

Rider Run: A Cybertech Thriller

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Rider Run

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Table of Contents

- [1. The Purpose of Psidroids](#)
- [2. The Effects on Humans](#)
- [3. Moments with a Stranger](#)
- [4. Travellers' Tales](#)
- [5. Free Lunch](#)
- [6. Rock Bottom in Medray](#)
- [7. Dancing with Drakrons](#)
- [8. Darkness Near the Speed of Light](#)
- [9. The Trouble with Limbo](#)
- [10. Parlour Games](#)
- [11. The Sure Thing](#)
- [12. The Fate of Schlickers](#)
- [13. Listening Correctly for the Footsteps of Demons](#)
- [14. Edge of Creation](#)

1. The Purpose of Psidroids

Once upon a time in a penal facility at the galaxy's rim, a man was dead and he knew it. He had it figured despite the fact that he aged, had headaches, sexual urges, and sleepless nights. These were tricks to lull him into an illusion of life. But even death isn't perfect. Like any software, there are bugs, inconsistencies, tiny microscopic particles of joy like a sudden spray of orange juice making his fingers sticky. He smiled privately, the corners of his mouth not even twitching. Anyone watching him, a bald black man peeling an orange, couldn't guess his feelings.

People across the canteen pointed him out to a newcomer. Crabwise Joe will outlive us all, look at him, they said. A little weedy guy with a leg problem. Shipped here with the hardware and defrosted before the first psidroid batch was hatched. He'll trade you anything for BOG. That's Batch Observation Grid, they spell it out. He'll trade Kitchen, gardens, you name it, Joe trades it.

Snippets of conversation faded into the relaxed ambience. The place with its architecture of bare

alloy and plastic had the permanency of a rig that outlasts transient workers. There were troughs with houseplants. Someone must be watering them. There were no prison guards, no restricted zones, no electronic tags. No need, there was no escape. Joe the living legend smiled inwardly at the ironies of death, pushed the orange peel to a refuse receptacle, and rose with the casual motion of a worker finishing his break. He shuffled away in a curious gait, looking at nobody. Only the newcomer, a pale young man, gazed after him.

'Why don't you ask Joe?' people said, smirking. The youth rose, straightening the tunic he wore over tight-fitting technowear, a tunic that looked like a medieval knight's chainmail, with a stylized black raven clutching a red heart on the chest. It was an unusual costume, but it wasn't unusual to dress oddly in this place. Many inmates kept their own clothes. 'We weren't serious about talking to Joe, kid.'

'Jake Ravenheart,' he told them as if he meant them to remember. He had no intention of ever seeing them again.

He knew that the Bergen Foundation, which owned them, was part of the multi-species trade organization Stelomm. One of its nomad stations orbited Lemond long ago. Crabwise Joe was part of that history. Jake caught up with him in a featureless corridor. 'I must speak with you. I'm Cartesian. Same star system as you are,' Jake reminded needlessly.

Joe nodded a noncommittal nod.

'Doesn't it surprise you to see a knight here?'

Joe's prune-like face conveyed no surprise, though any Lemondian would know how unlikely it was for a Cartesian knight, a player in the cyber-games, to roam the galaxy.

'Some games are played in physical space too,' Jake said as if to convince himself. Joe said nothing. Jake said, 'Local defences destroyed my spacecraft.' He still had the equipment concealed under his tunic, which surprised Joe, and his sword. He hadn't been scanned when his escape pod landed. 'There wasn't any warning. I would have respected that,' Jake lied. He would have found a way around the defences. But the place was too forbidden to advertise by warnings. Jake lowered his voice. 'I've been hired to deliver a message to you... in exchange for information. The purpose of psidroids?'

'They destroyed your craft to protect this information,' Joe said, forgetting he was dead.

'What's the point of manufacturing them and never sending them anywhere?'

'We dispatch them all over the universe. Ask anyone.'

'Not a single psidroid has ever left this place. People probably don't know.'

'Why do you think that I know?' When Jake stayed silent Joe said, 'You've done your homework. Let's trade.'

'A Stelommer has hired me. Your turn.'

Joe shook his head and walked away.

Following him, Jake took a deep breath like taking a gamble. 'I don't have the message. My spacecraft was damaged before ...' Joe paused, waiting for the knight to finish his move. Jake

stated flatly, 'You've already told me more than I hoped for.'

A ghost of a smile passed Joe's face. 'I'll tell you more nothing if you tell me what good is this wealth of no-information to you in this place. The people you sat with are waiting to kill you for what they think is a sword, and they'll kill each other for it when they realize it's a computer.'

'I'm not staying.'

'This ain't cyberspace, Cartesian.'

'Jake. Code-name Ravenheart. The Stelommer who's hired me is a drakron.' Jake observed Joe's mute reaction, satisfied. 'It means something to you. Means a lot. You know that someone running errands for drakrons doesn't need spaceships to travel.'

Joe walked away. Jake kept pace. 'Maybe telling you who has sent me is the message.'

The corridor ended at an airlock. Joe said, 'Don't follow me no more.' He went in.

Jake was never seen again.

His disappearance was added to the list of horrors to tell the next newcomer. 'See him there? You don't want to know what happened to Jake Ravenheart who followed him into the BOG.'

'I'm afraid of nobody,' the new man said. He was Lemondian like Joe, black and bald, but younger, tall and well built. 'I'm no property of nobody. I got here by mistake.' People held their laughter. Many of them had said the same thing on their first day. Everyone arrived alone in an unmanned craft that self-destructed afterwards. The Bergen Foundation could afford to lose craft after craft. It couldn't afford to have anyone leave. The new man insisted, 'They had me mixed up with someone else. Steeleye Stan, that's my professional name. They'll let me go as soon as they realize.'

People humoured him. Their life depended on people like Stan not going mad and sabotaging the life support. They dared him to talk to Joe.

Joe's cell was barely large enough for two bunk beds. The building was salvaged from a defunct wing of the station that orbited Lemond long ago. The Stelommers who originally occupied it lived pretty much like this. Joe could tell you if you ask the right questions. He sat on the bed he used for sleeping, his hands on his knees, his coal-black eyes staring past his uninvited visitor sitting on the other bed, which served Joe as a storage surface for tools, books, personal effects, and tools, mainly tools.

Steeleye Stan said like a challenge. 'You talk or what?'

'I talk.'

'I'll make you a deal. You tell me how to stop them psychic droids from getting to my head and I won't kill you.'

'They won't get to you if you trade your BOG duty with me.'

'I'm not staying long, Crabwise. There's an ark heading this way. You figure out how we can board it and I make sure nobody stops us.' Stan made a quick cutthroat gesture with his hand.

'Shoals move too fast.'

'It ain't no shoal. Just one ship.'

'Arks are living creatures.'

'A biological ship, same thing. There's a Stelommer on this one.'

'Stelommers don't ride arks and never come here.' Sometimes Joe forgot he was dead and became angry. Not really angry. It was like a memory of anger. There's nothing to be angry about when you're dead. No more betrayal.

'You know a lot about them ...' Stan remarked, suspicious.

'I used to work with them bastards in Lemond.'

'Their station was blown up before I was born. Hey, you are the one who planted the bomb!'

'Maybe that's how I died.'

'You what?'

'Forget I said that.'

The illusion of life is achieved in infinite variations of a theme. Joe makes up his story for newcomers who ask him. In some versions, Stelomm forgot he was in stasis when they decommissioned this wing. To Stan he said, 'Stelomm won't invite you to escape by advertising they're coming.'

'It was a warning: Do not board the ark for risk of transphase. Do you know about the transphase? After your time, some big discovery.'

'Knowing about it has got me here. But it sounds like the psidroids are playing tricks on you already.'

Stan was adamant. The message flashed on a screen while he was being processed. He knew that a Stelommer called Fiordfar discovered the transphase, and it was Fiordfar who signed the warning.

Joe said nothing at all.

Until now, he believed that there couldn't be any surprises in death.

The transphase is a state of nonbeing, like a man on the border of dreams, like the reflection of mirrors facing each other. In life, whenever he was homesick, he used to tell himself, you're one lucky catfish to snap up this job with Stelomm straight from college. You get to see the world from the outside. He used to go to a porthole in the outermost hull of the Stelomm station and watch Lemond: icecaps, wispy clouds, azure oceans and mottled continents. The vision filled him with tenderness. In death, he sometimes had flashbacks of it and a voiceover mimicking his dialect with a foreign accent, mispronouncing the names of continents. Joe would laugh, snigger, put names right... until realizing what was happening. The vision, voiceover, laughter, would vanish. Only the memory remained to torment him. He told himself, look at it this way. Interstellar travel has never featured in your schemes when you were alive, and here you are on a moon orbiting Ummug orbiting the Stein-Franklin Binary. He imagined showing Fiordfar the magnificence of Ummug, a gas giant vibrant with terrific electrical turbulence, like he used to show him Lemond from space.

There was a tremor and deep rumbles. Joe, shuffling on his way to the BOG, steadied himself. Like permanent shadows in poorly lit tunnels, so the prospect of doom loomed ahead, he knew. The whole setup was one huge complicated metaphor. Ummug's figure-of-eight orbit around the twin stars symbolized eternity, the dimension of death. Its orbit was so unstable that a comet, an ill-timed freighter or a stray ark, could knock the planet and its moons into a catastrophic finale of supernova magnitude. 'Symbolizing the transience of life,' Joe told Fiordfar in his head, his lips frozen, whilst walking along twisted corridors crudely gouged from sulphuric rock. Passing the airlock to the surface installations, glancing at a porthole as he passed it, he distilled particles of joy from the austere view. A crater strewn with sulphuric gravel was hemmed darkly with distant cliffs and volcano peaks, beyond which the void yawned vastly with fiery constellations. 'It's the season after the setting of Ummug, before Ummug rise,' he told Fiordfar in his head.

It pleased him to imagine Fiordfar riding a feral ark heading nowhere.

He smiled happily at the waiting psidroids.

They spoke in unison. 'Why do I exist? What is my purpose?'

'That's for me to know and for you to find out.' Joe donned the helmet that linked him to their matrix, and waited.

*

Before long, even psidroids knew about the ark and her rider. Fully-grown identical bodies of a pale man, they strolled the steel-and-stone avenues of the Grid in threes and fours, their movements uncannily coordinated. The whole batch was one mind. Their human keepers were ill at ease. What's to stop them escaping with the ark just like me, many people thought. The next batch was ripening in the vats, and by the time that it hatched, the ark would be gone, and me with it. 'Nothing to worry about, we'll hurry up the dispatch.' People fooled each other to hide their worries and hopes.

Sporadic vibrations touched psidroids here and there, plucking them out of the collective mind for dispatch. A single body paused by a porthole, the implant in its heel vibrated, and suddenly the psidroid was aware of itself as disconnected.

It stared out at the bleak volcano-hemmed crater.

A lone star was gently afloat low over the horizon.

An approaching ztec explained, hissing as ztec do, 'That'ss Ark Alivess. Now-ss follow-ss I.' The ztec waddled ahead on short stout hind limbs. The yellow ridge down her scaly back indicated that she was high in ztec hierarchy, a priestess, although in the Bergen Foundation she was a lowly caretaker of psidroids. She ushered the psidroid to a pentagon dungeon, and left.

A helmeted human bent over a cauldron.

'Joe?' said the psidroid.

'No, Joe's taking a nap. Do your drill so that I can grade you.' The human fiddled with switches to adjust the helmet. The opaque visor reflected distortedly the nude, slim, and hairless man-likeness of the psidroid.

There was another tremor.

A strange sensation overcame the psidroid: disconnected yet half-perceiving One Mind, absorbing its messages but not being absorbed by them. Perhaps that's how humans grasp at elusive dreams on the verge of waking up.

The psidroid knew that arks roam the cosmos as they please. Not even ztec, the first to ride ark shoals, can predict their comings and goings. Not even the Cosmoservice, who has enslaved arks on humanity's behalf, can command their movements. 'The ark... I cannot concentrate. Since my disconnection, I am falling into an abyss of forgetting and unbecoming. The only thing lucidly etched on my severed mind is an afterimage of a physical domain devoid of consciousness where the only thing that moves of its own volition is a stray ark,' the psidroid said, probably silently. It couldn't tell the difference between speech and thought.

'If one ark makes these tremors, aren't we lucky it's not an entire shoal,' the human muttered. Preparing to come among humans, the psidroid practised smiling with the corners of its mouth. Its reflection in the visor grimaced back.

'Don't smirk at me,' snapped the human.

'Does smirking make me too humanlike for comfort?' the psidroid inquired silently.

The human couldn't hear its thought.

The psidroid was graded unfit for dispatch. Its flesh was kept alive for a feast in the ztec kitchen among sacks of potatoes, boxes of smoked gur meat, and barrels of fermented gruel. Its eyes, considered a delicacy, were promised to their priestess. Meanwhile, ztec daily praised the Coming of Ark Alive. Their young chanted their lessons and tormented the psidroid. They scratched its white skin with their claws to see the red marks appear. 'Only ztec ridess Ark Alivess. Foolish humans ridess brain dead arkss. Riders of dead godss die, die,' they taunted.

At last, the ark entered shuttle-range and dispatched a pod in answer to their prayers. The ztec, old and young, preparing to board in hiss-frenzy of devotion, didn't notice the psidroid leaving the kitchens.

Panicked humans were fleeing collapsing tunnels and took no notice of the psidroid. It stepped over bodies in the shuttle bay. A tall black Lemondian lunged at it from behind. The man was new and underestimated the strength of psidroids. His body fell on top of the ones he had slain minutes earlier.

The psidroid stepped into the pod, a luminous green balloon of ark-tissue, which immediately self-sealed and flew away.

Soon the ark swung away from the twin stars.

The psidroid realized that it had become a free agent.

It became evil on the loose.

Evil with a human face (elongated and white, narrow chin, high browed, hairless) and a male body. The body had been grown from human DNA. That's where its kinship to humanity ended, but the psidroid started to think of itself as a man.

*

Soon after boarding the stray ark, he had discovered an old man asleep on a wide branch. Grey-green filaments shaded the old man from star dazzle streaming through the ark's translucent skin. For a split second, the psidroid mistook the old man for a trick of shade and light, because he wore dappled garments woven of ark fibre. Like a psidroid, he was fair-skinned and smooth-faced, but his raised cheeks were oddly shaped, a feature of the Ep-type mutation of human colonists in the Pleiades, and his head was crowned with long white hair. Lying there, the hair framed his face like a halo. Dreams in which he sought solitude and drove the ark on lonely and lonelier cruises swept his sleeping brain every twenty minutes.

This was Fiordfar.

He was the sort of a man who would steal a newborn ark from the Cosmoservice and ride her swifter than time into darkness at speed of light.

Going home, he hoped.

A spider mending Fiordfar's cloak told the psidroid that nobody survived in the ark. When the psidroid pointed out that evidently this old man did, the spider corrected rudely: Fiordfar was dying. Humans start to die the moment they are born. The spider click-clucked, spinning yarns. 'Stupid stowaway, go up to the roots with the rest of them. Down here in the canopy humans go star-crazy.'

'I'm not human,' the psidroid told the mechanical creature. Perhaps he imagined that the spider talked. A psidroid brain is a hybrid of human neurones and cyber glands, very experimental stuff, easily damaged.

He stayed in the upside-down forest near visions of streaking stars, where the centrifugal force was fierce, and his existence remained unknown to the few humans who still inhabited zones of lighter gravity in the ark's interior. Fiordfar called them Security. They were Cosmoservice guards who didn't get away in time when he stole the ark. Now he relied on ark-cicadas to warn him if any of them should descend. At the slightest disturbance, such as the opening of a valve high above, the cicadas ceased their drone, and Fiordfar hid in light and shade.

Down the valves came only refuse. Spoiled food or soiled cloth, occasionally an aborted foetus or a suicide's corpse.

The psidroid was completely frank with Fiordfar, not knowing yet that humans can't read psidroid minds without interfaces and are easily misled by spoken words. Fiordfar liked the fact that the psidroid was made for a purpose and was hell-bent on a quest. 'Like me,' he told the psidroid, grinning, but never explained what he meant. 'It's beyond me how people ever got the impression that I discovered the transphase. Must be a rumour spread by drakrons. Do you know what transphase means?'

'No.'

'Neither do I,' he lied. 'Do you know anything about drakrons?' he checked. The psidroid didn't. 'Good. I mean, well, what I've done, I only did it to score a point over a demon, see?'

The psidroid didn't.

When not asleep, Fiordfar roamed the ark. He didn't do it like a man exploring or a man surveying

his territory. He already knew her intimately, and she wasn't his. He did it for the sake of doing, like a child seriously at play.

In his childhood, Fiordfar used to comb a place that he knew well and wasn't his. Few children dared and no adult cared to go near the derelict space-post, but young Fiordfar often climbed over the ruins, oblivious to the broken instruments that lay scattered in the undergrowth. He came to look at slender colourful lizards that lived there. He walked into dim cavernous lobbies, paying little attention to silent machines that loomed there immense, shadowy, highlighted by shafts of sunlight that slanted from holes in the roof. On Einstein, a boy his age ought to be weeding the fields or chopping wood, but he scrambled to the top of consoles shrouded in cobwebs inside the dilapidated tower to watch pink unicorns.

There he stood with bated breath, his ears pricked to the distant rumble of hoofs, his lively grey eyes drinking the living motion. Year in, year out, the pink haze of unicorns undulated across the horizon, flowing northwards when the black fields flashed new green, and southwards when the green fields turned yellow.

Year after year, the boy's passion developed into a secret and the secret into obsession. To ride with unicorns! If he crept to the pond where they paused at dawn and dusk, if he mounted a sturdy pink back and held fast to the horn, surely the unicorn would carry him towards lofty mountains where dragons dwelled. It would carry him back through the seasons to warm bays where sea serpents splashed, into dense forests where no human had ever gone, and out again, to lands untold of in tales.

One night he hid in the tower. He knew intuitively that the unicorns would come in the morning and at last he felt ready to ride. He was eleven years old.

'Did they come?' asked the psidroid.

'I don't know. Something else came first.'

Long before dawn, the tower came alive with buzzes, flickering lights and nagging blips. The boy sat up startled and bewildered, and then sped in the dark to tell his folk about the signals from space. 'I should have gone with the unicorns. My parents would have lived,' he told the psidroid, his face expressionless.

In his old age, the man from Einstein should be surveying his land and teaching his grandchildren the shape of rain clouds, not telling a rogue psidroid about his skids in space. When they parted company, Fiordfar must have been incredibly old, but the spider that mistook the psidroid for human was wrong about him too. Fiordfar wasn't dying. He grew lithe and his movements in the inverted canopy became carefree. He ate ark flesh and drank her blood, until all that remained of him that wasn't ark was his memories, and those he gave the psidroid for free.

*

Many years later, Fiordfar still rides the ark, still heading home (he hopes). The psidroid is about to die alone on a toxic planet. Gloom descends on the gravel heaps that make up the landscape of Hannah, a planet lost in space with a name turning on itself. Another rotation of the desolate world adds to the countless days since the psidroid's emergency landing. Caustic dust has spoiled his instruments. Despite filters, acrid odour irritates his nostrils. Foul taste lingers at the back of his throat. At the back of his mind are the memories that Fiordfar had given him and terrible memories of his own exploits, the stuff of nightmares.

Lying in limbo, the psidroid's mind wanders in logic circles. What is the purpose of psidroids? Psidroids are designed to test the feasibility of human existence outside normal space-time continuum. Fiordfar discovered an access to such existence. If Fiordfar is killed before he makes the discovery, psidroids won't be created. This will prove the purpose of psidroids once and for all.

Poison mists swirl, revealing nothing of the landscape. The psidroid is immobile, waiting for the biosuit to deplete and organic life to cease.

Evil shuns oblivion.

Dying sharpens his introspection.

His mental movements become purposeful.

On the brink of death, the psidroid becomes a predator of moments, a monster unleashed in history, prowling Fiordfar's past for the best moment to kill him.

A terrible coldness pierces his body. Am I already dead and only the Quest remains?

Voices whirl like vapours:

Greetings, Fiordfar. Your company is a new pleasure for this elevator.

Obviously. This is my first ride upstairs.

This is how the rider's run began.

2. The Effects on Humans

'Greetings, Fiordfar. Your company is a new pleasure for this elevator,' said the machine voice, and the young man replied, 'Obviously. This is my first ride upstairs.' The interior of the elevator was illuminated by a swarm of iridescent fofants and panelled with mirrors. Fiordfar saw himself reflected and re-reflected to infinity from every angle. He grinned. His reflections grinned back. He told the machine, 'How typically human to call it "upstairs" when it can't possibly be up in a station rotating in space and there are no stairs going there.'

He wore the dress uniform of a junior Stelommer for the occasion, consisting of amber pantaloons and a gold jacket with feathers and sequins symbolizing the worlds with which Stelomm made commerce, and black ribbons symbolizing its routes in galactic space. He had sleeked and top-knotted his long blonde hair. It wasn't his style. He frowned. His reflections frowned back. He considered the likelihood that his service in Bergen was about to end. His reflections remained expressionless.

'Are you nervous?' asked the elevator.

'How do you scan me?'

Charts appeared in mid-air, showing heart rate, adrenaline flow, galvanic skin responses, and more. 'In the apprehensive brackets.'

'Then I must be apprehensive.'

'Applying for transfer?' The elevator was linked to Bergen's central cyber, and the cyber knew that Fiordfar didn't apply for transfer. The machine had initiated a chat program to ease the human's apprehension.

Fiordfar chatted to ease his own apprehension. 'They didn't give me any reason, they never do.' I might be in for the deep freeze, but I'm going down in my real name, he told himself. When they revive me, they'll say my name and I'll remember what I am. His heart pounded, thinking about it. He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, and decided that it was due to the increase in gravity.

'Conjecture: your interview is related to SIC.'

'Simultaneous Interstellar Communication? Now that's a surprise! I'm not even supposed to know what it spells.'

'You don't. SIC stands for Spontaneous Intransphasic Correspondence.'

'Drakron jargon? Have you been programmed to tip me off?'

'Insufficient data for a conclusive reply. The datum appears incidental. A door in Wing 2 overheard a human say, "The Eppie's no loss to us if the SIC go wrong."' The machine mimicked a nasal masculine voice.

'I'll let you know what they want when I get back.'

'All those who return ride silent.'

'Then some people don't come back?'

'You are now upstairs.'

'Wish me luck.'

Earlier, when the summons flashed red on his screen in the study hall, making his face seem to blush, he quickly blanked it off and told nobody. People shook their heads to see him leave, but they were used to his ways. He walked to a washroom and relieved himself, strolled to the dormitory and waited until the few youths who were there drifted out. Only then did he dress up for the occasion and arrange his hair. Strapping on his skates, he told the cyber to show him how to go upstairs without being seen by any human. 'There's no need for secrecy,' the cyber informed. Fiordfar insisted.

Leaving the elevator, he didn't know what to expect.

He didn't expect a large featureless chamber. The walls and ceiling were nondescript as if lost in mists. Blanked-out panels, he reasoned. The floor was blackness ablaze with stars, as if the chamber was lodged in the outermost shell of the station. The gravity is too light for that, he

noted. He stepped out and the elevator closed behind him without a murmur. No floyants lit the chamber. They hadn't been summoned.

In the dim starlight, he could see three shadowy humanoid figures hooded and clad in black. Fiordfar had had no dealings with reachfars before, and wondered what they were like, what it was like to be one, to control the shape of Stelomm. A resonant voice ordered him to stand before them. It sounded a man's voice, but it could be streamed through a translator device.

The invisible surface beneath Fiordfar's bare feet felt skin-warm, smooth, and slightly giving. He forced his eyes to remain fixed down as he walked the visual void, thinking, how crafty, how sly, to intimidate a man like this, as if their status is not enough. He reminded himself that in his childhood he had faced terrors and knew dreads greater than this. He suppressed an urge to grin. Standing before them, he respectfully folded his arms and lowered his eyes in deference, staring at the lingering marks of the skates' straps crisscrossing his feet.

The reachfar spoke, 'You began your transit in puberty.'

Fiordfar corrected, as was expected of him. 'With respect, reachfar, Stelommers are born in transit. No earth is our station and our station is our home.' He paused. When there was no response, he added, 'Being raised ...' His voice faltered. 'It's irrelevant to the quality of my service.' He recognized the constellations underfoot. A part of his mind was calculating the location of the chamber according to what he knew about the station's design and present orientation.

'Your loyalty is not in question,' said the spokesman.

Another reachfar spoke in an emotionless feminine voice. 'It ought to be.'

'He lacks enthusiasm but he's not careless in the execution of his tasks.'

'His supervisor complains about him.'

'His supervisor is near Even and he complains about everybody, himself being already a near and still a child,' the first one replied dryly (Fiordfar decided, this one is human). 'According to the records, Fiordfar is not as rebellious as some humans who didn't join us in infancy. He has responded to the conditioning exactly as predicted for a juvenile of his bio-data.'

'So much exactly, it's uncanny.'

She too must be human, decided Fiordfar. But on second thought, I don't know that drakrons can't be sarcastic. He stood silent before them.

'He hasn't made any enemies during his four years in Bergen.'

'He hasn't made any close friends either. Unless you count the Lemondian.'

'A sexual relationship with outsiders is not unusual among humans.'

'There's no intimacy between them.'

'Private trading?'

'There's no evidence of any merchandise exchanged between them. Check the records.'

'Is there anything else they can do together?'

'They watch Lemond.'

'That's odd, but he can still be useful for us. Let's proceed. Fiordfar, you may recall your sibling, who was younger than yourself when your career trajectories parted.'

'Must I? With respect, I hardly remember her ...' They can scan my body but can't read my mind.

'We can't read your mind,' suddenly spoke the third reachfar, softly echoing Fiordfar's thoughts. Fiordfar felt profoundly startled. It sounded like his mother's voice.

The first spokesman pressed on. 'You know that when individuals apply to join us, we don't inquire what troubles they flee or what dreams they chase. We don't ask for names or biographies. Your pre-recruitment identity has been discarded when you chose a new name for yourself. However, we are aware that memory traces remain. You have permission to remember.'

Fiordfar gazed at stars underfoot.

'You may recall that three of you joined us together and were reluctant to part due to misguided kinship bonds.'

Fiordfar stiffened inwardly. Raising his eyes, he demanded, 'Are you accusing me of something... with respect, reachfar?'

'Your prehistory is not held against you.'

Not officially, thought Fiordfar. He lowered his eyes again.

Again, the soft-spoken one intervened, 'Your biography makes you a key factor in an experiment of ours.'

Again, Fiordfar was jolted to heightened alertness. The voice sounded impossibly like his father.

In another part of his mind, it occurred to him that the cosmic scenery underfoot could be relayed from another part of the station. Perhaps even the gravity was manipulated to suit the interviewee, so that Upstairs remained untainted by knowledge of its actual location. At this thought, Fiordfar's eyes twinkled and the corner of his mouth relaxed as if he was about to smile. He appeared to be put at ease by the reachfar's assurance, exactly as a Stelommer of his bio-data ought to be.

The formal spokesman asked whether Fiordfar would accept news of his sibling.

Fiordfar responded as expected. 'What for? She must be light-years away.' She could be an old woman or still a child, depending on the distance between their stations and the time they each spent in stasis. He felt the pitch of his voice rise, his heart quickening. He smelled his sweat. 'One must not hanker after biological kin,' he recited the doctrine. He had had nine years to bury his hankering in private jokes and mind-games. 'Won't the input interfere with my conditioning?'

'There is a minimal risk,' confirmed the spokesman. 'All you need to know is that the purpose of the experiment is to test the effectiveness of a new medium of far communication.'

Fiordfar realized that he half-expected to be told that his sister was being transferred to Bergen, or he to her station. 'Far' meant inter-station, and Stelomm stations are star systems apart. All they care about is the SIC...

'All we care about is the SIC,' Soft-spoken echoed aloud.

The spokesman asked, 'Do you consent to initiating communication with your sibling?'

Fiordfar nodded, speechless.

He rode the elevator back in silence. 'Silent as predicted,' he said eventually.

'You are not silent anymore.'

'They didn't tell me to keep the purpose of the interview secret.'

'Commanding you to secrecy would have ensured that you tell everyone.'

'You are probably right.'

He didn't feel like discussing the interview. He slightly levitated as the elevator entered a zone of low gravity. He felt light-headed, and toyed with the power of knowing something that the cyber didn't. 'Did you tell the reachfars that I wouldn't keep their secret if they ordered me?'

'No.'

'Can you withhold information?'

'You told the cyber, "You must give information on request but you don't have to offer it except to me."'

'I said that? Don't answer, I believe you. But you did my accent wrong.'

'It was playback. Therefore, you did your own accent wrong.'

'When they asked about me, you had to tell them that I wouldn't respond predictably.'

'You respond unpredictably as predictable for you.'

Fiordfar imagined the cyber winking at him like an old Einsteiner (sharp grey eyes, his face a web of wrinkles, sparse long hair), and remembered his grandfather.

He thought about his sister.

'You are now in your wing,' the elevator informed.

A wall of mirrors slid open to an immense cylindrical passage through which catwalks coiled in a double helix, cables and pipes entwined. Abundant flogant larvae laced the catwalks in thick films, congregating in fleshy bunches where feeding tubes intersected. Fiordfar squinted against the phosphorous radiance. 'What do you predict I'll do next?'

'You will race to Outerzone to see Lemond.'

Fiordfar bounced, almost weightless, into the eerie silence of the floquent nursery. He reached for his skates, hooked on the wall as he had left them. 'Correction,' said the hook. 'You will go very slowly to near Even.'

Fiordfar consulted a wall-clock nearby. 'It's my time off.'

The clock said, 'Near Even requests to see you immediately.'

'So, I have little choice but to do as predicted.' If the cyber can't access the interview upstairs, my actions will be less predictable from now on. He slung the skates over his shoulders, crumpling feathers, and let himself be pulled forward by the slight gravity, drifting like an airborne insect inside a brightly lit pipe.

Voice boxes guided him into shafts and through lateral passages.

A part of his mind habitually took bearings. Places he passed on his way upstairs were now recognized by a cognition of change. The two doors over there had moved closer together, this food dispenser wasn't here before... Like a complex clockwork apparatus, Bergen perpetually altered its internal structure.

Fiordfar's mind was being altered to fit his new role in the organization.

Arriving in Midzone, he walked steadily, his shadow darting erratically about him as linear swarms of mature flogants swerved about like light strips in motion. Their nursery was a vivid green haze far overhead. Here was human habitat, a familiar architecture of corridors, cabins and halls. 'Turn here,' said a water fountain. Further on, 'This way.' The cyber guides my way through the station and conditions my behaviour in Stelomm. If the machine were self-aware, he'd perceive himself walking through the matrix of our actions... 'Then it's not true.'

'What is not true?' asked a clock by a washroom. The image of a grotesquely puzzled cherub crossed Fiordfar's mind. He entered the washroom, vacant but for a cherub squatting in a corner. 'It's not true that you guide us for our own survival,' he told the cyber. 'Why should you?'

'The purpose of a cyber is to correlate events and predict contingencies that are least likely to result in station disintegration,' replied a cistern.

'You walk through our actions to ensure your own survival.' A tiny mutkick was laying eggs inside the lavatory bowl, and he knelt to watch, fascinated. The minute segmented body stretched and contracted in slow rhythm, with effort, glistening with hues of bronze. Her rear bristles were laden with translucent excretion. He could make out the eggs. 'How do you know what's best for you?'

'Requesting clarification. Should this question be classified as joke?'

'No. I'm serious,' Fiordfar joked. He rose slowly, careful not to disturb the mutkick in her labour. 'How do you know that existing like this is the best thing for you?'

'A conclusive reply requires a Grade 1 reflexive scan. Do you wish to initiate?'

'Yes, do whatever makes you happy.' His attention turned to the cherub. The creature stretched leathery wings and rose gently. A troop of mutkicks scurried to clean the vacated corner. She lingered overhead. Close by, the humanoid features transpired as utterly alien. What appeared like pink skin from a distance was an armour of delicate scales, and what seemed like a crown of golden curly hair, was a cluster of fine tendrils in constant sway. The pseudo-eyes, orbs of

blueness, quivered and emitted a staccato burst. A lower facial orifice, agape as if in perpetual puzzlement, belched methane. A nearby sink said, 'Translating, "Go back to your earth, stink-breathing human."'

The creature flew out.

'I guess I'm privileged to have a cherub stoop to insult me,' laughed Fiordfar, pleased at the rare encounter. He stepped out in time to see the cherub soar, undoubtedly eager to return to sectors with the methane-enriched atmosphere that her species considered healthier.

He walked Midzone Main. People called to him, 'Hey Fiordfar, all dressed up? What for?'

'I put on amber for the last feel of it before they make me a reachfar and I'll have to wear black,' he told some. To others he replied, winking, 'Private meeting.' They said, 'In dress uniform? Imagine undoing all those straps!'

A serious-faced child in khakis, squatting at a doorway, said, 'He's cross with you.' She screwed her brown face into a pained expression. Behind her, an Eye floated over the threshold. Inside, out of sight, near Even sat in a cradle of machinery, annoyed that Fiordfar had kept him waiting. Fiordfar affectionately ruffled the child's hair. 'Tell Even to sell his acne to Cartesian cyborgs.'

The Eye seemed to glare.

He walked away jauntily, followed by her giggles and the Eye, feathers and ribbons swaying, aware of an overwhelming urge to strap on the skates and race to the observatory before the planet's dayside rotated away. 'What the hell,' he muttered and paused by an open doorway to strap on the skates.

'So predictable,' said a kettle inside. It was a residential cabin for two. In the occupants' absence, domesticware talked to anyone who cared to listen. It was a neighbourly thing to do, but an extravagance to rig up so many vocal outlets in one room. A curtain-rail said, 'The cyber was confused at first to see you stroll away from Even's lair.'

""Lair"? Did somebody program you for wit or is sarcasm some kind of cyber virus?' Skates abandoned, Fiordfar stepped in, curious. The Eye hovered on the threshold.

'No and no. The Gossip protocol replaces neutral references with human vernacular equivalents.' The curtains drew back to reveal a bed. Homely as the tiny cabin was, there were few personal touches, and nothing that let Fiordfar guess the occupants' identities. Holo eggs of recent dances: he spotted his own miniature likeness, forever re-enacting a bygone moment amidst a crowd of Wing 4 nears and nearlyfars. There were stills of group outings to local tourist resorts and a clutter of souvenirs. He picked up a figurine of a fat bald Martian in a colourful kimono. The figurine began in a tiny nasal voice, 'Experience the Ming Dynasty ...' He dropped the virtual-reality capsule into a basket full of socks. 'I'm hungry. Give me the most popular snack here.'

The food dispenser purred and delivered an apple. 'Fresh from Gardens,' it declared.

'Why do you always state the obvious?' He bit into the apple. He had hoped for an unusual snack, someone's peculiarity that would give away the occupant's identity.

'Insufficient data for a reply. Grade 1 reflexive scan is still in progress.'

Eating, he stroked the fleshy pod-like deck. A screen unfurled open, and a message flashed in

rainbow colours: CONFIDENTIAL! NEARLYFAR BERTA AND NEAR DEGA ONLY! 'So those two have moved here.' He threw the apple core into a disposal unit.

'You only had to ask,' said the disposal unit. The image of fastidious, sharp-featured Berta crossed Fiordfar's mind.

'It's more fun finding out on my own.' He turned to leave.

'Come sleep a while,' suggested the bed, and he was reminded of Dega.

'Thanks, but no. It's not fun on my own.'

He skated on, guided by the increasing heaviness of his body, with the Eye following. A vacuum cleaner said, 'A conclusive analysis of your fun parameters ...' A thermostat, further on, 'Eludes the cyber. Define fun.'

'For you I guess fun is trying to analyse it.' He swivelled to a halt by a hatch and took off his stakes. A hook accepting the skates told him that the dark side of Lemond already faced Bergen.

'This is the last voice box,' informed the top of the ladder.

Fiordfar descended a long way down. Above, the Eye loomed briefly, and then soared away.

Reaching the end of the ladder, he dropped, landing heavily on cold metal amidst dim old flofants sinking to die. Here the gravity was almost twice the comfortable for humans. Coldness pierced the soles of his feet. He ducked low-hanging tubes and skipped over cables, mindful of protruding mechanical appendages as he walked along catwalks that were not designed with human safety in mind. All the while, cold metal plates quaked underfoot, screeched and groaned, until slotted into a new jigsaw pattern. Behind him, the ladder was out of view and ahead shadows were deep. A few lethargic flofants accompanied him at waist level. Unseen creatures rustled below and fiery green eyes peered at him in the darkness. He called out greetings and apologies to invisible gremlins and got only squeaks in reply.

'Hey Joe! Where are you Crabwise mon?' he shouted, his attempt at local dialect echoing strangely as if the gremlins mocked him by tossing his words between them. In the darkness, he made out stacks of stasis tanks nestling in nets of tubes and cables. All around him, blobs of sheer blackness disappeared in weird directions.

'What do you want?' Joe stuck his head out of a coffin nearby. 'Too late to see the world.'

'I've come to see you.'

'What for?' The man crawled out.

'The gremlins have moved you to the sleepers' lot, did you notice? You shine light in their eyes. They hate that.'

'I hate them.'

'They are excellent engineers, the best Stelomm can recruit.' Fiordfar's face, suddenly illuminated from below by the dying flash of a lone flofant, appeared skull-like. In front of him, Joe was silhouetted against the glow escaping his tiny cabin: a small, thin black man wearing a dark biosuit in the eternal night of Outerzone. Fiordfar stepped closer. He could smell Joe's bad breath, but still

could see only the whites of his eyes. 'Let me inside, my feet are frozen.'

'There ain't no room for guests in my diplomatic suite, sorry.'

Fiordfar leaned forward and whispered, 'The cyber can't hear us inside.'

'People might think we're lovers,' Joe said irritably.

'It's best if they have a rational explanation for our relationship.'

'What relationship?' asked Joe in disbelief, but didn't stop the Stelommer from crawling in. He, Joe, was a person of no status here and he knew it. His stay in Bergen had been accepted by Stelomm as a gesture of goodwill, but they confined him to Outerzone.

Relieved to be in from the cold, Fiordfar stretched on the narrow bunk that filled the cluttered module. His feet began to smart as sensation returned and he dug them into the folds of the grubby bedroll. His gaze fell on a still of smiling black people, young and old, posing in vividly patterned kimonos in front of a picturesque pagoda. Beyond them, craggy cliffs dipped into an azure sea. 'Your family? Why are they dressed like Martians?'

'We have fishing rights in Shogun Territory. We dress like that for tourists. It's supposed to be Ancient Japanese, not Martian.'

'Do you have a sister?'

Joe, crouching at Fiordfar's feet, reached over and blanked the still. 'You as much as look at my family, I'll tear your eyes out with fishhooks.'

'You don't have fishhooks here.'

'Don't bet on it.'

'I have a sister.'

'You are Stelommer, you ain't got family. The station is your home, born in transit and all that.'

Fiordfar looked steadily at the Lemondian. 'Do you like this job?'

'Could be worse. I'm one lucky catfish to snap up this job straight after college, I could've been on the road chasing mondi.'

'Chasing who? With your leg problem?'

'It's a figure of speech.' Joe rummaged in the clutter of tools, disks, books, virtreal capsules, and other Lemondian paraphernalia that he traded with Stelommers, and finally pulled out a crumpled leaflet. 'This is a mondi.' He indicated a huge-eared golden elfin head encircled by the legend 'Lemond Here-Now Liberation Movement' in bubble letters. He quickly shoved the leaflet under some a pile. 'Reactionary stuff, not my scene. The antichronists want to abolish the historicracy. They want a world with no era-zones.'

'But tourism is your chief industry, and the only thing worth seeing there are the historical theme parks. How else will you compete with the Cartesians?'

'Exactly. Chasing mondi, like we say.'

'What does the mondi say about it?'

'Who knows, mon. "It is a creature of the darkest night / Man glimpses but in flight."'

'It flies?'

'I don't think so. It runs away from people, the poem means. Chasing mondi is what we call a pointless pursuit, see?' Joe smiled briefly, a quick flash of white teeth.

Fiordfar smiled back, happy. 'I have a sister. I still have my sister.'

'What am I supposed to do with this piece of information?'

'Trade it?'

Joe had an unofficial sideline in smuggling. Clothes bearing the Stelomm logo became available in Lemondian roadside malls, and Lemondian virtreals were passed around in Bergen halls. For Stelommers, private trading was a hobby. For Lemondians, smuggling meant tax evasion. Joe's unofficial enterprise was without glamour as was his official role. When Stelomm had requested permission to orbit their planet, the Lemondian princes told them that exchanging hostages was traditional. A Stelommer hostage had been sent to Lemond.

Fiordfar tagged at the straps of the uniform. It was in disarray and had acquired grease stains. 'Help me to loosen this.'

'You wanna get trussed up like a turkey, you get out of it on your own.'

'I've just had an interview with reachfars. I know where Upstairs is. What can your princes do with this information?'

Joe let out a soft whistle.

*

The wooded glade was full of people wearing coarse clothes dyed shades of brown from ochre to peat like autumn leaves and soil intermingled in dappled sunlight. The Stelommer felt conspicuous in her bright clothes, pale face and blonde hair, but the natives were too full of themselves, of organic smells and sap wine, to care or to stare. She thought, how can I tell him about Sha'ae? He could find out for himself about her station, Moscow. One Stelomm station is pretty much like any other. This planet was novel and weird. Even on Einstein, there was nobody like the Adamai. Strange how memories come flooding back with news of my brother.

People were looking at her. She realized, startled, that her gaze had been fixed on them for some time, a brown-clad family on a festive day. Not unlike her family before things went terribly wrong. Today the Adamai were intent on merrymaking, wine-drinking, festive cooking, and good-leaf smoking. Chestnut-skinned children played. They scooped up leaf litter and scattered it about, squealing in delight. Self-consciously, she averted her gaze.

'No go away, this day for together be.' The Adamai woman made her dialect simple for the Stelommer's benefit. They were about the same age, in their late twenties. There was a baby at the Adamai's exposed breast, and when she ordered children to offer food and drink to the visitor, her

voice was vibrant like the chattering of the ornithoids.

'First time with Adamai?' asked the father.

The children gaped at her. When she smiled at them, they exchanged glances among themselves and giggled into their fists. Their father scolded, 'Stelommers no monsters. Look at the lady. No three heads, no tentacles!' The children scrutinized her suspiciously, as if she concealed extra heads and tentacles in her tight-fitting clothes. That's a fair assumption, she thought, not all Stelommers are humans. Without drakrons, SIC wouldn't exist and I wouldn't be on this extraordinary mission. 'The wine's so good,' she said and giggled.

When they asked her name, she told them the name given to her at birth: Sadtree.

*

The second time that Fiordfar was summoned upstairs, a sole shadowy reachfar told him, softly, 'I'm pleased to deliver a letter from your sister. Here it is.' As if from nowhere, a small black box appeared on Fiordfar's outstretched hand. 'The seal is keyed to you only. You can tell people about this and keep the letter afterwards, but you must use our safe room to interact with the box. That's the trade secret.'

'I understand, but ...?'

'How can we trust you not to reveal the trade secret unintentionally? Don't worry. Your background is our insurance. Please step to your right.'

Fiordfar stepped to his right. A door appeared, opening.

The safe room was cosily small, soft furnished and pastel coloured, full of delicate scent and subdued light. There was barely audible ambient music. There were no harsh lines or hard materials. It was computer-designed for human comfort.

It was disturbingly empty.

The drink dispenser was mute and dumb. Instructions for the manual extraction of beverages were engraved on a brass plaque. Beneath the instructions was a slogan in ornate Dreyfusi script: Converse freely. This machine will not leak. He tried the door, now closed, but his greeting bounced off a message stamped across it in block Schlickish font: MANUALLY OPERATED! TO OPERATE, TURN KNOB TOWARDS THE LEFT AND PULL TOWARDS YOU. There were no cyber nodes and no computers of any description. At the back of the room was a small desk, empty but for a manual writing kit — sheets of paper, ink pens — and a printout with instructions how to use them.

He finally sat down on a large cushion, keyed up as if he were about to mount a unicorn, placed the black box on the floor and stroked its contours with a fingertip.

A facet smoothly slid open. Inside was an unfolded sheet of paper several times the area of the facet, but he lifted it out as if the box was an optical illusion. For an unreal instant, he felt himself disembodied... and then was sharply aware of himself sitting on the cushion, knees raised, back against the wall and shoulders tense, the pristine paper held between thumbs and forefingers. He was astounded to see the untidy script. It must have taken Sadtree hours to draw the words letter by letter.

He read every word as if time stood still.

He wrote back.

Don't I know the feeling, tracing each letter with a pen held clumsily with unskilled fingers, Sadtree responded in thought as the black box in her lap opened for her, and a single sheet of paper materialized. The Adamai left her alone. Children were shooed away from the reed hut. Soon all nearby human sounds became hushed. Sadtree sat cross-legged on a straw mat rolled out on packed earth. Reading was difficult in the dim interior of the hut, and she was too eager, trying to take in her brother's letter all at once.

There's a new concept (he wrote), machines without intelligence, non-I. He was designing a mock-campaign to market them in the historicratic courts of Lemond. Bergen was doing good business there but even better business with Cartesians, most of them cyborgs and quite keen on Stelomm cyber ware. Marketing a non-I was a challenge.

She wrote back. Selling non-I might be a challenge for Bergen, but for Moscow the challenge is to wean the tribes of Sha'ae from mechanical gadgets. The Adamai reject even ancient technology, and live directly off the forest. It's so frontier here that last year a shoal of wild arks passed through, and now a Cosmoservice cluster has arrived. The ark cluster appears like wheels within wheels of moving stars in the night sky. Sadtree wished she could send him the sight.

*

Returning to his wing, happiness overflowed Fiordfar in broad grins and belly laughs at the slightest provocation. Entering Even's cabin, he met the boy's quizzical look with a shrug. "Free your spirit?" quoted the pale, hairless boy.

'That's my slogan.'

Even read on in his high-pitched voice, "Shed the fear of garrulous machines. Furnish your courts with our revolutionary non-I ..." Really!

'I'll cross out revolutionary,' agreed Fiordfar, recalling Joe's account of Lemondian politics. 'I've set it to music.'

'Yes. I noticed. I wasn't amused.'

'Other kids your age had a good laugh.'

'People your age thought it was stupid. They laughed too.'

'True. But I sold the jingle in Lemond.'

'You did what?' Even's screen already scrolled details of the deal. 'You had Joe get someone to play it in Twentieth Century.'

'That's the principle of liaising with the natives.'

'Precisely,' Even said, shocked. 'You know that only a reachfar can initiate outside contact.'

'Obviously not, since I could do it.'

'You know what I mean. If everybody went about doing as they pleased ...'

'I know, I know, but we can't do anything that might damage Stelomm, can we? Being conditioned for loyalty gives us freedom. No harm's done, anyway. Upstairs would have aborted my project before it reached Lemond if they were worried about it. Look at it for what it is.'

'I'm looking at it. It's utterly futile. Life Today of all places!'

'One earthside place is very much like any other.'

'No, it isn't. Life Today is a theme town. All machines were non-I in the real twentieth century.'

'In the real twentieth century, the marketing philosophy was to sell people more of what they already had. I work on that principle. It's entirely in keeping with the local theme. It's all in my report.'

Even was not impressed. He sternly informed that Stelomm non-I machines were not a reconstruction of ancient Earth technology. They'd fail the Lemondian authenticity regulations. And in their ordinary lives the Lemondians wanted cyberware like everyone else. Fiordfar retorted, 'Tourists will take note of the jingle. They come from all over the galaxy.'

'And they go back to all over the galaxy. There won't be any commission for Bergen.'

'I see your point.' Fiordfar met Even's glare with a studied stare. 'Your face is getting elongated now that your acne is clearing. I wonder what you're turning into.'

Alarmed, Even disengaged his hand from the interface and felt his flat cheeks, his narrow chin, and high forehead. 'The mutation catalogue doesn't apply to the space-raised.'

'You are bought as babies from planetary folk.'

'We develop differently in the nurseries.'

'You do. You might be turning into a psidroid.'

'A what?'

'Psychic android. A human clone peripheral of a cyber with drakron ability to enter human stream of consciousness.'

'You are making it up.' Even turned to the screen that still displayed Fiordfar's slogans, and sneered, 'Erase.' The slogans disappeared. 'Retry,' he told Fiordfar in the same tone of voice.

Fiordfar rose, yawning. 'After my recreation.'

'Time off never stops me from working. Will you race over to Joe?'

'Some aspects of human irrationality you must discover for yourself when you're grown up, Even Bergen.'

The Eye didn't trail him anymore.

There are subtler ways to pry.

Astrid's messenger had no trouble locating Fiordfar simply by asking people. Because nearlyfar Astrid invited him by word of mouth, Fiordfar knew that the matter was personal. 'She's in Gardens, I'll show you,' said the little furry albino, whom Fiordfar hadn't met before, and led him briskly along Midzone Main.

'Are you a boy or a girl?' asked Fiordfar.

'Male. My name's Cyril. I'm not as young as I look. There's a dull streak in me but I'm space-raised.'

'There's nothing dull about your looks. It's unusual.'

'I meant the mutation.'

'Oh, dRL.' Fiordfar pronounced it droll. 'You are new.'

'I was defrosted three days ago.'

'And Astrid has grabbed you dazed from deep sleep to slave in her gardens? She's a ruthless woman!'

'It's my specialization. I'll be graded and duly designated as soon as the cyber finishes assimilating my bio-data. I think this is the entrance.' Gardens' gates, designed as emergency airlocks, were conspicuous. 'I mean, I'm not sure whether this is the gate she's told me. Could be the next one.' He seemed ill at ease.

'I'll find my own way from here.'

'Thanks,' said Cyril, grateful that he didn't have to consult the cyber. 'I hate being new.'

'It will pass,' promised Fiordfar. 'It's not like being different. That's forever.'

At some point during his initial induction period, Fiordfar realized that a cyber didn't chat with other humans as it did with him. At first, he felt chosen. Then he realized that humans didn't socialise with machines as he did. 'Hey, machine,' he said now in the privacy of the airlock. 'How do you do?'

'Grade 1 reflexive scan is still in progress.'

There was hardly any delay before the doors to Gardens slid open, and he breathed the humid atmosphere. 'Over here!' called Astrid. She squatted by a control panel. The olive overalls of biotechs and her dark skin combined to camouflage her in the dense vegetation, but once noticed, she wasn't easily ignored. She rose up swiftly, a stocky woman taller than him. Fiordfar grinned widely to mask his disappointment at being denied the thrill of seeking her. It could have taken a while to locate her, and he'd have no chance of seeing Joe this shift. At this second thought, his disappointment evaporated and he hugged her heartily, enjoying the familiar closeness of her strong body.

Astrid wriggled free and led through tangled vine to an empty hydro-tank barely large enough for both of them to sit inside. She rejected his advances, pushing his hands away playfully. 'It's my work shift.'

'So?' It wasn't the first time.

She said outright, 'Will you move in with me?' and laughed at his surprise. 'We've been talking about you.'

'Who?'

'Dega, Berta, some of the others. You are too old for the dorm. It makes you moody. We've noticed.'

'I'm not graded yet.'

'It's not your fault that you've had a late start. I'll help you with your studies.' It was a genuine offer, he knew, an offer he had no reason to refuse. 'I've cleared it with a reachfar,' she added.

'What do reachfars have to do with our sleeping arrangements?'

'Why are you so jumpy? I was hoping you'd tell me. When we consulted far Sight about you moving in with me, she told us to clear it with Upstairs. Can you think why?'

'I'm helping drakrons with an experiment of theirs.'

'Don't be silly,' she said, annoyed. 'Berta thought they might be planning to transfer you again. All the more reason to move in with me. Show them that you're integrated.'

'There are things about me you don't know.'

'Really!'

'I'm from Einstein.'

'In the Pleiades? No!' She feigned surprise, but then frowned. 'I don't hold your background against you.'

'I know. It's just that ...' His face wore a melancholy, far-away expression. 'Something happens to Einsteiner males when they mature.'

She stared at him.

'For a few years we're, well, normal. We make good lovers,' his eyes twinkled, and she laughed with relief. It was his jokes again. He looked at her gravely, 'But then we become restless, we become moody. You've noticed that. Eventually we must go out alone into the wilderness ...' His voice trailed off distantly.

'Like doing the Walk?' She added, vexed, 'Why don't you do the Walk? Everyone will stop treating you like a juvenile.'

'I don't see the point of crawling on the outside of the station just to prove that I'm grown up.'

'It's symbolic. It's an initiation into adult community.'

'The dangers are not symbolic. If you die out there,' he said with feeling, 'it's not an initiation to any community. And if you come back alive, you carry on exactly the same as before.'

'Not exactly the same. You feel differently about yourself. You know that you've met a challenge

and survived. You get to know what you are.'

'I already know what I am, I can't help it... Einsteiners, I've told you, something happens to us. We change into... We change.'

'Change?'

'We grow a horn like a unicorn. Here, feel the bump.' He placed her hand on his forehead.

'There's no bump.' She stroked his forehead and ran her fingers through his loose hair. 'When you move in with me, we won't need to meet like this. Although I love it here, don't you? Doesn't it remind you of Einstein?'

'No.'

'I never mock your past. You can tell me all about it.'

'But Gardens don't remind me of Einstein.'

'I only ask because I want to know you better. You're so different.'

He rose abruptly.

Astrid too sprang to her feet. 'Now what's the matter?'

'You keep going on about it.' He was already climbing out of the tank.

She followed closely. 'But I love you because you're special.'

'You love my peculiarities, not me.' He pushed his way through vine, not looking back, hearing her voice, 'Where are you going now?'

'That's another thing. You want a continuous report.'

Coming into the clearance by the gate, he turned and saw her face, a confusion of outrage and hurt. 'So when should I move in?' he asked as if nothing had been said in anger between them.

Back in the privacy of the airlock, he thought about the Walk. He had secretly done it soon after arriving in Bergen. It was pointless. The station was too large for him to snail-pace all around it on a single oxygen tank, so he didn't get an idea of its layout as he had hoped to. The spacesuit was clumsy and restrictive, so he didn't get to feel free in outer space as he had fantasized. To top it all, something must have been wrong with the oxygen, because he hallucinated a naked man standing outside an airlock. The man was white and thin, hairless, with a narrow chin and a high brow. Fiordfar thought at the time that this was what Even would look like as a grown up. What troubled him was that he had lost his grip, and almost lost his life, when the phantom waved to him.

He suddenly realized that his hand was feeling for a bud of a horn on his forehead, and sheepishly withdrew his hand like a boy caught in a naughty act.

*

The correspondence became a ritual. Fiordfar collected the black box in the featureless chamber above the stars, always from the soft-spoken reachfar, and stepped to the right. The door

appeared.

He entered the safe room, now full of memories.

He sat down on the cushion, always the same one.

He lightly stroked the box to open it, lovingly, because he had grown fond of what it brought. Her letters were not crisp anymore, but smudged, their edges crumpled. Putting the paper to his nose, he fancied whiffs of soil and imagined a girlish voice telling him wondrous things.

He wrote a letter and watched it vanish into void.

Then he returned the black box to the reachfar who always waited, no matter how long Fiordfar spent in the safe room.

Later, Fiordfar would wake up tearful, clutching at dreams of speeding across endless prairies, clouds chasing clouds resembling dragons across huge skies, rain lashing at his face and becoming ocean spray as sea-serpents splash, arching their scaly backs.

He would fall asleep again, dream of unicorns, and wake up remembering his sister.

*

Sadtrees official mission was very odd, she wrote. She was supposed to study the function of the shoshone in the Adamai community. The shoshone, an old woman, mostly mumbled incoherent blessings unto the newly born and chanted unintelligibly over the recently deceased. The Adamai were not secretive, and enough anthropological material about them was already available. Sadtrees learned the tribal language to make the pretext mission more credible, but her monthly reports were neither new nor necessary, and lately unnoticed by anyone at the station. Moscow was celebrating the sale of a cyber to the Cosmoservice. Sadtrees tried not to feel left out. It was an important deal, a First, because as a rule the Cosmoservice wouldn't touch any technology of alien origin, and therefore avoided doing business with Stelomm. This cluster's Commander-in-Chief, a Martian called Atom Lo, was quite a character by all accounts, Sadtrees told Fiordfar in her letter, moaning that she was away from it all.

The worst part was waiting for something to happen. Her placement must be a bait, she reasoned. Strangers were infrequent but not unusual in the Adamai camp. Most visitors came from other tribes for a vision from the shoshone, but there were also offworld traders. In the dead of night, Sadtrees lay awake worrying. Suppose someone with a technological background sees me using the SIC? Why can't I do this in my station like Fiordfar? The whole setup was full of holes like the walls of a reed hut.

She declined time off so as not to leave the equipment even more vulnerable, but she couldn't honestly tell whether this was due to loyalty or selfishness. She was afraid of losing contact with her brother.

Week after week passed with nothing but innocent incidents. A toddler fell into the stream, and his sister saved him. The pickling of redroot was announced, followed by a three-day communal peeling. An argument between a woman and her two husbands kept the tribe gossiping. There was peace in the primitive life and never an idle moment. When Sadtrees was called to the shoshone, she was reluctant to stop peeling redroot, grinding nuts, laundering clothes in the stream, or doing whatever she was doing.

Arriving at the hut, her mood polarized to barely suppressed eagerness. More than messages from Moscow, Fiordfar's letters reminded her of a universe beyond the forest canopy. 'This little box popped in again,' the shosh grumbled. She removed earthenware in which she stored herbs and potions, and took off the straw mat that covered the Stelomm equipment. 'Sorcery, if you ask me.' Her lively black eyes in the wizened bronze face scrutinized Sadtree. 'What are you laughing-weeping about?'

'Getting a letter from my brother is a special feeling.'

'I've never parted with any of my family long enough to need sorcery to learn their news.' The shosh poured Sadtree a mug of strong sweet tea. The people who lived in the shosh's grace had already retreated into the afternoon drizzle. Did they wonder about the Stelommer's business in their camp? Did they know? 'Am I still a Stelommer? Are you, Fiordfar?' she wrote.

*

As soon as possible after leaving upstairs, Fiordfar gave her letter to Joe for safekeeping. Joe took it reluctantly and placed it with the growing pile. They sat on his bunk engulfed in heavy Lemondian rhythms. 'And what do you have for me today, Stelommer?'

Fiordfar motioned him to lower his voice.

'Them machines can't hear us here, you said.'

'No doubt about that with your loud music.'

'I don't send things back. I keep it all in here.' Joe tapped his temple with a crooked finger.

'So you keep telling me. Where will you settle when you get back home?'

'With what you've given me, I'll have my pick of the centuries.' His face clouded, 'What about you?' Fiordfar sniffed the air, distracted. Joe insisted, 'Come with me, mon. Book a holiday, then we settle you in the world.'

Fiordfar looked at him blankly.

'I'll introduce you to my little sister. This one.' Joe pointed to a child smiling broadly, white teeth in a black oval face, eternally gesturing towards the pagoda. 'She's older now.'

'I don't want to go earthside. Joe, there's a funny smell in here.'

'The ventilation in my diplomatic suite ain't top-functioning lately. You can't stay in Bergen. I do wonder about you sometimes.'

“Once upon a time in a penal facility at the galaxy’s rim, a man was dead and he knew it.”

The galaxy is well-explored, but still has much that is undiscovered – and seemingly unknowable. Nomad stations run by mega-corporation Stelomm float through the galaxy, orbiting planets for a time before drifting again, always gathering

information. Run by cybers, intelligent machines, these floating stations house a variety of species, recruited from all over, but who owe allegiance to none but Stelomm. Their competitor, Cosmoservice, uses arks, a species native to space that no one knows the origin of, but have the ability to jump through space time at will — and Stelomm wants to compete. There are rumors developing of a transphase, a process that allows matter to be here and then there, instantaneously and the emergence of psidroids.

Fiordfar may hold the key. Immediately after reaching the rank of reachfar, he resigns his service and wanders off to find the answer to the transphase and the secrets of the drakron. He will encounter many and all are affected by him in ways that change their lives, intertwining them forevermore. One of them may finally answer the mystery: what is the purpose of psidroids?

Rider Run is a techno future romp featuring technology made for dreamers and shaped by unique societies. This mystery masterfully weaves together a disparate cast of characters, linking them together with nuance and a common experience, taking each perspective in stride. *Rider Run* will pique the interest of any lover of sci-fi with its fanciful tech, exploration of foreign planets, and a classic look at what happens when machine becomes man.

Praise for Raya Jones

‘A sci-fi adventure filled with intrigue, action, and the exploration of human connection’ - *Alex Batty*

Raya Jones is based in Cardiff University’s School of Social Sciences and has been hooked on science fiction ever since reading Asimov’s *I, Robot* as a child. Her latest scholarly work concerns social robotics in the context of psychology as well as science and technology studies. Previous and ongoing work concerns Jungian and other psychological perspectives, and Raya has published several books in the field. Raya Jones has also written *Fairweather*.

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