

ROBERT REED

THE MAJESTY OF ANGELS

THE DEAD ARE DRESSED TO travel. Their clothes come in every fashion, but always comfortable and practical and familiar. None of them are carrying luggage, because what are possessions? Temporary, and imperfect. Everything worthwhile has come here. These people are here, and nothing else matters. So many, I declare.

Too many! we blurt in astonishment.

The overseer explains what has happened. An ancient soul wearing a big woman's body, she relates the horrific and tragic with effortless, even graceful dignity. Dignity is vital to our work. She tells us what she knows and nothing else, and it is only our training and our dignified nature that keep us from screaming in anguish, demanding to know how such awful things can happen.

How many teams will be helping us today?

I have to ask it.

The overseer admits that every available team has been assembled, plus the full corps of reserves, and every trainee, and the trainees' teachers, and even the most venerable members of the old administrative echelons.

And they won't be enough, I'm thinking. Not nearly enough.

But with a steadying voice, she reminds us of who we are. Do your walk-throughs, she urges. Go on, now. Go!

Walk-throughs are essential.

We show ourselves to the newly dead. That's how it begins. Let them see a face. Let them feel close to you. Give them an opportunity to find qualities familiar and reassuring in that very careful picture you present to them. Our team is a dozen, including our overseer: Two male bodies, and the rest female. Humans accept these proportions best. They also prefer uniforms, and on this wicked day, we wear dark blue-gray suits with false pockets and narrow gold trim and neat little buttons of brass. To every eye, we look important. Ennobled. Creatures of thorough and perfect competence. I normally cherish this ritual. This walk-through business. My body is tall and young and decidedly female. The crowd parts for me and the dead men can't help but stare. I have long legs and a long, sturdy gait. Countless penises stiffen in my presence. It makes the men grateful, discovering that in death they have held on to this most treasured magic.

A thousand languages carry up toward the illusion of a ceiling.

"She looks like a stewardess," the multitude declares.

One man forgets to step out of my way. He stares at me, particularly at the pin riding above my left breast. He expects to see a crucifix or an Islamic crescent, but the pin is neither. Wearing a puzzled expression, he stands in my way, and I gracefully dance around him, and after I have passed by, he blurts, "Did you see her jewelry?"

"The sideways eight?" says a young woman. "So what's that about?"

"It's mathematical," he explains. "To me, it means infinity."

"Huh," says the woman. "I guess that makes sense, doesn't it?"

Something about the man catches my interest. I'm past him, but I'm lingering, too. His name is Tom. He lived in Oregon. He has two ex-wives and no children, and since he was ten years old, he hasn't believed either in God or Heaven.

"Isn't this just wonderful?" asks the young woman.

Her name is Julianna and she was raised Catholic.

"Things looked so awful," she says with a beaming smile. "And suddenly, this...!"

Tom nods, asking, "So how'd you die?"

Surprised by his question, Julianna blinks and stares.

With a crooked grin, Tom explains himself. "I was riding my bike. It was...I don't know...sometime last week. I tried to beat the light, and a city bus plowed into me." He laughs amiably, faintly embarrassed by his incompetence.

"Right now, just being able to stand and hold my guts inside me...well, that's a major accomplishment!" His laughter thins. Squinting, he adds, "The last thing I remember, I was being wheeled back to surgery. Internal bleeding, I guess...I couldn't breathe...and I remember the orderly pushing me down this long, long hallway"

Julianna touches him. Her hand is warm and a little sticky.

"You really don't know," she says. "Do you?"

"Know what?"

"Something went wrong in the sky," she tells him. "A few days ago, without warning...it just sort of happened"

"In the sky?"

"Something exploded," she admits.

"What something? A star?"

"No, it wasn't that," says Julianna. "On the news, they said it might be a quasar. A little one that happened to be close to the Earth --"

"A quasar?"

People grow quiet, eavesdropping on their conversation.

"A black hole started eating gas clouds and stars," Julianna explains, "and there was this terrific light --"

"I know what a quasar is," Tom says. "It's bright, sure, but it's also very, very distant. Billions of light-years removed from us, and perfectly safe, and I don't see how one of them can just appear one day, without warning."

Julianna shrugs. "Maybe our quasar didn't know your rules."

With his own kind of dignity, Tom absorbs the horrific news. Sad brown eyes look at the surrounding faces. Perhaps he notices that most of the faces are young. Children outnumber the elderly by a long measure. Finally with a soft, hurting voice, he asks, "What about the world? And the people?"

"Dead," says Julianna. "All dead."

More than six billion souls were killed in a heartbeat.

"You were sick," she promises. "Nobody told you what was happening, I bet. I bet not." And again, she touches him.

AN ENORMOUS MACHINE assembles itself around the multitudes. Our passengers find themselves standing inside what resembles the cabin of an airliner or a modern train; yet this machine feels infinitely superior to anything human-built. The ceiling is low but not smothering and feels soft to the touch like treasured old leather. The floor is a carpet of ankle-deep green grass. Ambient sounds hint at power below and great encompassing strength. This interior is a single round room. An enormous room. Padded seats are laid out in neat concentric rings. Normally there is a healthy distance between seats, save in cases where a family or a group of dear friends died in the same accident or a shared plague. But emergency standards rule today. The seats are packed close, as if everyone is someone's brother or sister. Even a graceful creature has to move with constant care, her long legs dancing from place to place to place.

A routine voyage carries several hundred thousand compliant and thankful souls. But this soul-carriage, built according to our meticulous worst-case scenarios, makes the routine appear simple and small.

Every passenger has a seat waiting. Their name and portrait show in the padded headrest, and everyone begins close to their destination. But even normal days bring problems. Children always run off. Adults want to hunt the loved ones who died before them. My first duty is to help everyone settle, and it is a daunting task. Besides the crush of bodies and the armies of kinetic children, I have to cope with our desperate lack of time.

"If you cannot find your seat," I call out, "take another. Take the first empty seat you come across. Please. You must be sitting and restrained before we can begin our voyage. Please. And make the children sit too. Your child, and everyone else's. We're bound for the same place. A shared destination. We must cooperate to make it an easy voyage."

I have a bright, strong voice. A voice worth hearing. But I need to be in many places at once, and my skills reach only so far.

Six billion people drop into some seat, adults taking responsibility for the young ones. Those left standing beg for help, and I do my absolute best, smiling as I do with every little part of my job.

People call me "the angel" fondly, with easy trust.

Finally, once everyone is sitting somewhere, I stand in front of my passengers. "Yes," I admit, "you have died. You are dead."

Tom sits in my audience. And Julianna has taken the seat beside him.

"Yet you obviously aren't dead," I tell them. "There is a network, a set of embedded and eternal machines that stretch throughout your galaxy. These machines do nothing but rescue sentient souls as they die, then transport them to a place where they will be safe and happy for all time."

In a stew of language, voices blurt out, "Heaven!"

"Call it what you will," I warn, using the same tongues. "Maybe you're right, yes. Your gods could have built the soul-snaring machines and the wormholes that we are going to use. Since I don't know who actually built them, every answer is valid to me."

That attitude rarely makes people sit easier. Yet it has the delicious advantage of being my honest opinion.

"I'm here to serve you," I promise, showing them my warmest smile. "To make your journey easier, I will do everything I can for you."

Always, a few men giggle in a vulgar way.

Not Tom. He sits quietly, dark eyes never blinking while thick hands wrestle nervously in his lap. He is a brown man with receding black hair worn as a ponytail. I touch his armrest and a glassy round screen appears in the air in front of him. "You may watch any movie or television program, read any book, listen to a favorite song, or if you wish, choose any moment in your own life and watch it replayed as your own eyes saw it, in full. The controls on your armrest will explain themselves --"

A hand jumps up.

"Yes, Quincy," I say. "Do you have a question?"

The man is small and pudgy, wearing shorts and a tan safari hat, and he is thrilled that I know his name. "Do we eat?" Quincy asks. "Because I'm feeling awfully hungry."

"Any meal you can think of, we can make." I promise everyone, "I'll take your orders later. Though I should add, nobody needs to eat or drink anymore."

Another hand lifts.

"Yes, Jean."

She's a young mother with two tiny children. Custom and common sense have set her between her babies. Quite reasonably, she asks, "Will this be a long trip?"

"It will be, yes. I'm sorry, Jean. We have a tremendous distance ahead of us."

Tom makes a low sound.

I look at him. I smile, always. "Do you have a question, Tom?"

He lies, telling me, "I don't. No."

I won't press him. We have run out of time. Lifting my gaze, I stare at the grateful multitudes. "The infinity button on your armrest will summon me or one of my colleagues. Once we're underway, don't hesitate to press the button." Then before anyone can throw out another good question, I close my eyes, vanishing from their gaze.

Again I hear the word, "Angel."

Julianna says it with an easy reverence.

Tom says nothing. Nothing. He never saw the sky catch fire. He never heard the black warnings, the torrent of hard radiations and fantastic heat chasing after the light. As he was dying in the hospital, his family and friends, doctors and nurses, conspired to keep this one worry from him. Alone among my passengers, Tom was unaware. Innocent.

He's likely grieving for his dead world, a reasonable anger festering inside him.

"Our angel's beautiful," says Julianna. "Don't you think, Tom?"

He shrugs and says, "Very," while his hands continue to wrestle in his lap. He

glances across the aisle. One of Jean's babies looks up at him, smiling gamely. Leaning low, Tom whispers to the wide-eyed three-year-old, saying, "Hey there, kid. Hey. So what about this whole crock of shit bothers you the most?"

The early vibrations are honest and important. Space and time are being manipulated by means both decisive and violent. Dimensions without human names are being traversed. For safety's sake, everyone must remain in his seat. No exceptions. Tiny variations of mass disrupt the intricate calculations, and our ship is cumbersome enough, thank you.

My team and overseer sit together.

As is customary, we discuss what has happened and what we can anticipate, the overseer nourishing a mood of cautious optimism.

You don't remember, she says to me. You haven't worked with humans long enough. But there was a period when we wondered if this was inevitable. Bringing all of them, I mean. Because they had some brutal weapons, and with a few buttons pushed, they would have killed most of their world.

I show her that I'm listening, thinking hard about what she's telling me. Then, letting my worry show, I ask, How do I respond to certain questions? She knows which questions. Showing a narrow smile, she asks, Do you think they're likely to ask them?

No, I admit.

Haven't we taken the sensible steps?

Always, I say.

But make yourselves ready, she advises all of us. Examine your manifest. Don't let anyone catch you unprepared.

Easily said. But nobody mentions that each of us, standing alone on the grassy floor, is responsible for thousands upon thousands of souls.

We are successfully underway. People are encouraged to stand if they wish, and if they don't move too far, they may wander. A constant trembling passes through the floor, and from overhead a whispering roar comes, reminding them of a distant and irresistible wind. These are artificial sensations. They bring the sense of motion, of distance won. Sentience doesn't mean sophistication; humans would find the perfect stillness of interstellar travel unnerving, which is why we supply them with every comforting illusion.

Being sophisticated doesn't give me the right to think small thoughts about those who are otherwise.

That's what I remind myself as a thousand fingers call to me.

Wherever I am, I watch Tom. I listen to his voice and the voices swirling around him. In life, the man was a reader. He enjoyed a broad if rather haphazard love for science and mathematical puzzles. "Tell me what happened," he says to the English-speaking strangers. "What did you see? Read? Hear? And what do you absolutely know as fact?"

His neighbors have few facts to offer. But that doesn't stop some of them from declaring, "It was God's judgment, plain and simple."

Tom never listens to the plain and simple.

Others repeat the magical word, "Quasar," and shrug their shoulders. "That's what everyone says it was."

Tom explains his doubts. In clear, crisp terms, he teaches dozens of people about the universe and its brutal, amoral past. "Quasars are far away because they live in the deepest past," he explains. Then with grim urgency, he adds, "The part of the sky you're talking about doesn't have a big black hole. It's too close to us. We'd see its gravity at work. And even if something like that was hiding near us, there isn't nearly enough gas and dust to fuel the monster."

Once, then again, I happen by. I show Tom my best smile, and with a warm but firm voice, I suggest that he move back near his seat again. "I'll show you the way," I remark. "Or if you'd rather, I can just put you there."

Tom is a bright, determined skeptic, but he's also a male. His eyes betray interest.

Lust is a vapor that I can inhale, and then enlarge by assorted means,

flinging luscious, intoxicating molecules back at the man, feeding his lust until his penis quivers and his breathing comes up short.

After a third visit, the male animal is a little bit in love with me.

On my fourth visit, he stops interrogating the passengers, watching as I deliver a dish of kale and potatoes to a fellow passenger.

The passenger asks, "Do you know how old I am, dear?"

"One hundred and three," I reply, "and your name is Bernice. But your good friends call you Bernie."

With giddy amazement, the old woman says, "Do you know? I outlived three husbands and as many children. But that's fine, because now I'm traveling to Heaven to see them again. Isn't that right, dear?"

I nod. And smile. "Your husbands are there. And your children. And everyone else who made this journey before you." I lift my gaze, smiling only at Tom, forcing him to stare back at me. "How can anything that perfect be anything but beautiful?"

The male animal licks his lips.

Again I urge Tom to return to his empty seat. But he gathers himself, then tells me, "No," with a cool determination. "No, I want to talk to you. Just to you."

I pretend to misunderstand his intentions.

"Me? Really?" I bubble, letting my nipples engorge.

But the man puts on a cold, uncompromising face and declares "Alone."

He asks, "Is it possible?"

Then with his shoulders squared, he says, "Because if you won't do this, Miss Angel...if you don't pay attention to me, I'm screaming with whatever I've got for lungs...!"

I CAN SEE the man that he seems to be. In an instant, I examine the enormity of Tom's brief life -- everything that he has said and done, and everything done and said to him. Obvious strategies present themselves to me, begging to be used. Yet I hesitate. I know better. This man was assaulted by a bus, his belly ripped open, candy-colored guts spilling across the hot black asphalt. For that horrible instant, Tom was conscious. Despite misery and spreading shock, he managed to look at his mangled insides...and what he thought at that particular instant, I do not know. I cannot know. Every soul's thoughts are always its own; no eye can peer into a mind's foggy depths. Which is why the soul is precious. Is worth this kind of sacrifice and expense. What we cannot know perfectly must be preserved, at all costs. That's what this soul-carriage means.

This is what I'll tell him, in some fashion or another.

But he speaks first. "How does this all work?" Tom asks. "You and your angel friends carry the dead off to this heaven place? Is that it?"

We're standing in the chamber where I sat with my colleagues. By all appearances, we are alone.

"Is this your job?" he presses.

"This is my life," I purr. "My purpose. My calling."

Something in those words amuses him. He stares at my face, occasionally glancing at my nipples. Then with a little snort, he asks, "Are there other alien species? And when they die, do you whisk them off to wherever?"

"There are others, but I don't whisk them anywhere," I explain. "My calling is here, with your noble species."

"You help us travel to the afterlife?"

"Yes."

"And you've always done this?"

"Not always," I confess. "Not for very long, considering."

He doesn't ask the obvious questions. How long? Where did you work before? And why did you change posts? Instead Tom points out, "You won't be making the human run anymore. Will you?"

I say, "No, I won't," with obvious, honest sadness.

Tom nods. Considers.

Then I take hold of our conversation, telling him, "Yes, this is a tragedy. A

tragedy. But aren't you just a little pleased to find yourself alive and bound for places that you can't even imagine?"

Dark eyes narrow. Then he calmly and firmly says, "Dolphins."

"What about them?"

"Are their souls saved, too?"

"Of course. Yes."

"And they're riding toward their afterlife...what...? Inside a starship that masquerades as a saltwater lagoon...?"

His guess is rather near the truth.

"There are many species of cetaceans," I explain. "Some are sentient. But others, sadly, have nothing for a soul-saver to latch onto."

I expect Tom to ask about other species. Elephants, dogs, and the like. But he returns to me, remarking, "You're going to have to be reassigned."

"I'll take the calling that suits me," I declare.

He doesn't seem to hear me. His mouth opens, teeth a little crooked and yellowed. Their imperfections make his face seem more handsome. Because it helps my strategy, I fall in love with him. Or is it my strategy that's to blame? Love needs to feel genuine to be love; isn't that what every overseer and every poet claims?

"What killed my world?" he mutters.

I pretend not to understand the question. "Pardon --" I begin.

"It wasn't a quasar," he maintains with a loud, knowing voice. "Or an exploding star. Or anything else normal."

I say nothing.

He stares at my chest. At the infinity pin riding on my breast. A slow tongue wets his lips, and with his next breath, Tom asks, "Are you a robot?"

"No," I blurt.

"A projection? A fantasy? What?"

This is a perfect moment. With my warm, slightly dampened hand, I touch his chin and then the soft back of his ear, teasing him for a little moment before saying, "I could be any of those things. How would I know? But what I believe I am is an immortal soul, and a good soul...at least good enough to be entrusted with your little species "

Tom shivers, nods.

I take back my hand.

He wants the hand, and everything else. But he denies himself, almost sobbing when he explains, "I had this professor in college. A brilliant man. He spent an entire class talking about black holes and white holes and wormholes, and how it might be possible to leap through space and time...and all the reasons why you don't want to do it, because of the places -where everything could go to shit...."

I could undress myself, and then undress him. I could win this man with a few simple acts of geometry.

Yet I do nothing but listen.

"What happened in the sky...it sounds like a wormhole turning unstable...."

We are alone here. My team and the overseer are busy with the multitudes.

"If it was a wormhole," he tells me, "then that explains why an empty piece of the sky can explode, without warning."

I could lie. And maybe he would believe me.

Or I could take emergency measures, easing Tom into a quarantined region of the ship. He would enjoy himself. He hasn't seen his professor in twenty years; perhaps he would leap at the chance.

But for good reasons, I do something else.

I grasp his hand and lift it easily, straightening his first two fingers, making their brown tips fondle the warm brass of the infinity pin. Beneath the pin, he feels the firm breast. Beneath the breast, a heart drums along. And with a pleading and soft and absolutely honest voice, I beg, "Please, tell nobody. Nobody."

He tries to lift his hand, but I won't let him.

"There was a malfunction," I confess. "A mistake and a tragedy, and

everything's in a shambles. We were caught by surprise. The radiation could have destroyed us before we launched. We haven't nearly enough staff and it's going to be a terribly long, long journey, and please, don't tell anybody what you know." My heart beats; my lungs rise and fall. "Unless you really want to make a mess of things," I concede. "But I don't think...I can't believe, Tom...that there's even a little bit of that kind of man lurking inside you...."

I WATCH HIM, but not as closely now.

In part, I believe we have a pact. An understanding. If I cannot trust this person, then I haven't the skill necessary to do my job, and that is a revelation I'd rather not endure.

Yet more is at work here than trust. I haven't the time or resources to hover beside a lone soul, deciphering his every whisper. The multitudes are begging for delicious meals, and they ask the same few questions, hungry for my smile and my musical reassurances. Many men and the occasional woman hope to see what is beneath my skirt. There is nothing dishonorable in that. A moment's flirt buys a wealth of good tidings and durable hopes. An arm brushing against an arm is the easiest trick. The human face is fluid and rich, capable of its own language, and I've always been adept at making the most from a single expression, from a lifted eyebrow and the flash of my perfect white teeth. By all appearances, I am relentlessly cheerful and seamlessly kind -- an expert in every facet of my endless work. But the real soul always hides behind an impenetrable shroud. Who we are is our only genuine secret, and my secret self grows weary and bored, and in odd ways, terrified.

The children scare me. There are too many babies, too many toddlers. Countless souls whose sentience is minimal by any measure. Older children can be bribed with movies and bright games and the vague promise of greater pleasures to come. But the littlest ones are sociopaths demanding nothing but the undiluted attention of everyone else. They scream and whine and cry, and they build fierce little rages that refuse to die. Out of habit, mothers press them to their breasts, and for a little while, they nurse with the same habitual dedication. But diapers remain unsoiled, thankfully; messy old metabolisms were left on the dead world. And after the first long while, the eating habit always falters. Always fails. The adults quit asking for feasts and snacks, and their babies grow tired of drinking without the pleasures of the toilet. The cycle breaks, at least temporarily, and now an equally treasured habit takes hold.

Sleep comes to everyone, or nearly so.

I move among my slumbering souls. Seats have plunged backward, forming beds. The ambient light falls away into a delicious gloom, save for those little pools of colored light where someone fights the urge. Tom is one of the fighters. With bleary, blood-dashed eyes, he sits upright, chin to palm, watching moments culled from his own life. Drifting beside him, my smile goes unnoticed. "She's beautiful," I mention in a whisper.

Tom acts startled. He blinks and takes a quick deep breath -- another unnecessary and treasured habit. To prevent misunderstandings, he explains, "She was my mother. She died a few days after this."

"I know that," I promise.

A dark brown woman looks at her son, singing and smiling. She has a beautiful voice perfectly suited for the hymn. God and Christ are her passions. That's plain to see. When she finishes the verse, she stops singing and straightens her hospital gown, and she gasps with a drowning vigor, then kisses her ten-year-old between his blinking and embarrassed eyes.

"Where is she?" he asks.

"Waiting for you," I reply instantly.

But that won't satisfy Tom. He shakes his leaden head, glancing at the girl beside him. At the sleeping Julianna. "What's this place?" he whispers. "This afterlife place...what really happens there...?"

"Imagine," I begin. Then I hold my tongue against the damp roof of my mouth, waiting for his eyes to come around, meeting my fond gaze. Then I say,

"Imagine," again. Firmly, as if uttering a command. "Your home will remind you very much of the Earth, and you can build any life for yourself there. Any life you can imagine. Your neighbors will be human souls and alien souls. With a word or a thought, you can learn anything you wish about the universe. Those enduring questions that your college professors could not answer...refused to answer...? They will be transparently obvious, if you wish. With more astonishing questions looming behind them, revealing themselves to you for the first time."

An intelligent soul can't help but be seduced by such a promise. Yet Tom buries his curiosity beside his eagerness. Looking only at me, he says, "This place. Whatever you call it. Have you ever actually lived there yourself?"

"No, I haven't."

Then in the next moment, I confess, "I never joined with the Afterlife. Honestly. Honestly, no."

Again, this man continues to surprise me. He nods as if he fully anticipated my answer, as if he already knew all about me. Then he gives his tired eyes a brutal massage, fingers digging at the sockets as he says to me, or maybe to himself, "I don't know what I'm scared of. But I am. Absolutely, rip-shitting scared."

But I am not scared any longer.

Everyone grows bored of sleep, and they wake by the millions. And again I am swimming in my work, answering summonses and the same few precious questions and delivering treats as well as ease-of-mind. I coax children toward their abandoned seats. I explain to harried parents that no, I cannot slip sedatives into milk or cake. Nothing metabolic is happening inside our ship. Hearts and heads are illusions, seamlessly convincing but perfectly unreal. Stripped of meat and blood, souls are invulnerable to every chemical assault. But the same souls can always be distracted, which is why I keep generating great heaps of fancy colored blocks and soft dolls with soft voices, plus intricate, wondrous puzzles that change their nature, always building some new conundrum as the old conundrum collapses under hard scrutiny.

Adults settle into a mood of sturdy contemplation. Of review and reappraisal. Every soul passes through this normally comforting stage. Tom simply arrived early. People are sitting forward in their seats, watching little snatches of their thoroughly recorded lives. Most seek out special days that they've always treasured, and then later, they hunt out moments filled with regrets, weighing what they see now against the emotionally charged events that they've never been able to forget.

For me, this is always the best part of the journey. Not just the easiest, but the most fulfilling. How can it be anything but beautiful, watching the multitude gradually and inexorably come to terms with its enormous past?

I mention this to my overseer.

She doesn't seem to hear my thoughts.

I am confident, I confess to her. Aren't things going exceptionally well?

She looks at me, and hesitates. Then in an almost glancing fashion, she mentions, Two of your contemplative souls are fighting now. Brawling.

The man with the floppy hat, Quincy, is trading blows with a teenage boy named Gene. They can't hurt each other, but their little mayhem is unseemly.

Alarming. And absolutely foolish.

I place myself next to them, and I glare.

They barely notice me. Quincy says, "You son-of-a-bitch liar," and takes a careless swing at the boy's angry face. Gene steps back, avoiding the blow. Then he moves forward, delivering matching blows to the wide soft belly. And Quincy doubles up and crumbles for no better reason than he expects pain. The idea of misery pulls him down to the floor, and curled up like an embryo, he moans. Then with a plaintive and exhausted voice, he says, "You're still." He says, "A son-of-a-bitch liar."

Gene tries to kick the man, but a second foot clips his foot, deflecting it.

I'm standing nearby, watching. What I want is to show everyone else my disapproval. My scalding rage. This is not seemly behavior and I intend to

make that point incandescently clear. And then I'll punish both souls, making them look pathetic in front of the others and hopefully putting an end to this particular nonsense.

I am not the agent who stops the fight.

Tom is.

And Tom is the one who barks, "Leave him alone," while stepping between the two combatants. "Back away, and walk away. Okay, son?"

"Liar," Quincy mutters from the safety of the floor.

The boy fumes and spits, then finally looks in my direction. Dark eyes widen until his young face is mostly eyes, and a scared and furious voice says, "Bitch. You. You did it to our world, didn't you?"

For too long, I say nothing.

"Enough," is what Tom tells him.

Then I manage to ask, "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"I heard. I know." The young man's anger is seamless and irresistible. "Your damned machines are what killed us all! Isn't that right, bitch?"

What I need to say is perfectly obvious.

"You are mistaken," I tell him.

Then to everyone in earshot, I say, "Someone must have lied to you. Or you heard things wrong."

"See?" Quincy moans. "Told you!"

Then I give Tom a good hard stare. Waiting for him to look at me. Waiting for some trace of shame. But the man simply stands motionless, hands at his sides, wearing a sturdy expression that implies concentration, and concern, as his eyes rise, looking into my gaze, those staring eyes telling me:

No, I did not. I did not. I did not.

My team and overseer are waiting for me.

Who did you bring with you? the overseer asks.

Everyone, I say.

But she sees that for herself. I'm holding tight to several hundred souls -- everyone who might have seen the fight or heard the ugly rumor -- and Tom is at the front of the heap, saying to the old woman's face, "Like I told your girl here. It wasn't me."

Is the damage contained? the overseer asks me.

I believe so, yes. I heard nothing else from anywhere else, and nobody except Quincy and Gene spoke about our complicity.

Complicity? the overseer responds.

Yes, I say. What else is it?

She looks at Tom. "What did you tell the others?"

"Nothing," he promises.

The overseer searches the seating charts, and then summons Julianna. With a warning sneer, she asks the girl, "What did Tom tell you?"

"About what?" Julianna asks. She acts nervous, but no more than anyone who is in the presence of someone important. "He told me about the bus hitting him. About a thousand times, he told me that story." Then she glances at Tom, adding, "You're dead. Okay? So get over it!"

"What were those two men fighting about?" the overseer asks.

Julianna shrugs and says, "Who knows?"

"You don't know?"

"Something about how the Earth died." Again, she shrugs. Then she grudgingly admits, "Yeah, I heard talk. Whispers, mostly. They were saying--"

"Who was speaking--?"

"People. Three, four seats over. This kid was standing there --"

"This child?" The overseer shows her Gene. "Is this the one?"

Julianna says, "No," without a shred of doubt. "It was a younger kid. He was talking about how the Earth died. He heard it from some angel--"

"Do you see that boy here? Anywhere?"

Julianna looks at the souls that I brought with me. She is thorough and slow, shaking her head when she finishes, telling us, "He was moving through, I

think. On foot. He said he wanted to see as many people as possible before we got where we were going --"

Search for this boy! the overseer cries out.

It takes an instant, and too long. A teammate retrieves the boy and places him in front of us. He is a Sikh, perhaps thirteen years old. He is handsome and bright-eyed and a little fearless. When asked, he is nothing but forthright about what he knows. "The explosion came when a shipment of souls were taken away. Their wormhole turned unstable --"

"Who told you this?" the overseer demands to know.

The boy looks at my team, lifts his arm in my direction, and then points at the man-angel beside me.

My colleague collapses, and sobs, saying, "I did not. I told you --"

"That my calculations were wrong." The boy smiles with genuine pride, then tells the overseer, "I like math and relativity. Neat things like that. I watched the fire in the sky, and did calculations, and I told this angel that it made sense, if our ship employs some kind of superluminal transportation system--"

The boy has walked a very long distance. In the general confusion, he went unnoticed. Each of us is to blame and we know it, and by every means available we look back along his likely course, listening to everything that's being said. Particularly to the whispers.

"And they were wrong," he confesses. "My math was. I wasn't taking into account the effects of --"

A million whispers wash over me.

"They murdered our world," the multitudes are telling each other. "The angels slaughtered us all...!"

I feel horrible. Wicked, and weak. Useless. And doomed.

Then Tom steps forward, looking only at me. "It wouldn't kill you to apologize to me," he says. "But before you get around to that, maybe you experts should figure out what you're going to do next. Now that this tiger's crawled out of her bag."

AGAIN, I STAND before my souls.

My shoulders slump, and I consciously keep my face from showing anything that might be confused for a smile. I am apologetic. Contrite. Hands opened, palms upturned, I bow before thousands of glowering faces, and with a hurting voice admit, "It's all true. This rumor that you're hearing...that we tried to keep from you...it is true, and it is awful, and perhaps it would help if you took out your anger on me"

I tell them, "Attack me. Brutalize me. Do whatever you wish to me and to my body, please."

Of course, no one moves. Or remembers to breathe. With others watching, even the most vicious soul is incapable of acting on his worst impulses.

I kneel. Dip my sorry head. Wait.

Then I raise my head, looking through genuine tears. "I don't know who built the wormholes," I admit, "or if they were the same entities who built this place where you are being taken now. I don't even know what you are feeling now. Souls are sanctuaries. Citadels with windows but no gates. Each of you feels hatred and rage and a choking sense of betrayal that I can only imagine, and all I can do is remind you, each of you.., remind you that for ten million years, creatures such as I have been saving your ancestors whenever they perished...whisking them to immortality...and without our hard labor, your souls and their souls would have been thrown away by this enormous and very extraordinarily cruel universe...."

Faces stare. Even the children sense the importance of my words, if not what the words mean.

"As promised," I continue, "you may live as you wish in this safe place. In this heaven. Which means that if you desire it, you may rebuild the Earth that you've left. Every brick in its place. Every mote of dust and blue river and the towering mountains and the scuttling beetles. Every little feature can be made real again, and you will return to your old lives. Which, I might add, is

not that unusual for a species in your particular circumstance."

That brings a roaring silence.

"Build a new Earth," I tell them. "But this time, the sky doesn't explode. You will grow up and grow old and die, each in your own time. And that's when each of you discovers that you're already living in your afterlife."

The silence quiets. Grows reflective.

"Which reminds me," I mention, casually but not. And again, I show my smile.

"It has been suggested...suggested by better minds than mine...that every living world and every conscious mind always exists in someone's heaven...and Death simply moves each of us along an endless chain of Heavens....

"Now isn't it pretty to think so...?"

"How's the general mood?" Tom asks.

I am back in the chamber again. It is just the two of us, again.

"Better?" he asks.

"Better," I admit. Then I give him a look, and too late by long ways, I tell him, "I'm sorry for suspecting you --"

"No need for apologies," he remarks, laughing mildly.

Then before I speak again, he mentions, "It seems you can use some help.

You're so thin, and there's so many people out there...I'm just thinking that maybe it would be best to pull a few passengers out of their seats and train them fast and give them little duties they can't screw up too badly --"

"Are you interested in that work?" I ask.

The man doesn't answer me. Not immediately or directly, he won't. But his dark eyes grow distant now, and with a distracted voice, he explains, "I was in the hospital, dying. And thinking about everything. My life. Its purpose, and its worth, and all the usual bullshit. Then they were wheeling me down the hallway...and I was sure that I was dying...and what I kept thinking, over and over, was that the orderly pushing the gurney had the best job in the universe. You know? Bearing the dead along like that. It just seemed so natural. So lovely. I just felt envious, all of a sudden. And that was my last thought. My only thought, really. I just wished that in my life I could have done something simple and noble like that guy got to do every damned day

"

I stare at him. And I wait.

"You never actually entered that afterlife place," he says to me. "Did you?"

"Never."

"Is that typical of your profession?"

"It is," I confess. "You don't happen upon many souls who wish to leave, once they're actually there."

He nods. Sucks on his teeth. And finally, looking into my eyes, he says,

"Well," with a deft finality. He says, "I never believed in that place anyway." And he smiles, touching me, squeezing my elbow with one damp hand while the other hand fingers that symbol of boundless forever.