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Songs for a New World

Even through the rose tinted porthole of the shuttle, Whinzer's world looked completely uninviting. Sighing, Pers Paqaat made his way toward the landing pods. A crewman was taking advantage of the low orbital gravity to toss Paqaat's weighty trunk up from the cargo hold. Paqaat winced as it collided with a bulkhead and bounced down the corridor. Inside was everything he owned.

From the vantage point of the descending landing pod, Whinzer's world looked progressively uglier. Its surface was a muddle of dull gray and billious green. If one color was land and the other water, it was impossible to say which was which. Who, he wondered, would voluntarily settle on such a hideous planet, not including a certain young musician in desperate need of a patron?

When the invitation from the self-styled Lord Whinzer arrived, Paqaat was packing his sonitor for a job at a nursing home. It was as low as a serious musician could sink, performing banal ditties popular a century earlier for a roomful of drooling, incontinent mummies. If the offer of patronage were from one of those sentient crustaceans out in the Gkhta system, Paqaat would have accepted.

All he really knew about his new patron was that Whinzer was physiologically within the parameters established for *homo sapiens* and wealthy enough to support a house musician. In exchange for room, board, and a small stipend, Paqaat would direct the local choir and compose music to celebrate special occasions, like Whinzer family births and nuptials. None of his friends from the Conservatory knew anything about Whinzer or his world, so the consensus of opinion was that the man must be a bourgeois colonial with pretensions to culture. They predicted that Paqaat's main role would be that of status symbol, drawing the envy of his patron's rustic neighbors.

Pers Paqaat was not offended, and hoped his fellow musicians were right. An artist whose main role is to be a status symbol should have plenty of time for serious composition. The five major themes for a new quintet sparkled in his thoughts, at least when they were not drowned out by century-old love ditties and novelty tunes. Whatever lay ahead on Whinzer's world, the nursing home residents would be left behind to clap their liver-spotted hands out of rhythm with some other starving artist.

The pod thunked into its slot, and its hatch cover retracted. Heat, humidity and the odor of something rotten slid through the hatch and enveloped Paqaat in a miasma of discomfort. Whinzer's world looked even uglier up close than it did from space. Nobody was waiting to greet the new house musician, so Paqaat dragged his trunk from the pod onto the platform and wondered what to do next. Behind him, the unmanned pod lifted from its slot and disappeared into the gray-green clouds.

The platform stood by itself in the middle of swampland, but with most of the visible organic life below the surface of the water. Areas of green water were interspersed with dark gray mudbanks studded with a few fleshy, unattractive plants, and there was no road or path in sight. The pull of gravity felt fractionally stronger than Terran Standard, adding to the feeling of oppression. Paqaat sat on his trunk and waited.

A bit later, he opened his trunk and took out his sonitor. A new tonal sequence was teasing through his thoughts, a pattern that seemed to enter by osmosis from the green water and gray mud. He keyed the sequence into his instrument, and set the replay function on infinite loop. Next he added an inversion with variable echo based on random prime numbers between three and seventeen. Then he closed his eyes and listened. Not bad. Not bad at all.

He turned his attention to rhythmic patterns. Usually it was best to keep it simple at first, and add complexity along with additional voices. Sticking to prime numbers, he began with seven-fifths time, then

overlaid a second rhythm of five-thirds. It was all wrong. He deleted it, closed his eyes again, and inhaled the tonal sequence along with the wet, malodorous air. Deciding that time signatures could wait for fresh inspiration, he focused all his attention on the play of overtones until his concentration was interrupted.

"That's so beautiful."

Paqaat opened his eyes and wondered if he was asleep and dreaming. Sitting in an open floater next to the platform was a young woman, little more than a girl. Her hair was a mass of auburn curls, her face the perfect conjuncture of green eyes, wide lips, and dimpled cheeks, and her body -- well, her body knocked the breath out of him like a blast from an air cannon. Part of it was her dress, or undress, to be more exact. All she wore was a triangular pouch or purse, suspended beneath her belly from a web belt. After the neo-puritanism that dominated Terra, the sight of a near-naked body was startling enough. The body in question, though, was perfect.

"Is something wrong, Maestro?"

It took him a moment to figure out that he was the Maestro. Nobody ever had called him Maestro before.

"Ah, um, no, everything's fine. Just lost in thought."

She smiled a smile of awe-inspiring radiance. "Then are you ready to go to the manor, or would you like to think some more?"

Paqaat caught his breath and smiled back. "Why, I'm quite ready. Certainly. I'll just pack up my

sonitor."

He powered down the instrument and stowed it back in his trunk, then began to drag the heavy trunk towards the floater. The young woman jumped out onto the platform.

"I'll get that, Maestro."

She grasped the trunk by one end and swung it easily over her head. As she lowered it carefully into the floater, Paqaat observed that she was just as perfect from behind as she was head on. And she certainly was a powerful little thing. When she extended her hand to help him into the floater, he took it happily.

"My name is Rua," she said, as the gravinuls lifted the floater a few inches above the surface of the water.

He hesitated as his ego wrestled his libido. "Call me Pers," he replied.

Now that my story is underway, I can take a moment to tell you a little bit about Pers Paqaat. You might remember learning about Paqaat in school. He was the composer of "Unquiet Intervals," which you were taught was a masterpiece of the quincentina form. Indeed, it *is* a masterpiece, although you probably didn't much care for it when you heard it in culture class.

This story, though, takes place when Paqaat was a very young man, long before he created his greatest quincentina. It is a story of love and lust and treachery, which should keep you entertained well enough, even if you still dislike quincentinas. Based on the best historical documents, artifacts, and

analysis available, it should be moderately accurate. Hence, it is what commonly is called a "true story," even though all the dialogue and most of the specific incidents described are inventions of the author.

I hope you are not too offended by this interruption of the narrative. Hopefully, it will not happen again, but if it does, I promise to keep it brief. Now, back to our story.

Rua expertly guided the floater through an open portcullis and into a small alcove equipped to receive it. The manor had the look of an old Terran castle of the worst sort, all turrets and massive gray stones. Paqaat wondered where the Whinzers found massive gray stones on a world that appeared to be all swamp. The puzzle was solved when he disembarked. Everything was plastic foam composite, probably extruded on-site by the contractor, strong yet extremely light. Perhaps the manor was floating on the surface of the water and mud.

Rua picked up the heavy trunk again, and Paqaat followed her up a short flight of stairs, through an arched doorway, and down an ersatz stone corridor lit by ersatz torches. The flame effect was done very nicely, but there was no smoke or heat. As they moved further into the manor, the humidity dropped sharply, although the temperature stayed high. The new house musician noticed these things in passing, but most of his attention was focused on Rua's delightful buttocks, swinging briskly in slightly syncopated double time as they led him along.

Several minutes later, they emerged from the

corridor into an open space. Paqaat came to a dead halt, stunned by what he saw. The manor was built around a very large central courtyard. Five galleries, one above the other, circled the open space. Along each of them, smaller courts opened onto the great courtyard in the middle. What was amazing, though, was the courtyard itself. Real plants grew in abundance, many of them flowering in brilliant colors. Genuine trees grew tall and healthy, all the way to the uppermost gallery. Above all was an expanse of bright blue sky. Looking a little harder, Paqaat realized that the sky was a dome formed of some blue, glasslike material. All the same, Whinzer's garden was the most idyllic place he'd seen since leaving Terra.

On second thought, it was far more perfect than anyplace left on Terra. It was a dream of what Terra once was, or what it once might have been. Nobody really was sure what Terra looked like in ancient times, because ancient representational artists were inclined to "correct" any "imperfections" in their subjects. Whinzer's courtyard brought to mind almost forgotten folktales about a place called Eden.

Rua grinned at him. "Do you like it?"

Paqaat realized that his mouth hung open, making a reply entirely unnecessary. Nevertheless, he replied. "It's marvelous. Who'd expect such a place on a world like this?"

"I don't know much about other worlds," she replied, "but Charles and Freddy say there's nothing like it anywhere."

"Charles and Freddy?"

"Charles and Freddy Whinzer, his lordship's sons. It was their idea, and they planned everything in it. What people say is that when they got back from University on Appolonia, they told his lordship if he wanted them to stay on-planet, it would have to be in a place a lot more comfortable than the old manor house."

"And you call them Charles and Freddy?"

"Everybody calls them that. You'll see when you meet them a little later. They're the ones who actually brought you here."

Rua led Paqaat up flights of stairs, explaining that he could see more from them than from the levipods. They also walked along several of the galleries, which allowed him to view the great garden from different perspectives. There was no doubt about it -- whoever built such a garden had exquisite taste. For the first time, he wondered if they would find his work satisfactory.

There were many people to be seen, primarily in the smaller courts that looked out on the great garden. Artisans of all sorts worked at their crafts while children chased after balls and paper gliders and each other. Young couples stared earnestly into each other's eyes, elderly men sat arguing in folding chairs, and serious looking individuals strode purposefully along to unknown destinations. There was a great deal of shouting and laughing, and an occasional snatch of song.

The inhabitants all wore skimpy outfits by Terran standards, although few were as minimally clad as Rua. It was clear that there was quite a bit of genetic variety on Whinzer's world, in terms of skin color, body

type, and other readily visible features, which was not at all typical of a private world. Paqaat could see nothing to suggest that any significant portion of them were native to the same planet, and he wondered how many were immigrants like himself.

His assigned quarters were at the edge of a court on the fourth level, and consisted of two rooms with a bathroom attached. The outer room had a window that afforded a view of the garden, and was furnished with a long table, two armchairs, and a big box of a thing that looked like it was made of wood. The inner room was windowless. It held a bed, a chest of drawers, and a wardrobe,

Paqaat was happy that the gray stone effect of the outer walls was not continued inside his living quarters. The interior walls were smooth, pale blue, and decorated with a number of tasteful, unobtrusive prints. All in all, it was quite nice -- much better than the room he rented back on Terra.

Rua placed his trunk at the foot of his bed, then turned and smiled at him. He smiled back, wondering if he was supposed to tip her. If he had a bottle of elatonic, he would have offered her a drink. Clearly, he did not want to offend her -- she was more beautiful than any woman the young musician ever had imagined, much less met. He still was deciding what to do when she gracefully collapsed onto the floor. Disconcerted, he tried to decide what he should do. Her breathing was slow and regular, her color was good, and there was a suggestion of a smile on her face. She certainly did not look unhealthy -- just sound asleep.

"Narcolepsy," said a voice behind him. A copper colored man with matching copper colored hair was standing in the open doorway of his suite. He was a small, compact man who somehow looked very dense, as if he were copper through and through. "Just leave her there and she'll come around in a little while. Charles has her on hypocretin therapy, but some neuropeptides are harder to modulate than others. I'm Freddy Whinzer. Glad you could come."

Paqaat's Conservatory training took over. He jumped to his feet, bowed deeply and intoned, "Your servant, sir" in his most courtly voice.

Whinzer chuckled. "We're not especially formal here, Pers, except maybe when Papa comes visiting from the old manor house. You can call me Freddy."

He extended his hand, and Paqaat took it. It was a warm, firm handshake, accompanied by a broad, coppery smile. Paqaat smiled back, but couldn't stop himself from glancing down at Rua, still motionless on the floor. Freddy Whinzer's eyes followed Paqaat's, and came to rest on the unconscious girl.

"She's beautiful, isn't she? Beautiful, incredibly strong, and quite intelligent as well. Don't mistake her innocence for stupidity. Except for the narcolepsy, she's close to perfect."

"More than just close," Paqaat replied. "She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Well, she'll come around in a little while, and you can continue making her acquaintance. In the meanwhile, though, I just wanted to welcome you, and to say how excited we are to have you here."

"Actually, I was wondering about that. How did you happen to hear my music and offer me the position?"

"Music?" Freddy shrugged. "I don't think we heard any music. Charles picked you out of a genetic databank. Saw your talent, I suppose. He's good at that sort of thing."

When Rua woke up, Freddy Whinzer was gone, and Paqaat was doing his best to disregard her enticing presence by investigating the large box that occupied one corner of his front room. It stood waist high, and each of its four sides measured about half its height across. It felt like real wood, which meant it almost certainly was an antique. There was a seam that formed a large circle on it's top side, and he ran his fingernail around it, looking for a way to open the box and see what was within. Rua coughed to get his attention.

"I'm terribly sorry, Maestro," she said when he looked around, "but I fall asleep in the middle of things sometimes."

"Don't let it bother you," he replied. "Freddy was here, and he explained. And I really want you to call me Pers, not Maestro."

Rua smiled, radiant as a sun. "Pers."

"That's much better." He gestured towards the wooden box. "Do you know what this thing is, or how to open it?"

"I never saw it before. Is it something musical?"

"I should have asked Freddy before he left. I suppose there has to be a reason it's here. Help me

look for a way to open it."

Obliging, Rua leaned in close, and they touched for the first time. Her piquant scent filled his nostrils, and Paqaat was seized by an impossibly powerful upsurge of desire. All his muscles froze, and he broke out in a sweat. She was not the first woman he lusted after, of course, but none inspired the overwhelming passion he felt when she looked in his eyes, touched his cheek, and asked, "Are you alright?"

There is no saying what Paqaat might have done had she discouraged his advances, but she welcomed them. He just had to have her, to be inside her, right there on the hard floor next to the mystery box. It was quick and rough, and not especially pleasant, but relieved him enough to make love to her again in a more leisurely manner. Two hours later they lay exhausted in his new bed, grinning at the ceiling.

Rua purred. "I'm so happy."

"I feel like I'm dreaming," Paqaat replied. "I feel like you're the only reason I came to this planet."

"I attract you," said Rua, rubbing up against him. "My pheromones just frighten off the local men, but not you. You're wonderful."

Paqaat's blissful contentment was not exactly broken, but Rua's comment dented it a bit. He tried to remember what pheromones were, and didn't like what he remembered. It had something to do with scents that animals give off during mating season, like when Terran dogs are in heat. True, he acted like an animal at first, but he was an educated, cosmopolitan, completely civilized man. He was an artist, not some rare ape

cloned back to life from ancestral DNA.

He inhaled the scent of Rua's hair, and all thoughts of pheromones disappeared. The only thing on his mind was whether or not he could manage to make Rua happy one more time that afternoon.

Charles Whinzer looked nothing like his brother. For one thing, he was very tall and very thin, and while Freddy looked like he was made of copper, Charles could have been made of chalk. Not only was he completely colorless, but he looked like he might break if he tripped and fell.

Charles' colorlessness extended beyond his complexion to his personality. He was totally lacking in Freddy's easy bonhomie, and even when looking straight into Paqaat's eyes, Charles seemed to be focusing on empty space. Nevertheless, Paqaat thought he might prefer the feeling of distance he experienced with Charles to Freddy Whinzer's overwhelming presence.

With an act of will, he focused his attention on Charles, who was saying something in his colorless voice. Paqaat caught the tail end.

". . . soon after your arrival, but I hoped you might let us hear you play a tune or two after dinner."

"Oh, of course. My pleasure. Just tell me where to be and what time to be there."

"We'll send our little Rua along to fetch you. I hear the two of you have, ah, taken to each other. In the meanwhile, though, I'll pass you along to Ajax, my assistant. He'll fill you in on the basics you'll need to know for this world, and find you some new clothes.

Too hot here for those Terran togs."

Paqaat was not yet ready to adopt the skimpy local fashion, but Ajax provided some lightweight tunics and a pair of sturdy sandals. The musician also received a chronograph that kept local time, and learned that the day on Whinzer's world was ten local hours long, with each hour divided into one hundred minutes. An hour of local time lasted roughly two Terran hours, which meant that a local day was about fifteen percent shorter than a day on Terra. It would take time to adjust.

Ajax also led Paqaat on a tour through some of the interior tunnels to see where the business of the planet was done. Whinzer's world earned interstellar exchange by exporting a highly refined animal fodder, made from the planet's underwater vegetation, to worlds that had little or no plant life. The production, storage, and shipping facilities occupied a great deal of the space between the inner courts and the outer wall of the manor.

Not especially interested in fodder or its production, Paqaat was happy when the tour was over and he could go back to his rooms. Rua had gone off on her own after escorting him to Charles Whinzer's offices, but he still hoped she might be waiting for him when he got back to his quarters.

She was not there, but he consoled himself with the knowledge that she would be coming to escort him to dinner with Charles and Freddy. He cleaned and cooled himself in the bathing stall, put on a fresh tunic, and returned his attention to the mysterious box. Somehow, it had to open and reveal what it held inside, but try

as he might, he found no hidden catch or switch or other mechanism. He put his ear against it and listened. Nothing. He rapped with his knuckles against the circular panel that looked like the only place the box might open, then rapped twice more...

The box opened. The circular panel receded and slid out of sight, and a glass cylinder was extruded from the opening. No, the cylinder was not glass at all, just a glassy shimmer in the air, fading away about an arm's length above the circular opening.

Paqaat's heart leapt. He knew what it was, and knew it might be the only one of its kind still in existence. It was the near mythical Flegerphone, the invention of Anton Fleger, a bioelectrical engineer and composer of the organic school, who lived on Terra over six hundred Terran years earlier. If what he knew from music history was true, the Flegerphone used synthetic crystals to convert the electrical fields of living things into music. Only Fleger knew the secret of synthesizing the crystals, so the only Flegerphones that ever existed were created in Fleger's laboratory. According to historical documents, just seven were built before Fleger's death ended production.

The last Flegerphone known to scholars was destroyed in the Lunar Rebellion nearly two hundred years earlier, but Paqaat now had one at his disposal on a backwater planet at the edge of human settlement. The only way modern musicians heard the sound of the Flegerphone was in old audio-visual recordings. Now Paqaat could hear it in person, and even listen to the music of his own electrical field. And he would listen

to Rua's as well, which certainly would be the most beautiful music ever to fall on human ears. All he had to do was figure out how to use it. The antique audio-visual showed somebody standing beside the Fleggerphone glowing like a Sammellan jellyfish, so brightly that it was impossible to see exactly what he or she was doing. If you did something wrong, could it be dangerous?

Paqaat decided to talk to Freddy and Charles about the Fleggerphone before attempting any experiments. Presumably, one of them had the Fleggerphone brought to his room before he arrived, so they probably knew something about it. He would ask when he saw them at dinner. Since he had no clue how to turn the thing off, he left it glimmering while he programmed his sonitor for the evening's performance. After a few minutes, the Fleggerphone turned itself off, and its top panel snapped shut.

Rua arrived, more conservatively dressed than that afternoon in a length of translucent lavender gauze. She greeted him with a kiss, and he instantly wanted to be late to dinner. Rua just smiled, handed him his sonitor, and pulled him out the door. Up on the fifth terrace, they followed a pseudostone corridor lit with artificial torches for about a hundred paces, and emerged into a large room capped by its own blue dome. With plant life all around its walls, the room might have budded off from the central garden. At its center was a round table, set for eight. Freddy Whinzer and four guests were standing near a dark green shrub, admiring a large, white blossom.

Freddy turned and flashed a smile across the room.

"Come on over and look at this. Have you ever seen a real magnolia before? Or smelt one? It's entirely intoxicating."

Rua took Paqaat's hand and led him toward the others. Freddy never stopped enthusing over the flower.

"They're originally from Terra, you know, but they've been extinct there for several hundred years. Charles and I were lucky enough to find this one on Craddock's World. The original Lord Craddock was an amateur horticulturist, and quite a few plants gone missing on Terra were preserved there for posterity. What do you think of that fragrance?"

The magnolia's scent was so sweet, Paqaat nearly lost his appetite for dinner. Still, he managed a polite response.

"Extraordinary. Really extraordinary."

One of the other guests, a large man with a curly yellow beard, chose that moment to interrupt. "Maestro, it's such a great pleasure to have you here."

Freddy remembered his manners. "Oh, I'm so sorry, I haven't introduced you yet. Pers, this is Janucz Krobin, who leads the bass section of our choir. And here is his lovely wife Rosa, who leads our altos." Rosa was a tall woman with sharp features and black hair caught up in a decorative knot. Paqaat smiled and shook hands.

"And here are Astrid Cortes, our first soprano, and Arvo Hand, first tenor. You'll all be working closely together fairly soon, I expect.

Paqaat greeted chubby, red haired Astrid, and then Arvo, whose bald head and large nose made him resemble

those flightless birdlike things from the Carian system. From their speaking voices, Paqaat imagined that all their singing voices would be adequate with some training. He already knew that none of them had any professional experience. He wondered what the rest of the choir was like, and why sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses each needed their own leader. Could any of them even read musical notation? They might require more effort than anticipated.

Drinks were served, and Paqaat was impressed. Along with the finest elatronics, serotonics, and transcendentonics available, the Whinzers kept some unusual items. Somebody had a taste for the ancient alcoholic drinks, it seemed. Paqaat viewed them with curiosity, and wondered if he should try one. They probably were there just for show, too expensive to actually drink. Besides, people said their taste was truly awful.

Freddy noticed his hesitation. "Go ahead, Pers, try something new. Well, something old, really. I'm an elatonic man myself, but we keep the alcohol around for when Papa comes to visit from the old manor. He's the one who really likes it."

"Do you think I could have a little taste? I never tried any before."

Freddy grinned. "Then try 'em all! The purple stuff is for when you're eating, according to Papa, so have some of that with dinner. For now, you can try the other stuff. I'll fix it up for you just the way Papa does it."

Freddy filled a short glass with a yellowish liquid he called shotz, and a tall glass with foaming stuff he called sudz. "You drink some shotz first," he explained, "and then wash it down with sudz."

The shotz smelled like it would burn if you set a flame to it, and his throat felt hot while it was going down. He quickly reached for his big glass of sudz, and gulped a few gulps. "Oh," he said, "what a weird sensation."

"Did you like it?" asked Rua.

"I don't know. It's nothing at all like tonic."

"You have to finish your drinks to get the full effect," Freddy advised. "Papa usually drinks the first ones fast, and then goes back for more. The second time around, he pours the shotz right into the sudz."

Paqaat looked at his glasses. The shotz was still half full, the sudz more than three quarters. Thinking it would be poor manners to waste something so rare and costly, he emulated Lord Whinzer by pouring the rest of his shotz into his sudz. Mixed together, the taste was even worse, and made him feel a little nauseous. By the time Charles arrived, though, it was going down a little more easily.

"Tied up in the lab," Charles explained, offering an excuse but no apology. He nodded to Paqaat. "I see you're trying Papa's demon brew. You don't actually like it, do you?"

"The taste must take some getting used to, but the effect is really interesting. It's like my feelings are all mixed up. I don't think I could describe it to someone who never tried it, except maybe with my

sonitor."

"You'd better play your music now," Charles advised. "If it works on you the way it works on Papa, you won't be able to do it after dinner."

"Great idea," Freddy put in. "Quiet, everybody, Pers is going to play us some tunes."

The sonitor felt a little awkward in his hands, but soon it was producing music. The musician made a few more mistakes than usual, but nobody seemed to notice. and for some reason he didn't care. He segued from classic Rosario to raga, the most ancient form of music still performed on Terra. The raga felt good, and he forgot his audience for a while. just floating on patterns of his improvisations. A while after that, he noticed he was improvising on some of those sentimental old tunes he performed at the nursing home. With a giggle, he let the music die away.

They all applauded him with great enthusiasm, and as he switched off his sonitor, Freddy was saying, "That was great! That was absolutely great, especially that part at the end. I loved it!"

Paqaat accepted similar praise from the others as they sat down at the round table to eat. Freddy poured him a glass of the purple drink, which tasted much better than the shotz and sudz, so he accepted a second glass when it was offered. At some point or another, he just lost track of things, and remembered almost nothing that happened afterwards until he rose unsteadily from his new bed the next morning. He could not remember ever having been so thirsty, and his head felt like it had spent seven or eight hours at a percussion festival

held under a metal dome. He pulled off his tunic, which was encrusted with everything he had eaten or imbibed the night before, and stumbled into his bathing stall. If he remembered correctly, somebody was supposed to come by and lead him to a rehearsal room where he would meet the full choir. He hoped it would be Rua.

Alas, it was not Rua who came to fetch him, but chubby, red haired Astrid, leader of the sopranos. She was almost intolerably cheerful given the aftermath of his excesses the night before, but he followed her down a corridor near his quarters and into a room that looked like a very small theater. Taking him by the hand, she led him to a seat in the first row.

"If you'll sit here for just a moment, maestro, we've prepared a little welcome for you. I hope you like it." With that, she scampered up a short set of steps leading up onto the stage, and disappeared behind a heavy green curtain.

When the curtain opened, Paqaat saw his new choir for the first time. He counted twenty-two singers as hawk nosed Arvo Hand slowly tapped a pair of wooden blocks together three times. On the third tap, the choir began to sing.

The song was dreadful, an overblown, sentimental theme from an overblown, sentimental play that never opened at all on Terra, but had some success on the outer worlds. The voices, though, were extraordinary. Paqaat could not believe that such wonderful vocalists had been assembled on such a minor, out-of-the-way world. As the song went on, though, the musician noticed things that were even more surprising. He

noticed the strange physical similarities among the singers -- at least among those he did not know from the night before. They were short in stature, with pixie-like features. All had upturned noses, protruberant ears, and receding chins.

It was a Derz-Williams choir, illegal and unknown on Terra for over three hundred years, but standing there before him, singing that dreadful song perfectly. Most contemporary musicians never would have heard of Derz-Williams choirs, but Paqaat was something of a specialist in the odd musical practices of the ancients. Derz, as he recalled, was the entrepreneur who first marketed the unusual choirs to second string concert halls and to the Corporate Cluster, the first private planets. Williams was the far more ancient geneticist who first described what became known as Williams syndrome. Paqaat could not remember all the details that morning, but it was a condition caused by non-homologous recombination during gametogenesis that deleted a batch of genes from one copy of chromosome 7. Along with the peculiar facial features and short stature, Williams syndrome also was marked by severe cognitive disability, cardio-vascular disease, perfect pitch, and an uncanny sense of rhythm.

It was less than a century between the time Williams described the syndrome and the time the growth of genetic science eliminated it, but a century and a half after that it was back. Derz said he had discovered a remote community in the Caucasus region of Terra where Williams syndrome was endemic, and claimed to be doing a great service to those afflicted by

training them as choristers. Despite their severe mental and physical disabilities, he claimed, he was making it possible for their short lives to be productive and fulfilling by giving them the chance to use their amazing musical talents. For a time, Derz-Williams choirs were all the rage, and Derz was a very wealthy man.

Eventually, though, the truth was known. The Williams cluster in that Caucasus village was not natural, but a product of genetic engineering commissioned by Derz. Derz was exiled to the molybdenum mines of Berexzut, and Williams syndrome again became an unpleasant memory of the dark ages. Except, it seemed, on Whinzer's world.

Pers Paqaat was very young in those days, and it was his first moral dilemma. Somebody, somewhere, was engineering individuals with Williams syndrome for the sake of their musical abilities. The most likely suspect, from Paqaat's perspective, was Charles Whinzer. Even disregarding where the choristers came from, was it appropriate to use them? If not, what could he tell Freddy and Charles? Could he continue employment on a planet with such disregard for the standards of contemporary eugenic practice?

Rua was no help at all, unless helping him put the dilemma out of his mind for several hours could be considered helpful. She arrived at his quarters late that afternoon in an irrepressibly amorous mood, and refused to listen to his concerns until he was completely incapable of further physical effort. Then

she could not understand why he perceived a dilemma.

"Well, why don't you ask them if they mind?" she suggested. "If they don't mind being that way, what's the problem?"

"They can't understand what's been done to them," he replied. "These are people who can't even subtract three from five and get two -- that's how limited they are. How am I supposed to ask them if they think it's worth it to have shorter life expectancies for the sake of being great singers?"

Rua remained puzzled. "But they can talk, can't they? And they can't be so dumb they don't have feelings, right? So why don't you just ask them how they feel about it? Maybe they don't mind."

It made sense, in a very naive way, but it presented additional problems. Even if the choristers could understand why the lack of elastin in their arterial walls was a problem, and why it wasn't there, was it right for Paqaat to tell them how it would shorten their lives? Was it moral to make young people with such limited coping skills aware that they were bred to sing sweetly and die young?

Damn, I'm interrupting the narrative again! Not only do I seriously doubt that Paqaat knew anything at all about how de novo deletion of *ELN* on Chromosome 7 in carriers of Williams syndrome results in a failure to encode for elastin, the responsible microdeletion at 7q11.23 including about 2 million base pairs flanked by highly duplicative chromosome regions, I'm not even sure he was troubled by the morality of working with a Derz-

Williams choir. The moral dilemma, though, serves to advance the plot, and so I will include it for the sake of the story. I apologize for this annoying digression, and I promise to keep these departures to a minimum. We now rejoin Paqaat about half an hour after we left him.

A shaft of golden light found its way past the window shade and glistened on Rua's moist breast. Paqaat observed it, watching from a place of contentment that would admit no distress or anxiety. Perhaps, he thought, he would have a talk with Charles the next day, or the day after. Perhaps he would follow Rua's advice, and try to get a sense of how the Derz-Williams choristers felt about life on Whinzer's world. Whatever the drawbacks, Paqaat mused, life on Whinzer's world had its rewards.

His contentment evaporated when Rua said she had to leave the following morning, explaining that she would be visiting the old manor to deliver some packages to Lord Whinzer for Freddy and Charles. "I'll miss you," she said, "but it shouldn't be more than three days there and back."

"Three days?" he complained. "Can't somebody else make the trip?"

"No," she replied, "Lord Whinzer asked for me specially. He likes me."

Paqaat envisioned a decrepit, liver spotted old man similar to those from the nursing home on Terra enjoying Rua in roughly the same manner he himself had enjoyed her fifteen minutes earlier. Rua interpreted the pained expression on his face.

"No, silly, he doesn't like me like that. He's too old for that sort of thing."

Paqaat did not believe a man ever becomes too old for that sort of thing -- or perhaps he just *hoped* that a man never becomes too old for that sort of thing. As a sort of self-test, he decided to try for one more episode of that sort of thing, despite already having performed heroically that afternoon. Burying his face in Rua's hair, Paqaat inhaled deeply. Albeit reluctantly, his body responded.

Rua left before he awoke the next morning, dashing his hopes for a tender and prolonged farewell. He was scheduled to meet with his choir in the afternoon, so he had the morning free. He considered finding Charles or Freddy for a talk, but was distracted by the Fleggerphone in his living area. Once again he knocked, and once again the mechanism opened, emitting its column of light. The most obvious way to have it produce sound would be to interrupt that column, so he looked around for a likely implement. Paqaat was not yet ready to risk a finger or a hand in the mysterious radiant energy field.

A plastic spoon did nothing at all when inserted into the field, and a piece of copper wire from his sonitor repair kit elicited just a dull sizzle. He got better results with the green leaf of a potted plant that grew just outside his door. That elicited a steady hum at about 875 vps. He was looking around for other materials to try when visitors arrived.

Standing at his door, Paqaat found two members of

his new choir, their heads barely topping the level of his navel. It seemed that the moral dilemma he meant to postpone at least until afternoon had come to confront him. Forcing a smile, he invited them inside and offered them seats on his sofa, wondering how to keep them from realizing that he could not remember their names. The woman saved him the embarrassment of asking.

"I'm Angelica, remember? And he's Roby."

"I remembered," Paqaat lied. "We're supposed to meet this afternoon. Is something wrong?"

Angelica, perched at the front of his sofa cushions so that her feet could remain on the floor, looked over at her male companion, who was leaning back with a big smile on his face and his feet dangling. It looked like she would be doing all the talking.

For a moment, she hesitated. Then she went on. "It's about Astrid and Rosa. And Arvo and Januszcz. We couldn't talk while they were there."

"Your section leaders," Paqaat prompted. "What about them?"

Angelica blushed. "It's about their singing."

Roby started to giggle in his clear tenor. Angelica looked at him crossly, then hid her face in her hands. Paqaat was not sure if he was supposed ask her a question at that point. From behind her hands, though, Angelica forged ahead.

"When they sing along with us it makes our heads hurt. Rosa's voice is, well, too wiggly, you know? And Astrid goes sharp all the time. And Januszcz is scratchy and Arvo tries to be louder than everybody else put together. And we don't like it!"

By the time she finished her appraisal, she was crying. Roby, no longer giggling, sidled across the sofa to comfort her with a hug.

"Well," said Paqaat, "they're not exactly top notch. But they read the music and teach you the tunes. Could you do that on your own?"

Angelica sniffled and rubbed her eyes before she answered. "You're here now. You can do it."

"I could," said Paqaat, "but then they'd lose their jobs." Paqaat remained sympathetic to the plight of the out-of-work musician.

Angelica wrinkled her forehead. "I didn't think of that. But it still hurts our heads when they sing."

"Yes," said Roby, finally joining in, "hurts our heads. I feel sorry for them, but they make the whole choir sound like crap."

Having said his piece, Roby climbed down from the couch and walked over to the door. Angelica stood as well. "I feel bad," she said. "I know that Astrid and Rosa and Arvo and Januszcz can't help how they were born. I think they don't even understand how, uh, how cloudy they are in their brains."

"Cloudy?" asked Paqaat.

"You know. They hear the music but they don't understand unless it's real simple. Cloudy brains. It was nice of Freddy and Charles to give them jobs, but I don't know why they have to be in our choir."

Suddenly the problem came into focus for Paqaat -- Angelica and Roby didn't think their choir should employ the handicapped. It added a new wrinkle to his moral dilemma, but he had no time to think about it because an

extraordinary sound filled the room. On the surface, it was a major sixth chord in A, the individual notes clear and crystalline. Even the musically handicapped would have to recognize its beauty. Beneath the surface, though, was far more. The chord's overtones were interacting in a complex rhythmic pattern that would have riveted the young composer's attention had he not been distracted by the melodic counterpoint in the uppermost harmonic voices. As he listened, further penetrating the internal structure of the sound, he heard even more complex structures, fugal sequences that transported him to some higher plane of being.

Roby withdrew his hands from the Flegerphone's column of light, and the sound subsided into silence.

"Wow," Roby commented. "Nice."

Paqaat realized he was holding his breath, and let it out. He also realized that Angelica was gripping his sleeve, shaking with emotion.

"Oh," she said, "Oh oh oh. Oh, Roby, please take me home."

Gingerly, Paqaat fingered the column of light that emerged from the opening in the Flegerphone. His hands and arms began to glow, and the instrument sang. He put his hands further in, and the sound that emerged entered his entire body, not just his ears. His fingertips trembled, and something like a feedback loop was created, music flowing from his fingertips to the column of light to his ears and then back out through his fingertips. The sound swelled, and the play of overtones and undertones created complex rhythms,

extraordinary harmonies, a glistening concourse of music that led straight out to the stars. It was an unbelievable sensation, and the music was breathtakingly, heartwrenchingly beautiful.

It was almost as beautiful as Roby's.

"Hey, Pers! Great to see you!" The cheerful greeting interrupted Paqaat's attempt to find his way back to the choir's rehearsal hall. He turned to see Freddy Whinzer's coppery grin.

"How's our Maestro? Looking a lot better than the last time I saw you, slung over Rua's shoulder on your way home from the party!"

Paqaat blushed, previously unaware of just how he had returned to his quarters on the night in question. "Oh, yes, and feeling a lot better too. How are you?"

"Couldn't be better. Well, how's the music business?"

"Well, it's been . . . I have to say, I've had a couple of real surprises in the past couple of days. Like the Fleggerphone. Where did you get it?"

Freddy looked blank. "What's a Fleggerphone?"

"It was in my quarters when I arrived. The antique. You know, the big wooden box?"

Freddy brightened. "Oh, the music box. I picked it up at an estate sale on Appolonia, back when me and Charles were in school there. I never could figure out how to work the damned thing, so I figured I'd let a real musician have a try. It still works?"

"Oh, it certainly does. And it's probably the last of its kind. You'll have to hear it. Try it yourself."

"Love to. We can bring it out when Papa comes to visit next week. He loves gadgets."

"Lord Whinzer is coming next week?" Paqaat was sure that meant a concert was called for, and he did not see how he could be ready so soon.

"Well," Freddy replied, "Rua headed over to the old manor this morning, and I added an invitation to the rest of the stuff she was taking, so we can count on him to come. He wants to meet you."

"I'll do my best to get the choir ready, but it's so little time. Just now I couldn't even find the rehearsal hall on my own."

Freddy laughed. "Don't worry, it'll be fine. And the hall is just down that corridor. How do you like your choir?"

Paqaat hesitated. "They were another surprise. Beautiful voices, but I never expected a Derz-Williams choir." He hesitated again. "I didn't think they were allowed anymore."

For just a second, Freddy seemed less cheerful. Then he brightened again. "Well, I'm sure Charles can tell you all about it. That's his territory, not mine."

It had been a long day. The rehearsal was a major headache. Roby and Angelica's appraisal of Astrid, Rosa, Januszcz, and Arvo may have been a bit harsh, but it was certain that the section leaders diminished the quality of the choir as a whole. Angelica's eye-rolling and dark stares did not make it any easier for Paqaat to deal with the problem. The problem, as Paqaat perceived it, was that Lord Whinzer would expect a concert in

roughly seven days, and the choir's repertoire was a collection of some of the most banal, nauseating pieces ever composed. Whoever selected the music had dreadful taste. Paqaat suspected Freddy.

After two frustrating hours spent trying to work with the whole group, Paqaat had his best idea of the day. He sent Astrid, Rosa, Januszcz and Arvo off to another room with a score by Eero Balken, pleasant enough to sing and easy to perform. Their task was to learn the piece while he worked with the remainder of the choir. When they had mastered it, Paqaat told them, they either would teach it to their sections for the performance or, perhaps, perform it by themselves. They seemed to like the idea of performing apart from the main ensemble, and they left enthusiastically poring over the music and pointing out to each other the merits of their individual parts.

Once they were gone, Paqaat turned his attention to the Derz-Williams choristers. He called on them one at a time, and had them repeat tunes he produced from his sonitor. It didn't matter whose turn it was, nor how difficult the melody he played. Everything was perfect. It looked as though he could be prepared in one week, even if he attempted a difficult project -- and the project he realized he wanted to attempt was quite difficult. It was an extremely ancient work, something the people of the dawn ages called a cantata, and it was one of the few compositions from that period still in existence. The composer was a mysterious figure about whom little was known except his or her abbreviated name: J.S. Bach.

Then came the discussion with Charles.

Paqaat was just finishing a dinner of fish stew and green salad when the elder Whinzer brother sat down beside him in the Level Four food services center. The long, pale face approximated a smile.

"That's catfish you're eating, you know. Ordinary Terran catfish. They do beautifully here. Some grow to be the size of a man."

"Delicious," Paqaat replied, then waited to hear what Charles had to say. His brief experience with Charles led him to believe there would be no further small talk. He was right.

"Freddy told me you have some concerns about the choir, and I thought I should clear that up. Are you satisfied with their musical talents?"

"They sing beautifully. It's just that, well, I never expected to find a Derz-Williams choir here. Or anywhere. Because of the, um . . ."

Charles finished his sentence. "Because of the ethical concerns."

Extremely uncomfortable, Paqaat nodded.

"Then let me put your mind at rest. Nobody in your choir is any more likely to have heart or circulatory problems than you are. Their elastin production is quite normal, and so are their life expectancies."

"Uh, that's good," Paqaat replied. "But they're still, uh . . ."

"Short?" Charles contorted his face into his version of a smile again.

"Yes, but that's not important. Their intelligence, though . . ."

"Their intelligence," said Charles, "is different from yours and mine, just as ours differ from each other's. Do you think you could ever gain more than the faintest grasp of linkage disequilibrium mapping? I know I could never write a tune worth the media it was stored on. Their grasp of music is effortless, intuitive. You spent years learning to appreciate the subtleties of more complex musical forms, and they were born with that appreciation."

"I've heard those arguments before. But there have to be limits. They couldn't survive on their own."

"None of us can. That's why we're social animals."

"But you can't deny they've been genetically engineered!"

"Of course I won't deny it. They were created by my teacher and mentor, Elvo Kakakis. Perhaps you've heard of him?"

Pagaat thought he must have heard the name, but could not remember the context. "He's a genetic engineer?"

Charles corrected him. "A biosystems analyst. Not just a technician. One of the greatest intellects of our time."

"But does that make it okay to mess with people's genes?" Pagaat shook his head, answering his own question. "I don't think so."

Charles shrugged. "You're a Terran, so I'm not surprised you feel that way, but it's different out here. In the old days, people used to talk about terraforming planets so that human beings could live on them. That turned out to be impossible. Even here, on

what's really a very hospitable world compared to most others, we need our little cocoon of a manor to survive. People who left old Earth for other worlds saw right away that it was easier to change a man to suit his new world than to change a world to suit the man. Without practical gene science, we'd be trapped on just a dozen or so worlds, and very miserable on most of them."

Paqaat was not sure what to say. He could see some virtue in Charles's argument, but could not see how a Derz-Williams choir would be any help in conquering new worlds. And who was to say that humans even belonged on more than a dozen or so worlds? And would they still be human after they were engineered to breathe methane or photosynthesize their own food? There were a lot of questions, but Paqaat would have no immediate answers because Charles rose to leave.

"Just one thing before I go." Charles fixed Paqaat with his icy gaze. "Are you going to have a problem working with the choir? Can you do the job?"

The moment of truth had arrived. "Of course I can work with them," Paqaat answered. "They're the best I've ever heard."

Perhaps he should have stopped at that point, but his conservatory training impelled him to embellish the comment with a small falsehood. "I feel much better after talking to you."

Four days had gone by, and Rua was still away. Paqaat thought it might be time to worry, then remembered just how at home she seemed on the swampy planet when she picked him up at the landing platform

the day he arrived. Perhaps she would not return alone, but wait for Lord Whinzer's party. It would be the sensible thing to do, but still he wished there was some way to contact her. Unfortunately, the planet's extremely stormy sun meant that long distance communication was never dependable, and currently it was impossible.

Paqaat missed Rua most at night, inhaling her scent from his bed linen and dreaming vividly. In one dream, she was swimming with a catfish the size of a man. Paqaat woke up sweating, and needed two doses of serotonic to get back to sleep.

During the day, though, he was fully occupied by his preparations for the upcoming concert. Kantate 195 by the mysterious J. S. Bach was written in a dead language, subtitled "Dem Gerechten muß das Licht immer weider aufgehen," whatever that meant. An annotation indicated it was intended to be performed at a "wedding," a primitive ritual that marked a sort of contract conveying exclusive mating rights. The whole thing was confusing, but the music was pure and beautiful.

Unbelievably, Paqaat's choir grasped it instantly. Not only did they remember their parts after hearing the whole thing once, synthesized on Paqaat's sonitor, but they instinctively performed it so well that Paqaat could not suggest anything to improve their performance. Angelica even came to his aid when he was trying to decide what sort of sound might have been produced by an extinct instrument called an oboe, and the sorts of tonalities that might produce the most pleasing

continuo.

He found an hour each on two days to work with the non-Williams quartet. The Eero Balken piece was a good choice for the four, each part comfortably within the range of its performer. On the second day he worked with them, they actually attempted to work together, rather than competing to see who could be the loudest or the most dramatic. Whether they could manage to do so at the actual concert remained to be seen. Rosa and Januszcz probably could control themselves, but Astrid and Arvo would be hard pressed.

In the evening of that fourth day, Paqaat returned to his quarters to find a note pushed under his door. It was from Freddy. "Papa will arrive tomorrow. Come to dinner, and treat us to a little music afterwards. Rua will give you all the details."

Rua! She was back, probably the bearer of the message from Lord Whinzer. Almost certainly, he believed, she would be in his arms that same night.

As it happened, she did not make an appearance until almost noon of the following day.

The Bach cantata was ready, more than ready. It was perfect. Astrid, Arvo, Rosa and Januszcz were as prepared as they ever would be for the Balken quartet. Paqaat had rehearsed a raga for sonitor based on an original theme, which he would dedicate to Lord Whinzer. All that remained to be decided was whether or not to bring the Fleggerphone.

He had no doubt that the Fleggerphone would be well received, but there were problems. One was that the

Flegerphone did not seem to require any special musicianship to produce emotionally engrossing music. He experimented with several random individuals, including the man and woman who cleaned his quarters and two boys he found playing outside on the terrace. All the music was different, and all well worth hearing. The female cleaner produced a tonal-rhythmic pattern with such intense internal tension it made Paqaat's hair stand on end. Her male associate's output was slow and somber, like the progress of a large creature through the depths of the sea. The boys each produced clear and simple harmonies, until they put their hands in together. The resulting counterpoint resulted in local people gathering around outside the composer's quarters to listen.

Paqaat had a new idea of what had become of the rest of Anton Fleger's extraordinary inventions -- they were destroyed by professional musicians who didn't want to be put out of business. If the Whinzers learned how to use their Flegerphone, what need would they have for Pers Paqaat?

The second problem was more ethical than practical. Paqaat had a strong feeling that what the Flegerphone did was somehow very invasive, tapping what some would call the soul of the user. He thought of the two cleaners, and what their music revealed of their internal states. Should people have their souls laid bare for public amusement?

He decided the Flegerphone should stay in his quarters until he knew more about it. Having settled that matter, he was free to stew about where Rua might

be, and why she had not come to see him the night before. He was stewing when she arrived.

Her smile evaporated his annoyance, and when she came up to him and touched her cheek to his, he was overcome with emotion. Something, though, seemed different. He inhaled the scent of her hair, and felt a surge of energy. He knew he would protect her with his life, if need be. How had he been so negligent as to let her go off to the old manor on her own? He should have been with her.

"Lord Whinzer is looking forward to your music, my Pers," she said, beaming. "I told him you're wonderful. Everything is ready?"

"Uh, yes," he replied, feeling slightly confused for some reason. "The choir's sounding really good, and I've got a nice piece for the sonitor."

Something was off, just not right. Something was different, and he couldn't put his finger on it.

"You'll be perfect."

Suddenly it occurred to him just what was different. It was sex, the attraction, the act. All the time she was gone, all he could think about was having her back in his bed. Now she was back, and instead of having sex they were having a conversation. They should be writhing in ecstasy, and they weren't. He didn't even want to, and he couldn't explain why.

The reception for Lord Whinzer was in the great hall, and he wanted to be there early to make sure everything was set up properly for the performance. Walking there with Rua, he again felt odd. He was experiencing a good deal of anxiety, and it had nothing

to do with the performance. He realized he was on the lookout for anything that might be a danger to Rua. The terraces and corridors of the manor, he knew, were entirely safe, but he could not relax for a moment. Rua must have noticed, but she said nothing.

At the great hall, kitchen staff were setting an enormous horseshoe of a table, with room to seat fifty or more. A low platform stood at the open end of the horseshoe, and held two risers where his choir would stand. He set up his sonitor and had Rua hold down two keys that produced a simple major third while he checked sound quality in different parts of the room. Performing the familiar task relaxed him a little, although he kept a watchful eye on a woman who was placing knives at the table settings. What was wrong with him?

Paqaat was astonished by his first view of Lord Whinzer. For one thing, neither Charles nor Freddy looked anything like him. More astonishing, though, was the sheer size of the old man. He stood nearly a head taller than Charles, and three Freddies could have fit inside his clothing. He was not fat, though, except for a slight paunch. He was just a giant, one who looked powerful enough to backhand any normal human being across the room with no effort whatsoever.

Long white hair covered the Lord of the World's head and shoulders, merging into a bushy beard and moustache that obscured most of his face. All that could be seen was a large nose crisscrossed with fine blue veins and two very green eyes peering out from beneath overgrown eyebrows. All present stood when Lord Whinzer

entered the hall. Charles and Freddy went forward to greet him and lead him to his oversized chair at the midpoint of the horseshoe shaped table. Once the great man was seated, the remaining guests found their own seats.

Paqaat's place was set just two seats to the left of the Lord's, and Rua sat one seat further along. Charles and Freddy sat to their father's right. For a moment, it seemed that the seat between Whinzer and Paqaat might remain unoccupied, but then it was filled by a handsome older woman dressed in pearl gray. Her skin and hair were similar shades of pink.

As she sat down, she planted a firm kiss on the side of Lord Whinzer's head while removing a tall glass of shotz from his hand and replacing it with a tall glass of sudz. His lordship raised an eyebrow, but accepted the substitution. Then she turned to Paqaat.

"Nice to have you here, sonny. I've been looking forward to the show."

"I hope you'll enjoy it, madam." Paqaat had no idea who she was, but assumed she was important. He did his best to hide his ignorance, but failed.

"I can see nobody's mentioned me," she said. "Generally, they don't. I'm Lu Callahan, and I've been Willy's mistress since his first wife was pregnant with Charles. It's close to sixty-two years now, but Willy's boys like to pretend I don't exist, and everybody else just pretends right along with them. How are you adjusting?"

"Better than I expected, ma'am. I seem to be settling right in."

"Good. Charles keeps saying we need fresh blood here. Well, what Charles really says is that we need fresh genes. He's very precise, you know. And now you've got our little Rua in a family way, as my mother used to say. We're all very happy for both of you."

Lu Callahan put her hand to her lips as Paqaat's mouth dropped open. "Oh," she said. "Oh, oh, oh. I thought you knew. I think Charles might be a little angry with me when he finds out I told you."

Paqaat turned to Rua, and found her with her head down on the table, apparently experiencing one of her narcoleptic seizures. Had he somehow known she was pregnant, and was that what his recent drive to protect her was all about? Apparently, something about Rua set off some previously unsuspected atavistic impulses in the primitive regions of his brain. First came the overwhelming urge to mate, then the compulsion to protect the mother of his prospective progeny -- a compulsion that began before he knew, consciously, that Rua was pregnant.

That first day they were together, hadn't Rua said something about pheromones? Could it really be that her body produced subtle scents that sparked instinctive behavior, overwhelming his centers of higher reasoning?

There was no time to think about such things. Lord Whinzer thrust his hoary head past Lu Callahan and sent a powerful blast of alcohol breath in Paqaat's direction as he said, "I hear you're a drinking man. Come by after the show and we'll knock a few back, get to know each other. Now let's have some music."

Astrid, Arvo, Rosa, and Januszcz performed the Balken quartet during the soup course, oblivious to loud slurping sounds from the giant guest of honor. Inevitably, they began to compete with each other, resulting in a crescendo towards the end of the piece that Balken never intended. If any of the guests noticed, it did not seem to bother them.

Back in his seat for the pickled catfish, Paqaat found Rua beginning to stir. He wanted to talk about their impending parenthood, but emotion overwhelmed him, and all he could do was beam at her as she blinked open her clear, beautiful eyes.

"Pers," she whispered, "what did I miss?"

"Just the soup," he replied. "Have some of your fish, sweetheart. You have to keep up your strength."

She smiled. "He's a boy. And he'll be just as sweet as his father."

Paqaat could not be sure whether his audience quieted itself to listen to his raga or because they were too involved in eating to talk. Whatever the reason, he received generous applause when it was done. Kantate 195, however, was an indisputable triumph. The Derz-Williams choir performed perfectly, and Lord Whinzer pushed his plate away from his immense stomach to listen. When Freddy tried to whisper some comment into his father's ear, the old Lord's giant paw was promptly clamped across his son's mouth.

Later, Paqaat sat on a comfortable couch in a comfortable room with soft lighting. Rua was tucked in comfortably beside him, and Lord Whinzer and Lu Callahan

occupied a similar couch a few feet away. On a table between them was a bottle of shotz called brandy, and some nearly spherical glasses. Paqaat watched with pleasure as Rua's eyes flickered shut, and she fell into ordinary, non-narcoleptic sleep.

"She's a good girl, our Rua," said Lu Callahan, "and I'm glad she has a man to love her the way you do."

"I adore her," Paqaat replied, surprising himself. Back on Terra, he never would have revealed such feelings to anybody -- probably not even to himself. Then again, back on Terra he never had known such powerful emotion.

"I'm a little concerned, though," Lu Callahan continued. "You're a very talented man, Pers, and this planet might not be big enough for your talents. One of these days you'll want to move on."

"But I'm happy here."

"Now you are, but that won't last forever."

"Then she'll come with me. She'll see all the civilized worlds, and so will our children."

Lu Callahan looked down into her glass, swirled the amber liquid, and watched the reflections before she spoke again. "It might not be that easy. I don't think she would be happy off-world. She's not particularly comfortable even here, in the new manor. Did you know that when she's outside, out in the swamps, she never has those narcoleptic fits? There's something here, in this more Terran environment, that sets them off."

"So on Terra," said Paqaat, speaking more to himself than to his hosts, "on Terra..."

Lord Whinzer swallowed the rest of his brandy, then

finished the thought. "On Terra, who knows?"

In the months that followed, a great many events transpired on Whinzer's World, and a good number of those involved Paqaat, but it is beyond the scope of this narrative to mention them all. Some were of no particular narrative interest, and many were quite repetitious. Paqaat's compositions for that time included the first movement of the now seldom-performed Whinzeriad, but also the elegant and poignant setting of "Large My Love," a poem believed to have been written by Lu Callahan. You probably know it best from the overenergetic performance by Kai Qum Dai, the Orensian pop singer, but it would be worth your while to hunt down the classic recording by Aline d'Vert, from her "Hearts Across Time" collection. Sorry, I'm digressing again.

More important for our purposes is the fact that after three Whinzian months, which I shall not trouble to convert into Terran months because my math skills are not up to the task, Rua was very visibly pregnant. Also, her episodes of narcolepsy were increasing in number, enough so that Paqaat was increasingly concerned, even though the midwife told him everything was going well. It was Charles who suggested that it might be best for Rua to "continue her gestation," as he put it, at the old manor, where life was "a bit more rugged, but probably healthier under the circumstances."

"Not without me!" proclaimed Paqaat.

"Of course not," Charles replied. "She wouldn't go without you at this stage, and I'm sure my father will

be happy to see you again. You can take the choir along too if you like. The humidity doesn't seem to bother them all that much."

And so it was that Paqaat, Rua, Tatiana the midwife, and all eighteen of the Derz-Williams choristers embarked for the old manor on an oversized, malodorous floater most often used to hunt and harvest the swamp's giant catfish. At the end of one long, miserably uncomfortable day of travel, they saw the old manor silhouetted against the darkening sky. It was as different as could be from the new manor. A series of unimposing domes reflected the grey of the mudbank they occupied and the surrounding green water. More than anything, the domes looked like especially large and slimy bubbles of swamp gas, recently belched up and liable to burst momentarily.

Paqaat and Rua stood at the rail that circled the floater's deck, watching the old manor grow larger as they approached. Roby joined them.

"Is that where Lord Whinzer lives?" he asked.

Rua answered him. "Yes, that's where he lives."

Roby looked up at her. "Why? It looks like a pretty crummy place for the guy who owns the planet."

"He likes it," said Rua, "and so do I. I grew up here."

"I grew up in the lab on Appolonia. All of us did. We didn't have a mother, you know. Just Uncle Elvo. Did you have a mother?"

It suddenly occurred to Paqaat that he knew nothing of Rua's family. She never mentioned family, and he never asked. How, he wondered, did that happen? He

loved her, she was pregnant with his child, they had been living together for months, and he knew nothing about her. It seemed as if their relationship was so emotionally intense his intellect hadn't entered into it at all.

Rua was answering Roby. "I had a mother, but she left when I was very little, back to her home world. I don't remember her much. But Lu Callahan always looked out for me. It was kind of like having a mother."

"Your baby will have a mother," said Roby.

"Yes," agreed Paqaat, "and a father too."

Paqaat was honestly mistaken, as it happened, and how that came to be comprises the remainder of this history. Well, to be perfectly honest, there is no way of knowing if Paqaat said any such thing, but probably he was thinking it, or something similar at least. Once again, I think I should remind my readers that none of the conversations and only some of the events reported here can be verified from primary sources, and what you are reading is more a reconstruction of what might have happened than a literal history. Still, it should be close enough to what actually happened to be considered truthful, if not exactly factual. I apologize once more for interrupting the narrative, and will get back to it forthwith.

Unlike the new manor, the old manor bore no resemblance to any sort of paradise. It was kept cooler than the new manor, but the humidity was oppressive. Instead of a central courtyard filled with exotic and colorful plant life, it had open spaces between the

various domes, traversed by walkways and planted with a handful of malodorous swamp species that could not have been greatly appreciated on their home planets, but were able to survive, if not thrive, on Whinzer's World. To make matters worse, their odors entered the domes whenever anybody opened an aperture to move from one dome to another, and their pollination depended on the presence of several insectoid species that enjoyed a snack of human flesh as well as a bite of stinkwort.

The people who lived at the old manor with Lord Whinzer were neither as handsome nor as varied as those at the new manor. Most were pale and thin, although they seemed healthy and happy enough as they went about their various tasks. One thing Paqaat noticed almost immediately was that children were rare at the old manor, and that there was something a bit odd about the ones he saw. He could not quite figure out just what it was that made them odd looking, but there was something. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

Naturally, he had planned a concert for Lord Whinzer and Lu Callahan, and the performance took place in the largest dome, with almost all the residents of the old manor present. Almost certainly, the occasion included the premier performance of "Large My Love," and we can assume it was a great success. Within a week, though, Paqaat sent the choir back to the new manor. The humidity was harder than expected on the little choristers, and many began to complain of breathing problems. One does not risk losing a perfect musical instrument to an adverse environment. Were it not for Rua, he would happily have returned to the new manor

himself. Every time he had to go from one dome to another, he found himself feeling weak, chilled, and short of breath.

Rua, on the other hand, was thriving. The further along in her pregnancy she was, the more radiant she appeared, and the less time she spent inside the domes. Paqaat would be insane with worry when she insisted on diving off the floater dock to bathe in the muddy water, thick with algae and home to dangerously large catfish. He would feel queasiness in his stomach when he saw her wading calf-deep through the thick mud between the domes, occasionally munching one or another of the foul smelling plants. Just the same, it was all forgotten whenever he took her in his arms to kiss her and inhaled the intoxicating fragrance of her thick auburn hair. He loved her with every element of his being, and was certain it would be forever.

Day followed day, and each merged seamlessly into the next. Little by little, Paqaat grew accustomed to the humidity, the sour odors, and the sameness of the domes. In the mornings, he worked on his first quincentina, the one we know now as "Night Without Stars." In the afternoon, he often spent time with Lu Callahan, talking about poetry and music, and letting her hear snatches of his work as it developed. At other times he listened to stories of earlier days on Whinzer's World from Tatiana the midwife and Lord Whinzer's elderly valet, Roald. In the evening, he was expected to attend to Lord Whinzer, which meant sharing the old man's endless supply of shotz and sudz. Sometimes Lu Callahan was present, sometimes not. Twice

there were visits from the owners of neighboring worlds, more customers for the high quality animal feed produced on Whinzer's world than actual friends, but still welcome as new faces. On those occasions, Paqaat would perform on his sonitor and refrain from calling his employer "Willy," a privilege he enjoyed when the two were alone.

Here are some samples of conversations that may have taken place in the time Paqaat awaited the arrival of his son:

"Willy, whaddaya, I mean, whaddaya wanna live here for? I mean, the other, uh, the new place is a whole lot nicer than this, don't ya think?"

"You met my boys, din't you? No, not really. I know guys got kids a whole lot worse than mine. But this place is home for me. Came here with my mother when I was two, grew up here. My father put up the first domes here, let's see... Well, in your Terran years, it was maybe a hundred-five, hundred-ten years ago. I'd be maybe ninety-eight, ninety-nine if I lived on Terra. Do I look it?"

"Nah, not for a minute. Ya don' look a day over seventy, maybe, but seventy in real good shape. How'd you get so big?"

Lord Whinzer laughed hard, as if it were the first time anybody asked him that question. "Maybe it's from growing up out here, who knows? I was a head taller than my father by the time my balls dropped."

This comment resulted in both Whinzer and Paqaat collapsing in peals of drunken laughter. After a while, they regained the original thread of their conversation.

"I'm a spaceman, Pers. I live out here 'cause this is the real world, or pretty close to it. It's rough, but it's real. Ya know what I mean?"

"Maybe. But I guess, me, I'm no spaceman. I mean, I really like you, and Lu, but mostly I'm here 'cause of Rua. She's doing great since we got here, y'know? Me, though, I sure hope we can get back to the new manor after the baby's born."

Lord Whinzer was silent for a moment. Then he shook his huge, hairy head, trying to shake off the alcohol for a moment or two. "I don' know. Maybe she won't wanna go. She does better here."

It was Paqaat's turn to shake his head. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I know."

Rua spent less and less time among the domes, and more and more time out in the swamp. Paqaat protested, but it made no difference. Rather than argue with him, Rua began to slip away while he was occupied with his music, or spending time with Lord Whinzer or Lu Callahan. Sometimes she would be gone overnight, and Paqaat would be sick with worry, even though when she returned she always appeared well rested and more content than when she had gone. As more time passed, her overnight stays grew to two, three, and four nights, and the nights she spent at the manor became increasingly rare.

"But, you know," Paqaat commented to Lu Callahan, "I guess I'm getting used to it or something. It's, well, it's like the opposite of what you might expect. The longer she's away, the less I worry. The first

night, it's all I can do to stop myself from jumping into a floater and going after her -- but after that I calm down and just accept that she's okay."

"Actually," said Lu Callahan, "I can't say I'm entirely surprised. Your tie to Rua, the way you love each other -- please don't be offended, Pers -- but it seems so, well, *biological*. And I'm not even sure exactly what I mean by that. But I've wondered what part of it has to do with, well, *proximity*."

"Proximity? Biological?"

"Oh, now I've gone and upset you. As I said, I don't know exactly what I mean, and I suppose when I don't know what I mean I ought to keep my mouth shut."

Paqaat was not upset, though, nor offended. There was a spark of something in what she had said, and like Lu Callahan, he didn't know exactly what it meant. Just the same, there was *something*.

Not long after that conversation, Charles came for a visit to the old manor. "It's not to see *me*, of course," Lord Whinzer told Paqaat, "I don't interest him at all. He's come to check on Rua."

"Rua? Why?"

"Science. It's always science with him. Probably wants some amniotic fluid or something for his collection. Data sets, you know, he just loves his genetic data sets."

Paqaat was not one-hundred percent happy with the idea of the cold and colorless Charles poking around in Rua's amniotic fluid, but he certainly had no objection to genetic testing. DNA sequencing was universal on

Terra, and pretty standard on most well established worlds. A frontier outpost like Whinzer's World was fortunate to have a trained geneticist in residence.

Nonetheless, Paqaat asked, "Does he test all the pregnant women?"

The Lord nodded as best he could with a tankard of sudz in his face, then swallowed a belch, wiped his moustache on his sleeve, and said, "Yes, but he takes a special interest in Rua. Ya gotta admit, your lady friend's gotta have a pretty impressive set of genes there."

Charles had to wait two days before Rua came back in from the swamps, but he busied himself running batteries of tests on the children being raised at the old manor. Still, Paqaat managed to pull the scientist aside one time to ask the question that preyed most on his mind.

"Why does she spend so much time in the swamps?"

"This planet is her home," Charles replied. "In point of fact, she's more at home here than anybody else, so far. She doesn't need the manors to insulate her from the world, and she's comfortable out there."

"But what does she *do* out there?"

"Haven't you asked her?"

"Of course. She says she's exploring, learning about, well, everything that's out there. But she doesn't tell me what she's learned, and she won't let me go along."

"You'd be like an anchor around her neck out there. Actually, Pers, you don't even belong *here*, at the old manor. It's probably having an effect on your health.

When I go back to the new manor, you should come along."

Pagaat protested. "But Rua! What about Rua?"

Charles shrugged. "How much time have you spent with her lately? My guess is that you'll see even less of her as she gets closer to delivery. And when the time comes, we'll come back together."

Rua arrived back at the domes the next day. She yielded up a sample of amniotic fluid, and passed some time with Pagaat.

"He's right you know," Rua told him. "You should go back to the new manor for a while. I'll be fine."

Back in his quarters at the new manor, Pagaat stared at the bed he'd shared with Rua, trying to remember the explosive intensity of their lovemaking. In an odd way, though, the memories seemed to have, well, *detached* themselves from his experience. It was almost as if he had slipped outside himself to watch two strangers. Perhaps, he thought, it had something to do with the complete absence of sex in their relationship for all the long months at the old manor. Come to think of it, why hadn't they continued to have sex after learning that Rua was pregnant? Most other couples continued for months, but he and Rua just seemed to suddenly lose interest. It made no sense at all.

And so he busied himself with music, especially with his choir. Stored in his sonitor, he kept a dozen examples of a form of ancient choral music called "Mass." Some were stately, some were lively, and some seemed to suggest a distant place that could live only in the imagination. What they had in common was a

standard text in some lost language. Scholars guessed at the meaning of phrases like "*Kyrie eleison*" and "*Agnus Dei*," but the precise meanings and cultural contexts were lost in time, even back in Paqaat's day. Nevertheless, the Masses were extraordinarily beautiful when performed by his perfect choir.

Paqaat also experimented with the Fleggerphone, not so much as a musical instrument as a conduit to his hidden thoughts and emotions. By writing variations on themes mined by the Fleggerphone, he could combine passion and artifice, producing some of his best work to date. We believe that "Red Remembering" and "Mirrored Stranger" date from that period. He reserved the Fleggerphone for his personal use, however. It was just too intrusive on the privacy of others to listen to the music of their inner being.

Then, one day, Ajax arrived with a message from Charles. The time had come to return to the old manor. Very soon, Pers Paqaat would become a father.

Paqaat did not witness the birth of his child, nor did he hold it in his arms for some time afterwards. Rua delivered her baby off in the swamps, away from the domes of the old manor, then stayed away for several weeks more. Paqaat was worried. Charles was annoyed.

"Blavids," Charles swore, invoking the name of a singularly repulsive species native to a singularly unpleasant world in the Plakte Cluster. "There are plenty of other projects I could be working on, you know. What can she be doing out there all this time?"

"Well," said Ru Callahan, rather enjoying her

stepson's displeasure, "I'm sure she'll be along in her own time. It's hard to travel with a newborn."

As usual, Charles ignored her existence. When Lord Whinzer suggested he ingest a portion or two of shotz to calm his nerves, Charles rolled his eyes and stalked out of the room.

"But, do you think she's okay?" asked Paqaat.
"What if something happened to her out there?"

"Believe me, Pers, she's fine," Lu Callahan insisted. "She was made for this world, and it won't harm her."

Paqaat ingested a portion or two of shotz to calm his nerves, and then several more portions to calm them further. As a result, he was sound asleep on a pile of ariesoid pelts when Rua swam up to the old manor with her baby clinging to her hair.

"Look at him, Pers. Look at your son."

Paqaat looked. The baby already had a full head of Rua's auburn hair, and displayed some other extraordinary traits, not the least of which was the uncanny strength of his grip. When he grabbed his father's finger in his little fist, Paqaat was able to lift the boy up into the air. He seemed more developed and less helpless than a Terran infant of the same age. When he wanted to suckle he emitted insistent little noises, but never cried.

"Does he have a name?" Lu Callahan asked.

"Not yet," Rua replied. "Pers and I talked about it before he was born, but we haven't decided yet."

"We might have decided," Paqaat thought, "if you

hadn't kept disappearing into the swamps" -- but then he caught himself. How could he feel resentment towards the mother of his beautiful new son?

Charles insisted that Rua bring the baby to the new manor for a complete examination, claiming that only there did he have the proper equipment. Paqaat wasn't sure that was the truth, suspecting that Charles may just have been annoyed at being forced to wait around the old manor for two weeks. Nevertheless he felt relieved, figuring that the new manor had to be much healthier for a newborn than either the old manor or the swamps. Their floater pulled up to the faux-stone walls of the new manor late the next day, and Paqaat carried his son along the torchlit corridor to the garden court.

"Look," he cooed, "isn't it pretty?"

Again unlike any Terran child less than a month old, the infant raised his head from the hand that supported it and looked around. Paqaat experienced a strange mixture of pride and dismay.

Charles interrupted the experience. "Don't dawdle. We have to get up to the lab."

"Now? But we just got here," Paqaat complained, "and it's almost dinnertime."

"You two can do whatever you like," Charles snorted in return, "but the baby is coming with me."

Paqaat gave in, but Charles relented enough to order some food sent along. Before it arrived, though, Charles lay the baby on a table and moved a long rod attached to a cable across the little body, from head to toe. Pictures of what Paqaat figured must be his son's insides began to appear on a screen. Having no real

knowledge of biology, the composer couldn't identify a thing, but Charles's grunts and head nods seemed to signal that everything was where he expected it to be. Next he pricked the baby's big toe and collected a tiny sample of blood. Paqaat's son still didn't cry.

There were more machines and more procedures, interrupted only by a quick meal of catfish sticks and fried tuber. Finally, Rua interrupted Charles to ask him just what his tests were showing. "I know there can't be anything wrong with him," she said, "so why do you have to keep poking at him?"

"You're right," Charles replied. "And not only is there nothing wrong, he's even better than I expected. He's very nearly perfect."

Not long after that, Charles was willing to let them go. They went to Paqaat's quarters and found that a crib had been placed in the sleeping room. Rua lay the sleeping baby inside, took one step back, and collapsed on the floor. Paqaat rushed to her side, then remembered her narcolepsy. It had been a long time since Rua's last narcoleptic seizure, but apparently nothing had changed, and she remained sensitive to the Terra-like conditions at the new manor. He lifted her up and put her on the bed, then went out to his front room. He had a lot of things to think about.

First, it seemed clear that for Rua's sake and possibly the baby's as well, they couldn't live at the new manor. He supposed he could tough it out at the old manor, especially since "Willy and Lu," as he thought of them, had become his best friends on the planet. He could travel back to the new manor every so often to

work with the choir, but primarily he would spend his time working on new compositions and caring for his woman and his child.

That, of course, was assuming they would stay at the old manor -- but what if Rua continued her pattern of disappearing into the swamps for weeks at a time. Would she leave her little one behind with Paqaat and Tatiana the midwife, or would the baby go with her, clinging to her hair? Paqaat sincerely wanted to act responsibly and be a good father to his son, but he could not, for the life of him, figure out what that would entail.

Rua slept through the night and woke normally the next morning. So did the baby, which was something Paqaat understood to be almost unheard of in a child so young. He would have talked to Rua about the worries that kept him awake half the previous night, but she looked so peaceful and happy sitting in a chair and nursing her son, he couldn't bring himself to disturb her.

Later that morning, Roby and Angelica stopped by to see the new baby. They cooed appropriately and were treated to a demonstration of the tiny hands with a grip of steel. As they were about to leave, Roby saw the Fleggerphone standing in the corner, and spoke the words that would change the course of Paqaat's life.

"Hey, boss, do you think I could get to try that thing again? It's, uh, it's fun."

"Fun" was not a word he would have used to describe the experience of playing a Fleggerphone, but Paqaat was

inclined to give Roby his wish. After all, he reasoned, if Roby actually *wanted* to play it that would be his *choice* -- not an invasion of his privacy. And if some tunes and tonalities happened to find a home in some future Paqaat quincentina, Roby wouldn't mind at all, would he?

"I don't see why not," said the composer. "We'll just set up a good time for you to do it."

"How about now," asked Roby, "is now a good time?"

"Now" was as good a time as any, so Paqaat rapped on the Fleggerphone the requisite three times; the panel opened and the light shone forth; and so began the events that finally will bring this story to an end. Roby put his hands into the light, and once again marvelous music emerged. It roared, it soared, it echoed through the vast space that was the new manor. Eyes closed, Roby called out to Angelica to join him. Gingerly, she put first one hand and then the other into the column of light. The sounds swelled, and it soon was evident that the two Derz-Williams choristers were connected by more than their music and the design of their genotypes. Paqaat heard love, a vast and enveloping crescendo of love -- and when Angelica's hands touched Roby's at the center of the column of light, Paqaat thought his heart would break.

Slowly, the two withdrew their hands. The haloes of light around their bodies dimmed, and the music subsided into two sweet voices sounding an interval of a major third. The voices gently faded away, and the music was gone.

Around the manor, people who had stood transfixed

began to move again. Some sighed, some wiped away tears, some clasped their hands together to stop them from shaking. Paqaat looked to Rua, who stood a few steps away, holding her baby very close against her breast. He went to them and wrapped them both in his arms.

Rua looked up into his face. She seemed about to say something, then stopped herself. A moment later, though, she said it. "Pers, we should try it too. We should hear our music."

"Why," he thought, "why?" He loved her, didn't he? He loved his baby boy, and would be a real father to him, unlike his own father who sent him off to the Conservatory at age eight and never entered his life again. What could the Fleggerphone tell him that he didn't already know?

It was too late. Rua already was moving toward the machine, which had not yet shut itself off. She put a hand, the one not holding her infant, into the light. There was music. It was bright, and strong, and tender. It made him think of green water, and gray-green clouds. In its way it was as perfect as Rua herself, but something about it was alien. Paqaat struggled to wrap his mind around it, to feel it in his heart, but it was too different. It was just too different.

Then Paqaat's son copied his mother and thrust both little hands into the light. The music expanded, transformed, burst forth with new sonorities and harmonies. It was as beautiful as the stars of a cold Terran night, but just as distant, just as remote, just as impossible to embrace.

Paqaat did not join them. He was a musician, and he knew that his music mixed with theirs would produce nothing but dissonance. He went out the door and back to the lab to find Charles, who doubtless still was pattering with the measurements and images and samples derived from the strange child who was, by all accounts, Paqaat's firstborn son.

Pers Paqaat stood on the platform, watching the unmanned pod descend to lift him up to the ship that would carry him back to Terra. In his trunk was his sonitor, and packed into its memory was the music that would initiate his career as a serious composer. In his personal interstellar account was a sum considerably larger than the wage he had been promised to serve as Lord Whinzer's house musician.

He thought about Rua. He remembered her perfect curves, her flawless skin, and the mass of auburn curls that so efficiently trapped the pheromones that kept him so thoroughly enthralled until his job as a gene donor was done.

Now, everything made sense. His first day on the planet, Freddy Whinzer told him that Charles selected him not by hearing his music, but by examining his genotype. He still couldn't say which traits he possessed that Charles wanted to incorporate into his perfect human inhabitant of Whinzer's World, nor did he know the extent to which Charles manipulated the DNA he contributed during those times Rua was unaccountably absent, but it was unlikely that musicianship was what Charles was after. Paqaat's susceptibility to Rua's

pheromones must have played a role, but otherwise Paqaat was in the dark.

He was pleased to learn that neither Willy nor Lu were in on the scheme, although they weren't entirely surprised when they found out. It seemed that Charles pulled a very similar stunt when he recruited Rua's mother from off-world, and probably had used others as well. Charles, he recalled, once told him that the way to populate new worlds was not to remake them to suit human beings, but to remake human beings to suit their new worlds. The children at the old manor were steps in that direction, but Charles was impatient. Paqaat's son was designed to be the father of a new race.

What if the Fleggerphone hadn't been there? Would he have dutifully stayed loyal to Rua and their son even as they abandoned him for the muck and mud that was their true home? Would he have fallen just as much in lust when Rua's oestrus cycle, or whatever it was that controlled her pheromone production, kicked in again? Might Charles even now be prowling through the genetic databanks of hundreds of worlds, hunting for Rua's next mate? Was he planning to breed mother and son, the way people sometimes bred domestic animals?

The pod thunked into its cradle, and Paqaat struggled to drag his heavy trunk aboard. Rua could have lifted it with ease, of course, but she hadn't come to tell him goodbye. She and the baby were off, somewhere in the wilds of Whinzer's World, living the life they were designed to live. It was just as well. After all, it was just biology. Pheromones were the basis of their relationship, and he felt badly enough

without another whiff of her hair. Could all love be just biology?

As the pod lifted, he looked down at the gray-green morass of Whinzer's World. Somewhere down there, on some mudbank or floating through the malodorous waters, were his first love and his firstborn son.

Was it all just biology? Paqaat never would be sure. Rua named the boy Pers, for his father -- Pers Persson, first person perfect for a new world.

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