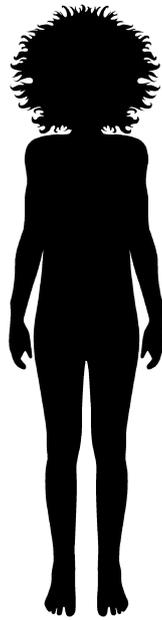


Nimbus

By Tero Niemi and Anne Salminen



A Science Fiction Novel

Original work: *Nimbus ja tähdet*
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And God Wove Rugs of Her own Hair

LFT 200, Earth

In one of his many star catalogues, the diligent astronomer W. J. Luyten listed all the known stars with large proper motions. Two stars in the list were labeled with the row numbers 199 and 200. I don't think Mr. Luyten was entirely aware of what he was doing when he catalogued these stars.

Looking through the darkly-tinted window of the orbital shuttle, I could see the reddish silhouette of a star. I had been told it was still named Two Hundred, even though I think even a small star deserves a better name than just a row number. One ninety-nine is at least named Far, despite being relatively close, just a few hundred astronomical units away.

A young woman approached me. Her brown eyes seemed familiar in an indistinct sort of way.

“Sister's weight will increase,” she warned me, smiling pleasantly.

I nodded to her, even though I wasn't sure if she would understand the meaning of the gesture. The woman's suit was made of a thin blue material, and it had legs. Her hair curled attractively around white hairclips.

“The increase is entirely normal,” she continued. “Sister's weight will increase to two, but then it will return to one when we reach Earth. If Sister begins to feel uncomfortable, she may lower the seatback.”

“Thank you,” I said, nodding, and she smiled at me warmly again. I watched her as she continued on to the next passenger.

She stirred strange feelings in me. I wasn't used to having another person look after my welfare in such a tender way. It was pleasant in a confusing sort of way, even though she didn't know I had been through planetary landings before. Or that I'm not her sister.

I lowered the seatback and then felt the pilot changing the orientation of the ship. I

instinctively leaned in the opposite direction. The ice cubes clink in my closed glass. It was strange to have nothing to do but watch them melt.

I took the glass from its holder and shook it. It was probably just flavored water; at least I couldn't detect any alcohols or other narcotic agents from the flavor. Usually someone always comes up with a way to contaminate the algae tank with yeast fungus or invents a fashionable way of drinking synthetic hydrocarbons.

I may have leaned my seat a little too far back. I tilted my head back even farther and saw the face of the man sitting behind me. There was a lot of gray in his hair. He leisurely watched me in my lowered.

“Daughter's first time?”

I shook my head, rolling it against the seat. “Second,” I answered.

I had been here before. But everything was different.

«Ah, an airport. The gateway to civilization,» said Talamus.

“How can anyone like airports?” I asked myself, trying to get used to the feeling of weight. The brightly lit gangway was long and its floor didn't move. The people walked quietly in a line and I tried to be part of them, at least in some way.

I didn't recognize the airport or the city it belonged to. The people felt different, and even the name of the planet had changed. The last time it was Fénelon, but now everyone just calls it Earth. Earth—like dust, sand, or rock.

The walls of the gangway turned transparent, and the terminal building opened up below. I stopped instinctively, and the people behind me crowded past. I didn't mind. I just let them by.

The hall below was filled with people. There were so many of them, and they and they all seemed so similar in appearance off in the distance. The only thing disrupting the

uniformity was their clothing, colorful swaths of fabric draped beautifully about them. The roof of the building arched high overhead, its long luminous surfaces forming a regular pattern, some sort of many-pointed star.

I realized I'd been left alone and reluctantly continued my descent to the ground level of the terminal building. I tried to walk under the arches, but found only a flat glass surface blocking my way. I almost ran into it.

"Sister's identification," said a young man from behind a tall table, motioning me to approach. I had walked past him without noticing.

I walked back and dug my co-op shares and travel tickets out of my bag. Finally I found the flat square, one side of which displayed a portrait of me based only on light intensity. I looked a little strange, and I wasn't looking straight into the lens.

The young man made a copy of the card and returned the original to me. I found my baggage claim ticket in my bag and tried handing that to him as well.

He shook his head and smiled. "Lower down. Please follow the four greens," he said, indicating the narrow stripes on the floor. "Sister may partake of the air and the water."

"Air and water," I replied, trying to put all my things back in my belt pack. This time the glass surface let me through, and the noises of the terminal's great hall washed over me.

There were people everywhere, and they were all tall and slender. Their skin was darker than my own, and their hair shone a deep black. Some of the older people had white in their hair, but they appeared to be proud of it. The people looked strong and vibrant in their long clothing, and the jeweled pins that held the fabrics on sparkled brightly. I just clutched my belt pack, feeling small and naked in their midst.

"There certainly are a lot of them," I whispered to myself. There were altogether too many people, and they all seemed to know where they were going. I just followed the four green stripes on the floor, desperately wanting to take my shoes off and rub the soles of my

feet. It was always like that after a long period of weightlessness.

«Eight point five million inhabitants.»

I kept my shoes on my feet and my eyes fixed on the four green lines on the floor.

“How many of them survived in the end?” I asked, even though I already knew.

«Four.»

Some catastrophe had destroyed nearly the entire original colony. Four people rebuilt the entire society, starting from nothing. Everything had changed: the names, the customs, even the language. They even wrote in a different way, using some sort of syllabic notation of their own invention. I couldn't even understand their numbers. Talamus had told me it was a base-five numeral system.

«Quite the family resemblance.»

I lifted my gaze from the floor and nodded.

Four people. A mother and her three children. Two daughters and a son.

“Unbelievable...” I replied, not knowing how I should continue the sentence. A mother, two daughters, and a son—filling an entire planet.

«An unbelievably high-quality gene pool,» Talamus prompted, and I could hardly disagree. «Did you notice the pattern on the ceiling?» he asked. «It was symbolic too, the whole place is saturated with it.»

I gazed upwards and immediately almost ran into something. It was a decorative pillar of some sort and had several particularly mechanical-looking machines built into it.

«The longest of the star's points is the Creator Mother. The three others are Mother Light, Mother Strength, and Father First. The twelve smaller points are their children: Daughter Love, Son Sympathy, Daughter Wisdom...»

I had lost the green stripes on the floor. I searched for them desperately.

«You are spinning around,» Talamus informed me.

Yes, I know. “I lost the stripes,” I said, feeling the proximity of the surrounding people beginning to weigh on me.

I now knew where my feeling of nakedness was coming from. I missed my pressure suit. In a pressure suit, the whole world was safely at a distance, somewhere on the other side of the layers of insulation and helmet glass. All this was pushing in too close.

«Remember that sane people don't talk to themselves. Someone to your right was trying to get your attention just now. Hard to say though, since you're turning about so much.»

“Sorry,” I patted my belt pack and turned around one more time. I could see some sort of room or restaurant, but there were no chairs in it. The sign had a string of foreign symbols, and the people inside were just standing around and leaning on things.

Between me and the room was a thick window, and I couldn't see anyone through it I felt like talking with.

«That man, there on the left, the not-so-young-looking one.»

Now I noticed him. He was leaning against a surface next to the pane of glass, and at his feet was a flat box, on the side of which the letters UNICORNIS XXIII had been carefully copied in Roman script.

I waved my hand, and the man turned to look at me, with a slightly astonished look on his face. I knocked on the glass next to the word Unicornis and pointed to myself. His expression slowly turned to one of understanding, and he began looking around anxiously, searching for a way to get to me.

Luckily he succeeded in finding a way out, since I had no clue about how to enter the room. He arrived with the box in tow. It had an integrated handle to make it easier to carry.

“I didn't...” he began, but then he went silent and just extended his hand. He was taller than me, and the loose piece of cloth he was wearing was held by a silver clasp.

«You're supposed to shake it,» Talamus informed me, but I still looked at the hand warily. I took it. It was large and warm. He shook my hand and then released it.

“Sister Nimbus Lambda?” he asked.

“Just Nimbus,” I answered “...and I'm not your sister,” I added, almost unconsciously.

“Not a sister?” he said, confused. Dark hair hung loosely over his forehead. It were thinner on the top and some white hairs had strayed into the mix. “Sister does not...” he said, beginning a new sentence, but then stopped short again. “You're not a sister?”

«Don't tease people,» Talamus said, chiding me. He was right.

“You may call me sister,” I said. “Even daughter, if you wish.”

He nodded, visibly relieved. “Father Sprouting Plant,” he said, extending his hand again, but then he remembered that we had already been through that step. “Sister's appearance was not at all...what was expected.”

I looked down at myself and saw my breasts. My shirt was still strangely tight, even though I already had them reduced. “They're almost bearable. I fixed them immediately after Kappa Fornacis.”

«I think he's referring to your hair.»

“Hair?” I stroked my disheveled hair, finally understanding.

I was the only light-haired person in the star system.

Luckily Father Plant was along to arrange things. The local transportation system consisted of a network of private rail cars, and I hadn't had any inkling of how uncommon a unit a standard two-cubic-meter crate could be in a planetary transportation system.

In fact, I only understood it fully when I saw the box in the center of my hotel room floor. Some of the room's furniture had needed to be removed.

«Analogue,» Talamus said, commenting on the data connections. I didn't even try to connect him or anything else to them, because the interface was already taken up by some kind of manually-operated device, and I didn't want to break anything.

The next day I had at least three meetings scheduled, two with representatives of local businesses and some kind of interview. I threw myself onto the bed, discovering how hard it was.

“I don't like the mattress,” I eventually said aloud.

«Then sleep on the floor.»

I thought quietly to myself.

“You're right.” Who was I to complain. On this planet, gravitational acceleration was five meters per second squared. LHS 129 has a planet whose gravity was four times heavier, and people live there too.

I tried for a moment to picture the difficulties they would have in the bedroom.

«Checklist?» suggested Talamus.

“Checklist,” I agreed.

«Checklist. Oxygen: present. Radiation: tolerable. Biology: the active antibodies in your blood will keep your natural defenses in overdrive for twenty more days, which is insufficient. The population mass is so large that it is impossible to make any kind of projection about mutations. Take care of yourself, and wash your hands before you eat.»

“Do I have to eat?”

«I doubt you can avoid it. You will get hungry though.»

“Damn.”

«At the first sign of biohazard, back to Virgo. Remember we're already fifty hours away. Security?»

I glanced at the door. “I locked the door, but it was an electronic lock. I don't know

what sensors there might be.”

«In any case, the society seems safe, surprisingly so.»

I agreed. There were just too many people.

«Either their public statistics have been cleaned up, or we have landed in some sort of semi-utopia. Standard security. Needle gun?»

I dug a small card out of my shirt breast pocket. The readout on the lower edge reported a full charge and twelve ampoules. I placed the card back in my pocket. Its outline was visible through the fabric, even though I was already lying on my back, and my breasts should be under the influence of five meters per second squared.

“Why in the universe are women supposed to have breasts? They’re nothing but a nuisance, always in the way.”

«Because first there were the buttocks.»

“Buttocks?” I didn’t understand the connection. I turned my head and tried to look at my own behind. “I thought they were on the other side.”

«Ah,» sighed Talamus, «this is a long story. On four-legged animals the buttocks were an erotic cue that helped in mating.»

“And now breasts are?”

«When four-legged creatures moved on to being two-legged, mating also began to occur from the front, and the buttocks had to be moved in front as well.»

In front. I stared at my breasts. “Now you’re just anthropomorphizing.”

«Well, males just mated more with the females whose glands looked more like buttocks. It’s called natural selection. Security?»

“I don’t understand biology. It’s so irrational.”

«Security...»

“Needle gun full. Hopefully it won’t be needed.”

«Just as long as you keep it within reach. Somewhere handy. Water: presumably present, but no information about purity, as with bio. Food: also the same as with bio, just as long as we access to funds. Communication: verbal. Interlang's old vocabulary works, but we sound a bit silly, and you're bad at adopting new accents. Incidentally, try not to speak to me when other people are present. They can't hear when I reply, and it could give the impression of...well, instability. Social status: arranged, and we even have some degree of human rights—at least you do. You are a recognized and registered citizen, but there is a small problem. How many people know who you are?»

“A few dozen. In any case, it isn't common knowledge.”

«Exactly, and it's better that it stays that way. You need clothing, and something should be done about your head.»

“People here don't dye their hair.” At least I hadn't noticed anyone who had done it. They also seemed to lack any kind of cosmetics, but I tended to overlook such things.

«We'll come up with something. Just keep a low profile. Culture: religio-ideological, claiming to be open. An extremely rare combination, extremely unlikely. Private ownership: permitted, but heavily regulated. Laws: complicated and theologically-based, but fortunately public. Possible to work things out with people by talking. I don't believe that even you will be able to offend these people so much that it would endanger your safety.»

“Thanks.”

«That is just an assumption. Technological level: low, in some places extremely low, but space commercialized out of necessity. Property: Virgo in dock, Unicornis in parking orbit. Maintenance: work scheduled. This is why we are here. Economy: only one planetary currency in use, and we even have some of it.»

I didn't feel like digging the co-op shares out of my bag. “Yes, we still have a little. There is some sort of banking system in use here too.”

«More like a cooperative. No money is coming in, so we'll have to live on what we have. Budget: you never feel like making a budget. Unknown factors?»

I looked around. "None visible."

«Cosmic-level powers are not coming into play, at least not for now. End list. Final result: green, with qualifications. No immediate danger of death which we would know how to prepare for.»

That sounded just fine. I moved on the bed and some sort of shock-dampening system bounced me. I tried again.

"Boing!" I said, bouncing higher.

I usually used one hundred kiloseconds as the base unit of my own daily rhythm, but the day of Earth was based on the planet's rotation, which occurred once every forty-one thousand seconds.

That changed the concept of tomorrow slightly. The local residents had learned to time their lives according to the light time of their planet, but for me getting used to other people's time was always difficult.

It also explained why I toss for hours in the hard bed, burying my head under the blanket until I finally succeeded in falling asleep.

Then I awoke to the sound of some sort of electrical device.

It was completely dark, and I just drew the blanket tighter over me, but the noise wouldn't go away.

«Nimbus?» Talamus began cautiously, «I think someone is at the door.»

"The door?" I moaned and then grunted, dead tired. I fumbled at the objects around the bed, finally succeeded in finding the hand switch for the table light.

The source of the sound was a buzzer, and it was still making the noise. I staggered to

my feet, rubbing my face, and walked toward the door.

«Nimbus...clothes...»

I stopped in the middle of the floor and looked at myself. My breasts were swinging in front of me. They were bare. I was naked. I slept without any clothes on. It was hard enough to sleep in full gravity on a hard bed without rolling myself into knots with clothes.

I didn't bother getting dressed. I just snatched the blanket off the bed and wrapped it around myself.

"Who's there?" I yelled at the door, but received no reply; the buzzer just rang. I swore, half to myself. I wouldn't have been in the best of moods even without this.

I opened the door. In the hall stood two tall men in clean-cut, simple clothing.

"What?" I asked them angrily, clutching my blanket.

"Nimbus Lambda?" said one of the men, looking at me.

"Just Nimbus," I answered.

"We request that Nimbus Lambda accompany us," the man said, continuing. I slowly realized he had left the "sister" off on purpose.

"Where?" I asked, looking them both over, not at all liking the way this situation was shaping up. I took a step back and at that moment one of them forcefully grabbed my blanket.

"Hey!" I growled, pulling back. "This is mine!"

"Come with us immediately," the man repeated, as if nothing were happening, even though the other one was still pulling on my blanket.

"I'm just getting...my clothing!" I replied, wrenching the blanket back. I turned around, but was grabbed again, more firmly this time, and my feet rose from the ground.

"Immediately," said the voice. I thrashed and inhaled, preparing to scream as loud as I could, but then I felt something cold against my neck. It stung, and the air flowed out of my lungs uncontrollably. I looked at my hands, hanging limply. The whole world fell away.

Sharp jolts and clattering. Lights flashing.

I opened my eyes a crack. It was hard to see anything. It was dark, and I could feel my body shake with each jarring bump. Lights moved somewhere above, flitting by.

I still had the blanket around me. I sat bound with some sort of buckles, looking into the gloom. Each flash of light was accompanied by bump. In front of me I could see the backs of other seats. The people on the other side of them were speaking to each other in hushed tones. They were the same men as before. The room around me was a car meant for personal transport, and we were moving.

I closed my eyes and tried to think, but my head felt fuzzy. Something had been injected into me with a needle gun, a primitive one.

I opened my eyes again, but more cautiously, and two things entered my mind: the feeling that I was not in control of the situation and the voice of Talamus saying something about security.

One of the men moved. I closed my eyes but left them open a crack. The man turned and looked at me, but apparently he didn't notice any change. I stayed motionless.

They still thought I was drugged. Someone somewhere had measured the dose to the milligram, trying to guess my weight. They didn't know that the active antibodies in my blood would speed up the recognition and processing of foreign chemicals. They didn't know I was already awake.

The man turned to face forward again, and I started searching for something close, anything. I didn't know where I was being taken, but I didn't want to go there, not like this, dressed only in a blanket, without anyone knowing where I was.

There was nothing around me. The lights flashed again, and all I could see was the bare interior of the car. I was belted into the seat, but I could get the restraints open if

necessary. The clattering of the tracks echoed threateningly. I feared the sound would end far too soon.

The doors were automatic and would only open once we had come to a stop. Above the door was some kind of mechanism, a manual lever under a transparent membrane, with lines of red text running around it. I pulled my hand out from under the blanket and reached out cautiously, watching the backs of the seats and the men in front of me. They talked to each other without looking back, keeping their voices low.

The transparent membrane yielded a little under my fingers. I pushed harder. One of the men turned his head to say something to the other, but then stopped short, looking back. He looked at me, and we stared at each other. He didn't say a word. He opened his mouth, looking more confused than anything else. The lights flashed past us.

I pushed my fingers harder still, and the membrane split. I found the lever with the tips of my fingers and pulled with all my might. The lever slipped from my fingers, and all I could hear was the banging of metal as a rush of air surged over me. There was no door anymore. It had separated from its latches and disappeared somewhere in the surge of air. I stared out into the darkness, unable to see anything. As each light passed, I could make out some crude structures, but the car was still moving far too quickly.

Someone yelled, and metal began to grate against metal. The safety belts tightened around me, and I could feel our speed dropping. I tried to unlatch the belt, but it wasn't fastened like I thought. I stopped trying and pushed myself out underneath the belts. My foot got caught. As the car stopped with a jerk, one of the men rotated his seat. I struggled free and stepped out of the vehicle. The air smelled of burned oil, and the rough gravel under my feet was cold and slimy.

I tried to tug the blanket along with me, but it wouldn't come loose. The car's interior lights came on, and I saw one of the men standing right next to me.

I backed away as the man searched for something under his clothes. Suddenly he looked over his shoulder and retreated back into the car.

I saw what he was afraid of: I was standing in the middle of a cluster of rails, and another car was coming toward me. Warning lights illuminated the passageway as I stumbled away across the rails.

A blast of air, followed by a metallic clatter and a rushing noise, knocked me down onto the black gravel. I got up and tried to run, but I stumbled on another set of rails in the darkness and fell against a wall. It was metal instead of rock. I followed it with my fingers, hearing voices behind me, people shouting. I opened my eyes and saw lights approaching. Another car was coming toward me.

I didn't know what to do. I pressed my cheek against the metal wall, closed my eyes tight, and tried to make myself as flat as possible. The approaching car braked, screeching, and I could hear that it was already too late. I held my breath and felt the stream of air against my naked back. The breaks kept screeching until the noise was cut off by a grinding crash of bending, tearing metal.

I trembled, gasping for breath. My feet felt limp, but I floundered into motion, trying to grope my way forward through the darkness. My hands ran into what felt like a step. There were more of them, and they led upward.

The heavy hatchway door opened with a shove. I managed to open it all the way and stumbled out into the bright light. I kicked the hatch shut behind me and stared at it as I backed away.

The door did not move. It didn't seem like anyone was following me. At least not yet. My feet were still shaking, and I wrapped my hands around my bare body, looking around to see where I was. The narrow alleyway was filled with untidy rows of unmarked recycling bins, which I walked past.

I pulled back quickly. A strange city spread out before me. The buildings rose up, reaching toward the dome structures above me, and the broad street was filled with people passing by.

I sat hiding behind a large bin, holding my knees with my fingers. I tried to choke down the confused feeling of shock. My whole body was trembling. I looked toward the end of the alley, with its large, metal hatch, and going back underground didn't feel like such a bad idea anymore.

If I had been unconscious for even an hour, I could already be dozens of kilometers away. In two hours I could have been taken hundreds of kilometers. I tried to remember the map I had seen, but all I could visualize was a tangle of colored lines. The more I thought, the less I knew, and in the end I couldn't even remember the name of my hotel.

Eight million people required hundreds of domed cities, and I was in one of them. I parted my knees slightly and stared at the soles of my feet. The heels and toes were black from walking on the oily gravel, as were my fingers, and even my knees had dirty handprints on them.

"What next?" I asked silently. What could be worse than finding myself naked and dirty in the middle of an unfamiliar metropolis, with nothing? Even Talamus was still sitting on the nightstand in my belt pack.

I curled up smaller against the recycling bins. They smelled of sulfur, and their sides were warm from the fermenting biomass. I rubbed my black fingers against them, but I don't think my hands got any cleaner.

I tried to think rationally, but my head was empty. I'm a self-reliant person; I've traveled between stars. I'm not supposed to be sitting naked in the shadows of some alleyway hiding behind dumpsters. The more I thought about it, the more unreal it all started to feel.

Then I looked at myself, and the sense of reality returned painfully. This was probably

going to be one of those stories I never tell anyone. “I give up,” I said out loud with a sigh and then remembered that sane people aren’t supposed to talk to themselves. There was an empty space in my stomach too. It might have been hunger.

The feeling of despair in my chest was crushing and brought a tearful feeling to my palate. Crying might help. I considered this, but then I started to get angry. This situation couldn’t be all that bad. I was alive, and all of my body parts were functional. My knees had some scrapes, and I had stubbed my toe, but that was nothing. I was also not completely stupid—what else can a person ask for?

I stood up and listened to the noise of the street and the echoes of the footfalls of the passers-by. I would only give if I died, I thought to myself, and my feet moved. I walked straight out into the street, feeling nothing. I knew that people were stepping around me, but I didn’t look at them.

The dome’s lights scattered and reflected a soft, clear light everywhere. The street curved toward the edge of the dome, and if I walked on it far enough, I would probably find some kind of city center, a station, something. The lower floors of the tall, old buildings were filled with large windows and colorful signs, but they didn’t tell me anything.

I felt in my back how people were stopping to stare. I heard quiet whispering and alarmed snatches of conversation, but fortunately no one was laughing out loud. It still felt like my face was burning though. I tried to walk straight ahead, but I found myself staggering and looking over my shoulder. Each time I just saw more unfamiliar people staring after me.

They were different from the people at the airport. These were tall and dark-haired in the same way, but their clothing wasn’t as colorful and their facial expressions weren’t as intense. They were more ordinary and worn, but that didn’t make me feel any better.

There was a small booth built into the wall of a building. It was missing a door, and I could see inside it. On the back wall, among the many passages of text and notices was some

version of the hand-operated communications device that had been on the table in my hotel room. I hesitated, but then stepped inside, especially after I noticed that the booth did have a door of sorts.

The folding door rattled and its surface was pasted full of differently-colored pieces of paper as well. I inspected the machine in the dark. On one side was a line of switches and a long metal bar that ran into some sort of metal box. I picked up what looked like the handset and flipped some switches. They clicked, but nothing happened. I even tried pulling on the thin metal bar, but it wouldn't budge.

The switches had similar markings to the ones in the text on the wall. I tried to repeat the strings of text on the wall using the switches, but still nothing happened. The booth started to feel confining, and I began to get discouraged. I slammed the receiver back on the cradle and opened the door.

The street was covered with people, and they were all looking at me.

I hung onto the edge of the door, not knowing what to think anymore. I took a step, and the people gave way. They stayed a safe distance from me, but as I walked, they surrounded me on every side. The oldest of them were the nearest, strong-looking men and grave-faced women. No one smiled or spoke. From farther off I heard whispering and some talking, but no one around me said anything.

I didn't want to look any of them in the eye. It was getting hard to move anywhere anymore, and it began to feel like someone should say something. The people's expressions were not angry, not even mocking or surprised.

They all seemed to revere me in some way, but that only felt more frightening. Narrow stairs led up into the next stone building. Young boys had climbed up on the handrails, and I thought I could understand their expressions. They didn't seem as devout as those of the old women closer to me.

I stopped, and the people stopped with me. I turned toward the stairs of the stone building, and the older people hurriedly shooed the young boys away from the rails.

The boys disappeared into the throng, hooting and hollering. I climbed the emptying stairs a few steps, and, turning, sat down. The people looked at me. The stone surface felt cold against my behind; I leaned on my knees and looked back at them calmly. They were avoiding direct eye contact.

“So,” I finally said out loud, “I think I’m lost.”

No one replied. A large, gray-haired man standing next to me crouched, with some effort, and sat on the ground in front of me. Others began to follow his example, and in the end only the people furthest off remained standing. They wouldn’t have been able to see anything otherwise.

I stared at them, and they stared at me. I couldn’t guess how many of them there were. At least two hundred, and more kept arriving.

“Um,” I tried again, but was forced to stop. An old woman approached and set a round ceramic dish containing a clear liquid in front me.

It had to be water, but I didn’t know what I should do with it. The ceramic dish was far too large to be a drinking container.

The woman wouldn’t leave, remaining bowed as if waiting for something. I was supposed to do something with her gift. I descended the steps and placed my hands in the water, rubbing my fingers and getting some of the filth off.

“Thank you...” I whispered aloud and shook my hands. I wiped them on my thighs. I could have washed my feet as well, but I didn’t dare.

Without saying a word, the old woman took the ceramic dish and carried it away.

The people looked at me, and I began to feel like they were waiting for me to do something. A young woman in a long dress stepped before me, and I could see in her face

how much she feared me. She proffered a bundle wrapped in cloth.

I accepted it hesitantly, and the young woman threw herself at my feet, bowing down and pressing her forehead to the ground. I tried to say something, but I became aware of a quiet breathing sound and started to suspect the bundle in my lap might be alive.

I carefully unwrapped the gray cloth and found the face of a very small child. The child was bright red. Her breathing halting, and her skin burned my fingers. She was sick. She tried to cry, but she no longer had the strength.

As I looked at the people around me, I suddenly understood their behavior. They believed I was some kind of deity. They thought I knew how to do miracles.

The young woman was still bowing before me. She wanted me to heal this child.

“I can’t...” I said quietly, holding the child in my lap, “I don’t know how. I’m just...”

A human being. I didn’t know how to heal, to do miracles with only a touch.

The young woman would not move away, and all the people were staring at me. I stood there, swaying silently, holding the sick child close to my body. The fever was far too high for such a small child.

I had to do something.

“Rise,” I commanded. The young woman lifted her face hesitantly. I gestured for her to come closer.

She obeyed, still not daring to look at me. I took hold of her gray clothing and tugged her closer. The fabric was held in place by a silver-colored metal clasp with a bowed pin as the locking mechanism. I unfastened it and allowed the woman to retreat.

The pin looked sharp enough. I pressed it against my finger.

“Ow,” I whispered and squeezed my fingertip, forcing out a large, red drop of blood. I put my finger to the sick child’s lips. The mouth clenched around my finger tip, and I just hoped for the best. I had nothing else to give except for the active antibodies in my blood. I

knew a few drops wouldn't heal the child, but the antibodies might succeed in identifying the cause of the sickness and getting the child's immune system to fight it in the right way.

I removed my finger from the child's mouth, and it continued to run with blood. I might have overdone it with the pin.

All of a sudden, the child let out a heart-rending cry. Startled, I almost put my hands to my ears, but then the young woman took the child from me. She calmly bore her breast and pushed the child against it.

We looked at each other. I handed the metal clasp back to her, and she retreated slowly, still looking at me. At that moment, I knew that I had to get out of there.

I stood up and strode toward the old woman sitting closest to me. She was wearing a long cloak, which was fastened with a gray metal chain. The woman turned to look at me. "Please forgive me," I whispered, loosening the cloak. It was long and made of sufficiently thick fabric, and it had a hood.

"I will pay for this...someday," I said to her. The people around me started to get up. I threw the hood over my head and wrapped the cloak tighter around my shoulders. "I'm sorry," was all I could say to them as I hurried past. The people stepped aside, and I ran, holding the cloak firmly as the cobbled street sped beneath my feet.

I ran forever. The city was just too big.

I sat down against the wall of a grubby building on the edge of an empty square. I squeezed the cloak closer around me; the cloth was sturdy and beautiful, and only my feet stuck out from under it.

My toes were gray from the dust, and I could no longer tell which one of them was sore. They all looked the same, and my stomach was achingly hollow. I was hungry, and the feeling of hunger was causing strange things to happen in the body. All of my senses felt

sharper.

I peeked at the city from under the hood. I could see everything clearly and smell everything around me. The dust, the grime, the pungent odor of the cloth over me, and something sweet and hot.

On the far side of the square was a small stall where an old woman was selling something. There was a large, black, iron plate over a gas flame, and the woman was throwing masses of something white onto it with a ladle. I heard the sharp hiss of sputtering grease and a sweet, hot smell spread through the air.

I leaned against the dirty wall, holding the cloak around me. I needed to talk to someone, someone I could trust who would understand what I was trying to say.

As I thought this, the woman poured on another ladleful. The smell of hot grease kept muddling my thoughts. I would have to go somewhere else if I wanted to be able to think straight.

I just couldn't seem to leave.

I had to come up with a simple, believable story. I came from space and two strange men kidnapped me naked from my bed and took me underground. That was neither simple nor believable. I was robbed? That sounded much simpler. I was robbed. Please help. It was even almost true.

Someone stopped next to me. I shifted the hood back and raised my head. I saw a woman with modest features, and her dark hair and peaceful face seemed strangely familiar. Brown eyes gazed into mine as she offered me something.

I took it. It was a thin polymer square, a co-op share. Startled, I turned to look at her again, but the woman was already walking away.

“Shiobhan?” I asked under my breath.

She had given me money.

The sugary dough fried on the iron plate until it was brittle. I chewed on the lightly colored, round wafers; I had gotten three of them, and they were still hot enough to burn my fingers. I couldn't wait for them to cool off. I tried to catch all the falling crumbs in my lap, feeling the grease and sugar melt on my tongue. "Good..." I said to myself, and tears flowed down my cheeks. I dried them and started giggling—I couldn't help it. I ate the crumbs off my cloak. I wiped the tears from my eyes again.

I got change too, but it was made of metal. I turned the partial shares over in my lap and bit into the edge of another wafer. The metal bits had images pressed into them, and each had a hole in the middle. The holes in the smaller pieces of money were narrower, but the larger ones seemed familiar in some way.

There had been a metal bar next to the communications device. Its diameter matched the holes in the larger metal pieces; I was sure of it. I gulped down the last of the wafers quickly, but I still ate all the crumbs from my lap. Then I started searching for another one of those machines.

Across the square was a platform surrounded by a row of pillars, and on the side of one pillar was a device similar to the one I had seen before. I picked up the receiver and tried to put one of the larger pieces of metal into the device. It slid down the bar, and I heard a click.

A quiet hum started to come from the receiver. I looked at the rows of switches in front of me, but this unit didn't have a single piece of paper pasted to it or any text written on its sides. I pushed switches at random, but nothing seemed to happen. I wasn't going to give up. I kept pushing until I heard another mechanical click, and the hum from the receiver stopped.

"Area?" said a female voice in the receiver. "The caller has exceeded the first fifth."

I quickly tried to figure out what to say. There was no point in trying to contact the hotel; Talamus wasn't able to answer. I hadn't plugged him into the data transfer line, and he wasn't capable of using mechanical devices. He lacked the limbs.

"Area?" said the voice from the receiver again.

"Orbital," I said, "Great Light shipyard, hangar eight." I groaned and tried again.

"Hangar one, third-fifth, Virgo."

"Sister has exceeded the first fifth," the female voice repeated matter-of-factly.

"I'm sorry!" I pleaded. "This is an emergency! Orbital, Great Light shipyard, hangar one, third-fifth, Virgo."

I heard only quiet clicking until the white noise behind the voice went silent.

"Can anyone hear me?" I asked, but the receiver only kept clicking.

I didn't dare let it out of my fingers. I clutched it and waited.

"Great Light, one third-fifth. Virgo. The caller has reached the operating authority point for Nimbus Lambda."

"Talamus!" I shouted. I recognized the voice even though it sounded raspy coming across so many connections and radio links.

"Nimbus?" asked the astonished voice.

"Talamus," I said and almost felt like crying again. "I'm lost..."

Suddenly the device crackled loudly.

"What was that?"

"You're calling from a mechanical pay phone, and your money is running out. Do you have another coin?"

"Coin?" I examined the pieces of metal. One of them could still fit. I dropped it along the bar and heard a click on the line.

"There we go," said Talamus. "Where exactly did you lose me?"

I swallowed silently. “I left you on the nightstand...”

“On the nightstand?”

“I was...kidnapped, from the hotel. But I managed to escape. I don’t know where I am...and my money is running out.”

And I didn’t have any clothing, but I didn’t have the nerve to tell him that.

“Stay where you are. Can you tell me anything about your location?”

I looked around, but didn’t see anything that I understood.

“No...” I began, and all of a sudden I heard a new click. “Talamus!”

“Stay where you are,” Talamus ordered. “Do you have any idea who down below can and can’t be trusted?”

“No.” I didn’t have any idea.

“Surely you are still on the planet?” Talamus asked, but after that nothing more came from the receiver: no humming, no hissing, no clicking.

I placed the receiver back in its cradle and sat down on the ground next to the pillar. I only had one piece of money left, and it was very small. And I was still hungry.

A metal bell jingled above me. It was somewhere inside the device. I stood up and lifted the receiver.

“Hello?” I inquired cautiously.

“Talamus here. I called the relay center and found out your location. By the way, they want to bill us an extra fee because you made a long distance call at the local call price. I told them it wouldn’t be a problem.”

It wouldn’t be, I thought, shaking my head.

“I arranged for either Father Quiet Meditation or Father Sprouting Plant to pick you up—if you believe Father Plant can still be trusted.”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t have any idea what had happened.

“In that case, Father Meditation will have to do. Stay where you are.”

I nodded to the machine. I would.

«Low profile,» Talamus said, and I thumped the belt pack with my elbow. I could feel in my bones that I would be hearing about this for a long time to come. I pushed my way out through the car doors, hauling the long containers with me. The people around me stopped to help. Baffled, I thanked them and tried to arrange the bundles better. Luckily the long vacuum-sealed tubes had carrying straps.

«To the left, to Free Air Square. I managed to move the metal industry enterprise meeting to tomorrow, but the meeting with the synthetic materials representative is in ten kiloseconds.»

I wrapped the cloak around myself and started walking with the stream of people toward a long flight of stairs. The cloak was a simple, remarkably common-looking garment. It fit well over the rest of my clothing. I never wanted to give it up. I just hoped it wasn't terribly valuable. I didn't even remember who I had taken it from. The people just became impossible to tell apart.

Luckily all my belongings were still intact. Talamus sulked a bit and gave me a lecture about security, but only because he had been worried.

“The next meeting is the reporter,” I said to myself.

«Not a reporter,» Talamus corrected, «a priest.»

“A priest?”

«You'll see soon enough. On the right should be the Room of Refreshing Waters. Look for a male dressed in dark blue clothing.»

I wondered if it was safe here; the needle gun was loaded and ready in my pocket. The stairs ended, and I arrived at some sort of a central plaza. On the right there seemed to be an

outdoor café, but it didn't look like a room to me.

«Lots of people. Lots of people is safe.»

I didn't think there were all that many people; I had already gotten used to how dense the population was.

A young man was sitting alone at an empty table with an object in front of him that looked like a normal glass of water.

He was dressed in dark blue. I walked up to him and dropped my packages. The metal containers clanged on the stone floor. I sat down and sighed with relief.

He stared at me.

“Nimbus,” I said, “and you are?”

“Father Leafy Bough.”

«This is the right person,» Talamus confirmed, but to me he seemed awfully young to be a father.

“Is Sister really Nimbus Lambda?” Father Bough asked, his eyes sparkling with the kind of zeal that has a tendency to fade with age.

“Just Nimbus,” I said, not understanding what he was so amazed about.

“This is...did Sister...Nimbus really meet the Creator?”

“The Creator?” I asked, puzzled.

«God,» Talamus added, but of course I knew that.

“The Creator Mother,” he repeated.

A young woman came over to us. She was some kind of service person, and she offered us food lists. I took one, but the Father just waved his hand. I handed my own back. “Something...cold,” I said.

“Ice Green?” suggested the woman, and I nodded. She left, and my eyes followed her for a while. I never got used to the fact that everything was done by people.

“Sister Nimbus travels from one star to another, and she visited here one hundred and three generations ago,” Father Bough said.

«One generation is point five zero five giga, one hundred and three generations is 52 giga, or 1,650 Terran sidereal years.»

I waved for Talamus to be silent. “This is my second visit here, and during my first visit I met a person name Shiobhan Mondino, but everything here was different then. I thought that Father was some sort of priest.”

“Father is a priest,” he stated proudly, “but above all a historian.”

“A historian?”

“Sister’s...friend Talamus told me that Sister was the target of some type of attack,” he said in a more serious tone. At that moment the woman returned, bringing me a tall glass filled with a murky green liquid. I would have thanked her, but she had already left so quickly I hadn’t noticed.

“Does Sister intend to press charges against her attackers?” he inquired as I investigated the contents of the glass suspiciously.

“Not for now.” In fact, I had great difficulty remembering the appearance of the men who had kidnapped me. The identifying features that I could have given would fit far too many people on this planet, and even Talamus had failed to get a picture of them. “I’m just going to take care not to be kidnapped a second time.”

“Sister was probably wise to go without pressing charges. As it happens, Sister has created quite a problem.”

“A problem?” I asked, confused.

“A maternal problem.”

«Theological,» explained Talamus.

“When knowledge of Sister’s second coming spread, the Fathers of the Creator’s

Children split into two groups, groups who had long quarreled over other matters as well. One professes the Infinite Divinity of the Creator Mother, while the other proclaims the Equal Sisterhood of All.”

“Which...does Father belong to?” I asked a little hesitantly.

He smiled. “Father does not belong to either; Father swears only to Truth. Father is a historian,” he said with a sort of pride that one rarely hears.

I sampled my drink. The green liquid mostly tasted tart and cold.

“This is why Father asks whether Sister met the Creator Mother when she visited here previously.”

“I suppose Sister did,” I answered.

Father Bough lifted a large metal box from under the table. It was a crudely-constructed machine of some sort.

“Will Sister allow me to record this conversation?” he asked as he set the box on the table.

“Of course,” I answered. He pressed a switch on the box. A belt system began to rotate. I stared at the device, hardly able to believe that it actually worked.

“Conversation with the star traveler Sister Nimbus Lambda, fourth fifth of the first, one hundred and three, interviewer Father Leafy Bough, historian.” Father Bough nodded to signify that everything was ready, and I took another sip from my glass. “Father will inquire about portions of the Great Maelstrom and the Mother’s Story. Is Sister able to tell us something about the Grief of Mother Wisdom and her walk through the airlessness?”

I shook my head. He pointed at the box on the table.

“No,” I said to the box.

“Oh,” he said. “What about the birth of Mother Love?”

“No,” I said again to the box.

“About Father First?”

I shook my head, but then remembered to say “no” to the box.

He was beginning to get desperate. “About the Great Maelstrom?” he tried again.

“No. Nothing about any of that. I visited here before the beginning of your chronology. Wait...” I opened my belt pack and looked for the small permanent printout. “Here.”

Father Bough looked at it in amazement. I wasn’t sure if he had ever seen a color printout before.

The picture wasn’t very good—it was just one frame of Talamus’s recording, and it had been taken with a shoulder camera using a wide-angle lens. In the distorted picture was a small gray room of the sort that family apartments in colony barracks usually are. A dark-haired woman was looking not quite directly into the camera, holding a small girl in her arms while another was clinging to one of her legs. You couldn’t tell from the picture, but she was already pregnant when it was taken. I had heard after I arrived here that the third child had been a boy.

“That is Shiobhan Mondino.” I pointed to the woman. “In her arms is Marcella, and the one hanging from her leg is Debbie. Shiobhan’s husband François Mondino is missing from the picture. He was at the Unicornis Seventeen shipyard at the time the picture was taken.”

He let go of the picture slowly, as if he were afraid to touch it.

“In your language, the Creator Mother and her daughters. Mother Light and Mother Strength—or the other way around; I don’t know about the daughters. Father First hadn’t yet been born in this picture.”

Father Bough looked pale as he stared at the picture. He took his glass of water and drained it in one pull. I got the feeling he hadn’t expect anything so tangible from me.

“How about I tell you slowly what I know?” I suggested, and he nodded. I smiled silently, because he wasn’t remembering to speak into the recorder either.

“Three thousand years ago... That is...”

«One hundred and eighty-seven generations.»

“—one hundred and eighty-seven generations ago, a space ship left Tau Ceti with the intention of colonizing a star named Kappa Fornacis. The space ship traveled through this system and dropped a small group of people and their supplies to orbit your star, Two Hundred. This place was to be a sort of way station, but I won’t try to explain their train of thought, as it was all just a part of Tau Ceti’s second expansion.”

He nodded silently, but I couldn’t tell how much he was really understanding.

“In any case, your planet was colonized, and the colonizing agency was a business corporation from Tau Ceti. Your planet was named Fénelon, and it stayed that way for two hundred years—”

«Twelve and a half generations.»

“—for a period of twelve and a half generations. Near the end of that time, I arrived here from the direction of Gliese 91, the same way I came this time as well. For maintenance, repairs, and to build. Fénelon didn’t have shipyards or space technology, so I was forced to found an entire industry in order to get Unicornis back into flight condition...Father?”

He flinched silently.

“Are you...feeling ok?” I asked. He didn’t seem to be completely awake, and I was afraid he would faint and fall over. I offered him my own glass, and he began to shake his head, but then he accepted the drink and swigged half of it. Luckily, it appeared to wake him up a little.

“I’m always searching for anything interesting,” I said, continuing my story carefully.

“Knowledge and goods that might be worth selling, something exotic and local. At the time,

we were building a heavy water refinery, and I was talking with a young pressure technician. His name was François Mondino, and he told me about his wife, Shiobhan, who didn't have a profession, but had come up with a way to weave rugs."

"Rugs?" Father Bough asked, confused.

"Well...sort of floor cloths, things that are used on the floor to cover the cold metal. I went planetside on Fénelon to see the rugs and thought they were beautiful. Her husband had built her a loom out of metal scavenged from air circulation ducts. When I arrive, Marcella and Debbie were running all over the place. Shiobhan was a quiet and slightly distant-seeming woman, and I listened as she told me in detail about weaving the rugs. The polymer production of the young colony was limited and reserved only for strictly functional purposes, so she collected hair from her family and her friends' families. She had a way of breaking the hair fibers mechanically, and from that she was able to produce rug yarn. The guide threads were synthetic, but in principle she wove rugs from hair."

Father Bough drained the glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"That was my meeting with your Creator Mother. I left and something happened soon afterward. You call it the Great Maelstrom, but we don't know what it really was. It could have been some sort of viral contagion that killed the whole colony, leaving only Shiobhan Mondino and her children in its wake. Perhaps they had some genetic mutation that made them immune, or perhaps it was something else. Whenever we come to a settled planet we do a bioanalysis, but we didn't find any remnants of your Maelstrom. We just don't know."

He nodded; I hoped he understood.

"Did I answer the question?" I asked cautiously.

"Sister..." he said, looking at the glass in front of him. Then he saw the picture. "Oh God..." he said and pressed his hands to his face.

"Be more polite to your Mother," I ordered and then stood up. Then I saw the

containers on the ground.

“Ah yes, I almost forgot.” I lifted one of the containers onto the table and the recorder box bounced on the table.

“What...?” he asked.

“I’ve been lugging these rugs around for over a thousand years and across one hundred light years, and I still haven’t come up with any use for them. Now I entrust them to you. In each container is one rug in a vacuum-sealed and acceleration-protected state. Be careful as you open them, because they really are ...”

«One thousand six hundred and fifty Terran sidereal years, i.e. one hundred and three generations.»

“...one hundred and three generations old.” I looked Father Bough in the face. He stared at me as if witnessing a divine revelation.

“Do you understand that in these containers is fabric made from your gods’ hair?” I asked. “They are vacuum sealed and one hundred and three generations old.”

He nodded slowly and lowered his gaze to the container resting before him.

I had a feeling he still didn’t understand entirely.

“You can keep the picture,” I said and then left.

The car clattered down the tracks. There weren’t many other passengers. Some young girls were bickering amongst themselves, and an old man was reading a thin pamphlet with flashy colored letters on the cover. I dug another printout out of my hip pack. In it, Shiobhan Mondino was turned away from the camera, with only the gray wall in front of her. Debbie was still clinging to her leg.

That was how I remembered her, as a quiet, simple woman, who looked at walls more than at other people.

“Did you know...” I said quietly, “that she gave me money?”

«Money?» Talamus said.

“Yesterday—when I had nothing.” At least the woman had looked just like her.

«A small gene pool easily repeats the same features.»

I nodded. Nothing in her had indicated she would have wanted to start humanity again from nothing, to raise a new nation and become its creator mother. What kind of person was capable of such a thing—when everyone else would have died away? The woman in the picture was looking at the gray wall before her, but perhaps in its place she was seeing something entirely different.

I revered her. It was impossible not to revere her.

“Should I have told him that I have the whole recording?”

«I think you were wise to pass over that. I don’t think those who profess the Infinite Divinity of the Creator Mother will even like what young Father Leafy Bough will pull from his machine. Let’s take care of the synthetics enterprise meeting, but then after that, I would recommend we execute a tactical retreat from this planet.»

One thing was still bothering me. “Talamus...did we cause the Great Maelstrom?”

«By bringing some virus here from Nemesis?»

I nodded. By bringing a new disease from another star.

«We have always been careful—but of course anything is possible.»

That would make us accomplices. I looked at the photograph and asked for forgiveness, but that wouldn’t change anything.

“How does a person become a god?” I asked quietly.

«Actually, you should know,» Talamus said. I didn’t like the way he had said that.

«‘Visitation in the Essential Gift residential area. Archdiocese denies. Hundreds of people saw a glowing being, which they call the Spirit of the Mother.’»

I looked at the old man sitting across from me. Talamus was apparently reading the headlines from his pamphlet.

«Singing your praises. According to eyewitness accounts, the spirit was a ‘being of heavenly beauty who blessed those present and performed a healing miracle with her own blood.’ The archdiocese refutes the existence of the Spirit of the Mother, but the reporter succeeded in tracking down the child who was the subject of the miracle of healing with blood. The child’s mother declined an interview, but she did report that the child’s fever disappeared on the same day.»

I thumped my belt pack with my elbow.

«With her own blood, eh?»

I didn’t respond.

“Do you know?” I said, sniffing, “I may have caught an infection of some kind. I’ve been in too much contact with people.”

«All the more reason to leave quickly.»

I nodded. In a strange way I would miss these people, despite everything that had happened. I looked at my feet, and this time I could see shoes under the cloak.

I looked at my breasts. I took hold of them with both hands and squeezed. They still felt a little strange.

“I think I’m going to make them even smaller,” I said to myself.

«It would make you look more girlish,» Talamus admitted.

I wasn’t thinking of outward appearances.

I just didn’t have any use for them.

Translated by Owen F. Witesman