

BREATHMOSS

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1.

In her twelfth standard year, which on Habara was the Season of Soft Rains, Jalila moved across the mountains with her mothers from the high plains of Tabuthal to the coast. For all of them, the journey down was one of unhurried discovery, with the kamasheens long gone and the world freshly moist, and the hayawans rusting as they rode them, the huge flat plates of their feet swishing through purplish-green undergrowth. She saw the cliffs and qasrs she'd only visited from her dreamtent, and sailed across the high ridges on ropewalks her distant ancestors had built, which had seemed frail and antique to her in her worried imaginings, but were in fact strong and subtle; huge dripping gantries heaving from the mist like wise giants, softly humming, and welcoming her and her hayawan, whom she called Robin, in cocoons of effortless embrace. Swaying over the drop beyond into grey-green nothing was almost like flying.

The strangest thing of all in this journey of discoveries was that the landscape actually seemed to rise higher as they descended and encamped and descended again; the sense of *up* increased, rather than that of down. The air on the high plains of Tabuthal was rarefied -- Jalila knew that from her lessons in her dreamtent; they were so close to the stars that Pavo had had to clap a mask over her face from the moment of her birth until the breathmoss was embedded in her lungs. And it had been clear up there, it was always clear, and it was pleasantly cold. The sun shone all day hard and cold and white from the blue blackness, as did a billion stars at night, although Jalila had never thought of those things as she ran amid the crystal trees and her mothers smiled at her and occasionally warned her that, one day, all of this would have to change.

And now that day was upon her, and this landscape -- as Robin, her hayawan, rounded the path through an un-rear-th forest of alien-looking trees with wrinkled brown trunks and soft green leaves, and the land fell away, and she caught her first glimpse of something far and flat on the horizon -- had never seemed so high.

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Down on the coast, the mountains reared behind them and around a bay. There were many people here -- not the vast numbers, perhaps, of Jalila's dreamtent stories of the Ten Thousand and One Worlds,

but so many that she was sure, as she first walked the streets of a town where the buildings huddled in ridiculous proximity, and tried not to stare at all the faces, that she would never know all their families.

Because of its position at the edge of the mountains, the town was called Al Janb, and, to Jalila's relief, their new haramlek was some distance away from it, up along a near-unnoticeable dirt track that meandered off from the blue-black serraplated coastal road. There was much to be done there by way of repair, after the long season that her bondmother Lya had left the place deserted. The walls were fused stone, but the structure of the roof had been mostly made from the stuff of the same strange urrearth trees that grew up the mountains, and in many places it had sagged and leaked and grown back toward the chaos that seemed to want to encompass everything here. The hayawans, too, needed much attention in their makeshift stables as they adapted to this new climate, and mother Pavo was long employed constructing the necessary potions to mend the bleeding bonds of rusty metal and flesh, and then to counteract the mold that grew like slow tears across their long, solemn faces. Jalila would normally have been in anguish to think of the sufferings that this new climate was visiting on Robin, but she was too busy feeling ill herself to care. Ridiculously, seeing as there was so much more oxygen to breathe in this rich coastal air, every lungful became a conscious effort, a dreadful physical lunge. Inhaling the damp, salty, spore-laden atmosphere was like sucking soup through a straw. She grew feverish for a while, and suffered the attentions of similar molds to those that were growing over Robin, yet in even more irritating and embarrassing places. More irritating still was the fact that Ananke her birthmother and Lya her bondmother -- even Pavo, who was still busily attending to the hayawans -- treated her discomforts and fevers with airy disregard. They had, they all assured her vaguely, suffered similarly in their own youths. And the weather would soon change in any case. To Jalila, who had spent all her life in the cool unvarying glare of Tabuthal, where the wind only ever blew from one direction and the trees jingled like ice, that last statement might as well have been spoken in another language.

If anything, Jalila was sure that she was getting worse. The rain drummed on what there was of the roof of their haramlek, and dripped down and pooled in the makeshift awnings, which burst in bucketloads down your neck if you bumped into them, and the mist drifted in from every direction through the paneless windows, and the mountains, most of the time, seemed to consist of cloud, or to have vanished entirely. She was coughing. Strange stuff was coming out on her hands, slippery and green as the slime that tried to grow everywhere here. One morning, she awoke, sure that part of her was bursting, and stumbled from her dreamtent and out through the scaffolding that had by then surrounded the haramlek, then barefoot down the mud track and across the quiet black road and down onto the beach, for no other reason than that she needed to *escape*.

She stood gasping amid the rockpools, her hair lank and her skin feverishly itching. There was something at the back of her throat. There was something in her lungs. She was sure that it had taken root and was growing. Then she started coughing as she had never coughed before, and more of the greenstuff came splattering over her hands and down her chin. She doubled over. Huge lumps of it came showering out, strung with blood. If it hadn't been mostly green, she'd have been sure that it *was* her lungs. She'd never imagined anything so agonizing. Finally, though, in heaves and starts and false dawns, the process dwindled. She wiped her hands on her night-dress. The rocks all around her were splattered green. It was breathmoss; the stuff that had sustained her on the high plains. And *now* look at it! Jalila took a slow, cautious breath. And then another. Her throat ached. Her head was throbbing. But still, the process was suddenly almost ridiculously easy. She picked her way back across the beach, up through the mists to her haramlek. Her mothers were eating breakfast. Jalila sat down with them,

wordlessly, and started to eat.

That night, Ananke came and sat with Jalila as she lay in her dreamtent in plain darkness and tried not to listen to the sounds of the rain falling on and through the creaking, dripping building. Even now, her birthmother's hands smelled and felt like the high desert as they touched her face. Rough and clean and warm, like rocks in starlight, giving off their heat. A few months before, Jalila would probably have started crying.

"You'll understand now, perhaps, why we thought it better not to tell you about the breathmoss...?"

There was a question mark at the end of the sentence, but Jalila ignored it. They'd known all along! She was still angry.

"And there are other things, too, which will soon start to happen to your body. Things that are nothing to do with this place. And I shall now tell you about them all, even though you'll say you knew it before...."

The smooth, rough fingers stroked her hair. As Ananke's words unraveled, telling Jalila of changings and swellings and growths she'd never thought would really apply to *her*, and which these fetid lowlands really seemed to have brought closer, Jalila thought of the sound of the wind, tinkling through the crystal trees up on Tabuthal. She thought of the dry cold wind in her face. The wet air here seemed to enclose her. She wished that she was running. She wanted to escape.

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Small though Al Janb was, it was as big a town as Jalila had ever seen, and she soon came to volunteer to run all the various errands that her mothers required as they restored and repaired their haramlek. She was used to wide expanses, big horizons, the surprises of a giant landscape that crept upon you slowly, visible for miles. Yet here, every turn brought abrupt surprise and sudden change. The people had such varied faces and accents. They hung their washing across the streets, and bickered and smoked in public. Some ate with both hands. They stared at you as you went past, and didn't seem to mind if you stared back at them. There were unfamiliar sights and smells, markets that erupted on particular days to the workings of no calendar Jalila yet understood, and which sold, in glittering, shining, stinking, disgusting, fascinating arrays, the strangest and most wonderful things. There were fruits from off-planet, spices shaped like insects, and insects that you crushed for their spice. There were swarming vats of things Jalila couldn't possibly imagine any use for, and bright silks woven thin as starlit wind that she longed for with an acute physical thirst. And there were aliens, too, to be glimpsed sometimes wandering the streets of Al Janb, or looking down at you from its overhung top windows like odd pictures in old frames. Some of them carried their own atmosphere around with them in bubbling hookahs, and some rolled around in huge grey bits of the sea of their own planets, like babies in a birth sac. Some of them looked like huge versions of the spice insects, and the air around them buzzed angrily if you got too close. The only thing they had in common was that they seemed blithely unaware of Jalila as she stared and followed them, and then returned inexcusably late from whatever errand she'd supposedly been sent on. Sometimes, she forgot her errands entirely.

"You must learn to get *used* to things...." Lya her bondmother said to her with genuine irritation late one afternoon, when she'd come back without the tool she'd been sent to get early that morning, or even any recollection of its name or function. "This or any other world will never be a home to you if you let every single thing *surprise* you...." But Jalila didn't mind the surprises; in fact, she was coming to enjoy them, and the next time the need arose to visit Al Janb to buy a new growth-crystal for the scaffolding, she begged to be allowed to go, and her mothers finally relented, although with many a warning shake of the head.

The rain had stopped at last, or at least held back for a whole day, although everything still looked green and wet to Jalila as she walked along the coastal road toward the ragged tumble of Al Janb. She understood, at least in theory, that the rain would probably return, and then relent, and then come back again, but in a decreasing pattern, much as the heat was gradually *increasing*, although it still seemed ridiculous to her that no one could ever predict exactly how, or when, Habara's proper Season of Summers would arrive. Those boats she could see now, those fisherwomen out on their feluccas beyond the white bands of breaking waves, their whole lives were dictated by these uncertainties, and the habits of the shoals of whiteback that came and went on the oceans, and which could also only be guessed at in this same approximate way. The world down here on the coast was so *unpredictable* compared with Tabuthal! The markets, the people, the washing, the sun, the rain, the aliens. Even Hayam and Walah, Habara's moons, which Jalila was long used to watching, had to drag themselves through cloud like cannonballs though cotton as they pushed and pulled at this ocean. Yet today, as she clambered over the groynes of the long shingle beach that she took as a shortcut to the center of the town when the various tides were out, she saw a particular sight that surprised her more than any other.

There was a boat, hauled far up from the water, longer and blacker and heavier-looking than the feluccas, with a sort-of ramshackle house at the prow, and a winch at the stern that was so massive that Jalila wondered if it wouldn't tip the craft over if it ever actually entered the water. But, for all that, it wasn't the boat that first caught her eye, but the figure who was working on it. Even from a distance, as she struggled to heave some ropes, there was something different about her, and the way she was moving. Another alien? But she was plainly human. And barefoot, in ragged shorts, and bare-breasted. In fact, almost as flat-chested as Jalila still was, and probably of about her age and height. Jalila still wasn't used to introducing herself to strangers, but she decided that she could at least go over, and pretend an interest in -- or an ignorance of -- this odd boat.

The figure dropped another loop of rope over the gunwales with a grunt that carried on the smelly sea breeze. She was brown as tea, with her massy hair hooped back and hanging in a long tail down her back. She was broad-shouldered, and moved in that way that didn't quite seem wrong, but didn't seem entirely right either. As if, somewhere across her back, there was an extra joint. When she glanced up at the clatter of shingle as Jalila jumped the last groyne, Jalila got a proper full sight of her face, and saw that she was big-nosed, big-chinned, and that her features were oddly broad and flat. A child sculpting a person out of clay might have done better.

"Have you come to help me?"

Jalila shrugged. "I might have done."

"That's a funny accent you've got."

They were standing facing each other. She had grey eyes, which looked odd as well. Perhaps she was an off-worlder. That might explain it. Jalila had heard that there were people who had things done to themselves so they could live in different places. She supposed the breathmoss was like that, although

she'd never thought of it that way. And she couldn't quite imagine why it would be a requirement for living on any world that you looked this ugly.

"Everyone talks oddly here," she replied. "But then your accent's funny as well."

"I'm Kalal. And that's just my *voice*. It's not an accent." Kalal looked down at her oily hands, perhaps thought about wiping one and offering it to shake, then decided not to bother.

"Oh...?"

"You don't get it, do you?" That gruff voice. The odd way her features twisted when she smiled.

"What is there to get? You're just--"

"--I'm a man." Kalal picked up a coil of rope from the shingle, and nodded to another beside it. "Well? Are you going to help me with this, or aren't you?"

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The rains came again, this time starting as a thing called *drizzle*, then working up the scale to *torrent*. The tides washed especially high. There were storms, and white crackles of lightening, and the boom of a wind that was so unlike the kamasheen. Jalila's mothers told her to be patient, to wait, and to remember -- *please* remember this time, so you don't waste the day for us all, Jalilaneen -- the things that they sent her down the serraplate road to get from Al Janb. She trudged under an umbrella, another new and useless coastal object, which turned itself inside out so many times that she ended up throwing it into the sea, where it floated off quite happily, as if that was the element for which it was intended in the first place. Almost all of the feluccas were drawn up on the far side of the roadway, safe from the madly bashing waves, but there was no sign of that bigger craft belonging to Kalal. Perhaps he -- the antique generative word *was* he, wasn't it? -- was out there, where the clouds rumbled like boulders. Perhaps she'd imagined their whole encounter entirely.

Arriving back home at the haramlek surprisingly quickly, and carrying for once the things she'd been ordered to get, Jalila dried herself off and buried herself in her dreamtent, trying to find out from it all that she could about these creatures called *men*. Like so many things about life at this awkward, interesting, difficult time, men were something Jalila would have insisted she definitely already knew about a few months before up on Tabuthal. Now, she wasn't so sure. Kalal, despite his ugliness and his funny rough-squeaky voice and his slightly odd smell, looked little like the hairy-faced werewolf figures of her childhood stories, and seemed to have no particular need to shout or fight, to carry her off to his rancid cave, or to start collecting odd and pointless things that he would then try to give her. There had once, Jalila's dreamtent told her, for obscure biological reasons she didn't quite follow, been far more men in the universe; almost as many as there had been women. Obviously, they had dwindled. She then checked on the word *rape*, to make sure it really was the thing she'd imagined, shuddered, but nevertheless investigated in full holographic detail the bits of himself that Kalal had kept hidden beneath his shorts as she'd helped stow those ropes. She couldn't help feeling sorry for him. It was all so pointless and ugly. Had his birth been an accident? A curse? She began to grow sleepy. The subject was starting to bore her. The last thing she remembered learning was that Kalal wasn't a proper man at all,

but a *boy* -- a half-formed thing; the equivalent to girl -- another old unlearned word. Then sleep drifted over her, and she was back with the starlight and the crystal trees of Tabuthal, and wondering as she danced with her own reflection which of them was changing.

By next morning, the sun was shining as if she would never stop. As Jalila stepped out onto the newly formed patio, she gave the blazing light the same sort of an appraising *what-are-you-up-to-now* glare that her mothers gave her when she returned from Al Janb. The sun had done this trick before of seeming permanent, then vanishing by lunchtime into sodden murk, but today her brilliance continued. As it did the day after. And the day after that. Half a month later, even Jalila was convinced that the Season of Summers on Habara had finally arrived.

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The flowers went mad, as did the insects. There were colors everywhere, pulsing before your eyes, swarming down the cliffs toward the sea, which lay flat and placid and salt-rimmed, like a huge animal, basking. It remained mostly cool in Jalila's dreamtent, and the haramlek by now was a place of tall malqaf windtowers and flashing fans and well-like depths, but stepping outside beyond the striped shade of the mashrabiya at midday felt like being hit repeatedly across the head with a hot iron pan. The horizons had drawn back; the mountains, after a few last rumbles of thunder and mist, as if they were clearing their throats, had finally announced themselves to the coastline in all their majesty, and climbed up and up in huge stretches of forest into stone limbs that rose and tangled until your eyes grew tired of rising. Above them, finally, was the sky, which was always blue in this season; the blue color of flame. Even at midnight, you caught the flash and swirl of flame.

Jalila learned to follow the advice of her mothers, and to change her daily habits to suit the imperious demands of this incredible, fussy, and demanding weather. If you woke early, and then drank lots of water, and bowed twice in the direction of Al'Toman while she was still a pinprick in the west, you could catch the day by surprise, when dew lay on the stones and pillars, and the air felt soft and silky as the arms of the ghostly women who sometimes visited Jalila's nights. Then there was breakfast, and the time of work, and the time of study, and Ananke and Pavo would quiz Jalila to ensure that she was following the prescribed Orders of Knowledge. By midday, though, the shadows had drawn back and every trace of moisture had evaporated, and your head swarmed with flies. You sought your own company, and didn't even want *that*, and wished, as you tossed and sweated in your dreamtent, for frost and darkness. Once or twice, just to prove to herself that it could be done, Jalila had tried walking to Al Janb at this time, although of course everything was shut and the whole place wobbled and stank in the heat like rancid jelly. She returned to the haramlek gritty and sweaty, almost crawling, and with a pounding ache in her head.

By evening, when the proper order of the world had righted itself, and Al'Toman would have hung in the east if the mountains hadn't swallowed her, and the heat, which never vanished, had assumed a smoother, more manageable quality, Jalila's mothers were once again hungry for company, and for food and for argument. These evenings, perhaps, were the best of all the times that Jalila could remember of

her early life on the coast of Habara's single great ocean, at that stage in her development from child to adult when the only thing of permanence seemed to be the existence of endless, fascinating change. *How* they argued! Lya, her bondmother, and the oldest of her parents, who wore her grey hair loose as cobwebs with the pride of her age, and waved her arms as she talked and drank, wreathed in endless curls of smoke. Little Pavo, her face smooth as a carved nutmeg, with her small, precise hands, and who knew so much but rarely said anything with insistence. And Jalila's birthmother Ananke, for whom, of her three mothers, Jalila had always felt the deepest, simplest love, who would always touch you before she said anything, and then fix you with her sad and lovely eyes, as if touching and seeing were far more important than any words. Jalila was older now. She joined in with the arguments -- of course, she had *always* joined in, but she cringed to think of the stumbling inanities to which her mothers had previously had to listen, while, now, at last, she had real, proper things to say about life, whole new philosophies that no one else on the Ten Thousand Worlds and One had ever thought of.... Most of the time, her mothers listened. Sometimes, they even acted as if they were persuaded by their daughter's wisdom.

Frequently, there were visitors to these evening gatherings. Up on Tabuthal, visitors had been rare animals, to be fussed over and cherished and only reluctantly released for their onward journey across the black dazzling plains. Down here, where people were nearly as common as stones on the beach, a more relaxed attitude reigned. Sometimes, there were formal invitations that Lya would issue to someone who was *this* or *that* in the town, or more often Pavo would come back with a person she had happened to meet as she poked around for lifeforms on the beach, or Ananke would softly suggest a *neighbor* (another new word and concept to Jalila) might like to *pop in* (ditto). But Al Janb was still a small town, and the dignitaries generally weren't that dignified, and Pavo's beach wanderers were often shy and slight as she was, while *neighbor* was frequently a synonym for *boring*. Still, Jalila came to enjoy most kinds of company, if only so that she could hold forth yet more devastatingly on whatever universal theory of life she was currently developing.

The flutter of lanterns and hands. The slow breath of the sea. Jalila ate stuffed breads and fuul and picked at the mountains of fruit and sucked lemons and sweet blue rutta and waved her fingers. The heavy night insects, glowing with the pollen they had collected, came bumbling toward the lanterns or would alight in their hands. Sometimes, afterward, they walked the shore, and Pavo would show them strange creatures with blurring mouths like wheels, or point to the vast, distant beds of the tideflowers that rose at night to the changes of the tide; silver, crimson, or glowing, their fronds waving through the dark like the beckoning palm trees of islands from storybook seas.

One guestless night, when they were walking north away from the lights of the town, and Pavo was filling a silver bag for an aquarium she was ostensibly making for Jalila, but in reality for herself, the horizon suddenly cracked and rumbled. Instinctively by now, Jalila glanced overhead, expecting clouds to be covering the coastal haze of stars. But the air was still and clear; the hot dark edge of that blue flame. Across the sea, the rumble and crackle was continuing, accompanied by a glowing pillar of smoke that slowly tottered over the horizon. The night pulsed and flickered. There was a breath of impossibly hot salt air. The pillar, a wobbly finger with a flame-tipped nail, continued climbing skyward. A few geelies rose and fell, clacking and cawing, on the far rocks; black shapes in the darkness.

"It's the start of the Season of Rockets," Lya said. "I wonder who'll be coming...?"

2.

By now, Jalila had acquired many of her own acquaintances and friends. Young people were relatively scarce amid the long-lived human Habarans, and those who dwelt around Al Janb were continually drawn together and then repulsed from each other like spinning magnets. The elderly mahwagis, who had outlived the need for wives and the company of a haramlek and lived alone, were often more fun, and more reliably eccentric. It was a relief to visit their houses and escape the pettinesses and sexual jealousies that were starting to infect the other girls near to Jalila's own age. She regarded Kalal similarly -- as an escape -- and she relished helping him with his boat, and enjoyed their journeys out across the bay, where the wind finally tipped almost cool over the edge of the mountains and lapped the sweat from their faces.

Kalal took Jalila out to see the rocketport one still, hot afternoon. It lay just over the horizon, and was the longest journey they had undertaken. The sails filled with the wind, and the ocean grew almost black, yet somehow transparent, as they hurried over it. Looking down, Jalila believed that she could glimpse the white sliding shapes of the great sea-leviathans who had once dwelt, if local legend was to be believed, in the ruined rock palaces of the qasrs, which she had passed on her journey down from Tabuthal. Growing tired of sunlight, they had swarmed back to the sea that had birthed them, throwing away their jewels and riches, which bubbled below the surface, then rose again under Habara's twin moons to become the beds of tideflowers. She had gotten that part of the story from Kalal. Unlike most people who lived on the coast, Kalal was interested in Jalila's life in the starry darkness of Tabuthal, and repaid her with his own tales of the ocean.

The boat ploughed on, rising, frothing. Blissfully, it was almost cold. Just how far out at sea was this rocketport? Jalila had watched some of the arrivals and departures from the quays at Al Janb, but those journeys took place in sleek sail-less craft with silver doors that looked, as they turned out from the harbor and rose out on stilts from the water, as if they could travel half-way up to the stars on their own. Kalal was squatting at the prow, beyond that ramshackle hut that Jalila now knew contained the pheromones and grapplers that were needed to ensnare the tideflowers that this craft had been built to harvest. The boat bore no name on the prow, yet Kalal had many names for it, which he would occasionally mention without explaining. If there was one thing that was different about Kalal, Jalila had decided, it was this absence of proper talk or explanation. It put many people off, but she had found that most things became apparent if you just hung around him and didn't ask direct questions.

People generally pitied Kalal, or stared at him as Jalila still stared at the aliens, or asked him questions that he wouldn't answer with anything other than a shrug. Now that she knew him better, Jalila was starting to understand just how much he hated such treatment -- almost as much, in fact, as he hated being thought of as ordinary. I am a *man*, you know, he'd still remark sometimes -- whenever he felt that Jalila was forgetting. Jalila had never yet risked pointing out that he was in fact a *boy*. Kalal could be prickly and sensitive if you treated him as if things didn't matter. It was hard to tell, really, just how much of how he acted was due to his odd sexual identity, and how much was his personality.

To add to his freakishness, Kalal lived alone with another male -- in fact, the only other male in Al

Janb -- at the far end of the shore cottages, in a birthing relationship that made Kalal term him his *father*. His name was Ibra, and he looked much more like the males of Jalila's dreamt stories. He was taller than almost anyone, and wore a black beard and long colorful robes or strode about bare-chested, and always talked in a thunderously deep voice, as if he were addressing a crowd through a megaphone. Ibra laughed a lot and flashed his teeth through that hairy mask, and clapped people on the back when he asked them how they were, and then stood away and seemed to lose interest before they had answered. He whistled and sang loudly and waved to passers-by while he worked at repairing the feluccas for his living. Ibra had come to this planet when Kalal was a baby, under circumstances that remained perennially vague. He treated Jalila with the same loud and grinning friendship with which he treated everyone, and which seemed like a wall. He was at least as alien as the tube-like creatures who had arrived from the stars with this new Season of Rockets, which had had one of the larger buildings in Al Janb encased in transparent plastics and flooded in a freezing grey goo so they could live in it. Ibra had come around to their haramlek once, on the strength of one of Ananke's *pop in* evening invitations. Jalila, who was then nurturing the idea that no intelligence could exist without the desire to acknowledge some higher deity, found her propositions and examples drowned out in a flurry of counter-questions and assertions and odd bits of information that she half-suspected that Ibra, as he drank surprising amounts of virtually undiluted zibib and freckled aniseed spit at her, was making up on the spot. Afterward, as they walked the shore, he drew her apart and laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and confided in his rambling growl how much he'd enjoyed *fencing* with her. Jalila knew what fencing was, but she didn't see what it had to do with talking. She wasn't even sure if she liked Ibra. She certainly didn't pretend to understand him.

The sails thrummed and crackled as they headed toward the spaceport. Kalal was absorbed, staring ahead from the prow, the water splashing reflections across his lithe brown body. Jalila had almost grown used to the way he looked. After all, they were both slightly freakish: she, because she came from the mountains; he, because of his sex. And they both liked their own company, and could accept each other into it without distraction during these long periods of silence. One never asked the other what they were thinking. Neither really cared, and they cherished that privacy.

"Look--" Kalal scuttled to the rudder. Jalila hauled back the jib. In wind-crackling silence, they and their nameless and many-named boat tacked toward the spaceport.

The spaceport was almost like the mountains: when you were close up, it was too big to be seen properly. Yet, for all its size, the place was a disappointment; empty and messy, like a huge version of the docks of Al Janb, similarly reeking of oil and refuse, and essentially serving a similar function. The spaceships themselves -- if indeed the vast cistern-like objects they saw forever in the distance as they furled the sails and rowed along the maze of oily canals were spaceships -- were only a small part of this huge floating complex of islands. Much more of it was taken up by looming berths for the tugs and tankers that placidly chugged from icy pole to equator across the watery expanses of Habara, taking or delivering the supplies that the settlements deemed necessary for civilized life, or collecting the returning fallen bulk cargoes. The tankers were rust-streaked beasts, so huge that they hardly seemed to grow as you approached them, humming and eerily deserted, yet devoid of any apparent intelligence of their own. They didn't glimpse a single alien at the spaceport. They didn't even see a human being.

The journey there, Jalila decided as they finally got the sails up again, had been far more enjoyable and exciting than actually arriving. Heading back toward the sun-pink coastal mountains, which almost felt like home to her now, she was filled with an odd longing that only diminished when she began to

make out the lighted dusky buildings of Al Janb. Was this homesickness, she wondered? Or something else?

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This was the time of Habara's long summer. This was the Season of Rockets. When she mentioned their trip, Jalila was severely warned by Pavo of the consequences of approaching the spaceport during periods of possible launch, but it went no further than that. Each night now, and deep into the morning, the rockets rumbled at the horizon and climbed upward on those grumpy pillars, bringing to the shore a faint whiff of sulphur and roses, adding to the thunderous heat. And outside at night, if you looked up, you could sometimes see the blazing comet-trails of the returning capsules, which would crash somewhere in the distant seas.

The beds of tideflowers were growing bigger as well. If you climbed up the sides of the mountains before the morning heat flattened everything, you could look down on those huge, brilliant, and ever-changing carpets, where every pattern and swirl seemed gorgeous and unique. At night, in her dreamtent, Jalila sometimes imagined that she was floating up on them, just as in the oldest of the old stories. She was sailing over a different landscape on a magic carpet, with the cool night desert rising and falling beneath her like a soft sea. She saw distant palaces, and clusters of palms around small and tranquil lakes that flashed the silver of a single moon. And then yet more of this infinite sahara, airy and frosty, flowed through curves and undulations, and grew vast and pinkish in her dreams. Those curves, as she flew over them and began to touch herself, resolved into thighs and breasts. The winds stirring the peaks of the dunes resolved in shuddering breaths.

This was the time of Habara's long summer. This was the Season of Rockets.

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Robin, Jalila's hayawan, had by now, under Pavo's attentions, fully recovered from the change to her environment. The rust had gone from her flanks, the melds with her thinly grey-furred flesh were bloodless and neat. She looked thinner and lighter. She even smelled different. Like the other hayawans, Robin was frisky and bright and brown-eyed now, and didn't seem to mind the heat, or even Jalila's forgetful neglect of her. Down on the coast, hayawans were regarded as expensive, uncomfortable, and unreliable, and Jalila and her mothers took a pride in riding across the beach into Al Janb on their huge, flat-footed, and loping mounts, enjoying the stares and the whispers, and the whispering space that opened around them as they hobbled the hayawans in a square. Kalal, typically, was one of the few

coastal people who expressed an interest in trying to ride one of them, and Jalila was glad to teach him, showing him the clicks and calls and nudges, the way you took the undulations of the creature's back as you might the ups and downs of the sea, and when not to walk around their front and rear ends. After her experiences on his boat, the initial rope burns, the cracks on the head and the heaving sickness, she enjoyed the reversal of situations.

There was a Tabuthal saying about falling off a hayawan ninety-nine times before you learnt to ride, which Kalal disproved by falling off far into triple figures. Jalila chose Lya's mount Abu for him to ride, because she was the biggest, the most intelligent, and generally the most placid of the beasts unless she felt that something was threatening her, and because Lya, more conscious of looks and protocol down here than the other mothers, rarely rode her. Domestic animals, Jalila had noticed, often took oddly to Kalal when they first saw and scented him, but he had learned the ways of getting around them, and developed a bond and understanding with Abu even while she was still trying to bite his legs. Jalila had made a good choice of riding partners. Both of them, hayawan and human, while proud and aloof, were essentially playful, and never shirked a challenge. While all hayawans had been female throughout all recorded history, Jalila wondered if there wasn't a little of the male still embedded in Abu's imperious downward glance.

Now that summer was here, and the afternoons had vanished into the sun's blank blaze, the best time to go riding was the early morning. North, beyond Al Janb, there were shores and there were saltbeds and there were meadows, there were fences to be leapt, and barking feral dogs as male as Kalal to be taunted, but south, there were rocks and forests, there were tracks that led nowhere, and there were headlands and cliffs that you saw once and could never find again. South, mostly, was the way that they rode.

"What happens if we keep riding?"

They were taking their breath on a flatrock shore where a stream, from which they had all drunk, shone in pools on its way to the ocean. The hayawans had squatted down now in the shadows of the cliff and were nodding sleepily, one nictitating membrane after another slipping over their eyes. As soon as they had gotten here and dismounted, Kalal had walked straight down, arms outstretched, into the tideflower-bobbing ocean. Jalila had followed, whooping, feeling tendrils and petals bumping into her. It was like walking through floral soup. Kalal had sunk to his shoulders and started swimming, which was something Jalila still couldn't quite manage. He splashed around her, taunting, sending up sheets of colored light. They'd stripped from their clothes as they clambered out, and laid them on the hot rocks, where they now steamed like fresh bread.

"This whole continent's like a huge island," Jalila said in delayed answer to Kalal's question. "We'd come back to where we started."

Kalal shook his head. "Oh, you can never do that...."

"Where would we be, then?"

"Somewhere slightly different. The tideflowers would have changed, and we wouldn't be us, either." Kalal wet his finger, and wrote something in naskhi script on the hot, flat stone between them. Jalila thought she recognized the words of a poet, but the beginning had dissolved into the hot air before she could make proper sense of it. Funny, but at home with her mothers, and with their guests, and even with many of the people of her own age, such statements as they had just made would have been the beginning of a long debate. With Kalal, they just seemed to hang there. Kalal, he moved, he passed on. Nothing quite seemed to stick. There was something, somewhere, Jalila thought, lost and empty about

him.

The way he was sitting, she could see most of his genitals, which looked quite jaunty in their little nest of hair; like a small animal. She'd almost gotten as used to the sight of them as she had to the other peculiarities of Kalal's features. Scratching her nose, picking off some of the petals that still clung to her skin like wet confetti, she felt no particular curiosity. Much more than Kalal's funny body, Jalila was conscious of her own -- especially her growing breasts, which were still somewhat uneven. Would they ever come out right, she wondered, or would she forever be some unlovely oddity, just as Kalal seemingly was? Better not to think of such things. Better to just enjoy the feel the sun baking her shoulders, loosening the curls of her hair.

"Should we turn back?" Kalal asked eventually. "It's getting hotter...."

"Why bother with that -- if we carry on, we'll get back to where we started."

Kalal stood up. "Do you want to bet?"

So they rode on, more slowly, uphill through the uncharted forest, where the urrearth trees tangled with the blue fronds of Habara fungus, and the birds were still, and the crackle of the dry undergrowth was the only sound in the air. Eventually, ducking boughs, then walking, dreamily lost and almost ready to turn back, they came to a path, and remounted. The trees fell away, and they found that they were on a clifftop, far, far higher above the winking sea than they could possibly have imagined. Midday heat clapped around them. Ahead, where the cliff stuck out over the ocean like a cupped hand, shimmering and yet solid, was one of the ruined castles or geological features that the sea-leviathans had supposedly deserted before the arrival of people on this planet -- a qasr. They rode slowly toward it, their hayawans' feet thocking in the dust. It looked like a fairy place. Part natural, but roofed and buttressed, with grey-black gables and huge and intricate windows, that flashed with the colors of the sea. Kalal gestured for silence, dismounted from Abu, led his mount back into the shadowed arms of the forest, and flicked the switch in her back that hobbled her.

"You *know* where this is?"

Kalal beckoned.

Jalila, who knew him better than to ask questions, followed.

Close to, much of the qasr seemed to be made of a quartz-speckled version of the same fused stone from which Jalila's haramlek was constructed. But some other bits of it appeared to be natural effusions of the rock. There was a big arched door of sun-bleached and iron-studded oak, reached by a path across the narrowing cliff, but Kalal steered Jalila to the side, and then up and around a bare angle of hot stone that seemed ready at any moment to tilt them down into the distant sea. But the way never quite gave out; there was always another handhold. From the confident manner in which he moved up this near-cliff face, then scrambled across the blistering black tiles of the rooftop beyond, and dropped down into the sudden cool of a narrow passageway, Jalila guessed that Kalal had been to this qasr before. At first, there was little sense of trespass. The place seemed old and empty -- a little-visited monument. The ceilings were stained. The corridors were swept with the litter of winter leaves. Here and there along the walls, there were friezes, and long strings of a script which made as little sense to Jalila, in their age and dimness, as that which Kalal had written on the hot rocks.

Then Kalal gestured for Jalila to stop, and she clustered beside him, and they looked down through the intricate stone lattice of a mashrabiya into sunlight. It was plain from the balcony drop beneath them that they were still high up in this qasr. Below, in the central courtyard, somehow shocking after this emptiness, a fountain played in a garden, and water lapped from its lip and ran in steel fingers toward

cloistered shadows.

"Someone *lives* here?"

Kalal mouthed the word *tariqua*. Somehow, Jalila instantly understood. It all made sense, in this Season of Rockets, even the dim scenes and hieroglyphs carved in the honeyed stones of this fairy castle. Tariquas were merely human, after all, and the spaceport was nearby; they had to live somewhere. Jalila glanced down at her scuffed sandals, suddenly conscious that she hadn't taken them off -- but by then it was too late, and below them and through the mashrabiya a figure had detached herself from the shadows. The tariqua was tall and thin, and black and bent as a burnt-out matchstick. She walked with a cane. Jalila didn't know what she'd expected -- she'd grown older since her first encounter with Kalal, and no longer imagined that she knew about things just because she'd learnt of them in her dreamtent. But still, this tariqua seemed a long way from someone who piloted the impossible distances between the stars, as she moved and clicked slowly around that courtyard fountain, and far older and frailer than anyone Jalila had ever seen. She tended a bush of blue flowers, she touched the fountain's bubbling stone lip. Her head was ebony bald. Her fingers were charcoal. Her eyes were as white and seemingly blind as the flecks of quartz in the fused stone of this building. Once, though, she seemed to look up toward them. Jalila went cold. Surely it wasn't possible that she could *see* them? -- and in any event, there was something about the motion of looking up which seemed habitual. As if, like touching the lip of the fountain, and tending that bush, the tariqua always looked up at this moment of the day at that particular point in the stone walls that rose above her.

Jalila followed Kalal further along the corridors, and down stairways and across drops of beautifully clear glass, that hung on nothing far above the prismatic sea. Another glimpse of the tariqua, who was still slowly moving, her neck stretching like an old tortoise as she bent to sniff a flower. In this part of the qasr, there were more definite signs of habitation. Scattered cards and books. A moth-eaten tapestry that billowed from a windowless arch overlooking the sea. Empty coat hangers piled like the bones of insects. An active but clearly little-used chemical toilet. Now that the initial sense of surprise had gone, there was something funny about this mixture of the extraordinary and the everyday. Here, there was a kitchen, and a half-chewed lump of aish on a plate smeared with seeds. To imagine, that you could both travel between the stars *and* eat bread and tomatoes! Both Kalal and Jalila were red-faced and chuffing now from suppressed hilarity. Down now at the level of the cloisters, hunched in the shade, they studied the tariqua's stooping back. She really did look like a scrawny tortoise, yanked out of its shell, moving between these bushes. Any moment now, you expected her to start chomping on the leaves. She moved more by touch than by sight. Amid the intricate colors of this courtyard, and the flashing glass windchimes that tinkled in the far archways, as she fumbled sightlessly but occasionally glanced at things with those odd, white eyes, it seemed yet more likely that she was blind, or at least terribly near-sighted. Slowly, Jalila's hilarity receded, and she began to feel sorry for this old creature who had been aged and withered and wrecked by the strange process of travel between the stars. *The Pain of Distance* -- now, where had that phrase come from?

Kalal was still puffing his cheeks. His eyes were watering as he ground his fist against his mouth and silently thumped the nearest pillar in agonized hilarity. Then he let out a nasal grunt, which Jalila was sure that the tariqua must have heard. But her stance didn't alter. It wasn't so much as if she hadn't noticed them, but that she already *knew* that someone was there. There was a sadness and resignation about her movements, the tap of her cane.... But Kalal had recovered his equilibrium, and Jalila watched his fingers snake out and enclose a flake of broken paving. Another moment, and it spun out into the

sunlit courtyard in an arc so perfect that there was never any doubt that it was going to strike the tariqua smack between her bird-like shoulders. Which it did -- but by then they were running, and the tariqua was straightening herself up with that same slow resignation. Just before they bundled themselves up the stairway, Jalila glanced back, and felt a hot bar of light from one of the qasr's high upper windows stream across her face. The tariqua was looking straight toward her with those blind white eyes. Then Kalal grabbed her hand. Once again, she was running.

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Jalila was cross with herself, and cross with Kalal. It wasn't *like* her, a voice like a mingled chorus of her three mothers would say, to taunt some poor old mahwagi, even if that mahwagi happened also to be an aged tariqua. But Jalila was young, and life was busy. The voice soon faded. In any case, there was the coming moulid to prepare for.

The arrangement of festivals, locally, and on Habara as a whole, was always difficult. Habara's astronomical year was so long that it made no sense to fix the traditional cycle of moulids by it, but at the same time, no one felt comfortable celebrating the same saint or eid in conflicting seasons. Fasting, after all, properly belonged to winter, and no one could quite face their obligations toward the Almighty with quite the same sense of surrender and equanimity in the middle of spring. People's memories faded, as well, as to how one *did* a particular saint in autumn, or revered a certain enlightenment in blasting heat that you had previously celebrated by throwing snowballs. Added to this were the logistical problems of catering for the needs of a small and scattered population across a large planet. There were travelling players, fairs, wandering sufis and priests, but they plainly couldn't be everywhere at once. The end result was that each moulid was fixed locally on Habara, according to a shifting timetable, and after much discussion and many meetings, and rarely happened twice at exactly the same time, or else occurred simultaneously in different places. Lya threw herself into these discussions with the enthusiasm of one who had long been missing such complexities in the lonelier life up on Tabuthal. For the Moulid of First Habitation -- which commemorated the time when the Blessed Joanna had arrived on Habara at a site that several different towns claimed, and cast the first urrearth seeds, and lived for five long Habaran years on nothing but tideflowers and starlight, and rode the sea-leviathans across the oceans as if they were hayawans as she waited for her lover Pia -- Lya was the leading light in the local organizations at Al Janb, and the rest of her haramlek were expected to follow suit.

The whole of Al Janb was to be transformed for a day and a night. Jalila helped with the hammering and weaving, and tuning Pavo's crystals and plants, which would supposedly transform the serraplate road between their haramlek and the town into a glittering tunnel. More in the forefront of Jalila's mind were those colored silks that came and went at a particular stall in the markets, and which she was sure would look perfect on her. Between the planning and the worries about this or that turning into a disaster, she worked carefully on each of her three mothers in turn; a nudge here, a suggestion there. Turning their thoughts toward accepting this extravagance was a delicate matter, like training a new hayawan to bear the saddle. Of course, there were wild resistances and buckings, but you were patient,

you were stronger. You knew what you wanted. You kept to your subject. You returned and returned and returned to it.

On the day when Ananke finally relented, a worrying wind had struck up, pushing at the soft, half-formed growths that now straggled through the normal weeds along the road into Al Janb like silvered mucus. Pavo was fretting about her creations. Lya's life was one long meeting. Even Ananke was anxious as they walked into Al Janb, where faulty fresh projections flickered across the buildings and squares like an incipient headache as the sky greyed. Jalila, urging her birthmother on as she paused frustratingly, was sure that the market wouldn't be there, or that if it was, the stall that sold the windsilks was sure to have sold out -- or, even then, that the particular ones she'd set her mind on would have gone....

But it was all there. In fact, a whole new supply of windsilks, even more marvelous and colorful, had been imported for this mouldid. They blew and lifted like colored smoke. Jalila caught and admired them.

"I think this might be you...."

Jalila turned at the voice. It was Nayra, a girl about a standard year and a half older than her, whose mothers were amongst the richest and most powerful in Al Janb. Nayra herself was both beautiful and intelligent; witty, and sometimes devastatingly cruel. She was generally at the center of things, surrounded by a bickering and admiring crowd of seemingly lesser mortals, which sometimes included Jalila. But today she was alone.

"You see, Jalila. That crimson. With your hair, your eyes..."

She held the windsilk across Jalila's face like a yashmak. It danced around her eyes. It blurred over her shoulders. Jalila would have thought the color too bold. But Nayra's gaze, which flickered without ever quite leaving Jalila's, her smoothing hands, told Jalila that it was right for her far better than any mirror could have. And then there was blue -- that flame color of the summer night. There were silver clasps, too, to hold these windsilks, which Jalila had never noticed on sale before. The stallkeeper, sensing a desire to purchase that went beyond normal bargaining, drew out more surprises from a chest. *Feel! They can only be made in one place, on one planet, in one season. Look! The grubs, they only hatch when they hear the song of a particular bird, which sings only once in its life before it gives up its spirit to the Almighty....* And so on. Ananke, seeing that Jalila had found a more interested and willing helper, palmed her far more cash than she'd promised, and left her with a smile and an oddly sad backward glance.

Jalila spend the rest of that grey and windy afternoon with Nayra, choosing clothes and ornaments for the mouldid. Bangles for their wrists and ankles. Perhaps -- no? yes? -- even a small tiara. Bolts of cloth the color of today's sky bound across her hips to offset the windsilk's beauty. A jewel still filled with the sapphire light of a distant sun to twinkle at her belly. Nayra, with her dark blonde hair, her light brown eyes, her fine strong hands, which were pale pink beneath the fingernails like the inside of a shell, she hardly needed anything to augment her obvious beauty. But Jalila knew from her endless studies of herself in her dreamtent mirror that *she* needed to be more careful; the wrong angle, the wrong light, an incipient spot, and whatever effect she was striving for could be so easily ruined. Yet she'd never really cared as much about such things as she did on that windy afternoon, moving through stalls and shops amid the scent of patchouli. To be so much the focus of her own and someone else's attention! Nayra's hands, smoothing across her back and shoulders, lifting her hair, cool sweat at her shoulders, the cool slide and rattle of her bangles as she raised her arms....

"We could be creatures from a story, Jalila. Let's imagine I'm Scheherazade." A toss of that lovely

hair. Liquid gold. Nayra's seashell fingers, stirring. "You can be her sister, Dinarzade...."

Jalila nodded enthusiastically, although Dinarzade had been an unspectacular creature as far as she remembered the tale; there only so that she might waken Scheherazade in the Sultana's chamber before the first cock crow of morning. But her limbs, her throat, felt strange and soft and heavy. She reminded herself, as she dressed and undressed, of the doll Tabatha she'd once so treasured up on Tabuthal, and had found again recently, and thought for some odd reason of burying....

The lifting, the pulling, Nayra's appraising hands and glance and eyes. This unresisting heaviness. Jalila returned home to her haramlek dazed and drained and happy, and severely out of credit.

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That night, there was another visitor for dinner. She must have taken some sort of carriage to get there, but she came toward their veranda as if she'd walked the entire distance. Jalila, whose head was filled with many things, was putting out the bowls when she heard the murmur of footsteps. The sound was so slow that eventually she noticed it consciously, looked up, and saw a thin, dark figure coming up the sandy path between Pavo's swaying and newly sculpted bushes. One arm leaned on a cane, and the other strained seekingly forward. In shock, Jalila dropped the bowl she was holding. It seemed to roll around and around on the table forever, slipping playfully out of reach of her fingers before spinning off the edge and shattering into several thousand white pieces.

"Oh dear," the tariqua said, finally climbing the steps beside the windy trellis, her cane tap-tapping. "Perhaps you'd better go and tell one of your mothers, Jalila."

Jalila felt breathless. All through that evening, the tariqua's trachoman white eyes, the scarred and tarry driftwood of her face, seemed to be studying her. Even apart from that odd business of her knowing her name, which she supposed could be explained, Jalila was more and more certain that the tariqua knew that it was she and Kalal who had spied on her and thrown stones at her on that hot day in the qasr. As if that mattered. But somehow, it *did*, more than it should have done. Amid all this confused thinking, and the silky memories of her afternoon with Nayra, Jalila scarcely noticed the conversation. The weather remained gusty, spinning the lanterns, playing shapes with the shadows, making the tapestries breathe. The tariqua's voice was as thin as her frame. It carried on the spinning air like the croak of an insect.

"Perhaps we could walk on the beach, Jalila?"

"What?" She jerked as if she'd been abruptly awakened. Her mothers were already clearing things away, and casting odd glances at her. The voice had whispered inside her head, and the tariqua was sitting there, her burnt and splintery arm outstretched, in the hope, Jalila supposed, that she would be helped up from the table. The creature's robe had fallen back. Her arm looked like a picture Jalila had once seen of a dried cadaver. With an effort, nearly knocking over another bowl, Jalila moved around the billowing table. With an even bigger effort, she placed her own hand into that of the tariqua. She'd expected it to feel leathery, which it did. But it was also hot beyond fever. Terribly, the fingers closed around hers. There was a pause. Then the tariqua got up with surprising swiftness, and reached around

for her cane, still holding Jalila's hand, but without having placed any weight on it. *She could have done all that on her own, the old witch*, Jalila thought. *And she can see, too -- look at the way she's been stuffing herself with kofta all evening, reaching over for figs....*

"What do you know of the stars, Jalila?" the tariqua asked as they walked beside the beach. Pavo's creations along the road behind them still looked stark and strange and half-formed as they swayed in the wind, like the wavering silver limbs of an upturned insect. The waves came and went, strewing tideflowers far up the strand. Like the tongue of a snake, the tariqua's cane darted ahead of her.

Jalila shrugged. There were these Gateways, she had always known that. There were these Gateways, and they were the only proper path between the stars, because no one could endure the eons of time that crossing even the tiniest fragment of the Ten Thousand and One Worlds would entail by the ordinary means of traveling from *there* to *here*.

"Not, of course," the tariqua was saying, "that people don't do such things. There are tales, there are always tales, of ghost-ships of sufis drifting for tens of centuries through the black and black.... But the wealth, the contact, the *community*, flows through the Gateways. The Almighty herself provided the means to make them in the Days of Creation, when everything that was and will ever be spilled out into a void so empty that it did not even exist as an emptiness. In those first moments, as warring elements collided, boundaries formed, dimensions were made and disappeared without ever quite dissolving, like the salt tidemarks on those rocks...." As they walked, the tariqua waved her cane. "...which the sun and the eons can never quite bake away. These boundaries are called cosmic strings, Jalila, and they have no end. They must form either minute loops, or they must stretch from one end of this universe to the other, and then turn back again, and turn and turn without end."

Jalila glanced at the brooch the tariqua was wearing, which was of a worm consuming its tail. She knew that the physical distances between the stars were vast, but the tariqua somehow made the distances that she traversed to avoid that journey seem even vaster....

"You must understand," the tariqua said, "that we tariquas pass through something worse than nothing to get from one side to the other of a Gateway."

Jalila nodded. She was young, and *nothing* didn't sound especially frightening. Still, she sensed that there were the answers to mysteries in this near-blind gaze and whispering voice that she would never get from her dreamtent or her mothers. "But, *hanim*, what could be worse," she asked dutifully, although she still couldn't think of the tariqua in terms of a name, and thus simply addressed her with the short honorific, "than sheer emptiness?"

"Ah, but emptiness is *nothing*. Imagine, Jalila, passing through *everything* instead!" The tariqua chuckled, and gazed up at the sky. "But the stars are beautiful, and so is this night. You come, I hear, from Tabuthal. There, the skies must all have been very different."

Jalila nodded. A brief vision flared over her. The way that up there, on the clearest, coldest nights, you felt as if the stars were all around you. Even now, much though she loved the fetors and astonishments of the coast, she still felt the odd pang of missing something. It was a *feeling* she missed, as much as the place itself, which she guessed would probably seem bleak and lonely if she returned to it now. It was partly to do, she suspected, with that sense that she was losing her childhood. It was like being on a ship, on Kalal's nameless boat, and watching the land recede, and half of you loving the loss, half of you hating it. A war seemed to be going on inside her between these two warring impulses....

To her surprise, Jalila realized that she wasn't just thinking these thoughts, but speaking them, and that the tariqua, walking at her slow pace, the weight of her head bending her spine, her cane whispering a

jagged line in the dust as the black rags of her djibbah flapped around her, was listening. Jalila supposed that she, too, had been young once, although that was hard to imagine. The sea frothed and swished. They were at the point in the road now where, gently buzzing and almost out of sight amid the forest, hidden there as if in shame, the tariqua's caleche lay waiting. It was a small filigree, a thing as old and black and ornate as her brooch. Jalila helped her toward it through the trees. The craft's door creaked open like an iron gate, then shut behind the tariqua. A few crickets sounded through the night's heat. Then, with a soft rush, and a static glow like the charge of windsilk brushing flesh, the caleche rose up through the treetops and wafted away.

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The day of the moulid came. It was everything that Jalila expected, although she paid it little attention. The intricate, bowered pathway that Pavo had been working on finally shaped itself to her plans -- in fact, it was better than that, and seemed like a beautiful accident. As the skies cleared, the sun shone through prismatic arches. The flowers, which had looked so stunted only the evening before, suddenly unfolded, with petals like beaten brass, and stamens shaped so that the continuing breeze, which Pavo had always claimed to have feared, laughed and whistled and tooted as it passed through them. Walking beneath the archways of flickering shadows, you were assailed by scents and the clashes of small orchestras. But Jalila's ears were blocked, her eyes were sightless. She, after all, was Dinarzade, and Nayra was Scheherazade of the Thousand and One Nights.

Swirling windsilks, her heart hammering, she strode into Al Janb. Everything seemed to be different today. There were too many sounds and colors. People tried to dance with her, or sell her things. Some of the aliens seemed to have dressed themselves as humans. Some of the humans were most definitely dressed as aliens. Her feet were already blistered and delicate from her new crimson slippers. And there was Nayra, dressed in a silvery serwal and blouse of such devastating simplicity that Jalila felt her heart kick and pause in its beating. Nayra was surrounded by a small storm of her usual admirers. Her eyes took in Jalila as she stood at their edge, then beckoned her to join them. The idea of Dinarzade and Scheherazade, which Jalila had thought was to be their secret, was now shared with everyone. The other girls laughed and clustered around, admiring, joking, touching and stroking bits of her as if she was a hayawan. *You of all people, Jalila! And such jewels, such silks...* Jalila stood half-frozen, her heart still kicking. *So, so marvelous! And not at all dowdy....* She could have lived many a long and happy life without such compliments.

Thus the day continued. All of them in a crowd, and Jalila feeling both over-dressed and exposed, with these stirring, whispering windsilks that covered and yet mostly seemed to reveal her body. She felt like a child in a ribboned parade, and when one of the old mahwagis even came up and pressed a sticky lump of basbousa into her hand, it was the final indignity. She trudged off alone, and found Kalal and his father Ibra managing a seafront stall beside the swaying masts of the bigger trawlers, around which there was a fair level of purchase and interest. Ibra was enjoying himself, roaring out enticements and laughter in his big, belling voice. At last, they'd gotten around to harvesting some of the tideflowers for

which their nameless boat had been designed, and they were selling every sort here, salt-fresh from the ocean.

"Try this one...." Kalal drew Jalila away to the edge of the harbor, where the oiled water flashed below. He had just one tideflower in his hand. It was deep-banded the same crimson and blue as her windsilks. The interior was like the eye of an anemone.

Jalila was flattered. But she hesitated. "I'm not sure about wearing something dead." In any case, she knew she already looked ridiculous. That this would be more of the same.

"It isn't dead, it's as alive as you are." Kalal held it closer, against Jalila's shoulder, toward the top of her breast, smoothing out the windsilks in a way that briefly reminded her of Nayra. "And isn't this material the dead tissue of some creature or other...?" Still, his hands were smoothing. Jalila thought again of Nayra. Being dressed like a doll. Her nipples started to rise. "And if we take it back to the tideflower beds tomorrow morning, place it down there carefully, it'll still survive..." The tideflower had stuck itself to her now, anyway, beneath the shoulder, its adhesion passing through the thin windsilks, burning briefly as it bound to her flesh. And it *was* beautiful, even if she wasn't, and it would have been churlish to refuse. Jalila placed her finger into the tideflower's center, and felt a soft suction, like the mouth of a baby. Smiling, thanking Kalal, feeling somehow better and more determined, she walked away.

The day went on. The night came. Fireworks crackled and rumbled, rippling down the slopes of the mountains. The whole of the center of Al Janb was transformed unrecognizably into the set of a play. Young Joanna herself walked the vast avenues of Ghezirah, the island city that lies at the center of all the Ten Thousand and One Worlds, and which grows in much the same way as Pavo's crystal scaffoldings, but on an inconceivable scale, filled with azure skies, glinting in the dark heavens like a vast diamond. The Blessed Joanna, she was supposedly thinking of a planet that had come to her in a vision as she wandered beside Ghezirah's palaces; it was a place of fine seas, lost giants, and mysterious natural castles, although Jalila, as she followed in the buffeting, cheering procession, and glanced around at the scale of the projections that briefly covered Al Janb's ordinary buildings, wondered why, even if this version of Ghezirah was fake and thin, Joanna would ever have wanted to leave *that* city to come to a place such as this.

There were more fireworks. As they rattled, a deeper sound swept over them in a moan from the sea, and everyone looked up as sunglow poured through the gaudy images of Ghezirah that still clad Al Janb's buildings. Not one rocket, or two, but three, were all climbing up from the spaceport simultaneously, the vast white plumes of their energies fanning out across half the sky to form a billowy *fleur de lys*. At last, as she craned her neck and watched the last of those blazing tails diminish, Jalila felt exulted by this mouldid. In the main square, the play continued. When she found a place on a bench and began to watch the more intimate parts of the drama unfold, as Joanna's lover Pia pleaded with her to remain amid the cerulean towers of Ghezirah, a figure moved to sit beside her. To Jalila's astonishment, it was Nayra.

"That's a lovely flower. I've been meaning to ask you all day..." Her fingers moved across Jalila's shoulder. There was a tug at her skin as she touched the petals.

"I got it from Kalal."

"Oh..." Nayra sought the right word. "*Him*. Can I smell it...?" She was already bending down, her face close to Jalila's breast, the golden fall of her hair brushing her forearm, enclosing her in the sweet, slightly vanilla scent of her body. "That's nice. It smells like the sea -- on a clear day, when you climb up

and look down at it from the mountains...."

The play continued. Would Joanna really go to this planet, which kept appearing to her in these visions? Jalila didn't know. She didn't care. Nayra's hand slipped into her own and lay there upon her thigh with a weight and presence that seemed far heavier than the entire universe. She felt like that doll again. Her breath was pulling, dragging. The play continued, and then, somewhere, somehow, it came to an end. Jalila felt an aching sadness. She'd have been happy for Joanna to continue her will-I-won't-I agonizing and prayers throughout all of human history, just so that she and Nayra could continue to sit together like this, hand in hand, thigh to thigh, on this hard bench.

The projections flickered and faded. She stood up in wordless disappointment. The whole square suddenly looked like a wastetip, and she felt crumpled and used-up in these sweaty and ridiculous clothes. It was hardly worth looking back toward Nayra to say goodbye. She would, Jalila was sure, have already vanished to rejoin those clucking, chattering friends who surrounded her like a wall.

"Wait!" A hand on her arm. That same vanilla scent. "I've heard that your mother Pavo's displays along the south road are something quite fabulous...." For once, Nayra's golden gaze as Jalila looked back at her was almost coy, nearly averted. "I was rather hoping you might show me...."

The two of them. Walking hand in hand, just like all lovers throughout history. Like Pia and Joanna. Like Romana and Juliet. Like Isabel and Genya. Ghosts of smoke from the rocket plumes that had buttressed the sky hung around them, and the world seemed half-dissolved in the scent of sulphur and roses. An old woman they passed, who was sweeping up discarded kebab sticks and wrappers, made a sign as they passed, and gave them a weary, sad-happy smile. Jalila wasn't sure what had happened to her slippers, but they and her feet both seemed to have become weightless. If it hadn't been for the soft sway and pull of Nayra's arm, Jalila wouldn't even have been sure that she was moving. *People's feet really don't touch the ground when they are in love!* Here was something else that her dreamtent and her mothers hadn't told her.

Pavo's confections of plant and crystal looked marvelous in the hazed and doubled silver shadows of the rising moons. Jalila and Nayra wandered amid them, and the rest of the world felt withdrawn and empty. A breeze was still playing over the rocks and the waves, but the fluting sound had changed. It was one soft pitch, rising, falling. They kissed. Jalila closed her eyes -- she couldn't help it -- and trembled. Then they held both hands together and stared at each other, unflinching. Nayra's bare arms in the moonlight, the curve inside her elbow and the blue trace of a vein: Jalila had never seen anything as beautiful, here in this magical place.

The stables, where the hayawans were breathing. Jalila spoke to Robin, to Abu. The beasts were sleepy. Their flesh felt cold, their plates were warm, and Nayra seemed a little afraid. There, in the sighing darkness, the clean scent of feed and straw was overlaid with the heat of the hayawans' bodies and their dung. The place was no longer a ramshackle tent, but solid and dark, another of Pavo's creations; the stony catacombs of ages. Jalila led Nayra through it, her shoulders brushing pillars, her heart pounding, her slippered feet whispering through spills of straw. To the far corner, where the fine new white bedding lay like depths of cloud. They threw themselves onto it, half-expecting to fall through. But they were floating in straggles of windsilk, held in tangles of their own laughter and limbs.

"Remember." Nayra's palm on Jalila's right breast, scrolled like an old print in the geometric moonlight that fell from Walah, and then through the arched stone grid of a murqana that lay above their heads. "I'm Scheherazade. You're Dinarzade, my sister..." The pebble of Jalila's nipple rising through the windsilk. "That old, old story, Jalila. Can you remember how it went...?"

In the tide of yore and in the time of long gone before, there was a Queen of all the Queens of the Banu Sasan in the far islands of India and China, a Lady of armies and guards and servants and dependants....

Again, they kissed.

Handsome gifts, such as horses with saddles of gem-encrusted gold; mamelukes, or white slaves; beautiful handmaids, high-breasted virgins, and splendid stuffs and costly....

Nayra's hand moved from Jalila's breast to encircle the tideflower. She gave it a tug, pulled harder. Something held, gave, held, hurt, then gave entirely. The windsilks poured back. A small dark bead of blood welled at the curve between Jalila's breast and shoulder. Nayra licked it away.

In one house was a girl weeping for the loss of her sister. In another, perhaps a mother trembling for the fate of her child; and instead of the blessings that had formerly been heaped on the Sultana's head, the air was now full of curses....

Jalila was rising, floating, as Nayra's mouth traveled downward to suckle at her breast.

Now the Wazir had two daughters, Scheherazade and Dinarzade, of whom the elder had perused the books, annals, and legends of preceding queens and empresses, and the stories, examples, and instances of bygone things. Scheherazade had read the works of the poets and she knew them by heart. She had studied philosophy, the sciences, the arts, and all accomplishments. And Scheherazade was pleasant and polite, wise and witty. Scheherazade, she was beautiful and well bred....

Flying far over frost-glittering saharas, beneath the twin moons, soaring through the clouds. The falling, rising dunes. The minarets and domes of distant cities. The cries and shuddering sighs of the beloved. Patterned moonlight falling through the murqana in a white and dark tapestry across the curves and hollows of Nayra's belly.

Alekum as-salal wa rahmatu allahi wa barakatuh....

Upon you, the peace and the mercy of God and all these blessings.

Amen.

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There was no cock-crow when Jalila startled awake. But Walah had vanished, and so had Nayra, and the light of the morning sun came splintering down through the murqana's hot blue lattice. Sheltering her face with her hands, Jalila looked down at herself, and smiled. The jewel in her belly was all that was left of her costume. She smelled faintly of vanilla, and much of Nayra, and nothing about her flesh seemed quite her own. Moving through the dazzling drizzle, she gathered up the windsilks and other scraps of clothing that had settled into the fleece bedding. She found one of Nayra's earrings, which was twisted to right angles at the post, and had to smile again. And here was that tideflower, tossed upturned like an old cup into the corner. She touched the tiny scab on her shoulder, then lifted the flower up and inhaled, but caught on her palms only the scents of Nayra. She closed her eyes, feeling the diamond speckles of heat and cold across her body like the ripples of the sea.

The hayawans barely stirred as she moved out through their stables. Only Robin regarded her, and

then incuriously, as she paused to touch the hard grey melds of her flank that she had pressed against the bars of her enclosure. One eye, grey as rocket smoke, opened, then returned to its saharas of dreams. The hayawans, Jalila supposed for the first time, had their own passions, and these were not to be shared with some odd two-legged creatures of another race and planet.

The morning was still clinging to its freshness, and the road, as she crossed it, was barely warm beneath her feet. Wind-towered Al Janb and the haramlek behind her looked deserted. Even the limbs of the mountains seemed curled in sleepy haze. On this day after the mouldid, no one but the geelies was yet stirring. Cawing, they rose and settled in flapping red flocks from the beds of the tideflowers as Jalila scrunched across the hard stones of the beach. Her feet encountered the cool, slick water. She continued walking, wading, until the sea tickled her waist and what remained of the windsilks had spread about in spills of dye. From her cupped hands, she released the tideflower, and watched it float away. She splashed her face. She sunk down to her shoulders as the windsilks dissolved from her, and looked down between her breasts at the glowing jewel that was still stuck in her belly, and plucked it out, and watched it sink; the sea-lantern of a ship, drowning.

Walking back up the beach, wringing the wet from her hair, Jalila noticed a rich green growth standing out amid the sky-filled rockpools and the growths of lichen. Pricked by something resembling Pavo's curiosity, she scrambled over, and crouched to examine it as the gathering heat of the sun dried her back. She recognized this spot -- albeit dimly -- from the angle of a band of quartz that glittered and bled blue oxides. This was where she had coughed up her breathmoss in that early Season of Soft Rains. And here it still was, changed but unmistakable -- and growing. A small patch here, several larger patches there. Tiny filaments of green, a minute forest, raising its boughs and branches to the sun.

She walked back up toward her haramlek, humming.

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The sky was no longer blue. It was no longer white. It had turned to mercury. The rockets rose and rose in dry crackles of summer lightning. The tube-like aliens fled, leaving their strange house of goo-filled windows and pipes still clicking and humming until something burst and the whole structure deflated, and the mess of it leaked across the nearby streets. There were warnings of poisonings and strange epidemics. There were cloggings and stenches of the drains.

Jalila showed the breathmoss to her mothers, who were all intrigued and delighted, although Pavo had of course noticed and categorized the growth long before, while Ananke had to touch the stuff, and left a small brown mark there like the tips of her three fingers, which dried and turned golden over the days that followed. But in this hot season, these evenings when the sun seemed as if it would never vanish, the breathmoss proved surprisingly hardy....

After that night of the mouldid, Jalila spent several happy days absorbed and alone, turning and

smoothing the memory of her love-making with Nayra. Wandering above and beneath the unthinking routines of everyday life, she was like a fine craftsman, spinning silver, shaping sandalwood. The dimples of Nayra's back. Sweat glinting in the checkered moonlight. That sweet vein in the crook of her beloved's arm, and the pulse of the blood that had risen from it to the drumbeats of ecstasy. The memory seemed entirely enough to Jalila. She was barely living in the present day. When, perhaps six days after the end of the mouldid, Nayra turned up at their doorstep with the ends of her hair chewed wet and her eyes red-rimmed, Jalila had been almost surprised to see her, and then to notice the differences between the real Nayra and the Scheherazade of her memories. Nayra smelled of tears and dust as they embraced; like someone who had arrived from a long, long journey.

"Why didn't you *call* me? I've been waiting, waiting...."

Jalila kissed her hair. Her hand traveled beneath a summer shawl to caress Nayra's back, which felt damp and gritty. She had no idea how to answer her questions. They walked out together that afternoon in the shade of the woods behind the haramlek. The trees had changed in this long, hot season, departing from their urrearth habits to coat their leaves in a waxy substance that smelled medicinal. The shadows of their boughs were chalkmarks and charcoal. All was silent. The urrearth birds had retreated to their summer hibernations until the mists of autumn came to rouse them again. Climbing a scree of stones, they found clusters of them at the back of a cave; feathery bundles amid the dripping rock, seemingly without eyes or beak.

As they sat at the mouth of that cave, looking down across the heat-trembling bay, sucking the ice and eating the dates that Ananke had insisted they bring with them, Nayra had seemed like a different person than the one Jalila had thought she had known before the day of the mouldid. Nayra, too, was human, and not the goddess she had seemed. She had her doubts and worries. She, too, thought that the girls who surrounded her were mostly crass and stupid. She didn't even believe in her own obvious beauty. She cried a little again, and Jalila hugged her. The hug became a kiss. Soon, dusty and greedy, they were tumbling amid the hot rocks. That evening, back at the haramlek, Nayra was welcomed for dinner by Jalila's mothers with mint tea and the best china. She was invited to bathe. Jalila sat beside her as they ate figs fresh from distant Ras and the year's second crop of oranges. She felt happy. At last, life seemed simple. Nayra was now officially her lover, and this love would form the pattern of her days.

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Jalila's life now seemed complete; she believed that she was an adult, and that she talked and spoke and loved and worshipped in an adult way. She still rode out sometimes with Kalal on Robin and Abu, she still laughed or stole things or played games, but she was conscious now that these activities were the sweetmeats of life, pleasing but unnutritious, and the real glories and surprises lay with being with Nayra, and with her mothers, and the life of the haramlek that the two young women talked of founding together one day.

Nayra's mothers lived on the far side of Al Janb, in a fine tall clifftop palace that was one of the oldest in the town, clad in white stone and filled with intricate courtyards, and a final beautiful tajo that looked

down from gardens of tarragon across the whole bay. Jalila greatly enjoyed exploring this haramlek, deciphering the peeling scripts that wound along the cool vaults, and enjoying the company of Nayra's mothers who, in their wealth and grace and wisdom, often made her own mothers seem like the awkward and recent provincial arrivals that they plainly were. At home, in her own haramlek, the conversations and ideas seemed stale. An awful dream came to Jalila one night. She was her old doll Tabatha, and she really was being buried. The ground she lay in was moist and dank, as if it was still the Season of Soft Rains, and the faces of everyone she knew were clustered around the hole above her, muttering and sighing as her mouth and eyes were inexorably filled with soil.

"Tell me what it was like, when you first fell in love."

Jalila had chosen Pavo to ask this question of. Ananke would probably just hug her, while Lya would talk and talk until there was nothing to say.

"I don't know. Falling in love is like coming home. You can never quite do it for the first time."

"But in the stories--"

--The stories are always written *afterward*, Jalila."

They were walking the luminous shore. It was near midnight, which was now by far the best time of the night or day. But what Pavo had just said sounded wrong; perhaps she hadn't been the right choice of mother to speak to, after all. Jalila was sure she'd loved Nayra since that day before the mould of Joanna, although it was true she loved her now in a different way.

"You still don't think we really will form a haramlek together, do you?"

"I think that it's too early to say."

"You were the last of our three, weren't you? Lya and Ananke were already together."

"It was what drew me to them. They seemed so happy and complete. It was also what frightened me and nearly sent me away."

"But you stayed together, and then there was..." This was the part that Jalila still found hardest to acknowledge; the idea that her mothers had a physical, sexual relationship. Sometimes, deep at night, from someone else's dreamtent, she had heard muffled sighs, the wet slap of flesh. Just like the hayawans, she supposed, there were things about other people's lives that you could never fully understand, no matter how well you thought you knew them.

She chose a different tack. "So why did you choose to have me?"

"Because we wanted to fill the world with something that had never ever existed before. Because we felt selfish. Because we wanted to give ourselves away."

"Ananke, she actually gave birth to me, didn't she?"

"Down here at Al Janb, they'd say we were primitive and mad. Perhaps that was how we wanted to be. But all the machines at the clinics do is try to recreate the conditions of a real human womb -- the voices, the movements, the sound of breathing.... Without first hearing that Song of Life, no human can ever be happy, so what better way could there be than to hear it naturally?"

A flash of that dream-image of herself being buried. "But the birth itself--"

--I think that was something we all underestimated." The tone of Pavo's voice told Jalila that this was not a subject to be explored on the grounds of mere curiosity.

The tideflower beds had solidified. You could walk across them as if they were dry land. Kalal, after several postponements and broken promises, took Jalila and Nayra out one night to demonstrate.

Smoking lanterns at the prow and stern of his boat. The water slipping warm as blood through Jalila's trailing fingers. Al Janb receding beneath the hot thighs of the mountains. Kalal at the prow. Nayra sitting beside her, her arm around her shoulder, hand straying across her breast until Jalila shrugged it away because the heat of their two bodies was oppressive.

"This season'll end soon," Nayra said. "You've never known the winter here, have you?"

"I was *born* in the winter. Nothing here could be as cold as the lightest spring morning in the mountains of Tabuthal."

"Ah, the *mountains*. You must show me sometime. We should travel there together...."

Jalila nodded, trying hard to picture that journey. She'd attempted to interest Nayra in riding a hayawan, but she grew frightened even in the presence of the beasts. In so many ways, in fact, Nayra surprised Jalila with her timidity. Jalila, in these moments of doubt, and as she lay alone in her dreamtent and wondered, would list to herself Nayra's many assets: her lithe and willing body; the beautiful haramlek of her beautiful mothers; the fact that so many of the other girls now envied and admired her. There were so many things that were good about Nayra.

Kalal, now that his boat had been set on course for the further tidebeds, came to sit with them, his face sweated lantern-red. He and Nayra shared many memories, and now, as the sails pushed on from the hot air off the mountains, they vied to tell Jalila of the surprises and delights of winters in Al Janb. The fogs when you couldn't see your hand. The intoxicating blue berries that appeared in special hollows through the crust of the snow. The special saint's days.... If Jalila hadn't known better, she'd have said that Nayra and Kalal were fighting over something more important.

The beds of tideflowers were vast, luminous, heavy-scented. Red-black clusters of geelies rose and fell here and there in the moonlight. Walking these gaudy carpets was a most strange sensation. The dense interlaces of leaves felt like rubber matting, but sank and bobbed. Jalila and Nayra lit more lanterns and dotted them around a field of huge primrose and orange petals. They sang and staggered and rolled and fell over. Nayra had brought a pipe of kif resin, and the sensation of smoking that and trying to dance was hilarious. Kalal declined, pleading that he had to control the boat on the way back, and picked his way out of sight, disturbing flocks of geelies.

And so the two girls danced as the twin moons rose. Nayra, twirling silks, her hair fanning, was graceful as Jalila still staggered amid the lapping flowers. As she lifted her arms and rose on tiptoe, bracelets glittering, she had never looked more desirable. Somewhat drunkenly -- and slightly reluctantly, because Kalal might return at any moment -- Jalila moved forward to embrace her. It was good to hold Nayra, and her mouth tasted like the tideflowers and sucked needily at her own. In fact, the moments of their love had never been sweeter and slower than they were on that night, although, even as Jalila marveled at the shape of Nayra's breasts and listened to the changed song of her breathing, she felt herself chilling, receding, drawing back, not just from Nayra's physical presence, but from this small bay beside the small town on the single continent beside Habara's great and lonely ocean. Jalila felt infinitely sorry for Nayra as she brought her to her little ecstasies and they kissed and rolled across the beds of flowers. She felt sorry for Nayra because she was beautiful, and sorry for her because of all her

accomplishments, and sorry for her because she would always be happy here amid the slow seasons of this little planet.

Jalila felt sorry for herself as well; sorry because she had thought that she had known love, and because she knew now that it had only been a pretty illusion.

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There was a shifting wind, dry and abrasive, briefly to be welcomed, until it became something to curse and cover your face and close your shutters against.

Of Jalila's mothers, only Lya seemed at all disappointed by her break from Nayra, no doubt because she had fostered hopes of their union forming a powerful bond between their haramleks, and even she did her best not to show it. Of the outside world, the other young women of Al Janb all professed total disbelief -- *why if it had been me, I'd never have...* But soon, they were cherishing the new hope that it might indeed *be* them. Nayra, to her credit, maintained an extraordinary dignity in the face of the fact that she, of all people, had finally been rejected. She dressed in plain clothes. She spoke and ate simply. Of course, she looked more devastatingly beautiful than ever, and everyone's eyes were reddened by air-borne grit in any case, so it was impossible to tell how much she had really been crying. Now, as the buildings of Al Janb creaked and the breakers rolled and the wind howled through the teeth of the mountains, Jalila saw the gaudy, seeking and competing creatures who so often surrounded Nayra quite differently. Nayra was not, had never been, in control of them. She was more like the bloody carcass over which, flashing their teeth, their eyes, stretching their limbs, they endlessly fought. Often, riven by a sadness far deeper than she had ever experienced, missing something she couldn't explain, wandering alone or lying in her dreamtent, Jalila nearly went back to Nayra.... But she never did.

This was the Season of Winds, and Jalila was heartily sick of herself and Al Janb, and the girls and the mahwagis and the mothers, and of this changing, buffeting banshee weather that seemed to play with her moods. Sometimes now, the skies were entirely beautiful, strung by the curling multicolored banners of sand that the winds had lifted from distant corners of the continent. There was crimson and there was sapphire. The distant saharas of Jalila's dreams had come to haunt her. They fell -- as the trees tore and the paint stripped from the shutters and what remained of Pavo's arches collapsed -- in an irritating grit that worked its way into all the crevices of your body and every weave of your clothes.

The tariqua had spoken of the pain of *nothing*, and then of the pain of *everything*. At the time, Jalila had understood neither, but now, she felt that she understood the pain of nothing all too well. The product of the combined genes of her three mothers; loving Ananke, ever-curious Pavo, proud and talkative Lya, she had always felt glad to recognize these characteristics mingled in herself, but now she wondered if these traits hadn't cancelled each other out. She was a null-point, a zero, clumsy and destructive and unloving. She was Jalila, and she walked alone and uncaring through this Season of Winds.

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One morning, the weather was especially harsh. Jalila was alone in the haramlek, although she cared little where she or anywhere else was. A shutter must have come loose somewhere. That often happened now. It had been banging and hammering so long that it began to irritate even her. She climbed stairs and slammed doors over jamming drifts of mica. She flapped back irritably at flapping curtains. Still, the banging went on. Yet all the windows and doors were now secure. She was sure of it. Unless....

Someone was at the front door. She could see a swirling globular head through the greenish glass mullion. Even though they could surely see her as well, the banging went on. Jalila wondered if she wanted it to be Nayra; after all, this was how she had come to her after the mouldid; a sweet and needy human being to drag her out from her dreams. But it was only Kalal. As the door shoved Jalila back, she tried not to look disappointed.

"You can't do this with your life!"

"Do what?"

"This -- *nothing*. And then not answering the fucking door...." Kalal prowled the hallway as the door banged back and forth and tapestries flailed, looking for clues as if he was a detective. "Let's go out."

Even in this weather, Jalila supposed that she owed it to Robin. Then Kalal had wanted to go north, and she insisted on going south, and was not in any mood for arguing. It was an odd journey, so unlike the ones they'd undertaken in the summer. They wrapped their heads and faces in flapping howlis, and tried to ride mostly in the forest, but the trees whipped and flapped and the raw air still abraded their faces.

They took lunch down by a flatrock shore, in what amounted to shelter, although there was still little enough of it as the wind eddied about them. This could have been the same spot where they had stopped in summer, but it was hard to tell; the light was so changed, the sky so bruised. Kalal seemed changed, too. His face beneath his howli seemed older, as he tried to eat their aish before the sand-laden air got to it, and his chin looked prickled and abraded. Jalila supposed that this was the same facial growth that his father Ibra was so fond of sporting. She also supposed he must choose to shave his off in the way that some women on some decadent planets were said to shave their legs and armpits.

"Come a bit closer--" she half-shouted, working her way back into the lee of the bigger rock beside which she was sitting to make room for him. "I want you to tell me what you know about love, Kalal."

Kalal hunched beside her. For a while, he just continued tearing and chewing bits of aish, with his body pressed against hers as the winds boiled around them, the warmth of their flesh almost meeting. And Jalila wondered if men and women, when their lives and needs had been more closely intertwined, had perhaps known the answer to her question. What *was* love, after all? It would have been nice to think that, in those dim times of myth, men and women had whispered the answer to that question to each other....

She thought then that Kalal hadn't properly heard her. He was telling her about his father, and a planet he barely remembered, but on which he was born. The sky there had been fractaled gold and turquoise -- colors so strange and bright that they came as a delight and a shock each morning. It was a place of

many islands, and one great city. His father had been a fisherman and boat-repairer of sorts there as well, although the boats had been much grander than anything you ever saw at Al Janb, and the fish had lived not as single organisms, but as complex shoals that were caught not for their meat, but for their joint minds. Ibra had been approached by a woman from off-world, who had wanted a ship on which she could sail alone around the whole lonely band of the northern oceans. She had told him that she was sick of human company. The planning and the making of the craft was a joy for Ibra, because such a lonely journey had been one that he had long dreamed of making, if ever he'd had the time and money. The ship was his finest-ever creation, and it turned out, as they worked on it, that neither he nor the woman were quite as sick of human company as they had imagined. They fell in love as the keel and the spars grew in the city dockyards and the ship's mind was nurtured, and as they did so, they slowly re-learned the expressions of sexual need between the male and female.

"You mean he *raped* her?"

Kalal tossed his last nub of bread toward the waves. "I mean that they *made love*."

After the usual negotiations and contracts, and after the necessary insertions of the appropriate cells, Ibra and this woman (whom Kalal didn't name in his story, any more than he named the world) set sail together, fully intending to conceive a child in the fabled way of old.

"Which was *you*?"

Kalal scowled. It was impossible to ask him even simple questions on this subject without making him look annoyed. "Of *course* it was! How many of me do you think there are?" Then he lapsed into silence. The sands swirled in colored helixes before them.

"That woman -- your birthmother. What happened to her?"

"She wanted to take me away, of course -- to some haramlek on another world, just as she'd been planning all along. My father was just a toy to her. As soon as their ship returned, she started making plans, issuing contracts. There was a long legal dispute with my father. I was placed in a birth sac, in stasis."

"And your father won?"

Kalal scowled. "He took me here, anyway. Which is winning enough."

There were many other questions about this story that Jalila wanted to ask Kalal, if she hadn't already pressed too far. What, after all, did this tale of dispute and deception have to do with love? And were Kalal and Ibra really fugitives? It would explain quite a lot. Once more, in that familiar welling, she felt sorry for him. Men were such strange, sad creatures; forever fighting, angry, lost....

"I'm glad you're here anyway," she said. Then, on impulse, one of those careless things you do, she took that rough and ugly chin in her hand, turned his face toward hers and kissed him lightly on the lips.

"What was that for?"

"*El-hamdu-l-illah*. That was for thanks."

They plodded further on their hayawans. They came eventually to a cliff-edge so high that the sea and sky above and beneath vanished. Jalila already knew what they would see as they made their way along it, but still it was a shock; that qasr, thrust into these teeming ribbons of sand. The winds whooped and howled, and the hayawans raised their heads and howled back at it. In this grinding atmosphere, Jalila could see how the qasrs had been carved over long years from pure natural rock. They dismounted, and struggled bent-backed across the narrowing track toward the qasr's studded door. Jalila raised her fist and beat on it.

She glanced back at Kalal, but his face was entirely hidden beneath his hood. Had they always

intended to come here? But they had traveled too far to do otherwise now; Robin and Abu were tired and near-blinded; they all needed rest and shelter. She beat on the door again, but the sound was lost in the booming storm. Perhaps the tariqua had left with the last of the Season of Rockets, just as had most of the aliens. Jalila was about to turn away when the door, as if thrown wide by the wind, blasted open. There was no one on the other side, and the hallway beyond was dark as the bottom of a dry well. Robin hoiked her head back and howled and resisted as Jalila hauled her in. Kalal with Abu followed. The door, with a massive drumbeat, hammered itself shut behind them. Of course, it was only some old mechanism of this house, but Jalila felt the hairs on the nape of her neck rise.

They hobbled the hayawans beside the largest of the scalloped arches, and walked on down the passageway beyond. The wind was still with them, and the shapes of the pillars were like the swirling helixes of sand made solid. It was hard to tell what parts of this place had been made by the hands of women and what was entirely natural. If the qasr had seemed deserted in the heat of summer, it was entirely abandoned now. A scatter of glass windchimes, torn apart by the wind. A few broken plates. Some flapping cobwebs of tapestry.

Kalal pulled Jalila's hand.

"Let's go back...."

But there was greater light ahead, the shadows of the speeding sky. Here was the courtyard where they had glimpsed the tariqua. She had plainly gone now -- the fountain was dry and clogged, the bushes were bare tangles of wire. They walked out beneath the tiled arches, looking around. The wind was like a million voices, rising in ululating chorus. This was a strange and empty place; somehow dangerous.... Jalila span around. The tariqua was standing there, her robes flapping. With insect fingers, she beckoned.

"Are you leaving?" Jalila asked. "I mean, this place...."

The tariqua had led them into the shelter of a tall, wind-echoing chamber set with blue and white tiles. There were a few rugs and cushions scattered on the floor, but still the sense of abandonment remained. As if, Jalila thought, as the tariqua folded herself on the floor and gestured that they join her, this was her last retreat.

"No, Jalila. I won't be leaving Habara. *Ifaddal*.... Do sit down."

They stepped from their sandals and obeyed. Jalila couldn't quite remember now whether Kalal had encountered the tariqua on her visit to their haramlek, although it seemed plain from his stares at her, and the way her grey-white gaze returned them, that they knew of each other in some way. Coffee was brewing in the corner, over a tiny blue spirit flame, which, as it fluttered in the many drafts, would have taken hours to heat anything. Yet the spout of the brass pot was steaming. And there were dates, too, and nuts and seeds. The tariqua, apologizing for her inadequacy as a host, nevertheless insisted that they help themselves. And somewhere there was a trough of water, too, for their hayawans, and a basket of acram leaves.

Uneasily, they sipped from their cups, chewed the seeds. Kalal had picked up a chipped lump of old stone and was playing with it nervously. Jalila couldn't quite see what it was.

"So," he said, clearing his throat, "you've been to and from the stars, have you?"

"As have you. Perhaps you could name the planet? It may have been somewhere that we have both visited...."

Kalal swallowed. His lump of old stone clicked the floor. A spindle of wind played chill on Jalila's neck. Then -- she didn't know how it began -- the tariqua was talking of Ghezirah, the great and fabled city that lay at the center of all the Ten Thousand and One Worlds. No one Jalila had ever met or heard

of had ever visited Ghezirah, not even Nayra's mothers -- yet this tariqua talked of it as if she knew it well. Before, Jalila had somehow imagined the tariqua trailing from planet to distant planet with dull cargoes of ore and biomass in her ship's holds. To her mind, Ghezirah had always been more than half-mythical -- a place from which a dubious historical figure such as the Blessed Joanna might easily emanate, but certainly not a place composed of solid streets upon which the gnarled and bony feet of this old woman might once have walked....

Ghezirah... she could see it now in her mind, smell the shadowy lobbies, see the ever-climbing curve of its mezzanines and rooftops vanishing into the impossible greens of the Floating Ocean. But every time Jalila's vision seemed about to solidify, the tariqua said something else that made it tremble and change. And then the tariqua said the strangest thing of all, which was that the City At The End Of All Roads was actually *alive*. Not alive in the meager sense in which every town has a sort of life, but truly living. The city thought. It grew. It responded. There was no central mind or focus to this consciousness, because Ghezirah *itself*, its teeming streets and minarets and rivers and caleches and its many millions of lives, was itself the mind....

Jalila was awestruck, but Kalal seemed unimpressed, and was still playing with that old lump of stone.

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4.

"Jalilaneen...."

The way bondmother Lya said her name made Jalila look up. Somewhere in her throat, a wary nerve started ticking. They took their meals inside now, in the central courtyard of the haramlek, which Pavo had provided with a translucent roofing to let in a little of what light there was in the evenings' skies, and keep out most of the wind. Still, as Jalila took a sip of steaming hibiscus, she was sure that the sand had gotten into something.

"We've been talking. Things have come up -- ideas about which we'd like to seek your opinion...."

In other words, Jalila thought, her gaze traveling across her three mothers, you've decided something. And this is how you tell me -- by pretending that you're consulting me. It had been the same with leaving Tabuthal. It was always the same. An old ghost of herself got up at that point, threw down her napkin, stalked off up to her room. But the new Jalila remained seated. She even smiled and tried to look encouraging.

"We've seen so little of this world," Lya continued. "All of us, really. And especially since we had you. It's been marvelous. But, of course, it's also been confining.... Oh *no*--" Lya waved the idea away quickly, before anyone could even begin to start thinking it. "--we won't be leaving our haramlek and Al Janb. There are many things to do. New bonds and friendships have been made. Ananke and I won't be leaving, anyway.... But Pavo..." And here Lya, who could never quite stop being the chair of a committee, gave a nod toward her mate. "...Pavo here has dec-- expressed a *wish* -- that she would like

to travel."

"Travel?" Jalila leaned forward, her chin resting on her knuckles. "How?"

Pavo gave her plate a half turn. "By boat seems the best way to explore Habara. With such a big ocean..." She turned the plate again, as if to demonstrate.

"And not just a *boat*," Ananke put in encouragingly. "A brand new *ship*. We're having it built--"

--"But I thought you said you hadn't yet decided?"

"The contract, I think, is still being prepared," Lya explained. "And much of the craft will be to Pavo's own design."

"Will you be building it yourself?"

"Not alone." Pavo gave another of her flustered smiles. "I've asked Ibra to help me. He seems to be the best, the most knowledgeable--"

--"Ibra? Does he have any references?"

"This is *Al Janb*, Jalila," Lya said. "We know and trust people. I'd have thought that, with your friendship with Kalal...."

"This certainly *is* Al Janb...." Jalila sat back. "How can I ever forget it!" All of her mothers' eyes were on her. Then something broke. She got up and stormed off to her room.

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The long ride to the tariqua's qasr, the swish of the wind, and banging three times on the old oak door. Then hobbling Robin and hurrying through dusty corridors to that tall tiled chamber, and somehow expecting no one to be there, even though Jalila had now come here several times alone.

But the tariqua was always there. Waiting.

Between them now, there was much to be said.

"This ant, Jalila, which crawls across this sheet of paper from *here* to *there*. She is much like us as we crawl across the surface of this planet. Even if she had the wings some of her kind sprout, just as I have my caleche, it would still be the same." The tiny creature, waving feelers, was plainly lost. A black dot. Jalila understood how it felt. "But say, if we were to fold both sides of the paper together. You see how she moves now...?" The ant, antennae waving, hesitant, at last made the tiny jump. "We can move more quickly from one place to another by not travelling across the distance that separates us from it, but by folding space itself.

"Imagine now, Jalila, that this universe is not one thing alone, one solitary series of *this* following *that*, but an endless branching of potentialities. Such it has been since the Days of Creation, and such it is even now, in the shuffle of that leaf as the wind picks at it, in the rising steam of your coffee. Every moment goes in many ways. Most are poor, half-formed things, the passing thoughts and whims of the Almighty. They hang there and they die, never to be seen again. But others branch as strongly as this path that we find ourselves following. There are universes where you and I have never sat here in this qasr. There are universes where there is no Jalila.... Will you get that for me...?"

The tariqua was pointing to an old book in a far corner. Its leather was cracked, the wind lifted its

pages. As she took it from her, Jalila felt the hot brush of the old woman's hand.

"So now, you must imagine that there is not just one sheet of a single universe, but many, as in this book, heaped invisibly above and beside and below the page upon which we find ourselves crawling. In fact..." The ant recoiled briefly, sensing the strange heat of the tariqua's fingers, then settled on the open pages. "You must imagine shelf after shelf, floor upon floor of books, the aisles of an infinite library. And if we are to fold this one page, you see, we or the ant never quite knows what lies on the other side of it. And there may be a tear in that next page as well. It may even be that another version of ourselves has already torn it."

Despite its worn state, the book looked potentially valuable, hand-written in a beautiful flowing script. Jalila had to wince when the tariqua's fingers ripped through them. But the ant had vanished now. She was somewhere between the book's pages....

"That, Jalila, is the Pain of Distance -- the sense of every potentiality. So that womankind may pass over the spaces between the stars, every tariqua must experience it." The wind gave an extra lunge, flipping the book shut. Jalila reached forward, but the tariqua, quick for once, was ahead of her. Instead of opening the book to release the ant, she weighed it down with the same chipped old stone with which Kalal had played on his solitary visit to this qasr.

"Now, perhaps, my Jalila, you begin to understand?"

The stone was old, chipped, grey-green. It was inscribed, and had been carved with the closed wings of a beetle. Here was something from a world so impossibly old and distant as to make the book upon which it rested seem fresh and new as an unbudded leaf -- a scarab, shaped for the Queens of Egypt.

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"See here, Jalila. See how it grows. The breathmoss?"

This was the beginning of the Season of Autumns. The trees were beautiful; the forests were on fire with their leaves. Jalila had been walking with Pavo, enjoying the return of the birdsong, and wondering why it was that this new season felt sad when everything around her seemed to be changing and growing.

"Look...."

The breathmoss, too, had turned russet-gold. Leaning close to it beneath this tranquil sky, which was composed of a blue so pale it was as if the sea had been caught in reflection inside an upturned white bowl, was like looking into the arms of a miniature forest.

"Do you think it will die?"

Pavo leaned beside her. "Jalila, it should have died long ago. *Inshallah*, it is a small miracle." There were the three dead marks where Ananke had touched it in a Season of Long Ago. "You see how frail it is, and yet..."

"At least it won't spread and take over the planet."

"Not for a while, at least."

On another rock lay another small colony. Here, too, oddly enough, there were marks. Five large dead dots, as if made by the outspread of a hand, although the shape of it was too big to have been Ananke's.

They walked on. Evening was coming. Their shadows were lengthening. Although the sun was shining and the waves sparkled, Jalila wished that she had put on something warmer than a shawl.

"That tariqua. You seem to enjoy her company...."

Jalila nodded. When she was with the old woman, she felt at last as if she was escaping the confines of Al Janb. It was liberating, after the close life in this town and with her mothers in their haramlek, to know that interstellar space truly existed, and then to feel, as the tariqua spoke of Gateways, momentarily like that ant, infinitely small and yet somehow inching, crawling across the many universes' infinite pages. But how could she express this? Even Pavo wouldn't understand.

"How goes the boat?" she asked instead.

Pavo slipped her arm into to crook of Jalila's and hugged her. "You must come and *see!* I have the plan in my head, but I'd never realized quite how big it would be. And complex. Ibra's full of enthusiasm."

"I can imagine!"

The sea flashed. The two women chuckled.

"The way the ship's designed, Jalila, there's more than enough room for others. I never exactly planned to go alone, but then Lya's Lya. And Ananke's always--"

Jalila gave her mother's arm a squeeze. "I know what you're saying."

"I'd be happy if you came, Jalila. I'd understand if you didn't. This is such a beautiful, wonderful planet. The leviathans -- we know so little about them, yet they plainly have intelligence, just as all those old myths say."

"You'll be telling me next about the qasrs...."

"The ones we can see near here are *nothing!* There are islands on the ocean that are entirely made from them. And the wind pours through. They sing endlessly. A different song for every mood and season."

"Moods! If I'd said something like that when you were teaching me of the Pillars of Life, you'd have told me I was being unscientific!"

"Science is *about* wonder, Jalila. I was a poor teacher if I never told you that."

"You did." Jalila turned to kiss Pavo's forehead. "You did...."

-=*=-

Pavo's ship was a fine thing. Between the slipways and the old mooring posts, where the red-flapping geelies quarreled over scraps of dying tideflower, it grew and grew. Golden-hulled. Far sleeker and bigger than even the ferries that had once borne Al Janb's visitors to and from the rocket port, and which now squatted on the shingle nearby, gently rusting. It was the talk of the Season. People came to admire its progress.

As Jalila watched the spars rise over the clustered roofs of the fisherwomen's houses, she was reminded of Kalal's tale of his father and his nameless mother, and that ship that they had made together

in the teeming dockyards of that city. Her thoughts blurred. She saw the high balconies of a hotel far bigger than any of Al Janb's inns and boarding houses. She saw a darker, brighter ocean. Strange flesh upon flesh, with the windows open to the oil-and-salt breeze, the white lace curtains rising, falling....

The boat grew, and Jalila visited the tariqua, although back in Al Janb, her thoughts sometimes trailed after Kalal as she wondered how it must be -- to be male, like the last dodo, and trapped in some endless state of part-arousal, like a form of nagging worry. Poor Kalal. But his life certainly wasn't lonely. The first time Jalila noticed him at the center of the excited swarm of girls that once again surrounded Nayra, she'd almost thought that she was seeing things. But the gossip was loud and persistent. Kalal and Nayra were *a couple* -- the phrase normally followed by a scandalized shriek, a hand-covered mouth. Jalila could only guess what the proud mothers of Nayra's haramlek thought of such a union, but, of course, no one could subscribe to outright prejudice. Kalal was, after all, just another human being. Lightly probing her own mothers' attitudes, she found the usual condescending tolerance. Having sexual relations with a male would be like smoking kif, or drinking alcohol, or any other form of slightly aberrant adolescent behavior; to be tolerated with easy smiles and sympathy, as long as it didn't go on for too long. To be treated, in fact, in much the same manner as her mothers were now treating her regular visits to the tariqua.

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Jalila came to understand why people thought of the Season of Autumns as a sad time. The chill nights. The morning fogs that shrouded the bay. The leaves, finally falling, piled into rotting heaps. The tideflower beds, also, were dying as the waves pulled and dismantled what remained of their colors, and they drifted to the shores, the flowers bearing the same stench and texture and color as upturned clay. The geelies were dying as well. In the town, to compensate, there was much bunting and celebration for yet another mouldid, but to Jalila the brightness seemed feeble -- the flame of a match held against winter's gathering gale. Still, she sometimes wandered the old markets with some of her old curiosity, nostalgically touching the flapping windsilks, studying the faces and nodding at the many she now knew, although her thoughts were often literally light-years away. *The Pain of Distance*; she could feel it. Inwardly, she was thrilled and afraid. Her mothers and everyone else, caught up in the mouldid and Pavo's coming departure, imagined from her mood that she had now decided to take that voyage with her. She deceived Kalal in much the same way.

The nights became clearer. Riding back from the qasr one dark evening with the tariqua's slight voice ringing in her ears, the stars seemed to hover closer around her than at any time since she had left Tabuthal. She could feel the night blossoming, its emptiness and the possibilities spinning out to infinity. She felt both like crying, and like whooping for joy. She had dared to ask the tariqua the question she had long been formulating, and the answer, albeit not entirely yes, had not been no. She talked to Robin as they bobbed along, and the puny yellow smudge of Al Janb drew slowly closer. You must understand, she told her hayawan, that the core of the Almighty is like the empty place between these stars, around which they all revolve. It is *there*, we know it, but we can never *see* it.... She sang songs from the old

sahas about the joy of loneliness, and the loneliness of joy. From here, high up on the gradually descending road that wound its way down toward her haramlek, the horizon was still distant enough for her to see the lights of the rocketport. It was like a huge tidebed, holding out as the season changed. And there at the center of it, rising golden, no longer a stumpy silo-shaped object but somehow beautiful, was the last of the year's rockets. It would have to rise from Habara before the coming of the Season of Winters.

Her mothers' anxious faces hurried around her in the lamplight as she led Robin toward the stable.

"Where have you *been*, Jalilaneen?"

"Do you *know* what time it is?"

"We should be in the town *already!*"

For some reason, they were dressed in their best, most formal robes. Their palms were hennaed and scented. They hustled Jalila out of her gritty clothes, practically washed and dressed her, then flapped themselves down the serraplate road into town, where the processions had already started. Still, they were there in plenty of time to witness the blessing of Pavo's ship. It was to be called *Endeavor*, and Pavo and Jalila together smashed the bottle of wine across its prow before it rumbled into the nightblack waters of the harbor with an enormous white splash. Everyone cheered. Pavo hugged Jalila.

There were more bottles of the same frothy wine available at the party afterward. Lya, with her usual thoroughness, had ordered a huge case of the stuff, although many of the guests remembered the Prophet's old injunction and avoided imbibing. Ibra, though, was soon even more full of himself than usual, and went around the big marquee with a bottle in each hand, dancing clumsily with anyone who was foolish enough to come near him. Jalila drank a little of the stuff herself. The taste was sweet, but oddly hot and bitter. She filled up another glass.

"Wondered what you two mariners were going to call that boat...."

It was Kalal. He'd been dancing with many of the girls, and he looked almost as red-faced as his father.

"Bet you don't even know what the first *Endeavor* was."

"You're wrong there," Jalila countered primly, although the simple words almost fell over each other as she tried to say them. "It was the spacecraft of Captain Cook. She was one of urrearth's most famous early explorers."

"I thought you were many things," Kalal countered, angry for no apparent reason. "But I never thought you were *stupid*."

Jalila watched him walk away. The dance had gathered up its beat. Ibra had retreated to sit, foolishly glum, in a corner, and Nayra had moved to the middle of the floor, her arms raised, bracelets jingling, an opal jewel at her belly, windsilk-draped hips swaying. Jalila watched. Perhaps it was the drink, but for the first time in many a Season, she felt a slight return of that old erotic longing as she watched Nayra swaying. Desire was the strangest of all emotions. It seemed so trivial when you weren't possessed of it, and yet when you were possessed, it was as if all the secrets of the universe were waiting.... Nayra was the focus of all attention now as she swayed amid the crowd, her shoulders glistening. She danced before Jalila, and her languorous eyes fixed her for a moment before she danced on. Now she was dancing with Kalal, and he was swaying with her, her hands laid upon his shoulders, and everyone was clapping. They made a fine couple. But the music was getting louder, and so were people's voices. Her head was pounding. She left the marquee.

She welcomed the harshness of the night air, the clear presence of the stars. Even the stench of the rotting tideflowers seemed appropriate as she picked her way across the ropes and slipways of the beach.

So much had changed since she had first come here -- but mostly what had changed had been herself. Here, its shape unmistakable as rising Walah spread her faint blue light across the ocean, was Kalal's boat. She sat down on the gunwale. The cold wind bit into her. She heard the crunch of shingle, and imagined it was someone else who was in need of solitude. But the sound grew closer, and then whoever it was sat down on the boat beside her. She didn't need to look up now. Kalal's smell was always different, and now he was sweating from the dancing.

"I thought you were enjoying yourself," she muttered.

"Oh -- I was..." The emphasis on the *was* was strong.

They sat there for a long time, in windy, wave-crashing silence. It was almost like being alone. It was like the old days of their being together.

"So you're going, are you?" Kalal asked eventually.

"Oh, yes."

"I'm pleased for you. It's a fine boat, and I like Pavo best of all your mothers. You haven't seemed quite so happy lately here in Al Janb. Spending all that time with that old witch in the qasr."

"She's not a witch. She's a tariqua. It's one of the greatest, oldest callings. Although I'm surprised you've had time to notice what I'm up to, anyway. You and Nayra..."

Kalal laughed, and the wind made the sound turn bitter.

"I'm sorry," Jalila continued. "I'm sounding just like those stupid gossips. I know you're not like that. Either of you. And I'm happy for you both. Nayra's sweet and talented and entirely lovely... I hope it lasts... I hope..."

After another long pause, Kalal said, "Seeing as we're apologizing, I'm sorry I got cross with you about the name of that boat you'll be going on -- the *Endeavor*. It's a good name."

"Thank you. *El-hamadu-l-illah*."

"In fact, I could only think of one better one, and I'm glad you and Pavo didn't use it. You know what they say. To have two ships with the same name confuses the spirits of the winds...."

"What are you talking about, Kalal?"

"This boat. You're sitting right on it. I thought you might have noticed."

Jalila glanced down at the prow, which lay before her in the moonlight, pointing toward the silvered waves. From this angle, and in the old naskhi script that Kalal had used, it took her a moment to work out the craft's name. Something turned inside her.

Breathmoss.

In white, moonlit letters.

"I'm sure there are better names for a boat," she said carefully. "Still, I'm flattered."

"Flattered?" Kalal stood up. She couldn't really see his face, but she suddenly knew that she'd once again said the wrong thing. He waved his hands in an odd shrug, and he seemed for a moment almost ready to lean close to her -- to do something unpredictable and violent -- but instead, picking up stones and skimming them hard into the agitated waters, he walked away.

Pavo was right. If not about love -- which Jalila knew now that she still waited to experience -- then at least about the major decisions of your life. There was never quite a beginning to them, although your mind often sought for such a thing.

When the tariqua's caleche emerged out of the newly teeming rain one dark evening a week or so after the naming of the *Endeavor*, and settled itself before the lights of their haramlek, and the old woman herself emerged, somehow still dry, and splashed across the puddled garden while her three mothers flustered about to find the umbrella they should have thought to look for earlier, Jalila still didn't know what she should be thinking. The four women would, in any case, need to talk alone; Jalila recognized that. For once, after the initial greetings, she was happy to retreat to her dreamtent.

But her mind was still in turmoil. She was suddenly terrified that her mothers would actually agree to this strange proposition, and then that, out of little more than embarrassment and obligation, the rest of her life would be bound to something that the tariqua called the Church of the Gateway. She knew so little. The tariqua talked only in riddles. She could be a fraud, for all Jalila knew -- or a witch, just as Kalal insisted. Thoughts swirled about her like the rain. To make the time disappear, she tried searching the knowledge of her dreamtent. Lying there, listening to the rising sound of her mothers' voices, which seemed to be studded endlessly with the syllables of her own name, Jalila let the personalities who had guided her through the many Pillars of Wisdom tell her what they knew about the Church of the Gateway.

She saw the blackness of planetary space, swirled with the mica dots of turning planets. Almost as big as those as she zoomed close to it, yet looking disappointingly like a many-angled version of the rocketport, lay the spacestation, and, within it, the junction that could lead you from *here* to *there* without passing across the distance between. A huge rent in the Book of Life, composed of the trapped energies of those things the tariqua called cosmic strings, although they and the Gateway itself were visible as nothing more than a turning ring near to the center of the vast spacestation, where occasionally, as Jalila watched, crafts of all possible shapes would seem to hang, then vanish. The gap she glimpsed inside seemed no darker than that which hung between the stars behind it, but it somehow hurt to stare at it. This, then, was the core of the mystery; something both plain and extraordinary. We crawl across the surface of this universe like ants, and each of these craft, switching through the Gateway's moment of loss and endless potentiality, is piloted by the will of a tariqua's conscious intelligence, which must glimpse those choices, then somehow emerge sane and entire at the other end of everything....

Jalila's mind returned to the familiar scents and shapes of her dreamtent, and the sounds of the rain. The moment seemed to belong with those of the long-ago Season of Soft Rains. Downstairs, there were no voices. As she climbed out from her dreamtent, warily expecting to find the haramlek leaking and half-finished, Jalila was struck by an idea that the tariqua hadn't quite made plain to her; that a Gateway must push through *time* just as easily as it pushes through every other dimension...! But the rooms of the haramlek were finely furnished, and her three mothers and the tariqua were sitting in the rainswept candlelight of the courtyard, waiting.

With any lesser request, Lya always quizzed Jalila before she would even consider granting it. So as Jalila sat before her mothers and tried not to tremble in their presence, she wondered how she could possibly explain her ignorance of this pure, boundless mystery.

But Lya simply asked Jalila if this was what she wanted -- to be an acolyte of the Church of the

Gateway.

"Yes."

Jalila waited. Then, not even, *are you sure?* They'd trusted her less than this when they'd sent her on errands into Al Janb.... It was still raining. The evening was starless and dark. Her three mothers, having hugged her, but saying little else, retreated to their own dreamtents and silences, leaving Jalila to say farewell to the tariqua alone. The heat of the old woman's hand no longer came as a surprise to Jalila as she helped her up from her chair and away from the sheltered courtyard.

"Well," the tariqua croaked, "that didn't seem to go so badly."

"But I know so *little!*" They were standing on the patio at the dripping edge of the night. Wet streamers of wind tugged at them.

"I know you wish I could tell you more, Jalila -- but then, would it make any difference?"

Jalila shook her head. "Will you come with me?"

"Habara is where I must stay, Jalila. It is written."

"But I'll be able to return?"

"Of course. But you must remember that you can never return to the place you have left." The tariqua fumbled with her clasp, the one of a worm consuming its tail. "I want you to have this." It was made of black ivory, and felt as hot as the old woman's flesh as Jalila took it. For once, not really caring whether she broke her bones, she gave the small, bird-like woman a hug. She smelled of dust and metal, like an antique box left forgotten on a sunny windowledge. Jalila helped her out down the steps into the rainswept garden.

"I'll come again soon," she said, "to the qasr."

"Of course... there are many arrangements." The tariqua opened the dripping filigree door of her caleche and peered at her with those half-blind eyes. Jalila waited. They had stood too long in the rain already.

"Yes?"

"Don't be too hard on Kalal."

Puzzled, Jalila watched the caleche rise and turn away from the lights of the haramlek.

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Jalila moved warily through the sharded glass of her own and her mothers' expectations. It was agreed that a message concerning her be sent, endorsed by the full long and ornate formal name of the tariqua, to the body that did indeed call itself the Church of the Gateway. It went by radio pulse to the spacestation in wide solar orbit that received Habara's rockets, and was then passed on inside a vessel from *here* to *there* that was piloted by a tariqua. Not only that, but the message was destined for Ghezirah! Riding Robin up to the cliffs where, in this newly clear autumn air, under grey skies and tearing wet wind, she could finally see the waiting fuselage of that last golden rocket, Jalila felt confused and tiny, huge and mythic. It was agreed though, that for the sake of everyone -- and not least Jalila herself, should she change her mind -- that the word should remain that she was traveling out around the

planet with Pavo on board the *Endeavor*. In need of something to do when she wasn't brooding, and waiting for further word from (could it really be?) the sentient city of Ghezirah, Jalila threw herself into the listings and loadings and preparations with convincing enthusiasm.

"The hardest decisions, once made, are often the best ones."

"Compared to what you'll be doing, my little journey seems almost pointless."

"We love you so deeply."

Then the message finally came: an acknowledgement; an acceptance; a few (far too few, it seemed) particulars of the arrangements and permissions necessary for such a journey. All on less than half a sheet of plain two-dimensional printout.

Even Lya had started touching and hugging her at every opportunity.

Jalila ate lunch with Kalal and Nayra. She surprised herself and talked gaily at first of singing islands and sea-leviathans, somehow feeling that she was hiding little from her two best friends but the particular details of the journey she was undertaking. But Jalila was struck by the coldness that seemed to lie between these two supposed lovers. Nayra, perhaps sensing from bitter experience that she was once again about to be rejected, seemed near-tearful behind her dazzling smiles and the flirtatious blonde tossings of her hair, while Kalal seemed... Jalila had no idea how he seemed, but she couldn't let it end like this, and concocted some queries about the *Endeavor* so that she could lead him off alone as they left the bar. Nayra, perhaps fearing something else entirely, was reluctant to leave them.

"I wonder what it is that we've both done to her?" Kalal sighed as they watched her give a final sideways wave, pause, and then turn reluctantly down a sidestreet with a most un-Nayran duck of her lovely head.

They walked toward the harbor through a pause in the rain, to where the *Endeavor* was waiting.

"Lovely, isn't she?" Kalal murmured as they stood looking down at the long deck, then up at the high forest of spars. Pavo, who was developing her acquaintance with the ship's mind, gave them a wave from the bubble of the forecastle. "How long do you think your journey will take? You should be back by early spring, I calculate, if you get ahead of the icebergs...."

Jalila fingered the brooch that the tariqua had given her, and which she had taken to wearing at her shoulder in the place where she had once worn the tideflower. It was like black ivory, but set with tiny white specks that loomed at your eyes if you held it close. She had no idea what world it was from, or of the substance of which it was made.

"...You'll miss the winter here. But perhaps that's no bad thing. It's cold, and there'll be other Seasons on the ocean. And there'll be other winters. Well, to be honest, Jalila, I'd been hoping--"

"--Look!" Jalila interrupted, suddenly sick of the lie she'd been living. "I'm not going."

They turned and were facing each other by the harbor's edge. Kalal's strange face twisted into surprise, and then something like delight. Jalila thought that he was looking more and more like his father. "That's marvelous!" He clasped each of Jalila's arms and squeezed her hard enough to hurt. "It was rubbish, by the way, what I just said about winters here in Al Janb. They're the most magical, wonderful season. We'll have snowball fights together! And when Eid al-Fitr comes..."

His voice trailed off. His hands dropped from her. "What is it, Jalila?"

"I'm not going with Pavo on the *Endeavor*, but I'm going away. I'm going to Ghezirah. I'm going to study under the Church of the Gateway. I'm going to try to become a tariqua."

His face twisted again. "That witch--"

"--don't keep calling her that! You have no idea!"

Kalal balled his fists, and Jalila stumbled back, fearing for a moment that this wild, odd creature might actually be about to strike her. But he turned instead, and ran off from the harbor.

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Next morning, to no one's particular surprise, it was once again raining. Jalila felt restless and disturbed after her incomplete exchanges with Kalal. Some time had also passed since the message had been received from Ghezirah, and the few small details it had given of her journey had become vast and complicated and frustrating in their arranging. Despite the weather, she decided to ride out to see the tariqua.

Robin's mood had been almost as odd as her mothers, recently, and she moaned and snickered at Jalila when she entered the stables. Jalila called back to her, and stroked her long nose, trying to ease her agitation. It was only when she went to check the harnesses that she realized that Abu was missing. Lya was in the haramlek, still finishing breakfast. It had to be Kalal who had taken her.

The swirling serraplated road. The black, dripping trees. The agitated ocean. Robin was starting to rust again. She would need more of Pavo's attention. But Pavo would soon be gone too.... The whole planet was changing, and Jalila didn't know what to make of anything, least of all what Kalal was up to, although the unasked-for borrowing of a precious mount, even if Abu had been virtually Kalal's all summer, filled her with a foreboding that was an awkward load, not especially heavy, but difficult to carry or put down; awkward and jagged and painful. Twice, now, he had turned from her and walked away with something unsaid. It felt like the start of some prophecy....

The qasr shone jet-black in the teeming rain. The studded door, straining to overcome the swelling damp, burst open more forcefully than usual at Jalila's third knock, and the air inside swirled dark and empty. No sign of Abu in the place beyond the porch where Kalal would probably have hobbled him, although the floor here seemed muddied and damp, and Robin was agitated. Jalila glanced back, but she and her hayawan had already obscured the possible signs of another's presence. Unlike Kalal, who seemed to notice many things, she decided that she made a poor detective.

Cold air stuttered down the passageways. Jalila, chilled and watchful, had grown so used to this qasr's sense of abandonment that it was impossible to tell whether the place was now finally empty. But she feared that it was. Her thoughts and footsteps whispered to her that the tariqua, after ruining her life and playing with her expectations, had simply vanished into a puff of lost potentialities. Already disappointed, angry, she hurried to the high-ceilinged room set with blue and white tiles and found, with no great surprise, that the strewn cushions were cold and damp, the coffee lamp was unlit, and that the book through which that patient ant had crawled was now sprawled in a damp-leafed scatter of torn pages. There was no sign of the scarab. Jalila sat down, and listened to the wind's howl, the rain's ticking, wondering for a long time when it was that she had lost the ability to cry.

Finally, she stood up and moved toward the courtyard. It was colder today than it had ever been, and the rain had greyed and thickened. It gelled and dripped from the gutters in the form of something she supposed was called *sleet*, and which she decided as it splattered down her neck that she would hate

forever. It filled the bowl of the fountain with mucus-like slush, and trickled sluggishly along the lines of the drains. The air was full of weepings and howlings. In the corner of the courtyard, there lay a small black heap.

Sprawled half in, half out of the poor shelter of the arched cloisters, more than ever like a flightless bird, the tariqua lay dead. Her clothes were sodden. All the furnace heat had gone from her body, although, on a day such as this, that would take no more than a matter of moments. Jalila glanced up though the sleet toward the black wet stone of the latticed mashrabiya from which she and Kalal had first spied on the old woman, but she was sure now that she was alone. People shrank incredibly when they were dead -- even a figure as frail and old as this creature had been. And yet, Jalila found as she tried to move the tariqua's remains out of the rain, their spiritless bodies grew uncompliant; heavier and stupider than clay. The tariqua's face rolled up toward her. One side was pushed in almost unrecognizably, and she saw that a nearby nest of ants were swarming over it, busily tunneling out the moisture and nutrition, bearing it across the smeared paving as they stored up for the long winter ahead.

There was no sign of the scarab.

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5.

This, for Jalila and her mothers, was the Season of Farewells. It was the Season of Departures.

There was a small and pretty onion-domed mausoleum on a headland overlooking Al Janb, and the pastures around it were a popular place for picnics and lovers' trysts in the Season of Summers, although they were scattered with tombstones. It was the ever-reliable Lya who saw to the bathing and shrouding of the tariqua's body, which was something Jalila could not possibly face, and to the sending out though the null-space between the stars of all the necessary messages. Jalila, who had never been witness to the processes of death before, was astonished at the speed with which everything was arranged. As she stood with the other mourners on a day scarfed with cloud, beside the narrow rectangle of earth within which what remained of the tariqua now lay, she could still hear the wind booming over the empty qasr, feel the uncompliant weight of the old woman's body, the chill speckle of sleet on her face.

It seemed as if most of the population of Al Janb had made the journey with the cortege up the narrow road from the town. Hard-handed fisherwomen. Gaudily dressed merchants. Even the few remaining aliens. Nayra was there, too, a beautiful vision of sorrow surrounded by her lesser black acolytes. So was Ibra. So, even, was Kalal. Jalila, who was acknowledged to have known the old woman better than anyone, said a few words that she barely heard herself over the wind. Then a priestess who had flown in specially from Ras pronounced the usual prayers about the soul rising on the arms of Munkar and Nakir, the blue and the black angels. Looking down into the ground, trying hard to think of the Gardens of Delight that the Almighty always promised her stumbling faithful, Jalila could only remember that dream of her own burial: the soil pattering on her face, and everyone she knew looking down at her. The

tariqua, in one of her many half-finished tales, had once spoken to her of a world upon which no sun had ever shone, but which was nevertheless warm and bounteous from the core of heat beneath its surface, and where the people were all blind, and moved by touch and sound alone; it was a joyous place, and they were forever singing. Perhaps, and despite all the words of the Prophet, Heaven, too, was a place of warmth and darkness.

The ceremony was finished. Everyone moved away, each pausing to toss in a damp clod of earth, but leaving the rest of the job to be completed by a dull-minded robotic creature, which Pavo had had to rescue from the attentions of the younger children, who, all though the long Habaran summer, had ridden around on it. Down at their haramlek, Jalila's mothers had organized a small feast. People wandered the courtyard, and commented admiringly on the many changes and improvements they had made to the place. Amid all this, Ibra seemed subdued -- a reluctant presence in his own body -- while Kalal was nowhere to be seen at all, although Jalila suspected that, if only for the reasons of penance, he couldn't be far away.

Of course, there had been shock at the news of the tariqua's death, and Lya, who had now become the person to whom the town most often turned to resolve its difficulties, had taken the lead in the inquiries that followed. A committee of wisewomen was organized even more quickly than the funeral, and Jalila had been summoned and interrogated. Waiting outside in the cold hallways of Al Janb's municipal buildings, she'd toyed with the idea of keeping Abu's disappearance and her suspicions of Kalal out of her story, but Lya and the others had already spoken to him, and he'd admitted to what sounded like everything. He'd ridden to the qasr on Abu to remonstrate with the tariqua. He'd been angry, and his mood had been bad. Somehow, but only lightly, he'd pushed the old woman, and she had fallen badly. Then, he panicked. Kalal bore responsibility for his acts, it was true, but it was accepted that the incident was essentially an accident. Jalila, who had imagined many versions of Kalal's confrontation with the tariqua, but not a single one that seemed entirely real, had been surprised at how easily the people of Al Janb were willing to absolve him. She wondered if they would have done so quite so easily if Kalal had not been a freak -- a man. And then she also wondered, although no one had said a single word to suggest it, just how much she was to blame for all of this herself.

She left the haramlek from the funeral wake and crossed the road to the beach. Kalal was sitting on the rocks, his back turned to the shore and the mountains. He didn't look around when she approached and sat down beside him. It was the first time since before the tariqua's death that they'd been alone.

"I'll have to leave here," he said, still gazing out toward the clouds that trailed the horizon.

"There's no reason--"

"--no one's asked me and Ibra to *stay*. I think they would, don't you, if anyone had wanted us to? That's the way you women work."

"We're not *you women*, Kalal. We're people."

"So you always say. And all Al Janb's probably terrified about the report they've had to make to that thing you're joining -- the Church of the Gateway. Some big, powerful body, and -- whoops -- we've killed one of your old employees...."

"Please don't be bitter."

Kalal blinked and said nothing. His cheeks were shining.

"You and Ibra -- where will you both go?"

"There are plenty of other towns around this coast. We can use our boat to take us there before the ice sets in. We can't afford to leave the planet. But maybe in the Season of False Springs, when I'm a grown

man and we've made some of the proper money we're always talking about making from harvesting the tideflowers -- and when word's got around to everyone on this planet of what happened here. Maybe then we'll leave Habara." He shook his head and sniffed. "I don't know why I bother to say *maybe*...."

Jalila watched the waves. She wondered if this was the destiny of all men; to wander forever from place to place, planet to planet, pursued by the knowledge of vague crimes that they hadn't really committed.

"I suppose you want to know what happened?"

Jalila shook her head. "It's in the report, Kalal. I believe what you said."

He wiped his face with his palms, studied their wetness. "I'm not sure I believe it myself, Jalila. The way she was, that day. That old woman -- she always seemed to be expecting you, didn't she? And then she seemed to know. I don't understand quite how it happened, and I was angry, I admit. But she almost *lunged* at me.... She seemed to want to die...."

"You mustn't blame yourself. *I* brought you to this, Kalal. I never saw..." Jalila shook her head. She couldn't say. Not even now. Her eyes felt parched and cold.

"I loved you, Jalila."

The worlds branched in a million different ways. It could all have been different. The tariqua still alive. Jalila and Kalal together, instead of the half-formed thing that the love they had both felt for Nayra had briefly been. They could have taken the *Endeavor* together and sailed this planet's seas; Pavo would probably have let them -- but when, but where, but how? None of it seemed real. Perhaps the tariqua was right; there are many worlds, but most of them are poor, half-formed things.

Jalila and Kalal sat there for a while longer. The breathmoss lay not far off, darkening and hardening into a carpet of stiff grey. Neither of them noticed it.

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For no other reason than the shift of the tides and the rapidly coming winter, Pavo, Jalila, and Kalal and Ibra all left Al Janb on the same morning. The days before were chaotic in the haramlek. People shouted and looked around for things and grew cross and petty. Jalila was torn between bringing everything and nothing, and after many hours of bag-packing and lip-chewing, decided that it could all be thrown out, and that her time would be better spent down in the stables, with Robin. Abu was there too, of course, and she seemed to sense the imminence of change and departure even more than Jalila's own hayawan. She had become Kalal's mount far more than she had ever been Lya's, and he wouldn't come to say goodbye.

Jalila stroked the warm felt of the creatures' noses. Gazing into Abu's eyes as she gazed back at hers, she remembered their rides out in the heat of summer. Being with Kalal then, although she hadn't even noticed it, had been the closest she had ever come to loving anyone. On the last night before their departure, Ananke cooked one of her most extravagant dinners, and the four women sat around the heaped extravagance of the table that she'd spent all day preparing, each of them wondering what to say, and regretting how much of these precious last times together they'd wasted. They said a long prayer to

the Almighty, and bowed in the direction of Al'Toman. It seemed that, tomorrow, even the two mothers who weren't leaving Al Janb would be setting out on a new and difficult journey.

Then there came the morning, and the weather obliged with chill sunlight and a wind that pushed hard at their cloaks and nudged the *Endeavor* away from the harbor even before her sails were set. They all watched her go, the whole town cheering and waving as Pavo waved back, looking smaller and neater and prettier than ever as she receded. Without ceremony, around the corner from the docks, out of sight and glad of the *Endeavor's* distraction, Ibra and Kalal were also preparing to leave. At a run, Jalila caught them just as they were starting to shift the hull down the rubbled slipway into the waves. *Breathmoss*; she noticed that Kalal had kept the name, although she and he stood apart on that final beach and talked as two strangers.

She shook hands with Ibra. She kissed Kalal lightly on the cheek by leaning stiffly forward, and felt the roughness of his stubble. Then the craft got stuck on the slipway, and they were all heaving to get her moving the last few meters into the ocean, until, suddenly, she was afloat, and Ibra was raising the sails, and Kalal was at the prow, hidden behind the tarpaulined weight of their belongings. Jalila only glimpsed him once more, and by then *Breathmoss* had turned to meet the stronger currents that swept outside the grey bay. He could have been a figurehead.

Back at the dock, her mothers were pacing, anxious.

"Where have you *been*?"

"Do you *know* what *time* is?"

Jalila let them scald her. She *was* almost late for her own leaving. Although most of the crowds had departed, she'd half expected Nayra to be there. Jalila was momentarily saddened, and then she was glad for her. The silver craft that would take her to the rocketport smelled disappointingly of engine fumes as she clambered into it with the few other women and aliens who were leaving Habara. There was a loud bang as the hatches closed, and then a long wait while nothing seemed to happen, and she could only wave at Lya and Ananke through the thick porthole, smiling and mouthing stupid phrases until her face ached. The ferry bobbed loose, lurched, turned, and angled up. Al Janb was half gone in plumes of white spray already.

Then it came in a huge wave. That feeling of incompleteness, of something vital and unknown left irretrievably behind, which is the beginning of the Pain of Distance that Jalila, as a tariqua, would have to face throughout her long life. A sweat came over her. As she gazed out through the porthole at what little there was to see of Al Janb and the mountains, it slowly resolved itself into one thought. Immense and trivial. Vital and stupid. That scarab. She'd never asked Kalal about it, nor found it at the qasr, and the ancient object turned itself over in her head, sinking, spinning, filling her mind and then dwindling before rising up again as she climbed out, nauseous, from the ferry and crossed the clanging gantries of the spaceport toward the last huge golden craft, which stood steaming in the winter's air. A murder weapon? -- but no, Kalal was no murderer. And, in any case, she was a poor detective. And yet...

The rockets thrust and rumbled. Pushing back, squeezing her eyeballs. There was no time now to think. Weight on weight, terrible seconds piled on her. Her blood seemed to leave her face. She was a clay-corpse. Vital elements of her senses departed. Then, there was a huge wash of silence. Jalila turned to look through the porthole beside her, and there it was. Mostly blue, and entirely beautiful: Habara, her birth planet. Jalila's hands rose up without her willing, and her fingers squealed as she touched the glass and tried to trace the shape of the greenish-brown coastline, the rising brown and white of the mountains of that huge single continent that already seemed so small, but of which she knew so little. Jewels

seemed to be hanging close before her, twinkling and floating in and out of focus like the hazy stars she couldn't yet see. They puzzled her for a long time, did these jewels, and they were evasive as fish as she sought them with her weightlessly clumsy fingers. Then Jalila felt the salt break of moisture against her face, and realized what it was.

At long last, she was crying.

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6.

Jalila had long been expecting the message when it finally came. At only one hundred and twenty standard years, Pavo was still relatively young to die, but she had used her life up at a frantic pace, as if she had always known that her time would be limited. Even though the custom for swift funerals remained on Habara, Jalila was able to use her position as a tariqua to ride the Gateways and return for the service. The weather on the planet of her birth was unpredictable as ever, raining one moment and then sunny the next, even as she took the ferry to Al Janb from the rocketport, and hot and cold winds seemed to strike her face as she stood on the dock's edge and looked about for her two remaining mothers. They embraced. They led her to their haramlek, which seemed smaller to Jalila each time she visited it, despite the many additions and extensions and improvements they had made, and far closer to Al Janb than the long walk she remembered once taking on those many errands. She wandered the shore after dinner, and searched the twilight for a particular shape and angle of quartz, and the signs of dark growth. But the heights of the Season of Storms on this coastline were ferocious, and nothing as fragile as breathmoss could have survived. She lay sleepless that night in her old room within her dreamtent, breathing the strong, dense, moist atmosphere with difficulty, listening to the sound of the wind and rain.

She recognized none of the faces but her mothers' of the people who stood around Pavo's grave the following morning. Al Janb had seemed so changeless, yet even Nayra had moved on -- and Kalal was far away. Time was relentless. Far more than the wind that came in off the bay, it chilled Jalila to the bone. One mother dead, and her two others looking like the mahwagis she supposed they were becoming. *The Pain of Distance*. More than ever now, and hour by hour and day by day in this life that she had chosen, Jalila knew what the old tariqua had meant. She stepped forward to say a few words. Pavo's life had been beautiful and complete. She had passed on much knowledge about this planet to all womankind, just as she had once passed on her wisdom to Jalila. The people listened respectfully to Jalila, as if she were a priest. When the prayers were finished and the clods of earth had been tossed and the groups began to move back down the hillside, Jalila remained standing by Pavo's grave. What looked like the same old part-metal beast came lumbering up, and began to fill in the rest of the hole, lifting and lowering the earth with reverent, childlike care. Just as Jalila had insisted, and despite her mothers' puzzlement, Pavo's grave lay right beside the old tariqua's whom they had buried so long ago. This was a place that she had long avoided, but now that Jalila saw the stone, once raw and brittle, but now

smoothed and greyed by rain and wind, she felt none of the expected agony. She traced the complex name, scrolled in naskhi script, which she had once found impossible to remember, but which she had now recited countless times in the ceremonials that the Church of the Gateway demanded of its acolytes. Sometimes, especially in the High Temple at Ghezirah, the damn things could go on for days. Yet not one member of the whole Church had seen fit to come to the simple ceremony of this old woman's burial. It had hurt her, once, to think that no one from offworld had come to her own funeral. But now she understood.

About to walk away, Jalila paused, and peered around the back of the gravestone. In the lee of the wind, a soft green patch of life was thriving. She stooped to examine the growth, which was thick and healthy, forming a patch more than the size of her two outstretched hands in this sheltered place. Breathmoss. It must have been here for a long time. Yet who would have thought to bring it? Only Pavo: only Pavo could possibly have known.

As the gathering of mourners at the haramlek started to peter out, Jalila excused herself and went to Pavo's quarters. Most of the stuff up here was a mystery to her. There were machines and nutrients and potions beyond anything you'd expect to encounter on such an out-of-the way planet. Things were growing. Objects and data needed developing, tending, cataloging, if Pavo's legacy was to be maintained. Jalila would have to speak to her mothers. But, for now, she found what she wanted, which was little more than a glass tube with an open end. She pocketed it, and walked back up over the hill to the cemetery, and said another few prayers, and bent down in the lee of the wind behind the old gravestone beside Pavo's new patch of earth, and managed to remove a small portion of the breathmoss without damaging the rest of it.

That afternoon, she knew that she would have to ride out. The stables seemed virtually unchanged, and Robin was waiting. She even snickered in recognition of Jalila, and didn't try to bite her when she came to introduce the saddle. It had been such a long time that the animal's easy compliance seemed a small miracle. But perhaps this was Pavo again; she could have done something to preserve the recollection of her much-changed mistress in some circuit or synapse of the hayawan's memory. Snuffling tears, feeling sad and exulted, and also somewhat uncomfortable, Jalila headed south on her hayawan along the old serraplate road, up over the cliffs and beneath the arms of the urrearth forest. The trees seemed different; thicker-leafed. And the birdsong cooed slower and deeper than she remembered. Perhaps, here in Habara, this was some Season other than all of those that she remembered. But the qasr reared as always -- out there on the cliff face, and plainly deserted. No one came here now, but, like Robin, the door, at three beats of her fists, remembered.

Such neglect. Such decay. It seemed a dark and empty place. Even before Jalila came across the ancient signs of her own future presence -- a twisted coathanger, a chipped plate, a few bleached and rotting cushions, some odd and scattered bits of Gateway technology that had passed beyond malfunction and looked like broken shells -- she felt lost and afraid. Perhaps this, at last, was the final moment of knowing that she had warned herself she might have to face on Habara. The Pain of Distance. But at the same time, she knew that she was safe as she crawled across this particular page of her universe, and that when she did finally take a turn beyond the Gateways through which sanity itself could scarcely follow, it would be of her own volition, and as an impossibly old woman. The tariqua. Tending flowers like an old tortoise thrust out of its shell. Here, on a sunny, distant day. There were worse things. There were always worse things. And life was good. For all of this, pain was the price you paid.

Still, in the courtyard, Jalila felt the cold draft of prescience upon her neck from that lacy mashrabiya where she and Kalal would one day stand. The movement she made as she looked up toward it even reminded her of the old tariqua. Even her eyesight was not as sharp as it had once been. Of course, there were ways around that which could be purchased in the tiered and dizzy markets of Ghezirah, but sometimes it was better to accept a few things as the will of the Almighty. Bowing down, muttering the *shahada*, Jalila laid the breathmoss upon the shaded stone within the cloister. Sheltered here, she imagined that it would thrive. Mounting Robin, riding from the qasr, she paused once to look back. Perhaps her eyesight really was failing her, for she thought she saw the ancient structure shimmer and change. A beautiful green castle hung above the cliffs, coated entirely in breathmoss; a wonder from a far and distant age. She rode on, humming snatches of the old songs she'd once known so well about love and loss between the stars. Back at the haramlek, her mothers were as anxious as ever to know where she had been. Jalila tried not to smile as she endured their familiar scolding. She longed to hug them. She longed to cry.

That evening, her last evening before she left Habara, Jalila walked the shore alone again. Somehow, it seemed the place to her where Pavo's ghost was closest. Jalila could see her mother there now, as darkness welled up from between the rocks; a small, lithe body, always stooping, turning, looking. She tried going toward her; but Pavo's shadow always flickered shyly away. Still, it seemed to Jalila as if she had been led toward something, for here was the quartz-striped rock from that long-ago Season of the Soft Rains. Of course, there was no breathmoss left, the storms had seen to that, but nevertheless, as she bent down to examine it, Jalila was sure that she could see something beside it, twinkling clear from a rockpool through the fading light. She plunged her hand in. It was a stone, almost as smooth and round as many millions of others on the beach, yet this one was worked and carved. And its color was greenish-grey.

The soapstone scarab, somehow thrust here to this beach by the storms of potentiality that the tariquas of the Church of the Gateway stirred up by their impossible journeyings, although Jalila was pleased to see that it looked considerably less damaged than the object she remembered Kalal turning over and over in his nervous hands as he spoke to her future self. Here at last was the link that would bind her through the pages of destiny, and, for a moment, she hitched her hand back and prepared to throw it so far out into the ocean that it would never be reclaimed. Then her arm relaxed. Out there, all the way across the darkness of the bay, the tideflowers of Habara were glowing.

She decided to keep it.