

Seeds of Yesterday

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Seeds of Yesterday

by [Lt Zoe Jebkanto](#)

Summary

"I was Udara, George."

Notes

The two TV series "Alien Nation" & "Star Trek: Enterprise" would rate as my two all-time favourites (both canceled by networks for financial reasons far too soon). This story came out of the reunion movie "The Legacy of Udara". I wanted to explore from her point of view, Susan's journey out of slavery, its dark seeds of rebellion and secrecy to her achieving true freedom.

The Waiting Area

Seeds of Yesterday

The Waiting Area

“Missus Francisco?”

The voice came from far away. High up, off to my right.

“Missus Francisco?”

She was talking to me, wasn’t she?

I opened my eyes. Looked up. The woman standing over me wore a loose blue tunic and slacks. “Navy blue” they call that color. “Scrubs” is the name for clothing like that. “Hospital scrubs”.

She was a nurse, a human, with kind, rather bleary, early-morning eyes. Her touch was gentle as she laid a warm hand on my shoulder.

That’s when I found a word to describe the feeling that had hunched me forward in my seat and hugged my arms tight across my chest.

Cold.

Not from the chill of the plastic chair I’d been sitting in for I wasn’t sure how long.

The cold came from inside. Deep to my bones, to my blood, to my two aching hearts.

Her warm fingers pressed, tugged a little, a silent, beckoning call for my attention. “Susan?” she said this time. “I brought you something hot to drink. You’re shivering.”

She’d recognized what my body felt even before I had. Knew shivering was common to both humans and Tenctonese.

“Come on, Susan, try a little,” she encouraged. “You’ve had such a long night...”

A night? It wasn’t hundreds of lifetimes?

“It’s hot coffee...” she said.

I saw the Styrofoam cup in her hand. Smelled the aromatic steam trails above its white rim.

“I put a little mustard in it...” she added.

How kind to think of that small, comforting detail.

“Susan?” she said again.

I realized I hadn’t answered, had barely registered the name, though I’ve been Susan for almost ten years now. Since I came to this planet. The immigration worker filling out my paperwork gave me the name. I liked the sound of it, even before I knew what she bestowed on me. It reminded me of the words Tsu-shahn, which, in our language mean “Sun rising”.

Sun rise. A new day, new beginning... It was a hopeful thing.

When we came here, we so badly needed hope.

Later, I learned to speak my full name as she had given it to me. It was Susan B. Anthony. When my English was good enough, I sought through the quarantine camp for her and was able to ask her if it meant something in my new language. She said she saw me trying to set up a sleeping area for the littlest podlings and named me in honor of a determined organizer who fought for the right of women to vote in this country. To have a voice. So they could make a difference for themselves and their children.

After that, I liked the name even more.

So many of us Newcomers were given names that suggested only the indifference, tiredness, or cruel humor of the bureaucrats in charge. Slave names like Sonny Day, May O’Naise or Hugh Manatee, that labeled us as less than the humans that inhabited this world. Thanks to her, I carried a name to be proud of. That said something about the hope she held that our two species could live together and also about what she saw in me.

Even back on the slave ship, when I spent my kraig-ta cleaning ventilation systems and was called Appy, I wanted to make a difference. At least, once I had someone to protect, to dream dreams for that went beyond the drudgery of slavery. First, it was my husband, my dear neemu, Stanya, known as George here. Later, it was our daughter, Kiteari, who was taken from us by the Kleezansoon when she was ten years old. George and I, by silent agreement, don’t speak of her now, though I think he also studies spot patterns in a crowd. Then, it was our son, Finiksa, now called Buck and finally, our little Devoosha- Emily as she is in this world, who was not so very long past her toddling days when I made the choice that brought me to this hard plastic chair.

The nurse beside me was still waiting. More to please her than for any other reason, I nodded and reached for the cup. “Thank you,” I said, though I didn’t care about the coffee, even with that beckoning aroma of mustard rising from it.

Still, with the Styrofoam cradled in my hands, I felt better, stronger. There is always something hopeful in the smallest touch of warmth amid cold.

Hope.

Such a sweet, treacherous word.

The Embracing of Risk

The Embracing of Risk

In our slave days to hope was to embrace risk. Did we open our hearts to love? How did it weigh against loss?

Loss I'd understood since I was a child of ten, carried, shrieking in rage and terror from my parents. Loss was a cold, hard certainty that could come any kraig. Anyone might be sold or traded to another ship or a mining colony, or killed by Overseers.

Love was a memory, held very close and precious. Warmth and strength filled me when I looked back at the cycles spent in the living space beside our family's bed rack. My mother singing songs of long-ago Tencton. My father's tales keeping a vision of our home-world alive for me. The press of gentle knuckles against my temples...

Later, after I was taken, work filled my waking kraig-ta, along with casual talk and laughter shared among girls my age. It enlivened time in food lines or ultraviolet chambers. But lonely sleep rounded out each cycle before the whole routine began again. Love was outside anything I allowed myself to imagine as part of my future.

Until I met my Stanya.

The first time I saw him was on the day we pledged ourselves to each other as wife and husband. Though we were allowed the blessing of an Elder to perform the ceremony according to the old Celenist tradition and given three work-shifts- in a privacy chamber, like all marriages, ours was arranged by the Overseers. We were selected for each other because of what our bloodlines could bring to the gene-pool. If we did not manage to bond on our own, we would be given sardinak to drink, binding us in monogamy until death. It was expected we'd find a binnaum- a third one- to help us conceive children.

My hearts pounded with fear and ached with loneliness as I was led through narrow grey corridors to the marriage chamber. What was the gannaum I was to intertwine my life with like? He was a hull worker, I'd been told, and very intelligent. But was he kind? Did he find moments of joy and laughter amid the numbing starkness of the ship? Would I loose what identity I had created for myself in the years since I lost my parents while trying to forge a bond with him? Would he want me as more than a mate to share a quick hum with, to get pregnant with or to complain to about what had gone on at his work station during the previous kraig?

"I thank Andarko for this day," I had murmured the ancient prayer I'd learned from my parents, rather than listen to the sound of the door sliding open before me. If only there hadn't been such a note of desperation in the tone. There had to be something to be thankful for, didn't there? To strengthen myself with for what lay ahead?

Through the dimness of the chamber, I saw the glimmer of an Elder's white robes. Rather than look at the gannaum beside her, I stared at the golden threads on her collar and sleeves. There was comfort in the embroidered ancient symbols. How amazing that the Elders had managed to carry on the traditions of Tencton, even during our people's enslavement. But then, they had made the choice that, no matter what conditions must be endured, our past, our identity, would not be surrendered.

"I thank Andarko for this day," I'd repeated. The words were barely a whisper, but the note of desperation had gone. Whether or not I found joy in the bond with this stranger, I would face it with the same determination and purpose the Elders had shown us since leaving Tencton. I would shape our bond into something worthy and honorable that I could live with through all the kraig-ta of my life.

Stepping through the doorway, I found I was able to finish the prayer. "And I thank Celene for the future."

It wasn't long before I realized how much I had to be thankful for. How could I help but love Stanya? Though he grew up as a slave, he carried himself with a natural poise and dignity that spoke of a free and noble spirit. His voice was clear and gentle as he stood before me and made his vows. His bright, glowing eyes smiled with encouragement as he listened to me speaking the words that would join us, linnaum and gannaum, wife and husband.

In the time we spent getting to know each other, I found he had the warmest hearts I'd known since my parents'. There was no need for sardinak. We bound ourselves to each other by choice alone. And as, one by one, the podlings came, Kiteari, Finiksa and at last Devoosha, the love we shared only grew stronger.

The love, and the fear. Unless we gained our freedom, the children would only be ours until they were ten. Then it would be for us the way it had been for our parents. Our children would be taken, tested, and assigned to learn whatever tasks were most needed to maintain the ship. Whether we saw them or had news of their whereabouts or well-being was in the hands of the Kleezansoon. They used our love for our families and our dread of being separated, as well as the subduing effects of the Holy Gas of Obedience, to keep us toiling away, kraig after mind-numbing kraig...

They said our only hope was in obedience. Many of us believed them. Or convinced ourselves we believed. Obey, perform well, and the opportunities for a scrap of news, a larger ration of food or extra cycles in an ultraviolet bay or privacy chamber increased, the odds of punishment would grow smaller.

But there were those of us who sensed that such compliance would cause the souls within us to grow smaller as well.

Wasn't there something to hope for that wasn't in the hands of others? A way to shelter our loved ones and take some part of the future into our own grasp?

Yes! The whispers traveled through the work lines when the Overseers were looking elsewhere. They spread through the columns of bed-racks during rest cycles. Hope was there for those who dared to reach out and take it. The name of that hope was Udara.

It was our word for freedom as well as that of a secret organization which was both feared and revered among the slaves. Our light of hope in the confines of the ship and the mining colonies among which we were sold or traded, where it was expected we would work all the countless kraig-ta of our lives until the day we were, at last, recycled.

Udara was not large or strong enough to change all that. But through its actions, several of the cruelest Overseers were eliminated. Though many of us were killed in retribution, many, many more of us had been spared from the harshest of the Kleezansoon, those who had drawn pleasure and satisfaction from their acts of cruelty.

Perhaps more important, was how Udara diminished the stature of the Overseers. Reminded us that they were as mortal as the rest of us and that their reign might end some day. Back then, for me, the name of Udara, even whispered in secret, made the dark walls of the ship shine with hope.

Now, sitting in the quiet of the early morning hospital, the word had a taste more bitter than the cooling coffee between my hands.

The Empty Chair

The Empty Chair

I stared down at the dark liquid, the yellow skin of mustard congealing on its surface. The coffee had seemed such a nurturing thing a while ago. Now, there was something almost revolting about it. There must be somewhere I could get rid of the tepid cup!

I got to my feet, made a slow survey of my surroundings. There were a couple of low tables with battered magazines on top of them, and a scatter of plastic chairs like my own lined up along the wall, all in drab orange, rust or turquoise. Harsh colors beneath the bluish light of fluorescent tubes.

From a wall mount high above me and off to the left, a TV monitor showed the head and shoulders of the anchor-woman from a morning news show. In a brisk, almost cheerful voice, she was reporting on a conflict on the far side of this planet that had been going on since before our ship crash landed here.

Though the volume was turned down to what humans would perceive as an indistinct murmur in accordance with this early hour, I could hear it with disturbing clarity.

“The fragile period of truce instituted last month,” she said. “Has proved unable to withstand the seeds of violence planted by its generations long history of anger and mistrust, as, today, new fighting broke out within the nation’s capital city...”

Seeds... Of violence. I shuddered. Would it never end?

Seeds... Of violence planted... Did that reporter understand what she’d said? Or were they only words sketching a history that was outside her experience?

What an awful program to have on in a hospital, where people were already tired and anxious! Revulsion shivered across my back and down the sensitive line of my spots. I turned away before the screen could fill with bloody scenes of battle.

Across a wide stretch of linoleum was the nursing station where the woman who brought me the coffee was tapping on a keyboard and staring into a computer monitor.

Should I bring the Styrofoam cup and its murky contents to her to dispose of, or go in search of a waste basket? All right, Susan, it’s decision time, I told myself, but found myself standing motionless in front of my empty chair.

Making up my mind was usually no problem. But my choices were what brought me here, weren’t they? Now the confidence to choose my next action seemed to have frozen.

Like it had done in my silent dining room, just days ago, when all I could do was sit and wait. Another endless morning, when the seeds of decisions made so long ago I’d believed them all but forgotten, had burst from the dark past and entwined themselves in every part of my life,

until now here I was, scared and shivering, standing in a hospital hallway, in front of an ugly orange chair.

“Susan?” came a familiar voice from behind me.

My hand jerked. Brown coffee sloshed across the floor, forming a kind of spatter design, a blotchy rose, standing out against the beige linoleum. For a moment, I saw another flower, made from a splattering of pink Tenctonese blood on another pale floor...

“Cathy!” My voice rang loud against the quiet of the hallway as I swung around to face her. “What are you still doing here?”

Back on the ship, she had been called Gelanna. There, she had been a cargo specialist who took care of young children or podlings, as well as ill or injured slaves whose conditions were not serious enough to demand immediate recycling. Here, she had become Doctor Cathy Frankel, a dear friend of our family and the long-time hearts-mate of George’s police detective partner, Matthew Sikes.

“Catching up on paperwork,” she said, eyeing me up and down and making no comment at all about the spilled coffee at my feet. “But mainly just waiting, like you.”

“Is there anything new to report?” I asked.

“Not yet.” She shrugged. “I just saw George a couple of minutes ago. He’s on the phone with Matt right now.”

Matt. George was off down the hall talking to his partner again!

Even knowing that, if he was sitting here right now, I’d be urging him to go call Matt for news, did nothing to ease the prickle of irritation covering my aching wish that he was in the chair beside mine. Close enough that we could have brushed a strengthening or companionable knuckle across each other’s temple as we waited.

Close enough to talk to.

But the last time we’d talked, really talked, there’d been such coldness between us...

The Name on the Folder

The Name on the Folder

“Susan, why did you never tell me?” I could still hear the anger in his tone, and, along with it, the sound of long ago words echoing off the walls of a narrow chamber near the engine center on the ship- Take my blood, we will be free...

Anyone would have recognized the vow taken by those who gave themselves to the mission of Udara. Days ago it was a distant memory. My concerns were centered on this planet, and, on the Los Angeles Police Department in particular.

Then I dropped by the precinct house to ask my husband to take his lunch break with me so I could talk with him about what troubled my hearts. There was something comforting about the familiar busy atmosphere of the place and the people who called greetings to me as I moved toward George’s desk. I smiled as his fellow officer, Beatrice Zepeda, showed me her calendar with the word “vacation” written in huge red letters across the whole of the two upcoming weeks. Albert, the station’s custodian, paused with a pot of flowers in one hand and a multi-pack of paper towels tucked under his arm. Once known as Glinza, he was binnaum to our Emily back on the ship, and to little Vessna here on Earth. “If you’re looking for George, he’s not here right now,” he said.

Well, it was the chance I’d taken when I stopped in. With the ad presentation I’d been working on for days done, lunch with George had been an impulse. “I’ll just leave him a note,” I told Albert. “By the way, who are the flowers for?”

“Cathy.” He set the pot on Matt’s desk. “They’re marigolds, aren’t they beautiful? I sprouted them from seeds a few months ago. She’s been trying to start a garden.”

I watched him stroke the frilly leaves before he headed off toward the small side room that formed the station’s combination kitchenette and vending area. Hadn’t George told me about Cathy’s garden not long after she and Matt moved in together? What other news had I forgotten to ask him about? Or tell him about? Between his work and mine, and now this new concern over Buck, a good long conversation was well overdue!

Next time, I’d call first, I told myself, picking up a pen at the side of his blotter. Pencils in a cup, paper clips in a tray, red bound writing tablet just showing from beneath a stack of manila folders. Great, got it! As I began to slip it free, the English word on the top folder reformed itself into Tenctonese and shouted up at me. Udara!

I glanced around the squad-room. If only I could snatch off my office shoes and ease the tension rushing to my feet! With a trembling hand, I lifted the cover, scanned the page beneath it and found only more questions.

I closed the folder with a snap and looked up as Albert returned to stand beside me. “Why do they think these cases have something to do with Udara?”

“What do you think?” he gave me a knowing nod, then quoted words I’d seen halfway down the page. “Take my blood, we will be free...”

Shaken, I turned for the door, my disappointment at not finding George turning to an odd relief. This was no time for talk. Not with my worries for the future now tangling with old memories. Not when I needed to walk under open skies and remind myself I was not a slave. Despite what I’d seen, Udara had no more reason to exist.

George and I would talk later, like we always did. About Buck, the police academy and George’s pride in our son. We’d sit on the love seat, sip a leisurely sour milk and have a good devahh-ksu-ta- a four-hearted conversation. Talk, connect, listen, share.

There was no reason I couldn’t go home. With Vessna waiting in day-care for Buck to pick her up later this afternoon, I could relax under the ultraviolet lamp for an hour. Later, I’d break with tradition and be the one to prepare supper- a nice salad with spleen on the side. Something calling for a little creativity and a lot of concentrated planning. I wouldn’t think about Buck’s career announcement or that folder on George’s desk.

I would celebrate having the freedom to spend the day any way I liked, and thank Andarko for it. I’d remember the opportunities this world offered us these last years. I’d do my best to thank Celene for the future and all the possibilities open for George and me, for Vessna, Em and Buck. I’d try not to demand why on Earth, amid all those possibilities, Buck had decided to follow in his father’s often dangerous footsteps!

The question nudged its way between me and the soothing effects of the ultraviolet.

Why would he want a police career? Hadn’t he read the strain around George’s eyes and the weariness weighing down his shoulders on nights he carried an unsolved case home with him? Or watched him sit in his favorite chair trying to massage the tension from his feet? Or remembered the times we’d waited and worried when George was out late on patrol or stake-out duty?

All right, Susan! Enough of this stressful relaxing! Turning off the U V, I headed to the kitchen and set the spleen to marinate in a nice lemon and dill dressing. The carrots and cucumbers still needed chopping. I’d do that listening to the evening news, I decided, flicking on the TV on the counter. Distraction would be the name of the game.

Big mistake. The anchor-woman was reporting on a hostage situation. A life and death decision. A brave police detective. Fear as old as George’s badge shivered cold down my spots and curled my toes until I heard the incident had been safely resolved. Before Buck’s announcement, I thought I’d mastered that fear, learned to weigh the worry against my pride in the service George performed with such love and honor.

But there it was again, as strong as it had been on his first day on the job. And now I would have two cops in the family!

The face of the brave detective filled the T V screen just as the kitchen door closed and I heard the hero’s voice calling out that he was sorry he was home late.

There was no devahh-ksu-ta. Instead, the kitchen filled with harsh, painful words. About how touched George was that Buck would follow in his footsteps, while I could wish he'd chosen any other path.

We drew a truce line of dishes across the dining room table and sought safe subjects as we served ourselves from it. Usually I loved dinners for two with George but, forking spleen onto my plate, I wondered aloud why the kids weren't home yet.

"Likely," George said. "Because they really aren't kids anymore."

Ladling marinade over the spleen, I turned the subject away from the kids, to the situation that brought George's face home to my TV screen. I must try to be more supportive of both him and Buck, as well as their choices! My fears weren't their responsibility, but my own! Our son was an adult, free to follow his hearts. And why shouldn't my husband be proud? What greater honor could Buck show him? Had I lost sight of where I'd come from? I wondered, pushing spleen around my plate. Lived in this sunny house so long I'd forgotten there were things worth taking risks for?

I knew what Buck wanted. How could I not? His desire was in the words of the oath he would take when he finished his training. The same one George had taken at the end of his academy days. To protect and serve... Who wouldn't understand that?

Buck's oath, and George's, carried the same wish, the same hope to make a better future, as that other one, back on the ship-

"Do you remember the Udara?" asked George over his water glass.

How had he known what I was thinking of?

"What about it?" I raised my own glass, heard words echo in the metal grey chambers of the ship. The same as in the report on George's desk. No longer the hopeless...

George frowned, sorted through memories of his own. "It was something our suspect shouted as he was captured. And something about the nature of the crime. You know, the Udara always believed their ends justified the means, no matter how extreme..."

Was that a note of disapproval in his tone?

I must be wrong about that! While there was at least one other resistance group active at the time of our Day of Descent- one that was supposed to have found the means to drive the ship off course and cause our forced landing on this planet, Udara was the one who for so long symbolized hope. Take my blood, we will be free...

I could still see the face of Ahvrah, the Leader, her ardent eyes framed by a light hood that cast the crown of her spot pattern in shadow, hear her as, barely above a whisper, she recited the oath. No longer afraid, we shall hack cruel chains from our wrists...

"Have you forgotten, George, what it was like back then?" Old defiance stirred between my hearts. I could almost see the lights dim, feel the walls narrow as I leaned forward in my

chair. I smelled the sour tang of the mind altering drug, stolen from Special Section as it was measured out in a precise dose... “We were treated no better than animals, George, on a slow line to slaughter. It was the Udara who dared to step out of that line.”

George’s eyes widened. “The Udara were obsessed! How many innocent people were killed when the Kleezansoon retaliated against their actions?”

He was right, the retribution was terrible, like everything about the Kleezansoon. The pain in his tone tore at my hearts. Poor Stanya. He was gone so often in the kraig-ta when Udara reached its greatest strength! How desperate he must have been, on a distant planet, wondering if we were safe. Aboard ship, Udara was a hand to grasp on a path toward an uncertain future! What had there been for Stanya to cling to?

“Because of their action,” exclaimed George. “We grew unable to trust one another!”

Because of Udara? When hadn’t distrust been woven in with the fear that filled our lives, waking and sleeping? The words came again. Take my blood...

“Susan! Don’t tell me you condone their actions!” George’s voice seemed far away. We- I felt a whiff of air, light and quick, brush against my eyes. We will be free... We-

“Susan, what is it?” Beneath the confusion was that tenderness that had been Stanya’s ever since I met him, that tenderness that could melt my hearts. “Are you all right?”

At last, the echoing words were still. Still as the bright room around me. Silent as the seconds that passed between the ticking of the dining room clock while I gathered the past and brought it with me into the present where my husband waited. I braced myself against the concern in his gaze, the same way I’d held myself rigid against the stinging in my eyes as I waited for the drug to open my mind to suggestion.

“I was Udara, George.”

The Path of the Rebel

The Path of the Rebel

The dishes were left on the table as we carried our accusations upstairs to our room.

George paced back and forth, back and forth in front of the closet. Questions flew, quick and hard as his footfalls.

Didn't I know what atrocities Udara had committed? All the weapons they made or stole? The Overseers they killed? The danger their actions brought to the other slaves?

From across the bed, I followed every movement as I fluffed our pillows up against the headboard. No, not fluffed. I pounded them. Hard.

Had he lived here so long he'd forgotten how different those times had been? Couldn't he understand how desperate I was to protect our family during our prolonged separations? Especially, I thought, but couldn't bring myself to add, after Kiteari was gone and Finiksa approached the age of selection?

He paused in his pacing, but only to stare at me long enough to take aim with his next barrage of words. Didn't I know that even a subjugated race must maintain a sense of conscience? Or realize that Udara's actions sunk us to the level of the Kleezansoon?

"I understood the difference, George!"

I turned from the anger in his eyes only to find it glaring back at me from the mirror above the dresser. I blinked against the painful heat of it. But there was no avoiding the note of betrayal in his next words.

"Susan, why did you never tell me? We've always shared everything!"

I froze, my back to him, arms hugged across my chest as I stared at our reflections.

Why hadn't I told him? I'd wanted to, so often. Ached to have him, warm and steady beside me as I weighed out my options. But my decision to join was made only after many nightmare tangled rest cycles while he was planet-side. Who knew how long they might keep him there, on that mining colony, fixing machinery similar to that which he maintained on the ship?

At first, when he returned, I wasn't sure of the best way to confide what I'd done. Not because I didn't trust his reaction to it. I didn't know how, where or when, to tell him without jeopardizing his safety or Devoosha's.

Could I talk to him about it as we waited in the food line? No. Bad idea, too public.

Or whisper to him in the quiet of our bed rack? Better not. A new group of people had been assigned to the space above ours. Strangers. Transfers between mining colonies. Who knew

what they might overhear? Much too risky to speak of anything so dangerous, even if there was so little that I actually knew.

No, I'd have to wait for a better opportunity. There were too many open ear valleys, to many ready hands eager to exchange information for extra rations or U V sessions.

When the idea came, it was so perfect, I wondered why I hadn't thought of it sooner! I'd tell him when we got our first kraig since his return, together in a privacy chamber. It wasn't many shifts away. Then there'd be no secrets between us-

Then came the Day of Descent and it hadn't seemed to matter anymore.

The ship crashed. George, Buck, Emily and I were back together again, preparing to start an amazing life as free people. Even our dear binnaum, Albert was living near us, along with his new wife, May. The Overseers were either dead or scattered, their power at an end. We had reason to think those commanding the other ships in the fleet believed us victims of a plague on a lethal planet.

Udara was only a memory from a painful past that grew more distant each day.

Until a young cop with a clean record died making a mob style hit on a witness in police custody and gasped the oath with her last breath.

Take my blood-!

And a construction worker with no criminal history took hostages for ransom he didn't need and, when captured, shouted it before trying to commit suicide

-We will be free!

Now the memory of Udara and my neemu's words hung cold and terrible between us.
"Susan, why...?"

The echo of them chilled me all the way to my hearts as, behind me, his reflection gathered up pajamas, slippers and robe, then walked from the room.

Filled me with dread that I'd opened a wound between us too deep for healing.

Left me to curl, alone and shivering, on my side of our bed...

The Old Nightmare

The Old Nightmare

“Susan?”

The brush of warm knuckles across my temple was as soft as Cathy’s voice. For the second time in half an hour, I had forgotten to answer when spoken to. “I’m sorry, Cathy. What were you saying?”

“Here, let me take that cup for you. Why don’t you go home for a while and rest?”

“I’m fine. I had a nap on the couch in the lounge down the hall.”

Cathy sighed as she took the cup. Sniffed the contents and frowned. “Caffeine? You’re not going to do yourself or Buck or anybody else any good if you’re exhausted.”

“Caffeine doesn’t have half the effect on us it does on humans. I’ll be fine. Really.”

“Look, Susan, Albert and May have Vessna at their place, so you could at least get yourself a few good hours of sleep.”

I shook my head. Go home, she said? When I couldn’t walk down the hall and find a place to dump a cold cup of coffee?

Still, she was right. Half of my inability to make a decision came from the fatigue deepening over the last several days. So was the degree of concentration it took these past hours to put one English word in front of another. Tenctonese would have been so much easier, even after all these years. But I didn’t want to hear myself speak in the language of the ship any more than I wanted to go back to my silent and empty house.

“No, I’m going to stay until I hear what Matt has to say.”

“Okay. But you at least need to eat something with a little nutrition. Can I bring you a blueberry and bile smoothie from the cafeteria? I know you like them.”

Why would I want something like that when I was already cold?

Except that her eyes were so warm. “Yes, thank you, blueberry and bile would be fine.” I turned back to the line of chairs and sank onto an ugly turquoise one.

The T V monitor was displaying a green and yellow weather map of the Los Angeles area. Much more soothing than the news. I leaned the back of my head against the wall, let the voice of the broadcaster lull me. “Today’s shaping up to be clear and warmer-”

How right Cathy had been about my need for nourishment and rest! Between the two, eating would take less effort than getting myself home. It wasn’t like that good sleep was there beckoning me to my bed and bidding me a nice warm welcome!

What would be waiting was the dream. The one that first sent me to Udara.

I hadn't been able to do Buck any good in that, either, or my husband, or even myself.

I'd had it dozens of times in our last weeks on the ship. Not more than once or twice since the Day of Descent. Never at all once our family was out of quarantine. After a beaming Buck announced he'd been accepted to the Police Academy, I found myself remembering odd threads of it. But on the night of my argument with George, with a door, a staircase and a wall of coldness between us, the dream returned, as vivid as if days, rather than nine Earth years had passed since I'd had it last.

It was forming, even as the sun dried linen of my pillow dissolve beneath my cheek. The shimmering song of California crickets outside the bedroom window began to fade...

The soft darkness of a moonless night grew brighter, became grey. Grey that formed itself into a long line of corridor stretching into the distance ahead of me. I didn't want to look down, to see the slave grey work tunic I'd be wearing. I couldn't stop myself, any more than I could keep from recognizing where I was.

How could I know this was a dream and still feel such horror? Was it because I knew what waited when my reluctant feet carried me to the end of the corridor? Realize it was moments before the shouts would come and the figures struggling outside our sleeping quarters? Or because I had never been able to keep the scene from playing itself out to the end? Any more than I'd could stop it the time when it wasn't a dream.

The familiar run of my long ago thoughts was as inevitable as the forward motion of my footsteps. I was coming back from a work kraig, tired, eager to sit with Stanya and enjoy the chatter of Finiksa and Devoosha before it was time to go to the food line. Only two more dormitories of bed-racks to pass now, before I reached our own.

Raised voices echoed along the hall. Three black clad Overseers were struggling with a fourth figure, dressed in slave grey. The sight would have been more common near a work station than in a dormitory.

My feet moved faster as familiar rage rose in my throat. At the Overseers. At my helplessness. It thrummed back and forth, back and forth, between my hearts, a cold, horrible beat, beat... beat, beat of fury and dread.

Why was I hurrying when there was no help I could give? Maybe because the Holy Gas of Obedience had been in low concentration where I worked that kraig and I didn't feel as lethargic as usual. Oh, Celene! Sometimes I hated the intervals of clarity when I was faced by scenes like this one! Maybe it would be better, if the mind-numbing effects of the gas never lifted! But, no, some wordless knowledge told me if the stirrings of pain and anger ever went still, all the love inside me, and any dreams I harbored of a better future for my family, would go silent as well.

Only one dormitory section from our quarters now, and the voices were louder, clearer. Was that- Stanya? My gentle Stanya shouting? He was twisting and straining in the grasp of two

tall male Kleezansoon as the third, a heavy female, disappeared into the shadows beyond the door at the end of our section.

There was only an instant to take in what I hadn't seen before- the small figure beside her being half led, half dragged by the hand-

“No!” The cry squeezed up from my hearts into my throat, flew ahead of my running feet. This wasn't happening! Not yet! Not so soon! Or without warning!

With Kiteari there'd at least been a moment to gather every precious memory of our first-born, to summon a bit of calmness to make the parting less frightening for her...

Even as the last echo of the door's closing faded, the two Kleezansoon were shoving Stanya toward me and turning away down the corridor from which I'd come.

“Appy!” he shouted what I already knew, as together, we ran toward the metal barrier. “Appy! They've taken Finiksa!”

“No!” My fists pummeled the cold metal as my voice rose in a keening wail. “Finiksa! Finiksa!”

But on that California night, the cry died in my throat as I sat straight up in bed.

There was no ship. No metal barrier...

And no Stanya.

Only the beat, beat, beat of my hearts, the steady, indifferent sound of crickets and the familiar chill of knowing my child was, again, walking into unknown danger.

The Waking Fear

The Waking Fear

“One large blueberry banana smoothie with bile for you,” Cathy sat beside me, pressed a tall plastic glass into my hands, then held up a matching one of her own. “One strawberry, cabbage and banana, no bile, for me.”

“Thanks,” I drew a long sip from the jaunty straw sticking out of the lid. There seemed little flavor, despite the rich purple color. But my throat recognized nourishment and I found myself almost gulping the thick liquid.

Cathy smiled. “Good. That should at least give you some energy until you can rest.”

She took several quick swallows of her own pink tinted drink, sighed in satisfaction, then got to her feet. “Why don’t you finish that while I check with Rebekah for the latest report?” She gestured to the nursing station where the woman I’d spoken with earlier now stood, in conversation with three other people.

“Thanks,” I nodded. At this point, I was almost positive that Cathy’s news would be good. Almost, not quite, though my rational mind told me there was little reason to believe otherwise. Even in the ambulance, I had seen honest reassurance in the Emergency Medical Tech’s eyes.

But even if that danger was fading, there was still so much uncertainty ahead.

More than I could have imagined that wakeful night after my argument with George.

When the wild beat, beat, beat, beat of my hearts quieted enough that I realized the noise wouldn’t wake the entire house, I threw back the covers and got out of bed.

Shivering against the late night cold, I slipped into the robe George had surprised me with at the beginning of the last Descent holiday. Moving to the door, I pulled it open, then padded, barefoot, into the hall.

Around me, the house was still. But was that a small gleam of light coming up the stairs? Could George be awake, too? Sitting down there, in the living room or the den, as restless and unsettled as I was? I stared hard into the dimness, as if my willing that light to be there might make it appear.

There was so much I needed to tell my husband. If I hadn’t recognized it during our argument, the knowledge was all too clear as I hurtled up from that nightmare. So much must be said. About Udara and the almost forgotten choices I made all those years ago on the ship...

But the top of the stairway was hidden in shadows. George was somewhere beyond that darkness, behind a barrier of our own angry words.

We would talk. We would have to, and soon. Very soon. But it was more than I could do right then, to force my way through that wall of ringing silence, make him understand that, right or wrong by the standards of our California life, my choices had not been made casually or lightly. Or by someone without a conscience.

For a long time, I stood gazing at the doors to the rooms where my children slept.

A teddy-bear night-light, a gift from her Godfather, Matt, cast a soft pink glow through Vessna's half open door.

Buck's was closed. After that dream, it would be wonderful, reassuring, to look at him, to remind myself to take my attention off our days of enslavement. It was wiser to remember how we were reunited with him after the crash. That George and I had shared the privilege, unknown in more than a generation, of raising a child to adulthood.

I almost knocked, then hesitated, my hand above the knob. His light was out. Unlike Emily, he had always been a light sleeper. Even his name, softly called in inquiry, could be enough to rouse him. With his grueling training schedule, he needed his rest. I wasn't about to disturb him, just to look at his earnest young face, when, from where I was standing, I could hear the steady, reassuring rhythm of his sleeping breaths.

Still, I stood listening to the comforting sound for several moments before I turned to tiptoe through the half open door of Emily's room.

Unlike Buck, who was fascinated with the history and culture of Tencton, Em was very much Earth's child. Her walls were covered with posters of human and Tenctonese musicians and movie actors, her desk as crowded with music and clothing magazines as it was with schoolbooks and study supplies. She had lived so much of her life here, she barely remembered the ship at all. When she was older, perhaps she would explore that part of her heritage, but for the moment, it was what this planet had to offer that she was gathering to herself.

That was a good thing, I found myself thinking with more than a little relief. The less she remembered about the ship, the better.

The ship and all that happened there had nothing- would have nothing- to do with my daughter! Not now. Not ever.

In the glow from the hallway, I studied her sweet, sleeping face. There were traces of tears on her cheeks and I wondered how much she and Buck had heard of the hard, ugly words spoken between their father and me.

And the words I would need George to hear in the very near future, would be harder than any we had exchanged tonight.

I brushed Emily's temple with a breeze- light knuckle before turning back to my room and the next several hours of a sleepless night.

The Interrogation Room

Cathy was back. "I've just reviewed the vitals. Buck had a good night." She dropped into the chair beside mine and took a long sip of her drink.

I released a breath I hardly knew I was holding. Though in the last little while I'd almost allowed myself to expect it, the news was a relief. Not that I could sit back and relax with it. Not yet.

I glanced down the hall. Somebody on the cleaning staff had mopped up the coffee I'd spilled, but I remembered how it had painted the image of blood- Buck's blood- across the linoleum. My imagination had painted a picture like that since he announced his decision to become a policeman. But the horrible reality had come so soon and from a direction I would not have imagined.

I shook aside the thought. "Thanks, Cathy. Is he awake? Can I see him?"

There was a sparkle of humor in her green eyes. "Yes he's awake and no, you can't see him unless you want him to die of embarrassment. He's having a bath."

I managed a smile and something that was almost a laugh. "I guess the perquisites of motherhood only go so far once the ling-pod flap matures. I'll just wait here a while then, to hear what Matt has to say."

Amazing how I longed to hear from my husband's partner this morning. Days ago, rising rumped from my comfortless bed, I was dreading it. I'd known since I told George I had been Udara the call would come, and it wouldn't be him to make it.

He had already gone when I came downstairs. From the kitchen window, I watched Buck drive off for the police academy, with Em beside him in the front seat, bound for high school and Vessna in her booster in back, headed for day-care. When the last sound of the motor had faded, I called the office to cancel my appointments.

I sat alone at the dining room table, waiting. There were a hundred things I could do, would rather do, until the call came, than sip tasteless tea and play with a plate of leftover pancreas. Review this last month's bills, make an appointment for Vessna's pre-school physical, do the hamper of laundry I'd seen inside Em's door last night. Any of them would be better than sitting, listening to the clock tick, loud, louder, louder. But I didn't move. Only waited and remembered. The last time I sat here, I'd been hoping that a talk with my husband would ease my worries over Buck. Now, neither of the males in my family tugged at my thoughts as much as Emily. Her sweet, sleeping face. The tears on her cheeks. Those long ago words- Take my blood...

But Buck was the one who'd gone off to be a cop. Emily was sitting in a nice, safe classroom. Probably passing notes to her friend Jill when the teacher wasn't looking.

Why hadn't I gone to the office, after all? I could have put my overactive imagination to work on something constructive while I waited.

The call came at last at mid-morning. "Susan? It's Matt. You need to come down here to the station. There are some questions we have to ask you. It's about a case."

"It's not exactly we who have questions, is it, Matt?" I muttered as I got behind the wheel of the car and backed down the drive. "It's really George who has them, because he's the one who understands enough about the ship to know what to ask. It's George, but he doesn't want to look at me while he's asking. Right?"

What did he think, anyway? That I'd turned into some kind of monster overnight?

By a huge act of will, I kept my exasperation from passing from my head to my hands and into the steering wheel as I swung out into traffic. Instead, I reached over and flicked on the radio. News. The run of someone else's words to follow instead of the same old pointless trail of my own thoughts. Not that there was anything new on the news. The stock market was up, as predicted last night. Negotiations for a cease-fire overseas had broken down and any plans for future talks had once again been suspended. A wildfire in Topanga Canyon was ninety five per cent contained. Senator Silverthorn had a debate scheduled in a few days with a Newcomer candidate, Paul Bearer.

George had mentioned working with Bearer when he was a lawyer in the Prosecutor's office and often commented on what a fine, honorable public servant he was.

And wasn't that just what an upright, sparkling example of a law-enforcement officer like my husband would notice? How fine, how upstanding, Paul Bearer was? Naturally, such a proper, by-the-book, policeman wouldn't want to see the face of a rebel, a subversive superimposed on the features of his wife, would he? Or hear her accounts of a lawless past that wasn't really dead after all! Not if it meant giving up his notion that all Udara were monsters as bad as the Kleezansoon! Not ordinary people who couldn't watch their families stolen, sold or tormented by the Overseers!

Why did everything- everything-! I thought about keep coming back to George?

Why had I turned on that ridiculous radio? I was beginning to understand why Matt grumbled about how much he hated watching or listening to the news.

My fingers played across the panel. Music. Yes, better. An old song was playing. One Emily liked, even though she said it was almost pre-historic. I'll Be Watching You, she'd called it, then laughed as she told me who played it... a group called The Police.

The Police! Wasn't that just about perfect?

Should I punch up a different station? No! I wasn't going to let a little thing like a music on the radio get to me. It wasn't as though it was George singing, after all! Anyway, the tune was almost over. The last chords were fading into the beginning notes of another song.

The sweet voice of Dionne Warwick filled the air.

Oh, Celene! I groaned at her lilting words.

“Do you know the way to San Jose...?” It was our song. The one that was playing on a fuzzy transistor radio in the quarantine camp when Stanya and I first found each other after the crash.

“I’ve been away so long...” George had sung it to me as he sat at my hospital bedside and held my hand during an illness years ago. He’d even persuaded Matt to sing it along with him, their voices blending in a kind of sweet and awkward harmony...

“I could go wrong and loose my way...”

A car pulled ahead of me in traffic. I hit the horn. Hard. There was savage joy as its raucous blare drowned out the music. Too bad George wasn’t here to hear how harsh and loud it was! To know how damn angry I was at his Earthborn attitude for my actions in another life, half a galaxy away! And how it hurt that he hadn’t recognized my struggle, even before he had heard the worst of it.

“I’ve got lots of friends in San Jose...” I brushed away the blur of tears as I pulled into a parking spot beside the police station. They left a dark splotch on my sleeve.

Oh, Stanya! Oh, George!

Oh, Celene! We’d come so far since we landed in this world! Built a life we could never have imagined! Udara shouldn’t matter now! Everything it existed for is gone!

At least, it’s supposed to be gone.

I stepped from the car and headed through familiar double doors. The squad room I’d walked into hundreds of times was a strange place now that I was here as- what? An informant? I hated the sound of that word. It rang of betrayal. But if Udara was a dead cause, there was nothing left to betray, was there? Especially when there were other loyalties to consider. The ones that for me, had lain between the very hearts of Udara...

Taking my arm, Matt guided me down a hall and into an interrogation room. As he set a sheaf of folders on a small table, I walked past him to a window. Hugging myself tight against the coldness of the place, I stared at sunlight streaming sweet warmth down to bake an indifferent parking lot. “Ask your damn questions.” I said.

I didn’t remember the questions or the words to my answers, only that I led Matt into my memories. Through long narrow, metal gray hallways, always with at least a hint of an echo. Showed him the bed-rack where five of us used to live and now where there were spaces allotted for only two. Opened the drawer built in beneath the sleeping frame, then gathered up and held out to him the little white gown Stanya’s Uncle Moodri had carried with him from Tencton and given us for Kiteari’s naming day. I showed him the little medallion Finiksa won in his day crèche for learning all his numbers before any one else in his study group. They were all that I’d still had, then, of my two eldest children.

I could taste the old tears as I told Matt how, with Kiteari and Fininksa gone now, Andarko-knew-where and Stanya planet-side until Celene-knew when, Udara offered the shelter of protection for my last remaining child, my little Devoosha, who was barely more than a podling, and for me.

I took him to the chamber where I stood, head high before a line of shadowed figures. Let him listen as I answered question after question posed by the hooded figure of the leader with her defiant, hopeful eyes, until she at last began speaking the words that I repeated after her, the phrases forming the vows that made me part of Udara.

No longer afraid, no longer the hopeless, we will hack cruel chains from our wrists... I brought him to my side as I accepted the eye-stinging drug, stolen from Special Section, which opened my mind to suggestions.

Take my blood... Explained how, if the missions we were assigned succeeded, that suggestion submerged the memory so they couldn't be revealed, or if their failure resulted in capture, compelled us to commit suicide rather than expose other members.

We will be free... I shared my desire to make a difference in the lives of slaves like me, to stand against the oppression that the Kleezansoon had visited upon my parents, my husband, my children and how many other families, until the last kraig of my life. And when I was dead and recycled, to know that the ability to resist them would live on until the Tenctonese were free again.

"Do you know who the leader was?" asked Matt. "If that person had a list of members? Of codes or signals that would activate the conditioning?"

I nodded. "On the ship, she was known as Ahvrah. She might have had a list. I'm not certain. She was the only one I ever believed might be aware of who all the members were and, for our protection, she always carried a suicide pill."

Behind me, Matt drew out slow, thoughtful words. "If there was a list, and it fell into the wrong hands, it could explain what happened with our construction worker, but..."

He paused. I was holding my breath, waiting for words I hoped I would not hear.

"But not with Tina," he said, referring to the young cop. "She was barely past childhood when the ship crashed."

It was the thought of Tina, whose young life had been stolen from her by something that one of her parents must have intended to be her greatest protection, that had lain on my stomach, uneasy as cooked meat, since the small hours of the morning.

I turned from the window. "Matt, I need to see George."

It was a long time before my husband came. I watched Matt clap him on the shoulder before George stepped into the room. I could see confusion in his eyes, along with their familiar tenderness. It would be such a comfort to rest my knuckles on his temple, to feel his warm, gentle fingers caress the spots on my neck or the back of my head.

But this was no moment for tenderness. It might crumble my resolve, tempt me to delay, even for a few urgent minutes, speaking my deepest secret about my time as Udara . Painful words, to be spoken once between us, then, Celene willing, never again.

I pressed my back against the blinds, felt stripes of warmth across my shoulders and spots. Sweet ultraviolet to strengthen me for what I must describe next. About how Udara members could ensure its struggle would continue in generations to come. About how, if something- any one of a thousand somethings- happened to separate Devoosha and me, I was not leaving her alone and unprotected.

Whether or not my husband understood, with the risks looming before us, he needed to know what I had done.

I drew a deep breath. “George,” I said. “I allowed Udara to seed Emily.”

The Chill of Loneliness

The Chill of Loneliness

It amazed me that the sunshine beating on the windows of our house didn't dim behind a film of frost. Was it my imagining or did our children huddle in their chairs? Hunch over their meals?

If only George and I could share our concerns! How often I thought about him at night, sleeping downstairs in the den on our lumpy old couch, while I shivered in our bed. Was he warm? Had he taken enough blankets from the linen closet in the hall? It would be better for our whole family if he were here, beside me so we could talk like we'd always been able to do until now. Bridge this terrible thing instead of lying alone, listening to the silence grow loud between the chirps of the crickets outside. Maybe just resting close enough together so our hearts could find and match each other's rhythm...

Half a dozen times a night I'd sit up in bed, throw back the covers to go check on him. Then I'd freeze, feet halfway to the floor.

Why wouldn't he consider that my choices didn't make me a monster? That they came from a need to do something about conditions that were now almost unimaginable? Did he think I would make the same choices now if I had it to do over again?

I had to admit, that was a good question. I asked it of myself, sitting on the edge of the bed, gazing at the past with today's eyes.

Would I fight with all my will and all my skill to keep my family as safe as I could?

Yes. That was what Matt would call a no-doubter. Absolutely, yes.

Would I join a group like Udara, seeing in it a strength and authority greater than I possessed? Or think of any authority as the surest source of security or protection?

Maybe not.

Would I search for a different solution altogether? One somehow all my own?

Well, yes. Yes, of course I would... Now. But back then? Back then...?

Oh, what did the question matter anyway? I was another person then. A slave. Almost powerless, except in her dreams. And even those were held in chains of ignorance and the habits of fear. How could I imagine myself so ignorant again? Or say whether I would do the same things if I were back in that slave grey tunic?

All I knew was that the same love for my family still beat within my hearts. It was a love George and I had shared all the way back to the kraig-ta when we were still Stanya and Appy, brought together by the Kleezansoon, but bonded by choice..

Pain and anger would tangle in my hearts, pulling me down on the bed to pound on his helpless pillow.

How could that love send us down separate paths? Drive us away from each other?

There was no point, no point at all, in checking on George or bringing him extra blankets. He would not want them from me. Wouldn't accept anything from the hands of a murderous, ruthless Udara!

Sitting in the interrogation room at the precinct house, I'd told him what I could about my part in a ship-wide series of subversive acts. Looking back on them was surreal, disorienting. Like watching a stranger wearing the face I saw in the morning mirror, both familiar and oddly alien. I described every event I could remember, whether I'd been a direct participant or only an approving observer, though time and conditioning had blurred the details.

Smuggling medicines from the Overseers' supplies. Theft of mind control drugs from Special Section. Destruction of instruments used there for experimentation on slaves. Hardest to talk about now was my involvement in the death by quick poison of one of the cruelest Kleezansoon, and my agreement to give Devoosha to Udara's cause so she wouldn't be left alone if I was sold or killed while he was away...

Horrid, wrenching admissions from a time I'd never wanted to look back on...

George had weighed my confession and found me guilty, not only of my own, but of all of Udara's crimes. To accept anything from me would grant them a sort of approval by association, wouldn't it? Grant me a kind of approval too. For my by-the-book cop husband, it was facts that mattered, evidence mattered. The verdict was in. Guilty. The accused was sentenced to a solitary bed in a cold, dark house with anxiety curling her toes and dread pulsing between her hearts.

And who, exactly, had appointed him judge and jury, anyway?

Oh, but I wasn't being fair, was I? George hadn't sentenced me to loneliness! I knew that, even if my aching hearts didn't want to! I'd rather pound his pillow in peace!

But as I reached for it, I'd find myself remembering the confusion in his beautiful, earnest eyes, the apprehension in Buck's, the bewilderment in Em's, and the sting of tears would fill my own. Grasping his beaten and rumpled pillow, I'd hug it hard against my chest as the tears flowed...

Emily's eyes... They were what haunted me. Even more than my neemu's.

Emily's eyes.

Oh, Celene! Her wide, trusting eyes! Her sweet face, with a waiting smile so ready to light it from within. The long ago, deep shadowed kraig of a seeding ceremony that happened when the grave eyed child she had been was too young to understand. The present danger to my nearly grown child that was the result of it. Her mind potentially open to a sequence of coded

tones while she walked, all unsuspecting, through the warm and sunny California days of her life.

The Crack in the Wall

The Crack in the Wall

“We’re still not going to tell her!” George stared at me over a tasteless take-out dinner of beaver tar-tar. “Not yet!”

Ice cubes rattled as I brought my water glass down on the table with a heavy clunk. “Well of course not!” The tone of my words sounded just as cold.

Finally, something the two of us agreed on, though it hardly sounded like it!

Where had my sorrow of last night gone?

Why did George make his remark ring like a pronouncement? Did he think I wanted to knock on Em’s door and say she might come under the control of a criminal? That I had so little compassion or judgment I’d put her through that, just to clear my conscience? Still, this was not an interrogation room where it was his right to lay down the law. Had he forgotten that, as head of the household, the decision about Em was, ultimately, mine?

But by some wordless agreement, most of our argument was unspoken. Maybe we were afraid of inflicting deeper wounds on each other or our children. Maybe we were running out of any extra energy, just trying to conserve what we had, in order to get through the time it took to bring the pieces of George and Matt’s case together.

The calendar said it was two days since Matt called me to the station, a little over forty eight hours by the clock ticking over the table. They lied. Two Earthen years or forty eight kraig-ta were a better approximate.

Silent, I rose and gathered up dishes as George picked up barely touched take-out boxes and followed me to the kitchen. We gave each other lots of room as if in the charged air, the lightest touch would give off a static shock.

And yet, how odd it was, the way we could agree to argue in silence or work in perfect accord without exchanging a syllable. All the while I stacked little cardboard cartons of tar tar and vegetables, George was pulling a post-it pad from the hodge-podge drawer and penning a note inviting Buck and Emily to help themselves to midnight leftovers.

Or maybe it wasn’t odd at all, I decided later, trudging upstairs. We’d known each other so long and so well, we could’ve almost lived in each others heads and felt at home. Until recently. Now his mind was a place that seemed closed to me. Still, I knew his hearts. The pain of his struggle was the mirror image of my own.

That didn’t ease our conflict. Only intensified the loneliness of it.

How unfair it was, that we could do seamless work on tasks like clearing the table when we couldn’t clear the air between us. Unfair that we each wore ourselves out, waiting for the next

storm of words, instead of drawing close for strength to face whatever future Celene would show us, whether it was the resolution of the case or another police incident involving Udara.

I thank Celene for the...

I couldn't finish the prayer, or find it in myself to feel gratitude for the future.

All I seemed able to do as I lay in our large bed, was listen to George's footsteps pacing one floor below. Steps as restless as the tree branch painting shadows across my ceiling. Barefoot steps, meant to disturb nobody's sleep...

From the den into the dining room...

Was he on the cordless phone to Matt?

No, the pauses were wrong. He was muttering, sorting his thoughts into spoken words, probably convinced nobody was awake to listen.

"How could Susan let herself be lured into a group of radicals? Let our daughter be seeded by that leader of theirs? Obviously Ahvrah wasn't her real name. It's not much of a lead toward learning what new identity the immigration people gave her..."

Across the dining room, into the kitchen, his voice fading a little with the distance...

"Still, if she hadn't joined, we'd have had no leads at all..."

Leads, he'd said? Hardly! I'd provided what? A useless code name! An estimate of Ahvrah's height, right at the center of average! A guess at weight that could have shifted by pounds in either direction depending on how the foods of Earth appealed to her!

Back in the squad room, sitting between Matt and Detective Beatrice Zepeda, I'd studied hundreds of mug shots, while George contacted the Bureau of Newcomer Affairs.

I saw faces of Tenctonese females booked for crimes ranging from pan-handling to prostitution, misdemeanors to murder. A food worker from the ship, the Kleezansoon racketeer, Betsy Ross, who I recognized as the one who took Finiksa, and a resident of the trailer three doors down from us when we lived in quarantine. But no Ahvrah.

The drawing pad and pen I'd been given produced no better results.

Beneath my hand, angular features emerged. But how high were the cheekbones? She'd had deep set eyes, shadowed beneath the hood of a welding specialist. But what shape were those eyes? What color? There had been a wide, firm mouth, a strong chin... But was the nose long? Narrow? As for her spot pattern... Not the delicate dots like those capping Cathy's head, or the backswept swirls Em, Vessna and I shared. Something in between. But the details that might have identified Ahvrah had been blurred by the passing of time.

There was George's voice again, sounding from somewhere near the kitchen sink...

"Would Susan recognize Ahvrah if we could bring them face to face?"

He was moving across the kitchen now... I strained to hear the words...

“Maybe, between Matt and I and the Bureau, we could arrange that. Bring in females with her general spot pattern type, or of approximately her age...”

He was coming back along the hall...

“If Ahvrah had a list of members, it would stand to reason she’d have the codes to implant the suggestions... And the signals to release them...”

Back in the den, George’s voice came from almost below me...

“Does soliciting Susan’s help imply I’m not hurt by what she’s done? That I don’t feel betrayed?”

Across the den to the lumpy couch...

He?- Felt betrayed?

Oh, Celene! What on Earth would he have me do differently, being the person I was then? Knowing only what I had about myself, Devoosha, the Kleezansoon and the ship around me? And...

And exactly when had the anger and reproach I’d heard in his voice these last days given way to such aching sorrow? I reached for his pillow, pulled it close against my chest, drew comfort from the smell of George’s shower soap. Probably around the time the same changes had begun within my own hearts...

Holding the pillow tighter, I listened to the squeak of the couch’s springs as George sank onto its lumpy cushions, to rest in silence, at least until the next cycle of muttering and pacing began again fifteen minutes later.

Another bleary dawn.

I thank Andarko for....

For what? Another endless, aching day...

I thank Andarko for this...

Oh, really? Do I?

Thank Andarko for hours that lasted years? Had I actually believed that Earth, days were shorter than kraig-ta?

Through the frost separating George and me, I could see the same sorrow that squeezed my hearts, shadowed his bright eyes, as we looked at our children over a hurried breakfast the next morning. Watched Vessna fuss, and Buck and Emily gather their things in confused, resentful silence, before the three of them sped away in Buck’s car. What was happening between the two of us was, in no way their fault. We both knew that. Silently agreed that

something had to be done. With sparse, clipped words, we decided the next evening to have dinner out as a family. at a nearby restaurant with Em and Buck, while Albert and May took care of Vessna. Maybe, on neutral ground, seated around an outdoor table, we could reduce the static charge filling the air at home.

But from the moment we sat down, it only got worse. I jittered as Em rose from the table to get some extra catsup, even though George had told me earlier he'd arranged plainclothes surveillance for her. Buck mentioned something about hazing at the Academy, reassured us it was no big deal, then announced he had his first cadet assignment, working security at the Silverthorn versus Bearer debate. For a moment he beamed, then sat watching as George and I argued whether he was ready for it.

The real high point of the evening came when the kids gave up trying to thaw out their parents and left in disgust to catch the bus home.

George and I stared at each other, then at their empty chairs.

For the first time since Buck had announced his plan to enter the Academy, there was a stillness between the two of us. It was awkward. Careful. Uncomfortable. But there was no energy left for sniping, none of that awful static in the air around us. Instead, it ached with naked sadness.

What were we doing to ourselves? To each other? To the family we both loved?

"I shouldn't have been so hard on Buck," I said, as my hands fidgeted, remembering what it was like to cup my husband's face between their palms, knowing just how to soothe his temples and ease the look of strain around his eyes.

George's words were unexpected. "Do you want me to move out?"

Horror slammed my hearts down into my stomach. My hands dropped, futile, onto the tablecloth. "Do you want to?"

There was more weariness than conviction in his words. "No, never."

No, never, he'd said, as if my question surprised him as much as his startled me. Could that mean...? My hearts beat heavy in my chest. Hope, apprehension, hope, apprehension, hope...

Maybe this was the moment the ice would break. I leaned toward him.

Was that a glimmer of the George I'd always known, flickering in his eyes? If I reached across the table, I might find a crack in our icy wall that I could reach through. one that would set it to crumbling.

His hand was only inches away. I lifted mine, reached out-

His cell phone rang.

The moment shattered as George sat back in his chair, raising his hand to free the phone from the pocket of his jacket. "Francisco," he said, turning on his work voice. "Yes, Matthew?"

What is it? Where? I'll be right there."

I sighed. "Go ahead," I mouthed the words, gesturing him toward where I knew he'd parked his car.

We knew this routine as well as we knew how to clean up the kitchen together. When we went out in the evening, either with or without the kids, if he had an important case pending, we always drove separate cars. My own car was waiting, only two doors down from the restaurant.

He stared at me for a moment before he nodded and got to his feet. He stepped past my chair, his hand lifting for a quick stroke across my temple as he murmured a quick phrase in Tenctonese. My fingers brushed the back of his wrist before he turned and wove his way between the crowded tables.

Had I caught that phrase right? As he left, had he said "I love you"?

Had I only formed the same words in my mind, or managed to say them out loud?

For now, I could only hope.

In my slave days to hope was to embrace risk. Well, tonight, in freedom, I would embrace it again.

When he got home, I'd be waiting. Downstairs where, maybe we could sit and talk, have that devahh-ksu-ta I'd imagined so long ago.

If he'd said those words... If he remembered saying them. If I could tell him that I loved him, too...

"Hold that thought," I said and heard the yearning in my voice as I watched him disappearing into the twilight.

The Mind of the Slave

The Mind of the Slave

He got home after midnight. “Well, there was a list of Udara members,” he told me, pulling off a jacket reeking with the stench of sea-salt and hanging it on the peg rack inside the kitchen door. Taking the sour milk I handed him, he walked into the living room. Instead of going to the couch or love seat where we usually sat over a glass of Guernsey, he sank into a wing chair by the window. Setting the glass on the table beside it, he removed his shoes and began massaging his feet.

“Well, at least we know more than we did,” I settled myself across from him on the love seat. Sighing, I kicked off my own shoes and tucked my feet up under me. The sharpest bite of cold might not be there, but that moment at the restaurant hadn’t melted the distance between us. How strange, not to be brushing comforting knuckles across his temple as I waited for him to speak, or stroking the sensitive spots at the back of his neck.

George shrugged. “From what we learned, it was confiscated by an immigration official during our time in quarantine. It fell into the hands of his brother, who managed to configure his computer to access its files. It seems he sold the services of seeded Udara to anyone willing to pay for them. We’re almost certain he sent Tina to perform the hit on our witness. As a cop, she had perfect access to him. The reason for that hostage situation isn’t clear. It may have been a sort of demonstration of the program’s potential, but the connection between the two crimes is too obvious to ignore...”

This was the news we’d hoped for, but... “What haven’t you told me yet?”

“He either got greedy or learned too much about a clients. We found him dead in his houseboat, his computer still on and a dictionary with a number of Tenctonese sentences written out phonetically, with their English translations. Among them we found ‘take my blood, we will be free.’ There was an envelope for a data disc with the words “Udara members” on it, in English, not Tenctonese, of course. Ahvrah would hardly have labeled anything in such an obvious manner. But the disc and any list of names or codes it held, was missing.”

He didn’t need to tell me what that meant. Somebody was going to be selected, activated, programmed and sent to... Where? When? To do what?

“I think we need to get the surveillance increased for Emily.” George said, bending to slip one of his shoes back on, then reaching for the other. “Tomorrow morning, I’m going to ask Captain Grazer about setting it up.”

“All right,” I said, not waiting for him to straighten up. “I’m going with you.”

“Susan, nobody is asking you to do that.”

“What does that mean, George? Don’t you want me there?” I swung my feet to the floor and rose to stand above him.

“What I mean is, I can take care of it.” Was that kindness I heard in his voice, or authority? Tiredness or dismissal? And why would he think it mattered to me whether anybody asked for my presence?

One of the people in danger was Emily! It was for her protection I’d joined Udara! Now that choice put her at risk. And there were countless other people whose names I didn’t know, whose names, if we were successful, I wouldn’t need to learn at all, at least, in connection with any future acts of senseless violence...

I studied him as he tied the laces of one shoe, then the other. It didn’t make sense that he would exclude me now because I hadn’t told him about Udara years ago. It must be something else. He was angry with me, hurt with me, but no matter how he felt, personally, he’d want any leads I could provide.

He got to his feet and moved past me, back toward the kitchen. His weariness ached through every bone in my body as I turned to follow him.

Though what he planned to discuss with Captain Grazer didn’t require information from me, he must realize I’d do what I could to help... Didn’t he?

Didn’t he?

Celene! Could it be that he didn’t know what to expect from me, because of what happened after our first argument? Head of the household or not, I’d made no attempt to take charge and clear up the difficulties our harsh words had created. No, I’d taken my anger and confusion and all but crawled into bed. Later, cold with dread, I waited for morning light to release me from my dreams. Sat half the morning, listening to the run of my thoughts going in circles as I waited to be summoned for questioning. Waited, almost immobilized, for that order to come. Waited-

Like a slave.

All the stunning guilt, the sorrow, the regret for my years of silence had caught me up, and, before I saw what was happening, had thrown me into that old mode of frustrated helplessness and submission. Refitted me into the mind of a slave.

Well, no more!

There were no close grey surfaces of a work station or bed rack here, but a bright and spacious house. No metallic hulls, but windows that let in the chirping of crickets, the deep barking of a dog and the murmur of distant traffic. No smell of stale, re-circulated air filling the hallways of the ship, or of the Holy Gas, but the fresh tang of ginger and tangerine marinated pancreas that swept toward me as George opened the refrigerator door. The familiar sights, sounds and aromas of the place we had made our home. The place where we defined ourselves as free beings with each coming Tsu-shahn- with every new sun’s rising.

I thank Andarko for this day...

Had I said that, even once, since Buck's announcement? Since my argument with George? Thanked Andarko for the day, for the freedom I'd enjoyed on this world? Reminded myself by speaking those words that I was no longer a slave?

I was Susan B. Anthony Francisco, not only someone who called herself a free Tenctonese linnaum. I was Susan B. Anthony Francisco, who could choose with each breath and heartbeat to be that free Tenctonese woman of Earth.

I was not a slave. I would not allow myself to become one again.

Not a slave to the Kleezansoon. Not to the past. Not to the guilt, to the sorrow or to the choices I made years ago.

I lifted my head, felt my shoulders squaring as I took a deep breath, then spoke with deliberate calm as George closed the refrigerator door.

"I know you can take care of it," I said, watching his back as he set the container of spleen on the counter, then reached into the cupboard and brought down a plate. At the moment, it didn't matter whether he greeted my next words with annoyance, enthusiasm or indifference. What mattered was that I speak my intention for both of us to hear.

"But tomorrow, when you talk to Captain Grazer, I am going to be there with you."

The Family Circle

The Family Circle

“Increase surveillance?” Bryan Grazer studied George, Matt and I from behind a half finished blueberry croissant, a steaming cup of coffee and a pile of papers. “We’ve had a plain-clothes officer in an unmarked car monitoring your daughter’s movements when she’s out. And we’re trying to get a wire tap set up on your home line, in the event that anybody tries to contact her by telephone.”

Matt plucked a manila folder from George’s hand and slapped it on top of the papers on the captain’s desk beside the cup. He flicked it open to the top page. Ran a finger down a column of numbers. “Let’s try for a push on the wire tap. Here, look at this. According to the phone company, both crimes were preceded by calls from the same houseboat where we found a very dead guy and an empty data disk envelope that all the evidence suggests has names and contact info of every seeded Udara member, including Emily. Whoever wanted that data bad enough to kill for it isn’t gonna use it just to study samples of Tenctonese handwriting. Somebody’s planning something. Big. Whatever that plan is, the fact they took so little time and effort to cover their tracks means they’re not concerned with being subtle right now. They’re in a hurry. This thing’s gonna come down soon.”

Grazer picked up the cup, then leaned forward to stare over it at the figures.

George leaned forward and pointed from one number two thirds of the way down the column, to another almost at the bottom. After a few seconds, he turned the page to reveal a second, covered with typescript. Flipped that to show a third with a large letterhead. “The request we’re making is for the interval when the sting operation you authorized to draw Ahvrah into the open is being set in motion. Here are the details and logistics you requested, along with the drafted letter sent out on official letterhead from B N A Headquarters. All Tenctonese women of her approximate age, registered with Social Services or the Bureau of Newcomer Affairs have been asked to attend an afternoon informational meeting in three days time about increased senior benefits. At which point...”

“At which point,” put in Matt, resting a hand on my shoulder. “Susan here goes into action and I D’s her so we can-”

“Just a minute, Sikes.” Grazer lifted his gaze from the folder, set the coffee cup aside as though it had become an afterthought. He held up a silencing hand. “I understand the connection, and...”

He sighed. The quick impersonal tones of a harried bureaucrat dropped away. He lower his hand. Divided a look between George and me. His voice became softer, more compassionate. “That you’re concerned about your daughter. We all are, but why should we step up surveillance on Emily specifically, when the odds she’ll be chosen for this... this programmed mission are... what? Fifty? A hundred to one?”

Turning from the captain, George looked across Matt to me, asking, without words that I define the risks.

“We don’t know the odds,” I said. “The whole organization was structured on the idea that nobody knew exact numbers...”

“Oh, come on, Bry!” exclaimed Matt. He leaned an irreverent hip against the desk, folded his arms across his chest and stared down at the captain. “If the fact that Em’s one of our own, isn’t enough for you, how about this? She’s the one person we know for sure has this program stashed in her head! How about that she’s the only lead we’ve got?”

“And-?” Beatrice Zepeda pushed through the glass door leading in from the squad room. She came to stand beside Matt. “How about this? On duty or off, I’m volunteering to take the first shift!”

“Beatrice!” George turned from Grazer’s desk. “Your vacation! You’ve been planning it for months!”

She quirked a grin. “The boat will still be there. The cruise company’s not going out of business any time soon.”

I caught the flash of Matt’s grin as I stepped past him to touch Beatrice’s arm. Tried to sort into words a hundred appreciations. “This means more than I know how to say. Thank you.”

George’s voice was husky. Stepping past Matt to Beatrice’s other side, he grasped her hand. “To think that you would do something like this for Emily!”

She shrugged a slim shoulder. Though she was trying to sound casual, the brisk, cheerful tone of a moment before had picked up a little too much bravado to be quite convincing. “Oh, come on, Susan! George! Of course we’re all going to do what we can to protect her.” She smiled at us, each in turn. “You’re family. So’s Emily.”

There was a moment of silence. George turned from Beatrice to me. The bright gratitude lighting his face faded. Became something quieter, more thoughtful. His eyes narrowed. His gaze sought mine, held it for several long, silent seconds. “Family,” he murmured, then shifted away at the sound of the captain’s chair sliding across the carpet.

Bryan Grazer had risen and was coming around his desk to stand next to Matt.

Within the glass walls of the office, the five of us had formed ourselves into a circle. When he spoke, the compassion I’d heard in his voice was shining in his eyes. It was tinged with weariness and more than a hint of sorrow.

“Yes, family. She’s family.” He said. “Emily’s family. And so was Tina. George, Susan, you’ve got that extra surveillance.”

The Face of the Past

The Face of the Past

Beat. Beat. Beat beat. My hearts pounded like hurrying footfalls. Any moment it would be over. Ahvrah uncovered, Udara's potential for harm, ended.

From where I stood, halfway up a staircase overlooking an echoing room on the ground floor of a city administration building around the block from the precinct house, I gestured to George, two steps below me. He passed me a monocular with a telescopic lens. Images sharpened into focus as I gazed at a room full of chairs, tables, forms and at least two hundred elder Tenctonese linnaum-ta.

Which one? Which? I studied one lined face, then another. Had she gotten the letter about this meeting? Had she come? Would I know her after so many years?

I noticed the scarf first. Pastel blue, a pretty color, soft and light for a warm California day, a gauzy shimmer fluttering in the breeze that came through the door with her. It matched her dress, gave her an air of casual elegance. The floating fabric obscured most of her cranial spots. On the ship, hadn't she worn a hood to hide her identity? I imagined the blue as grey. Pictured how dim light would affect the angle of cheekbone and jaw-

"George! By the door. In the blue scarf."

"Matt, she's here..." he murmured into his phone and started down the steps.

Hope prickled through my spots as I went after him. Caution kept me from breaking into a run. Mustn't move fast, tip her off that she'd been singled out from the crowd...

From across the room, Matt moved to block the doorway. With no apparent concern, she turned back the way she'd come, only to find a second officer stepping into her path.

"We have a few questions to ask you," Matt said. He and George took positions on each side of her. Her eyes widened in what looked like polite curiosity. Otherwise, her features remained calm. Self-possessed...

The words spoke a truth I'd recognized on the ship, long before I knew the English phrase. Self-possessed. She may have worn the grey of a slave, but her bearing said she bowed only to internal authority, called nobody master but herself. It whispered to me of Tencton. Of days when our people walked tall, without looking over their shoulders. Of a world without Kleezansoon or Holy Gas of Obedience. One with air that hadn't been recycled a thousand times. Where we could stroke the temples of our children every single night until they grew tall enough to have children of their own.

With the memory, came the old quickening of my hearts. The stirring of hope. She would recall Udara's programming codes and, more important, how to cancel them out.

Oh, I thank Andarko for this day!

I followed George, Matt and Ahvrah through a maze of halls. The footfalls in my chest hurried ahead of our echoing steps. It would be all right now. She would provide names. The Bureau of Newcomer Affairs would attach Tenctonese names to Earth identities and contact them. For Em and the others, as well as those who could have become their victims, the threat would be over.

It would be a joy to go back to everyday concerns. My next ad presentation. That talk with Em about how not to use a credit card at the mall. Vessna's pre-school physical. How to be both wife and mother to cops... And oh, how I thank Celene for that future!

Matt swung open a heavy metal door connecting to a familiar hallway at the back of the police station. He let us go ahead of him, then let it clang shut as he dropped back into step beside Ahvrah. He led her into a room, like the one where- how many days ago?- I'd opened the doors of my past. I stood beside George who stared through a window with one way glass.

Without hurrying, Ahvrah sat down at a small table, folded her hands and raised expectant eyes. She was so calm. Cool, Matt would say. So impassive in her silence as she listened to his every question. So cool that I shivered.

It wasn't working. Why should it? This was Ahvrah, who defied the Overseers and lived not to tell about it. Matt was nothing to her but another authority, making demands.

With a shrug and a sigh, he greeted us a few minutes later. "Nothing. She can't, or won't speak English." Breaking off, he raised his phone to his ear. "Sikes."

"I'll talk to her," George, started for the door.

"Wait," Matt held up a restraining hand. "Someone yanked the fire alarm at Emily's school. We've lost her."

Beat... Beat... Hope faltered, tried to regain its step. Of course, there could be a dozen totally innocent explanations. But my own dread was mirrored in George's eyes.

He plunged past us through the door and slammed into Ahvrah's impenetrable calm.

He prowled the room, looking for answers. "These were your own people..." he said.

Her voice was cool, steady. "I'm not who you think I am..."

Beat, beat. I hugged my arms across my chest, pressed cold hands against my sides.

"A young girl is missing." George's tone was urgent.

Ahvrah's face was as blank as if he was prattling in a foreign language. The same look she would have given the Kleezansoon. Didn't she see the difference between our lives on the ship and our lives here? Had defiance become such a part of her that she couldn't recognize that her silence now endangered the people it once would have protected?

Had force become the only language she understood?

It was with a clutch of horror, but no real surprise I saw George pull his police revolver from the holster beneath his jacket. I shook my head. Beside me, Matt leaned closer to the window. "I am in control now..." George said in Tenctonese.

"No, George!" I almost groaned. He was moving into territory she knew all too well.

She raised unblinking eyes to him. "You're not Udara." Her voice held a note of contempt, touched by the glimmer of a smile. More than self-possession. Something in the look and sound of her spoke less of freedom than an assurance of power.

Like the Kleezansoon she had once hated. Like the Overseers who taught her the opposite of slavery was control. This was our other inheritance from the slave kraig-ta, as sure as was the horrible, almost motionless waiting I had experienced a few days ago.

"She's calling his bluff," exclaimed Matt.

Ahvrah was still smiling. "You wouldn't shoot a helpless old woman."

Dread became pulsing fury that pushed me past Matt and through the doorway.

Okay, if force was the only language she understood, she was going to get a talking to.

"Susan-" The word barely formed on George's lips before I snatched the gun from his startled hand and advanced on Ahvrah.

"You're right," I raised the gun. "He wouldn't. But you know me. You trained me."

Her gaze flicked from me to George, then back again.

I moved closer, willing her to see both Appy of the ship and Susan of Earth. "I was Udara. The missing girl is our daughter. I gave her to you. Now, we want her back."

My hearts traded beats as recognition dawned in her eyes. Then, slowly, she nodded.

The Seeds of Yesterday

Seeds of Yesterday

“I just saw Emily!” Albert announced, his face bright with excitement as Matt, George and I burst into the squad room.

Without plan, my hand sought George’s as I glanced toward Captain Grazer’s office, Beatrice Zepeda’s desk and finally the vending area. “Where is she-?”

“Oh, she’s not here,” Beaming, Albert gestured toward a small wall-mount television in the corner. “She was on TV, at Paul Bearer’s debate...”

“You mean Buck, don’t you?” My own confusion sounded in George’s voice. “He’s working security with another police cadet-”

“No, Emily!” Confusion replaced the excitement. “Sitting with the Bearer people.”

Even if he hadn’t been working the event, I could see Buck there. He and I’d worked on campaigns before- especially for the amendment granting Tenctonese the right to vote.

But Emily? At a concert, science fair or movie opening, yes. But a debate? She might sport a jaunty button announcing which candidate she favored, but sitting in an auditorium with a group of campaign activists? Not likely, unless...

The questions was asked and answered in a look between Matt and George.

How long did it take them to arrange back-up? No longer than it took George to shout a few instructions to the Sergeant at the duty desk and for us to dash through the squad room and doors to the car waiting outside. Only seconds, though it seemed my body moved as slowly as in a dream, leaving plenty of time to note each detail of our progress.

Like I kept seeing, all through the siren shrieking ride, each instant with Ahvrah. Clearer than it had been when I lived it. Even as I shivered in the back seat and willed the car to go faster, faster, the scene kept repeating itself, like a movie.

I hadn’t thought twice about going for that weapon! Twice? Andarko! I hadn’t thought about it at all...

Beat, beat... The rhythm of my steps crossing that room. The shock in George’s eyes as I snatched the gun...

Beat, beat... The pulsing in my ears and the old refrain singing in my veins-

No longer afraid...

Oh, but it was a lie! I was afraid. So afraid. Like I'd been on the ship.

Had always been back then, even if Appy, the other me, would not have named fear as what always lay, curled and waiting between her hearts. The seeds of it were planted in so many of us, when we were too young to know any other reality. Such a constant presence as to go almost unnoticed. Even after Finiksa and Kiteari were gone, I only knew I wanted a different sort of life for Stanya, Devoosha and me.

Not until we came to Earth did I recognize how much of our lives fear had governed. The old tension twitched less often in my feet. The skin tickling itch that said somebody with a prod was watching from behind me was gone. I found a delicious joy in having a home nobody entered without invitation, to be proud of, to feel safe enough in that George and I could celebrate the idea of creating a child.

Then I saw that name on a folder and it took no time at all to recall what fear was.

In the back of the car, I shivered harder...

What I hadn't remembered was how those seeds could erupt from dormancy into righteous and violent bloom, like it had when I took an assignment to help assassinate one of the cruelest of the Kleezansoon. When I watched myself pour a vial of green liquid onto a dish of vedge-growth before the Overseer snatched the tray from my hands. That bloom had such an intoxicating effect! It sang and pulsed in the veins. A song of power! Of standing at an invincible distance, watching oneself dish out sweet, terrible revenge for dozens of hurts, hundreds of betrayed dreams and thousands of injustices...

Now, as we sped toward the auditorium, I recalled the heaviness of George's gun, the curve of the trigger against my finger and the promise of death between my palms.

Beat, beat... As I'd looked at Ahvrah, that power song had pulsed again in my blood, as if no time at all had passed since then. It sang of confidence that I was doing the right thing, the only thing as I raised and aimed the gun. You know me. You trained me. I was Udara... I killed for Udara...

At last I'd recognized the power lust that had grown from those ancient seeds, and lain behind the arrogant assurance in the smile that had touched Ahvrah's lips. Just like hers, my actions of long ago taken in the name of defense, were unleashing unforeseen violence that endangered those I'd wanted so much to protect.

There had been relief in George's eyes as I'd lowered the gun and let him take it from my unprotesting fingers. He checked the safety, then holstered the gun. It hadn't really been set to fire. That did nothing to lessen the horror over my actions, or the certainty that, in the same situation, I'd do it all again. The one question I would never be able to answer with absolute certainty was whether or not I could have pulled the trigger.

From far away now, came a new song, one of other police sirens joining in urgent harmony with the one wailing atop our car. We skidded to a stop before the main doors to the auditorium. A moment later, I was racing up the steps behind Matt and George.

Blue uniforms swarmed into the lobby from half a dozen outside doors. Matt dashed up a flight of stairs with several of them at his heels. I watched George pointing and realized he was shouting instructions to the others as they began dividing themselves into groups and moving into the auditorium and down its several aisles toward the stage.

But it was the Tenctonese code words that shouted loudest in my head. Tencton is our home- They were what was important. -Tencton is our home. Tencton is-

They would protect my child, my Devoosha... No, my Emily. This was Earth and she was Emily now, as I was Susan, even if the words echoed in my mind as if they were bouncing off the grey metal walls of the ship. Tencton is our home. When we-

Above the shouts of the crowd, I heard myself repeating them along with Ahvrah, the way I once chanted a vow with her, an urgent litany that sounded over my footsteps as they pounded down the aisle. -Tencton is our home. When we- when we die-

They must prevent my child from continuing the legacy of unforeseen violence that I'd passed into her hands so long ago. Protect whichever candidate that was her intended target. Break her programming to keep her from taking her life when the mission failed...

Ahead of me, a familiar figure moved from one of the side aisles, toward a place in front of the spot-lit stage. She lifted a weapon- a gun, not so different than the one I had raised against Ahvrah. Pointed it at Senator Silverthorn. As I passed the front row, I saw her eyes, fixed and empty, as she sighted her target.

"Here's my vote." As her words rang out, I heard the voice of my child-.

Wait- no! Not of my child, but of my children! -as another voice rose to mingle with hers. "Emily!" In a flash of cadet blue, Buck burst from a shadowed position between her and the stage. "What are you doing here?"

There was no time to shout a warning before the gun roared and Buck was staggering back a step, two steps, three, a spreading stain of blood on his shirt. It splashed on the concrete floor at his feet, a pink splatter whose image seemed to burn itself into my retinas. George hurtled past me, reaching his side, catching him as he fell.

The old, long-drawn-out cry of despair echoed, soundlessly, within me.

Finiksa!

For a moment, it drowned out the words Ahvrah had taught me. George was lowering Buck to the floor. I stood, hearts pulling in the directions of both my son and daughter.

Then I swung toward Em. George would have to look after Buck. He knew First Aid. I knew codes. A dozen cops were positioning themselves in front of the stage and the politicians who were scattering in every direction across it. Dropping low. Out of range. Safe. They were all safe. But not Emily!

Through the sea of blue uniforms I saw her, still standing in front of the first row of seats. As I started to run, I shouted the first code phrase. "Tencton is our home!"

Several police were pointing weapons at my daughter. She seemed unaware that they were there, any more than she saw my approach. The gun dangled from a hand hanging heavy at her side as she stared at the swarming blue barrier separating her from her target.

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” George’s English words mingled with my Tenctonese. From the corner of my eye, I saw him coming to his feet and swinging toward us as two other cops crouched over Buck. The officers with their weapons trained on Emily didn’t move. How could they know that the only danger she posed now was to herself?

“Tencton is our home!” Pushing past them, I made a grab for her shoulder as, with movements that were still trance-like, she lifted the gun. My hand found hers, covered it. Single-minded in her purpose, she twisted in my grasp until the barrel had turned in her direction. Beat, beat. Beat, beat... Close together, our heartbeats thrummed so fast and hard I couldn’t tell what part of the rhythm was hers and what was mine. Only knew that cold metal was pressed, hard and clammy, between our chests, as I shouted Ahvrah’s words into her face. “When we die, wherever we die, we die at home!”

Empty words about how a hero’s death would reunite her with a free and glorious home-world! Meaningless words! This Earth was our home now, and there were no heroes here! Nobody to defy or to hate! No cause to fight for. And nobody was going to die! Nobody! Not here! Not tonight!

Still, I must protect my daughter, my Devoosha, my Emily. As meaningless as they were, I shouted Ahvrah’s words again. Again. Again. Again. Above the thundering beat, beat, beat of our hearts. Tencton is our home, is our home, is our...

Emily blinked. Once. Twice.

Tencton is...

Her eyes widened in dawning recognition. “Mom?”

Blinking, she relaxed against me.

Beat, beat.

The thrumming between us slowed. Her arm lowered, and, as George reached us, she let the gun slip harmlessly into my hand.

The Gardens of Earth

The Gardens of Earth

Beside me, there was the rustle of fabric as Cathy got to her feet. At her movement, I half rose. What-? Who-? Had she seen? George? Matt?

Her touch on my arm pressed me back into my seat. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I was going to get rid of my cup. Would you like me to take yours for you?”

Nodding, I settled back and took one last pull at my straw. There was a garbling noise and a lot of air but no more of the drink than a hint of blueberry. I didn’t remember finishing it. “Thanks,” I said, passing the empty cup to her.

“Be right back.” Moving behind the desk, she disposed of the cups, then stood talking with Rebekah, who was working at her monitor. I could hear not only their voices, but several others, echoing from both ends of the hall. The place had passed from the quiet of first dawn into the activity of full morning. Through the rumble of a passing cart full of breakfast trays, I heard Cathy laugh. Soft, rippling laughter. Warm, relaxed. That sound brought home what she’d been trying to tell me before. People didn’t bathe in front of death’s door. Buck was going to be fine. His wounds would heal, the scars, fade.

Maybe someday the spatter design of a blood pink blossom would likewise fade from my memory. If only I could be as sure I would also be free of the seeds, planted on the ship all those kraig-ta ago, from which it had sprung.

“Seeds of violence” was the phrase the TV newswoman used. Of course, she wasn’t speaking of our events but those happenings on the Earth’s far side. Still, they didn’t seem much different to me. Didn’t they both grow from power used unfairly and the fear of danger or injury to loved ones? Hadn’t something or someone kept nurturing those seeds for their own purpose, so they flowered again and again even after years? What would it take to weed them out? To plant seeds of hope instead?

Big questions with no simple solution. Not for us, or for those people across the globe.

But if I’d learned nothing else from the last few days, I knew that saying the past was past, wasn’t enough to sever the ties with it. A month ago I would not have believed George and I could tear into each other over an old difference in philosophy the way we had. Or that a slave still lived in hiding at the back of my mind, one ready to revert to years of training, looking for Matt’s direction, the same way that Emily waited for orders programmed into her by whoever happened to control the Udara code.

So much fear! So much bitterness and pain we thought left far behind, only to find it had only lain dormant! And ours had been only one Tenctonese family out of a hundred thousand still carrying their slave-day legacies from the ship!

Maybe George was right the night of our first argument. Maybe we of Udara hadn't been so different than the Kleezansoon. No matter how just we believed our cause to be, we'd wanted to teach them some of the same fear they'd taught us. But now, here on Earth there were no slaves, no Overseers, except in whatever memories we chose to nurture. Was it time to free ourselves from those old differences and whatever new wounds they might cause, and focus instead on what we had in common? Hadn't all of us, Overseer and slave alike, been used to serve the purposes of others? Hadn't we all once been children of beautiful, ancient Tencton, wrenched first from our planet, then our parents and selected for different kinds of training?

Children like George, Albert and I had been. Like Finiksa might have been if the Day of Descent hadn't changed the direction for all our lives.

Children like our Kiteari.

For those of my generation, tolerance or forgiveness for Overseers would likely be a conscious, day to day endeavor. But if the ship's dark confines had seeded us with fear, could we use reconciliation to reseed ourselves with hope in the wide, bright gardens of Earth that were the future of our children?

Maybe it was time to take up campaigning again as Buck and I did before Vessna came. Put my creativity into more than ad presentations. Maybe it was time to start making a difference again.

Hadn't I been, after all, gifted with the name Susan B. Anthony?

Maybe that difference would have to do with that new seeding. Not only in the Newcomer community, but the larger one here on Earth that it was now a part of. Seeds of peace. Blossoms of co-operation. A big thought, more like a dream.

One for later...

For when I could concentrate on sorting out how to start doing something like that.

When I'd seen Buck... Reassured myself with look and touch that he was mending...

When I knew Emily was with the police. The coded termination of her programming had left her memory intact. Matt had taken her to the station to give her statement that Senator Silverthorn himself had staged a mock assassination attempt to generate seeds of mistrust toward Newcomers like Paul Bearer.

When I knew if there was a future for George and me. If I was right and he had said "I love you" that evening at the restaurant, maybe I had reason to hope.

When I was not so cold and aching and tired.

"When we return at the top of the eight o'clock hour," the beckoning voice of that eternal news anchor cut into the run of my thoughts. "We'll recap stories from national and local headlines, looking first at the potential threat from the latest conflict raging..."

Why did she load her words with such drama? It was almost a compulsion to turn and listen to her, even when I didn't much want to hear anything she said.

Talk about planting seeds of fear!

Did my agency's ads sponsor that broadcast?

Another good question. One I could check on easily enough...

Later.

"And going in-depth on a story closer to home," she continued. "The shooting during last night's senatorial candidates' debate and the emerging details concerning allegations of an inside conspiracy which may lie behind the sudden violence which erupted during-"

How long had that television been running, anyway? Since I came back here after my nap in the lounge? Yes, of course. Somebody had been jumping up and down on a mattress to show how firm it was. At some time the news had snuck in with images from the war. Later, I'd been lulled by weather predictions for the next five days. Sunny. Warm. Well, what else would one expect in Los Angeles?. Now they were back to the news, where conflicts forever seemed to rage and violence was always said to be sudden!

Again I found myself wondering who'd want something like that on in a hospital? Why it was allowed to drone on and on in the background, where, while it went almost un-noticed, it continued pouring uneasiness down on the heads of the tired or vulnerable?

Hadn't I said, days ago, I wouldn't be a slave to the past?

Hadn't I just been thinking how I could make a difference?

It wouldn't need to take lots of time or energy. It didn't have to be a big difference to be an important one.

And, Celene!- this was it!

Enough letting that professionally perky voice pull at my attention, trying to draw me in where it could plant a whole new set of fears!

This was a time for weeding, not seeding.

I got to my feet. "Excuse me," I said, forcing weary legs to stride, not shamble, to the desk. "Who has the remote control for that TV?"

"It's, umm-" Rebekah surveyed the desk beside her computer, than pulled open and poured through a drawer. "...Right here."

"I am either going to change the channel," I said. "Or- how about this?- Even better, let's turn the damn thing off."

Almost snatching it from her hand, I whirled toward the monitor, raised the remote, aimed, pressed the red “off” button and sent the broadcast into darkness and silence.

Rebekah raised startled eyebrows. Beside her, Cathy’s smile was wider than before.

“Thank you,” I said, passing the small black box back across the desk to Rebekah.

“I guess nobody thought to turn it off since last night,” She glanced down at the remote, almost like she’d never seen it before, then slipped it back into the drawer. “You know, half the time, I forget it’s even on. I think a lot of us do.”

Nodding, I turned and walked back across the pale linoleum and the chilly, early morning hallway. I was no less tired, but the fatigue rested lighter on my shoulders. The brisk strides that before had been in deliberate defiance of a slave’s weary shamble, came more naturally, in a motion that was both easy and free.

The Hearts of the Free

The Hearts of the Free

I didn't go back to the line of ugly colored chairs, coated with their many hours of strain. Passing wheelchairs, heated tray racks, gurneys and laundry bins, I moved toward the large window at the end of the hall. My reflection came to meet me, eyes heavy with fatigue, her yellow dress rumpled after a long night. But her steps were surer with each stride, her carriage erect. There was strength in that walk. Knowledge that she- That I-

Was free from the last of the ship's secrets, of any pride or shame that went with being Udara. Whatever happened next, I would walk toward it the same way, with no reason to look over my shoulder. I was no more a slave to the past than I chose to be.

Cathy's reflection glimmered into view beside mine. "I'm going to call Matt," I said.

"I wouldn't bother if I were you," came a familiar voice behind me. "He's not at his phone right now."

Turning, I saw Matt grin at me over Cathy's shoulder, a moment before I caught sight of the figure beside him.

"Emily!" I took two strides, raised a hand, then paused. Apprehension tugged, beat beat, between my hearts. Whether she knew it yet or not, Em had as much right to be furious with me as George had been. The events of these last horrible hours had begun with a decision I had made. But, no. Not a slave to the past, right? No pride. No shame. That series of happenings really began over a generation before I was born. Before I learned I was a slave, became the mother of slaves and then a desperate rebel. Before I became a free woman of Earth, mother of free children who would build their lives on this planet.

Let Emily be angry with me for my part in it, if that helped her heal. It was her free choice. In slavery, I learned to hope was to embrace risk. Freedom could mean taking risks was one way of embracing hope. So we would risk walking through the memories together and, I hoped, find love waited, intact, on the other side. But that was for later. Now was for reunion. I swept glad knuckles across her temple.

"Mom!" Her face split into a wide smile. Then she was hurtling herself into my arms.

"It's official," said Matt. "Her statement's been given. The Senator's under arrest. The judge ruled Em has no responsibility for what happened, and that her co-operation has helped uncover a string of criminal activities Silverthorn seems to have a hand in."

"The judge was really nice, Mom!" Em's words tumbled over each other. "She asked me a lot of questions. I could tell she was really trying to be fair. You know, I think I understand why Buck's so interested in law. It's so cool when it works and..."

Oh, Celene! Not another cop!

There was a moment's cold horror, then an echo of my own thought. Her free choice.

"...I'm thinking," she continued. "I just might want to be a lawyer!"

Laughter, the first in a long time, was rising in my throat when Emily's words trailed off. She drew back, looked into my face as her brow furrowed. "How's Buck? I feel so bad about what happened, but Matt says it wasn't nearly as bad as it looked. He and Dad keep saying that it wasn't my fault. Do you believe that's true?"

"I know it wasn't."

"Do you think Buck will believe it?"

"He knows you love him. You were carrying some of the last programming from our slave days. We'll talk about it later. The main things are, he's going to be fine and you're free of it now."

The crease between her eyes smoothed out. "When can we go see him?"

"Right now if you like. That's what I was coming to tell you," Cathy was smiling. Matt's arm slipped around her waist as we turned to make our way toward his room.

A tired eyed George was waiting by the nurses' desk along with Beatrice Zepeda, who divided a smile between Em and me. Beside them, Albert was beaming at us over a large green and orange croton plant which was probably a get well soon gift for Buck and the pot of marigolds that he'd grown for Cathy's garden and which had been sitting on Matt's desk for days now. Maybe I'd ask him to help me start a garden of my own. A reminder of my hopes for the future

An all-too-familiar perky voice drifted out to greet us as Cathy pushed open Buck's door. We passed underneath it to enter the room.

"...And in political news, all six major networks are projecting no contest in the Senatorial race after the charges pressed last night against the incumbent..."

I frowned until I saw Buck sitting up in bed. His face was pale, but his eyes were bright. He was grinning up at the TV. Glancing over my shoulder, I found a smile of my own for the image of the handcuffed Senator being bundled into a black and white.

Hurrying forward, I pressed Buck's temple with grateful knuckles. His hand shook a little with the effort as he returned the gesture, but there was reassuring warmth in his fingers. I stepped toward the foot of the bed to allow Emily a turn greeting her brother.

I thank Andarko for this day...

Heads close together, Buck and Emily murmured words of regret and forgiveness. I had only a moment to hear in what quick order that gave way to their usual teasing before their voices were drowned out as the space around the bed filled with talk and laughter. .

There was George, beaming at our son and saying something about the Police Commissioner recommending him for a commendation.

Albert was setting the plants on the bedside table and asking Buck about his ribs, as Beatrice passed him the cassette. Pointing at the VCR beneath the TV, Buck handed the tape to Matt, along with the remote. He was smiling even wider than before. I caught his words as he said discovery of the recording had led to proof of hazing and discrimination practices at the Academy which resulted in the reassignment of several personnel.

Beside me, a grinning Cathy nodded at his words, then tussled the remote from Matt's grasp as he tried to aim it at the TV. Dodging back a step, she held it just out of reach. He laughed and made a playful grab for it. Was this part of some private joke between the two of them? A bit of their language of love?

George and I had shared a lot of that kind of language, too. Like sipping sour milk with our arms hooked through each other's so the sensual areas at the inside of the elbows touched. Or muffling our late-night laughter in the pillows and trying to sing our song to the ceiling above our bed in voices so quiet that the children wouldn't hear us.

Do you know the way to San Jose...?

From across Buck's bed, George was watching as Cathy traded the remote for a quick hug. Was he as overwhelmed with relief and exhaustion as I was right now? As lonely for those times when the two of us were that close and comfortable with each other? For a flickering instant, our gazes brushed.

Cold sorrow rippled through me as he turned away and made his way along the far side of the bed in the direction of the door.

None of the others seemed to notice him go. Beatrice was grinning, a wicked sparkle in her eyes, no doubt saving up material to rib Matt about back at headquarters. Albert was smiling gentle approval at Matt and Cathy. Buck and Emily had stopped teasing and were watching them both with open amusement.

Already, it seemed, they were moving into the future, leaving Udara and last night's events behind. I would have to do the same. Had to do the same to be as free of the past as I knew I could become. Later. After all the tired tears of the last days had a little time to flow. After some good clean clothes and a long nap like Cathy suggested earlier. One long enough to give me the energy to form words to tell my husband that, for whatever it was worth, whatever satisfaction it gave him, I saw his point now, about Udara and the Kleezansoon being more alike than I'd allowed myself to see before.

But all that would come only after a long, hot shower to wake a memory of what it was like not to be so ever-lasting cold.

There was a touch on my arm. "Susan?" George gestured toward the door.

A bit reluctant, I followed him out. There was an odd ache of comfort watching the people I loved picking up the rhythm of their lives. A seed of hope being planted.

But there were arrangements to be made before either a very tired eyed George or I could rest. Who would pick up Vessna at Albert and May's? Or had they taken her to daycare? Would we drive home together or separately? Had I driven to the linnaum-ta gathering yesterday or come in with George or Matt? I couldn't seem to remember.

George stopped outside the door. "Susan," he said before I could form the question. His voice was soft, tender. "Those were difficult days..."

There was reflection, rather than relief in his tone. As if he were speaking of something more distant than the events we'd traveled through in these last long days. Again, his hand brushed my arm. A light touch. A gentle tug at my attention. Standing very still, I waited.

Though shadowed from a sleepless night, his eyes were bright as he turned me round so I could look him full in the face. His gaze was as bright as when we took our long ago vows, linnaum and gannaum- wife and husband. Bright as the sun now pouring through the picture window at the end of the hall.

Tsu-shahn. Sun rising after a cold, long night.

"Neemu, how can I have judged you, when what I have always loved about you is your passion?" He asked. His hands brushed my temples, my shoulders, then gathered me close against him.

"Look who's talking about passion," I murmured and let my head rest against his chest, where I could hear the beat, beat, beating of his hearts.

A good, strong sound. Nurturing. Breathing slow and deep, I floated in the sweet rhythm for maybe fifty, a hundred beats, then drew back to look into his eyes. "My passion? George, that passion started this whole nightmare."

There was no sound of the slave in my voice. No defiance, no self blame. Only wonder that he could speak that word with such tenderness.

"Passion," he repeated. "I saw the look on your face when Beatrice and Captain Grazer spoke of family. I saw your love for our children shining in your eyes as we started into that auditorium where Buck and Emily were. How it shone, even stronger than the fear as you fought for Em's life, even at risk of your own. After all our years of freedom here, I realized that I'd come to think of the safety of my family as a right, almost taken for granted. But at that moment, it was like being on the ship again, with every moment an uncertainty, and I knew I understood your choices..."

"But, neemu, you were right. About Udara and the Kleezansoon being..." I began.

He brushed my lips with a finger. "It doesn't matter now," he said and drew me against him once more.

He was right, it didn't matter. Not now.

We'd seen through each other's eyes again. Had walked back into each other's minds and been at home there.

What could matter more than that?

My hands circled George's back, stroked the soft fabric of his jacket. I shivered once as the warmth of his embrace melted the cold despair of the past days and thawed my braced muscles. It was a sweet, strengthening warmth that I knew could nurture the seeds of hope that would carry us through all our tomorrows on this free and beautiful planet that was now our home-world.

Smiling, I cradled my temple against his shoulder and murmured the rest of my parents' ancient prayer, as I had done on the kraig of our bonding, knowing I meant the words from the deepest part of my hearts.

I thank Celene for the future.

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