

In Transit

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1.

Snow was falling in dithering flurries, spilling from the clouds like a shower of white confetti. The accumulation on the ground was already deep, and the horses pulling the sleigh were struggling, their hooves sinking into the drifts as if wading through vanilla quicksand. They were making steady progress—enough to keep the sled from bogging down—but they were plodding, not trotting. Their chances of outrunning the wolves were slim to none.

This had been a bitter winter with unrelenting blizzards, frozen rivers, frosts keener than grief, trees stripped skeleton-bare, and temperatures colder than a mother-in-law's kiss. The wolves were starving. They ordinarily steered clear of the settlements, deterred by the unpleasant scents and by the watch-fires that were kept burning all night every night. They feared fire, and—unaware of how often this dreadful accomplice of the villagers betrayed its masters—they let themselves be daunted by it.

If Molly and her friends had remained in the vicinity of the town, they would have been safe. But no—Brian had insisted on going beyond the city limits. “If you want an adventure, you have to be adventurous,” he declared.

The wolves were floundering in the snow. They weren't running so much as lunging forward in an explosive sequence of springs and bounds. Gone was the boneless fluidity with which they usually ghosted over the ground. This was a jerkier, less graceful form of locomotion, but it was accomplishing its purpose. They were in a semicircular formation, closing on the sleigh like pinchers poised to grasp. They had made no attempt to leap aboard. Their obvious intention was to attack the horses.

Brian had the rifle cocked and ready. It was a lever-action Winchester .30-30. It held seven rounds in the magazine and one round in the chamber. If he remained calm, aimed carefully, and didn't miss a shot, he could put eight wolves out of commission.

And when the ammunition was exhausted?

They were being chased by more than eight wolves. Many more.

A big gray wolf had drawn abreast of the sleigh and was attempting to hamstring the horse hitched to the near side of the doubletree. Brian sighted along the barrel of the rifle, squeezed the trigger, and felt the impact against his shoulder as the weapon convulsed in his hands. A hole appeared in the wolf's skull. A spray of blood and brains erupted from the exit wound. The wolf died instantly, collapsed like a stringless puppet, and came to rest in the middle of a snow-bank.

Would that discourage the others?

Evidently not.

They hadn't flinched at the report of the firearm, and they hadn't stopped to savage the carcass of their fallen leader. Molly had been hoping that—desperately hungry as they were—they might turn cannibal and feast on one of their own. But no—these hunters were grimly determined. Tonight they were after human flesh and nothing less would satisfy them.

Brian was like an overwound watch-spring, his nerves coiled tight with tension. He had to make a conscious effort to remain composed. He couldn't banish the emotions that were clawing at him, but he could quarantine them, refuse to countenance them, continue to function in spite of them. And that's what he did. He held the rifle rock-steady. He waited until each target was in point-blank range. He made absolutely sure of each shot. When the cartridges were spent, there were eight dead wolves lying in the snow.

The barrel of the Winchester was warm to the touch. Brian gripped it tightly, preparing to swing the stock like a club.

"Here." Molly took an object from the pocket of her coat and dropped it into his palm.

"What's this?" Stupid question. He knew very well what it was, but he didn't want to believe the evidence of his eyes.

"Spare ammo clip."

"But . . ." he spluttered.

"But what?"

"That's against the rules!" he bleated. "That's cheating!"

She expressed bland unconcern with a shrug. "Given a choice between cheating and being devoured by wolves . . ."

Brian was strangling handfuls of air in clenched fists. "Abort!" he shouted. He expelled a great breath of air in a huff of exasperation. "Game over!"

He and Molly exchanged glances that were like two ridges of ice rubbing together.

"Why not a Gatling gun?" he snarled. "Or a laser pistol? If you're going to flout the rules and arm yourself with equipment you're not supposed to have, why restrict yourself to extra ammo? Why not plasma grenades or a flamethrower? What about a few hellwands? They'd come in handy."

Brian took an aggressive step toward her, bristling with anger. Molly's first impulse was to respond in kind, but she kept a tight rein on her temper and said: "You take these stimsims too seriously, Brian."

"And you don't take them seriously enough. I should have known better than to invite you to come along. I put a lot of work into this tri-dim. And you've ruined it! Just like you always do."

"What am I supposed to do? Let myself be victimized? I'd like to believe I have a more exalted destiny than dog food. If I can avoid such a fate, I will. Is that so difficult to understand?"

Brian dismissed her objection with a negligent wave of his hand. "Now who's taking this too seriously? It's not as if the threat is genuine. You aren't *actually* in danger of being torn to pieces by ravenous wolves."

"It'll just seem like it." She stalled his rebuttal with an upraised palm. "No—don't even try to tell me otherwise. You're a first-class virtualoso. I'll grant you that. Your realies are real to nine decimal places. If I allow myself be ripped to shreds in one of your stimsims, I'll feel every appalling minute of the experience."

"That's the risk we take."

"No! That's the risk I take. Not we. Not you. This isn't my first bite of a poisoned apple from your garden, Brian. You're the creator. You're the designer. The program has a loophole built into it, doesn't it? An escape hatch known only to you. The rest of us may fall prey to the wolves, but you'll emerge without a scratch." Her fists were planted on her hips. "Am I wrong?"

Brian's forehead was curdled in a scowl. He couldn't deny it. The runners on the sleigh did double-duty as rocket tubes. He could—at his discretion—unhitch the horses by pressing a hidden button. The sled would then become a rocket-propelled skidoo, capable of breaking the sound barrier. It was, of course, a last resort. If he took advantage of it, he wouldn't be breaking

the rules of the game for the simple and sufficient reason that he'd written the rules himself. He could, of course, halt the action at any time with a verbal command to abort, but he considered that an admission of defeat, and he deeply resented being compelled to do so by Molly's recalcitrance.

His fury was mounting like mercury in a thermometer. "I've had all I'm going to take from you," he hissed, spitting the words the way a pit viper spews venom. "Always a noncom, aren't you? Always a contrarian. Okay. Be that way. I'm going to report you to the Elders. You belong in Coventry, and if I have anything to say about it, that's where you're headed."

When the program had been terminated, the winterscape vanished, and the synth chamber had been revealed for what it was. Brian stalked through the exit into the corridor beyond. Caleb and Dinah—the other two sleigh-riders—had remained silent, refusing to take sides in the dispute between Brian and Molly, but now Dinah gave Molly an encouraging hug. "Don't fret," she said. "He'll get over it."

Molly responded with a headshake. "I'm not so sure about that."

* * *

2.

When she'd emerged from the Incube as a squalling newborn, she'd been given the name "Mary."

She was still listed on the ship's manifest as Mary, but she'd never liked the name and didn't answer to it.

A query addressed to the ship's archive when she was ten years old revealed that "Mary" was derived from the Hebrew name "Miryam," and that Miryam had spawned a great many variations: Maria, Marie, Mame, Marietta, Marilyn, May, Maureen, Molly, Miriam, Mariah . . .

She had considered her options and settled for "Molly." By the simple expedient of ignoring anyone who called her anything else, she compelled everybody she knew—guardians, caretakers, acquaintances, teachers—to respect her wishes.

They said she was stubborn.

She said she was resolute.

The experience had taught her a lesson that most people didn't learn so young—if, indeed, they ever learned it. Molly realized that she was endowed with a veto power that only she could revoke. It was simple. It was the ability to refuse. It was the option to say, "No." If she said it, meant it, and accepted the consequences, no one's authority could be imposed on her without her consent.

She was unaware of the irony involved. Her rejection of her given name demonstrated that it was appropriate.

"Miryam" meant "rebellious."

She wasn't rebelling against rules and regulations so much as against conformity. Brian had called her a "noncom"—one of the noncompliant—and she admitted that the accusation was true. But only to herself. She wouldn't have made such an admission to anyone else. Noncoms weren't tolerated aboard the *Aesop*. Noncoms were exiled. Noncoms were banished to the stern-most third of C Deck, otherwise known as "Coventry." No one had ever returned from beyond those bulkheads. The punishment awaiting misfits in Coventry was unknown and was, perhaps, all the more daunting for that very reason. Was Coventry a prison? A ghetto? A lawless slum where only the most brutal survived? Only the Elders knew.

And if Brian's threat wasn't empty?

If he meant it?

A single complaint from a disgruntled stimsimer wouldn't be enough to condemn her, but Molly was already on the Elders' list of suspects. She wasn't a herd animal. She kept to herself, rarely took part in group activities, rejected most overtures of friendship. In any social situation, she was a silent spectator—a solitary figure standing aloof, radiating contemptuous amusement.

They said she was a loner.

She said she was self-reliant.

Her lack of gregariousness hadn't gone unnoticed by the caretakers.

She had received three reprimands from the Council of Elders.

Her response had been to seek companionship—or at least to go through the motions. She had made herself agreeable to Dinah—a charming young lady who was the sun around which many lesser lights orbited. Dinah understood why Molly was trying to insinuate herself into Dinah's circle of acquaintances, didn't mind being used as a smokescreen behind which Molly could hide, but Dinah doubted that the Elders were being fooled by the deception. Molly was a square peg in a round hole—a poor fit for Dinah's crowd of party-goers and pleasure-seekers. Even when Molly was with them, she wasn't one of them. She didn't belong, and no one was more cognizant of that than Molly herself. She felt like a ghost at the feast. Or maybe the opposite. More like the inversion of a ghost. She was physically present but her spirit was elsewhere.

Dinah had urged Brian to include Molly as one of the participants in his newest stimsim. Brian was reluctant, but a request from Dinah was only slightly less compulsory than a royal command. Molly knew that Brian became totally immersed in his make-believe scenarios, had ruffled his feathers twice before by stepping out of character and/or introducing a random element for which he was unprepared. He had responded as if she'd used the Holy Grail as a chamberpot. This time, she'd promised herself, would be different. This time she'd be on her good behavior. But no—her streak of perversity had triumphed once more. These elaborate fantasies to which Brian—and many others—were addicted struck Molly as hollow shams. It was all so pointless. So purposeless. So futile.

But what wasn't?

The *Aesop* was fully automated. The Elders were ostensibly in charge, but Molly doubted that any of them could make a repair or compute a course change—not even if the lives of everyone on board had been at stake. The Elders relied on the robots to fix anything that went wrong, or—more exactly—to make sure nothing went wrong that had to be fixed. The robots had demonstrated their infallible efficiency to fifteen generations of Aesopians. After two hundred and ninety-two years of interstellar flight, the *Aesop*—self-controlled and self-maintained—had encountered no serious mishaps and was still bound for its destination: Tau Ceti III.

Meanwhile . . .

Molly and her shipmates were just killing time while they waited for time to return the favor. Until the *Aesop* made planetfall, the human beings aboard had nothing to do that really needed doing.

Were the stimsims, dreamies, and interactive frolics elaborate wastes of time?

Yes.

Did Molly have a better suggestion?

No.

She had to concede that Brian might have the right idea.

If you *must* walk the plank, you might as well do a half-gainer with a twist.

If you have nothing to do, you might as well do it with style.

* * *

3.

Brian was a stimsim junkie.

Dinah was a social zonker.

Others were sports fanatics.

Or hedonists.

Or sex addicts.

Or dazer freaks.

Molly?

She was a bookworm.

Molly had never seen an actual book, but the ship's "library" contained numerous images of real libraries, and Molly had always been entranced by them. She had taken virtual tours of the Abbey Library of St. Gaul and the Abbey Library of Waldsassen. The same interactive technology that generated Brian's stimsims made her feel as if she were physically present, surrounded by venerable tomes and exquisitely carved bookshelves. She had also paid a visit to the ancient

ANALOG

Library of Alexandria, but she was well aware that no accurate description of the great-great-ultra-great-granddaddy of all libraries existed. What she was experiencing was a computerized counterfeit, and Molly wasn't deceived by it. Unlike Brian, she did not get so immersed in whimsies that the distinction between reality and virtual reality became blurred.

Molly's love affair with the written word was another quirk that set her apart from her fellow wayfarers. They *could* read—the robots responsible for their upbringing had seen to that—but not many of them did.

Not many?

Correction.

None of them did.

Molly was the only reader in the bunch.

Or so she'd assumed.

And then she'd asked Minerva—the ship's central computer—to recreate the Stone Library: the annex to Peacefield Manor that had been constructed at the request of John Quincy Adams to house his books. Molly often came here to sit and read in isolated splendor.

When she entered the simulacrum and discovered that it was already in use, she was surprised.

When she saw who was using it, she tried to recall his name and drew a blank.

That was understandable. Dwight Cameron *was* a blank of sorts.

A more nondescript nonentity would be difficult to imagine. Dwight was average in all respects. He wasn't tall or short, thin or fat, cheerful or sad. He was so exceptionally unexceptional that he was almost nonexistent. When Dwight left a room, the people who remained in it had the distinct impression that nothing had changed.

Molly knew who he was but didn't really know him. She had never paid much attention to him. Of course not. He was a chameleon. He blended into the background so seamlessly that he was more or less invisible.

And yet here he was, slumped bonelessly in the cushioned embrace of an armchair, as relaxed as a punctured balloon, a butterflyed copy of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* gripped in his left hand.

Molly acknowledged him with a nod. "My apologies. I'm intruding."

He granted pardon with a lazy wave of his unencumbered hand. "No problem. It never occurred to me to request privacy. No one comes here."

"Until now."

"Right." His mouth quirked in a wry smile. "You're the exception to the rule."

Was he referring to her presence in this particular place or to her reputation as an oddball? She couldn't decide. It might have been either. Or both.

She pointed to the battered pseudo-book he was holding. "I've never been able to make sense of that."

"It's a challenge, all right. Deliberately difficult. So much so that you could almost accuse it of being self-defeating—a form of communication that constructs barriers to communication. I got nowhere with it until I asked Minerva for help. The damn poem's bulging at the seams with obscure references. When Minerva put me wise to them, a pattern began to emerge."

"And now you understand it?"

"Me? That's a laugh!" He gave a derisive snicker, self-directed. "No. I don't understand it. At most, I've acquired an understanding of how little I understand."

Adopting a sing-song tone of voice, Molly recited:

"We all dance round in a ring and suppose

"But the secret sits in the middle and knows."

Dwight lofted an inquisitive eyebrow.

Her response to the question he hadn't asked was: "Robert Frost."

"After wrestling with Eliot for an hour and a half, it's refreshing to encounter a poet who just says what he means." Dwight got to his feet and offered to shake hands. "I'm Dwight Cameron. No need to introduce yourself. Molly—*not* Mary—Franklin. I know who you are."

If Molly had hoped to cultivate companions whose influence would be deemed beneficial by

the Elders, Dwight Cameron fit that description like socks on a rooster. He, too, was a noncom. He, too, was a maverick. He, too, was a candidate for Coventry.

Dwight had recently created a disturbance in Professor Rawlings' Ancient History class. R.I. Rawlings (Robot Instructor Rawlings) had been delivering a lecture on the Peloponnesian War when he was interrupted by a student with an upraised hand.

"Do you have a question, Dwight?"

"Yes." A pregnant pause. Then: "Relevance. I question the relevance of the subject you're teaching. What has it got to do with us—with our everyday lives aboard the *Aesop*?"

Interpreting Dwight's query narrowly, the robot said: "The Peloponnesian War was a major conflict that decided . . ."

"No! Not the Peloponnesian War. Or the Persian Wars. Or the plays of Euripides. Or the philosophy of Aristotle. None of it seems pertinent to my concerns. I'm a colonist aboard a generation ship. I've never been on Earth, and I never will be. Why should I care about the ancient Greeks?"

The robot did not reply at once, and Dwight experienced a fleeting flutter of triumph. Robot-baiting was a form of harassment in which all of the children indulged. The objective was to confront a robot with a request or a query that exceeded its programming. Compelling it to justify its own existence usually did the trick. Compelling it to justify the task it had been assigned to perform could also scramble its circuits.

The R.I. remained silent and immobile for three or four minutes. Then it came back to life. "All right, smartass! Congratulations. You've done it again."

Dwight pantomimed patting himself on the back. Rawlings' surrogate had been forced to contact Rawlings himself. "Sorry, Professor."

"Like hell you are. You get a kick out of stonkering the tin men." Rawlings vented a sigh of exasperation. "I wouldn't mind so much if you'd asked a question to which you actually wanted an answer."

Dwight assumed an expression of spurious innocence intended to be recognized as spurious. "You wrong me, Professor. I'm sincere."

"Sincere?" he echoed. "You're sincerely a scalawag. You're sincerely a rascal. You're sincerely a pain in the ass. Why should a troublemaker like you study ancient history? Is that what you'd 'sincerely' like to know?"

"Yes."

"If you were willing to learn the lessons that ancient history has to teach, you'd be able to answer your own damn question." With heavy condescension, he added: "I'll give you a hint. What kind of person asks questions like that one?"

The obvious response was "an impertinent noncom," but Dwight wasn't seriously tempted to say that. If he'd been deliberately trying to get ousted to Coventry, that would have been a good way to go about it.

But even if he hadn't been daunted by the threat of Coventry, he'd have kept his tongue in check.

By comparison with some of the other reprimands he'd received, this one had been mild. Rawlings hadn't really been chiding him. Rawlings had spoken like a priest offering holy communion to a skeptical backslider.

What kind of person asks questions like that one?

Yes—and what kind of a teacher asks questions like *that*?

Could it be a teacher who was making a genuine attempt to teach him something?

If so, what?

* * *

4.

"Molly Franklin and Dwight Cameron?"

"Birds of a feather . . ."

". . . flock together. Yes—but some varieties of birds are solitaires, aren't they?"

"How would I know? I've never set eyes on an actual bird. Neither have you, Alfred."

“No—and I never will.”

“We have bird zygotes in deep freeze.”

“So we do, but I won’t live long enough to see them in flight. Introducing Terran life forms into the ecosystem could have catastrophic consequences. Years of study will be required before we can take a chance like that.”

“We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Do we have a choice? Crossing a bridge at any other time would be exceedingly difficult.”

“Tell that to Molly and see what happens. Better yet, *forbid* her to do it. She’ll sure as hell give it a try.”

“And if she teams up with Dwight? Two solitaires. Two noncoms. Two misfits. Put them together and what have you got? They could be double trouble.”

“Separate them?”

“How?”

“Send her to Coventry. We have sufficient grounds. We’ve received a formal complaint from Brian Purcell.”

“She’ll have to answer those charges. Has she been summoned to appear before us?”

“Not yet.”

“All right, Gretchen. Issue the summons. Let’s hear what the little scamp has to say for herself.”

* * *

5.

He wasn’t her biological father, of course.

The ship was heavily shielded, but constant exposure to cosmic rays couldn’t be averted. Natural childbirth would have produced too many deformities. Even if that hadn’t been so, the gene pool aboard the *Aesop* wasn’t sufficiently extensive to insure genetic diversity. The solution to both problems was the Incube—a freezer deep in the bowels of the ship containing millions of sperm samples and unfertilized ova. The Incube wasn’t radiation-proof, but it conferred as much protection as possible. With the exception of the crewmembers belonging to the first generation, all of the Aesopians had been designer babies. Children were raised by adoptive parents who were not blood-kin and who would have been scandalized by the suggestion that they were.

For all practical purposes, the appropriately named “caretakers” were responsible for the upbringing of infants and toddlers. Newborns imprinted on their robot nannies much more frequently than they did on any of the human beings with whom they came into contact. Most of them were assigned to foster homes when they were three months old, but even then child rearing was a task delegated to tin men especially programmed for the purpose. Very few Aesopians had ever sung a lullaby, and almost none of them knew how to change a diaper.

Waldo Franklin was—at best—a poor excuse for a father. To him, a baby was an alimentary canal with a loud voice on one end and no sense of responsibility on the other. Molly hadn’t been a welcome addition to his household, he hadn’t warmed to her as she got older, he didn’t understand her, he made no attempt to do so, and he resented her waywardness because he took it as a deliberate rejection of the example he had tried to set.

He was correct about that.

Molly considered him a follow-the-leader dumbass with a cookie-cutter mentality who had never in his life been tempted to stray from the beaten path or go against the grain. Conformity was to him as purity to Sir Galahad.

The Franklins were lodged in a spacious two-bedroom cabin halfway between the outer hull and the inner core. Living quarters aboard the *Aesop* weren’t as densely shielded as the Incube, but the bulkheads were massive, perpetually monitored for radioactivity, and replaced whenever the level of contamination exceeded acceptable limits. The life-expectancy of the average Aesopian was about the same as that of the average Earth dweller, but the incidence of disorders due to mutation were higher. Every Aesopian underwent frequent medical exams. Carcinomas and other unwholesome tissues were removed by the autodocs.

A subpoena to appear before the Council of Elders was an actual document, delivered by messenger-bot, which required a signature from the recipient. Waldo had signed with an angry scrawl. He was waving the summons in Molly's face.

"What have you done this time?"

"Why do you ask? You don't care. You've already decided I'm guilty. Hopefully, the Elders will at least give me a fair hearing."

"Is that what you're hoping? To get a fair hearing? What about me? What about your mother? We were hoping for a daughter who would make us proud. We were hoping for a daughter who'd grow up to be something other than an embarrassment. Is there no hope of that?"

"That depends. What would make you proud? A dutiful little doll? A submissive puppet who does just as she's told? A flesh-and-blood human being who behaves like a tin man?"

"How about a girl who isn't *mis*behaving all the time? I'd settle for that." Anger was emanating from him like heat from a radiator. "I'm ashamed of you. I'm tired of making excuses for you."

"Then don't."

"I won't. When you go before the Elders, you'll be on your own. I won't be with you."

Molly successfully hid her dismay, but she knew that lack of parental advocacy would be interpreted as a black mark against her. No doubt about it. By simply remaining absent, Waldo Franklin would be acknowledging that Molly was hopeless.

Molly was unwilling to beg his pardon, but an appeal to his own self-interest might sway him. "What will you tell your friends?" she inquired.

He shrugged. "It's none of their business."

"You know better than that. A hearing before the Council of Elders can't be kept secret. Our neighbors will know about it, and they'll know that you turned your back on me. They'll ask you why. When they do, what are you going to say to them?"

Lowering her voice, she did a convincing imitation of Waldo himself.

"She's impossible!" she sniveled.

She wrung her hands in mock despair.

"I can't do a thing with her!" she bleated.

She made a forlorn gesture of impotence.

"She won't listen to me!" she squawked.

She made him sound like a whining, inept, dimwitted bungler. "You'll be a laughingstock." She demonstrated with a contemptuous snigger. "You can kiss your unblemished reputation farewell."

That was a subtle barb, deftly inserted. Molly meant it to sting, and it did. Waldo's good name was the star by which he steered. That was the scale on which he weighed all of his decisions. At one extreme were choices likely to be good for his reputation. At the other extreme were choices less likely to be good for his reputation. A choice that would be outright bad for his reputation was, of course, unworthy of consideration.

Molly was tempted to press her advantage, but she wisely refrained. Shaking him just to watch him fizz would be counterproductive. What she needed to do was back away, let his fury burn to ash, give him time to consider his options.

"Think it over," she said.

And with that, she did an abrupt about-face and left him there, stewing in his own juices.

* * *

6.

The two eldest of the Elders were Alfred Russell and Gretchen Hargrave.

Russell's hair was saline white, and his skin was as wrinkled as that of a tortoise.

Hargrave was cadaverously lean, had a parrot nose and predatory eyes that seemed to measure the distance between herself and others in pouncing terms.

To a fifteen-year-old girl, both of them looked older than time itself.

The inquest was intended to intimidate Molly, and it succeeded. When the Council of Elders sat as a tribunal dispensing justice, all seven of its members had to be present. This was

a provision to prevent deadlocks. An odd number of magistrates insured that indecisive decisions couldn't happen. They were seated in a semicircular formation on an elevated dais. Molly felt as if they were looking down on her in both senses of the phrase.

Molly's father hadn't relented and was not in attendance, but—to Molly's surprise—her mother was. For Bridget Franklin to defy her husband was a rare departure from the norm. Molly sincerely appreciated her mother's show of support.

Her accuser—Brian Purcell—was wearing a troubled expression and refused to meet Molly's gaze. He'd been angry when he lodged his complaint, but now that he was here, confronted by the consequences, he was obviously ill-at-ease. Had he overreacted? Molly suspected that Brian would have disavowed his grievance if he could have done so without making a fool of himself.

As it was, he had to see it through. His testimony was an accurate recital of the facts, given without exaggeration or embellishment. He stated that he put a lot of thought and hard work into his stimsims. The participants *could* defeat the hazards he created for them. He always provided an escape-hatch that they could use if they were clever enough to find it. But Molly hadn't outsmarted him. Molly had blatantly cheated—on this occasion and on two previous occasions. Her unwillingness to abide by the rules was typical of Molly, and—in Brian's opinion—she deserved a stern reprimand. He had originally intended to recommend that she be consigned to Coventry, but he stopped short of that. Ironically, his clemency rebounded to her disadvantage. Insisting on Coventry would have been unmistakably spiteful. A request for a lesser penalty sounded more reasonable and less vindictive.

Molly didn't deny what she'd done. Instead, she attempted to justify it. "There was only one rifle," she said, "only one ammo clip, and only Brian was armed. Do you see? Dinah, Caleb, and I had no way to defend ourselves. Brian refers to us as 'participants.' But we weren't. We were mere spectators. We *couldn't* participate. The rules made sure of that." She gave Brian a mock salute that converted a sign of respect into its polar opposite. "When Brian says that a lot of thought and effort goes into his stimsims, that's nothing but the truth. Ingenuity, too. Give him his due. He is a virtualoso without compare. The illusions he creates seem just as real as a punch in the nose and they're just as impossible to ignore. If he put his mind to it, he could produce masterpieces—extraordinary adventures that would become the cherished memories of anyone who experienced them. But no—he treats his companions like extras in old-fashioned movies. They're present so that the star of the show can shine. They're his audience. Just onlookers. And they're expendable. He gets to strut his stuff. They're supposed to applaud and allow themselves to be sacrificed like pawns in a chess game." She shrugged. "When I realized that this sleigh-ride was just another of Brian's slay-rides . . ." she accentuated the homophone to make sure her meaning was clear . . . "I decided not to cooperate. Getting devoured by wolves is no fun. I've had fun before, and that isn't it."

This harangue had been carefully rehearsed—that much was obvious—but its lack of spontaneity wasn't necessarily a defect. If nothing else, it showed that Molly was taking this proceeding seriously. She had come prepared. Yes—but she was displaying no contrition and was defending herself by finding fault with her accuser.

Russell focused an interrogatory gaze on her from under formidable eyebrows. "Let me be sure I understand this. You're pleading guilty, but you're arguing that you had just cause. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

Turning to Brian, Russell said: "What about you? Were you on a joyride or an ego-trip? Molly claims that she and the others were helpless. True or false?"

"Well . . ."

"The program had a built-in escape protocol?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was it?"

Brian described the concealed rocket-tubes. Russell's expression was skeptical. "Can we agree," he drawled, "that none of your passengers were likely to find the panic-button?"

Brian equivocated. "They knew it existed. Molly said so herself." Sensing that he had strayed

onto unsteady ground, he hastened to add: “It wasn’t as if any of them *had* to be there. I asked them to come along, and they did. They volunteered.”

“Yes! That’s the point.” Hargrave was playing an invisible piano on the arm of her chair. “You and Molly are both guilty of failure to learn from experience. Molly had disrupted your stimsims more than once. You should have known better than to invite her yet again, and she should have known better than to accept your invitation. The two of you were bound to clash, you did just that, and now you expect the Council of Elders to settle your quarrel? Unfortunately, stupidity and stubbornness aren’t against the law. If they were, I’d clap you both in irons. As it is, I’ll have to be content with scolding you.” She shooed them away with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Consider yourself scolded. Go on. Get lost. Shove off. Get out of my sight.”

Molly didn’t need to be told twice, much less four times. She made a beeline for the exit.

Brian?

Not only had he failed to obtain a favorable verdict, but he himself was being rebuked. The sudden reversal took him completely by surprise. Startled into stupidity, he only just prevented himself from asking: “You want me to go?” He aborted the sentence even as the words were trembling on his tongue, executed an awkward little bow, and took his leave.

Judging by the expression on Hargrave’s face, he could have taken nothing from her that she would have relinquished more cheerfully.

* * *

7.

“You occasionally do the unexpected, Gretchen. Even now—after all these years of working together—you remain unpredictable.”

“That’s good. I’m glad.”

“Yes. I predicted that you would be.”

“And what have I done that you *didn’t* predict?”

“I thought Molly was Coventry-bound. You were just looking for an excuse.”

“It seemed the simplest solution. Molly and Dwight make a potentially explosive combination.”

“But?”

“But I didn’t like Brian Purcell. He’s a petty, piddling little pissant.”

“An interesting exercise in alliteration, but I don’t quite see . . .”

“We have better things to do than appease Brian Purcell. A virtualoso? No. Not really. Not yet. He has the *potential*, but he’s a long way from realizing his potential. His stimsims are nothing but mirrors reflecting empty vanities. He’s inventive without being creative.” She gave a huff of mirthless laughter. “If he fell in love with anybody else, it would be a triangle.”

“So you decided to give them both a spanking and send them on their way.”

“Brian was trying to use the Council of Elders to pursue a frivolous vendetta. That is not permissible.”

“No?”

“You disagree? You could have said so. A dissent from you would have forced us to put it to a vote.”

“I don’t disagree. Molly’s feisty, but she didn’t deserve to be harshly penalized for such a trifling misdemeanor. If our purpose had been to render a verdict that’s fair, you’d have been impeccably correct.”

“But that *isn’t* our purpose.”

“No. Our purpose is to maintain social stability. We preserve the status quo. We are *not* open-minded. We are *not* evenhanded. Anyone who comes to the Council of Elders seeking justice will get *just us*—seven old codgers who won’t allow dissidents to rock the boat.” He wheezed a chuckle. “Ironical, isn’t it? The threat in Brian’s stimsim was a wolf pack. And who spoiled his fun? Molly—the lone wolf who wouldn’t let herself be thrown to the wolves.”

“You admire the little spitfire.” Hargrave shook her head. “Don’t bother to deny it.”

“I wasn’t going to deny it.”

“Of course not. You *aren’t* unpredictable.”

The duct was cylindrical, cramped, and breezy.

The perpetual exhalation of the ventilators was a persistent stirring and sighing, as steady and unvarying as a mathematical constant. The breeze brisked past Molly like an impatient cat, scuffling her hair and ruffling her clothes, but she paid no heed to it. If it had stopped, if the air had ceased to flow, *that* she would have noticed. She and everyone else aboard the *Aesop* would have been in imminent danger of suffocation.

Circulating fresh air wasn't the only service provided by the air ducts. They also housed water pipes and electrical conduits. Exposure to cosmic rays couldn't be totally prevented, but the primary shaft ran straight down the central axis of the *Aesop*, protecting the ship's supplies of air and water as much as possible.

Dwight was close behind Molly. He, too, was jackknifed at the waist, shoulders hunched, muscles tense, crouching with half of his weight on his outstretched forearms. The maintenance tubes weren't big enough for a human being to stand upright. They had been designed to accommodate scurrying repair bots, not furtive teenagers bent on mischief.

"Let's call a halt," he panted. "I need a rest. This is murder."

By "this" he meant being compelled to bend double and crabwalk on all fours, jerked along like a marionette twitching to the pull of invisible strings. The lurching gait was exhausting. He wrenched to a stop and wilted to the floor, sagging prone and sighing with relief as the strain on his muscles relaxed. Molly, too, collapsed and lay flat on her stomach, as inert and still as a trampled flower.

"I didn't realize it would be this difficult," she admitted.

Dwight lowered his head, resting his cranium on his crossed forearms. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have, but if I hadn't, I never would have known." He barked a fey laugh. "This is a quandary I've met before. I'm no stranger to self-inflicted hardships."

"But you *didn't* inflict this on yourself. I talked you into it."

"So you did. But I agreed to it. You aren't the only one who's curious."

"Curious 'inquisitive,' or curious 'peculiar'?"

"Maybe a little bit of both."

They'd been discussing Molly's most recent brush with Coventry and speculating on the tribulations that awaited wrongdoers there. "No matter how bad it is," she surmised, "it can't be the equivalent of a death sentence. People banished to Coventry won't be denied the essentials of life. Will they?"

"I wouldn't think so. Why bother? If your objective is to bump off the troublemakers, all you need to do is shove them out of an airlock." He brisked his palms together. "Presto! Problem solved."

"Fear of the unknown!" Molly signaled a sudden insight with a fingersnap. "That's it! That's why Coventry's so scary. If we knew what's on the other side of that bulkhead, we wouldn't be daunted by it."

"Evidently, I'm more easily daunted than you are. Not that it matters. The only way to learn what happens to the exiles is to get exiled yourself."

"I'm not so sure of that. We just agreed that the essentials of life will be provided. Air. Water. The air ducts must extend beyond the barrier. They *must*."

Dwight's expression was withdrawn, contemplative. "Yes. And access to them could be obtained through one of the ventilation grills. It'd be a tight squeeze, but it could be done."

It had been done. They'd jiggered the fastenings on a vent in an out-of-the-way storeroom. Beyond was a constricted flue down which they had to crawl, but the auxiliary branch soon disgorged them into the main shaft—slightly larger but by no means roomy. Fortunately, neither of them suffered from claustrophobia. Few *Aesopians* did. They spent their lives in relatively confined spaces, were very much accustomed to enclosing walls.

"All right. Enough of this. Up and at 'em. We've got a long way to go."

Actually, they didn't. As big as it was—and interstellar arks like the *Aesop* were enormous—

the ship had a prow and a stern, and reaching one or the other was a simple matter of selecting a direction and going in that direction until you got there. Or it should have been. They had come further than they realized and were closer to the stern than they supposed, but they didn't reach it because the path was blocked by a massive grate.

Molly whistled aloud. "Wow! That's what you call a serious obstruction—not a grill that can be opened or closed. This is part of the bulkhead itself."

"Original ship's construction."

"Must be. This monster has been here ever since the hull was assembled."

Dwight's expression was wistful. "And that—I guess—is that. We'll have to turn around and go back." He paused to consider. "*Can* you turn around?"

"I'll have to convince myself that I'm a contortionist, but yes, I think so."

Molly assumed a reclining position and drew her knees up to her chin, hugging herself. She spun in place, shoulders brushing the sides of the shaft until she'd completed a rotation of 180 degrees. Dwight did likewise, had more trouble because he was taller, but soon they were both advancing to the rear. Retreating was no easier on weary muscles. Dwight was progressing in a series of dizzy staggers, and Molly felt like a squeezed orange.

Dwight—now in the lead—heard a metallic scuttling sound that was getting louder. He correctly interpreted it as the approach of a maintenance bot. This one scrambled along on six flexible legs and was about the size of a clenched fist.

Ordinarily, the little servitor would have scooted past Molly and Dwight without taking special notice of them. Dwight was surprised when it skittered to a stop, and a voice issued from the miniature loudspeaker embedded in its side.

"Molly Franklin?"

"Yes?"

"I regret to inform you that your mother has died. Go home immediately. Please follow this maintenance unit. It will guide you to the nearest exit."

* * *

9.

Bridget Franklin had been a likeable woman with an aura of congeniality that was contagious. She never seemed to do or say anything that was remarkable, but she set other people at their ease, and they opened to her like flowers to the sunshine.

Her funeral had been well attended.

Aboard the *Aesop*, rubbish was fed to the ever-ravenous engines and used for fuel. Disposal of the bodies of the dead was handled the same way. This did not seem disrespectful or irreverent to the Aesopians. They lived by a code of mutual effort—everyone striving to achieve the same objective and contributing what they could to the joint venture. To die by the same code was only fitting. Could their vacated husks benefit their fellow Aesopians? Good. So be it.

Bridget had subscribed to no religion. In the absence of a pastor, minister, or the like, Alfred Russell officiated at the ceremony. Central casting could have found no one better suited for the role. With his untidy shag of white hair, Russell looked like an Old Testament patriarch, he was a polished orator, and he'd had plenty of practice at delivering eulogies. He observed the standard obsequies, inserting remarks tailored to Bridget often enough to avoid sounding like he was reading from a script. Much of what he said would have been familiar to Earth-dwellers, but not all. Fifteen generations of Aesopians had introduced a few refinements of their own. The phrase asserting that the atoms of the deceased were being returned to the cosmos was an Aesopian innovation. After many years of repetition, it had become a standard aspect of Aesopian funerary rites.

Shared grief should have brought Molly and Waldo Franklin together, but a temporary truce was the best they could do, and even that was none too good. They stood side-by-side for the duration of the ceremony, but that was only dissimulation for the sake of show, and no one was fooled by it. The tension between them was palpable. The silence between them was eloquent. As soon as the other mourners had dispersed, Waldo turned to Molly and said: "I'll be moving into bachelor quarters later today. I've packed your stuff. Come and fetch it. Better be quick

about it. The new tenants will be taking possession soon.”

He consigned her to hell with a contemptuous wave of his hand and turned his back on her, not going anywhere in particular, not much caring where he went as long as it was away from her.

He knew.

That was the thought uppermost in Molly’s mind as she stared at his receding backside. Waldo Franklin had known how ill his wife was, and he’d withheld that information from Molly. *The bastard. I’d have liked to ask for her blessing. Couldn’t he have let me do that?*

He’d told her to collect her belongings right away, and—for once—she took his advice. From the funeral she went directly . . .

. . . home?

No.

Not really.

She had never felt at home in these lodgings, had spent relatively little time here in recent years. It hadn’t been her dwelling so much as her return address, and being evicted from it did not give her a sense of dislocation.

The rooms weren’t empty—the cabin had come fully furnished and it still was—but with all of Bridget’s pictures and decorations missing, the apartment had acquired an air of anonymity. It was functional—even attractive—but impersonal. The placard announcing that this was the FRANKLIN RESIDENCE had been removed from the slot on the door. The nameless nameplate was the equivalent of a sign saying, “Space Available.” That, evidently, was Bridget’s epitaph.

Everything Molly owned had been squeezed into five standard-issue storage crates. She summoned a fetch-and-carry. The sturdy little bot had been specifically designed to haul freight, was not inconvenienced by the cumbersome load. Molly made sure the stacked boxes were properly balanced. That done, the bot was good to go.

But where?

Molly didn’t have a cabin of her own—not yet. For the time being, she was staying in a snugery: an enclosed sleeping shell not unlike the overnight berths on terrestrial trains.

She activated her comtote and pecked at the keyboard, ringing Dwight’s number. He answered immediately.

“Dwight? It’s me.”

“So it is. That, of course, would be equally true no matter who was calling.” A pause. “What’s up?”

“I’m homeless. My father’s booted me out.”

“On the day of the funeral? Nice guy.”

“He, too, is moving.”

“He’s not being compelled to do so. He’s a bereaved spouse. The Elders would have extended his lease. All he had to do was ask. He’d have been given time to make other arrangements.”

“Probably, but as it is, *I’m* the one who needs to make other arrangements. Can I stow my gear with you until I get settled?”

“Sure. No problem.”

“Okay. Thanks. I’m on my way.”

When she’d accessed her comtote’s vucall function, a blinking icon had materialized, informing her that a message was being held for her in the hopper. She downloaded it, was caught off-guard when her mother’s image coalesced on the screen.

“Hello, Molly. I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.”

She blew Molly a kiss.

“Goodbye, my dear.”

A sigh.

“Minerva will shelve this recording until I’m gone. If it has been forwarded to you . . .

“ . . . let me guess. You and your father are at each other’s throats. The two of you are barely speaking, and only then to trade insults. Without me to referee, the friction between you will have only gotten worse.

“Am I right?”

“My unannounced departure is, I suspect, one of the bones of contention between you.

“Let me make this absolutely clear. I learned that my condition was terminal about six months ago. The decision to keep it from you was mine—not your father’s. Don’t blame him. I saw no point in burdening you with bad news that you could do nothing about. There was, in addition, our domestic discord to be considered. If you had tried to be more attentive to me, you and your father would have been constantly rubbing shoulders. Fire and tinder. Not a good mixture.

“I’ve tried to be a conciliator between you two, and I won’t have another opportunity. That being so . . .” She was making calming motions with her hands. “You mustn’t think that your father deserted you. He vowed that he wouldn’t appear before the Council of Elders on your behalf, and he didn’t. But those words were spoken in anger. He regretted them, and he didn’t object to me being there. On the contrary. He urged me to go.

“I guess what I’m saying is: don’t be too hard on him. The two of you will never be reconciled, but Waldo Franklin isn’t the total son-of-a-bitch that you think he is. Let your feud die with me.

“I love my husband, but that doesn’t mean I’m blind to his shortcomings. He is an unimaginative man who follows orders, obeys the rules, and does as he’s told. It would never occur to him to ask if those orders make sense or if allowances must be made for exceptions to the rules. He’s not a bad man, and he’s certainly not a fool, but he doesn’t have a rebellious streak, and if the pack is running, you can be sure that he’s running with it.

“Is it any wonder that he doesn’t get along with you?”

She crooked a finger, pointing to herself.

“But I always have, haven’t I?”

“Ever asked yourself why?”

“Believe it or not, I’m a kindred spirit.

“When I was your age, I, too, was a noncom. I was considered difficult, unruly, insubordinate. I was a prime candidate for Coventry. That’s what I deserved, and that’s what I would have gotten if I hadn’t met your father.

“But I did.

“We became husband and wife.

“And that changed everything.

“Marriage is a custom with a long and venerable history. It has served a wide variety of purposes, but no matter what else it might be, matrimony has always been a form of social regulation. The newlyweds are complying with tradition. They aren’t deviating from the norm. You can rely on them. They won’t be snacking on forbidden fruit.

“When I became Waldo’s wife, the Elders ceased to regard me as a troublemaker. The maverick had been tamed. Or so they supposed.

“They weren’t wrong. For the sake of my marriage, I restrained my more defiant impulses. But the fires were merely banked. They hadn’t been extinguished altogether. I was very much in sympathy with my fire-eating daughter.

“Why didn’t I give you more encouragement?”

“Because . . .

“Raising your middle finger to society at large is an impulse I understand, but I don’t recommend it as a way of life.

“I’m not telling you to stop sailing against the wind.

“I *am* telling you to stop sailing in circles.

“Choose a destination, set sail for it, and don’t stray from it.

“A goal.

“A purpose.

“All of your hassles will be in vain if you don’t have a purpose.

“Choose well, my dear.

“Farewell.”

Molly hadn’t wept at Bridget’s funeral, but now she watched Bridget’s image fade from the

screen through a blur of tears.

* * *

10.

“The timekeeping instruments must have been calibrated that way.”

Gretchen Hargrave delivered this non sequitur with the air of a sibyl on leave from the Delphic Oracle.

Alfred Russell awaited additional profundities, but none were forthcoming. His brows were puckered in perplexity. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said . . .”

“I know what you said. I *don't* know what you meant by it.”

“Another ten months. You were telling me that you consulted Minerva, and the estimate she gave you was another ten months.”

“So?”

“So I've been thinking. Months. Days. Years. We're no longer associated with the Earth—we haven't been for a long time—but we're still using units of time that are measurements of Earthly cycles. I asked myself why. And then I realized that our chronometers were calibrated by Earthmen. The same would be true of routine maintenance schedules—the engines to be tested every so often, the filters replaced, the ducts cleaned . . . that kind of thing. Even after all these years, we're still operating on Greenwich Mean Time.”

“That'll change when we reach our destination.”

“Will it? I'm not so sure. Ingrained habits are deeply rooted.” She blinked like a ruminating tortoise. “Our home-to-be . . . Refresh my memory. How long a day does New Canaan have?”

“The Promised Land? Twenty-eight hours and nineteen minutes.”

Hargrave was doing comparative arithmetic on the back of her closed eyelids. “Could be worse,” she concluded. “Even so, that's going to require some mental adjustments.”

“Mental *and* physiological. Our biorhythms will be out of sync, and we'll need to get accustomed to a world where teenagers are codgers, not kids.”

Hargrave brushed his concerns aside with a backward wave of her hand. “Human beings are adaptable.”

“Some are. Some aren't.”

“We have a few of the former.”

“And plenty of the latter—including us. In another ten months, we'll be obsolete.”

“Yes. Our day is almost over. A new day—of a different length—is about to dawn.” She cackled with laughter. She sounded like a parrot perched on the rim of a cracker barrel. “How does *that* feel, old timer?”

Russell's response was a cavalier shrug. “You can't become a has-been if you never were. We've made a difference, you and I. Are we no longer needed? That just proves we did a good job. The fledglings are ready to leave the nest.”

“Or—as Professor Rawlings would say—the long race is nearly over.”

“Our resident expert on has-beens. Why would Rawlings put it that way?”

“His list of notable has-beens includes Aesop: the Greek writer of fables who probably didn't.”

“He didn't?”

“Not according to Rawlings. He maintains that *Aesop's Fables* aren't really Aesop's. They were most likely written by other scribblers and attributed to Aesop.”

“Reverse plagiarism?”

“Kind of.”

“And the long race?”

“The tale of the tortoise and the hare. Have you ever wondered why this ship was named for Aesop? The moral of that story is: slow and steady wins the race.”

* * *

11.

“. . . and so,” Dwight was saying, “I kept pawing at the puzzle. If he'd come right out and *told* me, I'm not sure I've have heeded him. But no—he put it in the form of a query. *What kind of*

a person asks questions like that one? He dangled the bait in the water and left the rest up to me. Was I smart enough to solve the riddle? Was I curious enough to try? It became an annoying little fret—an itch at the back of my mind that I just *had* to scratch.”

“Clever,” Molly admitted. “A kick in the backside wouldn’t have worked with you, but a carrot on a stick . . . *that* got results.” She arched an interrogatory eyebrow. “And . . . ?”

“I knew that a study of ancient history would reveal the answer. Or at least it could. He’d specifically said so.”

Molly’s expression was dubious. “Ancient history. That covers a lot of territory.”

“Yes. It does. But you can narrow the focus. You can concentrate on what Rawlings himself has to say about it.”

Molly nodded. “You asked Minerva.”

“That’s right. And Minerva found a recording of a lecture Rawlings gave about ten years ago. He was addressing the Council of Elders—Rawlings himself, not a robot proxy.” Dwight activated his comtote. “Here. Take a look.”

The screen powered itself aglow, steadied, and an image of Rawlings became visible.

“Modern society,” he stated, “is a tapestry woven from the dual strands of our classical heritage.”

He upended his palms—a gesture not unlike that of a merchant displaying his wares. “Greece,” he said. “And Rome.”

He raised his right hand. “Our debt to the aesthetic and philosophical genius of the ancient Greeks is enormous.”

He lowered his right hand and lofted his left. “So is our debt to the pragmatic, administrative genius of the ancient Romans.”

His hands met and married, building a bridge over nothing. “If we’re obligated to the Greeks for our art, our literature, our principles of reasoning, and—ultimately—our science, the influence of Rome’s political and legal codes, Roman engineering, Roman values, and the Latin language can hardly be exaggerated.”

His cupped hands became a pair of scales on which he weighed their comparative merits. “How much inspiration we draw from one or the other will be determined by our personal preferences and the priorities of the times in which we live. When we devote ourselves to pursuit of the truth, when we seek to solve the mysteries of the Universe—of both nature and of human nature—we are following the trail blazed by the Greek pioneers of thought.”

He spread his fingers, as if releasing a captive bird. “And that always leads to a questioning of established traditions and conventions, a challenge to the dictates of authority, and a search for enlightenment that will inevitably disrupt the status quo.”

He made a fist. “When we prefer the more secure guidance of an entrenched orthodoxy, when we prioritize the molding of character over the cultivation of intellect, when the independence of the individual is subordinated to the demands of the community or state . . .”

He held his hand up to his ear. “Listen! Do you hear? Those are the echoes of ancient Rome.”

Dwight silenced the playback with the touch of a button. “What kind of a person asks questions like that one?” he reiterated. “A Greek, of course. Or—more exactly—a person with a temperament in tune with the ancient Greeks. Someone like you. Someone like me.”

“Noncoms.”

“Yes. We live in a society with a structure that’s very Roman. Very regimented. How could it be otherwise? As big as the *Aesop* is, it’s not big enough to let everyone do as they damn please. The Elders keep a tight grip on the reins. Rules, regulations, codes of behavior—this ship’s got more thou-shalt-nots than one of Brian’s stimsims.”

“But not everyone marches to the same drumbeat.”

“No. And those who don’t are banished to Coventry.”

Molly’s expression was thoughtful. “It was foreseen from the very outset. That bulkhead—the one that stopped us . . . it’s been there all along. Coventry existed ever since the keel was laid.” She gave him a glance of inquiry. “More than ever, I want to see what’s on the other side of that barrier. How about you?”

The *Aesop* was an enormous cylinder with an interior consisting of six concentric rings.

The innermost of the six housed the Incube, the hydroponic farms, and the cryo vaults where frozen zygotes of various Terrestrial creatures—bees, dogs, cats, birds, horses, etc.—awaited resurrection.

The third, fourth, and fifth levels were habitat rings.

The outermost circle was used mostly for storage of supplies, replacement parts, and equipment that would be needed to establish a colony after planetfall was made. The Aesopians weren't forbidden to go there, but they seldom did. This close to the hull, the risk of exposure to radiation was much greater than it was in the depths of the ship.

"There!" Molly might have been a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. "There it is."

"You almost sound surprised."

"I almost am. I remembered catching a glimpse of it, but I've only been up here once before. I wasn't sure I could find it again."

Dwight gave her a nod of understanding. Not only was the cargo hold enormous, but it was stacked floor-to-ceiling with crates that obstructed Molly's view and made it difficult for her to get her bearings. Like every warehouse, it had a door permitting machinery and materials to be moved in and out. In this instance, the door was an airlock.

Molly and Dwight knew what it was but had never actually used one. The same could have been said of the fourteen generations of Aesopians who had preceded them. No Aesopian had ever gone outside the *Aesop*.

Until now.

"I won't let myself be bested by a bulkhead," Molly had declared. "If I can't get past it, I'll do an end run around it. What do you bet there's another airlock—probably more than one—aft of this one?"

"And if there isn't?"

"Then I'll go for a little stroll on the hull, turn around, and come back. No harm done. But if there is . . ."

"Coventry. You might get access to Coventry from above."

Adjacent to the airlock was a closet containing space suits. Molly and Dwight soon discovered that getting into a space suit was a more involved process than donning ordinary clothes. There was a right way to go about it, every other way was wrong, and they would have been stymied if Dwight hadn't found a user's manual providing step-by-step instructions. They followed the exact sequence prescribed by the manufacturer and were soon dressed for hard vacuum, gaskets tight, helmets clamped, and safety catches dogged, with cool air flowing from the oxygen bottles on their backs.

Molly tried to take a step and damn near fell flat on her face.

Here—where the centrifugal force created by the ship's spin was roughly equivalent to one-g—she had to get accustomed to walking while suited-up. If she'd been wearing galoshes, shin guards, a toga, oven mitts, and an overturned pail on her head, she'd have felt no clumsier than this.

The gear with which they were wrestling had been sitting idle for almost three centuries. Molly and Dwight simply assumed that it was still in working order. That it might not be never even occurred to them. The maintenance bots were superbly efficient. Equipment failures just didn't happen aboard the *Aesop*.

Directions for operating the airlock were spray-painted on the surface of the door itself. They stepped inside, sealed the inner hatch, pressed the red button, and the outer hatch slid aside into a sandwiched recess.

Their magnetic boots were cumbersome. Moving with the disjointed strides of a marionette, Molly lurched forward toward the yawning portal . . .

. . . and stopped.

Beyond the opening was nothing but a void—an endless night sequined with stars, emptier

than vain hopes, false promises, or delusions of grandeur. Looking at it through the thick quartz of a viewport had never bothered Molly, but standing here, poised on the brink of infinity with no enclosing walls between her and the darkness . . . *that* was terrifying. Chill fingers strummed her nerves. Her stomach contracted like a knotted fist. She gulped panic, seized by a dread so powerful that she would have run away if she'd had anywhere to run. As it was, she took a stagger-step back and whispered: "I can't, Dwight. No way I'm going out there. Shut the door. Please! Shut the damn door!"

* * *

13.

"Agoraphobia." Gretchen Hargrave pronounced the word as if it were a magic incantation. "Fear of open spaces. It's the opposite of claustrophobia. Molly Franklin and Dwight Cameron both suffer from it. So do we. So do all of our shipmates. We've conducted exhaustive tests. None of us are immune." She indicated the *Aesop* with an all-inclusive sweep of her arm. "We've spent our entire lives inside an enclosure."

"A womb with a view."

"An atrocious pun, Alfred, but yes—that's the general idea. Even the largest compartments aboard the *Aesop* have walls that are clearly visible at all times. Being out under an open sky is an experience none of us have ever had. A space-walk is an ordeal none of us could endure. Molly Franklin is an exception to so many rules that we take her idiosyncrasies for granted, but *this* is an exception to *that* rule. When it comes to this brand of angst, Molly Franklin couldn't be more typical. We've raised multiple generations of children who can't go out and play."

The other members of the Council of Elders were wearing glum expressions. Miriam Clarkson asked: "How long do we have?"

"The last time I inquired, the answer I got was ten months. That was . . . what? Two months ago?"

Alfred Russell responded with a bob of his head. "Just about."

"Eight months," Clarkson mused. "We'll arrive in eight months with a shipload of colonists who won't be able to disembark."

Philip Wilkens grunted a laugh—a dour, bitter sound that couldn't have been mistaken for an expression of amusement. "We're a bunch of wayfarers whose journey will never end. Or—when it does—it won't matter. Fifteen generations of us—and *this* is what we've accomplished? It's all been an elaborate exercise in futility."

Gunther Rawlings cleared his throat with an unpleasant rasp. "Let's keep things in their proper perspective," he said. "I'm not so sure we've failed, but even if we have, we mustn't flatter our failure by letting ourselves be deterred by it. The Founders weren't so easily daunted. The men and women who originally launched the *Aesop* were sponsoring a multi-million-dollar project that would yield no results for three centuries. Did that stop them? We can learn from their example, and we can start by rejecting the notion that we have a deadline. We'll get to our destination in eight months. So what? We always supposed that we'd establish a settlement on the surface of the planet right away. But we don't *have* to. We can remain in orbit as long as we please."

Clarkson squinched her eyes shut, concentrating. "That's right. The *Aesop* is self-sufficient. It's not as if we had a compelling reason to make planetfall ASAP. The ship isn't going to fall out of the sky."

Alfred Russell twinkled at her. "This vessel was built for the long haul," he said. "Very little needs to happen aboard the *Aesop* ASAP."

"Except, perhaps, the passage of a law imposing the death penalty on chronic punsters." Hargrave looked as if she had just scented an especially repugnant odor.

She saluted Rawlings with a perky forefinger, giving his remarks her seal of approval. "All right. As you say, we're in no hurry. We have plenty of time to solve this problem."

"We do," Rawlings agreed, "but we won't. At least, I don't think we will. Innovative thinking is required. We aren't good at that. If we compare the *Aesop* to a wooden sailing vessel—a carrack or galleon from the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries—I'd be a helmsman. Give me a

predetermined course, and I'll make sure we don't stray from it. I am skillful. I am reliable. But I'm *not* a navigator. If circumstances arise that require a change of course, I don't know how to take sightings with a sextant, I haven't mastered the math needed to make the computations, and I'm certainly not qualified to steer the ship into unknown waters. For a voyage of discovery, you need a skipper who can improvise when the unexpected occurs." He gave them all a look of appraisal. If he was impressed by what he saw, he made a heroic effort to keep his admiration in check. "No one on the Council of Elders matches that description. Fortunately some of our shipmates do."

"The Coventeers," said Hargrave.

"Yes. Exactly. The Coventeers. At long last, they have a chance to earn their keep."

* * *

14.

Coventry.

The aft-end of C deck and the aft-end of D deck were more or less identical, and both of them matched the aft-end of E deck. Coventry didn't *look* any different. And yet it was. What set it apart wasn't so much a matter of appearance as of attitude. Or ambience. Or atmosphere—the air they were breathing but the air of freedom conferred by a conspicuous lack of regimentation.

Attire, for example.

Aesopians didn't dress in uniforms, but they adopted a uniformity of dress that branded them as members of the same community. Most of them wore standard-issue jumpsuits—garments that were simple, comfortable, practical, and recyclable. Personal adornments—jewelry, scarves, smocks, shawls, caps, and the like—were on display, but the clothing they accessorized was too functional to be fashionable.

By way of contrast . . .

The Coventeers were as gorgeously and vividly clad as a flock of parrots. Those wearing jumpsuits chose bright, variegated colors that gave them the look of harlequins. Gaudy bandanas were wrapped around their skulls like ornamental fevers. Many of the women had flouncing skirts dangling from their hips that behaved with the restlessness of half-domesticated whirlwinds. Others were garbed in diaphanous silks that clung to them like amorous ghosts. A few exhibitionists were showing cleavage of approximately the same dimensions as the Valles Marineris.

The Coventeers were ostentatious in their finery. They were not the slaves of fashion, and they were making emphatic fashion statements to prove it.

Allowances had to be made for newcomers to Coventry. Accustoming themselves to such a bass-ackward lifestyle usually took a while. Molly and Dwight didn't feel like fish out of water—not exactly. They were more like salt-water fish getting used to swimming in fresh water.

Being sent to Coventry was not a punishment but a privilege?

This had been explained to them, and Dwight seemed willing to accept it, but Molly was less receptive. A hardcore noncom, Molly shrank from joining any group—even a tribe of other noncoms.

She and Dwight had been taken into custody right away. They didn't even have time to shed their space suits before the peacekeeper bots descended on them. Molly was vastly annoyed with herself.

"I should have known!" she gritted. "I should have seen it coming! When Mom died, they sent a maintenance bot to fetch me. They knew *exactly* where I was. Did I learn from that? No! I'm an idiot. I thought I could go for a spacewalk without their knowledge. They'd just demonstrated that they have every square centimeter of this ship under constant surveillance, and I *still* tried to pull a sneak on them."

"Don't be so hard on yourself." Dwight clucked his tongue sympathetically. "We're fallible human beings. Most of our lives are spent making the discoveries that should have been obvious all along." He indicated the *Aesop* and everything in it with an expansive gesture. "Is the whole shebang lousy with eye-spies and electronic snitches? Sure. Of course it is. It has to be. A blown

gasket or a circuit failure could trigger a major catastrophe. Minerva must be keeping watch on every nook and cranny. She dispatches maintenance bots to cope with routine malfunctions, but when two lunkheads breach an airlock, she sounds an alarm." A pause. "When I stop to consider, I'm glad she's so vigilant. How many micrometeoroids punch holes in the hull every year?"

"Not as many as you'd suppose. Out here—in interstellar space—there's a whole lot of nothing, and not much else. Interplanetary space—that's a different story. Solar systems are rich in rubble."

Dwight quirked an eyebrow. Molly gave him the response he'd expected. "I got curious about it when I was a kid. I asked Minerva."

"That means the danger will be greater in the vicinity of Tau Ceti."

"Yes, but the odds of a collision are still remote. I wouldn't worry about it if I were you."

Molly and Dwight had been given credit for the revelation that the Aesopians were all agoraphobic. Treatment options were being explored. The possibility of administering antidepressants had been discussed and rejected. Drugs like benzodiazepines could be used to suppress panic attacks, but they were addictive, couldn't be taken for more than a few weeks without risk of dependence, and they had unfortunate side effects.

The conclusion reached by the Coventeers was summarized by Alfred Russell when he said: "Colonists who are doped out of their skulls? If we went along with a half-baked idea like that, our goose would be cooked."

Russell's play-on-words—as usual—rubbed Gretchen Hargrave the wrong way, but she didn't complain. If Alfred could squeeze a little amusement out of this predicament, let him. Such a minor concession would do her no harm.

He said: "How are our two newest Coventeers getting along?"

"They're going through a period of adjustment."

"Yes. Of course they are."

"Dwight's fitting in all right, but Dwight *would*, wouldn't he? That's what he did before he became a Coventeer. He's . . ." A headshake. She edited herself, revising what she'd been about to say. ". . . not the invisible man. More like the inconspicuous man. He's always been adept at hiding in plain sight. No one notices him."

"And Molly?"

"The girl's a human porcupine. There's no right way to approach her."

"Dwight found a way."

"Yes. And I'd like to know how. They both have an old-fashioned fondness for books. What else do they have in common?"

"Coventry. They're Coventeers. *Both* of them." Russell shook hands with himself and then relaxed his grip, separating his fingers. "I thought you wanted to keep them apart."

Hargrave pled guilty to inconsistency with a shrug of her shoulders. "I changed my mind. If not for them, our aversion to open skies wouldn't have been discovered until we'd made planetfall. They didn't mean to do us a favor, but they did, and I figured we owed them a favor in return."

"Just how good is a good deed if the do-gooder doesn't know he's doing good?"

Hargrave fluttered an eyelash at him. "Are we indebted to them for a service they performed unintentionally? Is that what you're asking?"

"They were a couple of mischievous scamps. They shook the apple tree and we got a windfall. It was an accident."

So it was, but the single-minded determination with which Molly attacked the Problem was not. She could almost hear her mother's voice whispering: "A goal. A purpose. Choose well, my dear."

Molly had made her choice as soon as the Problem had been explicitly stated. That had occurred about three weeks after the airlock incident. The Council of Elders convened an emergency meeting that was attended by all of the Coventeers. (A gathering of perhaps two hundred? Fewer than Molly would have guessed.) Alfred Russell gave them a thorough briefing. "Needless to say," he said, "colonists who can't leave the ship won't be doing any colonizing." If no

solution was found, the voyage of the *Aesop* would end in a fizzle. Or as Dwight, quoting T.S. Eliot, put it: “not with a bang but a whimper.”

Molly hadn’t been suddenly transformed into a team player. Most of the Coventeers were hardcore individualists, but they realized that—under these extraordinary circumstances—collaboration was advisable, and they seemed resigned to it. Group-think sessions were being held twice daily. Molly was present at them, but she didn’t participate. She remained reserved, removed, stand-offish—a listener on the sidelines.

It seemed to Molly that their deliberations were . . . well, deliberate. Plodding. Dull. They were discussing the Problem and ways of dealing with it, but they did so with no sense of urgency.

They concurred with Gunther Rawlings: an immediate response was not required. If the current generation of Aesopians didn’t have what it took, the next generation could be trained to do it. No matter how they went about it, the assistance of robots would be essential. That being so, why not let robots establish the beachhead on New Canaan? Robots could clear the land, construct the buildings, dig the wells, chase away the carnivores, install the solar power facilities . . . and so on and so forth. Once the settlement was a going concern, newborns could be taken to the surface of the planet and raised by caretaker bots. Life in the open wouldn’t bother them because they’d be acquainted with no other way of life.

All of this made sense. Molly couldn’t deny it.

But she didn’t have to like it.

“Know what I think?”

“No,” said Dwight, who didn’t. “But I suspect I’m about to be told.”

The most recent confab had just adjourned. Nothing definite had been decided.

“I think I need to talk to the Council of Elders. Maybe not all of them. Russell or Hargrave would do.”

“You’re serious?”

“I am.”

Dwight reached for his comtote. “I’ll see if I can make an appointment.”

“Don’t bother.”

“But . . .”

“I’ve learned from my mistakes.” Raising her voice, Molly shouted: “Tell Alfred Russell to meet me at the entrance to Coventry. I’m going to use it as an exit. If he’s there, I’ll explain why. If he’s not, I’ll leave without his permission.”

* * *

15.

Molly’s assumption that Minerva’s scrutiny hadn’t relaxed was correct. Alfred Russell was waiting for her when she and Dwight arrived. Gretchen Hargrave was with him, and they were soon joined by Gunther Rawlings.

If Russell was disturbed by Molly’s recalcitrance, he gave no sign of it. His face was expressionless—as neutral as a blank sheet of paper. “Well?” he said. “Here I am. What’s all this about?”

Molly had been mentally rehearsing what she meant to say, but Rawlings’ presence prompted her to go about it in a different way. Nodding to Rawlings, she stated: “Your not-so-ancient Greeks . . . They’re not-so-damn-smart, Professor.”

Rawlings’ gaze swiveled to Dwight. “You figured it out, did you? Good. Good for you.” Turning back to Molly, he said: “But you’re wrong. Look.” He pointed to Dwight. “See for yourself. Dwight proves you wrong. He solved my riddle. Dwight’s plenty smart. So are you. So are all of the Coventeers.”

Molly made a sour-taste mouth. “Not smart enough. If you’re waiting for them to cure us, you’re in for a long wait. They don’t really want to find a cure. They’re procrastinators, one and all. You, Professor Rawlings, are partly to blame for that.” She spread her hands, palms outward, like a prelate dispensing absolution. “But only partly. They’d have realized that they needn’t act right away even if you hadn’t told them so. They don’t *want* to deal with this emergency.”

“But it’s *not* an emergency. There’s no rush.”

“No. They can take their time. They can, and they will. They’re stalling. Delaying. Dragging

their heels. If they can postpone planetfall, they won't have to face their fears. The next generation of Aesopians will be the trailblazers. Not them. Not us."

"Nothing corrupts like complacency." Hargrave's face was wrinkled with worry. "We've created a privileged class, haven't we? The Coventeers are elitists. They're the best and the brightest, they take pride in that, they're accustomed to preferential treatment, they like it, and they don't want to exchange it for the hardscrabble life of a pioneer."

"And who can blame them?" Dwight asked. The question was addressed to no one in particular. He did not expect a reply.

But Molly had one. "Me," she declared. "I blame them. They're depriving me of my birthright. If these cowards want to make Coventry a refuge where they can hide from their own demons, so be it. That's fine with me. But I won't let myself be locked up in the same cage. Fourteen generations of Aesopians preceded us. They were dedicated to an objective that they knew they themselves could never attain. But we can! The prize is within reach, and I'm going to grasp it."

"How?" Russell made a gesture of helplessness. "I approve of your resolve . . ."

"Some would call it 'stubbornness,'" Molly grated.

"Yes, but calling things by their right names is usually considered impolite."

"I've broken more than my share of rules," Molly retorted. "I won't be bothered if you break one or two rules of etiquette."

"All right. You're stubborn. No doubt about *that*. But you're trying to cross this bridge before you've come to it." He smiled at Hargrave, acknowledging that her assessment of Molly's character had been accurate. "A stubborn streak won't help you do that."

"It will if what I need to do is build a bridge. If I make preparations to do that, I'll get across the river."

Hargrave couldn't suppress a chuckle. "What do you have in mind?"

"Psychological intervention. On Earth, systematic desensitization has been an effective treatment for agoraphobia."

"Yes—but the Coventeers rejected that idea. It involves exposing the patients to open spaces that get gradually bigger over periods of weeks. That isn't feasible for us. The *Aesop* has relatively few open spaces, and those that do exist can't be enlarged."

"Really? Want to bet?"

* * *

16.

The weather had gloomed badly. Churning clouds smoldered overhead, rain was falling with tropical vigor, bright dazzles of lightning strobed the landscape, and sustained concussions of thunder were shaking them like dice in a cup.

It was a real blitzkrieg of a storm.

Their footfalls made sucking sounds in the squelchy mud. Every step forward was a struggle. The rain stammered on their hat-brims and smoked from their shoulders. They had to take great care to keep their powder dry. A flintlock contaminated by moisture was almost sure to misfire.

The Hurons were on the warpath again and had most likely been incited by Simon Girty and his band of renegades. When news of the uprising reached Fort Henry, five bordermen had been dispatched to warn settlers whose farmsteads were located more than a mile away.

He had alerted the Donahues, the Griffons, and the MacKenzies, and was now guiding Dinah, Caleb, and Judith by roundabout paths to . . . the "safety" of the fort? No. That was unrealistically optimistic. At best, the fort was a place of refuge, but if they were besieged inside it, none of them would be safe.

What was that? He thought he'd detected movement in the trees ahead. Holding Old Sureshot so that only the barrel of the rifle would get wet, he took deliberate aim and . . .

. . . the bushes parted, a colorfully dressed young woman emerged from them, pointed a .45 caliber forefinger at him, and said: "Bang! You're dead."

Brian Purcell was too astonished to be angry. "You! What are you doing here? You were banished to Coventry."

"Aren't you pleased to see me?" The question was rhetorical. He obviously wasn't.

“No one returns from Coventry!”

“And yet here I am. It’s against the rules, of course . . .”

“Since when did that bother you? And you’ve ruined another of my stimsims. Damn you!”

“I’m sure you’ll forgive me.”

“Not likely.”

Molly gave him a dolphin smile. “I’m betting that you will. I’m betting that you’ll even thank me for it.”

“Go away and leave me alone. I’ll thank you for *that*.”

“If you owe me thanks, it’ll be for giving you a challenge worthy of your talent.” She upended her hand and let the rain fill her palm. “Here we are—in the middle of a rainstorm. The sleigh-ride took place in a blizzard. One of the other stimsims I bollixed for you was set in a cave.” She looked up at the sagging underbellies of the clouds. “The sky is never visible in any of your scenarios. Why is that?”

“Who knows?” he sputtered. “Who cares?”

“I do. And you should. Let me explain why.” Molly succinctly summarized the Problem, did her best to convince him that it was his problem too. “You heard my testimony before the Council of Elders. I told them that you’re a virtualoso without compare. I assured them that you’re capable of creating masterpieces.” She made a be-my-guest gesture. “Here’s your chance. Are you as good as you think you are? Prove it. Build a bridge for us, Brian. If you do, you’ll get your wish. Build me a bridge and I’ll cross it. I’ll go away and leave you alone.”

* * *

17.

A single year on New Canaan lasted six Terran years.

Gretchen Hargrave had been correct. The residents of New Canaan had never adjusted to a year that long. The units by which they reckoned the passage of time had little in common with the orbit of their adopted planet.

A six-“year”-old on New Canaan and a six-year-old on Earth were more or less the same age.

When the diamond jubilee of the initial landing on New Canaan was celebrated, Molly Franklin—an old woman but still very much alive—was asked to be the guest of honor.

The advance preparations had been extravagant.

The festivities were going to be lavish.

Fifty years earlier—when the silver jubilee had been observed—an honorary title had been conferred on her. From then on, Molly—the first Aesopian to go from ship to shore—could call herself “First Citizen.” Gunther Rawlings had been wryly amused and had started calling her “princeps.” She didn’t understand why, was not enlightened when she queried Minerva. She thought he’d been addressing her as “princess.” Minerva had no explanation for that.

Molly had never learned to like Brian Purcell, but she readily acknowledged that he had confronted the Problem with cleverness and cunning.

Brian had plundered old movies for images of blue skies, windswept prairies, snowcapped mountains, and the like. He used them as backgrounds for interactive stimsims. The participants were cowboys caught in a stampede or passengers on a runaway train or skiers fleeing from an avalanche. Threatened by dangers that had the immediacy of a migraine and the urgency of a fire alarm, they paid scant attention to the scenery. Were they anxious? Fearful? Yes. Of course they were. Their lives were at risk—or so it seemed—and they were getting a vicarious thrill out of it. Meanwhile, Brian was exposing them to the great outdoors for longer and longer intervals. They were, of course, being deceived by an illusion, but they knew that. What else could they expect of a stimsim?

Brian’s “fright fests” became enormously popular. After six months of this, most of the Aesopians had become sufficiently habituated to exchange virtual reality for the real thing.

They *could*.

But would they?

Not all of them were willing. Many were reluctant to trade their shipboard lifestyle for a precarious existence on an untamed world.

And yet . . .

The *Aesop's* task was done. It wasn't going anywhere. For all practical purposes, the ship had become an extension of the colony. It was a supply depot. It was a source of robotic labor. For the foreseeable future, the population of New Canaan would be Incube-begotten, and Minerva would be the repository of knowledge (or at least of information), but the *Aesop* had been demoted to a subsidiary rank, and the same was true of those who chose to remain aboard. They could be comfortable. They could not be useful.

That rubbed most Aesopians the wrong way. They belonged to a tradition of dedication to the common weal, each of them seeking to attain the same ultimate goal. And now? If they shrank from taking this last step, they were parasites, pure and simple. They couldn't kid themselves that they were making a genuine contribution.

The prospect of a life without purpose was intolerable to Waldo Franklin. His soul was Roman to the core. He felt like a boat without a rudder. Waldo was on the third shuttle bound for New Canaan. He astonished Molly by marching up to her, hugging her, and saying: "Your mother would be proud of you." He looked at all the scurry and bustle taking place around him and brisked his hands together. "So what needs doing?" he asked. "Put me to work."

All but a few of the Coventeers eventually joined the colony. They were both constructive and disruptive, cooperative and contumacious. They helped, and they hindered, probably solved as many difficulties as they caused, and they were, in short, the creative contrarians that mavericks always were.

Now that Molly herself was a figure of authority, she didn't disapprove of dissenters, but she had to admit that they could be vexing at times.

The dignitaries were gathering. The ceremony was about to begin. At Molly's request, it had been scheduled to take place on the steps of the Dwight Cameron Memorial Library.

Her old comrade hadn't lived long enough to attend in person, but here—on the portico of the library he had built—his presence could be sensed. Or so she imagined.

The library was a small structure, more symbolic than substantial. Visitors to it could select from more than fifty million titles, but the archive consisted of electronic projections that could be read on the screens of comtotes, not actual volumes. The entrance to it was flanked by two display cases. One of them contained a computerized replica of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. A well-thumbed copy of *The Poems of Robert Frost* reposed in the other.

After many years of listening to Dwight recite passages from Eliot, Molly had acquired a genuine appreciation for Eliot's poetry, but she still preferred Frost's more readily accessible verses.

The mayor rose to his feet and made a few preliminary remarks. Molly wasn't really paying attention. She was whispering to herself:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

J.T. Sharrah had a perfectly ordinary childhood. When his evil younger brother usurped the throne, he escaped from the palace through an underground tunnel and made his way to the harbor where he stowed away aboard a pirate ship bound for . . . What's that? You suspect he's strayed from the truth? Okay. Guilty as charged, but what did you expect? He writes fiction. He's a professional liar.

The truth? He was born and raised in Denver, Colorado. He became a voracious reader when he discovered science fiction and fantasy novels. He attended the University of Colorado. He subsequently taught at CU: Greek and Roman history. He began taking Taekwondo lessons during my junior year in college, became the assistant instructor of CU Taekwondo, and eventually served for three years as the head instructor. He also worked in the hotel industry—as a bookkeeper and front desk manager. He retired in the year 2000 to devote himself to his first love: writing science fiction.