

# SEND THEM FLOWERS

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alter Jon Williams was born in Minnesota and now lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. His short fiction has appeared frequently in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, as well as in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Global Dispatches*, *Alternate Outlaws*, and in other markets, and has been gathered in the collections *Facets* and *Frankensteins and Other Foreign Devils*. His novels include *Ambassador of Progress*, *Knight Moves*, *Hardwired*, *The Crown Jewels*, *Voice of the Whirlwind*, *House of Shards*, *Days of Atonement*, *Aristoi*, *Metropolitan*, *City on Fire*, a huge disaster thriller, *The Rift*, and a *Star Trek* novel, *Destiny's Way*. His most recent books are the first two novels in his acclaimed Modern Space Opera epic, "Dread Empire's Fall," *Dread Empire's Fall: The Praxis* and *Dread Empire's Fall: The Sundering*. Coming up are two new novels, *Orthodox War* and *Conventions of War*. He won a long-overdue Nebula Award in 2001 for his story "Daddy's World," and took another Nebula in 2005 with his story "The Green Leopard Plague."

Williams has made his name in New Space Opera circles with novels such as *Aristoi* and the "Dread Empire's Fall" books, but those are not the only strings he has to his bow. In the droll and exciting adventure that follows, he demonstrates that even if you have multiple universes to flee through, the past has an uncomfortable way of *catching up* with you...

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We skipped through the borderlands of Probability, edging farther and farther away from the safe universes that had become so much less safe for us, and into the fringe areas where stars were cloudy smears of phosphores-cent gas and the Periodic Table wasn't a guide, but a series of ever-more-hopeful suggestions.

Our ship was fueled for another seven years, but our flight ended at Socorro for the most prosaic reason possible: we had run out of food. Exchange rates and docking fees ate most of what little money we had, and that left us on Socorro with enough cash for two weeks' food or one good party.

Guess which we chose?

For five months, we'd been running from Shawn, or at any rate the cloaked, dagger-bearing assassins we imagined him sending after us. I'd had nothing but Tonio's company and freeze-dried food to eat, and the only wine we'd drunk had

been stuff that Tonio brewed in plastic bags out of kitchen waste. We hadn't realized how foul the air on the *Olympe* had grown until we stepped out of the docking tube and smelled the pure recycled air of Socorro Topside, the station floating in geosynchronous orbit at the end of its tether.

The delights of Topside glittered ahead of us, all lights and music, the sizzle of grilled meats and the clink of glasses. How could we resist?

Besides, freaky Probability was fizzing in our veins. Our metabolisms were pumped by a shift in the electromagnetic fine structure constant. Oxygen was captured and transported and burned and united with carbon and exhaled with greater efficiency. We didn't have to breathe as often as in our home Probability, and still our bodies ran a continuous fever from the boost in our metabolic rate.

Another few more steps into Probability and the multiverse would start fucking with the strong and weak nuclear forces, causing our bodies to fly apart or the calcium in our bones to turn radioactive. But here, we remained more or less ourselves even as certain chemical reactions became much easier.

Which was why Socorro and its Topside had been built on this strange outpost of the multiverse, to create alloys that weren't possible in our home probabilities, and to refine pure chemicals in industrial-sized quantities at a fraction of the energy it would have taken elsewhere.

Probability specialists in the employ of the Pryor corporate gene line had labored hard to locate this particular Probability, with its unique physical properties—some theorists would argue, in fact, that they'd *created* it, like magicians bringing an entire universe into being with their spell. Once the Pryors had found the place, they'd explored it for years while putting together the right industrial base to properly exploit it. When they finally came, they came in strength, a whole industrial colony jigsawing itself into the Socorro system practically overnight.

Once they started shipping product out, they had to declare to the authorities where it came from, and this particular Probability was no longer secret. Others could come and exploit it, but the Pryors already had their facilities in place, and the profits pouring out.

Nobody lived in Socorro permanently. There was something about this reality that was conducive to forming tumors. You came in on a three-year contract and then shipped out, with cancer-preventing chemicals saturating your tissues.

“Oh yisss,” Tonio said as we walked down Topside's main avenue. “Scru-tinize the fine ladies yonder, my compeer. I desire nothing so much as to bond with them chemically, oh yisss.”

The local fashion for women was weirdly modest and demure, covering the

whole body and with a hood for the head, and the outfit looked *inflated*—as if they were wearing full-body life preservers, designed to keep them floating even if Topside fell out of orbit and dropped into the ocean.

But even these outfits couldn't entirely disguise the female form, or the female walk. My blood seemed to fizz at the sight, and perhaps, in this quirky Probability, it did.

Music floated out of a place called the Flesh Pit, all suggestive dark windows and colorful electric ads for cheap drinks. "Let us sample the pleasures of this charming bistro," Tonio suggested.

"How about some food first?" I said, but Tonio was already halfway through the door.

The Flesh Pit had alcohol and other conventional stimulants, and also others that were designed for our current reality, taking advantage of the local biochemistry to deliver a packaged high aimed at our pumped metabolism. The charge was delivered from a pressure cylinder into a cheap plastic face mask. The masks weren't hygienic, but after a few huffs, we didn't much care.

While getting refills at the bar we met a short, brown-skinned man named Frank. He was drinking alcohol, and joined us at our table. After two drinks, he was groping my thigh, but he didn't take it amiss when I moved his hand away.

The Flesh Pit was a disappointment. The music was bottom-grade puti-puti and the women weren't very attractive even after they took off their balloon-suits. After we bought Frank another drink, he agreed to be our guide to Topside's delights, such as they were.

He took us up a flight of stairs to a place that didn't seem to actually have a name. The very second I stepped into the front room, a woman attached herself to me, spreading herself across my front like a cephalopod embracing its prey. My eyes were still adjusting to the dim light and I hadn't seen her until she'd engulfed me.

My eyes adapted and I looked around. We were in what appeared to be a small dance hall: there was a bar at one end and a live band at the other, and benches along the sides where women smoked and waited for partners. There were a few couples shuffling around on the dance floor, each man in the octopus clutch of his consort.

"Buy me a drink, space man?" my partner said. Her name was Étoile and she wore a gardenia above one ear. I looked longingly at the prettier girls sitting on the benches and then sighed and headed for the bar. On my way, I noticed that Tonio had snagged the most beautiful woman in the place, a tall, tawny-haired lioness with

a wicked smile.

I bought Étoile an overpriced cocktail and myself a whiff of some exotic gas. We took a turn on the dance floor, then went to the bedroom. Then back to the bar, then to the bedroom. Frank was sent out for food and came back with items on skewers. Then the bar, then the bedroom. I had to pay for clean sheets each time. Étoile was very efficient about collecting. Oc-casionally I would run into Tonio and his girl in the corridor.

By morning the bar was closed and locked, the dance floor was empty, I was hungry and broke and melancholy, and Tonio's girl had gone insane. She was crying and clutching Tonio's leg and begging him to stay.

"If you leave I'll never see you again!" she said. "If you leave I'll kill myself!" Then she took a bottle from the bar and smashed it on a table and tried to cut her wrist with a piece of glass.

I grabbed her and knocked the broken glass out of her hand, and then I pinned her against the wall while she screamed and sobbed, with tears run-ning down her beautiful face, and Étoile tried to find the management or the bartender or someone to get Tonio's girl a dose of something to calm her down.

I gave Tonio an annoyed look.

He had driven his woman crazy in only one night.

"That's a new record," I told him.

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Étoile returned with an irritated and sleepy-eyed manager, who unlocked the bar and got an inhaler. He plastered the mask over the weeping woman's face and cracked the valve and held the mask over her mouth and nose till she relaxed and drifted off to sleep. Then Tonio and I carried her to her room and draped her on the bed.

"She ever done this before?" I asked the manager.

He slapped at the wisp of hair atop his bald head as if it had bitten him. "No," he said.

"You'll have to watch her," I said.

He shrugged his little mustache. "I'm going back to bed," he said.

I looked at Étoile. "Not me," she said. "Unless you pay."

“It is necessary at this juncture,” said Tonio, “for me to confess the infortunate condition of our finances.”

*Infortunate.* Tonio was always making up words that he thought were real.

“Then get your asses out of here,” said the manager. Étoile glared at me as if it weren’t her fault I had no money left.

We dragged ourselves back to the *Olympe*. The ship smelled a lot better with air being cycled in from the station. I wondered if I’d ever be able to pay for the air I was breathing.

“I hope Fanny will recover, yiss,” Tonio said as he headed for his rack.

“What did you *do* to her?” I said.

“We did things, yiss. It was Fanny did all the talking.”

I looked again at Tonio and tried to figure out yet again why so many women loved him. He wasn’t any better-looking than I was, and he was too skinny and he had dirt under his nails. His hands were too big for the rest of him. He had blue eyes, which probably didn’t hurt.

Maybe the attraction was the broken nose, the big knot in the center of his face that made it all a little off-center. Maybe that’s all it took.

“Listen, Gaucho,” he said. He had his sincere face on. “I am aware that this contingency is entirely my fault.”

“It’s too late to worry about that,” I said.

“Yiss, well.” He reached down and took the ring off his finger, the one with the big emerald that Adora had given him, and he held it out to me. “This is the only valuable thing I own,” he said. “I desire that you take it.”

“I don’t want your ring,” I said.

He took my hand and pressed the ring into it. “If necessity bides, you can sell it,” he said. “I don’t cognizate how much it’s worth, but it’s a lot, yiss. It will pay for docking fees and enough food to peregrinate to some other Probability where you might be able to make a success.”

I looked at him. “Are you saying goodbye, Tonio?”

He shrugged. “Compeer, I have no plans. But who knows what the future may necessitate?”

He ambled away to his rack. I looked at the ring on my palm—all the intricate little designs on it, the dolphins of the Feeneys and the storks of the Storch line all woven together in little knots.

I went into my stateroom, where I closed the door. I put the ring on my desk and looked at it for a while, and then I went to bed.

When I woke in the morning, the ring was still there, shining like all the unpaid debts in all the multiverse.

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I met Tonio when I was working with my wife Karen on a mining concession owned by her family, an asteroid known only by an identification number. We were supervising the robots that did the actual mining, following the vein of gold and sending it streaming out into the void to be caught by the processor that hovered overhead. Gold was a common metal and prices were low. The robots were old and kept breaking down.

Tonio turned up in a draft of new workers, and we became friends. He had his charm, and his strange Andevin accent, and the vocabulary he'd got in prison, where he had nothing to read for months but a dictionary. He said the prison term was the result of a misunderstanding about whether or not he could borrow someone else's blazemobile.

Tonio and I became friends. After Karen and Tonio became friends, I equipped myself with a heavy pry bar and went looking for him. When he opened the door to his little room and saw me standing there, he just looked at me and then shrugged.

"Do whatsoever thou must, compeer," he said, backing away from the door. "For I deserve it in all truth."

I stepped in and hefted the pry bar and realized that I couldn't hit him. I lowered the bar and then Tonio and I talked for about six hours, after which I realized that my marriage hadn't been working in a long time, and that I wanted out and that Tonio could have Karen for all I cared.

After the divorce, when everything had played itself out and there was no point in staying on the claim of a family to which I was no longer tied, I left the scene along with Tonio.

Of the various options, it was the course that promised the most fun.

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The *Olympe* isn't a freighter, it's a small private vessel—a yacht in fact, though I'm far from any kind of yachtsman. The boat can carry cargo, but only a modest amount. In practice, if I wanted to carry cargo, there were three alternatives. Passengers. Compact but valuable cargo, which often means contraband. And information, dispatches so private that the sender doesn't want to broadcast them even in cipher. Usually the dispatches are carried by a courier.

Once we docked on Socorro, I advertised *Olympe*—I even offered refer-ences—but didn't get any takers, not right away. Fortunately, docking on Socorro was cheap—this wasn't a tourist spot, but an industrial colony with too much docking capacity—and the air was nearly free. So Tonio got a job Upside, selling roasted chestnuts from a little wheeled grill—and with his blue eyes and broken nose working for him, he soon sold more chestnuts than anyone in the history of the whole pushcart business.

I took my aurora onto the station and went looking for work as a musi-cian. I did some busking till I got a job with a band whose aurorista was on vacation in another Probability, and my little salary and Tonio's got us through the first month even though the puti-puti music bored me stiff. Then I auditioned for a band that had a series of regular gigs in upscale bars, and they took me on. I got a full split and a share of tips instead of a tiny salary, and things eased a bit. Even the music was better. We played popu-lar songs while the tables were full of the dinner crowd, but afterward we played what we liked, and when I got a good grind going, I could make the room sizzle the way my blood sizzled in this little corner of the multiverse.

During our flight, I'd had nothing to do but practice, and I'd got pretty good.

A couple of months went by. I didn't see Tonio much—he'd got a girl-friend named Mackey and was spending his free time with her. But he sent a piece of his pay into my account every month, to help pay for *Olympe*.

I didn't have to sell the ring. I put it in the captain's safe and tried not to think about it.

The docking fees got paid, and our air and water bill. I had *Olympe* cleaned and the crudded-up old air filters replaced. I polished the wood and the ornate metalwork in my stateroom till it glistened, and put up some of Aram's old things, in case I wanted to impress a potential passenger with the luxury we could offer. I started stocking the larder against the day it was time to leave.

I began to relax. Perhaps Shawn's vengeance was not quite so hot on our tail. I even spent some dinars on my own pleasures.

Not knowing whether or not it was a good idea, I went back to the place where Frank had taken us that first night. I wanted to find out if Tonio's

tawny-haired woman was all right. But I didn't see her, and I had barely started chatting with a couple of the employees when the manager recognized me and threw me out.

Which was an answer, I guess.

There were other places to have fun, though, that didn't come with bad memories. My band played in a lot of them. I met any number of women in them, and we had a good time with the sizzling in the blood and nobody went crazy.

So it went until a friend of Frank's made an offer to hire *Olympe*. Eldridge was a short man with fast, darting hands and genes left over from some long-ago fashion for albinism. His pale hair was shaggy, and his eyes looked at you with irises the color of blood.

Eldridge offered a very generous sum to ship a small cargo out to one of the system's outer moons, a place called Vantage, where a lot of mining and processing habitats were perched on vast seams of ore. The trip would take five days out and five back, and I was free to take any other cargo on the return trip. Half our fee would be paid in advance, half on delivery. The one condition Eldridge made was that the seals on the packages should not be broken.

I'd been scraping a living aboard *Olympe* long enough to know what that stipulation meant, and I knew what I meant to do about it too.

The band hired a temporary aurora player, and Tonio quit his chestnut-selling job even though his boss offered him a bonus. We had no sooner cleared Upside than the two of us went into the cargo space and broke every seal on every container, digging like maniacs through cushions of spray foam to find exactly what was supposed to be there, bottles of rare brandy or expensive lubricating oil for robots or canister filters for miners' vac suits. We searched until the air was filled with a blizzard of foam and I began to wonder if we'd misjudged Eldridge entirely.

But in what was literally the final container, we found what we were looking for, about forty kilos of blue salt, exactly the stimulant to keep miners working those extra hours to earn that end-of-the-year bonus, to keep them all awake and alert and safe until the salt turned them into sweating, shivering skeletons, every synapse turned to pork cracklings while heavy metals collected in their livers and their zombie bodies ran on chemi-cal fumes.

Well, well, I thought. I looked at Tonio. He looked at me.

Vantage would have been a couple months away except that *Olympe* could shift to a Probability where we could make better time, a place where the stars hung in the sky like hard little pearls on a background of green baize. We made a couple course changes outside our regular flight plan, then docked at Vantage and waited



for the police to come and tear our ship apart.

Which they did. It was all part of Eldridge's plan. The griffs would find the blue salt in our cargo hold, and we'd be arrested. The salt would find its way from police lockers to Eldridge's dealers on Vantage, who would sell it and give the griffs a piece. In the meantime, the griffs would collect our fee from Eldridge in fines, and the money would be returned to Eldridge. I'd be coerced into signing over *Olympe* in exchange for a reduced sentence, and *Olympe* would be sold, with the profits split between Eldridge and the griffs.

It's the sort of trap that tourists in the Probabilities walk into all the time. But Tonio and I aren't tourists.

The griffs came in with chemical sniffers and found nothing, which meant they had to break into the cargo containers, and of course found that they'd been broken into already. "A freelance captain's got to protect him-self," I told the griff lieutenant. "If I find contraband, it gets spaced."

I wouldn't admit to actually having found the salt. I didn't know the local laws well enough to know whether that admission would implicate me or not, so I refused to admit anything.

The lieutenant in charge of the search just kept getting more and more angry. I was worried that she or one of her cronies would plant some con-traband on the ship, so I made a point of telling her that I'd turned on all the ship's cameras, one in every room and cargo space, and was livecasting the whole search back to a lawyer's office on Upside. If she tried to plant anything, it would be caught on camera.

That sent her into a towering rage, and she tossed all the staterooms for spite, ripping the mattresses and blankets off the beds and emptying the closets onto the deck, before she stomped off.

I planned to unload the cargo and leave the second we could get clear-ance, but thanks to the griff lieutenant's temper tantrum, we had to do some cleanup first. That's why we had time for a passenger to find us. That's how we met Katarina.

Katarina was one of the Pryors, the incorporated gene line that pretty much owned the system, all of Upside and most of Downside, as well as every facility on Vantage. She'd been on some kind of inspection tour of the Pryor facilities on the various moons, but she'd been unexpectedly called back to Socorro and needed a ride.

When the message first came that someone wanted passage to Socorro, I'd been worried that Katarina was a plant from the police or from Eldridge, but as soon as I looked at her I knew that she was going to be a lot more trouble than that.

I don't understand the way the gene lines operate internally, with all the cloning and use of cartridge memories and marriages by cousins to keep all the money and power in the same pedigree, but it was clear from the second she came aboard *Olympe* that she ranked high in the structure. She had that eerie perfection that came with her status. Geneticists had sweated over her body years before she'd ever been born. Flawless complexion, perfect black hair, perfect white teeth, full expressive lips, black eyes that looked at me for a full half-second before they had added up my entire life and riches, found them unworthy of further consideration, and looked away. She wore an outfit that was the opposite of the balloon-suits women wore in Socorro, a dark fabric that outlined perfectly every curve of that genetically ideal body. I got dizzy just looking at her.

She looked at my stateroom—I'd moved my stuff out of it—and spared an extra glance for the painting I'd put over the cabinet door that had been ripped off its hinges by the griffs. The painting was of a nude woman on a sofa, with a black ribbon around her neck and a bangle on her wrist. She has a cat, and a servant bringing her flowers from the admirer that's obviously just walked into the room. She's looking out of the painting at her visitor with eyes hard and objective and cutting as obsidian.

Aram had that painting in the stateroom when he'd died. I'd kept it for a while, but put it away later. It is true that travelers, stuck in their ships for months at a time, like to look at pictures of naked ladies, but not the same lady all the time, and not one who looks back at you the way this one does.

I looked for a startled moment at Katarina and the woman in the painting, and I realized that they had the same look in their eyes, that same hard, indifferent calculation. She turned those eyes to me.

"I'll take it," she said. "There's a room for my secretary?"

"Of course." With a torn mattress and a smashed chair, but I didn't mention that.

She left the stateroom to call for her secretary and her baggage. In the corridor, she encountered Tonio.

He grinned at her, blue eyes set on either side of that broken nose. Those hard black eyes gazed back, then softened.

"Who is *this*?" she asked.

*Trouble*, I thought.

"I'm the cook," Tonio said.

Of course, she was married. They almost always are.

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Tonio and I had first come aboard *Olympe* as crew. Aram was the owner and captain—he was a Maheu and had inherited money and power and responsibility, but after eight hundred years he'd given up everything but the money, and traveled aimlessly in *Olympe*, looking for something that he hadn't seen somewhere before.

He also used massive amounts of drugs, which were sent to him by Maheu's special courier service. To show that the drugs were legitimate he had doctor's prescriptions for everything—he collected them the way he had once collected art.

Physically, he had the perfection of the high-bred gene lines, with broad shoulders, mahogany skin, and an arched nose. It was only if you looked closely that you saw that the eyes were pouchy and vague, that his muscles were wasting away, and that his skin was as slack as his first-rate genetics would permit. He was giving away his body the same way he'd given away his collection.

He was lonely too, because he would talk to Tonio and me, about history, and art, and poetry. He could recite whole volumes of poetry from memory, and it was beautiful even though most of it was in old languages, like Persian, that I'd never heard before and didn't understand.

I asked him about his gene line, his connections, what he did before he'd started his wandering.

"It was prostitution," he said, with a look at the painting on his stateroom wall. "I don't want to talk about it, now I'm trying to regain my virtue."

These conversations took place in the morning, after breakfast. Then he'd put the first patch of the day on his arm and nod off, his head in Maud's lap.

Maud Rain was his girlfriend. She looked about seventeen, and maybe she was. She appeared as if her genetics had been intending to create a lily, or cornflower, or some other fragile blossom, and then been surprised to discover they'd produced a human being. She was blond and green-eyed and blushed easily, and she loved Aram completely. I was a little in love with her, myself.

Life aboard the *Olympe* was pleasant, if somewhat pointless. We wandered around the multiverse without a schedule. We'd stop for a while, and Aram would leave the ship to visit old friends or see something new that he thought might interest him, and we wouldn't hear from him for anywhere between three days and three months, then abruptly we'd be on our way again. Aram paid us well and gave us a good deal of time off, and once he bailed Tonio out of a scrape involving the wife of

a Creel station superin-tendent.

I don't pretend to understand the chemistry between users and their con-sorts, and I don't know whether Aram talked Maud into using, or whether it was her own idea. I do know that, like all users, Aram wanted to make everyone around him use too. He offered the stuff often enough to me and Tonio, though I never heard him make the same offer to Maud.

Whoever made up Maud's mind for her, she then went on to make a stupid, elementary mistake. She gave herself the same dose that Aram took, without his magic genes and all the immunity he'd built up over the de-cades, and she screamed and thrashed and went into convulsions. Tonio got his fingers savagely bitten trying to keep the vomit clear of her mouth while I madly shifted the ship through about eight Probabilities to get her to a hospital. By the time we got her there, she didn't have much of a brain left. She still blushed easily, and looked at you with dreamy green eyes. She had the sweet-natured smile, but there was nothing behind it but a void.

We left her in a place where they'd look after her, a stately white building on a pleasant green lawn, and *Olympe* resumed its wanderings. Aram dete-riorated quickly. He no longer talked in the mornings. We'd find him alone and crying, the tears pouring down his face in silence, and then he'd put a new patch on his arm and drift away. One afternoon, we found him dead, with six patches on his arm.

In his will, he left all his money to a trust for Maud, and he left *Olympe* and its contents to me. He left Tonio some money. I gave Tonio everything in the pharmacy, and he sold it to someone on Burnes Upside and we gave Aram a long, crazy wake with the profits. The rest of Tonio's money went to lawyers to fix a misunderstanding that occurred during the course of the wake.

When we sobered up, I realized that I had a yacht, but no money to sup-port it.

Tonio was the only crew I ever had, because he didn't expect to be paid. He did the job of a crew, and when he had money, he paid me, as if he were a passenger. When I had money, I shared it with him.

We kept moving, the same kind of random shifts we'd made with Aram.

It was almost enough to keep us out of trouble.

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Tonio spent that first night in the stateroom with Katarina Pryor. I tried to console myself with the fact that this was all happening in a whole other Probability from the one Katarina normally lived in. I also tried to concen-trate on how I was going to

handle Eldridge when I saw him again.

I checked some data sources and inquired about Katarina Pryor. She was about fifty years old, though she looked half that and would for the next millennium, if she so desired. She was one of the Council of Seven that ran Socorro on behalf of the Pryor gene line.

Her husband, Denys, was another one of the Seven.

I let that settle in my brain for a while. Then I sent a message to Eldridge, telling him that I wanted to meet him as soon as *Olympe* docked Topside. He replied that it would be his pleasure to do so.

We'd see how much fun he'd have.

I told Tonio of this development as we were walking to the lounge. As he stepped into the room, he gave me the news. "Katarina has invited me to accompany her to Downside on completion of our returnment. I have accepted, yiss, pending of course my captain's sanction."

Katarina's secretary, a young Pryor named Andrew, happened to be sitting in the lounge as we entered, and he looked as if someone had hit him in the head with a brick.

"It's not as if people are going out of their way to hire us," I said, "so the ship can spare you. But..." I hesitated, aware of the presence of Andrew. "Doesn't this *remind* you of anything, Tonio?"

He gave me a look of offended dignity. "The situation of which you speak was on an entirely different plane," he said. "This, on the contrary, is *real*."

The conversation was taking place in a Probability where stars looked like spinning billiard balls on a felt-green sky, and he and Katarina were traveling to another place where oxygen burned in their blood like naphtha. Who knew how real *anything* could be under such circumstances?

I asked Tonio if he could delay his departure with Katarina until Eldridge came aboard.

"Oh yiss. Most assuredly."

He seemed perfectly confident.

I wish I could have echoed his assurance.

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Eldridge was present when *Olympe* arrived at Upside, and he had brought a couple of thick-necked thugs with him. They were hanging back from the personnel lock because there were plainclothes Pryor security present, wait-ing to escort Katarina and her new beau on the first stage of their planetary honeymoon.

I called Eldridge from the control room. “Come on in,” I said. “Leave your friends behind.”

When he came on board, he looked as if he were fully capable of dis-membering me all by himself, his small size notwithstanding. I escorted him through the lounge, where Katarina and Andrew waited for Tonio to finish his packing job, a job that would not be completed until I gave him the high sign.

Eldridge’s eyes went wide as he saw Katarina. She wore a compromise between the local balloon-suits and the form-fitting outfit she’d worn when she came aboard, which amounted to a slinky suit with a puffy jacket on top. But I don’t think it was her looks that riveted his attention.

He recognized her.

“This is Miss Katarina Pryor,” I told him, redundantly I hoped, “and Mr. Andrew Pryor.”

“Pryor,” Eldridge repeated, as if he wanted to confirm this striking fact for himself.

Andrew gave him a barely civil nod. Katarina just gave him her stone-eyed stare, let him know he had been measured and found wanting.

I went to the bar and poured myself a cup of coffee. You had to drink coffee quickly here, because in this Probability it cools very fast.

“Eldridge,” I remarked. “I haven’t received my on-delivery fee.”

He gave me a scarlet stare out of his white face. “The cargo did not arrive intact.”

“One crate went missing,” I said. “It was probably the fault of the load-ers, but since I signed for it, you should feel free to deduct its value from the delivery fee.” I made a show of looking at the manifest on my pocket adjutant. “What was in that crate—? Ah, jugs of spray foam mix. Value three hundred—would you say that’s a correct value, Miss Pryor?”

Katarina drummed her fingers on the arm of the sofa. “Sounds about right, Captain Crossbie,” she said, in a voice that said *Don’t bother me with this crap.*

I called up my bank account. “Might as well do the transfer now,” I said.

Eldridge’s eyes cut to Katarina, then cut back. His lips went even whiter than usual.

If the Pryors decided to step on him, he wouldn’t leave so much as a grease spot on their shoes. He knew that, as did I.

He got out his own adjutant and tapped in codes with his one long thumbnail. I saw my bank account jump by the anticipated amount, and I put away my adjutant and sipped my coffee. It was already lukewarm.

“Want some coffee, by the way?” I asked.

Eldridge gazed at me out of those flaming eyes. “No,” he said.

“We have some other business, but there’s no reason to bother Miss Pryor with it,” I said.

He followed me into the control room, where I closed the door and gestured him toward a chair.

“Consider that a penalty,” I said, “for thinking I was new to the multiverse.”

“The Pryors aren’t really protecting you,” he said. “They can’t be.”

“They’re old family friends,” I said. I sat in the padded captain’s chair—genuine Tibetan goat hide, Aram had told me—and swiveled it toward him. He just stared at me, his busy fingers plucking at his knees.

“I’m willing to sell you coordinates,” I said.

He licked his lips, pink tongue on paper-white. “Coordinates to what?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

He didn’t answer.

We had put the blue salt in orbit around an ice moon, one that circled the same gas giant as Vantage.

“The coordinates go for the same price as the cargo.” I smiled. “Plus three hundred.”

He just kept staring. Probably that agate gaze had frightened a lot of people, but I wasn't scared at all.

Five days around Katarina Pryor had given me immunity to lesser terrors.

"If you don't want the coordinates," I said, "your competition will."

He sneered. "There is no competition."

"There will be if Katarina takes you and your tame police out of the equation," I said.

So, in the end, he paid. Once the money was in the account, I gave Eldridge the seven orbital elements that described the salt's amble about its moon. Someone from Vantage could easily hop over and pick up the salt for him, and the strung-out miners would go on getting their daily nerve-searing dose of fate.

I showed Eldridge out, and as he bustled away, he cast a look over his shoulder that promised payback.

I sent a message to Tonio, telling him to solve his packing crisis, and as I returned to the lounge, he came loping out of his quarters, his belongings carried in a rucksack on one shoulder. Andrew raised an eyebrow at the tiny amount of baggage that had taken so long to pack.

Katarina rose to embrace Tonio. I watched as she molded her body to his.

"I am primed, lover mine," Tonio said.

"So am I."

I showed them to the door. "Thank you, Captain," Andrew said, and with an expression like someone passing gas at a funeral, handed me a tip in an envelope.

I looked at the envelope. *This* had never happened before.

"See you later, compeer." Tonio grinned.

"You bet."

I watched them walk toward their waiting transport, arms around each other's waists. People stared. Wary guards circled them. Eldridge and his people were long gone.

I decided it was time to buy and stow a lot of rations. A year's worth, at least.



For two fools, running.

\* \* \* \*

But first I wanted to celebrate the fact that I now possessed more money than I'd ever had in my life, even if you didn't count my tip—which was two thousand, by the way, an inept attempt to buy my silence. I couldn't make up my mind whether Eldridge was going to be a problem or not—if I were him, Katarina would have scared the spleen right out of me, but I didn't know Eldridge well enough to know how stubborn or stupid he was.

While I considered this, it occurred to me to wonder how many years it had been since I'd had a planet under my feet.

Too many, I thought.

I opened my safe and put Tonio's emerald ring in my pocket—no sense in leaving it behind for people like Eldridge to find—and then I followed in the footsteps of Tonio and Katarina and took the next ride down the grapevine to Downside. I looked for tourist resorts and exotic sights, and though I discovered there were none of the former, there were plenty of the latter. There were mountains, gorges, and colossal wildlife—the chemi-cal bonding of the local Probability led to plants, even those with Earth genetics, running amok. I saw rose blossoms bigger than my head, and with a smell like vinegar—chemistry not quite right, you see. Little pine trees grew to the size of Douglas firs. Socorro's internal workings had thrust huge reefs of nearly pure minerals right out of the ground, many of which the miners had not yet begun to disassemble and carry away. For a brief time, wearing a protective raincoat, breathing apparatus, and crinkly plastic overshoes, I walked on the Whitewashed Desert that surrounded Mount Cyanide. I bathed in the Red Sea. Then the Green Sea, the Yellow Sea, and the Winedark Sea. The Yellow Sea stained my skin for days. It looked as if I were dying of cirrhosis.

I kept the ring in a special trouser pocket that would open only to a code from my personal adjutant. After a while, I got used to the feel of it, and days went by before I remembered it was there.

I'd brought my aurora. Along the way there was music, bars, and happy moments. I met women named Meimei, Sally June, and Soda. We had good times together. None of them died, went crazy, or slit their wrists.

Carried away by the sheer carefree joy of it all, I began to think of going back to the *Olympe* and sailing away on the sea of Probability. Tonio was probably still happy with Katarina, and I could leave with his blessing.

I would be safe. Shawn wasn't after me. And Tonio, provided he stayed put, would be as safe as he ever was, probably safer.

I contemplated this possibility for a few too many days, because one morning I woke from a dense, velvety dream to the birdlike tones of my adjutant. I told it to answer.

“Compeer,” said Tonio. “Wherewhich art thou?”

“Shadows and fog,” I said, because the voice seemed to be coming from my dream.

“There’s a party on the morrow. Come and share it with me. Katarina would be delighted to see you.”

*I’ll bet*, I thought.

\* \* \* \*

The hotel looked like a hovership that had stranded itself on land, a series of swoops and terraces, surrounded by cypress trees the size of skyscrapers, with gardenias as long as my leg tumbling brightly down from the balconies. Katarina had installed Tonio and his rucksack in a five-room suite and given him an expense account that, so far, he’d been unable to dent.

Tonio greeted me as I stepped into the suite. His blue eyes sparkled with joy. He looked well scrubbed and well tended, and his hair was sleek.

“Did you bring your aurora, Gaucho?” he said. “Let us repair to a suitable location, with drinks and the like, and partake of heavenly music.”

“I thought we were going to a party.”

“That is later. Right now we’ve got to have you measured for clothes.”

A tailor with a double chin and a ponytail stepped out of a side room, had me take off my jacket, and got my measurements with a laser scribe. He vanished. Tonio led me out of the apartment and down a confusing series of stairs and lifts to a subbasement garage. Empty space echoed around us, supported by fluted pillars with lotus-leaf capitals. Tonio whispered a code into his adjutant and turbines began their soft whine somewhere in the darkness. Spotlights flared. A blazemobile came whispering toward us on its cushion of air. I felt its breath on my face and hands. The colors were gray and silver, blending into each other as if they were somehow forged together. The lines were clean and sharp. It looked purposeful as a sword.

“Nice,” I said. “Is this Katarina’s?” I had a hard time not calling her “Miss Pryor.”

“It’s mine,” Tonio said. “Katarina purchased it for me after, ah, the inci-dent.”

I looked at him.

“There was a misunderstanding about another vehicle,” Tonio said. “I thought I had the owner’s permission to take it.”

Ah, I thought. One of *those* misunderstandings.

“Are you driving?” I asked.

“Why don’t you drive? You’re better than I am.”

I settled into the machine gingerly. It folded around me like a piece of origami. Tonio settled into the passenger seat. I drove the car with care till I got out of town, then let the turbines off their leash, and we were soon zooming down a highway under the system’s fluorescing, shivering smear of a sun, huge jungle growth on either side of the road turning the highway into a tunnel beneath vines and wild, drooping blossoms.

“There’s another car behind us,” I said, looking at the displays. I was surprised it could keep up.

“That would be Katarina’s security,” Tonio said. “It is a mark of her love. They follow me everywhere, to render me safe.”

And to prevent, I thought, any of those misunderstandings about who owns what.

A blissful smile crossed Tonio’s face. “Katarina and I are so in love,” he said. “I sing her to sleep every night.”

The thought of Tonio crooning made me smile. “That sounds great,” I said.

“We wish to have many babies, but there are complicatories.”

“Like her husband?”

“He is obstacular, yiss, but the principal problem is legal.”

It turned out that Katarina did not legally own her own womb, as well as other parts, which belonged to the Pryor family trust. She could not become pregnant without the permission of certain high-ranking members of her line, who alone knew the codes that would unlock her fertility.

“That’s... not the usual problem,” I said, stunned. I don’t know much about

how the big corporate gene lines work, but this seemed extreme even for them.

“Can you hire a surrogate?” I asked. “Use an artificial womb?”

“It’s not the same.” He cast a glance over his shoulder. “Those individuals behind us—mayhap you can outspeed them?”

“I’ll try.”

I set the jets alight. My vision narrowed with acceleration, but oxygen still blazed in my blood. Alarms began to chirp. The vehicle trailing us fell back, but before long we came to a town and had to slow.

It was a sad little mining town, covered with the dust of the huge magnesite reef that loomed over the town. Vast movers were in the process of disassembling the entire formation, while being careful not to ignite it and incinerate the entire county.

Tonio pointed to a bar called the Reefside. “Pull in here, compeer. Mayhap we may discover refreshment.”

The bar sat on its tracks, ready to move to another location when the last chunk of magnesite was finally carried away. I put the blazemobile in a side street so as not to attract attention to ourselves. We climbed up into the bar and blinked in its dark, musty-scented interior. We had arrived during an off-peak period and only a few faces stared back at us.

We huffed some gas and shared a bag of crisps. After ten minutes, the security detail barged in, two broad-shouldered, clean-cut, thick-necked young men in city suits. After they saw us, one went back outside, and the other ordered fruit juice.

The regulars stared at him.

I asked the bartender if it was all right to play my aurora.

“You can if you want,” he said, “but if the music’s shit, I’ll tell you to stop.”

“That’s fair,” I said. I opened the case and adjusted the sonics for the room and put the aurora against my shoulder and touched the strings. A chord hung in the air, with just a touch of sourness. The bartender frowned. I tuned and began to play.

The bartender turned away with a grudging smile. I made the aurora sound like chimes, like drums, like brass. Our fellow drinkers began to bob their heads and call for the bartender to refill their glasses. One gent bought us rounds of beer.

The shifts changed at the diggings and miners spilled in, their clothes dusty, their respirators hanging loose around their necks. Some were highly specialized gene types, with sleek skin and implants for remote control of heavy equipment. Others were generalized humans, like us. One woman had lost an arm in an accident, and they were growing it back—it was a formless pink bud on the end of her shoulder.

I played my aurora. I played fierce, then slow. The miners nodded and grinned and tapped their booted feet on the grainy plastic floor. The security man clung unhappily to his glass of fruit juice. I played angry, I played tender, I played the sound of birds in the air and bees in their hive. Tonio borrowed a cap from one of the diggers and passed it around. It came back full of money, which he stuffed in my pockets.

My fingers and mind were numb, and I paused for a moment. There was a round of applause, and the diggers called for more refreshment. A few others asked who we were, and I told them we were off a ship and just traveling around the country.

Tonio had a blazing white grin on his face. “It is *spectacular!*” he said. “This is the true joy!”

“More than with Katarina?”

He shrugged. “With Katarina it is sensational, but she is terribly occupied, and I don’t know anyone else in this coincidence of spacetime. People fear to be in my vicinity, and when I corner one, they only speak to me because they are afraid of Katarina. I have nothing in my day but to wait for Katarina to come home.”

“Can’t she give you a job? Make you her secretary, maybe?”

“She has Andrew.”

“Her social secretary, then.” I couldn’t help but laugh at the idea.

He gave a big grin. “*She* knows the social rules, yiss. I am signally lacking in that area of expertise.”

“You could be a prospector. Travel around looking for minerals or what-ever.”

“For this task they have satellites and artificial intelligences.” He gazed for a long moment off into nowhere. “I am filled with gladness that you came to see me, Gaucho.”

“I’m glad I came.” Though I’m not certain I was telling the truth.

Tonio was getting bored with his life with Katarina. A bored Tonio was a dangerous Tonio.

We talked and drank with the miners till Tonio said it was time to leave. Our guard was relieved to follow us out of the bar. His partner had been guarding our blazemobile all this time.

We were both too drunk to drive, so we got in the car and told the auto-pilot to take us home. Once we arrived, I had a fitting with the tailor, who had run up my suit while we were off enjoying ourselves. I had this deep blue outfit, all spider silk, with lots of gold braid on my cuffs.

“What’s this?” I asked Tonio.

“You are my captain,” he said, “and now you are dressed like one.”

“I feel ridiculous,” I said.

“Wait till you see what *I* am compelled to wear.”

The tailor adjusted the suit, then gave me the codes so that I could alter the suit’s fit if I wanted to, or add a pocket here or there. In the meantime, Tonio changed. His suit was the latest mode, with ruffles and fringes that seemed to triple the volume of his thin body. He looked unusual, but he carried himself with his usual jaunty style, as if he wanted it made clear to everyone that he was only *pretending* to be the person in the suit.

Katarina arrived and wrapped herself around Tonio without caring if I was there or not. I was reminded of my little limpet-girl, Étoile.

Katarina began tearing at Tonio’s ruffles and fringes. They went off to the bedroom for a lust break. I went out onto the balcony and watched the sun set over the jade forest. The sweet smell of flowers rose on the twilight air.

Tonio and Katarina returned. She wore a dark lacy sheath that was as simple as Tonio’s suit was elaborate. Gemstones glittered sunset-red about her neck, and a languid postcoital glow seemed to float around her like a halo. I could feel sweat prickling my forehead at her very presence.

“You’re looking very well, Captain Crossbie,” she said.

“You’re looking well yourself,” I said. There was a bit more regard in her glance than I usually got. I wondered if Tonio had been telling her stories that made me seem, well, interesting.

We went to the party, which was in the same building. It celebrated the fact that some production quota or other had been exceeded, and the room was full of Pryors and their minions. Katarina took Tonio's arm and pressed herself to him all night, making it clear that they were a couple.

The place was filled with people who were perfectly perfect, perfect ev-erywhere from their dress to their genetics. All the talk I heard was of busi-ness, and complex business at that. If I'd been a spy sent by the competition, I would have heard a lot, but it would have been opaque to me.

Don't let anyone tell you that people like the Pryors don't work for their riches and power. They do nothing else.

I was introduced as Captain Crossbie, and people took me for a yachts-man, which technically I suppose I was. People asked me about regattas and famous captains, and I admitted that I only used my yacht for travel. I was then asked where I'd been, and I managed to tell a few stories.

I was talking about yachts to an engineer named Bond—his dream was to buy a ship when he retired, and travel—when a blond man came up to talk to him. I thought the newcomer looked familiar, but didn't place him right away.

He talked to Bond about some kind of bottleneck on the Downside grapevine station that was threatening to interfere with shipments to Upside, and Bond assured him that the problem would be engineered out of existence in a couple weeks. He asked after Bond's family. Bond told him that his son had won some kind of prize from the Pryor School of Economics. It was then that the blond man turned to me.

He had the chiseled perfection that came with his flawless genes, and violet eyes, and around his mouth was a tight-lipped tension that nature— or his designers—had not quite intended for him.

"This is Mister Denys Pryor," Bond said. "Denys, this is Captain Crossbie."

He realized who I was about the same instant that I finally recognized him as Katarina's husband. The violet eyes narrowed.

"Ah," he said. "The accomplice."

"I don't have any response to that," I said, "that I'd expect you to be-lieve."

He gave me a contemptuous look and stalked away. Bond looked after him in surprise, then looked at me. Then the light dawned. Panic flashed across his face.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, and was gone before I could even reply.

That was the last conversation I had at the party. Word about my connection to Tonio flashed through the room faster than lightning, and soon I was alone. I got tired of standing around by myself, so I went out onto the terrace, where a group of women in immaculate white balloon-suits were grilling meats. I was considering chatting up one of them when Tonio came up, carrying a pair of drinks. He handed me one.

“My apologies, compeer,” he said. “They are stuck-up here, yiss.”

“I’ve been treated worse.”

He looked up at the strangely infirm stars. “I have Katarina by way of compensation,” he said. “You have nothing.”

“I have *Olympe*,” I said. “I’ve been thinking maybe it’s time she and I flew away to the next Probability.”

He looked at me somberly. “I will miss your companionship,” he said.

“You’ll have Katarina.” I looked at the sky, where Upside glittered on its invisible tether. “I hope Eldridge isn’t still looking for me,” I said.

“You don’t have to worry about Eldridge,” Tonio said. “I told Katarina all about him.”

Hot terror flashed through my nerves.

“What did you tell her?” I asked.

“I told her that Eldridge tried to use us to smuggle his salt, and that we found the stuff and spaced it.”

I relaxed a little. The scene that Eldridge and I had played in front of Katarina might not seem that suspicious, if, of course, she believed her lover.

“You didn’t hear the news?” Tonio said. “About that police officer that was found in the vacuum, over on Vantage.”

My mouth was dry. “That griff lieutenant?” I asked.

“Her captain. The lieutenant is learning a new job, floating in zero gravity and sucking up industrial wastes with a big vacuum cleaner.” He rubbed his chin. “The Pryors don’t like people fucking up their workers with drugs.”

“They don’t seem to mind all those enhanced production quotas, though,” I said. “Do you think those come from workers who aren’t spiked up?” There was a



moment of silence. The scent of sizzling meat gusted past. “What happened to Eldridge?” I asked.

“Don’t know. Didn’t bother to ask.”

If anything was going to harden my determination to leave Socorro as quickly as I could, it was this.

I turned to Tonio. “I’ll miss you,” I said. I raised a glass. “To happy endings.”

Before Tonio could respond, there was a sudden brilliant radiance in the sky, and we looked up. An enormous structure had appeared in the sky above Socorro, a vast black octahedron covered with thousands of brilliant lights, windows enabling the 1.4 million people aboard to gaze out at the passing Probabilities. To gaze down at *us*.

“It’s the Chrysalis,” I said aloud.

Surrounding the structure were half a dozen birds, each larger than the habitat, long necks outstretched. The storks that were the emblem of the Storch gene line, each with ghostly white wings flapping in utter silence, holograms projected into space by enormous lasers.

Suddenly, I remembered Tonio’s emerald ring, in its special pocket on the old trousers I’d left back at Tonio’s flat.

*Too late*, I thought. Shawn had come for us.

\* \* \* \*

“We can’t keep them out,” Katarina said. “This Probability isn’t a secret any longer, and anyone can exploit it now that it’s registered.”

I doubted the Pryors could keep the Chrysalis out even if they wanted to. The Pryors maintained a police force here, not an army, and I knew that the Chrysalis had weapons for self-defense. They had those huge lasers they’d used to project their flying stork blazons, for one thing, and those could be turned to military use at any time.

We sat on Tonio’s terrace the morning following the Storch’s arrival, soaking in the scent of blossoms. The Chrysalis was still visible in daylight, its edges rimmed with silver.

Breakfast was curdling on our plates. Nobody was very hungry.

“The Chrysalis is a state-of-the-art industrial colony,” I said. “They can park it here and start exporting materials in just weeks.”

Katarina gave me a tell-me-something-I-don't-know look.

“They have also made an official request,” she said. “They want the two of you arrested on charges of theft and turned over to them.”

I felt myself turn pale, a chill touching my lips and cheeks. “What are we supposed to have stolen?” I asked.

Katarina permitted herself a thin smile. “They haven't said. We have re-quested clarification.” She turned her black eyes to me. “They have also asked that your ship be impounded, until it can be determined whether you obtained it by forging Aram Maheu's will.”

“That was all settled in the chancery court on Burnes Upside,” I said. “Besides, if I was going to forge a will to give myself a yacht, I'd give myself the money to keep it going.”

“The request is a delaying tactic,” Katarina said. “It's to tie up your vessel for an indeterminate period and prevent you from escaping.”

“Is it going to work?” I asked. Katarina didn't bother to answer.

The previous night's party had ended with the appearance of the Chrysalis, as the Council of Seven went into executive session and their employees scattered to duty stations to do research on the Chrysalis and the implication of its arrival.

Apparently at some point in the night, Tonio had told Katarina about Adora and Shawn, and Katarina must have believed him, because neither of us was being tied to a chair and tortured by Pryor security armed with shock wands.

Katarina rose and gave Tonio a kiss. “I've got a lot of meetings,” she said.

“See you tonight, lover mine,” Tonio said.

We sat in silence for a while as Socorro's strange sun climbed above the horizon. I turned to Tonio.

“Are you certain,” I asked, “that Adora gave you that ring?”

He gave me a wounded look. “Surely I am not hearing what I am hearing, my compeer.”

“It wasn't one of those misunderstandings?” I pressed. “Where you're certain

she gave it to you, but she doesn't remember doing it?"

"I am certain she told Shawn it was stolen," Tonio said with dignity, "but this is what happened in sooth. He presented her with the ring at their wedding, a sentimental token, I imagine. But later she was angry at Shawn for a scene he'd made, where he was complaining about how she had behaved with me at a certain social function, and out of anger she bestowed the ring upon me."

"And when you left and she went back to Shawn," I said, "she couldn't admit it, so she told him it was stolen."

"That is my postulation."

Or that was the postulation that Tonio wanted me to believe.

Tonio had been to prison, and in prison you learn to manipulate people. You learn to tell them what they want to hear. Is it lying if there is no harm intended? If it's just saying the thing that's most convenient for everyone?

*I didn't steal anything.* How often in prison do you hear *that*?

I think Tonio was sincere in everything he said and did. But what he was sincere *about* could change from one minute to the next.

In any case, this had to be about more than just the ring. The ring was valuable, but it didn't justify moving over a million Storch employees to this Probability and opening mining operations.

"Why did Shawn and Adora marry in the first place?" I asked.

"Their families told them to. They hadn't met until a few days before the ceremony."

"But *why*? Usually line members marry each other, like Katarina and Denys. It keeps the money in the family. When they merge or take another outfit over, they do it by adoption. But Shawn and Adora were different— each was ordered to marry *out*. The Storchs do heavy industry. The Feeneys specialize in biotech and research. What did they have in common?"

Tonio waved a hand in dismissal. "There was a special project. I did not ask for details, no. Why would I? It was connected to Shawn, and when I was with Adora, I had no wish to talk about Shawn. Why spoil a bliss that was so perfect with such a subject?"

"If it was so perfect, why did you leave Adora?" I asked. "When I last saw you together, you seemed so... connected."

“She grew too onerous,” Tonio said. “Once we began to live together, she began giving orders. *Go here. Do this. Put on these clothes. What do you want to name the children?* Under the oppression my spirit began to chafe, yiss. She loved me, but only as a pet.”

“Still,” I said, “you had good times.”

“Oh yiss.” There was a soft light in his eyes. “They were magical, so many of our times. When we were sneaking away together, to make love in an isolated corner of the Chrysalis... that was bliss, my compeer.”

I looked up at the Chrysalis, hovering over our heads like the Big Heavy Shiny Object of Damocles.

“Do you think she’s up there?” I asked. “It was Adora who was the member of the Storch line. Shawn was the Feeney half of the alliance. He could only command the Chrysalis with the permission of his in-laws.”

Tonio looked at the sky in wonder. His face screwed up as he tried to think.

I rose and left him to his thoughts. I needed to do a lot of thinking myself.

\* \* \* \*

For the next several days we bounced around the apartment with increasing energy and frustration. The news was grim. Shuttles from the Chrysalis were exploring uninhabited parts of Socorro. There had been one near-miss between a Storch shuttle and a Pryor transport. Fail-safes normally kept ships from getting remotely close to one another, so the miss had been a deliberate provocation.

Guards stood at our door and even on the next terrace, sensors deployed, looking for any assassins lurking on the horizon. Tonio’s blazemobile privi-leges had been revoked, and he wasn’t allowed out of the building.

“I love my little Katarina, yiss,” he said one day as he stalked about the main room. “But this is growing onerous.”

A bored Tonio was a dangerous Tonio. If he walked out on Katarina, we were both just so much dog food.

“She’s just trying to protect you,” I said. “It’ll only last until the business with the Storches is resolved.”

He flung out his arms. “But how long will that be?”

I looked at him. “What if Adora’s up there, Tonio?”

He gave me an exasperated look. “What if she is?”

“Do you think you can talk to her? Find out what she wants?”

Tonio stopped his pacing. His startled face began to look thoughtful.

“Do you think I can?” he asked.

“If you try it from here, Katarina will be listening in before you can spit.”

“But she won’t let me *leave* here!”

“Let me work on that.”

His adjutant bleeped, and he answered. His face broke into a look of pure joy as he said, “Hello, lover.”

*Go on pleasing them, Tonio*, I thought.

I went to one of the security guards at our door and told him that I needed to speak to Denys Pryor.

\* \* \* \*

“I don’t know why I’m even talking to you,” said Denys. I had been called into his office, the design of which told me that he liked clean sight lines, no clutter, curved geometries, and a terrace with a water view. He remained at his desk as I entered, and was turned slightly away, so that I saw his perfect chiseled features in three-quarter profile. He wore fewer ruffles in his office than at the party.

There was no chair for me to sit in. Not anywhere in the room. I had a choice of responses—Denys would probably have preferred an awkward shuffle—so instead I leaned on his immaculate white wall.

“I’m here to solve your problems,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow.

No wonder Katarina was dissatisfied with him, I thought. She could have conveyed the same suspicion and contempt without twitching a single hair.

“Your Chrysalis problem,” I clarified, “and your Tonio problem.”

“Tonio Hope,” he said, “is welcome to my wife. They deserve each other,

and I hope you'll tell them that. But the problem represented by the Chrysalis is rather more urgent." He turned in his chair to face me. "Tell me your scheme, please. Then I can have a good hearty laugh and have you thrown out of here."

Cuckolded husbands, I have observed, are rarely models of courtesy.

"Tell me one thing first," I said. "Is Adora Storch on the Chrysalis?"

"Your friend's former lover? Yes." His tone was bored. "Apparently, he stole something from her, but she's too embarrassed to admit what it was."

"Her heart," I said. He looked away suddenly, toward the distant lake.

"What I would like," I said, "is a secure means of communication between Tonio and Adora." And then, at the sudden, sharp violet-eyed look, I added, "Secure, I mean, from Katarina."

\* \* \* \*

"Start with flowers," I suggested. Tonio contacted a florist on the Chrysalis and sent an extravagant bouquet, with a humble little message. There was no reply. "Just call her," I said finally.

Her secretary kept him waiting for half an hour, while he paced about gripping the adjutant I'd got from Denys. I played quiet, tinkly music on the aurora to keep him calmed down, while I watched the muscles leaping on his face. Finally, I heard Adora's voice.

"Tonio! You have the nerve to call me after the way you walked out on me?"

Adora had taken half an hour to work up sufficient anger to decide to confront Tonio instead of just leaving him hanging. Things had worked out more or less as I'd hoped.

Tonio looked at the adjutant's screen. Over his shoulder I saw Adora's brilliant red hair, her flashing green eyes, her pale rose complexion. He didn't reply.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "Have the lies stuck in your throat for the first time in your life?"

"I—I am but stunned, seeing you again," Tonio said. "I know you're angry and suchlike, but—at least the anger shows you still care."

Adora began screaming at that point, and I left the room. *Just do what you do best*, I told Tonio silently.

I heard Tonio murmur, and more fury from Adora, and then a lot of si-lence, which meant Adora was doing the talking and Tonio was listening. It went on for nearly two hours.

While it went on, I strummed the aurora, volume at a low setting. I really didn't want to know how Tonio did these things: I didn't think I could be trusted with the knowledge.

After the murmuring stopped, I walked back out into the main room. Tonio sat on the sofa, his hands dangling over his knees. He shook his head.

"I'd forgotten what Adora was like," he said. "How beautiful she is. How passionate."

"You've got to tell Katarina," I said. He looked up in shock.

"Tell her that I—"

"Tell her that you're in touch with Adora. Tell her it was my idea, and I made you do it."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't, Denys will. He'll use it to turn Katarina against you."

He rubbed his face with one of his big hands. "This is complicated."

"Tell Katarina the next time you see her," I said.

Which he did, that night. By morning, he had Katarina thinking this was a good idea, and the three of us plotted strategy over breakfast.

When, later that day, Denys told her of Tonio's supposed treachery, she laughed in his face.

\* \* \* \*

While Denys was fuming, and Tonio and Adora were cooing at each other with Katarina's approval, I decided that it was time to find out as much as I could about the ring. I got free of security by telling them I was going to report to Denys, and took the ring to a jeweler. If I got no answer there, I'd take it to a laboratory.

I could feel my blood sizzle as I walked into the shop. There was a little extra oxygen in the air here, I thought, to make the customers happy and more willing to buy.

The jeweler was a dark-haired woman with a low, scratchy voice and long, elegant hands. She stood amid cases of brilliant splendor, but refused to be distracted by them. Her attention was devoted entirely to the customer.

“Splendid work,” she said, gazing at a hologram of the ring as big as her head. “The emerald is a natural emerald, which makes it slightly more valuable than an artificial one.”

“How do you know?” I asked. She’d made the judgment a split second after she’d put the ring into the laser scanner.

“Natural gems have flaws,” the jeweler said. “Artificial gems are perfect.”

*Imperfection is worth more.* Perhaps that says something about our world. Perhaps that says something about how women relate to Tonio.

“The setting is common gold and platinum,” the jeweler continued, “but it’s more valuable than the gem, because it’s clearly handmade, and by a master. Let me see if it’s signed anywhere.”

She called up a program that would scan the ring thoroughly for numbers or letters. “No,” she said, and then cocked her head. She rotated the image, then magnified it.

“This is curious. There are letters laser-inscribed in the gem, and that’s not unusual—most gems are coded that way. But *this* is a type of code I’ve never seen.” She frowned, and her long fingers reached for her keyboard. “Let me check—”

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s not necessary.”

I only recognized the number sequence because I was a pilot. The numbers had nothing to do with the gem. They weren’t a code, they were a set of *coordinates*.

For a Probability. And given how badly Shawn wanted it back, it was almost certainly a *brand-new* Probability.

Feeney researchers must have developed it, very possibly a Probability with one of the Holy Grails of Probability research, like a Probability where electromagnetism never broke into a separate force from gravity, or where atoms heavier than uranium have a greater stability than in the Home Universe, thus allowing atomic power with reduced radioactivity. The Feeneys had discovered this new universe, but they needed an industrial combine with the power of the Storches to exploit it properly. Hence a marriage to seal the bargain. Hence a gem given by one line to the other with the *co-ordinates* secretly graven onto it.



I wasn't foolish enough to think the ring held the only copy of the coordinates—the Feeneys wouldn't have been that stupid. But it was the *only copy outside the gene lines' control*. If we gave the coordinates to the Pryors, the Storches would have competition in their new realm before they ever made their investment back.

No wonder something as huge and powerful as the Chrysalis had been sent after us.

I asked the jeweler for an estimate of the ring's worth—"so I know how much insurance to buy"—and then I took the ring and walked out of the shop with billions on my finger. The store's oxygenated atmosphere boiled in my blood.

The ring was the best insurance in the world, I thought. Shawn didn't dare kill us until he got his wedding present back.

That night, Tonio and Katarina had their first fight. She complained about the time he was spending talking to Adora. He pointed out that he was stuck here in the apartment and had nothing else to do. It degenerated from there.

I went to my room and played the aurora, loudly this time, and tried to decide what needed to happen next. It might be a good idea to get Tonio closer to Adora, just in case he needed a fast transfer from one girlfriend to another.

I went to Denys and suggested that we all go up the grapevine to Upside, in case any face-to-face meetings became necessary. He understood my point at once.

And so we all moved off the planet, spending a day and a half in the first-class compartment of a car roaring up the grapevine. Katarina spent the time adhered to Tonio, who looked uncomfortable. Denys kept to a cubicle where he worked, except for his occasional parades through the lounge, where he was all ostentatious about paying no attention to his wife.

The atmosphere on the car was sullen and ominous and filled with electricity, like the air before a thunderstorm. Even the other passengers felt it.

To dispel the lowering atmosphere, I played my aurora, until some pompous rich bastard told me to stop that damned noise or he'd call an attendant. "I'm with Miss Katarina Pryor," I told him. "Take it up with her."

He turned pale. I played on for a while, but the mood, such as it was, had been completely spoiled. I went to my cabin and lay on my bed and tried to sleep.

I needed to get away from Tonio and Katarina and Denys. I needed to get away from this freakish Probability where my blood sizzled all the time and my skin burned with fever. I needed to get *away*.

“I’d like to move onto *Olympe*,” I told Katarina. She was curled around the spot on a lounge sofa where Tonio had just been sitting. He had gone to the bar for a cup of coffee, but you could still see his impression on the cushions.

Her cold eyes drifted over me. “Why?”

“I’ll be out of your way. And it’s where I live.” When she didn’t answer, I added, “Look, I can’t leave the dock without your permission. I’m not *going* anywhere.”

She turned away, dismissing me. “I’ll tell the guards to let you pass,” she said.

“There are *guards*?”

The only answer was an exasperated set to her lips, as if she didn’t consider the question worthy of answer.

So it was that I showed the guards my ID and moved back onto *Olympe*. The air was stale, the corridors silent. I stepped into the stateroom and told the lights to go on and the first thing I saw was the painting of the naked woman, staring at me. She reminded me too much of some people I’d grown to know, so I put the painting in storage.

I went to the pilot’s station, where I’d talked to Eldridge, and checked the ship’s systems, which were normal. I wondered what would happen if I powered up the engines, and decided not to find out.

For a few days, I indulged myself in the fantasy that I was going to escape. I filled the larder with food and drink, enough for eight months of flight to whatever Probability struck my fancy. I tuned every system on the ship except the drive. I made plans about where I’d like to travel next.

I thought about putting the ring back in the safe, but I figured that the safe was no real obstacle to people like Denys or Shawn, so I kept the ring in the special pocket in my trousers. Maybe Denys or Shawn was less likely to rip off my pants than rip off the door to the safe.

I went to some of the places I’d enjoyed when I was living Topside the first time. All the bars and restaurants that had seemed so bright and inviting when I was just off a five-month voyage now seemed garish and third-rate. Guards followed me and tried to be inconspicuous. Without a friend, I didn’t seem to be having any fun.

It really was time to leave.

I brought a bottle home to the *Olympe* and drank while I worked out a plan.

I'd sell the ring's coordinates to Denys in exchange for our safety and a lot of money. Then I'd sell the ring itself back to Shawn for the same thing. I'd split the money with Tonio, and then I'd run for it while the running was good.

I looked at the plan again the next morning, when I was sober, and it still seemed good. I was trying to work out my best approach to Denys when Tonio came aboard. He was a reminder of everything I was trying to escape and his presence annoyed me, but he was exasperated and didn't notice.

"Katarina is more onerous than ever before," he said. He flapped his big hands. "I am watched every moment, yiss. She says she is protecting me but I know it's all because she doesn't want me to speak to Adora. Yet out of every port I see the Chrysalis floating in the sky, with Adora so near."

"You've got to keep Katarina's trust," I said.

"*Olympe* is the only place where I'm free," Tonio said. "Katarina doesn't mind if I come here. And that's why you've got to help me get Adora on board."

"Adora?" I said. "Here?"

"There's no place else."

"But the ship's being watched. So is the Chrysalis. If Adora comes here, they'll see her."

Tonio smiled. "The Pryors and the Storches do not confront each other all the time. Even if they're playing chicken with each other's cargo ships, both the Chrysalis and Socorro possess resources the other finds useful. There are ships coming from the Chrysalis, to purchase certain commodities and sell others and perform transactions of that nature. Adora will come in one of these ships, and when the business is being transacted by her minions she will fly here to me in a vacuum suit, and enter through our very airlock, bypassing those inconvenient guards upon the door."

I was appalled. Tonio smiled. "Adora assures me that it will be perfectly safe."

*For whom?* I wondered.

"I don't want to be on board when this happens," I said.

\* \* \* \*

When Tonio entertained Adora on my ship, I spent the time shopping for stuff I never bought, and when I got bored with that, I found a bar and huffed some gas. I

didn't return to *Olympe* until Tonio sent me a prearranged little beep on my adjutant.

*Olympe's* lounge still smelled faintly of Adora's flowery perfume. Tonio was splayed on the couch. Energy filled his skinny body. His blue eyes were aglow.

"Such a passion it was!" he said. "Such zealosity! Such a twining of bodies and souls!"

"Glad to know she doesn't want to kill you anymore," I said.

He waved a hand. "All in the past." He heaved a sigh, and looked around the lounge, the old furniture, Aram's brass-and-mahogany trim. "I am glad to bring happiness here," he said, "to counter those memories of sorrow and tragedy."

I looked at him. "What memories are those?"

"The afternoon I spent here with beautiful little Maud. The day before she gave herself that overdose."

I stared at Tonio. Drugs whirled in my head as insects crawled along my nerves.

"You're telling me that—"

He looked away and brushed a cushion with the back of his knuckles. "She was so sweet, yiss. So giving."

I had been off the ship that day, I remembered, making final preparations for departure. Aram was saying goodbye to some of his friends and picking up a new shipment of drugs from the Maheu office. That must have been the time when Maud Rain had finally succumbed to the magic that was Tonio.

And then, in remorse, she'd decided to grow closer to Aram. By becoming a user, like him.

And now she lived in a little white room in the country, her mind as white and blank as the walls that surrounded her.

I stood over Tonio. I felt sick. "Remember you're spending tonight with Katarina," I said.

The glow in his eyes faded. "I know," he said. "It is not that I am not fond of her, but the circumstances—"

"I don't want to hear about the circumstances," I said. "Right now I need to be alone so I can think."

Tonio was on his feet at once. “I know I have made an imposition upon you,” he said. “I hope you understand my gratitude.”

“I understand,” I said. “But I need to be by myself.”

“Whatsoever thou desirest, my captain.” Tonio rose and loped away.

I went to the captain’s station and sat on the goatskin chair and decided that I had better get my escape plan under way. I called Denys’s office and asked for an appointment. His secretary told me to come early the next day.

Tonio had been in prison, I thought. In prison, you learn how to handle people. You learn how to tell them what they want and how to please them.

I wondered if Tonio had been playing me all along. Telling me what I wanted in exchange for a place to stay and a tour of the multiverse and its attractions.

I had many hours before my appointment, but alcohol helped.

\* \* \* \*

This reality’s blazing oxygen had burned the hangover out of my blood by the time I stepped into Denys’s office. The geometries of the room were even more curved than his place Downside, and there were even more windows. Outside the office, the structures of Upside glittered, and beyond them was the ominous octahedron of the Chrysalis, glowing on the horizon of Socorro.

There were two chairs in the room this time, but neither of them were for me. Both were on the far side of Denys’s desk. One held Denys, and the other the black-skinned, broad-shouldered form of Shawn Feeney.

Denys raised his brows. “Surprised, Captain Crossbie? Surely you don’t imagine that you and Tonio are the only people who employ back-channel communications?”

He was enjoying himself far too much. Cuckolds, as I’ve stated elsewhere, are rarely models of deportment.

“I’d asked for a private meeting,” I said, without hope.

“Shawn and I have decided,” Denys said, “that it’s time for you and your friend to leave this reality. We know that your ship is provisioned for a long journey, and we intend that you take it.”

“How do I know,” I said, “that there isn’t a bomb hidden somewhere in my

ship's pantry?"

The two looked at each other and smirked. Denys answered.

"Because if you and Tonio disappear, or die mysteriously, that makes *us* the villains," he said. "Whereas if you simply abandon this Probability, leaving the two ladies behind..." He couldn't resist a grin.

"Then *you* are the bad guys," Shawn finished in his deep voice.

I considered this. "I suppose that makes sense," I said.

"And in exchange for the free passage," Denys said, "I'll take the ring."

"*You?*" I said, and then looked at Shawn.

"Oh, I'll get it back eventually," Shawn said. "And I'll get the credit for it, too."

"The Storch line," Denys said, "will have at least a couple years to exploit the new Probability before we Pryors arrive in force. But even so, we'll get there years ahead of the rest of the competition. .. and *I'll* get the credit for that."

Shawn smiled at me. "And *you'll* get the blame for selling our secret to our rivals. But by then I'm sure you'll have lots of practice at running."

"I could tell the truth," I said.

"I'm sure you can," Shawn said. He leaned closer to me. "And the very best of luck with that plan, by the way."

"The ring?" Denys reminded.

I thought about it for a moment, and could see no alternative.

"To get the ring," I said, "I have to take my pants off."

Shawn's smile broadened. "We'll watch," he said, "and enjoy your embar-rassment."

Tonio was in *Olympe* by the time I returned. Delight danced in his blue eyes.

"I have received a missive from Adora!" he said. "We are to flee together, she and I—and you, of course, my compeer. She has bribed someone in Socorro Traffic Control, yiss, to let us leave the station without alerting the Pryors. We then fly to the coordinates she has provided, where she will join us. From this point on

we exist in our own Probability of bliss and complete happiness!”

I let Tonio dance around the ship while I went to the captain’s station and began the start-up sequence. Socorro Traffic Control let us go without a murmur. I maneuvered clear of the station and engaged the drive.

As we raced to the coordinates the message had provided, there was no pursuit. No ships came out of some alternate Probability to collide with us. No lasers lanced out of the Chrysalis to incinerate the ship. No bomb blew us to fragments.

As we neared the rendezvous point, Tonio grew anxious. “Where is my darling?” he demanded. “Where is Adora?” His hands turned to fists. “I hope that something has not gone amiss with the plan.”

“The plan is working fine,” I said, “and Adora isn’t coming.”

I told him about my meeting with Denys and Shawn, and what I had been ordered to do. Tonio raged and shouted. He demanded I turn *Olympe* around and take him back to his beloved Adora at once.

I refused. I fed coordinates into the Probability drive, and, an instant later, the stars turned to hard little pebbles and we were racing away from Socorro, leaving its quirky electromagnetic structure in our wake.

Tonio and I were on the run. Again. Trapped with one another in Reality, whether we liked it or not.

I had let Tonio play me, just as he had played Adora and Katarina and Maud and the others. Now we were in a place where we had no choice but to play each other.

Tonio was in despair. “Adora and Katarina will think I deserted them!” he said. “Their rage will know no bounds! They may send assassins—fleets—armies! What can I do?”

“Start,” I said, “by sending them flowers.”

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