

**Lázaro y Antonio**  
by Marta Randall

*In our January issue this year, Marta Randall made her return to our pages with a tale of magic realism. Now she takes us into space—specifically, one little nook of it known as the Curve....*

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**It starts**

Sure Lázaro was broke, but he still wasn't interested in rolling drunks, not even rich belligerent Academy *chilito* drunks. This one had shown up last night with some *pendejo* brotherhood, too many to take on, but tonight he was alone and still a dick so Lázaro had no qualms about holding Antonio's new foxleather jacket while Antonio whacked the guy's fright-coifed blond head, just precisely so. The kid fell into the alley, all bonelessness and fat, and Antonio had his wallet out and popped his com and wasted the chip, all within thirty seconds. Lázaro observed with admiration: it was always a pleasure to watch a master at work. A couple of minutes after the kid had stepped into the alley to take a leak, Antonio and Lázaro strolled out together, Antonio wriggling his shoulders a little to seat the jacket and smoothing back his black hair. Lázaro admired that, too.

The Curve was quiet for a Friday night. Paychecks had come out last week and would come again next week, but those who had money tonight were not the kind to waste it on the bars and bitches in the Port's seedy arc. The solid citizens were all at home Northside, with their families and their big screens and their hot dinners. The *chilito* wasn't an exception, he was a tourist, which was why Antonio felt free to relieve him of his cash and com. Tourists were warned to stay away from the Curve, warned that the spaceport cops wouldn't protect them once they left the port by the Southside gate. There was always someone who couldn't resist the challenge. The ones who could take care of themselves had a good time and no harm done, but dicks like this one were easy pickings.

"So, how much he had?" Lázaro asked.

Antonio shrugged. "Dunno, bro. We get to Celia's, I'll tell you. Not gonna paw it out here. What, you some kinda tard?"

"Hell no," Lázaro said, but his outrage was faked. He was some kinda tard and he usually admitted it. It made life easier.

Celia's was almost empty. Two old birds sat at the bar, staring into their glasses and not saying much. Krumholz, who owned Celia's, was in a generous mood and had cranked up the sound so everyone could enjoy his beloved ancient techno. Lázaro didn't like it because he couldn't follow the melodies, but Krumholz was always good for a drink and a place to hang out for a few hours without being hassled. Now Lázaro followed Antonio to a booth near the back. Krumholz came

over and slapped at the table with his rag.

“You guys freeloading again?” he demanded.

“No, man, we got scratch,” Antonio said with lazy confidence. “I wanna beer, and another for my ‘ssociate.”

Krumholz snorted but went back to the bar. Antonio waited until he came back with the drinks, collected a five, and left. Each took a ritual sip of beer before Antonio slid the wallet onto the table. The two men regarded it with approval. It was a nice one, made of some fine-grained leather, probably real, tanned a pleasant light brown with fancy designs burned into it along the edges and a complicated glyph on the front. Most tourists just used paper folds from the change houses: no thumbs allowed on the Curve. This guy either traveled a lot or wanted people to think he did. Lázaro tapped the wallet and, when Antonio didn’t object, touched it again.

“Whazzat?” he said.

“It’s the, what you call it, the picto for some fancy-ass school off near the Hub.” Antonio used one fingernail to flip the wallet open. Sheaves of plastic decorated the insides under the lip of the billfold. Here’s the thing about plastic and chips: a chip’s this bitty thing and kinda private, but plastic, hell, you can flash that around and impress everyone you can get to look at you. Antonio snorted. Lázaro knew that Antonio had plenty of plastic himself and wasn’t dazzled by this lot.

When Antonio opened the billfold, he cursed with surprise and jerked his hand back.

“Yeah? What?” Lázaro whispered, leaning away from the table.

Antonio lifted the lip of the billfold again and started sliding out the bills. There were a lot of them, more than either man had ever seen in one place. Lázaro whistled under his breath.

“*Hijo de la madre*, man,” he breathed. “You think they’re real?”

Antonio dropped a napkin over them. “How’n hell do I know?” he muttered, and stuck his fingers in the billfold again. This time he brought out scraps of paper. Sales receipts, tickets, notes in a language neither man recognized. The last one held a series of numbers. Lázaro squinted at the paper and muttered the numbers. “One one two three five eight one three two one three four five five eight nine.” He looked up. “Mean anythin’ to you?”

Antonio shook his head.

Lázaro thought for a long moment. The numbers were almost familiar, like voices so far away that you can’t understand them. He shook his own head. “You gonna gimme some of the cash, man? I mean, I held your coat and all.”

“Sure, what you take me for?” Antonio’s fingers got busy under the napkin. He brought his hand out, palm down, and slid it over to Lázaro. The money moved from Antonio’s palm to Lázaro’s with the ease of long practice. Lázaro peeked at the bills and grinned and put them in his pocket, the inside one right over his hip.

A few minutes later they finished their drinks. Antonio palmed the bills and plastic into his jacket pocket and left the paper scraps on the table. When his back was turned, Lázaro scooped them up and tucked them away. He didn’t know why.

At the corner, before they parted, Antonio dropped the wallet into a trash mouth. The mouth gargled for a second, flashed, and the wallet was gone. Then they hit each other’s shoulders in farewell and went their separate ways.

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### **One one two three five eight**

Lázaro sat at the table in his squat and counted over the bills again. There were enough to last for a couple of months, if he was careful, didn’t binge, made his food instead of buying it—hell, he could even pay his rent ahead and still have some cash left over for a new jacket, maybe foxleather like Antonio’s. It was getting cold out there.

Or he could blow the whole thing in a week, roistering along the Curve like any other fool with a pocket full of cash and enough whiskey and drugs in him to make sure that he didn’t have a care in the world, or didn’t recognize them. He grinned, thinking about that and about the cathouse above Papa Carlisle’s. It didn’t matter that he’d spend a week in lockup, jonesing until the last of the drugs washed out of him and left him back in the pale beige world with nothing in his pockets and not even the memories of the drunk to sustain him. A good drunk was its own reward.

He had piled the paper scraps beside the money and now he went through them again. The lettering looked like it ought to be familiar but it just barely wasn’t, like something seen through wavy glass. The only numbers were on the scrap that he had read. They were hand-written and strung together to form one long chain. The next numbers in the sequence were 144233 but Lázaro didn’t know why he knew that. It felt like how it felt when old garbage came up from the back of his brain, stuff he’d rather not have, from a life that he couldn’t remember. He pushed the paper around with his forefinger. Too many numbers to be a passkey. Maybe some form of ID or an account number. He could pay for time on public access and search, but he wouldn’t get anything useful although he didn’t know why he knew that.

He pondered this as he broke off some soup and nuked it. This being the first day of his current riches, he had determined to stretch it out as long as he could before he fell, as he knew he inevitably would, into the delirium of the Curve. It bothered him that the number sequence wasn’t just gibberish, it bothered him that he couldn’t let it go. He pushed the numbers out of his head and thought about the

plastic Antonio had palmed but wouldn't use. Plastic was trash but it caused trouble. Antonio knew what to do with it; by now the plastic was probably out-system somewhere, making mischief in places that Antonio and Lázaro and even the drunk kid had never been.

The soup was pretty good. He dunked the heel of a bread loaf into it and counted out the bills again. One one two three five eight one three ... maybe the numbers didn't mean anything alone but pointed to something else. Like, maybe, the next numbers in the sequence. Or pointed to a pattern. Images grew into his consciousness, patterns starting and growing and turning on themselves to the rhythm of almost but not quite 1.618 from the zero square where you started to the one square to the two square to the three square to the five square to the eight square and on and on through the matrices of the Continuum, each square turning into itself to the next square in a dance folding and doubling until you reach, you reach, you reach....

Damn, Lázaro thought. He grabbed up the paper scraps and shoved them into his ancient trash mouth. Nothing happened. He hit it on the side and finally it grunted and flashed, and the papers whooshed into gray ash and disappeared. Lázaro returned to the table, grabbed another hunk of stale bread, and slammed it into the soup. Drops of broth scattered over the table, balling up in the accumulated dust.

Screw all of it. He'd spend the money on the biggest, loudest, longest drunk anybody in the Curve had ever had. Yeah. As soon as he cooped out a bit so he'd be fresh and ready for action. He could start at Papa Carlisle's and work his way up one side of the Curve and down the other, and end up at Papa's again but upstairs this time. Or he could start upstairs at Papa's and snag him a honey and have some company up and down the Curve. Yeah. Yeah, that.

He pushed the soup bowl aside, where it settled against a growing collection of crusted plates and crawling green food wrappers, and rolled onto his shelf. Tomorrow. Early. Up one side and down the other. That would make all this damned clarity go away.

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### **Domes, bubbles, and arcs**

First, the Port dome's not really a dome, it's an annulus but everybody calls it a "dome" so what the hell. The top's open and the sides only come up about a thousand meters because the designers figured that was enough but of course it wasn't. So the ships go in and the ships come out, and the gas and garbage spills into the Port and down the outsides, too, like this thick crap soup. The Port dome's about half a klick thick and inside are offices and subways and hotels and all the stuff you need to run a good respectable Port, but it isn't enough space. It never is. You'd think they could've figured that out but they never do.

So after the Port dome went up they built this lean-to partial dome that tilts up

against the Port dome like a crescent cupping a bigger arc: the Curve. It was supposed to be just warehouses and megas, not living space, so they didn't attach it to the Port dome very well and now the Curve pulls away from the Port dome a little more every year, and a little more gas and garbage falls into the Curve but nobody seems to give a damn.

Northside, there's the Bubbles with the residentials and parks and stores and crap like that. Inside the Port dome there's a whole separate dome called the Island that was management and politics before the plague came. You can forget about all that. This story isn't about the Bubbles or the Island or the plague, it's just about Lázaro and Antonio and the Curve. Oh yeah, and it's about Jane, too, a little bit.

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## **Jane**

The next morning he wasn't drunk or hung over which was kind of too bad because it meant he could see okay. Papa Carlisle's crowded up against an edge of the Curve, next to where the port dome came down into the dirt and under where the arc of the Curve dome lay up against the bigger dome but not quite, so weather crept in. Today there was bright, sunny weather falling through the dome joins, and that was too bad too because Papa Carlisle's didn't do well in sunny weather. It shabbied up all the scales and feathers.

Lázaro came through the front shimmer. Papa was up already, wearing a face ferocious in its cheerfulness until he saw Lázaro and the cheerfulness fell away, as did the extravagant mustache. Papa turned back to its card game and turned her sweet, sexy face into the usual mirror.

"Hey," Lázaro said, his feelings hurt. "I got scratch."

Papa turned back to him. The flat mirror face grew one eyebrow, which rose into an arch. "Yes?" Papa said. "Where did you find money, you useless junk-diver? Were you relieving inebriated personages of their superfluity of cash?" Papa hadn't grown a mouth, so the words came out of the air behind it.

Lázaro squirmed. "Not me," he said, clinging to the half-truth. "Look, I got scratch and I wanna spend it, maybe with ... with ... who you got today you can rent to me? Not too shaggy," he added with haste. "I don't want be seen with no skant."

Papa waved this away. "Today I am honored by the presence of Mistress Anastasia of the Fourteen Mysteries, the lovely and talented Stephen Comelightly, and—" Papa paused. "And—we can call her Jane."

"Jane," Lázaro breathed. "Jane."

The mirror grew lips, which smiled and shouted, "Jane, darling. Descend."

"Wait," Lázaro said, panicked. "I ain't got that much scratch, I mean, I gotta save I ain't paid up my rent and—"

And by then it was too late, because a brand-new Jane was there and smiling at him as though she knew that he did so have that much scratch and that she scared him pale and that it didn't matter because, after all, she was Jane and they had been married for twenty years and he still loved her like fury even though he couldn't quite remember anything else about her. But Jane did that to you, had always done that even way back when he was a—was a—was a what? He almost had it for a minute before it pixelated and was gone, leaving just Jane.

"Children," Papa said, smoothing a mustache that grew somewhere under her tilted eyebrow and beside his still-smiling lips. "Go."

They went.

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### **You dance a box**

By noon he found himself telling her all about it. They sat over a plate of spaghetti with meatballs in the back room at Giancarlo's, sharing a fork and a beer and a glass of wine which mostly Jane drank, and he told her about Antonio and the rude drunk Academy asshole and the money and

"...three five eight one three two one three four," he whispered.

Jane's pretty eyes went wide. "The Fibonacci sequence," she said, and he nodded because of course that is what it was. "A space grid?"

"I dunno. Maybe. Yeah." Lázaro looked at her. "Jane? Why do I know that?"

"I don't know," she said, touching his hand. "I just met you this morning, remember? But that's what it is, yeah? I mean, launch's zero and you follow the numbers until somehow you're off into the Continuum, zero one one two three five eight thirteen twenty-one ... don't need to be a space jock to know that."

"I ain't just no space jock," he muttered. She touched his hand again.

"Of course you're not, Lázaro. Of course not."

That's when Antonio came in, waving his flash and wearing his foxleather jacket over his shoulders, in that suave way he had. Lázaro waved at him. Antonio looked over the bar along the side wall and the tables in front of it, already crowded with tourists and spacers and a couple townies come to the Curve for rough trade along with their lunch. He had that lazy picking-and-choosing look on his face. Lázaro waved harder and for a moment it looked like Antonio was gonna ignore him before he saw Jane and came over like she was reeling him in.

Antonio got all smoothly and snakely and put his ass down on the bench beside Jane so she had to scootch over but she was smiling because that's what Jane was, a whore, and whores give people what people want. Lázaro didn't mind.

While Antonio sweet-talked Jane, some spacers at a table near the bar made big juhla, yelling and slamming mugs on the table where they flashed out so the beer jumped into the air all on its lone. Lázaro liked it when they did that. He watched and finished off another beer himself. By now he was getting fuzzy around the edges and so was the world. One more and he'd be flying, so he ordered it and downed it and when he looked across the table he saw that Jane and Antonio had disappeared somewhere. Anything Jane made while away from Papa's was hers and Lázaro didn't begrudge her a little walking-around money. Besides, by then the flying was happening, the backwards and forwards inside his head matching the backwards and forwards inside his mind. All the comforting fuzziness came back like he lived in a world that he couldn't just quite almost touch, but it was okay now because he was backwards and forwards and flying and he didn't care.

So he let himself fly over to the spacers's table and took a chair and slid it up between a couple of them and waved his hand at the barkeep and waved at the table to order another round. The barkeep blinked and buzzed and the spacers looked at each other and moved over for him.

Lázaro took a deep, happy breath. "*Yo soy un Fibs,*" he announced.

"The hell," said the spacer with captain's bars, but she said it grinning. "No way you ain't no Fibs, knocker."

"*Te lo juro,*" Lázaro said. The waitress floated a tray full of drinks over and everybody grabbed. Lázaro stuck a bunch of bills in the waitress's navel, which went green. He liked doing that. "You start at zero and you dance a box," he said with authority. "Then you dance a box, then you dance a box, then you dance a box until you're solid gone. Whoof! Just like that!"

The captain laughed. "You are so fulla shit," she said. She lifted her drink to him. "*Danke.*"

The table had finished drying itself by now, so Lázaro, who was about to illustrate by drawing boxes on the tabletop with beer, instead just ran his index finger in an imaginary square, joined to a square, joined to a square.

"It's the numbers," he told them. "It's the numbers and dancing, numbers to boxes to places to time to something, something I don't remember ... but I remember the numbers. Except," he said, compelled by an engineered honesty, "I don't know how to use it anymore but I remember I did use it, but then I stop remembering it at all."

"*Skitte,*" one of the spacers said with cheerful contempt, and they all went back to yelling and drinking. The numbers fell out of Lázaro's head and he was happy to sit with them, like he belonged at the table, like he was still a Fibs and the yelling and drinking were home somehow, except they weren't.

"Hey, Fibs, we're dry," one of the spacers shouted to him. Lázaro started to

raise his arm but somebody put a hand on his wrist and stopped him. He looked up and back at Antonio and Jane. Antonio always was kinda fast and here he was done and his hair combed back and bein' his buddy. That Antonio didn't miss a thing.

Now he shook his head at the spacers. "I think my bro Laz has bought enough," he said. "What you givin' him in return, just you let him sit here? You think that's some kinda big deal? You show some respect."

"Like hell," the captain said but she didn't sound mad. "Your ponyboy says he's a Fibs. Don't take kindly to that, mockin' the trade."

Antonio made a big sigh and put his head to one side, like he was exasperated. "First off he ain't my ponyboy, he's my bro. And second, he was Fibs on *Mi Fregado Suerte*."

"Like hell," the captain said again. "Emiliano Corazón's ship? No way. That was one stand-up balls-on smugglin' bastard. They caught him and scrapped the ship years ago."

"Laz," Antonio said. "Show her your arm." Lázaro started rolling up his right shirt-sleeve and Antonio cuffed him lightly on the side of his head. "The other one, *cabron*. With the writing on it."

Lázaro did and held his arm out so everyone could see the numbers and symbols under his skin. Once all that stuff had moved and had lights and color, but that was a long time ago and now it was just a washed-out kind of blue. The spacers crowded around to stare, then backed off and stared at his face instead.

"Hell," the captain said again, quieter. "What happened to him? He wasn't like that when he was Fibs on the *Suerte*—not if he's the one who navved Castle Peaks."

"There an' back," Antonio said. "Come on, Laz, let's get goin'."

When Lázaro stood he staggered a little with all the beer, so Jane put his arm over her shoulders to help him walk. He waved goodbye to his new friends but the captain caught up with them at the door.

"Man, what happened to him?" she demanded. "I heard the Freddies found the ship, said some lyin' *skitte* about a cargo and jumped the ship when they got aboard. Ditched Corazón out on some asteroid."

"Yeah," Antonio said. By now they were out on the Curve and somehow it had gotten to be late afternoon so it was darker and the place looked a lot better. Giancarlo's was almost in the middle and the Curve curved back on both sides until it disappeared behind the port dome's arc. Lázaro smiled at Jane, who smiled back and put his hand on her boob.

Antonio said, "Bastards don't mind stealin' when it's them doin' it, and don't believe in capital punishment, but they sure as hell believe in gettin' even." There was

a pause while he stared at the captain and she stared back at him, and something came up between them because she nodded and Antonio nodded, and Lázaro was happy that his friends were getting along but the flying was going away and he wanted more.

“*Mira, Antonio,*” he said, “*quiero mas cerveza.*”

“Yeah, bro, just a minute.” Antonio kept staring at the captain.

“The crew,” she said. She didn’t sound like she was flyin’ either anymore. “What happened to the crew?”

Antonio put Lázaro’s free arm over his shoulders so Lázaro was bracketed by two people he cared about. The captain looked at his face and looked away again.

“You know that stuff they make, brings back your memories? I mean, everything you want, all the time? Cleans out all the sticky junk in your brain like blasting sludge off an engine? That stuff?” The captain just looked at him. “Yeah, well, before they got to that they found a way to make the sludge. You’d think they ain’t got a use for that, brain-gunk, but they ain’t about to let nothin’ go they can squeeze some use outta it.”

“The crew.”

“The crew,” Antonio said, agreeing. “Laz’s brain, he’s got so much sludge in there he can’t remember nothin’. Sometimes something comes up but he don’t know what it is half the time, an’ don’t know what to do about it.”

Antonio took a deep breath. Lázaro’s hand had gone slack so Jane put her hand over his and cupped his fingers around her breast.

“Last year he remembered a week of training, like it was yesterday. That’s gone. Right now all he can remember is good times, and he’s havin’ fun. Year from now, maybe two, he’ll forget how to breathe, or his heart’ll forget how to beat, and that’ll be that. ‘Cause the Freddie’s, they don’t believe in no death penalty. So they ain’t killin’ him, they just shot him up and chipped him and dumped him here.”

“And you’re his jailer,” the captain said.

“He don’t need no jailer,” Antonio said. “He’s chipped. There ain’t no way out of here.”

With that, Antonio and Jane moved him down the street. Lázaro looked over his shoulder at the captain. He had told her something, important maybe, but he couldn’t remember what it was. After a moment he stopped trying to remember and waved good-bye. She just stared back.

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**A halcyon interlude**

So anyway, Lázaro got to fly but he didn't get to spend a week doing it and didn't get to spend any more of his scratch either, because Antonio took it away and said he'd give it back in pieces. For a little while this made Lázaro mad, before he forgot that he had the scratch at all and was just happy that Antonio gave him money when he wanted it. Jane went back to Papa's but sometimes Antonio let Lázaro buy her out for a couple hours, and they went up and down the Curve and had spaghetti at Giancarlo's before she and Antonio went away to do some nookie-nookie but they always came back. Papa Carlisle let Jane go out cheap on account of he knew Lázaro couldn't fuck but what she did when she was out with him, that wasn't Papa's business at all, so everyone was happy.

So Lázaro's finishing the spaghetti and finishing his beer, and this woman comes and sits across from him and says "Yo" like she knows him, and they talk garbage for a while before Antonio comes back alone and sees her and sits down.

"I figured you'd be back," he said. "Did some research?"

"Ain't much else to do, workin' short hauls around this *penjamo*." She put her beer down. "Corazón's last run."

Antonio nodded.

"Don't know what he was runnin', but rumor says he stood to make a killing from it."

Antonio nodded again.

"Which wasn't on *Mi Suerte* when he got tagged."

"So probably he dumped it," Antonio said. "And it's still sittin' there, somewhere out there, just waitin' for someone to come bag it. You ain't the first to think it."

"And your friend here, if you ain't lyin' and he was Corazón's Fibs, he knows where it is."

"*Knew* where it is," Antonio said.

Lázaro looked from one to the other. "Knew what, Antonio?"

"Go on," Antonio said to the captain, ignoring Lázaro.

"They got the cleanin'-up memories stuff. So why not just get some for your buddy and clean up his memory, and we go out after the schatz." She leaned back. "Fifty-fifty, you an' me. I cut my crew into my half, you cut your buddy into yours. Win win."

Antonio shook his head. "You can't do it. MemMax's red-list Hub only, and even if you find it it's hella expensive and you ain't got that much scratch, not for enough to do some good. Little dose, all it'll do is get him unfuzzed for maybe a

day. You want my help, you get enough so he's never goin' back to this. Got me?"

The captain looked at him, then away, then back, then pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. "I'll find a way," she said. "Don't you go sellin' him to anyone else, hear?"

Antonio just laughed. "You the only bitch crazy enough to think that'll work," he said. "Don't worry. Me an' Laz, we ain't got nowhere to go."

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### **Floating like a yuck parade**

After that there was a long time when nothing much happened. The weather that leaked in beside Papa Carlisle's got hot, then it got damp, then it got cool, then it rained like hell and the street flooded so all the mud and garbage and boosters and prophs and dead cats came floating through like a yuck parade. Days like that, Lázaro stayed home. Lately he'd been spending a lot of time back when he was a kid right out of school, before he hooked up with—with—well, never mind. Being right out of school was like swank, lots of money to send home and money in his pocket and good friends and once they all climbed a mountain together, got the gear and hired a guide and went on up the sucker to the very top where there was hardly any air and it was cold as sin, and he and Jane made love in the snow at the top of the world. It was great, like it all happened yesterday, and Lázaro had a good time telling his furniture all about it, telling the jokes and laughing at them, and sharing around the hike food, and saying what his dad said when he called him up from the top of the world and that made him cry a little but it was a good cry even if he couldn't remember why he did it.

When Antonio showed up Lázaro thought he was the guide and told him they were running low on food and when was it going to stop raining at the top of the world anyway? Antonio went away and came back with food and made Lázaro eat some hot stuff and go to bed. When he woke up Antonio was gone and so was the top of the world and he didn't remember what it was that he missed, only that he missed something. Maybe it was the rain, because there wasn't any now and the mud was drying up with crap sticking up out of it so he had to walk around it real careful 'cause some of that stuff, it got on your foot it could hurt you. He kept walking anyway, trying to find a place that would take him back to the place that he remembered that he couldn't remember. He walked all the way to where the Curve got skinny and dark and stopped in a pile of garbage against the port dome, then he came back on one of the side streets but nothing made him remember anything. He slept out a couple of times. Maybe more. There was maybe someplace else he was supposed to sleep, but maybe not. It made his eyes hurt to try to think about it.

One morning he thought he found the remembering place so he came through the shimmer into Papa's. Papa scowled with only half her face on and then a woman came down and took his hand and led him away.

“We’ve been looking for you for days,” she said. “Are you all right? Stop, turn around, let me see you, damn, Laz, you scared the shit out of Antonio an’ me, we thought you’d gone off and died somewhere, where you been?”

Lázaro wanted to tell her, but he couldn’t. The words were there, he just couldn’t make them work, couldn’t remember how to make his mouth make them. Jane started crying and took him upstairs to her room and called Antonio. Lázaro just sat with his hands folded in his lap and the only thing he could remember was that everything he had to remember was gone. It was all dark and cold and hollow and he didn’t like it but when he stood to go the woman grabbed his arm and told him he couldn’t leave, and that made him angry so he hit her and she fell away so he went out the door and someone he almost knew came and pushed him back into the room and locked the door.

“You okay?” the man said to the woman. The woman nodded and stood and put her hand alongside her face where she was bleeding a little. Lázaro didn’t know who had hit her but if he found out he’d make them real sorry.

Then a voice with no body started shouting and the man in the room cursed and he and the woman took Lázaro away to another place and a second woman came and they all stood around looking at Lázaro and jabbering but nothing they said made any sense to him. Something about swag and something about skunking a deal and other stuff. The woman had a box with shiny things in it and the man talked about what was real and the woman said it was real and did he want it or not and he said he didn’t trust her and the other woman, the pretty woman with the black eye, she kept crying and Lázaro kept trying to talk but the words were gone, solid gone, and the harder he tried the more gone they were. First he wept, then he got mad again and stood up and made fists, and the man pulled Lázaro’s sleeve up and slapped a skinsting against his arm and then he went to sleep.

He woke up two days later. His brain hurt. Before he could be all the way awake, they fed him and skinned him and he passed out again.

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### **How she got it**

It’s only available in the Hub and even there you need a full croesus and permission from the Govs carved in platinum and set with gems just to get within a klick of it. Made from some kind of venom from some kind of bug that can only live on a planet that got crudded to death years ago, so you can see that it’s pretty rare. But that’s not what the story’s about, how she found it and got it and brought it back, and we’re not stopping the story to say. She found it. She got it. She brought it back. That’s enough.

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### **Clarity**

The fourth time he woke up, he opened his eyes and saw Antonio sitting there,

holding a bowl of hot soup. Behind him a woman in spacer's clothes sat with her butt on the edge of a table, arms crossed, staring at him.

"Toño," Lázaro said. "*Híjole, me duele la cabeza como un verdadero diablo*."

"Yeah, well, that ain't too surprising," Antonio said but he was grinning like a maniac. "Have some soup."

"Corazón," the woman said, like she'd said it a lot before. She had captain's bars on her sleeves. Lázaro decided he didn't like her.

"*Mi Fregado Suerte*," she continued.

Lázaro scooted himself up to sit against the wall and took the bowl. "I been drunk?"

"Kinda," Antonio said. He passed a hunk of bread.

"Corazón's last run."

Lázaro frowned at her. "Corazón's last run, some *chingadero* ratted him to the Freddies and they dumped him on some *cagado* asteroid somewhere and trashed the rest of us too."

"But he had a cargo, he dumped it before the Freddies caught him," she insisted. "Where'd he dump it?"

Lázaro took a bite of the bread. It was fresh and tasted great. "Toño?" he said, his mouth full. "What's goin' on?"

Antonio shrugged, leaning back in the chair. It creaked and wobbled, but it held him.

"She got an offer for us," Antonio said. "She's got MemMax, enough to fix what the Freddies did to you. What she wants is the zero point to get to where Corazón dropped his loot, and she'll share it out fifty-fifty, you an' me on one side, her and her crew on the other."

"You don't even have to come with," she said. "Maybe better if you didn't. You just tell me where and—"

"And you take off with the whole thing," Antonio said, like he'd said it a lot already. "What, you think we're stupid or something? Laz can't go 'cause the Freddies got him chipped and he can't leave the Curve but I'm goin' with. You got a problem with that, you say it and we can stop the whole thing right here."

"*Skitte*," she said. "Your ponyboy ain't got enough MemMax in him to be permanent, just enough to buy him maybe a couple weeks then bang, right back to Stupidville. You ain't about to stop it right here."

“And I ain’t about to give you the numbers and watch you fly off and hope someday you’ll be back, neither,” Antonio retorted. “And he ain’t my ponyboy, he’s my brother, got it?”

They kept bickering. Antonio’s foxleather jacket hung from the back of the rickety chair, frayed along the seams so that Lázaro could see the plastic of it. Antonio’s slick black hair showed some gray at the roots. He had always cared a lot about his looks, even back when they were kids. Lázaro sat up and swung his legs over the side of the shelf. Now that the soup was gone, the room smelled stale and close and there was nothing in it that said it was his place, no glyphs or books or anything, but he knew it was his anyway. He recognized the stains on the wall.

He recognized his memories, too. Being a kid, school, the Academy, climbing mountains, the first commission, the years with Emiliano Corazón, the last run, the bust, and what the Freddie’s did to him afterward. He remembered the years roaming the Curve while more and more of himself sloughed away, and he remembered Jane, the Jane that had been and the Jane that was.

“How’m I chipped?” he said, interrupting their conversation. Both heads swung toward him. “How’m I chipped?” he repeated. “Where’d they put it?”

“It’s, like, it’s a blastoma nano.” Antonio hesitated. “It’s in your brain, Laz. They shoot it into your artery, right about here, and it heads up to your brain and latches on.” He took his fingers off his neck. “They know it’s there, they check for it, ‘slong as they get a signal back they know where you are and that you ain’t dead, and it sleeps. But you try to leave, we even try to find it, it goes malignant.”

He pulled his mouth down and shrugged and went back to the argument while Lázaro thought about that and about his memories. The argument kept intruding, making noise inside his head as well as outside. Finally he put his hand out to stop them.

“Enough,” he said. “Here’s how we’ll do it. I’ll give Toño the zero points, there and back, and your Fibs can run the numbers. I’ll stay here with the rest of the MemMax, you two go get the cargo. Is Trafalgar still outside Freddie control?”

“Oh yeah,” the captain said. “Outside and wide open.”

“You go there, look for a company name of Chisler Chang-Himmel. They commissioned the smuggle, they’ll still pay for it. Chang’s got a long memory. You divide up the loot, Antonio brings our half back here, you go wherever you want with your own cut. Agreed?”

“Hold on,” the captain said. “Why unload it on Chang-Himmel? If it’s that damned valuable, we could bid it up...”

“It’s kids,” Lázaro said. “Chang’s kids, embryos. Stem cells, some of them, others already growin’ parts. Everything in ten-year stasis. Chang commissioned

them, then welshed on the debt. Hemetica wouldn't release them and blackballed Chang from the other clone houses, too. Chang's pretty desperate for spare parts. I been out for what, four years?"

"Five," Antonio said.

"Five. Chang still wants them and nobody else does 'cause they're tailored. You want to unload them, you got only one market but that market'll pay big. You take the stuff to Trafalgar. Chang'll want a recognition code—Toño's gonna carry that. And part of the price is Chang gives Toño a ride back. You get the money, you split the money, you split. Nobody gets a chance to screw nobody."

"Stem cells," the woman said. "About how big a payload?"

Lázaro showed her with his hands; maybe the size of a spacer's duffle, maybe a bit smaller. "That's why it's tricky," he said. "It's a small box and it's just floating out there on some bitty asteroid, probably no bigger than the one they left Emiliano on." He rocked back; the shelf creaked and sagged a little. "So, you gonna do it?"

Antonio and the woman looked at each other, then she shrugged and he stuck his hand out and they shook on it. She went outside while the men huddled over the table and Lázaro made Antonio memorize the zero-point coordinates and the recognition code. When Lázaro was satisfied, he put out his hand to keep Antonio from rising.

"Hey, that stuff about the chip. True?"

"Yeah, bro. All of it." Lázaro looked at him and Antonio said, "But listen, man, it's not a bad life. And when this comes down we'll have so much scratch we won't never have to even think about it again, we can walk on money and drink credits and piss gold, we'll be kings of the Curve. You remember all that scratch you used to send home, kept us all goin'? It'll look like mouse dicky next to what we're gonna have. We ain't gonna be livin' in no squats, either. Hell, you could buy Papa Carlisle's if you want, kick that skanky noface bastard outta there and have it all for yourself." He hit Lázaro's shoulder. "What you say, bro? Pretty sweet, yeah?"

"And the stuff, the MemMax—"

"Relax, there's plenty. You got about half in you right now. You get Jane to come in an' babysit you while you finish it off. Another week, maybe ten days, and bammo! The gunk's outta your brain and the Freddies won't know nothing."

"And if I stop now—"

"But that won't happen, cause the bitch's gonna give us the rest of the drug just as soon as we let her in again. You take it while we're gone, and when I come back, I tell you bro, kings of the Curve." He hit Lázaro's shoulder again and opened the door for the woman.

\* \* \* \*

## **And that's almost the way it went down**

Antonio and the numbers and the codes and the captain lifted off for the Continuum as soon as she could gather her crew and sober them up. Lázaro stood at the edge of the Curve dome and stared up through the gap until a ship rose into the sunlight, then walked back to his apartment, avoiding Papa Carlisle's. He didn't want to see it. He didn't want to see any more of the Curve than he had to.

Back in his squat, Lázaro sat with his hands in his lap and remembered, although some of the older memories were getting fuzzy and others were already gone. But the Curve memories were clear and strong: laughing with Antonio at Celia's, Papa Carlisle's mirror face, the taste of beer and the way it made him feel like he was flying, and Jane who wasn't Jane but who was, somehow. He remembered how the Curve curved inside its arc of dome and how small it all was, and how the only sky was the little bit of it that leaked in beside Papa Carlisle's. When Antonio came back with all that scratch they'd still be in the Curve and none of the memories would matter because what the hell use was it if you remembered mountains if you couldn't touch them?

There was another memory waiting, an older one. He turned away from it and the very act of turning brought it over him like a falling of light.

\* \* \* \*

## **How it works**

I don't know exactly, I'm no Fibs and neither are you. But it starts where you are, that's the zero and grows square to square, from (zero) where you are to (one) to (zero+one) to (one+one) to (two+one) to (three+two) to (five+three) to (eight+five) and on out forever, in growing strides to the reaches of the universe, and every right-angle step is a dimension from zero (here) where you start to (here+up+down) to (here+up+down+backwards+forwards) to (here+up+down+backwards+forwards+time), dancing through the dimensions and the Fibs dances each step, hands and mind and body moving to the rhythm of phi and the Fibs makes a turn and the boxes follow and the dimensions follow into the other there that is the Continuum, like launching the ship out through the pit of your guts, like sex only better because you're it and you're you and you're the ship and the boxes and the dance and the Continuum and when you're not the dance you're waiting for the dance like you wait for a breath or a heartbeat or anything else that keeps you alive because you're a Fibonacci Dancer. You're a Fibs.

\* \* \* \*

## **The King of the Curve**

He couldn't dance, not without a ship, not without the Continuum, not sitting at the table in his squat, not anywhere in the Curve, just not.

He wondered how long the blastoma nano would take to work. He wondered

if it would hurt. He wondered if it would eat memories too. He wondered what it would be like, living in the Curve knowing the dance was out there but unable to reach it, ever. He wondered what it would be like to die in the Curve knowing you were dying in the Curve.

He couldn't change the Curve and he couldn't escape it, but he could change who he was within the Curve. When he understood that, he opened the box of MemMax ampules. There were four left, each one ready to slip into the skinsting and apply, and when they were all gone he would be a king of the Curve. His brother had said so.

He took them into the reeking bathroom and broke each ampule into the commode, and flushed them away. Then he went back to the table and sat, hands folded, waiting to be Lázaro again.