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REMEMBERING SIRI

I climb the steep hill to Siri's tomb on the day the islands return to the shallow seas of the Equatorial Archipelago. The day is perfect and I hate it for being so. The sky is as tranquil as tales of Old Earth's seas, the shallows are dappled with ultramarine tints, and a warm breeze blows in from the sea to ripple the russet willowgrass on the hillside near me.

Better low clouds and gray gloom on such a day. Better mist or a shrouding fog which sets the masts in Firstsite Harbor dripping and raises the lighthouse horn from its slumbers. Better one of the great sea-simoons blowing up out of the cold belly of the south, lashing before it the motile isles and their dolphin herders until they seek refuge in lee of our atolls and stony peaks.

Anything would be better than this warm spring day when the sun moves through a vault of sky so blue that it makes me want to run, to jump in great loping arcs, and to roll in the soft grass as Siri and I have done at just this spot.

Just this spot. I pause to look around me. The willowgrass bends and ripples like the fur of some great beast as the salt-tinged breeze gusts up out of the south. I shield my eyes and search the horizon but nothing moves there. Out beyond the lava reef, the sea begins to chop and lift itself in nervous strokes.

"Siri," I whisper. I say her name without meaning to do so. A hundred meters down the slope, the crowd pauses to watch me and to catch its collective breath. The procession of mourners and celebrants stretches for more than a kilometer to where the white buildings of the city begin. I can make out the gray and balding head of my younger son in the vanguard. He is wearing the blue and gold robes of the Hegemony. I know that I should wait for him, walk with him, but he and the other aging council members can not keep up with my young, shiptrained muscles and steady stride. Decorum dictates that I should walk with him and my granddaughter Lira and the other ladies of the society.

To hell with it. And to hell with them.

I turn and jog up the steep hillside. Sweat begins to soak my loose cotton shirt before I reach the curving summit of the ridge and catch sight of the tomb.

Siri's tomb.

I stop. The wind chills me although the sunlight is warm enough as it glints off the flawless white stone of the silent mausoleum. The grass is high near the sealed entrance to the crypt. Rows of faded festival pennants on ebony staffs line the narrow gravel path.

Hesitating, I circle the tomb and approach the steep cliff edge a few meters beyond. The willowgrass is bent and trampled here where irreverent picnickers have laid their blankets. There are several fire rings formed from the perfectly round, perfectly white stones purloined from the border of the gravel path.

I cannot stop a smile. I know the view from here; the great curve of the outer harbor with its natural seawall, the low, white buildings of Firstsite, and the colorful hulls and masts of the catamarans bobbing at anchorage. Near the pebble beach beyond Common Hall, a young woman in a white skirt moves toward the water. For a second I think that it is Siri and my heart pounds. I half prepare to throw up my arms in response to her wave but she does not wave. I watch in silence as the distant figure turns away and is lost in the shadows of the old boat building.

Above me, far out from the cliff, a wide-winged Thomas Hawk circles above the lagoon on rising thermals and scans the shifting bluekelp beds with its infrared vision, seeking out harpseals or torpids. Nature is stupid, I think and sit in the soft grass. Nature sets the stage all wrong for such a day and then it is insensitive enough to throw in a bird searching for prey which have long since fled the polluted waters near the growing city.

I remember another Thomas Hawk on that first night when Siri and I came to this hilltop. I remember the moonlight on its wings and the strange, haunting cry which echoed off the cliff and seemed to pierce the dark air above the gaslights of the village below.

Siri was sixteen … no, not quite sixteen … and the moonlight that touched the hawk's wings above us also painted her bare skin with milky light and cast shadows beneath the soft circles of her breasts. We looked up guiltily when the bird's cry cut the night and Siri said, "It was the nightingale and not the lark,/That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear."

"Huh?" I said. Siri was almost sixteen. I was nineteen. But Siri knew the slow pace of books and the cadences of theater under the stars. I knew only the stars.

"Relax, young Shipman," she whispered and pulled me down beside her then. "It's only an old Tom's Hawk hunting. Stupid bird. Come back, Shipman. Come back, Merin."

The Los Angeles had chosen that moment to rise above the horizon and to float like a

wind-blown ember west across the strange constellations of Maui-Covenant, Siri's world. I lay next to her and described the workings of the great C-plus spinship which was catching the high sunlight against the drop of night above us, and all the while my hand was sliding lower along her smooth side, her skin seemed all velvet and electricity, and her breath came more quickly against my shoulder. I lowered my face to the hollow of her neck, to the sweat-and-perfume essence of her tousled hair.

"Siri," I say and this time her name is not unbidden. Below me, below the crest of the hill and the shadow of the white tomb, the crowd stands and shuffles. They are impatient with me. They want me to unseal the tomb, to enter, and to have my private moment in the cool silent emptiness that has replaced the warm presence that was Siri. They want me to say my farewells so they can get on with their rites and rituals, open the waiting farcaster doors, and join the waiting worldweb of the Hegemony.

To hell with that. And to hell with them.

I pull up a tendril of the thickly woven willowgrass, chew on the sweet stem, and watch the horizon for the first sign of the migrating islands. The shadows are still long in the morning light. The day is young. I will sit here for awhile and remember.

I will remember Siri.

Siri was a … what?… a bird, I think, the first time I saw her. She was wearing some sort of mask with bright feathers. When she removed it to join in the raceme quadrille, the torchlight caught the deep auburn tints of her hair. She was flushed, cheeks aflame, and even from across the crowded Common I could see the startling green of her eyes contrasting with the summer heat of her face and hair. It was Festival Night, of course. The torches danced and sparked to the stiff breeze coming in off the harbor and the sound of the flutists on the breakwall playing for the passing isles was almost drowned out by surf sounds and the crack of pennants snapping in the wind. Siri was almost sixteen and her beauty burned more brightly than any of the torches set round the throng-filled square. I pushed through the dancing crowd and went to her.

It was five years ago for me.

It was more than sixty-five years ago for us. It seems only yesterday.

This is not going well.

Where to start?

"What say we go find a little nooky, kid?" Mike Osho was speaking. Short, squat, his pudgy face a clever caricature of a Buddha, Mike was a god to me then. We were all gods: long-lived if not immortal, well-paid if not quite divine. The Hegemony had

chosen us to help crew one of its precious quantum leap C-plus spinships, so how could we be less than gods? It was just that Mike, brilliant, mercurial, irreverent Mike, was a little older and a little higher in the Shipboard pantheon than young Merin Aspic.

“Hah. Zero probability of that,” I said. We were scrubbing up after a twelve-hour shift with the farcaster construction crew. Shuttling the workers around their chosen singularity-point some 163,000 kilometers out from Maui-Covenant was a lot less glamorous for us than the four month leap from Hegemony-space. During the C-plus portion of the trip we had been master specialists; forty-nine starship experts shepherding some two hundred nervous passengers. Now the passengers had their hardsuits on and we Shipmen had been reduced to serving as glorified truck drivers as the construction crew wrestled the bulky singularity containment-sphere into place.

“Zero probability,” I repeated. “Unless the groundlings have added a whorehouse to that quarantine island they leased us.”

“Nope. They haven’t,” grinned Mike. He and I had our three days of planetary R-and-R coming up, but we knew from Shipmaster Singh’s briefings and the moans of our Shipmates that the only groundtime we had to look forward to would be spent on a 7 by 4-mile island administered by the Hegemony. It wasn’t even one of the motile isles we had heard about, just another volcanic peak near the equator. Once there, we could count on real gravity underfoot, unfiltered air to breathe, and the chance to taste unsynthesized food. But we could also count on the fact that the only intercourse we would have with the Maui-Covenant colonists would be through buying local artifacts at the duty-free store. Even those were sold by Hegemony trade specialists. Many of our Shipmates had chosen to spend their R-and-R on the Los Angeles.

“So how do we find a little nooky, Mike? The colonies are off limits until the farcaster’s working. That’s about 60 years away, local time. Or are you talking about Meg in Spincomp?”

“Stick with me, kid,” said Mike. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

I stuck with Mike. There were only five of us in the dropship. It was always a thrill to me to fall out of high orbit into the atmosphere of a real world. Especially a world that looked as much like Old Earth as Maui-Covenant did. I stared at the blue and white limb of the planet until the seas were down and we were in atmosphere, approaching the twilight terminator in a gentle glide at three times the speed of our own sound.

We were gods then. But even gods must descend from their high thrones upon occasion.

Siri’s body never ceased to amaze me. That time on the Archipelago. Three weeks in

that huge, swaying treehouse under the billowing treesails with the dolphin herders keeping pace like outriders, tropical sunsets filling the evening with wonder, the canopy of stars at night, and our own wake marked by a thousand phosphorescent swirls that mirrored the constellations above. And still it is Siri's body I remember. For some reason—shyness, the years of separation—she wore two strips of swimsuit for the first few days of our Archipelago stay and the soft white of her breasts and lower belly had not darkened to match the rest of her tan before I had to leave again.

I remember her that first time. Triangles in the moonlight as we lay in the soft grass above Firstsite Harbor. Her silk pants catching on a weave of willowgrass. There was a child's modesty then; the slight hesitation of something given prematurely. But also pride. The same pride that later allowed her to face down the angry mob of Separatists on the steps of the Hegemony Consulate in South Tern and send them to their homes in shame.

I remember my fifth planetfall, our Fourth Reunion. It was one of the few times I ever saw her cry. She was almost regal in her fame and wisdom by then. She had been elected four times to the All Thing and the Hegemony Council turned to her for advice and guidance. She wore her independence like a royal cloak and her fierce pride had never burned more brightly. But when we were alone in the stone villa south of Fevarone, it was she who turned away. I was nervous, frightened by this powerful stranger, but it was Siri—Siri of the straight back and proud eyes, who turned her face to the wall and said through tears, "Go away. Go away, Merin. I don't want you to see me. I'm a crone, all slack and sagging. Go away."

I confess that I was rough with her then. I pinned her wrists with my left hand—using a strength which surprised even me—and tore her silken robe down the front in one move. I kissed her shoulders, her neck, the faded shadows of stretchmarks on her taut belly, and the scar on her upper leg from the skimmer crash some forty of her years earlier. I kissed her greying hair and the lines etched in the once-smooth cheeks. I kissed her tears.

"Jesus, Mike, this can't be legal," I'd said when my friend unrolled the hawking mat from his backpack. We were on Island 241, as the Hegemony traders had so romantically named the desolate volcanic blemish which they had chosen for our R-and-R site. Island 241 was less than 50 kilometers from the oldest of the colonial settlements, but it might as well have been 50 light years away. No native ships were to put in at the island while Los Angeles crewmen or farcaster workmen were present. The Maui-Covenant colonists had a few ancient skimmers still in working order, but by mutual agreement there would be no overflights. Except for the dormitories, swimming beach, and the duty-free store, there was little on the island to interest us Shipmen. Some day, when the last components had been brought in-system by the Los Angeles and the farcaster finished, Hegemony officials would make Island 241 into a center for trade and tourism. Until then it was a primitive place with a dropship grid,

newly finished buildings of the local white stone, and a few bored maintenance people. Mike checked the two of us out for three days of backpacking on the steepest and most inaccessible end of the little island.

“I don’t want to go backpacking, for Chrissake,” I’d said. “I’d rather stay on the L.A. and plug into a stimsim.”

“Shut up and follow me,” said Mike, and like a lesser member of the pantheon following an older and wiser deity, I had shut up and followed. Two hours of heavy tramping up the slopes through sharp-branched scrub-trees brought us to a lip of lava several hundred meters above the crashing surf. We were near the equator on a mostly tropical world, but on this exposed ledge the wind was howling and my teeth were chattering. The sunset was a red smear between dark cumulus to the west and I had no wish to be out in the open when full night descended.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get out of the wind and build a fire. I don’t know how the hell we’re going to set up a tent on all of this rock.”

Mike sat down and lit a cannabis stick. “Take a look in your pack, kid.”

I hesitated. His voice had been neutral but it was the flat neutrality of the practical joker’s voice just before the bucket of water descends. I crouched down and began pawing through the nylon sack. The pack was empty except for old flowfoam packing cubes to fill it out. Those and a harlequin’s costume complete with mask and bells on the toes.

“Are you … is this … are you goddamn crazy?” I spluttered. It was getting dark quickly now. The storm might or might not pass to the south of us. The surf was rasping below like a hungry beast. If I had known how to find my own way back to the trade compound in the dark, I might have considered leaving Mike Osho’s remains to feed the fishes far below.

“Now look at what’s in my pack,” he said. Mike dumped out some flowfoam cubes and then removed some jewelry of the type I’d seen hand-crafted on Renaissance, an inertial compass, a laser pen which might or might not be labelled a concealed weapon by Ship Security, another harlequin costume—this one tailored to his more rotund form—and a hawking mat.

“Jesus, Mike,” I said while running my hand over the exquisite design of the old carpet, “this can’t be legal.”

“I didn’t notice any customs agents back there,” grinned Mike. “And I seriously doubt that the locals have any traffic control ordinances.”

“Yes, but …” I trailed off and unrolled the rest of the mat. It was a little more than a meter wide and about two meters long. The rich fabric had faded with age but the flight threads were still as bright as new copper. “Where did you get it?” I asked. “Does it still work?”

“On Garden,” said Mike and stuffed my costume and his other gear into his backpack. “Yes, it does.”

It had been more than a century since old Vladimir Sholokov, Old Earth emigrant, master lepidopterist, and E-M systems engineer, had hand-crafted the first hawking mat for his beautiful young niece on Nova Terra. Legend had it that the niece had scorned the gift but over the decades the toys had become almost absurdly popular—more with rich adults than with children—until they were outlawed on most Hegemony worlds. Dangerous to handle, a waste of shielded monofilaments, almost impossible to deal with in controlled airspace, hawking mats had become curiosities reserved for bedtime stories, museums, and a few colony worlds.

“It must have cost you a fortune,” I said.

“Thirty marks,” said Mike and settled himself on the center of the carpet. “The old dealer in Carvnal Marketplace thought it was worthless. It was … for him. I brought it back to the ship, charged it up, reprogrammed the inertia chips, and viola!” Mike palmed the intricate design and the mat stiffened and rose fifteen centimeters above the rock ledge.

I stared doubtfully. “All right,” I said, “but what if it …”

“It won’t,” said Mike and impatiently patted the carpet behind him. “It’s fully charged. I know how to handle it. Come on, climb on or stand back. I want to get going before that storm gets any closer.”

“But I don’t think …”

“Come on, Merin. Make up your mind. I’m in a hurry.”

I hesitated for another second or two. If we were caught leaving the island, we would both be kicked off the ship. Shipwork was my life now. I had made that decision when I accepted the eight-mission Maui-Covenant contract. More than that, I was two hundred light years and five and a half leap years from civilization. Even if they brought us back to Hegemony-space, the round trip would have cost us eleven years worth of friends and family. The time-debt was irrevocable.

I crawled on the hovering hawking mat behind Mike. He stuffed the backpack between us, told me to hang on, and tapped at the flight designs. The mat rose five meters

above the ledge, banked quickly to the left, and shot out over the alien ocean. Three hundred meters below us, the surf crashed whitely in the deepening gloom. We rose higher above the rough water and headed north into the night.

In such seconds of decision entire futures are made.

I remember talking to Siri during our Second Reunion, shortly after we first visited the villa along the coast near Fevarone. We were walking along the beach. Alón had been allowed to stay in the city under Magritte's supervision. It was just as well. I was not truly comfortable with the boy. Only the undeniable green solemnity of his eyes and the disturbing mirror-familiarity of his short, dark curls and snub of a nose served to tie him to me … to us … in my mind. That and the quick, almost sardonic smile I would catch him hiding from Siri when she reprimanded him. It was a smile too cynically amused and self-observant to be so practiced in a ten-year-old. I knew it well. I would have thought such things were learned, not inherited.

"You know very little," Siri said to me. She was wading, shoeless, in a shallow tidepool. From time to time she would lift the delicate shell of a frenchhorn-conch, inspect it for flaws, and drop it back into the silty water.

"I've been well-trained," I replied.

"Yes, I'm sure you've been well-trained," agreed Siri. "I know you are quite skillful, Merin. But you know very little."

Irritated, unsure of how to respond, I walked along with my head lowered. I dug a white lavastone out of the sand and tossed it far out into the bay. Rainclouds were piling along the eastern horizon. I found myself wishing that I was back aboard the ship. I had been reluctant to return this time and now I knew that it had been a mistake. It was my third visit to Maui-Covenant, our Second Reunion as the poets and her people were calling it. I was five months away from being 21 standard years old. Siri had just celebrated her thirty-seventh birthday three weeks earlier.

"I've been to a lot of places you've never seen," I said at last. It sounded petulant and childish even to me.

"Oh, yes," said Siri and clapped her hands together. For a second, in her enthusiasm, I glimpsed my other Siri—the young girl I had dreamed about during the long nine months of turn-around. Then the image slid back to harsh reality and I was all too aware of her short hair, the loosening neck muscles, and the cords appearing on the backs of those once beloved hands. "You've been to places I'll never see," said Siri in a rush. Her voice was the same. Almost the same. "Merin, my love, you've already seen things I cannot even imagine. You probably know more facts about the universe than I would guess exist. But you know very little, my darling."

“What the hell are you talking about, Siri?” I sat down on a half-submerged log near the strip of wet sand and drew my knees up like a fence between us.

Siri strode out of the tidepool and came to kneel in front of me. She took my hands in hers and although mine were bigger, heavier, blunter of finger and bone, I could feel the strength in hers. I imagined it as the strength of years I had not shared. “You have to live to really know things, my love. Having Alón has helped me to understand that. There is something about raising a child that helps to sharpen one’s sense of what is real.”

“How do you mean?”

Siri squinted away from me for a few seconds and absently brushed back a strand of hair. Her left hand stayed firmly around both of mine. “I’m not sure,” she said softly. “I think one begins to feel when things aren’t important. I’m not sure how to put it. When you’ve spent thirty years entering rooms filled with strangers you feel less pressure than when you’ve had only half that number of years of experience. You know what the room and the people in it probably hold for you and you go looking for it. If it’s not there, you sense it earlier and leave to go about your business. You just know more about what is, what isn’t, and how little time there is to learn the difference. Do you understand, Merin? Do you follow me even a little bit?”

“No,” I said.

Siri nodded and bit her lower lip. But she did not speak again for a while. Instead, she leaned over and kissed me. Her lips were dry and a little questioning. I held back for a second, seeing the sky beyond her, wanting time to think. But then I felt the warm intrusion of her tongue and closed my eyes. The tide was coming in behind us. I felt a sympathetic warmth and rising as Siri unbuttoned my shirt and ran sharp fingernails across my chest. There was a second of emptiness between us and I opened my eyes in time to see her unfastening the last buttons on the front of her white dress. Her breasts were larger than I remembered, heavier, the nipples broader and darker. The chill air nipped at both of us until I pulled the fabric down her shoulders and brought our upper bodies together. We slid down along the log to the warm sand. I pressed her closer, all the while wondering how I possibly could have thought her the stronger one. Her skin tasted of salt.

Siri’s hands helped me. Her short hair pressed back against bleached wood, white cotton, and sand. My pulse outraced the surf.

“Do you understand, Merin?” she whispered to me seconds later as her warmth connected us.

“Yes,” I whispered back. But I did not.

Mike brought the hawking mat in from the east toward Firstsite. The flight had taken over an hour in the dark and I had spent most of the time huddling from the wind and waiting for the carpet to fold up and tumble us both into the sea. We were still half an hour out when we saw the first of the motile isles. Racing before the storm, treesails billowing, the islands sailed up from their southern feeding grounds in seemingly endless procession. Many were lit brilliantly, festooned with colored lanterns and shifting veils of gossamer light.

“You sure this is the way?” I shouted.

“Yes,” shouted Mike. He did not turn his head. The wind whipped his long, black hair back against my face. From time to time he would check his compass and make small corrections to our course. It might have been easier to follow the isles. We passed one—a large one almost half a kilometer in length—and I strained to make out details, but the isle was dark except for the glow of its phosphorescent wake. Dark shapes cut through the milky waves. I tapped Mike on the shoulder and pointed.

“Dolphins!” he shouted. “That’s what this colony was all about, remember? A bunch of do-gooders during the Hegira wanted to save all the mammals in Old Earth’s oceans. Didn’t succeed.”

I would have shouted another question but at that moment the headland and Firstsite Harbor came into view.

I had thought the stars were bright above Maui-Covenant. I had thought the migrating islands were memorable in their colorful display. But the city of Firstsite, wrapped about with harbor and hills, was a blazing beacon in the night. Its brilliance reminded me of a torchship I once had watched while it created its own plasma nova against the dark limb of a sullen gas giant. The city was a five-tiered honeycomb of white buildings, all illuminated by warmly glowing lanterns from within and by countless torches from without. The white lavastone of the volcanic island itself seemed to glow from the city light. Beyond the town were tents, pavilions, campfires, cooking fires, and great flaming pyres, too large for function, too large for anything except to serve as a welcome to the returning isles.

The harbor was filled with boats: bobbing catamarans with cowbells clanking from their masts; large-hulled, flat-bottomed houseboats built for creeping from port to port in the calm, equatorial shallows but proudly ablaze with strings of lights this night; and then the occasional oceangoing yacht, sleek and functional as a shark. A lighthouse set out on the pincer’s end of the harbor reef threw its beam far out to sea, illuminated wave and isle alike, and then swept its light back in to catch the colorful bobbing of ships and men.

Even from two kilometers out we could hear the noise. Sounds of celebration were clearly audible. Above the shouts and constant susurration of the surf rose the unmistakable notes of a Bach flute sonata. I learned later that this welcoming chorus was transmitted through hydrophones to the Passage Channels where dolphins leapt and cavorted to the music.

“My God, Mike, how did you know all of this was going on?”

“I asked the main ship computer,” said Mike. The hawking mat banked right to keep us far out from the ships and lighthouse beam. Then we curved back in north of Firstsite toward a dark spit of land. I could hear the soft booming of waves on the shallows ahead. “They have this festival every year,” Mike went on, “but this is their sesquicentennial. The party’s been going on for three weeks now and is scheduled to continue another two. There are only about 100,000 colonists on this whole world, Merin, and I bet half of them are here partying.”

We slowed, came in carefully, and touched down on a rocky outcropping not far from the beach. The storm had missed us to the south but intermittent flashes of lightning and the distant lights of advancing isles still marked the horizon. Overhead, the stars were not dimmed by the glow from Firstsite just over the rise from us. The air was warmer here and I caught the scent of orchards on the breeze. We folded up the hawking mat and hurried to get into our harlequin costumes. Mike slipped his laser pen and jewelry into loose pockets.

“What are those for?” I asked as we secured the backpack and hawking mat under a large boulder.

“These?” asked Mike as he dangled a Renaissance necklace from his fingers. “These are currency in case we have to negotiate for favors.”

“Favors?”

“Favors,” repeated Mike. “A lady’s largesse. Comfort to a weary space-farer. Nooky to you, kid.”

“Oh,” I said and adjusted my mask and fool’s cap. The bells made a soft sound in the dark.

“Come on,” said Mike. “We’ll miss the party.” I nodded and followed him, bells jangling, as we picked our way over stone and scrub toward the waiting light.

I sit here in the sunlight and wait. I am not totally certain what I am waiting for. I can feel a growing warmth on my back as the morning sunlight is reflected from the white

stone of Siri's tomb.

Siri's tomb?

There are no clouds in the sky. I raise my head and squint skyward as if I might be able to see the L.A. and the newly finished farcaster array through the glare of atmosphere. I cannot. Part of me knows that they have not risen yet. Part of me knows to the second the time remaining before ship and farcaster complete their transit to the zenith. Part of me does not want to think about it.

Siri, am I doing the right thing?

There is the sudden sound of pennants stirring on their staffs as the wind comes up. I sense rather than see the restlessness of the waiting crowd. For the first time since my planetfall for this, our Sixth Reunion, I am filled with sorrow. No, not sorrow, not yet, but a sharptoothed sadness which soon will open into grief. For years I have carried on silent conversations with Siri, framing questions to myself for future discussion with her, and it suddenly strikes me with cold clarity that we will never again sit together and talk. An emptiness begins to grow inside me.

Should I let it happen, Siri?

There is no response except for the growing murmurs of the crowd. In a few minutes they will send Donel, my younger and surviving son, or his daughter Lira up the hill to urge me on. I toss away the sprig of willowgrass I've been chewing on. There is a hint of shadow on the horizon. It could be a cloud. Or it could be the first of the isles, driven by instinct and the spring northerlies to migrate back to the great band of the equatorial shallows from whence they came. It does not matter.

Siri, am I doing the right thing?

There is no answer and the time grows shorter.

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Sometimes Siri seemed so ignorant it made me sick.

She knew nothing of my life away from her. She would ask questions but I sometimes wondered if she was interested in the answers. I spent many hours explaining the beautiful physics behind our C-plus spinships but she never did seem to understand. Once, after I had taken great care to detail the differences between their ancient seedship and the Los Angeles, Siri astounded me by asking, "But why did it take my ancestors 80 years of shiptime to reach Maui-Covenant when you can make the trip in 130 days?" She had understood nothing.

Siri's sense of history was, at best, pitiful. She viewed the Hegemony and the worldweb the way a child would view the fantasy world of a pleasant but rather silly myth; there was an indifference there that almost drove me mad at times.

Siri knew all about the early days of the Hegira—at least insofar as they pertained to the Maui-Covenant and the colonists—and she occasionally would come up with delightful bits of archaic trivia or phraseology, but she knew nothing of post-Hegira realities. Names like Garden and Ouster, Renaissance and Lusus meant little to her. I could mention Salmen Brey or General Horace Glennon-Hight and she would have no associations or reactions at all. None.

The last time I saw Siri she was 70 standard years old. She was 70 years old and still she had never: traveled offworld, used a comlog, tasted any alcoholic drink except wine; interfaced with an empathy surgeon, stepped through a farcaster door, smoked a cannabis stick, received gene tailoring, plugged into a stimsim, received any formal schooling, taken any RNA medication, heard of Zen Christianity, or flown any vehicle except an ancient Vikken skimmer belonging to her family.

Siri had never made love to anyone except me. Or so she said. And so I believed.

It was during our First Reunion, that time on the Archipelago, when Siri took me to talk with the dolphins.

We had risen to watch the dawn. The highest levels of the treehouse were a perfect place from which to watch the eastern sky pale and fade to morning. Ripples of high cirrus turned to rose and then the sea itself grew molten as the sun lifted above the flat horizon.

"Let's go swimming," said Siri. The rich, horizontal light bathed her skin and threw her shadow four meters across the boards of the platform.

"I'm too tired," I said. "Later." We had lain awake most of the night talking, making love, talking, and making love again. In the glare of morning I felt empty and vaguely nauseated. I sensed the slight movement of the isle under me as a tinge of vertigo, a drunkard's disconnection from gravity.

"No. Let's go now," said Siri and grasped my hand to pull me along. I was irritated but did not argue. Siri was 26, seven years older than me during that First Reunion, but her impulsive behavior often reminded me of the teen-aged Siri I had carried away from the Festival only ten of my months earlier. Her deep, unselfconscious laugh was the same. Her green eyes cut as sharply when she was impatient. The long mane of auburn hair had not changed. But her body had ripened, filled out with a promise which had been only hinted at before. Her breasts were still high and full, almost

girlish, bordered above by freckles that gave way to a whiteness so translucent that a gentle blue tracery of veins could be seen. But they were different somehow. She was different.

“Are you going to join me or just sit there staring?” asked Siri. She had slipped off her caftan as we came out onto the lowest deck. Our small ship was still tied to the dock. Above us, the island’s treesails were beginning to open to the morning breeze. For the past several days, Siri had insisted on wearing swimstrips when we went into the water. She wore none now. Her nipples rose in the cool air.

“Won’t we be left behind?” I asked, squinting up at the flapping treesails. On previous days we had waited for the doldrums in the middle of the day when the isle was still in the water, the sea a glazed mirror. Now the jibvines were beginning to pull taut as the thick leaves filled with wind.

“Don’t be silly,” said Siri. “We could always catch a keelroot and follow it back. That or a feeding tendril. Come on.” She tossed an osmosis mask at me and donned her own. The transparent film made her face look slick with oil. From the pocket of her caftan she lifted a thick medallion and set it in place around her neck. The metal looked dark and ominous against her skin.”

What’s that?” I asked.

Siri did not lift the osmosis mask to answer. She set the comthreads in place against her neck and handed me the hearplugs. Her voice was tinny. “Translation disk,” she said. “Thought you knew all about gadgets, Merin. Last one in’s a seaslug.” She held the disk in place between her breasts with one hand and stepped off the isle. I could see the pale globes of her buttocks as she pirouetted and kicked for depth. In seconds she was only a white blur deep in the water. I slipped my own mask on, pressed the comthreads tight, and stepped into the sea.

The bottom of the isle was a dark stain on a ceiling of crystalline light. I was wary of the thick feeding tendrils even though Siri had amply demonstrated that they were interested in devouring nothing larger than the tiny zoo-plankton that even now caught the sunlight like dust in an abandoned ballroom. Keelroots descended like gnarled stalactites for hundreds of meters into the purple depths.

The isle was moving. I could see the faint fibrilation of the tendrils as they trailed along. A wake caught the light ten meters above me. For a second I was choking, the gel of the mask smothering me as surely as the surrounding water would, and then I relaxed and the air flowed freely into my lungs.

“Deeper, Merin,” came Siri’s voice. I blinked—a slow motion blink as the mask readjusted itself over my eyes—and caught sight of Siri twenty meters lower, grasping

a keelroot and trailing effortlessly above the colder, deeper currents where the light did not reach. I thought of the thousands of meters of water under me, of the things which might lurk there, unknown, unsought-out by the human colonists. I thought of the dark and the depths and my scrotum tightened involuntarily.

“Come on down.” Siri’s voice was an insect buzz in my ears. I rotated and kicked. The buoyancy here was not so great as in Old Earth’s seas, but it still took energy to dive so deep. The mask compensated for depth and nitrogen but I could feel the pressure against my skin and ears. Finally I quit kicking, grabbed a keelroot, and roughly hauled myself down to Siri’s level.

We floated side by side in the dim light. Siri was a spectral figure here, her long hair swirling in a wine-dark nimbus, the pale strips of her body glowing in the blue-green light. The surface seemed impossibly distant. The widening V of the wake and the drift of the scores of tendrils showed that the isle was moving more quickly now, moving mindlessly to other feeding grounds, distant waters.

“Where are the …” I began to subvocalize.

“Shhh,” said Siri. She fiddled with the medallion. I could hear them then; the shrieks and trills and whistles and cat purrs and echoing cries. The depths were suddenly filled with strange music.

“Jesus,” I said and because Siri had tuned our comthreads to the translator, the word was broadcast as a senseless whistle and toot.

“Hello!” she called and the translated greeting echoed from the transmitter; a high-speed bird’s call sliding into the ultrasonic. “Hello!” she called again.

Minutes passed before the dolphins came to investigate. They rolled past us, surprisingly large, alarmingly large, their skin looking slick and muscled in the uncertain light. A large one swam within a meter of us, turning at the last moment so that the white of his belly curved past us like a wall. I could see the dark eye rotate to follow me as he passed. One stroke of his wide fluke kicked up a turbulence strong enough to convince me of the animal’s power.

“Hello,” called Siri but the swift form faded into distant haze and there was a sudden silence. Siri clicked off the translator. “Do you want to talk to them?” she asked.

“Sure.” I was dubious. More than three centuries of effort had not raised much of a dialogue between man and sea-mammal. Mike had once told me that the thought structures of Old Earth’s two groups of orphans were too different, the referents too few. One pre-Hegira expert had written that speaking to a dolphin or porpoise was about as rewarding as speaking to a one-year-old human infant. Both sides usually

enjoyed the exchange and there was a simulacrum of conversation, but neither party would come away the more knowledgeable. Siri switched the translator disk back on. “Hello,” I said.

There was a final minute of silence and then our earphones were buzzing while the sea echoed shrill ululations.

distance/no-fluke/hello-tone?/current pulse/circle me/funny?

“What the hell?” I asked Siri and the translator trilled out my question. Siri was grinning under her osmosis mask.

I tried again. “Hello! Greetings from … uh … the surface. How are you?”

The large male … I assumed it to be a male … curved in toward us like a torpedo. He arch-kicked his way through the water ten times faster than I could have swum even if I had remembered to don flippers that morning. For a second I thought he was going to ram us and I raised my knees and clung tightly to the keelroot. Then he was past us, climbing for air, while Siri and I reeled from his turbulent wake and the high tones of his shout.

no-fluke/no-feed/no-swim/no-play/no-fun.

Siri switched off the translator and floated closer. She lightly grasped my shoulders while I held onto the keelroot with my right hand. Our legs touched as we drifted through the warm water. A school of tiny, crimson warriorfish flickered above us while the dark shapes of the dolphins circled further out.

“Had enough?” she asked. Her hand was flat on my chest.

“One more try,” I said. Siri nodded and twisted the disk to life. The current pushed us together again. She slid her arm around me.

“Why do you herd the islands?” I asked the bottle-nosed shapes circling in the dappled light. “How does it benefit you to stay with the isles?”

sounding now/old songs/deep water/no-Great Voices/no-Shark/old songs/new songs.

Siri’s body lay along the length of me now. Her left arm tightened around me. “Great Voices were the whales,” she whispered. Her hair fanned out in streamers. Her right hand moved down and seemed surprised at what it found.

“Do you miss the Great Voices?” I asked the shadows. There was no response. Siri slid her legs around my hips. The surface was a churning bowl of light forty meters above

us.

“What do you miss most of Old Earth’s oceans?” I asked. With my left arm I pulled Siri closer, slid my hand down along the curve of her back to where her buttocks rose to meet my palm, and held her tight. To the circling dolphins we must have appeared a single creature. Siri lifted herself against me and we became a single creature.

The translator disk had twisted around so it trailed over Siri’s shoulder. I reached to shut it off but paused as the answer to my question buzzed urgently in our ears.

miss Shark/miss Shark/miss Shark/miss Shark/Shark/Shark/Shark

I turned off the disk and shook my head. I did not understand. There was so much I did not understand. I closed my eyes as Siri and I moved gently to the rhythms of the current and ourselves while the dolphins swam nearby and the cadence of their calls took on the sad, slow trilling of an old lament.

I sit here in the sunlight and wait. Now that I have made my decision, I wonder if it is what Siri wanted all along.

The tomb is a white glare behind me. The sunlight touches my skin. I can hear a low murmur from the restless crowd on the hillside. Several of the council members are conferring with Donel. Soon he will climb the slope to urge me on. The farcaster ceremonies cannot wait for me.

Is this what you wanted, Siri?”

I desperately want to talk to her now. I want to ask her who it was who so deftly crafted and shaped the legend that was our love.

Was it you, Siri? Could a not-quite sixteen-year-old have planned so far ahead?

Surf breaks against the lavastone seawall. I can hear the bells ringing as the small boats bob at anchorage. I sit in the sunlight and wait.

Where were you when I awoke that first time, Siri?

Somewhere to the south a Thomas Hawk screams. There is no other answer.

Siri and I came down out of the hills and returned to the Festival just before sunrise of the second day. For a night and a day we had roamed the hills, eaten with strangers in pavilions of orange silk, bathed together in the icy waters of the Shree, and danced to the music which never ceased going out to the endless file of passing isles. We were hungry. I had awakened at sunset to find Siri gone. She returned before the moon of

Maui-Covenant rose. She told me that her parents had gone off with friends for several days on a slow-moving houseboat. They had left the family skimmer in Firstsite. Now we worked our way from dance to dance, bonfire to bonfire, back to the center of the city. We planned to fly west to her family estate near Fevarone.

It was very late but Firstsite Common still had its share of revelers. I was very happy. I was nineteen and I was in love and the .93 gravity of Maui-Covenant seemed much less to me. I could have flown had I wished. I could have done anything.

We had stopped at a booth and bought fried dough and mugs of black coffee. Suddenly a thought struck me. I asked, “How did you know I was a Shipman?”

“Hush, friend Merin. Eat your poor breakfast. When we get to the villa, I will fix a true meal to break our fast.”

“No, I’m serious,” I said and wiped grease off my chin with the sleeve of my less-than-clean harlequin’s costume. “This morning you said that you knew right away last night that I was from the ship. Why was that? Was it my accent? My costume? Mike and I saw other fellows dressed like this.”

Siri laughed and brushed back her hair. “Just be glad it was I who spied you out, Merin my love. Had it been my Uncle Gresham or his friends it would have meant trouble.”

“Oh? Why is that?” I picked up one more fried ring and Siri paid for it. I followed her through the thinning crowd. Despite the motion and the music all about, I felt weariness beginning to work on me.

“They are Separatists,” said Siri. “Uncle Gresham recently gave a speech before the All Thing urging that we fight rather than agree to be swallowed into your Hegemony. He said that we should destroy your farcaster device before it destroys us.”

“Oh?” I said. “Did he say how he was going to do that? The last I heard you folks had no craft to get offworld in.”

“Nay, nor for the past fifty years have we,” said Siri. “But it shows how irrational the Separatists can be.”

I nodded. Shipmaster Singh and Councillor Halmyn had briefed us on the so-called Separatists of Maui-Covenant. “The usual coalition of colonial jingoists and throwbacks,” Singh had said. “Another reason we go slowly and develop the world’s trade potential before finishing the farcaster. The worldweb doesn’t need these yahoos coming in prematurely. And groups like the Separatists are another reason to keep you crew and construction workers the hell away from the groundlings.”

“Where is your skimmer?” I asked. The Common was emptying quickly. Most of the bands had packed up their instruments for the night. Gaily costumed heaps lay snoring on the grass or cobblestones amid the litter and unlit lanterns. Only a few enclaves of merriment remained, groups dancing slowly to a lone guitar or singing drunkenly to themselves. I saw Mike Osho at once, a patch-worked fool, his mask long gone, a girl on either arm. He was trying to teach the hora to a rapt but inept circle of admirers. One of the troupe would stumble and they would all fall down. Mike would flog them to their feet among general laughter and they would start again, hopping clumsily to his basso-profundo chant.

“There it is,” said Siri and pointed to a short line of skimmers parked behind the Common Hall. I nodded and waved to Mike but he was too busy hanging on to his two ladies to notice me. Siri and I had crossed the square and were in the shadows of the old building when the shout went up.

“Shipman! Turn around, you Hegemony son-of-a-bitch.”

I froze and then wheeled around with fists clenched but no one was near me. Six young men had descended the steps from the grandstand and were standing in a semicircle behind Mike. The man in front was tall, slim, and strikingly handsome. He was twenty-five or twenty-six years old and his long blonde curls spilled down on a crimson silk suit that emphasized his physique. In his right hand he carried a meter-long sword that looked to be of tempered steel.

Mike turned slowly. Even from a distance I could see his eyes sobering as he surveyed the situation. The women at his side and a couple of the young men in his group tittered as if something humorous had been said. Mike allowed the inebriated grin to stay on his face. “You address me, sir?” he asked.

“I address you, you Hegemony whore’s son,” hissed the leader of the group. His handsome face was twisted into a sneer.

“Bertol,” whispered Siri. “My cousin. Gresham’s younger son.” I nodded and stepped out of the shadows. Siri caught my arm.

“That is twice you have referred unkindly to my mother, sir,” slurred Mike. “Have she or I offended you in some way? If so, a thousand pardons.” Mike bowed so deeply that the bells on his cap almost brushed the ground. Members of his group applauded.

“Your presence offends me, you Hegemony bastard. You stink up our air with your fat carcass.”

Mike’s eyebrows rose comically. A young man near him in a fish costume waved his

hand. “Oh, come on, Bertol. He’s just …”

“Shut up, Ferick. It is this fat shithead I am speaking

to.”

“Shithead?” repeated Mike, eyebrows still raised. “I’ve traveled two hundred light years to be called a fat shithead? It hardly seems worth it.” He pivoted gracefully, untangling himself from the women as he did so. I would have joined Mike then but Siri clung tightly to my arm, whispering unheard entreaties. When I was free I saw that Mike was still smiling, still playing the fool. But his left hand was in his baggy shirt pocket.

“Give him your blade, Creg,” snapped Bertol. One of the younger men tossed a sword hilt-first to Mike. Mike watched it arc by and clang loudly on the cobblestones.

“You can’t be serious,” said Mike in a soft voice that was suddenly quite sober. “You cretinous cowturd. Do you really think I’m going to play duel with you just because you get a hard-on acting the hero for these yokels?”

“Pick up the sword,” screamed Bertol, “or by God I’ll carve you where you stand.” He took a quick step forward. The youth’s face contorted with fury as he advanced.

“Fuck off,” said Mike. In his left hand was the laser pen.

“No!” I yelled and ran into the light. That pen was used by construction workers to scrawl marks on girders of whiskered alloy.

Things happened very quickly then. Bertol took another step and Mike flicked the green beam across him almost casually. The colonist let out a cry and leaped back; a smoking line of black was slashed diagonally across his silk shirtfront. I hesitated. Mike had the setting as low as it could go. Two of Bertol’s friends started forward and Mike swung the light across their shins. One dropped to his knees cursing and the other hopped away holding his leg and hooting.

A crowd had gathered. They laughed as Mike swept off his fool’s cap in another bow. “I thank you,” said Mike. “My mother thanks you.”

Siri’s cousin strained against his rage. Froths of spittle spilled on his lips and chin. I pushed through the crowd and stepped between Mike and the tall colonist.

“Hey, it’s all right,” I said. “We’re leaving. We’re going now.”

“Goddamn it, Merin, get out of the way,” said Mike.

“It’s all right,” I said as I turned to him. “I’m with a girl named Siri who has a …” Bertol stepped forward and lunged past me with his blade. I wrapped my left arm around his shoulder and flung him back. He tumbled heavily onto the grass.

“Oh, shit,” said Mike as he backed up several paces. He looked tired and a little disgusted as he sat down on a stone step. “Aw, damn,” he said softly. There was a short line of crimson in one of the black patches on the left side of his harlequin costume. As I watched, the narrow slit spilled over and blood ran down across Mike Osho’s broad belly.

“Oh, Jesus, Mike.” I tore a strip of fabric from my shirt and tried to staunch the flow. I could remember none of the first-aid we’d been taught as midshipmen. I pawed at my wrist but my comlog was not there. We had left them on the Los Angeles.

“It’s not so bad, Mike,” I gasped. “It’s just a little cut.” The blood flowed down over my hand and wrist.

“It will serve,” said Mike. His voice was held taut by a cord of pain. “Damn. A fucking sword. Do you believe it, Merin? Cut down in the prime of my prime by a piece of fucking cutlery out of a fucking one-penny opera. Oh, damn that smarts.”

“Three-penny opera,” I said and changed hands. The rag was soaked.

“You know what your fucking problem is, Merin? You’re always sticking your fucking two cents in. Awwwww.” Mike’s face went white and then gray. He lowered his chin to his chest and breathed deeply. “To hell with this, kid. Let’s go home, huh?”

I looked over my shoulder. Bertol was slowly moving away with his friends. The rest of the crowd milled around in shock. “Call a doctor!” I screamed. “Get some medics up here!” Two men ran down the street. There was no sign of Siri.

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute!” said Mike in a stronger voice, as if he had forgotten something important. “Just a minute,” he said and died.

Died. A real death. Brain death. His mouth opened obscenely, his eyes rolled back so only the whites showed, and a minute later the blood ceased pumping from the wound.

For a few mad seconds I cursed the sky. I could see the L.A. moving across the fading starfield and I knew that I could bring Mike back if I could get him there in a few minutes. The crowd backed away as I screamed and ranted at the stars.

Eventually I turned to Bertol. “You,” I said.

The young man had stopped at the far end of the Common. His face was ashen. He stared wordlessly.

“You,” I said again. I picked up the laser pen from where it had rolled, clicked the power to maximum, and walked to where Bertol and his friends stood waiting.

Later, through the haze of screams and scorched flesh, I was dimly aware of Siri’s skimmer setting down in the crowded square, of dust flying up all around, and of her voice commanding me to join her. We lifted away from the light and madness. The cool wind blew my sweat-soaked hair away from my neck.

“We will go to Fevarone,” said Siri. “Bertol was drunk. The Separatists are a small, violent group. There will be no reprisals. You will stay with me until the All Thing holds the inquest.”

“No,” I said. “There. Land there.” I pointed to a spit of land not far from the city.

Siri landed despite her protests. I glanced at the boulder to make sure the backpack was still there and then climbed out of the skimmer. Siri slid across the seat and pulled my head down to hers. “Merin, my love.” Her lips were warm and open but I felt nothing. My body felt anaesthetized. I stepped back and waved her away. She brushed her hair back and stared at me from green eyes filled with tears. Then the skimmer lifted, turned, and sped to the south in the early morning light.

Just a minute, I felt like calling. I sat on a rock and gripped my knees as several ragged sobs were torn up out of me. Then I stood and threw the laser pen into the surf below. I tugged out the backpack and dumped the contents on the ground.

The hawking mat was gone.

I sat back down, too drained to laugh or cry or walk away. The sun rose as I sat there. I was still sitting there three hours later when the large, black skimmer from Ship Security set down silently beside me.

• • •

“Father? Father, it is getting late.”

I turn to see my son Donel standing behind me. He is wearing the blue and gold robe of the Hegemony Council. His bald scalp is flushed and beaded with sweat. Donel is only 43 but he seems much older to me.

“Please, Father,” he says. I nod and rise, brushing off the grass and dirt. We walk together to the front of the tomb. The crowd has pressed closer now. Gravel crunches

under their feet as they shift restlessly. “Shall I enter with you, Father?” Donel asks.

I pause to look at this aging stranger who is my child. There is a little of Siri or me reflected in him. His face is friendly, florid, and tense with the excitement of the day. I can sense in him the open honesty which often takes the place of intelligence in some people. I cannot help but compare this balding puppy of a man to Alón—Alón of the dark curls and silences and sardonic smile. But Alón is 33 years dead, cut down in a stupid battle which had nothing to do with him.

“No,” I say. “I’ll go in by myself. Thank you, Donel.”

He nods and steps back. The pennants snap above the heads of the straining crowd. I turn my attention to the tomb.

The entrance is sealed with a palmlock. I have only to touch it.

During the past few minutes I have developed a fantasy which will save me from both the growing sadness within and the external series of events which I have initiated. Siri is not dead. In the last stages of her illness she had called together the doctors and the few technicians left in the colony and they rebuilt for her one of the ancient hibernation chambers used in their seedship two centuries earlier. Siri is only sleeping. What is more, the year-long sleep has somehow restored her youth. When I wake her she will be the Siri I remember from our early days. We will walk out into the sunlight together and when the farcaster doors open we shall be the first through.

“Father?”

“Yes.” I step forward and set my hand to the door of the crypt. There is a whisper of electric motors and the white slab of stone slides back. I bow my head and enter Siri’s tomb.

“Damn it, Merin, secure that line before it knocks you overboard. Hurry!” I hurried. The wet rope was hard to coil, harder to tie off. Siri shook her head in disgust and leaned over to tie a bowline knot with one hand.

It was our Fifth Reunion. I had been three months too late for her birthday but more than five thousand other people had made it to the celebration. The President of the All Thing had wished her well in a forty-minute speech. A poet read his most recent verses to the Love Cycle Sonnets. The Hegemony Ambassador had presented her with a scroll and a new ship, a small submersible powered by the first fusion-cells to be allowed on Maui-Covenant.

Siri had eighteen other ships. Twelve belonged to her fleet of swift catamarans that plied their trade between the wandering Archipelago and the Home Islands. Two were

beautiful racing yachts that were used only twice a year to win the Founder's Regatta and the Covenant Criterium. The other four craft were ancient fishing boats, homely and awkward, well-maintained but little more than scows.

Siri had nineteen ships but we were on a fishing boat—the Ginnie Paul. For the past eight days we had fished the shelf of the Equatorial Shallows; a crew of two, casting and pulling nets, wading knee-deep through stinking fish and crunching trilobites, wallowing over every wave, casting and pulling nets, keeping watch, and sleeping like exhausted children during our brief rest periods. I was not quite 23. I thought I was used to heavy labor aboard the L.A. and it was my custom to put in an hour of exercise in the 1.3-gee pod every second shift, but now my arms and back ached from the strain and my hands were blistered between the callouses. Siri had just turned 70.

"Merin, go forward and reef the foresail. Do the same for the jib and then go below to see to the sandwiches. Plenty of mustard."

I nodded and went forward. For a day and a half we had been playing hide and seek with a storm; sailing before it when we could, turning about and accepting its punishment when we had to. At first it had been exciting, a welcome respite from the endless casting and pulling and mending. But after the first few hours the adrenaline rush faded to be replaced by constant nausea, fatigue, and a terrible tiredness. The seas did not relent. The waves grew to six meters and higher. The Ginnie Paul wallowed like the broad-beamed matron she was. Everything was wet. My skin was soaked under three layers of rain gear. For Siri it was a long-awaited vacation.

"This is nothing," she had said during the darkest hour of the night as waves washed over the deck and smashed against the scarred plastic of the cockpit. "You should see it during simoon season."

The clouds still hung low and blended into gray waves in the distance but the sea was down to a gentle five-foot chop. I spread mustard across the roast beef sandwiches and poured steaming coffee into thick, white mugs. It would have been easier to transport the coffee in zero-gee without spilling it than to get it up the pitching shaft of the companionway. Siri accepted her depleted cup without commenting. We sat in silence for a bit, appreciating the food and the tongue-scalding warmth of the coffee. I took the wheel when Siri went below to refill our mugs. The gray day was dimming almost imperceptibly into night.

"Merin," she said after handing me my mug and taking a seat on the long, cushioned bench which encircled the cockpit, "what will happen after they open the farcaster?"

I was surprised by the question. We rarely talked about the time when Maui-Covenant would join the Hegemony. I glanced over at Siri and was shocked by the countenance revealed by the harsh, upward glare of the instrument lights. Siri's face showed a

hidden mosaic of seams and shadows which would soon replace the pale, translucent complexion of the woman I had known. Her beautiful, green eyes were hidden in wells of darkness and the cruel light turned her cheekbones into knife-edges against brittle parchment. Siri's gray hair was cut short and now it stuck out in damp spikes. I could see the tendoned cords under the loose skin of her neck and wrists. Age was laying claim to Siri.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What will happen after they open the farcaster?"

"You know what the Council says." I spoke loudly, as if she were hard of hearing. "It will open a new era of trade and technology for Maui-Covenant. You won't be restricted to one little world any longer. When you become citizens, everyone will be entitled to use the farcaster doors."

"Yes," said Siri. Her voice was weary. "I have heard all of that, Merin. But what will happen? Who will be the first through to us?"

I shrugged. "More diplomats, I suppose. Cultural contact specialists. Anthropologists. Ethnologists. Marine biologists."

"And then?"

I paused. It was dark out. The sea was almost gentle. Our running lights glowed red and green against the night. I felt the same anxiety I had known two days earlier when the wall of storm appeared on the horizon. I said, "And then will come the missionaries. The petroleum geologists. The sea farmers. The developers."

Siri sipped at her coffee. "I would have thought your Hegemony was far beyond a petroleum economy."

I laughed and locked the wheel in. "Nobody gets beyond a petroleum economy. Not while the petroleum's there. We don't burn it, if that's what you mean. But it's still essential for the production of plastics, synthetics, food base, and keroids. Two hundred billion people use a lot of plastic."

"And Maui-Covenant has oil?"

"Oh, yes," I said. There was no more laughter in me. "There are billions of barrels reservoired under the Equatorial Shallows alone."

"How will they get it, Merin? Platforms?"

“Yeah. Platforms. Submersibles. Sub-sea colonies with tailored workers brought in from Ouster or the Tau Ceti Cities.”

“And the motile isles?” asked Siri. “They must return each year to the shallows to feed on the bluekelp there and to reproduce. What will become of the isles?”

I shrugged again. I had drunk too much coffee and it left a bitter taste in my mouth. “I don’t know,” I said. “They haven’t told the crew much. But back on our first trip out, Mike heard that they planned to develop as many of the isles as they can, so some will be protected.”

“Developed?” Siri’s voice showed surprise for the first time. “How can they develop the isles? Even the Founder’s Families must ask permission of the Sea Folk to build our treehouse retreats there.”

I smiled at Siri’s use of the local term for the dolphins. The Maui-Covenant colonists were such children when it came to their damned dolphins. “The plans are all set,” I said. “There are 128,573 motile isles big enough to build a dwelling on. Leases to those have long since been sold. The smaller isles will be broken up, I suppose. The Home Islands will be developed for recreation purposes.”

“Recreation purposes,” echoed Siri. “How many people from the Hegemony will use the farcaster to come here … for recreation purposes?”

“At first, you mean?” I asked. “Just a few thousand the first year. As long as the only door is on Island 241 … the Trade Center … it will be limited. Perhaps 50,000 the second year when Firstsite gets its door. It’ll be quite the luxury tour. Always is after a seed colony is first opened to the web.”

“And later?”

“After the five-year probation? There will be thousands of doors, of course. I would imagine that there will be twenty or thirty million new residents coming through during the first year of full citizenship.”

“Twenty or thirty million,” said Siri. The light from the compass stand illuminated her lined face from below. There was still a beauty there. But there was no anger or shock. I had expected both.

“But you’ll be citizens then yourself,” I said. “Free to step anywhere in the worldweb. There will be sixteen new worlds to choose from. Probably more by then.”

“Yes,” said Siri and set aside her empty mug. A fine rain streaked the glass around us. The crude radar screen set in its hand-carved frame showed the seas empty, the storm

past. “Is it true, Merin, that people in the Hegemony have their homes on a dozen worlds? One house, I mean, with windows facing out on a dozen skies?”

“Sure,” I said. “But not many people. Only the rich can afford multi-world residences like that.”

Siri smiled and set her hand on my knee. The back of her hand was mottled and blue-veined. “But you are very rich, are you not, Shipman?”

I looked away. “Not yet I’m not.”

“Ah, but soon, Merin, soon. How long for you, my love? Less than two weeks here and then the voyage back to your Hegemony. Five months more of your time to bring the last components back, a few weeks to finish, and then you step home a rich man. Step two hundred empty light years home. What a strange thought … but where was I? That is how long? Less than a standard year.”

“Ten months,” I said. “Three hundred and six standard days. Three hundred fourteen of yours. Nine hundred eighteen shifts.”

“And then your exile will be over.”

“Yes.”

“And you will be twenty-four years old and very rich.”

“Yes.”

“I’m tired, Merin. I want to sleep now.”

We programmed the tiller, set the collision alarm, and went below. The wind had risen some and the old vessel wallowed from wavecrest to trough with every swell. We undressed in the dim light of the swinging lamp. I was first in the bunk and under the covers. It was the first time Siri and I had shared a sleep period. Remembering our last Reunion and her shyness at the villa, I expected her to douse the light. Instead she stood a minute, nude in the chill air, thin arms calmly at her sides.

Time had claimed Siri but had not ravaged her. Gravity had done its inevitable work on her breasts and buttocks and she was much thinner. I stared at the gaunt outlines of ribs and breastbone and remembered the sixteen-year-old girl with baby fat and skin like warm velvet. In the cold light of the swinging lamp I stared at Siri’s sagging flesh and remembered moonlight on budding breasts. Yet somehow, strangely, inexplicably, it was the same Siri who stood before me now.

“Move over, Merin.” She slipped into the bunk beside me. The sheets were cool against our skin, the rough blanket welcome. I turned off the light. The little ship swayed to the regular rhythm of the sea’s breathing. I could hear the sympathetic creak of masts and rigging. In the morning we would be casting and pulling and mending but now there was time to sleep. I began to doze to the sound of waves against wood.

“Merin?”

“Yes?”

“What would happen if the Separatists attacked the Hegemony tourists or the new residents?”

“I thought the Separatists had all been carted off to the isles.”

“They have been. But what if they resisted?”

“The Hegemony would send in troops who could kick the shit out of the Separatists.”

“What if the farcaster itself were attacked … destroyed before it was operational?”

“Impossible.”

“Yes, I know, but what if it were?”

“Then the Los Angeles would return nine months later with Hegemony troops who would proceed to kick the shit out of the Separatists … and anyone else on Maui-Covenant who got in their way.”

“Nine months shiptime,” said Siri. “Eleven years of our time.”

“But inevitable either way,” I said. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“All right,” said Siri but we did not speak. I listened to the creak and sigh of the ship. Siri had nestled in the hollow of my arm. Her head was on my shoulder and her breathing was so deep and regular that I thought her to be asleep. I was almost asleep myself when her warm hand slid up my leg and lightly cupped me. I startled even as I began to stir and stiffen. Siri whispered an answer to my unasked question. “No, Merin, one is never really too old. At least not too old to want the warmth and closeness. You decide, my love. I will be content either way.”

I decided. Towards the dawn we slept.

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The tomb is empty.

“Donel, come in here!”

He bustled in, robes rustling in the hollow emptiness. The tomb is empty. There is no hibernation chamber—I did not truly expect there to be one—but neither is there sarcophagus nor coffin. A bright bulb illuminates the white interior. “What the hell is this, Donel? I thought this was Siri’s tomb.”

“It is, Father.”

“Where is she interred? Under the floor for Chrissake?”

Donel mops at his brow. I remember that it is his mother I am speaking of. I also remember that he has had almost two years to accustom himself to the idea of her death.

“No one told you?” he asks.

“Told me what?” The anger and confusion is already ebbing. “I was rushed here from the dropship station and told that I was to visit Siri’s tomb before the farcaster opening. What?”

“Mother was cremated as per her instructions. Her ashes were spread on the Great South Sea from the highest platform of the family isle.”

“Then why this … crypt?” I watch what I say. Donel is sensitive.

He mops his brow again and glances toward the door. We are shielded from the view of the crowd but we are far behind schedule. Already the other members of the Council have had to hurry down the hill to join the other dignitaries on the bandstand. My slow grief this day has been worse than bad timing—it has turned into bad theater.

“Mother left instructions. They were carried out.” He touches a panel on the inner wall and it slides up to reveal a small niche containing a metal box. My name is on it.

“What is that?”

Donel shakes his head. “Personal items Mother left for you. Only Magritte knew the details and she died last winter without telling anyone.”

“All right,” I say. “Thank you. I’ll be out in a moment.”

Donel glances at his chronometer. “The ceremony begins in eight minutes. They will activate the farcaster in twenty minutes.”

“I know,” I say. I do know. Part of me knows precisely how much time is left. “I’ll be out in a moment.”

Donel hesitates and then departs. I close the door behind him with a touch of my palm. The metal box is surprisingly heavy. I set it on the stone floor and crouch beside it. A smaller palmlock gives me access. The lid clicks open and I peer into the container.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I say softly. I do not know what I expected—artifacts perhaps, nostalgic mementos of our hundred and three days together—perhaps a pressed flower from some forgotten offering or the frenchhorn conch we dove for off Fevarone. But there are no mementos—not as such.

The box holds a small Steiner-Ginn handlaser, one of the most powerful projection weapons ever made. The accumulator is attached by a powerlead to a small fusion-cell that Siri must have cannibalized from her new submersible. Also attached to the fusion-cell is an ancient comlog, an antique with a solid state interior and a liquid crystal diskey. The charge indicator glows green.

There are two other objects in the box. One is the translator medallion we had used so long ago. The final object makes me smile ruefully.

“Why you little bitch,” I say softly. I know now where Siri had been when I awoke alone that first time in the hills above Firstsite. I shake my head and smile again. “You dear, conniving, little bitch.” There, rolled carefully, powerleads correctly attached, lies the hawking mat which Mike Osho had purchased for thirty marks in Carvnal Market.

I leave the hawking mat there, disconnect the comlog, and lift it out. The device is ancient, possibly dating back to pre-Hegira times. I can imagine it being handed down in Siri’s family from the seedship generation. I sit cross-legged on the cold stone and thumb the diskey. The light in the crypt fades and suddenly Siri is there before me.

• • •

They did not throw me off the ship when Mike died. They could have but they did not. They did not leave me to the mercy of provincial justice on Maui-Covenant. They could have but they chose not to. For two days I was held in Security and questioned, once by Shipmaster Singh himself. Then they let me return to duty. For the four months of the long leap back I tortured myself with the memory of Mike’s murder. I knew that in my clumsy way I had helped to murder him. I put in my shifts, dreamed my sweaty

nightmares, and wondered if they would dismiss me when we reached the web. They could have told me but they chose not to.

They did not dismiss me. I was to have my normal leave in the web but could take no off-Ship R-and-R while in the Maui-Covenant system. In addition, there was a written reprimand and temporary reduction in rank. That was what Mike's life had been worth—a reprimand and reduction in rank.

I took my three-week leave with the rest of the crew but unlike the others I did not plan to return. I farcast to Esperance and made the classic Shipman's mistake of trying to visit family. Two days in the crowded residential hive was enough and I stepped to Lusus and took my pleasure in three days of whoring on the Rue des Chats. When my mood turned darker I 'cast to Ouster and lost most of my ready marks betting on the bloody Shrike fights there.

Finally I found myself farcasting to Homesystem Station and taking the two-day pilgrim shuttle down to Hellas Basin. I had never been to Homesystem or Mars before and I never plan to return, but the ten days I spent there, alone and wandering the dusty, haunted corridors of the Monastery, served to send me back to the Ship. Back to Siri.

Occasionally I would leave the red-stoned maze of the megalith and, clad only in skinsuit and mask, stand on one of the uncounted thousands of stone balconies and stare skyward at the pale gray star which had once been Old Earth. Sometimes then I thought of the brave and stupid idealists heading out into the great dark in their slow and leaking ships, carrying embryos and ideologies with equal faith and care. But most times I did not try to think. Most times I simply stood in the purple night and let Siri come to me. There in the Master's Rock, where perfect satori had eluded so many much more worthy pilgrims, I achieved it through the memory of a not-quite sixteen-year-old womanchild's body lying next to mine while moonlight spilled from a Thomas Hawk's wings.

When the Los Angeles spun back up to a quantum state, I went with her. Four months later I was content to pull my shift with the construction crew, plug into my usual stims, and sleep my R-and-R away. Then Singh came to me. "You're going down," he said. I did not understand. "In the past eleven years the groundlings have turned your screw-up with Osho into a goddamned legend," said Singh. "There's an entire cultural mythos built around your little roll in the hay with that colonial girl."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I was irritated and frightened. "Are you throwing me off the Ship?"

Singh grunted and brushed idly at his right eyebrow. The gold bracelet on his wrist caught the light. "Did you know that your groundside girlfriend was a member of their

original Shipmaster's family?" he asked. "Sort of the local equivalent of royalty."

"Siri?" I said stupidly.

"She told the story of your … what shall we call it … your love affair to everyone she could. Poems have been written about it. There was a play performed every year on one of those floating islands of theirs. Evidently there's an entire cult that's sprung up. You seem to be at the center of a romantic legend that's caught the imagination of most of the yokels on the planet."

"Are you throwing me off the Ship?"

"Don't be stupid, Aspic," growled Singh. "You'll spend your three weeks of leave groundside. The Hegemony needs this planet. The Ambassador says that we need the cooperation of the groundlings until the farcaster's operational and we get some occupation troops through. If this half-assed, star-crossed-lovers myth can smooth things for us during the next few trips, fine. The experts say you'll do the Hegemony more good down there than up here. We'll see."

"Siri?" I said again.

"Get your gear," ordered Singh. "You're going down."

The world was waiting. Crowds were cheering. Siri was waving. We left the harbor in a yellow catamaran and sailed south-southeast, bound for the Archipelago and her family isle.

"Hello, Merin." Siri floats in the darkness of her tomb. The holo is not perfect; a haziness mars the edges. But it is Siri—Siri as I last saw her, gray hair shorn rather than cut, head high, face sharpened with shadows. "Hello, Merin my love."

"Hello, Siri," I say. The tomb door is closed.

"I am sorry I cannot share our Sixth Reunion, Merin. I looked forward to it." Siri pauses and looks down at her hands. The image flickers slightly as dust motes float through her form. "I had carefully planned what to say here," she goes on. "How to say it. Arguments to be pled. Instructions to be given. But I know now how useless that would have been. Either I have said it already and you have heard or there is nothing left to say and silence would best suit the moment."

Siri's voice had grown even more beautiful with age. There is a fullness and calmness there which can come only from knowing pain. Siri moves her hands and they disappear beyond the border of the projection. "Merin my love, how strange our days apart and together have been. How beautifully absurd the myth that bound us. My

days were but heartbeats to you. I hated you for that. You were the mirror that would not lie. If you could have seen your face at the beginning of each Reunion! The least you could have done was to hide your shock … that, at least, you could have done for me.

“But through your clumsy naïveté there has always been … what? … something, Merin. There is something there that belies the callowness and thoughtless egotism which you wear so well. A caring, perhaps. A respect for caring, if nothing else.

“Therein lay the slim basis for so much hope through these long years, Merin. Even through your Hive-born and Ship-bred shallowness there was that sense of caring. I believe … no, I know that you sometimes cared for me. If you could care for me, you could care for our world. In our brief hours of sharing, you might find an understanding. Therein lay our hope. Therein lay the only possible source of our salvation.

“I confess that I did not plan this when I stole your silly flying carpet. I don’t know now what I was thinking and planning when I let you lead me from the Festival that first time. Of kidnapping you, perhaps. Of delaying and seducing you until Uncle Gresham could use any information you might have. Perhaps I dreamed even then of your joining us, of both of us swimming free with the Sea Folk and protecting the Covenant together. Then Bertol ruined everything …

“I miss you, Merin. Tonight I will go down to the harbor and watch the stars awhile and think of you. It will not be the first time I have done that.

“I’m sorry that I will not be waiting for you this time, Merin. But our world will be waiting. The seas that I listen to tonight will greet you with the same song. Preserving that song is not such an impossible idea, my love. They can’t have this world without controlling the isles and the Sea Folk control the isles.

“I’ve kept this diary since I was thirteen. It has hundreds of entries. By the time you see this, they will all have been erased except the few that follow. Our love was not all myth and machination. We were good friends and some of our times together were sweet, were they not?

“Stay well, Merin. Stay well.”

I shut off the comlog and sit in silence for a minute. The crowd sounds are barely audible through the thick walls of the tomb. I take a breath and thumb the diskey.

Siri appears. She is in her late forties. I know immediately the day and place she recorded this image. I remember the cloak she wears, the eelstone pendant at her neck, and the strand of hair which has escaped her barrette and even now falls across

her cheek. I remember everything about that day. It was the last day of our Third Reunion and we were with friends on the heights above South Tern. Donel was ten and we were trying to convince him to slide on the snowfield with us. He was crying. Siri turned away from us even before the skimmer settled. When Magritte stepped out we knew from Siri's face that something had happened.

The same face stares at me now. She brushes absently at the unruly strand of hair. Her eyes are red but her voice is controlled. "Merin, they killed our son today. Alón was twenty-one and they killed him. You were so confused today, Merin. 'How could such a mistake have happened?' you kept repeating. You did not really know our son but I could see the loss in your face when we heard. Merin, it was not an accident. If nothing else survives, no other record, if you never understand why I allowed a sentimental myth to rule my life, let this be known—it was not an accident that killed Alón. He was with the Separatists when the Council police arrived. Even then he could have escaped. We had prepared an alibi together. The police would have believed his story. He chose to stay.

"Today, Merin, you were impressed with what I said to the crowd … the mob … at the embassy. Know this, Shipman—when I said, 'Now is not the time to show your anger and your hatred,' that is precisely what I meant. No more, no less. Today is not the time. But the day will come. It will surely come. The Covenant was not taken lightly in those final days, Merin. It is not taken lightly now. Those who have forgotten will be surprised when the day comes but it will surely come.

The image fades to another and in the split second of overlap the face of a 26-year-old Siri appears superimposed on the older woman's features. "Merin, I am pregnant. I'm so glad. You've been gone five weeks now and I miss you. Ten years you'll be gone. More than that. Merin, why didn't you think to invite me to go with you? I could not have gone, but I would have loved it if you had just invited me. But I'm pregnant, Merin. The doctors say that it will be a boy. I will tell him about you, my love. Perhaps someday you and he will sail in the Archipelago and listen to the songs of the Sea Folk as you and I have done these past few weeks. Perhaps you'll understand them by then. Merin, I miss you. Please hurry back."

The holographic image shimmers and shifts. The 16-year-old girl is red-faced. Her long hair cascades over bare shoulders and a white nightgown. She speaks in a rush, racing tears. "Shipman Merin Aspic, I'm sorry about your friend—I really am—but you left without even saying good-bye. I had such plans about how you would help us … how you and I … you didn't even say good-bye. I don't care what happens to you. I hope you go back to your stinking, crowded Hegemony hives and rot for all I care. In fact, Merin Aspic, I wouldn't want to see you again even if they paid me. Good-bye."

She turns her back before the projection fades. It is dark in the tomb now but the audio continues for a second. There is a soft chuckle and Siri's voice—I cannot tell the

age—comes one last time. “Adieu, Merin, Adieu.”

“Adieu,” I say and thumb the diskey off.

The crowd parts as I emerge blinking from the tomb. My poor timing has ruined the drama of the event and now the smile on my face incites angry whispers. Loudspeakers carry the rhetoric of the official ceremony even to our hilltop. “… beginning a new era of cooperation,” echoes the rich voice of the Ambassador.

I set the box on the grass and remove the hawking mat. The crowd presses forward to see as I unroll the carpet. The tapestry is faded but the flight threads gleam like new copper. I sit in the center of the mat and slide the heavy box on behind me.

“… and more will follow until space and time will cease to be obstacles.”

The crowd moves back as I tap the flight design and the hawking mat rises four meters into the air. Now I can see beyond the roof of the tomb. The islands are returning to form the Equatorial Archipelago. I can see them, hundreds of them, borne up out of the hungry south by gentle winds.

“So it is with great pleasure that I close this circuit and welcome you, the colony of Maui-Covenant, into the community of the Hegemony of Man.”

The thin thread of the ceremonial com-laser pulses to the zenith. There is a spattering of applause and the band begins playing. I squint skyward just in time to see a new star being born. Part of me knows to the microsecond what has just occurred.

For a few microseconds the farcaster had been functional. For a few microseconds time and space had ceased to be obstacles. Then the massive tidal pull of the artificial singularity triggered the thermite charge I had placed on the outer containment sphere. That tiny explosion had not been visible but a second later the expanding Schwarzschild radius is eating its shell, swallowing thirty-six thousand tons of fragile dodecahedron, and growing quickly to gobble several thousand kilometers of space around it. And that is visible—magnificently visible—as a miniature nova flares whitely in the clear blue sky.

The band stops playing. People scream and run for cover. There is no reason to. There is a burst of X-rays tunneling out as the farcaster continues to collapse into itself, but not enough to cause harm through Maui-Covenant’s generous atmosphere. A second streak of plasma becomes visible as the Los Angeles puts more distance between itself and the rapidly decaying little black hole. The winds rise and the seas are choppier. There will be strange tides tonight.

I want to say something profound but I can think of nothing. Besides, the crowd is in

no mood to listen. I tell myself that I can hear some cheers mixed in with the screams and shouts.

I tap at the flight designs and the hawking mat speeds out over the cliff and above the harbor. A Thomas Hawk lazing on mid-day thermals flaps in panic at my approach.

“Let them come!” I shout at the fleeing hawk. “Let them come! I’ll be thirty-five and not alone and let them come if they dare!” I drop my fist and laugh. The wind is blowing my hair and cooling the sweat on my chest and arms.

Cooler now, I take a sighting and set my course for the most distant of the isles. I look forward to meeting the others. Even more, I look forward to talking to the Sea Folk and telling them that it is time for the Shark to come at last to the seas of Maui-Covenant.

Later, when the battles are won and the world is theirs, I will tell them about her. I will sing to them of Siri.