

Still Waters

by

David Dvorkin

2082-2093

ONE

Connie ran down the hallway, choking, gasping for breath. It was almost as if she were outside, on the surface, without a suit. That bastard, she kept saying to herself. That bastard!

She returned to her quarters and dropped onto her bed. She was exhausted. Not only had she spent days traveling about the Moon on Isaac Simkin's business, she had also spent two days digging through musty, dusty old archives to find the ancient journals Jonathan had wanted.

Exhausted she might be, but the exhaustion was physical. Her mind was awake, her nerves jangling. She could almost feel the electric currents coursing along them.

She jumped to her feet and paced about her bedroom. Elena, Elena, she thought. I bet I'm better in bed than you are. I bet you're like a mannequin.

Connie was no mannequin: she had had endless breathless testaments to that effect from men.

So why doesn't Jonathan prefer me? she wondered repeatedly and pointlessly. Elena doesn't want him. She's frightened of him, of his desire for her. She told me so. Jonathan, what's wrong with me?

Christ, she thought, listen to me whine! How many other abandoned and rejected lovers throughout history had asked the same pointless question? What does she have, what does he have, that I don't? What's wrong with me?

What did Jonathan Holroyd have? Why had she fallen in love with him? After all these years of immunity to that emotion, why had she chosen this man, out of all of them, to be the object of her feelings — the one man who, she should have known, was too emotionally committed elsewhere to ever want her as more than a lover?

"Why, I've been used!" she said aloud. She who had been accused more than once of using others sexually, had been used herself! "How does it feel, Connie?" she asked herself. Crummy, Connie, she answered herself. Crummy and shitty.

As her emotions calmed and objectivity returned, Connie began to feel the effects of her days of exertion. Eventually she pulled off her clothes, slid beneath the covers of her bed, and drifted into sleep. Her sleep became deep, soothed by calm dreams of waveless seas beneath a night sky and a full moon.

The next day was Fiveday, but Connie went to her office anyway. She had awakened drained of anger and also of enthusiasm, but she could think of nowhere else to go and nothing else to do but work. She was unsurprised to find Isaac also at work in his adjacent office.

He heard her enter, and he came quickly through the connecting door. “Connie! What’re you doing here today? I thought for sure you’d be taking the day off to recuperate. Thought you’d probably spend it with Jonathan.”

She shrugged and avoided his eyes. “Too much to do here. I was feeling guilty about letting it go during the last few days.” She could sense Simkin’s penetrating glance on her. At times like these, she admitted to herself, his very presence — his big body and powerful personality — were abrasive to her.

“What’s wrong, Connie?”

She had no intention of telling him, and she wished he weren’t always so perceptive. “Nothing, Isaac. I just have all of this to take care of.” She gestured at her desk, on which papers and computer wafers were piled in random order.

“A lot,” he agreed, and then he added, with heavy playfulness, “Too much time with Jonathan and not enough here at your desk, eh?”

Connie forced a smile. “Isaac, when I do get all of this cleared up, I’d like to work somewhere else for a while.”

He stared at her, nonplussed. “Somewhere else?”

“It’s not you,” Connie said quickly. “I’ve always loved working for you. You know that.” Despite her words, she could see the pain in his face. He chose to show no expression to others, but he couldn’t disguise his feelings from her. “Isaac, I mean that. I just want a change. I’ve been here at Mendeleev for eight years already.”

“Take a vacation, then!” Isaac said loudly. “For as long as you want. Go anywhere. Go to Frontside, go to Earth. Wherever. Rest yourself. Then come back.”

Connie shook her head. “I need more than that. I need ... I want a real change.”

Isaac shook his head. “This whole damned place would fall apart without you.” And so would I: he didn’t need to say that.

Connie laughed and shook her head. “Isaac! You’re fifty-two years old, you’re still as strong as a bull, and you’ll last forever. This place won’t fall apart until you do, and you will never fall apart!”

Isaac grinned back at her. “True enough!” He turned solemn again. “But I’ll miss you, Connie. You can’t dismiss that.”

“No.” Connie sighed. “No, I can’t, Isaac. But you know, you’re settled in what you do. You’ve been in charge of everything for a long time, and you have decades more of the same. I’m not like that. I’ve enjoyed these years, but it doesn’t lead anywhere, does it?”

Simkin gestured expansively. “You’re helping me to run things, aren’t you? It leads to more of that!”

“Does it? Will you marry me? Make me your co-ruler? And will the governing of the human race to me in case you die before me?”

Simkin hesitated, searching for words. Connie laughed. “Don’t work so hard at it, Isaac! Of course you won’t. Elena’s your heir and successor. I’ve always understood that. Always accepted it, too.”

“All right, all right.” Simkin sat on the edge of her desk and looked down at her. He was intimidating at this near distance. It was one of his favorite tricks, but it had ceased working with Connie a long time before. “So what about Jonathan, then? You know I’ve got high hopes for him, but I can’t handle him the way he is now. I can tell he’s resisting what we’re doing up here. When you and he — Well, I thought that then you’d be able to manipulate him for me.”

Connie smiled sadly. “It turned out that he ended up manipulating me, instead. You know who can handle him, don’t you, Isaac? Who can make him do anything you want from him?”

Simkin shook his head. “No, I don’t. Who?”

“Elena, of course.”

“Elena?” He jumped up and stood beside the desk, drumming his fingers on it. “Elena! Hmm. Interesting.”

Connie grinned at him, at the practically visible working of the wheels within his mind. “Terribly surprised, aren’t you?”

Simkin chuckled. “I admit I’m not.”

“What a poser you are!”

“I don’t allow anyone else to speak to me the way you do, you know,” Simkin said. “Why is that, do you suppose? Must be your sexy grin.”

“It really is time for me to leave, isn’t it, Isaac?”

Simkin sighed deeply. “And find yourself and make your own way in life and set your own goals, and so on?”

Connie nodded. “The first, especially.”

“You have somewhere in mind, no doubt?”

“N—” But she did, as she realized at that moment, at the instant Isaac asked his question. How long had her unconscious been considering the idea of leaving the Moon? “No doubt I do. SCRS.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“SCRS. Southern Coastal Research Station. Scares, the locals call it, so very cleverly.”

“Where the Hell is that?”

“Oh, Isaac!” Connie shook her head in mock disapproval. “You know so little about the world you rule.”

“The grand picture, Connie: that’s what I concentrate on. Now tell me about Scares.”

She stood up and turned to the map of Earth on the wall behind her desk. Lander and the Valley were in the middle of the map, colored a dark, inviting green. The map shaded quickly to white both to the north and the south of Lander, denoting the Cold. Africa was to the right side of the map, and beyond it lay Malaya and the surrounding islands. The island chains were repeated on the left-hand side of the map. Connie leaned close to examine the map, and then put her finger on a point southeastward along the east coast of South America from the point where the Valley met the Atlantic. “Here. I’ve been dealing with these people for close to a year, helping them get established and get the supplies they need. An independent bunch. They don’t like Lander, and I’m not so sure they particularly like you.”

“And you want to go change their minds, I hope.”

“No, Isaac,” she said very seriously, “I want to go and live with them and help them in their work. They’re pushing the frontier south, they’re studying the sea, and ... they’re as far away from Mendeleev and everything to do with it as I can practically get.”

Simkin sighed and said again, “I’ll miss you, Connie.”

She came around the desk and embraced him, burying her head against his chest. “And I’ll always miss you, Isaac. You know that.” And yet she realized it was a lie: having made the decision and chosen her destination, she was suddenly consumed with eagerness to be there and to be away from this world and this life and these complications and even this overpowering man.

At first, the gravity was the hardest part. It made her wonder if she had made a terrible mistake.

Like Elena, Connie had been back to Earth on and off on business. Unlike Elena, she had never stayed for any longer than necessary. (But I never had Jonathan to stay for, she thought bitterly.) The gravity, six times what she had become used to at Mendeleev, was bad enough for short periods. She had always found it impossible to imagine what it would be like to have to drag her heavy body about indefinitely under that relentless pull. Now she was finding out.

“I used to laugh at people when they arrived on the Moon and overdid everything,” she told Hartmuth. “They take a step, and they bounce twenty feet in the air. They panic when they fall, not realizing they have many seconds before they hit the floor.”

“Well, don’t jump off any roofs,” Hartmuth said, a bit brusquely. “Down here, you’ll break your legs, or your back, or even worse, and I’ve received a message from Mendeleev that if anything bad happens to you, we’ll be shut down.”

Connie noticed his sour expression. “Signed, Isaac Simkin?”

Hartmuth grunted. “Signed, Director of Mendeleev Observatory. Draw your own conclusions.”

Connie laughed. “You’ve already drawn them, haven’t you?”

Jenssen Hartmuth was tall, thin, blond, and blue eyed. He was in charge of logistics at SCRS, and it was with him that Connie had been dealing for the past year. He put his hand on Connie’s shoulder to steady her, and she clutched at him gratefully for support. “You’ll have to redevelop your own muscles sooner or later,” he told her disapprovingly. “Might as well start now. Yes, okay, I drew my own conclusions. They are, that Isaac Simkin takes a special interest in you, so that if I let you come to harm down here, I’ll regret it and so will all of Scares.”

Connie looked up at him seriously. “I’m part of Scares now, Jen. Don’t you think I can protect all of you?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”

A brutal question, Connie reflected, but an honest one, and one that struck to the heart of her new career. “Isaac still ... regards me highly,” she said carefully. “I don’t have any official position up at Mendeleev any more, but you don’t cancel eight years of hard work and loyalty, you know.” Although it’s hard to say with Isaac Simkin, she thought. Does loyalty count for anything with him?

Hartmuth, though, took what she said at face value. “Well, that’s something to be thankful for, anyway. Let’s get back to the dining hall, okay? You’ve had enough exercise for today. You need to rest your muscles. From this exercise, anyway. ... “

“From all exercise,” Connie said firmly. Jenssen’s physical attraction to her had been obvious from the first — over the comm, at first, and then even more strongly when she had appeared at Scares in person. But she wasn’t ready for another physical relationship yet. Jonathan was still with her. In her thoughts, his body still pressed against hers, he still rested inside her. Go away, Jonathan! she thought desperately, sadly. Make way for another man. Jonathan Holroyd was still her incubus.

Connie moved easily into her new appointment — arranged by her, while still at Mendeleev — as Scares’ liaison with the government in Lander.

For quite a while, it seemed strange to her to be dealing from this perspective with people in Lander and Mendeleev with whom she had once dealt from the vantage point of superiority. Now they made her wait, told her to call back repeatedly, brushed her off as insignificant. In a fairly short time, though, she became used to her new inferior position and handled her calls to Lander or Mendeleev quite routinely.

The only time she felt a momentary pang was when she called an old acquaintance at Mendeleev to try to speed up a request for supplies and was told that from now on, she should route all such calls through Lander.

Is that it? Connie wondered. Am I now reduced to being yet another mud-slug? I’m an Earthman again! She had worked so hard while in high school and college to get to the Moon, had even rejected her parents’ advice that she contact their old family friend Isaac Simkin for help, because she had wanted to get there entirely by her own efforts, and now she had sunk back into Earth status again — and by choice, at that. Oh, well, Connie told herself, the Moon wasn’t Paradise either, was it?

The Moon was where she had found power and fulfillment — and then Jonathan Holroyd and emptiness. Scares was where she would find herself.

Connie Allendorf has no future on the Moon, she told herself. No one has. Mendeleev can never be more than a temporary thing. Down here is where we can breathe without suits, where our ancestors evolved. This is the future of mankind. This is Connie Allendorf’s future.

Oh, God, she thought, I hope I’m not just deluding myself!

Two

Six months passed before Connie Allendorf took Jenssen Hartmuth as her lover. He was neither highly virile nor very imaginative, but his happiness and gratitude largely compensated for such lacks. Connie found that she now wanted affection, companionship, and comfort more than passion or novelty.

Meanwhile, she had passed from doing all of the needed liaison work with Lander to unofficially running the entire installation. Golden Weldner, the nominal Director of SCRS, was in fact a marine biologist, and she was only too happy to return to that work full time, leaving the running of Scares to the newcomer who seemed so much more at home and adept at such duties.

The researchers working at Scares specialized in studying the interface between the land, the sea, and the Cold. That meant that they willingly exposed themselves to the fierce storms that boiled continuously along those interfaces. It was dangerous, but the researchers were willing to take chances because of what they hoped to discover. “Be more careful, Jen,” Connie would urge him. He would shake his head. “Too much to find, Connie. That’s our job here. That’s why most of us are here. The danger’s just a side issue.”

Stupid posturing, Connie thought. But apart from the possible danger to Jen and the others she had come to like so much, it wasn’t an issue she could feel very involved with. She remained more interested in the news, especially that from Mendeleev, than in local events.

She noticed that Isaac was coming out of the shadows, asserting his power more openly. He was becoming a living icon, and the public adulation extended to his family. Indeed, the publicizing of the doings of his family served to reinforce Isaac’s own larger-than-life image.

In 2083, the marriage of Isaac Simkin’s daughter Elena to Jonathan Holroyd, escapee from America, was announced. It was to take place on the 1st of Io of that year. Connie converted calendars with the help of her computer at Scares. On the pre-Taking calendar, that was the 5th of November. Why, that’s Jonathan’s birthday, she thought. He had mentioned that to her once, and she had remembered it, filed it away for future use, liking the sound of the words, of the strange-sounding month from olden times. She placed a call to Isaac Simkin and was refused access.

“Just leave my name,” she pleaded with the software construct on the screen.

The construct was female and catty. “I really doubt that he’d be interested in talking to you, uh, Allendorf. He’s a very busy man.”

Maybe it’s not a construct, Connie thought. Maybe it’s real. Maybe she’s my replacement. She examined the face on the screen carefully. She saw a young, fresh face, a lovely woman. A lot prettier than me, Connie thought resentfully. Then she laughed at herself.

You've left, Allendorf! she reprimanded herself. Did you really think Isaac would mourn you for long?

"Just leave my name," she repeated doggedly.

"Oh, yes, I'll do that," the beautiful face said.

And then the screen cleared abruptly, and Isaac was looking out at her — as affectionately as she remembered, but with an unusual hint of concern in his face. "Connie! How delightful!"

Connie found herself grinning foolishly. What a comfort this man was, in spite of all she knew about him. "Hello, Isaac. I wanted to convey my congratulations — to you and to Elena."

"And to anyone else?"

Connie shook her head, her grin fading.

"I'll tell her that you called. She'll be happy." He paused, and then asked gently, "Now tell me, how are you doing down there, my dear?"

"The work's ... fulfilling. Well, it's useful, anyway. I feel I'm doing more for the future here than I was before."

"Yes, yes," Isaac said dismissively. "Fulfilling, finding yourself, and so on. But are you happy?"

"Oh, is that why we're put on Earth?" Connie asked sarcastically. "I always thought it was to help our fellow man."

Isaac grinned. "So, are you doing even that?"

"One of them, at any rate."

Isaac laughed. "Oh, Connie, you never change. When do I receive an invitation to your wedding?"

When do I receive one to your daughter's? Connie asked silently. "I'm not really that kind of woman, Isaac."

"No," he said thoughtfully, "I suppose you're not." There was a long, empty pause. "Was there something else, Connie?"

No, Isaac, that's all there is. The old ease and intimacy were gone, the old comfort she could expect from him. He had assumed the role of uncle and then of older brother early in her life, and later, almost, something more. Now, that seemed nothing but an old memory — a was and a might-have-been. "There's no news from here, Isaac. Things don't change much down here. The excitement lies in new discoveries at sea or along the shores of the Cold. That's all."

Isaac nodded. "About the same here, too. Call me if anything does happen, okay?"

"Of course." And then a blank screen, epitomizing a suddenly blank period in her life. It might as well never have been, Connie realized. Those years of looking up to Isaac and confiding in him and leaning on him — and letting him lean on me ... What's left of all that?

Jenssen came into the cabin. The wind roared in behind him, scattering papers, until he managed to close the door. He pushed back the hood of his Cold suit. "More new life forms!" he said enthusiastically. "Get dressed and come and look. The sea's really coming back to life. You know what this means, don't you? That it was never really dead. A lot more must have survived beneath the ice layer than we had hoped. Come on, come and look!"

Connie made herself grin the carefree, toothy grin that she knew he loved. "Another dead fish, Jen?"

"A dead shark, Connie! Think what this must imply about the whole food chain leading up to the shark. This is the biggest find in years — in my lifetime!"

Connie laughed and put on some warm clothing and went outside to look at the carcass Jenssen and his team had brought back from their latest expedition. It was rotting and it stank, but it really was a hammerhead shark, and Connie managed to look suitably astonished and intrigued and to express wonderment to a degree that made the Scares team happy. Simple pleasures for simple minds, she thought scornfully.

Unfair, she told herself. It really is a find of great significance. It's me: I can't get excited about anything any more.

Jenssen was beaming at the decaying shark body. He looked from it to Connie and laughed at the disgust she couldn't quite keep from her face. His gaze drifted from her face to the hazy sea horizon. "What else is out there?" he said wonderingly. "What's been waiting for us under the ice?" His face wore such a look of wonder and delight and longing that Connie almost loved him.

Two years later, in 2085, Jenssen Hartmuth went out to look for more dead sharks or other fish in the storms along the watery edge of the Cold, and he didn't come back. One of the expedition's two boats overturned, and, weighted down by their Cold suits, the crew sank beneath the almost freezing water and disappeared. Jenssen was on the other boat, but he foolishly, bravely leaped into the choppy sea, still wearing his own Cold suit, to try to rescue his friends. The surviving boat circled the area for hours in the clammy mist, but found nothing.

Connie felt guilty that she didn't feel more of a sense of loss. But that's because I already lost everything when I left the Moon, three years ago, she told herself. That argument helped slightly.

Jonathan and Elena Holroyd's first child, Catherine, was born a month later. Connie followed the news of the birth with morbid interest, trying to tell herself that there was some sort of mystical connection between the child's birth and Jenssen's death, but not believing it. It was easier to believe in a mystical connection between the child and Connie herself: with a different twist to all of their lives, the baby would have been hers and Jonathan's.

Jonathan's and Elena's second child was born three years later. After that, there was no more news about the couple or their children, and Connie tried to concentrate fully on her new life.

In 2088, Golden turned sixty and immediately retired on half-pension. She announced that she was moving to Malaya to enjoy the remainder of her life studying sea life in the form of ingredients in recipes and that she was urging Lander to appoint Connie as her successor. "You've been doing the work in fact for the last five or six years," she told Connie. "Why shouldn't you also have the title and salary? Oh, yes, and the prestige. I forgot about that."

Connie laughed. "A lot of that, is there?"

"No, actually, almost none. Mostly lots of abuse and complaints. But you know about that by now. For me, there was also the constant smell of fish — dead ones. But not any more."

"I thought you loved your work," Connie said, surprised. "I remember you wanted to be free to study fish, when I first got here."

Golden sighed and shook her head. She had been born with a thick fuzz of golden hair, prompting her parents to give her her name. Now her thick bush of hair was mostly white, but it still glowed with golden highlights here and there in the bright light of her office. She was a short, stocky woman, still vigorous and healthy thanks to the active life mandated by the scientific field she had chosen. “That was still true, back then. Something’s happened during this last year or so, though. I don’t know what. Suddenly, I just find it all disgusting. Maybe I’m just tired.” She shook her head again. “All that hard work and studying when I was young! I did it all so enthusiastically. And I did my job enthusiastically for years — decades. And then it suddenly all went away from me. Just slipped away. I don’t understand it myself.”

Because nothing lasts forever, Connie thought. Not purpose, and not dedication, and certainly not love.

Nor Golden Weldner. Only four years later, Connie received word that the older woman had died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack in Malaya. Even though the two women had been out of touch during those four years, Connie felt Golden’s loss more than she had Jensen’s.

Work, Connie told herself. That lasts, because there’s always more of it to do. It never goes away. It just keeps coming, every day, every morning. I can depend on it.

She threw herself into the work with determination, and Scares grew and prospered, and years passed. She focused on the Earth and the sea and forgot about the Moon.

And then, in 2093, Isaac Simkin died.

The news arrived indirectly. Connie’s secretary rushed into her office without knocking and gasped, “He’s dead! Did you hear it?”

Connie stifled her anger at the interruption and turned away from her computer keyboard. Overly ambitious expeditions and a series of particularly bad storms had resulted in the loss of three young marine scientists within only the last twenty weeks. With each such death, Connie found herself less upset and more angry. Why couldn’t the young fools stay on land when the weather was bad? “Who is it this time, Al?”

Watanabe said, “Simkin. Isaac Simkin. There was a news bulletin just now from Mendeleev.”

Connie stared at him uncomprehendingly. “Mendeleev?” She felt suddenly utterly bewildered. Mendeleev died? she asked herself. How can that be?

“Of course, Connie. Where else would it come from? You used to work up there, didn’t you? Did you know him?”

Realization forced its way through the fog. “Isaac Simkin? He’s dead?” She licked her lips and waited for the world to end.

“Wake up, Connie! What’s wrong?”

“Go away,” Connie whispered. “Close the door behind you.”

Al Watanabe stared at her for a moment, astonished at being spoken to this way. Then he shrugged and left the room, pulling the door to behind him with a bang.

“Isaac,” Connie said aloud. “Uncle Isaac.” She almost expected him to answer.

Much later in the day, Connie found the strength to listen to a news broadcast from Lander. What little entertainment broadcasting there was had been suspended in favor of long retrospectives on the life and work of Isaac Simkin, and speculations about his death. The young man on the small screen in Connie's cabin at Scares seemed more excited than sad as he read the story aloud. To him, Connie realized, Isaac Simkin must have been a remote power figure, a demigod living on the Moon, and Simkin's death was a welcome disruption to the boredom of reading production and colonization figures every evening. The reporter's attitude should have made her angry, she realized, but she felt unable to react in any way. She felt deadened by the loss.

"... failure of the seals of his surface suit," the reporter was saying, seeming to relish the details. "Once again, an investigative team is being formed at Mendeleev to try to determine how this could have happened and whether any changes need to be made in the maintenance schedule for the surface suits at the observatory. It appears that Director Simkin was in violation of safety rules he himself had instituted some years ago, first because he walked out of line-of-sight of the observatory, and second because he was alone. The footprints indicate that, despite his age, the Director managed to run at least two hundred meters toward Mendeleev Rim before collapsing and suffocating. Technicians at the Observatory speculate that he could not use his suit radio to call for help because his suit was evacuated and he was holding his breath as he ran."

"Oh, God," Connie moaned. "Isaac! Oh, God, Isaac!"

"Coming up," the reporter said, "Sixty-Three Years of Service: the Life of Isaac Simkin. Repeating our bulletin, Isaac Simkin, Director of the Mendeleev Observatory, died early today when the seals of his surface suit suffered a simultaneous failure. Maintenance negligence has not been ruled out. In accordance with his will, the Board of Governors of the Observatory have appointed his daughter, Elena Holroyd, as Director of the Observatory."

Through the night, Connie lay on her bed, sleepless, listening to the voices from the screen repeating the nightmare until she could see it happening in her mind's eye as clearly as if she had been there.

In the morning, she called Elena.

The dazed look, the reddened eyes told Connie that this was no construct. Had Elena introduced such major changes into Mendeleev already? Perhaps the computer that normally handled incoming comm calls was down.

"Who?" the young man asked, his attention elsewhere.

Definitely not a construct, Connie thought. Their programming never includes human frailties. That's one of the main things that gives them away. She wondered briefly why it was so important to her to be able to tell the difference. "Connie Allendorf," she repeated with diminishing patience. Was she going to have to go through this every time she called Mendeleev? The irritation brought a wave of anger that pushed her grief away. Surely the place hadn't been so inefficient when she was there!

"I'm sorry, but the Director is accepting no calls except official ones."

“How long have you been working there?” I haven’t been away that long! Connie thought bitterly.

The young man didn’t hear her question. He was scanning something on his screen, so that he seemed to be looking over her shoulder, his eyes moving from side to side. His lips moved slightly, repeating the words. “Connie Allendorf,” he muttered. “Oh, I’m terribly sorry. Your name is on the list. Just a moment, please.” His image faded, and the screen became a uniform gray.

The frustration of dealing with ineptitude, Connie thought, is the surest cure for grief. By the time the screen cleared again to show Elena seated behind a desk, Connie felt calmer and more in control of herself than she had since first hearing of Isaac’s death.

Elena’s face was pale and lined. She stared blankly at the screen for a moment, tears rolling unnoticed down her cheeks.

“Hello, Elena.”

Elena jumped at the sound of Connie’s voice. “Con— Connie! Oh, Connie, how kind ... “ Her voice trailed away, the conventionalisms dying out. She put her hands over her face. She said, her voice muffled, “Thank you for calling. I appreciate it.”

“Do you want me to come up there? Would that help?”

Elena shook her head. She dropped her hands to the desk. “Nothing will help.” She reached out of camera range and drew her hand back bearing a paper tissue, with which she wiped her eyes and then blew her nose. She crumpled the tissue up and let it fall from her hand.

Connie watched its slow fall with fascination. After all these years, she had forgotten the world of low gravity. She noticed other movement on the screen and pulled her eyes away from the tissue, but she was a moment too late. She had the impression of a human figure, a man, coming into camera range and then jerking himself quickly out of it again. She had no doubt who it was.

“Yes, there is, as a matter of fact,” Elena was saying. “It’s Cathy. I’m just— I just can’t give her the attention she needs right now. There are surrogates available here, but I feel ... that she needs a real mother, and just now, I’m not it. Could you ... ?”

“Take care of her for you?” Christ, Connie thought, what do I know about kids? “She’s eight, right?” she asked, stalling for time. “What about Andy?”

Elena waved her hand. “He’s only five. He doesn’t realize what’s going on, yet.” She managed a tremulous smile. “Andy never does quite realize what’s going on around him. Cathy’s a lot more aware, though. It’s not just what I said — that she needs someone to be her mother. It’s also that I want to get her away from this atmosphere. It’s gruesome up here now, Connie! Everyone’s walking around crying all the time, and I just can’t stop crying myself, even though they’re all looking to me to take charge and put everything in order, and I ... “ She put her face in her hands again and sobbed without restraint.

Connie shook her head slightly. You’re in charge of the whole damned human race, now, Elena, and I’m still being asked to take care of you! “Yes, Elena, of course. Of course I’ll help. I don’t have any experience with kids, you know, but ... Hell, it’s an interesting place down here. We’ll keep Cathy entertained. Send her down.”

The feeling of being imposed upon disappeared immediately when the helicopter from Lander arrived four days later and disgorged the small, frail, blonde child. She was bewildered, frightened, and not dressed for the weather.

Connie rushed forward and picked Cathy up and managed to wrap her own heavy coat around the child. “Oh, baby,” she crooned, “don’t worry about a thing any more.”

Good God, she thought in amazement. Is this what I’ve really been looking for after all, all these years? To be someone’s mother?

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THREE

Press ploughed his way slowly and doggedly through the muck. At each careful step, a small cloud arose and hung in place, staying behind as he moved on. He had left a trail, small puffs of surface material settling slowly, cloudlets of diminishing height dispersing, fading away behind him. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes, but all he could do about it was squeeze his eyes shut very tight and hope that would force the sweat out of them. Locked in his suit, he could not reach his forehead to wipe it. Cooling system in these suits isn't worth a damn, he thought.

This whole leg of the trip was uphill. The slope was extremely gradual — not even visible to the naked eye, especially given the limited visibility — but Press could feel it in his legs.

The air inside his suit grew constantly thicker. He had been told innumerable times that the smell was all in his mind — that a man quickly became so used to his own body odor, concentrated in the air inside the suit, that he ceased to be aware of it. Press knew that was nonsense; he knew the smell was in his nose.

This was all such stupid, pointless, menial work anyway! Press kicked the ground angrily. A fine cloud erupted upward and surrounded him, particles scintillating in the beam of his helmet light. He was enclosed in a glowing mist, nothing else visible in whatever direction he turned. Oh, that's great, he told himself. Now you're stuck in one place until it all settles. It's a good thing Evelyn can't see you. As he stood there, waiting for visibility to return, he imagined what Evelyn would say if she had seen this little episode. Something to the point and embarrassing, but amusing as well. And undeniably correct. His annoyance with himself and his situation disappeared as he thought about it.

When his helmet light at last began to show something more than drifting particles, Press moved on again cautiously. His daydream had cheered him. The work, though, was still menial, and he still felt that it was beneath him.

He could feel through his feet that he was approaching the vent. Being aware of that vibration was a vital skill that Marshans who worked outside developed early. After a few more minutes, the thick column of rising bubbles began to show faintly in Press' helmet light. The vibration he had felt through his feet grew into a sound that penetrated his suit, and then into a steady roar. It surrounded and engulfed him, throbbing through his bones and blood.

The vent was a monster. Nothing like it was recorded from before the Exile. As far as the Marshans could tell, Ridge activity was more violent in general now. Evelyn was convinced that this was due to greater surface pressure, which was in turn, she said, due to the weight of the ice on the ocean surface. Other Marshans ridiculed that idea. Press didn't really care. Or as he had

once incautiously said to Evelyn, “I really don’t give a shit. Just get me outta this place.” “That’s ‘out of,’” Evelyn had replied sweetly. “MARSH is already filled with cretins. Don’t join them.”

Blasphemy, Press thought. They may be cretins, but they’re the only life left on Earth. A worm, she said. Be sure to get one of the big worms. Okay, worms, show yourselves.

Just ahead of him, one did. It emerged from the ground less than a meter in front of him, and Press gasped and jumped backward, drifting up off the ground and floating back a meter.

The worm was a monster. It oozed slowly from the ground, reaching upward, many meters in length, at least half a meter in diameter. Its blind head, little more than a gaping mouth as wide as its body, turned toward Press.

Ground-sucker, he thought in relief. It was one of the chain-bottom species.

This one normally slid along the ground around the vent sucking in the bottom muck, as well as any plants it happened on, or small animals that didn’t move fast enough. It processed this conglomeration as it passed along its length — which was nothing but a series of stomachs — extracting whatever nutrients it could. The unused result spilled out of the worm’s rear end, which was a hole as wide as its mouth. “Elegant simplicity,” Evelyn had once called it. “Disgusting,” Press had said.

It was chain-bottom because it was near the bottom of the food chain that had established itself along the Ridge since the Exile. Despite its fearsome size and mouth, it was harmless to anything more than a couple of centimeters across. It was, in fact, easy prey to many of the predators that had been showing up during the last century. Evelyn and the other Marshans who worried about such things were convinced that the larger worms would either disappear soon or develop armor — or perhaps develop into predators themselves. “Evolution in action,” she liked to tell Press. “And extraordinarily fast! Think how privileged you are to see it.”

What little mind this worm had, Press knew, was probably devoted to finding food and to escaping becoming food. It had probably detected the vibration of Press’ boots and was trying ineffectually to escape him. For a moment, he was tempted to let it go.

“Don’t worry,” he said aloud. “I’m not a predator.” He sighed. “Well, I guess I’m lying. I’m here to take you back for pickling and dissection. We won’t eat you, but that’ll make little difference to you.”

He trudged forward. As he did so, with one hand he pulled his specimen bag open, letting the flow of water caused by his motion keep it open. In his other hand, he held his pincer outstretched. You are a big mother, he thought.

As the pincer touched the wall of the worm, it automatically stretched its two arms further and further open. At the touch, the worm tried to squirm away and move faster. Now Press was close enough to see the hole it was oozing from. At least three meters of it were now above ground, and still it slid from its hole. Go back! Press begged it. Don’t try to run. Hide in the ground.

The pincer arms extended suddenly, shot around the worm’s body, and locked tight on it. Press gasped in sympathetic pain and let go of the pincer’s handle.

The worm thrashed in desperate struggle, but it was a slow movement, a sluggish fight. A mindless predator itself, the pincer extended more arms and began methodically to gather the worm to it. Ground muck began to drift up, clouding the struggle. The lights set into the pincer’s handle came on, blinking brightly so that Press would not lose sight of it.

It was unlikely that he would, even though he wanted to. He watched in horror as the pincer steadily crumpled the length of the worm’s body into a compact bundle, ignoring its

struggles, crushing it into a small space. Blood filled the water. The worm was a tangled ball of flesh less than two meters across, organs oozing from the burst skin, parts of it still rippling in hopeless protest.

The pincer turned itself in the water, searching. It homed on the transponders along the rim of the specimen bag and jetted toward it. It deposited the worm into the bag, which shut itself tightly, and then the pincer turned itself off and settled to the sea bed, ready for its next task. The bag moved ever so slightly, either from stray currents in the water or from the dying worm's final struggle to live. The drifting surface material and worm blood floated slowly away from Press in the sea's uncertain currents.

Press closed his eyes tightly and tried to bring his churning stomach under control. How could anyone even get any useful information out the worm after what the pincer had done to it? He opened his eyes again and looked at the pincer, lying on the ground like any harmless, amoral tool. Press had learned the rule in childhood: never vomit in your suit; you'll choke to death — and ruin the equipment.

His stomach lurched, and he held his nausea back with difficulty.

He drew a deep breath, bent, and picked up the pincer. His bag was full — no more room for any other specimens. Surely he could head back to MARSH now.

Gingerly, Press touched the specimen bag. At least it was no longer moving. He pulled at it experimentally. Automatically, it inflated air bladders set into its skin to cancel the worm's weight, so that it floated just above the ground. Overcoming the inertia of the mangled corpse within it was Press' problem, not the bag's.

The ULW light inside his helmet began to blink.

Press tongued the radio switch. "Stevens. What?" He could smell the vomit on his breath.

The voice that answered sounded offended. "Don't blame me for your problems."

"Sorry, Vanda. I'll explain later. What do you want?"

"You, of course. Back here, I mean. Big things are happening. Drop what you're doing and get back as quickly as you can. We're calling everyone in for this. Full meeting in the auditorium as soon as the slowest guy gets back here, which is you."

"And that's all you're going to tell me? Just leave me hanging like that?"

"Oh, it's just too juicy. I want to surprise you with it."

"On my way." Poor Vanda, Press thought. Wanting everyone in Marsh, and getting no one. He heaved on his specimen bag, setting it in motion, his feet slipping on the soft sea floor. "Come on, you cretin," he said, addressing the worm. "I'm taking you home to your comrades."

Vanda was waiting for him in the airlock. "Well, here you are. You certainly took your time."

Press let his heavy, white suit fall to the floor of the airlock. Seawater dribbled from its crevices, and a salty smell rose from it. "You try walking fast out there, especially dragging a specimen bag filled with crushed worm."

Vanda's face wrinkled in disgust. "I never walk outside, either slow or fast. And I much prefer normal-sized worms to monster ones."

Press laughed, a sudden, explosive sound. “You always cheer me up with your one-track mind. Now tell me what’s so important.”

“The ice is breaking up,” Vanda Michaelson said simply. He watched the disbelief fill Press’ face, and then the delight that followed it, and he grinned. “That’s right. Something big is going on up there. Want to find out more, or would you rather go outside and collect more specimens?”

Press looked down at the smaller man with growing anger. “Christ, Vanda, it’s not all some kind of joke. Be serious for a change.”

“Serious is all I ever am, Press,” Vanda said solemnly. “You just refuse to take me that way.”

“Oh, Jesus, come on, let’s go.” Vanda’s problem, his unfulfilled desires, touched Press, but it all seemed trivial to him in the light of Vanda’s news. “I want to find out everything there is about this. We’ll drop the bag off along the way.”

Vanda sighed and, without being asked, began to roll the specimen bag out of the airlock. It rolled unevenly, squelching, leaving a damp, pink trail.

Press picked up his suit and followed. In the small room outside, while Vanda spun the wheel that dogged the lock closed, Press hung his suit from one of the hooks provided for the purpose, and then he ran a quick check of its systems, looking for any damage that might have occurred unnoticed during his trip outside. Some rules and procedures always applied, no matter how startling the latest news might be.

All but a few of the three-hundred and twenty citizens of the habitat were assembled in the auditorium when Press and Vanda arrived. Along the way from the airlock, Vanda had added a few details.

“It was that surface-measuring junk,” he explained. “You know, the stuff that was put here when MARSH was first established. Good equipment. Just keeps on humming along. Never gives up. Unlike most men. Doesn’t wilt, doesn’t say it’s tired, doesn’t — “

“Come on, Vanda!”

“Sure, okay. Well, anyway, the machines did keep running, following their old programs, looking for changes in the distance from the ground to the surface, on the alert for anomalies. Which it found: phase changes; also the standing waves broke up. So the computer sent out alarms. Of course, no one’s really paid any attention to its little alarms since the ice formed. This time, though, Marge Bontemp saw the significance in it.”

“She would. She’s such a detail type. Couldn’t there be other explanations, though, like a gas cavity developing between the water and the ice right in the path of the signal?”

Vanda nodded. “That’s what most of us think happened. But it is exciting, isn’t it?” For a moment, Vanda’s mask of flippancy vanished. “After a hundred years, we might be able to see out into the universe again.”

Press shrugged. “Very briefly, though. Water either evaporates or freezes in a vacuum. The upper layers of the sea under the ice are close to freezing all the time, anyway, so it would just freeze over again — probably in a matter of hours.” The more Press thought about it, the

more his earlier excitement drained away. Probably just a gas cavity, anyway, he thought. How could the ice break up?

No one knew how thick the ice layer atop the ocean was, nor how thick the layer of frozen gases lying above it was — the gases that had once been the atmosphere of the Earth. All the Marshans knew was that while their ancestors were going about their daily work in their undersea research establishment, looking forward to getting back to dry land and their waiting relatives and lovers, something had destroyed the sun.

The administrative center at the naval base in Norfolk had sent them one short, panicky message, something garbled about an alien race and the sun. To the demands from the MARSH administration that the research center personnel be evacuated back to land immediately, there had been no official reply.

Official communications had been cut off. MARSH's only link to the world had consisted of one of the operators in the ultra-long-wave station in Norfolk. An orphan, he had no family to go home to; he felt closer to the scientists and engineers marooned on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean than to anyone else. Their long-distance friendliness toward him paid off, for he stayed at his post and told them what was happening to their world. He also told them of the rumor circulating at Norfolk that an alien race were responsible for the sun's disappearance. His transmissions ended with the final war, the war at the end of the world, the war that ended what little spark of civilization and reason still survived on the rapidly freezing Earth.

After that, the ice that had formed over the sea had seemed a protective blanket to those in MARSH, rather than a prison door. Beyond it, there was only death, while in the warm depths of the Atlantic, there were life and a future.

And yet here we are, thought Press, being excited and happy about this. Even if there were a hole in the ice, and the frozen gases above it weren't there, and the ocean didn't evaporate away — even so, what good would it do us? We don't have spacesuits or spaceships. We still couldn't escape. We're still only safe down here. And I'm still stuck here forever, for the rest of my Goddamned life.

Marge Bontemp was on the stage, along with all of the current members of the committee, when Press and Vanda finally arrived at the auditorium. The chairs were still stacked along the walls of the room, and the crowd seemed to prefer it that way. The Marshans were gathering in groups and arguing with each other, and others were yelling questions at the group on the stage. Cline Bellman, the committee chairman for the second quarter of 2081, looked tired and worn and, to Press' eyes, glad that his term as chairman was almost over.

As Press and Vanda stood in the doorway looking at the chaos, reluctant to enter and become part of it, Evelyn Trevethan caught sight of them. She extricated herself from the argument she had been part of and came to the doorway and glared up at Press. "You took your time!"

"He's so slow," Vanda said. "I always tell him that."

Evelyn's glare widened to include Vanda. Before she could say anything, however, Cline Bellman leaned forward, put his mouth close to his microphone, and bellowed, "Shut up!"

The roar of garbled, distorted sound was scarcely intelligible, but the shock of its volume brought silence to the room.

Cline leaned back again and spoke more quietly. A short, stocky, balding man, he had a voice that was normally powerful and resonant, but his time as chairman had worn and fatigued him so that now he sounded weak and strained. Without the microphone, he would have been inaudible. "The committee has solicited technical opinions from our best minds," he announced, while the other five members of the committee nodded their agreement.

There was another outburst of shouting, consisting mostly of various Marshans yelling that they hadn't been consulted, and what was wrong with their minds?

Cline gave it time to die down into discontented mutterings. "Marge only came to me with her data a couple of hours ago," he said in a reasonable, calming tone. "I could scarcely talk to all of you in that time. I should have said, 'some of our best minds.'"

There were more mutterings and angry headshakings, but no outburst.

Cline grasped the moment quickly. "And I didn't want to put this meeting off. Who knows what might be happening up there?" He gestured upward with his thumb. Miles above your heads, the gesture said, up there at the surface.

Press noticed the others glancing up at the ceiling of the auditorium. The sea above them was something they never thought of normally; it was just there. MARSH and the sea around it — that was their world, not the lost one beyond the ice. Now, thanks to that simple gesture, the imprisoning sea and its deadly tons of pressure were very much present.

"Marge?" Cline said. "The honor should be yours."

Marge Bontemp stood up, pushed her chair back, and stepped briskly to the front of the table, so that she faced the crowd and looked down on them.

Press examined her admiringly, unaware of Evelyn's amused glance at him, or Vanda's sad one.

Marge was one day older than Press. She was short, slender, dark, and wiry, and she radiated an electric energy. Other young men of their generation were frightened away by her energy and her high intellect, but both traits excited and attracted Press.

"The general opinion," Marge said, projecting her clear, firm voice out over the room, "seems to boil down to four main possibilities. One is that there's been some sort of tectonic event, probably along the Ridge, that we somehow didn't detect, and the pressure wave that generated cracked through the ice right above us. Think about the size the tectonic event would have to be, and then ask yourself how we could not have detected the event itself."

There was an angry objection from somewhere in the crowd. Press recognized the voice as that of Mary Tellerman. So that's who came up with that tectonic theory, Press thought, grinning. Beside him, Evelyn muttered, "Right. Tell the bitch, Marge."

"Second idea," Marge said, pacing back and forth along the front of the stage, capturing the crowd's interest all the more, "is a meteorite, a really big one, hitting the ice right above us, breaking it up and evaporating a big part of it. Same problem: why didn't we detect the pressure wave from the impact?"

"The third one is even worse. This hypothesizes some sort of huge vent opening along the ridge, and all the hot water it generates somehow rose up in a curved path and ended up above us, where it melted the ice. And once again, not only did all of this happen in just the right way, but we didn't even detect any direct effects from it. Until now, I actually believed we had a lot of competent scientists down here."

This time, there were more voice raised in protest than just Mary Tellerman's. Press laughed and shook his head. Vanda said, "Girl's going to need a bodyguard. Press, why don't you volunteer?"

"I won't even bother," Marge shouted. Her voice penetrated the noise even without amplification, and the noise died down slightly. "I won't even bother," she said again, "spending time on the other serious suggestions from our best minds. My favorite one is that the aliens who destroyed the sun have found out we survived, and now they've come back to finish the job. They're peeling away the ice and then they're going to reach right down here through the Atlantic Ocean and get us."

There was much amused laughter at this, and it served to dissipate the hostility Marge had aroused earlier. But to Press' ears, the laughter sounded forced; there was real fear beneath it.

"The fourth main idea," Marge said, "is the only one that, er, holds water. That's the suggestion that a gas bubble has been building up slowly between the ice and the sea surface, and it just recently reached some sort of critical size, changing the radio reflection. That's not a bad one," she said reluctantly. She sat down abruptly.

Cline Bellman jerked as if suddenly awakened from a healing sleep. "Uh, thank you, Marge. Henry?"

The committee member to his left stood up to address the gathering. This was Henry Pierce, a tall, handsome man of thirty, and another admirer of Marge Bontemp. Press felt inferior to him in looks and intelligence, and he feared that somehow Henry's extra five years of age and maturity gave him unfair advantage in their rivalry. Press glared at him. Henry spoke out with his usual imperturbable self-confidence. "The committee has agreed that whether the ice really is breaking up or it's just a bubble forming up there, the situation is of considerable scientific interest to MARSH — and may turn out to be of more than just scientific interest. Therefore, as suggested by one of our," he smiled disarmingly at Marge, "finest minds, we've decided to send up an air-filled balloon, carrying TV cameras and a variety of sensors, to see what's what."

Discussions broke out all over the auditorium again, but Press was interested only in the warm, grateful look Marge Bontemp was giving Henry Pierce. Evelyn said conversationally, "Actually, the fine mind in which that suggestion originated was mine." But Press couldn't hear her over the grinding of his teeth.

Five days later, even Press Stevens forgot about Marge Bontemp and stared in fascination at the temperature graph.

They were in the auditorium again, all of them. The stage was now occupied by man-high screens on aluminum stands. One displayed the water pressure measured by the probe; no surprises here, and so it was of little interest. Another, in split-screen mode, showed the view from the television cameras set around the balloon's equator, aimed outward. At this point, there was little to see but an occasional slender body darting into the field of the probe's lights, then flashing as the sea creature darted away again. And a third screen, currently the most interesting one of all, displayed a running graph of temperature plotted against altitude above the sea floor.

After the abandonment of MARSH and its inhabitants, as the sea began to freeze from the surface downward, the usual temperature distribution of the ocean had become inverted. Instead of the warmest layers of water being at the surface and the coldest at the bottom of the sea, now the warmest water was at the bottom, thanks to heating from the Earth itself and especially from the vents along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, while the uppermost layers of the sea were solid ice.

Thus the temperature readings being transmitted back by the balloon rising above them should have been falling constantly. At first, that had been the case. But now, as the balloon approached the surface ice, the line on the graph Press and the others were watching with such fascination had stopped falling and was holding steady.

Vanda Michaelson broke the silence. "Why, of course! It's the gas bubble. There may be a whole stream of large gas bubbles, consisting of heated gases, and the balloon's rising through them. See, it's simple!"

Some heads nodded, but Evelyn said, "In that case, why is the balloon's altitude increasing steadily? Why didn't it change suddenly when the balloon encountered the bubble?"

"Because it's a large bubble, and the balloon's rising with it," Vanda said quickly.

"Or the bubbles are all small," someone else said eagerly. "Big enough to affect the temperature readings, but not big enough to change the balloon's motion."

The happy agreement from all around surprised Press, but then he realized what must be behind it. They're all afraid that something has changed fundamentally, he thought. And they're all eager to find explanations for any anomaly that will fit into our old picture of the sea and the ice at the top. This was, once again, the view of the ice layer as a protective blanket. "Sorry to burst your bubble," he said cheerfully, "but in either of those cases, we'd be able to tell what was going on from the television picture, and that hasn't changed at all."

Evelyn nodded approvingly at him. But then Vanda said, "But it has changed. Look: it's getting lighter."

Perhaps the light in the water had been growing for some time, hidden from them by the brightness of the probe balloon's own lights. Now that Vanda had pointed it out, it was unmistakable: a red glow in the background, growing stronger by the minute, strikingly different from the white of the balloon's own lights.

Then Press gasped, and Evelyn shouted, "That's not ice!"

She was looking at the top of the screen, which displayed the view straight upward from the balloon. There the light was brightest, and now they could see the shadows of ripples. Second by second, as the balloon rose, it became more obvious that they were looking up at the turbulent surface of the sea. And through the shifting layers of hazy, glowing water, they could tell that the light from above wasn't diffused at all: it was concentrated almost at the zenith in a circular light.

The balloon broke through. Water cascaded off the camera lenses, and they saw the sun.

Iwish Andy would come and see me sometimes," Connie said, trying to hide the wistfulness.

"You can't do anything to help him," Cathy said. "If you'd stayed up at Mendeleev, he'd be hanging around his beloved Aunt Connie all the time." She held her hand up quickly. "And

don't say anything hackneyed about how cynical I am for one so young. I get enough of that from Matushka."

In fact, Connie had been about to remark that Cathy reminded her more of Jonathan every day, but she obeyed Cathy by saying nothing at all.

"That boy's such a leshbot," Cathy said angrily. "He's a void, he's a nothing, he's a vacuum, and yet he manages to lick Dad's boots all the time as well. I can't figure it out. I know he wasn't like that when he was small. I used to like the kid back then."

Connie wisely kept to herself what she had observed over the years — the extent to which Cathy's own personality, and her developing strength of will and closeness to her father, had led to Andy's retreat into whining. The clearer Jonathan made it to his children and the world he ruled that his daughter was his choice to succeed him, the more his son begged for his attention and help with self-destructive acts. Connie had watched Andy change from a bright and loving child to a dependent self-pitier. All she said, and in a mild tone, was, "He spent his last vacation here, and we had a good time." Away from the rest of his family, and in the rugged environment of Scares, he had shown signs of developing into what he might have been. Not enough time, Connie thought. He'd need another twenty years to undo the damage of the first twenty.

Cathy shrugged. "Good. That's nice for him. Listen, Auntie, I've found the perfect man for you."

Connie burst out laughing. "Oh, Cathy, when're you going to give up on that? I'm happy the way I am. Anyway, I'm more concerned about your emotional future than mine. Why, when I was your age—"

"You were screwing every man on the moon," Cathy interrupted. "Right?"

Connie turned away and looked out over the sea. The breeze gusted suddenly, and she pulled her ankle-length coat tighter, hugging herself. On the horizon, the eternal storm clouds churned. "There really weren't all that many men on the moon in those days." She was unaware of the faint smile on her face.

Cathy noticed it, though, and grinned. "Well, Auntie, right now I have my own wild oats to sow. One of these days, Dad will have his way and get me to move permanently to Mendeleev and settle down forever. There's a lot I want to find out about before that happens."

Connie began walking slowly along the beach. Cathy walked beside her, still talking with her characteristic odd mixture of forcefulness and childishly unrealistic enthusiasm. "But I can tell how lonely you are, and I want to arrange your happiness, too, before I do what Dad wants me to."

"You can't arrange everyone's life all the time, you know," Connie said.

"Rubbish. Why not? Anyway, if his Dad has his way, that's exactly what I'll end up doing for the rest of my life — arranging everyone else's!"

Now it wasn't Jonathan speaking through his daughter: now it was Cathy's grandfather, Isaac Simkin. Connie grimaced. She knew she wasn't really innocent of wanting to arrange the lives of others, either. Her secret wish was to introduce Cathy to a man, for love of whom Cathy would decide to stay on Earth and build a life of her own instead of the life Jonathan wanted for her. Nor did Connie wish to do this because of her maternal love for Cathy and a consequent wish to see her happy. That was part of it, certainly, but a much larger part was Connie's wish to sabotage Jonathan's plans.

She often thought how ironic it was that it was Jonathan who had first exposed her to the idea that Simkin's dictatorship was morally wrong and that it was time for mankind to reestablish democracy — Jonathan Holroyd, now the most powerful dictator in the history of the human race, now her enemy both personally and politically.

Connie stopped and face the sea again. "I'm married to that, now," she said suddenly.

Cathy looked bewildered.

"It was just a job when I came here. No, it was more than that. But I didn't come here because of the romance of the ocean, or anything like that, but for other reasons. But I've been here for more than twenty-five years now. The sea has taken my friends away from me, and my lover. In return, it's given meaning to my life."

Cathy put her arm around the smaller woman's shoulders and hugged her gently. "You know, Auntie, that makes no sense to me at all."

Connie laughed. "You don't have to understand me. Just don't reassign me when you take over. If I haven't retired or died by then."

"You're going to live forever," Cathy assured her, trying to reassure herself. "Of course I won't reassign you. Besides, I want to know what's going on out there, too. You'll stay in charge of Scares so that I can have someone down here who's as determined as I am to find out everything there is to know about the sea."

"I don't know if we'll ever do that, Cathy."

"Nonsense. Of course we will. It's just water, you know, and it's finite. There are a finite number of facts to know about it, and we're determining the facts at a finite rate, so sooner or later we'll know all there is to know about it."

"Sounds simple enough," Connie said with her face kept carefully straight.

Cathy nodded. "Exactly. I want to know what's out there," she repeated.

Out there, almost fifteen hundred kilometers away from the coastline where the two women stood watching the thunderheads towering into the sky, a huge balloon, built of materials mined from vents along the great undersea ridge, and covered with measuring instruments and television cameras, was wallowing in the heavy seas and rapidly being torn apart by wind and water.