

B E T W E E N

T W O

W O R L D S

"You can't be serious, Jonnas."

"Why not?"

"You actually think there's a similarity between Rene Magritte and Barnett Newman?"

This is interesting. How do you figure?"

"Well, they used the same kind of symbolism in their art--very abstract and ambiguous. One thing was supposed to represent another, entirely different thing. In Magritte's paintings he used totally unrelated objects, and in Newman's he used colored lines of varying widths and shades. Beneath it all is some sort of message about man and the world he lives in."

Professor Edell eyed me as a security guard would a potential thief, making me wonder if I just kissed my "A" in Art 10002 good-bye. "You know," he said, "I never thought of it that way."

"Neither did I," I replied. "But that's what happens when you do a report on Barnett Newman and do your research with a fellow working--" I glanced at a building outside the SkyBus while we were stopped at a light. It was a haunting structure, made entirely of glass and steel. There were only women in the building, all of whom wore the same outfit.

"You were saying, Jonnas...?" Professor Edell said as the SkyBus pulled away.

"Oh, yeah--what was I saying? Oh--that I worked alongside a friend who did his report on Rene Magritte." I rubbed my nose and changed the subject. "Professor, do you know what building that was, that glass building we just passed?"

"Oh, yes. That's the WORLD building--the Women's Organization for the Right to Live in Decency. That has something to do with our visit to the museum today. Fascinating piece of history, too."

Within five minutes we reached the museum. Professor Edell stood up and cleared his throat. "Folks, we're here. Get your materials together. Just a reminder--the paper is due two weeks from today."

A chorus of groans surfaced from the other seats on the SkyBus. "Shall we make it one week?" he replied.

Ever since high school back in Al-Minneapolis, I was stung by the modern art bug. It always intrigued me to see how people lived in what many considered the most turbulent century to date: The Great Depression, two World Wars, several other wars on smaller scales, a Presidential assassination, a huge political scandal involving another President, the insider trading scandals on Wall Street, the fall of Communism, the siege and subsequent war in the Persian Gulf. That period's art reflected that turbulence. Andy Warhol, for instance, did what no other artist centuries before would do--namely, make a mockery of his society. His multiple pictures of Marilyn Monroe and his many canvasses of Campbell's Soup cans and Coke bottles were not inspired by the wish to entertain, but rather to shock people into seeing what everyone took for granted. It was bizarre--a tribute to the century it was created in.

My classmates and I spent an hour taking notes on the museum's permanent collection. I didn't see too many Magrittes, but the twenty Newmans made up for that. It was the best time I ever had at an art museum.

Afterwards we took the VerticTrans up to the third floor to see what was called "The Women's Exhibit." We all filed off and were silenced by our professor. "Okay, gang--here's the deal," he began. "You're about to get a look at an interesting chapter of history. Between 1996 and 1998 the United States was involved in the First Frustration Wave. During this time the men

of the U. S. faced many troubles. Some lost jobs, others watched investments go sour, and most faced a great deal of stress and unhappiness. They turned all their anger toward the women and, unfortunately, the women put up with mistreatment and abuse--most of it physical. Things changed around December of 1998, when the men brought their violence to a halt. Although they realized what they did was totally wrong, they could not express their sorrow in any form--except one. It was called the Nationwide Apology Program. As part of the Program, several artists were commissioned to create paintings and sculptures glorifying women.

"We're not exactly here to relive history; I'm more concerned about the art itself. We'll spend about an hour here, which should give you enough time to view all the works. Pay attention to each artist's methods, and try to compare and contrast their styles. Be sure to take notes on what you see."

So--we're not here to relive history, huh? I mulled that thought over and over for fifteen minutes as I proceeded on my own through the gallery. I never learned too much about the Frustration Waves; my teachers didn't ignore the subject, but they never went into great detail about it either. But when I first heard about them, I wondered--how could such a thing happen? Men and women don't always get along, no doubt, but to resort to violence? Weren't men supposed to respect women? Weren't they supposed to treat women as human beings? Things like sexual harassment in the workplace and the booming adult industry continued to plague society in my time, but outright aggression? And for men's own troubles, no less. There was no logic.

Every painting and sculpture was so fiercely dedicated to its subject it scared me. Chuck Close created a multi-colored, computer-printout portrait of his wife in her everyday environment on an enormous canvas. Next to it was a Roy Lichtenstein, a scene of a woman

strolling down a sidewalk with men all around, gazing with genuine admiration at her, as well as his comic-book style captured it. Jasper Johns abandoned his typical sculpture style to create a clay statue of a woman on her knees, with her arms outstretched, looking up to the sky with a terrified expression--his comment on the effects of the First Frustration Wave. The painted detail was so sharp I thought she was flesh and blood.

But deep within each work was the awful truth this Wave occurred. The canvasses threatened to become movie screens, telling their own stories. The sculptures would spring to life, reenacting their own parts in the Wave. The thought of men fighting against women on such a large scale stifled my sympathies for the women.

I rounded a corner to see a work by Robert Ryman taking up most of a wall. It consisted of sixteen panels, each with the same cameo-style profile of a woman carved out of wood. The backgrounds of the first eight panels went from a bright, cheerful pink to a cruel, sinister shade of red. The last eight panels followed the same pattern in reverse.

This work sent out a message different from all the others, but I couldn't figure it out. All I could do was jot down the analysis on my keypad:

"Robert Ryman brilliantly depicts the plight of the American women during the First Frustration Wave in *Untitled* (1999). He minimizes and still tells the story by increasing the intensity of red in the background, then offers his hopes for the future by decreasing it."

As I walked through the gallery, I saw most of the other works had the same title, but none lacked in glorifying women. One nameless painting by Richard Estes portrayed a woman as the ultimate symbol of love. She stood on a floor of clouds, clothed in a flowing white gown, with a spacious blue sky behind her. Estes' style of art was photorealism, and his nameless work was overwhelmingly realistic.

What in the world did those men do for these artists to glorify women to the fullest? The scenes truly defied imagination. I tried to picture my parents in the midst of such an event, but I couldn't--not with the fairy-tale marriage they had. Suddenly, my nose began to twitch like a four-year-old's does when scolded for some childhood crime. That was the end. Unable to put up with the exhibit any longer, I left the gallery.

I went into the bookstore, where Professor Edell perused a book on Roy Lichtenstein and his style of Pop Art. I slowly walked up to him as he flung through the pages. "Hi, Jonnas. How are things going?"

"Everything's fine," I said nervously.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No, not really," I lied. "I have one question, though."

"Sure."

"Why are most of the works in the gallery nameless?"

"You want to know something? You're the only person who asked me that so far. All right. Let's suppose, God forbid, you were involved in the First Frustration Wave. If you expressed your sorrow to your wife or girlfriend in every possible way, would you think it was enough?"

"I'd be crazy if I did, I guess."

"There you go. If those men made their greatest statement, if they came together and made a joint effort, they too would think it wasn't enough. That's why there are no titles to those works."

"A-ha. I see. Thanks, Professor."

"Sure, Jonnas. Oh--by the way, be on the SkyBus by two forty-five."

"Will do."

I couldn't handle it any longer. It was 2:20, so I proceeded to the VerticTrans for the main floor and went into the souvenir shop to do some browsing.

Evannas, my best friend and roommate, arrived at the shop a couple of minutes later. He slapped me on the shoulder as I marveled at a book on Magritte. "Hey, Jonnas! What's up?"

"How's it going? Did you get everything?"

"Almost. I missed one of the de Koonings and one of the Pollocks."

"How could you miss a Pollock? I could pick a Pollock out a mile away."

"It's very easy to miss a painting that looks like nothing," he joked.

We continued to banter as we boarded the SkyBus. "Man--can you imagine something like that First Frustration Wave?" Evannas said.

"You know, Professor Edell told me that WORLD building had something to do with it, but he never said what."

"Oh, yeah. It was--" His face suddenly went blank. Maybe he knew more about this than anyone else.

"It was what?"

With a pause and a grim look in his eyes, he said, "Jonnas, I'm about to break a vow of silence. I'm not supposed to tell you this, but we're friends a long time. If I can't trust you by now, I've got a big problem."

He checked around the SkyBus to make sure everyone else carried on, then turned to me. "Okay, Jonnas. My sister is a WORLD secretary. She told me everything she knows about this.

"Mr. Edell's story about the First Frustration Wave is correct, but he forgot something. See, things got so bad the women threatened to leave the planet and find another place to live as

a separate race from the men. That's when the men finally snapped out of whatever the hell made them beat up the women."

"This is going to sound ridiculous," I broke in, "but do you suppose they pretended to be sorry just to keep the women on Earth?"

"Some people thought so when the Second Frustration Wave broke out, but that Nationwide Apology Program did wonders, so it's really up in the air. Anyway, when the Program peaked in mid-1999, the women realized something must be done to prevent such cruelty from repeating itself. So in April of 2000, WORLD was created."

"How does WORLD work?"

"Good question. All I know is there are chapters throughout the U. S. Chapters were established in Europe as well, and it was a damn good thing too, because there were rumblings in Europe in 2035, the year of the Second Frustration Wave.

"I think there are chapters all over the world now. The organization doesn't go public with their functions and such; they prefer to remain as much of a secret as they can. WORLD members never say they are members. You could know a woman for a long time--and know her intimately, too--but you'd never know she was a WORLD member unless she said so.

"WORLD did quite a lot for the women of the world. They don't use violence to reach their goals, though. Nobody knows how they peacefully ended the Second Frustration Wave, which began in January 2035 and ended in August. It was a pretty bad Wave in itself, but it was nothing compared to the one before it."

"There's still one thing I don't understand," I said. "Where were the gentlemen when all this happened? Didn't anyone help those women while these Waves went on?"

"Who the hell knows? But if there were, the women wouldn't bother to acknowledge

them. As far as--"

"That's crazy," I said apprehensively. "You don't just go out and beat on any woman you lay eyes on no matter what your problem is. I mean, that's not why they're on this earth. It doesn't register. How could you or I look at a woman and decide she's inferior to us, then treat her like dirt? You and I are living proof some men consider women beautiful people inside and out. Then this Frustration Wave breaks out and we're out in the cold. Where's the justice in that? Where's..."

Evannas looked ready to put me in a padded cell. "Dude, what's bothering you?"

It was best to tell him the truth rather than deny anything. "All right," I relented. "You saw that work by Robert Ryman with the sixteen panels?"

"Yeah."

"Well, every work I looked at after that one upset me more and more. I mean, what would I do if there was another Frustration Wave? How far would I go if those men who mistreated the women poured themselves out in saying they're sorry?"

"Jonas, you're getting worked up over nothing--again. There's no sign of any Third Frustration Wave."

I let out a sigh that was less of relief than regaining composure.

"I've got an idea," Evannas said. "Wanna go to the Suspendo-Club tonight?"

"Well, I wanted to get cracking on the report..."

"Really? After the way you responded to this exhibit? We need to relax. It's been a tough week for us. What do you say, ace?"

"All right. I'll buy that," I said, unwittingly hopeful.

Evannas went into the shower first when we got back to our dorm room. I sat at my desk

and sat back silently, letting my thoughts drift wherever they wanted--which turned out to be that August evening back in 2054, complete with my girlfriend Arielle and a golden sunset on the shore of the Mississippi River...

"Jonnas, I want to talk to you."

"What about, sweetheart?"

"Well, you...are...very different from the other guys I've known. No one else I dated took me for walks in the park or along the shore here, or slow dance with me, or anything else we've done."

"I'm glad. It's how I show you how much you mean to me."

"Yes, I understand. You mean very much to me too--so much so that if we broke up, it would be very painful for me. So I...I have to...let you go."

"What?"

"I'm letting you go, Jonnas."

"You've gotta be kidding!"

"It hurts me just as much as it does you."

"Well, if it helps, you're not the first to say that. In fact, you're probably not the second, either."

"Oh, Jonnas, I'm sorry. But it isn't your fault. It's just the way I feel."

"I don't get it. Why are you worried about the future? What about--"

"I just don't know. But I thought a lot about this, and I feel it's the best thing for us."

The sound of Evannas's voice made the picture fade away instantly. He emerged from the bathroom in his bathrobe bearing the Al-Detroit University logo.

"Did you say something?" I said.

"Yeah. I asked you if something was wrong."

"No, everything is cool."

"You're a liar. What's wrong?"

I heaved another sigh and said, "I thought about Arielle. You know, it's funny--the second time she said 'I'm letting you go,' she said it as if she were a pro at dumping people."

I expected the fourth degree from Evannas. Instead, he replied, "This hasn't been your day, huh, Jon?"

"Putting it mildly, yes."

He slapped my shoulder and said, "Look. You are who you are, and you can't be anyone else. If those two or three girls dumped you for being 'too nice,' it doesn't look favorably on them. That doesn't mean you have to give up altogether. Someone out there will appreciate you for the hopeless romantic you are."

I turned slowly toward him and said, "You'd better watch who you call a *hopeless* romantic, buster."

"I guess I couldn't get that one past you," he chuckled.

A smile came to my face as I grabbed the nearest pillow and lunged it at him.

After dinner in our cafeteria, we jumped into my AirCar and headed for the Suspendo-Club. A March wind blew long and hard, but it wasn't enough to destroy the pleasure of a clear, star-studded night. No longer did that sad feeling from the museum trip pervade me,

because I wanted to have a good time and thought of nothing else.

We arrived twenty-five minutes later and found a spot for the AirCar. Parking was the only easy thing we did that night because getting inside was an adventure. It was surprising for a Friday night; most people would be tired from working all week, and the droves of patrons wouldn't arrive until ten or ten-thirty. This time it was packed by eight-thirty. Go figure, I mused.

We met up with some fellow ADU students seated in the back lounge with their drinks on tables. Greetings were exchanged, gripes against the museum trip and Professor Edell were aired, and smiles became contagious. Evannas was asked why Rasherra, his girlfriend, wasn't with him, to which he responded she was busy researching a Psych term paper. An hour later we all made our way to the dance floor and formed our own circle to dance in. That was a neat trick because the dance floor was jammed.

I always liked the Suspendo-Club. The atmosphere was so upbeat I could almost touch it. The dance floor was made of transparent plastic with colored lights flashing underneath, as were the walls and ceiling, giving one the sensation of being suspended in mid-air. We didn't have much room to dance in, but we let ourselves go.

A sole computer terminal generated the music, piped to the dance floor through six cheap speakers hanging from the ceiling. It was fine for dancing, but it seemed inhuman for the terminal alone to make the music. My grandparents told me stories of when they went dancing and how someone called a deejay stood behind a table loaded with equipment and played disks of music called records. What's more, they even asked this person to play a favorite song or dedicate a song to their loved one. You couldn't do that with a computer programmed to imitate the sound of any instrument.

Evannas beckoned me off the floor an hour later to get a drink. I never developed a taste for alcohol, but a Kalhua-n-Cream every once in a while didn't hurt, especially after all that dancing. Maybe it was because we were with friends that night, but we found more energy to dance than usual. "Think we can dance any harder?" Evannas said, smiling.

"I don't know," I panted. "Let's go back and find out."

"Have fun. I'm cooling off."

We took the last two empty stools at the bar and stayed there for a half hour, after which Evannas heard something catchy the computer pumped out. He left his unfinished Manhattan at the bar and bounded back to join our friends.

The Kalhua-n-Cream was unusually strong and difficult to drink. It felt strange to be alone at that moment, but my eyes were arrested by an attractive woman sitting elsewhere at the bar. She wore a dazzling royal blue dress that contrasted stunningly with her golden hair cascading down to her shoulders. She took gentle sips of her drink and ran her slender fingers up and down the glass. It seemed she too was there alone, which spurred me to walk over and start a conversation with her--somehow. I tried to be casual about it, but when I stumbled over a barstool I realized how hasty I actually was. Fortunately, no one noticed.

Millennia seemed to pass before I reached her section of the bar. "Hello there," I said with a twinge of nervousness.

She looked at me in what I thought was disgust, but her response revealed a tone of pleasant surprise. "Hi," she said in a sweet voice.

"I noticed you're by yourself, and I thought you might like some company," I said calmly.

"I appreciate that. Thanks. You know, I saw you and your friends dancing before.

You're pretty good."

"Oh yeah?" I said in a voice two octaves higher than normal. I cleared my throat and said, "Oh, yeah?"

As she laughed at my blunder, I sheepishly said, "Whoops. Sorry about the voice change. I thought I passed that stage years ago."

"Don't worry," she said through her laughter. "I'm very flattered. What's your name?"

Music to my ears--she asked me first. "Jonas Baymann," I replied.

"Hi. Chartrene Caldwell. Nice to meet you."

"Same here. Chartrene...that's a lovely name. Were you ever here before?"

"Nope. This is my first time. I've heard good things about this place, so I decided to check it out."

"Are you here with someone?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "You might think it's strange to come here alone, but once in a while I do it."

"Sounds great to me. You picked a great place, too. Rumor has it the other joints go out of business at the rate of one a day."

Chartrene laughed and said, "Do you come here often?"

"Only when my roommate and I need to blow off steam, and we do that a lot."

"You do it quite well, too," she said, smiling sweetly.

"Thanks," I said. Then I noticed Evannas making some unusual movements on the dance floor. "Uh-oh...my roommate's out of control again."

She laughed again and asked, "Where do you go to school?"

"Al-Detroit University. What do you do?"

"I'm at Willis University."

"No kidding? What's your major?"

"Psychology. I like to figure out what makes people tick. And you?"

"Accounting. Numbers fascinate me, especially when there are dollar signs connected."

As the night went on, we discovered we had a lot in common. We enjoyed playing racquetball, swimming, and reading English literature. We also shared an interest in art. She thought 20th Century art was "different"; she preferred the gentler style of the French Impressionists. She mentioned she had prints of Monets and Renoirs in her apartment.

Neither of us realized we talked for an hour-and-a-half passed as we talked, during which Evannas came over to check on me. I introduced him to Chartrene, and they chatted for a while before he beckoned me back to the floor. I passed, but five minutes later the computer began to churn out a long slow song. "Would you like to dance?" I asked Chartrene with some hesitation.

"Yes, I would," she said without a moment's delay. She took my offered hand, and we walked to the crowded dance floor.

The music floated through the air. A sudden stillness covered the floor as the music moved us. Before I knew it, my gaze slowly focused itself upon Chartrene's deep blue eyes. The lights faded away, the music withered into oblivion, and the other people disappeared, leaving us practically suspended in mid-air. I was filled with a mixture of fear and amazement that didn't let up until--

"Uh, Jonnas, are you okay?" Chartrene's voice asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine," I replied over the music.

The Suspendo-Club blazed back into reality as I came out of the beautiful hypnosis. Chartrene smiled. I felt embarrassed, but when she started giggling, I smiled out of relief and

held her closer.

When the song ended, Evannas suggested we go home, since it neared 12:30 in the morning. Chartrene and I stepped off the floor. "I guess I should get going too," she said.

"Would you like us to give you a lift?" I asked.

"No, thanks. I'll catch a cab. Anyway, I had fun with you tonight. I hope we can do it again sometime."

"Oh, I'm sure we will," I gushed.

Chartrene smiled and kissed me on the cheek. As she headed for the door, Evannas drifted over and slapped me repeatedly on the shoulder. We said goodnight to our friends and left.

Evannas drove home because I was in no condition to do it. According to him, I smiled too much. "Wake up, lovebird," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," he replied, grinning.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, Jonnas. You're in love."

"What?! Get outta here. I'm not in love with her."

"You're displaying some tell-tale symptoms," he said. "You may as well 'fess up, sucker."

"I just met her tonight," I protested.

"Means *nada*. Trust me--love can happen anytime at all."

"Give me a break. It's bad enough I get mushy. I don't need anyone to outdo me."

Evannas chuckled, which ended the conversation. We were too tired to keep trade quips,

so silence blanketed the rest of the ride home. The clock announced "1:00" in bright orange digits when we entered our room. "Wow, man--it's late," Evannas said as I let a yawn escape.

As we prepared for bed, I hung my pants up and noticed something fell out of a pocket. It was a small slip of paper with the initials "C. C." and seven digits scrawled on it. "Well, I'll be damned," I said as happily as my sleepy state allowed. "That was sneaky of her!"

"What? Oh...how'd that happen?" Evannas said wearily.

"I must have been in the men's room when she wrote it down, and she stuck it in my pants while we danced. This is great!"

"You can call her tomorrow. Now go to sleeeeeeeeep..." He fell upon his bed, face in the pillow, and snored almost instantly.

The next day, after I knocked out half the report, I called Chartrene around noon. She didn't remember me, especially since she was asleep when I called, but I jogged her memory. We talked as if we never said goodnight the night before.

We planned to visit the local park the next day. To me Sundays are just days and nothing more. But I thought I found an extra day hidden away somewhere, and what better way to spend it with someone who could make it worthwhile.

The park was perfect for us that day. The sky was an endless plane of blue, and the sun beamed down as if the day was the first. We spent most of our time talking as we walked among the trees, through which shafts of sunlight fell and brought out Chartrene's beauty--the kind that could never be hidden under faint light, even in a place like the Suspendo-Club.

Through all the discussions about our families, lives, hopes and dreams, Chartrene made me feel comfortable. Maybe that's why I reached out and took her hand. Whatever it was, it didn't matter--at least, not until she turned to me with a surprised look. I feared she would

wrench her hand away in disgust. Instead, she giggled, which threw me off guard. I tried to pretend nothing happened, but I couldn't even fool myself. I turned purple and asked, "Er, ah--what did I miss?"

"Jonnas, are you in love with me?" she asked, giving me the impression she thought I lost my mind.

"Uh, well...I--"

"Let me put it this way--do you like me?"

I responded with a dead silence of uncertainty.

Chartrene became serious and said, "Listen, Jonnas. If you like me, don't bottle it up. Tell me. I promise--I won't bite. Say what's on your mind."

"Ah, nuts. I didn't want to tell you so soon after we met. It's crazy to open up like that--after all, I just met you Friday night. If I felt anything, I'd want to wait until the right moment to tell you."

"Why would you do that?"

"Experience left me with an acute fear of scaring women off. I don't like to pressure someone with my feelings, nor do I want that person to avoid me. So I held back, figuring I'd tell you when I thought you were ready to hear it."

A smile crossed Chartrene's face as compassionate understanding filled her eyes. "You know," she began, "that's sweet of you. I appreciate your concern for me. But I might react like that in my freshman year of high school. I'm twenty-one now, which makes me eight years wiser, and I understand how you feel."

"Thanks," I said assuredly. "But despite my silly gesture, I think we should take things slowly. If we're going to have a meaningful relationship, rushing into it blindly would be a

mistake."

Chartrene paused thoughtfully and said, "All right. I think we're better off that way for now myself."

For the next month-and-a-half, Chartrene and I got to know each other better. We played racquetball at her club, visited the art museums, went to an amusement park on the outskirts of the city, walked along the Lake St. Clair beach, and dined at a fancy restaurant downtown called the Fontana di Luce.

One evening she asked me over to her college-owned apartment to help her with some Statistics homework. The apartment featured huge windows stretching from ceiling to floor; one view was of the WORLD building. From that distance it didn't loom like before, but it still distracted me during my visit.

We spent one Sunday at the Al-Detroit Purchasing Complex. Chartrene needed some new clothes, so I tagged along. She visited every women's clothing store about three times apiece and wound up lugging four bags of clothing around.

By the time all was bought and spent it was four o'clock. Exhausted, we sat down in front of the fountain in the Complex's center. "I didn't think it would take so long," Chartrene said apologetically. "Buying clothes for myself used to be simple."

"Don't worry about it. You taught me more about women's fashion than the class at ADU."

Chartrene laughed, but a strange silence followed. Something was on her mind. "Jonnas, I want to talk to you."

Oh, no--here it comes, I thought. "What is it?"

"Well, uh...I--well, I really enjoyed spending time with you these last few weeks, and I've seen what kind of person you are. Most guys I knew weren't nearly as considerate as you."

"Uh-huh," I said with a hint of dread.

"Well," Chartrene continued, "I'm not sure how to tell you this...I mean, you said you wanted to take things slowly, but I thought a lot about this, and I can't seem to help it."

Something told me this wouldn't turn out as I thought.

Chartrene seemed to hit a roadblock in expressing herself. It dawned on me what she wanted to say; the last thing I wanted was the woman of my dreams crumbling under her fears.

"Go ahead," I coaxed. "Tell me."

"I think...I'm in love with you," she blurted.

No matter how much I expected her to say that, it would still be a surprise. She turned toward the fountain and wiped the makings of a tear away. After a pause, I took her hand and said, "I'm very touched by that, Chartrene. I mean it. And now I have a confession to make."

That drew her attention back to me. "I really was in love with you the night we met," I continued. "Like I said, it's ridiculous to decide you love someone so soon, but you showed me otherwise. I appreciate you telling me. Believe me, it's not easy to say."

Chartrene's smile dried her tears. We didn't know what to do next, but we surprised each other when we both leaned closer to kiss. It felt awkward, but our first real kiss was too thrilling

for it to persist.

Every love affair stays alive by many things, among them mutual respect and compassion. But there was something more to ours, yet I couldn't put my finger on it. My main concern was treating Chartrene with respect and kindness. That didn't mean giving in to her every whim, but I couldn't treat her otherwise. Still, there was something deeper beyond the usual factors, something more compelling. If only everyone--including those bastards in the Frustration Waves--had the relationship Chartrene and I shared.

One evening, after a week of some tough exams, I took Chartrene to the St. Clair Diner. My cousin worked there as a cook; restaurants in those days had underground kitchens to accommodate more customers. The hostess seated us at a booth and gave us bubble menus. After we looked them over and fed our orders into the booth computer, Chartrene asked, "So--what's new?"

"Well, I spoke to my parents the other day. I told them about you, and--uh...they want to meet you."

"You sound like you're ashamed of me," she said somewhat accusingly.

"No, not exactly. I just didn't want it to strike fear in your heart."

"Well, I'd be nervous about meeting your parents no matter what."

I smiled and said, "Is next weekend okay for you?"

"No--well, wait a minute...yeah, I'll have my tests over with. Sure." After a slight pause she said, "You know, you never told me much about your parents."

I gave a short laugh. "As you know, I'm an only child, so my parents and I are close."

"What's their marriage like?"

"Hmm...let's put it this way. They've been on their honeymoon for twenty-four years. If there was anything wrong you'd never--well, wait a minute--that's not exactly true. But for the most part theirs is the happiest I ever saw. God only knows how they did it. You might even say it was...magical."

"Magical?! What do you mean by that? This should be interesting."

"It's kind of strange, but...well, sometimes my parents would be in the same room, involved in their own projects--my mother ironing, my father on the computer, or something--and they wouldn't say anything, but when they looked at each other, one or both of them would smile."

"What do you think happened?" she asked.

"I don't know--maybe they knew what the other person thought--"

"By looking into their eyes," Chartrene finished. "I had a few friends who thought they could do that. It's creepy. It's like someone's playing with your mind."

"I don't think so. I think it's romantic--two people having their own secret code." I became lost in thought, then said, "Hey--you don't suppose you and I--"

"Oh, no. I'm not even going to venture--"

"Why not? You're a psych major."

She laughed. "That's not the same thing as being a mind-reader. All right." She sat straight up and focused her eyes upon mine. "Right now," she began, "you're thinking about your last three girlfriends and how those relationships didn't last because they all thought you were too nice. You didn't understand how it happened, but when it did, you were in shock. At times it felt devastating, but that little voice told you not to give up even if it made your life easier. You're glad you listened to it because you found someone in whose life you made a

difference the way you always wanted to."

I had a huge smile on my face as she spoke. Chartrene was visibly moved by the sentiments she read in my eyes. "Am I right?" she asked eagerly.

My smile melted into a simple grin. "No," I said plainly.

"What?!" Chartrene shrieked, smiling.

"I had two girlfriends, not three."

"So?"

"You didn't know exactly what I thought."

"Fine. Get technical," she said, still smiling. "But I got everything else right."

I leaned in closer. "Yes, Chartrene. You certainly did."

Just then the doors below us opened up, and there was my cousin. "I should've known when I saw the order for Veal Parmigiana," he said. "Why can't you order something different for a change?"

"Hello to you too, Midjad."

"Haven't seen you around here lately."

"Well, no offense, but I haven't had reason to come here lately," I said, looking at Chartrene. "This is my girlfriend, Chartrene."

"How do you do? Be careful with this guy. He's an animal. Only eats Veal Parmigiana."

His remark caught me off guard and sent Chartrene into another bout of laughter. "Shut up and give us our food, you mook!" I finally said.

"All right. It's coming up," he said, smiling.

As the table slowly rose up to us, Chartrene asked, "What did he mean by that?"

"Nothing," I replied. "He always breaks my chops. Get ready to dig in."

Despite my cousin's silly remarks, that night was unforgettable.

The following Saturday at three o'clock, I stepped out of the shower to see Evannas packing his backpack. "Whatcha up to?"

"Rasherra and I have a killer Law exam soon, so we're studying together," he replied.

"Have fun. Just make sure you stick to Law and don't let Biology get in the way."

Evannas stopped and said, "That was a joke, right? Tell your folks I said hello." He slung the backpack over his shoulder and disappeared.

My parents arrived two hours later, appropriately dressed for the occasion. They greeted me with warm smiles and open arms, like they always did when they visited their son on

campus. "What's up, guys?" I said.

"How's our little accounting major?" my mother said, hugging me.

"Oh, Mom, stop. I haven't been little for ages. How are you, Dad?"

"Pretty well, thanks. I'm still getting a tough time at the firm, so nothing's changed."

"You sounded really happy when we last spoke," Mom said.

"First time for everything," I replied.

We shared a laugh between us, then Mom asked, "So, how long are you and Chartrene together?"

"A few months. She's a little apprehensive about meeting you guys, so if you could make her feel--"

"No trouble," Dad chimed in. "Umm...just out of curiosity, what did you tell her about us?"

He set himself up so well I had to follow through. "I told her you can't stand each other and you sleep in separate beds with a force field between you."

"Well, as long as you told her the truth..."

"Oh, Wiltian," Mom said, smacking Dad lightly but lovingly as he snickered at his remark. To me she asked, "Now where is this Fontana di Luce you told us about?"

"I have the directions, Savia," Dad interrupted. "He gave them to me on the phone."

"Oh--okay," Mom said. "We're on our way, then. See you guys there."

The dinner turned out very well. Chartrene was nervous at first, but it didn't take long for her to loosen up with my parents. Mom's stories of my younger years on the planet helped break

the ice. All throughout the appetizer Chartrene aimed that "You did, huh?" smile at me. Dad just smiled and broke in with his own memories whenever Mom thought it appropriate, which just goes to show what kind of moral support he lent. But all in all, they liked Chartrene. They couldn't get over her.

When I dropped Chartrene off at her complex she said, "You were right. Your parents are really nice."

"I--I told you so," I stammered inadvertently.

"What's the matter, Jonnas?"

"Nothing. I'm just nervous about meeting your parents now."

Chartrene laughed and said, "Oh--I meant to ask you something. Would you come with me to the Purchasing Complex tomorrow? I have to get my brother something for his birthday and I need a man's opinion on clothes."

"That's really short notice. I have to go over some tough accounting material tomorrow."

"It shouldn't take more than an hour."

"All right, then."

"Okay. I'll call you when I'm ready to go."

"I'll be waiting."

She kissed me and said, "Thanks for everything. Good night, Jonny-toots."

"Oh, God!" I wailed, cringing. Dining with your parents and your girlfriend has its drawbacks, all right.

Mom and Dad waited in the lobby when I returned to the dorm. Before I could say a word Mom declared, "Jonnas, she's wonderful."

"You have our blessing to marry her," Dad said, smiling.

Mom and Dad followed me up to my room, eager to discuss the other developments in their son's life. "We're staying at Uncle Haydor's house," Dad said.

"That's good," I responded. "Then you won't have to haul back to Al-Minneapolis."

I let us into the room; Mom sat down on Evannas's bed while Dad remained standing as I slowly walked over to the window. "Is something wrong, Jonnas?" Mom asked.

"No, not really...well, there isn't anything wrong, but..."

"But what?"

I sighed. "A few months ago my Art History class went to a local museum. We saw this exhibit from 1999 about the First Frustration Wave and the Nationwide Apology Program--you know about that, I guess."

"Yes," Dad said. "In fact, your mother and I saw that exhibit years ago back home."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all."

"What did you think of it?"

"By itself, the art was wonderful. They were such beautiful, vivid pieces of art they left an impression on my mind. But an even bigger impression remains from when I think of why it was created in the first place. Such things are inconceivable, but it happened--twice, no less."

"What did you and Mom do during the Second Frustration Wave?" I asked after a pause.

"We went up to Dad's house in Al-Beaver Bay," Mom interjected. "We just got married and were on our honeymoon when it seemed we'd have to extend it longer than we planned. It was something else being up there alone, where we didn't have to put up with the stupidity and chaos. Why does it bother you?"

"Because I don't know where I belong in a situation like that."

"You don't, Jonnas," Dad said calmly.

"What do you mean?"

"We are a minority," Dad said, sitting down next to Mom. "Some people thrive on fighting with the opposite sex in any form--psychologically or in a Frustration Wave. They're not programmed to do it, but they value different things than we do."

"We raised you the only way we could," Mom added. "Your father and I saw what men and women did to each other in the past. We swore we would never bring our children up to follow in their footsteps. The values you have don't make you superior to everyone. They make you Jonnas Baymann. You have a lot to be proud of."

"I know, I know," I said. "But I need to know Chartrene is happy with it too."

"Well, didn't you listen to her tonight?"

"She sounded head-over-heels to me," Dad broke in. "Where were you, Jonnas?"

I guess I was a little distant at dinner. "You're right. I should know better. I just can't help wondering what would happen if...another--"

"Don't worry about it," Mom said. "You may never live to see such a day. And if you did, well..."

"Well what?"

Dad drew a deep breath. "There's an old saying that goes, 'Everything looks the same in the dark.' If another Frustration Wave happened, you'd probably be regarded like all the other men. You wouldn't make any difference to anybody."

I was aggravated hearing those words coming from someone who offered comfort all along. But then Mom said, "Wait a minute, Wiltian. Chartrene would beg to differ."

"That's true, that's true." To me he said, "Sorry I sounded cynical. In any event, you

have to do whatever makes you happy. If you're comfortable with those values, stick with them. Don't let anything stop you."

"Thanks a lot, guys," I said as I hugged my parents.

"That's what we're here for, sweetheart," Mom said.

Dad slapped my shoulder hard enough to topple a building. "Wanna get going, Savia?"

"Yes. I'm a little tired."

Evannas stumbled in and offered his greetings. They chatted with him for a while and said good night to us. I went to bed soon after, thinking about how pleasant the night was.

The next day Chartrene and I reached the Purchasing Complex in the early afternoon. As we walked into a men's clothing store, she said, "You can look around if you like. I'll call you before I make my decision."

I went over to a rack of sunglasses in the center of the store just in front of the counter. As I tried on a pair, a female voice bellowed, "Give it up, Jonnas!"

I whipped off the sunglasses and followed the voice. It belonged to Vonelle Jannz, who in high school declared war on me for reasons she never explained. She stared me down as I strode over to the counter. "Well," I said calmly. "Isn't this a small world?"

"Too small for me," she snapped.

I pretended to ignore that remark and said, "You know, when I go home for vacation, I always see the girls you hung out with in high school."

"Oh, really?" she said, unimpressed.

"Uh-huh. The only difference is they talk to me. We actually have conversation."

"And you'd like me to stoop just as low, right?"

I couldn't respond directly to that, so I said, "You haven't changed a bit, Vonelle. Always quick with the lip service."

"Thank you," she said bitterly. "What about you? Have you changed at all? Do you still carry around those foolish ideas about how you could make a girl happy?"

She aimed for the heart. "They're not as foolish as you think, Vonelle," I defended. "I made a couple of girls happy."

"Which explains why they both dumped you for the same reason."

"That's their loss, not mine. But I found someone who loves me for who I am."

"Yeah? Who's the lucky lady?" she said with more sarcasm.

"She's over by the sweater rack," I said, nodding in Chartrene's direction.

Vonelle looked with a grimace of disbelief, then bluntly said, "Did she get her sight restored?"

I slammed my hand on the counter and walked off to the side, wondering if I should continue such a pointless exchange. I charged back and said, "What the hell is your problem?"

"You're asking the wrong person."

Feeling somewhat defeated, I tried fighting fire with fire. "I wish you'd grow up, Vonelle."

Vonelle snorted and said, "You of all people should say that."

Chartrene finally called me over, but instead of relief I was stricken with fear. Something wasn't right about the way she called me, as if she didn't want to rescue me from a losing battle. I trembled as a lump forced its way into my throat. Burying it took every ounce of strength as I helped her decide on a sweater.

As Vonelle rang up the sale, Chartrene did a double take. Vonelle put on her glasses, but

Chartrene still stared long and hard at her while she wasn't aware of it. I didn't even breathe during the transaction, but when we left the store I silently let out a big sigh of relief. "I hope my brother likes this," she said.

"I'm sure he will."

"Good. Now you can tell me what you and that woman argued about."

I was nowhere near prepared for that.

"Well? Will you answer me?" Chartrene beckoned angrily.

"Well," I began nervously, "we went to high school together, and she used to pick on me for no reason. She and her friends--"

"Sounds like she's not the most mature person in the world."

"You could--"

"Then again, neither are you."

"Come on, Chartrene. I minded my own business. She mouthed off to me first."

"And you had to mouth off right back?"

Score one for Chartrene.

"I don't understand you, Jonnas," she continued, raising her volume. "I thought you knew better to ignore her if she said anything nasty to you. You should have dealt with her like an adult, but you chose to argue with her like a little child. It's ridiculous."

"Chartrene, she chewed me out for no good reason. I had every right to defend myself."

"Really?? Whatever happened to `All women should be respected'? Huh?"

My response came out in bits and pieces before I said, "It isn't easy to respect a woman who doesn't respect me, but I do my damndest to try."

"Well, your damndest isn't good enough!" Chartrene yelled.

All eyes in the vicinity were upon us by then. "Look, Chartrene," I pleaded, "there's no reason to make a spectacle out of this."

"Why?! Are you afraid everyone will see you as the hypocrite you are?" she fired back. When I offered no response, she said, "Why do I bother with this?"

To my shock, she suddenly stormed away. "Chartrene!! Chartrene, goddammit!! Come back here, for crying out loud!!"

"Forget it!! I don't need the aggravation and I damn well don't need you!!"

I couldn't believe it. The whole episode drained me of the strength I needed to walk away from the scene. Half the shoppers in the Complex stayed behind, casting accusing eyes at me, but it took Vonelle's victorious smile to finally drive me away from that disaster area.

Whatever miracle distanced the afternoon's events from my studies, it wasn't enough. I had the room to myself; Evannas took Rasherra out to dinner and a double feature at the Student Center. During those five or six hours, Chartrene's fiery words were mere interruptions until they destroyed my concentration altogether. I disengaged the Accounting TextPack, returned the screen and keyboard to their places in the desk, and stared out the window aimlessly. It was 9:50, and sleep suddenly washed over me.

The phone screamed around midnight. "Hello?" I grumbled.

"Jonnas, please don't hang up," Chartrene's anxious voice said. "Listen to me. I couldn't sleep after what happened today. I didn't realize you argued with Vonelle Jannz in the store."

"How do you know Vonelle?" I said, fully awakened.

"She's been in some of my classes. She has a gift for making people, like me, feel like garbage. That bitch deserved what you gave her today."

"No, she didn't," I said, surprising myself. "You were right the first time. We could spare ourselves a lot of trouble if I just kept my mouth shut."

"Well, let's forget about the whole thing," she said. "I hope you'll forgive me."

"Not unless you forgive me too, Chartrene."

"You betcha," she said, no longer sounding shaky.

"Now go to bed. I want you bright-eyed next time I see you."

She laughed and said good night. I changed clothes, tumbled into bed and prayed something like that never happened again. Before I fell back to sleep I got the weird feeling she prayed for the same thing.

Three weeks later Evannas and I lazed around in our room, watching a hyperball game on our VisoWall. Chartrene visited relatives that day and didn't expect to get home before nine that night. I worked on some grueling accounting homework in the morning and spent the afternoon with my eyes glued to whatever was on the screen. Evannas joined me in wasting the day away.

The phone beeped at four o'clock. Evannas had the receiver to his mouth before it beeped again. "Hello? Oh, hi, sugar...uh-huh. Having a real blast...yeah, I have the Finance notes from Thursday...sure. I'm not going anywhere...7 o'clock? No problem...nah, that's all right. You should miss Finance more often, actually...ha, ha! Okay...see you then. 'Bye." He returned to his seat, smiling contentedly.

"You realize you have me to thank for that," I said.

"For what?"

"Playing matchmaker for you."

"Oh, please. I would have met her whether you knew her or not," he said with mock confidence.

"And how would you manage that?"

"I'm just such a studly kinda guy."

"Well, don't get too studly. I've known her for sixteen years. She's the sister I never had."

When the hyperball game reached halftime, the news snapped on. The top story dealt with a shootout in Al-Palm Beach, in which two women suffered minor injuries. "Now who in their right mind would pull a stunt like that?" I asked sharply.

"Easy," Evannas said. "He said they had minor injuries."

The news blared on again after the game ended. This time some kind of riot took place in

Al-Seattle. Inexplicably, the men went into the streets and grabbed women arbitrarily, passing them back and forth in a bizarre ritual. The brutal footage drew us bolt upright and made our mouths drop open. "What the hell are they doing?" Evannas cried.

"Why can't those women fight back against those bums?" I said, shaken by the sight.

But the worst was yet to come. *Astro Fortress* was interrupted at 6:45 by a Special Report detailing the events of another incident:

"In Al-Cleveland today, at least thirty-five women were injured when men hurtled bottles, rocks and other objects at women throughout the city. There's no explanation for the riot, but sources say--"

The VisoWall suddenly turned light gray, the color of the other walls in the room.

Evannas leaned back with the remote in his quivering hand. "What'd you do that for?" I said. "I want to know what's going on!"

"If it's what I think it is, we don't need to know any sooner than necessary."

He flicked the VisoWall on again two minutes later. There was no sign of the Special Report, but fifteen minutes later the news crashed on again, this time to drop a bomb on us:

"In light of the events that transpired throughout the U. S. today, it is officially declared that a Third Frustration Wave has begun."

It was like being struck by lightning--no warning, no time to take precautions, no place to run for shelter. The words "Third Frustration Wave" ricocheted off the walls and grew louder each time. Evannas fell back upon his bed and moaned, "I don't believe this. I just don't believe this!"

I sat there, oblivious to the VisoWall and thoroughly dumbfounded. "This is a joke," I

said in a low, throaty whisper. "This isn't happening."

A piercing scream sent me scrambling to the window. The street was flooded with helpless women as the crusade began. No matter how far or fast the women ran, the men caught up to them and unleashed their rage. Men abused women in ways one would never have dreamed. Horrified screams filled the air, weaving among each other in ugly patterns. The Wave in Al-Detroit just began and already it looked like it went on forever.

My nose twitched again. I slammed the window open and shouted, "NO!!!! NO, YOU BASTARDS!!!! YOU CAN'T DO THIS!!!! STOP IT!!!! STOP IT, GODDAMMIT!!!!!"

It was useless. The men continued their onslaught and the twitching in my nose persisted. Fired up, I raced out of the room, destination unknown. The dorm was eerily vacant as I barreled through the halls toward the VerticTrans.

"JONNAS!!!" Evannas yelled, "COME BACK!!! YOU'LL GET KILLED!!!"

I ignored him as I raced into the VerticTrans. Cries of terror streamed from the lobby. I tore through the halls to see the security guard harassing Rasherra. He knocked her to the floor and was about to slap her. Fear paralyzed me until I heard the collision of hand against face. "NOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!" I roared, shooting into the lobby. I leaped over the center couch as the guard lifted her up by the collar of her blouse. We fell to the ground in a tangled mess.

Rasherra broke free and dropped onto a nearby couch, crying uncontrollably. I struggled to straighten myself out while keeping the guard pinned to the floor. "ARE YOU CRAZY??!" he yelled hysterically. "YOU SHOULD HELP ME!!!!!"

"YOU BASTARD!!! YOU LEAVE HER ALONE, YOU SON OF A BITCH!!!!!" I accented the last word by pummeling his face against the floor. Then I picked him up and gave him two rights before he threw one of his own into my rib cage. I stumbled backwards and

landed on the large glass table, shattering it instantly. He seemed to disappear, but his fists remained; one of them found its way to my face and grounded me. I sensed him hovering above me somewhere. He was a blur, but I determined his outline and tried to kick him in the groin. The kick was awkward and did little more than graze his pants leg. He grabbed my shirt and lifted me up, pinning my right arm--my stronger arm--between us. But he slowly came into sharper focus, and I made a fist with my weaker hand. A shot out of nowhere would do the trick.

It didn't, but it distracted him enough to let go of me. He wobbled backwards but righted himself and charged at me. He was a runaway AirTrain, nailing me in my left shoulder. I collapsed, gasping for air. "COME ON!!! GET UP, YOU JACKASS!!!" he yelled. Ten seconds later he picked me up, connected with my solar plexus and sent me spiraling toward the couch where Rasherra lay.

Rasherra's crying grew violent, and for good reason. Behind her tears was the sound of a woman physically chastised for being one. The city fell apart over the most basic difference between people. Who could blame her for sinking into desperation? Who could blame her for feeling so helpless she couldn't find the strength to get away? Like all the other women in the city, she did nothing to bring that abuse upon her.

The security guard rushed me again. I leapt off the arm of the couch, fueled by rage, driven by Rasherra's tears, and charged toward him. At the last possible second I ducked and butted him. He lost his footing and crashed to the ground as I trampled him with my momentum. I doubled back to see him struggling to breathe. I fell to my knees by his blue face and delivered a left from which he didn't bounce back. I hoisted him up, gave him another left to his stomach and a right uppercut to his jaw. Then I yanked his right arm down and drew it behind his back, which made him shriek. I forced up against his terminal and pulled his head back by his hair.

"Who's the jackass now?" I grumbled.

"You're a goddamn lunatic!!"

"That's right. But not nuts enough to let you walk away. I'm not finished with you yet."

I grabbed both his legs, making sure of my grip before I let his arm go. I tried to fling him over the terminal, but he fell head-first behind it once I let go. He slid down slowly, landing as a crumpled mess.

Rasherra lost her voice by then. I darted to the couch and embraced her when Evannas appeared at the end of the hall. "Oh, God!!" he cried, "I forgot she was on her way here."

"It's okay. She'll be fine."

"What happened?"

"The security guard made her life miserable. I just got finished beating the shit out of him."

"Good," Evannas said. "He always looked like a creep anyway."

Rasherra slowly pulled herself together. "Are you okay, sweetheart?" Evannas said, kneeling beside her.

She nodded, then jumped up and latched onto her boyfriend. "Aww...it's okay. You're with me now," he said softly.

"Get her out of here," I said.

"No kidding. What about you?"

"Just get her out of here, okay?"

"You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?"

"Damn you, Evannas, GET HER THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!!"

He paused, either out of concern or because he never saw me that angry before. He

motioned Rasherra to the VerticTrans, and together they fled the lobby. I remained on the couch, reeling from the slugging match. The sound of someone thrown against the window distracted me. A WORLD member was tossed between three men when one of them thrust her on a fourth man. He gripped her by the shoulders and shook her viciously, then threw her against the wall and ripped her uniform off, exposing her lace minimums.

That did it. That broke the floodgates open. At the top of my lungs I screamed, "NOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!" Infuriated, I charged out the door and plunged into the night.

The only way to describe it was madness. I ran through the streets aimlessly, swinging at the other men with wild abandon. I saved some women from being stripped of their dignity and their clothes, but my deeds either went unrewarded or punished. If they didn't take off, they gave me anything from slaps in the face to swift kicks where it really mattered. When I asked them why, the response was the same: all men were slime. And yet I was too far beside myself to let that gnaw at me.

At one point I made the terrible mistake of taking on five men at once. They took turns at a WORLD member cornered near the campus. I pushed two of them aside to take on the one hitting her, but after I decked him the other four converged on me. I wound up on my back, flailing my arms in all directions, searching desperately for an escape route. One of them turned me over, slipped his arms around mine and lifted me up. The other four stood around sneering, prolonging the agony. When the one I jumped drew back and zoomed in for the kill, I thought it was all over.

The WORLD member hid from the spectacle and dragged me into her hideaway when the five goons were finished. According to her, I was out for a half hour. She thanked me profusely for coming to her rescue--the only woman that night who thanked me at all. She

helped me to my feet, but I almost crashed again after I discovered a sharp pain in my left leg--a pulled muscle. I stayed where I was for ten minutes to muster the strength to limp back to the dorm. Two hours of punishment was enough for one lifetime.

I got a good look at myself in the mirrored glass entryway. My ADU shirt was poked with holes and streaked with red. My hair was scattered and a giant black-and-blue mark appeared on my left arm. Cuts and bruises were strewn across my face and my jeans were torn down the seams. My new sneakers were filthy and splitting at the heels. It was a wonder how I recognized Jonnas Baymann under all the beatings I took.

A familiar voice groaned in agony from the nearest couch as I trudged into the lobby. I dragged myself over, and there, battered, bruised and sprawled out, was Evannas. "You look like shit," he said.

"Thanks for the moral support."

He forced himself into a sitting position and said, "Damn--if I lived the way you do, I'd be dead by now."

"I take that as a compliment."

"It was sent as one. Help me up."

With whatever strength remained, I lifted him and put his arm over my shoulders. "I hate to tell you this, but you're gonna die."

"Me? You took the bigger beating."

"So I'm gonna die?"

"You got it."

"Good. I deserve a big rest."

Rasherra helped us into our room when the VerticTrans reached the third floor. We fell

on our beds as she soothed our wounds. We stayed in the room as the rest of the world continued to corrode. When she finished patching us up, she climbed into Evannas's bed and clung fiercely to him. There was a sort of resolve in their eyes, as if they knew things would only get worse and they could only let it happen. It was terrifying and unbelievable. Then again, one single person giving the men a taste of their own medicine didn't work well. Still, the nonstop screams of the women plagued me. If I wasn't riveted to my pillow by an earth-shattering headache, I would probably go back out there again.

While contemplating my wounds and my failure to stop the Wave, I remembered something--the most important thing in my life. "OH, GOD!!" I cried, sitting straight up.

"What's the matter, Jonnas?" Evannas asked.

"I FORGOT ALL ABOUT CHARTRENE!!!"

Rasherra peered up and gave me a strange look. "Who?" she said.

"My girlfriend!!!"

She raised her brows in shock. At the same instant a short, quick beep resounded through the room, and the VisoWall powered itself on. The words "News Bulletin" flashed on and disappeared to let the next message flash across:

"This just in: we received word the head chairwoman of WORLD--the Women's Organization for the Right to Live in Decency--we learned the chairwoman, Chartrene Caldwell, has ordered all the women of the U. S. to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in two days. A rocket is being prepared to take all the women off the planet and take them to Venus, where they will live as a separate race."

As if things weren't bad enough...that's what I deserved for letting her slip my mind. I couldn't take it at all. Without a word I took the compress for my headache, fired it into the bathroom and bulleted back out into the uncaring night.

Within a half hour I reached Chartrene's complex by hobbling along on the AutoWalk. It was painful, but not nearly as much as having my masculinity questioned from underneath the night. It made no sense to reply to whatever those bastards said, especially since I was obsessed with stopping Chartrene from tossing everything we had to the wind. And who would guess she was the leader of that damned organization anyway?

I raced into the building, dove into the VerticTrans and slammed the "4" button. When the doors moved apart, I jumped out and sprinted wildly down the hall toward Apartment 41. I rang her doorbell with a shaky hand, so consumed with panic it was impossible to speculate on her condition. I rang the bell twice more before she answered; I would probably explode if she didn't. But she did.

Chartrene stood across the threshold, fuming. The dazzling dress she wore when we met was in tatters. Her hair was disheveled, and the sweet beauty of her face was distorted by an

emerging bruise and her seething expression. The sight almost made me break down and--

"What the hell do you want??!!" she roared.

The display of fury left me speechless.

"What's the matter??!!" she continued. "Cat got your tongue??!! It doesn't matter--I don't give a damn what you've got to say anyway!!!"

"But Chartrene," I fumbled, "I love you--"

"You love me?!? You love me??? HA!!! I laugh in your face!!! You and the other so-called men don't know what the word means anymore!!! And even if you did love me, it wouldn't change the fact that every man in this city tossed me around like a piece of trash!!!"

"Wait a minute!! What about me??"

Her fuse got shorter and shorter. "You selfish son of a bitch!!! Are you all you care about???"

Now I was upset. "No, Chartrene, no!! I care about you too!!!"

"You make me sick!!! I'll bet you were out there harming any woman you saw too!!!"

She came close to the bullseye. "No, no!! I could never hurt a woman in any way!!! You know that!!!"

"YOU LIAR!!!" she raged. "You don't care about anything but yourself!! I wish I had nothing to do with a slimebucket like you!!!"

As I stared my worst fears squarely in the eye, Chartrene put a million miles between us. Weakened by the double-barreled blow, I remained unnaturally silent.

Chartrene continued her angry litany. "This planet has gone to hell!!! Every man should be shot for this!! They come out and they beat any woman they can lay their slimy hands on!!!

"There I was, minding my own business, and the next thing I knew, a mob of men came

after me!! They had me on the floor, kicking me, dragging me, punching me--you name it, they did it!! I'm a wreck!!! Look at me!!! Those men didn't give a damn!! They ripped my dress to shreds!! Those men didn't care!!! As long as we women are made to suffer, those morons get their way at our expense!!!

"And now look at me!! I'm a mess!! Every man in this city took a swing at me!! They made me feel worthless!! They reduced my life to a miserable existence!!!"

That brought me out of my emotional suspension. If there's anything worse than a man hurting a woman, it's a woman hurting herself. Convinced our love affair could be salvaged, I listened for a chance to jump into Chartrene's lament.

"I've got nothing now!!" she continued. "I've got no future on this planet!! Nobody cares, nobody wants to treat me like a woman!!! Nobody respects me!!! They all violated me!!!! I'm just a target for abuse!!!! WHO OUT THERE CARES ABOUT ME???? WHO NEEDS ME???"

That was all I could stand. Something from my heart surged through me, something strong enough to make me open my mouth and shout, "I NEED YOU!!!!!"

Chartrene stopped cold. A long, solemn silence followed, during which she seemed to debate believing me or not. She paced about the room for a minute. "No--no, no, no--you don't need me," she finally said self-defeatingly. "You don't need me at all."

"Yes, I do need you, Chartrene!! You don't realize how much you mean to me, and if you do, you don't care!! You're convinced I'm like those `slimebuckets' out there!! Well, I'm not, and I'll prove it to you!!! Where am I right now, Chartrene?? Am I out in the street beating any woman who crosses my path??? HELL, NO!!! I'm up here in your apartment, showing you I still care for you, while those other men are out there doing the damage!!!"

Then I realized there already was enough shouting. Trying to calm down, I brought a bewildered Chartrene to the couch and sat her down. I had to convince her I was still the same Jonnas Baymann who loved her and whom she loved, and God help anyone or anything that stopped me.

"Look at me, Chartrene," I began, grabbing my shirt. "Does this look like I knocked women around? No, it doesn't. It's what happens when the men pull the same garbage on me. It was as much fun for me as it was...aw, hell.

"Anyway, how could you think I could do such a thing? After everything you and I did and shared, how could it enter your mind I'm capable of this? After you saw it with your own eyes--"

I suddenly realized I went about it the wrong way. "Listen, Chartrene," I started again, "you didn't lose everything. You still have me." She grimaced, so I said, "I know it doesn't thrill you now, but you've got to hear me out.

"You know I love you. You know I have the utmost respect for you. You made me happier than I've ever been and I'll be damned if I wreck that. If you're upset I didn't get to you sooner, well...for crying out loud, there's chaos everywhere. You see what I tried to do for the women and you see what it solved.

"If I could help it, I would make sure you got back untouched. I'd even die for that, dammit. You mean too much to me to see you caught up in this garbage. But you were, and I'm sorry it happened to you.

"No woman deserves this, especially the woman I love. I don't see you as 'worthless' or anything else you called yourself five minutes ago. None of that is true. You're not a 'target for abuse.' You are Chartrene Caldwell, whom I met months ago in the Suspendo-Club and with

whom I'm madly in love with ever since.

"Please, Chartrene--you mean the universe to me. Don't leave me behind. Please love me again."

She trembled. Her eyes were filled with confusion. Tears streaked down her face, but I wiped each one away before it fell.

Suddenly a thundering blast rocked the complex and knocked us to the floor. Chartrene sprang up and hurried to the window, screamed and began to cry heavily. I bolted over to her and what I saw left me stunned.

The WORLD building was blown to pieces.

Columns of smoke rose into the air, melding seamlessly with the black night. The orange flames attacked every steel girder and glass pane. All at once I understood why Evannas and Rasherra seemed so resigned. They lost all hope. The women of the U. S. were leaving, and the men were only too happy to give them reason to leave. Nothing mattered between them anymore. The explosion was icing on the cake.

I recovered from the revelation and saw Chartrene sobbing over her loss. Then she started as if she gave herself away. She turned to me, her eyes begging for forgiveness. And that's exactly what she got.

We sat back down on the couch. I held Chartrene tightly as she cried on my shoulder. We didn't expect such a disaster to happen without warning. Chartrene lost everything she had, and I came dangerously close to losing her. The world came crashing down on top of us, and we were unprepared.

Chartrene's tears grew more distressful. With every tear she shed I felt myself collapsing under the weight of the tragedy--slowly, slowly--until I finally broke.

* * *

I woke up early the following morning, unaware I fell asleep. All seemed quiet in the neighborhood, but that didn't mean the Wave was over--not by a longshot. Chartrene slept soundly in my arms; I didn't want to wake her after the night she had. I woke her ten minutes later anyway. "Chartrene? Chartrene, wake up, sweetheart."

She squirmed at first, but then she progressed into a full stretch. "What is it?" she replied sleepily.

"Are you all right?"

Her sleepy expression transformed into one of recollection. "Yes, Jonnas, I'm fine." She roped her arms around me in a fierce embrace. "I'm so sorry for what I did last night," she sobbed. "I know you wouldn't do that, but the whole world attacked me, and everything was crazy..."

"Aww, Chartrene..."

"I don't know what came over me. I didn't mean any of it, Jonnas. I'm so sorry..."

"Don't worry," I whispered, rocking her back and forth. "You got more than your share last night. You had every right to be angry." I looked into her eyes. "I still love you."

"I love you too, honey," she said, rubbing her eyes. "Don't ever forget that."

We locked ourselves in a kiss that seemed like eternity. Then she looked at me tenderly and asked, "Will you come with us?"

"What? You mean, to Venus?"

"Yes."

"You're kidding, right?"

She shook her head.

"Well...what...would I...do there?" I stammered.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're with me." She shifted her position. "I realize now what we have together, and it's too much to give up. I don't care what anyone else thinks. I'm in charge. And besides, why should you suffer for something you didn't do? Jonnas, you don't belong here. You don't deserve the punishment everyone else will get. It'll be you and me."

My head whirled. "Wow," I said dazedly. "I can't go head-first into this. Can Evannas come down here? I'd like to discuss it with him."

"Yeah, sure."

It took a while, but he answered the phone. "Hello?" he said groggily.

"Ev?"

"Jonnas? Is that you?"

"No, just someone who sounds like him."

"Where are you? Rasherra and I thought you were dead!"

"Reports of my death are premature," I quipped. "When we got the bad news, I went straight to Chartrene's apartment. I spent the night here."

"You little devil," he said.

"Ha, ha, very funny. Listen--this is serious. You've got to come down to the complex."

"I don't know where it is."

I gave him directions and told him to bring the AirCar. "All right," he said. "Give me twenty minutes."

After I hung up, I took Chartrene in my arms, but something felt strange. "Your dress is soaked," I said, pointing to the left shoulder.

"Yeah, it is."

"Well, how'd that happen?"

"You tell me."

A chill raced up my spine. "I don't believe this..."

"Don't be ashamed, Jonnas. I never knew a man who cried over me before." Chartrene kissed me and went into her bedroom. "I'll be out shortly."

I returned to the couch and looked over the room. On the opposite wall near the door were two prints of paintings by Monet and Renoir. The Monet was of his wife dressed in a red kimono while the Renoir was of one Mme. Charpentier and her two daughters. They weren't portrayed in artificial glory like the women in the exhibit a few months before. Instead, they were presented within their own natural environments. They were reminders of a time when men and women knew what they meant to each other. Although it was sad to think it would never be that way again, knowing those values endured for a long time made everything more tolerable.

Chartrene was still in her room when her buzzer sounded fifteen minutes later. It was Rasherra and Evannas, showing signs of recovery from their own shocking experiences. I gave Evannas five and Rasherra a hug. "Thank God you're all right," Rasherra said.

"Man, if only I could get away from this garbage," Evannas grumbled.

At that instant the bedroom door opened. Chartrene, in a light-blue-and-white bathrobe, cried "Rasherra!!" and raced over to her. They wrapped themselves around each other, nearly smothering each other. "I thought I heard a familiar voice! Is everything okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. What about you?"

"I think I'll survive."

They laughed at her remark. Evannas and I exchanged glances. "Umm...mind if I ask you guys a question?" he volunteered.

"Sure. What is it?" Rasherra replied.

"How do you two know each other?"

Rasherra's face fell. She turned to Chartrene, whose eyes were sadly aimed at the floor.

"You may as well tell them," Chartrene said. "They know about me."

Rasherra took a deep breath. "You both know Chartrene is the chairwoman of WORLD, right? Well, I'm the vice-chairwoman."

Evannas was stunned senseless. He sat down on the couch and buried his face in his hands. "I knew he'd never understand," Rasherra said weakly.

"Come here, Rashie," Chartrene said, leading her to the bedroom. "We have to discuss something."

I took my cue from Chartrene and sat down next to Evannas with my mouth shut, hoping Evannas would reason things out for himself. "You know," he said three minutes later, "I knew there was a reason she begged me to take her with me."

"Well--"

"Jonnas, I'm going to lose that woman."

"Hold on a second. It's not as bad as it seems."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" he said, turning to me red-faced. "The woman I love will be light years away from me, and you've got the nerve to tell me 'It's not as bad as it seems'? It can't get any worse!"

"Wait a minute!! You didn't let me explain!"

He still had that steel-eyed stare on his face. "Fine. Explain."

"I called you because we also have to discuss something. Chartrene wants me to go with her to Venus."

"And you want my permission?"

"Would you stop feeling sorry for yourself and listen to me, dammit? I didn't make any decisions. But with this little twist, Chartrene might let you go with Rasherra. They're probably talking about that right now."

"That's ridiculous," he said incredulously.

"No, it isn't."

He sprang out of his seat and said, "What would we do there? How would we survive? What's your rationale for going? This I've got to hear."

"Well, shut up and you'll hear it. I haven't forgotten all the times you talked about what you and Rasherra would do when you got married. If she goes without you, those ideas would be just that--ideas. You may not believe it, but it seems you did everything for your future after ADU. Well, there's no future here. Things on this planet will never be the same. If men and women can't live in peace together, there is no life."

Evannas mellowed out and said, "I hate it when you talk like that."

Chartrene's bedroom door slid open. "Evannas," Rasherra asked, "will you come with me to Venus?"

He nodded.

"Okay," Chartrene said, "the rocket will leave tomorrow at five o'clock. Be here at noon."

Rasherra took Evannas's hand and left the apartment with him. "Jonas," she said, "are you coming?"

"Yeah. Just wait for me." When the door closed Chartrene walked over, kissed me again, and held me close with a warmth I never imagined. "What am I doing?" I asked, trembling slightly.

"The right thing."

"I know, but--why Evannas and me? Aren't there other men who don't deserve to stay here?"

"Yes, I do. I don't believe every single man took part in this. But where are they? Jonnas, I know what you're saying, but right now--and I know this sounds selfish--I have to look out for myself among all the other women. Rasherra does too. We need you both. We didn't expect this, but it happened. Now we have to make the best of it. I can't do it alone, and neither can you."

Having your mind read like that is terrifying, and yet touching enough to give you the strength to do just about anything--including leaving your home planet. I stopped shaking and said, "I love you, Chartrene."

"I love you too," Chartrene said, drawing me close. We kissed one last time, then she said, "Go home and pack."

So I did--without asking the biggest question of all.

The next day, around eleven-thirty, Evannas and I were in the garage with our SpaceCases when one of Al-Detroit's female citizens raced past the window. Behind her was an angry man. My temperature rose sharply; I almost took off after him when they vanished around a corner. "SHIT!!!!" I yelled, slamming the AirCar roof.

We put the SpaceCases in the trunk and got into the AirCar. "This is it, man," Evannas said moodily.

"Ain't that the truth."

Chartrene and Rasherra waited on the parking pad in their WORLD uniforms, navy-blue-and-orange with the WORLD insignia on the sash. We saw several women dressed the same on our way to the complex. It was chilling, like WORLD was a radical group that took over the country after a violent revolution. Although they weren't, Evannas and I still exchanged worried looks as we drove to the complex.

Rasherra put her own and Chartrene's belongings in the trunk as Chartrene took the front seat. "Are you ready?" she said, leaning in for a kiss.

"Absolutely not," I replied half-seriously.

Soon we were on our way, leaving what was once AI-Detroit behind. It took us an hour to reach the barren Upper Peninsula and another half hour to reach the launch site. The site was located on the western end, taking up a plot starting at the border between Michigan and Wisconsin and extended five miles east. "The rocket was here for a while," Chartrene

explained. "When WORLD was instituted in 2000, plans were drawn up to build the rocket and have it ready in case things got as bad as they are now."

We flew over the first four miles, then landed and crossed the last mile on foot. Evannas and I carried two SpaceCases apiece, making the walk tedious, but we didn't mind.

We saw the rocket just before we reached the Upper Peninsula. Once we landed, Evannas let out a loud "WHOA!!!" while my eyes were peeled to the rocket--or rather, monstrosity. It was enormous, maybe bigger than the limits of imagination allowed. I was intimidated by its menacing size and wondered if leaving Earth was a mistake. But Chartrene noticed my response; she took her SpaceCase from my hand and replaced it with her hand, squeezing mine slowly and affectionately. I realized there was nothing to be afraid of.

Evannas and I couldn't do much once we reached the rocket's vicinity, so we found a shady tree to doze under. The shade disappeared by four o'clock, but we were awakened by the commotion from an astonishing number of women behind the "Police Line" barriers. I cleared the sleep from my eyes to see faces scowling and fingers pointing at us. We jumped up, snatched our SpaceCases and headed for the small platform outside the rocket. We ran into Lorrinda, Evannas's sister, who was the only one glad to see us. "How are you, kiddo?" she said, hugging her brother.

"I'm all right. I'm glad to see you are too, sis."

"Me too. How are you, Jonnas?"

"I'm managing."

"Sorry I haven't checked up on you these past couple of days," Evannas said.

"That's okay," Lorrinda replied. "Neither of you is in any condition anyway. What happened to you?"

"Let's just say we were out fighting for what we believe in," I chimed in.

"Oookay...How come you're here now?"

"We're coming along," Evannas said. Lorrinda looked shocked, so her brother plowed ahead. "It turns out we're in love with the head honchos of WORLD. We weren't involved in this Wave, so this is our reward."

Lorrinda smiled. "How do you like that? You too, Jonnas?"

"Uh-huh. Chartrene and I are a happy couple--sort of," I said.

"Well, I can't complain if you're coming." She gave us each a hug and kiss. "See ya on the ship, guys."

Evannas and I continued toward safety, freezing in place when a drilling voice behind us said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. Are you aware you don't belong here?"

The familiar voice turned my spine into a giant icicle. Evannas and I turned slowly and fearfully around--and came face-to-face with Vonelle. She wore her WORLD outfit and had suffered a black eye. "What are you doing here, Jonnas?" she interrogated.

I was too taken aback by her condition to be angry. "What happened to you?"

"What does it look like?" she replied after a shocked pause. "Now will you answer my question?"

Evannas quickly stole off to the side, probably sensing Vonelle was someone I was better equipped to deal with. "My friend and I are coming along," I said slowly.

"Where did you get this crazy idea?"

"It's not an `idea,' Vonelle. We're going because Chartrene and Rasherra asked us."

It took a while, but Vonelle understood. "Well...you should stay behind with the other scum on Earth."

"Oh, really?" I blared, feeling cheated. "Let me tell you something! My buddy and I didn't get beat up for nothing! We went out, like a couple of idiots, and tried to kick every man's ass for what they did! We didn't join in with them because that isn't our style! We had nothing to do with it, so if you want to pass judgment, you little bitch..." I noticed her black eye again. "Did you do anything for your eye, Vonelle?"

"Yeah. What's it to you?"

I opened my SpaceCase and pulled out the compress. "Take this," I said firmly.

"I don't want your goddamn compress."

"You take this and put it on that black eye or I'll put it there for you," I declared.

Vonelle slowly took the compress and placed it gingerly on her eye. "Why are you doing this, Jonnas? Why are you concerned about me?"

"I can't believe you asked me that. After all this time--"

"All right. That's enough." She paused thoughtfully and said, "You're incredible. I don't understand you. I put you through hell, Jonnas. I said and did some rotten things to you, and you can't hate me for it! What kind of man are you? What kind of man puts up with my shit without despising me? Do you realize I hate myself now, since you can't do it? Do you realize that?? I may never forgive myself for what I did to you! And you know whose fault it is? Huh?? It's yours!! It's all your fault!! I hope you're satisfied, you bastard!!!"

She tossed the compress at me in unrestrained fury and slapped me in the face. Then the impossible happened--she broke into tears and stormed away shamefully. Evannas walked over after Vonelle put a safe distance between her and myself. "Oh, God--I felt that one," he said.

"I'm glad one of us did," I said with my hand pasted to my cheek.

By now there was hardly room for the women in their designated area. They pushed and

shoved each other, eager to leave. Our presence pissed them off more, so we broke for the platform. Chartrene emerged from the ship's main entrance as we got there. I gave her my "Please-do-something-and-do-it-fast" look.

She hurried over to the microphone stand and said, "ALL RIGHT! LET ME HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE!" Her words boomed throughout the site through a series of speakers set up out of our vision, but they had to be huge anyhow.

"ALL RIGHT, EVERYONE. THERE'S NO MYSTERY WHY WE'RE ALL HERE. OUR LIVES FELL APART, AND WE CAN NO LONGER LIVE HERE. NOW, I KNOW YOU ALL WISH TO LEAVE AS SOON AS YOU CAN. IN FIVE MINUTES THE BARRIERS WILL BE REMOVED AND YOU CAN BOARD THE ROCKET. HOWEVER, BECAUSE THERE ARE SO MANY OF YOU, WE MUST DO THIS IN AN ORDERLY FASHION. YOU CANNOT CHARGE ON AT ONCE. I UNDERSTAND YOU WISH TO LEAVE, BUT YOU MUST BE PATIENT."

Someone in the front with a broken arm yelled, "CHARTRENE!! WHO ARE THOSE TWO MEN AND WHAT THE HELL ARE THEY DOING HERE??"

After some hesitation, Chartrene replied, "THEY'RE COMING WITH US."

An uproar took place right before our eyes. Chartrene remained solid in her stance, unmoved by the chaos, but for the umpteenth time in three days I was sorely offended. I sprang up, walked over to Chartrene and gripped the mike. "Jonnas, what are you doing?" she said, almost panicky.

"I want to see what effect my speech has on a standing-room-only crowd."

"Oh, no, you don't," she said with an aggressiveness I never saw.

"What do you mean by that?"

"This is my problem, not yours. I will handle this. Besides, you've done so much for me, especially in these last few days, it's time I returned the favor."

She had a point. "All right. It's all yours." I trudged away as she called Rasherra over and conferred quickly with her. Then she threw the power switch back on and tried to calm everyone down.

"EXCUSE ME...PEOPLE...QUIET, PEOPLE...EXCUSE ME!! THANK YOU. NOW LET'S GET SOMETHING STRAIGHT HERE. RASHERRA AND I ARE YOUR LEADERS, AND WE DON'T HAVE TO EXPLAIN ANYTHING TO YOU! WE COULD EASILY SAY 'THEY'RE COMING WITH US,' AND THAT WOULD BE THE END OF DISCUSSION! BUT SINCE WE WENT THROUGH THE SAME HELL AS YOU, WE OWE YOU AN EXPLANATION. SO LISTEN UP!

"BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THESE TWO MEN, JONNAS BAYMANN AND EVANNAS GREZZLER, TOOK NO PART IN THIS WAVE. THEY GAVE THE MEN A TASTE OF THEIR OWN MEDICINE AND, AS YOU SEE, GOT SOME BACK IN RETURN. BUT THAT'S NOT WHY THEY'RE COMING WITH US.

"MR. BAYMANN IS COMING WITH US BECAUSE OF WHAT HE DID FOR ME TWO NIGHTS AGO. AFTER ALL THE MEN IN AL-DETROIT DESCENDED UPON ME, I WAS READY TO GIVE UP. I HAD IT WITH EVERYONE AND MYSELF. I FELT WORTHLESS. JONNAS SAW THAT, I'M AFRAID.

"JONNAS WAS SO SHOCKED BY MY ATTITUDE HE STAYED WITH ME EVEN AFTER I SUBJECTED HIM TO A BARRAGE OF MISGUIDED INSULTS. I ATTACKED HIM, I HURT HIM DEEPLY, BUT HE STOOD TOUGH. THEN, AFTER I WOUNDED MYSELF, HE TURNED IT ALL AROUND AND SHOWED ME I STILL HAD MORE

WORTH THAN I BELIEVED. EVERYTHING THE OTHER MEN DID HAD NO BEARING ON JONNAS'S VIEW OF ME. IT WAS THE MOST SELFLESS THING HE DID. HE'S COMING WITH US BECAUSE I LOVE HIM. IT'S THAT SIMPLE."

She passed the mike to Rasherra, who explained her circumstances and praised Evannas in a similar manner as Chartrene did me. After justifying his presence she added, "MOST OF YOU IN THE FRONT CAN SEE EVANNAS HERE. LOOK AT HIM. HE TOOK THE SAME BEATINGS CHARTRENE AND I AND ALL OF YOU. AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, IF HE TOOK LUMPS LIKE THAT, HE'S ONE OF US!!"

Evannas nearly crumbled to the floor.

"THE SAME FOR JONNAS," Chartrene broke in, sending a lightning bolt through my nervous system.

Rasherra took the mike back and added, "KEEP IN MIND WE'D BE INSANE IF WE ALLOWED ANY MAN WITH US WHO DIDN'T HAVE THE VALUES THEY POSSESS. IT ISN'T FAIR TO THEM IF THEY'RE PUNISHED FOR WHAT EVERYONE ELSE DID. WE KNOW WHAT WE'RE DOING."

Evannas slapped me twice on the shoulder in a gesture of finality. We grabbed our SpaceCases and met Chartrene and Rasherra at the rocket's entrance, ignoring the jeers from the crowd behind us.

Chartrene and Rasherra took us to their quarters and told us we could stay there, opting for the cockpit if they needed it. We took our belongings inside and unpacked, but something drew me to the window once we finished. The women boarded for their exodus in staggering numbers. It crushed me to think every one of them, regardless of race, religion, creed, or social standing, had their lives turned upside-down by forces they could not understand or control. I

thought of the art exhibit and realized there were still no answers to my questions--and never would be.

At five o'clock the final countdown began. The engines fired up and whirred furiously for a few minutes before they kicked in. I didn't have the strength to stay at the window for the launch. Maybe it was just as well.

* * *

At nine o'clock Earth time Evannas shut the light above his bed off and fell asleep. Rasherra paid us a visit during her rounds; Evannas took advantage to thank her for the speech she made--much to my embarrassment. She left around ten, which was reason enough for him to fade off to sleep.

I stayed awake, staring straight ahead blankly. There were a million things to sort out, not the least of which was why leaving Earth was the only solution. I thought of my parents and hoped they fled to our house in Al-Beaver Bay. I made it a point to ask Chartrene about sending a message to them.

An hour after Evannas dozed off, Chartrene opened the door and whispered, "May I come in?"

I nodded.

She sat down on the bed facing me. "Things were crazy these past few days," she said.

"Putting it mildly," I droned, and took a deep breath. "How will we live on Venus?"

"It's about time you asked. One of the first, and more public, things WORLD was make a trip to Venus. A group of scientists, male and female, went to the planet to check out living conditions--how to deal with the sun's excess heat, how to measure time, how to provide for basic needs. WORLD did extensive research on the subject; we sent another team to Venus in

2029 to build the living quarters, which are underground. We're bringing other provisions--food, clothing, and all. In time we'll get back to the way we lived. If we can't do it, we'll help future generations make the transition." She went silent and looked down at the floor. "Jonnas--"

"Hold it," I interrupted. "You're about to tell me how you became the leader of WORLD, right?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"That's not important." I sat straight up and focused my eyes upon hers. "When you were thirteen years old, your mother sent you to a meeting of WORLD'S AI-Detroit chapter, because you were shy and fragile and without a sense of immediate identity. She thought if you joined, you would get over that shyness and find out who you were. You were scared at first, but soon you felt like a new person with an identity and a confidence you never thought possible. But while you learned to be confident, your other boyfriends felt threatened; they thought you didn't need them to make you happy. It upset you, but you still held on. You had WORLD to thank for that, so you felt it was only proper to give back what you received. As the youngest chairwoman in history, you lived up to that promise. But when the WORLD building was destroyed, that ended your hopes for the organization too. Now, you have something else to live for--someone who respects and admires you for your strength. And now you want to devote yourself to the man in front of you, a man who did more for you than...WORLD ever could..."

Chartrene tried to put on the biggest smile despite the tears streaming down her face. My heart pounded. "How did I do?" I asked faintly.

"You blew it."

"What?!"

"My mother sent me when I was fourteen, not thirteen."

"Well...did I get the rest of it right?"

She wiped another tear from her face. "Yes, you did."

I couldn't help gazing into her eyes as she spoke. That hypnotic sensation from the night we met came back to me. I stroked her sunshine-colored hair as she put her arms around me and caressed me. She smiled at me proudly, and I grinned in happiness. "You know something, Chartrene? You're a beautiful person."

"And you are too, Jonnas."

She moved closer and pressed her lips gently against mine. A rush flowed wildly through me, one so strong I thought we floated in mid-air. I pulled her closer as she tightened her hold. Suddenly I realized what awaited us on Venus.