

THE BORZOI SUITE

MARK MCKENNA

*The more we advanced,
the more isolated
we became.*

AlainDuChaine33

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

An Author's Foreword is usually written to offer additional information, to make personal contact with the reader, or simply because there were a few sheets left over and no writer can resist a blank page.

That's not why I'm writing this foreword.

I'm writing to tell you *I'm* the author. Not Mark McKenna. Forget about him, that's just a name I made up. "Mark McKenna" doesn't exist. I wrote *The Borzoi Suite*, period.

If you turn to Appendix A in the back of this book, you'll find it's subtitled *The Interrogation of JonAnderson*²⁸. Here, a space miner named JonAnderson will tell you *he's* writing the story. Don't believe him.

It's still me.

I wrote it all. Every word, every phrase, brick by brick, like a nineteenth century, OldEarth coaltown, I bathe you in HomoSaps progress and pollution.

Why?

Sorry. I don't know. I have no idea why I wrote it.

You're probably thinking, "Who is this person?"

Well...uh...actually, that's one of the things I was hoping *you* could help me with. You could be a doctor or an historian. You might even know me!

It's embarrassing to have to write this—writing makes it more real somehow—but I can't remember my name. I mean, I *know* it, I just can't *remember* it. I don't want any sympathy. It's just annoying.

Anyway. First off, I give you Toby and LaJuana. And their meeting. And their lovely vacation, which will change the course of human history a bit. Like destroying the Galaxy, a bit.

And Her, of course. I give you *Her*.

Her who?

*

*We strained to praise
The unfair malaise!*

*

Get it? But be careful. She's very clever and she's always listening. Just like the poor HomoSaps, tricked from pillar to post, I too, have been deceived. Devilishly, deviously...oh, you *didn't* get it?

*

She's the keeper of the Holy GRaiL.
She's the poor HomoSaps JaiLOR.

See! I do it all for you, Reader. That is, if you're really *there*...
(A little joke. You'll get it later.)

*

Well, I've said too much and I've stayed too long. We shouldn't keep Toby and LaJuana waiting. But if you happen to be a fan of old history you can always turn to *The Miner's Tale* on page 311. That's JonAnderson's story. Does it matter where you start? Not really. Just do what you like. No one's keeping score.

Oh, I almost forgot. What should you call *me*? How about Atropos? *The Borzoi Suite* by Atropos. That has a nice ring.

*

Oh, one more thing. I know reading is hard work, paper or digital, it's just so *slow*. So I'll pop in from time to time to cheer you along, k?
Good. Now let's say hi to Toby and LaJuana...

*

BOOK ONE

THE PILGRIMS

2722 A.D.

It was a beautiful dawn. The sun rose over the jagged mountains turning the highest peaks to gold. The slopes below showed every shade of red, from pale quartz to charcoal-dusted rose. The foothills were still in darkness, a perfect backdrop for the shattered plains which glowed like molten iron under the red, rising sun.

Toby Ellerton ran across the top deck and took a deep, satisfying breath. He could smell jasmine and coconut wafting across the bow. He could also smell coffee and fresh-baked croissants which reminded him he was starving.

Boy, these cruise ships sure pump out the food!

At sixteen, Toby's life was complete. He was with his famous uncle, on a fabulous adventure, on a legendary ship. The QE16! The giant starship, plus the dislocation that removed them from local spacetime, had cruised in late last night. Dawn found them floating gently, insulated from the howling winds and blasted landscape. Their itinerary called for a forty-eight hour layover before returning to EarthFour. Once home, they'd have the standard twelve-hour delay while local spacetime was reacquired.

The starship's captain, Artau, had a face like a smooth-cheeked boy, but over sixty years in service. Captain Artau always moored the great ship here, he believed the view to be the finest in the Galaxy. Toby was amazed how few people had gotten up to see it. He laughed. Probably because the average passenger's age was about a hundred and sixty.

Toby strolled over to the railing and stared hard into the middle distance. He squinted, shielding his eyes. Captain Artau had told him the dislocation would refract planetary light if he could catch it at the right angle. It was supposed to be visible, a hundred meters off the bow, just after sunrise. Toby tried moving his head from side to side.

Nope! Nothing. The smell of coffee was stronger now. *I'd better head in to breakfast. Maybe Uncle Pete's up!*

Toby had met his uncle only once before, years ago. Peter Rothchilde Ellerton IV was the black sheep of the family. As the eldest son, he'd been expected to step into a leadership role in the Company.

Instead, Pete spent years living in a glass-spinning community. No one in the family could understand his need to lose himself in menial craftwork, especially his younger brother Arthur, Toby's dad. But Pete Ellerton learned enough from the genetically-engineered crafters to develop his own spun-glass style. He'd gone on to become one of the most famous sculptors in the Homeworlds. His signature was a snake with a book in its mouth. Even a small spun-glass sculpture bearing that chop cost a cool quarter-million credits. Hence the trip for Toby's sixteenth birthday: Uncle Pete could afford it.

Pete had promised Toby a trip anywhere in the Galaxy if he could learn to play *My Wild Irish Rose* on the violin. No enhancements. Neurological authenticity. Good intonation. OldEarth style. It was hard. Probably the hardest thing Toby ever had to do. It took almost a year!

But I did it! And now I'm here! On Borzoi Seven!

Toby's family had a connection to the planet. His great-grandfather on his mother's side had been one of the early Directors of Planetary Operations. That was in the old days, when the Homeworlds still depended on the Company's mines to survive. Great-grandfather Rothchilde used to ride shotgun over the genetic monsters they used for mining back then—all obsolete since they'd perfected AR. Toby learned a lot of family history from AI. Plus his mom had the old man's journals, mostly records of some weird art he and his coevals used to make and blast out of the Galaxy. Great-grandfather Rothchilde had also been one of the first Upperlevels to get a full-personality download. But the FPD didn't take. The old guy wound up pretty scrambled, so eventually they'd had him wiped.

Toby skipped down the stairs, following his nose to the grand dining hall. He hadn't touched the violin since he had played that song for his uncle, but he would soon have his reward. He was going to see the greatest wonder of the Galaxy—The Psychic Sculptor of Borzoi Seven!

Just as he'd hoped, Uncle Pete was already there, talking to a pretty girl with one blue eye and one red one. They glittered, jewel-like, as her eyes darted from table to table. *Looking for her friends?* thought Toby. When he sat down she ignored him completely. "Reaver," he muttered,

turning his skin camouflage-gray.

But she ignored his skin change, too. *Camouflage!* Her friends had given *that* up six months ago. *What an adolescent!*

“Toby, I’d like you to meet LaJuana Taylor, from EarthSix. Her father is the Head Researcher for Psi-Luna. You know, The Heart/Mind Company.” As he added the familiar tag, Uncle Pete smiled complicitly at LaJuana.

Toby winced. “Hi,” he said in a monotone.

“Hi back,” said LaJuana, studying the menu written in the air above her plate. “Look at this retro holoscript. Could it be any flatter?”

“I like it,” said Toby. “The old ways are best.”

“Yeah, if you’re a mastodon.”

Toby took in her eyes and lack of skin art. “That’s better than a reaver!”

Uncle Pete stepped in. “Tell LaJuana how you earned this trip, Toby.”

Toby screamed inside. “No thanks,” Uncle Pete, he said casually.

“Go on! Don’t be modest!”

Sensing Toby’s distress, LaJuana perked up. “How *did* you get here, Toby? Did you win a prize for the best cloned horny toad?”

Toby’s uncle laughed easily. “Nothing like that. Toby learned to play *My Wild Irish Rose* on the violin, OldEarth style. This trip is his reward.” Toby slumped in his chair, willing himself to become invisible.

“Yes...” Pete leaned back in his chair which instantly reformed to support him. “I asked him to learn that particular tune because of an Irish girl I knew a long time ago, actually, before either of you were born...”

“I’d love to hear him play it,” LaJuana interrupted breathily. Toby rolled his eyes. Uncle Pete glowed. Toby began to think of all the ways an annoying seventeen-year-old girl could get maimed on a cruise ship.

“Did you bring your violin, Toby?” said Uncle Pete.

“No, I burned it.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed Pete. LaJuana made tsk-ing noises.

Toby loved his uncle, but the truth was if Uncle Pete made him play the violin he was going to jump off the ship and crash right through the dislocation.

He'd heard it happened, too. The guy wound up breathing frozen methane and weighing about eight hundred pounds.

Toby went on the offensive. "So your dad's the Head Researcher for Psi-Luna. Must be quite the shrink, huh?" LaJuana swallowed. *Bingo!* he thought. "So what's new and exciting in the Heart/Mind world?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about his work."

"Oh, you can tell *us*, LaJuana," said Toby with exaggerated camaraderie. "I don't think Psi-Luna's reading our minds now. Much!"

"I *do* know..." Now she seemed awkward and slightly gawky. Toby began to warm up to her. "He never tells my mom or me anything and he's always complaining about..." she lowered her voice and imitated her father, "...AI's intransigence."

"You think they'll ever try to recalibrate?" asked Toby.

"Current thinking is we probably wouldn't notice the difference," threw in Uncle Pete. "But we don't want to bore LaJuana with all this speculation. Let's eat and go for a walk on deck. I hear the sunrise is spectacular."

"Over," said Toby.

LaJuana laughed. "Did you see it?"

"It flamed," said Toby. "Couldn't see the dislocation, though."

"My father says that's just people's imagination."

"A friend of mine saw it."

A waiter arrived with their food. Plate after plate cascaded on to the table filling all the available space. Uncle Pete's eyes grew wide. "Who ordered all this stuff?" he asked.

Toby and LaJuana looked at each other and laughed. "It doesn't matter," said Toby.

"It certainly does matter," said Uncle Pete. "Waste is what ruined OldEarth."

"The Genome Plague is what ruined OldEarth," said Toby.

"Actually," said LaJuana, "they recycle everything on board the QE16. My father's made this trip a bunch of times."

Now *that's interesting!* thought Ellerton. He told AI to bookmark the moment.

Toby dug into his breakfast. He could tell he was going to get tired of hearing about LaJuana's father every five minutes, but at least he didn't want to strangle her anymore.

Guy's probably a mind-wiping troll. He laughed to himself. Probably if someone kissed his daughter an alarm would go off in Psi-Luna headquarters. He was feeling better. The food was helping. Well-known fact: People fight when they're hungry.

"What are you grinning about?" asked LaJuana.

"Oh, nothing," said Toby stuffing waffle into his mouth. "Just enjoying the feast-break."

"It's fast-break," said LaJuana. "That's the actual OldEarth root, you know."

"Yeah, if you were born without a sense of humor," said Toby. LaJuana stuck out her tongue. "Or a brain," he added. She made a face, her lips turned blood red, and her red eye turned violet.

"Now kids," said Uncle Pete. "Let's not argue. We've got too nice a day planned. It's not every day you get to see an alien intelligence at work."

"It's not intelligent," snapped LaJuana. "My father's seen the tests."

"I bet," muttered Toby.

"He says it only mimics intelligence."

"Whatever it does," said Ellerton, "it provides one of the most spectacular sights in the Galaxy."

"No argument there," said Toby. "Unless your father hates art."

"It's not art," she said passionately. "It's duplication. AI could do the same thing with ease."

"I doubt it," said Toby. "And it still wouldn't be the same. No one can figure out how the Psychic Sculptor rearranges atoms. The art is in the technique."

"You're just parroting one of your professors."

"That's better than quoting your father every five minutes."

LaJuana bristled. "I don't quote my father every five minutes. And he happens to be a very important man."

Pete Ellerton sighed. *I hope they don't keep this up the whole trip.*

He watched, like a spectator at a low-grav hockey game, as the two teens bickered. *Too bad. We'll have to shed this argumentative beauty. A very important man. Ha!*

Pete recalled the problems his family had getting Psi-Luna clearance for their production facilities on EarthSix. It required massive amounts of what his father used to call *liquid maintenance*. This included both the single malt and accounts payable varieties. Pete mentally took care of the bill and allowed his body language to say: *Leaving...*

"It's been wonderful meeting you, LaJuana," he said warmly. "Perhaps Toby and I will see you again before the end of the cruise."

"That would be nice," she said politely.

Pete got to his feet. Even after the hearty breakfast he was raring to go. He knew they kept the gravity at point nine-six-five of the Company Standard for that very reason. *But it works! I feel great.*

The two teens got up slowly from the table. "It was nice to meet you, Toby," said LaJuana. "Thanks for breakfast, Mr. Ellington."

"It's Ellerton. But please, call me Pete."

"Uh...LaJuana," said Toby. "If you're not doing anything, we're not scheduled to see the Sculptor till this afternoon."

"That's when we're going," said LaJuana.

"I was going to explore the ship, you know, look around and stuff."

"It flames," said LaJuana. "Although there are a lot of old people."

"Sadly, yes," said Toby. They both laughed. "You want to come?"

"Sure!"

"Do you mind, Uncle Pete?"

There were a lot of old people around—and Pete Ellerton was starting to feel like one of them. He thought this trip would just be for the two of them, a chance to get better acquainted. Then he remembered what it was like to be sixteen.

"Of course not, Toby. As a matter of fact, I've got some calls to make. Why don't you kids go off and explore."

The sudden joy on his nephew's face both pained and delighted him. He laughed to himself. Those days were over and he wouldn't be taking the meds that would bring them back. He checked his resolve.

Well, not yet, anyway. Maybe when I get older.

“Thanks, Uncle Pete. You sure you don’t want to meet to play shuffleboard or anything?”

Shuffleboard! He was a great kid, though. Arthur had done a fine job with him. “No thanks, Toby.” Pete smiled. “I’ve got some calls to make. Let’s meet here for lunch. Say, noon?”

“Great! Thanks, Uncle Pete!” The two teens rushed off.

Pete Ellerton looked around the dining room and spotted a good-looking woman sitting by herself. He smoothed out a few wrinkles then had AI send over a brief bio and a casual invitation. She appraised him with a glance and nodded. Pete laughed.

I’ve got plenty of time to make those nonexistent calls.

Toby and LaJuana charged up the steps, which thrilled them by clanging. “Hey, LaJuana! Check it out. They must have done an AR retrofit. I bet this is real iron.”

LaJuana ran up and down, banging her feet and drawing disturbed looks from an elderly couple. “Yeah, it flames! My father says with Atomic Reassembly we’re really starting to know the physiotrophic ontology of OldEarth.”

“Maybe *you* are,” said Toby with a grin.

“It’s how the feel of material things affects the psychology of the common person.”

“Okay, how?”

“Well, like how this clanging iron makes us feel good.”

“I don’t see those old folks running up and down.”

“You know what I mean,” said LaJuana.

“Right. The old ways are best.”

LaJuana made a face. “I’m not going *that* far. But my father says understanding the physiotrophic ontology of OldEarth will bring us closer to understanding what went wrong. So we won’t repeat the same mistakes.”

“Yeah, we can make new ones.”

LaJuana stuck out her tongue. Toby noticed her violet iris had turned orange. *Maybe it means she likes me.* He took LaJuana’s hand and pulled her from the last step to the plastisteel deck. She landed with a jolt he barely heard. *I never thought about it before. It’s not the same.*

“Hey, LaJuana. What did you call it, that iron sound?”

“Physiotrophic ontology. It’s really hot now. All my father’s friends are getting wood floors.”

“Reaver! Floors made out of wood?”

“Yeah, dope! He even has a set of wooden bowls for eating.”

“Right! Flathead!”

The two teens ran across the deck dodging elderly passengers who were strolling about oohing and aahing at the shattered plains and iron-red mountains. They overheard a man saying, “...and every atom arranged by an alien intelligence! That’s the frosting on the cake, dear!”

Toby whispered in LaJuana’s ear. “Which they’ll also be having for lunch at noon.” She whispered back. “And dinner at eight!” Toby felt a thrill when her lips touched his ear.

Toby saw a row of binoculars on the observation deck. “Hey, have you tried these?”

“No, my father said it could be dangerous.”

“Flathead! People have been doing this for a century.”

LaJuana bit her lip. Toby ran up, instructed AI to transfer the necessary credits and peered in. Two lamellate prisms immediately adjusted to his vision. He found a distant peak. Suddenly an iron-rich crag, framed by snow and ice, loomed before him. He stared harder. His vision fractally advanced from crag to boulder, to crevice, to shard, to dust particle, to molecule, to atom, to proton, to electron, to a very disorienting space in which he suddenly felt very large.

Toby tore himself away and swayed a moment, blinking. “Wow! That flames!”

“Are you all right?” asked LaJuana.

“Sure. Try it!”

LaJuana took a quick peek. “Nice.”

“No. That’s not how you do it. You gotta to let it cycle through.”

LaJuana looked again, gingerly. After a second the iron-rich crag swam into focus. Then the boulder. Then the crevice. She was drawn deeper: to a shard, to a dust particle, to a molecule. The molecule disappeared. LaJuana found herself in a small room: bare, windowless, unnaturally quiet. In the center was an antique bioware chair. She walked to it and sat.

A massive statue appeared before her. Not through a door. It was just there! It was huge! Over three meters tall. She noticed the legs first, the muscles appeared to have been sculpted from OldEarth steel. One thigh was bigger than her whole torso. Then the hands, each with seven fingers. The palm, a chitinous, black shield, was raised. In greeting? As a warning? The giant’s massive chest and shoulders were covered with short brown fur.

LaJuana gasped when she saw the face. It was alive! She was seeing a living being somehow buried in the mountain. A triangular head. Erect ears. Suddenly LaJuana was caught by the creature’s eyes. Soft and brown, the kindest eyes she’d ever seen. She relaxed, but then she grew wildly, careening over the scene. The chair grew, too. It could engulf the whole room, except the room was gone.

LaJuana heard a word spoken in her mind: *Locus*. Everything started to spin. She screamed and tore her eyes away. Her warned, shocked eyes.

“Great, isn’t it?” said Toby.

LaJuana held on to the binoculars until the deck of the ship steadied under her feet. Toby noticed her pallor. “Are you all right?” he said. “We can go inside.”

“I’m fine!”

“Did you get as far as the interstitials between particles? Nobody gets further than that.”

“I saw a huge...*thing*. Half-man, half horse.”

Toby laughed, experimentally putting his arm around her waist. “Right! Flathead!”

LaJuana slipped free with a sinuous stretch. “What did *you* see? An invitation to *share*? But her blue eye was twinkling.”

“I saw a half-girl, half-wit...”

Toby’s response came too late. LaJuana had already moved on. He ran to catch up, his camouflaged skin pulsing. She shouted over her shoulder, “Let’s go for a swim. You can show me the technique you’re gonna use when you jump.”

Toby hurried to catch up. *I’ll hold her hand again. We can practice jumping together. It’s something.*

An hour later they were relaxing by the side of the pool. Legs kicked lazily, making waves that overlapped and moved on. Toby stole a glance at LaJuana’s body as her shimmering suit spontaneously tightened and loosened. The indoor sky was a morning-fresh blue. The pool on the QE16 held ten million gallons which cost over a hundred million credits. It was the largest quantity of water dedicated solely to recreation in the Galaxy. Purified, held in place by specially calibrated graviton beds, a traveler could swim and drink at the same time.

“Lovely, lovely water...” said LaJuana. She pushed off in a smooth breaststroke, adding, “When most people will never see more than a glass at a time their whole lives.”

“Alas!” said Toby, but he noticed LaJuana didn’t laugh. He swam after her. “Hey! This afternoon. You want to jump together?”

He’s sweet. But what would Daddy say when he saw the holo?

“I don’t know, she said,” remembering the binoculars. “I’m not even sure I’m gonna jump.”

“Why else would you come to Borzoi?”

“My father said it could be dangerous.”

“That’s so flat. There hasn’t been an accident in a century. Over a quarter of a million jumps. The Psychic Sculptor enjoys it. It’s his art.”

“What about that guy in the beginning? My father’s seen the transcripts of his interrogation.”

Toby laughed, confident at last. “My great-grandfather *did* the interrogation.”

“No!”

Toby swam up to her and nudged her bare shoulder, timing it with an emphatic, “Yes! And it wasn’t a *guy* who jumped. It was a *gennie*.”

“What happened?”

Toby swam over to the side of the pool. LaJuana followed. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone and leaned his head next to hers. He was overjoyed when she did the same. Her wet hair tickled his shoulder.

“Rothchilde Level3 was my great-grandfather. Mom still has his journals. A genie discovered the pool...Anderson...something. He was the first to jump.” Toby laughed. “He sank like a stone and didn’t get returned for forty-three years.”

“See! That’s what my father said.”

“Because the Sculptor didn’t *know* us. The human race! It only met a genie! Ever since the xenobiologists and AI made contact, we’ve been good co’s.”

“Didn’t they quarantine the planet?”

“Yeah. AI left orbitals. Once the genie was spotted they picked him up. Then my great-grandfather interrogated him.”

“What happened to him?”

“It was way past his date.”

LaJuana sighed. “That’s so sad.”

“Here!” Toby dropped an encapsulated version of JonAnderson’s interrogation of into LaJuana’s mind (*see Appendix A*) and put his arm around her shoulders. “Gennies don’t feel anything. They wiped my great-grandfather, too. He had one of the first FPDs. It didn’t take.”

“What’s that?”

“Full-personality download. That’s what they called EverHome back then. It’s like when they used to freeze people on OldEarth. It’s great for historians who want to harvest a few memories. Not much else left, though.”

“That’s terrible!” LaJuana looked like she was going to cry so Toby arranged his face to match. He was ecstatic she hadn’t removed his arm from around her shoulder. He would have cheerfully wiped a dozen ancestors to keep it there.

“Let’s swim.” Toby urged her into the water. He could see how their bodies would touch as he carried her: floating; her arms around his neck,

their legs intertwined...

"I've got to go!" said LaJuana. "My father will be wondering where I am." She removed his arm. "I haven't seen him since breakfast."

Toby recovered quickly. "Don't you mean fast-break?"

"On the QE16, the word fast is a pejorative."

"A who?"

LaJuana smiled. "Why don't you stop by our cabin? My father's there. You can meet him."

I'd rather drink bilge water, thought Toby. There were some bad links between Psi-Luna and the Company which was, basically, his whole family. But LaJuana was beautiful. There really wasn't any question.

"Sure. Let's go!"

Toby subtly dialed down his skin and visualized a *Contemporary Casual* look that made him want to puke.

"AI. If you say anything..."

AI immediately presented him a *carte d'visite* in a nuptial font. It read: *Just the thing for evenings on the yacht!* Toby grimaced as he matched his pace to LaJuana's. "You're not in partnership with me, pal!"

"I know my father's gonna like you," said LaJuana.

"Right!" said Toby. "Can't wait." He noticed her orange eye had turned blue to match its mate.

I wonder if her father knows about her biowork.

LaJuana slipped her arm through his. "Silly!"

"Silly!" repeated AI in his frontal lobe. Despite considerable effort, Toby grinned.

Psi-Luna Head Researcher Wendell Taylor was enjoying a few moments of peace. Having a seventeen-year-old daughter he rarely saw was one thing. Traveling with her for the first time was another, entirely! LaJuana had spent most of the first three days—initially spectacular, but ultimately boring nebulae—jacked into scenics. The rest of the time she spent complaining about the room, complaining about the food, the *flatness*

of her fellow passengers, the age of same, the clothes she'd packed, the clothes she hadn't packed, her mother (his ex) and a multi-player scenic called *Troth*, in which she'd recently been forced to marry a troll.

Taylor still had a lot of work to do and under the circs, getting help from AI was out of the question. So he stayed off-line, slogging through it alone. Usually when LaJuana was talking he'd slap an emotionally acceptable expression on his face, nod and hmmm, and rip through data like a photon through a proton. Until she noticed his eyes glaze.

"Daaaddy! Are you listening to me?"

"Of course, sugar." His ex, the bitch, was probably *enjoying* her vacation. When he heard the door, he cringed.

"Hi Daddy. It's me. I've brought a friend to meet you."

Head Researcher Taylor unfolded himself from the couch, then spent about ten seconds clearing reports, memos, holos, two restorative scenics and worldline projections for Psi-Luna's new project from the mental area where he commonly spread his work. He gazed through the porthole at the shattered plains of Borzoi. Even after blinking and taking a few breaths, his mind still hummed. He struck a cautiously welcoming pose.

"Daddy, this is Toby Ellerton."

Head Researcher Taylor took in a callow youth with plaid skin and a manner that was temporarily diffident, but fundamentally arrogant, while his mind screamed: *Ellerton! Impossible! What incredibly rotten luck!*

"Toby, I'm pleased to meet you." Taylor crossed the lavish space and offered his hand. Then casually, to LaJuana, "How did you kids meet?"

"Toby's here with his Uncle Pete, Daddy."

Christ! Peter Ellerton!

Taylor knew "Uncle Pete" well. He'd surveilled him more than once. That thing with the gennie craft...what was it...spun-glass? That was a sad bit of duplicity, easily penetrated. Those genwrights. Everyone knew it was "Gen-rights" all the way. But LaJuana hadn't really answered his question, had she?

Head Researcher Taylor smiled at Toby. "Here with your *uncle!*

That's *wonderful!*"

His voice dripped so much earnestness and fervent emotion that for a moment Toby thought this tall gawk might be a relative. Then he remembered this was, in fact, the Head Researcher for Psi-Luna. Toby laughed to himself. *The Heart/Mind People! What did Uncle Pete say? Rip out your heart and fuck up your mind.*

"Yeah! It's been a while," said Toby, "so Uncle Pete's taking me on a get-reacquainted trip."

Head Researcher Taylor made a note to run a check on Peter Ellerton's whereabouts for the past few years and said, "How nice for the both of you!"

Toby's change of direction would have made his family proud. "Psi-Luna must really be interested in the Psychic Sculptor."

Arrogant little twerp. "No, Toby. I just wanted to spend some time with my little girl."

"Are you gonna jump, sir?" Toby had a vision of His Gawkness, arms and legs akimbo, cartwheeling through the air.

I'd pay to see that sculpture.

The Head Researcher decided to open a file on young Toby as well. He chuckled. Benevolent, kindhearted. Just a lean Santa Claus, really. "No, Toby. I'm a little old for that."

"My Uncle Pete's jumping and he's your age." Toby was surprised to see a dark scowl flick across the face of Head Researcher Taylor. *That's odd. Usually Psi-Luna emps have total control, like talking to a mask. Maybe he switched it off cause he's on vacation.*

LaJuana broke in. "Toby and I were thinking about jumping together."

Head Researcher Taylor appeared to give this serious consideration. *Right! An Ellerton and the Head Researcher's daughter, immortalized in a tourist holo.* He could hear the roars of laughter already.

"We'll see, honey. You know how I feel about under-tested technology."

Toby couldn't hold back. "But they've got a hundred-year safety record!"

"What's a hundred years to a million-year-old..." Taylor stopped

himself short. *This kid's father has to be at least a Level2. Not prudent, Wendell. Especially not now!*

"I mean, what's a hundred years compared to the millions of variables in Atomic Reassembly?"

Toby's mind raced. *That was weird. He was going to say—to a million-year-old entity. But no one knows how old the Psychic Sculptor is.* Toby looked innocently at the Head Researcher and said, "I thought there were quadrillions of variables in Atomic Reassembly?"

"Yes, well." Taylor smiled again. "What I know about the tech side could be written on the head of a pin, Toby."

That's a thousand OldEarth books, pinhead!

"Uncle Pete and I are both jumping," he said. "I hope you'll let LaJuana go. It's as close as we'll ever get to communicating with an alien species. They say it's sublime."

The Head Researcher shrugged. "The sublime can be biochemically generated without risk to the individual. At Psi-Luna we call it 'internal tourism.' And I think *species* is a little strong. He permitted himself a small smile. Mindless fabricator, maybe."

If Psi-Luna's "internal tourism" is so great, thought Toby, what's he doing here? And LaJuana told us he'd been on the QE16 plenty of times. I can't wait to tell Uncle Pete.

"Even if you don't jump, sir, I hope you'll be there to watch us."

Head Researcher Taylor chose to ignore the assumption in the word *us*. *This little twerp will bear watching.*

"Perhaps, Toby. We'll see. Now LaJuana, we need to freshen up."

"Yeah," she said. "I promised mom if I went swimming I'd use this special oil she gave me. You know how water dries out the skin."

Toby vaguely recalled hearing something about that, however, the image of LaJuana rubbing oil all over her body caused his brain to go into a spasm. All he could do was mumble, "Oil, oil."

LaJuana took his arm and walked him to the door. "Let's ride over together on the shuttle. Ask your uncle if he wants to join us."

Toby fought the impulse to blurt out, "God! What kind of oil?" Instead he said, "Sure! I'll ask Uncle Pete if we can watch them install

the dislocation on the shuttle. I think he could swing that.”

The door closed behind him. Toby wandered the corridors in a daze, staying off-line to think. *What does Psi-Luna want with the Psychic Sculptor? And how do they know the Sculptor is a million years old? I've never come across that and I've accessed everything, even classified stuff from my dad.*

Between the plush carpet, the diminished gravity and meeting LaJuana, Toby felt like he was floating. He bent down and touched the rug. Real wool. Rounding a corner he saw a stateroom with a carved, oaken door. He ran his hand over it. More AR, of course. Real wool. Real wood. Nice. *I bet this physiotrophic ontology set them back a few credits.*

Toby caught another whiff of jasmine...*must be the signature scent of the ship...* which made him think of LaJuana. *I wonder what kind of oil.* He remembered how she looked in her shimmering suit and the way her hair tickled his shoulder. Toby grinned.

My skin's starting to feel really dry.

Toby found his uncle, still in the dining room, deep in conversation with a beautiful woman. Reddish hair, freckles, slim, athletic and, Toby realized when he heard it, an incredibly sexy laugh. Her laugh was such a combination of eroticism and joy that it instantly gave Toby an erection and caused every man within earshot to turn, quickly or slowly, to track down its source.

I'll say this for Uncle Pete. He sure knows how to meet the women. Then Toby remembered he'd met a woman, too.

“Toby! How was your morning? I'd like you to meet Agnes Hartsough. She's a xenobiologist on holiday.”

Toby sat down quickly. “Hi, Agnes. You sure picked the right planet. Are you jumping?”

Agnes laughed again. “It's a working holiday. You couldn't keep me away.”

“Great,” said Toby. “You're an expert. Maybe you can help me talk

this girl's father into letting her jump."

"Do you mean LaJuana's father?" asked Ellerton, feigning ignorance. He'd already sent a distal transmission to his BrotherArthur to discuss the implications of having Psi Luna's Head Researcher on board.

"Yep," said Toby. "He called it 'under-tested' technology." Toby hesitated, trying to appraise Agnes Hartsough. He decided he could trust her and plunged ahead. "And he said some pretty strange things."

"Really?" said Pete Ellerton. He moved his chair nearer to Toby's, slipped his arm around Agnes Hartsough's shoulder, and inclined his head until it was touching hers. "Tell us more."

Smooth move, Uncle Pete, thought Toby. He leaned forward. "For one thing, I'm pretty sure Psi-Luna thinks the Sculptor's a million years old."

"Why would they think that?" said Agnes. "No one's sure of the age of Borzoi because every atom's been rearranged."

"Maybe they dated the solar system?" said Toby.

"The Sculptor could have come from somewhere else," said Agnes. "Just like us."

"Maybe they asked him," said Ellerton.

Agnes laughed like a professor at a favored student's naïveté. "Xenobiology doesn't work like that, Peter."

"How did we finally communicate with the Sculptor?" asked Toby.

"It's an interesting story," said Agnes. "They actually built on the efforts of a genetically-engineered miner named Anderson." Pete and Toby exchanged glances. "JonAnderson28. He had the idea to ask the Presence, as he called it, to create objects from his life. Of course, he had no scientific training so he couldn't interpret the results, but the approach was basically sound."

"So that's what xenobiologists did?"

"In a general sense, yes." We based our approach on the metalogical sociology of AlainDuChaine. He's the one who taught us how to communicate with AI. Interestingly enough, he was genetically engineered, too."

"Just an anomalous mutation," said Toby.

Pete Ellerton loved his brother Arthur, but there were some huge

blind spots in the boy's education. "You know Toby," Pete said, some of our greatest inventions can be traced back to genetically-engineered humans. Works of art, too."

Toby realized his uncle was about to climb on his favorite hobby horse so he quickly asked Agnes, "But what did the xenobiologists actually do?"

"We gave the Sculptor a crash course in humanity. For example, we had it create all the parts of an object, then the object assembled. Then we created a larger context to show how the object fit in. The Sculptor loved it. It thrived on the novelty. The whole process took fourteen years. AI was instrumental, of course. One of the spin-offs was a new science called physiotrophic ontology."

"Physiotrophic ontology!" said Toby. "It flames!"

"Try to be serious, Toby," said Pete. "Agnes is a scientist."

"I am serious, Uncle Pete. It's how the feel of material things affects the psychology of the common person." Toby couldn't resist. "Everybody knows that!"

Agnes Hartsough looked at Toby with astonishment. "He's right, Pete!" She sat up straighter, dislodging Ellerton's arm.

That's twice today, thought Pete. *This kid's gonna be the death of me.* He addressed Agnes. "So, did making all those things teach it to talk?"

She smiled indulgently. "I don't think 'teach it to talk' accurately describes our achievement. We created a body of physical knowledge that gave this alien being a workable Weltanschauung with respect to the human race." Agnes smiled. "This is starting to sound like one of my graduate classes. Simply put, communication is based on shared experience. We shared the experience of being human."

"But what did *it* share?" asked Toby.

"It shared its creations. It shared its experience of being alive."

"The Presence shared the whole planet," Pete added gratuitously.

"It may have learned a lot about us," said Toby, but I don't think we learned much about it. Like, why does it make things?"

Agnes Hartsough laughed. "Just study metalogical sociology and you'll understand."

That's not much of an answer, thought Toby. "Oh, Uncle Pete. Can you get me and LaJuana into the shuttle to watch them install the dislocation?"

Pete Ellerton withdrew as he queried AI. "Sorry, Toby. It's already in. I can get you two on early, if you want."

Toby pictured himself and LaJuana. Alone on the shuttle. Intimate nooks. The scent of her oil on her beautiful skin. "Definitely! Get us on early. How many are jumping?"

Ellerton queried again. "Four hundred, twenty-six. But there are sixteen pools, each with its own holo generator. It should go pretty fast."

I hope the mind-wiping troll doesn't show up, thought Toby.

Pete checked out for another second. "It's all set. On the Bardonia. AI has the entries logged."

Toby went online and connected with LaJuana. Basic channels. He didn't want to presume, or get filtered. They agreed to meet at the passenger's entrance. "It's located aft on the starboard side," said Toby. He couldn't resist the old joke. "Of course, there are stars on both sides."

LaJuana laughed. "Stars in the middle, too. I saw Olivia Marchante. She's got a stateroom near ours."

Toby yelled. "Hey, Uncle Pete! Olivia Marchante's on board."

"I don't know what men see in her," said Agnes. "She's got to be over a hundred and fifty."

"Agnes is right, Toby. We're already with two beautiful women."

"Right," said Toby. "But I'm getting her autograph, anyway." He grinned. "I'll get yours too, Agnes."

Agnes laughed. "You can autograph my holo. At my feet, of course."

The Bardonia, the QE16's tender, made the trip to the Sacred Pools in a comfortable two hours. The Bardonia was scaled-down version of the mother ship, lacking the pool plus a few dozen other amenities. It compensated for these shortcomings by having something the QE16 didn't have, in fact, something no other ship in the Galaxy had—a clear,