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PART ONE: BUSINESS-SPECIFIC, HISTORICAL, COGNITIVE

Gazing at the landscape outside the window, Diana sipped her coffee.

Looking at natural green can have a soothing effect on one's psyche. The deep hue of the spreading maples contrasted pleasantly with the pine crowns further away, less bright and tinged with gray. In front of the window, a pale oleander fluttered in the wind. A fresh gust brought in the faint scent of wild roses. Diana inhaled. From where she was sitting she could only see the tiny leaves and thorns. The rest of the bush was below the window. Some of the leaves were withered. Roses do not get along with oleanders.

Tossing back her coffee, Diana ran her thumb along the table's edge. The holographic image disappeared along with the scents. Now the window showed what was really out there: pitch-black outer space studded with bright stars.

She had a good recollection of the stereoscopic model of this part of the galaxy. Some constellations visible from the Solar System were already in place, just slightly distorted. Later today, after the leap, the bright lump to starboard would expand into the Southern Cross. The tiny dot three clicks to the left would be the brightest: the Sun, i.e. the star around which the planet Earth, the purpose of the mission, revolved.

Glancing once again at the image of the Outer Edge of the Galaxy, Diana decided it was time to activate the long-range scanners. Orders had to be issued. As soon as the scanners determined the direction of the leap, everyone would enter their anti-gravitational chambers – a necessary precaution against possible buffeting at the commencement of the leap and more buffeting after it was over.

She had been issuing too many orders lately. One must not alienate one's subordinates. Diana switched the monitor screen to Engineering.

"Theodore."

The chief helmsman was on duty.

"Admiral?"

"Remember to switch on the scanners before entering the open sector."

"Yes, Admiral."

"I'm going to join you shortly. In the meantime, please tell everyone to get ready for the leap."

Theodore looked at her inquiringly from the screen. "Admiral?"

"Yes?"

"Wouldn't you rather give the order yourself?"

"Negative."

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She switched off the monitor. A different screen tinkled almost immediately. Someone was in the hallway outside her cabin.

Richard.

Diana pressed the button. The door opened.

"Anything important?" she asked indifferently.

"We need to talk."

"Not now, Richard. I'm busy."

"You're always busy. We might as well talk now."

Being the one in charge, Diana could just order him out. He would have obeyed instantly. Richard was her official husband, though. Sending him away would have been tactless, or would have seemed so to him, at least.

"Fine. I must ask you to be brief, though," she said. "The leap – I really have no time for personal matters right now."

"Here it is – I don't think seeing your lover when Julia's around is a good idea."

"You mean Iskender?"

"Yes. Your current lover."

"I don't have a current lover, as you put it. I've been seeing Iskender for some time. Our trysts are very infrequent. He came over. Julia was in my cabin. We chatted. All three of us."

"It's common knowledge he's your lover. Our daughter certainly knows it. Girls thrive on gossip."

"Richard, Julia knows about your mistress. In fact, they're friends."

"I'm a man."

"We're all equal."

"Hardly."

A bit too blunt, perhaps, but perfectly true.

A man can only have one child. Richard had his: their daughter Julia. Diana could have had more children with other men. Back when this was still possible, though, she couldn't imagine being unfaithful to her husband, and now it was too late.

Taking his hand, she said, "I, too, only have one child. I had my chances, and I threw them all away. I loved you too much."

He bent down, bringing his face close to hers. She kissed him on the cheek – a manifestation of tenderness invoked by the memory of their auspicious relationship. Richard's eyes softened, but only for a moment. In men, paternal feelings are more potent than any other

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kind. He straightened abruptly, saying in a rigid, almost formal voice, "Our daughter is going to be eighteen two months from now."

"We were both eighteen when we met," Diana said, wishing to prolong the moment.

"Yes. We got lucky," he said coldly. "Our honeymoon coincided with my active period. We were a perfect genetic match. Unfortunately, this doesn't happen too often."

"You keep telling Julia that."

"Of course. Theoretically, she knows that the most important thing is to select the right partner. In reality, the majority of young people fall in love spontaneously. It's the Romeo and Juliet Syndrome, a hurricane of passion that sweeps away all theories."

"She isn't in love with anyone, is she?"

"Not at the moment. I wouldn't answer for tomorrow, though. She's constantly flirting with everyone, including your lover."

"What do you want, Richard?"

"Unimpaired grandchildren, for one thing. Grandchildren whose good health is guaranteed by every test Julia and her potential partner can take."

"Yes," she said patiently. "What do you want from me?"

"You should at least pretend to be concerned. In front of Julia, I mean. Exercise your maternal influence."

"Paternal influence isn't good enough anymore?"

"You spoil her rotten, but that's not the point. What kind of example do you think you're setting for your child with your free love and all the rest of it?"

"Iskender is long past his active period, and Julia knows it."

"Only in theory. In practice, it all boils down to your not being able to resist sexual urges, however nominal they may be. No one's asking you to become a prude overnight. Just try making it less obvious."

"Making what less obvious?"

"Your very public affair with Iskender has no foundation other than lust. Our daughter is certainly not blind."

"She's not judgmental. She's intelligent and perfectly capable of drawing the right conclusion. We brought her up that way. She ..."

"We? Please. I brought her up. You were always too busy."

Theodore the helmsman announced on the loudspeaker: "Attention all crew. The long-range scanners are on. Return to your cabins and prepare the chambers."

"That's an order," Diana said, relieved, without looking at Richard.

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"You're still here, though," he pointed out.

"I'm going." She got up.

Shaking his head, he left. Diana entered the bathroom. It is always a good idea to urinate just before the leap. The entire crew was similarly engaged.

She ran down the hallway, turning corners without missing a step. At Engineering's door she slowed down. Everyone was in his or her seat when she entered.

Theodore announced in a formal voice: "Admiral, the direction of the tack is twelve degrees, two minutes, and sixteen seconds. We could put it off until a more comfortable opportunity presents itself."

"Distance?" Diana demanded.

"As planned. Two hundred and forty, five hundred and eighty six thousandths."

"We're on," Diana switched on the main communication circuit. "Attention everyone. This is your Admiral speaking. Enter the chambers and check for decompression."

The eight in Engineering entered their chambers. Diana entered hers. Switching on the display, she saw that the other hundred and seventy nine had followed the order. She turned to the controls. A green light flashed.

"Activating the condenser," Diana announced curtly, pulling the space condenser lever and moving it to one side, securing it in active position.

Like a sailboat bucking into the wind, a space liner makes spatial leaps in short tacks, selecting with long-range scanners matter-free segments of space. With a sailboat, each tack is a few dozen knots. Space liners measure theirs in light years. The smaller the degree of the data's accuracy, the shorter the tack. Firmly opposed to the idea of taking unnecessary risks, Diana preferred shorter tacks.

The speed of a sailboat depends mostly on the wind. The velocity of spacecraft during a null-transference leap depends on nothing at all. Strictly speaking, it does not exist. The liner simply disappears from one point in space while simultaneously re-appearing in another. What does a space traveler feel when this happens? A flash of darkness. Literally: a flash. The darkness is absolute. A moment later, it takes on a brown tint. One is likely to experience a feeling similar to regaining one's consciousness. First, a patch of visibility emerges in the brown fog, right in front of one's eyes. Gradually, the patch spreads. Peripheral vision slowly restores itself. One begins to rationalize the surroundings. Nausea and dizziness are common. After two or three minutes, all negative side effects vanish.

Saying, "All clear," Diana got out of the chamber.

They were now traveling through a different point of the galaxy's spiral. Theodore and his two subordinates verified their maps against what was outside the liner. On the main screen, as expected, Diana saw the Southern Cross, Alpha Centauri, and the snaking Eridanus. She pressed a key. Rigel, the first and brightest star of Eridanus,

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appeared on the screen. All of the major stars were at or close to their position as seen from the Solar System. The next leap was definitely going to put them in their proper places.

The star called the Sun was now the brightest.

The liner was moving at the same Newtonian velocity as before the leap. Nine hundred kilometers per hour – the speed of a medium-sized cargo plane. Theoretically, the ship should be motionless relative of the nearby cosmic bodies at the end of the leap, and the engines should have to be turned on in order to regain speed, but it never happened that way. Invariably, spacecraft continued traveling after leaps. Why? Only atomic matter can participate in a leap; momentum cannot. For decades, scientists had been trying to solve this riddle. It annoyed Diana. Pretty much anything that could not be explained by modern science annoyed her.

Theodore and his assistants sat in their chairs on her right, Apollo and Iskender, the gravitologists, on her left. Iskender was Diana's lover – a secret everyone was privy to. Gravitologists might have their own theories about momentum before and after leaps. They might even have reasons for keeping quiet about it. Diana promised herself she would try to get the truth out of Iskender the next time they were alone.

As always after a leap, nearly all members of the crew who were not on duty gathered in the Mess Hall, sharing impressions. Some had experienced dizziness, others had been nauseous; still others had not been affected at all. Now, everyone was fine and in high spirits. Astarte the biologist, a very pretty woman, claimed she had hallucinated briefly right after the leap, seeing a winter landscape and a group of people running through the deep snow. The people's clothes were the kind that had been in vogue towards the end of the Twenty-Fourth Century.

"That must have been beautiful," Julia remarked from her chair. "Twenty-Fourth Century – the height of the Third Renaissance."

"It was frightening," Astarte said calmly. "They seemed horrified. Some had blood all over their faces and clothes."

"Sounds like associative thinking," Wotan, a botanist who had studied psychology once, said, approaching.

Stopping behind her daughter's chair, Diana passed her arms around Julia's shoulders. The latter threw her head back to look at her. "Mom, what do you say I put on a Twenty-Fourth Century costume?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," Diana disagreed. "Repulsive clothing designs were that epoch's trademark."

"That's just the idea, though! Imagine everybody intentionally wearing clothes that don't look good on them. Don't you think that's fascinating?"

"It's foolish."

"Mom, do you think you're smarter than an entire epoch?"

"Of course."

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"Well, I suppose you're right," Julia said, sounding indifferent. "They didn't make you an Admiral for nothing."

Hephaestus, a twenty-year-old historian with an extraordinary memory, turned to Astarte. "Those people you saw, covered in blood. Were they Originals?"

"Yes."

Wotan immediately put in, "Why do you have to assume they were Originals? They might have been Clones dressed after a twenty-fourth century fashion."

"I'm not sure how I knew it," Astarte said, looking earnestly at Wotan. "The vision lasted about a minute. I was certain all along they were Originals."

A number of young geneticists approached. Their supervisor, Jason, said, "Hallucinating is a lot like dreaming. All strangers in our dreams are Originals."

Others started to come over.

Diana was wary of these discussions. Naturally, it was the hottest topic on the liner now. Moreover, it had everything to do with the purpose of their mission. Still, the three-hundred-year-old terminology, long forgotten, and now suddenly resurrected here, on board her liner, jarred her. Younger people had started using those terms first. The fad had spread quickly.

Hephaestus smiled, looking at Astarte.

"It's a psychological quirk," he said. "We visualize Originals the way they were when our ancestors saw them last."

Now Diana spotted Cleo, Julia's older girlfriend, approaching the group slowly, sipping orange juice from a crystal glass.

Julia said dreamily, "I wonder what they wear these days."

"For all we know they might be running around naked," Cleo observed casually. Turning to Julia and changing the subject abruptly, she said, "Bear in mind, it's a good idea to get some experience before selecting a husband. If I were you, I'd take a lover or two."

"I'm considering a few candidates," Julia said, smiling.

Jason asked playfully, "Oh? Am I on the list?"

Wotan rejoined, also playfully, "There's no list. There's just one person. I think I know him."

Cleo asked perfunctorily, "Julia, is that true?"

Julia inclined her head. "Unfortunately, he's already spoken for," she said. "I doubt his mistress would give him up without a fight."

"Don't you think love is worth fighting for?" Hephaestus exclaimed, in earnest.

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Diana knew they were talking about her and Iskender, even though no one had so much as looked at her yet. Evidently, it was more difficult to keep one's daughter under control than an entire space mission. Julia, aged seventeen, seemed to have some clout here. It was time for Diana to step in.

She said, "Rivalry leads to violence. In a sense, it is violence. Love and violence are mutually exclusive."

Astarte disagreed calmly, "Just imagine, two men fighting over you. I'd be flattered."

Everyone turned to her. The way she was sitting – her back straight, her hands on the armrests of her seat – she resembled a sphinx. Something about her face was reminiscent of Middle Kingdom statues.

Cleo pontificated, "Every game has its rules. If you encourage men to fight over you, you'll have to give yourself to the winner. Suppose you didn't like him? Suppose you liked the loser better?"

Astarte raised her Egyptian eyebrows. "Then I'd choose the loser. Getting into a fight with a superior opponent would be sufficient proof of his feelings for me."

This, in fact, was almost true in Astarte's case. Four years previously, two active young men had gotten into a fistfight over her. To their disappointment, Astarte chose a third man who was firmly opposed to fighting of any sort. The tests confirmed their compatibility. Now her husband and three-year-old son were waiting for her back on Noah. She had been selected for the mission as an expert biologist. The demand for her services was considerable. The mission needed young people in an era in which the younger generation did not seem to be eager to attain any kind of expertise.

Looking Astarte in the face, Hephaestus asked, "Are you saying that to win your favor, one would have to brawl for it? Back to the Middle Ages, eh?"

"Don't mind her," Julia remarked. "She just enjoys watching men fight."

Hephaestus turned to Julia. "What about you? Would it flatter you if men perceived you as a prize rather than a human being?"

Julia shrugged. "I'm not Astarte. If she wants to come across as bloodthirsty, that's her business, even though it doesn't mean anything. Her own marriage shows you that a woman can fall in love for no particular reason."

"Right. And that just goes to show that love is still the most important thing in marriage," Hephaestus said with emphasis.

"It is, when it's mutual," Julia agreed. "When a man and a woman love each other like ... like Romeo and Juliet." She looked up at Diana. "Mom, that's what you had in mind when you named me Julia, right?"

Diana replied in a formal voice, "Most parents choose pleasant-sounding names for their children. It has nothing to do with the original bearer's disposition."

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Richard was right after all. Hephaestus, the twenty-year-old historian, was entering his active period. His tests had not produced satisfactory results, severely limiting his matrimonial chances – that was the reason he now insisted that love should be the main criterion in choosing one's partner. Some of the young people, though, both male and female, seemed to be sympathetic of the idea, including Julia.

Jason the geneticist came to Diana's rescue, saying, "Certain romantic notions, no matter how wonderful they may sound, are no longer applicable in today's life. Partners are selected based on genetic testing, and there's nothing we can do about it."

"That's immoral," Hephaestus said quietly yet very distinctly.

It was courageous of him – to express a dissenting opinion in the presence of the expedition's commander.

Promptly, Diana said, sounding formal, "Hephaestus is right."

Everyone looked at her, astonished. The Admiral was publicly agreeing with a dissenting view.

She went on, "It is immoral. Nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary."

Everyone fell silent. Diana's argument was irrefutable.

The meeting of the Expedition's Council that afternoon was brief. The communications chief, Abraham, announced that all attempts to establish contact with the planet Earth had been futile. The Originals either had not received, or simply ignored, the signals sent to them by the UF transmitter. (The terms Originals and Clones that grated so on Diana's ear seemed to be part of the Expedition's everyday vocabulary now).

Diana addressed Hamlet, the historian, "At the time of the ... Clones' departure from Earth, the ... Originals ... frowned on null-transference experiments. Why? We all know the official theory; I would like to hear your personal opinion, though."

Hamlet hesitated, no doubt reflecting upon one of his new hypotheses. Diana resented this habit of his – after all, an historian's main function is to remember facts and chronology, not come up with outlandish concepts. Finally, he said, "Back in those days, I don't think the Originals themselves knew why they had a problem with null-transference. Some sources suggest that even before our ancestors left the planet, the Earth Council passed a new law effectively banning all genetic research and all null-transference projects."

Abraham added, "It would only be logical to assume that UF transmitters were also banned."

"That's possible," Hamlet agreed, adding, "The Originals' foibles are numerous and well-documented."

"Which is a sure sign of their degeneration," Wotan put in – he had once specialized in the Originals' psychology.

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Hamlet went on, "Our approach is trial-and-error, probing various possibilities at random. The Originals, on the other hand, only start testing when their theoretical data is flawless."

Theodore the helmsman said, "Our method is certainly superior. We wouldn't have been able to leave Earth at all without it, let alone discover and colonize our own planet. To be fair, the Originals themselves are not completely averse to trial-and-error. We wouldn't be here today if they were. The history of genetic engineering is all trial-and-error. On my part ..."

Diana interrupted him, "Theodore, we digress. Hamlet, please continue."

"Yes, Admiral. I mentioned the quirkiness of the Originals' psychology. Wotan, with all due respect, your degeneration theory is flawed. The Originals have been superstitious since prehistoric times – it is one of their inherent traits. Eventually their beliefs took a more organized form, known as religion, which later on evolved into a social institution. Even though religion started gradually to eliminate itself, so to speak, back in the Nineteenth Century, elements of superstition are still present in the Originals' DNA. All Earthlings have a tendency to worship anything and everything they cannot explore – the Ineffable, if you will."

"Thank you, Hamlet," Diana said and turned to Adonis the senior geneticist sitting next to her, "Do we have the actual genetic code for superstition?"

"We don't know whether such code exists. Remember, the Originals would not allow Clones to be present at any of their genetic engineering sites. That's what caused the initial conflict to begin with."

"Astarte," Diana turned to the sphinx-like Middle Kingdom beauty (who was also an expert biologist), "Do you have anything to contribute?"

In a very calm voice that was in keeping with her serene appearance, Astarte said, "I don't think there's any point in trying to establish a theoretical basis for this."

"Explain."

"It's like null-transference. In practice, we leap. We can't explain it theoretically. We just do it. In our case, practice is ahead of theory. The Originals, as far as I can judge from the available data, make every effort to avoid this kind of situation."

"That's not true," Theodore objected. "In null-transference, theory came first."

"There's no such thing as a Unified Field Theory," Astarte remarked in her indolent voice.

Diana realized that, in a way, Astarte was right. She was not going to ask her to elaborate, though. She turned to Hamlet instead. "How do you explain the planet's silence?"

He paused before replying, "The Originals may have decided to shut down their UF laboratories until the day they gained more theoretical

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knowledge. Stands to reason, considering their propensity for psychological quirks.”

Diana summarized, “In any case, our only option is to wait until the next leap. It should get us close enough to establish conventional radio contact.”

“It’s equally possible, “ Astarte suggested calmly, “that their genetic experiments have been put on hold as well. That would render this entire mission pointless.”

“We have a powerful group of geneticists here,” Adonis disagreed. “Should the Originals refuse to cooperate, we could set up our own laboratory on their planet. We’ve made remarkable progress over the past three centuries. All we need in order to continue our experiments is a number of live specimens.”

“Suppose they turn us down?” Hamlet asked.

Diana announced firmly, “We’d have to use force. One way or another, we’ll have the specimens.”

Astarte asked, indolently, “That wouldn’t be ethical, would it?”

“We have every moral right to ask for anything within reason,” Diana said evenly. “The Originals created us using genetic engineering. Clearly it is their responsibility to cooperate where our welfare is concerned.”

Back in her cabin, Diana turned off all internal circuits and stood naked in front of the electronic mirror, inspecting her body. Her rotund breasts were the same as they had been when she was a virgin. Back when she was breastfeeding Julia, her breasts grew heavy and started to sag. She had had them restored to their ... original ... shape ... which would not have been possible without genetic help. Could it really be true that the Originals had renounced all genetic correction? How foolish. Her thighs, alas, could not have been fully rejuvenated. Also, folds formed on her stomach now unless she kept her back perfectly straight – a sure sign of aging. Thirty-eight. Geneticists were working around the clock on slowing down, and perhaps stopping altogether, the aging process. Eventually people would be able to live forever – in theory, anyway. As for the present, well, in all likelihood, she would still have to get old and die at an age when women normally died. Men aged a great deal quicker, and began falling apart rapidly after reaching forty years of age.

No one had any idea what had been happening on Earth all this time – three hundred years. For all the Clones knew, the Originals might be ahead of them in genetics. Should that be the case, many things were going to change, soon.

Diana poked the mirror’s frame with her finger, causing it to rotate her reflection ninety degrees horizontally. Now she could see her profile and also the golden canopy over the sofa on which Iskender reclined languorously. His tunic was a venomous shade of green – he favored bright-colored clothes. Diana followed his eyes, noting with some satisfaction that her buttocks, with their impeccably smooth skin, looked perfectly round in profile. Iskender and she locked eyes in the mirror.

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He said, "Pretty women are immune to aging. Their charm attains a degree of sophistication as they get older, that's all."

Raising himself on an elbow, he started to pull off the tunic, letting her know he now felt sufficiently aroused. Going over to the sofa, Diana lowered herself onto it next to his knee.

"You didn't feel nauseous earlier? Right after the leap?" she asked.

"Nothing beyond the ordinary. You?"

"Just a little. Why were we still moving afterwards? Momentum can't be transferred."

"That's just the way things are. You leap, and then you just keep moving."

"That's it? That's your expert opinion?"

"Hmm. Do you know anything about Buddhism?"

"Not really."

When he was aroused, Iskender's voice attained a purring quality. "A long, long time ago, Buddhists developed a notion that time, instead of just flowing, consisted of moments, or winks, if you will. You can picture it as a string of points in space. A leap, according to this theory, would be a Buddhist moment, or wink."

"Yes? Go on," Diana prompted.

There was less purring now. "We got into outer space and leaped, relocating instantly to a different part of the Galaxy. According to the Buddhist theory, it took place during one of those in-between moments, a no-time interval between winks. You can visualize it as time suddenly getting tired of winking."

He paused. He was going to change the subject.

Diana pressed the point, "In the next wink, though, and in the wink after that, we maintained the same Newtonian velocity as before the leap. Why?"

"We became a copy. Each time we leap, we turn into a copy of ourselves."

"What do you mean, a copy?"

No more purring. Rigid notes crept into his voice. "The liner, with everything and everybody inside, was copied, molecule by molecule, from the liner that existed before the leap."

Diana asked, "If we're just a copy, though ... then ... what's become of the liner that existed earlier?"

"It vanished. It's gone. It's no longer part of this Universe. It erased itself, the way a portion of electronic data disappears when we press the delete button."

Diana was looking him in the eye. Both were very serious now.

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"It's only a hypothesis, and it's my own," Iskender said quickly. "There is no factual data to support it."

For some time they remained silent. To alleviate the tension, Diana said lightly, "We've gone through a lot of leaps already – we've become copies of ourselves many times over. There's nothing new in it for us. After all, we're copies to begin with, created in the image and after the likeness of the Originals. I don't know about you, but on my part, my copy is perfectly happy with your copy," she added, placing her hand on his knee.

Even though Iskender's libido had diminished considerably over the past year, as man and lover he was very convenient. He was thirty-six. In a few years, he would start aging with catastrophic rapidity. All men do. His aspirations, yearnings, desires – all was now focused on his fifteen-year-old son Leander, on board Diana's liner as a trainee pilot. Had Julia really been in love with the aging Iskender, Diana would not have minded giving him up to her before it was too late. Richard's fears were ungrounded. A girl should acquire some sexual experience before marriage – it helps her make the right choice later.

The following morning, Diana decided to inspect the entire liner personally. Taking the elevator to the upper level where the hangars with the two local-range spaceships were located, she found the area deserted. There was not even a guard on duty. In the military section, the entire corps was at their Mess Hall, watching a film – about the Originals, of course. The Hall's front wall was now a holographic screen showing a three-hundred-year old documentary.

Walking over to Daphnis, the chief of the defense corps, Diana asked, "You don't think the Originals have changed much in all these years?"

"Of course they have. We do need something to go by, though."

"Why would they change?" Aurora, the rigid-beam specialist, disagreed. "People haven't changed since prehistoric times. Only garments change."

"An epoch's ideology is best expressed through its fashions," Daphnis announced dryly, as if making a report.

Diana turned her eyes on the holographic image. A homely-looking middle-aged man in elastic overalls stood in the foreground, holding a tiny transparent antenna ball in his hand. He was teasing the cameraman. Tossing the ball up deftly, he kept distorting the image. Looking Diana in the face, he said, smiling, "Yeah, yeah, keep rolling it, you moron. Fucking Australia, man, it's one big tourist trap." Though bowlegged (slightly) and slovenly (greasy spots on his overalls), the man seemed inexplicably attractive. For some time, Diana continued looking him – the fellow who had lived three hundred years ago. Suddenly he hurled the transparent ball – right in her face. She had an urge to duck. The ball passed next to her ear and vanished. The man said, "Oops. Sorry. Didn't mean to hit you, you fucking imbecile."

After a quick inspection of the laboratories and the greenhouse, Diana went down to the main Mess Hall where a number of people were watching yet another movie featuring Originals – an action flick based on a Twenty-First Century classic. Clones did not exist back

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then. Diana proceeded to the Music Salon – yet another movie about the Originals was on. This one was pornographic. Only two young girls, sitting on cushions, were paying any attention to it. The rest of the people crowded around the grand piano. Caesar, an elderly zoologist, was playing a simplified version of the first part of the Brandenburg Concerto. Diana drew closer. Caesar's technique was very poor. Distinguishing between separate voices was beyond him. At one point, Diana wanted to correct him. Isolde, a corpulent forty-year-old woman, selected for the mission as an experienced surgeon, beat her to it.

"You missed that line altogether," she said, pointing it out in the score.

Two active young men entered and, after glancing at the screen once, left hastily. Actives made it a point to avoid sexual excitement, saving their semen for conception time. Plus, the new generation seemed to have no flare for art or music, which was hardly commendable. Music written by such competent composers as Bach or Mozart helps develop one's auditory faculties.

As they continued to get closer to the Solar System, Diana could sense that the entire crew was getting increasingly nervous. Everyone had high expectations. She was certain that every active man on board was hoping he could conceive a child with an Original woman. Personal interests overshadowed the main objective of the expedition.

At noon, Diana rested in her cabin, sitting in front of the holographic window that depicted her favorite landscape, as was her habit. The wind abated, as it usually did around this time. Layers of warm air permeated by the scent of forest grass and last year's malt rose up from the ground. The aroma recalled to Diana's mind her strolls in reservation parks where, as a child, she would sneak in with her friends, keeping under the line of vision of the guard's cameras. Picking and eating wild berries was a lot of fun, much more fun than getting them at home in factory packaging. In old forests, blackberries and blueberries grew in random spots – one had to search for them amid the grass and shrubbery. In reservations, berries were delivered from greenhouses along with layers of soil, and re-planted in symmetrical rows. By now those reservations themselves must have become old forests. Diana mind wandered further back to the time when meteorologists detected a dangerous decline of ozone levels in the upper layers of the atmosphere. The entire population of the planet was sealed hermetically in their homes while powerful oxygen generators created great thunderclouds covering up all of the planet's sky. The storm that followed continued for six weeks, raging all over the planet. Today's young people only knew about it from their history teachers.

A side screen tinkled. Julia. She came in and sat on the armrest of her mother's chair, glancing at the window.

"Mom, aren't you tired of that maple coppice?"

"I'm used to it. You should change your view, though. You'll catch cold one of these days."

The holographic window in Julia's cabin featured Mont Blanc in the middle of a snowstorm. Every now and then, a gust of wind tossed a cloud of very fine snow dust into the cabin.

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"I've already changed it."

"Indeed. Anything spectacular?"

"Noah. It's actually an exact copy of our living room view."

"Do you miss home?"

"Hardly. I really want to see our ancestors' planet."

"There's no telling what exactly we're going to see there."

"That only makes it more interesting."

"Suppose there's no longer any life on Earth?"

"That's impossible."

"We should be prepared for anything. We haven't been getting any response – there must be a reason. One of the possibilities is that the planet is no longer inhabited."

"Mom, stop saying nasty things."

"All right, I'll stop. Julia?"

"Yes?"

"Your father says you've been flirting with Iskender. Do you find him attractive?"

"Mom, you just promised you wouldn't say nasty things."

"Do you ever think of your future?"

"Depends. Mom, listen, when we meet the Originals, who's going to do the introductions?"

"I am."

"Oh. Yes, of course. You're the Admiral. They'll probably send their chief representative, too. What I mean is who's going to step forward after all the formalities are taken care of?"

"I don't know yet. A great deal depends on what we find there. It's been three hundred years. The information probe we sent to the Solar System never returned. There might not be any contact. There might not be a planet Earth anymore."

"Mom!"

"I just don't want you to expect too much."

A side screen tinkled. Theodore, the chief helmsman, said, "Admiral, the long-range scanners are online."

"Line them up along the tack's trajectory," Diana ordered and switched off the monitor.

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She ran her finger along the edge of the table. The afternoon landscape disappeared along with the grassy scents. Once again she was looking at pitch-black space studded with bright stars, the brightest of them all shining more or less in the middle – the Sun.

“The final leap?” Julia asked.

“That’s right,” Diana confirmed.

“At last.”

The crew’s nervousness was affecting their concentration. Diana started to verify the tack’s coordinates herself. Julia kept silent, absorbed in her own thoughts – about the Contact, no doubt.

Turning on the coordinates program, Diana said, “Julia, it’s almost time to prepare one’s chamber.”

“I’ll be all right, Mom. You’re still here.” Picking up a study aid from Diana’s desk, she asked, “What are you doing, practicing your French?”

Three hundred years ago, French had been very popular among the Originals, even though New English continued to be the standard for international communications. Diana replied, “I was just making sure I know enough of it. In any event, should the Contact in fact take place, they’ll speak the three-hundred-year-old version of New English to us, whether it’s in fashion or not.”

The helmsman’s voice came on in the loudspeakers, “Attention all crew. Return to your cabins and prepare the chambers.”

Diana rose. “Julia, you should go. Our living room window and all. Now.”

“Please, Mom, I’d like to stay. I want to be in Engineering with you.”

“No.”

“How about right after the leap?”

“No need. You’ll see it all on the monitor in your cabin. If we receive any transmissions, we’ll broadcast them on the public circuit. Go.”

Exiting her chamber after the leap, Diana realized instantly that conventional radio contact had been established. The monitors in Engineering were flashing, multi-colored stripes dancing on them. A great deal of undifferentiated noise was coming from the loudspeakers. On the main screen, amid the familiar constellations, a tiny disc shined blindingly. The Sun.

Abraham, the communications chief, fumbled with the controls, casting brief glances at various screens from time to time. Theodore at his control panel was calculating the liner’s Newtonian velocity and exchanging brief remarks with Apollo, the gravitologist. Diana got into her seat in front of the central control panel. Even without tuning her monitor she knew: the Originals did not use UF energy for communication. Their conventional radio technology, on the other hand, had improved considerably. The quality of the incoming signal indicated as much.

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Switching off their UF transmitters at the same time, the eight in Engineering sent out their own radio signals. The detector screen showed what they were broadcasting – a wide-angle view of the entire room. Diana reached over and changed the angle so as not to be seen on the screen.

Suddenly the image of several people standing against a dark-green background appeared on every monitor. It flickered briefly and disappeared, replaced by dancing multi-colored stripes. Gradually the stripes straightened out, brightened momentarily, and vanished. The previous image returned and stayed.

Four men and one woman, all of them in elastic dark-blue overalls, looked at the clones from the screen.

Abraham's electromagnetic detectors indicated that the liner was in radio contact with a spaceship moving in its own orbit around the Sun, just outside Pluto's orbit. Diana issued an order for plotting a new course that would get the liner closer to the spaceship.

Theodore announced in a formal voice, "Attention all crew. A tight turn to starboard is about to begin. Check all unsecured objects."

After twisting some knobs, he pulled a miniature lever on his control panel. Diana found herself pressed against the left-hand armrest. Newtonian speeds make velocity changes feel very real, as opposed to light-year leaps. She recalled the unpleasant conversation she had had with Iskender: each leap, according to him, transformed you into a copy of yourself. Navigators, thanks to the specifics of their craft, are no less fond of outlandish theories than gravitologists.

The Originals on the monitor screen exchanged glances. Clearly they had heard Theodore's order and realized that the liner was now on its way to rendezvous with their ship. They looked at the Clones silently. The Clones looked back. The distance between the two vessels was just over four hundred thousand kilometers. It therefore took radio signals just under two seconds to reach the other party.

Every known code of ethics suggested that the guests should introduce themselves first.

Diana adjusted the view. When she saw her face on the broadcasting screen again, she said, "Greetings. We are representatives of the planet Noah." Composing herself, she continued calmly, "It is the fourth planet of a star known on Earth as the Fourth Star in the constellation of Cepheids. I am the commander of this space liner. My official rank is Admiral. We are happy to meet you, people of Earth, representatives of the planet from which our ancestors departed three centuries ago."

She paused, waiting for the radio waves to convey her words to the Earthlings' ship. A second and a half. Another second and a half for their initial reaction to get here. The Earthlings' expressions suggested they had heard and understood. The four men moved laterally, leaving the woman in the middle of the screen – as Diana was in the middle of hers.

The woman said, "Uh ... Hello. We are, in fact, representatives of the planet Earth. My name is Elizabeth. I'm the captain of this sentinel spaceship. Normally, we stay in orbit around the Sun. We've just

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changed our course. We're going to meet you halfway, if that's all right with you."

A man's muffled voice came on, "Ask her if they use UF energy."

"Shut up," the woman said quietly and quickly, glancing sideways. She continued, looking at Diana, "I'm Elizabeth. I already said that. Oops. What's your name, Admiral?"

"I'm Diana, Captain. Would you rather we addressed each other more formally?"

"No. First-name basis is a lot more comfortable. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Everyone on my liner calls me Diana except when they come to me with official business."

"Everybody here calls me Beth, except when they're on duty, in which case I'm Captain, ma'am."

Odd. A woman captaining a sentinel spaceship – this did not at all agree with Diana's notions of the Originals' mentality. She said, "We can make it formal or friendly. It's up to you, Beth."

Beth smiled. "This is so ... unique! Of course we should make it friendly. Diana, I mean ... You guys are just as gorgeous as your ancestors. All those movies ... I'm sorry."

You guys.

Diana said, "It's all right. Thank you. Your own species, on the other hand, seems to have changed – for the better. Your men seem to have grown more handsome, and your women are certainly prettier than they used to be. You understand, my impression is based only on what I can see on my monitor screen. Still, the difference is striking. Unless, of course, sentinel craft crews are selected based on their good looks."

A three-second pause.

It was not a compliment. In fact, these Originals did appear to be more pleasant-looking than the average Original in a three-hundred-year-old film. Captain Beth must be middle-aged, two or three years Diana's junior, perhaps. Her features were fine yet soft. The men Diana had seen so far looked handsome enough. The pliant suits accentuated their slenderness.

"I don't remember there being any special selection criteria," Beth replied. "Well, naturally, if you're real ugly, you won't pass the test ... Uh ... In fact, we've, been able to improve our... uh... overall something or other ... somewhat ... over the past... uh... ten generations or so."

She smiled.

A three-second pause. Diana decided the time for the first pertinent question had come. "Was this achieved through genetic engineering?"

A three-second pause.

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"No." Beth paused before elaborating, "It's more like natural selection. People with any kind of pathological disorders are discouraged from having more than one child. The embryo has to pass a series of tests." Without pausing, she added, sounding very serious, "Diana, there's just one thing I have to stipulate right now. Uh ... All right, here it is. You may not use any UF energy devices within the boundaries of the Solar System."

"I accept," Diana replied promptly.

The reason was obvious. UF generators could destabilize the gravitational equilibrium of the System.

"Beth," she continued. "Perhaps you'd like to know why we're here."

A three-second pause.

"Of course. I mean, I realize you haven't traveled all those light years just to do a little sightseeing."

"Beth, I'm an official representative of the planet Noah. Are you authorized to represent your planet as well?"

A three-second pause.

"I see what you mean. Yes. I could even do some light negotiating, if necessary."

"We need your help."

A three-second pause.

"We're ready to do anything we can."

Exactly as expected. An Original had no moral right to say anything else.

"Beth, I'd like to speak with you privately, someplace with no monitoring or recording devices. We could use one of our shuttles unless you have a better suggestion."

A three-second pause.

"Oh. Uh ... I'm sorry. No can do. Our captains are instructed never to leave their ships in outer space. We have a shuttle too, but we can only use it in an emergency. Never mind. We could chat here on my spaceship – in my cabin, if that's all right with you. I'll turn everything off. I can do that. Can you leave your spaceship, or is it against regulations?"

"I'm an Admiral, Beth. I act as I see fit. Would your airlock be able to accommodate one of our shuttles?"

A three-second pause.

"I guess so. You'd have to give us some measurements, though."

Moses, a young navigator just past his active period, accompanied Diana on board the shuttle. He had a wife and a one-year-old daughter back on Noah.

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Reclining in her seat, Diana browsed through the history of the Clones' civilization, using her monitor. One last time, just in case.

When a group of scientists cloned the first human – who died less than a year later – France became the first country to ban genetic engineering outright. Italy and Iran, the most religious states at the time, followed. Soon the ban spread to all other countries.

With the exception of Australia.

The sprawling complex of genetic science centers flourished in the north of the continent.

Twenty Second Century – Clone colony – three generations. Population: just under one hundred.

The city of Borrooloola becomes the second largest in Australia due to the influx of tourists. The entire planet is suddenly eager to see a species very much like themselves created in a laboratory.

Twenty Third Century – the colony expands – Clones protest the passing of a new law that effectively confines them to their colony – Clones successfully assimilate the Originals' science and technology – Clones experiment with null-transference banned in all other countries.

An armed revolt: the Clones protest the Originals' freezing their experiments with space travel by means of null-transference leaps.

Twenty-Fourth Century – Clone population reaching three thousand – attaining state status – the United Nations recognizes Clone territories as a sovereign state in Northern Australia – social incompatibility of the two species – scientific proof of the latter – Clones discover a planet in the constellation of Cepheids suitable for colonization – naming it Noah after the Biblical character – making plans for relocating to it en masse – Originals cooperate with the Clones in constructing gigantic spaceships referred to as Arcs – the Clones depart.

Twenty-Fifth Century – the Clones alter the mass and atmosphere of the planet Noah – colonization successful – life forms they have brought along from Earth spread everywhere.

Twenty Sixth Century – colonization of the nearby outer space begins in order to obtain additional energy sources – plasma storms on the Forth Star of the Cepheids, which the Clones call their Sun – global panic – the storms cease. (Later, it was determined that the storms occur every one hundred and fifty years and cannot seriously affect biological life on Noah).

Past few decades – further experiments with UF energy – developments in genetic engineering.

And there it was. The tragedy.

To this day, no one had any idea what had caused it. The consequences had been horrible so far. Today, the problem still remained unresolved.

Unresolved.

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The right-side bank of monitors lit up. Theodore's face appeared on one of the screens.

"Admiral, please let us know what communication devices are available inside and around the docking area when you get there."

Diana kept silent. From the opposite screen, Captain Beth replied, "The cameras are positioned along the perimeter. We'll be able to monitor the whole thing."

Theodore to Moses, "Moses, coordinate the respective velocities."

Diana to Moses, "You look tired. It's been eight hours. Get some rest. I'll handle this."

Rising from his seat, Moses stretched.

Diana reminded him, "You might as well sleep in the chamber. I'll have to go full throttle when we get there."

Moses left for his cabin.

Diana turned back to the monitors. "Beth, I need some figures here."

"I'm listening."

"Our velocities in relativity, in case there are any differences."

Beth started reading off the figures. Diana verified them against her own. There were no differences. For three hundred years, the radio technologies of the two species had been developing along similar paths. No one was ahead. This well nigh proved their intellectual parity.

Diana switched on the brakes, causing the shuttle to tilt abruptly forward. This was going to go on for a while. She had above average endurance and was not concerned. She opened the channel to the cabin. Following her suggestion, Moses had gotten into his acceleration chamber. She could get into hers now. She decided she would wait for maximum strain.

Theodore asked from the screen, "Admiral, why aren't you in your chamber?"

"I'm fine. I can take it."

A few hours later, getting out of her chamber, Diana contacted the cabin. "Moses, take over. I'm going to get some rest." Once Moses was back in his seat, Diana got up and headed for her cabin, reeling a little from fatigue.

The hailing signal from one of the monitors awakened her. The channel to the liner was open. Iskender, the mission's chief gravitologist, was looking at her from the monitor screen. The fact that he was also her lover was immaterial right now.

"Admiral, we've found some discrepancies in the gravity calculations."

"Just give me the number."

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"Twenty eight hundredths, in their favor."

"Should have been expected. The Originals are known for their negligence."

She should not have said that. The channel to the Earth spaceship was open as well.

Now was not the time to stand on ceremony, though.

"It's no big deal," she added. "I'll just think I've gained a pound."

In the helmsman's cabin, Moses calculated the respective velocities.

"Admiral, can we decrease our speed further?"

Quickly estimating the differences in relativity, Diana replied, "Yes we can."

"Are we going to use the chambers again?"

"How did you fare at extra-G training?"

"The highest grade."

"Same here. We'll be fine."

Both grabbed the armrests of their seats. The tilt increased. Diana studied the image of the Earth spaceship on the screen. No signs of UF energy devices anywhere. An oval dome towered over the hull. An aquiline beak pointed forward from the nose. Everything was clearly designed for traveling in outer space, as well as in an atmosphere, at conventional speed only. The Originals seemed to be very much in earnest about renouncing UF.

Moses asked, "Admiral, should I accompany you to the airlock?"

Like all younger Clones, he was eager to meet the Originals in person, believing blindly in their so far purely theoretical omnipotence. No doubt he was hoping she would take him along.

Diana replied dryly, "No. Your place is here. Did you read the instructions?"

"Yes, Admiral."

Watching Moses maneuver the shuttle towards the spaceship, Diana went over her plan for preliminary negotiations. The spaceship's captain was a woman – an important point that had to be clarified first and foremost.

...It began back on Earth, four centuries ago, during the epoch in which analyzers were replacing traditional computers. Seating a secretary (a twenty-year-old girl) in front of a brand-new machine, one of the analyzer's inventors gave her a jocular assignment. She had to find the easiest way out of the social, moral, economic, scientific, technological and artistic crisis humanity was desperately trying to overcome in those days. The diligent young woman spent over a week uploading data on sociology, biology, economy, history, and psychology. Once she was done, it took the analyzer less than a second to come up with a solution, which was to relieve from their

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duties ninety percent of the women occupying key positions in any and all fields.

The world was shocked.

Each individual analyzer owner wished to know the exact logical steps the inventor's machine had taken in arriving at the result. Around the globe, analyzers were put to work. All of the replies were instant, succinct, and ruthlessly precise.

There is a difference between the generative and sustentative types of temperament, or, as the analyzers invariably put it, disposition. Successful career advancement requires sustentative, rather than creative, qualities. That is why women have an easier time achieving their career goals. On the other hand, upon attaining a desired position, a woman's executive instinct does not stop. According to the analyzers, the disproportionate number of women holding administrative positions where a creative outlook is one of the objective requirements had led the world to a permanent, although not quite irreversible, crisis.

The analyzers' verdict caused an avalanche of protests. Some people were outraged. On the other hand, the many men who applauded the results were joined by an unexpectedly large number of women. New analyzer-controlled tests for generative and sustentative qualities were invented. Exceptions were found among both genders caused mostly by pathological hormone patterns. After a while, it got silly. Questions were raised along the lines of, Could Mozart or Beethoven have been women? What about Shakespeare and Tolstoy? Pythagoras? Einstein? Napoleon? Jefferson? Churchill? Henry Ford? The degree of silliness did not matter – analyzers continued to provide instant answers, most of them, although not all, in the negative.

...The docking proceeded as smoothly as Diana expected. Beyond the airtight chamber, there was another one in which Diana, shedding her suit, had to pass through a half-dozen examination stalls, following the polite instructions coming from a woman watching her from the monitor screens – she introduced herself as Mary, the ship's physician. Fairly pretty, she wore the same outfit Beth and her men had paraded in on the communication screens – comfortable close-fitting overalls.

Theodore the helmsman appeared on one of the screens.

"How do you feel, Admiral?"

"I'm fine. Thank you, Theodore. Have you been watching me all this time?"

"Yes. We've been able to monitor your progress throughout, as Captain Beth promised."

"They only have one monitor screen in each chamber, which is highly impractical."

Immediately the screen split into three sections. Mary's image was in the left-hand section; Moses appeared in the middle; and Theodore, in the right-hand section.

Mary said, "My mistake, Admiral. Is this better?"

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"Yes, Mary, thank you."

In the disinfecting chamber, the monitor screen was already split into three sections when Diana entered.

"I'd like to take a shower after this," Diana said.

Mary replied from the screen, "There's a shower stall in the next chamber."

The shower featured a monitor screen as well. Removing her soft leather boots, Diana asked, "Is everyone on the ship going to see me naked?"

Mary replied promptly, "No, of course not. I've turned off all of the local channels except this one. I could block your men's view as well. Should I?"

"No need," Theodore said from the screen. "Members of our crew see one another naked all the time. My instructions are to keep the Admiral in sight at all times while she's on board your spaceship."

"No need to feel awkward, Admiral," Moses put in. "You have a wonderful body."

Ignoring Moses' remark whose playful tone was characteristic of all young men, Diana removed her tunic and loin wrap, placed them on the plastic bench beside her electronic detector, and stepped into the shower. The water felt exactly like Noah water. After blow-drying her hair, Diana dressed, picked up the detector, and entered the hull illuminated by a number of soft, warm lights. Beth was waiting for her here, accompanied by two men. Originals. Smiling, she introduced them. One of them was her assistant, the other a member of the ship's administration. Being first of her contemporaries to contact live Originals, Diana felt solemn and excited.

They did not seem to be all that different. Their features appeared to be a bit irregular, perhaps, and their bodies' proportions a notch imperfect. Also, there was something intangibly, inexplicably attractive about them; something Diana sensed but could not quite pinpoint. This annoyed her.

They took an elevator up to a narrow corridor with walls whose dark green changed gradually to pale blue as one's eye went up to the vaulted ceiling. The design reflected, perhaps, the Originals' sense of aesthetics. If so, their tastes could not be very different from those of the Clones.

Beth and Diana entered Beth's cabin unaccompanied, as promised.

The living room was designed and furnished so as to give one an impression of intimacy. Soft chairs – flowers in a crystal vase – a holographic image depicting an Earth landscape beyond the artificial window with tulle curtains – an oval mirror on one of the walls. Such living rooms were common in the Eighteenth and Twenty Second Centuries. Amiably, as befits a good hostess, Beth indicated a chair. They seated themselves opposite each other. Almost automatically, Diana glanced at her detector. As expected, no monitoring devices were online here, at least for now.

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Following Diana's eyes, Beth gave a small smile. "Tête-à-tête, the way you asked."

"Have you been in touch with your superiors?"

"About your arrival? Sure. The Earth Council received our transmission six hours after we established contact with your liner. That's how long it takes for the signal to reach the planet. Six hours after that, I received my orders."

"I'm not going to ask you what they were."

"It's no secret. They expect me to report the outcome of this little chat we're having, that's all."

"I see. We have one hundred and seventy-nine people on our spaceship – our research team. How many people do you have?"

"Sixty-two. Pretty standard for a sentinel ship."

"And your mission?"

"Patrolling the area just outside Pluto's orbit. It's mostly to detect cosmic bodies approaching the System, although we do some research as well."

"Are you in charge of the entire crew?"

"Yes."

"How, may I ask?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're a woman."

"Yes. And?"

Diana paused before pointing out, "On Earth, sustentative and generative powers are gender-oriented. At least they used to be when our ancestors lived there. One would assume, therefore, that only men would be allowed to command Earth spaceships."

Beth smiled again. "Most of a captain's duties are, in fact, of executive nature."

Diana looked at her inquiringly.

Beth elaborated, "Oh. I see what you mean. Well. A ship captain has to follow her instructions to the letter. A man in charge of a ship would be constantly tempted to deviate from the original plan. Then there's the question of correct assessment. When dealing with concrete situations, folks with generative dispositions, instead of examining every detail to see what it might yield, tend to give it a quick glance, imagine the rest, and act upon their imaginings rather than the actual thing."

This sounds practical enough, Diana thought.

Beth said, "It's odd that you should ask that. You're an Admiral."

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This was an important point. Making her voice sound almost formal, Diana said, "Generative and sustentative have always been a source of uncertainty between men and women. They can lead, indeed have led, to gender conflicts. Correct?"

"Yes. A lot of stuff happened in the past," Beth agreed. "I suppose our ancestors always found a way to reconcile the differences."

"You ... " Diana hesitated before forcing the word out, " ... Originals ... had an easier time reconciling those differences. Your psychology is ... different from ours. We ... " she hesitated again, " ... Clones ... favor precision in everything we do." She paused. "Our scientists researched various areas of genetics, looking for the code responsible for temperamental differences. Artificial DNA was created in laboratories. Eventually, the code was found and deciphered. Shortly thereafter, ten volunteers, all of them female, were selected who agreed to have their DNA altered. Subsequent tests demonstrated conclusively that their generative potential reached levels common in men. The same DNA could be passed to their children regardless of their gender. Today, our women have the same generative potential as men, which is why I, a woman, have the rank of admiral and command this mission."

She paused again. Beth's eyes were fixed on hers. Diana thought there must be something mesmerizing about in the Earth captain's gaze, something that impelled one towards frankness. She kept silent.

After a while, Beth said quietly, "That's wonderful, though. Isn't it? For the first time in history, the genders are truly equal."

She smiled. Involuntarily, Diana smiled wanly back.

"That's not everything, Beth." She continued calmly, "Our women give birth to healthy children with generative dispositions, boys and girls. There's just one problem. Our men are no longer ... complete."

Again both women were silent.

Eventually Beth asked, "Your men ... have lost their generative ... disposition?"

"No, it's nothing like that. Their looks haven't changed either. The difference is strictly physiological."

"Explain."

"Their ability to procreate is greatly diminished today."

Diana paused again, assuming that an Original always needed some time to process new information. Contrary to the assumption, Beth asked promptly, "Impotence?"

"No. That's not the point." Again, Diana paused. "They produce inferior semen that the egg rejects. The period of full-fledged virility only lasts a few days, after which the molecular structure of the sperm changes abruptly, leaving the man infertile. Those few verile days – we call them the masculine activity period. Once it's over, the man's libido remains the same until he's about thirty years of age, whereupon he enters a period of decline. By the time they're forty, our

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men are completely impotent and start to age quickly. Life expectancy among men today is forty years less than among women.”

Stunned, Beth stared at Diana. She continued staring. A few painful moments passed.

Diana asked, “Have there been any developments in that area?”

“What? Oh,” Beth said. “Life expectancy, you mean. No, everything’s the same as it was three hundred years ago.”

“I see. It’s the same on Noah. I mean ... as far as our women are concerned.”

Beth did not seem to have fully grasped what she had just been told. Diana elaborated, making her voice sound calm, “Men reach their so-called active period when they’re about twenty-three or twenty-four. Our analyzers have repeatedly confirmed that that is, in fact, the ideal time for reproduction; the odds of conceiving a healthy baby are the greatest at that point. After only a few days of sexual activity, the semen begins to mutate. As a result, our men have hypertrophied paternal feelings. The effect is more psychological than physiological. An active man regards his bride, not as his life-long companion, someone he’s closest to and most comfortable with, as was customary in the past, but only as the mother of his future child. His only future child. Men are always the ones who verify the results of compatibility tests. They scrupulously determine the patterns of the prospective brides’ individual monthly cycles, the most favorable days for conception, and so forth. Sometimes, a man’s active period passes without his wife conceiving a child. That is always a tragedy. Upon reaching their active period, many young men take two wives instead of just one in order to increase their chances. Thus it becomes possible for one man to have two children, even though it does not occur very frequently. Oftentimes a man’s active period does not coincide with his sexual peak, especially when there have been occurrences of premature amorous excitement in the past. Involuntary ejaculation during the night can be very dangerous. In order to prevent it, young men take special medications whose side effects can be lethal – indeed have been, in some cases. Some men fall desperately in love and begin sexual activity before their peak, renouncing all tests. We call it the Romeo and Juliet Syndrome. I myself was in a relationship of that sort once, with my husband. Fortunately for us, we were compatible. We conceived our daughter when both of us were only nineteen.”

Diana fell silent, expecting a reaction. Beth looked down – processing the information, no doubt. Finally, she looked up again, her expression grave. “How does this affect your demographics?” she asked.

Somewhat taken aback by this Original woman’s unexpected ability to separate the fundamental from the inessential, Diana composed herself, replying in a deliberately calm voice, “The population of Noah is in steady decline. As you know, in order to maintain the status quo, each married couple must have two point five children. We’re facing extinction.”

Beth hesitated. She asked, “Your genetic engineers ... They haven’t tried to restore your women’s genes to the way they were before? I mean, logically speaking, the prevalence of executive temperament is still better than extinction.”

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"There have been experiments of that sort. We have had a number of women whose DNA got restored to its ... original ... state. Unfortunately, all of those women gave birth to inadequate men with an abbreviated reproductive period. "

Beth raised an eyebrow. "What kind of help do you expect to receive from us?" she asked bluntly.

"First of all, your geneticists would have to cooperate with ours. I understand that you ... " Diana wavered. She had to compose herself again. "Originals ... have renounced genetic engineering altogether. However, some documentation must have survived all these years, in an archived form, perhaps. Your last researches, your most recent data, however old it may be – anything that could help us. If only for humanitarian purposes, your scientists could reactivate projects interrupted many years ago, allowing our scientists to join them. We have a group of very capable genetic engineers on board. We have our laboratory." Diana braced herself before uttering yet another very unpleasant thing. She said, "As you know, an average Clone's intellectual powers are the same as those of an Original."

Beth observed suavely, "In some cases, Clones proved to be more astute."

"That's true," Diana agreed calmly. "Still, the Originals differ from the Clones in one very important aspect. Seldom as it may be, your species can produce a special kind of human being ... a genius. Back when our ancestors still lived on Earth, psychologists were busy researching this phenomenon. In the beginning, our scientists viewed brilliance as a property of the generative disposition. Later it was established that individual genius has nothing to do with temperament. Rather, it's a unique trait made possible by a special arrangement of certain brain cells. It is not part of DNA and cannot be inherited."

Beth kept silent. Maybe she had not known any of this. One would not expect the captain of a sentinel ship to be thoroughly educated.

Diana resumed, "There are no geniuses on Noah. Never have been. A Clone genius has never been born. Are there any among your geneticists today?"

Beth hesitated. Her reply sounded uncertain. "I don't know ... I guess I could name a few prominent scientists." She paused again. "I'm not qualified to tell you if they're geniuses or not. No one on board this ship has any experience in genetic science. I could contact Earth and make inquiries, if you like."

"No, please," Diana said quickly. "Beth, do me a favor. Don't tell anyone about this. There's a good time for everything."

"I understand," Beth said seriously. "It's been three hundred years. You'd like to see what we are today before you commit to anything."

They looked at each other silently for a while.

And then, as if confirming Diana's thoughts for her, Beth said, "Yes. We've changed. There's something very important you should know."

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"Yes?"

"We've become religious."

"In what way?" Diana asked quickly.

After giving it some thought, Beth said, "In the traditional sense of the word, I guess."

Diana had expected anything but this.

"How did it happen?"

"Certain events ... Well. Let's see. Back in the Twenty-Fifth Century, after your ancestors' departure, all genetic science was put on hold, along with all UF applications. The ban is still in effect, I'm afraid."

"Who imposed it?" Diana asked.

Beth sighed. She went on, "Your information module arrived from Noah. After decoding the data, our ancestors gathered from it that you were successfully colonizing the planet you'd discovered. They found out that you had created an atmosphere similar to ours, and that you were busy working on the flora and fauna."

"Yes. Our ancestors thought it was their duty to keep their creators informed of the progress. The module never returned, though. There was no reply of any kind, which was interpreted as a sign. Some people did actually suggest that there might be a ban."

"That's pretty astute," Beth observed politely. "The module is still in orbit around Earth. Back when it arrived ..."

"Yes?"

"It was a difficult time for humanity."

"Go ahead."

"Our gravitologists and seismologists had just announced they had discovered hazardous fluctuations in the planet's gravity and mass. The axis had become unstable. Some prominent scientists had an emergency conference in the city of Borrooloola."

"Indeed. Borrooloola?"

"That's right. They decided to return, temporarily, to the Unified Field Theory. Millions of people participated in the project. In the end, they managed to stabilize the poles. The planet's mass got redistributed, resulting in climate changes everywhere."

"What kind of changes?"

"Nothing major, fortunately. If you get to visit the planet, you won't notice anything. Once things got back to normal, another top-secret conference was held at which folks decided never to return to the Unified Field Theory. Immediately after that, they put together a public statement. The first clause stated, in a nutshell, that Man was God's creature; that in some areas Man's knowledge was naturally, and permanently, limited; that God was beyond that limit; and that Man cannot, indeed should not, attempt to penetrate into God's spheres."

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Looking down, Beth fell silent. This was inconvenient – one cannot speak comfortably to an Original without seeing the Original's eyes.

Diana asked, "Beth, do you really believe in God?"

"Of course."

"I would like to meet other members of your crew."

"Sure. I could give you their names and ..."

Diana interrupted, "No, nothing formal, please. Do you have a Mess Hall, or anything of that sort, where people meet when they're off-duty?"

"We have our cafeteria. It's almost lunchtime. There should be a lot of people down there."

"Good. I'd like to look at them."

"I could summon them ..."

"No. I'd like to look at them en masse, regardless of their rank. Needless to say, I'd never do anything around here without getting your approval first ..."

Beth understood. She said, "Oh, sure. Of course. We'll go down there together and sit at my favorite table. We'll pretend you're just an old friend of mine. How's that?"

Diana pointed out, "Some of them have seen me on monitor screens."

Beth laughed. "I know. Don't worry. My entire crew is very tactful. No one's going to goggle at you, and I give you my word they won't come over to our table unless they're invited."

"Thank you, Beth. It's very kind of you."

In the elevator, Diana reminded Beth, "You promised not to mention what we were talking about earlier."

"Yes. I remember."

The cafeteria turned out to be an elongated room lit by soft, warm light fixtures. Each white-clothed table had a miniature porthole next to it. The pale blue ceiling featured concave cells directly over the tables. Diana figured they must be acoustic traps designed to keep sound from spreading – table chatting could be kept private. The burgundy plush chairs were stylized antique. The décor reflected, perhaps, the Earthlings' notions of coziness.

Some of the tables were already occupied.

Originals.

Diana scanned the place briefly, noting the people's various types of attire. Shorts reaching down to one's knees – shorter shorts – tight pants – loose-fitting slacks – tunics – shirts – t-shirts. Looking around,

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she expected to see the automatic food conveyor in some corner. There was nothing of the kind.

Some of the patrons were already eating. Porcelain plates – crystal glasses. Beth led Diana to one of the tables, exchanging nods and smiles with some of her people. Even though, as she had promised earlier, none of the Originals actually goggled at Diana, some could not help glancing at her briefly.

The centuries did not seem to have had much of an effect on the Originals' racial aspect. One could still easily detect Mongoloid, Negroid, and Nordic features in their inexplicably attractive faces.

Strange faces. Strange people.

As soon as Beth and Diana seated themselves, an attractive young woman in a white jacket with short sleeves came over, placing a pitcher filled to the rim with ice water in front of them.

“Good afternoon.”

She looked at Beth expectantly. Pouring a glassful of water for herself, Beth said, “I like to have a sip before my meal.” She looked up at Diana. “Would you prefer something else? Juice?”

Diana was looking at the girl. Could it be true? Did they really have waitresses here? The girl looked back at her amiably.

“Do you have any apple juice?” Diana asked at last.

“Right away, ma’am.”

The girl walked away with a light gait.

“Is she really a waitress?” Diana asked quietly.

A broad smile played on Beth's lips. The earlier tension must have fatigued her, and now she was happy to be at ease again. Good-looking woman, too, Diana noted to herself.

Beth explained lightly, “That's right. We've been using this model for a while. There was once this jolly bunch of scientists who worked around the clock proving to everybody that humans needed humans, not machines, to serve on them when they're eating. It's not as simple as it looks. For instance, each waiter or waitress has to be a good psychologist. They pass a lot of tests before they get the nod. Apart from that, all of them have other responsibilities. Daisy, the one you just saw, is a medical student. She's our nurse.”

Daisy reappeared, placing a pitcher of apple juice in front of Diana.

“The usual, ma'am?” she asked, turning to Beth.

“Yes. Diana, I'm going to have shrimps. What would you like?”

Diana turned her eyes on Daisy. The latter offered, smiling cordially, “Today's specials are Blanquette de Veau, Pochouse, Salade Landaise, and Aligot.”

“I'll try the Blanquette de Veau ... I think,” Diana had never before placed an order with a waitress.

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"Good choice."

Daisy vanished.

Two male waiters had approached two other tables in the meantime – two young men in open white jackets and white shorts – good-looking, too, in a way only Originals can be. While taking orders from the customers, both glanced in Diana's direction now and then.

In the meantime, new customers kept coming in, talking quietly among themselves. Their eyes stopped on Diana involuntarily from time to time. This did not annoy her. There is nothing wrong with a little curiosity. A different waiter – a handsome middle-aged black man – came over to their table.

"Bon appetit, Mesdames les Admirals," he said, giving them a broad smile as he unloaded dishes from the large silver tray onto their table.

Returning his smile, Beth asked, "Thomas, did you have enough time to recuperate from last night's sermon?"

"To be frank, no, Madame. Not really. I'll be as good as new for the next one, though. You have my word on it." Still smiling, he turned to Diana, "Madame? What would you like for desert? We have ice-cream, rice pudding, and all kinds of fruit. And I mean all kinds. Oh, and coffee – we never run out of coffee here. You should try it. It's very good."

"I'll have some," Diana said, returning his luminous smile involuntarily. "Do you have any whipped cream?"

"Tons of it."

"Thomas," Beth said. "Hello?"

"Uh ... Madame?"

"Bring me the all kinds of fruit you just mentioned, with some whipped cream on the side. All right?"

"Right away, Madame."

Thomas left.

Beth explained, "He's our chaplain."

"Your what?" Diana was not sure she heard right.

Beth smiled again, "We have a chapel here. Thomas reads us one sermon every week."

"And he's a waiter, too?"

"Yes. The requirements are basically the same. You have to be personally charming, project good vibes, have a pleasant voice, and above average communication skills. The whole concept revolves around sociability, really."

"Is he versed in theology?" Diana asked.

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"Who? Thomas?"

"Yes."

"And how! On top of it, he has a degree in math. It's funny – that last sermon I just mentioned, it was about the realm of the Ineffable – that's a very trendy topic these days ... Anyway, one of the gravitologists asked, you know, the usual thing, like, whether there was anything ineffable about a curve. Gravitologists are a special breed, they always get you with a tricky one. Well, Thomas is one of those people who never turn down a challenge. He drew a curve on the screen. Just a simple plane curve, the kind that keeps getting closer and closer to the abscissa. The two of them started arguing and scribbling formulas. The gravitologist got very upset. It was a lot of fun. In the end, Thomas proved that there has to be something ineffable even about a straight line, unless it's a segment."

Didn't this have something to do with the ultimate knowledge threshold these Originals dreaded?

Two men Diana remembered seeing on the monitor back on her own vessel entered the cafeteria. Beth motioned for them to approach.

"Vlad, my assistant."

The swarthy man with graying hair inclined his head.

"Glad to meet you, Admiral."

Diana nodded politely.

Now Beth introduced the other man, a thin, russet-haired fellow with frankly Mongoloid features, "Eric, our communications guru, a man who suffers fools gladly."

Eric asked, smiling, "Does the slight difference in gravity bother you at all, ma'am?"

Evidently, it was customary among the Originals to smile at each other. Diana wondered whether this could be a nuisance sometimes. In any event, these two men had so much charm it was easy to smile back at them. Doing so, Diana replied, "It's nothing. The extra pounds only add confidence to one's step. What about yourselves? It's somewhat different from Earth as well, I believe?"

"We've been out here over a month," Eric explained. "We're used to it."

Diana asked, "How long does an average tour of duty last?"

Beth replied, "Three months. Two months from now, another team will relieve us unless Earth says we should stick around a little longer, considering the situation. Eric, why aren't you down in Engineering?"

"Lee can handle it. Of course, if you've made up your mind to be cruel today, Captain, I could go back down there this instant, even though I must tell you ... "

"It's okay, you may stay if you like," Beth winced comically. "Now go away, both of you."

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Both men nodded and headed for an unoccupied table. Most of the tables were occupied by now.

Beth said, "I made them come over on purpose. Remember them?"

"Yes. I saw them on the monitor right after we established contact."

Beth observed casually, "Of course. You guys have powerful memories."

You guys.

A side door opened. Two more waiters in white jackets entered – a young man and a girl. With a single glance Diana assessed the man's appearance. Good-looking – blond – medium height – slender – sunken cheeks characteristic of the transitional period, when a boy is turning into a man. Even though she averted her eyes, the image remained imprinted in her mind. She asked, "Do you have many waiters here?"

"Six. I can never figure out what their schedules are. All of them have other responsibilities. All of them are here now."

"Because of me?"

"Bingo." Beth scanned the room. "The place is packed. Some folks are playing hooky, I see. Can you blame them? Everyone is eager to meet you. People are curious. That's the way God created us."

People. God created us. She meant the Originals. Clones were not God's creatures.

Table manners appeared to have undergone some minor changes over the past three centuries. For instance, none of God's creatures were using their forks anymore to pick up sliced vegetables.

Eating and observing discreetly, Diana cast a glance at the young blond waiter now and then. Once she managed to lock eyes with him. She quickly averted hers. With her side vision, she saw him taking an order from a nearby table. A graceful brunette customer said whimsically, "Fred?"

"Ma'am?"

"What's with this milk glass, my friend? Don't you know the difference between glass and crystal?"

Diana strained to hear Fred's reply.

"Hey, do you still want a ride on my motorbike? Then you'd better stop whining."

Some of the patrons smiled. There could not possibly be a motorcycle on board. Must be a local joke of some sort. Originals' humor. The brunette pulled a serious face – coquetry, Diana realized. The brunette took the young man's hand.

"Fred, just get me a proper glass. Please?"

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Heading for the side door, the young man cast a glance in Diana's direction. They locked eyes again. Diana remembered the monitors on her space liner.

"Beth, are there any cameras in here?"

"Sure. Oh! I see. Yes, they're watching. Your assistant said they would be."

The young waiter re-appeared from the side door, tray in hand. Beth was busy with her shrimps. Diana studied the young man. Even though his white shorts reached down to his knees, one could still see that his legs were slender and his thighs narrow. Placing a new glass in front of the whimsical brunette, he smiled, saying, "Next time, I'll make you lap it up from my palm."

At last, the brunette smiled. "Oh, my. We'd have to be alone for that."

Diana recalled the term Beth had used – sociability.

Spinning around, the young man approached Diana. She averted her eyes again.

"Bon appetit, Mesdames."

He set their desert on the table. Full of primitive prehistoric insolence, his eyes fixed on Diana. He might be older than she had thought. Yes. He was definitely in his twenties.

Probing the desert with her spoon, Beth said, "What happened to the cream yesterday? It was too cloying."

"My apologies. I did all the mixing myself this time. Try it, Captain."

Beth did, saying earnestly, "Much better. Thanks, Fred."

He leaned towards her, bending his very supple back and offering her his cheek. Beth pecked it with her lips. Diana thought that if she praised the desert, she too would get to peck him. She imagined her lips touching the sun-tanned youthful cheekbone. Fred was staring at her again with his insolent light-colored eyes. Diana asked the first thing that crossed her mind, "Fred, where did you get so tan?"

"You'd never believe me if I told you, Admiral. Should I? Okay. Ready?" He paused for effect, winking conspiratorially. "In Alaska. Can you believe it? It's summertime there now. The sun is kind of low, but they compensate by keeping it on almost around the clock. Twenty-three hours a day."

Familiar with the Earth's geography, Diana knew all about the so-called Polar Day, of course, and yet, oddly enough, she felt as though she was hearing something new – she even raised her eyebrows in astonishment.

"Yes," Fred confirmed, raising his eyebrows as well, as though he, too, was astonished by what he was telling her. "Polar Day. That's what those clowns call it."

"What clowns?"

"The Alaskans."

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"Oh."

A mustached fellow with very hairy legs sitting at the opposite window called out, trying to engage Fred's attention. Fred went over to him, swinging his tray as he did. Half-rising from his chair, the man said something quietly. Fred, bending down, replied quietly almost in the man's ear. Both laughed.

Sociability.

Diana turned to Beth, "This Fred, does he have other duties as well?"

"Of course. He's got a degree in chemistry. On top of that, he serves as our pharmacist and nutritionist. The kitchen here is his territory."

"That's a lot of skills for someone so young."

"He's twenty-two."

Out of the corner of her eye, Diana was watching Fred. He stopped at a table occupied by an eye-arresting blonde and two young men, immediately joining in their conversation. A moment later patted the blonde's hair.

Sociability.

He started to coil a blond tress around his finger. Smiling, the woman slapped his wrist lightly.

Even though lunchtime was over, no one seemed to be leaving yet. Some lit up cigarettes. Fred disappeared through the side door.

Diana asked, "Do you have married couples here?"

"Yes. Aren't there any on your liner?"

"Yes, of course. Some of us have our grown children on board, like myself, for instance. It's a long mission."

"I realize this is silly ..." Beth smiled sheepishly. "I should have asked you eons ago. How long was your ... uh ... journey?"

"Four months."

For a while both were silent. The Originals around them continued talking, the sound of their conversation muffled by the acoustic traps overhead. Four months meant that the Clones had been traveling in gigantic spatial leaps, covering millions of miles at a time – UF energy. The Originals never used it. The ultimate threshold – God's own territory – no trespassing. Diana remembered her little chat with Iskender. Copies. We are copies of ourselves. Suddenly she realized she did not feel very bad about it. All these Originals around her – their inexplicable natural charm must be affecting her. Involuntarily, she cast a glance towards the side door.

Following her eyes, Beth asked, "Don't you have a cafeteria on your ship?"

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"We have a few. They're nothing like this place, though. Less cozy. We don't have waiters either. We use our Mess Hall for leisure, or the music salon."

"Really? You have a music salon? Wow. That must be wonderful. We don't have room here for anything like that. This is the only place where you can relax."

"I see a lot of flirting going on."

"Of course. What would you expect? We have many young people here. Don't your people flirt?"

"They do, albeit less openly. One has to be cautious – under the circumstances. I don't remember seeing so much frivolous behavior in my life. Look at that red-haired woman."

Beth did, and said, "That would be Ruth, our communications specialist."

Diana continued, "The way she's talking to that short black man ..."

"That's Ed. Our engines man."

"There's so much infatuation in their eyes. Are they newlyweds, or just in love?"

"Hmm ... They're not married, that's for sure. You're right, though, something's going on there. You're very observant."

"I realize," Diana said after some pondering, "there must be a great deal of things you and I perceive differently. Tell me, as an Original, would you say that Ruth is an attractive woman? Do men find her appealing?"

"I believe so," Beth replied seriously, looking at Ruth. She elaborated, "She's a redhead, you know. Redheads are special."

"I see. Now, Beth, as a woman, what would you say about the ... engines man?"

"Ed? He's pretty handsome."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"What about that one over there, with the hirsute legs?" Diana indicated the mustached man with her eyes. "Is he good-looking?"

"Michael, our astrophysicist," Beth said matter-of-factly. "Lots of sex appeal. Women like that. He's not my type, though."

Finally collecting enough nerve to pose the important question, Diana said, "What about that youngster ... the waiter. Fred, isn't it? As a woman, what is your opinion of him?"

Beth said, sounding casual, "He's my husband."

Diana managed to control her features. She said, in order to say something, "Do you have children?"

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"We have a daughter. She's eighteen months. She's staying with my sister's family in Norway. I have a son from my previous marriage. Nicholas. We call him Nick."

"How old is he?"

"Sixteen. He and Fred are buddies. Nick's the one who introduced us."

"What about your first husband?"

"He married someone else ten years ago. They have an eight-year-old son."

"Does your former husband visit you? How does he get along with Nick?"

"They don't see each other at all, I'm afraid. You'd think his younger son would be better off."

"He's not?"

"Nope. My ex doesn't take any interest in him either. This must sound odd to you, considering what you've told me so far about Noah."

"Odd? Not really. The father assumes all responsibility for the child's upbringing, that's all."

"That's only natural, under the circumstances."

"On the contrary," Diana said morosely. "It's monstrous. Nothing about our life is natural. That's why we're here."

After a brief silence, Beth changed the subject, moving on to business matters.

"Diana, you mentioned some kind of negotiations earlier."

"Yes."

"You have some kind of offer, or offers, to make? Something concrete?"

"Yes."

They locked eyes. Both understood what the other meant. Offers. Something concrete. Maybe not just offers, or not mere offers. Demands. Not just any old demands, either. Demands – supported by threats, perhaps. The Clones had mastered UF energy. The Originals had not. Not yet. As the commander of a mighty space liner, Diana had unlimited powers. The Clones had only one goal, one objective, one purpose – to save their planet. Any means were good. Diana fingered the tiny monitor attached to the edge of the table.

"Can I contact my people through this?"

"Yes."

Leaning over helpfully, Beth pressed some keys on the panel. The screen lit up. Diana saw Abraham, the Communications Director.

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"Where's Theodore?"

"I sent him away, Admiral," Abraham said. "He hasn't had any sleep in twenty-four hours. Admiral, we had no contact with you during your discussion with the Originals' captain."

"That was upon my own request," Diana reminded him. "I'm down at their cafeteria now. I need more time. We're going to resume our ... negotiations ... shortly. When we do, we'll have to turn off the channel again. The relative velocity still holds, I expect."

"Yes, Admiral."

Out of a corner of her eye, Diana noticed that the miniature screens at other tables were lighting up one after another. Perfectly tactless. The people in the cafeteria could not help themselves, though. She couldn't blame them. She said, looking at the screen, "Captain Beth has notified Earth. The Earth Council knows we're negotiating."

"We got that, Admiral. The rest of the transmission faded too quickly, though. We could neither record nor decipher it."

"I'm aware of that. They're using narrow-band transmitters and alternate frequencies. It's the only way, really, considering the distance. We'll have to wait some hours before we get anything from Earth ... " Diana glanced at Beth, " ... before we get their Council's reaction to our presence in their System."

Noticing Fred, who was just entering, Diana switched off the screen. Fred's white uniform was gone – he was now off duty. Shorts – loose-fitting turtleneck – long sleeves. He came over, grabbing a free chair and saying, "Pardon me, Management, I'm not in the way, I hope."

"This is totally tactless, Fred," Beth said, smiling condescendingly. "The Admiral is our guest. You should have asked her permission first."

Fred looked at Diana – not brazenly, but rather inquiringly this time. She smiled despite herself.

"You're not in the way, Fred. We've decided we'll exchange secrets later."

Fred straddled the chair.

Beth asked, "Folks already talking, I take it?"

"Are you kidding?" Fred shrugged. "Liners from Noah don't arrive here every day." He turned back to Diana. "Everyone's dying to know what y'all are doing here and stuff. There's a couple of theories."

"Indeed?" Diana raised an eyebrow. "What kind of theories?"

"Like, some folks figure you'd want to land in Australia, in the area that used to belong to you people."

Diana glanced at Beth before turning her eyes back on Fred and smiling once again. "So, what do they think our purpose here is?"

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"Well, like I said, you'll probably want to make that area your outpost on our planet."

With some effort, Diana stopped smiling. She said coldly, "We do not have any imperialist aspirations. We're quite satisfied with our own planet."

"Oh. So, what's your problem, then?"

He was much too snoopy to let the matter go.

Beth interrupted him, "Fred, not only is this tactless ... Putting such questions to the Admiral is way beyond the scope of your responsibilities here."

"Oh. I'm sorry," he said in a placating tone. He turned to Diana again. "Listen, do you people have, like, polar areas on your planet where it gets, like, real cold?"

She replied, "Yes, we do. None of them are populated, though. The tropics are uninhabited as well. There's enough room for everyone in the temperate climate zones."

"That's pretty convenient, I guess. Hey, you got any movies about your planet over on your liner?"

"Yes. I'll have someone transmit a few over to your ship if you like. Also, if it's not too much trouble, I would like to watch some films about your planet."

"I figured you would. Awesome! I could show you a few! Great idea," Fred said excitedly.

Diana turned to Beth. "There's plenty of time. It'll take the signal twelve hours to reach Earth and just as long to get back. I'd like to have a tour of your ship, if you don't mind. I'll only see the parts that you think are all right for me to see."

Fred butted in excitedly, "Hey, Beth! Can I be the Admiral's guide? Please, please, please?"

Exactly what Diana had counted on.

"Of course," Beth smiled. Turning to Diana, she added, "I don't think there are any technical novelties around here that could surprise you, but I'm sure you'll be interested in certain ... customs and standards?"

"Sure, Beth," Diana said. "You mentioned a chapel. May I?"

"Certainly," Beth got up.

Fred sprang to his feet.

Beth said, "Fred is as good a guide as any. I should be getting back to the bridge. By the way, Fred, while you're at it, just show the Admiral around. Choose whatever sections of the ship you think might interest her. And some movies, maybe. If any of the crew follow you around, just shoo them away once in a while, okay, Fred? We wouldn't want them to annoy the Admiral."

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Fred led the way. Diana followed, looking at his straight pointy shoulders. There was a kind of youthful spring in his step. The shorts revealed his tan legs.

The passage was narrow. Stopping at a miniature monitor imbedded in a wall, Fred dialed a code.

"I'm hailing Thomas. He's our priest. Real smart," he explained.

The chapel turned out to be a narrow room designed, in fact, exactly like an ancient chapel on Earth – with Doric pilasters, narrow windows, and stained glass images. At the far wall stood an altar with a wooden crucifix. A lamp hung from the vaulted ceiling. Upon entering, Fred, with what seemed to be an automatic gesture, poked his fingers in the marble chalice protruding from the wall and crossed himself. Following his movements with her eyes, Diana had an urge to do the same. She ran her hand along the wall. Could this be real marble?

As if reading her thoughts, Fred confirmed, speaking under his breath, "That's right. The marble is real."

Lowering her voice involuntarily, Diana said, "Isn't it too heavy for a spaceship?"

"The panels are pretty thin," Fred explained. "Less than a millimeter. They glued them on over the plastic."

Even though they were speaking in hushed tones, the resonance was considerable. Only marble can produce that kind of echo.

Diana thought it felt strange – being alone with Fred in what the Originals considered a holy place. She asked, "Any cameras in here?"

"Are you kidding? Of course not." He added, very much in earnest, "Prayer is a very intimate thing, you know."

"Did you get married in a church?"

Fred threw her a slanting glance, realizing Beth had mentioned their marital status to Diana. He said, "Of course. Don't you people get married?"

"Yes. Biological compatibility needs to be officially registered."

Heading towards the altar, he reached over, lowering a pull-down screen on the left-hand wall. "This is what Thomas uses when he wants to illustrate something graphically."

Quite unexpected, Thomas' solemn voice came from the entrance, "Oh yes – graphically, my child."

Diana turned around. Standing in the doorway, Thomas gave her a broad smile. "Welcome to our astral abode!" The echo was tremendous. He came over. "Like the place so far? Our temporary dwellings?"

"I do," Diana replied seriously. She added, indicating Fred, "Beth gave me a guide."

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"Good choice," Thomas said, also seriously. "Spontaneity is more useful than wisdom sometimes."

Diana noticed Fred pucker his lips skeptically. The remark about his spontaneity did not go down well. On an impulse, she took Thomas' side.

"I know," she said. "It's in your Scripture." She quoted from memory, "Thou has hid these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes."

Thomas asked, "Does the fact that we're religious surprise you?"

"Beth explained it to me earlier. You had some sort of global catastrophe in the previous century. Right after you dealt with it, your scientists discovered God."

Thomas shook his head. "No one discovered Him, my dear lady. He has always been with us, even though certain periods in history are marked – or, should we say, marred – by many people distancing themselves from Him."

"I see a crucifix here," Diana said. "Is there a Mosque as well?"

Thomas chuckled. "I see that Beth did not have enough time to explain certain important points of our recent history to you. I could fill in some of the blanks, if you wish."

"Please do."

He smiled luminously again.

"You see, back in the last century, when a number of religious denominations started to experienced a renaissance, an obscure Japanese historian by the name of Okinawa did a research on what he called the faith phenomenon. With a reasonably powerful analyzer at his disposal, he somehow managed to prove that the religious instinct is inherent in every person. Unless it is suppressed, the instinct can be realized in any of the available houses of warship. However, God is one, you see. Mr. Okinawa drew up a comparative table of all religious denominations. After processing it, his analyzer showed that if a person studied all of the available religions, giving an equal amount of attention to each, he would invariably arrive at Christianity as the ultimate answer to his spiritual needs. Moreover, the analyzer suggested that people who weren't Christians yet might lack something in the way of intellectual development."

Thomas sounded as if he were joking – almost. Diana had no idea how she was supposed to react.

"That must have shocked the entire non-Christian world," she offered.

Thomas smiled again. "No kidding. Being a confirmed Buddhist, Okinawa was the first one to be shocked. Once he published his research, everybody rushed to their analyzers to verify the results. Some folks came up with astoundingly tricky questions. They devised ingenious traps, they tried to confuse their analyzers with intricate philosophical concepts. The results never varied. In a gist, the analyzers maintained there must be gaps in non-Christians' education."

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"How did the non-Christians take it?"

"Rather well, in fact, and that's the amazing part. The Muslims, after some pondering, announced that Mohammed was a prophet who followed Jesus' teachings, while the Koran was a natural sequel to the New Testament. The Buddhists eventually decided to promote Okinawa to the rank of prophet. The Jews took it in stride – they had no problem with it at all. In fact, some of their leaders announced that, since according to all rabbinical laws Jesus himself was a Jew, as were all of the apostles and first Christians, and since the Christian principles were prophesied and even outlined in some detail by the Essenes long before Jesus, humanity owed its universal faith to the Jews. To this day some Jewish theologians maintain that all proper priests should be Jewish by birth."

Diana thought about this. "The Jews are ... chauvinists, then?" she asked reluctantly.

"Everyone's a chauvinist nowadays." Thomas flashed his smile again. "There's only one faith, but folks are still impelled towards grouping. Everyone's suddenly aware of his ethnic belonging, and what not. Ask Fred."

Involuntarily, Diana looked at Fred. He looked glum for some reason.

Thomas continued cheerfully, "His Dad's a Pole, you see. Fred's been burning midnight oil studying Polish. He spent all of his last vacation in Northern Poland. His parents seem to have named him after Frederic Chopin, which goes to his head now and then. As for myself – and, as a priest, I should know better, you'd think – I must have traversed North Africa a thousand times since the day my bio tests showed that I should seek my roots among the Mali tribes."

There was something else, something more important, on Diana's mind. She asked, "What is the primary basis for this ... faith of yours?"

"It's logic, my dear," Thomas said, moving towards the screen. "Oh, yes, it's all logical. For an average person, logic is the shortest path to the truth, you see." With an object resembling a conductor's baton he drew a circle on the screen. "The limits of our knowledge. Sometime in the past, there was less knowledge." He drew a smaller circle inside the larger one. "And before that, still less." An even smaller circle followed. "At one point, humanity was under the impression that knowledge was limitless – one could continue learning forever. Back in the Nineteenth Century, people imagined that chemistry, as a science, was infinite. Only a century later, chemistry topped out and became a mere part of nuclear physics. That was the first sign that the large circle you see here would be our last."

Intrigued, Diana listened to Thomas. Only once did she glance imperceptibly at Fred, who chose that moment to give a prolonged yawn.

Thomas continued enthusiastically, "At that point, scientific development became somewhat chaotic. Nuclear physics led to experiments with atomic energy, which, hard as we tried, we failed to master."

"We do use it," Diana pointed out.

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"Superficially, yes. We split the atom, which conveniently generates a little heat. We use the heat to warm up the water in steam engines invented back in the Eighteenth Century. We never learned to use nuclear energy directly."

"What about nuclear warheads?" she reminded him.

"Ah, yes," Thomas appeared to be tickled by this. "It's amazing, I almost forgot about those. What can I tell you, Admiral. We're all of us great experts when it comes to destroying something. It's putting something together that usually presents problems. The mystery of the atom is here," he pointed to the large circle. "Beyond that point," he indicated the area past the circle, "lies the Ineffable. That's Newton's infinity for you, depicted graphically, if you will," he pointed past the screen.

"Hey, Thomas, man," Fred interrupted him. "The captain asked me to show the Admiral around. Could you put off sermonizing her till later?"

Thomas shrugged apologetically. "Force of habit. I'm awfully sorry. Please go on with the tour, Admiral. We'll talk some other time."

Only now did she notice a number of men and women standing at the entrance, looking at her. She remembered Beth's words, "If any of the crew follow you around..."

On his way out, Fred made a threatening gesture. The Originals backed off. Diana could sense them following at a respectful distance. Stopping, Fred spun around and called out to them, "Hey, what's the matter, y'all got nothing better to do? The Admiral wants to look at the ship, not your ugly faces. Get lost. I mean it."

The young man who had flirted with the blonde at the cafeteria earlier said defiantly, "Nobody's following you. We were just going to the Big Screen room."

"Oh, really? That's where we're going too. What an astonishing coincidence," Fred said, adding less harshly, "Listen, I would really appreciate it if y'all, like, didn't go there now. You know what I mean? Seriously."

Diana and he continued down the hallway. The Originals fell behind.

It was a square room with a large screen taking up an entire wall – the only large screen on board, apparently. Sitting on a swiveling chair in front of the controls, Fred pressed some keys, explaining, "Here's something we might as well start with ... to get it over with ... Beth must have told you about it. The global catastrophe and all."

The screen lit up, showing an icy Antarctic landscape. People in transparent headgear and thick bright overalls – spacesuits, really, with the temperature and air structure artificially controlled – operated enormous drilling machines, assembled some sort of metal structures, unloaded gigantic metal rods from helicopters ... The wind wailed and whistled. A little later, the color of the sky changed, attaining a mauve tint.

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"That's the South Pole," Fred commented. "Not too many folks actually had to go there. Most of the machinery is operated by remote control."

Assisted by a forest of cranes, two large vehicles resembling combine harvesters on caterpillars started to assemble a monumental trapeze-like edifice.

"Gravity stabilizer," Fred explained. "It's over in Paris now. Chateau de Vincennes. Kids love it. I climbed all over it when I was a kid. It's one hundred and ten meters tall, can you believe it?"

The imagery on the screen changed. Now it showed a roaring ocean, with heavy clouds hanging over it. Tempestuous waves swept forward large clumps of ice. Oddly, a narrow shoal studded with palm trees could be seen in the distance.

"Where is this?" Diana asked.

"The Pacific. They had to freeze some areas. Two billion cubic meters of water turning to ice – Merry Christmas, planet Earth. It was part of, like, the big plan, stabilizing the planet's axis, and all that. Many sea animals didn't make it. The whales migrated over to the Equator. Everything's pretty much back to normal now."

The scene changed again. Now it was an underwater area of some sort, with large automatic devices hanging up networks of pipes from pear-shaped buoys. Underwater spotlights illuminated the site.

"The Arctic," Fred commented. "The clowns spent some time out there, trying to raise the bottom. Eventually, they got it right. Okay, that's enough of this boring shit. Would you like to see a movie now? Something really good for a change?"

Watching documentaries must have fatigue him. Diana replied shortly, "Yes."

She was curious to see what today's Originals, and this Original in particular, thought was "really good."

It was an action flick about the adventures of a man with a square jaw being chased by his daughter's belligerent lover. The latter wished to possess a recording of some sort that might compromise him if some others saw it. When the lead character jumped from a helicopter onto a protrusion in a mountain's slope, Fred commented excitedly, "Did you get that? He's doing it all himself! I mean, can you believe it?"

"Believe what?"

"You don't understand. Look, there's no computer bullshit in it, no special effects, nothing like that. That's Dick Orlov. He always does the stunts himself. That's his trademark. Like, he made this movie once, about Greenland, and there's this scene, right, he jumps off a sailboat into this bad-ass gap with, like, a sheet of ice on either side. He was actually naked when he did it. I mean, can you believe it?"

The story was set in a contemporary city with slanting façades and glass-walled galleries connecting the upper floors of some not particularly tall buildings.

"Skyscrapers are no longer in vogue?" Diana hazarded.

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"No, not anymore. Even elevators are supposed to be, like, I don't know, poor taste or something. We have only one elevator on this whole tub. Watch this, watch this. He's going to climb that tree over there, can you see it? And then he'll jump through that window over there. He has no idea she's inside."

Though somewhat twisted, the plot seemed perfectly banal, like most fiction plots of the past eras. Fred was very excited, though.

The interior decorators' tastes seemed to be similar to those of the Eighteenth or, perhaps, Twenty-First Century people. The architecture, on the other hand, had changed a great deal over the past three hundred years, becoming deliberately eclectic. Classical Revival, Gothic Revival – suddenly the camera zeroed in on a building shaped like a seashell – definitely the influence of the end of the Twenty-First Century.

"There isn't much traffic in the streets," Diana remarked.

"What do you mean?" Fred sounded puzzled.

"Lots of pedestrians, but very few cars."

"Oh, that. Yeah, I remember. You must be thinking back to the Twenty-Fourth Century. Folks used to drive around a lot back then. That's supposed to be, like, unhealthy. We're into walking now. If you have to go really far, you just take the metro. There's tracks under every street. What about your own world? What's your metro like?"

"We don't have a metro system. Everybody has a car."

"Gee, that's awesome! Really?"

"Yes."

"Do you have private helicopters, too?"

"No. There's no point."

"Suppose you need to get someplace real fast?"

"Cars aren't much slower than helicopters."

"Yeah, but still, you have to follow the road when you drive. A helicopter just flies in a straight line."

"The roads are so planned that it's almost a straight line every time, no matter where you're going."

"That's awesome. Wow. Oh! Watch this, watch this. Dick's going to jump right on top of that car! Did you see that? Can you believe the speed? Wow!"

He froze, anticipating. Diana glanced at him. His enchanted eyes shining, his mouth agape, his hands clutching his knees, his thigh muscles flexed – he was quite a sight. Remembering the cameras, she turned her eyes back on the holographic screen. There were Originals on it, men and women – attractive, like all Originals, but her mind's eye kept focusing stubbornly on Fred, Fred leaning forward, Fred agitated, Fred anticipant. The movie's action transferred to

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South America – a tropical reservation of some sort, where the lead character found himself surrounded by alligators. Keeping them at bay with his laser pistol, he dropped the compromising disk into a gigantic reptile's jaws.

In the end, the lead character made up with his daughter's lover and arrived in Boston to attend their wedding. "A happy ending – traditionally simplistic," Diana thought. Out loud, she said, "The director must be pretty good."

"Are you kidding!" Fred agreed enthusiastically. "Rico Spanelli? He's the best! There's no one like him out there."

More than a dozen people were now in the room. Absorbed in the movie, Fred had been neglecting his duties. Diana turned to Eric, the communications person, who was sitting not too far from her. "Eric, what kind of antennae do you use here?"

"The monolith type, ma'am. It's mostly electronic."

"Really? Ours are portable. We usually line them up along the entire hull."

"That's pretty ingenious. We can't do that. We only have two." Pressing a panel on the miniature screen beside his chair, he turned the monitor towards her. Diana saw the image of the spaceship. "There," altering the image's angle, he pointed. "In the outer cell. See it?"

"Yes. Can you see it from inside?"

"Sure. In the engines section."

Fred immediately offered, "Admiral, I can show you. Hang on a sec."

He pressed a panel. Engineering appeared on the screen, with Beth at one of the control boards, making calculations.

"Hey, Captain!" Fred called. "The Admiral wants to see the engine section. Permission to show it to her?"

"Go ahead," Beth replied. "I'll notify whoever's on duty up there."

With Fred leading the way as before, they went up a stairway connecting the two levels. At the engine section's door, Fred pressed a panel. The door slid open, revealing the engineer Beth had introduced to Diana earlier, the robust mulatto man named Ed.

"Welcome, Admiral. Please," he made an inviting gesture. Fred went over to the controls at the right-hand wall. "Hey, Fred," Ed warned, "don't even think about touching anything in here. Seriously."

Diana scanned the room. A web of pipes of various diameters and colors covered the walls and ceiling. Blue pipes – compressed oxygen, no doubt; white – compressor ducts, maybe. The red ones were fuel feeds, and the thin yellow ones, oil lines. The engines themselves nestled under the floor, to one's right. Diana peered, discerning through the semi-transparent panel in the floor the body of one of them. The overall design of the Newtonian engine had not changed much in the past three hundred years – it had not back on Noah either. Sometimes it makes sense to leave a time-proven

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design alone. Steam engines, for instance, had not been radically altered since the Eighteenth Century.

She did not ask where the front engines were located – Ed volunteered the information without any prompting on her part.

“The headers are on the other side, over the cafeteria.”

“And the antenna?” Diana asked. “I thought it was supposed to be here someplace.”

“Right over there. That whole area is soundproof,” Ed pointed to an oval door.

The door slid open. Ruth, the attractive redhead, appeared, wearing a snug-fitting green dress with a long cut that struck Diana as perfectly inappropriate in here.

Fred reacted promptly, “Hey, Ruth, Ed, what’s this? Is this a date? Are we interrupting something here?”

“Date!” Ruth exclaimed disdainfully. “Yes, with the antenna, maybe. I hate that piece of junk. It’s been giving me trouble from the start.”

“No need to put on a show,” Fred disagreed cheerfully. “A date in the engines section, man, that’s awesome. What’s the word? Piquant. It’s piquant. Oh, you turned off the cameras, too? Awesome, man.”

Ed looked at Fred condescendingly, smiling.

Ruth turned to Diana. “It’s the mechanical part, you understand. There’s nothing wrong with the electronics. The mechanics are just dreadful, though. It’s such decrepit trash. You should see it. There’s excessive friction in every joint.”

Ruth’s tone made Diana wonder whether she was really, as Fred had just suggested, trying to justify her attire and her presence here.

“Do you use robots for outside work?” Diana asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Ed said. “Four of them. Brand-new, state-of-the-art. I mean, we used to have four. We dropped the one that serviced the antenna by accident.”

“What do you mean, dropped it?”

“Well, you know. Dropped it. Into space. We were going to pick it up, but then you guys showed up, so our priorities changed a bit. It must be still floating out there in the cosmos.”

Fred grinned. “It’s in orbit around Pluto,” he said. “Pluto could use a moon.”

“We might stop by and pick it up on our way back,” Ed said carelessly.

Ruth announced, “That’s why I have to do the tuning myself.”

“You mean, outside?” Diana was shocked.

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"Yeah. Well, it's not like we have a lot of options, you know," Ruth shrugged, making a face. "Stuff like this happens, you don't start rationalizing, you just don your ugly space gear and crawl out there looking like a lizard for the whole Universe to see."

The Originals' levity was difficult to comprehend. Losing a robot in space by accident –allowing this pretty redhead to go out there to repair an antenna – well!

They entered the antenna room. A cone-shaped contraption protruding from the wall, covered with a crazy cobweb of apparently loose wires, occupied about half of it. Some of the contact cleats were not even insulated.

Pointing at one of the panels, Fred bragged, "See that? I once soldered that one myself. Ruth was changing the adapter, so everybody here bent over backwards to help her out. She's very popular. Hey, Ruth? Why are you so popular?"

The setup resembled a school model of a radio telescope. A floor-to-ceiling copy of Boticelli's Springtime hung on one of the walls. This went beyond odd. These Originals – who recklessly slapped together their antennae and neglected to attach maneuvering devices properly – were also liable to adorn a wall with a piece of Renaissance art. Amazing. Diana inspected the familiar picture – Mercury and the Three Graces on the left-hand side, Springtime herself clad in a costume made of brown flowers to the right, accompanied by Flora and Zephyr. The overall composition resembled a comb with broken teeth.

Pointing at one of the Graces and turning to Diana, Fred said, "Hey, that one looks a lot like you, Admiral."

Ed asked, "Admiral, what do you think of our equipment? Everything's in perfect order, I expect?"

"Highly unsatisfactory," Diana had to admit.

Ed chuckled in a debonair manner. "The Council doesn't take sentinel ships very seriously. Your arrival might change that."

The Council. The Council of the planet Earth. It used to be called the League of Nations, and later, the U.N., and now it was simply the Council.

Alone in the hallway once again, Fred leading, Diana following, he turned around, facing her and asking, "Listen, Admiral, would you like to see my dog?"

"Sure. You keep a dog here?"

"Yep."

"Is it allowed?"

"Not really. Beth told me I could, though."

Something was not adding up here. Fred – an impulsive, shallow youngster, not an erudite by anyone's standards; his wife – the captain of a spaceship patrolling the boundaries of the Solar System. How?

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Diana realized she knew the answer. Her own thoughts kept zeroing in on this youngster.

He asked, grinning, "Are you afraid of dogs?"

"We don't have any on our planet."

"No? I thought you people, I mean, your ancestors ... I thought they packed all kinds of animals into those ships. The Arks. That's what they called them, right? The Arks? I thought they even took some insects, and some bacteria. At least that's what our school teacher used to tell us."

"Not really. Everything we could find in Australia was considered very carefully, but not all of it could be taken along."

"So. This will be your first time seeing a real dog," Fred concluded. "Awesome. You're going to like her."

Mary the doctor appeared at the end of the corridor, meeting Fred and Diana halfway. She smiled at Diana.

"Admiral, how do you feel?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Doctor."

"I had to ask, being the one responsible for your well-being on this ship. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"Are you going up to the cafeteria?"

Fred replied for Diana, "Yes, we're going to have some tea, and after that, guess what? I'm going to show the Admiral my dog. She's never seen a dog before, can you believe it?"

At the cafeteria's entrance, Fred said, "Go ahead, grab a seat. I'll just serve those clowns some grub. It'll only take a minute. After that, I'll pick you up. You can have your tea in the meantime. Don't go away, though."

"What clowns?" Diana asked.

"Well, you know. The captain and her cronies." He raised his eyebrows in mock awe. "Management. They take their tea in Engineering."

He disappeared into the kitchen.

Mary said, "Normally, I sit at the captain's table. Mind if I join you?"

"Please do."

One of the waiters served them tea and crackers and walked away.

Mary said, "Be careful with that dog."

"Is it dangerous?"

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"It's just a dog. You'd better not touch it, though."

"I don't understand."

"The dog's origin is just as mysterious as the origin of man. They have this inexplicable need to be around humans. Homeless dogs don't just run away to the forest, they always stay near people's dwellings hoping they could find a master, any master. When your people ... " She hesitated.

"The Clones, you mean," Diana corrected her with deliberate indifference.

"Yes. Back when the Clones still lived on Earth, dogs did not attach themselves to them the way they do to ... us. For some reason, they just couldn't. Even when a Clone managed to keep a dog, the moment one of ... the moment an Original beckoned it, it would switch owners like that," she snapped her fingers, a gesture that, up to that point, Diana had only seen in three-hundred-year-old documentaries. She paused before adding, "It would appear that Clones and dogs had no use for one another."

Thomas entered wearing a white jacket – and carrying a tray. Mary waved at him, and he nodded. After distributing the tea cups among the customers, he came over. Mary pointed to the empty chair.

"Thomas – we were just discussing something here ... Why don't you join us?"

Cup in hand, Thomas lowered himself onto the chair.

"What's up?"

Mary explained, "There's nothing in the Bible about the origin of dogs. Do you have anything to contribute?"

"Dogs?"

"Yes."

Thomas looked at Mary, turned his eyes on Diana, and flashed his engaging smile. "I see. Do I have anything to contribute on the subject of dogs. Well. There might or might not have been dogs in the Garden of Eden. In any event, according to Scripture, all animals, including lions and tigers, used to serve people the way dogs do today. It is possible, if we follow the logic of the Bible's narration, that when God exiled Adam and Eve from Paradise, He sent the dog along to keep them company – and maybe defend them in the wilderness. Here's a faithful friend for you guys. Something like that."

Mary nodded. "That's good, Thomas, really deep. Now let's get back to earth. Can you explain why dogs cling to man, and not horses or elephants?"

"Mary, my dear, as a doctor you should know that the dog's instincts have not been decoded yet, nor is there any explanation for the dog's slavish submissiveness to man. What do they teach you in medical school these days, anyway?"

"Yes, but I thought theology had its own take on the subject."

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"It does," Thomas said promptly. "In man, there are two overlapping instincts, i.e. the instinct to govern and the instinct to obey. It is necessary for people to group in order to engage in certain activities, such as mammoth hunting or spaceship building. Every group has a number of superiors, as well as a number of subordinates. Normally, subordinates ... "

At that moment, Fred came over, saying peevishly, "The Big Shots are very cranky today. Especially Vlad. Shit. Everybody's having crackers, but not Vlad, oh, no. Son of a bitch gotta have a biscuit with his tea. I had to run back to the kitchen to get him one. I hope he chokes on it." Sitting down, he turned to Thomas, asking rudely (Diana thought), "So, what are we preaching this time, Holy Dad?"

"The role of dogs in everyday life," Thomas replied calmly. He resumed, "The governing instinct is akin to personal vanity. To a dog, man is the ultimate potentate, the master who has to be defended against any possible threat, whatever the odds. Whether it's a tiger or a crocodile, the dog will fight it to protect his master. Dogs perceive their service as a blessing. Loyal and charitable, they expect nothing in return. This strokes man's ego or, to put it another way, gratifies his hidden vanity."

"I knew you were talking about me," Fred said, grinning.

Thomas and Mary chuckled.

Thomas went on, "We haven't been able to discover the actual genetic code for these instincts. My own theory is God created the dog, not merely to defend man, but also to balance man's instincts."

All of this seemed very odd to Diana. Mary, the ship's doctor, was listening earnestly to Thomas' theological rant. Thomas, a mathematician, was the ship's official priest. What next!

Beth's face appeared on the monitor.

"Thomas?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"They want you in Engineering."

Fred said, "The ship Council is meeting again. Blah-blah-blah. You'd think they have nothing better to do with their time."

Thomas excused himself and left. Diana tried hailing Beth using the panel attached to the table, but the Engineering circuit went dead.

Fred explained, "They're keeping it under wraps."

"Keeping what?"

"Their stupid meeting. Makes them feel important. Don't worry about it."

"You have a Council here?" Diana asked.

"Are you kidding," Fred replied. "This tub, she's like a sovereign state. Of course we have a Council."

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"They're discussing our arrival, aren't they?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," Fred agreed. "Don't you people have a Council on your liner?"

"Yes, we do. We meet whenever I need to consult them."

"Wow. Do they have a say in it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose they had to make a decision, and you couldn't come, like, you were busy somewhere else?"

"They can't. All final decisions are made by the Admiral."

"That's awesome."

Mary asked, "Suppose the Admiral is wrong about something?"

"Only people who are practically never wrong can have the rank of Admiral."

"Are many of your women creative?"

Diana did not reply. Fred and Mary exchanged a quick glance. Yes. There were questions they had better not ask. Diana used the panel again, hailing her liner. Abraham's face appeared on the screen.

"Abraham, the Earth Council is going to broadcast the preliminary reply shortly. They'll be using a narrow-band focused. You should aim your antenna directly at the planet."

"Yes, Admiral."

"Captain Beth is in conference with her ship Council. She is not authorized to make extraordinary decisions without consulting them. They're keeping it secret. I have no communication with them right now. Beth might want to speak to me immediately after the conference."

"Understood."

"I'm back at the cafeteria having tea. So far, I haven't seen anything that would strike any of us as unusual."

Fred and Mary were looking past her indifferently. At other tables, however, monitor screens began to light up: people were curious to hear what the Clones were discussing.

Tossing back her tea, Diana turned to Fred, "So where's this dog you've been bragging about?"

Fred sprang to his feet. "Come on! I'll introduce you."

As they walked down the corridor, the Originals they met stepped aside, averting their eyes modestly, aware that Fred would shoo them away if they spoke to Diana or goggled at her.

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"I still have to show you our sickbay," Fred said. "We'll stop by my cabin to pick up the dog and then go down there, all three of us. Here we are."

He opened the door.

The cabin was adjacent to Beth's – Diana knew because the cabin Beth had given her was immediately opposite. Through the open door, Diana heard a dog's bark for the first time in her life.

"Wait," she said. "I'll be back in a moment."

She entered her own cabin.

It was barely larger than four square meters, discounting the tiny bathroom section. Apparently, all cabins were the same size here except the captain's. After taking a quick shower, Diana put on a blue tunic. When giving her this cabin, Beth had asked what kind of spare clothes she would prefer. Diana had mentioned she usually wore knee-length men's tunics. Beth had one such tunic. Dressing in front of the mirror now, Diana decided blue did not look good on her. She could take her own tunic to the laundry machine, or simply rinse it in the shower and then dry it with the hair drier, but Fred was waiting – his dog and all. The blue tunic turned out to be a bit too ample for her – Diana noted with satisfaction that her waist was thinner than Beth's. She recalled Fred pointing at one of the Graces and saying she resembled her. Drying her hair, Diana attempted to make a curl at her left temple – like the Grace's – but it came out too pointy.

Remembering her detector, she reached for it and scanned the place. As expected, there was a camera here, and it was on now, which meant someone might have seen her coming out of the shower. Fred might have seen her – naked. Goodness, one had to stay alert at all times around this place.

When she got out of the cabin, Fred opened his door a notch, poking his head into the hallway. The dog barked loudly inside.

"Come on in," Fred said. "Don't be afraid. I'm holding her."

Opening the door wide, he stepped aside. Diana entered – a bit cautiously.

The dog looked frightening. As far as she could distinguish among dog species, remembering them from old films, it had to be a husky mixed with some other type. Fred was holding it by the collar. Barking frantically, the dog tore towards Diana. Fred held it. The dog wouldn't give up. At last, Fred slapped it across the snout. The dog fell silent, shutting its eyes.

"Her name is Zoska," Fred announced, clasping a leash onto the dog's collar. Leading the dog to the narrow bed, he ordered, "Sit!" Obediently, the dog jumped onto the bed and sat on its haunches, keeping a watchful eye on Diana all along. "She needs some time to get used to you," Fred explained, approaching Diana. "It's not going to take long, I promise." The dog growled threateningly. Evidently it saw no point in getting used to anybody. "Hey! Watch it, you twit, or I'll incarcerate you," Fred said. "Do you want to spend the next three days in the Bastille? Yeah, I could arrange it for you." Turning to Diana, he explained, "That closet over there is the Bastille." Turning back to the dog, he said, "This is Diana. She's an Admiral. She's in

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charge of an entire space liner. Besides, she's from a different planet. Barking at her isn't merely impolite. It's undiplomatic. It's, like, an act of interplanetary aggression. Okay?"

Diana noted that, when he spoke to the dog, Fred's language was slightly more cultured, and his phonetics purer, than usual.

The dog growled again. Fred went on, "She's not a stranger. She's our guest. We have to show her we can be as hospitable as anybody. She's our friend."

To prove that last point, he placed a hand on Diana's shoulder. She had not expected it and drew back involuntarily – too abruptly. The dog rose up and started barking again.

"You see, Admiral," Fred said didactically, "she's not buying it. She didn't believe me when I told her you were my friend. Dogs don't like abrupt movements. They get edgy. Just pretend you're my friend, okay?" Saying so, he put his arm around her shoulders. Oddly anxious, Diana threw back her head. "Sit!" Fred ordered. The dog sat on its haunches again. Bending down slightly, Fred slapped his knee and ordered, "Here!" Jumping off the bed, the dog came over and, craning its neck, looked into his eyes inquiringly. Fred grabbed the collar. "Go on, inspect the Admiral. You really should make friends with her." The dog poked Diana's knee with its nose. Diana drew back. "No touching!" Fred pulled on the collar, raising the dog's head. The dog growled. Fred slapped it across the snout again. The dog shut its eyes, wagging its head. Fred ordered, "Boot!" The dog sat down at his foot. "Diana's an Admiral. She's our friend. Is that clear?" He put his arms around Diana's shoulders, demonstrating their friendship to the dog. Looking Diana in the eye, he said, "Now I know who you remind me of."

"You already told me back in the engines room. One of the Graces."

"I was wrong. You have a much better body."

"Were you watching when I got out of the shower?"

"Sure. Hey, your own people watched you in the shower earlier, including the one who's still sitting in your shuttle."

"Moses," Diana said.

"That's right. Moses. He said you have a wonderful body. Which you do." Fred kept holding her in his embrace, pressing her to his chest just a little. Still demonstrating their friendship to the dog, she told herself.

She said, "The people watching us right now might think you're trying to teach me tricks instead of the dog."

"Don't worry, no one's watching. I turned everything off."

He pressed her tighter. Now she could physically feel his arousal, a natural and ordinary thing that all healthy men experience when they are this close to a woman. A kind of excitement she did not remember feeling in years seized her. She realized this was what she had been waiting for since the moment she first saw this fair-haired youngster at the Originals' cafeteria, locked eyes with him, and heard

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the sound of his voice. They were alone now, discounting the dog, and all the circuits were off.

Still, the destiny of the entire Clone civilization was at stake. Her people needed her, her own world, living in fear of extinction, needed her. This boy here had nothing to fear. He had a long life ahead of him, and would still be sexually functional when he grew old. With a slow yet forceful movement she drew away from him. The dog yipped loudly. Fred grabbed the collar again.

"So, whom do I remind you of, since it isn't the Grace?" Diana asked calmly.

Sounding somewhat embarrassed, he replied, "There's this statue. It's, like, you know, classical? Diana. See, even your names are the same. She's the goddess of hunters and archers, or something like that. She's got a bow in her hand. She's got a dog, too. It's not as beautiful as my dog. And you're much prettier than the goddess, of course."

Diana explained in the same even voice as before, "My ancestors were created in accord with the classical canon. Please turn the monitor back on."

Fred threw the switch. The cabin was so tiny one could reach anything without stirring from the spot. Abraham appeared on the screen.

"Abraham, where's Adonis?"

"He's at the lab, Admiral. Should I put him through?"

"No. Caesar?"

"In his cabin. Should I?"

"Please."

Caesar's cabin appeared on the monitor screen. The experienced elderly zoologist (and mediocre pianist) was lying on the sofa, naked. Seeing his screen light up, he threw on a short toga and rose to his feet.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your rest, Caesar."

"I'm at your service, Admiral."

"Can you see the dog?"

Fred, ever helpful, pulled the dog up in front of the camera.

"I can see it," Caesar replied. "Looks like a cross between a husky and a German shepherd."

"There's some St. Bernard in her too," Fred added proudly.

"I doubt it." Caesar peered. "It's not large enough. So you're allowed to have animals on board."

"No," Diana, indicating Fred with a nod, explained in a formal tone, "Fred has privilege as the captain's husband."

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At that moment, the dog barked loudly at Diana. Fred slapped it again. The dog shut its eyes.

Diana asked, "Caesar, do we have any data pertaining to canine DNA?"

With the kind of thoroughness characteristic of elderly people, Caesar explained, "Let's see. Dogs can't survive without man. There are instances on record when groups of dogs were forced to live in the wilderness without humans. They could not survive beyond the second generation. Our ancestors did not take any along. Dogs only respond to Originals. They wouldn't have been able to adapt on Noah, even though today's geneticists regret the fact that they have no dogs at their disposal. Three hundred years ago genetic science was still in a fairly early stage. The principal differences between Clones and Originals were not yet properly defined. Our scientists could use a few dogs. There might be a link that would help us solve the problem. Certain tests might demonstrate ... "

Fred proclaimed in an austere voice, "Forget it. I'm not letting you people put my dog through any stupid tests."

The dog started barking at Diana again.

Caesar addressed Fred, "Yours is not the only dog on the planet, I hope? There must be others."

"Hey. Sure. No problem," Fred agreed. "They'd probably give you guys a few, if you asked. Eggheads experiment on dogs all the time."

"Fred, you were going to show me your sickbay," Diana reminded him.

"That's right," Fred remembered. "Zoska, it's time for a walk."

He led the dog out into the hallway.

"She needs to run around a little, right?" Diana suggested.

"Yes. We always go for a run together. Are you a good runner?"

"I'll try not to let you down. I do three miles every morning."

They started running along the hallway, Fred and his dog leading the way. Looking over his shoulder, Fred assessed Diana's athletic style, and ran faster. She found she could keep up with him easily enough. Reaching the end of the hallway, they turned into a passage, got into a parallel corridor, and ran back. The Originals they encountered as they ran pressed themselves to the walls getting out of the way. To them, it must have looked preposterous – the Clone Admiral running, following Fred and his dog. Now and then Fred tugged on the leash, and each time the dog leaped up into the air. At one such moment, Diana leaped into the air at the same time as the dog. She immediately checked herself. What was this? Thomas' words came back to her, "... nor is there any explanation for the dog's slavish submissiveness to man." A conclusion flashed through her mind: we must have a dog in our laboratory as soon as possible.

The Originals' sickbay turned out to be an oblong room partitioned into a number of sections, each section containing various testing

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equipment. Two of the sections constituted an artificial solarium where the Originals could get their tan under a row of ultra-violet lamps. Another section served as Surgery – evidently, it had not been used in a while. When Fred flipped the switch, the lamp over the operating table did not light up. There air-filtering device in the ceiling featured some dents. Pipes and hoses hung loose from bent consoles. A half-finished cup of coffee sat on the operating table under the dangling surgical equipment.

Daisy the nurse reclined in a chair in the pharmaceutical section. A rank of vials with multi-colored tablets and liquids stood in front of her. She was attending to her manicure, covering her nails with bright-colored polish – and using the same brush and polish to make marks on some of the vials. Turning, she saw the entering party and got up, smiling amiably at Diana. The latter returned the smile involuntarily.

“Hey, Daisy-baby, what’s with manicuring the vials?” Fred asked.

“I’m just marking the stuff that’s past the expiration date.”

“I’ll throw them away for you.” Fred turned to Diana. “My shift starts right after hers.”

“No, we shouldn’t discard them yet,” Daisy objected softly. “Now that it looks like we’ll be out here longer than expected, it might be a good idea to keep everything we have.” Holding the miniature brush, Daisy extended her hand toward the dog. “Zoska, let me paint your nose for you.”

The dog turned away jauntily, wagging its tail, and then yipped loudly at Diana.

The other end of the sickbay featured a square section with a wide groove in the floor. A conveyor belt rested on its bottom.

“That’s our waste disposal,” Fred explained.

From a small hatch in the wall, using a plastic scoop, he picked up a measure of some substance closely resembling sand and tossed it onto the belt. The dog fussed around Fred’s feet nervously. Fred unleashed it. Diana stopped at a safe distance.

“Don’t be afraid,” Fred told her. “She’s going to take a shit now. She never attacks anyone when she’s taking a shit.”

Jumping onto the belt, the dog sniffed at the sand for some time, did what Fred had promised it would do, and started to bury the resulting excrement, using its hind legs.

Fred commented, “That’s her instincts working. Dogs always have to bury their shit. It turns into mould afterwards. Humous bacteria can’t live on the surface. After that, mould gives life to trees, flowers, strawberries, and cacti.” Grinning, he concluded, “It’s, like, the perpetual cycle. Thomas explains it better. You should ask him. He’s very eloquent.”

“He’s a very rational speaker,” Diana pointed out. “He chooses just the right words.”

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"That's because he's black, and a priest," Fred explained. "Half my teachers in high school were black. My pharmacology professor was black too. Blacks like to teach."

He turned on the conveyor belt. The engine screeched and clattered. The soiled sand on the belt began to disappear into the gap at the bottom of the wall, taking away the malodorous filth in which flowers and cacti might otherwise have grown.

Fred clasped the dog's leash back on. After fidgeting impatiently for some time, the beast started to leap high into the air, trying to touch its snout to Fred's face. Diana kept her distance despite Fred's soothing words, "It's all right, Admiral. Don't be afraid. She's always playful after taking a shit."

Daisy appeared from the pharmaceutical section.

"Fred, do you really think the Admiral is interested in any of that?" she asked without smiling.

"Are you kidding? Of course she is. She's never seen a dog before."

"I am interested," Diana confirmed, opening a narrow oval-shaped door. Beyond it was a toilet bowl with some sort of mechanism over it, with tubes and pipes hanging loose.

"That's for testing your prostate," Fred explained. "Test while you piss."

Diana turned on the machine. Lights flickered. A green indicator flashed. It was astonishingly simple. Urine is an excellent conductor. Even the most primitive electronic gadget can detect fluctuations in the bio-current. So. The Originals used that device to check their prostate glands. For some reason, the Clones had never thought of anything like it.

Lowering his voice, Fred said, "Elderly men use it a lot."

Now, that was clear enough, wasn't it? The men here remained active till they were ancient, which was why they worried so much about their prostate glands.

"Fred, it's almost dinner time," Daisy said. "Who's making dinner tonight?"

"Why, is Louis off again?"

"He's upstairs, watching movies about genetic engineering."

"Louis is our cook," Fred explained to Diana. "I cover for him when he's off, even though I'm not really a chef, only a nutritionist."

"I thought there was a ban," Diana hazarded.

"On what?"

"On genetic engineering."

"Oh, that," Daisy smiled. "You mean the movies. They're old. They're treated as documentaries, not study aids."

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"I guess I'd better get my ass over to the kitchen," Fred winced. Then, livening up, he said, "Admiral, would you like to see our kitchen?"

"Indeed I would," Diana agreed in earnest.

Once again they ran down the corridor. Running alongside Fred, the dog leaped into the air from time to time. Bringing up the rear, Diana had a powerful urge to leap as well. She managed to control herself.

The kitchen with a row of food preparation machines along one of the walls was monstrosously filthy. Some of the numerous conveyor belts sagged. Some of the dispensers were obviously clogged.

Fred explained, "The floor washer is on the fritz. Something's wrong with the wiring. They should have replaced it eons ago, only there isn't an inch of wire you can take from the stockroom without everybody crying about using up the fucking resources. I'll think of something tomorrow. I might have to do some soldering after all." He unleashed the dog. Right away the beast started sniffing around the stoves. Fred opened one. "Still hot. Leftovers from lunch," he said, fishing out a piece of unusual-looking baked potato with a long fork. "Admiral, want to try one? Potatoes baked in apples and cabbages. My own recipe. I used to make it for folks with stomach pain. Now everybody wants some."

He handed the fork to Diana. His light-colored eyes fixed on hers inquiringly. She drew the potato off the fork with her fingers. It was very good. Taking the fork from her, Fred picked up another piece from the stove and offered it to the dog. The dog sniffed at it and looked at Fred quizzically.

"Zoska, cut it out. You shouldn't be so picky. You've had your meat today, you dumb glutton."

Delicately, the dog picked the potato off the fork.

Spotting a monitor, Diana keyed in the code for Engineering. Beth's face took up the entire screen.

"Hello, Diana. Do you need anything? Or would you like to continue our discussion?"

"Yes, I would, Beth."

Fred butted in, "The Admiral hasn't seen our Engineering yet. I'll take her down there in a second."

Beth replied, "Sure. Although, Fred, no! You're covering for Louis today, aren't you? Diana, do you know how to get here?"

"Yes. Fred's an excellent guide. I know my way around now."

Engineering closely resembled its Clone counterpart. The Originals had not invented anything new or different.

The image of the Clone liner was on one of the screens. A different screen, divided into sections, showed various rooms around the ship.

Vlad was busy sweeping up pieces of porcelain from the floor, using a miniature broom, with Beth standing beside him, holding a mop

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reminiscent of the type sailors used in antiquity to wash their vessels' decks.

Beth said, sounding anxious, "We shattered two tea cups during the meeting. We have to clean up the mess before Fred gets suspicious."

"He won't," Vlad said. "Don't worry. Louis doesn't do any inventory either."

Beth started mopping.

"So! Diana, this is our Engineering," she said. "Hope you like it."

Diana was beyond surprises. Genetic science and the Unified Field Theory, banned – external antennae repaired manually in outer space – burnt-out wiring welded together by hand – waste disposal located in the sickbay and serving as a latrine for a dog. In the filthy kitchen, Fred had fed the dog using a fork no one had any intention of disinfecting afterwards. The captain of a spaceship – mopping up in Engineering. And everybody terribly religious. One would think the Originals' civilization was in decline.

Diana said indifferently, "Yes, I know. Fred told me your floor washer is on the fritz."

"Diana, that tunic looks good on you. The size is just right."

"Thank you."

"Fred didn't wear you out with the tour, I hope. Okay, ready? Let's go to my cabin."

In the cabin, Diana asked promptly, "Beth, you didn't tell anyone about our discussion earlier?"

"Of course not."

"Does your ship Council have anything to tell me?"

"Not really. You agreed not to use UF energy while you're here – that's what we discussed, and that's the most important thing so far. The rest is up to the Earth Council. Six hours for the transmission to reach Earth, six more for the reply to get back – we'll have to put up with twelve-hour pauses in our dialogue, unfortunately. To compensate, we should thoroughly prepare all our questions and answers. Do you intend to conduct the negotiations from your own vessel?"

"Certainly. I'll wait here until you receive the first transmission. There's no reason for them to delay it."

"No, you're right, they're sending it as we speak."

"Where are their headquarters located?"

"The official site is in Paris, in the Third Department. I wouldn't expect them to summon everyone at this time. They'll probably just set up a conference call for all members."

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Diana scanned the living room, already familiar to her, seeking signs of Fred's visits here.

She asked, "Does the design of your cabin reflect your personal taste in furnishing?"

It took Beth a moment or two to understand the question. She smiled. "No. Our decorator furnished it. It's pretty standard. What about your own cabin? On your liner, I mean?"

"I furnished it according to my idea of the Originals' tastes. Do you have a bedroom as well?"

"Yes. Would you like to see it?"

"If you don't mind."

Going to the door in the corner, Beth pressed a panel. The two sections of the door parted.

A wide sofa bed with a canvas cover – two chairs – more ascetic than cozy – two heavy foils and a seventeenth century pistol, good imitation, on one of the walls.

"Fred's toys," Beth explained, smiling.

"Is the pistol functional?" Diana wanted to know.

"Yes. It's one of Fred's favorite pastimes."

Beth lowered herself on the edge of the sofa. Diana sat in a chair, facing her. Beth slept on that sofa every night. With Fred by her side.

"Diana, what are you going to tell the Council? Any specific conditions you have in mind?"

"That depends on the Council's initial reaction. I'd like you to be present."

"Of course. They must have recorded their reply by now. There's a great deal the Council wants to know. They're curious about your media and stuff, and there are loads of questions for me personally. Most of it is just a lot of nonsense, you understand. Folks haven't had enough time to digest the news. I realize you're interested in the actual opinion of the Council. We'll have it. In about six hours." Beth looked at the antique electronic clock on the bedside table. "Diana, would you like to get some rest now? In your cabin? Well, actually, it's almost dinner time. Cafeteria?"

"Good idea, Beth. We'll rest afterwards."

Returning to her cabin after dinner, Diana contacted Abraham and asked him to awaken her five hours from now. Lying down on the bed with her eyes closed, she concentrated on the ends of her fingers and toes. Normally this would have been sufficient. This time, sleep would not come. She remembered seeing Originals on the monitor screen for the first time ever. Soon after that, they abandoned their close-fitting blue suits in favor of their more habitual attire. Diana recalled a very old television series about astronauts in which the actors wore close-fitting, elastic costumes. Beth and her assistants must have donned their costumes in order to fit the classical

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astronaut image. Cheap tricks. Cheap, primitive psychology of the Originals. And yet, there was their inexplicable charm. And then, transcending all of that, etched in her memory was the image of the lanky youngster with the brazen pale eyes – Fred, named after a Polish composer. Fred, pointing at one of Boticelli's Graces. That one looks a lot like you, Admiral. Fred, in his cabin, with his arms around her, and the growling dog beside them. I turned everything off – and he pressed her to his chest, and she knew he was aroused. His somewhat embarrassed expression. The goddess of hunters and archers, or something. ... Not as beautiful as my dog, though. And you're much prettier than the goddess.

She could not fall asleep at all. Diana started to go through the list of proposals she would make to the Earth Council five hours from now.

A buzz from the screen awakened her. Not Abraham – it was Theodore, her assistant.

"Admiral, it's been five hours."

"Anything from Earth?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"All kinds of nonsense. It's obvious they need more time."

Naked in her bed, Diana reached over and turned off the monitor screen before throwing away the thin sheet and going to the bathroom. She had never felt awkward before. It was her people's duty to watch her while she was here. Well.

After taking a quick shower, she donned the green tunic and went down to Engineering. All of the members of the ship Council were there. She already knew all of them. Beth offered her a seat next to hers. In the foreground on the large monitor screen stood a man in a formal suit – an Original living on Earth – saying, "... since it takes six hours for a message to reach the other party. When you hear this, you'll ..."

Beth leaned towards Diana, saying quietly, "That's just one of the Council's Speakers. The session is still in progress."

"... according to the message we have just received, the commander of the space liner... is that correct? A space liner? ... The commander of the space liner from Noah is called Admiral Diana. Admiral... am I right? Admiral, is it? Greetings, Admiral. It goes without saying that we're ready to offer any and all ..."

It was nonsense, all right. The Originals were just trying to fill in the pause. No decisions had been made yet.

Thomas and Fred entered Engineering, carrying trays. Coffee and biscuits. Once the cups were distributed, Beth motioned Thomas to an empty chair.

Fred asked, "Captain, may I stay?"

"No."

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Fred shoved his empty tray to Thomas, saying peevishly, "Do me a favor, Holy Dad, watch these mothers for me, okay? Last time, they smashed two cups. They thought I wouldn't notice." He walked out.

Vlad smiled, shaking his graying head. "He noticed."

Beth suggested seriously, "He must have seen the pieces in the waste disposal."

The pottery, as well as some other things, was subject to strict inventory, it would seem.

Diana could see Theodore and Moses on a side screen, in her liner's Engineering and on board the shuttle, respectively.

"Theodore, are you recording this?"

"We're recording everything, Admiral."

"Don't miss the moment when a real member of the Earth Council appears. Whatever he says is official and goes on record."

"Understood."

Diana's remark was superfluous. Everyone was so tense, though, she felt she had to assert herself, demonstrating to everyone she was in control.

At last, the speaker of the Council proclaimed from the screen, "And now permit me to introduce ... Ladies and gentlemen, Secretary of the Earth Council Otto Kraus."

Diana leaned over to Beth. "Do you know him?"

"Yes. We were all introduced shortly before takeoff."

Otto Kraus turned out to be a middle-aged man with thinning hair. He wore a white shirt apache – one could see his chest covered with fair-colored hairs, thicker than those on his head. It must be hot in Paris in the middle of the summer but, as Diana knew now, Originals hardly ever used air-conditioning, preferring everything to be natural, including their air.

"Admiral, greetings to you, and also to all those who are watching this on Earth." He gave a tiny smile. "No dialogue can be called ordinary that is constantly interrupted by twelve-hour pauses. Captain Elizabeth Kern has informed us down here of some problems on the planet Noah that need solving. We understand that the matter is pretty urgent, and that you came here seeking our assistance."

For the first time, Diana heard Beth's full name. Elizabeth Kern.

Secretary Kraus went on, "Naturally, we're ready to assist you and to cooperate with you to the best of our abilities. We, the people of Earth, harbor friendly feelings towards your species despite the three-century gap during which our civilizations developed independently. I understand Captain Kern has already stipulated that you may not use your UF devices within the Solar System. We confirm that, and we hope that you will accept our condition." He paused for a moment. "Captain Kern, it is the Earth Council's opinion that everything you've done so far is truly commendable. You were

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the first person to detect the Noah spacecraft and contact them. Thank you, Captain. Admiral, we are aware that you had a private discussion with Captain Kern who promised she would not reveal the particulars until the actual dialogue begins. The dialogue has begun. Please tell us about the problems you have, your conditions, your proposals." Secretary Kraus smiled again. "Damn inconvenient to have these twelve-hour gaps. Let's pretend there aren't any. We are listening, Admiral."

Diana started giving a more detailed account of what she had told Beth earlier.

Because the Originals had put their genetic science on hold, much of what she said might not be clear to them. Taking that into account, she elaborated and simplified as much as she could, elucidating a number of scientific terms for them. She moved on to demographics. The main thing the Originals absolutely had to realize was that today, at this very moment, civilization on Noah was doomed unless a dramatic scientific breakthrough occurred. The arrival of the liner in the Solar System was a desperate attempt to find help. The Originals had to offer their best effort. It was their duty to do so.

Otto Kraus was still on the screen. Six hours had to pass before he heard Diana's words. Nevertheless, he knew she was speaking now. He was trying to figure something out on his computer while pressing an earpiece to his ear from time to time, taking in some information that, for one reason or another, could not be made public.

And then, suddenly, he looked directly into the camera, saying, "My apologies, Admiral. I have to interrupt you, even though I'm sure you're in the middle of saying something very important right now. Something just came up. Admiral, the Earth Council is all but convened. We're only missing a few people. We would like to suggest something to you, Admiral, and also to you, Captain Kern. The sentinel ship and the liner from Noah are to all intents representatives of their respective planets. As any two friendly sovereign states would in your position, you might want to exchange ambassadors who will maintain contact with their respective ship Councils. I fully expect both of you to accept, and to act upon, this suggestion. Admiral, we are aware of your decision to get back to your own vessel immediately after you inform us of your intentions. Why don't you take an ambassador along. Then, upon your arrival, you could send someone back. Captain Kern, if both you and the Admiral agree with this plan, we suggest you appoint your ambassadors right now." Kraus smiled. "Diplomacy in outer space. We're making history here. Admiral, once again, I apologize for the interruption. Please continue."

Diana did.

She said she realized that the scientists who volunteered their services would only have theoretical knowledge of the field. That was fine with the Clones. However, the people whom the Clones would like to consult first and foremost were the ones possessed of human genius. In addition to that, Clone geneticists would like to have a number of Originals voluntarily submit themselves to a series of tests. Being careful not to use the word religion, Diana said she was aware of certain modifications the Originals' ideology had undergone over the past three centuries, and that those modifications had affected, indeed altered considerably, the general outlook of the Earthlings. Remembering Fred's manners, Diana thought to herself that the

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change had somehow failed to ennoble some of them. Out loud she said, "I fully expect those changes to have strengthened your humanitarian principles." After that, she moved on to options and possibilities. Even though the liner had a laboratory equipped in accordance with the latest scientific standards, it carried various UF devices – the Earthlings might not like the idea of those landing on their planet. The joint research project would have to be conducted in outer space. Some Originals might not like the idea of being transported to Pluto's orbit, either. The liner had a number of shuttles on board. The Clones could redesign one of them as a laboratory and land it on the planet or, if the Originals preferred, put in orbit around it. After a brief pause, Diana said, "I'll be waiting for your reply twelve hours from now, by which time I expect to be back on board my vessel. I fully support your suggestion that we should exchange ambassadors, and I'm ready to take one on board our shuttle unless Captain Beth has any objections."

"Not at all," Beth said. "I think it's a great idea."

After that, Beth went on with the list of questions prepared at her meeting with the ship Council earlier.

Otto Kraus was still on the screen.

Beth lit a cigarette. She asked Diana, "You don't mind, do you?"

"It's all right. You have good air-conditioning here."

Now Beth addressed everyone in the room. "Our entire Council is here. I promised Mr. Kraus we would appoint an ambassador."

Diana observed, "I'm not a member of the Council. Should I leave?"

"Not at all. Please stay, Admiral."

Exactly as Diana had expected.

"This might interest you," Beth added.

"Oh," Diana said. "Indeed. In that case, I'd like to propose a candidate."

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Fred."

"No way," Beth shook her head. "He's not qualified to represent the entire planet."

Vlad, Beth's assistant, said after pondering a little, "Why not?" He sounded perfectly serious. "Look, back in the old days, the monarch's spouse was always regarded as an official. Democratic states inherited that tradition. For instance, in the United States, the President's wife is always an active politician. Surely being your husband gives Fred enough status in our administrative hierarchy."

"He's very sociable," Michael, the mustached, hairy-legged astrophysicist who had spoken to Fred at the cafeteria, observed. "We could do worse."

Beth insisted, "I suggest we name some others."

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And so some others were considered – Susan, the laser technician (the pretty blonde with whom Fred had flirted earlier).

Beth disagreed. "A woman cannot be an ambassador."

They almost agreed on Carlo the mathematician whom Beth had introduced to Diana at dinner. Eric the helmsman raised an objection, "He's such a boor. An ambassador should be more upbeat."

They considered Fred again – sociable, cheerful, buoyant, smiley. Everyone liked him except Ed, the staid-looking chief engineer, who insisted that Fred was neither knowledgeable nor intelligent enough to represent the whole planet.

"Lighten up, Ed. Exactly what kind of knowledge do you expect an ambassador to bring to the table?" Vlad asked, exasperated. "The Roman Bill of Rights? Or should he be able to calculate the capacity of your stinking reactors? Really!"

"Clones value knowledge," Ed pointed out.

They summoned Fred and tested his erudition. Everyone had a question. In what year was Julius Caesar killed? What does a chromosome consist of? What is the energy formula? What does DNA stand for? What are the final two lines of Byron's Manfred? – and so forth. Oddly enough, Fred had a correct answer for nearly every question. All the while, he kept eyeing everyone suspiciously.

At last, Vlad proclaimed, "Fred, we've decided to make you our ambassador on the Clones' liner. Your task will be to represent our entire civilization."

After looking intently at Beth for some time, Fred livened up abruptly. "Hey! That's awesome. I'm going to put on my musketeer costume! Oh, and the épée – I'm definitely taking my sword. Is that okay?"

Clearly, in his mind, if mankind's entire culture had ever been able to come up with a masterstroke, D'Artagnan was it. Everyone smiled.

First to stop smiling, Ed said matter-of-factly, "Fine. I retract my objection. In fact, there is no better candidate."

Fred added confidently, "I'm taking my dog too."

"That won't be necessary," Beth snapped.

But now Diana said, "Why not? Let him take it along if it makes him feel comfortable. Now I must announce the name of my ambassador. That will be Richard, my husband. He's a geneticist. In our administrative hierarchy, the Admiral's spouse is an official rank."

Thomas gave her a broad smile. "I see. We're not exchanging ambassadors, we're swapping husbands."

Everyone laughed. Diana had no choice. She had to smile, at least. She smiled. One had to be respectful of the Originals' traditions. Humor was definitely one of them.