

PRODIGAL

by Justin Stanchfield

Justin Stanchfield's fiction has appeared in over seventy-five publications including *Boys' Life*, *Interzone*, and *The Intergalactic Medicine Show*. He lives with his wife and two kids on a Montana cattle ranch, a stone's throw from the Continental Divide. "Prodigal," his bittersweet story about just how hard it can be to go home, is his first tale for Asimov's.

* * * *

I didn't recognize my father when he stepped past the security barrier, a single carry bag banging against his thigh in the weak spin-gravity the hub produced. He wore a simple one-piece flightsuit beneath a nylon jacket covered with patches from the vessels he had piloted. His hair was longer than I remembered, nearly to his shoulders, deep brown without a single stitch of gray. It curled at the ends to give him a devil-may-care appearance that contrasted harshly with the weary expression on his face. Not until he turned and noticed me did I finally let myself believe it truly was him.

"Mara?" Even from across the crowded reception lounge I heard the question in his voice. Obviously, he hadn't recognized me, either. I nodded, then started toward him.

The old, boyish smile broke in full, though it faded quickly as he hurried to where I waited, using that easy, loose-gaited stride I'd seen so many deep-spacers use. He dropped his carry bag and threw his arms around me. The stiff fabric of his jacket held the musty, locker-room scent I'd always associated with space flight. I let him pull me closer. Was that hesitation I felt, not quite a flinch but maybe something deeper? Guilt, perhaps? Or regret? Apart from a handful of video calls over the years, we had become strangers. The laggardly, stop-and-go pace of communication between planets hardly made the effort worthwhile.

"It's good to see you," I finally said. I'd returned the hug, but was glad that the awkward moment was over. Self-consciously, I added, "I wish it was under better circumstances."

He nodded. As we stood there studying each other, my first thought was that this man could not possibly be my father. Apart from the tiny creases at the corners of his eyes—and those had been there since he was a teenager—his face was unlined. Despite his heavy beard stubble, he hardly looked a day over twenty. Not surprising; he had been twenty-five when he took the change, six years older

PRODIGAL

by Justin Stanchfield

Justin Stanchfield's fiction has appeared in over seventy-five publications including Boys' Life, Interzone, and The Intergalactic Medicine Show. He lives with his wife and two kids on a Montana cattle ranch, a stone's throw from the Continental Divide. "Prodigal," his bittersweet story about just how hard it can be to go home, is his first tale for Asimov's.

* * * *

I didn't recognize my father when he stepped past the security barrier, a single carry bag banging against his thigh in the weak spin-gravity the hub

produced. He wore a simple one-piece flightsuit beneath a nylon jacket covered with patches from the vessels he had piloted. His hair was longer than I remembered, nearly to his shoulders, deep brown without a single stitch of gray. It curled at the ends to give him a devil-may-care appearance that contrasted harshly with the weary expression on his face. Not until he turned and noticed me did I finally let myself believe it truly was him.

“Mara?” Even from across the crowded reception lounge I heard the question in his voice. Obviously, he hadn’t recognized me, either. I nodded, then started toward him.

The old, boyish smile broke in full,

though it faded quickly as he hurried to where I waited, using that easy, loose-gaited stride I'd seen so many deep-spacers use. He dropped his carry bag and threw his arms around me. The stiff fabric of his jacket held the musty, locker-room scent I'd always associated with space flight. I let him pull me closer. Was that hesitation I felt, not quite a flinch but maybe something deeper? Guilt, perhaps? Or regret? Apart from a handful of video calls over the years, we had become strangers. The laggardly, stop-and-go pace of communication between planets hardly made the effort worthwhile.

“It’s good to see you,” I finally said. I’d returned the hug, but was glad that

the awkward moment was over. Self-consciously, I added, “I wish it was under better circumstances.”

He nodded. As we stood there studying each other, my first thought was that this man could not possibly be my father. Apart from the tiny creases at the corners of his eyes—and those had been there since he was a teenager—his face was unlined. Despite his heavy beard stubble, he hardly looked a day over twenty. Not surprising; he had been twenty-five when he took the change, six years older than I had been when I underwent the treatments. Still, the pain in his expression seemed ancient. The corner of his lips trembled slightly, and I was sure he was fighting back tears.

“Mara...” His voice broke on my name. “They won’t let me see her.”

“I’m working on it,” I told him. “I’ve got a call into the consulate. Hopefully they’ll cut through the red tape and issue a temporary visa.”

“And when they can’t? Or won’t?” Anger flashed in his eyes, but he covered it well. “I’m sorry. None of this is your fault. But I’ve been fighting these same pin-headed bureaucrats since I left Ceres.”

“Don’t worry. I have connections.” I managed a weak smile. “Remember, I work for them. I have a few favors I can call in.”

That seemed to calm him, at least temporarily. Wil Dupuis had a

mercurical temper. That much of my childhood I recalled all too vividly. He drew a long, deep breath, sighed as he let it out, then asked, “Have you talked to Jane?”

“I called her yesterday. I told her you were coming.”

“Was she...” He hesitated. I could see how much this effort was costing him. “Was she in pain?”

“They have her on medication. She’s resting comfortably.”

“Yeah?” He ran a hand through his hair, then tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling, his eyes following the high, curved beams that swept down to the viewscreen that made up the outer wall. On it, displayed in real-time, Earth

hung placidly, the air above Antarctica so clear I could actually make out the clusters of buildings and runways that ringed the Needle's massive foundation hundreds of kilometers below us. Father let his gaze drift back to me.

"I'm sorry, Mara. I shouldn't take this out on you. It's just that I know how short time is." A shudder passed through him. This time, he didn't try to hold back the tears. "A man shouldn't have to watch his daughter die."

"I'm your daughter, too," I felt like saying. Instead, I put my arms around him again, pulled him close, and let him cry on my shoulder.

* * * *

We rode the public elevators down

from the docking ring to the permanent quarters two decks below. I told him we could hit one of the little cafés or order take-out, but he said he didn't have much of an appetite. Neither did I. I felt like I had been sleepwalking, the last few weeks blurred into one long stretch punctuated by phone calls and text messages and the endless, empty waiting. Waiting for father to arrive. Waiting for one bureaucrat or another to return my call.

Waiting for Jane to die.

The people we passed in the spiral corridor muttered polite greetings as we squeezed around each other. Thankfully, none stopped to chat. Most were short-timers, career-minded techies, or mid-

level agents serving six-month tours before riding the elevator back to *terra-familiaris* and the lives they had interrupted. I didn't have that option. Like my father, I was barred from the surface. I had reconciled myself to the fact ages ago and made the best of it that I could. At least, that's what I told myself in the quiet hours.

“Just a sec.” I slipped past him as we arrived outside my apartment door. I put my thumb on the touch-pad and breathed against the face-high sensor. The bio-lock recognized me and the door slid aside almost soundlessly. “Remind me to code you into the lock.” I said over my shoulder. “That way you can come and go as you please.”

“I hope,” he said, “I won’t be here that long.”

I stared at him, and to my surprise saw him blush. He held up his right hand, palm out, and quickly added, “I didn’t mean it to sound like I’m not glad to be here. It’s just that...”

“I know,” I said, forestalling any further embarrassment. “I understood what you meant.”

We stepped into my apartment. The lights came on, a warm, yellow cast to them that simulated a summer evening. The wall panels showed a lodgepole thicket seen through the screened-in pillars of an old-fashioned porch, the wood grayed with age and weather. Beyond the forest a broad, sloping

meadow beckoned, sun-bleached grass waving in the breeze. Now it was my turn to blush. I had completely forgotten to reset the vista to something less personal. An odd expression crept over my father's face.

“Is this the cabin?” he asked softly.

I nodded. I had been eight the summer we spent on Lost Horse Creek—father, mother, Janie, and me. Janie was fourteen, and complained endlessly about how bored she was. To me, it had seemed like heaven. Maybe it was only heaven in recollection, a faded pastiche of childhood imagination seen through the filter of my unending middle-age. Maybe I just liked the nostalgia of something that had never really been true

in the first place.

“Want a drink?” I asked, anxious to avoid the subject. “I’ve got bourbon or vodka.”

“They let you have alcohol on the Needle now?”

“No. But like I said, I have connections.” I went around to the little kitchen, the two rooms separated only by the counter jutting from the inner wall. From the tiny refrigerator I took out a bottle of Jim Beam, then two glasses from the cabinet above it. I didn’t bother with ice, but poured two fingers of the amber liquid into each glass. Careful not to spill, I carried the glasses back into the main room, handed one to Father, then nodded at one of the room’s two

chairs. We sat opposite each other, both of us leaning slightly against the ring's rotation. Spin is not the same as gravity, no matter what the travel agencies tell you.

“Cheers.” I raised my glass. Father sipped at his bourbon, then nodded thoughtfully, savoring what was probably the first whisky he'd tasted in decades. I tossed most of mine off in a single swallow. A familiar numbness rushed through my nerves. I welcomed it.

Father took another sip, then let his arms rest on his knees, the plastic tumbler clasped in both hands. He stared into it, as if he expected to find some lost revelation at the bottom of his glass.

Without looking up, he said, “How long until you hear from the consulate?”

“It’s barely dawn in Washington. I wouldn’t expect to hear anything for a while.” I finished my drink. Hesitantly, I asked him if he wanted me to put in a call to Jane’s hospital. He shook his head.

“No.” He glanced up from his glass, but didn’t meet my eyes. Instead, he stared out at the simulated meadow. “Let her sleep.”

I doubted if she was asleep, but I understood. Father had traveled millions of miles to see his first-born child before the cancer in her spine took her, but that didn’t mean he was anxious to face the truth of it all. The silence

lengthened uncomfortably, the recording of wind whispering through the wall speakers the only sound. I stood up, went back into the kitchen and poured another drink, then on an impulse brought the bottle back into the living room with me, the glass icy cold in my hand. Father let me pour another finger's worth into his tumbler before I sat down. It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

Human beings evolved at the bottom of a deep ocean of air, our bodies shielded from the barrage of cosmic radiation by Earth's magnetic field. Once we ventured into space it became apparent how ill-suited we were to this strange new environment. We could

build ships with thicker shielding, or faster engines to let us reach our destinations with less exposure, but in the end those were temporary fixes at best. What was needed was a new kind of human.

And in that respect, we surpassed all expectations.

Tailored viruses were designed to stimulate the body's natural immunities and trigger dormant stem-cell clusters to repair the damage produced by the relentless bombardment. Wil Dupuis, my father, had been among the first test pilots to undergo the treatment. Of the twenty men and women who'd been approved for the painful series of shots, six died within the first month, two more

by the end of a year, and one went insane. But those that survived found themselves virtually immune to sickness or decay. Suddenly, real space travel became possible—crews were now able to make journeys that might stretch into years.

What no one had realized was that the effects might be permanent. Unintentionally, medical science had created a sub-class of people who were, for all practical purposes, immortal. By the time the public understood the consequences, thousands of people had taken the transformation.

I was one of them.

My parents divorced when I was thirteen. Mother blamed my father's

frequent absences, blithely ignoring her own dalliances with other men. He barely seemed to notice what was happening. When the divorce became final, he was halfway to Mars. Jane had just turned nineteen. She was in college and had already dusted her feet of the poisonous environment that had taken over our family. She had her own dreams to chase. I, on the other hand, was devastated. Mother and I never got along well. She tried, but we were simply too different, or maybe too much alike, to ever be truly comfortable with each other. This was especially true as the years went by and I neared adulthood. I missed Father desperately. My heart constantly returned to that lost

summer in the Rockies when we had actually been a family. After I graduated, I decided to follow in his footsteps and become a pilot.

The treatments were safer by the time I checked into the hospital for the first of the long series of shots and transfusions. Still, 10 percent of the patients suffered serious, often debilitating, side effects. I was scared to death as the syringe pricked the tender skin inside my elbow, the clear, syrupy serum flowing into my veins. I was sick for days afterward and I was convinced I was dying. Still, I reported gamely for the next series, and the ones after that. Three months after I began, I was certified healthy and accepted for flight training by one of the

fledgling multi-planetary corporations. Two years of mind-numbing training followed, but in the end I earned my commercial ticket. I was ready to start my career pushing ships back and forth across the rapidly expanding frontier.

Fate, however, has a funny way of intervening.

First, I discovered after my first and only flight as co-pilot that I was not cut out to be a spacer. I didn't like the unending routine in a ship barely as large as most mobile homes. I hated the competition between crewmates, and I especially hated the excruciating responsibility. I never could reconcile myself with the thought that lives rode on my shoulder, that one mislaid decision,

one wrong switch, could lead to passengers dying. When we reached Martian orbit I resigned from the crew and took a job as an orbital flight controller on Phobos. A few years later, I returned to Earth and accepted a similar position here on the Needle.

Once again, Father barely seemed to notice.

Others, however, did.

With each new medical study, every new report about how long those of us who had undergone the change might be expected to live, public outcry worsened. While billions suffered in the slums and third-world factories, those addicted to the 24-7 media saw us as a privileged class. We were played up as

immortal monsters bent on securing universal domination. Not surprisingly, both the Parliament of Terra and the U.N. banned anyone who had responded well to the treatment from Earth. We became exiles.

The process was quickly outlawed. Of course, although the legitimate research was halted, the procedure went underground. Any celebrity or politico with cash in hand could get the treatment done in dozens of private clinics. The colonies continued to rely on those of us with enhanced immune systems, but thanks to the media and their unwitting puppets in government, Earth sequestered itself from the revolution. I made the best that I could of my new

life, rising slowly through the ranks of controllers. I consoled myself with the material comforts a long and single life could provide. Father continued to fly, moving almost instinctively outward as the frontier expanded beyond Mars and the asteroids to the Jovian system and even Saturn.

Meanwhile, Jane got old, got sick, and eventually got up the nerve to tell me she was dying. Father, perhaps for the first time in his life, discovered that even he was capable of regret.

* * * *

The dot-pager in my earlobe woke me at six-thirty the next morning. I sat up in bed, my head thick from the bourbon, and fumbled for my phone. A man's

voice, heavily accented with what I took to be Mandarin, clicked on, the time-lag between ground to sky hardly noticeable.

“Mara Dupuis?” he asked.

“Yes.” I was glad the call was audio only. If I looked half as bed as I felt, I would probably frighten the man out of his wits. The treatments, for all their benefits, did nothing for a hangover.

“How can I help you?”

“My name is Li Chin, with the Bureau of Extra-Planetary Commerce. Recently you applied for a hardship variance to your travel restrictions.”

“That’s correct. I applied several weeks ago, and again last Thursday.” My throat was so dry I could barely speak. I shifted on the edge of my bed

and reached for the bottle of water I'd left there the night before. It was tepid and flat, but I drank it gratefully.

“That is what my records show as well,” Chin continued. “Unfortunately, your request has been denied.”

“But...” My hand began to shake so badly I found it hard to keep the tiny phone pressed to my ear. “You realize the request is to visit a dying family member? We would be under constant surveillance and would return to orbit immediately following the visit.”

“Of course. But, sadly, the request must be denied. You are on the list of proscribed persons.” There was a slight pause. “You did say we, did you not?”

“Yes.” Maybe there was hope for my

father's permit even if mine was denied. "The request was for my father and myself. His name is William Dupuis."

"Ah, yes, I have his form in front of me."

"Then, he has permission?"

"I am afraid his request is also denied." I couldn't tell if Chin was genuinely contrite delivering the bad news, or if he was quietly enjoying the moment. "If you would like to appeal the decision..."

"I would," I told him. He gave me the names and ID numbers of the agencies to go through, then politely hung up. I sat stunned, my stomach curled into tight knots. A shadow fell across the floor and I saw my father standing in the open

doorway, his elbow propped against the wall. He wore a pair of light green scrub pants, but was otherwise naked, his brown hair tousled.

“Problem?” he asked.

I nodded. Suddenly, it was very hard to look at him. Instead, I took another sip of lukewarm water before I launched into what Li Chin had said a few moments before.

“So, what now?” He couldn’t quite hide his growing anger.

“We appeal.”

“How long is that going to take?”

“I don’t know.” I raised my head and looked him in the eye. The pain and frustration I saw on his face was heartbreaking. “I’m sure it won’t take

long, given the circumstances.”

“All right.” He ran his hand through his hair, leaving it in spikes above his high forehead. His eyes bored into mine. “And what happens when the appeal is turned down as well?”

I looked away. We both knew I had no answer for that question.

* * * *

Looking back, I suppose everything that happened was inevitable. At the time, though, I was too caught up in the events to see them clearly. After the disappointing phone call, I air-showered and dressed for what I assumed would be a long day of heated wrangling with the various agencies that held my life in their collective fist. I chose a

conservative brown one-piece that effectively mimicked my controller's uniform, then donned a tailored smart-fabric jacket, and set the color a shade darker than my hair. To the casual observer, I looked like just another high-ranking official, which was exactly the look I wanted.

"I'm going to be gone a couple of hours," I told Father on my way to the door. He looked up from the chair he was sitting in. He had dressed as well, a blue flightsuit covered in multiple pockets, and the same jacket he'd worn the day before.

"You're going to file an appeal?"

"Among other things," I told him. "I have some favors to call in."

He nodded, but said nothing. From his posture, I knew he didn't hold a lot of hope. A surge of anger swept through me, but I held it in. While I understood on an intellectual level how he felt, his lack of confidence stabbed deep. I opened the door, then paused and turned around.

“Are you going to be here when I get back?”

A diffident shrug, followed by a piercing, unblinking stare. “Where else would I be?”

His tone stung, but I ignored it. Once again I was reminded of how little I actually knew my father. I stepped into the corridor, sealed the door behind me, then started toward the hub.

The Needle is enormous—the

structure stretches hundreds of kilometers from base to tip. The actual living section, however, is rather cramped, especially compared to the LaGrange stations that accommodate the real flow of interplanetary traffic. I thought about riding one of the public mag-cars, but decided in the end to walk, giving myself the extra time to map out a strategy. First I went to my office on Three Deck and filed the appeals. Then, finished with the actual paperwork, I stepped across the hall and rapped on the door opposite mine.

“Come in,” a bland, high-pitched male voice answered. The door slid open. Inside, seated behind an unadorned plastic desk, sat my supervisor, Chief

Controller Edward K. Edmonds. A startled frown flashed across his face.

Edmonds was a slight man, thin with graying hair and a short, neatly clipped mustache. He was forty-seven, three decades younger than myself. Even so, I felt a little intimidated. Sometimes, I think a respect for those who look older is hard-wired into our brains. Edmonds had been my supervisor for three years, a transplant from Earth, and would no doubt transfer again soon, either to Washington or Shanghai to continue his slow rise through the agency.

We both knew I actually ran the office. We also knew that I would never rise beyond my current position, no matter how many decades I might work

as a controller. As Li Chin had so pointedly mentioned earlier, I was on the list of proscribed persons.

“Mara?” He seemed genuinely surprised. “I thought you had requested some personal days?”

“I did.”

He nodded at one of the chairs neatly arranged in front of his desk. Unlike most offices on the Needle which relied on wall-screens to lend a touch of warmth, Edmonds had planted air-fern and allowed it to take over two of the inner walls. More than once I'd caught him fussily trimming the springy little fronds, pruning them in the way I imagined some ancient Japanese poet-warrior might have cultivated a bonsai

tree. Still, I had to admit, his office always smelled wonderful.

I crossed the room and sank into one of the chairs. Edmonds closed the screen on his computer, folded it down, then leaned stiffly forward on his elbows, all the while watching me. He forced a smile. We were colleagues, but hardly friends.

“How is your sister?” he asked politely.

“Not well.” I hesitated, carefully timing what I needed to ask. “Actually, she’s the reason I came here this morning.”

“Oh?” Edmonds cocked an eyebrow. Again, I waited a heartbeat before continuing.

“I’m sure you know my father arrived late yesterday?” He bobbed his head in answer, and I went on. “When he first told me he was coming several months ago, I had hoped Jane might ride the elevator up to see him. Unfortunately, my sister’s cancer has progressed to the point where she can no longer travel. And my request for a travel variance has been denied. I’ve appealed, but I don’t know how much good that will do.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Actually, I think there might be.”

Now his brows drew together, his expression surprisingly forthright. “What did you have in mind?”

“There are seventeen Consulates with offices on the Needle—any one of them could offer my father temporary diplomatic status. Once that happens, he could travel without restriction, at least as far as Phoenix where my sister is undergoing treatment.”

“Mara, I don’t have that kind of authority.”

“I realize that.” I leaned closer, keeping my eyes steady on his. Inadvertently, he drew back, his fingers clutching at the glassy surface of his desk. For the first time since I’d known him, I think I actually intimidated him a bit, which was exactly what I hoped to do. I might appear to be twenty-one, but I had seven decades of life and

experience behind me. Pressing my advantage, I continued.

“You know people, Edward. You have friends inside those embassies. I’m not asking for a miracle, just a chance to meet with one of them and make my case.”

“I ... I don’t know.” The idea seemed to frighten him. I could almost see the dark thoughts reflected in his eyes. No doubt he was watching his carefully mapped career plan crumple. “Mara, you’ve got to understand....”

“Damn it, I do understand!” The anger in my voice was genuine. Where had that come from? Edmonds’ eyes widened, the tone in my voice seemed to drive him further back from his desk. Was he

frightened? To my surprise, I found the thought delicious. “I’ve devoted my life to this agency. You can’t argue that I’m not an asset.”

“I never said you weren’t.”

“Then step up for me.” I let myself calm down. Inside my chest, my heart was thundering, but I think I hid it well. “Edward, we aren’t criminals, and this isn’t some sinister plot. All I want is for my father to see his daughter before she dies. Is that too much to ask?”

“I...” Tiny beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead, but he made no move to wipe them away. I kept my gaze fixed on him, not giving him the chance to turn away. Finally, he nodded, and gravely sighed. “I’ll see what I can

do.”

* * * *

Six hours later, bone-weary, I returned to my apartment and opened the door. In my pocket was a flash-drive with an authorization issued from the Australian Consulate. Tired as I was, I couldn't stop grinning. Despite everything, I'd made good on my promise.

“Father?” I called. “Dad?”

The room was empty. I checked his bedroom, and then mine. On the night stand beside my bed I found a flat-screen with a memo light flashing. I picked up the flexible reader and thumbed it on.

“Mara. I'm sorry but I couldn't wait. I'll see you in a few days.”

Furious, I threw the screen to the floor, hoping to see it shatter into a million pieces, but in the weak spin it simply fluttered lazily downward. Not bothering to change clothes, I hurried out of my apartment and started for the docking ring.

* * * *

Situated at the very top of the Needle, spreading outward like the crenellation on a medieval tower, the docking ring took up nearly a hundred thousand square meters of space, the various bays and holding tanks opening onto a central hub. Unlike most of the slowly rotating station at the tip of the elevator shaft, here the ring's motion was carefully nulled to take advantage of zero-gee.

The reek of machine oil and ozone permeated the gunmetal gray chamber, while enormous floodlights mounted on high girders melted patches on the frost that formed along the inner walls. It was cold in the ring, and I zipped my jacket tighter as I stepped out of the long, cylindrical mag-car to the passenger platform.

Across the tumult of cranes and catwalks, I spotted my father standing outside one of the gantries. He noticed me, but made no move to run. Working my way clumsily around a stack of shipping containers, I crossed the central hub, then pulled myself onto the platform beside him.

“Damn you.” I raised my voice to be

heard over the machine noise. Clouds of breath formed around my face in the frigid air. “You intended to do this all along, didn’t you?”

He shrugged. He had changed into padded, dun-colored pants tucked into insulated boots. A hooded coat, dark blue with bright yellow piping on the collar and sleeves, replaced his flight jacket. On the left breast, scuffed by hard use, was an embroidered patch that identified him as part of the crew of the *Goshawk* out of Toronto. Beneath that was a name tag that read *Mendoza*. I had no idea how he secured the jacket, but I had no doubt he would have phony credentials somewhere in his pockets to match. I was shaking, though from the

cold or rage, I wasn't sure.

“At least you could have told me you intended to sneak down to the surface and saved me a lot of effort,” I said, glaring at him.

“I'm sorry.” Another shrug. “You've got to understand, Mara, I've had a long history of not trusting the wheels of bureaucracy.”

I blinked as the realization struck. I had blithely assumed my father would obey the restrictions. Obviously, I was wrong. This was certainly not his first trip under an assumed identity.

“You bastard.” I wasn't sure if I was angry with him for lying to me, or for thumbing his nose at the same authority I worked for. “Do you have any idea how

much trouble you would be in if you're caught?"

"Do you think I'm some kind of newbie?" His face relaxed slightly.

"Mara, I'm sorry I didn't go through channels, but there simply isn't time to wait. Jane can't hold out much longer."

"You should have trusted me more." From my inner pocket I drew out the pin-drive with the diplomatic credentials. "I told you I had favors I could call in."

He actually seemed impressed, but made no move to take the little device from my hand. Instead, he forced a weak smile, then tipped his head toward the gantry door. "Let's go aboard where it's warm. You're so cold your lips are turning blue." He started toward the

broad, open hatchway, pulling himself along the rubberized steel railing, then glanced back at me over his shoulder. A scowl cut across his face. “Damn it, Mara, you’re not breaking any of your precious regulations by just visiting, you know.”

The scorn in his voice was so thick I couldn’t believe he’d said it. I stood there, teetering in the weak gravity, my mouth hanging open while I fought back tears. At once he saw how deeply his words had struck, and reached for my arm, but I snatched it away.

“I didn’t mean it to sound like that....” he said.

“No? How did you mean it to sound?” All these years I had lived with my

father's indifference, but I'd never thought it was more than that. "I had no idea I was such a disappointment to you."

"You're not a disappointment." Suddenly, he couldn't meet my eye. "Come on, let's go aboard the ship and talk."

"Go to hell."

I started to turn around, but he was much better in low-gee than I was and gently caught my sleeve. This time I let him pull me toward the gantry. As hurt as I was, part of me desperately wanted to get everything out in the open. The anger that had flared earlier in Edmonds' office returned, and for the first time in ages I found myself actually

relishing a confrontation.

We glided down the short passage, the walls a brackish gray in the flickering fluorescent lights. At the far end, an airlock stood open, the warning strobe flashing amber. Beyond it, closed off by insulated doors, lay the *Gos-hawk*, her cargo already offloaded. The ship's low bay was empty and stark.

“So, why pretend to be part of this crew?” I asked, wishing my lips weren't trembling so badly. I wanted to appear contemptuous. Instead, I only sounded cold.

My father shrugged as he continued to lead the way deeper into the ship.

“I've known the pilot and the co-pilot for ages. We've done business before.”

I let the remark slide. No doubt he was used to this, but to me the thought of going behind the law felt vaguely repulsive. When had I become so entrenched in the system, I wondered? Maybe my father was right to hold me in contempt. He thumbed a side door open, and we drifted inside the ship's cramped galley. The aroma of hot coffee and grease floated on the warm air. Father grabbed one of the overhead straps, then turned to face me. He floated above the narrow table like some glowering genie in a nylon parka.

“All right,” he said. “Let me have it.”

“Have what? You make this sound like a scuffle over who gets Great Grandmother's china. Damn it, you've

been lying to me for years. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“For the record,” he began, “I’ve only been down to the surface five or six times since the restrictions went in effect. Besides, what would you have wanted me to do?”

“You might have trusted me,” I said quietly.

“I did trust you. I *do* trust you.” He actually seemed contrite. “Maybe it was wrong not to tell you, but I couldn’t stand the thought of what might happen if I was caught and you were somehow implicated. You would have lost everything you’ve worked so hard to achieve.”

“All I’ve achieved?” I snorted in

disgust, despite the fact that everything he said made perfect sense. I didn't want to be reasonable. I wanted to lash out and make him see how deep the wounds ran. "Do you think living on this place is something I wanted? Yes, I've made a life here, but a stalled career two hundred miles above the god-damned South Pole is not how I saw my life progressing when I decided to follow in your footsteps and take the change."

He muttered something under his breath. I felt my face flush, and snapped at him. "What did you say?"

"I said 'I should have known you would pin this on me.'" He tipped his head down until our eyes locked. "I know I wasn't the perfect father. Hell, I

was a lousy father. But I never, not once, encouraged you to take the change.”

“No, you’re right,” I said, unable to keep the bitter edge from my tone. “As a matter of fact, you never encouraged me do a single thing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Anger flashed in his eyes.

“Nothing. It doesn’t mean anything.” I drew a deep breath, then plunged on. “Just answer one question. Would you be here if the tables were turned and it was me dying instead of Jane?”

His face paled; the hurt in his eyes was so horrendous that I immediately regretted what I’d said. He started to say something, but I cut him off. “Don’t, please. That was unfair, and I apologize.

But I've known since I was a baby that Jane was your favorite. How could I not notice?"

"Mara, honey..." Suddenly he was drifting toward me. I tried to move away but he caught me and enfolded me in his arms. I might have pulled back, but didn't. All my anger, all the years of resentment faded into the background, and suddenly I was a child again, crying over a skinned knee. I felt his hand on my back, patting gently, a rare gesture when I truly had been little.

"Mara," he continued, no longer hiding his own tears. "I loved you both. There was never a favorite. If it seemed that way, then I'm sorry. It's just that Janie was always so angry, so resentful.

But you, I never had to worry about. I always knew you would do the right thing.”

“Yeah?” I choked out a harsh laugh. “Maybe I should have tried misbehaving more often.”

He pulled me closer. “We’re not all cut out to be rebels.”

“No.” Softly, I pushed away until I could face him eye to eye, and then I actually managed to smile. “Some of us I guess were just meant to be boring.”

“Boring?” He shook his head slowly. “I wouldn’t call you that. Mara, perhaps I haven’t said it before, but I should have. I’m proud of you.”

Again, he pulled me close. I didn’t resist. After all this time, I’d finally

heard the one thing I had waited for all my life, but instead of feeling elated, I just felt empty. Empty and old.

* * * *

Jane passed away a week later, Father at her side during the last hours. I wasn't physically present at the service a few days later, but attended over the vid-link. Through the wall screen in my apartment I saw Father seated in the front row of the chapel. He was flanked by a pair of security guards who had been hired by the Australian embassy, ostensibly to protect him from any protesters who might be angry that an immortal had been allowed to return home. As far as I could tell, no one even noticed. That, I thought, was a good sign.

Maybe in a decade or two, people would begin to see how ridiculous their fears had been and the restrictions would be relaxed. Then again, maybe not. Either way, I really didn't care anymore.

At the end of the simple eulogy, delivered by one of Jane's grandsons, the crowd filed out. Father glanced at the tastefully screened alcove where those of us attending via the net were displayed, and smiled. I smiled back, then let the image of the chapel fade. The walls went dark and, a few seconds later, brightened once more. I had changed the wallpaper; the cabin in the Rockies no longer held the same charm it once had. Now, a different vista filled

two sides of my living room, a stark, rust-orange landscape framed by pink skies. Wispy clouds drifted on the horizon, tendrils of mist at once both familiar and alien. In the foreground the entrance to an underground city rose from the rocky soil, enormous plascrete ramparts capped by flashing strobes. A bulky tanker truck with balloon tires trundled up the low ramp and turned west, a trail of brown dust churning in its wake.

I sighed as I watched the tanker vanish into the distance. I had lived off Earth most of my life, but other than my brief sojourn on Phobos had never visited Mars.

That was about to change.

I hadn't talked to Father since he had been escorted into the Needle's elevator the day after our fight aboard the *Goshawk*. He didn't know that I'd resigned from my position as a traffic controller. Why not? I'd been eligible for retirement for ages, and it was long past time I took a chance. Life here had grown stale. I had grown stale, but it took my sister's death to make me realize it. I still didn't know what I would do once I reached Mars, or even if I would settle there or simply use it as a stepping stone to one of the other colonies further out from the sun. But no matter what I did, the decision to leave felt right.

After decades of hiding from who I

was, running from every challenge and blaming my past, it felt right to move on. I had been given a rare gift when I underwent the change, an opportunity few human beings would ever receive. I was going to live for centuries.

Or, I might be killed tomorrow.

Either way, I intended to face my life head on. I owed myself that much.