

Yesterday I Sang A Love Song

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Starrise on Centre, and Kauth-n-11-14 was spurred into activity. Part of her was hungry, but that would have to wait. She had no thoughts of protest. Does an arm protest when a brain forces it to move?

The wind was cold as it fingered off the lake past her, but with dawn came welcome warmth. She walked along the lakeside, harvesting the fungal growths for her Gatherer. Without warning she felt a flux: she was alone. Perhaps 11 had switched to Dreamstate, or perhaps she was merging directly with her Sifter - who might at that moment be merging with the Controller herself. The very thought of such an honour gripped Kauth-n-11-14 and made her dizzy. But whatever the reason, she hoped the period would be a short one. As always, she felt naked and defenceless without 11 to guide her. The colours, the songs and the wondrous *flow* of experience were no longer there for Kauth-n-11-14. It was emptiness. It was vulnerability.

Automatically, her hands continued to garner the growths, but now they passed them to her mouth. Warmth and satisfaction suffused her body without assuaging the distress of her mind. Ahead of her on the lake shoreline she saw Kauth-n-11-7. Her form was undistinguished to her, indeed she may never have seen it in the real before; but the flow of emotions marked her unmistakably as a Close Sister. She took some comfort from 11-7, as 11-7 did from her. They were both hurting. They shared that hurt and helped to heal.

Further away was another individual with a different signature: Kauth-n-4-12. A Distant Sister. That one was fully occupied with 4's will and was even partly merged with her. But despite this, emotions and greetings flowed over the distances to Kauth-n-11-14. It felt salt as well as sweet; here was a unit like Kauth-n-11-14, yet she was not cut off. The flow of experience channelled through her and back to her, humbled and exalted her at the same time. This was what Kauth-n-11-14 wanted, and she whimpered with the loss of it.

And then, as she had known it would, as it always did, the flow resumed. Always continuing, yet always too slowly. 11, the tender, the sweet, the loving, the caring, guiding Kauth-n-11-14 and showing her what life was. It was her privilege and her delight to serve 11, and in so doing serve the Sacred One, Kauth herself. She could hardly picture such wondrous greatness, lofty as a mountain peak in the highest ranges far to the north. Yet because of the flow she knew her spirit, her refreshment, her joy, even her laughter. It was as humbling as utter spirit loss and as exalting as the greatest merging in the world.

The long day wore on, but it was not long to Kauth-n-11-14. She harvested more food, passing her harvest to a Close Sister as 11 decreed. She

heard the sounds and saw the sights of Centre: ripples on the lake, birds squabbling in pools, grasses waving as gently as the flow. Clouds like lofty dwelling places, like Close Sisters, like emotions. And 11 sampled her mind as she worked, taking her thoughts and experiences, passing them Upwards.

Towards starfall she stopped, and knew from 11 that all her Close and even some Distant Sisters had stopped too. She stood still and watched the light strengthen before its final fading: and as it did so, a rhapsody poured from her voice, in twenty-part harmony. Her ears heard only her part, but her mind heard the song of her sisters. It was the experience of others, but it was her song: those who had been before, those who were now, those who were to come. It was praise and delight and transcendence, and Kauth-n-11-14 knew she had never been complete before that moment. She and her sisters were one, cleansed and purified in the flow. The song grew: she could feel the gratitude of 10 and 12 as they joined with 11 into the triad to magnify the song onwards and Upwards; and perhaps far away and yet part of the harmony, the pleasure of the Sisters and even of the wondrous Controller herself. Tears of joy ran unnoticed down her face.

Perhaps because of that transfiguring song, Kauth-n-11-14 was not content with passivity during Dreamstate. As her eyelids closed, control from 11 fell away entirely, and even the support of her Close Sisters faded down into a mere background murmur. At once, images began to flow in from sentient life throughout the galaxy, into the centre, into the hub of it all. Into Centre. But tonight, Kauth-n-11-14 opted for lucidity.

Her mind's eye took her to a familiar scene. She had seen these sights many times, so often that her mind had given a signature to this bizarre place of dreams: a hospital room. Strange, satisfying images came to her and helped renew her body for the day ahead.

There was a creature in something that her mind wanted to call a bed. Coverings of cloth lay over him. But all that was irrelevant. What mattered was that the creature was radically different to herself, almost more different than she could imagine or accommodate. As always, the difference was so great that she hesitated. But after all, it was Dreamstate; there was no threat of spirit-shock or disassociation. No harm could happen in Dreamstate.

The creature had a signature: he was called Michael Severin. But he was a well, almost a bottomless well, and his spirit was far below the surface. Even in Dreamstate she was shocked and fascinated to see it. His spirit was broken and bleeding, and his only defence was to curl like a newborn in the protecting water of his well. Shards of pain, though foreign to her, filtered through.

Her mind was made up: she had decided to attempt a partial merger. She was aware of the enormity of the decision, aware too that no inhabitant of Centre ever merged with alien life; but something in this creature called out to her for help.

Tentatively, she began the attempt. But his body was flaccid and unresponsive. She could sense the feeling: his body remembering movement, yearning to return to it, resentment at being denied. It rose like a bitter song

from the very cells of his muscles. No, the problem was in his thinking centre, and that would have to be addressed before the body moved.

But should it be addressed?

Again, she decided in favour. She merged further, something like panic hovering in the background at the thought of being trapped here. She understood now why such mergings were not made. The spirit of this creature Michael Severin was strong. Strong and twisted, bruised and bleeding. But then came the song of her sisters again, not just her Close Sisters but the Distant, the Remotes and then her Cousins, until the whole of Centre seemed behind her. Unconsciously supporting her, giving her strength. She was in no danger. She sorted through the thinking centre and gave of herself, and what she gave repaired damage. Tiny cellular voices offered paeans of praise. She accepted them humbly. It was difficult; not the repair itself, but the association with one so damaged, so afflicted. She had never felt anything like it before, and it sapped her energies. But she also rejoiced at the new pairing. She slipped away as soon as it was complete and switched to the fullest passivity for the rest of her Dreamstate.

As one dream ended, another began. Or perhaps it was the same dream, woven together against all odds through time and space. He was himself again: he had been troubled and confused, but all that was past. He saw clearly, with the compelling reality of dreaming, that he had a sister who loved and comforted him and took away his pain. He too was female, but there was nothing surprising about that. They were sisters, the closest bond of his life; the bond had always been there for him. They were sisters.

"Sisters," said Mike, as he awoke. Sunlight was coming through the window, blue skies framed in soft white wood. A bird on the ledge fluttered its wings. He felt better than he had felt for days, or maybe years. He wanted to return to the security of his dream, crazy though it had been - better not let out to the guys that he'd been a girl! - but he also wanted to stay where he was. He felt he had a lot of time to make up somehow, and yet there was much he couldn't remember. But no doubt it would come.

"Beautiful morning," he said to the body in the bed next to him: then he raised himself to look. Slobber ran unchecked from the face in the next bed. But what struck Mike most of all was the fear and the hopeless loss in the eyes. Suddenly he remembered something: not a fact, but a revulsion. He himself was utterly worthless, compared to whom this dribbling wreck of a man was a pure and chivalrous knight. He whipped the metal pot up from under his bed as acid vomit burned the back of his throat. Worse still was the vertiginous hatred of being himself.

He lowered the full pot to the floor and sank back on his bed. Perhaps it was part of the dream, this nausea? Anyway, he was shakily himself again. He wasn't a monster. Nobody could be that bad.

After a while of lying there feeling the sunlight pour into him, he felt better. He was Mike Severin. He was okay. The first thing to do was to get out of this place, wherever it was.

The door opened to admit a white-coated attendant with a ratlike face.

"How are we today, Mr Bull?" he said, perfunctorily checking over the slobberer in the next bed. Mike was shocked at the cynicism in his voice. "And what about you, Mr Severin? How are we this bright morning?"

"I'm just fine," said Mike: and had the satisfaction of seeing the attendant's jaw drop open in amazement. Now he looked more like a mouse.

"You're...?"

"There's nothing wrong with me."

The attendant was a rat again. His mouth smiled but his eyes didn't join in. "So. I always thought that insanity plea was a put-on."

Mike ignored that. "Anyway, I'm fine. You can let me out of here."

"You might be fine, but you're still a convicted killer," said Ratty pleasantly. "You're staying here till you're pardoned, which is slightly less likely than me winning the lottery."

Another jolt of shock; but the word "pardoned" had chipped free another sliver of memory for Mike.

"Funny you should say that," he said. "I was dreaming I'd been pardoned just last night."

"Yeah, well dreams go in opposites, they say," said Ratty. "If you're through playing games, I'll see about transferring you back to solitary." He left the room, his eyes staying on Mike all the time.

On Centre, work had begun as the third of its moons sank below the horizon. Now it was bright morning and sisters were everywhere, gathering food, seeking experiences, merging with the flow. All but Kauth-n-11-14. She lay unresponsively on the ground, her body flaccid, her mind inactive. A Close Sister stood watching her because 11 had decreed it, acting as the eyes of the Gatherer while she herself was far away. The Close Sister, 11-3, tried to merge with Kauth-n-11-14, but even with the combined wills of others of her kind it was impossible.

11-3 heard the majesty of 11's voice in her mind, and she was enriched by the contact.

"What is the problem? Is she in extended Dreamstate?"

"No, Revered One. Her mind is here, but it is hidden from me. And, I think, from herself."

The Close Sister would have continued, but something came rapidly into her vision. A Tribulator. She was the closest she had ever been to fear as she shied away from the gross shape.

The Tribulator looked at Kauth-n-11-14 dispassionately and spoke into the flow. "This unit is damaged. Spirit dissolution for her. I will request a replacement for you, Gatherer Kauth-n-11."

And at that, long limbs reached out towards Kauth-n-11-14, who still lay prone, the muscles of her unconscious face twisted into expressions never seen before on Centre; but before the limbs made contact, another presence intervened. The flow was unutterably rapid and hard to follow, but 11-3 revelled in the richness, a tithe of which came to her even though the Tribulator was being

addressed. It was her Sifter. 11-3 nearly fainted with joy at being involved, in however minor a way, in such elevated discussion.

When she could attend again she realised that the Blessed One was asking the Tribulator to suspend judgment. Something about a totally new kind of flow, coming from her own Close Sister! She tried again to merge, and this time got something of it: new emotions, never experienced before, like an entirely new flavour or an unknown colour. New enough for a Sifter to involve herself, and while conversing to devote enormous energy to passing the emotions onward and Upward lest the Tribulator decide against her.

The rarely heard voice of the Tribulator registered on 11-3's mind, sounding like ponderous metal. "Very well, Sifter Kauth-n. Send sisters to heal. They may be able to soothe the spirit-shock in this unit and free her body. Damage could remain, but it might be reversible. I give you until starfall."

The Tribulator moved away with astonishing speed for its bulk. 11-3 relaxed, though remaining in an almost impossibly heightened state from the close contact with a Sifter. Her thoughts came down through 11, which made them easier to handle.

"Remain and merge, 11-3. Remain and heal."

So 11-3 remained, secure in the knowledge that help was on its way. Some came immediately, across the flow, the efforts of Distant and even Remote sisters. She was rapidly joined in the real by as many of her own Close Sisters as could be diverted to her. Together, they sought for the infinitely thin thread that held her mind and spirit, and slowly and gently they drew on it with expressions of love. As the skies of Centre reddened into starfall, Kauth-n-11-14 looked up at the host of Close Sisters in recognition, and they rejoiced together.

In his cell, Mike dreamed with the vividness he had become used to in recent days. He saw a great treeless plain, distant towering peaks to the north, two moons silver crescents in a sky of velvet blue. It was almost unimaginably far away, yet in his dream he crossed that distance in a single leap.

Across the plain moved creatures utterly alien to him; but with the zany logic of dreams, he understood them and felt at home with them. In appearance they resembled large animals, but they had six legs and an external skeleton like insects. Outwardly they were repulsive to him, yet this was deceptive. Mike knew that, in reality, they were less like insects than angels. Shimmering strands of thought linked them together, the lowest to the highest as one organism - and still they were capable of separate thought like animals. Those thoughts fed back and enriched the whole in continual self-sustaining renewal.

In his dream he entered into the experience, became one with the *flow*. An astonishing duality: he was both the least worthy creature in the universe and at one with its apex. He was inside and outside one of these aliens, seeing everything it could see and also aware of things beyond its knowledge. He was part of a great web of being that numbered three hundred and twenty-one, the number itself, 321, satisfying him beyond all expectation: it was a number that had to be, that complied with universal harmony. Those three hundred and twenty-one beings comprised units, Gatherers, Sifters and one great Controller at

the head. He experienced something of the awe and the joy in contemplating the Controller that the alien felt; but he also knew what the alien did not, or perhaps cared not, that there were many other such organisms. Not only that, but the Controllers themselves were subordinate to the mighty Directors, of whom only five existed throughout the plain.

Then there were other types of creatures entirely, different yet still part of the great flow: the bulky Birthgivers who alone were capable of reproduction; the timorous males who lived in bands like buffalo, kept away from all the other plain dwellers by repulsion screens fashioned by pure thought - apart from the times when replacements were necessary; and the sinister, neuter Tribulators, whose shapes hugged the ground and yet could move like the wind.

It had all the quirky consistency of a dream; and as he thought that thought, Mike was awake, sweat drying on his forehead. For a moment his body felt uncomfortable and wrong, and he had the panicky delusion that he had lost several legs.

"Deeply weird," he muttered to himself. Nevertheless it had seemed so real. Had seemed, for even as he thought that, the startling visions were fading. Fading but not quite vanishing. Perhaps because of the gaps in his memory, this dream world was more real than reality. And in any case, what relish did reality hold in a prison cell?

The door opened. Mike shaded his eyes as he looked at a uniformed male.

"Okay, Severin. You're free to go."

Mike's thoughts whirled. "How do you mean?"

"You're pardoned."

"How come?"

"Better ask the Secretary. Although I bet even *he* doesn't know."

For days, Kauth-n-11-14 had been feeling an undercurrent of unease in the flow which never quite interfered with its joy but was nonetheless there; so when she passed the streamlined cylindrical shapes she offered a supplicant query. The shapes were unimaginably old, yet now they were being worked on by Sisters and Cousins.

"What are those things, Revered One?"

Almost absently, 11 replied. "They are ships, 11-14; vessels we once made to travel to other worlds before we realised that our minds were all the vessels we needed."

"And now, Revered One?"

"And now, beloved, we may need them again. Another race is coming. It would do us harm."

Kauth-n-11-14 was instantly on the verge of spirit-shock. "They would do harm to such as you? They could even hold the thought of harming the Sacred One herself?"

11's thoughts were gentle, a sadness so soft it was indistinguishable from the serenity of the flow. "Yes, even Kauth herself." The enormity of a name imposed its own pause for a moment. "They are far from the light, those ones."

They have enslaved and conquered a dozen races because they worship strength and despise weakness and know no other way. They would do the same even to Centre itself, and they may succeed."

"Succeed?" thought Kauth-n-11-14. "But that cannot be!"

"It may well be, beloved. But if it is, what does it matter? We of Centre have flourished for millennia, glorying in the glory of the universe, enriching the flow. A day of such experience would be bliss and we have had millennia. What does it matter if it ends, when it has already lasted forever? Taste the flow."

And as her thoughts continued, 11 opened up the flow fully to Kauth-n-11-14, fuller than she had ever tasted it; and she knew the wonders of being, of creation, of infinite love. She felt sorry for the race which was coming to bring destruction, and 11 and all her Sisters smiled at the thought.

Mike's feelings of pleasure at seeing his brother again were wiped from his face as though by a towel.

"Yes, I heard about your release, though I can still hardly believe it," said John. "I suppose you've come for the money."

"Money?" said Mike. Feeling for those memories which still wouldn't reveal themselves.

"Don't worry; you'll get it. The trust has administered your share of the bequest. It's all there. In fact it's appreciated considerably." John sat down and wrote out an address. "A Mr Sackville at this firm of solicitors is expecting you. I don't think there's anything else."

John's contempt mixed anger into Mike's incomprehension.

"You don't think there's anything else? What about us?"

"Us?" echoed John, his expression changing to incredulity. "There isn't any us, not after the way you've behaved. Wasn't it enough to take a life, without taking it like that?"

Seeing Susie again brought him a different kind of pain. She opened the door and collapsed crying onto his shoulder.

"Oh Mike," she kept saying through her tears. "Oh Mike."

"You didn't wait for me?" he said softly. A stray memory flashed into his mind like a meteorite flaring in the atmosphere. "You said you would."

"I waited: I waited for eight years. I would have waited forever, but they said your mind was gone."

He felt as cold as frozen meat. "Eight years," he murmured.

"I'm sorry, Mike," she said. Holding him to her one last time. He looked past her into her home. It was spruce and shining and he liked it.

"I'm sorry too, Susie," he said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

On the way downstairs he felt his face, his hairline, seeking signs of aging. Eight years! Where had they gone to? Eight years of his life stolen from him. He went to a bar and on into the men's room. The mirror told the story. Eight years in lines and tucks, wrinkles and grey hairs, yet still him. Still the same Mike Severin. He looked into his own eyes and it was like looking into eternity.

But over a double brandy the hopelessness eased. Maybe he had lost eight years, but he was himself again. No: he was better - certainly better than

that animal John had so rightly despised. He despised himself, what little of his past he could remember. He was glad then for the first time of the gaps in his memory; they seemed more like bulwarks of protection. Eight years gone, but it might have been his whole life. He could redeem himself. He could atone.

Kauth-n-11-14 looked up into the sky of Centre. Far beyond the clouds a battle was taking place. Refurbished ships of Centre moved through the silent starry blackness of space, captained by dour Tribulators. Their vision joined the flow, washing down even to units such as Kauth-n-11-14. Ahead of them came the ugly squat ships of the nameless enemy. Offers of discussions, of negotiations, of diplomacy streamed out from Sifters on board the Centre ships and were ignored. A wave of sheer destructive thought came next, sufficient to destroy Kauth-n-11-14 a thousand times over - and was brushed aside with equal contempt.

She felt the sighs of the Sifters as they gave up their part of the struggle and handed full control to the Tribulators. They knew about termination, about spirit dissolution, about relentless opposition; they neither took pleasure in these things nor regretted them, but understood them and were designed to carry them out. Energy weapons blazed on the Centre ships, answered by the enemy. Shields buckled and tore in both fleets. Hulls broke, gas and light flared out in the dark and were gone. Kauth-n-11-14 saw enemy ships fragment and their crews shiver into nothingness: and she felt the sweet poignancy of loss as the Blessed Ones died, one by one. The Tribulators died too, without reflection, without regret, with the same grim concentration as they had lived. The enemy ships were much reduced in number, but the Centre fleet was destroyed.

"I have never known a Tribulator die, and now all of them are dead," reflected 11, partly to herself, partly to the flow, and switched to Dreamstate. Kauth-n-11-14 was alone, and she too entered Dreamstate, opting for full lucidity. Her mind instantly took her to Michael Severin.

It was astonishing. She had repaired his thinking centre, she had given a part of herself and taken part of him in a permanent merging, she had arranged for his release from confinement and even shielded him from knowing the worst of his offences. And still he was far from the happiness that characterised the flow. Even as she and her sisters stood on Centre and knew their fleet had gone, the flow was still a joyous wonderment, consoling and enriching them. She could only ponder the phenomenon.

Seeking answers, she merged with him, tasting the emotions to the full. They were rich and strange, dark flavours he called cynicism and betrayal, hurt and anguish, self-loathing and despair. They were unknown to the Centre dwellers and added spice to the flow. The entire community, from the Directorate to the lowest unit, transformed those emotions into assimilable forms, drank deeply and felt refreshed.

And there was even more. These negative feelings had their counterpart in positive emotions which would be even more nourishing to the Centre dwellers. In her lucid Dreamstate, Kauth-n-11-14 posed a question. The answer filtered down from the Directorate, and the answer was yes.

Her mind scanned the area near Michael Severin for a suitable vessel. Time contracted for her and days passed swiftly before she found what she wanted. A creature lying on the ground surrounded by others of her kind, a small piece of metal embedded deep in her body. Turmoil everywhere. She attempted a merger, but there was nothing to merge with. The spirit had departed, leaving an empty shell. She entered.

Unimagined horrors poured in on her. First was pain, such as Michael Severin had experienced for her: but this was like a wall of sound, obliterating everything else. She scanned her new body: small and large tubes for carrying fluid had been severed, and a large organ in the chest had sustained damage. She closed her mind around the piece of metal and it faded away to nothingness; meanwhile, her will repaired the bodily damage. The chest organ began to dilate and contract rhythmically. Fluid circulated again. Apparently this was as it should be.

Now she felt herself into every zone of this new body. Strange and compact - only four limbs, clearly designed for upright movement - with a million soft sensations. For a moment she pictured herself back on Centre and everything swam in confusion. But then her mind cleared. It was fascinating and different and rewarding. She damped down the emotions to a manageable level and stood up. Instantly the crowd reacted: she could sense support and empathy from them, but most of all astonishment. They were telling her to sit down, to lie down, to lie still. One of them in particular was visibly distressed.

"Fiona!" he called to her. "Thank heaven!" She understood the syntax from her mergings with Michael Severin, but his attentions were unwelcome. She backed away from him, her mind sifting through the procedures for rapid movement.

"Fiona..." he said; and then she turned and ran into the astonished crowd, his shouts of disbelief following her.

She slowed down quickly and let the ganglions of her mind interpenetrate the hordes around her. How many creatures there were in this place, millions upon millions! Yet how separate they were. None of them had the flow, none of them had the support that she had from her Close Sisters. Their isolation was appalling. It came close to spirit-shock for her, but she forced herself to damp it down. They had at best a few fragile, shallow relationships, while on Centre she had known the whole world intimately.

But there was one relationship here worthy of the name: her Close Sister Michael Severin was here somewhere, and her mind was leading her to him. Perhaps she could finally heal his hurts. She knew she could. She was part of him, he was part of her, and had been since their first merging that had given so much to Centre. So much, indeed, that it was not exaggerating to say that it dwarfed the loss of the fleet.

Cocooning herself from the frenetic bustle of these closed beings around her, she saw much that was wonderful in this world. Accessing Michael Severin's memories, she recognised *trees* - like massively thick grasses, soaring upwards and singing songs of praise unheard by these busy creatures; *blossom*, which was like a flower yet was made up of dozens of tiny flowers; *aromas* to beguile

her, unknown and vibrant scents to enrich her and enrich the flow. And above, sky and clouds similar to her beloved Centre, although the sky here was a softer blue.

She found herself descending steps off the walkway, down into a darkened area where people sat, some singly, some in couples. Long before she saw him her mind rejoiced at his presence. She walked over to him. He was seated, cradling a small glass in his hands, a bitterness in his eyes. But she would change all that. He looked up.

"Michael Severin," she said. Something in his eyes changed for the better at the very moment he saw her. Part of her mind realised that her new body was attractive to him; but that quickly passed. It was when their eyes met that his spirit began to recover, and she was puzzled and delighted at her own feelings. This meeting of eyes was a kind of merging, then.

"I'm sorry, have we met?" he said, his voice pleasant to her ears now that she heard it in the real for the first time. "I'm afraid my memory's been playing up lately."

"Don't worry," she said, sitting down beside him. "We haven't met."

"No? I could have sworn we've met before somewhere - " he laughed, interrupting himself. "What a corny line. Sorry about that."

It was a new and delightful experience to hear him laugh. She laughed too and enjoyed it. "Haven't you anywhere to go?"

"I've got one of the most expensive apartments in town, but I'm hardly ever there. It seems empty."

"Let's go there now, and then it won't be empty."

He stared at her, interest, suspicion, hope and doubt in his mind: and at that moment the man in the crowd arrived. He walked over to her resolutely.

"Fiona, listen to me. You're not yourself. You're in shock. It's understandable. You're lucky to be alive. Come home with me and I'll call the doctor."

She looked up at him. "Leave me alone," she said.

He reached towards her arm. "Come on Fiona," he said, "that's enough."

"I'm not Fiona." She flinched away from his touch.

"You're delirious - "

Mike got to his feet. "Look, whoever you are, the lady's not interested."

The stranger turned on Mike a face full of worry, frustration and shock. He shot out a hand and pushed him back into his seat. It scraped noisily along the ground. She reacted instinctively: her mind gave a twist, the stranger gasped, his head rolled backwards and he fell heavily. People in the bar looked in their direction.

"Let's go," she said unflusteredly. Mike made his decision and they went quickly, leaving confusion behind them.

He led her out into the sunshine but stopped suddenly, staring at her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Your blouse - it's covered with blood!"

"It's all right. It's not my blood."

"But - are you hurt?"

"No. Nobody's hurt."

"But..."

"What does it matter? You can buy me another."

Something in her tone made him laugh.

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"Aren't you?"

He laughed again. "Quite probably."

"Then we should stick together."

It was late. She looked out of his window and watched the stars burning bright in a clear sky. She heard a sharp sound as he pulled a cork out of a bottle of liquid - wine, to drink, to help enjoy, she realised - and was startled by the intense smell of fruit.

"I just realised," he said, smiling. "I never asked your name. It didn't seem important somehow. Tell me now."

She was taken aback. "Kauth...n..." she stammered.

"What's that? Kathy? It's beautiful. I love it."

She was filled with confusion and a sense of transgression against the order of things. To have a name - and more than that, a name like the Sacred One! It was too much. But then she considered. He wanted to give her a name. He wanted to give her such a colossal honour. She sounded the name in her mind. It was beautiful. It had softness and strength as the names of the great ones had. She flushed with pleasure, and all of Centre waited, agog.

"Thank you, Michael Severin."

He laughed. "Just Mike will do," he said.

So he had a name too. He was a great one, a Controller, himself - and he thought of her in the same way! Unknown emotions reeled through her, but she recognised joy out in front. A name for her, alone. Had there ever been such delight?

She soon knew that there had. They sat down on the soft floor covering and sipped the wine he had poured. Instantly, complex and wonderful taste exploded through her being. She heard the song the grapes had sung on the vines, and the song the wine itself made, which was deeper and statelier and yet the same.

Then, unexpectedly, he leaned over, his head looming close to hers, and touched her cheek with his. She had to restrain herself from terminating him at once; no being had ever touched her. Only Tribulators touched units, and that touch meant death. But, she reflected, it was different here. They were part of each other. She analysed the feeling, of cool yet burning cheeks softly touching, and realised she loved it: an intimacy approaching the warmth of the flow. She....

And then he turned his face, closed his eyes and touched his lips to hers. It was a soft and gentle kiss but it blew her away like a roaring wind with feelings more intoxicating than the wine. She responded to him, copying his actions, and a torrent of emotions poured through her, into the flow, and filled Centre to the brim. Even as the battered enemy ships entered the atmosphere, the Directorate orchestrated Kathy's rich source of new experience into a thousand songs, a

million poems, a billion epiphanies. As the searing energy beams lanced through the air to kill and destroy, the inhabitants of Centre were more alive than they had ever been before.

Kathy pulled away from Mike as the flow died. Tears stood in her eyes: but there was joy mixed with her sadness at the thought that her people had reached the pinnacle of experience, and through her. Through her, too, Centre lived on. She was the memory of an entire civilisation.

"What's wrong?" Mike said, concerned.

She smiled. "Nothing's wrong. It's beautiful."

He pulled her to him, to delicious breathless warmth. "Let's make it even better."

"You mean - you want to merge?"

"Yes. Let's merge."

As her mind found his he caressed her: gently and sweetly the caresses continued, each emotion more soaring than the last, each surely the ultimate yet each overlaid, on and on, onward and Upward, through the successive circles of heaven into the empyrean.

The next day they shopped, to turn his apartment into their home. He bought her that new blouse, along with a complete set of clothes. While they were buying CDs for the new hi-fi, she left him in the jazz department and wandered into the classical section. Something was playing that she just had to have. She went to find Mike.

Over French bread, cheese and dry white wine they played the music he'd chosen. Each sound, each note was a new experience for her, enriching and satisfying. Then the time came for her choice, and she asked him to play it. He opened the CD case and looked at it bemusedly.

"Sibelius symphony number seven," he said. "I don't know about this: I'm a rock, blues and jazz man myself." She could already identify the teasing in his voice so she just smiled at him. He loaded the disc and pressed play. From the stately opening it mounted up, higher and higher until it was floating: and they floated too, like birds on thermals high above the world. She sat on the floor, her eyes elsewhere, lost in the filling music. From start to finish it was serenely beautiful in its own right, in its utter self-absorption; but it was also more than that. It was, in a distant pairing, the song of praise she and her Close Sisters had sung. It was Mike and Kathy, different yet the same.

When the music finished she took a deep breath and looked a question at him.

"Mmmm," he said. "Like I said before, it isn't really my stuff. And yet it was. It gave me a sort of shiver of delight, as though it was familiar."

"We're the same," she said.

"Okay, my turn," said Mike. He put on an old blues standard and they listened to it with the same enjoyment. He quoted the lyrics. "*Yesterday I sang a love song, but today I sing the blues.* Funny that. Yesterday I sang the blues, but today I sing a love song."

"A love song?" she breathed.

"Yes." His eyes held hers. "I love you, Kathy."

Emotions threatened to overwhelm her; but before she could respond the doorbell rang. She got up, went into the hall and opened the door: and instantly, bodies burst into the flat past her. Hard metal clipped her head and she fell unconscious to the carpet.

With her spirit more remote than even Dreamstate, her benign control of Mike's memories ended abruptly. At that moment he knew everything: his black moods, his psychotic behaviour, his worthless companions and his barbaric murder. Only his deep loathing of all that he had been kept him sane at that moment. He looked at the men in his flat and recognised every one of them.

"Hi, Mike," said the one at the head of the group. "You don't seem pleased to see us."

"What is there to be pleased about?" he said. He knew his life was counting out in seconds, but he also knew there was nothing to be gained by playing along with them.

"Yeah, I heard you got out," continued the other in the same even tone. "I heard you're all cured too. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"But I also heard you've given up your old ways. I got to thinking that might include giving up your old associations."

"I'm not about to squeal on you, if that's what you mean."

"Yep, that's what I mean all right. But you'll understand, Severin, knowing you as we do, we don't really feel like taking your word. All right," he said to his companions, turning away.

So death had counted down to three, to two and to one, and zero came next. But something happened before that. The dreams of the planet came back to him at the speed of thought: and even as the guns came out of the jackets, he knew the answer. He didn't want the bullets to leave the guns. So they didn't.

Guns clicked rapidly at him, then the men looked at each other in amazement. He could see their next move clearly: they would grab anything that could make a weapon and beat him to a pulp. But even as they turned on him they gasped in pain and fell to the floor. They were dead, but even their bodies were an affront, so he made them not to be. They faded away like the nothings they were.

He had no eyes for them. He was cradling Kathy in his arms, hoping against hope that she was still alive. The tears in his eyes turned to tears of relief when she came to.

He told her what had happened while she had been unconscious, and found his explanation expanding to include his visions of Centre. "I wouldn't blame you if you didn't believe a word of it," he said. "It all feels like a dream. And believe me, I've been having some weird dreams lately."

"It's not a dream," she said. "It's all true. I was on Centre: I was born there. I was a unit called Kauth-n-11-14. And now I'm Kathy, thanks to you." They shared a smile.

"Then how was I able to stop those killers?"

"When I repaired you, I left part of myself in you and took part of you for myself. We're close: closer than any other lovers. You picked up the techniques of mental control from me. That's what gave you the power to defeat your enemies."

He held her close, breathing the scent of her hair.

"This is wonderful," he said. "It means we can - "

She smiled at him. "Let's talk about it tomorrow. You're exhausted."

"Okay," he said. "But now that I know that it's all true, there's one thing to remember: there are two of us now that know everything about Centre. And as long as we hold those memories, it can never really die."

"That knowledge is more precious than all the information ever carried by the flow."

"We'll restart the flow," he said.

Mike awoke with a lightness of heart that he hardly recognised. Now he knew everything; but he could face the consequences of what he knew. He had been less than worthless, the dregs of society, and he had taken a life in a shameful, despicable way. But now he had renounced his old self so utterly he felt himself forgiven. And he had given something back to society by ridding it of those cartoon-strip gangsters. Now life could begin again. But not just life as it was: precious new life with the sole survivor from a perfect world. Kathy, whom he loved and who loved him.

He wondered where she was; then he heard sounds from the next room. He lay back on his bed in contentment. Sunlight was coming through the window, blue skies framed in soft white wood. A bird on the ledge fluttered its wings. He felt better than he had felt for days, or maybe years. At that moment the door opened and Michael Severin looked up, an expectant smile on his face.