

THE MOLENSTRAAT MUSIC FESTIVAL

Sean Monaghan

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As he trimmed at the dying vine, Clancy saw an echo transport heading along the access road. Not many people came out this way, and certainly not riding an echo. Those that did show up at his corner of the lake usually rode animals, horses or dromedaries, or came in wagons towed by lumbering ground sloths. Doctor Symond rode a motorcycle.

Clancy kept trimming. The grape had caught some kind of fungus—Chappel’s perhaps, or just vine rot—but he figured he could save it. With some of the trimmings he might try propagating new vines.

Out on the lake some swans began hooting. There had been a cat around lately, stealing chicks and eggs. It was going to get itself killed soon, if one of the adults found it.

Clancy’s fingers ached. Arthritis, he knew. It was getting harder to straighten them out, harder to bend them. Symond had given him some pills to take, but Clancy had forgotten this morning. He wasn’t in the routine of having to remember to take a pill every morning. It wouldn’t be far off, though. At his age—eighty-seven—a regimen of daily medications impacted plenty of people. Those that didn’t have implants.

Clancy saw the echo transport would be arriving at his open gate in a couple of minutes. He folded the secateurs and took the clippings to his shaded patio, putting them into a vase of treated water. Hopefully they would suck up the antifungal and take healthily when he planted them out.

With a glance at the approaching visitors, Clancy went inside, found the pill, and washed it down with a gulp of water.

Symond was an old-school doctor, liked the less invasive methods. Still, he had suggested Clancy might want to consider implants. “Like a little webwork filigree

through your joints and tendons. It massages and dissolves build-up. It grows from a micro-stud." He'd touched the back of Clancy's hand to show where he would inject it.

The echo transport slowed as it passed through the gate opening. The flickerings of vapor swirled around it, making it look as though it were a kind of hazy ball. Momentary bolts lanced out in wide arcs, meeting the ground and shuddering staccato-like as they faded away.

As the transport slowed, the substance of the ball diminished further and he could clearly see the occupants. Two women. One older, though perhaps less than half his age, the other much younger, barely more than a girl. The girl stared at him with blank, unwavering eyes. Disconcerting, he thought.

The transport platform settled to the ground, and the vapors of the engine faded away completely. It was an older vehicle. A four-seater, with an open roof. He could see where the panels were scuffed, a couple out of alignment.

"Hello?" the older woman called. "Clancy Jonah?"

They'd parked directly in front of the patio. The girl didn't move.

"I'm Clancy," he said.

"I'm Tamsin Birchall." She stepped down from the vehicle. She was tall, thin-legged, and wasp-waisted. She'd had work done, but then everybody did these days, didn't they? She was wearing a blue, single-piece dress that seemed to wrap around her legs almost like slacks as she walked. Her hips swayed, but her shoulders stayed steady. She could be a dancer.

"I can help you?" he said. He pointed back the way they'd come. "Stay on that road for another six or seven miles, you'll come to a nice, isolated beach. The water's a long way down now, with the dry, but it's still pleasant enough. The trees grow down to the sand's edge, and there are some grassy picnic spots. Another ten miles on, up Freyberg Road, there's a rooming house."

"It's not directions I'm looking for."

"Well, I don't know that I'm much use for anything else."

Tamsin nodded. "This is a nice garden," she said. "Lush." Her nostrils flared, and she wafted her hands at her face, breathing in the scents. She blinked at him. She had moon eyes, bright and wide, with tiny irises. Her dark hair was cut in a see-saw bob, the ends all jagged, sawtooth waves that settled in perfect alignment.

"I've got infections and blight," he told her. "But I don't have much else to occupy me." He didn't mention his painting. He wasn't well known here—most of his works sold off-world—but sometimes there were people who thought him public property.

"It must be nice out here. Out of the bustle."

Clancy nodded. Kaylee was a sparsely populated planet. Fewer than six million people in a land area greater than Earth's, and only marginally smaller than Oblong and Seychel, his main markets.

Tamsin pointed at the cuttings. "Grapes?"

"Yes," he said. "The climate's a bit too cool for them here. It leaves them vulnerable. I do get a few bunches most years, but this one's infected, so I'm being ruthless. Perhaps you have a remedy?"

She shook her head. "I seem to be expert at killing plants. I can't have them in the house, it feels cruel."

"I'll think of something."

Tamsin smiled. The girl hadn't moved from the landed transport.

"You're not here to talk about my garden, though, are you?" he said.

With a glance back at the girl, the woman stepped up onto the patio. He could see that she was older than she appeared at a distance. She might even be in her fifties. "Perhaps we could talk inside."

“And leave her in the sun?” With its field turned off, the transport was simply an unshaded nest of chairs.

Tamsin turned. “Eleanor,” she called. “El? Come on over.”

Clancy hadn’t meant that. He’d actually hoped they would leave, in a way. Company was nice, but better if it was invited company. Not someone who invited themselves, and invited themselves inside. Even attractive ones.

The girl blinked, looked at them, and got out of the vehicle. She too was older than Clancy had first thought. An adult. Not as tall as her mother—Clancy assumed the relationship—nor as lithe and elegant. Her right hand twitched as she walked over. She was dressed in dark culottes and a black blouse, gold earrings and a beaded necklace. Her hairstyle matched her mother’s.

“What is it you want to talk about?” Clancy said.

The younger woman came to the patio, caught her foot on the step and almost stumbled. She caught herself and hobbled up.

Tamsin took her hand, helping her balance.

“I’ve got it,” Eleanor said. “I’m okay.” She spoke each word clearly, almost as if she’d been raised in the south, but there was a measured slowness to getting the words out. Her mother definitely sounded northern.

Tamsin let go of her hand. “Why don’t you tell Mr. Jonah why we’ve come out here?” Eleanor didn’t respond.

“We’ve come from Meredith,” Tamsin said.

“That’s a long way.” The city was two days’ journey, by ground, between the lakes. An hour by air, from Parkes.

“We want to enter the Molenstraat Music Festival. Eleanor does.”

The slightest flicker of Eleanor’s eyes. Clancy kept watching her.

“I don’t know how I can help.” He did, but that was so long behind him that he would do everything he could to get them off his property.

“We need a teacher,” Tamsin said.

“I’m not a teacher. I raise my garden, I walk along the lake shore, maybe walk out on the jetty and try to catch some fish. I paint.” He stopped speaking.

“We know who you are,” Eleanor said, with her slow crisp speaking pattern. “We know you played with the Ocatella Symphony for thirty years. We know that you taught everyone, not just in the cello, but all the strings, and then the percussion and woodwinds. You’re a great music teacher.”

Clancy didn’t respond. Tamsin stared at Eleanor. The young woman looked around at her mother. “What?”

“Well,” Tamsin said. “That’s the most I’ve heard you say at once in five years.”

“Yes.”

Tamsin looked at Clancy, her gaze fixed and piercing. She took a deep breath. “Eleanor fell from a horse in 3218.”

For a moment, the number meant nothing to him. An Earth date, he realized. About five years back. It was standard usage, accepted, even encouraged, but outside of the main centers most people used the zero-register from the arrival of Kaylee’s first inhabitants. Kaylee’s year was about fourteen days longer than Earth’s. In the six hundred year history there had been occasional campaigns to align with the old planet. Ideas ranged from skipping a year every twenty-five or so to arbitrarily using the Earth calendar. Kaylee’s inclination was so low, the seasons varying so little that, they argued, the missing year simply wouldn’t matter.

“You’re from Earth?” he said. Despite his longevity, he’d met few off-world people excepting buyers.

Tamsin shook her head. “My father liked the idea of aligning. We only had Earth calendars in the house.” She managed a smile. “It’s a hard habit to break.”

Clancy nodded. Unusual.

He realized he hadn't acknowledged the accident. "A horse?" he said.

"She was twenty-two. Kaylee years. Out by—"

"I was twenty-two," Eleanor said. "Kaylee years. Out on the shores of Cermmanon. Three friends. I fell off and hit my head. I'm not dead. I haven't been back to the lake ever. The end." She plunked herself down in one of the patio chairs. "You should get some hydrangeas."

Tamsin lifted her hands away from her body.

"I want to see his cello," Eleanor said.

"Let me make some coffee," Clancy said. "We can talk."

Tamsin sighed, dropping her hands.

"Don't get your hopes up," he said. "Look at my hands. I can barely manage pruning, let alone hold a bow the way I used to." Clancy hesitated. "I don't play anymore," he said. "Too hard on my hands."

"But you paint," Eleanor said. "Don't lie. You can hold a paintbrush just fine."

Clancy smiled. "I do."

"And you paint very well."

"Lucky, I suppose. It's a different thing. If anything it's good for my hands."

"I find that hard to believe," Eleanor said.

"You should be more polite," Tamsin said.

"Yes I should."

"Let me get the coffee," Clancy said. "Please, sit." He indicated another of the chairs.

Tamsin nodded, sat. Clancy went inside.

Perhaps after all it was good to have company, he thought. He was becoming curmudgeonly in his aging, needed to visit more. That's what Symond would tell him. "As much about brain lubrication as anything. Work your body and work your brain. Don't let those neural networks seize up."

"House," Clancy said at the kitchen bench. "Coffee, plunged. Three cups."

"Guests?" the house's melodious voice said.

"Two."

"Big coffee drinkers?"

"Sure. Enough for six cups then. Milk, cinnamon. Chocolate on the side."

"Archerland or imported?"

"Archerland is fine." It was export quality anyway.

"Five minutes," the house said. From inside the walls Clancy heard the faintest whirring as it worked.

"On the patio, please."

"Wise choice."

Clancy returned to his guests. He pulled one of the chairs around and sat, the third corner of a triangle, still facing the garden. The grapevine looked worse from this angle.

"How do you know I have a cello?" he said. He'd almost said "What makes you think . . .", but there was no denying. Despite her strangeness, Eleanor seemed perceptive.

"I—" Tamsin began.

"I can hear it," Eleanor said. "It's in a cupboard or something." She didn't look at him. She seemed to be staring at a spot where she imagined he might put in some hydrangeas.

"Eleanor played," Tamsin said. "She was very good. Very good. But then the accident."

"The Accident," Eleanor said so that he could hear the capital letter. It wasn't just an accident, it was The Accident.

"She would have gone to the orchestra. She'd auditioned. They would have accepted her."

"Twenty-two is old to be auditioning," Clancy said. Most people were trying out before they were twenty, right out of school. If you were especially talented it would have been sooner.

"On Nialel," Tamsin said. "She'd already been in the Meredith Symphony for years."

"Oh." Clancy managed. Nialel was one of the first worlds. A place with a population of billions. "You don't mean the Nialel Bach?"

"Exactly," Eleanor said. "Then I bashed my head in."

"I never heard about it, though," Clancy said. He didn't read the press every day, but he did keep up with most music news. Someone from Kaylee getting accepted into the NBO should have rung bells around the planet.

"It was never confirmed," Tamsin said. "The accident."

Out on the lake the swans splashed, panicked. They squawked and screeched. Probably a seal coming up fast, looking for lunch.

"What was that?" Eleanor said, standing. "What?"

"Just swans." The lake inlet wasn't visible from this side of the house.

"Oh. Swans." Eleanor sat.

Clancy moved to look at Tamsin, meeting her eyes. Eleanor stared off again.

"I can't teach at that level," he said. Again, it felt like the wrong thing to say. He should have said that he couldn't teach at all. Now he'd given her a wedge. "I'd like to help, but . . . well, surely there's someone in Meredith who would take her on."

"Coffee," the house said. A slot opened in the wall, revealing a tray with the plunger, spoons, three cups and a milk jug. Also a small plate of cookies. Nice touch, Clancy thought.

Clancy retrieved the tray, placed it on the low table between the chairs. He poured.

"Sweetener?" Eleanor said. "Oh." She picked up a blue spoon and stirred it until its bowl dissolved.

"It's been hard," Tamsin said. "She loses focus. I mean, when she plays, it's good, but she wanders off, sometimes stops playing in the middle of a piece."

"Because of the injury?"

"Yes."

"I can't help with that. Perhaps some medication? Or an implant. Can't they do something with that? It's common enough with patients. Injury, mental health, even just healthy people who want regular access and education."

"Nothing's going in my head," Eleanor said.

"Honey, please."

"Nothing."

Tamsin looked at Clancy. "She refuses an implant. We know where the injured sites are. The surgeon described it to me. A couple of little microscopic spots, injected through her ear, or her eye."

"I'm listening to you," Eleanor said. "Listening."

"I understand how those procedures work," Clancy said.

"Oh," Tamsin said. "Of course, you're older, aren't you? You've probably had it done."

Clancy laughed, shook his head. "No. No Alzheimer's here. Not yet."

"Preventative," Eleanor says. She looks at him, her eyes even more piercing than her mother's.

Clancy rubbed his hands together. "I guess I'm not ready for that."

"We can pay you," Tamsin said.

"Of course."

The corners of Tamsin's mouth flitted upward. Clancy nodded to himself. She'd been expecting him to decline payment.

"If you had the procedure," Clancy said, "you'd regain your talent very quickly."

"Yes, yes."

"Don't you have power of attorney?" he said to Tamsin.

"Limited."

Eleanor sipped from her coffee. She dissolved another spoon. Tipping the cup back, she drained it and set it on the table. She stood up. "Where's the cello?" she said. "Let me show you."

"Let's keep talking a while," he said.

"Sure." She stomped by him and went through the front door.

Tamsin set down her own coffee. "Eleanor. Back here."

But she'd gone.

Clancy followed her in. He found her standing in the center of the living room, staring at the painting above the fireplace.

"I didn't invite you in," he said.

"Yes you did." She didn't turn to face him. "You own a cello. That's an invitation."

In a way he kind of liked her smart-alecky oddness. Limited inhibitions.

"Nice painting," she said.

It was one he'd never sent for sale. Sunset across the lake, the patterns of light wiped across the sky and reflected in the lake's rippled surface. Some swans paddling in the foreground, and seals on a rock, looking around, surprised once again that the day was over.

"It's very vivid," Eleanor said. "My therapist said I should try painting."

"It's soothing," he said.

"You must make a lot of money."

"How so?" Clancy heard Tamsin come up behind him.

"Selling these," Eleanor said. She turned to face him.

Clancy nodded. "I sell a few."

"Big money?"

"I do all right." Perhaps she was a bit *too* forthright.

"Gorgeous," Tamsin said.

But Eleanor had moved on from the oil. She walked across the living room and pulled open the cupboard.

"Hey," Clancy said. He took a couple of steps.

"It's all right." Eleanor took the case out and laid it on the floor. She flicked open the catches and lifted the lid.

Light from the windows sparkled off the cello's polished surface.

"Oh my," Eleanor said. She took the instrument out, with its bow, and balanced it on the endpin. "This is a very lovely instrument. A Podjurski."

"It's from Nialel," Clancy said. "Very expensive. How did you find it?"

"I heard it. I told you that. It didn't want to be in a cupboard. May I?"

"Now you're asking permission?"

Eleanor didn't respond. She stared at him. Not at him, he thought, but through him. No one said anything. Tamsin took a couple more steps into the room, looking at the painting.

It's become a contest, Clancy thought. The pair of us, both waiting for the other to back down. He wanted to tell her to put it away, to get her greasy, dirty hands off his wonderful cello. But he also wanted to hear her play, hear if she was as extraordinary as the story suggested.

"You painted this?" Tamsin said.

Clancy kept watching Eleanor. She broke off, looked at the other door, lifted the cello and walked through to the back of the house.

"Hey," Clancy said, as Tamsin said, "It's very good."

Clancy glanced at her. She was still staring at the oil. "Thanks," he managed before following Eleanor and his cello.

She'd gone right through to the sunroom and pulled a chair up to the big windows. As Clancy came in, she was just settling down with the cello between her legs.

"What are you doing?" he said. He went right around and stood directly in front of her.

"You have a nice view," she said. She took the bow and tuned the cello.

Quickly.

She made a single pass, lowered the bow, turned each of the pegs and played a scale. It had been badly out of tune—from years in a cupboard—but she'd been immediately able to get it in tune without even a second pass.

Clancy stepped back. The young woman knew the instrument. Better than he ever would.

"Oh my," Tamsin said, coming into the room. "Your painting is from here."

Clancy glanced at his easel. "This is where I paint." He lifted his index finger to his lips. "Let me listen."

Eleanor played a couple more scales. "Nice timbre," she said.

She played a long part of Beethoven's Cello Sonata No. 3, segueing into Jourdain's *The Butterfly Sings Silently*, followed by Andrea's Suite 13, a piece that usually was played on oboe, but with the way she played, seemed as if it belonged to strings. To the cello.

The hair on Clancy's neck stood on end.

There was nothing he could teach her.

Tamsin folded her arms and leant back against the doorframe.

Eleanor shifted to Shirakawa's *Sonata for Yuki*, playing softly with a controlled legato and letting the volume and tempo increase in a way Shirakawa might have imagined, but knew would be rarely realized.

As she came to the gigue, Eleanor stopped.

Clancy jumped. The sudden silence was unsettling. The piece played on in his head, but Eleanor just stared at the ground.

"See," Tamsin whispered.

Eleanor looked up. "This sure is a small house."

"Four rooms," Clancy said. He felt shaken and unnerved by the natural power of her playing.

He knew musicians often were caught up in a piece, to the exclusion of the world around them. Sometimes he had that feeling now as he painted. With her, though, it was as if there were a switch that turned that off and brought her back to the present as though nothing had happened. As if she hadn't been playing at all.

He remembered himself the elation that came from playing with a fervor that elevated him like some kind of drug. The effects lingered. He'd never come out of that state to make an inane and unconnected observation the way she had.

"If you're going to teach me," she said, "I'm going to need somewhere to stay. Parkes is too far away."

Clancy looked at Tamsin. "I can't teach her.

Tamsin stayed where she was. She licked her lips.

"You need an implant," Clancy said to Eleanor. "Your playing is extraordinary. No wonder you were auditioning for the NBO."

Eleanor looked around at Tamsin. Her mother nodded at her.

"I stopped, didn't I?"

Clancy nodded. "But aside from that, fantastic. There's nothing I can do."

"I need to train through it."

"You need something medical. Probably. It's not something I can help with. I could teach you if you were six years old and had never picked up an instrument. I would love to do that. Such talent." He leaned back against the glass, annoyed with himself

again. He'd admitted that he would teach, even if not her. That would be just the opening Tamsin could use to force the wedge.

"Right now, you're so far beyond what I can do," he said. "It's outside my area of expertise."

"Implants mess with you," Eleanor said. "There's too much noise. You should see my friends. You ask them a question and they go blank for a split second, then they know. What's the difference, percentage-wise, of the land area of Nialel compared to Oblong? Quick, answer."

"What?"

"Who was the fourth daughter of the second president of Verlain after the second dynasty?"

Clancy looked at Tamsin. Was the girl having an episode?

Tamsin shrugged.

"There's too much noise." Holding the cello's neck, she stood. "I wouldn't be able to concentrate."

"How do you know? Anyway, it doesn't have to be a full implant. Just enough to stop the fugue. Or the break, or what have you."

"Fugue is good," Eleanor said. "Perfect."

"Someone in Meredith could do it."

"No one," Eleanor said, "is putting anything in my head." She sat down and mis-fingered, drawing the bow across a discordant set of notes.

"I . . ." Clancy trailed off. They weren't going to leave with a no, he thought.

"She needs someone like you," Tamsin said. "Someone inspiring."

"Three hundred and fifty marks," he said. Perhaps making the price unattainable would make them rethink. "Per day. Two hours of lessons"—he didn't know what he would teach—"and two hours of practice. She has to walk on the beach, too, to get out of the house."

"Three hundred," Eleanor said. "Two and a half hours of lessons."

Well, that hadn't worked.

"Where will she stay, though?" Tamsin said. "I imagined you having more space."

Clancy sighed. "I'll have the house realign. It'll add on a few rooms. I guess that Mom wants to stay too?"

Eleanor's face brightened. "That would be fabulous."

* * *

The vine had died. Clancy saw that he'd taken too much off, the rest too infected and weak to go on. And none of the cuttings were showing signs of taking at all. He would have to get to Parkes and see if he could get a new vine. It would be a couple of years before any grapes came in now. He would miss eating them.

He took his bicycle out through the garden and along the forest path, heading for the jetty. The smell of the pines immediately drew him away from the house, out into the wilderness. The bike rattled as it bumped over roots and divots in the well-worn trail. Squirrels scampered out of his way. One of the black-and-white-striped cats lay curled on a stump.

It was ten days until the Molenstraat Music Festival, and he couldn't imagine that Eleanor would be ready. She'd practiced as agreed, and walked, and listened to recordings, and read his whole stack's worth of music theory books. She'd read everything she'd had time and concentration for. Biographies of Mozart and McCartney and Tulappain. The history of music and the history of art. She devoured books, but wasn't so good at retention.

As he came around into view, he saw Eleanor sitting at the end of the jetty. She dangled her feet out over the water. In the time since she'd arrived here—two months—the lake had dropped a further three feet.

The forecasters said rain was coming, but it might be weeks away. The southern ocean was gyring again, and the warmer waters were moving back into the currents. The air was swelling with northbound clouds. Eventually, the predictions said, the moisture-laden air would traverse the land and fill the watershed again. Clancy had been around long enough to know that it would happen, though maybe not as quickly as the meteorologists might hope.

He put his bicycle against the post at the head of the jetty and started down. Some coots paddled in with the swans, and a group of egrets walked in the muddy shallows, heads darting down for the guppies and carp.

"Hello," Eleanor said as Clancy walked to her. "I think the lake's running out of water."

She said this most days, whether out here or on the forest trail or in the practice room. It was usually the first thing she greeted him with.

"I think the lake's got a lot more water than we know."

"The top half is gone," she said, looking around now. That was new.

"Half?"

"Look down," she said.

Clancy looked. He saw that the last of the jetty's supporting posts met the lakebed at the same place as the water's surface. Perhaps this was why the vine had died. He watered it regularly, but it was still a stressful time. So dry.

"See?"

"That's fifteen feet from high water," he told her. "The lake's three hundred feet deep at its lowest point."

"Think of it like a cone," she said. "Inverted. Most of the volume is in the top few feet. Every foot down, there's less and less."

"It will rain soon. I've got pancakes." The house had made them as soon as he'd gotten up.

"Maple syrup?"

"Just like every day. Where's your mom?" Clancy sat beside her.

"At the house."

Tamsin hadn't been there when he'd left. It wasn't like her to vanish that way. She did take long walks through the forest, but rarely without letting them know. He hoped that she'd just gone into Parkes.

Tamsin had settled in. She'd negotiated the payment, in exchange for gardening, maintenance, and supply trips to Parkes. Very shrewd, he thought. On the first day he'd wanted them to leave almost right away, but every day that passed they were more and more embedded. Affixed, as if with a glue that was curing harder and harder every week.

At least, he thought, knowing it was a grumpy, curmudgeonly thought, they would leave soon for the festival.

Not that Eleanor would be ready. Despite himself, he was disappointed in himself for failing her.

Clancy set the coarse tea towel down and unwrapped the pancakes. He took the syrup bottle from his pocket and handed it to her.

The jetty was an extension of the house, constructed from the same grown materials. Its surface looked similar to the house's floorboards, but was rougher.

"Today," she said, pouring, "I'm going to play Brahms's Cello Sonata No. 1 right through." She rolled up the pancake and put one end in her mouth.

"That's great," he said. Fifty-five days of lessons, he thought, and they were no closer. She could read a score once and know it perfectly—she never played with the score in front of her—but she still had dropouts. Nothing he could do was going to fix that, despite the incremental improvements that Tamsin noticed.

Sometimes Eleanor would play four or five pieces, segueing perfectly, as she had that first day, but mostly she faltered much sooner.

Occasionally Clancy had suggested the medical path again. He thought it was worth another go.

"Ten days," he said. He poured syrup on the next pancake and rolled it.

"I'll be ready," Eleanor said. "I want to do duMarrier's *Eagle Music*."

"That's a tough piece."

"I know."

Across the inlet a seal surged up out of the water onto an exposed rock. The animal barked, flopped along, then lay down, its pink mouth wide open. Rivulets ran away from its body. Clancy could see more seals in the water nearby, their heads bobbing as they looked around.

"I'm glad you built the jetty on this side," Eleanor said. "The seals stink."

She was right. All the oils and hair and skin that the seals shed in their sleeping spots baked in the sun and gave off a disgusting odor. They were progressively moving down the rocks—which they preferred to the muddy beach side—leaving a trail of stinky, abandoned sleeping hollows.

"I didn't build the jetty." He'd told her this before. It had been here when he'd bought the place.

"I wish I could paint or something," she said. "I wish I was creative like you."

Clancy was taken aback. How could she not see how creative she was? He told her. Eleanor shook her head. "I play well, I know that."

"You play exceptionally."

"But it's just the notes, the spiccato or whatever, the tempo. That's all. It's like math."

"Who told you that?"

Eleanor shrugged.

"The way you play is stunning," Clancy told her. "I get what you say about the notes, but it's always more than that. It's the way you come at the notes. The way you bow, the energy you have, the concentration. Your performances are unique."

"Yes. Uniquely truncated," Eleanor said with a laugh.

"It takes creativity to play the way you do, believe me."

Eleanor looked away, unconvinced.

"Any donkey with half a brain can run a bow across a cello's strings. I can play well, but with you, I know there's something special."

She gave him a smile, humoring him. "You don't think I'm ready, do you?" She took another pancake. The syrup ran out between her fingers.

Clancy found the pack of wet cloths and passed it to her. "Sorry," he said.

"What if I don't worry about it?" she said. "Maybe in front of an audience I won't falter."

"Do you think that's possible?" He took a bite of pancake and said, "There's something about being on the stage."

"I know. I remember. Do you get that with painting?"

"Painting is a solitary experience," he said. "There's no audience, no one to cheer you on or buoy you with the reverent silence."

Eleanor laughed. "I'd like to play for an audience again. I miss it."

He understood. He missed it himself. But this was what he had chosen.

Eleanor lowered her head. "Maybe Mom's right. Maybe I should just get the implant?"

Clancy didn't reply. His hands hadn't gotten any better. The medications he took—some anonymous steroids and balms from the southern honey snapper glands—helped a lot, but it was a progressive disease. Eventually he would lose the effective use of his hands altogether.

He stretched his arm out, level with his shoulder, fingers splayed as far as the knobbly joints would allow. He wondered how long it would take for Symond's hand implant to improve the functioning if he got one.

It was a very different thing, he knew, to having something in your head, but he was resistant, just as she was.

"That's why you get tired playing," Eleanor said, looking at his half-ruined hand. "You should take a pill right before we practice together."

"Yeah, I don't think it works like that."

After the first week, when it was clear the pair were settling in, he'd ordered another cello. It was a Domdom, a cheap, generic print-clone, but it was adequate for her. She made it sound almost as good as the Podjurski. Tamsin had collected it on one of her trips to Parkes.

Sometimes he and Eleanor had played together. He discovered then that she would be able to play for longer while he played too, but he ran out of energy. Hands aching, he would have to stop, and then moments later, she would too.

Eleanor took a pancake and threw it out over the water at the seals. The pancake spun like a discus, almost hovering as it sped out. After fifty yards the air caught it and it buckled and, glide lost, tumbled to the water. Half of the bobbing seals disappeared. One popped up moments later, the pancake in its mouth.

Eleanor laughed.

Clancy heard something from beyond the trees. An artificial sound. An echo transport coming along the access road.

"Mom," Eleanor said. She got to her feet. She ran back along the jetty, the boards rattling as she went.

Clancy shook his head. At least they were still paying him, even the reduced fee on barter. He didn't need the money, but he wasn't going to let them freeload.

He tossed a few more pancakes out for the seals, wrapped the rest and started back for the house. When he arrived, the flickerings of the echo transport were just dying away.

Far off across the plain, perhaps ten miles, a column of black roiling smoke rose from a grass fire. Overhead an altitude echo chopper swam through the smoke, spraying a glistening pink mix of water and retardant. There were more fires these days, but all quickly doused.

Clancy leant the bicycle against the house and went inside. The house was cooking lunch, enchiladas from the smell. At least he was still able to get tomatoes and cilantro from the garden.

He found the others on the balcony outside the front room.

In reconfiguring to accommodate his guests, the house had added the balcony, in addition to the two upstairs bedrooms, a bathroom, and a sitting room, also overlooking the lake. Clancy kind of liked the additions and thought he might keep them after. It wasn't taxing the house any.

"Clancy," Tamsin said as he stepped out with them.

"Good morning." He saw Dr. Symond at the corner of the balcony. "You brought a guest."

"I did."

Symond turned around and smiled. "How're you doing, old codger?"

"Fine. Don't you have patients?"

The doctor shrugged. "It was my day off. I usually play eighteen holes, but they've closed the course until the rains get here."

"The shire council declined their extended water rights," Clancy said.

"Good," Eleanor said. "The lake's half gone already."

"I don't think watering a few greens will impact the lake so very much," Symond said.

Tamsin's face fell. "Please, Doctor. I need you to be on her side."

Symond nodded. "Excuse me. Every drop counts." He managed to make it sound sincere. "Nice piano," Symond said, pointing through the windows into the sunroom.

The house had made a piano so Clancy could accompany Eleanor on some pieces. His damaged old hands struggled with some chords, but even when he played, she would still falter.

"What's this about?" Clancy said. He had a feeling he knew.

"Sam's the best doctor in Parkes," Tamsin said.

"I'm aware." There were only thirty or so anyway. Parkes wasn't a very big town, and Symond was the only one who'd spent any real time at a big city clinic. And he'd been a surgeon for almost a decade before opting for the lower stress and quieter life in the provinces. He was a friend and visited from time to time.

"Let me take a look at your hands," Symond said. He walked over and took Clancy's raised right hand. "Not bad. You're taking the medication?"

"He paints too much," Eleanor said. She'd moved right to the corner of the balcony. She had Clancy's binoculars and was watching the seals.

"I take it," Clancy said. "If I don't you're going to get me all microed up, right?"

"I will."

"And that's why you're here?"

Symond didn't reply.

"It's ten days until the festival," Tamsin said. "And she's no better."

"I'm fine," Eleanor said. "I'm bored with being in the country."

Clancy smiled. She was just saying that to antagonize her mother. Eleanor loved it here.

"Good," Tamsin said, antagonized. "Because your father's money isn't going to last forever."

"You want me to talk to her?" Symond said.

"About what?" Eleanor said. She lowered the binoculars and looked back at the three of them. "Oh," she said.

"The festival is your opportunity. There's the prize, but also the scouts. If you do well, you'll be able to try out for the orchestra."

"The Meredith Symphony," Eleanor said, enunciating the words, speaking quickly and clearly in a way Clancy had never heard before.

"The NBO," Clancy said.

Symond nodded.

Eleanor's face went blank. Exactly as she'd appeared the first time he'd seen her. Clancy hadn't noticed how much she'd changed. She'd become more animated over the weeks, he now realized.

"I'm never playing for the NBO," she said. "We know it." She walked away from the rail and handed Clancy the binoculars as she went by.

"Honey," Tamsin said. "Honey."

Eleanor didn't reply. She went off up the stairs. Clancy heard her door slam.

Tamsin's shoulders slumped. She went to the rail and leaned against it. "We have to leave in a couple of days. She's not ready."

"I can't perform a procedure against her will," Symond said.

"I know that!" Tamsin said. Clancy jerked at the vehemence in her voice.

Symond said nothing.

Tamsin continued to stare across the lake. The sun glinted back off the surface. A small flock of egrets circled and dropped to the water's edge near the house.

"Sorry," she said, barely audible. "I just can't keep this up."

Looking at Clancy, Symond held his hands out, his expression perplexed. "What can I do?" he said.

"Nothing," Tamsin said. "Sorry to have wasted your time."

“No waste,” Symond said. “It’s okay to get out into the country. I like what Clancy’s done to the place. It always felt a bit cramped before.”

Clancy nodded. “You could stick around if you like, join us for lunch. It would be good for Eleanor.”

“Good for her?” Tamsin said.

“Yes. So long as you—both of you—stop trying to convince her that she should get an implant.”

No one spoke. Out across the lake a seal barked. It fell silent too, for a moment, then the whole group of them set up a cacophony of barks. Clancy looked over and saw a flock of swans dip down close and sail away again. Mocking the seals, taunting them. Mostly the seals just ate the lake fish, but would take a cygnet, or even an adult, if they could get one.

“I’ll ask her,” Clancy said.

Tamsin nodded.

“Okay,” Symond said. “I’ll stick around. Did I smell something Latin?”

“Enchiladas, I think,” Clancy said. “They’re on the rotation.”

He went inside, past his easel and the cellos, and up the stairs. He knocked on Eleanor’s door.

“Go. Away.” Sometimes she was like an eight-year-old. He put some of that down to the physical injury, some of it just down to her. Of course she’d been special and revered when she was younger, of course she would have some prima donna in her.

“The doctor is going to stay for lunch.”

“Who cares?”

“Enchiladas,” Clancy said. That would get her to join them.

She didn’t reply. Clancy went back down.

“A little early for lunch?” Symond said.

Clancy checked the time. “Another hour, I guess. You didn’t eat already, did you?”

Symond shook his head. “Got out of the breakfast habit years ago. I like this new painting.”

“Want to buy it?” Clancy had already given Symond one of his smaller works for the surgery wall.

“Sure. Offworld prices?”

“Sorry. It’s a commission for the Sultan of Sikarra.”

The painting was a four-foot-wide, three-foot-high, oil of the lake—but with a full to the brim surface, and it was surrounded by lush forests. The seals looked happy and the swans kept their heads raised.

They talked for a while, Clancy careful to keep Tamsin away from the topic of Eleanor’s issues. Symond talked golf and swimming, and the state of his practice.

“Not enough doctors these days,” he said. “The kids, they train, then they want to be big-time surgeons in the city.”

Clancy heard footfalls on the stairway.

“When’s lunch?” Eleanor said, coming into the room.

“Soon,” Tamsin said.

“Would you play something for me?” Symond said.

Eleanor squinted at Clancy and Tamsin. “Trying to get me to trip up, huh?”

“We didn’t suggest it,” Clancy said, as Tamsin said, “Oh, honey.”

“I’d like it,” Symond said. “I’ve not heard you yet. Apparently you’re quite good.”

“Quite good!” Eleanor said. She went straight across to the chair, picked up the cello and the bow and began to play.

The deep notes thrummed through the sunroom. The fingers on her left hand, spread like spider legs, danced from string to string, wobbling to give a hint of tremolo. She bowed higher, faster.

"This is very old," Symond whispered. "Khachaturian? The Russian?"

Eleanor threw the bow, adding a jeté. Invented by her in the piece, but perfect.

"Kodaly," Clancy whispered back. "Sonata Opus eight. This is a treat. Not many people play this one. Not many can."

Eleanor slowed. Her bowing slackened. A couple more passes and the bow slipped to the floor.

Her eyes glazed.

Tamsin drew a sharp breath. Symond nodded.

Eleanor stared away into the distance for another few moments. She blinked, looked at Clancy. "When's lunch?" she said.

"About now," Clancy said. He went back into the kitchen.

Clancy set out the plates on the balcony table. The house unfurled the sun membrane to shade the table. Tamsin brought the big pot of bean mix and Eleanor separated the tortillas. Symond set out the glasses.

Symond caught Clancy on a trip to the kitchen, filling a carafe with water for the meal.

"She's very good, isn't she?" the doctor said.

Clancy nodded. "Extraordinary."

"But she'll never get to play in an orchestra."

"And the pity of that is that she would be fine in an orchestra, I'm sure. She's played with me and never loses focus. But I tire quickly."

"Have you tried recordings? I mean, orchestral works with the cello parts stripped out."

"It's not the same," Clancy said. He shut off the water and set the carafe on the bench. "I have a lot of recordings, that's for sure. We listen to them, and she's tried playing. And like you say, I got the house to strip out the cello, but it's just not the same as playing live."

"Theater experience? Maybe your house could make a kind of simulation. I could get you some enhancement contact lenses for her. That might work like an implant."

"A little. The house is nearly as old as I am, I guess. She's not really up to that kind of simulation thing."

"We could try in town."

"The festival's in ten days." Clancy picked up the carafe, meaning to head out to the balcony again. "Tamsin would try anything, but Eleanor's very straightforward."

"It would be the best thing for her," Symond said. "Mixing with other young, brilliant musicians."

"Yet because of this, what you saw, she'll never get the opportunity."

Symond rubbed his chin. "I might go with them," he said. "See if I can . . . well, do something."

Clancy frowned. Symond was a good doctor, but he had patients here to tend to.

"I'll get a locum, of course," Symond said as if hearing Clancy's thought.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Can you imagine her on the stage if she—"

"She won't get on the stage if she doesn't feel ready."

"I just meant—"

"Come have lunch." Clancy put his hand on Symond's shoulder.

Symond smiled. "I guess you know what's best."

* * *

Clancy arrived in Meredith two days before the festival. He'd flown a commercial echo liner that arced up in a long, elegant parabola, the fuselage staying level the whole time.

The views across the lakes had been stunning. Though from his home at the inlet Lake Andronne seemed so depleted, from eight thousand feet in the air it appeared

endless and vital. The surface area was still over a quarter of a million square miles, even at its low level.

And Cermmanon, bigger and darker than its sister, spread out beyond the horizon.

The land was brown, desiccated. Clancy saw frequent blackened patches where grass and forest fires had occurred. On the trip, he'd seen two aircraft hovering and dousing active blazes.

Meredith lay on almost a direct line between the two lakes from Parkes. The isthmus that separated the lakes from each other narrowed to as little as six miles in some parts. The beaches on both had been littered with umbrellas, looking from his height like the dots of tiny sequins.

When the craft landed, a sweep from the echo lofted him through the terminal, splitting him from the other passengers. He slipped to his feet in the arrival hall, in a line of moving people heading for a taxi rank.

A stalkeye glanced at his passport and squinted through his luggage. It directed him to stand number three.

The taxis were all wheeled and driven by engines. The interior smelled of sweat and bad food. Clancy saw some wrappers on the floor that might have come from burgers or burritos.

On the road, traffic buzzed and blared. Some great striding thing stepped over them; a vehicle on stilts surging through the jammed up ground vehicles. On a flyover he saw traces of the echo effect, the wisps and clouds forming and dissipating.

Meredith was a city with a population of over one hundred thousand, but it was spread out across more than three hundred square miles. People had to travel great distances sometimes.

He was in the heart of the city here, where distances were short and wheels were adequate.

Through the grimy window he saw the tall buildings, some with as many as fifteen stories. Their curving lines intersected in blues and greens, mimicking the country flowers everyone missed so much.

He asked the taxi to go by the concert hall on Molenstraat. The vehicle asked for another fifty, and Clancy accepted.

They turned onto a wide, tree-lined boulevard. It took Clancy a moment to recognize it. Molenstraat. Things had changed so much. Different buildings, a different pattern of ground traffic.

The building stood like something ancient, as if it had been transported from Earth block by block. It had six thick stone pillars, rifled with sharp, tight helixes from plinth to capital. Wide steps rose up thirty feet to the main floor, and the building's façade was set back from the pillars, dark and mysterious.

Despite its apparent age, the building hadn't been here during his years. He couldn't remember what had been on the site, but felt sure it had been less imposing than this edifice.

The traffic carried them on. The taxi deposited him at the Hotel Grand Chancellor, region three. Inside, a stalkeye on wheels welcomed him into the lobby and arranged his accommodations.

In the room, Clancy stripped and showered and rested on the bed. Once, he reflected, he could have traveled across the continent and begun sightseeing immediately. Now, though, his weary bones needed some recovery time.

When he woke, it was already growing dark outside, so he ate and watched some documentaries on the expanded strip.

He kind of wanted to call Eleanor and Tamsin. And kind of didn't. They'd left the same day Symond had visited, and left the house feeling vacant and hollow. He

hadn't been able to reconfigure it to the old layout, even though that had once been his plan.

Eleanor had just inserted herself into the place too much.

She was everywhere he looked. In the comments she made about the paintings, in the way the seals moved, in his old cello, still leaning against the empty chair.

The next morning he got out for a walk. The hotel had given him a sheet with a walking tour that took him through some of his old neighborhoods. It was strange to see the new buildings retrofitted over the old. Places he remembered—the old Barry cottage, the Clerestory restaurant—that had seemed so permanent and immovable were so altered with modern elements that it was only the location that told him what they were. It was strange to see the restaurant, somehow retaining its name although the high windows had been filled, the atrium closed off with an inserted second floor. He felt like a stranger. A genuine tourist.

He ate lunch at the Clerestory, the menu so modern and diverse he struggled. He ordered a sandwich.

As he walked on, he kept seeing Eleanor in the other pedestrians. But then a girl would turn her head, clearly not his student. He was not used to so many people all at once.

Back at the hotel, he toyed with calling them again. He was worried about her, more worried than he thought he should be. He had a sense that she would do fine. He remembered being on the stage himself: so often it was like something transcendent. Everything seemed to fade away except for the music and an awareness of the audience. He could become caught up in practicing, but in a concert hall the audience elevated the experience.

He hoped the same happened with Eleanor. He remembered talking with her about it.

She missed having an audience.

He used the hotel phone to call. They would be at home, he knew, preparing, perhaps arguing. Tamsin would still be trying to convince her to try the implant.

Clancy remembered Symond describing it after lunch that day. It acted fast. A kind of microscopic biological machine. It would grow through her brain, forging new connections between the neurons. It would read her, as it burrowed, look for where there was scar tissue and damage. Smart enough to theoretically do no damage and to stop when its job was done.

"It's standard procedure," Symond had said. "Most brain-injured people have it done."

But the doctor couldn't promise that "no damage" meant she would still be musical. Many people changed.

"I've read about it," Eleanor said, her words forming precisely and individually. "People lose their limbs and gain their speech and their sight and ability with math and all that, but they're different. They used to like clam chowder, and now the meal makes them sick. They could ski like a rocket, but now they're afraid of snow. Yay for being able to order in a restaurant without making a fool of yourself, but who cares if I lose interest in the cello?"

"It's unlikely," Symond had said.

"I've tried to tell her," Tamsin had said. Later, after they'd packed up lunch, she'd come to tell Clancy they were leaving. "We need to get back. The festival's in ten days. She can at least go to the preliminaries."

"She might find an audience," Clancy had told her. "That will be a big help."

"You've been a big help. Listen to her talk. She barely spoke when we got here and now listen to her. Not perfect, but so much more articulate."

"It's playing, I guess. Playing the cello so much."

“And you, of course. I wish you could come. To the festival. It would mean a lot to her.”

“It’s an awful long way.”

Tamsin had understood, but now here he was.

The phone was still ringing, and he waved at it to break the call. They weren’t at home.

The next morning he lined up for a ticket to the first round of the festival. The crowds were bustling, the line slow. Most people, he saw, had tickets already, bought weeks ago.

The array of costumes and hats on display was overwhelming. There seemed to be a penchant for clashes: purples with blues, yellows with pinks. Feathers and sashes and living sleeves that pecked and squawked from women’s elbows.

There were tiers to the festival, from the formal evening shows with the full orchestra and offworld acts to the talent shows and a series of open auditions. Clancy imagined the audiences at the audition sessions being primarily made up of family and friends.

On the festival guide he found Eleanor’s name. She wasn’t in the auditions at all. She’d been placed in the local musicians section.

She was going to perform Haydn. Concerto in C Major.

Clancy felt his breath catch.

Not an easy piece at all. Even for someone as gifted as she.

He could picture it, watching her work through the piece, gaining momentum, hitting the notes perfectly but with inspiration, making the audience gasp, even weep. She would play with a fervor and energy few had seen.

Then she would falter.

He liked to believe it wouldn’t happen, but he’d lived with her for weeks.

Returning to the hotel, he called again. Still no reply. He tried the SeekMe service, trying to track them down, but the service did not have them on record.

Back at the concert hall he found a stalkeye and had it find him an official.

“Help you?” the woman said. She was in her thirties, in a freshly dry-cleaned uniform that should have been replaced. It was worn at the seams, and the epaulets were too tangled.

“I’m looking for Eleanor Birchall,” Clancy said.

“Performer?”

Clancy nodded.

“Backstage.” The woman squinted at him. “But you don’t have a pass, do you?”

“I was her teacher, for a while.”

“And you wanted to wish her well?”

“Yes.” Clancy was aware of the throngs around him, still in the gaudy colors, still preening and showing off. He was sure that it hadn’t been this ostentatious when he’d been on other occasions. He had spent a lot of time in the city over the years, but hadn’t been back in almost two decades.

The woman beckoned and led him across the huge foyer, across the tiled floor. Clancy saw images of fish and seals underfoot as he followed.

They came to a booth beyond the wide curved stairs that led to the balcony levels. The woman—Clancy glimpsed her nametag: Sarah-Lyn—rapped on the roller panel that closed off the booth’s counter. A stalkeye reached out of the side, and the roller door slid up.

Inside an old man—older than Clancy—sat on an office chair in the glow of a bank of displays.

“Backstage pass for this gentleman,” Sarah-Lyn said. She looked at Clancy. “You’ll have to answer a bunch of questions, I’m sorry. Good luck.” She turned and walked away, waving at Clancy’s “Thank you” without looking around.

“Performer you’re with?” the old man said.

Clancy explained and found himself in a negotiation. The man called the dressing room, then told Clancy to wait. Clancy wished that he'd been able to get hold of the women from the hotel. It would have been much easier.

"Someone's coming out for you," the old man said. "You can wait over there."

Clancy thanked him and went to sit on a bench seat under a vast tapestry that showed the colonization of Kaylee, the first remote probes and explorers, the huge dropspace ships, the first cities. It made him feel tiny.

The glistening crowd milled and chattered around him. People filed into one or another of the halls for various shows.

Clancy heard someone call his name. He looked up.

Symond.

What was he doing here?

The doctor moved sideways through a surge of people.

"Come, come," Symond said, gesturing for Clancy to follow.

Clancy got to his feet. By the time he reached the doctor, the crowd had thinned and he was able to proceed in a civilized manner.

"You came," Clancy said.

"They asked." Symond turned and headed for a corridor.

"Did you give her an implant then?" Clancy said. "Did you talk her into it?" He felt angry, angrier than he would have expected. He'd become attached to Eleanor. Too quickly. He didn't want to see harm come to her.

"Nothing like that," Symond said. "I don't get to Meredith often enough: this was an opportunity to visit. And I'll enjoy the festival."

"But you're with them," Clancy said, biting back his annoyance. He knew he should have come with them. He wanted to tell Symond to keep away, to never harm the girl.

"As a guest." Symond stopped and put his hand on Clancy's.

Clancy decided he was getting a new doctor when he returned home.

"It's true, though," Symond said. "Tamsin, I'm sure, did invite me in case she managed to convince Eleanor at the eleventh hour. You know, the pressure of having to go on stage might make her relent."

"And here you are." Clancy pulled his hand away.

"But I wouldn't do it. You know that?"

"Where's the dressing room?" From the distance, muffled, Clancy heard an overture. Wagner? he wondered. The piece was unfamiliar.

Symond started walking again. It took a few moments before he spoke. "If Eleanor did agree, I would make her wait a few days, at least. Cooling off period."

"Huh." Clancy was not impressed.

"By which time she would change her mind anyway. The festival would be over. An implant wouldn't affect the outcome of that."

They walked on in silence. The path to the dressing rooms seemed labyrinthine. The building was even bigger than it appeared from the outside.

Three levels down, along a narrow cinderblock corridor lined with doors, Symond knocked and took the handle to slide it open.

Eleanor was sharing the room with two other young women. She sat staring into the mirror while her mother applied make-up around her daughter's eyes.

Tamsin looked up. "Clancy," she said.

Eleanor sprang out of the chair. She almost bounced off the mirror and jumped at Clancy. He staggered back at her embrace, and Symond put his arm around Clancy's shoulders, steadying him.

"You came. You came. You came," Eleanor said, arms wrapped around his neck. "Oh, you came."

Tamsin smiled and nodded, mouthed, "Thank you."

"I got lost," Clancy said. "I meant to just bicycle out to the jetty to feed the seals. Next thing I find myself outside your dressing room."

Eleanor pushed back. "That's some fugue."

"I think I must be losing my mind."

"Well. It might be around here somewhere. We could take a look." Eleanor bent, making a pretense of looking under her chair.

Clancy heard some Elgar. One of the other women warming up. Good, but not as good as Eleanor.

Symond laughed.

Tamsin came over and gave Clancy a stiff hug. "Suddenly she's so animated," she whispered. "Thank you. I really didn't think—"

"It's all right," he said. "I'm glad to be here."

"Do you have a seat?" Eleanor said.

"I bought a ticket." He felt his chest clench.

"Yay, yay, yay! Yay-yay-yay-yay!"

She was so excited, so thrilled, not just to see him, but just to be here, to be on the stage again. He hoped that it worked out all right.

Eleanor turned to Tamsin. "He has to be in the wings. Has to."

"Eleanor."

The other cellist segued into a sonata by Surbier, and then into one by Brahms. She was very proficient.

"I think it's a good idea," Symond said. Again he put his hand on Clancy's.

"Yes, yes," Eleanor said. "Please."

"Okay," Clancy said. "Sure." He had the sense that Symond was suggesting subtly that Clancy should be getting implants for his arthritis.

Once upon a time it would have been considered an invasion of space, and Clancy had to remind himself he was in the city now. Social mores were different here, even with people from Parkes.

Tamsin nodded. "Yes. It's a good idea." She stared straight at Clancy. "You were her teacher."

"Only for a little while."

"I'm on in an hour," Eleanor said. She looked at the time. "An hour, fifteen."

"We should give you some space," Clancy said. "Let you two relax." She'd become edgy, excited since he'd arrived. He'd hate for that to turn into agitation. He'd only seen that a couple of times from her, but it would ruin the concentration she had.

"You'll be in the wings?" Eleanor said.

"Definitely."

"He'll need a pass," Tamsin said.

"We'll organize it," Symond said. He smiled at Clancy. "Back at the booth."

"See you then," Eleanor said. She leapt up at him again, kissing him on the cheek. "You're everything. Everything."

"I'm just a painter who listened to you play." He set her down on her feet. Much more of that and he was going to start breaking bones.

"You're too modest," she said. "You're the cellist who became a painter who became a teacher." She gave him another kiss on the cheek. "Now, away with you. Let me concentrate." She waved him off with a flourish.

"Okay," he said. "Good luck."

In the corridor he asked Symond about his hands. "Twice," Clancy said. "You touched them."

Symond shrugged. "I figure that you're going to get implants. I've seen how much you enjoy playing."

"A couple of visits," Clancy said.

"I mean since Eleanor came."

Clancy couldn't deny it. Over the years of leaving the cello behind, he'd come to miss it less and less. Painting occupied him. With Eleanor around, though, it had been different. She made the instrument sing, made it part of her. He wanted that again, despite his aging frame.

"We can do your hands, shoulders, elbows. It will be like you're eighteen again."

Clancy laughed. "Wouldn't that be something?"

"I am prone to exaggeration, but it would be better."

Clancy wondered if he would still paint. He asked Symond. "I make good money from that. It would be different with limber joints."

"Sure, but how much longer are you going to be painting anyway? How long before your hands are nothing more than knobbed claws and your elbows are swollen up like baseballs?"

"A few months, anyway."

Symond laughed.

They got the pass and found their way to the backstage area. Symond talked about how the procedure would work, and Clancy gave a noncommittal agreement to look into it when they got back.

A chamber quartet on stage played through a Borodin piece, ably but not exceptionally.

When the group brought the piece to a close, the audience clapped, politely but not rapturously. The musicians stood, bowed, and filed offstage. As they went by, Clancy heard one of the women muttering at one of the men. Clancy couldn't catch the words, but she was clearly agitated. Dissatisfied.

"A few more performers, then Eleanor," Symond said.

People milled around in the wings. Clancy and Symond sat on a bench seat at the back wall, letting the friends and family crowd up to the edges of the curtains. A piano stood on the stage, just at the edge of the lights, a pianist waiting near them on another bench seat, ready to accompany some of the soloists, if needed.

A solo violinist played some Mfannlise. A complex, lengthy capriccio that required a challenging mix of plucking and bowing. The dexterous young man pulled it off. The applause at the end rumbled around the auditorium. Clancy could imagine the crowd on their feet.

The man took his bows, overstaying his welcome really, before wandering from the stage with a haughty air as if all the adulation was expected and insufficient.

Eleanor and Tamsin joined them. Eleanor seemed bright and alert. She held her cello tightly.

"It will be fine," Tamsin told her. Clancy could imagine the phrase had been on repeat all afternoon.

More performers came and went, and then it was Eleanor's turn.

"Come," Eleanor said. They all followed the stage guide out to the edge of the curtains. Behind them, the next performers had lined up already. Another chamber quartet. They were over-perfumed and young. Clancy's nose wrinkled.

The concert leader called Eleanor's name across the PA. The audience clapped.

"Wish me luck," Eleanor whispered to Clancy.

"All the luck in the world," Clancy said. "You don't need it. You'll be fine." He realized he was echoing Tamsin.

"I will," Eleanor said. Her face was drawn. Terrified.

The clapping had subsided. They were waiting for her.

Clancy stepped forward, bent a little, and hugged her. "Eleanor," he whispered into her ear. "You are the finest cellist I've met. Now, play the way you played for me."

That's all I'd ask."

She squeezed him back. "Thank you." She pulled away, her face lighter, a soft smile on her lips.

Tamsin touched her daughter's shoulder. Eleanor nodded and strode out onto the stage.

She sat, adjusted, and began to play.

Haydn. Concerto in C Major.

The bow swept across the strings with an elegance Clancy thought he should have been used to. It still moved him, made his throat clench up.

Behind him the other musicians jostled forward, straining to hear. Clancy moved aside a step as they craned in. No one spoke.

Eleanor's head bobbed as her arms worked. Her left fingers splayed, darting across the notes. Her eyes were closed.

Despite the silence from those around him—Tamsin, Symond and the musicians—he could sense their amazement, almost awe. She really was creative, Clancy thought. She really made the piece her own.

She stopped.

Silence.

The bow dropped.

Tamsin gasped. She put her hand to her mouth.

Eleanor's head lifted. She looked bewildered, unsure where she was and what was going on.

Tamsin took a step forward, but Symond put his hand on her shoulder.

"But she's—"

Symond cut her off, moving his fingers to her lips.

A murmur went around the audience. Another went around the waiting quartet.

Clancy looked at the cellist. A young woman, no older than Eleanor. The woman stared back wide-eyed.

"Please," Clancy said. "Your cello." He held his hands out for the instrument and the bow.

Less than five seconds had passed since Eleanor had stopped. The crowd was becoming restless. Eleanor stayed on the stage.

Clancy took the cello's neck. "Let me play," he said.

Startled, the woman let him take the instrument, and handed him the bow.

Clancy positioned his fingers and drew the bow across the open A string. The note resonated.

Eleanor looked up. Her bow lifted.

Clancy played a G and pulled the bow back firmly, slowly. It was awkward, standing with the instrument. He had the bow too high, and his wrist too angled.

Eleanor's bow touched the strings. She resumed the piece. In moments she was back with her own passion. She played and played.

Clancy continued, playing softly. His fingers ached. He played too many open strings. As Eleanor picked up the piece, Clancy stopped. He stood holding the bow and cello until she had finished.

The audience hesitated. Eleanor took a breath.

They clapped. A supportive, encouraging clap, though, not the excited, celebratory clap she deserved. Some gave her that. Clancy could hear some individuals over the crowd, clapping heartily, even some shouted "bravo"s. But Eleanor's break was too much for most of them, and the applause quickly subsided.

Eleanor stood and almost ran to the side of the stage. Tears ran down her face. She didn't stop, just barged through and raced on for the exit, endpin dragging on the ground.

Clancy handed the borrowed cello back. The woman nodded and managed a half a smile.

Following Tamsin and Symond out, Clancy felt heavy. He knew he should feel better, knew he should feel thrilled that she'd participated, and participated so phenomenally. But for the break—just a few seconds really—it had been a perfect performance.

Symond waited for him in the narrow corridor. Clancy gave him a nod and kept moving for the dressing rooms.

"You saved her," Symond said. "You saved the performance."

"Just about." Clancy wished that he'd thought to get the cello from the very start. He would have recognized the signs of her faltering. He'd seen it often enough to know. As soon as the bow dropped like that, he could have begun bowing immediately. The audience might not have even noticed.

He felt like he'd failed her.

"Really," Symond said. "She completed the piece."

Symond was right on that.

But it wasn't enough. He knew he could have done so much better.

They stopped outside the closed dressing room door. One of the other women—the one who'd practiced earlier—stood by the doorframe, leaning against the wall. She looked glum.

Symond knocked on the door and reached for the release.

"Wouldn't do that," the woman said. "If I were you, that is."

Symond dropped his hand and looked at Clancy.

"That's probably exactly why we should," Clancy said. He moved ahead and touched the release without knocking. The door slid aside.

Eleanor sat at the mirror, eyes red. Tamsin stood to one side, almost hiding away in the shadows.

Clancy went to Eleanor.

"So close," she whispered, staring at herself in the mirror.

"There'll be other times," he said. He put his hand on her shoulder. The slick satin of her dress was cool to the touch.

She looked up. "Are you going to be there to rescue me again?"

"You don't need—"

"I do," she said. "Isn't it obvious? I'm brain damaged. I can't maintain concentration."

Clancy didn't respond. "You should play with a quartet," he said. "Or an orchestra."

"Who would have me?"

"Anyone. Nialel."

Eleanor laughed. "You really think the NBO would take a risk like that?"

"Studio work," Symond said from the door. "Errors like that don't matter. They can edit."

Clancy glared at him. Symond raised his hand.

"She loves music so much," Tamsin said.

"I know," Clancy said.

"I think I need a better solution," Eleanor said. She looked down, then back up at Clancy.

"We should go eat," Symond said. "To celebrate."

"Hush," Tamsin told him.

"What do you mean 'a better solution'?" Clancy said.

Her eyes flicked to Symond. Back to Clancy.

"Please," he said. "I know that's not what you wanted."

"Things change," Tamsin said.

Clancy looked at her. Eleanor's mother seemed drawn, exhausted.

"Dr. Symond," Clancy said. "You'd perform an operation for her?"

"No," Symond said.

"But you've consulted?" Clancy felt furious. Who was this country doctor to go meddling with what Eleanor wanted and needed? Clancy had thought of Symond as a friend. Over the years they'd spent enough time together socially, as well as professionally. At Clancy's age it paid to have a good doctor, but Clancy was already considering alternative practitioners.

"They asked," Symond said.

"By 'they,' I'm guessing you mean Tamsin."

"I asked, too," Eleanor said. She was back to staring into the mirror. "I had to know."

"It's none of your business anyway," Tamsin said. "We appreciate all you've done for us, but the decision lies with Eleanor."

"You would—" Clancy began. Eleanor cut him off.

"I might lose my ability, my talent," she said. "My passion." She stood up. "My fire." She still wept, tears running fast down her cheeks, streaking her makeup and dripping to her dress.

"But she might not," Symond said.

Clancy took a breath. It was her decision anyway. Tamsin was right. It was none of his business. He just hated to see her losing what she had for some vague promise. He should know better, he thought. He should trust the medical process to do no harm.

He exhaled. "You performed magnificently today. I hope you continue to perform."

Eleanor nodded.

"I'm glad to know you. I hope I can get to see you again. I hope—"

Eleanor jumped up and grabbed him again, wrapping her arms around him. She squeezed so tight he thought he might have trouble breathing soon.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I hope I get to see you perform again," he whispered back.

"Of course."

Eventually she let go.

"We could go eat," Tamsin said. "I'm starved."

Eleanor and Symond agreed.

"I think I'll get going," Clancy said. "I'm not used to all this travel and bustle. And tomorrow's a big day. I'm flying back. I'd better head over to my hotel and get some sleep."

Eleanor gave him another hug. "Stay," she said. "Stay longer."

"I can't." He could. He could easily afford it, but it was so hard watching her like this. He wanted the memories of her at the house, practicing technique and talking about painting and seals and other planets.

"I understand," she said. She held his hand, rubbing her thumb across his rough knuckles.

He stepped back. "All right. Well done tonight. Do stay in touch."

Eleanor nodded. She sucked her lips in between her teeth and sniffed.

Clancy turned and left. The concert hall's foyer seemed bare as he walked through it. A few people stood talking, but the crowds from earlier were all inside the auditorium. He heard distant muffled clapping as another performer finished.

He walked along Molenstraat in the dark. He'd lost track of time, but it was already late.

At the hotel, he packed and stood staring out the window.

He hoped she made the right choice. He felt privileged to have known her. Known her the way she was, damaged but passionate. He hoped that if she did have the implant it didn't change her too much.

He rubbed his own knuckles. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps, when he got back, he should talk to Symond about getting something done about his hands.

* * *

The rains came. The deluge seemed to last months, with barely a clear day. The seals flopped into his yard as the lake rose until it butted up against the balcony's sill. The jetty's deck was just inches above the surface.

The land turned soft and lush, and then sodden. Water lay in great, shallow lakes across the fields. The grasslands and forests became verdant and overgrown. Clancy had to hack a path through the vines and ferns to get to the jetty.

He painted.

He propagated a new vine. The fungus didn't return. The plants took and swelled out along the wall. If the weather ever dried out to something like a regular climate, he would have grapes in six months.

He allowed Symond to fix his hands. And he could play again, without pain, without hesitation. Perhaps he had learned more from Eleanor than he'd realized. He would never have her level of mastery, or her passion, but he would be a better teacher, if he ever chose that again.

Even the painting was easier. His works became more dexterous and detailed, though he feared they were losing something about him that made them distinct and special. But they continued to sell.

Like Eleanor, he thought, he needed to trust himself.

He chided himself for thinking of her too much.

The house built him a pool table, upstairs in Eleanor's old room. Often he played alone, but Symond visited regularly. He would stay for an afternoon, and they would play several games.

"Perhaps you should get some land out here," Clancy told him one day. They'd played a half-dozen games. Clancy was up four to two.

"See," Symond said, racking another game, "then I'd just want to get a boat, and maybe a plane. A float plane. And then I'd be spending all week at the surgery wishing I could get out and use them more. I like this. It's good we're still friends."

"You need friends your own age," Clancy said. He bent over the cue and took aim. The felt itched his skin. He shot the white down like a darting seal. The triangle split apart with a crack. Two balls dropped into pockets.

Clancy was glad of the company. He'd lived here alone for too long. Eleanor had changed things for him. Every day he wished he would stop missing her so much.

"I should never have fixed your fingers," Symond said.

Clancy laughed. Symond made the same joke every time they played.

"And I'm fine," Symond said, rounding on the table. "I'm not that young. Most people my age have grown children and are done." He bent, aimed, and took his shot. The white clicked against the seven, which bounced off the cushion and settled back in the middle of the table.

"Maybe you should have a child, then?" Clancy said. He looked away from the table. He could hear a drone in the distance.

Symond shrugged. "I guess that's technically possible. Maybe you should take an offworld vacation. Go see some of your paintings on the walls in the palaces and parliament buildings."

Clancy kept listening. A vehicle was approaching. "More like corporate lobbies and private collections," he said. He went to the window. Through the pelting rain he saw the stir and flicker of an echo transport coming along the access road.

"Expecting company?" Symond said.

"You're here already."

They left the game and went downstairs to the patio. The transport turned through the gate and came to a stop.

Eleanor climbed out.

“Well,” Clancy said. He stepped down to his muddy yard and walked through the rain toward her.

She was wearing a long parka, a hood over her head, droplets bouncing off in a spray and running down in shimmering rivulets.

Right away he could tell something was up. Her gait was different. The way she carried herself had changed. A lift in her shoulders, a new smoothness to her stride. She’d never been awkward, but now she moved like a dancer, like someone who fitted perfectly within her body.

“Clancy,” she said as he came close. “We should get out of the weather.” Even over the hiss of the rain he could hear the change in her voice too.

And her eyes. They held a new spark, and new awareness.

“What have you done?” he said.

“We’re getting drenched,” she said. She reached out and took his hand, glanced down and up. “What have *you* done?”

“I got my . . .” He glanced back. “Come inside.”

At the patio she slipped the parka off and hugged Symond. Inside, she went straight into the front room, overlooking the lake.

“I didn’t know the water ever came so high,” she said. “Won’t you get flooded?”

“The Messier falls,” Clancy said, standing in the doorway. “They’re huge now, but the water just can’t get any higher.”

“Of course. I like your painting. It’s very different.” She stayed in the middle of the room, facing the lake, his latest canvas slightly to her right. “It’s very earthy.”

The picture was of a plain of cracked mud, mountains in the distance, and a stone with a long-antennaed cricket standing on top in the foreground.

“Funny,” he said, not feeling like laughing. The old Eleanor would never have been quite like this, conversational and stand-offish. “I started painting the dryness just as the rains began. I just kept on.”

Eleanor laughed and turned. “Boy, it really is raining, no?”

Symond stood just behind Clancy. “Did you have the operation?” the doctor said. “The implant?”

She blinked and turned away again. “You got your hands taken care of, Clancy,” she said. “I felt it in them. I couldn’t imagine you painting like this unless you had.”

“I did,” he said.

No one said anything for a moment. The only sound, the rain pounding the balcony and windows.

“I suppose you’ve been accepted into an orchestra now?” Clancy said.

“You kept our rooms,” Eleanor said. There was a catch in her voice as if she was crying. “I saw the shape of the house as I drove in.”

“It’s a pool room now,” he said. “We were playing when you drove up.”

“He’s an agile player,” Symond said. “With the way . . . his hands are now.”

“Good,” Eleanor said.

A seal barked out on the lake.

Symond stepped around Clancy. “It’s good to see you. Sorry I can’t stay.”

Clancy smiled to himself at Symond’s perception. There had been no plans for him to leave just yet.

“You’re going?” Eleanor said.

“I have a busy week ahead.”

“Will you let me play?” she said. “Before you go. My playing’s stronger now. I even wrote a piece.”

Clancy just caught the last few words. She'd written something? Good for her.

"Well," Symond said. "I figure you two have some catch—"

"Stay," Clancy said. "She'll be going for good, leaving the planet for her new orchestra."

"The Nialel Bach," Eleanor said.

"What you've always wanted."

"It's light years away," she said. "I'll never . . ." She turned to face him directly. "I don't know when I'll be back."

Clancy managed a smile, his heart quickening.

"Then you should play for us," Symond said. "If it's the last time we'll hear you."

Eleanor nodded. She went to the chair near the windows. Clancy's cello stood in its stand next to the chair.

Symond moved to the sofa against the wall and sat. Clancy stayed where he was.

Eleanor sat. She took the bow and the cello's neck and quickly tuned the instrument.

"Elgar," she said quietly. She played quickly. Clancy knew the piece—of course, he thought—the Cello Concerto in E Minor, Opus eighty-five. The complex array of darting and sustained opening notes sounding proficient and competent under her fingers. She raced through the piece, playing faster than he was used to, settling away from the opening deeper notes into the higher phrases. Her left fingers darted up the neck.

She played perfectly.

Too perfectly, Clancy thought. The notes were less an interpretation—as he was used to from her—than a rendition of the score. Certainly it was skilled, but something was missing.

He saw she was crying as she played. She ran through from the adagio to the *lento*. Clancy listened.

As she began the second adagio, he realized that she hadn't faltered at all. Every note came perfectly.

Clancy had to go sit on the sofa too. Despite the arthritis implants—he'd had more than just his hands worked on—his legs were still those of an octogenarian.

Eleanor played the whole piece without a break. She wept on as she bowed with precision and concentration.

Beside Clancy, Symond sniffed. It was a powerful piece, Clancy knew, able to make people weep, but part of what was moving was seeing the depth of Eleanor's sadness with it. Clancy wondered if Symond realized that it was something more than the music.

Clancy wanted to take her and hold her close. He remembered her as so young and innocent, almost as a child. During her time with him, he'd had to remind himself that she was an adult, that it was just her injury that made her personality seem so youthful.

And now she'd grown up.

She drew out the final notes, playing them long and sustained, the bow at the limit of where it could produce a note.

Symond began clapping the moment the bow came away from the strings. Clancy joined him. Eleanor sobbed. She turned away, looking out over the swollen lake.

Symond went to stand, but Clancy put his hand on the doctor's shoulder. Going to her, Clancy took the cello.

Eleanor looked up.

"Perfect," he said. "I could never have shown you that."

She sniffed, licked a tear from the corner of her mouth. "It took my soul," she said. "That implant robbed me."

He knew what she meant, though he wouldn't have put it so strongly.

"What's that?" Symond said. "That was amazing."

"Yes," Eleanor said. "Thank you. But where's my verve? Where's the passion?"

"You're in the orchestra."

"Why didn't you play us your piece?" Clancy said. "Why Elgar?"

“My piece?”

“You wrote something. You mentioned it.”

“Oh.” Her face brightened. “I’ve never played it to anyone.”

“You once told me you weren’t creative,” he said.

Eleanor nodded. “It kind of came to me. As I was trying out for the orchestra again.”

“Would you play it?”

“Kind of embarrassing,” she said.

“Exactly what I thought when I started painting. A successful musician tries his hand at art? At oils, yet?”

“I’m not you.”

“Thank goodness,” he said. “You really don’t want to be me.” He held the neck out to her again and went back to the sofa.

“All right,” she said. “Don’t expect anything great here.”

But from the first few bars, Clancy knew she had something special. She jumped notes so unexpectedly, yet so perfectly. She threw her finger down the A string as she bowed, rising with almost a pentatonic scale, but then leaping up quickly to bow the C with a D, E, E, all as fast distinct quavers, to the D string. Sometimes she used martelé, pinching the strings before quickly bowing, sometimes she bounced the bow with a sautille. The piece felt rich and full.

As she played, he found that he stopped listening to the notes technically, and gathered in the flow of the piece. She went on and on, moving to some unusual, but strong, vibrato and gave him chills.

Her piece lasted for close to a quarter hour. As she rose into a gigue, the notes became fast and high, almost a crescendo, and she moved to a 9/8 signature. In his imagination, Clancy could hear the orchestra behind her, the violins supporting her notes with their octaves-higher harmonies, the kettle drums rolling and pounding with a drama befitting the strings.

She finished on a high, the last note ringing through the sunroom.

Holding her head down for a moment, she stared at the floor and lifted the bow away from the strings. She looked up, beaming a brilliant, glistening smile.

Clancy and Symond applauded. Symond hollered a few “bravo”s.

“I think we should have pancakes,” Eleanor said.

* * *

After Symond left, with hugs, Clancy and Eleanor walked out to the jetty under an echo umbrella. The swirling field at the pole’s tip scattered the rain, creating a kind of miniature localized storm behind them. Clancy carried a stack of pancakes wrapped in a tea towel.

“You wrote that,” Clancy said. It was half-question, half statement. Almost, he thought, a statement of surprise, if not incredulity.

“Shhh,” she said. “Let me enjoy the forest. We can talk out on the jetty.”

Water sluiced around their feet. The old worn path that had been so dry and white had become a stream. The sides were beginning to erode away.

The jetty’s deck, Clancy noticed when they reached it, had become a raised grid-work. The house had reconfigured it to make it even less slippery from the rain. As they walked along, without the protection of the trees, more spray slipped around the echo, dampening their legs.

Eleanor sat at the end, dangling her feet into the water. “Oh, cold,” she said.

Clancy stood the umbrella up and sat beside her, immediately feeling the surface water soaking through his pants. He crossed his legs—a new luxury—keeping his feet away from the lake. He unwrapped the pancakes.

“I thought the implant would help me concentrate,” Eleanor said. She took one of the pancakes and spun it out over the lake.

"That worked. Aside from the Hadyn at the festival, I've never heard you play longer than four or five minutes. That concerto is close to a half hour."

"And my own piece is fifteen minutes. You helped at the festival."

He waved that off. "You told me you didn't write." He took a pancake, rolled it and took a bite. Sweet and maple-y. The house had come up with a technique to cook the syrup right into the mixture. It lost the romance of pouring, but in weather like this, it was convenient.

"You're eating?" she said.

"Lunch."

"Ah, just feed the seals." Eleanor threw another pancake out. A seal bobbed up and swished away with it.

Clancy finished his. He threw the next one out.

"After the operation," Eleanor said, "I played like that, like you heard. Sustained and focused, but . . ."

Clancy didn't say anything.

"Well?" she said. "What did you hear?"

"You were very proficient."

"Say it," she said. "There was no passion, no light. I listened to some old home recordings of myself. There was something invigorating about them."

"Yes," Clancy said. "Even when you were here and, well, dropping out in those moments, you had a fire."

"It's the trade off," she said. "I can play in the orchestra, but I'll never be the soloist."

"I'm sorry."

Eleanor shrugged. "Few enough can anyway."

"But you could have been."

"Before the accident, maybe. But now I can play a whole piece. That's got to be good."

"You seemed so sad. I wept with you."

"Don't. See, even if I'm not soloing, I'm a composer now. And that's even rarer."

"The implant?"

She nodded. She took a pancake, rolled it up and ate it.

"I thought those were for the seals."

"Sure. They're not going to be able to eat this whole stack. The lake's so full, there must be plenty of fish for them."

They sat eating, chatting, and feeding the seals until the stack of pancakes was gone. They walked back, the rain easing a little. Eleanor climbed into her transport.

"I'll come back," she said. "I'll come see you."

"That would be nice," he told her. "But don't feel obliged. I do have one request, though."

Eleanor smiled. "I thought you'd ask. I nearly forgot." She reached into the vehicle's glove compartment and took out a slim screen. "I'm glad you liked it."

He took the sheet and squeezed the corner. The first page of a score scrolled onto its face. *Cello Sonata One, in A Major* it read across the top. On the next line, *by Eleanor Birchall*.

On the next line it read, *For Clancy Jonah*.

Clancy swallowed. "That's very generous," he said, barely able to get the words out.

Eleanor stepped from the transport and wrapped her arms around him. She held tight, and he hugged back.

"I'll see you again," she said. "I promise."

The umbrella tipped and fell into the puddles. Rain washed over them.

She didn't let go.

"I know," he said, though he knew it was but a distant possibility. She would be on Nialel, playing in all the vast concert halls, and he would be here out in the country,

light years away. He would pass on before this young woman would be able to tear herself away from those demands, however well-meaning she might be.

“Next year,” she said, still clinging to him.

“Next year’s good.”

She let go, stepped back, tears hidden in the rain running down her face. “I’d better go. I’ll start bawling soon.”

“Me too,” Clancy said. He already was, tears streaming.

Eleanor smiled and ducked her head. She got into the transport and wound up the echo. The vehicle lifted off the ground. Eleanor waved to him. The whole thing turned and moved away, seeming to swim off into the rain.

Clancy stood waving until she was well down the access road, until well after he would have been lost to her in the haze.

Inside he dried off and went to the front room. He set the slim screen on his music stand and took up the cello. The bow felt so familiar in his hand.

Pressing the strings to the neck, he began bowing, drawing out the first note the way Eleanor had. By the end of the second bar, he had the rhythm of her sonata.

For Clancy.

He wept at its beauty as he played. Even if she never came back, he would always have this part of her, right here by the lake.