

# Absolute **ABORIGINAL** Magnitude & **SCIENCE FICTION**

Summer/Fall 2002

Issue #19

Grandmaster  
**Jack Williamson**  
"Luck of the Legion"

Hugo  
Award  
Nominee

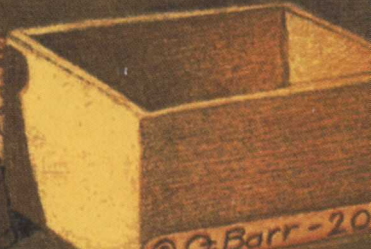
**Chris Bunch**

**Sharon Lee &  
Steve Miller**  
A new Linden story

**Scott Edelman**

**Carolyn Clowes**

\$4.95 (5.95 Canada)





# Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

M = m + 5 + 5 log p

Welcome to another issue of *Absolute Magnitude*. I'm really happy and proud of this issue. We've got a new Legion story from Grand Master Jack Williamson, a new Liaden story from Sharon Lee and Steve Miller, as well as wonderful Novellas by Scott Edelman and Carolyn Clowes. *Absolute Magnitude* is starting to get quite a few stories from top writers now that we've raised our pay rates to seven to ten cents per word on acceptance which makes us the top paying print science fiction market. So you can expect to see a lot more stories from your favorite writers.

As you can imagine, I was very happy to receive the news that *Absolute Magnitude* has been nominated for a Hugo for best semi-professional magazine. In the ten years that I've been in the business, only two other fiction magazines have made the cut. I've often wondered about that. For the last couple of years *Absolute Magnitude* has had more readers than any of the magazines that have been perennial nominees. It seems to me that for some reason the readers of nonfiction magazines are more inclined to vote for the Hugo Awards than are the readers of fiction magazines. I don't know why that is or if anything can be done to change that. I've meet scores of *Absolute Magnitude* subscribers at past Worldcons, so I know that the votes are out there if the readers would only vote.

It's time to put the fiction back into science fiction. If you're going to the San Jose Worldcon please remember to vote for *Absolute Magnitude* as best semi-professional magazine. You can download the ballot at [conjose.org](http://conjose.org). We'll see you at the Hugo ceremony.

## Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

### PUBLISHER/EDITOR IN CHIEF/ART DIRECTOR

Warren Lapine

### ASSISTANT PUBLISHER

Angela Kessler

### PUBLISHING ASSISTANT

John Perreault

### CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Allen Steele

Ian Randal Strock

### ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Mike Allen

Mike Jones

Catherine A. Reniere

### ADAPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Joe Lazzaro

### LAYOUT & DESIGN

Warren Lapine/Angela Kessler

### DISTRIBUTORS

International Periodic Distributors

Cold Cut Comics

and others

### SUBSCRIPTIONS

Get *Absolute Magnitude* delivered to your doorstep! Get four

issues for only \$16. That's a savings of 25%. Make all checks payable to **DNA Publications, Inc.** U.S. funds only.

### CORRESPONDENCE

We look forward to receiving your comments. All letters sent become the property of **Absolute Magnitude**. We reserve the right to edit and/or comment upon any letter included in the magazine. Correspondent's full address will not be printed except upon specific request. E-mail correspondence only—no manuscript submissions—to [dnapublications@dnapublications.com](mailto:dnapublications@dnapublications.com). Visit us on the web at: [www.dnapublications.com](http://www.dnapublications.com)

### ADVERTISEMENTS

Ad guidelines and rate card are available upon request. Write to **DNA Publications, Inc.**, P.O. Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988 or visit our website or call 540-763-2925.

**Absolute Magnitude**, Issue #19/*Harsh Mistress* Issue #21, Summer/Fall 2002 (ISSN 1070-6569). Published quarterly by **DNA Publications, Inc.**

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to **Absolute Magnitude**, P.O. Box 2988, Radford VA 24143-2988. Material from this publication may not be reprinted or used in any form without written permission from the Editor in Chief, except short passages and graphical representations used strictly for review purposes. Copyright © 2002 by **DNA Publications, Inc.**, and individually copyrighted by the authors and artists who have contributed to this issue.

**Absolute Magnitude** encourages freelance submissions, but cannot be responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or materials. All such submissions/correspondence must include SASE for response/return of materials. Send SASE for writers' guidelines.



# Absolute Magnitude

## Science Fiction

Summer/Fall 2002

Issue #19

- Anthem** by Carolyn Clowes . . . . . 7  
Illustrated by Kelly Faltermeyer
- Veil of the Dancer** by Sharon Lee & Steve Miller . . . . . 10  
Illustrated by George Barr
- The Luck of the Legion** by Jack Williamson . . . . . 17  
Illustrated by George Barr
- The Only Thing That Mattered** by Scott Edelman . . . . . 40  
Illustrated by Dominic Emile Harman
- No Heroes in Inner Space** by Chris Bunch . . . . . 51  
Illustrated by Dominic Emile Harman

Cover art by George Barr.





Kelly Fattermayer. 02



# Anthem

by Carolyn Clowes  
Copyright © Carolyn Clowes 2002

"No," was all she said.

Pen watched her drop the paper on the table. Air from the window sent it sailing to the floor.

Outside, in an island summer morning, the gardens bloomed all the way down to the dunes. Lazy breakers rolled in on the tide, their spray blowing back to sea in an offshore breeze. Far across the water, where gulls rode the wind and ocean met the sky, the banners and rooftops of Strand caught the rising sun.

Another perfect day on Isle, most blessed and beautiful of all the Four Worlds to its summer-minded people. Their tiny islands strung out like pearls on this ocean planet closest to the sun. Not even the running rivers, the shining cities, the fertile plains of neighbor Denemerra could compare. The outermost world was a frozen rock called Ice, snowbound land of shimmering light that few summer-born would ever see. Between Denemerra and Ice, ringed by stations of its Watchers, lonely Enlor turned in orbit. No one went there. No one even spoke its name.

Ari had forgotten the paper. Her eyes were on the day beyond the window, the sloop that rode at anchor out from shore.

"Did you like any of it? Maybe if I changed the—"

"No, Pen," she frowned, distracted. "Forget it. Go rest. I'm going to tell my guest goodbye and think about tonight."

"You wanted something special. I'm sorry."

"Never mind. We have some new songs, and they still like the old ones."

"They'll like anything you sing. They love you."

"Easy for them," she laughed, "they don't know me. Cheer up, Pen. I'm promised there for sunset. Come with me? Help me choose my songs?"

"Yes." Pen waited until she was gone, then retrieved the paper and turned from the window. The garden was where Ari told her lovers goodbye. This one was young and beautiful. There would be kisses and tears and promises. It might take hours. Pen had seen it all before, had learned to look away. Lovers came and went, brief as summer rainbows. Pen had stayed.

She didn't like the words, that must be it. Then Pen would change them. But if she didn't like the meaning, she would never sing the song.

There were worlds of meaning in her voice. It poured through the air like liquid gold, a sound so rich and free and aching that, once heard, it never left the mind. Babies would hush their crying. Dogs would stop fighting to listen. Lovers would forget their quarrels and fall into each other's arms. In that sound people heard the secrets of their souls, and they said she knew them all. To sing like that, she had to know. That voice, they said, could heal the heart. That voice could outshine the sun. That voice could bring the rain. Once, so they said, it did.

The words. Pen rather liked them, thought they said what she would mean tonight. Apparently not. In all their years together, this had never happened. This time Pen had let her down.

A glance through the window showed them far down the garden walk, and *Chanty* waiting, bobbing on the waves. Was she taking Young&Beautiful aboard? She didn't ask Pen, not this time.

"Come on," she said that first day, "let's go sailing."

"Uh . . ." Pen dithered, felt foolish. The message had read:

*I'm a Singer. I Need Songs. Meet Me  
at Noon on the Pier. My Name Is Ari.*

That singer had the wrong writer, and Pen had come to tell her so. There was certainly no point in climbing aboard like this. Her boat was rocking. It might sink. Why couldn't they have their little chat on the dock? It wouldn't take long.

"What do you sing about, anyway?" Pen muttered, clutching the railing, waiting for the dizziness to go away. Then a simple no—

"Everything," she said. "Love, life, truth—well, that's what I want to sing about. I'm just beginning." Before Pen could stop her, she pushed off from the pier. The wind carried them away from dock and out into the cove. "What do you write about?"

"Uh . . . poems. I write poems." On dry land, solid land, land that didn't go up and down, and up . . .

"I know that. Say, are you feeling all right?"

"Fine." . . . and down.

"Poems about what?"

"Uh . . . love, life . . . wait! Stop! Where are we going?"

"Sailing. I live over there," she pointed to a dot of land.

"Then we're going the wrong way! Can't you turn around?" Pen was miserable, drenched with salty spray, shouting above the wind, watching the horizon pitch, the ocean heave, up and down . . . this wasn't going well. Tell her no. Tell her now.

"Look, your poem won a prize. You must be good. This summer they're letting me sing at Festival, so I'll need lots of songs."

". . . mistake. Big mistake. I write words. Can't sing a note, can't hear a tune in my head, so let's just—"

A breaker sloshed against the hull as they headed for the open sea. Oh, this was bad. The waves were bigger out here.

"I can find tunes, but I can't think up words. So write me some. Go on."

"You mean now? I'm not—" . . . feeling well, not well at all.

"Then we'll have a song, won't we?"

"No!" Pen said, leaned over the side, and threw up.

"Yes?" said Pen to the knock at the door.

"Good morning. Am I disturbing you?"

Young&Beautiful stood there smiling, an altogether perfect piece of Creation. Pen reached for a name, couldn't think of one. It had not taken hours. Good.

"Not at all."

"I wanted to ask a question, if you have a moment. I'm a bit embarrassed."

"Don't be. Come in."

"It's about something she said in the garden, when we were saying goodbye. She needs to rest before she sings tonight, you know, and I understand that, I really do! I know she's kind of old, but I don't care! I love her! And I was telling her that. I really do, you know."

So earnest, so charming.

"I do know. Come sit down." Pen gestured Y&B to a chair that faced away from the window—and its view of Ari wading into the surf, diving into a wave, striking out for her sloop.

"So I told her, and she laughed, and then she said, 'Of course you love me. Everyone loves me. It's like the rain on Denemerra.' I don't know what she meant."



# Absolute Magnitude

"The old story, that's all." Pen's eyes strayed to the window. She'd reached the *Chanty* now, was climbing aboard.

"What story? I'm sorry, I don't know it. Should I?"

So beautiful. So young.

"It happened a long time ago," Pen said kindly, "when the drought on Denemerra was in the third year. Its people had always grown food enough to feed the Four Worlds. By then they couldn't even feed themselves. One vast continent surrounded by water, and all the storms stayed out to sea. Wind currents had shifted, and for the first time in living memory, the rains wouldn't come. Crops failed that first year. As time went by, the rivers dried up. Forests turned to sticks, fields turned to dust. Cities baked and burned. All Denemerra's science, its space ships and commerce, even its technology couldn't save the land. It was dying, but its people wouldn't give up.

"On Isle we built huge tanks to collect our rainwater. The Denemerrans brought machines to remove the salt and pump water from our seas. We planted bigger gardens and caught more fish and picked seaberries every night until dark. We filled every ship they sent, again and again, but it wasn't enough.

"Ari asked if she could come and sing. Everyone had heard of her by then, and it gave people something to look forward to. The news spread. They began arriving by the thousands in Harveston, too many for the stadium or the streets to hold. So the concert was moved out onto the fields. It began at sunrise, broadcast to every screen on the planet, so everyone could hear.

"She stood on the plain of Denemerra that day and sang, in the heat and dust and despair. She sang songs about rain—love and rain, courage and rain, hope and rain, rain and rain. She sang her heart out, and the whole world was listening.

"There were storms at sea that day, as always. But instead of blowing themselves out over the water as they'd done for three long years, on that day a line of storms crossed the mountains, moved over land. She sang, and everyone watched the sky.

"By sundown the front was a black line on the horizon. She sang, everyone sang, as it came sweeping across the land. Wind blew hot, dust swirled on the ground, and ocean birds came inland, flying before the storm. Bolts of lightning split the air. Thunder rolled over the plains, and the rains came at last, pouring, drenching, glorious torrents. She stood there in the storm and went on singing, while the people of Denemerra cheered and danced in their rain. They tell the story to this day."

"Magic!" said Young&Beautiful.

"Not at all. There was a 62% probability a storm would make landfall that day. It had to happen eventually. But no one who heard her will ever believe that. They said it was the sound of her voice. They said she brought the rain to Denemerra."

"Oh, I believe it—don't you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I was there."

"But she's magic when she sings. From the first moment I heard her, I felt I'd always known her, and she'd always known me. Oh, she could make it rain. She could do anything she wanted. But—" Young&Beautiful frowned, prettily confused, "I still don't understand. How is my loving her like the rain on Denemerra? What did she mean?"

"She meant it is—" an image, a legend, a lie "—a gift of Nature," Pen smiled, choosing the words with care, words she might have said herself.

"Oh, good. That's all right then. I can't wait for tonight! I must go get ready! She said a boat would come for me."

"It's here." Pen pointed out the window to the sea, where a launch from Strand came bouncing over the waves.

"Oh. Well, thanks for telling me the story. I guess she's really famous then, isn't she?"

"Yes." Famous? She had nations at her feet, and worlds.

Pen watched from the window as the launch sped away, wishing to be with her now, out on the water. After years of practice, words came easily there, perhaps ones she would like better. *Chanty* had disappeared from the horizon, and here, waiting, the same thought always crossed Pen's mind.

What if she sailed away one day and never came back?

"Feeling better?" she asked, that first day.

"I think so," Pen muttered, deeply embarrassed. Pitiful for an Islander to be afraid of boats, absurd for an Islander to get seasick. At last that seemed to have abated. Spray in the face, wind in the hair, ocean and sky meeting in a distant endless blue. Yes, actually feeling better. Strand lay far behind them now. "Where are we going?"

"To find a tune, for those words you're going to write."

"You don't understand."

"No," she said, looking out to sea, "but it works. I have lots of tunes, and this is where I find them. There's music out here, Pen. On the water, in the wind. It plays in my sails and races over the waves, and I follow. I sail and sail until I can hear the whole thing, and then I sing it all the way home. But it's only a tune. It needs words to be a song."

"I'm telling you, I can't even—"

"Your poem that won the prize, I found a tune for it. Hope you don't mind. Want to hear?"

Suddenly Pen did mind. That poem had been published in the spring Gathering's anthology. It lay pristine and perfect on its own page, every word correct, with Pen's own name at the top. It won the Gathering's prize. Pen was invited to read it at summer Festival. Those words belonged to Pen, no one else—and they did not require a "tune." Tell her no—why was that so hard?

"If you must," Pen sighed.

She turned her sloop into the wind, lowered its mainsail, and left the small jib rippling as *Chanty* rose and fell on the gentle swells. She waited a moment and closed her eyes, listening to something in her mind. Then she began to sing.

Her voice seemed to rise from the ocean's depths, to inhabit the air and expand the sky, to separate the sunlight into beams. The sound melted Pen's bones. Every note, every thought meant more than the world was wide enough to hold, and she sang the words' own truth straight into Pen's heart.

*"Island in the sky, island far  
Left by the light of a wand'ring star . . ."*

All made up, of course. Pen had never gone anywhere, never done anything so brave, only sat alone in a room imagining how it would be. Now those made-up words soared, wrote themselves into the sky, carried Pen so far away there was no coming back.

The song ended, lingered in empty air. The silence ached for music. *Chanty* drifted on the waves, and gulls wheeled in the sky.

Words. Silent, beautiful words had always been reason enough to live, until that day on the water under a streaming sun and rippling sail. Pen was lost and found. Words would never be the same. Choosing them, arranging them, trapping them in ink on the prison of a printed page—how could that ever have been enough?

The memory echoed. Pen longed to hear her sing it over, couldn't find words to tell her so, content for the moment to be drifting on the tide. But words would come to mind again, and when they did, from now until the end of days, they would all be for singing. They would all be for her.

She was beautiful. Pen hadn't noticed that before.

# Anthem

"Well? Did you like it?"

"It's . . . over too soon."

She grinned at that. "Then I'll sing it again," she said, "are you listening?" When she finished, even the wind was still. "That's a good song, Pen," she said. "It's exactly what I mean. Write me some more. Say yes. Just say yes."

"Yes," said Pen.

"Come on," she called, "we're late!"

"Yes," Pen agreed, having waited for the past hour.

The sun was low in the sky. *Chanty's* bow deftly touched sand as she nosed it in to shore. No time for her to come up to the house, to bathe or change clothes. No need to point that out, Pen decided, and climbed aboard without comment. At least her mood had improved. With much laughter and shouting, she waved off the launch sent from Strand to bring her, which had also been waiting. Its deck and passengers were festooned with flowers, ribbons fluttering in the breeze. The revelers aboard were well past caring, and the crew knew what to expect. Ari always showed up, eventually, and she always sailed across herself.

Wind at their backs and sails billowing, they skimmed the water in a perfect summer afternoon. As the launch sped ahead of them, its passengers began tossing all their flowers into its wake to honor her, a diverting sight, for most of them were wearing nothing else.

Ari's mind was elsewhere. She began humming to herself, a melody so sweet and haunting that Pen forgot to suggest songs for the night's program.

"That's beautiful. What is it?"

"Don't know yet. You'll think of something."

"Yes," and perhaps she would like it more than—let that go. No time to dwell on failure. "Your audience came to meet you. They knew where you'd be docking."

"Ah, they know me better than I know myself," she laughed, waving to the throng gathered on Strand's long pier. "Someday I must ask them what I'm really like."

Pen let that go too. They loved a voice, a legend. They didn't know her at all. Ari thought being a singer was easy; being a legend was tiresome, and she had no patience for it.

"We're here, Pen. Happy festival!" She tossed a line to the workers on dock, grabbed her melodir, checked her pocket for extra strings, then kissed Pen goodbye and was swept off the deck and away into the crowd heading to the amphitheatre. Pen stayed until *Chanty* was tethered. By then the crowd was gone, except for one man who waited.

His clothes were drab, shabby, oddly inappropriate on this day of wild fashion. He seemed dazed, not with the usual island abandon, but as though he didn't understand where he was.

On Isle, everyone was an Islander. Five generations, five minutes, made no difference. At festivals, hospitality flowed like seaberry wine. Dockside ceremonies officially proclaimed all visitors to be Citizens—an administrative convenience, the announcement went, to eliminate the paperwork for those who might forget to ever leave. This was island humor. There was no paperwork on Isle, no administrative anything. The only officials were spontaneous Islanders inspired by fine vintage and ceremonial zeal, and the only requirement for citizenship on Isle was being there. Or having been. Or wanting to be.

This man was no Islander, not even for the day. He stared in puzzlement at the harbor, the banners, the buildings, the flowers blooming everywhere. From Denemerra, Pen decided, probably one of their Plainfolk, who ignored science and commerce, tilled their land with handmade tools, and asked only to be left alone. But Plainfolk never went anywhere. So what was this one doing here?

He removed his hat respectfully as Pen approached, held it in his

*See Anthem on page 22*





# Veil of the Dancer

by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller

Copyright © Sharon Lee and Steve Miller 2002

In the city of Iravati on the world of Skardu, there lived a scholar who had three daughters, and they were the light and comfort of his elder years.

Greatly did the scholar rejoice in his two elder daughters—golden-haired Humaria; Shereen with her tresses of flame—both of these born of the wives his father had picked out for him when he was still a young man. Surely, they were beautiful and possessed of every womanly grace, the elder daughters of Scholar Reyman Bhar. Surely, he valued them, as a pious father should.

The third—ah, the third daughter. Small and dark and wise as a mouse was the daughter of his third, and last, wife. The girl was clever, and it had amused him to teach her to read, and to do sums, and to speak the various tongues of the unpious. Surely, these were not the natural studies of a daughter, even the daughter of so renowned a scholar as Reyman Bhar.

It began as duty; for a father must demonstrate to his daughters that, however much they are beloved, they are deficient in that acuity of thought by which the gods mark out males as the natural leaders of household, and world. But little Inas, bold mouse, did not fail to learn her letters, as her sisters had. Problems mathematic she relished as much as flame-haired Shereen did candied *sventi* leaves. Walks along the river way brought forth the proper names of birds and their kin; in the long neglected glade of Istat, with its ancient sundial and moon-marks she proved herself astute in the motions of the planets.

Higher languages rose as readily to her lips as the dialect of women; she read not only for knowledge, but for joy, treasuring especially the myths of her mother's now empty homeland.

Seeing the joy of learning in her, the teaching became experiment more than duty, as the scholar sought to discover the limits of his little one's mind.

On the eve of her fourteenth birthday, he had not yet found them.

Well though the scholar loved his daughters, yet it is a father's duty to see them profitably married. The man he had decided upon for his golden Humaria was one Safarez, eldest son of Merchant Gabir Majidi. It was a balanced match, as both the scholar and the merchant agreed. The Majidi son was a pious man of sober, studious nature, who bore his thirty years with dignity. Over the course of several interviews with the father and the son, Scholar Bhar had become certain that Safarez would value nineteen year old Humaria, gay and heedless as a *flutterbee*; more, that he would protect her and discipline her and be not behind in those duties which are a husband's joy and especial burden.

So, the price was set, and met; the priests consulted regarding the proper day and hour; the marriage garden rented; and, finally, Humaria informed of the upcoming blessed alteration in her circumstances.

Naturally enough, she wept, for she was a good girl and valued her father as she ought. Naturally enough, Shereen ran to cuddle her and murmur sweet, soothing nonsense into her pretty ears. The scholar left them to it, and sought his study, where he found his youngest, dark Inas, bent over a book in the lamplight.

She turned when he entered, and knelt, as befit both a daughter and a student, and bowed 'til her forehead touched the carpet. Scholar Bhar paused, admiring the graceful arc of her slim body within the silken pool of her robes. His mouse was growing, he thought. Soon, he would be about choosing a husband for her.

But not yet. Now, it was Humaria, and, at the change of season he would situate Shereen, who would surely pine for her sister's companionship. He had a likely match in mind, there, and the husband's property not so far distant from the Majidi. Then, next year, perhaps—or, more comfortably, the year after that—he would look about for a suitable husband for his precious, precocious mouse.

"Arise, daughter," he said now, and marked how she did so, swaying to her feet in a single, boneless move, the robes rustling, then falling silent, sheathing her poised and silent slenderness.

"So," he said, and met her dark eyes through the veil. "A momentous change approaches your life, my child. Your sister Humaria is to wed."

Inas bowed, dainty hands folded demurely before her.

"What?" he chided gently. "Do you not share your sister's joy?"

There was a small pause, not unusual; his mouse weighed her words like a miser weighed his gold.

"Certainly, if my sister is joyous, then it would be unworthy of me to weep," she said in her soft, soothing voice. "If it is permitted that I know—who has come forward as her husband?"

Reyman Bhar nodded, well-pleased to find proper womanly feeling, as well as a scholar's thirst for knowledge.

"You are allowed to know that Safarez, eldest son of Majidi the Merchant, has claimed the right to husband Humaria."

Inas the subtle stood silent, then bowed once more, as if an afterthought, which was not, the scholar thought, like her. He moved to his desk, giving her time to consider, for, surely, even his clever mouse was female, if not yet full woman, and might perhaps know a moment's envy for a sister's good fortune.

"They are very grand, the Majidi," she said softly. "Humaria will be pleased."

"Eventually, she will be so," he allowed, seating himself and pulling a notetaker forward. "Today, she weeps for the home she will lose. Tomorrow, she will sing for the home she is to gain."

"Yes," said Inas, and the scholar smiled into his beard.

"Your sisters will require your assistance with the wedding preparations," he said, opening the notetaker and beginning a list. "I will be going to Lahore-Gadani tomorrow, to purchase what is needful. Tell me what I shall bring you."

Mouse silence.

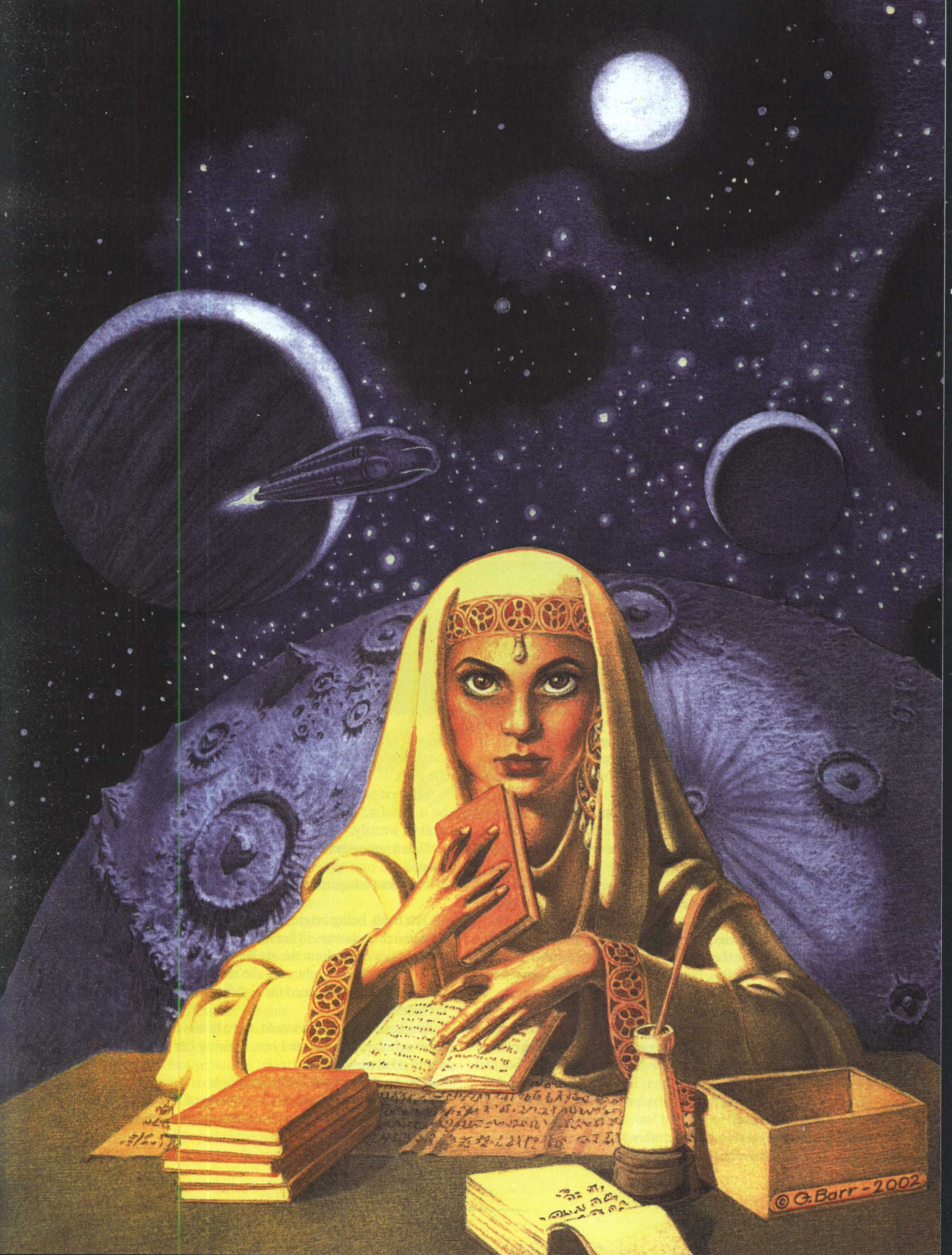
"I? I am not to be wed, Father."

"True. However, it has not escaped one's attention that tomorrow is the anniversary of your natal day. It amuses me to bring you a gift from the city, in celebration. What shall you have?"

"Why, only yourself, returned to us timely and in good health," Inas said, which was proper, and womanly, and dutiful.

The scholar smiled more widely into his beard, and said nothing else.





© G. Barr - 2002



# Absolute Magnitude

Humaria wept well into the night, rocking inside the circle of Shereen's arms. At last, her sobs quieted somewhat, and Shereen looked to Inas, who sat on a pillow across the room, as she had all evening, playing Humaria's favorite songs, softly, upon the lap-harp.

Obedient to the message in her sister's eyes, Inas put the harp aside, arose and moved silently to the cooking alcove. Deftly, she put the kettle on the heat-ring, rinsed the pot with warm water and measured peace tea into an infuser.

The kettle boiled. While the tea steeped, she placed Humaria's own blue cup on a tray, with a few sweet biscuits and some leaves of candied *sventi*. At the last, she added a pink candle, sacred to Amineh, the little god of women, and breathed a prayer for heart's ease. Then, she lifted the tray and carried it to her sister's couch.

Humaria lay against Shereen's breast, veils and hair disordered. Inas knelt by the end table, placed the tray, and poured tea.

"Here, sweet love," Shereen cooed, easing Humaria away from her shoulder. "Our dear sister Inas offers tea in your own pretty cup. Drink, and be at peace."

Shivering, Humaria accepted the cup. She bent her face and breathed of the sweet, narcotic steam, then sipped, eyes closed.

Shereen sat up, and put her head scarf to rights, though she left the *ubaie*—the facial veils—unhooked and dangling along her right jaw.

"Our young Inas is fortunate, is she not, sister?" Humaria murmured, her soft voice blurry with the combined effects of weeping and the tea.

"How so?" asked Shereen, watching her closely, in case she should suddenly droop into sleep.

"Why," said Humaria, sipping tea. "Because she will remain here in our home with our father, and need never marry. Indeed, I would wonder if a husband could be found for a woman who reads as well as a man."

Shereen blinked, and bent her head, fussing with the fall of the *hijab* across her breast. Inas watched her, abruptly chilly, though the night was warm and no breeze came though the windows that stood open onto the garden.

"Certainly," Shereen said, after too long a pause. "Certainly, our father might wish to keep his youngest with him as long as may be, since he shows no disposition to take another wife, and she knows the ways of his books and his studies."

"And certainly," Humaria said, her eyes open now, and staring at Inas, where she knelt, feeling much like a mouse, and not so bold, so bold at all.

"Certainly, on that blessed day when the gods call our father to sit with them as a saint in Heaven, my husband will inherit all his worldly stuffs, including this, our clever sister Inas, to dispose of as he will."

At her father's direction, Inas had read many things, including the Holy Books and domestic law. She knew, with a scholar's detachment, that women were the lesser vessel and men the god-chosen administrators of the universe the gods had created, toyed with and tired of.

She knew that, in point of law, women were disbarred from holding property. Indeed, in point of law, women were themselves property, much the same as an ox or other working cattle, subject to a man's masterful oversight. A man might dispose of subject

women, as he might dispose of an extra brood cow, or of an old and toothless dog.

She knew these things.

And, yet, until this moment, she had not considered the impact of these facts upon her own life and self.

What, indeed, she thought, would Safarez the merchant's son do with one Inas, youngest daughter of his wife's father? Inas, who read as well as a man—a sinful blot so dire that she could not but be grateful that the Holy Books also stated that the souls of women were small, withered things, of no interest to the gods.

Humaria finished the last of her tea, and sat cradling the blue cup in her plump, pretty hands, her eyes misty.

"There now, sweet, rest," Shereen murmured, capturing the cup and passing it to Inas. She put arm around Humaria's shoulders, urging her to lie down on the couch.

Inas arose and carried the tray back to the cooking alcove. She washed and dried the teapot and cup, and put the crackers back in their tin. The *sventi* she left out.

She was wise in this, for not many minutes later, Shereen slipped into the alcove, veils dangling and flame-colored hair rippling free. She sighed, and reached for the leaves, eating two, one after the other, before giving Inas a swift glance out of the sides of her eyes, as if Shereen were the youngest, and caught by her elder in some unwomanly bit of mischief.

"Our sister was distraught," she said softly. "She never meant to wound you."

"She did not wound me," Inas murmured. "She opened my eyes to the truth."

Shereen stared, *sventi* leaf halfway to her lips.

"You do not find the truth a fearsome thing, then, sister?" she asked, and it was Inas who looked away this time.

"The truth is merely a statement of what is," she said, repeating the most basic of her father's lessons, and wishing that her voice did not tremble

so. "Once the truth is known, it can be accepted. Truth defines the order of the universe. By accepting truth, we accept the will of the gods."

Shereen ate her leaf in silence. "It must be a wonderful thing to be a scholar," she said then, "and have no reason to fear." She smiled, wearily.

"Give you sweet slumber, sister. The morrow will be upon us too soon."

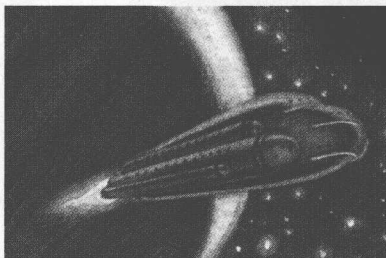
She went away, robes rustling, leaving Inas alone with the truth.

The truth, being bright, held Inas from sleep, until at last she sat up within her *chatrue*, lit her fragrant lamp, and had the books of her own studies down from the shelf.

In the doubled brightness, she read until the astronomer on his distant column announced the sighting of the Trio of morning with his baleful song.

She read as a scholar would, from books to which her father, the elder scholar, had directed her, desiring her to put aside those he might wish to study.

The book she read in the lamplight was surely one which her father would find of interest. A volume of Kenazari mythology, it listed the gods and saints by their various praise names and detailed their honors.





## Veil of the Dancer

Nawar caught her eye, “the one who guards.” A warrior’s name, surely. Yet, her mother had been named Nawar. A second aspect of the same god, *Natesa*—“blade dancer”—in the Kenazari heresy that held each person was a spirit reincarnated until perfected, alternatively took the form of male and female. The duty of the god in either aspect was to confound the gods of order and introduce random action into the universe, which was heresy, as well, for the priests taught that the purpose of the gods, enacted through mortal men, was to order and regulate the universe.

Inas leaned back against her pillows and considered what she knew of her father’s third wife. Nawar had been one of the married women chosen as guardians of the three dozen maiden wives sent south from Kenazari as the peace tithe. Each maiden was to be wed to a wise man or scholar, and it had been the hope of the scholars who had negotiated it that these marriages would heal the rifts which had opened between those who had together tamed the wildlands.

Alas, it had been a peace worked out and implemented locally, as the Holy Books taught, and it had left the mountain generals unsatisfied.

Despite the agreement and the high hopes of wise men, the generals and their soldiers swept through Kenazari shortly after the rich caravan of dowries and oath-bound girls passed beyond the walls of the redoubt. Fueled by greed, bearing off-world weapons, they murdered and laid waste—and then dispersed, melting back into the mountains, leaving nothing of ancient, wealthy Kenazari, save stone and carrion.

The priests of the south found the married escorts to be widows and awarded them to worthy husbands. Reyman Bhar had lately performed a great service for the priests of Iravati, and stood in need of a wife. Nawar was thus bestowed upon him, and it had pleased the gods to allow them to find joy, each in the other, for she was a daughter of an old house of scholars, and could read, and write, and reason as well as any man. Her city was dead, but she made shift to preserve what could be found of its works, assisted gladly by her new husband.

So it was that numerous scrolls, books, and tomes written in the soon-to-be-forgotten language found their way into the house of Scholar Bhar, where eventually they came under the study of a girl child, in the tradition of her mother’s house...

The astronomer on his tall, cold column called the Trio. Inas looked to her store of oil, seeing it sadly depleted, and turned the lamp back til the light fled and the smoky wick gave its ghost to the distant dawn.

She slept then, her head full of the myths of ancient Kenazari, marriage far removed from her dreams.

Their father sent word that he would be some days in the city of Lahore-Gadani, one day to west across the windswept ridges of the Marakwenti range that separated Iravati from the river Gadan. He had happened upon his most excellent friend and colleague, Scholar Baquar Hafeez, who begged him to shed the light of his intellect upon a problem of rare complexity.

This news was conveyed to them by Nasir, their father’s servant, speaking through the screen in the guest door.

Humaria at once commenced to weep, her face buried in her hands as she rocked back and forth, moaning, “He has forgotten my wedding! I will go to my husband ragged and ashamed!”

Shereen rushed to embrace her, while Inas sighed, irritable with lack of sleep.

“I do not think our father has forgotten your wedding, sister,” she said, softly, but Humaria only cried harder.

As it happened, their father had not forgotten his daughters, nor his mission in the city. The first parcels arrived shortly after Uncu’s prayer was called, and were passed through the gate, one by one.

Bolts of saffron silk, from which Humaria’s bridal robes would be sewn; yards of pearls; rings of gold and topaz; bracelets of gold; *ubaie* fragile as spider silk and as white as salt; hairpins, headcloths, and combs; sandals; needles; thread. More bolts, in brown and black, from which Humaria’s new dayrobes would be made, and a hooded black cloak, lined in fleece.

Additional parcels arrived as the day wore on: A bolt each of good black silk for Shereen and Inas; headcloths, *ubaie*; silver bracelets, and silver rings set with onyx.

Humaria and Shereen fell upon each new arrival with cries of gladness. Shereen ran for her patterns; Humaria gave the saffron silk one last caress and scampered off for scissors and chalk.

Inas put her silk and rings and bracelets aside, and began to clear the worktable.

Across the room, the guest screen slid back and a small package wrapped in brown paper and tied with red string was placed on the ledge.

Inas went forward, wondering what else was here to adorn Humaria’s wedding day, even as she recognized her father’s hand and the lines that formed her own name.

Smiling, she caught the package up and hurried, light-footed, to her room. Once there, she broke the red string and unwrapped the brown paper, exposing not a book, as she had expected, from the weight and the size, but a box.

She put it aside, and searched the wrapping for any note from her father. There was none, and she turned her attention back to his gift.

It was an old box of leather-wrapped wood. Doubtless, it had been handsome in its day, but it seemed lately to have fallen on hard times. The leather was scuffed in places, cracked in others, the ornamental gilt work all but worn away. She turned it over in her hands, and rubbed her thumb along a tear in the leather where the wood showed through—gray, which would be ironwood, she thought, from her study of native product.

She turned the box again, set it on her knee, released the three ivory hooks and lifted the lid.

Inside were seven small volumes, each bound in leather much better preserved than that which sheathed the box.

Carefully, she removed the first volume on the right; carefully, she opened it—and all but laughed aloud, for here was treasure, indeed, and all honor to her father, for believing her worthy of so scholarly a gift. She had read of such things, but this was the first she had seen. A *curiat*—a diary kept of a journey, or a course of study, or a penance.

These... Quickly, she had the remaining six out and opened, sliding the *ubaie* away from her eyes, the better to see the handwrit-





# Absolute Magnitude

ten words. Yes. These detailed a scholar's journey—one volume dealt with geography, another with plants, another with minerals, still another with animals. Volume five detailed temples and universities, while volume six seemed a list of expenditures. The seventh volume indexed the preceding six. All were written in a fine, clear hand, using the common, or trade, alphabet, rather than that of the scholars, which was odd, but not entirely outside of the scope of possibility. Perhaps the scholar in question had liked the resonances which had been evoked by writing in the common script. Scholars often indulged in thought experiments, and this seven volume *curiat* had a complexity, a *layering*, that suggested it had been conceived and executed by a scholar of the highest learning.

Carefully, she put volumes two through seven back in the box and opened the first, being careful not to crack the spine.

"Inas?" Shereen's voice startled her out of her reading. Quickly, she thrust the book into the box and silently shut the lid.

"Yes, sister?" she called.

"Wherever have you been?" her elder scolded from the other side of the curtain. "We need your needle out here, lazy girl. Will you send your sister to her husband in old dayrobes?"

"Of course not," Inas said. Silently, she stood, picked up the box, and slipped it beneath the mattress. Later, she would move it to the secure hidey hole, but, for now, the mattress would suffice.

"Well?" Shereen asked, acidic. "Are you going to sleep all day?"

"No, sister," Inas said meekly and pushed the curtain aside.

The days of their father's absence was a frenzy of needlework. At night, after her sisters had fallen, exhausted, into their beds, Inas read the *curiat*, and learned amazing things.

First, she learned that the geographical volume mislocated several key markers, such as the Ilam Mountains, and the Sea of Lukistan. Distrustful of her own knowledge in the face of a work of scholarship, she stole off to her father's study in the deep of night, and pulled down the atlas. She compared the latitudes and longitudes given in the *curiat* volume against those established by the Geographical College, verifying that the *curiat* was off in some areas by a league, and in others by a day's hard travel.

Next, she discovered that the habits of certain animals were misrepresented—these, too, she double-checked in the compendium of creatures issued by the Zoological College.

Within the volume of universities and temples were bits of myth, comparing those found in Lahore-Gadani to others, from Selikot. Several fragments dealt with the exploits of the disorderly Natesa; one such named the aspect Shiva, another Nawar; all set against yet a third mythic creature, the *Coyote of the Nile*.

Then, she discovered that the whole of volume five had been machine printed, in perfect reproduction of the fine hand of the scholar. So the *curiat* was not as ancient as it appeared, which gave her cause to marvel upon the scholar who had created it.

Minerals—well, but by the time she had found the discrepancies in the weights of certain ores, she had made the discovery which explained every error.

She had, as was her habit, waited until her sisters retired, then lit her lamp, pulled up the board under the carpet, and brought the box onto her *chatrue*. She released the three ivory hooks, opened the

lid—the box overbalanced and spilled to the floor, books scattering every which way.

Inas slipped out of bed and tenderly gathered the little volumes up, biting her lip when she found several pages in the third book crumpled. Carefully, she smoothed the damaged sheets, and replaced the book with its brothers inside the box.

It was then that she noticed pieces of the box itself had come loose, leaving two neat, deep, holes in the wood, at opposite corners of the lid. Frowning, she scanned the carpet, spying one long spindle, tightly wrapped in cloth. The second had rolled beneath the *chatrue*, and by the time she reached and squirmed and had it out with the very tips of her fingers, the cloth covering had begun to unravel.

Daintily, she fingered it, wondering if perhaps the cloth held some herb for protection against demons, or perhaps salts, to insure the books kept dry, or—

There was writing on the inside of the cloth. Tiny and meticulous, it was immediately recognizable as the same hand which had penned the *curiat*.

Exquisitely careful, breath caught, she unrolled the little scroll across the carpet, scanning the columns of text; heart hammering into overdrive as she realized that she had discovered her nameless scholar's key.

Teeth indenting her bottom lip, she unrolled the second scroll next to the first, and saw that she had the complete cipher.

Breathless, she groped behind her for the box, and extracted a book at random.

Slowly at first—then more quickly as her agile mind grew acquainted with the key—she began to read.

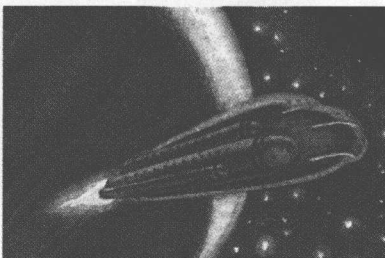
Illuminated by the cipher, it was found that the volume geographical did not concern itself with mountain ranges and rivers at all, but was instead a detailed report of a clandestine entry into the city of Selikot, and a blasphemous subterfuge.

*I regret to inform you, oh, brother in arms, that our information regarding this hopeful world was much misleading. Women are not restricted; they are quarantined, cut off from society and commerce. They may only travel in the company of a male of their kin unit, and even then, heavily shielded in many layers of full body robes, their faces, eyes and hair hidden by veils. So it is that the first adjustment in our well-laid plans has been implemented. You will find that your partner Thelma Delance has ceded her route and her studies to a certain Scholar Umar Khan. And a damnable time I had finding a false beard in this blasted city, too. However, as you know to your sorrow, I'm a resourceful wench, and all is now made seemly. Scholar Khan is suitably odd, and elicits smiles and blessings wherever he walks. The project continues only slightly impeded by the beard, which itches. I will hold a copy of this letter in my field notes, in the interests of completeness.*

*Farewell for now, brother Jamie. You owe me a drink and dinner when we are reunited.*

Inas was slow with her needle next morning, her head full of wonders and blasphemies.

That there were other worlds, other peoples, variously named "Terran" and "Liaden"—that was known. Indeed, Selikot was the site of a "space-port" and bazaar, where such outworlders traded what goods they brought for those offered by the likes of Merchant





## Veil of the Dancer

Majidi. The outworlders were not permitted beyond the bazaar, for they were unpius; and the likes of Merchant Majidi must needs undergo purifications after their business in the bazaar was concluded.

Yet now it seemed that one—nay, a pair—of outworlders had moved beyond the bazaar to rove and study the wider world—and one of them a woman. A woman who had disguised herself as a man.

This was blasphemy, and yet the temples had not fallen; the crust of the world had not split open and swallowed cities; nor had fires rained from the heavens.

Perhaps Thelma Delance had repented her sin? Perhaps Amineh, the little god of women, had interceded with his brothers and bought mercy?

Perhaps the gods were not as all-seeing and as all-powerful as she had been taught?

Within the layers of her at-home robes, Inas shivered, but her scholar-trained mind continued its questions, and the answers which arose to retire those new and disturbing questions altered the measure of the world.

"Truth defines the order of the universe," she whispered, bending to her needlework. "When we accept the truth, we accept the will of the gods."

Yet, how if accepting the truth proved the absence of the gods? Why had her father given her such a gift? Had he read the *curiat* before sending it to her? Did he know of the hidden—

Across the room, from the other side of the guest screen, Nasir's voice intruded.

"The Esteemed and Blessed Scholar Reyman Bhar is returned home and bids his daughter Inas attend him in the study."

Her father was at his desk, several volumes open before him, his fingers nimble on the keypad of the notetaker. Inas waited, silent, her hands folded into her sleeves. The light of the study lamps was diffused into a golden glow by the *ubaie*, so that her father seemed surrounded by the light of heaven. He was a handsome man, dark, with a masterful beak of a nose and the high forehead of a scholar. His beard was as black and as glossy as that of a man half his age. He wore the house turban, by which she knew he had been home some hours before sending for her, and the loosened braid of his hair showed thick and gray.

He made a few more notes, turned a page of the topmost book, set the notetaker aside, and looked up.

Inas melted to her knees and bowed, forehead to the carpet.

"Arise, daughter," he said, kindly as always.

She did so and stood quiet once more, hands folded before her.

"Tell me, did my packet arrive timely?"

"Father," she said softly, "it did. I am grateful to you for so precious a gift."

He smiled, well-pleased with her. "It is a curiosity, is it not? Did you mark the pattern of the errors? Almost, it seems a farce—a plaything. What think you?"

"Perhaps," Inas said, her breath painfully short, "it is a test?"

He considered it, black brows knit, then nodded, judiciously. "It could be so. Yes, I believe you have the right of it, daughter. A test

devised by a scholar of the higher orders, perhaps to teach discipline." He paused, thinking more deeply. Inas, waiting, felt ill, wondering if he knew of the hidden scholar's key and the blasphemies contained in the revealed text.

"Yes," he said again. "A test. How well the scholar must have loved the student for which it was devised!"

"Yes, Father," Inas whispered, and gathered together her courage, lips parting to ask it, for she *must* know...

"As you progress in scholarship, you will learn that the most precious gifts are those which are more than they appear," her father said, "and that hidden knowledge has power." He bowed, seated as he was, scholar to scholar, which was a small blasphemy of its own, face as austere as a saint's.

And so, Inas thought, she was instructed. She bowed. "Yes, Father."

"Hah." He leaned back in his chair, suddenly at ease, and waved her to the stool at his feet.

"Sit, child, and tell me how the arrangements for your sister's wedding progress."



The *curiat* bouyed her, frightened her, intrigued her. She spent her nights with it, and every other moment she could steal. She stored it now in the long-forgot sand-wood drawer—the hidden pass-through where it stood long out of use—where she could, if she wished, reach it as easily from the garden or her room.

Thelma Delance—she heard the woman's voice in the few hours of sleep she allowed herself—a loud, good-natured, and unwomanly voice, honest as women could never be, and courageous.

Inas read, and learned. Thelma Delance had been a scholar of wide learning. There were recipes for medicines among her notes; recipes for poisons, for explosives, and other disasters, which Inas understood only mistily; and lessons of *self-defense*, which held echoes of her mother's name. There was other knowledge, too—plans for establishing a *base*.

And there was the appalling fact that the notes simply ended, and did not pick up again:

*They're on me. I've got one more trick up my sleeve. You know me, Jamie Moore, always one more trick up Thelma's wide sleeve, eh? We'll see soon enough if it's worked. If it has, you owe me—that's my cue. They're shooting...*

There was nothing more after that, only the box, and the wound it bore, which might, Inas thought, have been made by a pellet.

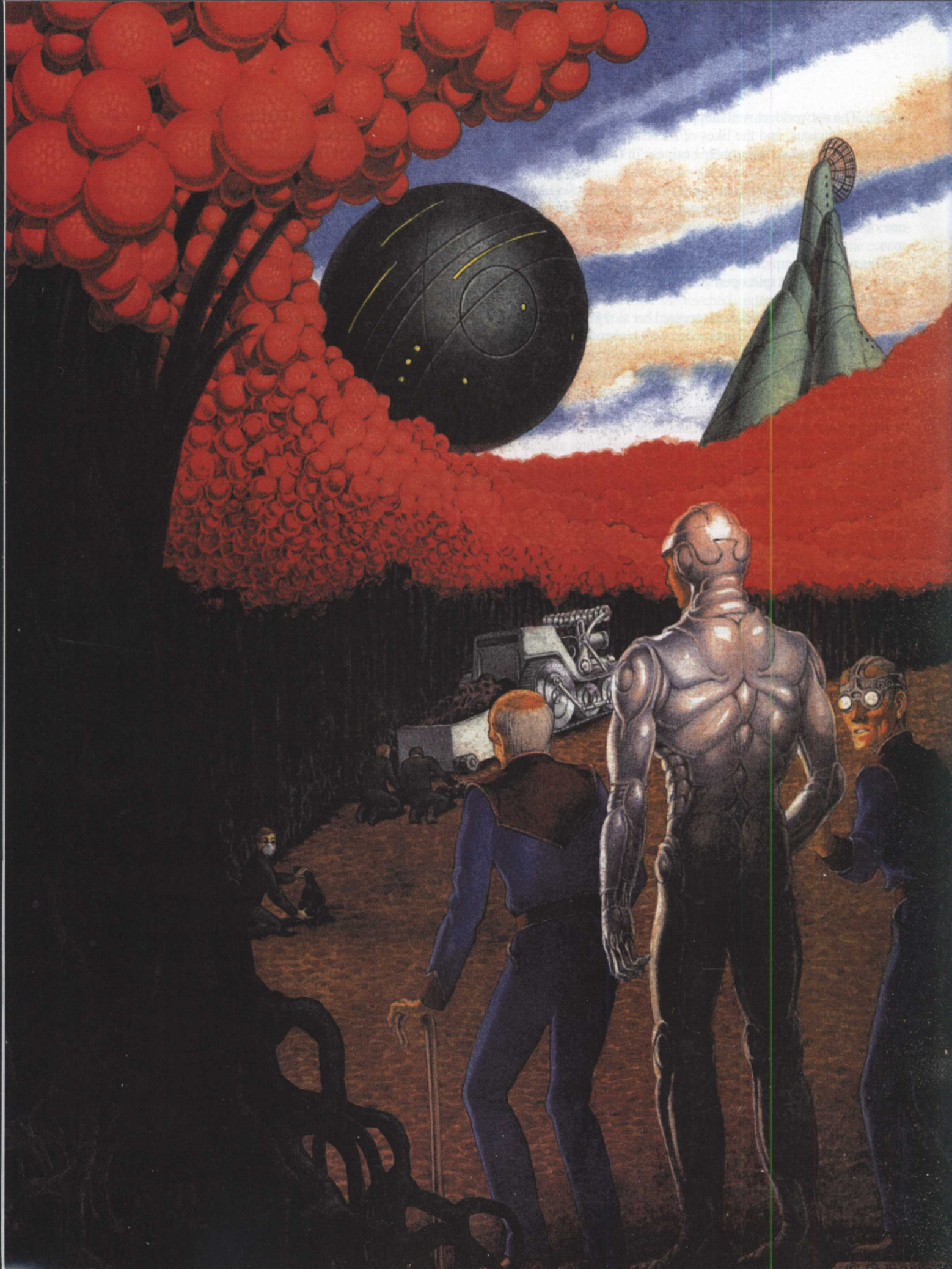
She wondered who had wished to kill Thelma Delance—and almost laughed. Surely, that list was long. The priests—of a certainty. The scholars—indeed. The port police, the merchant guild, the freelance vigilantes...

And Inas realized all at once that she was crying, the silent, secret tears that women were allowed, to mourn a sister, a mother, a friend.

The day before Humaria was to wed, Inas once again attended her father in the study, where she was given the task of reshelving the volumes he had utilized in his last commissioned research. By

*See Dancer on page 37*







# The Luck of the Legion

by Jack Williamson

Copyright © Jack Williamson 2002

“Soldier starmen, rise and fly!”

Goodsister Joylander yelled from the door and came stalking down the narrow aisle between the rows of cots in the long dim barracks, screeching out her mockery of the Legion marching song.

“Fly and fight to save the earth that gave you birth,  
Tell the story of your glory—and how you sold your souls  
To bring the dragon bugs to Earth  
And made us slaves forever.”

A tall gaunt woman in a stark white uniform, she wore the Goodfriend badge, a blood-red heart, pinned over her own Her dagger-sharp eyes stabbed at Giles Habibula, who lay moaning on his cot.

“Move it, soldier! Now! All of you out for a special inspection.”

“Mercy, lass!” Habibula groaned and sat up on the side of the cot, pulling his purple pajama jacket around his white-haired chest and shaking his pink-scalped head. “Why roust us out of our blessed beds on this holy Sabbath dawn?”

“Special orders!” Her voice was a clang of hard authority. “You will secure your quarters now, and fall out at oh five hundred for review by Goodfellow Inspector Nine.”

“Not today!” his old voice quavered. “Has he forgotten the noble history of the Legion? How we spilled our precious blood in ten thousand bitter battles on twenty thousand hostile planets to defend mankind—”

“He knows how your own cowardly commander Kalam sold us out,” her icy voice cut him off. “How he gave away this great fortress and all our secret weapons to save his own precious skin. We’d all be dead today, if the Goodfriends hadn’t got here to beat the bugs.”

“A lie, Miss! A monstrous libel, if you’ll forgive the word. The commander fought the mortal bugs to the bitter end, and lost his own blessed eyes.”

“Stop your senseless sniveling and thank the GoodFather for your good care here in Goodhome.” Marching past him, she raised her brass voice. “Rise and fly! Out on the ramp in fifteen minutes!”

“Goodhome!” Habibula whispered hoarsely to Jay Kalam, on the cot beside him. “Thank anybody for this filthy sty and the stinking swill they feed us?”

“I heard you, soldier.” Goodsister Joylander turned abruptly back, her voice an icy blade. “The Goodfellows are the galactic police, serving many thousand worlds. They drove the invading bugs off the planet. They defend us now, since your noble Legion failed.”

“And they work us like mortal dogs—”

“Silence, soldier! Inspector Nine won’t tolerate such insolence.”

He raised his gnarled old hand to press his lips to a large green stone set in a thin gold band.

“Soldier, what is that?”

“A precious treasure, lass.” He looked up at her, tears in his faded eyes. “A gift from a woman I loved. She blessed it with the luck of the Legion. The stone is carved with the Legion star. It will guard me, she promised, from all the malice of a merciless world.”

She sniffed and strode away.

Most of the cots ahead of her were empty, but Jay Kalam was fumbling blindly for his eyes. Hal Samdu, beyond him, was reaching with his single arm to lever himself into the cradle of his towering ambulator. Habibula sat still, following her with his plaintive wail.

“Insolence? Where is the insolence in a moan of mortal truth? Please, lass! ‘Tis true we’ve suffered cruel defeats. I know the survivors want a scapegoat to suffer for their pain, but don’t you think we’ve earned just one blessed day of rest to heal our fearful wounds?”

“Ask Inspector Nine.” Her long nose lifted. “If you’ve got the guts.”

She swung back to snatch the pillow off his cot and uncover a little silver flask.

“Soldier, what is this?”

“A sacred elixir, Miss. I need it to sustain me through moments of distress. And those moments come too mortal often now. Pity me, lass!” Tears welled out of his eyes. “Leave it with me, for precious Terra’s sake.”

She unscrewed cap, sniffed it, and made a sour face.

“Alcohol! You know it’s not allowed.”

“You’re a rare beauty, lass!” He spread imploring hands. “I’ve loved your tender heart since my first blissful glimpse. Forty years ago I might have died for half an instant with you in the dark. How could you steal the last blessed sip of life—”

“If you ever need alcohol, the Goodfellows will issue you alcohol.”

She drained the flask on the floor and sent it skittering across the room.

“Listen, Miss!” He drew a wheezy breath. “That’s too mortal much! We’ve been patient as blessed angels, but we are still soldiers of the holy Legion. Give us time and we’ll escape this miserable pit—”

“Escape, soldier? How do you plan to escape?” Hands on her hips, she swung to sneer at him. “Three old men, miserable cripples, alive by the GoodFather’s mercy and blathering your stupid arrogance! Inspector Nine will hear of this.”

“I warn you, Miss!” He pointed a quivering finger. “We’ll make your tin-shelled inspectors rue the day they ever saw the precious Earth.”

“Soldier, I warn you—” Her voice caught, and she stood a moment glaring at him. “If you care how I feel, your devil bugs killed my father.”

“Quiet, Giles!” Jay Kalam was fitting the skullcap to his shaven head. “Peace!”

Samdu cradled himself in the belly of the ambulator and lurched upright, a towering titanium giant. Habibula shrugged himself into a faded uniform fitted when he had been fatter. Kalam fumbled to focus his eyes. They limped after Goodsister Joylander into daylight.

The barracks was a tunnel driven into the side of a hill, a bomb-proof arsenal while the old fortress stood. Outside they fell into a ragged line of aged and crippled men. The hillside sloped below them to what had been a wide flight-field. Saplings had grown up through broken pavements littered with masses of black and twisted metal that had been gantries, spacecraft, and heavy weaponry.

“Son, look at that fearful sight!” Habibula turned to a new arrival, a younger man beside him, leaning on a crutch. “This was Star Fort Seven, built for Keeper Ro and her secret arsenal. I’ll never forget the dreadful night it fell.”

“The star-bug attack?” The younger man blinked at him. “You remember that?”



# Absolute Magnitude

"Aye, my lad." He drew a long, uneasy breath. "It happened near twenty years ago, back before your own blessed mother ever let you out to play, but I lived through it, every frightful minute. I'd been posted to the Keeper's guard detail. She was Relya Ro, if you don't recall your history. A Keeper of AKKA, the wonder weapon that had saved our worlds a thousand times. A living goddess she was, a perfect sweetheart like you'll never meet. She let me tend her rose garden. I used to bring her a dozen long-stemmed beauties every blessed morning—till that dreadful night when the missiles hit."

He rolled his yellow eyes.

"A night of wicked evil, when the bugs made their sneak attack. Monsters you can't imagine, cunning and pitiless as they were hideous. Hatching their fearful scheme, they'd spied on us for years and captured Commander Kalam. After years of hell in their ugly clutches, he escaped to warn us. Alas, the fearful pity of it! He'd been away too long. He had no papers. The dumbbell commandant laughed at his advice and left humankind at the mercy of the bugs."

He stopped to blink at the man on the crutch.

"Lad, I trust you do believe me?"

"It's news to me." The man nodded doubtfully. "I guess I do."

"You're damned if you don't. I was there, lad, in a bunker high on the hill behind us. Shivering there alone, long past a black and bitter midnight. I must admit I'd had a precious dram from my pocket flask to help me endure the piercing fangs of a cruel north wind. Perhaps I dozed for a mortal moment before the wicked thunder of the falling missiles jolted me awake."

His gesture swept the lifeless field, the crater pits, the crumpled armament.

"When the smoke and dust had cleared, this fearful ruin was all I saw. Yet we fought on, my comrades here!" He nodded at Samdu, standing tall in the titanium frame, and Kalam grimly scanning the field through his skullcap lenses. "Hopeless odds against us. The monster bugs hit all seven Star Forts on their seven different planets in a single mortal instant. Killed all the seven Keepers, with no chance to use their weapons."

"Yet we fought on with the feeble means we had. From my own perilous post on the hill, I saw a bug battle-craft drop out of the sky. A great black ball, rockets blazing, red lasers stabbing out of it at anything left alive on the field. It landed right there."

He pointed.

"A long ramp slid down the side of it. I watched the hell-born bugs crawling out."

"You saw them?" the young man whispered. "Saw them yourself?"

"Nightmares that haunt me yet! Great blobs of black jelly, each one wrapped in a glittery bubble. They had no shapes that I could see. Nothing except their demon eyes and hellish fangs. Great green eyes, shining in the dark. Fangs red as blood, long as sabers. No natural arms or legs, but they grew jelly hands to carry laser guns. You see what they did to us—"

"Attention!" Goodsister Joylander came tramping past them. "Silence in the ranks. Toes on the yellow line. Inspector Nine has arrived. His escort is Goodfriend Colonel Karnby. You will greet them with a snappy salute."

Inspector Nine was a thick red cylinder, taller than a man, hopping on a coiled spring. His head was a bright bowl-shaped

signal dish, tilted toward the sky. Two eyes on long stalks projected forward. Two snaky arms coiled around a laptop computer and a laser weapon.

Colonel Karnby came close behind him. A fat little human in a white-and-gold Goodlife uniform, he had a round pink face and headphones over his ears. He returned their salutes, looked up for orders from the inspector's dish, and stopped to shout hoarsely at the waiting men.

"Inspector Nine wishes to remind you of your great debt to the holy Goodfather, who sent the Goodfellows to drive the bugs off the Earth and care for us you forever. The inspector asks me to announce that this old battlefield is now to be cleared and leveled for a blackroot plantation. Goodhome will be closed. Inmates will be transferred for subsistence and employment at Goodwork Valley, to continue your labor for the greater glory of the GoodFather."

The major colonel turned to listen again, but Inspector Nine was already hopping on down the line.

"Greater glory!" Habibula snarled when they were gone. "If we're condemned to sweat and die in Goodwork Valley?"

The young man frowned. "What's Goodwork Valley?"

"A tar pit." Habibula wrinkled his nose.

"The Goodfellows have drained our precious petroleum and shipped it off the Earth. Now they want our oil tar. We'll be slaving out our lives digging the foul stuff and loading it on space freighters for export to wherever they take it."

Back inside the barracks, he picked up his empty pocket flask and shook it sadly. Jay Kalam swung his lenses to be sure they were alone.

"Giles." He dropped his voice and beckoned them closer. "I heard your rash ultimatum to our hostess. Do you mean it? Are you ready to give up the rotgut you brew in the basement and risk a desperate chance at freedom?"

"You know I'm ready, Jay. When did I ever shrink from danger? Though perhaps I feel a hint of blessed prudence when you speak of desperation. What exactly is this chance?"

"In prudence, we can't discuss it here." He touched his lips and brushed Samdu's human arm. "If you want to know, follow me."

"Are you dreaming?" Habibula stared at him. "You know Goodsister Joylander and her devils, watching us like mortal hawks. And the Goodlife patrols cruising all the roads—"

"Lead us on, Jay," Samdu interrupted him. "Lead us on."

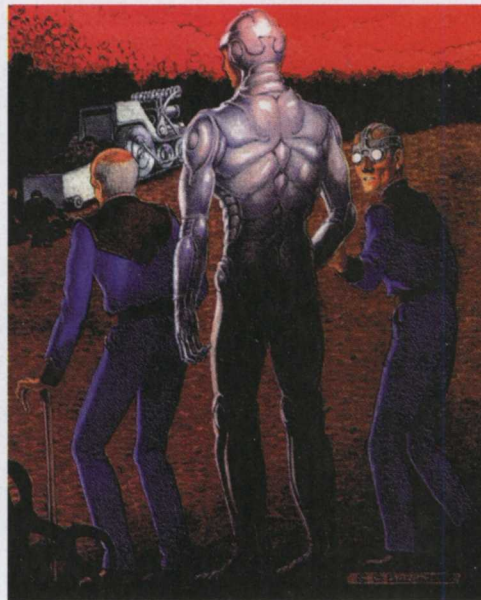
Kalam led them though the empty cots and down a long dim hall past a dozen doors, deep into the mountain, finally into a dark and vacant space where the tiny lamp on the crown of his skullcap made the only light. They squatted on the bare stone floor.

"Tell us, Jay," Samdu begged him. "If you have a plan."

A drop of water fell somewhere in the gloom, a small explosion that startled Habibula.

"For life's sweet sake!" he wheezed. "Don't ask too mortal much. I lost my temper with that hideous witch, but I never meant to beg for suicide. True, I once was able to serve the blessed Legion with a certain rare and precious gift with locks and secret things and the ways of evil beings, but the curse of time has blighted all my gifts and wit."

"Tell us Jay." Samdu hunched closer. "Tell us."





# The Luck of the Legion

"The bugs were spying on us with their quantum wave devices." Kalam's voice had gone with his eyes; he spoke in a raspy whisper. "I was scouting for their bases. They surprised us, seized my flagship, took us off to their hives in Draconis. They held us there for years, squeezing us in every way they could for information about AKKA and all our defenses.

"We kept silent when we could, tried to play their game when we had to, trading our own lies for theirs. You know the ugly score. We failed to scare them off. They offered peace and killed the Keepers. Killed our civilization. But there's one last play I never got to make. I've waited all these years, hoping for a chance to try it. If they're going to take us to the tar pits, we must make our move tonight."

A drop of water fell.

"Now?" Habibula cringed and gasped, "What's this mortal move?"

"Better you don't know till after we've tried it." Kalam swung his lenses to sweep the bare walls again, and his whisper fell till they had to lean closer. "But I can tell you something about the bugs. Or in fact the bug. Because they are only one single individual."

"One bug?" Habibula blinked. "We saw ten thousand."

"Or ten million." Kalam nodded, the shadows from his headlamp flickering on the walls. "But they have no individual minds, only tiny rudiments of brains. Every bug is linked to every other by a net quantum entanglement that can flash a signal across the galaxy in no time at all. They are all connected like the individual transistors in a computer to make a single hive mind.

"That was a problem when it tried to question us." Old pain shadowed his leathery face. "It had no language. Existing alone, it needed none. The solution we found was to connect our computers to it. I have a message for it now, if we can reach the right computer."

"Jay, are you crazy?" Habibula stared at him. "We have no computers. And you know the mortal bugs are gone, since the Goodfellows drove them out." He shook his hairless head. "I hate to speak about it, Jay, but I sometimes think all that torture by the bugs was too much for you."

Kalam flinched.

"Trust me!" he whispered to Samdu, and turned back to Habibula with a stiff little grin. "Trust your Legion luck."

Habibula blinked.

"Jay, actually I can't." He shook his head at the ring. "I don't talk about her because I'm so ashamed I ever saw her, but the green stone was a gift from Elegia LeChark. It happened while you were off in Draconis. She was a dancer and dazzling beauty. The sort of woman I never hoped to touch, until she arranged the accident that got us together.

"I loved her, Jay." He wiped his bleary eyes and blew his nose. "She made me think she loved me, but she was trying to turn me traitor, make me betray the Keeper to the bugs. A blade through my mortal heart when I found it out. I had to turn her in. She died in the Legion prison on the dark face of Mercury."

He caught a long breath and looked back at Kalam.

"What in the name of total craziness are you asking us to do?"

"The thing may be insane." Kalam shrugged, frowning soberly. "I've delayed so long because it seemed impossible. But here's what we must do." He raised three scarred and twisted fingers. "One, get out of this trap. Two, get to Green Hall Starport. Three, get into the flight control tower."

"Madness, Jay!" Sadly, Habibula rolled his yellow eyes. "Utter madness. You know it can't be done."

"We'll try it, Jay," Samdu said. "If we must."

Midnight past, Kalam rose and touched their shoulders. Samdu struggled into his ambulator. Habibula stifled a moan and followed them through the cots of snoring men, back down that dark tunnel into the mountain, till they came to a steel-barred barrier across it. Kalam's headlamp found tall iron door with a massive lock. Samdu tried it and turned to Habibula.

"Giles," he whispered, "can you get us through?"

"Must you doubt my precious skills?" Habibula wheezed. "I came here years ago for one last test of my dying skills."

He twisted a scrap of wire in the keyhole and gestured for Samdu to try the door again. With a rusty screech, it swung open. Water drops fell and echoed in the dark ahead. They blundered on, with only Kalam's headlamp to light the way through piles of black ruin that had been weaponry.

Deep in the mountain, Habibula yelped in alarm to stop them. Kalam tipped his head to show a wide black pit beyond a broken railing, the yelp quavering faintly back from somewhere far below. Habibula shrank back from a cold wind from below and a reek of long decay.

"A vent shaft," he said. "If we can climb it."

The headlamp found a rusty steel stair that spiraled around the shaft.

Kalam stepped through a gap in the railing and tipped his head to show the way. Samdu and Habibula climbed after him. They came out of the shaft into the pale light of a waning moon that fell on masses of twisted metal and missile-shattered concrete.

"The mortal bunker where I watched the missiles fall," Habibula whispered. "Or what the bugs left of it."

By moonlight, they found a way through the thickest and saplings grown up over the wrecked defenses and down a rocky gorge to level land. Daylight found them lost in a dense jungle of towering stalks wrapped in black leathery leaves and crowned with heavy masses of scarlet seed. It set them all to sneezing.

"A fearful reek!" Habibula wheezed.

"Blackroot," Kalam said. "Alien stuff.

Poison to us humans."

Samdu lifted Habibula to let him look farther.

"We're lost in a sea of what looks like a sea of mortal blood!" Habibula sneezed again. "Red seed pods waving in the wind. And a great machine roaring through them."

"A harvester," Kalam said. "It shreds the stalks, threshes out the seed, digs up the roots. We farm it for the Goodfellows. To pay for protection from the bugs."

"Let me down!" Habibula cried out. "That machine is roaring straight at us."

Samdu set him down, coughing and gasping for his breath.

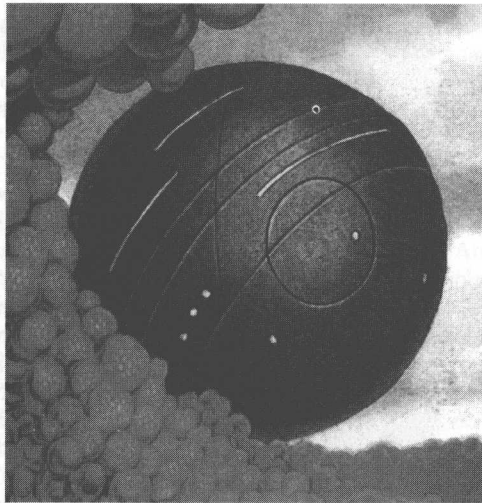
"Did you see the Green Hall tower?" Kalam asked. "Off in the north?"

"With a big signal dish on top?"

"We've got to get there."

"I don't know how. It's miles away. And the mortal harvester's here on top of us."

It thundered by, came back again and yet again, cutting their cover away, until they had to stumble out into sunlight. Scores of human workers were crawling on their knees where it had been, digging out the thick black roots its plows had turned up, knocking off the clinging soil, pitching them into a wagon drawn by a chuffing tractor. Men and





# Absolute Magnitude

women, little children, they were clad in grimy black. All wore white breathing masks. They rose and stared.

"Run!" Habibula yelled at Kalam. "Run for your blessed life!"

He stumbled off across the clods and staggered back when the harvester swerved turned off its last swath and swung back to face him. The driver opened a window high in the air-conditioned cab and shouted through a megaphone.

"Runaways! Escaped from the Home! Catch 'em! Half a day free for all when we turn 'em in."

Kalam walked to meet the workers.

"Do it," he called. "If you love crawling in the mud for these poison roots. If you don't, listen to us."

The bewildered workers stood shaking their heads, gazing at Kalam's wide-lensed skullcap, at Samdu's gigantic metal frame.

"Tell them, Giles," Kalam called.

"Remember—" Choked with the thick black dust, Habibula had to blow his nose. "Do you remember the blessed Legion and how we fought to stop the hell-born bugs? Look at the fearful price we paid!" He pointed. "Look at Captain Hal Samdu, who lost three limbs. Look at Commander Kalam, blinded—"

"But still alive." Kalam stepped closer to the workers. "And fit for one more battle. Your last chance at liberty." He gestured. "If you will help us reach that tower—"

"Back to work, you idle idiots!" The driver was a beefy man with a bulldog jaw, a huge crimson Goodfriend heart on the breast of his white coveralls. "Hear that!" They heard the whine of sirens. "The Goodlife Guard. Back to the job, or they'll make you sorry."

"For sweet life's sake!" Habibula fell to his knees, wheezily pleading. "Give yourselves a mortal chance!"

"Knock 'em down!" the driver bawled. "Sit on 'em till the guard gets here."

"Hold everything!" A stooped, white-bearded man slid off the tractor and ripped off his breathing mask. "My father served in the Legion. He died at Pluto Station. Mom gave me his medals when I was a kid. If this is Commander Kalam, I say we trust him. If he needs wheels, I say we give him wheels."

He tossed the tractor keys to Samdu.

Habibula and Kalam dived into the wagon and crouched down on the roots. The harvester roared and lumbered toward them. Samdu shook his metal fist at it and drove them jolting across the furrows. The harvester followed close. Habibula clung with one hand to the side of the rocking wagon and held the green stone to his lips until the harvester fell behind.

They reached a highway that took them past blood-red fields of uncut blackroot, past blackroot mills that poured dense black dust into the sky, past scores and hundreds of workers creeping on their knees behind the lumbering machines. A Goodlife patrol car was suddenly howling behind them.

"Better kiss your ring again." Kalam grinned at him. "We need all your luck."

"I don't know, Jay." Habibula sighed. "If you want the mortal truth, I lost the last of my trust when Elegia LeChark swore at her trial that you'd been the leader of her plot with the bugs. Elegia—" Whispering, he shook his head at the ring. "She had the look and body of a holy angel. A night with her was blessed heaven, till she showed me the black snake in her heart."

He cringed from the screaming siren.

"Don't grieve, Giles." Kalam gripped his shoulder. "Our luck is what we make it. We've got to make it now."

The patrol car screamed past them, veered off the road, and parked in the scarlet glow of a huge red heart above a blazing sign, GOODTIMES BAR. Habibula drew a long breath and kissed the ring.

"Every little helps." Grinning, Kalam shaded his lenses to study a great black moon rising out of the blood-colored fields ahead. "A space freighter," he said. "Loading a blackroot cargo."

A few miles toward it, Samdu turned toward the lone green tower at the old starport.

"Remember?" Habibula nodded at a row of spacecraft standing behind a high steel fence. "Remember the silver towers they used to be, skipping from star to star in the time of one heart beat. Look at them now! Dead as the mortal Legion! Streaked with rust like drying blood, buried under all the years of weeds and brush."

He shook his head at Kalam.

"Remember how we used to fly the starways? I went once with the Keeper's guard when she toured the Legion forts on half a dozen secret planets. Her sacred sisters welcomed us like kings, feasting us, with meats and wines I won't forget."

Kalam shrugged and looked ahead at the freighter, an enormous dead-black globe. Tractor wagons in an endless line were halted on the road beneath it, waiting to dump their blackroot loads into loading conveyors.

Samdu drove on around the ship, and stopped beside a patrol car standing on the lot at the foot of the tower. His titanium fist seized a heavy blackroot root. They jumped out of the wagon and ran toward a massive metal door.

"Watch that mortal monster, Jay—"

The door was sliding open. A huge, red-shelled Goodfellow bounced out to meet them, its stalked eyes bent to study them, its silver signal dish tilted down.

"Sir!" Habibula bowed and raised a shaking hand. "Please forgive our intrusion. We intend no harm. We've come to report disorder—"

Its boneless arm swung a gleaming laser weapon at Samdu. The weapon flashed. His metal legs buckled. Shouting something incoherent, he crashed to the pavement. The weapon swung to Habibula.

"I loved you, Hal!" he wailed. "I knew we had no blessed chance."

With a last convulsive effort, Samdu's titanium arm hurled the heavy root. It hit the signal dish and carried it away. The crimson cylinder toppled to the pavement. Something inside it thudded, squalled, and ceased. Something hissed. The eyestalks threshed and went limp. The weapon clattered out of its grasp.

"For life's precious sake—"

A door had fallen open in the side of the cylinder when it fell. Habibula gasped and staggered back from a shapeless mass of thick black jelly that quivered around long red fangs. A faint red gleam faded from the glassy bubbles that had been its actual eyes. Habibula bent double, sick from its fetid reek.

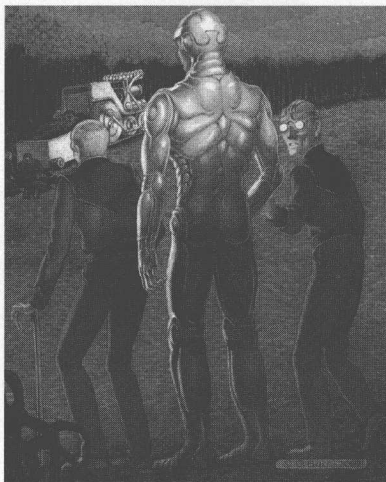
"A mortal bug!" he gasped when he could speak. "And a fearful trick on us. The Goodfellows saying they'd saved us. And all of them dragon bugs, ruling us out of their red tin cans!"

Kalam had bent over Samdu.

"Go—!" The whisper came faintly out of his crumpled frame. "Go on!"

Kalam patted the human shoulder and ran on into the tower. Habibula snatched the fallen laser weapon and followed him into a long dim hall. Nausea doubled him again.

"Bug stink," Kalam said. "Don't let it get you."





## The Luck of the Legion

He ran across the hall and stopped to punch at strange red characters glowing on a panel.

"Bug script," he muttered. "On our own elevator."

He turned his head to listen. Habibula heard a hollow hooting that seemed to come from somewhere below.

"A job for you, Giles." He pointed to an archway at the end of the hall. "We've got surprise. Use it! There's a stair. Take it to the top. Knock out that big signal dish."

"Me?" Habibula blinked at the weapon. "All alone? Armed with only this mortal gadget I never saw before? Life knows I can't—"

"Move it Giles, while you can. I've got another errand."

"Jay, I never was never born to be a lone hero --"

The door snapped open. Kalam stepped inside. It snapped shut. Habibula was left alone, wheezing for breath. Something hooted, closer. Clutching the laser gun, he stumbled down the hall and through the arch. Beyond was a spiral stair. He kissed the green stone and stumbled up it. The hooting echoed behind him, louder and louder.

Gasping for breath, he reached the top landing and blundered through a doorway into interstellar space. A starry sky arched overhead, curving down into a starry void with no support beneath him. For an instant the illusion was perfect. He reeled with a vertigo that eased when he felt the comfort of a solid floor under his feet.

The stars were simulated, set in a web of thin bright lines in a dozen colors tracing the spaceways between them. The control room was a huge hollow globe. He was high on the side of it, standing on a transparent bridge that led to a tiny island of instrument consoles.

An air jet thundered.

He saw a huge red cylinder in the air overhead, soaring toward him from the consoles. It hooted. He saw a weapon in its serpent grasp. Its signal dish tipped toward him. He raised the captured laser gun, shaking in his clammy hands, and found the firing button. Its scarlet flash stabbed the dish.

The thunder ceased. The cylinder fell past him, into the gulf of stars beneath. After a moment of silence, its crash rang against the walls around him. Dazed with dread, he stumbled on to the consoles. They were set in a tiny circle. He kissed the green stone and crouched down inside the circle, wheezing for his breath.

"I knew it, Jay!" he moaned. "I knew it when Elegia duped me. I remember when we thought we thought we had it all. Our blessed colonies thriving on a thousand planets and the seven sister Keepers ready with all the power of AKKA safe in their seven might forts. I thought we were invincible.

"But the bugs were too much for us." Crouching lower, he shook his head at the ring. "The mortal bugs and that witch Elegia. I knew it, Jay. I knew we had no precious sliver of a chance—"

The stars were gone. Brightness blinded him. Thunder crashed, the roar of air jets. He blinked and found Goodfellow cylinders swarming into the room. The foremost came plunging straight at him. He aimed the laser gun and hit the trigger button. It failed to fire. Shrinking down from the deafening roar and the diving cylinder, he kissed the lucky stone. He knew nothing else to do.

The thunder stopped. The room went dark. The falling cylinder crushed him to the floor. He lay a long time there, dazed and aching from its weight on his legs. The fetid reek of the bugs grew strong around him. His throat grew dry. He longed for a drink, and dreamed of Goodsister Joylander taking his flask away.

"The last of us gone," he was whispering. "The last of the mortal Legion." He heard a rustle like rats in the dark. "Poor Hal gone. And Jay." He tried to lift his head. "I don't know where—"

"We're right here with you."

Kalam's voice was like a dream, but the weight on his legs was gone. Samdu's titanium arm was lifting him. It seemed another dream till he saw that the room was bright again, saw Samdu bending over him, heard Samdu's booming voice.

"If you can stand up, Giles, we're okay now."

On his feet, he clung to the corner of the console and blinked at Samdu.

"Hal, I thought you were done for."

"Bruises." Samdu's human shoulder shrugged. "A scratch on my good arm. The laser hit my knee and knocked me down, but I owe a debt to the Legion medics that build my suit before the bugs shut the center down. It was able to fix itself.

"And Jay has killed the bugs."

"Killed them?" He shook his head at Kalam. "How?"

"Or let them kill themselves." Kalam grinned. "They made one great mistake."

"Tell us, Jay," Samdu urged him. "Tell us what it was."

"They had grown too big," Kalam said. "They had reached too far.

When they captured my flagship, they thought they had us down. Their great blunder was to penetrate our interstellar computer system. They was easy for them, because their own common mind functions through the same quantum entanglement effect.

"That effect was the secret of their power, but also their Achilles' heel. They had to use our computer systems to communicate with us. That gave us the chance to study their great hive mind. And write a virus to disable it. The problem was to plant the virus. They struck before we got that done. Giles, you gave us the break." He clapped Habibula's shoulder. "Climbing the stair, you led the bugs off their duty stations and let me reach to the computer room and send the virus into the bug's neural web."

Habibula blinked again. "It killed them all?"

"When the mind shut down, the bodies stopped."

Kalam gestured the cylinders piled below them, at the bottom of the pit, many of them burst and oozing black jelly. "These look dead enough."

Habibula leaned to peer into the pit, and kissed the green stone.

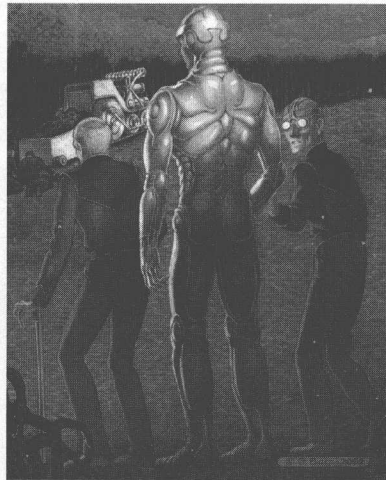
"They were a nightmare," Samdu said. "Now it's over."

"Then let's get out of their fearful stink." Habibula's pale eyes brightened. "Let's head back to the Goodtimes Bar and drink our fill to the glory of the Legion."

"Not yet, Giles." Very soberly, Kalam shook his head. "The quantum signal system is ours again. We must call everybody, our own people here and out across the stars. Tell them what happened what happened to the bugs, and help them organize to rule themselves again."

"And don't forget." Samdu grinned at him. "We're none of us so young as we used to be. You still have all your natural limbs, but I believe the medics have advised you to avoid alcohol."

"Aye, Hal." Habibula sighed. "The Elegia's mortal stone has brought better luck to the Legion than it ever did to me."





# Absolute Magnitude

## Anthem from page 9

hands, and looked completely lost.

"Good evening," said Pen, "happy festival. Can I assist you in some way?"

"I want to hear her sing," he said.

"Then you'll want to go through town to the park. I'm going there now. My name is Pen. You're welcome to walk with me."

"Most kind." He didn't give his name, and Pen didn't ask.

The sun was setting as they walked in silence up the pier and turned down an avenue of homes and shops. Banners flew from every rooftop. Flowers bloomed in every window, every doorway. Children raced back and forth, showing off their costumes. One ran up to the stranger and held out her string of beach roses. When he stared in confusion, she looped it around his neck.

"Thank you," the stranger said, "allow me . . ." but she darted off, ignoring the coin in his outstretched hand. "Is this place always like this?"

"Yes," Pen laughed, "only more so at festivals."

"More than one?"

"On Strand, nine so far this year, maybe a tenth if we don't exhaust ourselves. But this one is the most celebrated."

"Then how is there time for anything else? Does anyone here do useful work?"

"Why, yes, we all do. What is more useful than a festival?"

"But no one earns any money," the stranger seemed perturbed by that. "I am given food and flowers, a place to stay, and no one lets me pay for anything."

"Because nothing costs anything. I'm afraid money has never quite caught on here," Pen explained. "We tried it for a while, but it took up space in our pockets, and we kept losing it. What we didn't lose, we tried to give away, but no one wanted it. We found it entirely useless, so we don't bother with it anymore."

"Your people must be poor. How does anyone make a living?"

From far ahead of them came the sound of cheering and applause. The sky was aflame, stray clouds fired with gold.

This man was very odd. Pen chose not to take offense.

"We just live. We do what we do. We fish the seas, build the houses, sweep the streets, sing the songs—and we're rather good at making festivals. If something needs to be done, someone will do it, eventually. That must sound strange to you," Pen smiled, thinking of the industrious Denemerrans, "but it's our way. No one here is poor. On Isle, we are all quite wealthy."

It was twilight when they reached the park. More flowers, trees in bloom, grassy hills and sandy dunes against a fading sky. In the distance the amphitheatre was packed, and the crowd spilled onto the grounds, lying on blankets, partying in groups. Ari would be pacing backstage. It wouldn't be long now.

"You came with her. You know her, then?"

"Yes."

"Is it true what they say?"

"And what would that be?" Pen asked, resigned to another story about the rain.

"That she tamed the snowdeer, saved them from certain death."

"Oh, and where did you hear that?"

"On planet Ice. I met a man there," the stranger said, "a philosopher. Until recently, I didn't know people lived on Ice."

"Very few, and they all seem to be philosophers. I think their weather accounts for it, as ours accounts for festivals."

"This man saw it happen," the stranger went on. "He said she had come to see the migration. The great herd, white deer against white snow, making their way through Crystal Pass. She was standing at the top to watch. But just as the herd started up, the snow far below them gave way—an avalanche, he said. The roar of it frightened them. They went running the wrong way, up the ridge instead of through the pass. The far side of that ridge was a sheer drop into a canyon. They would never be able to stop in time. He told how she called to them and began to sing, how her voice floated through the mountains. He said there was never such a sound in all Creation, a sound so free and true. The herd's leader stopped, turned to listen. The others slowed, then stopped as well. They came down from the ridge, started up the pass again, and she went on singing. The snowdeer, he said, never allowed anyone to approach them. But they surrounded her, let her touch them as she sang, then went safely on their way. He said it was the most beautiful song his world had ever heard."

"'Farland,' a lullaby."

"Will she sing it tonight?"

"I don't know. I don't know which songs she'll sing," Pen said glumly, thinking of the one she wouldn't.

"I came to hear her for myself, this singer who works magic."

"There was no magic," Pen sighed. "Snowdeer are sensitive to sound. The avalanche frightened them, the singing calmed them, that's all."

"How do you know?"

"I was there."

A scattering of applause began when a stagehand came out to adjust a light. Then the audience began clapping in earnest, chanting "Ari! Ari!" Any moment now.

"You'd best find a seat, if you can," Pen said. "I prefer to stand. Enjoy this concert you came so far to hear."

Was it the wrong thing to say?

A shadow passed over the man's face. Suddenly Pen sensed a bleakness in him, a sorrow too intense for words—and something more disturbing that Pen could not identify, something as foreign as his

confusion and his clothes.

"Thank you for our talk. I shall try not to expect magic," he said solemnly and moved away through the crowd, never having said his name, never having said a thing about himself.

Then a word came to Pen for the shadow on that man's face, the feeling he kept inside. Dread. Pen tried to make it something else, but dread was what it was. It had no place here. Not on this night, not on this world. Pen wished they had never met.

The stage waited in the dark. The audience grew quiet. The night breeze carried scents of flowers and the sea. When a pool of light shone down, the crowd began to cheer.

She walked into the light, salty and sunburnt, in the same shirt and pants she'd worn sailing, hair still tangled from the wind. She looked ready to roll up her sleeves and get down to work. They loved it. They roared. When she struck familiar chords on her melodir, everyone knew what was coming, and Pen smiled: their first song. Perhaps she wasn't angry after all.

*"Island in the sky, island far  
Left by the light of a wand'ring star  
I'll be back someday, if I ever find my way  
across the dark where the new worlds are, island far!"*

They joined in as always, linking arms, raising bottles, spacefarers of the moment, Islanders all.





# Absolute Magnitude

*"Ride the light, flying high  
Ride the light and wonder why  
just one more sun, one more sky  
one more world before I die  
Too many nights alone!  
Lightyears bring me home, island far . . ."*

The moon rose huge and silver, hung above the trees, and she sang the night away. Songs for being born and growing old. Sweet songs, bawdy songs, songs that broke the heart, and songs that rocked the night. When she saw fellow musicians in the crowd, she beckoned them on stage with their melodirs and pipes and fiddles. The music swelled, shook the air. Rapture overflowed in tears and cheers and storms of flowers falling at her feet. When applause wouldn't end for some particular favorite, or whenever the notion struck her, she shouted over their thunder.

"So you liked that one, did you? Then I'll sing it again—are you listening?"

Love, life, truth, she sang it all.

Standing in the dark, Pen remembered writing every word. Where she was that day, whether it was fair or raining, how the light fell on the page when she took it in her hand, how time stood still until she smiled and said, "That's a good song, Pen! It's exactly what I mean!" and then the world would turn again.

Finally, she held up a hand for silence.

"My last song is for this very concert, this very night, for every one of us, so we'll never forget . . ."

And there it was, the song she put aside that morning. She'd done something different with the melody, Pen couldn't tell quite what, didn't care. The important thing was that she hadn't changed a single word.

*"Remember today when the sun slipped away  
here at the great jubilee  
when we danced through town, when flowers rained down  
when our hearts turned gold as the sea  
when we drank to the sunset, cheered at the end  
Remember it when, remember it then  
remember, remember it all.*

*"Remember tonight how we shine in the light,  
how melodirs ring to the skies  
how the good times belong to our favorite songs  
how the moon comes up in our eyes  
how we'll sing one more chorus, take one more bow  
Remember it how, remember it now  
remember, remember it all.*

*"O remember the tune, the cheers and the moon  
that ache in our hearts when it's over too soon  
the times of our lives in songs of our years  
with light in our faces, love in our tears  
Remember this moment until the stars fall!  
Remember it when, remember it then  
remember it how, remember it now  
remember, remember it all!"*

They wouldn't let her leave. They stood cheering, weeping, throwing flowers until she held out her arms to them and said,

"Then I'll sing it again—are you listening?"

They were indeed.

"Oh, that's a good song, Pen!" She came running off the stage into Pen's arms, extravagant with her kisses. "Listen to that! They liked it!"

"You were wonderful—and you sang it. I'm so glad. This morning I thought you didn't like the words."

"What? When have I ever not liked your words?" she asked between kisses. "How could you think such a silly thing?"

"Because you said no, and then you left."

"The tune! The tune wasn't right, Pen, couldn't you tell?"

"No, they all sound good to me."

"Well, I fixed it and—oh, no! I forgot to tell you! Oh, poor Pen, did you worry about this all day? You did, didn't you!"

"Well—"

"Your pardon," a voice interrupted, "may I speak with you?"

The stranger from the dock was standing there, hat in hand. None of the night's joy had rubbed off on him. His face and manner were somber as before.

"Hello again," said Pen, wishing he would go away, but Ari was in an expansive mood. "We met before the concert," Pen explained. "He didn't give his name, but I think he came a long way to hear you. From Denemerria, was it?"

"No." The man stared at the ground, turning his hat in his hands. Then he took a deep breath and looked into Ari's eyes. "My name is Fiel," he said. "I am from Enlor."

## II

"Perhaps you've not heard of it. It's the third planet—"

"We know," Ari said, her smile gone. "Everyone has heard of Enlor."

The world's name explained much about this man, but not why he was here. Pen tried to think of some pleasantry to change the subject, but what did one say to a person from Enlor? Pleasantries were inadequate.

Ari was more direct. "So how is your world?" she asked. "How goes your war?"

"There is a truce now. The Watchers enforce it."

"I am glad. That's progress, isn't it?"

"No," Fiel sighed, "it will begin again. It always does. That is why I came. Will you speak with me?"

"All right," she nodded and tucked her melodir under her arm. "Pen, let's duck out now, or we'll be trapped for hours. Follow us, Fiel—and keep going."

Already there were crowds gathering backstage, waiting to see her. "Stay awhile!" they called, "We love you, Ari!" but they got only a smile and wave as the three slipped through a back exit and started across the park. More well-wishers there, more smiles, waves, sorry-not-tonights.

Fiel kept looking back toward the amphitheatre, where most of the audience had retired to blankets on the lawns. The singing and celebrating went on. Bottle corks popped, and snatches of music mingled in the air with laughter and perfume of flowers.

At last they left the crowds behind and slowed their pace, taking the long way around the park to town.

"So Fiel," Ari said, "your war will begin again? Which side are you on?"

"Neither," he replied. "I am from the Peacemakers. We believe both sides are equally wrong. We work to end the war forever."

"Then I'm glad to meet you, Fiel. Are there many like you?"

"Not enough."

"Forgive me for asking," she said, "I'm not well-informed. Has your world really been at war for a thousand years?"

"Closer to two."

"Is it true your people hurt and murder one another?"

"They do."



30/1887; D. Jeanette Holloman, 8/30/55; Phil Bronson, 8/31/24; Alan J. Lewis, 8/31/42; Robert Adams, 8/31/43. Unless stated otherwise, all birthdays are in the 20th century.

## Us Versus Them

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* has been banned from school libraries in the United Arab Emirates because it "contravenes Islamic values," according to the Emirates' Education Ministry, which routinely bans books which have sexual, religious or historical content offensive to Islam. The book remains on sale in bookstores, and the movie is still being shown there, however.

Shown in two parts over June 8-9 on BBC-TV, *Fields of Gold* starred former soap opera actress Anna Friel, Phil Davis and Max Beesley investigating the effects of genetically modified crops on a local community and the government conspiracy that attempts to suppress the truth. Despite predictable complaints from some scientific sources that such a scenario is extremely unlikely, co-writer and editor of *The Guardian* newspaper **Alan Rusbridger** revealed his inspiration when he recalled that he was reading *The Day of the Triffids* to his daughter, "And I thought: 'Hang on, plants mutating out of control?' **John Wyndham** was a 1950's version of an anti-GM campaigner. I mentioned it to (co-writer) **Ronan [Bennett]**, and he said, 'Why don't we write our own version?'"

## Other Stuff

Among the many postage rate increases effective June 30th is one for Post Office boxes. The SFC box (size 4) used to cost \$250 a year, but will now cost \$410—an increase of 64 percent. We will likely close it sometime next year. As it is, in the last year the amount of mail received, since business mail now goes to Virginia, is down by more than half.

The artist **Jael** reports, "The patron who owns the painting on [the cover of the] June SFC wanted me to know how happy he was about his painting being featured on the cover. These 12 copies are for friends and family: His son is the little boy on the motorcycle in space! The boy was thrilled about it too! I sent him a personally signed copy about a week ago and he took it to school for show and tell!"

A study of library users conducted by Wales University has come to the shattering conclusion that children who read scary books are three times more likely to have nightmares. The findings also revealed that those who read fantasy books had the most lucid dreams. Experts concluded that there

# PUBLISHER'S NOTES

by Warren Lapine

DNA Publications has been publishing *Science Fiction Chronicle* for just over two years. In that time we've made a number of upgrades to the production values, solidified the print schedule, added several columnists, and increased the number of feature articles that we run. It's now time for us to make a few more changes. As I'm sure you noticed, this issue is the first issue to run a photograph of an author rather than our typical art covers. Why did we make this change? you might ask. Well, for quite some time, I've been wondering if the fact that *Science Fiction Chronicle* looks more like a fiction magazine than a trade journal has been having an impact on our sales. I've decided it's time to find out. I'll be following the sales closely for the next few months to see what difference, if any, the new look makes. Once I know, I'll make a decision to either stay with the new cover look or go back to the old one. Simply doing something because that's the way it's always been done is not the way we do business. Next month we'll be introducing an even bigger change. We'll be changing the name of the magazine from *Science Fiction Chronicle* to the shorter and simpler name *Chronicle*. I know that a number of people will be upset by the name change, but frankly the current title is misleading. The name *Science Fiction Chronicle* implies that all we cover is science fiction, which just isn't so. In fact, we cover more horror and fantasy than any other magazine of our sort, so why should the title imply otherwise? I'm sure that there will be other changes as we grow and mature. That's the nature of being alive.

was a link between people's waking life and their dreams—which most SF readers could have told them.

## AUTHORS & EDITORS

### Personnel

**Lori Benton** has been named VP and Publisher of Harcourt's children's book division, replacing **Louise Pelan**, who retired. Benton was Associate Publisher, Director of Marketing at Henry Holt, and before that Marketing Director at Harcourt before moving to Holt in 2001. She reports to Harcourt Trade President and CEO **Dan Farley**, and will be located in Harcourt's New York office. In connection with the move, Executive Managing Editor **Robin Cruise** has been named Deputy Publisher, in Harcourt's San Diego office. Harcourt publishes numerous SF/fantasy titles for children and older readers.

**Devi Pillai**, editorial assistant to **Jennifer Brehl** at Eos Books, left at the beginning of June. She is being replaced by recent college graduate **Kelly O'Connor**.

Author **Sarah Monette** is now represented by **Jack Byrne** of Sternig & Byrne Literary Agency.

**Hal W. Hall**, curator of Texas A&M University's Cushing Memorial Library SF/fantasy research collection, was named Irene B. Hoadley/Friends of the Sterling C. Evans Library Professor, for "Marketing a Research Collection: Developing Scholarly Tools as a Method of Marketing Library Research Collections," which establishes the first web-

based register of library SF collections.

**S.T. Joshi** is no longer reviewing for *Weird Tales*. He has been replaced by **John Gregory Betancourt**, also publisher of Wildside Press.

### Activities

*Redwall* author **Brian Jacques** has completely recovered from the mild stroke he suffered last August, and recently completed another book in the series of popular children's books—which are published in the US in hardcover by Philomel, and as cross-over animal fantasies by Ace Books—*Loamhedge*, scheduled to be published in the Fall of 2003. He also provided the narration for *Triss*, a *Redwall* novel scheduled to appear in hardcover and as an audio book with a full cast this coming September. Now he is working on an autobiography with the working title *A Divvil of a Lad*, because "that's what my grandmother used to call me," Jacques told *Publishers Weekly*. "The first part tells about when I was a little kid in wartime, growing up in a Catholic working-class parish along the docks in Liverpool," he said. Jacques will be touring the US in the fall for *Triss*, and then early in 2003 for *The Angel's Command*, sequel to *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*.

According to the May 9th *New York Post*, **Stephen King** is losing his vision because of incurable macular degeneration. The disease, according to King, is hereditary.

A rumor swept the internet in mid-May that **Forrest J. Ackerman** was at death's door, paralyzed and not expected to recover. After alarming his many friends, it was



# Absolute Magnitude

"And is it also true that sometimes—by accident, surely—but sometimes, in the fighting, that even children are killed?"

"Frequently. Often on purpose. The children of today are the soldiers of tomorrow." Fiel's voice was quiet and ashamed.

"I am so sorry," she murmured. "I'd hoped it wasn't true. On Isle we hear these things about Enlor. We don't understand how they could happen, or why. Thinking of it makes us grieve on beautiful days and gives us bad dreams at night. It all seems so terrible that—forgive me, Fiel—we just don't want to know."

They walked down a neighborhood street toward the pier. The moonlight cast shadows through the trees.

"I understand," he said, "it isn't your war. It is ours, each generation's legacy to the next. The cause became irrelevant long ago. Now it is a war of neighbors, not nations. Now we fight over what our parents did and what we have done to each other. In all our public squares there are huge screens, provided by the Watch, so we may see the fighting all around the world. We fight until our cities are rubble and our land is scorched and those who survive are too weak to go on. Then we agree to a truce. But we do not trust ourselves, so we ask the Watchers to enforce it."

"And on these screens now, do people see the peace?"

"I must tell you," Fiel said with a sad smile, "it took us Peacemakers a long time to even think of asking that question. The answer is no. The Watch owns the screens. Through them they also watch us. They say using the screens during the truce would risk conflict by reminding us of the war, so it is not allowed."

"How odd. Everyone has screens on Denemerra," Ari said, "they love them. They see stories and music and crops growing all over their world. Do your Watchers ever go to Denemerra?"

"I don't think so."

"Maybe they should. I've seen their stations. On the way home from Ice, our ship crossed Enlor's orbit. Who are these Watchers, Fiel, and where did they come from?"

"From Enlor itself. They believe each side is equally profitable. They build weapons, sell them to both armies, then confiscate them under terms of the truce, which they charge us further for keeping. A truce gives them time to retool their factories, which are in space, and to enjoy their homes, which are also in space. They are not inconvenienced by the use of their products. They don't fight the war, but they live well by it. They even extend us credit. Every child born on Enlor for the next hundred years will labor a lifetime to pay the debt." Fiel turned to Pen, who had not said a word. "I showed my ignorance of your world when we met. Forgive me. I did not understand. On Enlor, you see, we are all quite poor."

"At least you have a truce," Pen muttered, not knowing what else to say, ashamed for resenting this stranger's presence and his dreadful words. What must it be like to live them?

"We do. This is a precious moment in time. Now all of Enlor longs for peace, some even join our cause. But it isn't over. Resentments will build. The old ones will begin to tell tales of valor, to ask the young ones, 'and which side were *you* on in the war?' and to name the names of people they must kill when they grow up. Then one day, someone will say something or do something so terrible that the screens are activated, and it's shown all around the world. Then someone else will exact revenge, and so it all begins again."

They reached Strand's waterfront and walked along the pier. The moon floated over the sea. Ari studied Fiel's sorrowful face and tried to make sense of what he had said.

"Why don't they just stop? Do they love the war so much?"

"We hate the war," he whispered, "hate the Watchers. We pray for our children's sake that somehow this time will be different. But it won't. Events will overtake our prayers. History will repeat itself. The truth is we don't know how to stop."

"Just live."

"We can't live a thing we've never known. Some of us think we can. We call ourselves Peacemakers, but we fail. Over and over, we fail. We preach, protest, refuse to fight—and still we fail. This time we decided to ask for help. We consulted the doctors and scientists on Denemerra."

"For a cure?" Ari asked. "Might this be a disease?"

"Or a genetic trait, we thought, like our memories. They are long. From birth we remember sights and sounds in minute detail. Children recall every word of every tale they're told. Every horror they see and hear and feel, they will remember for the rest of their lives. A truce doesn't change that. We hoped there was some physical cause, some inborn propensity for violence we could identify. But Denemerra found no answers in our genes or blood or the chemistry of our brains. There is no cure."

"You must keep trying."

"I do. I went to Ice, to speak with a thinker there. He said there were no answers for a world without questions. He said to change the world, one must first change the heart. He said no one sings without a song. Then he told me about you. So I came to hear you sing. Now I ask your help."

"To do what?"

"To change," said Fiel. "Tonight you changed me, Ari. Perhaps you can change others. You see, I'd heard the stories, all about the rain on Denemerra, the snowdeer on Ice—"

"Stop it!" she cried, suddenly upset, "you heard wrong! I sing songs—that's all I do. People make up stories to explain themselves, not me. Foolish stories! I'm sick of hearing them!"

"Explain what?" asked Fiel. "I do not make things up."

"A feeling they don't understand, or don't want to."

"Please," he said, "explain it to me."

The moon's reflection shimmered on the water all the way to the dock. She sat down on the boards, put aside her melodic, and dangled her feet in the light. Fiel and Pen sat beside her. The only sound was the lapping of waves on the pylons beneath them.

"Tell me a story," Ari said, "sing me a song. That's what we want when we're little, and the world is big, and we're feeling all alone. So grownups tell us tales, sing us to sleep at night. Then the world is full of amazing things, and we know we're not alone. We grow up, but that tell-me-a-story, sing-me-a-song feeling never goes away. So we have performers give us stories and sing to us at night, and we love them for it. Because then we're young again. The world is big again, full of amazing things, and we know we're not alone. It's so simple we don't understand it. We call it magic or rain or something else outside ourselves. We make our performers famous and important. We think they change us. They don't. I don't!" she insisted. Tears filled her eyes. "I don't change anything, Fiel. I only sing songs."

"On Enlor, you see—"

"I'm sorry, Fiel, for you and for Enlor, but—"

"—the children have never heard a song."

"What do you mean?" Ari stared at him, wiped her eyes.

"They've never heard a song. They don't know what one is, and their stories are not the kind your children hear. No one—"

Fiel paused as footsteps sounded on the pier. A man and woman strolled past without noticing them. Each carried a sleeping child. *Remember it when, remember it then, they were singing softly, remember it how, remember it now...* They reached their skiff tied up to the dock, went aboard, and tucked the babies into the boat. They kissed awhile in the moonlight. Then they cast off and were gone.

"No one sings on Enlor," Fiel said quietly, as he watched them sail away.



# Absolute Magnitude

"Forgive me for mentioning this, Fiel," Pen spoke up, "but some of our Islanders have gone to Enlor, tried to help. They also failed. Nothing helps, Fiel. Nothing changes."

"I did. Tonight. When I came here, I saw . . . this. Peace, beauty all around me. At home those are words I struggle to believe in. Here they are so simple, so easy, so free that I couldn't trust what was before my eyes. Then I heard her sing, and something . . . something happened. That voice went inside me, and now I am not the same. Now I know that sound exists—and now I know that anything is possible, even on Enlor. You must hear it all the time, Pen. Has it ever changed you?"

Oh, for some other question, some other answer. She was waiting, frowning. She wasn't going to like this.

"Yes," sighed Pen, because it was the truth.

Ari glared at them both.

"I have no right to ask this," said Fiel, "but I must. Our truce will not last. For my world, for the children, would you come and sing to them? I believe you can change their hearts."

"Listen to me, both of you!" Ari jumped to her feet, furious. "Talking nonsense won't make it so. I don't care what you say. I don't care what anyone says. I can't change your world, Fiel—and don't you dare go saying I can! Your people must change themselves." She started crying again. "If you know anything, Fiel, know this—I don't stop wars! I don't make the rain! I don't tame wild animals! I don't change a thing! I won't stand for any more stories!" That said, her temper vanished. She reached out, took Fiel's hand. "Of course I will come and sing to your children. I can't imagine what, but Pen will think of something. Now I'm tired. I want to go home. Take your time, Pen. Goodnight, Fiel. Please excuse me."

She picked up her melodic and walked off down the dock. Some moments passed before Fiel spoke.

"I thought she would refuse."

"You don't know her."

"I know you don't like this, Pen. You think it's futile."

Pen sighed, and by way of answer said, "Did you ever hear the one about the child they say she woke from the dead?"

"No."

"It happened on World's End, a tiny island far across the ocean. A little boy fell and hit his head. He lay in a coma between life and death. He was taken to Denemerra, to the best doctors, but nothing could wake him. So he was brought back home and wept over by his kin. By the time Ari heard of this, he was dying. The family begged her to come. So she sailed to World's End, sat at his bedside, and sang him his favorite song. When she finished and was telling his mother goodbye, the child opened his eyes and spoke. He said, 'Sing it again.'"

"And why are you telling me all this, Pen?" Fiel asked with a wry smile. "So you can say she had nothing to do with it, he would have awakened anyway, that it was just coincidence?"

"No. I was there. I believe," Pen said with great reluctance, "that it was the sound of her voice. I believe she woke that child from his sleep. What you said, Fiel, is true. It goes inside us, into places we don't know we have. I understand what happened to you tonight. I understand what you want for the children of your world—and yes, I believe she can touch their hearts. Who knows, perhaps even change them."

"But you don't want her to go."

"No."

Fiel smiled, looked around him. Pen could feel his longing.

"I understand. If I lived in a place like this, I would never want to leave. My world isn't beautiful, Pen, but it won't be dangerous. The fighting is stopped. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I sense that you're afraid."

"Yes."

"Of what?"

You, Pen thought, but didn't say it. From another pier down the waterfront came the sound of voices and laughter, followed by playful shrieks and splashing. The moon flooded the docks in the warm island night.

"I am afraid," Pen whispered, "that Enlor will change her. You see, Fiel, I know what happened to the ones who went there, the ones who tried to help. I'm afraid she'll become like old Marissa who cries her days away, because after all these years she still can't forget what she saw. Or like young Samuel, who came back so tortured by his dreams that one blue summer morning he walked into the sea to die. You want her to change hearts. What if she loses her own? What if she never sings again? What if she's unhappy for the rest of her life? If that happens, I will never forgive you. I respect you, Fiel, admire you. But I wish you hadn't come here."

"You love her."

"She sings to me."

"I understand," he said without a trace of bitterness, "if I were in your place, I would feel the same."

Pen had the uncomfortable thought that it probably was not so. Fiel was far more generous, and again Pen felt ashamed. They spoke of practicalities for a moment, took their leave. Fiel started up the pier toward town, then turned back.

"I am sorry, Pen," he said. "I had to ask."

She cast off without a word. They sailed home by moonlight, trade winds whispering on a sea smooth as glass. When she began humming to herself, Pen recognized the tune, the new one she was singing on the way over, before she met a stranger and made a promise. Even Ari couldn't sing that away, and her melody, haunting as it was, refused to make words in Pen's mind.

She dropped anchor close to shore, watched its ripples travel on the moon's path of light.

"When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow."

"You don't have to come, Pen."

"Yes I do."

She lowered the sails, made them fast, then strung up the hammock on deck and held out her arms. Ari sailed alone and sang alone. She didn't like to sleep alone. They loved as if the dawn would never come. Then as they rocked on the turning tide, she sang to Pen in a voice soft as the dark.

*"Daylight's gone across the sea  
Midnight whispers, Come with me . . .*

*"To Farland, where we go when we sleep  
Stars are bright, skies are deep  
and dreams are secrets our pillows keep  
to take with us to Farland.*

*"Nothing to fear, an eyelash away  
from sunshine and seaberry colors of day  
Come morning you'll wake, forget till we say  
It's time you go off to Farland.*

*"So turn out the light, don't bounce on the bed  
Open the door inside your head  
Fly with the moon till the dawn turns red  
and catch your dreams in your hand*

*They're waiting for you, they're all coming true  
in Farland."*

They counted shooting stars while the moon sank into the sea.

# Anthem

"It's important, Pen, what to sing for the children."

"Yes."

"Lullabies won't do. You will think of something, won't you?"

"Yes," said Pen.

## III

"No? Why do you say no? I was invited here to sing."

"Too bad, lady." The young officer of the Watch was clearly out of his depth and trying not to show it. This failed to improve his personality. He stomped about the ship's tiny control room, phone in hand. He opened storage compartments, rummaged through contents. He activated monitors, scrutinized displays.

"Damn, Fiel," he jabbed at a screen, "you took on cargo at Denemerra! That screws my whole day!"

"Sorry, Leon." Fiel stood by patiently.

Pen tried to do the same. Ari made no such attempt. She dogged the officer's steps, peering over his shoulder when he keyed his phone, smiling pleasantly.

"Excuse me—Leon, is it? I think there's been some mistake."

"Yeah, yours. Out of my way."

"Actually, you seem to be in mine," she said, still smiling. "We came all the way from Isle. We were invited here to—"

"You don't leave this ship. I don't care where you came from. Security," he barked into his phone, "board through the cargo lock. Manifest declares seventeen crates of fruit, thirty-two crates of cabbage. Inventory and search it. Fruit goes to stations, send the rest downworld. Cabbage stinks. I hate cabbage," he rang off, disgusted. "That's all I need, Fiel, you and cabbage!"

"Can I help you, Leon?" Fiel asked.

"You've done enough. Damn, Fiel, you see this?" he pointed to the insignia on his sleeve. "You know what this means?"

"A promotion. Congratulations."

"It means no more favors, Fiel, no more sticking my neck out, no more peace people screwing up my—"

"Leon, I requested a permit for these guests before this ship departed Isle. It was confirmed. Clearance was granted."

"Not anymore. Where'd you get money for a ship?"

"It's an old freighter, Leon, a gift from the Denemerrans."

"You carrying contraband? Any little extras from Denemerra?"

"No, Leon, of course not."

"Excuse me," Ari persisted, "clearance? Is that like permission? You mean I need *permission* to sing?"

"Damn right, lady, so shut up. Things change, Fiel, like you showing up here with a ship, cargo, foreigners—"

"Excuse me. I promised to give concerts for the children of Enlor City and Downside. We hope to arrange more. If I need permission, from whom do I get it?"

"Me, lady—and you don't!" Leon started for the door, but Ari planted herself in his path.

"Excuse me. Then I would like to speak with someone else."

"You see someone else? You piss me off, you know that? Hey, I heard about you. I heard the stories. Oh, you make it rain. Oh, you sing to animals. Well, you don't sing here. There's a war going on."

"Really? I thought there was a truce."

"Yeah," Leon sighed, shook his head, "that's just a war waiting to happen. We get unrest. We get incidents. Those downers want enforcement, then they hate our guts for doing it. My orders say nobody rocks the boat, nobody—and that means you." He took a small

cylindrical object off his belt and pointed it at her. "Now stand over there with your friend, and shut the hell up!"

"What is that?" she frowned at its blinking red light.

"A weapon, Ari," Fiel said quietly. "Please, do as he asks."

She stared, incredulous. "He never *asked*," she said, but she turned and walked over to Pen, eyes brimming with tears. "He's rude, Pen," she whispered, "I don't like him. This isn't fair!"

"Sssh!" Pen had never seen a real weapon before. The sight of one pointing at Ari's heart was terror beyond imagining. Leon went back to berating Fiel and poking around the control room, to Pen's profound relief.

"He doesn't make sense, Pen! What did he mean, rock the—"

"Sssh, he'll hear you!" Pen's heart was still knocking. Hers seemed not to have skipped a beat. Didn't she understand? If only she would obey the horrible man, perhaps they could go home without meeting any more like him, without having to set foot on that forsaken world. They should never have come here. Fiel said there would be no danger. Fiel was wrong.

"But what about the children, Pen? What about the song?"

"Hey! I told you to shut up!" Leon came striding over, reaching for his weapon again. "Is there a problem here?"

Suddenly it was all too much for Pen—the miserable voyage, the dismal ship, the constant chill, the dank, stuffy air—and now this, this atrocious behavior to Ari. She was fearless. She ignored discomfort. She hadn't complain once. She kept their spirits high, sang to them

every night, made a song for the children of a world she'd never seen. And now this insufferable twit had pointed a weapon at her and made her cry. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. It was all too much.

"Yes, there's a problem—yours!" Pen heard the words from a distance, wondered who was insane enough to be speaking them. Across the room, Fiel was shaking his head, warning silence. "... or perhaps it's nothing."

"Oh, yeah? What's nothing?" Leon came closer. Pen felt seasick. "And what's the matter with her?"

"Artistic temperament. Take no notice," Pen

drew Leon and his evil weapon away, ignoring Ari's gasp of outrage. "You see, Leon, this singer is quite famous. Perhaps you are unaware of the love and esteem she commands on other worlds. She is a living legend. Those stories you've heard—"

"Garbage. Don't believe 'em."

"Of course not, and neither does she. But on Ice, they believe. They say she saved their snowdeer from extinction. And on Denemerra—oh, on Denemerra, I promise you that they believe. They say she saved their world."

"So..." Leon's eyes narrowed from the strain of trying to work it out, "those people are stupid—but guess what? They're not here! So how's that my problem?"

"Exactly my point. So unfair for you to take the blame."

"What blame?" The weapon was in his hand, its red light blinking again.

"Ah, well, for the agreements—contracts? Treaties? I don't know the proper term, but—"

"You got no agreements!"

"Enlor does. Your Watch does." Pen spelled it out for him. "The ores to power your stations, are they not mined on Ice? And is not all your food imported from Denemerra? When they hear how Ari was invited and then—"

"This Islander speaks the truth, Leon," said Fiel. "I have been to these places, and I know. Our neighbor worlds would never forgive such ill treatment of this lady."





# Absolute Magnitude

"But surely," Pen reasoned, "they wouldn't interrupt deliveries or withhold their resources—do you think, Fiel? Why, that would be catastrophic, wouldn't it? Blackouts, shutdowns, everyone freezing, eating cabbage in the dark—"

"Hey, I got orders!"

"Of course you do. And of course your superiors know those stories and how other worlds believe them. And of course they've considered the consequences—and even if they haven't, surely they wouldn't blame you for being the one who—"

"Shut up! You're worse than she is." Leon paced the room, gesturing with his weapon to help him think. "So maybe there's a problem. But I go to my boss, then it's his problem. I take him this problem with no way to fix it, and there goes my job. Damn you, Fiel, she can't go down there! That comes straight from the top, and they don't change their minds. So there's no way—"

"There is," said Fiel, "there is a way."

Leon turned on him. "You shut up! You peace people kill me! You get these stupid ideas, like your rally that turned into a riot, and I get screwed. Now you bring some outworlders here upsetting things. For gods' sake, Enlor City? Just picture it, Fiel—all those people congregating at the same time! What were you thinking? You want another riot on your hands? If word gets out about this, all hell's going to break loose."

"Well, I'm sorry, Leon," Fiel said gently, "but word is out."

"What?"

"My request was confirmed, Leon, so I sent word ahead to both citizen councils, and they have announced the concerts. By now, everyone knows. She's expected. Both councils are working together on this. Don't worry, Leon. There is a way."

"THEY KNOW DOWN THERE?"

"I certainly hope so," Ari said, to no one in particular, "how else can there be a concert?"

"Leon," Fiel was concerned, "the Watch must know this. Why weren't you told? They sent you in here without even—"

"SHUT UP! Aw, damn!" The implications were beginning to sink in. "So the downers think this'll happen. Then it doesn't. Then they blame the Watch. Then the Watch says it's *my* fault? Aw, I'm gonna hate this," Leon whined, but he grasped at the only straw in sight. "All right, Fiel, you got a way? What way?"

"The screens. The Watch can use the screens. We can dock, transmit from the station. She can stay on board and sing—not just to one or two cities, Leon, but to all of them, to every town and village on Enlor. And the Watch can take all the credit for bringing Enlor this famous singer of songs."

"Screens. She stays here," Leon's eyes narrowed to slits with mental effort. "Credit? Like it's our idea?"

"Like it's your idea—or your superior's. For your own good, Leon, you would do well to send this up the line."

"Why? What does the Watch get out of it?"

"The good will of the people of Enlor," explained Fiel, "which is in short supply just now. An easier time enforcing the truce, which is in your interest just now. Think of it, Leon—a worldwide event, presented by the Watch, for all the children of Enlor. Some might call that a stroke of genius."

"Event," Leon mullied it over, "to enforce the truce?"

"Celebrate," Pen muttered, "'celebrate' works better."

"She'll say that?" Leon eyed Ari with suspicion. "She'll thank the Watch and say we're great and it's all our idea?"

"Uh . . ." said Pen.

"Yes," said Fiel.

"No!" said Ari from across the room. "I won't say that. It was Fiel, it was the Peacemakers who invited me. I'll sing all day, but I won't tell lies. I won't."

"You got no brains, lady!"

"And you have no manners! No wonder you have wars!"

"Don't worry, Leon," Fiel whispered, "we'll work this out."

"Oh, yeah, 'Don't worry, Leon,'" he sneered as he swapped his weapon for his phone. "Three little words that mess up my life. You peace people kill me—sir, Leon here. We got this little problem . . ." he took his conversation across the room.

"Ari, I am so ashamed," said Fiel, "so sorry for this. But by heaven, that was clever of you, Pen!"

"It was, Pen," Ari said fondly, "the cleverest thing I ever saw."

"And if it works—" Fiel could hardly contain his excitement, "do you know what this means? Both councils and the Watch, all working together. That's never happened, Pen. It's historic."

"Practically a festival. What did he mean, Fiel? A rally that turned into a riot?"

"The Watch caused it, pushing and shoving the crowd."

"Ah. And the ship, it's not carrying contraband, is it?"

"No, Pen, of course not."

"Better not be," Leon was back. "Search crew's on the way. They'll take this crate apart. You screw with me, Fiel, you get me posted back downworld, you'll be sorry, I swear. Now we go see the boss. You tell him that stuff you told me. And you," he glared at Ari, "you can practice saying thanks."

"I'll choke first!"

"Perfect. Practice that. You peace people just kill me."

He marched Fiel from the control room.

Silence was a relief. Ari stood at the tiny viewport, watching the hulk of a station turning in the distance and the yellow, uninviting surface of the planet below. It had all sounded so simple back on Isle.

Pen went to stand beside her and said the only thing that came to mind.

"Acknowledge. 'Acknowledge' works better."

"I'll still choke."

"Yes," said Pen, "but then you'll sing."

## IV

"Move it! Stand back! Let them through!" Leon was beside himself with importance at being left in charge. He shouted orders, snarled into his phone, and went strutting about with an air of being severely overworked. He wasn't doing any, which Pen decided was just as well.

The ship was still sitting in open space, permission to dock on station not forthcoming. Not necessary, according to the technicians who brought in all the equipment. The station would boost their signal, the links would bounce it around the globe.

"This is more than I ever dreamed," said Fiel, watching the activity with amazement. "The whole world will hear her sing."

"Yes, and then we can go home." Pen was feeling a bit better. At least no one was pointing weapons at them now. Aside from the appalling conditions, this would be like a broadcast appearance or a recording session on Denemerra. She was accustomed to that.

The shabby control room was even more cramped than before. Now a bank of monitors lined one wall. Ropes of cables snaked across the deck. Technicians were performing sound checks. Silent men in dark suits, presumably the search team, prowled the corridors, came and went in the control room, watched everything. If that concerned Fiel, he didn't show it.

Leon's phone rang incessantly, annoying everyone.

Ari fidgeted with nowhere to pace, barely enough elbow room to tune her strings. She studied the lights, the lens, the sound sensors, the rows of monitors that would show views of the planet from twenty cities, towns, and villages.

# Anthem

"This equipment looks like Denemerra's years ago," she reminisced. "They use a new system now, but this one worked," she smiled at Pen, "even in the rain. At least it feels familiar."

"All this came from Denemerra," Fiel told her. "Besides food, they send us technology, so long as it doesn't kill people. That," he lowered his voice, "the Watchers make themselves."

"Speak of the devil," she murmured as Leon approached.

"Huh? Look, you stand right there, and you look into that thing there, you get it? How long will this take anyway?"

"Oh, quite a while, I should think," Ari said and walked away. "Excuse me," she smiled at one of the techs, "I hope it's not a bother, but could we lower this sensor a bit? Yes, right there, that's lovely . . . and move this light over here? Much nicer, thanks. I've got a bit of room, don't I? Yes, that's what I thought—no, no need for marks . . ."

"Hey," Leon pursued her, "I'm talking to you. You say that thing you're supposed to first."

"When I'm ready," she said, turning back to the technician. "Now, on these screens, will I see the name of each location and be able to hear the people? Oh, good—and this single monitor, that one's on me? Hmm, might we get it out of the way? It's silly of me, but I never like to see myself. Thanks so much—"

"Say it first! Or I'll shut this whole thing down!"

"When I'm ready, Leon. Don't you want them to—" she winced at the strident ringing of his phone, snatched it away from him, snapped it shut. "Stop that! It's awful!"

Promptly, the phone rang again. Leon grabbed it back, glaring, and retreated a few steps to answer.

"That's it," he told the techs, "they're ready."

One by one, monitors came to life. Each black and white image showed a public square filling up with people. Pen watched, fascinated as Ari by the sights, grateful to be seeing them from far away. And then, by occasional drab specks of almost-color in the crowds, Pen saw it wasn't the images in black and white—it was the world. How could any place be so bleak and colorless? And how could they tell friend from foe? All these people looked much alike, pale and gaunt, tired and poor. The scars of battle showed on their bodies and in their eyes. In locations on the planet's nightside, the crowds were bathed in floodlights. On the dayside, the destruction was visible in shattered buildings of their cities, the crumbling walls of their villages. Many adults had brought children and held them tightly by the hand or in their arms. Others stood alone or in small clusters. Old faces looked wary, guarded. Children were timid and solemn. Some of the little ones were crying. They all looked afraid.

"Pen!" Ari stared intently at the screens, gripped by a sudden attack of nerves. "About the song—what if we got it wrong? What if it won't work? What if they don't—"

"You'll know. Sing the others, then you'll know."

She nodded, plucked a few notes on her melodir, waited.

Then, over the links from the planet, a voice boomed.

"ATTENTION! ATTENTION! CITIZENS OF ENLOR!"

"Oh, they're introducing me," she smiled, "that's very—"

"THIS TRANSMISSION IS PERMITTED. CITIZENS MAY ATTEND. THERE WILL BE ORDER. REPEAT, THERE WILL BE ORDER. DISTURBANCE WILL RESULT IN ARREST. WATCHERS ARE AMONG YOU. END ANNOUNCEMENT."

On all the monitors, crowds registered their disapproval with angry murmurs, raised fists. Ari gasped. Fiel hung his head.

"Welcome to Enlor," he said sadly.

"Happy festival," said Pen.

"Oh, gods," Ari breathed, "I really am going to choke!"

"Right," Leon bustled over, "you get over there, but first—" he brandished his phone in her face for emphasis, "first off, you tell them how—"

"Leon! Go away!" Ari brushed past him, walked to stand facing the lens and wall of screens. The monitor that showed her, as she appeared to audiences on the planet, had been moved off to one side. Along with Pen, Fiel, and Leon, all the techs and a few nameless dark-suited men gathered around to watch.

She didn't say anything. She looked into the lens, struck a chord on her melodir, and sang.

*"Island in the sky, island far . . ."*

She sang it as never before. On Isle it was a drinking song, rousing and sentimental. Here it became a prayer, a heart-rending hymn to escape and freedom, loneliness and love.

The sound swept over the world. Adults gazed in silence. Wide-eyed children began standing on tiptoe to see better, peeking out from arms that held them, listening so hard they forgot to be afraid. In cities and villages of war-weary Enlor, the people were spellbound, caught in the music, in the meaning, in the melting, magical sound of her voice. Then it was over.

"Hello," she said to them, "my name is Ari. I was invited here to sing for you, to celebrate the truce on your world. I'm in a ship, far above your planet. I don't know how many people are listening to this, but I can see some of you on screens from here. Can you see me? Can you hear me? Hello, Enlor City! Clap your hands," she demonstrated, "if you can . . ."

Leon's phone rang. He muttered into it, pulled Pen aside.

"Hello, East Meeting! Hello Downside! Clap your hands . . ."

"Look, they don't like this. She was supposed to—"

"She will."

"Hello, Coldstream and Westfield! Clap your hands!"

"She's taking too long," he complained, as the list of names went on. "What's she doing, anyway? We tested the links. There's nothing wrong with the—"

*" . . . and Saltwater and Riveredge, clap your hands . . ."*

"She is showing the people of your world how to applaud," Pen whispered, "in case they wish to express their appreciation. We heard it's not a custom here. Can't think why."

" . . . and now that we can see and hear each other," Ari smiled into the lens, "let us thank your Peacemakers for inviting me and bringing me here!" She clapped encouragement, and the crowds did so too. "And both your citizen councils for working together and spreading the news and sending me such wonderful audiences!" Everyone clapped again. "I wanted to be there in person, that was the plan. But then I could be in only one place at a time. Your Watchers—now, now," she held up a hand to silence the grumbles, "your Watchers had a way for me to be everywhere at once, and without their consent," she lent a touch of weight to her words, "I wouldn't be here at all. So let us acknowledge the Watch for allowing this concert, for lending their screens and their excellent technicians, and for making this celebration a worldwide event for all the children of Enlor. May there be many more! May your truce last forever!"

The clapping began grudgingly, then grew to a respectable round of applause. People could find something to agree with in her carefully chosen words, and they wanted to hear her sing again. She had obliged the Watch with good timing and good grace, and she'd managed not to choke. Pen was proud.

"Satisfied, Leon?" Fiel murmured.





# Absolute Magnitude

Leon didn't know until he looked at the technicians and the dark-suited men, who all seemed entirely satisfied. "Yeah, but how did she . . . what did she just do?"

"Saved your ass," Pen muttered.

"She can do anything," said Fiel, "anything."

"Most of my songs," Ari began picking a tune on her strings as she spoke, "will be for the little ones. And I think I see some little smiles on some little faces. Yes, I'm sure I do! So here's a song for them . . ."

She sang "How Do You Do, I'm Smiling At You"—the most innocent version, of course, followed by "Lucky Day" and "Can You Catch the Rain?" And then "Secret of Starfish Garden," about children on a deep adventure.

They hung on every word, every note. Now the applause came freely. A universal constant, even on Enlor—children loved to clap their hands. Whenever she said, "Then I'll sing it again—are you listening?" these children held their breath and waited.

She didn't forget their elders. She sang them the tender "Ocean Of Your Eyes," the funny "Don't Look At Me That Way If You Don't Mean It," the teasing "Let's Do Something New Tonight," which left meaning to the imagination. Men and women smiled.

How did she do it? Pen contemplated that mystery every time she sang. Even here her instinct was flawless. These were faraway strangers, marooned on a world of war. How could she sing their secrets, know their hearts? Was it some sort of magic after all?

Then she began a song Pen had forgotten, a song she sang only once, years ago. Skies were grey, the sea unforgiving that day on Isle. Fishing boats circled in the fog to bid farewell where one of their number had gone down. Flowers strewn on the water were churned to bits in the foam, as Ari sang an island's grief into the wind. "Under the Waves" mourned the seven who were lost.

Here on Enlor, it mourned them all, every soul who would not be coming home, every man, woman, child left behind to fight on without them. She sang the tragedy they had lived too long. She cried to heaven and did not spare the pain. Old and young heard their hearts break aloud, and no anger, no cause, no courage could stand against that sound. Citizens of Enlor, enemies and allies, stood together on the battlegrounds of their world and wept. There was no applause at the end.

She let the silence speak. She dried her eyes. Then, softly, she began again, a lilting, joyful song of praise to the glory of Creation. "Anywhere the Sun Goes" lifted their spirits, soothed their hearts, left them whole.

How did she do it? At last an answer came to Pen. Strange to learn it now, here on Enlor. There were no secrets. She didn't know their hearts; she simply gave her own. Love, life, truth—whatever the risk, she sang the song. Bravery, Pen thought, was far more mysterious than magic.

"Do you ever get used to it?" Fiel whispered.

"Never," said Pen.

They both jumped when Leon's phone shrilled and exchanged despairing looks at his audible mumblings.

"Right, sir . . . right, right."

"Now, this instrument I play," Ari was saying, "is called a melodir." She held it up so everyone could see what it looked like and rippled her fingers over the strings. "And the only thing better is two melodirs, or three, and some fiddles and pipes and drums—or anything you can find to make a good sound. Then you've got music. And when a group of people play music together, then you've got a band. Now, I don't have a band. I've only got one melodir—and you. So let's see what happens."

She played a tune, one note at a time, a delightful, bouncing, tantalizing tune. She repeated it over and over, adding embellishments, variations, sliding her fingers up and down the strings

to make them shiver and whine, tapping the wood, playing louder and faster, then slower and softer, ending with the tune alone again, one note at a time, as she began to sing.

*"Here comes the music, sneaky and sweet  
to wiggle your ears and tickle your feet"*

"I gotta talk to you!" Leon hissed in Pen's ear.

"Not now," Pen snapped, annoyed beyond patience. This song had a purpose. If it went well, she'd sing the new one next.

"Right now! They want to know what this stuff means."

"It means what it says."

*"Humming in your head, turning you around  
beating your heart in time to the sound of  
Here comes the music! Don't let it go!"*

"Well, they don't get it. I don't either. She makes people do things. She's controlling them or something, right?"

"No, ssssh!"

*"It's clapping your hands and tapping your toes!  
Feel it in your bones and whatever you do—"*

*"Those words are stupid—so how's she doing it? How does she  
make them clap and just stand there?"*

*"Don't stop now, this song's singing you—it goes  
Here comes the music! Look what you found!"*

"She's singing, Leon. They're listening. They stand there because they want to. They clap because they want to. They get it, Leon, even if you don't. Now please—"

*"A tune from the air right there on the ground!"*

*So put it in your pocket, take it away  
and when you want to listen, what do you say?"*

Only a murmur on the screens, shy voices of children across Enlor. But they knew the answer.

*Here comes the music, they whispered.*

*"Say it again!"*

*Here comes the music!*

*"Don't let it end!"*

*Here Comes The Music! they called.*

*"Rhythm and rhyme!"*

*HERE COMES THE MUSIC! they shouted.*

*"One more time!"* Ari laughed, and her melodir rang.

The second time through, on every screen it was the same. They were saying the words along with her as she sang. Fiel was right, they knew every one. They remembered everything.

Leon was shaking his head. "You can't tell me she's not doing something! Look at them down there. That's not normal."

Pen was looking. The people seemed to be enjoying themselves. More subdued than other audiences, no drinking or dancing, no cheering or throwing flowers. But the children were entranced and excited, some sitting atop adult shoulders and waving to Ari as she sang. The elders were still watchful, but proud when their children joined in, and the look on their faces was one that Pen knew well. They had fallen in love with Ari.

"Perfectly normal," Pen said. "You worried about incidents. There aren't any. People seem fine, considering—"

# Anthem

But Leon had cornered Fiel and was badgering him about something, drawing him away. Pen's eyes followed them to the pair of dark-suited men by the door, where they all stood talking. Fiel looked back, caught Pen's eye, and shrugged.

Pen felt uneasy without him. What was that about? And why was Leon so agitated? Things were going well. He should be pleased, or at least relieved, unless . . .

The song ended. People were clapping. Children were delighted with themselves, smiling, waving, calling "Here comes the music!" to make her sing again. It was now or never.

Ari turned to look about the room for Pen, trying to see past the glaring lights. She grinned, blew a kiss.

No! Don't sing it, Pen thought, *something's not right*—but that was foolish. This was why she came. She couldn't stop now. Lights were shining in her eyes. Applause was ringing in her ears. They loved her. She could do no wrong.

"Those songs were about other worlds," her serious tone quieted the crowds. "This one is about Enlor. This one is for the children, for their very own. Everyone who brought children with you—I ask your permission to give them this song. And if they like it, I beg you to let them keep it."

She sang it, all the way through. They listened, transfixed. When it ended, there was utter silence. Nothing happened. The silence stretched into an eternity. Then applause began like a ripple on an ocean. It grew into a wave, a thundering tide. It reverberated from every screen, pulsed like a mighty heartbeat. It filled the control room, filled the world. It went on and on.

She took her bows with gratitude and grace, blew Pen another kiss, then looked for Fiel. But the lights were in her eyes. When she couldn't find him, she turned back to her audience.

Fiel. Where was he? Pen scanned the room and found him still by the door, in the midst of a group of men in dark suits. There seemed to be more of them now. Leon was talking on his phone, naturally. Pen wondered what Fiel thought of the song, wished he would come back. At last the applause began to fade.

"You liked it!" she beamed at them. "Then I'll sing it again! Will you sing it with me? After all, it's your song."

The tempo was lively, the tune irresistible. She started slowly. On the world below, in town after town, children's voices began chiming in. Not quite on pitch, but almost in time, almost together. They remembered every word.

*"What do we say when they ask us  
which side we were on in the war?  
What do we say when we don't know  
what the fighting was for?"*

*"Say to our grownups we love them  
but their war has come to an end  
Nobody had fun, and nobody won  
and we won't let them do it again!"*

*"Sing a boy, sing a girl, sing a country, sing a world  
A new day's knocking on our door  
Sing it red, sing it blue, sing it over, make it true  
It's not our fight—who was wrong, who was right  
not our fight anymore!"*

*"And what do we say when they tell us  
Never, ever forget*

*Someday you'll get even,  
the score's not settled yet?"*

*"Say to our grownups we love them  
we'll find a better way  
Too many cried, too many died  
too many more than reasons why  
but you didn't do it, and neither did I  
so say goodbye to yesterday!"*

*"Sing a stranger, sing a friend, sing a sky, sing a land  
Hold a hand, join a band, sing it any way we can  
If we're all alone, we'll sing it on our own  
and if we grow up clever, we'll sing this song forever!"*

*"Sing it over from the start  
sing it under from the heart  
How it ends all depends on you and me  
Sing it two times two, what we sing we can do  
Then sing it three times three  
The war is over! We are free!"*

The crowds were ecstatic, children applauding themselves, grownups applauding their children, everyone looking up at Ari in complete adoration. When clapping wasn't enough, they began to cheer. "Ari! Ari!" they cried, waving, weeping, smiling.

"That was the most beautiful singing I've ever heard in my whole life! I think we should do it again—what do you think?" The whole world seemed to agree. "Now this time—wait a moment—"

On one monitor, the transmission from Enlor City distorted, began breaking up. It reestablished briefly, then blanked.

"I'm sorry," she said, "there's a problem with my screens."

The same thing was happening to Riveredge, and Downside's picture began to waver.

"Listen to me, everyone! I'm losing signal from Downside and Riveredge. I can't see Enlor City at all. If that happens where you are, we'll try to get it fixed. Now maybe they can still hear us—so let's sing louder! Come on, grownups, we need you too!"

*What do we say when they ask us*

They were singing on their own, but the image from two more locations began to deteriorate. Ari stepped away from the lens, shading her eyes from the lights as she searched for help.

"Pen! Where's a tech?"

"I'll—" Pen looked about, but no one else was in the room.

Strange. No, wrong. Very wrong. Where were all those black suits, the obnoxious Leon—and Fiel?

"I'll go," Pen motioned to the door. She nodded, and went back to singing.

*Say to our grownups we love them*

Out in the corridor, there was no one in sight. Pen didn't want to leave her alone, fearing she might somehow vanish as well. After hours of noise and distractions, the ship was ominously quiet. Which way?

*Sing a boy, sing a girl . . .*

She was fine. This wouldn't take long.





# Absolute Magnitude

Cargo, Pen decided, and started down the corridor. At its end, a turn right, then left—and from around the next corner, there were voices, familiar voices.

“ . . . can't believe you tried this, Fiel. That's all illegal. Sensors, processors, transmitters, all of it. They found all kinds of stuff in your bulkheads.”

“No they didn't, Leon. You know that.”

“You saw. How else you think it got there?”

Pen stayed around the corner, out of sight, heart knocking in fear. Could this be true? Did Fiel bring them here to cover his real purpose? Or was smuggling only an afterthought? Or . . .

“They put it there themselves, Leon. Those compartments were empty, every one.”

“They say not. Who's going to believe you? They've been wanting a reason to get you, Fiel. Guess they found one.”

“It's this ship they want, isn't it. Whole or in pieces.”

“Yeah, well. Parts. Hard to come by these days.”

“So take it. I can't stop you. Just let me—”

Leon's phone rang, its nerve-shattering jangle set Pen's heart pounding so loudly they must surely be able to hear. But Leon was mumbling, “Sir . . . right . . . understood . . . right,” and then the call ended. Pen was shaking. Fiel sounded quite calm.

“Trouble, Leon? You don't look well. About the ship, Denemerra can send transport for Ari and Pen. I'll tell—”

“No you won't.”

“Ah, I'm under arrest?” he seemed amused, resigned. “That's nothing new. You don't need a weapon, Leon. I'll come quietly.”

“Damn, Fiel, you don't get it. You're not going anywhere.”

“I see.”

Pen didn't, too paralyzed with fear to move or even breathe. What were they talking about? Taking Fiel's ship? Putting him in prison? How would they ever get home?

“You got no brains, Fiel! You upset things, you make trouble. You went too far this time, bringing them here.”

“They have nothing to do with this. Don't harm them, Leon. Send them back. No one needs to know. Call Denemerra, call Ice, anyone will come for them, anyone. Promise me you'll do that.”

“You just don't get it. They watch me, Fiel—because of you! You had your chance, you could've come—”

“No, I couldn't. Promise me, Leon.”

“I won't go back down there! I got this job! I got orders!”

“I understand, Leon. Promise me.”

Pen listened to a nightmare. Fiel arrested, no ship, stranded in this hideous place, their fate riding on . . . Leon? Gods.

“Damn you, Fiel!”

“Promise me.”

The phone rang again, went on ringing.

“Promise, Leon. Say it.”

“Sure, Fiel. I promise.”

There was another sound, a high-pitched whine, then a soft thud. Then the phone stopped ringing. A horrible thought came to Pen. *Say something, Fiel.*

“Done, sir,” said Leon, “on my way.”

Footsteps echoed down the corridor.

*Fiel! Say something!* Maybe he was just waiting. If Pen didn't look around that corner, maybe nothing had happened.

Pen looked. Fiel was lying in a heap, halfway down the corridor. Maybe he was only injured, maybe . . .

“Fiel?” Pen knelt beside him, touched his shoulder, eased him onto his back. Eyes wide open, face serene. The beam of Leon's weapon had burned a hole through his heart. So little blood, surely not enough for him to be dead.

“They were singing, Fiel,” Pen whispered, touched his face. “They remembered every word. You would have loved it. Oh, Fiel, I didn't know. I was afraid. I was right there. I should have done something, helped you, saved you—”

A door clanged far down the corridor. Footsteps again, coming this way—and Ari waiting, all alone.

“Goodbye, Fiel. Forgive me!” Pen raced down the corridor to the control room, tugged open the door. Inside there was music.

*Sing it red, sing it blue, sing it over, make it true*

All but two of the screens had gone out. Sal/water and East Meeting were still there.

*It's not our fight, who was wrong, who was right*

“Ari, stop!” Pen called out to her. The footsteps were loud and close. “Please! Stop now!”

*Not our fight anymore!*

“DO IT!” Leon shouted. He stood in the doorway.

The melodir twanged as a string snapped. On the screens, they were still singing.

“Keep going, I'll be back!” she smiled, holding up the broken string for them to see. Then she whirled around, furious.

“What is going on here? Get a tech! Can't you see the—”

“Shut up! Move over there.” Leon came closer, gesturing with his weapon.

“I will not!” Her eyes blazed. “Put that thing away! Get me a tech this instant! There's a concert going on!”

“It's over, lady!” Leon said.

“Ari,” Pen stepped between them, “it is. It's

over.”

“No, it isn't!” she pointed to the screens. “Where is everyone, Pen? Where's Fiel?”

“I said SHUT UP!”

“Ari,” Pen reached out to her, “Fiel is dead. Leon killed him—and now he's going to kill us.”

## V

*Sing it two times two, what we sing we can do*

“Dead?” Ari stared, uncomprehending. “Why?”

“So no one will know. Isn't that right, Leon?”

*Then sing it—*

She twisted from Pen's grasp, threw herself at the screens.

“HELP!” she screamed to the world below.

The word traveled into space as the beam from Leon's weapon hit a monitor. It exploded in a rain of sparks and glass. In time lag from one tiny village on the planet, the children still sang.

*—three times three*

*The war is over, we—*

That screen shattered. The melodir flew from her hand, crashed to the floor in smoking pieces. The weapon's beam had pierced it on the way. Sparks kept erupting from the bank of monitors. Cables melted. Floodlights flashed, went dark.

“Killed Fiel—why?” she cried. “Tell me why!”

Science Fiction Writers of Earth  
Annual SF/F Short Story Contest.  
Judged by Author Edward Bryant  
\$450 cash prizes. Winner published.  
Rules/Entry form, mail SASE to SFwoE  
Box 121293, Fort Worth TX 76121  
or download from  
<[www.flash.net/~sfwoe](http://www.flash.net/~sfwoe)>

# Anthem

"Because someone told him to," said Pen. "He had orders."

"Shut up!" said Leon, busy at the controls. He tore the covers off one panel after another, ripping wires, removing components, stuffing it all into his pockets with one hand while he held his weapon in the other.

An alarm began to shriek. Leon reached into the controls again, and the sound stopped.

"What did Fiel do, Leon?" Pen demanded, "that he had to die?"

"You shut up, just shut up!"

"Why should I? It won't bring Fiel back, will it, Leon? It won't save us, will it? You said you would, but you lied."

"Pen," Ari whispered, "tell me. Lied about what?"

Pen spoke slowly, trembling with rage. "Fiel knew he was going to die. He didn't ask for his own life, Ari, not once. He only asked for ours, and Leon made him a promise. Leon promised to call Denemerra to come for us. But that was a lie, wasn't it, Leon. You lied to Fiel while you killed him."

"Maybe not, Pen. Maybe he'll keep his promise."

"You don't know anything," Leon muttered, as he struggled with the plate of the comm panel, pulled it from its casing.

"I do know," said Pen. "I was there. And you know, Leon, you always will. What was he to you? Friend? Teacher? Brother?"

"Nothing now." Leon extracted more wiring from the ship's comm. His pockets were bulging. With his free hand, he found his phone, keyed it. "All done, sir," he said, and put it away.

Pen and Ari held onto each other, waited.

"Well, well, well," Leon sighed, looking around the control room, "too bad I can't stick around, sing some little songs, celebrate the truce and all—but it's been a real long day." He tucked his weapon in his belt and headed for the door.

"Leaving so soon, Leon?" Ari was defiant. "Aren't you going to kill us after all?"

He turned in the doorway and laughed. "You got no brains, lady," he said, "I just did."

He didn't bother to close the door. His footsteps faded away.

"I never did like him!" Ari said, and burst into tears. They threw their arms around each other, sank down to the floor. "Pen, is this really happening?"

"My fault, Ari, all my fault. It's what I said. The stories," Pen confessed, wracked with guilt, "the lies we don't believe, I told them. Oh, I was so clever. I said Ice and Denemerra would stop their supplies—food, power. Bad mistake. That scared them. Once I said that, they weren't going to let us go."

"Hush, Pen. You said it for me, and for Fiel. You wanted to go home. And if I'd only sung little ditties, we'd be on our way right now. Don't you see? It was that song. It meant too much, and people were singing it. So the Watch turned off the screens. That's what it was, Pen. All their power, and they were scared of a song." She got to her feet, pulled Pen up with her. "Come on. We need to hurry. We don't have much time."

"Time?"

"To get off this ship! We can't call anyone from here. Leon tore up the comm—and I think he shut down life support. Remember that alarm? He stopped it, but I bet that's what it was. That's why he said he'd killed us."

"Ari, we can't exactly swim for shore."

"We won't have to. This ship has lifeboats—escape pods! Come on," she tugged Pen toward the door. "Fiel showed me. Three pods under the cargo deck. Beacons—and comms, Pen. We'll call for help. They'll hear us all the way to Denemerra! Come on!"

They ran down the corridor, turned right, left, around the corner.

"Pen? Why are we stopping?"

A single dark smear on the floor. Fiel's body was gone.

"He died right here," Pen whispered, living it over again. "I was hiding, listening. They must have planned it all along, to kill Fiel and take his ship. Fiel finally saw it, but I—"

"Oh, Pen—poor, sweet Fiel." Ari knelt to touch the floor and wept. "He wanted to change his world. He tried so hard."

"Ari, I didn't do anything. I should have known. If I hadn't been so afraid—"

"How could you know? How could anyone know the wickedness in this place? We don't understand this world, Pen," she sobbed, "and I'm glad we don't! You were right to be afraid."

"But I'm always afraid, my whole life, afraid of everything, water, boats, space—"

"Listen to me," she took Pen's face in her hands. "We have to go now. Fiel was a hero. When we get back home, you'll write a song about him, and I'll sing it—but now we really have to go. Listen to me, Pen. Do exactly what I say—"

*Never mind the waves, Pen. Don't look at them. Tie this. Hold on to that. It's just water, Pen. It's just a squall. Do exactly what I say!*

"—and we'll make it, Pen. I'm going to get us home."

"Destroyed? All of them?" Pen asked.

"Every one." She climbed up the ladder from the lower hold.

Like every other compartment in the cargo section of the ship, the service access through the deck had been left wide open. Not a good sign.

Lockers of equipment and tools were empty now. Emptiest of all were the ones that held the spacesuits with life support and comms. Not much chance without them.

In the ship's belly, three black tubes sat on their moorings, with launch chutes beneath to send them into space when the pods' ejectors were fired. But the ejector systems had been removed. Also the firing mechanisms, beacons, comm panels—and so far as Ari could tell, any parts that might be used to improvise any of those things. Not that she knew

how.

"Never mind, Pen. I'll think of something." She sat on the cargo deck to rest. The air was getting thin. "Our best chance is back in the control room. If we could send a signal, there might be someone in the shipping lanes. Maybe," she seized on an idea, "maybe parts from the monitors would work in the comm!"

"They were smoking," Pen reminded her.

"Oh, I forgot," she sighed, dejected, "and Leon took all the wires. Wait! I have wires—my strings!"

"Those were smoking too."

"I took an extra set to the control room for the concert, and there're more in the cabin!" Now she was hopeful again. "Go get them, Pen. I'm going to have a look at those monitors."

The cabin had been searched too, their few possessions thrown about, but Pen found the strings. The ship's pervasive chill was increasing. Pen gathered blankets, pieces of warm clothing, the notebook and pencils scattered on the floor. Scribbles, a verse or two, mostly empty pages.

With everything tucked into a bundle, Pen looked around the dingy cabin, and had never felt so alone.

"You know what I think, Pen?" Ari said, as if she were sitting on *Chanty's* deck, mending her sails in the sun.

She sat wrapped in a blanket where the comm used to be, with all her strings and a jumble of elements collected from the monitors. She'd





# Absolute Magnitude

been at it for hours. She had no idea what she was doing, but she didn't know how to give up.

The ship's lights flickered, dimmed, then brightened again. That had happened twice before. She continued to ignore it.

"What?" Pen sat on the floor, wrapped in a blanket, writing.

"I think," she concentrated on twisting wires together, "I think they only let me sing because they thought people would start fighting, and then they could stop the Peacemakers. But that didn't happen, so they just stopped the music."

"I think you're right. They didn't like it when things were going so well. They kept asking Leon what the songs meant. They thought you were controlling people."

"They knew what that song meant. They're the ones controlling people. They're tyrants, Pen. Only tyrants stop the music."

The lights flickered, dimmed again, stayed dim.

"Pen? Remember how I screamed for help, just when Leon started shooting? Maybe someone down there heard me."

"Maybe they did," Pen said. No need to point out the odds, or who might have a ship handy to rescue them, or how any help could arrive in time, or—

"Or maybe," Ari's voice quavered, "maybe Leon . . . changed his mind and . . ." she turned her face away. No odds at all on that.

"How's it coming?" Pen asked instead.

She didn't answer. She put down the wires and sat there for a long time. Then she left the comm and stood looking down at Pen. She was shivering, her face streaked with frozen tears.

"No one's coming," she said. "We're going to die, Pen. Are you afraid?"

"Yes."

They curled up together on the floor, under all the blankets. Their breath turned to ice crystals floating in thin air.

"Oh, Pen, I never thought we'd end like this. I thought we'd just sail away one day and never come back."

"Don't cry, Ari, that's what we did."

"We got in over our heads, that's what," she wept, "for this awful world. Do you think it changed anything, us coming here?"

"Yes, Ari. Of course it did."

"How? Like the rain on Denemerra? All these years, Pen," she tried to smile, "I thought you didn't believe in magic."

"I believe in you. I believe in music. Something big happened today. It wasn't magic, Ari, more like . . . seaberries."

"Seaberries? They're small."

"Yes, and when you plant them, they don't come up right away. But when they do, they take over the garden. This was the day music came to Enlor. They were singing, Ari. For the first time ever, those children were singing. You planted a song, and now the music's in their minds. Not even the Watchers can stop that.

"You think they'll remember?"

"Of course they will. They remember everything."

"But we'll never know what happens. I'm so sorry, Pen."

"Don't be, Ari. What else could we have done? Fiel had to ask, and we had to come. It was a great concert."

"It sure was. Kiss me, Pen. Let's don't think about Enlor anymore. Let's think about home."

"Yes. Home. That last day. The wind's hot, the water's warm. The sun's going down. Festival's beginning. We're sailing over, late as usual, and you're humming the most beautiful tune."

"I remember."

"Good, because I thought of something. Maybe it's what you mean." Pen found the notebook in the blankets, tore out a page.

"Oh, Pen," she said, "I've always meant to tell you—I never know what I mean, until you write the words." As she reached for the paper, she was smiling.

And the lights went out.

Tears, kisses, tangled blankets in the dark. Listening to each other's heartbeats. So dark. So hard to breathe. So cold. No more songs. The worst thing about dying was not hearing her sing.

Then, between kisses, Ari whispered in Pen's ear.

"Tell me how it goes."

*"Darkest night, deepest sea, no wind to carry us home  
They say there's a shore just out of sight  
over the water a shining light  
into a bright Unknown"*

*"Maybe it's there, don't know where  
Beneath the sea, beyond the air  
or not at all, we don't care  
We're sailing"*

*"Blowing far, rolling fast, on a breaking wave  
All we need at the end of the ride  
to bring with us to the other side  
a song we found out on the tide  
to sing where the stars are brave"*

*"Maybe it's there, tonight is fair  
a song can take us anywhere  
past all we know and all we dare  
We're sailing"*

*"And if we see a light that shines  
to an island where music meets the mind  
we'll stay awhile where winds are kind  
and time's our fortune to spend  
Where children never sing in vain  
maybe a singer can bring the rain"*

*"And maybe she'll sing her songs again  
forever and ever without end  
to words and music on the wind  
We're sailing"*

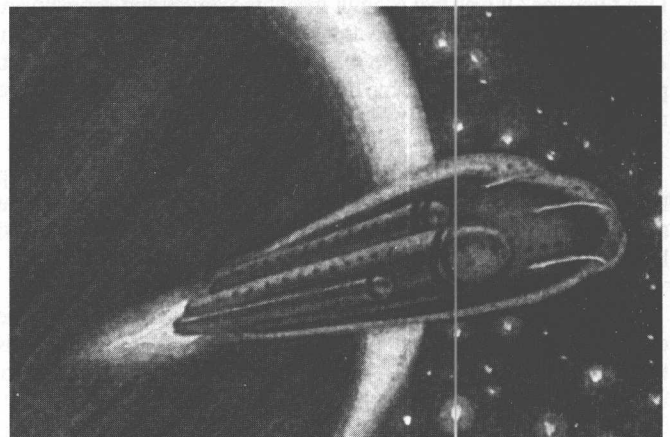
"Good song, Pen. Over too soon."

"Yes."

"Still afraid?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll sing it again . . . are you listening?"



# Veil of the Dancer

## Dancer from page 15

chance their proper places were in the back corner of the room, where the convergence of walls and shelves made an alcove not easily seen from the greater room.

She had been at her task some time, her father deep in some new bit of study at his desk, when she heard the door open and Nasir announce, "The Esteemed and Honorable Scholar Baquar Hafeez begs the favor of an audience with the Glorious and Blessed Scholar Reyman Bhar."

"Old friend, enter and be welcome!" Her father's voice was cordial and kindly—and, to his daughter's ear, slightly startled. His chair skritch'd a little against the carpet as he pushed away from the desk, doubtless rising to embrace his friend.

"To what blessed event do I owe this visit?"

"Why, to none other than Janwai Himself!" Scholar Hafeez returned, his voice deeper and louder than her father's. "Or at the least, to his priests, who have commissioned me for research at the hill temple. There are certain etched stones in the meditation rooms, as I take it?"

"Ah, are there not!" Reyman Bhar exclaimed. "You are in for a course of study, my friend. Be advised, buy a pair of nightsight lenses before you ascend. The meditation rooms are ancient, indeed, and lit by oil."

"Do you say so?" Scholar Hafeez exclaimed, over certain creaks and groanings from the visitor's chair as it accepted his weight.

Inas, forgotten, huddled, soundless and scarcely moving in the alcove, listening as the talk moved from the meditation rooms to the wider history of the hill temple, to the progress of the report on which her father and Scholar Hafeez had collaborated, not so long since.

At some point, Nasir came in, bearing refreshments. The talk wandered on. In the alcove, Inas sank silently to her knees, drinking in the esoterica of scholarship as a thirsty man guzzles tea.

Finally, there came a break in the talk. Scholar Hafeez cleared his throat.

"I wonder, old friend—that *curiat* you bought in Hamid's store?"

"Yes?" her father murmured. "A peculiar piece, was it not? One would almost believe it had come from the old days, when Hamid's grandfather was said to buy from slavers and caravan thieves."

"Just so. An antique from the days of exploration, precious for its oddity. I have no secrets from you, my friend, so I will confess that it comes often into my mind. I wonder if you would consider parting with it. I will, of course, meet what price you name."

"Ah." Her father paused. Inas pictured him leaning back in his chair, fingers steepled before his chin, brows pulled together as he considered the matter. In the alcove, she hardly dared breathe, even to send a futile woman's prayer to the little god for mercy.

"As much as it saddens me to refuse a friend," Reyman Bhar said softly, "I must inform you that the *curiat* had been purchased as a gift for a promising young scholar of my acquaintance."

"A strange item to bestow upon a youth," murmured Baquar Hafeez, adding hastily, "But you will, of course, know your own student! It is only that—"

"I most sincerely regret," Scholar Bhar interrupted gently. "The gift has already been given."

There was a pause.

"Ah," said Scholar Hafeez. "Well, then, there is nothing more to be said."

"Just so," her father replied, and there was the sound of his chair being pushed back. "Come, my friend, you have not yet seen my garden. This is the hour of its glory. Walk with me and be refreshed."

Inas counted to fifty after the door closed, then she rose, reshelved the two remaining volumes, and ghosted out of the study, down the hall to the women's wing.

Humaria's wedding was blessed and beautiful, the banquet very grand to behold, and even the women's portions fresh and unbroken, which spoke well for her new husband's generosity.

At the last moment, it was arranged between Reyman Bhar and Gabir Majidi that Shereen would stay with her sister for the first month of her new marriage, as the merchant's wife was ill and there were no daughters in his house to bear Humaria company.

So it was that Scholar Bhar came home with only his youngest daughter to companion him. Nasir pulled the sedan before the house and the scholar emerged, his daughter after him. He ascended the ramp to the door, fingering his keycard from his pocket—and froze, staring at a door which was neither latched nor locked.

Carefully, he put forth his hand, pushing the door with the tips of his fingers. It swung open onto a hallway as neat and as orderly as always. Cautiously, the scholar moved on, his daughter forgotten at his back.

There was some small disorder in the public room—a vase overturned and shattered, some display books tossed aside. The rugs and the news computer—items that would bring a goodly price at the thieves market—were in place, untouched. The scholar walked on, down the hall to—

His study.

Books had been ripped from their shelves and flung to the floor, where they lay, spine-broke and torn, ankle deep and desolate. His notepad lay in the center of the desk, shattered, as if it had been struck with a hammer. The loose pages of priceless manuscripts lay over all.

Behind him, Scholar Bhar heard a sound; a high keening, as if from the throat of a hunting hawk, or a lost soul.

He turned and beheld Inas, wilting against the door, her hand at her throat, falling silent in the instant he looked at her.

"Peace—" he began and stopped, for there was another sound, from the back of the house—but no. It would only be Nasir, coming in from putting the sedan away.

Yes, footsteps; he heard them clearly. And voices. The sudden, ghastly sound of a gun going off.

The scholar grabbed his daughter's shoulder, spinning her around.

"Quickly—to the front door!"

She ran, astonishingly fleet, despite the hindrance of her robes. Alas that she was not fleet enough.

Baquar Hafeez was waiting for them inside the front hallway, and there was a gun in his hand.

"Again," Scholar Hafeez said, and the large man he called Danyal lifted her father's right hand, bent the second finger back.

Reyman Bhar screamed. Inas, on her knees beside the chair in which Scholar Hafeez took his ease, stared, stone-faced, through her veil, memorizing the faces of these men, and the questions they asked.



# Absolute Magnitude

It was the *curiat* they wanted. And it was the *curiat* which Reyman Bhar was peculiarly determined that they not have. And why was that? Inas wondered. Surely not because he had made it a gift to a daughter. He had only to order her to fetch it from its hiding place and hand it to Baquar Hafeez. What could a daughter do, but obey?

And yet—*hidden knowledge has power.*

"The *curiat*, old friend," Scholar Hafeez said again—patient, so patient. "Spare yourself any more pain. Only tell me who has the *curiat*, and I will leave you and your household in peace."

"Why?" her father asked—a scholar's question, despite his pain.

"There are those who believe it to be the work of infidels," Scholar Hafeez said smoothly, and yet again: "The *curiat*, Reyman. Where is it?"

"It is not for you to know," her father gasped, his voice hoarse from screaming, his left arm useless, dislocated by Danyal in the first round of questions.

Scholar Hafeez sighed, deeply, regretfully.

"I was afraid that you might prove obstinate. Perhaps something else might persuade you."

It happened so quickly, she had no time to understand—pain exploded in her face and she was flung sideways to the floor, brilliant color distorting her vision. Her wrist was seized and she was lifted. More pain. She tried to get her feet under her, but she was pulled inexorably upward, sandals dangling. Her vision spangled, stabilized—Danyal's face was bare inches from hers. He was smiling.

Somewhere, her father was shouting.

"Your pardon, old friend?" Scholar Hafeez was all solicitude. "I did not quite hear the location of the *curiat*?"

"Release my daughter!"

"Certainly. *After* you disclose the location of the *curiat*. Such a small thing, really, when weighed against a daughter's virtue."

"Inas—" her father began, and what followed was not in the common tongue, but in that of her mother, and they were uttered as a prayer.

"Opportunity comes, daughter, be stout and true. Honor your mother, in all her names."

Scholar Hafeez made a small sound of disappointment, and moved a hand. "The *ubaie*, Danyal."

Inas saw his hand move. He crumbled the fragile fabrics in his fist and tore them away, unseating her headcloth. Her hair spilled across her shoulders, rippling black.

Danyal licked his lips, his eyes now openly upon her chest.

There was a scream of rage, and from the corner of her eye she saw her father, on his knees, a bloody blade in his least-damaged hand, reaching again toward Hafeez.

Danyal still held her, his attention on his master; Inas brought both of her knees up, aiming to crush his man-parts, as Thelma Delance had described.

The villain gasped, eyes rolling up. His grip loosened, she fell to the floor, rolling, in order to confound the aim of the gun, and there was a confusion of noises, and her father shouting "Run!"—and run she did, her hair streaming and her face uncovered, never looking back, despite the sounds of gunfire behind her.

The house was in the merchant district of the city of Harap, a walk of many days from the prefecture Coratu, whose principal cities, Iravati and Lahore-Gadani, had lately suffered a sudden rash

of explosions and fires and unexplained deaths. There were those who said it was a judgment from the gods; that Lahore-Gadani had become too assertive; and Iravati too complacent in its tranquility. The priests had ordered a cleansing, and a month long fast for the entire prefecture. Perhaps it would be enough.

In Harap, though.

In Harap, at that certain house, a boy crossed the street from out of the night-time shadows and made a ragged salaam to the doorman.

"Peace," he said, in a soft, girlish voice. "I am here to speak with Jamie Moore."

The doorman gave him one bored look. "Why?"

The boy hefted the sack he held in his left hand. "I have something for him."

"Huh." The doorman considered it, then swung sideways, rapping three times on the door. It opened and he said to the one who came forward, "Search him. I'll alert the boss."

The search had discovered weapons, of course, and they had been confiscated. The bag, they scanned, discovering thereby the mass and material of its contents. Indeed, the search was notable in that which it did not discover—but perhaps, to off-worlders, such things mattered not.

The door to the searching chamber opened and the doorman looked in.

"You're fortunate," he said. "The boss is willing to play."

So, then, there was the escort, up to the top of the house, to another door, and the room beyond, where a man sat behind a desk, his books piled, open, one upon the other, a notetaker in his hand.

Tears rose. She swallowed them, and bowed the bow of peace.

"I'm Jamie Moore," the man behind the desk said. "Who are you?"

"I am Inas Bhar, youngest daughter of Scholar Reyman Bhar, who died the death to preserve what I bring you tonight."

The man looked at her, blue eyes—outworlder eyes—bland and uninterested.

"I don't have a lot of time or patience," he said. "Forget the theatrics and show me what you've got."

She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. This—this was the part of all her careful plans that might yet go awry. She opened the bag, reached inside and pulled out the *curiat*.

"For you," she said, holding it up for him to see, "from Thelma Delance."

There was a long silence, while he looked between her and the box. Finally, he held out his hands.

"Let me see."

Reluctantly, she placed the *curiat* in his hands, watching as he flicked the ivory hooks, raised the lid, fished out a volume, and opened it at random.

He read a page, the next, riffled to the back of the book and read two pages more. He put the book back in the box and met her eyes.

"It's genuine," he said and gave her the honor of a seated bow. "The Juntavas owes you. What'll it be? Gold? A husband with position? I realize the options are limited on this world, but we'll do what we can to pay fair."

"I do not wish to marry. I want..." She stopped, took a breath, and met the bland, blue eyes. "My father was a scholar. He taught me to be a scholar—to read, to reason, to *think*. I want to continue—in my father's memory."

He shrugged. "Nice work, if you can get it."

## Veil of the Dancer

Inas drew herself up. "I speak five dialects and three languages," she said. "I am adept with the higher maths and with astronomy. I read the mercantile, scholarly and holy scripts. I know how to mix the explosive *skihi* and—" The man behind the desk held up a hand.

"Hold up. You know how to mix *skihi*? Who taught you that?"

She pointed at the *curiat*. "Page thirty-seven, volume three."

He whistled. "You found the cipher, did you? Clever girl." He glanced thoughtfully down at the box.

"You wouldn't have used any of that formula, would you? Say, back home or in Lahore-Gadani?"

Inas bowed, scholar to scholar. "They killed my father. He had no sons to avenge him."

"Right."

More silence—enough that Inas began to worry about the reasoning going on behind those blue outworlder eyes. It would, after all, be a simple thing to shoot her—and far more merciful than the punishment the priests would inflict upon her, were she discovered dressed in a boy's tunic and trousers, her face uncovered, her hair cut and braided with green string.

"Your timing's good," Jamie Moore said abruptly. "We've got a sector chief checking in tomorrow. What I can do, I can show you to the chief, and the two of you can talk. This is sector chief business, understand me?"

Inas bowed. "I understand, Jamie Moore. Thank you."

"Better hold that until you meet the chief," he said, and the door opened behind her, though she had not seen him give a signal.

"We'll stand you a bath, a meal and a bed," he said, and jerked his head at the doorman. "Get her downstairs. Guard on the door."

He looked at her once more. "What happens next is up to you."

She sat on the edge of the *chatrue*—well, no she didn't. Properly a *chatrue*, a female's bed, would be hidden by a curtain at a height so that even a tall man could not see over. This was hardly a bed meant for a woman....

She sat on the edge of the bed then, with the daybreak meal in dishes spread around her, amazed and appreciative at the amount of food she was given to break her fast.

But, after all—she had come to the house in the clothes of a boy, admitted to taking a son's duty of retribution to herself; and agreed to meet with the *sector chief*. These were all deeds worthy of male necessities; hence they fed her as a male would be fed, with two kinds of meat, with porridge of proper sweetness and with extra honey on the side, with fresh juice of the gormel-berry—and brought her clean boy's clothes in the local style, that she might appear before the sector chief in proper order.

She had slept well, waking only once, at the sound of quiet feet in the stairway. Left behind when she woke then was a half-formed dream: In it she had lost her veils to Danyal, but rather than leer, he had screamed and run, terrified of what he had seen revealed in her face.

Too late now to run, she thought as she slipped back into sleep, both Danyal and her father's false friend had fallen to her vengeance. And the *curiat* was in the hands of the infidel.

Inas ate all the breakfast, leaving but some honey. There had been too many days since her father's death when food had been scarce; too many nights when her stomach was empty, for her to stint now on sustenance.

"Hello, child!" A voice called from outside the door. There followed a brisk knock, with the sound of laughter running behind it. "Your appointment begins now!"

The name of Jamie Moore's boss was Sarah Chang. She was small and round, with crisp black hair bristling all over her head, and slanting black eyes. Her clothing was simple—a long-sleeved shirt, open at the throat, a vest, trousers and boots. A wide belt held a pouch and a holster. Her face was naked, which Inas had expected. What she had not expected was the jolt of shock she felt.

Sarah Chang laughed.

"You're the one pretending to be a boy," she commented, and Inas bowed, wryly.

"I am an exception," she said. "I do not expect to meet myself."

"Here, you're an exception," the woman corrected, and pointed at one of the room's two chairs, taking the other for herself. "Sit. Tell me what happened. Don't leave anything out. But don't dawdle."

So, she had told it. The gift of the *curiat*; the visit of Scholar Hafeez to her father; Humaria's wedding; the violation of her father's study, and his brutal questioning; her escape into the night, and return to a house of the unjustly murdered—father, books and servant. Her revenge.

"You mixed a batch of *skihi*, blew up a couple buildings, disguised yourself as a boy and walked away from it," Sarah Chang said, by way of summing up. She shook her head. "Pretty cool. How'd you think of all that?"

Inas moved her hands. "I learned from Thelma Delance. The recipe for *skihi* was in her *curiat*. She disguised herself as a man in order to pursue her scholarship."

"So she did." The woman closed her eyes. "Any idea what I should do with you?"

Inas licked her lips. "I wish to be a scholar."

"Not the line of work women usually get into, hereabouts." Sarah Chang's eyes were open now, and watching carefully.

"Thelma Delance—"

"Thelma was an outworlder," the boss interrupted. "Like I am. Like Jamie is."

This woman possessed a man's hard purpose, Inas thought; she would do nothing for pity. She raised her chin.

"Surely, then, there is some place where I, too, would be an outworlder, and free to pursue my life as I wish?"

Sarah Chang laughed.

"How old are you?" She asked then.

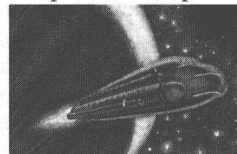
"Fourteen winters."

The boss tipped her head. "Thirteen Standards, near enough. Regular old maid. And you've got a nice touch with an explosive. *Skihi*, for your information, is an extremely volatile mixture. Many explosive experts have the missing fingers to prove it." She bounced out of her chair and shook her head.

"All right, Inas, let's go."

She stayed in her chair, looking up into the slanting black eyes. "Go where?"

"Outworld," the boss said, and moved an impatient hand, pointing upward, toward the sky—and beyond.





# The Only Thing That Mattered

by Scott Edleman

Copyright © Scott Edleman 2002

Tully's clumsy crawl across the planetoid's face was made even more difficult by an inescapable fact he had spent endless brittle months suppressing—that after dreaming of how he and Sal would finally embrace this moment together, he was stuck having to walk it alone.

He'd landed the *Fortune* as close to his goal as he could, but having done so he was still forced to maneuver uneasily for several hundred yards over rough ground before the unnaturally smooth path he'd seen from orbit sliced at his feet. Sal's research had led him to believe that if they worked long and hard enough they would eventually find this small, hidden planet, but the raw astonishment he felt at finally facing that sculpted path cleaving the chaos told him that no, he must not have trusted their information, not in his heart where it counted most, had not truly had faith that they would ever stand beneath just these stars in just this part of the galaxy. Faced with proof that this small fragment of a world, rocky as a roiling ocean flash frozen, was the answer to a promise he and Sal once had made to each other, he forgot himself. He turned to Sal so that together they could, as they had done so many times before, shake their fists in triumph to an alien sky.

Only Sal, of course, was not there.

She'd figured it out, read the clues, interpreted the signs, pinpointed the big score, given him directions to the find of a lifetime, no, a dozen lifetimes . . . and then vanished.

Tully's cheeks flushed, and as he jerked his arm back suddenly from its upward sweep, he unintentionally caused it to aim towards the treasure he now knew must surely lay beyond.

Sal.

A shroud of sadness fell across his sense of foolishness and he let his arm fall.

He looked back at the *Fortune*, resting there atilt upon the crags. He half-expected to see Sal climb down to follow him. Even now, after so long, that was still alive in him. He shook his head and then stepped off the uneven surface to begin lumbering slowly along the strange, flat walkway that bisected his vision. Even with the low gravity, he could not move at more than a ragged gait. He was held back, he knew, by an outmoded suit that many explorers would have long ago abandoned, so his progress was erratic. As he stumbled against an outcropping on his left, he prayed for this find to pay off as they'd always hoped. He could upgrade to one of the newer shells then, one that did not reduce him to shuffling like an old man. With the old man's heart that he now believed occupied his young man's form, however, he often considered the hobbling of his stride to be just. His ragged breathing agreed.

As he curved down the planetoid's shaven spine, the pathway grew wider, turning from a rivulet scarcely more than a few boots wide into a small stream of polished stone that he could have lain across if he'd so wished. When Sal had been with him, and they'd come upon places where they'd had to move single file, he always let her walk first. He could not help but think of that here. Looking ahead, he knew he would have given her the gift of an uncluttered view until they could again walk side by side. She would have tried to do the same, he knew that, too, offering him the chance to go first. But he would have been the most persuasive. He always had been. After all, seeing her before him was really all that he ever needed.

Memories of ancient footsteps were arrayed before him in the dust, with outlines so odd he reprimanded himself for thinking of them as having been made by feet at all. Though the squashed circles, curved

rectangles and other less conventional shapes seemed fresh, Tully knew that due to the absent atmosphere, they could have been made a hundred years ago, or ten thousand. Following them, adding his own imprints with each sluggish movement, helped him find within himself each further step of his own, for he sometimes wondered how he could ever find the will. He trudged along, the path continuing to widen until, as Sal had taught him to expect, all footsteps ended. He could see the pathway's end ahead in wait for him like a threat, and there was no longer a need for moral support. It was as if the whole world had fallen away.

Approaching the lip, he peered over the cliff's edge. A series of steps carved out of gray rock spun away from him down into the darkness. Trusting Sal, he turned from the void and began to back his way down, clumsily seeking out each step with the blind toes that were all he could now afford. At the final step, Tully rocked back to stand, and in doing so pulled his upper body into a sheet of darkness. An overhang, wrest from the rock as the steps had been, stole his starlight. He passed his palm close to his chest lamp, but paused before bringing it into contact. He

refrained from activating the lamp's harsh beam, instead turning to sit gingerly on the steps behind him. This was not a thing to be done quickly. The closer he neared to his goal, the less enthusiastic he became about arriving there. He shut his eyes before they could adjust to the black of the shadows. Even though his suit, for all its other faults, still kept him warm, he found himself trembling.

He did not want to make that final leap and come face to face with what Sal had assured him would be there.

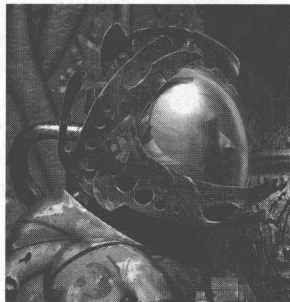
Not until he had made himself ready.

This first sight of the alien reliefs, the location of which they had puzzled out over many long years, this glimpse that was now granted to him alone, was intended to be theirs together. Over the years, on site after site, they had turned the approach to that first look into a loving ritual. It had with find after find brought them closer together, but on this day, he feared that it could push them no further apart. They'd always paused so as to extend their anticipation, and timed each of their movements, the way they stepped around a newly discovered bend, the way they leaned into a pit just rescued from oblivion, the way they'd mirrored each others footsteps on countless alien worlds, with a deliberateness so that each of them achieved their first glimpse at the same instant. He would have the comfort of no such ritual now, and he felt naked and uncertain without it.

Her face hovering before him, he could have easily stayed there in the darkness forever as the energy drained from his suit. The only reason that his hand finally crept to the chestplate was the chiding look he began to see in that same face. *Do it. Do it already*, she was thinking. He knew that she wanted him to go on.

As he slapped the switch, he corrected himself—she *would* have wanted him to go on. Had she still lived.

The brilliant snap of light blazed against the wall from which the stairs upon which he'd descended had been cut. What had seemed a simple cliff face from above was revealed as but one wall of a waterless canal from below, a wall alive with ornate carvings, thrown for perhaps the first time in centuries into stark relief. The channel vanished over the horizon, and as far as Tully could see, a rippling string of aliens the likes of which he had never before seen danced upon the rock. Untouched by wind or rain, they could have been made yesterday, but Tully knew, because Sal had told him, that those who had devised this place were



# The Only Thing That Mattered

long dead. A race that had once stretched its arm across a dozen worlds was now left with no more evidence of their existence than this relic. The attenuated bodies that stretched the height of the wall back to the path from which he'd descended were the only images left of them. Like humans, they possessed two arms and two legs, but each body part was long—too long, it seemed to Tully, as if reflected back out of a crazy circus mirror. In aspect, this gave them an appearance closer to grasshoppers than to humans. Tully wondered whether the race could really have been three times the height of the tallest Earther, or whether that was just the way the artisans portrayed them. If the only remnant of Earth was Mount Rushmore, after all, he imagined that any aliens who might come after would be confused as well. There were no survivors of this species left to tell them whether artistic license had been taken, only a few sacred books, such as the one that Sal partially translated to point the way here. But carved into the wall a handful of steps away, sandwiched between the sacred art that could do no more than hint at the answers to the vanished race, was a square inset niche that held a treasure from which science could pry the truth. Tully still had faith in that, if little else.

"You were right, Sal," he whispered, not really believing there was anyone else who would hear. "Just like you said. They're truly here."

He staggered towards the alcove and slowly placed his hand upon a short, wide-mouthed urn with the care one uses to touch the belly of an expectant mother. Carved into the dark blue skin of the urn were small figures similar in proportions to those that loomed on the walls around him. His eyes clouded, and he blinked away tears his hands could not touch. He continued along the canal, finding alcove after alcove, each containing still another urn, each urn unique in color and design. He paused before one after the other in prayer, his lips moving, forming nothing more than his lover's name, as if that was all that there was left for him to say, as if that was the only thing that mattered.

Tully's ship trembled. As he woke and rolled from the cot he had Sal's name on his lips; he could not recall a time when she was not his first thought each morning. The soles of his feet vibrated as they hit the deck, and he hurriedly palmed his viewscreen controls.

The walls around him vanished and he was naked beneath the stars. The brief horizon curled away in the distance, intimate, forbidding, and suddenly very much *his*, made all the more so by the appearance of an odd ship that had not been there when he'd finally collapsed mere hours before. The invader was seemingly made of nothing more than four equal globes bound together one atop three so that they formed a pyramid. It sat a hundred meters closer to the sculpted path than his own. He could not recognize such a ship; the dust cloud settling around it still obscured the detail of its features.

He'd been careful to avoid any damage to what Sal had correct discerned to be an ancient treasure, and here an intruder plopped down in the midst of it, apparently blind to the consequences. That was the root of his anger, he tried to tell himself, but he knew that if forced to be truthful, he'd have to admit his motivations to be less noble than that. Instead, the anger came from a baser place, a gut reaction that by all rights, this rock was his now. He felt just as if he'd returned to his ship to find it burglarized.

As Tully watched, too stunned to take further action, a circular opening blossomed in the invading ship's top globe. A ladder dropped down slowly, and then a squat figure descended—a figure possessing the right number of arms and legs, but with a body definitely too broad for its height to be human. Yes, the form was a humanoid of some kind, but at this distance Tully could not guess at the species.

Whatever it was, it twisted its squat body for an instant and seemed to look off quickly in Tully's direction—he recoiled briefly, forgetting at first that it could not see him

—before hurrying down the path that Tully had already come to think of as his own. Tully kept his eyes on the unsettling form as he clambered into his own suit, but by the time he finished his preparations and finally stood, breathing heavily, in front of his own ship, the strange figure was long out of sight.

He wished he'd had weapons aboard with which to defend his find, to drive this newcomer away, but no, when Sal was still around, she would have none of that, no guns of any kind, and it was still far too soon for him to make any changes that would erase her. All he had that he could arm himself with were his digging tools, and as he balanced a shovel across one shoulder and a pickax across the other, he felt helpless before the universe.

He rushed along the path, cursing his suit, needing to catch up with the creature, whatever it was, needing to discover something, anything, even that the momentary glimpse had all been a dream. Reaching the lip of the cliff, he leaned forward before descending, and grimaced at the effort. There it was, motionless at the base of the stairs. Tully crept halfway down the steps, then paused. It seemed not to notice his approach, but only stood there, waiting. The light from Tully's chestlamp passed over it, tossing a tall, thin shadow along the wall, and still it did not move. The wide creature, framed by the carvings of the lost ethereal beings, did not seem to Tully as if it could even be remotely related to the species.

Tully finished descending the stairs, and studied what little he could make out of its profile. It seemed not to care. He could barely see its features through the thick, translucent glass of its faceplate, and what muddy chiaroscuro he perceived did not correspond to any species he had yet met in a lifetime of travels. He tongued his radio, and while he spoke, his words racing through the frequencies and seeking a match with this new creature, he let his tools drop from his shoulders to his waist.

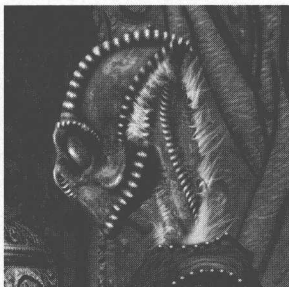
"Who are you?" said Tully, his voice ragged. Questions were all he had. "Why are you here? How did you find this place?"

It placed one hand on the sculpted wall before them, giving no sign that it had understood him, or even heard him at all. He studied that hand, hoping that it could give him some answers that the alien itself would not, but because of its silvery mittens, Tully could not even count the number of fingers the alien had. He moved more closely beside it and spoke again, but it continued to treat him as if his words were silence. As he neared, their lamps blended together, causing the glossy finish on the urn before them to sparkle like a starfield. Seeing the pinpoint reflection bouncing off the alien's smooth faceplate caused Tully to loosen his grip on his shovel. If asked, he couldn't have said why.

"Why are you here?" said Tully, moving a step closer. They were now so near that their suits almost touched. "Can you hear me? You shouldn't be here. Do you understand? We found this place first. I found this place."

It turned to him suddenly, and used what appeared to be a thumb to tap rhythmically along a series of notches that circled its other wrist. Tully could see vague movement within its helmet, but whether the blur was from the motion of lips or eyelids or something less human, he could not discern. Blinking lights that ran along the front of the alien's suit began cycling more rapidly, and the alien smacked a palm against one wrist.

With a sharp, sudden motion the alien reached up to place its hands around Tully's head. Before he could stagger back, the thing pulled his helmet down to its own. Glass to glass, he could hear a tinny voice





# Absolute Magnitude

transmitted through the shell of his suit, and at the same time could see more clearly to within its helmet. He stared into an odd face the skin of which was a blue he had never before seen, somewhere between that of a rare clear Earth sky a vid had once showed him and the shell of a frozen robin's egg he had once seen in a museum. The number and placement of facial parts were in line with what had been handed out to the rest of the humanoid creatures of the galaxy, though the eyes were slightly larger, the nose significantly smaller, and the lips so flush to the rest of the face that the mouth was almost a slit. A strip of yellow fur, short and smooth, ran low about its neck like a scarf and then up behind its ears, leaving its head for the most part hairless. The vestigial lips vibrated rapidly, but the sounds they made did not create any syllables that made sense to Tully. He'd been face to face with aliens before, particularly when trading back on The Wheel, but never this close, never with one whose species was unknown to him, and never so dreadfully alone.

He looked into its saucer eyes and desperately tried to find the familiar. Burbles morphed to clicks changed to hums, none any language he knew.

"Who are you?" asked Tully, speaking more softly this time, curiosity pushing aside his anger. "Where did you come from?"

Only meaningless noise answered him.

The alien closed its eyes, its lids an even deeper blue than its other skin had been, and dropped its hands from around Tully's head. The contact between their faceplates broke, restoring him to uncomfortable silence. Tully stepped back, and regarded the creature warily. He might have stayed that way forever, wondering, but the alien broke the tableaux. It gestured above their heads back towards their ships, and stepped briskly around him in the direction of the stone stairway. Tully turned more slowly, and it motioned broadly for him to follow, a little impatiently at that, he thought.

As he ambled after it, falling further behind with each step, it did not look back to see whether he was coming along. Seeing it near its ship, Tully looked past it to his own vessel, wondering whether he should invite the creature aboard so as not to lose the upper hand. But to bring it aboard after so long alone, to have no choice in it, to be driven by this accidental meeting, seemed wrong. He should be the one to decide when to let someone in, and not random chance.

Upon his arrival at its ship, it placed a hand on the ladder there. He gestured weakly, almost imperceptibly, towards his own. Its only answer was to push a rung into his hand. Folding his fingers around the bar, it motioned for him to climb. He clawed his way ungracefully up into the airlock. He paused there, and as it was immediately behind him, it bumped into him gently. The hull sealed after them, and it moved to the inner wall, where its fingers flew across a triangular keyboard. Tully waited patiently for the hissing pumps to cycle in whatever atmosphere the creature called home, wishing that Sal was beside him to tell him what to do next. Without her, he did not want that moment of decision to come.

The pumps silent, the creature pointed at its helmet, and then began to manipulate the restraints that held it in place. As it lifted the head covering away, Tully did not follow its lead, doing nothing but watch as it then unpeeled its suit to reveal a form not quite as stocky as it had looked when fully covered. There was still no way that it could pass for human, but without its armor the alien seemed less . . . *alien* than a few minutes before. The shirt and pants it wore were so close in color to its skin that it almost seemed bare flesh. It dropped the suit casually to the pebbled flooring, after which the inner airlock door opened to reveal the rest of the ship. It stepped through quickly, waving for him to join him inside. He leaned forward to peer in after it, but did not follow.

A circular table ringed a chair in the center of the room, and the creature slipped through a thin notch there and sat. It spun, slapping buttons from which Tully tried to decipher a meaning, but which he

could not possibly recognize. It tapped a microphone with blunt fingers—he could recognize that—and then waved him forward urgently. Tully remained motionless within the airlock. It tapped the microphone again, touching its harsh lips with the other hand, a hand that Tully only just then noticed bore but three fingers opposite its thumb. Tully pointed to his own chest, which caused it to wave at him again. He turned on his speaker so that his voice would echo within the room instead of continuing to transmit on random frequencies.

"What is it that you want of me?" said Tully. "I don't understand. What do you want me to do?"

His words were met with high-pitched squeals, and the creature clapped its hands against its chest and then rubbed its wide thumbs along its neck fur. It stuck out its purple tongue till it almost touched its nose, and then spun in its chair slamming blockish fingers against several buttons on the surface that surrounded it. When it whirled back to Tully, it held out both hands widely, and then began to yet again utter its incomprehensible sounds. Only this time, a split second behind what to Tully was nonsense, he could hear a high-pitched voice boom from speakers in the ceiling. It was the first English, other than that from his ship's all-too-familiar computer files, that Tully had heard for a very long time.

"You are from Earth, are you not?" the voice repeated.

Hearing those words, Tully thought he might cry.

"You can speak English," he replied in a whisper, and then, afraid it might not have heard, afraid that his words would only come across as nonsense, he repeated his statement.

"I can speak nothing of the kind," played the speakers loudly over the alien's natural crackling voice. It gave a knob a swift twist and then moved closer to Tully, standing face-to-face before him, the raised lip of the airlock door between them at their feet. When it spoke again, the voice that mirrored its words was softer. "My ship, though, has the capacity to translate your English, something that my suit computer was not preprogrammed to do. Now that your voice tells me who you are, I can tell my ship to correct that deficiency. Please come in. We should talk, now that we can."

Taken aback by the sudden cascade of a stranger's thoughts, Tully lifted a boot, about to step forward, but then he remembered who he was and why he was here. And why this thing should not be.

"Are you really from Earth?" it asked him, its wide eyes uncomfortably close. It usually did not bother him to deal with members of alien races, but this time, here, it felt wrong. "I have never met anyone from that world."

"Neither have I," said Tully. It was disconcerting to hear it utter two languages at once, one overlaying the other, the seemingly random and chaotic real one making it difficult to lose himself in the sense of the translation. And as he continued to speak, the clicks and sputters that spilled from the speakers almost had him lose the sense of what he was saying. "My ancestors must have been from Earth, at least that's what I was told, but that was so many generations back that I can't even keep track. But that's not important. Where are *you* from? How can you have possibly heard of Earth when I've never heard of anyone like you? With all my visits to The Wheel I've never seen even so much as a picture of a race that looked remotely like you."

"My people do not travel."

"Yet here you are," said Tully, sullenly. The creature appeared not to pick up on his tone.

"I have not heard of any who ever left our homeworld before me. Not in my lifetime. And not, I think, in the lifetimes of my parents either. We are taught that it is pointless to step away from our planet. Most of my people would surely feel it to take too much time away from other more important pursuits. We are scholars, you see, trading our goods for knowledge. We sit back and let the traders come to us."





D. E. HARMAN



# Absolute Magnitude

Tully knew that he should care who these unknown people were, what species of beast they called themselves, what knowledge they had found worth trading for the offworld goods they'd need, the trajectory of the path that would lead him back to their home planet, all manner of particulars other than just that she was there uninvited occupying his space. But that sort of detail had barely interested him before, and was certainly not what was uppermost in his mind right then. Tully's narrow focus would have upset Sal, but his irritation could not be denied—he only cared about one thing.

"How did you find this place? It took us years before we suspected that it even existed."

"Who is this 'Us'? Is there another back at your ship?"

"How did you get here?" asked Tully quickly, with little space between its words and his own. His voice was rough, his face flushed.

"I will tell you. Come."

The alien took a step back, a clear invitation. Tully hesitated, but then stepped slowly into the room. He hung close by the airlock, one hand remaining on the lip of the doorway so that it could not slide shut behind him.

"How?" he repeated. "Tell me."

"I didn't find this place. I couldn't have possibly done that. I was not allowed to know of such things, only to dream of them. What I found, you see . . . was you. I knew that you were out here. Well, not you, in particular. But someone, see? My ship, it has been programmed to look for other ships, to sort through the signals and find ones that are off alone in unexplored areas."

"And then what do you do next? Take what others have worked so hard to find? Steal our work, having done nothing to earn it? Loot our dreams and bring them back to your homeworld?"

"No, I do not want—"

Tully broke in before the alien's doubled words could possibly sway him. Its yellow fur was risen on its neck; that made Tully nervous, and he did not like to have to think that he was the cause.

"Look, I don't need you here," he said, as flatly as he knew how. "I don't want you here. You have to understand—this is a place where I was meant to be alone."

"I am sorry that you feel that way, but there is much for me to learn here. Without what can be found here, I cannot go home. You do not know my species, and I do not know yours, but I do not believe that you are so selfish as to keep this place a secret for just yourself."

"There you are wrong. I thought I was selfish once, but I was wrong. Now I know that I am selfish as hell."

His knuckles trembled from holding his tools too tightly. He forced himself to breathe deeply as the alien's words continued to fly, but that did little to calm him down.

"Let us talk about this," it said, backing further away and then moving to its control panels. "Have you yet tested the air here in my ship? Maybe we can talk to each other without your suit between us. How can we ever reach an agreement standing here like this? You must come in, sit down. Perhaps I can tell you my history and make you understand why my need to be here is as strong as your own. Maybe even stronger."

The creature was right, at least about the first part of it. Caught up in his anger, he had not bothered to activate his suit's analyzer to check the atmosphere makeup in the alien's ship. If the air had qualities close to his own, he could have confronted it while maintaining his limited reserves. Forgetting that told him his emotions were putting him in more trouble than he'd thought. His feelings were making him foolish, and that was dangerous. Now he was not only angry at the alien; he was angry at himself.

"No," he said, turning away. He hoped never to see such a being again. Breaking down a wall like this now seemed forever beyond him. "I don't want to hear about your needs. I couldn't bear to hear about

them right now. Whatever they are doesn't matter. I'm leaving now. And while I can't force you from this place, I don't want to ever see you when I'm out there. Please. Help me pretend that this never happened."

Tully backed into the airlock, almost tripping over its upthrust lip. Once, in another time, in another universe so much like this one as to fool most that they were identical, he and Sal would have embraced another lifeform with enthusiasm, welcomed anyone, anything to talk to after such a long, dark ride as he had just experienced. But now that Sal had left him behind an empty space where she had once been, he found he had no room in his life for anyone else to inhabit it. He let the door slide shut between the alien and himself, and waited to see whether it would activate the chamber.

The hissing of the pumps came as a soothing relief. When the hull split to once more reveal the outer world, it seemed no bleaker to him than what he had just left behind. Climbing down the ladder far too quickly, he slipped on the bottom rung, hitting the ground hard. His teeth ached from the fall as he watched the ladder retract above him.

Sal would have been disappointed. He hadn't even asked its name.

The urn when Tully lifted it was not heavy; no, not heavy at all. It came easily from its alcove, and as he looked up, stepping back with the perfect object cradled in his arms, it was almost as if the long-limbed creatures carved in stone on either side were passing it on to him.

He liked to think that they were giving him license to do so, that if he could have reached back thousands of years and asked them if it was all right for him to take the urn away, that they would have understood. Once back at the ship with his prize, however, it would be up to him to attempt to do the understanding. Who had made this place? What did it all mean? Sal had only been able to get them so far.

Peering down, he considered his distorted reflection in the urn's sealed lid. Even if Tully could have seen through the protective film of his own reflected faceplate, he doubted that he would have been able to recognize himself. It had been a long time since the look in his eye had seemed familiar. Before turning back towards his ship, he raised his head to stare at the spot on which the urn, if the records could be trusted, had sat for centuries. Then he looked back down at the urn once more, where his helmet was mirrored like an alien thing, stretched out eerily. It unnerved him, and he couldn't quite say why.

He knew he should do this quickly and be done with it, should take the urn back to his ship before the alien could come along and do more damage here. He needed to examine the artifact more closely in peace, to run his bare fingertips over the carvings etched into its body—Sal had been able to make him a present of some small part of the dead language she had figured out, so they—*he*—could read bits of it now—but he could not bring himself to move. Looking down at the odd width of his reflection, he found himself overcome with a languid feeling that he had found too much a part of him recently.

Take the urn, leave it in place for another to discover and disturb, at that moment neither course of action seemed much different to him. There were choices before him, paths that diverged into other choices, branched into other lives, each with the potential of making him different than he was now, he knew that—but at this moment he did not have the energy to pick one. Take the urn. Leave it. He repeated the possibilities in his mind, but his mind offered no answers. The power of decision had been draining from him for months, and now appeared to be at an end; all that remained was lethargy.

Either option seemed now as good as the other, and so he placed the urn back into the recessed circle that had been carved aeons ago to embrace it, and took one long, slow step away. He raised his hands



## The Only Thing That Mattered

above his shoulders to rest on the walls on either side of the alcove, and let his chin drop to his chest. Peering into the stark, black, endless shadow that his chestlamp created in the niche behind the urn, Tully began to cry with an intensity he had not known since Sal had died.

He stood that way—legs trembling, tears streaming down his face, choices swirling in his head with no apparent place to land—until his suit alarm blared to warn him that his oxygen mix was running dangerously low, and he returned to the *Fortune* empty-handed.

Tully sat at the ready close by his airlock door, his helmet the only missing piece. Uncomfortable in his spacesuit, he stared off unblinking through invisible walls at the threatening presence of the invading ship. Between his feet, his overturned helmet looked very much like an empty urn, an allusion his mind was making that he regretted, and which he tried hard to ignore. The sheets of stars overhead were unblinking witnesses to his tense vigil.

When the alien finally climbed down its ladder, Tully did not move. He was frozen as it headed off towards the site, foolishly afraid that a stray twitch would give him away. He forgot to breathe, and forgot that it did not matter whether he breathed or not. It wasn't until the creature vanished over the cliff that Tully became something like himself again. He latched his helmet tight, and turning his back on its path, trundled towards the alien's deserted ship.

The ship's airlock controls were easy to manipulate, and he was relaxed as he played his fingers swiftly along the colored buttons. He'd watched closely as the alien worked them, so he'd had no doubt that he could do so himself. When the airlock door was solidly sealed behind him, he rechecked his helmet's pop-up grid. What he'd suspected had been the truth of it. Their atmospheres, while not identical, were close enough in so many ways as to be compatible. Aside from showing up so close in time upon this small planet, they had that much in common, at least. He paused for a moment, considering whether he was truly ready to take the next step, and then realizing his readiness did not matter, he cracked his helmet. He knew that he might as well conserve the stock of oxygen he had brought with him on his travels; he was unsure whether he would be able to bring himself to make any profit off this trip and buy more, and his recent inaction told him which way his heart was leaning.

Cradling his helmet under one arm, he studied the interior of the unfamiliar ship in a way he'd been too wired to do during his first brief visit. He felt somewhat unclean as he looked about, as if he was suddenly remembering that he should have known better than to do this. If Sal had been with him, she'd never have let it happen.

If Sal had been here, it wouldn't have been necessary.

As he gazed around, nothing he could see gave him any clue as to what the alien expected to do with whatever it found here, but then, he imagined that the creature would have been equally as lost in his own ship. He tried to read the markings on the controls, but they were completely unfamiliar to him. He could have recreated the moves it had made to activate the translator, but nothing more. And coming here at all had exhausted his daring; he was not about to experiment with anything random. As resentful as he felt that the ship was here, he did not intend to destroy it like a child.

A lone book, the only bit of humanity—or life, he corrected himself—he could see, obscured a row of buttons on the circular table. He flipped it open, picked his way slowly through its rough pages. Endless rows of strange letters there, neat and ordered, also meant nothing to him. Halfway through the volume the pages began to be blank, and he wondered if the book could it be a diary.

Sal would have known what to do with this chaotic information. She was always the one who had to be the smart one, and he had depended on that. It was his turn now, but he didn't know that he would ever be ready. And definitely not this soon.





## Absolute Magnitude

He had no choice. He would have to talk to the creature, confront it—no, not confront it, *reason* with it—something he had hoped to avoid. That was the only way. The paths before him had dwindled to one.

He would wait, then. Maybe with the element of surprise on his side, he would not feel at such a disadvantage.

Tully stood still in the center of the room, repressing every urge to touch. When the hum of the airlock finally began and ever-so-slowly ended, rescuing him from silence and solitude, *he* was the only one surprised, for the inner door opened to reveal the broad creature to be carrying an urn at least twice as large as the one that he had prevaricated over, and larger by far than any he had yet seen in his explorations here. The being nodded at Tully perfunctorily, as if it had all along been expecting to find him there. It took great effort on Tully's part to feign calm as he watched it place the urn beside the book on the control table.

"You don't seem startled to see me," he said, when he could finally muster speech. "You seem quite at peace with the idea of me being here. Or maybe you're not. Either way, I can't know for sure. You are alien, and so I haven't the slightest idea how to read you. You could be livid inside, and I would never know."

It removed its helmet, and sat in the control chair, but did not speak. Tully hoped it would, so he would not have to.

"I am talking too much," he continued, ignoring the way the translator seemed to mangle his words. "That's not what I intended, to talk too much. Only, it's been a long time since I've had anyone to speak with, anyone I've been willing to let myself speak to, and so... I'm rambling. But aren't you worried, finding me here like this? You should be, you know."

At last the alien spoke, its words once more in dual voices, sense layered with nonsense.

"You have not moved so much as a dust mote outside that you didn't need to. You've hardly touched anything out there, leaving very little evidence that you were even here. You treat it all with respect."

"But you don't know me. Not even my name."

"Why should I think that you would do me any harm?"

"Well . . . I did tell you that my ancestors were from Earth."

"That is an attempt at a joke, I think. The translators are not perfect, but I think I am right. It is kind of you to make such a joke."

Tully nodded, even though he was not sure himself whether or not it was a joke at all.

"I know you think that you do not want me here," it continued. "I also know that if you really did not want me here with you, you would have done something about it. You would have left. Or you would have driven me from this place. But you would not be sitting calmly across from me, talking about the future."

Tully was startled at the way this alien seemed to know him better than he knew himself. He smiled, something it seemed he had not done in a long while. He wondered whether the alien knew what a smile meant.

He wondered if *he* knew what the smile meant.

He wondered whether it knew that it smelled like almonds. Or even what almonds were.

"My name is Tully. Please, if you can, accept my apology for the way I acted earlier."

"My name is Xi," it said, and as the name was spoken, Tully sighed along with the sound. He suddenly sensed, not knowing how, that what he had been thinking of as an it was actually a she. She tapped the book before her, and then opened a recessed drawer in the table to slide it

away. "And I accept your apology. Soon I hope to be able to do more than that. Soon I hope to understand it."

"I don't know that I'll ever be able to give you that." He paused, staring at the place where the book had been. "Why have you come here?"

"As I told you before, we are scholars, my people. Information is important to us. Who better to get worthwhile information from than one such as yourself, out each day exploring an unknown universe?"

"And what do you intend to do, now that you have followed me to this particular place in the universe?"

"That I do not know as yet. I do not even know what this place is supposed to be. Remember? I did not follow clues here, I followed you here. Or at least my ship did. I brought this urn back here in hopes of understanding the nature of where you have led me. Look at it. It seemed remarkable there, even back in a hall of the remarkable. What do you think it is? Do you have any ideas?"

Tully did not answer, could not answer, and after a moment, the alien spoke again.

"You know, don't you?" she said.

"This is a place of the dead," he said at last. "And the only one who fully knows the answer to your question... is the same."

"I do not know what that means."

"Put your helmet back on," he said, his hands shaking as he reached for his own, "and I will show you."



The star maps he showed to Xi were two. First, floating in the air, translucent like a dream, a holographic projection of the path that had led him from yesterday into today, glowing red lines leading from star system to star system until they ended here. They stood on opposite sides of it while he explained the journey, and he could still see her through a mist of stars, her blue skin made a dark purple. Then, beneath it, limp upon a table, a parchment, so fragile it seemed mere molecules thick and likely to dissolve simply from the pressure of being looked at, also showed the way to the rocky planetoid on which their two ships perched. Tully hoped that these twin sights pushed from her brain the image made upon

entering of that second spacesuit, Sal's spacesuit, hanging hollow in the airlock. He did not want to make explanations until he was sure he was ready for them. He needed to stay for awhile in the shallows, and not go out where it was deep.

"Each time I unfold this," said Tully, pointing to the ancient, physical map, the map of atoms rather than air, the clue that had started it all, "it moves a little closer to becoming dust."

"Then I thank you for making the sacrifice of showing it to me at all," said Xi. She had detached her reconfigured translator from her suit, and was wearing it loosely about her neck like an amulet. He looked at it resting against her flesh as her words poured out, and saw that her skin seemed to glow with a pale phosphorescence, something he had not noticed before.

"That's all right. I need to look at it from time to time anyway, to help me remember. Even if I had not brought you here, I still would have had to do this eventually."

"Then I have reason to thank you anyway, for letting me be here while you remember."

Tully took a step back, and the hologram dissolved from the air. He turned away from the map that remained, and from Xi. He had to tell her, and yet he could not look at her and speak; the blankness of the wall made a more inviting audience, and one that he desperately needed or else he could not go on.



# The Only Thing That Mattered

"We'd heard of this place a long time ago, you see," he began in a slow voice, surprising himself with his formality, "in rumors and superstitions alive for generations. It was said to be a planet of the dead. The world itself, or so the common knowledge went, was never inhabited, had never known life of its own. Some race, the name of which we've as yet been unable to translate, would travel from their homeworld to this graveyard, and place their dead ones here. It's a race that apparently no longer exists, from a planet we've yet to find.

"Who were these mourners? We don't know. We figured out just enough to learn that on the outside of each urn is carved the life story of the being within. I can only make out a few words, but I hope to be able to read them in full someday, because we still do not know their stories. Who would warrant such effort of time and expense to be brought so far to say a ceremonial goodbye? Surely not all the members of that race are here. That wall we walked was long, but not long enough for that. So as you can see, we knew very little. But we knew enough to understand that what we discovered here, this destination that was pieced together of scraps and whispers, would be the find of anyone's lifetime. But now that I'm here . . . Sal was the one . . . She'd know how to interpret that find. She'd figured out much of this language, held it in her head, in her soul. I can hardly read it at all. It's meaningless. I understand as little of these scratches as I would of you, without that translator. I feel lost here. There is no longer any map that I can read."

He turned back to the map, making sure to keep his line of sight low so he would not catch Xi's gaze, and the sheet billowed slightly with his movements. He slowly folded the chart until it could fit in the palm of his hand, where it seemed no thicker than it had been a moment before.

"That's why I did not bring one of the urns back here. At least that's the reason that I told myself. I wouldn't know what to do with them. I could sell them, but I could never understand them. And though I need this money, money isn't what I want right now. I want to see. And without Sal..."

He seized control of himself before the crying began, but just barely. He hoped that since she was alien to human ways that she could not possibly have read the sure signs that he'd been about to crumble.

"But I am not lost," said Xi. He could sense her moving around the table towards him, then stopping before she came too close. So she could tell that much, at least. "Perhaps with a little help from me, if I could see your notes, study your maps further, I would be able to help figure it all out."

"But the thing is, Xi, the thing is, you see—I don't know whether I want it all figured out."

He still could not bear to look at her, and so looked down at the map in his hand. When her hand appeared and covered his own, he was too stunned by the touch to be startled.

"I do not believe that," she said. "I think you do know what you want."

He kept looking down. To avoid being drawn to her eyes, he kept looking hard at her skin, so blue against the pale map.

"May I take this back to my ship? I would like to study it, and whatever else you might have that could help us solve this mystery."

"No," said Tully, driven to look up at her at last. "No. You may look at these as much as you like, but when you do, I want you to look at them here."

He turned away again, even though he had grown tired of all this turning away, because he hoped that she could not read him, hoped that she did not realize that he wanted to retain the documents not so much because he did not trust her with them, but because he missed the sound

of another life echoing around him in the ship. He was sick of only hearing sounds of his own making.

"Do you really think you will be able to help read them?" he asked. He placed the map upon the table and looked at her straight in the face and this time refused to turn away from her big, round eyes. She did not answer immediately.

"With time," she said. "After all, that is why I am out here with you, instead of back home with all the others. As I said, we are scholars, not explorers. It is unusual that we wander space. We leave it to others to do the traveling. It is only my abilities that have caused my people to allow me to wander this far. They have great hopes for me, and for my journey. The intellectual thirsts of those at home are strong."

"Let's hope that they are not too strong, Xi. I wouldn't want them to cross the galaxies to drink this place up."

Xi gave out a long, high-pitched whistle, her lips vibrating swiftly, that the translator mirrored as a laugh.

"No. Believe me. They would not do such a thing. No one will come after me. But having found this place, Tully, don't you want the universe to know about it? It should not stay hidden from the rest. Isn't that what your life's work has been about? Discovering what has been lost, and making it found again?"

"I know that what you say is making sense. Still... you must be patient with me. I don't know why I find I can say this to you, but... I used to make sense in what I did. Really, I did. But not anymore. And I don't know that I will be ready to start making sense again for a long time."

"Perhaps not. So come. At the very least, we can go for a walk."

In the airlock, so she would not see him go through his ritualistic longing stare at Sal's suit while he climbed into his own, as he had grown accustomed to doing each time when he exited the ship, he instead forced himself to study Xi as she slithered back into her own suit. Her movements were unexpectedly graceful, and he was startled to find himself smiling yet again.

They walked until the sculpted walls were no more, the canyon coming to a dead end where the unknown creators had ceased their carving. The raw

rock before them there seemed like a wave stalled mere moments before sweeping them away.

"Why do you think they stopped here?" Tully asked.

"Perhaps they stopped dying," said Xi, running her hand along the craggy face of the dead end. There were alcoves along both walls, with an urn in each one of them save the one that Xi had had the courage to strip bare, all the way until this final wall they faced. As they'd made their way along, Tully had found that he was able to see differences in the carved aliens, where at first there had only seemed uniformity. Slight variations in body type had become more noticeable. He wondered what else he could learn if only he left himself open.

"People don't stop dying," he said.

"These were not your people," said Xi. "Maybe they have some surprises for you."

"Life is life. It stops. You'll learn. It always stops. Usually far too soon."

Even with the expanse of dead air between them, he could still smell Xi, her odor carried away from his ship in the confines of his suit, and for a moment, he felt a sting of guilt over wearing such traces so close to his skin. Since Sal's aroma had faded away, it had been a long time since any scent other than his own had invaded his nostrils. He exhaled sharply, hoping to blow away the fragrance, blow away the feelings, but







her smell was still trapped there with him, inescapable, and all he succeeded in doing was misting his faceplate.

"It is beautiful, you know," said Xi. "This place, this sky. Finding that is almost enough of a treasure."

"I know," he said.

She touched a hand to the chaotic outcropping that barred them from going any further.

"You should know that you do not have to feel guilty because you are not seeing this with your partner."

"Yes, I do have to feel guilty. That's the only sane thing to do. I left her behind in a graveyard, only to come to this new graveyard alone. I'm trapped between graveyards, and don't know which way to go next."

"Some place a little less morbid, I hope," said Xi.

He dropped to one knee and ran a finger along the join where floor met wall, hoping that even if he could not decipher their language, at the very least he could determine how and why they'd created this strange monument.

"They left no tools behind," he said. "Not a trace of what they were. They left us no message for us here, either deliberate or otherwise."

"I do not think we need there to be an intentional message. But we will find one anyway. I feel sure of it."

"What are you looking for here, Xi?" Tully asked, looking up, her broad silhouette blocking out the stars. "How can you sound so confident that you will find it? And even if you do, what could you possibly uncover here that your people would want? You say you want knowledge, knowledge that your people can turn to a profit, but what does that mean? I guess I don't really understand that. I sell physical objects—artifacts, scrolls, artwork. How do you trade a fact from a dead world?"

Xi turned from him then, lowering her hands to her sides. In her silence, he tried to read her body language, but could not.

"Xi?"

"I do not know," she said quickly. "I have never done this before."

"What are you talking about? You gave me the impression that you could help me, that you came here bringing some small scraps of knowledge with you. You let me think that."

She turned back to him slowly, and then knelt beside him.

"I am sorry. I should not have said what I did. But I am being truthful now. I have never done this before, Tully. This is my first time off my home planet."

"Wait," he said, in a whisper even he could barely hear. He pressed his hands together tight so that he would not be moved to take hold of her and shake her hard. "Wait. You follow me into the middle of nowhere. No, you don't just follow, you *stalk*. You strut around an ancient site as if you've done it a thousand times before. You even convince me that you should be here. You make me think that there must be a chance you can figure it all out for me, you have me hoping—and now you tell me that you've never done it before?"

Tully started to laugh, but though his body went through the motions, no sound came. Tears rolled down his cheeks to pool at the base of his faceplate. He fell back against the unhewn wall and slid to the ground. The canyon stretched out before him and vanished far over the rim, seeming so far he doubted if he had the strength to walk it again. Xi slid a few feet closer, banging her toes into the sole of one of his boots.

"What are you doing, Tully?" asked Xi.

"Haven't you ever seen anyone laugh before?" he said roughly. "Or doesn't your translator compensate for that?"

"Yes. All races laugh. But what I haven't seen before is a human acting like an idiot."

She got quickly back to her feet and started walking back the way they'd come. Tully scrambled upright, grabbing for her awkwardly, but missed, and fell back to his knees. By the time he was standing again, she was far ahead of him.

"Xi, wait up! I didn't mean to hurt you!"

*I didn't even know I could.*

He cursed his unwieldy suit as he struggled vainly to catch up with her.

"You think that you're the only one who has ever known loss?" she transmitted back to him, her computerized voice sounding more human than ever. As the distance between them increased, her words began to be interspersed with an ever-increasing static. "You lost one lover, and you think that gives you the right to hurt? Well, I lost them all. Pain is more than just a human quality, you know. Pain belongs—"

Her transmission faded completely then, abandoning him mid-sentence. He was left without even the comfort of static, moving slowly forward as the eyes of a dead race followed him down a long and lonely road.

By the time Tully arrived at Xi's ship, she had already changed the airlock codes. Using the sequence that he had learned before, he punched at the buttons by the outer door, then went on to experiment with other patterns—but nothing happened. He pressed his palms against the dark metal, trying to sense her within. He hoped that the ship had alerted her to his attempts, that she was looking his way and wondering. He rapped at the door, first softly, and then harder, but he knew that trying to get her attention that way was pointless; meteors had bounced off like snowflakes against the very spot where his glove banged. In a war of metal against metal, his suit would surely give out first. She likely couldn't hear his vibrations even if she tried.

"Xi, do you hear me?" he broadcast to the silence, hoping that even if she was unaware of his frantic actions, she'd at least pick up his transmission. But there was no response. He could imagine her sitting there, skin of her ship stripped away as his had been before, watching him make a fool of himself. It wouldn't be the first time someone used him for amusement in that way. "Xi? Listen to me. Please. I must not lose you now."

He pressed his forehead against the ship and wondered how long he could stay there that way, whether he should just remain propped up



## The Only Thing That Mattered

until the oxygen was gone, a monument to foolish hope. If that was what it would take, he swore that he would do it. He had no idea how much time had passed when he finally heard Xi speak to him through his helmet.

"My people didn't want me to come here." Xi's words were in the translated computer voice that he had come to think of as her own, but they comforted him nonetheless. The sound caused him to push at the door, but it still remained sealed against him. "Actually, Tully, my people didn't want me to go *anywhere*. They liked to sit back on our planet, self-important and still, and let other races travel to them from all across the universe, but none of them ever went off-planet to see these things for themselves. They felt they belonged at the center of the universe, and as such could live as contemplators rather than doers. The mere idea of us traveling seemed blasphemous to them. I begged them, Tully, but they would not listen."

Open the door, thought Tully, but he could not bring himself to speak the words. Not then, not when it seemed as if she still might bolt. The last thing he wanted was to look up at the ship rising away from him. He could not bear such loss again. Her voice seemed distant to him, and not from just the transmission alone.

"When I would tell them," she went on, "that I would rather be one of the people who came to us to trade than who I was, that I was not willing to submit to a life spent looking up and out from our surface towards the mysteries above, like a fish that could never know the outside of the tank, they told me to keep quiet about my desires. They told me to keep those thoughts to myself. But silence couldn't save me. I would keep looking at the stars, imagining the planets that raced around them, and the people who populated those planets, and wished I could know more about them first hand, as more than just an impersonal intellectual puzzle. If forced to live that way, if forced to contain my reach, I would die.

"But they would not hear me, or having heard, would not value my urgency. As far as any of the elders were concerned, the territories beyond our sky were damned. Terrible things would happen to me if I went off-planet. They warned that outside of our homeworld, the universe held nothing good for us. They promised there would only be pain for me if I left."

"I will not let them hurt you, Xi."

"They were not the ones who would hurt me. They said that the universe itself would do that. They said—"

A strange static danced in Tully's ears, louder than the white noise of the universe. It was a sound unlike any he had yet heard from Xi, and though at first it was unidentifiable, he quickly decided that it was most likely the sound of her crying, untranslated by the computer, untranslatable by anything but his heart.

"Xi, let me in." He'd never heard himself beg like that before. It startled him, but at the same time felt fully justified. "Please. I don't want to be the cause of your pain. They lied to you, Xi. The universe doesn't want to cause you pain. The universe wants you to be happy. I believe that. I suddenly know that to be true."

She went on as if he had not even spoken.

"This ship that I have," she continued, "the ship that brought me here to your side? I lied to you, Tully. It isn't mine. I stole it from one of our many visitors. While its true owner traded in the city, I broke inside. I'd been waiting for such an opportunity. The elders would never have let me go, there was no way to ever find an acceptable path towards going, I knew that, and so . . . and so, I simply went. And that's why I cannot help you. That's why, back at the site, I had nothing to give. I'm no explorer. I can't interpret for you what this place means. I'm merely a thief. All I am, Tully, all I really am, is just someone who wants to look at the stars."

"That's all I need," he whispered.



"They're probably looking for me right now. If we stay here too long, they'll find us. They'll find this place, and I'm not sure I want them to have it. Let them learn that they can't have everything. It's not me they want, anyway; it's the ship back. I've embarrassed them with one of their traders. Me, they wouldn't know what to do with.

"I can't go home now. I can't help you and I can't go home. And I don't know which of the two is worse."

"You don't need to go home, Xi," he said quietly. "You don't have to accept that. Just open the door. Let me in so we can talk. We need to talk, Xi, and not through a vacuum. We need to talk in the same room, occupying the same space. The future is too fragile to be discussed in such a distant way. Please let me in. There's something important I need to tell you. Something terribly important."

The airlock when it opened surprised Tully. He had not thought his words would be enough. He rushed through the opening and felt so crazed that it was a great struggle for him to wait for the outer door to close before peeling off his suit. He found the delays of his clumsy controls unbearable. Standing there, at last no barriers between them, he did not speak, not at first; his mind was racing too swiftly now for the words to get out. The smell of almonds was still in the air, even stronger this time than it had seemed before, and he could only pause and inhale deeply. The words that had seemed so important when he was outside Xi's ship seemed too heavy to carry inside with him. Even though his cheeks were wet, he was smiling. It was a broad, honest smile, something that had been alien to him for far too long. He could think of only one thing to say.

"Xi," he said, speaking slowly, deliberately. "I love you."

Tully looked at Xi as his translated words spewed out of the ship's computer. She did not turn to look at him, instead staring at the speakers, and she did not speak, breaking his heart with her silence. *Look at me*, he thought, but she would not, not at first. His heart thudded as she sat and punched a series of buttons, and together they listened to his declaration in her tongue, repeated once, twice, again. By the time she finally returned his gaze, it had seemed like forever.

"Tell me that again."

"I said that I love you, Xi."

"You are a crazy man! I had thought that the translator surely had to be broken, but—What kind of thing is that for you to say? You don't

*See Mattered page 53*





D. E. HARTMAN '02



# No Heroes in Inner Space

by Chris Bunch

Copyright © Chris Bunch 2002

First Lieutenant David Katz, USAF, morosely watched his ship's claw lift the dead British satellite into the cargo bay.

"High adventure in the wild vast regions of space!" he chanted into his suit mike. "Missions of daring in the name of interplanetary garbage removal! Travel into the present with Lieutenant—"

An alarm shrilled in his headphones, and, completely without logic, he tried to flatten himself on the hull of his ship, succeeded only in pulling his boots clear of the skin, where he floated, flailing.

"And what in the sonofabitchin' hell is...was *that*?"

"Near collision avoided," the computer said. "Unknown object approached within sixty meters, anti-collision program activated."

"You didn't answer my goddamned question. What the hell is it?"

The ship hummed. "Negative ID, all files."

Katz saw a mooring link swinging close as he orbited his own ship, reached with a toe, had it, and pulled himself back to the ship. He clumped to the airlock, cycled into the one-man craft's tiny control room, unsealed his helmet.

"Gimme a radar picture."

"Screen Three."

"Can you get me a real time pic?"

"Real time image loading onto Screen Four...IR image."

Another screen swam up. Katz, long familiar with infrared imagery, translated the picture into something the human eye might recognize:

"A frigging donut," he said. "A small frigging donut. With a pencil down the middle."

He touched keys, called up a scale next to the image.

"Not *that* frigging small," he said. "Thirty meters in diameter, maybe?"

He puzzled at the image for a moment. Unknown satellites, burnt-out lift stages, or just plain space junk, weren't that uncommon this close to earth. All they had was give their discoverers the heebie-jeebies, and another job for the garbage men.

Then he had a not terribly pleasant thought.

"Ship, isolate everything except that tube in the middle. Check your *Janes*, under ICBM's."

He realized his breathing had gotten quicker, louder.

"I have a tentative," the ship said, almost apologetically. "The closest ID I can offer is an SS-22."

"And what the hell is that?"

"A missile developed by Russia, never put into production, due to the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic, although *Janes* says plans have been rumored to have been sold to various countries."

"USSR?" Katz said, incredulous. "That was before I was even born, for the love of Allah and other strange gods. What the hell do we have up here, the Museum of Antique Rocketry?"

"Gimme its specs."

"Missile was supposed to be solid-fuel, cold-launch, six MIRVed warheads, nuclear."

"Wonderful. I don't believe you. What's it doing out *here*?"

The ship remained silent.

"I don't like this," Katz complained. "I don't like surprises," he complained. "Get the station up."

"Negative contact," the ship reported. "Station will be in earthshadow for next...24 minutes."

"So I'm supposed to either cut and run or make some kind of noble decision, all on my very own, just like heroes are supposed to do."

"Shit."

"Ship, old buddy, chase down that there satellite. I guess we're expected to go visiting, and figure a way to tow it to the boneyard."

"Tracking...I have an orbit...firing...under drive...will close with satellite in...19 minutes."

Katz tried to relax, failed.

"Now, when I come up on this beast," he mused. "First we get alongside. Then...gawds. Then I guess I gotta board, and figure out what this prize is about."

"Shiver me timbers, however you shiver a timber, and break out me cutlass."

"Command not understood."

Katz watched the unknown object close on a radar screen, contemplated his present, found it wanting.

A lousy goddamned missile up here. Which I'm supposed to go out and collect. Goddamned thing probably has nuclear warheads, probably unshielded from what I remember reading about the Rooshians and their efficiency.

But will I get a hero medal for doing that?

Not a chance. Not this close to earth.

"No heroes in inner space," he muttered. "If there's any heroes at all these days."

He was lying to himself. He knew damned well where heroes were: The UN team, at the High Station, busily putting together the first manned Mars probe.

Somewhere out there in blackness, the already launched EC Inner Planets Survey;

Even, on the moon, the hammer-swingers building Israel's research station, which was also rumored to also be a launch platform, intended to finally make sure Eretz Israel was safe from the Arab saber-rattlers.

"You could've maybe been one of them," he said, wondering when he'd gotten into this stupid habit of talking to himself. "Up there, on the edge of everything."

"Yeh," he said. "But more likely pushing a stupid Kfir VII over Syria, waiting for some raghead to figure he needed target practice."

"Nope, no heroes this close to the ground."

He knew what he needed:

Ground leave. Manhattan. A chance to see if Sheila had really meant that Dear John. A chance to sit in a nice sports bar with some friends and a beer or seven, bitching about the Cubs, ignoring the Dodgers.

A corned beef sandwich at the Carnegie.

His mother's blintzes, listening to her kvetching about the neighbors, and how NYU was going to the hounds, and that she was going to give up her professorship and emigrate to someplace she was appreciated.

Her matzoh ball soup...and he caught himself.

Nobody gets *that* homesick, he thought, remembering near-raw dough in his mind.

Go back to dreaming about Sheila and her charms.

"Closing on unknown object," the ship interrupted.

"You got any more details on the monsker?"

"Negative."

Katz sighed.

"Match orbits, close, and prepare for me to go across. Avast, ye hearties!"

"Command not—"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it the first 400 times. Oh yeah. Begin recording."

"In what ranges?"

"All of 'em. They'll make a grand memorial."

"Base system recorder is Red-Xed for maintenance, and reported in your log book last watch. No recording possible." Katz thought the ship's synthesized-voice sounded a little smug.

"Do you got contact with the station yet?"

"Negative."

Katz grunted. "Then carry on the mission, like they say in group-pounder school."

"Matching orbits. Will close," the ship reported after a few moments.



# Absolute Magnitude

Then:

"Unknown object, forty meters distant."

"Can you get a grapple across?"

"Affirmative."

"Then if you would?"

"Object grappled."

"Tell mother I died game," Katz said, unbuckled, and went to the hatch.

"Keep trying to reach Station," he ordered, unplugging his life support, checking the various readouts in his suit.

"Goin' hunting," he murmured, and went into the lock, cycled it, and floated out into space.

He considered the object across from him. He could see no ID, no cautionary signs in any language. Just gray metal, doughnutting what definitely was resembling an antique ICBM.

He braced against his ship, and, one hand on the grapple line, kicked away, and pulled himself to the unknown satellite.

He considered the satellite, saw where booster rockets had been clamped on for the launch. A few meters away was the wheel of a lock. He carefully and awkwardly clomped over to it.

"Pretty standard," he said, opened the outer hatch, and cycled himself into the satellite.

"Got gravity," he said. "All the comforts."

The main cabin was large, almost as big as the space station's exercise area. He checked his gauges, saw that the compartment was pressurized. But he didn't unsnap his faceplate.

There were two control stations. One was blank, but the other—

"This bugger's still alive!" he yelled.

It was, indeed. There was a time reel downticking to one side of the main screen, showing 4 hrs, 23 min, 11 sec. The screen showed earth, and, looming in the foreground, the nose of that missile. More interesting was a flashing screen, that read:

40°46'N/73°59'W.

Latitude and longitude... I wonder where... Katz thought. He'd been good enough at geography to represent his PS at a New York State Geography Fair.

"That's... sunnovabitch, that's frigging New York City... Central Park, for all I know."

The bastards, the bastards, his mind rang. And who cares if the warhead's still MIRVed, only one'll do just fine. They're gonna dump this pig down on Momma and my cousins. Which means they're from...

He looked at the control panel, at other data panels. There weren't any, and the control panel had nothing in any language.

"Sanitized," he muttered. "Which means somebody built this bastard, sold it to another bastard, who's gonna take New York out."

"Like hell they are," he said.

If this were a nice piece of Hollywood, he thought, I would have me an old-fashioned .44 Magnum or something that granddaddy used to tame the Wild West with that I could blow holes everywhere and FUBAR the works.

Instead...

Instead I've got this here fire extinguisher, clipped right here to the bulkhead, so all I need to do is unsnap it, and—

—And he felt, through his bootheels a vibration, and saw movement, reflected in a gauge's cover on the control panel.

Katz spun, as a man came out of the right hand compartment. Guns were obsolete in space, but he had a nice, long kitchen knife that looked more than sharp enough to puncture some nice, life-emitting holes in Katz's space suit and Katz himself.

He was shouting something, which Katz of course couldn't make out.

The man rushed in, lifting the knife. Katz had one second to remember what an unarmed combat coach had taught him at the Academy, reaffirmed by one of David's more dissolute street friends.

"Only an amateur lifts a blade when he's coming in," the man, who probably had seven or eight black belts in various disciplines had said

comfortably. David Katz, who owned one black belt, which went nicely with his dress blues, yanked the fire extinguisher from the wall and threw it in the man's face.

He could feel the scream as the man fell to the side, dropping the knife.

Katz had it, and drove it three times into the man's chest. He felt the man shudder and die.

David Katz fought very hard to keep from throwing up in his suit, got control, and came to his feet.

Holding the knife, he checked the rest of the satellite, found one room, its door cracked. He chanced opening his faceplate, heard snores.

Moving as quietly as he could, he went back into the control room. The timer... obviously marking down to launch time... was still ticking.

Katz knew his superiors would want him to ID the corpse, found strength enough to riffle through the man's shipsuit pockets, found nothing, and was staring again at that timer.

If he threw the fire extinguisher through the screen, his second thought came, would that do any more than chop the display?

Maybe not.

He considered, then went to the other control station, and began moving every control from where it was to its opposite setting.

That couldn't launch that frigging missile.

Could it?

He was quite intent on his work, and barely noticed a wisp of smoke drifting past his faceplate.

Then it registered, and he saw more smoke coming out of the open compartment door the man had come out of.

He held back panic, waddled to the lock, entered it, and cycled himself into space.

"Ship, can you receive me?" He didn't feel like making a joke.

"Affirmative."

"Coming home. Stand by."

He went across the rope like an acrobat, made it to his own lock, turned back. At the stern of the satellite, metal had begun to glow red.

Katz didn't waste any more time, but reentered his ship, buckled himself in, jabbed plugs into life support holes.

"Ship, get me the hell away from here."

"Be precise."

"Goddamit, get me two clicks away, maximum drive, now! Then stabilize orbit."

"Firing."

It took three forevers to get away from the satellite, and by then the rear of the machine was white-hot.

Katz watched, fascinated, and the satellite blew up. His IR display blanked overload, and even the real time monitor fuzzed over.

Then there was nothing in space but space.

"Hoboy," Katz said. "I'd mop my goddamned brow, if it weren't for this silly hat."

"Now for my Galactic Cross or whatever gongs they give these days. Here I come, Duck Dodgers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

Then he realized. No recording. No hard evidence, either.

"Wonderful," Katz said. Another thought came. "Did you ever make contact with the station?"

"Affirmative. I told them to stand by, you'd be in contact as soon as possible."

"So they know from *nada*, and with nothing to look at but a hole in the environment, they ain't likely to believe anything I say. Or if they do, they'll be pulling my toenails out not finding out where the villains hang their hats."

"Just frigging wonderful," he said again, shaking his head.

"Like I said before, there ain't no heroes in inner space."



# The Only Thing That Mattered

## Mattered continued from page 49

even know who I am. You don't even know *what* I am!"

"I know exactly what you are, Xi. I didn't plan this. I'm not sure where it came from. But standing here now, before you, I know it to be true. Maybe I *am* crazy. But love is crazy, isn't it? Love has to be crazy."

She remained still as he moved towards her. He placed his bare fingers on her cheek, touching her for the first time. He slid those fingers to her chin, and expected her gaze to follow the trail of his hand across her skin, but she did not. She was holding herself back, he knew that, and he had to make her let go.

"You say this to me after what I have told you," she said. He did not need a translator to know that she wanted to pull back. "This is pity, not love. You do not know what you mean. You feel sorry for me, as I would for myself if I were you. This is not love. You could not possibly know."

"I know I need to hold you," he said, letting his hand drop from her face to her shoulder, pulling her closer to him. She did not stop her head from resting against his stomach. "Isn't that enough?"

He bent low with a grace he'd never quite known to place his lips upon the blue of her forehead, which was soft and damp, like an open, hungry mouth. Her whole body as it called to him made him feel as if he was already in a deep and intimate place, one buried inside her heart. He was astonished to feel this way, astonished that Sal would let him. He tilted back her head to place his trembling lips against her own almost absent ones. So thin were those vestigial lips that at first he could not tell whether or not she was kissing him back, but then her tongue, alive and round and small, darted against his own.

"I've needed you for so long," he said, "only I didn't know that what would fill the empty hole was you."

She backed away from him for a moment and seemed to study the strangeness of his face. To him, hers seemed strange no longer, and he hoped that he could convince her to let him seem the same.

"I do not know what we are doing," she said.

"We are doing what it is that couples do," he said, reluctantly dropping his hands from her so he could unbutton the light shirt which he had worn beneath his spacesuit. "We are going mad."

"I have never had anyone look at me in that way before," said Xi. "Not even my lovers."

"Then perhaps they were not really your lovers after all," said Tully.

They lay entwined in her bunk, a thin blanket down around their ankles. He felt that he could have floated to any shore he wished just on the breadth of her. One of Tully's hands was pinned beneath her, while with the other he ruffled the yellow fur at her neck. He followed the soft trail as far down her back as he could reach. He took a deep breath to prepare himself for what he had to say. He felt no more prepared after than he had before, but he had to plunge in anyway.

"Follow me," he said, murmuring into her neck as he drank of her skin. "Come to my ship. come live with me, and send this ship empty back to your home. Let them have it. You will not need it. Then maybe your elders will forget about you, and you can go on with me. That's all you'll ever need. You want to decipher the puzzles of the universe? Then we'll do it together. There is no need for you to make that journey alone, Xi. You have me now. You have me."

There was more he would have said, he didn't know that he would ever have stopped speaking until she agreed to follow him, but she pulled away from him suddenly, silencing him. Her feet caught in the blanket as she sat up. He reached for her back, but at the sight of her hunched shoulders, he let his fingers fall short before they neared her skin.

"Who was she?" asked Xi. He could not begin to conceive of how to answer her. She turned to him once more, and did not appear pleased with his silence. "Tully?"

He tried again to reach for her, to cure this rift with a touch, but this time she raised a hand against him.

"Tully, tell me," she said. "Or this invitation of yours comes much too soon."

He turned from her, and sat at the far corner of the bunk.

"You're right," he said softly. "I guess you need to know. I guess I need to say it. Forgive me for not saying it sooner, Xi. But it's difficult most times to even think it."

He shifted slightly to make sure that his back was completely towards her, so he could not see her even out of the smallest corner of an eye. He could not bear to look at Xi and talk about Sal. The two concepts should not have to be contained within the same universe. Until he began to speak, he was not sure that the words would be able to come at all.

"I have not spoken of this to anyone before," he said, the sounds dredged out of him from great depths. "Not voluntarily. And not even to those who thought they knew me well enough to ask me. I had turned into a ghost. Believe me, Xi, when I would walk through the world that we had formerly inhabited together, and see those who had known us both, I would shake my head and look away, and try to make myself invisible, and they would know enough not to ask anything further of me. And yet, even if they had asked, even if they'd loved me enough to ignore my protests and try to dig the truth out of me, I doubt that I would have been able to tell them. But I will tell you.

"I will tell you."

He looked down into the palms of his hands, and he knew he was alone there on the bunk. There was no planetoid, no Xi, and most definitely of all, no Sal.

"You don't know what this life you say you want is really like, Xi. You couldn't possibly know, living on the surface as you did. I don't know that you could ever understand the choices that one makes, the stupid, stupid choices. Because when you live out among the stars, with your ship your only true home, you must learn to make do without neighbors or friends. You figure out quickly how to take care of yourself. You don't go looking elsewhere for answers. Elsewhere could be months away.

"So when Sal first started feeling weak, we figured it was from overwork, from spending too much of her energies trying to find this place. We didn't dig any deeper than that. It was easier for our hunt not to. Our only doctor was the ship's computer, and if you learned anything from your brief moments onboard the *Fortune*, it is that we could not afford the best. This find was supposed to change that. I like to tell myself that even if we'd brought along the top of the line, it wouldn't have done any good, that no computer can ever be as intuitive as a human doctor. That we still wouldn't have known that this was far more than just exhaustion. But that's just what I like to tell myself.

"So we did what we thought was right. I tried to get her to slow down, to sleep more, to eat better, to rest her eyes, her hands, her mind, keeping her focus on the strength that we both knew would certainly come back if only we gave it time. We were so foolish, Xi. We knew our love was immortal, and we thought that meant we were immortal too. A common problem, I guess. Yet if we'd only admitted that we weren't, maybe we would have headed back. We could have done something in time. But no, we were so fixated on this damned, horrible place.



# Absolute Magnitude

“Sal was so tired one morning that she could not get out of her bed, and so I went about my work without her, hoping that her time alone would strengthen her. Later that day, when I looked in on her to see if she needed anything, she was sleeping. At least I thought that she was sleeping. She seemed so peaceful there, the covers tucked up under her chin, her mouth slightly open like a child. But she never woke up again. Later that day, I realized that she had fallen into a coma of some kind. It was only then that I understood that her illness was beyond us both.

“I rushed us back to The Wheel, whatever good rushing does in the vastness of space; we were so far out that by then it was too late. She’d fallen victim to Frayn’s Syndrome, Xi. Your people would not know of such a thing, and we do not know much more, just enough of it to give it a name. Spacers who handle many alien artifacts often succumb to it, but we always knew it wouldn’t happen to us. They could not tell me for sure how she had contracted it, what object or set of objects she might have touched that let this disease get to her, or even how it had killed her. They think it might have something to do with combinations of various alien organic matter reacting with each other in one’s system, but that’s still just a theory. We know so damned little.

“They could not even tell me whether or not it would eventually kill me, too.

“For the longest time I hoped that it *would* kill me. Without Sal, I was dead already. Eventually, once I no longer had the will to even wish that it would catch up with me, I started wandering again. I called it wandering, but by using that word I was fooling myself. I guess I always knew I would come here. This is the place towards which Sal was pointing us. This is what our final years had been *about*.

“If you had not come here and taken me by surprise, I don’t know what I would have done having finally gotten here. Sat there, perhaps, until all my oxygen went away, all the while thinking of Sal and what might have been. There didn’t seem to be any reason to go back to the real world.”

It wasn’t until he felt Xi’s touch on his shoulder that he realized he had fallen silent, or that his eyes were closed. The imprint of Sal’s face was still, as ever, haunting his eyelids.

“But I did come and take you by surprise,” whispered Xi. Her fur was so soft as her cheek pressed against the side of his neck, pushing Sal’s face gently away.

“Yes, you did,” he said. “And I never thought I’d see again the emotions that you brought. I thought that I was dead, and that these feelings were dead within me. Now everything has changed.”

“You seemed so sad before,” she said, reaching her short arms around him so that her fingers almost touched each other across his chest. “Is that what finding the right person can do? Could it really be me that made such a change? It does not seem, I don’t know, *proper* somehow. Are all humans so mercurial?”

“I couldn’t tell you. It’s been a long time since I gave much thought to any other human but Sal. I am no longer an expert on them. But she was unchanging, as steady as the ground beneath my feet.”

He took her hand, and turned so that they faced each other. He had never seen her like before. Somehow he was sure that even if he traveled to her world and met all of her people, taking the measure of every single one, he would still not see her like again.

“There,” he said. “You asked me to share about Sal, and I told you. Now come with me.”

She pressed her forehead against his, and emitted what seemed like a sigh. That close, her large eyes were all of existence.

“I will go with you,” she said. “But life isn’t as simple as that. How will we live?”

“That is simple. We will live as I have always lived. There are museums that will pay well for what we have found here. And if not museums, then men.”

“Tully, listen carefully. You already tried that. I saw you out there. You seemed unable to take what we have found. You were frozen. You let it all rest exactly as the makers had placed it. I had to be the one to bring the urn back here. Be honest with yourself. Will you be able to take from this place? Will you be able to move on?”

Tully tilted his head slightly to stare at the urn on the far side of the room, and thought of the time with Xi that it could buy. He wanted that time, and even more, to his great surprise, he found that he needed that time.

“Yes,” he said, burying his head in the crook of her neck and breathing in his new life. “Yes, Xi, I promise I will.”

Tully had never before seen the trader so distracted, so unwilling to settle to the task before them. The last time Tully had returned with Sal from one of their missions, Jak had immediately become so intent on the objects of his greed that he had seemed to forget anyone else was with him in the room. The fact that he and Tully were two of the few humans on The Wheel out of tens of thousands of members of several hundred alien species usually allowed them to relate comfortably when doing business after one of their long separations. They’d always at least have that comfortable habit between them, the catching up on gossip while easing into the more profitable business at hand. But now Jak seemed like a different person.

“Is there something that’s making you nervous, Jak?” said Tully, Xi standing slightly behind him. The rhythm seemed all wrong between them today. The way Jak’s eyes flicked between them both disturbed Tully. “You don’t seem quite ready to do business. Are you feeling all right?”

Jak finally stopped looking at Xi. Wedged into the crowded room of artifacts for sale or trade, Jak seemed somewhat like an artifact himself. His right hand rested on the urn they had brought back, but casually, not with the intensity that Tully had expected such a find would bring. The merchant took a deep breath, and stared hard at Tully.

“I always stand ready to do business with you, my friend,” he said, his words slow and forced. “Only for this specimen, I fear I will need more time. You can understand that, can’t you? I want you to go away happy. Aren’t I always that way? And if what I suspect is true, once I check my databases further, you will be *very* happy, Tully. Let me tell you about what I’ve discovered over dinner.”

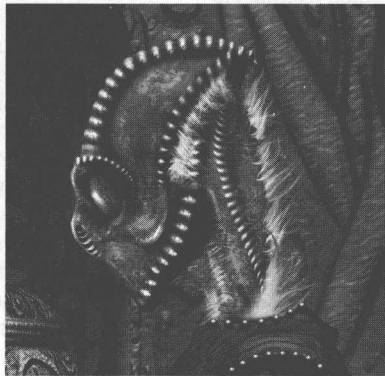
Only when Jak had finished speaking did he peer beyond Tully’s shoulder to look at Xi.

“We don’t need dinner, Jak,” said Tully, puzzled. He took one step to the right to block the man’s view of Xi, but his eyes did not refocus on Tully. The dealer had never asked to break bread with him before. Tully’s words caused the dealer to suddenly notice him as if startled. “Only credits.”

“Yes, credits, and you shall have them.” Jak paused. He seemed confused, as if he had just awoken, and was still trying to remember in what room he had fallen asleep. “Only there are sometimes more important things than credits.”

“Yes, I suppose there always are,” said Tully.

The two men stared at each other in silence, their roles changed, and Tully not quite sure what was expected of him. Jak was normally the one hurrying the process along. They’d done this many times before with little variance, and Jak’s jittery attitude left him unsettled. Tully did not like that feeling, not after having just discovered himself again after so



## The Only Thing That Mattered

long a time adrift. If Xi had not been there, perhaps the silence would never have been broken.

"We might as well eat here," she said. "I have a feeling that I will not see an inhabited planet or even an inhabited station like this again for a long while. I'd best learn what I can."

"If that's really what you wish," said Tully. He turned to Jak, whose hand still absentmindedly stroked the urn. "We'll leave you alone to examine the piece further, and then be back when you're ready to close up."

Tully turned, but before they could leave, Jak was suddenly beside him, having sprung across the room to place one hand on his sleeve.

"Wait!" Jak muttered, almost to himself. Tully had to strain to hear the man. The words were almost beneath a whisper. "Before you go, may I speak to your friend alone? Please."

"I don't know," Tully whispered, positioning himself more solidly between the merchant and Xi. He reached out and took one of her hands, fighting the urge to back quickly out of the room. He would not have been able to explain his discomfort to Xi if he'd tried.

"What could be wrong with that?" said Xi, her fingers wriggling to loosen his grip. And then she said softly, close to Tully's ear so that only he could hear it, "He seems harmless enough."

"They all seem harmless enough."

"They?" she asked.

Tully shrugged. He didn't know what else to say to make her understand, since he didn't fully understand his feelings either.

"Go on," he said, speaking slowly. "I'll wait right over here."

Tully stood in the doorway, anxious to go, and watched uncomfortably as the two spoke. Xi seemed huge beside him, looking as if she could have crushed him if not careful. Tully was not a man given to hunches or intuitions, and so he suppressed the ones he was feeling. He wondered if he was being silly. He studied Jak as the man whispered to Xi, and he tried to tell himself that all was well, all continued as it had before. Jak suddenly noticed Tully's gaze, and the man tried to spin Xi around so that their positions were reversed, but when he could not move her, instead he moved between her and Tully and quickly turned his back. Jak's voice grew louder, and when Xi began to back away, Tully had to admit that what his gut had told him has been correct—Xi had been made upset. Jak lunged for Xi, and Tully rushed across the room to grab Jak's wrist. Jak held on tightly, the man's fingers deep into Xi's forearms, as Xi attempted to pull away.

"You mustn't leave me," Jak shouted. "You've got to stay here. You must! Can't you see how I feel?"

So strong were the trader's fingers that Tully had to pull them away one by one. As Tully bent back Jak's hand, Xi stood there, silent, more a witness to the tableaux than a participant.

"I love you," the man said. Jak's words stung at Tully, but for all Xi reacted, it was as if she had not even heard them. "Stay here with me. Don't go off with Tully. What do you need him for? I'll give you all I have! That's how much I love you."

"Jak," said Tully, his voice near a growl. "What's with you? Calm down!"

Jak made a clumsy move to push past Tully, but the spacer held him tight. He would keep Xi safe at his shoulder; he would do that forever. The more agitated Jak grew, the tighter Tully held the man's arms pinned to his side.

"I don't know what's come over him," said Tully, as Jak began to cry in his arms. "You'd better wait outside, Xi."

Xi retreated out the front door of the shop, and Jak's wriggling lessened. The trader crumpled to the floor and began weeping, his hands ripping at his hair. Tully did not know where he found the reserve to kneel beside him and place a hand gently on the man's back.

"Jak," he said softly. "Why?"

Jak made no answer, not with any conscious words. He just continued to emit the sound of agonizing weeping. Tully tried to make contact with what was in anguish within Jak, but whenever he looked into the man's eyes, he could tell that Jak did not see him. He stood and backed away, hoping that this fit would not cause Jak to hurt himself after he left. Tully picked up their artifact and left the shop to join Xi out in front.

But when he got to the outer corridor, their past and future tucked under one arm, she was nowhere to be seen.

Without her, the ship was too much for Tully to endure. As soon as he discovered that she had not returned to the *Future*, he searched for her in every inch of The Wheel that he knew, and a few places he was surprised to discover he hadn't even known existed.

He made a tour of every dive he had visited in the years before he had met Sal, and the aeons afterwards, finding people who had seemingly never moved in all that time from their private corners of Hell. He described Xi's manner to a number of old friends, the way she moved and sounded and smelled, and even felt moved to speak of her to a few of his old enemies. He called in every favor he had outstanding, and indebted himself by asking for new ones, but the favors yielded nothing. He hacked onto the security link, the defenses of which were as usual more amusing than frustrating, but found nothing there that could lead him to Xi. He visited the places where the dead men lived, and discovered nothing but that a little piece of him was dead as well. He told himself that the reason he did all this was in hopes of successfully finding her, but at the same time he knew in his heart that if she did not want herself found that he would never see her again. The truth of the matter was that he searched mainly because the only other option—sitting back in the ship and staring at the places she had been, the corners she had made hers—was too much for him. When he was too exhausted to continue looking any further, and only then, Tully returned to the *Fortune*, because his only alternative would have been to drop where he was, and that would have meant abandoning what last shred of hope he had.

Tully found Jak waiting there beneath his boarding ladder, his shoulders sunken, seeming as if exhaustion had defeated him as well.

"Did you find her?" Jak asked, but there was nothing in the man's eyes that allowed of that possibility.

Tully could not bear to look at him. There was a black hole within the skin of the man he once thought his friend.

"If she doesn't come back," said Tully, with a calm certainty the source of which surprised him, "I think I'll kill you."

The trader started to speak, but instead sputtered into tears before the words could get out.

"It wasn't my fault," he finally said. "Believe me, Tully, I couldn't help it. I would have if I could. What I felt was so powerful I had no control over it. It was an urge I could not shut off. The feeling just came over me." Jak paused, and looked down at his hands. His shame was palpable, but quickly turned to pride. "But that doesn't make it any less real. So don't say that it does!"

"Right," said Tully, with a dead voice. Jak's manner, one moment funereal, the next moment giddy, was too ludicrous to endure. "Now let me pass. I've had a big night. And as much as I liked you once, I have to say that there's no more time in it for you."

"We've been friends, Tully," said Jak, standing, placing one hand on Tully's arm. "Yes, I insist, friends. Not just businessmen together. Always more than that. You've got to know I'd never intentionally interfere in your private life. I never went after Sal. Never."

Tully shrugged off Jak's hand and moved one foot to the ladder's lowest rung.

"Don't talk about Sal," he said. "Or I won't wait to kill you. I don't want to ever see you again, Jak. I don't care whether the way you acted



# Absolute Magnitude

was deliberate or not. The outcome is the same. You've put at risk the only thing that still matters to me."

"I can make it up to you," Jak called out as Tully brushed by. "Let me do that for you. After I calmed down, I did the further research I said I would on that artifact you've found. It's priceless; do you know that? Normally I wouldn't just come right out and say that, but now, I figure I owe it to you. I've never seen one of its kind before. And neither has anyone else. Do you realize what it is? It's more than just a funereal urn. Inside are the remains of two aliens, a couple, blended together forever. Mixed there is an entire species, one that could live again. People will pay for this artifact. Politicians, scientists . . . artists. I can help set you up good. You'll be able to get a better ship. You'll be able to bend yourself to bring Xi back. And even if she won't return to you, well then, you'll be able to buy everything else you could possibly need to forget her."

"The only thing it will ever make me happy to forget is you," muttered Tully from the top of the ladder. "Goodbye, Jak."

Tully foolishly hoped that when the lock opened that Xi would be there, but of course, she was not. He found the artifact and set it beside his bed. With one hand on its smooth finish, he fell asleep. He did not dream of Xi, or of anything or anyone else.

"Your people are crazy," Tully suddenly heard Xi say, her voice and her translator merging into poetry. His eyes snapped open. He could smell her before he could see her. The light that streamed over Xi from the busy port outside as she stood in the open doorway cast a shadow across his face. He did not dare to turn, so he kept his head still and just let his eyes trail towards her. He was afraid to move, almost as if she were a small animal he thought might startle. "Your people cannot be trusted."

"Don't make this about your people and my people," he said. "This is about you and me." He had no idea how long he had slept. He noticed that the fingers of his right hand were numb where they still rested on the artifact. He did not dare to move them. "Where have you been?"

"Then it is *you* who cannot be trusted," she said, ignoring his question.

"Please, Xi. Where have you been?"

She took a further step into the room and the door slid shut behind her, sending them into darkness once more. All there was was the smell of her, and when she spoke, the perfect sound of her voice. Hidden, he placed his hand across his chest and felt the life come back to his fingers.

"Do you realize how difficult it was for me to get back here unseen? There are humans all over The Wheel. Crazy humans."

"But I don't get it," he said, letting himself sit up in the darkness. "Why did you go? Why didn't you wait for me outside of Jak's in the first place? I would have gotten you safely back here."

"Did you look into your friend's eyes?"

"I was too busy paying attention to what he was trying to do with his hands."

"You should have looked there, Tully. That would have explained it all. Because what I saw there in his eyes was the same look I see in yours. You two might as well have been twins back there."

"I don't know what you mean, Xi. Jak was trying to hold onto you against your will. I was trying to free you. We're as different as could be, not just today, but in everything—he's trapped down here, I'm wandering out there where you want to be. The way he acted before, that was an aberration. Even Jak realized that. He came by earlier to apologize for having lost control."

"Tully, don't you realize by now what's going on? If he'd found me here, there wouldn't have been an apology. No. It was more than one human losing control. All of you are mad."

"That can't be," he said, slapping a light alive. He was no longer able to abide by the darkness, not when she was there. "Here. Let me look at you."

"You'd better not," she said, bringing the darkness back with a wave. "Maybe looking at me is what sends you astray."

"Xi—"

"Just try to listen, and try, try hard, to forget that it's me talking. I learned something valuable today, Tully, something that changes everything. You humans. Do you think I *wanted* to stay away from you this long? I admit I was upset this morning when Jak went wild, but once I left that man's place I intended to head right back here. And I started to, I did, I truly did, Tully. But I could not make it here. Your species was determined to be an obstacle course. Every human whose path I crossed for even a fleeting instant professed undying love for me. Just like you. Every one of them wanted to live by my side forever. Just like you. And not one of them, man or woman, would take no for an answer. Just like you."

She fell silent, waiting for a response he did not know if he had the words to give.

"This has to be some kind of mistake, Xi. Haven't I proven my love for you during our long trip back here? I'm not like all the others. There is no one like me. This has to be some sort of sick coincidence. What I feel for you is real. It's real, Xi."

"Is it? Then why did I have to move through this place like a hunted animal, racing as fast as I could away from humans, hiding until there were none nearby, sneaking around as if the smell of my skin was a perfume that induced insanity. Who knows what it was—my smell, my fur, the color of my skin, some secret signal I sent out by the way I walked? The specific reason doesn't matter. Its existence is enough. But this must be why my people have made it a taboo to travel off our planet. This has to be why they've hidden themselves away. They had to make sure that none of us would ever run into Earthlings. Don't you see? That's got to be why you feel the way you do, Tully. Locked in together as we were

for so long during our trip back here, I've become imprinted on you. What you feel for me isn't you—it's like a disease. You're *sick* of me. Literally sick of me."

"I don't care. I'm not looking for a cure. I'm not looking for anything. How can I make you understand? There's nothing more to look for."

He heard her sigh in the darkness. The closeness of the sound told him that she had moved deeper into the room even as the import of her words seemed to move her further away. When she spoke next, he could feel her breath on the side of his neck.

"And that, Tully," she said, "is exactly why there is a problem."

He could not stand the darkness a moment longer, and he hoped that she would forgive him. He brought back the light, and luckily, this time she did nothing to stop him. Tully turned and reached out a hand to Xi. She made no move to take it, so he scuttled closer and slipped his fingers into hers.

"This thing we have cannot end so quickly," he said softly. "That is what would be the madness, not this. Not love. We've barely found each other. What can I do to make you believe in me? There must be something that will erase all that. Something that will turn you back to me."

His fingers tingled in hers, and as he looked down at the picture they made, blue flesh and pink flesh, as close as flesh could be, that made him



## The Only Thing That Mattered

think once more of the urn they had brought so far. He could not bear to turn away to acknowledge it, to lose Xi even for a moment, but he was suddenly overwhelmingly aware that it was there, challenging them both.

"We must be like *them*," he whispered. "Lost forever in forever."

She put a stubby finger on his chin and tilted his head back so they could look into each other's eyes.

"Them? I don't know what you mean, Tully."

He looked at the muscles twitching in her face and saw her confusion there, saw her desire to understand, and seeing that, able to interpret her alien flesh into earthy emotions, told himself that this must mean he was meant to gaze on those indigo planes forever. Her confusion had to fade. He told her what Jak had told him earlier, of the one final secret of the world of the dead and the love that transcended it. Of how much Jak had offered for the artifact that was evidence of an eternal love, not that Jak had seen it that way, of how easy their lives could be afterward if only they would sell it to him and move on. They would not know need. He offered to take care of her forever and show her the universe, use that dead love to justify their own living love. He spoke these things as if they were the last words that he would ever utter, as a sort of final confession that if spoken with enough truth and intensity would let him know peace.

Looking at her, though, exhausted by the effort, he could see that words were not enough.

"There's nothing wrong with knowing need," said Xi, slipping her fingers from his. "I have never asked or expected that life would lift it away from me, and you, Tully, as for you, I fear that you will grow to know it very well. But looking at you now, knowing what I know, I do not think that I will be the cause of it. Maybe, if you are lucky, you will forget me. I think you will. I hope you will. I will move on, and you will move on, each to our own separate place in the universe, and after a while I will dim in your mind. Whatever part of me that has over this recent time lodged itself in you will wither and fade. And it will all be for the best."

She paused, though he knew that she had not said all she needed to say. He looked up at her standing there and watched a drop bead by one eye until it splashed upon his cheek. He welcomed it as it fell.

"Xi, you are crying."

"I am crying, yes, but I have cried before. I wonder how hard the one cried who was the first to know why my people and yours should stay far apart. It must have been a terrible thing to have to learn. I guess . . . I guess I should go back. The elders, though they would not tell us why, though they may not even have known the reality behind the customs themselves, were right. But I can see why they did not tell us. We would never have believed them. We would not have wanted to believe them. Who could live in a world where love and trust and desire are only a virus?"

"But that's what it's always been," he said, reaching up to trace the damp lines upon her face. "And none of that matters."

Tully dropped to his knees. He wrapped his arms tightly about her broad waist, fingers straining to graze fingers. If he could encompass her with his arms, with his soul, perhaps she would stay.

"Come," he murmured into her belly. He listened to the sound echo there. "Let me prove to you that before I would forget you, I would forget myself."

He waited. He was willing to wait as long as it took until she realized the truth. Eventually, he could feel her fingers run through his hair. They moved slowly there, feeling his skull beneath the skin, and he could sense her holding back, could almost taste her bewilderment at having come so far to stand together in this way with a creature whose head was so oddly shaped. Her hands dropped away to his shoulders.

"Tully," she said. "Tully, Tully, Tully."

The slow whisper with which she spoke his name carried a sadness so sharp he thought he might begin to bleed from their cuts, yet her

syllables also bore a touch so soft he did not know whether he could bear their absence if she were to stop.

As they landed once again on the planetoid where they had discovered each other, the rutted surface beneath seemed to Tully to welcome him like an old lover. Though his trip back had not been as comfortable as he had at first hoped—Xi fought a war with herself, struggling to remain distant, often failing or forgetting, but always allowing those cold emotions to reassert themselves—Tully knew in his gut that now that they had arrived back where they'd begun, things could be made right here. Things *would* be made right here. He was so sure of how this day would end that he could almost feel Sal waiting silently on the surface, happy, content, and preparing to say goodbye.

Tully came up beside Xi as she looked out onto the crisp landscape through the ship's transparent walls. He looked out with her, saying nothing, strong feelings of awe and gratitude welling up within him. When he veered from studying the path they would take back to their discovery, he noted that Xi's gaze had turned elsewhere: she was instead looking off to where her ship had once been, a ship that had by now long returned to her sequestered home.

"Don't worry," he said, trembling as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "If you want me to take you back to your home, I will. You can trust me on that. If I must, I will take you there. Though it would kill me, I would do that for you. Do not be afraid. You are not trapped, neither here, nor with me. That is how much I love you."

"Love," she said in a strained whisper, as if that single syllable was so painful in her throat that she had to force the word out or die. "Why is it that I always worry when I hear you say that word so easily?"

"Let's get into our suits," he said. He had no other answer for her than to simply take her by the hand.

They were silent as they donned their suits. Though there was an endless world of words he wanted Xi to inhabit, a lifetime of telling that would bind her to him, he knew she was not yet ready. There was still something he had to do, a proof that had to be handed over to the universe, after which his words, and hers, would flow. As he listened to the thrum of the airlock engines, he stared not at Xi, because he knew it would have been painful to see her deliberately not staring back, but instead at Sal's empty suit hanging there on the rack. For the longest time, seeing it there, pretending in some shameful part of himself that Sal might one day rise up to inhabit it again, was the only comfort he had. And now, at last, there could be more moments of hope than that. A future finally waited.

Stepping out of the ship, he clumsily hugged the urn as they moved down the ladder. Xi offered a hand as he struggled, but Tully would not let her help him. Not yet. If he could not do this one thing for her, what sort of message would that be sending her? They shuffled quietly along, making their way to where the wall of the dead began, and followed the sculpted path until it led them back to the planetoid's lone empty alcove. Tully returned the urn to the niche where it had rested undisturbed for centuries, and where, if all went as he hoped, none would rediscover it for many centuries more. Words were necessary here, but he found his heart thumping so wildly that he could hardly speak.

"This is where they chose to be," he said, taking comfort in the steady sound that the radio gave him of Xi breathing. It was a gift without which he would not have been able to continue. "Together forever. We have no lives to move them, no matter what difference it would make to our lives. No matter what burden it would lift off our backs. This is where they should remain forever."

He turned to her and paused, expecting, no, *hoping* that she would speak, hoping that his decision to have done this would mean something to her. Xi did not look back towards him. She stayed motionless and kept her silence.

"Don't you see? No one ever asked why they were together like that.



# Absolute Magnitude

Jak acknowledged it, but didn't care. At first, I didn't care. But I do now. We do not know who they were, but we know this. These two were so in love that they chose to remain entwined this way until the end of time. Shouldn't we do the same?"

He reached out to take her hand, but still she did not move. He decided that he would hold that hand out before him as long as it took. He would wait. She remained motionless as his arm began to ache, motionless and silent for so long that Xi might as well have been one of the ancient wall carvings that loomed above them.

When his muscles eventually failed and his hand fell limply to his side, finally, she spoke:

"And now what?" she said. Her words were brittle. He wished he could hear her real voice layered beneath the translation, as he could back in the open air of the ship, but he knew even as he made that wish that he'd find no comfort there.

"And now what," Tully repeated leadenly. It had not been enough. His gesture had not been enough. "And now what?"

"Yes."

"And now . . . wait here. Yes. There's one final thing I must do before we leave this place and never return. Will you wait? Will you give me that much?"

As Xi stood dwarfed and alone in the bleak mausoleum, staring at the artifact the return of which Tully had obviously thought would mean so much to her, she marveled at her absence of fear. She supposed that she should be afraid that Tully would never return, leaving her to die on a world she had fled her own world to find. She felt foolish that she could not find that emotion in her, because there was that possibility. That might be Tully's easiest way to deal with the news she had given him, to treat her like a literal plague, and leave her behind, cutting her out of his life. Her people, if the news of her abandonment and death ever made it off this airless surface, would say that hers was an end to be expected for one who could not obey their society's rules. She did not mind. Let them think that. Xi might not have found exactly what she'd left her world to seek, but what she had found had been enough. It was enough. The stars were bright above, even if her future was not.

As she waited to see whether she was right to feel no fear, her eyes only occasionally flickered to her oxygen reserve gauge. It was falling, though not yet disastrously so. That would come eventually, if she let it, she knew. He loved her, he said, endlessly and with seeming sincerity, but what good would that love do if she could not breathe?

She could go home, she knew. Her people would welcome her, if not with fully open arms—as no one living would have a memory of one who had left and then returned, or, in fact, one who had ever left at all—but they would welcome her as best as they were able. They had to. Maybe she could return there and tell herself that she had seen enough of the universe. Maybe she could make herself believe that. She could try. But she knew her people, the way they would look at her, the fact that they would remove any chance possibility of her ever straying again. And she knew that she could not be happy there. She'd even settle for less than happiness. Happiness was not a promise life made. She'd settle merely to be . . . content. But at home, the home she remembered, she did not think that she could have that either.

Her muddled confusion worried her. She was not someone who usually found herself lost in internal debates this way. If she were, she'd never have left in the first place. She checked her oxygen once more, hoping to blame her racing thoughts on something other than herself, something other than what Tully had done to her, but no, whatever muddle she found herself in was hers alone.

Did Tully love her, in truth? It had seemed so real to her, and until she discovered the underlying truth of it all back on The Wheel, she'd felt her heart starting to answer him back, but she'd learned enough of life to understand that whatever the situation seemed to be was not

necessarily what it was. He loved, she could believe that. But did he love *her*? Or would he fall helplessly and equally in love with the next of her species they encountered? For truth was all that mattered. She lived her life for that. That's how she ended up at this place at this time.

She placed a palm on the urn they'd taken and brought back and tried to imagine the lives of those within. The creatures lived hundreds of years before and she could not possibly know them, but still. Had those inside really loved each other? Had they known for sure that they did? Or was it all a lie that those who placed them together here afterwards wanted to believe? There were so many questions, and there seemed to be no answers.

So intent was Xi on tracing a finger around the urn's sealed mouth that it was not until she heard Tully speak that she knew he was beside her again.

"I'm back," he said. She turned, and he was so close that his faceplate filled her entire horizon. "You knew I'd come back, didn't you?"

"I never doubted it for an instant," she said, at first not knowing as she said it whether her own words were true, until she realized that they had been. That that was why she'd known no fear out there alone beneath the stars. And then she noted what he'd brought with him, what now lay in the dust between her feet.

"That's Sal's spacesuit, isn't it?"

"Yes. It doesn't belong to me any longer. It belongs here, in this place. It belongs with the dead."

"You've held on to that for a long time, Tully. Are you sure this is what you want to do? Are you sure?"

He did not give her words, but only nodded. He began to arrange the suit so that it leaned against the urn, so that it seemed as if it was being embraced by a living being. She could hear him breathing heavily from the effort.

"I've been holding on to her for too long," he said slowly, as he stepped back and studied what he had done. "There's something else I need to hold on to now."

"You can't be sure of that, Tully. Maybe you could with someone else, with a human lover, or with someone from another alien race. But not with you and me. Not with what you've learned about us."

"I'm as sure as I ever was before. I've only been in love, real love, twice in my life now, and I know what it feels like. I know what love is."

He opened a hip pouch and removed a folded sheet of paper. He knelt for a moment and placed the sheet in the empty fingers of the suit's right hand. Xi remained silent until he was done, and did not speak until he had gotten to his feet again and backed away.

"What does that note say?" she asked, when he was beside her once more.

"It says goodbye," he said, his thin fingers taking her own. "Come. It's time to go back to the ship. We have things to do there. I have to keep telling you how much I love you."

"But what about the truth?" she asked. "What if this is as I told you? What if it is all just a lie? What if our biochemistry has you brainwashed?"

He looked at her with shining eyes that showed her a million stars.

"Does it really matter?" he said.

And for them, at that time, in that place, it didn't. At least that's what they spent the rest of their lives telling each other.

