

Don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive — don't mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.

– Constantine Cavafy
"The God Abandons Antony"
Translated by Edmund Keeley/Philip
Sherrard

Perhaps our only sickness is to desire a truth which we
cannot bear rather than to rest content with the fictions we
manufacture out of each other.

– Lawrence Durrell
Clea (The Alexandria Quartet, Book 4)

My footsteps echoed under the high ceiling of the spaceport's arrivals gate. Plastic shrouds wrapped all but one of the interview stations. At the last open interview station, the guard's frizzy hair and long ears reminded me of Nesbitt, Juliette's husband. I held out my ALECS passport and let the guard take a fingertip scraping and a retina scan to confirm my identity.

After a few seconds, the machine gonged and a green light glowed on its panel, sequencing of my DNA complete. The guard gestured at a gray plastic frame, two meters fifty tall, one meter fifty wide, thirty centimeters thick. Under the center of

the frame, bee-striped lines marked the outlines of feet.

"Stand there until released," the guard said.

I raised an eyebrow at the frame, then at him. "Brain activity scanners are voluntary at any ALECS arrival or departure point."

"The rules have changed. Stand there until released."

He set his fists on his hips. The gesture set a crease into the ALECS patch on the guard's blue sleeve. Under the patch, no doubt, lay the logo of United Sodalities of the Galaxy. I could waste time with his superiors, arguing protocols they knew and disregarded, with little hope of evading the scanner. Or I could comply. In one inhalation I planned my thoughts, then did as he bade.

The guard moved around the frame and faced me. Motors spun up and fans whirled in the plastic frame as he scowled at my passport. "What's the purpose of your visit, *Mr. Lee*?"

I let slide his willful refusal to use my honorific. "The Way in the West has sent me to supervise the withdrawal of its personnel and assets from Elard,

according to the Indigenous Autonomous Council's decree." A sense of purpose filled in behind my eyes. Sadness at our mission's end hung from it like icicles. He would expect the scanner to pick up both those feelings.

It helped I felt them.

His scowl shifted targets to my face. "Is that your sole purpose?"

"I might look up some old colleagues," I said. Stolen hours with Juliette returned from memory and touched my inner senses. The glow of afternoon sun flooding the opacity of the window near my narrow bed. The texture of her kisses. The grinding of our pelvises against each other. The public trysts, in her jitney, that one in the women's restroom at the café on Gregory Dialogus Street, sneaking out with disheveled hair and untucked shirts only to find Purcell waiting for us—

Mustn't think about Purcell—

"Step forward," the guard said. He snapped shut my passport and held it out, pinched between his thumb and forefinger. "Your papers are in order. I cannot deny you admittance. But here's

some advice. The rules you might remember from your previous stay, when the ALECS administrators ruled the human settlement and the wishes of our native brethren were ignored, they've changed. The natives have decided your doctrines are false. We abide by those wishes. You'd be wise to do the same, Mr. Lee."

I took the passport from him, lifted my shoulders, and turned away. I had a month on Elard to learn her secrets. Secrets I had missed on my posting here decades prior.

The planet's secrets. Not Juliette's.

Outside the arrivals gate, a robotic flatbed cart waited with my suitcases. Its front structure bore shoulders and head, eyes level with my chest. A smile formed on its cartoonish features when I approached. "A jitney waits for you outside," it said.

I trickled my hands over the barely-visible seal in the uppermost suitcase. Cool to the touch. No sign of forced entry by the security guards. "Follow."

My heels clacked and the cart's tires whispered

on the tile floor. I alone had arrived today. The only other sounds and motions on the concourse came from cleaning robots. Chairs and tables gleamed in the glow of lighted ceiling panels and waited for passengers never to come. A cleaning robot, the size of a tiny dog, clung on gecko-like feet to a poster saying *The United Sodalities of the Galaxy and the Indigenous Autonomous Council Welcome You to Elard*. A lighted strip in the frame above the poster glinted on the robot's carapace. With a raspy sound, the robot licked the face of the Sodalities's local operations director. An augmented reality server pushed his name to the video screens in my contact lenses. Vainqueur. A name I'd never heard before.

A dozen paces further, a light had burned out over a poster with the ALECS logo and an array of smiling humans diverse in race, sex, and attire. Their puffed hair and narrow, starched lapels resembled decades-old images of the four of us on the soft synthleather couches in a back corner of the café. *The Apostolic League of Earth Communities of Spirit. Many Manifestations, One Truth*. Thick lines of dust marked the edges of the poster frame.

I rounded a last corner and entered the spaceport atrium. My footsteps echoed off the concrete walls and vast front windows. My pace remained constant but my heart sped up. Across kilometers of scrubby desert, the human settlement thrust its bony fingers toward the sky.

The most important three years of my life had been spent in and around those living buildings and the wide boulevards between them. I had been a callow boy, deluded by my recent diploma and my accepted application for an extrasolar posting into believing I was a man.

Three years of fruitless missionary work humbled my naive certainty in both The Way in the West's teachings, and my own abilities to persuade the natives. *Alien Lifeforms Extremely Contemptuous of Salvation*, Purcell had said with his customary cynicism, and Nesbitt had narrowed his eyes.

A few months in Juliette's close orbit demolished my masculine pretense of control over my surroundings and my emotions.

She lived still among those bony towers.

The doors to the loading zone parted to reveal a

single jitney waiting along a hundred meters of curb. On its side, the ALECS logo, the white sun of the Transcendent pouring out the rainbow-colored waves of the different spiritual communities. A standard vehicle from the motor pool. The baking air desiccated me, pulled recollections of field work out of the depths of my memory. I shaded my eyes and squinted at the cloudless sky under noontime Elar. Quick steps to the jitney, and I sagged into the rear seat before ordering the air conditioning vents to aim themselves at me. I stepped down the windows' opacity to give myself a sepia-tinged view of the spaceport and the landscape. Thumps came from the trunk as the robotic cart loaded my luggage.

Minutes later, the jitney hurried down the road toward the human settlement. Straight as a crow's flight, the same low, mounded median of rocky soil and sparse Terran shrubs divided the two inbound lanes from the two outer. To the sides, new boundary fences ran parallel to the road, ten meters from the paved edges of the shoulders. Atop the barbed wire, concertina coils angled toward the

road. In the old days, the ALECS concession stretched five kilometers to either side, marked by a fence a person could climb. Beyond the fences, rocky desert tufted by a few Elardian plants stretched to the edges of the plateau. The natives rarely strayed this far and high from the great narrow sea stretching halfway around the planet.

My thoughts turned to the hidden one of my purposes. Three days before I left Earth, my superiors sent me to Prague, where I met the executive committee of The Unneeded Hypothesis, Purcell's sponsors.

We never learned his fate on Elard. In the decades since he disappeared, our leadership focused on more urgent matters. But our stature declined anyway, and our number of adherents has shrunk. Learning Purcell's fate would be one of the last victories we could win. Now that the United Sodalities of the Galaxy has cajoled the natives into expelling the rest of us, our chance at even that victory is slipping away.

Three kilometers outside the window, across a city of midrise apartment buildings housing tens of thousands living mostly in virtual reality, gray-

bellied clouds brushed the spires of St. Vitus' Cathedral. *Where do I come in?* I asked.

The executive winced. *We can't afford to send an agent to Elard. Your superiors in Calgary agreed we could partially fund your trip if you do this for us.*

Calgary didn't tell me—

His eyes grew imploring. *We ask for a pair of reasons. First, yes, our spiritual paths differ, but they are more consonant than any others. We both strive to see the universe as it is, yes? Unlike the USG, and the Universal Church of Christ, both telling pretty lies of the universe as it could be, if only the masses would bow down to the USG's historical dialectic, or the UCC's god.*

All that is true. I knew the answer before I asked my next question. *And the other reason?*

In his reports, Purcell called you his friend.

A sign announced a thousand meters to the settlement's gate. To the left, beyond the road's outbound lanes, the boundary fence turned a right angle away from the road. The airfield looked little changed. The aircraft hangar and liftpad were as I remembered, shimmering in the heat. No one was about, and on a pole near the hangar slumped the

ALECS flag.

Between the airfield and the settlement, a few jitneys rolled over rock and packed sand between several new buildings. Extruded like giant sausages, only narrow, translucent windows and recessed doors broke up their smooth shells. Near each door was a building number and the spiral-galaxy-and-all-seeing-eye logo of USG.

The jitney slowed for a sallyport arcing over the inbound lanes. A curtain of air buffeted it and it stopped under the sallyport's shade. A guard tapped the window and I told the jitney to open it. "Yes?"

He leaned his head in and slid off his sunglasses. A speaker bud like a white chrysalis showed in his left ear, and flesh-toned discs on the sides of his Adam's apple marked his subvocal microphones. "Traffic control verification. Your destination?"

"The Way in the West, Elard Headquarters, 14 Laozi Street."

"Thank you." He angled his head to his left and got a faraway look, listening to his earbud. "May

your stay be productive. Good day.”

The jitney rolled forward, through another air curtain, and back into the glare of Elard at midday. Dark shadings from under pried-off letters marked shut-down shops along Guru Nanak Boulevard. A few remained open under unfamiliar names. Harvard Square Poetry Slam, Portland’s Finest Coffee, Park Slope Brewery & Pub Grub. All had windows tinted against the harsh light. The boulevard lacked any traffic other than me.

A few minutes later, I arrived at our headquarters. A glimpse up the front facade showed little change in the three floors of white bone and reflective windows. Our banner hung slack above the vehicle entrance. The banner bore the *taijitu*, its light side shaped roughly like the Americas. I turned into the parking garage entrance and shade swallowed the jitney.

I climbed out near double glass doors leading into the building. Though attenuated by the garage structure, Elar’s glare still forced me to shield my eyes with my hand to widen my pupils enough for the retina scanner mounted on the wall. I pressed

the thumbprint scanner and said, "Darren Lee, *daoshi* of the third rank."

The doors shuddered as the magnetic seals gave way.

I went in, savored the cold air thick like a hotel's, and followed a virtual arrow to the elevator. It debouched me on the top floor.

Silence reigned throughout the floor, broken only by a few low voices at the far end of a cubicle layout. Beyond the voices, lights glowed in one of the offices around the perimeter. I presumed the lighted office belonged to Scobee, the director of local operations. Between the elevator and the voices, the cubicles stood empty save for a few empty snack wrappers and abandoned datachips in their back corners and deep in their footwells.

In his office, Scobee stood behind his desk, arms crossed behind his back, shoulders high and rigid. His right eye drooped, and both eyes had heavy bags. I waited in the open doorway until he greeted me. "Welcome—back—to Elard, *Daoshi* Lee."

"You seem displeased to see me."

A moment of alarm flashed wide his eyes. "No,

Daoshi, certainly not. The chance to meet and share the Way with a *daoshi* of the third rank, I can only be pleased—”

“Perhaps *you* can, but what about all the other parts of your psyche?”

“They, yes, they are pleased to. I—part of me, rather—wonders, though, why Calgary sent you. And without warning, that’s what puzzles—me.” He cleared his throat. “My reports to Calgary have made clear our evacuation is on schedule. Haven’t they?”

“I can’t speak for Calgary, but they must see it differently. After all, they ordered me here.”

“We’ll be down to ten percent of our complement when the ship that brought you takes off. There are only four remote sites left and I shouldn’t have any more trouble shutting them down—”

“Brambles in the path.”

For all our claims of relying on inner wisdom, we regurgitate our share of mantras. *Brambles in the path? Go around them. That’s all you need. Don’t bother asking, ‘why are such things made in this world?’*

Scobee's head jittered, then stopped. "Of course, Marcus Aurelius said it so well, and so long ago." His shoulders slumped. "*Daoshi*, I'm sorry, all the difficulties in wrapping up our presence here are getting to me. I've been doing well closing down our operations, and still Calgary doubts me...."

"The handbook on withdrawing a mission from an alien planet was all theoretical," I said, tone chummy, "until now. Mind if I sit?"

He nodded, gestured at a chair facing his desk. He dropped into his. "The handbook came close enough. I've had to cut a few corners—I think my results will show those were good decisions—"

"I'm sure they will. Yet even if the handbook gave your team good advice, the logistics of packing up our facilities and shipping out hundreds of people must have kept you up at night."

"The logistics are just details. We're on top of them." He backhanded the air, confident and nonchalant, but his hand soon fell to the glass desktop. A dour look filled his face and he retreated deeper into his chair. "The United Sodalities is the difficulty."

“How so? USG won over the vast majority of the natives; the natives ordered the rest of us to leave. What am I missing?”

He looked haggard for a moment. “You know those aren’t ALECS security personnel at the spaceport and the settlement gate.”

“Yes. So? USG security is running a victory lap.” I peered at him. “Have they interfered with your operations?”

He rocked his chair back and forth in a slow but agitated tempo. “Not directly. Yet. Much. Mostly they just watch and jump on our every transgression. Did you see where our logo used to be on the building? No, of course not, it’s on the side away from the street.”

His window faced the same direction. I stood, went to it. The next block held dogtrot stucco houses where married ALECS personnel with families had lived. Beyond lay forty meters of bare dirt, then a barbed wire fence marked the settlement perimeter. Hazy with distance and heat shimmer, past the canyon-carved edge of the plateau, close to the sinuous indigo sea, thick brown

piles marked the nearest native villages. "Facing the lowlands," I said. "Visible to the natives. If someone gave the natives a telescope."

"Exactly. Visible enough to offend their newfound faith in USG-ism, at any rate. We wasted two days covering up the logo and spreading osteoclastic factors to get the building to slough it off."

"At least it was only two days."

Scobee shook his head. "They forbid access to some of our old field posts. They're uncrewed, we scrubbed anything sensitive when our people last left them, so maybe it doesn't matter, but the handbook says we should double-check those sites and remove anything which might affirm our tradition." He looked at me for approval.

Purcell's unoccupied airmobile had been found in the high desert two hundred kilometers to the north. To give our allies at The Unneeded Hypothesis all the answers they sought, I would have to find his remains.

Scobee expected a reply. "That's a corner I'm glad you didn't cut," I said.

"I've been haranguing them for flight plan approvals twice a day for the last week. We're still on schedule to evacuate, but that could slip if they delay us much longer and one of those field posts has more stuff left behind than we expect."

"I'll talk to the High Arbiter at ALECS local headquarters, and someone up in the ranks at USG. I was friends with Nesbitt Edmondson, and his wife Juliette, when I was first posted here. If he's still around—"

"He died."

"What?" I peered at him. Did he misspeak? Did I mishear? "I didn't know."

Scobee nodded his gaze down to his desktop. Death comes so unexpectedly these centuries. I read his avoidance of my gaze as a grant to me of privacy for grief and shock.

It also meant he saw no trace of a boyish longing shooting up the inside of my chest. *Her husband was dead, her other lover was dead, she might now turn to me—*

Scobee inhaled loudly enough for me to know he readied to speak. "It happened about five years

ago. Some task in the wilds went wrong and he came back to the settlement in a body bag."

"If I see his wife, I'll give her my condolences." I forced my voice to sound casual. "Did she stay here after he died?"

"Last I heard. I can look her up for you."

"No need. She probably wouldn't remember me."

A knock on the open door turned my head. The woman looked to be in her twenties, hair thin and sandy-blond. She dressed like an office worker, in a white blouse and a pleated skirt hemmed just below her knee. A glance showed she lacked Juliette's depths.

She looked puzzled. "Are you *Daoshi* Lee?" She had an Australian accent, thick with earthy casualness, heightening the lack of depth.

"I am."

"Sorry, *Daoshi*, from your name, I was expecting you to be ethnically Chinese."

"I get that sometimes. You are?"

"Clio."

Scobee cleared his throat. "Clio will be on the

final ship out. Her skills are too valuable to let her go before then."

To Clio, I said, "You do field work? Liase with ALECS local operations?"

"No, *Daoshi*. I'm in counterintelligence."

"We've been granted a flat for you," Scobee said, "on John Maynard Keynes Street a few blocks off Guru Nanak Boulevard. Clio will accompany you and get you situated."

"Thanks," I replied, then turned to her. "—but babysitting me seems a waste of your talents."

Clio held my gaze for a second. "*Daoshi*, I wish it were."

A few minutes later, my jitney drove from the depths of the garage and parked outside the double glass doors. It opened for us as we hurried into it. I let the vents blow cold air at my face for a few seconds before I turned to Clio. She held her finger in front of her lips and her eyes implored me. I nodded and she moved her finger away. "*Daoshi*, tell me news from Earth."

"You must get plenty of news already."

Muscles trembled in her neck. The jitney

apparently picked up her subvocalization: the windows opaqued as if thick curtains had been drawn closed. For a moment, the cabin seemed dim, cool. She reached between two pleats of her skirt and pulled from some hidden pocket a case about ten centimeters long and three deep and high. A thumb-press flicked open a lid. Four rounded black balls, each smaller than the thumbnail of my little finger, lay in foam. "I've been too busy to follow it."

"You can't have left that long ago."

"I've been here two years. Please, *daoshi*, tell me news from Earth." She gave me a look urging me to comply.

"There's no news. Ninety-five percent of the human race takes their charitable allotment..."

Clio lifted a ball from the case. A half-ball, actually, its missing hemisphere previously hidden by the foam. She tapped its flat face and pressed it against a lower corner of the window on her side of the jitney. It clung to the window after she pulled her hand away.

I subvoked to her, "Are you worried about eavesdroppers?"

"I am," she replied the same way, her voice lilting through my earbuds. "But speak aloud."

I did as she asked. "...twenty kilograms of nanoassembled products and five hundred kilowatt-hours of fusion electricity every day—"

"Hasn't changed, then." She stuck another half-ball to the front window.

"A little. For the worse. Virtual reality games and immersive stories gain more popularity every day, and engagement with the real world drops in proportion. Except for our adherents, and those of the other ALECS spiritual communities, we're becoming a species bounded by nutshells and counting ourselves kings of infinite space."

Clio reached across me to press the next half-ball to the window on my side. Halfway there, her chest over my lap, she blushed and her eye visible to me widened. She left the seat to crouch on the floor, skirt covering more of her legs than I would have guessed possible, and I shifted my legs further from her. Her stare bored into the window where she pressed the half-ball. "You've talked enough for the system to calibrate your voice."

“Why does it need to do that?” I filled my voice with languid humor.

Once more on the seat next to me, she turned her back to press the last half-ball against the rear window. Between her shoulder blades, sweat formed a dark drop the size of a large antique coin. “The rattlers are an eavesdropping countermeasure.”

“That implies an eavesdropping measure.”

“Set off, please,” she said to the jitney, aloud for my benefit. The jitney rolled forward. She crossed her legs, angling a knee toward me. Her face showed professional poise over traces of embarrassment. “When we speak, we create pressure waves in the air. When they hit a window, they set it to rattling. Not so much as we could notice, but aim a lidar—a laser rangefinder—on that window, and you could hear what we’re saying.”

What might USG security have heard during my ride from the spaceport? “The rattlers disrupt that.”

“Yeah, but the two easiest rattler techniques give the game away. Easiest is a jitter pattern to feed

the eavesdropper a white noise. That doesn't happen naturally. Next easiest is an interference pattern to cancel out our sound waves and feed the eavesdropper silence. But who ever is utterly silent for ten minutes in a jitney?"

"The rattlers are sending interference with an audio track."

"Exactly. Same principle as a noise-canceling earbud." Clio tapped her left ear. "We coded the system to improvise the audio track based on the jitney's passengers...." Her cheeks reddened. She turned away but forgot to subvocalize. Her inadvertent whisper came to me over the rush of air from the vents. "Is the system running a hook-up —?" Her cheeks grew even more red and a moment of alarm bulged her eyes.

Old habits stirred in me. I needled her embarrassment. "We wouldn't want that, would we?"

Her back stiffened and she half-turned away from me. I picked non-existent lint off my pants while the mood eased. I didn't have time for romantic encounters, especially not with the extra

complications arising from crossing rank levels within a workplace.

And especially especially not if Juliette had no other man in her life.

We pulled up to a two-story walkup on John Maynard Keynes. "I'll double-check, but we've already secured your flat."

Flat like the flight deck of an archaic aircraft carrier. My new space was twice the size of my apartment on the downtown Calgary riverfront, and ten times the cramped apartment I'd shared with Appel-Ball during my first posting on Elard. The few pieces of furniture stood on spindly carbon nanotube legs and made the space even larger. Clio put her finger to her lips, then slid a device smaller than her palm from another hidden pocket of her skirt. She paced around, checking some visual data projected to her contact lenses, while the building's robots set down my luggage. After the robots left, she scanned my luggage, then blew out a breath. "I've spoofed their cameras and microphones, but I wager they'll try to plant more when you're out. I've set up intrusion sensors on the doors. Vibration

detectors on the floor, in case they try to feed a device in from the flat below. You'll be free to speak here, in our headquarters, and in one of our jitneys. Anywhere else, assume you're being overheard."

"I will."

She nodded. "One last thing, *Daoshi*." She handed me the palm-sized device. I twirled it between my fingers. "That's yours till we leave. I'll do ongoing scans, but you're the first line of defense."

After Clio left, I rode my jitney down John Maynard Keynes to Guru Nanak. I passed through the shadow of a tall building, taller than I remembered, at the corner. USG headquarters. The front facade showed only a bone-white brilliance dappled with reflective windows. I checked the upper floors for the joint of new growth, saw none. Impermeable to the eye, USG kept its secrets.

ALECS local operations stood half a kilometer further down Guru Nanak, at the intersection with Gregory Dialogus. Despite the addition to USG headquarters, ALECS local operations remained the tallest building on the planet. I waited on the top

floor, where transparent interior walls combined with wide windows to give a view across dozens of kilometers, from far south out to sea to the lifeless gray mountains separating the plateau from the high desert to the north. Snow dusted the highest peaks like a dip in coarse salt.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind me, followed by a voice full of delight. "Darren! I knew you had come back, but I hadn't expected you to visit so quickly!"

I turned to Appel-Ball. He wrapped me in his burly arms and kissed my cheeks. "I didn't know I would have to," I said.

His jocular front faded. "Come to my office."

Appel-Ball's office occupied the southwest corner of the floor. From paintings hanging on the interior walls, English toffs from a bygone age judged us with their stares. The top of his desk could sleep three and, knowing him, quite likely had.

I remembered Clio's warning about USG's eyes and ears. The windows lacked rattlers. I sat facing his desk. My chair's leather squeaked and the

nailhead trim was cool under my fingertips.

“You’ve come up in the world, High Arbiter.”

His solemn moment in the lobby had disappeared. “As have you, old friend. A *daoshi* of the third rank? Almost high enough not to be sent interstellar on a pointless venture.”

“I had the bad luck to have Elard on my resume.”

“This planet is a curse upon us all.” A drawer of his desk slid open and a telescoping arm extended a tray bearing two glasses and a bottle of Scotch. He affected an accent, badly. “A wee nip?”

I nodded. The cork thwoomed from the bottle. I sipped peaty amber liquid and said, “Curse or not, while I’m here, I will do Calgary some good. Our man Scobee tells me USG security forbids him access to some of our remote sites. You know that’s a violation of ALECS protocols.”

He shrugged. “What does that matter? You have some empty buildings in a desert no natives ever cross. There’s no need to visit them. What, you think some native might stumble on them and happen to be literate enough in English to read the

Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, the *Tao te Ching*, or those other titles—” He squinted, swatted the air with thick fingers. “—*Self-Therapy, The Trading Tribe?*”

I gave him a level look. “I have to make sure our remote sites are scrubbed, or we’ll be in violation of ALECS protocols. We won’t stoop to USG’s level.”

With a wry grin, he shook his head. “The West keeps getting in your way,” he told me, for the hundredth time. He referred to all the archaic notions—the rule of law, respect for contract and custom, fair play, the rise and fall of individuals on merit rather than family connections or disparate impact regulations—that had propelled the human race a few thousand light years from Earth, then run out of fuel.

“You’ve become USG’s tool, I see.”

Ever the actor, he mugged a hurt look. “I still am the supreme human authority on this planet. But let us look at reality. I will strike ALECS’ colors in a month. What would I gain by ruffling USG’s feathers? Were I to tell them, ‘you must abide by the rules,’ they would just say, ‘what is permitted to

the gods is forbidden to oxen.” Not as eloquently, of course. Regardless, were I to repeat my demand, their agents would meet privately with the ALECS Executive Committee back on Earth, and I would be punished with an assignment even more inglorious than Elard.”

“I understand the USG offices here are run by a newer arrival, named Vainqueur?”

“Don’t bother.” Appel-Ball gulped whisky.

“If their agents try to meet privately with Calgary, the *daoshis* of the fourth rank would ignore them.”

Another wry head shake. “You are ever so naive. USG is strong and growing stronger, not just here and on other ALECS planets, but on Earth as well. You must know that better than I. They could make life difficult for The Way in the West by a thousand cuts.”

Appel-Ball had it right. Parts of my subconscious shifted. “A shame Nesbitt died.”

“You think were he still prominent with USG, he would pull strings to ensure his security personnel would give you passage?” His face

softened. "Perhaps you are right. You two were part of a close circle, with Juliette and Purcell."

He stared at his Scotch for a time. Formerly he spoke frankly when in his cups, and rare is the man who grows out of that habit with age.

"What did you hear?" he asked. "About his death?"

"An accident, out in the wilds."

Appel-Ball sniffed out a breath. "Suicide."

I lifted my glass and held it front of my mouth. Nesbitt had been capable of many things, but suicide? "Why would he kill himself?"

"Because he could no longer take Juliette's ailment."

I frowned. Ailment? Any disease of the body could be treated. Likewise, any disease of the brain.

But a disease of the spirit... "What ailment?"

"She is a nymphomaniac."

My voice worked while the rest of me sat stunned. "The clinical term is 'sex addict.'" I took a swallow of Scotch. The whisky glowed down my throat. "You're serious."

"I had it from Baldassare. The official

psychiatrist, recall him from our annual checkups?"

"Vaguely."

"He returned to Earth about ten years back. The night before he left, as the afterparty ran down, I pinned him in a corner and plied him with more drink. He was loose with many a person's secret, but hers was the only one that lodged in my mind. Juliette had all manner of affairs, and though she told him Nesbitt had no idea, Baldassare sensed from Nesbitt's checkups that he knew. Those hard edges, those steely eyes, Nesbitt repressed many emotions. Would you agree?"

What did Appel-Ball know about her affair with me? I blinked a few times. "I can't speculate."

"Her affairs dated back to your time on the planet. With hindsight, Baldassare realized Purcell had probably been one of her lovers. You did not notice?"

"No."

He leaned back, squinted. "I always assumed you were her emotional vibrator. Someone she could use to satisfy her need to talk about her feelings, without caring about yours."

“‘Dickless friend’ would be pithier.”

Appel-Ball spread wide his hands. “I’ve offended you. My pardons. We were all much younger and knew fewer of the ways of the world. I can tell you have grown as a man. When you meet her this visit, you will be free of the foolish hope she will open her heart and legs to you.”

I angled my head in conciliation. “You were right about my relationship with her then. And what it would be if I met her now.”

“But she never spoke of...?”

“The men she cheated on Nesbitt with? No. What woman in that situation would? Her words would stir up her male friend’s jealousy. Either he would break off their friendship and take away her emotional vibrator, or she would give him sexual sops out of guilt.” Juliette, of course, had done the latter. Realizing that a few months after I left Elard had been one of the clearest moments of my life.

“You have indeed grown as a man.” He raised his glass to me.

After I finished my Scotch, I rode back toward my flat. I could spend the rest of the long afternoon

reviewing files from Scobee, and from the Unneeded Hypothesis, while Elar crawled toward the horizon. An early night, a fresh start in the morning—

A new message alert chimed in my ear. I subvoked, “Play.”

Her voice, like old honey: sweet as ever, but gritted by time.

“Darren. Just the sound of your name takes me back to our younger days. You must meet me for dinner and catching up. The old café, twenty-five o’clock. The name has changed, but you recall the address. I’ll get the table in the—in our—corner. Till then.”

In my subconscious, my younger self jumped up at her command and ran to the old café. He thrashed within me while I sat immobile. The jitney continued down the scorched street. My younger self gave a confused, plaintive note and then sank back.

Presumptuous. Demanding. Flattering when it served her purpose. Juliette hadn’t changed. But as Appel-Ball had put it, now I knew more of the ways

of the world. She could wait in the café till closing, craning her long neck at each clang of the entry bell, while she found for herself what powerlessness felt like.

A wisdom from the Way passed through my awareness. If I avoided her to show I finally held some power over her, she still held power over me.

My thoughts ran more clearly. Her organization, the Universal Church of Christ, had long been in partnership with the United Sodalities. She might be on good enough terms with her late husband's friends at USG to give Scobee's field teams the clearance they needed to scrub our remote sites.

And me clearance to find Purcell's remains.

I subvoked a reply message. "Till then."

After styling my hair and changing into slacks and a blazer, a few minutes before twenty-five, my jitney rolled along Gregory Dialogus. Elar lay two hours under the horizon. The lights of shops spilled out of transparent windows and pooled at the feet of strolling pedestrians. Jackets shielded the pedestrians against the cloudless desert night and