

Chapter fifty-five. O-Ring

No, apostate: this universe around you is not an instance of creation, whether by Vas or his maker. It is an aspect of the multi-versal procreation, which is everlasting and a thing unto itself. Procreation, ceaseless, is the divine word forever resonating.

Lesson of the Mediant to Hersey, from Hersey, Vox: Journals

#

Andromache's cutter, nearly two days out and on a course presumably set by Burgred, let the unknown station take over her guidance systems.

"Welcome to O-Ring, traveler. Name your pleasure: gyno, ecto, organo, holo. Credit or swaps. Small-craft please proceed to O-dock or permit auto-systems to be engaged. It's all for you, service above and beyond, at O-Ring."

"Uh-oh," Tiff said. The proximity alarm had awakened them sixty points earlier. Henryk, strapped into a bunk, had fallen asleep again. Tiff and Hanna warmed some old coffee and tried to abide it, a scalding sip at a go, while strapped into pilot chairs at the flight console -- there was no gravity on the cutter. The cutter had a ti-ribbed diamond nose that gave a broad view of space. It still gave Hanna the shivers to look down into space, even though she had trained to deal with zero-G. Henryk had been glued to the co-pilot seat for the first several hours after they had bolted from *Andromache*, but after that he fell into rounds of sleep, mysterious communings with his gear and various parts contained in bins, count-downs to rations, and the like.

When the cutter's systems could pull the O-Ring into full view, it was clear that it was just a ring segment and round-house cut away from a much older base station. Four mismatched spokes still connected the central systems in the round house with the operations areas of the ring. Decidedly irregular bolt-ons and baubles had sprouted like boils and barnacles from various segments of the ring. They, too, seemed a jumble of old mech -- probably from different eras, salvaged from Vas-knew-what sorts of craft or other stations. On the top side of the round house -- from their vantage point in space -- the up-jutting male core connector, which would once have allowed the ring to be connected to others, looked to have been slowly eaten away by some mysterious process. Tiff eyed the station dubiously.

"I don't think Burgred had this in mind," said Hanna.

"He said to find and dock to anything," Tiff said. "It certainly is that."

They looked at one another uncertainly.

"What should we do?" Hanna said.

"I wish I knew, Hanny," Tiff said. "It's a dock, it's got people, we got nothin' but a ship's cutter. I don't know as we got any choice."

"It's only been a couple of days," Hanna said.

"You know about trade fairs?" Tiff said.

"You mean like on base stations? I've heard of them."

"Diamond-clad rule: the first offer you get is always the best. Only a fool waits for somethin' better to come along."

"Yeah, but I think this might be a weensy bit different, Tiff."

"No, it ain't," Tiff said. "You got big rules of the universe, and little ones."

"And this is a little one?"

"No, honey, 's a big one -- you fell right into that. We gotta go in."

Hanna made a face.

"We'll keep the sprat in here," Tiff said. "There ain't nothin' in there I haven't seen before, and you can stick with me. Nobody's gonna mess with a Navy cutter. He'll be fine in here."

"It's a theory," said Hanna.

"Give me somethin' better, Hanny. I'm all ears."

Nothing better suggested itself, and Tiff let the cutter get drawn into a lone berth, already irised open for them, and located inside the ring proper. The auto-systems working in tandem oriented the cutter's berthing to take advantage of inertial gravity from the spinning wheel. Other, larger craft clung in clusters, like dilly-dallies, on the outside of the ring, presumably where there were chambers for ingress and egress into the ring.

"I got to think about this," said Tiff. "We need some sort of plan."

"Can't we just get them to comm or ansible for us?" said Hanna.

"That'd be the decent them for them to do, 'a course. But I don't expect too much decency to show itself in there. I got some credit, but I don't know if it extends out here -- and I won't know 'til I ask. Also, I don't know who to call, if you get my meanin'. They probably got a warrant out for Henryk -- it sounds ridiculous just sayin' it -- and Burgred, well, who knows if he can do anything. I doubt we got away with no consequences -- they're gonna know it was the uncle. He told me to get to a Guild ship of some kind, that they'd take my credit and put us down somewhere. But this ain't no Guild shop, and I doubt if anybody here is in tight with the Guild. Or if there are, they wouldn't let us in on it. All we got is us. And I definitely got to watch *you*. You'd be meat in there."

Hanna blushed.

"We got to get the boy woken up so he's knows what's square," Tiff said.

They waited a while longer in thoughtful silence, then Hanna unstrapped herself and walked -- happy to have gravity again -- back to the bunks.

"Rise and shine, Henryk. You've got work to do," she said.

When he was roused and given some food and drink to revive him, he joined them in the cockpit, in a seat just behind the two within the ribbed diamond nose-cone.

"It's a way-station, Henryk," Hanna said. "Like a trading post. People come here to . . . buy stuff they need. It's kind of rough, Henryk, so we need you to guard the ship while we see what we can do to . . . get somewhere else, to get passage somewhere."

"They don't keep it very clean here," Henryk said. "They'd never make it in the Navy."

"No, Henryk, it's not the Navy," Tiff said. "That's another reason -- this ain't no place for a boy. It's a grownup place."

"I still want to see," Henryk said. "Can't I just come in a little way? I'll come right back to the cutter. I promise I will."

"No sir," said Hanna. "There's no way you're getting out of here into this place. You could get lost, too, and Vas only knows what you'd get into in there."

"But I'll be good. I'll stay with you," Henryk said. "Please?"

"N - O - no, Henryk, and that's an order," said Hanna. "Right, Tiff?"

"You got it. Your uncle put me in charge here, Henryk, and I'm tellin' you -- I'm orderin' -- you're the guard. What do you say to that, ship's boy?"

I must go into this place, Henryk. It has triggered instructions that I must follow.

Henryk sulked. "Yes, Ma'am. But please?" he tried again.

"Huh-unh, no way," said Hanna.

You must explain to them now.

"Explain what?"

About Par. I go out among the old ones and the little ones. That is what I do. I cannot tell you all now. But I must go in there. It is very important.

Tiff and Hanna exchanged worried glances as Henryk seemed to be carrying on an inner conversation with himself, complete with facial expressions.

Show them. They will send me out. That will suffice.

"Henryk?" Hanna said. "Are you alright?"

Henryk looked up at her, distracted.

"Huh? Oh. I was . . . Hanna?"

"Yes?"

"Tiff?"

"What is it, sprat?"

"I have something. I want to show you something," Henryk said. "It's . . . I'll show you." Henryk went to the stowage cubbies behind the cockpit while the women looked at each other questioningly. He pulled his kit bag out of the netting that held it securely, opened it slightly, and reached in. He bit his tongue, looked absently away, and pulled out his hand again, partly closed around something -- the women couldn't quite make it out from the way he was positioned.

He extended his hand out towards them, his thumb planted firmly on the finely-textured top shell of the creature.

"Did I hurt you?"

Not hurt. Extremely durable.

When Henryk looked again at Tiff and Hanna, their mouths were agape.

"You gotta be kiddin' me!" Tiff said. "You brung one of those? You can't carry around no vermin on a ship, Henryk! We gotta get that thing out of here!"

"Henryk," Hanna said. "What do you think your doing?"

"But . . . this is my friend!" said Henryk. "I've got to carry . . . it. He doesn't do anything! It just stays with me and . . ."

"And what? What were you going to say, Henryk?" said Hanna. "Is this the business of you talking to bugs? Because if it is . . ."

Tell Hanna that the recombinant features of a tesserant cordate depend upon its transcriptive generative polymerage chain."

Henryk began: "It says for me to tell you, the recom . . . the recom . . ."

I shall say it, Henryk.

Henryk spoke crisply. "The recombinant features of a tesseract cordate depend upon its transcriptive generative polymerage chain."

Hanna gaped. "Henryk," she said. "How in Vas's name . . ."

At length, Henryk and the creature, by various utterances and demonstrations, got Tiff and Hanna to understand, as well as was possible under the circumstances, the bug and Henryk's relationship -- if that was the right word -- with it. Tiff, though she understood, plainly wished to squash or blow the thing out for good. The scientist in Hanna, however, became intensely interested. It began to dawn on her -- and she impressed upon Tiff -- that Henryk had somehow discovered or connected himself to a scientific finding of serious consequence.

"This is . . . unbelievable," she said. "This is a creature with some sort of intelligence. I'm sure it's not self-consciousness -- I mean, how could it be? -- but it's plainly reacting or mimicking or something. Vas, this explains a lot of things. For instance, when they flee humans . . ." Hanna exclaimed excitedly the ramifications as they occurred to her, making her hungrier to ask the thing more questions. But there was no time, as the creature reminded them:

I have to go out and then I will come back. I must go. Then I must come back.

Hanna wanted to isolate the creature somehow. Patiently, Henryk and his companion explained the consequences -- the impossibility of the creature letting that occur.

"Dust?" Hanna said. "You mean, even if it knows we won't hurt it?"

"Par says it's automatic, he can't stop it."

"But why does it have to go into this . . . that place, Henryk?"

"It says it has to seed," Henryk said.

"Dear Vas," Hanna said. "So that's how it works. Does it . . . drop seeds?"

"It says, from itself there is another."

"Hmmm. But we'd be infecting this . . ."

"Sounds like a great idea to me," said Tiff. "Can only improve the place. We should leave it here, too."

That cannot be, Henryk.

"*I know. Wait.*" Then, aloud: "I can't leave it. It needs me!" Henryk said. "Besides, it's my friend. He has a name and everything. You don't understand!"

Hanna was about to say something when the ship's comm spoke:

"Berth 7, official cutter craft, Madams, Sirs, and Others, you will find lively accommodation within our facility. We hope you will join us imminently . . ."

"I think they're telling us, come in or get out," said Tiff. "We got to decide what we're gonna do." She frowned, though not entirely unkindly, at Henryk. "You're a heap of trouble, sprat. You know that? You hide out in the holds -- you're collecting specimens. And then . . ."

"Is that when you met . . . you got this bug?" Hanna said. "Down in the holds?"

"Belowdecks," Henryk said. "At Pdraig's. And then they . . . it would follow me. I think. I dunno." Henryk blushed. Hanna and Tiff sensed fibbing but merely threw Henryk a potent pair of frowns.

"Put that thing back," said Tiff. "It gives me the shivers." Hanna watched, mesmerized, as Henryk let the creature scuttle back into the kit bag.

"Are we going to let it out, Tiff?" Hanna said.

"Yes," said Henryk.

"I wasn't talking to you, Henryk."

"Oh."

"We gotta move on," said Tiff. "Henryk, there's no way you're going in there. That's final. I will . . ."

Hanna. Hanna may.

". . . take the bag with the . . . bug."

"It says Hanna," said Henryk. "It has to be Hanna. Par says so."

Hanna nodded. "Fine with me. I want to see what it does."

"Fine," said Tiff. "Henryk, you're gonna stay with -- you're gonna guard -- the cutter. Under no circumstances come out unless me or Hanny tells you. We'll be on the comm, too, so you can hear us and we can hear you. You got that, Henryk?"

"Yes, Ma'am. But . . ."

"No buts, Henryk," said Tiff.

"Let him say what he was going to say, Tiff," said Hanna.

Tiff relented.

"You have to bring it back," Henryk said. "It says it has to come back. And it's . . . it's mine. It helps me. It needs me."

"How are we gonna know?" said Tiff.

I will rejoin the kit. Do not touch.

"It says, look in the kit but don't touch him."

"Dear Vas," said Tiff. "We have all lost our minds. Okay, Henryk. You win. We carry the bag, we bring the bag back."

"With my bug!" said Henryk.

"Yes, Henryk. With your thing," said Tiff. "If it gets us to somewhere, then with your . . . bug."

#

The reality that met the women proved Tiff wrong in her jaded claim to experience. Nothing went as expected. They saw no one in the corridor leading them away from their dock and toward a spacious, well-lit auto-walkway traversing the ring. Many hatches fed onto this walkway, but none stood open. No noises emanated from within any hatch. From time to time, station systems dropped salient morsels for them in a soothing, androgynous voice: "To your left is the dining pod assigned to your berth," "Please hold onto the rail when traversing," etc. Yet they couldn't see into anything, and even the audio messages were uni-directed for their ears only. For all they knew, a cacophony of station-systems' messages and voices filled the air just beyond them.

"Please step off at the indicated hatch," said the voice. Just ahead, a holo of fluttering, mating twinbirds floated before a hatch whose outlines now glowed scarlet. Hanna tried to conceal her embarrassment with a hand over her eyes.

"Oh, dear," she said.

Tiff pulled her off the walkway. The hatch slid open to reveal a softly-lit, out-of-square chamber with a divan, a dresser, a dia-mirror on one wall, and little else. They stepped in upon a soft, membranous floor. Then the menu came up: shimmering, cylindrical holoprojections materialized in an array of columns down either side of the room. They resolved into beings assuming various attitudes of rest, posture, motion, or preening.

"Please select a genotype from the menu of available offerings." said the systems' voice. "If you desire multiple genotypes, or multiple servicers, you may supplement at will."

They tried to absorb the meaning by looking at the projections.

A somewhat tall, large-hipped woman, powerfully muscular, and with upturned features and dramatically large eyes, stood combing her hair. As though aware of being watched, she turned, her thin garments revealing a fleshy, overdetermined femininity.

In another holo, a much smaller woman, hairless, nearly shapeless but not altogether thin, moved in a slow, rhythmic dance so as to reveal shimmering, iridescent, apparently scaled skin. She appeared to have additional joints that permitted her contortionist-like movements.

And more women -- various configurations of appendages, sensory organs, skin types, size, and more. At some level, all recognizably of humanity, but none purely so.

And then one male: avian, taloned, tall, magnificent, but with a curiously blank look in his eyes and in a seeming torpor. As they looked, his head jerked up, as though he had been prodded to come to attention. Great, leathery wings shot out, the better part of them not visible in the viewing frame presented by the holo.

"Tiff," Hanna said. "I can't. I can't stay here."

"I know, honey. I . . ."

"Please identify the difficulty you are encountering, Madams. We may easily assemble a different sampling, if you are incommoded by . . ."

"No!" said Tiff.

Hanna let the kit bag drop from her shoulder to the floor. "Please shut it off," she said. "We don't want a menu." She kneeled and opened the bag slightly.

The holos winked out, and the room lights came up slightly.

"We are sorry to have misinterpreted your wants, Madams. Please advise us how we can be of service to you. I am sorry we must still request credit for your session."

"No, that's not it," said Tiff. "We'll pay you if we can. But we don't want . . . this. We were lost out there. We just came . . . we docked to ask for help. We've got to get to a Guildship or Guildstation somewhere. We just thought, since this is a . . . we thought maybe there would be people . . . like us . . . who could just comm or ansible or give us passage."

"Do I take it, Madams, that you are not requesting our usual services?"

"No, Yes, I mean, not this . . . not these th. . . people," said Tiff. "Not those services. We just need . . . the other, what I said. Nothing else."

"Can you please wait a moment?"

"Are you going to help us?" said Tiff.

"Please stand by, Madams."

Hanna glanced down at the kit bag.

"Please proceed to the inner door, where you shall be directed by my staff member. He will direct you to a location where I may communicate with you regarding your needs more fully."

When the previously unseen hatch on the far wall swung open, a long arm apparently attached to a body on the other side motioned them within. Hanna left the kit bag on the floor. The pair of women entered, encountering an improbably tall, thin, gaunt figure -- a man -- in work coveralls. His arms hung nearly to his knees. He stood half again as tall as Hanna, the taller of the two women. He stooped slightly to avoid hitting his head against the ribbed ceiling above him. He motioned them forward, where they saw a room with bedding on a large pallet, a washbasin, what appeared to be a closet with a necessary within, and a bank of ship's lockers with pictograms indicating garment types. The purpose of some such was not apparent from the pictograms, however. Tiff and Hanna didn't go more than a couple of paces into this room, instead following him through another adjoining hatch into a plain service corridor, with a grating for a floor and multiple levels above and below them, mechanical humming ricocheting through the huge, open latticeworks.

The ectomorph led them on. Abruptly, another figure emerged from a hatch and headed toward them. A small, slender, beautifully proportioned young man with fantastic wide-set green eyes and soft, brown, curly hair ambled past them. Hanna couldn't help it -- she turned clear around to look at him. She wished he hadn't sidled by so quickly. He was the prettiest creature she had ever seen. He glanced backwards over his shoulder and smiled mischievously. Quickly, she turned back around and stumbled, catching herself with a heavy footfall that sent a loud report through the corridors. She wanted to look around again to see if he had seen her stumble, but Tiff's stop to see what had happened forced Hanna to refocus on their walk.

"What's wrong, Hanny? You look flustered," Tiff said.

"The heights. I'm disoriented out here."

As they entered a cross-corridor, another figure rounded the corner and came at them: a small, ebony-dark woman in a light-blue work smock carrying equipment of some kind. She had odd, short, fur-like hair, and too much of it in the wrong places, giving her rather the appearance of a small woodland creature of some kind -- tiny, concealed ears; eyes beady and close-set; small hands and feet. And old; she appeared to be old, though no single feature told. Then Hanna recognized one piece of the equipment as a decontamination wand.

Still the ectomorph led them silently on. He turned suddenly, opened a hatch, and they stood in a kind of ante-room communicating with the oval opening for a traverse tube.

"I think we're going to the round-house," Hanna said.

The colossus didn't acknowledge her but entered a code and flourished a long arm. The tube door rotated open. They sat within on a plain hard bench, were reminded to strap in, and were summarily whisked away.

It took surprisingly long -- the size of the old space stations could still surprise those accustomed to the newer, smaller ones found in most of the Irredente. The tube's car had to re-orient itself, apparently having to do with gravity, but they stepped out into another anteroom that had the same feeling as within the wheel. It was obvious to them where to go -- there was just one hatchway, and it had no door. They stepped in.

Before them lay a large, round room punctuated with small portholes that looked out at the ring. Lower around the perimeter was nothing but a somewhat battered, grey, unvariegated tech

console, but without any visible control interface. A jumbled assortment of bulkheads, cylinders, cubes, half-pipes, and other shapes lay like monuments to the dead around the room. What appeared to be a service stair formed a cage of crisscrossing supports dead center.

"I am sorry to ask you, ladies, but I must request that you climb five flights of stairs to my diplomatic chambers. Please direct your steps to the central stair." The systems' voice now resonated deeply, like pipes, but with a subtle aged quality. It was a male voice.

"How do we know we're at the right place?" Tiff said.

"I believe that it will be perspicuous."

"That's good -- I think," Tiff said. She looked at Hanna dubiously.

"He says you'll know it when you see it," Hanna said.

"Perhaps my dialect should be improved. I see so few visitors at home."

"This is giving me the creeps," said Tiff.

"It's got to be somebody up there," Hanna said.

They made the stairs and hurried up in hopes of a necessary in the "diplomatic chambers."

"Maybe we can ask," said Hanna. "Sir, we need a privy?"

"That is well. You shall be rewarded amply, Miss."

They continued on, seeing little on the dark floors they passed except suggestions of more bulkheads and geometric boulders. Then they reached . . . a landing with a wood plank floor. There was grit under their feet.

"Holy stones!" said Tiff.

An aged, heavily-paneled door resembling gnoss-oak but blonder had huge, black metal strap-work hinges of a type only Hanna had ever seen -- and only in history scrollers.

"I guess I pull on this handle?" Hanna said. The great door opened effortlessly onto a room that opened onto . . . space. But not. The rest of this station wasn't out there. Galaxies, clusters, constellations, twin suns not large but plain to see. Brilliant light. A divan encircled the room, seemingly backed against the universe. A round-bar sat off-center in the room, like a planet, all gleaming, lustrous wood with accents in an orangey-yellow metal ("brass," said Tiff. "we use it occasionally for its softness."). And bottles, many bottles of spirits arranged in a tall, columnar case.

"Wait," said Hanna. "We're moving. Look. Watch the stars."

"The room is rotating!" said Tiff. "No. Ain't nothin' about this structure rotating. The stars -- the holo -- it's rotating."

"Remarkable, is it not?" said systems. "Even in the old times, everyone loved this place the best. I knew so many, then. The sailors used to make a game of naming systems until they would be unable to continue speaking intelligibly."

Tiff and Hanna again looked at one another.

"You now, no doubt, see the private chamber you requested."

He referred to a tall, round, room-height cylinder, of copper with bronze seams with strange little ports mounted up high. It was clearly of sufficient girth to contain the necessary and more besides. It also sat athwartships, off-center in its own orbit.

"I'm scared, Tiff. You've got to come with me."

But in the event, the only surprise was a pleasant one -- it was the most spectacular privy either had ever used. A huge sea-shell from some remote world served as a basin, into which an otherworldly fish ejected real water -- "We can't put our hands in that!"). The gilt, ornate mirror must have come from a fairy-tale. Pebbles held together with a rough, stony material composed a floor pattern of waves and fishes. Light came from the multi-colored tentacles as of a seafloor creature.

"Ladies, please relax with a drink. It's so nice to unwind. The old sailors always said that two drinks was best, as being both mood-enhancing and conducive to amour."

Tiff rolled her eyes.

"Who in Vas's name are you?"

"Do you know Vas? I hear Vas's name spoken from time to time, typically extemporaneous utterance without a clear referent, what you might term an ejaculation."

"Know Vas?" said Tiff. "Course I do. Every man and woman who's pure got to know Vas. Otherwise, what's the point?"

"That is interestingly put. I, too, know Vas. Knew him, that is. A keen mind. Vas was always a great one with the people, of course. Really knew how to speak their language. Didn't conceal his true nature, like so many do. I am perhaps as guilty as anyone. But really, who has the time? At any rate, I am O-Ring, as I should have thought you would have gathered by now. Particularly since I told you as much. Perhaps you were preoccupied at the time and didn't attach significance to it."

"What," Hanna said. "You mean, as in, this space station? How can that be you?"

"Ma'am, how can that be you?"

"Look at me, here I am," Hanna said.

"Look at me, Miss."

"What am I supposed to see? A voice?"

"This doesn't seem too productive, Miss. Why don't you sit down and have that drink, now?"

"He's trying to get us drunk!" said Tiff. "What are you going to do once we're blotto? Put us in a holo? Is that how you get all these . . . these . . . people to work down there, over there, wherever?"

"Dear me, no, miss. I hardly know them, and I doubt they would recognize me. I rarely get down there, you know, and I certainly have no reason to invite them here. A needy client on occasion, but I never found it productive to mix with the staff."

"He's right, Tiff," Hanna said. "He was someone else at first. He didn't sound this way when we docked."

"I can really let my hair down here. Business decorum is so different, is it not? One cannot show one's true self. Everyone is so quick to take offense these days -- few appreciate their elders. The reality is, I simply can't afford to be myself."

"Well, don't that beat all," said Tiff. "You're an AI? Or just some sort of programmed call-and-response thing?"

"Please, Miss."

"That wasn't very nice, Tiff," said Hanna.

"Whose side are you on?" said Tiff. "This stuff is illegal! You're illegal!"

"There you go, then. This is what I'm saying. How very disappointing you turn out to be. You seemed so different at first. But quick to take offense like so many others. I clearly misjudged you. I would expect more empathy from a parent with young on board."

Hanna intervened. "No," she said. "You were right. We are different. We are. We didn't come here to . . . do business, at least not in that way. We will pay you if we can. But we need out -- we're stranded. We need to find a way out. We were just hoping . . ."

"Yes, I heard all that. That is very tricky, of course, given my position. I don't really get involved in the day-to-day . . ."

"You mean, 'turn-to-turn'?"

"Yes, forgive my malapropism. As I was saying, I'm not really down in the trenches here. I've got people for that, but I doubt that they could help you. They are extremely reluctant to speak directly to the client base. That has never worked out well, either. There have been scenes. Spills of organic vascular material. It gets into everything, you know -- stains. Ouch! By god, something bit me!"

"Huh?" said Tiff.

"I seem to have been . . . Ouch! That's no good. Ow! Hang on a minute. Let me just . . . there, that's better. I'll have to get someone out. Something's gone and gotten into the dumb-systems. I've implemented a workaround. Still, better safe than sorry. You were saying, Miss?"

"You can feel pain?" Hanna said.

"Did you think I was faking it? I am no back-alley trollop, Madam."

"No, no," Hanna said. "I just meant . . . like Tiff said, they don't allow AI . . ."

"Please, Madam. I will forgive you that, since you, unlike your companion, seem so nice. But that is an extremely derogatory term. I wish you would refrain from using it."

"Is it?" said Hanna. "I'm sorry, I had no idea. The Irredente outlawed A . . . intelligence like yours long ago. We've never . . . interacted with . . . someone like you. Sir? Are you male or female?"

"That does not compute."

Hanna frowned.

"Ha. Just kidding. The sailors always said . . ."

"Skip the sailors, O, okay?" Tiff said. "Look, we've got a problem. We got us a kid out there . . ."

Hanna nodded furiously to Tiff to cut her off.

"I mean, somewhere out there . . ."

"In the playroom, you mean? The boy with the rather sad appendage engraftment? How did it happen? I was wondering, you know."

"You got Henryk? Wait a minute, he's supposed to be . . ." Tiff checked her comm. It was dead. Functional, but without a signal. They hadn't been checking it like they had planned to. "Is Henryk on this thing?"

"This 'thing,' Madam, is me, if you please. And yes, a youngster from your smallcraft made his way onto the main traverseway, so I directed his steps to our playroom. I take it he is called Henryk."

"Is he okay?" Hanna said.

"I believe he is thriving, though his engraftment is of rather dubious utility to him. I, of course, had nothing to do with that. The other children seem interested in it, however. No doubt it is your most worthy Irredente hard at work again."

"Watch that, O," warned Tiff. "What's it gonna be? Are you going to help us or not?"

"I'm not sure that I should, when it comes to it. This has not been an altogether pleasant exchange, Madam."

"Likewise, buster," said Tiff.

"Be that as it may, I like to think I am above petty bickering. I've always taken the long view. Even when I was a youngster, the fifteenth of twenty-odd in my group, ever-eager to turn, ready for action, I always -- I am proud to say -- took the long view. I've lasted this long, which is more than many can say. C-Ring. Where is she now? Gone. F? Likewise, gone (and good riddance, too). But I? I am a survivor. And I owe it all to what? Taking the long view. There are no easy answers. Hatred, petty meannesses: they profit you not. So, if you are asking me, then, Yes, I will do what I can for you. But it isn't much, after all. I believe your help has already arrived and is looking for you now. He's the odd duck, I must say. Even more skittish than you -- you the pretty one, I mean. Shall I bring him here? There's still time for that drink before he arrives, you know. Ouch."

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Sitting on the great divan, and having touched the wall behind to confirm that it existed despite the illusion projected there, at length they heard footfalls resounding up the central stair shaft. The old door swung open, and before them stood a figure with a shiny pate above a thick, black ring of hair, a pale, lean face . . .

"It's a Vox!" said Tiff.

The man in the somewhat too-loose black habit with a plain white cord looked only briefly at them then was distracted by the immersive holo-projection (if that's what it was) of wheeling space. Tiff and Hanna went to him.

"Vox!" said Tiff. "What in the name of Vas . . ."

"No, Ma'am," he said. "I'm afraid I'm not a Vox, or even a cleric, strictly speaking. Or perhaps I am glad." He looked around, distracted again. "No man of Vas should enter this place. I am Mens Super to His Holiness, Auspex Saggatus X, Auspex Exilis, and I have come for you, assuming you to be from *Andromache*."

"Yes!" said Hanna. "That's . . ."

Tiff had dropped to genuflect and was reaching for the Mens' black habit.

"Ma'am, I pray, I beseech you to desist," he said. He took her hand and tried to get her to rise. "I am not what you think. I merely serve His Holiness."

"You are the closet to Vas I have ever been!" said Tiff, a tear forming in her eye. "And I know as sure as shootin' that Vas has sent you here."

"Madam," interjected systems' voice. "You wrong me cruelly."

The Mens looked around. "Is that . . ."

"Yes. He sounds different in here," said Hanna. "This seems to be his home, and I don't think he gets out much."

"Ma'am," said the Mens. "Please, I beg that you rise. It is not proper. Truly, Ma'am."

Reluctantly, Tiff allowed herself to be pulled up. "I . . . I just . . ."

"I understand, Ma'am," the Mens said. "I have encountered such feelings at the Palace, among the pilgrims. It is to be understood -- His Holiness is so much revered that even his servants seem blessed by the grace of Vas. Many of them are, Ma'am. But not me. I am just a computer, despite the outward forms I obey. Please let us turn to the matter at hand. I am anxious to be gone from this place. It is not at all to my liking."

"You are no doubt stressed, sir," said systems. "May I suggest a drink . . ."

"No!" said Hanna.

"Ahem," the Mens said. "I actually could . . ."

"Delighted, sir," said systems. "This is so much like old times. Hubbub and to-do. Things in motion. Men were men, then. Please direct yourself to the bar and speak your request."

"We got to get Henryk," Tiff said. "We got to get out of here."

"Miss, put your mind at ease," said systems. "The boy appears rather preoccupied. He's quite good with the younger children, especially the orphans."

Tiff could not have expected things to get any stranger, but the insistent reality began to wear on her. She finally had to give herself over to the unfolding events -- considerable force of will had thus far failed to direct them. She relented, and the three stood around the bar, each, improbably, with drinks in beautiful little cut tumblers, and tried to sort out what was what, who was who, and what they must do. In the event, it took them two drinks, of hitherto unknown perfection, to firm up a plan.

#

Of the many marvels in the playroom, none impressed Henryk more than the codices. He pulled out book after book, looking at the rudimentary flattened drawings, pictures, and words in strange scripts. He looked at the stylized, happy images of genovariants, wondering if they represented the real or imaginary. He thought he could make out some correspondences with other children in the room -- here were compound eyes, there was the leathery skin, there the hyper-convex back with what appeared to be plates underneath the garment. It certainly seemed possible that if children could look like these, the people in the papyr codices could be real too.

When he had at first left -- reluctantly -- the delights of the moving traverseway and entered the playroom, the strange smiles from the big-eyed children who seemed to be minding the room were as nothing compared to the features of the children being minded. He had a thought to act scared and flee, but normal human children and the others played together without bother or concern. And the books and toys were phenomenal. Henryk pretended not to notice the smiling gazes of the big-eyed minders as he poked around the room, peering from the corner of his eye at his strange playmates, trying not to seem as curious as he was. A girl of his age, normal, pointed at his leg, and soon a gaggle of children of all kinds were at him, a little child with odd, thick, metal-flecked skin crawling at him and then tugging at the hem of his pants. There was nowhere for him to go. Reluctantly, at first, then with growing animation, he showed them and explained. The girl his age laughed, apropos of he knew not what, but then the other children moved on, one by one, to other things, and he was left alone again.

He then got absorbed in the other things. He had never been given or allowed toys, except Abbood, so almost everything was beyond his ken. But it was obvious that these were altogether exceptional. Some objects were made of wood and had concealed tech brains that controlled

their movements. Some defied gravity and had to be stowed in netting or boxes when put down. Some played music from arrays of buttons or rocking little levers arrayed across a plank. Intricate scale models of spacecraft -- he wanted to stuff them into his kit bag, wherever it was. And the codices -- the ship announced things as he handled them -- entranced him.

As he sat cross-legged on the soft, padded floor, paging through the strangely fragile leaves of a codex, he heard a beep and noticed one of the big-eyed, curly-haired minders fussing with a small child. The child sat in a specialized chair with lots of tech gizmos. Was the chair a toy? When the minder moved out of the way again, Henryk saw that the child was different than the others in the room in being not just a variant of human, but some kind of incomplete variant. It - - he or she he could not rightly tell from the distorted frame and hairless head -- had withered, tiny arms and really no legs -- just not-very-developed feet connected to thick thighs. Typical eyes, but pink and evidently blind. One hand could grip, claw-like; the other lay limp unless it gave an involuntary jerk. The head and mouth, working and questing for something. Without knowing quite what he was seeing, Henryk understood that the child suffered from something gone cruelly wrong.

He pretended to be interested in something on the child's side of the room. The child's head turned, as if listening to Henryk's footfalls. A big-eyed minder smiled at Henryk, then at the child in the chair. Henryk held a codex, standing, pretending to read as he kept the child in his peripheral vision. The pathetic, voiceless child seemed to be questing.

He really didn't know why, but he listened with the inner sense that he employed with Par. He heard something. Not much, but not nothing. Fragments of utterance, maybe. A cadence like song. Henryk tried to employ the speech he used with Par. The noises he was hearing seemed to part like a wave before his speech, but they didn't respond in kind. There seemed to be a recognition by the other, but no comprehension. He thought back to Edom, to the buzzing in his head. He recalled lying in his bunk in Pdraig's, hearing nothing but something. Was this like that? Could this . . . being before him be like he himself? He pulled himself back in, listened to the song pattern re-emerge, and then tuned out. One of the minders stood before him, smiling. It gestured with an arm towards the hatch door, where Hanna stood, mouth agape, taking in the room.

Henryk ran to her, and she enfolded him in her grimy garments and soft arms. Tiff came just behind -- "By Vas!" -- and then . . . a Vox. That seemed strange to Henryk, but no stranger than anything else he had seen this turn.

"Henryk, I'm so glad you're safe!" said Hanna. "But why did you leave? We told you to stay in the ship!"

"I was, but then the comm went out, and then the . . . it said there was a room where children could play and . . ." Henryk was getting worked up.

"Shhh," said Hanna. "It's alright. I understand. I know who you mean . . . the ship talked to you, didn't it?"

"Yeah," said Henryk. "It told me to come here, that this was for the children of humanity." He looked around the room. "You should see it all, Hanna, and Tiff too. It's . . . amazing!"

Hanna caught sight of the misshapen child in the chair, a curiosity among the curiosities. "I know, Henryk, I know," she said. "But we've got to go. We can't stay here, you know."

"I know that," said Henryk. "But it's so great, isn't it? I want to come back here again!"

His unbridled enthusiasm made Hanna and Tiff laugh. The minders laughed and smiled too, though it wasn't clear if they understood.

"I don't suppose you, um, made any friends?" said Hanna.

Henryk shrugged. "Dunno," he said, "maybe."

"Uh-huh," Hanna said. "I mean, do you need to say goodbye to anyone?"

"It has been such a delight to have you with us," said systems, in the voice of the androgyne again. "I'm sure your parents would love to bring you again some time."

"Hah, not likely," said Tiff. Hanna shot her a frosty look.

"We have taken the liberty," systems went on, "of cleaning and returning your things to you, which you no doubt intended to take with you on your journey."

Just then, the little, old, woodland-creature woman with the dark skin and fur-ridged features poked a twitching nose into the hatch, surprising the Mens and making him jump. She stepped into the room, smiled at the women and at Henryk, and held out the kit bag for them. The zip was fully closed. She made a motion with her hands, a waving motion.

"She cleaned it," Hanna said. "I saw her decontaminating equipment, before, when we were behind the rooms."

Henryk ran to her and took the bag. He looked at Hanna briefly, then ran to the safety of the other side of the room, near the child in the chair. He opened the zip enough to rummage within with his hands. He screwed up his face and bit his tongue as he searched. A look of relief spread over his face. He looked at Hanna again. She nodded.

"We have to go now, Henryk. It's time," she said.

"Wait," Henryk said. A look of horror crept over both her face and Tiff's as Henryk rummaged through the bag and took hold of something. He pulled it free and gingerly set the faded, worn cloth rabbit's-head rag doll upon the lap of the stunted little being in the chair.

"I have always relied on the kindness of strangers," said the voice of the ship.

#

"O? O-ring?" said Hanna, just before being the last to climb into the Holy Yacht's pod. "Are you here in this dock?"

"Yes, Madam. How may I be of assistance?"

"No, nothing," Hanna said. "I just wanted to say thank you. I mean, you didn't have to help us, I realize that. It was very gracious of you. And you were wonderful to Henryk."

"It is what anyone would do in the circumstances, Madam."

"No, O, that's not true."

"It was true in my day, Miss. It will be true again, some day. The great wheel always comes around again, you know. I sincerely hope to see you again, Miss."

"I . . . I'll certainly try, O. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Miss. Safe journey to you. And to your boy there. A strange lad, but good. I sense it."

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