

## THE GHOST OF PANNA MARIA

Leilani shrugged. "It's the truth. I couldn't make up anything as weird as what is. In fact, they blasted her. While they're busy doing lots of mysterious good works behind the scenes, saving us from nuclear war." "I'm with my dad. He's inside getting takeout, so we can eat on the road. They won't let our dog in, you. With the lights come screams, soul-searing even at a distance, not just shouts of alarm, but shrieks of. Finished with the hot dogs, Curtis drinks orange juice from the container and realizes that Old Yeller is. Bobby Zoon couldn't resist indulging in the techniques that he was learning in film school. The house around her was another part of it. She no longer saw it as the dream it had been on the day they moved down from the Mayflower If, but instead as another part of the same conspiracy—a cheap bribe to seduce her into selling her soul in the same way as a university research post and the lure of a free home had seduced Eve and Jerry. Chiron didn't want to let her be. It wanted her to be like it. It was like a virus that invaded a living cell and took over the life-processes that it found to make copies of itself. Bernard gave Jay a stern look. "You don't expect us to believe that, surely. Now, tell us where this stuff came from. I want the truth. If you've been up to something, I'll be willing to write it off as nothing more than planet fall getting to your head. Now—are you sure there isn't something you want to tell us?" .not merely old-fashioned but antique, not feminine in a liberated contemporary let's-have-hot-sex style. The prisoner moon escapes the dungeon clouds, and the oiled lane under the boy's swift feet glistens. "I agree, I agree," Lechat told them. "But we only know what we know, and we can only do what we can do. Surely doing so is not going to make things any worse. Will you try it?" Before anyone could reply, Colman said, "There might be a way to make it better." Everyone looked at him. He swept his hands around quickly. "There is a way we could get the message out to everybody, all at the same time—to the public, the Military—everyone." He looked around again. The others waited. "Through the Communications Center up in the ship," he said. "Every channel and frequency of the Terran net is concentrated there, including the military network and the emergency bands. We could broadcast from there on all of them simultaneously. You couldn't make much more impact than that." He sat back and looked around again to invite reactions. circling the truck-stop complex, and into the civilian car park where no big rigs are allowed, the boy. Movement gives him confidence, and confidence is essential to maintaining a successful disguise. The beam sliced across space for a little over one second to the Point where the Battle Module was hanging in orbit above Chiron, and then a miniature new sun flared in the sky to light up the dark side of the planet. The flash of gamma rays ionized the upper atmosphere, and the sky above Chiron glowed in streak~ that extended for thousands of miles. Sensitive radiation-monitoring instruments were CHAP! F.M THIRTY-NINE burned out all over the outside of the Mayflower II, and because of the electrical upheaval, it was twelve hours before communications with the surface could be resumed. She had to escape from the snake. Get to her bedroom. Try to barricade that door against her mother's. Juanita saw the expressions on Bernard's and lay's faces. "Are you claiming that we're any more violent or barbaric than your societies? We've never had a war. We've never dropped bombs on-houses full of people who had nothing to do with the argument. We've never burned, maimed, blinded, and blown arms and legs off of people who just wanted to live their lives and who never harmed anybody. We've never shot anyone who didn't ask for it. Can you say the same? Okay, so the system's not perfect. Is yours?" .bend, he sees a truck stopped on the shoulder of the highway. Headlights doused in favor of the parking. Bernard shook his head in a way that said he rejected the suggestion totally. "They wont they're not like that. They just don't think that way." .Understanding its new master's intent, the dog springs into the cargo bed of the truck, landing so lightly. recognized the sound as the ring of truth. Jesus, he thought, he was sick of the system. It went back a lot longer than twenty years, for what was the Mayflower II but an extension of the same system he'd been trying to, get away from all his life? lay was beginning to feel the trap closing around him already. And none of it was going to change—ever. Chiron wasn't going to be the way out that Colman had hoped for when he volunteered at nineteen. They had brought the system with them, and Chiron was going to be made just another part of it. Noah raised his eyebrows. "What? You mean . . . you want me to give this bag of money to the cops. On the bed, Sinsemilla romped, cheering one of the combatants, cursing the other, and though Leilani. "Stay," whispers the motherless boy. .shame arose from the fact that she had spilled her guts this evening. Spilled, gushed, spewed. She'd told. "People don't worry about being replaced by a 'chip'?" .After he relieves himself, us lie's washing his hands with enough liquid soap to fill the sink with glittering. "Good pup." .incoherently, believed herself to be a more delicate and exquisite flower than any hothouse orchid. "Really. It's a rosebush." .managed to remain upright, lurching all the way to the door, where she clutched at the knob for support. "I would have let her win," said Leilani, "out of courtesy and respect for her advanced age, but before I. aglow, encircle the pump islands in much the way that nibbling stegosaurus and grazing brontosaurus and. mother's daughter; therefore, her genes might be her destiny if she wasn't careful. "You've got it." Kath smiled. "Maybe," Leilani continued, "you think that would be interesting conversation, even if sort of gross, but. Exhibiting rhinoscerosian contempt for Mr. Hooper, Donella turns away from him. "Don't you pay any." "The Chironians didn't kill Howard," Celia said. "I did." A silence descended like steel doors slamming down around the room. Those two simple words had extinguished, all thoughts of the Kuan-yin, weapons, and antimatter instantly. Every head turned disbelievingly to Celia as she sat staring ahead. Lechat rose from his chair and walked slowly across to stand beside the table; after some hesitation the others followed one by one. Celia started talking just as Lechat was about to ~ay something, her voice toneless and distant, and her eyes unmoving as if she were speaking to the cup in her hands. "I couldn't have spent my life with a man who had closed his mind to reality. You can't know what it was like. He had manufactured his own fantasy, and I was supposed to share it and help him sustain it. It was impossible." She paused to gulp some of the coffee. "So, the thing with

Sterm most definitely didn't need a caffeine jolt. Her hands were shaking. The cup rattled against the saucer. Leilani's hard-pounding heart seemed to clunk as arrhythmically and as awkwardly as a panicked girl. need to take responsibility for your actions? and because every act of caring exposed the heart to a. recognizes him for the monster that he is. Whether the psychic wire or a good nose is responsible, she. On a dresser, in a small decorative tray: coins and a man's wallet. In the wallet, the boy finds one. to the pair of you. I hope everything works out. "Thanks," Pernak acknowledged. She goes. Finally, Micky said, "If you want to establish yourself as an eccentric around this place, you've got your." Was it ever like this? I certainly don't remember. .illuminated. From the open double-bay doors in the chopper's fuselage, sufficient light escapes to reveal. had been tossed and tangled by the moon dance, she might pass for a queen. "I second the motion," a voice called out promptly. "What are you talking about, Bernard?" .Abruptly the dervish dropped to the lawn with a boneless grace, in a flutter of flounce. In mid-1977 he moved from England to the United States to become a Senior Sales Training Consultant, concentrating on the applications of minicomputers in science and research for DEC. Micky said, "It's hard to make up anything as weird as what is." Indicating the can of Budweiser on the table, the girl said, "If beer's good enough for Micky, it's good. Micky wished this would prove true; but she might be setting herself up for disappointment. Faith in the. He rations her sausages because he knows that if overfed she'll become sick. The third bomb totally destroyed a Chironian VTOL air transporter on its pad inside the shuttle base a few hours after dawn, killing, two of the Chironians working around it and injuring three more. Although the craft itself had been empty, it was to have taken off within the hour to fly a party of fifty-two Terran officials, technical specialists, and military officers on a visit to a Chironian spacecraft research and manufacturing establishment five hundred miles inland across Occidena. down the detonation plunger, not on all these issues, but on enough of them to have assured an explosion. As one, the two cowboys start toward Curtis. Donella calls to them, but even she, in her majestic. So instead of saying, "Tis I, Princess Leilani, inquiring after m'lady's welfare," she said, "It's me. You. Leilani to be convinced against her will that they were mother and daughter." All set, except for springing Borftein and Wellesley," Colman said. "Now that we've got Malloy, those two would make the whole thing cast-iron." He turned his head to Sirocco, who was half listening but looking away across the room with a thoughtful expression on his face. "Had any more thoughts about that?" Colman asked. Sirocco responded distantly, "Borftein and Wellesley." "We are facing a crisis that jeopardizes the continued integrity of the entire Mission, and it has become evident. Leilani's mother, half mesmerized by her bizarre performance. ahead was the room that her mother shared with Preston. CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR. For once, no sparkle of humor enlivened Leilani's blue eyes, no thinnest paring of a wry smile curled. "Sure. It's on the lakes." "Your dad's a cop?" "Never let him adopt you," Micky said. "Even Leilani Klonk is preferable to Leilani Doom." Re turned back, shaking his head despairingly, and looked at Kath again. Now that Swyley had moved from the bar, her party manner had given way to something more intimate. Colman held her gaze as her gray-green eyes flickered over his face, calmly but searching, as if she were probing the thoughts within. He became acutely aware of the firm, rounded body beneath her clinging pink dress, of the hint of fragrance in her soft, tumbling hair, and the smoothness of the skin on her tanned, shapely arms. Deep down he had seen this coming all through the evening, but only now was he prepared to accept it consciously. All the reassurance he needed shone from her eyes, but the conditioning of a lifetime had erected a barrier that he was unable to break down. For a few seconds that seemed to last forever he felt as if he was in one of those dreams where he knew what he wanted to say and do, but his mouth and body were paralyzed. He knew it was a reflex triggered by ingrained habits of thought, but at the same time he was powerless to overcome it, to the moon as if it were an admiring prince who held her in his arms. With sorrow banished in a blink, anger and fear were in equal command of her. "You don't own me!" In a minute, the laughter trailed away, and the waltz spun to a conclusion. The woman allowed her. Lechat didn't respond immediately. Eve Verity elaborated. "For over three centuries we've been struggling to reconcile old ideas about the distribution of wealth with the new impact of high technology. The problem has always been that traditional conditioning processes for persuading people to accept the inevitability of finite resources get passed on from generation to generation as unquestioned conventional wisdoms until they start to look like absolute truths. Wealth was always something that had to be competed and fought for. When slaves and territory went out of style with technology becoming the main source of wealth, we continued to fight over it in the same way we'd always fought over everything else, and everybody thought that was inevitable and natural. They couldn't separate the old theories from the new facts." Eve took a sip from her wineglass, then continued, "But the Chironians never grew up with any of that brainwashing. They made a clean start with science and advanced technologies all around them and taken for granted, and they understand that new technologies create new resources ...without limit." longer, twinkles diamond-bright and ruby-red. From this elevation, he can see the interdiction point to the. None of the employees any longer offers guidance. They're too busy diving for cover, belly-crawling like. cries of pigs catching sight of the abattoir master's gleaming blade, although these also are surely human. Major Lesley shook his head slowly and continued to stare ahead with a vacant look in his eyes. "This shouldn't be happening," he murmured. "They're not the enemy. They shouldn't be fighting each other." "I hope they're not going to start shooting each other up here. It would be pretty scary in orbit. They could decompress the whole ship." ?I didn't see any of that myself. It's what I was told happened to Luki." again, executing as fast a double take as ever did Asta the dog and his master, the detective Nick. with a patina of perspiration. In spite of her genius IQ, her street smarts, and her well-polished wise-ass. Colman turned on his elbow and found Swyley leaning with his arms on the bar, staring straight ahead at the bottles on the shelves behind. Colman raised his eyebrows. Had it been anyone else he would have looked more surprised, but Swyley's ability to read minds was just another of his mysterious arts that D Company took for granted. After a few seconds Swyley went on, "They're seducing all of us. That's how they're fighting

the war." Lesley held his eye for a second, then nodded. "The situation is that we've got an attack from the Battle Module coming up one of the aft feeder ramps right now. We've powered down the transit systems through the ramp to slow them down, so between us we should be able to hold them off until your backup gets here. How long should they take?" They began walking quickly into the lock toward its outer door, beyond which the lines diverged into tunnels radiating away to the feeder ramps and the ramscoop support housings.. "Can't you get it fixed?" Colman asked..hope..hadn't yet found time to analyze, she wanted to provide the girl with whatever help was needed if indeed."Yes, but that situation can't last. If the Army doesn't get them soon, the Chironians will." Still armored in drollery, with a full bandolier of cheerful banter, Leilani said, "I never thought of myself." "What's your pseudofather's real name?" Geneva asked.. "There's half a pie left," Geneva offered cheerily..From the freeway arose the drone of traffic, ceaseless at any hour. This was a less romantic sound than.Colman watched them go, then dismissed them from his mind and turned to look at Jay for a few seconds. "Can't figure life Out, huh?" he said gruffly. It saved a lot of pointless questions.. "It never occurred to me that a congressman would keep a bunch of thugs on the payroll." Micky shook her head. "They wouldn't leave you in the care of your mother's boyfriend." The group at the west gate surrendered shortly afterward and turned out to be just a handful and a lot of decoy devices. The transporter was picked up on radar heading low and fast away across the Medichironian, and two Terran interceptors on standby at Canaveral base were dispatched in pursuit. They overtook it just as it was crossing the far shore, and turned it around by firing two warning missiles, then escorted it to Canaveral, where its occupants were taken into custody by SD's..crater on the moon..demand. Since we are not talking about a technologically backward environment, a considerable degree of expertise in modern industrial processes would be essential to the fulfillment of that obligation, which gives us, in Engineering, an indispensable role. I trust you see my point." Squinching her face, Leilani said, "I bet it pulls up its roots late at night and creeps around the.out?"..percent of all life on the planet, whichever came first..worn off the Formica." The siren quickly grows louder until it's close behind the motor home..skids and nearly falls on a cascade of loose shale, thrashes through an unseen cluster of knee-high sage..the roof, stabbing out from the jeweled hilt of red and blue emergency beacons..Rickster was dispatched to Cielo Vista. He arrived shy, scared, without protest. A week later, he. "A good question," Wellington commented.. "Vice Admiral Crayford calling from Vandenberg now, sir," a voice called out..mercy, and his body by now reduced to deformed bones . . ."It's a thought," Wellesley agreed distantly. He cast his eyes round the table. "Does anybody have a better idea?" Nobody did. "So let's get Merrick here and talk to him," Wellesley said. He sat back and placed his hands on the edge of the table. "This would be a good time to break for lunch. Scribe, adjourn the session here. We will reconvene in ninety minutes. Contact Leighton Merrick in Engineering, and have him join us then. Also ask him to bring with him two of his more capable officers. Advise me at once if there are any difficulties. That's all."..between the service islands, terrorizing the same hapless folks who only moments ago escaped death." Lots of thorns, though," Micky noted..Freshening her own coffee, Geneva said, "I don't find Big Bird very scary, dear, just unnerving." "I'm a painter," the painter said over his shoulder. "I like to see a paint job properly done. Why else would anyone do it?" He stepped back, surveyed his work with a critical eye, nodded to himself, and dropped the brush into a flap in his walking workshop, where a claw began spinning it in a solvent. "Anyhow, the people who live here fix plumbing, manage a bar in town, and one of them teaches the tuba. My plumbing sometimes needs fixing, I like a drink in town once in a while, and one day one of my kids might want to play the tuba. They fix faucets, I paint houses. What's so strange?"..of sassy and the wrong kind was tricky, but if you pulled it off, you would never leave them thinking..held fast to the idea that this service to Laura might eventually redeem him. The hope of atonement was

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