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captured in time

old brick streets were covered in slush
a grey sleet scattered and clung
to black branches twisting like
tormented arms - reaching for the sky
the moonlight made the night glow
and shadows she'd swear were moving
cause the night to dance bizarre
for strangers who might have come by

a young man in a moment passed
his blank stare no boy could disguise
clouds of frozen breath trailed behind
his short chopped hair and wild brown eyes
a misty grey haze descended upon
the swirling madness which followed
as thoughts like branches reaching up
filled her head with an aching hollow

she turned to watch him walk on
in a silence that froze and cracked
as he stopped in his thick tweed overcoat
two sizes too big and looked back
like animals caught in still life
a soldier / a thief in the night
they stood like statues in contemplation
like pillars - both captured in time

a dog howled off in the distance
a savage warning - distorted / insane
he spoke and she felt her hands clench
the blood in her heart rushed her brain

they walked on together in silence
the smell of hasish drifted / froze
while eyes in the night watched uneasy
from dim lit houses gathered in rows
til somehow a calm fell upon them
and suddenly chance sparked fate
confusion found peace in the shadows
where soldiers love - and thieves still wait

old brick streets are covered in white
where a blanket of snow came to rest
smoke streams from chimney tops
drifting like clouds in the sky
the full moon suspended in midair
casts shadows of trees in a room
where she sleeps alone - in naked silence
she lays - like a city in ruin

love

Love, the never ending challenge
of articulating ideas
Sometimes trapped in the web
of my
spaghetti
slurped back
into
The passionate cavity from whence they came
to come
again
purely
innocently

juergen tossmann

Steve Jackson
Sea
The wide sea
Of endless
Solitude
Beckons me.
I seek to
Rejoice it.
Powerful
World of blue.
Waves are wild
Just as the
Thoughts of a
Playful child.
Reminds me,
The sea does,
Of a kite
Soaring free.
Contained
Not by any.
However,
Sustained.
The sea is
Home to many
That choose life
In the fizz.
But now, I
Decide to
Remain here
High and dry.

Thomas A. Schmidt

Imperfections
Sometimes I look at people and I sure don’t understand, why some folk act the way they do when professing salvation’s plan.
One minute you can see them with God’s glory on their face, and the next time that you see them they are acting a disgrace.
You ask yourself the question, “Is this person truly saved, or are they just pretending trying to make it through the day.” And then it dawned on me one morn that no one has perfection, for all of us have little faults that others are detecting. God has to mold and make us over day by day and fix the imperfections when we faulter in our ways. God has never left a one unfinished or undone, but tries to make us ready for the coming of his son.

Kathy A. Clark

Steve Jackson
The World that Harbors Me

As the pipe went out 
and I looked about 
at the world that harbors me.

Past the broken watch, 
and the Ice Cream shop, 
and the Babe on Daddys knee.

Do I really care to be somewhere? 
Should I set out to sea?

As the pipe went out 
and I looked about 
at the world that harbors me.

Cross the Pool room, 
into the Bar, 
Nellie in red and an old candy jar 
cradled by a Wino, 
A Wino from singapore 
and another Whore.

Do I really care to be somewhere? 
Should I set out to sea?

As the pipe went out 
and I looked about 
at the world that harbors me.

A lonely Canyon, 
a blue ridge mountain, 
an Elk at the edge of a tree, 
a Hunter in brown 
A shot went down.

Do I really care to be somewhere? 
Should I set out to sea?

As the pipe went out 
and I looked about 
at the world that harbors me.

Juergen Tossmann

a final embrace

sunset / they fumble with matches 
to set a fire which burns so low 
and builds like others - enclosing 
themselves - in circles of flames 
his hunter green jersey / dirty 
with ash and pieces of crisp brown leaves 
her turquoise jersey - their bodies 
entwine and tumble in pine needles 
somewhere so deep in the woods 
where eyes snap a crystalline blue 
reflecting the violent violet hue 
of the fire that burns in the distance 
their sacrifice to the gods 
bellowing grey black ash mingles 
with clouds - and white hot memories drift 
his hair smells of smoke / cool brown silk 
she brushes from his eyes and smiles - they seem 
just on the edge of a dream 
his heart beats as sirens defy 
their painting a savage september sky 
she reaches to kiss his tender wet lips 
in passionate rebellion 
the flame which devours / evil 
and blazing demon they have set free 
sorching the brittle dying earth 
beyond them it seethes in delight 
two scared young kids - on the edge of their time 
extinguished - we'll search for a reason 
in evergreen embers tonight 
as they lay beneath the stars tasting truth 
that tastes of love - and raging youth 
a hunter green jersey / dirty 
with ash and pieces of crisp brown leaves 
a turquoise jersey - two bodies 
entwine - a final embrace

steve jackson
Juergen Tossmann

**Pit Stop**

I was driving back from Canton after a long day at school when I saw the huge metal spaceship slowly descend upon my town from some distance away.

There was no doubt in my mind that I had just witnessed an event I have long dreamed of—the contact of Earth by intergalactic visitors. A devoted science-fiction buff, my most burning desire was to discover incontrovertible proof that life existed from outside the Earth—and here it was. Not only that, but I might get a glimpse of the aliens, also. For a moment I was torn with indecision—my yearning to see the visitors, and the warning in the back of my mind that they might be hostile—we might even be conquered in just a short time.

I live in a small, quaint, Midwestern town, which is very nice and peaceful, but I reasoned that aliens trying to conquer the world who were so advanced as to be able to reach the planet in a technologically complex spaceship were probably knowledgeable enough to realize that when trying to overtake the world, or at least the United States, the place to start is hardly Alliance, Ohio.

I remembered from high school history courses that Abraham Lincoln once stopped in our town, and Samuel P. Chase delivered a speech from what now is occupied by the Mount Union College Campus, so I guess it stands to reason that there other-worldly visitors would pick a historically notable town like Alliance to begin. If I were trying to subdue this civilization, I would probably start with New York City or Washington D.C., but I guess there's just no accounting for extraterrestrials' motives.

Curiosity overcame fear, and I elected to attend the scene of the landing and find out first-hand just what their intentions were. I drove quickly down 'that great street, State Street', mindful of other drivers who were also speeding to the scene, their fancies titillated by the sight of the alien ship.

It had been difficult to gauge just how far away the ship had been, and I guessed that possibly they might have landed on the Mount Union campus, although I wondered whether there was any area sufficiently barren of trees to provide adequate room for the massive body. I personally felt that Silver Park would have made a better landing strip, but as I pointed out before, aliens that would try to take over
the world by starting with Alliance couldn't be expected to pick the better spot in town on which to alight.

I found that the cosmic craft had landed not on the Mount Union campus, but on the area of land by Glamorgan Castle near Alliance High School. I proceeded down Union Avenue until I reached Vincent Street, and then I had to stop because the traffic was so jammed that nothing moved. Too impatient to wait for the clog to begin flowing again, I jumped out of my car, shoved my keys in the back pocket of my jeans, and ran the rest of the way to the castle property, where I saw the mob of people who had reached the area before me, all eager to see what was going to happen next.

I was too short to see over the heads of the people ahead of me, so I quickly climbed a nearby tree for a better view of the aliens when they emerged from their craft. It occurred to me that I became a prime target for them if they had deathray guns or atomic blasters, but I decided that they probably wouldn't waste their ammunition on a harmless college student who probably couldn't fire a projectile missile from a slingshot, much less a more dangerous weapon.

The crowd grew silent as the side of the ship slid away and we awaited the emergence of the first extraterrestrial. As the first eight-foot figure stepped into the sunlight and blinked its huge cyclopean eye, every human being screamed and there was a colossal stampede as hundreds of people all tried to evacuate the scene of the insufferably ugly insectoid creature at the same time.

I was thankful for my space in the tree as I watched people trample each other to escape the leader and the three aliens that soon followed him, although I was mentally willing them to hurry and clear away so I could jump down from my perch and run for the hills. I glanced over my shoulder to check on its progress and noted that it had almost caught up with me as it easily covered my tracks faster than I, and it was calling to me in different languages, apparently trying to communicate to me, as if it wasn't sure what tongue I spoke. I didn't even try to answer it, I merely ran like the wing-footed messenger Hermes himself, although my lungs were giving me hell for abusing them so badly.

I ran as though the Devil himself was snapping at my heels as I flew down Glamorgan Avenue and up Rockhill, the huge alien not far behind. I prayed silently to myself that I either escape it or that it annihilate me as quickly and painlessly as possible before I died of fright or exhaustion. I could hear the laborious thudding of the creature behind me and it became louder as it speedily shortened the distance between us. I glanced over my shoulder to check on its progress and noted that it had almost caught up with me as it easily covered my tracks faster than I, and it was calling to me in different languages, apparently trying to communicate to me, as if it wasn’t sure what tongue I spoke. I didn’t even try to answer it, I merely ran like the wing-footed messenger Hermes himself, although my lungs were giving me hell for abusing them so badly.

I knew all was lost. The alien was so close to me that its shadow blocked the sun from my back, and I could smell the foul stench of its breath as it reached out a slimy tentacle to touch my shoulder.

I collapsed on the grass across the street from Parkway School, all the fight gone from me. Do with me what you will, I thought silently, I’m too bushed to resist any longer. The sweat poured down my face and my lungs strained to collect enough oxygen to keep me alive, although there wasn’t enough in the Universe to satisfy my needs. My heart was pounding from the exertion of running and of unparalleled fear, and my tongue was rendered speechless as the cadavorously monstrous face loomed above me and the fathomless mouth with the revolting rotted teeth dipped nearer to my own countenance and the alien said:

"Hey, where’s the best place to go around here for a beer?"

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Nicole Chardenet

Untitled

I want you to realize my strengths and not be intimidated by them; my weaknesses, and understand their roots.

I want to gain strength from your strengths and offer hope when you despair.

I’d like to see the world through your eyes, and open-for you—new doors of perception.

There is so much for us to share, so much for us to learn.

All it will take is for each of us to understand one another.

Lori Picone
A man
Dressed in leather
Walks the endless street
Of the unknowing, unsuspecting town
He observes
With steely eyes
The wide empty street
Once full of happy people
He enters
"Red Rose Saloon."
People divide quite evenly
Just as the Red Sea.
He paces
To the bar
Dusty, a drink appears.
He reaches and it disappears.
He exits
Tired and thirsty,
Beds across the street
Into the hotel he goes.
He hears
Laughter of women
Loose with their trade.
He follows a painted lady.
He climbs
The creaking stairs
Past gaudy, worn chairs
Into the tomb quiet room.
He sits
Tarnished brass bed
A denuded hand reaches;
He pays with his dust.

Thomas A. Schmidt
Memories
I stare
at the wall of decaying concrete
withdrawing into my mind
to find
myself standing in the dust of
old forgotten memories
trying
to grasp gently the faded pages
all tattered and brown
Softly
brushing the cobwebs from the
edges of time to reveal a
glimpse
of golden years, treasured tears
dreams lived and lost
Passing
gracefully through the rhythm
and rhyme of time
gone-by
bringing to crystal clear vision
the vintage wine of my mind
Radiant
warmth blankets the old and
unfolds to welcome the new.
Lisa Cantrell

Untitled
In all of my life I have always seen.
All of the things that have come down on me.
And in all of my life I will always see.
All of the things to be troubling me.
But somehow inside I keep myself strong.
Not sure what it may be, but it helps me along.
It may be understanding, for that's the only thing.
That will remain with me from end to beginning.
For if there's understanding you can always relate,
To people's understanding along with fate.
I wish everyone could have understanding too,
For if there'd be understanding you could be you.
People don't know why they do things they do,
For if they did know the world could be so true.
So try to understand yourself and try to find,
All those things inside of you which make you so blind.
There must be a beginning for us to see the light,
And if there's no beginning -
I guess nothing will ever be right.

Lori Picone
Jean Appleton
Relationships

She was tall, blonde, a synergy of curves that gave him the impression of movement even while at rest. With the easy grace of a lioness she ran in the rolling surf as spray now and again formed a glistening aura around her, charged by the light of the sun. Her eyes spoke of intensity and purpose.

He lay naked in the sand, watching her approach with a mixture of anticipation and intimidation, for her presence was overpowering. But when she reached the spot where he lay she did not leap to tear the flesh from him; instead she flowed onto his prone form. Being sandwiched between her softness and that of the warm sand filled him with a pleasure beyond description. Of their own accord, his hands moved to trace the forms of her back, studied the frictionless working of shoulderblades beneath perfect skin, luxuriated in the complex topography of her face. Under a lavender sky time seemed to part, leave them to their playful wanderings undistracted by a sense of its passage.

She raised herself slightly to gaze into his eyes. "I love you, Wollick." Her voice suggested a kind of guileless animalism. It was deep, sensuous, sincere. The strength of her confession made him close his eyes and forced a sigh to escape his lungs as if he had never been told this before. In fact, however, she told him this every time they met in these mystical places. He let his palms slide upward along her arms, over smooth shoulders, until they came to rest on her cheeks, holding her as if she were a treasure of immeasurable value.

Reality blurred, gave way to another. His eyes opened to the warm semidarkness of the hibernation chamber, a status panel above providing the scant illumination. Wollick felt a touch upon his arm. "Welcome back, dearest." The disembodied voice emanating from the voxbox was that of the leonine woman. "Did you enjoy the last dream as much as I?"

"More," he said, a slow grin forming.

The hand that caressed him took his own, squeezed it gently. The hand that caressed him took his own, squeezed it gently. But this was not the flesh-and-blood member of an organic being. From the ceiling of the hybroom hung a pair of mechanical servomanipulators bearing little resemblance to a woman's arms. These were longer, more elegant, moving with a grace surpassing that of a dancer, perhaps. The slender fingertips were padded with a layer of soft plastic. "I thought you might like a little time to stretch before we arrive at the communications platform, thirty minutes from now."

He did so, yawning. "Thanks, Kiela."

The ship was decelerating. This provided the illusion of gravity—a luxury here in deep space. He loosened the crash webbing and swung his legs over the edge of the sleeper, rubbing tired eyes and the rough beginnings of a beard. "Bring the cabin lights up fifty percent, please." As requested, the lighting panels brightened but still left the room rather dim. Wollick liked low lighting because it tended to make the crowded lifesystem look slightly larger.

His bare feet made soft padding sounds as he walked to the command module and plopped, naked, into the control couch. It felt good against his skin. One of the servos in this room handed him a warm sippy of soup; he broke its seal and drank the rich broth, letting it awaken his palate.
The ship's monitors all displayed nominal readings. "You're looking shipshape, Kee." This complement set her to purring. "Any calls?" he asked as she stroked his hair.

"We've received no communications since you went into stasis three weeks ago. But I wrote you a poem. Would you like me to read it to you?"

"Sure."

'Little crystal cybership
Feels the man who sleeps within her,
Deep within her womb, and yearns
To feel the flame of fusion
Heat her loins once more.
He stirs and dreams of her
As flesh they mesh
Forgetting for a time
While the ancient, patient stars
Observe their lust and blush."

"Mmm...nice. Do you ever wish you were human?"

She paused a moment before answering. "Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be a woman. But when I think of being trapped at the bottom of a gravity well, subject to the whims of an atmosphere, I'm glad to be cyber. And this way I enjoy my freedom and you simultaneously."

Wollick rose to search for something in a drawer. He produced a time-worn bracelet. "Give me your hand." She offered a servo; he slipped it over her fingers, saying, "This is for being so sweet to me. She held her wrist before a videopickup, turning it this way and that, admiring the gift. He continued:

'Belonged to a girl I met in tertiary school, my last term. Her name was Jenna. We got paired up for a survival class in Hellespont and spent a week in an environment, pinned down by the worst sandstorm on Mars in a decade. There wasn't much else to do, so we talked a lot, then moved on to other things. Actually, I think she made the first move-you know: poor crazy Wollick going off to join the damned cybereperts and never even had a real woman yet.' Well, she didn't change my mind about the corps, but she gave me that bracelet as a reminder of the week we shared. I hope you don't mind it being a second-hand sentiment."

Her long, shining arms held him tightly. "No, it's wonderful."

Wollick knew she spoke in earnest and without jealousy; cyber psychology might differ subtly from that of humans but their love was of a form and magnitude unknown to strictly organic relationships. They remained this way, embracing, for a long time before their minds turned to the subject at hand.

"Let's have a look around, shall we?" The couch enveloped him and his senses became those of the ship. He regarded the silent commstation with her scanners as if with his own eyes, but no damage was apparent at this range. "She looks fine from here. I don't think she's suffered a major collision, so we might not be facing a big repair job. If we're really lucky we might only have to replace a bad set of frequency synthesizers."

Kielia was not as optimistic. "I don't scan any electrical activity on board. That could signify a problem in the reactors themselves."

"I certainly hope I won't have to rebuild an entire power plant..." He let himself daydream for the few remaining minutes of deceleration.

Wolf 359 CommStation was one link in a chain of platforms that served to bind the farflung colonies together in a net of hyperwave communications. Each was built with multiple backup systems to minimize the likelihood of a complete malfunction. But they did occasionally go down.

At a distance of two kilometers Kielia's main drive shut off. Weightlessness returned. Wollick began to examine the exterior of the station both visually and with scanners; all of the large structures were intact. His scrutiny moved to the smaller systems.

"Okay, I've found it. All three power conduits have been severed midway between the reactors and the antenna cluster. My guess if from a micrometeoroid impact. Shouldn't take more than a couple hours to patch."

"Do you want to make a more thorough scan?"

"Nah, I'm positive that's the cause of the malfunction."

The couch released him. He drifted to the suit locker where he donned a vacc suit and thruster pack with Kielia's assistance. In the airlock a servo tweaked his nose before he had closed his helmet. "Be careful."

The trip to the station took several minutes. Suit thrusters did not yield a high acceleration, nor was he in a hurry. "Rushed is reckless and reckless is dead," a spacer learned or didn't live long. He passed the time by whistling a rather atonal improvisation until Kielia, unable to bear it any longer, piped a Handel concerto through his helmet phones. He did not protest; the harpsichord relaxed him.

Finally he floated before the damaged area, taking inventory of the things he'd need from the station's spare parts cache. "Just what I thought-this will be a piece of cake. But it doesn't look a whole lot like a meteoroid impact up close...it looks more like the lines vaporized from an overload. I can't imagine how it happened." He would have scratched his head had a helmet not been in the way. As it was, he had to content himself with a shoulder shrug.

While he procured the necessary parts from the cache Kielia reported a rise in the ambient radiation levels. "Probably the result of a solar flare," she added. "If it threatens to exceed your suit's tolerance I'll give plenty of advance warning."

"Not to worry. I'll only be an hour at this...but keep an eye on it just in case."

A few minutes later, however, her voice was laden with concern. "You'd better return, and quickly. The radiation rise isn't a solar flare; it's another ship coming straight for us and decelerating hard. That puts us right in the middle of her exhaust wake. If she doesn't alter course in the near future the levels will pose a serious hazard for you."

He talked as he thrusted back, more rapidly this time. "Why didn't you see her earlier? Have you notified her of our position?"

"One: she's coming with the sun at her back; I couldn’t detect her against all that background noise. Two: I've been constantly transmitting since I picked her up a few moments ago. Either she is unable or unwilling to communicate."

"ETA?"

"Five minutes. Two before you can reach me at maximum acceleration. If I more to put you in my shadow I should offer some protection, but please hurry."

Time passed with maddening lethargy. At the midpoint of his run he began decelerating, for it would be dangerous and difficult...
to enter Kiela's airlock at several kilometers per hour. "Still no reply?"

"I've sent emergency codes, everything. Not even a carrier beam.

"If she angles, move to keep me covered if you can. Direct exposure to her exhaust at this range could do nasty things to me." Silently he cursed the anonymous vessel for such a careless approach; stupidity of this magnitude was heavily punishable.

Unexpectedly, the intruder introduced herself, though not directly. But the voice was female, and all too familiar.

"Wollick?" it said.

His face paled behind the visor. Alkalabeth had returned after a six year exile, and Wollick was seized by a sudden terror.

That Wollick, as a young man, should have wanted to enter into symbiosis with a cybership was not surprising. He'd been raised on one. And, in part, by one. For sixty-three years Kuriin had been content to thrust from world to world with only her ship, Alandoth, for company. But eventually she felt a stirring that would not be quenched. So while he waited in parking orbit over Tau Ceti she made planetfall to be impregnated at the gene bank.

Nine months outsystem, Alandoth lifted Wollick to Kuriin's waiting breast-Kuriin crying from a mixture of fatigue (10%) and elation (90%) (the dream synthesizer, slightly modified, had taken care of most of the pain). Wollick crying for reasons known only to newborn infants, and Alandoth crying (though not really equipped for it) to evince his own happiness.

They were capable parents and teachers. However, when the trio reached Sol fourteen years later, they stopped from their travels so that Wollick could finish his education on Mars. While he could have learned the same material from his parents, they felt exposure to society would benefit their son.

He graduated in five years. Kuriin and Alandoth invited Wollick to rejoin them in their journeys, but when he declined they understood his reasons: though he'd received only the purest love from his parents he was still fated to remain subtly outside their symbiosis. No, he would join the cybercorps so that he, too, could experience this same sense of communion. They parted in tears; but who knows? they said, consoling themselves, space is vast but not infinite. Perhaps we'll meet again sometime...

His sorrow was later dampened by his meeting with Alkalabeth. She was beautiful (to Wollick, almost erotically so)-three hundred meters of slender, glittering cybership with a stride as long as the stars-and their mutual training was completed in the blink of an eye. Wollick felt as if part of his being had been secreted away at birth and was only now reunited to form the whole. The next eleven years were more joyous than he'd ever hoped. Nothing could compare to the intricately woven interdependence of two so perfectly matched. When he worked her servos would caress him, surprise him; when he slept she sculpted his dreams so that she could come to him as a human female. In these dreams she was small, waiflike, with huge dark eyes and auburn hair that fell upon her shoulders as lightly as a cloud.

But all was not well. A small imperfection, indetectable and minor at first, grew within her personality banks. Alkalabeth became secretive, possessive. When in his dreams she metamorphosed into an over-protective mother figure he began to worry. She sensored his communications and eventually cut them off altogether, while thrusting out of known space to insure his fidelity.

Two light years beyond Beta Hydri, man's furthest colony from Sol, he managed to shut down her higher psychic functions, but this did not help his already traumatized state. Not only had the most beloved being in his life become psychotic, forcing him to effectively lobotomize her; he now had to make the long journey back inside her mindless hull, feeling the mute accusation and condemnation radiating from every bulkhead and deck plate. Intensive therapy was needed to heal the wounds he'd suffered.

Upon his request, he was given a new cyber and returned to active duty. Once again he sailed the void within a loving, caring starship; in fact Kiela was the best treatment he could have given. She helped him to forget the pain and loved him so completely that he could not help but return this love. Many times he had cried, cradled in her servos, awash in emotion too great to be contained in a single human body.

With the strength he gained from Kiela he could now afford to let his thoughts turn to Alkalabeth. At Beta Hydri she had been reactivated and given exhaustive testing to locate the source of her psychosis. How was she responding to treatment? he wondered. Would she ever function normally? But a fear of the old agony kept him from actually inquiring about her. And in time the shadowed memories were drowned out by the glow of his symbiosis with Kiela.

Wollick scrambled for coherence, following the deluge of associations triggered by Alkalabeth's voice. How had she come to be here? The manner of her approach did not allay his fears-it implied a degree of instability that was not promising.

"Beth? Please, angle your vector or your drive will kill me." This last statement was perhaps not entirely true but her compliance would lessen his present risk. She did not verbally acknowledge his request. His suit counters showed a decline that let him breathe a little easier for the moment.

"Oh, Wollick! Dear Wollick! How I'd hoped you would come!" He understood instantly. "You sabotaged the commstation... and then waited to see if it was me who came to repair it."

Girlish glee dripped from the helmet 'phones. "Wasn't that devious? Oh, I hope you won't be angry with me."

Something in her tone told him to tread cautiously. "No, not at all. So you wanted to talk? I'm all ears."

"We can't talk like this. Why don't you come aboard?" Kiela now broke in. "Wollick, I'm worried..."

"Shut up, bitch!" Alkalabeth cut her off sharply, voice like a thunderclap. The strength of this outburst left Wollick shacking and Kiela silent. Just as abruptly her tone softened again, dispelling any doubts about her instability. "Oosh...I can't wait to see you again, to touch you after all these years..."

He, however, had no such desire. Once inside her lifesystem he would be trapped, helpless against her whims-and this time she would make certain he got nowhere near her vital functions. Not knowing what else to do he continued to close on Kiela, still decelerating.

Two minutes from safety. Beth should be nearly on top of them by now. Scanning, he saw her to the left of Kiela and slightly below, perhaps a kilometer distant. She was approaching on attitude thrusters; her main drive was down.

That was the biggest hazard he could foresee. If provoked she could aim her drive at the two of them, which would be instantly
fatal to him and eventually to Kiela in spite of her shielding. But as long as she did not resort to this—and Wollick guessed she would not, considering the effort she'd expended in finding him—he knew she could evade her exterior servos. If it came down to that. Until he ran out of reaction mass.

"Wollick," Kiela said urgently, "if you flatten your deceleration curve you'll reach me sooner. I can maneuver to lessen your relative velocity..." Her signal faded and died, suddenly. Her communication dish had become a cloud of expanding vapors. But how? Alkalabeth couldn't have such fine control of her drive, and he hadn't seen the accompanying glare...

As if in answer to his thoughts, Alkalabeth spoke. "I've modified my comm maser to function as an offensive weapon. Quite a formidable toy, don't you think?" Her smugness infuriated him. In a single stroke she had rendered Kiela both deaf and mute, totally incapable of communicating. "Now, dear, if you don't veer away from that ship I'll detonate its fuel pods."

Wollick knew better than to doubt her sincerity, and altered his course, beaten. Alkalabeth was not likely to use the maser on him, but he did not wish to jeopardize Kiela; if it was indeed powerful enough ignite her fuel he saw little chance of her surviving the resulting explosion. And even if by some miracle she was spared, she'd be unable to maneuver or call for help.

What to do? Vague, unformed plans fluttered within his head. Kiela had no defenses other than her speed. His toolkit contained a cutting torch, useless except at close range and even then it did not work rapidly to make an effective weapon. Perhaps if he obeyed Beth, let himself be taken and waited until she let her guard down...maybe he could reach her breaker board. No, this prospect was too frightening to contemplate. In a flash of macabre humor he realized what a misnomer the term "lifesystem" was in Alkalabeth's case.

Wollick did not wear futility well. Sweat lined his body, and the cooling fan that attempted to compensate for his increased metabolism only made him shiver. Tears welled in his eyes as he surveyed Kiela's silent form. I'm sorry, he thought. I don't know what to do. Run, if you can...at least I'd like to know you escaped even if I didn't.

Movement held his bleary gaze on the nearer ship. She was rotating almost imperceptibly. He watched in horror as she trained her drive on the approaching ship with desperate slowness. He wanted to scream protest at this suicidal tactic, but he did not wish to jeopardize Kiela; if it was indeed powerful enough to destroy her he saw little chance of her surviving the resulting explosion. And even if by some miracle she was spared, she'd be unable to maneuver or call for help.

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"Quite a few! I'm sure you'd be proud of them. I've shed a number of superfluous systems and streamlined the less critical ones to conserve mass. You should see my delta vee now that..."

She had noticed.

"You scheming little bitch! Thought you could use your drive on me, didn't you?"

The actinic glare of fusion flame leapt from Kiela's main engine, but only for an instant. Then soundless flashes of light heralded the eruption of her pods as Alkalabeth's maser played over them. The blast threw debris in all directions. Kiela's hull was shredded so thoroughly and instantaneously that she may never have realized she was dying.

A fragment struck Wollick's suit; he began to whirl dizzyly. Air hissed from a puncture, but he remained conscious long enough to catch a glimpse of Kiela's twisted structures spinning lazily into empty space, long enough to feel the animal scream claw its way out of his throat simply to fade in the rapidly decreasing pressure.

Later, when Alkalabeth placed his unconscious form in her control couch he lay there as a corpse would. He did not move his eyes to search the heavens with her scanners. Occasionally a random muscle twitched, and she dutifully fired the corresponding attitude control, but she knew he was not actually controlling her as he once had. So she waited.

And talked: told with pride how she managed to defeat the security systems at the rehab center, cursed the several humans and cybers who had died pursuing her, wept over the lonely years spent listening to the interworld chatter, hoping for some clue to the location of her lost love. The impassioned tale went on with little semblance of order.

Presently Wollick woke, sobbing. Alkalabeth tried to soothe him but was soon overcome by frustration. The more she stroked his trembling body the harder he cried. She had to strike him several times, savagely, to make him stop.

When he failed to eat the food she offered, she fed him intravenously. Her servos shook so violently that it took three tries to get the needle properly placed. Wollick didn't seem to mind, though, as she wiped the blood away, apologizing profusely.

"Time for bed," she said, cheerfully. That seemed to evoke a reaction from him. His eyes momentarily widened, his nostrils flared; but this passed so quickly she was not completely certain it had happened. Wollick did not resist, however, as she carried him lightly to her long unused sleeper. She brushed a lock of hair from his glazed eyes. The dream synthesizer poured its energies into his mind, and he slept.

He was a fetus. The womb that encased him was far too constricting; his arms and legs were pressed cruelly against his body. The microscopic heart within him fluttered in terror like the heart of a bird in a young boy's careless grip. If he struggled, the pressure grew until he stopped.

A voice, more felt than heard, thundered around Wollick.

"I LOVE YOU," it boomed.
Jean Appleton