

# Sometimes They Really Are

An extract from *Queen of Nowhere*

by Jaine Fenn

We met at a party.

I only went to shut Chellis up. She was my facilitator – that’s what ThreeCs call the handlers who managed mavericks like me. She said I should get out more. So I got out. The party was to celebrate someone’s promotion or suchlike.

The first thing Tand said was, ‘Are you the numbers girl?’

I remember thinking, *Oh, give me a break.*

But he looked as uncomfortable as I felt. And when we got talking it turned out he actually knew what a beevee cryptographer was. He was probably the only person at that party who did. He was a freelance researcher. ‘I study the patterns of history,’ he said, then pulled a face and added, ‘Yeah I know that sounds pretentious. Actually most of the time I freelance for the Holo-Ents division; hardly intellectually challenging but it pays the rent.’

We spent the rest of the evening sitting in a corner and talking, ignoring everyone else.

Three days later, on our first proper date, I drank too much and did my party trick, testing an ancient conjecture said to have first been postulated on Old Earth: I got Tand to give me a high-value even integer, then told him which two primes it was the sum of. Most people get bored after a couple of numbers. He gave me seventeen, and only stopped because the waiter came to ask if we wanted dessert.

I went back to his apartment that night.

The next morning we walked in the park. Because Tethisyn-Delta’s a hollow-earth, the park runs round the top edge of the inhabited district. I used to hang out there because I liked the illusion of solitude. I’d also walked in the park with my previous boyfriends. All three of them. That morning, with Tand, it was like the whole place had been newly created for us. We watched the mist over the ponds, kicked up leaves under trees, and looked for flowers in

the long grass. Then he took me to one of the bridges, a steep, elegant curve of red metalwork. 'Watch this,' he said, and ran up and on to the bridge. At the top of the curve, he jumped—

—and didn't come down. Or, rather, he came down slowly, gracefully, tracing a parabolic trajectory to land ten metres along the path. There was a dodgy grav-plate, he said; the utilities board hadn't got round to fixing it yet, and because the bridge let you start your jump a few metres above ground level, you didn't come down at once. I had a go. It was exactly the kind of craziness that'd been missing from my life.

For the next three weeks, Tand and I spent all our free time together. When Chellis noticed me making mistakes at work, she was annoyed. Then I admitted I had a boyfriend and she was delighted. Suddenly I was normal, rather than the difficult girl-genius who didn't make small talk or go to parties.

By then I was closer to Tand than I've ever been to anyone. And I began to suspect there was something he wasn't telling me.

It came out after we had our first row. We argued about money. Being a freelancer, Tand couldn't afford the time he was spending with me. I offered to help. He refused, saying he didn't need charity. The row went on, backwards and forwards, not getting out of hand but not resolving either. I guess people in long-term relationships learn how to argue, but we had no clue.

Eventually I accused him of hiding something. Idiot that I am, I even said, 'If you love me, you'll tell me what the problem is.'

He said it wasn't relevant to our relationship. That just made me more determined to find out.

He said I'd think he was crazy. I said I'd never think that.

So he explained. It was about the patterns in history he'd talked about when we first met. Someone was messing with them at a level so deep, so universal, that no one suspected. He used the beevee network as an example, claiming that using its capacity as the basis for a universal currency shouldn't work. A system like that was too unstable, too vulnerable to greed and short-sightedness; he said he'd found several examples where unexpected corporate altruism appeared to have averted a human-space-wide financial crisis. Someone was saving us from ourselves, just like the

Sidhe had always claimed they were. When he mentioned the Sidhe I flinched, because that *did* sound crazy, given they've been dead for a thousand years.

I said something about the inherent illogicality of human systems. I may even have called him paranoid. I didn't tell him that I already had my own doubts.

But he wouldn't let it go. He gave other examples, such as the scarcity of shiftships, and humanity's failure to rediscover lost technologies like zero-exchange power generation: he said that *someone* was controlling the supply of interstellar-capable ships, and stifling certain research when it got too technologically advanced.

Even though I didn't think it could be the Sidhe, I admitted my own doubts then, because this was Tand, the love of my life. My problem was with beevee. I knew about the different channels and the prioritising systems, but my area was encryption: attention to detail, not the big picture. Even so, I'd spotted anomalies: encoded priority messages that made no sense even when deciphered, odd redundancies, apparent repetitions. Nothing to compromise the data I was paid to protect, and up until then I'd believed some sort of concerted beevee conspiracy was as unlikely as someone manipulating human history.

Unless someone was using beevee as a means of bypassing normal communication channels *in order to* manipulate human history.

Put together his supposition and mine, and suddenly they both got more plausible. But that didn't mean this potential conspiracy was down to the Sidhe. Those evil alien doppelgangers are long gone, I told him. He said he hoped I was right, but he couldn't see who else it could be. He'd looked into the historical sources in depth and found missing data and anomalous accounts relating to their apparent extinction. It was possible, he said, that not all Sidhe had been killed when their Protectorate fell.

I didn't mean to tell Chellis. It just came out. She asked how things were with me and Tand. I said we'd rowed, she came across all sympathetic, and I fell

for it. I guess I needed someone to talk to. Not my mother, obviously, and I didn't have friends as such.

I was so naive. But I got on all right with her, and she showed an interest. Besides, I wanted to know what other people thought about Tand's theory, the sort of people who watched lifestyle holos and socialised with their colleagues and knew what to say to strangers.

I didn't mention my doubts about beevee. I wasn't that stupid. I just said my boyfriend had this really wild theory about the Sidhe still being around. Chellis raised an eyebrow and said I should check his apartment for medication next time I stayed over. I didn't mention it again.

When I told Tand I'd spoken to Chellis, he was furious. We argued again. Then we made up. Then he got me to apply cutting-edge encryption to his research files, and sent a remote copy off to a secure storage service.

Things cooled off a bit between us. I'd damaged our relationship, and it was going to take a while to mend.

Two weeks later I received a meeting request from a Holo-Ents exec called Merice Markeck. I began to understand Tand's paranoia. But to refuse the meeting might arouse suspicions.

I checked her out: she was young and ambitious and she was visiting Delta from Three-Cs head office for various face-to-face meetings with people way above my level. When I met her we chatted easily and I remember thinking how nice she was, how open and friendly. I liked her. Trusted her.

She'd heard that I knew someone who'd unearthed a really interesting, potentially important story. I said I had, and told her about Tand's findings. She listened, nodding, then said this was something humanity needed to know about. Those were her exact words: *something humanity needed to know about*. At least, that's what I remember her saying.

We talked some more: trivial, easy stuff. Then she offered to fund a docudrama. I said I'd put it to Tand.

He was sceptical. But the money was good, the piece was going out in prime-time and he'd have full artistic freedom. Besides, thanks to my loose tongue, his secret was already out.

I persuaded him that this wasn't a disaster but was actually the break he'd been waiting for.

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The programme aired a couple of months later. We were at my place, because I'd got a better ents system, though soon it would be *our* place: he was moving in at the end of the week.

The feature was called *The Hidden Empire*. It started with an attention-grabbing reconstruction of Protectorate days: humans as willing slaves of a beautiful and lethal Sidhe, building a shiftship for her. It employed rather more melodrama than I'd expected, and the Sidhe wore rather less clothing than I'd expected, but as Madame Marbeck had apparently said during production, 'First, you have to grab your audience.'

Then, apparently, you have to reassure them. Reassure them that while there are some crackpots out there who think the Sidhe aren't dead, these people are lone cranks. Such people should not be believed.

Everything Tand said had been carefully edited to make him look like a fringe loony. Talking-head academics vaguely but vitriolically deconstructed his evidence.

I believe the technical term is 'hatchet job'.

Tand watched in silence. After a while, tears started running down his cheeks. When it was over, I tried to comfort him, but he shrugged me off. He said he needed to be alone. I let him go.

After an hour, I commed to see if he was all right. I got no reply. I gave up after the seventh attempt.

I didn't sleep much that night. The next morning he commed and we talked; he said he didn't blame me, but he needed more time alone, to think.

A day passed. Two. I'd pretty much given up on sleep and food. I went to work, but got almost nothing done. I had a new co-worker, whom I ignored. (Chellis had suddenly and mysteriously transferred to another department, which was probably for the best, as otherwise I might've tied her to a chair with elastic bands then used my hard-copy cutter to slowly skin her alive.) I considered resigning, but though my work wasn't the most important thing in my life any more, it still mattered to me, and ThreeCs was the only place I could do it.

Four days after the broadcast, I had the news on in the background while I cooked a meal I had no appetite for. I stopped, knife in hand, as Tand's picture appeared on the holo. I dropped the knife and shouted the volume up.

'Witnesses say they saw the young man in the park early this morning, though no one was nearby at the time of the incident. After the utilities board traced the cause of the anomaly, the local surveillance footage was reviewed. This is what they found.' Cut to a silent recording of Tand, walking through the park, head down, coming into shot from one side. He speeds up. He's running now, along the path to our bridge. When he reaches it, he pelts up the smooth curve, arms pumping. At the highest point, he jumps.

This time, he doesn't come down. He just floats up slowly, until he's out of shot.

Someone chimed my door. It was the police.

They'd sent a man and a woman, not in uniform, looking glum and formal. When I let them in the woman spotted the newscast and said, 'I'm so sorry: the media got hold of it at the same time we did.'

I was confused, so she explained, gently, how my boyfriend had used a faulty grav-plate to jump high enough to escape the field generated by the habitat floor, then carried on upwards until he eventually fell into the nearest source of gravity.

Suddenly I knew what the news report had meant by 'the cause of the anomaly'. One of my random acts of teenage rebellion had been to throw a ball that had once been a favourite toy straight up as hard as I could, to see whether it would come down. It didn't. Mother told me sternly that it had fallen up into the sun. We hadn't got into trouble because a ball wasn't big enough to register on the utilities board's read-outs when it hit the fusion sphere at the heart of our hollow-earth. Apparently a human body was.

I didn't take it well. The police were very understanding, and did their best to comfort me. But when I'd calmed down they insisted I go and stay with my mother. They probably didn't want two suicides in one week.

Mother was as sympathetic as she ever got, which wasn't very. A couple of days later, she told me ThreeCs had got hold of Tand's suicide note. The authorities had originally found the recording when they went to his apartment, and they had asked if I wanted to hear it then. I'd said no. It would

be too painful. Now everyone except me would be hearing it, courtesy of my employers.

Make that ex-employers.

I sent ThreeCs my resignation, waiving my severance payment.

Later that day I had another visitor, a lawyer. I hadn't realised Tand had made a will, but he had, just before the damned-to-hell programme had gone out. My lover had left me everything. The will also specified that his possessions be left exactly as they were when he died. Apparently the authorities had honoured his wish. After all, there was no criminal investigation as a result of his death.

It was still two more days before I could bear to visit his apartment. If I'd had a friend, I'd have asked them to come with me.

The place looked just like I remembered it. I spent a while wandering round, picking stuff up, smelling his clothes, sitting on the bed.

Finally I turned my attention to his comp. Ignoring the flashing message icon, I checked the secure files.

All gone. Deleted.

Were the law in on it? Or was it ThreeCs themselves?

I combed the data storage firm he'd left the back-ups with. They told me the back-ups had been deleted.

Who by? I asked.

By the account holder, they said.

I checked the log on Tand's comp. It was encrypted, but I'd written the encryption, so that wasn't a problem. The files had been deleted one hour and seventeen minutes before Tand's leap off the bridge. As far as I could tell, they'd been deleted by him.

This made no sense.

I acknowledged the message icon, because I'd run out of other places to look.

Tand stared out of the screen at me. He looked calm and sad, like a man who has reluctantly reached the only logical conclusion.

'Bez, I'm so sorry. I've been such an idiot. I've wasted my life on this crazy obsession. I've finally seen it for the paranoid lie it is, but it's too late.

You . . . you were almost enough to make me want to carry on. But then, someone like me, I'd be no good for you, not in the end.'

Tand's gaze sharpened. He was looking straight at me now.

'I love you, and I hate how it will hurt you, but I *have to* do this.'

The recording ended.

The image of his face blurred as my tears started. It was a while before I could see or think clearly again. When I did, I thought of his expression: so intense, like he was trying to tell me something he couldn't voice.

*I have to do this.*

I went back into the base directory and accessed the suicide note from there. As I expected, the file was too big. About five times too big.

It wasn't hard to find the embedded file. It was another vid-and-audio, far longer than the original note.

It started similarly, with Tand sat at his desk, but the perspective was different. This recording came from the spotcam hidden inside the frame of one of the poster prints on his wall. It showed him stopping work, and looking up. The audio was faint, but I thought I heard him say my name.

He got up and walked towards the door.

The camera didn't cover the door. Audio caught his voice, *Who are—?*

A pause. No audio, nothing in shot.

Then Tand backed into sight. He was moving oddly: not like a man who was facing a threat; more like he was dazed. The figure that shadowed him wore a dark, hooded tunic, but from the way she moved I knew it was a woman. Tand stopped in the centre of the room. So did the woman, standing toe-to-toe with him. Neither of them spoke.

She reached out a hand to his cheek, like a mother caressing a child who's fractious or upset.

For a minute and a half the two of them stood there, not moving, not speaking.

Then the woman turned on her heel and left.

The screen went blank.

I checked the timestamp. Exactly two hours before he jumped.

I'd been sustaining myself on hatred for ThreeCs, but my emotions were misplaced. ThreeCs were amoral and venal but they weren't the ones



calling the shots. They were just like any other big organisation: they did whatever it took to survive.

It occurred to me later that maybe Tand didn't hide that surveillance file after all; maybe I was just meant to think he did. Maybe the bitch who killed my lover let him leave that clue. Maybe she even *made* him do it. Perhaps my untimely death would have been one odd event too many – better just to warn me off.

If that's what the Sidhe intended, they're going to find that their plan has seriously backfired.