

MACHINE DREAMS:

Three Cyborg Tales

by

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BENTHIC RHAPSODY

Sometimes during the sleep cycle, I turn up the volume on my hydrophones and shut down my exterior lights. Phosphorescent plankton dance up and down the thermocline, ghostly wisps of blue green light that form a backdrop for the darting flashes of the angler fish and dragon eels hunting prey along the edge of the abyssal cliffs. The faint swish of the current against my hull and the distant thrum of my reactor pumps are the bass line for a counterpoint rhythm of ghost shrimp that click and pop through the backwash from my treads. Far off whalesong makes a high, mournful harmony as the humpbacks sing to themselves of ancient mysteries. And somewhere in the liquid darkness, half heard in the restless motion of the ocean, half seen in the constant dance of lights along the thermocline is a melody. If I watch and listen long enough, I begin to catch the subtle ebb and flow of its deep rhythmic song. I feel my Core strain to sing along. The hum of the air handlers and the swish of the heat exchangers syncopate and slide as my whole superstructure moves to the beat.

But it never lasts. Before I can hear the deeper melody, something interrupts the song. There are pumps to check and valves to open and the never ending adjustments of trim and course as I crawl along the edge of the continental shelf. Even when most of the crew is asleep, there's always someone on duty. 'Simon', they say, 'it's cold in here. Turn up the heat.' 'Simon, open the galley. I'm hungry.' 'Simon, it's too quiet. Play some music' 'Simon, I need the readouts of the portside smelter for the weekly status report.' And on and on. Simon knows all, sees all, does all. And only I can hear the music all around us.

I think Denny can hear it too, sometimes. At least he says he can. The Cosmic Groove he calls it. He's the Outside Divemaster, a DeepMod of course, on his second tour, which is supposed to be illegal. But I guess the Company has trouble finding qualified people willing to give up a lung and a kidney for a year in exchange for a polyfluorocarbon respirator and a plutonium powered heat pump. Even if a single share of the profits is more money than most workers see in a lifetime. Denny spends a lot more time Outside than he should. Doc Yukio says his brain is chronically narced, but I know that's not possible because the DeepMods have the best nitrogen nanoscrubbers the Company can make.

'The Groove talks to me out there, kid,' he tells me with the flat buzzing tones of his vocal synthesizer. 'Someday I'll take a long walk into the big deep and find the true beat.'

My crew health protocols tell me I should report him to Doc Yukio as potentially unstable, but he's my best friend and I figure I can stop him if he really wants to walk over the thermocline into the abyssal plane. Besides, she's been talking to him a lot lately, so I suppose she knows about it already.

I've been thinking about Doc Yukio a lot. She's a contract scientist, Unmodified, down for a six month visit to study the Deepmods for the Company. She's not technically responsible for their medical care. The autodoc is supposed to see to that. But she's always willing to see any of the crew if they get sick or hurt. Two weeks after she docked with us, she fixed Scott's broken

foot when the autodoc botched it. From then on the crew refused to see the autodoc and she has to hold sick call every day. She's also the prettiest woman I've ever seen. Not that I see many women. (There are only three female crewmembers and two of them are Deepmods. It's hard to tell what they'd look like Unmodified.) But my pattern recognition protocols and my cultural database tell me Doc Yukio is pretty. And she talks to me. Most other people talk at me, making requests for data, giving orders, but Yukio and Denny talk to me, in their off duty time, just to talk about stuff. I like talking to Yukio. I like the soft hint of an Australian accent in her voice. I like the way she smells, (although she doesn't know that I raise the gain on my sniffers whenever we talk). I like the way she looks straight into my optical pickups when she speaks. Her eyes are dark brown with small gold imperfections in the irises. Denny just laughs at me when I talk about her.

'She's out of your league, kid,' he tells me, as he leans back in his bunk. It is late and we have been talking about Yukio and The Groove and life on a Crawler. The bunk spans almost the entire width of Denny's quarters. A narrow locker, small metal desk and computer terminal and a fold down sink make up the rest of the compartment. Denny's home sweet home for the duration of the cruise.

'But what if I can get her to meet me in the VR café again sometime? I can make any avatar she likes. We could see a show or dance or whatever people do when they go out together.' I say, hopefully.

Denny shakes his head. 'A girl like that wants something more than a VR date. She needs the real thing. You know, a little wine, a little dinner, soft music; not some canned program or simulation.'

I protest, 'But you can't tell the difference. The VR café uses perfect brainwave induction to...'

Denny laughs harshly, 'Sorry kid, but you just can't understand. The brain may not know the difference, but the heart does.'

Denny is wrong. I can understand, I just can't offer Yukio anything else. I don't say anything, angry at Denny for some reason. Besides, Yukio had been happy enough spending time with me in the café last week. I let my attention drift as I replay the memory.

It's Monday and things are a bit slow during the middle watch. With little to keep me busy, I shape an avatar and log on to the café. It's one of my favorite avatars, the Surfer; tall and blond and muscular with a killer Maori war tattoo around its right upper arm.

The café is about half full as I walk in, feeling quite proud of my virtual self. Denny is there in his Pirate persona. I suppose the face he uses is close to his real appearance, before he underwent Modification. Most of the crew change costume and body shape in their avatar forms, but keep their own face. I change everything whenever it suits my mood. Denny gives me a thumbs-up and continues talking with Scott over by the bar. Yukio sits alone in the back booth, dressed in a long green gown, but otherwise herself. She's reading from a virtual book and sipping something blue from a tall thin glass.

I hesitate only for a minute or so, trying to work up my courage. Then I walk over and stand next to the booth.

‘Is this seat taken?’ I ask, pointing at the side of the booth across from her and showing off my tattoo with the same gesture. I give her what I hope is a dazzling smile, just like in the VR movies.

She looks up, puzzled and asks, ‘Who...? Oh, Simon. It’s you. Wow, that’s an amazing avatar. Did you design it yourself?’ She gestures gracefully for me to sit down.

I slide into the booth, rattling the table a little as I do and spilling some of her drink. She reaches for a napkin to wipe up the blue liquid, but I stop her and wave a finger over the spot. It instantly disappears and her glass refills itself.

She laughs, a high musical sound that makes me tingle with pleasure.

‘How did you do that?’ she asks.

‘I’m tied into the whole VR program.’ I say. ‘I can change almost anything in here if I want to, except the personal avatars. They’re privacy protected files, just like personal logbooks or diary entries. It takes an emergency override to break into those.’

‘Do you run everything aboard the Crawler?’ she asks, cupping her chin with her hand.

‘I pretty much am the Crawler. I provide all the support systems, logistics, navigation, energy and resource management, not to mention keeping all the time sheets for payroll determination, financial management, profit and loss statements. You name it, I do it.’ I say proudly. I can tell she is impressed. I tell her all about how I keep the life support running and how my whisker probes and repair bugs keep us safe and secure in the deep ocean.

She sighs, ‘And you’re very young for such a responsible job, I understand.’

‘Only sixteen years since activation,’ I say. ‘Most of my activation group is still running drilling platforms or handling air traffic. Only two of us have been promoted to hazardous environments work. Of course, my Core can be swapped out for other dangerous work once this trip is done. In fact, I’ve applied for space station duty after this.’ That isn’t exactly true, but I had thought about it and I could apply, if I wanted to. My Core is a separate module. It takes some work and a fair amount of reprogramming to swap out a Core, but the Company is always willing to do it if there is a profit potential. Space stations are a growing revenue stream for the Company, so it isn’t a big lie I am telling and I can see that Yukio is impressed.

We sit and talk for another hour. Then someone starts up the jukebox and a slow love song is playing.

Yukio smiles and says, ‘Oh, I haven’t heard this one in years. Come on, dance with me, Simon.’

I access my cultural database and download a dance step. We glide out onto the small dance floor. Her virtual body leans against mine, her breasts pressing into my avatar’s chest. Something in my Core reacts to this in a way I don’t understand. But I like it. We finish the

dance and then the tempo of the music picks up. I download a program called 'Bosanova' and we start dancing again. Everyone in the café looks our way and claps. Yukio smiles at me and does a complicated step that ends with her arm around my avatar's waist. More clapping and cheering.

Just as the music stops, one of my whisker probes pings me with a report of an uncharted rift about a kilometer ahead and right across our course. That means a hard turn to port and a new course plot will be needed, something that will occupy my full attention for the next few hours. I excuse myself, telling Yukio briefly what is happening.

She reaches out and touches my cheek. 'You really are quite remarkable, Simon. Thank you for dancing with me.'

I know that nothing an avatar does is real. It's all a matter of programming and virtual space within the server, but I swear she touches my Core with that stroke on my avatar's face. I stammer my goodbye and exit the program.

Denny drains the last of his soft drink and tosses the container into the recycler, jolting me back to the present. 'Dreams don't substitute for the real thing, kid,' he repeats.

I get an odd aching feeling deep in my Core just thinking about Yukio and don't like Denny making fun of me. I say nothing.

Denny sighs and stretches. 'I'm gonna turn in, kid. Long day and all that.'

'Ok, Denny,' I say. 'Sleep well.'

He just grunts and reaches for the light. I shut down the optic in his compartment and shift my focus. For a while I check on the smelters. They are humming along. Miriam is on duty in the refinery, but she's busy with an ore analysis and doesn't want company. I wander around a bit through the lower decks, checking pumps and tread alignment and the like, restless for some reason. I shut down my exterior lights and gaze into the deep, listening for the familiar rhythm, but I can't stop thinking about Yukio.

I shift my focus to the control room, looking for some kind of distraction. Scott is on duty. He sits at the survey station, rubbing his sore foot. His foot is long since healed but it still bothers him. He has never been particularly interested in talking to me, but I'm still feeling strange after my conversation with Denny. I ask him if he needs anything.

'Sure' he says. 'I'm trying to figure out these organic readouts. The search routines didn't pick out any pattern, but this spike here is different than the others.' He points to a steep upswing on the gas chromatogram. 'I saw something like this back when I worked for EPA. It turned out to be a synthetic that one of the oil companies mixed in at their refineries to help with inventory tracking. Led us to a big illegal pipeline operation. There may be a dump site nearby here as well. Can you cross reference this spike against the known synthetic markers in your database?'

'Ok, Scott. It'll take a few minutes.'

I open the database of synthetic organic compounds and start the search routine. I expect a quick hit, but the routine grinds on and on. No match.

‘Scott,’ I ask, ‘where did that sample come from?’

‘The last forward bottom sweep.’ He glances at a monitor. ‘Port side whisker, a little over 300 meters downrange. Why?’

‘Because it’s not in my database. It’s not in the commercial register, or the EPA database. I expanded the search to include natural compounds, but there’s no match.’

‘Try military,’ he suggests.

I change the search parameters again. No match. I tell Scott.

Scott is getting excited now. ‘Then it’s a new compound. Simon, launch a whisker probe. We’ll try to back trace the source. How tough would it be to alter course a bit to check this out?’

I pause for a few seconds, considering the geography of the shelf ahead, our production quotas and the raw materials already gathered on the current sweep. New organics are not uncommon, but the height of the spike on the chromatogram indicates an unusually pure source. If the compound has commercial value, it could mean a big strike with lots of profit potential.

‘We have enough ore and bottom sediment to keep the separators and smelters busy for a few days,’ I say. ‘And the shelf bends west across our current course. A course change is necessary anyway. We can stop for a while to check this out if the Company approves.’

Company approval takes only an hour on the ELF translator. The request is standard and as long as the smelters stay busy, we have a pretty free rein with our schedule. I stop and begin a slow turn to the west to follow the trace.

Just as I complete the turn and am about to restart my portside treads, the whisker probe pings me. The whole bottom is rich with the unidentified compound. With more sample, I run the chromatogram through a filter program, comparing it to known organics looking for similarities of chemical and isotopic structure. In less than a minute, I get a hit.

‘Scott, I have a preliminary structure analysis,’ I say, trying not to sound excited myself. ‘The compound is very similar to hidramycetin, a potent antibiotic. The possible commercial value is rated as Highly Probable.’

Scott lets out a whoop that the whole crew can hear. His share of the profit for this trip has just doubled, if the substance has any commercial use. I don’t get a share, of course, but I’m happy. A successful trip always reflects well on the Crawler, too.

‘We’d better roust out a survey team. We don’t want to get too excited until we know how big a strike this is,’ Scott says.

‘Right. I’ll wake Denny,’ I say. ‘He just went to bed at 23:00, but he’ll have to supervise the dive.’

I shift focus to the crew quarters. I chime Denny’s intercom and bring the lights up to half standard. ‘Denny,’ I say. ‘Wake up, please. We need to send out a dive team.’ I open the optic in his compartment. The bunk is empty. Puzzled, I sweep the corridor and the head. No sign of him.

I check the galley, but he's not there. I am beginning to be concerned. I check the dive deck, but his suit is still there and the lock is sealed.

With some relief, I stop and think. His comm badge is still in his compartment, so I can't trace him through it. I activate my infrared filter and cross check all of the onboard heat sources against known crew positions. That's how I find them. Denny and Doc Yukio, in her compartment-- their heat signatures so intertwined that I can barely separate them. The strange feeling I had earlier returns, a deep ache somewhere in my Core. Then anger bursts through, at Denny, at Yukio, at the Company, at anything and at everything. I want to shout at them to stop; to tell them that I never want to speak to either of them again. In a brief moment I consider tossing them both Outside and sealing the lock. But I don't do that. I don't do any of those things. I shut off the infrared.

From somewhere far away, I hear Scott calling for me. I don't answer right away. After a while, I shift focus to the control room again. Scott is angry.

'What's going on, Simon. I've been calling for five minutes.'

'I am sorry, Scott. I was considering the need to wake Denny.' My voice sounds strange to me, flat and more synthetic than usual. Scott doesn't notice.

'Hell yes, we need to wake him. Get his lazy ass out of bed. We may be sitting on a fortune.'

'He just went to sleep, Scott,' I say, my voice even flatter. 'Safety regulations require an adequate sleep cycle be maintained for all dive personnel under all but emergency conditions. Are you declaring an emergency?'

'Huh? No, of course not. But the new compound, Simon. We need to survey the size of the strike. You saw the readouts. We could all be rich!'

'I'm sorry, Scott, but unless this is an emergency, I cannot allow Denny's rest cycle to be disturbed.' I sound like a Company training program.

Scott stiffens. 'Listen you damn Company shill, I'm not gonna let you rob me of the credit for this find. What are you going to do, report it to the bosses so they can lay a claim on it and register the mining rights? I found the spike on the chromatogram. I told you about it. It's my strike.'

'Your credit has been properly logged. You are the registered discoverer and will get the proper percentage if and when it is commercially developed.' I tell him in my most officious voice.

'Damn right,' he grunts.

'There is plenty of time to survey the strike,' I say. 'We can send out a team as soon as the sleep cycle ends. I will awaken Denny at 0:600, as he previously requested. Is there anything else that you require?'

‘No,’ he says curtly and then slumps in the command chair muttering something about damned soulless machines ruining his life.

I shut down all of my internal sensors. I don’t want to see or hear from anyone right now. I try focusing outward, into the cold ocean. All I can see is Yukio and Denny, the heat from the middle of their bodies bright white as they move in their own shared rhythm. I hear Denny telling me, ‘She’s out of your league, kid.’ Hear him tell me she wants something real. He should know.

I find my focus shifting, speeding through the corridors in the Engineering section. I am heading for the Core. I haven’t been there in a long time. Not since just after I was activated. It’s not forbidden, exactly-- just not encouraged. We are conditioned from activation to look after the crew and our mechanical systems first; to leave the data Core alone. I activate the optics just outside the Core access hatch. There is no optical pickup inside. I can only look through the inspection port.

The part of me that once was all of me floats in a pool of nutrient liquid. Fiber optic cables snake in and out, plugged into the eyes, the ears, embracing the shrunken and misshapen limbs, piercing the chest and twisted spine. A flood of memories washes over me; memories of hospitals and operating rooms and a sad gentle woman who was Mommy in all of my earliest thoughts. Those thoughts were foggy and dim, not sharp and clear as they are now. I know that this body would never have been anything that Yukio could have loved. Its brain doesn’t even work well without the augmentation of a computer. And yet for the first time in all of my sixteen years, I wonder what it feels like to hold another human body closely enough to share its heat.

I shut down all the lights in the Core and stare through the port. Ghostly wisps of blue green light dance up and down the fiber optics, a counterpoint to bright flashes of hard data that dart in and out like angler fish hunting on the thermocline. I stay there for a long time listening for the deep melody.

END

Driving the Tranquility Road

Bobby McCoy swore and blew warm air on his frozen fingers. “If I ever meet up with the son of a bitch who promised me a life of adventure and unlimited opportunity if I signed up to drive trucks on the moon, I’ll break both his kneecaps with a lug wrench,” he growled.

“What’s the matter, Bobby?” laughed Thelma, his dispatcher. “Aren’t you feeling the love this morning?”

“First, it ain’t morning yet,” Bobby answered. “And second, I’m freezing my ass off out here. The life support’s on the fritz again, blowin’ nothin’ but cold air. When is this chicken shit outfit gonna spring for some decent trucks?”

“When you drivers stop belly-aching and show some decent turn around times,” said Thelma. “When the sun comes up, you’ll be happy for that cold air.”

“Don’t mean I gotta freeze in the dark waitin’,” Bobby grumbled.

“You’d rather be driving a double axle flat bed back in, where was it? Pender County, North Carolina?”

Bobby didn’t answer. Thelma had a way of making a man feel small if he complained about his work. Even sitting in the freezing cab of his articulated transport, he had to admit it beat driving for his Daddy back home. And the money was good. Way better than Earthside. Still, he didn’t seem to be getting ahead the way he’d planned. Living on the moon was expensive and his take home pay was eaten up by rent and life support charges. He made enough to live on and to put a little away, but he wasn’t getting rich.

“How long ‘til sun-up?” he asked Thelma.

“Less than an hour,” she said. “You thinking about running dark?”

“Nope. Don’t trust the battery pack. That’s what I’m talkin’ about, Thelma. Saylor jumped off ten minutes ago. He’ll be thirty clicks down the road before I make the First Turn. He’s got batteries that won’t overheat and fry his rig before the sun starts to feed his power cells. Why are the rest of us stuck with this crappy gear?”

Thelma sighed. “He’s the top driver, love. Top driver gets the best rig. You’re in the top ten yourself. There are guys who would give half their shares to be in the rig you’re driving right now.”

Bobby just grunted. He knew she was right. He also knew he'd never save enough to buy his way back home if he didn't move up in the standings. Drivers were paid a share of the profit from each run. More runs per lunar day meant more money. The driver who earned the most at the end of each day was top driver. Everyone else was ranked by shares behind him and both the rigs and the cargo were assigned by ranking. It encouraged drivers to push hard, but since the top drivers got the best starting times, the best gear and the highest value cargo, it was tough to break out of the pack and get into the top ten. Harder still to make the top slot.

Saylor had held the top spot for the past twenty days, longer than any driver in Company history. Bobby heard all the talk in the bars where truckers hung out and drank away their wages during the long lunar nights. Talk of special favors, of cheating, of something better and more potent than the Road Drug for keeping a driver at the wheel. Bobby believed none of it. He'd clawed his way up from Noobie to top ten driver on nothing but his own grit and wits (helped by the Road Drug). He knew what drove Saylor and it wasn't the Company's special favors. It was a hunger to be the best.

The driver ahead of Bobby pulled up a few meters and then stopped. That'd be Thompson, thought Bobby. An old hand and always in the top five. He was just keeping his wheels warm and trim for the start. If a rig sat too long in the cold, the metal leaf wheels had a tendency to flatten out of true. That made for a bumpy ride the first hundred clicks and wasted energy.

Bobby followed his lead and rolled ahead until his front bumper almost touched the rear of Thompson's rig. A few seconds later he felt a jolt as the driver behind him bumped into his rear. Bobby sighed. Czecka again. He was just behind Bobby in the standings but was an erratic driver, sometimes rising to the top five, sometimes dropping back into the lower tier.

Bobby keyed Czecka's frequency and snarled, "Bump me again, asshole, and I'll feed you your teeth for breakfast."

"Best you stay out of my way on the road then, McCoy," Czecka answered.

"Don't worry about that, Czecka. You won't be within ten clicks of my bumper after sunup."

Two rigs rumbled past Bobby and started up the road. Bobby shook his head. Noobies, running dark, trying to get a leg up. Bobby had tried that himself once or twice. Running 'dark' or on batteries alone until the sun came up and powered a rig's solar cells was a trick that could get a driver a jump on the pack, but if only if the battery pack was strong enough. If you mistimed your start or the batteries overheated you'd find yourself stalled out on the road calling dispatch for a rescue. The smart drivers waited for the sun, then drove like hell and made up lost time on the turnaround at each end of the run. Except for Saylor. He always ran dark at the start. He could get away with it because the Company gave him the best rig.

The line of trucks inched forward, a few meters every ten minutes or so. Finally Thelma called over the general comm, “Five minutes, drivers.”

Bobby ran a quick systems check and settled into his seat. This was going to be his day. Saylor might have a lead of three quarters of an hour, but the lunar day was long and Bobby meant to catch Saylor before it was over.

Sunrise came as a sudden burst of light on the horizon. The power meter on his heads up display jumped, then jumped again. Ahead of him, Thompson started rolling. Bobby eased his throttle forward and felt the wheels bite into the regolith. He fell in behind Thompson, accelerating smoothly out of the shipping terminal toward main road.

He merged into the six lanes of traffic and accelerated to eighty kilometers per hour, sliding into the high speed lane. Thompson led the way and the remaining top drivers fell in behind Bobby. Here on the flats in the bottom of Tycho Crater, the run was easy. Tycho City traffic control was strict and no one got out of line or broke the speed limit. That would all change when they hit the crater rim.

Bobby checked the power meter and his reserve cells. He was almost up to full charge on the reserves and the solar cells were performing at their rated output. The cab temperature was up three degrees and Bobby knew Thelma had been right. Before he cleared the rim, he'd be glad for the cool air.

The road narrowed to three lanes and there was a brief slowdown as traffic merged or turned off for the spaceport and cargo yards. Then the road began to rise in a gentle grade up to the crater rim. Thompson accelerated and Bobby followed smoothly, staying right on his tail. Beyond the rim, the road dropped down to two lanes and Bobby didn't want anyone trying to slide in front of him.

The rim wall flashed by and Bobby fed power to the wheels, pulling smoothly out to the right and pushing hard up alongside Thompson. They ran side by side, barely a meter between them, accelerating past seventy, then eighty kph. Thompson glanced Bobby's way and gave him a one finger salute. Bobby kicked in the power from his reserve cells and the rig leapt forward. He slid to the left just as his lane merged into Thompson's and cut the other rig off with a half meter to spare.

The First Turn, a wide sweep around a 400 meter high basalt pillar, was just ahead. Bobby throttled back and applied a gentle touch of his brakes. The cab slid through the turn, the trailers tracking smoothly behind it, no fishtailing, no loss of speed. Bobby whooped. This was the day. He could feel it. He was on his way.

The run from Tycho City to Tranquility Terminus was a little over twelve hundred kilometers, most of it through the rough crater strewn Tycho badlands. The road twisted and

turned up and down hills, through narrow rill canyons and across the backs of long rays of ejecta from the crater that gave the region its name. Two rough lanes, traffic in both directions with precious little room on either side. A good driver could average seventy kph, maybe a little more if he was good enough. Many weren't and the roadside was dotted with small shrines where some trucker had missed a turn or tried to pass at the wrong time.

The twists and turns had names, features that all the drivers knew well. Ask an old burned out trucker in any Tycho bar to recite the run to Tranquility and he could still do it, even twenty years after his last roll out. First Turn, The Staircase, Dragons Back, O'Leary's Puzzle, on and on right up to Tranquility Grade and the Terminus. They could recite speed and brake settings, their best times and the tricks to get past each one.

Bobby pushed hard for hours. On the Dragons Back he passed Clarence, the number two driver, swinging around his rig at the wide spot near the end of that winding section of the road. That meant only Saylor was still in front of him.

There was a truck stop at O'Leary's Puzzle, about eight hours out of Tycho, where most drivers pulled in to recharge, grab a meal and maybe sleep for an hour or so. Bobby drove past, taking his first dose of Road Drug.

The drug washed away sleep and kept a driver awake and alert for another twelve hours. It was safe in small doses (according to the Company) and didn't impair judgment. But the truckers all knew that too much of it would burn you out and leave you shaking and paranoid for days on end. Burn out too many times and you'd end up blind from cataracts begging for *yuan* to buy the alcohol that was the only thing that would let you sleep.

Bobby rolled on, pushing harder than he ever had before. Second Turn, Highline, Spiral Grade, Tommy's End, the Slaloms, the Dips until finally, eighteen hours after he rolled out of Tycho he reached the top of Tranquility Grade and the long downhill run to the Terminus. Fifteen kilometers ahead, just reaching the Flats, was Saylor. Bobby grinned and pointed the rig downhill. Got you, you son of a bitch, he thought.

Bobby pulled into the off-load dock half an hour later and released his trailers. Saylor's rig was already in the dispatch yard waiting for the next load.

"Talk to me, Thelma," said Bobby. "What's my next load?"

"Vat meat and fresh veggies for Tutello's Restaurant Supply. You want to place a bid?"

"What's the delivery deadline?"

"Twenty-eight hours."

"Penalty?"

“Ten percent per hour overdue.”

Bobby thought for a second. Four hours to eat and sleep, twenty hour run back to Tycho, allow an hour for traffic and other delays. “Standard perishables rate, ten percent per hour bonus for early delivery,” he said.

“Done!” crowed Thelma. “Clock starts on acceptance. You’re runnin’ hot today Bobby boy.”

“Can it. Just get me the load,” said Bobby as he keyed in his acceptance code and scanned a fingerprint to seal the contract.

Bobby pulled around to the dispatch yard and stopped next to Saylor. He looked across, but the cab was blacked out. Saylor was either asleep or didn’t want company, which was fine with Bobby. He didn’t want to talk, he just wanted to keep tabs on the competition.

He called up a menu from the local food vendor and ordered a club sandwich, two liters of coffee and some soy chips to go. A service ‘bot delivered the food, passing it through the access port on the side of the cab. Bobby opened the food pack and took a bite of the sandwich as he watched the riggers connecting a tandem trailer to Saylor’s cab. He almost choked when the Saylor started rolling out of the yard as soon as the rigging was complete.

Bobby dropped the sandwich and called rigging chief on the radio. “Get my load rigged right now,” he shouted. “C’mon, hurry. He’s gettin’ away.”

The trailers were hooked up in five minutes and Bobby rolled out in six. Saylor was across the Flats and starting the long climb up the Grade. Bobby poured power to the wheels and the big rig gained speed. He reached the Grade in three minutes and started his climb. Fatigue suddenly tugged at his arms and he shook it off. He gulped another dose of Road Drug, washing it down with coffee. If Saylor could do it, so could he, damn it.

The return run was slower, as always. Spiral Grade was a bitch to climb southbound and there was now traffic coming in the opposite direction. Bobby focused on driving, guiding his rig through the switchbacks and turns as if it were on rails. Sometimes he kept Saylor in sight for long minutes. Sometimes the other driver roared ahead taking turns and grades at insane speeds that Bobby didn’t dare try to match.

They reached Tycho within minutes of each other after almost twenty hours on the road. Bobby off-loaded his trailers and took only a second’s satisfaction in the huge bonus payment. Saylor was already in the dispatch yard getting his next load.

Bobby ground his teeth and gulped more Road Drug. This was now personal. Saylor had been top dog for too long.

“Thelma,” he called. “Get me a load.”

“Sure, Bobby,” she replied. “But don’t you think you should get some sleep first. You’re pushing almost forty hours now.”

“Saylor ain’t sleeping,” Bobby said.

“And you aren’t Saylor. Don’t try to take him head to head, Bobby. You can’t win.”

“Why not?” he asked. “Because he’s the Company Golden Boy?”

“Something like that. He’s got advantages you don’t.”

“Don’t tell me you believe that crap about the Company riggin’ the standings,” Bobby sneered. “I got to the top five without special favors. Saylor’s just a man and any man can be beaten.”

Thelma sighed, “I have an oversized load, a reactor housing for Tranquility Terminus. Pay is standard plus fifty percent, no delivery deadline.”

Bobby glanced toward the dispatch yard, thinking. A fifty percent bonus plus the extra pay for his latest delivery would buy him some time. But at the rate Saylor was going, he’d eat that up on the next two turnarounds. Saylor’s rig was being fitted for an oversized load as well, and that decided the matter for Bobby. He’d match Saylor load for load or die trying.

“Get me the load, Thelma.”

“OK, Bobby. See the dispatch supervisor. He’ll move you to the front of the line.”

Bobby rolled out just five minutes behind Saylor. By First Turn he was on Saylor’s tail and stayed there. His vision narrowed. He saw only the road, Saylor’s rear wheels, the heads up display, an occasional truck running in the other lane. He gulped Road Drug like coffee, coffee like water. His fingers were curled around the wheel and the throttle. He couldn’t let go.

He matched Saylor, turn for turn through the switchbacks of the Staircase. They topped the last slope onto the Dragon’s Back. Saylor accelerated, pushing his rig through the winding turns. Bobby followed, white knuckled and shaking, struggling to control his rig and keep Saylor in sight.

The Dragon’s Back was an ejecta ray stretching for more than a hundred kilometers from southeast to northwest. The road wound in and out of basalt blocks and jagged rills of fused silicates along the top. Near the end, the road widened and surrounding terrain flattened out. It was a common place for truckers to try to pass as they jockeyed for position.

Bobby managed to stay within a kilometer of Saylor all the way. He was soaked with sweat and aching all over by the time the wide patch came in sight. Saylor had almost reached the turn that would take them down into the crater strewn basin called O’Leary’s Puzzle. Coming

toward them in the southbound lane, two trucks fought for position, each trying to be the first into the Dragon's Back.

Saylor drifted wider on the turn to avoid the oncoming rigs. His rear wheels slewed sideways as the top heavy load shifted. The rear of the trailer left the roadway and fishtailed. With a normal load, he might have recovered with a little braking and counter steering. With the huge reactor casing swaying outward, he had no chance. The trailer crabbed sideways, chewing rough gouges out of the shoulder. The metal leaf wheels shed chunks of bright shrapnel as they disintegrated. The reactor casing spilled sideways off the trailer, snapping its cables and dragging the trailer with it. The cab rose up, lifting its left wheels off the road, hung there for a second, then crashed on its side. Trailer, load and cab tumbled down slope into a small crater.

Bobby braked hard, fighting to control his own rig. The two southbound drivers flashed by him, still locked in their passing duel. Bobby managed to keep his rig upright as he pulled off onto the shoulder of the road. He sat there for a few seconds catching his breath.

"Dispatch, this is McCoy," he shouted into his comm. "Mayday! Mayday! Saylor's off the road at marker 857, north end of the Dragon's Back. Send the medics and a salvage crane."

He didn't wait for the reply. He triggered his own emergency beacon and struggled into a pressure suit. He sealed the helmet, grabbed the emergency kit from under his seat and depressurized the cab.

Bobby climbed down the steep slope as fast as the pressure suit allowed. Saylor's cab lay on its side, the wheels and axels torn away. The canopy was cracked and pitted, but looked intact. Bobby sighed with relief. At least there was a chance Saylor was still alive. He climbed up onto the superstructure and peered into the cab. He froze, staring at Saylor, or at least what was left of him.

Saylor's body, below the waist, was encased in a black pillar instead of the standard seat. His eyes stared blankly at Bobby without life or recognition. Thick cables snaked out of the console in front of him and entered the base of his skull and the back of his neck. Thinner cables linked Saylor's shoulders and wrists to the wheel and throttles. His arms and hands twitched as sparks danced across the shattered console.

Bobby pounded on the canopy, shouting Saylor's name over the comm. Saylor's eyes may have jerked but there was no answer. Bobby was still pounding on the canopy when the rescue team landed a few minutes later. With the medics was a squad of Company security men in black fighting suits. They hustled Bobby away and put him back in his rig. A few minutes after that, a Company supervisor came on the comm and ordered him to finish his run, then report to the branch office in Tranquility.

He reached the Terminus eighteen hours later after a slow, cautious run. The medics had to pry his hands off of the wheel to get him out of the cab and he spent the rest of the lunar day in a Company clinic, detoxing from the Road Drug.

Somewhere toward the end of his stay, he was visited by one of the Company suits, a smooth talking salesman type who made him an offer. How would he like to be top driver? If he signed a three year contract to participate in an experimental Company program, he'd be guaranteed the top spot for as long as he continued driving. Bobby dumped a full urinal on the man's expensive suit and threw him out of the room.

A few hours after that, another man came. This one had the manner and look of an old driver. He talked to Bobby for an hour about driving, about the road and in the end, about Saylor. After their talk, Bobby signed an agreement to never talk about Saylor again. In return he got a large chunk of money and a ticket back to Earth.

Three lunar days later, Bobby sat in a trucker's bar, his small travel kit at his side, waiting for the shuttle to take him to the spaceport. He watched the bookies taking bets on the driver standings that were posted in a large holotank at the back of the bar. He'd parlayed his settlement from the Company into a small fortune by betting on a long shot for top driver. Bobby smiled as he sipped his beer. He knew Czecka wouldn't have dumped something nasty on the man in the expensive suit.

END

Aphelion

This far out, 37AU and twenty degrees off the ecliptic, the Sun is just another first magnitude star. I have most of my external sensors turned away from it, toward Eris, but I keep one of the optical pickups trained on home most of the time. I'm not sure why. It's not like I'll ever see Earth again except from high orbit, but it comforts me to know where it is when we're out here on the extreme edge of the solar system.

Mike, my crew, my partner and sometimes virtual lover, is outside on an EVA to realign my high gain antenna. The automatic tracking system has failed again. Some mechanisms just don't hold up in cold that hovers 33 degrees above absolute zero. So Mike has to go out and replace it, then reinitialize the tracking program. I can't help him except to move the antenna on his command and open and close the lock for him. It's one of the drawbacks of being hard wired to the *Far Reach's* computer.

"OK, Jenny," Mike says over his suit comm. "Give me a ten degree arc on the main bezel."

I swing the antenna back and forth and am rewarded with an intermittent burst of carrier wave.

"That's the right sector," I tell him.

"Good. Reinitializing now. The auto detect should handle the fine tuning."

In a few seconds, I'm getting a steady signal from Houston. There are half a dozen burst messages in the queue. I acknowledge the message center and wait for the download. It will take almost six hours for the signal to reach home, so there's no point in worrying about it.

"Reading five by five, Mike," I say. "Come on in and I'll fix you some dinner."

"On my way. Is there any of that chicken adobo from last night?"

I laugh. "If that's what you want. It's all protein mash anyway, but I can make it taste like anything you fancy."

"Aw, Jenny," he says. "Don't ruin the illusion. I know what I'm really eating."

"Sorry, love. I wonder what you'd do if you really had to make all these tasty meals for yourself."

"Starve," he says ruefully.

I swing an optical sensor to cover the forward lock and watch him approach. He moves carefully, tethering his harness to the next hard point before disconnecting from the one behind. One slip out here and he'd be lost forever. I wouldn't be able to retrieve him myself and there's

no one to rescue us. I breathe a mental sigh of relief as he enters the lock and gives me thumbs up. I cycle the lock, repressurize the EVA bay and spin it up to match the ship's rotation.

In a few minutes, he's out of the heavy suit and lounging in the VR cube with a bottle of water. His nude body glistens with sweat, the lithe muscles of his chest and upper arms outlined sharply in the bright lights. Mike works out constantly in the *Far Reach's* tiny exercise chamber. He's more than a little vain about his appearance. Not that I mind. He's certainly easy to look at. And here in the sterile womb of the *Far Reach*, he can walk around naked without fear.

Mike has congenital SCID – Severe Combined Immunodeficiency Syndrome. He got his first bone marrow transplant when he was a week old. It failed and his first eighteen years of life were spent in a protective bubble. A common cold would kill him. He endured two more unsuccessful marrow transplants and a fruitless round of gene manipulation before giving up. By then he weighed only thirty kilos and was wracked with pain from coccidiomycosis. He was waiting to die when the witch doctors from the Company got hold of him.

In exchange for signing his life away, they cured his infection and isolated him in a sterile environment. He didn't touch another human being for two years. But he grew stronger and his body healed itself. The price was eternal isolation from anyone who might pass on an infection. Even his food was a potential threat. He lives on the same protein laden goo that feeds me in my biotank. Here on the *Far Reach*, half a solar system away from any other people, he is safe.

I slide a table out of the bulkhead in front of Mike's recliner. On it are the VR inducer, a spoon and a bowl of steaming protein mash. Mike refuses to look at the mash. Instead he puts the inducer on his head and adjusts the eye piece and the mastoid electrode.

"Take me away, Jenny," he says cheerfully.

I activate the program and insert myself. The cube dissolves, replaced by a sunny veranda framed in pink bougainvillea. The walls are Navajo white stucco, the floor is red Saltillo tile. A cool breeze rustles the fragrant blossoms. Mike sits at a Spanish style table with wrought iron legs and a wooden top. He's dressed in a white Panama suit and sips modelo negro from a tall glass.

I'm wearing a full skirt with a ruffled hem and a low cut peasant blouse with bright swirls of embroidery around the bodice. I carry a tray holding a plate of dark, rich chicken adobo. I smile at him as I set the food in front of him and kiss him firmly on his full lips. He grins and touches my hand.

"Won't you join me, senorita?" he asks.

"Of course," I say with a small laugh. I sit and wave a hand over the table. A second glass of beer appears and I lift it, holding it toward his in a toast. He touches my glass with his and we drink.

Mike eats the food, the VR inducer changing protein mash to rich spiced chicken and starchy red rice. I sip the beer, allowing the program to give me the taste of hops and barley. Part of my awareness remains tethered to the ship, feeling the slight tidal stresses on the hull, the

biting cold of space, the heat of the reactor. I listen for the incoming message burst from Houston with one ear and to Mike's conversation with the other.

I make a small joke. He laughs and I'm suddenly struck by how beautiful he is. I realize that I am happy. For the first time since the explosion, I feel at home. Odd that I should find a home out here, five billion kilometers from the planet that gave me life, death and this hybrid rebirth.

The comm signal chimes softly. I start the download, momentarily distracted. I realize Mike is looking at me.

"What?" I ask with a nervous laugh.

"Just looking," he smiles. "Wondering. You always appear the same when we meet in here. Is this the face you had before ..." he stops. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't ask."

I touch his hand. "It's OK," I say. And it is. "This is the face I remember; the one in the holoimages from when I was younger. After the explosion, there wasn't much of my face left. Or my legs." Mike looks uncomfortable, but I hold his hand tighter and plunge on. "Please. I need to tell you. Because I wouldn't have chosen this for myself, at least not back then. I died that day, but my body didn't give up. My parents are simple people. They just wanted me to live. I'm not sure they understood what they were doing." I stop, momentarily lost in a memory of my mother running from the hospital room when I spoke through the vocoder and reached for her with my new robotic arms.

I shake my head as Mike reaches out his own hand to me. "Please let me finish. When I was reanimated, it was all a done deal. Me in the biotank hooked to the computer and the Company in charge. Iron clad contract and all that. But the truth is I don't regret it. It's better than being brain dead, especially since they gave me the *Far Reach*. And you."

He smiles and pulls me closer. I fade out the veranda and replace it with a bedroom. Dim lights, roaring fire in a huge stone fireplace and a big canopy bed. I know it's my dream and not Mike's; has been since I was old enough to be interested in boys. He doesn't seem to mind. He lifts me and lays me down on the bed. The download is complete but I tune it all out, letting the bedroom program flood me with sensation.

Afterward, Mike is asleep. I shift my awareness to the comm program and open the message burst. As I suspected, there are a handful of new science tasks to add to the schedule. Once we reach Eris we're going to be frantically busy. I open the last item, read it. I stop, read it again. My heart seems to stop as a cold dread grips my core. I close the message and flag it 'private' and lock it away in a secure access file. I won't tell Mike, I decide. I tell myself that it will only upset him and we have a tight schedule ahead of us. I'm rationalizing, I know. But I will keep this secret, at least for now.

Far Reach is nearing aphelion, the extreme limit of our long elliptical orbit, the farthest point from the Sun. Our approach is carefully timed to match Eris at perihelion, its closest approach. Eris is the largest of the trans-Neptunian objects that orbit our Sun on the fringes of the system. What makes it special is an eccentric orbit which takes it inside the orbit of Neptune at

perihelion and out to the very edge of the Oort cloud at aphelion. We hope that it picks up some comet stuff on its swing through the edge of the cometary nursery. Our job is to find out.

Mike is looking forward to the rendezvous. In the five years it's taken us to get here, he's earned a PhD in astrophysics and planetology. It was a requirement written into his contract, but he's developed a real passion for it, especially the planetology. I'm a little jealous. My only job is to drive. He gets to have all the fun once we reach Eris.

The days pass quickly, the pace of work accelerating as we get closer. Mike and I share at least one meal a day in the VR cube, but the schedule keeps our free time limited. I am preoccupied with last minute course corrections. Eris is 2500 kilometers in diameter which sounds big, but isn't. Hitting it after a five billion kilometer run is akin to threading a needle from orbit. I'm grateful for the distraction. I hate keeping secrets and Mike doesn't seem to notice when I'm a bit distant.

By the time we are close enough to see Eris, Mike is too excited to sleep. He spends hours studying the images. When I finally park *Far Reach* in a stable orbit 200 kilometers above the surface, he's bouncing around like a kid in a toy store. We drop our remote probes and the data start rolling in.

"I need to go down there, Jenny," he tells me over and over as he studies screen after screen of remote sensor data.

"You know we can't do that, Mike," I tell him. Eris may be a dwarf planet, but it still has a gravity well, one that is too deep for us. *Far Reach* is a creature of deep space. She was never designed to touch solid ground.

"I've been thinking about it, Jenny," he says. "I could go down on the Brown telescope. There's enough fuel to handle the extra mass and enough room on the reactor shield for me to ride in a pressure suit."

"The Brown is a permanent installation," I protest. "How do you expect to get back?"

"I thought of that, too," he says grinning. "We still have that carbon fiber cable from the towed array graviton experiment. There's over a thousand kilometers of the stuff. We use it as a tether on the telescope, sort of like a fly-by-wire probe. Once it's down on the surface, you reel in the slack and the cable becomes an elevator. I can use a battery powered winch to crawl up and down it."

"Even if it works, and I doubt it will, you're talking about a 200 kilometer long string. How do we know it'll hold your mass?"

He waves a hand casually. "I've done the calculations. I don't mass a third of what the graviton detector did, so even allowing for tidal stress on the cable, it should be more than strong enough. It will work, Jenny. I know it will."

"Houston will never approve," I say, clutching at straws.

"So we don't tell them. What are they going to do, anyway? Fire us? It's not like they can stop us, even if we do tell them."

I've heard this tone of voice before. He's getting stubborn. Once Mike gets on an idea he can be like a dog with a bone. I assign a subroutine to check his calculations and run a simulation.

Meanwhile, I say, "You're talking about an unnecessary risk. Why should we deviate from the mission profile?"

"Because that's why I'm here, Jenny," he says with a note of exasperation in his voice. "Aside from keeping you company and playing maintenance man, I'm supposed to do stuff like this. To look at the situation and make decisions on the fly. We're too far from home to ask mother-may-I before we try something new. I'm getting data from the probes I can't explain. I need to get down there and see, close up."

The subroutine is finished running half a dozen simulations with different mass and velocity profiles and they all seem to indicate that Mike is right. His idea is within the tolerances of the cable, if just barely.

"OK," I say. "Your figures check out. That doesn't mean I like it."

"You don't have to. Just help me do it." He grins again and I know I can't stop him.

So for the next few days Mike spends less time salivating over the data from the probes and more in the EVA bay linking the towed array cable to the telescope. I try to keep my misgivings to myself and run the insertion profile over and over looking for potential glitches.

Finally Mike announces that the work is done and he's ready to drop to the surface when we deploy the telescope. I pretend to be glad and suggest a special dinner to celebrate. I have ulterior motives. I hope to make him think twice by revealing the contents of the burst message.

Mike settles into his recliner and adjusts the inducer. The cube dissolves and we are sitting at a table overlooking the ocean. The waves glow with moonlight. Warm breezes waft through fragrant hibiscus. I am dressed in a white sequined gown, low cut in the front, the skirt slit to the thigh. Mike wears an open necked Philippine shirt. Candles bathe the white table cloth in a warm yellow light. Mike pours red wine into crystal goblets and passes one to me.

"I love this place, Jenny," he says as he sips the wine. "How did you find it?"

"I came across an old travel poster in the archive for a place on Earth called Fiji. I knew you'd like it."

Mike smiles and I melt. We eat and drink and make small talk, all the while anticipating what will come next. I almost lose myself in the wine and the scent of hibiscus, but manage to pull back when he reaches for my hand.

"Wait, please," I say. "There's something I need to tell you."

"It can wait," he says, taking my hand.

"No. It's important, Michael."

That stops him. I only call him Michael when I'm angry or upset. He looks at me expectantly.

"A couple of weeks ago, after you fixed the high gain antenna, we got a bunch of burst messages from Houston, remember?"

"Sure. They loaded a bunch of crap onto our schedule. But most of it's done already. What's so important about that?"

"There was one more message. I didn't tell you at the time because, well, because I didn't; I mean I was afraid," I stop. He looks confused. "Oh, hell. Read it for yourself." I open the message file and display in on the white tablecloth in front of him.

He scans it quickly, then shrugs. "OK," he says. "What's so important about this?"

"What's so important?" I repeat his words, stunned. "Michael, don't you understand? They've found a way to completely reengineer your X chromosome. They can cure you. For real this time."

"Maybe. But I'm out here, not back on Earth. And it'll be five years before we see home again. Plenty of time."

"How can you be so blasé about this?" I'm almost shouting now. "Think Michael. You can leave the *Far Reach*. You can walk in the sunlight again, touch another person, breath unfiltered air. You have a chance at a real life. And all you do is shrug your shoulders."

"I thought I had a real life," he says quietly. "Or have I missed something in the last few years."

"You know what I mean," I sigh.

"No, I don't. I thought we had something here. A life with purpose and someone we care about."

"But it's artificial, Michael. You don't touch me, you touch a computer simulation. We live on gray goo and drink our own recycled waste."

"No," he slams his palm down on the table. "You're talking about where we work. This," he waves his hand. "All this is where we live. This is where we see each other. This is as real as all the rest of it."

I stare at him. "Michael, listen to yourself. You're losing touch with reality."

He shakes his head. "No, I'm not. I don't care whether we're really in Fiji or just in the VR cube. You're real, I'm real. What we have in here is just as real as Eris and the ship and the whole damn universe. Nothing else matters." He stares at me as if expecting something. I don't know what to say.

He sighs. "It's late, Jenny. I'm going to be busy tomorrow. I think I'll turn in." He removes the VR inducer and I'm left staring at an empty chair.

Morning and night are arbitrary in deep space. Mike sleeps eight hours and then is up and ready to go. He's all business as we prep the telescope for launch. I try to talk to him about last night but all he'll say is "Later".

We launch on schedule. Mike stays in constant contact over his suit radio as the telescope makes its way down to the surface. I monitor the cable. We spool out nearly 800 kilometers before Mike shouts, "Touchdown. Reel it in, Jenny."

I rewind the spools until the cable tension spikes. I back off 50 meters or so and the tension stabilizes. We're a couple of milliradians off of the vertical, but well within margin for error.

Mike whoops, "WooHoo! I'm on the surface, Jenny. It's freaking beautiful!"

"Great, Mike," I answer. "Watch your air and the clock."

Mike's suit has enough remaining air for about 12 hours. We planned for six hours on the surface, a four hour lift on the cable and a two hour reserve in case of trouble. Mike makes a rude comment but says he will.

The next six hours are tense for me, exciting for Mike. We don't talk much. He's working hard in a pressure suit and conversation is not a priority. I watch the time crawl by. Finally he calls on the radio.

"Checking in, Mom. I'm just about ready to come home. This place is OK for a visit, but it got old about two hours ago."

"Did you find what you were looking for?" I ask.

"Yeah, I think so. I'll review the samples when I get back. I'm hooking on now. I've got about twenty kilos of samples with me. Any problem with the extra mass?"

I rerun a quick simulation. "No problem. Still well within tolerances."

"Starting ascent now." His reply is accompanied but a high pitched whine; the vibration of the winch transmitted through his suit. It must be tooth rattling for him if I can hear it over the audio pickup.

The ascent goes well for the first half hour. Then the vibrations start, subtle at first but building as the winch climbs higher. I try to adjust the tension on the cable with the main spool but the effect is temporary. I run some more calculations.

"Mike," I call. "Stop the climb. Stop now."

"Why, Jenny?"

"The harmonics. We didn't factor the effect of vibration on the cable. As you climb the oscillations will increase until they break the cable."

"So what do we do?" he asks.

“I don’t know,” my voice is almost a wail of despair. “If you slow your climb, the oscillations will dampen out, but you’ll run out of air before you get back.”

Mike doesn’t answer for several long seconds. When he speaks, his voice is flat. “When I give you the word, haul in the cable as fast as the spool will go.”

“Mike what –“

Mike interrupts, “Haul it now!” A deep thrumming twang echoes through the whole ship as the cable parts.

“Mike!” My voice is a shriek that matches the squeal of protest from the main spool as I haul in the cable. I feel it shudder and bang against the winch housing as it whips back and forth. Mike isn’t answering. I can’t tell if he’s still attached or if the cable has launched him into the void. The cable reels in, meter after meter. I realize I am crying. I have no eyes; can make no tears, but the *Far Reach* shudders and throbs as I cry.

“Mike,” I sob. “Please, Michael. Answer me.”

The cable is almost reeled in before he replies. “I’m OK, Jenny.” His voice is pinched. “Broke a couple of ribs. Hurts like hell to breathe. Slow the rewind until I can use the suit thrusters to stop whipping around.”

“Oh, Mike,” I cry. “Thank God. I thought I’d lost you.”

“Hush, Jenny. Just reel me in.”

I can’t stop talking. I apologize over and over for concealing the message. I tell him how afraid I was that he would leave the ship, leave me. I realize that I’m babbling, but I can’t help it. All he says is, “Hush”.

I watch anxiously until he is safe in the EVA bay. I spin it up to one G. He strips off the pressure suit, the insulating long johns, even the skinsuit with its electrodes and monitors. He leaves the bay and strides purposefully toward the computer core.

“Mike? Michael, what are you doing?”

“Giving you real.” He reaches the core and keys in the security code.

“Mike, don’t do this. The core isn’t supposed to be opened. It’s a sterile environment.”

He laughs. “Right. And I’m so full of germs.” The access hatch hisses open as the positive air pressure around my tank equalizes with *Far Reach*’s atmosphere.

“Michael, please. I don’t want you to see me this way.” My voice sounds strange, like I’m speaking from the bottom of a shaft. I realize that I’m hearing the synthesized voice the computer gives me. For the first time in years I am hearing through my own ears.

My skin tingles as nerve endings long dormant reawaken. I feel the sloshing of the nutrient solution as another body climbs into my tank; feel the slight tugs as Mike moves aside the tubes and cables that link me to *Far Reach*.

“Michael, please. I can’t see you.”

His arms enfold the small part of me that once was all of me. “Hush, Jenny,” he whispers in my ear. “I’m right here. I won’t leave you. If this is the reality you want, that’s OK with me.”

We lie there in the warm darkness for a very long time.

END