

Praise for L. Timmel Duchamp

“L. Timmel Duchamp has become a major voice as an editor, publisher, and critic.”

—Karen Joy Fowler, author of
The Jane Austen Book Club, and
We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

“Duchamp writes some of the most rewarding science fiction stories you can read today; she is simply and unarguably among the best.”

—Samuel R. Delany, author of *Dhalgren* and *Nova*

“...a unique, essential voice.”

—Jeff VanderMeer, author of
the *The Southern Reach Trilogy*

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Praise for The Marq'ssan Cycle

“This is easily one of the best science fiction series I’ve read in years. Rather than beginning with what is already known, it strips bare the arbitrary structures of our world (sexuality, gender, government) and rebuilds them in complex, new structures that are strikingly at odds with our experience...and yet also strikingly familiar, with classes or castes, torture, war, the designation of the unfamiliar as automatically ‘terrorist’. ...Ms. Duchamp does not take lightly her responsibilities of presenting a believable, if frightening world; nor does she present a simple dichotomy between men and women, or between human and Marq’ssan.”

—Sean Melican, *Ideomancer*

“Duchamp’s work challenges its audience with a perhaps uncomfortably on-target vision of our extrapolated social, political, and economic structures as well as with a decidedly leftist, feminist message. It is definitely a work heavy on the ‘cognitive pleasures’ that Robert Scholes identified as proper to good sf. But, for those willing to accept its challenges, the narrative experience of the Marq’ssan Cycle...fulfills our need for both cognition and for sublimation as well.”

—Amy J. Ransom, *New York Review of Science Fiction*

“Taken as a whole, the Marq’ssan Cycle is one of the most ambitious political SF series to appear in the last twenty years. The novels have received praise from the likes of Samuel Delany and Cory Doctorow, with Doctorow calling them ‘a refreshing read and a rare example of deft political storytelling.’”

—Jeff VanderMeer, *Omnivoracious*

Special Honor for the Marq'ssan Cycle

The 2010 James Tiptree Award jury awarded a special honor to L. Timmel Duchamp's Marq'ssan Cycle, noting the importance of this stunning series, which envisions radical social and political change.

Praise for The Waterdancer's World

...Duchamp...raises some hard questions about society's responsibility for the well-being of its most marginalized people, suggesting that the powerful create the underclasses and keep them powerless for the sake of economic convenience. Readers will find much to ponder in Duchamp's provocative ideas about culture and colonization.

—*Publishers Weekly*, October 17, 2016

This author's work is almost always just a bit outside the mainstream of science fiction, and that is I think part of the reason that it is so often, as in this case, intensely appealing.

—*Critical Mass*, Don D'Amassa, October 5, 2016

Praise for Never at Home

2011 Tiptree Award Honor List for

“The Nones of Quintilis” (from the collection)

“L. Timmel Duchamp’s stories are intense, tricky, heartfelt, and most of all, interesting; they take on big themes in a clear way, but also at the same time swirl with complications, moments of poetry, life itself.”

—Kim Stanley Robinson, author of the
Mars Trilogy and *Galileo’s Dream*

“*Never at Home* is an intelligent, sensitive, important collection of short stories...”

—*The New York Review of Science Fiction*,

“L. Timmel Duchamp sees the world from an angle inclined at about 25 degrees to the rest of us. Her stories make you feel odd, as if the ground shifted in mid-step and your foot has come down somewhere you weren’t expecting. In this collection she explores in many ways the theme of belonging. They are some of her best stories: unfailingly original, emotionally intense, and suffused with intelligence. I am in awe of this book.”

—Carolyn Ives Gilman, author of
Isles of the Forsaken and *Halfway Human*

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The Marq'ssan Cycle

Alanya to Alanya

Renegade

Tsunami

Blood in the Fruit

Stretto

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Chercher La Femme

L. Timmel Duchamp



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To all the mentors I've had, who
taught me about becoming

Recognition, as a product of memory, is what we learn to rely on as proof of identity and existence. But it is a misleading proof since it does not involve us in what is happening but only in what has happened or a re-presentation of it. “These days,” [Gertrude] Stein says, people don’t experience but only know what happens “by radios cinemas newspapers biographies autobiographies until what is happening does not thrill any one” (*What Are Masterpieces*, 87). We have learned, one might say, to know without being there. That is how we can mistake cultural ideology for the truth of our experiences.

—Nancy Gray, *Language Unbound: On Experimental Writing by Women*

1.

A SERIES OF gentle chimes penetrated the fog of deep delta-wave sleep. <<Julia, wake up now.>> Her implant used a soft, coaxing voice for its first iteration of the command, then, after five seconds, repeated it in a firmer, louder voice.

When her eyes opened, revealing the gray tinted plexiglass half a meter from her face, the ship's AI, interfacing with her implant, bombarded Julia with information. <<Your sedative medication has been withdrawn. A vessel is hailing us. Fuyuko is the only other crew member awake.>>

Julia muttered the usual scatological expletives but resisted the impulse to dive into a soothing c-space surround from which she could ease herself into consciousness. The memory of where she was filled her mind, and she ordered her body released from the caretaker's functions. Then, as the information that a vessel was hailing them sank in, she requested the position of *Pax III* and the identity of the vessel hailing them.

<<*Pax III* is at the transudation point in the Cygnus system, approximately 750,000 miles from the planet known as "La Femme" and approximately 1 billion miles from the star Albireo.>>

Julia heard the decoupling of the gastric intake valve an instant before she felt the pinch caused by the removal of the urinary catheter. She wondered for the thousandth time why the caretaker did not perform these operations before waking her. The lid to the caretaker swung away from her. Julia blinked as the onslaught of light struck her retinas, and she shrank from the touch of dry cool air on her skin. For a few breaths it smelled thin and stale. After the silence of being shut away in her caretaker, the collective noise of the many caretakers' fans, individually minor, felt like an assault on her ears.

<<The vessel hailing us is *Leopard*, a shuttle subsidiary to *Pax I.*>>

<Is anyone on board *Leopard*?> Julia queried as the caretaker honked to inform her that her body was now fully disengaged from it.

<<Solita, *Pax I*'s word processor, is on board *Leopard.*>> A dull ache throbbed in her head. Though Velcro straps held her to the pallet, her stomach lurched in sudden panic that her body might drift away, out of control. Softly, half under her breath, she told herself that they had returned to real-spacetime, that she and the ship and everything else on it now enjoyed a location and were therefore no longer in any sense of the word *lost*.

“AI: where is Fuyuko?” Julia said aloud, her voice nearly unintelligible for the thick glob of phlegm coating her long-unused larynx.

“Fuyuko is on the bridge,” the AI said, also aloud, using the caretaker’s speaker.

Julia cleared her throat and swallowed several times more to get her salivary glands working. Her stomach pitched in a sick wash of acid. “Caretaker,” she said hoarsely. “Release the Velcro restraints holding my arms and legs.”

“Julia?” Fuyuko’s voice said through the caretaker’s speaker.

Julia clung to the caretaker’s frame with her left hand as she flexed her right hand and ankles. It would be hard walking. Her muscles had presumably been kept exercised, but whenever she spent more than a few days in a caretaker she inevitably found walking and other routine physical activity difficult. It always took her a while not only to reacquire motor coordination, but also to adapt to the sudden demands of meat-space weight. Though of course the latter would be little problem in zero-gee... “Julia, if you are awake, and the AI informs me that you are, respond at once, please. We are being hailed by a shuttle from *Pax I.*”

Still clinging to its frame, she stepped out of the caretaker. Unaccustomed effort made her breath come hard. She said, “AI: transmit my voice to Fuyuko.” She hoped she wasn’t going to vomit. Her

body was floating just out of the caretaker, and as had happened the few other times she'd let herself loose in zero-gee, her mind was constructing dissociated images of her body—in this case, of her body floating without control, thinly anchored. “Fuyuko, Julia.” Hearing the phlegm still furring her voice, Julia made another effort to clear her throat. “I suggest we instruct the AI to acknowledge the other vessel and ask its crew to stand by.”

In the brief pause before Fuyuko answered, Julia imagined the psyche-synthesist wondering why she, Julia, hadn't already done so. “Is there a problem, Julia?” Fuyuko's voice sounded...careful. “Is there something I should know about, or that you could use help with?”

Julia bit the insides of her cheeks to keep back the retort sizzling on her tongue. “I haven't been awake for more than ten minutes,” she said evenly. “Would you mind giving me another ten before dumping such an asinine question on me?”

“Very well, Julia,” Fuyuko said. “I'll get back to you in ten.”

“AI: end transmission,” Julia said. Her nausea was getting worse, though she was still holding on to the caretaker's frame. Perhaps she should reconnect with the caretaker and interface with the ship and crew through v-space? Except that the protocol called for her making a personal, meat inspection of both the ship and crew, now that they'd emerged from the transudation shifts. And if she didn't follow the protocol, she'd have Fuyuko on her back, and Vance ready to—

“AI: why of all the crew are only Fuyuko and I awake?”

“The priority order still in effect specifies that first Fuyuko and then you should be released from sedation following the ship's emergence from transudation.”

“AI: what priority order are you talking about? Who gave this priority order, and when?”

“The priority order was given by Fuyuko, according to standard emergency protocol. There is no record of when it was given.”



In addition to urging crew members to follow the suggestions to be found in the briefing for the *Pax I*'s mission, we are also equipping the mission's psyche-synthesist with emergency protocols to be available during the ship's period of transudation should the crew suffer disturbances the psyche-synthesist or lead diplo believe might result in violence. We are also directing the ship's AI to make interim reports to the First Council at reasonable intervals, which the word processor will transmit via transudation. We urge that crew members throughout the period of transudation use the skin patches prescribed and spend as much time as possible in v-space. As far as it's possible to determine from the unreliable reports from *Pax I*, no one was attacked while in their caretaker. (Few crew members spent much time in their caretakers because they were briefed to do otherwise, in order to prepare them for fulltime meat-space life on arrival.)

—from the Briefing for the *Pax III* Mission to La Femme

crew members are healing. Do you wish an itemized list of the injuries?"

Deceased. Scratching an itch on her thigh, Julia broke the skin. The itches crawling her body were getting to be nearly unbearable, and her nails, untended for all the time she had been in the caretaker, had grown into dagger-like instruments of threat. "I'll request an itemized list later," Julia said. Not only did the considerable ambient

Julia stopped her calisthenics and sucked in a deep breath. She glanced around the ward at the many caretakers in their all-too-unsynchronized positions and non-uniform lengths. Most were upright, but some were canted at a variety of angles, the sight of which could only be exacerbating her nausea. If she looked hard, she could just make out the unconscious faces behind the tinted plexiglass faceplates. "AI: which emergency protocol did Fuyuko invoke?"

"Fuyuko invoked emergency protocol 6C."

"AI: describe the character of the emergency situation."

"There is no record of the situation in which the emergency protocol was invoked."

Julia swallowed repeatedly, but her mouth produced almost no saliva. She needed water, she realized. It could have been a long time since she'd taken anything by mouth. "AI: are any crew members injured?"

"Glory, a member of the Science Section, is deceased. The injuries of other

noise and the disturbing visual messiness and poor lighting of meat-space bother her, but she needed a shower to get rid of the stench of her sweat and the filthy, itching slough of dead skin, not to mention a haircut and nail-trim to clear away the animal excrescences that were even more annoying than dirty or dead epidermal cells.

“Julia, may we talk now?” said Fuyuko’s voice over the cabin’s speaker.

It couldn’t have been ten minutes already. “AI: transmit my speech to Fuyuko.” Julia worked her way hand-over-hand along the long chrome bar that would get her (eventually) to the personal hygiene box. “So what’s the fucking hurry?” she said, resisting the urge to pause for another dagger-sharp scratch. “The AI hasn’t mentioned anything about *Leopard* calling for help, or the potential of a serious threat. Is there a problem of which I’ve yet to be informed?” Her voice, though hoarse, was a trifle savage in tone, she thought, especially for speaking to a psyche-synthesist. Still, the conditions of zero-gee meat-space sufficiently irritated her that she drew considerable satisfaction from slamming Fuyuko with essentially the same question she’d hit her, Julia, with a few minutes earlier.

“No, there’s no problem,” Fuyuko said. “But I am anxious to get a report from Solita on exactly what did happen on *Pax I*—as I assume you must be, too.”

The muscles in Julia’s upper arms trembled. “We’ve waited this long, I presume it won’t kill you to wait until I’ve scrubbed off the layers of dead cells that have accumulated on my body while I was in the caretaker.”

“Well no, of course not. But if it’s merely a matter of your getting cleaned up, wouldn’t it be possible for me to open communications—”

“No,” Julia said, “it wouldn’t. You see, I will be wanting a report from you first, as to why—for starters—the entire ship was put to sleep on your order and second, as to why you and I are now the only ones awake.”

During the long pause that ensued, Julia managed to reach the row of personal hygiene boxes lining the far end of the cabin. “I’ve already filed a report, Julia. If you’d like to access it while you’re getting cleansed—”

“No, Fuyuko, I would not. I’ll let you know when I’m ready for it. In the meantime, stay out of my space for at least the next half-hour, will you?” Julia thumbed the door control. “AI: discontinue transmission of my speech.”

So Fuyuko had already made a report. That suggested she’d been awake for some time. Which raised a whole other set of questions and problems. As if there weren’t enough already to sink a battleship (as people once liked to say).

2.

“MY COMING-OF-AGE WAS the happiest time of my life,” Hendrix, one of Julia’s grandparents, told her a few days before Julia’s coming-of-age. Though the declaration had been inspired by the occasion, it recurred to Julia many times after. At the time she had regarded it as a proper sentiment, reflecting life as it was and should be. Her coming-of-age filled her with joy and pleasure and excitement: joy at knowing herself to be so well-loved by her family, pleasure at the many gifts family members bestowed on her, and excitement at the prospects that now lay open before her, from apprenticeship in the family’s eutopic group to exploration of v-space with a freedom limited only by her own imagination. Later, though, the grandparent’s words haunted her. Suppose it’s true? she asked herself. Suppose the best is now behind me. Suppose I’ll never again be as happy as I was then?

Still later, she wondered if “happiness” weren’t simply a childish idea. She never ceased to experience sharp, brief moments of elation. And though excitement grew harder to come by, she continued to experience it, too. But if “happiness” implied not a momentary state, but a sort of



V-space (virtual-space) is used to refer to virtual space generally, but is specifically used to denote the shell open to all adult members of the Pax and to adult residents of the Pax’s merging zones. The default visualization of the shell is a courtyard on which face as many doorways as the user wishes, though v-space can be (but seldom is) customized by individual users with environments that are not visible to other users; the doorways serve as portals into the user’s preferred c-spaces.

C-space, known variously as constructed-space, created-space, consensual-space, and—among eutopians—Cockayne-space, designates a specific site in v-space that has been furnished with its own particular environment and usually requires an invitation or password to enter. The term “consensual-space” usually denotes a site that has been constructed for more than one individual, for either workplace, commercial, social, or familial purposes. “Created-space” tends to be applied to sites constructed for entirely aesthetic purposes, while “constructed-space” most often refers to a private space providing an environment tailored to individual desires and needs. When establishing c-spaces, most individual users tend to use boilerplate forms they can tweak at will.

—from *The Quick and Dirty Guide to Everything of Significance*

semi-permanent consciousness of satisfaction... Now at fifty biological years, she could no longer imagine such a condition as likely to be again within her grasp. And she wasn't sure she would want it to be. Continuous satisfaction with one's self, one's life, and with the state of the world, seemed immature to her now. Desirable, because it eluded her. But dubiously so.

Perhaps, yes, the pinnacle of her joy, pleasure, and excitement had come when the family stood around her as she stepped naked into the caretaker and submitted her body for the first time to total physical connection. All her parents had been there, cheering her on, kissing her face, welcoming her to adulthood. "We trust you to heed the guardian's advice, to keep your body fit for meat-space," Lanna said, squeezing her shoulder.

She had not then known embarrassment at being seen to enter or leave the caretaker. She had not then known the things that could happen to her body by staying too long in v-space. She had been informed of them, but the worst physical disorder she had theretofore suffered had been a sprained ankle, and her clearest notion of physical malady was of headache or butterflies in her stomach or a skinned knee or a scratch from a careless attack on an itch. The caretaker would massage her muscles, void her bladder and bowels, and nourish and hydrate her as necessary. It would even regulate her hormonal secretions and monitor her brain chemistry and deliver corrective medication when necessary. She *knew* the rest could not be that important since most adults of her acquaintance spent the majority of their lives in caretakers.

True, her great-grandparents and other contemporaries of their generation could not leave their caretakers now, even if they wanted to, but then they were old and probably wouldn't want to deal with the degeneration inevitably afflicting their bodies. That was nothing to do with her. She wouldn't have to face their kind of problems (and she wasn't sure if they were real "problems") until she was old herself.

Oh to be "grown-up!" What more could anyone ask for?

And of course, Julia thought at fifty, it was the minimum of what one could ask for. Not being grown-up would have been intolerable if it had lasted any longer than it had. Only of course, like everyone else, she had eventually learned that being grown up wasn't what she had expected. And so just what, she had queried herself at forty, does one look forward to next? Retirement, after which one lives permanently in v-space?

It had been her family's fault, she thought with malicious irony. They had inculcated the ideals of eutopia in her. They had made her expect "happiness" and yet had made it her life's work to seek...more. And not only that, they hadn't warned her that ambitious undertakings inevitably entailed ugly compromises that subtly, often imperceptibly, changed who you could in the future be.

And so here she was, a wreck from who-knew-how-long in the caretaker, five hundred light years from Earth, facing the unknown in the shape of the known.



For most humans outside the Pax, the Delta Pavonians, an intelligent avian species from Delta Pavonis, are mythical creatures, more plausible than fairies, less plausible than angels. . . . Their movements and vocal communications cannot be intuitively understood in any sense by humans. Nor is it possible to say with any clarity what Delta Pavonians get out of their relations with the Pax, a situation that creates a continual sense of unease in humans, particularly since the Delta Pavonians have occasionally bestowed lavish gifts of technology on the Pax, even as they decline to engage in commercial trade. Though the Pax's diplos make use of AI translation of Delta Pavonian speech, the Delta Pavonians consistently refuse to understand AI vocalizations, thus requiring humans to be altered and trained in performing the necessary vocalizations. Such humans have come to be called "word processors."

Among the Delta Pavonians' most generous gifts have been three ships in orbit around Earth's moon, which they helped the Pax adapt for human use. Numerous word processors have insisted that the Delta Pavonians consider these educational tools that

3.

SUCKING DOWN A bulb of water, Julia debated tactics. She knew she wanted to question Fuyuko before reading or listening to the latter's report. But should she insist on a meeting in c-space or put herself at a disadvantage by undertaking a meat-space meeting on the bridge? Ordinarily there would be no question. But under the circumstances, with communications about to be established with a crew member of *Pax I* and the prospect of meat-space dominance for the rest of the mission, it was probably wisest to begin reaccustoming oneself to doing business in meat-space.

She didn't have far to go to reach the bridge from the caretaker ward, but her body was out of shape, and so, edging hand-over-hand along one of the hold-bars lining the passage, she was soon out of breath and drenched in sweat. To distract herself from the discomfort, Julia mused on the Delta Pavonians' notions of utility. The Paxans had added a few of the hold-bars—distinctive because they were made of smooth, shiny chrome, unlike the dull gray material, roughly textured, used by the Delta Pavonians, and lacked the small platforms that extended at intervals from them. The hold-bars already in the ship must have served as

perches, since presumably creatures that flew could manage to get about quite easily in low- and zero-gee. Obviously the bridge, like the caretaker ward (which must have been something else entirely for the Delta

will enrich human understanding. No AI translator has confirmed this belief.

—from *The Quick and Dirty Guide to Everything of Significance*

Pavonians, who did not use caretakers), placed as they were in the hub, rated low on their list of priority spaces. Had they even had a bridge? Julia wondered. Could it be that the bridge had been something else, too? The periphery, which when under spin provided at least some gravity, held technical work areas and relatively large open spaces human crews used for exercise. Perhaps, Julia mused, the Delta Pavonians used the open spaces for singing.

How could her crewmates not be aware of the Delta Pavonians, and the Pax's decades-long failure to achieve real communication with them, every moment they spent in the ship's meat-environs? Creeping through the corridors along the hold-bars, Julia found it impossible to avoid the sick sensation she got whenever she thought of how the Pax had botched their only Contact with an exo intelligent species. Only the word processors had the faintest notion of what the Delta Pavonians were like, but since their contact was strictly limited by the Pax, even they had to eke out the little they knew with imaginative extrapolations.

It would not be the same with the species inhabiting La Femme, Julia promised herself. Whatever *Pax I* had been doing, she would see to it that *this* exo Contact would be different.

Julia lingered for a minute or two outside the bridge to catch her breath. The smell of her sweat nauseated her. And the constant hum of ambient noise in her ears and the many smells permeating the ship's meat-space were not exactly soothing, either. But so. She would have to get used to the messiness of meat-life. According to Paul 22423's interstellar transmission to the Pax, the La Femmeans, like the Delta Pavonians, lived in it full-time.

Entering the cavernous, visually barren bridge, Julia found her orientation opposite Fuyuko's, who appeared to be hanging upside down from the ceiling. This was exactly what she hated about the meat-spaces of the ship. Certain people did, of course, find such anomalous conditions charming, for otherwise there would be no one living in the Pax's orbital arcologies. Certain dancers, graphic artists, and other aesthetically oriented types enjoyed the sense of "truly living in three dimensions" (as Julia once heard it put in a discussion of spacetime aesthetics). Well she wasn't about to turn herself upside down, especially since it was for Fuyuko they were holding this interview in meat-space at all. "Fuyuko!" Julia called. "Come down from the ceiling, will you?"

The psyche-synthesist complied. Then, holding her head in her hands—obviously reeling with dizziness—she groaned a command to the AI to give them recliners to sit on.

Two puddles of bright green plastic, parallel and closely adjacent, extruded from the "floor" and inflated into recliners. Julia eyed them with misgiving. Not only weren't they facing one another, but they were in the center of the "floor," a good distance from all the hold-bars, including the one to which Julia clung. It was a weakness of hers, she knew, but she hated making a fool of herself.

Vanity makes even brilliant people foolish. Of which you've been warned many times, Julia.

Floundering and flailing she got herself to one of the recliners and strapped in. She drew several breaths and tried to recover her sense of personal dignity before looking at Fuyuko. "So," she said, "tell me—" but fell silent when she saw the other's face. A raw red crater gaped beneath the left eye. And on closer scrutiny, a fierce twitch of a muscle there became apparent. Julia struggled to keep her gaze directed at the psyche-synthesist's narrowly set, small brown eyes.

Julia swallowed. And tried again: "The AI tells me that Glory is dead. And that others are injured." Julia noticed Fuyuko's hands writhing finger-to-finger, as though in a contest of wills, one

against the other, and her stomach lurched. Ordinarily Fuyuko offered a preternaturally calm and quiet presence in both meat- and v-space, a vibe reassuring to some people and irritating to others. Julia forced herself to continue. “Would you tell me, please, how she came to...die?”

Fuyuko’s head jerked sideways, puppet-stiff, to meet Julia’s gaze full-face. Her lips trembled visibly, and her right index finger hovered at the edge of the crater under her eye. Her pleasant face, graced with delicate, symmetrical features, had become a rigid mask of tension and—fear, perhaps? Julia watched, sickened and fascinated, as the psyche-synthesist slowly lost her ability to keep the finger from rubbing the bright, shiny meat. The twitch, Julia thought, must be driving her to distraction.

She reached over and tapped Fuyuko’s elbow. “Stop picking at your wound,” she said, scolding gently as a milk-parent. “When we’ve finished our business on the bridge, you should get your personal program to help keep your picking under control.” Fuyuko’s hand jerked back into her lap and, like its mate, clenched into a tight fist. “So tell me about how Glory died. Please.”

“My throat’s so dry.”

“Surely there must be water bubbles available on the bridge,” Julia said.

“Yeah,” Fuyuko said. “I guess so.” Her eyes, frowning and worried, darted about. “The AI said that using caretakers was dangerous. So even though we were briefed to the contrary, I advised everyone to stay in meat-space.” Her slight, dainty fingers were writhing again. “I didn’t like doing that, though, because almost everyone was showing signs of psychosis. I had to worry about potential suicides on the one hand, and extreme aggression on the other. And Vance...” Fuyuko’s gaze swerved to Julia’s face and then quickly away.

“And Vance,” Julia said softly.

Fuyuko swallowed. “Please, Julia. I think you should read my report. Or else question Vance first.”

A thick wave of underarm odor wafted about them, overriding the ever-present faint smell of ozone. *Ah, meat space.* “This isn’t a disciplinary hearing,” Julia said gently. She extended her right palm. “Just tell me what you know—or rather what you deem important for me to know—before we answer *Leopard* or wake the rest of the crew.”

Fuyuko glanced sidelong. “All right,” she said hoarsely. She averted her gaze. “But...as I said, virtually all of the crew were experiencing personality disorders. You need to remember that when you’re making judgments, Julia.”

Julia nodded. “All right. We’ll take that as a given. That some problem was afflicting all of us, albeit in different ways. And so, Vance...?”

Fuyuko cleared her throat. “Vance, ah, Vance was upset with Nadia. Because we seemed to be stuck...out there. And because Nadia could not be reached. The word processor was...totally *away*. Inaccessible. And behaving...oddly. Perhaps as the Birds do?” She coughed. “Sorry. I mean Delta Pavonians. As the Delta Pavonians do. And the ship seemed to be responding to her with bizarre sprays of light, and she’d loaded herself with a jet-pack, so that she could achieve a sort of approximation of flying. All the while she was making those strange sounds they call *singing*, really really intense sound that you could feel vibrating in your bones.” Fuyuko shivered. “It was horrible, Julia, believe me. There we were, apparently lost, at Nadia’s mercy, outside, nowhere, and the clocks weren’t working, the AI presenting symptoms of psychosis, and Nadia was flying about, totally unaware when anyone else entered the bridge.”

Julia leaned back in the recliner and stared “up” at the “ceiling.” “And this, I take it, upset Vance,” she said.

“Tremendously.” Fuyuko giggled—with nervousness, Julia supposed. “She developed a full-blown case of paranoia. With Nadia and the B—I mean, the Delta Pavonians—at the heart of it, and you—”

Fuyuko hesitated. Julia could feel her stare, but did not turn her head to return it. She let the silence beat on.

After perhaps half a minute, Fuyuko continued. “As her paranoid delusions grew more elaborate, she wove you and what she called a faction of the Council into the conspiracy.” Fuyuko’s voice had grown almost breathless. She rushed on in a torrent, as though afraid she might not otherwise be able to get all the words out. “Sometimes she argued that it was just that you were foolishly trusting. At other times she held that you were in league with the...Delta Pavonians.”

“Vance is a Do-or-Die Protector of the SQ,” Julia said. “So it’s really quite natural that her manifestation of psychosis involved inventing that sort of scenario.” She rolled her head to the right and caught a look of bewilderment cruising the psyche-synthesist’s face.

“SQ? Do-or-Die Protector?” she said. “I don’t understand, Julia.”

Julia made her a *nice* smile. “Just a little diplo terminology. Vance’s faction is called—by others than themselves, I hasten to add—Do-or-Die Protectors of the Status Quo. ‘SQ’ is status quo. But please, don’t let me distract you.”

Fuyuko’s hand crept toward her eye, then pulled back in sudden consciousness. “Yes. Well. Vance called me to a meeting with her and Loren and Golden. In a c-space bunker.” Her nose wrinkled. “She said something about *Pax III* having brought...weapons? Because her faction on the Council seem to think *Pax I* was sabotaged, by the Birds, and—sorry, I mean the Delta Pavonians... where was I, oh yes. She said that her c-space bunker would be the perfect command center. And...” Fuyuko hesitated.

“Excuse me, Fuyuko,” Julia said pleasantly into the pause. “But was all this an invention of the moment, or was there some sort of premeditated...plot, shall we say, for want of a better word quickly to hand... And if so, just how did Vance and her, ah, lieutenants, plan on getting around my...authority?”

Fuyuko shot Julia a scared look. “Please, Julia, this is just *background*. I thought you wanted a report on the events preceding my invocation of the emergency protocol?”

Julia examined her short, smooth, freshly cut nails. “Come now. You surely don’t think it’s escaped my notice that you had the AI wake only you and myself. Stop worrying about politics. Just spit it out.”

“Very well,” the psyche-synthesist said stiffly. “Vance wanted me to declare you unfit. She said she had weapons. And a sizable contingent ready to follow her.”

“Continue.”

Fuyuko ran her pale pink tongue around her chapped lips. “I’m not exactly certain what happened. But tensions and depression among the crew deepened. There were isolated outbreaks of violence. Nothing organized. But then—” Fuyuko stared down at her writhing hands. “I wasn’t in great shape myself,” she whispered, almost inaudibly. “So I started patching sedatives. I became so depressed I could hardly move. At some point, the AI woke me, signaling an emergency on the bridge. So I got myself up and floundered my way here. I found the hatch stuck open, and a fight—no, really it was more like a battle, because there were about a dozen people involved—and some of them with knives. . . .”

“I know this is difficult,” Julia said. “But please, Fuyuko, could you speak a little louder. I can hardly hear you.”

Fuyuko’s teeth caught at her lower lip, perhaps to stop it from trembling. “I looked around for Nadia,” she said, marginally louder, though hoarse. “I was worried that they might have. . . harmed her.”

“Shit,” Julia said softly. She could just about imagine the panic into which the loss of Nadia would put any sane person.

Fuyuko jerked her head in assent. “I was terrified I was too late. There were clumps of blood and feces floating around. The smell was horrible.” She swallowed again and cleared her throat. “But then I saw Glory—and knew that Glory was dead. I can’t remember much else, except that I finally found Nadia, on the ceiling, be-

hind a shield. She looked oblivious to the fighting. I don't know if it was the ship that protected her, or if she somehow had some kind of awareness of things going on around her. Though I was relieved that she was safe, I still had to figure out what to do about the fighting. I mean, Glory was dead. And it was obvious that..."

"I understand," Julia said. "It's all right." She leaned over to touch the other's arm and stroked it. "You did the best you could in unthinkable circumstances. Please continue."

Fuyuko pressed her hands to her face, covering her eyes. "Sering was wounded before I could figure out what to do. I should have ordered the AI to implement Emergency Procedure 7B, but it occurred

to me to do so only after Sering was wounded, by which time it was too late, since it would probably have meant Sering's bleeding to death." Fuyuko's hands were covering her face, but Julia thought from the choked, quavering sound of her voice that she must be crying. "So I had to pull Sering out of there first. And then I implemented EP7B, and once everyone—except Nadia, of course—was in caretakers, invoked EP6C. With special instructions to wake only the head of mission and myself on our reaching real-spacetime."

Julia pressed her hands to her stomach. How had Fuyuko had the strength to cope? It must have been hell. "Thank you, Fuyuko," she said softly, her voice barely steady. And now it was her problem, her responsibility, her culpability. Like a rock inside her weightless body, heavy, sharp-edged, indigestible. But that was tolerable. She could live with the pain and anxiety—as long, that is, as it didn't wreck all promise of the manifold possibilities to come.



The most important point I have to report—and I can't emphasize this with sufficient strength—is that you *must not send anyone to La Femme who identifies as female*. (In fact, it would be best if you were to send only those who identify as unequivocally male.) All the female-identified members of the crew of the *Pax I*, with the exception of the word processor, were dead by the time we arrived in the Albireo system. Those who didn't die during the first period of transudation died during the second. Transudation poses a clear danger to female humans that must in future be avoided.

—from Paul 22423's (Oral)
Report to the First Council

4.

THEY TOOK A break, ostensibly to guzzle a half-liter of water apiece. Julia considered a brief dip into v-space to access Fuyuko's report but quickly discarded the idea. The constant ooze of sedative into their capillaries for so long had left them parched in mouth and throat and with skin like paper. Aware that even minimal physical activity would improve her cognitive functions, Julia released herself from the recliner's restraints and determinedly propelled herself toward one of the hold-bars lining the bridge's perimeter. By the time she reached her goal, the bot the AI had summoned was presenting her with a bulb of water.

Fuyuko's twitch was now so violent it pulled at her cheek; and her mouth had not stopped trembling even when she had finished describing the terrible events on the bridge. What Fuyuko needed, Julia thought, was for a deep friend to enfold her in a long, close embrace. But Julia was not a friend, and Fuyuko would resent it if Julia tried to do that. She was already angry at Julia for not having been the one to deal with the mess on the bridge. Accordingly, Julia confined herself to a few remarks on how they had traveled into the unknown and could only hope themselves prepared to face the challenges it would continue to pose.

When they had finished their water and resettled in the recliners, Julia said, "We're both anxious to find out what Solita can tell us about the situation with *Pax I*. But we've got to prepare a strategy before we contact her. I have a few ideas, but I need your expert input and guidance. Do you feel up to it now?"

Fuyuko's lips, trembling, pressed whitely together. "Yes, of course I feel 'up to it.' But it's not obvious to me why we need to prepare a 'strategy' at all. Surely we should be making contact with

Solita as soon as possible, so that we can find out what has been going on here.”

Concern for the psyche-synthesist’s stressed state made Julia hold her impatience in check. “But...” Julia paused to consider how best to frame her concerns. “Before we do that, I think we need to have at least some idea about the mental state of our own crew.”

Fuyuko frowned at her tightly clasped hands. “You mean...you want me to order full brain-chem workups on...everyone?”

“I’m asking you, Fuyuko,” Julia said. “What *you* think. What you think we’ll find when we start waking the others. Even whether doing so will be...letting the microbes out of the lab, so to speak.”

Fuyuko stared at her. “You mean, out of control?”

“Some of them at least were out of control when you invoked the EP,” Julia said.

Fuyuko swallowed. “You’re saying you think the psychoses could be...permanent.”

“We’ve no way of knowing,” Julia said. “But the strange transmission we got from *Pax I* after they’d reached this system...”

Fuyuko looked away. “After they’d reached the planet, you mean,” she said softly.

Julia thought about that. She and Fuyuko, she realized, could be totally fucked-up and not know it. And also, it could very definitely be the case that whatever befell the females on *Pax I* struck not during the transudation shifts but after they’d arrived in the Albireo system.

“You need to run diagnostics on *all* of us,” Julia said. “Starting with yourself and me, and then Nadia, before anyone else. AI: how long has Nadia been sleeping?”

“Nadia has been sleeping for three hours and seventeen minutes.”

“And was awake before then for who knows how long,” Fuyuko said. “We can’t wake her now that she’s finally getting some sleep. And I don’t see anyhow why *she* should be in on it. She’s our pilot,

Julia. What possible contribution can she have to make to any other part of the mission?”

Julia debated removing her ankle restraints so that she could cross her legs. The pressure on her bladder was getting to be intolerable. Perhaps a shift in position would mitigate the discomfort? After so long in the caretaker it wasn't surprising her bladder muscles wouldn't function optimally right off.

“But besides all that, checking out the health of the rest of the crew can wait until after we talk to the *Leopard*,” Fuyuko said. “This is what we came for, Julia. And the sooner we get some idea of what we will be facing, the better. Think about it. Solita might have positioned herself here in order to warn us against getting any closer to the planet.”

Julia offered Fuyuko the most reassuring smile in her repertoire. “I'm as curious and impatient as you are,” she said. “But it may be that we have only one chance to get this right.” That *Pax I* had already determined the future of Contact with the La Femmeans was Julia's worst fear. “And I believe that we might find Nadia's help useful because she will have a different way of listening to what Solita says than we do.” Fuyuko's eyes widened. “Word processors essentially live in another culture,” Julia said. “Few of them ever spend enough time in v-space to find caretakers attractive. They have their own city—a meat-space they live in, as children do in kindercities.” Or as eutopians lived in Cockayne-spaces. But Julia knew she couldn't say *that*. “As for whether Solita might have an urgent warning for us—I believe she would have signaled an emergency if that were so, instead of passively accepting our request that she stand by.”

Fuyuko pressed her hands to her cheeks, exercising obvious care to avoid aggravating her wound. “It will take hours for the AI to assess everybody,” she said.

The psyche-synthesist's disappointment, Julia noted, seemed to be overriding her earlier distress. Did she realize how childish she sounded, moaning and groaning about the wait? “Well, start with

us, and Nadia, and then do the rest of the Executive Team—Vance, Astra, Blaise, and Candace,” Julia said. “We can decide after you’ve done the Exec whether we should do everyone else besides.”

“All right,” Fuyuko said. “But you do realize, don’t you, that since they’ve all been in sedated sleep for who-knows-how-long we may not be able to get a meaningful take on what their condition will be once they’ve been awakened.”

“I understand,” Julia said. That was something she didn’t care to think about unless and until she had to.