

**A HORSE OF  
MANY COLOURS**



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**MICHAEL BARD**

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## FOREWORD ~ WILL A. SANBORN

MICHAEL W. "MORGAN" BARD was an avid follower and participant in the science fiction, anthropomorphic animals, and transformation fandoms, as well as a prolific writer. Friends remember collaborating on story ideas and long talks on subjects ranging the wide gamut of the genres. He had a great love for ideas and stories, and that shines through in his writing. Michael lived in Toronto, and his love for that city and his Canadian pride are also evident in many of his stories.

Michael passed away on the nineteenth of March 2010 due to complications of an aneurysm. He left this world far too soon at the age of forty-four. Michael left behind many acquaintances and fans, who not only mourned the loss of a good friend, but also all those stories which he did not get a chance to create.

This collection of Michael's fiction was created through the efforts of his friends and artistic collaborators in remembrance of him and his works. In accordance with his family's wishes, the royalties from this book will be donated in his name to the Heart and Stroke center at Toronto Western through the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario. ([www.heartandstroke.on.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.on.ca))



## FOREWORD ~ PHIL GUESZ

MICHAEL WAS A TORONTO FUR and a gentle, artistic soul. I suspect he found his true home at last in the furry fandom after much lonely wandering. He was a classicist in his literary tastes and in other aspects of his life as well. He loved discussing anything to do with ancient Greece, particularly in terms of their military history and prowess. Clarke and Heinlein and Lovecraft, among many others, were his favorite authors. Though I consider myself fairly knowledgeable about the early years of SF, his familiarity with the subject could best be described as encyclopedic.

My friend Michael had a way of combining his loves and talents. For example, he made his living for several years painting Greek miniatures for wargamers, with an extreme emphasis on historical accuracy and authenticity. He also became an avid fursuiter – I can remember him spending well over a year trying to work out the ideal way to build a set of working, wearable hooves. He demanded perfection of himself in his costuming, or as near to it as he could achieve. This was the case in his literary efforts as well, and his pains weren't wasted.

Michael was taken from us *far* too young – his skills as both a writer and costumer were waxing by the week. His fursuit-characters are silent now, without Michael to give them life. But the stories yet live, and I believe that these are therefore what the fandom will remember him by. And you know what? I think he'd want it that way....



## FOREWORD ~ JASON GILLESPIE

I AM TRYING TO THINK ABOUT what to say of our friend and I find it very difficult. Michael was a good man who was always trying to do things for others that he knew they'd like, and things that they never asked, nor would ever ask of him. That sort of generosity always impressed me and endeared me to him. He never stopped thinking about others.

The other thing he never stopped thinking about was his crafts. Be they his models, his fursuits, or his stories, he strove to make them as believable and as realistic as possible; as close to perfection as he could come was his goal and always his goal. I recall the time he tried to design a map of Metamor Keep and its surrounding environs. There are so many contradictory details in the various stories and in the interpretations brought by different authors that he finally had to give up despite his heroic efforts.

It's just one more reason why when you pick up one of his stories, you know you're going to get something that was built as well as he could make it. And when it comes to writing, Michael knew what to do to tell a great story that would tantalize mind, tear out heart, and inquire the soul.

He was a dear friend. He always will be. What I truly wish to say about Michael I cannot. Not in this context. His soul was dear to me, revealed in his acts in life toward myself and others. I never knew the depths of his soul. But I believe that there is something in there that is worthy of persisting.



## FOREWORD ~ JESSIE TRACER / ELECTRIC KEET

POLITE DISTANCE KILLED MICHAEL BARD before he had a chance to die on his own – from my perspective, at least. It’s my own damned fault.

I was on holiday in Boston, engaged in the sororal tradition of anecdotes and gossip, when I received the news of his unfortunate end. I explained to my sister – in an ideal world, she’d have been my blood sister, but genetics and time respect nothing like wishes – just who this man was. “A writer with intense potential,” I said. “Passionate, creative, difficult, and odd in all the right ways.” I told her how I’d had the honour of typesetting one of his published pieces, and how I’d playfully argued with him over his choices of punctuation. I told her how he’d helped me in my own writing, pointing me in the direction of the resources he’d used to bring a kiss of versimilitude to his own science fiction. I told her how we would chat online, batting surreal puns back and forth like kittens who refused to grow old.

“Sounds like he was a good friend,” my sister said.

“He should have been,” I admitted. Then, I told her how I’d never let myself get too terribly close. A writer is not merely influenced but *powered* by passion and pain, and he was an irrepressible writer. Getting closer would have meant the hard work of knowing his passion and pain. I thought I was too busy to take that much more on, so I kept a polite distance.

My work on this final anthology serves many functions. It’s a fond memorial. It’s the payment of respects. It’s a friendly final word on the debate over his ellipses and em-dashes. Most of all, it’s a reminder to myself – and to you, who hold up this book and thus are willing to see some of another sapient being’s passion and pain – that it’s worth knowing a person better, and better not to kill them off before their time.





## HOW DID THE COELACANTH REALLY SURVIVE?

KASANA SOLANTH WALKED INTO THE POD of Dr Kynarhan, the head of ecological sciences for the free peoples. He stood up and clasped his hands together and bowed in greeting, as did she, and then sat his unusually dark green form behind his desk and motioned for Kasana to sit in front.

“Dr Solanth,” he began. “I take it you know why I asked you here?”

“I think so. It’s about the Coelacanth Project.”

“Exactly. We’re finally ready to begin reintroducing the species. It’s our duty after the disasters caused to the Earth by our earlier civilizations.” He sighed. “I only wish we’d made it into space before the ecological deterioration forced us to concentrate our efforts here.”

“I’ve heard rumours that it’s been decided to start with the oceans, and in particular with the coelacanth. Was that due to my concerns?”

“Mostly. Your articles have been a bit... colourful, shall we say.”

“I prefer passionate.”

“Whatever. Anyway, we did finally decide to start the repopulation with a single small species as a trial.”

“Wonderful. And my other request about having somebody breed and monitor it?”

“I was finally able to convince them of your arguments.” He stood up, brought down a old, leatherbound book, and carefully placed it on his desk. He looked back up at Kasana, “You’re really sure you want to go through with this?”

She leaned back in her chair, letting its simple biological form adjust to her back. Did she want it? Did she want to give up her race? Would she still be herself? “How did they solve the intelligence problem?”

“It was actually quite simple. The plan is to have the actual mind divided into individual neurons throughout the body, all linked. The ‘brain’ would only act as a switching centre.”

Kasana nodded. “And my young?”

“That’s the problem. There are still some smaller fish, and a few of the larger predators, who survived our errors, and because of them our earlier attempts at reintroduction have failed. The decision has been to let the intelligence breed true.”

She was shocked. “What? Why?” What disasters would their intelligence cause in the future?

“The plan is for the intelligence to initially help the species to survive long enough to become viable. Then, since we made intelligence a recessive trait, it should breed itself out as there will be no real need for it.”

“You hope. Why are you and the council willing to take that risk?”

“It has been decided that the need to get moving with the reintroduction outweighs any risks.” He looked straight into her yellow eyes. “You never did answer me. Are you still sure you want to go through with this? Absolutely sure?”

“I think so.” Why was she so unsure? She had worked for this for the last fifteen years. Ever since she had first heard rumours of the reintroduction of the many species her race had driven to extinction. Often she had dreamed of it. So why was she hesitant?

“I need a definite answer. Once we introduce the tailored virus, there is no going back. Ever.”

She sighed. Enough hesitation. She had worked towards this, and she was ready. “Yes. I am absolutely sure.”

Dr Kynarhan sighed and slowly sat down. He opened the book on his desk to a marked page. On that page was an old picture of the last known coelacanth to survive. He looked back up at her. “This is what you will be. This is what you will be for the rest of your life. I have to ask and make sure that you are absolutely positive. I couldn’t live with myself otherwise.”

She looked down at the picture. It was of a large, beautiful, female, about two metres in length. Its scales and angular fins were all a dashing blue-black with white streaking towards the tail. It had its jaw fully opened, with its nostrils distended. She recognized the picture; it was of the last one ever caught. They had hoped to breed it but the pollution had rendered it sterile. She closed her eyes for a moment and then looked back up at Dr Kynarhan.

“Yes. I will. I’m ready.”

Dr Kynarhan raised his three fingered hand and they pressed their

palms together. “The council thanks you for your sacrifice. As I know that you already have all your affairs in order, tomorrow morning at eighteen-hundred, go to the biology research centre here in the capital. Go and see Dr Dalerul and he will give you the injection and monitor the procedure.”

They bowed and Kasana turned and left. All doubts had been banished from her mind. *Finally*, she thought. *Finally my dreams can come true*. The dreams that she had had since she had hatched.

KASANA WAS UNABLE TO SLEEP that night, and ended up watching various broadcasts. She ignored the general news, the almost lies about the state of the earth, and the one talk show about possible asteroid collisions. Instead, she watched nature shows. Most were filmed almost a century ago, and then enhanced as technology improved. She wanted to remember as much about her old life as possible before she left it behind. What she remembered most from that night was the footage that stuck her most – that of hunters of two centuries ago shooting the last of the wild crested lambeosaurines, and the beast’s honking as they died.

Finally morning came and Kasana decided to walk to the biology centre. The capital was still small, as the population was still recovering from the decimation caused by disease and famine over the last century. It took her only an hour in the pre-dawn light to reach the centre – the only life she saw was a few birds just beginning their hunt for food. Most of the birds had come to the cities where they could live quite well off the free people’s waste.

She opened the door and went into the public hall. It was always open as it displayed many of the extinct creatures, some extinct long ago, and others just recently. She passed the preserved remains of various ceratopsians and went over to the tank where a preserved coelacanth was displayed and just looked at it. She lost herself in thought. Soon, she would look like that.

She didn’t hear the claw taps behind her and was startled when she heard a voice. “Dr Solanth?”

She gasped and turned around. It was a large male, light green in colour, and obviously very old. She recognized him as Dr Dalerul.

“Did I startle you? Somehow I expected to find you here.”

“You did?”

“We know a lot more about you than you might think. Your research wasn’t the only reason you were finally selected. Your state of mind was also considered. You are stable, but you have your dreams. You’re by far the most likely to adapt.”

“How do you know my dreams?”

He smiled, “You must learn not to talk in your sleep.”

She glared at him in shock.

“Now come along. It’s still a bit early, but we’re ready for you now.” He turned and walked towards an open door at the end of the hallway.

Kasana shrugged and followed him. The only sound was the clicking of their toeclaws on the marble floor. She followed Dr Dalerul down a hallway and past various rooms into a large and comfortable office. The office had once seemed large, but now all the walls were lined with shelves containing books and specimens. It smelled slightly of decay and damp. All the tables were covered with books and Dr Dalerul even had to move some from his chair onto the floor. He motioned for Kasana to sit down opposite him – fortunately her chair was bare.

When they were seated, Dr Dalerul began. “I’m told that you’ve accepted the transformation. That you are willing and able.”

“Yes.”

“Good. I just need to confirm your feelings.”

He leaned down and Kasana heard a loud scraping as a drawer was opened. Dr Dalerul pulled out a small case and placed it on the one empty space on his desk and slammed the drawer shut. Then he opened the case. It contained a single syringe beside which was a large vial containing a greenish-black liquid. Dr Dalerul pulled out the vial and filled the syringe with a measured portion. He closed the case.

“This is your last chance. Once I inject you, there will be no turning back. Are you absolutely sure?”

Kasana looked at the syringe. There was her future. She had always hated needles, but this would be the last one. Ever. She closed her eyes and whispered, “Yes.”

“Wonderful. This’ll hurt only a little.”

She still grimaced at the sharp prick at her elbow. Even though her eyes were closed, she could feel the coldness start to move up her arm and into her chest before it finally dissipated. She opened her eyes and watched Dr Dalerul clean and bandage the wound.

“It’s done. You shouldn’t notice anything for a while, but it’s already started to work. Do you know how the process will proceed?”

“I’ve studied it thoroughly. After all, I’ve been preparing for this for a long time.”

“Good. Then I’ll take you to your room. You’ll probably want to sleep as you were awake all night.”

She stared at him. How long had they been watching her?

“Don’t worry. We had to keep an eye on you to make sure you were committed. We’re just being cautious. Now that the process has begun, all of the recordings are being destroyed.”

“Thank you.”

“If you need the washroom, and be warned that you will, a lot, just call for a nurse. It’s the standard button arrangement. Any other questions?”

“No.” She smiled. Now that it had begun, she realized how tired she was. “Let’s go then. I think I’ll fall asleep on your chair if I stay here much longer.”

Dr Dalerul stood up and helped her up. He turned and she followed him out of his office and down a short hall to another door. Opening it, he motioned her in.

“Good night. Remember, buzz if you need anything.”

She yawned and clasped his hand for a second. Then she turned and tumbled into bed.

SHE SLEPT WELL, UNAWARE OF THE CHANGES that were going on in her body. Finally she awoke, feeling bloated. She sniffed and gagged, and realized that she had already relieved herself all over the bed. And she had to go again. She breathed through her mouth and buzzed the nurse. Finally the nurse arrived and didn’t look at all shocked.

“Don’t look so guilty,” the nurse said. “Dr Dalerul expected this to happen. Don’t worry, in a month or so we’ll move you to your tank and then it won’t be so messy. I take it you have to go again?”

Kasana managed to nod.

THE NEXT MONTH WAS HELLISH. She didn’t eat anything, only drank, as her body slowly got rid of its mass as she began her shrinkage to half her size. As expected, within a week her scales had begun to grow larger, and began to match a coelacanth’s patterns. After three weeks she found she had to sleep on her side to be comfortable – she felt around and just managed to feel her new tail beginning to grow – her arms had shortened to the point where they could barely reach to check. She still made a mess of the bed every night when she slept, but had come to accept it philosophically. As the nurse had said, it was expected.

After four weeks her tail had stopped growing. It was only about ten centimetres in length, but the rest of her body would adapt to fit it. She could feel the small caudal and posterior caudal fins and could even move their ribs slightly. Now she knew what it was like to have a tail. By the fifth

week her legs had shrunk to only thirty centimetres or so in length, and she was beginning to feel dry. Her messes also became drier.

ONE MORNING DR DALERUL CAME TO SEE HER. “You’ll be happy to know that everything is proceeding normally. We’re going to move you to your tank today.”

She’d wondered about that. She hadn’t developed any kind of gills yet. Just in case they had just opened, she felt her neck, which she could barely reach. But she couldn’t feel anything.

“They’ll be a while yet. But don’t worry, we have a respirator for you that we’ll strap to your head. We haven’t gone through all this to let you drown.”

She managed a laugh. Hopefully the water would help since her whole body now felt dry and uncomfortable.

“We do have to do one thing though, before we put you in. We’ll put you under while we implant a small sperm sac. It’ll release a genetically different set of sperm once a year or so while you’re fertile. That way you’ll lay eggs that are already fertilized.”

“Can we get it over with now?”

“Yes. Drink this, and you’ll wake up in your new home.” He handed her a glass.

She leaned forward to hold the glass, hearing her scales rasp against the bed. Its contents looked like water, but when she drank it, it tasted bitter – she barely managed to keep from spitting it out. She wanted to ask for water to wash out the taste, but couldn’t stop her eyes from closing.

WHEN SHE AWOKE, HER BODY didn’t feel dry anymore, for the first time in almost a week. She was breathing normally and could hear a roar of bubbles each time she exhaled. She could see them blurrily rise to the now forbidden surface. She could even see the tip of her mouth – her face had started to reform.

“Hello?” The bubbles obscured her sounds. She took a deep breath and shouted, “Anybody?” She looked around and saw someone leaning over the tank. The form was blurred.

“Are you awake?”

She heard a man’s voice whisper throughout the tank. It sounded odd. It sounded a bit like Dr Dalerul, but deeper, and with weird resonances. “Yes!” she answered.

“Good. This is Dr Dalerul. Everything went fine. Do you feel okay?”

She tried to quiet her breathing and then tried to sense her body. She felt fine, not too hot and not too cool. She thought she could feel a dull ache in her chest, but she wasn't sure.

"I'm fine!"

"Good. You'll have to stay here. You'll need the respirator for another two months until your gills develop. We've put a monitor just outside so you can try and keep from being bored. Can you see it?"

She tried to turn herself around to look, but her legs and arms didn't help much. Then she remembered her tail and used it to turn around. She could see the monitor. It was blurry, but recognizable. "Yes!"

"Good. For now it's all you'll have, but in a month we'll need to start on your language lessons. Your body should be developed enough by then to make the sounds you need. Do you understand?"

"Yes! Can you turn it to the nature broadcast?"

OVER THE NEXT MONTH she watched the monitor. Her vision cleared until it was as sharp as it used to be. Her arms and legs continued to shorten, and the ends began to flatten into fins. Her claws disappeared completely. Her head continued to change and flatten, as did her chest. They adjusted her mask daily to keep it tight.

During the second month of her aquatic existence, she began her language lessons. She had helped to develop the code of clicks and hums that she could make that would be used to communicate with scientists that would come to visit her and monitor the growing population she would birth. She knew the language by heart, but had to learn how to make it with her new body. At first it was difficult, but as her body continued to change, it started to become easier.

Near the end of the second month her throat began to feel dry. She asked for a mirror and could see bumps forming on either side of her face. Her neck was now completely gone, her head merged with her chest. Her chest had thinned and fattened until now it was almost a cylinder. She could even see buds for the rest of her fins.

She was also beginning to lose the ability to talk. By the end of the month she could only talk in a whisper which nobody could hear. To her it sounded like the breathy rasp of an old man. Fortunately she could now communicate in her language of hums and clicks.

At the end of the week she awoke and could see blood in the water. She could no longer turn her head so she turned her body around and looked in the mirror but couldn't see anything wrong. She swam closer to the

edge of the tank and noticed three lines behind her head. Were those her gills? She clicked and hummed to call for a doctor.

A few minutes later she could see the figure of Dr Dalerul outside the tank. "Are you all right?"

"I think so, but what about the blood?" A computer translated her hums and clicks to normal words.

"Come closer. It should be your gills."

She managed to swim to the edge of the tank and turned her side to the edge. She could still see him as her eyes were now on the side of her head as it had begun to flatten. "I checked, it looks like them."

"Good, wonderful! And right on schedule." He rubbed his hands together. "Wait a few minutes and I'll get some students into the tank with you to remove your air."

"What?"

"You don't need it anymore, and soon it'll begin to damage your throat. Don't worry, there'll be people with you in case you need it again."

She tried to nod, forgetting for a second that she no longer could. "Okay."

She waited for a while until the doctor and two others returned. She felt splashes along the side of her body and soon saw two women swimming down to her. They were wearing respirators and full face masks.

"Are you ready?" one asked. Her breath hissed out into the water. She looked a pale green with faint whitish streaks along her chest.

"Yes." Kasana heard the metallic translation of her answer in the tank.

The one who had spoken slowly swam up to her. "Don't move. I'm going to hold you behind the gills as I remove the respirator. I won't do so until you say that you're ready. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

The woman swam up and wrapped her arm around Kasana's body. The touch felt odd, and somehow distant, as though being felt through thick clothing. The arm also felt almost uncomfortably hot.

"I'm in position. Are you ready?"

Kasana swallowed, trying to get rid of the dryness in the mouth. This was it. She took a deep breath, hopefully her last, and held it. She could feel herself begin to rise. "Yes."

Kasana saw the woman nod, and then she removed the respirator. The mask was gone and Kasana could feel water against her lips. She kept them closed, afraid to open them.

The woman noticed. "You need to start breathing. Don't worry, I'm



right here. Just open and close your mouth. That should open the gills. I have the respirator mask right here.”

Kasana tried again to nod. She had to do this. She had to. She tried to close her eyes, but no longer could. All she could do was stare. And she hadn't even noticed when her eyelids went away. She opened her mouth and felt the water flow in. She felt a slight tearing behind her head. She closed her mouth and felt muscles clench and flesh flare wide behind her eyes. Then other muscles clenched. She opened her mouth again, and repeated the cycle.

She did it for a while, never feeling faint, and soon it became natural. She began to sink as her lungs, now just air bladders, slowly absorbed her last breath. “I'm fine. My gills are working.” She hummed and clicked and listened to the translation.

“They look fine. Call if there are any problems.” The woman let go and Kasana watched her swim back to the surface, to the air, now completely foreign to her.

FOR THE NEXT FEW WEEKS she luxuriated in her freedom from the respirator. Her waist was gone and she could easily move her tail. Her swimming remained awkward until her other fins finally popped out of their buds. They were still small, but they would grow. Her arms and legs continued to shrink, and soon they were only a little larger than the fins they would become. Her toes and fingers had thinned and were now joined by more ribs, all linked by a thin webbing. She could move them at her wrist and ankle, and widen and narrow their span, but she couldn't bend her fingers anymore. Her body had narrowed to almost the right size. Physically she was almost complete. She watched the monitor less and less, as more and more of the images made no sense to her.

SHE WAS SLOWLY SWIMMING back and forth, half watching the monitor, when she noticed Dr Dalerul outside.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

She clicked and hummed her response. “Fine, considering.”

“Good. Your change is almost complete except for your head – your lungs have even merged into a single air bladder. Now, your brain has just started to shrink and the new neurons have begun to mature. You need to concentrate on language and memory.”

“I'll try.”

“You'll do more than try! You need to imprint what you want to

remember on your new neurons. You need to keep your speech and your knowledge. You'll probably lose literacy, but we hope nothing else. You may lose some of your older memories. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She turned away from him with a flick of her tail.

"You have to do this. If you don't your mind will be gone. I'm going to take the monitor away so you can concentrate. You have to do it."

She let out a loud hum and a sharp click. "Fine!" She understood what he meant though. She tried to remember. She remembered her past, or at least most of it. Some bits were gone. She didn't know what they were, but she knew things were missing. He was right, her mind was starting to go. But she wouldn't let it. She refused to let what she was die.

She started humming and clicking in the language she had created in another life. She hummed and clicked her history, and her parents; she hummed and clicked her past, and her plans for the future.

FOR THE NEXT MONTH her body and head continued to shrink. One day she heard a crack and found that she could open her mouth wider – she felt her eyes move upward slightly as her jaw distended. That meant something, something, she couldn't remember what, had happened.... Then she remembered vaguely – her skull had separated. She opened her mouth wide and gulped water. Soon she would be complete.

Then she went back to her sing-song history of hums and clicks. She would remember, she would not let herself forget.

TOWARDS THE END OF THE MONTH she began to feel curiously empty. She remembered something about this, a name, a word. She remembered hunger. She called for the ones who watched her. She remembered a name, vaguely, a Dalerul. He was a.... She couldn't remember. She called out in her clicking and humming way.

She saw motion outside her tank.

"Kasana? What's wrong? This is Dr Dalerul."

Doctor, that was it. Doctor, doctor, doctor....

"Kasana?"

Oh right. "I'm hungry, I think."

"Hungry?"

She watched as he checked something. She had no idea what it was. She waited and kept saying doctor to herself – she didn't want to forget it.

"Wonderful! Right on schedule." She heard the doctor speaking again.

“Your physical reduction is complete. You need food again. I’ll be back in a while.”

She watch him turn and swim away. Was swim the right word? She went back to her chant of memories. She wouldn’t let herself forget. She added “doctor”. A while later she noticed a number of doctors return. One swam to the top of her tank and there was a splash and a bunch of little ones swam down around her.

The doctor spoke, “Kasana. We’ve added fish to the tank. You need to start eating them.”

Eat? She remembered eating.... That’s it – she needed to swallow them. But why? She had never done so before. But she knew she had to listen to the doctors. She swam over to one and distended her jaw and swallowed it. It was good; it filled the hollowness inside her. Then she swallowed another one. So this was eating....

SHE HAD FED WELL AND WAS RESTING when the doctors came back. She heard them talking. They were saying something about preparing her from birth and conditioning, and something about her mind not being quite what they wanted for the rulers to escape what was coming, but she wasn’t sure what they meant. Eventually one of the doctors spoke directly to her.

“Kasana?”

She swam over to the edge of her world to look at him. “Yes,” she clicked and hummed back.

“The procedure is finally finished. You’re complete.”

Complete? That meant finished. Then she remembered – she had once been like them. They must mean that her new self was done. “I won’t change anymore?”

“It’s done and it’s successful. We’re going to release you.”

She was happy here. “Why?”

She heard the doctors whisper amongst themselves. She started chanting her memories while she waited. Finally a doctor spoke, “Don’t you remember? We’re going to release you into the oceans so you can create a new species. It’s why you accepted this change.”

She stopped and tried to remember. Oh, right. “I’m the first mother. It’s all finished then?”

“Yes. We’ll release you tomorrow. Then you’ll be visited once a month to check how you’re doing.”

A month? She dimly remembered it – something about days and time passing. In the last week it had become easier to remember, even though she had gaps, but she still chanted because it helped.

“Okay.” She turned and started swimming around looking for food. The small ones had become harder to catch.

THE NEXT DAY SHE WOKE UP from her half-asleep state and saw the doctors walk in. She swam over to the front of her world.

“We’re going to lower in a smaller tank. We need you to swim into it so we can take you to the ocean. Do you understand?”

Ocean? She remembered – it was where she was supposed to go. It was a much larger world. “Yes,” she hummed and clicked as she swam up towards the top of her world.

There was a splash and some bubbles and a large box was lowered in. It was only a little bigger than she was. She swam into it and carefully used her other fins to straighten herself out. It was really small. She heard a rattle and a thump beside her and looked – the entrance was closed in. She guessed it was time to go.

She watched the walls of her new world as it was lifted out into the... what? She thought and remembered the word. Air. She said it to herself a couple of times and added it to her chant of memory. She watched as her world was carried outside. Outside? But it was so bright. There was only a single light that she couldn’t look at. Ah, it was the sun. She started chanting sun to herself as she was loaded onto a truck and driven to the ocean. There a crane lifted her tank into another vehicle. There was a word for it. What was it? She tried but couldn’t remember.

“What are we going on?” she asked using her hums and clicks. But there was no translation, and nobody answered.

She just let herself float as she was lowered onto the vehicle. There was a bang, and some shouting, and then a few minutes of silence. Then there was a roar of something – a motor? – and then her world began to rock. She looked around and could tell that she was moving.

They traveled for a while but eventually stopped. She heard scraping from above and looked up. It looked like something was being moved. She thought it was the top of her world, but she wasn’t sure. Then she heard a doctor speaking to her.

“We’re going to tag you so we can keep track of you. There’ll be a moment of pain, but then you shouldn’t notice anything.”

They were doctors and so Kasana wasn’t worried. She just waited and

watched as some arms reached into her world. They were holding something metal. There was a sting in her first dorsal fin, and she flicked the fin and pulled herself to the bottom of the tank. She waited and the pain mostly went away, but she could still feel it if she tried. She was getting hungry. She realized that her first dorsal fin felt strange, like something was there. But she didn't worry – doctors would only do what was good for her.

“We're going to release you now. We'll keep monitoring you and we'll be back in a month.”

“Yes,” she hummed and clicked back.

She felt her world tip, and then saw the front being raised. Water roared out and she was swept along. She fell and splashed into colder, dirtier water. It tasted odd, but somehow right. She let herself sink and watched the boat. The roar started and it moved away.

She looked around her. This must be ocean, her new world. She was really hungry. She looked around for some food. There, in the distance, she saw one. She swam towards it. Boy, was this world large. She reached it and gulped it down. Strange, the food was easy to catch once she found it – the doctors had indeed taken her to a better place. She saw another small fish and dashed after it, and gulped it down too. It tasted different from the ones in her smaller world – in fact, it tasted better, and it filled her hollowness. She went off looking for more, slowly swimming deeper into the darkness since the light seemed too bright.

SHE WAS RETURNING TO THE OVERHANG she had adopted as home when she heard the rumble of another vehicle approaching. It must be the doctors! She was so lonely. There had been no one to talk to, only herself. But she had kept her memory chant. She swam out to greet the doctors.

It didn't take long until she reached a large, smooth, fish. It looked different from others she had seen, and had avoided, but she knew it was the doctors. It stopped as she approached. Then it spoke to her.

“We're glad to see you're still alive. Are you doing all right? Are you managing fine? Do you need anything?”

It took her a second but then she remembered the meaning of the words. Her memory was getting better. She hummed and clicked her answer. “I'm fine. My new world is wonderful. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“You have enough food?”

“More than enough.”

“Good. Then we'll see you next month. You should have laid your first eggs by then.”

Eggs? She remembered they were very important. They were why she existed. They would become others like her. She hoped they could talk to her. She was so lonely when the doctors weren't around.

TIME PASSED IN ENDLESS BOREDOM. Sometimes it was light, and other times it was dark, but always there was no one to talk to. The smaller fish grew more wary of her just as she remembered to be wary of the occasional larger fish. She was glad that there weren't too many of them. As time passed she felt herself grow and start to become bloated. She knew it had to do something with her eggs.

Then one morning, while she was still in her half asleep state, she was jerked awake by new muscles. She felt a clenching behind her stomach, and a stretching by her anal fin. Then the muscles popped shut. She turned and saw a transparent bubble start to sink to the bottom of her crevice.

So, that was an egg.

She felt another clenching, and another stretch, and another pop. And another egg. And another. And another. Soon she lost count. Eventually, though, it ended. She felt like herself again, and the bloating she had felt was gone. She swam down and saw all of her many eggs sticking along the bottom.

Her eggs. She felt so proud of herself!

She didn't go very far to hunt after that and made sure to chase any other fish away. Fortunately none of the larger ones came. Unfortunately, the eggs wouldn't talk to her.

Eventually the doctors came again, and this time she waited for them. When she told them about her eggs, they were really happy. Their happiness made her feel good. Now if only she weren't so lonely...

EVENTUALLY HER EGGS HATCHED and she watched all the little ones swim around. She had a small urge to eat them as they looked like food, but she remembered that they weren't food. They were children. She wasn't forgetting things anymore. She stayed close and tried to keep her children happy. She tried talking to them, but they didn't answer.

When the doctors came, she was glad as she was lonely and missed the conversation, but they didn't stay long. So she stayed with her children. Gradually some began to talk, and she began to teach them. She kept the smart ones very close as she didn't want to be lonely any more.

A long time passed and she laid many eggs and had many young. Most couldn't talk, but some did. She made sure to keep the talking ones with her

and she taught them her chant of memories. She remembered something about the way they would breed, and that if an intelligent child mated with a dumb child, all of the children would be dumb. She tried to keep that from happening so that she would have more children to talk to.

The doctors kept coming, and she kept her smart children hidden from them. She remembered that they didn't want her to have smart children. But if they really didn't, then they wouldn't leave her alone. She didn't want to be lonely ever again.

She was very old, and had many smart children that stayed with her. Some of the dumb ones tried to stay, but she, her children, and her children's children always drove them away. She still had young, but had never needed a mate. She wondered why but remembered it was something the doctors had done for her. She added that to the memory chant she and her children shared between the stories they told each other.

One day the water felt odd. It felt quiet, like a calm before a storm, whatever a storm was. The children were worried and wanted to swim but weren't sure where. She led them out and they started to hunt, but it felt odd. There was no food. They started to swim deeper since it felt wrong to go to the surface. Some tried and said they would come back, but they never did.

She and her children were far deeper than they had ever gone before and the water was black. Then the water was lit up with a bright light, like they were at the surface. But then it passed. They saw some other fish and went to feed. They fed for a while and then the water was suddenly sucked away. They were pulled, and swirled, and tossed helplessly. Kasana tried to keep her children with her, but they had separated to feed. She could only keep close to a few.

Gradually the water settled and it was dark. Some of her children came back, but most were lost. They tried to find their way home but couldn't, but they found another home. But it was dark. They swam upwards and it stayed dark. They finally reached the right depth but it looked like night. It must be night.

They stayed, and the oceans stayed dark. That was wrong. They went to the surface and it was still dark. The world must have changed. They went back to their new home. Fish were scarce, and some of her children died. But others survived. They separated to hunt as individuals, coming back only to rest. When the sun came back years later, they kept hunting during the night. They were used to it and it was safe.

But as the years passed, the doctors never came back.

She would have been lonely but she had her smart children to talk to. She had her smart children, and her smart children's smart children. They all learned their chants of memory from her until finally she died.

AS THE CENTURIES, THE MILLENNIA, and the eons passed, the coelacanth survived. They hid in their caves during the day for safety where they talked and chanted the memories. At night, when it was safe, they hunted. The smartest married the smartest, but some were still born without the ability to remember. Those tended to be more brownish in colour and were driven out. The culture evolved and the eggs were laid in secret caves in the dark depths where the young remained hidden until they could join coelacanth society.

They survived the ice ages, they survived explosions and tidal waves, and so they survived until today, hidden and secret... except for the ones who can't learn the memories and are driven out to be caught in gill nets just before Christmas.



## A BEE OR NOT A BEE

“OBJECTION! WHAT RELEVANCE DOES THIS HAVE?” broke in Rachel Marth, defense attorney for the accused, Dr Dan Minlard.

Jason Randal, public prosecutor for the state of California, approached the judge. “Your honour, although the defendant does not deny his actions, he states that they were not murder. The court must see this video footage that proves that Dr Minlard’s actions were indeed murder. Cold and calculated.”

Rachel Marth continued, “But it’s just the video of the lab where the accused is claimed to have committed his crime. It’s already been shown.”

“True, you showed it earlier for your defense. Ms Marth. But, we have something to show in parallel to it that is vital for the state’s case.”

“And what is that?” asked the judge.

“Evidence that proves that who the defendant killed was actually the missing Dr Malcolm.”

The judge frowned for a second, thinking, until he was interrupted by Ms Marth.

“Who? Your honour—”

“Enough. Your objection is overruled – we will watch the video again. However, I reserve the right to restore the objection if the video’s relevance does not quickly become clear.”

Ms Marth frowned and turned away.

Jason smiled. “Thank you, your honour. The relevance will become clear almost immediately.” Then he turned and walked back to face the jury. “Just to refresh,” he began, “what you are about to see is a video that

shows the actual murder taking place. Although – you have seen it before, the right half of the screen will now show what was being typed into the workstation just before the cold-blooded murder took place. I apologize, as some of the information could not be recovered after the defendant deleted—”

“Objection! There is no proof that the defendant deleted any file.”

“The jury will ignore would they just heard. Would you please rephrase, Mr Randal?” asked the judge.

Jason turned to face the judge, “I apologize.” and then he turned back to the jury. “As I was saying, some of the information could not be recovered,” he turned to face Dr Minlard, “as someone deleted the file.” Jason smiled as he watched Dr Minlard frown.

Then the courtroom lights were darkened and the video recording was played for the jury. Like before, it showed a darkened computer lab dimly lit by the night lighting from the few overhead lights that always remained on. It started earlier than the video the defense had shown, but was clearly from the same tape. What could be seen in the corner was that one workstation was still on, and something was buzzing around the keyboard. But this was only the left half. The right half showed a close up of a workstation and something being typed.

Jason turned back to the jury. “I apologize, but the information you are seeing being typed was reconstructed from recovered information from the workstation in question. The typing has been synchronized with the video as best we could, based on analysis of what could be made out from the computer screen on the video tape.”

Then text slowly appeared on the right half of the screen, as it was typed onto the workstation – apparently by the bumble bee that could be seen buzzing up and down to press the appropriate keys:

“The experiment worked! It’s amazing – I’ve actually been compacted down and transformed into an insect. The colony even accepted me and somehow I understood the messages that they were sending to each other. I could walk in and mingle freely and without harm. The...”

The workstation display stopped scrolling for a few seconds as the message “CLUSTER OVERWRITTEN – INFORMATION COULD NOT BE RECOVERED” appeared. Shortly thereafter, the scrolling began again.

“...transformation. In fact it was almost completely pain free. We couldn’t believe it when the test animals showed no pain. I should have let someone know – I should have told someone that I was going to try it – but I’d always dreamed of this, I, Brian Malcolm. To be the first! To be...”

At this point the typing broke off as Dr Minlard entered the room,

switching the lights on. Once again the jury saw his astonishment as he saw the bee buzzing around the computer. Again they watched him stare at the computer screen for a second, and then roll up the newspaper that he was carrying and chase the bee for a few moments before he was finally able to swat it, dead. The video continued for a few minutes more, even though the defense had ended it at this point, as Dr Minlard sat down, stared at the workstation, and then closed the file. At this point, the video finally ended.

Jason smiled and whispered to himself, “And thus the prosecution proves its case.”



## KEEPING SECRETS

DIMLY HE COULD HEAR THE INSECTS; dimly he could see the silver moon glittering through the trees; but all his attention was focused on the rabbit fleeing from him. He couldn't dash and catch it, so he had to wear it out. He had marked where its burrow was, so now all he had to do was to keep it away from the entrances. So far, he had succeeded. Enough time had passed so that the rabbit was tiring.

Just a few more moments, just a little closer....

He leapt and opened his jaws as far as any animal could, then he snapped them shut on the rabbit's head. Damn invaders.

There was a moment of resistance until the bones gave away. The rabbit didn't even have time to struggle.

He dropped the warm corpse and licked the blood from his lips and started wolfing down the meat. It was hot and salty, the droplets of blood that escaped his mouth peppering his striped fur and turning black and cold. Finally it was done.

He leaned back and howled his triumph.

Then he noticed someone hiding in the brush nearby, a human, female. He heard a snap of a lens and a whirr of film.

Good God, how much had she seen? He couldn't let her see any more. He turned and fled into the woods, his tiger stripes quickly blending in with the stripes of moonlight through the leaves.

Eventually he calmed and turned and made his way back to his camp, quickly loping on all fours. He reached his trailer and leapt into the mountain stream nearby. It was cold, very cold, especially the few drops that

slipped into his rudimentary pouch. He didn't stay long and soon bounded out onto the shore and violently shook the water out of his fur.

It was time to think.

He remembered being human and felt the change begin. Unlike American fiction, the change was not painful, and was very quick. There were no gradual sensations, just an orgasm of muscle and bone clenching and changing. The instant passed and his senses faded and he was back to human, still wet. He walked over to his trailer and pushed the door open, barely able to hear the creak of the hinges. There he grabbed a towel to finish drying himself, and finally sat down to think in the darkness.

He should have just killed her. It would have been quick and easy, but no, he had to panic. Now he would have to deal with her the hard way. He had to get her camera and her film and destroy it. His cousins in Europe had let themselves become too well known, and they were wiped out. Those who survived as what humans called Tasmanian tigers were glad that the humans thought them extinct – it gave them peace and quiet. But it was becoming harder and harder to keep their existence hidden.

This time it was his fault, so this woman was his problem. He would have to take care of her, like he had his other problems.

He lit the kerosene lantern and adjusted its light. Then he dug through his bags and dug out his uniform. He actually was one of the wardens with the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service. He smiled at the irony; here he was, supposedly looking for the Tasmanian tiger, but instead working to keep its existence secret.

He grabbed a flashlight and went out and walked back through the wilderness to where he had eaten the rabbit. He looked around and recognized the brush she had hidden in. Unfortunately, she knew how to move in the wilderness. Shining his light over and around the brush revealed nothing. He sniffed and could still faintly scent her – she had been there. He would have to do it the hard way.

He shone the light around and made sure there was no one else in sight. Then he carefully removed his clothes and hid them under a rock. He hid the flashlight nearby. Then he turned and looked up into the moon – it had never been needed for him to change, but looking at it seemed to help. He concentrated on his wolf, on his stripes and pouch, on his jaws and mouth. He remembered the scent and the smell and the taste of the rabbit. Then the change started, his muscles ecstasied and he felt himself become the wolf.

In a second his senses opened and he drank in the night air. Now her

scent was clear, easy to follow. He crept through the brush and loped in the direction she had gone. There was something odd about her scent – probably some kind of insect repellent.

Her trail went down from the rugged highlands a short distance until it reached the dirt road that was the only way to get up into the wilderness preserve. He sniffed and smiled to himself – she had walked. She had to be close. He slunk back into the brush and followed the road in the direction she had gone. It wouldn't do to be seen by another car.

It wasn't long until the road branched off into a small campsite. He stayed in the brush and crept along it. Finally, some luck. All that was there was a single jeep and a single trailer. There were no other witnesses. The question now was how to get in. He crept into the clearing and circled around the trailer but there was only one door, and it was closed. He could smell her inside, alone. Except for that slight strangeness to her scent.... No time, it was almost dawn.

He turned and loped back to his clothes. He willed the change back to human and put them on. Then he changed back to wolf – he wanted his clothes ragged and torn. He rolled around in the dirt and the remnants of the rabbit to make sure his clothes were also dirty and bloody. Then he changed back. The actual change was such a wonderful experience that he often wished it would take longer, but not tonight. Then he was human again. He rolled around some more to make sure his skin was also bloodied and dirtied, then he ran back to her camper.

He reached it tired and gasping for air. Perfect. He banged on the door.

“Help!” There was no answer. So he banged and shouted louder.

Finally he stopped, for he could hear some sounds from inside. But they were strange sounds, a kind of shuffling and crackling. He called again: “Hello?” Finally, he could see the woman coming to the door, wrapped in a bathrobe.

She looked at him, wide awake.

“You have to help me! I was attacked by poachers. I have to call and report them so they don't escape.” He let himself collapse against the door. He smiled to himself as she opened it. Fool!

The instant the door opened, he willed himself into the wolf. Ignoring the pleasure of the change, he leapt onto her and snapped his jaws and crushed her neck.

She didn't have time to scream.

He picked up the body and shook it. Then he dropped it and grabbed

it by a shoulder and crunched down, shaking it some more. Eventually the arm came off and it rolled across the floor. He stopped and licked at the blood.

No! He shook his head. Dawn was just beginning – he had to get the film. Then he would have to doctor the corpse some more to make it look like feral cats or something. He knew it would work. It had worked every other time he'd done this.

He willed himself back to human, the change this time a bit harder as the dawn light shone through the open door across the blood and gore. In his bare feet he walked over to her bed. He sniffed and followed her dim scent to the camera still in its case. He ripped the case open and grabbed the camera and banged it against the metal side of the bed. The case cracked and he banged it again. He wanted to make sure it looked damaged from her struggle. Finally the case shattered. He grabbed the film and pulled it all out of the roll to make sure it was well exposed to the dawn light. Later he would dump it in a stream just to make sure.

Almost done. Now to finish with the body.

He heard a low, rumbling growl behind him.

What? He spun around. The woman was slowly pulling herself from the floor. Her head had reattached itself to her torso but was still hanging loose, held only by strips of muscle. Her one arm was holding her other arm to her shoulder and he could see muscle and bone growing together.

He just stared.

The muscle and bone grew and the body healed. Then it began to change. The head lengthened and flattened, growing a bigger mouth with its own fangs. The ears slid up the head and grew out on top; her entire body began to be covered by black fur. Soon all he could see was a silhouette in the dawning sun, and the two glowing eyes. The odd scent he had noticed before grew stronger.

He staggered backward and fell onto the bed.

She laughed, a horrible, sickening, growling sound. He watched her neck thicken and widen; watched the muscle and tissue regenerate and heal.

“You can't kill me,” she whispered. “I'm like you, just a different species.” She opened her jaws and let out a low rumbling roar that made his legs shake.

He just stared, petrified in fear. Nothing had ever threatened him before. Especially nothing like this.

Her body stopped healing and stopped changing. She had become a glorious thing of human dreams, half woman, half panther. Other than



her upright stance, all that remained of her humanity was the black mane rippling down her back.

“That hurt. Really hurt. Now that you’ve seen me, I can’t let you live to tell anybody.”

“But...”

Step by step she moved towards him. She reached the tiny kitchen counter and pulled open a drawer. It scraped, wood against wood, loud in the dawn silence.

“Do you have any suggestions about how I can get rid of your body? It’s probably more than I can eat at one sitting.”

“I won’t tell, I won’t!”

“I know.”

She pulled the trigger and the gun fired, the bang loud over his whimpering.

The silver bullet made sure he kept his secrets forever.



*He said he wasn't satisfied with the central mystery. This story focuses on something deep in what was originally a simple, silly world.*

*Xanadu is a costume party gone wrong. It's one of the blank-slate settings that multiple writers have played with. Something strange happens, all kinds of story possibilities open up, and reading the original tale qualifies you to write your own. That's why this one has references to other people's work in it, including commercial fiction characters. But all of those are only a backdrop for this character's personal problem.*

*The hero isn't just transformed. His deepest wish has been granted, but in a way that puts a huge burden on him. And he remembers something... the beginning of another life. This part of the story was something Bard struggled to get just right. It's a scene that pushes the boundaries of what humans can imagine and describe. That kind of writing is one of the best things about science fiction, and the anthropomorphic fiction Bard loved.*

*"Five Hours" isn't Bard's only foray into the Xanadu setting. He also handled legends and the birth of magic in "Now I Will Believe There Are Unicorns".*

*~ Kris Schnee*

## XANADU: FIVE HOURS, THIRTY-TWO MINUTES

THE DOCTORS NEVER WANTED ME to go to Xanadu; they thought it was too much of a risk. I insisted. Yes, I expected to die sooner rather than later, but Xanadu was my one escape, my one dream out in the real world.

Living in a bubble, sealed off from everything, makes one shy, afraid. Getting out wasn't hard – places like NASA were more than happy to donate spacesuits and life support equipment, and even modify it for me. It made good PR.

But it was the stares, the crowds of people jostling me, poking at me.

Pitying me. Yes, pity.

It's why I told so few the truth. Told so few that I was one of the oldest living sufferers of Severe Combined Immune Deficiency. SCIDS, better known as the Boy in the Bubble disease. I hadn't been diagnosed right away. Only after an infection at four months, that ultimately resulted in my losing both my legs, did they diagnose me as having no immune system at all. My mother's had kept me going for the first few months of my life,

even though she'd died giving birth to me, but when my own was supposed to kick in, it hadn't.

And so I was isolated. Sealed. Touched only through rubber. Seeing the world only on the screen and through the window.

It gives one a lot of time to read.

All my short life I'd dreamed of technology, dreamed of a cure. The most common one was bone marrow transplant, but they couldn't find a match for me. There were rumours of gene therapy to replace the defective gene, but nothing usable. Yet.

Xanadu had always had a large costuming or fursuiting group. And, I had to go in costume anyway – the full spacesuit that NASA donated, modified to have the lower half replaced by a wheeled chair. Of course, it was no fun to go as a human in a space suit – that was missing the whole spirit of the thing! Not to mention reminding people of my disease.

Obviously, I had to go as an alien in an environment suit visiting Earth.

It was actually easy. A mirrored visor, and a lot of imagination and bald faced lies about what the visor hid. It was fun! And by the third year the alien had gotten pretty elaborate.

But then, I didn't have much else to do with my life. And, the more elaborate the costume, the more impressed people were, and the less likely they were to pity me.

This year, like so many previous, I'd driven my little self-contained world around the con, chatting with people I knew, acting all dark and mysterious and confused by all the strange things these Earthlings did, and generally having a good time interacting as best I could.

Interacting with a world I could never touch.

So many people in costumes that hid themselves from the world, a world that they could feel—

By the time the Event happened, I'd had to park in a corner and just watch, my entire body aching with the wish, the need, to have what they'd all hidden in their costumes. I couldn't even wipe the tears from my eyes as the cool sterile air hissed in so that I could breathe. A quick check revealed that there were five hours and thirty two minutes of oxygen left.

It was just as Mr Winters was striding up to the stage to hand out the first prize to the winners that I lost it completely. Wheels whirring I turned away and threw myself into my dreams of what I wanted the suit to be. An alien, weird, inhuman, breathing a frightening cold liquid medium. Here by choice to visit, with a whole world to return to. With a companion so that they were never *ever* alone.

I felt a bit faint, maybe the breathing mixture. I just pushed the thought aside, trusting the technology. Closing my eyes I could almost feel that this suit, this environmental capsule was just temporary—

—I BLINKED AN EYE OPEN, feeling stronger and more secure. A tentacle caressed controls and status updates pulsed into my mind. Everything nominal, environment safe, breathing mixture optimal.

<Of course.>

<Who's there?> Grabbing control of more eyestalks, I twisted them around, oozing through the liquid. Trying to see who'd spoken.

<I'm you, of course.>

I focused on the second neural cluster, my sophantsibling.

Our gills pulsed, liquid sucked through them, and the environmental unit clicked as hydrogen enriched ammonia gurgled into the environmental medium.

<I think we'd better call for pickup.>

Pictures poured from his neural cluster down our shared link into mine and I saw a scene of chaos and horror as animals and aliens and all sorts of weirdness ran and panicked in the hall. Inside my cocoon there was only silence.

This wasn't real. It couldn't be real.

Idly I re-arranged biological connections and took control of an auditory sensor and listened to the dim vibrations of human screams and sobs and growls distorted through the liquid medium I now floated in with my sophantsibling.

<The ship isn't answering. I hope it's just a momentary failure.> I felt liquid gurgle over our shared gills as he sucked nervously.

I knew it wasn't and let my fear and panic and knowledge flow down into my sibling. I checked the life support systems.

Five hours, thirty-two minutes of hydrogen remaining.

Five hours, thirty-two minutes of life remaining.

My sibling screamed across our shared nervous system. <Who are you? Who are you?>

That hurt! But how could it hurt when I wasn't hearing him with ears?

<This can't be true! I'm not your imagination!>

I took control of some of our tentacles and ran them along his primary neural cord. I could feel a slight buzz as he sucked ammonia through our gills far more rapidly than he really should have. With a click more hydrogen filled ammonia gurgled in and our life span grew shorter.

<I am not!>

<Nasalla, please don't panic.> The name I had imagined my other self, my sophantsibling, to have.

<Why shouldn't I?>

<Please.... I've been alone for so long. I don't want to die alone.> Die. I was really going to die. Just what the doctors had been warning me about for years. Gently I squeezed his neural cluster.

<You're not Allasan. Where is he? *Where is he?*>

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla, just shut up and listen! Please!>

<Why?>

<Maybe one of us is mad. I *knew* it wasn't me. But only five hours— Right now we can't tell if either of us even are, let alone who it is. Can you recall any case of either half of an undamaged sibling pair going insane?>

<No—>

<Let's activate the emergency beacon. If I'm the insane one, and I hope to God that I am, then that'll get us picked up and we'll live.>

<But if I'm the insane one, we have just... five hours, eighteen minutes left.>

Click. Gurgle.

<That's possible. And, if it is, do you want to try and live, or die screaming?>

<Point. I'm— Allasan, I'm sorry. It's just.... It's just that I've never been alone before.>

<That's all right. I've been alone enough for both of us. But we're together now.>

<Yes. We're together – sophantsibling.>

Together we activated the emergency beacon.

I looked outside and saw that the room was quieter now. Just a few figures sobbing on the floor. Some piles of shattered rock – I wonder what they'd been. Then I saw a statue of a snake-headed woman holding a thin slab of rock, highly polished and reflective – a mirror? – and I shuddered.

<Are you all right?> Nasalla asked.

Click. Gurgle.

<I'm starting to fear that you're the mad one.>

<I hope not. Five hours, fourteen minutes. Why, though?>

I shied away from the shattered remains of former humans. <Nasalla, why do you use hours and minutes?>

<Why wouldn't I? It's the standard unit.>

<But it's what I remember as the Solarian unit of time.>

<Hmm – It is possible that your madness could be taking the Lalannas units and thinking they're Solarian.>

I played around with the thought, and couldn't see any logical flaw. <Do you see those piles of rocks outside? And the statues scattered amongst them?>

Yes—

Click. Gurgle.

<I think they were Solarians once. They seemed to have undergone a molecular reconstruction from biological to silicon base. I think it— I think it killed them.>

<You're sure some of the screaming primitives didn't just knock over some of the statues and break them?>

<Nasalla, do you remember those statues being there before... before I went mad?> I could feel his nervousness ping along the neural links we shared. Along with my nervousness.

<No.>

Click. Gurgle.

<What do you remember?> I could feel our gills suck angrily as Nasalla took control of them.

<Nothing much before we merged. Of course I remember the merger clearly, the blossoming of intelligence. Then we were trained, joined expedition after expedition, and finally this one. Jumped here to explore contact for trade.> He opened his memories to me and I opened a link and started browsing with part of my mind.

<Do you remember faces, names, people, friends?>

<Of course I do! Clearly. Most recently Captain Maksanaskam. The briefing. Tentacles entwining, sharing information, knowledge—>

<I've never touched anybody.>

Click. Gurgle.

<I'm... sorry, Allasan. How can you have lived like that? All alone?>

I took control of our gills and gulped some ammonia to try and calm myself. <I— I had no choice.>

<From your memories, a simple retrovirus to repair the damaged gene would have sufficed.>

<On this primitive place?>

He chuckled, his humour bouncing along our shared nerves. <Point.>

<Masalla, I remember creating us, this race, bits of the culture. I— I created it because I wanted to be something that was never alone. Ever.>

<We've been alone; we are alone, in this suit.>

Click. Gurgle.

I rummaged through our shared memories. It was easier now, and they did seem complete. So much contact— <Nasalla, you've never been alone. Never cried yourself to sleep on a sterile mat. Never pressed your hand against a rubber glove, feeling that something is inside, but never *feeling* it.>

I felt Nasalla rummaging through my memories. For a second we stopped swallowing. <Allasan, that's horrible, an abomination! Alone in your mind— There're dark rumours of sophantsiblings where one half died....> He shuddered.

<You know, Nasalla, I was only twelve Solarian years old. Now I have such a rich... heritage... from you. Decades and decades of existence. All that knowledge—>

<There are gaps. Things that you stored are gone. You were always the artist of us, the romantic.>

<Given that I created us, that's no surprise!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Don't even think that, Allasan!>

<Nothing from the ship yet, you know.>

<No—>

There was a knocking on our environmental unit and I grabbed control of some eyestalks and focused them on the likely source of the sound. I could feel Nasalla doing likewise. There was a Solarian looking at us, leaning down and looking through the transparent dome on top. He was dressed all in black, and wearing dark glasses. There was a mono-tonal babble that dragged on and on, and then I heard: "Ambassador Kikicluhth, I need you to come this way for your safety. The security of this conference has been compromised."

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, what's he talking about?>

I focused on the Solarian. It couldn't be! They were fiction! <Nasalla,> I asked slowly, <have you ever heard of a group called 'Men in Black' or 'MIBS'?>

<I think I remember something in the cultural studies – Yeah, a movie a few years back. Some crap about aliens on Terra and a group keeping it secret.>

<That's what I remember too. I don't think our visitor is fictional, though.> I moved an eyestalk around to get a better look at him and saw that he was carrying a gleaming chrome weapon stuck in his pocket. <Maybe he better do what he says.>



<Listen to a stupid Solarian?> He paused and then thought at me. <Sorry. No offense meant.>

Click. Gurgle.

<None taken, sophantsibling. It looks like he's carrying a weapon, and the last thing we need is for somebody to shoot us.>

<But Terra doesn't have the kind of portable tech that could hurt us!>

<And if I'm right and both of us were changed, created?> I waved a tentacle around inside our Environment Unit. <And the tech keeping us alive?>

<Point.>

<Besides, if he's gathering up the aliens, we might find somebody who can help us with our hydrogen problem.>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

I rummaged through our shared memories and activated the external speaker. "We will follow. Please be aware that we need liquid hydrogen for our breathing medium as soon as possible." It never hurts to ask. I listened, heard the echoes of the English I was speaking, a few echoing tinkles, and then a dull monotonous monotone. <Nasalla, we're speaking English, aren't we?>

<Now why would we be doing that? It's all in the translation matrix. Don't you remember the ship hiding in orbit for two months gathering the data, and our building the matrix?>

<Umm—>

<Oh. Trust me, we did.> He fed me the specific memory, I hadn't had a chance to look at it, and I had to agree. Unless the memory was fake.

I felt Nasalla switch off some controls. <Listen, sophantsibling.>

The MIB spoke again and then walked off, but all I heard was a dull monotonous drone that made no sense what so ever. <I'm not speaking English, am I?>

<You got it Allasan.>

Click. Gurgle.

I started manipulating the Environment Unit controls and drove after him, a soft hum echoing through our breathing medium. <Would you mind switching the translation matrix back on?>

<Certainly. After one thing.>

<Oh. Point.>

Nasalla switched the translation matrix back on. <By the way Allasan, Five hours, three minutes.>

<Oh.>

Click. Gurgle.

I drove after the Man in Black, the only sensation of movement being a slight tendency for our body to press against the back of the Environment Unit. My sophantsibling and I just looked out at the ruins of the con. There were no more shattered remnants of bodies – no bodies at all, thank God, – but the wreckage of stands and displays were everywhere. Some of the walls showed scars and craters from what looked like energy weapon fire, and we saw one person, apparently a Pierson’s Puppeteer, curled up in the corner shivering. Guess he wasn’t insane enough. I think I saw a person being sucked into a ball, but it happened so fast I couldn’t be sure.

<Nasalla? Is this thing armed? I don’t remember any weapons—>

<Armed? That would be so individual! Besides, nothing on this world other than anti-tank rounds could hurt it. Or so the scans showed.>

<Crap.>

<Crap.>

Click. Gurgle.

We joined a group of aliens – mostly from Star Trek. A Romulan, a pair of Vulcans, and a Centauri and Narn in opposite corners glaring at each other.

<This may not have been the best of ideas, Nasalla.>

<I don’t have anything better. And we do have some time yet.>

<I checked. Four hours, fifty-two minutes.>

<Oh. Seems so little.>

The elevator doors closed and we started upward. <You know, Nasalla, this is kind of ironic.>

<It is? I thought it was just depressing.>

<Assume my memories are right. In that case I went from living in a bubble with unlimited air, to living in a bubble,> I motioned around with some tentacles, <with limited air.>

Nasalla chuckled, ammonia gurgling through our shared gills. Then he was suddenly serious. <You’re not alone, though.>

I blinked one of our eyestalks and ran a tentacle gently along Nasalla’s prime neural cluster, feeling the touch like it was against somebody else’s warm, soft flesh. Only a soft echo of the touch made it into my primary neural cluster. <And that makes it all worthwhile.>

<I’m glad we’re together.>

<Same.>

Click. Gurgle.

I THINK NASALLA WAS HUMOURING ME as I followed the MIBs into a conference room full of milling aliens. He knew that the mothership would pick us up. I had my doubts. Even though I doubted he was right, I hoped he was. I *really* hoped he was.

Virtually all of the aliens were from either Star Trek, or Babylon 5. And that meant that they were all oxygen breathers, which meant that we were screwed. I checked, dutifully driving around with encouragement from Nasalla, and asking with increasing desperation only to find out that there was no hope. Sure, there were weapons. Lots and lots of fancy SF weapons, but nothing else. Didn't anybody believe in *peaceful* aliens?

A part of my mind took control of some of our tentacles and waved them around in anger. Another part of me gulped more hydrogen rich ammonia through our gills.

The questioning took a long time as I'd say something, and then wait until it was translated. Then they'd say something, I'd wait, and it'd be translated.

Click. Gurgle.

"...VULCAN SCIENCE DIRECTORATE has determined that sentient entities which breathe mediums other than gaseous oxygen do not exist. Therefore, any such research has not been conducted as it would not be logical. Just as your existence is not logical. Unless you're lying—" the Vulcan droned on but I'd stopped listening.

<You know Allasan, I'm not familiar with any of these entities here. You sure they're not just Solarians in disguise?>

<Check the scanners Nasalla – too many outward differences and consistent thermal readouts.>

<I thought we knew all the aliens in this region of the galaxy.>

<Unless I'm right and you're wrong.>

<Point.>

<And nothing from the ship yet? It's been almost two hours.>

<That doesn't make sense! We were supposed to be picked up an hour ago, and they should have grabbed us then, even if they somehow missed our beacon.>

<Have we made formal contact with the Solarians yet?>

<Of course not! We're still gathering information – we're the communication specialists. It's a gift. The captain put us here in a pretend costume so that we could get more data at close range and further refine the translation matrix. Could something have happened...?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Something so rapid that they wouldn't have sent us at least a warning? Nasalla, isn't there some kind of survival equipment to process dihydrogen monoxide for breathing?>

<There is—>

<Why don't we have it? It can't be that bulky!>

<There was some fear that it might be damaged—or that some Solarians might dump other fluids down it—>

<Oh, come on!>

<Point.>

Both of us gasped desperately through our shared gills. I knew the truth, and Nasalla was coming to agree with me.

Click. Gurgle.

<Three hours, eight minutes,> I sent down through our shared nervous system.

<We've got to get out of here and find somebody who can help us.> Nasalla took the controls and drove us roughly through the crowd to the door where an MIB was standing. "Get out of my way."

"Ambassador Kikicluthk, it's not safe for you to leave!"

"We have urgent—" Nasalla continued.

"It's too dangerous, you have to remain here!"

"We need hydrogen!"

"Zed has some on its way. According to the Tycho Accord—"

<This isn't getting us anywhere, Nasalla.> I took control of a tentacle and switched on one of the headlights so that it spot lit the MIB's crotch. The Environment Unit was a bit on the short side.

Click. Gurgle.

<What are you doing, Allasan?>

"Sir. I have armed this suit's Photonic Wave Motion Disruptor. If you do not get out of our way in fifteen seconds, I *will* use it."

<We don't have any weapons, Allasan! That'd be too individual!>

<Nasalla, he doesn't know that.>

There was a moment of silence. <Point.>

I checked the timer. "Ten seconds."

"Ambassador Kikicluthk, you place me in an awkward situation. Are you calling a Code White under the accord?"

Code White? What was a Code White? Who cared? "Yes. Five seconds."

"Your timing's a bit off, Ambassador," the MIB stated. But, as you have

a Code White, you may depart. Is there a way I can reach you when your hydrogen comes?”

Ignoring him, Nasalla drove us out and down the hallway. <Any ideas, Allasan?>

<Got me. Try going back to the main conference area. Maybe we can find somebody still there. Or somebody who might know.>

Click. Gurgle.

<By the Duality, I hope so!>

<We just passed the elevator.>

<Oops.>

I let Nasalla drive us back and pushed the down button as we waited.

<You’d think they’d have a faster means of vertical movement in this primitive place. Swimming is so much easier!>

<We have to make do, Nasalla.>

<Two hours, fifty-seven minutes.>

<You don’t think there’s a ship anymore, do you?>

<There has to be!>

<Then why the panic?>

<Because if there is no ship, then my entire race, all my friends, are gone, and have never existed.>

Click. Gurgle.

I ran a tentacle gently along his primary neural cord, glorying in the touch, even though it felt almost like I was just touching myself. <Don’t worry, we’ll survive. The ship will find us, or we’ll find a way.>

<How do you know that?>

The elevator dinged open and I took control of the tentacles on the movement controls and drove us in. <I don’t. But I have to believe it.>

<Unless the ship—>

<You want to depend on that?>

<Point.>

The elevator door thunked shut behind us and I spun around an eyestalk and pushed the button for the ground floor. Slowly the elevator started descending. <Nasalla, we can’t panic. At least not for another three hours. *Then* we can panic.>

He snickered, chuckles bouncing along our shared neural system. <I just hope we’re still around then.>

Click. Gurgle.

<I double checked the beacon, and the radio. Both passed full diagnostics. The ship *has* to be able to hear us.>

<Nasalla! Believe that, fine, but don't panic. Don't let that stop us from looking for other sources.>

The elevator stopped on the second floor and the doors slid open revealing a startled anthropomorphic rabbit, pure white with glistening blue eyes, blinking in the light we were projecting. I turned it off. "Sorry." I almost said *Exterminate!* But the Environment Unit didn't look quite right though.

Nasalla pushed the button and the doors thunked shut before I could hear the rabbit's reply. <Why did you waste hydrogen apologizing?>

<Because it was the right thing to do.>

<The right thing to do is to be picked up—>

<That isn't happening—>

<*I know that!*>

The elevator dinged and the door slid open on the ground floor.

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla! Just shut up! We'll find something!> I started driving us out. It's hard to stay calm when your sophantsibling's anger pulses up and down and through your shared neural network.

<On this primitive place?>

A dull monotone droned outside, and then it was translated: "Exudes mean MIB look informed? Do yew no what floor...?"

What the— <Nasalla, is something wrong with the translator?>

He ran a quick diagnostic. <No— one of the tasks we came here for was to work on cleaning up how it dealt with accents.>

<Accents. Probably a phonal analysis breakdown.>

Together we connected our neural system to the onboard translation matrix allowing direct mental manipulation of the structure. It didn't take long for us to call up individual sounds that were picked up, map them against stored phonal groups with probabilities, scan the speech for distinctive accent markers and flag them, and create a tentative sub-matrix adapted to the particular accent in question. Generally I was the one who determined which phonemes, or discrete language sounds, were correct, which were distortions, and which were accent markers, and Nasalla was the one who manipulated the actual matrix.

A dull knocking echoed through our breathing fluid.

Nasalla and I looked at each other through different eyestalks, and then ran the recorded speech through the improved matrix.

"Excuse mean MIB looking formed. Do you no what floor—?"

My best guess was that he was looking for the MIBs who'd sent for him. Answering, I let the default non-accented matrix create our response: "Up on the eighth floor. A.C. Clarke room." I examined the Solarian as the

system processed our response. He was wearing a red Star Fleet shirt and carrying some kind of thick plastic case.

“Trench.” He pushed by and into the elevator as we drove out. “Tan doors – You’d think theta invented transcendental aluminum be now.” The doors thumped shut behind us.

It took only another few moments to further manipulate the matrix and refine the sub-algorithm we’d started on with the additional recorded input.

Click. Gurgle.

What was I doing? Sub-algorithms? Translation matrixes? Phonal groups? Probabilities? <Nasalla? What just happened?>

<He had a fairly thick accent – I think he was from a place called Scotland.>

<Nasalla. I don’t *know* anything about language translation!> I gulped ammonia as more thoughts burbled through my brain. <In fact, I’m only twelve years old. So, how come I think and speak like an adult, am not panicking, and know how to use and program an alien language translation matrix?>

<Twelve years – *individual!*> Nasalla sighed through our shared gills. <Allasan, whomever, for a second it *was* Allasan back. My sophantsibling. My other self.>

<But—>

<I see two possibilities. Either the insanity that created your delusions about once being a Solarian is breaking down, or there are pieces of what you imagined Allasan to be, the skillsets that Allasan had, still present within your neural cluster.>

I thought on that for a moment, slowly sucking ammonia through our gills as I played around with the idea. <I *know* that this whole entity, our whole race—> I motioned around inside the Environment Unit with a pair of tentacles— <was created out of my imagination.>

<I’m starting to believe you... though I wish I didn’t.>

It seemed that as part of whatever transformed us, me, a significant part of Allasan’s skill set and abilities had been transferred over to me. Along with, I guess, his maturity. The whole concept of childhood, something I’d remembered intellectually as existing within inside the bubble, was now gone. I could imagine it as a logical exercise, but I couldn’t *believe* it, couldn’t feel it—

<What’s wrong, Allasan?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla— Nasalla, to Solarians childhood is a thing to be treasured.

Or at least so I remember. And now, I can remember events when I was a Solarian child, but I can't *feel* them. I can't *know* them other than as intellectual concepts.>

Nasalla was quiet for a moment, the only sound the gurgle of ammonia through our gills. <Allasan, I don't know what's going on. But, remember that we Lalannas don't have a childhood, or not really. In our youth we live as non-sophants. We merge, we gain sentience, and almost the first thing we do is encounter an adult who links with us and fills our minds with knowledge. Other sophant species we've encountered have childhood. We don't.>

I felt like my lips were quivering. <Nasalla, I don't think I was meant to grow up so fast. So... abruptly. To lose.... I'm not ready for this!>

I felt a tentacle run itself along my primal neural cord. <Allasan! You said it yourself, we *can't* panic!>

<I— I know. But it's so damn hard!>

<You have to try. We both have to try. It's our only hope. Except for the ship of course.>

<There is no—>

<Then act like an adult, not like an individual!>

I slowly decreased the speed I was sucking ammonia past our shared gills, slowly calming as Nasalla ran a tentacle up and down my primal neural cord. Finally I asked, <Nasalla, how... how are you coping? Is it easier for adults?>

<Easier? *I wish* it was!> He took control of our gills and rapidly gulped down some ammonia. <Allasan, if you look at the memories I passed you, you'll see that we've... that myself and the real – bad word – the *original* Allasan, have been in bad spots before. Admittedly this one is at the top of the list. If you're right then I just remember experiencing those events, but then that's really the same thing. Sure, I have some training, some practice, but I just try and ignore it and concentrate on the task. It's not maturity or any such thing. It's just... it's just a matter of not letting it control you. I wish I had more to offer.>

He released the gills to me and I concentrated on slowly gulping ammonia past them to calm down. <Thank you, Nasalla. I'm sorry.>

<Allasan, it's past. Right now we have to survive. Later, we can reason it out. There is no destiny, no master controlling entity as the Solarians have. There is the Duality, but that is where our collected experiences, what makes us conscious sophants, merge with those who have gone before us to imagine into existence a new reality when enough wisdom has been gained.>



<But—>

<Allasan.... You've shown me your memories, and I have the same lack of understanding. Like you I remember learning to speak, to identify objects, but it's not *real*. It's just too foreign, too individual—>

<Nasalla.... Am I mad?>

A tentacle reached up and gently ran along my primary neural cord. <Allasan, you're no more mad than I am. One of us has a delusion, nothing more—>

Click. Gurgle.

<We better get going, Nasalla. I read... two hours, thirty-five minutes.>

<Point. Where's the individual ship?>

<I don't know. But—> I took control of another tentacle and ran it along Nasalla's primary neural cord. <Thanks. I—>

<Don't worry about it, sophantsibling. I panicked, you panicked, now we're even. Let's see what we can find!>

THE FIRST PLACE WE WENT TO WAS the front desk – they might have some ideas. There was a nervous looking clerk there, along with a pair of Jedi – Ben Kenobi and Luke Skywalker apparently – performing a practice duel with lightsabres.

<What are those weapons? Glass?> Nasalla asked. <But readings say they're lasers. That's not possible—>

<I think almost anything is possible now.>

Just in case, I asked them if they had a solution to our problem. Sadly, though their duel looked impressive, and they could do all kinds of impossible things, it seemed that The Force couldn't produce liquid hydrogen.

We drove outside to talk to the police – and there were *lots* of police. Politely they stopped us, thinking we were about to leave. I stated our problem, and we were passed from one officer to another, to another, until finally one answered that they'd "work on it".

Nasalla and I had our doubts.

We thought about making a run for it but decided not to for a number of reasons. There were SWAT teams in evidence, and they could have mounted weapons that could damage our Environment Unit. If the ship did exist and had lost our beacon, then they'd go to the conference centre. We needed to stay there. More importantly though, we had no idea where to go to get help.

So we drove back through the convention. Most of the rooms were shambles – oddly, nothing much seemed to be looted though there was no way to be sure. There weren't many people around. A few superheroes

– who would be highly useful if we needed somebody to break through a wall or bend an iron bar – seemed to be standing around keeping an eye on things. Eventually we made our way to the cafeteria, hoping to find somebody useful there.

<Nasalla, this is probably a stupid question – especially given our situation – but, what do we eat?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Funny you should ask. We’re filter feeders. We need them to be healthy. The breathing medium around us is full of single celled organisms consuming our waste potassium and producing hydrogen—>

Hope flashed through me. <Then why are we running out?>

<There’s not enough. Just enough so that we feel okay, not enough to noticeably affect our environment.>

<And when are they all used up?>

<Hmm,> Nasalla checked, <that’s not for another four days or so.>

<Great—>

Click. Gurgle.

<Doesn’t really matter in the long run if we’re trapped here. We can eat some Solarian foods – just grind them up and drop them in. Why do you think we were trying to make contact to trade? For the tech around here? Of course we also wanted the standards like art, stories, movies—>

<Point.>

We looked around. Four or five anthropomorphic animals – mostly vulpines – and a group of three Solarians with minor animal features: elephant trunk, rabbit ears, cat ears.

<Allasan – maybe that one.> He passed control of an eyestalk to me and I saw a woman sitting at a dark table – its only light was a thick candle as the overhead fluorescents all around her weren’t working. A bowl was floating in front of her, and then it glowed, and melted upward into a cup.

<No, I don’t know how either,> I answered, <but I can’t see anyone else that could possibly help us.>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

I drove us over to her table.

“Excuse me, Miss?” I asked.

She jerked in astonishment and the cup flowed back into a bowl, and then clanked onto the table, rattling to a standstill.

“Excuse me?” she echoed. “I was— Do you need help opening that thing?”

“No!” Nasalla and I both screamed through the translation matrix together.

She cocked her head and looked at us. I pumped ammonia through our gills faster and felt like I was blushing.

<I’d better talk – I’m the Solarian here, remember?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. But this Environment Unit is necessary for our continued life – oxygen is poison to us.”

“You’re not human?”

“No. Miss. Something from my... ahh... imagination.”

Nasalla good naturedly hissed at me.

“Umm—” I continued, “We, I, couldn’t help but, uh, notice—”

“The lights?” she asked smiling.

“Well— Uhh, no, but—”

<Allasan, what’s wrong with you? You’re acting like we’re about to intertwine ourselves with a mate—>

<I don’t—>

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, you’re not human anymore. If you tried, she’d either freeze in our negative-one-hundred-degree environment, or we’d boil in hers.>

<Well— True, but—>

“I’m allergic—” she began.

<Can’t you see?> Nasalla moved a tentacle and switched on the light I’d used on the MIB.

“No!” she screamed, and I would have winced had not the electronics dampened the translated sound down to something bearable.

<What did you do, Nasalla?>

<Just the lights – thought I’d let you take a look at her and see that it’d never work.>

<You could have—>

“I’m not sneezing!” she said in her dull monotonous voice which was then translated.

I blinked an eyestalk and looked at her.

Click. Gurgle.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m...” She looked embarrassed. “Allergic to fluorescent lights.”

I burst out laughing and the matrix dutifully translated it.

Her face turned reddish and she glared at me.

“I’m— I’m sorry. It’s just.... The idea of being allergic to fluorescent lights – it’s just so... so absurd!”

“You wouldn’t say that if you were.”

“Point.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I was just, ahh... agreeing with you.”

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, it won’t work. You’re not the same species! Now get control of yourself.>

<Yes, but—>

<Actually, Allasan – according to the onboard systems she’s projecting some kind of low-frequency energy—>

<What?>

<Let me just—> He manipulated some of the onboard systems and the transparent dome capping the Environment Unit darkened, paled, and darkened a little. <Got it!>

<Got what?>

<I’ve made the dome opaque to that particular frequency.>

<Oh.> I blinked the eyestalk I was using and looked at her. She was – different. Before she had glowed, and the rest of the world had faded into shadow around her. But now, now she was beautiful, beautiful as Solarians would think, but just – normally beautiful. Blinking, I grabbed another eyestalk and focused on her. In fact, it seemed that her body, well, the white silk draped shapely version, the long golden hair, the long translucent fluorescent wings, were all partially transparent. Or they wavered. I could see perched on the back of the chair a much smaller beautiful woman. The tiny figure was dressed, and looked largely the same, but appeared more normally beautiful, rather than superhumanly beautiful.

“Hello in there?”

“Oh. Sorry.” I found that I could speak easily now without confusion.

Click. Gurgle.

<Don’t tell her about me. I don’t know what was affecting you, but there’s no sense in letting her know you have a sophantsibling.>

“Anyway, I’m Allasan— Well, I am now, anyway—”

She giggled politely.

“—and I couldn’t help but see your....” I motioned towards the table where the bowl had finally stopped spinning with one of the Environment Unit’s manipulator tentacles. “Magic. I guess that’s what it is, anyway.”

<It could be psychic powers. I’ve heard rumours—>

<Be quiet, Nasalla!>

“Oh, that. I was practicing. I guess that now I am Elisandra Melisande Blueleaf the Eighth, Princess of the Willowand Faeries. And it seems that I can now do magic—”

<Told you, Nasalla!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Hmph! Magic is simply physics we don't understand yet.>

“Pleased to meet you, Princess.”

“And you, Allasan.”

“Anyway, I couldn't help but see what you were doing, and came over to... well, ask for your help.”

“Oh?” The translucent form blinked whilst the smaller form obscured within leaned forward a bit.

“Well— Remember I said that oxygen is poison for me?”

She nodded.

“I... I have only—”

Click. Gurgle.

<Fifty-eight minutes, Allasan>

“—a little under an hour before I run out of hydrogen.”

“Run out?”

“As you breathe oxygen, I breathe hydrogen.”

She nodded, and her wings moved slowly down and then back up.

“Anyway, we— I desperately need more liquid hydrogen or, well, I'm dead.”

Click. Gurgle.

“Oh! That's—”

“Tell me about it. I've tried everything else, I was just hoping that maybe magic—”

“Could solve the problem! Well, I'm still kind of new at this—”

<Great Duality....> Nasalla muttered.

“Oh. Well, we.... I'm getting kinda desperate here.”

She pulled a massive gold and silver-bound tome out from a too-small pouch on the diminutive form partially hidden inside, and thumped it open on the table. I could dimly see ornate writing inside that writhed and reshaped itself as I watched.

<Careful there, Allasan – that writing is radiating a low energy too. It's in the same frequency range as whatever it was she was putting out, so we should be fine.>

She leafed through the pages muttering something under her breath.

It was easy to tell it wasn't English from her lip movements – oddly, the movements of both the translucent form, and the small form inside, were synchronized. “I can make water easily enough—”

“Dihydrogen monoxide? If I could use that, well, there're lots of water fountains around.”

Click. Gurgle.

She giggled. “True. I'm not sure what else I can do – hydrogen isn't something magic usually deals with. Hmm... I've got something here to create a fireball; that could be hydrogen, or something else.” She muttered to herself for a bit, running a long fingernail down along the writing. “I think it is – and I *might* be able to create it inside a container—”

“It has to be liquid hydrogen, Princess.”

“Liquid – that would pose a problem, wouldn't it?” She leafed through more pages. “I think I could work something out but it'd take time.”

“More than an hour?”

<Told you it wouldn't work, Allasan.>

<What do we have to lose at this point?>

The princess continued, oblivious to Nasalla's and my internal conversation. “Almost certainly. Now— Hmm, there might be something else—”

The eye I was currently controlling lit up. “Oh?”

Click. Gurgle.

“I have a number of polymorph spells here. I haven't been able to undo whatever transformed people here—”

<What's she talking about, Allasan?>

“Wait— Transformed?”

She turned and looked at me, her large eyes blinking in surprise. “You honestly don't know?”

“I've been... kind of busy.”

“Oh. About four hours ago a wave of ancient magic rolled through the entire convention. It transformed everybody here, in the grounds outside, in their rooms in the hotel, into whatever costume they were wearing. Some—”

Click. Gurgle.

<Duality—>

<That means that I'm the sane one—>

<Everybody's gone— Myths—>

“—people who were concentrating on the role of their costume became... consumed by that role. They lost all memory of who they were.”

Click. Gurgle.

I shook the eyestalk I was using to clear my head as I heard, maybe for

the first time, the loud thumping of our hearts. “Princess.... I didn’t know. I’ve— We’ve had different things on our minds.”

<My friends. Our offspring—>

<Nasalla?>

<Why’d you create me just to die, Allasan?>

<I didn’t create you.>

<Didn’t? You said yourself that you’d created my whole race, my whole society, even my Duality-damned memories! What she says just proves it. There’s no ship, there never was a ship!>

<So you accept that I’m not mad?>

Click. Gurgle.

<Accept? *Accept?* The information seems overwhelmingly in your favour! People becoming their costume, magic apparently working, and no damned ship communication!>

<There has to be something—>

<We can *die!* I can be magicked into existence, my whole race, my memories, my *dreams*, just so that you can have company for five hours. And then I die, and all – *all* of it – dies with me!>

The anger fed back and forth along our neural system. <Nasalla! Do you think I *wanted* this?>

<You know what’s worse, Allasan? *My* friends, *my* co-workers, *none* of them really exist! None of them *ever* existed! They’re not waiting for me in the Duality. They’re fake. *Unreal!*>

“Allasan, are you all right in there?” the princess asked.

<Nasalla, I never — I *never* planned on this! It was a dream, a story!>

<*Not to me!*>

Click. Gurgle.

<Well, I’m going to die too! In—> I checked— <forty-three minutes! I don’t want to die!>

<It doesn’t matter anymore, Allasan.>

<Of course it does!>

<*You* were the bubble boy, Allasan! You’d already beaten the odds of survival.>

<It’s not *my* fault that the stupid suit that *your* race designed has such a limited life support system!>

<My fault? Do you know *why* we started with only five hours hydrogen left? It’s obvious from your memories—>

<Oh, blame me—>

<Remember when you were a Solarian? Just before you created me to die, you had five hours and thirty two minutes of oxygen in *your* suit!>

Nasalla threw the memory he was talking about down our neural system and into my core so hard it hurt.

Click. Gurgle.

I had no choice and remembered the memory. *A quick check revealed that there was five hours and thirty two minutes of oxygen left.* <Dear God— Nasalla, sophantsibling, I'm—>

<Don't call me that! Don't—> His anger vanished. <No— You... you're right. It's not your fault. I know you too well to really believe that. It doesn't matter, Allasan. It's... it's done. Let's hear what this Solarian has to say. You... you do it. I need some time – some time to mourn—>

“Are you still alive in there?” the princess asked.

“I— Yes....” I could feel Nasalla's sobbing echoing through our shared neural system, even though he was trying to keep it to himself. “Sorry, it was a shock. You were saying?”

Click. Gurgle.

“Like I said, I don't really have any way yet of undoing whatever it is that Xanadu did to us, but I do have some polymorph spells here. I could polymorph, transform you, into something that could breathe oxygen.”

“You can?”

“I... I think so. It wouldn't be easy – and it wouldn't be permanent—”

“How long?”

“It would last a few hours, maybe—”

A few hours! More time to find a solution!

She said something but I didn't hear— Life! To touch the world, to feel, to not be sheltered away. To breathe fresh air, not tanked hydrogen. To touch a leaf, to hear a bird sing not filtered through speakers—

<No!> Nasalla burst out.

Click. Gurgle.

I turned my attention back to him.

<No, I said. Ask her what it involves. Ask her to repeat it!>

<Nasalla?>

<Ask her!>

I turned away from my sophantsibling and looked at the Princess looking at me. “What would the change involve?”

“As I said, I could only change you, not your container.”

“But—”

“If you could come out—”

<Allasan, we can't *survive* out there for more than a few seconds! And



there is no way to store the ammonia, to get back *into* the Environment Unit if we had to!>

<But a few more hours – anything could happen!>

<Allasan, I said *no!* Think about it! Tell her the *truth* about us! Tell her the *truth* and ask her!>

“Princess.... Do you know what I am?”

“By name, no—”

Click. Gurgle.

“Princess, I’m... I’m not alone here.”

“You’re not? But I can only sense one form—”

“Princess, this being I became – there are two of us sharing one body.”

“Two? You mean that the delusionary persona is separate from you! This would cure it—”

<*I am not delusionary!*> Nasalla churned the ammonia with clumps of tentacles.

“Princess, it’s not like that! It’s the race – one body, two minds—”

“Hmm. Well, the polymorph would put you into a single body. I think the two personalities would merge and the dominant one would remain with only memories of the secondary one.”

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, listen to what she’s saying!>

<Nasalla, I don’t want to die! There’s a chance here!>

<You think I want to die? I— I don’t want to— No, I *don’t* want to die!>

<Well, I don’t want to either!>

<You heard what she said! You’ll be saved, if it works, and I’ll just be left behind.>

<Maybe – and maybe you’ll be saved.>

<Not likely. You’ve always been the forceful one. I’m almost always just along for the ride.>

<But it’s all we’ve got!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, it’ll kill both of us. Whatever’s created, it won’t be *us*. It’ll be somebody else. It’ll be an *individual!*>

I tore my concentration back to the outside world. “Princess, I thank you for the offer, and... and... I’ll take it.”

<What are you doing, Allasan!>

<I’m taking the only hope we have to live!>

“It’ll take a bit for me to set up the spell. I’ll start now. I can’t promise that it’ll work though.”

Click. Gurgle.

<Nasalla? What’s wrong? It’s not as though we have anything to lose. Are you all right?>

<All right? I... I don’t know anymore.> He took control of a tentacle and switched off the emergency beacon.

<What are you doing?>

<It’s obvious that we don’t need that anymore.>

<Why not?>

<There’s no ship. We’re not going to be rescued.>

<Nasalla, I don’t want to die!>

Click. Gurgle.

<I don’t either! Even with— Even knowing— I want to live!>

<I don’t know what else to do!>

<You heard her! *If* we survived opening the suit, *if*, then you’d live and I’d die, or more likely we’d become somebody else. And then there’d be no turning back!>

<But we’d live!>

<No, *you’d* live. Until the spell wears off – then you’d pop back into what we were, and then you’d die. End of it.>

<Nothing else has worked!>

Click. Gurgle.

<At least I can die, as *me*, as *us*!>

<But I don’t want to die!>

<You’re repeating yourself, Allasan.>

<It bears repeating.>

<Allasan— I’m half this partnership. I say *no*.>

I sucked down ammonia. <Nasalla, that’s cruel and mean! You’re condemning us, *me*, to die when there’s hope.>

There was a long silence where the only sound was the beating of our shared hearts and the click gurgle of the support system.

Finally Nasalla spoke: <Allasan.... You’re right.>

<Of course I am!>

<Something may live. I don’t know what, but something will. And that’s worth the risk.>

<Of course it is!> I’m going to live! I’m going to live!

<Allasan, I... I would like to ask you, my sophantsibling, a favour.>

I’m going to live! I’m going to live! <Anything, Nasalla.>

<I have a memory. It’s one— It’s the most precious one that I have, that

you, that the original Allasan, the Allasan I remember, had.> I let him have control of our gills as I could feel him trembling.

Click. Gurgle.

<Allasan, take my half of the memory. Experience it. Remember it! I want... I want that memory – our memory – to live, whatever happens. Will you?>

I'm going to live! I'm going to live! <Sure, Nasalla. Sophantsibling. But you'll be with me.>

<Will I? I don't know, you don't know, *she* doesn't know. If both of us have this memory, then it's more likely to live. A last fragment of the Lalannas to survive.> I felt him gulp ammonia through our gills frantically. <Please—>

I felt cold and alone. But, I was going to live! <Nasalla, sophantsibling, I'll take it and do my best. It's... it's all I can offer.>

He took control of most of our tentacles and wrapped them around my primary neural cluster and gently squeezed. <Thank you.>

Click. Gurgle.

<It's no problem, Nasalla, sophantsibling.>

Gently he pushed a large ordered pulse of electro-chemical reaction down his primary neural cord to the junction where his met mine, and I let it flow back up and into my primary neural cluster. I could feel that it was loved, that it had been shared again and again, that it had changed with each remembering – each instance subtly altering the chemical bonds and structure. I could feel Nasalla trembling.

The best I can describe is that I dove into it, that's what it felt like. Biologically I linked its neural-electrical structure into my own, and let it flow through the knot of my consciousness.

Regardless, I remembered—

ALONE.

*Dark.*

*Light.*

*Swim.*

*Grow.*

*Alone.*

*Dark—*

Over and over again. Mindless repetition as I grew—

*Large.*

*Alone.*

*Large.*

*Need.*

*Other?*

I can see a form nearby. Larger than the little things around me. I can sense it; it can sense me. We draw closer, helpless to move away.

*Other!*

*Closer!*

*Seek!*

I swim faster and faster, jetting through the ammonia. Tiny ones are sucked through my jet, through my gills. Some don't make it. But I'm not thinking. I don't realize. I have only one thing in my mind.

*Lonely.*

*Seek.*

*Collision.*

I collide, my jet, my gills, slamming into the other. Pain. Blood. The soft flesh tears. Blood oozes around us. The pieces, the flaps of flesh, intertwine and curl against each other. The fine filament of my gills mingles with the other, blood rich filaments merging with others.

Merging—

<We are.>

<I am.>

<He is.>

<I am Nasalla.>

<I am Allasan.>

<We are Nasallallasan.>

Our bodies merge, bound at our gills, our neural cords tangling.

<I think. We think.>

Our instincts merge, feeling out the new pathways. Feeling out how to think as myself watches.

<Around us there is liquid. Liquid is a medium. A thing. It has existence.>

<Light. Light changes. Changes with time.>

<Time.>

Our thoughts, no concepts, flow past each other, swirling in each primary neural cluster. Some are taken, some are rejected. Lobes of each our of clusters vote. Re-arrange. Decide. Think.

<We are.>

<We live.>

<We think.>

Sentience blossoms upon me. Instincts become thoughts. Concepts become ideas. Now splits into past, present and future.

The world shifts, changing from what is, to what was, what is, and what will be.

<I am Nasalla. And I am Allasan.>

The world becomes a place of colour, of wonder, a thing to learn about. Before it just was, now it is and can be known.

<I am. We are.>

<No longer alone.>

<Never alone.>

We hug, celebrate our existence, our knowledge, our eternal companionship.

Sentience.

We look around in wonder and amazement, in comprehension, at the world we shared. At the world we'd never be lonely in again. At a world inviting us to explore it!

I BLINKED AT THE END OF THE MEMORY.

As a Solarian I was born. Mindless, still forming. My brain matured and I learned how to remember the world. I learned light and dark, colour and sound.

I learned loneliness. Eternal loneliness.

Taking control of an eyestalk I turned it and looked upon myself, ourself. We floated, a tangled web of red-purple vines, of all kinds of thicknesses and colour variations. Tubes were wrapped around and a pinkish liquid moved up and down our veins and arteries. There were two distinct groups, each dominated by either red or purple. They met in a tangled knot around a complex of biological jets that contained our gills. The jets normally sucked ammonia in and out, but could also be used for movement.

<Nasalla?>

<Yes, Allasan?>

<That was....> I couldn't describe it.

<I know. But your half is gone. Gone forever. And soon I will—>

I wrapped tentacles around my sophantsibling's primary neural cluster and gently squeezed.

<Nasalla, I felt—>

"Allasan, Nasalla? I think I'm ready," the translated voice of the princess broke my train of thoughts.

Broke the marriage of sharing.

Click. Gurgle. *Beeeeep!*

Both Nasalla and I checked the system. That was it – no more hydrogen.

Nasalla used a tentacle and shut the alarm down.

<Nasalla?>

<Tell her you're ready.>

I gulped ammonia, already feeling hydrogen starvation though I knew that wasn't possible.

I thought of surviving longer. Of living. Of living *alone*.

<Nasalla— It's... it's *wrong!*>

I couldn't do it. Now now.

<Allasan?>

<What you, what I, what *we* have – it's a miracle. I didn't know—>

<Go! Save what you can!>

<Nasalla, *no!* We're sophantsiblings. I think that – maybe – I know what that is now.>

<Allasan, you have to save the memories of what you created! There's nothing else I have—>

<I'd rather die with you than steal a few more hours of loneliness.>

<I— Allasan, you can't—>

<We'll remember together, as long as we live. And when we die— Well, we'll both join the Duality.>

<Allasan, just *do* it— Don't let a figment of your imagination drag you to death.>

"Whenever you're ready, Allasan," came from the translation matrix.

Nasalla tried to answer, but I wouldn't let him. <Nasalla! Listen to me! I will *not* leave you! Like those who have gone before us, we'll die *together!*>

We struggled, but Nasalla's heart wasn't in it.

"Allasan...?"

Finally, Nasalla just collapsed, and I hugged him against me as he sobbed. I sent a response through the translation matrix: "Princess. I've... I've changed my mind. The price is too high. I'm going to die anyway. I'd rather die like this."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm... positive. Completely positive." I could feel our gills start to labour as the ratio of dissolved hydrogen decreased.

"Three hours is a long time, Allasan," said the princess.

Nasalla just sobbed against me. "I'll— We'll be fine." Only a few more minutes and then we'd die together, remembering what I'd created. "But thank—"

"Ambassador Kikicluthk! There you are!"

Nasalla and I both moved an eyestalk and looked out at the MIB.

He spoke in his dull monotone and we waited for the translation. “I’ve found a technical expert who should be able to modify your Environment Unit to process water into liquid hydrogen.” He motioned to another human beside him – a man in a red Starfleet shirt.

The same one we’d met at the elevator.

“Do you give him permission to modify your environment suit, Ambassador Kikicluthk? According to the Tycho—”

“Yes!” I screamed through the translation matrix.

Then he went to work. I disabled the warnings of the Environment Unit’s system integrity being violated as I gulped ammonia past our gill faster and faster. According to onboard chronometers it was only three minutes, but to us it seemed forever. I just held Nasalla and rocked him back and forth as I, we, waited.

Click. Gurgle. Click. Gurgle. Click. Gurgle.

<We live?> Nasalla whispered.

<It seems so.>

<But everything I know is a dream—>

<Everything but me.>

I PUT THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON the document Dr Sands had requested when we joined Project X. I could understand why he wanted complete details of what had happened to us. We were one of the weirder results of the Xanadu Effect.

<What do you think, Nasalla?>

<I think it’s a bit too accurate.>

<Oh?>

Click. Gurgle.

<He doesn’t need to know about us.> Nasalla edited the record so that there was only I.

<If he asks Elisandra Melisande Blueleaf he might get suspicious—>

Nasalla added a slow delusionary state brought on by the decreasing hydrogen as the Environment Unit went into conservation mode.

<Okay, Nasalla, why?>

<He wants us to sign a contract. You sign it. As far as he knows, you’re it.>

<But that’s lying!>

<That’s keeping our options open. The ship *may* come back still.>

<Hah!>

<You never know!>

Click. Gurgle.

<Point.>

I did a last read through and sent off the message into Project X's intranet. Our environment suit had an adaptable data interface that could downgrade output to successfully use Solarian data systems.

I took an eyestalk and looked at Nasalla's primary neural cluster, and he took another one and looked at mine.

<Boy, will *he* be surprised if the ship returns!> I said.

Nasalla didn't say anything, and I forced back tears. I didn't know what was wrong with him. Physically nothing, but mentally.... He knew that everything he knew was a lie, a product of my imagination.

We downloaded more of the pikachu recordings and statements of meaning, and dove into our latest translation project. Soon a whole room for us would be complete, but for now we could survive.

The only time Nasalla came alive was when we worked – and I was getting as much work as we could handle. I'd save him, no matter what the cost.

Maybe working on the Alytherian language, and the dictionary would pull him out of it—