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‘I’M NOT MYSELF’

‘Mother. Father. Did I do it right?’

The last words of Han Qing-jao, from
The God Whispers of Han Qing-jao

Si Wang-mu stepped forward. The young man named Peter took her hand and led her into the starship. The door closed behind them.

Wang-mu sat down on one of the swiveling chairs inside the small metal-walled room. She looked around, expecting to see something strange and new. Except for the metal walls, it could have been any office on the world of Path. Clean, but not fastidiously so. Furnished, in a utilitarian way. She had seen holos of ships in flight: the smoothly streamlined fighters and shuttles that dipped into and out of the atmosphere; the vast rounded structures of the starships that accelerated as near to the speed of light as matter could get. On the one hand, the sharp power of a needle; on the other, the massive power of a sledgehammer. But here in this room, no power at all. Just a room.

Where was the pilot? There must be a pilot, for the young man who sat across the room from her, murmuring to his

computer, could hardly be controlling a starship capable of the feat of traveling faster than light.

And yet that must have been precisely what he was doing, for there were no other doors that might lead to other rooms. The starship had looked small from the outside; this room obviously used all the space that it contained. There in the corner were the batteries that stored energy from the solar collectors on the top of the ship. In that chest, which seemed to be insulated like a refrigerator, there might be food and drink. So much for life support. Where was the romance in starflight now, if this was all it took? A mere room.

With nothing else to watch, she watched the young man at the computer terminal. Peter Wiggin, he said his name was. The name of the ancient Hegemon, the one who first united all the human race under his control, back when people lived on only one world, all the nations and races and religions and philosophies crushed together elbow to elbow, with nowhere to go but into each other's lands, for the sky was a ceiling then, and space was a vast chasm that could not be bridged. Peter Wiggin, the man who ruled the human race. This was not him, of course, and he had admitted as much. Andrew Wiggin sent him; Wang-mu remembered, from things that Master Han had told her, that Andrew Wiggin had somehow *made* him. Did this make the great Speaker of the Dead Peter's father? Or was he somehow Ender's brother, not just named for but actually embodying the Hegemon who had died three thousand years before?

Peter stopped murmuring, leaned back in his chair, and sighed. He rubbed his eyes, then stretched and groaned. It was a very indelicate thing to do in company. The sort of thing one might expect from a coarse fieldworker.

He seemed to sense her disapproval. Or perhaps he had forgotten her and now suddenly remembered that he had company. Without straightening himself in his chair, he turned his head and looked at her.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I forgot I was not alone.'

Wang-mu longed to speak boldly to him, despite a lifetime retreating from bold speech. After all, *he* had spoken to *her* with offensive boldness, when his starship appeared like a fresh-sprouted mushroom on the lawn by the river and he emerged with a single vial of a disease that would cure her home world, Path, of its genetic illness. He had looked her in the eye not fifteen minutes ago and said, 'Come with me and you'll be part of changing history. *Making* history.' And despite her fear, she had said yes.

Had said yes, and now sat in a swivel chair watching him behave crudely, stretching like a tiger in front of her. Was that his beast-of-the-heart, the tiger? Wang-mu had read *The Hegemon*. She could believe that there was a tiger in that great and terrible man. But this one? This boy? Older than Wang-mu, but she was not too young to know immaturity when she saw it. He was going to change the course of history! Clean out the corruption in the Congress. Stop the Lusitania Fleet. Make all colony planets equal members of the Hundred Worlds. This boy who stretched like a jungle cat.

'I don't have your approval,' he said. He sounded annoyed and amused, both at once. But then she might not be good at understanding the inflections of one such as this. Certainly it was hard to read the grimaces of such a round-eyed man. Both his face and his voice contained hidden languages that she could not understand.

'You must understand,' he said. 'I'm not myself.'

Wang-mu spoke the common language well enough at least to understand the idiom. 'You are unwell today?' But she knew even as she said it that he had not meant the expression idiomatically at all.

'I'm not myself,' he said again. 'I'm not really Peter Wiggin.'

'I hope not,' said Wang-mu. 'I read about his funeral in school.'

'I do look like him, though, don't I?' He brought up a hologram into the air over his computer terminal. The hologram

rotated to look at Wang-mu; Peter sat up and assumed the same pose, facing her.

'There is a resemblance,' she said.

'Of course, I'm younger,' said Peter. 'Because Ender didn't see me again after he left Earth when he was - what, five years old? A little runt, anyway. I was still a boy. That's what he remembered, when he conjured me out of thin air.'

'Not air at all,' she said. 'Out of nothing.'

'Not nothing, either,' he said. 'Conjured me, all the same.' He smiled wickedly. 'I can call spirits from the vasty deep.'

These words meant something to him, but not to her. In the world of Path she had been expected to be a servant and so was educated very little. Later, in the house of Han Fei-tzu, her abilities had been recognized, first by her former mistress, Han Qing-jao, and later by the master himself. From both she had acquired some bits of education, in a haphazard way. What teaching there had been was mostly technical, and the literature she learned was of the Middle Kingdom, or of Path itself. She could have quoted endlessly from the great poet Li Qing-jao, for whom her one-time mistress had been named. But of the poet he was quoting, she knew nothing.

'I can call spirits from the vasty deep,' he said again. And then, changing his voice and manner a little, he answered himself. 'Why so can I, or so can any man. But will they come when you do call for them?'

'Shakespeare?' she guessed.

He grinned at her. She thought of the way a cat smiles at the creature it is toying with. 'That's always the best guess when a European is doing the quoting,' he said.

'The quotation is funny,' she said. 'A man brags that he can summon the dead. But the other man says that the trick is not calling, but rather getting them to come.'

He laughed. 'What a way you have with humor.'

'This quotation means something to you, because Ender called you forth from the dead.'

He looked startled. 'How did you know?'

She felt a thrill of fear. Was it possible? 'I did not know, I was making a joke.'

'Well, it's not true. Not literally. He didn't raise the dead. Though he no doubt thinks he could, if the need arose.' Peter sighed. 'I'm being nasty. The words just come to my mind. I don't mean them. They just come.'

'It is possible to have words come to your mind, and still refrain from speaking them aloud.'

He rolled his eyes. 'I wasn't trained for servility, the way *you* were.'

So this was the attitude of one who came from a world of free people - to sneer at one who had been a servant through no fault of her own. 'I was trained to keep unpleasant words to myself as a matter of courtesy,' she said. 'But perhaps to you, that is just another form of servility.'

'As I said, Royal Mother of the West, nastiness comes unbidden to my mouth.'

'I am not the Royal Mother,' said Wang-mu. 'The name was a cruel joke—'

'And only a very nasty person would mock you for it.' Peter grinned. 'But I'm named for the Hegemon. I thought perhaps bearing ludicrously overwrought names was something we might have in common.'

She sat silently, entertaining the possibility that he might have been trying to make friends.

'I came into existence,' he said, 'only a short while ago. A matter of weeks. I thought you should know that about me.'

She didn't understand.

'You know how this starship works?' he said.

Now he was leaping from subject to subject. Testing her. Well, she had had enough of being tested. 'Apparently one sits within it and is examined by rude strangers,' she said.

He smiled and nodded. 'Give as good as you get. Ender told me you were nobody's servant.'

'I was the true and faithful servant of Qing-jao. I hope Ender did not lie to you about that.'

He brushed away her literalism. 'A mind of your own.' Again his eyes sized her up; again she felt utterly comprehended by his lingering glance, as she had felt when he first looked at her beside the river. 'Wang-mu, I am not speaking metaphorically when I tell you I was only just made. Made, you understand, not born. And the way I was made has much to do with how this starship works. I don't want to bore you by explaining things you already understand, but you must know what - not who - I am in order to understand why I need you with me. So I ask again - do you know how this starship works?'

She nodded. 'I think so. Jane, the being who dwells in computers, she holds in her mind as perfect a picture as she can of the starship and all who are within it. The people also hold their own picture of themselves and who they are and so on. Then she moves everything from the real world to a place of nothingness, which takes no time at all, and then brings it back into reality in whatever place she chooses. Which also takes no time. So instead of starships taking years to get from world to world, it happens in an instant.'

Peter nodded. 'Very good. Except what you have to understand is that during the time that the starship is Outside, it isn't surrounded by nothingness. Instead it's surrounded by uncountable numbers of *aiúas*.'

She turned away her face from him.

'You don't understand *aiúas*?'

'To say that all people have always existed. That we are older than the oldest gods ...'

'Well, sort of,' said Peter. 'Only *aiúas* on the Outside, they can't be said to exist, or at least not any kind of meaningful existence. They're just ... there. Not even that, because there's no sense of location, no *there* where they might be. They just are. Until some intelligence calls them, names them, puts them into some kind of order, gives them shape and form.'

'The clay can become a bear,' she said, 'but not as long as it rests cold and wet in the riverbank.'

'Exactly. So there was Ender Wiggin and several other people who, with luck, you'll never need to meet, taking the first voyage Outside. They weren't going anywhere, really. The point of that first voyage was to get Outside long enough that one of them, a rather talented genetic scientist, could create a new molecule, an extremely complex one, by the image she held of it in her mind. Or rather her image of the modifications she needed to make in an existing ... well, you don't have the biology for it. Anyway, she did what she was supposed to do, she created the new molecule, calloo callay, only the thing is, she wasn't the only person doing any creating that day.'

'Ender's mind created you?' asked Wang-mu.

'Inadvertently. I was, shall we say, a tragic accident. An unhappy side effect. Let's just say that everybody there, *everything* there, was creating like crazy. The *aiúas* Outside are frantic to be made into something, you see. There were shadow starships being created all around us. All kinds of weak, faint, fragmented, fragile, ephemeral structures rising and falling in each instant. Only four had any solidity. One was that genetic molecule that Elanora Ribeira had come to create.'

'One was you?'

'The least interesting one, I fear. The least loved and valued. One of the people on the ship was a fellow named Miro, who through a tragic accident some years ago had been left somewhat crippled. Neurologically damaged. Thick of speech, clumsy with his hands, lame when he walked. *He* held within his mind the powerful, treasured image of himself as he used to be. So - with that perfect self-image, a vast number of *aiúas* assembled themselves into an exact copy, not of how he was, but of how he once was and longed to be again. Complete with all his memories - a perfect replication of him. So perfect that it had the same utter loathing for his crippled body that he himself had. So ... the new, improved Miro - or rather the copy of the old, undamaged

Miro – whatever – he stood there as the ultimate rebuke of the crippled one. And before their very eyes, that old rejected body crumbled away into nothing.’

Wang-mu gasped, imagining it. ‘He died!’

‘No, that’s the point, don’t you see? He lived. It *was* Miro. His own *aiúa* – not the trillions of *aiúas* making up the atoms and molecules of his body, but the *one* that controlled them all, the one that was himself, his will – his *aiúa* simply moved to the new and perfect body. That was his true self. And the old one ...’

‘Had no use.’

‘Had nothing to give it shape. You see, I think our bodies are held together by love. The love of the master *aiúa* for the glorious powerful body that obeys it, that gives the self all its experience of the world. Even Miro, even with all his self-loathing when he was crippled, even he must have loved whatever pathetic remnant of his body was left to him. Until the moment that he had a new one.’

‘And then he moved.’

‘Without even knowing that he had done so,’ said Peter. ‘He followed his love.’

Wang-mu heard this fanciful tale and knew that it must be true, for she had overheard many a mention of *aiúas* in the conversations between Han Fei-tzu and Jane, and now with Peter Wiggin’s story, it made sense. It had to be true, if only because this starship really had appeared as if from nowhere on the bank of the river behind Han Fei-tzu’s house.

‘But now you must wonder,’ said Peter, ‘how I, unloved and unlovable as I know I am, came into existence.’

‘You already said. Ender’s mind.’

‘Miro’s most intensely held image was of his own younger, healthier, stronger self. But Ender, the images that mattered most in *his* mind were of his older sister Valentine and his older brother Peter. Not as they became, though, for his real older brother Peter was long dead, and Valentine – she has accompanied or followed Ender on all his hops through space, so she is

still alive, but aged as he has aged. Mature. A real person. Yet on that starship, during that time Outside, he conjured up a copy of her youthful self. Young Valentine. Poor *Old* Valentine! She didn’t know she was so old until she saw this younger self, this perfect being, this angel that had dwelt in Ender’s twisted little mind from childhood on. I must say, she’s the most put-upon victim in all this little drama. To know that your brother carries around such an image of you, instead of loving you as you really are – well, one can see that Old Valentine – she hates it, but that’s how everyone thinks of her now, including, poor thing, herself – one can see that Old Valentine is really having her patience tried.’

‘But if the original Valentine is still alive,’ said Wang-mu, puzzled, ‘then who is the young Valentine? Who is she really? You can be Peter because he’s dead and no one is using his name, but ...’

‘Quite puzzling, isn’t it?’ said Peter. ‘But my point is that whether he’s dead or not, I’m not Peter Wiggin. As I said before, I’m not myself.’

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. The hologram above the terminal turned to look at him. He had not touched the controls.

‘Jane is with us,’ said Wang-mu.

‘Jane is always with us,’ said Peter. ‘Ender’s spy.’

The hologram spoke. ‘Ender doesn’t need a spy. He needs friends, if he can get them. Allies at least.’

Peter reached idly for the terminal and turned it off. The hologram disappeared.

This disturbed Wang-mu very much. Almost as if he had slapped a child. Or beaten a servant. ‘Jane is a very noble creature, to treat her with such disrespect.’

‘Jane is a computer program with a bug in the id routines.’

He was in a dark mood, this boy who had come to take her into his starship and spirit her away from the world of Path. But dark as his mood might be, she understood now, with the hologram gone from the terminal, what she had seen. ‘It *isn’t* just