

My Love Has Wings

Jack English

Michael Rooney joined the diplomatic corps right out of school, and after a year of toting and fetching in Washinton, he was assigned to the diplomatic staff of Coradin. Coradin was the most earthlike planet in the known universe. It was the second most populated, after earth, and it was a hundred and ten light years from earth. It was a plum assignment.

He had been on the ambassador's staff for three years and had worked his way up from glorified tea boy to someone trusted to oversee secure communications and even represent the ambassador at low level functions. The downside was that there were more than two hundred people on the ambassador's staff and it was hard to get noticed. In fact, he had never spoken to the ambassador one-on-one, so he was surprised when the ambassador called for him.

As he walked down the long marble corridor leading from the staff area to the suite where the ambassador received various delegations, he checked and rechecked his formal dress. He wanted to make a good impression.

He paused at the entrance to the ambassador's office.

An aide announced him, "Michael Rooney, Diplomat 3rd Class."

The ambassador waved him in.

"Good morning, Mr. Rooney," the ambassador said. "Sit," she waved to a chair off to one side of her desk.

Rooney sat.

"I have been reviewing your file," the ambassador said. "You have done very well here. I wonder whether you are ready for a more challenging assignment?"

"Like what, ma'am?"

"What would you say to being named ambassador to some small planet somewhere? Do you think you could handle that? Or would you like to spend another decade or two absorbing the ways of diplomacy?"

“I think I could step up, ma’am, but ambassador to even a small planet is a big promotion from Diplomat 3rd Class.”

“Yes, well,” the ambassador looked away. “It was just a thought.”

“May I ask what posting you had in mind, ma’am?”

“The post is ambassador to Tartarus.”

“The planet of hunchbacks. That is what they call it, isn’t it?” Rooney asked.

“In the diplomatic corps we never mention people’s handicaps or disfigurement. Anyway, I see you are not interested. I want to thank you for your time. You may return to your duties,” the ambassador waved him away with the back of her hand.

“I did not say I was uninterested. I just want to know more about the posting, that is all.”

“Oh, well,” the ambassador said. “It is a five-year posting and I do not know whether you realize it, but Tartarus is six hundred ninety light years from here. It is at the very edge of the known, inhabited universe. It takes three years to get there. So, if you accept this posting, you are committing the next eleven years of your life to this.”

“Can you give me a little background on Tartarus, ambassador?”

“You may or may not know that Tartarus is the center for all medical, virology and genetic research. I am sure you learned in history class that there has been four major viral and or genetic disasters in the last six centuries. The last one, two centuries ago, wiped out the population of three planets. So, it was decided to place all viral and genetic research on the farthest, most isolated planet possible. You mentioned it was the planet of hunchbacks, that is probably due to some genetic accident. And, I would not be doing my duty if I did not caution you as to the possibility of another accident while you are stationed there. On the other hand, Tartarus is a tremendous resource. Some 95% of all new medical breakthroughs, genetic or otherwise are pioneered on Tartarus. Trade negotiations is going to be a major element of the job. That is what makes it so important.”

“What is the diplomatic complement on Tartarus? How big will my staff be?”

“I am afraid it will just be you.”

“Just me?”

“The Tartarus government insists on limiting off-world diplomatic staff to one person, the ambassador.”

“Eleven years is a big commitment, especially when it means going it alone among a sea of hunchbacks. May I ask why the post is open and why me?”

“The last ambassador to Tartarus, Brandon Brooks, went for five years and stayed for sixty more years. He just died, so we are looking for a replacement.”

“Why me when there are hundreds if not thousands of more seasoned diplomats to choose from?”

All expression fell from the ambassador’s face. “Let me be honest. You were not my first choice or even the second. By my count, some forty others, both here and on earth, were offered the post. They all declined.” The ambassador clasped her hands and leaned

forward in her chair. “If you take this assignment, and do not screw it up, you will have your pick of assignments when you return. That includes an ambassadorship to one of the middle-sized planets or even a position as the ambassador’s first deputy here on Coradin. What do you say?”

“May I think about it?” Rooney asked.

“Do not take too long. We are continuing to screen candidates both here and on earth. If someone better or more willing comes along...”

“Understood,” Rooney said.

“Thank you. You may resume your duties.” It was the ambassador’s way of ending the meeting. She turned away from him and started pecking away at her computer.

Rooney returned to his cubicle. He tried to get as much information as he could on Tartarus. Other than mentioning that it is on the fringes of the known universe to isolate it in the event of future genetic disasters, little was known about it. There were no pictures of its people; buildings; landscape; no mention of its government; and nothing about its culture. It was almost like there was an information blackout. However, the blackout did not extend to the thousands of life-saving and life-enhancing medical breakthroughs pioneered on Tartarus. In the end, he decided to take the post.

“Ambassador, I accept your kind offer of this appointment. Thank you for having confidence in me.”

“Thank you for accepting. Do not screw it up. I have one piece of advice for you.”

“What?”

“Take an extensive library of books, music and videos with you.”

“Why?”

“Five years without human company is a long, long time.”

“What do you mean without human company?”

“From what I hear, the Tartarans have been modifying their own gnome for hundreds of years. Who knows how human they are, if in fact, they are human at all anymore. Good luck.” The ambassador extended her hand.

Rooney shook it. It was the first time she had ever extended her hand to him. It had to mean something.

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The day he was to leave for Tartarus, he met the ship’s Captain Garth.

“Ambassador Rooney,” Garth said. “Ever been in suspended animation before?”

“On my way here from Earth. Why?”

“How long were you under?”

“One hundred and eighty days. That is standard, isn’t it?”

“It might be standard, but it is not right. Me and my crew go under for ninety days at a time, then we come out for ten days to rehydrate, put some fat on and start rebuilding our musculature. Then we go back for another ninety.”

“Doesn’t that make the trip seem longer?” Rooney asked.

“It does, but when you are under for one hundred and eighty days the body begins to break down. You know why the standard is one-eighty? Cost. The longer they keep people under, the lower the cost. They picked one eighty because that is when deterioration is noticeable in 5% of people. At three hundred sixty-five days, deterioration is noticeable in 20% of people. Me and mine, we stick to ninety days and come out fresh as daisies. Do you have a problem with that?” The captain rolled a gamey eye over Rooney as if to take his measure.

“No problem, Captain. It is all good information,” Rooney said.

“I see you have packed coffee and dried fruit for five years,” the Captain wagged his thumb toward a container with Rooney’s name on it.

“It is not clear what they eat or drink on Tartarus.”

“How much information did they give you?” Captain Garth asked.

“Not much; the briefings were mostly about the trade in medical goods.”

“So, you don’t know.”

“Know what?” Rooney asked.

“What did they tell you about this vacancy?”

“They said Ambassador Brooks took the post for five years and decided to stay on for sixty years. He died on Tartarus, and I got picked to replace him.”

“Ambassador Brooks died more than three years ago. They sent a replacement, he was on the surface for about eight hours, looked around and demanded he be returned home. The post has been vacant for six years.”

“How do you know?”

“Ship captains talk. One crewed ship a year calls on Tartarus. Mostly trade is carried on by uncrewed, robot ships. They call on the planet monthly.”

“What are they like? The Tartarans? I mean, how bad can they be?” Rooney asked.

“I do not know. This is my second run and I have never been on the surface.”

“How come?”

“They do not let our ships get closer than 10 million clicks. They send up a shuttle from the surface; bring their containerized medical goods on board; and collect our trade goods. We stay in orbit for 48 hours, then leave. Containers are all handled by robots so we never see them. Like I said, the last person to see them quit the ambassador’s post after eight hours.”

“Oh, shit,” Rooney breathed.

“Still, there is money to be made,” Garth said. “Once I complete this run, I can retire and buy my own private island. If you stick it out for five years, you can have almost any diplomatic post you want. Sticking it for five years... that is the issue.”

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So, the newly minted ambassador to Tartarus, was put into stasis for 90 days; woke up with the crew; spent ten days rehydrating and rebuilding fat and muscle; and went under again. He did that for the entire three-year voyage. Finally, he arrived ten million clicks from Tartarus.

Over breakfast, Captain Garth asked, “did they tell you about the atmosphere, kid?”

“What about it?” Rooney asked.

“Shit!” Garth threw his spoon into a plate of oatmeal. “What kind of briefing did they give you?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“The planet’s gravity is only a third that of Earth’s, so you will have to spend a lot of time in a centrifuge and working out to maintain muscle and skeletal fitness. The atmosphere is four times as dense as that on earth. They say it is like walking through water. Are you sure they did not tell you about this?”

“Not a word, Captain, not a word.”

“Here is the drill,” Garth said. “Grab your kit and sit yourself in the passenger module in the cargo bay. Once you are locked in, Tartarus personnel will take care of you. I hope you last five years.”

“So do I.”

Rooney grabbed his personal kit and Garth detailed two of his crew to carry Rooney’s clothes and things to the passenger module. Then they locked him in.

A garbled voice came on the speaker. “Welcome to Tartarus. My name is Waldan. I am the planet’s Chief Administrator. Your passenger chamber will be transferred to one of our shuttles along with the trade goods. As soon as we transfer our medical products to Captain Garth’s ship, we will transport you directly to the embassy. This may take some time, so make yourself comfortable.”

Rooney cleared his throat and said, “On behalf of Earth and the United Planets, I would like to say... Hello?” All he heard was static on the line. “Is anyone there?” He felt the passenger chamber being moved and it almost knocked him off his feet. For the next several hours, he felt almost constant movement. He tried the intercom dozens of times but no one answered. Then with a heavy thunk, all movement stopped.

“Welcome to Tartarus,” Waldan said. “Your passenger chamber has been directly connected to the embassy. If you will be patient just a little while longer, we will equalize our atmospheric pressure and you may exit.”

“Greetings, Administrator Waldan,” Rooney said, “on behalf of Earth and...” all he heard was static coming over the intercom. “Hello? Is anyone there?” He got no response.

A few minutes later, he heard the hissing of gasses and a sequence of lights flashed above the chamber door. It opened onto a marble terrace. A hunchback was standing there.

“Welcome to Tartarus. I am Waldan, the Chief Administrator.”

Waldan would have been a strikingly handsome man had it not been for the huge hump on his back. Rooney expected a small hump, maybe the size of watermelon. The hump he saw was enormous and stuck up behind Waldan’s head.

“The embassy is quite large, especially for one person.” Waldan extended his hand out toward the garden. There is a private garden within the walls of the embassy.”

“Wow!” Rooney said. “It looks big.”

“It is one klick on a side. The embassy building wraps around it. It is a security measure.”

“On behalf of Earth and the United Planets, I would like to say how happy I am to serve as ambassador to Tartarus.”

“Yes, yes. That is all very good. Would you like something to eat? I have a banquet all laid out for you.”

“Thank you. That is most gracious,” Rooney bowed a little. “I am anxious to see your planet; to meet your people; and to understand your culture.”

“I do not think that would be a good idea. My people do not mix much with outsiders.”

“Is it because of the...” Rooney started to say “hump,” but thought better of it.

“Because of what?” Waldon did a half turn in his direction.

“Isolation, being so far from other inhabited worlds.”

Waldon made a sour face. “Something like that.”

He ushered Rooney into a large dining room. The floors were highly polished marble, as were the walls. A gold trimmed, coffered ceiling rose high above them. Scenes were painted in each of the ceiling panels, most were of angels holding out their hands to men and women. A row of marble columns along one wall framed a floor to ceiling window. The window looked out onto the embassy’s enclosed garden. A wide, polished wooden table sat in the middle of the room. Twenty chairs were arranged around the table.

“Do you have many diplomatic dinners?” Rooney extended his hand toward the table.

“Very few,” Waldan said, “hardly any.” He directed Rooney to a buffet laid out along one side of the room.

There were three kinds of meat, a dozen kinds of fruit, a half dozen kinds of vegetables, half a dozen kinds of bread and pastry.

“Help yourself,” Waldan said. “After eating spaceship rations for three years, you must be hungry for real food.” Waldan loaded up his own plate.

Rooney sampled a little of everything.

Waldan sat on one side of the table.

Rooney sat opposite him.

They ate and talked, but mostly Waldan asked Rooney about his background, and how he was selected for the posting. Rooney assumed Waldan was just collecting background for trade negotiations.

When they finished eating, Waldan said, “Did you notice that little door in the wall behind the buffet? That is where your food will come out. You can order what you want via computer or push the button next to the window and the cook will make it happen.”

“What about staff?” Rooney asked. “Servers and cleaners and so forth?”

“It will be all taken care of,” Waldan smiled a little smile. “Just concentrate on trade negotiations. Would you like to see your rooms and office?”

“Sure.”

The private quarters were off a wide, pinkish marble hall with high ceilings. A black marble band outlined the marble floor. Natural light streamed in. Double doors opened into a cozy reception area with chairs around the outside. Another set of double doors led into a spacious, high-ceilinged room. A pinkish marble floor flowed in from the hallway and spread across the breadth and width of the room. The black marble band outlining the floor followed it. There were windows on both sides of the room allowing in tons of natural light. The room was furnished with comfortable sofas and chairs, several large video screens, and wooden bookcases.

Another set of double doors led into the ambassador's bedroom. The pink marble floor and its black band flowed into this room as well. This room had windows on three sides. There was also a balcony that looked out over the embassy's extensive garden. A king-sized bed was tucked up against the same wall as the double doors. It was situated so that one could see tree tops lying in bed.

"Impressive," Rooney said.

"We are on the fourth floor here," Waldon said. "It has the best views. Your office suite is directly below us and is decorated about the same."

"What is on the first and second floors?" Rooney asked.

"Reception rooms. We have not used them for... well, we have not used them in my memory."

"A pity," Rooney said. "It is a shame not to share all this beauty. May I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"If the embassy staff consists entirely of the ambassador, why the vast embassy complex?"

"The truth is often complicated, hard, and embarrassing. When the complex was built long ago, the embassy staff was more than two hundred."

"What happened?"

"You know we are involved in medical research, right?"

"Right."

"A pathogen we were analyzing got out of the lab. It killed nearly ten percent of our population and all but three of the embassy staff."

"What kind of pathogen? Was it a virus? Bacteria? What?"

"Let us just call it a pathogen and leave it at that. The surviving embassy staff left, and a trade embargo was put on our medical products. It took a decade and a plague on Coradin to restart diplomatic relations and more importantly trade. When relations were reestablished both sides felt limiting embassy staff to just the ambassador was the best thing."

"What about opening the embassy to the people of your world?" Rooney said. "Surely, they would enjoy looking around. We might even sublet space to some businesses or a restaurant."

“I advise caution, Ambassador. Not everyone on our planet lives as well as you are going to. And some might resent an outsider having luxuries they can never afford. I am sure envy is not unknown where you come from. Shall we look at your office?”

“Maybe I should unpack first.”

“That was taken care of while we were eating,” Waldan extended his hand first to a dresser, then to a closet.

Sure enough, Rooney’s clothes and personal effects had been unpacked and stowed away. It was a first-rate job.

“I guess I better check the office then.”

Waldan lead him to an elevator. “There is a wide staircase at either end of the hall if you ever need any exercise.”

They got off on the third floor. The marble flooring throughout was a light bluish grey. The same black band surrounded the marble floor. His office was just below his bedroom. It had windows on three sides and spectacular views of the walled garden.

Rooney pointed to a computer on his desk and said, “I guess I better check in and see whether they have any dispatches for me.”

“Then I will leave you to it,” Waldan backed out.

Rooney logged onto the computer, and jumped through all the security hoops. Then he looked at the camera and said, “I have arrived at Tartarus and met Waldan their Chief Administrator. I am awaiting orders.” He sent the message. Then he set about organizing his “embassy.” High on the agenda was negotiation for a better price on regenerative medicine, medicine that helped those with spinal cord injuries repair the spine and those with missing limbs regenerate them. Genetic tweaks for enhanced longevity were also on the list.

Time passed quickly and when he looked up from his desk, he saw a magnificent sunset. The sky was alight in orange, red, and purple hues. He stood at his window and watched until the sun sank completely below the horizon.

Then walked back to the dining room. A meal had been laid out for him on the buffet. No one else was around. He ate quietly while he picked at his tablet computer. It was going to be a lonely five years. But, he figured, it was a sacrifice he needed to make to accelerate his diplomatic career.

The next morning, he had breakfast alone. When he returned to the office, he found a message from Waldan wondering whether he was ready to negotiate for some trade goods. There was also a message from Captain Garth. He opened Garth’s message.

“Ambassador, have you decided whether you will stay? My ship leaves at 0800 tomorrow. If you want to leave, let me know by 2000 this evening and I will have a Tartarus shuttle bring you up. And, whatever you decide, may God have mercy on your soul.”

Rooney recorded a reply. “Captain Garth, I am going to stay, at least until the next crewed cargo ship arrives in a year. Thank you for delivering me here safe. Smooth sailing.” He sent it.

Then he opened Waldan's message. "May we meet in your office at 1000 hours to discuss trade and production priorities?"

Rooney answered, "See you at 1000."

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By the time Waldan arrived, Rooney had already set out coffee and an assortment of pastries he had brought with him. He felt it was important to extend the little courtesies.

Waldan sat. "Good morning, Ambassador. Suppose you tell me the top three items on your list. Then I will tell you the top three on my list, until we work our way through both lists. How does that sound?"

"Very well," Rooney said, "we would like to triple our order of Propetrall from 900 billion doses to 2.7 trillion doses."

"May I ask why?" Waldon said.

"Published reports indicate it increases lifespan 20%. A drug like that is in high demand."

"You are quoting an old study," Waldan tapped his tablet computer. "The latest research shows it increases lifespan 35%." He turned the tablet so that Rooney could see the article. "We will meet your production target, but we are also going to quadruple the price."

"The old price is fair," Rooney said.

"So is the old production volume. What do you want to do? Do you want more supply or what?"

Rooney did not have to think about it long. He said, "We accept your terms. But I have a question."

"What?"

"What are you going to do with all the extra money? You cannot possibly spend what you are making from pharmaceuticals, mRNA, and genetic material now."

"We are going to buy a planet, something closer to our market," Waldon said. "What is number two on your priority list?"

And so, the negotiations went, back and forth all day long. Waldon got through a tenth of his list. Rooney barely scratched the surface of his list.

Waldan stayed for dinner, then left Rooney alone in the vast and empty embassy complex.

Rooney took a staircase down to the ground floor, at least it was the ground floor on the garden side of the complex, then he tried to find a door leading out into the street. He could not find one. He found another set of stairs and went down another level and searched for the street side door there. He could not find one there either. *Perhaps*, he thought, *the garden is sunken below street level*. He went up to what was called the second floor and searched for a street side door. He found nothing. In fact, it struck him that there were no windows looking out over the street on any level. *Was it a security measure? Or were conditions for the Tartarans so abysmal that they did not want*

embassy staff to see them? In his mind's eye, he imagined a vast rubble strewn landscape stretching to the horizon.

He returned to his office level and poked into two dozen rooms he thought might look out over the city. None of them had outward facing windows. All windows looked over the garden. It was the same on the living quarters level.

Exhausted, he returned to his quarters and checked his messages. There was a farewell message from Captain Garth and a message from Waldan asking whether it would be convenient to resume negotiations at 1000 hours the next day. He said it would.

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The next morning at 1000 Waldan sat down across the table from Rooney, "Good morning, Ambassador. I trust you slept well."

"Fine thank you. And you?" Rooney asked.

"Fine."

"I walked around the embassy last night," Rooney said

"That is good. How did you like it?"

"It is magnificent. But I could not find the front door."

"The front door? What do you mean, the front door?"

"The door that leads out into the city... I assume we are in a city."

"I think you would call this a leafy suburb."

"Can you direct me to the front door?"

"Why?"

"I want to see your leafy suburb," Rooney said.

"That would not be a good idea," Waldan said.

"Why?"

"Security."

"I am willing to take my chances," Rooney said.

Waldan slumped back in his chair like he was exhausted. "The embassy was designed as a completely self-contained complex. There is no front door. There are no side doors. There is no back door. There are no doors to the outside."

"Wow!" Rooney said. "You make it sound like a prison."

"It is not a prison. It is an island of unmatched luxury in a leafy suburb."

"How do you get in, if there is no door?"

"I fly in." Waldan said.

"How? I did not hear any engines."

"It is an electric flyer."

"May I see it?" Rooney asked.

"I am afraid its technology is proprietary. I cannot show it to you. Now, I have answered your questions. May we get back to trade negotiations?"

The two of them negotiated all day again. This time Waldan excused himself from dinner and Rooney ate alone. After dinner, he stood on his balcony looking out over the garden.

At dusk, he saw something move in the distance. Someone was trimming a hedge. He walked out into the hall, down the marble steps to the first floor and walked out into the garden toward where he saw the figure. By the time he got there, the figure was gone. He looked around. A few small clippings had not been swept up. A pair of shears lay under the edge of a bush.

Then he thought, *If Waldan will not let me mix with the population, maybe I can make friends with the gardener.*

He returned to his quarters, watched a video, then went to bed. He had not been in bed more than a couple of hours when he heard some noise. It was coming from the garden. He stepped out onto the balcony and watched. A group of shadowy figures was removing a dead tree in the middle of the garden. A new tree lay on a cart next to it.

He put on some clothes and ran down the stairs, determined to introduce himself to the workers and get to know them, even invite them to dine with him.

When he got to within two hundred meters they scattered; silhouettes that vanished into the night. And on reflection, they looked bulky, more like bears than people. *Bears trained as gardeners, how odd*, he thought. But then this was an odd world.

The next day, trade negotiations resumed. He was beginning to learn Waldan's negotiating quirks. He thought about mentioning the gardeners he saw, but something told him not to. Waldan seemed dead set against his meeting any Tartarans.

Three hours after sundown, Rooney dressed in warm, dark clothes and walked out into the garden. Found the dead tree, dug out of the ground, and its replacement still laying on a cart. He picked a comfortable spot, on a nearby patch of grass, and lay down. He desperately wanted to get to know some of the Tartarans other than Waldan. The more he knew about them the better an ambassador he would be, at least that was his thinking.

He must have dozed off for a few minutes. He was awakened by the snap of a twig. He looked around and saw no one. He listened and heard no one. Then he looked skyward. He could just see the silhouettes of a couple of large birds circling high in the sky over his garden. He lay there for a while watching them and must have fallen asleep again because the next thing he knew, it was dawn.

He returned to his room, showered, changed clothes, and had breakfast alone. He checked his messages as he ate.

When Waldan sat opposite him for the next round of negotiations, Rooney said, "I saw something extraordinary last night."

"What?" Waldan asked matter-of-factly.

"Birds, big ones, flying over the garden."

"What did they look like?"

"It was dark, and they were high up, so I saw little more than their silhouettes. What kind of birds are they?"

"I am the wrong person to ask. I was trained in medicine and microbiology. Anything larger than that," Walden held his thumb and forefinger about a millimeter apart, "is outside my area of expertise."

“Who could I ask about these birds?” Rooney asked.

“I will ask my daughter what they might have been. Now, what is the first item on your list today?”

~

Waldan left after a day of negotiations. Rooney ate dinner alone and he dressed in dark clothes. He anxiously waited for it to get dark again and planned to head into the garden.

When he got down to the first floor. He heard a door open down the hall. He turned to see who it was and he caught a glimpse of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. All he saw was her face peering around a door and one arm. He ran toward her. The door slammed shut in his face. By the time he got there, she was gone. Something told him not to tell Waldan about his encounter.

Over the next week, he caught glimpses of her several times. Once, sleeping in his bed, he dreamed she was standing over him, looking down at him. In his dream, she was a hunchback, the most beautiful hunchback he had ever seen. Somehow, he could not shake the feeling that it was not a dream.

Then one night, as she looked at him from behind a half-opened door, he held her gaze.

“Would you care to join me for breakfast tomorrow morning?” Rooney said. “I do not care if you are a hunchback. I just want to talk to you. I want to be your friend.” Then he turned and walked away.

The next day, halfway through breakfast, she peeked around the door.

“Come in; sit; eat.” Rooney motioned her to a chair.

She stepped into the room. Her hunchback was every bit as large as Waldan’s it came out of her back and extended up higher than her head.

“My name is Michael Rooney said. “What is yours?”

“Rebecca.”

“Rebecca what?”

“Rebecca of the 9th Generation of the House of David, Seth Branch, Lambda Division.”

“Wow! Glad to meet you,” Rooney said. “How do you fit into all this?” He twirled his finger in the air.”

“I am Waldan’s daughter. I am also a medical doctor and I hold Ph.D.’s in genetics, and computational genetics.”

“Double wow!” Rooney said. “What are computational genetics?”

“It predicts the effects of genetic changes four or five generations down the line.”

“That is way over my head. Maybe you will explain it to me one day,” Rooney said. “What would you like for breakfast?” He extended his hand toward the seat next to him again.

How breathtakingly beautiful she would be, Rooney thought, if it were not for her hideous hump. “You father does not want me to meet any of your people. Why do you think that is?”

“He believes you and the other children of Earth are violent, bad tempered, judgmental, prejudiced, disease carrying, warmongers.”

“But what does he really think?” Rooney asked. “Don’t sugar coat it.”

“You must admit,” Rebecca said, “your history confirms his every belief.”

“But you and every person on this planet are descended from the same human stock.”

“But we have evolved,” she said. “You haven’t.” She stabbed a thin slice of something on her plate and slid it into her mouth. And then she smiled as if to underline her assessment of humans.

“You have evolved in what way?” Rooney buttered a slice of the best rye toast he ever tasted.

“We have given up hate and greed and violence in favor of science and medicine and art and music.” She had generous helpings of eggs, sausage, and toast. It surprised him because she was relatively slender.

She saw him watching her eat, “I burn a lot of calories.”

“Doing computational genetics?”

“No,” her voice was high and light, “doing other things.”

“Are you involved in the trade negotiations at all?”

“Only to the extent that I keep my father updated on all the latest science.” She wiped the corners of her mouth with her napkin and set it aside. “Thank you for breakfast. Please do not tell my father we talked. He would not like it.”

“As you wish. Will I see you again?”

“Absolutely,” and with that she slipped out the door.

Waldan was waiting for him when Rooney walked into his office. “Whose turn is it to discuss an item?”

“I have something you might be interested in,” Waldan said. “It is a new drug called Propetramax. It extends life expectancy about sixty percent. We are prepared to offer you one million doses at the new price of Propetrall.”

“What is the catch?” Rooney asked.

“After the first million doses, the price will be twice the new price of Propetrall.”

“That is outrageous!” Rooney said.

“People want to live. They will pay.”

“And you have a planet to buy.”

“That is right,” Waldan smiled.

“Did you ask about the large birds I saw?”

“I am sorry,” Waldan said, “It must have slipped my mind.”

“Nothing slips by you Waldan, nothing.”

Trade negotiations broke at noon. Waldan had lunch with Rooney in the dining room. The two of them sat at a table designed for twenty.

After lunch, Waldan said, “I think we have done enough trading for a day. I must check in with some of our lab folks. Let’s pick up negotiations tomorrow, say 1000 hours?”

“Perfect,” Rooney said.

~

That night after dinner, Rooney turned out his bedroom lights. He stood in the dark looking out over the embassy garden. In the distance, he saw giant birds flocking in the air, twisting, and turning in a fascinating ballet.

He heard a noise behind him. Rebecca appeared at his bedroom door.

“Rebecca, what are you doing here?” he asked.

She extended her hand toward him. “If I tell you a secret, do you promise not to tell my father or any other children of Earth?”

“I promise,” he took her hand.

She led him to a part of the embassy he had not yet explored, a terrace that looked out over the garden. Two figures were standing there in the dark. They had huge humps on their backs. “This is Gabriel and Sarah.”

Except for his hump, Gabriel was handsome as any Greek statue. Sarah had classical Greek features as well. She too had an enormous disfiguring hump on her back.

“If I show you something,” Rebecca said, “do you promise not to tell anyone, ever?”

“I promise,” Rooney said.

“Show him,” Rebecca said.

Sarah unzipped the covering over Gabriel’s hump, revealing huge feathered wings.

Gabriel shook them a little and extended them out for a wingspan of nearly eight meters. Gabriel then unzipped the covering over Sarah’s hump exposing her wings.

Rooney was flabbergasted. “Wings? Can you... can you fly?”

“Of course,” Gabriel flapped his wings ever so slightly and he ascended into the air. Sarah followed his lead. They seemed to float up to the rail around the terrace and land there.

Then Rebecca took a covering off her hump exposing her wings. “Would you like to fly with us?” she asked.

Rooney shrugged, “I haven’t got any wings.”

Gabriel pulled a harness out of a closet. “Put this on. Press the wrist control,” he showed him, “and it will inflate a helium ballon that will hold you aloft. Compressed air jets will give you a little maneuvering capability, but it will not be like flying.”

Rooney harnessed up.

Rebecca worked the wrist control on Rooney’s flying harness and he floated into the air. Rebecca, Gabriel, and Sarah flew beside him. They did twists, and curls and loops. Gabriel and Sarah even embraced each other in midair. He could not do any of those things, but the harness allowed him to watch at close range. It was wonderful.

After an hour of playing in the sky, Rebecca guided Rooney back down to the terrace. “Remember Michael, you promised not to tell anyone our secret. The children of Earth would not understand. They would think us freaks. They might even fear us. Better they should think of us as poor deformed hunchbacks.”

“I understand,” Rooney said. “Your secret is safe with me.”

~

The next day, in Rooney's office. Waldan asked. "Shall we start with your list or mine?"

"The first thing on my list," Rooney said, "is to have a dinner party for yourself and eighteen others. I want to get to know the people of Tartarus."

"I have told you before, that is impossible."

"I never liked the word impossible," Rooney said. "Let's turn to the first thing on your list then."

Waldan looked at him as if to ask why he wanted to have a dinner party, but instead he got back to business. "We have identified six common diseases that can be cured on a permanent basis with gene editing. We will provide you with the genetic code, the medical protocols, and everything else needed to make these gene edits. In return, we want 90% of whatever your medical people charge."

"90%?" Rooney said. "Unless our medical people can make a profit off it, they will not use it at all, no matter how good it is. On behalf of our medical establishment, I am prepared to offer a 35% royalty for your nostrums."

"We will take 80%," Waldan said.

"You may have 40%," Rooney said.

"Can we agree on 50%?"

"Done," Rooney said. "We will give you a 50% royalty."

~

That night, after dinner, Rooney stood alone in his room with the lights out overlooking the embassy garden.

Rebecca appeared again, lit only by pale moonlight. She was more gorgeous than ever. This time, her wings were not wrapped tight in a covering that made her look like a hunchback. They extended freely from her back; her feathers took on a luminescent glow.

"Rebecca," he held his arms out toward her.

She came to him.

He wrapped his arms around her.

She wrapped her wings around him.

They held each other for a long moment before they kissed.

It was a kiss Rooney felt down to his toes. For an instant he felt like he was melting into her.

She wrapped her wings around him. "Do you want to fly?" she asked sweetly. "Gabriel and Sarah are waiting for us on the terrace."

"Yes, please. I want to fly."

~

They met Gabriel and Sarah on the terrace. Gabriel helped Rooney put on the flying harness and the four of them took off.

They floated high above the embassy compound, then floated out over the surrounding city to the shore, across a moonlit beach and out to sea. It was heady, intoxicating stuff, to slip the surly bonds of Tartarus and touch the face of God. But, was he flying with gods?

A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. Were these really children of Earth who, with clever gene modification grew wings? Or, were they really another specie, an alien race who simply looked, spoke, and acted like humans save for their wings? Or, were they the angels of the Old Testament?

If they were an alien species, how could he possibly know how they thought, how they felt, and how they would act? And if they were children of Earth, and they had so extensively modified their genome that they had wings, were they still human? And if they were no longer human, how could he possibly know how they would think, feel, and act? He had to find out.

Once they landed, Rooney said, “Rebecca, Gabriel, Sarah, I want to get to know you and your people better. I would like to invite them to a dinner party.”

“My father will not like it. He will not permit it,” Rebecca said.

“I will not tell him. It is always better to act first and apologize later, if necessary, rather than ask permission and be denied.”

“Would you have us with our wings unbound as we are now, or tucked in and covered the way Waldan meets with you?”

“I want you and your friends to be as comfortable as possible. So, wings out.”

“I have seen the embassy dining room,” Gabriel said. “You are going to have to remove half the chairs so there is room for our wings.”

“Done,” Rooney said.

“That means you can invite six people in addition to ourselves,” Gabriel said.

“Shall we have dinner say, the day after tomorrow?” Rooney asked.

“Of course.”

~

Rebecca helped him prepare. He had no idea what she and her friends liked to eat or drink so he let her guide him. He added a few touches to the menu himself like coffee, pumpkin pie, and cheesecake, all of which he brought with him from Coradin. He thought about providing them with brandy and cocktails, but then thought, *is drunk flying a good idea?* He would test their tolerance for alcohol another day.

The evening of the dinner, Rebecca, Gabriel, Sarah, and their friends flew in, landed on the balcony outside the dining room and pulled their wings in behind them.

Rebecca introduced them as they came in. They were all medical doctors, scientists, and researchers. They fell into science-speak almost without thinking and Rooney stopped them now and then to ask questions. They were eager to explain their work and research.

He asked about their culture, habits, arts, and what they did in their spare time. He found that more than half the population were involved in some aspect of medicine whether it be production or medical research. The other half of the population provided food, shelter, and life’s little comforts to those in the medical arts.

They had some art, not much, and little music. Dancing was unknown. They did have a little theater and a whole cadre of storytellers.

Flying was mostly recreational. People movers were used on the surface, though there was a wide variety of flying machines.

“How did you like flying?” Gabriel asked him. “To slip the surly bonds of Tartarus and touch the face of God.”

“It was wonderful,” Rooney said.

“What do you think of this Son of Earth?” Gabriel asked Rebecca.

“He is a good kisser for a flightless bird,” Rebecca said.

“How did you like the pumpkin pie?” Rooney asked Sarah.

She leaned across the table and pointed with a fork, “Your pumpkin pie with whipped cream was a revelation. Do your people eat pumpkin pie all the time?”

“Mostly during holidays, but I am glad you enjoyed it. Does anyone have anything to say about the cheesecake?”

“My name is Daniel,” one of Rebecca’s friends said. “While I was letting a forkful of cheesecake melt in my mouth, I closed my eyes and I felt like I was floating.”

“A lot of people get that feeling from cheesecake,” Rooney said.

There was a flapping sound on the balcony outside the dining room. All eyes turned toward it.

A winged person, a head taller than any of the others stepped into the dining room.

“Roland,” Rebecca asked. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” he asked her in a deep baritone voice.

Roland was possibly the handsomest man Rooney had ever seen.

“Do you want to introduce me to your friend?” Rooney asked Rebecca.

“Come with me,” Roland extended his hand toward Rebecca.

“No,” she said.

“I am not asking you,” Roland said. “Come!” he took a step toward her and grabbed her hand.

Rooney stepped close to Roland and looked into his eyes. “Let her go,” he said in a quiet, firm voice. “She does not want to go.”

“And what are you going to do, little man?” Roland shoved Rooney with his hand as he spread his wings out nine meters.

“It is not polite to push people,” Rooney said quietly, “or to grab them.”

Roland held Rebecca’s wrist with one hand, and pushed Rooney again with his other hand.

Without breaking eye contact with Roland, Rooney wrapped his hand around the hand Roland was using to hold Rebecca. Then he squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed. Earth’s gravity was three times that of Tartarus, so Rooney’s hands, bones and muscles evolved to work in that higher gravity. Roland’s muscles were relatively weak by comparison.

It was not long before Roland released his grip on Rebecca.

“All right! All right!” Roland said. “Stop! It hurts!”

Rooney released his grip. “I could have torn your arm out of its socket, if I wanted to,” Rooney said. Of course, it was a lie, but a good lie none the less. “I think you should leave now.” Rooney pointed to the dining room balcony.”

“Rebecca,” Roland said, “don’t listen to this man.” He turned to the others at the party, “Do not listen to this man! The flightless Sons of Earth cannot be trusted.” Then he walked out onto the balcony and flew away.

“He seemed angry,” Rooney said to Rebecca.

“He is afraid for me.”

“Afraid of what? Of me?”

“Tell him,” Sarah said.

“Did my father tell you why you are the only person in this vast embassy complex?”

“He said some disease pathogen escaped one of your labs killed nearly two hundred of the ambassador’s staff.”

“Did he tell you where that pathogen came from?”

“No. Not directly,” Rooney said. “He just said it escaped from one of your labs.”

“That pathogen was brought to Tartarus by a member of the embassy staff. We were analyzing it, trying to figure out how to cure it when it escaped and killed nearly ten percent of our population. Tartarus and Coradin almost fought a nuclear war over it. So, despite that fact the we do trillions in medical trade, there is still a great deal of suspicion between the Sons of Earth and the Daughters of Tartarus.”

The dinner party ended on that somber note. The guests, including Rebecca, walked out onto the balcony and flew away.

Rooney left the dining room. It was a mess of dishes and left over food, though not a single crumb of cheesecake remained. He would clean it up in the morning. When he got to his quarters, he sent a message to Waldan pushing back trade negotiations until 1300 hours. Then he crashed in bed.

The next morning, he expected to have to clean up the dining room. But when he arrived, the dining room was immaculate. He ordered coffee, eggs, and scrapple and sat down at breakfast to review his messages. Several of the prior evening’s guests sent thank you notes. Waldan agreed to push back the negotiation start time.

Roland sent a message to Rooney telling him to keep away from Rebecca. That was just not going to happen. In the short time he had known her, she had... *What?* He groped for words. All he knew was that she took his breath away when she was with him and he ached when she was not with him. Thoughts about when he would see her next were never far away.

~

Waldan appeared in Rooney’s office at the appointed hour and sat across the partner’s desk where they did their negotiations. “I heard you had some people over last night.”

“A few,” Rooney said.

“Did you learn anything?”

“The folks I met were all very pleasant, very interesting. Very smart; a lot smarter than me. I would like to get to know them better.”

“Does that include Roland?”

“Yes, even Roland. Why?”

“He is the one who tipped me off that you had a dinner party last night.”

“And he did that because?” Rooney asked.

“He is sweet on my girl,” Waldan said. “He and Rebecca have been seeing each other for a while now.”

“And?” Rooney asked. “Is there an “and” in there somewhere?”

“Roland is a bit of a bully. I don’t think he likes the friendship you have with my daughter. You know it is an impossible relationship, don’t you?”

“I am not going to have any trouble with Roland. Trust me. What was Polonius’ advice to his son Laertes in *Hamlet*? Avoid getting into a quarrel but once in it, conduct yourself so that those opposed may beware of you. And what makes you think our relationship, whatever that turns out to be, is impossible?”

“You have been warned,” Waldan said. “What is the first item on today’s trade list?”

~

Rooney wanted to spend every minute with Rebecca but he could not. His work was not keeping them apart; it was hers. She was deeply immersed in several research projects and since medical research was the lifeblood of the Tartarus economy, she could not neglect her duties. His longing to be with Rebecca made his loneliness more intense when she was not around. He busied himself by exploring the vast embassy complex.

Eventually, he found a tunnel leading from the garden out under the embassy to the surrounding city. It was, as Waldan said, a green and leafy suburb. The street that the tunnel exited onto was wide and clean. High walls surrounded each property along the street and provided privacy. Most houses were two and three stories and could be seen above the walls. Large trees provided shade within the sweet embrace of those walls.

A dozen or so Tartarans passed by as he stood there. Most pointed at him. A few made rude comments. One teenager referred to him as a penguin, another referred to him as an ostrich, another referred to him as a wingless wonder. Mothers shielded the eyes of their winged children from the sight of a wingless man. Suddenly, he felt naked.

Ronney retreated inside the tunnel. It was getting dark. He cut through the garden and walked back to his office. Usually, lights came on the moment he entered a room or hallway and shut themselves off after he left. For some reason, the lights were not working. Thought it was dusk, there was still enough light for him to see where he was going.

He stepped into his office.

A shadowy figure stepped up behind him and cracked him over the back with a wooden club. The blow would have been hard enough to kill most Tartarans.

It bounced off Rooney. He turned to the shadow. “What the hell are you doing? That hurts like hell!”

The shadowy figure raised the club again, ready to strike the fatal blow.

Rooney grabbed the hand holding the club and yanked the weapon from the intruder's hand.

There was just enough light for Rooney to recognize his attacker. It was Roland!
"What the hell do you think you are doing?"

"Stay away from Rebecca!" He stepped back a little.

Rooney advanced on him even though Roland was half a head taller than him. He pushed Roland hard against the wall and held him there with one hand. He put his other hand around Roland's throat and squeezed a little. Roland squirmed and tried to break Rooney's grip.

Rooney tightened his grip on Roland's throat. "I could have you brought up on charges for this. Or I could take more direct action and simply bury you in my garden. No one would ever know you were here. You would just vanish, puff! But I am not going to do either. I am going to give you one chance. I am going to turn the other cheek, as they say. But I am not going to turn the other cheek seven times seventy or even twice. If you ever attack me again, I will finish you," Rooney tightened his grip around Roland's neck to the point where he could neither speak nor breathe. "Blink if you understand."

Roland started blinking like crazy.

Rooney released him and picked up the club with a tissue so as not to disturb Roland's fingerprints or DNA.

What might have been a fatal blow on earth, was simply painful and annoying on Tartarus. The atmosphere was so dense, swinging a club was like swinging a club underwater. The other thing Roland had not thought about was that Rooney, growing up and living on a planet with three times the gravity of Tartarus, developed denser and stronger tissue than the Tartarans.

"Get out of here, and don't come back," Rooney said.

Roland slinked away into the growing shadows and vanished.

Rooney wondered whether he should tell Rebecca about the incident. But when they were together, he thought about nothing but her. He wrapped her in all the love he could give. She wrapped him in her wings. They laughed together; they made love together.

He wanted to see Tartarus beyond the walls of the embassy. She took him to her favorite restaurants. Mostly the experience was good. Often the Tartans stared at him. Sometimes they made cruel jokes behind his back, calling him disfigured because he had no wings. The cracks about being a penguin, an ostrich or a flightless bird could be heard among the whispers.

~

"If you are descendants of the human race," Rooney asked Rebecca, "how did you evolve wings?"

"Leonardo da Vinci dreamed of human powered flight several millennia ago. The problem was that human muscles could not generate the force needed to achieve lift. You can see our atmosphere is several times thicker than that on more earth-like planets and

you can feel our gravity is a third of their gravity. After doing some simple calculations, it was shown that human powered flight was possible here. It was not long before mechanical wings appeared and soon, human powered flight became common. That was five hundred years ago. You know our medical and genetic research has enabled us to regrow missing limbs. About three hundred years ago, a scientist asked whether it was possible to grow wings. It was not long before he worked out the genetics and within a short period of time almost everyone opted to grow wings. Now the instructions for wings are encoded in our sperm and eggs so wings begin to develop in utero. Most children can fly by the age of four.”

“Amazing,” Rooney said. “What an amazing people you are. What an amazing person you are.”

“Would you like to try the mechanical wings we used for our first flights?”

“Are they still around?”

“I believe ambassador Brooks had a set made and they are somewhere here in the embassy, if we can find them.”

They searched and searched and finally found them. Rooney tried them on. They were awkward but they got him airborne, at least a little. Over the following weeks he learned controlled flight. Still, Rebecca and her friends teased him by flying circles around him.

The more comfortable Rooney became flying, the angrier Roland became. He realized confronting Rooney head-on was not going to work so he organized protests against the mock pigeon, Rooney, the pigeon who pretends to fly.

“What are you going to do?” Rebecca asked.

“In three years, my tour will be up. Come with me. When I return home, I can have anything I want.”

“I cannot.”

“Why? I cannot stay here,” Rooney said. “I am a handicapped person. A person to be pitied at best, a freak to your people at worst.”

“And if I returned with you to one of the earth-like planets I would be a freak. With their thin atmospheres and high gravity, I couldn’t fly. I like flying. It is as natural for me as walking or breathing. If you loved me, you would not ask me to make such a sacrifice.”

“I love you with all of my heart and all of my soul, but I just do not know what to do.”

“Ask my father. He will know what to do,” Rebecca said.

~

So, Rooney met with Waldan. “Sir, I love your daughter with all my heart and all my soul and I want to be with her. But I cannot live here. I am an outsider, a handicapped freak by your standards. I want her to come to one of the earth-like planets with me.”

“How does she feel about that?” Waldan asked.

“She is afraid she would be a freak in my world and that she would have to give up flying.”

“If you really loved her, how could you ask her to give up something she loves so much?”

“What are we going to do?” Rooney asked.

“It will take three years for your replacement to get here, so the powers that be are probably recruiting someone to replace you right now. Please do not ask Rebecca to leave with you. Even if she goes, it will break her heart and sooner or later she will resent you for forcing her to choose between you and everything she loves.

“But if you stay here, you must be prepared to always be the outsider. The fact that you have mastered mechanical wings will help with some of my people but most will always consider you a penguin, an ostrich, a flightless bird, a mock pigeon.”

“You are not giving me any answers,” Rooney whined.

“Maybe the answer is for you must return to your people and for her to remain here with her people. You will always have these memories to cherish.”

~

The next day, Rooney got a message from Coradin.

“We would like you to extend your appointment on Tartarus for another three years. However, if you decline, we must select someone and send them on their way in the next ninety days. Let us know what you decide.”

~

Rooney and Rebecca talked about it, prayed about it, and cried about it and finally it was time to decide.

Rooney composed a message. Rebecca and Waldan were in the room when he recorded it.

“Ambassador, I would like to be appointed the permanent ambassador to Tartarans. It seems that while I was here, I caught a case of hunchback, he pointed to a large hump sticking up from his back. These are the only people in the universe who can treat it.”

Rooney ended the transmission and turned to Rebecca. “What do you think?”

She took the covering off his back. “Your wing implants are healing nicely. You should be able to fly in two weeks.”

THE END

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