

Lethe

by Walter Jon Williams, 1953-

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Davout had himself disassembled for the return journey. He had already been torn in half, he felt: the remainder, the dumb beast still alive, did not matter. The captain had ruled, and Katrin would not be brought back. Davout did not want to spend the years between the stars in pain, confronting the gaping absence in his quarters, surrounded by the quiet sympathy of the crew.

Besides, he was no longer needed. The terraforming team had done its work, and then, but for Davout, had died.

Davout lay down on a bed of nano and let the little machines take him apart piece by piece, turn his body, his mind, and his unquenchable longing into long strings of numbers. The nanomachines crawled into his brain first, mapping, recording, and then shut down his mind piece by piece, so that he would feel no discomfort during what followed, or suffer a memory of his own body being taken apart.

Davout hoped that the nanos would shut down the pain before his consciousness failed, so that he could remember what it was like to live without the anguish that was now a part of his life, but it didn't work out that way.

When his consciousness ebbed, he was aware, even to the last fading of the light, of the knife-blade of loss still buried in his heart.

The pain was there when Davout awoke, a wailing voice that cried, a pure contralto keen of agony, in his first dawning awareness. He found himself in an early-Victorian bedroom, blue-striped wallpaper, silhouettes in oval frames, silk flowers in vases. Crisp sheets, light streaming in the window. A stranger-shoulder-length hair, black frock coat, cravat carelessly tied-looked at him from a gothic-revival armchair. The man held a pipe in the right hand and tamped down tobacco with the prehensile big toe of his left foot.

„I'm not on the Beagle," Davout said.

The man gave a grave nod. His left hand formed the mudra for correct. „Yes.“

„And this isn't a virtual?“

Correct again. „No.“

„Then something has gone wrong.“

Correct. „Yes. A moment, sir, if you please.“ The man finished tamping, slipped his foot into a waiting boot, then lit the pipe with the anachronistic lighter in his left hand. He puffed, drew in smoke, exhaled, put the lighter in his pocket, and settled back in the walnut embrace of his chair.

„I am Dr. Li," he said. *Stand by*, said the left hand, the old finger position for a now-obsolete palmtop computer, a finger position that had once meant pause, as correct had once meant enter, enter because it was correct. „Please remain in bed for a few more minutes while the nanos doublecheck their work. Redundancy is frustrating," puffing smoke, „but good for peace of mind.“

„What happens if they find they've made a mistake?“

Don't be concerned. „It can't be a very large mistake," said Li, „or we wouldn't be communicating so rationally. At worst, you will sleep for a bit while things are corrected.“

„May I take my hands out from under the covers?“ he asked.

„Yes.“

Davout did so. His hands, he observed, were brown and leathery, hands suitable for the hot, dry world of Sarpedon. They had not, then, changed his body for one more suited to Earth, but given him something familiar.

If, he realized, they were on Earth.

His right fingers made the mudra *thank you*.

Don't mention it signed Li.

Davout passed a hand over his forehead, discovered that the forehead, hand, and the gesture itself were perfectly familiar.

Strange, but the gesture convinced him that he was, in a vital way, still himself. Still Davout.

Still alive, he thought. Alas.

„Tell me what happened," he said. „Tell me why I'm here.“

Li signed *stand by*, made a visible effort to collect himself. „We believe," he said, „that the BEAGLE was destroyed. If so, you are the only survivor.“

Davout found his shock curiously veiled. The loss of the other lives-friends, most of them-stood muted by the precedent of his own earlier, overriding grief. It was as if the two losses were weighed in a balance, and the BEAGLE found wanting.

Li, Davout observed, was waiting for Davout to absorb this information before continuing.

Go on Davout signed.

„The accident happened seven light-years out,“ Li said. „BEAGLE began to yaw wildly, and both automatic systems and the crew failed to correct the maneuver. BEAGLE’s automatic systems concluded that the ship was unlikely to survive the increasing oscillations, and began to use its communications lasers to download personality data to collectors in Earth orbit. As the only crew member to elect disassembly during the return journey, you were first in the queue. The others, we presume, ran to nano disassembly stations, but communication was lost with the BEAGLE before we retrieved any of their data.“

„Did Katrin’s come through?“

Li stirred uneasily in his chair. Regrettably „I’m afraid not.“

Davout closed his eyes. He had lost her again. Over the bubble of hopelessness in his throat he asked, „How long has it been since my data arrived?“

„A little over eight days.“

They had waited eight days, then, for BEAGLE—for the BEAGLE of seven years ago—to correct its problem and reestablish communication. If BEAGLE had resumed contact, the mass of data that was Davout might have been erased as redundant.

„The government has announced the loss,“ Li said. „Though there is a remote chance that the BEAGLE may come flying in or through the system in eleven years as scheduled, we have detected no more transmissions, and we’ve been unable to observe any blueshifted deceleration torch aimed at our system. The government decided that it would be unfair to keep sibs and survivors in the dark any longer.“

Concur Davout signed.

He envisioned the last moments of the BEAGLE, the crew being flung back and forth as the ship slammed through increasing pendulum swings, the desperate attempts, fighting wildly fluctuating gravity and inertia, to reach the emergency nanobeds... no panic, Davout thought, Captain Moshweshwe had trained his people too well for that. Just desperation, and determination, and, as the oscillations grew worse, an increasing sense of futility, and impending death.

No one expected to die anymore. It was always a shock when it happened near you. Or to you.

„The cause of the BEAGLE’s problem remains unknown,“ Li said, the voice far away. „The Bureau is working with simulators to try to discover what happened.“

Davout leaned back against his pillow. Pain throbbed in his veins, pain and loss, knowledge that his past, his joy, was irrecoverable. „The whole voyage,“ he said, „was a catastrophe.“

I respectfully contradict Li signed. „You terraformed and explored two worlds,“ he said. „Downloads are already living on these worlds, hundreds of thousands now, millions later. There would have been a third world added to our commonwealth if your mission had not been cut short due to the, ah, first accident...“

Concur Davout signed, but only because his words would have come out with too much bitterness.

Sorry, a curt jerk of Li’s fingers. „There are messages from your sibs,“ Li said, „and downloads from them also. The sibs and friends of BEAGLE’s crew will try

to contact you, no doubt. You need not answer any of these messages until you're ready."

Understood.

Davout hesitated, but the words were insistent; he gave them tongue. "Have Katrin's sibs sent messages?" he asked.

Li's grave expression scarcely changed. "I believe so." He tilted his head. "Is there anything I can do for you? Anything I can arrange?"

"Not now, no," said Davout. *Thank you* he signed. "Can I move from the bed now?"

Li's look turned abstract as he scanned indicators projected somewhere in his mind. Yes "You may," he said. He rose from his chair, took the pipe from his mouth. "You are in a hospital, I should add," he said, "but you do not have the formal status of patient, and may leave at any time. Likewise, you may stay here for the foreseeable future, as long as you feel it necessary."

Thank you "Where is this hospital, by the way?"

"West Java. The city of Bandung."

Earth, then. Which Davout had not seen in seventy-seven years. Memory's gentle fingers touched his mind with the scent of durian, of ocean, of mace, cloves, and turmeric.

He knew he had never been in Java before, though, and wondered whence the memory came. From one of his sibs, perhaps?

Thank you Davout signed again, putting a touch of finality, a kind of dismissal, into the twist of his fingers.

Dr. Li left Davout alone, in his new/old body, in the room that whispered of memory and pain.

In a dark wood armoire, Davout found identification and clothing, and a record confirming that his account had received seventy-eight years' back pay. His electronic inbox contained downloads from his sibs and more personal messages than he could cope with—he would have to construct an electronic personality to answer most of them.

He dressed and left the hospital. Whoever supervised his reassembly—Dr. Li perhaps—had thoughtfully included a complete Earth atlas in his internal ROM, and he accessed it as he walked, making random turnings but never getting lost. The furious sun burned down with tropical intensity, but his current body was constructed to bear heat, and a breeze off the mountains made pleasant even the blazing noontide.

The joyful metal music of the gamelans clattered from almost every doorway. People in bright clothing, agile as the siamang of near Sumatra, sped overhead along treeways and ropeways, arms and hands modified for brachiation. Robots, immune to the heat, shimmered past on silent tires. Davout found it all strangely familiar, as if he had been here in a dream.

And then he found himself by the sea, and a pang of familiarity knifed through his heart. *Home!* cried his thoughts. Other worlds he had built, other beauties he had seen, but he had never beheld this blue, this perfection, anywhere else but on his native sphere. Subtle differences in atmospheric had rendered this color unnatural on any other world.

And with the cry of familiarity came a memory: it had been Davout the Silent who had come here, a century or more ago, and Katrin had been by his side.

But Davout's Katrin was dead. And as he looked on Earth's beauty, he felt his world of joy turn to bitter ashes.

Alas! His fingers formed the word unbidden. *Alas!*

He lived in a world where no one died, and nothing was ever lost. One understood that such things occasionally occurred, but never—hardly ever—to anyone that one knew. Physical immortality was cheap and easy, and was supported by so many alternate systems: backing up the mind by downloading, or downloading into a virtual reality system or into a durable machine. Nanosystems duplicated the body or improved it, adapted it for different environments. Data slumbered in secure storage, awaiting the electron kiss that returned it to life. Bringing a child to term in the womb was now the rarest form of reproduction, and bringing a child to life in a machine womb the next rarest.

It was so much easier to have the nanos duplicate you as an adult. Then, at least, you had someone to talk to.

No one died, and nothing was ever lost. But Katrin died, Davout thought, and now I am lost, and it was not supposed to be this way.

Alas! Fingers wailed the grief that was stopped up in Davout's throat. *Alas!*

Davout and Katrin had met in school, members of the last generation in which womb-breeding outnumbered the alternatives. Immortality whispered its covenant into their receptive ears. On their first meeting, attending a lecture (Dolphus on *Reinventing the Humboldt Sea*) at the College of Mystery, they looked at each other and knew, as if angels had whispered into their ears, that there was now one less mystery in the world, that each served as an answer to another, that each fitted neatly into a hollow that the other had perceived in his or her soul, dropping into place as neatly as a butter-smooth piece in a finely made teak puzzle—or, considering their interests, as easily as a carbolic functional group nested into place on an indole ring.

Their rapport was, they freely admitted, miraculous. Still young, they exploded into the world, into a universe that welcomed them.

He could not bear to be away from her. Twenty-four hours was the absolute limit before Davout's nerves began to beat a frustrated little tattoo, and he found himself conjuring a phantom Katrin in his imagination, just to have someone to share the world with—he needed her there, needed this human lens through which he viewed the universe.

Without her, Davout found the cosmos veiled in a kind of uncertainty. While it was possible to apprehend certain things (the usefulness of a coenocytic arrangement of cells in the transmission of information-bearing proteins and nuclei, the historical significance of the Yucatan astrobleme, the limitations of the Benard cell model in predicting thermic instabilities in the atmosphere), these things lacked noesis, existed only as a series of singular, purposeless accidents. Reflected through Katrin, however, the world took on brilliance, purpose, and genius. With Katrin he could feast upon the universe; without her the world lacked savor.

Their interests were similar enough for each to generate enthusiasm in the other, diverse enough that each was able to add perspective to the other's work. They worked in cozy harmony, back to back, two desks set in the same room. Sometimes Davout would return from a meeting, or a coffee break, and find that Katrin had added new paragraphs, sometimes an entire new direction, to his latest effort. On occasion he would return the favor. Their early work—eccentric, proliferating in too many directions, toward too many specialties—showed life and promise and more than a hint of brilliance.

Too much, they decided, for just the two of them. They wanted to do too much, and all at once, and an immortal lifetime was not time enough.

And so, as soon as they could afford it, Red Katrin, the original, was duplicated—with a few cosmetic alterations—in Dark Katrin and later Katrin the Fair; and nanomachines read Old Davout, blood and bone and the long strands of numbers that were his soul, and created perfect copies in Dangerous Davout, later called the Conqueror, and Davout the Silent.

Two had become six, and half a dozen, they now agreed, was about all the universe could handle for the present. The wild tangle of overlapping interests was parceled out between the three couples, each taking one of the three most noble paths to understanding. The eldest couple chose History as their domain, a part of which involved chronicling the adventures of their sibs; the second couple took Science; the third Psyche, the exploration of the human mind. Any developments, any insights, on the part of one of the sibs could be shared with the others through downloads. In the beginning they downloaded themselves almost continually, sharing their thoughts and experiences and plans in a creative frenzy. Later, as separate lives and more specialized careers developed, the downloads grew less frequent, though there were no interruptions until Dangerous Davout and Dark Katrin took their first voyage to another star. They spent over fifty years away, though to them it was less than thirty; and the downloads from Earth, pulsed over immense distances by communications lasers, were less frequent, and less frequently resorted to. The lives of the other couples, lived at what seemed speeded-up rates, were of decreasing relevance to their own existence, as if they were lives that dwelled in a half-remembered dream.

Alas! the fingers signed. *Alas!* for the dream turned to savage nightmare.

The sea, a perfect terrestrial blue, gazed back into Davout's eyes, indifferent to the sadness frozen into his fingers.

„Your doctors knew that to wake here, after such an absence, would result in a feeling of anachronism,“ said Davout's sib, „so they put you in this Victorian room, where you would at least feel at ease with the kind of anachronism by which you are surrounded.“ He smiled at Davout from the neo-gothic armchair. „If you were in a modern room, you might experience a sensation of obsolescence. But everyone can feel superior to the Victorians, and besides, one is always more comfortable in one's past.“

„Is one?“ Davout asked, fingers signing *irony*. The past and the present, he found, were alike a place of torment.

„I discover,“ he continued, „that my thoughts stray for comfort not to the past, but to the future.“

„Ah.“ A smile. „That is why we call you Davout the Conqueror.“

„I do not seem to inhabit that name,“ Davout said, „if I ever did.“

Concern shadowed the face of Davout's sib. *Sorry* he signed, and then made another sign for profoundly, the old multiply sign, multiples of sorrow in his gesture.

„I understand,“ he said. „I experienced your last download. It was... intensely disturbing. I have never felt such terror, such loss.“

„Nor had I,“ said Davout.

It was Old Davout whose image was projected into the gothic-revival armchair, the original, womb-born Davout of whom the two sibs were copies. When Davout looked at him it was like looking into a mirror in which his

reflection had been retarded for several centuries, then unexpectedly released—Davout remembered, several bodies back, once possessing that tall forehead, the fair hair, the small ears flattened close to the skull. The grey eyes he had still, but he could never picture himself wearing the professorial little goatee.

„How is our other sib?“ Davout asked.

The concern on Old Davout’s face deepened. „You will find Silent Davout much changed. You haven’t uploaded him, then?“

No „Due to the delays, I’m thirty years behind on my uploading.“

„Ah.“ *Regret* „Perhaps you should speak to him, then, before you upload all those years.“

„I will.“ He looked at his sib and hoped the longing did not burn in his eyes. „Please give my best to Katrin, will you?“

„I will give her your love,“ said Old Davout, wisest of the sibs.

The pain was there when Davout awoke next day, fresh as the moment it first knifed through him, on the day their fifth child, the planet Sarpedon, was christened. Sarpedon had been discovered by astronomers a couple of centuries before, and named, with due regard for tradition, after yet another minor character in Homer; it had been mapped and analyzed by robot probes; but it had been the BEAGLE’s terraforming team that had made the windswept place, with its barren mountain ranges and endless deserts, its angry radiation and furious dust storms, into a place suitable for life.

Katrin was the head of the terraforming team. Davout led its research division. Between them, raining nano from Sarpedon’s black skies, they nursed the planet to life, enriched its atmosphere, filled its seas, crafted tough, versatile vegetation capable of withstanding the angry environment. Seeded life by the tens of millions, insects, reptiles, birds, mammals, fish, and amphibians. Re-created themselves, with dark, leathery skin and slit pupils, as human forms suitable for Sarpedon’s environment, so that they could examine the place they had built.

And—unknown to the others—Davout and Katrin had slipped bits of their own genetics into almost every Sarpedan life-form. Bits of redundant coding, mostly, but enough so that they could claim Sarpedon’s entire world of creatures as their children. Even when they were junior terraformers on the Cheng Ho’s mission to Rhea, they had, partly as a joke, partly as something more calculated, populated their creations with their genes.

Katrin and Davout spent the last two years of their project on Sarpedon among their children, examining the different ecosystems, different interactions, tinkering with new adaptations. In the end, Sarpedon was certified as suitable for human habitation. Preprogrammed nanos constructed small towns, laid out fields, parks, and roads. The first human Sarpedans would be constructed in nanobeds, and their minds filled with the downloaded personalities of volunteers from Earth. There was no need to go to the expense and trouble of shipping out millions of warm bodies from Earth, running the risks of traveling for decades in remote space. Not when nanos could construct them all new on site.

The first Sarpedans—bald, leather-skinned, slit-eyed—emerged blinking into their new red dawn. Any further terraforming, any attempts to fine-tune the planet and make it more Earthlike, would be a long-term project and up to them. In a splendid ceremony, Captain Moshweshwe formally turned the future of Sarpedon over to its new inhabitants. Davout had a few last formalities to

perform, handing certain computer codes and protocols over to the Sarpedans, but the rest of the terraforming team, most fairly drunk on champagne, filed into the shuttle for the return journey to the Beagle. As Davout bent over a terminal with his Sarpedan colleagues and the BEAGLE's first officer, he could hear the roar of the shuttle on its pad, the sustained thunder as it climbed for orbit, the thud as it crashed through the sound barrier, and then he saw out of the corner of his eye the sudden red-gold flare...

When he raced outside, it was to see the blazing poppy unfolding in the sky, a blossom of fire and metal falling slowly to the surface of the newly christened planet.

There she was—her image anyway—in the neo-gothic armchair: Red Katrin, the green-eyed lady with whom he in memory, and Old Davout in reality, had first exchanged glances two centuries ago while Dolphus expanded on what he called his „lunaforming“.

Davout had hesitated about returning her call of condolence. He did not know whether his heart could sustain two knife-thrusts, both Katrin's death and the sight of her sib, alive, sympathetic, and forever beyond his reach.

But he couldn't *not* call her. Even when he was trying not to think about her, he still found Katrin on the edge of his perceptions, drifting though his thoughts like the persistent trace of some familiar perfume.

Time to get it over with, he thought. If it was more than he could stand, he could apologize and end the call. But he had to know...

„And there are no backups?“ she said. A pensive frown touched her lips.

„No recent backups,“ Davout said. „We always thought that, if we were to die, we would die together. Space travel is hazardous, after all, and when catastrophe strikes it is not a small catastrophe. We didn't anticipate one of us surviving on Earth, and the other dying light-years away.“ He scowled.

„Damn Mosheshwe anyway! There were recent backups on the BEAGLE, but with so many dead from an undetermined cause, he decided not to resurrect anyone, to cancel our trip to Astoreth, return to Earth, and sort out all the complications once he got home.“

„He made the right decision,“ Katrin said. „If my sib had been resurrected, you both would have died together.“

Better so Davout's fingers began to form the mudra, but he thought better of it, made a gesture of negation.

The green eyes narrowed. „There are older backups on Earth, yes?“

„Katrin's latest surviving backup dates from the return of the CHENG HO.“

„Almost ninety years ago.“ Thoughtfully. „But she could upload the memories she has been sending me... the problem does not seem insurmountable.“

Red Katrin clasped her hands around one knee. At the familiar gesture, memories rang through Davout's mind like change-bells. Vertigo overwhelmed him, and he closed his eyes.

„The problem is the instructions Katrin—we both-left,“ he said. „Again, we anticipated that if we died, we'd die together. And so we left instructions that our backups on Earth were not to be employed. We reasoned that we had two sibs apiece on Earth, and if they—you—missed us, you could simply duplicate yourselves.“

„I see.“ A pause, then concern. „Are you all right?“

No „Of course not,“ he said. He opened his eyes. The world eddied for a moment, then stilled, the growing calmness centered on Red Katrin’s green eyes.

„I’ve got seventy-odd years’ back pay,“ he said. „I suppose that I could hire some lawyers, try to get Katrin’s backup released to my custody.“

Red Katrin bit her nether lip. „Recent court decisions are not in your favor.“

„I’m very persistent. And I’m cash-rich.“

She cocked her head, looked at him. „Are you all right talking to me? Should I blank my image?“

No. He shook his head. „It helps, actually, to see you.“

He had feared agony in seeing her, but instead he found a growing joy, a happiness that mounted in his heart. As always, his Katrin was helping him to understand, helping him to make sense of the bitter confusion of the world.

An idea began to creep into his mind on stealthy feet.

„I worry that you’re alone there,“ Red Katrin said. „Would you like to come stay with us? Would you like us to come to Java?“

No, *thanks* „I’ll come see you soon,“ Davout said. „But while I’m in the hospital, I think I’ll have a few cosmetic procedures.“ He looked down at himself, spread his leathery hands. „Perhaps I should look a little more Earthlike.“

After his talk with Katrin ended, Davout called Dr. Li and told him that he wanted a new body constructed.

Something familiar, he said, already in the files. His own, original form.

Age twenty or so.

„It is a surprise to see you... as you are,“ said Silent Davout.

Deep-voiced, black-skinned, and somber, Davout’s sib stood by his bed.

„It was a useful body when I wore it,“ Davout answered. „I take comfort in... familiar things... now that my life is so uncertain.“ He looked up. „It was good of you to come in person.“

„A holographic body,“ he said, taking Davout’s hand, „however welcome, however familiar, is not the same as a real person.“

Davout squeezed the hand. „Welcome, then,“ he said. Dr. Li, who had supervised in person through the new/old body’s assembly, had left after saying the nanos were done, so it seemed appropriate for Davout to stand and embrace his sib.

The youngest of the sibs was not tall, but he was built solidly, as if for permanence, and his head seemed slightly oversized for his body. With his older sibs, he had always maintained a kind of formal reserve that had resulted in his being nicknamed "the Silent." Accepting the name, he remarked that the reason he spoke little when the others were around was that his older sibs had already said everything that needed saying before he got to it.

Davout stepped back and smiled. „Your patients must think you a tower of strength.“

„I have no patients these days. Mostly I work in the realm of theory.“

„I will have to look up your work. I’m so far behind on uploads—I don’t have any idea what you and Katrin have been doing these last decades.“

Silent Davout stepped to the armoire and opened its ponderous mahogany doors. „Perhaps you should put on some clothing,“ he said. „I am feeling chill in this conditioned air, and so must you.“

Amused, Davout clothed himself, then sat across the little rosewood side table from his sib. Davout the Silent looked at him for a long moment—eyes placid and thoughtful—and then spoke.

„You are experiencing something that is very rare in our time,“ he said. „Loss, anger, frustration, terror. All the emotions that in their totality equal grief.“

„You forgot sadness and regret,“ Davout said. „You forgot memory, and how the memories keep replaying. You forgot imagination, and how imagination only makes those memories worse, because imagination allows you to write a different ending, but the world will not.“

Silent Davout nodded. „People in my profession,“ fingers forming irony, „anyway those born too late to remember how common these things once were, must view you with a certain clinical interest. I must commend Dr. Li on his restraint.“

„Dr. Li is a shrink?“ Davout asked.

Yes. A casual press of fingers. „Among other things. I’m sure he’s watching you very carefully and making little notes every time he leaves the room.“

„I’m happy to be useful.“ Irony in his hand, bitterness on his tongue. „I would give those people my memories, if they want them so much.“

Of course „You can do that.“

Davout looked up in something like surprise.

„You know it is possible,“ his sib said. „You can download your memories, preserve them like amber or simply hand them to someone else to experience. And you can erase them from your mind completely, walk on into a new life, tabula rasa and free of pain.“

His deep voice was soft. It was a voice without affect, one he no doubt used on his patients, quietly insistent without being officious. A voice that made suggestions, or presented alternatives, but which never, ever, gave orders.

„I don’t want that,“ Davout said.

Silent Davout’s fingers were still set in *of course*. „You are not of the generation that accepts such things as a matter of course,“ he said. „But this, this modular approach to memory, to being, constitutes much of my work these days.“

Davout looked at him. „It must be like losing a piece of yourself, to give up a memory. Memories are what make you.“

Silent Davout’s face remained impassive as his deep voice sounded through the void between them. „What forms a human psyche is not a memory, we have come to believe, but a pattern of thought. When our sib duplicated himself, he duplicated his pattern in us; and when we assembled new bodies to live in, the pattern did not change. Have you felt yourself to be a different person when you took a new body?“

Davout passed a hand over his head, felt the fine blond hair covering his scalp. This time yesterday, his head had been bald and leathery. Now he felt subtle differences in his perceptions—his vision was more acute, his hearing less so—and his muscle memory was somewhat askew. He remembered having a shorter reach, a slightly different center of gravity.

But as for himself, his essence—no, he felt himself unchanged. He was still Davout.

No he signed.

„People have more choices than ever before,“ said Silent Davout. „They choose their bodies, they choose their memories. They can upload new

knowledge, new skills. If they feel a lack of confidence, or feel that their behavior is too impulsive, they can tweak their body chemistry to produce a different effect. If they find themselves the victim of an unfortunate or destructive compulsion, the compulsion can be edited from their being. If they lack the power to change their circumstances, they can at least elect to feel happier about them. If a memory cannot be overcome, it can be eliminated.“

„And you now spend your time dealing with these problems?“ Davout asked.

„They are not problems,“ his sib said gently. „They are not syndromes or neuroses. They are circumstances. They are part of the condition of life as it exists today. They are environmental.“ The large, impassive eyes gazed steadily at Davout. „People choose happiness over sorrow, fulfillment over frustration. Can you blame them?“

Yes Davout signed. „If they deny the evidence of their own lives,“ he said. „We define our existence by the challenges we overcome, or those we don't. Even our tragedies define us.“

His sib nodded. „That is an admirable philosophy—for Davout the Conqueror. But not all people are conquerors.“

Davout strove to keep the impatience from his voice. „Lessons are learned from failures as well as successes. Experience is gained, life's knowledge is applied to subsequent occurrence. If we deny the uses of experience, what is there to make us human?“

His sib was patient. „Sometimes the experiences are negative, and so are the lessons. Would you have a person live forever under the shadow of great guilt, say for a foolish mistake that resulted in injury or death to someone else; or would you have them live with the consequences of damage inflicted by a sociopath, or an abusive family member? Traumas like these can cripple the whole being. Why should the damage not be repaired?“

Davout smiled thinly. „You can't tell me that these techniques are used only in cases of deep trauma,“ he said. „You can't tell me that people aren't using these techniques for reasons that might be deemed trivial. Editing out a foolish remark made at a party, or eliminating a bad vacation or an argument with the spouse.“

Silent Davout returned his smile. „I would not insult your intelligence by suggesting these things do not happen.“

Q.E.D. Davout signed. „So how do such people mature? Change? Grow in wisdom?“

„They cannot edit out everything. There is sufficient friction and conflict in the course of ordinary life to provide everyone with their allotted portion of wisdom. Nowadays our lives are very, very long, and we have a long time to learn, however slowly. And after all,“ he said, smiling, „the average person's capacity for wisdom has never been so large as all that! I think you will find that as a species we are far less prone to folly than we once were.“

Davout looked at his sib grimly. „You are suggesting that I undergo this technique?“

„It is called Lethe.“

„That I undergo Lethe? Forget Katrin? Or forget what I feel for her?“

Silent Davout slowly shook his grave head. „I make no such suggestion.“

„Good.“

The youngest Davout gazed steadily into the eyes of his older twin. „Only you know what you can bear. I merely point out that this remedy exists, should you find your anguish beyond what you can endure.“

„Katrin deserves mourning,“ Davout said.

Another grave nod. „Yes.“

„She deserves to be remembered. Who will remember her if I do not?“

„I understand,“ said Silent Davout. „I understand your desire to feel, and the necessity. I only mention Lethe because I comprehend all too well what you endure now. Because“—he licked his lips—„I, too, have lost Katrin.“

Davout gaped at him. „You—“ he stammered. „She is—she was killed?“

No. His sib's face retained its remarkable placidity. „She left me, sixteen years ago.“

Davout could only stare. The fact, stated so plainly, was incomprehensible.

„I—“ he began, and then his fingers found another thought. *What happened?*

„We were together for a century and a half. We grew apart. It happens.“

Not to us it doesn't! Davout's mind protested. Not to Davout and Katrin!

Not to the two people who make up a whole greater than its parts. Not to us. Not ever.

But looking into his sib's accepting, melancholy face, Davout knew that it had to be true.

And then, in a way he knew to be utterly disloyal, he began to hope.

„Shocking?“ said Old Davout. „Not to us, I suppose.“

„It was their downloads,“ said Red Katrin. „Fair Katrin in particular was careful to edit out some of her feelings and judgments before she let me upload them, but still I could see her attitudes changing. And knowing her, I could make guesses by what she left out... I remember telling Davout three years before the split that the relationship was in jeopardy.“

„The Silent One was still surprised, though, when it happened,“ Old Davout said. „Sophisticated though he may be about human nature, he had a blind spot where Katrin was concerned.“ He put an arm around Red Katrin and kissed her cheek. „As I suppose we all do,“ he added.

Katrin accepted the kiss with a gracious inclination of her head, then asked Davout, „Would you like the blue room here, or the green room upstairs? The green room has a window seat and a fine view of the bay, but it's small.“

„I'll take the green room,“ Davout said. I do not need so much room, he thought, now that I am alone.

Katrin took him up the creaking wooden stair and showed him the room, the narrow bed of the old house. Through the window, he could look south to a storm on Chesapeake Bay, bluegray cloud, bright eruptions of lightning, slanting beams of sunlight that dropped through rents in the storm to tease bright winking light from the foam. He watched it for a long moment, then was startled out of reverie by Katrin's hand on his shoulder, and a soft voice in his ear.

„Are there sights like this on other worlds?“

„The storms on Rhea were vast,“ Davout said, „like nothing on this world. The ocean area is greater than that on Earth, and lies mostly in the tropics—the planet was almost called Oceanus on that account. The hurricanes built up around the equatorial belts with nothing to stop them, sometimes more than a thousand kilometers across, and they came roaring into the temperate zones like multi-armed demons, sometimes one after another for months. They

spawned waterspots and cyclones in their vanguard, inundated whole areas with a storm surge the size of a small ocean, dumped enough rain to flood an entire province away... We thought seriously that the storms might make life on land untenable.“

He went on to explain the solution he and Katrin had devised for the enormous problem: huge strings of tall, rocky barrier islands built at a furious rate by nanomachines, a wall for wind and storm surge to break against; a species of silvery, tropical floating weed, a flowery girdle about Rhea's thick waist, that radically increased surface albedo, reflecting more heat back into space. Many species of deep-rooted, vinelike plants to anchor slopes and prevent erosion, other species of thirsty trees, adaptations of cottonwoods and willows, to line streambeds and break the power of flash floods.

Planetary engineering on such an enormous scale, in such a short time, had never been attempted, not even on Mars, and it had been difficult for Katrin and Davout to sell the project to the project managers on the Cheng Ho. Their superiors had initially preferred a different approach, huge equatorial solar curtains deployed in orbit to reflect heat, squadrons of orbital beam weapons to blast and disperse storms as they formed, secure underground dwellings for the inhabitants, complex lock and canal systems to control flooding... Katrin and Davout had argued for a more elegant approach to Rhea's problems, a reliance on organic systems to modify the planet's extreme weather instead of assaulting Rhea with macro-tech and engineering. Theirs was the approach that finally won the support of the majority of the terraforming team, and resulted in their subsequent appointment as heads of BEAGLE's terraforming team.

„Dark Katrin's memories were very exciting to upload during that time,“ said Katrin the Red. „That delirious explosion of creativity! Watching a whole globe take shape beneath her feet!“ Her green eyes look up into Davout's. „We were jealous of you then. All that abundance being created, all that talent going to shaping an entire world. And we were confined to scholarship, which seemed so lifeless by comparison.“

He looked at her. Query „Are you sorry for the choice you made? You two were senior: you could have chosen our path if you'd wished. You still could, come to that.“

A smile drifts across her face. „You tempt me, truly. But Old Davout and I are happy in our work—and besides, you and Katrin needed someone to provide a proper record of your adventures.“ She tilted her head, and mischief glittered in her eyes. „Perhaps you should ask Blonde Katrin. Maybe she could use a change.“

Davout gave a guilty start: she was, he thought, seeing too near, too soon. „Do you think so?“ he asked. „I didn't even know if I should see her.“

„Her grudge is with the Silent One, not with you.“

„Well.“ He managed a smile. „Perhaps I will at least call.“

Davout called Katrin the Fair, received an offer of dinner on the following day, accepted. From his room, he followed the smell of coffee into his hosts' office, and felt a bubble of grief lodge in his heart: two desks, back-to-back, two computer terminals, layers of papers and books and printout and dust... he could imagine himself and Katrin here, sipping coffee, working in pleasant compatibility.

How goes it? he signed.

His sib looked up. „I just sent a chapter to Sheol,“ he said. „I was making Maxwell far too wise.“ He fingered his little goatee. „The temptation is always to view the past solely as a vehicle that leads to our present grandeur. These people’s sole function was to produce us, who are of course perfectly wise and noble and far superior to our ancestors. So one assumes that these people had us in mind all along, that we were what they were working toward. I have to keep reminding myself that these people lived amid unimaginable tragedy, disease and ignorance and superstition, vile little wars, terrible poverty, and death...”

He stopped, suddenly aware that he’d said something awkward—Davout felt the word vibrate in his bones, as if he were stranded inside a bell that was still ringing after it had been struck—but he said, „Go on.“

„I remind myself,“ his sib continued, „that the fact that we live in a modern culture doesn’t make us better, it doesn’t make us superior to these people—in fact it enlarges them, because they had to overcome so much more than we in order to realize themselves, in order to accomplish as much as they did.“ A shy smile drifted across his face. „And so a rather smug chapter is wiped out of digital existence.“

„Lavoisier is looming,“ commented Red Katrin from her machine.

„Yes, that too,“ Old Davout agreed. His Lavoisier and his Age had won the McEldowney Prize and been shortlisted for other awards. Davout could well imagine that bringing Maxwell up to Lavoisier’s magisterial standards would be intimidating.

Red Katrin leaned back in her chair, combed her hair back with her fingers. „I made a few notes about the BEAGLE project,“ she said. „I have other commitments to deal with first, of course.“

She and Old Davout had avoided any conflicts of interest and interpretation by conveniently dividing history between them: she would write of the „modern“ world and her near-contemporaries, while he wrote of those securely in the past. Davout thought his sib had the advantage in this arrangement, because her subjects, as time progressed, gradually entered his domain, and became liable to his reinterpretation.

Davout cleared away some printout, sat on the edge of Red Katrin’s desk. „A thought keeps bothering me,“ he said. „In our civilization we record everything. But the last moments of the crew of the BEAGLE went unrecorded. Does that mean they do not exist? Never existed at all? That death was always their state, and they returned to it, like virtual matter dying into the vacuum from which it came?“

Concern darkened Red Katrin’s eyes. „They will be remembered,“ she said. „I will see to it.“

„Katrin didn’t download the last months, did she?“

No „The last eight months were never sent. She was very busy, and—“

„Virtual months, then. Gone back to the phantom zone.“

„There are records. Other crew sent downloads home, and I will see if I can gain access either to the downloads, or to their friends and relations who have experienced them. There is your memory, your downloads.“

He looked at her. „Will you upload my memory, then? My sib has everything in his files, I’m sure.“ Glancing at Old Davout.

She pressed her lips together. „That would be difficult for me. Me viewing you viewing her...” She shook her head. „I don't dare. Not now. Not when we're all still in shock.“

Disappointment gnawed at his insides with sharp rodent teeth. He did not want to be so alone in his grief; he didn't want to nourish all the sadness by himself.

He wanted to share it with Katrin, he knew, the person with whom he shared everything. Katrin could help him make sense of it, the way she clarified all the world for him. Katrin would comprehend the way he felt.

I understand he signed. His frustration must have been plain to Red Katrin, because she took his hand, lifted her green eyes to his.

„I will,” she said. „But not now. I'm not ready.“

„I don't want two wrecks in the house,” called Old Davout over his shoulder.

Interfering old bastard, Davout thought. But with his free hand he signed, again, *I understand*.

Katrin the Fair kissed Davout's cheek, then stood back, holding his hands, and narrowed her grey eyes. „I'm not sure I approve of this youthful body of yours,” she said. „You haven't looked like this in—what—over a century?”

„Perhaps I seek to evoke happier times,” Davout said.

A little frown touched the corners of her mouth. „That is always dangerous,” she judged. „But I wish you every success.“ She stepped back from the door, flung out an arm. „Please come in.“

She lived in a small apartment in Toulouse, with a view of the Allee Saint-Michel and the rose-red brick of the Vieux Quartier. On the whitewashed walls hung terra-cotta icons of Usil and Tiv, the Etruscan gods of the sun and moon, and a well cover with a figure of the demon Charun emerging from the underworld. The Etruscan deities were confronted, on another wall, by a bronze figure of the Gaulish Rosmerta, consort of the absent Mercurius.

Her little balcony was bedecked with wrought iron and a gay striped awning. In front of the balcony a table shimmered under a red-and-white checked tablecloth: crystal, porcelain, a wicker basket of bread, a bottle of wine. Cooking scents floated in from the kitchen.

„It smells wonderful,” Davout said.

Drink? Lifting the bottle.

Why not?

Wine was poured. They settled onto the sofa, chatted of weather, crowds, Java. Davout's memories of the trip that Silent Davout and his Katrin had taken to the island were more recent than hers.

Fair Katrin took his hand. „I have uploaded Dark Katrin's memories, so far as I have them,” she said. „She loved you, you know—absolutely, deeply.“ *Truth*. She bit her lip. „It was a remarkable thing.“

Truth Davout answered. He touched cool crystal to his lips, took a careful sip of his cabernet. Pain throbbed in the hollows of his heart.

„Yes,” he said. „I know.“

„I felt I should tell you about her feelings. Particularly in view of what happened with me and the Silent One.“

He looked at her. „I confess I do not understand that business.“

She made a little frown of distaste. „We and our work and our situation grew irksome. Oppressive. You may upload his memories if you like—I daresay you will be able to observe the signs that he was determined to ignore.“

I am sorry.

Clouds gathered in her grey eyes. „I, too, have regrets.“

„There is no chance of reconciliation?“

Absolutely not, accompanied by a brief shake of the head. „It was over.“
Finished „And, in any case, Davout the Silent is not the man he was.“

Yes?

„He took Lethe. It was the only way he had of getting over my leaving him.“

Pure amazement throbbed in Davout's soul. Fair Katrin looked at him in surprise.

„You didn't know?“

He blinked at her. „I should have. But I thought he was talking about me, about a way of getting over...“ Aching sadness brimmed in his throat. „Over the way my Dark Katrin left me.“

Scorn whitened the flesh about Fair Katrin's nostrils. „That's the Silent One for you. He didn't have the nerve to tell you outright.“

„I'm not sure that's true. He may have thought he was speaking plainly enough—“

Her fingers formed a mudra that gave vent to a brand of disdain that did not translate into words. „He knows his effects perfectly well,“ she said. „He was trying to suggest the idea without making it clear that this was his choice for you, that he wanted you to fall in line with his theories.“

Anger was clear in her voice. She rose, stalked angrily to the bronze of Rosmerta, adjusted its place on the wall by a millimeter or so. Turned, waved an arm.

Apologies, flung to the air. „Let's eat. Silent Davout is the last person I want to talk about right now.“

„I'm sorry I upset you.“ Davout was not sorry at all: he found this display fascinating. The gestures, the tone of voice, were utterly familiar, ringing like chimes in his heart; but the style, the way Fair Katrin avoided the issue, was different. Dark Katrin never would have fled a subject this way: she would have knit her brows and confronted the problem direct, engaged with it until she'd either reached understanding or catastrophe. Either way, she'd have laughed, and tossed her dark hair, and announced that now she understood.

„It's peasant cooking,“ Katrin the Fair said as she bustled to the kitchen, „which of course is the best kind.“

The main course was a ragout of veal in a veloute sauce, beans cooked simply in butter and garlic, tossed salad, bread. Davout waited until it was half consumed, and the bottle of wine mostly gone, before he dared to speak again of his sib.

„You mentioned the Silent One and his theories,“ he said. „I'm thirty years behind on his downloads, and I haven't read his latest work—what is he up to? What's all this theorizing about?“

She sighed, fingers ringing a frustrated rhythm on her glass. Looked out the window for a moment, then conceded. „Has he mentioned the modular theory of the psyche?“

Davout tried to remember. „He said something about modular memory, I seem to recall.“

Yes „That's a part of it. It's a fairly radical theory that states that people should edit their personality and abilities at will, as circumstances dictate. That one morning, say, if you're going to work, you upload appropriate memories,

and work skills, along with a dose of ambition, of resolution, and some appropriate emotions like satisfaction and eagerness to solve problems, or endure drudgery, as the case may be.“

Davout looked at his plate. „Like cookery, then,“ he said. „Like this dish-veal, carrots, onions, celery, mushrooms, parsley.“

Fair Katrin made a mudra that Davout didn't recognize. *Sorry?* he signed.

„Oh. Apologies. That one means, roughly, *har-de-har-har*.“ Fingers formed laughter, then sarcasm, then slurred them together. „See?“

Understood. He poured more wine into her glass.

She leaned forward across her plate. „Recipes are fine if one wants to be consumed,“ she said. „Survival is another matter. The human mind is more than just ingredients to be tossed together. The atomistic view of the psyche is simplistic, dangerous, and wrong. You cannot will a psyche to be whole, no matter how many wholeness modules are uploaded. A psyche is more than the sum of its parts.“

Wine and agitation burnished her cheeks. Conviction blazed from her eyes. „It takes time to integrate new experience, new abilities. The modular theorists claim this will be done by a *conductor*, an artificial intelligence that will be able to judge between alternate personalities and abilities and upload whatever's needed. But that's such rubbish, I—“ She looked at the knife she was waving, then permitted it to return to the table.

„How far are the Silent One and his cohorts toward realizing this ambition?“ Davout said.

Beg pardon? She looked at him. „I didn't make that clear?“ she said. „The technology is already here. It's happening. People are fragmenting their psyches deliberately and trusting to their conductors to make sense of it all. And they're happy with their choices, because that's the only emotion they permit themselves to upload from their supply.“ She clenched her teeth, glanced angrily out the window at the Vieux Quartier's sunset-burnished walls. „All traditional psychology is aimed at integration, at wholeness. And now it's all to be thrown away...“ She flung her hand out the window. Davout's eyes automatically followed an invisible object on its arc from her fingers toward the street.

„And how does this theory work in practice?“ Davout asked. „Are the streets filled with psychological wrecks?“

Bitterness twisted her lips. „Psychological imbeciles, more like. Executing their conductors' orders, docile as well-fed children, happy as clams. They upload passions—anger, grief, loss—as artificial experiences, secondhand from someone else, usually so they can tell their conductor to avoid such emotions in the future. They are not people any more, they're...“ Her eyes turned to Davout.

„You saw the Silent One,“ she said. „Would you call him a person?“

„I was with him for only a day,“ Davout said. „I noticed something of a...“ *Stand by* he signed, searching for the word.

„Lack of affect?“ she interposed. „A demeanor marked by an extreme placidity?“

Truth he signed.

„When it was clear I wouldn't come back to him, he wrote me out of his memory,“ Fair Katrin said. „He replaced the memories with facts—he knows he was married to me, he knows we went to such-and-such a place or wrote such-and-such a paper—but there's nothing else there. No feelings, no real memories

good or bad, no understanding, nothing left from almost two centuries together.“ Tears glittered in her eyes. „I’d rather he felt anything at all—I’d rather he hated me than feel this apathy!“

Davout reached across the little table and took her hand. „It is his decision,“ he said, „and his loss.“

„It is all our loss,“ she said. Reflected sunset flavored her tears with the color of roses. „The man we loved is gone. And millions are gone with him—millions of little half-alive souls, programmed for happiness and unconcern.“ She tipped the bottle into her glass, received only a sluicing of dregs.

„Let’s have another,“ she said.

When he left, some hours later, he embraced her, kissed her, let his lips linger on hers for perhaps an extra half-second. She blinked up at him in wine-muddled surprise, and then he took his leave.

„How did you find my sib?“ Red Katrin asked.

„Unhappy,“ Davout said. „Confused. Lonely, I think. Living in a little apartment like a cell, with icons and memories.“

I know she signed, and turned on him a knowing green-eyed look.

„Are you planning on taking her away from all that? To the stars, perhaps?“

Davout’s surprise was brief. He looked away and murmured, „I didn’t know I was so transparent.“

A smile touched her lips. *Apologies* she signed. „I’ve lived with Old Davout for nearly two hundred years. You and he haven’t grown so very far apart in that time. My fair sib deserves happiness, and so do you... if you can provide it, so much the better. But I wonder if you are not moving too fast, if you have thought it all out.“

Moving fast, Davout wondered. His life seemed so very slow now, a creeping dance with agony, each move a lifetime.

He glanced out at Chesapeake Bay, saw his second perfect sunset in only a few hours—the same sunset he’d watched from Fair Katrin’s apartment, now radiating its red glories on the other side of the Atlantic. A few water-skaters sped toward home on their silver blades. He sat with Red Katrin on a porch swing, looking down the long green sward to the bayfront, the old wooden pier, and the sparkling water, that profound, deep blue that sang of home to Davout’s soul. Red Katrin wrapped herself against the breeze in a fringed, autumn-colored shawl. Davout sipped coffee from gold-rimmed porcelain, set the cup into its saucer.

„I wondered if I was being untrue to my Katrin,“ he said. „But they are really the same person, aren’t they? If I were to pursue some other woman now, I would know I was committing a betrayal. But how can I betray Katrin with herself?“

An uncertain look crossed Red Katrin’s face. „I’ve downloaded them both,“ she said hesitantly, „and I’m not certain that the Dark and Fair Katrins are quite the same person. Or ever were.“

Not the same—of course he knew that. Fair Katrin was not a perfect copy of her older sib—she had flaws, clear enough. She had been damaged, somehow. But the flaws could be worked on, the damage repaired. Conquered. There was infinite time. He would see it done.

Question „And how do your sibs differ, then?“ he asked. „Other than obvious differences in condition and profession?“

She drew her legs up and rested her chin on her knees. Her green eyes were pensive. „Matters of love,“ she said, „and happiness.“

And further she would not say.

Davout took Fair Katrin to Tangier for the afternoon and walked with her up on the old palace walls. Below them, white in the sun, the curved mole built by Charles II cleaved the Middle Sea, a thin crescent moon laid upon the perfect shimmering azure. (*Home! home!*, the waters cried.) The sea breeze lashed her blonde hair across her face, snapped little sonic booms from the sleeves of his shirt.

„I have sampled some of the Silent One’s downloads,“ Davout said. „I wished to discover the nature of this artificial tranquility with which he has endowed himself.“

Fair Katrin’s lips twisted in distaste, and her fingers formed a scatologue.

„It was... interesting,“ Davout said. „There was a strange, uncomplicated quality of bliss to it. I remember experiencing the download of a master sitting zazen once, and it was an experience of a similar cast.“

„It may have been the exact same sensation.“ Sourly. „He may have just copied the Zen master’s experience and slotted it into his brain. That’s how most of the vampires do it—award themselves the joy they haven’t earned.“

„That’s a Calvinistic point of view,“ Davout offered. „That happiness can’t just happen, that it has to be earned.“

She frowned out at the sea. „There is a difference between real experience and artificial or recapitulative experience. If that’s Calvinist, so be it.“

Yes Davout signed. „Call me a Calvinist sympathizer, then. I have been enough places, done enough things, so that it matters to me that I was actually there and not living out some programmed dream of life on other worlds. I’ve experienced my sibs’ downloads—lived significant parts of their lives, moment by moment—but it is not the same as my life, as being me. I am,“ he said, leaning elbows on the palace wall, „I am myself, I am the sum of everything that happened to me, I stand on this wall, I am watching this sea, I am watching it with you, and no one else has had this experience, nor ever shall, it is ours, it belongs to us...“

She looked up at him, straw-hair flying over an unreadable expression. „Davout the Conqueror,“ she said.

No he signed. „I did not conquer alone.“

She nodded, holding his eyes for a long moment. „Yes,“ she said. „I know.“

He took Katrin the Fair in his arms and kissed her. There was a moment’s stiff surprise, and then she began to laugh, helpless peals bursting against his lips. He held her for a moment, too surprised to react, and then she broke free. She reeled along the wall, leaning for support against the old stones. Davout followed, babbling, „I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—“

She leaned back against the wall. Words burst half-hysterical from her lips, in between bursts of desperate, unamused laughter. „So that’s what you were after! My God! As if I hadn’t had enough of you all after all these years!“

„I apologize,“ Davout said. „Let’s forget this happened. I’ll take you home.“

She looked up at him, the laughter gone, blazing anger in its place. „The Silent One and I would have been all right if it hadn’t been for you—for our sibs!“ She flung her words like daggers, her voice breaking with passion. „You lot were the eldest, you’d already parceled out the world between you. You were only interested in psychology because my damned Red sib and your Old one

wanted insight into the characters in their histories, and because you and your dark bitch wanted a theory of the psyche to aid you in building communities on other worlds. We only got created because you were too damned lazy to do your own research!“

Davout stood, stunned. *No* he signed, „That’s not—“

„We were third,“ she cried. „We were born in third place. We got the jobs you wanted least, and while you older sibs were winning fame and glory, we were stuck in work that didn’t suit, that you’d cast off, awarded to us as if we were charity cases—“ She stepped closer, and Davout was amazed to find a white-knuckled fist being shaken in his face. „My husband was called The Silent because his sibs had already used up all the words! He was third-rate and knew it! It destroyed him! Now he’s plugging artificial satisfaction into his head because it’s the only way he’ll ever feel it.“

„If you didn’t like your life,“ Davout said, „you could have changed it. People start over all the time—we’d have helped.“ He reached toward her. „I can help you to the stars, if that’s what you want.“

She backed away. „The only help we ever needed was to get rid of you!“ A mudra, *har-de-har-har*, echoed the sarcastic laughter on Fair Katrin’s lips. „And now there’s another gap in your life, and you want me to fill it—not this time.“

Never her fingers echoed. *Never*. The laughter bubbled from her throat again.

She fled, leaving him alone and dazed on the palace wall, as the booming wind mocked his feeble protests.

„I am truly sorry,“ Red Katrin said. She leaned close to him on the porch swing, touched soft lips to his cheek. „Even though she edited her downloads, I could tell she resented us—but I truly did not know how she would react.“

Davout was frantic. He could feel Katrin slipping farther and farther away, as if she were on the edge of a precipice and her handholds were crumbling away beneath her clawed fingers.

„Is what she said true?“ he asked. „Have we been slighting them all these years? Using them, as she claims?“

„Perhaps she had some justification once,“ Red Katrin said. „I do not remember anything of the sort when we were young, when I was uploading Fair Katrin almost every day. But now...“ Her expression grew severe. „These are mature people, not without resources or intelligence—I can’t help but think that surely after a person is a century old, any problems that remain are her fault.“

As he rocked on the porch swing he could feel a wildness rising in him. My God, he thought, I am going to be alone.

His brief days of hope were gone. He stared out at the bay—the choppy water was too rough for any but the most dedicated water-skaters—and felt the pain pressing on his brain, like the two thumbs of a practiced sadist digging into the back of his skull.

„I wonder,“ he said. „Have you given any further thought to uploading my memories?“

She looked at him curiously. „It’s scarcely time yet.“

„I feel a need to share... some things.“

„Old Davout has uploaded them. You could speak to him.“

This perfectly intelligent suggestion only made him clench his teeth. He needed sense made of things, he needed things put in order, and that was not the job of his sib. Old Davout would only confirm what he already knew.

„I’ll talk to him, then,“ he said.

And then never did.

The pain was worst at night. It wasn't the sleeping alone, or merely Katrin's absence: it was the knowledge that she would always be absent, that the empty space next to him would be there forever. It was then that the horror fully struck him, and he would lie awake for hours, eyes staring into the terrible void that wrapped him in its dark cloak, while fits of trembling sped through his limbs.

I will go mad, he sometimes thought. It seemed something he could choose, as if he were a character in an Elizabethan drama who turns to the audience to announce that he will be mad now, and then in the next scene is found gnawing bones dug out of the family sepulcher. Davout could see himself being found outside, running on all fours and barking at the stars.

And then, as dawn crept across the windowsill, he would look out the window and realize, to his sorrow, that he was not yet mad, that he was condemned to another day of sanity, of pain, and of grief.

Then, one night, he did go mad. He found himself squatting on the floor in his nightshirt, the room a ruin around him: mirrors smashed, furniture broken. Blood was running down his forearms.

The door leapt off its hinges with a heave of Old Davout's shoulder. Davout realized, in a vague way, that his sib had been trying to get in for some time. He saw Red Katrin's silhouette in the door, an aureate halo around her auburn hair in the instant before Old Davout snapped on the light.

Afterward Katrin pulled the bits of broken mirror out of Davout's hands, washed and disinfected them, while his sib tried to reconstruct the green room and its antique furniture.

Davout watched his spatters of blood stain the water, threads of scarlet whirling in coreolis spirals. „I'm sorry," he said. „I think I may be losing my mind."

„I doubt that." Frowning at a bit of glass in her tweezers.

„I want to know."

Something in his voice made her look up. „Yes?"

He could see his staring reflection in her green eyes. „Read my downloads. Please. I want to know if... I'm reacting normally in all this. If I'm lucid or just..." He fell silent. Do it, he thought. Just do this one thing.

„I don't upload other people. Davout can do that. Old Davout, I mean."

No, Davout thought. His sib would understand all too well what he was up to.

„But he's me!" he said. „He'd think I'm normal!"

„Silent Davout, then. Crazy people are his specialty."

Davout wanted to make a mudra of scorn, but Red Katrin held his hands captive. Instead he gave a laugh. „He'd want me to take Lethe. Any advice he gave would be... in that direction." He made a fist of one hand, saw drops of blood well up through the cuts. „I need to know if I can stand this," he said. „If—something drastic is required."

She nodded, looked again at the sharp little spear of glass, put it deliberately on the edge of the porcelain. Her eyes narrowed in thought—Davout felt his heart vault at that look, at the familiar lines forming at the corner of Red Katrin's right eye, each one known and adored.

Please do it, he thought desperately.

„If it's that important to you," she said, „I will."

„Thank you,“ he said.

He bent his head over her and the basin, raised her hand, and pressed his lips to the flesh beaded with water and streaked with blood.

It was almost like conducting an affair, all clandestine meetings and whispered arrangements. Red Katrin did not want Old Davout to know she was uploading his sib's memories—„I would just as soon not deal with his disapproval“—and so she and Davout had to wait until he was gone for a few hours, a trip to record a lecture for Cavor's series on *Ideas and Manners*.

She settled onto the settee in the front room and covered herself with her fringed shawl. Closed her eyes. Let Davout's memories roll through her.

He sat in a chair nearby, his mouth dry. Though nearly thirty years had passed since Dark Katrin's death, he had experienced only a few weeks of that time; and Red Katrin was floating through these memories at speed, tasting here and there, skipping redundancies or moments that seemed inconsequential...

He tried to guess from her face where in his life she dwelt. The expression of shock and horror near the start was clear enough, the shuttle bursting into flames. After the shock faded, he recognized the discomfort that came with experiencing a strange mind, and flickering across her face came expressions of grief, anger, and here and there amusement; but gradually there was only a growing sadness, and lashes wet with tears. He crossed the room to kneel by her chair and take her hand. Her fingers pressed his in response... she took a breath, rolled her head away... he wanted to weep not for his grief, but for hers.

The eyes fluttered open. She shook her head. „I had to stop,“ she said. „I couldn't take it—“ She looked at him, a kind of awe in her wide green eyes. „My God, the sadness! And the need. I had no idea. I've never felt such need. I wonder what it is to be needed that way.“

He kissed her hand, her damp cheek. Her arms went around him. He felt a leap of joy, of clarity. The need was hers, now.

Davout carried her to the bed she shared with his sib, and together they worshipped memories of his Katrin.

„I will take you there,“ Davout said. His finger reached into the night sky, counted stars, one, two, three... „The planet's called Atugan. It's boiling hot, nothing but rock and desert, sulphur and slag. But we can make it home for ourselves and our children—all the species of children we desire, fish and fowl.“ A bubble of happiness filled his heart. „Dinosaurs, if you like,“ he said. „Would you like to be parent to a dinosaur?“

He felt Katrin leave the shelter of his arm, step toward the moonlit bay. Waves rumbled under the old wooden pier. „I'm not trained for terraforming,“ she said. „I'd be useless on such a trip.“

„I'm decades behind in my own field,“ Davout said. „You could learn while I caught up. You'll have Dark Katrin's downloads to help. It's all possible.“

She turned toward him. The lights of the house glowed yellow off her pale face, off her swift fingers as she signed.

Regret „I have lived with Old Davout for near two centuries,“ she said.

His life, for a moment, seemed to skip off its internal track; he felt himself suspended, poised at the top of an arc just before the fall.

Her eyes brooded up at the house, where Old Davout paced and sipped coffee and pondered his life of Maxwell. The mudras at her fingertips were unreadable in the dark.

„I will do as I did before,“ she said. „I cannot go with you, but my other self will.“

Davout felt his life resume. „Yes,“ he said, because he was in shadow and could not sign. „By all means.“ He stepped nearer to her. „I would rather it be you,“ he whispered.

He saw wry amusement touch the corners of her mouth. „It will be me,“ she said. She stood on tiptoe, kissed his cheek. „But now I am your sister again, yes?“ Her eyes looked level into his. „Be patient. I will arrange it.“

„I will in all things obey you, madam,“ he said, and felt wild hope singing in his heart.

Davout was present at her awakening, and her hand was in his as she opened her violet eyes, the eyes of his Dark Katrin. She looked at him in perfect comprehension, lifted a hand to her black hair; and then the eyes turned to the pair standing behind him, to Old Davout and Red Katrin.

„Young man,“ Davout said, putting his hand on Davout’s shoulder, „allow me to present you to my wife.“ And then (wisest of the sibs), he bent over and whispered, a bit pointedly, into Davout’s ear, „I trust you will do the same for me, one day.“

Davout concluded, through his surprise, that the secret of a marriage that lasts two hundred years is knowing when to turn a blind eye.

„I confess I am somewhat envious,“ Red Katrin said as she and Old Davout took their leave. „I envy my twin her new life.“

„It’s your life as well,“ he said. „She is you.“ But she looked at him soberly, and her fingers formed a mudra he could not read.

He took her on honeymoon to the Rockies, used some of his seventy-eight years’ back pay to rent a sprawling cabin in a high valley above the headwaters of the Rio Grande, where the wind rolled grandly through the pines, hawks spun lazy high circles on the afternoon thermals, and the brilliant clear light blazed on white starflowers and Indian paintbrush. They went on long walks in the high hills, cooked simply in the cramped kitchen, slept beneath scratchy trade blankets, made love on crisp cotton sheets.

He arranged an office there, two desks and two chairs, back-to-back. Katrin applied herself to learning biology, ecology, nanotech, and quantum physics—she already had a good grounding, but a specialist’s knowledge was lacking. Davout tutored her, and worked hard at catching up with the latest developments in the field. She—they did not have a name for her yet, though Davout thought of her as „New Katrin“—would review Dark Katrin’s old downloads, concentrating on her work, the way she visualized a problem.

Once, opening her eyes after an upload, she looked at Davout and shook her head. „It’s strange,“ she said. „It’s me, I know it’s me, but the way she thinks—“ *I don’t understand* she signed. „It’s not memories that make us, we’re told, but patterns of thought. We are who we are because we think using certain patterns... but I do not seem to think like her at all.“

„It’s habit,“ Davout said. „Your habit is to think a different way.“

Possibly she conceded, brows knit.

Truth „You—Red Katrin—uploaded Dark Katrin before. You had no difficulty in understanding her then.“

„I did not concentrate on the technical aspects of her work, on the way she visualized and solved problems. They were beyond my skill to interpret—I paid more attention to other moments in her life.“ She lifted her eyes to Davout. „Her

moments with you, for instance. Which were very rich, and very intense, and which sometimes made me jealous.“

„No need for jealousy now.“

Perhaps she signed, but her dark eyes were thoughtful, and she turned away.

He felt Katrin's silence after that, an absence that seemed to fill the cabin with the invisible, weighty cloud of her somber thought. Katrin spent her time studying by herself or restlessly paging through Dark Katrin's downloads. At meals and in bed, she was quiet, meditative—perfectly friendly, and, he thought, not unhappy—but keeping her thoughts to herself.

She is adjusting, he thought. It is not an easy thing for someone two centuries old to change.

„I have realized,“ she said ten days later at breakfast, „that my sib—that Red Katrin—is a coward. That I am created—and the other sibs, too—to do what she would not, or dared not.“ Her violet eyes gazed levelly at Davout. „She wanted to go with you to Atugan, she wanted to feel the power of your desire... but something held her back. So I am created to do the job for her. It is my purpose... to fulfill her purpose.“

„It's her loss, then,“ Davout said, though his fingers signed *surprise*.

Alas! she signed, and Davout felt a shiver caress his spine. „But I am a coward, too!“ Katrin cried. „I am not your brave Dark Katrin, and I cannot become her!“

„Katrin,“ he said. „You are the same person—you all are!“

She shook her head. „I do not think like your Katrin. I do not have her courage. I do not know what liberated her from her fear, but it is something I do not have. And—“ She reached across the table to clasp his hand. „I do not have the feelings for you that she possessed. I simply do not. I have tried, I have had that world-eating passion read into my mind, and I compare it with what I feel, and—what I have is as nothing. I wish I felt as she did, I truly do. But if I love anyone, it is Old Davout. And...“ She let go his hand, and rose from the table. „I am a coward, and I will take the coward's way out. I must leave.“

No his fingers formed, then *please*. „You can change that,“ he said. He followed her into the bedroom. „It's just a switch in your mind, Silent Davout can throw it for you, we can love each other forever...“ She made no answer. As she began to pack, grief seized him by the throat and the words dried up. He retreated to the little kitchen, sat at the table, held his head in his hands. He looked up when she paused in the door, and froze like a deer in the violet light of her eyes.

„Fair Katrin was right,“ she said. „Our elder sibs are bastards—they use us, and not kindly.“

A few moments later he heard a car drive up, then leave. *Alas!* his fingers signed. *Alas!*

He spent the day unable to leave the cabin, unable to work, terror shivering through him. After dark, he was driven outside by the realization that he would have to sleep on sheets that were touched with Katrin's scent. He wandered by starlight across the high mountain meadow, dry soil crunching beneath his boots, and when his legs began to ache he sat down heavily in the dust.

„I am weary of my groaning...“ he thought.

It was summer, but the high mountains were chill at night, and the deep cold soaked his thoughts. The word *Lethe* floated through his mind. Who would not

choose to be happy? he asked himself. It is a switch in your mind, and someone can throw it for you.

He felt the slow, aching droplets of mourning being squeezed from his heart, one after the other, and wondered how long he could endure them, the relentless moments, each striking with the impact of a hammer, each a stunning, percussive blow...

Throw a switch, he thought, and the hammerblows would end.

„Katrin deserves mourning,“ he had told Davout the Silent, and now he had so many more Katrins to mourn, Dark Katrin and Katrin the Fair, Katrin the New and Katrin the Old. All the Katrins webbed by fate, alive or dead or merely enduring. And so he would, from necessity, endure... So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

He lay on his back, on the cold ground, gazed up at the world of stars, and tried to find the worlds, among the glittering teardrops of the heavens, where he and Katrin had rained from the sky their millions of children.

