

An Excerpt from

ROLLBACK

by Hugo and Nebula Award-winner

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For

Robyn Meta Herrington

(1961-2004)

Great friend, great writer

No wise man ever wished to be younger.

—Jonathan Swift
(1667-1745)

How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?

—Leroy “Satchel” Paige
(1906-1982)

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Sunday, February 2, 2048

It had been a good life.

Donald Halifax looked around the living room of the modest house that he and his wife Sarah had shared for sixty years now, and that thought kept coming back to him. Oh, there had been ups and downs, and the downs had seemed excursions into the flames of hell at the time—the lingering death of his mother, Sarah’s battle with breast cancer, the rough periods their marriage had gone through—but, on balance, when all was said and done, it had been a good life.

When all was said and done.

Don shook his head, but it wasn’t in sadness. He’d always been a realist, a pragmatist, and he knew there was nothing left now but summing up and looking back. At the age of eighty-seven, that’s all anyone had.

The living room was narrow. A fireplace was built into the middle of one of the long walls, flanked by autopolarizing windows, but he couldn’t remember the last time they’d actually had a fire. It was too much work getting one going and then cleaning up afterward.

The mantel held framed photos, including one of Sarah and Don on their wedding day, back in 1988. She was wearing white, and he was in a tuxedo that had been black in reality but looked gray here, having faded, along with the rest of the photograph. Other photos showed their son Carl as a toddler and again graduating with his M.B.A. from McGill, and there were two pictures of their daughter Emily, one when she was in her twenties, and another, holographic one, from her early forties. And there were several holos of their two grandchildren.

There were also a few trophies: a pair of small ones that Don had won in Scrabble tournaments, and the big one Sarah had been given by the International Astronomical Union. He

couldn't remember the wording on that one, so he walked over, taking small steps, and had a look:

For Sarah Halifax
Who Figured It Out
1 March 2010

He nodded, remembering how proud he'd been that day, even if her fame had briefly turned their lives upside down.

A magphotic flatscreen was mounted above the mantel, and when they weren't watching anything it displayed the time in boxy red numerals a foot high, big enough that Sarah could see them from across the room; as she'd often quipped, it was a good thing that she hadn't been an *optical* astronomer. It was now 3:17 in the afternoon. As Don watched, the remaining segments in the rightmost digit lit up; 3:18. The party was supposed to have begun at 3:00, but no one was here yet, and Sarah was still upstairs getting ready.

Don made a mental vow to try to not be short with the grandchildren. He never meant to snap at them, but somehow, he always did; there was a constant background level of pain at his age, and it frayed his temper.

He heard the front door opening. The house knew the kids' biometrics, and they always let themselves in without ringing the bell. The living room had a short staircase at one end that led down to the entryway and a taller one at the other going up to the bedrooms. Don walked over to the base of the one going up. "Sarah!" he called. "They're here!"

He then made his way to the other end of the room, each footfall punctuated by a tiny jab of pain. No one had come up yet—this was Toronto in February, and, global warming be damned, there were still boots and jackets to be removed. Before he reached the top of the stairs, he'd sorted out the *mêlée* of voices; it was Carl's crew.

He looked at them from his elevated vantage point and felt himself smiling. His son, his daughter-in-law, his grandson, and his granddaughter—part of his immortality. Carl was bent over in a way Don would have found excruciating, pulling off one of his boots. From this angle, Don could clearly see his son's considerable bald spot—trivial to correct, had Carl been vain, but neither Don nor his son, who was now fifty-four, could ever be accused of that.

Angela, Carl's blond wife, was ten years younger than her husband. She was working to get the boots off little Cassie, who was seated on the one chair in the entryway. Cassie, who took no active role in this, looked up and saw Don, and a huge grin spread across her little round face. "Grampa!"

He waved at her. Once all the outerwear was removed, everyone came upstairs. Angela kissed him on the cheek as she passed, carrying a rectangular cake box. She went into the kitchen. Twelve-year-old Percy was up next, then came Cassie, pulling on the banister, which she could barely reach, to help her get up the six steps.

Don bent low, feeling twinges in his back as he did so. He wanted to lift Cassie up, but that was impossible. He settled for letting her get her little arms around his neck and giving him a squeeze. Cassie was oblivious to the fact that she was hurting him, and he endured it until she let go. She then scampered through the living room and followed her mother to the kitchen. He turned to watch her and saw Sarah coming down from upstairs, one painful step at a time, gripping the banister with both hands as she did so.

By the time she reached the bottom step, Don heard the front door opening again, and his daughter Emily—divorced, no kids—coming in. Soon enough, everyone was crowded into the living room. With his cochlear implants, Don's hearing wasn't bad under normal circumstances, but he couldn't really pick out any one thread of conversation from the hubbub that now filled the air. Still, it was his family, all together. He was happy about that, but—

But it might be the last time. They'd gathered just six weeks ago for Christmas at Carl's place, in Ajax. His children and grandchildren wouldn't normally all get together again until next Christmas, but—

But he couldn't count on there being a next Christmas; not at his age ...

No; that wasn't what he should be dwelling on. Today was a party, a celebration. He should enjoy it, and—

And suddenly there was a champagne flute in his hand. Emily was circling the room, handing them out to the adults, while Carl presented plastic tumblers of juice to the children.

"Dad, go stand by Mom," Carl said. And he did so, making his way across the room to where she was—not standing; she couldn't stand for long. Rather, she was seated in the old La-Z-Boy. Neither of them ever reclined it anymore, although the grandkids loved to operate the mechanism. He stood next to Sarah, looking down on her thinning snow-white hair. She craned

her neck as much as she could to look up at him, and a smile crossed her face, one more line in a landscape of creases and folds.

“Everybody, everybody!” shouted Carl. He was the elder of Don and Sarah’s kids and always took charge. “Your attention, please!” The conversation and laughter died down quickly, and Don watched as Carl raised his own champagne flute. “I’d like to propose a toast. To Mom and Dad, on their sixtieth wedding anniversary!”

The adults all raised their glasses, and, after a moment, the kids imitated them with their tumblers. “To Don and Sarah!” said Emily, and, “To Grandma and Grandpa,” declared Percy.

Don took a sip of the champagne, the first alcohol he’d had since New Year’s Eve. He noted his hand was shaking even more than it normally did, not from age but with emotion.

“So, Dad, what do you say?” asked Carl. He was grinning from ear to ear. Emily, for her part, was recording everything with her datacom. “Would you do it all over again?”

Carl had asked the question, but Don’s answer was really for Sarah. He set his glass on a little tea table next to the La-Z-Boy, then slowly, painfully, lowered himself onto one knee, so that he was at eye level with his seated wife. He reached over, took her hand, feeling the thin, almost translucent skin sliding over the swollen joints, and looked into her pale blue eyes. “In a heartbeat,” he said softly.

Emily let out a long, theatrical, “Awwww ...”

Sarah squeezed his hand, and she smiled at him, the same wry smile he’d fallen for back when they were both in their twenties, and she said, with a steadiness that her voice almost never managed these days, “Me, too.”

Carl’s exuberance got the better of him. “To another sixty years!” he said, lifting his glass again, and Don found himself laughing at the ridiculousness of the proposition.

“Why not?” he said, slowly rising again, then reaching for his glass. “Why the heck not?”

The phone rang. He knew his kids thought the voice-only phones were quaint, but neither he nor Sarah had any desire to have 2-D picture phones, let alone holophones. His first thought was not to answer; let whoever it was leave a message. But it was probably a well-wisher—maybe even his brother Bill calling from Florida, where he wintered.

The cordless handset was on the other side of the room. Don lifted his eyebrows and nodded at Percy, who looked delighted to be charged with such a task. He raced across the room, and rather than just bringing over the handset, he activated it and very politely said, “Halifax

residence.”

It was possible that Emily, standing near Percy, could hear the person on the other end of the line, but Don couldn't make out anything. After a moment, he heard Percy say, “Just a sec,” and the boy started walking across the room. Don held out his hand to take the handset, but Percy shook his head. “It's for Grandma.”

Sarah looked surprised as she took the handset, which, upon recognizing her fingerprints, automatically cranked up its volume. “Hello?” she said.

Don looked on with interest, but Carl was talking to Emily while Angela was making sure her children were being careful with their drinks, and—

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed Sarah.

“What is it?” asked Don.

“Are you sure?” Sarah said, into the mouthpiece. “Are you positive it's not—No, no, of course you'd check. Sorry. But—my God!”

“Sarah,” said Don, “what is it?”

“Hang on, Lenore,” Sarah said into the phone, then she covered the mouthpiece with a trembling hand. “It's Lenore Darby,” she said, looking up at him. He gathered he should know the name, but couldn't place it immediately—the story of his life, these days—and his face must have conveyed that. “You know,” said Sarah. “She's doing her master's; you met her at the last astro-department Christmas party.”

“Yes?”

“Well,” said Sarah, sounding as though she couldn't believe that she was uttering these words, “Lenore says a reply has been received.”

“What?” said Carl, now standing on the other side of her chair.

Sarah turned to face her son, but Don knew what she meant before she spoke again; he knew precisely what she meant, and he staggered a half-pace backward, groping for the edge of a bookcase for support. “A reply has been received,” repeated Sarah. “The aliens from Sigma Draconis have responded to the radio message my team sent all those years ago.”

Chapter 2

Most jokes get tired with repetition, but some become old friends, causing a smile whenever they come to mind. For Don Halifax, one such was a quip Conan O'Brien had made decades ago. Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones had just announced the birth of their baby girl. "Congratulations," O'Brien had said. "And if she's anything like her mother, right now her future husband is in his mid-forties."

There was no such age gap between Don and Sarah. They'd both been born in 1960 and had gone through life in lockstep. They'd both been twenty-seven when they'd gotten married; thirty-two when Carl, their first child, had been born; and forty-eight when—

As Don stood, looking at Sarah, the moment came back to him, and he shook his head in amazement. It had been front-page news, back when there *were* front pages, all over the world. On March first, 2009, a radio message had been received from a planet orbiting the star Sigma Draconis.

The world had puzzled over the message for months, trying to make sense of what the aliens had said. And then, finally, Sarah Halifax herself had figured out what they were getting at, and it was she who had led the team composing the official reply that had been sent on the one-year anniversary of the receipt of the original signal.

The public had initially been hungry for more news, but Sigma Draconis was 18.8 light-years from Earth, meaning the reply wouldn't reach there until 2028, and any response the Dracons might make couldn't have gotten here until October 2047 at the earliest.

And a few TV shows and webcasts had dutifully done little pieces last fall noting that a response could be received "any day now." But none was. Not in October, not in November, not in December, not in January, not ...

Not until right now.

No sooner had Sarah gotten off the phone with Lenore than it rang again. The call, as she revealed in a stage whisper while holding her hand over the mouthpiece, was from CNN. Don remembered the pandemonium the last time, when she had figured out the purpose of the first

message—God, where had the decades gone?

Everyone was now standing or sitting in a semicircle, looking at Sarah. Even the children had recognized that something major was going on, although they had no idea what.

“No,” Sarah was saying. “No, I have no comment. No, you can’t. It’s my anniversary today. I’m not going to let it be ruined by strangers in the house. What? No, no. Look, I really have to go. All right, then. All right, then. Yes, yes. Good-bye.” She pushed the button that terminated the call, then looked up at Don, and lifted her frail shoulders a bit. “Sorry for all the bother,” she said. “It’s—”

The phone rang again, an electronic bleeping that Don disliked at the best of times. Carl, taking command, took the handset from his mother and flicked off the ringer. “They can leave a message if they like.”

Sarah frowned. “But what if somebody needs help?”

Carl spread his arms. “Your whole family is here. Who else would call for help? Relax, Mom. Let’s enjoy the rest of the party.”

Don looked around the room. Carl had been sixteen when his mother had been briefly famous, but Emily had been just ten, and hadn’t really understood what had been going on. She was staring at Sarah with astonishment on her narrow face.

Phones in the other rooms were ringing, but they were easy enough to ignore. “So,” he said, “did—what was her name? Lenore? Did she say anything about the message’s content?”

Sarah shook her head. “No. Just that it was definitely from Sigma Draconis, and seems to begin, at least, with the same symbol set used last time.”

Angela said, “Aren’t you dying to know what the reply says?”

Sarah reached out her arms in a way that said “help me up.” Carl stepped forward and did just that, gently bringing his mother to her feet. “Sure, I’d like to know,” she said. “But it’s still coming in.” She looked at her daughter-in-law. “So let’s get started making dinner.”

#

The kids and grandkids left around 9:00 p.m. Carl, Angela, and Emily had done all the work cleaning up after dinner, and so Don and Sarah simply sat on the living-room couch, enjoying the restored calm. Emily had gone around at one point, shutting off all the other ringers on the phones, and they were still off. But the answering machine’s digital display kept changing every few minutes. Don was reminded of another old joke, this one from his teenage years, about

the guy who liked to follow Elizabeth Taylor to McDonald's so he could watch the numbers change. Those signs had been stuck at "Over 99 Billion Served" for decades, but he remembered the hoopla when they'd all finally been replaced with new ones that read, "Over 1 Trillion Served."

Sometimes it was better to just stop counting, he thought—especially when it's a counting down instead of a counting up. They'd both made it to eighty-seven, and to sixty years together. But they surely wouldn't be around for a seventieth anniversary; that just wasn't in the cards. In fact ...

In fact, he was surprised they'd lived this long, but maybe they'd been holding on, striving to reach the diamond milestone. All his life, he'd read about people who died just days after their eightieth, ninetieth, or hundredth birthdays. They'd clung to life, literally by the force of their wills, until the big day had been reached, and then they'd just let go.

Don had turned eighty-seven three months ago, and Sarah had done so five months before that. That hadn't been what they'd been holding on for. But a sixtieth wedding anniversary! How rare that was!

He would have liked to put his arm around Sarah's shoulders as they sat side by side on the couch, but it pained him to rotate his own shoulder that much, and—

And then it hit him. Maybe she hadn't been hanging on for their anniversary. Maybe what had really kept her going all this time was waiting to see what reply the Dragons would send. He wished contact had been made with a star thirty or forty light-years away, instead of just nineteen. He wanted her to keep holding on. He didn't know what he'd do if she let go, and—

And he'd read *that* news story, too, dozens of times over the years: the husband who dies only days after his wife; the wife who finally seems to give up and let go shortly after hubby passes away.

Don knew a day like today called for some comment, but when he opened his mouth, what came out were just two words, that, he guessed, summarized it all: "Sixty years."

She nodded. "A long time."

He was quiet for a while, then: "Thank you."

She turned her head to look at him. "For what?"

"For—" He lifted his eyebrows and raised his shoulders a bit as he sought an answer. And then, finally, he said, very softly, "Everything."

Next to them, on the little table beside the couch, the counter on the answering machine tallied up another call. “I wonder what the aliens’ reply says,” Don said. “I hope it’s not just one of those damn autoresponders. ‘I’m sorry, but I’ll be away from the planet for the next million years.’” Sarah laughed, and Don went on. “‘If you need immediate assistance, please contact my assistant Zagdorf at ...’”

“You are a supremely silly man,” she said, patting the back of his hand.

#

Even though they only had voice phones, Sarah and Don did have a modern answering machine. “Forty-eight calls were received since you last reviewed your messages,” the device’s smooth male voice said the next morning as they sat at the dining-room table. “Of those, thirty-nine left messages. All thirty-nine were for Sarah. Thirty-one were from the media. Rather than presenting them in order of receipt, I suggest you let me prioritize them for you, sorting by audience size. Starting with the TV networks, CNN—”

“What about the calls that weren’t from the media?” Sarah asked.

“The first was from your hairdresser. The second is from the SETI Institute. The third is from the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics at the University of Toronto. The fourth—”

“Play the one from U of T.”

A squeaky female voice came on. “Good morning, Professor Halifax. This is Lenore again—you know, Lenore Darby. Sorry to be phoning so early, but I thought someone should give you a call. Everyone’s been working on interpreting the message as it comes in—here, over in Mountain View, at the Allen, everywhere—and, well, you’re not going to believe this, Professor Halifax, but we think the message is”—the voice lowered a bit, as if its owner was embarrassed to go on—“*encrypted*. Not just encoded for transmission, but actually encrypted—you know, scrambled so that it can’t be read without a decryption key.”

Sarah looked at Don, her face astonished. Lenore went on. “I know sending us an encrypted message doesn’t make any sense, but that seems to be what the Dracons have done. The beginning of the message is all math stuff, laid out in that symbol set they used before, and the computer gunks say the math describes a decryption algorithm. And then the rest of the message is total gibberish, presumably because it has indeed been encrypted. Get it? They’ve told us *how* the message is encrypted, and given us the algorithm to unlock it, but they haven’t given us the decryption key to feed into that algorithm to do the actual unlocking. It’s the craziest

thing, and—”

“Pause,” said Sarah. “How long does she go on?”

“Another two minutes, sixteen seconds,” said the machine, and then it added, “She’s quite chatty.”

Sarah shook her head and looked at Don. “Encrypted!” she declared. “That doesn’t make any sense. Why in God’s name would aliens send us a message we can’t read?”

Chapter 3

Sarah fondly remembered *Seinfeld*, although, sadly, it hadn't aged well. Still, one of Jerry's bits of stand-up seemed as true today as it had been half a century ago. When it came to TV, most men were hunters, switching from channel to channel, always on the prowl for something better, while women were nesters, content to settle in with a single program. But today, Sarah found herself scanning constantly; the puzzle of the encrypted message from Sigma Draconis was all over the TV and the web. She caught coverage of odds makers paying off winners who'd correctly guessed the day on which a reply would be received, fundamentalists decrying the new signal as a temptation from Satan, and crackpots claiming to have already decrypted the secret transmission.

Of course, she was delighted that there had been a reply, but as she continued to flip channels on the giant monitor above the mantel, she reflected that she was also disappointed that in all the years since they'd detected the first message, no other alien radio source had been found. As Sarah had once said in an interview very much like the ones she was looking at today, it was certainly true that we weren't alone—but we were still pretty lonely.

Her surfing was interrupted each time someone came up to the front door and rang the bell; an image of whoever it was automatically appeared on the monitor. Mostly it seemed to be reporters; there were still a few journalists who did more than send email, make phone calls, and surf the web.

Those neighbors who had lived here on Betty Ann Drive four decades ago knew Sarah's claim to fame, but most of the houses had changed hands several times since then. She wondered what her newer neighbors made of the succession of news vans that had pulled into her driveway. Ah, well; at least it wasn't something to be embarrassed about, like the cop cars that kept showing up at the Kuchma place across the road and, so far, Sarah had simply ignored all the people who had rung her doorbell, but—

My God.

But she couldn't ignore *this*.

The face that had suddenly appeared on the monitor was not human.

“Don!” she called, her voice dry. “Don, come here!”

He had gone into the kitchen to make coffee—decaf, of course; it was all Dr. Bonhoff would let either of them have these days. He shuffled into the living room, wearing a teal cardigan over an untucked red shirt. “What?”

She gestured at the monitor. “My ... goodness,” he said softly. “How’d it get here?”

She pointed at the screen. Partially visible behind the strange head was their driveway, which Carl had shoveled before leaving yesterday. An expensive-looking green car was sitting on it. “In that, I guess.”

The doorbell rang once more. She doubted the being pushing the button was actually getting impatient. Rather, she suspected, some dispassionate timer told it to try again.

“Do you want me to let it in?” asked Don, still looking at the picture of the round, blue face, with its unblinking eyes.

“Um, sure,” Sarah said. “I guess.”

She watched as he made his way to the little staircase leading to the entryway, and began the slow pilgrimage down, one painful step at a time. She followed him and stood at the top of the stairs—and noted that one of her grandkids had forgotten a colorful scarf here. By the time Don reached the door, the bell had sounded a third time, which was the maximum number it was programmed to allow. He undid the deadbolt and the chain, and swung the heavy oak door inward, revealing—

It had been weeks since Sarah had seen one in the flesh—not that “in the flesh” was the right phrase.

Standing before them, gleaming in the sunlight, was a robot, one of the very latest models, she guessed; it looked more sophisticated and sleeker than any she’d seen before.

“Hello,” the robot said to Don, in a perfectly normal male voice. It was about five-foot-six: tall enough to function well in the world, but not so tall as to be intimidating. “Is Dr. Sarah Halifax in?”

“I’m Sarah Halifax,” she said. The robot’s head swiveled to look up at her. Sarah suspected it was analyzing both her face and her voice to make sure it was really her.

“Hello, Dr. Halifax,” the robot said. “You haven’t been answering your household phone, so I’ve brought you a replacement. Someone would like to talk to you.” The robot raised its right

hand, and in it Sarah could just make out a clamshell datacom.

“And who might that be?” she asked.

The robot tilted its head slightly, giving the impression that it was listening to someone somewhere else. “Cody McGavin,” it said. Sarah felt her heart skip a beat; she wished she’d actually been on the staircase, instead of just above it, so she could have grabbed the banister for support. “Will you take his call?”

Don turned to look at Sarah, his eyes wide, jaw hanging slack.

“Yes,” she said.

The word had come out very softly, but the robot apparently had no trouble hearing her. “May I?” it asked.

Don nodded and stepped aside. The robot came into the entryway, and, to Sarah’s astonishment, she saw it was wearing simple galoshes, which, in a fluid motion, it bent over and removed, exposing blue metal feet. The machine walked across the vestibule, its heels clicking against the old, much-scuffed hardwood there, and it easily went up the first two steps, which was as far as it had to go to be able to proffer the datacom to Sarah. She took it.

“Flip it open,” the robot said helpfully.

She did so, then heard a ringing through the small speaker. She quickly brought the device to her ear.

“Hello, Dr. Halifax,” said a crisp female voice. It was a little hard for Sarah to make out; she wished she knew how to adjust the volume. “Please hold for Mr. McGavin.”

Sarah looked at her husband. She’d repeatedly told him how much she hated people who made her wait like this. It was almost always some self-important jackass who felt his time was more valuable than anyone else’s. But in this case, Sarah supposed, that was actually true. Oh, there might be a few people on Earth who made more per hour than Cody McGavin, but, offhand, she couldn’t name any of them.

As Sarah often said, SETI is the Blanche Dubois of scientific undertakings: it has always depended on the kindness of strangers. Whether it was Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen donating 13.5 million dollars in 2004 to fund an array of radio telescopes, or the hundreds of thousands of private computer users who gave up their spare processing cycles to the SETI@home project, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence had managed to struggle on decade after decade through the largesse of those who believed, first, that we might not be alone, and, later, that it actually

mattered that we were not alone.

Cody McGavin had made billions by the time he was forty, developing robotic technology. His proprioceptive sensor webs were behind every sophisticated robot on the planet. Born in 1985, he'd been fascinated by astronomy, science fiction, and space travel all his life. His collection of artifacts from the *Apollo* program, an endeavor that had come and gone long before he was born, was the largest in the world. And, after the passing of Paul Allen, he'd become by far SETI's biggest single benefactor.

As soon as Sarah had been put on hold, music started playing. She recognized it as Bach—and got the joke; she was probably one of the few people left alive who would. Years ago, long before the first Draconis signal had been received, during a discussion of what message should be beamed to the stars, Carl Sagan had vetoed the suggestion of Bach, because, he'd said, “That would be bragging.”

In the middle of the concerto, the famous voice came on; McGavin spoke with one of those Boston accents that managed to say “Harvard” with no discernible *R* sound. “Hello, Dr. Halifax. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

She found her voice cracking in a way that had nothing to do with age. “That’s all right.”

“Well, they did it, didn’t they?” he said, with relish. “They replied.”

“It seems so, sir.” There weren’t many people an eighty-seven-year-old felt inclined to call “sir,” but it had come spontaneously to her lips.

“I knew they would,” said McGavin. “I just knew it. We’ve got us a dialogue going here.”

She smiled. “And now it’s our turn to reply again—once we figure out how to decrypt the message.” Don had been moving across the little entryway, and now was climbing the six stairs. When he was all the way up, she held the datacom at an angle to her face so he could hear McGavin, too. The robot, meanwhile, had taken up a position just inside the front door.

“Exactly, exactly,” said McGavin. “We’ve got to keep the conversation going. And that’s what I’m calling about, Sarah—you don’t mind if I call you Sarah, do you?”

She actually quite liked it when younger people called her by her first name; it made her feel more alive. “Not at all.”

“Sarah, I’ve got a—call it a proposition for you.”

Sarah couldn’t help herself. “My husband is standing right here.”

McGavin chuckled. "A proposal, then."

"Still here," said Don.

"Hee hee," said McGavin. "Let's call it an offer, then. An offer I don't think you'll want to refuse."

Don used to do a good Brando in his youth. He puffed out his cheeks, frowned, and moved his head as if shaking jowls, but said nothing. Sarah laughed silently and swatted his arm affectionately. "Yes?" she said, into the datacom.

"I'd like to discuss it with you face-to-face. You're in Toronto, right?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind coming down here, to Cambridge? I'd have one of my planes bring you down."

"I ... I wouldn't want to travel without my husband."

"Of course not; of course not. This affects him, too, in a way. Won't you both come down?"

"Um, ah, give us a moment to discuss it."

"Of course," said McGavin.

She covered the mike and looked at Don with raised eyebrows.

"Back in high school," he said, "we had to make a list of twenty things we wanted to do before we die. I came across mine a while ago. One of the ones I haven't checked off yet is 'Take a ride in a private jet.'"

"All right," she said, into the datacom. "Sure. Why not?"

"Terrific, terrific," said McGavin. "We'll have a limo pick you up and take you to Trudeau in the morning, if that's okay."

Trudeau was in Montreal; the Toronto airport was Pearson—but Sarah knew what he meant. "Fine, yes."

"Wonderful. I'll have my assistant come on, and he'll look after all the details. We'll see you in time for lunch tomorrow."

And the Bach started up again.

Chapter 4

It was ironic, now that Don thought back on it, how often he and Sarah had talked about SETI's failure prior to its success. He'd come home one day, around—let's see; they'd been in their mid-forties, so it must have been something like 2005—to find her sitting in their just-bought La-Z-Boy, listening to her iPod. Don could tell she wasn't playing music; she couldn't resist tapping her fingers or toes whenever she was doing that.

“What are you listening to?” he asked.

“It's a lecture,” shouted Sarah.

“Oh, really!” he shouted back, grinning.

She took out the little white earbuds, looking sheepish. “Sorry,” she said, in a normal volume. “It's a lecture Jill did for The Long Now Foundation.”

SETI, Don often thought, was like Hollywood, with its stars. In Tinsel Town, having to use last names marked you as an outsider, and the same was true in Sarah's circles, where Frank was always Frank Drake, Paul was Paul Shuch, Seth was Seth Shostak, Sarah was indeed Sarah Halifax, and Jill was Jill Tarter.

“The long what?” Don said.

“The Long Now,” repeated Sarah. “They're a group that tries to encourage long-term thinking, thinking about *now* as an epoch rather than a point in time. They're building a giant clock—the Clock of the Long Now—that ticks once a year, chimes once a century, and has a cuckoo that comes out every millennium.”

“Good work if you can get it,” he said. “Say, where are the kids?” Carl had been twelve then; Emily, six.

“Carl's downstairs watching TV. And I sent Emily to her room for drawing on the wall again.”

He nodded. “So what's Jill talking about?” He'd never met Jill, although Sarah had.

“Why SETI is, by necessity, a long-term proposition,” Sarah said. “Except she's skirting the issue.”

“You and she are practically the only SETI researchers who can do that.”

“What? Oh.”

“I’m here all week.”

“Lucky me. Anyway, she doesn’t seem to be getting to the point, which is that SETI is something that *must* be a multigenerational activity, like building a great cathedral. It’s a trust, something we hand down to our children, and they hand down to their children.”

“We don’t have a good track record with things like that,” he said, perching now on the La-Z-Boy’s broad, padded arm. “I mean, you know, the environment is something we hold in trust and pass on to Carl and Emily’s generation, too. And look at how little our generation has done to combat global warming.”

She sighed. “I know. But Kyoto’s a step forward.”

“It’ll hardly make a dent.”

“Yeah, well.”

“But, you know,” said Don, “we’re not cut out for this—what did you call it?—this ‘Long Now’ sort of thinking. It’s anti-Darwinian. We’re hardwired against it.”

She sounded surprised. “What?”

“We did something about kin selection on *Quirks and Quarks* last month; I spent forever editing the interview.” Don was an audio engineer at CBC Radio. “We had Richard Dawkins on again, by satellite through the Beeb. He said that in a competitive situation, you automatically favor your own son over your brother’s son, right? Of course: your son has half your DNA, and your brother’s son only has a quarter of it. But if things got tough between your brother’s son and your cousin, well, you’d favor your brother’s son—that is, your nephew—because your cousin only has an eighth of your DNA.”

“That’s right,” Sarah said. She was scratching his back. It felt very nice.

He went on. “And a second cousin only has one-thirty-second of your DNA. And a second cousin once removed has just one-sixty-fourth of your DNA. Well, when was the last time you heard of somebody volunteering a kidney to save a second cousin once removed? Not only do most people have no clue who their second cousins once removed are, but they also, quite bluntly, couldn’t give a crap what happens to them. They just don’t share enough DNA with them to care.”

“I love it when you talk math,” she teased. Fractions were about as good as Don’s math

got.

“And over time,” he said, “the DNA share gets cut down, like cheap coke.” He grinned, delighted by his simile, although she knew full well that the only coke he had experience with came in silver-and-red cans. “You only have to go six generations to get to your own descendants being as distantly related to you as a second cousin once removed—and six generations is less than two centuries.”

“I can name my second cousins once removed. There’s Helena, and Dillon, and—”

“But you’re special. That’s why you *are* interested in SETI. For the rest of the world, they just don’t have a vested Darwinian interest. Evolution has shaped us so that we don’t care about anything that’s not going to manifest soon, because no close relative of ours will be around then. Jill’s probably tap-dancing around that, because it’s a point she *doesn’t* want to make: that, for the general public, SETI doesn’t make sense. Hell, didn’t Frank”—whom he’d also never met—“send a signal somewhere thousands of light-years away?”

He looked at Sarah, and saw her nod. “The Arecibo message, sent in 1974. It was aimed at M13, a globular cluster.”

“And how far away is M13?”

“Twenty-five thousand light-years,” she said.

“So it’ll be fifty thousand years before we could get a reply. Who has the patience for something like that? Hell, I got an email today with a PDF attachment, and I thought, geez, I wonder if this thing is going to be worth reading, ’cause, you know, it’s going to take, like, *ten whole seconds* for the attachment to download and open. We want instant gratification; we find *any* delay intolerable. How can SETI fit into a world with that mindset? Send a message and wait decades or centuries for a reply?” He shook his head. “Who the hell would want to play that game? Who’s got the *time* for it?”

Chapter 5

As the luxury jet landed, Don Halifax mentally checked off that to-do-list item. The few remaining ones, including “sleep with a supermodel” and “meet the Dalai Lama,” seemed out of the question at this point, not to mention of no current interest.

It was bitterly cold going down the little metal staircase onto the tarmac. The flight attendant helped Don every step of the way, while the pilot helped Sarah. Downside of a private plane: it didn't use a Jetway. Like so many of the things on Don's list, this one was turning out to be less wonderful than he'd hoped.

A white limo was waiting for them. The robot driver wore one of those caps that limo drivers are supposed to wear, but nothing else. It did an expert job of getting them to McGavin Robotics, all the while providing a running commentary, in a voice loud enough for them to hear clearly, on the sights and history of the area.

The McGavin Robotics corporate campus consisted of seven sprawling buildings separated by wide snow-covered expanses; the company had lots of ties to the artificial-intelligence lab at nearby MIT. The limo was able to go straight into an underground garage, so Don and Sarah didn't have to brave the cold again. The robot driver escorted them as they walked slowly over to an immaculate elevator, which brought them up to the lobby. Human beings took over there, taking their coats, making them welcome, and bringing them up another elevator to the fourth floor of the main building.

Cody McGavin's office was long and narrow, covering one whole side of the building, with windows looking out over the rest of the campus. His desk was made of polished granite, and a matching conference table with a fleet of fancy chairs docked at it was off to the left, while a long, well-stocked bar, with a robot bartender, stretched off in the other direction.

“Sarah Halifax!” said McGavin, rising from his high-backed leather chair.

“Hello, sir,” said Sarah.

McGavin quickly closed the distance between them. “This is an honor,” he said. “A real honor.” He was wearing what Don supposed was the current fashion for executives: a lapel-less

dark-green sports jacket and a lighter green shirt with a vertical splash of color down the front taking the place of a tie. No one wore ties anymore.

“And this must be your husband,” said McGavin.

“Don Halifax,” said Don. He offered his hand—something he disliked doing these days. Too many younger people squeezed too hard, causing him real pain. But McGavin’s grip was gentle, and released after only a moment.

“A pleasure to meet you, Don. Please, won’t you have a seat?” He gestured back toward his desk and, to Don’s astonishment, two luxurious leather-upholstered chairs were rising up through hatches in the carpeted floor. McGavin helped Sarah across the room, offering her his arm, and got her seated. Don shuffled across the carpet and lowered himself into the remaining chair, which seemed solidly anchored now.

“Coffee?” said McGavin. “A drink?”

“Just water,” said Sarah. “Please.”

“The same,” said Don.

The rich man nodded at the robot behind the bar, and the machine set about filling glasses. McGavin perched his bottom on the edge of the granite desk and faced Don and Sarah. He was not a particularly good-looking man, thought Don. He had doughy features and a small, receding chin that made his already large forehead seem even bigger. Still, he’d doubtless had some cosmetic work done. Don knew he was sixty-something, but he didn’t look a day over twenty-five.

The robot was suddenly there, handing Don a beautiful crystal tumbler full of water, with two ice cubes bobbing in it. The machine handed a similar glass to Sarah, and one to McGavin, and then silently withdrew to behind the bar.

“Now,” said McGavin, “let’s talk turkey. I said I’ve got a”—he paused, and gave the word a special weight, recalling the banter of the day before—“*proposition* for you.” He was looking at Sarah exclusively, Don noted. “And I do.”

Sarah smiled. “As we used to say about the Very Large Array, I’m all ears.”

McGavin nodded. “The first message we got from Sig Drac was a real poser, until *you* figured out its purpose. And this one is even more of a puzzle, it seems. Encrypted! Who’d have guessed?”

“It’s baffling,” she agreed.

“That it is,” said McGavin. “That it is. But I’m sure you can help us crack it.”

“I’m no expert in decryption or codes, or things like that,” she said. “My expertise, if I have any, is in exactly the opposite: understanding things that were designed to be read by anyone.”

“Granted, granted. But you had such insight into what the Dracons were getting at last time. And we know *how* to decrypt the current message. I’m told the aliens made the technique very clear. All we have to do is figure out *what* the decryption key is, and I suspect your skill is going to be valuable there.”

“You’re very kind,” she said, “but—”

“No, really,” said McGavin. “You were a crucial part of it then, I’m sure you’re going to be a crucial part of it now, and you’ll continue to be so well into the future.”

She blinked. “The future?”

“Yes, yes, the future. We’ve got a dialogue going here, and we need *continuity*. I’m sure we’ll unlock the current message, and, even if we don’t, we’ll still send a response. And I want you to be around when the reply to that response arrives.”

Don felt his eyes narrowing, but Sarah just laughed. “Don’t be silly. I’ll be dead long before then.”

“Not necessarily,” said McGavin.

“It’ll be thirty-eight years, minimum, before we get a reply to anything we send today,” she said.

“That’s right,” replied McGavin, his tone even.

“And I’d be—well, um ...”

“A hundred and twenty-five,” McGavin supplied.

Don had had enough. “Mr. McGavin, don’t be cruel. My wife and I have only a few years left, at best. We both know that.”

Sarah had drained her water glass. The robot silently appeared with a replacement and swapped it for the empty one.

McGavin looked at Don. “The press has had it all wrong, you know, from day one. Most of the SETI community hasn’t understood, either. This isn’t a case of Earth talking to the second planet of the star Sigma Draconis. Planets don’t talk to each other. *People* do. Some specific person on Sigma Draconis II sent the message, and one specific person on this planet—you, Dr.

Sarah Halifax—figured out what he'd asked for, and organized our reply. The rest of us—all the humans here, and anyone else on Sigma Draconis who is curious about what's being said—have been reading over your shoulders. You've got a pen pal, Dr. Halifax. It happens that I, not you, pay the postage, but he's *your* pen pal."

Sarah looked at Don, then back at McGavin. She took another sip of her water, perhaps to buy herself a few seconds to think. "That's an ... *unusual* interpretation," she said. "Because of the long times between sending messages and receiving replies, SETI is something whole civilizations do, not individuals."

"No, no, that's not right at all," said McGavin. "Look, what are the fundamental tenets of SETI? Certainly one of them is this: almost any race we contact will be more advanced than us. Why? Because, as of this year, we've only had radio for a hundred and fifty-three years, which is nothing compared to the fourteen billion years the universe is old. It's a virtual certainty that anyone we make contact with has been around as a radio-using civilization longer than we have."

"Yes," said Sarah, and "So?" added Don.

"So," said McGavin, "short lifespans are something only technologically unsophisticated races will be subject to. How long after a race develops radio do you think it is before they decode DNA, or whatever their genetic material is? How long before they develop blood transfusions and organ transplantation and tissue cloning? How long before they cure cancer and heart disease, or whatever comparable ailments sloppy evolution has left them prey to? A hundred years? Two hundred? Doubtless no more than three or four, right? Right?"

He looked at Sarah, presumably expecting her to nod. She didn't, and, after a moment, he went on anyway. "Just as every race we contact almost certainly must have had radio longer than we have, every race we contact will almost certainly have extended their lifespans way beyond whatever paltry handful of years nature originally dealt them." He spread his arms. "No, it stands to reason: communication between two planets isn't something one generation starts, another continues, and still another picks up after that. Even with the long time frames imposed by the speed of light, interstellar communication is still almost certainly communication between individuals. And you, Dr. Halifax, are *our* individual. You already proved, all those years ago, that you know how they think. Nobody else managed that."

Her voice was soft. "I—I'm happy to be the, um, the public face for our reply to the current message, if you think that's necessary, but after that ..." She lifted her narrow shoulders

slightly as if to say the rest was obvious.

“No,” said McGavin. “We need to keep you around for a good long time.”

Sarah was nervous; Don could tell, even if McGavin couldn't. She lifted her glass and swirled the contents so that the ice cubes clinked together. “What are you going to do? Have me stuffed and put on display?”

“Goodness, no.”

“Then what?” Don demanded.

“Rejuvenation,” said McGavin.

“Pardon me?” said Sarah.

“Rejuvenation; a rollback. We'll make you young again. Surely you've heard about the process.”

Don had indeed heard about it, and doubtless Sarah had, too. But only a couple of hundred people had undergone the procedure so far, and they'd all been stinking rich.

Sarah reached forward and set her glass down on the granite desktop, next to where McGavin was leaning. Her hand was shaking. “That ... that costs a fortune,” she said.

“I have a fortune,” said McGavin simply.

“But ... but ... I don't know,” said Sarah. “I'm—I mean, does it work?”

“Look at me,” said McGavin, spreading his arms again. “I'm sixty-two years old, according to my birth certificate. But my cells, my telomeres, my free-radical levels, and every other indicator say I'm twenty-five. And, if anything, I feel younger even than that.”

Don's jaw must have been hanging open in surprise. “You thought I'd had a facelift, or something like that?” McGavin said, looking at him. “Plastic surgery is like a software patch. It's a quick, kludgy fix, and it often creates more problems than it solves. But rejuvenation, well, that's like a code rewrite—it's a *real* fix. You don't just look young again; you *are* young.” His thin eyebrows climbed his wide forehead. “And that's what I'm offering you. The full-blown rejuvenation treatment.”

Sarah looked shocked, and it was a moment before she spoke. “But ... but this is ridiculous,” she said at last. “Nobody even knows if it really works. I mean, sure, you *look* younger, maybe you even *feel* younger, but the treatment has only been available for a short time. No one who's had it yet has lived appreciably longer than a natural lifespan. There's no proof that this process really extends your life.”

McGavin made a dismissive gesture. “There have been lots of rollback tests with lab animals. They all became young again, and then aged forward perfectly normally. We’ve seen mice and even prosimians live out their entire lengthened lifespans without difficulty. As for humans, well, except for a few oddball indicators like growth rings in my teeth, my physicians tell me that I’m now physiologically twenty-five, and am aging forward naturally from that point.” He spread his arms. “Believe me, it works. And I’m offering it to you.”

“Mr. McGavin,” Don said, “I really don’t think that—”

“Not without Don,” Sarah said.

“What?” said McGavin and Don simultaneously.

“Not without Don,” Sarah repeated. Her voice had a firmness Don hadn’t heard for years. “I won’t even consider this unless you also offer the same thing to my husband.”

McGavin pushed himself forward until he was standing. He walked behind his desk, turning his back on them, and looked out at his sprawling empire. “This is a very expensive procedure, Sarah.”

“And you’re a very rich man,” she replied.

Don looked at McGavin’s back, more or less silhouetted against the bright sky. At last, McGavin spoke. “I envy you, Don.”

“Why?”

“To have a wife who loves you so much. I understand the two of you have been married for over fifty years.”

“Sixty,” said Don, “as of two days ago.”

“I never ...” McGavin began, but then he fell silent.

Don had vague recollections of McGavin’s high-profile divorce, years ago, and a nasty court case to try to invalidate the pre-nup.

“Sixty years,” McGavin continued, at last. “Such a long time ...”

“It hasn’t seemed that way,” said Sarah.

Don could hear McGavin make a noisy intake of breath and then let it out. “All right,” he said, turning around, his head nodding. “All right, I’ll pay for the procedure for both of you.” He walked toward them, but remained standing. “So, do we have a deal?”

Sarah opened her mouth to say something, but Don spoke before she could. “We have to talk about this,” he said.

“So let’s talk,” said McGavin.

“Sarah and I. We have to talk about this alone.”

McGavin seemed momentarily peeved, as though he felt they were looking a gift horse in the mouth. But then he nodded. “All right, take your time.” He paused, and Don thought he was going to say something stupid like, “But not too much time.” But instead he said, “I’ll have my driver take you over to Pauli’s—finest restaurant in Boston. On me, of course. Talk it over. Let me know what you decide.”

Chapter 6

The robot chauffeur drove Sarah and Don to the restaurant. Don got out of the car first and carefully made his way over to Sarah's door, helping her up and out, and holding her arm as they crossed the sidewalk and entered.

"Hello," said the young white woman standing at a small podium inside the door. "You must be Dr. and Mr. Halifax, no? Welcome to Pauli's."

She gave them a hand getting out of their parkas. Fur was back in vogue—the pelts lab-grown, without producing the whole animal—but Sarah and Don were of a generation that had come to frown on fur, and neither could bring themselves to wear any. Their nylon-shelled coats from Mark's Work Wearhouse, his in navy blue, hers beige, looked decidedly out-of-place on the racks in the coat check.

The woman took Don's elbow, and Don took Sarah's, a sideways conga line shuffling slowly to a large booth near a crackling fireplace.

Pauli's turned out to be a seafood restaurant, and even though Don loved John Masefield's poetry, he hated seafood. Ah, well; doubtless the menu would have some chicken or steak.

There were the usual accoutrements of such places: an aquarium of lobsters, fishing nets hanging on the walls, a brass diver's helmet sitting on an old wooden barrel. But the effect was much more upscale than Red Lobster; here everything looked like valuable antiques rather than garage-sale kitsch.

Once they'd managed to get seated, and the young woman had taken their drink order—two decaf coffees—Don settled back against the soft leather upholstery. "So," he said, looking across at his wife, the crags in her face highlighted by the dancing firelight, "what do you think?"

"It's an incredible offer."

"That it is," he said, frowning. "But ..."

He trailed off as the waiter appeared, a tall black man of about fifty, dressed in a tuxedo. He handed a menu printed on parchment-like paper bound in leather covers to Sarah, then gave

one to Don. He squinted at it. Although this restaurant doubtless had lots of older patrons—they'd passed several on the way to the table—anyone who dined here regularly probably could afford new eyes, and—

“Hey,” he said, looking up. “There are no prices.”

“Of course not, sir,” said the waiter. He had a Haitian accent. “You are Mr. McGavin’s guests. Please order whatever you wish.”

“Give us a moment,” said Don.

“Absolutely, sir,” said the waiter, and he disappeared.

“What McGavin’s offering is ...,” started Don, then he trailed off. “It’s—I don’t know—it’s crazy.”

“Crazy,” repeated Sarah, lobbing the word back at him.

“I mean,” he said, “when I was young, I thought I’d live forever, but ...”

“But you’d made your peace with the idea that ...”

“That I was going to die soon?” he said, lifting his eyebrows. “I’m not afraid of the D-word. And, yes, I guess I had made my peace with that, as much as anyone does. Remember when Ivan Krehmer was in town last fall? My old buddy from back in the day? We had coffee, and, well, we both knew it was the last time we’d ever see or even speak to each other. We talked about our lives, our careers, our kids and grandkids. It was a ...” He sought a phrase; found it: “A final accounting.”

She nodded. “So often, these last few years, I’ve thought, ‘Well, that’s the last time I’ll visit this place.’” She looked out at the other diners. “It’s not even all been sad. There are plenty of times I’ve thought, ‘Thank God I’ll never have to do *that* again.’ Getting my passport renewed, some of those medical tests they make you have every five years. Stuff like that.”

He was about to reply when the waiter reappeared. “Have we decided yet?”

Not by a long shot, Don thought.

“We need more time,” Sarah said. The waiter dipped his head respectfully and vanished again.

More time, thought Don. That’s what it was all about, suddenly having more time. “So, so he’s talking about, what, rejuvenating you thirty-eight years, so you’ll still be around when the next reply is received?”

“Rejuvenating *us*,” said Sarah, firmly—or, at least, in what he knew was supposed to be a

firm tone; the quaver never quite left her voice these days. “And, really, there’s no need to stop at that. That would only take us back to being fifty or so, after all.” She paused, took a moment to gather her thoughts. “I remember reading about this. They say they can regress you to any point after your body stopped growing. You can’t go back before puberty, and you probably shouldn’t go back much earlier than twenty-five, before wisdom teeth have erupted and the bones of the skull have totally fused.”

“Twenty-five,” said Don, tasting the number, imagining it. “And then you’d age forward again, at the normal rate?”

She nodded. “Which would give us enough time to receive two more replies from ...” She lowered her voice, perhaps surprised to find herself adopting McGavin’s term. “From my pen pal.”

He was about to object that Sarah would be over a hundred and sixty by the time two more replies could be received—but, then again, that would only be her chronological age; she’d be just a hundred physically. He shook his head, feeling woozy, disoriented. *Just* a hundred!

“You seem to know a lot about this,” he said.

She tipped her head to one side. “I read a few of the articles when the procedure was announced. Idle curiosity.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Was that all?”

“Sure. Of course.”

“I’ve never even *thought* about living to be over a hundred,” he said.

“Of course not. Why would you? The idea of being *ancient*, withered, worn out, infirm, for years on end—who would fantasize about that? But *this* is different.”

He looked at her, studying her face in a way he hadn’t for some time. It *was* an old woman’s face, just as his face, he knew, was that of an old man, with wrinkles, creases, and folds.

It came to him, with a start, that their very first date all those years ago had ended in a restaurant with a fireplace, after he’d dragged her to see the premiere of *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*. He recalled how beautiful her smooth features had looked, how her lustrous brown hair had shone in the dancing light, how he’d wanted to stare at her forever. Age had come up then, too, with Sarah asking how old he was. He’d told her he was twenty-six.

“Hey, me, too!” she’d said, sounding pleased. “When’s your birthday?”

“October fifteenth.”

“Mine was in May.”

“Ah,” he’d replied, a mischievous tone in his voice, “an older woman.”

That had been so very long ago. And to go back to that age! It was madness. “But ... but what would you—would *we*—do with all that time?” he asked.

“Travel,” said Sarah at once. “Garden. Read great books. Take courses.”

“*Hmmmmph*,” said Don.

Sarah nodded, apparently conceding that she hadn’t enticed him. But then she rummaged in her purse and pulled out her datacom, tapped a couple of keys, and handed him the slim device. The screen was showing a picture of little Cassie, wearing a blue dress, her blond hair in pigtails. “Watch our grandchildren grow up,” she said. “Get to play with our great-grandchildren, when they come along.”

He blew out air. To get to attend his grandchildren’s college graduations, to be at their weddings. That *was* tempting. And to do all that in robust good health, but ...

“But do you really want to attend the funerals of your own children?” he said. “Because that’s what this would mean, you know. Oh, I’m sure the procedure will come down in price eventually, but not in time for Carl or Emily to afford it.” He thought about adding, “We might even end up burying our grandchildren,” but found he couldn’t even give voice to *that* notion.

“Who knows how fast the costs will come down?” Sarah said. “But the idea of having decades more with my kids and grandkids is very appealing ... no matter what happens in the end.”

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe. I—I’m just ...”

She reached across the dark polished wood of the table and touched his hand. “Scared?”

It wasn’t an accusation from Sarah; it was loving concern. “Yeah, I suppose. A bit.”

“Me, too,” she said. “But we’ll be going through it together.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Are you sure you could stand to have me around for another few decades?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

To be young again. It was a heady thought, and, yes, it was scary, too. But it was also, he had to admit, intriguing. He’d never liked taking charity, though. If the procedure had been something they could have even remotely afforded, he might have been more enthusiastic. But

even if they sold their house, sold every stock and bond they owned, liquidated all their assets, they couldn't begin to pay for the treatment for even one of them, let alone for them both. Hell, even Cody McGavin had had to think twice about spending so much money.

This stuff about Sarah being the one and only person who could communicate with the aliens struck Don as silly. But it wasn't as though the rejuvenation could be taken back; once done, it was done. If it turned out that McGavin was wrong about her being pivotal, they'd still have all those extra decades.

"We'd need money to live on," he said. "I mean, we didn't plan for fifty years of retirement."

"True. I'd ask McGavin to endow a position for me back at U of T, or provide some sort of retainer."

"And what will our kids think? We'll be physically younger than them."

"There is that."

"And we'll be doing them out of their inheritance," he added.

"Which was hardly going to make them rich anyway," replied Sarah, smiling. "I'm sure they'll be delighted for us."

The waiter returned, looking perhaps a bit wary of the possibility that he was going to be rebuffed again. "Have we made up our minds?"

Don looked over at Sarah. She'd always been beautiful to him. She was beautiful now, she'd been beautiful in her fifties, she'd been beautiful in her twenties. And, as her features shifted in the light of the dancing flames, he could see her face as it had been at those ages—all those stages of life they'd spent together.

"Yes," said Sarah, smiling at her husband. "Yes, I think we have."

Don nodded, and turned to the menu. He'd pick something quickly. He did find it disconcerting, though, to see the item descriptions but no accompanying dollar values.

Everything has a price, he thought, even if you can't see it.

You've just read the first 10,000 words of Rollback, the new novel by Hugo and Nebula Award-winner Robert J. Sawyer. To read the remaining 90,000 words, pick up a copy of the book, published by Tor in April 2007.