

Perihelion

Online Science Fiction Magazine

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Knowing when to hold 'em
and knowing when to fold
'em comes easy to the
Forgiani who also happen
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Human Faces

"You're dying?" Jali said. Her eyes blinked rapidly as she looked at her mate.

"We're all dying," Peit replied. "Isn't it beautiful?"

She smiled at him. "That's not what I mean. I meant, you're dying *right now*?"

"Yes, that's my plan," Peit said. "The inhabitants of Earth, like many species with severely limited life spans, tend to have more compassion for the elderly, especially when the being is near death. That's one of the reasons I used that theme in my field persona."

"Then I will be young, for contrast," Jali said, ordering her symbiotes to shift her features into youth and exaggerated femininity.

Peit's face became wrinkled as his own symbiotes responded to his commands. His pupils grew rounder, and his irises darkened to a stormy gray, sprinkled with a hint of mischief.

"So you are my beloved ancestor, my—grandfather," she said, trying out the new word. "I am accompanying you on your last celebration."

"Sounds like fun," he said. "Where are we going? And what shall I wear?"

She asked the ship to display a map taken from his Culture Viability survey of Earth.

"You were posted on this world for two local years. What was *your* favorite place?"

"That's a difficult question," he said after a moment. He had met so many beings here: short-lived, passionate, simultaneously loving and contentious. It was hard to pick a particular place... but there were Humans that he wanted to see again, before the D'han consumed this star and froze the planet.

The Compact had sent Peit to Earth for two reasons: first, he was the ranking Cultural Assessor in this quadrant. Second, and nearly as important, his own Ghrxten somatype was a very close match to *Homo sapiens*. Unfortunately, his well-researched report on Humanity's potential had not impressed the Compact; in the end, the Trade Council had voted to sell the Earth's solar system to the luminous, gravity-loving D'han, who greatly desired its yellow star.

He pointed to a cluster of islands in the northern hemisphere. "We can start there. Mikonos."

She asked the ship to provide them appropriate local clothing and currency. "I will take the name *Agalia*," she said, swirling her short skirt.

"Too beautiful a name for a thief." He held up his suit jacket and adjusted the color to better match his new beard.

"I am not a thief!" Agalia said in mock anger. "Taking this ship was the most expedient way to see the sources of your report." She selected a pair of earrings, ordering her symbiotes to create proper holes in her new ear lobes. "Besides, artistic tradition clearly entitles me to necessary raw materials."

"That's an interesting interpretation," he said. "A field observation ship is slightly more valuable than a theatre rental." When she began to protest, he added. "As long as you notified the proper authorities, I have no quarrel with you." He smiled and slipped on a pair of loafers. "How could I? You're my mate, and I have always supported your work, even if I didn't always

appreciate it on an aesthetic level." He straightened up, and took her in his arms. "Call me *Eugene*, for that's how I was known in Greece." His beard tickled her.

Agalia embraced him briefly, then ordered the ship to hide itself from observation, mechanical or other, as they landed in a quiet cove not far from a village.

"It's a lovely night for a walk," Eugene said, and unfolded an ornate walking stick from his jacket pocket. It was middle summer, and the deep heat of the day had given way to cool breezes. Agalia wrapped a silk shawl around her loose blouse. On her feet she wore sandals adorned with seed pearls.

They walked for half an hour, and Eugene spent much of that time pointing out tough, scrubby plants, black birds, and the odd bit of faded pottery peeking out of the soil. "You wouldn't think to look at it, but this place was once a major center of trade."

"Dull," Agalia said.

"In their mythology, Zeus once fought the Titans here." He passed a data file to her.

"Beautiful. And violent," she said, taking in the Olympian mythos. "Their gods are so flawed."

"Yes, but you can understand them. Have a drink with them and wrestle over the check."

"Now you're talking," she said. "Ah, I think we're here."

Eugene slowed his pace, altering his walk until it became a dignified limp. He leaned a bit more on his walking stick. "We're in luck. It seems Tymon finally found enough courage to propose to Iona." They entered a small village whose central square was packed with people: eating, drinking, and singing. Agalia let her eyes drift through the crowd until she saw the couple.

"That's them over there, yes?" She tugged on his arm. "It's a celebration of a pair bonding."

"They say *gamos*, here." He steered them toward the couple. "Let me do the talking."

They joined the reception line, moving along slowly until Eugene found an old woman who was hugging everyone. "Congratulations!" he said to her. "You must be so proud of Iona."

The old woman looked at him, her smile growing even larger. "*Ya'sou!*" she said. "Is that you, Mr. Halkias?" She continued in Greek. "Back from California, I see."

Eugene answered her in the same language, "Yes." He turned and indicated his companion. "This is my granddaughter, Agalia. I'm moving back to Athens, and I insisted that she stop here and see where I worked on the archeological dig. Agalia, allow me to present Mrs. Katsuros, the grand dame of the village widows."

"Please, call me Sandra," said the old woman, and clasped Agalia's hands in both of hers. "Welcome to Mykonos. Have you eaten?"

"Excuse me?" Agalia said, wrapping her tongue around unfamiliar phonemes.

"She lives in a Chinese neighborhood in New York," Eugene whispered. "She doesn't speak Greek very often."

"That's a pity," Sandra said.

"*Papou*, please stop trying to embarrass me," Agalia said, copying Eugene's accent and intonations.

"Never," he said. "Now be a good child and fetch us some wine. I'm very thirsty and my feet are tired."

She disappeared into the crowd, returning a moment later with two cups of dark wine. On the other side of the square, a band struck up lively music. Agalia turned toward the sound

and grinned.

"Yes," Eugene said, "go and dance. Perhaps you will find yourself a nice man tonight."

"Oh, *Papou!*" She draped her shawl around him and kissed him on the nose. Then she slipped into the crowd.

"She's very beautiful," Sandra said.

"She takes after her mother in that respect, thank God," Eugene said. "Agalia's an artist, you know. Designs sets for live theatre, and does other things I don't quite understand. But she enjoys it, and makes a decent living, so I'm happy."

"That's how it is with children," Sandra said. They sat and sipped their wine, and she filled him in on the village gossip. Things hadn't changed much since his posting here. There were 14 new babies, by Sandra's careful count, and half that many deaths. As they talked, the moon crept over a hill and flooded the square with light.

"It's so bright," Eugene said. "Like harvest moon, but it's only June."

"Yes, it's been like that since they shut down all those old Turkish factories. You can see more stars at night, too." She swirled her wine. "You mentioned you were moving to Athens," she said. "Are you retiring?"

"In a way," he said. "But there's another reason. I'm not well."

"Really? I'm sorry to hear."

"Yes. That's why I went to California. There is a clinic there, started by Sergey Brin."

Sandra nodded. "I've heard about that place. They put tiny machines in you, to kill diseases."

"That's how nano medicine is supposed to work," Eugene said, taking a sip. He enjoying the wine's tartness, so very different than the sweet drinks popular on Ghrxt. "But not always.

It's straightforward enough to print up a new liver or even a heart, but some things...." He tapped his temple with his free hand. "Cancer."

Sandra took his hand and squeezed it. "Oh, Mr. Halkias, I am so very sorry. But I'm very glad to see you again, and so pleased you could see Iona married."

"So am I."

They watched the dancers for a bit, and nibbled on small, salty olives and skewers of roasted lamb. Agalia had found several willing partners, and as the minutes passed, she quickly found the rhythm of the music and negotiated the complex steps. Once she spun too far, and nearly fell, but a barrel-chested man seized her arm with a laugh and hauled her back to her feet.

Other guests paid their respects to Sandra, and their conversations wove a pleasing tapestry. Yes, the economy was still bad, but the tourists from China spent their *yuan* like emperors. The Prime Minister had resigned amid a scandal involving her brother-in-law's company, and the Church of Cyprus had officially recognized triad marriages, as long as both genders were represented.

Eugene recorded it all, his symbiotes quietly piggybacking on his senses to create a full spectrum experience. His official work was complete, but he wanted to add to his personal memory cache.

When Sandra excused herself to go check on the kitchen, Eugene made a quick decision and pressed a roll of paper currency into her hand. "I would like you to have this," he said. "For Iona and Tymon."

She looked down at the money, her eyes growing wide. "Mr. Halkias! I can't. It's too much—"

"Of course you can. I'm on my last vacation, and I would like to do something silly and

romantic." He tilted his head toward the new couple, who were dancing together slowly, oblivious to everyone around them. "For them. And their children."

Sandra pressed her dry lips to his cheek, lingering a moment. "God watch over you and yours, Eugene Halkias." Then she stood, smoothed her dress, and walked with great dignity through the crowd. Eugene smiled, imagining what she must have been like as a younger being. Then he stood a little unsteadily, and caught Agalia's eye. She finished her dance, hugged her sweaty partner, and joined Eugene.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"Not particularly, but I think you have more to show me," she said.

"I do. Now be a good *egoni* and take my arm. I'm an old man, you know."

#

Their ship skimmed east, barely clearing the wave tops as they passed through the Strait of Gibraltar. Peit's symbiotes gathered his beard into a white mustache, and changed his hair color to match.

"Where are we going?" Jali asked.

He sent her a background file and language template. "Sweden. A little place close to Halmstad. They'll be celebrating Midsummer and the weather looks fine."

Her black curls straightened and turned blond. Her cheekbones pushed out, and her nose shrank. "How's this?"

Peit nodded. "Good. Add some freckles. It's been a very sunny year there."

They dressed in casual clothes, and he had the ship fashion a clear glass flask and fill it with smoky, pungent liquid. "*Bränvinn*," he explained. "Flavored with the musk glands of beavers." He sent her an image of a broad-tailed rodent gnawing on a birch branch.

Jali wrinkled her nose. "Sounds awful."

"It's an acquired taste," he admitted. "Legend has it that in ancient times the king would invite his enemies to parley, and serve glasses of a drink similar to this. If his guest hesitated, or shrank at the prospect, the king would attack."

"Right there?" she asked.

"That part wasn't clear," he said. "But I liked the story. I found it while I was researching my novel."

"And here I thought all you did was file reports," she said.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, or in this case, about Dr. Anders Jespersen." He sent over his manuscript file.

"Vikings," she said, absorbing the information. "Ferocious beings. Explorers. I like the horns."

"That's mostly folklore," Anders said. "In any event, I told people that I employed a methodical researcher named Sonja. That will be your name for tonight."

"Are you relegating me to the secondary role on purpose?" she said.

"Sidekicks have more latitude, in my experience."

They set the ship down in a thick forest not far from a farm. A heavy rain made a pleasant rhythm on the hull. "So much for the weather model," Sonja said.

Anders smiled. "They have a saying here: 'There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.'"

"No wonder you liked it here," she said, adding a jacket and cap to her ensemble.

They strolled along a muddy road for 20 minutes until they saw the lights of a barn and heard voices. Nearby, a maypole draped with strings of wilted flowers and blue-and-yellow

pennants stood alone in the middle of a freshly mowed lawn. A green wine bottle, apparently abandoned at a folding table, collected raindrops.

They circled the barn until they came to a door, which was decorated with strands of wildflowers. An ancient horseshoe was nailed above the frame.

Anders pushed open the door, and a wave of warm air washed over them. "*Hej, det är Anders!*" he called out in Swedish. *Hi, it's Anders!* "Where is Fredrik, that son of a sea pirate?"

"Hallo yourself, Anders!" replied a man stirring a handful of dill into a large pot of potatoes. "And you of all people should know that my great grandfather was *not* a sea pirate. He was a merchant with a penchant for self defense." He put down the wooden spoon and threw his arms around Anders. "I see you brought the Danish weather with you."

"If I brought nice weather, you'd blame me for sunburn," Anders said, returning the embrace. Then he turned a hand toward Sonja. "Fredrik, meet my research assistant, Sonja."

"Pleasure," she said, giving the other man a painfully strong handshake. "Dr. Jespersen has told me a lot about you."

"Lies and hyperbole," Fredrik said, flexing his hand. "I deny everything except the parts where I'm the hero." He look at her closely. "Let me guess: you grew up north of Stockholm. Somewhere around Umeå?"

"What makes you say that?" She pursed her lips as she accessed the relevant data.

"The vowels give it away," Fredrik said. "I'm a linguist."

"Impressive," she said. "Well, you're right. I was doing my post-graduate work at Umeå University when Dr. Jespersen found me."

Anders added, "I rescued her from certain boredom, teaching Norse language and culture to unappreciative young people."

"Listen to him," Sonja said. "He makes it sound like it was all his idea. As it happens, I was intrigued by his book proposal."

"Yes, the book!" Fredrik said. "And the hologram series, of course. Sit down and give me the news." He commandeered three chairs from a nearby long table and fetched them tall bottles of beer.

"*Skål!*"

They tapped their bottles together and drank. After a long pull, Anders set his bottle down and leaned back in his chair, making the old wood creak. "We were *this* close last month—" he held his thumb and forefinger a centimeter apart "—and then the director backed out."

"What?" Fredrik said. "Again?"

Anders shrugged. "What can I say? Hollywood is a *dagis*"—a daycare—"for wealthy people. The studio doesn't seem to care if the holo series is made or not. They take turns throwing money at it, hoping to cover the crap. It's crazy."

"Ahh," Fredrik said.

"One week they love the script, the next they want to change it, and then they want to change it back." Anders shook his head. "I've seen, ah, ten drafts?"

"Fifteen," said Sonja.

"But the money's good?" Fredrik prompted.

"Well, good enough." Anders grinned. "The hardest part is seeing a meticulous piece of scholarly research reduced to popular actors dressed in horned helmets fighting over large-breasted women."

"With explosions," Sonja said, helping herself to a plate of pickled herring.

"What?" Fredrik nearly choked on his beer.

"Oh yes," Sonja said with a wicked grin. "The producers suggested that your ancestors travelled to far China and learned about gunpowder. They used it to great effect in their raids on the Irish."

"*Oj oj oj*," Fredrik said, shaking his head. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing," Anders said. "My agent constantly says that there's no such thing as bad publicity. When the series is made, *if* it ever gets made, the publisher will sell a special edition of the book, and I'll hide in Majorca while the critics try to bury me with praise and scorn." He finished his beer. "Can't live forever. Might as well make the best of it."

"*Javisst*," said Frederik. *Of course*.

Across the room, a group of young adults wearing data glasses watched a tall man hang a globe of white plastic from a wooden beam and connect it to one of the barn's few electrical outlets. As soon as he switched it on, they all adjusted their glasses and began whispering among themselves.

"What's going on?" Sonja said.

Fredrik shook his head. "That's Otto, my youngest. He didn't want to spend the weekend here without network access, so he asked our neighbor Rinaldi if we could piggyback on his signal. It's a few kilometers down the road, so I don't think they'll have enough bandwidth to watch the World Cup semi-finals in full sim." He looked at Sonja. "So has this trend reached Umeå, yet? I swear, these kids practically sleep with those glasses."

She shrugged. "It's not so bad. About half my students are virtual on any given day. At least they're showing up."

"*Jävlar!*" cried a young woman who sat at the large table. *Devils*. She wore her hair in

two long intricate braids. Loops of antique gold hung from her ears. "I've got a satellite feed, but there's no coverage for this area." She moved her hands in the air, manipulating virtual data windows. "How are we supposed to see where the storm is?"

Fredrik grinned. "I'll be back in a moment." He threaded this way across the crowded room and opened the door. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. He stepped out and looked around. Then he came back inside and clapped his hands loudly. People paused their conversations and set down their forks.

"There's a break in the clouds, and it's headed this way," he said. "Let's take this party outside!" With that, he ran to the farmhouse, returning with an armful of bioluminescent torches.

Anders and Fredrik planted the torches, which cast circles of warm light around the maypole. The other partygoers put on coats and joined them. The woman with the braids brought out a *nyckelharpa* and gave it to Otto, who took it from her with a kiss.

Everyone formed a rough circle around the maypole and Otto took his bow to the *nyckelharpa*. To Anders, the instrument looked—and sounded—like the offspring of a torrid affair between a violin and accordion.

Otto took a moment to check the instrument's tuning, then launched into a spirited rendition of *Små Grodorna*, the small frogs song. The guests began hopping around the maypole, singing about the small frogs, who have no ears, nor eyes, nor tails. The next verse concerned pigs, who had all these things. Then came a verse about politicians, who hid their tails in their suits.

Otto followed that song with some traditional polkas, playing with gusto until a thunderclap interrupted him. The rain returned then, heavier than before. Fredrik relented at this point, and declared that they could go back inside.

As the guests settled down to watch the rest of the *fotboll* match, Anders took Fredrik to the side.

"Sonja and I are heading down to Copenhagen tonight, but I wanted to ask about Lena before we left."

Fredrik shrugged. "Nothing's changed. I bring her flowers every week, and half the time she doesn't recognize me."

"Alzheimer's is a cruel master," Anders said.

"But there's hope," Fredrik said. "Parliament approved human trials for cryogenic sleep, and I received good numbers in the lottery. Lena and I will go to Stockholm next month."

"You can't live forever," Anders said.

"Not forever," he agreed. "Just long enough for them to find a cure."

"And if they don't? Or...?"

"Or they can't wake us up?" Fredrik offered up a smile. "Then I will pass away from this life, sleeping next to the woman I love. That's not a bad way to end the story, I think."

Anders looked across the room then, as Otto groaned about a missed penalty kick.

"And Otto?"

"He isn't happy with my decision, but he thinks the technology is sound." Fredrik rubbed his large nose. "He said he looks forward to waking us up one day and presenting us with a busload of great grandchildren to babysit."

"That's a nice image," Anders said. "Oh, I almost forgot. This is for you." He retrieved the flask of *brännvinn* from his coat and presented it to Fredrik.

"Oh, this is too much!" He twisted off the cork and wrinkled his nose. "Terrible. Appalling!"

"Shall we have a toast?"

"*Javisst*." He fetched two small glasses and filled them. "To sea pirates!"

#

They took their ship up into low orbit, and drifted east, then south, passing over the islands of Japan. Once they reached the outskirts of Kyoto, they descended and found a small park where they slept until nearly dawn. Then they organized their clothing and gear, and sent the ship to Mount Kurama to wait for them.

"I don't understand why you didn't mention any of these Humans in your report," Jali said, draping the folds of her black meditation robe, her *kesa*, over her left shoulder.

"Humans are to us as mayflies are to them. When I was born, the Greeks were preparing to lay siege to Troy, and you came into consciousness before Columbus crossed the Atlantic," Peit said. "The Compact is more concerned with Humanity's technology and potential for violence than with individual Humans."

He tied his own *kesa* closed with a simple rope, then draped a red tassel over his left shoulder and back, signifying his rank as *sensei*, or master. "I believe now that the Bureau of Cultural Assessment was under pressure to present Humans in an unfavorable light, and my report was edited accordingly."

Peit ran a hand over his head. His scalp was smooth, as was hers. His face bore the marks of late middle age. "Humans live on the cusp of true civilization," he said. "All they need is a slight nudge in the right direction, and they would make an excellent addition to the Compact. However, that opinion appears to be in the minority at the Bureau."

She frowned. "The D'han are willing to pay dearly for this system's star. Perhaps they made a private arrangement with the Trade Council."

"Politics as usual." He packed traditional shoulder bags for them, and took a battered walking staff for himself. "When I visited the Kinninji temple, I told them I was making a pilgrimage, walking the length of Japan. They gave me the dharma name of *Enkan*."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"Observant of Circumstances."

She laughed. "Very droll. And what about me?"

Enkan thought for a moment. "Perhaps you could be an initiate under a vow of silence." When he saw the look on her face, he offered a small chuckle. "That was ill-considered. I'll call you *Chiko*." He sent her an image of sparse, elegant ink strokes on rice paper. "Small Tiger."

"You're forgiven," said Chiko.

"Then put this on—" he handed her a type of wide-brimmed hat worn by many monks to protect their bare heads from the sun. "There's time to reach the cemetery before it opens."

Ten minutes later, they passed a bus stop, where a dozen beings stood at a street corner, engaged in email, voice calls, or sim games. Chiko noticed that everyone in the queue had a well-defined area of personal space, and even the most excited game players used clever microphones to contain their conversations and occasional exclamations as they moved through their virtual worlds.

A few blocks later, they reached the edge of a property separated from its neighbors by a tall wooden fence. They walked down a tree-lined stone path until they came to a pair of iron gates, which were closed. Enkan nodded. "This will do fine." He removed a small round cushion, a *zafu*, from his bag. "Make yourself comfortable," he told her. He settled himself on his *zafu*, pulled out a shallow bamboo bowl from his bag and rested that on the paving stone in front of him. Chiko followed his example.

"And now what?" she asked.

"We sit. And wait." He adjusted his hat, then sent her a synopsis of his temple studies. "I spent many months in places like this, observing beings and listening to their conversations. Occasionally, I would offer my blessing."

"Isn't that a little hypocritical? It's not like you actually believe in all of this," Chiko said.

He turned to her, smiled. "Perhaps not. But are we really so different? Every century, or whenever the urge strikes me, I transfer my consciousness to the Compact's neural cloud while my symbiotes rebuild my physical body, or create a new one, if I so desire. That process has an analogy in the Buddhist state called *bardo*." He pointed to the graveyard behind them. "Some Humans believe that after death, one's consciousness spends 49 days in the *bardo* trying to integrate one's life events in order to enter *nirvana*, the state of enlightenment. Failing that, the being returns to this world for rebirth. To try again."

"A reboot of the soul," she said. "Primitive mysticism."

"It doesn't matter if their belief meshes with physical reality. What's important is their outlook," he said. "They don't aspire to perfection, just improvement and compassion. That's a lesson the Compact could learn."

They were interrupted by the creaking of the iron gates being opened by a man dressed in a severe black suit. He propped the gates open with wooden blocks, turned, and offered them a deep bow. "*Ohayou gozaimasu, sensei*."

"Good morning to you, as well, Haruto," Enkan responded in Japanese. "Expecting a funeral soon?"

"Not until later," Haruto replied. "I wanted to check the flowers. May I offer you tea?"

"Most kind. It's thirsty work, becoming enlightened."

The other man laughed and walked past the gates to a small cottage. They heard the faint rattle of dishes.

"Who is that?" Chiko said.

"A friend. I found him living in the subway when I first came here."

"Really? Do many beings live underground?"

"Not at all," Enkan said. "Haruto was a soldier who suffered from a form of mental illness that caused him to live in a highly agitated state. When the government committed him to a treatment facility, he escaped. Several times. Finally, he retreated under the city."

"He seems perfectly functional now," Chiko said. "What happened?"

"I brought him food, and talked to him, usually from across the tunnel. It took several weeks, but eventually I found a way to reach that part of him capable of reason and social interaction."

"I'm impressed," she said. "And again, you didn't mention this in your report."

"I had my reasons," Enkan said.

Haruto returned at that moment, bearing a lacquered wooden tray with a tea pot, two small cups, and a plate of sweets. "Sorry to make you wait. This is all I have right now," he said. "I need to go to the store."

"Nonsense," Enkan said. "This will be fine."

"I'm pleased," Haruto said, kneeling to pour tea. He handed a cup to Enkan, who accepted it with both hands and bowed. Haruto repeated the process with Chiko. When she took her cup, her fingers brushed his, and a small shock of recognition passed through her.

You didn't! she exclaimed privately to her mate.

Yes, I did, he responded. *Now be a good nun and take something for your bowl. You don't want to offend him.*

Chiko quickly selected a few sweets and placed them in her bowl. "Thank you for this. Um, blessings." She bowed.

"Thank you, honorable nun," Haruto said. "Please enjoy your tea. I will come back later for the cups." He stood with the tray, bowed once more, and walked back into the cemetery. They heard him go into his cottage and shut the door. A few moments later, the smell of incense drifted past them.

"He likes to meditate before the mourners arrive," Enkan said.

"Never mind that!" Chiko said. "His body is full of *sympiototes*. How could you be so irresponsible?"

"He was very ill, and refused to go into the hospital," Enkan said. "He wouldn't have survived if I hadn't acted."

"You took a huge risk."

He sipped his tea. "I used a standard medical template and tailored it to his genome. His immune system barely noticed."

"You're dissembling," she said. "And why bother? They're all going to die when the D'han move into this system. *He's* doing to die."

"So let him die with full awareness. It doesn't hurt us to show some compassion."

She faced him and pushed back the brim of her hat. "Doesn't hurt? It's *prohibited* technology. If someone found out, you could—"

"What? Lose my position? Serve time in detention? It would be worth it," he said.

"Besides, how will the Compact learn of my crime? I was the only observer assigned here. No

one knows except you."

"And you expect me to keep my silence," she said.

"I expect you," he said slowly, "to do what is right." Then he put down his cup and straightened himself on his cushion.

Chiko copied his posture, but found herself unable to sit still. Finally, she whispered, "I don't want to do this any more. Call the ship."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded.

"All right," he said. "There is a vehicle parking structure not too far from here. There should be sufficient clearance for the ship on the upper level."

"Thank you."

"Before me leave, though, do me a favor." He removed a set of mala beads and began rolling them through his fingers. "I know you've read my report, but before we go, I'd like you to review my mission recordings. The raw data feed."

She frowned. "I'm not sure I want to do that right now. I'm... angry with you."

"I hear that. But this is important." His voice shifted, became more certain. "In all our time together, have you ever known me to act with impropriety? To break even the smallest law?"

"No," she said. "You're quite predictable in that regard. That's why I can't understand *this*."

"Because these beings need our help. Trust me, please."

She looked at Enkan for a long time, trying to see past the strange face he wore. Finally, she said, "All right. Give me the feed."

He reached over and covered her hand with his, opening a wide connection between them.

Her eyes closed.

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When the funeral party arrived in two sleek black electric vehicles, they encountered a monk and a nun apparently intent on their prayers. Haruto directed the procession past them and into the cemetery, leading them to the freshly dug grave. When he returned to the gate, he found only two empty tea cups.

Peit and Jali walked to the parking structure in silence, and the ship revealed itself. They slipped inside and left the world, their departure noticed only by a few pigeons.

Jali immediately discarded her costume and retreated to one of the crew cabins, sealing the hatch behind her. Peit recycled his own costume in the ship's galley, then allowed his features to regain their former appearance. He ate a meal by himself, and slept.

He woke up alone. He considered having the ship provide some form of entertainment, but in the end he wrapped himself in a soft chair and watched the lazy patterns of Under Space. They had some time before they would reach Ghrxt, and he was content to let Jali follow her own process. He was confident that he'd acted with the right intentions, and that she would soon understand.

Two weeks later, though, he began to worry. According to the ship, his mate had taken all her meals in her cabin, and avoided sleep in favor of writing, singing, and exchanging large communication packets with the home world.

Was Jali seeking legal advice, he wondered, or informing the authorities? Perhaps he had seriously misjudged her reaction.

His own message backlog began to grow. Peit authorized the ship to create a personality agent to deal with it. He didn't want to speak with anyone now, save for Jali.

Peit spent another night in solitude, reviewing his memories of Earth.

For two local years, he had moved among its inhabitants, wearing different Human faces. He had tagged whales in the Arctic Ocean, dug uranium in China, and performed illusions for children in a shantytown outside São Paulo. Through it all, he discovered that Humans were just as worthy of membership in the Compact as the Ghrxten or the D'han, or any of a hundred other sentient races. Given another century, Humans would have found their own path. Of that, Peit had no doubt. It had just been bad timing, really. There was nothing he could do about it now.

Just before they reached the boundary of the Ghrxt system, Jali came to his cabin, bearing a tray with food and drink: some of his favorites tastes and textures.

"A peace offering?" Peit asked.

"It may be the last quiet meal we have together for a while."

"What do you mean?"

"The Trade Council ordered the ship to divert to the capital. It seems they want to question us directly. "

"Us?"

"Well," Jali said, "You returned to Earth against orders, using a ship that I took without authorization." She laughed. "So much for artistic prerogative."

Peit took the tray from her. "So we're both under arrest." He ate a few bites, but couldn't enjoy the food. When he pushed the tray aside, she took his hand.

"Don't be so sure. Come with me." Jali led him to the control cabin and ordered the ship to give them full access to the Ghrxt data feeds.

His symbiotes presented him with multiple windows of data, including the official summons. Then he tried to access his message queue, and faltered. He had over three *million* messages. The ship was using half its AI capacity to process the communications traffic. He struggled to make sense of it all, and barely noticed as the ship entered the upper atmosphere.

"What did you *do*?" he said.

"I told your story, or more precisely, theirs." Jali hugged him tightly and showed him the episodic drama she had created using his mission logs. The stories had gained instant popularity on the Ghrxten entertainment networks, and beyond.

Compact citizens had absorbed the lives of Human characters through their symbiotes, and soon demanded more. In response, other artists created derivative works, borrowing from Peit's recordings of Chinese opera, Indonesian shadow puppetry, and Aboriginal creation myths, adding to a growing microtrend in all things Human.

The Bureau of Cultural Assessment found itself flooded with inquiries. Rival factions in the Bureau accused each other of collusion and manipulation in the D'han transaction. The Trade Council ordered an official investigation.

It was astonishing.

"It's only a matter of time before the Trade Council finds a reason to cancel the sale of the Human solar system to the D'han," she said. "To use the Human expression, they have to save face."

He looked at her. "You said it was our last quiet meal together."

"It will be," she said. "Even if we aren't arrested, I suspect you'll be kept busy answering questions, interviewing media factions, and generally appeasing the bureaucracy. No more field surveys on primitive worlds."

He hugged her fiercely. "Thank you for trusting me."

"It was the right thing to do," she said. Jali pointed toward the rapidly approaching spaceport, and the crowd gathered there. "Humanity's membership in the Compact needs to be resolved. It will be a great project."

The ship settled to the ground and opened its hatches. The crowd, many of whom wore Human faces, waved and called their names.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Jali said.

The End