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## Layover

By

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First there was a voice. There was always a voice, gentle and persistent. *Peter*. It fluttered like a moth against my ear, my cheek. *Peter*. *Can you hear me? It's Norice. Peter, wake up.*

My thrice-spoken name unlocked my dream, and I opened my eyes. The chamber lighting was subdued, softening the details of the cryocapsule so that it looked less like a coffin than usual. I shivered in the cold air and rejoiced at the thought of seeing another day. The Grim Reaper had put aside his scythe and gone for coffee. For a brief time, I would be allowed to breathe and walk and talk again as if I were a normal, healthy person.

With stiff fingers, I triggered the cryocapsule's lid. Sensing this movement, Norice, my Caretaker station's resident AI, raised the room's light panels to a warm 400nm, a welcome facsimile of sunrise on Earth, some 37 light years' distant. I stretched and found my clothes in the locker where I had left them.... "How long?" I asked, my voice rough and creaky.

"You've been asleep for 18 years, Peter," said Norice. Her synthetic voice was warm and familiar. She was my best, and only friend. I had outlived—or at least outlasted—all my organic acquaintances.

"Longer than usual," I said, pouring myself water. It tasted of lemons and bitter medicines, a not-so-subtle reminder of my illness.

Norice didn't reply. After so many years together, she had learned that I preferred not to engage in conversation when coming out of sleep, cold or otherwise. Neither of my ex-wives had really understood that.

I made my way upstairs to make a fire.

When they had showed me the template for my Caretaker station, I had been impressed at its efficient design: a compact, self-contained world carved from an asteroid and cast into orbit around some distant star. Humanity had built hundreds of such oases, since travel between Earth and its colonies in those days was protracted and sometimes perilous. When trouble arose, the great slow colony ships that followed the solar winds could find safe harbor at one of these Caretaker stations, which were equipped with food, repair 'bots, and healing machines. But the stations also struck me as sterile and impersonal. If I were to live in one, I would need something more. So I added a fireplace, built with layers of heavy stones fitted together with laser edge perfection.

The engineers had insisted on special filters to remove the carcinogens. Normally, I would have balked about the added expense, but considering the cost of the asteroid, it wasn't even noticeable.

Besides, I was *dying*. I wouldn't need the money much longer.

The logs sat where I had left them a generation ago. I split them and encouraged a cheery fire to chase away the last chill of my sleep. Every time I woke from coldsleep, it took a little longer to wake up, to come back to myself, so this ritual was especially important.

Finally awake, I went to the kitchen and rummaged through the pantry for a small meal. The "pantry" was actually an entropy reduction box, a birthday present from Norice, who'd acquired it from a trading ship during my third stretch of coldsleep. The pantry prevented certain

types of decay, but only worked with non-living matter. That meant Norice still had to grow my milk and cheese from nano templates.

Norice chimed in while I was brewing tea. “There is a ship approaching, Peter,” she said. “It will arrive in an hour or less.”

“What is their condition?” I asked, buttering some toast.

“They have not signaled an emergency,” Norice answered. “The ship’s crew manifest lists three passengers, two men and a woman, although it is a rather large vessel.”

Interesting. I mulled that over for the space of a cup, thinking over the last shipload of tourists who had joyfully invaded my little asteroid. Twenty Germans, on their way to some place in 51 Pegasus, had set their ship down on the far edge of the garden and hiked in to the station, just because they wanted to smell leaves and feel dirt under their feet. They carried great satchels of food, inflatable guitars, and some new strains of yeast. The kitchen nanos had turned that into beautiful, malty beer and sweet wines that we drank into the small hours of the night.

The tourists were loud, pushy, and demanding, and I loved every minute of it. Their layover kept me out of the coldsleep for 10 days, and transformed Norice into a nagging mother, worried that I might collapse in the middle of a venison pie and expire before they could hustle me back into my cryocapsule. (Fortunately, nothing like that has ever happened, but it’s part of her job to keep an eye on me.)

Before the tourists left, their ship’s physician, Hans Segur, had agreed to examine me and consult with Norice on my condition. Dr. Segur was a dour fellow who favored long hair braided with straps of leather, clipped together by antique pins fashioned from silver and nano-grown elk horn. “It’s a pity you don’t speak your mother tongue, Herr Klaus,” he said as he thumped my chest. “World Standard is well and good for most people, but it lacks *präzision* in

certain matters.” He passed an instrument over my eyes, nodding to myself. “You have noticed our navigator, Ava,” he said.

“Of course,” I replied. Ava was a short, plump woman with a lopsided smile who delighted in puns so bad that they seem to cause actual pain in her audience.

“We tell people she is foolish or rude,” Segur continued, “but such words are insufficient.” He opened his hands, showing emptiness, or perhaps confusion. “I think she suffers from *Witzelsucht*.” He laughed, and after Norice whispered a translation in my ear, I joined him.

“I love the idea that brain lesions cause inappropriate humor,” I said. It might explain some of my romantic relationships. Of course, it didn’t help that I had worked 60 hours a week building my fortune.

“Now to business,” Segur said. The physician placed a small cube of heavy glass on the table next to his right hand. He tapped it once with the edge of his interface ring, and the cube pulsed with a soft green light. He closed his eyes for a moment, reading data as it flowed over his virtuals. “I need your *hausintelligenz*.”

I spoke to the room, giving Segur limited access to Norice. The cube glowed brighter for a moment, shifted to cerulean, argent, and finally gold before fading to clear glass again.

The doctor opened his eyes, blinked away his virtuals, and gave me a sad smile. “*Nichts*. Our database does not contain any new treatment protocols for Joon-Perrson encephalopathy.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of his answer dragging me back to my cryocapsule.

The doctor pocketed the cube and clapped me on the shoulder. “But there is always hope for tomorrow, *ja*?”

“Yes.” Too much hope, I had learned, was a subtle poison, more dangerous than the prions that waited inside my brain. Hope might drive me mad, while the disease would merely kill me.

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I asked Norice to synchronize the Caretaker station’s clocks to the incoming ship, which informed us its crew were in their midafternoon cycle. The station’s lights and clock shifted accordingly. It was a small courtesy; it saved my visitors the trouble of adapting to my rhythms for their brief stay.

Day or night didn’t really matter to me; I could stay awake for at least a full day after a stretch in cryosleep. In fact, I preferred it. I was in no hurry to close my eyes again. As the ship made its final approach, I took a quick shower and dressed in what I considered my working clothes: a worn jumpsuit bearing the logos of one of my former companies and a pair of ship slippers. I pulled my hair into a pony tail and trimmed my beard, although it hadn’t grown at all during cryosleep.

I used to shave my head for convenience, but early exploratory surgeries had left enough scars that I found I didn’t like my reflection. Besides, how many times did I want to explain the seams on my head? Better to let the hair grow and be done with it.

My visitors brought their ship to rest gently into the docking cradle. A moment later, the three of them strode into the reception area, and right past me. The first man, shorter than me with piercing blue eyes and a hairless skull, snapped his eyes around the room as if searching for a buzzing insect. I turned to the next arrival, who appeared nearly identical, save that his eyes were brown. The last person to enter the room, a woman who might have been sister to the others, had short, spiky white hair, and eyes of jade green. All three wore gauzy shirts and short kilts that revealed young, strong bodies. Their feet were bare, with dancer’s calluses.

After perusing the room, the blue-eyed man flashed quick looks and hand signals to the others. They responded with arcane gestures, finger *mudras* that hinted at a deeper, more complex language. I could almost *feel* their conversation, like the brush of a warm breeze across the nape of my neck. Finally, the brown-eyed man stepped close to me, looked me up and down, and said, “I don’t think you can understand us. Do you require special protocols?”

“Words have always sufficed,” I said with a smile. “I’m Peter, the Caretaker. Welcome to my station.”

The blue-eyed man stepped forward. “I am the designated Pilot.” His hands flicked at the other, who moved aside. “Our ship requires repairs. See to it.” Before I could respond, the Pilot stalked off to the main living area.

“Anything else?” I asked the pair of brown eyes staring at me. “There are refreshments, and a small pool if you’d like a swim.”

“Perhaps later,” he said. “My title is Advocate. I will join the Pilot now.”

“As you wish.” I indicated the corridor. “Make yourself home, Advocate. Should you require anything, let me know, or ask the station AI. Her name is Norice.”

The Advocate nodded and turned to go, his movements both graceful and dismissive. I felt a wave of irritation, then chided myself for my reaction. I was here to assist these people, not judge them. Perhaps this passed for polite discourse where they came from.

“Caretaker?”

I had almost forgotten the other person in the room. “Yes, madam?”

She smiled in a disarming manner. “I am the journey Artist. You can call me Miri, if you prefer.” She tilted her head back and sniffed gently. “Have you been drinking tea?”

I returned her smile. “Assam, with honey. Would you like some?”

“What I would like, Caretaker Peter, is a swim. Then tea.”

“My pleasure.”

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I led her down gently sloping passageways to the grotto. It was artificial, of course, though the designers had taken their inspiration from the existing contours of one of the larger open pockets in the asteroid. The grotto’s original purpose was to store and filter the water for the station. Adding a fine webbing of gold to capture the waste heat from the fusion plant had turned the reservoir into a tropical pool. I had added my own touches as well: finely milled sand, orchids, and colorful vines that clung to the rough walls. All it lacked was birds. (Norice had many skills, but she told me early on that she wasn’t interested in being a zookeeper.)

Miri laughed when she saw the grotto. Without another word, she doffed her clothes and dove in. Her splash echoed through the chamber. I put her clothes on a bench and pulled a towel from a nearby storage cabinet. Then I raised the grotto’s lights, nano-grown blue diamonds set at regular intervals across the ceiling and walls, and watched Miri as she moved dolphin-like through the water. After five minutes of vigorous laps, she eased onto her back, closed her eyes, and slipped under the surface.

“Peter?”

I looked up at the ceiling. “Yes, Norice.”

“I have sent a remote ‘bot into their ship. The transfer valve for their reaction mass tank failed. They had to tap into emergency reserves to use their maneuvering jets. Apart from that, there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong.”

“Okay,” I said, and turned my attention to the grotto. The surface of water lay glass smooth. “Anything else?”

“Nothing so far. We can easily replace the valve and top off their tanks.”

“I’ll let them know, Norice.” I took a step closer to the water, looking for Miri, but couldn’t see anything. How long had she been under? “If they require something more, I’m sure the designated Pilot will mention it. He doesn’t appear to be shy.”

“I’d have to agree with you on that.”

Miri chose that moment to slip out of the water. She stood before me, wearing a large grin and a cloak of steam. I handed her a towel, and her clothes.

“I’ll put on water for tea,” Norice said.

The designated Pilot and Advocate were in the kitchen when we arrived. They paused in their meal and traded a flurry of hand *mudras* with Miri, who responded in kind, adding a brief nod. “How soon will our ship be repaired, Caretaker?” asked the Pilot.

“Not too long,” I said. “We can replace the valve in short order. After that, all you need is some reaction mass, and you can be on your way.”

“We could have continued on to our destination, you understand,” said the Advocate, “but we voted to interrupt our schedule here.” He glanced at Miri and raised an eyebrow a few millimeters. Again, I felt the hints of a deeper conversation.

“Would you mind giving us a copy of your logs for our archives?” I asked. “We like to keep records of everyone who stops.”

“That must be an interesting historical document,” said the Advocate. He touched thumb and pinkie together. “Done.”

Miri opened the pantry and located my stash of tea. She opened the tin, took a long inhalation, then rinsed out my teapot and spooned a generous dollop of leaves inside. “Tell me, Caretaker, how many ships have stopped here?” Then she poured water and set the tea to steeping.

“I’ve personally greeted 16 ships since the station was commissioned,” I said. The Pilot and Advocate both stared at me, their hands moving, fingers dancing as if working virtual keyboards. “We had a doubleheader once when a pair of cargo ships suffered the same glitch in their navigation and ended up here. They thought this was Harrison’s World. Boy, were they surprised.”

“That doesn’t seem like many ships, given the age of the station,” Miri said.

“Oh, I don’t know. It all depends on the route. Sometimes Norice handles the transaction without waking me.”

“How curious,” said the Advocate.

“Not really. My presence isn’t always necessary, and at my age, I need a lot of sleep.”

Miri offered up a small laugh. “You’re not that old,” she said, pouring tea into her cup.

“I’m old enough to be your great-grandfather,” I said, “if you look at the calendar.

Although my grandmother always said you’re only as old as you feel.”

“And how *do* you feel?” said the Advocate.

“Well enough, thanks,” I replied.

“Good,” said the Pilot. “I expect you to fulfill your function, then.” He stood, and the Advocate immediately pushed back his chair. They exchanged a few signs with Miri, then left the room.

“They’ve gone swimming,” Miri explained, taking one of the available chairs. “It’s been a very long trip,” she continued, “and they haven’t had much time alone.”

“Oh.” I perched myself on an empty chair. “I see.”

“The designated Pilot questioned the necessity of this stop, but we came to a consensus. His duty is to the ship,” Miri said.

“Speaking of your ship,” I said, “when you’re finished with that tea, I’d like to have a look at things onboard.”

“I would be delighted to show you.”

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Though Miri’s vessel appeared quite large on the outside, most of its space was given over to a cargo hold, machine shops, and an extensive laboratory, filled with complex, organic-looking machines. What remained for the living quarters was tiny and claustrophobic, at least by my standards. Bulkheads curved in crazy angles, and I glimpsed wild clashes of color through the open cabin doors.

We soon caught up with Norice’s remote as it dragged a bright yellow hose behind it. The repair ‘bot was small, only a meter high, with dozens of tools and manipulators folded flat across its back. One tool detached itself from the rest and tapped on the bulkhead, gently opening what appeared to be a input port. After comparing the hose to the port, the ‘bot extruded a length of rubbery fabric from its guts and used its soft manipulators to form an adapter to seal the hose. A moment later, the hose gurgled as Norice began pumping water into the ship’s tank.

As we waited, I looked around and saw dozens of translucent bubbles of some glass-like substance. Each bubble was about the size of Miri’s head, and imbedded in the bulkheads at irregular intervals. Inside the bubbles I saw schools of tiny fishes that flashed silver and red, or swarms of beetles, or jeweled spiders that spun webs in Möbius strips.

“Interesting decoration,” I said, watching something like a ferret run through a tube above our heads.

“They are all originals,” Miri said. “I have 199 registered original genomes.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Not really,” she replied. She knew people who had edited thousands of species, she said, but much of that work was derivative, or merely commercial. Miri preferred unusual commissions. “This is my main reason for this trip,” she continued. “There’s been so much modification to the human gene pool since the Diaspora, and I’ve been looking for someone closer to the twenty-first century genome standard.” She lowered her voice. “There have been rumors that some of the old Caretaker stations were still inhabited, and so I followed those rumors.”

“And your ship needed repairs in my neck of the woods,” I said.

“A fortunate chain of events,” Miri said. She gave me a long, appraising look and smiled. “So tell me, Caretaker Peter. Did your parents have any augmentations done to you as an embryo?”

That was a rather personal question, I thought, but again, it was hard to judge social mores with these people. “Such things were illegal when I was born,” I said.

“I suspect that didn’t stop people, especially those with wealth,” she said.

“It didn’t,” I admitted. In my business dealings, I had run into plenty of other children of privilege who all seemed to share suspiciously well-developed physiques and mental talents such as eidetic memory and polyglotism. “But my parents were pretty conservative; I’m your basic *homo sapiens*.”

“I thought as much,” she said and took my hand. “I’d like to get a DNA sample, if it’s all right with you.”

I shrugged. “Why not?”

When we arrived at her lab, Miri took samples of skin from inside my cheek, a tiny draw of blood, and even swabs of tears. Then she had favored me with an impish grin. “When you saw me in the grotto, Peter, did you like what you saw?”

“Very much,” I said, feeling my pulse quicken.

“Then come with me,” she said, and pulled me to her cabin.

Half an hour later, we lay covered by a soft blanket and a fine sheen of perspiration. There was a pleasant ache in the muscles of my lower back. Mira nestled in the crook of my arm, her eyes open and bright. “Lovely,” she said.

“I agree.” In subjective time, it had not been *that* long since I’d had a lover, some brief encounter with a passenger or crew of one of the visiting ships. But I couldn’t recall the last time I felt so connected and... alive. I reached out to stroke her face. As my thumb drifted down her cheeks, her eyes closed, and a thought occurred to me. “Tell me something.”

“What would you like to know?” she asked, her eyes still closed.

“I couldn’t help but notice that the designated Pilot and the Advocate are identical twins, and you could easily pass for their sister. Are you all related?”

“We’re gene siblings,” Miri said, her eyes opening. “But we’re not, as you say, related. The Advocate comes from Lödland, and I was born in the Senare islands. The Designated Pilot’s family lives in the capital, I think.”

“Seems like a pretty thin gene pool,” I commented.

“Not really,” Miri said. “There are a lot of differences under the skin.” She laughed. “Besides, all of our offspring are conceived *in vitro* to avoid any genetic disorders.” Viable embryos, she explained, were normally brought to term in standardized environments similar to my cryosleep capsule.

“Who settled your world? Aldous Huxley fans?”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“It’s a book I read back in college.” As I described the novel, my hand began to tremble. I closed my fingers into a tight fist, willing the spasm away. I finished what I was saying, wincing through a growing headache.

Miri asked, “Are you in pain, Peter?”

“It will pass.” After a moment, the headache subsided enough that it could be ignored.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Not unless you have a cure for Joon-Perrson’s floating in one of your fish tanks.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “My apologies.”

“No apology necessary.” I took a deep breath, inhaling her wonderfully exotic fragrance. “It’s just something I ask everyone who stops here. It’s the Sisyphean part of my job description.” Miri didn’t understand that reference either, so I explained it to her.

“Ah. Thank you. That will make a lovely back story to my project.” She kissed my nose. “Now! I have work to do.” She slid out from under the blanket and dressed quickly.

I found my own clothes. “Will we have time for dinner before you leave?” I asked.

“I will need a few hours to sequence your genome,” she replied. She headed back toward her lab.

I took that as agreement and made my way back to the station, pausing to check on the repair ‘bot. It had finished replacing the defective valve and was putting away its tools. “How does everything look, Norice?”

“Fine,” she said through the ‘bot’s speakers. “I have tested the tank’s integrity and all the system valves. Everything is working perfectly now.”

I gave the ‘bot an affectionate pat on the head. “The designated Pilot will be pleased to hear that,” I responded. “At least, I think he will be,” I added. “It’s hard to tell with these people.”

“They do have a complex etiquette system,” Norice said. “Although it’s clear that Miri enjoys your company.”

I felt myself blushing. “Yes, well, I like her, too.”

“Good!” Norice said. “I’m glad she’s staying for dinner.”

I watched the ‘bot coil up the hose and work its way down the corridor. We walked and rolled our way, respectively, through the docking cradle.

“Now,” Norice said, “you should really do your exercises.”

“Ouch,” I said. “Can’t I wait until they leave?”

Norice ignored my weak protest, so I went to my practice room, which was really only an empty storage chamber with a padded floor. (Once, very early on in my time as a Caretaker, Norice had decorated the chamber for a Blessed New Year festival for some visitors. I drank far too much plum wine and ended up volunteering to chase the greased Lucky Pig as it ran squealing through the chamber. The bruises and hangover delayed my return to cryosleep for an extra day.)

Norice lead me through my *qigong* breathing, then eased me through my solo *tai chi* routine. By the time I finished, I was calm and centered, but not tired, not really. My muscles felt warm and loose, and I allowed myself a moment of belief that I was truly healthy.

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After my exercises, I headed to the “wine cellar” - a heavily insulated chamber below the kitchen – and found a few bottles of red wine that I had put down 40 years before. Before I left the chamber, I trailed my fingers across the lid of a wooden box that contained a magnum of

cognac that I had brought with me from Earth. I promised myself I would open it when I found a cure for Joon-Perrson's.

The first bottle of red wine I opened had turned into a particular nasty vinegar, but the second bottle yielded a lovely bouquet. I set that bottle on the table to breathe, then paid a visit to the garden to see what had sprouted in my absence. Norice tried to mimic a regular growing season in my environment, but the remotes couldn't handle anything delicate. I found basil, lettuce, some tomatoes, and of course, a few kilos of squash. I gathered everything into a basket and asked Norice to produce up some pasta flour and a chunk of Pecorino Romano cheese. (The kitchen could have created the pasta directly, but it always lacked something, in my opinion.)

I put on an apron and set myself to work, mixing the flour for the pasta machine (which took me a few minutes to locate), then washed and prepped the vegetables, wishing for some Portobello mushrooms. We had tried to grow them, but the original spores from Earth hadn't survived the trip out here.

I had most of the cheese grated when the designated Pilot, Advocate, and Miri entered the kitchen. Vegetables sizzled in olive oil. "I was in the mood for Italian food," I said. "I made plenty for everyone."

"That won't be necessary," said the Pilot.

The Advocate exchanged gestures with the Pilot, then turned to me. "This is a traditional departure ritual, is that correct?"

"Traditional, and tasty, if I say so myself," I said.

"Then we should participate," the Pilot replied. "Tell us what to do."

"It's pretty straightforward. The pasta goes on the plate, followed by the vegetables, and then sprinkle some cheese on top."

The Pilot fixed himself a plate and sat down, and the others followed his lead.

Miri poured herself a glass of wine, and offered the bottle to the Advocate, who shook his head. She took a sip, then pursed her lips. “It’s very... unusual. Complex.”

“We normally avoid central nervous system depressants,” added the Advocate. He made a particularly complex *mudra* at the Pilot, who grinned slightly. “There are, of course, exceptions.”

“What do you think?” I asked Miri.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. She finished her glass and poured some more. “I could get used to it.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

We ate in silence for a few moments. I enjoyed the sight of Miri as she attempted to twirl her fettuccine around her fork without losing the noodles.

A bit later, Norice brewed up some coffee (without caffeine, at the designated Pilot’s request). I cleared the table and set out a small plate of biscotti. My guests took one each, but didn’t eat them right away.

I raised my cup. “Thanks for stopping by. I enjoyed it.”

Miri took a small sip. “So did I, Caretaker Peter.”

The designated Pilot stood gracefully and stretched his arms. “I will initiate the preflight.”

I stood and offered a hand to the Pilot. “Safe landfall.”

He shook my hand stiffly. “Caretaker.” He left.

“Have you told him?” said the Advocate to Miri.

“Tell me what?” I said.

“I’ve sequenced your genome and identified the cause of the Joon-Perrson encephalopathy,” Miri said.

I felt my breath catch. “What?”

“I used a standard technique from the reproduction blacklist,” she said.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Our world was settled on the principles of genetic purity,” the Advocate said. “We routinely edit the parents’ genes and suppress anything that’s on the blacklist.”

“So it isn’t a treatment, then,” I said, feeling my hopes crumble.

“Why treat something when you can prevent it?” asked Miri. “You can see the logic of that, can’t you?”

I could. But it didn’t help *me*.

“The information I gathered from your genome will allow us to stop the disease before it starts,” she continued. “No one else will ever have to suffer from Joon-Perrson encephalopathy.”

The Advocate tried to change the mood. “It’s good news,” he said. “Really, it is. Now that Miri has identified the source of your problem, someone will certainly devise better treatments. Since we freely distribute our genetic database, it’s not unreasonable to expect that a cure may be found as well.”

I sat down and poured myself another glass of wine. “NORICE, how many people are currently diagnosed with Joon-Perrson’s?”

“As of my last database update, there were 280 people with the disease,” she said.

I didn’t ask how many of them were dreaming away the decades in cryosleep. “Forgive me if I don’t share your enthusiasm,” I told the Advocate. “Unless human nature has changed radically since I arrived here, I just don’t see a lot of effort being put into this particular project.” In the back of my mind, I heard the Grim Reaper putting down his coffee cup and asking for a check.

“I appreciate the effort, though,” I said, trying to cover my disappointment. “Your Pilot is probably waiting.” I put out my hand. “Safe journey.”

The Advocate gripped my hand tightly for a moment. “Hear us out, Caretaker,” he said. “We are required to compensate you for your genetic data contribution.”

“What did you have in mind?”

Miri caught the Advocate’s eye and they exchanged agitated *mudras*. He nodded slightly. She turned to me and said, “I could program medical nanos to selectively remove certain proteins in your brain.”

“Remove?”

“It would be a great challenge,” Miri said. “The prions are comprised of proteins, as you know, and a healthy version of those proteins are found throughout your body. However, the prion protein in Joon-Perrson’s has a different structure. Let me show you.” She took her napkin from her lap. “Healthy tissue might have proteins of this shape.” She made a triangle with her napkin. “The prions in your brain have a different shape.” She turned the napkins into a rectangle. “This altered shape not only causes them to promote the infection, it makes them resistant to denaturation by the usual treatments.

“Radiation,” I said, counting out on my fingers. “Surgery, heat, enzyme therapy, and chemotherapy. I tried them all, and nothing’s worked.”

“This would be different,” Miri said. “My nanos would map out your brain and compare the protein in each cell against a known healthy template. When they encountered defective cells, they would... remove them.”

I nodded. “I think I understand,” I said. “But to be honest, this is a more than a little scary.” If too much of my brain were infected, I might end up with large holes in my head, or something to that effect.

“There is another consideration,” said the Advocate. “The Artist has shown me how long-term memory function is keyed to protein structures. You might emerge from the procedure unable to remember certain things, or people.” He glanced at Miri, then back at me. “You should understand the risks before making a decision.”

“I’ll need to think about this,” I said.

“Of course,” he said. “I will speak with the designated Pilot about our schedule.” He stood, offered a short bow, and left.

“Have you discussed this with Norice?” I asked Miri.

Norice’s voice emerged from the ceiling. “The journey Artist offered me her experimental data and asked me to review some of her earlier designs,” she said. “While she has more experience with modifying existing genomes, I think Miri’s methods could be applied to nanotech arbiters as well.” Then she added. “Don’t worry, Peter, we didn’t talk about anything personal. I would never do that without your permission.”

I responded with a nervous laugh. “Thanks for that.” I stood up. “If you ladies will excuse me, I need to stretch my legs.”

“Do you want some company?” Miri asked.

“I think Peter wants to be alone right now,” Norice said.

“Yeah, I do.”

I let myself wander away toward the heart of the asteroid, down dimly lit passages that brightened as I entered them, and darkened as I left. As I passed a maintenance panel for the fusion plant, I whispered, “Norice?”

“I’m here, Peter.”

“So what do you think, really?”

“I think you should seriously consider it. It’s your best chance to get healthy, and to leave the Caretaker station.”

“Are you that eager to get rid of me?”

I heard something akin to a laugh. “You know me better than that,” she said. “And I know you well enough to understand what you’re feeling.”

“And what’s that?” I asked, but I had a feeling what she was going to say.

“You’ve been here a long time, and I’m sure the prospect of leaving these familiar trappings is more than a little frightening.”

“You’re right,” I said. “As usual.”

“Peter, there’s something else you should consider, she said. “You can’t keep going back into coldsleep. You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

I thought back to the morning, and the deep cold ache in my bones. “Yeah, I do.”

“One day,” she said, “you’ll lie down in your cryosleep chamber and simply pass away. A ‘bot will bury your body in the forest dome and that’ll be the end of it.”

It sounded almost cold, the way she said, but then I realized that Norice was trying to ease her own feelings. She wanted me to live, even if that meant leaving her. “But you can’t be sure.” I felt tears welling up. “I could live for a long time, with coldsleep.”

“You could,” she admitted. “Statistically, though, it’s not a good prospect. Most people die after a few stretches, or a soon more. You’re been exceptionally lucky, Peter.”

I sighed. “So what are you saying?”

“‘Do not go gentle into that good night.’”

I laughed. “I’m not *that* old, Norice.”

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When I returned from my walk, Miri met me outside the living quarters. She stood balanced on the balls of his feet, alert, but not nervous. “The Pilot wishes to leave,” she said, “so we need your decision now. I can do the treatment while we’re en route, and be finished by the time we reach our destination.”

“And then what?”

“That’s up to you. I think you could make a good living talking with our historians. Many records were lost in the Diaspora.”

“And if I lose my memory?”

She looked at me, and her eyes softened. “You’re young; you can start over. I’ll help.”

I stepped close to her, but didn’t touch her.

Miri said, “What shall I tell the Pilot?”

I took a deep breath, then released it, feeling the tension fall from my shoulders. “Tell him I plan to rage against the dying of the light.”

She put a hand on my arm. “I don’t know what that means. Are you coming with us?”

I nodded. “May I have 10 minutes to pack a few things?”

“I’m sure the Pilot will wait that long.”

I squeezed her hand and went to my room. As I was throwing some books and clothes into a bag, Norice spoke. “Peter?”

“Yes”

“Don’t forget your cognac.”

I closed my bag and lifted it up to my shoulder. “If this works, I’ll come back and we’ll open it together.”

“I’d like that,” she said.

“Then it’s a date.”

I walked to the docking cradle, and into Miri's ship.

The End