He looked ready to defend the barricades.

"What's she want?" Val said.

Max shrugged. "She's not at home, she's at the clinic."

"Uh-oh," Val said. It was Allday, and they had planned on a picnic with Max's parents. Joan was supposed to be at home fixing food.

"Look, Mama," Dierdre said cheerfully, plucking a red fruit from her breakfast bowl and holding it out.

"That looks good, Deedee," Val said. She had never seen anything like it. It had a vaguely repulsive heart shape, with gaping pores on the surface. To Max she said, "What are you feeding her?"

"It's called a strawberry," Max said, holding out a container of them he was packing for the picnic. "One of those retrogenic things—backbred till it's healthy again, you know." Val took one and bit in cautiously. The inside was white and crunchy; the flavor was tart. She tossed the remainder into the compost. "You didn't pay for them, did you?" she asked.

“Of course not. It was some sort of promotion.”

Val went into the studium to take the call.

Joan looked breathless and scattered, as usual. She always tried to keep her graying hair pulled back in a bun, but it was constantly getting loose. The blue lab coat she was wearing meant she was on duty. She had retired from practice five years ago, but still did volunteer work at a charity clinic in Djenga Shana.

“Valerie! Good,” she said, all business. “I didn’t know who else to call. I’ve got a very peculiar problem here.”

“Joan, why are you at the clinic? I thought we were having a picnic.”

“They called me in because they were short-staffed. And I’m calling you in now. I need your expertise.”

“Professional or personal?” Val asked.

“Professional. As an exoethnologist. I’ve got a crazy alien on my hands.”

That was not terribly surprising, considering that Djenga Shana attracted some of the most indigent recent arrivals from the Twenty Planets.

“Where’s your alien from?” Val asked.

“That’s the problem. I don’t know. The patient’s got no ID, and isn’t very coherent.” She lowered her voice. “It’s a suicide case. It’s been twenty years since I’ve seen one of those, our prevention programs are so good.”

“Why don’t you call a mentationist?” Val said.

“I will, as soon as I know how to describe this patient. Val, this isn’t a him or a her.”

“A himher?” Val said. That was an easy riddle to solve.

“No,” Joan said a little crossly. “I know a Gyne when I see one. This isn’t an androgyne. It isn’t anything. No sexual characteristics at all—like one of those prudish children’s dolls. Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

Val hesitated a moment. It went against the grain to give away information she could get paid for; but Joansie was family, and it was in a good cause. At last she said, “I have, but you couldn’t have one in your clinic.”

“I do,” Joan maintained.

“No. What I mean is, there is only one documented case of true, natural asexuals—on Gammadis, the closed planet. No native has ever left it, and only about forty Capellans have ever seen it. What you have must be some sort of surgical construct, or a mutation.”

“I wish you would come here and look for yourself. I’ve got a hunch something strange is going on. You’ll know what I mean when you get here. If you can make it by 9.50, we’ll still have plenty of time to get to the beach.”

Val hit the time key to look up the university time. It was 8.90. A little over half an hour to get to the other side of the world. That was just like Joan. She swept people up in her crusades like a small, determined hurricane. “No peripheral vision,” Max sometimes said of her. But the fact was, Max had gone and married someone very like his mother.

"I can't, Joan," Val said, even though resistance was futile. "Max would kill me. I promised to be in charge of Deedee today. He's had to do it all week."

"Never mind that," Joan said breezily. "I'll call E.G. and tell him to give Max a hand."

The last time Max's father had baby-sat Dierdre, she had come home calling people she didn't like "infomongers." Max had been more amused than Val.

"I don't know, Joan..." Val said.

"Don't try to fool me, you want to come. I'll be expecting you." Joan cut the connection.

Val sat staring at the screen, which had reverted to clock mode. She clicked her thumbnail against her front tooth, a habit that made Max crazy. Actually, Joan had been right; Val *was* curious. She had gone into xenology dreaming of expeditions to new planets; but those days were long gone. No one could afford exploration any more. Magisters minor like herself might spend whole careers just going over dog-eared records from old expeditions, trying to extract from them one more monograph, never seeing any culture but Capella Two's, never discovering anything new. Val was restless for distraction.

"What was it?" Max said when she came out. The dinery table was heaped with picnic food; Dierdre had disappeared into her room.

"Your mother wants me to come to the clinic for a while," Val said. "She's got an interesting case. We'll have to meet you at the beach."

"Does that mean I'm taking Deedee?" Max said, his voice ominously neutral. "Wait until The Boss hears."

Deedee came racing in with a flexup toy in the shape of a fanciful alien. "Look what I'm taking, Mama," she said. "Papa said I could."

Val knelt to be at her level. "Listen, sweetie," she said, "Mama's got to go somewhere for a while. I'll catch up with you later."

"Do I have to go with Papa?" Deedee said, disappointed.

"Yes. Don't eat all the sawberries before I get there."

"Strawberries," Max said.

"I *always* have to go with Papa," Deedee protested. "You never want to take me."

Val wondered if children were genetically programmed to pull their parents' guilt-strings. She hesitated, and all was lost. Deedee brightened at the look on her face.

"Go dress, and maybe you can come," Val said. There had never been a more useless "maybe."

Joyously, Deedee raced off to her room. Max said, "To the clinic? Val, are you crazy? Have you ever been there?"

"She needs to be exposed to other ways of life," Val rationalized valiantly.

Max looked beseechingly heavenward. “Well, don’t blame me if she comes home asking what ‘venereal disease’ means.”

Val kissed him on the cheek and went to the bedroom to find her pack and university scarf.

On the pumice path to the waystation, Val tried to ignore the bite of disappointment at their new, low-rent neighborhood. As Deedee ran ahead down the hill, Val looked out at the bone-gray moonscape, and told herself it wasn’t so bad. The subsidized copartment was perched high on the slope of a crater, and the enclave nestled below like some monster bird’s nest, a clutch of domed buildings, eggshell white. In the west the huge limb of Gomb spanned half the horizon, its colors bleached to pink by the rising sun. Everything seemed bright and clear-cut in the dry air—all but Val’s thoughts. They felt like a messy room, too small for all the piles of neglected problems.

In their student days, she and Max had shared a jaunty contempt for the power structure, because then they could afford it. Val had been succeeding then—honors graduate, scholarship to study under a magister prime—and it had not seemed far-fetched to aim at a career as an independent contractor in the knowledge business. But the years since graduation had brought only frustration. The market was flooded with young magisters, each hawking an obscure expertise. One by one, her friends were giving up and signing life contracts with the big infocompanies, yielding all their future copyrights and patents for secure employment. So far, she had resisted that irrevocable step, hoping she only needed to repackage her knowledge to make it a more appealing commodity.

“Presentation, that’s what I need to work on,” she would say to Max. He only rolled his eyes. He had supported her loyally, even though it meant staying home with Deedee because they couldn’t afford to send her to school. But Val’s enormous education debts were coming due. For a while last month their infoservice had gotten disconnected for nonpayment. Val had grown intensely guilty, knowing it was her fault, for putting independence before responsibility.

The waystation jutted up from among the egg-domes like a shard of broken glass on edge. When Val stopped at the navigator, she found that getting to Djenga Shana was complex; with a twinge of guilt she paid for a printout of the shortest route. The station was crowded with holiday travelers. Holding Deedee’s hand, she dodged noisy families in bathing suits and hiking gear, lined up at the ports to the vacation spots. Her own destination port was almost deserted.

Deedee wanted to go through the wayport first, so Val stood and watched as her daughter disappeared in the flash of a lightbeam, leaving only a wisp of steam. The sight always gave her a twinge of panic. Quickly, she paid her own fare, stepped in, felt the familiar tingle, then

stepped out of an identical port in a waystation a thousand miles away. Deedee was there, studying some dried gum on the tile floor. Val took her hand again, then looked around for the next port on their route.

Almost as soon as she stepped from the wayport at Djenga Shana, Val regretted bringing Deedee. She paused to rearrange the scarf that gave her academic immunity here, then took her daughter's hand firmly. It was near noon, and the street was shuttered and empty. The garish signs looked faded and peeling, naked without the glamor of night and light. There was a pervasive smell of spilled beer cooking in the sun.

"Mama," Deedee protested, "don't hold my hand so tight."

"I'm sorry, chick," she said. She dreaded any questions.

Outside a fetish shop, a Worwha Shana gbinja stood, wrapped in the gray tubular garment he had donned at puberty and would not remove until he died. It was ragged and stained around the hem and sleeves, but the tough fiber looked like it would outlast the man. He glared at Val with loathing from under a mass of unshorn hair, doubtless wishing her to Worwha hell. There was a story in the xenology department at UIC about a researcher who had lived with the Worwha Shana for four years, and when he left, his Worwha family still called him "heathen garbage."

When Val entered the clinic, two wan, barely dressed teenage girls were sleeping in the waiting room. Roused by her entrance, one of them eyed her suspiciously. Val knocked at the battered lexan reception window. The clinic was like an unarmed fort, constantly under siege by drug-seekers.

Joan herself came bustling out to open the locked door. Deedee cried out, "Gramma! We came to visit you."

"Deedee!" Joan said, startled. Then, to Val, a whispered, "Why did you bring her here?"

"Temporary insanity," Val said.

As they passed down the hall, Joan said, "Go on and help yourself to coffee. I'll get Mandy to look after Deedee. Come with me, chickpea."

When Joan returned alone, she poured a cup from the coffee urn and stood sipping it, leaning against the wall as if a little too tired to support her own weight. "It was a pretty standard clientele last night," she said. "A couple of mugged tourists, the usual overdoses and nerve burns, some sexually transmitted diseases. Then about 1.50 Cannie Annie—one of our local characters—came staggering in saying there'd been a murder. You can't trust what she says, so we didn't call the law. I went out to check."

"Joan! You promised us you wouldn't go out of the clinic at night."

"Well, I'm not going to let someone die," Joan said crossly. "Besides, Bart was with me. Annie led us to an alley, and there we found our visitor from another planet, lying in a pool of blood, wearing a raincoat and nothing else. It had tried to blow its brains out with an explosive gun."

"How horrible," Val said softly.

“It hadn’t done a very good job. Not even close. We brought it back, patched it up, checked it over. That’s when we found it was an ‘it.’ I’ve been checking the medical nets, Val, and I can’t find a record of any mutation like this. There could be a surgical explanation—god knows we see some strange body alterations here—but if so they did it without leaving a trace. And why would anyone choose to eradicate their sex?”

“Maybe it wasn’t voluntary,” Val said. Here, she would believe anything. “Have you been able to ask the patient?”

“Well, that’s the problem. Medically, the patient’s not in bad shape, aside from being a little low on blood. But mentally—well, at first it was completely unresponsive, almost catatonic. I gave it a standard antidepressant, and it got quite agitated and incoherent. The drugs ought to be wearing off now; maybe we’ll have better luck. Let’s take a look first.”

She led the way into a small observation room. She closed the door, touched the switch, and the wall became a one-way window into the adjoining room.

The patient was crouched in a chair in hospital pajamas, knees drawn up to its chest. Val stared, fascinated. The person beyond the glass fit none of her half-formed expectations. She had pictured something eunuchlike and faintly repulsive, but the neuter’s face instead had an androgynous, Greek-sculpture beauty: classic bone structure, long lashes, dark brows under curly golden hair. But now the hair was darkened and matted, the eyes swollen. There was a bandage on the left temple, and the hair around it was singed.

“It used a gun?” she said softly. She was no mentationist, but to her the violence of the method meant something—a particular hatred of the self, a desire to inflict damage and pain. An attempt to match inner violence with outer, perhaps.

“Yes,” Joan said. “Good thing its aim was so poor. It could have done real damage to that beautiful face.”

Val said, “How old is...I feel strange saying ‘it.’”

“What else can you say? No other word is accurate. If this were one of us, I’d say it’s in its mid-twenties.”

“Really? That old?” The patient looked younger, but perhaps that was only because Val associated the lack of obvious sexual characteristics with adolescence. “What do you want me to do?”

“First, I’d like you to talk to it and get me some information. You know what a mentationist is going to want. He’ll take a scan and want to start altering the patient’s mental template. But how can we do that in good conscience when we don’t know what’s normal for this patient? We need to do a little research before jumping in.”

Val felt a little bubble of excitement rising through her chest. Whatever the thing in the next room was, it clearly represented an unstudied aspect

of someone's culture. This was an opportunity for discovery, maybe even a profitable one.

In the next room, the figure had moved; now it was pressing its knuckles to its forehead as if to hold in some terrible thought. Val felt a surge of sympathy and alarm invading her scientific detachment. She had never seen a suicidal person before, and the reality dispelled any romantic fantasies she might have had. There was nothing pretty about this. The person in the next room looked to be in almost unendurable pain.

"I'd feel better if there were a mentationist present," she said. "What if I do something wrong?"

"I'll be here, watching. Bart's on standby. Don't worry, Val. You're a trained interviewer. What can you do wrong?"

She didn't dare let Joan know how unprepared she felt.

"You don't mind if we record the interview?" Joan said. "We may need to study it."

Val restrained herself from asking about copyright. The recording was unlikely to be valuable.

Joan opened the door to usher Val into the corridor. She took out an access card and slid it into the slot. The door clicked open; Val took a long breath and stepped through.

As she entered, the patient rose quickly to face her, keeping the chair between them, as suspicious and edgy as a trapped animal. For a moment the two of them stood motionless, staring at each other. Val forced her voice into a friendly tone to say slowly, "Hello. My name is Valerie Endrada. You can call me Val."

"Are you here to drug me?" the neuter asked. Its voice was somewhere between alto and tenor, and full of strain. But what struck Val was the incongruous accent: not just a plain Capellan accent, but the cultivated accent of the intellectual elite, the kind of people you called "magister." She felt a moment of disorientation. Was she talking to someone found half-dead in a squalid alley, or to a colleague?

"No," she said. "I'm not a mentationist."

"Tell them I don't want any more drugs," the neuter said. "I can't think when I'm drugged. I've got to be able to think." One hand rose to its forehead, then flinched away when it touched the bandage. The evidence of what it had done seemed to repulse it.

Val heard her voice drop into the cadence she used with Deedee. "The drugs are only to make you feel better."

"Why do they have to give me drugs at all?" the patient said in a low, agitated voice. "What use is it, forcing me to feel this way? Are they just trying different psychoactives to see how I'll react? Is this an experiment?"

"They're giving you drugs because you tried to kill yourself," Val said.

For a moment it stared at her, as if shocked to hear the news. Then some thought or memory crossed its face and it looked upward, teeth clenched, drawing a ragged breath. Softly, almost to itself, it said, "Why does anyone care about that? What can it matter, one dead bland more or less? Wouldn't it just be simpler to get rid of me?" It turned away then, and with its back to her wiped the tears from its eyes with its hands. After a moment, it looked back and saw Val's dismayed expression; then another emotion swept across its face—guilt, this time. Quickly it said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. Please don't listen. It's the drugs, they make me babble. I barely know what I'm saying."

"That's all right, you can't offend me," Val said. She took a step closer, wishing she could do something. Watching this was agonizing. But the neuter only retreated, hidden behind the wall of paranoia again.

"Are you here to study me, then?" it said. "Are you a xenologist?"

Val hesitated, then decided lying was no way to gain a person's trust. "Yes," she said. "Now you know my name and who I am, and I don't know the first thing about you."

"You Capellans," the alien said softly. "You've always got to *know*."

"If we're going to make you feel better, we have to know something about you."

"Then you're not writing your dissertation about me, or something like that?"

"No."

As if barely daring to hope, it said, "You're not recording this? There are no cameras, or anyone watching?"

Val felt her face giving her away. The alien's expression showed betrayal. Desperately, Val said, "It's not my choice. I'm not in charge. Please believe me, all we want is to help you."

"Then why do you watch me like a peep show?" It was barely a whisper.

"Oh God, what a mess," Val said, mostly to the watching wall. She was in fathoms over her head. "I'm sorry, this is all wrong. Please forgive me." She turned to leave.

"No! Don't leave me!" the neuter cried out. She turned in time to see the desperation on its face, quickly hidden. It began to pace, talking fast, its hands moving nervously, as if it didn't know what to do with them. "I shouldn't be bothered, really. I...I'm not naive, like I used to be. You know, once I had the opportunity to use Epcos' proprietary database, and I did a search for my own name. There were over two hundred articles written about me, all classified, Epcos' property. Two hundred! Even *I* don't know enough about me to write that much. Every step I took, every word I said, was being studied, and had been since I got here. You know, it never even occurred to me why they took all those scans and samples every time I went to the clinic for some virus I had no immunity to. Can you believe that? I

didn't even know I was in a zoo. Please don't think I resent it; I just need to get used to the way you Capellans are. It's your nature. You don't mean any harm."

The nervous avalanche of words came to a halt. Val was very curious by now. She didn't want to disturb the alien's train of thought, so she said, "It would drive me crazy."

"Well, you were raised with the expectation of privacy. I don't have that excuse. The way I grew up, we were never alone. We saw everything about each other. There was no ethic of modesty; that is all a product of sexuality. If I were living back on Gammadis, I would be sleeping every night in a roundroom with dozens of other bland, all in a pile, like mice. I would have all that physical closeness, without any taint of sexuality—just plain humanity. I would fall asleep to the sound of their breath, the feel of their skin against mine. Do you realize, I've barely been able to touch another person in innocence for twelve years? On my planet, they believe that neuters need to be with their own kind, or they go crazy. Maybe it's true."

During this speech, Val had drawn a little closer. Now she stood, hands at her sides, and said very quietly, "Would you like me to give you a hug?"

A complex look crossed the alien's face—part fear, part longing. "No," it said, drawing back tensely. "Please don't be offended. It's not you."

"What is it?" she said. She was so close she couldn't help but notice again the alien's striking beauty. In some ways, its vulnerability only heightened the effect. She wanted to hold it as she would Deedee, to lay its head on her shoulder and stroke its hair, to feel the panic subside.

"I'm sorry," the alien said. "You've got to understand how hard it is for me, to live in a gendered world. I have to be so careful. Sexuality is always present, with you. It never leaves your minds. It's as if you exist in a cloud of pheromones I can't sense, but only guess at. I have to be on my guard all the time, thinking of hidden meanings, body language, and innuendoes. I can never assume I understand you, never take anything at face value. It all has to go through a gender-filter in my brain. I wish I could get away from it, just be able to relax, be in a completely nonsexual situation, just for a day. I don't suppose I'll ever be able to, for the rest of my life....You don't want to know all this. These drugs make me babble."

Once more, Val had the disorienting feeling that she was talking to another magister, or at least to someone of formidable—though currently scrambled—intelligence. "I *do* want to know," Val said. "But please tell me something first. You're from Gammadis?"

"Yes. How did you know?" As soon as the words were out of its mouth, the neuter shook its head. "Of course you know. You only have to look at me to know."

"I know because you said so," Val said calmly. "It surprises me, because that planet has been off-limits to Capellans for sixty-three years."

"I came here before that."

Val smiled skeptically. "You don't look that old."

"It's a fifty-one light-year trip."

That, at least, rang true. Any lightbeam traveler would not have aged during the journey. "You must have been very young when you set out," she said.

"I was seventeen."

"What's your name?"

The alien's eyes fell to the ground, as if in shame. "Tedla Galele," it said indistinctly.

"I'm glad to meet you, Tedla." Val held out her hand. The alien's arms were crossed protectively; it hesitated, then finally held out a hand. They shook formally. After touching her, Tedla turned away and walked numbly across the room till stopped by the wall, then stood leaning against it, cheek resting on the cool ceramoplast.

"Can you get me out of here?" it asked. "I hate this room. It's driving me crazy."

"Not unless you have somewhere to go. Do you have any family, or someone we could contact?"

Tedla stared at its feet. "No. I'm the only one."

"Where have you been living?"

"Out there," the neuter gestured vaguely. "The money's all gone, you know." A current of agitation welled up again, and it said, "I wasn't supposed to have to protect myself, or make decisions, or compete with you. That was the promise. People were going to take care of me. Now I have to act human, but I can never *be* human. If only I could go back! If I were at home I would know exactly what was expected of me. I could live my life surrounded by others of my own kind. Here, I'm nothing...Oh god, why can't I shut up?"

Its hands had begun to shake. It clasped them tightly together, making a visible effort to gain control.

On an impulse, Val reached out and took the neuter's hands in hers. She half expected it to pull away, but instead it grasped her hands tightly. Its eyes were closed now. In a whisper, it said, "I feel like there is something I ought to be doing, only I don't know what it is, and I probably wouldn't be able to do it anyway. But if I don't, something terrible is going to happen, but it's hopeless, I can't prevent it. It's already happened, it's who I am. There's nothing I can do, absolutely nothing."

"Shh," Val said, stroking its hands. She could feel the tension in them, the stretched tendons and knotty bones. "It's all right, Tedla. Everything is going to be all right."

"There's nothing out there for me, nothing," Tedla said. "No home, no life that fits me. I'm a piece from a different puzzle. I don't fit anywhere."

“We’ll make a place for you,” Val said. “Don’t worry.”

Behind her, the door clicked open. Joan entered, carrying a transdermal.

“No,” Tedla whispered.

“Tedla doesn’t want any more drugs,” Val said.

“It’s just a sedative,” Joan said to Tedla, “to calm you down. That’s all, I promise.”

The neuter just looked at her in terror.

“Don’t you want to feel a little calmer, Tedla?” Val asked. “Come on, it’ll help you think.”

Slowly, Tedla held out its arm. With a quick, practiced motion Joan pressed the hypo against the vein. “Why don’t you sit down now?” she said in an encouraging, doctor-to-patient voice. She gave Val a significant look, and nodded toward the door.

“I’ll be back in a second, Tedla,” Val said, and followed Joan out.

In the hall, Joan turned to say, “Good work, Val. All we need now is to find someone looking for a missing Gammadian.”

For a brief moment, Val hoped there wasn’t anyone. She wanted this find all to herself. Her conscience immediately censored the thought. “Of course,” she said. “This shouldn’t be hard. There are probably ‘missing’ notices all over X-O Net.”

Joan’s office was a tiny cubbyhole cluttered with printouts and mementoes of former patients. Val had to restrain herself from wiping the dust from the screen as she sat down at the terminal.

After tapping into X-O Net, she ran a search for anything posted in the last five days with the key words “Tedla Galele,” then sat back to wait. When the terminal beeped, she was surprised to see it had turned up nothing.

“That’s odd,” she said.

“Expand the search,” Joan suggested.

She did, but with no better results.

“What about all those articles in the EpcO files?” Joan said.

“If they’re proprietary, we’d need to pay a fortune. But some of them must have leaked out into public domain. I’ll check.” This time, the screen responded with two citations to articles on Gammadian physiology, both ten years old. “Well, at least now we know Tedla really exists,” Val said, and hit the key to access the first one. The screen responded, “Classified proprietary: Western Alliance Corporation. Please input access code.” Val tried Joan’s number, then her own, but both were rejected. She went back and tried the second article, with the same result.

“Did it say WAC?” Joan asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Yes. Not EpcO. Maybe Tedla was confused about which infocompany.”

“Or maybe they *both* have buckets of classified information.”

Val clicked her thumbnail against her teeth, thinking. “Actually, WAC makes more sense than EpcO,” she said. “I think the original expedition to

Gammadis was sponsored by WAC. It would make sense if they were keeping tabs on Tedla.”

“Should we ask them?”

Val shook her head. “They don’t give out anything cheap. Let’s try the public-service sources first. Isn’t there some sort of missing persons list?” So Val embarked on a search. But as time passed, she came to dead end after dead end. No one of Tedla’s name or description had been reported missing. Tedla had no listed number or address anywhere on Capella Two. No one of that name had ever registered to vote, or owned taxable property. It had no professional license, no credit history, and no infonet account. They turned up a variety of other Galeles, including one with a criminal record and another who had been expelled from UIC, but no trace of Tedla.

“We’ve got an invisible person,” Val said.

“Or someone who’s been hidden,” Joan said suspiciously.

Val thought briefly of posting a Found notice, but decided it would violate Tedla’s privacy. The fact was, she wasn’t entirely disappointed by her failure: The longer it took to track down where the alien belonged, the longer she would have with it.

From down the hall, she heard Deedee’s voice raised in play. She checked the time, and groaned. “We were supposed to be at the beach half an hour ago.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll call E.G. and tell him we’re hung up. Keep working on it, Val. I can’t keep Tedla here much longer. Legally, I have to transfer every client home or to a curatory within twenty-five hours. I’d rather not put this patient at the mercy of the public health system. That’s hard enough to negotiate if you know how.”

Joan left the room, and Val sat thinking. There was something here that didn’t add up. The disastrous end to the Gammadian expedition had happened a dozen years ago. She had been in her teens, but still could remember the near-universal outrage when the explorers had returned from their fifty-one-year trek back, expelled by the rulers of Gammadis for their attempt to interfere in the local culture. Already then, Val had wanted to be an explorer herself. She hadn’t been able to imagine how they had squandered the opportunity, the only one in two centuries.

But she could not remember any whisper of a Gammadian having come back with them.

Abruptly, she got up and went back down the hall to Tedla’s room.

Tedla was crouched in the chair, the way Val had first seen it; but this time the Gammadian didn’t stir at her entrance, merely followed her with its eyes. She sat down facing it.

“Tedla, I need to know more about you,” she said.

The neuter looked away indifferently.

The sedative had clearly taken effect—too much effect, perhaps. Val itched to ask outright if Tedla were telling the truth about its name and ori-

gins, but something warned her an adversarial approach would only make things worse. She needed to establish an atmosphere of trust.

"All right, let me tell you a little bit about myself," she said. Without much plan, she began to talk at random about the new copartment, and Max, and Deedee, and the picnic they were planning. When she next paused for breath, Tedla was watching her closely.

"You have a child?" it said.

"Yes, Dierdre, but we call her Deedee. She's really a good kid, even though she can be a terrible pain."

"I've never known a Capellan child," Tedla said.

"Would you like to see her picture?"

"Yes." At last, Val thought she saw a flicker of interest in the neuter's face. She went over to the wall screen and accessed her home file, picking out her favorite picture—an impish Deedee looking over her shoulder at the camera. Tedla came to her side, gazing at it in fascination.

"She's a little fiend," Val said.

Tedla looked fixedly at her, obviously uncertain what to say, and somewhat troubled. Choosing its words carefully, it said, "You don't like her, then?"

Val laughed. "Don't be silly, Tedla. Of course I like her."

"But...fiend means something horrible."

"I just *know* her, Tedla. Children are nasty little brutes, you know. And we love them anyway."

"I see," Tedla said, as if it didn't.

"You'll understand if you ever..." She remembered too late that the person at her side could never have children, and finished, "...get to know any children well."

Tedla appeared not to have noticed her slip; in fact, it was preoccupied with some hidden thought "You love them, even if they do perfectly horrible things? Even if they betray you and hurt you?"

The question was obviously more than theoretical. "Yes," Val said seriously. She watched Tedla's face, and saw the motion of memories across it. She was getting somewhere now.

"Would you like to meet her?" Val said.

"She's here?"

"Yes. Just a second, let me go find her."

When she poked her head out the door, Joan was coming down the hall looking for her. She said, "Joan, go call Deedee. I want Tedla to meet her."

Joan didn't move. "Do you think that's wise?"

"Humor me. I've got a hunch," Val said.

Deedee appeared from a doorway down the hall, saw Val, and came racing toward her, bubbling with news. Val said to Joan, "Make sure the recorder is running." Then, to Deedee, "I want you to meet someone, Dee.

Pretend to be good, okay?” Then she ushered her daughter into the mad alien’s room.

Deedee stood inside the door, staring at Tedla, who had retreated behind the chair and now stared back, both disconcerted and fascinated.

“This is Tedla, Deedee,” Val said. “Tedla comes from another planet—a planet so far away it takes fifty years to make the trip.”

Deedee didn’t react. She turned to Val and said, “Mama, did you know that people *die* here?”

“No,” Val said, startled.

“Mandy showed me. They have a *bin* for *stiffs*.”

Good Lord, Val thought, what an introduction. She looked apologetically at Tedla. “I warned you.”

Deedee spied the bed, and dashed over to it. “Mama, did you know these beds move?” Before Val could react, she clambered up onto the formable bed and pressed one of the controls. Nothing happened. “Oops,” she said, performing now. She pressed another square, and the bed rose to mold itself around her body. She froze it, then scrambled up to look at the impression she had made. Both Val and Tedla moved forward instinctively to catch her as she came close to tumbling backward off the bed. “See?” she said.

“Yes, I see. Now put it back, Deedee. That’s Tedla’s bed.”

Deedee turned around and stared at Tedla again. “Do you know how to play Scratcher?”

“No,” Tedla said.

“What will you pay me if I teach you?”

“Not now, Deedee,” Val said to her budding infocapitalist. “Come sit down with us.”

Deedee allowed Val to lead her to a chair, and all three of them sat. The child was now looking at Tedla fixedly. She said suddenly, “Are you a man or a lady?”

Val was ready to jump in, but Tedla said, “Neither. On the planet I come from, there are three sexes, not just two.”

“The polite word is ‘asexual,’ Deedee,” Val said.

Val expected more questions, but Deedee was pondering the explanation. Val said awkwardly, “Tedla, which should we call you—‘he’ or ‘she’?”

“Actually, your word ‘it’ is closest to the pronoun we use on my planet,” Tedla said. “We even use the same word to refer to animals and inanimate objects, like you do.”

“I don’t know. ‘It’ seems slightly...derogatory.”

“Well then, that’s an accurate translation, too.”

Deedee said, “I live with both my mama and papa.” She had just been learning that not all children did.

“I never knew my mama or papa,” Tedla told her. “No one on my planet does, except the really poor people who live like savages.”

“Did you know your grandma?” Deedee asked.

“No. I was brought up in a creche with lots and lots of other children. We had docents and proctors and postulants instead of mamas and papas.”

Deedee’s nose wrinkled. “I would hate that.”

Tedla leaned forward, looking relaxed for the first time. “No, you wouldn’t. We had lots of fun. We didn’t sleep in beds; we had a roundroom. It’s a big, circular room with a domed ceiling. The floor is cushiony, and you can bounce really high on it. All the walls are soft, so no one can get hurt. No grown-ups ever came into our roundroom.”

“How high could you bounce?” Deedee said.

“Almost to the ceiling.”

Deedee stood up on the chair and held up her arms. “This high?”

“No, higher than that.”

Deedee bounced on the cushion. “This high?”

Val made her stop. “You’re not in a roundroom, Deedee. You’re in a grown-up place, and you have to act like a grown-up here.”

Deedee settled down discontentedly. Val took her hand and said, “Come on, I think it’s time for you to go see grandma again.”

When Val had taken Deedee out into the hall and returned, she found Tedla sitting with its head in its hands, as if in the grip of dejection.

“Tedla? Are you all right?” Val said, a little alarmed.

Tedla looked up at her. Its face was not desperate, as before, but achingly sad. “It’s all coming back to me. Things I haven’t thought about in years. Seeing her reminds me of what it was like.”

Val sat down facing Tedla. “Are they good memories, or bad?”

“They are all intertwined, good and bad.”

“Tell me,” Val said softly. “Tell me everything.”

Tedla looked down at its hands. Val glanced over at the terminal to make sure it was recording. The red light blinked yes. Then, very softly, the alien began to speak.

CHAPTER TWO

When I think of home, I see myself as a child, fitting my toes in the bark-crevices of a knotty old aiken tree, trying to climb high enough to look out over the autumn-colored river valley where I grew up. There was a spot on the third tier of branches where I could rest, legs dangling, and see all the broad floodplain, densely wooded with deciduous trees, a calico of gold and umber. The river seemed impossibly far away, a sinuous

streak down in the bottomland, sometimes hidden with mist, sometimes shining like metal, sometimes chocolate-colored with mud. On still days I could hear the boat-horns echoing across the valley in the moist air.

Gammadis is a very beautiful planet. Everything there seems old. The plants, the insects, all *fit*. Here on Capella Two, the terraforming seems thin and ill at ease. The trees look like house plants, or museum pieces—on display, aware of their uniqueness. There, you pick up a handful of soil and it smells of eons of germlife permeating the planet. The river valley looks as if it formed of its own accord, not like an invention with vegetation veneered over it. There were even fossils in the limestone cliffs.

We don't call it Gammadis, as you do—we call it Taramond. Once, when I stupidly corrected Magister Galele on this, he laughed and said, "Yes, and my homeworld is called Earth. The natives of Baker's Knot call their home Eden." Only later did I learn what he meant—that every planet is named after the origin world of mankind. As a child, I didn't even know there was such a place. Or I thought my homeworld was it.

I still dream about that river valley where my creche was. But in my dreams the valley has changed. Some transformation has come over it—the water has risen and flooded the valley rim to rim, and it is full of mysterious islands—or all the land is built on, full of drab composite houses like Capella Two. I don't like those dreams. I don't want the valley to change. But there is nothing I can do about it, because it's *me* that has changed, and all I hold in memory has changed with me. Not even in myself does that place exist any more, because the person I was then doesn't exist, and that child was part of the place, as surely as the whiskered mudfish in the river. That child is gone forever.

The creche where I grew up was, of course, underground. The Capellan investigators who came to my planet kept asking why all the civilized societies lived underground, and all we could say was that it is the natural way for people to live. I could not imagine anyone but the poorest vagrant or the bravest frontier sappers living on the surface. When I came here, it took years before I felt easy sleeping in your flimsy houses perched right on the surface. I kept having an irrational feeling that somehow gravity would fail and we would all be flung off into space.

The creche had eight levels, one for every stage of a child's life. We started out as infants on the lowest level, the nursery. When we learned to walk we graduated to the next level, and kept moving up at every developmental phase thereafter. On the highest level lived the protos preparing for matriculation. They were on the threshold of humanity. We feared and envied them at the same time. They seemed more alien than the adults, because they were at the nexus of transformation.

The rooms were all round, like bubbles, which in fact they were: Our buildings are not so much constructed as inflated, like bottles, from lignis,

which hardens into a lovely, warm substance like wood, only stronger. Some bubbles were large, like the refectory where we all ate in shifts, or the assembly hall on level three. The rest were classrooms, recreatories, hygiene stations, labs, and offices for the gestagogues. Each level was laid out in a circle, ranged around a central axis. At the center was the roundroom for that level. At night the proctors would turn us all loose in our roundroom, the place that was ours alone. We would come pouring in, bouncing as high as we could on the cushiony floor, pushing each other into the soft walls. The only furnishings were pillows, and we had some mighty pillow wars before we would fall asleep, naked bodies all tangled together in the middle of the floor. The roundroom was the center of childhood. It was where we traded secrets, learned songs and stories, and sometimes fought out our rivalries safe from adult intervention.

I say there were eight levels, but in fact there were several below the ones we lived in. Those were grayspace: the territory of the blands. We knew nothing about it. Our food appeared from those levels, as did our linen and all the equipment used to clean our classes and playrooms; but we gave it no more thought than the electrical wiring. I learned later that there was an entire parallel building we never saw, made up of service corridors meant to keep the neuter staff invisible and out of mind. In a creche, that was futile.

The docents and proctors were all human, but as infants we were largely raised by neuters. I can see this surprises you, but it seemed quite natural to us. Blands were perfect for the tedious chores of infant care—nighttime feedings, diaper changes, the constant vigilance against harm. Both parties thrive on it. As babies we quieted to a neuter's touch as we never would to a human's, and as toddlers we loved them for their patience and dumb devotion. Then we grew older and learned to despise them for the same reasons.

We have no families on Gammadis, as you do: at least, not ones based on biological relationships. Capellans tend to assume this means that our children lead loveless lives. It isn't true. On the contrary, we cherish our children as if they were human.



“Just a second,” Val interrupted. She had been trying to keep quiet, despite several hundred questions in her mind, but this was too much. “Could you explain? Your children aren't human?”

“No,” Tedla said. “We are biologically different from you. Our children are not miniature adults, as yours are. They are born sexually undifferentiated. Our bodies don't change until puberty, when sexual characteristics appear. Until then, there is no way of knowing whether a child will become male or female—or whether it will be one of the minority who never mature, and remain in a childlike, asexual state forever.”

“So children are neuters?” Val asked.

Tedla seemed shocked. “No, certainly not. They are proto-humans. They may look like neuters, but they have the potential for humanity.”

“I see. You have to forgive my stupidity, Tedla. I don’t know much about Gammadis.”

Tedla looked at her uneasily. “This probably offends your Cappellan sensibilities. To you, children are already human. On Gammadis, we think of the years before puberty as an extended gestation period. That’s why learned people will call a creche a ‘gestatory.’ The fetal body and mind take that long to mature.”

“Unless they never do.”

“That’s right.”

When Tedla resumed the story, it seemed thoughtful.



Often I have searched my memories for any clue, any warning, of what I was going to become. I don’t know at what point my fate was decided. Perhaps it was at conception, or with some roll of random adrenal dice at puberty. Or—and this is what it’s hard not to dwell on—was it something I did? If only I could spot it.

I don’t know how I got my nickname, Tedla. Often it was obvious how a child got its nickname, like Moptop or Fidget, because it described the child’s looks or temperament. Other times, names are just nonsense words, or some whim of an adult. They don’t mean much, as a rule. They are only placeholders, a little better than “You There.” We all looked forward to receiving our real names at puberty.

I was a perfectly average child—neither very clever nor remarkably stupid, not especially talented athletically or artistically, but always able to hold my own. The only thing that made me stand out was looks—I was a pretty child. Though the gestagogues tried hard not to have favorites, I got more affection from the adults than the less attractive protos—it was only natural. Good looks counted for less among my peers. I wasn’t a natural leader like the brighter and more talented protos, but at least I was never rejected or excluded. When we would form up teams for games, I would be chosen in the very middle.

Virtually none of our learning was competitive, not even the sports. We were never ranked against each other. Often we had to complete assignments in groups, and we were evaluated for cooperation as well as achievement. As a result, I truly have no notion where I stood in my class, as Capellan children do. But I expect I was right in the middle.

Our classes were the usual academic ones—reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, and so on—but we also had sociability training and morality classes, since we had no families to teach us those things. Every day we had meditation to nourish the infant souls growing inside us, and on the

seventh day we visited the chapel. The chapel was the only part of the creche that was above ground, and it resembled an indoor garden—glass roof open to the sky, contemplative paths to stroll on, little groves and grottoes where you could sit, with gates to close if you wanted to be private. We never used it, as some sects do, for communal worship. At our creche, religion was a solitary matter, something between a person and his or her own god.

My earliest memories are of the second level. We played in a soft, bubble-shaped room with bright lighting and marvelous, though well-worn, toys: chutes and clamber-frames and ball pools. Many of the toys took more than one to operate, so that we were forced to cooperate with other children, or else enlist one of the blands to help us. I can still see the soft, vein-roped hands of the neuters that used to watch over the playroom. There was one in particular, named Joby, who never tired of playing games, no matter how repetitive or banal. Everyone in the creche thought of Joby as childlike itself, as if its brain had regressed to an infantile state. Later, I learned that all blands have their particular tactics for survival—protective coloration that helps them blend into the background. Joby's sweet, childlike nature was what protected it from harm. The adults taught us to speak to Joby, and others like it, in a firm and gentle tone, slowly, and to use simple words.

One of my most vivid early memories concerns Joby. It happened in the winter of my seventh year. The weather was very severe that year. Drifts of snow nearly buried the chapel and all the familiar landscape around the creche. When we went up for worship, the dome above was covered by a gray layer of snow, and in the odd twilight we could hear the wind pushing against it, trying to get in. Down in the creche, of course, we were quite safe and cozy, a self-sufficient little community, even though cut off from the rest of the world.

We protos were caught up in the preparations for Leastday, our main festival for that time of year. We were decorating the assembly hall for the climactic event of the season, the lighting of the Summer Candle. The candle tree was set up and strung with paper flowers. Fluffweed wreaths and treeshell garlands adorned the hallways. Everything was fragrant with the smell of glue, candle wax, and butterberry cakes cooking in the kitchens down below. Even though the cakes were meant for the celebration, a postulant would sometimes bring one up warm from the oven, and we would crowd around to get a piece, the adults admonishing us to share. On the day before the candle ceremony, the younger proctors got together and made an expedition out into the blizzard to gather evergreen boughs. We thought they were heroes. We hung up the boughs, getting our hands sticky with sap, and then the air was full of the tang of needletrees.

I had spent the day in Crafts, working on my wreath, and by evening my neck was stiff from bending over. When I woke the next morning, I could barely move my head, and I felt lethargic and nauseous. One of the

postulants noticed me moping around in the dressing room after all the other excited children had lined up for refectory, and she got me to confess what was wrong. After feeling my temperature, she quickly hurried me off to the clinic.

Ordinarily, being in clinic was no hardship, since you got to miss classes and sleep in a bed of your own, like an adult. But that day there were no classes, and I felt mightily abused to be incarcerated, missing all the fun. But as the day progressed, I began to vomit and developed a headache that felt as if my brain were in a vise. No matter which way I lay, I couldn't get comfortable.

The next morning I realized how worried they were when the Matron came down to see me. She asked me some questions, felt my forehead, then went into the next room to talk to the clinician. At last she came back to my bedside and said, "Tedla, we are calling an aircar to take you to the curatory at Tapis Convergence, so you can get better fast. You'll have to get dressed now. Once you're there, they will take good care of you."

Now I am certain they suspected meningitis, which must strike fear into every gestagogue. The way we children lived gave free rein to any contagion we couldn't be vaccinated against. Fortunately, those were few.

One of the proctors helped me dress in coveralls and coat, then led me up to the top floor. It seemed cold and deserted. In the corridor leading to the entryway, we found Joby waiting, dressed in a coat. It looked terribly anxious. The proctor gave my hand to Joby and said, "Wait in the cloakroom till the aircar arrives. Stay with Joby, Tedla."

As if I were likely to run off. We waited a long time. I lay down on one of the benches, my head pillowed on Joby's lap. The neuter stroked my hair. I had drifted off into an uneasy doze when at last the proctor came in and told us the aircar was here. "They had some trouble getting through," he said. Out in the corridor, blands were carrying in some boxes of medicine, supervised by the clinician. They were tracking wet snow onto the floor, and I felt a groggy surprise that no one was scolding them. When the clinician saw me she squeezed my hand and said, "You'll be all right as soon as you get there."

"Are you coming with me?" I asked.

"No, Joby will go with you in the aircar. Someone will meet you when you get to the curatory."

Outside, the world seemed wild and alien. Every familiar thing was buried under a layer of snow almost as tall as I was. The sky was gray and forbidding; the wind slung a stinging handful of snow into my face as I tried to look around. The blands had cut a path through the drifts to the playfield, where the aircar had landed at an odd angle, its legs sunk deep into snow. Even in the path the snow was deep, and it was exhausting work plowing through it. When Joby saw I was having trouble, it turned and picked me up.

I was astonished at the bland's strength; it looked so puny. I laid my head on its shoulder, my arms around its neck, and let it toil through the snow for me.

The pilot—a gruff, bearded man who looked displeased to be out in such weather—lifted me up into one of the two passenger seats and told me how to belt myself in. I looked out the open door to where Joby was still standing in the snow, looking into the aircar. It looked terrified. I said, “Don’t be scared, Joby. You’ll be all right.”

Impatiently, the pilot said, “Get in if you’re going to.”

Visibly steeling itself, Joby clambered up into the seat beside me, and the pilot slammed the door. I showed Joby how to work the buckles. The engine started with a deafening roar, and Joby clutched my hand. I felt the panic in its body, so I squeezed its hand and leaned against its shoulder.

We rose into the air with a sickening swoop, then banked. Joby’s eyes were closed tight. I don’t know why I felt so little fear—trust of the adults, perhaps. Or perhaps it was Joby acting like a bland that made me feel the obligation to act more human. At any rate, I stared out the window, trying to keep track of the horizon. Soon we rose into clouds, and there was nothing to see but grayness. Still the turbulent wind buffeted us; the ride was rough as a groundcar on a bad road. Joby and I were flung to either side, or nearly lifted out of our seats when the car dropped into a pocket of air. The pilot was talking to someone on his headset. He said nothing to us.

At last I felt the stomach-numbing sense of falling as we began a steep descent. At the very last moment we broke out of the clouds, and I saw a lighted landing pad below us. The snow was not so deep here, or the wind had swept it away. We settled down with a last bump. Without even stopping the engines, the pilot shoved open the door. Eager to be out, Joby unfastened its straps and clambered down, turning to lift me to the pavement. Then it looked around, trying to figure out what to do. “Where do we go?” it asked the pilot. He pointed and said, “Entry’s over there. Clear out, I’ve got another run.”

Joby took my hand and started off across the pad. Behind us the aircar door slammed shut and the engines began to roar. We headed down a ramp that led underground. When we passed through the door into a clean, tubular hallway, the silence was stunning.

No one was there to meet us. We stood looking around, bewildered.

“Maybe we should wait,” I said.

But there was no place to sit, so Joby steeled itself and chose a direction to go. Presently we came to a more frequented area. People in curatorial tabards were going about their business. Though several times Joby stopped to ask a question, people kept passing us as though we were invisible, and Joby was too timid to stop them.

At last we came to a circular lounge area with a counter in the middle, where a woman sat. Joby went up to her. She ignored us at first, but Joby stood there patiently, and at last she looked up. "What do you want?"

"Someone was supposed to meet us," Joby said in a faint voice.

"What do you mean?" she said.

Anxiously, Joby said, "We came from the creche. Tedla's sick. Someone's supposed to tell us what to do."

"What creche?" she said.

Joby and I looked at each other. It had never occurred to me that of course there was more than one, and ours must have a name. At last Joby, thinking feverishly, said, "Cliffside."

The woman looked at me. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's sick," Joby said.

"I gathered that," she said drily. Before Joby could summon the courage to say more, she said, "Never mind," and punched a number on her terminal. When someone answered, she said, "I've got a proto out here from Cliffside Creche. Do you have any record about this?" She listened for a while, then turned back to us. "Sit down over there."

"Thank you, ma'am," Joby said, grateful to be told what to do at last.

We settled down to wait on a couch. The excitement of the ride had given me an adrenaline-powered energy that now began to take its toll. I felt uncomfortably hot, and taking my coat off didn't help much. My headache was radiating down my neck, and making me feel sick again, though I had eaten nothing for over a day. I slumped against Joby, and it put an arm around me.

The lounge was very busy; people were constantly coming in, talking to the woman at the desk, sitting down to wait, and being directed into the many halls that radiated out from the hub where we were. Everyone but us seemed to know where they were and what they were doing. I watched them with a growing conviction that we were in the wrong place. We were lost, and no one cared. At last I couldn't sit up any longer, and so I lay down, my head on Joby's lap. It rubbed my back comfortingly. Joby was the only familiar, trustworthy thing in this place; I felt safe as long as it was near, though I knew it was as frightened as I.

After a long time Joby started to get up, and I clutched at it. "Don't go away," I said.

"I'm just going to talk to the lady. I'll be right back," it said.

From the couch I watched another fruitless exchange. Joby turned back to join me, its shoulders slumped in dejection. We didn't say anything to each other, but I hugged it, and it kissed my cheek. "They'll do something soon," Joby promised.

Of course, they didn't. As I drifted in and out of a feverish doze, I noticed that the woman at the desk had changed, and soon Joby had to go over and explain the whole situation again, from the beginning. After that I lost

track of time. My mouth was parched, but I didn't even have the energy to ask Joby to fetch me some water. It hurt to move, it hurt even to open my eyes.

I was roused from my torpor by the sound of shouting. The scene I saw then was surreal as a hallucination. Joby was standing at the counter, its face red with anger, its voice raised, the woman looking at it in utter astonishment. "Hours—hours!—that child has been lying there sick, with you ignoring it," Joby shouted passionately. "What are you going to do, wait for it to die before you pay attention?"

The whole room fell silent, shocked to inaction by the sight of a bland stressed beyond its limit, shouting—actually shouting—at a person. Never in my life had I seen such a thing, and even in my condition I felt a pang of fear for Joby. Recovering from her paralysis, the woman at the counter stabbed at her console and said, "Could you send a curator down here immediately?"

"Joby!" I cried out, afraid they would clap it in chains and haul it away, and I would be left all alone. At the sound of my voice, Joby whirled around and came flying back to me. There were tears in its eyes. "Hush, Tedla, it's all right, it's all right," it said, still so distraught its hands shook.

Seconds later, it seemed, a sweet-smelling, gray-haired woman in a curator's tabard was leaning over me, asking questions that Joby stumbled to answer between its tears. Soon a rolling cot arrived, and they lifted me onto it. I wouldn't let go of Joby's hand, though the postulants tried to make me. The curator said, "Let the bland go, too."

Joby stayed by my side through the tests that followed. It stayed when they transferred me to a bed. All through the restless, painful night that followed, every time I woke up, there Joby was, sometimes slumped over asleep but always in sight.

I was very sick for three or four days. When I was finally well enough to sit up and eat something, the curator looked very pleased. "I think you're going to be all right, Tedla," she said warmly, then added, "now maybe your bland can get some rest."

I was trying to sort out my memories, so I asked uncertainly, "Why didn't anyone meet us?"

"The pilot delivered you to the wrong curatory."

"Did Joby really make a scene?"

"Oh, yes," she said, laughing, then bent close to whisper, "your bland loves you very much."

When she was gone, I looked over at Joby, who was standing there like the picture of exhaustion. "I love you too, Joby," I said shyly.

It came over to my bedside and took my hand. "Hush, don't say things like that," it said, its eyes downcast.

“Why not?” I said. “It’s true.”

It put a finger on my lips to silence me. “You’re meant for better things than I,” it said.

I didn’t understand then what that had to do with love, but I do now.



For a while after coming back, I enjoyed some romantic notoriety at the creche as *The Proto That Almost Died*. I did not enjoy it. Once my physical stamina started to return, I slid gratefully into anonymity again.

The most lasting result of the episode was my relationship with Joby. Whenever we met in the hallway, Joby’s face would break out in a sunny smile, and I would rush into its arms. It would twirl me around till my feet left the floor. I sneaked it treats from refectory, thinking the blands didn’t get treats—though of course they finished up whatever food we didn’t eat. This went on for several years, till the older protos started whispering, “Neuter-lover!” when I passed, and I learned not to be so open about my affections.

We kept a great many traditions and holidays in the creche—more than they do in the outside world. I suppose it was to give us a sense of cultural identity. My favorite holiday was *Tumbleturn Day*, which came in the spring at a time when the snow was still melting in slushy heaps and the ground was too wet to play on, but spring fever had set in, making us seriously restless. We planned for weeks in advance what we were going to be on *Tumbleturn Day*, but kept it a secret from all but our truly special friends, so everyone would be surprised—or at least pretend to be.

We always woke early and excited that morning, because it was the one day of the year when confusion reigned, and all roles were reversed. We rushed from the roundroom to our lockers, where we had secreted costumes or insignia to show what we were supposed to be. There were always huge arguments about whether it was better to be a patternist or factor. I generally chose the former.

“Patternists are sly and sneaky,” said Bigger, a chunky proto who would have been the bully of our roundroom if anyone had let it get away with such antisocial behavior.

“Well, factors are dumb and greedy,” I retorted.

Those were the stereotypes, at any rate. Of course, we all lived up to the stereotypes when we played at being adults. It never occurred to us that our own gestagogues were patternists, since we trusted them implicitly.

In the year I am thinking of, my good friend Litch and I had conspired together to be vestigators, since we could torment the docents by asking them questions. Litch was a small, remarkably ugly proto with protruding teeth and a face that looked like someone had taken it by the ears and pulled out to either side. Litch compensated with comedy. We made such a

peculiar-looking pair—me like an angel, Litch like a demon—that people tended to break out laughing just seeing us. Litch had wanted to spend Tumbleturn Day as a beet, since that would *really* be a turnaround; but I balked at being a vegetable.

Our vestigator costumes consisted of long lab coats filched from the dietician and hygienist, notepads, and huge cardboard spectacles. The sleeves of my coat came down several inches over my hands and I kept tripping on the hem, but this only made everyone laugh harder, so I didn't mind.

When we got to refectory, the adults were all eating there as if they were us, dressed not in their gestatorial uniforms but in the bright, color-coded coveralls we always wore, but inside-out and backwards. One middle-aged proctor whom we had never suspected of humor was dressed as an infant in a sleeper, with the diapers on the outside. We shrieked in laughter to see him. The food line was reversed—we had to go through it backwards—and the blands served our food on upside-down plates. Eating got messy, but we knew the blands wouldn't mind cleaning up.

There was a pretense of classes, but of course we all held our books upside down and wrote the words backwards. The docents pretended that this was all perfectly normal, and acted puzzled if anyone said anything the right way. Halfway through the morning, Litch and I set off to do research, as vestigators are supposed to. We had a list of nonsense questions we tried to ask everyone.

There was an older proto named Seldom who was also dressed as a vestigator that day. We didn't know Seldom very well; it hung out with a creative, nonconformist group of protos who had actually written and presented a play the year before. Just before lunch it saw us in the hallway and said, "Do you protes want to discover something really strange?"

Flattered by its attention, we nodded. Seldom's voice got low and mysterious then. "I know where there's something hidden from ancient times. If you want to see it, you're going to have to go on an expedition."

"Okay," Litch said.

"Come on, let's get some supplies," Seldom said, and headed for the refectory.

The blands were instructed never to hand out food except at mealtimes, but everything was so topsy-turvy that day that we managed to wheedle snacks out of them. "Ready?" Seldom said, viewing us critically. It had a pointer from one of the classrooms that it used as a walking stick.

"Lead on, Chief," Litch said saucily.

We headed down the stairs. On the lower levels things were functioning more normally, since the truly little children didn't know enough about what was normal to appreciate Tumbleturn Day. We passed the toddlers' playroom, running crouched over so the blands wouldn't see us through the window. Then we descended to the infants' level. I hadn't been there

in years, and it looked small and low-ceilinged. Through an open door we glimpsed the nursery where the babies' cribs stood, ranged in circles. All but the tiniest babies were off in their exercise room; only a lone bland tended the nursery, slowly gathering laundry.

Seldom stopped by one of the plain gray doors that only blands used, and turned to us. It whispered, "We've got to go through grayspace to get there. Are you ready?"

No one had ever ordered us not to pass through the graydoors. We had learned to avoid them purely through the adults' unspoken example. I was not particularly frightened, but I was repulsed and uneasy. Seldom was watching us appraisingly, so I tried not to show it.

When we passed through the door, the contrast left us in no doubt where we were. Here, the walls were not warm lignis but rough, colorless poured-stone. Bare light fixtures hung from the ceiling, and all around us the pipes and ducts were exposed. It was like seeing the guts of an organism—the parts that make everything run, but no one was meant to know about.

We stood at the top of a metal staircase with open mesh treads. As we descended, our steps echoed loudly against the bare walls, and Seldom warned us to be more quiet. At the bottom, we found ourselves in a long, curving corridor that ran around the circumference of the creche. It looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years. From a doorway ahead, a loud mechanical humming came. I was relieved when Seldom gestured us away from it. "That's the laundry," it whispered. "The kitchen's on the other side. That's why you have to do this at mealtimes. All the blands are busy preparing the meal."

"What happens if someone finds us down here?" I asked uneasily.

"Oh, the blands go crazy," Seldom said.

"Really?" Litch said, perking up. "Let's go scare them."

"Not now," Seldom said. "We've got more important things to do."

At that moment we heard the sound of a cart approaching down the hall, its wheels rumbling on the cracked floor. Seldom set off running away from it, and we followed. Our leader skidded to a halt by another graydoor, and we all dived through. We found ourselves at the head of another staircase leading down into an even dimmer level.

The walls in this level were old square blocks of poured stone with crumbling mortar. There was a dank, musty smell. "This is where the neuters' roundroom is," Seldom said. "You want to see it?"

"No," I said.

"Yes," Litch said.

We sneaked down the corridor to an open door. Inside was a locker room, but not like ours. Where ours was bright and clean, this one was dim and dingy. The old metal lockers were scratched and worn. Beyond this room was a shower room, but instead of shiny ceramic tile there was a poured-

stone floor and walls stained with rust and hard water deposits. One of the showerheads dripped loudly as we tiptoed through. We stuck our heads through the next doorway. The bland's roundroom was threadbare and dim. There were rips in the cloth covering the walls.

"Look at the neuter-sweat," Litch said with distaste. The center of the floor, where they slept, was stained with the mark of decades of bodies resting there. "This is disgusting," Litch said, holding its nose.

We escaped gratefully out into the hall again. Now Seldom led us to another door. This one had been padlocked, but the screws on the hasp had worked loose, so that it only looked secure. Before opening the door, Seldom looked at us and said, "Are you really brave?"

We nodded our heads.

"You've got to go the next part of the way in the dark. Okay?"

Litch and I exchanged a look, but we both nodded. Seldom opened the door and we slipped through. When the older proto came in and closed the door behind it, the darkness was absolute.

"Put your hands on the railing and feel your way down the steps," Seldom whispered. "The light switch is at the bottom."

I groped and found Litch's hand in the dark. Hanging onto each other, we edged our way down the steps. At last my feet touched stone instead of metal, and I said, "Seldom?" For a panicky moment I wondered if the older proto had lured us here in order to escape and leave us in the dark. But I heard Seldom right behind me, feeling for the light switch. At last there was a click, and a sickly yellow light came on—a dusty bulb hanging from a cord. It would have seemed very dim, had our eyes not adjusted to the darkness.

On this level, the walls were not even poured-stone—they were raw limestone, cut from the bedrock itself. Curving away on either side was another corridor heaped with old junk. There were rusty garden tools and filing cabinets, broken furniture, and old machines. Litch and I ventured timidly out into the narrow walkway in the center, feeling dwarfed by the heaps on either side. I stopped to stare at a rusty machine of cast iron with a massive gear on one side. "How old is this stuff?" I said.

"This is the oldest level of the creche," Seldom said. "It was built back in the Machine Age."

We had all learned of the Machine Age, when people had built so many machines, and controlled them so poorly, that they had nearly destroyed life on Taramond. In those days, people had no respect for life or love for their world. To feed the machines' voracious appetites for power, they had poisoned the air and water, altered the climate, leveled the forests, and squandered the soil. In the end, millions had died, and whole species had gone extinct. An aura of evil hung over these machines. They had been used for diabolical purposes. "Is the creche that old?" I asked.

"It wasn't a creche then," Seldom said.

"I bet it was a rocket factory," Litch said. "I bet they built spaceships here." The Machine Age was also when we last had contact with the stars, before what Capellans call the Dire Years.

Seeing how I recoiled from the machines, Seldom said, "Don't worry, these machines couldn't do much harm. They're too little."

The one with the gears was taller than I.

Seldom led us down the hall. It was lit by occasional bulbs, and in between them the shadows gathered. My back was crawling, and I kept looking behind us. Only dust was there.

At last Seldom turned down a passage that led inward like the spoke of a wheel. This hall was lined with cobwebby machines in gray metal casings, full of faded dials calibrated in characters I didn't even recognize. I felt a thousand miles—or a thousand years—away from the creche. Here, everything was alien.

The hall ended in a rough stone archway opening into darkness. A breeze blew in from it, smelling of wet rock. On one wall was a metal box, which Seldom opened. It was full of switches. "Ready?" it said, looking at us. Without waiting for a reply, it pushed one of the switches. There was a faraway clunk, and the lights beyond the doorway came on, faltered, then came on again.

We edged through. Beyond the door lay a domed cavern carved from the rock. We found ourselves on a balcony that ran around the perimeter, edged with a metal railing. In the center of the space, squatting there like an immense, poisonous toad, was a single machine the size of a house. It was rounded on top, and had a forest of pipes feeding into it.

"This is the kind of machine that poisoned the world," Seldom said in a whisper.

It radiated evil. I backed away, terrified that we would waken it, and it would start up again. "What's it doing here?" I said. "Why didn't they destroy it?"

"I don't know," said Seldom.

"I want to go back," I said.

Litch was braver than I. It crept forward to the railing. "Look," it said with a horrified fascination. "There are ladders to get down."

"Of course," Seldom said. "People had to tend the machine."

I imagined a crew enslaved to the machine, working in chains. In my mind, they were blands. I couldn't imagine people doing it.

"See over there?" Seldom pointed to another opening in the wall opposite the one where we stood. It was pitchy black. "You know where that leads?"

I didn't want to know, but Litch said, "Where?"

"There's a whole 'nother creche that was abandoned and walled up," Seldom said. "That's the only way into it now. And you know what? The bodies

of the protos who were in that creche are still there. They're just skeletons now."

"Let's go back," I pleaded. At last Litch seemed to agree with me. It backed away from the railing. This place was too evil to be in.

We went back into the spoke-corridor and waited while Seldom opened the box to turn off the lights. It hesitated over the rows of switches. "Maybe I should punch a few others, just to see what they'll do," it said.

"No!" I pleaded, terrified.

Seldom relented and shut off the lights. We hurried back down the hallway to the bottom of the stairs. "Ready?" Seldom said, poised to switch off the lights.

I turned to race up the steps while the lights were still on. I only got about three steps up when Seldom threw the switch. Hanging onto the railing, I made it all the way up, and felt for the door. Suddenly, Seldom was there, blocking the way.

"Listen," it said. "You two have got to swear not to tell anyone you were down here, or what you saw. Not another proto, not a grown-up, not even a bland. If I find you've told anyone, I'll bring you down here and lock you up till you're just another skeleton. Do you swear?"

"I swear," we both said.

Seldom let us out then. We managed to sneak back up without anyone seeing.

I couldn't sleep that night. I kept thinking how, directly below our roundroom, that machine lay in the dark, waiting for someone to start it going again. I kept waking up, heart pounding, thinking I heard it going, feeling imaginary tremors in the floor and a deep-buried growling that would signal the return of an ancient evil. As I would begin to drift off to sleep, I would think how, just above the machine, the blandes were sleeping in that dirty roundroom, huddled together naked as we were. Everything horrible seemed like a mirror image of everything good. Nothing was secure any more.

It was a month later that the aliens came out of the sky.



On Gammadis, we joke about how everyone remembers exactly what they were doing when the aliens landed. I am no exception. I was in Language Arts class with my favorite teacher, Docent Mercady. She was young and pretty and gentle, and I worshipped her. We were taking a spelling test when one of the proctors came to the door. He whispered to her, and she stepped out of the room. For a minute we were silent, concentrating on the test. Then, inevitably, Bigger started to make farting noises. Bigger was always doing stupid things to get attention. Some of the other protos

started to giggle, then someone else started to burp. Pretty soon, mayhem had spread across the room.

Docent Mercady stepped back in. Her face looked so strained and worried that we instantly became quiet. She said, "Class, I want you to put your pencils down and line up very quietly. We are going to Assembly."

We knew something big was up then.

The Assembly room was awash in whispers, and Litch said in my ear, "Possit says that space aliens have landed." Since Litch was always talking about space and aliens, I said, "Don't be stupid."

We had barely settled down, cross-legged on the floor, when the Matron came to the front of the room. We did not see her often—only on grave occasions. She always looked serious, but never more so than this day. She said, "Children, we have received news of an important event at Magnus Convergence. The mattergraves and electors have been contacted by a delegation from one of our star colonies founded long ago in the Machine Age. We have never known if any of them survived. Now, they have come back across space to visit us."

There was a hum of talk all across the room. I was stunned. So Litch had been right, in a way.

The Matron raised her voice to make us quiet. "Since this is an important event, I want you to learn all about it. We are going to watch some news broadcasts." She gave a signal to one of the proctors, and the screen came on.

We sat there for the next several hours, mesmerized by the viewscreen. The aliens had sent a message from their orbiting ship, politely requesting permission to land. We watched as their atmospheric shuttle came down, not unlike one of our aircars. We waited, breathless, as the vehicle sat there for what seemed like an eternity, motionless. Then at last the door opened, and we saw our first aliens. They looked like little squashed brown people to me. (Please don't be offended; I expect we look strange to you, too.) Across the landing pad, the people sent to meet them waited. They were not electors or mattergraves themselves—that had been deemed too dangerous. Nevertheless, their faces became familiar as those first images were shown over and over. A pair of people—one factor and one patternist—walked forward to greet the approaching aliens. The patternist welcomed the "Members of the Community of Humanity" back to the homeworld. The aliens replied in accented but perfectly comprehensible Argot, saying they came in "brotherhood," an antique term I scarcely recognized, and their purpose was to learn from us. This seemed like either charming humility or deep subterfuge to us, considering that they were the spacefarers. We had no idea at the time that Capellans live to learn, and it was simply the truth.

The delegates ushered the three aliens into a groundcar, and whisked them off. Nothing else happened that day, but that did not stop the commentators from filling the screen with speculation. Why had no one detect-

ed the orbiting spaceship? (We later learned that it was specially designed to be invisible to our technology.) How did the aliens know our language? (We learned that they had been studying it, and us, from space for months.) Why were there only three of them? (Magister Galele later told me they were specialists called the First Contact team. The main body of researchers had not even arrived at that time.) What were their true motives in coming here? (No one believed that they had already told us.)

Then, because they had no answers, the commentators began discussing what effect this would have on the delicate balance of power in our own society. As the discussion wore on, I found it boring and irrelevant. How could they talk about politics at a time like this? Couldn't they see that everything had changed?

From where I sat there on the floor of my creche, it seemed as if the world was suddenly vulnerable, like a building with its top blown off, exposed to the sky. We no longer enjoyed the pleasant security of our isolation. No matter what happened, we had lost control. Just weeks before, I had discovered the threats we ourselves had created; now there was an external one. Nothing was safe. I moved closer to Docent Mercady, and she, sensing my fear, put an arm around me. I whispered to her, "Will the aliens start up the machines again?" She kissed me and said, "No. We won't let them do that. Don't worry, Tedla. We won't let anyone hurt you."

For the first time in my life, I wondered if she, or any adult, had the power to make good on such a promise.

In recreation that day, Litch and I played at being aliens. It was our way of robbing the event of strangeness, by acting it out. While most of the others played rocketball, we constructed a spaceship from gym equipment and imagination, and greeted everyone who came by, telling them we came in brotherhood.

After that first day, reports on the aliens became a regular part of our classes. We went on a night expedition outside to look at their home star, Capella Two, through a telescope built by the top roundroom in science class. We learned that their ship had set out hundreds of years ago, but the aliens themselves had only arrived recently by a magically advanced system of transport that made them into lightbeams. Docent Gambrel showed us the spectrum, so we could see the particular frequency of light they had been. Since we were all fascinated by the aliens, and would listen to anything about them, the docents learned to incorporate them in all our lessons. "You'll need to know this if you ever meet an alien," became a frequent refrain.

The strangest thing we learned about them was that they had no childhoods. That is how we interpreted it. They were born adults, fully differentiated, male and female. We would look at each others' naked bodies in the roundroom, and imagine them with sexual organs. It seemed repulsive.

The corollary fact that the aliens still had families raised many questions in socialization class, since the docents had always told us that only primitives lived that way, in tribalism, and true civilized amity was impossible as long as the bonds of biology were allowed to coexist with those of community. We discussed it, and I, at least, concluded that the aliens must be more socially primitive than we, despite their technological cleverness. I began to think of them as people who had never outgrown their own Machine Age.

The original sense of community we felt toward them cooled when they claimed not to be descendents of our own colonies. They traced their origin back to a place called Earth, and gently insisted that we had originated there, too, in unspeakably ancient times. Our own questionnaires debated this hotly.

However, we soon grew used to seeing the three aliens' gnomish faces on screen. They were endlessly available to answer questions, seemingly quite open with their information, up to a point. Certain questions, especially those about technology, they evaded. They explained that they would share their knowledge when they understood us well enough to know that it would not do us any harm. Having lived on Capella Two, I know this was not strictly true. They would *share* nothing; they intended to *sell* it.

After awhile I grew a little bored with the aliens. I became used to their presence on screen, and on our planet. They became oddities, not threats. I never dreamed that I would become more entangled with them than anyone else on Taramond.



As we grew older, the gestagoues allowed us more freedom to explore the landscape outside the creche on our own.

I loved the outdoors. It seemed as if my senses were more alive there, and I eagerly sampled all the sensations, from the smell of river mud to the stroke of wind on my face. I was feeling everything for the first time; all my emotions were sharp, unblunted by use, like coffee or herbs fresh out of the package. At times I indulged in them so extravagantly that they strained me to the limits. In those days, a melody could pierce to the bone, a sunset could bring tears of painful joy. And an unkindness could gnaw like cancer.



Tedla broke off suddenly, looking at Val. "I wonder if humans retain some of that freshness of perception. They told us neuters don't—that everything in a bland's brain becomes blunted and dull, even pain. I know it's true I can't sense things like I did then. It makes me wonder if I'm seeing the world muted, if there is a pitch of sensation closed to me. I wonder if everything I feel is a lesser emotion than humans do."

“I think that’s unlikely,” Val said, thinking she had hardly ever met a person whose emotions were so close to the surface. Capellans learned to hide their minds much better. “It sounds like they told you a lot of things about neuters that aren’t true.”

“Yes, but it was all woven in with things that are true.”

“If you don’t feel the way you did then, it may have more to do with growing up than with being a neuter. I don’t feel the way I did as a child, either.”

“But how can I tell whether you sense things I don’t?”

“I don’t know,” Val said. “It’s the one thing we can never know about each other.”



For you, puberty is a process. To us, it is a precipice. In a single day we pass from the social state of childhood to adulthood. Physically, the transformation takes longer, but it is still abrupt by your standards. At age twelve, we are immature, undifferentiated proto-humans. At fourteen, we are fully functioning sexual beings.

The gestagogues tried their best to prepare us, but as the metamorphosis came closer, it loomed over all our thoughts, a wall beyond which we could not see. In the roundroom we talked endlessly about whether it was better to be a man or a woman, despite the adults’ best efforts to convince us there was no advantage either way. Some protos had strong opinions. Women were better because they could make lots of money having babies. Men were better because they were strong and adventurous. I could never decide. All sexual organs seemed like grotesque deformities to me. In the shower, when I thought no one was looking, I would run my hands over the places on my body where the breasts or the penis would grow. My body, the thing in the world most familiar to me, was about to turn into something alien.

Rumors and legends proliferated in the roundroom, taking up where the instructionaries left off. There were rhymes: Eating beans will produce male genes, the bite of a needletail will make you female. There were diagnostic tests: If you looked at your fingernails palm up rather than palm down, you were sure to be a man. Looking over your shoulder to see the sole of your foot was a sure sign of a woman.

The instructionaries never breathed a hint that there was any third alternative. That knowledge was passed along the way we learned most frightful and unpleasant things, in the whispered roundroom talk at night. One night a group of us was gathered around an older proto named Little Bit, who often knew secrets the rest of us admired it for, even when they were false. This night, it had an especially grave look on its face. We all had to lean close to hear as it whispered, “You know, any one of us could turn into a neuter.”

“That’s not true!” an argumentative child named Axel said. “They wouldn’t be teaching us all this stuff if we were just going to turn into pubers.” It was a filthy word. Axel resented Bit’s prestige and was trying to win our admiration by obscenity. It only made most of us uncomfortable.

“They don’t know, you see,” Bit maintained. “They can’t predict who will be a neuter any more than they can predict who will be male or female. So they have to educate everyone, even though some of us will forget it all.”

Bit looked at the frightened faces surrounding it. By now everyone in the roundroom had come over to hear. “Any one of us,” Bit said in a spooky voice. We all looked around, and most eyes came to rest on Pitter, a fat and sulky proto who was unpopular because it had been a bed wetter, which never gains you points in a roundroom. Someone whispered, “I bet it’s Pitter who’s the puber.”

The phrase sounded so funny that we began to chant it, driving Pitter into a frenzy. Its face got red and it shouted, “Stop it, you creeps! It’s not even true. Bit’s full of crap.”

“You’d better watch out not to touch them too much,” Bit said. “Neuter hormones can go right through your skin, and if you touch your eyes or your mouth after touching a neuter, well, that’s it.”

We were silent, since we had all touched neuters quite unwarily up to that point.

“There’s another thing,” Bit said. “If you touch yourself down here, you’re sure to turn into a neuter.”

No one said a word. I expect we had all done that, too.

After that, there was a marked change in our behavior. We became more distant, even hostile and contemptuous, to the blands. Before, we had viewed them with neutrality or pity, since they weren’t really our concern—merely unfortunates who could not help what they were. Now, we took them personally. They were reminders of our own vulnerability, the flaw we ourselves might hide, and so we hated them. We were learning to act like humans.

Around that time, my best friend was a proto named Zelly. It was a terribly worried child, afraid and anxious about everything. Zelly found safety in rules—knew them all, obeyed each one to the letter, and was sure to warn the rest of us when we were falling dangerously short. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—I took a perverse pleasure in persuading Zelly to do things that would have terrified it without me—and a few things that should have terrified me.

One midsummer day Zelly and I snuck away from supervised recreation to go exploring in the river bluffs behind the creche. There was a spot where the limestone cliff was eroded in steplike layers, which made for easy scrambling. Zelly followed me a little way, then stopped. “We’re not supposed to climb the cliff,” it said. “There are rattletails and sucker beetles.”

There were hazards everywhere for Zelly. I said, "I'll go first and scare away the rattlers. You know what to do if you hear one?"

Zelly froze in place. "That's right," I said. We were sure the snakes could only see motion, and so we would turn invisible if we kept still.

I led the way up the cliff. Soon we could see over the tops of the aikens, and then we were at the grassy, windswept crest. Below us lay the creche, and the other protos playing on the broad natural terrace. Beyond them the valley fell away in ledges, and off in the blue distance were the river bluffs on the eastern side. To see the creche from outside, in its setting, gave me a feeling of discovery, like seeing a map of a place you knew only from ground level. It gave Zelly a feeling of acrophobia. "Come away from the edge, Tedla!" it pleaded. "You're going to fall."

It sounded like a neuter, and a few months before I would have told it so, teasingly; but now we knew the jibe might be true, and I stayed quiet. All the same, a moment of doubt invaded my day, like the smell of distant poison. I quickly put it out of my mind; I couldn't think such a thing of Zelly. Besides, I told myself, if it were that easy to tell, the adults would have figured it out long ago.

A path ran along the cliff edge, and we followed it single file till we came to a spot where the gray faces of an old ruin stuck up out of the grass.

Gammadis is simply peppered with ruins, mostly of a material we call poured-stone. They are so common that no one pays much attention to any but the most lavish and well preserved. This one was neither—merely a square outline enclosing a depression of hard-packed dirt, where, it was obvious, generations of children from the creche had played. Nevertheless, it looked wondrous in our eyes.

As we explored it, we wove elaborate speculations about what the building had been. We decided it was a fort erected to guard the river valley against invading armies—since we knew from our history lessons that people in the olden days did very little but war with each other and destroy things. Soon it was a place where a pair of freedom fighters had been killed. Since this led to the conclusion that their bones would be buried inside, we got some sticks and began to dig.

"Tedla!" Zelly shrieked, leaping up from its knees. "I found it! I found a skull!"

Eagerly, I came over to look. There it was—a curved, gray-white shard protruding from the soil. One side had a shiny glaze on it. I dug around it with my stick as Zelly peered over my shoulder, and soon wrenched it free.

"It's a piece of a dish!" I said, only a little disappointed it wasn't more macabre. "Maybe it's valuable."

"Maybe it's got a curse on it," Zelly said in a low, thrilling voice.

We looked at each other in fascination and fear. Then we turned back to dig even harder.

Soon we had excavated some bits of rusty metal, a piece of melted red plastic, and a mysterious round glass object with raised marks we imagined to be writing. We laid them out to study.

"You know, you can get diseases from old things in the dirt," Zelly said.

"Then I guess we're going to die," I said.

"We'll die friends, won't we, Tedla?" Zelly said. There was something earnest and anxious in its face, so I took its dirty hand in an improvised secret handshake.

"We'll be friends forever," I said.

We had created quite a satisfactory pile of loose dirt, and Zelly now said, "We ought to make some ammunition to defend ourselves against attack."

There was an old square pit behind the ruins where some scummy water had collected, so now we used it to wet down our dirt and form cannonballs. As we were thus occupied, we heard someone coming up the cliff toward us. Zelly said, "An invader! Quick, Tedla, make more mud-bombs so we can hold them off."

When the invader emerged onto the cliffside path, we saw it was just Joby, walking slowly as if winded by the climb. It came toward us, calling, "Tedla! Zelly! You're supposed to come down."

Obviously, some proctor had noticed our absence and sent Joby to fetch us. At my side, Zelly said in a low, venomous voice, "Filthy puber."

The hatred in Zelly's voice startled and frightened me. The emotion was too virulent for Zelly—cautious Zelly!—but I quickly adjusted. My friend was older, closer to being human, and had to know better than I. Besides, there was something that felt *right* about disobeying Joby. I was going to be human. Humans didn't let neuters order them around. I was different from Joby. I was going to grow up, as it never would. I shouted out, "We don't have to take orders from you!"

Emboldened, Zelly shouted, "Filthy puber! Don't come any closer!"

Joby stopped in its tracks, a complicated expression on its face. I couldn't tell what that expression meant, but my companion recognized it right away. "It's afraid!" Zelly said gleefully, feeling power over another being for the first time.

"Come on, you two," Joby said. "You'll get in trouble. Proctor Givern wants you to come down now."

A human would have ordered us, not wheedled. Zelly stood up, a mudball in one hand. "Get away, you defective, or you'll regret it."

Joby hesitated, then said, "Tedla? Are you coming?"

In answer, Zelly let the mudball fly. Joby saw it coming and turned away to shield its face; the bomb hit it on the shoulder with a thunk, spraying dirt into the bland's thinning hair.

"Right on target!" Zelly whooped, then snatched up an armload of mudballs. "Come on, Tedla. We've got it on the run!"

Something had come over my friend. There was a wildness in Zelly's face—a desperate, frightened aggression. I was awed, and caught up in it. I seized a mudball and threw it. When Joby saw that, it turned to flee.

"Sortie!" Zelly called, and leaped past the ruined walls of our fort to chase the retreating bland. I seized up some mudballs and followed. Ahead, Joby started to scramble down the steep cliff path. But the bland was old, and couldn't move fast. We came to the cliff top above it, and began to pelt it with mudballs as it clung to the cliff, slowly trying to move farther down into shelter.

"Mutant! Spado!" Zelly shrieked.

"Puber!" I joined in. In that moment Joby wasn't an individual; it was a symbol for all neuters, all we feared most. And we had power over it.

Zelly finally ran out of mudballs, but didn't want to stop. It picked up a rock from the path and threw it. The rock hit Joby on the side of the head, and its footing slipped. It slid several feet down the cliff before catching a handhold again. We saw blood on its face.

That brought us to our senses. We looked at each other, and suddenly we were ourselves again. Without exchanging a word, we dashed back to the fort.

"What do I care? It's just a bland," Zelly said as we sat there, debating what to do. "They don't even feel pain like we do."

"Let's go back down now," I said. "Then if Joby tells on us, we can just say it's lying, and we were never even up here."

But Zelly was too afraid of punishment to go back, and I wasn't going to go by myself. Before we could decide anything, we heard someone coming up the cliff. When we crept to the edge, we saw the lanky form of Proctor Givern, with Joby close behind him.

"Let's hide," Zelly said, eyes wide with fear.

But Proctor Givern knew exactly where to look. "Tedla. Zelly. Come out of there," he said in a voice that told us we had never been in trouble like we were in now. When we stood quaking before him, he looked us over with disgust. "Do you think this is funny?" he said, gesturing at Joby. The neuter stood a little behind him. Its face and hair were still crusty with mud, and the trickle of blood from its cut ear was drying on its face. Its coveralls were dirty. Its eyes were cast down—shamed, I thought, for having to fetch a human to defend it from two children.

"We were just playing," Zelly said sulkily.

"Throwing rocks isn't playing," Proctor Givern said harshly. "You could have hurt Joby. Would hurting a bland make you feel proud?" He stared at us, but we couldn't answer. "Only a coward would hurt a bland. They can't fight back; they don't know how. Real humans protect blands. Real humans are kind to them. What do you think that says about you?"

There was a long, horrible silence. At last Proctor Givern said, "Zelly, go down to the creche. Wait in my office till I get there. Tedla, stay here."

Released, Zelly raced away down the path. I watched it go, longing to be with it.

Proctor Givern said, "I really thought better of you, Tedla."

"Zelly started it," I said defensively.

"Zelly never started anything in its life. You're the one I expected to know right from wrong. You've disappointed me."

I stared at the ground, shamed and angry.

"All right. This is your punishment. You are going to spend twenty hours in the chapel in the next ten days, thinking about what you did and why you did it. If you want to talk to me about it, come to my office. Now tell me you're sorry."

I looked up, and the words stuck in my throat. But not because of Proctor Givern. From behind him, Joby was looking at me with the expression of someone watching a child it had cherished mature into a viper. In that moment I hated myself as I had never done before. I had forfeited Joby's love, the only pure and simple love I had ever known, a love without reservations or judgments. I would never know that kind of love again. At the thought, tears sprang into my eyes. I was sorry, so sorry it hurt, but I still couldn't say so, because I wasn't sorry for Proctor Givern—I was sorry for Joby, and Joby was only a bland.

The proctor didn't force the matter. Watching my face, he said, "All right, you can go now."

I climbed recklessly down that cliff, blinded by tears.

Twenty hours is a long time to spend thinking about yourself and why you did something shameful, and I cannot say I used the first ten very profitably. I walked along the quiet, leafy paths, or sat in the grottoes listening to the trickle of water, or watched the fish turn lazily under the lily pads. Whenever I tried to think about myself, as I was supposed to, my mind shied away. By the end of the first day I had constructed a thousand self-justifications and defenses, with corresponding resentments against everyone else. I left the chapel angrier and less repentant than I had walked in. The second day I spent thinking about anyone but myself, cataloging every casual cruelty I had seen adults commit, in order to convince myself that I was being held to a higher standard than humans themselves could meet. By the third day I was miserable again, blaming myself for stupidity, for not thinking ahead, for letting Zelly lead me into trouble.

As I daydreamed on the fourth day, a thought occurred to me: What if there were a drug I could take that would let me live the whole year over again without getting any older? Then, immediately: What if I could just stay twelve forever, and never have to grow up? The thought was so entrancing that I sat there on the stone bench under the ferns, dreaming about it.

Then a horrible realization struck me: What I was wishing for was what actually happened to neuters. They never matured. I had been wishing to be like a neuter.

The idea was so horrifying that I stood up, shaking all over, terrified that the mere thought would make it so. I had to talk to someone.

Proctor Givern was in his office. When I came in, he said, "What's wrong, Tedla?"

"Proctor, how can I be sure I'm going to be human?" I said.

"Is that what all this is about?" he asked, as if seeing the light.

"No!" I said. It was so much more complicated. "I don't want to grow up. I don't want to not grow up. I just want to be me. Why do I have to change? It's not fair."

He saw how distressed I was, and said, "Come here, Tedla." When I came, he gave me a long hug. Then he sat me down in a chair facing his, still holding my hands. "Tedla, everyone your age is afraid of growing up," he said. "I was. It's a scary thing. But once it happens, it'll feel like the rightest thing in the world. You'll be really glad you grew up, and you'll never want to go back to being a proto again."

His unquestioning assumption that I was going to grow up calmed me. He obviously saw something about me that I didn't see. Even so, I ventured, "Are blands happy they're blands?"

"Yes," he said, "because that's what they were meant to be. If we tried to make them act like humans, they'd be miserable."

"Can you get neuter hormones by touching them?"

"Who told you that?" he asked, frowning.

"Little Bit did."

"Well, Little Bit's wrong. There is absolutely nothing you can do to determine your sex. It's all a matter of biology. Neuters can't help what they are. They didn't do anything to get that way. The way we show we're human is to treat them kindly and take care of them. It's like a test of how worthy of humanity we are."

Again, that assurance. It was as good as a guarantee to me.

Proctor Givern said, "Now I want you to go back to the chapel and think about what all this has to do with how you acted the other day."

I went back reluctantly. By now I knew that Zelly's punishment had been twenty hours of cleanup work—dirty and humiliating, but at least it was mindless. I had started out thinking my punishment was easier, but now I envied Zelly.

The tenor of my thoughts changed after that. The expression on Joby's face kept coming back to me, and every time it made me more uncomfortable with myself. I was ashamed that I'd hurt Joby, but I was also ashamed to *care* that I'd hurt Joby. It was only a neuter. Why had that look pierced me through? At last I went back to Proctor Givern.

It was hard to frame the question. I sat there a long time, twining my legs under the chair. At last I said, "Proctor, is it wrong to love a neuter?"

He thought about it a long time before answering. "No," he said. "We all get fond of them from time to time. It's only natural. It can even be good, as long as we don't get too attached or possessive. After all, they don't belong to us."

His answer made me feel liberated from a huge weight of shame that had been building up ever since that first taunt of "neuter-lover." I could admit now that I loved Joby, and didn't need to deny it to myself.

After that, thinking became much easier. I realized that I had hated Joby that day on the cliff, because love for it had been such an important part of me as a child—a part I had grown to see as shameful. I wasn't able to simply detach myself and feel nothing toward Joby, as I should have; the feelings were too strong. Joby *was* my childhood, all I had valued and cherished. Now I had to leave all that behind, and didn't want to. I had been throwing those mudballs at myself, at my past.

"I got mixed up," I told Proctor Givern. "I thought I was mad at Joby, but it was really me I was mad at, because I was so scared."

Proctor Givern gave me another big hug. "You're a good kid, Tedla," he said. It made me feel so warm I never wanted to leave his arms.



Val said, "Why do you think your punishment was different from Zelly's?"

"Proctor Givern knew us," Tedla said. "He knew what would be effective for each of us. He made me think about myself, because he knew I would."

"We have an old-fashioned word for that," Val said, smiling. "It's called a conscience."

"Yes, I suppose that's right. He wanted me to have a conscience. It's one of many things that made me think—still does make me think—that they expected me to be human. A conscience is a useless commodity for a bland. Their behavior is too tightly controlled; they don't have to control themselves."

"'They'?" Val said curiously.

"We."

The word seemed to come hard.



Shortly after, there was an event—two events, really—that affected all of us at the creche, but me in particular.

It was justification time, the yearly period when the adults have to review their lives and search their hearts to see if they have made a contribution

to nature, culture, or humanity in that year. The air was full of tension and seriousness. The adults were all preoccupied and short with us.

I was struggling with an inner dilemma myself—whether to say anything to Joby. Proctor Givern had given me no advice about it, and I had been afraid to ask. Acknowledging my own emotions in the past had been one thing; acting on them in the present was another.

I kept a watch out for Joby, but though I glimpsed it a few times, there was never any opportunity to talk. Then, mysteriously, Joby seemed to disappear altogether. After five days, I finally asked one of the other blands about it. “Joby’s sick,” was the answer.

After three days of fretting, I finally went back to Proctor Givern. He was a little more relaxed than the other adults, and wasn’t impatient to see me.

“Is Joby sick because of us?” I asked. “Did we really hurt it?”

“No, Tedla.” Proctor Givern seemed to debate what to tell me. At last he said, “Joby’s been sick a long time. That’s why we’ve been cutting down its duties.”

“What’s wrong?” I said, trying not to show my alarm.

“It’s got cancer. It’s probably going to die soon.”

He sounded quite matter-of-fact, but to me the news was shattering. I had never known anyone to die before. “Can’t you do something?” I said. “Can’t you take it to the curatory?”

Proctor Givern put a hand on my shoulder. “That wouldn’t be kind, Tedla. We would only prolong its suffering if we tried to cure it. Here, we can keep Joby comfortable in its own familiar surroundings.”

“But it wasn’t even sick the other day!” I protested.

“Yes, it was. You just couldn’t tell.”

He saw how troubled I was, and said, “We have to make this kind of decision all the time, Tedla. Blands can’t decide when it’s right to end their lives, like humans can. We have to decide for them. We’d like to keep Joby around, just like you would. But it wouldn’t have a good life, only a sick and feeble one. This way is better.”

I had to accept that. But the weight of guilt was crushing. I couldn’t bear to think what Joby’s last sight of me had been, or that it never would know how sorry I was. I couldn’t think of anything else for the rest of the day. In the evening, I crept down to the clinic where we protos went if we were sick, thinking Joby might be there. I tried to peek around, not wanting anyone to know what I was looking for. But Joby wasn’t there.

That night in the roundroom I pulled Zelly aside and whispered, “Did you know that Joby’s dying?”

A look of shock and fear passed across Zelly’s face. “Are they going to blame us?” it whispered.

“No. Joby’s got cancer. It’s been sick a long time.”

Instead of remorse, I saw relief on Zelly's face. "Oh, that's okay then."

Angrily, I said, "Don't you care?"

"Why?" Zelly said defensively. "I didn't do it. What are you blaming me for?"

Disgusted, I turned away. But I knew Zelly's reaction was the safer, righter one. I couldn't let on that I cared. Whatever Proctor Givern might say, the other protos would have made my life a misery of teasing.

I slept apart from the others in the roundroom that night, feeling alienated and unable to face them. The thought of Joby made my throat ache with all the regret I had to swallow. I thought of it till I fell asleep.

The next morning the postulants who oversaw us seemed grim and upset. When we came into refectory and saw all the younger protos assembled and waiting, we knew something was wrong.

The postulants instructed us to sit down at the tables without any food. All of the gestagogues were there, waiting. It seemed unnaturally quiet. At last the Matron came in.

"I have some important news to tell you," she said. "As you may know, this is the time of justification for all the adults here. Last night, Docent Horst decided to justify himself by making space in the world for another."

The room was perfectly silent. We all knew what she meant. He had ended his own life.

The Matron went on, "Docent Horst's conscience called upon him to take this step, and though we will miss him, we all admire his self-knowledge and support his courageous decision."

It was possibly the nicest thing we had ever heard anyone say about Docent Horst. He had been a heavysset, white-haired man who sweated profusely and often smelled of alcohol. The other docents had treated him with open disrespect. I had only had one class from him, and hadn't learned much.

"Sooner or later, all of us will face the decision Docent Horst faced last night," the Matron said. "I hope that when the time comes, each of us will have the determination he did. This afternoon, we will have an assembly to celebrate his life. The docents and proctors will gather this evening. That is all."

She left, and the blands behind the counter began serving up our breakfasts. There was no weeping or grief; that was inappropriate, since Docent Horst had died the right kind of death, and thus justified any mistakes in his life. To weep would have implied disrespect for his decision. All the same, we were shaken and a little grave, especially those of us on the verge of adulthood. Very soon, the burden of justification would be ours. Every year we would have to decide whether we deserved to continue living.

That afternoon, the blands served up a big butterberry cake in Docent Horst's honor, and we all ate some. There were games for the little ones, and the chorus sang songs.

I watched the blands serving the refreshments and cleaning up. They seemed completely unaffected by Docent Horst's demise, as indifferent to the death of a human as we were to the death of a bland.

No one ever told us when Joby died. Joby simply disappeared, as if it had never existed. I suppose no one thought we would care.



I went through a very emotional time after that. I'm not sure anyone realized I was grieving; I'm not sure I realized it myself. It wasn't just Joby's death. I was grieving for the death of my childhood. I was saying good-bye to the creche and all the places I loved. I was saying good-bye to the person I had been.

I spent a great deal of time outdoors, walking the trails to the river or climbing the bluff. Often I brought along a book to read—mostly sad tales, which suited my mood. I became very interested in religion. The truth was, I desperately needed something to take me out of myself. I was maddeningly aware of my treacherous body and my undeveloped personality. I needed something to give me a nobler persona, whose eyes I could look through—so I could face the world thinking, it's not just me inside here; it's someone else, more worthwhile than me. Otherwise I might have perished of self-awareness.

Now I know, as I didn't then, that emotion is itself a kind of talent not everyone has. A form of intelligence, perhaps—though not much valued by any culture I know of. The intensity of my feelings that fall was a gift—a treacherous gift.

On Gammadis, our religion teaches that all life is suffused with spirit, but that humans, unique among life forms, are able to become aware of it. Each person, they say, has a god inside—an individual emanation of the life force. To search for one's god—to become aware of the aspect of one's self that approaches divinity—is the purpose of worship among us. People approach it in different ways—through dance, song, meditation, even drugs—though the latter, we had been warned, might confuse us with unrealities, not help us touch what is truly real.

That fall, I became absorbed with the idea of searching for my god. The docents would have warned me not to. I was too young, my mind too unformed. But amid the roil of emotions in me I felt one constant: kinship with the landscape I had grown up in. I became convinced that this was the way I had to search: by blending my consciousness with the living things around me.

I spent hours walking down forest paths, my mind excruciatingly attuned to the trees, trying to feel their consciousness around me. I rubbed my cheek against their bark, and listened to the whispering of the leaves. I lay in the grass on top of the bluff, feeling the wind stroking my back.

One day I was coming down a forest path at a time of day when the setting sun reflected off the leaves, giving them a coppery sheen. I discovered that if I unfocused my eyes, the plants all around me seemed to be glowing. My mind filled with exaltation. I was actually seeing it—seeing the spirit that suffused the world, manifested around me. I felt the glow in myself, as well, coursing through my limbs. The entire world was incandescent with visible spirit. I felt uplifted, as if I had seen a vision.

I thought I had touched my god. After that, I had no doubt—not a shadow, not a qualm—about my humanity.

I still don't know what it was I experienced. Sometimes I think I was right—that there was a spark of divinity in me, struggling to manifest itself. If so—if that was what I felt—I know I have Joby to thank for it. Without the shock of Joby's death, I might never even have gone searching. If I almost became human in that moment, it was Joby who made me so.