

SEQUEL TO AXIS AND THE HUGO AWARD-WINNING SPIN

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

"ROBERT CHARLES WILSON IS A HELL OF A STORYTELLER"
STEPHEN KING, ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

OUTER
LIMITS

VORTEX

ROBERT
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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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By Robert Charles Wilson from Tom Doherty Associat

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CHAPTER ON
SANDRA AND BOS

No more, Sandra Cole thought when she woke up in her sweltering apartment. Today was the last day she would drive to work and spend her day in the company of emaciated prostitutes, addicts in the final, sweaty stages of withdrawal, chronic liars, petty criminals. Today was the day she would hand in her resignation.

She woke every weekday morning with the same thought. It hadn't been true yesterday. It wasn't true today. But someday it would be true. *No more*. She savored the idea as she showered and dressed. It kept her going through her first cup of coffee and a quick breakfast of yogurt and buttered toast. But then she had mustered the courage to face the day. To face the knowledge that nothing, after all, would change.

* * *

She happened to be passing the reception area at State Care when the cop brought in the boy to be registered for evaluation.

The boy would be her responsibility for the next week: his folder had already been attached to her morning case list. His name was Orrin Mather, and he was supposed to be nonviolent. In fact he looked terrified. His eyes were wide and moist and he darted his head left and right like a sparrow scouting for predators.

Sandra didn't recognize the cop who brought him in—he wasn't one of the regulars. In itself that wasn't unusual; delivering minor arrests to the Texas State Care intake facility wasn't high-prestige duty at the Houston Police Department. Oddly, though, this particular cop seemed personally concerned with his charge. The boy didn't cringe away but pressed close to him, as if for protection. The cop kept a steady hand on his shoulder and said something Sandra couldn't hear but which seemed to soothe the boy's anxiety.

They were a study in contrasts. The cop was tall, big-bodied but not fat, with a dark complexion, dark hair, dark eyes. The boy was six inches shorter, dressed in a prison-issue jumper that sagged over his skinny body. He was so pale he looked like he'd been living in a cave for the past six months.

The orderly on reception duty at State was Jack Geddes, a man plausibly rumored to moonlight as a bouncer in a downtown bar. Geddes was often rough with patients—too rough, in Sandra's opinion. He sprang forward from his place behind the reception desk as soon as he registered Orrin Mather's agitation, quickly followed by the duty nurse with her armamentarium of sedatives and needles.

The cop—and this was *very* unusual—placed himself squarely between Orrin and the orderly. “None of that ought to be necessary,” he said. His voice was Texas with a hint of something foreign. “I can escort Mr. Mather wherever you need him to go.”

Sandra stepped forward, slightly embarrassed that she hadn't spoken first. She introduced herself as Dr. Cole and said, “The first thing we'll need to do is an intake interview. Do you understand, Mr. Mather? That happens in a room down the corridor. I'll ask you some questions and take down your

information. Then we'll assign you a room of your own. Do you understand?"

~~Orrin Mather took a steadying breath and nodded. Geddes and the nurse backed off, Geddes looking a little annoyed. The cop gave Sandra an evaluative look.~~

~~"I'm Officer Bose," he said. "Dr. Cole, can I have a word with you once you get Orrin settled?"~~

~~"That might take some time."~~

~~"I'll wait," Bose said. "If you don't mind."~~

~~And that was the most unusual thing of all.~~

* * *

Daytime temperatures in the city had topped 100 degrees Fahrenheit for ten consecutive days now. The State Care evaluation facility was air-conditioned, often to the point of absurdity (Sandra kept a sweater in her office), but only a trickle of cool air forced its way through a ceiling grate into the room that was reserved for intake interviews. Orrin Mather was already sweating when Sandra took the chair across the table from him. "Morning, Mr. Mather," she said.

He relaxed a little at the sound of her voice. "You can call me Orrin, ma'am." His eyes were blue and his big lashes looked incongruous in his angular face. A gash in his right cheek was healing into a scar. "Most everybody does."

"Thank you, Orrin. I'm Dr. Cole, and we'll be talking together over the next few days."

"You're the one who decides who keeps me."

"In a way, that's true. I'll be doing your psychiatric evaluation. But I'm not here to judge you, do you understand? I'm here to find out what kind of help you need and whether we can give it to you."

Orrin nodded once, ducking his chin to his chest. "You decide whether I go to a State Care camp."

"Not just me. The whole staff is involved, one way or another."

"But you're the one I talk to?"

"For now, yes."

"Okay," he said. "I get it."

There were four security cameras in the room, one in each corner where the walls met the ceiling. Sandra had seen recordings of her own and other sessions and knew how she would look on the monitors in the adjoining room: foreshortened and prim in a blue blouse and skirt, her ID badge dangling on a lanyard around her neck as she leaned across the plain pine table. The boy would be reduced by the alchemy of closed-circuit video to a generic interviewee. Though she really ought to stop thinking of Orrin Mather as a boy, as young as he looked. He was nineteen, according to his file. Old enough to know better, as Sandra's mother used to say. "You're originally from North Carolina, Orrin, is that right?"

"I guess it says so in those papers you're looking at."

"Do the papers have it right?"

"Born in Raleigh and lived there, yes, ma'am, all my life till I came to Texas."

"We'll talk about that later on. For now I just need to be sure I have the basics right. Do you know why the police took you into custody?"

He lowered his gaze. "Yes."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"Vagrancy."

"That's the legal word. What would you call it?"

"I don't know. Sleeping in an alley, I guess. And getting beat up by those men."

"It's not a crime to get beaten up. The police took you into custody for your own protection."

didn't they?"

"I suppose they did. I was pretty bloody when they found me. I didn't do anything to provoke those fellas. They just set on me because they were drunk. They tried to get my satchel, but I didn't let them. I wish the police had come along a little earlier."

A police patrol had found Orrin Mather semiconscious and bleeding on a sidewalk in southwest Houston. No address, no identification, and no apparent means of support. Under the vagrancy law written in the aftermath of the Spin, Orrin had been taken into custody for evaluation. His physical injuries had been easy enough to treat. His mental state was an open question, however, one which Sandra was expected to resolve over the course of the next seven days. "You have family, Orrin?"

"Just my sister Ariel back in Raleigh."

"And the police have contacted her?"

"They say so, yes, ma'am. Officer Bose says she's coming by bus, to get me. That's a long trip on that bus trip. Hot this time of year I expect. Ariel don't care for hot weather."

She would have to ask Bose about that. Usually, if a family member was willing to assume responsibility, there was no need for a vag case to end up in State Care. There were no violent acts on Orrin's arrest record, and he was clearly aware of his situation, not obviously delusional. At least not at the moment. Though there *was* something uncanny about him, Sandra thought. (An unprofessional observation, which she would not record in her notes.)

She began with the standard interview from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Did he know the date and so forth. Most of his answers were straightforward and coherent. But when she asked him whether he heard voices, Orrin hesitated. "Guess I don't," he said at last.

"Are you sure? It's okay to talk about these things. If there's a problem, we want to help you with it."

He nodded earnestly. "I know that. It's a hard question, though. I don't hear voices, ma'am, not exactly ... but I write things sometimes."

"What kind of things?"

"Things I don't always understand."

Here, then, was the entry point.

Sandra added a note to Orrin's file—*poss. delusions, written*—for later exploration. The subject was obviously distressing to him, she smiled and said, "Well, that's enough for now." Half an hour had passed. "We'll talk again soon. I'll have an orderly escort you to the room where you'll be staying over the next few days."

"I'm sure it's very nice."

Compared to the back alleys of urban Houston, maybe it would be. "The first day at State can be hard for some people, but trust me, it's not as bad as seems. Evening meals are at six in the commissary."

Orrin looked doubtful. "Is that like a cafeteria?"

"Yes."

"Can I ask you, is it loud in there? I don't care for noise when I eat."

The patient commissary was a zoo and generally sounded like one, though the staff made sure it was safe. *Sensitivity to noise*, Sandra added to her notes. "It can get a little loud, yes. Do you think you can deal with it?"

He gave her a downcast look but nodded. "I'll try. Thank you for warning me up front—I appreciate it."

One more lost soul, more fragile and less combative than most. Sandra hoped a week in State would do Orrin Mather more good than harm. But she wouldn't have cared to lay odds on it.

The remaining officer was still waiting when she left the interview room, much to Sandra's surprise. It was customary for cops to dump a case and walk away. State Care had begun its institutional existence as a means of relieving the overloaded prison system during the worst years of the Spin and after. That emergency had ended a quarter of a century ago, but State still served as a dumping ground for trivial offenders with obvious head issues. It was a convenient arrangement for the police, less so for the overextended and underfunded State Care staff. There was seldom any follow-up from law enforcement. As far as the police were concerned, a transfer was a closed file—or worse, a flushed toilet.

Bose's HPD uniform was crisp despite the heat. He started to ask her about her impressions of Orrin Mather, but because it was past time for lunch, and her afternoon schedule was heavily booked, Sandra invited him to join her in the cafeteria—the staff cafeteria, not the patient commissary Orrin Mather would almost certainly find distressing.

She took her usual Monday soup and salad and waited while Bose did the same. It was late enough that they had no trouble finding a free table. "I want to do some follow-up on Orrin," Bose said.

"That's a new one."

"Excuse me?"

"We don't generally get a whole lot of follow-up from HPD."

"I guess not. But there are some unanswered questions in Orrin's case."

It was "Orrin," she noticed, not "the prisoner" or "the patient." Clearly, Officer Bose had taken a personal interest. "I didn't see anything too unusual in his file."

"His name came up in connection with another case. I can't talk about that in any detail, but I wanted to ask ... did he mention anything about his writing?"

Sandra's interest ticked up a notch. "Very briefly, yes."

"When he was taken into custody Orrin was carrying a leather satchel with a dozen lined notebooks inside, all of them filled with writing. That's what he was defending when he was attacked. Orrin's generally a cooperative guy, but we had to struggle to get the notebooks away from him. He needed to be reassured that we'd keep them safe and give them back as soon as his case was resolved."

"And did you? Give them back, I mean?"

"Not yet, no."

"Because if Orrin is so concerned with those notebooks they might be pertinent to his evaluation."

"I understand that, Dr. Cole. That's why I wanted to talk to you. The thing is, the contents are relevant to another case HPD is dealing with. I'm having them transcribed, but it's a slow process—Orrin's handwriting isn't easy to decipher."

"Can I see the transcripts?"

"That's what I came here to suggest. But I need to ask a favor of you in return. Until you've looked at the whole document, can we keep this matter out of official channels?"

It was an odd request and she hesitated before answering. "I'm not sure what you mean by official channels. Any pertinent observation goes into Orrin's evaluation. That's nonnegotiable."

"You can make any observation you like, as long as you don't copy or quote directly from the notebooks. Just until we resolve certain issues."

"Orrin's under my care for just seven days, Officer Bose. At the end of that time I have to submit a recommendation." A recommendation that would change Orrin Mather's life drastically, she did not add.

“I understand, and I’m not trying to interfere. Your evaluation is what I’m interested in. What I like to get from you, informally, is your opinion of what Orrin wrote. Specifically the reliability of it

At last Sandra began to understand. Something Orrin had written was potential evidence in a pending case, and Bose needed to know how trustworthy it (or its author) was. “If you’re asking me for testimony in a legal proceeding—”

“No, nothing like that. Just a back-channel opinion. Anything you can tell me that doesn’t violate patient confidentiality or any other professional concerns you have.”

“I’m not sure—”

“You might understand a little better once you’ve read the document.”

It was Bose’s earnestness that finally persuaded her to agree, at least tentatively. And she was genuinely curious about the notebooks and Orrin’s attachment to them. If she discovered something clinically relevant she would feel no compunction about disregarding any promise she made to Bose. Her first loyalty was to her patient, and she made sure he understood that.

He accepted her conditions without complaint. Then he stood up. He had left his salad unfinished on a bed of lettuce from which he had systematically extracted all the cherry tomatoes. “Thanks, Dr. Cole. I appreciate your help. I’ll email you the first pages tonight.”

He gave her an HPD card with his phone and an email address and his full name: Jefferson Amr Bose. She repeated it to herself as she watched him disappear into a throng of white-clad clinicians at the commissary door.

* * *

After a day of routine consultations Sandra drove home under the long light of the setting sun.

Sunset often made her think of the Spin. The sun had aged and expanded during the radical foreshortened years of the Spin, and although it looked prosaic enough in the western sky, that was an engineered illusion. The real sun was an aged and bloated monster, furiously dying at the heart of the solar system. What she saw on the horizon was what remained of its lethal radiation after it had been filtered and regulated by the inconceivably powerful technology of the Hypotheticals. For years now—for all of Sandra’s adult life—humanity had been living on the sufferance of those alien and voiceless beings.

The sky was a hard blue, obscured to the southeast by clouds like glassy coral growths. One hundred five degrees Fahrenheit in downtown Houston according to the weather report, just as it had been yesterday and the day before. The talk on the newscasts was all about the ongoing White Sands launches, rockets that injected sulfur aerosols into the upper atmosphere in an attempt to slow global warming. Against *that* pending apocalypse (which was none of their doing) the Hypotheticals had offered no defense. They would protect the Earth from the swollen sun, but the CO₂ content of the atmosphere, apparently, was none of their business. It was, self-evidently, mankind’s business. And yet the tankers continued creeping up the Houston Ship Channel with their cargoes of oil, plentiful and cheap now that Equatorian crude had begun to flow from the new world beyond the Arch. Two planets’ worth of fossil fuels to cook ourselves with, Sandra thought. The car’s laboring air conditioner hummed a rebuke to her hypocrisy, but she couldn’t bring herself to forego the rush of cool air.

Ever since she finished her internship at UCSF and went to work for State Care, Sandra had spent her days rendering pass/fail verdicts over troubled minds, applying tests most functional adults easily passed. Is the subject oriented to time and place? Does the subject understand the consequences of his actions? But if she could give the same test to humanity as a whole, Sandra thought, the outcome would be very much in doubt. *Subject is confused and often self-destructive. Subject pursues short*

term gratification at the expense of his own well-being.

~~By the time she reached her apartment in Clear Lake night had fallen and the temperature had~~
dropped a trivial degree or two. She microwaved dinner, opened a bottle of red wine, and checked
to see if Bose's email had reached her yet.

It had. A few dozen pages. Pages Orrin Mather had supposedly written, but she saw at once how
unlikely that was.

She printed the pages and settled down in a comfortable chair to read them.

My name is Turk Findley, the document began.

CHAPTER TWO
TURK FINDLEY'S STORY

1.

My name is Turk Findley, and this is the story of the life I lived long after everything I knew and loved was dead and gone. It begins in the desert of a planet we used to call Equatoria, and it ends—well, that's hard to say.

These are my memories. This is what happened.

2.

Ten thousand years, more or less, is how long I was away from the world. That was a terrible thing to know, and for a span of time it was nearly all I knew.

I woke up dizzy and naked in the open air. The sun was hammering out of an empty blue sky. I was radically, painfully thirsty. My body ached and my tongue felt thick and dead in my mouth. I tried to sit up and nearly toppled over. My vision was blurred. I didn't know where I was or how I had gotten here. Nor could I really remember where I had come from. All I had of knowledge was the sickening conviction that almost ten thousand years (but who had counted them?) had passed.

I forced myself to sit absolutely still, eyes closed, until the worst of the vertigo passed. Then I raised my head and tried to make sense of what I saw.

I was outdoors in what appeared to be a desert. There was no one on the ground for miles, as far as I could tell, but I wasn't exactly alone: a number of aircraft were passing overhead at low speed. The aircraft were peculiarly shaped and it wasn't obvious what was keeping them aloft, since they seemed to have no wings or rotors.

I ignored them for the time being. The first thing I needed to do was to get out of the sunlight—my skin was burned red and there was no telling how long I'd been exposed.

The desert was hardpacked sand all the way to the horizon, but it was littered with fragments of what looked like gigantic broken toys: a smoothly curved half-eggshell, at least ten feet tall and dusky green, a few yards away; and in the distance other similar shapes in bright but fading colors, as if a giant's tea party had come to grief. Beyond all this there was a range of mountains like a blackened jawbone. The air smelled of mineral dust and hot rock.

I crawled a few yards into the shadow of the fractured eggshell, where the shade was blissfully cool. What I needed next was water. And maybe something to cover myself up. But the effort of moving had made me dizzy again. One of the strange aircraft seemed to be hovering overhead; I tried to wave my arms to attract its attention but my strength had deserted me, and I closed my eyes and passed out.

3.

The next time I woke I was being lifted into some kind of stretcher.

The bearers were dressed in yellow uniforms and wore dust masks over their mouths and noses.

woman in the same yellow clothing walked beside me. When our eyes met she said, “Please try to stay calm. I know you’re frightened. We have to hurry, but trust me, we’ll get you to a safe place.”—

Several of the aircraft had landed, and I was carried into one of them. The woman in yellow said a few words to her companions in a language I didn’t recognize. My captors or saviors set me on my feet and I discovered I could stand without falling. A door came down, cutting off the view of the desert and the sky. Softer light suffused the interior of the aircraft.

Men and women in yellow jumpers bustled around me, but I kept my eye on the woman who had spoken English. “Steady,” she said, taking my arm. She wasn’t much taller than five feet and changed and when she pulled off her mask she looked reassuringly human. Her skin was brown, her features were vaguely Asian, her dark hair was cut short. “How do you feel?”

That was a complicated question. I managed to shrug.

We were in a large room and she escorted me to one corner of it. A surface like a bed slid out of the wall, along with a rack of what might have been medical equipment. The woman in yellow told me to lie down. The other soldiers or airmen—I didn’t know how to think of them—ignored us and went about their business, working control surfaces along the walls or hurrying off to other chambers of the aircraft. I felt a rising-elevator sensation and I guessed we had lifted off, though there was no noise apart from the sound of voices speaking a language I didn’t recognize. No bounce, no chop, no turbulence.

The woman in yellow pressed a blunt metallic tube against my forearm and then against my neck, and I felt my anxiety ease into numbness. I guessed I had been drugged but I didn’t really mind. My thirst had vanished. “Can you tell me your name?” the woman asked.

I croaked out the fact that I was Turk Findley. I told her I was an American by birth but that I had been living in Equatoria lately. I asked her who she was where she was from. She smiled and said, “My name is Treya, and the place I’m from is called Vox.”

“Is that where we’re going now?”

“Yes. We’ll be there soon. Try to sleep, if you can.”

* * *

So I closed my eyes and tried to take inventory of myself.

My name is Turk Findley.

Turk Findley, born in the last years of the Spin. Variously a day laborer, sailor, small-plane pilot. Worked my way across the Arch to Equatoria on a coastal freighter and lived in Port Magellan some years. Met a woman named Lise Adams who was searching for her father, a search that took us among the kind of people who liked to experiment with Martian drugs—took us deep into the oil lands of the Equatorian desert at a time when ash began to fall from the sky and strange things grew out of the ground. I had loved Lise Adams well enough to know I wasn’t good for her. We had been separated in the desert ... and I believed it was then that the Hypotheticals had taken me. Had picked me up and carried me the way a wave carries a grain of sand. And dropped me on this beach, this shoal, this sandbar, ten thousand years downcurrent.

That was my history, as much as I could reconstruct of it.

* * *

When I came to myself again I was in a smaller and more private cabin of the aircraft. Treya, my guard or my doctor (I didn’t know exactly how to think of her), was sitting at my bedside humming a tune in a minor key. She or someone else had dressed me in a simple tunic and trousers.

Night had fallen. A narrow window to the left of me showed scattered stars that turned like points on a wheel whenever the aircraft made a banking turn. The small Equatorian moon was on the horizon (which meant I was still in Equatoria, however much it might have changed). Down below whitecapped waves glistened with phosphorescence. We were flying over the sea, far from land.

“What’s that song you’re humming?” I asked.

Treya gave a little start, surprised to find me awake. She was young—I guessed twenty or twenty-five years old. Her eyes were attentive but cautious, as if she were subtly afraid of me. But she smiled at the question. “Just a tune...”

A familiar tune. It was one of those lamentations in waltz time that had been so popular in the aftermath of the Spin. “Reminds me of a song I used to know. It was called...”

“‘Après Nous.’”

Yes. I had heard it in a bar in Venezuela when I was young and alone in the world. Not a bad tune but I couldn’t imagine how it had survived ten centuries. “How do you know it?”

“Well, that’s not easy to explain. In a way, I grew up with that song.”

“Really? How old *are* you exactly?”

Another smile. “Not as old as you, Turk Findley. I have some memories, though. That’s why they assigned me to you. I’m not just your nurse. I’m your translator, your guide.”

“Then maybe you can explain—”

“I can explain a lot, but not right now. You need to rest. I can give you something to make you sleep.”

“I’ve *been* asleep.”

“Is that how it felt when you were with the Hypotheticals—like sleep?”

The question startled me. I knew I had been “with the Hypotheticals” in some sense, but I had no real memory of it. She appeared to know more about the subject than I did.

“Perhaps the memories will come back,” she said.

“Do you want to tell me what we’re running from?”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You all seemed in a hurry to get away from the desert.”

“Well ... this world has changed since you were taken up. Wars were fought here. The planet was radically depopulated and has never really recovered. In a way, a war is *still* being fought here.”

As if to confirm this statement, the aircraft banked sharply. Treya gave the window a nervous glance. A burst of white light obscured the stars and lit the rolling waves below. I sat up to get a better view and I thought I saw something on the horizon as the flash faded, something like a distant continent or (because it was almost geometrically flat) an enormous ship. Then it was gone in the darkness.

“Stay down,” she said. The aircraft went into an even steeper curve. She ducked into a chair attached to the nearest wall. More light bloomed in the window. “We’re out of range of their seagoing vessels, but their aircraft ... It took us time to find you,” she said. “The others should be safe by now. The room will protect you if our vehicle is damaged, but you need to lie down.”

It happened almost before the words were out of her mouth.

* * *

There were five aircraft (I learned later) in our formation. We were the last flight out of the Equatorian desert. The attack came sooner and more powerfully than expected: four escort craft went down protecting us, and after that we were defenseless.

I remember Treya reaching for my hand. I wanted to ask her what kind of war this was; I wanted

to ask her what she meant by “the others.” But there wasn’t time. Her grip was fiercely tight and her skin was cold. Then there was sudden heat and a blinding light, and we began to fall.

4.

A combination of programmed emergency maneuvers and sheer luck carried our piece of the broken aircraft as far as the nearest island of Vox.

Vox was a seagoing vessel—a *ship*, in the broadest sense—but it was much more than that word implies. Vox was an archipelago of floating islands, vastly larger than anything that had ever put to sea in my lifetime. It was a culture and a nation, a history and a religion. For nearly five hundred years it had sailed the oceans of the Ring of Worlds—Treyra’s name for the planets that had been linked together by the Archways of the Hypotheticals. Its enemies were powerful, Treyra explained, and they were close. Equatoria was an empty world now, but “an alliance of cortical democracies” had sent pursuit vessels. They were determined to prevent Vox from reaching the Arch that connected Equatoria to Earth.

She didn’t believe they could succeed. But the latest attack had been crippling, and one of the casualties had been the aircraft in which we were traveling.

We survived because the compartment in which Treyra was treating me had been rigged with elaborate survival mechanisms: aerogels to cushion us from catastrophic deceleration, deployable wing surfaces to glide us to a landing place. We had come to rest on one of the out-islands of the Vox archipelago, currently uninhabited and far from the city Treyra called Vox Core.

Vox Core was the hub of the Vox Archipelago, and it had been the primary target of the attack. By the light of dawn we could see a pillar of smoke rising from below the windward horizon. “There,” Treyra said in a traumatized voice. “That smoke ... that must be from Vox Core.”

We left the smoldering lifeship and stood in a grassy meadow as the sun cleared the horizon. “The Network is silent,” she said. It wasn’t clear to me what this meant or how she knew it. Her face was rigid with grief. Apart from our survival compartment, the rest of the aircraft must have fallen into the sea. Everyone aboard had died except us. I asked Treyra how it happened that we had been singled out to survive.

“Not *us*,” she said. “*You*. The aircraft acted to preserve you. I just happened to be nearby.”

“Why me?”

“We waited centuries for you. For you and the others like you.”

I didn’t understand. But she was dazed and bruised and I didn’t press the question. Rescue would come, she said. Her people would find us. They would send out aircraft, even if Vox Core had been damaged. They wouldn’t leave us in the wilderness.

She was wrong about that, as it turned out.

* * *

The exterior wall of the downed survival chamber was still steaming—it had scorched the meadow grass it landed on—and the interior was too hot to use even as a temporary shelter. Treyra and I ferried out a few armloads of salvageable material. The survival room had been liberally stocked with what I guessed were pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, less generously with packages Treyra identified as food. I grabbed any box she pointed at and we stacked the salvage under a nearby tree (not a species I recognized). The tree was all we needed for shelter at the moment. The air outside was warm, the sky clear.

Despite all this physical effort I felt reasonably good, much better than I had when I first woke up in the desert. I wasn’t tired or even especially anxious, no doubt because of the drugs Treyra had

pumped into me. I didn't feel sedated, just calm and energetic and not inclined to dwell on the danger at hand. ~~Treya dabbed some sort of ointment on her cuts and scratches, which closed immediately.~~ Then she applied a blue glass tube to the inside of her arm. A few minutes later she appeared to be as functional as I felt, though she still wore her grief like a mask.

As the sun cleared the horizon it was possible to see more of the place where we had landed. It was a sumptuous landscape. When I was little my mother used to read to me from an illustrated children's Bible, and the island reminded me of watercolor pictures of Eden before the Fall. Rolling meadows carpeted with small cloverlike plants merged into thickets of fruit-bearing trees in every direction. No lambs or lions, though. Or people or roads. Not even a path.

"It would help," I said, "if you could explain a little of what's going on."

"That's what I was trained for—to help you understand. But without the Network it's hard to know where to start."

"Just tell me what a complete stranger might like to know."

She looked up at the sky, at the ominous pillar of smoke to windward. Her eyes reflected clouds.

"All right," she said. "I'll tell you what I can. While we wait to be rescued."

* * *

Vox had been built and populated by a community of men and women who believed it was their destiny to travel to Earth and enter into direct communication with the Hypotheticals.

That was four worlds and five centuries ago, Treya said. Since then Vox had held steadfastly to her purpose. She had traversed three Arches, making temporary alliances, fighting her declared enemies, accreting new communities and new artificial out-islands, until she reached her current configuration as the Vox Archipelago.

Her enemies ("the cortical democracies") believed any attempt to attract the attention of the Hypotheticals was not only doomed but suicidally dangerous, and not just for Vox itself. The disagreement had occasionally escalated to the point of open warfare, and twice in the last five hundred years Vox had nearly been destroyed. But her population had proven to be more disciplined and clever than her enemies. Or so Treya declared.

When Treya's slightly breathless narrative began to slow down I said, "How did you come to pluck me out of the desert?"

"That was planned from the beginning, long before I was born."

"You expected to find me there?"

"We know from experience and observation how the body of the Hypotheticals repairs and restores itself. We know from geological evidence that the cycle repeats every nine thousand eight hundred and seventy-five years. And we knew from historical records that certain people had been taken up into the renewal cycle in the Equatorian desert—including you. What goes in comes out. It was predicted almost to the hour." Her voice became reverent. "You've been in the presence of the Hypotheticals. That makes you special. That's why we need you."

"Need me for what?"

"The Arch that joins Equatoria to Earth stopped functioning centuries ago. No one has been on Earth in all that time. But we believe we can make the transit, as long as you and the others are with us. Do you understand?"

No—but I let it pass. "You said 'the others'—what others?"

"The others who were taken up into the Hypothetical renewal cycle. You were there, Turley Findley. You must have seen it, even if you don't remember it. An Arch, smaller than the ones that connect the worlds but still very large, rising out of the desert."

I remembered it the way you might remember a nightmare by the light of morning. The earthquakes it caused had been deadly. Hypothetical machines had been drawn to it from across the solar system, falling from the sky like toxic ash. It had killed friends of mine. Treya called it “temporal Arch” and implied that it was part of some cycle in the life of the Hypotheticals. But we hadn’t known that at the time.

I shivered, despite the warm air and the comforting pharmaceuticals coursing through my bloodstream.

“It took you up,” she said, “and held you in stasis for almost ten thousand years. It *marked* you, Turk Findley. The Hypotheticals *know* you. That’s why you’re important. You and the others.”

“Tell me their names.”

“I don’t know their names. I was assigned to you in particular. If the Network was working properly ... but it’s not.” She hesitated. “They were probably in Vox Core at the time of the attack. You might be the only survivor. So someone *has* to come for us. They’ll come as soon as they can. They’ll find us and they’ll take us home.”

So she said, though the sky remained blue and vacant.

* * *

That afternoon I scouted the area where we’d landed, keeping within sight of camp and collecting kindling for a fire. Many of the trees on this island of the Vox Archipelago produced edible fruit, Treya had said, and I collected some of that, too. I bundled together the kindling with a length of ribbony twine salvaged from the lifeship, and I tucked the fruit—yellow pods the size of bell peppers—into a cloth sack, also salvaged. It felt good to be doing something useful. Apart from an occasional bird call and the rustling of leaves, the only sound was the rhythm of my breathing, my feet moving through the meadow grass. The rolling landscape would have been soothing if not for the column of smoke still smudging the horizon.

The smoke was on my mind when I came back to camp. I asked Treya whether the attack had been nuclear and whether we ought to worry about fallout or radiation. She didn’t know about that—there hadn’t been a thermonuclear attack on Vox “since the First Orthodoxy Wars,” more than two hundred years before she was born. The history she had learned hadn’t discussed the effects.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” I said. “It’s not like we can do anything about it. And it looks like the wind is favoring us.” The plume of smoke had begun to feather out parallel to our position.

Treya frowned, shielding her eyes and looking to windward. “Vox is a ship under power,” she said. “We’re at the stern of it—we *should* be downwind of Vox Core.”

“What’s that mean?”

“We may be rudderless.”

I didn’t know what that might imply (or what might constitute a “rudder” on a vessel the size of a small continent), but it was confirmation that the damage to Vox Core had been extensive and that help might not reach us as soon as Treya hoped. I guessed she had come to the same conclusion. She helped me dig a shallow pit for the fire, but she was moody and uncommunicative.

* * *

We didn’t have a clock to count the hours of the day. I slept a little when the stimulants wore off, and when I woke the sun was just touching the horizon. The air was cooler now. Treya showed me how to use one of the salvaged tools to light the kindling I had gathered.

Once the fire was crackling I gave some thought to our position—that is, the physical position

Vox relative to the coast of Equatoria. In my day Equatoria had been a settled outpost in the New World, the planet you reached when you sailed from Sumatra through the Arch of the Hypotheticals. Vox was making for Earth she would have been headed toward the Equatorian side of that same Arch aiming to make the transverse journey. So I wasn't surprised when the peak of the Arch began to glitter in the darkening sky just after sunset.

The Arch was a Hypothetical construct, built to their incomprehensible scale. Back home, its legs were embedded in the floor of the Indian Ocean and its apex extended beyond the atmosphere of the Earth. Its Equatorian twin was the same size and may even have been, in some sense, the same physical object. One Arch, two worlds. Long after sunset the peak of it still reflected the light of the sun, a thread of silver high overhead. Ten thousand years hadn't changed it. Treya looked up steadily and whispered something quiet in her own language. When she had finished I asked her whether the words had been a song or a prayer.

"Maybe both. You might call it a poem."

"Can you translate it?"

"It's about the cycles of the sky, the life of the Hypotheticals. The poem says there's no such thing as a beginning or an ending."

"I don't know anything about that."

"I'm afraid there's a lot you don't know."

The unhappiness in her face was unmistakable. I told her I didn't understand what had happened to Vox Core but I was sorry for her loss.

She gave me back a sad smile. "And I'm sorry for *your* loss."

I hadn't thought of what had happened to me that way—as a loss, something to be mourned. It was true: I was ten irrevocable centuries away from home. Everything known and familiar was gone.

But I had been trying for most of my life to put a wall between myself and my past, and I hadn't succeeded yet. Some things are taken away from you, some you leave behind—and some you carry with you, world without end.

* * *

Come morning Treya gave me another hit from the apparently inexhaustible supply of pharmaceuticals she carried. It was all the consolation she could offer, and I accepted it gladly.

5.

"If help was coming it would have come by now. We can't wait forever. We have to walk."

To Vox Core, she meant: to the burning capital of her floating nation.

"Is that possible?"

"I think so."

"We have all the food we need right here. And if we stay close to the wreckage we'll be easier to find."

"No, Turk. We have to get to Core before Vox crosses the Arch. But it's not just that. The Network is still down."

"How is that a problem?"

She frowned in a way I had begun to recognize, struggling to find English words for an unfamiliar concept. "The Network isn't just a passive connection. There are parts of my body and mind that depend on it."

"Depend on it for what? You seem to be doing okay."

"The drugs I've been giving myself are helpful. But they won't last forever. I need to get back

Vox Core—take my word for it.”

~~So she insisted, and I was in no position to argue with her. It was probably true about the drug~~ She had dosed herself twice that morning, and it was obvious she was getting less mileage out of the pharmaceuticals than she had the day before. So we bundled up all the useful salvage we could carry and began to walk.

We settled into a steady rhythm as the morning unfolded. If the war was still going on, there was no sign of it. (The enemy had no permanent bases in Equatoria, Treya said, and the attack had been a flailing last-ditch attempt to keep us from attempting to cross the Arch. Vox had launched a retaliatory strike before her defenses went down; the empty blue sky was probably a sign that the counterattack had been successful.) The rolling land offered no real obstacles, and we aimed ourselves at the pillar of smoke still rising from beyond the horizon. Around noon we crested a small hill that allowed a view to the margins of the island—ocean on three sides, and to windward a hump of land that must have been the next island in the chain.

More interestingly, four towers rose above the canopy of the forest ahead of us—man-made structures, windowless and black, maybe twenty or thirty stories tall. The towers were separated from one another by many miles, and heading for any one of them would have required a serious detour—but if there were people there, I suggested, maybe we could get some help.

“No!” Treya shook her head fiercely. “No, there’s no one inside. The towers are machines, not places where people live. They collect ambient radiation and pump it down below.”

“Below?”

“Down to the hollow part of the island, where the farms are.”

“You keep your farms underground?” There was plenty of fertile land up here, not to mention sunlight.

But no, she said; Vox was designed to travel through inhospitable or changing environments all along the Ring of Worlds. All the worlds in the Ring were habitable, but conditions varied from planet to planet; the archipelago’s food sources had to be protected from changes in the length of days or seasons, wild variations in temperature, greater or lesser degrees of sunlight or ultraviolet radiation. Over the long term, aboveground agriculture would have been as impossible as raising crops on the deck of an aircraft carrier. The forest here was lush, but that was because Vox had been anchored in hospitable climates for most of the last hundred years. (“That might change,” Treya said, “if we cross to Earth.”) Originally these islands had been bare slabs of artificial granite; the topsoil had accumulated over centuries and had been colonized by escaped cultivars and windblown seed from islands and continents on two neighboring worlds.

“Can we get down to the farmland?”

“Possibly. But it wouldn’t be wise.”

“Why—are the farmers dangerous?”

“Without the Network, they might be. It’s difficult to explain, but the Network also functions as a social control mechanism. Until it’s restored we should avoid untutored mobs.”

“The farm folk get rowdy when they’re off their leash?”

She gave me a disdainful look. “Please don’t make facile judgments about things you don’t understand.” She adjusted her pack and walked a few paces ahead of me, cutting short the conversation. I followed her down the hillside, back into the shadow of the forest. I tried to gauge our progress by marking the relative positions of the black towers whenever we crossed an open ridge. I calculated that we might reach the windward shore in a day or two.

The weather turned sour that afternoon. Heavy clouds rolled in, followed by erratic winds and bursts of rain. We marched on grimly until we began to lose daylight; then we found a sheltering grove and stretched a sheet of waterproof cloth between the closely woven branches to serve as

shelter. I succeeded in getting a small fire going.

~~As night fell we huddled under the tarp. The air reeked of woodsmoke and wet earth. Treya hummed to herself while I heated rations. It was the same song she had been humming in the aircraft before it was destroyed. I asked her again how she had come to know a ten-thousand-year-old popular song.~~

“It was part of my training. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize it was bothering you.”

“It’s not. I know that song. First time I heard it I was in Venezuela, waiting for a tank assignment. Little bar there that played American tunes. Where’d you hear it?”

She looked past the fire, out into the dark of the forest. “On a file server in my bedroom. My parents were out, so I cranked it up and danced.” Her voice was faint.

“Where was this?”

“Champlain,” she said.

“Champlain?”

“New York State. Up by the Canadian border.”

“Champlain on *Earth*?”

She looked at me strangely. Then her eyes widened. She put her hand to her mouth.

“Treya? Are you all right?”

Apparently not. She grabbed her rucksack, fumbled through it, then pulled out the pharmaceutical dispenser and pressed it against her arm.

As soon as she was breathing normally she said, “I’m sorry. That was a mistake. Please don’t ask me about these things.”

“Maybe I can help, if you tell me what’s going on.”

“Not now.”

She curled closer to the fire and closed her eyes.

* * *

By morning the rain had turned to mist and fog. The wind had calmed, but during the night it had blown down a bounty of ripe fruit, an easy breakfast.

The column of smoke from Vox Core was invisible in the overcast, but two of the dark towers were close enough to serve as landmarks. By mid-morning the fog had thinned and by noon the clouds had lifted and we could hear the sound of the sea.

Treya was talkative by daylight, probably because she was fairly heavily medicated. (She had applied the ampoule to her arm twice already.) Obviously she was leaning on the drug as a way of compensating for the loss of “the Network,” whatever that meant to her. And just as obviously, her problem was getting worse. She started talking almost as soon as we broke camp, and it wasn’t a conversation but a nervy, absentminded monologue—a cocaine monologue, I would have thought at another time and place. I listened closely and didn’t interrupt, though half of what she said made no sense. In the odd moments when she paused, the wind in the trees seemed suddenly loud.

She told me she had been born to a family of workers in the far leeward quarter of Vox Core. Both her father and her mother had been equipped with neural interfaces that allowed them to perform any of dozens of skilled jobs, “overseeing infrastructure or implementing novel instrumentalities.” They were a lower caste than “the managers” but they were proud of their versatility. Treya herself had been trained from birth to join a group of therapists, scholars, and medics whose sole purpose was to interact with the survivors plucked from the Equatorian desert. As a “liaison therapist” assigned specifically to me (knowing only as much about me as had been preserved in historical records: my name and date of birth and the fact that I had vanished into the temporal Arch), she needed to speak

colloquial English as it had been spoken ten centuries ago.

~~She had learned it from the Network. But the Network had given her more than a vocabulary:~~ had given her an entire secondary identity—a set of implanted memories synthesized from twentieth-century documents and channeled through the interactive node that had been attached to her spinal cord at birth. She called this secondary personality an “impersona”—not just a lexicon but a life, with all its context of places and people, thoughts and feelings.

The primary source from which her impersona had been constructed was a woman named Allison Pearl. Allison Pearl was born in Champlain, New York, a little after the end of the Spin. Allison’s diary had survived as an historical document, and the Network had synthesized Treya’s impersona from those diary entries. “When I need an English word I get it from Allison. She loved words. She loved writing them. Words like ‘orange,’ the fruit. A fruit I’ve never seen or tasted. Allison loves oranges. What I have from her is the word and the concept, the roundness and brightness and the color of an orange, though not the *qualia*, the taste ... But memories like that are dangerous. They have to be kept within boundaries. Without the Network’s neurological constraints, Allison’s personality is beginning to metastasize. I reach for my memories and I come up with hers. It’s ... confusing. And it will only get worse. The drugs, the drugs help, but only temporarily...”

Treya said all that and more. Insofar as I understood it, I believed she was telling the truth. I believed her because her voice had taken on an American twang, colored with phrases that might have been lifted directly from Allison Pearl’s diary. It explained the song she had been compulsively humming, her fits of absentmindedness, the way she stared into space with her head cocked as if she were listening to a voice I couldn’t hear.

“I know these memories aren’t real, they’re made of Network inferences and collations of ancient data, but even talking about it this way feels strange, as if—”

“As if what?”

She turned and stared at me. Probably she hadn’t realized she was talking out loud. I shouldn’t have interrupted her.

“As if I don’t belong here. As if this is all some peculiar *future*.” She scuffed her heel into the damp earth. “As if I’m a stranger here. Like you.”

* * *

Not long before sunset we reached the edge of the island. *Edge*, not *shore*. Here the island’s artificiality was obvious. The forest gave way to a slope of scrub grass and exposed rock that fell away almost vertically, a drop of some few hundred feet to the sea. Across that gap was the next island of the Vox archipelago, separated from this one by a chasm half a mile wide. “Pity there isn’t a bridge,” Treya said.

“There is,” Treya said tersely. “A sort of bridge. We ought to be able to see it from here.”

She got down on her belly and scooted to the edge of the cliff, motioning for me to do the same. Heights don’t bother me particularly—I had flown airplanes for a living in the world before this one—but inching over that vertical drop wasn’t the most comfortable thing I had ever done. “Down there,” Treya said, pointing. “Do you see it?”

The sun was sinking and the chasm was already in shadow. Seabirds nested where centuries of wind and rain had carved hollows in the obdurate, artificial rock. Far to the left, I could see what she was pointing at. An enclosed tunnel connected this artificial island to the next, though only the far end of it was visible around the precise curvature of the island’s wall. The tunnel was a salt-rimed shade of black, the same color as the sea below. Vertigo and the odd perspective made it hard to judge its true size, but I guessed you could have put a dozen semi trucks abreast and driven them from one end

the other with room to spare. Even so, there were no spars, ropes, wires, or girders supporting it—somehow the structure carried its own weight. Each island in the archipelago contained its own drive system, slaved to a central controller at Vox Core. Still, I couldn't help wondering about the physical stress born by the link between these two enormous floating masses, even if the tunnel itself was bearing only a fraction of the load.

"Automated freight carriers pass through the tunnel carrying raw biomass to Vox Core and refined goods back to the farmers," Treya said. "It's not meant to be crossed on foot, but it'll have to do."

"How do we get inside?"

"We don't. We might be able to do that from down in the farmholds, but not from here. We'll have to cross on the outside."

I held that thought for a moment, trying to keep it at a reassuring distance.

"There are stairs carved into the cliff," she added. "You can't see them from this angle. But they were cut during the original construction, so they're probably somewhat eroded." Even the foamed granite composite the islands were made of couldn't resist wind and salt water indefinitely. "It won't be an easy climb."

"The top of the tunnel is a curved surface, and it looks pretty slick."

"It may be wider than you think."

"Or it may *not*."

"We don't have a choice."

But it was too late to begin the attempt, with only a couple of hours of daylight left.

* * *

We set up a fresh camp back in the forest. I watched Treya take another hit from her drug syringe. She said, "Is that thing bottomless?"

"It refills itself. It has its own metabolism. It draws a little blood during the injections and uses that as raw material to catalyze active molecules. It runs on body heat and ambient light. For you, I've fabricated a drug to suppress anxiety. What it gives me is something different."

I had stopped taking doses when she offered them—I had decided to live with my anxiety, for better or worse. "How does it know what to synthesize?"

She frowned the way she did whenever she tripped over a concept for which her ghostly tutor Allison Pearl didn't have a ready word. "It samples blood chemistry and makes an educated guess. Bottomless, no, it isn't bottomless. It needs to be refreshed, and this one is getting tired." She added, "If you want to use it, though, that's all right."

"No. What's it giving you?"

"A kind of ... you could call it a cognitive enhancer. It helps maintain the boundary between my real and my virtual memories. But it's only a temporary solution." She shivered in the firelight. "What I really need is the Network."

"Tell me about the Network. It's what, some kind of internal wireless interface?"

"Not exactly what you mean by that, but yes, in a sense. Except that the signals I receive are expressed as biological and neurological regulators. Everybody on Vox wears a node, and we're all linked by the Network. The Network helps us formulate a limbic consensus. I don't know why it hasn't been repaired. Even if the transponders at Vox Core were destroyed, workers should have been able to restore basic functionality by now. Unless the processors themselves were damaged ... but they were built to sustain anything short of a direct hit from a high-yield weapon."

"Maybe that's what happened—a direct hit."

She shrugged unhappily by way of response.

~~“Which means there’s a good chance we’re marching toward a radioactive ruin.”~~

“We don’t have a choice,” she said.

* * *

I sat up after she fell asleep, nursing the fire.

Without the calming drugs, my own recent memories had begun to firm up. Just days ago I had been trying to survive a series of earthquakes generated by the temporal Arch as it rose from its dormant state in the Equatorian desert. Now I was here on Vox. You can’t really comprehend events like that, I thought. You can only endure them.

I let the fire burn down to a glow of embers. The Arch of the Hypotheticals glimmered overhead, an ironic smile among the stars, and the rush of the sea was amplified by the echo from the nearby cliffs. I wondered about the people who had nuked Vox Core, the “cortical democracies,” and why had they done it, and whether their reasons were as superficial as Treya had suggested.

I was a neutral in the conflict, insofar as that was possible. It wasn’t my fight. And I wondered whether Allison Pearl, the Champlain Ghost, might be similarly neutral. Maybe that was what Treya found so disconcerting: “Allison” and I were both shades of a disinterested past, both potentially disloyal to Vox Core.

6.

We broke camp at dawn and followed the curving cliff until we came to what Treya had called “stairs,” broad declivities cut into the face of the granite. Time had beveled the steps into sloping ledges separated by giddy ten-foot drops. Every surface was slick with mossy growths and bird dung, and the deeper we descended the louder the roar of the ocean became. Eventually the high edges of the two adjoining islands closed off all of the sky apart from a few slanting rays of sunlight. We made slow progress, and twice we paused while Treya took hits from her high-tech syringe. Her expression was grim and, under that, terrified. She kept glancing backward and up, as if she was afraid we were being followed.

By the angle of the light I guessed it was past noon when I helped her down the last vertical gap to the roof of the tunnel itself. The roof of the tunnel was broader than it had looked from above and we were able to stand on it safely enough, though it was unnerving to walk on a surface that rounded away on both sides to a sheer drop. It was maybe a half mile to the opposite anchor point, now concealed by mist, where we would have to do another round of serious climbing, with any luck before darkness set in. Night would come fast down here.

For the sake of distraction I asked Treya what she (or Allison Pearl) remembered about Champlain.

“I’m not sure it’s safe to answer that question.” But she sighed and went on: “Champlain. Cool winters. Hot summers. Swimming in the lake at Catfish Point. My family was broke most of the time. Those were the years after the Spin, when everybody was talking about how the Hypotheticals might actually be benevolent, protecting us. But I never believed that. Walking down those Champlain sidewalks, you know the way concrete glitters in the summer sun? I couldn’t have been more than ten years old but I remember thinking that was how we must look to the Hypotheticals—not just us but our whole planet, just a glimmer underfoot, something you notice and then forget.”

“That’s not how Treya talks about the Hypotheticals.”

She gave me an angry look. “I *am* Treya.” And walked a few paces more. “Allison was wrong. The Hypotheticals—they’re gods by any reasonable definition, but they’re not *indifferent*.” She

stopped and squinted at me, wiping salt mist from her eyes. "You ought to know that!"

~~Maybe so. Before long we reached the midpoint of the transit, where the wind came roaring~~ between the chasm walls in a focused gale and we had to crawl on our hands and knees like ants clinging to a rainy clothesline. Conversation was impossible. Intermittent vibrations came through the palms of my hands from the tunnel, as of metal groaning under incalculable stress. I wondered what would take to tear this damaged archipelago apart—another nuclear attack? Or something as simple as a high sea and a strong wind, given what had already happened? I pictured cables the size of subway trains snapping, island-ships like battered piñatas spilling their contents into the sea. It wasn't a reassuring thought. If not for Treya I might have turned back. But if not for Treya I wouldn't have been here in the first place.

Finally we came into the shadow of the opposing cliff wall, where the wind eased to a low moan and we could stand upright again. The stairs that had been cut into the granite cliff were identical to those across the gorge: eroded and mossy, steep and stinking of the sea. We had climbed about a dozen of them when Treya gasped and came to a dead halt.

The ledge above us was full of people.

* * *

They must have seen us coming, must have hidden until they were ready to show themselves. It didn't look like a welcoming committee.

"Farmers," Treya whispered.

There were thirty or so of them, male and female, all staring at us with grim expressions. Many of them carried implements that might have been weapons. Treya cast a quick look back at the bridge we had just crossed. But it was too late and too dark to run. We were outnumbered and effectively cornered.

She reached for my hand and took it. Her skin was cold. I felt the beat of her pulse. "Let me take you to them," she said.

I boosted her up the next ledge and she pulled me after and then we were level with the crowd. The farmers surrounded us. Treya held out her hands in a conciliatory gesture. Then the head man stepped up.

At least I guessed he was the head man. He wasn't wearing any insignia to mark his rank, but no one appeared to question his authority. He carried a metallic rod the length of a walking stick, tapered at the end to a fine point. Like the people behind him, he was tall. His dark skin was finely wrinkled.

Before he could open his mouth Treya said something in her native language. He listened impatiently. In English Treya whispered, "I told him you're one of the Uptaken. If that matters to him at all—"

But it didn't. He barked a few words at Treya. She said something hesitant in return. He barked again. She bowed her head and trembled.

"Whatever happens," she whispered, "don't interfere."

The head man put his hands on her shoulders. He pushed her down to the slick surface of the granite tier and gave her a shove so that she sprawled onto her stomach. Her cheekbone grazed the rock and began to bleed. She closed her eyes in pain.

I had been in my share of fights. I wasn't a particularly good fighter. But I couldn't stand passively and watch. I lunged at the farmer. Before I could reach him his friends had their hands on me, holding me back. They forced me to my knees.

The boss farmer put his foot on Treya's shoulder, holding her down. Then he raised his weapon and slowly lowered it.

The sharp end touched a knob of Treya's spine just below the neck. Her body stiffened at the pressure of it.

Then the farmer drove the point down hard.

CHAPTER THREE

SANDRA AND BOSE

Sandra went to bed convinced the document was a fake—a bad joke, though it was too late to call Bose and accuse him of it. Although, if it *was* a joke, it was a pointlessly elaborate one. She couldn't believe that Orrin Mather, the shy and inarticulate young man she had interviewed at State, had written any of this. Her best guess was that he had copied the text from some science fiction novel and pretended it was his own work ... though she couldn't imagine why.

So she tried to shrug off the unanswerable questions and get a decent night's rest.

Come dawn she had managed, she reckoned, at most three hours of useful sleep, which meant she would go through the day sandy-eyed and irritable. And the day would be another hot one, judging by the haze tinting the view from her living room window. The kind of smog only August in Houston could brew up.

She tried to call Bose from the dashboard phone in her car but the number bounced to voice mail. She left her name and work number and added, "Is it possible you sent me the wrong file? Or maybe I ought to be interviewing *you* for State Care. Please call as soon as you can and clear this up."

* * *

Sandra had been employed at the Greater Houston Area State Care facility long enough to have a feeling for the place—the flow of its internal politics, the rhythm of daily business. She could tell, in other words, when something was up. This morning, something was up.

The work she did had a certain moral ambiguity even at the best of times. The State Care system had been mandated by Congress in the messy aftermath of the Spin, when homelessness and mental illness had risen to epidemic levels. The legislation had been well intended, and it was still true that for anyone with a full-blown psychiatric disorder State Care was better than life on the street. The doctors were sincere, the pharmaceutical protocols were finely tuned, and the communal housing, while basic, was reasonably clean and well policed.

Too often, however, people were swept into State Care who didn't belong there: petty criminals, the belligerent poor, ordinary folks who had been driven to chronic bewilderment by economic hardship. And State Care, once you were given involuntary commitment status, wasn't easy to leave. A generation of local pols had campaigned against inmates being "dumped back on the street," and the State's halfway house program was forever under attack from NIMBY activists. Which meant that the State Care population was continually rising while its budget remained fixed. Which led in turn to underpaid staff, overpopulated residential camps, and periodic scandals in the press.

As an intake physician it was Sandra's job to short-circuit those problems at the front end, to admit the genuinely needy while turning away (or referring to other social welfare agencies) the merely confused. In theory it was as simple as checking off a patient's symptoms and writing a recommendation. In fact her work involved a great deal of surmise and many painful judgment calls. Turn away too many cases and the police or the courts would get testy; accept too many and

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