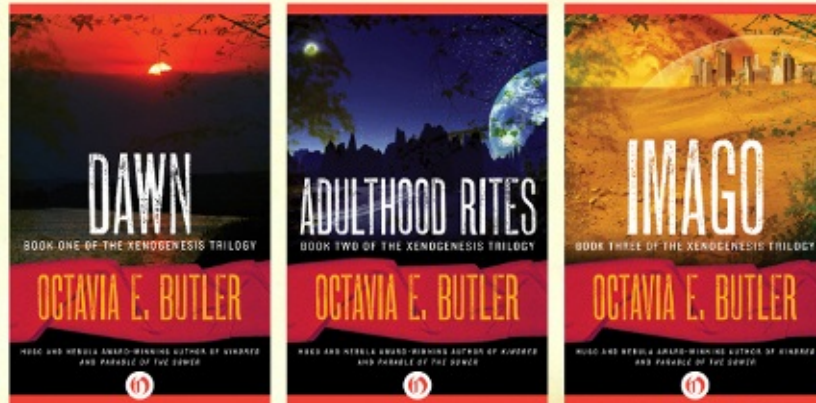


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LILITH'S BROOD





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Lilith's Brood

Octavia Butler



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Dawn

Octavia Butler



In memory of Mike Hodel who, through his READ/SF campaign for literacy, sought to share with everyone the pleasure and usefulness of the written word.

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Womb

ALIVE!

Still alive.

Alive ... again.

Awakening was hard, as always. The ultimate disappointment. It was a struggle to take in enough air to drive off nightmare sensations of asphyxiation. Lilith Iyapo lay gasping, shaking with the force of her effort. Her heart beat too fast, too loud. She curled around it, fetal, helpless. Circulation began to return to her arms and legs in flurries of minute, exquisite pains.

When her body calmed and became reconciled to reanimation, she looked around. The room seemed dimly lit, though she had never Awakened to dimness before. She corrected her thinking. The room did not only seem dim, it *was* dim. At an earlier Awakening, she had decided that reality was whatever happened, whatever she perceived. It had occurred to her—how many times?—that she might be insane or drugged, physically ill or injured. None of that mattered. It could not matter while she was confined this way, kept helpless, alone, and ignorant.

She sat up, swayed dizzily, then turned to look at the rest of the room.

The walls were light-colored—white or gray, perhaps. The bed was what it had always been: a solid platform that gave slightly to the touch and that seemed to grow from the floor. There was across the room, a doorway that probably led to a bathroom. She was usually given a bathroom. Twice she had not been, and in her windowless, doorless cubicle, she had been forced simply to choose a corner.

She went to the doorway, peered through the uniform dimness, and satisfied herself that she did indeed, have a bathroom. This one had not only a toilet and a sink, but a shower. Luxury.

What else did she have?

Very little. There was another platform perhaps a foot higher than the bed. It could have been used as a table, though there was no chair. And there were things on it. She saw the food first. It was the usual lumpy cereal or stew, of no recognizable flavor, contained in an edible bowl that would disintegrate if she emptied it and did not eat it.

And there was something beside the bowl. Unable to see it clearly, she touched it.

Cloth! A folded mound of clothing. She snatched it up, dropped it in her eagerness, picked it up again and began putting it on. A light-colored, thigh-length jacket and a pair of long, loose pants both made of some cool, exquisitely soft material that made her think of silk, though for no reason she could have stated, she did not think this was silk. The jacket adhered to itself and stayed closed when she closed it, but opened readily enough when she pulled the two front panels apart. The way they came apart reminded her of Velcro, though there was none to be seen. The pants closed in the same

way. She had not been allowed clothing from her first Awakening until now. She had pleaded for it but her captors had ignored her. Dressed now, she felt more secure than she had at any other time in her captivity. It was a false security she knew, but she had learned to savor any pleasure, any supplement to her self-esteem that she could glean.

Opening and closing her jacket, her hand touched the long scar across her abdomen. She had acquired it somehow between her second and third Awakenings, had examined it fearfully, wondering what had been done to her. What had she lost or gained, and why? And what else might be done? She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge.

It enraged her during later Awakenings that there had been moments when she actually felt grateful to her mutilators for letting her sleep through whatever they had done to her—and for doing well enough to spare her pain or disability later.

She rubbed the scar, tracing its outline. Finally she sat on the bed and ate her bland meal, finishing the bowl as well, more for a change of texture than to satisfy any residual hunger. Then she began the oldest and most futile of her activities: a search for some crack, some sound of hollowness, some indication of a way out of her prison.

She had done this at every Awakening. At her first Awakening, she had called out during her search. Receiving no answer, she had shouted, then cried, then cursed until her voice was gone. She had pounded the walls until her hands bled and became grotesquely swollen.

There had not been a whisper of response. Her captors spoke when they were ready and not before. They did not show themselves at all. She remained sealed in her cubicle and their voices came to her from above like the light. There were no visible speakers of any kind, just as there was no single spot from which light originated. The entire ceiling seemed to be a speaker and a light—and perhaps a ventilator since the air remained fresh. She imagined herself to be in a large box, like a rat in a cage. Perhaps people stood above her looking down through one-way glass or through some video arrangement.

Why?

There was no answer. She had asked her captors when they began, finally, to talk to her. They had refused to tell her. They had asked her questions. Simple ones at first.

How old was she?

Twenty-six, she thought silently. Was she still only twenty-six? How long had they held her captive? They would not say.

Had she been married?

Yes, but he was gone, long gone, beyond their reach, beyond their prison.

Had she had children?

Oh god. One child, long gone with his father. One son. Gone. If there were an afterworld, what

crowded place it must be now.

Had she had siblings? That was the word they used. Siblings.

Two brothers and a sister, probably dead along with the rest of her family. A mother, long dead, father, probably dead, various aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews ... probably dead.

What work had she done?

None. Her son and her husband had been her work for a few brief years. After the auto accident that killed them, she had gone back to college, there to decide what else she might do with her life.

Did she remember the war?

Insane question. Could anyone who had lived through the war forget it? A handful of people tried to commit humanicide. They had nearly succeeded. She had, through sheer luck, managed to survive—only to be captured by heaven knew who and imprisoned. She had offered to answer their questions if they let her out of her cubicle. They refused.

She offered to trade her answers for theirs: Who were they? Why did they hold her? Where was she? Answer for answer. Again, they refused.

So she refused them, gave them no answers, ignored the tests, physical and mental, that they tried to put her through. She did not know what they would do to her. She was terrified that she would be hurt, punished. But she felt she had to risk bargaining, try to gain *something*, and her only currency was cooperation.

They neither punished her nor bargained. They simply ceased to talk to her.

Food continued to appear mysteriously when she napped. Water still flowed from the bathroom faucets. The light still shone. But beyond that, there was nothing, no one, no sound unless she made noise. No object with which to amuse herself. There were only her bed and table platforms. These would not come up from the floor, no matter how she abused them. Stains quickly faded and vanished from the surfaces. She spent hours vainly trying to solve the problem of how she might destroy them. This was one of the activities that helped keep her relatively sane. Another was trying to reach the ceiling. Nothing she could stand on put her within leaping distance of it. Experimentally, she threw a bowl of food—her best available weapon—at it. The food splattered against it, telling her it was solid, not some kind of projection or mirror trick. But it might not be as thick as the walls. It might even be glass or thin plastic.

She never found out.

She worked out a whole series of physical exercises and would have done them daily if she had had any way of distinguishing one day from the next or day from night. As it was, she did them after each of her longer naps.

She slept a lot and was grateful to her body for responding to her alternating moods of fear and boredom by dozing frequently. The small, painless awakenings from these naps eventually began to disappoint her as much as had the greater Awakening.

The greater Awakening from what? Drugged sleep? What else could it be? She had not been injured in the war; had not requested or needed medical care. Yet here she was.

She sang songs and remembered books she had read, movies and television shows she had seen, family stories she had heard, bits of her own life that had seemed so ordinary while she was free to live it. She made up stories and argued both sides of questions she had once been passionate about *anything!*

More time passed. She held out, did not speak directly to her captors except to curse them. She offered no cooperation. There were moments when she did not know why she resisted. What would she be giving up if she answered her captors' questions? What did she have to lose beyond misery, isolation, and silence? Yet she held out.

There came a time when she could not stop talking to herself, when it seemed that every thought that occurred to her must be spoken aloud. She would make desperate efforts to be quiet but somehow the words began to spill from her again. She thought she would lose her sanity; had already begun to lose it. She began to cry.

Eventually, as she sat on the floor rocking, thinking about losing her mind, and perhaps talking about it too, something was introduced into the room—some gas, perhaps. She fell backward and drifted into what she had come to think of as her second long sleep.

At her next Awakening, whether it came hours, days, or years later, her captors began talking to her again, asking her the same questions as though they had not asked them before. This time she answered. She lied when she wanted to but she always responded. There had been healing in the long sleep. She Awoke with no particular inclination to speak her thoughts aloud or cry or sit on the floor and rock backward and forward, but her memory was unimpaired. She remembered all too well the long period of silence and isolation. Even an unseen inquisitor was preferable.

The questions became more complex, actually became conversations during later Awakenings. Once, they put a child in with her—a small boy with long, straight black hair and smoky-brown skin paler than her own. He did not speak English and he was terrified of her. He was only about five years old—a little older than Ayre, her own son. Awakening beside her in this strange place was probably the most frightening thing the little boy had ever experienced.

He spent many of his first hours with her either hiding in the bathroom or pressed into the corner farthest from her. It took her a long time to convince him that she was not dangerous. Then she began teaching him English—and he began teaching her whatever language he spoke. Sharad was his name. She sang songs to him and he learned them instantly. He sang them back to her in almost accented English. He did not understand why she did not do the same when he sang her his songs.

She did eventually learn the songs. She enjoyed the exercise. Anything new was treasure.

Sharad was a blessing even when he wet the bed they shared or became impatient because she failed to understand him quickly enough. He was not much like Ayre in appearance or temperament.

but she could touch him. She could not remember when she had last touched someone. She had not realized how much she had missed it. She worried about him and wondered how to protect him. What would she do? She knew what their captors had done to him—or what they would do? But she had no more power than he did. At her next Awakening, he was gone. Experiment completed.

She begged them to let him come back, but they refused. They said he was with his mother. She did not believe them. She imagined Sharad locked alone in his own small cubicle, his sharp, retentive mind dulling as time passed.

Unconcerned, her captors began a complex new series of questions and exercises.

WHAT WOULD THEY DO this time? Ask more questions? Give her another companion? She barely cared.

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

She had a long wait. She had lain down and was almost asleep when a voice spoke her name.

“Lilith?” The usual, quiet, androgynous voice.

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

Was he the reason for the clothing, then? He seemed to be wearing a similar outfit. Something to take off when the two of them got to know each other better? Good god.

“I think,” she said softly, “that you might be the last straw.”

“I’m not here to hurt you,” he said.

“No. Of course you’re not.”

“I’m here to take you outside.”

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

“Outside to what?”

“Education. Work. The beginning of a new life.”

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

He moved slightly. “And what am I?”

She jumped because that was what she had almost said.

“I’m not a man,” he said. “I’m not a human being.”

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

“I’m here to tell you ... and show you. Will you look at me now?”

Since she was looking at him—it—she frowned. “The light—”

“It will change when you’re ready.”

“You’re ... what? From some other world?”

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

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

The creature said nothing. It stood utterly still in its corner, and she knew from her many Awakenings that it would not speak to her again until she did what it wished—until she said she was ready to look at it, then, in brighter light, took the obligatory look. These things, whatever they were, were incredibly good at waiting. She made this one wait for several minutes, and not only was it silent, it never moved a muscle. Discipline or physiology?

She was not afraid. She had gotten over being frightened by “ugly” faces long before her capture. The unknown frightened her. The cage she was in frightened her. She preferred becoming accustomed to any number of ugly faces to remaining in her cage.

“All right,” she said. “Show me.”

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

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

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

Good. “It” could become “he” again. Less awkward.

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

“What?”

“Come closer and look.”

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

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

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

Medusa.

Some of the “hair” writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions.

Revolted, she turned her face to the wall.

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

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

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

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

“You will,” he said. “My sensory organs aren’t dangerous to you. You’ll have to get used to them.”

“No!”

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

She swallowed. “Listen, don’t go quiet on me. Talk!”

“Yes?”

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

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

“How many other humans do you have here? And where’s here?”

“This is my home. You could call it a ship—a vast one compared to the ones your people have built. What it truly is doesn’t translate. You’ll be understood if you call it a ship. It’s in orbit around your Earth, somewhat beyond the orbit of Earth’s moon. As for how many humans are here: all of you who survived your war. We collected as many as we could. The ones we didn’t find in time died of injury, disease, hunger, radiation, cold. ... We found them later.”

She believed him. Humanity in its attempt to destroy itself had made the world unlivable. She had been certain she would die even though she had survived the bombing without a scratch. She had considered her survival a misfortune—a promise of a more lingering death. And now ... ?

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

“Oh, yes. Time and our efforts have been restoring it.”

That stopped her. She managed to look at him for a moment without being distracted by the slowly writhing tentacles. “Restoring it? Why?”

“For use. You’ll go back there eventually.”

“You’ll send me back? And the other humans?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“That you will come to understand little by little.”

She frowned. “All right. I’ll start now. Tell me.”

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

“No!” he said sharply. “I’ll only talk to you, Lilith, if you look at me.”

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

“Kaaltediinjdahya lel Kahguyaht aj Dinso.”

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

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

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

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

“Tell me *something* now, whether I understand it or not.”

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

“No species would do that!”

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

“Do you understand now what happened to us?”

“I’m aware of what happened. It’s ... alien to me. Frighteningly alien.”

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

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

“And they’re still alive?”

“Some of them are.”

“And you plan to send *them* back to Earth?”

“No.”

“What?”

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

“Slept ... Jdahya, how long have I slept?”

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

Abruptly she realized he was several feet closer to her. She leaped away. Then, feeling utterly foolish, she tried to come back. He had folded himself compactly into an uncomfortable-looking seated position. He ignored her sudden move—except for his head tentacles which all swept toward her as though in a wind. He seemed to watch as she inched back to the bed. Could a being with sensor tentacles instead of eyes watch?

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

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

He said nothing.

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

“I’m here to teach you to be comfortable with us,” he said. “You’re doing very well.”

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

“Several have tried to kill me.”

She swallowed. It amazed her that they had been able to bring themselves to touch him. “What did you do to them?”

“For trying to kill me?”

“No, before—to incite them.”

“No more than I’m doing to you now.”

“I don’t understand.” She made herself stare at him. “Can you really see?”

“Very well.”

“Colors? Depth?”

“Yes.”

Yet it was true that he had no eyes. She could see now that there were only dark patches where tentacles grew thickly. The same with the sides of his head where ears should have been. And there

were openings at his throat. And the tentacles around them didn't look as dark as the others. Murki translucent, pale gray worms.

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

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

"Yes. But not the way you do."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The tentacles down the sides of his face wavered, looked for a moment like dark, muttonchew whiskers.

"At one point a little boy was put in with me. His name was Sharad. What happened to him?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But Sharad and I—”

“He may have had parents, Lilith.”

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

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

“Others know. I was only curious.”

“You’re sure he’s all right?”

“He’s well.”

She felt assured at that and immediately questioned the emotion. Why should one moment of an anonymous voice telling her everything was fine reassure her?

“Can I see him?” she asked.

“Jdahya?” the voice said.

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

JDAHYA WOULD NOT LEAVE her. As much as she had hated her solitary confinement, she longed to be near him. He fell silent for a while and she wondered whether he might be sleeping—to the degree that he did sleep. She lay down herself, wondering whether she could relax enough to sleep with him there. It would be like going to sleep knowing there was a rattlesnake in the room, knowing she could walk up and find it in her bed.

She could not fall asleep facing him. Yet she could not keep her back to him long. Each time she dozed, she would jolt awake and look to see if he had come closer. This exhausted her, but she could not stop doing it. Worse, each time she moved, his tentacles moved, straightening lazily in her direction as though he were sleeping with his eyes open—as he no doubt was.

Painfully tired, head aching, stomach queasy, she climbed down from her bed and lay alongside on the floor. She could not see him now, no matter how she turned. She could see only the platform beside her and the walls. He was no longer part of her world.

“No, Lilith,” he said as she closed her eyes.

She pretended not to hear him.

“Lie on the bed,” he said, “or on the floor over here. Not over there.”

She lay rigid, silent.

“If you stay where you are, I’ll take the bed.”

That would put him just above her—too close, looming over her, Medusa leering down.

She got up and all but fell across the bed, damning him, and, to her humiliation, crying a little. Eventually she slept. Her body had simply had enough.

She awoke abruptly, twisting around to look at him. He was still on the platform, his position hardly altered. When his head tentacles swept in her direction she got up and ran into the bathroom. He let her hide there for a while, let her wash and be alone and wallow in self-pity and self-contempt. She could not remember ever having been so continually afraid, so out of control of her emotions. Jdahya had done nothing, yet she cowered.

When he called her, she took a deep breath and stepped out of the bathroom. “This isn’t working,” she said miserably. “Just put me down on Earth with other humans. I can’t do this.”

He ignored her.

After a time she spoke again on a different subject. “I have a scar,” she said, touching her abdomen. “I didn’t have it when I was on Earth. What did your people do to me?”

“You had a growth,” he said. “A cancer. We got rid of it. Otherwise, it would have killed you.”

She went cold. Her mother had died of cancer. Two of her aunts had had it and her grandmother had been operated on three times for it. They were all dead now, killed by someone else’s insanity.

But the family “tradition” was apparently continuing.

“What did I lose along with the cancer?” she asked softly.

“Nothing.”

“Not a few feet of intestine? My ovaries? My uterus?”

“Nothing. My relative tended you. You lost nothing you would want to keep.”

“Your relative is the one who ... performed surgery on me?”

“Yes. With interest and care. There was a human physician with us, but by then she was old and dying. She only watched and commented on what my relative did.”

“How would he know enough to do anything for me? Human anatomy must be totally different from yours.”

“My relative is not male—or female. The name for its sex is ooloi. It understood your body because it is ooloi. On your world there were vast numbers of dead and dying humans to study. Ooloi came to understand what could be normal or abnormal, possible or impossible for the human body. The ooloi who went to the planet taught those who stayed here. My relative has studied your people for much of its life.”

“How do ooloi study?” She imagined dying humans caged and every groan and contortion closely observed. She imagined dissections of living subjects as well as dead ones. She imagined treatable diseases being allowed to run their grisly courses in order for ooloi to learn.

“They observe. They have special organs for their kind of observation. My relative examined you, observed a few of your normal body cells, compared them with what it had learned from other humans most like you, and said you had not only a cancer, but a talent for cancer.”

“I wouldn’t call it a talent. A curse, maybe. But how could your relative know about that from just ... observing.”

“Maybe *perceiving* would be a better word,” he said. “There’s much more involved than sight. It knows everything that can be learned about you from your genes. And by now, it knows your medical history and a great deal about the way you think. It has taken part in testing you.”

“Has it? I may not be able to forgive it for that. But listen, I don’t understand how it could cut out a cancer without ... well, without doing damage to whichever organ it was growing on.”

“My relative didn’t cut out your cancer. It wouldn’t have cut you at all, but it wanted to examine the cancer directly with all its senses. It had never personally examined one before. When it had finished, it induced your body to reabsorb the cancer.”

“It ... induced my body to reabsorb ... cancer?”

“Yes. My relative gave your body a kind of chemical command.”

“Is that how you cure cancer among yourselves?”

“We don’t get them.”

Lilith sighed. “I wish we didn’t. They’ve created enough hell in my family.”

“They won’t be harming you anymore. My relative says they’re beautiful, but simple to prevent

“Beautiful?”

“It perceives things differently sometimes. Here’s food, Lilith. Are you hungry?”

She stepped toward him, reaching out to take the bowl, then realized what she was doing. She froze, but managed not to scramble backward. After a few seconds, she inched toward him. She could not do it quickly—snatch and run. She could hardly do it at all. She forced herself forward slowly, slowly.

Teeth clenched, she managed to take the bowl. Her hand shook so badly that she spilled half the stew. She withdrew to the bed. After a while she was able to eat what was left, then finish the bowl. It was not enough. She was still hungry, but she did not complain. She was not up to taking another bowl from his hand. Daisy hand. Palm in the center, many fingers all the way around. The fingers had bones in them, at least; they weren’t tentacles. And there were only two hands, two feet. He could have been so much uglier than he was, so much less ... human. Why couldn’t she just accept him? All he seemed to be asking was that she not panic at the sight of him or others like him. Why couldn’t she do that?

She tried to imagine herself surrounded by beings like him and was almost overwhelmed by panic. As though she had suddenly developed a phobia—something she had never before experienced. But what she felt was like what she had heard others describe. A true xenophobia—and apparently she was not alone in it.

She sighed, realized she was still tired as well as still hungry. She rubbed a hand over her face. If this were what a phobia was like, it was something to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible. She looked at Jdahya. “What do your people call themselves?” she asked. “Tell me about them.”

“We are Oankali.”

“Oankali. Sounds like a word in some Earth language.”

“It may be, but with different meaning.”

“What does it mean in your language?”

“Several things. Traders for one.”

“You are traders?”

“Yes.”

“What do you trade?”

“Ourselves.”

“You mean ... each other? Slaves?”

“No. We’ve never done that.”

“What, then?”

“Ourselves.”

“I don’t understand.”

He said nothing, seemed to wrap silence around himself and settle into it. She knew he would not

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