# The Sweet Not-Yet

*Melissa Scott*

*Breakfast*, the prosthesis said. I looked where it pointed me, and took a meal bar out of the box. Achronics often didn't feel hunger, it explained, as I undid the wrapper and took a bite out of the oily bar. We lost the sensitivity to any but the grossest physical symptoms; it was better to eat small meals before we knew we wanted them than to wait until we noticed something was wrong.

*Hurry*, it said.*You're late.*

I ate as I walked, letting the machine prompt me through the tangle of unmarked and white-painted corridors that it identified as our Glasstown complex. I could smell things the prosthesis named hot metal and fiber-form and acid; heard noises that were labeled as coming from the shop and the support line and the office; saw faces that smiled and nodded as the prosthesis attached names. I came at last to a short flight of stairs, and a red light flared in the center of the door jamb: the house mainframe, the prosthesis whispered, and its voice belonged to my dead grandfather, whose personality lived on in memory.

"You're late," that voice said, an old man's, no more familiar than that, and another voice said, "Leave him be, Pappy."

*Your father*, the prosthesis said, and I braced myself, realizing I wouldn't know him, either. The face that looked down at me was all angles like the one I'd seen in my mirror, just lined and older, the hair white and cropped to a stiff and bushy halo, the nose tilted out of true like someone had hit him. Someone probably had, from the things the prosthesis was whispering about him, and the stranger looked down at me for a second longer before he stepped back out of the door.

"Morning, Cass."

"Morning, Daddy," I answered, and in the moment I met his eyes I saw both our hopes defeated.

He looked away, busied himself with a big urn that took up half the service console behind the workstation. "Pappy bring you up to speed?"

"Not really," I said, and took the cup he handed me.

Daddy glanced at the node that glowed red in the upper corner of the room, and Pappy said, "The boy didn't get up till just now. And you know how long it takes him to get going now."

A personality construct shouldn't be able to sound accusing, but this one did. Daddy ignored it, and nodded me toward one of the chairs.

"We got a problem."

We had lots of problems, according to the prosthesis-the family shipping business was barely breaking even, and we couldn't supplement it with racing since I'd wrecked myself and the family ship and there wasn't anybody left who could take my place, plus there was new competition from Echt-Hanson, who were planning to build a transfer station in the Merredin system that would take even more of our business-and I made a soft and hopefully encouraging noise, wondering what it would be this time.

"We got a runner," Daddy said.

“It ain’t ours,” Pappy corrected, and I blinked once before the prosthesis caught me up to them.

“Who is it?” Runners happened when the workhorse, the artificial life that was supposed to mediate between the driver and the ship’s systems, seized control of the ship and bolted, heading for some destination known only to its circuits. Most of the time, the drivers just bailed, but sometimes they hung on, trying to retake control, and the horse made its jump with them still on board. That was a runner. There wasn’t a very high survival rate among runners.

But that never stopped us from looking. If a workhorse bolted and took the driver with it, every spaceworthy ship in the system went out after it, on the off-chance that one of our own horses might spot it-quantum-processor-based, they could see a little way into the adjacent possible-or if the driver regained control and forced it back out a jump point, at least there would be someone there to pick him up. It all depended on where the ship had gone missing.

“Where’d it happen?” I said, just a few seconds too late, and saw my father wince.

“About two minutes off the N-2 jump, coming from J-8.”

The prosthesis presented me with a map, Merredin’s system and the jump points that honey-combed local space/time, and there was a part of me, down in the muscle memory, that understood how the ship had been heading, how it would have felt under the driver’s hands.

“And,” Daddy said, “it was Alrei Jedrey.”

The name sparked anger, contextless and disconcerting. I blinked again, waiting for the prosthesis to supply something, anything, that would explain the feeling, but all I got was a passionless biography. Alrei Jedrey was a pilot, too, a racer and the son of a racer, just like I was. We were of an age, we’d raced against each other dozens of times; I’d won a few more than him, but we’d both lost more to the current-make that last year’s- champion. There was no reason to be angry-but the feeling was there, unmistakable, a core of heat down in my gut, and I savored it, nursed it, disconnected as it was. It was the closest thing I’d had in a long time to a real memory of my own, and I shivered with the excitement. Whatever was between us, it had to be something big to have imprinted itself that deep, beyond normal memory. . . .

“Old Man Jedrey’s asking for all hands,” Daddy said. “And that includes us.”

That was a problem, too, I could read it in his face, and I dragged myself away from my own exciting anger, focused instead on the way his hands flexed on his coffee cup and then relaxed, as though he was afraid of breaking it. Once again the prosthesis gave no reasons, and I rummaged in its front-brain storage-the artificial memory that was supposed to give me immediate contexts in conversation-for possibilities.

“Don’t we have something that can fly?” I asked, drawing the words out a little to give the prosthesis a chance to correct me if it needed to. No, it assured me, we had ships capable of running the local jumps-even my wrecked racer was pretty much ready for launch, just a few cosmetic repairs still to be done.

“What we don’t have is a pilot,” Daddy said bluntly. “I’m too old, and you’re not up for it.”

“I can fly.”

The panic at the back of my words scared me. If I couldn’t fly, what the hell else was there for me to do? I’d never done anything else in my life. More than that, it was the one thing I knew bone-deep, worked

so far down into the muscle memory that I could actually almost remember it, could function as though I did consciously remember it, the sense of the controls against my hands and feet, the way the horse and the ship responded to my lightest touch. I'd proved it in sims, the prosthesis reminded me, hours and hours of them, the only time I felt like myself, and Daddy knew it.

"I can do it," I said again, and Daddy shook his head.

"You haven't been out the house for 241 days," Pappy said.

"That ain't right," I said. "Can't be."

"It's right," Daddy said, grim-faced. "And that's why I say you can't do it, never mind the sims. And Colton Jedrey can-" He broke off, shaking his head, mouth clamped tight over bitter words.

And what in hell's name do we have against the Jedreys? The prosthesis was silent, and Daddy went on as though the words were forced out of him.

"We've lost enough." He wouldn't meet my eyes, and I knew he was talking about me.

"The law says we have to go," Pappy said. "The company charter mandates it."

"We don't have a rated pilot," Daddy said. "Ty's out-system, Dee's not due in until day after tomorrow, and Cass-Cass can't do it."

"Then you're just asking for somebody to sue to get your charter," Pappy said. "And they'll win, too."

The prosthesis whispered in my head, confirming local law. Merredin was a poor planet, and not particularly law-abiding, either. We didn't have much of a local search-and-rescue group, relied instead on deputizing all available shipping in the event of an emergency, and those terms were written into the charter that let the family operate. Pappy was right; if we didn't send a ship, someone could take the charter away from us, and the anger in my belly made me wonder if it would be the Jedreys who'd try.

"Pappy's right," I said. "You know we have to do it."

"We're obliged to send somebody," Daddy said. "Not necessarily you."

"You just said you didn't have anybody else," I said.

"Peeky's in Cah'ville," Daddy said. "That's only a couple hours away; we could hire him to take the flight."

"Peeky Toms?" I laughed even before the prosthesis finished feeding me the details. "Peeky hasn't flown anything but sub-light for-oh, it must be six, seven years. I bet he doesn't even have a jump license anymore."

"The boy's right," Pappy said. "Peeky's not an option."

I looked at my father. "You got to send me. We can't risk losing the charter."

Daddy scowled, the frustration plain on his face. "Goddammit, I shouldn't have to keep telling you this-and the very fact that I do is the reason I don't want you doing it. You already lost most of your perceptors. You only got six minutes of natural memory. You lose that, even that goddamn prosthesis won't do you any good."

"I ain't actually stupid," I began, and Daddy slammed his cup down on the table, not caring that the

coffee splashed across the scarred fiber.

“You sure are acting it. You remember the last time you went outside?”

No. I bit back the word, knowing the question was rhetorical, knowing that attitude wouldn’t do me any good. The prosthesis answered his question anyway, spilling pictures into my mind as it accessed images I could no longer create. A chaos of light and color, explanation lagging behind the perceived shapes; my feet stumbling on a flat walkway, splashing through liquid color that became advertising that became a puddle. . . . There had been friends there, people that I knew before the accident, but I’d been too busy trying to learn to see again that I hadn’t remembered to tell the prosthesis to remember who they were. The Glasstown skyline loomed in memory, jagged color against the sunset, and I felt remembered nausea-anger, too, that so many people had been there to see. I guessed Daddy had been one of them, but I didn’t, couldn’t, remember.

“Yeah,” I said, reluctantly, and Daddy glared at me.

“You still think you can fly.”

“It’s different,” I said, and knew it sounded feeble. But it was different, a different kind of memory. . . . “Besides, somebody’s got to do it.”

“He’s right,” Pappy said again. “You know the law.”

Daddy muttered something under his breath.

Pappy said, “What about this? Send the racer up-send the tender with the racer grappled on. The tender crew can do the real looking, and the boy will be onboard as the jump pilot.”

“What if they find Alrei?” Daddy asked.

“Odds are 283.2 to one against it,” Pappy said. “That’s based on the number of ships the charter-holders are throwing up there.”

“I don’t like it,” Daddy muttered.

I said it before Pappy could. “I don’t think we got a choice.”

Once the decision was made, it didn’t take long to get things moving. We had procedures in place for this kind of emergency, just like any charter holder, and they pretty much worked the way they were supposed to, so that by nightfall we were on our way to the port for a midnight launch. We went in a closed runabout, passenger windows blanked as though it was full daylight, screening out Glasstown’s lighted towers. I kept my head down for the walk into the hangers, and the queasiness I had been expecting did not recur. It was a struggle, though, the prosthesis always a heartbeat behind what I needed, and I knew there were people I should have known who I passed without a greeting. *That* I’d expected, been braced for, but somehow I’d thought I’d still know our tender. I’d thought that knowledge would be burned into me at the same level as piloting itself, but the heavy ship that hung in the launch cradle was just another round-bellied modified lifter. I recognized it only by the family logo splashed across its nose.

We slipped aboard without fuss, and I found myself at the door of the pilot’s cabin without knowing how I got there. A little dark woman was waiting there with a stack of data-the prosthesis identified her as Tetia Curry, the ship boss, and I looked away, seeing her hair uncovered. Tetia was Alari, the prosthesis reminded me, not Merredina; she didn’t mind being seen without a scarf. But she’d seen my mistake, and her eyes were sad as I took the multi-colored wafers and retreated into the cabin. Not knowing the

tender had depressed me, even if I had been able to find my own cabin without trouble; messing up with Tetia depressed me even more. I knew I ought to review the data, it was bound to be stuff I needed to know, like the exact approach Alrei Jedrey had been taking, and the local space/time weather, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Anyway, it was late enough that I had an excuse, and I stripped and rolled myself into the familiar bunk. The lights faded automatically, but I stopped them with a wave of my hand. There was a scratch pad where I expected to find it, the top film curled from long disuse. I tore it away, and wrote on the next one, leaving myself a message for the next day.

*Why do I hate Alrei Jedrey?*

I woke to familiar vibration and a voice repeating a name. I moved, listening, and the light strengthened, bringing color back out of the gray. I lay there, sorting perceptions of an unremembered place. The vibration was right, though, comforting; the bed was large, pleasantly warm beneath a weight of covers. The air outside the blankets was cold, my hand pale and tingling as though I'd slept on it, and the light was strong and cool now, a light to match the delicate trembling in the air.

*Your name is Cass Lairmore. You are achronic. Connect your prosthesis before engaging in further activity*.

I didn't remember a prosthesis-but, of course, if I were achronic, I wouldn't remember it. I sat up, the movement triggering the room lights and a whirring that carried warmth, and saw an odd, skin-colored ovoid lying on the ledge that had been above my head. A jack lay loose on top of it-no, extended from it, a short, flat head, clear plastic that showed a hint of gold in its depths. I reached for it, picked up the seashell round, smaller and flatter and softer than I had expected, and found myself reaching behind my left ear. There was a jack there, not consciously expected or even fully recognized, but my fingers had gone to it immediately, and the connection seemed clear. I slid the head into the socket, the ovoid nestling cozily against my skin, and-expanded. The world brightened, gained depth and context, and I took a deep breath, letting the prosthesis's information cascade through me.

I was Cass Lairmore, all right, and that meant I was a pilot, a jump-and-JSTL pilot. I had been a moonlighter not all that many years back, and now I was a hauler, a legit shipper, and a sometime racer and the hope of the family. I had six minutes of natural memory left, plus whatever implicit and muscle memory could give me-it was implicit memory that led my fingers to the prosthesis's jack-and everything else, any past six minutes earlier than my permanent*now* , was backed up in memory, stored somewhere in the family mainframe to be accessed by the machine. The prosthesis kept me updated, kept a few important things always in that six-minute window and prompted me for the rest, so that in practice I could keep up with about a day's worth of events. It had to download every night, and I started over every morning. Except that we were on the tender, going out on a rescue run, so the prosthesis was working from the ship's copy: no real difference, except that I would have to be sure to check that everything I stored here was downloaded when we got back. The process was supposed to be automatic, but the prosthesis reminded me it never hurt to double-check.

I'd heard most of this before, and often enough that it was kind of like an echo, not exactly remembering, but enough like it that I pushed myself out of bed and began my morning listening with half an ear while I washed and shaved. I'd been a moonlighter because my father was a moonlighter before me, back when it was serious business-the prosthesis reminded me of the tax reforms that made it less profitable, and the two years Daddy'd spent in federal suspension, both of which probably had a lot to do with the decision to stick to legal work. But regular haulage didn't earn what smuggling did, even when you added a machine shop on the side, and we'd gone racing to help make ends meet. He was pushing sixty, reflexes shot, so I was what was left. I was just a bit past thirty, the prosthesis told me, though the body I watched in the mirror looked older than that to me, and I was already at the point where I was using

more brains than instinct when I got myself wrecked. And now nobody knew what to do with me-nobody knew if I could even fly the racer tucked into the tender's belly, but we were required to send a ship and a jump pilot when there was a rescue call, and so here I was. It just seemed to be an open question whether I could actually do anything if we found the missing ship.

The prosthesis didn't offer any answers, just a quick summary of the race that I'd wrecked in, and I stopped in my tracks, hoping for some hint of a feeling, some way of telling that it had actually happened to me. There wasn't, of course, just like there hadn't been any other morning. The images stayed pictures in my head, plain and unconvincing as a bad trideo. It happened in the AT Boland 3 x 5-the prosthesis annotated that for me, a high-purse, single-system race, five passes through a course of three in-system jump points; you could take them in any order, but had to pass through all three in each circuit. It was a muscle course: there was only one good way, one fast way, to run the pattern, and winning depended on having a slippery ship, one that could get as close as possible to .9C in the JSTL, just-slower-than-light, runs, and then a real kickass jump motor to put you through the jump point first and best. I'd had all of that, and I watched myself nurse the controls, confer with the ship's horse: not real memories, just images without feelings. The prosthesis was doing its best, touching spots in my brain, accessing information I could no longer reach without its help, but there were some things that were just missing. I saw myself watching the view screens as the stars turned to streaks, and the universe outside the race shrank to tiny rumbling voices in the speakers. On the third pass, I somehow got sideways going into the jump-another ship was close to me, its time wake may have rocked me, got me loose, or at least that was what I thought then-and I missed the entry. The ship slipped out of time, fell through the weakness in space/time and into the sweet not-yet, what the theorists called the adjacent possible, and the prosthesis had nothing for me anymore. I, the ship, the horse, and me, hung there, stuck there in a place where memory couldn't happen because time wasn't, until something-the horse, maybe; quantum processors shouldn't be as time-dependent as a human brain-kicked us out again.

I thought I'd feel something then, not just what the prosthesis told me to remember, but that something gut-deep would hold the fear-and I'm not ashamed to be afraid, would have been glad of it, even, if it had made the memory stick. There was nothing, and I watched myself struggle to pull enough thought and memory together to keep the ship alive until the other ships could get to me. The prosthesis played me the voices of the other racers talking me through it, telling me over and over what I had to do and why, and none of it meant any more than a story that had happened to somebody sometime back. Less, actually, because a story would have been better told.

But that was what had happened, and the prosthesis told me it had told me this every morning for 253 days, and it still didn't mean a damn thing except that it had happened to me.

There was a note stuck to the wall beside the recessed bunk. I pulled off the thin film, staring at words scribbled in a spiky hand the prosthesis told me was my own.

*Why do I hate Alrei Jedrey?*

The name brought back the emotion, a real, unmistakable anger that left me gasping because I hadn't felt anything so direct in what seemed forever. But it was only yesterday, the prosthesis reminded me; I'd felt it when Daddy had said it was Alrei we were going up after, and I didn't know then or now what was behind it.

Could it have been the wreck? I wondered suddenly. Was Alrei Jedrey in the Boland-was it his ship that knocked me out of time? I dropped into the chair in front of the mainframe console, let the prosthesis guide my fingers as I punched in the inquiry, but the screen came back blank. The Boland had been run almost a year ago; the ship's system didn't have anything more in memory than the entry list and the results, and we were already too far out and traveling too close to C to query the home system. But at

least I could check the entries. Sure enough, Alrei had been entered-had run, had finished fourth, well ahead of the racers whose times were marked with the asterisks that resulted from my wreck. So it looked like he'd been ahead of me, unless he'd got me loose and jumped without checking to see what happened behind him. That sparked another flare of anger: I knew that was wrong, the same ingrained way I'd known it was wrong to look a bare-headed woman in the face. If Alrei had done that, he deserved to have a runner, deserved to be lost. . . .

I took a deep breath. I didn't know that he'd done it-couldn't know, until we got back to Glasstown and I could consult Pappy there. But that would explain the anger that I remembered, would explain why I hated Alrei's name.

There were clothes laid out on the shelf at the front of the storage wall. The prosthesis nudged me toward them, then went on muttering about dyschronia in general as I dressed myself. At least that was something I could do with implicit memory, no prompting necessary, and I listened instead to the steady medical drone, trying to make it real. Dyschronias, disruptions of the human body's ability to place itself in time, had been around since the earliest days of the jump-and-jostle drive. It was pretty easy to hit a jump point just wrong enough to put a ship outside the bounds of recognizable space/time. It wasn't so easy to get back-that's why workhorses were AL, built and bred with a herd animal's instinct to seek more of their kind-but if you did make it, there was a good chance the miss would damage the body's chronal perceptors. Without time, they began to die, and that was dyschronia. Sometimes the effect was temporary, and you'd lose your hair or your fingernails as the quick-growing cells got speeded up or slowed down: that was chronorrhea, and I think every moonlighter or racer has had it at least once. Sometimes the effect was permanent. You could lose a chunk of memory when the perceptors died in that part of the brain: chronophasia. You could stop shedding your past, mental and physical, end up choked to death by the sheer weight of memory and dead cells: chronal sclerosis. You could be speeded up, stuck in fast-time, burn out a lifetime in a year or less: pyrodyschronia. You could become too sensitive to time itself, and it would eat you up, hollow out your conscious self and leave a wasting shell: chronophagia. Or you could lose most of your time perceptors altogether, and be left unable to form lasting memory: that was achronia.

That was me.

"OK, enough," I said aloud, and the prosthesis went silent. I took one last look in the mirror-tallish, fairish, clean-shaven and freshly washed, fading hair pulled back in a neat tail-and had no idea if I was ready for whatever was planned for the day. The prosthesis sensed the hesitation, and chirped again.

*Continue function?*

"Yeah, fine."

The information spilled through me. We were looking for traces of Alrei Jedrey's ship, the space/time distortions left by a bad jump or a horse trying to kick back into normal space. I needed to finish putting on my undersuit, but then nobody needed me until they found something. Which was just as well, I thought. The prosthesis reminded me I still needed to read over the data Tetia had given me, and I needed to think about what I was going to do if we did find him. If he'd wrecked me-but nobody deserved to be timelost. No matter what they'd done. I pulled the thermal shirt over my head, leaving the waist seals undone for now, and settled myself in front of the reader.

It was only a few hours later that we got the signal. One of Harrel Hershaw's boys picked up an anomalous reading, and the other one confirmed it. There was a heavy hauler in the area, and they managed to triangulate, pinpoint the center of the spiral-at least that was what it looked like on the scan they broadcast-where presumably Alrei or his horse was trying to fight back into realspace. We were

one of the closer ships, and Daddy cursed when he heard it. But we were already committed, and he told Eskew Grey, the tender pilot, to kick us up as close to C as he could get us. We made it to the point in less than two hours, wasting fuel at the end to shed speed, and flung ourselves into a linked orbit with the other ships, locking into a pattern that would keep us close to each other, and close enough to help. The Hershaw boys had already tried opening up the spiral, but even pulling in tandem, they didn't pack enough power to add significantly to the distortion. I hung at the back of the control room while Daddy and Eskew argued about how best to add our engine in, but even Eskew couldn't get the three ships linked up close enough to do any good. The prosthesis told me what was happening, though I had a sense of it in my bones: Alrei's ship was somewhere outside space/time-if those terms really meant anything in this context-and trying to get back in. If our engines, our false mass, could further weaken the distortion, there was a chance Alrei's horse could latch onto it, and fire the jump engine to kick him through. After all, that was how I'd escaped from my bad jump. Of course, Alrei's horse had bolted, but most runners would still seek a way back into realspace. We'd have to catch the ship if the workhorse was still out of control-but we could cross that bridge when we came to it.

We made another circuit, the ships' power balanced against each other, straining realspace as our engine crawled toward the red line, but nothing happened.

"Pull it back, Eskew," Daddy said at last, and a voice-Harrel Junior, the prosthesis said-crackled through the local com.

"I'm not seeing nothing."

The other Hershaw boy's voice rode over him. "Damn, somebody's going to have to jump it."

"Nobody's jumping nothing," Daddy said. "Not yet."

Tetia looked up from the console where she'd been monitoring the local gravity. "It's starting to fade, Jess."

"Goddammit," Daddy said. He tapped two fingers on his mouth. "Junior, what's your reading?"

"Um." Harrel Junior drew the word out for a long moment. "Not good, sir. Looks like we might be losing him."

"Dammit," Daddy said again.

"We got to jump it," the other Hershaw boy said. "Junie, I got a skid-racer in tow, maybe we can use that, do it on autopilot."

"That horse won't jump without a pilot," Harrel Junior objected.

The other boy sighed. "All right, what about Cass? Doesn't he have his racer along?"

"Now wait just a damn minute," Daddy began, and Eskew put his hand on the com switch, muting the transmission.

"We're here, boss. We got to try something."

I said, "Let me go." I hadn't meant to say it, but I knew I had to, down at the core where I still knew a few things. Whatever Alrei had done, even if he had wrecked me and not looked back, I was a racer still, and I knew what I was supposed to do.

"No," Daddy said.

“You know I got to.”

The look on his face was terrible, like we’d been arguing for an hour and he already knew he’d lost. “No, son.”

“I got to,” I said again. For a second, it was like there was nobody else in the control room, just him and me, and I tried to find the words. “Look, I can’t be any worse off than I am right now. And if there’s any chance of getting him out, we got to try it before we lose him again.”

“You could be a lot worse off,” Daddy said fiercely. “And dead ain’t half of it.” He swung away from me, staring at Tetia’s screens, at the fading spiral.

“I’m going,” I said, and walked out of the control room.

Nobody stopped me, just like I’d known they wouldn’t. I climbed down into the belly of the tender, squeezed though the transfer tube and into the body of the racer to find Tetia already working the launch checklists. I strapped myself into the couch, let the control systems close over my arms and legs, and felt the first tentative movements that meant the ship and the horse were coming alive for me. This felt right, this felt normal-just like the sims, only better-and I wriggled myself down into the seat. It wasn’t mine; the size was close, but not quite right, and that didn’t matter at all. This was what I knew best, and I would show them all.

Lights spread across the control boards, long strings of orange and yellow, quickly fading to green. As long as I didn’t look too close, didn’t think too much about them, I understood what they meant. I made the mistake once of trying to remember what one panel was-I knew it was important-and lost the flow of the ship even as the prosthesis prompted me. My hands faltered, falling out of the rhythm, and Tetia’s voice sounded in my ears.

“You all right, Cass?”

“Fine,” I said, my voice strangled. I closed my eyes, blanked the prosthesis, let my hands reach for what they knew they should hold. I was back again, in the groove, the ship waking under me, and I would have giggled aloud, except no one would have understood.

“Ready for drop,” I said, and it was Daddy who answered.

“Drop in ten.” He paused. “Jump safe, Cass.”

“Roger that,” I answered, and braced myself for the launch.

The charges kicked me loose, and I felt the workhorse surge to full life under my hands. It should have frightened me, all that raw power and me with no real sense of how it was I controlled it, but it felt too good, too much like normal, and this time I did laugh aloud. I pulled the ship around, the horse answering easily, and saw the center of the spiral looming on my screens. It was obvious it wasn’t a real jump point, lacked their normal compact structure; instead it lay across my screen like the slash of a knife. The ragged edges faded too fast into nothing, were too hot and raw in the center, a wound not fully open. It would break, though, if we hit it right . . . and I could see the angle of approach, feel the kick it needed. I touched the controls, urging the horse forward, power building in the jump engine, saw the angle shift slightly as the racer’s abnormal mass touched the proto-jump, and touched the controls again to correct. Somebody was saying something in my ears, but I couldn’t listen, bracing myself instead to find just the right moment. The horse was warm and easy under my hands, the jump engine primed and ready. We touched the point, the edge of what I’d seen on my screens. I felt space move, and kicked hard. The horse answered, firing the jump engine, and we flashed into glue.

I couldn't seem to breathe for an instant, choked and fought, then caught the knack of it, as though somehow I'd grown gills and learned to breathe water. I couldn't see anything, not even my screens; the lights that had filled the cockpit were dimmed to nothing, barely embers. The prosthesis was dead, silent and utterly absent. Six minutes, I thought, I only have six minutes without it-but there was no time here except within my body, whatever clock still ticked within my cells, and even that was slowed and changed by the dead perceptors. No sight, no sound-but I could feel everything. It was as if I'd expanded, like I had with the prosthesis, only bigger, as though I could reach outside the hull of the racer, right into the sweet not-yet, as though I could dig my fingers into it and feel the universe itself in the moments before it was made real. I flexed my hands and felt strands against them, thick and gnarled as tree roots, taut and fine as harp strings. I moved my feet, and felt myself rooted, a thick cord holding me to something I could no longer name. I felt winds against my face, felt them stretching to infinity, and felt those winds curving around something familiar. I twisted my head from side to side, and realized it was another ship. Alrei's ship.

I closed my eyes as though that would help, though there wasn't enough light around me to make a difference, reached out again slow and cautious. I could feel the adjacent possible, see it in my touch: not just the ship, but Alrei himself, trapped in time, the strands thick and choking, binding him and the ship into a failing possibility. The workhorse must have thought it saw a chance of escape, thought it saw a weakness in local space/time, but its quantum sight was flawed. Of all the possibles, it had chosen one already past or never ready, and time itself battered them back, closed in to smother them. There were strands around me, too, but not so many, fraying loose and trailing away: I was time-blind, and that made me free. In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. . . .

In the sweet not-yet, the timelost man is whole.

I reached out through the twining strands, reached with them, tugged them free and wove them again into a new possible, pulling Alrei to me along with the ship. I reached for my horse, for his horse, for all possible workhorses and our own, and gathered them up to bring them home.

We slid from not-yet to now, fell into realspace with a shriek of engines and all the indicators on my boards flaring red. The workhorse was belling its complaint as well, and the prosthesis still didn't answer my call. Tetia's voice hammered in my ears.

"Come on, Cass, talk to me. Talk to me, kid."

"I'm not a kid," I said, and heard her shaky laugh.

Alrei's ship floated huge in my screens, almost close enough to touch. I giggled at the thought, at the memory of what I'd done, the universe at my fingertips, and ran a frequency search, looking for his band. A light flared, and I spoke into the com.

"Alrei? You there?"

"Yeah." The voice was shaky, shaken, and Daddy's voice rode over both of us.

"Hang tight, you two. We're moving for pickup."

"Roger that," Alrei said, and I echoed him.

I leaned back in my couch, exhausted beyond words. I wondered vaguely if that was the symptom of another dyschronia, wondered if Alrei was going to suffer one, and couldn't find the energy to care. A light flickered on the com: Alrei, offering a private circuit. There was one thing I did want to know, and I mustered the strength to accept the contact.

“Thank you,” he said, and I stopped. The anger was gone-well, it was there, in memory, but it didn’t seem to matter.

“You’re welcome,” I said, and paused. “Was it you who wrecked me?”

“Huh?” There was another pause, and I could imagine Alrei remembering I was achronic. “No, it was Junie Hershaw. Why?”

“Then why was I mad at you?”

There was a silence, starsong hissing in the speakers. Alrei said at last, low and nervous, “I jumped anyway. I saw you go, and I went ahead and jumped. I might-that might have been the thing that kicked you far enough out that the horse couldn’t get you back quick enough. That-it might’ve been my fault.”

The achronia, he meant. It rang true, almost as if I did remember it, and maybe, down on the level where I’d felt the anger, I did remember something. I worked my hands, feeling something between my fingers-feeling the truth of what he said, of his mistake, and mine, and Junie’s, a tangible past as real as the way realspace still echoed like a plucked string from where it had broken. I didn’t remember, you couldn’t call this memory, exactly, it was something different, more and less and always inarticulate: a past for touching, not yet for words. But it was a past, and a future, too, the strands of the sweet not-yet easy in my hands, time and possibility lying rough beneath the surface of the now. Not memory, no, but something almost better. Time in my hands, time on my hands, never time within me again, but that was nothing, no loss, set against what I’d been given. We were even, Alrei and I; if anything, I was in his debt. I lay back in the couch again, time heavy and comforting around me, and waited for rescue.