

Conversation Pieces
Volume 25

The Buonarrotti Quartet

by
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Saving Tiamaat

I had reached the station in the depth of Left Speranza's night; I had not slept. Fogged in the confabulation of the transit, I groped through crushing eons to my favorite breakfast kiosk: unsure if the soaring concourse outside Parliament was ceramic and carbon or a *metaphor*, a cloudy internal warning—

now what was the message in the mirror?

Something pitiless. Some blank-eyed, slow-thinking, long-grinned crocodile—

“Debra!”

It was my partner. “Don't *do* that,” I moaned. The internal crocodile shattered, the concourse lost its freight of hyper-determined meaning, too suddenly for comfort. “Don't you know you should never startle a sleepwalker?”

He grinned; he knew when I'd arrived and the state I was likely to be in. I hadn't met Pelé Leonidas Iza Quinatoa in the flesh before, but we'd worked together, we liked each other. “Ayayay, so good you can't bear to lose it?”

“Of course not. Only innocent, beautiful souls have sweet dreams.”

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He touched my cheek—collecting a teardrop. I hadn't realized I was crying. "You should use the dreamtime, Debra. There must be *some* game you want to play."

"I've tried; it's worse. If I don't take my punishment I'm sick for days."

The intimacy of his gesture (skin on skin) was an invitation and a promise; it made me smile. We walked into the Parliament Building together, buoyant in the knocked-down gravity that I love although I know it's bad for you.

In the Foyer we met the rest of the company, identified by the Diaspora Parliament's latest adventure in biometrics, the aura tag. To our vision the KiAn Working Party was striated orange/yellow, nice cheerful implications, nothing too deep. The pervasive systems were seeing a lot more, but that didn't bother Pelé or me; we had no secrets from Speranza.

The KiAn problem had been a matter of concern since their world had been "discovered" by a Balas/Shet prospector and joined the miniscule roster of populated planets linked by instantaneous transit. Questions had been raised then, over the grave social imbalance: the tiny international ruling caste, the exploited masses. But neither the Ki nor the An would accept arbitration (why the hell should they?). The non-interference lobby is the weakest faction in the Chamber; quarantine-until-they're-civilized was not considered an option. Inevitably, around thirty local years after first contact, the Ki had risen against their overlords, as they often had in the past. Inevitably, this time they had modern weapons. They had not suc-

ceeded in wiping out the An, but they had pretty much rendered the shared planet uninhabitable.

We were here to negotiate a rescue package. We'd done the damage, we had to fix it, that was the DP's line. The Ki and the An no doubt had their own ideas as to what was going on: they were new to the Interstellar Diaspora, not to politics.

But they were here, at least; so that seemed hopeful.

The five Ki Federation delegates were unremarkable. They conformed to the “numinal biped” body-plan that unites the Diaspora. Three were wearing Balas business suits in shades of brown; two were in gray military uniform. The young co-leaders of the An were better dressed, and one of the two, in particular, was *much* better looking. Whatever you believe about the origins of the “Diaspora” (Strong theory, Weak theory, something between), it's strange how many measures of beauty are common to us all. He was tall, past two meters; he had large eyes, a mane of rich brown head-hair, an open, strong-boned face, poreless bronze skin, and a glorious smile. He would be my charge. His co-leader, the subordinate partner, slight and small, almost as dowdy as the Ki, would be Pelé's.

They were codenamed Baal and Tiamaat, the names I will use in this account. The designations Ki and An are also codenames.

We moved off to a briefing room. Joset Moricherri, one of the Blue Permanent Secretaries, made introductory remarks. A Green Belt Colonel, Shamaz Haa'agaan, gave a talk on station security. A slightly less high-ranking DP administrator got down to basics: standard time conventions, shopping allowances,

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access to the elevators, restricted areas, housekeeping... Those who hadn't provided their own breakfast raided the culturally neutral trolley. I sipped my Mocha/Colombian, took my carbs in the form of a crisp cherry-jam tartine, and let the day's agenda wash over me, as I reviewed what I knew about Baal and Tiamaat's relationship.

They were not related by blood, except in the sense that the An gene pool was very restricted: showing signs of other population crashes in the past. They were not "married," either. The Ki and the An seemed to be sexually dimorphic on the Blue model (thought they could yet surprise us!), and they liked opposite-sex partnerships. But they did not marry. Tiamaat's family had been swift to embrace the changes, she'd been educated on Balas/Shet. Baal had left KiAn for the first time when war broke out. They'd lost family members, and they'd certainly seen the horrific transmissions smuggled off KiAn before the end. Yet here they were, with the genocidal Ki: thrown together, suddenly appointed the rulers of their shattered nation, and bound to each other for life. Tiamaat looked as if she was feeling the strain. She sat with her eyes lowered, drawn in on herself, her body occupying the minimum of space. Beside her, Baal devoured a culturally-neutral doughnut, elbows sprawled, with a child's calm greed. I wondered how much my alien perception of a timid young woman and a big bold young man was distorting my view. I wondered how all that fine physicality translated into mind.

Who are you, Baal? How will it feel to know you?



From the meeting we proceeded to a DP reception and lunch, and from thence to a concert in the Nebula Immersion Chamber: a Blue Planet symphony orchestra on virtual tour; the Diaspora Chorus in the flesh, singing a famous masque; a solemn dance drama troupe bi-locating from Neuendan. Pelé and I, humble Social Support officers, were in the background for these events. But the An had grasped that we were their advocates, as was proved when they pounced on us, eagerly, after the concert. They wanted to meet “the nice quiet people with the pretty curly faces—”

They spoke English, language of diplomacy and displacement. They’d both taken the express, neurotech route to fluency, but we had trouble pinning this request down. It turned out they were asking to be introduced to a bowl of orchids.

Appearances can be deceptive. These two young people were neither calm nor cowed. They had been born in a mediaeval world and swept away from home, as to the safety of a rich neighbor’s house: all they knew of the interstellar age was the inside of a transit lounge. The Ki problem they knew only too well: Speranza was a thrilling bombardment. With much laughter (they laughed like Blue teenagers, to cover embarrassment), we explained that they would not be meeting any bizarre lifeforms. No tentacles, no petals, no intelligent gas clouds here; not yet!

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“You have to look after us!” cried Baal. He grabbed my arm softly, but I felt the power. “Save us from making fools of ourselves, dear Debra and Pelé!”

Tiamaat stood back a pace, hiding her giggles behind her hand.



The last event scheduled on that first day was a live transmission walkabout from the Ki refugee camp, in the Customized Shelter Sector. Some of us had expressed doubts about this stunt in the planning stages. If anything went wrong it'd sour the whole negotiation. But the Ki and the An leaders were both keen, and the historic gesture was something the public back on the homeworlds would understand—which in the end had decided the question. The Diaspora Parliament had to struggle for planetside attention; we couldn't pass up an opportunity.

At the gates of the CSS, deep in Speranza's hollow heart, there was a delay. The Customized Shelter Police wanted us in armored glass-tops, they felt that if we *needed* a walkabout we could fake it... Pelé chatted with Tiamaat, stooping from his lean black height to catch her soft voice. Baal stared at the banners on two display screens. The KiAn understood flags, we hadn't taught them that concept. Green and gold quarters for the Ki, a center section crosshatched with the emblems of all their little nations. Purple tracery on vivid bronze for the An.

Poor kid, I thought, it's not a magic gateway to your lost home. Don't get your hopes up. That's the door to a cage in a conservation zoo.

He noticed my attention and showed his white teeth. "Are there other peoples living in exile on this floor?"

I nodded. "Yes. But mostly the people sheltered here are old spacers, who can't return to full gravity. Or failed colonist communities, likewise: people who've tried to settle on empty moons and planets, and been defeated by the conditions. There are no other populated planet exiles. It hasn't been, er, necessary."

"We are a first for you."

I wondered if that was ironic, if he were capable of irony.

A compromise was reached. We entered on foot, with the glass-tops and CSP closed cars trailing behind. The Ki domain wasn't bad, for a displaced persons camp wrapped in the bleak embrace of a giant space station. Between the living-space capsule towers the refugees could glimpse their own shade of sky and a facsimile of their primary sun, with its partner, the blue-rayed daystar. They had sanitation, hygiene, regular meals; leisure facilities; even employment. We stopped at an adult retraining center. We briefly inspected a hydroponic farm. We visited a kindergarten, where the teaching staff told us (and the flying cams!) how all the nations of the Ki were gathered here in harmony, learning to be good Diaspora citizens.

The children stared at Baal and Tiamaat. They'd probably been born in the camp and never seen An in the flesh before. Baal fidgeted, seeming indignant under their scrutiny. Tiamaat stared back with equal

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curiosity. I saw her reach a tentative hand through the shielding, as if to touch a Ki child; but she thought better of it.

After the classroom tour there was a reception, with speeches, dance, and choral singing. Ki community leaders and the An couple didn't literally "shake hands"; but the gesture was accomplished. Here the live trans ended, and most of our party stayed behind. The An leaders and the Ki delegates went on alone, with a police escort, for a private visit to "Hopes and Dreams Park"—a facsimile of one of the Sacred Groves (as near as the term translates), central to KiAn spirituality.

Pelé and I went with them.

The enclave of woodland was artfully designed. The "trees" were like self-supporting kelp, leathery succulents—lignin is only native to the Blue Planet—but they were tall and planted close enough to block all sight of the packed towers. Their sheets of foliage made a honeyed shade. We seemed alone in a gently managed wilderness. The Ki and the An kept their distance from each other now that the cams weren't in sight. The police moved outward to maintain a cordon around the group, and I began to feel uneasy. I should have been paying attention instead of savoring my breakfast. I had not grasped that "Hopes and Dreams Park" would be like this. I kept hearing voices, seeing fitting shadows, although the park area was supposed to have been cleared. I'd mentioned the weak shielding; I hoped it had been fixed—

"Are religious ceremonies held here?" I asked Tiamaat.

She drew back her head, the gesture for *no*. “Most KiAn have not followed religion for a long time. It’s just a place sacred to ourselves, to nature.”

“But it’s fine for the Shelter Police, and Pelé and I, to be with you?”

“You are advocates.”

We entered a clearing dotted with thickets. At our feet smaller plants had the character of woodland turf, starred with bronze and purple flowers. Above us the primary sun dipped toward its false horizon, lighting the blood red veins in the foliage. The blue daystar had set. Baal and Tiamaat were walking together. I heard him whisper, in the An language, *now it’s our time*.

“And these are the lucky ones,” muttered one of the Ki delegates to me, her “English” mediated by a throat-mike processor. (No expensive neuro-tech fluency for her.) “Anyone who reached Speranza had contacts, money. Many millions of our people are trying to survive on a flayed, poisoned bombsite—”

And whose fault is that?

I nodded, vaguely. It was NOT my place to take sides—

Something flew by me, big and solid. Astonished, I realized it had been Baal. He had moved so fast, it was so totally unexpected. He had plunged right through the cordon of armed police, through the shield. He was gone, vanished. I leapt in pursuit at once, yelling: “Hold your fire!” I was flung back, thrown down into zinging stars and blackness. The shield *had* been strengthened, but not enough.

Shelter Police, bending over me, cried: *what happened, Ma’am, are you hit?*

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My conviction that we had company in here fused into certainty—

“Oh, God! Get after him. After him!”

I ran with the police. Pelé stayed with Tiamaat and the Ki; on our shared frequency I heard him alerting Colonel Shamaz. We cast to and fro through the twilight wood, held together by the invisible strands and globules of our shield, taunted by rustles of movement, the CSP muttering to each other about refugee assassins, homemade weapons. But the young leader of the An was unharmed when we found him—crouched, in his sleek tailoring, over his prey—having followed the sounds of a scuffle and a terrified cry. Dark blood trickled from the victim’s nostrils, high-placed in a narrow face. Dark eyes were open, fixed and wide.

I remembered the children in that school, staring up in disbelief at the ogres.

Baal rose, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “What are you looking at?” he inquired haughtily, in his neighbors’ language. The rest of our party had caught up: he was speaking to the Ki. “What did you expect? You know who I am.”

Tiamaat fell to her knees with a wail of despair, pressing her hands to either side of her head. “He has a right! Ki territory is An territory, he has a right to behave as if we were at home. And the Others knew it, don’t you see? They *kenen!*”

The CSP officer yelled something inexcusable and lunged at the killer. Pelé grabbed him by the shoulders and hauled him back, talking urgent sense. The Ki said nothing, but I thought Tiamaat was right. They’d

known what the Diaspora's pet monster would do in here; and he hadn't let them down.



Perfectly unconcerned, Baal stood guard over the body until Colonel Haa'agaan arrived with the closed cars. Then he picked it up and slung it over his shoulder. I traveled with him and his booty and the protection of four Green Belts, to the elevator. Another blacked-out car waited for us on Parliament level. What a nightmare journey! We delivered him to the service entrance of his suite in the Sensitive Visitors Facility and saw him drop the body insouciantly into the arms of one of his aides—a domestic, lesser specimen of those rare and dangerous animals, the An.

The soldiers looked at each other, looked at me. “You'd better stay,” I said. “And get yourselves reinforced. There might be reprisals planned.”

Baal's tawny eyes in my mind: challenging me, trusting me—



The debriefing was in closed session, although there would be a transcript on record. It took a painfully long time, but we managed to exonerate everyone, including Baal. Mistakes had been made; signals had been misread. We knew the facts of the KiAn problem; we had only the most rudimentary grasp of the cultures involved. Baal and Tiamaat had made no further

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comment. The Ki (who were not present at the debriefing) had presented a swift deposition. They wanted the incident treated with utmost discretion; they did not see it as a bar to negotiation. The Balas/Shet party argued that Baal's kill had been unique, an "extraordinary ritual" that we had to sanction. And we knew this was nonsense, but it was the best we could do.

One of our Green Belts—struck by the place in the report where Tiamaat exclaims *the Others knew it!*—came up with the idea that the young Ki had been a form of suicide bomber: sacrificing his life in the hope of wrecking the peace talks. Investigation of the dead boy and his contacts would now commence.

"Thank funx it didn't happen on the live transmission," cried Shamaz, the old soldier, getting his priorities right.

It was very late before Pelé and I got away. We spent the rest of the night together, hiding in the tenderness of the Blue Planet, where war is shameful and murder is an aberration; where kindness is common currency, and in almost every language strangers are greeted with love—*dear, pet, darling, sister, brother, cousin*—and nobody even wonders why. What an unexpected distinction, we who thought we were such ruthless villains, such fallen angels. "We're turning into the care assistant caste for the whole funxing galaxy," moaned Pelé. "Qué cachó!"



The Parliament session was well attended: many tiers packed with bi-locators, more than the usual scat-

ter of Members present in the flesh and damn the expense. I surveyed the Chamber with distaste. They all wanted to make their speeches on the KiAn crisis. But they knew nothing. The freedom of the press fades and dies at interstellar distances, where everything has to be couriered, and there's no such thing as evading official censorship. They'd heard about the genocide, about the wicked but romantic An, about the ruined world, the rescue plans. They had no idea exactly what had driven the Ki to such desperation, and they weren't going to find out—

All the Diaspora Parliament knew was spin.

And the traditional Ki, the people we were dealing with, were collusive. They didn't *like* being killed and eaten by their aristos, but for outsiders to find out the truth would be a far worse evil: a disgusting, gross exposure. After all, it was only the poor, the weak-minded, and the disadvantaged who ended up on a plate... Across from the Visitors' Gallery, level with my eyes, hung the great Diaspora Banner. The populated worlds turned sedately, beautifully scanned and insanely close together; like one of those ancient distorted projections of the landmasses on the Blue. The "real" distance between the Blue system and Neuendan (our nearest neighbor) was twenty-six thousand light years. The location of the inscrutable Aleutians' homeworld was a mystery; between the Neuendan and the Balas/Shet it was fifteen hundred light years. How would you represent *that* spatial relationship, in any realistic way?

"Why do they say it all aloud?" asked Baal, idly.

He was beside me, of course. He was glad to have me there and kept letting me know it: a confiding pressure

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against my shoulder, a warm glance from those tawny eyes. He took my complete silence about the incident in Hopes and Dreams Park for understanding. A DP Social Support Officer *never* shows hostility.

“Isn’t your i/t button working?”

The MPs tended to speak in their various native languages, and the instantaneous translation in here had a mind of its own.

“It works well enough. But everything they say is just repeating the documents on this desk. It was the same in our briefing yesterday, I noticed that.”

“You *read English*?”

“Oh yes.” Reading and writing have to be learned, there is no quick neuro-fix. Casually, with a glint of that startling irony, he dismissed his skill. “I was taught at home. But I don’t bother. I have people who understand all this for me.”

“It’s called oratory,” I said. “And rhetoric. Modulated speech is used to stir peoples’ emotions, to cloud the facts and influence the vote.”

Baal screwed up his handsome face in disapproval. “That’s distasteful.”

“Also it’s tradition. It’s just the way we do things.”

“Ah!”

I sighed and sent a message to Pelé on our eye socket link.

Change partners?

D’you want to reassign? came his swift response. He was worrying about me; he wanted to protect me from the trauma of being with Baal, which was a needle under my skin. I liked Pelé very much, but I preferred to treat the Diaspora Parliament as a no-ties singles bar.

No, I answered. *Just for an hour, after this.*



Getting close to Tiamaat was easy. After the session the four of us went down to the Foyer, where Baal was quickly surrounded by a crowd of high-powered admirers. They swept him off somewhere, with Pelé in attendance. Tiamaat and I were left bobbing in the wake, ignored, a little lost. “Shall we *have coffee*, Debra?” she suggested, with dignity. “I love *coffee*. But not the kind that comes on those trolleys!”

I took her to “my” kiosk, and we found a table. I was impressed by the way she handled the slights of her position. There goes Baal, surrounded by the mighty, while his partner is reduced to having coffee with a minder... It was a galling role to have to play in public. I had intended to lead up to the topic on my mind, gently: but she forestalled me. “You must be horrified by what happened yesterday.”

No hostility. “A *little* horrified, I admit.” I affected to hesitate. “The Balas/Shet say that what Baal did was a ritual, confirming his position as leader, and that the Ki expected it. They may even have arranged for the victim to be available. And it won’t happen again. Are they right?”

She sipped her cappuccino. “Baal doesn’t believe he did anything wrong,” she answered carefully, giving nothing away.

I remembered her cry of despair. “But what do *you* think—?”

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“I can speak frankly?”

“You can say anything. We may seem to be in public, but nothing you say to me, or that I say to you, can be heard by anyone else.”

“Speranza is a very clever place!”

“Yes, it is... And as you know, though the system itself will have a record, as your Social Support Officer I may not reveal anything you ask me to keep to myself.”

She gave me eye-contact then, very deliberately. I realized I’d never seen her look anyone in the eye before. The color of her irises was a subtle, lilac-starred gray.

“Before I left home, when I was a child, I ate meat. I hadn’t killed it, but I knew where it came from. But I have never killed, Debra. And now I don’t believe I ever will.” She looked out at the passing crowd, the surroundings that must be so punishingly strange to her. “My mother said we should close ourselves off to the past, and open ourselves to the future. So she sent me away, when I was six years old, to live on another world—”

“That sounds very young to me.”

“I *was* young. I still had my milk teeth. I’m not like Baal, because I have been brought up differently. If I were in his place things would be better for the Others. I truly believe that—” She meant the Ki, the prey-nations. “But I know what has to be done for KiAn. *I want this rescue package to work.* Baal is the one who will make it happen, and I support him in every way.”

She smiled, close-lipped, no flash of sharp white: I saw the poised steel in her, hidden by ingrained self-suppression. And she changed the subject,

with composure. Unexpected boldness, unexpected finesse—

“Debra, is it true that Blue people have secret super-powers?”

I laughed and shook my head. “I’m afraid not. No talking flowers here!”



Pelé tried to get the DP software to change our codenames. He maintained that *Baal* and *Tiamaat* were not even from the same mythology, and if we were going to invoke the Blue gods those two should be Aztecs: Huehuateotl, ripping the living heart from his victims... The bots refused. They said they didn’t care if they were mixing their mysticisms. Codenames were a device to avoid accidental offense until the system had assimilated a new user language. “Baal” and “Tiamaat” were perfectly adequate, and the MesoAmerican names had too many characters.



I had dinner with Baal, in the Sensitive Visitor Facility. He was charming company; we ate vegetarian fusion cuisine, and I tried not to think about the butchered meat in the kitchen of his suite. On the other side of the room bull-shouldered Colonel Haa’agaan ate alone, glancing at us covertly with small, sad eyes from between the folds of his slaty head-hide. Shamaz had been hard hit by what had happened in the Hopes and

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Dreams Park. But his orange and yellow aura-tag was still bright, and I knew mine was, too. By the ruthless measures of interstellar diplomacy everything was still going well; set for success.

If things had been different I might have joined Pelé again when I was finally off duty. As it was, I retired to my room, switched all the décor, including ceiling and floor, to starry void, mixed myself a kicking neuro-chemical cocktail, and applied the popper to my throat. Eyedrops are faster, but I wanted the delay, I wanted to feel myself coming apart. Surrounded by directionless immensity I sipped chilled water, brooding. How can a people have World Government, space flight, industrialization, numinal intelligence, and yet the ruling caste are still killing and eating the peasants? How can they do that, when practically everyone on KiAn admits they are a single species, differently adapted: *and they knew that before we told them*. How can we be back here, the Great Powers and their grisly parasites: making the same moves, the same old mistakes, the same old hateful compromises, that our Singularity was supposed to cure forever?

Why is moral development so difficult? Why are predators charismatic?

The knots in my frontal lobes were combed out by airy fingers; I fell into the sea of possibilities; I went to the place of terror and joy that no one understands unless they have been there. I asked my question, and I didn't get an answer. (You never get an answer.) Yet when I came to the shallows again, when I laid myself, exhausted, on this dark and confused shore, I knew what I was going to do: I had seen it.

But there always has to be an emotional reason. I'd known about Baal before I arrived. I'd known that he would hunt and kill “weakling” Ki, as was his traditional right, and I'd been undecided. It was Tiamaat who made the difference. I'd met her, skin on skin as we say. I knew what the briefing had not been able to tell me. She was no cipher, superficially “civilized” by her education, she was *suppressed*. I had heard that cry of despair and anger, when she saw what Baal had done. I had talked to her. I knew she had strength and cunning, as well as good intentions. A latent dominance, the will and ability to be a leader.

I saw Baal's look of challenge and trust, even now—

But Tiamaat deserved saving, and I would save her.



The talks went on. Morale was low on the DP side, because the refugee camp incident had shown us where we stood; but the Ki delegates were happy, insanely, infuriatingly. The “traditional diet of the An” was something they refused to discuss, and they were going to get their planet rebuilt anyway. The young An leaders spent very little time at the conference table. Baal was indifferent—he had people to understand these things for him; and Tiamaat could not be present without him. This caused a rift. Their aides, the only other An around, were restricted to the SV Facility suites (we care assistants may be crazy but we're not entirely stupid); Pelé and I were fully occupied, making sure our

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separate charges weren't left moping alone. Pelé took Tiamaat shopping and visiting museums (virtual and actual). I found that Baal loved to roam, just as I do myself, and took him exploring the lesser-known sights.

We talked about his background. Allegedly, he'd given up a promising career in the Space Marines to take on the leadership. When I'd assured myself that his pilot skills were real, he wasn't just a toy-soldier aristo, I finally took him on the long float through the permanent umbilical, to Right Speranza.

We had to suit up at the other end.

"What's this?" demanded Baal, grinning. "Are we going outside?"

"You'll see. It's an excursion I thought you'd enjoy."

The suits were programmable. I watched him set one up for his size and bulk and knew he was fine; but I put him through the routines, to make sure. Then I took him into the vast open cavern of the DP's missile repository, which we crossed like flies in a cathedral, hooking our tethers to the girders, drifting over the ranked silos of deep-space interceptors, the giant housing of particle cannons.

All of it obsolete, like castle walls in the age of heavy artillery; but it looks convincing on the manifest, and who knows? "Modern" armies have been destroyed by Zulu spears, it never pays to ignore the conventional weapons—

"Is this a *weapons* bay?" the monster exclaimed, scandalized, on suit radio.

"Of course," said I. "Speranza can defend herself, if she has to."

I let us into a smaller hangar, through a lock on the cavern wall, and filled it with air and pressure and lights. We were completely alone. Left Speranza is a natural object, a hollowed asteroid. Right is artificial, and it's a dangerous place for numinal bipeds. The proximity of the torus can have unpredictable and bizarre effects, not to mention the tissue-frying radiation that washes through at random intervals. But we would be fine for a short while. We fixed tethers, opened our faceplates and hunkered down, gecko-padded bootsoles clinging to the arbitrary "floor."

"I thought you were angels," he remarked, shyly. "The weapons, all of that, it seems beneath you. Doesn't your codename, "Debra" mean an angel? Aren't you all messengers, come to us from the Mighty Void?"

"Mighty Void" was a Balas/Shet term meaning something like God.

"No...Deborah was a judge, in Israel. I'm just human, Baal. I'm a person with numinal consciousness, the same kind of being as you are; like all the KiAn."

I could see that the harsh environment of Right Speranza moved him, as it did me. There was a mysterious peace and truth in being here, in the cold dark, breathing borrowed air. He was pondering: open and serious.

"Debra...? Do you believe in the Diaspora?"

"I believe in the Weak Theory," I said. "I don't believe we're all descended from the same Blue Planet hominid, the mysterious original starfarers, precursors of homo sapiens. I think we're the same because we grew under the same constraints: time, gravity, hydrogen bonds, the nature of water, the nature of carbon—"

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“But instantaneous transit was invented on the Blue Planet,” he protested, unwilling to lose his romantic vision.

“Only the prototype. It took hundreds of years and a lot of outside help, before we had anything like viable interstellar travel—”

Baal had other people to understand the science for him. He was building castles in the air, dreaming of his future. “Does everyone on the Blue speak English?”

“Not at all. They mostly speak a language called *putonghua*; which means ‘common speech,’ as if they were the only people in the galaxy. Blues are as insular as the KiAn, believe me, when they’re at home. When you work for the DP you change your ideas; it happens to everyone. I’m still an Englishwoman, and *mi niño* Pelé is still a man of Ecuador—

“I know,” he broke in, eagerly, “I felt that. I *like* that in you!”

“But we skip the middle term. The World Government of our single planet doesn’t mean the same as it did.” I grinned at him. “Hey, I didn’t bring you here for a lecture. This is what I wanted to show you. See the pods?”

He looked around us, slowly, with a connoisseur’s eye. He could see what the pods were. They were Aleutian-built, the revolutionary leap forward: *vehicles* that could pass through the mind/matter barrier. An end to those dreary transit lounges, true starflight, the Holy Grail; and only the Aleutians knew how it was done.

“Like to take one out for a spin?”

“You’re kidding!” cried Baal, his eyes alight.

“No I’m not. We’ll take a two-man pod. How about it?”

He saw that I was serious, which gave him pause. “How can we? The systems won’t allow it. This hangar has to be under military security.”

“I *am* military security, Baal. So is Pelé. What did you think we were? Kindergarten teachers? Trust me, I have access; there’ll be no questions asked.”

He laughed. He knew there was something strange going on, but he didn’t care; he trusted me. I glimpsed myself as a substitute for Tiamaat, glimpsed the relationship he should have had with his partner. Not sexual, but predation-based: a playful tussle, sparring partners. But Tiamaat had not wanted to be his sidekick...

We took a pod. Once we were inside I sealed us off from Speranza, and we lay side by side in the couches, two narrow beds in a torpedo shell: an interstellar sports car, how right for this lordly boy. I checked his hook-ups and secured my own.

“Where are we going?”

“Oh, just around the block.”

His vital signs were in my eyes, his whole being was *quivering* in excitement, and I was glad. The lids closed, we were translated into code, we and our pod were injected into the torus, in the form of a triple stream of pure information, divided and shooting around the ring to meet itself, and collide—

I sat up, in a lucent gloom. The other bed’s seal opened, and Baal sat up beside me. We were both still suited, with open faceplates. Our beds shaped themselves into pilot and copilot couches, and we faced what seemed an unmediated view of the deep space

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outside. Bulwarks and banks of glittering instruments carved up the panorama: I saw Baal's glance flash over the panels greedily, longing to be piloting this little ship for real. Then he saw the yellow primary, a white hole in black absence, and its brilliant, distant partner. He saw the pinpricks of other formations that meant nothing much to me, and he knew where I had brought him. We could not see the planet, it was entirely dark from this view. But in our foreground the massive beams of space-to-space lasers were playing: shepherding plasma particles into a shell that would hold the recovering atmosphere in place.

To say that KiAn had been flayed alive was no metaphor. The people still living on the surface were in some kind of hell. But it could be saved.

"None of the machinery is strictly material," I said, "in any normal sense. It was couriered here, as information, in the living minds of the people who are now on station. We can't see them, but they're around, in pods like this one. It will all disintegrate, when the repairs are done. But the skin of your world will be whole again, it won't need to be held in place."

The KiAn don't cry, but I was so close to him, in the place where we were, that I felt his tears. "*Why* are you doing this?" he whispered. "You must be angels, or why are you saving us, what have we done to deserve this?"

"The usual reasons," I said. "Market forces, political leverage, power play."

"I don't believe you."

"Then I don't know what to tell you, Baal. Except that the Ki and the An have numinal consciousness. You

are like us, and we have so few brothers and sisters. Once we'd found you, we couldn't bear to lose you."

I let him gaze, for a long moment without duration.

"I wanted you to see this."

I stepped out of my pilot's couch and stood braced: one hand gecko-padded to the inner shell, while I used the instruments to set the pod to self-destruct. The eject beacon started up, direct cortical warning that my mind read as a screaming siren—

"Now I'm going back to Speranza. But you're not."

The fine young cannibal took a moment to react. The pupils in his tawny eyes widened amazingly when he found that he was paralyzed and his capsule couldn't close.

"Is this a dream?"

"Not quite. It's a confabulation. It's what happens when you stay conscious in transit. The mind invents a stream of environments, events. The restoration of KiAn is real, Baal. It will happen. We can see it 'now' because we're in non-duration, we're experiencing the simultaneity. In reality—if that makes any sense, language hates these situations—we're still zipping around the torus. But when the confabulation breaks up you'll still be in deep space and about to die."

I did not need to tell him why I was doing this. He was no fool, he knew why he had to go. But his mind was still working, fighting—

"Speranza is a four-space mapped environment. You can't do this and go back alone. The system knows you were with me, every moment. The record can't be changed, no way, without the tampering leaving a trace."

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“True. Except that I am one of those rare people who can change *the information*. I can make a different story true. You’ve heard fairytales about us, the Blues who have super-powers? I’m not an angel, Baal. Actually it’s a capital crime to be what I am, where I come from. But Speranza understands me. Speranza uses me.”

“Ah!” he cried. “I knew it, I felt it. We are the same!”



Next thing I knew I was in my room, alone. Earlier in the day Baal had claimed he needed a nap. After a couple of hours I’d become suspicious, checked for his signs and found him missing: gone from the SV Facility screen. I’d been trying to trace him when Right Speranza had detected a pod, with the An leader on board, firing up. The system had warned him to desist. Baal had carried on and paid a high price for his attempted joyride. The injection had failed, and both Baal and one fabulous Aleutian-build pod had been annihilated.

Remembering this much gave me an appalling headache—the same aching awfulness I imagine shape-shifters (I know of one or two) feel in their muscle and bone. I couldn’t build the bridge at all: no notion how I’d connected between this reality and the former version. I could have stepped from the dying pod straight through the wall of this pleasant, modest living space. But it didn’t matter. I would find out, and Debra would have been behaving like Debra.

Pelé came knocking. I let him in and we commiserated, both of us in shock. We're advocates, not enforcers. There's very little we can do if a Sensitive Visitor is really determined to go AWOL. We'd done all the right things, short of using undue force, and so had Speranza. When we'd broken the privilege locks, Baal's room record had shown that he'd been spying out how to get access to one of those Aleutian pods. It was just too bad that he'd succeeded, and that he'd had enough skill to get himself killed. *Don't feel responsible*, said Pelé. *It's not your fault. Nobody thinks that. Don't be so sad. Always so sad, Debra: it's not good for the brain, you should take a break.* Then he started telling me that frankly, nobody would regret Baal. By An law Tiamaat could now rule alone; and if she took a partner, we could trust her not to choose another bloodthirsty atavist... I soon stopped him. I huddled there in pain, my friend holding my hand: seeing only the beautiful one, his tawny eyes at the last, his challenge and his trust; mourning my victim.

I'm a melancholy assassin.

I did not sleep. In the grey calm of Left Speranza's early hours, before the breakfast kiosks were awake, I took the elevator to the Customized Shelter Sector, checked in with the CSP, and made my way, between the silent capsule towers, to Hopes and Dreams Park. I was disappointed that there were no refugees about. It would have been nice to see Ki children, playing fearlessly. Ki oldsters picking herbs from their windowboxes, instead of being boiled down for soup themselves. The gates of the Sacred Grove were open, so I just walked in. There was a memorial service: strictly no

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outsiders, but I'd had a personal message from Tiamaat saying I would be welcome. I didn't particularly want to meet her again. I'm a superstitious assassin, I felt that she would somehow know what I had done for her. I thought I would keep to the back of whatever gathering I found, while I made my own farewell.

The daystar's rays had cleared the false horizon; the sun was a rumor of gold between the trees. I heard laughter, and a cry. I walked into the clearing and saw Tiamaat. She'd just made the kill. I saw her toss the small body down, drop to her haunches and take a ritual bite of raw flesh; I saw the blood on her mouth. The Ki looked on, keeping their distance in a solemn little cluster. Tiamaat transformed, splendid in her power, proud of her deed, looked up, straight at me. I don't know what she expected. Did she think I would be glad for her? Did she want me to know how I'd been fooled? Certainly she knew she had nothing to fear. She was only doing the same as Baal had done, and the DP had made no protest over *his* kill. I shouted, like an idiot: *Hey, stop that!* and the whole group scattered. They vanished into the foliage, taking the body with them.



I said nothing to anyone. I had not, in fact, foreseen that Tiamaat would become a killer. I'd seen a talented young woman, who would blossom if the unfairly favored young man was removed. I hadn't realized that a dominant An would behave like a dominant An, ir-

respective of biological sex. But I was sure my employers had grasped the situation; and it didn't matter. The long-gone, harsh symbiosis between the An and the Ki, which they preserved in their rites of kingship, was not the problem. It was the modern version, the mass market in Ki meat, the intensive farms and the factories. Tiamaat would help us to get rid of those. She would embrace the new in public, whatever she believed in private.

And the fate of the Ki would change.

The news of Baal's death had been couriered to KiAn and to the homeworlds by the time I took my transit back to the Blue. We'd started getting reactions: all positive, so to speak. Of course there would be persistent rumors that the Ki had somehow arranged Baal's demise, but there was no harm in that. In certain situations, assassination *works*—as long as it is secret, or at least misattributed. It's a far more benign tool than most alternatives, and a lot faster. I had signed off at the Social Support Office. I'd managed to avoid goodbyes. Just before I went through to the lounge I realized I hadn't had my aura tag taken off. I had to go back, and go through *another* blessed gate, and Pelé caught me.

"Take the dreamtime," he insisted, holding me tight. "Play some silly game, go skydiving from Angel Falls. *Please*, Debra. Don't be conscious. You worry me."

I wondered if he suspected what I really did for a living.

Maybe so, but he couldn't possibly understand.

"I'll give it serious thought," I assured him, and kissed him goodbye.

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I gave the idea of the soft option serious thought for ten paces—passed into the lounge and found my narrow bed. I lay down there, beside my fine young cannibal, the boy who had known me for what I was. His innocent eyes... I lay down with them all, and with the searing terrors they bring: all my dead remembered.

I needed to launder my soul.