

Secret Rider

by Marta Randall

"Foundering between eternity and time, we are amphibians and must accept the fact."

Aldous Huxley, *Theme and Variations*

I

She had followed him across the galaxy.

Twice

Always arriving the barest moment too late, always just behind the jet that left, the ship that sailed, the tauship that taued the day before, carrying him with it. On Gardenia they told her he had gone to witness the Rites of the Resurrected; she flew over the face of the globe, pushing the sled to its limits above the checkerboard jungle, arriving in time to see the thin contrails of his jets leaving the Awakening Place toward the Port. Followed him to Asperity, to Quintesme, to Jakob's World; to New Aqaba, where she thought she saw him entering a sky-blue mosque. But, again, she was wrong. To Nineveh Down. To Augustine. To Poltergeist. To Jason's Lift. Past stars as yet unnamed, booking passage on the quickest, the fleetest, second-guessing his guessing mind.

She had something of his, sewn under the skin of her thigh. Kept warm and secret, although it demanded neither. Perhaps he no longer needed it, certainly had forgotten it might have existed, but she had it and wanted to give it to him. Besides, she loved him.

On Murphy's Landing she shared a hotel with him, unbeknowst to either of them. Had arrived, body-time at sleepless dawn in the bright morning light; had registered, slept, woke at planet-noon to ask the questions she had been too tired to ask before, discovered he had just, barely, left. And no room on the ship for her. Didn't weep, but wanted to. What use?

Back home her children grew older and younger, cities failed and flourished, she herself died many times. On Asperity at 1852 Earth Time, on Jason's Lift at 3042 E. T ., on Soft Conception 1153 E.T .; Constantinople toppled while she argued with border guards, New

Jerusalem rose to the stars as she slept exhausted in the arms of a stranger on Endgame II.

II

Tau travel does not do odd things to time, nor does time do odd things during tau travel. Were tau a linear projection, a line running without deviation beside the other straight and infinitely curving lines of the universe, it would be possible to see a correlation between the Y of tau and the Z of time, to quantify a correspondence and arrive at a formula for controlling tau-shift. But there is no correspondence, there are only places where the Y and the Z lie close enough to touch, almost, with a little help. On one side of the barrier a place exists, coordinates in space and time that can be mapped, can be entered into a ship's control banks, can be relied upon to describe the place now and always. But tau doesn't work that way. Leave Parnell for Ararat and when you arrive Parnell may not have been discovered, might have centuried to dust in the wake of your passing. Ararat, clear in the telescopes of Parnell, might be still a formless cloud shivering in the pull of gravity's shaping. Tau takes you to a place, but the time is of its own choosing, and random.

And so the terminals, the gaping jaws connecting real space and tau space; time-machines, capable of plucking a ship from tau and sending into reality precisely at the time demanded. Which may or may not be seven months' time from the beginning of a seven months' journey. Why dismiss the possibilities of a burnt planet that once was green, simply because it met its death four million years before the Terran seas were formed? Or because it had not yet been born, not in real-space? Humanity, not content with having the universe for a playground, delved into past and future, and lost itself amid the ages of the stars.

III

She lost the trail on Nueva Azteca, spent hours and days tracking those who had served him or seen him during his brief stay on the pyramid planet. A porter at the hotel had overheard his plans to book for Leman, but the port records did not carry his name for that destination; the Colonial Administrator's office offered the information that he had requested a visa-stamp for Hell's Outpost but, again, there was no record of his departure. She got drunk on heavy beer and sobered in steam showers, accepted an invitation to ColAd's yearly celebration and spent the evening curled in a corner, hopelessly scanning the tri-dims of Galactic Central that floated through the noise and scents of the transparent room.

Queried every shipping company serving the planet and sat back to await the answers to her questions. They came in over the next planet-weeks; no, and no, and not since five years back and then in a completely different sector. She swam in the dark red waters of the inland sea and safaried across the endless plains that girdled the planet at the equator. Cupped her hand over her thigh in the night and never considered going home.

IV

He had been with her during the birth of her daughter, floating weightless with her in the labor sphere while her body paced through the rhythms of childbirth. Had kept her mind on the hypnotic convolutions when she tended to wander, helping her pulse love and warmth toward the tiny soul working its way from her body and, finally, had taken the wrinkled, squalling infant from the doctors and placed it in her arms. It did not matter that the child wasn't his. It was hers. He shared her joy.

He left Interplanetary and took assignments closer to Terra; she refused an engineering assignment that would have taken her halfway across the sector and contented herself with minor jumps through Terra End. They calculated their comings together carefully, always reappearing on Terra a week planet-time after they had left. It didn't matter that their bio-ages shifted, that each one was, alternately, older and then younger than the other. Accept off-planet jobs and one had to accept the mismatch of planet-time and bio-age. They loved, and bio-time little to do with that.

But the time-shifts made it harder to note other differences, harder to decide which were the natural changes of age and which were the unnatural transmutations of illness.

Until the changes became very clear and now it was her turn to wait for him and with him, to help him through the tests, to await not the delivery of a child but the delivery of a verdict, an opinion, an identification. First with hope, then with faith, through his growing desperation. Waiting.

Two years had passed for her daughter, seven for herself, six him, when they told her that he would have to die.

V

The night the last negative answer arrived, she pulled a dark clingsuit over her slim body and ventured into the Nueva Aztecan evening to drink, smoke, ingest, sniff, swirl, unsync - all, if possible, simultaneously. Started high and moved lower during the course of the night, from the elegant

dignity of a crystalline cube that floated over the apex of the largest pyramid to an expensive tourist club clinging to the sides of a seacliff to a raucous gathering at the home of the Attache for Sensory Importation to a neighborhood saloon where they threw her out after five Bitter Centauris. Found herself at dawn, half draped over a table at SeaCave, a spacer's bar at the bottom of the bay where she had been once before during her quest, but not in her present condition. Peered at the double-imaged, blasted face across from her and asked her usual question.

"Yeah, I know the knocker," the harsh voice replied. She extracted the words from the stoneapple haze, pulled herself nearly upright and forced the double images to resolve into one.

"When?"

" 'Bout three runs ago. Booked passage from here to Augustine. Funny knocker, came on board something unusual." The voice paused.

"Want another drink?" she asked.

"Naw, I'm up enough."

"Food?"

"Cash," he suggested.

"Cash. Okay. How much?"

"How much do you want to know?"

She considered, then excused herself, found the dispos and cleaned her stomach, bought a sobor from the vending machine and pressed the vial to her arm, felt the coolness of rationality return. Augustine. She had already followed him to Augustine. For a moment she thought of leaving, but the habit of curiosity was strong. She made her way back to the bar and sat beside her informant.

The blasted face turned toward her and now, without the deceptive veils of high, she could see the spaceburns and fightburns, the scars where an eye had been replaced with a maximum of haste and a minimum of skill. The hand wrapped around the vibraglass had thick, splayed fingers, some one joint long, some two, none of them whole. Rivers and streams of scars flowed down his neck and under the top of his battered tunic, emerged again to run down his forearms and fingers.

"Pretty, ain 't I?" the spacer asked, grinning. There was no telling where the scars ended and his lips began. "Pit engine scars."

"Why don't you..."

"Get fixed? Why bother? Not bad enough yet, give me another run or so

and it'll be due for a clean-up, then I'll just bash it up again." The spacer shrugged.

"Want another drink?" she asked.

"And cash."

"How much do you know?"

"How much 've you got?"

"I want to know what you meant by boarding unusually."

"Ten skims."

"Skims?"

"Units, graffs, get me?"

She pulled ten from her hip pouch and put it on the table, covering it with her hand.

"Talk."

"Well, it was about five to lift-off ..."

"To Augustine?"

"Yeah."

"Augustine when?"

"Five skims."

"Later."

"Your chips, lady. So everything was pretty much battened down, we had the hoppers in gear and were just about to cut cords when this knocker comes sprinting over from Main and through the cord. Seems there was a cancelout about half hour before lift-off and this knocker came in on stand-by, just made it to the port on time."

"Go on."

"That's ten skim's worth."

"The hell it is. There's nothing unusual about someone boarding late, there's always one."

The spacer shrugged. She lifted her free hand and ordered a DoubleTaker for him, a glass of innocuous JelWatr for herself. The drinks arrived and the floating tray hovered for a moment while she pressed her thumb to the plate. The empty glasses winked out, the transparent cover of the tray snicked down and the tray floated away.

"You gonna give me the ten?"

"If you finish giving me ten's worth."

Their eyes met over the radiant blackness of the table, then he dropped his glance and poured the "Taker down his throat.

"Okay, lady. What was funny was he wore the wrong name."

She pushed the ten to him and replaced it with a five.

"Augustine when?"

"Twenty-five odd, seven down."

She thought about that. John had been on Augustine four planet-years after before that date.

"Name?"

He watched her add another five to the one already under her palm.

"Called himself Johan Ab'naua, but before we reached the grab he, uh, asked me to get rid of some old tags for him. They said 'John Albion.'"

She pushed the money to him, sat back, finished her drink. The next day she booked passage for Augustine, twenty-five odd, seven down.

When she got there, he was dead.

VI

Or, at any rate, Johan Ab'naua was dead. The body was prepared for burial but she bribed one of the morgue attendants to let her see. The tall woman led her down to the stasis vaults, swung open the heavy door, and ushered her into a room with numbered doors lining the sides. Her hand drifted down to rest on her thigh as the attendant selected the appropriate door, opened it, and a transparent rectangle floated into the room.

The coroner's report, 'hezied to the end of the rectangle, was quite thorough. It talked about traces of radiation damage and talked about traces of chemicals found in the body, mentioned half a dozen, each one fatal in the proper amount. Talked about water in the lungs and speculated about immersion before the deceased deceased. Considered the fusion bums, speculated on the possibility that weapons were used to put the deceased out of the misery undoubtedly caused by the above or to disfigure the departed beyond recognition. Or to cover the radiation, and the poison, and the water. Mentioned the difficulty of effecting a true recognition from the remains and boasted of positive identification achieved through thorough and painstaking work. The burned, blasted, unrecognizable mass in the glass coffin, the coroner's report insisted, was all that remained of Johan Ab'naua.

She glanced inside the rectangle quickly, thanked the attendant, passed over the balance of the bribe and returned to hotel.

VII

Was he dead because she hadn't reached him, or dead because had?

Their times, she knew, had crossed before. Even before he had journeyed out so far, even before she had tucked a secret in her thigh and followed him, their various whens had crossed and recrossed - he older and she younger, or she older and he younger, backward, forward. Once, as a birthday gift, he arranged to stay on an off-planet job an extra but unnecessary week, simply so that when they came together they were precisely the same biological age. So perhaps at some future biological date she would meet him before his death, would give him the ampule stitched beneath the skin of her leg. His death was no reason to end the quest. It was, simply, a matter of timing.

Somewhen, curling through the intricacies of tau, John/Johan still lived. Somewhen on this very planet he lived, but that past was closed to her as completely as it would have been without tau. There are laws that maintain the continuity of planet-time, strictly enforced regulations proscribing visits to a planet at any time previous to one's first planet-time visit, that forbid jumping on-planet itself. How else to cope with the ensuing chaos, how maintain a measured sanity in the face of life when tomorrow is last week and yesterday happens next year, when your great-great-great grandfather drops in for a drink ten minutes before the arrival of your current lover, who hasn't been born yet? They try to enforce planet-time laws as strictly as the universe enforces the laws of gravity, as rigorously as light follows the dictates of real-space. Or she would have leaped backward after that first near miss, countless planetfalls ago; would leap back now, into John's Augustine life.

Yet, had one the time, the resources, the contacts, the courage, there were ways to circumvent the laws. Name changes, print changes, the subtle individualities of the body rearranged, and one could slip by the guardians of time, revisit the past of one's present. John must have done it. Otherwise, why the change of name? Why the end of the trail on Nueva Azteca, why the misnamed body lying in the morgue?

She could not duplicate his feat. She lacked the resources, the contacts, perhaps even the courage to have her life changed. And so, again, it came to this: a matter of timing.

She rose from her bed, wrapped herself in warmth and went to trace his

death through the glittering austerity of the city.

VIII

Augustine is a sovereign nation, a chartered member of the Union of All Worlds, and consequently information was harder to obtain than it had been from the various ColAd agencies on Nueva Azteca. His effects? In storage, where they would remain for seven years unless claimed by a relative. Could she, perhaps, prove a relationship with Johan Ab'naua? No, not with Johan. Sorry. After seven years the effects would be destroyed. She looked at the pinched, bureaucratic face before her and dismissed the idea of bribery.

She had no better luck at the port. The passenger lists were confidential, classified, but a sympathetic clerk suggested the files of the local newsfax, the public lists of entry and exit taken not from the port but from customs. So she booked time on the public computer and keyed in her request.

Johan Ab'naua had arrived on Augustine ten weeks before. Had been discovered dead in a back alley in Port Sector four days ago - a small story, that. Violent deaths in any port sector are far from a rarity. A holo from his passport accompanied the story, a chip taken from the main crystal; the resolution was fuzzy, the colors off. But she recognized John Albion's face behind the subtle changes. So.

She thumbed the connection closed and went out to wander the city.

IX

They had tried to build Augustine austere, straight, square, grim, but the planet itself defeated them. The world's basic stone was a refractive crystal, hard and shimmering, and only it would stand up to use as a building material. The architecture of the city was all cubes and rectangles - small, severe windows and disapproving right angles, built of glimmering, color-changing crystal that reflected the flowing of wind and temperature, turning the monastic blocks into the unexpected wonders of a drug dream. The citizens strode purposefully amid these hulking fantasies, dressed in dark severity, grim of eye and lip. She hurried past them, knowing that their sour glances were not for her alone but for the entire universe that, in creating their planet, had played them such a dirty trick.

As she wandered away from the city proper and more deeply into Port Sector, the texture of the city changed. The buildings were now covered

with layers of grime, the filth bringing them closer to the ideal of the founding fathers than the more respectable, and clean, parts of the city. The people were less grim here, the spacers decked in the usual collection of charms and artifacts, no two alike and not a one drab. She moved among spacers and whores and drug pushers, asking questions, and at last stood in a small alley that ran between a block of tenements.

Nothing there, of course. Nothing to tell her how or when or even where he had met his death on the oil-streaked pavement. She walked the alley twice, staring until she felt intimate with each small crevice and corner, each pile and heap, each crack and discoloration. She found no answers to her silent questions; the walls kept their counsel and after a while she left.

X

Evening of the thirty-hour day had begun; the business establishments of Port Sector had their glaring come-ons already lit. She wandered past, unseeing, her dark hair tumbling over the neck of her suit, reflecting back the lights spilled from doors.

"Hey, spacer, wanna night?"

"Gimme some, will you?"

"Fucking knocker!"

"Lady!"

"It'll cost you, junk..."

"Hey, lady!"

"Jump it, jump it, jump it!"

"Lady, wait up!"

She felt a hand on her arm and raised her eyes. The spacer beside her was unfamiliar.

"Yes?"

"Hey, don't you remember me?"

She looked more carefully. The man had never been good-looking but his face was smooth, eyes clear and as yet unreddened by the night. Coils of orange hair, thick eyebrows, ears decked with small, mismatched cascades of jewels, body draped in iridescent shamskin. She shook her head.

"Oh, yeah, I got cleaned up. You asked me about some knocker, back on Nueva Azteca, remember?"

"Oh. Yes."

"Find him?"

"Sort of. He's dead."

"Care." The spacer raised an eyebrow. "Matter?"

"Yes, it matters."

"Care. Here, I'll stick you a drink. I need one."

She shrugged and he guided her into a dim bar, snapped his fingers for a tray as they sat behind a grid.

"You wanna JelWatr?"

She shook her head. "Whatever."

"Okay. Two Tri-levels," he told the tray, and they sat in silence until the drinks arrived. The spacer thrust his thumb at the printbox, grinned as the green panel flashed, and turned to her.

"Got paid," he explained. "You bruised?"

"I suppose."

"So goes."

She shook herself from her lethargy and glanced up at him. "How'd you get cleaned up so fast?."

"Went up to Sal, got it done in time for my next run out."

"Sal?"

"Salsipuedes. Oh, you're a knocker. You know about time regs and all that? Right. Well, you can't always get enough spacers for a run in the start port, 'cause some of em's been to the stop port up the line, see? So most ships stop at a Salsipuedes just off orbit and pick up crew, then drop them off at another Sal before the stop port. Lots of spacers get stuck that way, 'specially old ones that work just one sector and have their times so screwed up that there's no when they haven't been up the line anywhere."

He raised his eyebrows, waiting for confusion. She shrugged. "I work off-planet a lot. So how long did the clean-up take?"

"'Bout a standard year. I, uh, jumped."

"Jumped?"

"Yeah, there's no time regs on a Sal. You just gotta watch out you don't meet yourself, if you're the superstitious type. Lots of spacers don't care, though. Last time up there was one old junker sitting in the lounge talking

with five others of himself. Me, I don't want to know what's going to happen. Can't change it, anyway."

She felt the first level of the drink tickling at her mind and pushed the low, sweet euphoria aside.

"Look, can a - a knocker spend time on a Sal?"

"Yeah, sometimes. Hey, drink, you're not down to second level yet."

She raised the vibraglass to her lips and drained off the second level. It flowed down her throat like liquid stars and she felt dizzy as it hit her stomach.

"Can a knocker jump around at a Sal?"

"Maybe." His eyes narrowed and he tugged at one earring.

She considered the remaining liquid in her drink, slowly swirling it against the invisible sides of the glass.

"Look, I want to know how to get on a Sal and how to jump around once I get there."

The spacer grunted noncommittally, keeping his eyes on her.

"How much'll it cost me?"

"You alone tonight?"

She met his eyes, paused, finished her drink. And nodded.

XI

"This all of it, knocker?"

"It's all I know. From Terra to Neuhafen, to Gardenia, to Asperity, to Quintesme and the radiation labs. To Jakob's World, to New Aqaba, to Nineveh Down for the baths. To Poltergeist, to Jason's Lift, to Endgame II, to Murphy's Landing. To Nueva Azteca, to Augustine. These flights, here, these times, these ships."

"Okay, gimme another cup of that stuff. Now look, here's your sticker. All these jumps, here, they're long hops, five lights or more, see? You book for one of those, you've got to be cleared before you leave the start port. Too much trouble with knockers who make it to stop port, and then the company discovers that they've been there before, up the line, and can't afford the passage back, see? So they check you out before lift-off and save themselves the trouble. And since you followed him along the line, you might as well count these hops out."

"Couldn't I get on board as a spacer? They're dropped off on Sals after

long hops, aren't they?"

"Look, knocker, see the band here? It's my registry, my license. Implanted when I finished training. No way to forge one of those. Seems like you'll have to try it here, between Azteca and Augustine."

"But that's so close. .."

"It's the only way, knocker. Sorry ."

XII

The sack vibrated against her shoulder as she stood by the port at the jump station, watching the tau-ship move ponderously into the coil. The huge bulk slid between the heavy, curving bars, jockeyed the final humps of its tail section into place, and paused. Then it began to shimmer, so softly at first that she thought the shivering might be in her mind, her eyes. The shimmering coalesced, expanded, sent tendrils over the curves and bumps of the ship. Light spilled through the bends of the coil at odd angles and odder wavelengths, a flow of molten crystals, an agglomeration of colors, a sudden transparency that wavered, disappeared, re-emerged larger than before, grew to cover the magical creation within the coils, and the ship vanished, the gaudy display cut off as abruptly as if someone had thrown a master switch and plunged the show in darkness. She shut her eyes, opened them, stared at the empty coil where not the least iridescence remained to mark the passing of the ship from one time to another. From on board ship, she remembered, it was the coil that shimmered and restabilized as the translation through time took place, the universe that shook and was again steady.

She was alone at the receiving lock, the only one to disembark at Azteca Sal. The bursar had been furious, aggrieved that her previous presence on Nueva Azteca had marred an otherwise smooth flight; had raged and stormed into her cabin, waving the GalCentral fax sheets and cursing. She had shrugged, forfeited the remainder of her passage as a result her "carelessness" and stepped into the shuttle to the Sal without a backward glance.

Her footsteps were silent on the bleak, unmarked corridor stretching from the lock area toward the heart of Salsipuedes. It angled to the right and opened into an empty, ovoid room. She walked to a semiopaque shutter set into a curving wall and rapped on it.

"Oh, yeah, hang it," said a voice. The window sphinctered open. "Right, you're off the *Hellion*, bursar called. Want a bunk?"

"I want to jump, fourteen even, two down."

"Can't, not for another week. Bunk in G'll cost you ten, private sixteen. Private? Right, level H, section four, back two. One week, okay."

She pressed her thumb against the plate and turned to go, code key in her hand.

"Hey, knocker!"

"Yes?"

"Thumb's okay here, but it won't buy you anything else on Sal."

"I know."

Her room was a barren cube with a bunk, a clean-unit and one chair. She stowed her gear and, following the remembered words of the spacer, found her way to one of the many mess-chambers.

XIII

John Albion was/is/will be living/dying/dead, sucked into the dead/dying void. John Albion had been/is/will be sitting in the warmth of her home and talking of something very small, something very alien, something very much in his bones which has/is/will be killed/killing him. Conjugate the tenses of time travel. Verbs are illusory.

A disease. An organism. The marrow. The blood. An explosion of time, but biological time; inescapable, certain. A searching. A sampling. A yearning, a leave-taking, a sudden aching absence. A movement of machinery and data. A discovery. A synthesis. An ampule of clear fluid. A quest. A death.

Despite or because of? Too soon or too late? An idiot's question, a useless knowledge. What is/was/will be/is/was/will be. Immutable mutability; the ultimate paradox.

A discovery, a quest, an ampule in the thigh. A walk down the corridor of Azteca Sal, a seat in the midst of confusion. Because they always were/are/will be.

XIV

Noise. Fumes. Dim swirls of ersatz smoke. Raucousness. Belligerence in the corners. Shapes hulking and moving through labyrinths of sound and scent. She sat, ignored except by the trays that brought her food and drink, accepted the flat notes she pressed upon their surfaces. She felt the small curious tensions her presence produced as though, without a halt in the uproar, she was being watched, evaluated, measured and metered on scales she only dimly comprehended. She, in turn, watched and measured.

A spacer moved by her for the fourth time. There were three others of him in the room, and each apparition ignored the other three. Another spacer, gray hair cut ragged about her gray face, leaned over a nearby table.

"When is it?" she pleaded. "When is it?" And received four conflicting answers in reply.

Music from somewhere, as disjointed as the echos of the room. Dancing of a sort, on tables at the far side. Trays floating and bobbing among the shapes, never spilling, never colliding, ever present. And, once, a familiar face.

Seamed and gnarled, a river of scar tissue and a misplaced eye. No mistaking that, but though she raised her face to his passing and called, he did not look back. She wavered, uncertain, then pushed away from the table and crossed the room.

"Hey," she began.

The hideous face turned, the eye winked.

"Yeah, sure, knocker. But I keep my nose out of my own business, see?"

She nodded, found her table again. Soon afterward she returned to her own cabin, curled on the bunk with one hand over her thigh, slept fitfully.

She spent the second day sprawled on a chair in the mess-chamber, watching the eddies of the crowd, the changing sounds and moving faces, drinking sparingly. In the evening someone offered her a vial of stoneapple; she took a small sniff, returned the vial with thanks and it disappeared back into the crowd.

The third evening someone finally approached her. A slim spacer, a woman in middle years with quick, nervous eyes and a thin mouth, two or three scars meandering down the curves of her neck.

"Share your table, knocker, " the spacer said and swung her legs over a stool, dropped her drink on the table, slouched down and peered over.

"Sure. Want another?"

"Alla time. Name's Kalya."

"Name's unimportant."

"Up to you, knocker." Kalya captured a passing tray and ordered the offered drink. "You waiting for something special?"

"Jump time."

The spacer smiled. "On which side of regs?"

"Whichever side I can find it."

"Cash?"

"Sure."

The drink arrived and was paid for, then the spacer stood from the table. "Follow me, knocker. There's always a spare coil somewhere."

XV

They followed the maze of station corridors and Kalya always ahead or beside her, words tumbling as she waved her drink to punctuate her sentences. Spacers called it "coiling", only knockers called it "jumping." This was one of the better Sals, always something going on. Sure, there were always illicit coils on a Sal. GalSec made sweeps for them, but all you had to do was coil forward to see when the sweep was, then move the coils to different whens; it wasn't hard, you dismantled them and put them through the coil that remained behind. Yeah, sometimes you saw a bust, no help for it, if you made it, you made it; if you didn't, you didn't. A game. No care. Small, one-person coils, some larger, some as big as an entire mess-chamber but those were difficult to maintain, the power drain had to be camouflaged from GalSec. There was one here at Azteca Sal, a party, maybe she'd like to try it, sure, it'll get you there, we'll drop you off on our way, nothing like it. You're loose, knocker, know that? And tense, like a spacer on job. You're not GalSec 'cause I'd have seen you, or you wouldn't be here, would you? Jarl tipped me, you're quick. Here, knocker. Here.

A door like any other on Sal, a gleaming metal circle with palm receiver on the right side, protruding a little from the brushed silver gleam. Kalya pushed her palm to the plate, the door sphinctered open, and they stepped forward.

Into nothingness.

She spun, seeking the door, but Kalya grasped her arm, laughing.

"Easy, knocker, easy."

She glanced down to where her feet floated, toes pointing down, nothing underfoot; a darkness from which her companion stood as the only illuminated figure on a blackened stage.

"Easy, easy, easy." Her hand spread along her thigh, throat constricted, knees flexed to absorb the impact of a fall. Kalya laughed. Shudder. Strain.

"Easy, easy. This is only the entrance, we're not into it yet. Calm,

knocker. Quiet."

She straightened, touched her hip-pouch, chin, hair. Wriggled her toes experimentally against the resilient emptiness. Calmed.

"When are you headed?" Kalya asked.

"Fourteen even, two down."

"Cash?"

She fumbled at her pouch, produced a fistful of notes, handed them over.

"Good. I'll toss it into coil, we'll get you there. Ready?" The spacer hooked an arm over an invisible something and, reaching out her other arm, offered it for support.

Floating, unable to imagine the next stage, she drifted passively on Kalya's proffered arm. Felt the roundness of a door circling her. Kalya pushed them through and the invisible door clicked shut.

XVI

For we exist in time. Time is what binds molecules to make your brown eyes, your yellow hair, your thick fingers. Time changes the structures, alters hair or fingers, dims the eyes, immutably mutating reality. Time, itself unchanging, is the cosmic glue, the universal antisolvent that holds our worlds together.

Passage through a coil releases time, and the body dies. Energy remains, the components, the atoms remain but their structure is random, for the glue has been stripped away and the time-bound base no longer exists. When coiling ceases, time rebuilds the molecules to its own specifications, the glue snaps back and the self in time is recreated.

But the soul, the mind, the essence has no time, dwells in an eternity and is bound to the "now" only as it is bound within the molecules of the moment, only as it is caught in the cosmic glue. Matter, here, is transcended, the sum of the parts is more than the whole and is capable of existence apart from the base. An analogy: mind as gas, time as the sphere in which the gas is enclosed. Break the sphere, divorce mind from time, and the essence is free to roam eternity, consistent only unto itself. Drugs release the mind from a realization of time, temporarily. Pain, starvation, flagellation, intense mysticism release the mind but, again, temporarily. By defrauding the brain, by convincing it for the hour or the day that there is no true physical base, the mind reaches toward infinite ecstasy, encompasses a portion of the god-head before it is snapped back to the

temporal.

And coiling releases the mind. By destroying time, by revoking the bindings. Coiling is the possibility of endless transcendence, broken only by an act of will.

XVII

Chaos happened as though signaled by the shutting of the portal, colors and shapes danced by too swiftly for meaning, deafening noise battered at her ears. Bewilderment. Fear.

Kalya laughed and stepped into the maelstrom, crying, "Come, join the party, the party, the party," and was lost to sight.

"Kalya! Wait! How?" Nothing. She strained her eyes, searching for a glimpse of anything familiar but the rushing refused to yield coherence. Complicated abstractions presented themselves, vanished, reformed, exploded into a million further abstractions; rationality exiled from the universe; the senses reeled.

It is a hoax, she thought bitterly. A paltry joke played on a stupid knocker. A fraud. And she flung herself forward.

A brief wrenching as she passed the barrier, a metaphysical twist and she was within. She glanced down, screamed, closed her eyes, refused to glance again at what she had become/was becoming. Sound and color sliced through, quick hard lines that melted, honey-like, at her ears and became slow thunder. Infinitesimal tastes hovering through the air, past and presences, a million brushings and her brain lost in sensations for which there were no names, the ordering of the universe exploded in a spacer's game.

"When are we?" she demanded of a flicker. "Where are we? What? How?"

"It is the end of the universe," a voice said. "Very popular. Quite pretty. Look."

She looked and would not look again, turned and fled through the fabric of the room.

"Stay," she commands a passing face. "Help, stay!"

The face dissolves before her, and a voice says, "Why here? When did you come? How?"

"Kalya brought me, I'm lost. "

"Bitch! I told her to clear, but she meddles." The sense of glare, an

amorphous swirling, a purposeful stride.

"Don't leave me!"

An impatient hand, a jerk that sends her stumbling after the form. Which shifts through the spectrum, becomes, briefly, a quick warm scent on the air, spills outward, condenses as a scream, falls into orange. And still the image of a hand on the image of her arm, dragging her through chaos.

"Kalya! Bitch!"

"No," she pleads. "Just let me out, please."

"When?"

"Fourteen even, two down. Please."

Something like dragging happens to something like her arm. She abandons herself to it, cuts off visual impressions, feels the insidious tickling of change. The sensations lessen, disappear, and she opened her eyes to find herself back in the room of nothingness, still grasped by her rescuer.

The face stabilized, somewhere between the scarred monstrosity of Nueva Azteca and the smooth youthfulness of Augustine.

"When are you?" she asked.

"Two years after Augustine. Just passing through. Stopped at the party. Didn't know."

"What happened?"

He shrugged, a quick motion of the shoulders beneath the soft scales of his robe. "Spacers get used to it, get their kicks that way. Frame of mind."

"But a ship, it's not like when..."

"Different. Ship coil's phased, quick. That one's not, completely random, not linked to a durator."

"So when are we now? How do I get back?"

The spacer grinned, stretching one scar wide, and reached a hand through blackness. A twisting, a writhing, she cried in fear. But the twisting settled, the darkness remained intact. The spacer palmed open a door and ushered her into a corridor.

"Fourteen even, two down. Ship well, knocker." The spacer popped back through the door: the snick of its closing echoed in the empty hall.

XVIII

She stared down the pitted corridor, noting the stains on the stainless walls, the cracks in the floor under-foot. Wondered briefly if another trick had been played on her, if she had been deposited far in the future rather than three months in the past. Decided that she was not going to re-enter the insane party to find out and walked down the hall, looking for a known place from which she could chart her course back to the intake port.

She peered surreptitiously at the spacers she passed but found no one familiar, even considering the time-jumping fluidity of a spacer's face. After a time, she spotted a face that looked friendly and she approached.

"Spacer?"

"Yeah?"

"When is it?"

The spacer stared at her, taking in all the small differences that branded her as a knocker, and smiled.

"Fourteen even, two down. Last I checked."

"Thanks. Where's the intake port?"

"Same place as always. Follow that corridor, take a right at the second intersect and you'll find it."

She found it. The agent irised open the window and peered out.

"Yeah?"

"I want passage on the *Claudia Frankl*, it ought to be through here tomorrow."

A swift hum of machinery. "Right, there's space. First class, second class, nothing in stasis."

"Give me first class, I don't care where."

She pressed her thumb to the plate; a bright vermilion flashed across the face of it.

"Here, knocker, gimme your thumb a minute."

She pressed her thumb against the new plate and the agent palmed it, disappeared, came back a moment later carrying her credit plate and the sack of belongings with which she had entered Azteca Sal, three months in the future.

"Arrived yesterday morning through the cargo coil. Here, look, here's the notation on the log. So I'll enter it in the PDL for, um, seventeen odd, four down, and when the agent up the line opens the PDL, there it'll be,

bright and clear. And the agent'll shoot the stuff down the line, and I'll receive it yesterday and give it to you today. Enter time-change against your credit, right. And next time, knocker, take your gear with you, it's simpler that way. Try your thumb again."

This time bright green glowed from the panel. She took her sack.

"Can I have a bunk for the night?."

"Sure, one in Temp'll cost you ten, plus six for cargo-jump, press again. Level A, section nine, bunk fourteen. Down the corridor, first to the right, one up. Be at Intake at fourteen two tomorrow, sharp. The shuttle doesn't wait."

She stowed her gear in the locker at the foot of bunk 14, checked the time, then piled her clothes over the locker and swung in. Spent no time thinking of the room in which she had traveled time; her mind settled on the future, on tomorrow, and for the first time in her quest she did not sleep at all.

XIX

We'll get off at Augustine Sal, yes, and jump to somewhen where neither of us has been before. And he'll have taken the medicine, of course. A small home somewhere, a place that needs engineers so we'll be able to work. In the quiet, like the beginning, me and John, John and me, until it's time for Augustine. Since it has to happen.

He'll be changed, of course, but he'll remember me. His hands are swift and gentle, his hips are sweet. Brown and golden under my hands, between my thighs, laughing at midnight from a soft bed. When he looks toward the sky his eyes narrow against the glare, with small crinkles at the corners. Brown. His mouth is honey.

Some new star, perhaps, some just-discovered world, to build a city, a seatown, a spiraling cluster of lights and sounds. Such solid geometry we make together, me and John, John and me. New animals, new plants, we'll have a garden and he'll take a small greenery in his palms and urge it to the soil, things leap to life at our touch, cities and subways, fruits and flowers, tiny birds rest on his shoulders.

And to wake to find him sleeping, thighs under my knees, arm across my stomach, head on my breast, his breath is easy as he sleeps, and his hair spills over my shoulders, brown and golden, brown and golden. As it was before, and for almost forever. Until Augustine. Of course.

He'll open the door, smile, open the door, iris to his face and hands,

to his legs and smile, to his chest and arms.

When he sings his voice cracks, leaves him stranded in laughter on a high, subversive note. He'll build vaulting arches across the seas, from my city to my city, and together we'll shape worlds.

Until Augustine.

Until Augustine.

XX

She stood before the closed shutter of his cabin, feeling knots twisting in her stomach. Pressed the call button on the wall. Pause. Pause. He's not here. He's asleep. He's not answering. He's...

"Yes? What is it?" Suspicious.

"Mr. Ab'naua? I have something for you."

"Who are you?"

"It's a medicine."

"A medicine? Who are you?"

"Please, Mr. Ab'naua. John, please let me in."

The door sphinctered open and he stared at her.

It was as though he carried a fire within him, an inward light that bathed his skin with a deep bronze glow. That ate him from within, for his cheeks were deep and hollow, his eyes impossibly large in his narrow face, his wrists and ankles much too heavy for the thinness of his limbs. A medicinal smell reeked from the room behind him, crept out into the corridor as he frowned at her.

"May I come in, John?"

His eyes hardened, hand moved toward the door's controls.

"You must be mistaken. My name is Johan."

She glanced at the back of his neck, where her fingers had often massaged the tension from him. Glanced at his hand resting at his side, at the slant of his shoulders, the curve of his hips. She could have sculpted each slight plane and angle of him in plasteen, with her eyes closed, despite the ravages of the disease.

"John," she repeated positively.

"Sorry, lady, the name's Johan." His hand touched the controls, but she caught his shoulder with one hand and with the other forced his face

toward her. A deliberate, furtive blankness echoed in his eyes.

No, she thought furiously. I shall not be robbed of an ending to this. She snatched her vibraknife from the pouch at her hip and, before he could respond, she sliced through the skin of her leg, reached within and withdrew the ampule, held it red and dripping before him. He stared from it to her face, to her bleeding thigh, to the vial once again.

"It's for your marrow disease," she snapped. "It's the cure. I've been following you for seven years to give it to you and now, by damn, you're going to take it."

His hand rose, then grabbed the vial. He snatched at her arm and pulled her into the cabin.

XXI

His eyes were the wrong color. Teeth smaller and more even than she remembered them to be, lips thinner. But his broad fingers were unchanged, and she watched them expertly stitch the incision, spray a healer over the area. The deep tingling of healing tissue warmed her thigh.

Shimmering bottles lined the walls of the room. The table was littered with tubes and cans, the foot of the bunk held tiny reels of books scattered among the jars. She looked at them as she told him of the research, the synthesis, the quest. Inspected them, rather than inspect the harsh, bright, wrong light of his eyes.

He listened impatiently, fingers tapping against the cleaned ampule, and interrupted her before she had finished.

"Yes, naturally, you've come a great distance," he said, waving away her travels with a sweep of his unchanged hand. "But of course you didn't see those planets as I did, you couldn't know, could you? I've been so far. .." And he told of a search for health, of one frustration after another, of failures on differing planets, of promises made and promises broken. He talked of healers and doctors and those who cure through the soul; of the resurrected natives of Gardenia and the immortal proto-organisms of Neuhafen. Expounded. Declaimed. Praised and excused. Wise men, healers, saints, gurus. Charlatans. His wrong-colored eyes glowed, his hands moved impatiently through the air as he described the promises of the healer he had changed his name to visit.

"And, of course, I was suspicious when you called me 'John,'" he explained. "If Galsec knew... But they won't. This man, this monk on Augustine, he's spent much time on Neuhafen, he's communed with the proto-organisms. I've been there, of course, but you simply can't make any

contact with them, fleetingly, like that. This man spent decades. And, listen, he can cure me. He... he can make me immortal!"

"But this is the cure," she told him through her confusion, and he smiled, lofted the bottle, watched it spiral through the air and made no move to catch it. She cried out, grabbed it before it shattered on the floor. Crouched, staring at him.

"But it's no good to me," he explained. "The monk can't cure me unless I'm ill, that makes sense, doesn't it? And to be immortal, to live forever! He can really do it, I've heard from people who've known people, I have it documented, here, and here. Take this one, read it, it'll convince you."

"But, John ..." she protested, reaching the ampule toward him. He waved the vial away without looking at it.

"No, really, he can, it's all here. I know. I didn't believe it at first either, but this will change your mind, I know it will. Here, take it to your cabin, keep it, I have another copy."

"John..." with despair.

"Johan, please. Of course, it was quite kind of you to bring me the stuff. You couldn't tell that it would be useless, could you? I had no inkling, of course, but this thing of mine is actually a blessing, you have to consider it as a catalyst, if it weren't for that the monk wouldn't even touch me. He's a saint! A wonderful man, he'll change and cure me, they say he's immortal himself, you know, but he claims that immortality isn't important once you've reached the higher planes. We can't all do that, naturally, we have to settle for simple immortality and wait for time to mature us enough so that we can attain sainthood too. It takes time and work, I know, but I'll have forever to do it in!"

"John, you're going to die on Augustine!"

"What? Nonsense, of course not. Listen, this monk, this saint..."

XXII

So she decided that he wasn't John any more after all. That he was indeed Johan, someone who carried within him the essence of her lover, but transformed, transmuted, beyond her. Johan was on his way to Augustine to die. John was already dead. She spent the remainder of the trip in her cabin, disembarked, pursued by angry bursar, at Augustine Sal, and watched the Claudia Frankl shimmer from her life.

And, when you come to cases, John had died on Augustine.

Had/is/will.

Which is paltry consolation.

She could have entered the coil at Augustine Sal and burned time away in a blaze of confusion. Could have died for love in the bleakness of space. Wandered unconsolable among the stars. Done any number of dramatic things. But she wasn't a very dramatic woman, so she booked passage for Terra, arriving three months after her departure. Returned to her work, raised her children and, eventually, died of old age. Was puffed to chemicals in the mortuary, with appropriate ceremony.

And that was that.