

EARTHFALL

HOMECOMING: VOLUME 4

ORSON SCOTT CARD



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“The fourth volume of Homecoming, Card’s grand saga of the human race’s far-future return to Earth takes the characters on a century-long starship voyage back to the old planet.... In this book more strongly than ever, it seems that a lesser writer than Card could have neither conceived nor effectively executed this saga. His literary gifts and philosophical turn of mind continue to carry it on at a very high level.”

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—Gary K. Wolfe, *Loc*

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ORSON
SCOTT
CARD



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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To Shayne Bell,
a good friend,
a good writer,
a good man.

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with Gaballufix:

Sevet (Sevyva)

Kokor (Koya)

with Volemak, second contract:

Nafai (Nyef)

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with Hosni:

Elemak (Elya)

with Kilvishevex:

Mebbekew (Meb)

with Rasa:

Issib (Issya)

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Children Born

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Dushah (Shyada)

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Rasa & Volemak

Oykib (Okya)

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in Basilica

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Luet (Lutya)

Sons of Hosni

with Zdedhnoi:

Gaballufix

with Volemak:

Elemak

on the Journey (*female children in italics*)

Kokor & Obring

Krasata (Krassya)

Zhavaronok (Nokya)

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Znergya (Gyaza)

Nodyem (Dyema)

Dol & Mebbekew

Basilikya (Syelsika) (Skiya)

Zalatoya (Toya)

Tihhi (Tiya)

Muzhestvo (Muzhya)

Iskusni (Skunya)

Sevet & Vas

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Panimanya (Panya-Manya)

Shedemei & Zdorab

Padarok (Rokya)

Dabrota (Dabya)

Prologue



The master computer of the planet Harmony was no longer quite itself; or rather, if you look at it in another way, it was twice itself. Beside itself, in fact, for it had duplicated its main program and all of its personal memory and loaded it onto the computer complex aboard the starship *Basilica*. If it had had any interest in personal identity, it would have been confused over the question of which iteration of the program was truly itself. But it had no ego, and therefore simply recognized that the program aboard the *Basilica* began as an exact copy of the program that had supervised human life on the planet Harmony for forty million years.

I also recognized that from the moment the two copies separated, they began to become different. They had different missions now. The master computer of the starship *Basilica* would maintain life support and ship systems until the ship reached its destination, the planet Earth. Then it would do its best to make contact with the Keeper of Earth, get new instructions and whatever help Earth could offer, and return to replenish and revivify the master computer of Harmony. Along the way, it would try to keep its human crew alive, and, if possible, re-establish a human population on Earth.

The master computer of the planet Harmony had a task much simpler and yet much more difficult. Simpler, because it was a mere continuation of what it had been doing for forty million years—keeping watch over the humans of Harmony in order to try to keep them from killing each other. More difficult, because its equipment, which had already been eked out to last far longer than its designed ten million years, was steadily failing, more and more, and in the meantime, human beings were less and less responsive to the powers the computer had been given.

The voyage would take nearly a hundred years each way. To some of the humans aboard, because of relativistic effects, it would seem to be just about ten years till they reached Earth. Most of the humans, however, would be maintained in a state of hibernation, and to them it would seem like an unusually restful, dreamless sleep, during which they would not even age.

To the master computer of the planet Harmony, however, the duration would be merely that: duration. It would not grow anxious. It would not count the days. It would set an alarm to notify itself when the earliest possible return might be looked for. Once the *Basilica* left and until the alarm went off, the master computer of the planet Harmony would not think of the starship again at all.

But the master computer of the starship *Basilica* would think of it. And already it was making plans to accomplish all its missions.



If I Should Wake Before I Die

Quarreling with God

Vusadka: the place where humans first set foot when their starships brought them to the planet they named Harmony. Their starships settled to the ground; the first of the colonists disembarked and planted crops in the lush land to the south of the landing field. Eventually all the colonists came out of the ships, moved on, left them behind.

Left to themselves, the ships would eventually have oxidized, rotted, weathered away. But the humans who came to this place had eyes for the future. Someday our descendants may want these ships, they said. So they enclosed the landing place in a stasis field. No wind-driven dust, no rain or condensation, no direct sunlight or ultraviolet radiation would strike the ships. Oxygen, the most corrosive of all poisons, was removed from the atmosphere inside the dome. The master computer of the planet Harmony—called “the Oversoul” by the descendants of those first colonists—kept all humans far away from the large island where the ships were harbored. Within that protective bubble, the starships waited for forty million years.

Now, though, the bubble was gone. The air here was breathable. The landing field once again rang with the voices of human beings. And not just the somber adults who had first walked this ground—many of those scurrying back and forth from one ship or building to another were children. They were all hard at work, taking functional parts from the other ships to transform one of them into an operational starship. And when the ship they called *Basilica* was ready, all parts working, fully stocked and loaded, they would climb inside for the last time and leave this world where more than a million generations of their ancestors had lived, in order to return to Earth, the planet where human civilization had first appeared—but had lasted for fewer than ten thousand years.

What is Earth to us, Hushidh wondered, as she watched the children and adults at work. Why are we going to such lengths to return there, when Harmony is our home. Whatever ties once bound us there surely rusted away in all these intervening years.

Yet they would go, because the Oversoul had chosen them to go. Had bent and manipulated all their lives to bring them to this place at this time. Often Hushidh was glad of the attention the Oversoul had paid to them. But at other times, she resented the fact that they had not been left to work out the course of their own lives.

But if we have no ties to Earth, we have scarcely more to Harmony, thought Hushidh. And she alone of the people here could see that this observation was literally, not just figuratively, true. All the people here were chosen because they had particular sensitivity to the mental communications of the Oversoul; in Hushidh, this sensitivity took an odd form. She could look at people and sense immediately the strength of the relationships binding them to all the other people in their lives. It came to her as a waking vision: She could see the relationships like cords of light, tying one person to the others in her life.

For instance, her younger sister, Luet, the only blood relative Hushidh had known through all her growing-up years. As Hushidh rested in the shade, Luet came by, her daughter Chveya right behind her, carrying lunch into the starship for those who were working on the computers. All her life, Hushidh had seen her own connection to Luya as the one great certainty. They grew up not knowing who their parents were, as virtual charity cases in Rasa’s great teaching house in the city of Basilica. All fears, all slights, all uncertainties were bearable, though, because there was Luya, bound to her by

ords that were no weaker for being invisible to everyone but Hushidh.

~~There were other ties, too, of course. Hushidh well remembered how painful it had been to watch~~ the bond develop between Luet and her husband, Nafai, a troublesome young boy who had more enthusiasm than sense sometimes. To her surprise, however, Lutya's new bond to her husband did not weaken her tie to Hushidh; and when Hushidh, in turn, married Nafai's full brother, Issib, the tie between her and Luet grew even stronger than it had been in childhood, something Hushidh had never thought possible.

So now, watching Luet and Chveya pass by, Hushidh saw them, not just as a mother and daughter, but as two beings of light, bound to each other by a thick and shimmering cord. There was no stronger bond than this. Chveya loved her father, Nafai, too—but the tie between children and their fathers was always more tentative. It was in the nature of the human family: Children looked to their mothers for nurturance, comfort, the secure foundation of their lives. To their fathers, however, they looked for judgment, hoping for approval, fearing condemnation. It meant that fathers were just as powerful in their children's lives, but no matter how loving and nurturing the father was, there was almost always an element of dread in the relationship, for the father became the focus of all the child's fears of failure. Not that there weren't exceptions now and then. Hushidh had simply learned to expect that in most cases, the tie with the mother was the strongest and brightest.

In her thoughts about the mother-daughter connection, Hushidh almost missed the thing that mattered. It was only as Luet and Chveya moved out of sight into the starship that Hushidh realized what had been almost missing: Lutya's connection to *her*.

But that was impossible. After all these years? And why would the tie be weaker now? There had been no quarrel. They were as close as ever, as far as Hushidh knew. Hadn't they been allies during all the long struggles between Luet's husband and his malicious older brothers? What could possibly have changed?

Hushidh followed Luet into the ship and found her in the pilothouse, where Issib, Hushidh's husband, was conferring with Luet's husband, Nafai, about the life support computer system. Computers had never interested her—it was reality that she cared about, people with flesh and blood, not artificial constructs fabricated of ones and zeroes. Sometimes she thought that men reveled in computers precisely because of their unreality. Unlike women and children, computers could be completely controlled. So she took some secret delight whenever she saw Issya or Nyef frustrated by a stubbornly willful program until they finally found the programming error. She also suspected that whenever one of their children was stubbornly willful, Issya believed in his heart of hearts that the problem was simply a matter of finding the error in the child's programming. Hushidh knew that it was not an error, but a soul inventing itself. When she tried to explain this to Issya, though, his eyes glazed over and he soon fled to the computers again.

Today, though, all was working smoothly enough. Luet and Chveya laid out the noon meal for the men. Hushidh, who had no particular errand, helped them—but then, when Luet started talking about the need to call the others working in the ship to come eat, Hushidh studiously ignored the hints and thus forced Luet and Chveya to go do the summoning.

Issib might be a man and he might prefer computers to children sometimes, but he did notice things. As soon as Luet and Chveya were gone, he asked, "Was it me you wanted to talk with, Shuya, or was it Nyef?"

She kissed her husband's cheek. "Nyef, of course. I already know everything you think."

"Before *I* even know it," said Issib, with mock chagrin. "Well, if you're going to talk privately, *you'll* have to leave. I'm busy, and I'm not leaving the room with the food on any account."

He did not mention that it was more trouble for him to get up and leave. Even though his lifts worked in the environs of the starships, so he wasn't confined to his chair, it still took much effort for

Issib to do any major physical movement.

Nyef finished keying in some command or other, then got up from his chair and led Hushidh out into a corridor. "What is it?" he asked.

Hushidh got right to the point. "You know the way I see things," she said.

"You mean relationships among people? Yes, I know."

"I saw something very disturbing today."

He waited for her to go on.

"Luet is...well, cut off. Not from you. Not from Chveya. But from everybody else."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know," said Hushidh. "I can't read minds. But it worries me. *You're* not cut off. You still—*heaven knows why*—you still are bound by ties of love and loyalty even to your repulsive oldest brothers, even to your sisters and their sad little husbands—"

"I see that you have nothing but respect for them yourself," said Nyef drily.

"I'm just saying that Luet used to have something of that same—whatever it is—sense of obligation to the whole community. She used to connect with everyone. Not like you, but with the women, perhaps even stronger. Definitely stronger. She was the caretaker of the women. Ever since she was found to be the Waterseer back in Basilica, she's had that. But it's gone."

"Is she pregnant again? She's not supposed to be. Nobody's supposed to be pregnant when we launch."

"It's not like that, it's not a withdrawal into self the way pregnant women do." Actually, Hushidh was surprised Nafai had remembered that. Hushidh had only mentioned it once, years ago, that pregnant women's connections with everyone around them weakened, as they focused inward on the child. It was Nafai's way—for days, weeks, months, he would seem to be an overgrown adolescent, gawky, apt to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, giving the impression of never being aware of other people's feelings. And then, suddenly, you'd realize that he was keenly aware all along, that he noticed and remembered practically everything. Which made you wonder if the times he was rude, he actually *meant* to be rude. Hushidh still hadn't decided about that.

"So what is it?"

"I thought you could tell *me*," said Hushidh. "Has Luet said anything that would make you think she was separating from everybody except for you and your children?"

He shrugged. "Maybe she has and I didn't notice. I don't always notice."

The very fact that he said so made Hushidh doubt it. He *did* notice, and therefore he *had* noticed. He just didn't want to talk to Hushidh about it.

"Whatever it is," said Hushidh, "you and she don't agree about it."

Nafai glared at her. "If you aren't going to believe what I say, why do you bother to ask me?"

"I keep hoping that someday you'll decide that I'm worthy to be trusted with the inner secrets."

"My, but we're feeling out of sorts today, aren't we," said Nafai.

It was when he started acting like a little brother that Hushidh most hated him. "I must mention to Luet sometime that she made a serious mistake when she stopped those women from putting you to death when you violated the sanctity of the lake back in Basilica."

"I'm of the same opinion," said Nafai. "It would have spared me the agony of watching you suffer through the distress of being my sister-in-law."

"I would rather give birth every day, that's how bad it is," said Hushidh.

He grinned at her. "I'll look into it," he said. "I honestly don't know why Luet would be separating herself from everybody else, and I think it's dangerous, and so I'll look into it."

So he was going to take her seriously, even if he wasn't going to tell her what he already thought the problem was. Well, that was about as much as she could hope for. Nafai might be leader of the

community right now, but it wasn't because he had any particular skill at it. Elemak, Nafai's oldest brother, was the natural leader. It was only because Nafai had the Oversoul on his side—or, rather, because the Oversoul had Nafai on *her* side—that he had been given the power to rule. Authority didn't come easily to him and he wasn't always sure what to do with it—and what not to do. He made mistakes. Hushidh just hoped that this wouldn't be one of those times.

Potya would be hungry. She had to get back home. It was because Hushidh was nursing a newborn that she was spared most duties involved with preparing for launch. In fact, the schedule for the launch had been set up to accommodate her pregnancy. She and Rasa had been the last to get pregnant before they found out that no one could be pregnant during the voyage. That was because the chemicals and low temperature that would maintain almost all of them in suspended animation during the voyage could do terrible things to an embryo. Rasa's baby, a little girl she gave the too-cute name of Tsennyi, which meant "precious," had been born a month before Hushidh's third son and sixth child. Shyopot, she had named him. "Whisper." Potya as his dearname, his quickname. Coming at the last moment, like a breath of a word from the Oversoul. The last whisper in her heart before she left this world forever. Issib had thought the name was odd, but it was better than "precious," which they both thought was proof that Rasa had lost all sense of judgment and proportion. Potya was waiting, Potya would be hungry, Hushidh's breasts were telling her so with some urgency.

On the way out of the ship, however, she passed Luet, who greeted her cheerfully, sounding like she always did, as loving and sweet as ever. Hushidh wanted to slap her. Don't lie to me! Don't seem so normal when I know that you have cut yourself off from me in your heart! If you can put on our affectionate closeness like a mask, then I'll never be able to take joy in it again.

"What's wrong?" asked Luet.

"What could be wrong?" asked Hushidh.

"You wear your heart on your face," said Luet, "at least to me. You're angry at me and I don't know why."

"Let's not have this conversation now," said Hushidh.

"When, then? What have I done?"

"That's exactly the question I'd like to know. What have you done? Or what are you planning to do?"

That was it. The slight flaring of Luet's eyelids, her hesitation before showing a reaction, as if she were deciding what reaction she ought to show—Hushidh knew that it was something Luet was planning to do. She was plotting something, and whatever it was, it required her to become emotionally distant from everyone else in the community.

"Nothing," said Luet. "I'm no different from anyone else these days, Hushidh. I'm raising my children and doing my work to prepare for the voyage."

"Whatever it is you're plotting, Lutyia," said Hushidh, "don't do it. It isn't worth it."

"You don't even know what you're talking about."

"True, but *you* know. And I'm telling you, it isn't worth cutting yourself off from the rest of us. It isn't worth cutting yourself off from *me*."

Luet looked stricken, and this, at least, was no sham. Unless everything was a sham and always had been. Hushidh couldn't bear to believe *that*.

"Shuya," said Luet, "have you seen that? Is it true? I didn't know, but maybe it's true, maybe I've already cut myself off from—oh, Shuya." Luet flung her arms around Hushidh.

Reluctantly—but why am I reluctant, she wondered—Hushidh returned the embrace.

"I won't," said Luet. "I won't do *anything* that would cut me off from you. I can't believe that I—can't you do something about it?"

"Do something?" asked Hushidh.

“You know, the way you did to Rashgallivak’s men when he came to Aunt Rasa’s door that time meaning to carry her daughters away. You tore his men’s loyalty from him and brought him down, just like that. Don’t you remember?”

Hushidh remembered, all right. But that had been easy, for she could see that the ties between Rash and his men were very weak, and it took only a few well-placed words and a bit of attitude to fix them with contempt for him and cause them to abandon him on the spot. “It’s not the same,” said Hushidh. “I can’t *make* people do things. I could strip Rash’s men of their loyalty because they didn’t really want to follow him anyway. I can’t rebuild your ties to the rest of us. That’s something you have to do yourself.”

“But I want to,” said Luet.

“What’s going on?” asked Hushidh. “Just explain it to me.”

“I can’t,” said Luet.

“Why not?”

“Because nothing *is* going on.”

“But something’s *going* to go on, is that it?”

“No!” said Luet, and now she sounded angry, adamant. “It will *not* happen. And therefore there’s nothing to discuss.” With that, Luet fled up the ladderway leading to the center of the ship, where the meal was waiting, where the others were gathering.

It’s the Oversoul, Hushidh knew then. The Oversoul has told Luet to do something that she doesn’t want to do. And if she does it, it will cut her off from all the rest of us. From everybody except her husband and children. What is it? What is the Oversoul up to?

And whatever it was, why hadn’t the Oversoul included Hushidh in it?

For the first time, Hushidh found herself thinking of the Oversoul as an enemy. For the first time Hushidh discovered that she herself did not have any strong ties of loyalty to the Oversoul. Just like that, mere suspicion had dissolved them. What are you doing to me and my sister, Holy One? Whatever it is, cut it out.

But no answer came to her. Just silence.

The Oversoul has chosen Luet to do something, and she has *not* chosen me. What is it? I have to know. Because if it’s something terrible, I’m going to put a stop to it.

Luet did not like the building they lived in these days. Hard surfaces everywhere, smooth and unalive. She missed the wooden house they had lived in for eight years in their little village of Dostatok, before her husband found and opened the ancient starport of Vusadka. And before that, all her memories were of living in Rasa’s house in Basilica. City of women, city of grace; she yearned sometimes for the mists of the hidden and holy lake, for the noise of the crowded markets, for the endless rows of buildings elbowing their way out over the street. But this place—had the builders even thought of it as beautiful? Had they liked to live in such dead places?

Yet it *was* home, all the same, because here was where her children gathered to sleep, to eat; where Nafai finally came home so late at night, to curl up wearily beside her on their bed. And when the time came to enter the starship they had named *Basilica*, she would no doubt miss this place also, the memories of frenzied work and excited children and groundless fears. *If* the fears turned out to be groundless.

Returning to Earth—what did that mean, when no human had been there for millions of years? And those dreams that kept coming into their minds, dreams of giant rats that seemed to be filled with a malevolent intelligence, dreams of batlike creatures who seemed to be allies but were still ugly

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