

## Sub-Tracks

By

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*I am the voice of the World Soul crying out in the wilderness.  
My sweet prima materia, you will be golden or you will be burned off as dross.*  
--Kalypso, "Bahuchara Mata" liner notes

"Who gives a shit what the surface track is?" asked Kalypso. "It could be your Aunt Frieda playing 'Love Me Tender' on the accordion, and they would still love me." The beautiful intersexual half-reclined on a marina-blue velvet chaise.

Big Mike wanted to bring in guest performers for the audio, but the sub-tracks would more than make up for any flaws in top tracking. The raw emos--that was what mattered, that was all that mattered. Kalypso knew it. We all knew it.

But producers, as a rule, didn't get it. "You're losing the mainstream," Big Mike complained.

"Wake up, Mikey. *That* mainstream is nothing but a trickle," Chari said. "No one loads albums for listening anymore." With her tapered fingers, Chari wove Kalypso's tresses into slender braids. She drew golden beads from a box and threaded them onto the ebony plaits.

I sat on the sofa with Scaler, who doodled caricatures of the producer on his magna-slate. The graffiti-like scrawls emphasized Mike's lumpy face and buggy eyes. He'd flash the image toward Chari and Kalypso when Mike wasn't looking, erase it, then begin again. Chari and I made little effort to muffle our snickers, but Kalypso allowed only the barest hint of a smile to flicker across hir coolly composed expression.

Kalypso dismissed Big Mike with a wave. "My ship awaits," ze said.

The magic words. Hir "ship" was a chamber at the top of the stairs whence all musical mystery voyages commenced.

Chari and I followed Kalypso on a slow procession to the sanctuary atop the mansion's tower. Chari continued to fuss over Kalypso's hair, but I knew it was just an excuse to touch hir. By the end of the day, one of us would be dismissed.

Fortunately, Kalypso needed me.

We'd grown up together on Arcadia. Located at the Arc-8A cross-point, it was not just a tourist trap, it was a tourist tar pit. Only glam-folk, casino employees, and members of the Piranha Syndicate actually called it home. Our mas used to make a living sanitizing dormers down at the Feenix Fyre. Since I was the older cousin, I had to keep an eye on Kalypso, which was no easy task. We wouldn't have had such a

hard time in edu-core had it not been for the tears. As a genetic intersexual, Kalypso was a mild curiosity, but as a cry-baby, ze was an irresistible target.

Chari waited until we had just about reached the upper landing before she remembered the jewelry box.

"T-boy, could you go back and fetch it?" Before I could tell her to get the damn thing herself, she added, "I have to redo this part." Again, her hand lingered at Kalypso's temple, brushing hir high, prominent cheekbone.

I stomped back down the long winding stairway, a slow burn spreading up from my stomach. Antoine was my real name, and I never had a problem with it, but you know how things happen. I wasn't crazy about T-boy, but it was a hell of a lot better than Tony-Tone, which Scaler tried to attach to me when the posse first formed, so I left it alone.

"Down already?" Scaler asked. He fiddled with the recording equipment arrayed along the wall under the stairs. A hook-net dangled over one ear.

I grabbed the stupid box and headed back up.

"Hey!" Scaler said. He tossed me a sealed pack of anti-m tubes. "Save yourself another trip."

"Thanks," I said, genuinely grateful. There were exactly 999 steps up to Kalypso's studio sanctuary.

The emotional outbursts and episodes that funded the Kalypso empire used to get hir butt kicked on a regular basis. If hir mother had been an Arc-8A legit, she could've taken Kalypso to the clinic for a good dosing, just as all the other parents with problem children did. Good thing she didn't. Who knew Kalypso'd be able to parley hir disadvantage into a career? Hir ma sure couldn't complain about the aerial suite her moody little golden goose scored for her.

Half way up the spire, I exchanged hands between the hefty box and the lighter package of pinkish tubes. Kalypso used AntiMatter to amplify the emos, to get hir into that Oz space where ze could weave hir magic. With its special ability to pry open the subconscious, hir audience also bleared on anti-m. Any musician with a shelf-life had to include sub-tracks. Kalypso was a blear-and-hooker's dream; ze could produce everything from the raw edge of rage to the sweet complexity of melancholy. Ze made the others look like amateurs who lay down nothing but cheap, recycled mood-spurts with all the subtlety of a porn-site hook.

I was wheezing by the time I reached the outer court. On the stair side of the archway, a fountain spilled into a basin where entrants had to wash their hands and feet. Kalypso insisted that it was to preserve the sanctity of the place. I say it was to keep the wine-colored silk shag that carpeted the interior in pristine condition. Dutifully, I removed my socks and ladled the cool water over my feet.

Chari's voice issued from inside. Was that desperation I heard? I shoved my damp feet into a pair of slippers. Kalypso and Chari were in the washroom. I waited in the central chamber counting my heartbeats.

"Call Ishiguro, then," Kalypso said. "We can all eat cotton candy and pretend we're blue clouds."

"But--"

"Not what I need right now, Char."

Yes! Game point goes to T-boy.

Chari's jaw was clenched when she emerged from the washroom. She glowered at me as she gathered up her daybag. The purple and scarlet ribbons that festooned her head made her look like a petulant doll. She'd have to set up camp downstairs with Scaler.

I smiled sweetly in return.

The mansion, with its lofty tower, perched on the upper fold of Arcadia so it overlooked the Ring. Three turrets with bow windows took full advantage of the metropolitan view. Pale marble columns rose from the deep ruby carpet. A domed skylight serving as the ceiling had an open view of the sky. Outside, Arcadia's artificial sun poured onto the base, but the sanctum was veiled in golden shadows. The day-shade for the windows was set to "Fields of Gold." It approximated sunrise on a real planet. Sunrise, new beginnings, creation--Kalypso liked to surround himself with symbolism.

Without acknowledging me, Kalypso padded barefoot across the main chamber. Ze wore purple and gold gypsy pants that rippled when ze moved, granting me a glimpse of hir tawny, muscular legs. Chari had fixed hir hook-net so that the tiny filament wires and their attachment nodes were hidden beneath beaded braids. Ze took hir place in the central turret where ze often composed hir symphonies to the waiting universe.

Away from the windows, the sanctum's sensors and recorders huddled unobtrusively on shelves inset in the back wall and picked up signals from the tiny antennae in the hook-net. The equipment detected the slightest shifts in the tides of hir emotions and recorded them. Only the dancing display of the equalizer indicated the translation from mood to music.

"How old are we?" ze said. The ship was moving.

"You were ten, I was eleven." I'd already decided on the scene. It was what made me valuable. Kalypso had unparalleled emotional capacity, but it was unfocused. Chari's input might be fine for the experimental tracks, but the quality emo-tracks came from the past. Our past. A past Kalypso had sacrificed to anti-m. Ze'd been hanging with Auntie M for so long that ze'd forgotten the way to Oz. Anti-Matter smeared out all the scenes and left behind only amorphous moods.

"Bird and Rico came after us in the playfield. We ran as fast as we could, but they caught us anyway." Bird and Rico were serial thugs from the class ahead. They had been getting more and more violent. There was no malice in the pursuit--that would have required a level of zeal long-drained from those two dead-blocks. It was fascination. Rico slugged tears out of Kalypso just so he could observe them.

"Bird had me pinned. I couldn't get to you. Rico had you pushed up against the volley-wall. He wore a new jacket, and we could both smell the packaging it came in. When he hit you, I yelled at him, but Bird shoved his gym-sham in my mouth. You tried to hold it in because you didn't want to give him the satisfaction of making you cry, but he wouldn't stop. You couldn't help it; you cried out."

"She comes to my rescue," Kalypso said. Ze started to fill in the bleared-out portions of hir memory with my prompts. The equalizer spiked and rolled as ze latched onto the attendant emotion.

"Like the Amazon of the story," I said.

"Atalanta," ze breathed.

The daycare supervisor, a towering copper-skinned woman and retired show-femme, had intervened more than once. I always saw the incident as a woman doing her job; Kalypso saw it as a warrior queen descending from Olympus bent on deliverance. In hir mind, she was every bit as legendary as the constellation that stood at the pinnacle of the sky every three AM over Arcadia. Ze had used this one before. It was on both best-ofs, which were still selling. Another track based on *profound gratitude* was a guaranteed draw.

I avoided anti-m, not only because keeping the memories whole gave me access to the sanctuary, but because I didn't like it. Emos were okay for Kalypso. They made hir deca-platinum. Emos had never been okay for me. I had to stay in control; I had to protect my cousin.

Later that night, we lay side by side in the dark, watching the laser-scape of night through the arching skylight. It was my favorite part of the recordings, when Kalypso wasn't too far adrift for words. Ze was blearing and wanted to know about *fervor* I recalled the first time we snuck into the Zone and hooked in at one of the booths. We were around ten. It made me sick. I threw up all over the chrome-webbed glass floor and got us kicked out. ut Kalypso loved it, crazy loved it, wouldn't stop talking about it.

"What about my hands?"

"You couldn't keep them still. I always knew you were about to bring it up when you started clenching and opening your fists. Like butterflies trying out wet wings." Ze loved details like that.

"Yesss . . ."

I felt hir body stir next to mine. Ze writhed, dancing to the invisible music of hir feelings. Hir hands began their butterfly undulation. Weeks from now, klub kids everywhere, down all eight legs of the cross-point, would be swaying beneath the same impulse. They would borrow Kalypso's heart for an hour. Ze would fill in the gaping anti-m holes with vibrant spells of color. Then, they would unhook and go back to the dead-grey real, carrying hir rainbow inside them.

Kalypso's overt displays of emotion enthralled me as much as they used to scare me. Most people believed that Kalypso's ability to spontaneously generate emos was a special quality of true hennadites. That was the romantic version. They never heard about the two capsule-cleaning women who couldn't score so much as a rit-supplement for the kid who was allergic to fortified synth-milk. They never saw the fight scars cosmetically sealed beneath the best dermal regeneration money could buy. They were never there to help me carry hir home from edu-core.

The next day we hit a snag. Leaning against a column by the back wall, I tried to make myself unobtrusive.

"There is not enough gold in the spectrum," ze said through hir teeth. "I need to go deeper." Ze clung to the sheer drapes as if deliberating about whether to yank them down. I wondered if ze was doing this for the recording or if it was spontaneous. *Restless frustration* was pretty much old hat. Even a slug-band could pull off a convincing rendition. "So much bullshit. There is no adequate reason for this much red."

"Do you want me to change the shades?" I offered.

Ze threw himself across a divan, scattering the cushions. "Ugly lions. All of them falling onto self-sharpened spikes in self-dug pits," ze moaned, one arm flung across his eyes. His usual velvet tenor overflowed with bitterness. "I'm so sick of the track-one: sorrow. Track-two: elation. Track-three: fill-in-the-blank desire. Track-four: guilt. It's so nauseatingly predictable."

"You are never predictable."

A sigh and ze was up again, flitting from curtain to pillar. Ze spun and fixed me with a glare. "If I want someone to lick my toe jam, I'll call Chari in."

Right. Deeper.

"Obliterit?" I asked. I didn't really think ze'd go for it, but his distress threatened to push me out of the tower.

His impatient silence was assent. It was also a signal that I had best get my ass downstairs and start that ball rolling. I cursed under my breath. Like shoes, all comm-links had to be left outside. They weren't even allowed in the outer court--again, ostensibly to preserve the sanctity of the place, but I knew Kalypso enjoyed having us trot up and down the stairs at his command.

Obliterit was liquid anti-m and way more potent than the inhalant, more...permanent. Mystics and extremists dabbled in it for kindred reasons. Funny how those who sought to open up to reality and those who wanted to flee from it took similar routes.

I wound down the spiral staircase yet again.

Chari was in the corner, tears streaking her cherub face and a broad grin curving up her sharply drawn fuchsia lips. Hooked in and blearing. It looked like a good ride. Scaler was half-hooked in, absorbing the new material and laying down loose sketch-tracks.

"Kalypso wants obliterit," I said.

Scaler frowned. "Ze's never done obliterit."

"Get it," I said.

Chari emerged from her blearing session. "Hey, T-boy, what's up?"

"Kalypso just put in for an oblit cruise," Scaler answered.

"Cool!" she said. "Could you imagine what ze could do soaring on O?" She did a few pirouettes around the room, humming a track from "Bahuchara Mata," the first album.

Scaler looked skeptical but shrugged. "If that's what Kalypso wants, that's what Kalypso gets. Check the fountain tonight."

Before I could slip back upstairs, Chari pumped me for the particulars she had missed out on. What was ze wearing? Where was ze standing when I left? When was the last time ze slept and for how long? She consumed each detail as if it were aphrochocolate. It was pathetic, but I ran the gamut of her questions because she asked politely. I enjoyed having the cute little viper kiss up to me for a change.

I started back up the 999 steps.

"What about the tint?" she called up to me when I was at thirty-two.

"Twilight Rose."

"Ha! I *knew* it." Satisfied, she flopped onto the couch. She reached for one of the AM inhalers that littered the surface of the mirrored coffee table and took a long drag. Re-affixing the hook-net, she sank back into the bright pillows to continue her blear

with rose-colored visuals.

That evening, Kalypso sat cross-legged on a fat midnight-blue cushion. Without preamble, ze twisted the stopper off the oblit. I held my breath while ze drained the vial. Ze closed hir eyes and inhaled deeply. The muscles along hir angular jaw clenched then relaxed.

"This is the final voyage," ze said.

Ze stood shakily. I reached out to help, but ze brushed my hands aside. I kept close watch as ze teetered from pillar to pillar.

"We shall enter the great abyss," ze said. "The universe has accepted the sacrifice." Ze was not talking to me, but ze expected me to remember. Ze'd ask for the details later--verbatim.

"We are going there," Kalypso declared. Ze pointed at the skylight.

"The S-curve?" I asked. It was the brightest, most noticeable constellation through the studio skylight this time of night.

Ze nodded as if captivated by the sight. Without Chari's ministrations, hir trinket-adorned hair no longer camouflaged the hook-net. Silver light glinted off crisscrossing filament. The recording equipment, alerted by an auto-start signal, blinked to life as hir emos became more substantial.

"Delphi's Daughter," I told hir, "the serpent that Apollo killed before taking over the oracle for himself."

"That bastard," ze said. The equalizer display bulged.

"Yeah, solar gods are pretty tyrannical."

We'd had this conversation before, almost word for word.

"I remember...such loss." ze said, and just like the previous times, the emotion behind it was genuine.

"We went out to the Needle. The star-guide told us about Delphi. You were so moved, you cried...as if you'd been there and saw it happen. You scared the tourists."

"All that beautiful magic stolen...the sword pierces her heart." Kalypso started to shake, hir gaze still fixed on the constellation. "All magic has fled the mortal world." There went the hands. Ze began to dance to hir silent music through the glade of hir sanctuary; hir fingers strummed a harp made of air and shadow. I guessed it was no longer too red for hir.

I let my anxiety subside. Maybe oblit wasn't so bad. This would be a superb sub-track.

I awoke in the cool pewter darkness of filtered daylight. The windows were at "Silver Moon." The brighter stars could still be discerned through the concave glass of the skylight. Arcadia's artificial sun, as bright as it was, could never quite lift the midnight shroud of space. I cursed myself for nodding off. How long had I been asleep?

The smell of decay swamped my nostrils. I bolted upright. *Kalypso!*

I stumbled through the grey shadows. *Gods, please, no.*

Ze was curled in the alcove of bay windows overlooking the Ring. Outside, laser lights and luminescent shafts stabbed into the sky from the boisterously competitive casinos. The musky odor hung more thickly in the enclosed space.

"Kalypso!" I fell to my knees next to hir body. My heart never beat so fast. Still warm, still breathing, still alive. Then, what was that smell...? Oh.

Grimly, I lifted hir under the shoulders and cradled hir in my arms. The spider wire laced through hir serpentine braids, glinting platinum amid the black and gold tendrils. A glance at the equalizer showed wild activity, so I had to be careful not to disturb the settings. Hir face drooped against my chest as I carried hir into the spacious washroom. A circular hot tub was raised three marble steps above the floor in the center of a column-encircled rotunda.

I stripped off hir soiled clothes. Hir wide-set eyes were still half-open, dark pools ringed with gold and fringed with long lashes. Hir lips pouted beneath hir elegant nose, but ze didn't stir. It took some time to unravel all the gold cording and the knots of silk, but eventually hir body was free of the costume.

Dark nipples crested hir eternally juvenile breasts. Hir long torso tapered into narrow hips and a hairless pubis. I rolled hir onto hir stomach. With a perfumed cloth, I swathed the swelling mounds of hir ass until they were once again immaculate and amber-scented. My hand lingered in the depression where the spine gently dipped at the small of hir back. Hir skin was softer than the silks ze wore. Shuddering, I withdrew my hand. I brought out a royal purple robe and wrapped hir in it. I had to get hir back out into the studio.

Kalypso needed me. I took care of things so ze could be free to create.

I decided I didn't like hir on obliterated. Ze didn't dance to invisible music. Ze didn't ask for anecdotes. Ze didn't have tantrums and demand that Delphi's Daughter appear in the skylight. Ze was barely cognizant of hir surroundings, let alone me. Scaler assured me it was typical, but it still made me uncomfortable. I had to help hir drink. Scaler sent up some supplement boosters so ze wouldn't starve. Puncturing the tender flesh in the crook of hir elbow was almost more than I could bear. After the third day, I went down to put in a call to Big Mike.

"Kalypso's not moving."

Mike was ecstatic. "The feed over here's going haywire. We might have a double album on this one." I glanced over at Scaler, who nodded in confirmation. Chari was so involved in gorging herself on the new tracks that she didn't even know I'd come down.

"Ze hasn't moved in three days, ever since the obliterated--"

"Look, T-boy, whatever you guys are doing over there, keep doing it," said Big Mike.

I'd never heard him so vehement. I wondered if Mr. Granite-ass was blearing.

"Mike, ze's drooling," I tried. "What if he keels?"

At least it got the slug-man's attention. "Yes, well, ze's still conscious, right?"

"If you can call it that."

"Ze's pumping out quality tracks, T-boy. Isn't that what ze was going for?"

"It's on your head, man." I cut the connection and went back up. Maybe I should call the medics. Screw Mike and his fucking label. Freaking parasites.

The track counter still whirred non-stop. I returned to my vigil over Kalypso, searching hir face for a trace of my cousin in there. When it became too unnerving, I watched the equalizer spike with vivid color and tried to convince myself that all was

going according to plan. It was where ze wanted to go.

We were in hir favorite turret, which I had lined with pillows and a quilted satin coverlet dragged from hir bed chamber. With a damp face cloth, I dabbed the saliva collecting at the corners of hir mouth and the sticky mucous gathering on hir upper lip.

Marine Depths sheltered us from the sudden Arcadian dawn. As the sapphire shade replaced the natural dimness of night, I decided it had gone on too long. I had to go after hir.

It took me awhile to affix the spare hook-net to my head. Two hours passed before I actually worked up the determination to loop in to Kalypso's feed. The pulses beat against my skull in synch with the equalizer. Since I was hooking sober, the emo-spikes were almost impossible to differentiate beyond poking sensations that alternately attracted and repulsed me. When the inevitable nausea rose in my throat I forced it away by focusing on hir slack face. The spikes were Kalypso. I sat down with what was left of the obliterated. A few drams of the magenta liquid remained at the bottom. I stretched out next to hir and dabbed the last droplets onto my tongue.

A slow fire spread over my taste buds. It slid down my throat like a fuse and detonated in my gut. A steel trap clamped down on my stomach and I couldn't breathe. Dark blobs oozed through my vision. *I'm coming, Kalypso, please wait for me....*

I was dying. Darkness. My body was not responding. I had to think. It took all of my concentration to inflate my lungs. Panic receded. Dark, dark eyes flecked with gold. I needed to find Kalypso. The urgency of the thought startled me.

Then, my pulse slammed me into awareness. I was alive. It was the oblit. My head hurt. Throbbing pain that erupted into colors.

Something moved in the darkness, hulking presences, almost colors, but not colors. I felt them rather than saw them. Blobs like whales drifted toward me. I couldn't tell if their motion was deliberate or random. Something was familiar in the drifting blobs.

*Kalypso, where are you?*

As if through fish eyes, I saw us: Kalypso and me. We lay side by side in the sanctum under the glass umbrella dome, web-headed, wired together. Together. A purple-not-purple globe sucked me into it, and I panicked, flailing and gulping for air.

*Once upon a time Antoine threw his lunchbox at the bullies chasing them. So Kalypso shared hir lunch with him. They sat hunched over a single box, parceling out chips, dividing the sandwich squares and fruit leathers. They took bites at the same time and chewed and swallowed in unison. It was the best lunch ever. Together.*

Belonging. Happiness.

My submission to joy disturbed me. *That is how it was.* I struggled against the memory. It wasn't like that. We just shared a lunch because I didn't have one. No big deal. Another behemoth bobbed toward me. It had me in its emerald embrace.

This is Kalypso's world, I told myself, reminding myself to breathe in the green.

*Once upon a time Kalypso and Antoine went to Lotus Land. They rode no-hands on the plunging jet-coaster. They laughed and shrieked so loudly the attendant almost stopped the ride. They laughed and laughed with wide-open mouths.*

Joy! Joy!

My heart felt like it was about to burst. But I didn't laugh out loud back then. That



was Kalypso. I was different.

*Kalypso's mother and Antoine's mother are in the med-centre. They talk behind their hands. Hir ma cries into his ma's shoulder. Antoine can see ma and ma through the aquarium glass. He couldn't stop the boys. They were too big. They hurt his cousin.*

Fear mixed with guilt.

More carnival eruptions. I was drowning. *Kalypso where are you?*

*We are atop the Feenix Fyre picking out constellations. You are impressed I know them. I have them all memorized because you love them. The star-guide wore a cowboy hat with glittering studs, a star hat. He put it on you, and it covered half your face down to your nose. I memorized the stars so you would look at me the same way you looked up at him, with admiration in your eyes. I tell you the stories behind the stars so you will like me.*

Happy pride. And more....

I didn't resist it. I let it wash over me. It was gentle as it was all consuming. Soft, like lotus unfolding on a still pond.

Love.

It was you. It was why you let me into your sanctuary, into your soul. I understood. Finally, I understood. The end of our search. You were there, with me. Together. I didn't care where we were going, where we ended up. I sank with you into the unfathomable depths.

After the darkness, there was light....

Pale blurs swam in black waters, like albino cavefish, blind and senseless. The waters smelled like puke. *Where are we, Kalypso? Kalypso? Panic.*

It was not Kalypso. When the blurs resolved into faces, the first one I saw was Scaler – or his teeth anyway. He only grinned that big when someone was in trouble. Next to him was Chari, and my vision didn't have to clear before I could tell she was pissed off. Her garishly outlined features fixed me with a cartoon scowl. Her nose seemed to grow sharper and longer, stretching out to impale me.

"Good going, moron, you almost trashed the entire thing." That was Chari.

"Fucking greenies," Scaler put in.

Confused shame....

Kalypso was in the alcove of the left turret, leaning against the glass.

Relief...stifled by caution. One long beaded braid cut a dark line down hir face, dividing hir faraway smile. The distance in hir gaze was not one of consciousness receded and coiled around the maw of oblit, but the distance of the sage from the maddening crowd. I wanted to close that distance, to rush to hir and catch hir in my arms. I wanted to press my cheek against the warm skin of hir breast and find my pulse in hir heartbeat. We went through it together, didn't we? We conquered the chaos and came back triumphant, right?

At least to touch hir and share that moment of recognition: I understand. But hir gaze stayed on the other side of the galaxy. The alert tension around hir searching eyes had eased. Kalypso had finally found peace in hir own skin.

"I love you."

Scaler's whooping laughter made me realize I'd spoken aloud. I didn't care. It

was the truest thing I'd ever said. Why should it embarrass me? Embarrassment.  
It was okay. I knew Kalypso understood.

"Final Voyage" was amazing whether blaring or not. To listen to it was like having a crystal shard thrown into the pool of your heart that sent ripples to the shores of your being. It was hir masterpiece, and I got to be there during its gestation and nativity. Pride. Seven nights and softly filtered days. Caring tinged with anxiety.

The posse treated me with spiny contempt after that week. Their grumbles rehashed how I almost contaminated Kalypso's magnum opus with my unrefined emotions. They were just jealous that I got to be there, really there. Besides, Mike & Co. were able to edit out all traces of my intrusion.

They could complain all they liked. Kalypso needed me.

"Don't you want to hear about that time we went to Lotus Land?" Joy suffused with childlike awe.

Kalypso shrugged without turning from the bay window. In the reflection, I could see hir small, private smile. Hir hands were still.

"It was the break between first and second studies, and we...." I stopped. I'd recounted it dozens of times for the appropriate tracks.

"I don't need it," ze said. "It's in the pools."

Where was it? I cast about desperately. I remembered the story, the words I'd used, but there was a smudge where the actual day had been. Ze was going to call Chari in, I just knew it. She'd breeze past me with her hair baubles and improvised fairy tales. I'd be exiled to the netherworld. I had to do something, had to engage hir.

"Remember when we stowed away on that tour cruiser? The lifters started up, and we thought we'd pee our pants...." Shit, where was the image? Fear, excitement, endless possibility.

Beyond hir, the silver city gleamed beneath the lofty white brilliance of synthesized sunlight. Kalypso was a shadow outlined in radiance. I stared, mesmerized by the light that slid along hir jaw line down hir slender neck and over the slope of hir bare shoulder. Inviolable, the play of light and flesh. Suddenly, all I wanted in the world was to trace my fingertips along that curving ecliptic. Ze sighed and broke the spell.

Kalypso needed me, but I had to remember more than just the words. "We were so scared we almost—"

"I don't need it anymore," ze said more quietly but with more finality. Without moving, ze had drifted leagues away from me.

The ship was departing, and this time I wasn't on it.