

1. Visiting Albuquerque

When I was a teenager I was taken by car to Albuquerque at night. From the car it looked to me like any other city, with bright lights. But when we got out I looked up and saw the Milky Way.

My route arched across Earth from east to west. Glasses showed my route traced heavily in blue ballpoint pen on an unfolded paper map in a projection in which lines of latitude were curved. Except for a tail at the end I was following an east-west trunkline across southern Africa and into the Atlantic. The north-south trunkline I had come down an hour before lay already out of sight beyond the right edge of the map on the other side of Africa. I was traveling by railtube to visit space aliens, the second set of space aliens in history to land on Earth. They had called themselves Albuquerque and then they had landed in the South Atlantic. I bridged the world like Sun on an equally inevitable journey, I told myself, only a faster one.

The map was virtual of course but for this occasion glasses, or perhaps the Net itself, had chosen to present it as surreally real, no wavering forms as of the past but correcting for the individual imperfections of my eyes so that the image was sharper than direct vision. The pushpin meaning you-are-here stood in what the map colored as ocean and moved smoothly west while pretend paper fibers slid around it under microscopic control in tiny hyperreal movements that I could not have seen if the paper were real. The presentation included a tiny scritch sound like termites with diamond teeth for the moving pushpin and the smell of wood and leather and old books that in my imagination was the smell of a British explorer's study in 1900. The Net is more subtle than I know but it doesn't always let on.

The most important question to settle about Albuquerque was whether they were the same as the Rovers, and the Net could not answer that question so there was no chance that I could. Both had arrived from about the same direction and only centuries apart which is no time at all in a galaxy a hundred thousand light years across, and they told mutually consistent stories that conveniently could not be checked. They certainly knew each other. Were they enemies of each other as they said or friends? I could not find out, I was going because I had to see for myself, that is my job, it was the only right path.

Ahead was a pretend crease in the paper with pretend abrasion then a turn to the northwest as my route left the trunkline. Before then I had a ritual to perform. "Denis," I ordered (it's pronounced "Denise"), and glasses placed me back home in the Garden where the light is thin and cold and the air always has a little bite. Denis was sitting in the filamentary airframe on Street, dark against the brilliant scene. She knew the timing and had perhaps just put away her work on the variant life art project. Nobody else was in sight, only a few dangling loops of inactive airframe.

"Of taking many looks there is no end" she quoted from somewhere I didn't recognize.

“The dome of my skull would be a whispering gallery were it not that I can look out through the peepholes.” I’d hardly left and nothing needed saying, banter was part of the ritual.

She tilted her head forward. “Suppose a real angel came from heaven. He’d go mad, so have your blindfold ready.”

That was more like it. “Maybe they came to note the secret of Da Vinci’s drains” I answered pretending to pretend to take the joke seriously. I lifted my head to look at the communal nuclear computation experiment attached to the ceiling over Street and stretching out of sight in both directions with the airframe around it uncoiled into moving waves of smoke that carried rod-shaped and Y-shaped robots into and out of and around it, appearing and disappearing in the smoke, working to finish details so that it could be closed up for the first time.

“Then I’ll just stay here with my maiden aunt until it’s time to strike out on my own.”

“Oh? Are you going to go outbound when she dies? Voyage on the deep for ten days and nights to arrive at the frosty cliffs? Though Albuquerque arrived here as well. Careless of them.”

“Maybe I will” she said “but it looks like the Net is about to tell you what you’re doing so I should go. Give ’em hello.”

“Westward ho” I closed, and glasses crossfaded back to the map.

Rituals are supposed to be calming, but now I was past the fold in the map and impatience started to nibble at my fingertips. That was silly. I closed my aimless hands. “Are they little and green?” I don’t ask real questions ahead of a visit because my task is to see for myself.

The pushpin reached the turn and acceleration pressed me hard left in the harness as with a distant resonance and a few small pushes my railcar was unpacked at speed from the trunkline car and directed down the branchline. Glasses said in the same everyday voice it had used at the start to announce my arrival time “The place is little and green. Just as a heads up, the last stage of the trip will be ballistic. You’ll fly through the air and drop into a dome. That should be exciting. Also, once you leave the railcar you’ll be off the Net and off the grid. Your destination is Albuquerque’s embassy. It is an extension of Albuquerque’s territory on Earth, fully under Albuquerque’s control and subject only to agreed rules of war.”

I smiled at the surprise-packed little speech and wondered if the Net knew why I smiled. “Agreed rules of war?” For two angels, learning to talk to each other was like learning to put one toy block on top of another, of course they’d come to some kind of agreement.

“If Albuquerque does something dangerously out of bounds, the Net will declare war and take the embassy back swiftly.” Meaning, I supposed, blast it safely to atoms from one second to the next, nothing as leisurely as nuking it from orbit. Now that I thought of it it made sense that they’d talk early about war, war motives were important to get straight, no game theorist would overlook that.

With another push the car left the branchline for the final spur. My smile turned down at one end. The Net knew that I always took glasses off on a visit because my task is to see for myself, so when it said that I would be off the Net it did not mean only that I would be out of touch, it seemed to mean that it would be out of touch, rare and strange if true. Why would the Net mention so late that I was leaving the regular railtubes and that news of me would not get out? That’s what it would do if it planned to kill me, since to succeed it would have to keep the news from Deli as long as possible. Rover made me durable, the Net would have to delay Deli until my ashes were figuratively scattered. Or at least literally scattered, that might be long enough.

Well it probably did know why I smiled, but that’s part of the deal. The Net is the next closest thing to all-powerful and if someday it declared war on me and blasted me with lightning like Zeus then that would be that, Deli or no, and no warning or rules of war would save me.

“Reality” I ordered and glasses switched to a rendering of the inside of the pitch dark railcar, exaggerating edges slightly and picking out the locations of the interior sensors that I knew from experience were hard to notice by eye. Why did it choose now to be literal? I frowned and glasses corrected itself. The railcar and tube and I myself faded to glass and I seemed to sit in sunlight rushing across what had once been the floor of the Atlantic and was now level wasteland. Sun was west but still in dark sky above the band of salmon around the horizon. The Braeburn-red Peel stretched flat to the curve of the world, spiked with occasional stalks. The tube was set directly on the Peel, as usual in outlying areas.

Same old same old, nothing new under the round sky. The car was starting to decelerate, pressing me forward, so I looked ahead toward my destination. Glasses understood this time and magnified part of the view to show me a clear dome with green inside, vivid green that stood out on the dull red Peel. I couldn’t judge size and distance from this view and didn’t ask. Why was the car to be thrown into the dome instead of simply stopping at a door? You can walk from vacuum to air through a double door hardly thicker than a soap bubble. Did Albuquerque require drastic measures of isolation?

My weight shifted and the Peel suddenly receded as the railcar began to curve upward, the rollercoaster of the postentertainment age. Train rides don't normally include flying so this should be fun. Glasses scaled down the magnification as I paid more attention to the ride. In seconds, or so it seemed, the car left the end of the evacuated railtube with a thoop not at all like the pop I had been expecting. The car continued to rise like a thrown ball. The dome was in sight, greenery surrounding one white building.

"Turnover" announced glasses by surprise as without warning my seat swung around to face the other direction and slid backward, putting my destination behind me. I had hardly said "I like this amusement park" when with a rush and a push like an airplane crash in an avalanche the car decelerated violently to a dead stop. It was not a ride for Humpty Dumpty. I was there already.

While two sides of the hexagonal car opened the seat adjusted its harness then stood me up then lowered me to the ground outside. I was still in the amusement park for a few moments, but as I passed through the door glasses went dark. I was off the grid as promised; glasses could not work without power. I wiped glasses slowly from my eyes and it let go reluctantly like spidersilk, a few grams of inert machinery. The car behind me reached to pick the scrap from my fingertips then closed itself up.

I left my eyes closed to regain orientation. Take in one thing at a time. Sun shone on me from the left, the air was warm, no breeze. Of course there was no breeze. I took a deep breath. The grass under my feet felt like grass and smelled like grass. Was it a little stiffer than real grass? Rover taught me long ago that if it's big enough to see then it's probably smarter than me so I assumed that the grass was an array of unintelligible machines. I guess that was still true if it was real grass. Behind me must be the catcher that stopped the falling railcar. I heard the catcher slowly repositioning the car behind me with ticks and creaks of tension like a hot engine cooling. It was probably also a thrower.

According to the map from before I should be facing north and I should be close enough to the equator to see the outer edge of the Wheel. At this hour it was a tossup whether the Wheel was still sunlit. I knew where my feet were so I looked upward to find the sky composed with balanced light and dark. Half-lit Moon anchored the east, its one dark feature with radiating lines reminding me as always of Stickney Crater. A segment of crossing happened to catch sunlight between Moon and zenith, gesturing as if a cusp of light on moving water had frozen there.

I looked forward and found I had been brought to rest as honestly as a compass needle. At this latitude the Wheel crossed a modest stretch of sky to due north, but it spanned its reach bravely like an arched bridge to other worlds, which in a way it is. Grazing sunlight laid subdued glints on moving parts in a pattern that shifted like light in shallow water, as though the Wheel were awash in the universal ocean that extends to

eternity. People thought of it that way for centuries, space as an ocean. Maybe the scattered and the outbound still do. They live in shells not very different from this dome, I think they always hear the sea.

I looked around. The dome was hardly more than a hundred meters across, maybe no larger than it had to be to catch a flying railcar with a robust passenger. Green grass, to my right trees over an old-fashioned white house with a white picket fence, behind me, taller than the trees, the dark gray catcher slowly shifting the light gray railcar in its grip. I've always lived in cities and I couldn't name the trees but I did recognize Spanish moss hanging from the trees and an azalea bush in the yard. The grass was worn in a path to a gate, beside the gate a mailbox on a post and, slightly askew on a rock, a flowerpot with a cartoon face drawn on by hand. I couldn't name the flower either.

Without looking further I knew that this place had been made for me alone. The earliest one or two generations of people to become immortal were old enough to remember scenes like this, but they were pioneers at heart and nearly all had joined the Net. I was sure none would visit in person. I, the only one older than immortality, was also the only one held in the past like a pebble under deep strata. I am the only one to feel that a house like this, a reproduction of the past, is a living fact and result in itself rather than a layer in the stromatolite of causes that grows from past to future. The Net, as I take it, sees itself as a highly-evolved tree which is so much broader than the rings of history it keeps inside, or which looks down from so great a height that to it the past seems minute.

The house was nothing large, one story with an open porch and a pitched roof, two windows on one side of the porch, the grassy yard with stepping stones to the porch steps. Something seemed off. Is this the kind of house I might have seen on a trip to Louisiana when I was young? Maybe, but the outer screen door looked too straight and clean and the windows had a more modern feel. The moving parts should be a little worn and a little crooked. I looked to the gate. The number on the mailbox was D-503 and—oh—it was a fake mailbox, there was no way to put mail in it. That's when it hit me that this was not supposed to be a house from 2000, it was a kitschy retro house from 2060, a remodel or an outright imitation.

The face on the flowerpot smirked and said "You got it" and I laughed because that completed the picture. I remember exactly when those animated faces started to show up everywhere, it was 2066 when an Indonesian gimmick with smart paint took off like Little Lord Flaunt-the-Boy or pet rocks or the Toy Spore. This one would be from a few weeks later when people were fed up with it and the meme was turning snarky.

"I'm Rocket Petunia" said the flowerpot. "You can call me Rocket." Fair enough, arrive by rocket, call yourself Rocket.

“Mike.” Was the personality period too or was it modern? That was easy to test. “Is the grass real?”

Rocket smirked again. “We dropped down from heaven with costly bales and what was our first job? To see if the high works were comprehensible” but went on soberly enough “We caught a few ringers but most of it looks natural. The trees are good too, we can tell they were built recently but it mostly shows in the isotope ratios. As magnificent as on the first day of creation because they are on the first day.”

The question was answered decisively. Cheap gimmicks do not quote Goethe, only expensive gimmicks do that. “So they’re alive?”

“They were made real like Pinocchio. We may get saplings next spring.”

Now Pinocchio! The Net must have given Albuquerque much more than just a language database. “Then the tree trunk can count as a nose, but by a job do you mean a job? The Net told me this was an embassy.” I was thinking: If they’re trusted with data, why are they isolated in a dome? For the possible war? Or because I’m the one to be isolated?

“Ah well” said Rocket as if delaying to think, which it surely wasn’t “that is only the legal status.” Law meant whatever rules you agreed on with the Net, usually safety limits and resource sharing, the Net doesn’t even bother to drive a hard bargain unless you cause trouble. Here it must mean what glasses had called “agreed rules of war.” Rocket went on “But now the car of the sun is about to complete its daily round with a thunderclap.”

Alerted more by the movement of Rocket’s painted eyes than by its words I turned around in time to be startled. WHUM—FLASHBANG—I ducked too late and for no good reason as in a giant cobra strike the thrower flung the car out of the dome. That in itself was no surprise, though usually my car waits for me, but I had not expected lightning and thunder. In retrospect I recall that the wind of the throw ruffled the grass and swirled the trees, but at the time I hardly noticed. “What the?” I asked. I should mention that, though I’ve been surprised by explosion-like events many times over the centuries, it is even so not one of my characteristic mistakes.

Rocket cackled like a mad scientist. “I warned you!”

“I don’t think that was a plasma window” I concluded out loud, still facing the other direction and looking at the spot high on the dome where the car had left and the lightning had flashed. Air pressure outside was less than 1% of what it must be inside the dome where I could breathe. A plasma window could keep air in and would make light but not that much.

“Security measure. It’s to toast any little machines we might have stuck to the outside of the car. They can spot the big ones ahead of time.” Ah. Stringent isolation made sense after the Rovers caused such staggering trouble I supposed but it contrasted with how the Net dealt with reckless originals. Tailorbell around Uranus once blew away half their mass and over half their population in a broken experiment but the Net only doublechecked that safety margins protected everyone else. Tailorbell rejected help, originals who live out that far believe in themselves first even with evidence to the contrary, but the Net still didn’t treat them like an active culture of plague germs.

“So then. The Net doesn’t trust you except with one thing, which is information about me, and now look where I’ve gone and gotten myself to” I reasoned.

“Stuck on a desert island and you didn’t even bring your favorite book” agreed Rocket. “Your ship will never come in so won’t you step into my parlor miss Muffet? The fence marks the border of our embassy, out here you’re still on the Net’s *turf*.” It made sure I couldn’t miss the dumb pun in the tumble of idea vectors.

Instead I held up a finger to pause the conversation while I thought back. Predicting the thunderclap was another reference to Goethe’s Faust, the bit in heaven where the sun finishes its daily round, but Rocket had subtly cast itself as Mephistopheles from the beginning I decided, starting with its identity as a sarcastic cartoon. Was I being steered? Rocket was showing me that it was an angel. An angel is just as Rilke said, beautiful and terrifying, that’s why I call them that even though all it means is being supersmart. Aliens who flew between stars were likely to be angels on general principles, let alone aliens who arrived splashing Sun so dramatically.

Rocket was saying that I shouldn’t worry where I was being swept to, let the current flow. It was true too, as long as Deli is in the world it doesn’t matter, my only job is to see for myself. Deli doesn’t talk but Deli understands and acts, so if I am silt in Heraclitus’s river then the delta will be productive.

“Oh” I said to indicate that I was finished thinking without hinting at what I had thought.

“Angel and puppet, let the play begin!” said Rocket nailing down my conclusion. Then it flew up from its rock on a tail of fake rocket fire and I laughed again because the period imitation was so perfect. The flame was a little cartoonish, it moved with stretch and squash, the lower notes were not strong enough, it was just right. If the decade itself had paid as much attention to presentation I might have fonder memories of it.

I couldn’t help saying “I see your runoff is caught in a flying saucer.” I’ll probably never learn.

Rocket flew beside me to the door. I had to open the screen door myself, but then the front door opened from inside and a woman's voice said "Come in."

Inside was an entryway with a door to the left. "My name is Rocket Petunia" said the small woman in a finely engineered voice. "You may call me Petunia." We stepped through into a dim living room with period furniture and a period layout of the sofa facing a screenwall. Dim was period-correct if we were going to watch the screen. There was no sign of the two windows, maybe they were entirely fake. Rocket settled on the coffee table and arched an eyebrow at me.

"You two have the same name to emphasize that you are the same person" I suggested. The rug had a soft pad at least five centimeters deep in the fashion of the time and its pattern emphasized a path onward to a closed door. I took control as best I could by sitting on the couch without being asked.

"Later you will meet a third bot" said Petunia distancing herself from humanity. "Together we constitute Albuquerque on Earth." Did she mean that their all their brains were mobile? Why would they be if all three were confined to a dome? But "bot" means independent operation which implies intelligence, at least it has ever since intelligence became cheap which was most of my life ago.

"And you are ensnared in our web of deceit!" added Rocket. That was true, surely the house if you could take it apart and look would not be made of wood and work but of alien machinery for alien machinations.

Asking questions is a good way to get information out of angels. In my experience they rarely lie, I think because they can manipulate me as much as they need to by telling the truth selectively. Though who knows, maybe they're so good at lying that I rarely catch them. What was my top question?

Albuquerque had dropped off a side mission on the way and set up a camp in the outfront that they called Albuquerque on High. By standards of the outfront it wasn't far away, around fifteen days light time, but you can't communicate by hand signals over that distance. So I asked "Are you in touch with Albuquerque on High?"

"The Net offered use of its equipment. We have a continuous feed of data from Albuquerque on High, including the time when we were unable to communicate ourselves because we were decelerating near Sun" she answered with understatement "and we have sent messages from here. It should go without saying that the data are encrypted."

Wow, she says "the data are."

“It’s nice to have privacy when you’re talking to yourself” added Rocket looking at Petunia.

“We have been on Earth for six days, so our messages from here to Albuquerque on High remain in transit” finished Petunia.

The facts were interesting too, Albuquerque was being allowed information freedom but not physical freedom, at least not on Earth. “And of course you don’t have any other offshoots that you’re keeping secret.”

“Of course not!” said Rocket with exaggerated indignation. We will neither confirm nor deny.

My eyes had adjusted to the dim room and I could see more clearly. I hadn’t chosen the correct top question. I paused for a moment to get the wording right and went with “What’s your plan for me?” They obviously had one, the place was made for me.

“Finally you get to the point” said Petunia in a tone of reproving me for my slowness. “We will carry out the bargain with the Net that Rocket alluded to at the start.”

“I thought that was just playing a role.” I frowned. “Furthermore you knew that I thought that.” I started to speak again but stopped, what I was about to say would add nothing.

“You exaggerate our insight. Remember when glasses misunderstood you?”

“That was minutes ago.” Probably Albuquerque was online and trading information with the Net at this moment and only I was cut off. But I’m always offline on a visit.

This time Rocket answered “You think of the Net as if it were the primordial electrician wiring the universe, *zap zap* and it can do whatever it wants.”

“It can make full-size working trees from scratch on short notice. Are you saying the mistake should have bothered me more?”

Petunia again “You believe so despite definite knowledge that the Rovers were more capable than the Net. Rover made you.” They were trying to confuse me so I relaxed. I start off confused, they won’t make it worse.

“Glasses weighs 2.7 grams and has a bunch of jobs besides thinking, but even glasses is smart enough to tell what you’re looking at. Safety Margarine would’ve guessed we were behind it and you didn’t” Rocket said meaning the vapid entertainer not the later AI-consortium.

Yes, knowing what I want to see is a basic part of glasses' job which it usually does well. The mistake had seemed odd but I'd been distracted and hadn't thought about it. I could at least have guessed at a connection to the visit. "Hmm" I said.

The screenwall lit showing a stubby cylindrical spacecraft with an outer cover stretched over what gave the impression of a complex surface, closing rapidly on Sun. It was the Net's model of Albuquerque's ship on approach which I had looked at again and again from every angle. Petunia said "The Net understands the theory of heliobraking but it cannot build the hardware for the two-stage heliobraking that we did. We saved some mass on that." On the screen the ship vanished in brilliance as it skimmed the photosphere. I started to feel hot myself. When the ship emerged into view it was smaller and smooth and had acquired a bag of thin hot plasma from Sun which, I knew, it would soon use to finish the job of decelerating from interstellar to interplanetary speed. Using Sun to slow down is impressive but even the Net had believed that stealing fuel from it at the same time was impossible. The virtual camera pulled back to show two huge plumes thrown from Sun like wings rapidly stretching, the screen's 3D effect looking dramatic for the first time.

I felt dizzy so I suddenly stood up. In retrospect that may be the opposite of what a human does when dizzy. Petunia and Rocket looked at each other theatrically and Petunia said, in a gentler tone than she'd used before, "I'm sorry, we irradiated you severely. Fine resolution over an object as large as you demands high intensity. We went to a lot of trouble to get you to relax and keep still and it all came to this."

My thinking was muzzy but my memory of events remains clear. Petunia continued "Let's get you into the examination room." I was wobbly but she picked me up and carried me into the next room. A robot is as strong as its builder thinks it should be.

The examination room was no historical replica. It was a patterned hemisphere, chances were a sensor array, brightly lit with a hard white floor. Petunia continued talking as she adeptly bent my limbs and sat me on the small circular mat at the center, the focus of the array. "Now we understand your nickname *Pseudohomo radiodurans*. Please sit here. We want to observe the repair process, this system should be good at resolving the repetitive chemical reactions." She stuck something small to each side of my head, I could feel the things sticking in. That hurt.

Petunia stepped out and Rocket flew in, this time without the fake flame, to settle in front of the doorway. Presumably Rocket didn't bother the sensor array from there. I didn't try to move, if they needed me to stay put they would find a way to hold me in place, better to remain free.

“It’s OK to talk and look around” said Rocket. A thin wire cage extruded itself around me, from the floor I think, not to hold me in but seemingly part of the apparatus. “This system looks more at the atomic and molecular scale, staying still at that scale isn’t happening no matter what.”

I looked up. I was already starting to feel better. The wires continually rearranged themselves with a sweeping hum, perhaps scanning through some spectrum, and nothing else under the room-sized dome moved. I could understand the hierarchical repeating pattern of the array, hexagons each divided into units, each divided in turn into smaller units until they were too small to see, an Escher motif familiar from many of the Net’s machines. At each scale a few units stood out as different like black kernels of corn. Maybe some kind of coded aperture. Maybe two sensor systems interleaved. I only looked, I did not try to guess what it measured.

“When did you first meet Deli?” asked Rocket.

“Deli was delivered suborbitally. It was an overcast day and she had a nametag.” I noticed I was incoherent, I could remember but my memories did not arrange themselves into a story. I would be OK in a few more minutes.

“Don’t worry about it” said Rocket. “Is the sensor array hexagons all around the sphere?”

“It could be” I started then “No it couldn’t. It’s topologically impossible.” It had taken me a moment to remember that.

“It’s time for us to answer your question. Why was our first job on Earth to analyze the living things that the Net made for us here?”

“It’s past time to answer.” I wasn’t angry though. This was a harder visit than most but it’s all part of the job of seeing for myself.

“Because we had to prove to the Net that we could fulfill our end. Our bargain with the Net is to understand you. It gave us its shiny chrome model of you, rolling up what it knows about what you know and how you think and how you act. Tampering with glasses was our first test of the model.”

I turned it over. “How’m I doing?”

“You mean how is the Net doing.” Rocket still had the sharp voice but its words had smoothed. “The model is accurate so far but not fully detailed. It predicted the gist and tone of what you just said but because you took time to think it could not pin down the words. The model is strong at intentions and at habits like gestures and movement

profiles but weak at the specifics of conscious decisions. It has good information about the contents of your long-term memory but without fresh input it diverges pretty fast because it can't always tell what you're thinking about now, so it can't know what new ideas you're remembering. So the forecast horizon is not far enough for a lot of purposes. It also doesn't understand how to adjust for the way we just hurt you."

It was a bigger and more serious answer than I had expected. How does Rocket know all that? Does Rocket know all that? "It's hard to believe you could do better than the Net could after all this time" I said.

"And yet you know we are more capable than the Net. We came prepared for first contact, we are especially prepared to analyze alien hardware. Like you, made by Rover."

"Even so" I said but Rocket had a point. Rover was also more capable back then than the Net is now, witness Deli.

"Do you wonder why the Net leaves you alive?"

"Because of Deli." Deli was like a sovereign state unto herself, she was not easy for the Net to treat with. Partly because, after all, she didn't talk. An isolationist state if you like.

"For yourself as well. As long as the Net cannot build you itself, as long as your design has secrets that it does not know, it wants to hold on to you as a resource. It wants to learn your secrets. You're not dangerous, after all." Deli is dangerous enough for us both. Rocket did not say that messing too much with me might anger Deli.

"You're saying that if you succeed in understanding me then the Net won't need me any more."

"Not for the same reason at least. But you and Deli form a system, you are meant to work together. You are not named after Michael the archangel but after the word 'microphone'. You are Deli's ear to the world."

Actually I was named by my mom and dad when I was still a human, or at least so they told me. I remember the later events personally, not from records like the Net does, and I think that Deli and I only happened to be the last survivors of the group that Rover remade, I because I am myself made durable and Deli because she is like Rover made small. It was a joke to suggest that Rover picked me for my name. But the Net had also told me that Deli and I were created to be a team. I only said "If you say so" narrowing my eyes.

"You're making sense, let's try again. When did you first meet Deli?" asked Rocket.

This time the events came back to me in good order and I told the story as I often have.

By the end of the story the wires had disappeared and Petunia had returned. I felt my temples and found two knobs stuck there like the electrodes on Frankenstein's monster in a movie. That bugged me. We walked back into the living room where the lights had been turned up. The light from the conformal panels was strikingly different from the space light of the examination room. The knobs were already loose because things that stick into me count as injuries and heal so I pulled them off. They were ridged like old-fashioned control knobs. Feeling no need to be polite, I turned around and threw them away hard, back through the door.

To my surprise the examination room was not empty. A strange sparse machine of rods and cords clung to the sensor array, stretched across a third of it. It reached out sleekly in two directions simultaneously and caught the two flying knobs. Then it compacted itself into a smaller configuration and beetled out of view. That must be the third robot. There had been no time to register part and whole, I was left with only an impression of complexity and efficiency.

Petunia nodded to where I had been looking and began "Soon we will complete our model of you and then we will return you to Deli in Schani-Ga. Deli already recognizes but we should explain to you that our bargain is not fulfilled until we have also modeled Deli."

"Do you never get straight to the point?"

"We showed you a glimpse of Combat Petunia. You should refer to it as Combat Petunia. Its purpose is to overmatch Deli."

They already knew my opinion of that so I only scowled.

That's when they killed me. Or broke me until I healed, English doesn't have the right word, partly because sometimes when it happens Deli has to help me. It must have been faster than I can hear because I don't remember it. It didn't matter at all that I knew it was coming.