

# Making Amends



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by

Nisi Shawl



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*I dedicate this book to the memory of my dear cousin,  
Vincent Troy Thompson, whom I last saw  
wearing chains and an orange jumpsuit.*





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# Introduction

by Nalo Hopkinson

IN THE 1980S, when I was in my 20s and about 15 years away from being a writer, I set out to discover whether the only Black science fiction and fantasy authors in the genre were Samuel R. Delany (aka Chip), Tananarive Due, Charles Saunders, Octavia E. Butler, and Steven Barnes. This was in the years before personal computers and the Internet would change the way we searched for information. I had to do it the old-fashioned way; by using the library. Luckily, I worked for a public library system.

However, I also had to ferret out the information at a time when the popular (read: white) narrative in the science fiction and fantasy community about race was that it didn't matter, and the polite thing to do was not mention it; in effect, to cultivate a deliberate blindness to it. It was the time when even if you could get a science fiction and fantasy novel published that contained humans of color, chances were that the cover would show someone blue-skinned, or purple, or green; in fact, just about any other colour than the darker flesh tones and non-Caucasian features possessed by most of Earth's human inhabitants. It was well before Chip Delany's 1998 essay "Racism and Science Fiction" in the August issue of *The New York Review of Science Fiction* unequivocally called out the systemic racism in our community. So as I searched for Black writers in the field other than the big five, I had to become a detective, looking for hints and clues in story content, reviews, etc.

I found Claude-Michel Provost, a Haitian Canadian short story writer from Montreal who wrote in French. In English, years later, I discovered Nisi Shawl. They had recently had their first short story published in the April 1995 issue of *Asimov's Magazine*. The story title was "The Rainses." The public library came to the rescue again; I was eventually able to find and read a copy of Nisi's lovely ghost story. It had felt like a stretch for me to aspire to the status of the five Black anglophone novelists in the field. They had published many SF/F novels among them. But Nisi's existence, and their first short story publication in a professional SF/F magazine, let me know that SF/F publishing, though loathe to engage with the issue of representation at the time, might still let an emerging Black writer with obviously Black characters slip in here or there.

It was a few years more before I met Nisi; by then, we were both published authors. Though we come from different backgrounds—they are American and I am Caribbean—we found we had a lot in common. For instance, a similar love for and insistence on putting Black speech types on the page whenever we feel like it. A frank approach to sexuality in our writing. A love of cooking and herbalism. A resistance to body shaming, slut-shaming, enforced gender binarism. And so much more.

In 2004, Uppinder Mehan and I were editors of the fiction anthology *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction*. Uppinder had conceived of it as an anthology of science fiction written by people of color. It may have been the first of its kind. Uppinder invited me to be his co-editor. We published Nisi's short story "Deep End" in that volume. "Deep End" is the original short story around which the stories in *Making Amends* are shaped.

I remember reading "Deep End" for the first time those many years ago. Nisi has the knack of planting the reader smack dab in the middle of the consequences of their science

fiction premises, of deeply humanizing the people discounted and discarded by the conquest-driven state machine. Nisi creates living, breathing, laughing, loving, hating, eating, farting, fucking, grieving, breeding people, and for the space of reading the story, makes us live as those people, surviving in the world-machine, and sometimes, despite all the odds, thriving. Many authors can do that, but Nisi's particular spin on it is inimitable.

Let's start with that title: *Making Amends*. The doubling of meaning that Nisi crafts; a community of people convicted of crimes (I won't say "criminals," for reasons Nisi addresses in this collection) who have opted to take the sentence of settling an alien planet, which has been named "Amends." To save space and make the journey affordable, their original bodies are destroyed, and their consciousnesses stored then loaded at the other end of the journey into bodies cloned from those of their purported victims. The prisoners are given no choice over the race or sex of the bodies they're given.

Nisi's facility with the science-fictional jargon of space travel impresses me; how well they infuse it into the stew of frail human bodies, people finding love in dangerous places, the implacable unjustness of a justice system that treats humans as not just disposable, but literally as material.

Then there is Nisi's wordcraft, their ability to write prose that simultaneously possesses both economy and a vibrant liveliness: "*Robeson. Unique. Trill. Trill.*" The phrase consists only of the names of three of characters, uninflected on the face of it. But in a few short pages I'd already learned enough about Wayna, one of the protagonists of that story, that the simple line of names made my heart clench for her.

One of the pleasures of science fiction and fantasy for me, both as writer and reader, is its frequent practice of getting you to see the familiar in a different way. In *Making*

*Amends*, characters' sexualities are described with two terms I hadn't encountered before; that made me put the book down to think about them. Then I picked it back up right away because I wanted to know what the difficult, manipulative but very relatable protagonist was going to get up to next.

Nisi's sense of mischief is very much on display in this collection: take for instance their replacement of the phrase "pissed off" with "queefed off." That one made me laugh out loud, the substitution of a juicy new phrase which centers women's bodies.

Another sentence that made me give my brain a think, in the story "In Colors Everywhere;" "*Odell wore no clothing, which meant Trill had no way of telling if the stranger was a him or a her.*" The phrase neatly infers a wide swath of worldbuilding without halting the piece overlong with exposition.

I won't give away the ultimate final surprise of the piece; actually, there are two. Suffice to say, they expand the possibilities of the world of *Making Amends* into spaces I didn't anticipate. I love that. Speaking of which...

Love. This is the overwhelming feeling I come away with from reading these assembled stories. Love of humanity. Love of the inadvertent outliers who strive to be themselves. To make community. To live. It's not all rainbows and syllabub. In fact, that may be the smaller part of what goes on. There is illness and death, manipulation and murder. But at the end, a deep, lovely sweetness. *Making Amends* is a gift, as is all Nisi Shawl's writing.







## My Recipe for Making Amends

STARTING AN INTERSTELLAR penal colony could be an extremely practical idea, right? It could even provide a sponsoring corporation a good Return on Investment—though of course the initial investment would be massive. *Making Amends* is my series of short stories about a corporate government trying to put this idea into action, and then about the idea's lovely and unforeseen consequences.

The first installment of the Making Amends series to appear was “Out of the Black,” then titled “Deep End.” In 2003, Nalo Hopkinson asked me to send her an anti-colonial science fiction story for her 2004 anthology *So Long Been Dreaming*, and my mind kept turning to historical examples of how empires had spread themselves. Australia, a long-running success, began as an extension of Britain's prisons, a dumping ground for debtors, revolutionaries, and other undesirables. I took that as my model: let convicts face the unknown dangers of life on alien worlds, the hostile animals, poisonous plants, and whatever other weirdnesses a strange ecosystem threw their way. If they were injured or died, well, too bad, but after all, these were criminals and not a great loss—though the benefits they won, such as mineral rights, would of course belong to the supervising political and financial entities.

There's an obvious problem with extrapolating the Australian set-up into space, and that's the prohibitive expense of hauling the necessary mass across the distance between Earth and any other at least semi-habitable planet. I solved that by stripping the transported prisoners of their flesh. Downloading

and uploading consciousness is a familiar science fictional concept. I made it more appropriately cruel by describing it as a very painful process, part of the punishment.

Conceiving of these convicts as strings of data stored on a rocket-borne computer made them a lighter load, which made the whole venture much more feasible, economically speaking. Plus, it meant I didn't have to worry about calculating the stresses human freight would be subject to during acceleration and deceleration. No bodies, no stress. And it also solved the problem of how long they'd have to spend aboard their interstellar rocket ship: if the prisoners were reduced to mere software programs, they could be run slowly, or intermittently shut down. So, at sub-light speeds these expeditions to other stars would take decades, centuries even—but not according to the prisoners' perceptions. For them, the time would be long and tedious, but not necessarily interminable, unless those in control preferred to make that their prisoners' experience by ramping up the software's run-time.

The final fillip of whatthefuckery I added to "Out of the Black's" premise was to stipulate that the bodies into which the convicts' consciousness would be downloaded were cloned from the genetic material of their supposed "victims." Thus a doctor providing abortions could be reborn into a body copied from the DNA of an aborted fetus, or a strike organizer into one copied from a corporation's CEO.

"Out of the Black" raised lots of questions, but despite Aqueduct publisher L. Timmel Duchamp's invitation to expand it into a novel, I didn't feel the immediate need to answer them. Eventually I wrote seven other stories that supposedly do that, though they probably raise others. They appear here in the chronological order of the stories' events, rather than in the order I wrote and published them, which I hope makes them make more sense.

Much of what goes on in the series resurfaces more than once. The question of control kept coming up as I wrote these stories, for instance. The creation of an autonomous second AI meant that the original first AI, responsible for implementing the decisions of a fascist regime, had to give up control of its creation's operations. The narrator of "Out of the Black," Wayna, is subject to uncontrollable pain, and in "Out of the Black" and the later stories, prisoners are subjected to the control of the colony's trustees, and through those trustees, the control of the state that exiled them.

Another common thread is the mutability of antagonism and the blurring of lines of enmity. The AI in charge of the Amends mission could well be taken to be the enemy of the prisoners, especially when they try to win their autonomy, but his position is more nuanced, and subject to change. For the first generation of Amends settlers, the connection between their consciousness and their flesh is potentially a hostile one. Trustees are put in positions of power that make them enemies of their fellow prisoners despite their shared concerns. And always the environments through which my stories' characters move must be adapted to, placated, integrated into their lives. There are the stultifying class hierarchies embedded in the Earth-orbiting habitat where "Best Friend" takes place, the hard vacuum surrounding the mission's spaceships in "Over a Long Time Ago" and "Out of the Black," and of course, the alien landscape of Amends itself. All these tensions are explored, in all their ramifications.

By the time we see Jubilee, which is the Amends settlement at the center of these stories, the prisoners brought there have begun naming elements of their surroundings. Glow-in-the-dark Christmas trees and Hannakka bushes soften the nights. Multicolored Rosetoos bloom and fruit, cured redivines bind the walls of their homes and accessorize their clothing, and

they fish the waters of Unrest Bay and scavenge the eggs prettybirds lay in the Rainshadow Mountains.

One question I've faced from some editors and reviewers when talking about this series and a few other stories I've written is: What did my imprisoned characters do wrong, and what justifies their treatment?

The short answer, the answer I give once I've quieted my fury enough to respond coherently is: "Nothing." Nothing justifies the police persecution experienced by the hero of "Lazzrus" and "Sunshine of Your Love;" nothing excuses the confinement and exile of the involuntary inhabitants of Amends.

The longer, more specific answer I give tallies up behaviors recently re-problematized: seeking and providing abortions, presentation as an unassigned gender, non-heteronormative sexual interactions, and so on.

My home community is the African diaspora in the United States, specifically in Kalamazoo, Michigan. In my neighborhood there was never a need to discuss *why* someone was incarcerated. Incarceration was axiomatic, a basic condition of our lives. This past is the root of my resistance to the question. And the unfurling bud at the tip of the tree of my resistance is my dawning realization that I and many others — maybe you yourself — could easily be classified as criminals. Indeed, many of us are classified that way already.

In *Making Amends* I do my best to describe the steps and ingredients needed for us to break out of that oppressive categorization and into the deliciously wild unknown.

## The Best Friend We Never Had

JOSIE STARED HARD at the woman standing just outside the connecting hose's exit. The expandable tubing she walked through was well-insulated, but for most of its length dimmer even than her ship had been. Still, though the light bleeding in from the exit to Mizar 5's concourse dazzled Josie's eyes, this woman's face looked unexpectedly familiar. Not the wig, though.

She kept staring as she walked. Was it going to be this easy to get in touch with the people she wanted to recruit? With Yale? Every step down the hose's gradient made Josie heavier and more certain who was waiting for her: obviously fake eyebrows slanting dramatically toward the shallow-bridged nose; hairline a perfect half-oval; smooth, ultra-medium brown skin—no, faint lines marked the former smoothness. She could see that now. And yet—“Lucky?”

Lucky's smile grew core bright. “You recognize me! Yeah, when I saw who was comin and it would be on my hours I told Twilla and Blaise and them you wouldn't forget.”

“Course not.” Though maybe she remembered the good old days differently. Saw them differently now, the fights and sickbay and jailtime. The friendships. The betrayal.

“How long you back for? For good?”

Josie had paused to talk to Lucky though she didn't really need a greeter; the hab's web had synched while her ship approached. Directions to her keep blinked in the window above her visual field. She could have followed them right off. But this would help her mission.

“Vacation,” she said. The simplest truth. She’d be working, too, of course. No need to tell Lucky yet.

Lucky’s mouth stayed in the same position, but her forehead moved up. “You’ll hafta be away from there for years. ARPA gives vacations that long?”

Josie nodded. “Project’s in a dormant phase.” Till she recruited a crew for the starship they were developing. Six or seven “volunteers” who didn’t mind leaving their bodies behind. Which she was convinced would be better for them than what would happen to her school otherwise. “I have to be back in time for the next big push.” At least this way they’d be trustees rather than regular prisoners.

Relaxing her forehead, Lucky squinched her smiling mouth into make-believe disgust. “And you can’t say what exactly it is you doin, cause ARPA.”

“Yeah.” The silence after her one-word answer filled with awkwardness. “Well—”

“Look.” Lucky held out a tiny silver tab. An unofficial interface to private data—when Josie left Mizar 5 only residents on the shorter yet more lucrative Able and Bitch work-shifts could afford them, and they’d been subdural, but she’d read in the latest version that you only had to keep steadily in touch with—

“Your hair nappy enough it’ll stay if you tuck it in.”

Josie had quit wigs out there. “What’s on it?”

“Contacts for me and the rest of our old school. And like that. If you wanna get together sometime, set it up?”

Josie took the tab, slipped it into position so it could interact with her skin’s biome and the routines embedded below.

“All right!” Lucky nodded, slick orange curls bobbing below her drooping earlobes. “And you synched up so you know where your keep is, yeah? Catch you later, then.”

So simple. She could lure them in all at once, an entire crew. Worth a pile of shares. And monitoring their journey to Amends as assigned would be a total piece of carb.

Josie crossed the concourse to join a clump of Able-monogrammed shoppers. She let herself be towed along spinward with them till her directions flashed for her to let go of the rope. Her keep was part of a complex organized around a noodle place. Ables lolled in a couple of padded niches, sipping frothy drinks and slurping bowls of fragrant soup. A pair of impatient-eyed Crowns waited to clear them out: it was almost 25 o'clock, time for shift change. Time for Crowns to play.

A sleepy-faced Bitch leaned into the armpit of one of the Ables. People did cross work shifts for pleasure, but they paid for it. Not only in confused circadians. Fights between shifts broke the endless routine, so of course they happened, with and without warning, which led to the sort of accusations Maree had faced one time. No one liked a traitor.

Ostracism. That was the worst. Consequences for fights didn't matter half as much. Sickbay was just more boredom. Expensive, though. But jail was a joke. Or it used to be; not so much the new facility.

Josie's directions pointed her to a set of plastic boards projecting out from the furthest-in wall. They formed steep stairs. No big deal, even in the hab's higher gravity. The ship's gym had been minimal, but there hadn't been too much to do on the way in besides train. Same basic routine as at the ARPA outpost.

There were a protective rail and a series of grips spaced along the wall above the boards. She ignored them and skipped every other step, waving at the Crowns below, who appeared to check their interfaces and ID her. Evidently. Thanks, gov. They stopped looking up as she hit the second-from-the-last riser, turning their attention back to the lingering Ables.

An opening at the top of the stairs became a corridor lined with four tall hatches. One hung wide. Directions claimed this was it. Josie stepped over the high sill and shut the hatch behind her, noting automatically the soft shush of meeting seals.

The walls were pale turquoise, freshly coated. Floor and scuffguards lavender, same as the controls and handles for the closets, water and dry. Josie lowered the bedsit, revealing a mirrored ceiling. She pulled out the desk so it shelved over her knees as she sat, opened it up. Another mirror. The previous occupant had had some quirks. Josie didn't expect she'd be here long enough that they'd annoy her.

She sang a measure of her security code and the desk boot-ed, showing the bland wallpaper she'd chosen, a few harmless-appearing icons. Her mission wasn't exactly a secret, but ARPA preferred a low profile. Subversives didn't need to know how far along they were with the project.

Satisfied, she set the desk to project a jazz score. Next, a shower. Josie stripped off her robe and tights. The robe would do for later — not the newest style, but she hadn't worn it enough to stink it up. The tights, though, were fab stock. She kicked them under the bedsit to get them out of her way and squeezed into the already running water closet. And out again fast.

The silver tab from Lucky hadn't gotten very wet. Maybe it didn't matter? She laid it on the desk anyway and went back in the water. Scrubbing absently at her strong shoulders, slat-ribbed sides, hips, legs — too bad they weren't longer — she puzzled briefly over why unofficial private interfaces had become popular. Something to do with escaping attention? Might subversives be involved? Because of gov everyone on Mizar 5, however high or low their shares, had plenty of storage and computing and communication capacity. Could be nothing more than a fad. Whatever Able and Bitch wanted they got. Then Crown picked up the leftovers and copied the two richer shifts.



Hard to soap between her toes in the tiny WC; like on the ship she had to lift her knees to her chin to reach them, but those were some of the best external spots to raise her personal biome's microbes. She wanted them well fed.

She turned the water off, got out wet because she'd forgotten to order new tights fabbed, got back in again, and turned on the heater and fan. By the time she'd dried off, the order was hanging from the fab frame in the other closet.

She strapped up and dressed. Baldric, holster, tights, and robe, though she was tired and longed for bed. Crown shift had seven more hours awake. Seven more hours for Josie's first shot at recruiting. She needed to align her circadians with that. She retrieved the silver tab from the desk to slip it in her hair — stopped.

No longer silver. She rolled the flattened cylinder in her pink palm. Now it gleamed black and blue.

Had that little bit of water...what was the word? Tarnished it? So quickly? Unlikely.

Nothing she'd seen before she headed out to ARPA, nothing she'd learned on the way back in, would explain this.

Josie was not putting some strangely mutated interface anywhere near her head. Those were her slickest routines up there. She set it carefully on the desk.

Fine. She had researched the school enough before she arrived. Should be easy to find her old friends even without Lucky's help.

Yes. Here were the notes she'd transferred from the ship's memory: addresses for keeps, protocols for messages, share statuses as of the most recent market, current employment — which last wouldn't do her any good till sixteen o'clock. Fifteen hours, almost. Too long. ARPA didn't class recruiting Crowns as a priority; she'd have to go for Ables and Bitches first if she couldn't reach the others in her old school right away.

Which was why she felt guilty switching off the projection and signing into Binocc. Almost no one used the site anymore, but Yale still had a page, and Josie had formed the habit of visiting it during the lonely voyage home. A stupid, pointless pleasure; he'd made his allegiance to Maree clear well before Josie responded to ARPA's offer. The very qualities that made her attractive to ARPA—her competitiveness, her skepticism, her lack of trust—had driven him away from her and into Maree's soft, soothing arms. Those two were lifers, judging by how they clung together.

The Binocc page predated Maree and didn't much mention her besides noting Yale's "Partnered" status. Josie scanned it. Nothing any different. Clips of his music, contest swag, stills and runs of him spitting verses, his wide green eyes focused on distant listeners. Round, dimpled cheeks belying his slender build—she remembered back in cresh when he'd been so chubby and determined not to be left behind by her and the other fast runners. But now—

Now she was wasting time. She checked her clock. A little before two. Crowns would be heading out from their keeps. Question was, where to?

Not here. She'd find them a lot faster if she headed out herself. Anywhere she figured she needed to get she could ask her field directions.

At the hatch she hesitated, went back to the desk for Lucky's tab, slipped it in her robe's bottom hem pocket. It couldn't hurt her from there. Maybe while poking around she'd learn what had caused the alarming color change.

Down the steps. Now Bitches leaned on their elbows behind the shop's counter. No customers. Ables should be asleep by this time. Crowns weren't big spenders. Wherever her school was hanging would be cheap.

The tow took her past massage parlors, churches, drops for fab stock. Then she saw a likely spot: a theater. She let go. Her school had always had a thing for live action.

The marquee told her the name of the production: Expanded Metal. Music. Yale's name wasn't on the bill. No one else she recognized, either. She bought a ticket anyway on a hunch. ARPA was good for it, and if the theater didn't pan out she'd plan her next move from here.

The seating area seemed sparsely filled. Out of a hundred seats, over half stayed empty as the lights dimmed. The act began and Josie understood why. Greasy-looking twinks, bare-topped and wearing kilts sewn together out of plaid patches, swung at each other with chrome-colored sticks. When the sticks connected, sounds — chimes clanging, hollow bangs, and rhythmic screeches — emerged from speakers arranged in the area's walls and ceiling. The program loaded to her field informed her she could listen internally instead.

There was a third option. Josie stood and edged past her row's only other occupant. The nearest hatch led to a different corridor than the one she'd entered by, and that led to the back access. And her school.

Oleanders bristled out of the access's walls from shoulder height up, filtering the droning, flickering lamps above. In the half-dark she recognized Hammer, Blaise, Vixi, Twilla, Lucky, and Lukie, the son born right before Josie left — everyone. Except where was Yale?

The tops of the bushes to her left rustled, loud and harsh. Josie looked over as a giggling, pink-faced drunk peered through their foliage. Oh, right. Maree. She'd totally forgotten her.

That only made Yale's absence weirder.

"Climb down before you scratch and poison yourself!" Lucky was always the school's mother, at it long before Lukie's birth.

“Climb down!” the young squirt echoed her. He’d be his school’s mother, too.

“Don’t wanna get caught!” Maree yelled.

“Then shut the fucks up!” Vixi never cared who she queefed off.

Burping and hiccupping, Yale’s wife disentangled herself from the oleander branches and fell to the access’s grated floor. Lucky hauled her upright, glancing at Josie. “Glad you could come — ain’t been the same since you took off.”

Right about then was when everyone’s permanent work assignments went to fulltime, that was all. Left less energy to enjoy fights. Nothing to do with whether she was there.

Maree leaned against the wall, hunching her shoulders to avoid the bushes. “Josie? Josie come home? Too bad, girl. Too —” Like a whip snapping, Maree’s spine flexed. A slug of vomit leaked between her lips, but she appeared to swallow most of it.

Josie turned away. Blaise grinned, gold teeth winking brighter as the hatch Josie had closed behind her opened. One of the twinks from the show stepped out. “You may wanna think to quiet down a shade,” she said, shutting it again. “Intermission. Audience will hear you plain.”

Lucky nodded. “We about to head off anyhow in a couple. Sure you can’t join us?” She laid a hand against the musician’s sweat-gleaming upper arm like it was a hatch control.

“Sure you can’t stay for the gig?”

“You compin the entire school?”

The twink shook her head no. “Only you; the rest have to pay like —”

“I need to pee!” Maree complained. She tugged at Lucky’s shoulder veil; with a shrug of annoyance, Lucky shook it off. “Come ON! Tab said we’d be there by four!”

Vixi ducked to retrieve the veil. “She has a point.”

Lucky tilted her head back till her chin pointed at the white flowers dangling off the highest pipes. Her throat quivered, then seemed to freeze solid. Her jaw unclenched. “Don’t *matter!* We can change what the tab cache *say!*”

“Yeah, but I NEED TO PEE!”

The hatch opened again, a sliver of crimson blocked by the twink musician’s twisting body. An apologetic “I gotta go on,” and she untwisted and vanished. The closing crack shifted to emerald green before it, too, vanished.

“Well, then.” Lucky didn’t sound as disappointed as Josie knew she must be. “Let’s set it up.” She looked at Josie as if for confirmation. Why? Josie gave a half-nod, not sure what she was agreeing with.

Then they were stomping down the access to a ramp, a ladder down further, a bridge over roaring ducts far, far below, barely visible. Josie had a good idea where they were headed: corewards. To a location they’d always managed to reach despite gov’s attempts to block them: Mizar 5’s forbidden center. Directions in her field agreed.

Sure enough, they halted halfway across the bridge. “Who first?” asked Lucky.

Once a repair crew had turned the local gravity bar back on, supposedly accidentally. Massive injuries for Lucky and Vixi that night. Sickbay massive.

All eyes on Josie. As if in a dream she pushed at the fence enclosing the walkway, finding the inevitable slit. It was in a different place than she remembered, and the cuts were fresh, the plastic sharp-edged where it had been sheared off. She threw one leg over the handrail. The other. Balanced. Fell. Fast. Faster. Her robe fluttered like the petals of a furious flower.

Fast but not far: soon she slowed. Slo-o-o-o-owed. Till she could snag a handle protruding from one of the hatches in the giant ducts now surrounding her and hover, waiting.

When the school had drifted into formation around her she pushed off from her duct and swam without hesitation for the nursery pod, the bulbous chamber where the hab's oxy-generating vegetation grew from seed to sprout to transplantable shrub.

The hatch in wouldn't open. A thick red cuff encircled and obscured its controls. Vixi tapped on Josie's arm to get her to move aside and rubbed a tab over them—as silver as Josie's had been originally. The cuff sprang apart, exposing the controls' edges. Now they worked. Now she pulled, and the hatch swung out.

Shining like a hundred suns, the nursery lights poured brilliance upon brilliance onto the oleanders' leathery leaves. They burned at 360 degrees of almost every circle that could be imagined, leaving nothing in shadow. Nothing hidden. Five other hatches showed in the sphere's curving wall, blank and bright. Ziggurats of hydroponic caskets stuck out from it in gradually higher rows, peaks and valleys of dark green. On the top of every towering stack a fan was mounted. On the bottom, where Maree was intent on getting fast, bright-capped fluid intakes.

Otherwise the nursery was empty. Josie realized she'd expected to find Yale here. This was where he used to spend his volunteer work shifts before his permanent assignment, where he would come to find peace, to meditate when upset by gov's too-transparent maneuverings. Despite how the oleanders' toxicity underlined its distrust, how gov had chosen a poisonous oxy generator on the theory non-poisonous ones would be eaten, Yale admired every variety of the species in every way. He should have been a botanist, not an ice harvester.

He should have been here.

She looked at Lucky. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

Josie just kept looking.

The smooth parts of Lucky's face got smoother. The dents deepened. "Thought you knew. Gone."

Gone? Deported? "How?"

"Shares run low — he kept sendin em down to Earth to his parents till it was only subsistence level left." No one wanted to live on subsistence. And eventually —

Mizar 5 had power, food, water, and air enough for everyone brought up or born here. Like that mattered. Use up your shares and you got thrown back in the dirt. Ables and Bitches especially hated "freeloading" Crowns, only allowed up from Earth because they'd won a lottery. Or rather because their parents had.

"Gov sent him down?" If she'd gotten here in time she could have — sort of — saved him from that.

"They was fixin — What now?"

Maree let go of Lucky's veil to fist tears from her cheeks. Pulling up her tights with the other hand. "You ain't gotta tell her. Let me. I was his wife. You take care of business."

Was. So much for being a lifer.

"Yeah, you right. Go ahead, then."

Lucky swooped off toward where Hammer and Blaise tossed Lukie back and forth between tower tops. "Tenshun! Time to get ready. We ain't *that* early!"

Maree side-eyed her. Josie grabbed a casket edge and adjusted her position so they were on the same plane.

"You never liked me, didja Josie?"

"No." Why lie?

Lukie started crying. Josie rotated slightly to see what was wrong. Lucky had him by his tights, wedging him under a fan housing.

"But Yale always talked about you and how best of a friend you was, so even if it makes me so sad I can't — even if it breaks

my *heart*—” Glistening with snot, Maree’s pink nose flared. “—I’m a make myself tell you how he died.”

Wait. “How he — *died*?” No reason for that — Mizar 5 medicine was as good as anything ARPA had. Which was the best.

But it took shares to buy it.

“He didn’t wanna be sent down.” Sniff. “I was gonna tell him I changed my mind to go with him. I was!”

Josiefeltstupid — maybe duetolackofsleep. “What — what —”

“I didn’t want his fucks in life insurance! Let every Bitch and Able we ever beat have it! I only wanted hi-i-i-im!” Wailing now. She still hadn’t told Josie how — if Josie didn’t hear —

He’d still be dead. For the first time since she could, since her ship synched with Mizar 5, Josie let herself query Yale’s location. Last known was sickbay. Eight hundred shifts ago, as a transfer from the newly built General Holding. Diagnosis: cancer. Etiology: radiation exposure. Chance of recovery sans medication: zero.

Didn’t make any sense.

Josie pushed herself away from the sobbing Maree. Why bother crying? She aimed for Lucky, but a softly smiling Hammer intercepted her. “Lucky says if you rather just watch, you prolly fit where that fan there mounted. We can take it down fast if you like.”

She had to be getting stupider. “Watch what?”

Hammer’s bald head drew back. “The fight. With the Bitches — you came cause of the invitation, right?” She must have looked as stupid as she felt. “The invitation Lucky gave you? One the tab accessed?”

The tab — she dug it out of her robe’s hem pocket. “This?”

Hammer flinched away from it — from her. “When did it start lookin that way?”

“I — uh — I had it in my hair when I got in the shower. Could that —”



“No.” Hammer shook his head so hard his whole body moved to counterbalance it. “What we got here is a reaction to your biome’s tracking tech.” They had a way to find that out?

Hammer flipped away. “Lucky! Our girl’s wearin a wire.”

“Say again?” Lucky took a big shiny purple ball from her loudly protesting squirt’s hand. “You see how them fools at the cresh gave him a candyball? He coulda choked—”

Four of the six hatches opened at the same time. In dived angry Bitches. Robeless and roaring, they swarmed towards the free space at the nursery’s center.

“Strip and strike!” Lucky yelled, hurling the candyball at the closest Bitch’s head. Hitting his temple. He spasmed, and the line behind him stalled a moment to avoid his flailing limbs. The others kept coming, though. Aiming at her? Get your opponents off balance. Josie tore free of her robe and slung it at their faces. All that did was ram her back into the fan. The cloth sailed harmlessly past her targets.

But at least now she could reach her weapon. She dragged her sting from the baldric’s back holster, whipped it at the black-browed Bitch lunging at her. Wrapped the tip around the Bitch’s naked arm. Squeezed the switch.

The Bitch gasped for breath. Couldn’t get enough. The sting’s cardiac glycosides prevented that. Josie waited a count of three to disengage, momentarily ignoring the blows of the two Bitches prying at her weapon’s grip. Used its butt to jab back at the one behind her and her open hand to hook the neckline of the one in front. Recoil from the jab bashed her head against his chin. Surprise! A come hither flick-and-jerk of the sting brought a third into their circle. Discharge. Release with a whirl that twirled her to face the one recovering from the punch to his belly. And a loop around his waist, but of course his tights impeded her sting’s poison. She tossed him into the stunned chin-casualty’s wide-open arms. And release.

This was the dance. So good with the proper equipment.

A lash to the second Bitch's still-dazed face caught him on the eyelids. He'd go under fast now. Josie didn't have to count. She did anyway, for fun. A new Bitch was on her before she finished, one who'd evidently fought a few rounds in low grav. But not against Josie. Not against Josie with an ARPA-issue sting.

The Bitch shoved off from a sheet-topped casket. Josie appreciated the counter-clockwise spin she added, obviously designed to negate the sting's wrap. Granted Josie was right-dominant. But when she got tired of stalking Yale on the trip in, she'd had nothing to do but come up with new ways to practice. She swapped the sting to her left and aimed for the Bitch's bare feet. When she had control of those, poison flooding through the Bitch's skin, Josie yanked hard. Beautiful! They began orbiting around an axis that wobbled lightly to the beat of the Bitch's twitching attempts to climb the sting. To choke her. Josie let the Bitch get close enough to touch her throat before losing consciousness. Safe, she kissed the Bitch on both her plump cheeks.

Safe. No more attackers. Among her Crowns only Maree obviously injured, one arm cradled in the other with its hand tucked in the crook of her elbow. Outnumbered two to one, her school had chewed the fourteen Bitches up: broken their bones, trapped them with nets and bolos, strangled them to the point of unconsciousness. Add to that her poisoning. If any moved, they were floating gently to the walls. Josie joined in with the work of towing them to the hatch her school had come in by.

"We gonna leave em here or try and take em to sickbay?" asked Twilla.

Hammer eyed Josie suspiciously. "Bet we don't got long to wait till sickbay come to us."

“Why?” asked Lucky. “You was sayin somethin before we stepped into it about a wire?”

A nod in Josie’s direction. “The tab you gave her turned. Looks like she did, too.”

Lucky grinned. “Well, fucks. Tell me somethin I didn’t already figure out for myself.”

Twilla frowned. “You work for ARPA, though, doncha, Jo?”

She wasn’t supposed to know they’d tagged her biome for tracking. But it was a pretty obvious move; even Lucky had expected it.

“If you’re so smart why’d you give a tab to her in the—”

“Who you think ARPA is, Twilla? They used to be DARPA, and that ‘D’ stood for defense. Like military. Like gov. Yeah.” Bending over a snoring Bitch, Lucky straightened out an awkwardly angled thigh. “Josie’s employer ain’t no secret, and if she agreed to come along with us tonight it’s obvious nothin we did was gonna be a surprise. In fact, havin somebody outta ARPA around probably what kept us from gettin hauled off to jail.”

Of course that was when the drones came. Gassed everyone.



Josie regained consciousness in the dark. No feed—her field glared stark white against the surrounding black. Pressure on her back; felt like she lay in full Mizar 5 gravity. She listened a while for more clues to where she was.

The echo of her breath came back almost instantly from nearby walls. A soft, barely detectable breeze swept past her ears. It carried the scent of—oleanders, certainly, but on top of that?

Depressants of some sort: she was obviously in jail again. Why? That wasn’t part of the deal. How could she convince her school that a trip to Amends was a smart alternative if she was incarcerated too?

She must have done something wrong. Useless to struggle...

The depressants. With a snort she forced herself to sit. Which triggered the cell's lights and camera. A blue recording signal winked on to the left of the waist-to-head-high hatch.

Fabric covered most of her skin. Confirming this was legit gov: public, not some private porno channel.

"What's the charges? When do I get counsel?" She aimed her questions at the camera lens, assuming a mic somewhere in its vicinity.

A voice issued from the bed she lay on. "If you wish to replenish or excrete fluids you may use the facilities beneath you."

She stood. Not too wobbly. Repeated her questions. No answer.

The bed's base was a water cupboard. This was a fancier cell than the ones she'd wound up in before hiring on at ARPA. In the new facilities? She'd get out soon as she could.

"Thanks," she said. To whom or what? She drank from the cupboard's tap and squatted over its pot. The camera's light stayed on, but probably it couldn't record everything she did inside the cupboard. If she had to stay here long enough —

The hatch lifted. Lifted but didn't open, since all the retraction of the cover did was reveal a metal screen. Someone Josie couldn't completely see was walking toward her. A few steps and he became visible through the screen's gaps. A man. A white man. A smiling white man with long dark bangs, wearing a robe that glimmered like far-off lamps. "Josie." No point in him asking. It was a simple statement.

"Who're you?"

"Your counsel. ARPA's paying me to get you off the riot and battery." Like they wouldn't have been able to keep her out of here without all that legal stuff.

But her head was getting clearer. The depressants had triggered ARPA's drug immunity implant. If ARPA was paying to get her off, they still needed her for something.

"My name's Berbarian," the man added.

"Like the singer?"

Through the metal, Berbarian looked shocked. "How—" He stopped himself, but Josie knew what he had been about to say.

"Crown cresh has as much access to data banks as Bitch or Able." Anybody could know just about anything.

And like that, she was queefed. Royally. Not just because she was stuck teaching Shiftism 101 again. Because Yale was dead. Dead. Lucky and all the rest of her so-called friends had known—for how long? And no one had told her.

Not that she'd asked. But they could have told her. Could have said something.

"Crown's what you call C shift. Right." Berbarian glanced at something she couldn't see below the hatch frame. "So. Do you want to accept my services and acknowledge the sovereignty—I mean, the—" He checked himself. "—sovereignty which will give ARPA the right to claim you temporarily from Mizar 5 juris—"

"Temporarily?" ARPA had to have known about Yale. They hadn't told her either. Had no doubt filtered her stalking of him on the trip in.

"Yes. Long enough, don't worry. They'll get you in the buy-out, anyway, but that could take a while." Her blank expression must have given him the courage to continue. "It's not exactly a take-over; they're forming a new political corporation, actually, with some of the old Earth-based contractors. Pick up additional freight."

Freight equaled subversives. Prisoners.

"Who? Who's forming a corporation?"

“ARPA.”

Another thing they hadn’t told her. Well, and why should they?

Josie stood still a moment, then turned away from the hatch. The cell was small. She paced it five times before Berbarian spoke again. “So you’ll authorize me to request your release in my custody?”

What *had* ARPA told her? Anything true?

What about her mission? Did they in fact need to recruit six crewmembers to fly the starship they were building? Was she going to be able to sign her school up before they did something that classified them as subversives? And then supervise them remotely —

“If you don’t authorize me you’ll have to wait here in general population holding till the contracts take effect.”

Judging from this one, the new general holding units stunk same as the old. Not all the oleanders stuffed in their walls would help. Plus because of their location along Mizar 5’s hull, radiation storms hit them worse. People jailed here got ill first and treated last. If they even had the necessary shares to buy a cure. As Yale must have understood.

Who’d sent him here? Did he refuse deportation?

Yale used to sing to the plants as he set their pots in the hab walls’ grooves. Said it made them grow better.

Angry tears hurt her eyes. She ducked her head into the cupboard and sipped more water as an excuse. She had to calm down. The tears fell, and then her eyes felt better for a moment. The only good that did. There was paper under there. She blew her nose and wiped her face.

Get the opponent off balance — and keep them there. Everybody was Josie’s opponent until proven otherwise. What wouldn’t Berbarian expect from her?

“Did they pick a name?”

“A —”

She stood up as straight as she could. Her legs were too short. Yale hadn't cared. Had laughed when she complained, called her his “hoppagrass.” Whatever that meant.

“For the corporation. Or are they going to hold a contest like they did to name Mizar 5?”

“They—In the docs we've drawn up so far, it's called WestHem. I fail to see what the name's got to do with your decision.” He clutched his bangs one-handed and gathered them in the middle of his forehead. “If you could focus on that for a moment —” His other hand appeared above the hatch frame. It held a handdesk. A big one, filling most of his square palm. “—I've got an agreement template here you can accept as is or modify.”

Nudging her back to the script. She tried an oblique line of departure. Betting he didn't know what she would be talking about she asked, “How's my mission covered in there?”

Fucks. He didn't exactly smirk, but his hair-tugging hand dropped and his eyelids lowered and relaxed. Like he'd gotten something he wanted. “A release for that's included. Since the first phase of the original assignment is now unnecessary.”

“Show me!” Josie realized she'd pressed herself against the screen and stepped back. Now who was off balance?

The handdesk's window displayed text. She read about the roster getting filled with “volunteers from the ranks of the recently fined and incarcerated.” She could imagine Maree, Vixi — all of them except Lucky, probably, would have signed up rather than serve a lengthy sentence in holding. Maybe even Lucky, if they'd take Lukie on the starship too. That would fill the roster.

More or less what she had been aiming for. She settled her weight on her heels. But ARPA wanted something besides that. Something her signature would give them. Wanted Josie to accept counsel so she could get out of here and head

back to the heliopause intact, moving on to her assignment's next phase: a century plugged into life-extension and hibernation tech, making sure the starship's crew and cargo reached Amends. Coaching them. Training them to be the penal colony's trustees.

Which was going to be harder to do if her school thought she'd betrayed them. At least Lucky had never doubted her. But if she left here in her body like no one else was going to —

“So?”

“Okay.” Giving way was bound to be unexpected. “But I’ll need a couple revisions.”



It made sense for ARPA-WestHem to site its first disassembly station here on Mizar 5. Why spend months shipping bodies out to the heliopause? They were only going to be left behind. And if the space they'd built here was larger than it needed to be, the blame could be laid on the hab's engineers' disinclination to lopsidedness. They'd solved a similar problem when constructing the new general holding facilities by wrapping the cells around the hab's equator. Matching the disassembly station's mass to the newly constructed immigrant processing center 180 degrees away meant it was huge, as if over a dozen keeps had been strung end-to-end, then doubled back on themselves.

Of course that brought up the question of where all those immigrants would go once they were processed. Josie hadn't envied Lucky the task of explaining to Lukie why half the hab was closing down. The noodle shop below the keep she'd left was vacant, taped off like the rest of that complex. Like a bunch of others.

Lucky had made her bargain, bought her way out of holding with the shares Josie gave her, deliberately vague about what she was paying her for. Nothing, really. Faith. Josie had



made her bargain, too, and she wouldn't be around when it became obvious to the squirt what was happening with all the incoming prisoners. Let Lucky worry about explaining that. Josie would be out of reach, would soon after be light years gone.

Five hatches. She walked in through the third in the row, stepped carefully down the steep stairs on the far side. The disassembly station's grooved walls were still bare of plants. The air smelled burnt without them. Sealant fumes, coating volatiles, freed particles from cut metals and plastics, each added their distinctive aromas.

Stacks of freshly fabbed materials lined her path across the floor. On the far side they formed a high enough wall she had to walk around it to see the waiting chairs and soundproof vaults.

All four chairs were out. And empty. But used—they smelled like cleanser. Fine. Josie hadn't expected to go first. Run times would determine the order in which they became conscious.

Lucky walked into view around the side of the furthest vault. She looked back over her shoulder. Lukie emerged following her. "Careful now." He carried a lacy-shelled data block about the size of his head. Standard. Was everything that made her Josie supposed to fit on that? And should a *child* be allowed to handle it?

"Now where you gonna leave it?" Lucky asked.

"Here."

"Naw, that's the chair I'm plannin to sit Ms. Josie in. Cause the track drives right into this." She indicated an open-hatched vault. "How about the next one?"

Lukie ignored his mother's instructions and kept trudging along the line of chairs. He hefted his burden onto the cushioned recliner directly in front of Josie. "Are you having a good shift, Ms. Josie?" So formal. So serious. How much did he know?

“I’m doin,” she replied. “Who’s — what’s on this?”

“Blank,” Lucky assured her. “He wants to help, and I had to find somethin for him to fuss over.”

Quickly, before she could think about it, Josie went to the seat nearest Lucky and sat. Then she got back up and removed her robe. “Will my tights make any difference?”

“Not according to how I been taught.” They both eyed the Crowns attaching tiles to the upper wall. “Keep em on and they get destroyed when the scanners kick in, or take em off and I’ll add em to fab stock after I shut down.”

Destroyed. Like her whole body. She’d already donated samples from which to grow the clone her mind would, presumably, be downloaded into once Amends was reached. Goodbye everything else.

Including Lucky — who knew what Josie had tried to do, maybe even why, and hadn’t tried to stop her.

She sat again. No sense stalling. Let Lucky strap her in. To be talking, she asked about the others from their old school. If they’d been surprised at the offer. If they’d said anything about her, whether they trusted her or believed she was behind things. If they’d thought to ask for any special conditions. Yes, no, none.

Not even Maree had asked for what Josie wanted. What she’d been positive she’d get in exchange for taking Lucky’s spot, for supervising onsite rather than remotely.

Yale.

Not Yale. But near enough. His body. Someone else’s mind but his body, cultured from research samples.

His body. Maybe his heart. His soul. Who could say where those were?

Lucky brushed back a stray lock of orange and looked down at her. “Ready? It’s only gonna hurt a little while.” No drugs. Full, unaltered consciousness was necessary for a viable

record. When her last nerve was torn apart there'd be no more  
pain. Nothing to feel. A dreamless sleep.

Till she woke.