



## A Growth in the Backyard

Her eyes floated in tears as she held her hands out. The powder had become so thick, wisps of it billowed into the air.

“Oh God,” Phil said, “we’re probably breathing that stuff.”

He leaped to his feet and stepped back. As each footstep hit grass, a cloud of dust billowed up. Dull flat tops of hundreds of tiny columns littered the lawn.

“Phil, they’re everywhere,” she moaned.

“Front yard. We’ll wait there.”

He held his hand out to her. She hesitated.

Showing his dusted hand, he said, “Doesn’t matter now.”

She nodded and took his hand. He pulled her to her feet.

As they ran, their feet crushed columns into dust clouds. Around the corner of the house was a boundary where the swarm of columns hadn’t spread. Hundreds of columns, then suddenly clear grass.

He pointed, and dust wafted from his finger. “They stop there.”

“Thank God. I thought they’d be everywhere.”

“I think they will be.” He pointed again. A new column had just peaked above the blades of grass. “Let’s go.” He deliberately stomped on the new column. It made him feel better, although it probably caused them to spread faster.

They stopped on the sidewalk of the quiet cul-de-sac. In the yard across the street, a young boy kicked a soccer ball around.

Emily held her hands out like they were tarantulas. They were completely covered in dust. Powder fluttered down from them in a steady stream. Phil’s hands weren’t far behind.

“I don’t feel the tingle anymore,” she said, a cry in her voice. “I can’t feel anything in my hands.”

He gasped. A tiny patch of grey had developed just under her right eye. A tear streaked through it, darkening the color where it touched. Please, no! Not her sweet face, not her sweet blue eyes!

“The ambulance will be here soon. Just hang on.”

She nodded. Mucous trickled from her nostrils. One trickle had the dark color of moistened dust mixed into it. He looked away, pretending to search for the ambulance. What in God’s name was this stuff?

“What’s that on your hands?” the boy from across the street called. He looked both ways and began to cross the street.

“No!” Phil shouted. “Stay there! We don’t know what it is. We can’t get it off.”

The boy stopped with a look of fear on his face, then slowly backed up until he was safe on the curb. “W-want me to call 911 or something?”

“Thanks,” Phil said. “We already did.”

The boy turned and ran into his house. “*Mo-om.*”



## Eternal Rectangle

Jake eased to a stop and felt a rush of vertigo as the normal flow of time took over. It was night, and his past self was preparing for bed. He took over his past life at once and climbed under the covers for a desperately needed night of sleep.

In the morning he headed to campus as usual, realizing for the first time that he'd have to relive close to two semesters of classes. The thought depressed him, but at least he should do better this time and raise his grades.

But today he made one change in his normal routine. On his way to lunch he took a detour that caused him to cross paths with Anthony. An "accidental" bumping together, some introductions, a few well-placed bits of conversation that sparked Anthony's interest, and in moments they were heading to the campus cafeteria together for lunch where they would rendezvous with Katie. As they walked, Jake dropped hints that Katie was "only a friend" and completely unattached.

The three enjoyed lunch and each other's company, and of course Anthony and Katie hit it off together immediately. She couldn't take her eyes off him: a tall, swarthy, Antonio Banderas type with hair as black as hers. They exchanged phone numbers. Within twenty-four hours Anthony had arranged to meet Katie at the student mixer dance. Within forty-eight hours Jake's neurons were having a hard time remembering why that pleased him so much.



## Solar Butterfly

As the ambulance zoomed at emergency altitude over the campus roofs to the university hospital, she imagined herself floating high above the world, Butterfly wings outstretched, gazing down on the shimmering blue-and-white globe, patches of earthy brown and green peeking through holes in the clouds. How beautiful the world looked from that vantage point, instead of face down on the sidewalk as someone thrust repeatedly into her rectum.

With clinical monotones she described what happened as they took photographs of her bruises and swabbed her anus. By the time a doctor showed up to examine her, the police reported that Jeff was in custody. His description matched that from several other rapes in town. Just her luck to hook up with a serial rapist.

The first time, when her sweet sixteen birthday companion date-raped her, she'd endured skeptical looks from several people, including her mother. This time the evidence must be obvious enough to spare her that indignity. No one was giving her "the look."

Nurses injected her with diagnostic nanites. They reported two broken ribs, but no other serious damage. When the medical staff asked if there was someone she wanted

them to contact, she hesitated. She desperately wished Monica were there, yet the whole situation arose because she'd been cheating on Monica. She shook her head.

As Elaine lay in the hospital bed overnight, she meditated on her decision. Her thesis would be the Butterfly, not the Mermaid. Her counselor insisted on the less risky project—the Mermaid. Sea transformations had already been done. Interplanetary space would provide the romance of breaking new ground, but by the same token, be much more risky. What good was a posthumous degree?

Elaine was ready to do either thesis. She'd run countless simulations for both. The life of a Mermaid had great appeal. Swimming through the world's oceans, feeling the rush of water flow past her nude body, breathing dissolved oxygen through her gills, thrashing her flippers on the surface, gleaning raw food from the sea with her own efforts—sushi for life! A few other students had designed Mermaids or Mermen since the Applied Morphogenetics program began. But Elaine's original contribution would be the gills and the carnivorous teeth. All the others had chosen to remain air breathers and socially attached to humans.

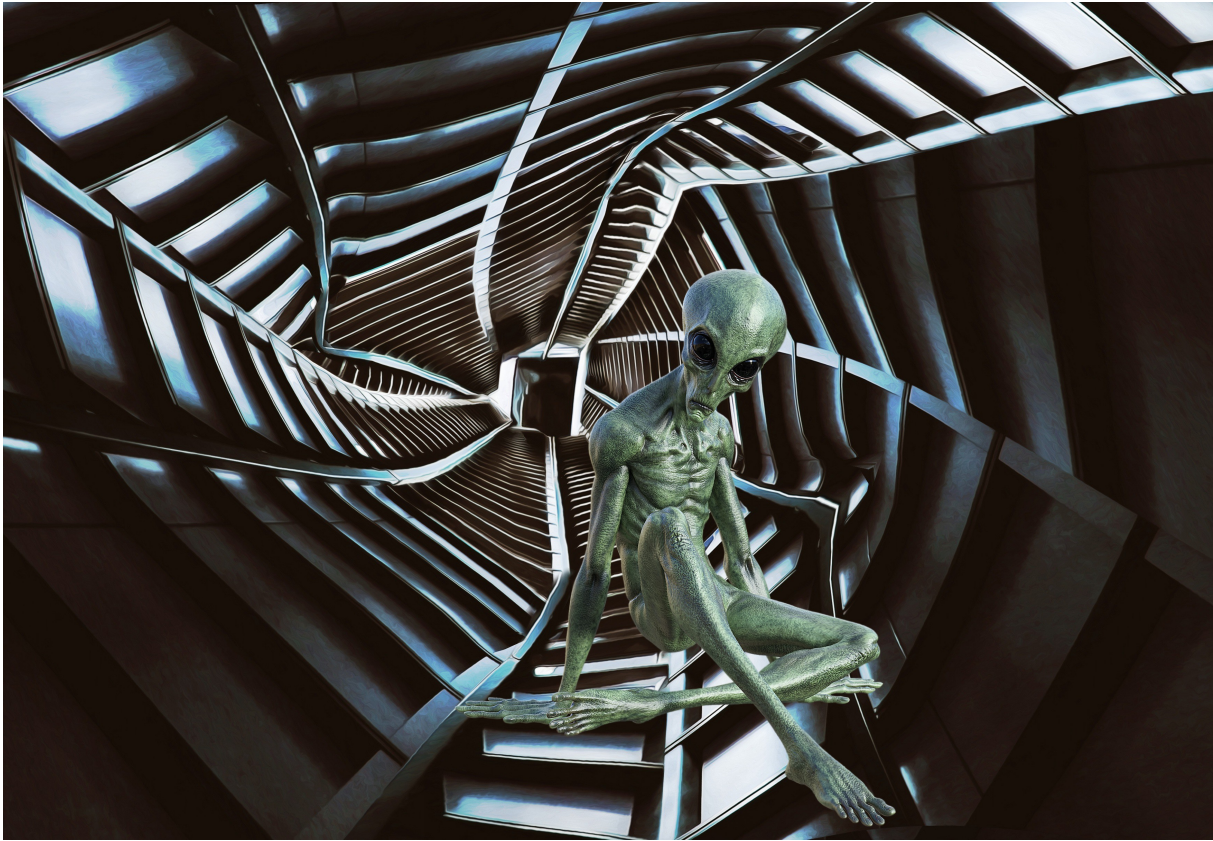
The Mermaid would certainly fulfill her desire to withdraw from human society, spending countless months alone in the sea, exploring the wonders of marine nature. But it wasn't a total withdrawal. She'd still be a part of the world, bound to its gravity, living within the protective cocoon of its atmosphere. She'd still be able to interact with humans, albeit with difficulty. The Butterfly was her true desire—complete escape from the global womb that bore her, then tossed her about like a plaything.

So what if the Butterfly was a more dangerous morph? As if life as a Mermaid would not be. Sharks, killer whales, relying on one's own hunting skills for food. Elaine calculated that the danger was only incrementally greater, not orders of magnitude. It would take a couple of years to develop the Butterfly body—much longer than the Mermaid. But it would be worth it.

Her counselor didn't see it that way and refused to approve the Butterfly. True to form, Elaine had slunk out of her office, bitter but acquiescent. But with Jeff's final insult to her life, Elaine was ready to take a stand. Since the days of her childhood when her father left and her mother abused her in drunken fits, Elaine had become less and less interested in other people. The handsome young boy who loved her singing voice and made her sixteenth birthday a delight—until he got her alone in the car and raped her virginity away—must have told others how “great” she was. All her dates ever after expected the same. She was seared enough in her soul from the first experience to let them.

Funny, she couldn't even remember his name now.

By the time she graduated with her B.S. in genetics, she'd had enough of men. Half the human race appeared nothing more to her than predators. Vivid dreams haunted her nights. She was a lioness, devouring screaming men who'd thought to test their machismo in the plains of Kenya. Or a shark, visiting her wrath on all the male swimmers in the sea. Pools of blood and testosterone mixing with ocean brine.



## Bokev Momen

The Murdzak had taken a captive. The figure was humanoid shape, the same general design of nearly all intelligent life in the galaxy. Taller and more stocky than the Murdzak, but not quite as tall as the Tetzl. Eteaki rushed forward, followed immediately by the others, and quickly felt around on the chest. In the upper center she discovered a steady thumping that had to be a heartbeat. "It's alive."

"He," said Pezeli. "It's a he."

Orbanek chuckled.

Eteaki gazed at the figure. Light-colored hair covered the scalp, cropped fairly short. No beard. Two closed eyes, two ears, a nose, and a mouth arranged on the head in the usual way. Strapped to the table at the chest, thighs, ankles, and wrists. Naked, with skin almost as pale as the Murdzak, and as Pezeli had noticed, male.

And five fingers on each hand.

Eteaki gazed at her own four-fingered hand, dark with brown pigmentation, and wondered what it would be like to calculate in a ten-digit number system. How clumsy that must be compared to octal!

"Another species in the image of the Great Divinity," Pezeli said with reverence.

Yes, Pezeli, Eteaki thought. Another humanoid species. Just like the thousands everywhere else.

“Seems most like the Kiryluk,” Orbanek murmured.

“No...” Pezeli brushed the chin of the figure. “He’s got the stubble of a beard growing.”

Eteaki could see them now—faint, light-colored bristles.

“Not like the Kiryluk, then,” Orbanek said, “if they grow facial hair.” He turned to Eteaki. “Did you get any more details on the culture of that no-contact planet?”

“Sorry, not much is known about it.”

Pezeli ran her hand around the face. “The beard covers from below the nose down to the throat, and along the sides of the face, merging with the scalp hair.”

The stranger’s eyelids fluttered, and his head rolled sideways.

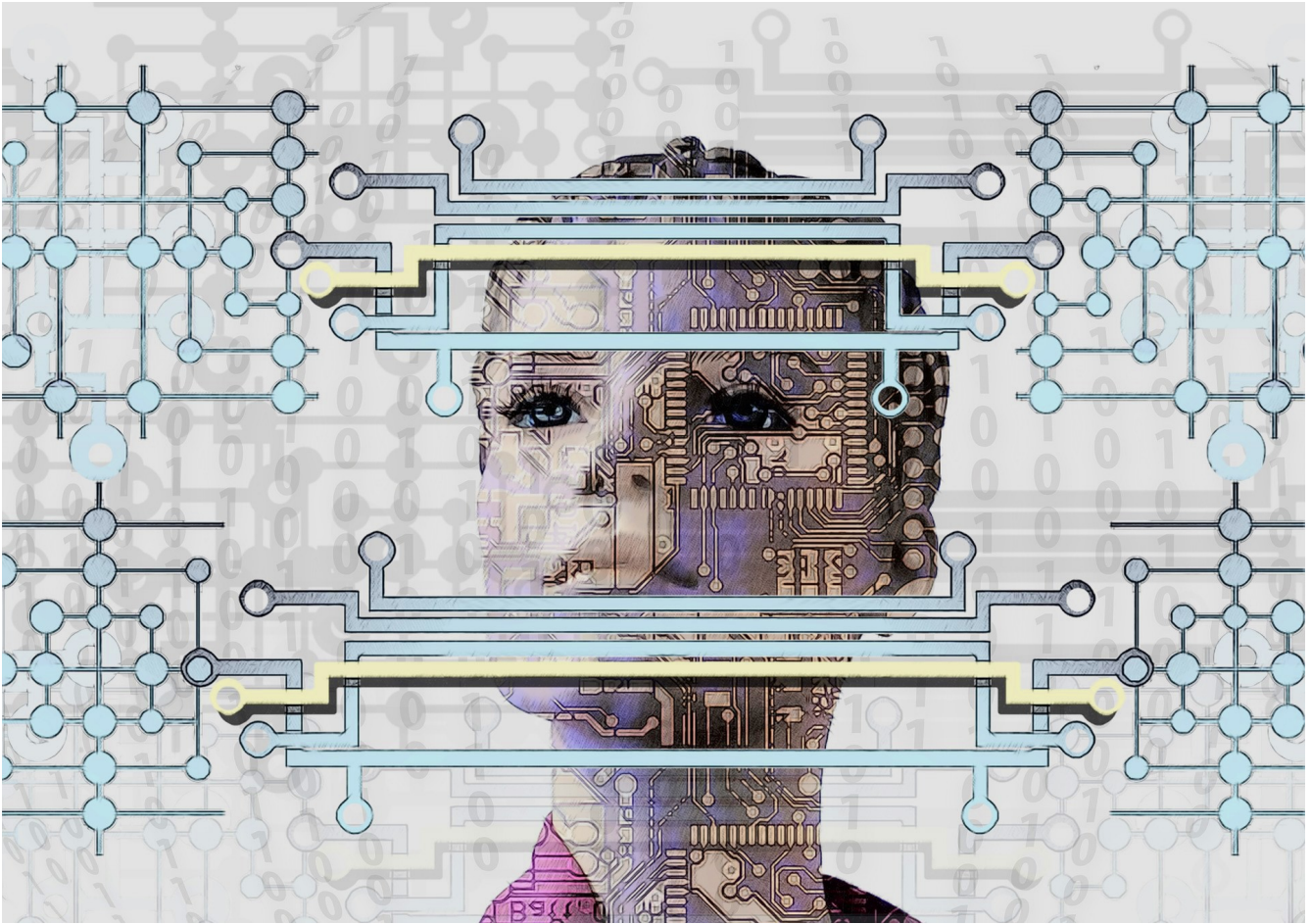
“Looks like he’s regaining consciousness,” Orbanek said.

A soft moan escaped his lips.

“Let’s get him loose,” Orbanek said, working on the nearest wrist strap with his free hand.

“What if he’s dangerous?” Pezeli asked, starting on the chest.





## Mary Mother of Nanites

Father Muriel approached the confessional with trepidation. Although he'd been a priest for nearly a year now, he still trembled at the awesome responsibility that was his as the representative of Christ. He wondered if he would ever get used to the idea.

As he walked from the rectory to the cathedral, the vibration of molecular-sized nanites lining his eardrums caused the strains of Bach's *Magnificat in D Major* to trickle into his ears. Listening to the choir voices weave its haunting themes helped him prepare mentally and spiritually for confession.

As he crossed the electronic boundary that surrounded the cathedral, his nanite connection to the Web broke, and the music abruptly halted. He could have instructed his internal nanites to buffer the data and continue playing, but Bishop Peregrine insisted on a moment of silence as part of the spiritual preparation. Turning off beautiful music was difficult for Father Muriel to do, so he allowed the automatic disconnection from the Web to do it for him.

His sense of loss when the music stopped was mitigated by the relief he felt when breaking contact with the Web. Father Muriel had nothing to hide, but still enjoyed the feeling of escape from being constantly monitored by the worldwide network of nanites.

He sat within his booth and switched on the light that announced his availability. He didn't have to wait long before the first of a parade of penitents entered on the other side of the screen. They all came one by one, confessing their sins and receiving absolution. Father Muriel cringed at some of their sins, but maintained his professional demeanor thanks to his rigorous training. It wasn't easy sometimes.

As the closing time for confessions neared without another penitent entering for several minutes, Father Muriel decided that he was finished. But just as he was about to turn the light off, someone entered the confessional. The individual knelt, clothes faintly rustling, and remained silent for a moment.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," a voice finally said. It was a strong, male baritone, unfamiliar to him.

"The Web has not followed you here, my son," Father Muriel recited. "You may speak freely and in confidence."

The shadowy face through the screen stared at the floor for several heartbeats.

"Father, it's been three years since I spoke to my daughter." The voice was apologetic.

"And why is that, my son?"

"I sent her to jail."

Father Muriel raised his eyebrows. "How do you mean?"

"I testified in her trial. She wouldn't speak to me after that."

He nodded absently. "She never forgave you? She never learned the error of her ways?"

"She never made an error."

This made him perk up. "I don't understand."

"She was innocent of the charge."

The ways of man, Father Muriel sighed wearily to himself. "I assume when you found out, you facilitated her release?"

"I knew all along she was innocent."



## Eyes of the Beholder

“Mere words cannot begin to express the significance of this day, so I will not attempt to find them. Let me now present to you the ambassadors from Tau Ceti, our honored guests and fellow citizens of the galaxy.”

She raised her arm in invitation. Applauding fiercely, the whole body of people within the building rose as one and turned to face the direction she indicated. From a doorway in the far wall from Gabe appeared shadowy movement, then a form.

Gabe expected the creature to waddle in like a penguin with those stubby legs and bloated belly, but into the hall walked a tall, lordly creature, then another, and another—twelve in all. They moved in a slow, flowing gait that caused the word comical to utterly flee from Gabe’s mind. They rested their six-fingered hands upon their bellies and stood tall and proud as they walked. In spite of the rustling spines and the snouts and the razor teeth, they reminded Gabe more than anything of solemn monks in a religious procession.

The Brotherhood indeed, Gabe thought.

The hall and the gallery fell silent as the humans watched them line up in the gap before the podium. The last one ascended the steps, gracefully in spite of Gabe’s expectation that those short legs would struggle up them, and glided to the podium. It

stood a full head above the Secretary-General, who herself towered above most women. Many heartbeats pulsed in silence as the humans gazed upon the beings, and they peered back with small, dark, piercing eyes.

The Under-Secretary and the U.S. President brought a large roll of parchment to the podium. The Secretary-General raised it high for everyone to see and said, “My friends, the Treaty of the Worlds.”

She rolled it out on the podium as the two men held the curling edges in place. “I will now sign this magnificent document on behalf of the United Nations and all the people of Earth.”

Hundreds of breaths held as she brandished a gold pen and signed her name with a flourish. “And now, this representative of the Taucetians will sign it on behalf of the Federation of Worlds.” The delegate gripped the pen in its six fingers. It scratched something out on the parchment. Gabe wondered what it wrote. Did it write in its own language, and if so, what would an alphabet that consisted of tastes and smells and song look like? Or did the Taucetian write some human invention that stood for its name, that it had been trained to write?

The delegate returned the pen to the Secretary, and pandemonium broke loose. Gabe wouldn’t have believed that any ovation could have exceeded the enthusiasm of the previous ones, but this one defied comparison. He was on his feet himself, adding to the din with hands and vocal chords, infected by the elation. The Taucetians stood silently, motionlessly, observing the demonstration with undecipherable expressions.

Music flooded the hall, the Jupiter movement from Holst’s *Die Planeten*. It was an ad hoc, unofficial world anthem chosen for today’s ceremony for its interplanetary symbolism and lively, inspiring themes. Gabe looked down at Marianne and found her applauding wildly, shaking hands with Mr. Uruguay. She seemed unusually demonstrative for her.

In fact, as Gabe peered around the Assembly Hall, he began to feel unsettled. All the normally distinguished, even stuffy, ambassadors clapped and cheered and jumped up and down, acting more appropriately for a football game than a historic ceremony.

The music crashed its way through the inspiring themes. The Taucetians began to sway in unison to its rhythm, hands resting on bellies, faces passionless but for the grinning crocodilian snouts. It stunned Gabe when the ambassador from Ireland leaped up on her chair and riverdanced. The observers in the media gallery commented anxiously on the lively behavior of the ambassadors below. Even the Secretary-General herself broke into graceful movements—a Nigerian folk dance, Gabe guessed.

Encouraged by the informal activities below, some of the gallery observers indulged in their own celebration. They clapped and swayed, and a few of them paired up to dance. But none of them participated with as much abandon as the delegates in the Assembly Hall, many of whom had jumped onto chairs and desks, gyrating as if performers at a strip joint. Gabe’s jaw dropped in shock as the woman from Ireland peeled her top off and danced in a white bra, swinging her top in circles over her head.

Marianne joined hands with Mr. Uruguay and danced a samba vigorously, ignoring

the rhythm of the music. The man suddenly placed his hand on her breast and fondled with large groping maneuvers.

Gabe cried out inarticulately and rushed forward to the window, almost bowling over one journalist. He placed both hands on the glass and stared in horror as Marianne removed her jacket, unbuttoned her blouse, and flung it away with a single movement. Mr. Uruguay removed his coat and tie and shirt, then fingered Marianne's bra until it popped off. They threw themselves at one another and embraced, planting their lips together in a passionate kiss.

Gabe shouted, "Marianne!" and pounded on the window with both fists. What the hell was she doing? Everyone in the gallery had stopped celebrating, some rushing to the window as Gabe had, and gaped at the activity below.

Clothes lay everywhere. People paired up into writhing masses of flesh, on the chairs, on the floor, against the walls. The Secretary-General of the United Nations straddled the U.S. President with her dress pulled up and his pants pulled down, and pumped up and down rhythmically. The Under-Secretary leaped the railing at the edge of the platform and joined the Irish ambassador in a nude dance of suggestive fondling.

The Taucetians swayed with a constant motion and in perfect synchronization.



## Time Forks

Jake gasped. It was because Derek wasn't really there. That had to be it. Derek's consciousness *had* gone back in time and left this empty shell of a biological robot. The simulation was so perfect that no one would know the difference. But Jake had witnessed the change, the first human being ever to do so. He couldn't tell what the difference was, but somehow his subconscious had noticed. With the immediate contrast for comparison—first Derek was there, and then he wasn't—somehow his subconscious knew.

Derek was still acting like Derek, but suddenly Jake felt a distaste for this creature in front of him. He had to get away. He needed to think. But mostly he needed to leave the presence of this creepy impostor who was playing Derek.

“Derek, I—I'm sorry it didn't work. Uh, I just remembered something, an important meeting I have. I, uh, have to meet with one of my professors. Sorry. I'll see you later, okay?”

The Derek-thing stared at him in amazement. “You’re going to leave me just when…”

“Sorry,” Jake blurted and flew out the door. He ran down the sidewalk as fast as he could, panic growing with each step. All around him were pedestrians, mostly students, who stared at him with curiosity as he flew by. He couldn’t meet any of their eyes. All he could think about was *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and that chilling ending where Donald Sutherland extended his finger and screeched as the camera zoomed in on his mouth. Jake expected the students around him at any moment to stop and point and screech. Here’s one who figured out our secret! Here’s one who still has a consciousness inside him.

At last, panting painfully, he collapsed on the grass behind a tombstone in the local cemetery where no one could see him. As his panic ebbed, three Latin words popped into his mind. *Cogito, ergo sum*. “I think, therefore I am.” Jake knew that his consciousness was in this universe because he was experiencing it. And he knew that Derek’s consciousness had been in this universe because he’d watched it depart. For all he knew there were no other consciousnesses. Jake may be utterly alone.