

Second Sight

Gray Rinehart

Phraestus turned the gear another fraction and made ready for the next cut, when his grandson barged into the workshop.

“Allo, Papa!” Mirosh called. The door banged into the wall and stayed open.

Phraestus glanced up in a quick prayer for patience. He almost crossed himself but instead cast as stern a glance as he could at the boy. As he did so, he scanned through the spectrum from near-IR to near-UV. It had become automatic, second nature, over the last few decades. In the ultraviolet, a tiny shape darted—

“Watch out for that clarify you let in,” he said.

“Where?”

No surprise the boy missed it. The pseudo-insects were practically transparent in the white-light spectrum.

“I wish you’d just smack the thing yourself,” Mirosh said, “since you can see it so well.”

Phraestus almost said *it’s not my fault*, but that didn’t matter. “Just close the door,” he said, “and don’t let in any more.” As Mirosh turned to obey, Phraestus added, “And you still owe me a new spring for the door.”

“Yes, Papa, I know.”

“Did you learn anything useful in school today?”

Mirosh stepped up next to Phraestus. He smelled of sunshine and sweat and something sweet, like toffee. “Only that ‘multiphasic’ doesn’t mean what it appears to mean.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t about electricity at all. It was some kind of psychological test from Minniesomewhere.”

“Minnesota.”

“That’s it. A personality test. Ms. Cavington didn’t have one to give us, though.”

“And that’s useful, how?”

Mirosh smiled. “Oh, you said *useful*. I thought you said *useless*.”

Phraestus felt a smile working its way onto his face in return, and gave in to the impulse. “So, nothing practical, then?”

Mirosh reached onto the workbench and picked up a pair of needlenose pliers. He opened and closed them and shook his head. “Not really.”

“Don’t worry,” Phraestus said, “one of these days your teachers will surprise you with something useful. And maybe even something *interesting*.” He held out his hand for the tool.

Mirosh dropped the pliers into his grandfather’s palm. “You keep saying that.”

“Only because it’s true. Now, are you going to make me a new spring for the door today?”

Mirosh stepped around Phraestus to the smaller workbench by the wall. “No, Papa, sorry. I’m still working on my Deorbit Day present for Momma.”

Phraestus chided him—“You still haven’t finished that?”—though he knew exactly what stage the gift was in.

Mirosh frowned at him. “You’re the one who’s always telling me that if it’s worth doing right, it’s worth the time.”

Phraestus turned his attention back to the gear he was cutting. He held another gear against the teeth, and his vision automatically measured the next cut and marked it precisely in his eye. Even with that advantage, Phraestus momentarily longed for the ship and the days when ShiVA would have had the specs ready, and all he had to do was order the piece to be printed in an autofactory.

“I’ve never said anything like that.”

Mirosh barked out a laugh. “Just like you never said, ‘There’s profit in modest work and poverty in mere words?’”

“*That* I might have said,” Phraestus allowed. He didn’t bother pointing out that it was a paraphrase.

Mirosh started up the lathe, and soon the warm, woody, nutmeggy scent of the spiceburr bowl he was turning filled the shop. Phraestus found he was filing the gear teeth almost in time to the sound of Mirosh’s cutting. They worked wordlessly—which, when Phraestus mused on it, made him smile.

A clarify droned past his ear. Phraestus was about to chastise Mirosh for letting it in when the boy shouted,

“Ow, shit! Shitshitshit . . . sorry, Papa, but damn it all to hell!”

Mirosh held his hand over his right eye. Phraestus’s vision tracked a slick fluid down the boy’s cheeks—not blood, for which he was grateful—and his electronic eyes automatically started analyzing it. Mostly water . . . but with traces of hemoglobin and some long-chain polysaccharides and proteins he didn’t immediately recognize.

Phraestus was afraid of what that might mean. He crossed himself on the way to grab Mirosh. “Hold still, shhh. Try not to move your eye. . . .”

* * *

It took little time, but far too much, for Phraestus to bandage Mirosh’s eyes. Even without enhancements, he saw three splinters of spiceburr wood in his grandson’s eye, with one almost large enough to qualify as a “chunk” and another embedded deep. He had Mirosh tip his head back and thought about rinsing the eye, but decided if it made the boy blink that might make things worse.

While Phraestus was wiping out a small cup to place over the injury, Mirosh yelled again.

“What is it?”

“It hurts, Papa—it burns!”

Nothing looked worse, at first glance, but Mirosh shifted his vision—

The clarify showed up bright in UV. It had landed on the cornea and was lapping at the tear-filled goo. Phraestus grabbed Mirosh’s shoulder, leaned in close, and blew softly across his face. The translucent thing clung stubbornly in the eye fluid. It took three tries to shoo it away, and each time Mirosh trembled in his grip.

Phraestus quickly put the little cup in place, then used the cleanest rag he could find to cover both the boy’s eyes. Mirosh complained, but Phraestus explained that eyes moved together—it would not do to have the right eye move, and possibly damage it more, just because the left eye tracked to see something.

Phraestus called for a taxi for two, lest the dispatcher send only a rickshaw, and maneuvered Mirosh outside to wait. He didn’t want to ask, and certainly didn’t look forward to explaining to

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Sessalina, but he had to know.

“What happened?”

Mirosh tipped his head forward, as if he might look at his toes. “I was using the gouge, cutting.” He began to pantomime sitting over top of the lathe, holding the tool. “I didn’t think I was too close.”

Phraestus took a deep breath. “Where was the face shield?”

Mirosh stood silent and did not answer until the taxi rolled to a stop in front of them.

“I took it off. I thought I felt a clarify on my face.”

They rode to the infirmary in silence.

* * *

Sessalina found Phraestus in the infirmary waiting room. He reached for her when she sat down next to him, but she refused to hold his hand. Her usual look of stern disapproval crystallized into frozen rage as he told her what had happened.

Phraestus *almost* told her that the bowl Mirosh had been turning was meant as a gift for *her*; but he refrained. If it softened her attitude any toward him, it would only be to melt and then boil it so it erupted and rained lava and ash everywhere. He found the cold condemnation somehow more comforting.

Sessalina left him to his thoughts and tried to bully her way into the back. She came back huffing and dropped onto the seat as if it had offended her. “You lied to me,” she said.

“No, I didn’t.”

“They’ve got him in surgery, for God’s sake! You didn’t say anything about it being so serious.”

“I said his eye was punctured, Ssali. That is serious.”

“You didn’t make it *seem* that serious.” She fidgeted, turning her datacard over and over in her hands.

Phraestus wondered if she would call Mirosh’s father. Probably not. Nor would Phraestus; it wasn’t his place. He wished Sessalina’s mother were still alive, so she could come in and smooth things over. He had relied so much on Mari’s gift for maintaining family harmony that he had never developed a talent for it.

Short-sighted, he thought and chuckled inwardly at what he thought was irony.

His cheek itched, and he brushed away a clarify that had lighted there. Damned things were everywhere.

Time crawled by like a spiny-shelled snail.

Phraestus had hoped they might call in Doctor Barreya, but it was her protégé, Doctor Stashell, who eventually approached them. The look on the youngster’s face betrayed bad news, and Sessalina reached behind her and grasped Phraestus’s hand.

“The boy is your son?” the doctor said to her. “Yes, then. We removed the pieces of wood from your son’s eye, but . . . I’m afraid the damage was quite severe, and endophthalmitis developed almost immediately. I understand an insectoid came in contact with the eye, as well?”

Phraestus nodded. “A clarify, yes.”

The doctor pursed his lips, as if he’d just tasted something sour. “That explains the quick infection.”

Sessalina’s grip began to hurt. “What? What does that mean?”

“We’ve administered a broad-spectrum antibiotic, the best we have for non-terrestrial—no, that doesn’t sound right—for *local* organisms, but . . . there’s a good chance your son may lose his eye.”

* * *

The kneeler was as uncomfortable as Phraestus remembered, but he tried to ignore it. If he came to chapel more often, he might have gotten used to it. At least it was padded, but it squeaked when he made the slightest movement. Maybe he should have chosen a different seat. . . .

He tried to shut out other sensations—the draft across his left shoulder, the lights humming—and concentrate on praying for Mirosh, but he had always been easily distracted. At least the settlement didn’t have a grand cathedral full of stained glass and organ music to overwhelm him.

The chapel doubled as auditorium and meeting space for every group that needed the space, and the primary concession to the faith was that some of the chairs had kneelers. All the other trappings were in a closet, brought out according to which faith group was using the room.

Gradually Phraestus focused on making his breathing even, and on the feel of his clasped hands and his thumb's knuckles against his forehead. He thought of his grandson in the infirmary and recalled his own eyesight suddenly switched off, destroyed, long ago in the deep darkness between the stars. The fear. The despair. "Oh, Mirosh," he said, and the boy's name was the deepest, most fervent prayer he could offer.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when new sounds filtered into his perception. The door, quietly but not silently, opened and closed. The flooring—actual local wood planks, not recycled deckplates from the ship—creaking. The shuffle of the chair next to him as someone sat. Phraestus guessed who it was when he felt a hand, firm but gentle, on his shoulder.

"I looked for you in your workshop," Caladros said. The man's voice, so deep and authoritative when he spoke from the ambo, was soft. Not quite a whisper—Phraestus thought such a powerful voice might not be able to whisper—but low, calm, soothing. "I'm a little surprised to find you here."

Phraestus stayed in his prayerful pose a moment longer, then wiped his face and slowly and stiffly levered himself up off the kneeler and down into his chair. "I'm a little surprised to be here."

Caladros released Phraestus's shoulder. "How's Mirosh?"

"Scared, but trying not to show it."

"He's a good lad." Caladros turned to face Phraestus. He wore no collar; the colony had no priest since the Luddites had killed Father Michael. Caladros had stepped in, arranged for special dispensation for consecrating the host light-years from any ordained clergy, and become the de facto pastor. His new role had aged him, but not embittered him: He may have gone grey long before Phraestus, and his smile might at times be sad, but he never failed to exude kindness and compassion.

Phraestus couldn't help but smile, but he shook his head as he did so. "The boy doesn't deserve this." The nagging truth that Mirosh had removed his eye protection drained sincerity from his words.

Caladros took a breath, and his gaze took on a distant look, as if he were seeing something beyond the chapel wall. "No one ever does. We may *think* they do, we may think *we* do, but who are we to decide? It's not our place, not our judgment to make." He looked back at Phraestus and pulled the corners of his mouth up in a slight smile that somehow still reached his eyes. "How are *you*, old friend?"

Phraestus chuckled, but it was more automatic than authentic. "I don't think I've wished so much to be back on the ship, in a long time."

"Things were simpler then."

Phraestus cast his friend a wary glance. "How do you mean?"

"Oh, in the way that it's simpler to adjust a thermostat than to build a fire. Simpler to let the machinery work in the background, so long as it works, and not to think about how complex it really is."

"I didn't have that luxury."

Caladros tipped his head. "No, I suppose you didn't. You made things simple for everyone else—you and everyone who kept things working. I imagine that's frustrating you now: not being able to make this simple for Mirosh."

Phraestus studied a bit of dirt or grease under his left thumbnail. He felt a nearly constant tug in his guts, the urge to be doing something to fix the problem, but at the same time he was rooted in place as if his feet were bolted to the floor. "I wish Mari were here."

"Ah, dear Maribrill—I'm sure Sessalina would appreciate her being here, too. I remember her smile, even after all these, what is it, twenty? years."

"Near enough, in Earth years." Phraestus squeezed his eyes shut. "And, yeah, she had the best smile, the brightest eyes—" He gasped a little, thinking of her eyes.

"I still miss her, Cal. All the time. Don't think of her as often as I should, but I miss her."

"Good."

Phraestus thought he might have misheard. "Good?"

His friend nodded. "Just proves you still love her."

Phraestus looked down and followed a line of wood grain until it ended at a chair leg. "That was never in doubt." He chuckled, a small convulsion that felt all too much like being wracked with sorrow. "Oh, God, Cal, I don't see how you deal with all of us, all our problems."

"I guess I've always been good with people."

"They've always puzzled me," Phraestus admitted. "Machines are orders of magnitude simpler."

"Ha! In many ways, I'm sure they are. I bet the Lord even missed his carpentry days sometimes, when his dealings with customers and contractors were minimal compared to his time spent sawing and carving whatever it might be he was making. I bet you can relate to him better, if you think of him that way."

"Maybe so. Never really thought about it."

"That's a shame. Too many of us only think of him on the cross, and we don't want to relate to that. But he did a lot of things before that. Even healed a couple of blind men, if I recall."

Phraestus nodded. He knew the stories, and thought about them fairly often, but now he felt more frustrated than faithful. "Would be nice if he were here then, wouldn't it? Or if he'd been on the ship with us."

"Do you really wish you—or all of us—were back there?"

"Right now? Singularly. Doc says Mirosh may lose his eye, and I'm proof that, on the ship, that was a problem but not a tragedy. Now the ship's scrap and the back-to-naturists ruined most everything we brought with us. What hope does Mirosh have?"

"He might not lose his eye. Miracles do happen, Phrae."

"Maybe. But on the ship, we carried our miracles with us."

* * *

Two days later, Mirosh had lost *both* eyes. It took two more days for the doctors to stem the blood infection that gave him a horrible constant headache and threatened to ravage his whole body.

Phraestus had come to the infirmary for hours every day. Sometimes he sat with Sessalina, sometimes not. They talked little, which left Phraestus too much time to think. . . .

Doctor Barreya was on duty when the boy was released. "It was touch-and-go," she said. "But he's a fighter."

Mirosh certainly looked as if he'd been in a fight: bandaged about his head, face swollen, and unpatterned bruising down his cheeks that gave him a mottled appearance.

Sessalina talked the whole ride back to their rowhouse, describing the action around them or remarking on some news she had heard. Mirosh said nothing. Phraestus helped get Mirosh inside, but he felt his advancing years with every step supporting the boy. He thought each beat of his heart would be the one that broke it for the last time.

Once Mirosh was abed and the medicines had settled him into sleep, Phraestus went to Colony Hall. The rickshaw driver was quick and got him there half an hour early for the appointment he'd made while Mirosh was being discharged. He fidgeted in the anteroom, wondering how the burgomaster would respond to his appeal. He and Ryccart had been friendly enough on the ship, even though their respective duties meant they had little interaction. Still, Ryccart had been, what? third watch commander? when that gamma ray burst caught Phraestus outside and blinded him. He may not have been in the loop when the captain decided to have new eyes fabricated for Phraestus, but surely he had been in the know. . . .

"Phraestus Bonavent?"

He looked up. A young lady, solidly built and wearing trousers and a many-pocketed light green bush jacket, stood by the interior door. He raised his hand, a little sheepishly, even though he was the only person waiting.

"If you'll come with me, we can discuss your case."

So Ryccart was too busy to be bothered, then.

Phraestus followed the woman into a utilitarian little office. It had once clearly served as a compartment on the ship. Even before the Luddites' uprising, the saboteurs' putsch, the ship had been stripped of most of its materials to provide shelter and other supplies for the colony. Phraestus had always supposed that's why Noah's Ark had never been found: Noah and his family built shelters and furniture and even fires out of it.

The young woman held out her hand. Her grip was firm without hurting him. "I'm Katellina, and I'm only three days into my rotation in admin so I'm still getting used to things." She directed Phraestus to a seat and then perched on the edge of the desk where she towered over him. She had already looked down on him before, being half-a-head taller. Phraestus leaned back as nonchalantly as he could to face her directly.

"I usually work on our family farm, up by Firstland Lake," she said, "and my folks are none too happy that I'm only getting a few chores done every day. I guess you're one of my chores today.

"It says here," she waved a hand at the desk, where a battered crewslate had Phraestus's picture in one corner of the screen, "that you were a maintainer on the ship, and you're a craftsman now?"

Phraestus considered how to answer. She looked young enough—maybe a few Earth years older than Mirosh—to have been born after landfall, so it was unlikely she would know his story. But if her parents were farmers now . . .

"Were your parents on the ship? I might know them."

She raised her eyebrows, and a flash of irritation crossed her face. "Bartho and Darisha Mayrick," she said.

Phraestus smiled. He vaguely remembered hearing that they'd had a child. "Good old Bartholomaeus. Always grew the best blackberries. And Dari made a wonderful cobbler. Are they well?"

Katellina smiled. "My mom's cobbler is the best. They're getting by. 'Better above ground than below,' my dad says."

"That sounds like him. Give them my regards when you talk to them." Phraestus had worked a good many extra hours helping the agronomists, which is how he earned cobbler rights, and he hoped that might win him some favor with their daughter. "But, to your question: Yes. In general, I make things and fix things."

"And in this case you want to have replacement eyes fabricated for your . . ." she consulted the crewslate, "grandson."

Phraestus fidgeted a bit, hating that he could not control the urge. "Yes."

"Eyes like yours?"

Phraestus sighed. "Yes."

"And yours were made aboard ship, correct?"

He only nodded.

She paused, then spoke as if she were the grandparent and Phraestus a child.

"You are, of course, aware that most of our replication and fabrication capabilities were destroyed in the . . . 'Simplification'?"

Phraestus balled his fists, then forced his hands to unclench. "Yes." Before she could respond, he added, "I *remember*. As you say, my eyes were shipmade, in transit. I was a colony *traveler*, not a colony child."

She leaned forward, looming over him. "And when the technology purge came about, which side were you on?"

Phraestus considered how to answer. He didn't recall her parents, Bartho and Dari, being part of the faction that ruined the fabricators and corrupted all but the most basic designs in the Ship Virtual Authority, but could he be sure? No, of course not. But he was too old to play games, so he told the truth. "I would've kept the tech intact. And not just because some of it is in my head. I thought that was the *colony's* side."

She kept her expression guarded as she slid off the desk, walked around it, and sat in the chair. She sighed.

"It would've made things a lot easier, wouldn't it?"

Phraestus nodded. Her question didn't prove whether she and her parents were technophiles, or if she simply wished they were. He was more interested in whether what he wanted was even possible.

Her sad frown answered that question before she spoke.

"Around Discoverers' Day last year, my brother was in a hurry and slipped, and his hand got caught in a PTO shaft." She held her own hand, and her expression twisted in sympathetic pain. "Power takeoff, I mean . . . from the tractor to the auger he was running.

"I tell you that so you'll know that I really *do* wish we could fabricate new body parts, for him and for your grandson. But we can't. The burgomaster got a report from the technologists that it'll be years before we can get the factories close to full strength—and even then, some designs . . ." She shook her head and put both hands on the desk. "I'm sorry."

* * *

Phraestus's hand shook, not from palsy but from rage, as he held the medicine bottle. What did it matter if the Simplifiers—simpletons, as far as he was concerned—had left the capability to make the drugs, if Mirosh had to live in darkness the rest of his life because their back-to-basics philosophy went too far?

He poured six or eight of the green-tinted tablets into his hand. He stared at them.

Phraestus had taken one every night, for years—decades, now—so his brain and body would interface correctly with his artificial eyes. His camera eyes. His fancy eyes.

He held them long enough that he thought they might dissolve in his sweating palm.

Damn my eyes, he thought, and dropped the pills in the basin. He washed them down the drain.

* * *

It was full dark when Doctor Barreya came out of the clinic the next night. Several times during the day Phraestus had thought about going inside to find her, but he had always opted to stay outside. He wasn't sure which would look more desperate. He supposed it didn't matter.

"Long day, Naya?" he asked.

She started and eyed him a little warily even after she recognized him. "Aren't they all?"

He shrugged and was suddenly speechless.

"I know what you're going to ask," Nayida said, "and the answer is no."

Of course she would know, and of course she would refuse.

Phraestus walked her over to the transit stop. They sat together in silence for a short while.

"I'm right, aren't I?" she asked.

Phraestus nodded. "I'm sure you are." He looked up, but the night was cloudy so he couldn't see easily which direction Earth was. He coughed a little chuckle. "The plans we make. We never know which ones will work, for how long. Everything is always changing, shifting, unstable. . . ."

Nayida patted his hand. "Seasons come and go."

"So do storms," he said, and the words caught in his throat. They were too close to the truth.

It hadn't really been a storm, of course. Storms in space were the stuff of fantasy, and even legend. But it had crashed on him like a silent tsunami, blown through him like an ephemeral hurricane—all because he was in the wrong place at the time. If he had been inside the ship when the gamma ray burst caught them, protected by shielding and many metric tons of water instead of exposed repairing a balky antenna, he wouldn't have lost his eyes. And if Isaac had been inside . . .

"Do you remember Ike?" Phraestus asked.

"You're going back to that, are you?" she said. "Of course I do. He was a lively fellow."

"Not at the end." Newton had taken a higher dose than Phraestus, and then his body rejected the radiation drugs.

Nayida leaned forward and gazed down at the dirt. "No one is lively at the end, no matter how hard we try to save them."

Phraestus sighed. A painful tear leaked from his left eye. "I never got to see him again. These

damn things took too long to build.” He tapped his temple next to his amazing, wonderful, cursed eyes, which had not even been fabricated until days after Isaac died.

“And now you want shed of them?”

“I want the boy to have them.”

“I thought as much.”

A taxi cart pulled up in front of them. Phraestus gestured toward it. “Go on, Naya, I’m not going to keep you. You’ve answered my question, anyway.”

The doctor waved the cab away. “It’s a nice enough night. Fancy a walk?”

They walked with the quiet, easy familiarity of longtime friends, down streets they had seen laid along paths cut from a forest that had never known human footsteps before they arrived. They stepped off the pavement into a glade bordered by a bend in the slow-moving river. Phraestus brushed his hand across the knobby bark of one of the grander trees the engineers had left—heritage trees, they called them—and sniffed the soft, leafy, mint-and-orange scent. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done so, or come to this spot.

“So easy to take things for granted,” he said.

“Too true,” Nayida said. “But very little is, is it? ‘Granted,’ I mean. Earned, mostly. Given, sometimes. But always worked for, by somebody.” She looked up. “Pity the stars aren’t out tonight.”

A rustle to their left drew Phraestus’s attention. Behind the foliage was all shadow and darkness, but almost without a thought he shifted his eyes into infrared and caught sight of a whip-petcat. The long, sinuous beast gave a whistly hiss, like a wet log thrown in a fire, before it slunk away.

Phraestus sank to his knees, same as he had when he’d first discovered that his new-made eyes could see beyond the visible spectrum.

“What’s wrong?” Nayida reached down, and Phraestus grasped her hand.

“I know how he felt,” Phraestus said, “and sometimes it’s too much.”

“Sure you do. You were out there with him, and could’ve gone the same way—”

“No, not like. I know how the man, blind from birth, felt after he’d been healed—when he saw things he couldn’t comprehend.”

Nayida squeezed his hand. “Phrae . . .”

“I know what it’s like, to have to learn to see with new eyes. The wonder of seeing things in a new way, for the first time . . . but I wish they hadn’t made the detectors so sensitive, the bandwidth so wide! My mind had to make sense of colors that have no names, except in reference to the ones I grew up seeing. So many things I had to learn to ignore, or pretend I don’t see, just in order to get through the day. And then we landed, and there were sunrises and sunsets, mountains and flowers, waxing and waning moons . . . every day some new sight to behold in that new, strange way.”

Phraestus’s knees grew cold and damp. “But I also know the horror of seeing things you never want to see. What loved ones did *he* see die, like I saw Mari? Did he maybe follow Christ to the cross, and see him hung there? To see *that*—the one who healed him, broken and bloodied—did he wish the scales had never been removed from his eyes?”

He sobbed. Each tear that leaked from his eyes burned.

“Why would you want to pass that burden on to Mirosh?”

Phraestus let go of Nayida’s hand, wiped his face and dripping nose. “Because, even so, it’s better than being blind.” He stood and brushed his hand on his pants, and brushed off his knees. “Because I could help him make sense of it.”

He walked forward, from the grass onto the rocks along the water’s edge. Nayida slipped up beside him and said, “Maybe we shouldn’t have come here.”

“Too late now.” Phraestus squatted, picked up a flat stone, then stood and skipped it over the water. It only hopped four times. He sniffed, and regarded the ripples in the current. “Newton River. I wonder if they’d have named anything after me if I hadn’t pulled through.

“I don’t suppose it would make a great deal of difference: The river would be the same. Wasn’t that an old poetic line?”

"Shakespeare," Nayida said. "A rose by any other name."

"That's it—and just another vanity. Meaningless, except that we ascribe meanings to them.

"I think about Ike most every single day, you know? Can't help it. Think about Mari too, at the oddest moments . . ." He shook his head, trying to fling the sudden loneliness from it. "Did you know I read up on Ike's namesake after he died? I wasn't sure if it was appropriate or weird that I was reading about his optical experiments while I was breaking in optics that he could barely have imagined."

Nayida laid her hand on his back. "I'm sorry we don't have a way to make new optics for Mirosh."

"I suppose Doctor Stashell would give me the same answer you did."

She sighed. "He would defer to me, so it would amount to the same thing. I wish the truth were different, I really do."

Phraestus grimaced, thinking of truths he wished were different, truths he would like to unlearn. "Truth can be like treasure," he said, "a rare thing, precious—but it can also be like poison." He paused a moment, then voiced a thought he had wrestled with a thousand times and more since his wife Maribrill had died. It hit him now with a sense of urgent purpose. He shuddered as he said, "If . . . if I . . . died, tonight . . . could Mirosh have my eyes?"

Nayida was silent for so long that Phraestus began to think maybe he had only asked the question in his mind. Then she said, softly, "I suppose I could talk to the council, ask them what they think about a transplant. If I promise to do that, will you promise not to hurt yourself?"

No, Phraestus thought. But he said yes.

And when he got back to his apartment, he threw his bottle of antirejection drugs in the trashcan.

* * *

For Newton—the original, famous Isaac Newton, not Phraestus's friend Ike—optics had been such an obsession that he fashioned implements to slip into his own eye socket, next to his eye, and noted how his vision changed when he did so.

Phraestus shivered at the thought and at the tools before him.

Since he hadn't taken his prescription for a couple of days, his eyes hurt all the time. The right eye hurt more than the left, for some reason. Auto-injecting anesthetic above and below his right temple only dulled the stabbing pain in the back of the socket, which felt as if the sliver that had pierced Mirosh's eye was lodged behind Phraestus's.

"If your right eye offends you . . ." he said in a low voice.

He had looked up everything about what he purposed to do, even the name. "Enucleation" sounded like a term for charging or cleaning one of the old ship's reactor cores. He had mapped out in his mind where the extraocular eye muscles should connect to his implants, and figured on cutting through them starting with the one on the outside—

His crewslate buzzed. He ignored it.

He pressed a needle against the skin at the outer corner of his eye. The sensation was . . . distant, he decided, but still considerable. He looked at the array of injectors he had left: they had been meant for Mirosh, and Phraestus felt bad about taking them, but how else could he hope to do what he needed to do?

His crewslate buzzed again. He reached over, intending to silence it, but touched the wrong icon and opened the call.

Dr. Barrey said from the speaker, "Hello? Phraestus? Are you there?"

Not a good indicator; shaky hands like that. He sighed and said, "No, Doc, I don't think so."

"Where are you?"

He picked up the gouge he had modified, that he hoped would pull his eyelid back enough to get the microscalpel in against his eye. "Here," he said. "There. Nowhere, really." "Phrae! What's going on?"

He pinched the corner of his eye and pulled it, but holding the gouge was awkward—

"Phraestus Bonavent, answer me!"

It seemed that his eyelid snapped back as he released it. "I'm busy, Doc," he said, "but thanks

for calling.” He cut the connection and silenced the crewslate.

No matter how he repositioned the mirror or held the gouge, something blocked his view. Maybe a curved mirror? A magnifier?

The room resounded with three bangs on the door.

“Go away!” he said before he realized he should’ve stayed silent and pretended not to be there. He might’ve left the lights on. . . .

“Open up, Phraestus, please!”

If he let her in, would Nayida do what he was planning to do? He didn’t trust that she would. But if he gave her no choice—

He pulled his eyelid away from his eye and went in with the gouge. He went by feel. The tool caught a little and scraped along the side of the metallic eyeball before he hit resistance. No time for the scalpel. He pushed harder with the gouge—

More banging on the door—

The resistance was springy, almost rubbery—

Muffled curses from outside—

He wiggled the gouge, twisted it a little, and the leading edge sawed—

Pain bloomed in his head—*not enough anesthetic after all*—and he struggled not to faint but also not to let go, not to close his eye over the tool as he forced it deeper—

Some impulse, some instinct, seized his muscles, and he pulled the tool from his eye.

The door slammed open. “What the hell are you doing?” Doctor Barreya asked.

The gouge slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor.

Phraestus wept.

* * *

“You’re an impetuous old fool,” Doctor Barreya said.

Phraestus, alone in the darkness behind his eyelids, said nothing. His mind was fuzzy, and he wondered if he had gotten drunk. Or had he slept?

“I’m minded not to give you any pain meds at all.”

He shrugged. What did the pain matter?

“Look at me, Phraestus.”

He wanted to refuse, but then she would accuse him of being childish. He had no argument against that, either.

Before he complied, he reached up and felt the swath of bandages covering his right eye. Under his fingertips, under the rough gauze, his eye throbbed. He opened his unbandaged eye and saw he was in an infirmary room. It might have been the same one—the same fixtures and equipment and walls, even—that had been on the ship. The thought brought a cold clench to his gut.

Nayida sat on a rolling stool next to the bed. “Couldn’t wait even a day,” she said. “Or maybe didn’t trust me. Either way, that was a stupid stunt.”

“I suppose so,” he said, and his voice seemed distant.

“Quit messing with it, and let me take that dressing off. You really don’t need it.”

He turned his head to make it easier for her. She unwound the bandages and dropped them on a bedside tray.

“Okay, open your right eye.”

His vision did not change.

It *felt* as if his eyelid had moved. Phraestus blinked a couple of times to be sure it was working, but his vision *did not change*.

His heart beat suddenly wild, and he struggled for breath. His eyebrows rose, and he almost yelled, “Did I ruin it?”

Nayida stopped him from touching his face. She held first his right hand, then both hands, firmly and gently. She shook her head.

“No, you old fool. It’s fine.”

“Then why isn’t it working?”

She sighed. “It’s not *there*.” She let go his hands. “We transplanted it to Mirosh.”

Phraestus settled back into the pillow. The pain in his right eye now felt as if she had struck him a stunning blow. After a moment, his thoughts caught up with one another and ordered themselves enough for him to ask, "The council was okay with that?"

"They weren't particularly happy with the idea, especially Mama Celestia, but Caladros said it would be better for each of you to have one good eye than for one of you to have none."

Phraestus knew it would take time for him to accept that, but he supposed he could find some wisdom in it. "The land of the blind," he said softly.

"What's that?"

"Something I heard long ago. 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.'"

Nayida frowned. "If you say so. Get some rest now, and in a while we'll bring Mirosh in and you can start coaching him on getting the most out of that eye."

"Thank you, Naya."

She watched him take one of the familiar green tablets that he had eschewed the past few days. Then she got up, patted his hand, and turned to leave. At the door, she turned back and said, "One more thing, Phraestus."

"Yes?"

"Leave off trying to do surgery, affirm? You don't have the knack."

"No, I don't suppose I do," he agreed, and as she left he reached up and gently touched his temple.

He thought of miracles, and Mirosh, and Mari. The simpletons had made it such that his eyes, autofactured aboard ship, were somewhat miraculous now that they couldn't be reproduced. But they could be shared. Phraestus wondered how many people who received miracles thought they should have been given to someone else, someone better. That's all he had tried to do.

Maybe Nayida was right: He could coach Mirosh, while he himself learned to look at the world with only one eye. And a good first thing to coach him on would be making a spring for the shop door.

As he settled back and drifted to sleep, Phraestus wondered if Mari might be a little bit proud of him.