

53 Mendingwall Circle

Madison, CT 06443

January 23, 1989

Dear Ms. Norton:

Enclosed please find my story, A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING, for the sign of Virgo in "The Touchstone Stars." I never knew how many Virgos were in my neighborhood until I started doing the research for this. I live with one, but one isn't the whole sign. Still, strange to say, all the Virgos I spoke with said that yes, they really were just like the books say they are.

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you enjoy the story.

Best,



Esther M. Friesner

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8000 words

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A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

"She's gone," said Niri. "Long gone." The last of the breakfast dishes waited in a neat row on the counter for her meticulous attentions. The dishes had been there first. Her husband would have to wait his turn. First things first, after all. Always.

Camblin snorted once, briefly. "Gone where? Not where she ought to be, I'll wager. You ought to keep better track of your daughter, Niri. It does not speak well of you, such a lax attitude. It lacks corners."

Large eyes the color of rosy starbreath regarded Camblin mildly. "Nor of you, such imprecise terminology. That lacks edges." She saw him wince under the insult. Well, he had started it. Fair was fair. "She is our daughter. As you should know. You pouched her yourself."

"I know what I did!" The words came out too hotly. Camblin had the good taste to flush with shame as soon as he uttered them. He made the customary sign against excess, but his wife's attention was back on the dishes. "Your pardon, fareeli. It is my youth."

Niri continued to scrub the dishes with fine black sand.

She refrained from any outward show of surprise at his sudden shift to formality. Since Bancom had died, Camblin was her only husband, with no need to employ the deferential title due a polyandrous she.

"It is not your youth, dear one," she replied, never slacking in the steady, rhythmic, sweeping circles her hands traced inside each blue clay bowl. "You are under such strain. Today is the day. The ship waits, and the stars have always waited. I do not wonder that you are nervous."

Camblin's spine stiffened. "I am never nervous."

Niri spared a moment from the pots and bowls to offer him the sign of self-error recognized. A pinch of black sand clung to her hand and scattered across the floor.

A cry of badly stifled anguish wrenched itself from Camblin's throat. Brush and dustpan flew to recoup the fallen grains. When his hunter's eye had tracked down and swept up the last one, it was as if a great coil of steel inside him relaxed. Then he began to cry.

Niri made very sure that the pots were all put away in orderly rows and the black sand stowed to the last grain in its proper bin before offering her husband the comforts of philosophy. She also found him a neatly folded, impeccably creased handkerchief and dabbed up his tears with small, precise motions.

"There, my dear. Pindra is a good girl, only a little young. And she does know the woods. I do not really think

she will be eaten."

"But the mess if she is, Niri!" Camblin moaned. "The terrible, terrible mess!"

"To say nothing of the paperwork," his wife murmured.

#

"You go alone," Omega said.

Still in the form she had assumed for their previous visit, Alpha was able to raise one quizzing eyebrow at him before saying, "This is sudden. You are well?"

"What? 'Well'?" Understanding came. "Oh! Oh, yes, thank you, I am quite whole."

His somewhat guilty stance was most intriguing. Alpha did not care for mysteries, which was why she was impatient of answers that did not present themselves on demand. In the intervening time between the Sowing and the Seeing, Omega had periodically accused her of attempting to steal a clandestine visit to the Wheel of Stars just to spy out how their experiment was progressing. She was smugly satisfied to know that these were all unfounded accusations. If he could wait for the agreed-upon interval to pass, so could she. Even so, the wait galled.

Unfounded or not, she was wise enough to know that an accusation was just so much dust kicked up to hide the fact that the prosecutor oftentimes charged the defendant with a fault already bright in his own mind. Frequently his impatience to know had been a nigh tangible third party

sharing space with them on shipboard. She was not the only one eager to have curiosity satisfied.

No, she was not the only one.

"You've been here before," she said, trying to couch her words so that there was no tinge of indictment tainting them. She only wanted a plain answer.

Or so she told herself.

His form was already tending back to the original, yet enough of its previous shape still clung for him to manage a shrug of the shoulders and a slump of confession.

"An error," he said. "You remember when I was called back by the Recorders and had to catch up with you again? I mistook our agreed goal-world and went to this one instead." Almost too quickly he added, "It was an honest mistake. So you see, there's no need for me to make a second visit. I've already seen it all. And since I was in my true being, no one saw me--nothing will interfere with your obtaining a pure view of how things fare down there. We can compare observations when you return, rather than run the double risk of our being detected by the natives."

"What risk?"

"Oh, none to ourselves, not in the least!" He was still too quick for her entire trust to touch him. "But we might cause a panic among them. One visitor can be called a delusion; two, an invasion."

Form and all its harmonies would not let her tell him

that she had never found glibness acceptable. He had never been this nice before about the natives' sensibilities, nor could she believe that there was any greater chance of detection and panic on this world than on those previously visited. He and she had their system: they copied the appearance of the creatures they wished to observe up close, using a method so perfect it might almost be called body snatching. Her nostrils were fading, but she re-formed them long enough to physically translate the idea that his excuses were neither fresh nor pleasant.

He bridled. She could sense his indignation on every level. She could also sense that she was right and he did not like it. If he did accompany her to the soft world of golds and blues and greens now lazily turning below them, he would be less than no help. He might even--what was the term she had so newly learned?--sulk.

How odd. Resentment was no part of her deepest memories, yet here it was, wearing skin. Where had it sprung from?

When we leave each world, we shed the skin and don the fire, she reflected, retreating to that part of Thought where even he could not come. Rightly the fire should burn away all traces of the skin, leaving us as we were in the beginning. But something is wrong. No, not wrong. All is as it should be, nothing offends or trespasses against our chosen life-code, but something is. . .different with us

since we began this experiment. Strange. The skin outlives its passage through the fire. It is gone, yet it clings.

She had a vision, then. Her consciousness flooded with the image of a female holding her young one close. She could not tell which of the Wheel worlds had birthed them, but she sensed it did not matter. The little creature clung to its mother, almost parasitic in its determination not to be dislodged. The female showed nothing but pleasure at this grim unwillingness to separate, this declaration of dependence. Time passed, the vision's own peculiar time that had no bearing on temporal reality. When at last the little one relinquished its grip and tottered some few steps away, the after-image of its past attachment formed a warm aura that wreathed the now-lone female with the comforting phantoms of memory. Alpha saw her smile and wondered at it. Only a ghost of the inseparable love that had been, and yet it lingered; it was enough.

It is gone, the skin and all its burdens, yet it clings as that child clung. In memory alone? In more? She could not know.

Alpha tried to sharpen the image, to demand that it specify which world mother and child had come from, to leap unbidden into her thoughts. Detail eluded her. The image was a glow and a blur, mocking even her powers. Like the departed infant, it too clung.

Here is something I must understand, she thought. She

glanced back with all her senses towards the material world below. A part of the answer waits there. I will go--as I must--even if he will not. The skin that passes through the fire, yet still clings. . .that is a mystery.

Alpha turned all her powers of perception towards the shadowed world-pearl in its starry cradle and chose a female at random. It was the work of moments for her form to duplicate the chosen one's shape. Alpha now wore a form that was an exact replica of that female's. It would hold her being until she returned to the ship and burned it away. If it had any imperfections, she would be subject to them for as long as she sojourned on the world below. A flaw large enough might affect the concentration she would need when it came time to focus her energies on departure, return to the ship. Therefore her questing energies made certain vital inquiries into the condition of the chosen one. All seemed satisfactory. It would be a healthy prison.

Straight duplication of a living native's body was a more reliable means of disguise than using the Records for reference and creating a shell based on the appearance of the beings Alpha and Omega had first Sown. The years since the Sowing had molded small differences into the physical types of the creatures the Ylembri had set down on the worlds of the Wheel. These minor variations did not affect what truly mattered, their unity of being under the birth-Sign of their world. Alpha then chose a site for her appearance that was

far removed from her double's homeland. The awkwardness of a chance meeting between original and duplicate thus pared to the barest minimum, she took her leave of Omega.

She felt his approval wrap itself around her new-made limbs, his affectionate concern forming a thin shell to shield the insufficiencies of her chosen body from the hard physical realities of the capsule's environment.

"This visit is unnecessary, you know," he said, sounding somewhat ashamed of his earlier cowardice. "We could rely on my observations alone."

"It is most necessary," she replied. The lilt of her audible voice came, as always, as a delicious surprise. "Your words have piqued me. The world below was Sown with those of the Maiden's sign. From our studies, we both know that they were born to be well organized, willing workers, much given to precision of thought. Perhaps that is why you do not wish to return. I was always fonder of the practicalities than you. You must admit it."

Omega was by this entirely disincorporate, but even as Alpha used her energies to blow the silvery bubble of transport around herself, her mind's eyes winked over the vision of a physically present Omega hanging his head.

What could he have seen down there? she wondered, and so wondering, danced her bubble down.

#

Vestiges of pain shot through her head the moment she

stepped from the bubble into the forest. It was a part of the perfection of disguise that when the duplicate form first came into contact with the world that spawned it, some residual memories sprang up inside the borrowed skull. All was information Alpha needed to know if her masquerade were to succeed. Looking like the natives would never be enough, on its own. She and Omega both realized that there were centuries of culture, tradition, and the day-to-day mundanities that must likewise be assumed along with the outer shell if they meant to pass unnoticed.

Thus it was the work of a moment for Alpha to learn that on this world, the formalities were highly prized; that ceremonies were as pretty and multiplex as the petals of a flower; that they were as precious to the native soul as if that selfsame flower were made of gold; that what not done to the ultimate degree of possible perfection was worthless; that a slovenly thought or a lax idea--it lacks corners, it has no edge!--were as unthinkable as a male giving birth or a female pouching the newborn young.

The flooding-in of this knowledge hurt. Alpha was not surprised. This had happened before, at least on those worlds where the Sown creatures had evolved a culture of any great complexity. Usually the pain was momentary, easily handled, and gone.

Something was wrong. This pain did not go away.

Alpha's hands stole up unbidden to touch her throbbing

temples. She could feel the blood pounding even through the several layers of sharply starched headgear proper to highborn females. A surge of agony made her fingers clench, wrinkling the angled folds beside her eyes. A second pain answered from deep inside her body. She knew it was her womb that burned so badly.

A flawed choosing! her mind cried out. A body whose original is sick, perhaps dying. But how could such a mistake have hap--? Another searing wave struck her to the roots of her soul. You must flee this form at once! Return to the vessel quickly, select another. The fault is coincidental, easily repaired, but you must hurry!

She gathered herself for the summoning, set her mind on calling all her set-by energies home again. She must blow a second transport bubble around herself, return to the ship, sear away this imperfect shell. . .

The pain clapped its own steely bubble over her eyes and she crumpled into darkness.

#

"Can you hear me, fareeli? Are you all right?"

Alpha moaned and tried to flee the light. It hurt her eyes just as the strange voice hurt her ears with its relentless drubbing. She turned her head aside and felt a starched crease sharp against her cheek.

"Fareeli, take a little of this. Try."

Something cold and sweet was forced between her lips. A

thin, viscous liquid dribbled from the corners of her mouth. Without willing it, Alpha drank. The spicy scent held captive in the small metal cup shot straight up her nose and speared aside the last of the darkness in her brain. She took another greedy swallow and coughed.

"Be at ease, fareeli. You will be well." The voice was sharp and sweet as the drink Alpha had just tasted, but the face leaning over her was not cold at all. It was young and a little frightened, and not very pretty, and--

Some part of Alpha's borrowed sensibilities winced. What wildness is this? The child is. . .dirty! And her hair, hanging loose, unkempt, tangled with leaves. Alpha realized that she was being cradled in the lap of this untidy creature. An involuntary shudder ran through her body.

The girl noted it and looked away, ashamed. By age, she was not a child, yet the tenderness of extreme youth hung about her like a garment. Very softly she said, "Your pardon, fareeli. I have been--long from home." She turned back to Alpha and gave her some more to drink. "If it is done to ask, and you?"

Alpha lowered her lids, shutting out the sight of those compassionate eyes and the blue-green forest canopy haloing the girl's face. The pain in her head was gone, but the ghost of the other pain still haunted her body.

"No need to speak so formally, child," she said wearily. "I do not merit the honored title you lend me." She opened

her eyes halfway and took the silver-gray cup from the girl's hands, draining it dry. She felt better, maybe well enough to call back her energies and tear herself free of this world. A renewed attempt in that direction would have to wait, however. She could not simply vanish from her rescuer's arms.

The girl spoke the high, formal tongue of her folk haltingly, as if there were thoughts and feelings inside her that yearned to leap out of her mouth, free. She held them in check badly, reluctantly, and the result was that she stammered. "If--if the honor of fareeli is not--not owing you, Mother, and if it is done--done to ask, then by--by what shall I call you?"

An apt name out of borrowed memory came easily to Alpha's lips. "I am cusan Hanir." The honorific identified her as an unpaired, unmated she. She gave no details of where she had come from or where she was going. She still felt too exhausted to drum up such details, and in any case, the strict code of these people did not recognize that the young had any right to make inquiries of their elders.

The reverse was not so. "And you, child? Who are you? Where is your home?" Alpha/Hanir tried to sit up, but fire creased her belly. Ludicrous as she felt, she had to remain reclining in the girl's arms like an overgrown infant.

The girl plucked a wrinkle out of Alpha/Hanir's mangled headgear. "I am Pindra." She gave herself no titles, though

she looked old enough to claim one. "I live with my parents in Stars. If--if the cusan Hanir would not take it as--as an impertinence, we have many good physicians in Stars. One could--could look to your pain. A male could also be found--"

"A male? Whatever for?"

Pindra's huge eyes grew even wider. For an instant, Alpha/Hanir thought the girl was going to push her out of her lap and bolt, like a startled wild thing. Alpha/Hanir saw a dozen meticulously worded replies twitch over Pindra's lips, then die unsaid until at last a clear, unquestionable exclamation tore itself loose and the girl blurted:

"Because you're pregnant!"

#

Fareeli Niri and her mate Camblin sat stiffly upright on two black stone stools. They wore the short white kilts of summer, stainless, expertly pleated and pinned at the shoulder with the triangular badge of Niri's house. They rested their hands in their laps, palm precisely covering knee, and did not speak. There was no need for further words at the moment. Their guest sat opposite them on a folding canvas sling while their daughter knelt on a blue quilted pad, slightly behind Niri. Alpha/Hanir thought she had never seen anyone look more miserable than Pindra. That was strange; the girl was not the one in so much trouble.

Still, for a household that had been so recently

assaulted with an improvidently pregnant guest, no one seemed visibly undone. On the contrary, there was something skin-chilling about Niri and Camblin's initial reaction and present silence. They had simply provided some pain-killers, then told cusan Hanir how things would be, and the matter was settled.

"You have no mate to pouch your young," Niri stated. "There are at present no unbespoke males in Stars. I admit the shame of my house: You can not use Camblin."

"I would not think of it, fareeli," Alpha/Hanir murmured.

Niri and Camblin both pursed their lips so exactly to the same degree that Alpha/Hanir almost laughed. Her borrowed knowledge clicked on just in time to prevent such an apparently illogical outburst.

"Not have thought of it? Then you have my pity, cusan," Niri continued. "I have heard that analytical lapses are the first symptom of garca fever. Surely you admit to the practicality of Camblin pouching your young?"

Alpha/Hanir bowed her head over her own folded hands. "Of course. Your pardon. An idea excellent in its pragmatism."

"Just so." Niri was pacified. Her expression softened. "However, impossible. We have been accorded permission to conceive a second heir, and the time set for his birth would conflict with any guest gestation. Our regrets go out to

you."

"Do you have garca fever?" Camblin inquired. To his wife's sudden, hard stare he replied, "That might explain how cusan Hanir came to carry this young with no mate."

"Certainly it does. There is no 'might' about it, Camblin: It is the sole explanation which keeps all nonvariables as they should be." Niri offered Alpha/Hanir a smile so exact that the visitor could almost feel the degrees of warmth being parcelled out into that expression. "After you die, we will assume all expenses for your funeral. Since you are ripe for pouching, and the pre-pouching gestation is one hundred fourteen days, and since the time from first onset of garca fever symptoms is--" She frowned. "Do you recall any irrational incidents before this mateless conception, cusan?"

Alpha/Hanir was dry and emphatic when she said: "No."

"Fine. From onset of symptoms to death is one hundred eighteen days. . ." Niri made some mental calculations. "Just in time for your next wages to be paid, Camblin. We can give her quite a nice funeral after all, and we shall only have to give up meat at three meals next week to cover the assigned costs."

"What would you like on your mortuary scroll, cusan?" Camblin inquired with the kindest grace in the world.

Through the pain in her womb that had become an unbanishable, feral ache, Alpha/Hanir at last understood that

there could be such a thing as too much practicality.

Before she could say anything, she saw Pindra's hands fly up to cover her face. A harsh sob burst from the girl's throat as she stumbled to her feet. The quilted kneeling pad slid across the floor as she bolted from the spare, square, unrelievedly white room.

Shamefaced, Camblin stooped to pick up the kneeling pad and folded it into geometrically accurate quarters.

Despite her pain, Alpha/Hanir too rose. "Your pardon," she gasped, making the shallowest of bows to her discomfited hosts before lurching after Pindra.

"Irregular," Niri sniffed.

"My dear, the child has always been. . .different."

"Different?" Niri's tone made it quite clear that this was neither virtue nor excuse. "Do you imply that my prenatal hormone adjustments were incorrect?"

"Never! Fareeli, when did I so much as imply--? But you must admit in the name of accuracy that it is so."

Niri grudgingly agreed. There was no room for denial.

"Still," Camblin went on, "there is fundamental good in her, a reliable base upon which we may build. You yourself have said that once we have her mated--"

"That must wait a month. The funeral expenses for our guest. Sortar's family will see the reason and accept it. And Pindra will make no disturbance about waiting."

Camblin looked dangerously thoughtful. "No; that she

never will." To his wife's face he asked: "Do you too think that Pindra wants none of the mating assigned her, or is it just my own thought?"

Niri gave a short laugh. "You, have a thought like that? With no honor to facts? I should hope not! Not unless you have contracted garca fever too. Of course she does not want this mating. Pindra spends half her time declaring what she does not want and the other half not knowing what she does want."

Camblin looked toward the doorway through which his daughter and the strange guest had fled. His eyes threatened further tears. "What she wants and does not want will not matter. Will it, Niri?"

Something decidedly warm, inaptly soft in his tone made Niri stare closely at her mate. All she said was: "They will be waiting at the base, Camblin. You must go, now. I will send Pindra along in plenty of time."

"I know." With an audible sigh, he pushed himself up from the formal host-seat and left the house. As soon as he was gone, Niri removed the celcomp from her sash and accessed the mating banks. With as few commands as needful, she requested a supplemental mate--straight acquisition, loan, or temporary exchange for Camblin--to pouch the new heir she was permitted to conceive.

"It certainly wasn't any of my hormones that made Pindra. . .different," she muttered. "Which leaves the

pouch. We'll not run that risk a second time." Dearly fond as she was of her surviving mate, affection must forever remain subordinate to a mother's duty: Creating the next generation of perfect workers.

#

Alpha/Hanir found Pindra in the garden. The girl's family lived in one of a row of clean, angular, attached villas. Despite the fact that there were minor architectural differences setting each house apart from its neighbor, Alpha/Hanir could not help feeling that these touches--a fountain in one forecourt, an abstract sculpture of a bird in the next--all served practical rather than artistic purposes. In case of a power loss, there would be no trouble for the inhabitants to find their own proper places in the dark.

The gardens too were different but the same. Low walls of glass brick set the boundaries, yet all could have been units of a homogenous whole. The grass underfoot was sheared to a uniform velvet, the topiary hedges were clipped into tidy geometric forms. Pindra crouched under a tree that grew in the exact center of the garden, its limbs meticulously lopped and trained into the umbrella shape most utile for keeping off the sun and rain. A quick glance to left and right confirmed that every other garden in sight boasted an identical tree.

Alpha/Hanir stood above the weeping girl. In the midst of so much polish and precision, Pindra was an ugly snarl of

disorder: A refreshing disorder, Alpha/Hanir thought. She knelt heavily beside the girl.

"Why are you crying?" She addressed her in the low tongue, the simple, informal speech reserved for addressing preschool infants. Etiquette would demand that Pindra reply in kind, and perhaps the freedom of this "inferior" tongue would let her give Alpha/Hanir some useful answers. The pain was getting worse, in spite of the medication she had received. She would need her answers soon.

"I'm sorry." The girl's voice was misery itself. There was a smudge of earth beside her nose, and the handkerchief she used on her eyes was a horror. "I only--I wish there was something I could do to save you, cusan!"

Alpha/Hanir managed a dry chuckle. "I too. But I doubt we shall have our desires." She patted Pindra's hand. "No more cusan, little one. To you I am Hanir."

"Oh, I couldn't--I mean, it would be improper--"

Alpha/Hanir's lip twisted with a wry smile. "You are a fine one to talk to me of proprieties. Or is it the done thing among the folk of Stars to send their daughters alone into the wildwood?"

Pindra hung her head.

"I owe my life to your disobedience, child," Alpha/Hanir said softly, lifting Pindra's chin so that the girl had to meet her eyes. "Now tell me, by the life-debt you hold of me, why were you in the woods alone? A lover?"

Pindra's cheeks crimsoned under their layer of grime. She fumbled inside the breast of what had once been a clean tunic and drew out a slim wooden wand. Seven holes and a mouthpiece had been carved into it, obviously by hand.

"I go into the woods to play this," Pindra said.

Alpha/Hanir smiled. "And is that such a shame?"

"Oh, but you don't know the things I play, cu--Hanir!"

The girl seemed almost eager to confess her wrongdoings. "Not set pieces, not fugues or rondos or--Only what comes into my head, tunes without fixed form, unfinished melodies. The trill of a bird. The song of water and wind. The sea--Well, I have never seen the sea, but in my mind I make its song."

Alpha/Hanir pushed the flute gently towards Pindra's lips. "I know the sea," she said. "Play me that song of yours, and I will tell you if you are correct."

Pindra raised the flute to her lips and played a few notes. For a few moments, the caressing notes freed Alpha from her entrapping body. She was herself again, able to ride the winds, to kiss the seas of this world. Illusion healed her of every pain. High above, shining like a white bird, she sensed Omega's waiting presence and soared to meet him, to tell him that now she understood why he was so reluctant to return to this stiff world of so many enforced perfections--

The music ended, the spell broke. Pindra was sitting up straighter, the flute in her lap. "I apologize. It was

silly of me to make you listen to my foolish pipings."

"On the contrary, Pindra; you are no player, but a thief. Your song has stolen the sound of the sea."

Pindra stared at her flute. "You must have garca fever, poor Hanir. Else why would you ever think I could be correct in copying a sound I have never heard? It is only a--a defect of mine. I have many."

"Do you? Then let my fever name them: imagination; fancy; dreams. You are an artist, little Pindra."

"You know nothing of what I am."

"I think it is you who does not know, or who wishes to deny it. Play for me again. It soothes the pain."

No. I'm late." She stood up swiftly and helped Alpha/Hanir to her feet. "Today of all days, my family needs me to pass for whole, and I--again I fail them. Father and Sortar will be waiting, and the other astrophysicists I work with. I must go." She started from the garden, but a wayward thought held her back. She turned to where Alpha/Hanir still stood bewildered under the shade tree.

"Will you--will you come with me? The launch will be in the center of Stars. Perhaps we have overlooked some male who can help you. You can lean on me."

Alpha/Hanir walked slowly over the grass, feeling the growing child within her twist her vitals. With a gasp she replied, "I think I had better." As they left the garden she added, "An astrophysicist, you say?"

#

"No," Sortar said firmly, folding his arms. "The very idea is improper. Haven't your thoughts a single edge left them, Pindra? To speak to me of fatherhood now? We have not even passed the sixth rite."

"Nor ever will," Pindra responded fiercely. "Not unless you give over your selfish behavior and help Hanir."

She and her promised mate stood facing in other in the small, completely utilitarian room of the Directory, Cosmological Exploration Division, that was their assigned office. Alpha/Hanir stood between them, feeling rather like a fraying rope being pulled in opposite directions. Wonders mounted on wonders in her mind as she heard Pindra speak. Not only was this seemingly meek child suddenly possessed by inspiration, she actually was one of this land's most expert astrophysicists.

She had been so since before birth.

Truly these people believe in order, Alpha thought. A place for every being, a role assigned each life that is determined by the projected needs of the community. Determined and regulated from the womb, no less, and choosing the child's sex is the least of it! Nothing is left to chance, nothing to desire. Occassionally there are sports, it would seem-- she glanced at Pindra --but by and large all lives are steered, all paths straight. How eminently practical. How terrifyingly neat.

There was nothing neat about Pindra at this moment, either in looks or emotion. "You heard me, Sortar. I will not be your mate--No, nor will I provide my half of today's final calculations!--until poor Hanir is seen to and settled."

Sortar was aghast. "Withhold your calculations? You can not mean that! Pindra, you are speaking of work."

Pindra's mouth twitched at one corner. "I will take the blame. All it will mean is that the starship pilot will lack one set of information. He's had the same training as us; he could do them himself, if he had to."

"That's not his job!"

"What of it?"

"But the starship--Your wrongheadedness will make them call off the launch!"

"That's an old story, Soltar. From the time I first peeped from Camblin's pouch, we were on the point of our first space launch. We're still there, waiting. For what? Every time we ready the ship, this or that is not exact, precise, so enough. I do not believe we shall ever touch the stars at this rate. It will be no loss to me if I don't breed up the next generation of useless astrophysicists."

"But if you don't breed--" Soltar's voice went small and frightened "--neither can I."

Pindra folded her arms. There was no need to say anything further. The facts had been stated, Soltar's choice

was clear. Alpha/Hanir regarded the girl with true admiration. At times, it would seem, this world's insistence on the purely rational was a blessing.

The boy stood trembling for seven breaths, then his whole body announced his surrender. He faced Alpha/Hanir and made a formal bow whose edges were only a little frazzled. "Cusan Hanir," he said in the high speech, "I would deem it honor if my unworthy pouch might provide. . ."

#

It was like being reborn. Alpha/Hanir threw her arms wide to embrace this world of the Maiden's sign. Now she was ready to forgive its thousand tiny nitpickings, its unremitting insistence on method, order, place. The process of embryo transfer from womb to pouch had been accomplished quickly, expertly, perfectly in the infirmary. The attending physician had asked no questions: that was not his job. Sortar would have to lie down for an hour or so, but she was free. Alpha felt Pindra's eyes on her as she whirled around the little office in a dance of exultation. The girl's stare was both fearful and knowing.

"You are not one of us," she said. "Are you?" It was a formality, not a question.

Alpha saw no cause to lie. If Pindra had been another like her parents, logic would not allow her to accept Alpha as she truly was. She would be immobilized, mentally and physically, by the revelation. But Camblin had said what

Alpha knew: Pindra was different.

It was easy to tell her as much of the truth as necessary; easy and delightful, a cleansing. A few touches here and there allowed the truth to pick up the mask local religious beliefs, much as Alpha had veiled her real form. Still, when she was done, the girl looked skeptical and--was it possible?--hostile.

"And the baby we've wished on Soltar--and on me, because now there's no help but I must mate with him now, for her sake--what of her?" Pindra spoke intensely. Alpha could not believe that this was the same meek young thing she had observed in the woods and under the parental roof. There was steel beneath the music.

"The body I assumed is just like yours. The child will be well, and entirely of your people."

"So you say. But even for the short time you housed her, did you think to regulate her developmental hormones? Every second she was inside you, your spirit influenced her. She won't be just another ordinary child; she can't. And now you will leave. You will return to the Eterne, and of course there will be questions. My parents will note your disappearance, Sortar's baby, ask, and I will repeat what you told me."

"Must you?" Even as she said it, Alpha knew the foolishness of the question. Of course Pindra would tell the truth. Honor was one virtue that these most irritatingly

scrupulous folk were strictest in maintaining. She could not cavil with that, but it could prove so. . . inconvenient.

Listen to you! she told herself. If Omega could steal into your thoughts now, he would be shocked! A wicked thoughtling sparkled in the corner of her eye. Let him.

Aloud she said, "We both know each other for what we really are, Pindra. You are both scientist and artist--and from what I have seen of other worlds, I do not think it is evil for those two callings to share one soul. Without your dreams, the most exact of calculations turns to a row of flat, sparkless characters. Without your imagination, you ~~can hold a world's destruction~~ in the palm of your hand and feel nothing but the idle wish to try if it works."

"What has this to do with the child?" Pindra demanded. "Born of a star-being, one of the Undying, her every day will be a misery of watching eyes! And you will be far away, without giving a thought to the life you sowed so randomly. I won't let you to do that to my baby. And I won't lie."

Alpha gently touched the fold in Pindra's tunic where the handcarved flute rested. "You never saw the sea either, child, yet what you played of it was no lie. You are an artist with more than music. There are ways. . .for her sake."

Pindra blinked as if surprised by a strong light. "Yes. Why, yes, I could. . ." She gazed at Alpha steadily. "On one condition."

"Name it."

"Show me yourself as you are."

Alpha's eyes widened. Very quietly she said, "Do you know what you are asking, child?"

"I know." Pindra's face was set stubbornly. "I know that you're afraid I might perish if I saw one of the Undying in their true form. Or if I didn't die, I would be left insane. The ancient records are full of such warnings when they speak of Eterne. Well, I'm not afraid; not of 'records' that may be nothing more than tales, legends."

Her voice rose, tensed with passion. She paced the small chamber as if she were impatient to shatter the walls, turning edges and angles to dust. "I'm tired of warnings, too. Warnings are all I've heard from the day I could understand: my parents warning me how to behave, my teachers warning me not to dishonor my parents, my friends warning me that I'd shame my chosen mate, never have another, never be fareeli like my mother if I didn't learn to do things the way they must be done. This place, Stars, it's full of warnings! Each one is a vine, clinging to the starship, tying it down. If this is not right then that might happen, if that result is not known to the fiftieth place than those might not function. Might not. But by the same token they just might! Can't we try?"

"You care so much?" Alpha asked. "The starlaunch is important to you?"

"Of course!" Pindra snapped. "It's all I've worked for since I was old enough to be a worker."

"But your music. . ."

"Will you limit me to one love, too? Science and song, why can't they both be me and mine? And other loves as well?"

I was born knowing that all things have their place in this world, but the heart. . .Not one of my people yet has been able to name its limits. One heart, one place, but how many things it can hold. A place for everything."

Alpha watched Pindra fold her arms and take just the same unyielding stance she had assumed with Sortar. "You are a starbeing, and if my folk continue as they have, I may never live to reach the stars. Give them to me. Give them as only you can. Let me see what one of the Undying looks like, and then the song I'll make--the starsong my heart hungers for--" Her eyes were aglow. "That isn't too much to ask after all I've given you."

The language Pindra used was blunt, rude, and so far from the degree of ceremony worthy of a starbeing that Niri would have died from shame had she heard her daughter now. Still pent in the copied body, subject to all its cultural sensibilities, Alpha felt the impact of Pindra's speech like a blow. For an instant she was tempted to comply, to burn away the skin then and there and see whether the girl was really as strong as she imagined herself to be.

But if she is not. . . Alpha closed her eyes, and a

Thought was sent out of the world, seeking its completion.

From far away it came, and it was Omega's: . . .then she will be lost. And this world needs her. There are more ways than one to prove our strengths, and the best gifts are often those we take away. Teach her that truth, Alpha. His presence was gone.

"What you have given me?" Her hand flashed out and slapped Pindra on both cheeks. "Nothing that I could not have taken easily, at any time I chose! Do you dare to dictate terms to the Undying? You, who still creep cowardly in the dust of this little world?" She seized Pindra's arm and dragged her from the little office, out into the corridor where a window was necessary. It framed the distant launch site, the glittering spire of the waiting starship. Alpha almost threw the girl against the shining glass.

"There are your stars!" she shouted. "That is as much of them as I shall give you. Take them, if your heart hungers so for their song! Follow me, if you can do more than whimper for your desires! Try, if you are worthy of the dream!"

Before Pindra could push herself away from the pane, Alpha wheeled and ran down the corridor. She burst from the building into bright sunlight. She raced past an officious looking passerby whose communicator squawked something about atmospheric conditions not being optimum according to the latest calculations. She did not pause to learn whether the

launch would be postponed yet again, but ducked into the nearest unoccupied shelter and focussed all Thought on return.

#

"Oh, there you are," said Omega.

She sensed his energies envelop her fading body, seeking to absorb all she had experienced. Abruptly she repulsed him.

"Why did you do that?"

She didn't know. He withdrew from her a little, respecting even those wishes of hers he did not yet understand.

"Tell me when you wish to compare impressions," he said. "For my part I was. . .not at ease among them. I felt as if no matter what I did, it would never be good enough. What an elusive, mutable entity they serve: Perfection. They have made much progress since the Sowing, in its service, but I wonder if they have sacrificed too much. . ."

Her borrowed form was drifting away from her like smoke. The inner fire burned away the outer skin and seeming, yet a hollowness and an aching lingered long after the heart of flesh was ashes.

"Still, perhaps we returned too soon," Omega was saying. "After I observed them, I was so certain that their every move and decision could be predicted--and then this."

"What?" she asked quickly.

"This stolen starship. I would never have imagined such a spontaneous act springing up among them in ten thousand lifetimes. Look, turn your thoughts back to the Maiden's world and you can see it. The strangest thing. . .They were all set to call off the launch when somehow, someone with the knowledge crept into the ship, tricked the flight controllers and the original pilot, and took off in the thing! They are all quite undone about it on the ground, but now that it is up, they are bending all their skills to bringing it safely back. They will succeed; they could not do otherwise. Ah. There it is. You see?"

Alpha saw. She was fully free of the body now, restored to her proper being, and there were no bounds to her senses. The starship was a glint of silver gliding across the face of the globe. Hesitantly, Omega touched his reflections to hers. She allowed him a controlled degree of sharing. Together they watched the starship's silent flight, but only Alpha thought to slip inside and hear, high and sweet, poignant and infinitely dear, the flute-like notes of a young woman's voice: the starsong.

"Forgive me for what had to be, Pindra," Alpha whispered in Thought for herself alone. "You are worthy of the stars." She watched the ship until it was hidden by the curve of the world. "Farewell, my child."

If all the Sown worlds had hung in the balance, she could not have said which child she truly meant. She turned

from the Maiden's world, and her ghosts followed after.

END

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