

# Cosmigellan

## Universe Unfolding

by  
Lily Splane



Cosmigellan: Universe Unfolding

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**Cosmigellan:  
Universe Unfolding**

*A Novel*

*of*

*Cosmic Consciousness*

*by*

*Lily Splane*

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There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is society, where none intrudes,  
By the deep sea and music in its roar:  
I love not man less, but nature more,  
From these our interviews, in which I steal  
From all I may be, or have been before,  
To mingle with the Universe, and feel  
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.

—*Lord Byron*

## CHAPTER 1—Encounter

*Some things have to be believed to be seen—Ralph Hodgson*

It was something alive and it smelled like the inside of a hyena’s mouth. And Rita had been crazy enough to “rescue” it.

“*Pwdre Ser*: The Welsh name for Rot of the Stars. Also known as Star Jelly. A foul smelling falling object, reported to be a gelatinous meteor. Grayish translucent. Evaporates quickly. May be the size of a fist or, as reported in one account, as large as four feet across. Findings of *Pwdre Ser* reported in Wales, England, Ireland, and Scotland, as well as isolated parts of the northeastern United States. Cannot possibly exist—entry into the earth’s atmosphere would destroy it,” she read aloud.

“Scotland? Golpher’s snot, maybe. But what’s it doing in the southwest?” Rita said, perhaps to her two feline companions.

She had been just quietly watering her vegetables, when SPLAT! it just landed right there between the last row of corn and the first row of tomatoes. It glistened in the sunlight like a baggie full of gelatin—formless, still, unassuming—altogether odd to be landing in a garden...*to be landing anywhere at all.*

Rita stared at it for a long time, then looked around for the prankster who must have launched it. She clenched her fists and clamped her jaw shut.

It was him, she knew it. He had done this obnoxious thing, it was his style. It was probably something highly corrosive that would burn her vegetables. To destroy that to which she gave her most attention and care would be so like him. But she had seen her father leave very early that morning.

She had leaned out of her bed and peeked through the curtain as his diesel truck bellowed past her window. She had breathed a sigh of relief to be alone. Not to be alone, per se, but to be the kind of alone that accompanied her father’s absence. An intermission kind of alone, a self-acknowledging kind of alone. An aloneness that would not be so welcome under other circumstances. But it was as necessary as finally falling asleep after a horrid nightmare, though you had to get up in half an hour. Now there was no one on the ranch but herself, a few strolling cats, an aged dog on his daily “sniffari.”

The vast, empty, sunbaked space surrounding her on her island in

the middle of civilization could cloak no one. The ranch was like a giant, hungry, waiting beast. It could drain the life out of anything that stayed there too long—one molecule at a time; one would hardly notice.

She stared down at the thing again, circling around it, barely breathing. It seemed to almost pulse—but dysrhythmically—flushing several shades, returning to a neutral clear. She squirted it with the hose. It recoiled, fluttered.

Fear: It afraid of her; she afraid of it. All the caution in the world would not seem like enough.

“Photon bombardment diminishes this Relation Event,” the voice in her head pleaded. It was her voice, but it was not her thought. She cupped her hands over her ears. *I must have overdosed on my medications again.* It was an odd thing to hear, that begging voice inside her head, her voice, but not her thought.

“Please, help this Relation Event,” the non-self voice pleaded. “This Relation Event is displaced,” it continued.

Rita gazed at the shapeless gelatinous mass quivering in the dirt. *This is significant, this thing. Let’s forget for just an instant that I am losing my mind, and go with the first impulse.* She stooped closer. A putrid odor violated her sinuses, reamed out her head, sending her backwards, arms flailing. She just caught herself before sitting in the zucchini patch.

She struggled to her feet, scrunched up her face in an effort to block the stench, and scooped up the mass with her shovel, pouring it into a large bucket. It couldn’t have weighed more than thirty pounds, as it slid gracefully, collectedly from her shovel into the bucket. It conveyed to her in her voice, into her thoughts: Anticipation, hope.

She turned off the faucet and carried the bucket slowly and painfully through the garden gate, threading her way carefully between the mounds of car parts and half-rebuilt engines, down to the dilapidated ranch house. The termite-riddled steps groaned as she hoisted the bucket up and through the kitchen door, barely missing banging the bucket on the corner of the stove, carrying it on down the hall and into the coolness of the living room.

The gelatinous thing touched her mind with tender feelings of relief, with gratitude, with wishes to repay her.

*When the medications wear off, I’ll laugh at what I just did, at the stupid feelings, at that voice.* Rita grabbed a reference volume of unusual natural phenomena from one of the many bookshelves crowding the walls of the small living room, gave one last glance to the bucket filled with formless but organized gelatin, and staggered to the bedroom to relieve her aching arthritic wrists and back. She opened the book to

the index, found what she was looking for, read it, and slammed both the book and her eyes shut.

The chatter from the TV in the living room faded from Rita's consciousness as she lay aching on her sponge-layered bed. The pain receded gradually, giving way to random hypnogogic sounds and images. This was always her favorite part of sleep: being aware of her external world while other worlds, other possibilities threw parties in her head.

A sweet smell, like honeysuckle smeared in carrion paste, permeates this pre-dream place. Voices: Mother. *I miss her.* Green icicles in a dense fog. Darkness. Falling . . . falling.

Napjerk.

For just a second, she remembers she is in her room, then sleeps.

The same sickening sweet smell. Smelled it before, but can't recall where. The smell permeates the inside of this almost clear bubble; it's like looking through Lucite that's been scrubbed with a Brillo pad. Outside, the green landscape pulls away from her at a frightening speed. Can't stop it. All around, thousands, maybe millions of bubbles like hers float and soar by. Above, the dark swallows her, sucks her into the void. Shrinking green planet below.

She is spaceborn, free, alone, responding to a greater force than the gravity from the now almost invisible speck of a planet. Something pulling at her, warping the bubble, stretching it. Can't see anymore. Awful unstoppable sensation of increasing acceleration. Blackness and silence everywhere. She is afraid, horribly afraid. *I have no heartbeat, I have no breath. . . .*

*Wake up. This is bad. Wake up NOW.*

Jerking with a grunt, Rita was relieved she still had a heartbeat, even though it was rapid. Lifting the pillow blocking her view, she read the clock. It was 7:20 P.M. already, cooler now, and the room was pleasantly lit from the rays of a setting sun.

The voices from the living room TV leaped into her consciousness. Tom Brokaw's voice pierced into the coziness of the bedroom. He was describing yet another airline disaster and the ensuing investigation. Must have been a bad one for the network to have broken in during *Wheel Of Fortune*.

Rita didn't notice right away, but his narrative sounded very peculiar. It was like . . . everything he said was being repeated, but not exactly like an echo. How weird. The technicians must be screwing up the transmission, like some kind of feedback or something. She wondered if feedback was possible during satellite transmissions.

She often thought how strange it was to ponder or even notice

such things. As a single 34-year-old woman, it just didn't seem normal to her that she should wonder about such things as feedback in satellite transmissions. Women her age rarely talked or thought of such things. This could account for her shortage of friends.

The last dinner party Rita was invited to, the hostess led her away into a corner of the kitchen and politely but firmly asked her to shut her cake-hole. "None of the guests want to hear about the latest book you've read on quantum physics or the emerging science of chaos," her friend had said. "No one understands what the hell you were talking about," she had said. "You always monopolize the conversation with your strange ideas," she had said. "Can't you talk about normal things, like national politics, Ted's new car, or Nancy's pregnancy, like everyone else?"

*No, I can't. So I don't, fuck you very much.*

The echo in the living room stopped suddenly. The news was over, and commercials rudely polluted the airwaves in their usual periodic manner. Rita creaked out of bed and ambled into the living room to change the channel.

The bucket: It was empty. How could it be empty? She knelt down painfully and patted the thick dark blue carpeting for wetness; it was dry. Her thoughts raced. *God, the cats ate it!* No, that's idiotic. It evaporated? No, not enough time. Too much of it, too stinky. Besides it wasn't loose like water or any other liquid. It had a kind of shapeless, contained, organized form—like Jello in a Ziplock bag. *What the hell am I thinking? Nothing is missing.* Only things that exist can be missing. She must have dreamed it or something. Yeah, that's it. Just part of that damn awful dream. Nothing to worry—

It rose slowly, quietly in the corner, somehow pulling itself into a recognizable shape, a form that didn't make sense to Rita, but somehow *did*. It stood, glistening, now as tall as she, translucent in most places except for . . . vacuoles. And small, colored, shiny . . . organelles. It couldn't be real, but yet there it stood, or rather, balanced. It was not used to this shape. Rita's head throbbed with the implications of it, of her understanding and odd acceptance of it. She thought she should be horrified, at least excited, but she could not feel fear, only astonishment.

"The seven fifty-seven then banked and dove headlong into the tower, leaving flaming fragments in its wake." Tom Brokaw asserted the details of the airline disaster from the corner of the room. Rita looked at the TV, then at the giant Jello baggie. The news was definitely over. Tom Brokaw's voice, however, reported on—clearly from the wavering gelatinous mass. An unexpectedly *odorless* mass.

It was just too much. Real, but impossible. Acceptable, but

baffling. Rita watched it carefully, not moving, barely breathing, as it emulated perfectly every word, every voice inflection, every nuance. Then, in her head, in her own voice, invading her whirling, privately astounded thoughts: “Touch. Touch this Relation Event as Of The One.”

Without even thinking or questioning, Rita advanced unafraid towards tall Jello. Gingerly her fingers danced on the cool surface of . . . *him*.

He gently caressed her brain, hugged it, held it in a field of almost religious tenderness. Invisible electric Jello fingers probed, smoothed, questioned, absorbed, reassured, collected, organized, sorted, understood every fissure and neuronal impulse of her stunned, foggy brain. A membrane of liquid understanding shrouded her mind.

Rita’s vision faded in and out, sparkling bugs swarmed around her head. She couldn’t remember breathing. It seemed to be lasting forever—for just an instant.

The living room returned to her consciousness. Or had *she* returned to *it*? It was hard to tell.

Tall Jello stood in the corner, motionless, silent. Rita felt him study her, with his eyeless eyes. She waited for what she knew would come.

“This Relation Event understands Relation Rita. The Relation Rita understands this Relation Event. This is truth,” he said in Tom Brokaw’s voice.

A wave of utter joy, of being alive and experiencing this, splashed over her, almost drowning her good sense. *To hell with good sense, this is much too extraordinary to flush out for the sake of the rational world.* The rational world offered very little to her other than pain, frustration and aggravation. This, *this* was important. Front seat stuff.

Rita found herself answering, “I understand you just fine. Why are you talking like Tom Brokaw?”

“The Relation Rita’s voice confuses Relation Rita. The transmitted image has a more acceptable voice. This is truth.”

“Truth, yeah.” *So is it true the Jello Company sent you here to fuck with my reality?* “Who are you? Where did you come from?” she decided to ask.

“Transmission voice cannot accommodate an answer. This Relation Event is displaced . . . tired. Must rest. Water—please give this Relation Event water.”

Rita obligingly went to the kitchen and filled up a plastic one-gallon container. When it was filling, she searched for other containers. From the looks of Tall Jello, he’d need plenty. She tried to guess how he’d drink it. Before she had the third jug filled, Tall Jello slimed across

the rough, wooden, unmaintained kitchen floor, shorter and wider now than when he stood in the living room.

“Jesus, watch it! You’ll get splinters in your baggie!” she blurted out, not thinking. Looking closer Rita could see that he was not really sliming across the floor, but carefully extending pseudopodia of himself and allowing the rest of him to flow into the protrusions. He left no slimy wet trail, and it appeared that he could be completely comfortable on almost any surface. Smoothly he advanced his glistening, almost see-through mass up close to Rita, then stretched up beside her to her height. A pseudopod from his left side pulled away from his greater mass and extended into the opening of a full container. The liquid disappeared with incredible speed. He plunged the upper part of his “body” under the running faucet. His form filled out visibly, inch by inch as he soaked in the water. He must have put away six gallons before he finally stopped and collapsed into a clear, sloshy, bean-bag-like thing at the base of the sink cabinet.

Rita stared at it for several minutes, spoke to it, prodded it with her bare toe. It wouldn’t respond.

Not knowing what else to do, Rita passed several hours in her bed, wondering whether the Relation Tall Jello would piss on the kitchen floor—if he did piss. She then wondered if he was hungry, and what he ate that she might have on hand. She saw no evidence of a mouth, or an asshole, or any orifice. Come to think of it, he didn’t even have any organs that she could see, just *things* in his transparent mass that looked very much to her like cell organelles and vacuoles. He drank water through his “skin”; perhaps wastes also left the same way. The thought of waste products spontaneously oozing from membranes on such a large scale did not please her. She hoped he had more control than that, or that she could find her long lost mop.

Silly thoughts, petty concerns. For chrissakes, this thing had intelligence and could emulate human voices. But no visible nervous system. *How absolutely unbelievable. How utterly impossible.*

Rita’s life was beginning to take a very strange turn. She dared assume things would never be the same again. But curiously, this most unusual event had not disturbed her in the least. It was almost like she expected it to happen.

And most interesting of all, there would be no more interest in going to dinner parties, ruining the conversation with her strange ideas, with her talk of unusual theories and speculations, her talk of the alien that now rested in a big shapeless blob, as real as cat barf, on her kitchen floor. Then she thought of her father in the next house.

Rita would have to keep this a secret from her father. His rigid,

structured reality would not allow for him to step out of the 1950s, much less understand or accept a being from somewhere else. God, the thought was ludicrous. “Excuse me, Dad? Allow me to introduce you to my new roommate, Tall Jello. If his voice sounds familiar, it’s because the first earth voice he heard happened to be Tom Brokaw reporting the evening news. I’ll pay any extra for the water bill.”

No, never. This would just have to be one more secret she kept from him. In fact, she would have to protect her alien friend from him.

*Alien friend.* She laughed slightly as she considered how and when she had actually decided he was her friend. Rita could not recall ever feeling fear at any point. She seemed to be taking the whole incident very calmly, as if it happened every day around this desolate, dried-up ranch.

There was so much to learn; Rita had so many questions. Would he be able to tell her where he came from and how he got here? Or why he was here?

Of more immediate importance: How was she going to continue to take care of this thing? She had to, didn’t she? It wasn’t the same as taking in an exhausted bird or a hurt rabbit. She just couldn’t ignore him or kick him out once she thought he was OK. He needed her.

Her responsibility, now. Her problem. Her new friend, maybe? *Will you stay with me if I take care of you, or will you quiver a curt “ta-ta” once you’re stronger?*

The two Ritas argued loudly in her head:

“You idiot, you don’t know what you’re dealing with here. Why are you so goddamn trusting?”

“This is a once in a lifetime opportunity—a once in a *hundred lifetimes* opportunity! How can I *not* do everything I possibly can, everything I can possibly think of, to help this amazing creature?”

“Yeah, you’ll lay it all on the line, just like you always do, and get screwed again. Just wait.”

“How in the hell can you say that? He’s not even human. How can you know what he’ll do?”

“I know your track record, bitch. When are you gonna stop playing rescuer and let someone come to *your* rescue for just once?”

“What do I need rescuing from? I’m doing fine, considering.”

“Rita dammit, your life is a toilet. You’re crippled, on a fixed income, loveless, and you live next door to a tyrant who’s delighted to see you this way. You’re a prisoner in your own life.”

“Someday the writing will pay off. It’ll get better. It has to.”

“Someday. Someday. How about now? What’s wrong with now?”

Growing sleepiness turned the familiar dialog into gibberish. Rita

drifted into hypnogogic fantasy once again on her way to the place where dreams incubate.

Her mom’s voice startled her: “Rita, what do you want?” Need to cry, but too busy now. Images of a long path ascending into a cobalt fog. Horses galloping across an ochre moor overlooking a stormy sea. Carrots spinning in a dark pool—vermilion flashes. Not carrots—stars. Stars contracting—orange streaks squeezing into blue pinpoints, spinning hideously. Spinning, getting blacker, denser, tighter.

Explosion of white fury. Her bubble is warped and lumpy. She can barely see the ribbon of stars streaming away through the clear, distorted walls. Slowing now, opening up, space dilates into an infinite carbon canvas flecked with silver. A blue sphere approaches up ahead: *My destination....*



## CHAPTER 2—Becoming

*We are what we pretend to be—Harlan Ellison*

Rita was jolted awake by a startled, muffled masculine scream coming from the living room. She didn't realize she had fallen asleep—maybe she wasn't even awake quite yet. Confusion. Alarm. It was pitch black in the bedroom. For just a nanosecond she wanted to remain in bed. Images of the alien's jelly finger stuck and steaming in a wall socket, of her father stumbling over the gelatinous thing, lurched through her sleep-numbed mind.

Curiosity yanked her painfully to a standing position, and Rita stepped cautiously towards the hall. What would she do if she didn't like what she saw?

Creeping down the hall, clutching the shelves to steady herself, wanting to turn back but finding her cowardice too weak, she peered around the corner into the living room. Unexpectedly, she found the overhead light had been turned up to full power.

Tall Jello stood quivering, books strewn about him on the living room floor. Every shelf was emptied; all three hundred twenty-five of Rita's carefully cataloged books were on the floor.

“What the hell are you doing in here? Why did you scream?”

Just then the creature turned towards her and extended a right pseudopod of solid oak. It hung heavily, tugging at his plastic-like membrane. “This Relation Event tried to translate something...there.” He twisted his gelatinous pillar to indicate the corner of the room, where an oak end table had been. “The field of this Relation Event is too weak. This Relation Event is incorrect,” he said in a sad Tom Brokaw voice.

“What field? What the hell were you trying to do, mate with my furniture?” Rita's astonishment mutated into anger and impatience. She fought to remain calm. “Please explain to me what you're doing. My books. What happened to my table and your...arm?” Her mind went crazy, hopping from theory to theory, groping for some kind of explanation. The scene was absurd, ridiculous.

“This Relation Event wants to learn of Relation Rita's kind; to do so this Relation Event must translate to one of Relation Rita's kind. The table does not translate.

“Relation Rita's mind reveals to this Relation Event many things;

the books tell more—things that this Relation Event wishes to experience. But there is interference from Relation Rita’s electronic companions. This Relation Event will destroy them if the field is allowed to dominate. This Relation Event cannot translate here.”

Rita felt her eyes open wider and her jaw slip a few cogs. He *couldn’t* be telling her what she *thought* he was telling her. “You mean, you can transmute matter—change into a human by using furniture?” After she said it she felt incredibly stupid. Transmutation of elements was the fantasy of ancient alchemists—or the nightmare nuclear reaction going on inside zillions of stars.

“Yes.” The answer came boldly, flatly. There was almost “Can’t everyone?” implied in his abrupt answer, but she dismissed it.

“Uh...could you do it outside, away from the electronics equipment?” she asked as if she had it all figured out. *Of course, fool, we do this kind of thing around here every day.*

“This Relation Event needs organic matter to translate. This Relation Event...will be?. . . like Relation Rita.”

“Wait a minute. You’re going to look like me? That’s a real bad idea. Can’t you be somebody else?”

“This Relation Event needs pattern images. Pictures. Or, from Relation Rita’s mind can be found a strong pattern image.” He reached an extension out, groping for her.

Rita jerked backwards. “Let’s be more systematic about this.” Could he really become a man? Could she help him create a man? The idea excited her. She thought about all the books she had; some must have nice looking men in them, even a Playgirl magazine would be good. Bending over to rifle through the disarray of her beloved books, she lurched back up in horror: All the pages were blank. Fingering through them, she couldn’t find even one damn book without blank pages. “You erased my books! God dammit you erased all my books!”

Tall Jello stood motionless. If he had had a face, he might have looked puzzled. Or even guilty. After several dead seconds, he said, “Absorbed the knowledge. Learned of Relation Rita’s world. This Relation Event is incorrect?” Tom Brokaw had never sounded so remorseful.

“You sucked the ink right off the paper? The *writing* is not the knowledge! The writing is *symbolic*. What did you do with all the ink?” He still looked murky-clear.

“Translate it. Can do nothing else with it. Strange, that knowledge should have waste products.”

“Hell, *some* knowledge *is* a waste product,” Rita muttered as she gathered the corpses of her cherished volumes of astronomy, physiology,

anatomy, nutrition, biology, psychology, physics and chemistry. An entire lifetime collection of reference sources, sponged up inside two hours by a knowledge-lusting alien. This just couldn't be happening.

As Rita was replacing the blank books to the shelves, it dawned on her that she could use any picture she wanted for Tall Jello's translation. And she had a perfect choice.

Rita turned to reach for a video tape. Placing it in the VCR, she instructed her curious friend to watch it carefully, remember it, absorb it. This would be his new human form. After all, it was very sad to have such an obscene and hopeless crush on an actor that one would never meet. The building excitement energized her. If this could really work. . . .

He watched the images on the TV screen intently, or so Rita imagined. "This pattern appeals to Relation Rita?" he asked in the flawlessly emulated voice of the sultry actor.

"Uh...yeah. Yes," Rita said, surprised. "Is this going to work—really? You don't *have* to look like a Glad bag full of Dippity-Do?" She slammed her mouth shut just as the unintentional insult escaped.

Tall Jello did not seem offended as he neared the VCR, placing a left pseudopod on the VCR door. Tiny tendrils oozed through the narrow cracks beside the door and deftly scanned the tape passing by the playback head. Small flitting sparks sprayed in all directions as Tall Jello's fluid turned violet. The images of the man of Rita's fantasies dissolved into non-signal snow on the TV screen. *Shit, he's erased my tape.*

Returning to his usual murky-clear color, he said in the actor's silky voice, "Done. This Relation Event remembers the human. Can allow this Relation Event's field full strength outside. Translation will be completed there."

"Before we go, tell me one thing. What the hell is a field?"

"In Relation Rita's books...there is no complete description. The field of the All That Is."

"All That Is? You mean, God?"

"What is God?"

"I was hoping you could tell me...eventually." She found her copy of *World Religions* on the floor, and leaned down to get it. "Did you scan this book? Many humans believe in a supreme being, an intelligent force. Are they right?"

"God: An anthropic punishing/rewarding parent-surrogate who resides in a fictitious wherewhen. Interesting delusion.

"The field is The All That Is. The field is Of The One. The field is Being."

Was this an answer? Rita couldn't be sure she understood what he had said. She decided not to pursue it. Trusting blindly, she motioned the being to follow her into the kitchen. Holding the door for him, she watched in amazement as he expertly navigated the porch steps, flowing easily into advancing sections of himself.

It was cool and dark out, but the landscape was well defined by a full moon slowly squeezing up in the east. A gentle summer breeze whispered from the east in a typical California Santa Ana fashion, drying and mummifying tubers and corn harvested from the week's labors.

Tall Jello's mass glistened and sparkled beautifully in the soft lunar glow as he inched his way behind, looking as if he were laboring to maintain a height equal to Rita's seventy inches. They stopped near the garden gate where she had scraped him up off a searing mound just hours before.

He bobbed and fluttered in shimmery rainbow colors. Every so often, his form would seem to disappear when the angle changed, then flash back into view. He reminded Rita of a mucus-draped diamond with a board stuck in it, the moonlight frolicking on and through his mass, showing colors unimaginable to her before. She felt almost sad that his unusual beauty would be traded in for human form.

Rita hurried to mentally prepare herself for the transformation about to occur. She had every confidence that it would occur, though logic strained her faith that this being spoke of real things. She knew she would have difficulty in convincing herself that the creature's final form was not going to be the genuine article, just someone who looked, sounded, and acted like the actor. Her already strange experience was about to evolve into a fantastic fantasy, and she had no idea how far she could take it.

"How will you do this? Do you need me to help?"

"Supply organic material. Enough mass to equal the mass of the human...plus eighty percent."

"I don't know how much he weighs! A hundred eighty pounds, I'd guess. Plus eighty percent. That's another...one hundred forty-four pounds." Rita limped-ran around the garden with a wheelbarrow gathering cornstalks, compost, uprooted potatoes. In her excitement, she bolted out of the garden and wheeled on down to the orchard where she collected leaves and fallen fruit. The load was getting heavy—should be about right. *A man made of vegetable matter, wasn't that a trip.*

The overloaded wheelbarrow balked and got stuck a few times on the trip back up the small incline to the garden where Tall Jello waited patiently. Dumping the load beside him like a pagan peasant

bringing offerings to appease one of her gods, Rita repeated her frenzied gathering of vegetation until she was satisfied she had enough.

The glistening mass leaned over into the wheelbarrow, wobbling and shuddering, extending several pseudopodia around the huge pile of matter. Tall Jello was no longer tall, or clear. His entire mass vibrated and hummed in hot lavender infrasound.

Rita's ears began to ring and her chest vibrated as the low, deep sound resonated in the air. The ground buzzed. Long spirals of slow electricity seeped from the humming purple mass swaying near the wheelbarrow. Electric moths casually leaped and meandered in fixed orbits around the mixture of lavender gelatin and changing vegetable matter.

Suddenly, the electric moths organized and assembled into a recognizable pattern. All of the matter somehow consumed, the lavender heap stood, circling electric moths dragging strings of burning slow liquid electricity into forms: human legs, a torso, arms, a head.

He seemed taller than Rita now, but she couldn't be sure because she thought she was going to pass out from the noise. Dizziness and nausea tore at her insides as the molten electric human pulsated before her. Rita's vision became blurred, then double. The shadows of the night warped in a sickening dance. She fought to form thoughts in her liquefying, roily mind. She could barely make out the faint, distorted bark of the dog in the distance.

Rita collapsed to her knees and the hard ground collided with her face as she doubled over, crashing slowly in dilated, measured time frames. The steamy vibrating air and ground folded in around her. Disorientation and confusion ripped at her brain, but she was intent on riding it out, on watching every last electrical charge split the air, gushing and zipping through, over and around the unearthly apparition before her.

Then, there in the brightening moonlight, his shape and features slowly took form, solidified and cooled, following precisely the image pattern remembered from the video tape. The oppressive infrasonic sound-net dissipated, leaving Rita's head suddenly clear and emptied like an ancient cavern. Her vision warped back to normal and she could see him: the human male, standing above her, looking down—smiling, she thought. It was several seconds before Rita realized that he was completely stark naked.

Rita groaned to her feet and stood, unsteady and dumbfounded, staring up into the man's shadowed face. Slowly she walked around him, and he turned in place, following her with a frozen, unsettling gaze, until the moonlight solidly struck his magnificent features. He

was a dead ringer for the actor: an exact copy. His beauty doubled Rita's sensitivity to the cool night air. She shivered in awe.

*This is a god. I have witnessed creation itself.* "Are you...done?" She could think of nothing more intelligent to say.

The newly created man moaned and grunted several animal-like noises, opened and closed his mouth several times, seeming to experiment with different ways to make sounds. After a few unintelligible phrases and even more facial contortions, he answered in that seductive silky voice. "This Relation Event is completed, Relation Rita."

Rita's mouth hung open. For a minute there she didn't think he would be able to utter one intelligent word. Now his voice was as confident and assured as if it were the actor speaking to her. She wanted to cry in sheer amazement. It would be difficult for Rita to keep reminding herself that Tall Jello was in there.

He brought his unfamiliar hands up to his face, turning them, examining them, then caressing his well-developed upper arms, his full chest, his chiseled face. "Very strange, this flesh. It moves in only three dimensions." He paused for a moment, still running his hands over his body. "But it is well suited to this dry planet. It is compact, contained, and very durable."

Suddenly, a look of distress overtook his expression of wonder, and Rita could see tears glisten in his eyes as the moonlight washed over his face. "Different...limited senses. And how very...isolated."

There was no mistaking it: he was sad. Maybe he regretted what he had done. Impulsively, Rita reached for his hand. He felt real, warm, the pulse was right. There seemed to be nothing about him that was not convincingly human.

"Let's go back into the house," she said, tugging at his hand and finding unexpected resistance. She never stopped to think that he would have to learn how to walk, how to coordinate and guide each step. He proceeded clumsily, watching her small steps carefully, imitating her movements. Then, his gait became perfectly fluid, as if he had walked this way always.



## CHAPTER 3—Discoveries

*There are times when one must choose between being human  
and having good taste—Bertolt Brecht*

Rita trembled, both excited and disturbed by his nudity as he lead him to the couch and gently pressed on his shoulders until he flopped down. He sat there, staring right through her like one of Rita’s cats would do if she forgot to feed it, absent-mindedly stroking the fibers of the cushions with his left hand. Rita impulsively jumped from her chair to get something to cover him. She would have to ask him later how he had copied with such precision the details of human male anatomy, all from a clothed image on a video tape.

Easing the unfolded sheet over his lap Rita explained, “Humans usually wear coverings when in the company of other humans they don’t know intimately.”

“But, this Relation Event does know Relation Rita,” he said softly, cocking his head as if he didn’t understand. She would have been shocked, even angry had she not remembered him crawling around inside her head, entwining his invisible jelly fingers around every neuron, tasting every neurotransmitter, absorbing her every thought and memory. It would have been worse than rape—had she not consented to it.

“Relation Rita is frightened? Please do not be afraid. This Relation Event knows Relation Rita. This Relation Event feels what Relation Rita feels.” Then, more seriously, “Please, do not let fear take Relation Rita. Relation Rita must not....*spindle.*”

“What? What’s this spindle stuff? How do you know what I’m thinking?”

“This Relation Event knows everything, every last detail, knows Relation Rita’s secrets, even the ones Relation Rita keeps from Relation Rita.”

“I don’t keep secrets from myself! How could I do that? If it’s in my head, I must know it!” Rita caught herself feeling almost angry, at least insulted. His self-assurance was unnerving, it even scared her a little.

“There is much about Relation Rita to which Relation Rita does not yet have access. This Relation Event does not understand why, but will in time. Relation Rita’s chemistry teaches this Relation Event.”

“You mean you can tell what I’m thinking by changes in my chemistry? That’s a bit invasive, don’t you think?”

“All of the colony joins in this manner...but, it is more difficult in this form. There is too much separateness and isolation.”

Rita didn’t know where to begin asking him questions. Millions of ideas flooded her mind. She thought he was telling her that his society, whatever kind it could be, was bonded chemically, somehow. But how he could interpret her emotions was astounding.

“How many of the mental attributes and senses do you retain from your normal form?” It seemed like a good place to start asking questions.

“Unknown in this wherewhen. Some are noticeably weakened by this barrier—skin. Dry barriers are not good for chemical communication, but this Relation Event reasons this skin is necessary for life on this planet.”

She had guessed correctly, he did motivate through chemotropism, or something like it. That would make it tough for his kind to hide their feelings and thoughts. But it would be even harder for her to accept such instant intimacy from a stranger.

“OK...uh, what do I call you? Do you have a name?”

“No.”

His bluntness irritated her. “Well then, where are you from? Maybe that’ll give me an idea for a name for you.”

“Relation Planet five of...Relation Planet orbits the star system...Relation Rita’s books call it Epsilon Eridani.”

“That’s a damn long way from here. It must be—”

“Three point two seven damn parsecs,” he chimed in, grinning. Rita could not help but laugh at the literal inclusion of profanity in his answer. He joined her laughing, then his expression dissolved to seriousness.

*Relation this, Relation that*, she moaned mentally. “Relation Planet? You have no name for your planet?”

“All names. All labels. There is no need for language in The One. Language is a function of vicinity. Those Of The One are non-local.”

She stared at him unintentionally, stunned by his answer. How could an intelligent species even operate without language? She felt uncomfortable in nameless things and looked around the room for something to trigger an idea for a name for his planet, for his kind. The title on a record album by Tangerine Dream jumped out at her. *Phaedra*.

“Do you mind if I call your planet Phaedra? And refer to you and your kind as Phaedran? It will be easier for me to talk with you.”

“This Relation Event finds the labels acceptable.”

“How did you get here? How long did it take you?”

“Unplanned. During...spindle. Many Relation Events leave the atmosphere protection and become spaceborn. This Relation Event is fortunate, perhaps others are also. Many dissolve into the substrate, this Relation Event feels the discontinuance. The encasement provides nourishment and water for several revolution cycle fragments—days, weeks.” Tears trickled down his face as sadness choked his words. So much emotion in so new a body.

Reaching across to touch his shoulder, to perhaps soothe him, Rita asked gently, “But how did you get *here*?”

“Do not know. Do not remember. The journey seems to be short subjectively, only a few cycle fragment fractions—hours. Everything begins to spin horribly, then it is all nothingness...black. Can sense nothing, smell nothing, taste nothing. Only coherent memory is of entering this planet’s atmosphere, and feeling the encasement break up. Then Relation Rita finds this Relation Event. Lose much moisture and mass.” He paused, still tearing up pitifully, struggling with his shattered memory to continue telling what little he could recall of his astounding experience.

Rita began to sense an eerie tapping inside her brain, like someone was in there trying to get her attention, trying to bring something to the surface. She dismissed the feeling and resumed listening.

“The oracle is displaced. If this Relation Event finds it, this Relation Event will know how this Relation Event comes here. The oracle records every cycle micro-fraction—minute—of the journey.”

“God, I’m sorry,” was the only thing Rita could think to say, still bothered by that nagging feeling. She squeezed his shoulder in sympathy. What a terrible thing: to leave your planet unprepared. It must have scared the protoplasm out of him. She couldn’t decide where to begin asking more questions. Every time she got answers, twenty more questions spilled into her head, begging to be asked.

“What is *spindle*? You’ve mentioned it twice now.”

“It is the ancient behavior of the colony. Relation Events cannot control it. When fear thresholds, spindle occurs. Many dissolve into the substrate. It is the ancient way.” His attitude was almost proud. Death for his kind must be some sort of mystical experience. Still, this explanation was far from adequate, and she dared drive on, asking more questions. She wished she could know him, his thoughts, as he knew hers. That talent would come in handy about now.

The Phaedran suddenly returned Rita’s consoling caress with a full body embrace, standing up, never unlocking his dark-eyed gaze from her. She almost tried to pull away, completely thrown off-guard

by his sudden burst of affection. Yet, it did not feel exactly like affection. This interpretation of his hug would have been miserably inadequate. It was affectionate—by her biased perceptions—but it was much more. It was a knowing, a sharing and giving of knowledge, feelings, impressions. Her brain buzzed as little electric moths swirled around in her head. The ringing in her ears was peculiarly pleasant as fluid electric fingers caressed her mind, bathing it in tender reassurance.

It is green, jade green all around, everywhere Rita looks. All of the mountains sparkle and glint iridescent jade green. The ground has no discernible vegetation at all, but instead is covered with a slimy ooze. The air is suffocatingly thick; she has no trouble breathing as she *wades through* the planet rather than walks upon it. A fine mist drifts upwards from the planet's surface and hangs languidly. Absolutely everything is a cool, wet, slippery, flowing *jade green*.

Gelatinous creatures mill, absorb microbial sustenance from the dense atmosphere, sporulate in private under opalescent shelves of jade green. Happiness, knowledge and contentment saturate the heavy air. Beings blush lavender as they exchange greetings and knowledge, passed as through osmosis from one gelatinous creature to another. All Beings are separate, but Of The One.

Large, clear, hard pods float in the viscous atmosphere in the distance as a near group of Beings share feelings and chemicals of happiness and mild apprehension. A distant colony has spindled. It is a time for reflection and rejoice. The young will survive, at the expense of the aged. It is the ancient code.

The air grows sticky with a sudden effusion of sweet chemicals. A newly spored Being has been abducted. Fear engulfs the colony. The stench of panic suffuses the slow, thick air. All at once, as if by command, thousands congregate and rush in a frenzied religious pilgrimage to an unmarked center. Many burst open and lose protoplasm along the way, but not one stops to pay attention. Nothing can deflect them from their single-minded migration.

For what seems like an hour, the bumping and climbing continues as they scramble to form a living minaret—a *spindle*—rising in place as Beings make their way up the center. The outside Beings trigger the ones in the middle to secrete a thick, gray ooze that cements the tower in place as younger, more fit Beings crawl to the top. Except for a very strong few, the Beings in the center die in their cement sarcophagus. At the top, the victorious climbers grow a hardened clear oval around their bodies: an aerodynamic capsule complete with water and nourishment for several weeks or months of travel. These are heaved

off the tower, out into the atmosphere. Some unlucky ones may escape the atmosphere and become forever marooned in orbit around their beautiful jade green planet. Some may open prematurely and die. Still others will open in some inhospitable area on Phaedra. Those that survive will carry on the genetic code of their race. It is the ancient way.

Rita felt herself trembling. She was somehow understanding everything she had seen, but for the life of her she couldn't understand how.

"Relation Rita has returned to this wherewhen?" the Phaedran asked softly, still holding Rita around the small of her back.

"Returned? I never left here. Did I?"

"That which is Relation Rita, was on Phaedra. Relation Rita's physical essence remained here, with this Relation."

*Of course, silly me. I do this kind of thing all the time—exist in two places at once.* Rita had seen, felt, experienced something so completely real, yet she had not left. "I couldn't have gone anywhere," she said as she glanced at the clock on the VCR. "Look, the time hasn't advanced."

"It doesn't in the fourth and fifth dimensions, at least not in a way Relation Rita would be willing to perceive. Time in the fourth dimension has no meaning—it *is* the fourth dimension—so therefore travel into the fifth dimension—being in two places at once—is possible. A very simple principle. All of spacetime is available to consciousness always, but denial of all but a single sequence of wherewhens distorts perception."

Smiling condescendingly he added, "This Relation Event realizes these are difficult concepts for humans. Relation Rita will understand soon, because Relation Rita wants to."

*Yeah, right.* "It was magnificent, your Phaedra. All jade green, opal cliffs and valleys. The air was so thick, almost liquid." The images of the soupy planet shrouded Rita's thoughts, left her speechless for a time. Thoughts of the flow of Beings rushing to spindle, crowded out the images of the surrounding beauty. It had been a very disturbing scene.

She suddenly felt horrified. "Spindle...I saw it. God, it was awful. Everyone was out of control, crazed with some kind of internal command to...that's what happened to you! Jesus, it must have come as a shock to you when you got tossed clear out of your planet's orbit."

"Yes. Unexpected. But this Relation Event continues."

Rita was abruptly jolted by his closeness and his grip around her waist. Without apologizing, she pulled away.

“Relation Rita fears this Relation Event. Why? This Relation only wishes to show Relation Rita this Relation Event’s origins.”

“It’s not you, not who you are. It’s who you’ve become. You have my hormones whipped into a froth.”

“Hormones? This Relation Event has scanned the subject ‘Sex.’ This function governs much of human behavior in this society. This Relation Event does not understand.”

“You will, if you’re all the man you appear to be,” Rita mumbled as she glanced down at his unaroused maleness.

“There is much to learn of humans. Sex is the most perplexing.”

“Sexuality may be the most studied but least understood of the human behaviors. It is biologically necessary for reproduction, but can sure as hell mess things up between a man and a woman otherwise.”

“But, how can two different species ever completely understand one another? This Relation Event does not believe this is possible. Why would humans expend so much time and effort in an attempt to do so?”

Rita couldn’t hold it back; she burst into hideously untimely laughter. *Different species?* “Men and women are of the same species, but of different sexes,” she tried to explain between guffaws.

“Two opposites of the same? Interesting, but unnecessary. Mutations from natural radiation and viral incorporation are sufficient for variation within a species.”

It was then that Rita remembered seeing sporulation on Phaedra. Of course he couldn’t understand sex. It didn’t exist for him or his kind. That realization depressed her. Almost. “Just how much of human existence do you wish to experience?” she asked, cocking her head, smiling.

“Everything possible. This form seems adaptable to much variety,” he said, looking at his hands as he turned them over several times.

“Oh, that’s encouraging. Well, let’s begin with a name for you. I can’t think of you as Tall Jello anymore. Hmm.” She thought hard about his planet, the strange society where the inhabitants gladly committed suicide for an opportunity to prove their race loyalty. *Phaedracidal Maniac?* No. She thought of his interstellar travel. “Like a cosmic explorer,” she muttered. “A Magellan of space and time...Cosmigellan!”

A frown wrinkled his forehead as he pondered Rita’s curious mating of words. “Relation Rita wishes to refer to this Relation Event by this label?”

“Yeah, it fits perfectly. Well, If you don’t like it...it was just a suggestion.”

“Cosmigellan it is. In this wherewhen. This Relation—Cosmigellan—may choose a new label. Does Relation Rita object?” He smiled warmly and reseated himself.

“No, knock yourself out. Whatever you like.”

A crease grew between his brows. “Why would Relation Cosmigellan wish to knock—”

“Just a figure of speech.”

Fatigue and hunger drove Rita to the kitchen where Cosmigellan watched her cut two chunks of lasagna from a large pan and place them on a plate, then put the plate in the microwave. He studied every movement, listened to every sound, sniffed near the oven door as if trying to absorb lasagna molecules from the air, all the time smiling his delight with the new sensations.

Learning how to eat from a plate instead of sucking his sustenance from the air proved a bit tricky at first. He pushed food into his mouth, never unlocking his gaze from Rita’s face, and chewed. A huge grin blossomed on his face. “Flavors. Good flavors. Except . . .” He stopped chewing, eyes bugging out and watering. Food exploded from a terrified smile and sprayed outwards. After gagging twice, he frowned and spit everything back into his plate, gasping for a clear breath.

“Can’t breathe and swallow at the same time. Try it without talking. Remember the physiology books?”

He nodded. Carefully watching Rita swallow, his second attempt was successful.

His dexterity with a fork would be slower in coming. Maybe he would never master it at all if he managed to make hors d’oeuvres out of an impaled eyeball. Apparently ambidextrous, he was using both hands to hold his fork. “Here, let me show you a better way to hold a fork.”

Between bites Rita asked incessant questions of his native biology. She had more trouble grasping the concepts of a “nebulous brain” than he did handling a fork, chewing and swallowing.

The nebulous brain: the brain without a brain. Free-floating intelligence within a whirlpool of electrically charged protoplasm. The whole being seemed to be one big, loose brain—a mind escaped into eddies of nutrient fluid. How weird—a mind without a head. How did they know where the “I” resided? And to top it off, each mind directly transferable—more correctly, *copiable*—to another through membrane contact, as all Phaedrans’ existence revolved around accumulating knowledge, and passing it on. The separate minds linked into one big mind, like a hologram. All parts were a complete representation of the whole. Rita wondered how big the One Mind was.

Rita was feeling more comfortable with Cosmigellan as the clock on the stove displayed eleven at night. He was absolutely fascinating. Indeed, he had read her entire library, plus he seemed to delight in telling of his strange cool, wet, homogeneous world. She no longer felt nervous when he stared into her eyes the way he did. Phantasms of the actor from whom Cosmigellan had copied his human form, flickered in her head as she sat staring back. Tall Jello was fading.

A sharp, intrusive rap hammered at the kitchen door. “Rita!” her father’s voice bellowed. She hadn’t heard the engine of his car announcing his return. Living next door to him was far too cozy a situation, especially at this very moment.

A monstrous surge of adrenaline spit into Rita’s bloodstream as she said, “Yeah?” She wouldn’t know what clever thing to say if he had rushed in and seen a nearly naked man sitting at her kitchen table.

Before Rita could even think how to handle the situation, Cosmigellan had leaped up and scaled the door entering the hall. He was clinging, naked as a centerfold, scratching at the ceiling, trying to *break through*. He began screaming incoherently, begging to be sacrificed, encouraging non-existent spindlers. It was a horrifying display.

The voice from outside asked, “What’s going on in there? Are you OK?”

Rita’s eyes darted up at Cosmigellan, then to the kitchen. *Think of something*. She grabbed at her scalp, massaged it, as if trying to produce a genie from the empty walls of the inside of her head.

“Nothing...New Age rock and roll tape,” she finally squeaked, eyes riveted on Cosmigellan dangling from the hall door like a terrified chimpanzee.

“I thought maybe you were layin’ a little leg on somebody,” Jim Grayson said, chuckling.

“It’s late. I’m going to bed. Can’t it wait?”

“I want that portable stereo your mamma left you. Mine broke. I’ll come in and get it.”

Cosmigellan was still clawing at the ceiling, whimpering.

“Shhhh! Quiet.”

“What’s that?” her father demanded. A thud at the kitchen door reminded her that she had had the forethought to lock it. “Hey, open up!”

“I lent it to Julie. She’s in Oregon on vacation,” Rita lied. *God damn him. He’s not going to take that stereo away like he did everything else Mom left me.*

“Oh. Well, when you get it back let me know. I know you don’t need it.” She heard his footsteps recede. Safe for now.

Rita’s attention returned to Cosmigellan, who gradually calmed and dropped from the top of the door. Sweat dripped from his disheveled black hair, and a tremor began to develop, spreading over his entire body.

“Don’t be scared, it’s not that bad,” she tried to tell him, not believing it herself.

“Relation Rita’s chemistry confirms that it is!”

“You mean, I triggerred that little scene?”

“It does not occur spontaneously! From Relation Rita—fear! Resentment!” he exclaimed.

It was the first time she’d heard him raise his voice. “Yes, it does. Don’t forget, you have a human body now, lots of things are likely to happen to you that you’ve never experienced before.” Rita felt a sly, sneaky smile grow on her face. “Don’t blame me if you get all wrapped up in human responses.” Silently and of its own accord, her mind enumerated the erotic possibilities.

Cosmigellan shuffled, covered in goosebumps and a film of sweat, into the living room and to the sofa. He just sat staring long-faced into his lap. He didn’t seem to be very happy at all with what he had become, apparently having a hard time dealing with the strange combination of human and Phaedran mental processes and physical attributes—a kind of cosmic identity crisis. But, observing his remarkable adaptability thus far, there was no reason to think he wouldn’t be able to sort it all out for himself in time.

Slowly, he began to snap out of his funk, asking questions pertaining to various human behaviors, straining to understand. It was all very comfortable until he asked Rita about a subject that was confusing enough to *her*; having to explain it to an alien seemed all but impossible, if not absurd.



## CHAPTER 4—A Hint of Wonder

*Space has no top, no bottom...in fact,  
it is bottomless both at the bottom and at the top—Bill Nye*

“Geez, what am I, a philosopher? I really don’t know. War exists. Always has, I guess. Men just fight with each other. Someone doesn’t like someone else’s opinions, beliefs or values, someone thinks his beliefs and values should be forced on others, someone wants something that doesn’t belong to him...I don’t know. A lot of times, the enemy is imagined—as in the fight against communism. Old power-crazed men send the young to fight, to kill without a reason to kill. It makes everyone insane, but it goes on. It probably always will.” Rita stumbled mentally. Could the concept of *differences* among members of the same species be fathomable to one from such a homogenized society? It occurred to her that differences were in fact the catalyst for war; sameness does not argue with itself.

“They *kill* each other?” Cosmigellan asked in horrified disbelief. “And women humans, do women fight?”

“That’s a very interesting question. Yes, they do, but not in the same way.” She took a long pause, trying to gather her thoughts before she bilged out some sort of female chauvinist drivel. “It’s different. We get just as angry, even just as insane. But women seem to keep it more personal. Men, on the other hand, organize committees, form armies and blow up a whole country.” It probably wasn’t quite accurate, but Rita liked it. “It’s funny, but in prehistoric times, men used to fight one on one—for females, territory, food—just like males of most other species on Earth. Now a few leaders send off thousands of younger men to kill each other for ideas, or rather *ideals*.”

“It is a displaced ancient behavior of competition?”

“Yeah, I never thought of it like that. I guess it is a sort of displacement, ruled by ancient codes that are no longer applicable. No wonder the world seems crazy to me. I don’t understand the whole mess, really. First comes judgment—of race, of religion, of ideals, of priorities, of political systems—then comes control. It seems to follow that same pattern. Humans always seem to be trying to control other humans. Maybe it’s to create sameness, homogeneity, believing that it will result in absolute peace. It would, but it would also snuff out

independent thought—the foundation of creativity--humans’ greatest asset.” Rita fell silent. She felt her breathing become shallow, then she burst forth with, “Humans are the only beings on this planet to endeavor to control their environment on such a massive scale; maybe it extends to other humans as well.” She paused again, only briefly. “The whole planet could be blown up several times over by the warheads in storage. One power has five, the other guy adds five, so the first guy adds ten more. It’s a childish kind of control, a power game that may never see a sane solution.”

“Then, this obsession with control, with acquiring and displaying power, actually decreases its effectiveness.”

“Yeah...yeah. Planet Earth needs more...men like you.” Rita realized she especially needed someone like him in her desolate life. “There’s a story, a kind of metaphor for what’s happening with bomb stockpiling,” Rita continued. “It’s a medieval story, but very applicable:

“A dragon on the outskirts of town promised not to come in and harass the townsfolk if a virgin was sacrificed to him every two years. Well, you know what happened? Pretty soon all the ladies caught on and they all ran around trying to get laid. Even the seven-year-olds were shameless. Eventually, the only virgins left were four-year-olds, and there was a law in this town against sacrificing children. In the end, the town had to fight the dragon instead of keep feeding it. Neat concept, eh?”

“Relation Rita is a philosopher. This story is interesting, but very distressing.” He sat quietly. She assumed he was mulling over the abstracts of human atrocities perpetrated upon fellow humans.

Rita added, “Men and women are very different in their concepts of fighting. There are notable exceptions on both sides of course. Human history has pretty much been dictated by the male ego.” She had just failed miserably at remaining impartial.

Cosmigellan raised his head to speak, then slumped back down on the sofa to think. He would not make eye contact.

*Lighten up, Rita.* “You must be thoroughly grossed-out by now.”

“It is deeply disturbing—war. There is no war on Phaedra, only revenge. It is an equitable solution to injustice, and as with women, it is personal.”

“Revenge?” How delicious. She couldn’t wait to hear all about it. Even more intriguing would be the reasons for it. What would such a simple, peaceful world need with revenge? “Tell me about revenge,” she almost demanded.

“It is the only rational response to...personal?...Relation Event to Relation Event injustice. Unlike war, it involves only three Relation

Events. And it happens once, then it is over. It does not go on interminably. Relation Events Of The One do not threaten or torment as a prelude to action.”

“What in the world could happen on Phaedra that would require revenge?”

“There are Relation Events that may wish to withhold knowledge from others, to refuse transfer. This is immoral. The only Relation Events desiring revenge are those that have been denied knowledge.”

“So, how in the hell do you get even, poke holes in their membranes, or what?”

“The idea of deliberately causing death to another Relation Event is repugnant. Relation Events of the One use chemical deception. Newly sporulated young are abducted and chemically altered to render them neutral to their Originators.”

Rita was almost sorry she asked. “Stealing children hardly seems equitable punishment for withholding knowledge.”

“It is not exactly stealing. Progeny are returned, but the Originators are unable to chemically bond or share knowledge with the offspring. Progeny are as strangers to the Originators, so eventually connect with other colonies.”

Rita was shocked. “Stiff penalty, losing your kids just for being secretive.”

“Selfishness and secretiveness are grounds for social ostracism. No Relation Event is killed. It is the ancient way.”

Rita remembered watching the thousands of Phaedrans in spindle, and a rush of realization filled her. “Child abduction *causes* spindle. Many *are* killed during spindle. Hasn’t the absurdity of this ever occurred to you?” The force of her remarks frightened her.

“It is the ancient way.”

And that’s that. Such grand mental and emotional sophistication. Such immensely conspicuous stupidity. Like interstellar wildebeests on their treacherous mission across a thundering river that claims vast numbers of them every year: It is as it has always been.

The conversation crawled to a tired limp. Rita was very sleepy. At least her father had not returned; that would be a nearly intolerable end to a marvelously stimulating day.

Cosmigellan requested access to the remaining books, promising not to erase them. Rita tossed him a blanket and retired to her bedroom, admiring him for the speed and competence with which he had adapted to his new form. No human could have ever accepted and adopted the ways of a species so completely different from his own.

Tomorrow would be a new adventure. Rita had an overwhelming

desire to take him around and show him human society at its most interesting. His responses could not help but be thoroughly entertaining.

Her sleep was restless. A torrent of thoughts and images inundated her groggy brain. She at first believed them to be memories of her visit to Phaedra, but realized that they were something else entirely. She was not dreaming, not remembering, but as before, was actually there. The sights and sensations were vivid and real; the weirdness of it all alternated with sparkling lilac electric moths flitting about inside her head, accompanied by that familiar low hum. He was doing it to her again—from the living room.

Rita spent most of the night and early morning hours walking among the Phaedrans unnoticed, watching them carry on their simple lives. A growing uncomfortable feeling nagged at her. Something unnerving was out of place on Phaedra, something just didn't figure and she couldn't put her finger on it. In the morning, Rita remained in bed, awake, fighting off the discomfort of the hugeness of it: the unaskable question.

She became vaguely aware of soft clicking sounds coming from the living room. It was familiar, but very much out of place. As she rose stiffly, the noises locked into place in her mind: Her computer was being used.

Rita dressed and walked into the living room where Cosmigellan sat, blanket wrapped around his waist, expertly keying in commands at the terminal. As she slowly walked around his chair, standing behind him to see the screen, he typed in a last command and sat back, waiting expectantly.

“My God, that's Citibank Online. How did you get into that database? It takes an ID number, a password and a credit card to . . .” Someday she was going to stop being so amazed at his resourcefulness and ability to pick up knowledge so phenomenally fast.

*Knowledge.* Knowledge—that was it! That was what was eating at her. “There's something I want to—”

“I have an ID number and a credit account. I created them last night,” he said, still waiting patiently for something.

He had said “I.”

“Did you access someone else's account?”

“No. It is mine. My new name is Dr. Jean-Michel Entremont. Visa card number four...ah,” he said, leaning towards the screenful of new information. “I now have a checking account as well.”

*Jesus, he's become a computer criminal on his first day here. If any of this gets traced to me, I'll be staring at gray walls and bars and begging for protection from some bruiser named Bertha.* “God, I wish

you hadn't done this."

"Why does Rita call me by this name? My chosen name is Jean-Michel."

"You'll always be Cosmigellan to me. Just tell me what the hell you're doing fucking with my computer, accessing an international banking database at three hundred dollars an hour." The anxiety leaked from her voice as well as her pores.

"I do not fuck."

"Will you quit!"

"But, Rita asks me—"

"Just tell me what you're doing on my computer, OK?"

"Collecting knowledge. And establishing credit. Rita has none, I checked."

Rita could have predicted his answer. But it seemed so odd. Such a simple being, from a simple society on a simple world. No politics, no superiors, no technology, no libraries, no news networks. Almost no social structure even existed except during spindle. It just didn't make sense that such beings should be so driven to collect vast amounts of knowledge, and by unquestioned moral code, share it with others. What use could they have for it? And where on Phaedra, for chrissakes, would they get knowledge?

"Are you finished here? I want you to explain where you get your knowledge on Phaedra."

"From each other. I have explained this before."

"New knowledge. Where do you get *new* knowledge?"

"Everywhere. Everywhen. This universe. Other universes."

"You mean, you travel all over hell and gone? How? You have no technology, no ships."

"We travel as Rita does to Phaedra, through the fourth and fifth dimensions. We go at will, anywhere we like. And we observe, learn, absorb knowledge."

This was getting hairy. Rita couldn't imagine just mentally zipping off anywhere in the universe she desired, and just be there, anywhere, instantly; it must be wonderful. He must have seen so much. She frowned in an effort to understand what she had never seen, and probably never would: the fifth dimension.

Cosmigellan touched her arm lightly, his expressionless face looking up at her. He faded into a gray mist. A low hum filled her head as electric moths zoomed through her consciousness.

She saw a planet nesting in a gravity well. She could actually see the gravity well enfolding around the planet. She saw it from one viewpoint, but even when she then traveled around it, she could still

see that same viewpoint in addition to others as she moved around the planet! She was seeing all possible viewpoints simultaneously, a superimposition of all possible views, winking in and out of existence, piling atop each other. It was impossible. Like a multidimensional collage in spacetime.

She caught her balance on the back of Cosmigellan's chair as she snapped back into the room. "Oh my God." It had been real.

"Are there other intelligent life-forms out there? Have any been to this planet?"

"Yes, many. I also have been here many times as well. Most travel in the fourth and fifth dimensions. Very few humans, and no human instruments, are aware of them. Yet, they are all around, in any randomly selected wherewhen."

She reflexively looked around her as if expecting to see the room fill with alien life-forms. It was a creepy feeling, sharing the same spacetime with unimaginable things.

"So, what are you doing with my computer when you can zap your mind all over the universe?"

"We cannot affect or act on things when we travel, we may only observe. Besides, this human form limits that ability. I may not participate in multidimensional reality without the assistance of another Phaedran in native form."

"But, you got into my brain just now, showed me the fifth dimension."

"Yes, with Rita's help. Rita understands the fourth and fifth dimensions. It is one of the secrets Rita keeps from Rita. I can help Rita see them because Rita and I are bonded."

"Bonded?"

"In synchronization, melded, connected. It allows me to know Rita, to hear Rita's thoughts, to feel what Rita feels." He sighed and sat limply in the chair. His boredom with her incessant questioning was becoming obvious.

"I am hungry," he finally said, leaning back in the chair, arms behind and supporting his head, a tired, vaguely disgusted look on his face.

"Yeah, I'll fix you some breakfast." Rita imagined she could almost feel her brain swelling inside her head. Too much strangeness. Too much understanding of the non-scientific, non-empirical kind. Many aliens, many worlds. Too damn many questions, piling up like constitutional amendments.

The Phaedran was a stupendous mixture of both abysmal prehistoric simplicity and highly evolved sophistication. His alieness

shouted out at her, reminding her of her almost forgotten promise to never lose touch with the fact that he was not who he appeared to be.

His appetite was ferocious as evidenced from the dozen eggs and eight biscuits he put away. Watching him wolf down that volume brought to mind a question Rita wasn't sure she had the bad taste to ask.

"You know about human digestion—about waste products." *Very clumsy, Rita.*

"Yes, but unlike humans or other life-forms here, I will absorb and utilize all food molecules. There will be no wastes."

"How...utterly goddamn dainty," she remarked in a nearly inaudible voice.

Rita hastily finished her measly two eggs and went to scrounge around in the bowels of her closet for some old clothes that could fit Cosmigellan. She found a pair of holey jeans and a huge, baggy, dark green T-shirt; they would have to do until Cosmigellan and she got to K-Mart for something better.

He took the pants from Rita and glared at them as if she had just asked him to tie a plastic bag around his head. "I dislike body coverings; they smother me—my skin," he complained.

"I'm sorry, but it's the custom here. I'm taking you downtown to get some better clothes. We wouldn't want to attract too much attention, would we?"

He fell silent as he eased reluctantly into the pants, contorting his face in an exaggerated grimace. The T-shirt seemed to go on with less protest from her oversensitive Phaedran friend. He looked like a bum, but no one would really notice unless they went someplace snobby. Now, to find some thongs that would fit his feet. It's amazing how many things she'd refused to discard over the years; men's jeans and thongs were just some of them.

"I don't have much money, but I think I can get you a new pair of slacks and a couple of shirts. Maybe some shoes, too. Not enough money for underwear. Oh well, you'd probably hate them anyway."

"Rita, do not worry about currency. I transferred money from my account into Rita's this morning."

"God, Cos—how much?"

"Five thousand dollars. It is not enough?"

"Yeah, that's just enough to raise suspicion from every government agency...shit, if the Social Security finds out. . . ."

"Rita is distressed. Why does money distress Rita? Rita's culture worships currency. I do not understand." Two wrinkles of concern pleated his forehead. He reached down for her hand and pulled her to

him, staring at her with dark hypnotic eyes.

Rita was forgetting to remember who he wasn't, again.

"It's hard to explain, but some government agencies don't want people like me to have too much—even enough—money. Disabled people are supposed to flush their dreams and just shut up and exist." She pulled away from his embrace. "Never mind, let's go. We can get you some better clothes and stuff after we hit the ATM."

Cosmigellan took great interest in his first trip in a car, watching every movement, listening to every noise. This must seem like a miserably slow method of travel compared to zipping through the fourth and fifth dimensions at will, arriving instantaneously anywhere his mind chose. He must have seen so much. Did Rita remember him saying "other universes?" My God, what a revelation. Theoretical physicists have been flogging themselves for decades over the multiple universe idea. Rita didn't understand why, but the prospect of asking Cosmigellan about such things—and getting answers—almost terrified her. Who would she be able to tell? Who would believe her, a no-name ex-biochemist, wanna-be writer? Maybe deep down inside she feared she would die knowing the truth while the scientific world toiled on trying to prove something she would take for granted.

*This is truth.* That's another thing he said.

"Cos, tell me about the places you've been, about other universes."

He smirked and spoke quickly: "Wherewhen is this body-covering place?"

"Wherewhen?" Rita thought about the curious word, a word that he had apparently made up from two words. So quick to learn, Cosmigellan.

"Wherewhen as a fragment of spacetime of the All That Is," he answered curtly.

"Oh. Time? Where and when? Twenty minutes. Is that what you want to know?"

"Time. Silly concept. Twenty minutes. Miles. Very linear interpretation of spacetime. It is subjectively short—twenty minutes?" he chuckled.

"For this kind of discussion, very." Rita realized he had derailed the intended subject of her query. "So, how about it? Tell me about the places you've been."

"There are many extraordinary wherewhens beyond even the most vivid human imagination. Many fascinating and not so fascinating life-forms. Non-intelligent life abounds."

"Is there other intelligent life in this galaxy, close to Earth?"

"Oh, yes." He paused, his effervescent expression sagged into

cheerless seriousness. “It is unfortunate. . . .”

“What is? That there’s other intelligent life?”

“Intelligence comes in many diverse forms. Humans would never be able to recognize most, to grasp the complexity...I am relieved human technology and understanding of universal principles is inadequate. It would be a shame. . . .” Again he paused, staring into the dashboard, somehow saddened by his thoughts. “After all, how would Phaedra and its inhabitants be perceived by even the most intelligent of human researchers?”

A chill gripped Rita’s bowels. He was absolutely right. “They’d see you as a primitive colony of amoebas, with no discernible thoughts or feelings, incapable of technological advances, therefore, unintelligent.”

An uncomfortable silent melancholy engulfed the inside of the car.

Humans seemed, after all, very impressed with themselves. Anthropomorphism corrupted even the most open-minded of thinkers. And technology is always the gauge by which other life-forms are assessed for intelligence.

Rita dared probe on. “So, SETI is a waste of time?”

“An abysmal waste of time, and more importantly to humankind, a waste of money. Radio frequencies are such a small fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum. I have not encountered any intelligent species who uses radio frequency for communication, or even would acknowledge a signal broadcast through it. Radio frequency is the background noise of interstellar space; it would be and *is being* ignored.”

“Even if messages are transmitted in a recognizable pattern?”

“Would a human pay attention if his neighbor flushed the toilet in a recognizable pattern?”

He crushed her with his logic. “No, I...guess not.” So much for universal secrets she’d die with.

“But, what about the way you communicated with me? Still communicate with me? What about that?”

“Entirely unexpected. I have encountered no other human as receptive. Believe me, I have attempted contact on my many previous visits here; it has invariably been dismissed as hallucination or delusion. Rita trusts Rita’s mind, Rita’s senses. That part of Rita that allows Rita to imagine—that makes Rita a writer—allows Rita to accept alternate possibilities.”

*Good God, I’m tired of hearing my name.* “It almost didn’t happen that way.”

“Almost does not count. Rita follows Rita’s inner truth. And I

continue because of it.”

“OK. But don’t you think it’s odd that of the whole Earth, you landed in my garden, while I was there?”

“Not especially. Collapsing quantum wave functions is a fairly ordinary method of reality manipulation.”

“What? Quantum Wave Functions? I always thought *qwiff*-popping was just a bizarre theory.”

“It is as real as anything else in this universe—whichever universe one chooses in any given wherewhen. All possible universes exist simultaneously, and all possible futures really are. Being aware of only one quantum wave or universe is how reality congeals in the linear mind.” He paused, staring directly at her, his gaze falling into her like molten lead. “Rita already knows this. Why is Rita asking me these questions?”

*I do?* The idea that we can control what happens to us just by visualizing it so, always struck her as some kind of mystical hogwash. Now, she was hearing that it’s true. “I wonder how many people are aware that they’re doing this.”

“Most are not aware. Some human scientists understand, but are skeptical. Some Far-Eastern peoples grasp the concept, but have contaminated the purity and simplicity of it with mysticism and religion.”

“Do you think I am aware I’m able to pop *qwiffs*?”

“The question would not occur to Rita if Rita were not. I do not understand why Rita needs my validation for such a deep internal belief.”

Why did he keep saying that? She was becoming more confused, even infuriated with his insistence that she already knew these things. True, Rita had studied quantum physics, but she was still unconvinced—especially of how it all pertained to her. “What about arthritis? And the things the paternal gene donor does to me? Did I create these for myself?” Rita tensed up, dreading the answer.

“Though humans are oftentimes responsible for their own destruction through a series of self-defeating behaviors, not all outcomes are avoidable. Rita must realize that some sets of *qwiffs*—parallel universes—are nearly identical, except for a few minor details. Sometimes the final outcome cannot be changed. Rita must also realize that negative outcomes are relative—the universes know no distinction between good and evil. This very fact is the foundation on which serendipity is based, wherein perceived bad luck surrenders gifts of fortune.”

“So, there is such a thing as fate.”

“Yes, in some wherewhens. In other wherewhens, not. If all possible universes converge, there are no alternate outcomes—all outcomes are identical. The divergence of quantum wave functions, of all possible universes, is what gives rise to different universes. This is when there is control—when one may actively choose which universe to materialize into consciousness, which fork in the road to take. Actions develop and collapse the quantum wave function. But, Rita already knows this!”

All Rita knew was that she would want to remember this conversation forever. Possibilities...stacked on top of each other, existing, happening at the precise same moment. We—aware of only one universe at a time. A smorgasbord of possible futures waiting to be popped into a single reality. Some directable, some inevitable. Everyone dreams about that kind of control, but few are willing to accept the responsibility. “It’s wonderful and frightening at the same time.”

“Rita’s universe is Rita’s alone. Why would Rita want to hand it over to someone else? Is that not more frightening?”

“Indeed, indeed it is.”

The last few minutes of their journey were shrouded in silence.



## CHAPTER 5—Detour

*I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act;  
I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act* —Chesterton

They strolled the endless aisles of Sears, Cos gawking and fingering everything as a small child would. A green sweater caught Rita's eye, so she lead him to the men's clothing section and left him to decide for himself what he would like to wear. Out of the corner of her eye she could see him paw and fondle everything, reveling in the textures.

Rita was lost in comparison and decision when she heard a lady scream. Glancing up, she saw two salespersons rushing towards the men's clothing section. Cosmigellan was nowhere in sight. Panic. Rita dropped an armful of sweaters and made her way to where Cosmigellan should have been.

"Sir, we have dressing rooms for your convenience. Please, this way sir," an agitated but remarkably composed salesman explained to Cosmigellan, who stood ass-naked in front of a full-length mirror, casually buttoning a shirt, tattered clothes at his feet, oblivious to the commotion he had caused.

"Cos! You shouldn't undress here. Go with the gentleman." Rita tugged at his elbow, standing as close to him as she could so his ass wasn't exposed. "Remember what I told you about social conventions? The importance of clothing in front of strangers?"

"Madam, is this man with you? I'll have to call security if he does not remove himself to a dressing room at once."

"He's...uh...retarded," Rita whispered to the man. "Please, be patient—I'll handle it. First time out of the institution and all." She gathered Cosmigellan's clothes and crammed them in his waiting arms.

"Humans are so uncomfortable in their native form," Cosmigellan protested as Rita pushed him from behind into a dressing room.

The sales clerk quickly closed in behind Rita. Rita threw him a warning glance. He stepped backwards three steps and crossed his arms over his chest. "What did he mean by that?" the salesman cautiously asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just a little game we play."

Cosmigellan reluctantly finished dressing in private as the sales clerk stood by, apparently waiting for Rita to do something unusual as

well. She smiled politely, holding back an explosion of laughter.

\* \* \*

*Jean-Michel Entremont?* Rita thought as they began their trip back from shopping in the city. He didn't look French at all, she wondered why he chose a French name. Cosmigellan stared silently out the window, taking in the scenery as it passed by. Trees languidly oozed by in a hyospace drool. The long empty stretch of freeway yawned listlessly out in front, a gray ribbon of endless drudgery, seeming to advance with every foot the car rolled forward, always there, never completed, the destination never obtained, always just out of reach. Or so Rita imagined her friend must feel about vehicular travel.

Rita fantasized freely as she watched him out of the corner of her eye, looking very attractive in his gray slacks and light blue dress-shirt.

He's an alien, Rita. An alien!

*Yeah, but what I'm feeling isn't.*

The two warring bitches inside her were at it again, sparring, moralizing and flipping a mental finger at each other.

Don't do it, slut.

*Mind your own Goddamned business. I've had so many guys—teenagers, senior citizens, Arabs, Mexicans, Germans, Asians, even an African Bushman—what could it hurt? He certainly looks functional. How different can it be?*

So you're an international whore. I wouldn't brag if I went to the United Nations building with a mattress strapped to my back. Now you want to expand your conquests galactically.

*I promise—I come in peace.* The slut wins. She usually did. Rita could never think of a good enough reason not to let her.

Glancing over to a quiet and still Cosmigellan, she said, "Don't you have any questions about anything you've seen? About anything that happened?"

"No."

Rita had really expected a bit more anxiety from him. She'd have to wear a disguise if she ever wanted to go in *that* store again. It was all she could do to keep from busting up in laughter, but the manager had hardly shared her amusement with Cosmigellan's spontaneity.

As they descended from the slight rise in the mile-long driveway to the ranch, the silence inside the car was broken by, "Stop. Let me out here. Rita's father is about, I will sneak into the house through the orchard."

"I don't think you'll have to be hiding, now that you look and act

human.” Rita grabbed at his shirt sleeve, trying to keep him in the car, but he slipped out and skulked off around one of the out-buildings and disappeared among the trees.

\* \* \*

Rita was getting very impatient as minutes, then hours passed. The sun was setting, and Cosmigellan had not come in yet. Dinner was cooked and waiting in the microwave; if he came in for any reason, it would be for food. She began to suspect that her fleeting thoughts of molesting him had somehow frightened him.

The last modicum of patience vanished, and Rita grabbed the flashlight to go looking for him. In the near darkness she carefully picked her way through piles of car parts scattered at the side of her house and throughout the orchard. Before she reached the farthest out-building, her father stepped out from the shadows of his dingy oil-soaked garage.

“Looking for something?” He reeked of sweat, beer, and burnt crankcase oil. His white hair was streaked with axle grease, his blue eyes rimmed in grease making him look like a demented Pharaoh.

“Yeah...yeah, I was just...um...expecting a dinner guest. He’s late.”

“Since when did you start dating wetbacks? And what are you doing spreading your legs when you’re supposed to be over here cleaning my house?” Jim Grayson interrogated, belching gusts of beer and something that couldn’t possibly have been edible even before the Budweiser marinade.

She’d forgotten about her weekly chores. “I’m...sorry. I’ll get to it...Wetbacks? He’s not a wetback!”

“The Border Patrol seemed to think so. They picked him up about twenty minutes ago.” He grinned evilly as he scanned Rita from head to foot and back again, as if trying to reduce her in size. He always did that when he wanted people to feel inferior, little, insignificant, stupid. This time he only made Rita despise him even more.

“You called the Border Patrol?” she said in a low, controlled monotone, battling with the internal rage screaming to release itself on him.

“He was sneaking around here like a thief! I asked him what he was doing and he refused to answer. I don’t even see a car. Had to have walked over.”

“What do you mean, he refused to answer? What language did you use?” Rita was getting more infuriated with every evasive answer he gave.

“Spanish. What else?” He laughed, throwing his head back, his

dentures flashing in the last of the sunlight. All of hell lived in that laugh.

“He doesn’t speak Spanish! He’s not Mexican! He doesn’t even understand the laws of this plan...this country!” Thirty-four years of resentment wanted to gush forth like raw sewage. She wanted to beat him raw with her bare fists, to scream until she had no voice left. But the scream was trapped in her throat, swelling and aching there like a cancer.

Rita stomped-limped back to the house and crashed down at the kitchen table—and cried. The garlic aroma of reheated lasagna permeated the entire kitchen, probed deep into her running nose. She felt no appetite for it. Cosmigellan was in horrid trouble and she couldn’t think of what to do.

He would undoubtedly be shipped across the border with other unpapered individuals. God—no identification, no understanding of international laws, citizenship, or of the strange place he would find himself. Rita couldn’t imagine how he would handle his sudden imprisonment and transport. He would never understand why he was taken from the ranch, why he was being treated like a criminal. A kind of nervous nausea tore at her stomach as she envisioned him freaking...spindling. God, they’d take him for a mental patient for sure.

Rita locked the kitchen door, paced neurotically, hugging herself and wallowing in her own misery, in her pity for Cosmigellan—wherever he was.

She could only hope he would somehow find his way back, however illegal it was likely to be. She was powerless to do anything for him. She would have to trust his intelligence, his extraordinary resourcefulness, to extract him from his circumstances.

The house seemed so empty, so lifeless without him. The aloneness and isolation drained Rita of the enthusiasm and inspiration the last two days had found in her. She feared she would never see him again. It was then that she realized that she didn’t want to be without him, ever.

Do something, Rita. Think of something.

She wheeled around and limped to the living room phone. *Yes*. She’d call the Border Patrol. Maybe they were still holding him and hadn’t bused him over the border yet. It was worth a shot.

“U.S. Border Patrol. Officer Nelson.”

“Uh, yes. This is Rita Grayson at the Grayson Ranch. About an hour ago some of your people picked up a man on my property who had no papers, and possibly did not speak. He’s not an illegal alien. He’s a friend—a retarded friend. Are you still holding him?”

“I’m sorry ma’am. The bus just left. What did you say his name was?”

“I didn’t. Thanks for nothing, jerk. Since when is it illegal to walk around a friend’s property without identification?”

“You’ll have to take that up with Jim Grayson, ma’am. He called us. We came.”

“Yeah, right.” Rita slammed down the receiver. Her guts started boiling hatred again.

The ring of the telephone shot through her stuffed up ears, startling her out of her private seething. She collected her misery and crammed it back into hiding in the recesses of her emotionally twisted brain.

“Hello?” she gurgled.

An irritating high-pitched voice informed Rita in broken English that she had a collect person-to-person call from Mexico.

*Yes!* “Yes, this is Rita. I’ll take it.”

“Rita, I don’t know where I am,” Cosmigellan breathed heavily. “I am injured. Please, Rita, you must find me.”

Before she could say anything, pictures developed in her mind; he was transmitting his surroundings to her, scenes of his journey across the border to where he was now.

“It’s the shopping center. That’s just a couple of miles from here! Stay put, don’t leave. Wait for me, OK? I’ll come and get you in a few minutes.”

Rita hung up and snatched her purse. Here she was, about to drive over the border alone for the first time in her life, in the dark, on a rescue mission of a non-human Latin-looking man with no papers, no ID of any kind. How they would pull this one off, she had no idea. For some reason she just didn’t care. It would all work out somehow. What did Cosmigellan say about serendipity? She hoped he was right.



## CHAPTER 6—Intimacies

*Come quickly, I am tasting stars!—Dom Perignon*

Cosmigellan was sitting on a bench near the curb as Rita drove around the parking lot to the front of the crowded, brightly lit Mexican supermarket. She almost didn't see him; he was doubled over, hugging himself. As she steered the car near the curb, he looked up, anguished.

"What happened? Are you OK?" Rita yelled through the passenger window. He stood unsteadily, and holding his left arm close to his stomach, fumbled for the door handle and eased painfully inside the car.

"One of them kicked me when I didn't answer. He kept screaming at me in what I now know as Spanish, and just pushed me to the floor of the van and kicked me. Rita, it hurts so bad." Tears trickled down his face as he shivered and rocked himself.

"Where were you kicked? Show me," she said, feeling more upset with each of his falling tears.

He gingerly pulled back the left side of his shirt collar, exposing a moderate bruise on his shoulder.

"It's not serious, you'll be fine." Rita was puzzled at his apparent agony over such a minor injury. "It really hurts bad?"

"Pain—I've never experienced it before."

"Oh, man. No wonder." She felt sorry, but unobligated to apologize for some other person's brutality. "You really don't experience pain as a Phaedran?"

"No, we haven't the chemistry to experience it. We can't even experience touch. The feeling of my physical body actually contacting something, aware of its place in spacetime, occurs through . . ." His face lost expression and he closed his eyes briefly, fighting to continue, "sharing chemistry and energy fields with others. These human sensations are...very distressing."

Without thinking, Rita reached over and gently turned his face to her, drawing him closer, delicately fondling his lower lip with her mouth. "Not all human sensations are distressing," she whispered.

He froze, not even a perceptible breath came from him as he stared directly into her. "This is a kiss," he said, laughing lightly, seeming to forget about his pain. "You kissed me. I've been awaiting this from you."

“Hey, you’re speech, it’s more...you said ‘you’ and you’re using contractions. How did that happen?”

He winced, and said, “Spanish is less complex than English. I just figured it out, I suppose.”

Rita kissed him again, more deeply this time. He reciprocated, imitated every minute movement. Electric filaments fondled her brain, tasted her thoughts, her desire. Her consciousness began to merge with his. Suddenly, she pulled away.

“What are you doing?” she said, horrified.

“I wish to bond further with you. This body feels many strange things...I don’t understand.”

“Like what? Describe it.” *This’ll be interesting.*

“I feel...my stomach is *dizzy*. My heart rhythm has increased frequency and contractile force. And...” He placed both hands into his lap, exploring his changing anatomy in the darkness of the inside of the car. “These pants are too tight.”

No, she didn’t imagine anything like this had ever happened to a Phaedran. Rita felt her face flush in embarrassment. “If you can just calm down until we get back over the border...shit! You don’t have an ID,” she said, pounding the steering wheel.

“We can use yours.”

“No, you don’t understand. We both need one.” A nauseating feeling of despair flogged at her guts. “God, what a shitty day. If it hadn’t been for my father, we wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

“How is your father responsible for this?”

Rita tried not to cry, took a deep shuddering breath. “He called the Border Patrol and told them you were an illegal alien...uh, non-citizen. Prowler. He’s the reason you were picked up. Damn him. If I could get even. . . .”

“I’ll give it some serious thought,” Cosmigellan said, staring out across the busy parking lot. “Do you have any other IDs resembling yours? It doesn’t have to be yours, just something the same size with a picture.”

“Yeah, I have an old college ID. What are you going to do?”

“Drive away from here—some place secluded.”

\* \* \*

The hum died and the violet electric moths disappeared as Cosmigellan withdrew his hand from the perfectly rendered California Driver License. The forgery-proof California seal even reflected as Rita examined it in the glow of the dashboard gauges.

“How did you do that? Shit, that’s a helluva talent.” Rita heard his stomach growl loudly. “Are you OK?”

“I need food, fast.”

Crossing the border went off without a hitch. The green and red lights from the border crossing shrank in the rear-view mirror and the dark stillness of the unadulterated countryside loomed up ahead like a giant nurturing mother reaching out to hug them to her heart. All Rita could think of was her big spongy bed and a tall glass of vodka.

“Stop here,” Cosmigellan abruptly demanded.

“What? We’re almost home. Just another mile or so.”

“It’s here, I feel it.”

“What’s here?”

“The oracle. It’s here somewhere. I must get it. It’ll tell me how I got here. Most importantly, wherewhen I am in spacetime since I left Phaedra.”

“Dammit, I’m dead tired. We’ll never find it in the dark anyway. Tomorrow, OK?”

“I can find it, the dark will not prevent me. Please, Rita.” Even in the dim light of the streetlight, those luscious dark eyes and pleading look evaporated Rita’s plans to get home at a reasonable hour.

Rita coasted the car near the curb. Cosmigellan ejected himself out, showing no signs of pain as he darted swiftly up a sand hill and vanished down into the darkness. She entertained thoughts of following him, but decided to wait instead of risking a misstep, or worse, a tumble down an unexpected grade; spondylarthritis would not be forgiving of such violence.

It felt like only seconds had passed when Rita saw Cosmigellan’s hand thrust up over the sand hill, his excited body bounding over the peak and scrambling down to the car. He was clutching something shiny, fantastically iridescent in his left hand as he climbed back into the car. “It is found,” he said happily, fondling the peculiar object with the affection and adoration suitable only in a lovemaking scene.

“What the hell is that? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Phaedrite.”

“Phaedrite. Very funny. And what do we call the slime all around on your planet—Phaedrooze? How about the rain—Phaedrizzle?”

He grinned, turning the thing in his hands. “It’s calibrated to me, and has recorded my entire journey here. You, Dear Rita, are not the only one with a multitude of questions.”

The vodka boiled away the tensions and aches of the day as Rita sipped it, sitting next to Cosmigellan on the sofa, watching him as she would watch a child play with a cherished toy. He alternated bolting forkfuls of lasagna and petting his stone. His fascination and regard for the oracle was almost obscene. Rita was growing very fond of this odd blend of human and alien.

“So, what are you going to do with it?”

“When it is time, I’ll read it. Look at it, Rita. Isn’t it beautiful? Here, hold it.” He laid it in her hand. She jerked back, almost flung it across the room when she felt its unearthly cool hum. “What’s it doing?”

“Don’t be afraid, Rita. You have felt this before—in me. It vibrates in my frequency.”

Rita grasped it harder. The humming buzzed her entire hand and poured into her arm. Yes, now she realized she had felt that same frequency from Cosmigellan when he went spelunking in her head.

The stone was amazingly beautiful, like a huge, elliptical, perfectly-cut, seven-inch opal, polished on both sides, fiery colors spraying out from a pearlescent foundation. It must have weighed over two pounds.

Cosmigellan watched Rita intently, smiling, reveling in some kind of ecstasy as she stroked the oracle. She was compelled to put the thing down, embarrassed as if someone had caught her playing with herself. It must have been her imagination that he was getting off on her handling the strange stone. Or maybe she shouldn’t have given him that second vodka...or taken her third.

Cosmigellan reached for her, closing his arms around her, kissing her in a passionate, *experienced* manner. Rita could not help but indulge herself in his impulsive, hungry, all-consuming embrace. It was more than just affection, more than lust. It was an unreal synchronized merging of energy fields, unlike anything she had ever experienced before. Rita struggled and forced herself away, utterly shocked, unable to explain her sudden fear.

“Rita, why are you afraid?”

“I—I don’t know. Nobody’s ever kissed me like *that* before.” She heard her voice becoming shaky. “I know I can trust you, but...you’re *different*. Cosmigellan, it felt like you were devouring me. Like I was going to disappear and never be heard from again. I couldn’t *find myself*.”

“We became bonded—connected. Neither of us has a separate identity. We simply *are*.”

“Well, it was incredibly scary.”

“It isn’t permanent.” He stroked her face and laughed. “Rita, your

thoughts have been guiding me to this all day. Have you changed your mind?"

*God, am I that obvious?* "I didn't mean for you to just dive in and become some kind of sex slave. These things take time. A little lusting for a while enhances the experience. Besides, wouldn't it be better if you knew a little more about it? I mean, reading my biology and medical books hardly qualifies you as a Casanova."

"Then show me," he said, still smiling as if expecting Rita to just strip down and start a demonstration.

*Demonstration.* Good idea. "How about a little lesson on how the natives do it?" She flounced over to the VCR and slipped in an X-rated movie.

He watched studiously, interested but not aroused. Rita felt a faint blush develop on her face, spreading to her throat and chest, as she observed him, watching *them*.

"All of this to simply reproduce? To indicate affection to another? It seems so involved and...not very energy efficient," he said, almost whining.

"Sex is not just for reproduction. For humans, it is the full exploitation of the sensitivity of the body, a sharing of sensual pleasure, as well as affection...bonding."

"You want this?" He nearly whined again, pointing at the TV screen.

"Uh...no. If you ever do *that* to me, I'll snap your neck."

He swallowed, composing himself. "Then some things are desirable, and others are not?"

"All humans have their individual preferences. The fun is in learning about them."

Cosmigellan leaned forward on the edge of the sofa and twisted his face. "She'll injure him...her teeth!" he shrieked, turning away, hiding his face, then peeking out at Rita's face, searching for the horror and disgust that wasn't there.

Rita couldn't help but laugh at his literal interpretation of the scene. "No, it's OK. Like kissing. Very gentle."

"But, he is suffering! He cries!" Cosmigellan was obviously becoming upset at his lack of understanding.

"Believe me, he feels pleasure, not pain."

"How do you know this?"

"Uh, well...I didn't exactly come down with yesterday's rain, Babycakes."

"This film is too confusing. Turn it off, please."

He sat quietly, staring down at the floor for several minutes. Rita

regretted rushing him into the situation. Here she was, slightly pickled at nearly midnight, trying to seduce an interstellar amoeba. *I must really be hard up.* “I’m sorry. I thought you’d be able to handle it a little better than this.”

Saying nothing, Cosmigellan’s face changed to utter seriousness as he stared unblinking into and through Rita’s mind. He started taking off his shirt, never removing his gaze, then removed his pants. Rita’s blood pressure could have forced five gallons of water into a two-gallon tank. He grasped her hand and pulled her up and close to him, still staring unflinchingly into her eyes.

“No. No don’t,” she said, trembling with fear.

“What’s wrong, Rita? First I sense you enjoy this, then in your mind I find reservations, fear...shame. *Shame, Rita?*”

“I pushed you away because...Because.”

His grip insisted on an answer. She felt him touching her mind, scanning for an explanation. Dizziness, disorientation.

“Because you don’t believe you are worthy. Not worthy, Rita? I don’t understand. Shamed...with me? Oh. I see. It’s your father. Your father pushed you away. You feel your father’s disgust for you, and you push others away to keep them from finding out what is so awful about you—as you are pushing me away right now. You don’t want anyone to discover your shame. Is that right, Rita? That’s what it is, isn’t it?”

*Goddamn him his bluntness.* He saw her. Her soul was completely naked, brutally stripped. Exposed. And she hated him for it. She hated herself for hating him. So much ugliness rotting in the abyss of lifelong shame. And he could see it. How could he stand it? Stand her?

She erupted into tears, weakened by his audacious intrusion. Her mind swirled with all he had made her sacrifice.

“Your mother. What about your mother?”

“She never understood. I couldn’t tell her,” Rita sobbed, her face in her hands, head leaning against Cosmigellan’s chest.

“Shhh. It’s OK, Rita. I’m here. It’s OK.” His arms held her fast.

Rita yielded to his continuing mind probe, ensnared in a mental electric web.

Somehow, she found herself in her bed, but she couldn’t remember how she got there. She felt her body being caressed and kissed all over; it was then that she realized she had been stripped down to her goose bumps.

“Rita, don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.”

As Cosmigellan continued his slow, gentle movements, Rita became emersed in a warm veil of focused self-awareness. She wasn’t

losing herself at all...until he kissed her on the mouth.

Then it happened: that dreadful sense of loss, of giving up that which made her who she was. In her head, he talked to her gently, tenderly, comforting her as her anatomy locked around his.

He enmeshed her brain in a lavender hammock of erotic enchantment, probing and petting every neuron, swimming and splashing in the mixture of their hormones, enveloped in a bubble of affection. The universe contracted and occupied only her mind—their mind, bending and undulating in blue and lavender ripples that sang of the splendor of fifteen billion benevolent years. The songs of eternity played sonorously in a thousand tonal harmonies—sweet and clear, more pure than any sound humanly produced, while crystal color enfolded their one mind.

Rita felt herself convulse into climax. External consciousness returned to her as she felt Cosmigellan also climax, crying out.

“What happened? What is this?” he panted. “Rita, something’s wrong—this body has discharged. . . .”

Rita laughed. “It’s normal, trust me. Didn’t you like it?”

“I...I don’t know. Maybe I should try to duplicate it.” Quickly he re-entered her, still hard.

Again the world evaporated. Time passed, or it stood still; there was no way to tell. Again she climaxed, Cosmigellan following, his whimpers rushing into Rita’s consciousness as the world returned. A spreading violet electric web discharged from between them. Electric moths spiraled out into the dim room and burnt out like cinders. Rita’s belly buzzed with a faint waning tingle.

Rita reached up to pet his face. “Your eyes! They’re glowing violet!” She couldn’t believe what she saw as Cosmigellan raised himself to sit upright. His eyes shone like jewels imbedded in velvet. He laughed softly and threw his head back, reaching up to stroke his moist face and chest.

“I’m not kidding, go look in the mirror. Your eyes are the same color as...that electric stuff you threw off when you came. Jesus, what are you, some kind of human Tesla coil?”

“In my native form, intense emotions can cause a color change. I really didn’t think it would happen in this form.” He stroked Rita’s arms, barely touching the red-blond hairs as lavender spikes danced above them, making them oscillate in a furied erotic ballet. The last of pin-point discharges flashed just millimeters above him as he retreated into the bathroom.

A childish giggle escaped from the bathroom as he stared into the mirror. Rita got up to go look into the mirror too; maybe her eyes had

turned purple as well. All she saw was a mat of hair that very much resembled frayed hemp rope. Not so unusual after having your IQ dropped fifty points; sex does that sometimes.

Back in bed, Cosmigellan stayed motionless for many minutes. Rita crawled gently beside him, trying not to disturb his apparent meditation. There was nothing she could say, anyway. The experience had been so emotionally and mentally intense, she was sad to think that sex with a human male would from now on be miserably inadequate, empty and dull.

“I’m hungry,” he said. “Very hungry. I have dissipated a great deal of energy.”

They retired back to the bedroom after a late dinner. Cosmigellan’s incessant questions of what Rita had experienced with him made her feel like she was under study, just another experiment, more knowledge of the universe to store away in that ever curious mind of his. “But tell me what *you* feel,” she insisted.

He hesitated, as if searching for words. “It is remarkably...indescribable,” he said as his body gradually relaxed and he fell into a deep sleep.



## CHAPTER 7—Malignancy

*If you want a picture of the future,  
imagine a boot stomping on a human face, forever—George Orwell*

Rita was pleasantly awakened by the smell of breakfast cooking. Pulling on a brown zippered caftan, combing her fingers through her hair, she limped into the hall, dreading the hideous mess only a man could make of a kitchen. Much to her surprise, everything was quite orderly and under control. Cosmigellan smiled his rubber smile as he stirred the eggs.

“You like these...disordered feathered lizard ova?” he teased. “And pulverized porcine flesh?”

Rita chuckled at his deliberate playfulness with the English language. “Yes, fatty but nice every once in a while. How did you learn to cook?”

“June Cleaver.”

“Ah, morning TV. Once again, you amaze me in your ability to pick up skills that take us humans a lifetime to perfect.”

“You humans are your own limiting factor. Everything is learnable to everyone, if only you didn’t fight for your limitations.”

Such arrogance, such overwhelming self-confidence. Had he been anyone but Cosmigellan, Rita would have slapped him. “Yeah, us inferior types are ruining the whole damn universe.”

“Rita, you are angry at me?” He even had the gall to smile as he asked her that in his quiet, silky voice. As irritating as it was, he had a way of diffusing a potentially unpleasant confrontation. He couldn’t help being smug about the way he was; everything came so naturally to him.

“This food isn’t cooking fast enough,” he said, leaning down to eyeball the flame under the skillet.

“A watched pot never boils. Or so grandmothers like to say.”

“Ah, another quaint human aphorism. Just another fallacy perpetrated by the impatient to appease the ignorant.”

“I’ll have to remember that. You know what’s so terribly neat about you?” Rita said in an effort to remind herself of the positive aspects of this unusual relationship. “You came to me without any emotional baggage from past relationships. And . . .” A lump formed in her throat. “You know me. I mean, *really* know who I am, and you’re

still here. You didn't run when you discovered my pain. You weren't disgusted or offended."

"How could I feel anything but gratitude and affection for you, Rita? You saved me from dehydration, attended to me, provided sustenance, shelter...and understanding. Your acceptance...how could I not love you?"

*Love?* "How indeed. Any one else would have left after learning my darkest secrets. They usually do. I guess pain makes people feel vulnerable, even threatened."

"I find you very interesting. You certainly don't represent any threat to me...to anyone—except your father." He stopped stirring and gazed momentarily into the pool of congealing fluid. "I have considered your problem with him. I need more background information."

"For what? What are you planning to do?"

"Revenge, sweet Rita, revenge. On Phaedra, revenge can take only one form. But here, the possibilities are infinite. Revenge could truly become an art form here for one such as myself." His eyes sparkled deviously, playfully as he stirred the scrambled eggs.

"Your obsession with revenge is...heartwarming."

They sat at the table, smells of an expertly prepared breakfast wafting up from their plates and blending with the cool morning air filling the kitchen.

"Tell me, Rita. Tell me why your feelings for your father are so...so hateful. Your torment affects your whole life; this is not good." He put his fork down and swallowed, waiting patiently for an answer that was very slow in coming.

"It's thirty-four years worth of power games, humiliation, intimidation, verbal cruelty and distrust. You know, I really don't want to discuss this now and ruin the wonderful breakfast you've made for us. Later, OK?"

"If you don't tell me, I'll get it from you anyway," he said confidently.

Rita flinched and tightened up as his words discharged off her offended mind. "You mean, like last night? You Goddamned trespasser!" She pulled herself together, softened her voice. "How in the hell did I get from the living room to end up stark naked in my bed, anyway? I don't remember what happened between the two events. I don't remember actually agreeing to—"

"Rita, you were afraid. I simply made you unafraid. You weren't harmed. You are angry again?" There was that infuriating smile again. You're so damn self-satisfied, so damn sexy.

"I won't do it again," he promised.

“Do what? I didn’t mean I didn’t want to—”

“I know. You need time. I accept this.”

*How is it that I’m the one that needs the period of adjustment, when he’s never done this before?* She resumed eating her breakfast, just as her two cats slipped into the kitchen through a gap in the screen door. “God, I haven’t seen you two in days!” Rita dropped bits of sausage on the floor and watched them ravenously swallow the pieces whole.

“That’s because you have been distracted by your other pet.”

Rita looked up in astonishment. “What an odd thing to say. You’re not a pet!” she blurted out. “You’re a...you’re my . . . lover.”

“Your *pet*,” he asserted. “I am of another species, you care for me, take pleasure from my touch. A pet.”

“Cosmigellan, don’t irritate me. No pet ever broke into a banking database and created his own accounts, no pet ever zapped an ID into existence. No pet ever made love with me, or for that matter can wander around in my head like you can.”

Smiling warmly, he reached down to Shana and lifted her to his lap, stroking her endearingly. “This pet can.”

Rita stopped chewing, trying to guess what he meant. It was true, Shana was special to her, unusually sensitive and responsive. She even raced around the house like a fool when Rita came back after a long day of absence. “What do you mean?”

“She knows you, feels what you feel.” He paused to caress the cat gently, turning her head to look squarely into her huge grapefruit eyes. “She is bonded to you. When you look at her, you see her. She can validate herself through you; she loves you for this.”

Rita glanced at Cosmigellan, then back down to Shana purring in his lap. Her appetite departed as a sheet of tears teetered on the rims of her eyelids. “How can you know this?” she asked in a strangled whisper, making an Olympian effort to refrain from an all-out gush.

“She’s a delightful being. Remarkably open—no barriers, no secrets.”

Overwhelming joy coursed through Rita like a warm effusion of syrupy sunshine. She reached for Shana and the cat got up and leaped from Cosmigellan’s lap to hers.

“To be your pet is not an objectionable existence,” he said, squeezing her right hand with both of his, smiling and flirting with those deer eyes. Rita felt a strong urge to take him into the bedroom and...but no, she had three days of writing to catch up on.

“And I must commune with the oracle,” he responded to her thought, bending to hug her. He exited to the living room where last night he had wrapped his stone and stored it under a pillow on the sofa.

\* \* \*

Rita had written only three sentences. As she lay on the soft bed, thoughts of the erotic other-worldly experience of the night before invaded her mental construction of the nearly finished manuscript. It was no good. Nothing could excite her, be as fantastic as what had been—was—taking place in her own home. Writer’s block for lack of inspiration was a pain in the ass; writer’s block because of great sex was inexcusable.

Cosmigellan entered the bedroom, looking very concerned, even gloomy, clutching his giant opal to his breast. “I have traversed many wherwhens,” he said solemnly.

“What does that mean? Did you find out *how* you got here?”

He spoke slowly, monotonously, staring down at the floor. “I got sucked into—or rather, my velocity combined with a specific wherwhen, created a quantum bridge—or many of them—through the fabric of spacetime, sending me from there to here without traversing the great vastness of spacetime that separates Phaedra from Earth. Like electron tunneling, only on an impossibly large scale. It amazes me that I had actually been ejected from the atmosphere so violently that inertia overtook my encasement until I actually became a part of Jiffyland.”

“You were Jiffy-popped?” Rita’s inappropriate levity degraded into sudden reflection. That finger tapping at the inside of her skull was back. A jolt of recognition hit her. “The dream. Those dreams! I dreamed this. Everything you’re telling me, down to the last detail. Shit, I dreamed this—once when I put you in a bucket and brought you in, again after...after you took in water. I saw everything, Cos.”

His only reaction was a brief smile that caressed his face, then vanished.

“The newly created wormhole must have shot me into another wherwhen, enabling me to travel an immense distance. Under those conditions, I could do nothing else.” His voice was low and dull, and his face blank. Not sad—stunned. “I should have been crushed out of existence and scattered to the stars.”

“What’s wrong? You don’t look too well. What’s wrong, Cos?” Rita readied for yet another emotional drama to unfold; it seemed a part of his personality. “What happened to you out there?”

“I am very old. In fact, if I were on Phaedra, I’d be expired.”

“Jesus, you can’t be but thirty-five, thirty-seven at the outside.”

“Not in this wherwhen. Not in this form. Not. . . .” His astonishment and despair mutated into full-blown sadness as he seated

himself on the edge of the bed, still hugging the opal to his chest like a jealous child. A tear leaped from his lower lashes and splashed down his expressionless face. “I can never return to the colony, to the Allness Of The One.” Cosmigellan lowered the opal to the floor and left it there. Embracing Rita, kissing her, he wrapped his electric web of affection around and through her mind. From him, extreme helplessness tugged at her, spoke to her, pleaded to be held, comforted, loved.

From beneath him, Rita watched in amazement as his dark brown eyes took on a violet glow and barely visible electric sparks leaped from him as he climaxed.

“Of The One, Rita,” he moaned softly.

The electric violet luster dwindled from his eyes as Rita slowly stroked his thick, black forest of hair and the soft features of his jaw and cheeks. His face was unusually smooth, as if clean shaven with a straight razor, but she knew he had not shaved.

“You don’t grow facial hair. How odd.”

“Am I supposed to?”

“Most men do. Do you know about...about shaving?”

“Do you want me to grow facial hair, so that I may shave?”

“No, not especially. But how, with human male physiology, can you avoid it?”

“I simply choose not to grow facial hair.”

Rita’s small laugh was broken by hollering from outside the kitchen door. “Rita! Move your car, it’s in my way!” Jim Grayson’s heavy footsteps clomped through the kitchen just as she leaped up, smoothed her dress, and slammed the bedroom door behind her.

She fought to control her breathing, to hide her fear. “What’s the problem? I always park my car there. God knows there’s nowhere else left to park it in this fucking junk-yard!”

“Just park it up behind the garden, will you kid? Arnold’s gonna pull his station wagon up here so I can work on it.”

He had the whole twelve acres, why did he need to take the last six feet in front of *her* house? Silently she stared at him, a muffled scream raging in her throat, threatening to reveal he had hurt her, to give him the gift of her pain.

“Nevermind. I’ll take care of it myself!” he bugled, turning brutishly, raking up a handful of splinters as he gouged his heel into the kitchen floor. “Incompetents. I’m surrounded by incompetents!” he said, not altogether to himself.

She hated him. Visions of kitchen utensils ripping through his back poisoned her thoughts as he stomped out the door and down the

steps. Something had to be done—before her own hostility killed her outright.

Locking the kitchen door, Rita returned to the bedroom where Cosmigellan stood shivering, plastered against the wall.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’m getting better,” Cosmigellan panted with great pride. “I’m teaching myself how not to spindle.” He forced a coerced, terrified smile.

“Terrific. I know how you feel. Now, if *I* can just learn how not to self-destruct.”

Breathing deeply, prying himself from the wall, he said, “Why does he treat you in this manner? What have you done to earn this?”

“I simply exist. That’s all.” Sitting, stewing in defeat and self-pity, Rita motioned to Cosmigellan to scoot closer. “Cosmigellan,” she whispered into his right ear, “you’ve got to help me.”

He looked squarely into her face. “Other than your fantasies of death or physical injury to your father, I will comply with your wishes. Tell me more of what’s been happening.”

“I thought you knew everything. Could just snatch it right out of my mind whenever you needed it.”

“I promised not to do that again, remember? You would feel more comfortable telling me in your own words, wouldn’t you?”

Before Rita could settle into a comfortable position on the bed, the air was rocked by the sickening thud of metal meeting wood. Spreading the curtains slightly, she saw her father pushing her car away from her house—and directly into the side post of his own front porch. “Ha! You fucked yourself this time, you son-of-a-bitch!” she gasped angrily under her breath. He had apparently jimmed the lock on the car door, put it in neutral and rolled it out of “his way.”

“Don’t worry, Rita. Talk to me.”

She began recounting her experiences with her father, hardly distracted by the sounds of a car engine accompanied by gallons of exhaust fumes seeping into the cracks of the kitchen, drifting throughout the house.

“There’s a fine example of his thoughtlessness, his cruelty. Look out the window. You’ll see the ass-end of a car parked not eight inches from my door—idling. He does it when I won’t let him control me. If I bitch, he’ll crank up the volume on that kinda shit.

“That’s just it. Complaining, asking nicely to be considered, pleading for him to stop, just spurs him to step up his abuse. When I ask him not to spray water into my open windows, soaking down my bed or stereo, he floods the ground around my front porch. I have slipped

and fallen several times because of that. The last time I fell, a bone spur in my back broke loose and severed nerve roots to my left leg; that's why I limp." She was crying by now. "When my mom was alive, she really tore into him for that. You know what he did? He laughed. The son-of-a-bitch laughed! I hate him more than I ever imagined I could hate anyone." Rita inhaled another breath of the stinking air.

"A textbook sociopath," Cosmigellan said softly, staring slack-jawed as she went on.

"As a child, he called me names, insulted me when my friends came over. Lardo. Tex. Shit-heel. Stupid. Idiot. He even called me 'The Bad Seed.' The Bad Seed! In that movie the little girl was a liar, a manipulator, a murderer. A murderer! I could never, would never . . ."

"From what I've learned of humans, anyone could kill another with enough provocation."

"Oh no. No, I don't think I could. I've fantasized about it, but I could never—"

"Please, go on with your history."

She sighed. "I believed something was wrong with me, that I was some kind of mutant or something. I was never good enough. I was always seeking approval from him, but nothing I did was worthy of His Highness. I somehow believed that if I worked hard enough, I would find something that would make him say, 'Good girl. That's real good what you did.' But I never did.

"As a very small child with asthma, I was weak and inferior, something to be shunned, avoided, sent away. Hell, he used to talk about me to his buddies right in front of me. 'I should have knocked her in the head and sold the milk.' That was one of his favorite references to his sickly daughter.

"When I was a fat teenager, he constantly reminded me that I would never be pretty. And to top it off, he would bring pies and doughnuts into the house and taunt me with them, offering them to me time and time again, saying 'They're non-fattening.' So I would eat the whole fucking box of pastries!

"As a young woman I lost weight and became beautiful and started dating. My modeling career took off and sustained me very well, but then, I was called a whore. Not directly—he would say things like, 'Nice dress, have it on much?' when I got home late from a date. I was even engaged to be married five times because I thought he wanted me to be like my older sister. She did it right, I thought.

"Straight A's in college were because the courses were too easy, my master's degree in biochemistry was from a diploma mill, he'd tell everyone. The name calling and derogatory labeling never stopped.

I've got so many labels on my face, I can't even see myself anymore.” Rita took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself and relieve the burning ache in her throat. “Now the cruelty is more deliberate, more direct. He messes with my car, gives things to me then steals them back, walks into my house unannounced, holds my mail for days—I've made many late payments because of that—runs loud machinery at odd hours, fills my house with car exhaust. His favorite sick game is to give me stuff and be real nice to me, then when I drop my guard, he starts in again with the cruelty full force. It's like a big set up—gain some trust, then cut loose with both barrels. Now, he's turned you over to the Border Patrol. God...it never stops. I'm the only family member that'll have anything to do with him so I get the whole shitload,” Rita sobbed.

“Rita, I'm sorry.” Cosmigellan rubbed her shoulders and back; she continued with the waterworks.

“Why don't you leave?” he asked.

“This is *my home*—where I was born. You know, he's alienated everybody in the whole family. My sisters hate his guts, won't even speak to him. Besides, I haven't the money to move.”

“I have all the funds you'll need. Where would you like to go?”

“I *like* my garden and my country house. I don't *want* to move. Why should *I* be the one to leave? But, I'll keep it in mind. What happened to the revenge?”

“Revenge, yes. I have nothing to work with yet. Revenge works best when there are weaknesses to be exploited. What are his weaknesses?”

“His whole Goddamned soul's his weakness! If he has one, that is. The fact that I'm related to him makes me feel dirty. God, I'm so ashamed to carry his genes.

“He acts like no one can measure up to him. No one could ever be as smart, skilled, aware, competent and important, as he. He had all of us kids convinced we were some kind of lower life-forms, striving to reach his level, to somehow live up to the superior opinion he had of himself. But, no one ever could, no matter how hard we tried. ‘Don't do as I do, do as I say.’” Remembering that frequent command made Rita's skin crawl.

“We all rebelled in some way. One of my sisters married a man my father hated, just to get the hell away from him. My younger sister became a junkie, stealing to support her habit. And I, I did exactly everything I wanted to do, lived life to the utmost, never allowing anyone to dictate my life-course for me. I'm sure he hates me for that.” Rita sighed, the tears stopped.

“Human psychology suggests that such exaggerated beliefs of oneself are born of the internal fear that none of them are true,” Cos said. “This is where he is vulnerable.”

“So eloquently said.” She was feeling encouraged; he made her feel like she mattered, that her feelings mattered.

“How is his memory?”

“Great, for all that stuff in the past: history, engineering, mechanics, baseball. He doesn’t seem to be able to grasp new technological ideas, how the banking system works, or that the legal system is different from the way it was in 1959. Yet, he loves to vomit his opinions about all of these things. You ought to hear him go on about biochemistry and medicine—he’s a fucking know-nothing who can impress any other know-nothing around. He attracts and fills his life with uneducated, simple people. As long as they’ll sit and listen to him orate for hours, he’ll find them deserving of his company.”

“His recent memory—how is his recent memory?”

“Not too nifty. Like most 70-year-olds, he has trouble now and then. But he has a tendency to blame his short-comings on everyone around him—me if he can.

“We’ve locked horns over the stupidest things—like misplaced keys. We went around and around one week when he insisted I return to him keys to the out-buildings that I have *never had in my possession*. He’s still mad at me because he believes I have them and I won’t hand them over. The son-of-a-bitch lost them, but it’s my fault. It never stops. Friends of the family won’t even come around anymore because he accuses them of stealing his tools.”

“Then this will be our area of concentration: his failing memory and his superior view of himself. This will be his downfall.”

“Hey, I don’t want to bring any more of this crap down on my head—”

“Do you want to be an extra in your own life, or do you want to be the star? I’ll help you through it, but you must be strong, to take on a righteous attitude of concern for his well being. Think you can do that?”

“Yeah, yeah. Not bad. So what’s—”

“It won’t happen overnight. You must gradually change your responses to him. Nothing will succeed unless you learn to become calm, helpful, concerned. Learn not to fight with him anymore. If he loses something, help him look for it. Cooperate as much as you can, do what he wants; it’ll drive him crazy. He’ll go to bed every night not knowing it is you who are chipping away at his image of himself, his very sanity. He must never know your motives. He must never know

who you really are—can be. In other words, obey, but do not comply. Understand?”

“So, what are we trying to achieve here? What’s our ultimate goal?”

“Irreversible insanity and ultimately, institutionalization. It’s just around the corner, and we’re going cut the brake line and do the steering. Don’t worry, you’ll have your ranch. And regain your happiness...where are you going?”

She squeaked in a cartoon character voice, “Over to Dear Daddy’s house to clean it.”

“You would be so kind to him now?”

“You confuse kindness with obedience. Your plan’s a good one, and there’s no time like now to begin it. Besides, if I don’t go over there, I’ll pay for it somehow. I can count on nothing in this life but that I *will* pay for it.”



## CHAPTER 8—Schemes

*Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge—Paul Gauguin*

“Rita!” Jim Grayson’s voice raped the still country air. “Rita! I want you to drive me to Chula Vista to pick up Ted’s car!” he bellowed from just outside the kitchen door.

Every cell in Rita’s body wanted to scream, “NO!” but she couldn’t break her promise to Cosmigellan. “I’m in the middle of a story right now,” she yelled out into the kitchen. “I’ll be about twenty minutes.” It was the only way she could think of to rebel without flat-out refusing.

Refocusing her mind back to the computer, Rita shuffled through the last few pages of notes. She had already entered twenty pages of text, two more to go...*what the hell?*

The screen had gone completely blank.

Her eyes darted to each peripheral device; the power indicators were off on all of them. The worst thing that could possibly happen, happened: four hours of typing flushed out of existence. Her mouth filled with the saliva of impending nausea. She launched herself from her seat and scrambled into the hall, stumbled into the kitchen, and shot through the screen door.

Outside, rounding the corner of the house, Rita caught a glimpse of a shadow skulking off into the depths of the orchard. On the side of her house the gaping door of the fuse box flagged the awful truth: her father had shut down the power.

Rita wanted him dead. Irreversibly, unquestionably, dead. “Why? Why couldn’t you wait?” she screamed into the trees at invisible, mocking evil. Her hands began shaking, the rest of her body soon followed suit. “It would have been just a few minutes. I was almost done. Why?” she whimpered, tears making a dark blue pool on the front of her caftan. She strained to keep from freaking out as she hobbled back into the house, into the arms of a rudely awakened and alarmed Cosmigellan.

“I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him!” Rita screamed, stomping her good leg, quaking and sobbing in Cosmigellan’s tight grip.

The rage slowly drained from her. Cosmigellan’s electric mind-wrap grabbed her once again from the soul-consuming hatred that had become such a common feeling.

“I can’t take this anymore,” Rita sobbed into Cosmigellan’s

shoulder. “I can’t be nice to that fucker. I can’t!”

“You must, Rita. It’s the only way.” Reaching for a brandy he had already poured, he said, “Drink this. I have some new ideas we must discuss.”

Gulping the brandy, waiting for its calming who-gives-a-shit effects, Rita listened to Cosmigellan’s plans while he prepared another exceptional meal. The evening pulled in around them as they mulled over their strategy for the following day.

\* \* \*

The ranch was still and quiet the next morning. Cosmigellan’s existence still a well-guarded secret at his request, Rita made one last patrol of the property to be sure she and the Phaedran wouldn’t be seen leaving. It was essential that Jim Grayson believe Rita was alone at all times; a possible accomplice could tip him off to what was going on and blow the whole operation.

The two climbed into Rita’s dirty-white Dodge Dart. Cosmigellan insisted on driving, assuring Rita he knew all he needed to know through observation. Rita did not challenge him. He turned the key. Nothing. Just a sickening *click*.

“It sounds like the battery’s dead. Shit, that battery’s brand new! Let me check the cables.” Rita groaned out of the car and lifted the hood.

“God damn him!” her voice echoed from under the hood.

“What’s wrong, Rita?”

“He’s switched batteries on me! The bastard stole my new battery!” Her voice was getting louder. “I hate him! I hate—”

Cosmigellan’s fingers drugged the fury from her. Rita felt that she would pass out, he had ensnared her so quickly.

Her speech was slurred and liquid. “No. It’s OK. No more. I’m OK. . . .”

“There’s no time for this, Rita. Never mind your battery, this one will do just fine,” he said, grasping the posts on the battery. Purple flashes arced across the battery like crazed confetti. “Start it now,” he said, bounding off towards the house.

Seconds later he returned with a big grin and a fistful of cream cheese.

“Thank you,” Rita remembered to say. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

After a few moments of his unnerving silent stare, he said, “I do.” She shuddered, realizing exactly what he meant. She wondered

how he could remain so calm being around someone who was teetering on the very rim of emotional collapse. “Of all the humans you could have gotten involved with, do you ever regret it was me? Don’t you ever wonder if all humans are as neurotic as I am?”

Cosmigellan steered the car over the rough dirt road, then onto the pavement of the country road that ran south of the ranch. “No, to your first question. I have seen your species on TV, listened to them speak in public places, read their words. I don’t understand the things they think, believe or want. I don’t understand their reasons for doing the things they do. Most of your species does not make sense to me. But you, Dear Rita, you make sense. Your anger and despair have a reason, as well as a purpose. You’re more sane than you think you are. And you know more than you will admit to yourself.”

Rita had no response other than the smile that began to replace her expression of consternation. Then, almost inaudibly, she said, “Everyone should have a friend who understands them so well.”

“Do you have other friends other than myself?”

“Huh? Yeah, sort of.”

“Why don’t they help you?”

“Sometimes problems are too personal to involve others.”

“And your siblings? Where are they? You are related, yet you do not relate. Is this the human way of relationships?”

“Oh. Well, some things are best left alone. Pam and Stella have their own lives, their own problems. Actually, Pam resents me; Stella hates my guts. I can’t open my mouth without one of them censoring me. ‘You make me feel like a worm!’ they’d say. I always had to give myself an intellectual lobotomy just to get along with them. You know—before I comb my hair, remove my brain and put it where they can’t see it. They don’t like me. Let’s just leave it at that, OK?”

He guided the car onto the busy freeway, immersed in a silent frown. “I don’t understand,” he finally said. “I am here, why isn’t anyone else?”

*Good question.* “I guess I’ve never saved anyone’s life before. No one else is grateful enough.” *Feeble-ass answer.*

“They’ve helped me with other things before. This time is different. It takes someone very special to put themselves on the line like you’re doing.

“Without you, I would have either freaked out or run away from my own home...like my sisters did. And my mother. Shit, she made the ultimate great escape: she died. On his birthday, even.” That last fact intrigued, almost delighted Rita. Maybe there was some kind of universal justice after all.

“I would like to meet your friends. When do you think this would be possible?”

Rita jerked to attention. His request was so unexpected. She had never given it any thought—him meeting her friends. “I don’t know when I’ll be seeing anyone. Ever since the arthritis and the accident—falling in the mud—and all...I don’t know.”

“Are you sad, Rita? Have I made you sad?”

“No, it’s not you. It’s...well, I keep pretty much to myself. Writing is a solitary profession, I can’t really work with people chatting in my ear.” Rita thought about how she sounded to herself and wondered if she was being honest or just protective of her feelings, throwing up more barriers. “Besides, most people are damn boring,” she added. “All they see—want to see—is their own four walls. There’s so much to the world, to the universe. So many wonderful things to ponder and discuss.” She laughed out loud. “Imagine me trying to tell those shallow assholes I’ve been to Phaedra, and by the way, I’m sleeping with an alien who looks just like—”

“*War of the Worlds.*”

“What?”

“*War of the Worlds.* Hysteria—fear and revulsion of the unknown and inexplicable. Yes, I understand your isolation. I’ve seen what things are important to most humans by watching TV.”

“Yeah—you’ve got it. That’s a perfect example,” she giggled. Was she growing to love this man, this alien?

It dawned on her that *War of the Worlds* may not be representative of all human fantasies of alien contact. “You know, there are better examples of human attitudes towards—”

“I know, Rita. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind, E.T.* I was just presenting an example that would illustrate your relationship with your friends, to let you know I understand. You are their Martian.”

“Yes,” Rita said softly. “A Martian.”

And across the vast incomprehensible expanse of the galaxy, a Martian and a Phaedran became best friends.

\* \* \*

Rita thought of the wonderful time she and Cosmigellan had been having doing little things in her father’s house—he never locked up when he left—that would set him up for the more elaborate things to come.

It was curious Jim Grayson had never mentioned the crazy things going on over there to *someone*. But of course, like Cosmigellan had said, her father probably wouldn’t tell anyone he had found Sani-Flush and shampoo in his refrigerator, and a carton of milk in the shower

caddy.

The keys must be driving him crazy too. He just thought he had problems with keys before. Rita was surprised he found his own car keys after she and the Phaedran had taken nearly twenty full key chains and switched all the keys on them. His car repair customers must be frantic.

The highlight of the week had been when Cosmigellan, retaining his talent for voice emulation, called a car parts supply warehouse in Chicago and ordered three hundred dollars worth of merchandise for an obscure model. Rita had access to her father's credit card number from making out his bills for him every month, so they, of course, "maxed the sucker out." The two had yet to see the reactions to this crazed purchase.

Rita's silent mental rehash session was interrupted by Cosmigellan's abrupt braking as he parked the car in the shopping center. A large package was waiting for them at the private mailbox Cosmigellan had suggested they rent. "So, what are we expecting today?" Rita rubbed her palms together with devilish anticipation.

"Surveillance and sound equipment. This will be our long-term project. We'll have to use special care in using it; get caught once and the whole plan is down the porcelain parkway," Cosmigellan explained as he heaved the large box into the trunk of the car.

\* \* \*

"And this green wire goes here," Cosmigellan said as he deftly soldered the wire in place. The finished surveillance dish would give them the feedback they needed to continue their slow, carefully planned mental torment of the man Rita could no longer allow in her life.

The technical work done, Chef Cosmigellan prepared another wonderful meal, or rather, two meals. Rita had refused the Phaedran's usual fare of nearly pure fat and protein, and he did not mind putting in the extra effort to accommodate Rita. He had nearly taken over the domestic chores, insisting that Rita free her time for what she enjoyed most: her writing. She often caught glimpses of him, hooked into a pocket tape player listening to Chinese instrumentals he had recorded from Rita's collection of international music, smiling as he did the laundry, vacuuming, even window-washing. The house had never looked so clean, and Cosmigellan literally glowed with satisfaction. He seemed happier than he had been since his arrival. Was it his affectionate servitude to Rita's comfort, or the exhilaration of engaging in his shameless lust for revenge? Rita couldn't be sure.

Filled with dinner and excited, they lay down on the bed and

fiddled with the electronics equipment until they were sure it was operating properly. “The warden” as they liked to refer to Jim Grayson, was now home.

“Now,” Cosmigellan said, adjusting the headphones for a tighter fit, “we wait for the day’s discoveries.” Almost an hour passed as Cosmigellan and Rita waited in the dimly lit room, surveillance dish pointing towards Jim Grayson’s house.

“What the hell?”

Rita jerked to attention, frightened and angry at the same time. Cosmigellan spoke in her father’s voice, repeating everything he heard, for her benefit.

“Shit. How’d this get in here—huh, Sonya?”

Rita whispered, “He’s talking to his cat. Guess he found the can of axle grease in the refrigerator.”

Cosmigellan continued to repeat Jim Grayson’s affectionate monologue. “Yeah, Sonya. Good kitty, beautiful kitty. You happy on the new pillow I brought you, huh? You like that nice orange pillow?” Rattle of paper. “Look what I brought you today, Sonya. You’ll like this.” There was nothing for a few minutes, then, “You know who’s been in here? Hmm, Sonya?”

“He already suspects someone’s been in his house—that’s not good,” Rita said.

“Don’t worry, it won’t last,” Cosmigellan said in his usual voice, squinting and pulling the headphones off. “He’s turned on the TV. That’s it for today.”

“So, he’s talking to his cat. He’s always done that. Used to piss my mom off. It’s sickening how he gushes over that cat, but could never—”

“Patience, Dear Rita. The longer it takes, the more effective it’ll be. Don’t worry. Get some rest, we have a lot of work ahead of us.”

During the night Rita awoke to the soft pecking sounds of a computer keyboard in use. She pushed her two sleeping cats aside and got up to investigate. Rita saw what she expected to see: Cosmigellan diligently typing in codes, numbers and other commands.

“What the hell are you doing now?”

“Tomorrow’s the third, right?”

“Yeah, and...?”

“Your father’s Social Security check is automatically deposited in his account. Tomorrow will hold a surprise: The complete contents of his account will be shunted to a fictitious account...a Mr. Roger Davis, in Anaheim.”

“Jesus, you’re hitting below the belt. Don’t you think?”

“Don’t worry. Everything will be automatically transferred back four days later. When he checks his account, as you say he always does on the third, it’ll be empty and no one in the bank will have an explanation...right away, that is. Later, after some checking, they’ll insist he authorized the transfer himself.”

“God, you’re devious. I’m glad you’re on my side.”

\* \* \*

It was two in the afternoon when Rita heard the engine of her father’s diesel truck idling out in front of his house.

“Hook up the dish! He’s back!” Rita half-whispered to Cosmigellan, who was lingering in the heavy spray of one of his frequent cold showers.

He leaped from the shower stall and grabbed a towel, not bothering to use it, streaked past her and flopped beside her on the bed, flipping his soggy hair on the pillows. “You do it this time. I’m too wet to use the equipment.”

Nervous, Rita watched for clues from Cosmigellan that she was doing something wrong as she put on the headgear and twisted the direction and gain dials on the small console.

Listening for a few moments, she said softly, “He’s banging around in there pretty good. Pissed, I’d say.” There was a long silence, then a startling slam as something impacted a wall—perhaps a lamp or other small appliance. Her ears rang; she reached over to turn down the gain, but cranked it up even further as the soft tinkle of a phone sounded in the background.

“Hello?” her father’s irritated voice said. “No Ma’am.” A short pause. “Not only has my Social Security check not been deposited, all of my money seems to have disappeared. I had over a thousand dollars, and when I went to withdraw cash for food this morning, the balance read exactly zero. I would suggest that someone in your institution is in error.”

Another pause.

“Perhaps a visit or call from my Congressman would expedite this matter?”

A longer pause.

“I’ll be expecting your call. Until then, I thank you for your assistance.” A forceful clank signaled he had hung up.

“Shit, he never treated me with as much courtesy,” Rita remarked.

“What’s happening?” Cosmigellan queried.

“He got a call from the bank. Expecting another call later, I think. Oh—I do believe he lost it for just a moment—he’s resorted to throwing

things.”

He smiled and pulled the towel to his head, ruffling through the shiny black locks. “Keep listening.”

Forty-five minutes passed. Cosmigellan had gone to the kitchen to stuff his face again. Rita wished she could eat like that and stay as fit.

Jim Grayson’s telephone rang. “Hello?” he said.

A long pause.

He laughed and said, “Roger who? I don’t know anyone by that name, much less anyone I would give all of my money to! Obviously, there’s been some kind of mistake.”

Another long pause.

“Anaheim? Madam, I don’t know anyone in Anaheim! This Roger Davis character is a thief!” His voice was strained and hot.

A very long pause.

“Madam, there’s no way I could have authorized an electronic transfer, I haven’t signed anything.”

A short silence.

“Madam, I don’t own a computer. I suggest you find my money, and fast, or I’ll have to press charges for theft!” He slammed the receiver down. “Computer transfer...” he mumbled. Rita heard the unmistakable *sproing* of the old chair relieved of his weight and the rustle of clothes as his footsteps announced their locations—heading out the door and straight towards her house.

“Oh my God!” She tore the headphones off and limped into the kitchen. “Cos, Cos,” she gasped, “he’s coming over here! He suspects *me!*”

Cosmigellan impaled a big chunk of cheese on his teeth and dashed for the bedroom, then turned, grasping Rita at the temples. She felt dizzy as he said repeatedly inside her head, “You didn’t do anything. You don’t know anything. Repeat what you know.”

“I didn’t do anything. I don’t know anything.” Electric moths spun before her and vanished as the pounding at the kitchen door and the demands for entry shattered the momentary fugue Cosmigellan had induced.

“Who is it?” Rita asked dumbly.

“Your old man. Hey, kid, let me in. How come you locked the door? I wanna ask you something.”

Cosmigellan’s instant hypnosis session hadn’t relaxed her fully; opening the door, allowing the falsely calm beast of a father to enter her home, she noticed a tremor in her hands.

“You eatin’ again?” he asked flippantly.

“No, just finished. What’s up?”

“You know about computers. Know anything about electronic transfer?” His blue eyes seared into her like Satan’s brand.

“Of what? Data, text files, money, graphics?”

“Money. From one bank account to another.”

“No, can’t say I know much about that. All I know is banks and government agencies do it all the time. That’s how we both get our Social Security checks.”

“Someone with a home computer couldn’t illegally take the money out of one account and put it in another.” The left corner of his mouth kinked up slightly in a noncommittal grin. He was enjoying this.

“Geez, that would be a real feat. Maybe some teenage hacker who spends hours at the keyboard...no, he’d need all the passwords, secret codes. It seems highly unlikely.”

He frowned, dropping his accusing gaze to the floor. “Someone’s gotten into my account, taken everything. The bank says I did it—transferred to some clown I never heard of in Anaheim.”

“Are you sure? Shit, man. What are you going to do?”

He searched Rita’s face for lies, for false concern, for mockery, and found only Rita’s steadfast blankness. “Contact my congressman, I guess. Obviously someone is a thief.”

“Good luck,” she said flatly, unemotionally, watching him storm out and down the steps.

Making sure both cats were in and relocking the door, Rita shuffled, emotionally whipped, back to the bedroom where Cosmigellan lay, head framed in electronics equipment.

He looked over his shoulder at Rita. “He’s talking to someone on the phone.”

“Who? What’s he saying?”

Again, in her father’s voice, the Phaedran repeated, “No. I think she knows more than she’s letting on. She knows my PIN numbers for both accounts.”

“Stop!” Rita said, truly afraid now. “This can’t go on. He’s going to make life hell for me. Put the money back.”

“All is not lost,” Cosmigellan said, removing the headgear. “He won’t do anything worse than he’s already done. And you *know* you can do worse. We haven’t even started.”

“I don’t know what his limits are! I don’t know if he has any! He’s not well, I don’t believe he has morals enough to tell him when he’s gone too far! Please, put the money back.”

“All right, I concede. You mustn’t suffer from this.”

He went into the living room, powered up the computer and went

to work. “Rita, may I transfer it into his other account at the other bank? Tomorrow?”

She let out a big sigh. “Oh, why not.” This thing was getting as convoluted as fresh tripe.



## CHAPTER 9—Resources

*He who has never envied the vegetable  
has missed the human drama—E.M. Cioran*

The snarl of a gas-powered lawn mower shredded the blissful early morning silence, grinding and chucking directly below Rita's bedroom window. Cosmigellan jerked awake, eyes popping open and darting in all directions. Rita looked over and smiled one of those insincere "Good morning, Darling" smiles.

In her best southern accent she announced, "It's 6:23 Saturday morning. Welcome to Camp Revenge. Our first event is the brain-paralyzing lawn mower sprint, manned by the undefeated Warden Grayson. First prize is an alienated family and a crying crippled daughter, complete with hostility and neuroses features. Homicidal psychosis is optional."

"This is unconscionable," Cosmigellan spoke into her left ear.

"Hey, he does this every time he thinks he's losing control over others. The day is usually random, but often follows what he believes to be an injustice perpetrated by one or more of the family members. He kept my mom in tears, popping Valium and blood-pressure medicine...What are you doing?"

"I'm taping this. Quiet, please."

A full five minutes of tape counted off before the blaring noise faded to other sections of growth around the ranch.

"Five to one, when he's finished with that—in about a half an hour—he'll fire up that 750 Yamaha parked beneath my window. Maybe he'll be really cruel and wait until he thinks I'm back asleep. He knows I usually wake late, because I often stay up late writing. You can really miss out on that REM sleep with this system."

"Speak softly. I don't want voices on the tape," Cosmigellan said.

"I'm going back to sleep. If I snore, jab me. You can play with your spy kit by yourself."

The deep anal growl of the Yamaha thundered against the outside wall of the bedroom at 8:30 A.M. Exhaust fumes wafted through the cracks in the rustic walls, burning Rita's throat and nose. She jolted awake and stared at the ceiling, tears of despair running into her ears as she cursed the continued cruelty of the hideous person she was repulsed to think of as her father.

Cosmigellan felt for her left hand and brought it up, placing it on his lower abdomen. “Think of something else,” he murmured close.

She could not help but laugh. The disturbance outside fleetingly lost importance as Cosmigellan pulled Rita into his mind, cloaking her in his loving electric web, mixing his emotions with hers until she could no longer identify which were hers. With some trepidation, she permitted herself the luxury, indeed the *necessity*, of becoming lost, lost and removed from the turmoil of her separate, tortured world.

At last, welcome silence drew Rita from her emotional retreat. Cosmigellan’s presence had made a very distasteful circumstance seem almost non-existent.

“I never thought to ask. Can I become pregnant by you?”

“No. My sperm cells have no DNA.”

“Then, why bother? If you can keep a beard from growing, why make sperm?”

“It slipped my mind. Breakfast!” he cheered, bouncing off the bed and trotting to the kitchen.

“Just yogurt for me. I can’t handle your rich diet. What’s it going to be today for you, steak and eggs?” Rita yelled into the kitchen.

“I haven’t decided yet,” he yelled back.

“It’ll be something disgusting, I can bet on that.”

“Low-residue, high energy—just what a Phaedran needs. It’s the only way I can maintain my energy output. It is expensive, being human.”

“You’re telling me! I’m glad you have your own bank account.”

Inside a fifteen minutes, Cosmigellan came in carrying a tray loaded with food. Rita found her cup of yogurt obscured by a mountain of French toast made with white bread and layered in cream cheese and bacon strips.

“My God, I’m going to have a coronary just watching you eat that.”

“Earth food is wonderfully diverse in flavor elements,” he said, sensuously licking his lips and fingers.

“Yeah, but do you have to get them all in one meal?”

“I’m making stuffed zucchini and chow mien tonight. That should be to your liking.”

“But, what will *you* eat?”

“The same, supplemented with a pound of sausage.”

“Sorry I asked.”

Not long after inhaling his fat-logged brunch, Cosmigellan indulged in yet another cold shower. It was a very curious habit. Rita’s

nipples crinkled into terminal raisins just thinking about it. “Hey, Cos, how come you take a cold shower right after you eat?” she yelled from the bed.

“To dissipate heat, level out my body temperature. Otherwise, I’d incinerate myself.”

*Good God, spontaneous combustion. I’m sleeping with someone who could just go up in smoke any minute.* Reshuffling her thoughts, Rita reached for her notebook and pen, promising herself that she would get *some* writing done this day.

Nothing. Nothing would come to her. She had probably less than two pages to go to finish the manuscript, but nothing happened. It was infuriating. Ever since Cosmigellan had sloshed into her life she couldn’t write another word for the story that, up until then, had been writing itself. She relaxed back onto the pillows, drumming the pen on her forehead, as if to pound some burst of brilliance from her stubborn imagination.

“Can you jostle my brain into behaving?” Rita asked casually as Cosmigellan finally emerged from his cold deluge.

“What’s the problem?”

“I’m totally blocked on the finish for this story. I hate my brain; it’s conspiring against me.”

“It’s supposed to happen like this,” he said bluntly, dressing his wet body.

“I’ve got to get this thing finished. I need the money.”

“Tell me how much you need.”

“No, you don’t understand. I want to be paid for *this*. It’s the only thing left I can do; I need to be rewarded for it.”

He touched her lightly on the forehead. “Write something else—start a new story. There’s nothing else you can do.”

“I don’t even have a new idea for a story. It’ll take days.”

“You may surprise yourself,” he said, pulling a white T-shirt over his wet head. “I’m going to go fuck with your computer.”

“Ha! You’re getting better with your slang. But, if you do to that computer what you’ve been doing to me, it’ll never work again!”

“Funny Rita.”

“What are you going to do today?”

“I think I’ll study war and weapons. I still don’t understand this ‘balance of power’ fantasy your species seems to embrace.”

“Hey—have a ball. As soon as you figure it out, drop a line to the world leaders. I’m sure they’d love to be enlightened.” She stared pathetically at that damn blank page, pen poised, just in case she was seized by a fit of uncontrollable genius.

Cosmigellan’s fury at the keyboard was distracting, even a room away. *Peck, peck, peck peck peck, peck-a peck*. It was beginning to feel like he was pecking small chunks from her throbbing brain with a dull chisel. Rita still had written only a few notes—nothing that could prod her into endless, inspired hours of prose. Giving up, she went to see what her interstellar companion was up to.

“What’s this?” she asked, lifting a page from the printer.

“A letter to the President.”

Rita read it aloud:

“Dear Mr. President: I have spent many long hours studying the problem of nuclear weapons stockpiling in these United States and abroad. The TNT equivalent of all the nuclear weapons in the world amounts to approximately 25,000 megatons, or 50 trillion pounds. This shocking figure translates to 10,000 pounds of nuclear destruction for each and every human inhabitant on this great planet. One pound in a car will obliterate the car and vaporize everyone in it.

“I am a peace-loving soul and have no desire whatsoever to destroy 10,000 cars or an average of 40,000 passengers of said cars.

“Since I am aware that my tax dollars have gone to purchase my allotted 10,000 pounds of nuclear devastation, I elect to sell it back to you for thirty cents on the dollar. Please deposit my refund in the bank account listed below. Signed—

“You’re not going to send this, are you? I dare you!” She laughed hysterically, wiping the tears from under her eyes.

“I already have—direct link to the White House computer.”

“I wish you hadn’t done that,” she found herself lamenting again. “If we get caught we’ll be licking hot skillet in Hell.”

“Don’t worry. How’s your story coming?” Derailed again.

“Oh, just a few notes. It should develop into a pretty entertaining story, except—I haven’t decided how the ending’s going to go. I usually have a general idea. . . .”

“Don’t worry. Your ending will come to you just when you need it.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. Shit, I hate that phrase. Are you always so damn certain things will work out?”

“Yes. Collapsing quantum wave functions—qwiff popping, as you call it—is one of my more admirable talents. It is yours as well.”

“That may well be, but I still think it takes a second row seat to your newly found talent at—”

“Rita, there’s no need to be dismayed when you get what you want.”

A little meanness squealed for attention inside her. “I’d love to

see you and a shrink beef it out. How about a little psychological test? We'll see if you're an optimist or a pessimist. Ready?" He nodded.

"If I had a glass half filled with water, would it be half empty or half full?"

Blinking once, he answered, "Neither. You'd have a glass that's twice as big as it needs to be."

"Oh, shit," she mumbled under her breath. There's no winning with this guy. "OK, I give up. There's nothing you can say or do that doesn't impress me immeasurably. You should be a comedian."

"I don't need to work for a living, I have all the money I need."

"Yeah, right. I've been meaning to ask you about that. Where does it come from?"

"People that no longer need it: the deceased and forgotten. I scan databases all over the U.S. There's lots of unclaimed money out there, sitting and waiting—but not for long."

"Very clever. But what are you going to do when the banks find out where it's going?"

"I erase my request codes after the transfers are finalized. I'll always have money."

"Won't your bank get suspicious?"

"Unlikely. But, if that happens, I'll start up again somewhere else, with another name and account number. The system is mine to use as I wish. I hurt no one."

"Just how much have you accumulated?"

"About eight thousand dollars. Any more would alert your income police."

"Well, you've pretty well got it covered, I'd say," Rita marveled at his economic trickery. "So, what's on the agenda for our second favorite pastime?"

"We need some time in your father's house."

"Oh. He rarely leaves on the weekend. Customers bring their cars in then. We'll have to wait until Monday."

He stood and draped his arms over her shoulders; a devious smile blossoming on his face. "Hey, how about a little fun with law enforcement?"

"Huh? What do you have brewing in that criminally creative mind of yours, now?"

"You said your father should be here all weekend? Let's take advantage of it. Remember, all situations we find ourselves in will surrender their gifts."



## CHAPTER 10—Fruition

*The object of war is not to die for your country  
but to make the other bastard die for his—George Patton*

“Sir, we have your voice recorded on five consecutive 911 calls this weekend. We’ve sent out units every time, only to be sent away because of your claims that you hadn’t called. You know false alarms are a crime; that 911 number is for real emergencies. You’re taking able personnel away from their duties. I’m afraid you’ll have to come down to the station with me, Mr. Grayson,” the officer explained as Rita pointed the surveillance dish garagewards.

“Officer Sheaffer, with all due respect, I’ve been out here in the garage all day—both days; I have witnesses. I don’t have a phone out here, I couldn’t have possibly made those calls!”

The Miranda speech ricocheted off Rita’s eardrums as the police radio screeched in the background. Carrying the dish and console to the bedroom window, she peeked through the curtains and caught a glimpse of her father hunched over, hands cuffed behind his back, two policemen packing him into the rear seat of a patrol car.

A malicious satisfaction overcame her and she smiled, but only briefly. Removing the headphones, she said, “He’ll be calling me, begging me to come get him. I know it.”

“So, go get him. You’re such a considerate, caring daughter, Rita. And dependable, too,” Cosmigellan answered, smiling slyly.

“I can’t believe you sneaked over to his house and used his phone once, much less five times. You thrive on the possibility of getting caught, don’t you?”

“Rita, you would have signaled me if he were headed for his house. There was no real risk.”

“This is really nerve-racking. I don’t think I’m cut out to be a spy.”

\* \* \*

The inevitable call came Wednesday night. Rita bit cookies out of the car seat all the way to the police station, and shit Twinkies all the way back. Jim Grayson had little to say of his arrest, erupting only

periodically with things like, “Those incompetent idiots haven’t heard the last of this! I remember the days when I was on the force. We’d never get away with a frame like this! I’d never be harassed like this if I were living in Mexico, I don’t care what they say about corrupt officials in that country! They’re all over *here*, those corrupt bastards! The commies, you know. It’s the commies. That’s how they’re gonna get us—one citizen at a time!” Nothing made any sense, but to Rita it was Golden Truth. She smiled to herself. *Ammunition.*

Cosmigellan was asleep on the sofa when Rita finally limped in. It took him a while to awaken to her kiss.

“It’s over. He thinks the police framed him and the communists are behind it. I wonder how he rationalizes that. They even played the tapes—with his voice on them, and showed him the computer records of phone calls coming from his number, with the times and everything. His head must be spinning like an over-flowing toilet.” She rested her head on Cosmigellan’s chest. His heartbeat was slow and regular, much in contrast with the tempo of activities of the last three days.

“What time is it?” he asked groggily.

“About 11:30. How long have you been asleep?”

“Two hours. I’m not feeling very well.”

“You’re probably tired from all that wiring you did yesterday and today. Did you get it all done?”

“Yes. I have six places in his bedroom ceiling wired with micro-speakers. You can’t even see them unless you know what you’re looking for. I’ve got his bedside radio rigged-up too. I think we’re ready. Two-thirty, the world falls in around him.”

“You don’t mean tonight, do you?”

“Are you getting soft-hearted all of a sudden?”

“No...but, don’t you think we should wait a few days? I mean, let’s drag this out a bit, like you said.”

“Timing is critical, Rita,” he yawned. “It’s about time for those flea eggs I sprinkled in his bed to start hatching. He’ll be deliciously irritated, perfectly primed for our final torments.”

“Still, I’d feel more at ease if we spaced this shit out a little bit.”

Night after night they took turns listening in on Jim Grayson’s phone calls and his private rantings. By now, he must be questioning his sense of reality. So many peculiar happenings. So much unexplained bad luck. He couldn’t help but be convinced it was *his* fault, *his* bad judgment, *his* failing memory.

He had taken to public displays of spleen-venting rage, scaring away customers by the dozens. She almost felt guilty, watching him

spend aimless lonely hours listlessly puttering around the property, picking up trash, moving car parts, moving them back. His only pleasure seemed to be running that infernal lawn mower. And tormenting his cat.

Rita watched him “playing” with his beloved companion and grew sickened with the undertow of his displaced aggressions. He would pluck a wisp of Pampas grass, tickling the cat’s nose with it as she perched on the cross-board of the clothesline. Then, while she batted and sneezed in delight, he’d reach up behind her and pinch the end of her twitching tail until she whipped back with a paw, angered and in pain. He’d repeat this routine until his cat simply left. Sometimes, animals are a lot smarter than humans.

But Rita took consolation in knowing that he was becoming deeply disturbed. He was losing weight steadily and a peculiar gray pallor took up residence on his face. That steadfast self-image of omnipotence crumbled and sank a little bit more as each day passed. His mysterious package from the auto supply warehouse in Chicago torched a glimmer of interest in him, but soon that deteriorated to disgust when he realized he didn’t remember ordering it.

\* \* \*

“Now, when I press the play button, listen carefully for any movement or mumbles. We can’t have him awake for too long, or he won’t be convinced it’s hallucinatory,” Cosmigellan explained.

In the quiet of 2:30 A.M. Rita pointed the dish towards her father’s house, propped up on her elbows on the bed, ready to signal Cosmigellan to start and stop the tape. All was silent, except for the horrendous rhino-in-heat snoring characteristic of a tired old man.

“He’s dead to the world,” Rita announced.

The pre-recorded blast of a lawn mower at close range filled his bedroom, nearly blistering the paint on the walls, Rita imagined. *How do you like it? Can’t sleep, eh? Ghost lawn mower coming back to haunt you?*

“Uh oh. He’s awake.”

Cosmigellan turned the tape player off.

“I just heard the click of a lamp chain being pulled. Now, footsteps away...coming back. I think he got back into bed.”

“Wait until he’s snoring again. The motorcycle’s next,” Cosmigellan said.

“Not so loud this time. I can’t tell when or for how long he’s awake. That last one was a close call.”

They played the tapes at random hours so their plaything wouldn’t

catch on; they skipped a few nights. Once, the frustrated old man opened his bedroom window and screamed foulness out to his unseen tormentors, sending the dog into his own furious search and incessant barking that even kept Cosmigellan and Rita awake.

“The placement of the six tiny speakers makes the sound seem like it’s coming from everywhere,” Cosmigellan explained. “This morning, when he’s just waking, he’ll *know* where the sound is coming from: Time for a devastating radio bulletin.”

“What are you planning to say?”

“Let’s get some sleep. We have to be awake by 6:30 A.M. It’s imperative that we be ready for him just when he wakes up and turns on the radio; the hypnopompic effect will cover our tracks.”

Rita was unable to sleep in any way but thirty minutes increments broken by hour-long spells of mental frenzy. Cosmigellan slept peacefully. He had been sleeping more lately; it was altogether opposite of his previous habit of cat-napping a couple of hours here and there. Perhaps all this bugging and surveillance business was taking too much out of him.

By 6:15 A.M. Rita was wide awake, ready for the broadcast trauma Cosmigellan had planned but had refused to detail for her.

Cosmigellan staggered to the kitchen for some unmentionable dietary calamity, returning quickly.

“How can you hack that stuff so early in the morning?”

“It is necessary,” he said energetically, shoving cold steak strips smeared with cream cheese into his mouth. “Any stir, yet?”

“No, still snoring,” she said, hugging the earphones close to her head, trying to avert her gaze from the unappetizing food orgy taking place beside her. She waited; Cosmigellan munched and smacked his revolting breakfast.

“Oh! I just heard his watch alarm. It won’t be long...there, he turned on the radio.”

Sucking his fingers and clearing his throat, Cosmigellan blew into the microphone and began his announcement. Rita could only understand a few words, but apparently Jim Grayson understood much more: he cranked the radio volume up to full gain.

Cosmigellan’s Spanish was flawless as he spoke, clearly, deliberately, alarmingly. Rita caught short phrases: “. . . *este dia...tropa de linea...Union de Soviet...invasion de Mexico . . .*”

Rita didn’t have to understand the whole thing to get the picture. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she gasped. “He’ll never buy that!”

Cosmigellan finished his announcement and allowed the regular

Mexican broadcast to resume on Jim Grayson's radio. "What's going on now?" he asked.

"I think he's dressing—rather quickly. There's a lot of movement over there. He's...going out the door. Coming this way. Shit, that's just great. Gee thanks, Cos." She rolled off the bed, tearing the headphones off and standing, trying to keep her breathing slow and regular.

Seconds later Jim Grayson was at her locked kitchen door pounding and pleading in a very panicked voice. She couldn't make out what he was saying until she was standing at the door.

"...has invaded Mexico! Let me in! Turn on your TV!"

"What?" Rita said, unlocking the door as her father burst into the kitchen. She pulled back her fingers in pain; he must have intended to break the lock, he had come through with such force.

"The Russians are invading Mexico!" he puffed. "Landed in Mazatlan and are headed north. I heard it on my radio just a couple of minutes ago! Turn on your TV!"

Rita rubbed her eyes and yawned as if she had just awoke. Her father followed her into the living room, trembling in his robe, wringing his hands, the right corner of his upper lip twitching.

Rita turned on the TV, disinterested. "It's just the usual morning crap—celebrity interviews and such," she said lazily. She had no idea if he suspected her exaggerated coolness.

"They obviously haven't gotten the word yet! Switch to another channel!" he demanded.

Rita obliged him, now trying to get caught up in his terror, to convince him she was just as upset. "No...just safety feature on baby strollers. God, this is too important to save for the evening news. I don't understand why the networks aren't carrying this. Are you *sure* you heard what you think you heard? I mean, you could have been dreaming."

"No! No! I heard it! I was wide awake, tuned into the same Mexican station I always listen to! Russia invaded Mexico—thousands of troops! They're coming in the back door! That's how they're gonna get us! I don't understand why the U.S. stations...I don't understand . . ." His hands shook visibly. His face sagged a sickly white, jaw dropping away in a huge gape, pupils dilated, making him look completely, irretrievably insane. He turned, gait wobbly, still mumbling to himself as he left.



## CHAPTER 11—Awareness

*Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it—unknown*

The paramedics lifted the gurney into the ambulance while an attendant explained to Rita that her father’s rather sudden catatonia was not as tragic as text-book senile dementia. “Though his condition is serious, with proper treatment, and providing there is no serious damage, he should pull out of this,” the crisply dressed man reassured her. “You’re lucky Mr. Martin here found him as early as he did.”

“Yeah, he coulda been in there for days like that,” Jim Grayson’s friend said.

Cosmigellan stood beside Rita, rubbing the nape of her neck as they watched the ambulance bounce over the rough dirt driveway and vanish with the shell that had been Jim Grayson.

Rita turned toward her house, towing a clinging Cosmigellan beside her, leaving Mr. Martin standing alone staring off into the distance. “I really didn’t expect it to turn out this way,” she said, acknowledging a twinge of remorse.

“It is regrettable that he was not physically stronger.”

“What’s done is done. How could we have known he would succumb to a stroke? I just wanted him to leave, preferably of his own accord, or if necessary, in a straight-jacket. I had no plans to—”

“What will you do now? Was it worth it?”

“Well, according to a clause in the lease, I will have title to the lease on the ranch, that’s about it. His Social Security payments will go to the nursing home, so there will be no rent payments going to hold his house for him.” Rita sat on the porch steps, feeling simultaneously relieved and guilty. “God, I can’t believe it’s over. I’m free—I’m finally free of that oppressive son-of-a. . . .”

Cosmigellan sat beside her and placed his hand on her shoulder. “And now, I can come out of hiding.” Rita sighed in response, staring down into the dirt at the foot of the steps, watching a troop of ants carry a star of dry cat food to another location. Ants weren’t the only creatures that rearranged the stars in their universe.

They went inside and collapsed on the bed. Rita was completely exhausted, emotionally stripped. It all seemed so unreal, so unimaginably peaceful. Thirty-four years of horror carried off in an

ambulance, removed from her, her nightmares, her life. A sigh of relief gushed out of her like an evicted demon.

“Are you happy now, Rita?” Cosmigellan asked in a near whisper, leaning over her, searching her face for some sign of dramatic change.

“It’s not all that simple, I’m afraid. I have a lot to sort out in my mind. It’s going to take a while before I’m completely sane again. Thirty-four years of soul-murder doesn’t dissolve just like that. I’m on the way, though.”

“Maybe you need a vacation, time away from this place and everything that reminds you of what’s happened to you.”

Before Rita could even respond, Cosmigellan’s hands were holding her head, gelatinous electric fingers meandering through her stunned, captive mind.

The cool jade green planet is cloaked in the thick, chemical effusion of joy. Epsilon Eridani shines like a suspended hazy orb through the canopy of mist, that strange mist that seems to rain from the surface of the planet upwards, filling the moisture dome that caps Phaedra. The ground feels more solid, more real than Rita remembered from before, beneath feet she still cannot see.

All around clumps of slippery tendrils capped with tiny silver pods reach toward the obscured sun. Intermittently, a pod from the center stalk bursts and sprays glittering dust onto the slick, slime-covered ground, giving rise to new generations of tendril clumps.

Rita finds herself wandering through a narrow passage, barely able to pass the body she cannot see. The sides of the passage rise high, white and jade green, wet. There are no sharp edges, the wall surfaces are as if rubbed smooth to accommodate the delicacy of the planet’s inhabitants.

Emerging from the narrow passage into a clearing, Rita sees a stream to her right, trickling gently, soundlessly. She follows it to a small pool of bubbling jade green water where longer, thicker tendrils, some several feet high, disappear into the low tarpaulin of mist hanging over Phaedra.

Traveling still further, she glimpses a small gathering of perhaps eleven Phaedrans darting and circling in excitement. The sweet odor is much stronger here. Their activity draws her to them. She feels herself being surrounded, touched, explored, pulled into the group. Beings touch and surrender their experiences, passing it from one mind to another: great journeys, volumes of knowledge and information. A huge surge of something never understood before. Blossoming, unrestrained sharing. Happiness, wonder. *More, I want more. Seek out others. Find*

*more. Take from me what I have learned. I have seen lovely and wonderful things. Take them from me, they are yours. Touch me, I willingly give myself to you...The Allness Of The One.*

The bedroom lurched back into consciousness. Cosmigellan smiled over Rita like a surgeon relieved to see his patient coming out of anesthesia. An indescribable rapture tingled inside her and danced out into her limbs. The intensity of it was more than she could handle, and she sobbed.

“Rita? Rita tell me what you know.”

She sniffed and swallowed. “What was I doing...how long have I been gone?”

“In linear time, about four hours have passed here. Please, tell me what you know.”

“Four hours! It seemed like an instant.” Her mind churned with impossible thoughts. “What do you mean, tell you what I know? I can’t even slow my thoughts down enough to sort them out.”

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t know...I feel weird, like...not myself.”

“Tell me what you know,” he repeated again, in calm anticipation.

“I was on Phaedra again. But, it was different this time. Real different. I wish you’d stop doing that shit to me without asking!”

“How did you feel when you were there?”

“Fine, happy. I was trading knowledge and experiences with some of the Phaedrans, begging them to give me more, and offering everything I knew. It was very nice, very...odd.” She was still puzzled, terribly bothered by something she couldn’t express.

Suddenly, a bewildering realization hit her. Rita felt her eyes widen and her body jerk, then become completely relaxed. “I...I felt like I belonged there. Shit, does hyperdimensional travel do that? I don’t remember it doing that before.”

“Tell me what you know, Rita,” he said again, more insistent.

*What? What do I know? I know...I know—*

It just couldn’t be true. She said it anyway. “I was a Phaedran,” she stated flatly, her throat clamping down on a scream, or a whimper.

Cosmigellan hugged her close, laughing softly. “Yes. Yes, Rita. You are.”

Rita tore away from him, horrified. “Am?”

“In another universe. You are aware of one of your other selves, a self that exists on another quantum branch. You have always known. Do you understand now?”

Rita felt weak and began to tremble. She was more alien than she ever imagined. And more distanced from humanity than she ever feared.

## CHAPTER 12—What Is Necessary

*A stitch in time would have confused Einstein—unknown*

“Rita, pull yourself together. It’s not the end of everything, it’s the beginning. Now that you know these things about yourself, the whole universe is yours to dance in. It is *yours*, Rita.” He paused, waiting earnestly for a response. “Do you hear me, Rita?”

Rita’s brain ached to be sublimely stupid again. “I still don’t get it. Why me, anyway? I’m not so special. There are lots of people out there, why have I been singled out? About the time I start feeling like I’m regaining some control over my life, something comes in and thwacks me up side the head. Why is this happening to me?” She wanted to cry, but was too numb, too lost, for tears.

“I’m sorry you are unhappy. I did not expect that you would be unhappy.”

“Don’t you see? All my life I’ve never been fully accepted for who I am, never quite fit in. How can I ever belong, knowing what I know?”

“Rita, I have no more answers. Those answers are within you.” He patted her face, as if wiping away the tears that should have come. “Just remember: Every exit is an entrance to someplace else,” he said, rolling back down on the bed to sleep.

The hidden implications of that statement couldn’t have been more stunning. Self-pity eroded into a realization that a great puzzle was being constructed right before her very eyes. The pieces were beginning to fall into place, in a sort of haphazard way. The dreams. Cosmigellan’s arrival and affect upon her life. It was all supposed to happen this way, or so it seemed. The secrets Cos said Rita had been keeping from herself were being revealed. Bald, out in the open, and...still meaningless. A huge emptiness filled her, drilled out a cavern deep inside and sat there in silence, mocking her astonishment.

There was a hole in the universe—a hole left by the Rita she thought she knew, the Rita that used to be.

Shana climbed quietly into her motionless lap and purred, her furry gray face exuding satisfaction with closed eyes and that permanent smile she always wore. These were her friends: Shana, Arabella, and of course, Cosmigellan. Why should she want for more?

The pillow and two sleeping balls of grayness were Rita's only companions when she woke. Cosmigellan had been laying beside her just a while before, but his warmth and soft breathing were absent. Darkness consumed the bedroom; the only light came from the red numbers on a digital LED clock: 11:34 PM. No light seeped in from other rooms; the whole house seemed shrouded in blackness. And silence.

The aura was unsettling, unexpected. Not because solitude and quiet were unfamiliar to Rita, but because it was uncharacteristic of a house where Cosmigellan would be furiously engaged in *something*. She heard no keyboard clicks. She smelled no cooking odors.

"Cos?" No answer. Every cell in Rita knew he was not there. She leaned over and turned on the bedside lamp. His wallet and checkbook were not on the table. She looked up and across to the closet. None of his clothes hung there. She searched the bed, the floor, the bathroom mirror for a note. There was none. A feeling of sadness, of abandonment, gripped at her.

Feeling her way down the hall, she turned on the living room light and stared at the empty couch. Her heart sank. Cosmigellan was gone.

Where was he? Why did he leave without telling her?

The oracle. Rita lifted the folded blanket from the couch; nothing fell from it. Her heart threatened to stampede right out of her chest. Her sleepy mind entertained the idea that everything up until now had been one long bizarre dream. Had he ever been here? God, maybe he didn't even exist, maybe her dreaming mind had invented him, then convinced her he was real before she woke.

It couldn't all be a dream. There was a Cosmigellan...wasn't there?

Shuffling out into the kitchen, Rita strained to see in the dim glow of a stovetop seven-watt bulb. Neat and tidy—no evidence of recent meal preparation. Peering in the refrigerator, she found it nearly empty, and except for a two-pound block of cheddar cheese, especially devoid of the fatty snacks Cos ate so frequently. It all began to crash in on her like some kind of surreal nightmare—worse than waking up from a dream of being filthy rich and frantically searching beneath your mattress for all that cash, finding none.

Then she saw it. It peeked out from inside a blue towel, winking fantastic colors in the glare of the refrigerator bulb. The oracle. It rested in the back near the baking soda, silent, reassuring: evidence she wasn't hallucinating.

*So where in the hell is Cosmigellan?* The stillness of the house was strangling her. Rita walked to the kitchen door, clutching the

oracle—her only evidence, her only link with rationality—and reached to the left to turn on the light. The fluorescent flicker spanked her dilated pupils into pinpoint submission. Rita grabbed for the doorknob—and froze. The door was locked.

The bolt lock was fast. The padlock hung, closed tight in defiance. The door was locked—*from the inside*.

It was then she noticed something odd about the chilled oracle burning into her chest. It was not only unusually cold—Arctic cold—but it did not hum. It was lifeless and that lifelessness sent a huge tide of horror through her, drenching her from the inside out. She heard a squeak escape from her throat, threatening to turn into tears.

Her mind became a chaotic whirlpool of uncertainty, fear and anguish. She couldn't sift a single thought from the swirling stew of questions—questions of sanity, of love, of abandonment, of reality itself. *Cos must be real, yet he is not here. The door is locked from the inside, and he is gone. He would not have left me. But he couldn't have left me—he doesn't exist.* Besides the oracle, there was no evidence in the house that he ever existed, except in her dreaming mind. Yet, her internal truth—those were his words, weren't they?—told her she had nothing to worry about. Her life had been changed by his presence. His philosophy pervaded every neuron in her body, his devotion had helped her purge the lifelong abuse of a man she was ashamed to call her father.

Her father! He was gone, wasn't he? She fumbled for the key to the padlock, and simultaneously—almost reverently—laying the oracle in the sink, unlocked the door and pulled it open.

Scanning across the ranch to her father's house, she was startled to see three yellow squares of light cut into the night. There was someone home; Rita could only assume it was her father. The sick tearing at her insides ripped away at her reality, at Cos' questionable existence, at her very rationality. Could it be true that nothing of what she remembered of the past few weeks really happened? *What day is this, anyway? How much time has passed? Has time passed? What's the first thing I remember since this dream began? Think back, Rita. Pwdre Ser. The bucket—I brought it in. I went to sleep, then woke up—just now?*

She was torn between knocking on her father's door and going to the living room to see if her reference book was still opened to the same page she had left it so many weeks? hours? ago.

And there in the sink still lay the sparkling enigma, so huge and lovely and...alien. Where did she get this thing if this was all a damned illusion?

*Aren't you DYING to know what's going on?*

You can, RIGHT NOW!

Just logon to

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