

Dawn by Octavia Butler (selected paragraphs for the FDRG)

2. *(p. 9 of the book)*

What would they do this time? Ask more questions? Give her another companion? She barely cared.

She sat on the bed, dressed, waiting, tired in a deep, emptied way that had nothing to do with physical weariness. Sooner or later, someone would speak to her.

She had a long wait. She had lain down and was almost asleep when a voice spoke her name. "Lilith?" The usual, quiet, androgynous voice.

She drew a deep, weary breath. "What?" she asked. But as she spoke, she realized the voice had not come from above as it always had before. She sat up quickly and looked around. In one corner she found the shadowy figure of a man, thin and long-haired.

Was he the reason for the clothing, then? He seemed to be wearing a similar outfit.

Something to take off when the two of them got to know each other better? Good god.

"I think," she said softly, "that you might be the last straw." "I'm not here to hurt you," he said.

"No. Of course you're not."

"I'm here to take you outside?"

Now she stood up, staring hard at him, wishing for more light. Was he making a joke?

Laughing at her?

"Outside to what?"

"Education. Work. The beginning of a new life."

She took a step closer to him, then stopped. He scared her somehow. She could not make herself approach him. "Something is wrong," she said. "Who are you?"

He moved slightly. "And what am I?"

She jumped because that was what she had almost said.

"I'm not a man," he said. "I'm not a human being."

She moved back against the bed, but did not sit down. "Tell me what you are."

"I'm here to tell you. . . and 'show you. Will you look at me now?"

Since she was looking at him-it-she frowned. "The light-"

"It will change when you're ready."

"You're. . . what? From some other world?"

"From a number of other worlds. You're one of the few English speakers who never considered that she might be in the hands of extraterrestrials."

"I did consider it," Lilith whispered. "Along with the possibility that I might be in prison, in an insane asylum, in the hands of the FBI, the CIA, or the KGB. The other possibilities seemed marginally less ridiculous."

The creature said nothing. It stood utterly still in its corner, and she knew from her many Awakenings that it would not speak to her again until she did what it wished- until she said she was ready to look at it, then, in brighter light, took the obligatory look. These things,

whatever they were, were incredibly good at waiting. She made this one wait for several minutes, and not only was it silent, it never moved a muscle. Discipline or physiology? She was not afraid. She had gotten over being frightened by "ugly" faces long before her capture. The unknown frightened her. The cage she was in frightened her. She preferred becoming accustomed to any number of ugly faces to remaining in her cage.

"All right," she said. "Show me."

The lights brightened as she had supposed they would, and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose-no bulge, no nostrils-just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over-pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head that grew down around its eyes and ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of the ears as well as around them. Above, it joined the eye hair, and below and behind, it joined the head hair. The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed-a kind of natural tracheostomy.

Lilith glanced at the humanoid body, wondering how humanlike it really was. "I don't mean any offense," she said, "but are you male or female?"

"It's wrong to assume that I must be a sex you're familiar with," it said, "but as it happens, I'm male."

Good. "It" could become "he" again. Less awkward.

"You should notice," he said, "that what you probably see as hair isn't hair at all. I have no hair. The reality seems to bother humans."

"What?"

"Come closer and look."

She did not want to be any closer to him. She had not known what held her back before. Now she was certain it was his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness. She found herself still unable to take even one more step toward him.

"Oh god," she whispered. And the hair-the whatever-it-was---moved. Some of it seemed to blow toward her as though in a wind-though there was no stirring of air in the room.

She frowned, strained to see, to understand. Then, abruptly, she did understand. She backed away, scrambled around the bed and to the far wall. When she could go no farther, she stood against the wall, staring at him.

Medusa.

Some of the "hair" writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions. Revolted, she turned her face to the wall.

"They're not separate animals," he said. "They're sensory organs. They're no more dangerous than your nose or eyes. It's natural for them to move in response to my wishes or emotions or to outside stimuli. We have them on our bodies as well. We need them in the same way you need your ears, nose, and eyes."

"But. . ." She faced him again, disbelieving. Why should he need such things-tentacles--to supplement his senses?

"When you can," he said, "come closer and look at me. I've had humans believe they saw human sensory organs on my head-and then get angry with me when they realized they were wrong."

"I can't," she whispered, though now she wanted to. Could she have been so wrong, so deceived by her own eyes?

"You will," he said. "My sensory organs aren't dangerous to you. You'll have to get used to them."

"No!"

The tentacles were elastic. At her shout, some of them lengthened, stretching toward her. She imagined big, slowly writhing, dying night-crawlers stretched along the sidewalk after a rain. She imagined small, tentacled sea slugs- nudibranchs-grown impossibly to human size and shape, and, obscenely, sounding more like a human being than some humans. Yet she needed to hear him speak. Silent, he was utterly alien.

She swallowed. "Listen, don't go quiet on me. Talk!" "Yes?"

"Why do you speak English so well, anyway? You should at least have an unusual accent."

"People like you taught me. I speak several human languages. I began learning very young."

"How many other humans do you have here? And where's here?"

"This is my home. You would call it a ship-a vast one compared to the ones your people have built. What it truly is doesn't translate. You'll be understood if you call it a ship. It's in orbit around your Earth, somewhat beyond the orbit of Earth's moon. As for how many humans are here: all of you who survived your war. We collected as many as we could. The ones we didn't find in time died of injury, disease, hunger, radiation, cold. . . . We found them later." She believed him. Humanity in its attempt to destroy itself had made the world unlivable. She had been certain she would die even though she had survived the bombing without a scratch. She had considered her survival a misfortune-a promise of a more lingering death. And now...?

"Is there anything left on Earth?" she whispered. "Anything alive, I mean."

"Oh, yes. Time and our efforts have been restoring it." That stopped her. She managed to look at him for a moment without being distracted by the slowly writhing tentacles.

"Restoring it? Why?"

"For use. You'll go back there eventually."

"You'll send me back? And the other humans?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That you will come to understand little by little."

She frowned. "All right, I'll start now. Tell me."

His head tentacles wavered. Individually, they did look more like big worms than small snakes. Long and slender or short and thick as. . . . As what? As his mood changed? As his attention shifted? She looked away.

"No!" he said sharply. "I'll only talk to you, Lilith, if you look at me."

She made a fist of one hand and deliberately dug her nails into her palm until they all but broke the skin. With the pain of that to distract her, she faced him. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Kaaltediinjdahya lel Kahguyaht aj Dinso."

She stared at him, then sighed, and shook her head.

"Jdahya," he said. "That part is me. The rest is my family and other things."

She repeated the shorter name, trying to pronounce it exactly as he had, to get the unfamiliar ghost j sound just right. "Jdahya," she said, "I want to know the price of your people's help. What do you want of us?"

"Not more than you can give-but more than you can understand here, now. More than words will be able to help you understand at first. There are things you must see and hear outside."

"Tell me something now, whether I understand it or not."

His tentacles rippled. "I can only say that your people have something we value. You may begin to know how much we value it when I tell you that by your way of measuring time, it has been several million years since we dared to interfere in another people's act of self-destruction. Many of us disputed the wisdom of doing it this time. We thought.. . that there had been a consensus among you, that you had agreed to die."

"No species would do that!"

"Yes. Some have. And a few of those who have have taken whole ships of our people with them. We've learned. Mass suicide is one of the few things we usually let alone."

"Do you understand now what happened to us?"

"I'm aware of what happened. It's... alien to me. Frighteningly alien."

"Yes. I sort of feel that way myself, even though they're my people. It was. . . beyond insanity."

"Some of the people we picked up had been hiding deep underground. They had created much of the destruction."

"And they're still alive?"

"Some of them are."

"And you plan to send them back to Earth?" "No."

"What?"

"The ones still alive are very old now. We've used them slowly, learned biology, language, culture from them. We Awakened them a few at a time and let them live their lives here in different parts of the ship while you slept."

"Slept. . . Jdahya, how long have I slept?"

He walked across the room to the table platform, put one many-fingered hand on it, and boosted himself up. Legs drawn against his body, he walked easily on his hands to the center of the platform. The whole series of movements was so fluid and natural, yet so alien that it fascinated her.

Abruptly she realized he was several feet closer to her. She leaped away. Then, feeling utterly foolish, she tried to come back. He had folded himself compactly into an uncomfortable-looking seated position. He ignored her sudden move-except for his head

tentacles which all swept toward her as though in a wind. He seemed to watch as she inched back to the bed. Could a being with sensory tentacles instead of eyes watch?

When she had come as close to him as she could, she stopped and sat on the floor. It was all she could do to stay where she was. She drew her knees up against her chest and hugged them to her tightly.

"I don't understand why I'm so. . . afraid of you," she whispered. "Of the way you look, I mean. You're not that different. There are-or were-life forms on Earth that looked a little like you."

He said nothing.

She looked at him sharply, fearing he had fallen into one of his long silences. "Is it something you're doing?" she demanded, "something I don't know about?"

"I'm here to teach you to be comfortable with us," he said. "You're doing very well."

She did not feel she was doing well at all. "What have others done?"

"Several have tried to kill me."

She swallowed. It amazed her that they had been able to bring themselves to touch him.

"What did you do to them?"

"For trying to kill me?"

"No, before-to incite them."

"No more than I'm doing to you now."

"I don't understand." She made herself stare at him. "Can you really see?" "Very well."

"Colors? Depth?"

"Yes."

Yet it was true that he had no eyes. She could see now that there were only dark patches where tentacles grew thickly. The same with the sides of his head where ears should have been. And there were openings at his throat. And the tentacles around them didn't look as dark as the others. Murkily translucent, pale gray worms.

"In fact," he said, "you should be aware that I can see wherever I have tentacles-and I can see whether I seem to notice or not. I can't not see."

That sounded like a horrible existence-not to be able to close one's eyes, sink into the private darkness behind one's own eyelids. "Don't you sleep?"

"Yes. But not the way you do."

She shifted suddenly from the subject of his sleeping to her own. "You never told me how long you kept me asleep."

"About. . . two hundred and fifty of your years."

This was more than she could assimilate at once. She said nothing for so long that he broke the silence.

"Something went wrong when you were first Awakened. I heard about it from several people. Someone handled you badly-underestimated you. You are like us in some ways, but you were thought to be like your military people hidden underground. They refused to talk to us too. At first. You were left asleep for about fifty years after that first mistake."

She crept to the bed, worms or no worms, and leaned against the end of it. "I'd always thought my Awakenings might be years apart, but I didn't really believe it."

"You were like your world. You needed time to heal. And we needed time to learn more about your kind." He paused. "We didn't know what to think when some of your people killed themselves. Some of us believed it was because they had been left out of the mass suicide-that they simply wanted to finish the dying. Others said it was because we kept them isolated. We began putting two or more together, and many injured or killed one another. Isolation cost fewer lives."

These last words touched a memory in her. "Jdahya?" she said.

The tentacles down the sides of his face wavered, looked for a moment like dark, muttonchop whiskers. "At one point a little boy was put in with me. His name was Sharad. What happened to him?"

He said nothing for a moment, then all his tentacles stretched themselves upward. Someone spoke to him from above in the usual way and in a voice much like his own, but this time in a foreign language, choppy and fast.

"My relative will find out," he told her. "Sharad is almost certainly well, though he may not be a child any longer."

"You've let children grow up and grow old?"

"A few, yes. But they've lived among us. We haven't isolated them."

"You shouldn't have isolated any of us unless your purpose was to drive us insane. You almost succeeded with me more than once. Humans need one another."

His tentacles writhed repulsively. "We know. I wouldn't have cared to endure as much solitude as you have. But we had no skill at grouping humans in ways that suited them."

"But Sharad and I-"

"He may have had parents, Lilith."

Someone spoke from above, in English this time. "The boy has parents and a sister. He's asleep with them, and he's still very young." There was a pause. "Lilith, what language did he speak?"

"I don't know," Lilith said. "Either he was too young to tell me or he tried and I didn't understand. I think he must have been East Indian, though-if that means anything to you."

"Others know. I was only curious."

"You're sure he's all right?"

"He's well."

She felt reassured at that and immediately questioned the emotion. Why should one more anonymous voice telling her everything was fine reassure her?

"Can I see him?" she asked.

"Jdahya?" the voice said.

Jdahya turned toward her. "You'll be able to see him when you can walk among us without panic. This is your last isolation room. When you're ready, I'll take you outside."

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She made him wait until she had washed the orange juice from her hands. Then he walked over to one of the walls and touched it with some of his longer head tentacles.

A dark spot appeared on the wall where he made contact. It became a deepening, widening indentation, then a hole through which Lilith could see color and light-green, red, orange, yellow.

There had been little color in her world since her capture. Her own skin, her blood-within the pale walls of her prison, that was all. Everything else was some shade of white or gray. Even her food had been colorless until the banana. Now, here was color and what appeared to be sunlight. There was space. Vast space.

The hole in the wall widened as though it were flesh rippling aside, slowly writhing. She was both fascinated and repelled.

"Is it alive?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

She had beaten it, kicked it, clawed it, tried to bite it. It had been smooth, tough, impenetrable, but slightly giving like the bed and table. It had felt like plastic, cool beneath her hands.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Flesh. More like mine than like yours. Different from mine, too, though. It's... the ship."

"You're kidding. Your ship is alive?"

"Yes. Come out." The hole in the wall had grown large enough for them to step through. He ducked his head and took the necessary step. She started to follow him, then stopped. There was so much space out there. The colors she had seen were thin, hairlike leaves and round, coconut-sized fruit, apparently in different stages of development. All hung from great branches that overshadowed the new exit. Beyond them was a broad, open field with scattered trees- impossibly huge trees-distant hills, and a bright, sunless ivory sky. There was enough strangeness to the trees and the sky to stop her from imagining that she was on Earth. There were people moving around in the distance, and there were black, German shepherd-sized animals that were too far away for her to see them clearly-though even in the distance the animals seemed to have too many legs. Six? Ten? The creatures seemed to be grazing.

"Lilith, come out," Jdahya said.

She took a step backward, away from all the alien vastness. The isolation room that she had hated for so long suddenly seemed safe and comforting.

"Back into your cage, Lilith?" Jdahya asked softly.

She stared at him through the hole, realized at once that he was trying to provoke her, make her overcome her fear. It would not have worked if he had not been so right. She was retreating into her cage-like a zoo animal that had been shut up for so long that the cage had become home.

She made herself step up to the opening, and then, teeth clenched, step through.

Outside, she stood beside him and drew a long, shuddering breath. She turned her head, looked at the room, then turned away quickly, resisting an impulse to flee back to it. He took her hand and led her away.

When she looked back a second time, the hole was closing and she could see that what she had come out of was actually a huge tree. Her room could not have taken more than a tiny fraction of its interior. The tree had grown from what appeared to be ordinary, pale-brown, sandy soil. Its lower limbs were heavily laden with fruit. The rest of it looked almost ordinary except for its size. The trunk was bigger around than some office buildings she remembered. And it seemed to touch the ivory sky. How tall was it? How much of it served as a building? "Was everything inside that room alive?" she asked.

"Everything except some of the visible plumbing fixtures," Jdahya said. "Even the food you ate was produced from the fruit of one of the branches growing outside. It was designed to meet your nutritional needs."

"And to taste like cotton and paste," she muttered. "I hope I won't have to eat any more of that stuff."

"You won't. But it's kept you very healthy. Your diet in particular encouraged your body not to grow cancers while your genetic inclination to grow them was corrected."

"It has been corrected, then?"

"Yes. Correcting genes have been inserted into your cells, and your cells have accepted and replicated them. Now you won't grow cancers by accident."

That, she thought, was an odd qualification, but she let it pass for the moment. "When will you send me back to Earth?" she asked.

"You couldn't survive there now-especially not alone." "You haven't sent any of us back yet?"

"Your group will be the first."

"Oh." This had not occurred to her-that she and others like her would be guinea pigs trying to survive on an Earth that must have greatly changed. "How is it there now?"

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"Wild. Forests, mountains, deserts, plains, great oceans. It's a rich world, clean of dangerous radiation in most places. The greatest diversity of animal life is in the seas, but there are a number of small animals thriving on land: insects, worms, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals. There's no doubt your people can live there."

"When?"

"That will not be hurried. You have a very long life ahead of you, Lilith. And you have work to do here." "You said something about that once before. What work?"

"You'll live with my family for a while-live as one of us as much as possible. We'll teach you your work." "But what work?"

"You'll Awaken a small group of humans, all English-speaking, and help them learn to deal with us. You'll teach them the survival skills we teach you. Your people will all be from what you would call civilized societies. Now they'll have to learn to live in forests, build their own shelters, and raise their own food all without machines or outside help."

"Will you forbid us machines?" she asked uncertainly.

"Of course not. But we won't give them to you either. We'll give you hand tools, simple equipment, and food until you begin to make the things you need and grow your own crops. We've already armed you against the deadlier microorganisms. Beyond that, you'll have to fend for yourselves- avoiding poisonous plants and animals and creating what you need."

"How can you teach us to survive on our own world? How can you know enough about it or about us?"

"How can we not? We've helped your world restore itself. We've studied your bodies, your thinking, your literature, your historical records, your many cultures. . . . We know more of what you're capable of than you do."

Or they thought they did. If they really had had two hundred and fifty years to study, maybe they were right. "You've inoculated us against diseases?" she asked to be sure she had understood.

"No."

"But you said-"We've strengthened your immune system, increased your resistance to disease in general." "How? Something else done to our genes?"

He said nothing. She let the silence lengthen until she was certain he would not answer. This was one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good. "We used to treat animals that way," she muttered bitterly.

"What?" he said.

"We did things to them-inoculations, surgery, isolation- all for their own good. We wanted them health and protected-sometimes so we could eat them later."

His tentacles did not flatten to his body, but she got the impression he was laughing at her.

"Doesn't it frighten you to say things like that to me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "It scares me to have people doing things to me that I don't understand."

"You've been given health. The ooloi have seen to it that you'll have a chance to live on your Earth-not just to die on it."

He would not say any more on the subject. She looked around at the huge trees, some with great branching multiple trunks and foliage like long, green hair. Some of the hair seemed to move, though there was no wind. She sighed. The trees, too, then-tentacled like the people. Long, slender, green tentacles.

"Jdahya?"

His own tentacles swept toward her in a way she still found disconcerting, though it was only his way of giving her his attention or signaling her that she had it.

"I'm willing to learn what you have to teach me," she said, "but I don't think I'm the right teacher for others. There were so many humans who already knew how to live in the wilderness-so many who could probably teach you a little more. Those are the ones you ought to be talking to."

"We have talked to them. They will have to be especially careful because some of the things they 'know' aren't true anymore. There are new plants-mutations of old ones and additions we've made. Some things that used to be edible are lethal now. Some things are deadly only if they aren't prepared properly. Some of the animal life isn't as harmless as it apparently once

was. Your Earth is still your Earth, but between the efforts of your people to destroy it and ours to restore it, it has changed."

She nodded, wondering why she could absorb his words so easily. Perhaps because she had known even before her capture that the world she had known was dead. She had already absorbed that loss to the degree that she could.

"There must be ruins," she said softly.

"There were. We've destroyed many of them."

She seized his arm without thinking. "You destroyed them? There were things left and you destroyed them?"

"You'll begin again. We'll put you in areas that are clean of radioactivity and history. You will become something other than you were."

"And you think destroying what was left of our cultures will make us better?"

"No. Only different." She realized suddenly that she was facing him, grasping his arm in a grip that should have been painful to him. It was painful to her. She let go of him and his arm swung to his side in the oddly dead way in which his limbs seemed to move when he was not using them for a specific purpose.

"You were wrong," she said. She could not sustain her anger. She could not look at his tentacled, alien face and sustain anger-but she had to say the words. "You destroyed what wasn't yours," she said. "You completed an insane act."

"You are still alive," he said.

She walked beside him, silently ungrateful. Knee-high tufts of thick, fleshy leaves or tentacles grew from the soil. He stepped carefully to avoid them-which made her want to kick them. Only the fact that her feet were bare stopped her. Then she saw, to her disgust, that the leaves twisted or contracted out of the way if she stepped near one-like plants made up of snake-sized night crawlers. They seemed to be rooted to the ground. Did that make them plants?

"What are those things?" she asked, gesturing toward one with a foot.

"Part of the ship. They can be induced to produce a liquid we and our animals enjoy. It wouldn't be good for you."

"Are they plant or animal?"

"They aren't separate from the ship." "Well, is the ship plant or animal?" "Both, and more." Whatever that meant. "Is it intelligent?"

"It can be. That part of it is dormant now. But even so, the ship can be chemically induced to perform more functions than you would have the patience to listen to. it does a great deal on its own without monitoring. And it. . ." He fell silent for a moment, his tentacles smooth against his body. Then he continued, "The human doctor used to say it loved us. There is an affinity, but it's biological-a strong, symbiotic relationship. We serve the ship's needs and it serves ours. It would die without us and we would be planetbound without it. For us, that would eventually mean death."

"Where did you get it?"

"We grew it."

"You. . . or your ancestors?"

"My ancestors grew this one. I'm helping to grow another." "Now? Why?"

"We'll divide here. We're like mature asexual animals in that way, but we divide into three: Dinso to stay on Earth until it is ready to leave generations from now; Toaht to leave in this ship; and Akjai to leave in the new ship."

Lilith looked at him. "Some of you will go to Earth with us?" "I will, and my family and others. All Dinso."

"Why?"

"This is how we grow-how we've always grown. We'll take the knowledge of shipgrowing with us so that our descendants will be able to leave when the time comes. We couldn't survive as a people if we were always confined to one ship or one world."

"Will you take. . . seeds or something?"

"We'll take the necessary materials."

"And those who leave-Toaht and Akjai-you'll never see them again?"

"I won't. At some time in the distant future, a group of my descendants might meet a group of theirs. I hope that will happen. Both will have divided many times. They'll have acquired much to give one another."

"They probably won't even know one another. They'll remember this division as mythology if they remember it at all."

"No, they'll recognize one another. Memory of a division is passed on biologically. I remember everyone that has taken place in my family since we left the homeworld."

"Do you remember your homeworld itself? I mean, could you get back to it if you wanted to?"

"Go back?" His tentacles smoothed again. "No, Lilith, that's the one direction that's closed to us. This is our homeworld now." He gestured around them from what seemed to be a glowing ivory sky to what seemed to be brown soil.

There were many more of the huge trees around them now, and she could see people going in and out of the trunks-naked, gray Oankali, tentacled all over, some with two arms, some, alarmingly, with four, but none with anything she recognized as sexual organs. Perhaps some of the tentacles and extra arms served a sexual function.

She examined every cluster of Oankali for humans, but saw none. At least none of the Oankali came near her or seemed to pay any attention to her. Some of them, she noticed with a shudder, had tentacles covering every inch of their heads all around. Others had tentacles in odd, irregular patches. None had quite Jdahya's humanlike arrangement- tentacles placed to resemble eyes, ears, hair. Had Jdahya's work with humans been suggested by the chance arrangement of his head tentacles or had he been altered surgically or in some other way to make him seem more human?

"This is the way I have always looked," he said when she asked, and he would not say any more on the subject.

Minutes later they passed near a tree and she reached out to touch its smooth, slightly giving bark-like the walls of her isolation room, but darker-colored. "These trees are all buildings, aren't they?" she asked.

"These structures are not trees," he told her. "They're part of the ship. They support its shape, provide necessities for us-food, oxygen, waste disposal, transport conduits, storage and living space, work areas, many things."

They passed very near a pair of Oankali who stood so close together their head tentacles writhed and tangled together. She could see their bodies in clear detail. Like the others she had seen, these were naked. Jdahya had probably worn clothing only as a courtesy to her. For that she was grateful.

The growing number of people they passed near began to disturb her, and she caught herself drawing closer to Jdahya as though for protection. Surprised and embarrassed, she made herself move away from him. He apparently noticed.

"Lilith?" he said very quietly.

"What?"

Silence.

"I'm all right," she said. "It's just. . . so many people, and so strange to me." "Normally, we don't wear anything."

"I'd guessed that."

"You'll be free to wear clothing or not as you like."

"I'll wear it!" She hesitated. "Are there any other humans Awake where you're taking me?"

"None."

She hugged herself tightly, arms across her chest. More isolation.

To her surprise, he extended his hand. To her greater surprise, she took it and was grateful.

"Why can't you go back to your homeworld?" she asked. "It. . . still exists, doesn't it?"

He seemed to think for a moment. "We left it so long ago. . . I doubt that it does still exist."

"Why did you leave?"

"It was a womb. The time had come for us to be born." She smiled sadly. "There were humans who thought that way-right up to the moment the missiles were fired. People who believed space was our destiny. I believed it myself."

"I know-though from what the ooloi have told me, your people could not have fulfilled that destiny. Their own bodies handicapped them."

"Their... our bodies? What do you mean? We've been into space. There's nothing about our bodies that prevented-"

"Your bodies are fatally flawed. The ooloi perceived this at once. At first it was very hard for them to touch you. Then you became an obsession with them. Now it's hard for them to let you alone."

"What are you talking about!"

"You have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics. Either alone would have been useful, would have allowed the survival of your species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you."

She shook her head. "If you're saying we were genetically programmed to do what we did, blow ourselves up.-"

"No. Your people's situation was more like your own with the cancer my relative cured. The cancer was small. The human doctor said you would probably have recovered and been well

even if humans had discovered it and removed it at that stage. You might have lived the rest of your life free of it, though she said she would have wanted you checked regularly."

"With my family history, she wouldn't have had to tell me that last."

"Yes. But what if you hadn't recognized the significance of your family history? What if we or the humans hadn't discovered the cancer."

"It was malignant, I assume."

"Of course."

"Then I suppose it would eventually have killed me."

"Yes, it would have. And your people were in a similar position. If they had been able to perceive and solve their problem, they might have been able to avoid destruction. Of course, they too would have to remember to reexamine themselves periodically."

"But what was the problem? You said we had two incompatible characteristics. What were they?"

Jdahya made a rustling noise that could have been a sigh, but that did not seem to come from his mouth or throat. "You are intelligent," he said. "That's the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves. You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we've found, though your focus is different from ours. Still, you had a good start in the life sciences, and even in genetics."

"What's the second characteristic?"

"You are hierarchical. That's the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones. It's a terrestrial characteristic. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all. . ." The rattling sounded again. "That was like ignoring cancer. I think your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing."

"I don't think most of us thought of it as a genetic problem. I didn't. I'm not sure I do now." Her feet had begun to hurt from walking so long on the uneven ground. She wanted to end both the walk and the conversation. The conversation made her uncomfortable. Jdahya sounded... almost plausible.

"Yes," he said, "intelligence does enable you to deny facts you dislike. But your denial doesn't matter. A cancer growing in someone's body will go on growing in spite of denial. And a complex combination of genes that work together to make you intelligent as well as hierarchical will still handicap you whether you acknowledge it or not."

"I just don't believe it's that simple. Just a bad gene or two."

"It isn't simple, and it isn't a gene or two. It's many-the result of a tangled combination of factors that only begins with genes." He stopped, let his head tentacles drift toward a rough circle of huge trees. The tentacles seemed to point. "My family lives there," he said. She stood still, now truly frightened.

"No one will touch you without your consent," he said. "And I'll stay with you for as long as you like."

She was comforted by his words and ashamed of needing comfort. How had she become so dependent on him? She shook her head. The answer was obvious. He wanted her dependent.

That was the reason for her continued isolation from her own kind. She was to be dependent on an Oankali- dependent and trusting. To hell with that!

"Tell me what you want of me," she demanded abruptly, "and what you want of my people." His tentacles swung to examine her. "I've told you a great deal."

"Tell me the price, Jdahya. What do you want? What will your people take from us in return for having saved us?"

All his tentacles seemed to hang limp, giving him an almost comical droop. Lilith found no humor in it. "You'll live," he said. "Your people will live. You'll have your world again. We already have much of what we want of you. Your cancer in particular."

"What?"

"The ooloi are intensely interested in it. It suggests abilities we have never been able to trade for successfully before."

"Abilities? From cancer?"

"Yes. The ooloi see great potential in it. So the trade has already been useful."

"You're welcome to it. But before when I asked, you said you trade.. . yourselves."

"Yes. We trade the essence of ourselves. Our genetic material for yours."

Lilith frowned, then shook her head. "How? I mean, you couldn't be talking about interbreeding."

"Of course not." His tentacles smoothed. "We do what you would call genetic engineering. We know you had begun to do it yourselves a little, but it's foreign to you. We do it naturally. We must do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation."

"We all do it naturally to some degree," she said warily. "Sexual reproduction-"

"The ooloi do it for us. They have special organs for it. They can do it for you too-make sure of a good, viable gene mix. It is part of our reproduction, but it's much more deliberate than what any mated pair of humans have managed so far."

"We're not hierarchical, you see. We never were. But we are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life-seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a minuscule cell within a cell-a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies. Do you understand me?"

"I understand your words. Your meaning, though.. . it's as alien to me as you are."

"That's the way we perceived your hierarchical drives at first." He paused. "One of the meanings of Oankali is gene trader. Another is that organelle-the essence of ourselves, the origin of ourselves. Because of that organelle, the ooloi can perceive DNA and manipulate it precisely."

"And they do this. . . inside their bodies?"

"Yes."

"And now they're doing something with cancer cells inside their bodies?" "Experimenting, yes."

"That sounds. . . a long way from safe."

"They're like children now, talking and talking about possibilities." "What possibilities?"

"Regeneration of lost limbs. Controlled malleability. Future Oankali may be much less frightening to potential trade partners if they're able to reshape themselves and look more like the partners before the trade. Even increased longevity, though compared to what you're used to, we're very long-lived now."

"All that from cancer."

"Perhaps. We listen to the ooloi when they stop talking so much. That's when we find out what our next generations will be like."

"You leave all that to them? They decide?"

"They show us the tested possibilities. We all decide."

He tried to lead her into his family's woods, but she held back. "There's something I need to understand now," she said. "You call it a trade. You've taken something you value from us and you're giving us back our world. Is that it? Do you have all you want from us?"

"You know it isn't," he said softly. "You've guessed that much."

She waited, staring at him.

"Your people will change. Your young will be more like us and ours more like you. Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified and if we learn to regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies, we'll share those abilities with you. That's part of the trade. We're overdue for it."

"It is crossbreeding, then, no matter what you call it."

"It's what I said it was. A trade. The ooloi will make changes in your reproductive cells before conception and they'll control conception."

"How?"

"The ooloi will explain that when the time comes."

She spoke quickly, trying to blot out thoughts of more surgery or some sort of sex with the damned ooloi. "What will you make of us? What will our children be?"

"Different, as I said. Not quite like you. A little like us."

She thought of her son-how like her he had been, how like his father. Then she thought of grotesque, Medusa children. "No!" she said. "No. I don't care what you do with what you've already learned-how you apply it to yourselves-but leave us out of it. Just let us go. If we have the problem you think we do, let us work it out as human beings."

"We are committed to the trade," he said, softly implacable. "No! You'll finish what the war began. In a few generations-" "One generation."

"No!"

He wrapped the many fingers of one hand around her arm. "Can you hold your breath, Lilith? Can you hold it by an act of will until you die?"

"Hold my-?"

"We are as committed to the trade as your body is to breathing. We were overdue for it when we found you. Now it will be done-to the rebirth of your people and mine."

"No!" she shouted. "A rebirth for us can only happen if you let us alone! Let us begin again on our own."

Silence.

She pulled at her arm, and after a moment he let her go. She got the impression he was watching her very closely.

"I think I wish your people had left me on Earth," she whispered. "If this is what they found me for, I wish they'd left me." Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears.

He sat down on the bare ground, and after a minute of surprise, she sat opposite him, not knowing why, simply following his movement.

"I can't unfind you," he said. "You're here. But there is... a thing I can do. It is. . .deeply wrong of me to offer it. I will never offer it again."

"What?" she asked barely caring. She was tired from the walk, overwhelmed by what he had told her. It made no sense. Good god, no wonder he couldn't go home-even if his home still existed. Whatever his people had been like when they left it, they must be very different by now-the children of the last surviving human beings would be different.

"Lilith?" he said.

She raised her head, stared at him.

"Touch me here now," he said, gesturing toward his head tentacles, "and I'll sting you. You'll die-very quickly and without pain."

She swallowed.

"If you want it," he said.

It was a gift he was offering. Not a threat. "Why?" she whispered. He would not answer.

She stared at his head tentacles. She raised her hand, let it reach toward him almost as though it had its own will, its own intent. No more Awakenings. No more questions. No more impossible answers. Nothing.

Nothing.

He never moved. Even his tentacles were utterly still. Her hand hovered, wanting to fall amid the tough, flexible, lethal organs. It hovered, almost brushing one by accident.

She jerked her hand away, clutched it to her. "Oh god," she whispered. "Why didn't I do it? Why can't I do it?"

He stood up and waited uncomplaining for several minutes until she dragged herself to her feet. "You'll meet my mates and one of my children now," he said. "Then rest and food, Lilith."

She looked at him, longing for a human expression. "Would you have done it?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Why?" "For you."